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Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Library Workers Experiencing or Observing Sexual Harassment in University of California Libraries is Commonplace and Commonly Unreported

Barr-Walker, J., Hoffner, C., McMunn-Tetangco, E., & Mody, N. (2021). Sexual harassment at University of California Libraries: Understanding the experiences of library staff members. College & Research Libraries, 82(2), 237. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.2.237

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Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Library Workers Experiencing or Observing Sexual Harassment in University of California Libraries is Commonplace and Commonly Unreported

A Review of:

Barr-Walker, J., Hoffner, C., McMunn-Tetangco, E., & Mody, N. (2021). Sexual harassment at University of California Libraries: Understanding the experiences of library staff members. *College & Research Libraries, 82*(2), 237. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.2.237

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Abstract

Objective – To identify whether academic library workers at the University of California Libraries (UCL) system experienced or observed sexual harassment and to measure their reporting and disclosure behavior.

Design – Anonymous online survey with open and closed-end questions.

Setting – All UCL system campuses (Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, San Diego, and San Francisco).

Subjects – All 1610 non-student employees working in UCL system were invited to participate, 579 (36%) responded.

Methods – The authors engaged multiple stakeholder groups to refine and promote this census of UCL non-student workers. The survey was distributed via REDCap and remained open for six weeks of November to December 2018. All questions were optional. Certain demographic information was not collected because respondents might have been identified via deductive disclosure. The first author conducted descriptive statistical analysis and pairs of authors conducted thematic analysis.

Main Results – More than half of respondents experienced or observed sexual harassment in the workplace; women were more likely to experience than observe and vice versa for men. Harassment was most likely to be exhibited by a coworker. Less than half of respondents felt that the UCL system administration considered the issue important. Nearly three out of every four respondents who had experienced harassment at work chose not to report or disclose; this did not vary significantly between women and men.

Conclusion – Sexual harassment of library workers, often by other library workers, is widespread. Staff training and policies should incorporate the reality of gender harassment and commenting on a person's appearance—the two most common forms of harassment exhibited and observed.

Commentary

Sexual harassment occurring in libraries is not a surprise, but research on this topic has only recently entered library scholarship (Benjes-Small et al., 2021; Ford, 2017). This study is the first to attempt a census, via an anonymous online survey, to understand how widespread the problem is in a specific population of library workers—in this case, non-student employees in the 10-campus University of California Libraries system.

The Center for Evidence-Based Management provides a checklist to appraise survey research (CEBMa, n.d.). In assessing the research by Barr-Walker et al. using this checklist, several aspects must be considered. First, while this was a census—all possible members of this population were contacted and invited to participate—not all chose to do so. Second, aside from broad gender identity (terminology used by the survey), the researchers did not gather demographic data (e.g., race, sexual orientation, campus). This protects participants' identities but also presents challenges for generalizability of the findings. Not requiring any of this information means that it is difficult to judge the success of a 36% response rate (Q.7 of the CEBMa tool), as one cannot ascertain if there are meaningful clusters of characteristics of participants who did not respond. This highlights the tension in collecting information about sensitive topics that could potentially endanger participants, as 12% of survey respondents did not report or disclose their experiences of harassment due to fear of retaliation, embarrassment, or being seen as a troublemaker.

Barr-Walker et al's research meets the CEBMa's criteria of addressing a clearly focused question and utilizes an appropriate design. While it is not possible to appraise the study on many of the CEBMa criteria because it lacks the typical statistical significance of surveys (particularly in comparison between groups), the authors do provide overwhelming evidence that sexual harassment is a widespread problem in the UCL system. Perhaps most notable and most disheartening, the study demonstrates how ubiquitous and typical this experience is at UCL; among participants who had experienced harassment at work and chose not to report it, 41% indicated the problem was not egregious enough. One participant reported, "If I were to report every time that I felt unfairly treated … I'd spend more time reporting than working."

These findings are as disturbing as they are revelatory. Academic library workers engage with members of the public and their patron populations in service roles where, as one participant acknowledged, "[you] feel like you cannot leave your post." This sentiment becomes far more sinister when contextualized by a workplace environment where behavior like this is typical. According to the survey, the most common source of harassment was a UCL staff member. If individuals do not feel they can avoid being treated this way by their coworkers, why would they expect better from their patrons? Adding to the issue, more than half of respondents did not feel their library administration considered the issue important. In a workplace where one regularly experiences or witnesses harassment, the sentiment that those in power do not care enables the continuation of this widespread problem. If campus administration is perceived as indifferent to this issue, they become complicit.

One important limitation of this study is the population was defined as non-student library workers. Many academic libraries rely heavily on student work forces. If staff are experiencing harassment, immediate attention should be directed toward understanding if this extends to students who do not have the benefits and theoretical protections of full-time employees. An additional limitation of this study is that it did not make comparisons across campuses. While the authors did this intentionally, it prevents further consideration of the role of setting (urban versus rural), size of library, or other characteristics that could contribute to or enable a workplace ambience that allows harassment. The authors may not have wanted to risk sowing division among campuses by comparing them to one another, but combining the campuses into larger categories would have allowed for statistical significance testing to provide insight if there are factors that make harassment more pervasive.

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