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“POLICIES AND TRAINING EMPOWERS STAFF AND MANAGEMENT TO ACT”: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE PATRON-PERPETRATED (PPSH) POLICIES AND PROCEDURES SURVEY (Full Paper)

Abstract

Library workers across Canada view library policy, training, and reporting as important interventions to prevent and address patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH). A nation-wide survey indicates that Canadian public libraries vary widely in their development and usage of PPSH policies, procedures, and training. While 40% of libraries surveyed have PPSH policies, 78% have patron codes of conduct and 74% have policies that address workplace violence, harassment & discrimination. Only 26% of participating libraries offer staff PPSH specific training. Of the 69% of participating libraries who had formal incident reporting processes, only 13% list sexual harassment as a reporting option. More positively, findings demonstrate a strong interest by participants to address PPSH in their workplaces.

Introduction

In 2021, study authors conducted a national survey of over 500 library workers in Canada to investigate the issue of workplace sexual harassment of library workers by their patrons (Oliphant, Allard, Lieu, & Mallach, 2021). Findings indicate that the issue of patron-perpetrated sexual harassment (PPSH) is particularly pronounced in public libraries. Ninety-three percent of library workers reported that they have been sexually harassed at work at least one time. Over 66% of library workers indicated that they have been sexually harassed at work more than 10 times or more times than they can count (Oliphant, Allard, Lieu, & Mallach, 2021). Library workers also indicated that staff training and library policies that name and oppose PPSH were viewed as potentially valuable tools to address PPSH and workplace safety. This finding prompted a follow-up 2023/2024 survey, entitled the *PPSH Policies and Procedures Survey* designed to better understand the scope and prevalence of current workplace sexual harassment policies, PPSH reporting processes, and PPSH related staff training in public libraries across Canada.

Many of our *PPSH Policy and Procedures* survey participants cited clear reporting processes, policies, and training as valuable interventions to contend with PPSH in the workplace. However, there is very little literature in library and information science (LIS) that specifically discusses policies, procedures, and training to address third-party sexual harassment.

We draw on our previous environmental scan of the healthcare, hospitality, organizational and management, and women's and gender studies (WGS) literature to provide insight about how other fields and industries conceptualize and develop PPSH interventions (Allard, Lieu, & Oliphant, 2020). Study findings suggest that PPSH interventions vary widely across workplaces and scholarly fields. For example, in the hospitality sector workers often decided that bringing incidents of third-party sexual harassment forward to management was not worth the trouble because there was an overall lack of institutional support for workers who experienced PPSH on the job (Good & Cooper 2016; Hughes & Tadic 1998). Conversely, in the organizational and management, healthcare, and WGS fields, policies and procedures are seen as critical interventions to address third-party sexual harassment. In the organizational and management field employers must be proactive in developing and implementing explicit policies, training, and responding to sexual harassment complaints in a timely and appropriate manner. This proactive approach is undertaken for two reasons: organizations and management are legally liable and responsible for protecting employees from third-party sexual harassment *and* they are responsible for protecting the financial and legal interests of the organization (Eaton 2004; Fine et al. 1999; Poulston 2008). The healthcare literature highlights how policies prohibiting sexual harassment by patients (i.e. third parties) and procedures for reporting incidents are critical in addressing sexual harassment in healthcare settings (deMayo, 1996; Finnis, Robbins, & Bender, 1993). WGS also advocates for timely and appropriate responses to third-party harassment by management; it highlights the importance of clear and explicit organizational policies and procedures (Good & Cooper 2016; Hughes & Tadic 1998; Kensbock et al. 2015). The WGS literature argues that workplace sexual harassment is not a "simple" issue of individual deviance (i.e. the sexually harassing patron) but is underpinned by institutional, social, and structural conditions that give rise to the conditions that make sexual harassment possible and pervasive (Fitzgerald 2017; Kensbock et al. 2015).

In the LIS literature, PPSH is often addressed in workplaces by offering library workers a suite of tools such as: scripts to redirect uncomfortable or difficult conversations or inappropriate actions during an incident; reporting procedures to document incidents; developing and implementing policies and procedures; offering staff training about PPSH, and providing timely managerial support (Allard, Oliphant, & Lieu, 2023; Civitello & McLain 2017; MacBride 2018; von Stackelberg 2018). While the literature in various fields describes how third-party sexual harassment is addressed (or not) via policies, procedures, and training, our current study is one of the first to examine PPSH specific policy, procedures, and training in library workplaces.

