

The Classification of Censorship:  
An Analysis of Challenged Books by Classification and Subject Heading

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**Abstract**

Using the 2010 edition of the American Library Association's *Banned Books Resource Guide*, this study analyzes the classifications and subject headings of all reported book challenges during the years 2000 to 2010. Classifications and subject headings were identified by cross-referencing each challenged book with the online card catalogs of several major U.S. public library systems. The most frequently challenged subjects are identified, as well as the reader audiences most affected by these challenges. This study also reviews the related literature on the subject of book challenges, such as ALA's statistics on challenged books, as well as research based on these statistics.

## Introduction

Nearly 6,000 challenges to library materials were reported to the American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom during the years 2000 to 2009 (ALA, 2013c). Though steep, this number only accounts for 15% of such challenges. According to Doyle, most go unreported and can only be estimated (as cited in Kidd, 2009, p. 198). The abundance of documented and undocumented challenges to library materials raises questions about the effects and prevalence of censorship as well as the role of intellectual freedom in practical library services.

Using the 2010 edition of ALA's *Banned Books Resource Guide*, this study analyzed the classifications and subject headings of challenged books from 2000 to 2010. Classifications and subject headings were determined by the way in which each title was cataloged in large American public library systems. The intention of this study was to identify particular intended reader audiences and subjects that were censored at higher rates than others.

## Literature Review

The question of how to select, rather than censor, was first articulated in the academic library science community in Lester Asheim's seminal 1953 essay "Not Censorship but Selection." In this article, Asheim describes the differences between censorship and selection as "an amusing word game" (para. 1). Although librarians may be inclined to think of themselves as selectors, Asheim challenges this belief by suggesting librarians use subjective reasoning during the selection process. Censorship can easily stem from a librarian's assumptions regarding an author's intent, a reader's

response, or a community's values. Asheim (1953) describes the slip of subjective selection:

When a book attacks a basic belief or a way of life to which we are emotionally attached, its purpose will seem to us to be vicious rather than constructive; dangerous rather than valuable; deserving of suppression rather than of widespread dissemination. (section 5, para.1)

Rather than decide what is "best" for their communities, Asheim asks librarians to select without censoring.

The ALA has contributed an extensive springboard of data through which researchers can objectively study challenged books in the United States. Since 1983, Robert Doyle has compiled lists of banned and challenged books for ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom (Doyle, 2010, p.7). Composed of reports from schools, libraries, and the media, Doyle's work is published every three years as *The Banned Books Resource Guide* and is included on ALA's website and in the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* (2013b). These lists are organized by title, author, year, and decade. Also available are charts that organize challenges by reason, initiator, and institution (see Figures 1-3).

Using this data, parents and adults who find an item's content unsuitable for children and young adults have been identified as the primary challengers of library books. The top three reasons for challenging books between 1990 and 2010 are the inclusion of sexually explicit material, material unsuitable to the intended age group, and offensive language. Other reasons included the presence of violence, racism, and homosexuality.

The ALA's data on banned and challenged books has been helpful to several research projects, including those conducted by Rickey Best (2010), Carly Akers (2012), and Ann Curry (2001).

