

## Bullying in the Library Workplace

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### Abstract

The primary purposes of the study were to investigate how often bullying occurs in libraries and whether bullying policies exist in libraries. The first survey questionnaire was sent to library personnel in the six New England states through statewide email distribution lists. Altogether 571 library staff members completed the survey. The second survey questionnaire was sent to large public and academic libraries in New England to see if they have anti-bullying policies in the workplace. The results of the study clearly showed there were significant reports of workplace bullying in all kinds of libraries. Nonetheless, not many libraries have policies that deal with this workplace challenge.

### Introduction

Bullying in the workplace is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon in many work environments, including libraries.<sup>1</sup> According to an article in ALA's *Library Worklife*, "up to 44 percent of U.S. workers report that they are or have been bullied at work and even greater numbers of workers have reported witnessing bullying in the workplace."<sup>2</sup> There are many definitions of workplace bullying currently in use around the world in investigating this serious workplace issue.<sup>3</sup> Workplace bullying behavior may be defined as action "that threatens, intimidates, humiliates, or isolates people at work or undermines their reputation or job performance."<sup>4</sup> This behavior can be directed at an individual by co-workers or supervisors in the work environment. It occurs without regard to gender and can include verbal and emotional abuse that targets an individual.

Workplace bullying involves situations in which one or more individuals, over a period of time, find themselves on the receiving end of persistent negative actions from one or several other persons, where the target has difficulty defending himself or herself against such actions and a hostile work environment is created.<sup>5</sup> Workplace bullying not only affects an employee's work performance but can cause long standing emotional and physical issues for the employee. These issues can include "post traumatic stress disorder, lack of self-esteem, absenteeism, sleep disorders and family tension and stress."<sup>6</sup> Bullying in the workplace deters the formation of a healthy, productive work environment. It is also shown that "workplace stress-related absenteeism costs US employers more than \$300 billion annually."<sup>7</sup>

### Literature Review

Workplace bullying can have serious and negative consequences for employees and for organizations. Over the last several decades, numerous research studies have been done

about workplace bullying. Many researchers have investigated the antecedents of workplace bullying in an attempt to understand what are the major attributes that can constrain or enhance the incidence and impacts of workplace bullying. A significant portion of the workplace bullying research has examined individual factors such as personality traits of the target or the bully<sup>8 9 10</sup> and organizational factors such as leadership and the organizational climate.<sup>11 12 13</sup> Many other research studies have also emphasized that bullying is a very complex phenomenon including many individual factors and group related factors.<sup>14 15 16</sup>

Other research studies have explored the association between workplace bullying and health problems. Workplace bullying has been found to be associated with sleep disorders,<sup>17 18</sup> absence due to sickness,<sup>19 20</sup> mental health outcomes, such as job-induced stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder,<sup>21 22 23 24 25</sup> and an eventual inability to work.<sup>26 27</sup> Specific documented work-related consequences of bullying have included decreased job satisfaction, reduced commitment, and an intention to abandon the job.<sup>28 29</sup> Furthermore, workplace bullying can result in suicide.<sup>30</sup>

There is also mounting research evidence that workplace bullying has serious detrimental effects not only for those bullied but also for organizations, workplace colleagues<sup>31 32 33</sup> and family members who are liable to experience much stress from living with a family member who has been bullied.<sup>34 35 36</sup> For organizations, bullying can result in lowered morale, reduced productivity, reduced loyalty, and increased staff turnover.<sup>37 38 39</sup> The financial effects to a workplace environment that tolerates bullying have also been documented in the research. First there are the economic challenges for the targets. For instance, one research study has found “41% of bullied women and 36% of bullied men quit their jobs and 18% were not working or underemployed.”<sup>40</sup> Besides the personal consequences to a bullied worker, bullying can cost an organization in many direct and indirect ways such as through decreased staff productivity, increased absenteeism, increased medical costs, increased turnover and the costs associated with staff replacement. Studies have estimated the cost of bullying to organizations to be \$300 billion per year.<sup>41 42</sup> Some other studies have also suggested that the cost of bullying to society is in the range of 1.4 - 2.0 percent of GDP.<sup>43 44</sup>

Workplace bullying is widespread in both the public and private sectors<sup>45</sup> and it is increasing in the United States and worldwide.<sup>46</sup> Research by the United Nations-sponsored International Labor Office has reported “professions that were once regarded as sheltered from bullying and mobbing (e.g., teaching, social services, library services, and health care) are now experiencing increasing acts of such abusiveness...”<sup>47</sup> It “takes place in schools, universities and libraries at twice the rate of workplaces in general.”<sup>48</sup> However, despite an increase in bullying in library workplaces over the last decade, little research has been done about bullying in libraries. A very limited number of studies in library literature deal with bullying in libraries and most of those are merely descriptive, brief, and some are didactic.<sup>49 50 51 52</sup> With regard to bullying in library workplaces, thus far no comprehensive empirical research has been done. This is probably because workplace bullying is difficult to examine, and there is no consensus regarding its definition. The primary purposes of this study were to investigate how often bullying occurs in libraries and whether bullying policies exist in libraries.

