ARTICLE

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With Passionate Purpose: How Public Library Outreach Staff Are Transforming the Library from a Building to a Service

ABSTRACT

This research study, part of the Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded Project LOCAL (Library Outreach as a Community Anchor in Learning, 2017–19), employed a nationwide survey of library staff to learn their motivations for engaging in outreach, the types of support library staff receive for this work, the challenges they face in serving the community outside library walls, and their future plans for outreach work. Survey analysis found that 100 percent of respondents believe libraries should be engaged in outreach. Furthermore, library staff expressed a variety of purposes for their outreach, including to promote and support learning for children and families and to inspire future engagement with the public library. For most respondents, outreach is highly valued by their library, though library support can differ in terms of staff time, funding, and materials. Outreach work, particularly with families and children in underserved communities, brings with it a variety of challenges that do not seem to deter most of the respondents; many indicated an intent to maintain or expand their outreach efforts. This research builds a picture of the passionate purpose underlying the commitment by library staff to meet communities where they live and thrive, while also making visible and validating the labor of these dedicated professionals as they transform the library from a building to a service.

KEYWORDS

public libraries, outreach as service, families and children, survey methodology, underserved communities

Public libraries can and often do play a crucial role in their communities by "providing access to information that helps people improve their individual, family, and community lives" (Scott 2011, 191). Despite serving as a trusted community resource and engaging in initiatives around learning and information access, libraries are not often recognized as fulfilling the crucial role of community anchor—a term that originated in the National Broadband Plan and has been prioritized by the field and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Hildreth 2013; Ball 2014), which can be described as an organization focusing on civic engagement, responding to community needs, supporting lifelong learning and digital inclusion, and "knitting community members together through common experiences and shared interests" (Hildreth 2013, 44). Given that libraries meet most of these characteristics (Garmer 2014),

research is needed to understand why libraries are not often recognized as community anchors.

It is possible this lack of recognition is due to a historic focus on the library's physical space, which limits the scope of service to those who take part in programs and services inside the library. However, many libraries have recognized that such a focus on physical space often excludes groups in their communities who face barriers to accessing the library. As a result, many libraries have moved their programs and services outside of the physical building and into community locations to reach and serve the entire community (Campana et al. 2022), typically referred to as outreach programs and services. This transformation of the public library from a physical space to a service that operates throughout the community may help the library to fulfill the role of community anchor, "knitting community members together" by more proactively responding to community needs and facilitating lifelong learning for the entire community regardless of location.

Though libraries and/or library staff invest time, organizational and personal resources, and funds in these programs and services, their outreach efforts are often hidden and become "invisible labor" (Clarke 2022) for the broader library and community because they are often not advertised or even included in the library events calendar. Research can pull back the curtain on this "invisible labor" (Clarke 2022), validate the importance of outreach programs and services, and help libraries gain recognition and acknowledgement for their crucial role in supporting their communities. The study described here contributes to uncovering some of this invisible labor by providing insight into the motivations for outreach work (specifically with families and children in underserved communities), as well as the logistical support provided for this work and the inherent challenges. These insights build a picture of the passionate purpose underlying libraries' outreach work.

Study Background

To provide insight into the different aspects of family outreach services offered by the public library, this study used survey data collected as part of a larger planning grant, Project LOCAL (Library Outreach as a Community Anchor in Learning, 2017–19), funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The planning grant employed focus groups, interviews, and a nationwide survey to understand the landscape of public library outreach with families and children in underserved communities (Campana, Mills, and Martin 2019; Campana et al. 2022). The planning grant illuminated current practices used by outreach library staff to reach and serve families where they are and revealed areas for further inquiry. Findings from the study data have been detailed in previous articles. Briefly, Campana et al. (2022) used findings from the focus groups and interviews to demonstrate that outreach library staff offer a variety of programs and services to reach many kinds of communities; in so doing, they are working to increase educational equity for these families amidst significant barriers. Campana, Mills, and Martin (2019) used data from all three methods to show that outreach staff employ a variety of strategies to gather data about their communities to inform their outreach work planning.

Literature Review

Recently, public libraries have been moving from a primary role of providing patrons with books and other resources to a community-engagement role in which they offer a variety of programs and services in addition to resources for their communities (Reid and Howard 2016). The Aspen Institute describes the public library as "a hub of civic engagement, fostering new relationships and

strengthening the human capital of the community." Further, "librarians are actively engaged in the community. They connect individuals to a vast array of local and national resources and … facilitate learning and creation for children and adults alike" (Garmer 2014, 10). The diverse range of programs and services offered by different public libraries includes interest areas such as literacy (Rea 2020), STEM learning (Baek 2013), physical activity (Lenstra 2017), health (Philbin et al. 2019), and engagement with nature (Lenstra and Campana 2020). In addition, libraries have begun to offer services intended to meet basic needs in their communities, including meal services (Lenstra and D'Arpa 2019), social work support (Philbin et al. 2019), and basic health services, such as health assessments and vaccination clinics (Philbin et al. 2019). Some of these programs and services evolved as libraries realized that portions of their communities do not have access to food, healthcare, or other basic services due to a variety of barriers (Lenstra and D'Arpa 2019).

