Finding Silent Censorship

2023 ALA Emerging Leaders Group F
Project for the Intellectual Freedom Round Table (IFRT)

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Project Description

In January 2023, the American Library Association (ALA) Emerging Leaders Group F was assigned the Finding Silent Censorship project by the sponsoring organization the Intellectual Freedom Round Table (IFRT). According to the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), 82-97% of challenges to library content (including challenges to books, library events and programs, and more) remain unreported. The goal of the Finding Silent Censorship project is to update the "82-97% unreported" statistic and raise awareness of the necessity of reporting censorship to ALA. We also created a set of recommendations for OIF, which we list in the conclusion of this report.

Background

At a time where the number of challenges to library books, materials, and programming has grown exponentially, it is especially important to track and disseminate statistical information on the number of attempts to restrict or remove access to library materials and the outcomes of these attempts.

One of the fundamental hurdles of this project was the identification and synthesis of sources of information for library challenges. ALA OIF has kept a database of challenged library materials since 1990[1]. IFRT (founded in June 1973), was organized as the association's "membership-activity program for intellectual freedom. The activities of the round table supplement the OIF's educational program and offer opportunities for ALA members to become active in the association's intellectual freedom efforts.[2]" Both OIF and IFRT gather, store, and disseminate nationwide data on challenges to library materials, and both develop resources, tools, and programs on how best to handle challenges and raise awareness on the importance of preserving intellectual freedom. In addition to the data from OIF and IFRT, some states collect challenge data and compile it into statewide reports. Furthermore, PEN America, the American

[1] ALA OIF Challenge Reporting, https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report.
[2] About IFRT, https://www.ala.org/rt/ifrt/about.

branch of an international nonprofit dedicated to free speech and intellectual freedom, also collects data on censorship. By identifying sources of censorship data, our group's goal was to determine where there was potential for discrepancy between reporting data, and potential areas for improvement.

Methods

The focus for this phase of the project was to determine how each state was gathering information about challenges in their libraries and the methods used to keep track of reports. It was determined that the best way to obtain this information was to send a survey out to the heads of the intellectual freedom committees for each state's library associations. The results and any additional feedback could be used to discover more about how the state associations handle content challenges. It was hypothesized that the IFRT could use this evidence to encourage states to send more data to ALA and improve the current low rate of reported information.

The survey questions were designed by our group and approved by the IFRT sponsors before release. We chose to use Google Forms as it provided a familiar interface for users, and allowed us to collaboratively view and analyze the results.

The survey was sent to all fifty state organizations, who were given two weeks to respond. Questions asked included.[3]

- Does your state library association track challenge reports independently of the ALA OIF Challenge Reporting form?
- Where do challenges get reported?
- What kind of information is reported as challenged?
- Who within a library is responsible for sending the report?
- How long are statistics about challenges retained?

All responses were compiled and reviewed upon the completion of the response period.

Results

Out of fifty state organizations, thirty-six responded to the survey, with at least eleven answering all questions.[4] 72 percent stated that they do not track challenge reports beyond what is sent to ALA-OIF (Figure 1). The majority of library reports do go to ALA, while many are also sent to the relevant state library association. Six states have copies of reports sent to library boards and/or administrations, while three ask that the State Library receives a copy. One respondent even said that each library can do whatever it wishes when it comes to reporting what information to which organization (Figure 2).

[3] See Appendix A for a full list of survey questions.
[4] See Appendix B for the charts and graphs of survey results.

Most states place the responsibility for reporting challenges onto library staff, while at least ten place it on the shoulders of the library director. A few reported that anyone, including community members and library users, had the ability to report challenges, though how they would be able to do so was not clarified. It is possible that, in these states, a member of the community could indirectly challenge an item by contacting the State Library without informing the local library first, but more information will need to be gathered on this particular method to determine the accuracy of this claim (Figure 3).