## Methodology

In order to explore how often bullying occurs in libraries and whether anti-bullying library policies have been implemented, two different sets of questionnaire surveys were developed respectively. In developing the surveys, the researchers included both multiple choice questions

that could be analyzed quantitatively and open-ended questions that allowed respondents to articulate and elaborate their answers more freely. SurveyMonkey.com was used to host the anonymous online surveys.

The first questionnaire survey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2Y88H9W>), which was designed to find out how often library personnel report bullying behavior, included questions regarding the type of library worked in and the length of service, demographic questions such as age and gender, and specific questions about workplace bullying. Whether the bullying was current or in the past, what type of library it occurred in and whether the person doing the bullying was a co-worker or supervisor were also among the questions that were asked. A cover letter including an online survey link was sent to library personnel on email distribution lists (e.g., [CSL-CONNTECH@LIST.CT.GOV](mailto:CSL-CONNTECH@LIST.CT.GOV) in Connecticut and [vtlibraries@list.uvm.edu](mailto:vtlibraries@list.uvm.edu) in Vermont) maintained by state library organizations in the six states that comprise the region of New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The email distribution lists that the first survey was sent to reach over 8,000 subscribers that work in library settings. This survey reached library personnel at all levels of library service from administrative to library support services, so to reflect as wide a range of library population as possible.

The second questionnaire survey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/29M7P3P>) was sent to large public and academic libraries in New England to see if they have policies regarding bullying in the workplace. Because small libraries are unlikely to have policies regarding bullying in the workplace, it was decided to survey only large public libraries and academic libraries in New England. To create a sample of large public libraries in New England, only the top ten percent of public libraries--based on the number of volumes held--in each New England state were included in the sample. For a sampling frame, for instance, the researchers used online resources such as "Public Library Data" by the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, available at <http://mbic.state.ma.us/advisory/statistics/public/>. Altogether, 122 large public libraries were sampled. To generate a sampling frame of large academic libraries in New England, the researchers used the College Navigator database that is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>. Only the top 30 percent of academic libraries--based on the number of volumes held--in each New England state were included in the sample. Altogether, 69 large academic libraries were sampled for the second survey. The second survey asked if anti-bullying policies were in place and whether these policies originated at the library level or within a larger organization. A cover letter, including an online survey link, was emailed to the directors of the sample of 191 large public and academic libraries.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the participants in the first questionnaire survey by their library type. Altogether 571 library personnel in the six New England states participated in the first survey. The vast majority (74.3%) of the participants that responded to the first survey were public library personnel, with the second largest group (15.8%) to respond working in academic libraries.

Table 1. Library Type Respondents Worked in

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Public</b>	424	74.3
<b>Academic</b>	90	15.8
<b>School</b>	36	6.3
<b>Special</b>	21	3.7
<b>Total</b>	571	100.0

The results of the first survey clearly show that many library personnel are experiencing workplace bullying in libraries. Nearly 46 percent of the participants reported that they have been bullied (see Table 2). In the comments portion of the survey, others that had not experienced bullying directly, stated that they have witnessed bullying incidents in their libraries. For instance, one respondent commented about it as follows.

I have seen pervasive bullying throughout all libraries (public and academic) that I have worked at. Normally by co-workers and the bullies are longstanding women employees, both librarians and support staff. If you ever are able to expand your research it would be good to include the effects on the other employees, who end up being bystanders, whistle blowers, etc. and are also affected by the negative toxic atmosphere that the bullying behavior creates.

Whether those that experienced bullying were more apt to complete the survey is a consideration, but the percentage of those who report workplace bullying is mainly in accordance with findings from previous research studies in other workplace environments.<sup>53 54 55</sup>

Table 2. Experience with Workplace Bullying

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Yes</b>	259	45.7
<b>No</b>	308	54.3
<b>Total</b>	567	100.0

Table 3 summarizes the experience with workplace bullying by the library type of the respondents. The results clearly demonstrate that workplace bullying occurs in all types of libraries. To determine whether the differences of bullying experience by the library type were significant, the chi-square test was used. A chi-square analysis,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 567) = 12.092, p = .007$ , indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in experience with workplace bullying by the library type. Academic and special library personnel reported experience with workplace bullying significantly more often than public and school library personnel did (see Table 3). It has to be noted here, however, that the sample size of the special library group was relatively very small. Therefore, the significant finding of the study should be interpreted with caution. A few respondents' additional comments below further supported these findings.

