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Health concerns of Kentucky's library workforce during the early COVID-19 pandemic.

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Figure 1. Word cloud generated from comments

HEALTH CONCERNS OF KENTUCKY'S LIBRARY WORKFORCE DURING THE EARLY COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Although research early in the pandemic primarily emphasized libraries' pandemic response and service to patrons, more interest has developed regarding library workers and their experiences. This study seeks to understand the impacts library workers experienced from the beginning of institutions' initial pandemic response through the end of 2020. This article focuses on a subset of the data related to the health concerns and impacts Kentucky library workers experienced during distinct phases of the early pandemic. Responses to this survey indicate that workers required to be onsite were impacted more frequently with COVID-related health concerns while all library workers experienced significant other health and safety impacts regardless of work conditions.

INTRODUCTION

When the first cases of COVID-19 began to appear in the United States during early 2020, libraries across the country were forced to close their doors and pivot to virtual service models in a noticeably short time frame (American Association of School Librarians, Hinchcliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg, Public Library Association). As the pandemic wore on and lockdown orders were lifted throughout the second half of 2020, library workers were often among groups considered "essential" and sent back into their buildings despite ongoing waves of virus transmission and before vaccines were available in the United States.

We conducted a survey of library workers in Kentucky during the summer of 2020 to determine the extent of employment-related impacts experienced by the workforce during the early pandemic response (Duggins and Hall). This survey was followed

by an expanded survey in the spring of 2021 assessing the impact of the pandemic response on the national library workforce. This article discusses the responses of Kentucky library workers to the second, national survey, with a specific focus on the health concerns reported by these respondents.

Research has begun to emerge about the disparate impacts of the pandemic on frontline and essential workers. A March 2022 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) policy document reports that frontline workers reported lower overall health as well as mental health during the pandemic (OECD) and were at much higher risk of contracting the virus than the general population. A Health Affairs policy brief (Wolfe, Harknett and Schneider) warned that frontline and essential workers typically could not socially distance themselves at work, and although masks and other PPE could provide mitigation from exposure, these were often difficult to access during the early days of the pandemic.

While some library and other education workers did continue to work onsite and others had to fight for the right to close their doors (Flaherty), generally they were not in the category of workers deemed "essential" in the earliest part of the pandemic response. However, by the end of 2020 they were much more often required to be back to in-person work (Blau, Koebe and Meyerhofer). This was particularly true for lower-paid workers who often held fewer credentials. It should also be noted that COVID-19 vaccines were only beginning to be available in Kentucky around the time of this survey's distribution. Further, the inconsistent nature of essential worker designations led to inconsistencies in vaccine eligibility in Kentucky (Wolf).

METHODS

The authors developed an online survey instrument for a national audience based on their previous survey of Kentucky libraries (Duggins and Hall). For the complete survey instrument, see Hall and Duggins. We distributed the national survey via professional library listservs and social media platforms during March and April of 2021. This survey sought to evaluate what impacts library workers had experienced because of their organization's early pandemic response in a variety of areas, from employment-related measures to personal impacts. For this article, the specific questions that we will examine are the questions, "As a result of your working conditions during the time periods listed below did you experience any of the following health and safety impacts?" and "Did you experience any of the following impacts on your personal life during the time periods listed below?" as well as open-ended comments on the topics of health and safety.

To better understand the evolving pandemic response, we asked respondents to indicate whether they had experienced impacts during two time periods: Between the initial pandemic response and June 30, 2020, and/or Between July 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020. These time periods were simply intended to gauge directional change of impacts between the initial pandemic response and ongoing measures, and they of course did not line up neatly with every organization's response and/or reopening timeline.

Please note that this survey represents merely a snapshot of Kentucky library workers during the initial pandemic response period. We are reporting descriptive statistics only and would caution against considering these results causative.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics and Work Environment

Out of 1431 total responses to the national survey, we received 80 responses from the state of Kentucky. Of these 80 respondents, a majority (70%, n=56) held a librarian credential, or were currently pursuing one (7.5%, n=6), and a smaller group (22.5%, n=18) did not hold a librarian credential. Respondents were primarily from *Public (55%, n=44) and Academic (30%, n=24) libraries, with a few responses from School or K-12 (7.5%, n=6), Legal (3.8%, n=3), Special (2.5%, n=2), and Government (1.3%, n=1)* libraries. We will primarily discuss responses from Academic and Public libraries, due to the very small number of responses from the other types of libraries.

Respondents were asked to report the percentage of their time that was spent working onsite during each of the time periods *(Between the initial pandemic response and June 30, 2020 and/ or Between July 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020)*. Unsurprisingly, respondents reported that they spent more time onsite each week after July 1, and only 3.75% of respondents indicated that they worked fully remotely during the second time, as compared to 35.44% for the first *(see Table 1)*. This general trend held true for respondents from all library types, and regardless of credential status.

Table 1. Time spent onsite by time period

	Percentage of Time Spent Onsite	Between the initial pandemic response and June 30, 2020	Between July 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020	Directional Change
Overall (n=80)	**0%**	36.71% (n=29)	3.75% (n=3)	-32.96%
	1-25%	36.71% (n=29)	25.00% (n=20)	-11.71%
	26-50%	12.66% (n=10)	22.50% (n=18)	+9.84%
	51-75%	7.59% (n=6)	20.00% (n=16)	+12.41%
	76-100%	7.59% (n=6)	28.75% (n=23)	+21.16%

HEALTH IMPACTS

Two questions asked specifically about health and safety impacts that respondents had experienced. The first, "As a result of your working conditions during the time periods listed below did you experience any of the following health and safety impacts?" asked specifically about impacts related to COVID-19. The second, "Did you experience any of the following impacts on your personal life during the time periods listed below?" included items related to general and mental health.