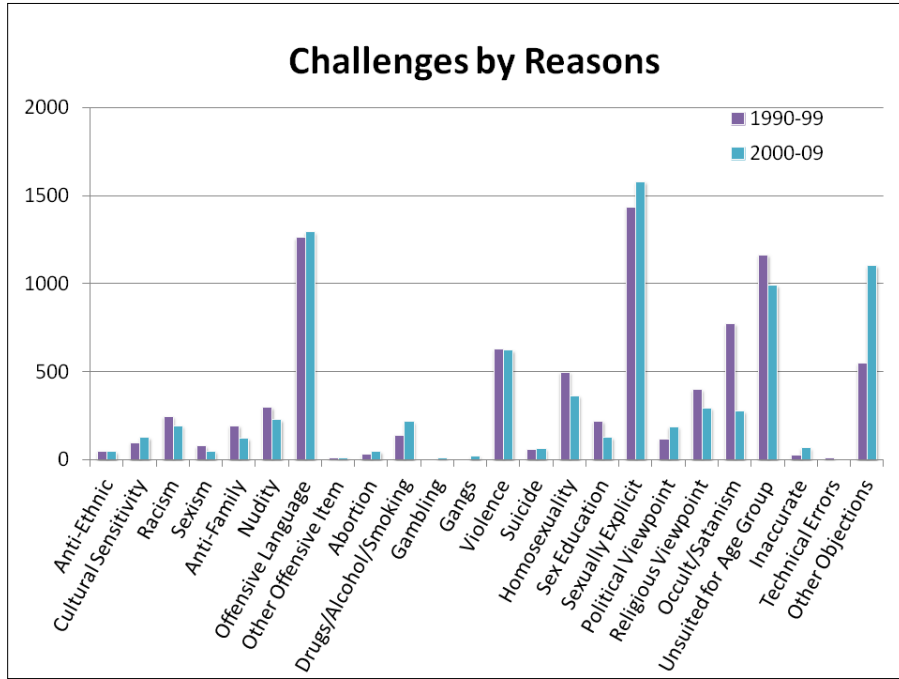


Figure 1. Challenges by reasons. Reprinted from Challenges by Reason, Initiator & Institution for 1990-99 and 2000-09 by ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved June 12, 2014. Copyright 1996-2014 by American Library Association. Reprinted with permission.

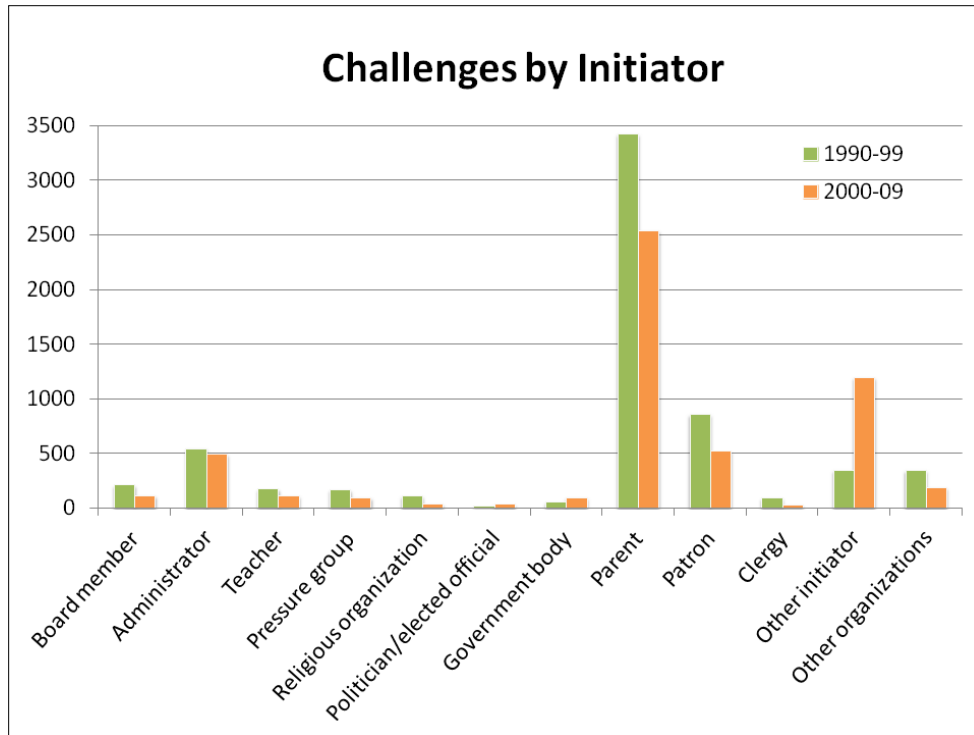


Figure 2. Challenges by initiator. Reprinted from Challenges by Reason, Initiator & Institution for 1990-99 and 2000-09 by ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved June 12, 2014. Copyright 1996-2014 by American Library Association. Reprinted with permission.

