



Protecting the Workers Who Keep B.C.'s Libraries Safe for Everyone

2025 CUPE Library Health & Safety Survey

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CUPE



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Methodology	3
Introduction	4
Who Responded	5
Libraries Represented	5
Employment status	6
Duration of employment.....	6
Age	6
Gender	7
Equity-deserving groups	8
Status of Health and Safety in the Workplace	9
Sense of safety at work	9
Minimum staffing levels	9
Incidents at work.....	11
Refusing unsafe work.....	12
Safety Incidents	14
Frequency and type of incidents	14
Incident reporting	15
Workplace Health Risks.....	19
Biohazards.....	19
Pests	20
Workplace Policies and Training.....	22
Summary of Findings: An Unsafe Haven	24
1. Pervasive Sense of Danger	24
2. Safety in Numbers.....	24
3. Violence and Trauma Are Routine	24
4. Frequent Contact with Biohazards	24
5. Inadequate Incident Response and Support.....	25
6. A Crisis of Accountability and Trust.....	25
Conclusion	26



Executive Summary

Public libraries are the heart of our communities, but our new report reveals a heart in distress. The 2025 CUPE Library Health & Safety Survey, engaging nearly 600 workers from 75 communities, documents a systemic safety crisis that has escalated dramatically over the past decade.

Library workers, tasked with maintaining open and accessible spaces for all, are now operating on the frontlines of overlapping social emergencies, often without the training, support, or staffing levels required to feel safe in their workplaces.

Key Findings Paint a Dire Picture:

- **Pervasively Feeling Unsafe:** 83% of library staff report feeling unsafe at work at least some of the time. Only 16% of library staff say they feel safe often or most of the time.
- **Staffing Levels Create Danger:** An overwhelming 77% of workers directly link understaffing to their personal safety, a 20% increase since 2015. Lone and skeleton shifts have become commonplace, leaving workers isolated and vulnerable.
- **Violence and Biohazards Are Routine:** Workers are routinely exposed to verbal abuse, threats, and physical violence, with 65% involved in an incident serious enough to require calling 911. 90% of library staff are regularly exposed to dangerous biohazards like phlegm, used needles, blood, and human waste.
- **Support Systems Are Failing:** When incidents occur, the response is often inadequate. 70% of workers never receive a critical incident debrief after a traumatic event, and 57% see either no action taken or no communication following a report.

This report outlines the urgent need for investment in staffing, training, and support for the dedicated workers who protect this vital public service.

Ensuring library workers feel safe on the job is the fundamental first step in keeping libraries safe and accessible for everyone.

Methodology

The 2025 CUPE Library Health & Safety Survey aimed to document the health and safety experiences of professional library staff. Conducted over the course of six weeks in April and May, the survey was promoted via email, posters, and at in-person events, including the 2025 CUPE BC Convention and the 2025 BCLA Conference.

In total, nearly 600 library workers from more than 75 communities and 25 locals from across the province participated in the survey. With approximately 3500 CUPE library workers across the province in schools, universities, colleges, and communities, this survey received participation from approximately 16% of CUPE library workers in British Columbia.

Building on the foundation laid by CUPE BC's 2015 Library Health & Safety Report, the 2025 Library Health & Safety Report intends to highlight progress made over the last decade as well as areas of continued focus moving forward. This report has been broken up into six sections, followed by a Summary of Findings.

For any questions regarding this survey or report, please contact Brady Yano at byano@cupe.ca.

Introduction

As one of the few accessible public spaces in communities, public libraries serve a broad range of people in accessing information, education, and social interaction. In carrying out this function, libraries must be safe spaces for both professional library workers and the public. However, as the findings of this report make clear, libraries have increasingly become unpredictable and often unsafe workplaces.

In fulfilling their role as a critical frontline service, public library workers have been increasingly exposed to a variety of challenging situations. Survey respondents report frequent interactions with vulnerable patrons with diverse social needs, challenging dynamics with supervisors and managers, and interpersonal conflict between employees. In addition, library workers are exposed to a range of biohazards and pests.

While libraries may have policies and resources in place to deal with health and safety issues, the survey results highlight significant and widespread gaps between policy and practice. The data reveal a system under strain, where workers feel persistently unsafe, under-supported, and left to manage crises alone.

This report documents these challenges in detail. By presenting the data and concluding with a comprehensive Summary of Findings, it aims to highlight the urgent need for action to protect the workers who are essential to maintaining this vital public service.



Who Responded

This section provides an overview of who responded, including an overview of the library locals represented, respondents' employment status, duration of employment, age, gender, and whether they identify as belonging to an equity-deserving group.

Libraries Represented

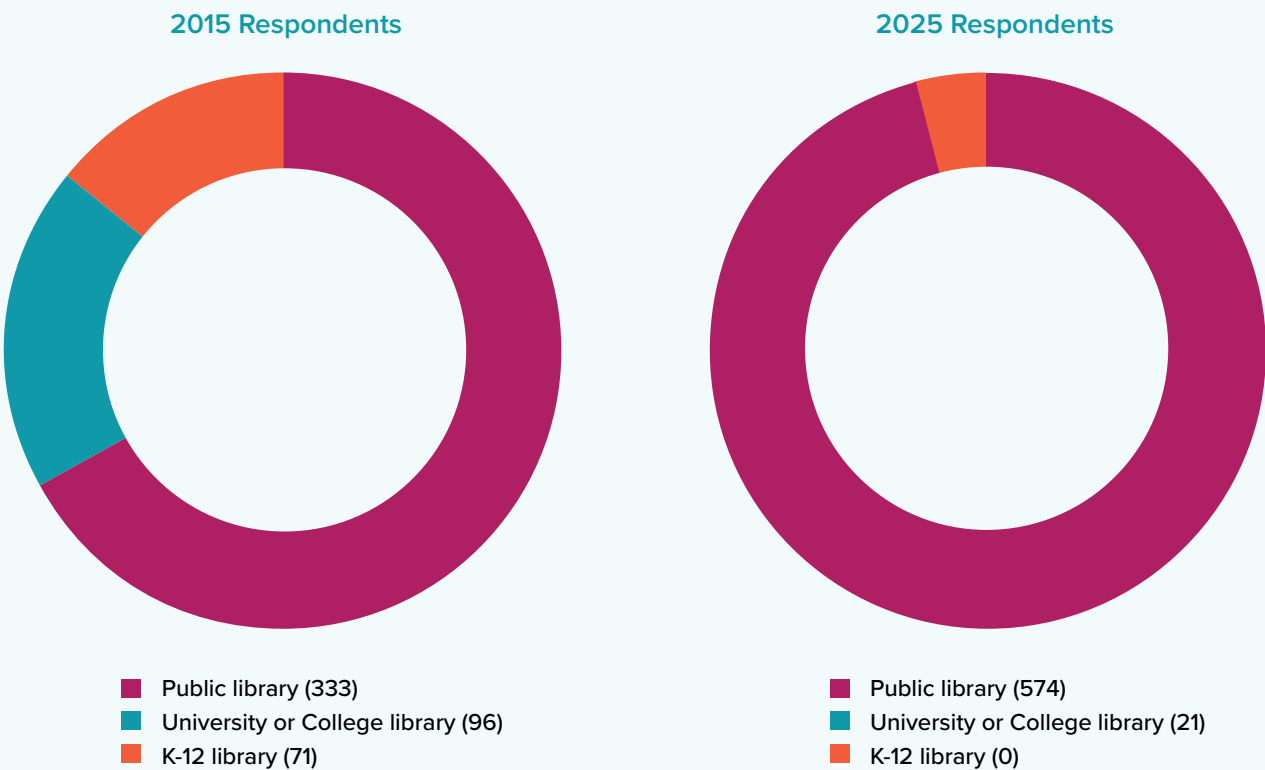
Nearly 600 library workers responded, representing 75 communities and 25 locals across the province. Of these respondents, 530 fully completed the survey while 63 partially completed the survey.

Responses were received from 20 of the 34 CUPE public library locals. In addition, responses were received from five post-secondary locals.

The three public library locals with the highest number of respondents were CUPE 391-01 – Vancouver Public Library (135), CUPE 401 – Vancouver Island Regional Library (118), and CUPE 1698 Fraser Valley Regional Library (86). Collectively, these three library systems represent 58% of total responses. These locals represent workers in 48 communities across the province.

Compared to the 2015 survey, the 2025 response rate represents a significant increase in the number of members representing public libraries (+241), and a decrease in the number of post-secondary (-75) and K-12 respondents (-71). Overall, the 2025 survey saw an increase in total participation, by 95 members.