Most state library associations that collect this data retain challenge records for five years or less, however, a significant minority keep them for more than ten years (Figure 4). The wide variation in archiving means that it is difficult to compare challenge histories from one state to another. A secondary issue that arises when trying to compile data on challenges by state is tied to the fact that states only reporting to the OIF are not given access to statewide statistics of any kind at the end of the year, or ever, making it virtually impossible to compare challenge histories for each state individually from year to year or across the board.

The vast majority of challenged resources are traditional print books. Over half of all reporting states stated that more than 60 percent of challenges were for these materials, with a majority of those claiming a percentage of over 80. Graphic novels were also high on the list, while it was relatively rare to see any challenges for digital resources (Figure 5). Meanwhile, most of these challenges were materials whose intended audience are young adults, with items published for other age groups not getting as much attention (Figure 6).

Limitations

In addition to various data sources, our group also found in preliminary research that there were varying definitions for what constitutes a "challenge." For example, ALA OIF categorizes challenges and censorship into the following[5]:

- Materials Challenge (books, movies, magazines, digital content)
- Internet-Related Challenge (filtering, access, use policies)
- Library Service (meeting rooms, programs, displays, exhibits, author visits)
- Patron Privacy or Confidentiality Issue (circ. records, PII)
- Hate Crime (defacement of library property to target a specific group; use of swastikas or other symbols of intimidation)
- Threats or Harassment to Staff (online, by phone, by email, or in-person)
- Legislative Concerns (including executive orders and A.G. opinions)
- Other (including 1st Amendment audits and student publications)

By comparison, PEN America measures book bans, which they define as:

> "[A]ny action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a

[5] ALA OIF Report Censorship form, https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report.

previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished.[6]"

Furthermore, PEN America makes a distinction between book bans in libraries *and* classrooms, just libraries or just classrooms, solely tracks bans in school libraries, and does not track data around school library programs.

As such, we believe the variance in the definition of a challenge and what constitutes censorship and/or a ban is worth further investigation, as we believe it influences what library workers and the public at large consider worthy of reporting to ALA OIF.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on the data collected, we present the following as formal recommendations to ALA OIF on behalf of IFRT:

- Clearly define "challenge" on the ALA website and throughout organizational materials. We believe a formal definition will have a positive impact on the overall number of challenges reported.
- Distribute annual reports for each state. This provides crucial information to states, especially since the majority of responses indicate that states do not keep separate statistics.

We propose the following as potential projects for future IFRT-sponsored Emerging Leaders:

- Develop targeted outreach to states who did not complete the survey. This could be a way to forge a new community partnership, or maintain an existing one. This could also be a great opportunity for research or case study work on a specific state.
- Develop workflow recommendations for ALA OIF for the release of individual state reports. This could be an opportunity to make recommendations on the compilation of the report, accessible visualization and interpretation of the data, or something else.
- Develop uniform language and definitions used in official ALA activities in re: data collection, outreach, and engagement.

Acknowledgements

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[6] Banned in the USA: State Laws Supercharge Book Suppression in Schools, PEN America, https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/.

Appendix A. IFRT/Emerging Leaders Project Survey

Section 1 of 6

We are reaching out in our capacity as volunteers working with the American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Round Table (ALA IFRT). We are currently working on the Fighting Silent Censorship Project, which will gather and summarize the various ways library materials are challenged across the country.

We are reaching out to you because we believe that you or your organization is an important source of information for this data, and we are especially interested in the answers to the questions below.

Thank you for your time and your responses.

Question 1: Which state are you from?:

1. Alabama
2. Alaska
3. Arizona
4. Arkansas
5. California
6. Colorado
7. Connecticut
8. Delaware
9. Florida
10. Georgia
11. Hawaii
12. Idaho
13. Illinois
14. Indiana
15. Iowa
16. Kansas
17. Kentucky
18. Louisiana
19. Maine
20. Maryland
21. Massachusetts
22. Michigan
23. Minnesota
24. Mississippi
25. Missouri
26. Montana
27. Nebraska
28. Nevada
29. New Hampshire
30. New Jersey
31. New Mexico

32. New York
33. North Carolina
34. North Dakota
35. Ohio
36. Oklahoma
37. Oregon
38. Pennsylvania
39. Rhode Island
40. South Carolina
41. South Dakota
42. Tennessee
43. Texas
44. Utah
45. Vermont
46. Virginia
47. Washington
48. West Virginia
49. Wisconsin
50. Wyoming

Section 2 of 6: State Library Association Reporting

Question 2: Does your state library association track challenge reports independently of the ALA OIF Challenge Reporting form?

