TURNING THE PAGE

LIBRARY WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT SURVEY REPORT



MARCH 2023

CUPE RESEARCH

CUPE

PREPARED BY CUPE RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 101 public library workers participated in CUPE's workplace violence and harassment survey, which represents 15.5% of CUPE's library sector membership in Saskatchewan. The online survey was conducted from June 29 to September 9, 2022.

- Most survey respondents reported working for the province's two largest library systems: Saskatoon Public Library (44%) and Regina Public Library (29%). Of those respondents who identified their gender, 75% said they were female.

- 78% of participants reported that they have experienced verbal abuse (such as yelling, swearing, racist comments, offensive remarks) in their workplace. Thirty-nine percent indicated they experience verbal abuse rarely, while 29% reported that they experience this regularly and 10% said they experience this abuse frequently. Respondents report higher frequencies of witnessing verbal abuse. For instance, one-quarter of respondents (25%) reported they frequently witness verbal abuse in their workplace.

- 44% of respondents reported experiencing some sexual harassment in their workplace, though 39% said they experience this rarely.

- 50% of participants reported they have experienced workplace violence, though 32% report that this violence is rarely experienced. More respondents (71%) reported witnessing violence in the workplace; 26% said they witnessed this regularly and 5% frequently.

- Library patrons/members of the public are cited as those most responsible for the verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and violence in the workplace.

- 40% of respondents said they have been threatened with physical harm while at work. The next most common forms of violence experienced by respondents were "struck with or had an object thrown at me" (16%), and "grabbed" (12%) and "pushed" (12%).

- 48% of respondents report that they rarely feel unsafe at work, while 27% say they regularly or frequently feel unsafe at work. Respondents working at the downtown branches in Saskatoon and Regina were more likely to report feeling unsafe at work.

- Most respondents reported that workplace violence has increased over the last two years, either somewhat (26%) or significantly (27%). In contrast, only 3% of respondents say workplace violence has decreased and 19% said there was no change.

- Respondents identified mental health and addictions as the most common reasons for increased workplace violence. They also identified several tasks that expose library workers to higher risks of violence such as: working at the public service desk, in isolated areas and working alone; "roving" the library; interaction with problematic or intoxicated patrons; ensuring compliance with library policies, bylaws, computer use and public health orders; and bathroom checks. Several survey participants said security guards could play a bigger role in enforcing many of the above rules, and doing bathroom checks.

- Nearly half of survey respondents (46%) reported that they have assisted or intervened with a member of the public experiencing an overdose or another trauma. Only 28% of these respondents believed they were properly trained to intervene in this situation compared to 46% who answered that they weren't properly trained and 26% who said they weren't sure.

- Only 30% of survey respondents said there was a violence prevention program at their workplace. Most respondents said they either didn't know (39%) or said there wasn't a violence prevention program at their workplace (17%).

- Half of respondents (51%) report that they have received employer-sponsored training on how to deal with potentially violent situations. While 48% agreed that this training had prepared them to deal with violent situations that may arise at their workplace, slightly more said the training either did not help (29%) or said they didn't know (23%).

- 71% reported that they have not exercised their right to refuse unsafe work, compared to only 5% of respondents who said they did exercise this right.

- 44 survey participants put forward possible solutions to reduce or eliminate verbal abuse, violence and harassment. These include: better training for staff, particularly on de-escalation and dealing with mental health challenges; supportive managers; more and better trained security guards; additional library staff; more effective or longer bans; zero tolerance for violence; and social workers at some branches.

Recommendations

1) Additional employer-sponsored occupational health and safety and violence prevention training.

2) Expand union education to ensure library workers are better aware of their rights, including the right to refuse unsafe work.

3) Greater utilize joint OH&S committees to push for measures in this survey that would reduce the incidence of workplace violence and harassment.

4) Locate social workers and elders at library branches most often used by marginalized people to assist with housing and income support, navigate the justice system, address mental health needs and bridge cultural gaps in service.

5) Negotiate new provisions into collective agreements to, among other things, define and prohibit all forms of discrimination, harassment and violence; provide supports for victims of domestic violence; require employer training on workplace violence, adjust staffing levels to eliminate the need for working alone; require critical incident debriefing; and require all incident reports to be submitted to joint OH&S committees.

INTRODUCTION

Saskatchewan's public library system is comprised of three municipal library systems, seven regional library systems and one federation of northern libraries. The two largest library systems are the Saskatoon Public Library (SPL) and Regina Public Library (RPL).

Altogether, CUPE represents about 650 public library workers across the province who work in all three municipal library systems and five regional library systems. CUPE public library workers are organized into seven separate library locals.

CUPE library workers are employed in a variety of jobs, including librarians and library assistants, pages, public service clerks, programmers, network technicians and maintenance staff.

Today's public libraries are more than a place to borrow books. Patrons can access large collections of audio-visual materials, newspapers and magazines, along with e-books and other digital collections. Libraries are information and technology hubs, where patrons can enjoy free access to computers, 3D printers and even digital media studios in some locations. Public libraries also provide important programming such as children's story time, literacy, homework support and career assistance.

Libraries are important gathering spots for communities. They also offer important supports for marginalized and vulnerable people including people struggling with mental health issues, seniors and immigrants. For homeless people, libraries offer shelter from the cold.

Many people see libraries as safe, public spaces. While that's true most of the time, in recent years media reports have documented increasing levels of violence faced by library workers, a phenomenon that seems to have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CBC reported on data collected by the Toronto Public Library which found that the reported cases of violent and abusive behaviour increased from 103 in 2011 to 249 in 2018. During the same period, the reported cases of threatening behaviour or verbal threats increased from 262 to 623.[1]

In 2021, a University of Toronto study that surveyed over 500 librarians in four large Ontario cities from 2020 to 2021 revealed that almost all respondents had witnessed or experienced violence, intimidation, and harassment in the workplace. Two-thirds of these survey respondents stated they felt unsafe at work a minimum of a few times per month.[2]

Here in Saskatchewan, the Saskatoon Public Library temporarily closed two of its library branches – Frances Morrison Central Library and the Dr. Freda Ahenakew Library - for two weeks due to concerns of increased acts of aggression.[3]

[1] "Librarians face increasing violence on the job, Toronto Public Library figures show," CBC News, posted Feb. 2, 2020 4:00 AM ET.
[2] Samantha Beattie, "Sexual harassment, intimidation, violence on the job worsened during pandemic, librarians report," CBC News, posted: Oct. 2, 2021 5:00 AM ET.
[3] David Shield, "Workers raise concerns as Saskatoon Public Library temporarily closes 2 branches to public," CBC News, posted: Feb 17, 2022 12:28 PM CT.

In addition to growing media attention like the above, there was an increase in reports from CUPE library locals in Saskatchewan of violent incidents in the workplace and members assisting with patron overdoses. This led to the idea of conducting a comprehensive online survey to better understand the level of workplace violence and harassment facing Saskatchewan library workers and possible solutions to address this problem.

The results from this survey clearly demonstrate that public library workers, particularly in Saskatoon and Regina, face significant and growing levels of verbal abuse, harassment and violence in their workplaces. While libraries have policies and measures in place to address these health and safety concerns, the survey data shows much more needs to be done to ensure safe workplaces for library workers and a safe and welcoming environment for patrons. When workplace violence is not treated seriously or not addressed appropriately, the situation could become even more dire, as evidenced in the tragic murder of a patron at the Millennium Library in Winnipeg in December 2022.[4]

With this in mind, this report puts forward several recommendations to reduce workplace violence and harassment in our public libraries. These recommendations are drawn from the many solutions put forward by the library workers who participated in this survey.

[4] Darren Bernhardt, Cameron MacLean, "Former high school football star killed in Winnipeg's Millennium Library" CBC News, posted: December 13, 2022 11:27 AM CST

METHODOLOGY

An online survey, using the anonymous LimeSurvey tool, was developed by CUPE Research with input from CUPE local library representatives and CUPE servicing representatives assigned to library locals.

The survey comprised 31 questions, including three open-ended questions, to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

Once finalized, a hyperlink to the survey was e-mailed to elected representatives of each of the seven Saskatchewan CUPE library locals on June 29, 2022. These local representatives were asked to distribute the e-mail with the survey link to the personal e-mail addresses of members in their respective locals. Two reminder e-mails to fill out the survey were sent out on July 19 and August 29, 2022.

The survey closed on September 2, 2022.