Along with the recognition by libraries that many groups in their community face significant needs but often cannot access their resources and services, the library field has also embraced social justice as an important part of their work (Jaeger, Shilton, and Koepfler 2016). Because of this, many libraries have placed a strong emphasis on learning how to overcome some of the barriers faced by underserved groups. Moving programs and services outside of library walls into community locations where underserved communities live and work has emerged as one way to overcome some of the barriers faced by underserved communities when trying to access library programs and services (Campana et al. 2022).

Outreach

The various programs and services that librarians offer out in community locations can be broadly referred to as outreach programs and services. However, outreach can be defined in different ways by different library systems, in the absence of national outreach standards. Since this study looked specifically at outreach programs and services that are offered to families and children, outreach is herein defined as "any activity conducted outside the library walls, such as presenting a school assembly to promote the upcoming summer learning program or developing a partnership with the local Boys and Girls club to offer joint programs in their facilities" (Crist 2019; Velasquez 2019). Moreover, it is crucial to understand who offers these family-focused outreach programs, why they offer them, and what challenges they encounter in practice.

Library outreach throughout US history has embodied a fervent mission to defeat poverty and illiteracy in urban and impoverished areas at all costs (Wheeler 2021). And yet, an additional and persistent reality concerning outreach in underserved areas is that few library staff come from or reflect the demographics of the community—racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, linguistically, etc. (Rosa and Henke 2017). This can pose additional barriers between libraries and the communities they serve. To be effective, outreach— especially with families and children in underserved communities—requires a community-centered approach that works to bridge these divides between library staff and community members. Additional research can help shape this approach and build on a call to service so evident in the ways many library staff work to close gaps and increase access, as well as to learn from and with communities (Campana et al. 2022; Mills, Kociubuk, and Campana 2021).

Invisible labor

Implementing a community-centric approach can take significant time and effort as it involves building relationships with the community and community

organizations, securing locations, designing and planning outreach programs and services, managing logistics and transportation, and providing the outreach program and service (Mills, Campana, and Martin 2019). Few of these tasks are acknowledged, yet each may be integral to the success of community-centric outreach. This work constitutes the "invisible labor" of library staff— the "unrecognized or undervalued work" (Clarke 2022). Invisible labor has been noted and explored across many fields and aspects of life, including teaching (Lewis 2006), nursing (Allen 2014), and caregiving (Kaplan et al. 2020).

Hatton (2017) builds out the concept of invisible labor and identifies three mechanisms that can contribute to making work invisible: sociocultural, sociolegal, and sociospatial. Sociocultural refers to work being obscured and devalued due to cultural ideas related to gender, race, sexuality, ability, and more. Sociolegal refers to work that is hidden because it does not fit within the legal designations of employment. Finally, sociospatial refers to work made invisible because it is "physically segregated from the socially constructed 'workplace'" (Hatton 2017, 343). Hatton further breaks down the sociospatial mechanism into two categories: 1) work that is invisible because it is in the domestic sphere and 2) work that is invisible because it is done in nontraditional worksites, which include "segregated workplaces" like prisons, but also includes roles that do not have one specific worksite, like digital labor (Hatton 2017). It is likely that most library outreach work is invisible due to the sociospatial mechanism as it is physically segregated from the library building and occurs in a nontraditional worksite(s), such as a bookmobile or across many different community locations. Therefore, the field needs to embrace the idea of the library as a service rather than a building, which could lead to viewing the entire community as a "socially constructed workplace." This can ultimately help libraries adopt a stronger community-centric focus. To facilitate the acceptance of these ideas, research is needed to provide insight into outreach efforts, and the work that goes into them, to bring attention to this invisible labor.

Methods

The study described here begins to fill these gaps by using the Project LOCAL survey data to explore the following questions:
1. Why do library staff and their libraries offer outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities?
2. What types of support are libraries providing for their outreach staff?
3. What, if any, challenges do library staff face in offering outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities?
4. What, if any, future plans do library staff and their libraries have regarding their outreach work?

