



---

# City Library Collective

## Strengthening Staff Project

**2023-2024**

*(For Public Dissemination)*

---



## Introduction

In 2023, the City Library Collective (CLC), initiated a joint project focused on strengthening and supporting library staff. As part of this endeavor, the collective spent 2023 gathering information from their staff members with an eye to the unique needs, challenges, and strengths of libraries serving mid-size communities across the state of Wisconsin. The goal of this information-gathering process was to provide participating libraries' staff the opportunity to drive the direction of any project work that might take place in 2024 versus a more top-down approach. This report provides summative information gathering during this process.

## Process

The information-gathering process began with a series of focus groups hosted in Spring 2023. CLC representatives brainstormed a series of open-ended questions (Appendix A) to generate discussion during four facilitated focus groups - three with library staff and one with library leadership. These focus groups helped to refine the direction of the project work by highlighting key issues and concerns for library staff at participating CLC libraries. Findings were then themed and brought back to the CLC for consideration. The themes from the focus groups fell largely into three topic categories: 1) job recruitment research, 2) security policy research, and 3) staffing research.

CLC members were asked to select one of the identified categories to focus on and, ultimately, selected staffing research as the direction. A key question that arose from this discussion was the desire to determine what role desk time might play in relation to staff satisfaction, including consideration of how much time staff were expected to work the desk, if they were able to engage in other activities, and other potential influencing variables. Collectively, the group contributed to the design of a follow-up survey to gather more quantitative data from CLC staff focused on this specific topic (Appendix B). This information included consideration of staff time addressing security and safety-related concerns in the library and was situated within consideration of whether the library employed/partnered with a social worker and/or security personnel.

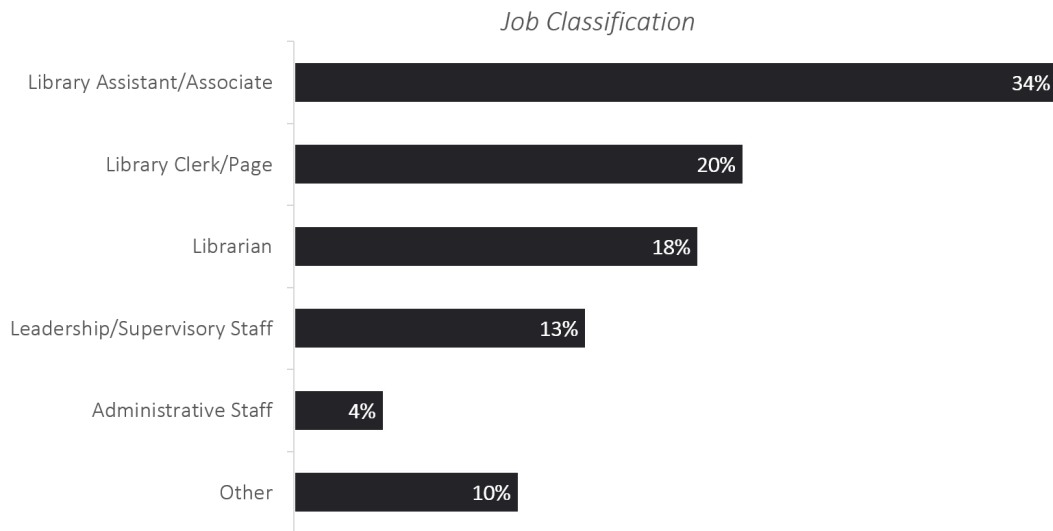
The survey launched in Winter 2023 and was completed by 277 staff members at 10 of the CLC libraries. Participating staff came from a wide variety of roles and backgrounds.



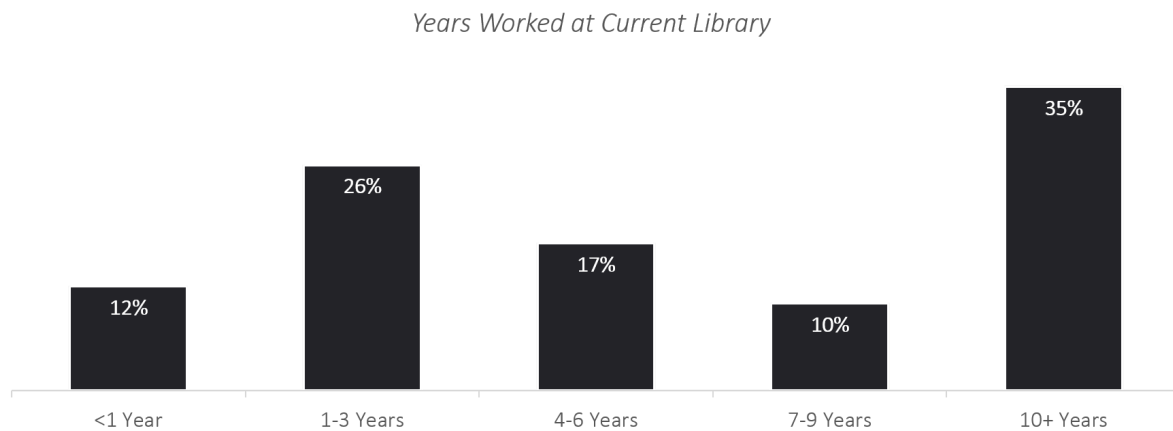
## Survey Results and Findings

### *Staff Roles and Employment Indicators*

Staff represented in the survey work in a variety of roles. Job positions noted in the “Other” category include maintenance staff, library social workers, and grant-funded positions. Librarians and leadership staff are much more likely to be full-time employees, while Library Clerks/Pages are more likely to be part-time employees.