Partially completed surveys were included in the survey, provided the majority of questions were answered. No questions were mandatory.

DEMOGRAPHICS

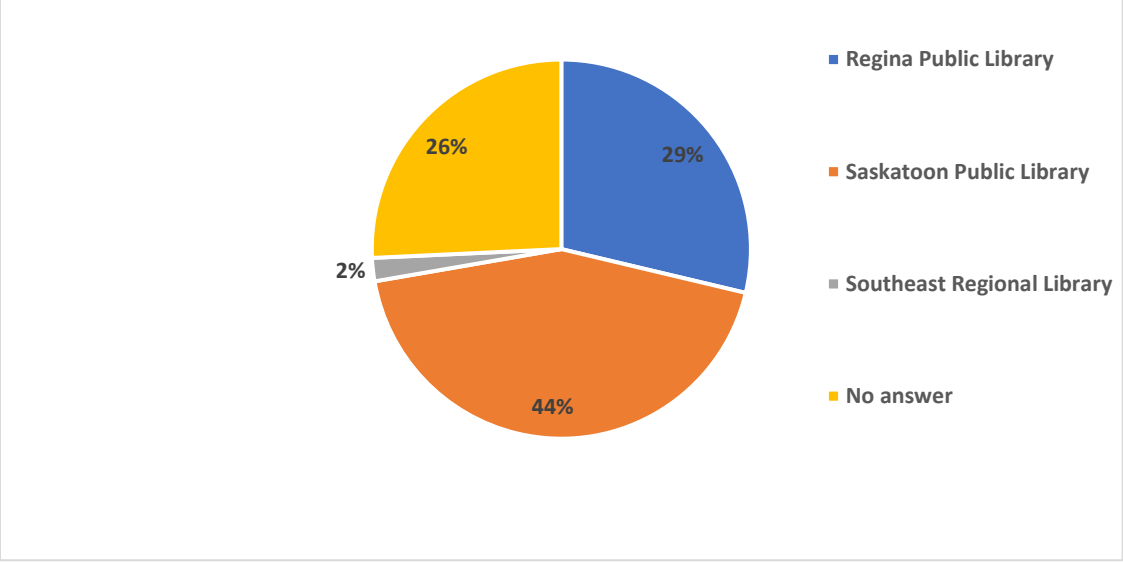
Three demographic questions were included in the survey. The placement of these demographic questions at the end of the survey may have contributed to several participants not answering these questions. Also, survey respondents are typically less likely to answer demographic questions than other questions.

Total Response

A total of 101 public library workers participated in the workplace violence and harassment survey. This total includes some partial surveys where respondents answered the majority of the 31 questions. The number of survey participants represents 15.5% of CUPE's library sector membership in Saskatchewan.

Place of Employment

As the chart below shows, most survey respondents reported working for the province's two largest library systems: Saskatoon Public Library (44%) and Regina Public Library (29%). Only 2% of survey respondents worked for another library system (Southeast Regional Library).

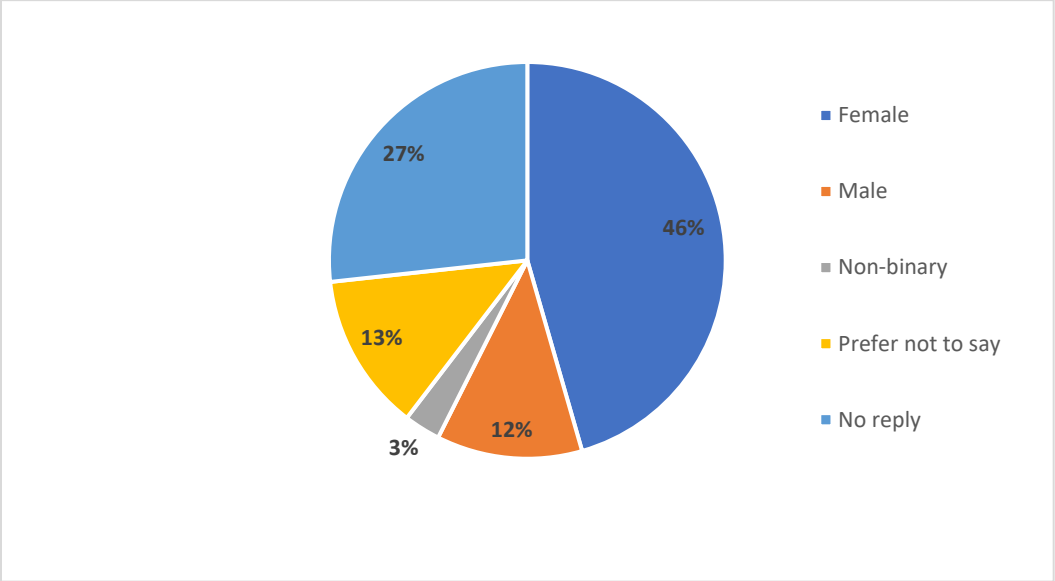


Unfortunately, one quarter (26%) of respondents did not identify which library system they worked for. It is possible that this number may include members working for other library systems who did not wish to identify their workplace even though the survey was anonymous. However, given the decentralized and voluntary method of survey distribution, it's more likely that these responses are from workers employed by the SPL and RPL. In any event, given the lack of participation from public library workers outside of Regina and Saskatoon, caution should be used in extrapolating survey results to public library workplaces outside of Regina and Saskatoon.

The survey also prompted respondents who identified their public library system to identify the branch where they worked. At the SPL, respondents from all nine branches participated in the survey, with the highest amount of respondents (37%) working at the downtown Frances Morrison Central Library. RPL respondents covered seven of nine branches with a plurality of respondents (41%) working at the downtown Central Library.

Gender

When asked to describe their gender, 46% of survey respondents identified as female, 12% as male and 3% as non-binary. However, 27% of respondents did not reply to this question and 13% said they preferred not to say. Excluding those respondents who either did not reply or preferred not to answer, 75% of respondents identified their gender as female, 20% identified as male and 5% identified as non-binary.



Equity-Seeking Status

Finally, when asked they were a member of an equality-seeking group, 8% of respondents identified as a person of colour, 6% identified as LGBTQ2+, 4% identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Metis or Inuit), and 2% identified as a person with a disability. Given that 30% of respondents did not respond to this question, it's likely that these numbers underestimate the diversity of the CUPE membership working in Saskatchewan's public libraries.

FREQUENCY OF VERBAL ABUSE

Survey respondents were asked, "How often do you experience verbal abuse (such as yelling, swearing, racist comments, offensive remarks) in your workplace." A separate question asked respondents how often they witness verbal abuse in their workplace.

As the chart below shows, a plurality of respondents (39%) report that they rarely experience verbal abuse in their workplace. However, the same percentage of respondents reported that they either regularly experience verbal abuse at work (29%) or frequently experience this (10%). Only 13% of respondents report that they never experience verbal abuse at their workplace.

Most notably, respondents report higher frequencies of witnessing verbal abuse. For instance, one-quarter of respondents (25%) reported they frequently witness verbal abuse in their workplace versus 10% who said they experienced verbal abuse in their workplace. The survey didn't probe further, but some of the verbal abuse that is being witnessed would include interactions between patrons.



FREQUENCY OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The survey results indicate that the incidence of sexual harassment against library workers is less common than verbal abuse. Still, 44% of respondents report experiencing some sexual harassment in their workplace, though 39% said they experience this rarely. According to this survey, library workers are more likely to witness sexual harassment than experience it. However, nearly half of respondents (46%) indicated they rarely witness sexual harassment in their workplace, while 12% said they witness this regularly or frequently.



FREQUENCY OF VIOLENCE

As the chart below shows, a plurality of survey respondents (35%) report that they have never experienced violence in their workplace. Still, a larger percentage (50%) reported that they have experienced violence in the workplace to some degree, albeit 32% report that this violence is rarely experienced.

More respondents report witnessing violence in the workplace – 40% said they rarely witness violence while over one-quarter (26%) said they witnessed violence in the workplace regularly and 5% said they witnessed this frequently. Again, some of the violence that is being witnessed would include violence between patrons.



WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Survey respondents identify that library patrons or members of the public are responsible for most of the verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and violence in the workplace. As per the chart below, respondents reported that library patrons/members of the public were most likely to carry out verbal abuse (82%), followed by violence (71%) and sexual harassment (57%).