Participants

Participants were recruited through national listservs, including those associated with three American Library Association divisions—Public Library Association (PLA), Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), and Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL)—as well as through established online library communities such as Storytime Underground and state library listservs. As a result of these recruitment efforts, the survey gathered responses from participants across twenty-two states. The survey included demographic questions to ensure a diverse representation of libraries. These demographic questions provided insight into the type of geographic area (urban, suburban, and rural), the nature of the library (stand-alone versus multi-branch system), and the size of the populations (American Library

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Outreach Staff
are Transforming
the Library from a
Building to a Service,**
continued

Association 2011) served by each participant's library, and the type of location in which these participants conduct their outreach work.
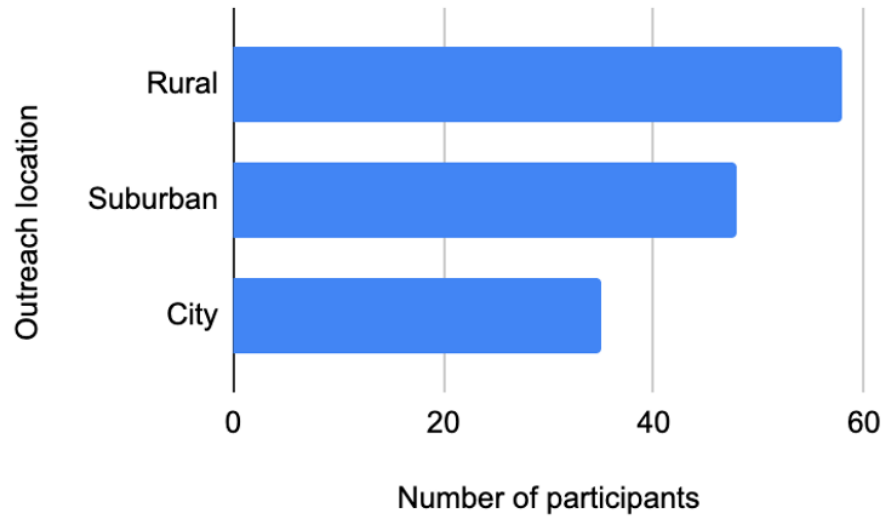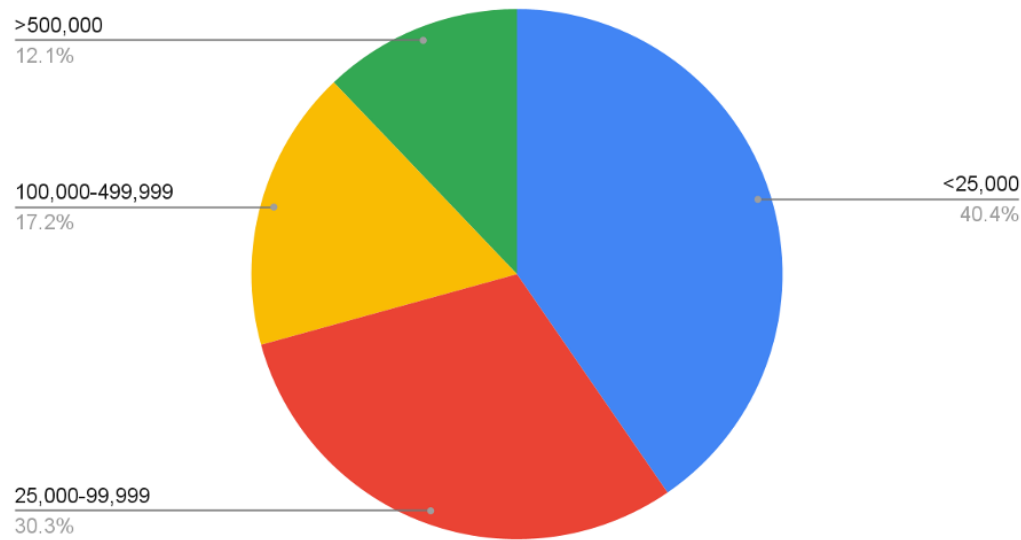

Figure 1. Geographic area

Figure 2. Population served

While the survey asked whether the respondents worked at a stand-alone or multi-branch library, this paper analyzes the data in aggregate, without specific attention to this distinction. Further research will be necessary to tease out the implications of this distinction, if any.

