

Reopening During a Pandemic: Responses to Library COVID-19 Policies

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ABSTRACT:

In the summer and fall of 2020, it was not clear what patron reaction would be to library COVID-19 safety policies and protocols. Despite reports from the American Library Association, the Public Library, Association, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services detailing the new library services being offered and suggestions about policies and protocols to keep library staff and patrons protected, no one knew how patrons would react. News stories about people coughing, spitting, and attacking front line staff in grocery stores and even medical responders raised the concern that this could be repeated in libraries. This paper attempts to fill that gap with a survey sent through the Florida Library Association listserv about COVID-19 related changes to library services and policies and to COVID-19 related incidents. Key findings were that libraries need to prepare for patrons arguing with each other, staff are more satisfied with their library's COVID-19 policies when they have input, and rural libraries were least satisfied with their policies even when they had input.

INTRODUCTION:

It is now more than one year since the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. In the months following the March 2020 announcement from WHO, most libraries closed their buildings to the public (and sometimes to staff)¹. The American Library Association (ALA), the Public Library Association (PLA), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) all worked to gather information, share resources, and evaluate best practices to help libraries plan to re-open safely.² Their surveys and research highlighted the innovative ways libraries worked to meet patron needs, quarantine materials, and keep everyone safe with social distancing and PPE during the pandemic. A June 2020 Library Journal article did an excellent job highlighting the plans libraries were making in preparation for re-opening.³ There was a gap, however, in the research about library re-opening. As libraries prepared to open their doors, it was not clear how patrons would respond to COVID-19 related health and safety protocols in the library.

The news was awash in Spring and Summer 2020 with reports in the US of people coughing, spitting, sneezing, and verbally and physically attacking health care workers, first responders, and retail and service workers over COVID-19 related policies.⁴

¹98% closed to the public, American Library Association. (March 2020). Libraries respond: COVID-19 Survey. http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey_Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf

²American Library Association. (May 2020). Libraries respond: COVID-19 Survey. <http://www.ala.org/pla/issues/covid-19/surveyoverview>; American Library Association. (March 2020). Libraries respond: COVID-19 Survey. http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/PLA-Libraries-Respond-Survey_Aggregate-Results_FINAL2.pdf; Reopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) Information Hub: A COVID-19 Research Project, (OCLC, IMLS, and Battelle) (June and July 2020). <https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/COVID-19-research-project.html>

³Freudenberger, E. (2020). Open options. *Library Journal*, 145(7), 14-15.

⁴Beer, T. (May 21, 2020). Florida man indicted for threatening to spread coronavirus by spitting and coughing on police officers. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/05/21/florida-man-indicted-for-threatening-to-spread-coronavirus-by-spitting-and-coughing-on-police-officers/>; Birch, J. (April 9, 2020). People are coughing on food and pretending to have coronavirus—Why would someone do that? <https://www.health.com/condition/infectious-diseases/coronavirus/why-people-cough-on-food-claim-to-have-coronavirus>; Houck, B. (May 5, 2020) Michigan woman charged with spitting on cop after refusing to wear a mask in a grocery store <https://detroit.eater.com/2020/5/5/21248496/michigan-grocery-st-clair-shores-store-customer-assault-charge-mask-covid-19>; McKay, D., Heisler, M., Mishori, R., Cattan, H., Kloiber, O. (2020). *Attacks against health-care personnel must stop, especially as the world fights COVID-19*. *Lancet*, 395(10239), 1743-1745. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7239629/>; Men assault Target store workers enforcing COVID-19 mask policy. (May 12, 2020). <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article244331222.html>

The Summersville Public Library in Virginia re-closed their buildings to patrons in July after a patron intentionally coughed on materials in protest of the library's COVID-19 safety policies.⁵ As libraries began to re-open, front-line staff and administrators had little information about just how prevalent problems like this might be. To address these concerns, a survey was conducted in the summer of 2020 of Florida library staff whose libraries had opened their buildings to the public. These findings shed light on early patron responses to library COVID-19 policies. They may also point to directions for libraries navigating new policies as COVID vaccines allow for re-opening more services while new COVID variants raise concerns over re-opening.

METHODS:

The Survey. The survey was posted to the Florida Library Association listserv on three dates in 2020 (June, July, and September). 136 staff from Florida libraries responded. 122 reported being open to patrons, 14 reported still being closed. "Open" was defined as "at least some patrons are allowed into some or all buildings." Not all respondents completed the survey; of those who did, 109 were from public libraries and eight were from other library types.⁶ 28% reported they worked in urban libraries, 51% in suburban, and 21% in rural.

