

## Librarian's Shelf

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### Freedom to Read is Fundamental

In April, the American Library Association (ALA) released its annual State of America's Libraries Report, highlighting the challenges U.S. libraries of all types faced in 2021 – as well as the ways they innovated to meet the needs of their communities.

The State of America's Libraries report is released annually during National Library Week, April 3 – 9, and this year's issue included the ongoing response of libraries to COVID-19, the continued reluctance of e-book publishers to provide reasonable licensing systems, and the commitment of libraries to defend the freedom to read, pushing back against increasing censorship efforts.

National Library Week is observed each April by the ALA and libraries across the US. It began in 1958 based on the idea that once people were motivated to read, they would support and use libraries. National Library Week celebrations currently include the release of the annual State of America's Libraries Report, including the Top Ten Frequently Challenged Books of the prior year; National Library Workers Day; National Library Outreach Day; and Take Action for Libraries Day.

Censorship, and the core value of libraries to stand opposed to it, is the main focus of this year's State of America's Libraries Report. According to Stephanie Hlywak, Director of ALA Communications and Marketing Office, in 2021 there was a "historic effort to ban and challenge materials that address racism, gender, politics, and sexual identity. But we know that banning books won't make these realities and lived experiences disappear, nor will it erase our nation's struggles to realize true equity, diversity, and inclusion." (State of America's Libraries Report 2022)

The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) tracks attempts to ban or restrict access to library materials and services across the United States. The OIF reported that in 2021, library staff in every state faced an unprecedented number of attempts to ban books, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals. "The 729 challenges tracked by ALA represent the highest number of attempted book bans since we began compiling these lists 20 years ago," said ALA President Patty Wong. (ALA Press Release April 4, 2022)

This dramatic uptick in challenges to library material is reflective of the lack of empathy we often see across the nation. Patty Wong explains that "diverse books create a better lens through which all children can see themselves in library collections. And yet these very titles—the ones addressing cultural invisibility and cultivating understanding— are the ones most frequently challenged." (State of America's Libraries Report 2022)

Similarly, Stephanie Hlywak states "that's why the work of libraries is more essential than ever. Books reach across boundaries and build connections between readers. Reading—especially books that extend beyond our own experiences—expands our worldview. Censorship, on the other hand, divides us and creates barriers." (State of America's Libraries Report 2022)

Thankfully, the efforts of libraries to resist censorship are supported and appreciated by the majority of citizens. In a recent national poll, seven in 10 voters oppose efforts to remove books from public libraries. The poll also found near-universal high regard for librarians and recognition of the critical role that public and school libraries play in their communities. (ALA Press Release April 4, 2022)

Across the nation and in Columbus, Nebraska, library professionals remain dedicated to protecting your fundamental right to access information and ideas. For additional information on library trends, read the full text of the State of America's Libraries Special Report: Pandemic Year Two, available at <https://bit.ly/soal-2022>.

References:

"State of America's Libraries Report 2022", American Library Association, April 1, 2022.

"Press Release: National Library Week kicks off with State of America's Libraries Report, annual 'Top 10 Most Challenged Books' list and a new campaign to fight book bans", American Library Association, April 4, 2022.