When asked about their job titles, respondents shared a wide variety that fall into two main categories. Examples include Children's Outreach Librarian, Children's Literacy Outreach Librarian, Teen Services Outreach Librarian, Library Outreach Manager, Head of Youth Services and Outreach, and Outreach Coordinator. Note the split between Librarian and Administrator in terms of "outreach" as a part of their job title (Figure 3).
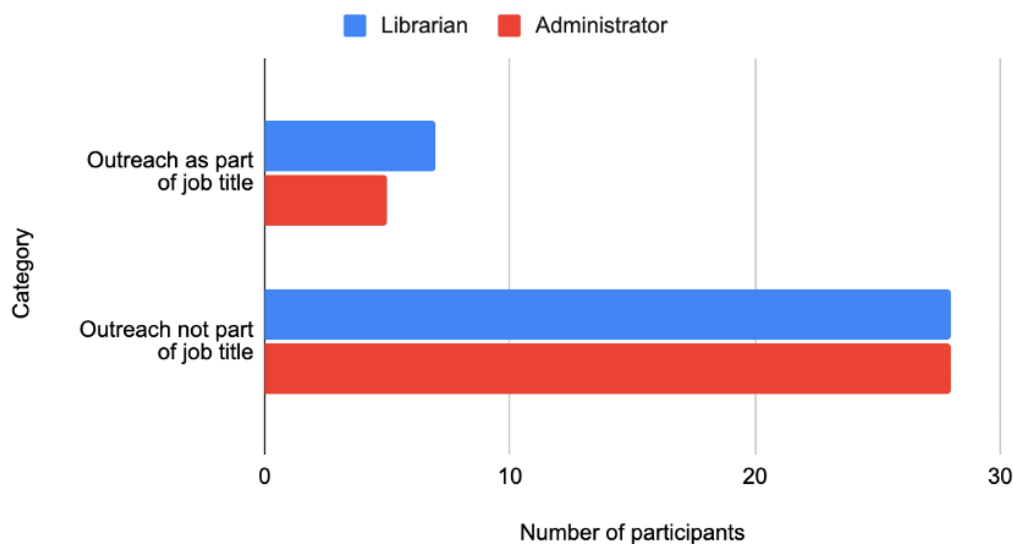
Figure 3. "Outreach" in job titles

Data collection and analysis

The survey's goal was to provide a broad, national understanding of current practices, challenges, and needs regarding library efforts to reach families in underserved communities—particularly those who do not come into the library to access its services. Because these libraries serve many communities, participants were asked to share their own definitions of underserved communities and to then identify relevant communities around their library (Campana et al. 2022).

Quantitative and qualitative survey questions explored a variety of areas related to outreach, with multiple-choice options drawn from the data gathered in the focus groups and interviews. In this way, the survey questions could ensure relevance to the work that library staff are already doing to reach underserved communities through outreach efforts. After undergoing several rounds of testing before dissemination, the survey was open for one month to maximize participation, resulting in a dataset of 115 complete responses. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the answers to the multiple-choice questions, looking for frequency and patterns to better understand the perceptions of library staff regarding the role and purpose of their own work and of their libraries' work out in the community to reach families and children where they are. Open-ended participant responses were analyzed using inductive and deductive coding to uncover broad themes and categories to construct a preliminary understanding—grounded in participant language—of the nature of the passionate purpose evident in this work. The responses to these open-ended questions were analyzed at the respondent level.

Results and Discussion

The survey findings will be presented by research question with short discussions to demonstrate how the data address each area of inquiry and to situate the data in the literature.

Research Question 1: Why do library staff and their libraries offer outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities?

Four survey questions were posed to elicit participants' perceptions of their libraries' motivations and the purpose of their work. Responses are presented within three areas of inquiry: Library's Role in Outreach; Library's Attitude Toward Outreach; and Library Staff's Role in Outreach.

The Library's Role in Outreach

Respondents were unanimous in indicating that libraries should be engaged in outreach work. Presented with a list of purposes for such work (Table 1), respondents were asked to select all options that apply. Four options were selected in 90 percent or more of responses:

- To promote and support learning for children and families
- To inspire future engagement with the public library
- To serve underserved communities where they are
- To increase awareness of library services and programs

Outreach purpose	% respondents
To promote and support learning for children and families (e.g., school readiness, early literacy, STEM, grade-level reading, lifelong learning, K–12 learning, etc.)	93
To inspire future engagement with the public library	92
To serve underserved communities where they are	90
To increase awareness of library services and programs	90
To bring underserved communities into library	84
To increase usage of digital services offered by the library	51
To provide library cards	43
Other (please specify)	12

Table 1. Outreach purpose

Interestingly, these four responses focus on both serving communities ("promoting and supporting learning for children and families" and "serving underserved communities where they are") and building connections between the community and the library ("[to] inspire future engagement with the public library" and "[to] increase awareness of library services and programs"). This is further evident in the short answers respondents were prompted to write in when they selected "Other." These short answers feature themes of connection, building and sustaining relationships in the community, helping to make library services more equitable and accessible, and offering opportunities for togetherness and learning through outreach programming. Terms such

as enriching, building, creating, connection, and thriving offer insight into the service-focused and active nature of the outreach work in which these participants engage in their communities. One quote in particular sums up many of the insights gained into respondents' outreach motivation: "To make meaningful connections [and inspire] the people of our community to succeed through ideas, interaction, and information."

Library's Attitude Toward Outreach

Respondents were asked to indicate what they perceived to be their library's attitude toward outreach, with available responses designed to sit on a continuum. Respondents could select only one statement (Table 2). In most cases, respondents indicated that their libraries prioritize outreach outright, that outreach is a part of the library's strategic plan, or that the library at least appreciates and supports the work involved in outreach efforts, even if outreach is not a priority. When taken together, these statements represent most of the responses to this question. However, it is interesting that no one option received an overwhelming majority. Perhaps this indicates that more advocacy work needs to be done to demonstrate to library administrators the importance of prioritizing, supporting, and appreciating outreach efforts.

