

Early Findings from the National Research Project on Workplace Violence and Aggression in Australian Libraries

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Thank you to everyone who participated in the national research project investigating workplace violence and aggression in Australian public and academic libraries. Your willingness to share experiences, concerns, and ideas has made it possible to begin building a clearer understanding of the realities facing academic and public library workers across Australia.

This project, funded by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), the Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA), and the Council of Australasian University Librarians (CAUL), was developed in response to growing concern within the sector about the safety and wellbeing of library staff. The project aims to understand the nature and prevalence of workplace aggression in libraries and to identify practical ways to improve workplace safety and support for staff.

1,182 customer service staff have completed their survey, 291 branch or department managers have completed theirs, and 113 CEOs or University Librarians have completed their survey. These results include staff from public and academic libraries across metropolitan, suburban, regional, and remote locations. The findings show clearly that workplace aggression is not isolated or uncommon. Initial data analysis on the data contributed by customer service staff indicates that 77% of front-of-house staff reported having experienced or witnessed violence or aggression at work. Among public library workers, this figure rose to 90%.

The survey identified a wide range of behaviours being experienced by library workers. Verbal abuse, including yelling, swearing, and threatening language, was the most commonly reported issue, experienced by 88% of respondents. Intimidation and harassment were also highly prevalent. More concerningly, 28% of respondents reported experiencing physical aggression, including being spat at, shaken, hit, or injured by objects thrown at them. Some workers required medical attention following these incidents.

Many respondents also described regularly managing behaviours associated with mental ill-health, alcohol and other drug use, and conflict between library visitors. Staff reported needing to balance public service, compassion, and safety in increasingly complex social environments.

The research also highlighted the emotional and professional impacts of these experiences on library workers. Eighty percent of respondents reported feeling unsafe at work, while many also reported feeling unsafe when travelling to or from work or while wearing library identification outside work. Compassion fatigue was common, with 72% of respondents reporting experiences consistent with emotional exhaustion from ongoing exposure to distressing situations and the responsibility of supporting vulnerable community members.

Importantly, the findings suggest that these experiences are affecting workforce sustainability. Almost 40% of customer service staff respondents reported considering leaving library work because of safety concerns, and some participants indicated they are actively seeking employment outside the sector for this reason.

Alongside these findings, participants also shared important insights about what helps improve safety and wellbeing in libraries. Consistent themes included strong leadership support, practical and team-based training, clear behavioural boundaries, effective communication during incidents, supportive colleagues, safe building design, and access to appropriate wellbeing support after difficult incidents. Many respondents emphasised the importance of balancing compassionate, trauma-informed approaches with clear expectations around unacceptable behaviour.

The researcher is continuing to analyse the data collected through the project, including participants' suggestions for improving workplace safety and organisational responses. The findings will contribute to future recommendations, professional development initiatives, and ongoing advocacy across the Australian library sector.

Most importantly, this project has confirmed that library workers' experiences matter and that the challenges many staff have been facing are real, widespread, and deserving of serious attention. Your contributions are helping create an evidence base that can support meaningful conversations and practical improvements across the profession.

Thank you again for your participation and contribution to this important work.