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## **The Impact of the Early Covid-19 Pandemic Response on Kentucky's Library Workforce**

Brandi Duggins and Anita R. Hall

### **Abstract**

Although prior research has examined the Pandemic responses of libraries in terms of physical closures and innovation in services, the impact these measures have had on library workers is largely unexplored. This study seeks to understand the impact of initial library responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kentucky from March 2020 through June 2020. A survey of Kentucky Library Workers found a wide range of impacts during the initial pandemic response period, with 30.49% of respondents affected by some type of employment-related measure, and 11.28% either furloughed or laid off during this time. Workers at different types of libraries and in different position classifications received somewhat different impacts during the period covered by the survey. Regardless of employment-related impacts, library workers have struggled economically, as well as with their emotional and psychological well-being, and many are concerned about long-term economic impacts of the pandemic on their organizations, even if their employment situation was largely unchanged during the initial response period.

### **Introduction**

Library workers in the Commonwealth of Kentucky have been subject to a number of employment-related measures as their organizations respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While there have been national studies regarding the pandemic's impact on libraries as institutions, little research emerged regarding the impact on library workers. By focusing on library buildings, services, and patrons, the employees may be overlooked.

This study incorporates responses from any library worker in Kentucky, regardless of their employment status, degree status, contractual protection, or the type of library that employs them. Unifying library workers as one population rather than segmenting into groups allowed for a more holistic picture of how the pandemic and subsequent measures impacted people. It also explores different ways in which they were impacted, including both work-related and personal impacts on the workers.

In seeking to understand both the types of employment-related measures that library workers in Kentucky experienced, as well as how they were impacted by the policies and measures implemented by their institutions, it was apparent that different types of library workers were impacted differently. The type of library and the worker's employment status within the organization affected which measures were implemented and the severity of their impact on the workers.

### **Literature Review**

The COVID-19 Pandemic arrived in Kentucky on March 6, 2020, and shortly thereafter Governor Andy Beshear declared a state of emergency and began issuing shutdown orders to prevent the spread of the virus (Acquisito; Staley and Kitchen). Kentucky's early, aggressive response earned the state national accolades and during the initial pandemic response period Kentucky's infection rates remained quite low (Hodge).

These measures, effective as they were, had drastic consequences for the workforce in Kentucky and nationwide. As of May 2019, there were approximately 2,000 librarians and media specialists in Kentucky, accounting for approximately 0.10% of the state's total labor force. During the initial pandemic response in spring of 2020, Kentucky's unemployment rate reached 16.6% in April, up from 5.2% the prior month. This was actually higher than the national unemployment rate, which peaked at 14.7% that same month (Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Kentucky's Economy at a Glance"). By June 30, half of all Kentucky households reported lost income due to the pandemic response (Bailey). The availability of enhanced Unemployment Insurance benefits via the CARES Act supported workers who were furloughed

or lost their jobs during the early pandemic response, although these benefits expired on July 31 (Department of Labor).

Recent literature about libraries and COVID-19 revolves around library closures and innovation in library services. Hinchcliffe & Wolffe-Eisenberg surveyed 407 Academic Libraries' initial response to COVID-19, including closures, institutional policies, and cleaning procedures. Similarly, the American Association of School Librarians conducted studies regarding the nature of what back-to-school services would look like in school libraries across the United States. The Public Library Association also sponsored a survey of public libraries that centered on initial pandemic response and innovative service. These studies were informative and important, but they all examine the institutional or professional impact rather than that of individual library workers.

## Methods

An online survey was conducted to determine the types of employment-based measures that impacted Kentucky library workers during the initial pandemic response (defined in our study as March through June of 2020), as well as the impacts that these measures had on the workers who were impacted by them. The survey was disseminated via the Kentucky Library Association email list, and participants were encouraged to share the survey with other workers in their libraries who may not be reached by this list, in order to encourage the participation of workers who do not identify as "Librarians" or hold an MLIS. Anyone employed in a Kentucky Library as of January 1, 2020 was eligible to participate. The survey was distributed in September 2020, and respondents were asked to respond about the period of the initial pandemic response, defined for the purposes of this study as March - June of 2020.