Library's attitude toward outreach	% respondents
The administration makes outreach a priority and provides support for it	32
My outreach work is appreciated, and while the library does not make outreach a priority, they do provide support for it	24
It is a part of my library's strategic plan	23
My outreach work is appreciated, but the library does not make outreach a priority and does not provide support for it	8
The administration makes outreach a priority but does not provide support for it	6
Other (please specify)	6
The library does not support it	1

Table 2. Library's attitude toward outreach

Themes elicited from the responses written in by participants who selected Other further underscore the need for advocacy work, by communicating a desire to demonstrate impact through numbers and data, the frustrations

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Purpose: How
Public Library
Outreach Staff
are Transforming
the Library from a
Building to a Service,**
continued

resulting from a lack of data, and differences between the goals of a library's administration and those of the library staff, among others. Overall, this reveals the range of libraries' attitudes toward outreach, particularly that a lack of data might indicate a lack of need for outreach to administration. Moreover, administrations may not always have a clear or prioritized attitude toward outreach. One response elucidates the difference between library administration goals and the goals of outreach staff: "Time and patience are not an administrative strength, but they are a librarian's strength," which may indicate why in some cases libraries do not support outreach work.

The Library Staff's Role in Outreach

Finally, the survey elicited respondents' perceptions of their individual motivations and sense of purpose in outreach work. Given a list of statements, respondents were asked to select all those that reflect their views (Table 3).

Library staff motivations	% respondents
I personally believe it is a crucial library service	94
It is a part of my job description	63
It is a part of my library's strategic plan	52
My department makes it a priority	40
Other (please specify)	6

Table 3. Library staff motivations

Themes elicited from the responses written in by participants who selected Other presented two main themes of personal satisfaction and professional purpose. The first theme of personal satisfaction can be further unpacked to include subthemes of fulfillment, love, highlight, and fun. The second theme of professional purpose can be further analyzed to include subthemes of "raising our circulation," a desire to "reach as many kids as I can," and "It's my job and I think it's important." These inductively generated subthemes begin to reveal the depth contained in these broad themes of personal satisfaction and professional purpose, pointing to a kind of inner calling or motivation that drives this work–a "passionate purpose." Furthermore, when asked directly if outreach was a part of their job description, 17% of respondents indicated it was not, which suggests that they have personal motivations for engaging in this work. Subsequent data analysis will help to further construct this idea of passionate purpose in the work of library outreach staff to meet their communities where they are and provide access to crucial library services and programs.

Why do library staff and their libraries offer outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities? The data demonstrate that librarians have a deep level of passion and motivation that drives their efforts to reach families where they are in their communities. Library staff see the purpose of outreach as multifaceted, operating across a variety of areas such as learning, library engagement, service, library awareness, and usage of the brick and mortar building as well as the available online services. Library

staff view their role in outreach as essential and multifaceted as well. Beyond overwhelmingly indicating they do outreach because they personally believe it to be a crucial library service, respondents pointed out that outreach is related to more practical aspects of their role—the organizational and administrative nature of their work.

Furthermore, the survey question regarding the purpose of outreach also touches on library staff's view of their role in outreach work, that of providing and supporting children's and families' learning, inspiring engagement with the library, serving underserved communities where they are, and increasing awareness of the library's services and programs. These four frequently identified roles indicate a complexity to the work of outreach library staff, as they work to meet communities' needs and aspirations in a variety of ways and with a range of resources and information. They help explain why libraries play such a crucial role in their communities by providing access (Scott 2011), thereby serving as a community anchor. These roles also further demonstrate how and why libraries are actively engaging in the community (Garmer 2014). But this complex, multifaceted, passionately purposeful work cannot be achieved simply or quickly; it is important to understand how libraries support their outreach staff.

Research Question 2: What types of support are libraries providing for their outreach staff?

Six survey questions addressed the ways in which libraries support their staff logistically in their outreach work. Responses are presented within two areas of inquiry: Multifaceted Types of Library Support; and the Nature of Staffing, Time, and Funding Support.

Multifaceted Types of Library Support: Respondents were presented with a list of types of support and asked to select all that represent the support their libraries provide for outreach and outreach staff. Staff time was clearly the top choice among respondents. Materials and funding were also common selections. The least selected type of support was transportation, which is compelling, given the wide area often traveled by outreach staff to reach their communities. It is worth exploring further how the participants define these terms and whether they believe transportation should be provided by the library or whether they feel that is something they should be expected to provide. Particularly significant is the fact that 72 percent of respondents chose more than one type of support, with many choosing most or even all the responses. Only 10 percent selected a single option. This indicates that libraries are providing multifaceted support to their outreach library staff.