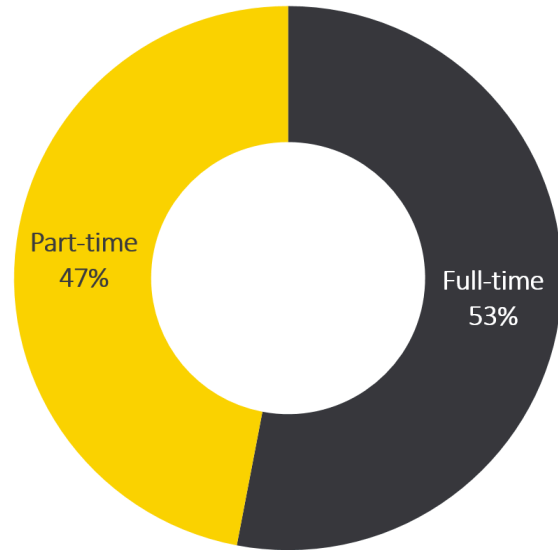
The survey also included staff at a variety of points in their careers at their current library, ranging from new employees to well-seasoned staff who have been employed for a decade or more.





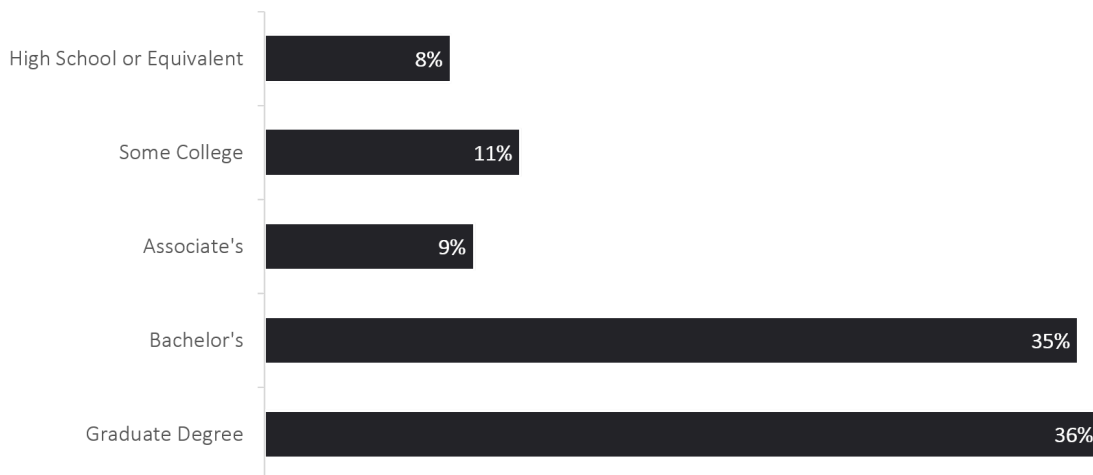
New employees (identified as staff who have worked at their current library for less than one year) were much more likely to be employed on a part-time basis in comparison to full-time staff members (18% v. 6%). The staff category most likely to be a new employee was Library Clerk/Page. Conversely, full-time staff members were significantly more likely to have worked at their library for 10 or more years (46% v. 22%) and were most likely to be in a leadership or supervisory role. This may point to the idea that part-time staff, especially those filling library clerk/page roles, are retained at a lower rate over time.

*Full-time v. Part-time Status*



Educationally, full-time employees are much more likely to have obtained a graduate degree than part-time employees (53% of full-time staff v. 16% of part-time staff), but of note, part-time employees are much more likely to have a Bachelor's degree in comparison to full-time employees (47% v. 25%). This finding highlights that the part-time staff pool is still highly educated.