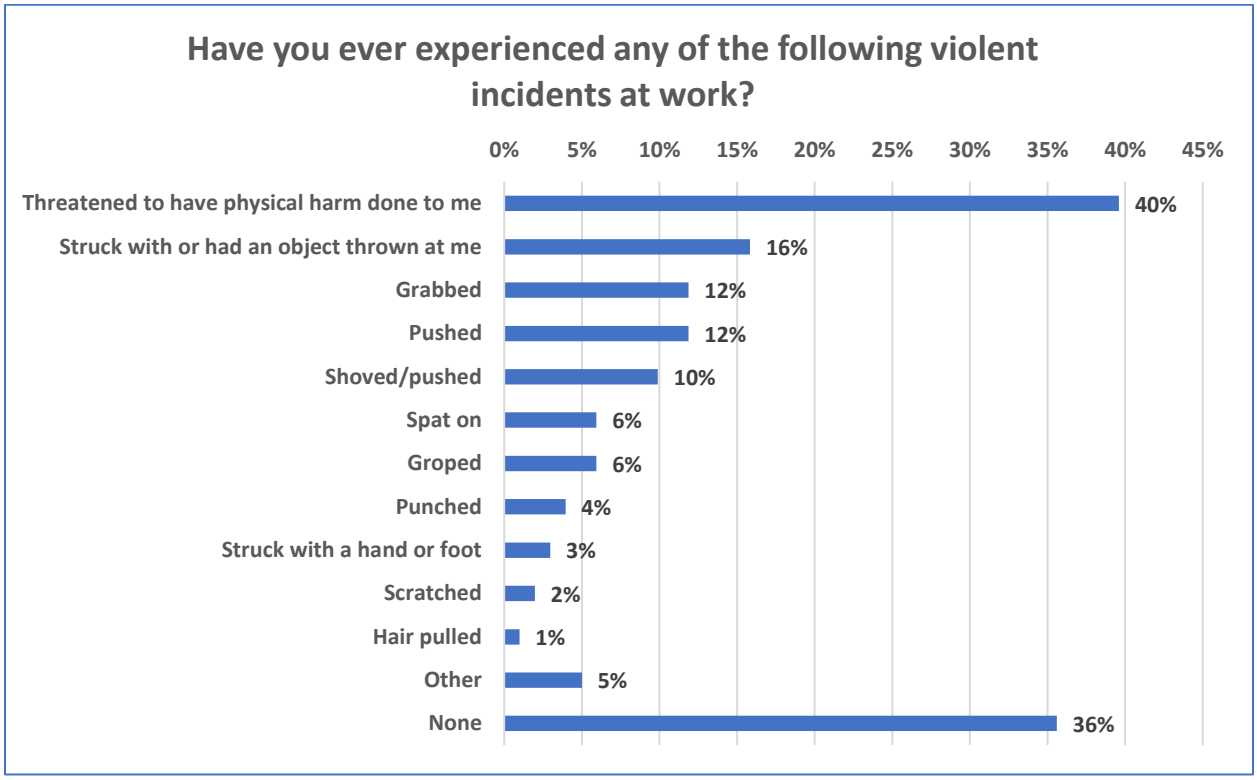


Very few respondents identified co-workers or supervisors/managers as the perpetrators of verbal abuse, sexual harassment, or violence. Only 7% of respondents reported that co-workers had carried out verbal abuse or sexual harassment. Only 6% of respondents reported that a supervisor or manager had carried out verbal abuse.

WHAT KIND OF VIOLENCE DO LIBRARY WORKERS EXPERIENCE?

Survey respondents were asked whether they have ever experienced a number of specific violent incidents. As the chart below shows, the most common form of workplace violence library workers report facing is "threatened to have physical harm done to me." Forty percent of respondents said they have experienced this at work.

The next most common forms of violence experienced by respondents were "struck with or had an object thrown at me" (16%), and "grabbed" (12%) and "pushed" (12%). Though the percentage responses are low, library workers responding to this survey also reported being spat on, groped, punched, struck with a hand or foot, scratched and having their hair pulled.



Near the end of CUPE's survey, respondents were asked "Do you have anything else you would like us to know about your experience with violence at work?" Many survey respondents answered this question by providing further detail on the kinds of violence they experienced or witnessed.

Here are a few examples of these comments:

> *"I have been threatened and knocked over and been verbally abused."*

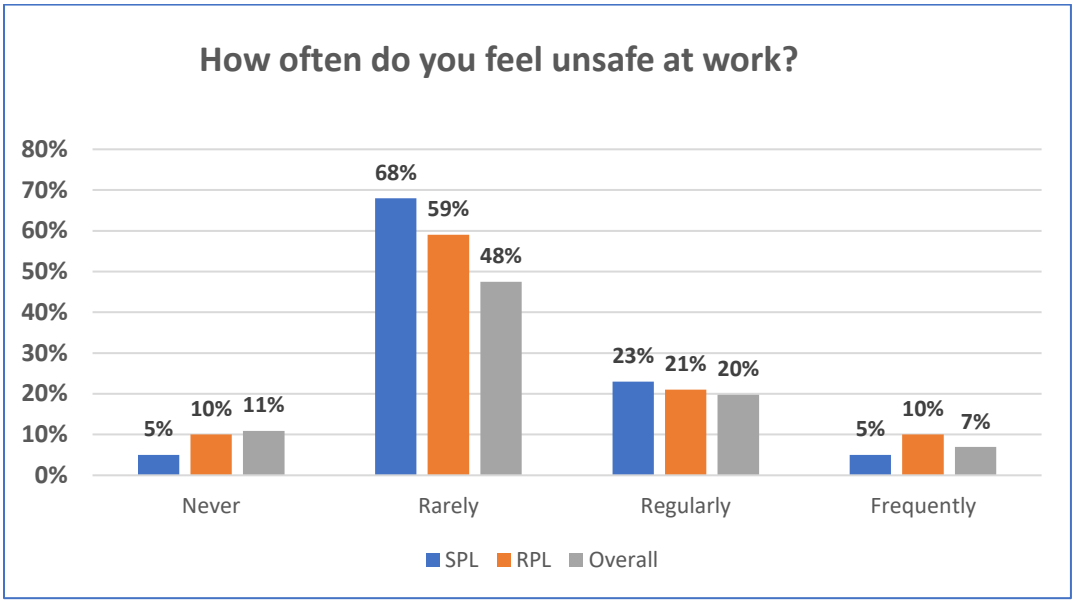
> *"Sometimes just witnessing an incident can be very emotionally/mentally taxing. And even though you're told steps are being taken it is somehow seen also as just part of the job and normalized."*

"Years ago, I was working an evening shift when someone pulled a knife on their social worker."

"When I worked at FMCL prior to the pandemic, I witnessed violence among patrons and towards LSA's and CSA's. I experienced one violent incident personally. Seeing these incidents occur towards front desk staff members when I was on the floor made me feel unsafe on a regular basis."

HOW OFTEN DO LIBRARY WORKERS FEEL UNSAFE?

The survey asked participants how often they feel unsafe at work. The chart below shows the overall results, as well as data for SPL and RPL respondents. Overall, only 11% of respondents report they never feel unsafe at work, while nearly twice as many respondents (20%) report they regularly feel unsafe at work and 7% frequently feel unsafe. Nearly half of respondents (48%) report that they rarely feel unsafe at work.