Figure 1: Comparison of 2015 Respondents and 2025 Respondents



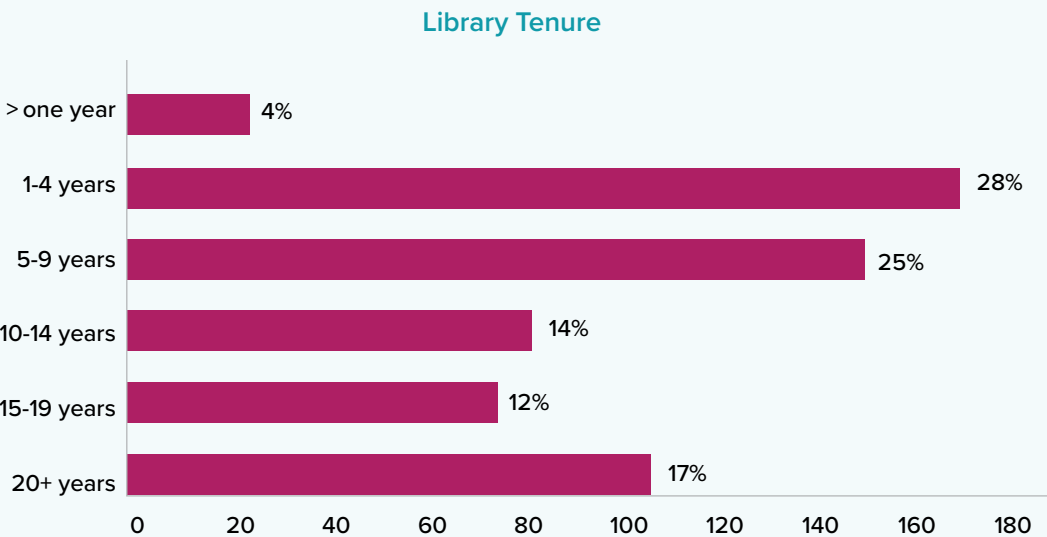
Employment status

Nearly half of the total respondents (49%) were permanent full-time employees, followed by permanent part-time (35%), and temporary or auxiliary/casual (17%).

Duration of employment

Nearly a third of respondents (32%) indicated that they had worked at the library for less than five years, followed by 38% having worked between 5-15 years, and 30% having worked more than 15 years.

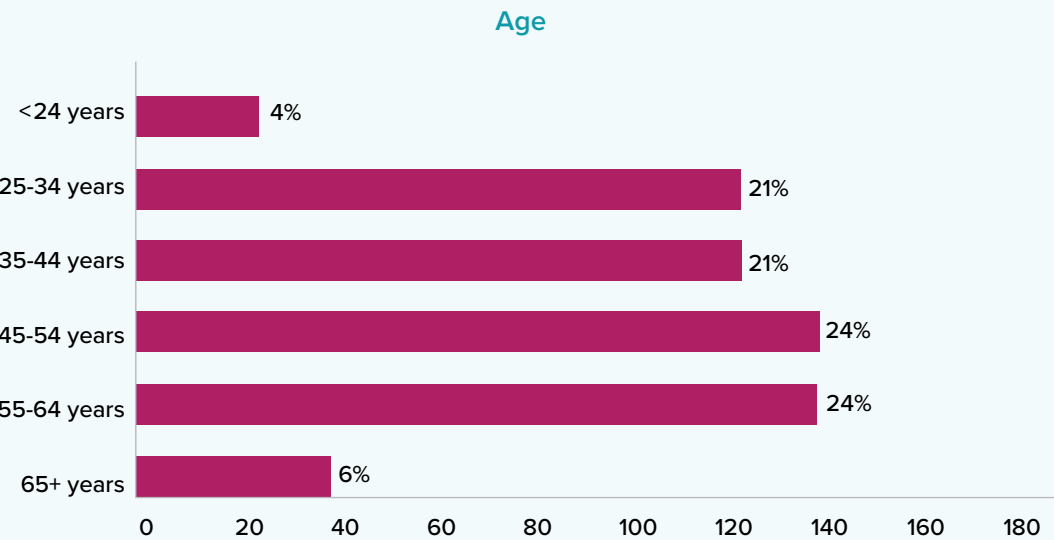
Figure 2: Library Tenure



Age

Amongst respondents, 25% were under the age of 34, 45% were between the ages of 35-54, and 30% were 55+.

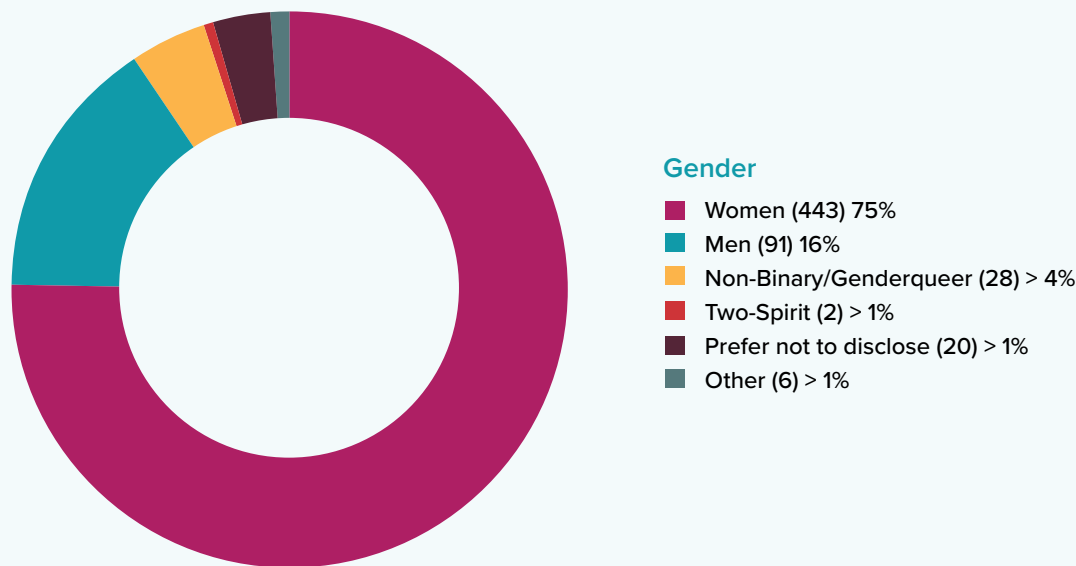
Figure 3: Age



Gender

Three-quarters of respondents identified as women (75%), followed by 16% as men, and 4% as nonbinary/genderqueer. Members who identify as two-spirit or as another gender identity were also represented. This response reflects the broader trend in the library sector as a highly feminized profession.

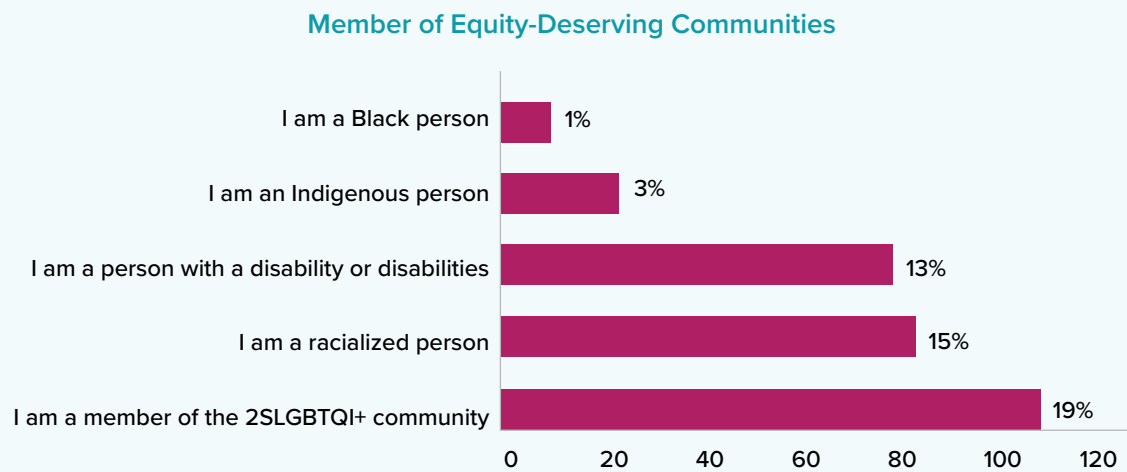
Figure 4: Gender



Equity-deserving groups

Compared to 2021 Statistics Canada data for B.C., survey respondents in this study reported lower levels of identification as Black (-0.3%)¹, Indigenous (-2.9%)², racialized (-19.4%)³, or as having a disability (-11.7%)⁴. Conversely, a much larger proportion of respondents (+13.1%)⁵ identified as members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, representing approximately three times the provincial average.

