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“You Can't Self-Care Your Way out of a Broken System”: the 2022 Urban Libraries Trauma Forum

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“You Can't Self-Care Your Way out of a Broken System”: the 2022 Urban Libraries Trauma Forum

The Urban Libraries Trauma Study (ULTS) conducted by Urban Librarians Unite (ULU) examines trauma that urban public library workers experience in the workforce through their work with the public and interlibrary relationships. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and a trauma forum, this paper discusses the problem of trauma in the library. It demonstrates a grounded way to engage library staff in research and change. Finally, this paper concludes with ideas proposed by the forum participants to begin addressing trauma in the library workplace and provide areas to look to going forward.

Keywords: trauma; libraries; public libraries; staff; vulnerability; design

Introduction

To start, a trigger warning. This article is about trauma. So please take your time reading, take breaks, dance it out, drink some water, and remember - if you have experienced trauma in your workplace, you are not alone.

Most people have experienced trauma, but it can be hard to name or define since trauma is a messy mix of nervous systems, emotions, sensations, and feelings, making it hard to pin down. So what is trauma? Trauma is an emotional response to an event that shocks the nervous system. It can have lasting, adverse effects on mental, physical, and emotional health along with social and/or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA, n.d.). Trauma has no boundaries on what intersection of
identities and individuals it affects, and it is a common human experience. But, what may seem small to one person, maybe something larger to another. While commonalities exist in trauma, it is important to acknowledge differences experienced by people with different resiliency factors, identities, privileges, and lived experiences, which all affect how trauma is processed (Van der Kolk, 2014).

While there is currently no complete understanding of the scope of trauma experienced while working at a public library, Urban Librarians Unite (ULU) set out to investigate trauma in the library and start to work toward addressing this issue. The guiding question for the Urban Library Trauma Study (ULTS) was how libraries can create better workplaces with less trauma that impacts library staff. For years the library profession has been accepting things, thinking library workers needed to earn their stripes (Ettarh, 2018) or that they were alone in their struggles. You are not alone. This study and resulting forum bring to light just how prevalent this problem is and provides hope that there are library workers who want to change the profession and start to create solutions.

This study is grounded in library work and was born from library workers’ experiences of trauma. While the forum and the solutions created were the end goal for ULTS, it took many steps and voices to get there. First, ULU researched library workers' trauma and traumatic experiences through a literature review, survey, and focus group. The literature review revealed the prevalence of trauma through news stories. And the online survey, where individuals shared their experiences and stories with ULU, only further confirmed that library staff is experiencing trauma in their workplace. The survey revealed that 68.5% of participants had experienced violent or aggressive behavior at their library, and 22% had experienced it from their colleagues (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022).

Following the survey, ULU conducted online focus groups, further digging into the lived experience of trauma that library workers face. The survey, focus groups, readings, and discussions then culminated in a three-day forum hosted in March of 2022 in Brooklyn, NY. This forum brought together diverse library workers to discuss, collaborate, and think of solutions to this extensive, systemic issue.

Trauma experienced in the library workplace results from many systemic issues and histories of public libraries. It also is an issue that affects people differently based on location, work culture, and their particular intersection of identity (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022). The solutions discussed later in this text do not claim to fix the whole issue. Still, they are a start to address trauma in public libraries and create actionable solutions for the future.

Pushing trauma to the forefront of discussion in public libraries disrupts the idea, held by many who do not work in libraries, that libraries are just quiet places for books and introspection. This
lack of acknowledgment by the community that library staff serves has carried over to the research and teaching of librarianship, ignoring (willfully or otherwise) the reality of working for public libraries. Libraries are believed to be beyond reproach because they are a public utility with library workers as a sort of "superhero."

However, many times the things that make librarianship great - open spaces and our social infrastructure support- are also the same things that leave library workers vulnerable. Even more intensely, this vulnerability was laid bare to the library profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The problems have always been there but are more noticeable than ever. And as one group wisely said during the forum, "You can’t self-care your way out of a broken system." So why do we keep trying and putting the onus on the individual rather than looking at the system?

**Literature Review**

While the library profession is beginning to discuss trauma in libraries, it is still a relatively new topic in the scholarship. It has not materialized as profoundly as in other fields such as healthcare, education, and social work. For the literature review, ULU had to pull from what was available in library scholarship along with these other parallel fields. The research looked for items in three categories - news articles, sociological/social science articles, and police/criminology. These texts helped to create a loose history, provide evidence of trauma in the library, and look deeper into how people interact.

