



# Freedom to Read 2023 wrap

Over the course of 2023, we witnessed a significant increase in challenges to the freedom to read in Australia. In public libraries and schools across the country, there was an unprecedented number of complaints, challenges, and protests targeting books, library displays, programs and events. An overwhelming proportion of these were connected to content with LGBTQIA+ themes or characters, especially around gender and sex education.

From March 2023, the ALIA team set up a reporting mechanism to collect data around these book challenges and incidents through the [Freedom to Read](#) page, and from August we began publishing monthly updates on the situation. We know that not all incidents have been reported through to ALIA, however even allowing for underreporting, it's clear that 2023 was unprecedented in the scale of challenges.

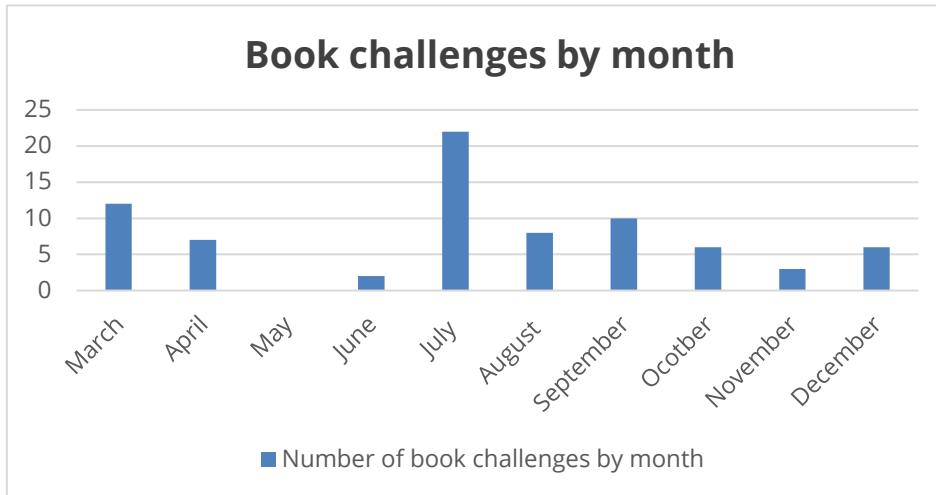
## KEY FIGURES

- In total, **75 individual book challenges of 48 unique titles** were reported to ALIA in 2023. Unofficially we are aware of more that have not been officially reported.
- In addition there were **21 incidents** which include protests, threats, abuse, petitions and other organised attempts to remove content or stop programs. Some of these incidents occurred across multiple sites.
- **Queensland**, especially south-east Queensland, and **New South Wales** are the states where the most activity was reported in 2023.
- **July was the most active month** for book challenges, complaints and anti-freedom to read activity in 2023.
- **Books for younger readers were by far the most targeted type of book**, with board books, picture books, children's fiction and children's non-fiction accounting for 63% of total complaints, and young adult fiction and non-fiction making up 13%.
- ***Welcome to Sex*** by Yumi Stynes & Dr Melissa Kang was the most targeted title, accounting for a quarter of all complaints.

## The year in graphics

### Book challenges by month

July was the busiest month of 2023 for challenges and complaints. This is broadly accounted for by the news that *Welcome to Sex* was taken off the shelves of Big W nationwide in July. This prompted a high level of attention and became the topic of articles, radio and television programs, a great deal of social media activity and copycat challenges. Aside from July, there appears to be a small decrease since September 2023, although numbers increased in December.



### Book challenges and incidents by location

The majority of challenges were reported from Queensland (especially the southeast) and New South Wales. There are clear demographic and social differences across the states and territories that may impact the levels of activity, however we are also aware of a number of groups that operate in southeast Queensland that have targeted councils locally and across the border into NSW. We have not yet received any reports from the ACT or the Northern Territory, which is not to say challenges have not occurred there.