Figure 5: Member of Equity-Deserving Communities



1. Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population
2. Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population
3. Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population
4. Comparison with Provincial Workforce
5. Comparison with Provincial Workforce

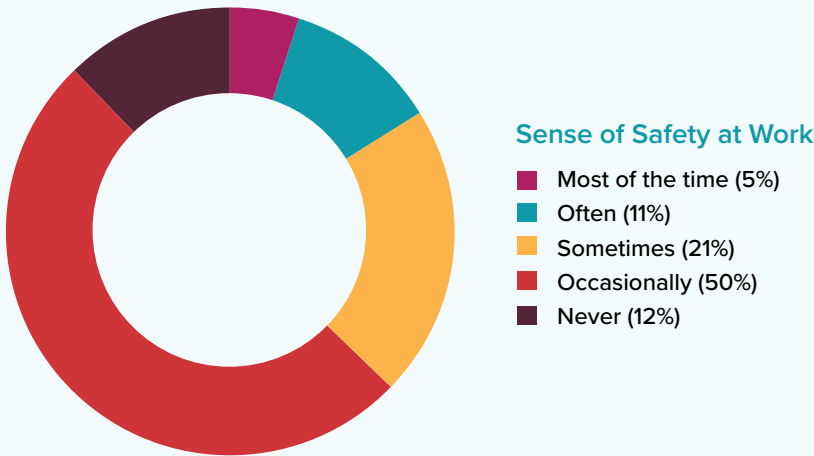
Status of Health and Safety in the Workplace

This section explores members’ perceptions of health and safety in the workplace, the impacts of minimum staffing levels, and the types of incidents occurring within the workplace. This section also explores members’ knowledge surrounding the right to refuse unsafe work.

Sense of safety at work

When members were asked how often they felt safe at work, 12% said never, 50% said occasionally (once in a while), 21% said sometimes (less than half of their shifts), while the remaining 16% indicated often or most of the time. This widespread perception of an unsafe workplace establishes a critical context for the following findings on staffing and incidents.

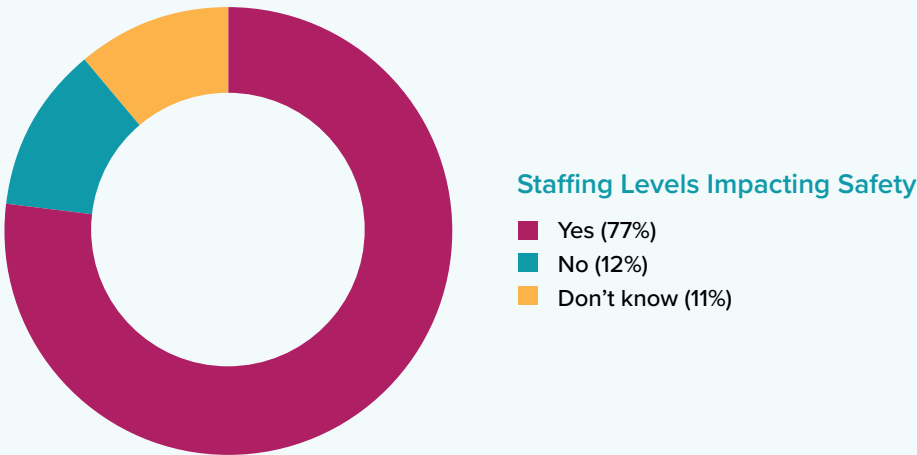
Figure 6: Sense of Safety at Work



Minimum staffing levels

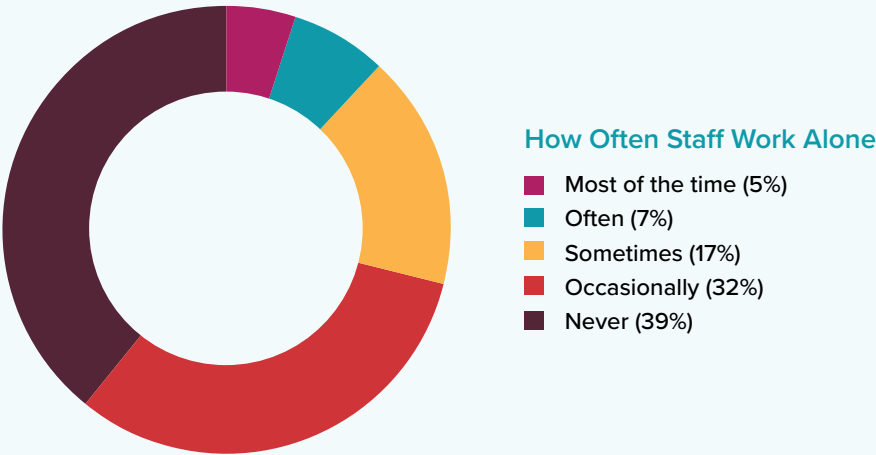
As a follow up, when members were asked if they felt that staffing levels impacted their safety at work, 77% indicated yes (444), 12% indicated no (70), and 11% were not sure (61). This highlights the need for locals to bargain stronger language surrounding minimum staffing levels into collective agreements.

Figure 7: Staffing Levels Impacting Safety



When asked how often they worked alone, 13% of respondents (73) indicated they did so in more than half of their shifts, 17% noted sometimes, or less than half of their shifts (182), and the remaining 70% noted they are not required or are rarely required to (404), as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: How Often Staff Work Alone



Incidents at work

When asked how often they witnessed or experienced verbal abuse, harassment, or violence in the workplace, verbal abuse was the most frequently reported, followed by bullying and harassment, and physical violence, as shown in Figure 9. It is important to note that while physical violence and threats were reported less frequently, their impact is severe, and their occurrence signifies a serious safety failure.

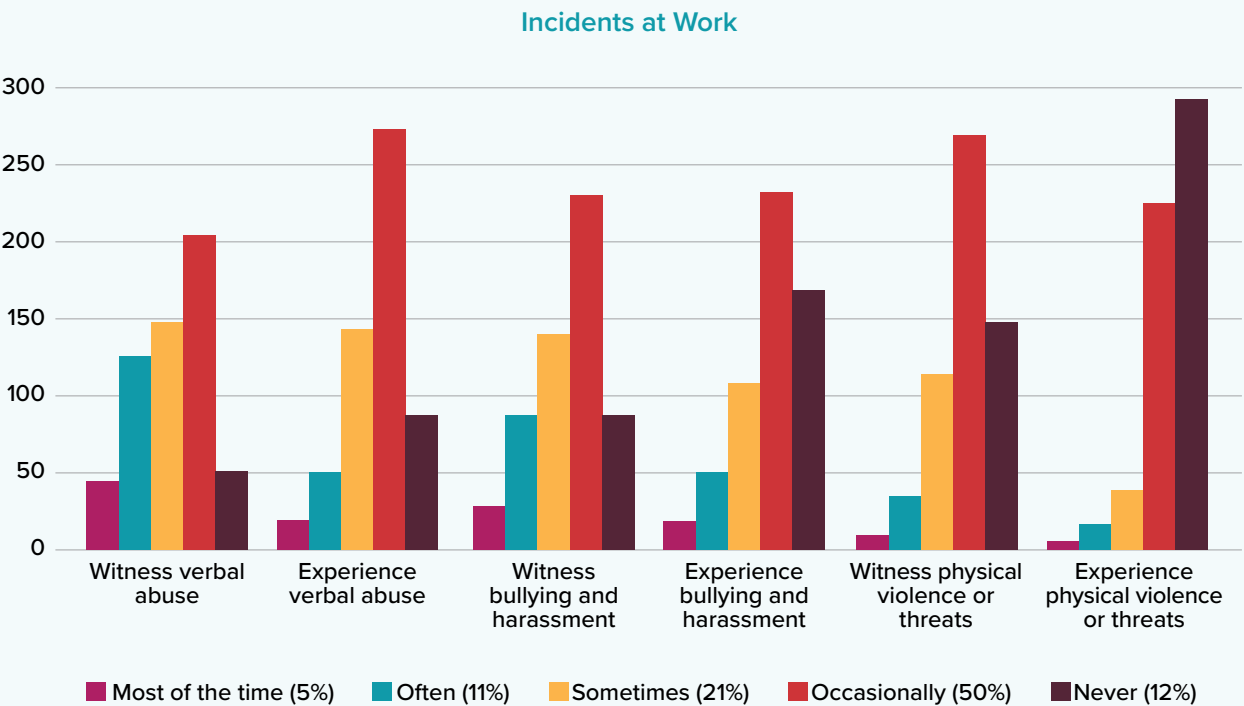
For This Survey

Verbal abuse includes hostile, offensive, or degrading language, such as yelling, insults, intimidation, or repeated unwelcome remarks—even if not explicitly threatening.

Bullying and harassment includes actions that a person knew or should have known would humiliate or intimidate a worker, such as verbal aggression, insults, harmful hazing, vandalism, spreading malicious rumours, or sexual and gender-based harassment.

Violence means physical assault, attempted assault, or threats of harm, including hitting, pushing, or intimidation.

