

# Racial and Ethnic Diversity of U.S. Library Workers

The ethnic makeup of our profession may say more about society than about librarianship

by Keith Curry Lance

**T**he need to recruit and retain a diverse workforce has come to be seen as one of the most crucial issues facing the library profession, inspiring much discussion and serving as the *raison d'être* of the American Library Association's Office for Diversity. Why? Because most of the faces in Libraryland belong to older white women. If libraries are to be welcoming institutions to all, regardless of race and ethnicity, librarians and other library workers should be more diverse.

This may be expecting too much. The challenge lies not in the lack of diversity among library staff, but more generally in the lack of diversity among holders of master's degrees—in anything. Perhaps it is time to stop flagellating ourselves and to assess realistically where libraries stand in the larger picture of the American labor force.

A considerable amount of data on this topic is available from the U.S. Census Bureau. In December 2003, the bureau released a special tabulation produced for a consortium that includes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Departments of Justice and Labor, and other federal agencies and private companies. The data comes from the long form of the decennial census, which is administered to a sample of approximately 17% of the nation's households. Readily available via the EEO Data Tool ([www.census.gov/eo2000/](http://www.census.gov/eo2000/)), data on the race and ethnicity of library workers was combined with other data from the 2000 census to shed some light on the extent to which library workers—especially librarians—represent the communities they serve.

When the issue of diversity in libraries is raised, the focus is generally placed on the discrepancies between the racial and ethnic composition of the community at large and



KEITH CURRY LANCE is director of the Library Research Service at the Colorado State Library in Denver.

Chart 1. Percentages of the U.S. Population Age 25 & Over, Those with Graduate Degrees, and Librarians by Race/Ethnicity, 2000

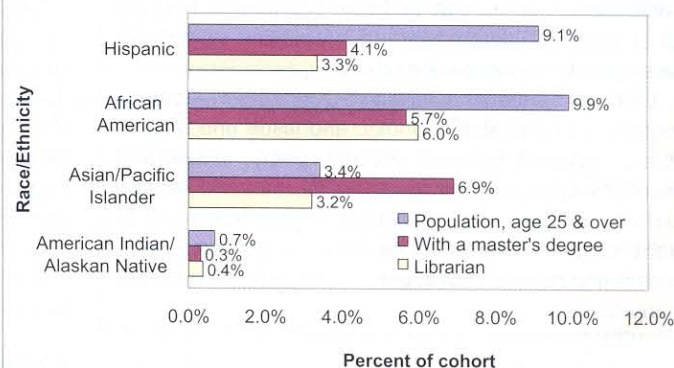
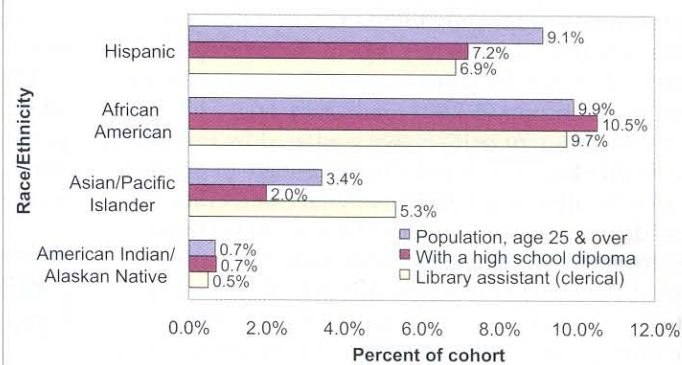


Chart 2. Percentages of the U.S. Population Age 25 & Over, Those with a High School Diploma, and Library Assistants (Clerical), 2000



that of library workers, especially librarians. Instead, we should be looking at two different bases for comparison: the racial and ethnic composition of the adult population (persons age 25 and over) and the subset of that population possessing an appropriate level of educational attainment (a graduate degree for librarians or a high school diploma for library assistants).