- Yes
- No
- N/A-I am not answering on behalf of a state library association

Section 3 of 6: Challenge Reporting Information

A "challenge" is considered any form of communication to a library or library workers that calls for removal of library materials, programming, displays, or other services.

Question 3: When challenges are reported, they are reported to the (Please select all that apply:

- American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom
- The State Library Association
- The State Library
- The library board
- Library administration
- Other…

Question 4: What kinds of information are being reported as challenges to your organization (Please select all that apply)?:

- Official requests for reconsideration of books.
- Complaints or Concerns about books or programming without official request forms.
- Complaints or Concerns about library displays or programming.
- Cancellation of library programming due to complaints/concerns from the general public.
- Books or materials being removed from shelves by library staff or school officials without proper procedure being followed.
- Being told to move books or materials to different areas of the library to restrict access.
- Books are being hidden by library patrons to restrict access.
- Books or materials being checked out by patrons who refuse to return them.
- Other…
- Add option

Question 5: Who reports these challenges (Please select all that apply?:

- Library Director
- Library Staff
- Library Users
- Other…

Question 6: How is information collected (Please select all that that apply)?:

- Google form or other survey style form
- Email
- Via phone call
- Other…

Question 7: Is the information collected and compiled into an annual report that is shared in your state?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- Other…

Section 4 of 6: File Upload

If you are able to, please upload the most recent annual report with challenge information here.

Section 5 of 6: Data Collected

The next questions deal with statistics and data collected from challenge reporting forms in your state.

Question 8: Approximately how many total challenges did your institution receive in the year 2022?

Question 9: How long does your organization retain statistics about reported challenges?

- 10 or more years
- 8-9 years
- 6-7 years
- 4-5 years
- 2-3 years
- 1 year
- Less than 1 year

Question 10: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with traditional print books?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 11: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with graphic novels or manga?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 12: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with digital resources?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%

- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 13: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with adult titles?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 14: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with YA titles?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 15: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with Middle Grade titles?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 16: What percent of challenges reported in 2022 deal with Juvenile or Children's titles?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 17: About what percent of challenges from 2022 result in the challenged items being retained by the reporting libraries?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Question 18: About what percent of challenges from 2022 result in the challenged items being removed by the reporting libraries?

- 100%-90%
- 89%-80%
- 79%-70%
- 69%-60%
- 59%-50%
- 49%-40%
- 39%-30%
- 29%-20%
- 19%-10%
- Less than 10%
- Unknown

Section 6 of 6: Additional information

Question 19: May we contact you with any additional questions or for additional information?:

- Yes
- No

Question 20: If the answer to the previous question is yes, please provide your contact information below.

End of survey.