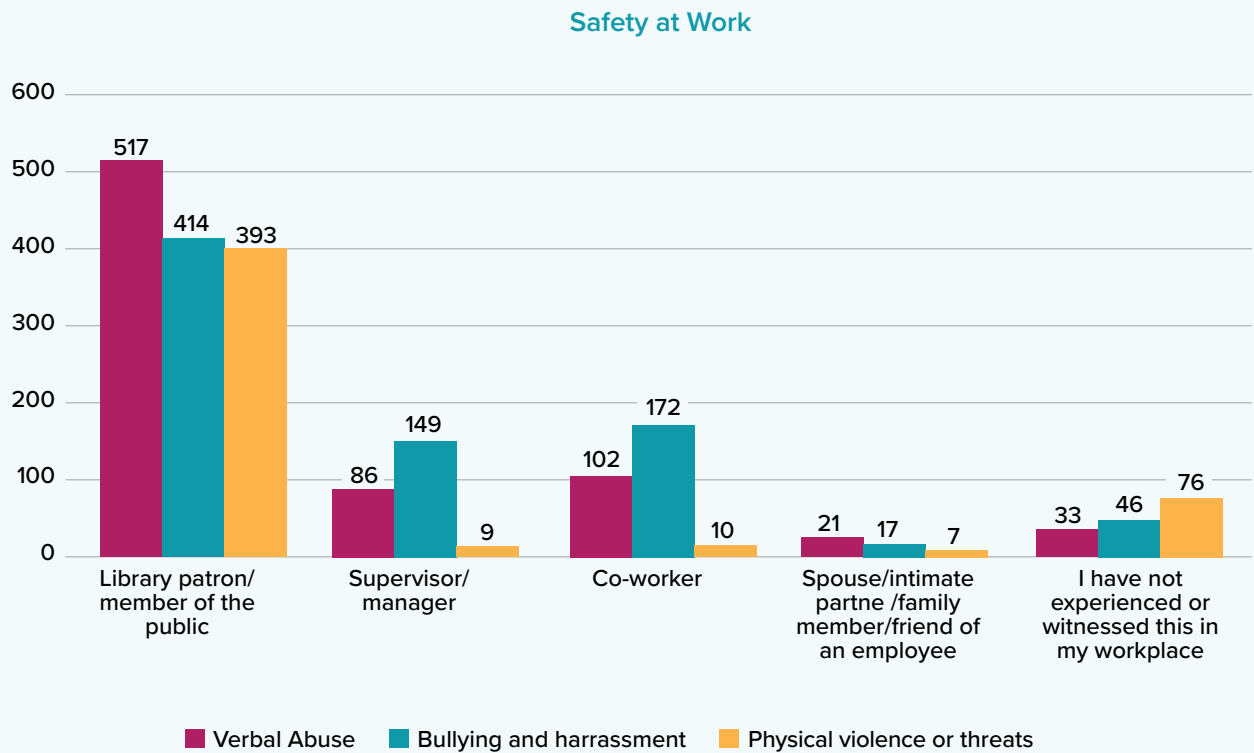
Figure 9: Incidents at Work



When asked who has committed acts of verbal abuse, harassment, or violence, survey respondents most frequently identified library patrons or members of the public (see Figure 10). This underscores the difficult and sometimes hazardous dynamics library staff can encounter in their public-facing roles, where they are frequently navigating the impacts of broader social and community crises.

Respondents also reported acts of verbal abuse, harassment, or violence from their co-workers and supervisor or manager, with bullying and harassment being the most common experience. This finding speaks to the important role of CUPE locals in supporting their members who are experiencing abuse at work.

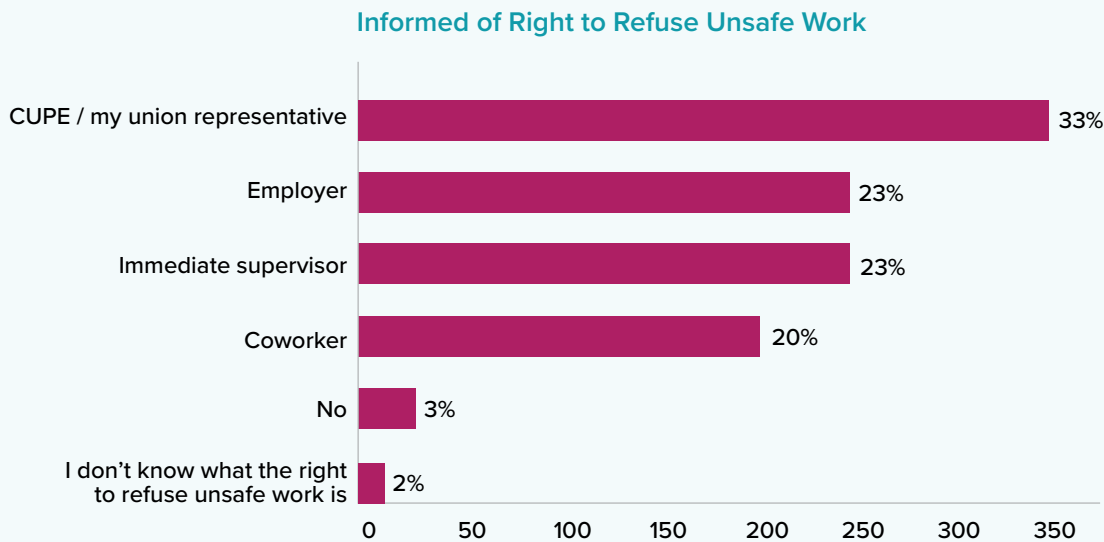
Figure 10: Safety at Work



Refusing unsafe work

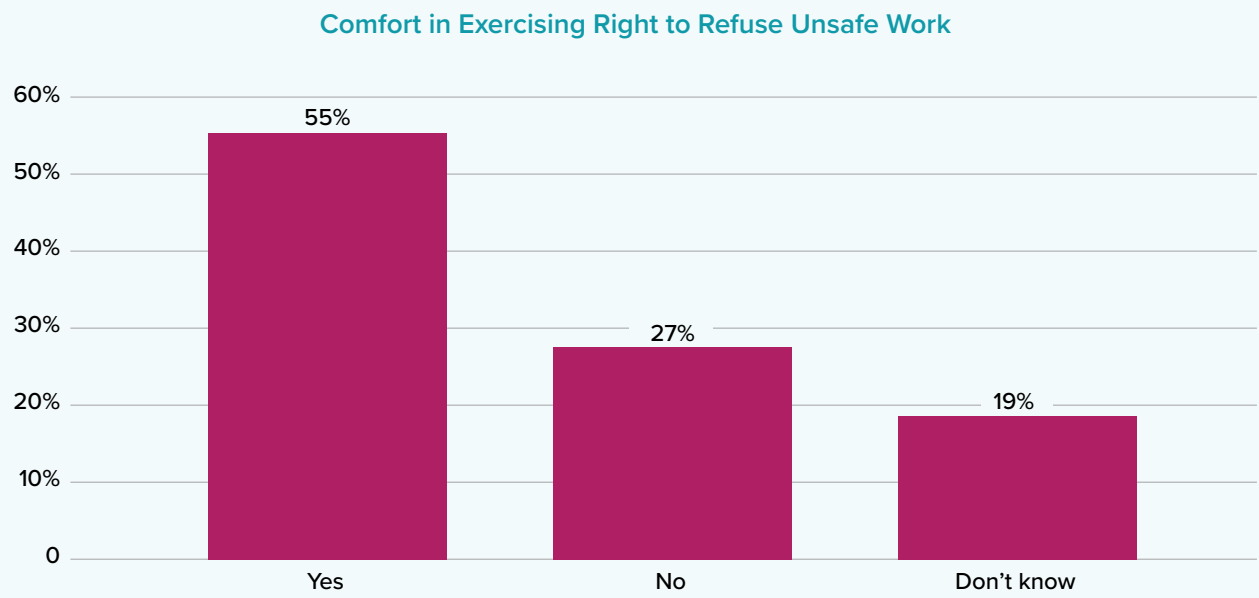
When asked if they had been informed of their right to refuse unsafe work, 95% of respondents indicated they had, while only 5% noted that they either had not (3%) or that they did not know what the right to refuse unsafe work was (2%).