Additionally, many of the resources used were items that could be easily obtained by a public library worker, limiting the number of texts that exist behind paywalls. The entire literature review can also be read and accessed easily by public library workers in the future if they wish to read some more work independently. Below is an abbreviated literature review. To see the full document, please check out the full trauma report.

**Themes**

The central theme that ULU found in the literature confirmed that there is a problem in libraries - library staff are experiencing trauma through library work. The ULTS found many instances of traumatic events at the library in the media while conducting the literature review in 2021. And instances have been only ramping up with the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and overwhelming numbers of challenges on library materials and policies (ABC7, 2020; Albrecht, 2019; amNY, 2010; Bandler, 2020; Bell, 2021; Boyer, 2019; Braun, 2019; Clark, 2019; Cullen & Hayes, 2012; deGrandpre & Wang, 2017; Enea, 2019; Hallquist, 2018; Mele, 2016; Reuters, 2021; San Felice, 2019; Saulny & Cullotta, 2009; Skipworth, 2020; Staff, 2018; Web Staff, 2018).

Additionally, examples of trauma occurring in the library can easily be found in the media. However, there are still limited attempts to address this trauma and the attempts that exist focus
on self-care and mindfulness. While these attempts should not be discounted, they fail to acknowledge and challenge the systemic issues of trauma in the library, instead placing the responsibility squarely on the already overwhelmed individual. More libraries have been employing and adopting trauma-informed librarianship practices, but this focuses outward on the community and community trauma and does not turn inward on helping, supporting, and reducing traumatic experiences of library workers.

With the continual focus on the service population to the detriment of employees, unsafe work environments appear to be evolving into the norm. While a safe place to work is a right, library staff are not given protections in the workplace (Ettarh, 2018; Wilkins Jordan, 2014). And on top of these unsafe work environments rests societal problems - racism, classism, violence, poverty, misogyny, and more. These societal problems are now part of the library landscape. They need to be acknowledged since they are coming into the library and causing issues for community members and library workers.

As these issues come into the library, besides directly experiencing trauma, library workers are also experiencing secondary traumatic stress. Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is “...the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another” (Peterson, 2018). STS may also be called secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma. It is also recognized and discussed in some fields as an occupational hazard (McGibbon et al., 2010; Peterson, 2018; Sloan et al., 2019). However, this discussion is new in librarianship, with many things still needing to be researched addressing how STS appears in the library space (Lindén et al., 2018).

Beyond this, more research should be conducted regarding all types of trauma in libraries, specifically focusing on what library workers experience. So far, there have been no real quantitative studies on the topic. And while studies and articles acknowledge the existence of trauma in the library workforce, there have not been any target attempts to measure the effects of traumatic experiences - either long-term or in the immediate aftermath.

While not directly part of the literature review, an additional source of information for the forum participants was the surveys and focus groups conducted earlier in the study, which helped to help organize and focus the forum (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022).
Figure 1. This word cloud is created from the ULU survey. The question asked participants to share a traumatic library workplace experience. From the *Urban library trauma study: Final report* (2022).

**Trauma Cycle**

Additionally, following the focus groups and survey, Lauren Comito, the executive director of ULU, used information gathered to create a model of the cycle of library trauma.

![Trauma Cycle Diagram](image)

Figure 2. From the (Comito & Zabriskie, 2022)
The cycle is split into three parts. First, an outside stressor occurs. The stressor can vary, but common examples are assault, sexual harassment, abuse, violence, bullying, and more. After the stressor has occurred, the individual is impacted by the response (or lack thereof) from their community which can include coworkers, supervisors, professional community, and more. Suppose the response is negative. In that case, the individual moves into internalization, where workers may feel something is wrong with them and hold onto the stress/trauma experienced. If this internalization is not disrupted, the individual is at a lower capacity to handle their subsequent interaction with an outside stressor. And round and around it goes.

However, if the cycle is disrupted at any point - if a coworker responds well or the stressor is never allowed to occur - the worker may break out of this cycle. Please check ULU's blog post for more information about the trauma cycle.