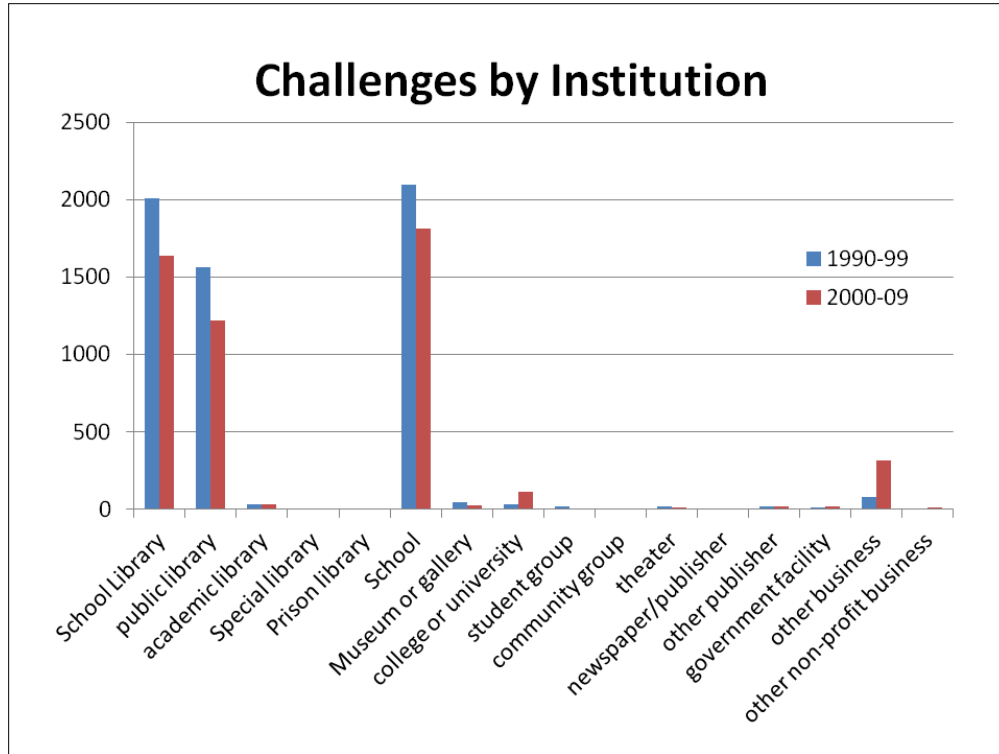


Figure 3. Challenges by institution. Reprinted from Challenges by Reason, Initiator & Institution for 1990-99 and 2000-09 by ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved June 12, 2014. Copyright 1996-2014 by American Library Association. Reprinted with permission.

Using the ALA’s list of Top Ten Challenged Books of 2007, Rickey Best analyzed the accessibility of challenged books in U.S. academic libraries in comparison to U.S. public libraries. Best (2010) states, “Although academic libraries are generally free from the challenges of items faced by school and public libraries, issues concerning selection remain” (p.18). With the use of *WorldCat*, libraries holding copies of the ten books in question were categorized. Academic libraries (specifically institutions with a bachelor’s degree program or higher) made up 7.85% of the libraries in this study, and approximately 30% of libraries with the challenged titles were academic libraries (p. 24).

Eight out of the ten challenged books in Best's study are either children's or young adult books. Since many of the academic libraries in this study do not offer programs that include these titles in the curriculum, Best (2010) speculates that the academic library "reinforces the concepts of intellectual freedom by supporting the mission of higher education to promote individual enrichment and community engagement" (p. 30).

In her 2012 study, Carly Akers examined whether classic books were challenged more than contemporary books during the years 2000 to 2010. By cross-referencing Doyle's *Banned Books Resource Guide* (2010) to the *Banned and Challenged Classics* list on ALA's website (2012), she identified which books challenged from 2000 to 2010 were classics. After finding that contemporary books were challenged more often than classics during this period, she researched whether there were any differences in why the two types of literature were challenged. She found that classic books were challenged more for racism, whereas contemporary books were challenged more for suicide and being "unsuited for age group" (2012, p. 392-393). However, both types of books were primarily challenged due to sexually explicit content.

Ann Curry utilized ALA's studies to further her research on the impact of relocation on juvenile and young adult literature. In her 2001 study, Curry references a qualitative and anecdotal study in which 30 Canadian and 30 British library directors were interviewed on the subject of challenged books from 1990 to 1993. When asked how they handled a challenge to a book, "a surprising number alluded to relocating problematic material to a different, if equally accessible, location after a complaint" (p. 28). For example, a challenged juvenile book might be moved to the young adult section,

whereas a controversial young adult book may be reclassified as an adult book. Other methods included moving an item to a different branch or to a closed stack.