Write-in responses yielded interesting insights that build on these findings. One participant shared the following: "All of these [types of support] are provided to varying degrees. In the end, 90% of the time, it is me, my vehicle, and a bag of books/puppets/games. Outreach doesn't have to be elaborate, but it does have to be fun. I bring the fun." However, in other cases, library staff need more support; another participant shared, "I am expected to do outreach within the constraints of staff and budget."

The Nature of Support Types: To understand more about how time is allotted for outreach efforts, the survey asked participants what percentage of their time is spent on outreach monthly. Respondents could select only one option. The majority of respondents (64 percent) said they spend zero to 25 percent of their time on outreach monthly, indicating that outreach is not all that these participants do each day to serve their communities. Therefore, the work they do to design and deliver their outreach programs and services sits alongside their other responsibilities, which speaks again to their passionate purpose.

Twenty percent of participants indicated spending up to half of their time on outreach, and just under 10 percent say they spend 75 to 100 percent of their time on outreach. To understand more about the staffing situation at these libraries, the survey asked if a participant's library has staff (full-time and/or part-time) dedicated solely to outreach. Forty percent of respondents selected Yes, and 60 percent selected No. To put this data into context, while only 40 percent of library staff reported having dedicated outreach staff, most respondents indicated that outreach is part of their job description and that they spend up to 25 percent of their time on outreach. Thus, for respondents whose job expectations include outreach work but who are not dedicated outreach staff, they must balance their outreach efforts with many other responsibilities in the library.

To further understand the funding situation at libraries with dedicated outreach staff, the survey asked about funding sources for these positions. Respondents were asked to select all options that apply (Table 4). Respondents unanimously indicated that their libraries' own budget funds these positions. Using the library operating budget—a more consistent, permanent source of funding—to fund these efforts speaks to the relative permanence of outreach in the library's service strategy. At the same time, because respondents could select "all that apply," these responses indicate that even if their library does fund outreach positions, additional support often comes from Friends of the Library, foundations, and other sources. This perhaps suggests that even when the library invests in the salaries for outreach library staff, they often need additional resources to make outreach programming viable.

Funding for dedicated outreach	% respondents
Existing library budget	100
Friends of the library	11
Grant funds	9
Other (short answer)	9
Foundation	4

Table 4. Funding for dedicated outreach

What types of support are libraries providing for their outreach staff? The data demonstrate that public library outreach staff receive a variety of support, particularly staff time, materials, funding, and transportation. And while 40 percent of the participants report having dedicated outreach staff at their library, there clearly are many other duties outside of outreach that are expected of most of the respondents. Thus, library staff whose positions are not exclusively dedicated to outreach, are balancing their outreach work with many other responsibilities. Given that the process of outreach work can take time (Mills, Campana, and Martin 2019), this balancing act should be explored further to better understand the various demands on library staff doing outreach, and to guide administrators in how to better support outreach efforts and help library staff achieve a balance across responsibilities. As these efforts often sit alongside existing work responsibilities and occur outside the

building, they fit with Hatton's (2017) characterization of sociospatial invisible labor. Though the creativity and motivations of library staff are key, outreach efforts cannot exist nor be sustained without the multifaceted support of the library. As explained by Clarke (2022), staffing, funding, and materials are components of the invisible work behind successfully facilitating community-based outreach, and yet they can too often be in short supply. The passionate purpose of outreach service therefore embodies balancing outreach with other responsibilities and taking advantage of library support as well as drawing on intrinsic motivation.

Research Question 3: What, if any, challenges do library staff face in offering outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities?

One survey question elicited the difficulties and obstacles library staff may encounter in their efforts to serve families and children in underserved communities. Given a list of challenges to outreach work, respondents were asked to select all that apply (Table 5).

Staffing, scheduling, and fiscal limitations received the most responses, which interestingly reflects the types of support respondents felt their libraries provide. This could be due to several reasons: 1) staff encounter these challenges outside the library during outreach efforts, 2) these challenges may be faced by respondents whose libraries are not offering outreach support, and 3) the library support is not matching the level needed by these respondents in their day-to-day work. Thus, the challenges persist despite the presence of library support. Future research might explore the extent and depth of these needs and challenges and the degree to which respondents' challenges are met by the types of support offered by their library. Importantly, 56 percent of respondents chose three or more challenges—with some selecting all six options—indicating that the challenges to outreach work are complex and numerous. Additional challenges include language barriers, transportation, and safety, which each warrant further research to unpack the nature and influence of these challenges on outreach work.

Write-in answers reveal various broad themes across these challenges. Of particular interest were the entwined challenges of time and staffing, as expressed through these quotes: "[I'm] unable to get it all done in a part-time position," and "I'm the only person that works through the week."

Participants also discussed funding and transportation, saying "We would always like to do more if we had more money," "I am limited by the type of outreach vehicle we own and feel an updated Bookmobile would be more suited to our needs," and "As a non-driver, I have limited ability to carry supplies (like boxes of books) to outreach locations."