Appendix B. Survey Results Charts

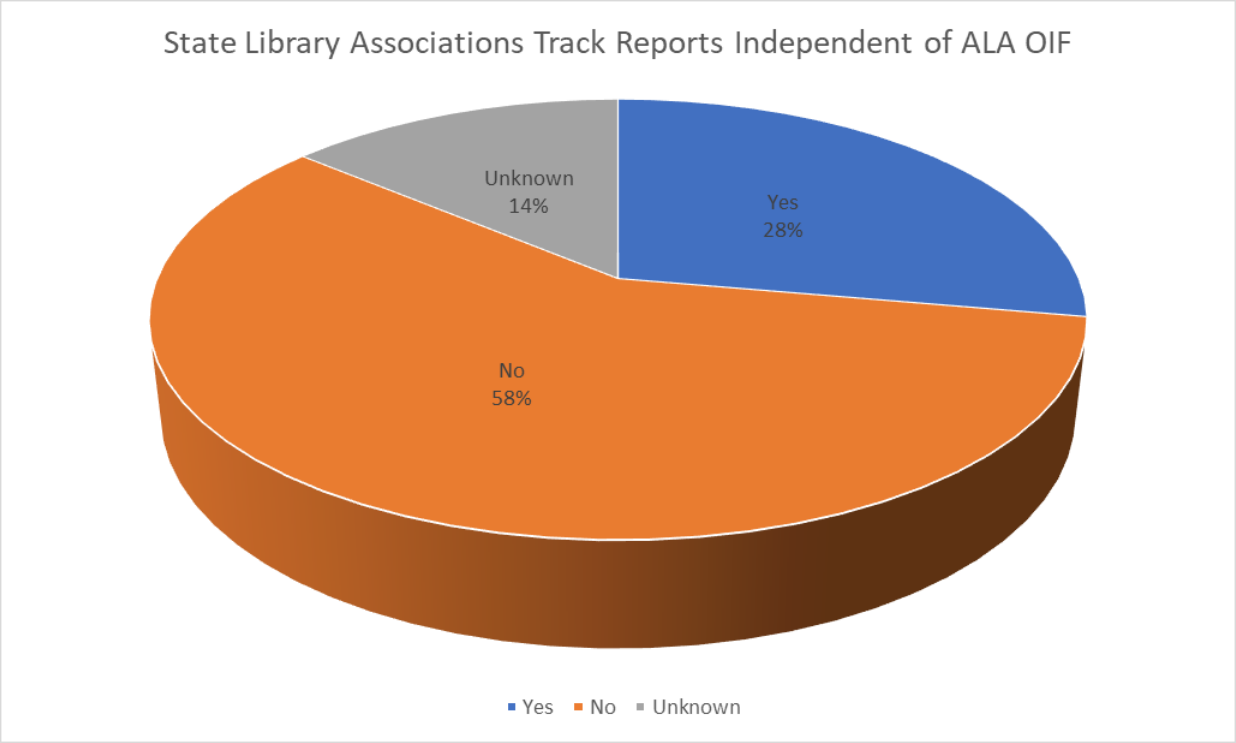

Figure 1: The percentage of state library associations that track reports independently of ALA OIF

Figure 2: Number of states that send challenge reports to each organization (states could mark more than one answer)

Figure 3: Which individuals are responsible for reporting challenges (states could mark more than one answer)