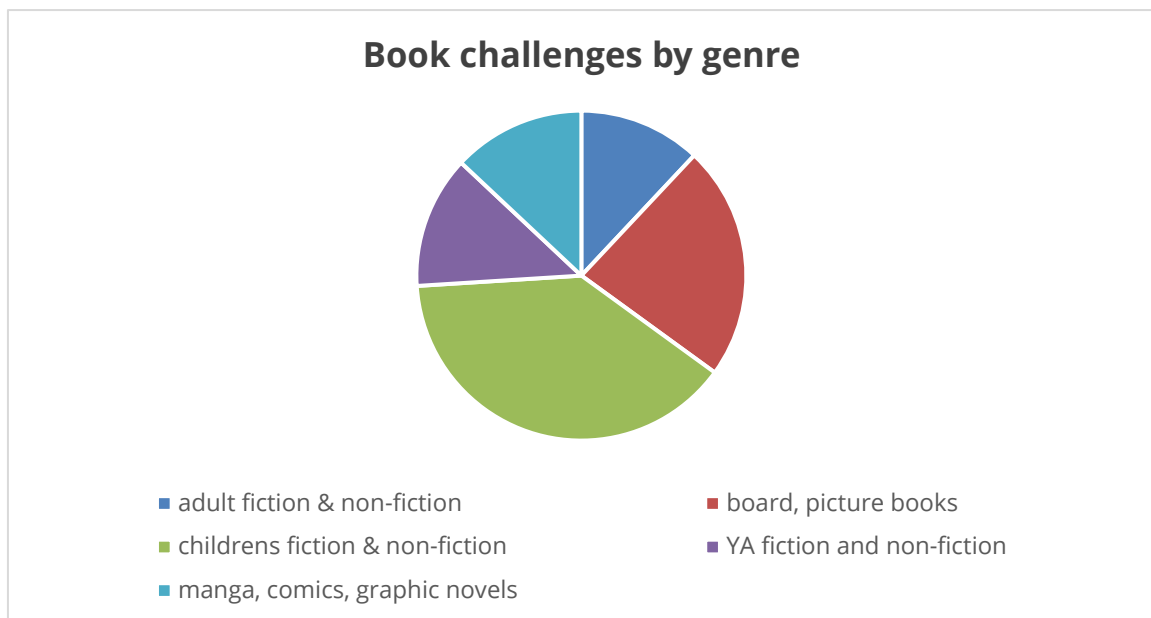


In terms of incidents including protests, petitions, threats, and other organised attempts to hide or remove content or stop programs, QLD and NSW make up the majority of cases again, but there is a more even distribution of incidents across NSW, QLD, WA and VIC. No incidents were reported in the ACT, Tasmania or the Northern Territory, which again doesn't necessarily mean they didn't occur.



### Genre of challenged books

The titles challenged in 2023 are heavily weighted towards books for children and young people. Complaints targeting younger readers (board books, picture books, children's and young adult fiction and non-fiction) make up three quarters of all complaints. Adult fiction and non-fiction made up 12% of the complaints in 2023, and graphic novels, comics and manga also made up 12%, which compared to collection sizes, makes up a large proportion. Images and illustrations can often be taken out of context and singled out as offensive or inappropriate, making graphic novels, manga and comics easier targets for complaints.



## Topics

In general, the complaints reported to us are predominantly related to titles dealing with LGBTQIA+ issues, gender identity, and explicit or graphic sex education. Concerns around sexual explicitness are however, most often directed towards books that treat same sex relationships as normal and equal to heterosexual relationships. Accusations of ‘child grooming’, ‘sexualising’, ‘pornography’ and ‘demonic/Satanic filth’ are not uncommon.

There have been a limited number of complaints about violence, and a smaller number about publications that express opinions that could be read as transphobic and harmful to trans people.

## Supporting resources

[Free access to information](#) and resources is a fundamental part of the [ALIA Core Values Statement](#), as is respect for the diversity, individuality and equality of all people. We know that access to library resources like books, comics, films, events and communities that reflect the faces, voices and identities of people like us makes us feel seen, shows us we have community, and reminds us that we are not alone.

In the [Freedom to Read](#) page, we have brought together a suite of resources to support and equip the library workforce to respond to the kinds of complaints and behaviours that we have seen increase over the course of 2023. These include information about the legal rights and responsibilities concerning public libraries, the Australian Classification Board, templates for collection development policies, requests for reconsideration of library resources, and much more.

We are encouraging one member per library service to sign up to the Microsoft 365 group, to share even more resources with colleagues on a shared SharePoint site, and also giving access to an elist where issues can be discussed and ideas shared rapidly. You can join via the [Freedom to Read](#) page.

## A global phenomenon

Australia is not alone in confronting this phenomenon, and a number of resources have been developed by our partner organisations in New Zealand Aotearoa, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

In the United States, the [American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom](#) brings together information, resources and news around intellectual freedom. [PEN America](#) compiles and publishes statistics and information about book bans. Also in the United States, the [Freedom to Learn Advocates](#) website brings together information around advocacy efforts across the country.



The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in the UK made a resource available in 2023, [Managing safe and inclusive public library services](#), to provide library staff with a clear decision-making framework when dealing with complex and challenging issues.

Closer to home, Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) have developed a [Toolkit for the library and information sector](#) with a host of useful resources.

## Acknowledgements

It is difficult to predict what 2024 has in store for book challenges, but it doesn't seem about to disappear immediately. We'd like to acknowledge and thank the library staff, volunteers, parents, guardians, authors, illustrators, publishers, and readers for doing their part to keep a diverse range of books available to all of us.