The Library where I experienced the bullying was a large academic library, and the phenomenon was endemic. It was part of the culture. I could have checked both co-worker and supervisor. Another co-worker described the atmosphere as "toxic." I am now in a small town library and am very happy.

Have been through two academic libraries with excessive sarcasm, screaming, shunning, etc. It needs to change. Left library work and I didn't experience any bullying.

Table 3. Experience with Workplace Bullying by Library Type

		Experience with Workplace Bullying		Total
		Yes	No	
Library Type	Public	181 (69.9%)	240 (77.9%)	421 (74.3%)
	Academic	52 (20.1%)	38 (12.3%)	90 (15.9%)
	School	12 (4.6%)	23 (7.5%)	35 (6.1%)
	Special	14 (5.4%)	7 (2.3%)	21 (3.7%)
Total		259 (100.0%)	308 (100.0%)	567 (100.0%)

Table 4 shows the frequency distribution of bullies' positions by their gender. On average, about 59 percent of the bullies were their supervisors while nearly 41 percent of the bullies were their co-workers. This finding further supports previous studies reporting that bosses are the majority of bullies.<sup>56</sup> A chi-square test,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 250) = 8.489, p = .004$ , between the two variables (bully's position and gender) revealed that significantly more male library personnel bullied people (79.1%) whom they are supervising more than they bullied their co-workers (20.9%). On the other hand, female library personnel bullied people (55.1%) whom they are supervising only about 10 percent more than they bullied their co-workers (44.9%). However, several respondents in our surveys noted that there was not a category for those bullied by people that they supervised. This form of bullying is referred to as "upwards bullying."<sup>57</sup> Although cases of upwards bullying have been reported rarely in the literature, some previous research studies reported that managers can also be the target of workplace bullying from their staff. For instance, two of the survey respondents commented about upwards bullying as follows.

The bullying came from some of my staff and their friends in the community. They didn't like some of the decisions I was making and harassed me over several months in the workplace, via email, regular mail, in person confrontations, at meetings and in public places where we might meet. There were constant and continuous angry confrontations over the course of several months along with political maneuvering. I looked for, and found, another position due to the chronic bullying behavior. I was unable to find any legal recourse for their behavior. Unfortunately, I was told it was fairly common. I have been in my new workplace for almost a year now and have had no issues at all here. It is a warm and welcoming environment.

I also worked in a library where I was the supervisor and a couple of female employees were the bullies. No matter if the bullies are above, below or at the same level you are at it is a challenging situation. And many other people, again whether they are above, below or at the same level as you, are fearful about getting involved, they don't know what to do and they don't want to get attacked themselves, so solving the problem can be a challenge. If everyone stands together against the bullies it works out best, but most people can't do it.

The results of this study support the findings of the previous research that reported the cases of managers who are bullied by their staff.<sup>58</sup> In addition, some respondents commented that they were bullied by other people that they reported to, such as a town manager and in many cases, members of the Library Board of Trustees. Also, there were reports of being bullied by multiple people, such as a co-worker and the library director. The results clearly demonstrate that bullying involves a lot of different dynamics of personal interactions with others in the workplace.

Table 4. Bully's Position by Bully's Gender

		Bully's Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Bully's Position	Supervisor	34 (79.1%)	114 (55.1%)	148 (59.2%)
	Co-Worker	9 (20.9%)	93 (44.9%)	102 (40.8%)
Total		43 (100.0%)	207 (100.0%)	250 (100.0%)

Table 5 shows the experience with workplace bullying by respondent's age. The largest age category of those that responded, at 35.8% was ages 55 to 64, which was approximately double that number in both the 25 to 34 year and 35 to 44 year categories. The second largest category, at 22.8% was ages 45 to 54. To examine whether the differences of bullying experience by respondent's age were significant, the chi-square test was conducted. A chi-square analysis,  $\chi^2 (5, N = 565) = 13.629, p = .018$ , revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in experience with workplace bullying by respondent's age. The results indicate that the two age groups of 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 reported their bullying experience more often than the other age groups. A majority of the respondents in these two age groups reported their bullying experience respectively. This finding further supports previous studies reporting that bullying was associated with age.<sup>59</sup> Several comments addressed age as a factor respondents felt affected the bullying.