*Educational Attainment*

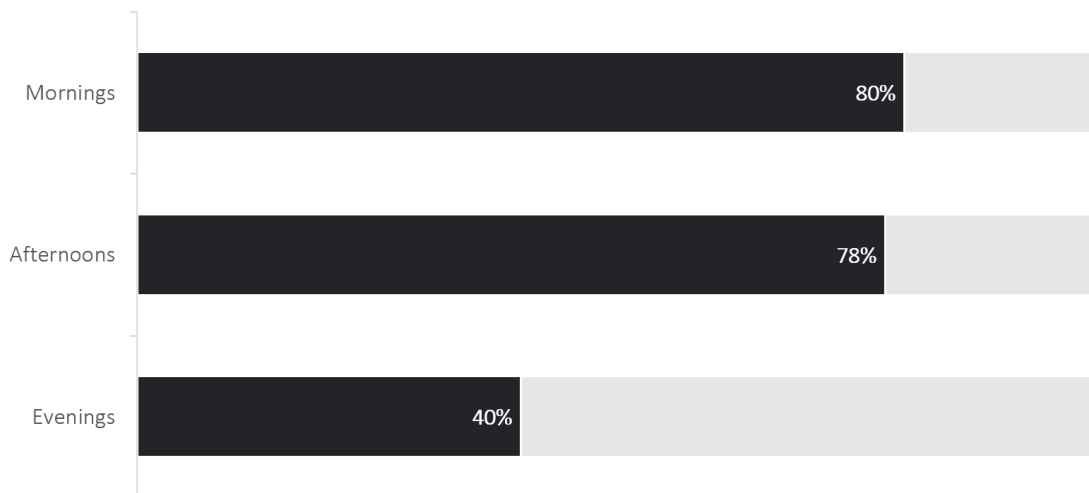




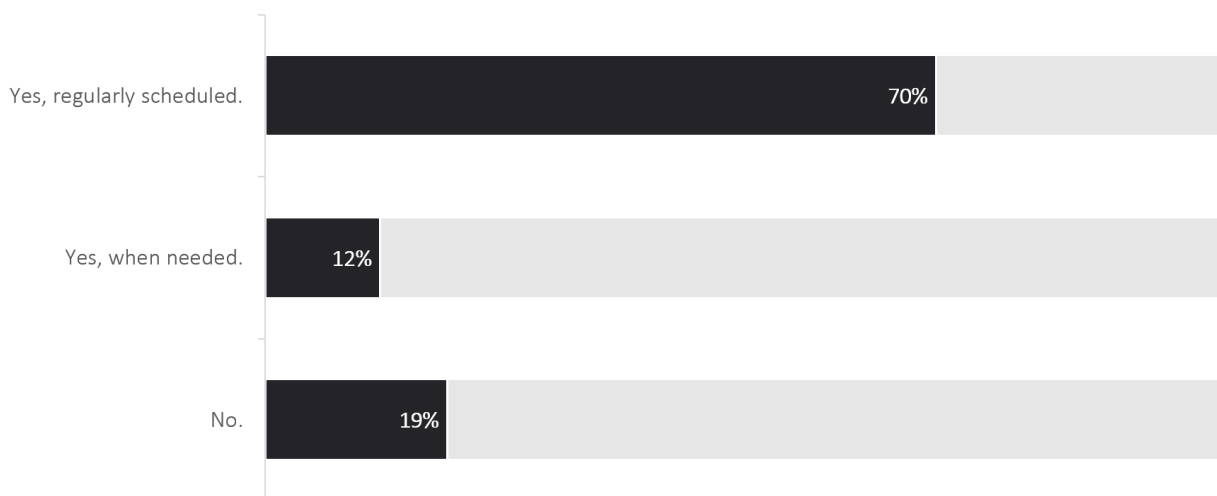
## Nature of Employment

Regardless of full-time versus part-time employment status, employees reported working evenings and weekends as part of their regularly scheduled hours at a comparable rate. This highlights that part-time staff is not necessarily being used to fill in scheduling “gaps” during the evening or weekend hours or vice versa. When it comes to staff roles, the majority of staff are working during the morning or afternoon. Library Assistants/Associates are the staff role most likely to be working evenings, followed by staff in leadership/supervisory positions. Librarians are most likely to be the ones scheduled to work weekends, and administrative staff are the least likely.