Curry compiled a list of juvenile and young adult books that had been challenged during the years 1984 to 1999 in American and Canadian school and public libraries. Two hundred and twenty books matched this description, and all were cataloged in British Columbia public libraries. Although she compliments British Columbian librarians on “their collection management courage” (p. 30), she is quick to point out that 15% of the challenged young adult titles were cataloged as adult fiction, which “indicates that approximately one in seven copies of the controversial titles on the research list has been ‘mis-shelved’” (p. 30).

Each of these studies documents repeated attempts to censor books for children and young adults. This study builds upon the findings of Best (2010), Akers (2012), and Curry (2001) by identifying the classifications and subject headings that were most commonly challenged from 2000 to 2010.

### **Methodology**

According to Doyle, 664 book challenges were reported between the years 2000 and 2010. To determine the classifications and subject headings of each challenged book, Doyle’s list was cross-referenced with the online catalogs in major public library systems. These library systems were chosen based on their large collections and their prominence in the United States and included the New York Public Library, Chicago Public Library, San Francisco Public Library, and Los Angeles Public Library. The catalogs were searched in this order to identify the title’s classifications and subject headings. In cases in which the title was not cataloged at any of these library systems, the



title was located at a public library using OCLC's *WorldCat*. Seventy-two percent of titles were cataloged in the New York Public Library; only 4.5% were identified using *WorldCat*.

The classifications used in this study included Adult Fiction, Adult Nonfiction, Young Adult Fiction, Young Adult Nonfiction, Juvenile Fiction, Juvenile Nonfiction, and Children's Picture Books. Young adult books are typically intended for adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18. Juvenile books are characteristically read by children under the age of 12. Picture books are similarly intended for young readers; however, the majority of picture books are intended for children of preschool age (Reitz, 2013).

If a challenged title was cataloged as more than one classification and had more than one subject heading, then all classifications and subject headings were included. For example, if a title was classified as Young Adult Fiction as well as Adult Fiction, then both of these classifications were included in the sample.

Additionally, many of the books on Doyle's list were challenged more than once during the ten-year time span. In this case, each challenge was counted separately in this analysis. The book *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, for example, was challenged 22 times from 2000 to 2010. In the New York Public Library, it is cataloged as both Juvenile Fiction and Young Adult Fiction. As a result, this study included 22 challenges to Juvenile Fiction and 22 challenges to Young Adult Fiction for this one title. In addition, this title had five subject headings. Each subject heading was included 22 times.

All data was collected in an Excel spreadsheet and organized by classification and by subject heading. The sum of each challenged classification and the sum for each challenged subject heading were identified using these charts.

### **Limitations**

As mentioned earlier, the majority of challenges go unreported. This study only used reported challenges documented in the 2010 edition of *The Banned Books Resource Guide*. Additionally, challenges may have been reported after the book was published. Therefore, it can be assumed that many challenges that occurred between the years 2000 and 2010 are not included in this study.

This study was also affected by the subjective nature of classification and subject heading systems. As Curry found in her 2001 research, public libraries have a history of relocating challenged young adult books to the adult section in order to mitigate a controversy. Therefore, a book marked as a young adult title in one library system may be marked as an adult book at another.

Other inconsistencies must be acknowledged as outliers. For example, 30 of 31 copies of the book *Anastasia Again* by Lois Lowry were cataloged as Juvenile Fiction at the New York Public Library. One copy at the Harlem Library was cataloged as Young Adult Nonfiction. Although a specific title may be of interest to more than one age group, it is unique for a single copy of a title to be cataloged one way when that title is consistently cataloged another way. This may have been a decision made by a different cataloger or a cataloging error, or it is possible that this branch had unique criteria for its collections. For future studies, locating one library that contains all the challenged titles may yield more consistent results. Alternatively, reviewing the chosen library's collection

development manual and interviewing its catalogers may reveal insight into why certain titles are cataloged under specific classifications.

### Results

After tallying the number of challenges to these specific classifications, as shown in Figure 4, the classification challenged the most was Young Adult Fiction, which was challenged 361 times. Adult Fiction was challenged 235 times; Juvenile Fiction, 195 times; Adult Nonfiction, 113 times; Young Adult Nonfiction, 49 times; Juvenile Nonfiction, 30 times; and Children’s Picture Books, 28 times. Because so many of the challenged titles are cataloged as more than one classification, the number of challenges by classification exceeds the total number of book challenges.