Method

The purpose of the *PPSH Policies and Procedures Survey* is to better understand the scope and prevalence of current workplace sexual harassment policies, PPSH reporting processes, and PPSH related staff training in public libraries across Canada. We create a representative snapshot of current PPSH practices that we will build on in future collaborative research with library workers to develop a comprehensive suite of PPSH public library interventions and best practices, including policies, procedures and training modules. The survey was developed, piloted, and circulated for feedback in October and November 2023. Personalized emails with a link to the anonymous online survey were sent directly to library CEOs and Human Resource (HR) managers to ensure that participants would be familiar with workplace sexual harassment policies and procedures at their libraries.

A significant challenge of this survey design was to ensure that the survey was sent to the same number of libraries across Canadian provinces as well as to ensure that we sampled public libraries of all sizes, including both urban and rural libraries. To develop our representative sample lists of the public libraries in each province/territory were identified (N=1290), and then categorized in spreadsheets based on the size of the population of the community that they served (e.g. from less than 2,500 to more than 250,000). Each province/territory had a separate spreadsheet. Where possible, a maximum of twenty libraries were chosen at random from each population category for each province/territory. In total 461 libraries or library systems were contacted.

One hundred and seven (107) valid responses were received. About 170 different PPSH related policies and procedures used by public libraries across Canada were also shared with us. Data were cleaned and uploaded into Excel and SPSS for analysis. Both qualitative (coding) and quantitative data analysis (descriptive statistics) was conducted.

Findings

The following provides a high-level overview of key survey findings.

Participant demographics

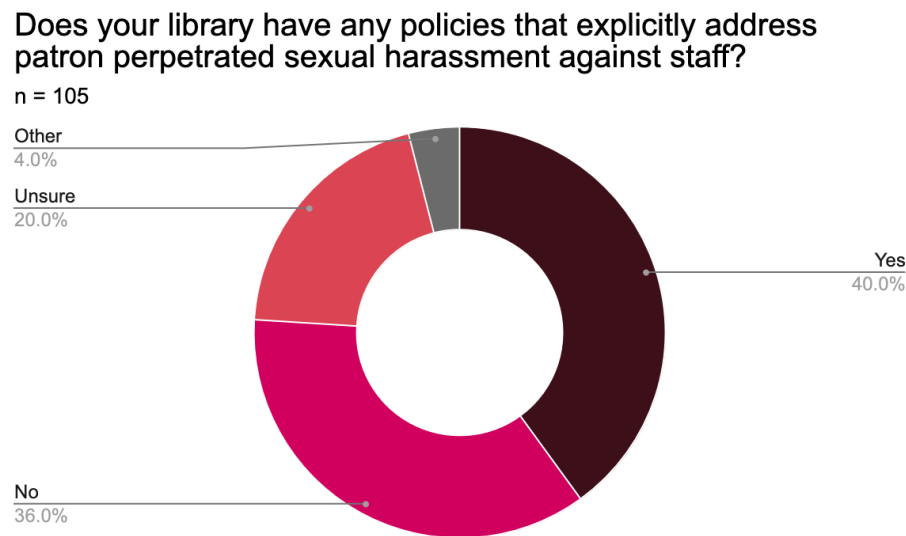
We received 107 valid survey responses from libraries across Canada with the exceptions of participants from Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Yukon, and the NorthWest Territories. The majority of responses were from Ontario (24%), Alberta (21%), and Manitoba (18%). The great majority of participants (76%) indicated that their library system is located in a rural area. Twenty-one percent (21%) of participants indicated that their library system is located in an urban area. Almost 3% of libraries had branches in both rural and urban locations. Further, 66% of participants indicated that their library system has one branch or service point and 28% of libraries reported between 2 and 10 service points. Only 3% had more than 29 service points. Additionally, 86% of libraries employed between 1-49 employees, and 9% employed between 50-100 employees. Only 3% of respondent libraries employed more than 200 employees. Finally, 31% of participating libraries had staff members who belonged to a labour union while 69% did not.

Policies and Procedures

Library organizations are often responsible for many different layers of policy and workplace legislation. In Alberta, for example, public libraries must comply with the Alberta Libraries Act, Alberta Occupational Health & Safety Act (including provincial legislation on workplace violence and harassment), and other local and municipal policies. Policy development is not one size fits all. Indeed libraries design policies based on the resources to which they have access and within a complex matrix of local, municipal, provincial, and federal obligations. From our own and other research we know that clear and well articulated policies that explicitly name PPSH and are known and understood by all members of the institution are an important tool to address PPSH in the workplace (Allard, Lieu, & Oliphant, 2020; Burrell et al., 2024; Good & Cooper, 2016; Reese & Lindenburg, 1999).