Figure 11: Informed of Right to Refuse Unsafe Work



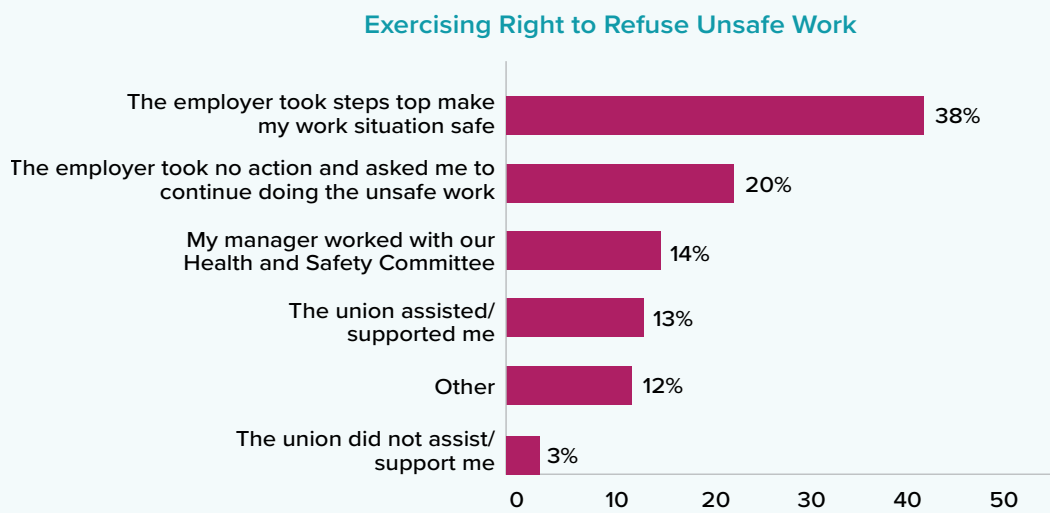
When asked if they were comfortable exercising their right to refuse unsafe work, 55% indicated yes, 27% indicated no, and 19% indicated that they were not sure.

Figure 12: Comfort in Exercising Right to Refuse Unsafe Work



When asked if they had ever exercised their right to refuse unsafe work, 14% said yes, 83% said no, while 3% were not sure. As a follow up, when asked what happened when they exercised their right to refuse unsafe work, 38% said their employer took steps to make their work situation safe. Notably, 20% said the employer took no action and asked them to continue doing the unsafe work, while only 13% said the union assisted or supported them.

Figure 13: Exercising Right to Refuse Unsafe Work



Safety Incidents

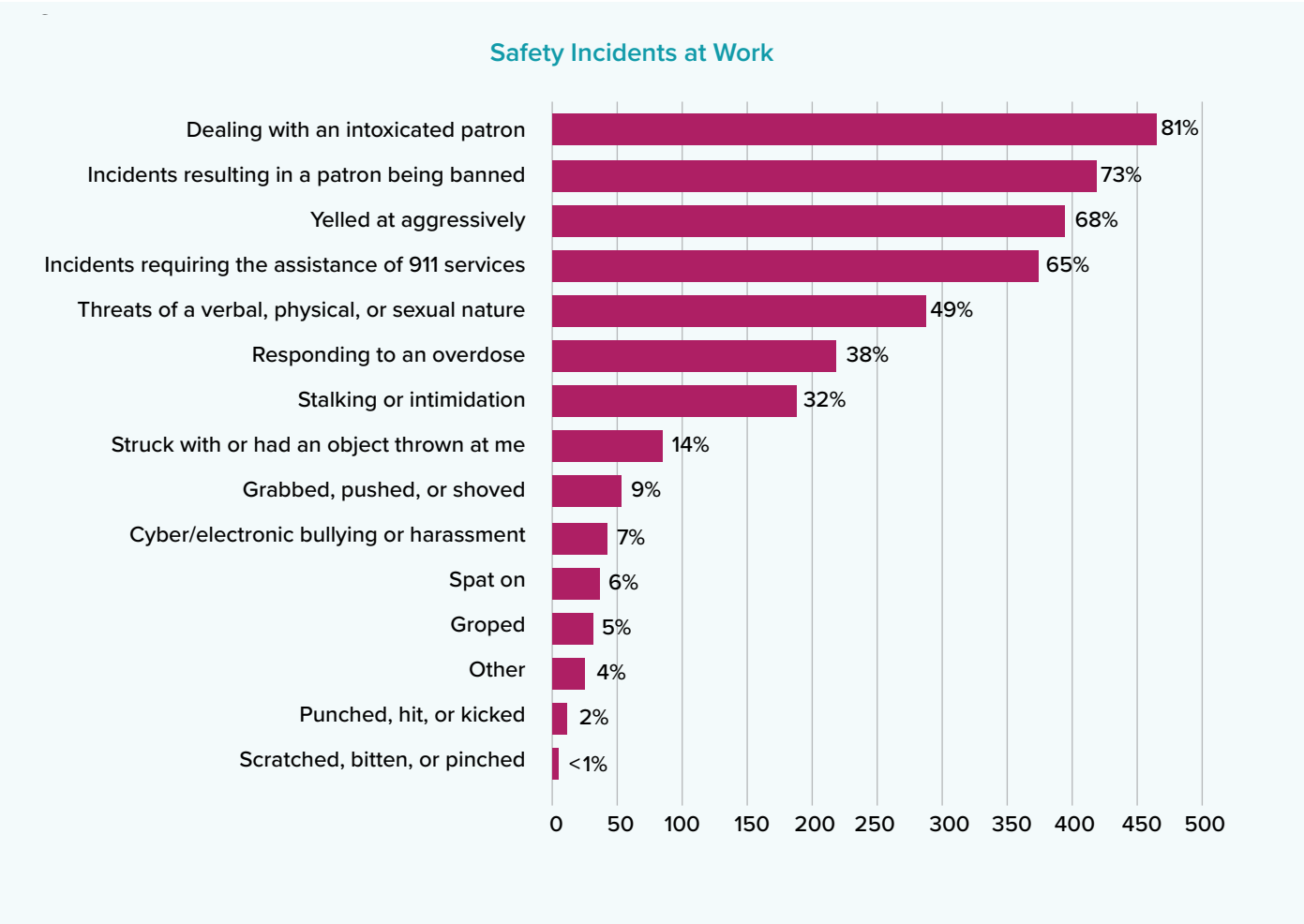
This section explores how incidents are reported, barriers to reporting, and how effectively employers respond. The findings identify existing gaps in reporting processes and workplace safety measures.

Frequency and type of incidents

When asked if they have ever personally experienced any of the following safety incidents at work, a high percentage of respondents reported dealing with an intoxicated patron (81%), incidents resulting in a patron being banned (73%), being yelled at aggressively (68%), and incidents requiring emergency services (65%). The high frequency of these incidents, particularly those requiring emergency intervention, points to a work environment where crisis management has become a routine responsibility.

The ‘Other’ category provided members with the opportunity to write a short response. Of note, more than one member took this as an opportunity to highlight that dealing with an intoxicated patron did not constitute a health and safety threat.

Figure 14: Safety Incidents at Work



Incident reporting

Respondents were asked if they had experienced or witnessed an incident involving violence and harassment and if so, how they responded. The top two most common occurrences, reported by nearly a third of members, were filing an incident report with their employer (29%) and verbally reporting the incidents to their supervisor (28%). The third most common response was to brush off the incident, representing 10% of responses (or 146 members).

To improve health and safety in the workplace, one respondent suggested: “We need to have a procedure whereby incidents are copied immediately to the Union Rep and the Workplace Health and Safety Committee.” This response highlights an opportunity for locals to play a more proactive role in protecting the health and safety of members.

Figure 15: Response to Experiencing or Witnessing Violence and Harassment



As a follow-up question, when asked why they did not report violence and harassment, the top three reasons were that employees did not think the incident was serious enough (25%), that employees felt reporting does not make a difference (21%), and that employees did not know that they should report the incident (10%).

Amongst the written responses provided for those who selected ‘Other’, the two most common themes surrounded violence and harassment from either a supervisor/manager or a coworker. While these represent a small sample size, it supports the previous finding that following violence and harassment from patrons and members of the public, the next most common occurrences came from representatives of the employer or co-workers.

Figure 16: Reasons for Not Reporting Violence and Harassment



When asked what the outcome was following a report of violence and harassment, 64% of respondents noted that either their immediate supervisor (40%), or their employer (24%) took steps to remedy the situation and protect their employee’s health and safety. The second and third most common outcomes were that respondents did not know what happened afterward (31%) or that no action was taken (26%).

This lack of action and communication represents a significant failure in the employer’s duty of care and underscores an opportunity for locals to play a more active role in holding employers to account by implementing consistent procedures, including clear communication with members, following workplace incidents involving violence and harassment.

The written responses provided by those who selected ‘Other’ offer further insight into the challenges experienced by members.

There were several comments highlighting instances **where supervisors or managers did not adequately support staff**. For example:

“Supervisor claimed they would do something, then did nothing or very little or not what they said they would, and then almost never followed up or retaliated or dropped the matter or gaslit me. They did not share important safety information with my colleagues, so I felt isolated and afraid.”

Other comments related to the **timeliness of an employer response**. For example:

“Following the incident, my immediate supervisor and employer did not take steps until the following week. The day following the incident, I went to work and felt I was not supported until the following week. At the night of the incident, we contacted the police as well as the director, I did not have any protection for my health and safety for the duration of the shift to closing.”