Methods
The Urban Libraries Trauma Study (ULTS) is grounded in library work. For the study, a diverse group of urban library workers of various races, identities, abilities, jobs, and locations participated throughout the project and were specifically selected to participate in the culminating forum. Not every participant in the forum had a Master’s in Library Science (MLS). Some people worked in various positions in the library - security, support staff, frontline workers, middle management, and even directors. As previously stated, this work was done for library workers by library workers, and this thinking and grounded methodology permeates the project.

While the forum held in March of 2022 was the culmination of the project, leading up to the forum, Urban Libraries Unite (ULU) conducted a survey and focus groups to gather data for the forum participants to use. This data gathering highlighted problems, shared commonalities, and helped lay the groundwork for forum participants by allowing them to see others' experiences beyond their own and the more significant, systemic issue at hand. Please review the full report for more information and data from the survey and focus groups.

Trauma-informed care and thinking also helped create guiding principles for this project. The University of Buffalo Center for Social Research writes, “Trauma-Informed Care understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.” As such, the whole process was led gently, with kindness, and understanding that participants were coming to the forum with different capabilities, capacities, resiliency factors, and trauma experiences.

When forum participants arrived, they were given tools for the conference and for themselves, like masks, fidgets, candy, and more, to support participants' needs. Lodging, travel, and food were also all covered by ULU, with snacks and drinks provided throughout the day. ULU made
great efforts to make sure that individuals' basic needs were met so participants could feel safe and cared for, allowing them to focus on the intense work ahead. The ULTS made great efforts to decolonize research practices where information is extracted from the participants, through this caring and ensuring that the work ultimately serves the community that this study focuses on - library workers (Smith, 2012).

The forum used design epistemology to address and find solutions for the “wicked problem” of trauma in librarianship (Clarke, 2018). And the design thinking was rooted specifically in participatory design, using design thinking as a problem-solving methodology, grounded in library workers' work, lived experiences, and creating solutions around the needs of library workers (Elizarova & Dowd, 2017). The design thinking process was composed of five parts: understand, define, ideate, prototype & test, and implement.

**Understand**
To create a shared understanding for the forum, participants were given a packet of readings from the literature review and information from the survey and focus groups to read and think about. These readings helped to create a shared body of knowledge beyond the embodied knowledge and experience of trauma that many of the participants brought with them. It also allowed participants to see how others were talking about the topic (or not).

At the forum's start when participants were asked to consider the following questions:
- What are the problems introduced?
- What are the needs recognized?
- What was missing?

**Define**
One of the first activities at the forum was to define the problem of trauma in libraries. ULU asked participants to do an iceberg model exercise to determine library workers' difficulties. This activity provides a way to look holistically at a problem. Starting with an event and then looking at the causes, underlying structures, and mental models that allowed an event to occur.

**Ideate**
During ideation, ULU asked participants to start coming up with ideas around the issue of trauma in the library. First, they were tasked to create questions using "How might we…" statements. They were creating questions that could then be a starting point for solutions to trauma in the library. ULU used a variety of idea generation exercises with the hope of coming up with as many ideas as possible. Part of this process was also coming up with "bad ideas" to prevent the self-censorship of ideas. This process allowed participants to get out all of their ideas, big or small, so that we could focus on actionable things later in the forum. Participants did not have to
narrow their visions and could express them even if they were something the forum could not necessarily address during our three-day time frame.

Once ideas were created, participants narrowed down ideas to focus on and prototype. Groups ranked ideas on how well they fulfilled a need, how novel the idea was, and if it was feasible in three years. The last part may seem unusual, but this was vital since the forum intended to create ideas that could be implemented. While systemic issues will take over three years to address, the forum wanted to develop an actionable start towards that work.

Prototype

Once participants narrowed their ideas, each group selected three ideas to develop prototypes around. Each idea received a name, problem statement, and space for the idea. Then participants were encouraged to think about who the stakeholders and decision-makers influencing the concept may be, along with the resources needed and any potential challenges. There was also a spot to sketch out what shape the prototype could take. Once sketches were complete, the groups chose what they believed to be the most feasible idea to move forward. Some groups presented tangible examples, some presented sketches of ideas, and others presented concepts. (These prototypes can be seen in the appendix of the full report.)