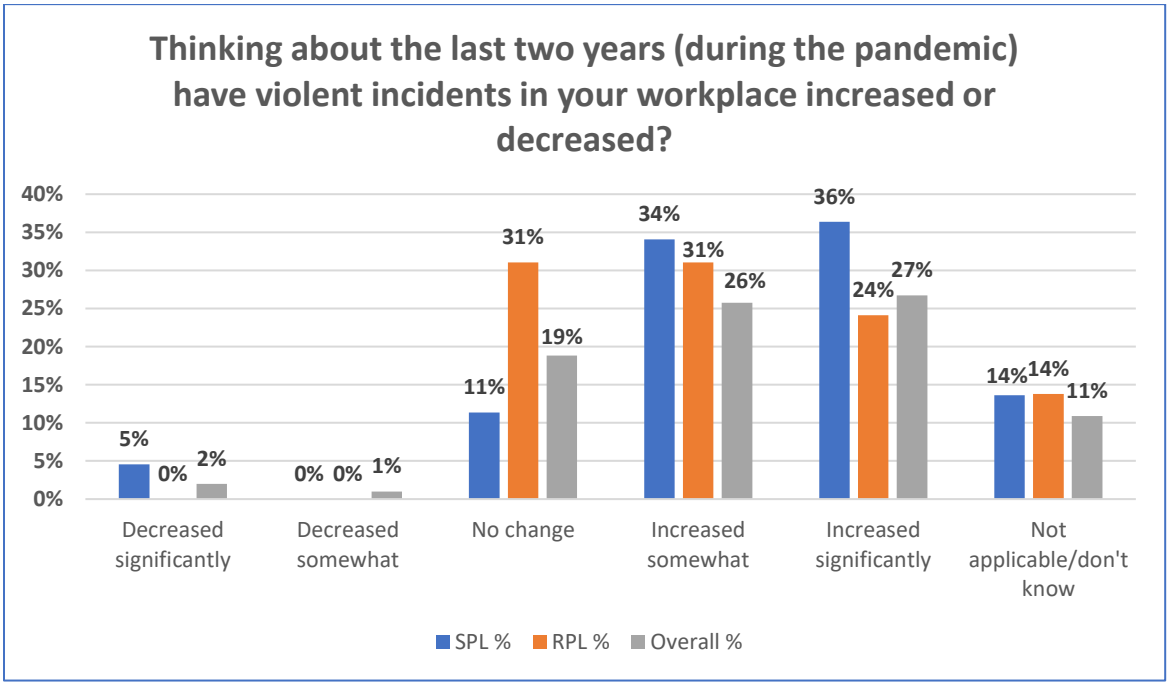


However, respondents working at the SPL and RPL are somewhat more likely to feel unsafe at work compared to overall respondents. Further, respondents working at the Frances Morrison Central Library (FMCL) in Saskatoon reported feeling the most unsafe at work. None of the 15 respondents reported that they never felt unsafe, while 53% said they rarely felt unsafe, 33% regularly felt unsafe and 13% frequently felt unsafe. By comparison, none of the 11 survey respondents from Regina's Central Library Branch reported they never felt unsafe, while 73% rarely felt unsafe and 27% regularly felt unsafe. Respondents from other SPL and RPL branches reported varying degrees of safety.

CHANGES OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS

CUPE's survey asked respondents whether violent incidents in their workplace have increased or decreased over the last two years (during the pandemic). Roughly speaking, these two years would cover the period of summer 2020 to summer 2022.

The chart below shows that most library workers participating in this survey reported that violent incidents in the workplace have increased. Looking at the overall results, a plurality of respondents (27%) reported that violent incidents in their workplace have increased significantly over the last two years, while 26% say that violent incidents have increased somewhat. On the other hand, only 3% of respondents indicated that violent incidents have somewhat or significantly decreased and 19% said there has been no change. The survey results also indicate that the frequency of violent incidents at the SPL has increased at a faster pace than the overall results.



Several respondents spoke to the frequency of workplace violence in their comments. Here are a couple of samples:

> *"I have felt increasingly unsafe at work over the past couple of years. I have witnessed coworkers getting spat on, punched and verbally abused. I often feel tense when I have to deal with any sort of patron conflict at work because I am waiting for something like this to happen to me."*

> *"It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it occurs quickly and is scary for those involved."*

Many survey participants noted that the frequency of workplace violence is often location-specific.

> *"It rarely happens at my location. The issue is highly specific to certain locations."*
>
> *"I work at a suburban library branch where incidents are rare. I know that inner city branches witness incidents far more frequently."*
>
> *"This varies from location to location in Saskatoon however increasing in all branches."*
>
> *"Verbal abuse, violence or harassment is so common at library workplaces especially at certain locations. It's to the point where employees and patrons don't feel safe and have actually been injured. It's has been growing and it doesn't feel like the employer has done enough to help make sure we are safe."*
>
> *"[I am] currently at a library that does have some but less incidents. I feel safer here. However, having worked at every single library, that has not been the case and staff are EXTREMELY vulnerable in many locations."*
>
> *"When I worked at an inner-city location, I ended up having to leave the location and taking a pay cut because of the impact on my mental health (I ended up with PTSD), physical health (I was always getting sick due to the stress) and fear my family had dropping me off at work since they would see the intoxicated patrons."*

The above statements are corroborated by the quantitative data of cross-tabulations. Respondents at both downtown branches were more likely to report increased levels of workplace violence: 87% of SPL respondents said violent incidents increased somewhat or significantly while 73% of RPL respondents said violent incidents had either increased somewhat or significantly.

RISK FACTORS

Violence doesn't "just happen." It's a workplace hazard with specific causes. There are several risk factors that can contribute to the occurrence of workplace violence. With this in mind, survey respondents were asked the following open-ended question: "What tasks expose you to the highest risk of violence or harassment in your workplace?"

Responses to this question can be grouped under the following themes:

Working at the public service desk, in isolated areas and working alone

Several respondents identified working at the front desk, information, or customer service desk as tasks that expose them to the highest risk of violence or harassment. Working alone at these desks or "shelving in the quiet corner of the library" were also identified by many respondents.

One respondent commented: "Shelving out on the floor especially in the stacks and areas where you are not visible to coworkers/supervisors. Patrons can corner you easily and you feel unprotected if an incident occurs."

Survey respondents also identified working alone in isolated departments during evenings and weekends as a higher risk task. On a related note, many identified understaffing as something that puts library workers at higher risk:

> *"We have been frequently understaffed when working the floor. There currently is zero break coverage so we have to leave our coworkers unsupported. This is significant on evening and weekends when there is no manager/supervisor in the building and less staff (Librarians working off desk) available as back up."*

> *"Staff are run off their feet and cannot even see what is going down at times since they are expected to be helping with technology, in an innovation lab or video game room or helping out with programming, etc. with limited staff."*

Roving the library

Many survey respondents identified "roving," working in open spaces and greeting patrons at the front door as tasks that put them more at risk of violence and harassment.

The following comments reflect these concerns:

> *"With library services moving towards a roving reference model and service desks being phased out, I often feel vulnerable when I don't have the desk as a barrier to feel safe behind. When I am out roving in the library, patrons have invaded my personal space by walking or standing extremely close to me."*

> *"Management does not want us to be behind the desk for too long/requires us to rove frequently which puts us in harm's way with potentially violent patrons."*

"Any tasks that require me to be away from the desk. i.e roving, working in the shelves, though I have been harassed by coworkers behind the desk as well as patrons across the desk."

Direct intervention with problematic or intoxicated patrons

Not surprisingly, dealing with problematic patrons, including asking them to leave the library, was identified by many as a higher risk task.

Here are some specific comments:

"Interacting with intoxicated patrons. Have been sexually harassed by intoxicated patrons many times. Also, "deescalating" patrons who come in already angry and irate."

"Intervening when there is a possible incident brewing (people's voices rising, people getting upset, addictions-based behaviours escalating). As a more senior staff member it is my job to be a leader and ensure safety for everyone else."

Enduring compliance with library policies, bylaws and public health orders

Enforcing compliance with library bylaws, policies and public health orders, particularly mandatory mask mandates, was identified by several survey respondents as a higher risk task.

"Ensuring people are following the bylaws set out by the library, as well as the public health orders over the last couple of years have a higher risk of exposure to violence or harassment."

"Enforcement of policies and procedures, protecting other's right to a safe environment."

Computer use

Several respondents referred to "enforcing time limits on computers", "monitoring appropriate computer use", "telling patrons that we are logging them off the computer" or "telling a customer no they cannot have a guest pass to get on the computer" as tasks that expose them to violence or harassment.

Bathroom checks

Bathroom checks were mentioned by several survey respondents. Comments included "checking washrooms for misuse of facilities for drug intoxication/use," "dealing with intoxicated patrons and drug use in the bathrooms" and "telling [patrons] the bathroom is busy or to exit the bathroom."

Security guards

Many library workers commented that security guards, where employed, could play a more active role with enforcing library bylaws, policies, or public health orders, bathroom checks or intervening in difficult situations.

The following comments are reflective of these concerns:

> *"I also don't feel that my role is to be confronting patrons about breaking our rules when we have security hired."*
>
> *"Having to enforce masks, and safe use bylaws. We are doing the work of a security guard."*
>
> *"Untrained, unlicensed security guards… They are untrained in mental health care and often do not remove a problem patron from the library."*
>
> *"The hired security is out of scope and not paid a living wage. My impression is they don't take their role seriously as putting themselves in harms way is not worth the pay. Turnover of the security guards is frequent, meaning they are unfamiliar with our policies and patron interactions. During the pandemic we were tasked with enforcing masking for patrons which caused a lot of conflict while we were roving the branch.*

Other comments

Two respondents noted safety concerns with leaving work. As one respondent put it, "Being kind to male patrons who then follow me home."