A second survey was also conducted in parallel, aimed at Library Administrators. Our hope was that this survey would provide comparison data that could be used to gauge the representativeness of the worker responses; however we had concerns about the validity of this data for School librarians in particular and this article discusses responses from the Worker survey only. Please also note that as this survey represents a snapshot of Kentucky library workers during the initial Pandemic response period, we are reporting descriptive statistics only.

## Results

### *Respondent Characteristics*

Our survey of Kentucky library workers received 327 responses. Nearly half (159 or 48.6%) of respondents indicated that they were working in a *Public* library as of January 1, 2020, while 113 (34.9%) worked in *Academic* libraries, 45 (13.8%) in *School* libraries, and 10 (2.8%) in *Special* types of libraries. A majority (56.3%) of our respondents held an MLIS or comparable American Library Association-accredited degree, versus 43.7% who did not.

We were curious whether employee status and/or position classification had an impact on the types of measures impacting our respondents, as well as representation by unions and other organizations, whether or not these groups enjoyed contractual protections. Responses showed that most of our respondents were classified as staff (45.8% *Non-exempt staff* and 16.3% *Exempt staff*), and the remainder as faculty (28.3% *Tenure-track* and 8.8% *Non-tenure-track*). Notably, comments on this question showed that many respondents were not entirely sure how their organization classifies them, although only 0.8% responded as *not sure*.

Only 17% of our respondents indicated that they were represented by a *Union* or other contractually-protected organization, and 24% indicated that they were represented by *Other organizations* such as a staff council. With Kentucky's status as a "Right to Work" state it is unsurprising that few respondents have union representation, and we are using respondents' self-reported levels of representation to analyze their responses. However, there were 68 respondents who described themselves as *Tenure-track faculty*, implying the presence of a negotiated contract, who stated that they

had no contractual protections. As with employee classification, it seems likely that many library workers do not think about these types of representative groups in the same terms as their employing organizations.

Respondents were asked to indicate their membership in Equal Employment Opportunity Center *Protected groups*. The question regarding *Protected groups* served two purposes: to ensure that the data was representing a diversity of library workers and to understand whether workers from *Protected groups* were disproportionately affected by the measures implemented by their employers. Seventy-four percent of respondents did not identify as being part of a protected group or preferred not to respond. Of the remaining 26% of respondents, the protected groups are as follows from largest representation to smallest: *LGBTQ+* (13%), *Physical or mental disability* (8%), *Racial or ethnic minority* (8%), *Religious minority* (4%), *Veteran or active military* (1%), *Age* (0.6%), and *Non-US citizen* (0.3%). We neglected to include *Age* in our question options, but after two respondents wrote it in under *Other* we realized the error and have included it here, although it is likely that more respondents would have fallen into this group had it been provided as an option.

### *Working Environment*

Overall, most respondents were able to work either *Entirely remotely* (29.97%) or in a *Mixed or hybrid environment* (52.52%) during the initial pandemic response period of March-June 2020. Only 7.95% of respondents worked *Entirely onsite* during this period, with an additional 7.65% who *Did not work*. Some differences showed up between respondents from different library types, with *School* and *Academic* library workers less likely and *Public* library workers more likely to have worked onsite or not worked during this period (see Fig. 1).

Comment responses related to respondents' working environment showed two primary themes, adjustments to working from home and concerns about safety protocols and noncompliance from both staff and patrons at their libraries. Those who were working from home reported challenges in finding work-life balance in their new working environment, as well as some issues accessing technology and equipment needed to work remotely. Those working onsite mentioned concerns with lack of follow-through on stated protocols, as well as lack of enforcement.

Despite these concerns, most of those who worked onsite for at least part of this time period were satisfied with the health and safety precautions taken by their library or organization. Overall satisfaction was rated as 4.03 (out of 5), and this was consistent among most types of libraries (*Academic*: 4.06, *Public*: 4.02, *School*: 4.18), with a slightly lower rating of 3.14 among *Special* libraries. This is perhaps unsurprising, as this category included responses from Medical and Prison library workers whose environments may have led to more direct risk of virus transmission.

