Summary Report

Ontario Public Library Psychological Health and Safety Survey

OPLA Research and Evaluation Committee

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Introduction

Public libraries are widely recognized as organizations that promote inclusion, equitable access, and community wellbeing. These principles are embedded in their policies and public services. Increasingly, however, attention has turned toward whether these same values are reflected in the experiences of library employees themselves. As public libraries continue to respond to evolving community needs and changing service expectations, understanding the psychological safety and wellbeing of library workers has become an important organizational and sector-wide priority.

The Ontario Public Library Association (OPLA) Research and Evaluation Committee conducted a survey to assess psychological safety and wellbeing of Ontario public library workers across the province. The survey was developed in response to growing concerns about employee well-being and the challenges library staff face in an increasingly complex public service environment. A total of 1,236 employees from public libraries across Ontario participated in the survey.

The survey utilized the internationally recognized *Guarding Minds at Work* framework, which assesses workplace psychological health across 13 psychosocial factors that have been linked to employee wellbeing and organizational performance. These factors include:

1. Balance
2. Civility and Respect
3. Clear Leadership and Expectations
4. Engagement
5. Growth and Development
6. Involvement and Influence
7. Organizational Culture

8. Protection of Physical Safety
9. Psychological and Social Support
10. Psychological Competencies and Demands
11. Psychological Protection
12. Recognition and Reward
13. Workload Management

By examining employee perceptions across these areas, the survey provides valuable insight into both organizational strengths and areas requiring attention.

Overall, the findings reveal a nuanced picture of psychological safety within Ontario public libraries. Employees reported strong positive perceptions related to physical safety, psychological protection, workplace respect, and commitment to their work. At the same time, the survey identified persistent concerns regarding organizational culture, employee influence in decision-making, recognition, workplace stress, and burnout. The results also demonstrate important differences based on job category, length of service (tenure), and library system size, suggesting that psychological safety is not experienced uniformly across the sector.

This summary report highlights the most significant findings from the survey, identifies key strengths and weaknesses within Ontario public libraries as employers, and outlines implications for leaders seeking to strengthen workplace culture, employee wellbeing, and long-term organizational sustainability. As libraries continue to adapt to changing community expectations and service demands, fostering healthy workplaces will be critical to attracting, retaining, and supporting the workforce that delivers public library services across Ontario.

Key Findings

Overall State of Psychological Safety

The strongest-performing psychosocial factors were:

- Psychological Protection: 83% positive responses
- Protection of Physical Safety: 82% positive responses
- Engagement: 80% positive responses

The weakest-performing factors were:

- Organizational Culture: 47% positive responses
- Involvement and Influence: 57% positive responses
- Recognition and Reward: 58% positive responses

These results suggest that employees generally feel protected from harm and committed to their work, but are less likely to feel recognized, trusted, or included in organizational decision-making.

Most Positive Responses

Several individual measures received exceptionally high positive ratings:

- 93% know what is expected of them in their jobs.
- 89% are willing to give extra effort when needed.
- 84% have what they need to perform their jobs safely.
- 80% report that people from all backgrounds are treated fairly.
- 77% believe people treat one another with respect in their workplace.

Most Significant Areas of Concern

Several survey findings point to persistent organizational challenges:

- Only 30% feel they have a say in how organizational changes affecting them are managed, while 37% do not.
- Only 42% believe people in their organization are held accountable for their actions.
- Only 43% believe employees and management trust one another.
- Only 45% believe their employer helps employees cope with workplace stress.

The findings suggest that organizational culture issues, rather than traditional safety concerns, represent the greatest challenges to employee wellbeing.

Differences Across Employee Groups

Librarians and Managers

Librarians and managers consistently reported more challenging workplace experiences than many other staff groups.

Only 56% of librarians and 54% of managers felt their workload was reasonable, compared with 83% of clerks and 78% of circulation staff.

Support for workplace stress was also weaker among librarians. Only 35% agreed that their employer helps employees cope with workplace stress, while 37% expressed negative perceptions. Managers reported more favourable experiences, with 55% responding positively.

Burnout was concentrated among librarians, managers, and employees with longer tenure. These groups were most likely to report that work negatively affects their work-life balance and overall wellbeing.

Overall, the results indicate that greater professional responsibility may be accompanied by higher psychological demands and increased risk of burnout.

Long-Term Employees

One of the strongest trends in the survey was the decline in positive perceptions as tenure increased.

Positive perceptions of psychological competencies and demands declined from:

- 84% among employees with less than one year of service
- 54% among employees with more than 11 years of service.

Support for workplace stress also declined substantially, from 71% positive among employees with less than one year of service to 38% positive among employees with more than four years of service.

Recognition followed a similar trend:

- 73% of employees with less than one year of service felt recognized for good performance.