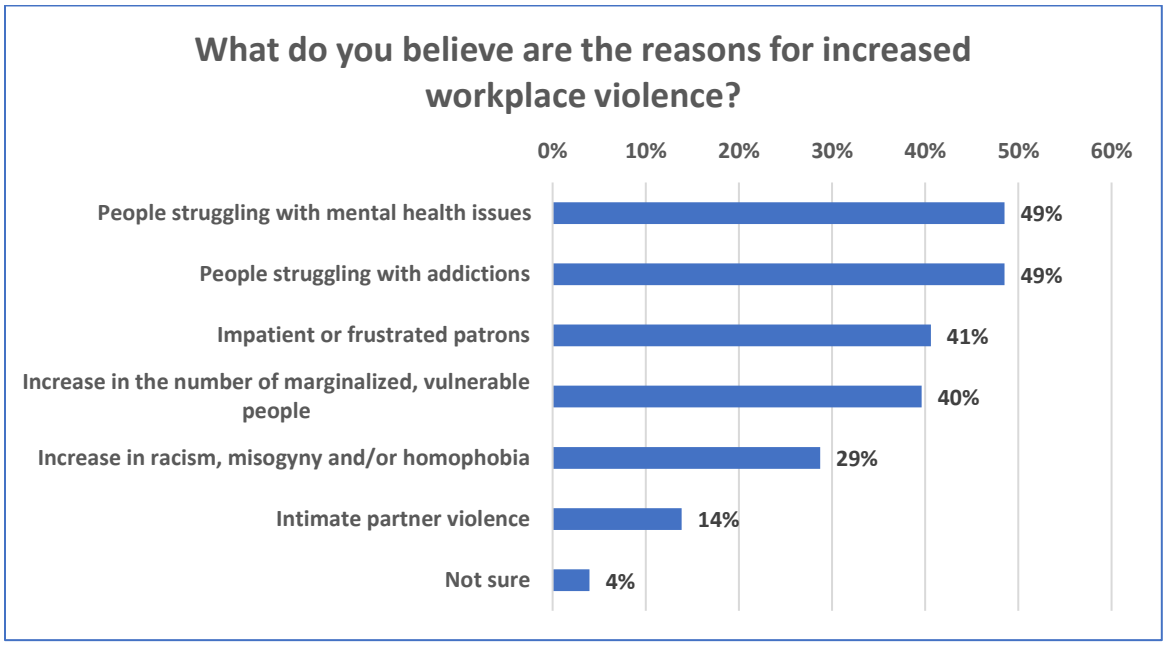
Another respondent said that "being unable to see the incident data base" was something that put library workers at greater risk of violence.

WHAT'S BEHIND WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

In recent years, there has been an increasing spotlight on the growing problems of addiction and mental health challenges, and the lack of supports provided. The number of overdose deaths in Saskatchewan continue to climb, while provincial government changes to social assistance programs have worsened the problem of homelessness.

As one of the most accessible indoor public spaces, libraries are not immune to the broader social problems affecting Saskatchewan people.

As the chart below shows, respondents clearly identified mental health and addictions as the most common reasons for increased workplace violence. An equal percentage of respondents (49%) cited "people struggling with mental health issues" and "people struggling with addictions" as reasons for increased workplace violence. This was followed by "impatient or frustrated patrons" (41%), "increase in racism, misogyny and/or homophobia" (40%) and "intimate partner violence" (14%) as other reasons for workplace violence.



It is important to note that not all verbal abuse, harassment and violence arises solely from patrons with addictions or mental health challenges. As noted above, some of this behaviour may arise from general frustrations of patrons, which in turn, may be the result of understaffing.

One respondent noted:

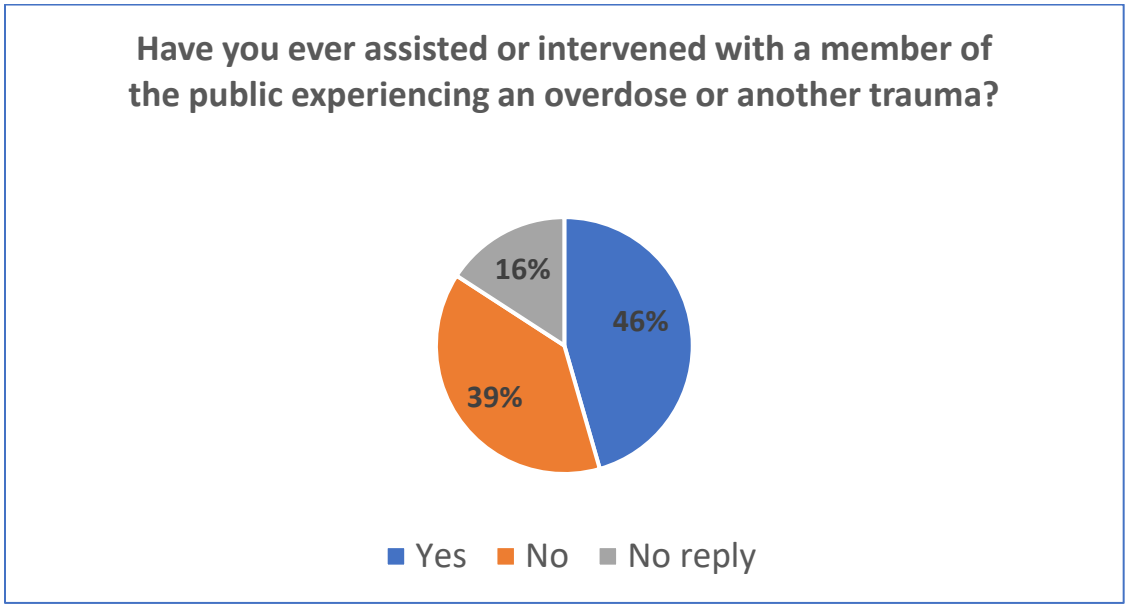
> "Being the front-line worker, I have to come in close interactions with patrons to help them on computer issues or during customer services. That is the time when sometimes I have to bear with their harsh behavior or their frustration."

INTERVENTIONS WITH OVERDOSES AND OTHER TRAUMAS

In recent years, many CUPE members working in public libraries have reported that they have found themselves in situations where they are required to assist members of the public who experience overdoses or other traumas while visiting libraries.

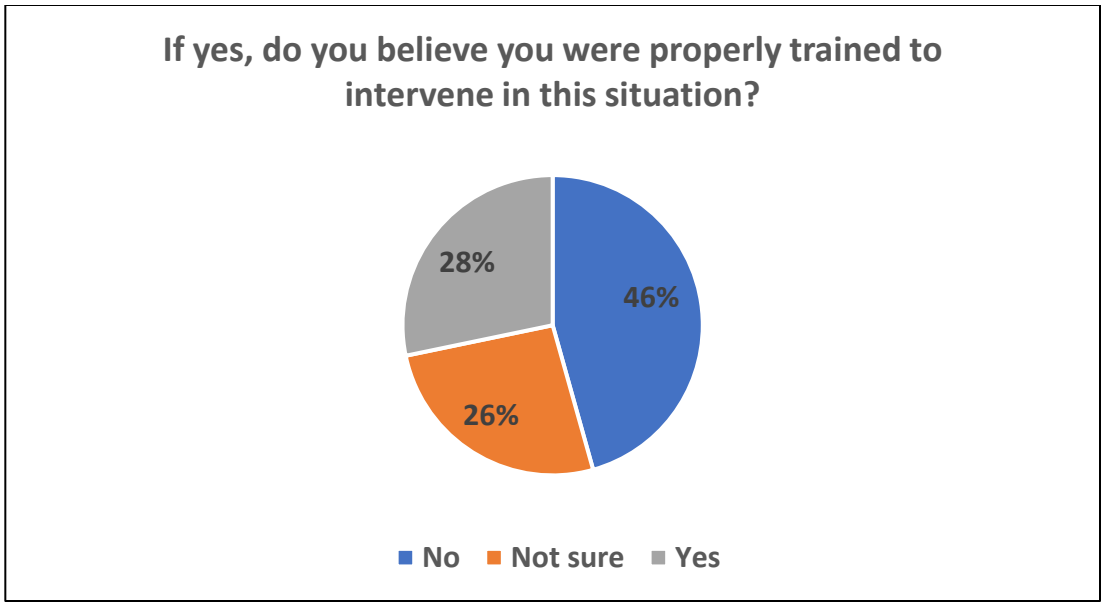
Survey respondents were asked: "Have you ever assisted or intervened with a member of the public experiencing an overdose or another trauma?"