### *Measures Impacting Respondents*

Respondents were asked about employment-related measures that their libraries or organizations took during the initial pandemic response period which impacted them personally (see Fig. 2). Less than one-third of all respondents (30.49%) reported being impacted by any of these measures. Of those who were impacted, the most common impact was a *Temporary benefit adjustment* (11.59%), followed by a *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* (9.45%). There were notable differences in measures impacting respondents across library type, as well as by respondent characteristics.

Looking at responses broken down by library type, all *School* library workers reported zero impacts during the initial pandemic response. These workers appear to have been protected, at least during this period, by the school year contract and funding cycle. *Academic* and *Special* library workers reported slightly higher levels of impact (42.11% and 40% respectively), with *Temporary benefit adjustment* the most common for both groups. *Public* library workers did not report higher levels of impact overall, but reported higher levels of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* (16.25% versus 9.45% for all respondents and only 4.39% for *Academic* libraries).

In terms of credentials, there was almost no difference between *MLIS holders* and *Non-MLIS holders* in terms of overall impact (31.15% versus 31.25%). However, differences appear in the types of

impact received, with MLIS holders being most likely to receive a *Temporary benefit adjustment* (15.85%) and non-MLIS holders most likely to receive a *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* (14.58%). Degree attainment is an imperfect metric for position type, but it is likely that within libraries those that hold an MLIS are more likely to be in higher-status and higher-paying positions.

When broken down by position classification, *Exempt staff* (23.53%), *Tenure-track faculty* (25.77%), and *non-Tenure-track faculty* (24.14%) experienced similar rates of overall impact, while *Non-exempt staff* had a higher rate of 36.21%. *Non-exempt staff* also had a higher rate of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* (22.41%) than any other group, with the other classifications all reporting a *Temporary benefit adjustment* as the most common impact. It is notable that zero *Tenure-track faculty* respondents experienced a *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* during this period.

Those respondents who indicated that they were represented by a *Union* or other contractually-protected group reported a higher overall rate of impact (49.06%), as well as a higher rate of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* (43.40%). *Non-union* respondents experienced a lower overall rate of impact during this period (23.13%), with the most common being a *Temporary benefit adjustment* (23.69%). It appears that union contracts limited the types of measures that could be levied against these workers, leading to the higher incidence of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* - however these workers were also protected against *Layoff or reduction in force*, with no respondents who had *Union* representation experiencing this impact, versus 2.24% of *Non-union* respondents.

Respondents who self-identified as belonging to one or more *Protected groups* did report slightly higher levels of impact from employment-related measures. These respondents were most likely to have been impacted by a *Furlough or Temporary Unpaid Leave* or a *Temporary Benefit Cut* (14.63% for both). We cannot infer that their membership in these protected groups contributed to the higher impact, however given the demographics of librarianship broadly (AFL-CIO) it is likely that these workers are concentrated in position types with less organizational status and protection.

#### *Communication and Explanation of Measures*

Respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with how their library or organization communicated employment-related measures that were being taken, as well as their explanation of how these measures were being applied. Overall, average satisfaction with communication was rated at 3.80 (out of 5). *School* library workers reported the highest level of satisfaction (4.18), followed by *Public* (3.77), *Academic* (3.76), and *Special* (3.44) library workers. Satisfaction ratings for explanations followed a similar pattern with an average rating of 3.84 rating overall, with highest ratings from *School* library workers (4.37) followed by *Academic* (3.85), *Public* (3.75), and *Special* (3.33).

Comments related to communication and explanation of measures highlighted stark differences between workplaces, with some providing an abundance of communication through multiple channels, and others struggling to disseminate information in a timely manner. Where communication was difficult, respondents indicated an increase in informal communication, gossip, and rumors. Particular communication challenges arose when there was confusing or conflicting information coming from the library and its parent organization, and many respondents indicated differing levels of satisfaction with the two groups.

#### *Measures Impacting Others*

As we were concerned that our respondents would not be fully representative of the general library worker population in Kentucky, we also asked about employment-related measures impacting others at their library (see Fig. 3). In response, respondents stated that others in their workplace had been impacted by more measures than they themselves had - indicating to us that those who were impacted by these measures (particularly *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* and/or *Layoff or reduction in force*) were underrepresented in our sample. Where only 30.49% of our respondents indicated that they personally had been impacted by employment-related measures, 47.87% indicated that others at their organization had been impacted. For *School* and *Special* libraries there was very little difference in the two groups (and many respondents from these groups indicated that they are solo practitioners), but *Academic* and

Public libraries showed large differences in impact, particularly from *Layoff or reduction in force* and *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave*.