Some comments related to **staff mental health**. For example:

“Staff is never checked in with regarding mental health. We are never ever brought in a counsellor. It’s quite disgusting. I checked in with a staff member after she witnessed her first overdose, and she was not ok. As a clerk it’s not my responsibility to check in with a supervisor outside work - but as a human being I could simply not ignore her.”

There were comments highlighting instances where members felt **their local** did not adequately support them. For example:

“I was discouraged from actively pursuing a report on a colleague which I assumed was because we were both union members. I felt like my Union didn’t want to deal with it.”

There were also several comments that touched on the **high frequency of such events**. For example:

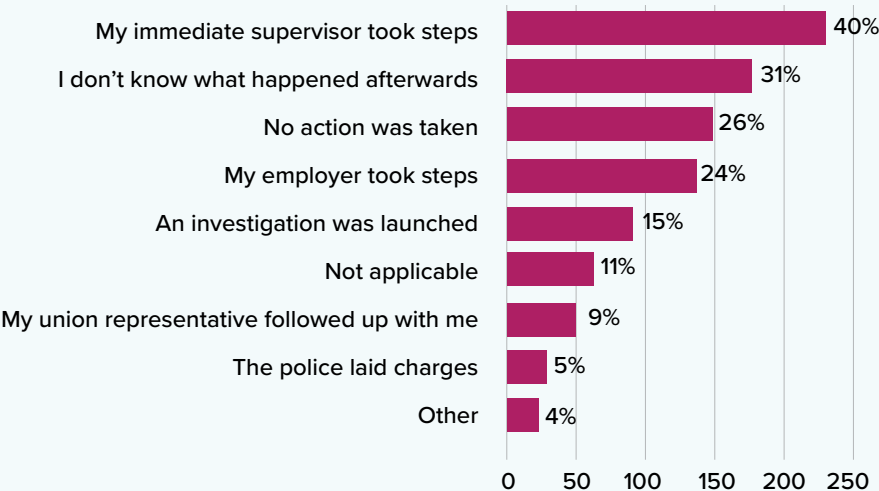
“Some incidents happen frequently or multiple incidents are going on at once so we just deal with it with staff back up and move on to helping patrons - public service doesn’t stop.”

Finally, there were comments highlighting some **current practices** within the library **which could become standardized** across the province. For example:

“Awareness emails go out to all staff about violence in the workplace. If the incident warrants, a temporary ban is placed.”

Figure 17: Outcome Post Violence and Harassment Report

Outcome Post Violence and Harassment Report

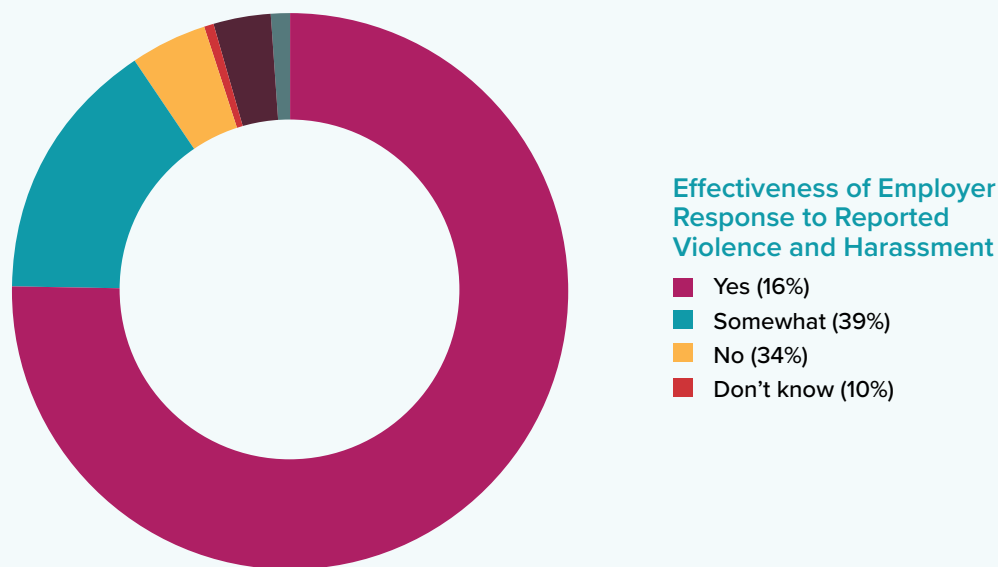


When asked how regularly members receive or have access to up-to-date information from the employer about safety incidents after they occur, over half of respondents (52%) indicated yes, while the remainder indicated no (34%) or that they were not sure (14%).

When asked if an employer had ever conducted a critical incident debrief following an experienced or witnessed incident involving violence at work, nearly one third (30%) of respondents said yes, while 70% either indicated no (34%), that they did not know (12%), or that they did not know what a critical incident debrief was (24%). This represents a clear opportunity for locals to educate their members on the importance of critical incident debriefs and to hold employers accountable for conducting them.

When asked if management’s response to an incident involving violence or harassment at work was adequate and effective, 16% of respondents indicated yes, 39% indicated somewhat, and 44% noted either no (34%) or that they did not know (10%). These findings highlight the shortcomings of the employer’s response and the need to develop consistent procedures in partnership with the local and adhere to them when incidents occur.

Figure 18: Effectiveness of Employer Response to Reported Violence and Harassment



When asked if there is a violence and harassment prevention program at work, over two-thirds of respondents (68%) indicated yes, while 33% said either no (11%) or that they did not know (21%). This finding highlights an opportunity to adopt prevention programs at all libraries in B.C., following models already in use at over two-thirds of libraries.

When asked if their employer has provided education, training, or orientation on how to prevent and deal with violence and harassment in the workplace, 86% indicated yes, while 14% said either no (8%) or that they did not know (6%). As a follow up, when asked if they thought the education and training was effective in preparing members to deal with situations of violence and harassment at work, over three quarters said it was either effective (13%) or somewhat effective (64%), while the remaining quarter said it was either ineffective (20%) or that they did not know (3%).



Workplace Health Risks

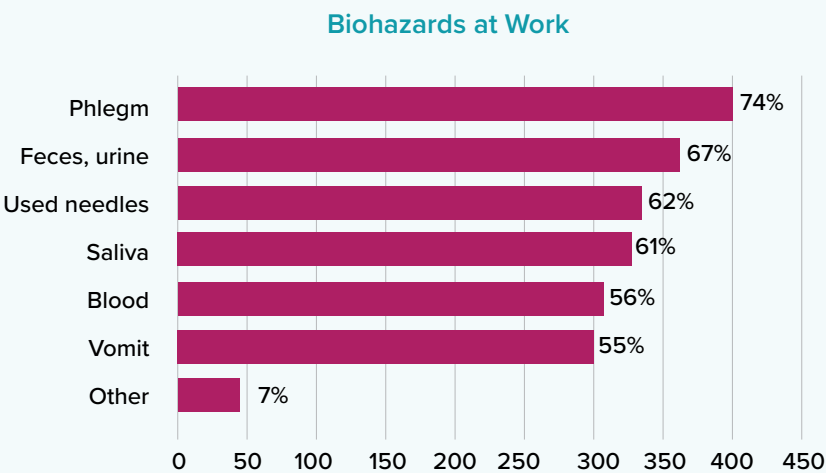
This section explores the frequency of incidents involving biohazards and pests, procedures for handling them, and current safety protocols in place. The findings identify gaps in workplace safety measures.

Biohazards

Library workers are commonly exposed to a range of biohazards at work. The three most common biohazards were phlegm (74%), feces or urine (67%), and used needles (62%). The ‘Other’ category (7%) had a range of responses, including drug paraphernalia and fumes, ejaculate, and mice droppings.

Together, these findings indicate that exposure to biohazards is a near-universal experience for library workers, with only 12% of respondents (63) noting a biohazard-free workplace.

Figure 19: Biohazards at Work



When asked about clear procedures for handling biohazards at work, over half of respondents (56%) indicated they existed, while 20% indicated no, and the remaining 24% indicated that they did not know.