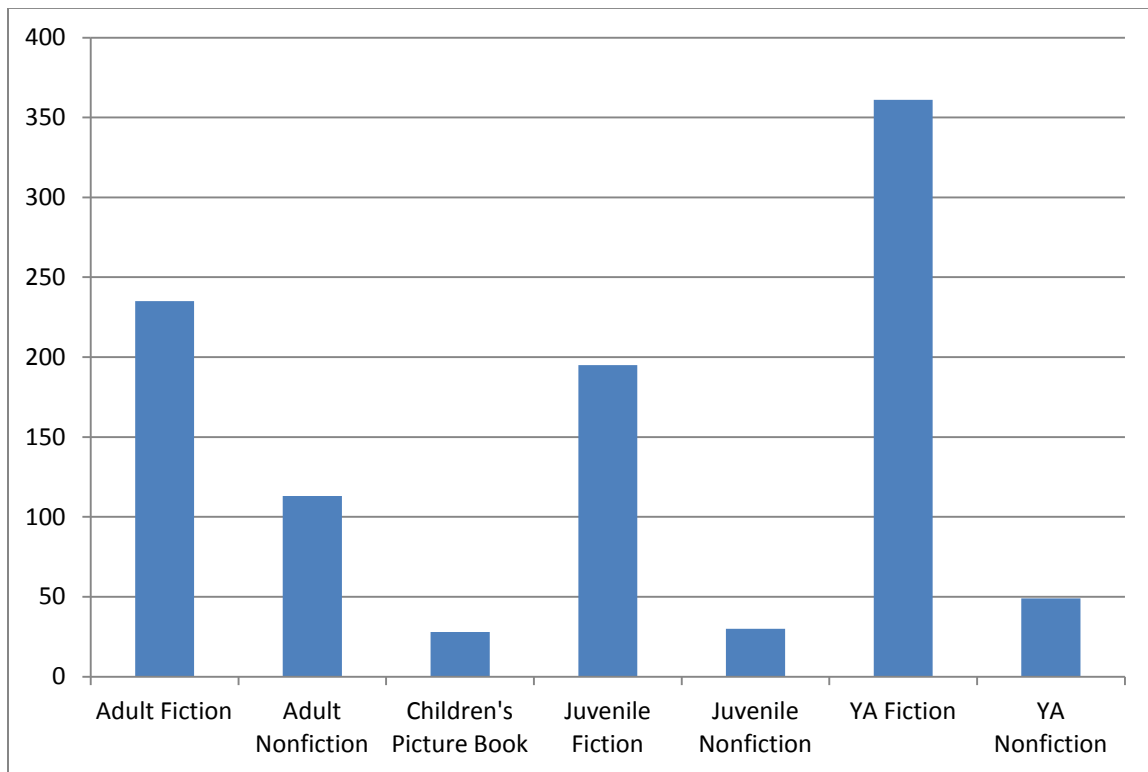


Figure 4. Number of challenged classifications.

The subject headings listed in each catalog were included in this set of data. There was a total of 2,198 challenged subject heading entries. These were organized

alphabetically. Some subject headings were grouped based on their similarities. For example, the subject heading *African Americans – Biography* was placed under the general *African Americans* subject heading.

The top 25 subject headings were identified and organized into Table 1. The top five sub-headings are listed under each heading when applicable.

Table 1

*Top 25 Challenged Subject Headings*

<u>Subject Heading</u>	<u>Number of Times Challenged</u>
<b>Schools</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Wizards</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Teenagers</b>	<b>80</b>
Teenage girls	25
Death	17
Teenage boys	6
Drug use	2
Emotional problems	2
<b>Magic</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>High school</b>	<b>70</b>
Students	19
<b>Harry Potter</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>African Americans</b>	<b>63</b>
Biography	9
Women	8
Color	4
Families	4
Ohio – Lorain	4
<b>Sex</b>	<b>50</b>
Sex instruction	30
Sexual health	7
Sex role	3
Sex customs	2
Sexual ethics	2
<b>Friendship</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Homosexuality</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Orphans</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Interpersonal relations</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Race relations</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Diary fiction</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Families</b>	<b>21</b>