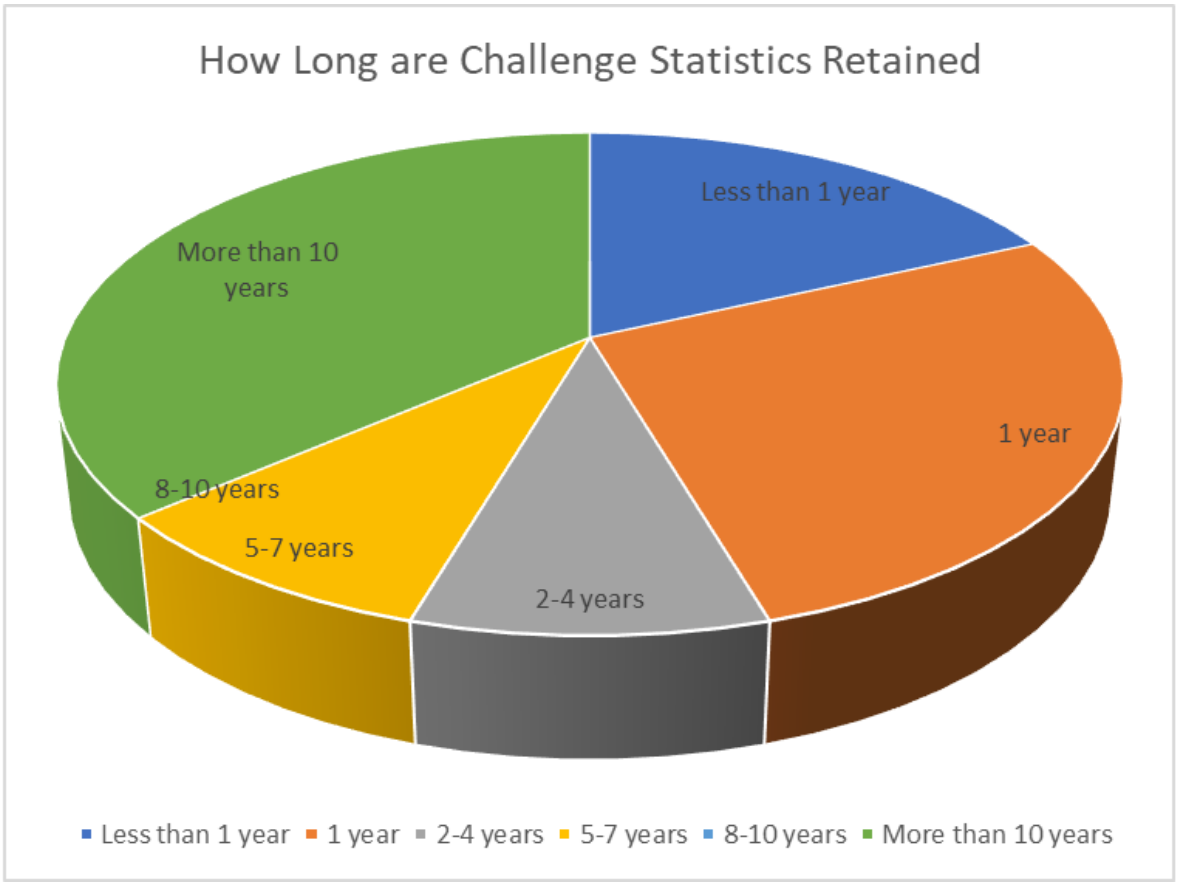

Figure 4: Length of time different states retain challenge records

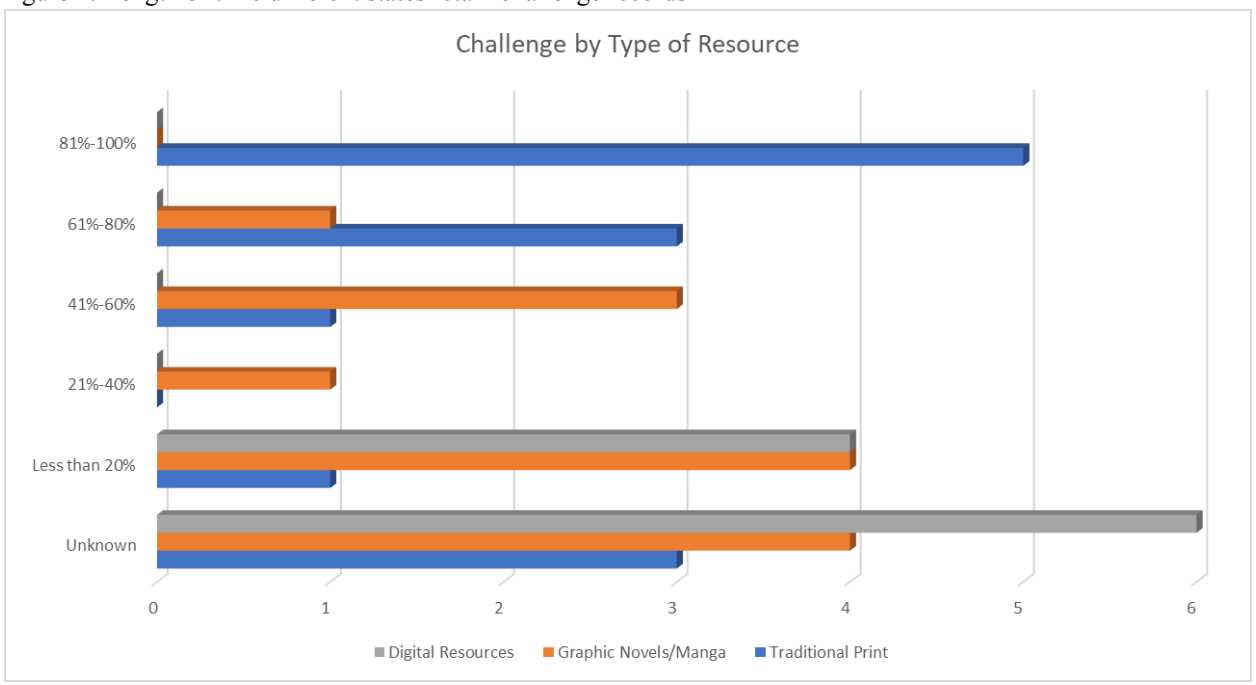

Figure 5: Number of States reporting percentage of challenges by resource type