In our survey we asked participants to identify specific sexual harassment policies as well as other policies that include PPSH language but are not solely about sexual harassment. We also asked about the presence of other policies that might support the opposition of PPSH, though they do not identify PPSH explicitly, such as patron code of conduct and occupational health and safety policies.

Figure 1. PPSH Specific Policies



Only 40% of participating libraries have a policy that directly addresses patron perpetrated sexual harassment. Of note, 20% of participants did not know whether their library policies specifically address PPSH. In general, we were surprised by how many “unsure” responses we received across many survey questions. This is important because a very real challenge of addressing PPSH is that sometimes employees don’t know what it is. They might understand PPSH conceptually but are not always sure if it has happened to them. This is made more unclear by the absence of specific workplace policies that name PPSH. It is also complicated by the uncertainty of employers and their lack of awareness of PPSH policy within their own institutions.

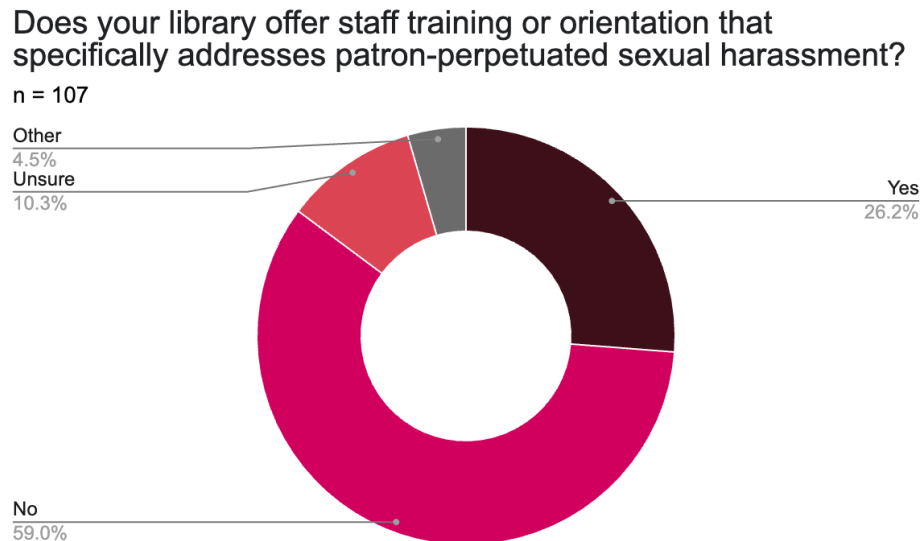
Participants also identified a wide spectrum of policies used at their libraries to address PPSH. Examples include: library board policies, employee policies, codes of conduct, library facilities usage policies (such as Internet and technology usage policy), and occupational health and safety policies. Of note, 78% of libraries reported having patron codes of conduct while 11% did not. Of those libraries with codes of conduct, about 40% of the policies address sexual harassment by patrons against both staff and other patrons and in 30% of cases the policy doesn’t address sexual harassment at all. Seventy-four percent (74%) of participating libraries have policies that address workplace violence, harassment & discrimination. Of the 74% of libraries that have workplace violence policies, about 41% of these specifically address PPSH. About 33% don’t mention PPSH specifically. We note that PPSH specific language and policies are and can be included across a wide range of policies and procedures.

Staff training

Staff training and education is well known to be an important intervention in addressing workplace sexual harassment (Allard, Lieu, & Oliphant, 2020; Allard, Oliphant, & Lieu, 2023; Perry, Kulik, & Field, 2009; Xiao, Liu, & Zhang, 2024). An important form of training is workplace health and safety training about harassment and workplace violence that names PPSH specifically. Training designed to help library staff deal with difficult patrons is also well known training offered in public libraries that sometimes takes up or responds to PPSH. We asked

participants about the specific PPSH training and orientation that they offer to their staff as well as other forms of training that might support library workers to understand, oppose, and address PPSH in the workplace.

