



# LIBRARY HEALTH & SAFETY REPORT

Survey  
and interview  
results

**CUPEBC**   
LIBRARY COMMITTEE

# SUMMARY

The Library Health & Safety project intends to build a better understanding of the main safety concerns of library workers. CUPE BC represents approximately 3700 library workers across the province in schools, universities, colleges, and communities. The survey was conducted in May and June, 2015. Over 500 individuals responded from more than 50 communities and 45 locals. Following the survey 23 workers participated in in-depth interviews in the fall of 2015 in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and possible solutions. This is the final report on both the survey and member interviews.

Libraries are one of the most accessible indoor public spaces that exist in communities. In addition to being information and technology hubs, in many communities libraries are also centres for community building and social interaction. As a result, at times libraries can be unpredictable workplaces.

## ***Libraries can be unpredictable workplaces***

Library workers are exposed to a variety of hazards and often are asked to deal with challenging situations. Survey respondents report increased expectations to fulfill surveillance and security functions. Respondents also report increased interactions with vulnerable, high needs and marginalized clientele. Libraries workers witness, and in many cases are responsible for dealing with, verbal threats, intoxicated patrons, drug use, theft, and viewing of explicit material. Over 65% of library workers are exposed to a wide variety of biohazards including feces, urine, used needles, and bed bugs.

Library workers often work with marginalized and vulnerable populations including the homeless, people struggling with mental health issues, seniors, and new immigrants. They often provide a source of social interaction and support. It is very common for patrons to use the library for shelter, or for the purpose of social interaction with library staff. Libraries often attract individuals seeking information that would be more commonly associated with social services, including

English language support, settlement support, legal advice, medical information, job search assistance etc. Library workers, as service providers, are often called on to utilize a wide range of skills on a daily basis in order to effectively work with diverse groups without necessarily having the training or the time to safely do so.

While libraries have policies and resources in place to deal with health and safety issues, the survey results demonstrate that there is room for improvement in many areas. These areas include improving awareness of working alone policies, increasing staffing when possible, establishing better sight lines within libraries (e.g. by using mirrors), improving procedures for dealing with problem patrons, hiring outreach workers specifically for dealing with vulnerable patrons, and encouraging better utilization of Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees.

## ***Library worker interviews offer solutions***

The follow-up interviews enabled a deeper analysis of key issues and possible solutions. They reveal that, although many of the issues cannot simply be dealt with overnight, good communication about the issues and time for debriefing is key for reducing stress and anxiety for workers. Many library workers know what they need to feel safe at work, and therefore consultation with them prior to decision making can help ensure remedies will be effective and that workers feel heard.

The interviews also demonstrated that library workers are passionate about the role libraries play as an open community space for all, but there is a tension between that passion and concern for health and safety. In order to ensure that library workers can continue to do the important work that they do in supporting and enhancing our communities, a proactive approach is required in dealing with OH&S issues.

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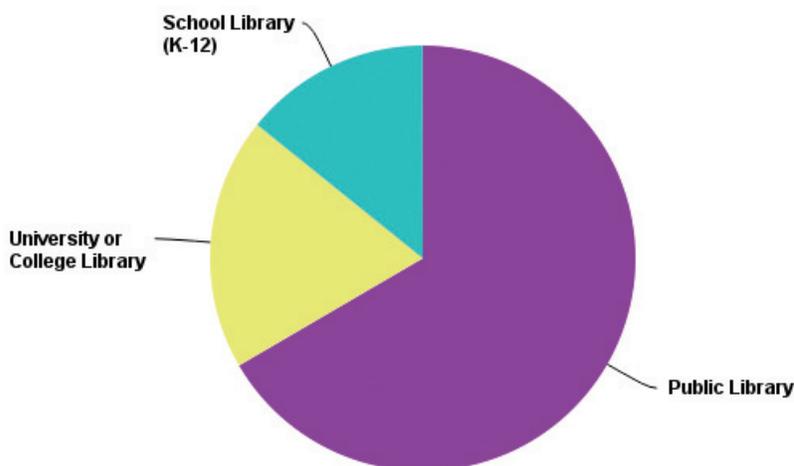
# WHO RESPONDED

Over 500 library workers responded from 45 locals and over 50 communities across the province. This represents a significant portion of the approximately 3,700 CUPE library workers in B.C.

## Type of library

The survey collected responses from 21 out of the 25 locals representing public libraries, 12 out of the 15 locals representing post-secondary libraries, and 12 of the 55 locals representing K-12 library workers. As a proportion, 67% of respondents were from public libraries, 19% from post-secondary and 14% from K-12.

Specifically for public library workers, 333 out of the 3,125 public library members in B.C. responded, which is just over 10%. The three public library locals with the most respondents were CUPE 391 Vancouver, Gibson and Sechelt Library workers with 58 responses, CUPE 1123 Okanagan Regional Library with 51 respondents and CUPE 1698 Fraser Valley Regional Library with 45 respondents. Together these three locals alone represent over 45% of respondents from public libraries. These locals represent workers in over 26 communities across the province.



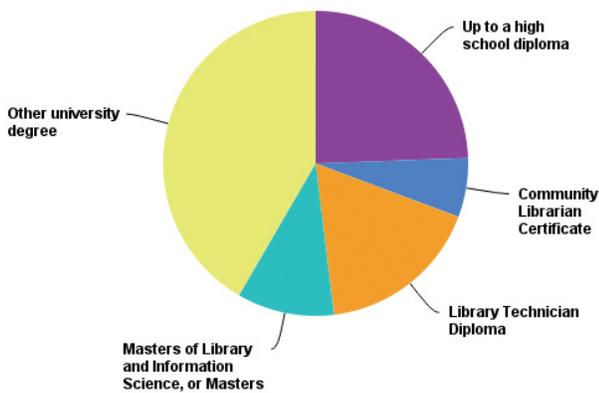
### TYPE OF LIBRARY

	# of responses	Percentage
Public	333	67%
Post-secondary	96	19%
K-12	71	14%
Total	500	100%

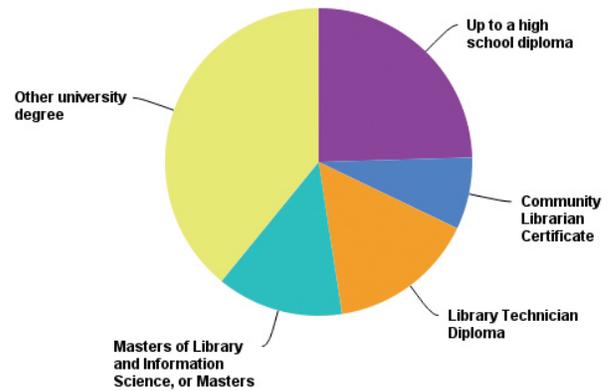
## Educational level

Seventy-five per cent of all respondents had some form of post-secondary education – 6% Community Library Certificate, 17% Library Technician Diploma, 10% Masters of Library and Information Science or Masters of Archival Science, and 41% other university degree. As the charts below demonstrate educational levels vary a bit between library types, with the university sector having the most highly educated library workers.

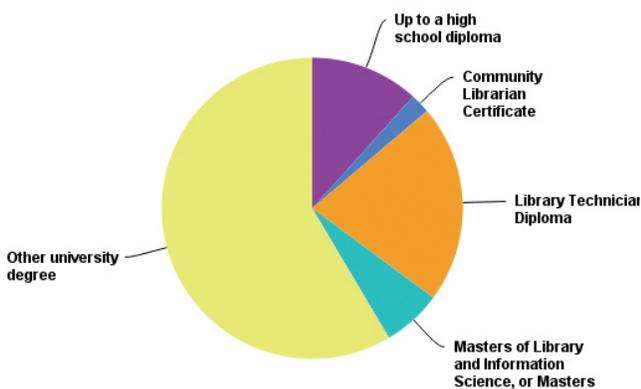
**Total for all Respondents**



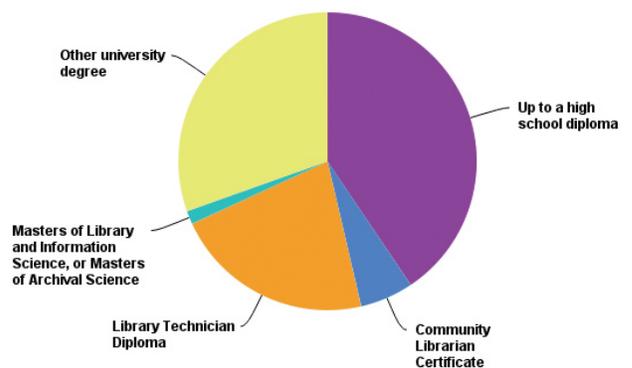
**Public Community Libraries**



**Post-Secondary Libraries**



**K-12 Libraries**

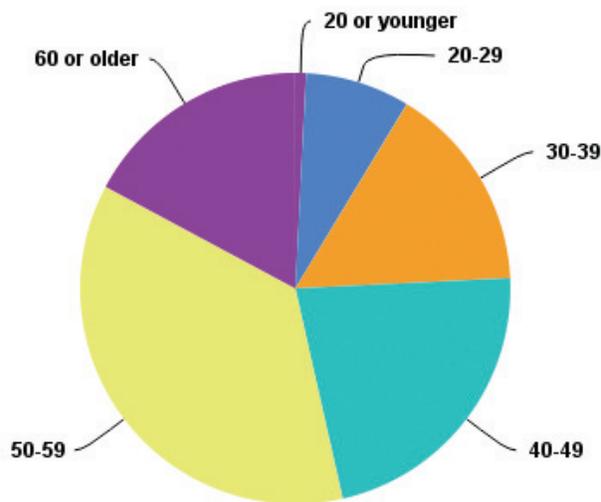


## EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF RESPONDENTS

	Regular full-time	Regular part-time	Auxilliary/casual
Public	47% (154)	39% (129)	16%(51)
Post-secondary	78% (75)	17% (16)	7% (7)
K-12	46% (33)	44% (31)	11% (8)
Total	53% (262)	35% (176)	13% (66)

## Employment status

The majority (53%) of respondents were regular fulltime employees, 35% were regular part-time employees and 13% were auxilliary/casual employees. Post-Secondary libraries had a higher proportion of respondents who are regular fulltime employees than public or K-12 libraries.