*Typical Time of Day Worked*



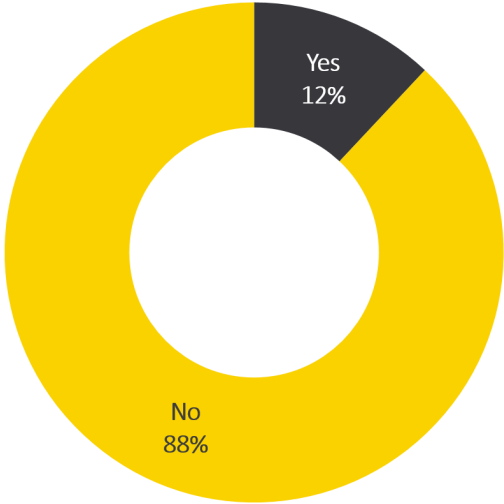
*Weekend Employment Hours*





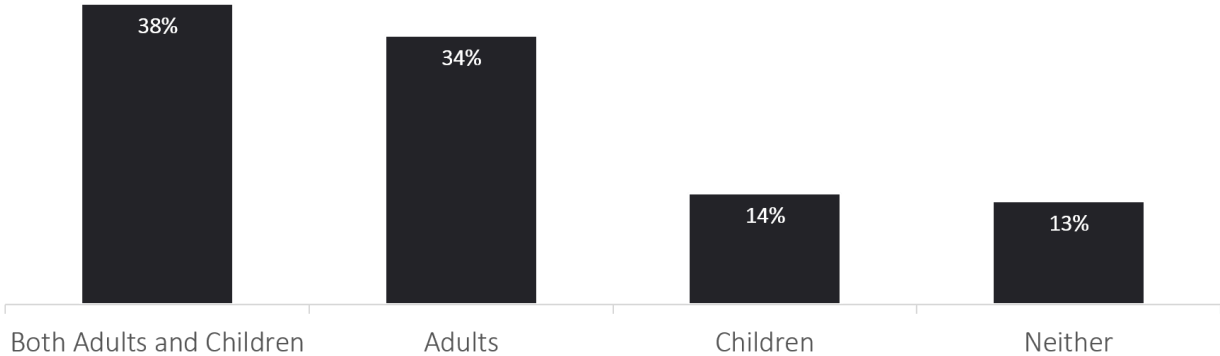
The majority of staff who are working remotely for some or all of their paid time are full-time staff (18% of full-time staff v. 5% of part-time staff). The library role most likely to work from home at least part of the week is staff in leadership/supervisory positions, with 25% indicating they work from home regularly. Of note, staff who work from home regularly are more likely to be dissatisfied with their current position (10% of staff who work from home vs. 1% of staff who do not).

*Work-From-Home Regularly  
(includes hybrid schedules)*



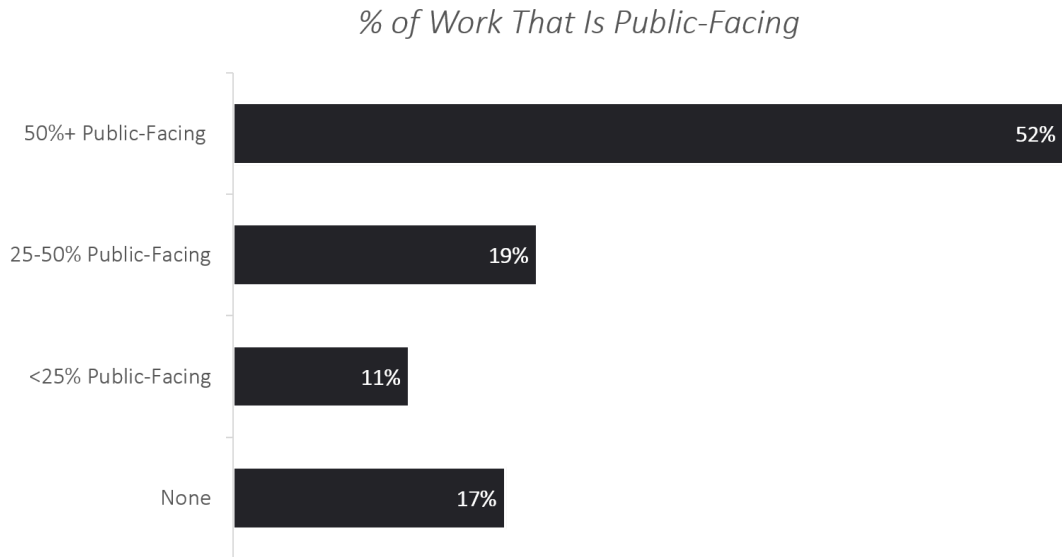
Some staff serve in roles that primarily serve adults, children, or both. Only 13% of staff members indicate they work with neither on a primary basis - the majority of these staff are either Library Clerks/Pages or staff in leadership/supervisory roles.

*Primary Audience Worked With*

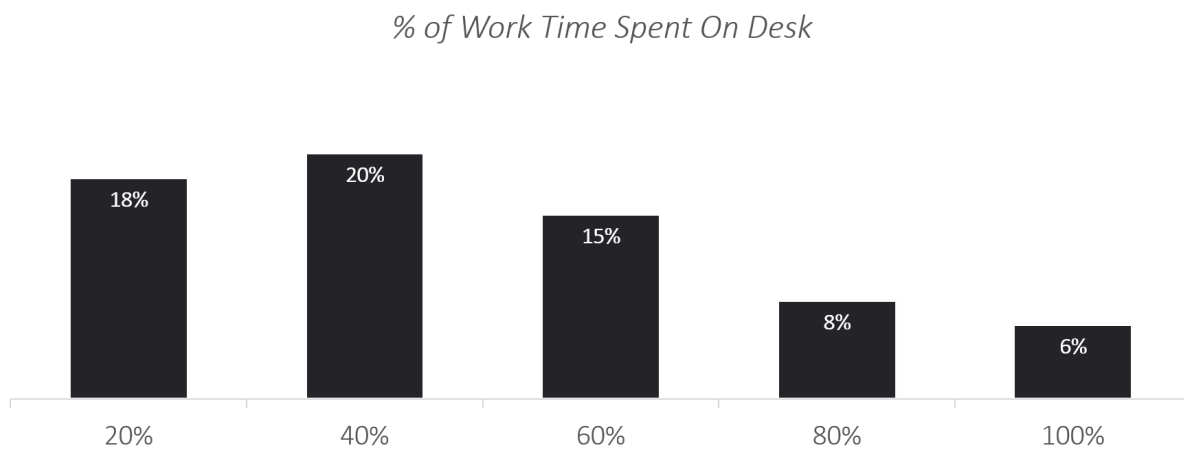




While both part-time and full-time staff report interfacing with the public, part-time staff are much more likely to spend more than 50% of their work time in a public-facing capacity (63% vs. 43%).