The survey included 10 questions about COVID-19 related changes to services, policies, and incidents (see appendix).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION:

Part I: COVID-19 services.

The results were consistent with ALA, PLA, and IMLS reports of COVID-19 related services except many Florida libraries also provided printed unemployment forms. During COVID-19 reopening, the most offered services were curbside (77%) and suspended fines (70%). Almost 60% offered free masks, only 31% created a digital-materials-only card for non-card holders, and just 12% were selling masks. See figure 1.

In the open-ended responses, three libraries mentioned offering meal services to children at their libraries and more than half reported that printed unemployment forms were available at their libraries. This is likely due to the problems with the Florida unemployment office over the summer; people were encouraged to apply on paper and libraries supplied the forms.

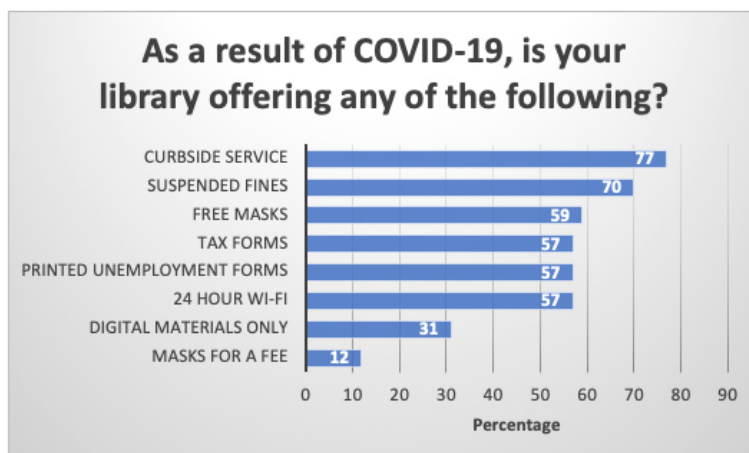


Figure 1: Services Offered to Patrons in Florida libraries as a result of COVID-19

⁵Stowers, S. (July 9, 2020). Summersville library closes after patron refuses to wear mask, coughs on books. <https://wchstv.com/news/local/summersville-library-closes-after-patron-refuses-to-wear-mask-coughs-on-books>

⁶Many thanks to the respondent who pointed out that so many of these surveys are geared toward public libraries. I will consider this moving forward!

Part II: COVID-19 policies.

During COVID-19 reopening, libraries changed their policies to add a variety of protective measures. The survey showed that the more staff were consulted on the policies, the more satisfied they were with them. Rural libraries were the least satisfied with the policies compared to the urban and suburban libraries, even when they were consulted on the policies.

Protective measures/policies.

Most libraries added sneeze guards (89%) and required social distancing by patrons (82%). Most also placed limits on access to services; they limited access to buildings (77%), computers (76%), and study rooms (69%). More than half (55%) added a greeter to explain their COVID-19 policies and services to patrons. Surprisingly, only about half (49%) added a mask requirement. Far fewer required the use of hand sanitizer, took patron temperatures, limited the number of children in the buildings, or added security guards. See figure 2.

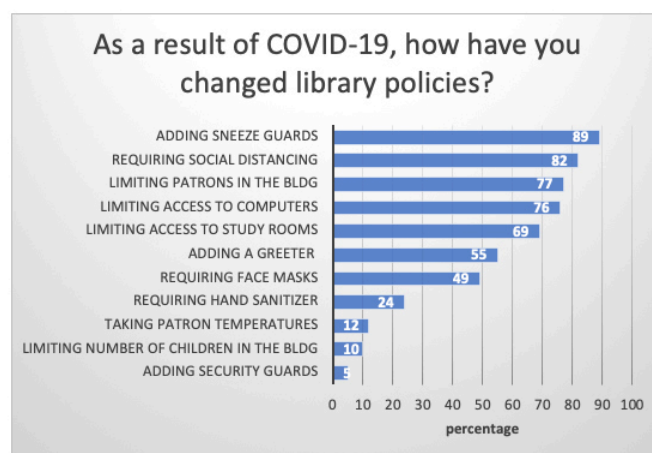


Figure 2: Policy changes in Florida libraries as a result of COVID-19

Contribution to and satisfaction with COVID-19 protective measures/policies.

Almost half of the respondents (47%) reported they were able to contribute a great deal or a lot to their library's COVID-19 policies and 32% reported that they contributed only a moderate amount or a little but 19% reported they were not able to contribute at all.