#### *Impacts of Measures Received*

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the impact of any employment-related measures that affected them personally. 32.32% of respondents indicated any type of economic impact, with 12.20% reporting a *Partial loss of income* and 5.79% reporting *Full loss of income*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents who experienced a Furlough, Layoff, or Temporary Salary Cut reported much higher rates of economic impact (*Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* 92.86%, *Layoff or reduction in force* 83.33%, *Temporary salary cut* 75.00%). The most common impact across these groups was *Partial* and/or *Full loss of income*.

We were pleased to see that only a very small percentage of respondents had a *Loss of health insurance* (0.61%), or experienced *Food insecurity* (1.52%) or *Housing insecurity* (0.61%). Notable exceptions were those who experienced *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave*, with 7.14% reporting *Loss of health insurance* and the same percentage reporting *Food insecurity*, and those experiencing *Temporary salary cuts*, of whom 8.33% reported *Housing insecurity*.

In comments, several respondents who were not subject to employment-related measures reported a positive economic impact due to cost savings, and even some furloughed workers reported benefiting from enhanced Unemployment Insurance benefits during this period that may actually have been larger than their normal salaries, assuming they were able to successfully navigate the heavily burdened state system (Pugel et. al.). However, other respondents noted that they lost supplemental income streams such as overtime hours or seasonal employment.

Even if most respondents had relative economic stability, there were a number of other impacts experienced by library workers. Respondents reported on emotional and/or psychological impacts both at work and in their personal lives. At work, 71.04% of respondents indicated some type of emotional or psychological impact, and these impacts were broadly distributed across categories, with 34.15% percent reporting *Increased pressure or stress in completing assigned duties*, 31.71% reporting *Increased workload or addition of assigned duties*, 31.40% reporting *Difficulty balancing work and home/family duties*, 28.96% reporting *Feeling of employment-related instability or insecurity*, 27.44% reporting *Feeling of not being valued by your library or organization*, 21.65% reporting *Loss of trust in your library or organization leadership*, and 18.29% reporting *Negatively impacted relationships with coworkers*. Respondents who experienced furlough or layoff reported higher overall rates of impact (85.71% and 100% respectively).

In their personal lives, 72.95% of respondents indicated some type of emotional or psychological impact. The most common impact experienced was *Increased general stress, anxiety, or malaise* (67.38%), followed by *Increased feeling of general instability or insecurity* (39.02%), *Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed mental health issues* (20.12%), *Negatively impacted personal or family relationships* (17.68%), *Increased child and/or family care responsibilities* (16.46%), and *Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed general health issues* (9.76%). Again, those who experienced a furlough or layoff reported higher overall rates of impact, at 82.14% and 83.33% respectively.

Comments reflected significant concerns about the pandemic generally, and mental health specifically. Respondents were concerned about working in public-facing roles during a pandemic. Many comments contained specifics about resurgent mental health concerns and general anxiety. Some respondents even reported that people they knew personally had died from Covid-19, and noted that this grief was especially challenging.

#### *Future Concerns*

The focus of this survey was the initial pandemic response period, ending June 30, 2020. However, we were also curious about what other impacts respondents expected to experience during the upcoming year. At the time of their responses, only 15.85% of respondents indicated that they had experienced or been notified of additional impacts during the period of July 2020 - June 2021. *Special*,

*Academic* and *Public* library workers all reported higher rates of impact (*Special* 30.00%, *Academic* 19.47%, and *Public* 16.98%), while *School* library workers reported no additional impacts. The most common impacts were *Temporary benefit adjustments* (6.40%) and *Temporary salary cuts* (4.27%), although some respondents did indicate additional *Furloughs or temporary unpaid leave* (1.83%) and *Layoffs or reduction in force* (2.13%).