## LIBRARIANS

Compared to the general adult population, Hispanics are the most underrepresented group among librarians. Over 9% of the adult population is Hispanic; but



## What's a Librarian? What's a Library Assistant?

In its Standard Occupational Classification System ([stats.bls.gov/soc/](http://stats.bls.gov/soc/)), the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the positions of librarian and library assistant as follows:

**Librarians (SOC 25-4021).** Administer libraries and perform related library services. Work in a variety of settings, including public libraries, schools, colleges and universities, museums, corporations, government agencies, law firms, nonprofit organizations, and healthcare providers. Tasks may include selecting, acquiring, cataloguing, classifying, circulating, and maintaining library materials; and furnishing reference, bibliographical, and readers' advisory services. May perform in-depth, strategic research, and synthesize, analyze, edit, and filter information. May set up or work with databases and information systems to catalogue and access information.

**Library Assistants, Clerical (SOC 43-4121).** Compile records, sort and shelve books, and issue and receive library materials such as pictures, cards, slides, and microfilm. Locate library materials for loan and replace material in shelving area, stacks, or files according to identification number and title. Register patrons to permit them to borrow books, periodicals, and other library materials.

only just over 3% of librarians are Hispanic. In other words, Hispanics are represented among librarians only about one-third as often as their proportion in the general adult population might lead one to expect. Asians and Pacific Islanders are the best-represented group: Only two-tenths of a decimal place separates their percentage of the adult population (3.4%) and the percentage of librarians who belong to this group (3.2%). (See Chart 1.)

A very different perspective is offered by examining the discrepancies between the percentage of graduate degree-holders and librarians by race and ethnicity. This data suggests that while there are substantial discrepancies between the racial and ethnic composition of the adult population and that of librarians, much of that difference can be attributed to three of the four groups—African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians/Alaskan Natives—being poorly represented among graduate degree-holders. The most dramatic example of this pattern is offered by Hispanics. There is a gap of almost 6% between the percentages of the adult population and librarians who are Hispanic. But five of the six percentage points that make up that gap (9.1% versus 4.1%, respectively) are explained by the fact that the percentage of graduate degree-holders who are Hispanic is low. This suggests that if librarianship as a profession wishes to become more representative of the Hispanic community, the most effective strategies for pursuing that goal will be ones that increase the odds that Hispanic Americans

will pursue graduate education generally. In short, it is a pipeline issue.

When the standard of representation is the percentage of the group with a graduate degree rather than the general adult population, the most underrepresented group, proportionally, is Asians and Pacific Islanders. Almost 7% of graduate degree-holders belong to this racial group—notably, the highest such percentage for any of the four racial or ethnic groups—but only about 3% of librarians are Asians or Pacific Islanders. In other words, Asians and Pacific Islanders are more than twice as likely to have advanced degrees as they are to be librarians.

Each of two racial groups—African Americans and American Indians/Alaskan Natives—represents roughly equal percentages of librarians and graduate degree-holders. African Americans are about 6% of graduate degree-holders and librarians. American Indians and Alaskan Natives are 0.3% of graduate degree-holders, and 0.4% of librarians. Just as for Hispanics, a major factor explaining the low proportions of African Americans as well as American Indians and Alaskan Natives among librarians is the fact that members of these groups are less likely to earn advanced degrees such as the one required for most librarian positions.

## LIBRARY ASSISTANTS

The poor representation of some racial and ethnic groups among librarians might lead to speculation that something about librarianship as a field is inherently unwelcoming or unattractive to members of those groups. Data available for the other end of the library job spectrum—library assistants—suggests otherwise.

Three of the four groups focused upon in this analysis are represented among library assistants in proportions that at least approximate their presence among those whose highest educational attainment was graduating from high school, as well as among

## What Are the Racial/Ethnic Demographics Where I Live?

To examine the racial and ethnic demographics of library workers in your state, county, or metropolitan area, consult the Census Bureau's Equal Employment Opportunity Data Tool at [www.census.gov/eeo2000/](http://www.census.gov/eeo2000/), where you will find data for 2000 about librarians, library technicians, and library assistants (clerical). In addition to racial/ethnic demographics, this tool also reports on the distribution of library workers by gender. The greatest drawback of this dataset is that it does not disaggregate academic, public, school, and special library workers. Still, it is a little-known resource that provides a great deal more detail about the demographics of librarianship—and a host of other jobs—than most expect.



the general adult population. (See Chart 2.) There are two notable exceptions: Hispanics make up just over 9% of the population, but only about 7% of high school graduates and library assistants. Conversely, Asians/Pacific Islanders are overrepresented among library assistants at 5%, versus 3% of the adult population and 2% of those who only graduated from high school.