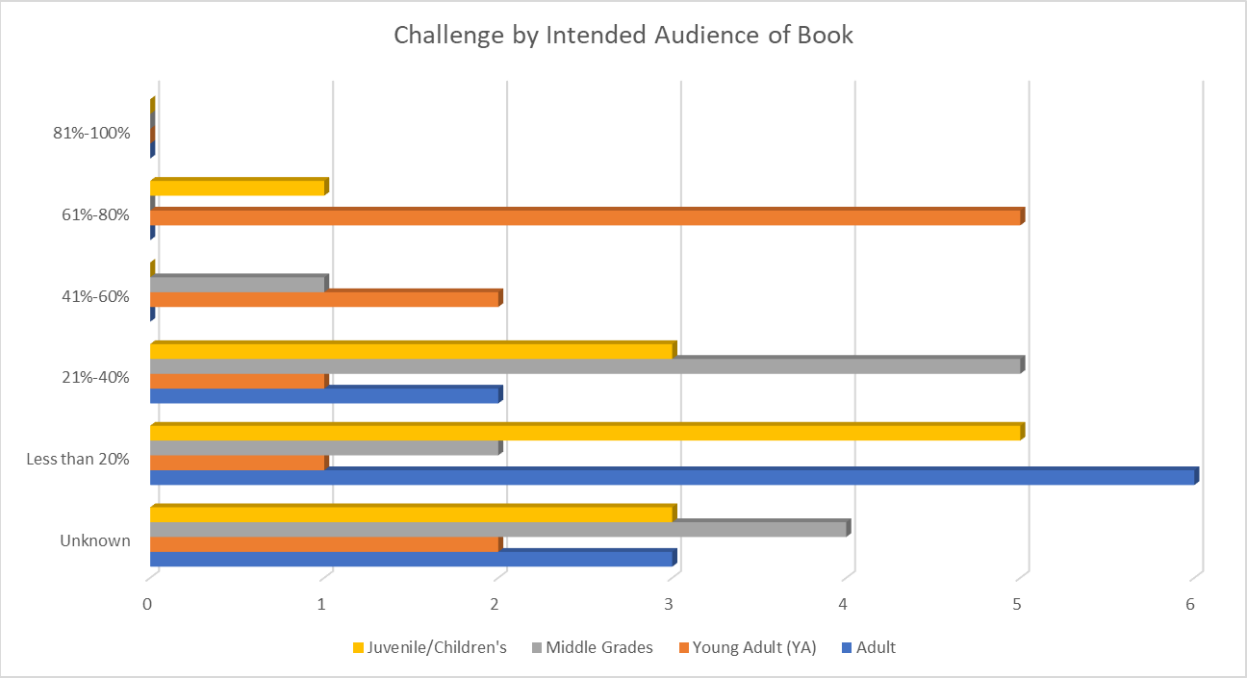

Figure 6: Number of states reporting percentage of challenges by intended audience

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