Bullying has been in the form of ageism and inappropriate/unprofessional comments from administrative staff.

I, as well as other "over 60" faculty members feel very unsupported and neglected by the young administration. Bullying takes the form of not responding or not standing up for us if there is a confrontation with students and/or parents. The attitude that we are "too old" to work with children is very demeaning.



Table 5. Experience with Workplace Bullying by Respondent's Age

		Experience with Workplace Bullying		Total
		Yes	No	
Respondent's Age	18-24	1 (0.4%)	3 (1.0%)	4 (0.7%)
	25-34	39 (15.1%)	68 (22.2%)	107 (18.9%)
	35-44	49 (19.0%)	45 (14.7%)	94 (16.7%)
	45-54	70 (27.1%)	59 (19.2%)	129 (22.8%)
	55-64	91 (35.3%)	111 (36.2%)	202 (35.8%)
	65 & Older	8 (3.1%)	21 (6.9%)	29 (5.1%)
<b>Total</b>		258 (100.0%)	307 (100.0%)	565 (100.0%)

In order to test the relationships between experience with workplace bullying and the other individual variables of respondents such as gender, education level, library position, and years at the library, chi-square analyses were conducted. No significant relationships were found between the variables. In addition, chi-square tests were used to examine the relationships between experience with workplace bullying and the individual traits of bullies such as gender and position. No significant relationships were found between these variables.

As seen in Table 6, the majority (58.7%) of the respondents experienced health issues as a result of bullying. The specific health issues that were experienced included stress (41%), anxiety (30%), depression (21%), headaches (13%), sleep issues (13%), migraines (6%), insomnia (6%), muscle aches (3%) and issues with weight gain/weight loss (3%). Those who reported workplace bullying experienced at times persistent and serious health consequences as a result of the bullying. A number of respondents made additional comments about health issues associated with bullying. Some of them are as follows.

Although I did not suffer "physical health" issues, I certainly suffered "mental health-wise" and emotional issues. This person was a pure bully, and the way she did it was under the radar so it would be hard to discipline this type of bullying.

My experience being bullied was very traumatic and had a great impact on my mental and physical health as well as on my current difficult financial status.

It is extremely important to this profession, which I believe has very sadly allowed for increasingly more abuses of power, even in academia. Unfortunately, corporate-minded administration has left very few rights to those abused by library supervisors. I resigned from a tenured position because of the constant screaming at me and restructuring that made it very clear that I was specifically not wanted under his new directorship. It has taken me over 6 months to recover from depression, not to mention the financial loss of not having a job. Since I worked in an at-will employment state in which tenure no longer means what it is supposed to mean, I felt there were no state resources to help me. There were witnesses, and they have been brave, too--a couple of my colleagues also left because of the abuses allowed to continue by the Vice President of Academic Affairs (she seemed to agree with and encouraged the new library director's hostility towards a

targeted group). As a woman, I paid the biggest price losing my baby due to all this stress.

Workplace bullying: it's there, and if it doesn't break you physically, then it breaks you emotionally and mentally, leaving scars that may effect you for life even in your new job.

Table 6. Health Issues from Bullying

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Yes</b>	149	58.7
<b>No</b>	105	41.3
<b>Total</b>	254	100.0

In order to examine the relationships between health effects and the individual variables of respondents such as a gender, an age, an education level, a library position, and years at the library, chi-square tests were conducted. No significant relationships were found between the variables.

As noted in Table 7 below, only 69 people (12.1%) out of the total 571 participants in the first survey reported that they left the workplace because of bullying. The quitting rate of 12.1 percent is much lower than the rates found in previous studies in other work environments, which reported generally over 30 percent of bullied employees quitted their jobs.<sup>60</sup> This library-quitting rate would be considered underrepresented because the sample of the first survey included only library personnel who are currently on email distribution lists maintained by state library organizations in New England. Those who left library jobs permanently because of bullying may not be even on the email distribution lists any longer. Of those who left the library workplace because of bullying, many looked for and found a new position. The results of this study showed that 71% left for another job, while almost 25% resigned and nearly 5% were terminated. A few respondents made additional comments about leaving their jobs.

I ended up leaving after 6 months, 3 months of probation and 3 months of regular employment. When I left both parties agreed that it "wasn't the right fit" though the town knew it was for other reasons. The director of the library (small town public) turned a blind eye to the situation and told me I needed to work on ways to get the other librarian to trust me, as if that were the root of the problem, and that was what was needed to fix the issue. I'm not sure I'll ever work for a public library again. I have no interest in working in that kind of environment ever again.