33% of staff indicated they do not work the desk at all, with a comparable rate of both full- and part-time staff indicating they do not have this as an assigned job duty. Part-time staff who work the desk are statistically more likely to be working at a public desk a greater percentage of their employment time (80-100% of the time); however, part-time staff are also working fewer hours each week overall in comparison, meaning that both full-time and part-time staff might be working a similar number of hours at the desk, but it takes up a greater percentage of part-time staff's employment hours.





### Work Desk Alone or With Colleague



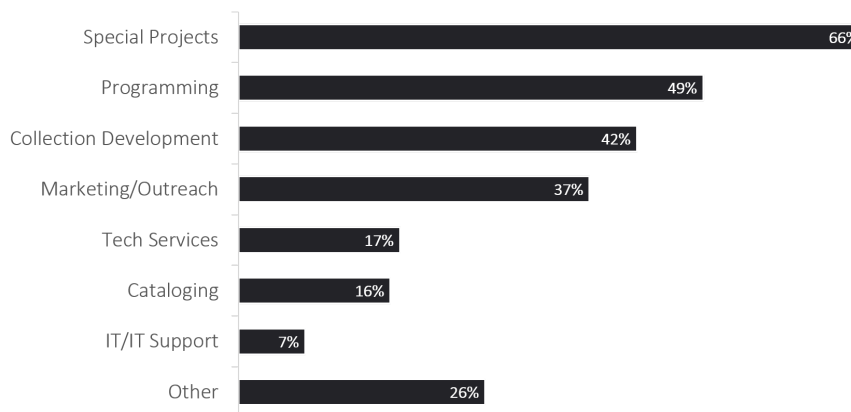
29% of library staff indicate that their library has a “preferred” desk location to work at within the library. When asked what made the desk preferred, answers varied but included

considerations like the location of the desk within the library (e.g. the desk closest to the main entrance), as well as the primary audience and/or function of the desk (e.g. preferring to work at the youth/children’s area desk or the reference desk). Desk preference was a subjective variable with no consistency for which desk was “preferred,” even when controlling for which library the staff member worked in.

Of note, staff who report usually working the desk with a colleague were less likely to report feeling unsafe or threatened while working the desk. 78% of staff who work the desk with a colleague indicate they feel unsafe, at most, a couple of times a year compared to 68% of staff who usually work the desk alone. This also relates to overall staff satisfaction whereby staff members who indicated they were usually working the desk with a colleague also were much more likely to report being “very satisfied” with their work position in comparison to staff who usually work the desk alone (42% v. 29%.)

Outside of desk time, staff are engaged in a variety of other tasks at their libraries, with special projects being the most common.

### Other Job Duties (Outside of Desk Time)





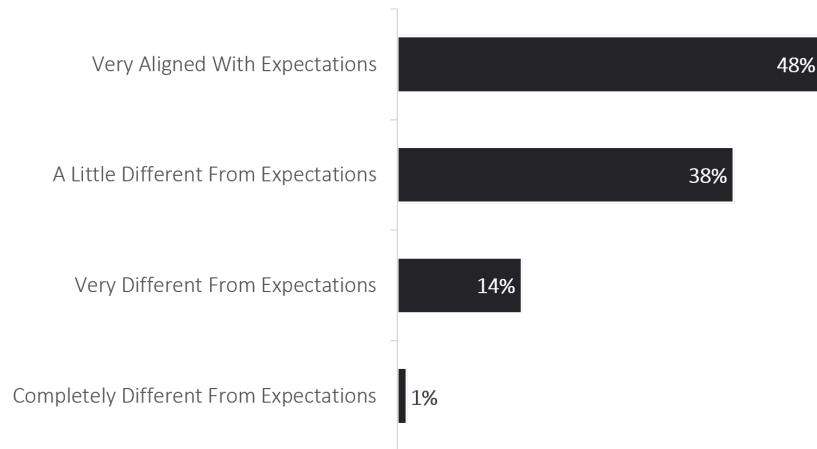


## Job Perception and Experiences

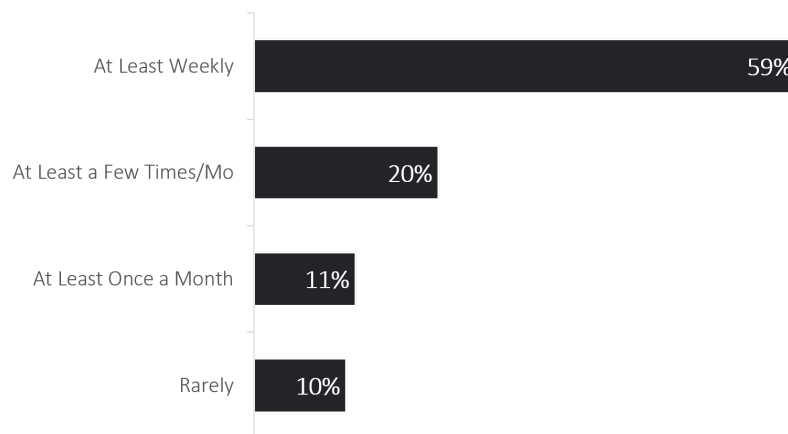
The following section details more subjective realities of staff's employment experiences, including security-related concerns, job expectations, and job satisfaction. At the most basic level, staff was asked to consider how much the reality of their job was similar/different to their expectations going

into the position. Over 85% of staff find the reality of their job to be mostly or fully aligned with their expectations going into the position based on the job description and training received. Staff in supervisory or leadership positions are most likely to indicate that the reality of their job is very different from their expectations (25%), while Library Clerks/Pages are least likely to feel this way (4%).