Test

While ideas could not fully be tested during the forum, the groups presented them to each other and the whole forum throughout the prototyping process. The presentations allowed others to give insight and feedback, which was then integrated into the final presentations (as seen in the full report).

Implement

The implementation for the forum was creating posters, but the project continues beyond that. In writing the full report, ULU was challenged to think of ways to take these posters and ideas and to create the next steps. ULU plans to pursue and put this into place with the help of more grant funding and library participation. While the forum is complete, the ideas and creations the participants made are still being discussed and considered by ULU. Design thinking is not a stagnant process but a throughline in the trauma work that ULU is doing. As ULU is beginning to move forward with the next steps, it will continue to jump back to these various design parts to create, evaluate, and implement.

Results

Findings

The survey results, focus groups, and the forum reinforced what more and more people in libraries are starting to realize - trauma experienced by library workers is real and is common. This understanding directly challenges the normalization of trauma in libraries and the idea that
people have to "earn their stripes." Experiencing trauma while working in the workplace seems to be expected, but it is still far from okay.

The forum also solidified trauma in the library workplace as a systemic issue in our libraries and the community and culture surrounding libraries, which was discussed during the forum. However, there is hope. The forum resulted in solutions, which will be addressed below, that begin to tackle this problem. I left the forum feeling hopeful, and I know many other participants did too. But the ULTS also proved one more thing - there is work to be done, and with COVID, things have only gotten worse, making this work even more vital.

**Result Themes**
Through both formal and informal discussions during the forum, some themes emerged. First, an acknowledgment that there is a problem. With that acknowledgment came a discussion of isolation. Many participants expressed feeling that they believed they were the only ones struggling. This feeling is due to the normalization of trauma in library workplaces and the idea that it is just something you need to push through. However, the diversity of participants at the forum proved that this is something many people experience differently. Still, there is an overarching problem of trauma in libraries.

Other issues discussed were unionizing, the usefulness of the MLS, lack of diversity and retention in the profession, pay, community expectations, and the overall structure of libraries. While the forum could not dive into all these topics due to lack of time and because they were not the forum's main focus, many of these issues still underlined the problems discussed and the solutions addressed. These are issues that need to be explored regarding trauma and the library profession as a whole. The forum showed that library workers are thinking about these issues and want to discuss them.

**Solutions**
The forum culminated with the solutions that the participant groups developed. While the solutions all focused on the trauma experienced while working at the library, different groups tackled different areas of the systemic issue. One solution aimed to remove some of the social services work and research that public-facing staff does. This group suggested a social services database that can be used and updated by libraries and local social services organizations. This solution directly challenges the idea that libraries have to do everything and moves the focus back to libraries being information hubs and community spaces that can create connections.

Two other groups focused on creating ways to keep libraries accountable and put trauma-informed care into the library policy and culture. The first group suggested a national library trauma certification that organizations can apply for, which would create capacity for libraries to create cultures of care while also signaling to workers potentially safer workplaces.
The other group proposed embedded trauma-informed policies and procedures. They wanted these policies and procedures to be part of the larger policy document, not a separate offshoot, signaling to staff that care permeates the whole institution. Both ideas would support staff advocacy while holding libraries and communities accountable for their care.

Yet another group aimed to bridge the gap between administrators and frontline staff by creating embedded management and communication structures. These structures not only give an outlet to employees but they would also further communication. So individuals at every level are aware of the workings of their library, bridging the disconnect between administration, middle management, and frontline staff.

A final group decided to tackle the isolation and disconnect that trauma can cause by creating peer support networks on both a local and national level that are independently run. At the national level, activities and support would be online, creating a hub and community space that library staff can access at any time. Having places where people could share their experiences would continue to fight the stigma that an individual is alone in their experiences of trauma and/or difficulty dealing with it.

**Outcomes**

Going forward, ULU hopes to take this study further and will be presenting webinars, presentations, and discussions around the topic of trauma in the library. When ULU released the report at ALA 2022, we were excited, but not surprised, by how many people were interested in and connected with the study, who shared their stories with us, and who took it back to their home institutions. While UTLS focused on urban library workers, its reception highlights the more considerable impact of UTLS on the library profession beyond one type of demographic, geography, and library type. I had discussions with academic and school library workers and those working in non-urban spaces, who all agreed that trauma was occurring in their libraries. The early feedback from readers seems to be one of universality across the library locations, sizes, positions, and disciplines.