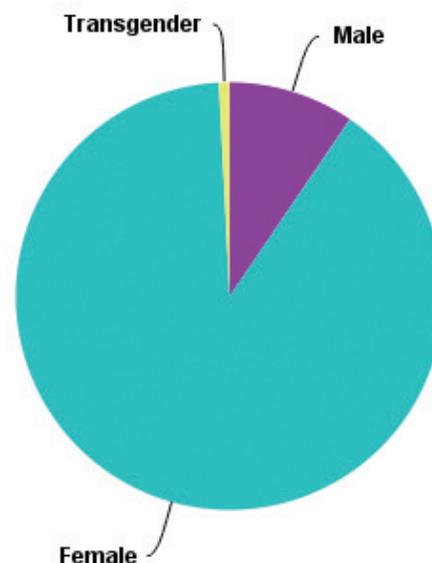


## Age

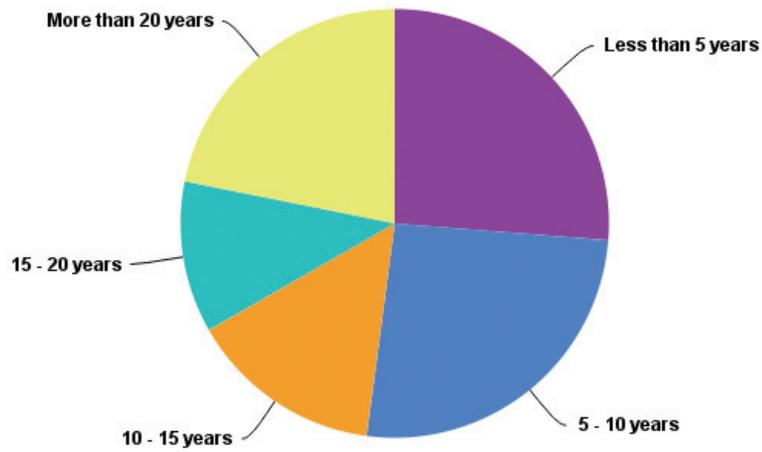
Approximately 75% of survey respondents were over the age of 40, specifically 22% (110 individuals) were 40-49, 36% (180) were 50-59, and 17% (85) were over 60. Less than 1% (4) of respondents were under 20, 8% (39) were 20-29 and, 16% (77) were 30-39.

## Gender

The vast majority, 90% (443), of respondents were female and just under 10% (47) were men and less than 1% (4) were transgender. This is not surprising, as most library workers who are CUPE members are female.

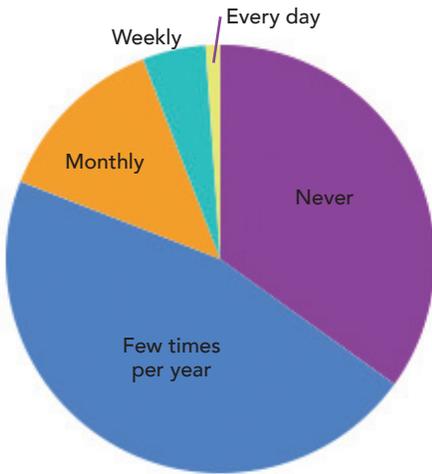


## Duration of employment



More than 20% (109) had worked at the library for more than 20 years, 11% (57) for 15-20 years, 15% (73) for 10-15 years, 26% (129) for 5-10 years, and 26% (133) for less than five years.

**How often have you felt unsafe at work?**



# STATUS OF HEALTH AND SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

Over 80% of respondents indicated that they never or rarely (a few times per year) feel unsafe at work. Thirty-five per cent (161) never feel unsafe, 46% (212) only a few times per year. The remaining 20% of workers feel unsafe at least monthly. One per cent (5) feel unsafe every day, 5% (22) feel unsafe every week, and 13% (61) feel unsafe every month.

## Refusing unsafe work

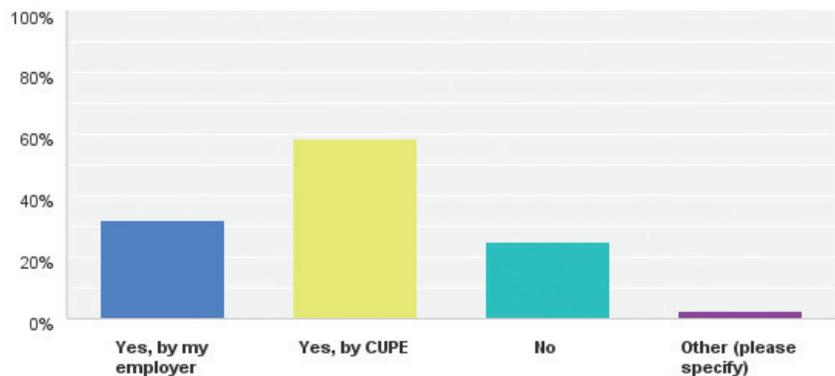
Approximately 75% of survey respondents were aware of their right to refuse unsafe work. Most commonly workers had been informed by CUPE rather than their employer, which demonstrates CUPE's important role in health and safety education. At the same time, only 54% of respondents indicated that they were comfortable exercising their right to refuse unsafe work, 23% of respondents stated they did not feel comfortable refusing unsafe work, and the rest of the respondents were unsure what they would do in that situation.

This demonstrates that more work needs to be done in educating and empowering workers to feel comfortable exercising this right.

**Do you feel comfortable refusing unsafe work?**



**Have you been informed of your right to refuse unsafe work?**



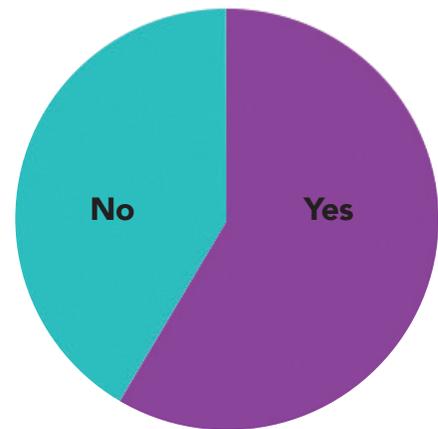
# STAFFING LEVELS AND SAFETY AT WORK

## Working alone

The majority (65%) of the survey respondents are not required or are rarely required to work alone. At the same time, there are many workers who are required to work alone on a frequent basis – almost 14% (65) work alone every day, 13% (58) every week, and 8% (38) at least once a month.

As the chart to the right demonstrates, of those who do work alone at least monthly, 46% (72) are unaware of the procedures for working alone. More needs to be done to ensure members working alone have access to this information.

**If you are required to work alone, are you aware of the working alone procedures in your workplace?**



## Higher levels of staffing required to ensure safety

Just over half (56%) of survey respondents felt that staffing levels impacted their safety at work. Eighty-two respondents provided comments to explain their response.

Those who said that staffing did impact their safety and provided comments (64 individuals), explained a variety of reasons why staffing impacted their safety. Generally, individuals feel safer with more staff around.

*Staffing models have changed so that information and clerical staff are not supposed to be on the desks anymore, and the lack of staff presence has meant less backup/support for those workers who are in the stacks and have problems/security issues with patrons.*

*Anything can happen when you work in a public place, especially if a person with negative or aggressive intentions sees that there would be few or no witnesses to whatever it is they're thinking of doing.*

Many individuals commented that they felt unsafe while working alone. This included those who explained that even if there is more than one employee on shift, workers may have to work alone during break times or may have to work on a floor of the library alone if the library has multiple levels.

*Sometimes working alone with no other staff at all in a five-storey building with multiple entrances and exits .*

*Staff work alone during their co-workers lunch/ break times very frequently; there may or may not be other employees (librarians, non-library staff, etc.) nearby.*

Some individuals felt their library was chronically understaffed, and there was also concern about not having enough staff to cover absences on weekends and evenings.

*Consistently understaffed; it is difficult to close and feel safe.*

*Inadequate staffing increases stress as work levels rise (inadequate replacement for sick staff).*

*Less staff in the evenings and weekends, when Directors and Security aren't available either.*

Some also talked about not only the importance of having enough staff, but the importance of having enough trained staff.