Staff contribution matters to staff satisfaction with COVID-19 policies. Overall, 65% were satisfied with the COVID-19 policies of their library. As might be expected however, those who were the most satisfied with the policies contributed the most to them and those who were least satisfied with the policies, contributed the least. 80% to 90% of those who contributed a great deal or a lot were satisfied or very satisfied with their libraries' policies and none were dissatisfied. 39% of those who contributed a little or none at all were dissatisfied with their libraries' policies. One respondent gave some insight into staff dissatisfaction; they commented, "staff are not getting enough notice about policies or even opening!" This is likely true for library leadership too!

The more staff contributed to policies, the more satisfied they were with them, but rural libraries were less satisfied overall whether or not they were consulted about them. Only 50% of respondents from rural libraries were satisfied or very satisfied with their libraries' COVID-19 policies. This contrasts with the 60% of the Urban and 69% of the Suburban respondents who reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their libraries' policies. This suggests that, as we move forward through the pandemic, library staff input to policies could play an important role for libraries and that rural libraries face special challenges. Rural library staff were less satisfied overall with library policies and that requires further investigation.

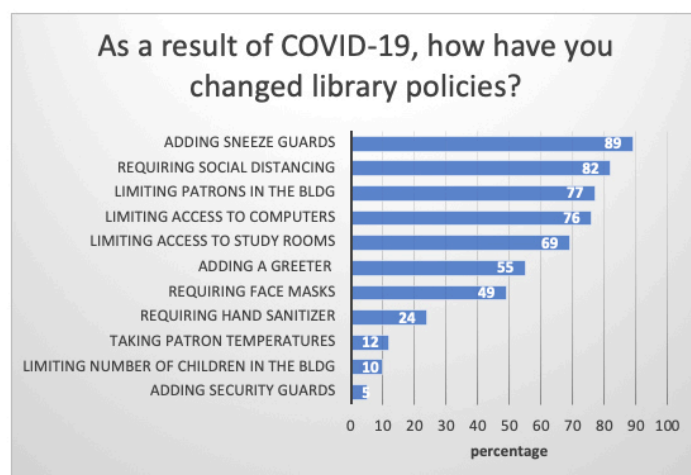


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Part III: COVID-19 incidents.

Overall, COVID-19 related incidents in the library included more arguing and less actual violence. During COVID-19 re-opening, library staff reported that the most common incidents related to library COVID-19 policies involved prolonged arguing⁷ by patrons with staff (77%) and prolonged arguing between patrons (46%). 28% reported prolonged arguing that required security or a call to police. Far fewer, less than 9%, reported more serious threats or actions like spitting on staff or pushing, hitting, or other violence toward staff as a result of COVID-19 policies. See figure 3.

⁷“prolonged arguing” was intentional phrasing to allow responses that fit with the culture of each library. I wanted to capture respondent’s subjective sense of when arguing or push back was not typical for a library.

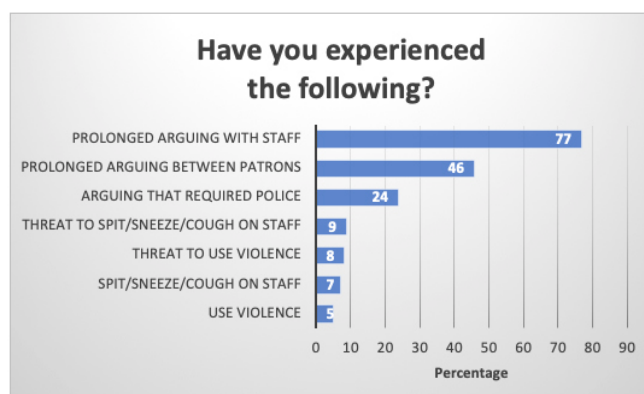


Figure 3: Incidents in Libraries after reopening to the public

Frequency of prolonged arguing by patrons with staff.

Respondents were asked how often their library experienced prolonged arguing by patrons with staff about any of the library’s COVID-19 policies. Remember that 77% reported they experienced prolonged arguing by patrons with staff. A full 50% of those reported they experienced it once a week or more. Interestingly, 23% never experienced prolonged arguing with staff and rural libraries were more likely to avoid it. Most of the suburban (89%) and urban (87%) respondents reported prolonged arguing with patrons but just 63% of rural respondents reported this. It would be helpful to examine why rural libraries reported less arguing with staff.