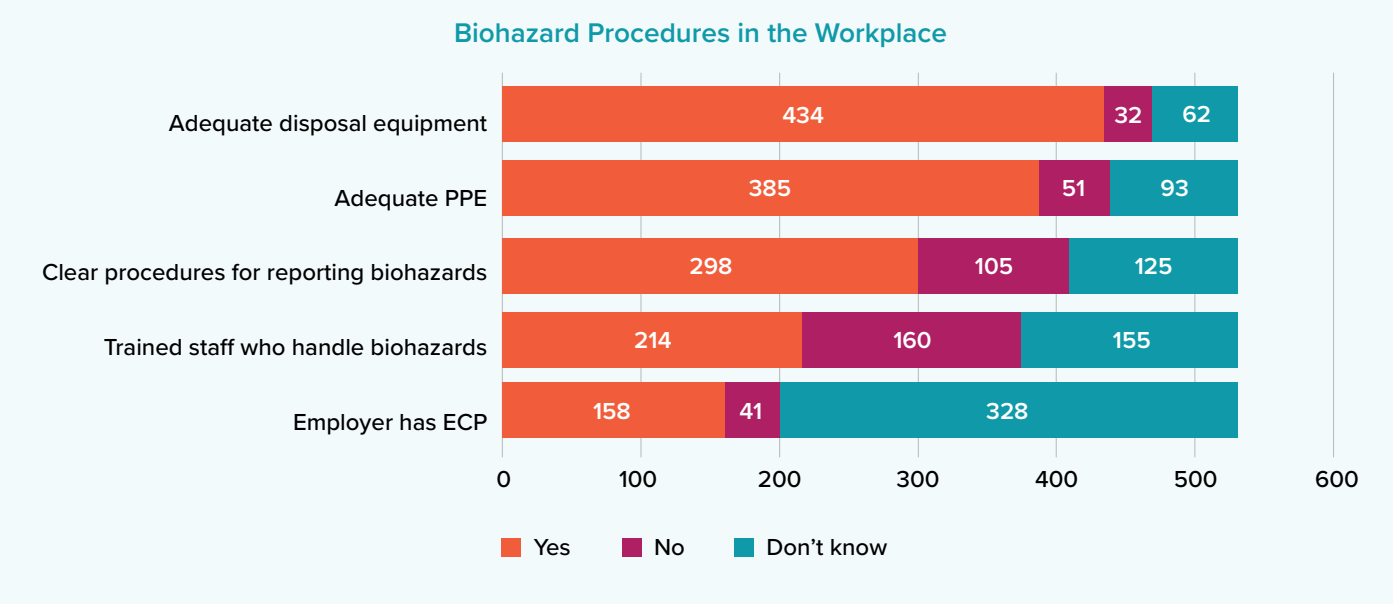
When asked if there were staff trained to handle biohazards, 40% indicated yes, 30% indicated no, and 30% indicated that they did not know.

When asked if their workplace had adequate personal protective equipment for those handling biohazards, such as gloves and masks, 73% indicated yes, 10% indicated no, and 17% indicated that they did not know.

When asked if their workplace had adequate disposal equipment, like a sharps container, 82% indicated yes, 6% indicated no, and 12% indicated they did not know.

Finally, when asked if their employer had an Exposure Control Plan (ECP) for biohazards, 30% indicated yes, 8% indicated no, and over half of respondents (62%) indicated that they were not sure. This represents an opportunity for locals to proactively request ECPs from employers and in instances where they do not exist, request that they be created.

Figure 20: Biohazard Procedures in the Workplace

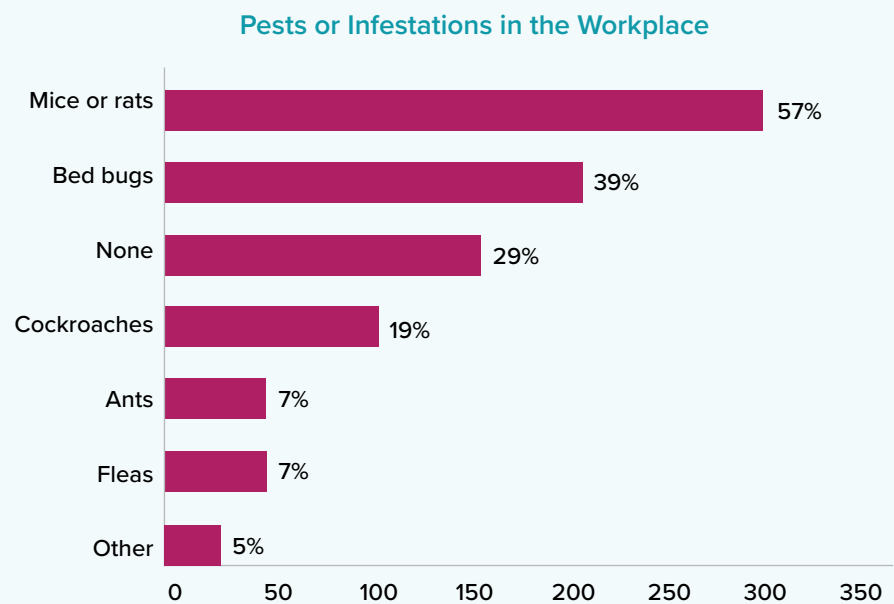


Pests

Library workers are exposed to a range of pests or infestations in their workplace. The three most common were mice or rats (57%), bed bugs (39%), and none (29%). The 'Other' category (5%) had a range of responses, including lice, silverfish, birds, spiders, and maggots.

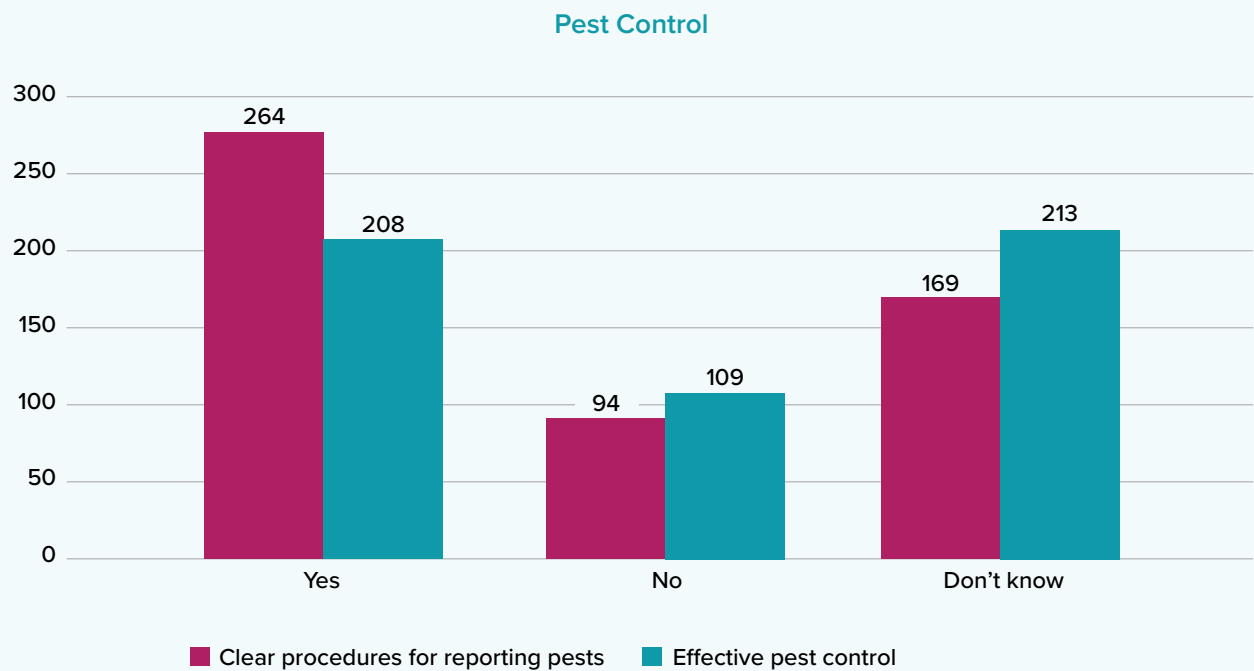


Figure 21: Pests or Infestations in the Workplace



When asked if there were clear procedures for reporting pests in the workplace, 50% said yes, 18% said no, and 34% were not sure. When asked if there were effective pest control measures in place, 39% said yes, 21% said no, and 40% were not sure. These findings highlight additional opportunities for workplaces to take a more proactive approach in handling pests and communicating procedures with employees.

Figure 22: Pest Control



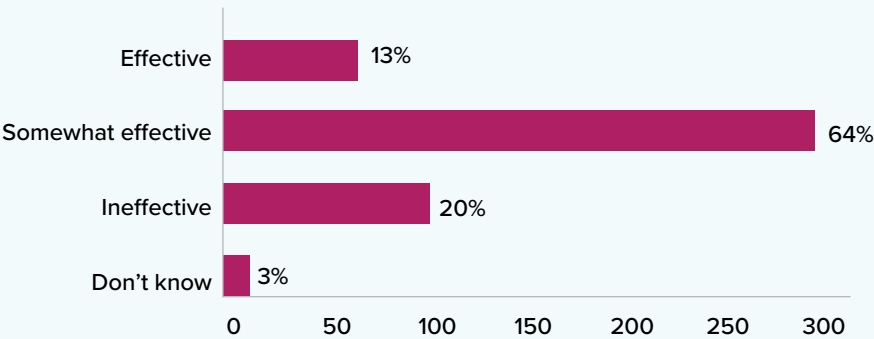
Workplace Policies and Training

This section assesses the policies and training intended to mitigate the risks documented in previous sections. When asked if there is a violence and harassment prevention program at work, over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said yes, 11% said no, and 21% were not sure.