<b>Male friendship</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Maya Angelou</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Runaways</b>	<b>18</b>
Children	11
Teenagers	6
<b>Witches</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Women</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Gays</b>	<b>16</b>
Men	8
Teenagers	2
Fathers	1
Musicians	1
<b>Determination</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Boys</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Fathers and daughters</b>	<b>13</b>

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### Conclusion

Based on the research reviewed earlier, it is not particularly surprising that Young Adult Fiction was the most commonly challenged classification. However, certain books contained subject headings that could be scrutinized as outliers. One that stood out more than others was the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling. More than 13% of the 424 titles challenged between the years 2000 and 2010 were from this series. As shown in Table 2, ten out of the top 25 challenged subject headings were listed as subject headings for the challenged *Harry Potter* books. Most apparent were *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry* and *Harry Potter*. A future study might remove these outliers, although the sheer volume of challenges made to these titles may be relevant to the research on censorship.

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Table 2

*Challenged Subject Headings of Harry Potter Series*

<u>Subject Heading</u>	<u>Number of Challenges</u>
Wizards	88
Harry Potter	85
Magic	72

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry	72
Schools	50
Orphans	38
Determination	16
Friendship	16
Teenagers and death	16
Witches	16

On the other hand, many of the smaller trends found in this study are relevant to note. For example, books with the ninth most commonly challenged subject heading *Sex* are predominantly cataloged as nonfiction titles. Out of these, the majority are classified as either Young Adult or Juvenile Nonfiction. (See Figure 5.)

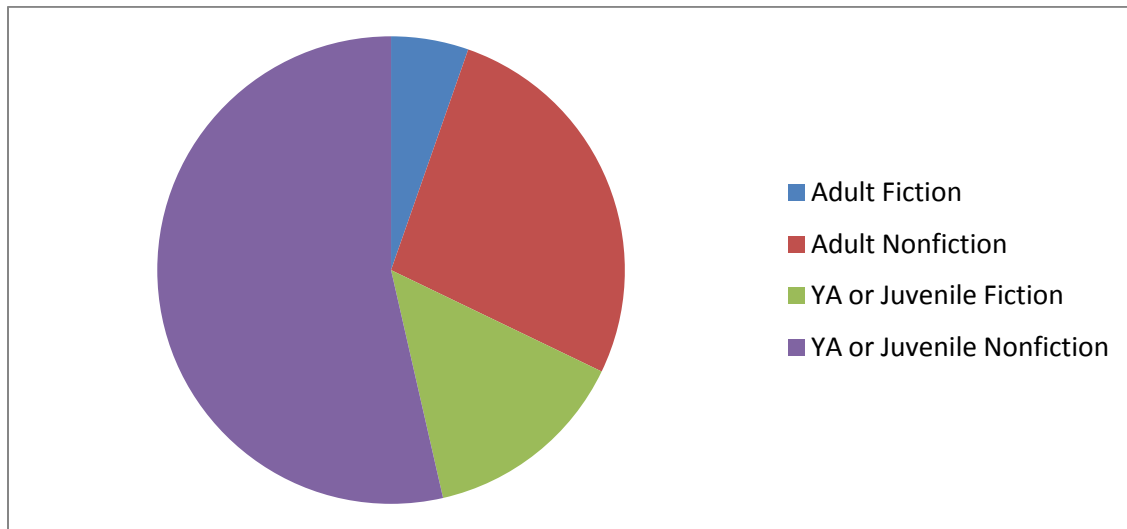


Figure 5. Sex as challenged subject heading arranged by classification.

The third most commonly challenged subject heading was *Teenagers*. This subject heading includes *Teenage girls* as its largest subheading. As shown in Figure 6, 15 of the 25 challenges with this heading are classified as nonfiction. These include *Deal With It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body, Brain, and Life as a gURL*; *A Girl's Life Online*; *The Notebook Girls*; and *Real Girl/Real World: Tools for Finding Your True Self*. All of these titles address female sexuality and sexual orientation. Interestingly, only a

small percentage of challenged books with the subject heading *Teenage boys* are cataloged as nonfiction. Although *Teenage boys* was only challenged six times, just two of these challenges were made against nonfiction titles.