When asked to report their level of concern that additional employment-related measures would be levied during the period of July 2020 - June 2021, respondents overall rated their concern at an average of 2.98 (on a scale of 1-5). *Academic* library workers reported the highest level of concern (3.34), followed by *Public* (2.91), *Special* (2.7), and *School* (2.33).

A majority of respondents (62.80%) indicated that they had taken some type of pre-emptive action out of concern about future impacts. The most frequent action was *Cut back on personal spending or increased savings* (46.04%), followed by *Delayed or cancelled planned major expenses* (33.23%), *Actively searched for a new job* (22.87%), with *Brushed up your resume or CV* and *Delayed or cancelled medical care* at 15.24%. *School* library workers reported less concern, with only 35.56% reporting any pre-emptive actions. Respondents working in *Special* libraries were most likely to report having *Actively searched for a new job*, at 40.00%. Concerningly, respondents from *Academic* libraries were most likely to report having *Delayed or cancelled medical care*, at 32.74%.

In comments, respondents expressed that they had fewer concerns in the short-term than the long-term, and a number of comments indicated significant concern about the impact of an extended economic downturn on library funding. Several comments referred to their organization's fiscal year and funding cycle as reasons for short-term security, but with concern about future budget years. Some respondents also mentioned hiring freezes and positions not being refilled after retirements as an indication that their organizations were concerned about finances. Short-term concerns focused on safely returning to onsite work while the pandemic is still active and/or increased interaction with the public.

## Conclusions

Although we considered these responses to be a snapshot of the early Pandemic response and not necessarily representative or predictive of impact on various types of workers, we did find some notable intergroup differences. Respondents who were members of groups likely to have higher status within their library or organization, such as *MLIS holders* and those classified as *Faculty* or *Exempt staff*, reported lower levels of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave* and more commonly experienced *Temporary benefit adjustments* and other less-drastic measures. With the demographics of library employment having less diversity for "professional" librarians than other categories of library workers, it stands to reason that workers in *Protected groups* would be impacted at higher rates (AFL-CIO 2020).

Reduced expenses during Kentucky's shutdown orders were mentioned repeatedly by respondents across classifications, and economic support available during this early period through the CARES Act and similar programs further softened the blow for those experiencing *Furloughs or temporary unpaid leave* and/or *Layoff or reduction in force*. However, with these programs expiring shortly after the time period covered in this survey, it is likely that workers who continue to experience these impacts are now struggling more than reported here. If past economic downturns are any indication these workers are likely to experience long-term financial and professional impacts that may be difficult to overcome. (Guarria, 209)

The pre-emptive actions taken by respondents indicate a lack of security and legitimate concern for the lingering impacts of the pandemic, and these concerns about long-term impacts are well-founded. Libraries themselves may also have benefitted from early federal assistance programs to offset revenue losses, which have since expired (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education). The lack of federal aid to state and local governments has led to budget shortfalls nationwide, and Kentucky is no exception. Both Louisville and Lexington's city governments reported significant budget cuts for 2020 due to ongoing

revenue losses from the pandemic, and Governor Beshear instructed Higher Education institutions to plan for an 8% cut in state funding (Costello; Musgrave; Perkins).

It is difficult to compare these survey results to general unemployment numbers for Kentucky, as this is not a representative sample of all library workers in the state. However, comparing our responses to the overall unemployment rate during this time period, which peaked at 16.6%, it appears that our respondents fared slightly better with a combined rate of *Furlough or temporary unpaid leave and Layoff or reduction in force* of 11.28%. Responses indicating measures that impacted other workers at our respondents' workplaces painted a murkier picture, with a combined 44.21% experiencing one of these impacts. The true number is likely somewhere in between, and will only be fully understood once updated official statistics become available for this time period.

This survey captured a moment in time as libraries made their initial responses to the pandemic. For further research on the impact of Covid-19 on library workers, we intend to repeat a version of this survey on a national level to analyze trends among library workers in all states. A national survey will allow us to learn more about the initial pandemic response nationwide, as well as ongoing impacts felt by the library workforce. In addition, a follow-up survey will be sent to the Kentucky library workers regarding any additional measures that were taken in the latter half of 2020. With the Kentucky population we hope to learn more about ongoing impacts that occurred after the initial pandemic response period.

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*For a copy of the survey instrument and/or data, please contact the authors:*

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