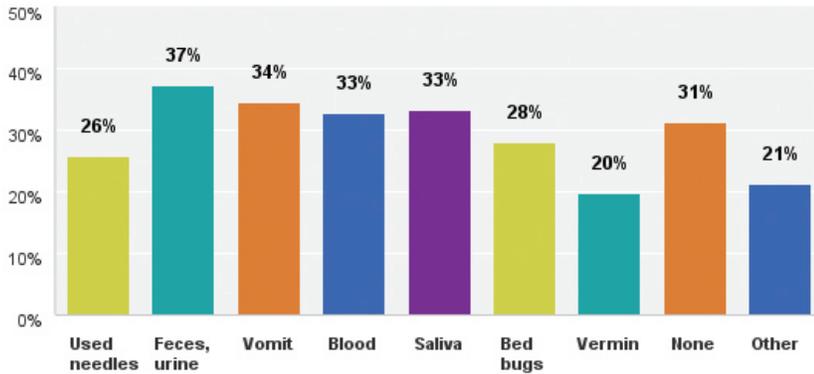
*Because training/responsibility for many safety procedures falls only to certain staff (librarians), yet they are often not available/on the front lines. Would be better to have more training for all front line staff.*

Those who said that staffing did not impact their safety and provided comments (19 individuals), explained that either staffing levels were sufficient or that more staff would not help improve safety.

*Depending on the situation, it would not matter if there were more staff. The danger still remains as all we are allowed to do is wait for police .*

*There are always at least five people working at my branch, so I never have to work alone.*

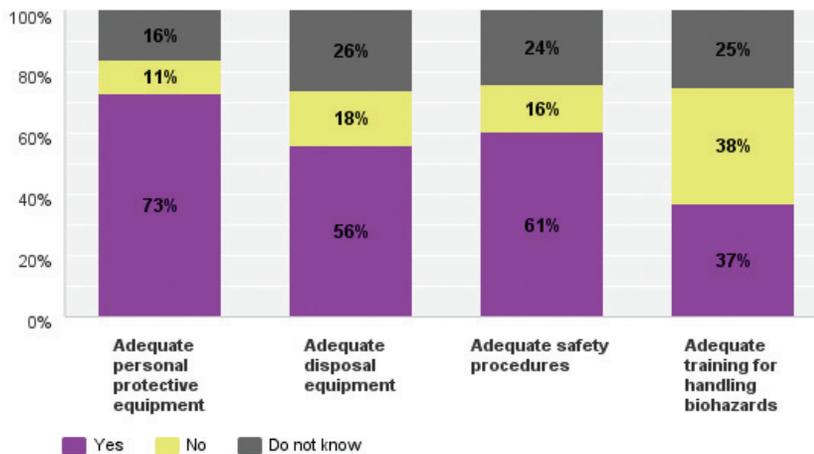
### Percentages of various biohazards staff were exposed to at their place of work



## Biohazards

Library workers are commonly exposed to biohazards at work. Only 31% of survey respondents indicated that they do not encounter biohazards at work. The most common biohazards encountered are feces and urine – with 37% of respondents indicating exposure at work. See chart to the right for other common biohazards. The ‘Other’ category had a wide range of responses including drugs and related paraphernalia, prescriptions, fleas, mice, mice droppings, nasal discharge, mould, lice, dust, and garbage.

### Resources available to staff at their workplace for dealing with biohazards

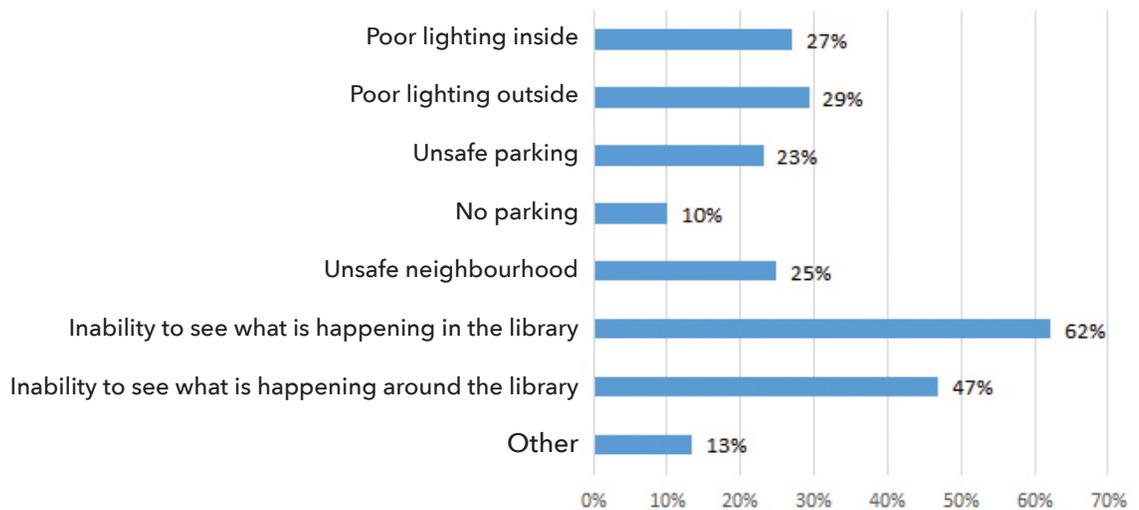


While more than 65% of survey respondents are exposed to biohazards at work, only 37% reported having adequate training for handling biohazards. Thirty-eight per cent said that adequate training did not exist and the remaining 25% did not know. On a more positive note, over 70% of respondents indicated having adequate personal protective equipment, and over 60% reported having adequate safety procedures.

## Physical hazards

A variety of building related hazards exist at libraries across the province. The most common building related hazard is the inability to see what is happening in the library and around the entrances and exits. Most of the comments in the 'other' section were simply to provide more detail on the hazard identified.