When asked if your employer has provided education, training, or orientation on how to prevent and deal with violence or harassment in the workplace, 86% said yes, followed by 14% who said no (8%) or were not sure (6%). For those who answered yes, they were then asked if they felt the education and training received was effective in preparing them to deal with situations of violence or harassment that may arise at work. Amongst respondents, 77% said it was effective (13%) or somewhat effective (64%), while 23% said it was either ineffective (20%) or that they were not sure (3%).

Figure 23: Effectiveness of Violence Prevention Education and Training

Effectiveness of Violence Prevention Education and Training

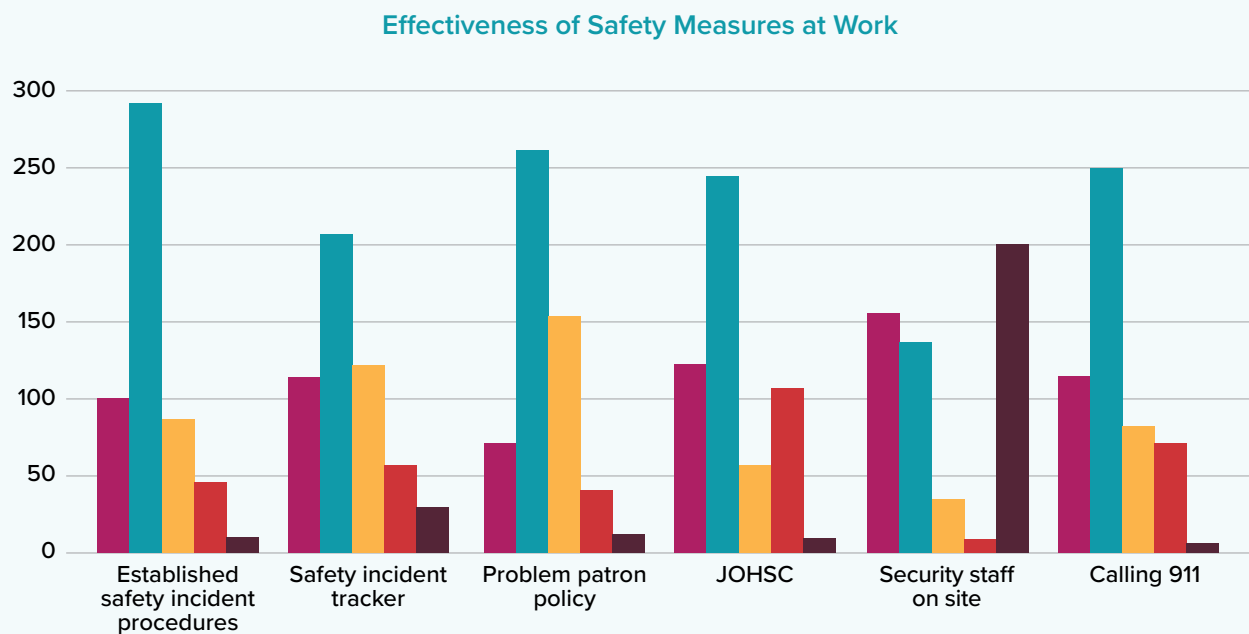


Respondents were asked how effective seven safety measures were at work, as shown in Figure 24. When weighting the results⁶, the presence of a Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (432) was the highest ranked measure, followed by security staff on site (416), established safety incident procedures (407), calling 911/police (403), safety incident tracking (310), problem patron policies (248), and finally having a social worker on staff (41).

There are several additional observations that can be made from this data. For example, despite being the second highest ‘somewhat effective’ measure (264), problem patron policies were also determined to be the most ‘ineffective’ safety measure (154). This represents an opportunity to strengthen the language in library user conduct policies.

Amongst respondents whose libraries have security staff on site, 90% found them to be either effective (48%) or somewhat effective (42%), compared to only 10% who noted them as being ineffective. While not all libraries may require the presence of security staff, these findings suggest their presence is effective for those that do.

Figure 24: Effectiveness of Safety Measures at Work



While not included on the graph above, respondents were also asked about the presence of social workers on staff. Four out of five respondents (84%) noted that a social worker does not exist where they work. Amongst the limited number of respondents that did indicate a social worker was present in their library (42), 74% found them to be either effective (50%) or somewhat effective (24%), while 26% found them to be ineffective. However, because the size of this data sample is limited, these findings may not be statistically significant. Further, this survey did not distinguish between social workers who support patrons compared to those who support staff.

6. Effective was given 2 points, Somewhat Effective 1 point, Ineffective -1 point, Don't Know 0 points

Summary of Findings: An Unsafe Haven

The 2025 CUPE Library Health & Safety Survey presents a stark portrait of British Columbia's libraries; for too many workers, feeling unsafe has become the norm. The findings, drawn from nearly 600 library workers across 75 communities, depict a sector grappling with escalating risks, inadequate support, and a dangerous erosion of safety protocols. The data tells a story of a valued public space where the workers who make it welcoming are being stretched to their limits.

1. Pervasive Sense of Danger

A profound and pervasive sense of danger now defines the modern library workplace. The data shows that feeling unsafe is not an exception but the norm for the vast majority of staff, representing a fundamental breakdown in the duty of care owed to employees.

A mere 16% of staff feel safe “often” or “most of the time.” For the rest, the work environment is characterized by apprehension: **50% feel safe only “occasionally,” 21% “sometimes” (less than half their shifts), and a shocking 12%—one in eight workers—state they never feel safe.**

This climate of fear, where 83% of workers feel unsafe for routine portions of their work life, is the most glaring indicator of a system in crisis.

2. Safety in Numbers

Library workers have sounded the alarm: **77% directly state that staffing levels impact their safety.** This is not an abstract concern—it's a reality where **30% of workers are regularly required to work alone**, leaving them isolated and vulnerable when crises occur.

This chronic understaffing is a primary driver of the unsafe conditions documented throughout this report.

3. Violence and Trauma Are Routine

Library workers are now frontline responders to social crises, facing a spectrum of abuse and emergencies as a standard part of their job. The data confirms this is a frequent reality: **85% of workers experience verbal abuse, 71% face bullying and harassment, and 2 out of 5 are exposed to violence or threats.**

The severity is clear from the fact that **65% of workers have been involved in an incident serious enough to require calling 911.**

As a result, library workers now routinely operate in an unpredictable and high-risk working environment, where trauma is a significant occupational hazard as they work to respond to the needs of their communities.

4. Frequent Contact with Biohazards

The job of a library worker now includes routine exposure to dangerous biological substances that pose significant health risks. This is not an occasional occurrence but a standard part of the job for the vast majority, with **90% of workers reporting exposure to biohazards** like phlegm (74%), feces or urine (67%), and used needles (62%).

Despite this being a near-universal experience, protections are inconsistent. **Nearly a third of workers (30%) report there are no staff trained to handle these hazards,** and a staggering **62% are unsure if their employer even has an Exposure Control Plan (ECP).**

This represents a critical failure in institutional responsibility, turning a vital public service into a high-risk occupation.

5. Inadequate Incident Response and Support

A culture of futility and inaction surrounds incident reporting, compounding the trauma of workplace violence and leaving hazards unaddressed. When workers brave the reporting process, the response is profoundly lacking: **26% saw no action taken at all after reporting an incident, and a further 31% were left in the dark, never learning what, if anything, was done.** The failure to act or communicate is the primary reason why **1 in 5 employees feel reporting “does not make a difference.”**

Following traumatic events, critical support is absent—**70% of workers never receive a critical incident debrief.** This systemic neglect ensures that trauma is compounded, trust is eroded, and violence is tacitly accepted as “part of the job.”

6. A Crisis of Accountability and Trust

The collective findings of this survey reveal a systemic failure in accountability that has eroded worker confidence in safety structures. This is most acute in management response to incidents: when asked if their employer’s response to violence or harassment was adequate and effective, **a mere 16% said yes.** A staggering **44% said it was either ineffective (34%) or they did not know (10%).**

This lack of accountability is further evidenced by the fact that **nearly half of all workers (45%) are either uncomfortable or unsure about exercising their legal right to refuse unsafe work.**

When the mechanisms designed to ensure safety are perceived as ineffective, and workers fear reprisal for asserting their rights, it signals a profound and dangerous breakdown in the employer’s duty of care.

Conclusion

Library workers are on the front lines of our communities' deepest social challenges, yet they are being asked to manage this crisis alone. This report documents the direct result: a workforce exposed to violence, trauma, and hazard without the necessary resources, support, or protection to feel safe in their workplaces.

Investing in library workers is not just an operational need—it is a moral imperative. Ensuring their safety is the non-negotiable first step to ensuring our libraries remain safe, accessible, and functional. We must act to protect the workers who keep our libraries safe, inclusive, and open for everyone.

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