Figure 2. PPSH Specific Training



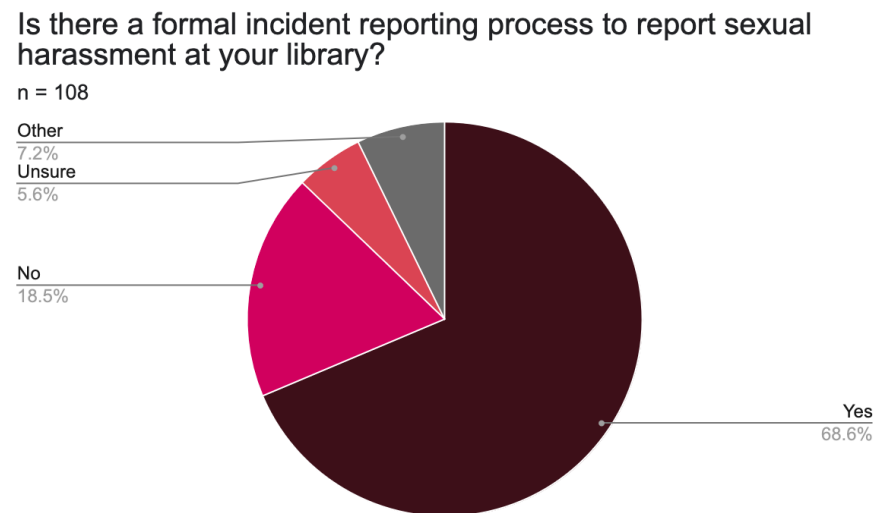
Only 26% of participating libraries offer their staff PPSH specific training or orientation, 59% of participating libraries do not offer any PPSH specific training or orientation, and 10% of participating library representatives were unsure.

Participants also identified a number of specific training materials and courses offered to library staff to address PPSH. Types of PPSH training identified by participants include: professional or government workplace health and safety courses, de-escalation and crisis intervention training, and difficult patron/conversations training. Of note, many participants told us that they want to offer PPSH training but struggle to find appropriate and PPSH specific training programs. Indeed, there is very little library specific PPSH training presently available.

PPSH reporting

The workplace sexual harassment literature indicates that workplaces require robust reporting procedures that keep a full record of incidents, believe library workers, and do not fault or penalize library workers when PPSH happens (Allard, Lieu, & Oliphant, 2020; Allard, Oliphant, & Lieu, 2023; Barr-Walker, Hoffner, McMunn-Tetangco, & Mody, 2021). These procedures need to be clear, consistent, and well known by all staff members. We asked participants how PPSH incidents were reported at their workplace, how incidents were adjudicated, and the types of consequences given by the library to sexually-harassing perpetrators. Here we only discuss reporting procedures.

Figure 3. Incident Reporting Processes



A total of 69% participating libraries have a formal incident reporting process. Of those, only 13% have sexual harassment listed as a reporting option.

Participant libraries describe a variety of procedures for reporting incidents and multiple reporting avenues, including the following: 69% of participating libraries use a paper or unstructured written submission system; 52% of participating libraries use a verbal reporting system; 41% of participating libraries use an email reporting system; and 26% use an online form or incident tracking system. In other words, reporting practices vary widely. We continue to explore effective practices around this complex issue, recognizing that different library systems have different capacities and practices in place. In general, smaller libraries tend to have more informal reporting practices than do larger institutions.

Discussion and conclusion

Survey findings indicate that only 40% of participating libraries have a policy that directly addresses PPSH. However, 78% of libraries have patron codes of conduct and 74% have policies that address workplace violence, harassment & discrimination. Although PPSH is not always mentioned in these policies, they can be a place to add specific PPSH policy language. As the wide spectrum of noted policies suggests, PPSH specific language and policies are and can be included in a wide range of library policies. Similarly, while only 26% of participating libraries offer their staff PPSH specific training, 64% offer staff training to deal with difficult patrons. PPSH training is an intervention that many survey participants indicated would be helpful, but few offered to their staff because they struggled to find available training options. A total of 69% of participating libraries have a formal incident reporting process. Of those, only 13% have sexual harassment listed as a reporting option. Incident reporting practices vary widely. Smaller libraries tend to have more informal reporting practices than do larger institutions.

We found that public libraries vary widely in their development and usage of policies, procedures, and training that specifically acknowledges or responds to patron-perpetrated sexual harassment. We were also surprised that so many participants don't know what PPSH related policies, procedures, and staff training are in place in their libraries. On the other hand, our findings identify important building blocks that are already in place in many public libraries, such as codes of conduct, occupational health and safety policies, formal incident reporting

mechanisms, and training modules designed to support staff interactions with patrons. These “building blocks” can be augmented, sometimes with little effort, to develop more robust and explicit PPSH policies, procedures, and staff training. Perhaps most importantly, our findings demonstrate a strong interest by libraries to address this issue. Going forward it is important that PPSH interventions are data-driven and informed by the experiences of folks most affected by PPSH.

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