This data suggests that the challenges libraries face in seeking to recruit workers who better represent their users are not specific to librarianship as a field, but rather are associated largely with the pipeline issue. Where a relatively low level of educational attainment is usually required,

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the racial/ethnic discrepancies between the general adult population, high school graduates, and library assistants are either minimal, or, in the case of Asians/Pacific Islanders, favorable to that group. It is librarian jobs—positions that generally require a graduate degree—that see more troubling discrepancies.

Certainly, a host of other related issues may be reflected in these statistics, such as: the variable supply-and-demand for library workers by geography, the salaries paid to librarians compared with other graduate degree-holders, and—last, but not least—the time and money costs of acquiring a master's degree in library and information science. ❖

## The U.S. Labor Market for Library Workers, 2002–2012

How many jobs are there for library workers—and librarians in particular?

How many existing jobs will be open in the future?

How many jobs will be created or lost?

Will there be enough qualified candidates for available jobs?

Information that can help decisionmakers begin to address these questions is available in Occupational Employment, Training, and Earnings Data through the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website at [data.bls.gov/oep/noeted/empoptd.jsp](http://data.bls.gov/oep/noeted/empoptd.jsp).

### Number and types of library jobs

In 2002, there were 167,000 librarians, 119,000 library technicians, and 120,000 library assistants—a total of 406,000 library jobs (see sidebar for the BLS definitions of these occupations). By 2012, it is expected that there will be 184,000 librarians, 139,000 library technicians, and 146,000 library assistants—a total of 469,000 library jobs.

The nation's libraries employ a substantial number of workers. In 2002, the number—406,000—approached the 2002 census population of Sacramento, California (407,000). In 2012, the projected number—469,000—will fall between the 2002 census populations of Cleveland (478,000) and Long Beach, California (462,000).

Overall, BLS predicts that library employment will increase by 15.5% between 2002 and 2012; but relative increases in library employment are greater as one descends the job hierarchy. Over that period, library assistant jobs will increase by 21.7%; library technician jobs, by 16.8%; and librarian jobs by 10.2%.

### Library employment and job openings

Projected change in library employment between 2002 and 2012 is substantial. During that period, the number

of workers is expected to grow by an estimated 63,000, including 17,000 librarians, 20,000 library technicians, and 26,000 library assistants.

New entrants will fill newly created jobs as well as vacancies for existing positions. The average annual number of library job openings is expected to be 70,000, including 16,000 librarians, 24,000 library technicians, and 30,000 library assistants.

### Growth and replacement

BLS reports two figures related to annual job openings. Growth is the anticipated increase in library positions between 2002 and 2012. Total replacement is the number of workers who must be replaced because they retire, leave their jobs for other reasons, or die. Net replacement adjusts total replacement by subtracting the anticipated number of new entrants from the number who retire, leave their jobs for other reasons, or die. Thus, net replacement is always lower than total replacement.

Growth plus total replacement indicates the number of positions that are expected to be open during the average year between 2002 and 2012. For that period, growth plus net replacement indicates the average annual number of positions that will require new entrants.

The relationship between position rank and expected numbers of openings, vacated and new, focused on growth plus total replacement. Growth plus net replacement indicates that the annual number of new entrants required to fill foreseen jobs will be at least 19,000—6,000 librarians, 6,000 library technicians, and 7,000 library assistants.

A fuller report, with additional data about educational attainment and earnings of library workers, is available at [www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/224\\_Labor\\_Market.pdf](http://www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/224_Labor_Market.pdf).