For all Kentucky respondents, 26.25% (n=21) reported experiencing at least one of the COVID-related health impacts *(Exposure to coworkers who tested positive for Covid-19, Exposure to patrons who tested positive for Covid-19, Tested positive for Covid-19, or Experienced Covid-19 symptoms but were not tested)*. The most common COVID-related health impact was *Exposure to coworkers who tested positive for Covid-19*, followed by *Exposure to patrons who tested positive for Covid-19*. A much higher percentage (77.50%, n=62) of respondents reported experiencing other health impacts *(Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed general health issues, Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed mental health issues, or Increased general stress, anxiety,*

Table 2. Overall health impacts

Covid-related Health Impacts	Frequency
Exposure to coworkers who tested positive for Covid-19	25.00% (n=20)
Exposure to patrons who tested positive for Covid-19	17.50% (n=14)
Tested positive for Covid-19	5.00% (n=4)
Experienced Covid-19 symptoms but were not tested	2.50% (n=2)
Any Covid-related Health Impact	26.25% (n=21)
Other Health Impacts	**Frequency**
Increased general stress, anxiety, or malaise	76.25% (n=61)
Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed mental health issues	26.25% (n=21)
Experienced new or resurgent diagnosed general health issues	13.75% (n=11)
Any other Health Impact	77.50% (n=62)

or malaise), with the most common being *Increased general stress, anxiety, or malaise* (76.25%, n=61) *(See Table 2)*.

Looking a bit deeper at the way that these impacts were experienced, it appears that *Public* and *School/K-12* library workers experienced COVID-related impacts at the highest rates *(See Table 3)*. Respondents in any type of library or who spent any amount of time onsite reported high rates of other Health Impacts; working remotely does not seem to have impacted a worker's likelihood of experiencing health impacts that were not directly COVID-related.

Table 3. Breakdown of health impacts

		Frequency of any Covid-related Health Impact	Frequency of any other Health Impact
All KY Respondents (n=80)		26.25% (n=21)	77.50% (n=62)
Library Type	Academic (n=24)	37.50% (n=9)	75.00% (n=18)
	Public (n=44)	56.82% (n=25)	75.00% (n=33)
	School/K-12 (n=6)	66.67% (n=4)	83.33% (n=5)
	Other (n=6)	16.67% (n=1)	100.00% (n=6)
Percentage of time spent onsite: Between the initial pandemic response and June 30, 2020n	0% (n=28)	0.00% (n=0)	67.86% (n=19)
	1-25% (n=29)	13.79% (n=4)	86.21% (n=25)
	26-50% (n=10)	10.00% (n=1)	80.00% (n=8)
	51-75% (n=6)	16.67% (n=1)	83.33% (n=5)
	76-100% (n=6)	16.67% (n=1)	66.67% (n=4)
Percentage of time spent onsite: Between July 1, 2020 and December 31, 2020	0% (n=3)	0.00% (n=0)	100.00% (n=3)
	1-25% (n=20)	15.00% (n=3)	70.00% (n=14)
	26-50% (n=18)	38.89% (n=7)	77.78% (n=14)
	51-75% (n=16)	75.00% (n=12)	87.50% (n=14)
	76-100% (n=23)	56.52% (n=13)	73.91% (n=17)

COMMENT THEMES

Respondents were invited to provide additional context about the impacts that they experienced via eight questions throughout the survey. From these, Kentucky respondents provided a total of 125 comments. Themes of health and safety were common and emerged even in comments ostensibly about other topics *(See Figure 1)*. The ten most frequent words appearing in comments

were: *mask (n=21), staff (n=16), work (n=11), library (n=10), stress (n=9), anxiety (n=7), health (n=7), time (n=7), vaccinated (n=7), and patrons (n=6)*.

Respondents expressed significant concern about virus transmission among their patrons as well as in their communities, and to a lesser extent their own coworkers. They reported challenges with enforcement and compliance around mask mandates, and the need to interact with patrons who were unmasked in their libraries. Vaccines were just beginning to be available in the United States at the time of this survey, and many respondents were not optimistic about the likelihood of their communities achieving high vaccination rates.

Overall, respondents indicated increased levels of stress and anxiety from a variety of sources related to the pandemic, work, and personal factors. Concern for family members with high-risk health conditions and balancing work with caregiving responsibilities were frequent contributors to increased stress and anxiety. Additionally, while many respondents appreciated the ability to work remotely, adjusting to this new situation presented new challenges that often made tasks more difficult or created tension with coworkers. Most respondents reported stress during this time, whether they were working onsite or not.

CONCLUSIONS

Although library workers in Kentucky were often able to work remotely during the initial pandemic response, by the end of 2020 most were working at least partially onsite. Respondents who spent more time working onsite, as well as *Public* and *School/K-12* library workers, reported higher rates of exposure to or actually contracting COVID-19 during 2020. However, the prevalence of non-COVID health impacts was high among all respondents - most notably an increase in generalized stress and anxiety.

Future work with this dataset will hopefully paint a clearer picture of the relationship between various worker characteristics (such as credential status, library type, EEOC-protected group membership) and time spent working onsite during the early pandemic, as well as the prevalence of health and safety impacts among various subgroups

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