### Does your workplace have any of the following hazards?



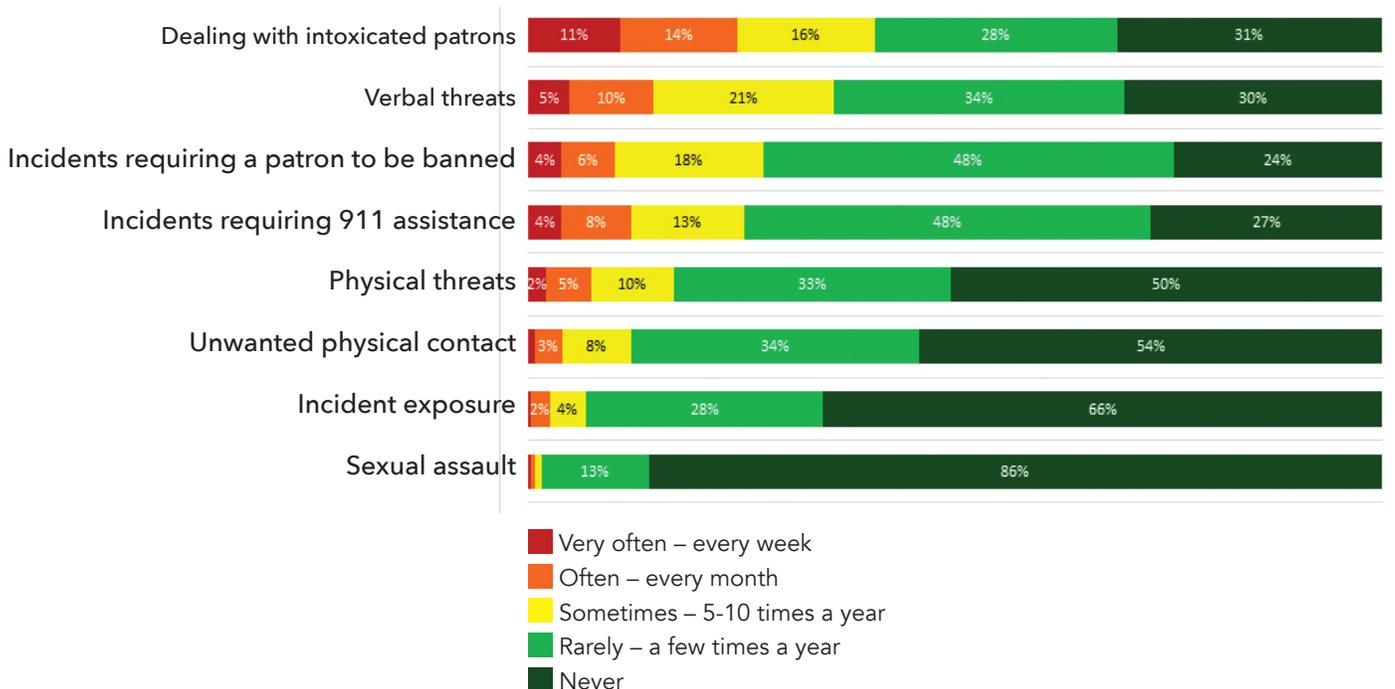
# SAFETY INCIDENTS

## Frequency and type of incidents

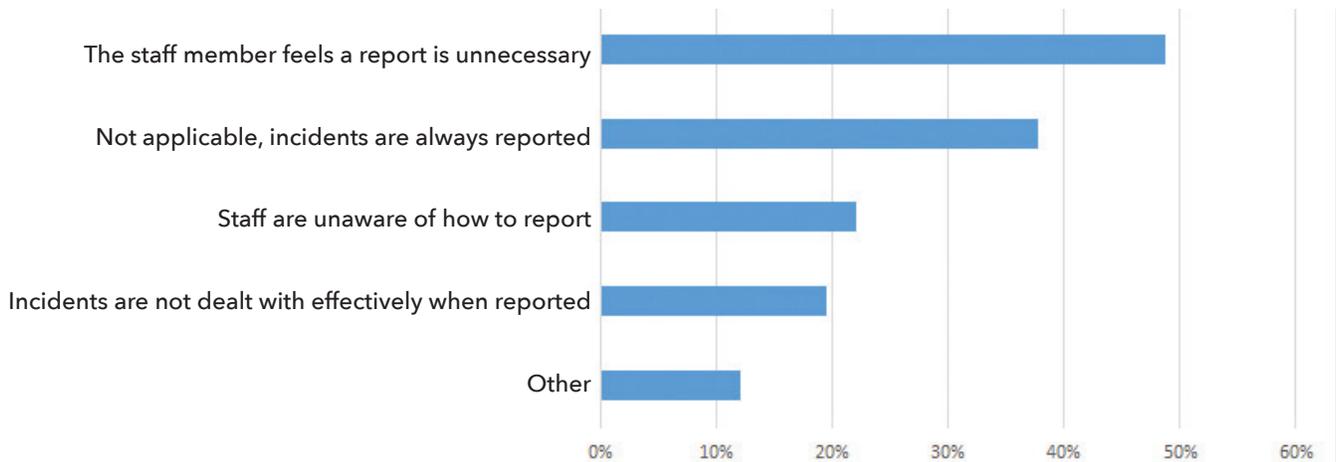
Approximately half of survey respondents had witnessed a safety incident at their library, and 30% had personally experienced a safety incident.

The graph below demonstrates the frequency of various types of incidents that may threaten the safety of library workers. The most frequent type of incident reported was dealing with intoxicated patrons – 11% indicated that this happened every week and 14% indicated at least once a month. In the comments section a few respondents specifically noted having to deal with patrons under the influence of other drugs as well. The second most common issue was verbal threats – with 15% of survey respondents indicating that this happens at least once a month. Only 27% of survey respondents reported that incidents requiring the assistance of 911 never occur in their library – approximately 25% responded that this happens at least 5 times a year.

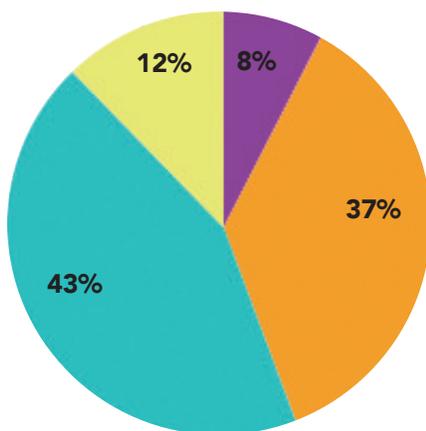
**Frequency and type of incidents**



## What are the main reasons incidents may not be reported?



## How effective is your employer in dealing with reported incidents?



- Not effective
- Somewhat effective
- Effective
- Do not know

Approximately 80% of respondents stated that employers are effective or somewhat effective in dealing with reported incidents. The main concerns expressed in the comments section were that there was not enough balance between desire to be open for all and safety concerns for staff.

## Incident reporting

Safety incidents that occur at libraries are often reported. Only 11% of respondents indicated that safety incidents were reported less than 50% of the time. Forty per cent reported that incidents are always reported. Incidents are most commonly reported to managers, 84% and coworkers 62%. In the other category many respondents indicated that incidents are also reported to security staff. Only 51% of incidents are reported to the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee. This again demonstrates the need to improve health and safety training and awareness of procedures. The Health and Safety Committee provides a useful resource to address health and safety in the workplace, but can only effectively do so if provided with the required information.

The most common reason incidents are not reported is because a staff member feels a report is unnecessary. In the comments section six individuals also brought up that reporting is time consuming and sometimes there is simply not enough time in the day to fill out reporting forms. It is concerning that workload is viewed as a deterrent for properly reporting incidents.

# RESPONDING TO HEALTH AND SAFETY CHALLENGES

## *Response to illegal activity*

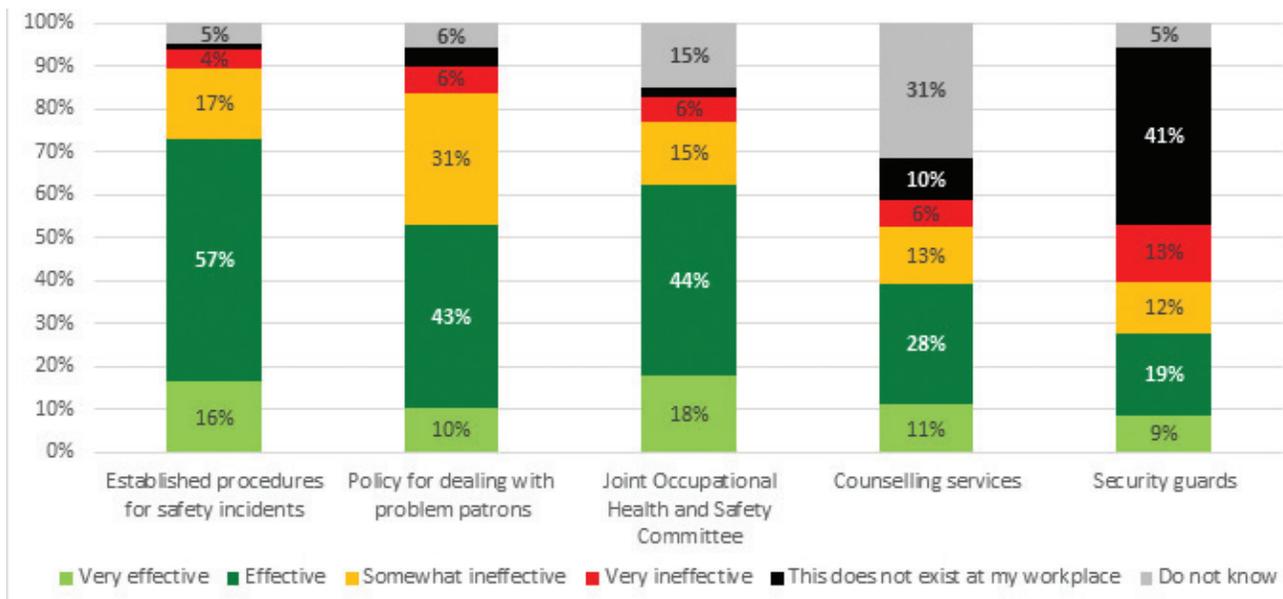
The survey asked 'If illegal activity occurs in your library, please describe how your employer has responded to such activities.' Over 190 individuals responded to this question with a variety of different approaches:

- **Police and/or security:** The most common response was that the police or security services are contacted if illegal activity occurs. Specifically, 72 individuals mentioned calling or notifying the police or RCMP, and 34 individuals mentioned getting security services involved.
- **Banning of patrons:** 19 individuals said that patrons are banned from the library as a result, and 4 individuals responded that individuals are asked to leave.
- **Surveillance:** 8 individuals mentioned the use of staff to monitor activity in the library, and 7 individuals mentioned the use of security cameras.
- **Reporting:** 14 individuals mentioned that illegal activities are formally reported.
- **Signs:** 7 individuals specifically mentioned the use of signs, especially to prevent theft.
- **Training:** Only 5 individuals mentioned specifically that they had received training as a result of illegal activity in the library.
- **Inadequate response:** 37 individuals described a response by their employer that did not adequately address the situation. One individual simply put it that 'Our employer says it's part of our job.' Others mentioned budget constraints, or just simply that measures taken have not prevented such activity from occurring in the future.

One individual mentioned that they call a youth liaison or an outreach worker when illegal activities occur.

## Policies, procedures and resources for health and safety at the workplace

The chart below shows how individuals rated the effectiveness of their workplace health and safety policies, procedures and resources. From bottom to top the chart shows – very effective, effective, somewhat ineffective, ineffective, does not exist, and do not know.



### EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND RESOURCES FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY AT THE WORKPLACE

	Very Effective	Effective	Somewhat Ineffective	Very ineffective	Does not exist	Do not know
Established procedures for safety incidents	16%	57%	17%	4%	1%	5%
Policy for dealing with problem patrons	10%	43%	31%	6%	4%	6%
Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee	18%	44%	15%	6%	2%	15%
Counselling services	11%	28%	13%	6%	10%	31%
Security guards	9%	19%	12%	13%	41%	5%

### **Established procedures for dealing with safety incidents**

The majority of respondents, 73%, indicated that established procedures in their workplace were either effective or very effective.

### **Policies for dealing with problem patrons**

Only 53% reported their policy for dealing with problem patrons as very effective or effective. Thirty-six per cent of respondents indicated that the policy at their library was either somewhat or very ineffective, and 10% were unaware of this policy or indicated that it did not exist in their workplace. This suggests that dealing with problem patrons remains a challenge in workplaces.

### **Joint Health and Safety Committee**

Sixty-two per cent of respondents indicated that their committee was effective or very effective. Twenty-one per cent indicated that their committee was somewhat or very ineffective. There was also a notable number of respondents who answered that they did not know – 15%.

### **Counselling services**

Most CUPE employees have access to an Employee Assistance Program, which is in place to provide assistance and counselling to distressed workers. This surveyed demonstrated that the awareness of this program is very low – 10% of respondents said that counselling services did not exist at their workplace and over 30% did not know. Of respondents who were aware, 39% indicated that the service was effective or very effective, while 19% indicated that services were somewhat or very ineffective.