As per the chart below, nearly half of survey respondents (46%) reported that they have assisted or intervened with a member of the public experiencing an overdose or another trauma while 39% said they have not assisted or intervened in such a situation.



Respondents who said they assisted in this way are not restricted to the downtown branches of SPL and RPL. Rather, cross tabulations show that respondents from seven SPL branches and five RPL branches assisted members of the public experiencing an overdose or another trauma. That said, survey respondents who were most likely to have assisted in this way worked at RPL's Regent Place (100%), FCML (87%), SPL's Dr. Freda Ahenekew Library (75%) and RPL's Central Branch (45%). Again, branch-level percentages are less reliable given the lower number of respondents at any one branch.

A follow-up question was asked of those respondents who answered that they had assisted or intervened in these situations. As the chart below shows, only 28% of these respondents believed they were properly trained to intervene in this situation compared to 46% who answered that they weren't properly trained and 26% who said they weren't sure.

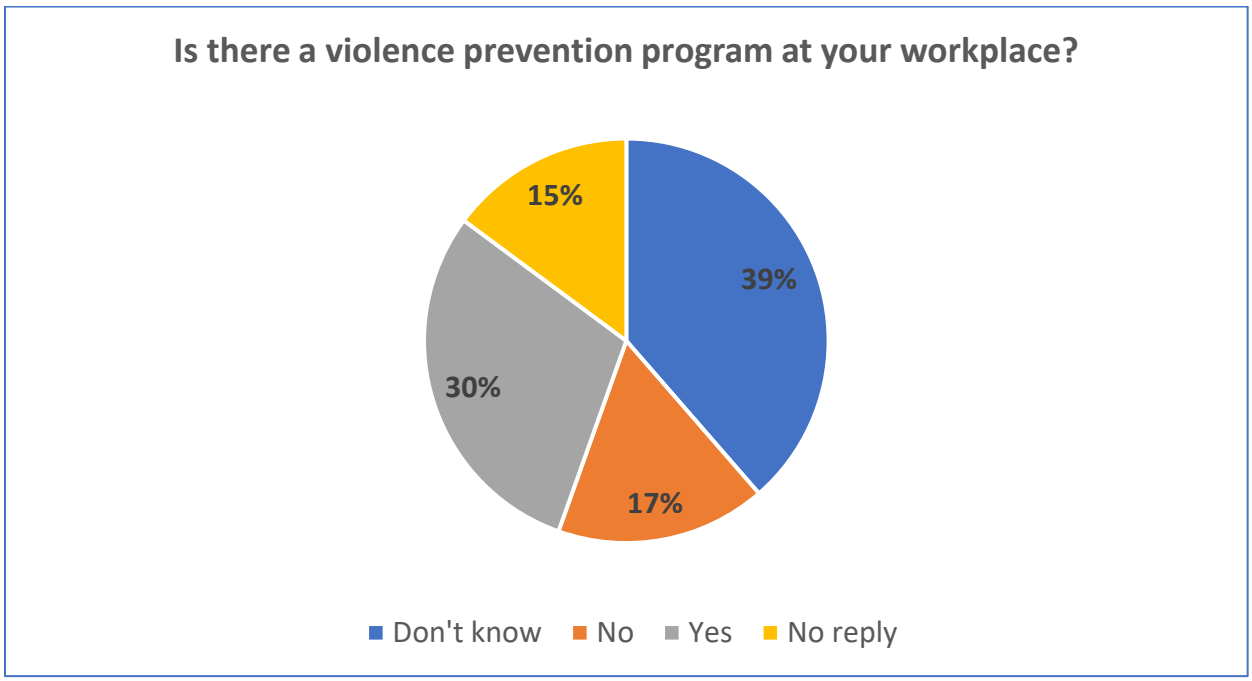

If yes, do you believe you were properly trained to intervene in this situation?
28%
46%
26%
No
Not sure
Yes

KNOWLEDGE OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE POLICIES

In accordance with Section 3-21(1) of *The Saskatchewan Employment Act*, prescribed workplaces where "violent situations have occurred or may reasonably be expected to occur shall develop and implement a written policy statement and prevention plan to deal with potentially violent situations." Public libraries are not exempt for this requirement.

Survey responses to this question demonstrated a significant lack of awareness of these programs.

Only 30% of survey respondents said there was a violence prevention program at their workplace. Most respondents said they either didn't know (39%) or answered that there wasn't a violence prevention program at their workplace (17%).



A slight majority of respondents (51%) report that they have received employer-sponsored training on how to deal with potentially violent situations. One-quarter of respondents (25%) said they haven't received this kind of training and 9% said they didn't know.

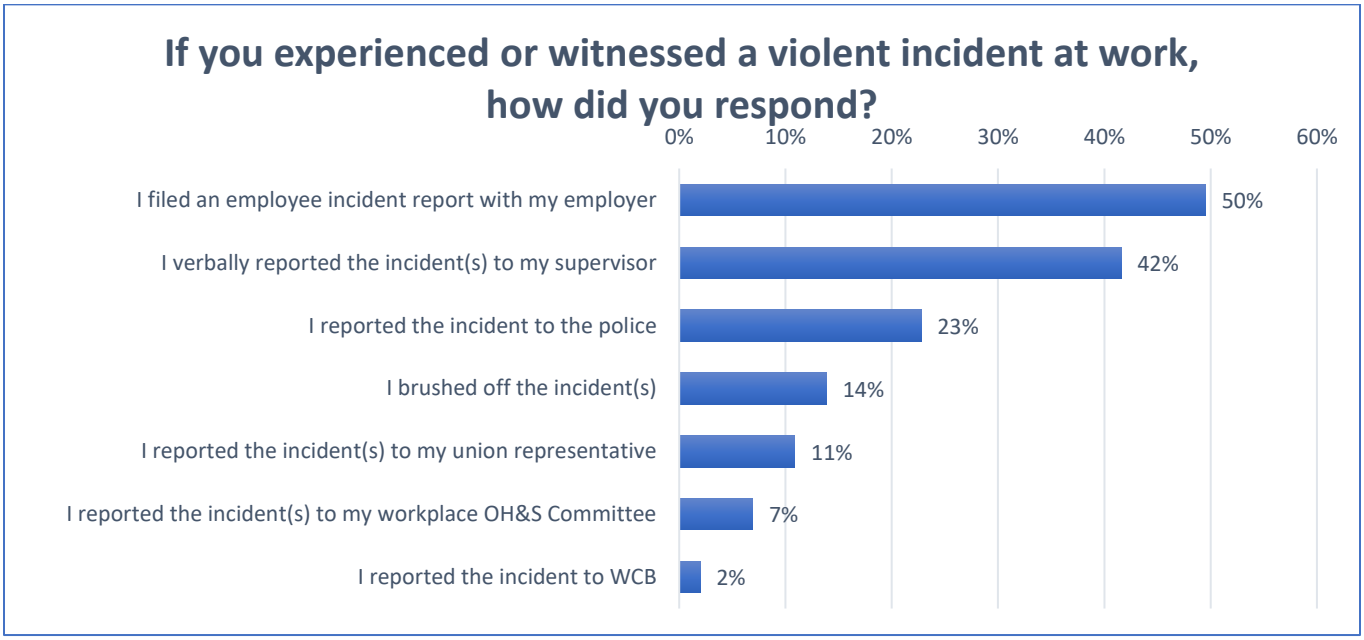


A follow-up question was asked of those respondents who reported taking this training. As the chart below shows, a plurality of respondents (48%) agreed that this training had prepared them to deal with violent situations that may arise at their workplace. Slightly more respondents either said the training did not help them prepare to deal with violent situations (29%) or said they didn't know (23%).



REPORTING VIOLENCE

As the chart below shows, of those survey respondents who said they experienced or witnessed a violent incident at work, 50% said they filed an employee incident report with their employer. A lower percentage (42%) said they verbally reported the incident to their supervisor, while 23% reported the incident to the police. Unfortunately, 14% of respondents said they brushed off the incident. Likewise, only 11% reported the incident to their union and only 7% informed their workplace occupational health and safety committee.