New challenges surfaced in these open-ended responses as well, including perceived partnership difficulties and a lack of community interest, as expressed in these quotes: "there was a lack of interest by parents," "personalities and administration at different school systems [can pose challenges]," and "We go to their homes in many cases and still can't get a consistent attendance." These comments from library staff about the challenges they experience while providing outreach indicate both a desire and a passion to serve young children and families in their communities and an attentiveness to what is needed to do outreach well.

What, if any, challenges do library staff face in offering outreach programs and services for families and children in underserved communities? The data demonstrate that public library outreach staff face a variety of challenges, particularly funding, staffing, and time, as evidenced in this quote: "Most

Outreach challenges	% respondents
Staffing	86
Scheduling	71
Fiscal limitations	50
Language barriers	27
Transportation	24
Safety	7
I haven't faced any challenges	4

Table 5. Outreach challenges

community locations either want us first thing in the morning or in the evening after work hours. I do not have enough staff to flex those hours and it is challenging to schedule at both ends of the day." One participant responded that, despite the relevance of all the multiple-choice options for doing outreach, they also faced "limited staff and limited budget," which was "placing an emotional and physical strain" on them as a director. This indicates that time is impacted by an insufficient number of staff to cover work inside the library while also sending staff out to do outreach, which in turn is impacted by funding. In this way, the data help to pull back the curtain and expose two of Clarke's (2022) components of invisible work—funding and staffing—as potent challenges faced by outreach library staff.

While personal motivation is profoundly present in responses that depict how outreach library staff persist amidst challenges, this work is not easy and is often constrained. One participant did share a solution to handling some of the challenges they faced in doing their work amidst these odds: "We used to have massive barriers to doing outreach but recently [our library system] has gone back to allowing librarians to reach out. If our local managers are good, we are allowed flexibility in our scheduling and staffing to get out and deliver services. I'm lucky that I have hugely supportive managers." This response suggests that flexibility, recognition, and perhaps even autonomy provided by their managers enable library staff to move beyond and even resolve some of the challenges they had been facing prior to that flexibility and autonomy. This is an area to consider for future research and to share with library organizations as part of their approach when managing outreach staff.

These complex, complicated challenges—often entwined and interdependent—are indeed real and can impact library staff's capabilities to reach beyond their walls and meet community members where they are. Despite the challenges, optimism seems to persist among these respondents. The data further enrich our understanding of this passionate purpose to include intrinsic motivation, balance, and resilience in the face of challenges, as well as a certain creativity despite difficulties.

Research Question 4: What, if any, future plans do library staff and their libraries have regarding their outreach work?

Three survey questions addressed this research question and enabled participants to reflect and share their thoughts on the prospects of their outreach work with respect to their own professional practice, as well as their library's strategic intentions. The responses are presented within two areas of inquiry: Participants' Future Plans and Libraries' Future Plans. In both areas, respondents could only select one answer from the lists (Tables 6 and 7).

Participants' Future Plans: Most participants indicated they are expanding their outreach work, followed by fewer than half who say they are keeping their outreach work the same, and a tiny number indicating that they are reducing their outreach work. No one indicated that they are eliminating their outreach work. Clearly for this respondent group, outreach is a priority as part of their library services, and most are doing their best to continue the work they have been doing in their communities. Future research might explore how these individual plans intersect with the libraries' strategic plans regarding the future of outreach to uncover any divergences and to understand what causes them.

Participants' future plans	% respondents
I am expanding my outreach work	56.5
I am keeping my outreach work the same	41.7
I am reducing my outreach work	1.7
I am eliminating my outreach work	0

Table 6. Participant' future plans

Libraries' Future Plans: Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that they are planning to keep, and expand, their outreach work, even amidst the challenges listed above. Once again, this drive to persist underscores the passionate purpose behind the work these outreach library staff do.

Intriguingly, the write-in responses resurfaced many of the challenges presented above in research question 3, as evidenced by quotes such as the following: "My department is interested in increasing our outreach as may be possible within the limits of our library's staffing" and "Expanding the number of places we go but reducing the frequency. So it looks like we are doing more, but really we are reducing quality and impact for the sake of stats." A prominent theme involved a lack of management vision and a change in priorities, as evidenced by quotes such as these: "Unknown at this time—at the local level outreach is primarily initiated and sustained by individual librarians. The management team does not have a process, approach, or expectation," and "I don't know what [our library system] has planned but my hope is that we will continue to be allowed to reach out to our community in a powerful way. If management changes, we could all find ourselves back in a chair trapped behind a desk again. So far so good." These responses paint a picture of uncertainty around continued library support; a deep recognition of the challenges present in this work; and a persistent drive to get out from behind the desk, go outside the library, and serve the community no matter the barriers.