### **Security guards**

Security guards had very mixed reviews. A significant number of respondents indicated that their library does not have security guards – 40%. Of the libraries that do have security guards half of respondents indicated

that they were effective and the other half that they were ineffective. This is especially concerning given that contacting security is a common response to illegal activity in libraries, and suggests that it would be useful to work with Health and Safety Committees to develop a different and more effective response.

### **Other security services**

The most common 'other security services' described were surveillance cameras and alarm systems. Also many respondents indicated that their library was close to the city police or RCMP.

### **Greater awareness among more senior employees**

In general workers with less than five years of experience were less likely to be aware of safety policies, procedures and services. In particular newer workers were much less likely to be aware of the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee. Among workers who have worked at the library for 5 years or less 4% indicated that this committee did not exist at their workplace and 25% did not know. In contrast, of workers who had worked at the library for twenty years or more, none of the respondents indicated that this committee did not exist at their workplace and only 5% did not know. This means nearly 30% of employees with less than five years seniority are unaware of the activities of the Joint Occupational Health and Safety committee compared with only 5% of employees with more than 20 years seniority.

This demonstrates a need to improve health and safety training during the orientation of new workers. The Health and Safety Committee is the primary workplace body capable of discussing issues and suggesting improvements. Awareness and use of this committee is key to a safe and healthy workplace.

# CHANGING JOB DUTIES AND CLIENTELE

One of the challenges in adequately dealing with health and safety issues is that the job duties have changed over time. On top of regular duties, library workers are increasingly working with populations that require social support, and also being relied on more by their employer to conduct surveillance for the purposes of safety. These duties put additional strain on the workload of library workers and can pose an additional health and safety threat if the proper training is not provided.

## ***Changing duties of library workers***

The survey asked “Have any of your duties changed over time due to the nature of your clientele?”

Only about half of survey respondents answered this question. Approximately 100 survey respondents simply indicated “No.” Approximately 150 said yes, with most explaining how duties had changed.

Answers varied but there were three themes that were identified by many individuals: 1) Increasingly being asked to carry out surveillance for security purposes 2) Increasingly coming into contact with marginalized populations, including seniors and those with compromised mental health, and in many cases providing social support and information 3) Increasing demand to help users with technology.

### **1) *Increasingly being asked to carry out surveillance for security purposes.***

Thirty-nine individuals had responses that fit within this theme. Sample responses:

*Yes, we “rove” more to keep an eye on the library, we are expected to be responsive to all situations. The only hard part is the chain of command when an issue arises as someone has to be responsible and could face criticism if something was not handled correctly.*

*More supervision of possible situations... walking around checking... flooding up on customer complaints and concerns... waking people at closing time.*

*Yes, in the downtown branch, we do a lot more patrolling, waking people up, kicking them out of washrooms for doing drugs or having sex. Answering more questions about social networks, where can I find a place to stay, how can I find a job, where can I get my resume done. More work helping with technological training, more questions about ESL, help with applying for citizenship, more vigilant about children being left alone, monitoring use of the internet. We are also being asked to do more programs/partnerships with community groups, but not given time to do it. We do it on the side of our desk in between customers checking in and checking out books, doing reference questions and helping people on the computer.*

*Not really in terms of our clientele, but as library assistants and library technicians, we are being asked to take more responsibility for library security. For example, it is now our job to make sure all windows are closed and no one is in the washrooms when we close. Also, security guard staffing has been reduced and their duties given to employees... For some reason a security guard who was excellent at her job and always made me feel secure is no longer working [on site]. No one told us she would be going or why. I miss her and the excellent service she provided.*

**2) Increasingly coming into contact with marginalized populations, including those with compromised mental health and seniors, and in many cases providing social support and information**

Thirty-five individuals had responses that fit within this theme. Sample responses:

*The issues at the library tend to be seasonal, with way more problems with the homeless during the winter months when they seek shelter in the library.*

*We have always done our best to help people with their information needs, but we are definitely dealing with the homeless a lot more in the past decade.*

*We have more people reveal to us that they have mental health issues and we have more international students/patrons using our library, but our duties are essentially the same, other than trying to accommodate any special needs that our clientele might have.*

*I work with more socially excluded patrons every day. We are asked to do more social services all the time.*

*Yes, we have become more like social workers as we deal with patrons with mental health issues, an aging population with dementia issues, etc.*

### **3) Increasing demand to help users with technology.**

Twenty-four individuals had responses that fit within this theme. Sample responses:

*Helping more young people and seniors with finding services and printing forms on the computer, as many in our area cannot afford computers or the internet.*

*Lots more questions about how you print things since we got the new Microsoft Word.*

*More training for public on E-services and E-device use. I spend less time looking on the shelves and more time on the computer.*

*Needing more tech skills to keep up with the younger generation and library programs.*

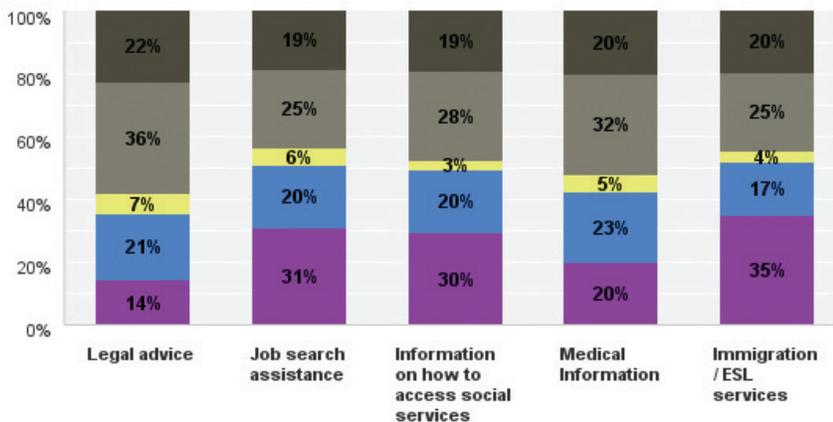
## Patrons requiring information about community services

Survey results show that more individuals feel that the demand for information regarding immigration and ESL services, job search assistance and accessing social services has increased over time rather than decreased or stayed the same. For the majority of individuals who answered, the need for legal advice and medical information has remained the same, rather than increased or decreased.

### HAS DEMAND FROM LIBRARY USERS FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE FOLLOWING SERVICES CHANGED OVER TIME?

	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased	Do not know	Not applicable
Legal advice	14%	21%	7%	36%	22%
Job search assistance	31%	20%	6%	25%	19%
Information on how to access social services	30%	20%	3%	28%	19%
Medical information	20%	23%	5%	32%	20%
Immigration / ESL services	35%	17%	4%	25%	20%

### Has demand from library services for the following services changed over time?



Many respondents, due to the nature of their job, felt they were unable to answer this question and explained this in the comments section.

Some library workers are not in information services and/or do not have contact with the public. Some workers at K-12 libraries and university libraries indicated also that they felt the question was not relevant to their library. In K-12, students are less likely to request this kind of information, and in universities, students have other free resources available to them in student services that can provide this information.

Other comments:

*Everyone is now a generalist and there is a lack of staff to access. These kinds of specialized resources and specialized programs the library provides have decreased – there is no acute training for staff in these areas.*

*Many roles, once the responsibility of various governments, have now fallen to the library yet its funding remains inadequate.*

## ***Beyond information – libraries serve many purposes for patrons***

Survey results clearly demonstrate that the library is not just simply a place to access information and books.

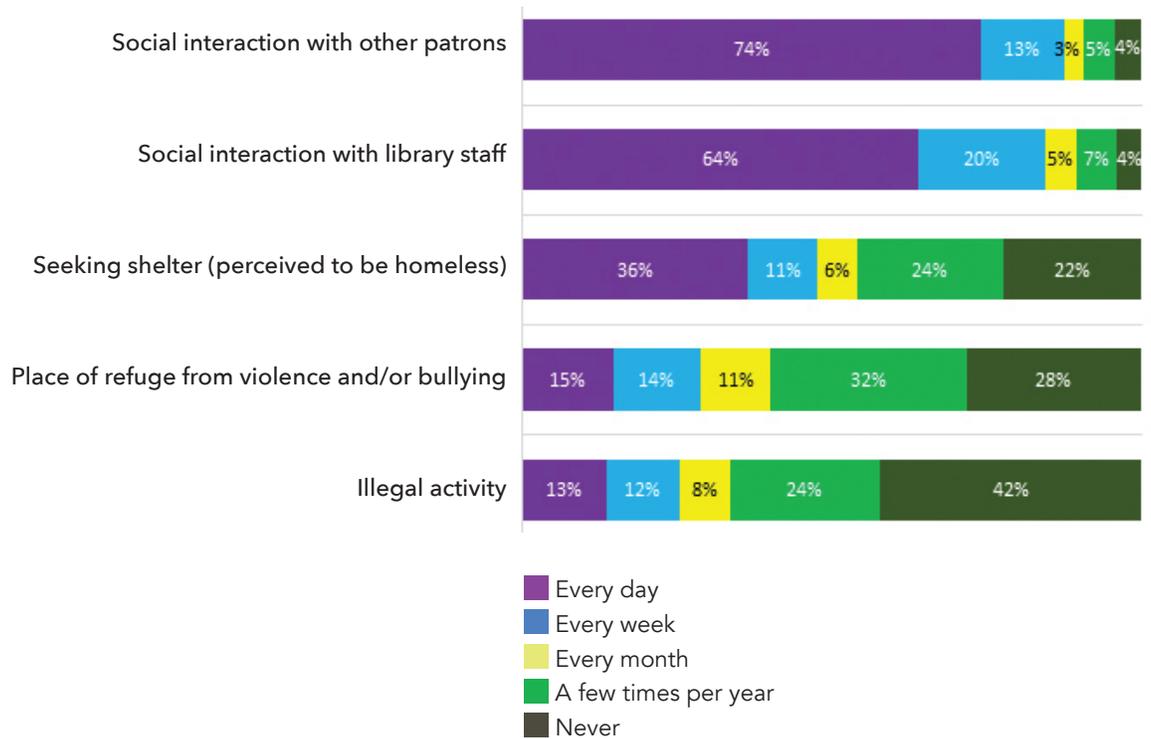
Libraries serve as open public spaces in communities and as the graph below demonstrates, patrons use the library for a variety of purposes.