Normalization of Workplace Violence

Many survey participants noted in a response to an open-ended question that workplace violence has become normalized. Several respondents said that library management is not taking incidents of violence and harassment seriously. Here is a sampling of these comments:

> *"The abuse from customers [patrons] has become normalized b/c it is such a frequent occurrence. Staff do not feel their safety matters to the employer."*

> *"In general, we are incredibly desensitized. We're fairly aware of it, but that doesn't help much."*

> *"I don't feel that it is taken seriously. I feel employees are expected to handle it as part of everyday library work. I do not feel supported by management."*

> *"Lack of managers following up and asking if I was ok after incidence. Management brushing it under the table. Having morning meetings talking about and joking about other things other than the incidences that occurred the day at the library. Management trying to undermine the severity of the violence we are exposed to in the workplace."*

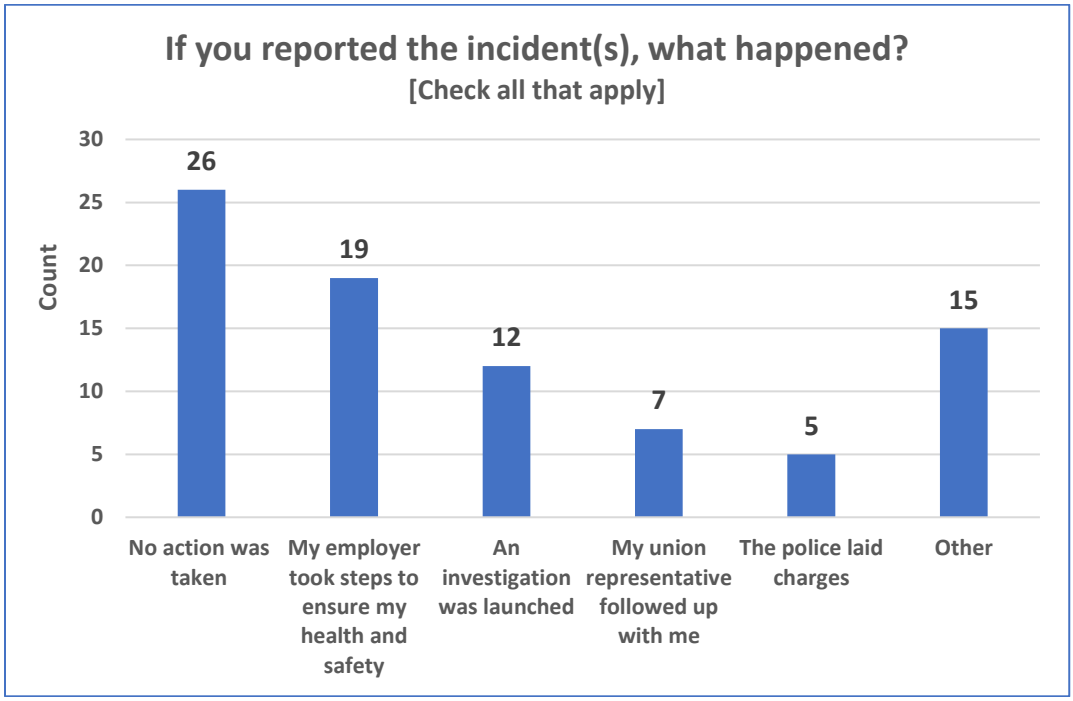
"I have been submitting incident reports for almost a decade and only one branch head actually cared enough to find who the harasser was and took steps to make me feel safer and prevent a repeat incident."

"There is a culture of letting patrons say abusive things to each other without intervention. This could be caused by a fear of escalation and not wanting to intervene because of threats and abuse being turned toward staff. Often it is ignored as a coping mechanism. I don't feel my role in the library is to police people's speech but when it becomes agitated it can be distressing. I also don't feel that my role is to be confronting patrons about breaking our rules when we have security hired."

Survey respondents were asked the follow-up question: "If you experienced or witnessed an act of workplace violence and did not report it, please tell us why."

Some respondents said that the incident was reported or handled by a co-worker, supervisor or security. However, many respondents either said they did not think the injury was serious or did not know they should report the incident. Ten respondents indicated their supervisor/employer discouraged them from reporting the incident. One respondent noted, "I've seen how they treated similar incidents and knew they would do nothing."

Another follow-up question was asked: "If you reported the incident(s), what happened?" Unfortunately, as the chart below shows, the most common response to this question was "no action was taken." Nineteen respondents reported "my employer took steps to ensure my health and safety" and 12 reported that "an investigation was launched."



A common response that was identified under the "other" category was the banning of patrons for a temporary period. As one respondent noted,

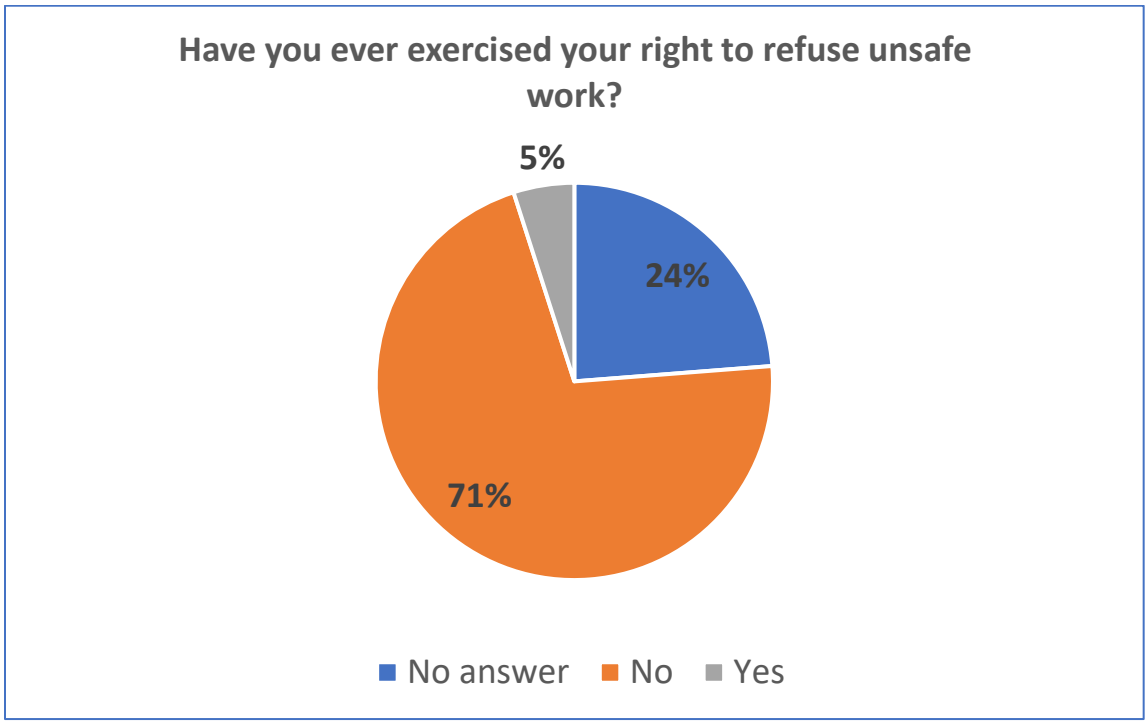
> *"Patrons may often be suspended from accessing the library for a window of time. Beyond this, there is no action taken, particularly when it comes to debriefing and ensuring employees involved in the incident are doing ok."*

RIGHT TO REFUSE UNSAFE WORK

Under *The Saskatchewan Employment Act*, workers have the right to refuse to perform work that they believe is unsafe. This legal right is spelled out in Section 3-31 of the Act as follows:

> Right to refuse dangerous work
>
> A worker may refuse to perform any particular act or series of acts at a place of employment if the worker has reasonable grounds to believe that the act or series of acts is unusually dangerous to the worker's health or safety or the health or safety of any other person at the place of employment until:
>
> (a) sufficient steps have been taken to satisfy the worker otherwise; or
>
> (b) the occupational health committee has investigated the matter and advised the worker otherwise.

As per the chart below, over two-thirds of survey respondents (71%) reported that they have not exercised their right to refuse unsafe work. Only 5% of respondents said they have exercised their right to refuse unsafe work.



POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The survey asked participating library workers a final open-ended question: "What do you think could be done in your workplace to reduce or eliminate verbal abuse, violence and harassment?"