In the open-ended responses, survey participants gave examples of the kinds of experiences they were having with patrons who argued. Staff reported feeling uncomfortable. They said patrons had no regard for staff safety, patrons acted insulted by the policies and grumbled about them, many refused to follow COVID policies even trying to come around barriers, patrons did not understand the pandemic was not over, and they became angry and were complaining to boards/cities, etc. Despite those complaints, survey participants also reported more positive interactions with patrons during re-opening; “patrons missed the library,” “they were grateful and just happy we are open and appreciate the steps we are taking,” and “most patrons have been very accommodating.”

Frequency of prolonged arguing by patrons with other patrons.

Respondents were asked how often their library experienced prolonged arguing between patrons about library COVID-19 policies. 46% reported they experienced prolonged arguing between patrons. Of those, most reported it was not very frequent; 42% reported it occurred less than once a month and 31% reported it occurred once a month or a few times a month. But 27% reported it occurred frequently, once a week or more. As one respondent said, “We thought we would encounter patrons who would become agitated about wearing a mask. What we have encountered instead are patrons agitated that other patrons don't wear a mask.” This might be the most surprising finding; library staff need to have plans in place to manage and de-escalate arguments between patrons. There was little difference between urban, suburban, and rural libraries in frequency of prolonged arguing between patrons.

Frequency of more serious incidents

More serious incidents were much less frequent though respondents did have to call security or police fairly regularly. Respondents were asked how often their library experienced threats to use violence and how often that happened. Threats to spit, sneeze, or cough and more serious threats to push, hit, stab, or shoot others happened less than once a month. Actual violence also happened less than once a month. But more than one quarter of respondents who reported patrons arguing with staff or with other patrons did have to call security or police. 28% said they called security/police and about half (52%) of those reported they called police or security once a month or more and about half (48%) reported they called less than once a month.

Satisfaction with library response to incidents.

Respondents were asked about how satisfied they were with their libraries’ response to incidents with patrons both before March 11, 2020 and after re-opening. While library staff reported they were mostly pleased with their libraries’ responses, their satisfaction decreased after re-opening. Before the pandemic, most respondents (79%) were very satisfied or satisfied with their libraries’ response to incidents with patrons. After re-opening a smaller number were very satisfied or satisfied (69%) and the number of dissatisfied increased from 5% to 11%. Staff were less happy with their libraries’ responses to incidents during the pandemic than they were before. That alone suggests libraries need to work on their responses.

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Before March 11, 2020	35%	46%	13%	5%	1%
After re-opening	28%	42%	18%	11%	1%

Table 1: Satisfaction with the library’s response to incidents with patrons

Conclusions

Libraries and library associations have been planning and working to provide services to patrons while also protecting staff and patrons. News reports of threats and attacks directed at employees has some also wondering how much they need to prepare for push-back directed at staff and the library. As expected, more than three-quarters of respondents in this survey did report prolonged arguing by patrons with staff and with some frequency; 50% said it happened once a week or more. Surprisingly, almost half the respondents also experienced prolonged arguing between patrons and half of those said it happened once a week or more. Fortunately, a much smaller number, less than 9%, reported patron threats to spit, sneeze, or cough or threaten staff with physical harm or reported that patrons carried out their threats.

Moving forward in the next stages of the pandemic response, libraries do need to make sure they have policies in place to support front-line staff as they manage patrons who argue with staff and patrons who argue with each other. And library staff need to be prepared for the relatively low, yet serious threat of spitting, coughing, or more direct violence by patrons. Libraries likely have existing policies to handle prolonged arguing by patrons with staff and even for disruptive arguments between patrons. For example, about a quarter of those in this study who experienced prolonged arguing with staff or with other patrons called police or security. However, the frequency of this kind of prolonged arguing during the pandemic, the decreased satisfaction with library response to incidents after the pandemic started, the heightened emotions surrounding COVID-19 and PPE, and the COVID risks from shouting during arguments⁸ all point to the need for specific, COVID-19 related policies.

One option to improve response to pandemic policies moving forward is to include library staff in policy making. In this survey, the more staff contributed to the policies, the more satisfied they were with them. The more satisfied staff are with the policies, the more likely they are to implement them well. This survey did not ask how staff were included in library COVID-19 policy making; future research should include this information. Library responses to the pandemic moved quickly over this past year and often changed without notice. But now there is time for reflection; for asking staff for feedback about library policies and how they were implemented.

⁸CDC guidance is to avoid shouting;

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/community-based.html>

Florida Libraries Journal Peer Reviewed Section

Take advantage of that time and create opportunities to contribute and improve responses to COVID-19 related incidents.