Libraries are gathering places – 74% of respondents indicated that everyday patrons use the library for the purpose of interacting with other patrons, 64% indicated that everyday patrons use the library for the purpose of social interaction with the library staff.

Libraries can also represent a safe and open space for individuals. Thirty-six per cent of survey respondents said that everyday patrons that appear to be homeless use the library for the purpose of seeking shelter. Another 11% indicated that patrons use the library for this purpose at least every week and 6% every month. The library also serves as a place of refuge from violence and/or bullying for some patrons. Forty per cent of respondents indicated that they see patrons using the library for this purpose at least once a month.

Due to their open access nature, illegal activity in libraries is more common than one might assume. Only 42% of respondents indicated that illegal activity never occurs in their library. Thirteen per cent of survey respondents indicated that illegal activity occurs in the library every day, another 12% every week, 8% monthly, and 24% a few times per year. In the comments section some of the most common illegal activities discussed were theft, drug use, and drug dealing – including the use of library phones and/or computers to set up drug dealing appointments.

## Beyond information – different purposes of library use



### Sample comments:

*Free bathroom, water fountain, free baby changing table.*

*We sometimes get people who are mentally ill that come to the library fleeing from imagined dangers, and because we are so busy and don't have much time to patrol the building, a lot can be happening that we don't know about.*

*Our public internet stations are used (I believe) to make "appointments" and connections for drugs and sex work. In our urban branches sales of drugs occur inside and outside, sex trade occurs in the washrooms.*

*We have a courtesy phone which has been used for drug deals.*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**1** Survey results demonstrated that workers who are newer to the workplace are less aware of safety policies and procedures. This suggests that the health and safety training carried out as a part of orientation could be significantly improved. Furthermore, it would be interesting to consider whether the online training for health and safety that has been implemented at some libraries is as effective as in person training.

The survey also demonstrated that all workers could benefit from more training on the right to refuse unsafe work, working alone policies, procedures for handling biohazards, and effective ways to work with patrons with compromised mental health.

**2** This survey broadens the scope of what may typically be thought of when considering the health and safety of library workers. Libraries play an important role as public indoor spaces in communities that are open to everyone. At the same time, as part of this reality library workers are often working with marginalized populations, including individuals with mental health issues, and challenging situations may arise. It is important that incidents that occur are not thought of as one-off situations, but instead recognized as likely to occur due to the nature of the role libraries play in communities. This will enable better health and safety planning to ensure that prevention is prioritized and risks for workers are mitigated as much as possible.

**3** Only 51% of respondents said that they report incidents to their Health and Safety Committee. As the main tool for improving workplace health and safety, more education and training should be done to ensure that all incident reports are provided to the committee.

The committee could also help to mitigate some of the safety risk factors identified in the survey. For example, in libraries where visibility within the library is a challenge, the committee should advocate for increased visibility, whether this be through the use of mirrors or changing

**Provide more occupational health and safety education and training**

**Increase awareness of occupational health and safety issues beyond ergonomics**

**Greater utilization of the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee**

the arrangement of the stacks. The committee could also advocate for increased staffing in instances where inadequate staffing levels are adversely affecting the safety of workers. While some committees are likely undergoing this work already, the lack of mention of Joint Occupational Health and Safe committees in the responses to survey questions indicates that committees could be utilized more.

**Bargain for provisions on minimum staffing in Collective Agreements**

**4** More than half of survey respondents reported that staffing levels impact their safety at work. Furthermore, only 54% of workers reported feeling comfortable refusing unsafe work. Including provisions on minimum staffing in Collective Agreements will help to ensure that workers do not feel pressure to work alone if it is unsafe for them to do so.

**Create specialized outreach positions in libraries heavily used by marginalized populations**

**5** In the US the American Library Association has a policy for ensuring libraries are accessible to people living in poverty and seven libraries have specific programs to ensure this is the case. In San Francisco, since 2009, the public library has employed a full-time Psychiatric Social Worker who provides outreach services as well as training for library staff members in order to improve their understanding of how to work with 'behaviourally-vulnerable' patrons. The aim is to provide assistance for patrons in challenging situations, reduce incidents, and provide an alternative to security staff.

In Canada, the Edmonton Public Library was the first library to implement a similar program in 2011, and currently has three outreach workers dedicated to working with the homeless.<sup>1</sup> They hope to reduce barriers and increase access so that all individuals are welcome to use the library. In one year alone outreach workers had 'over 6000 interactions with at-risk individuals.'

<sup>1</sup> [http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/12/public-services/edmonton-public-library-adds-homeless-outreach-to-five-new-branches/#\\_](http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/12/public-services/edmonton-public-library-adds-homeless-outreach-to-five-new-branches/#_)

# NOTES

# LIBRARY WORKER INTERVIEWS

As part of the survey we asked library workers if they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. A large number of workers were interested, and twenty-three individuals were interviewed from twelve different locals from around the province in the fall of 2015. Most interviewees were from public libraries, four were from university libraries, and one was from the K-12 sector. The purpose of these interviews was to develop a deeper understanding of the survey results, and to gather ideas around 'best practices' and possible solutions.

For the purposes of this report, in order to ensure that worker confidentiality is protected, we have left out the names and the locations of the interviewees. Through our research we discovered that the issues and pressures facing library workers are very similar throughout the province.



## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND CONSULTATION CARRIED OUT BY MANAGEMENT

In order for library workers to feel safe at work they need to know that their health and safety is a **priority for management**. The situations where staff were the most stressed about health and safety were the cases where employees felt that health and safety was not taken seriously by management, and where direct supervisors were not adequately trained on the issues.

*It's corporate mentality. It's people as commodities – **the wellbeing of the employees doesn't seem to be an issue**. It's where they can tweak so that they can use the financial resources for other means.*

*I am not sure about a stricter policy on behaviour issues. I think most people are too lax because **there is not going to be support from management to ask people to leave because of fear**...It could be fear of patrons' reactions, or that they are not confident in their roles. **One manager refused and told us to just deal with it.***

There isn't a clear direction on how to handle things, we are given a fair amount of autonomy on how to handle things which can be stressful. If you feel there is some weirdness or something that you feel has to be dealt with you have to go to a librarian and then to the library Director. **The library Director has escalated situations he has been called upon to deal with, into physical altercations.**

I got a letter from the Ministry of Justice, because the guy got arrested, on "Victim Impact" asking me if I felt impacted mentally, physically, financially and I answered "no". But it was a real contrast as **I got a letter from the Government of B.C. asking me if I was okay and the library, my employer, said "Well, really, perhaps you shouldn't have blown the whistle,"** it's just so typical of the library.

Particularly in cases where health and safety issues are related to patrons, **it is important to have a collaborative approach in resolving issues and encourage front line staff to debrief and contribute to solutions.** Some libraries deal with major challenges with respect to clientele, especially if they are located in areas where a significant portion of the population struggles with mental health issues and drug use. While no health and safety plan can solve these issues in the community, it is important to give staff, as the people who are most familiar with the issues, time to provide input on what they think could help the situation in the library. Reluctance to talk about the issues gives staff the real or perceived idea that management does not care, or is not addressing any of the issues. On the other hand, giving staff the opportunity to participate in problem solving can greatly improve wellbeing.

Collaborative communication with management can improve wellbeing:

*[When she] became the chief librarian, there was a complete change in the relationship management had with the union and it **affected the whole atmosphere** of the library. **Previously there was a real line drawn between the union and exec staff. When she came in that fence came down.** Communication was greatly improved, the union hasn't battled with management since then – it is workable now.*

*To some degree it has always been like that but we have had a change of Director and that has improved the atmosphere immensely, that has improved our wellness because before then it was very top down and before that we had to appear to be doing stuff all the time, our last director was not a people person at all.*

Lack of communication with management can be stressful:

**I have never met my manager face to face.** I have never had appreciation or been given the impression that management cares about what is going on in branches, just as long as the stats reflect things that are happening.

**We are not allowed allotted hours for staff meetings** so it's hard for the branch to have a good discussion and some consensus on how they would deal with that. And maybe set up a plan for a safe place or contingencies for some violent situation.

No [crew talks] are kind of frowned upon, it's not done. ... Some areas are more open than others. There is a huge variety in the system. I have experience when that has not been the case and [crew talks have] been very encouraged and there is follow up and concern and a flow of information. **But it is extremely inconsistent in the system.**

We were not consulted about it. Upper levels got it up and running and then left. The CEO retired, Client Services didn't get the CEO's position and left, the manager and supervisor left. The introduction of one desk was done very badly, there was no proper training it was very stressful. **Senior Management don't want to hear bad things.** There's always an agenda item on problems but the spin put on it is that it is so wonderful you can deal with this.