Forty-four participants answered this question. Many respondents identified several possible solutions. A wide range of ideas were put forward, but most can be grouped together under the following themes:

Better training for staff

Twelve respondents raised the need for additional and/or better training to help staff with de-escalation of violent situations, dealing with mental health issues and overdoses. Some said this training should be prioritized for those library workers at the greatest risk. Two respondents said library workers need self-defense training.

Supportive managers

Six respondents said part of the solution would be to hire more supportive, empathetic, or compassionate managers or to have managers more visible. One respondent noted, "management who make decisions regarding our safety are often not in the building and have no idea how things are on the front lines."

More and better trained security guards

Ten respondents suggested workplace violence could be reduced by adding more security guards and/or better trained security guards. Some specified that additional security guards could be added to high-risk locations while one respondent thought guards should be at every location. Many respondents said security guards should be doing bathroom checks and enforcing library bylaws and public health orders. On the other hand, a few respondents noted that were more effective solutions than simply adding more security guards.

Additional staff

Four respondents identified the need for more staff or appropriate staffing levels to reduce workplace violence. As one respondent put it, "Mostly, I want more staff in the branch. I feel safer when more people are there especially at night."

More effective or longer bans

Four respondents suggested that workplace violence could be reduced by implementing longer bans/suspensions, updating ban policies, or implementing methods to more effectively identify banned patrons. One respondent noted that "a co-worker was physically abused and the abuser only got a 3-month ban, whereas a theft of DVDs got a 1-year ban." Another respondent suggested no re-entry for patrons who have sexually harassed or assaulted library workers.

Zero tolerance for violence

Similarly, three respondents suggested there should be zero tolerance for violence and harassment towards staff and others.

Social workers at some branches

Three respondents suggested that social workers or social service providers should be located at some branches.

Other solutions

Other solutions respondents put forward to reduce workplace violence, abuse and harassment included reporting of incidents to joint occupational health and safety (OH&S) committees (instead of employer safety committees), employer consultation with employees, better placement of security cameras, safer layouts of facilities, less roving or shifting of everyone around the building, better communication from the employer, and working more closely with other agencies.

While most respondents focused on what the employer should do to alleviate violent incidents, one respondent said, "Also, I believe the union should educate its members on our rights detailing what constitutes an unsafe workplace." Another respondent noted that their current "Labour Management Union team is fighting with Mangers and CEO to implement a Critical Incident Team for debriefing."

One respondent suggested that police should be called faster and more often and do regular rounds at library branches where violence is more common. However, other respondents noted a serious disinterest by local police, even during active assaults.

Another respondent, recognizing the larger societal problems underlying the problem of workplace violence, put forward the following solutions:

> *"Better funding and coordinated interventions societally for addictions, mental illness, homelessness, etc."*

Notwithstanding the many challenges and risks of violence facing library workers, generally speaking, respondents still wanted to maintain the public library as a welcoming place for all community members, including marginalized people and/or those struggling with mental health concerns, while simultaneously addressing the very real health and safety concerns of staff.

> *"Generally, giving patrons, especially those exhibiting signs of mental distress more space and treating all patrons with compassion and respect. I don't think increasing surveillance type protocols are effective. They seem to cause tension and can escalate or instigate incidents."*

> *"In general, library workers are focused (and taught to be focused) on being 'welcoming' above all else. We do not tend to realize that we are also people and allowing the abuse of*

any person in a space, including ourselves, makes it unwelcoming for everyone. We tend to be very loath to call the police due to the increasing recognition of police malfeasance against marginalized people, and we also hate banning people because we know there often isn't any place else that will tolerate their presence. However, those aren't the only options, and it is vital that we do as much to protect ourselves and our fellow staff from abuse as we protect patrons."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The responses to this survey clearly show that much more needs to be done to prevent workplace violence in public libraries across Saskatchewan. While there are actions that CUPE locals can take to address workplace violence and harassment, it should be emphasized that ultimately, employers have the legal obligation under *The Saskatchewan Employment Act* to "ensure, insofar as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all of the employer's workers."

Given the comments from the members highlighted in this report, and the data that shows many workers are not reporting violent incidents, there is a need to challenge the normalization of violence in the workplace by many managers. Violence, harassment and abuse should not be "just part of the job." Library workers should be able to go to work without fearing, experiencing or witnessing violence.

The following recommendations are informed by the findings, experiences and suggestions of library workers who took part in this survey.

More employer-sponsored violence prevention training

The survey results clearly indicate that public library workers require additional employer-sponsored occupational health and safety and violence prevention training. This training should include, but not be limited to the following topics:

a) The causes of violence.
b) Factors that precipitate violence.
c) How to recognize workplace violence and warning signs.
d) Information contained in workplace violence prevention policies and procedures.
e) The appropriate response to workplace violence, including preventing and de-escalating violent incidents and incidents with a potential to lead to violence.
f) How to obtain assistance when a violent incident takes place.
g) Procedures for reporting, investigating, and documenting incidents of workplace violence.

As noted above, only half of the respondents to this survey indicated they had received employer-sponsored training on how to deal with potentially violent situations. Half of those respondents who indicated they had this training either didn't find the training prepared them to deal with violent situations or didn't know. This training should be provided on an annual basis and more frequently if required. Training should occur during paid work time.

Expand union education

As noted above, the survey results indicate that only 5% of respondents have invoked their right to refuse unsafe work. This could indicate a lack of awareness among library workers of this right and/or a reluctance to invoke the right. Under *The Saskatchewan Employment* Act, it is illegal for employers to take any kind of discriminatory action or reprisal against an employee who exercises their right to refuse unsafe work, assists an OH&S committee or seeks to have health and safety

rules enforced. On a similar note, the survey found that only 7% of those respondents who experienced or witnessed a violent incident at work said they reported the incident to their workplace OH&S Committee. CUPE library locals can contact their Servicing Representative to arrange for union OH&S training, which will underline the importance and critical role of joint OH&S committees and empower workers to refuse unsafe work. However, this should only complement employer-sponsored OH&S training, not replace it.

Greater utilization of joint OH&S committees

There were very few mentions of the joint OH&S committees among the responses of this survey. This may be an indication that these vital committees are not being utilized to their full potential. These committees should be used to push for measures identified in this survey that would reduce the incidence of workplace violence and harassment, whether these are changes to the layout of workplaces, better utilization of security staff, updating ban policies or better placement of security cameras. As much as possible, copies of all incident reports should be submitted to the joint OH&S committees for their review. It should be underlined that library employers have a legal obligation under *The Saskatchewan Employment Act* to create joint OH&S committees and ensure they are well-functioning. Employers must also respond to post-incident recommendations received from these joint committees within an appropriate time frame.

Onsite social workers and Elders

Those public library branches which are most often used by marginalized people could employ outreach or social workers to address the needs of these vulnerable populations. There are precedents elsewhere. For instance, the Edmonton Public Library employs three social workers to assist patrons in getting housing and income support, navigating the justice system and addressing mental health needs, among other things.[5] On a similar note, the presence of Indigenous elders and other role models at libraries, would help marginalized patrons to seek advice and assistance from those they easily identify with and respect. This would help bridge cultural gaps in service.

Collective bargaining

Finally, locals can take concrete steps to reduce workplace violence and harassment by bargaining new provisions into their collective agreements. These provisions could include language that:

- defines and prohibits all forms of discrimination, harassment and violence;
- provides supports for victims of domestic violence;
- requires the employer to provide training on workplace violence to all members during paid working time;
- requires the adjustment of bargaining unit staffing levels to eliminate the need to work alone and when this is not possible to put in place protective measures for staff working alone or in isolated areas;

[5] Anna Junker, "Edmonton Public Library outreach workers helping bind city's most vulnerable with resources," *Edmonton Journal*, August 8, 2022, accessed at https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/edmonton-public-library-outreach-workers-helping-bind-citys-most-vulnerable-with-resources

- mandates periodic workplace violence hazard assessments;
- requires all incident reports to be submitted to the joint OH&S committee within a certain period of time;
- provides details of the workplace violence and prevention program;
- requires critical incident debriefing;
- provides supports and quick access to employee assistance programs (EAP) for workers affected by an incident of workplace violence.

While many employers will balk at including such language in the collective agreement, it's important to note that workplace violence provisions like the above has been negotiated into library collective agreements across the country.

Contact your CUPE Servicing Representative for details. Local unions are also encouraged to consult CUPE's Workplace Violence and Harassment Prevention Kit, which can be accessed at www.cupe.ca.

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