- Only 39% of employees with 11 or more years of service felt recognized.

These findings suggest that long-serving employees may be at greater risk of disengagement and dissatisfaction.

Large Library Systems

Employees in smaller libraries consistently reported more positive experiences than those in larger systems.

For example:

- Positive perceptions of growth opportunities declined from 82-83% in libraries serving fewer than 5,000 residents to 43% in libraries serving more than 250,000 residents.
- Positive perceptions of psychological competencies and demands fell from 86% in the smallest libraries to 52% in the largest.
- Positive perceptions of workload management declined from approximately 76-78% in smaller systems to 56% in the largest systems.
- Only 47% of respondents in the largest systems felt safe speaking up at work compared with 74% in smaller systems.

These findings suggest that greater organizational complexity may increase challenges in maintaining employee wellbeing and positive workplace experiences.

Organizational Strengths

Several positive themes emerged throughout the survey.

Strong Psychological and Physical Safety

Employees generally feel protected from bullying, harassment, discrimination, and physical harm. Over 80% of public library workers viewed their workplaces as psychologically and physically safe, while only 5% reported currently experiencing bullying.

High Levels of Employee Engagement

Employees remain strongly committed to library work. Almost 90% of respondents reported being willing to give extra effort when required, and over 70% felt they were part of a workplace community.

Clear Expectations and Supervisor Support

Employees generally understand their responsibilities and expectations. Over 90% indicated they know what is expected of them in their jobs, and 77% reported that their supervisors support them in performing their jobs successfully.

These strengths provide a strong foundation on which libraries can build future wellbeing initiatives.

Organizational Weaknesses

While the survey identified several strengths, it also highlighted recurring organizational weaknesses affecting employee wellbeing and psychological safety.

Organizational Culture and Trust

Organizational culture was the lowest-rated psychosocial factor in the survey, receiving only 47% positive responses. Notably, around 40% agreed that people are held accountable for their actions, and that employees and management trust one another. These findings indicate that employees often perceive gaps between organizational values and daily workplace experiences.

Limited Employee Voice and Influence

Perception of organizational change emerged as the most significant area of concern in the survey. Despite having considerable autonomy in their daily work, many public library workers reported limited influence over organizational changes that affect them. Only 53% felt encouraged to participate in decisions affecting their work and that their suggestions were considered.

Stress, Burnout, and Mental Health Support

Workplace stress was one of the most consistent concerns across demographic groups. Only 45% agreed their employer helps employees cope with workplace stress, and 50% believed employees with mental health concerns are adequately supported in the workplace.

Burnout levels were particularly concerning. In reaction to the statement, "*I feel burned out in my job*", 34% of respondents agreed, while 39% were neutral and 27% disagreed.

These findings suggest that employee wellbeing challenges are less related to physical or psychological safety concerns and more related to broader workplace and organizational factors.

Sustainability of Long-Term Careers

Perhaps the strongest trend across the entire survey was the decline in positive perceptions with tenure.

Employees with longer service consistently reported:

- Higher burnout
- Lower organizational trust
- Lower recognition
- Greater workload concerns
- Reduced confidence in workplace support systems

This pattern raises important questions about employee retention, professional development, and the long-term sustainability of careers within Ontario public libraries.

Conclusions and Implications

The survey reveals a sector characterized by strong employee commitment, generally safe workplaces, and positive perceptions of physical and psychological protection. Public library workers remain highly engaged with their work and committed to serving their communities.

However, the findings also highlight significant challenges related to organizational culture, recognition, employee influence, trust, and workplace stress support. The

strongest concerns were not related to physical safety but to everyday experiences of being heard, valued, recognized, and involved in decisions that affect work.

Particular attention should be given to librarians, managers, long-term employees, and staff working in larger library systems, all of whom reported lower perceptions of psychological safety and organizational support.

Priority Areas for Action

Based on the findings, Ontario public libraries should consider:

1. Increasing employee participation in organizational decision-making and change initiatives.
2. Improving recognition programs, particularly for long-serving employees.
3. Strengthening organizational trust, accountability, and transparency.
4. Expanding supports for stress management, mental health, and burnout prevention.
5. Developing targeted strategies for librarians, managers, and employees in larger systems.
6. Enhancing communication and opportunities for employee voice across all levels of the organization.

The survey demonstrates that Ontario public libraries have established strong foundations in safety and employee commitment. The greatest opportunities for improvement now lie in strengthening organizational culture, employee influence, recognition, and support for long-term wellbeing. Addressing these areas can help libraries improve retention, foster healthier workplace cultures, and enhance psychological safety across the sector.

This report was prepared by the OPLA Research and Evaluation Committee.

Learn more about the Public Library Psychological Health and Safety Survey.