**With Passionate
Purpose: How
Public Library
Outreach Staff
are Transforming
the Library from a
Building to a Service,**
continued

Libraries' future plans	% respondents
We are expanding our outreach work	53
We are keeping our outreach work at the same level	30
Other (please specify)	17
We are reducing our outreach work	0
We are eliminating our outreach work	0

Table 7. Libraries' future plans

Programs and locations are clearly areas in which libraries are looking to expand in their outreach, with the number of partners not far behind (Table 8). Staffing may continue to be an issue, given current circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, even amidst library plans to expand outreach.

Libraries' outreach expansions	% respondents
Number of programs	43
Number of locations	43
Number of partners	35
Number of staff	16
Other (please specify)	4

Table 8. Libraries' outreach expansions

Write-in responses offer some insights into how libraries are planning to expand their programs and locations to meet perceived needs, as evidenced by the following quotes: "We are exploring other avenues of outreach, including developing a roving collection that could house a Wi-Fi hotspot to provide ongoing internet access in vulnerable neighborhoods" and "I am always looking to achieve the greatest impact though so if we can adjust times or places or locations and reach more patrons, I am willing to do the work to increase overall outreach work." These answers demonstrate creativity and flexibility in the ways in which respondents work to sustain and extend their outreach in the community.

What, if any, future plans do library staff and their libraries have regarding their outreach work? The data demonstrate that most of the public library outreach staff are planning to expand or sustain their current outreach efforts, which is a positive finding in terms of the future of this work. To enable this

sustainability, libraries offer different types of support, which in many ways mirror the staffing type of support already offered by many libraries. Moreover, the respondents seem hopeful about the sustainability of their outreach work in some form, to continue to meet their communities where they are and to work to be recognized as fulfilling the crucial role of community anchor (Hildreth 2013). Despite the gap between provided support and persistent challenges, library staff show a passionate purpose in seeking new program ideas, locations, and potential partners to enrich their outreach approach. However, it is important to keep in mind that the challenges uncovered by this survey may persist if libraries expand their outreach programs, locations, partners, and staff, without a consideration by the administration of the accompanying stresses those types of expansions can place on existing staff, time, and funding, as well as on transportation and materials. Future research should explore these intersections to develop research-based recommendations for addressing the challenges of outreach while still seeking to sustain and expand outreach programs and services.

Limitations

This study's survey received a rather small response rate, perhaps due to competing surveys being offered at the same time, as well as the busy lives of these professionals. This initial snapshot still offers a robust set of insights on which future work can be based to contribute to a fuller portrait of public library outreach with families and children in underserved communities.

To keep the length and complexity of the survey manageable for these busy library professionals, some survey questions remained rather broad, including the questions related to types of support, challenges, and future plans. More targeted surveys, which would enable shorter but deeper protocols, can work to provide additional information in these areas.

This survey was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; future research is needed to understand how the landscape of outreach has changed due to this global event.

This study did not seek to understand how the various challenges faced by outreach staff may have impacted their outreach programs and services; this presents an excellent area for future research.

Finally, additional research may provide further insight into how libraries can continue to increase their wider recognition as a community institution through the work they do to understand their communities better and serve them where they are.

Conclusion

This study provided a broad understanding of how and why public library staff offer outreach programs and services to serve families in underserved communities, particularly those who do not or cannot come into the library. Drawing on the data from all four research questions, it is clear that these professionals possess a multifaceted, passionate purpose—one that encompasses hope, balance, support, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and persistence, evidenced in how they offer outreach programs in the community. Returning to the survey question that asked whether the library should be engaged in outreach, 100% of respondents responded Yes, identifying the reasons of addressing family learning, increasing awareness of the library, inspiring future engagement with the library, and meeting the community where they are, among others. It is the recommendation of the researchers that the field consider the invisible labor undertaken by outreach staff to meet various challenges and explore ways to increase support to help them

overcome those challenges. Furthermore, recognizing community spaces and bookmobiles as part of the accepted library "workplace" should help to address the sociospatial mechanism that contributes to the invisibility of outreach labor, and thereby help outreach work become more visible and valued. By combining sources of funding, offering flexibility and autonomy to staff members, encouraging creative problem solving, and enabling staff to increase the time they can spend on outreach, this area of library service can become more visible and prioritized and, in so doing, increase in reach and richness. Partnering with well-established organizations such as the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services (ABOS) offers a way for practitioners to raise the visibility of this important work through inter-library conversations and cooperation. As libraries transition their programs and services to community-based locations, they are working to shift the emphasis away from the physical space (Campana et al. 2022), and toward meeting communities where they are, by engaging in sociospatial invisible labor that deserves recognition and resources to succeed. The field therefore must be dedicated to fostering and sustaining the passionate purpose of their outreach library staff in their work to strengthen communities through the services of the library, not just the building of the library.

Acknowledgements

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