This occurred over 30 years ago. If it happened now, I would fight rather than resign. With age comes wisdom.

Table 7. Reasons Respondents Left Bullying Workplace

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Resigned from the position</b>	17	24.6
<b>Left for a new position</b>	49	71.0
<b>Terminated from the position</b>	3	4.3
<b>Total</b>	69	100.0



Table 8 shows the results of the second questionnaire survey that was sent to the sampled 191 large public and academic libraries in New England to see if they have policies regarding bullying in the workplace. Altogether 65 administrators of large public and academic libraries in the six New England states participated in the second survey--a response rate of 34 percent. About two-thirds of the participants that responded to the survey were public library directors and the other one-third of them were academic library directors. Out of the 65 large public and academic libraries that responded, only six libraries (9.2%) had anti-bullying policies. Most of these policies originated at the city/town or college/university level. Library administrators did report that some had harassment policies in place that covered bullying behaviors in the workplace, and there was a trend to add harassment definitions that included bullying behaviors and broadening existing sexual harassment policies to be harassment policies in general. Even though more academic libraries tend to have anti-bullying policies than public libraries do, a chi-square analysis revealed that there was no significant relationship between the two variables (library type and anti-bullying policy). The results of this study clearly demonstrate that not many libraries have anti-bullying policies.

Table 8. Library Type by Anti-Bullying Policy

		Anti-Bullying Policy		Total
		Yes	No	
Library Type	Public	3 (50.0%)	41 (69.5%)	44 (67.7%)
	Academic	3 (50.0%)	18 (30.5%)	21 (32.3%)
Total		6 (100.0%)	59 (100.0%)	65 (100.0%)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary purposes of the study were to investigate how frequently bullying occurs in libraries and whether anti-bullying policies exist in libraries. The results of the study clearly showed that workplace bullying exists in library workplace environments. It affects all kinds of libraries and library personnel and has profound consequences for the persons who experience it and the dynamics of the libraries that they work in. The majority of the respondents reported experiencing health issues from workplace bullying. Stress, anxiety and depression were among the highest reported health issues. A significant number of respondents reported leaving the bullying workplace for a new position, demonstrating clearly that libraries are losing personnel who experience bullying in the workplace. In addition, respondents reported financial issues from having to leave positions when workplace bullying occurred and being unable to easily find other library employment.

Workplace bullying was reported across gender lines, workplace positions, education levels, and years at the library. While a majority of respondents reported being bullied by supervisors, comments from respondents noted that bullying occurred at all levels. In particular, the results of the quantitative data analyses revealed that workplace bullying was associated with the library type and respondents' age, respectively. Academic and special library personnel reported experience with workplace bullying significantly more often than public and school library personnel. The two age groups of 35 to 44 and 45 to 54 reported their bullying experience more often than the other age groups. In addition, significantly more male library personnel bullied people whom they supervised more than they bullied their co-workers.

The most telling part of the research was the comments that respondents shared about the ways bullying affected their workplace experience and their lives. Despite significant reports of workplace bullying in libraries, not many libraries have policies that deal with this workplace challenge. Less than 10 percent of the responded 65 large public and academic libraries reported having specific anti-bullying policies. Clearly, this needs to change. Workplace bullying is a significant issue and if it is occurring in our libraries, we need to be cognizant of how it affects library personnel and the workplace. Losing good personnel to bullying, health care costs incurred from bullying and lower moral are all consequences of bullying that impede the formation of healthy, productive library workplace environments. The first step is recognizing that workplace bullying exists in library workplace environments. Further research studies that document the existence of workplace bullying in libraries, nationwide, seem warranted. Interviewing library personnel to further tell the story of workplace bullying in libraries would also be an important step.

Developing anti-bullying policies and procedures that incorporate a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, formal reporting and documentation processes, and continuous assessment of the policies and procedures can help alleviate workplace bullying.<sup>61</sup> Having supports and remedies for those who experience workplace bullying is also important. No one who experiences bullying should feel alone, and as librarians we need to do better. Since workplace bullying has serious negative impacts not only on library personnel but also on libraries, library administrators should proactively address this serious social issue. According to a recent U.S. Workplace Bullying Institute survey, however, 72 percent of the employers deny, discount, encourage, rationalize, or defend workplace bullying.<sup>62</sup> Workplace bullying in libraries needs to be further studied in a comprehensive, systematic and sustained way because libraries have responsibilities to protect their employees from workplace bullying as well as to efficiently and effectively meet their organizational mission and goals.

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**Published:** February 2018

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