There used to be less managers, so branch heads were definitely more involved. We were, it was right in our job description that you would participate and contribute to decision making ... now we go to meetings but they are information meetings. We are not really encouraged to talk... **I think a lot of branch heads like me find it quite stressful because we were, we used to be, our opinions were respected. We used to sit around a table and vote on things democratically.**

While some library workers **saw their OH&S committees as a great venue for this type of collaboration**, a good proportion of workers were not aware of the activities of their OH&S committee. This committee, when used well, can be a good way to promote a collaborative approach to solving issues between management and workers on the floor. A good committee is accessible to all workers and is willing to bring issues forward. A good committee also sends out comprehensive notes on what was discussed or does presentations to staff on a regular basis.

*We have a good OH&S committee, it is equally represented, management and union, we get information from BCFED, newsletters and CUPE information... The changes on the committee made a big difference, someone on management retired and the new person is good, everything is getting done.*

*We have a safety committee that meets once a month and the rep from the library comes and reports back. Once every three months she does a safety talk and if there is a safety issue then the Deputy Director reports it.*

OH&S Committees that are perceived to be ineffective:

*Our committee is one person. She is stepping down because it is too stressful. In our Collective Agreement there is wording that there is a committee but that has never come to be.*

*We get an email on what they have discussed but it doesn't mean anything because it doesn't say what the discussion was.*



## MORE FORMAL AND INFORMAL TRAINING

Many of the library workers interviewed felt they had had experiences with patrons at work that they did not feel equipped to deal with. Libraries are open public spaces and therefore attract a wide variety of individuals, some of whom are marginalized and/or have mental health concerns. This can lead to challenging situations for library staff who do not feel that their education/training has prepared them to deal with the diverse circumstances that arise.

*Just last week a sister called the police not because of violence. A homeless gentleman came in because it was raining. He had two suitcases he started unpacking all of this clothes. He took a bunch of clothes and started hanging them up on the chairs to dry. The co-worker said "this isn't a laundromat" and the person who is homeless says he is autistic and started arguing with my co-worker, **he didn't get violent but my co-worker didn't know what to do.***

*There was a young kid about 6 years old and his father decided they should leave and the kid didn't want to go and the father got very loud and angry with him and literally dragged him into the parking lot. That was an incident where I called the police, and they went to the person's home. That was the biggest incident and I was not sure what I was supposed to do, I knew him although he wasn't a regular customer. The police said you probably did the right thing to call us but you know privacy issues, **I didn't feel like I had enough information to be able to deal with that situation.***

*I didn't receive any formal training, I was told I would have to deal with all kinds of people. They did bring in community policing to talk to us and did bring in social service workers, so we get seminars. **But I don't feel confident especially dealing with the mentally ill. I want to be helpful but I don't know who to call...**I had someone who threatened suicide. I contacted his social worker but they couldn't say anything because of privacy. My supervisor spoke to his social worker. Nobody came to get him, he was in distress. We had someone who was acting out and the care worker refused to come over because she was on her own. Everybody is facing the pressure, people are not receiving the care that they need in a wealthy country.*

*There are patrons that have mental difficulties, e.g., one day at the desk there was a woman just bawling her eyes out. Sometimes the patrons emotions trigger my own emotions, the same type of emotions. **I feel helpless,** I don't know how to help. If she was asking for a book, or wanted to look up a number I'm fine with that, but her crying...help! I don't think she is expecting me to help her. But last week there was a young man who definitely had mental health illness and he was asking for help.*

*In terms of mental health there have been difficult times with students, and **not having the tools and knowing how to deal with them.** Patrons can be dangerous, they can have mental health problems. You report them and you worry about how it is going to be dealt with.*

*Some people that are transitional that are without a home, between homes, or **whatever they can also have mental challenges they can also have substance abuse challenges I mean there are all sorts of things that can come that we are not trained to deal with.** And we do the best we can, but maybe we could do better if we knew how to deal with that sort of thing and altered mental states.*

In response to these issues, during the interviews workers told us that many libraries have provided at least one course on something related to self-defence, how to de-escalate situations, or how to deal with individuals with mental health issues. This is a welcomed improvement for many workers, and not something that is available at every library.

*I have gone to training about how to disengage. It is not mandatory but you do have the option so I can't really fault the library in terms of access to courses.*

*Not a lot of compulsory training there may be a workshop on a given day. Some of the training is helpful as is being involved with the safety committee. I don't know if individual departments and supervisors are giving us as much training as they should.*

In addition to formal workshops and seminars, library workers are looking for more recognition from management that there are serious health and safety issues and subsequently more work time to problem solve and debrief as a form of training. Because dealing with these situations often becomes easier with experience, it is important to provide more experienced staff time to pass on these skills and knowledge to less experienced staff.

***I would like to debrief on issues with patrons**, we have had incidents lately where patrons have been aggressive to staff, threatening the staff, there was indecent exposure in front of staff and public. I think it would be worth doing...simple stuff. We have the opportunity to go to RSI training and that is good but I think there needs to be more emphasis on what are the other kinds of workplace hazards.*

*It is very **helpful to be able to debrief with someone after an incident, that is the most effective way that I have learned some skills after the fact**. My supervisor is not very skillful in this. Our manager works in [another town] and anything that happens we would need to talk to a manager about over the phone. My direct supervisor has no more safety issues skills than me. **But between the two of us we have common sense to figure stuff out**. But debriefing with my manager is very helpful. He was able to give me helpful tools.*

*Like I said **staff meetings to discuss what the issues are** and find people to come in to speak to specific problems. And I think it has to be on a location by location basis because everyone has a different physical atmosphere to their building, everyone has a different clientele and layouts. It is pretty hard to speak to different libraries with the same topic when they are all so different. **Talk to employees and talk about what their concerns are and bring someone in to address those issues**.*

In some cases, incidents can be extremely serious, and it is important that staff are given the appropriate time to debrief and access to supports.

*The police told him not to come in the library – he came right back to the library to tell us what the police had told him. So we called the police again and he said “You know you phone the police again I’ll come back and with a knife or a gun.” And I was never afraid of him at all but I was just sort of like, what an idiot, you say something like that – the police take it seriously you go to jail. Then we all got restraining orders. **We had [someone] come to talk to us for a little therapy session**. Staff were really upset. They had made friends with him and been nice to him... some staff were terrified and others were just totally in shock that something we did would mean he would have to go. He ended up in a psychiatric home for a while and then they let him out.*



## SPECIALIZED STAFF

Not all staff have an interest or the time to deal with the challenging issues that may arise when working with members of the public. It would be useful to have a social worker, or even just a specially trained staff member with an interest in these issues. This person could work with patrons to prevent incidents from occurring and be a resource when staff need information or support.

Library workers in larger libraries located in downtown areas generally welcomed the idea of having a social worker located at their library. In smaller libraries, where there may not be sufficient need to justify having a social worker, it would still be helpful to have a particular resource person with more knowledge on the issues, or a formalized process for accessing resources in the community. Some of the library workers, especially in the smaller centres, have already created their own process for this.

*Definitely, **the staff are not social workers but it seems like they are**, they are having to deal with mentally challenged people and they aren't trained to deal with that. I know that they offer courses, you almost need a psychologist to deal with these people. I even had some problems myself with patrons just asking them to move because I had to work in a certain area. They can get quite aggressive and angry and you don't know how to react to them – are they going to pull a knife on you or spit on you?*

*I do think it would be helpful to have a social worker on staff not just for youth but for everyone. I see people come into the library **whose faces are as familiar to me as my family members but it is very rare that you can actually strike up a conversation** because often a lot of the vulnerable people have behaviours where they avoid talking to you, they don't want to interact with you.*

*I have read some of these delicious things on the internet that some of the big city libraries actually have **a social worker on staff which I think would be brilliant because some of these people really need that kind of attention**. That could be arranged to have somebody there to actually interface with these people.*

Because of our librarians being very professional good people they have **sought out names and phone numbers of people who work within the mental health organizations in town.** I think we have one name for a guy who sort of has his finger on what is happening with the mentally ill people in the town. Occasionally we can call him if we need information on how to deal with certain individuals. But there is certainly nothing formal set up.

Somebody we could call upon would be a really good resource. Someone to talk to social workers.

There is talk of [having outreach workers] but I'm not sure where we are going to put them. They talked about it for [a specific library] to have either a social worker or outreach workers because of the location. I think it would be a good idea but where do we put them? Maybe in one of the small study rooms and then that would be very helpful.



## ADEQUATE STAFFING LEVELS

Library workers take pride in their jobs, and want to provide a high quality service for their community. As a result, there is a high risk of employers taking advantage of workers through understaffing. When understaffed, many library workers will be inclined to work harder than they should to ensure quality service for the public. There were a many libraries in BC where workers felt their libraries were understaffed, in some cases directly due to a recent cut in staff hours. Understaffing has a major impact on health and safety. When asked 'what workers would do if they had an unlimited budget to improve health and safety in their workplace' the most common answer was to increase staffing levels.

