



Evidence Summary

Heightened Awareness of Oppressive Systems May Impact Black Library Workers' Perceptions of Inequitable Hiring and Retention Practices in Public and Academic Libraries

A Review of:

Caragher, K. & Bryant, T. (2023). Black and non-Black library workers' perceptions of hiring, retention, and promotion racial equity practices. *Journal of Library Administration*, 63(2), 137-178.
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Abstract

Objective – To measure Black and non-Black library employees' perceptions of their library's efforts to hire, retain, and promote Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) library employees.

Design – Literature review and subsequent questionnaire.

Setting – Academic and public libraries in the United States and Canada.

Subjects – 717 survey participants who met the criteria of working in the United States or Canada, and either being currently employed, retired, or unemployed library workers whose experiences are placed in an academic or public library. 68 subjects who selected Black as their ethnicity were coded separately from other ethnic designations.

Methods – A joint effort of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS) and the Public Library Association (PLA) launched the Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force in 2019. A subset of this task force broke out to create a survey titled Racial Equity in Libraries. A three-part survey was devised, covering demographics, personal experiences with racial equity, and workplace experiences with racial equity. The task force used non-probability convenience sampling and distributed the survey to several library listservs across the United States and Canada. Quantitative results underwent descriptive statistics; qualitative results underwent iterative thematic analysis.

Main Results – Black participants made up 68 (9.5%) of all responses. Five qualitative themes emerged: unsuccessful hiring searches; acknowledgement that hiring of BIPOC is an ongoing issue; no BIPOC employees; organization-based issues impacting hiring; and hostile work environments for BIPOC.

Conclusion – Black participants were more likely to report that their library hires, promotes, and retains BIPOC library workers compared to non-Black participants. However, Black participants were also more likely to refute that their employers were making efforts to hire, retain, and promote BIPOC library workers than their non-Black counterparts. This may be due to Black participants' greater sense of awareness of oppressive systems surrounding them.

Commentary

The authors of this study contribute to a sparse body of literature with a critical mission. Other work in this area has focused efforts on the larger BIPOC community, where this study lasers in on the Black experience in libraries (Neely 2007, Bugg 2015, Magurany 2022). Both authors have a depth of expertise in this research area—Caragher has been publishing in equity research since at least 2016, and Bryant since at least 2015 (according to Google Scholar author profiles).

To assess the rigor of the study, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for Descriptive/Cross-Sectional Studies was completed. The Checklist assesses goals including study validity, presentation of results, and overall study value. The authors' dedication to their research question remained a strength throughout the paper, and their method of surveying was appropriate. The primary methodological concern is the choice to not divulge to the respondents that their responses would be carved out into a non-Black comparison group, even if they were a non-Black or multiracial POC. Of the 50 responses that opted to write in their race, 23 of those described themselves as multi-racial, and were thus coded into the non-Black category. If those 23 knew they were being measured into a separate cohort if they described themselves as Black instead of noting the nuance of being multiracial, their responses may have been different. The study has an intentional and meaningful focus on the Black experience in library employment, but by framing it within their informed consent statement as a study of "racial equity in public and academic libraries", they may not have received responses that were as tailored to the Black experience as they could have been.

Given the unique cross-section of Black responses, there is an implication for deeper research into other POC groups and their lived experiences in this profession, as well as examining gender or sexual orientation for more nuanced cross-sections. It is especially interesting how Black participants had greater rates of both affirming and questioning their workplace's commitment to equitable hiring and retention, and this heightened awareness of the systems surrounding them would be interesting to cross-tabulate with the respondents' level of experience and management within the library. Finally, taking a more granular look into the differences across public, academic, and special libraries experiences in hiring and retention practices may lead to clearer strategic planning in units where there are equity gaps.

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