*Reality of Job Versus Expectations Going Into Position*



*Opportunities for Meaningful Patron Interactions*



In positive library culture indicators, staff were asked how often they had opportunities for meaningful patron interactions, defined as opportunities for things like getting complex or significant patron questions, having enjoyable patron interactions, and/or

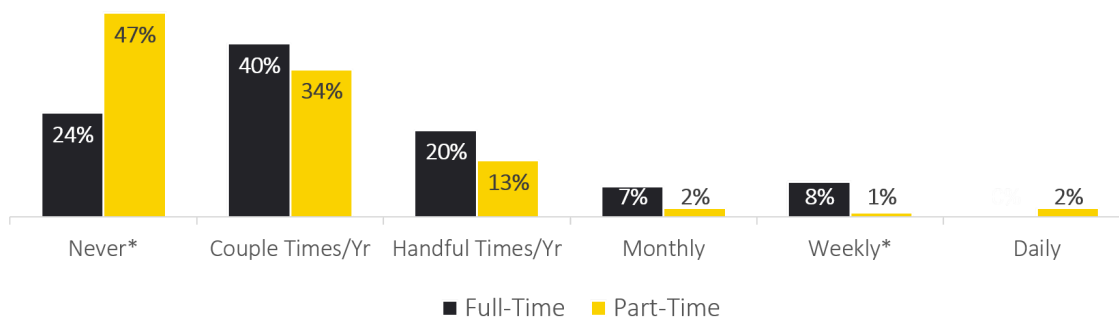
feeling accomplished when helping a patron. Almost 80% of staff indicate they experience opportunities for meaningful patron interactions. Part-time staff report having these on a more frequent basis, at least once a week, when compared to full-time staff (66% v. 53%). Working the desk regularly also greatly increased the likelihood of a staff member indicating they had opportunities for meaningful patron interactions; only 25% of staff who never worked the desk



indicated that they had meaningful interactions on a weekly basis compared to 74% of staff who work the desk. Finally, opportunities for meaningful patron interactions are highly correlated by job position within the library. Only 39% of library leaders indicated they experience meaningful patron interactions on a weekly basis versus 63% of all other staff.

While public libraries function as an open and welcoming community space for all, this can correlate with safety and security concerns, a top-of-mind topic in many mid-sized communities such as those that CLC member libraries serve. In many communities, public libraries function as de facto social service organizations for patrons. With that in mind, staff who work the desk were asked how frequently they felt unsafe or threatened. The majority of staff indicate they do *not* feel unsafe or threatened working the desk most of the time; 70% of staff indicate this happens, at most, a couple of times a year. Of interest, while part-time staff spend a greater percentage of their work time at the desk, they are more likely than full-time staff to indicate that they *never* feel unsafe or threatened when working the desk (47% v. 24%). Additionally, staff who regularly work weekends feel unsafe or threatened on a more frequent basis than staff who do not.

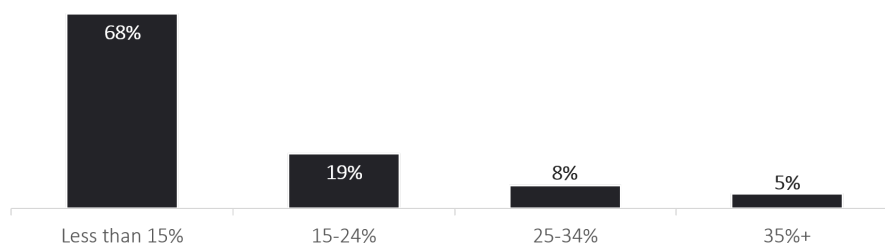
*Frequency of Feeling Unsafe or Threatened While Working Desk*



All staff, regardless of desk time, were asked what percentage of their time was spent on security-related concerns in the library.