Interviews revealed two aspects of understaffing that have an impact on health and safety. One, if an individual is working alone or in a large library with limited staff on each floor he/she may not have someone around if an incident occurs. For example, if a patron gets upset and starts yelling, it can be a challenge to deal with this alone. It is best to have one person to handle the situation

and another to witness and be available to call for help etc. Another aspect of understaffing is the stress of not being able to finish all assigned tasks, or to assist each library patron effectively with their questions.

*We keep telling each other – look don't burn yourself out. **Don't kill yourself to get this done, we haven't been given enough staffing hours but we are all achievement orientated women.** We want things to get accomplished. You know that sense of accomplishment – yay, I got it done. So we do tend to be more of a 'fry yourself out to get it done' type of worker instead of just sensibly letting it sit there which would then indicate to the employer, well, we need some more staff hours here. But yeah, it is a bit of a vicious circle.*

*We want our customers not to be frustrated or annoyed or unhappy with the service we are providing. So yeah, you knock yourself out trying to keep your customers happy.*

*I like my job but would like it better if staffing levels were improved, and [not] trying to be all things to all people – my anxiety level would drop.*

*I'd increase the staff. We run pretty barebones and that can add to the stress.*

*In smaller branches there could be one person at the front desk and one person at the back check-in but if one of those people go on their break, which could be up to 45 minutes, that one person is dealing with book drop, phone calls, patrons at the desk, a lost crying kid. If you are doing all that you are rushing and not seeing what your biomechanics are doing. So that is an H&S risk there. But management seems to think that for 15 to 45 minutes that is okay.*

In the worst cases, in some of the small branches workers work by themselves or with pages, often students. At some of these branches it is expected that even when working alone, staff should handle incidents that arise. A worker from a small branch describes that she was advised to approach a domestic dispute involving alcohol on her own, and advised to carry a phone with her for safety. This could be very dangerous depending on how the individuals react – library workers should not be expected to take on these risks, especially when working alone.

*What I have been coached to do is, for example, once when a couple have come in drunk and they are in the magazine section and they start to have a very loud argument, cursing at each other and things, I am coached to take the phone with me and tell them to change their behaviour and leave or if not call the police.*



## RELIABLE SECURITY GUARDS WITH EXPERIENCE

The reported effectiveness of security staff in the survey was highly variable. Through the interviews it was clear that this is because the effectiveness seems to rely mostly on the individual who is carrying out security at a particular library. Because security is often contracted out to a private company, and security guards often make close to minimum wage, there is a huge variability in the quality that is provided. Security guards often come with no guarantee of any kind of training that will help them in diffusing situations and/or protecting the staff and members of the public. There is also often a high turnover in security guards. The most effective security guards are those that have a working relationship with the rest of the staff and an understanding of the library and its regular patrons. This is not a common experience.

*The problem is when you get the security guards **after a couple of years the contract has expired and there is a whole new crew in.** You can't expect much out of them. They'll call the police but they are not going to put themselves at risk.*

*More stability with the guards, you need a guard there who recognises all the regular patrons and the ones that have issues. They can be properly trained...Because they are all contracted you get the cheapest labour that comes in...There have been situations where the security guard ... [does not have the skills or the physical presence to do the job effectively] there has been one security guard who came to me and asked what his job was supposed to be.*

*Because **it is contract it's not in-house – we have had different qualities.** We had young kids in the last contract who were very nice but had no training. The last contract was bought out. So [when the new company] took over they brought back a lot of the people who were working under the old contract... I mean it is such a poor paying job but personally the security staff are pretty good and they come and close the library for us and that is a biggy.*

We have new security guards and they are good. We've had the new ones for a few months. We had a security guard who was not good, and he was fired, so we got two new ones who were very diligent. They haven't switched companies, just employees. I don't think there is anything that would make security guards more effective. **It just depends on the personalities.** Some do walk throughs every half hour and some just remain at one station until we call them.

Positive experiences with security:

We can still call security if there is an incident but there are no longer any patrols. There has always been a fair amount of respect for security. They are uniformed, their presence just walking around was helpful. **They are not privately contracted ... I think that is why it has worked quite well they are not a private company but are [direct] employees. Generally there have been a lot of long term employees who know the [site] really well.**

When I say the Commissionaire is good, she is a good person and her presence helps. When there is a patron that needs to be told to leave she does that and I don't think anyone else wants to do this. What limits her effectiveness is that she can't be on two floors at once. When she's on lunch or coffee break I don't think there is anyone covering. I don't know how effective she is without a weapon but no one has ever come into the library with a weapon. When she needs to be forceful verbally with a patron she is, she has a cell.



## PROACTIVE APPROACH TO COMMON ERGONOMIC ISSUES

One of the issues that was consistently brought up in interviews was repetitive strain injuries from the work, mostly from **opening and closing DVD cases** but also from shelving. One person discussed an apparatus he developed to deal with DVDs, which was simply a metal rod that could be inserted and twisted to open DVD cases. It would be useful to develop something like this for all workplaces.

*It is helpful to use the rod device someone invented. I was shown a different way to open it which helped. But it's not from policy it's just from procedure many years later when other staff see you physically not doing well they say to try this. **But it's not from the beginning, it's not policy. It's just co-workers' tips.***

Repetitive Strain injury remains an ongoing issue for library circulation staff. While many workers suffer from it, it is very challenging to get compensation through the Workers Compensation Board (WCB). The belief of the interviewees was that WCB will avoid paying out repetitive strain claims at all costs because it would start a precedent that would lead to a large number of claims and financial burden for them.

*I saw my GP and mentioned in passing my problem and without intending it I had started WCB process. The WCB person came to see me and I had the impression he was being disingenuous saying that either soft tissue injury doesn't exist or he doesn't understand that it exists. My understanding was that he came in with the instruction that we can't accept this claim because this would trigger a flood of claims. He wouldn't accept that my injury had come on gradually, he wanted to know the exact moment it had happened. In the end, he said you can pursue this, but someone will come to the workplace and videotape you working, I thought it wasn't worth it and said forget it. I just thought from him that he was being dishonest.*

*I did try to get WCB but in the library system **it is very difficult to get a WCB case passed if it is just from you doing your work on an ongoing basis because that sets a precedent.** The only way WCB will compensate you is if it's a one-time freak accident – like if a bunch of books fell on you. **I've heard this from 1 or 2 dozen different staff members.** I was turned down because all my co-workers would claim and the library would shut down. There is talk of duty to accommodate but it is quite unclear how this is done.*

It is also useful to continue to educate workers to ensure that they are aware of the risks of their work and how to reduce the chances of becoming injured. Employers should also limit the duration employees are allowed to do certain tasks, and ask that employees rotate between duties.



## IMPORTANCE OF A GROUNDED LIBRARY BOARD

**The most effective board members are those that are active library users themselves.** If this is not the case, then board members should at least be provided with realistic information about what is happening in the library. There were mixed reviews of the effectiveness of library boards and their interest in health and safety issues. There is a perception at some libraries that management is reluctant to bring anything but good news to the board. This limits the board's capacity to understand the library, especially health and safety issues, and make sound decisions.

*For the most part the majority of our library board members are not library members. There are appointed by a member of town council. But not many actually have library cards so **they don't really get libraries.***

*I think on the board right now there are a couple of gung-ho trustees that want to do lots of good things. There's a variety of people on the board I know, the newest one worked as a legal secretary. **Most of the board members are library users. The board members didn't used to know anything about what happened at our library but that changed.***

*Trustee reports are distributed every month and reports from each branch, I read them, but it is all happy news. Sometimes you are looking at something and you know a situation isn't working. Reports from senior management to Trustees make out that everything is wonderful.*



## LIBRARY WORKERS WANT THE LIBRARY TO REMAIN A WELCOMING PLACE FOR ALL

Despite the challenges that library workers face, very few of the library workers suggested that libraries should restrict access to some members of the public. In fact the responses were generally quite the opposite, most library workers feel passionately that libraries should be open and welcoming community spaces for all individuals, including those who are marginalized and/or suffer from mental health concerns. At the same time there is a recognition that this reality results in many health and safety concerns.

*Absolutely it is part of our mandate, we are the last bastion of community space where you don't have to buy something to share the space.*

*I think it is a very important role. People who are marginalized, I mean that's an obvious choice for libraries because we are free, public, open long hours for the most part, as many days as we can be we are there, we are welcoming and we can provide information that might help them step forward in life. **So I think there are lots of reasons why we are a good fit to be together.** It just creates lots of challenges for sure.*

*Absolutely – it's vitally important. Because of the current political climate there have been so many program cuts and you know loss of care for vulnerable individuals there is nowhere else for them to go.*

*The librarians believe it is a public space, it is important to us and we are not going to address things through confrontation, we are going to deal with the public and work with people as much as possible unless they are creating an uncomfortable or dangerous situation for students or workers.*

*It is critical, absolutely. Management fully supports us and their philosophy is the same, this is open to everyone. The limits are budgetary and physical space. It has safety implications, someone who suffers from addiction or mental illness is more likely to be a physical threat but not necessarily...the number of 'circs' are going down. But I don't know if the foot traffic has gone down. I think we are heading to become more of a social space, we have to give the public what they want and we should do our best to provide it.*

**The quotes adequately illustrate the ongoing tension for workers between their passion for the role of libraries as an open community space, and concern for health and safety. It seems clear that the health and safety concerns described in detail throughout this report need to be addressed in order to ensure that library workers can continue to do the important work that they do in supporting and enhancing our communities.**

# NOTES



**CUPE**

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