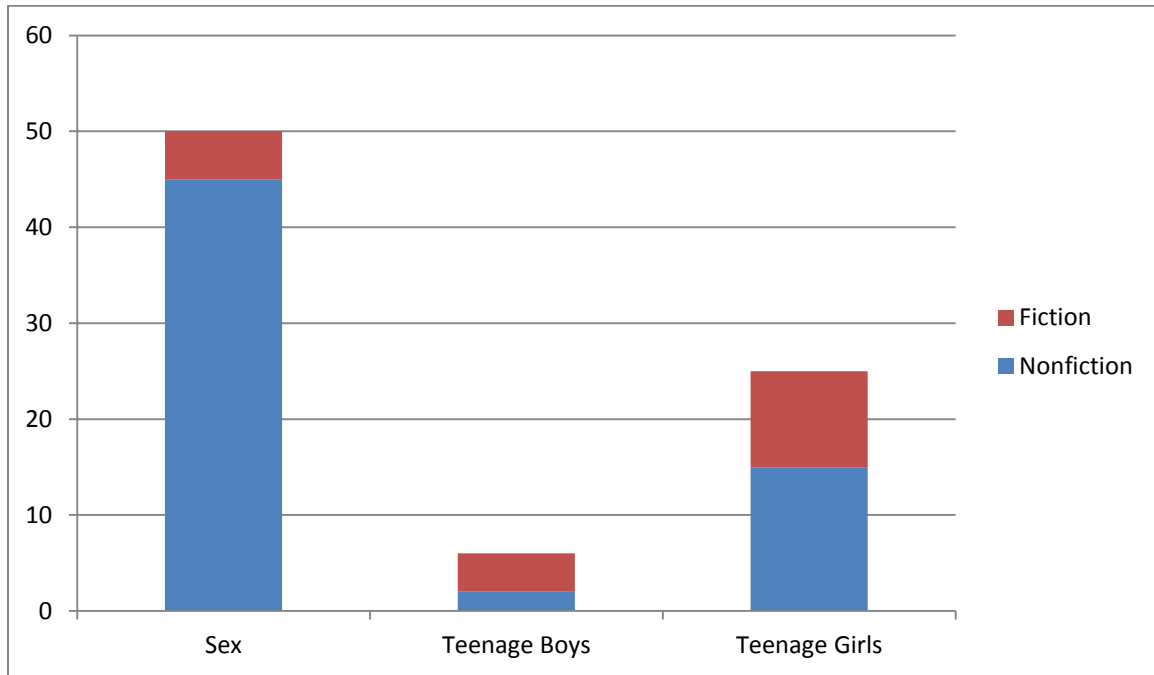


Figure 6. Challenged subject headings arranged by classification.

Nonfiction books that address sex and sexuality were more commonly challenged when the intended readers were young adults and, specifically, teenage girls. A future study might evaluate how many books with these subject headings and classifications were published before the year 2010. Although the number of challenges made to nonfiction books about sex and sexuality intended for teenage girls greatly exceeds challenges to similar books intended for teenage boys, there may have been many more books written for teenage girls on this subject before 2010.

Only one ethnicity or race was listed in the top 25 challenged subject headings: *African-Americans* (see Table 3). Sixty-three challenges were made to this heading or a

derivative of it, such as *African Americans – Biography*. Once again, further research may better explain this disparity.

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Table 3

*Subject Headings Arranged by Race or Ethnicity*

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<u>Subject Heading</u>	<u>Number of Challenges</u>
African Americans	63
Mexican Americans	10
Native American Indians	6
Japanese Americans	3
Haitian Americans	1

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Although this study found that challenged books primarily affected young adult fiction readers during the years 2000 to 2010, a wide range of other readers and subjects were impacted. Young adult fiction books that feature witchcraft and wizardry made up a large percent of books challenged. To a lesser degree, nonfiction titles with the subject heading *Sex* were challenged much more than their fiction counterparts. More pointedly, nonfiction books about sex intended for teenage girls were challenged more than those for teenage boys. Books with the subject heading *African-Americans* were challenged far more than those with subject headings featuring any other race or ethnicity. These trends in book challenges raise questions about the general nature of censorship in the 21st century and may relate to suppression in other fields, such as law and popular culture. Regardless, librarians who are aware of which subjects and classifications are prone to objections may better prepare for future book challenges.



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