Almost 70% said less than 15% was spent on such issues. 33 staff members indicated they spent at least 25% of their

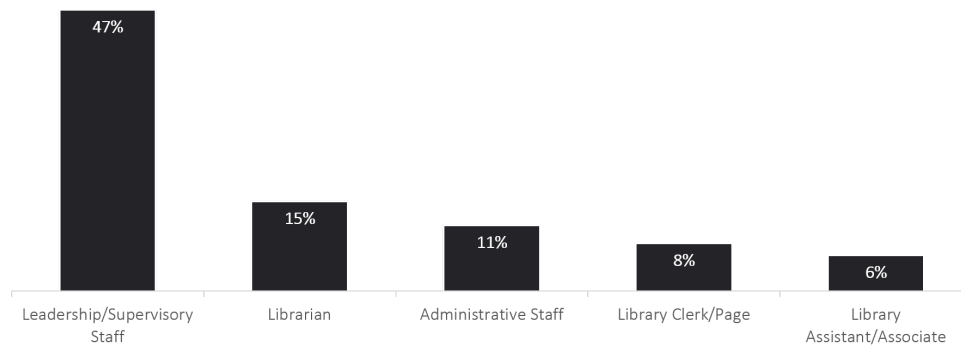
*% of Work Time Spent On Security-Related Issues*





work time dealing with security-related concerns; the majority of these staff members are supervisory or leadership staff. In sum, working the desk did not increase the amount of time that a staff member spends on security-related concerns and issues; rather, the library role was the biggest predictor of increasing the amount of time spent on security-related issues. Staff in leadership and supervisory roles are spending significantly more time on these issues than any

*% of Staff Spending 25%+ of Work Time on Security-Related Concerns*



other staff role. This finding points to unique support needs for these staff members who also might be being “burnt out” professionally by the demands of these roles, especially when paired with the

previous point that library leadership is much less likely to have regular opportunities for meaningful patron interactions in comparison to other library roles.

Staff were asked to rate how much they prefer to work with the public in their work role on a scale from 0 to 10 (regardless of how much they currently work with the public). Part-time staff rated themselves at an aggregate of 6.0, while full-time staff rated themselves at 5.3. Staff who work the desk reported preferring to work with the public much more than staff who reported they did not work the desk (6.4 v. 4.0). Referencing the security concerns outlined above, the more time spent on security concerns, the lower the staff’s self-reported preference for a primarily public-facing position. Staff who spend less than 25% of their work time on security-related issues rated themselves an average of 5.9 versus 4.3 for staff who spent more than 25% of their time on security concerns.

*Overall Staff Preference for Public-Facing Position*



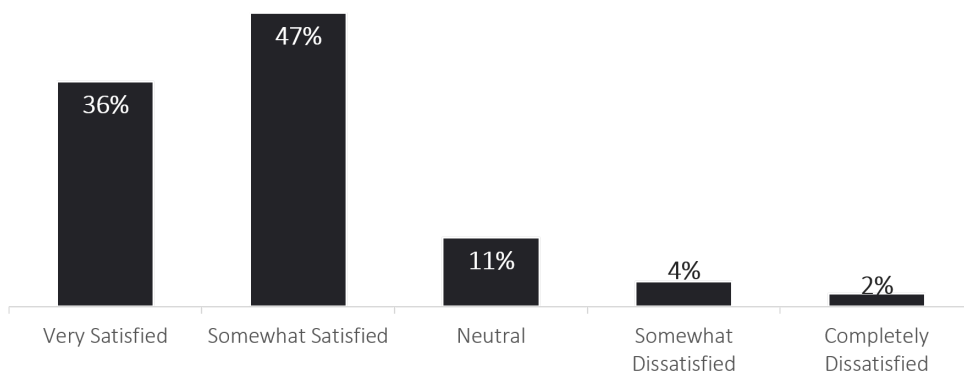


Staff who believe the reality of their job is very or completely different from their expectations were also much less likely to report preferring to work with the public (3.8 on a scale from 0-10 versus 5.9 for people who reported the job either fully or mostly aligned with their expectations). This also correlates to job satisfaction, where people who indicated some degree of satisfaction with their position were more likely to prefer working a job that is public-facing (5.9) versus people who indicated some degree of dissatisfaction (4.1).

83% of staff indicate some level of satisfaction with their position. Regardless of whether a person works the desk or not or is full- or part-time staff, the level of satisfaction remains the same. For staff who primarily work with adults and staff who primarily work with children, there are notable

differences in their job experiences - staff who work primarily with adults deal with more security concerns, have less frequent opportunities for meaningful patron interactions, are more likely to work

*Job Satisfaction*



the desk alone, and are more likely to work weekends. However, they are equally satisfied in their positions as staff members who work primarily with children.

Staff who indicated satisfaction with their job were more likely to report that they never felt threatened when they worked the desk. 18 staff members indicated they felt unsafe working the desk on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. This clearly impacted job satisfaction; only one of these staff members indicated they were “very satisfied” with their job.

### *Impact of Social Workers and Security Personnel*

Some libraries employ social workers and/or security personnel (note that two libraries work with student social workers through partnerships with social work schools). The nature of these positions means that these staff are ostensibly involved in the management of safety and



security-related concerns in the library, so consideration was given to whether having one or both of these roles on staff impacted overall staff experience in any way.

Of the participating CLC libraries included in this report, seven employ a social worker and/or security personnel, while three do not. Having a social worker and/or security personnel on staff impacted a number of variables analyzed in this report. Libraries with these specialized staff members on site had staff who felt safer at work, who indicated having more regular opportunities for meaningful patron interactions, and whose leadership and supervisory staff are less likely to be spending more than 25% of their work time on security-related concerns. The analysis did not show a greater value over having either a social worker or security personnel on staff; however, it is important to note that the sample size for this study is small and that there are likely other correlating variables that could also be impacting this finding (e.g. community indicators like crime rates and housing insecurity, as well as library variables such as staffing size and professional development training, etc.).