Following the forum, ULU has come up with some recommendations that libraries and the library profession can and should adopt to help library workers.

- National Worker Helpline, where library workers can call either during work hours or after for immediate support around traumatic experiences, mental health crises, or assistance with burnout.
- Standards for healthy library work experiences built by a diverse group of library workers. These would allow administrators guidance and give library staff something to use to advocate for better working conditions.
- Policies and procedures are written with trauma-informed leadership in mind. Trauma-informed leadership takes trauma-informed practice and applies it to the
library's employees. While these policies will be detailed, they will also have flexibility so leaders can easily tailor them to their library and start using them quickly and easily.

- Peer-support groups made up of library workers could allow individuals at all levels to receive support and feedback from colleagues at other library organizations who can understand what the individual is experiencing. Groups can also be based on the intersection of identities and positions (i.e., workers of color, administrators, lgbtq+, etc.). These groups recognize that while frontline staff may be more vulnerable to trauma from patrons/community, trauma is something that all levels of library workers experience and offer support for all. It also recognizes that trauma and resiliency factors are impacted by intersections of identities, disability, cultures, sexuality, lived experiences, and more.

Next Steps
First, we must spread the word about trauma in the library. We need you. Sharing this article or the full report helps build acknowledgment and understanding of the hurt and trauma that library workers experience. Besides sharing among the library community, we also need to bring in board members and community members to help foster a greater understanding of what library work truly is. Library staff are more than volunteers who read books all day. If you want to know more, please check out the full report or keep up to date with ULU's work on the website.

Finally, ULU is a small, non-profit organization that runs on limited funds. As such, ULU plans to pursue more grant funding to support this work. This funding will be used to implement, test, evaluate and share these ideas to provide helpful support to library workers.

Conclusion
There is an evident crisis in libraries regarding the trauma that library workers at all levels experience. As one group wisely said, "You can't self-care your way out of a broken system." Our system is failing library workers, and ULTS aims to spark discussion and support for library communities.

However, there is more work that needs to be done. More studies need to be performed, looking at the lasting impacts of trauma and quantitatively looking at the prevalence of trauma in libraries of all types. While ULTS begins to look into solutions, libraries and researchers must also dig deeper into the systemic issues and think about how libraries can make a radical culture change. This is just the beginning, but we hope it will be a strong one.

Most importantly, as a library community, we must continue the conversations about trauma in the library. This conversation is not over with the completion of this study. The work is not done. The library profession needs to continue these conversations in our libraries, across libraries, our
departments, our friends, and our community. Library workers' trauma and lived experiences should continue to be addressed, seen, and acknowledged to allow for healing around this systemic issue.

**Disclosure**
This work is centered on and dependent on the lived trauma experiences of the lead researchers, facilitators, research fellows, and forum participants. While some may argue for detachment in research, when asking others to discuss personal trauma and their lived experience, it becomes crucial for rapport building to have a shared understanding. It is colonizer thinking to expect to take from participants without giving something of the self. So while the participants shared so much, we also hope that we have shared with them and provided actionable solutions that can make their vulnerability worth it.

As such, this study is by library workers, for library workers, and in this grounded methodology is where we believe we can do the best work that has a direct impact on the lives of library workers.

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**Notes on contributor**
Leah Dudak is a former librarian and current Ph.D. student at Syracuse University’s Information School. Dudak’s research looks at public libraries and the trauma that library staff encounter giving attention to supporting library workers, systemic issues contributing to trauma, trauma-informed care, and librarianship. She also views her work through anticolonial, feminist, disability, and artistic lenses.

Lauren Comito is currently a Neighborhood Library Supervisor at Brooklyn Public Library and Executive Director of Urban Librarians Unite, a national 501c3 not-for-profit focused on providing training, advocacy, and support for front-line library staff working in large urban systems. She is creative, passionate about connecting library patrons to the services they need, and a true believer in the ability of the library to change people’s lives and communities for the better.

Christian Zabriskie is a founder and member of Urban Librarians Unite. He was also named Library Journal’s 2020 Librarian of the year along with Lauren Comito. Christian is currently the director of Onondaga County Library System in New York and previously has worked in Yonkers and Queens library systems. His focus is in a variety of areas including graphic novels, library advocacy, serving at risk communities and more.

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