Library Pool	% of Staff Feel Unsafe Working Desk (Monthly, Weekly, or Daily)	% of ONLY LEADERSHIP Staff Spending 25%+ of Work Time on Security-Related Concerns	No/Limited Opportunities for Regular Meaningful Patron Interactions
<i>NO Social Worker or Security Personnel</i>	19%	100%	16%
<i>YES Social Worker and/or Security Personnel</i>	8%	37%	8%

With those caveats in mind, this finding highlights an interesting cost-benefit consideration for libraries to make when determining if hiring a social worker or security personnel is a worthwhile investment if the presence of these staff increases the sense of overall staff safety and decreases the amount of time leadership and supervisors spend on security-related concerns in the library.



## Key Takeaways

The data collected for this survey was rich and allowed for consideration of many different aspects of library staff's experiences working in a small city library context. Of note, a major theme for the CLC over the last two years has been the consideration of the social work-oriented aspects of modern librarianship. In 2021, the CLC embarked on an endeavor to provide "whole person librarianship" training to increase staff confidence in managing aspects of assisting library patrons with their physiological and psychosocial needs. A related component of this endeavor was the recognition that many of the libraries in the CLC are dealing with security and safety issues in the library. This background sets the stage for the broadest takeaway from this data which is: *What if strengthening staff is specifically about strengthening small city library leaders and supervisors?* This group spends much time assisting other library staff with putting on their proverbial oxygen masks at work; the data points to the idea that these efforts have been successful but have left library leaders and supervisors as a group in need of additional strengthening and support.

CLC library leaders and supervisors have been highly engaged in supporting their staff through these previous training opportunities. While the nature of the survey findings outlined in this report does not allow for the determination of cause-and-effect related to the previous whole person librarianship training's long-term impacts, it does raise the potential that staff is, indeed, feeling more confident navigating patrons' diversity of needs in the library and are feeling safer while doing so. The data from this survey indicates that the majority of staff feel safe while working the majority of the time and are not burnt out by patron-related safety and security concerns. The majority of staff who are dealing with security issues 25%+ of their work time are working in library leadership by a large margin.

In addition to spending a much greater portion of their work time on security concerns, library leaders are also the library roles most likely to view that the reality of their job is different from their original expectations of the role when compared to staff working in other library roles; 24% of library leaders indicated their position differed a lot from their expectations. Simultaneously, the survey results indicated that the more time a staff member spends on security concerns, the less likely they want a primarily public-facing position, pointing to the impact managing these types of issues has on a staff member's capacity to interface with the public. For all other staff, working the desk, working nights, working weekends, and other job variables one might assume could potentially make an employee less satisfied with their position do not appear to be contributing to employee dissatisfaction. In addition, most staff - outside of library leadership - feel safe at work almost all of the time. These findings highlight



the potential that the occasional safety and security issues that individual staff members face are being escalated to library leaders who, in turn, due to their supervisory duties, are facing a much greater volume of these types of issues than other roles. This idea is reinforced by the data around opportunities for meaningful patron interactions; library leaders are much less likely to report that they have meaningful patron interactions on a weekly basis (39% of library leaders v. 63% of all other staff). This is of concern through a lens of preventing burnout for people who are working in these types of roles. However, in stories of resilience, these issues are not leading to dissatisfaction with their work. Only one leader indicated they were dissatisfied with their job (3%), even though 24% of the pool said the job was very different from their expectations.

As noted at the end of the findings section, having a social worker and/or security personnel on staff decreases the amount of time that library leadership spends on security-related concerns. 100% of leadership and supervisory staff in CLC libraries without these roles on staff indicated they spend 25% of or more of their working time on security-related issues, while only 37% of leadership and supervisory staff do so in libraries with a social worker or security personnel. Obviously, the decision to hire a social worker or security personnel has many implications, budgetary included. Still, the data from this report shows a positive correlation between having a specialized staff member in this role (even if a social work student!) and staff having an increased sense of safety and opportunities for meaningful patron interactions.

#### Other Considerations:

- Staff who work the desk regularly with a colleague report feeling safer at work and more satisfied with their job position. While it is, understandably, not feasible for all libraries to be able to consistently staff their desks in this manner, this finding points to a potential change that could increase staff safety and satisfaction where possible.
- Staff who work weekends report feeling unsafe while working the desk more frequently than those who do not work weekends. Paired with the finding above, where staff capacity permits, prioritizing weekend staff being able to work the desk with a colleague could potentially create a greater sense of safety.
- Librarianship is often a very public-interfacing position. Staff members' job satisfaction and belief that their job position is in alignment with their expectations are both highly correlated to a staff member's self-reported preference for working in a position that skews public-facing. In other words, the more a person prefers a primarily public-facing position, the higher their job satisfaction is in the library and the greater the chance they feel the reality of their job is in alignment with their expectations. Continuing to foster



hiring, professional development, and work practices in the library that emphasizes this relationship between staff and the public is an important component of overall staff satisfaction.