Half of the respondents in this survey were from suburban libraries and almost all were from public libraries. Just 21% were from rural libraries. And that group stood out in a few ways. They reported less arguing from patrons to staff over COVID-19 policies and they reported less satisfaction with their library policies even when they reported they were included in the policy making. This needs further investigation. What makes rural library staff less satisfied with library policies and why do they report fewer conflicts with staff? There may be lessons for all libraries in those answers.

This survey was an attempt to begin to answer questions about patron responses to COVID-19 policies in libraries. It was not intended to provide in depth statistical analysis but to offer a descriptive picture of library re-opening at a specific moment in time during COVID-19. Now, more than one year after the WHO announcement, libraries know more but there are challenges still to come. A few respondents offered suggestions to libraries looking to better manage COVID-19 incidents in libraries; “drop the “enforcement” mentality,” “respond quickly to complaints,” and “have clear policies (and legal support when needed).” The lessons from this survey are that incidents are probably not as severe as some might have feared but we need to prepare for incidents between patrons, that libraries need to include staff in their preparations, and that rural libraries need special focus.

APPENDIX:

Re-Opening Public Libraries: COVID-19 Policies and Library Patrons

Thank you for taking this survey

The purpose of this study is to collect data about the experience of re-opening public libraries after the World Health Organization described COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Any benefits or compensation for participating? There is no payment or compensation. This project does hope to benefit all libraries by sharing experiences of re-opening.

Any reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or costs to the subject? There are no costs to participate but questions about Covid-19 might raise stressful issues. As with any online survey, there is a risk that online data may be hacked or not remain confidential. The survey is set to "anonymous" and once the data is downloaded, it will be protected. See also the Survey Monkey [Privacy Policy](#).

Questions? Contact Amy An (MLIS, MA History); Boca Raton, FL; amyizabethan@gmail.com

If you click to begin the survey, you are consenting to the above terms. Remember that your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time.

* 1. Is your library building currently open to the public? Open means at least some patrons are allowed into some or all library buildings.

- Yes
 No (this will end the survey)

Re-Opening Public Libraries: COVID-19 Policies and Library Patrons

COVID-19 Policies and Procedures

* 2. As a result of COVID-19, which of the following have you offered to patrons (choose all that apply)?

- Curbside pick up
 Free masks
 Masks for a fee
 Greeter to explain COVID-19 policies
 24 hour access to wi-fi
 A digital materials only card for non-card holders
 Printed unemployment forms
 Tax forms
 Suspended fines
 Sneeze guards at service desks
 Other (please specify)

* 3. As a result of COVID-19, is your library requiring any of the following (choose all that apply):

- Take patron temperatures before patrons enter the building
 Patrons wear masks/face covering when entering the library (with accommodations for ADA)
 Patrons maintain social distancing of 6 feet or more
 Patrons should use hand sanitizer before entering the library
 Limit the number of patrons entering the facilities or using parts of the facilities
 Limits on the number or age of children entering the facilities
 Limited or no access to patron computers
 Limited access to study rooms and/or community rooms for patrons
 Other (please specify)

* 4. How satisfied are you with the social distancing and PPE requirements/policies that your library has for patrons?

- Very satisfied
 Satisfied
 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
 Dissatisfied
 Very dissatisfied

* 5. How much did your library ask you to contribute to your library's COVID-19 re-opening policies and procedures?

- A great deal
 A lot
 A moderate amount
 A little
 None at all

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Re-Opening Public Libraries: COVID-19 Policies and Library Patrons

COVID-19 Related Incidents

This section asks about patron behavior. The questions are based on actual incidents with retail, medical, and emergency staff. The purpose of the questions is to learn if the same incidents and types of interactions are happening in libraries.

6. Since you re-opened, how often has your library experienced prolonged arguing between patrons about library COVID-19 policies?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

7. Thinking about your phone calls with patrons, since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced prolonged arguing by patrons with staff about any of your COVID-19 policies?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month

8. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced prolonged arguing by patrons with staff about any of your COVID-19 policies?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

9. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced patrons threatening to spit, sneeze, or cough on staff?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

10. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced patrons actually spitting, sneezing, or coughing on staff?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

11. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced patrons threatening to use violence like pushing, hitting, stabbing, or shooting?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

12. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced patrons actually pushing, hitting, stabbing, or shooting?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

* 13. Before March 11, 2020, how satisfied were you with your library's response to incidents with patrons?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

* 14. Thinking of the time after your reopened the library, how satisfied are you with your library's response to incidents with patrons?

- Very satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

Re-Opening Public Libraries: COVID-19 Policies and Library Patrons

Security Guards and COVID-19

* 15. Thinking about your in-person interactions with patrons since March 11, 2020, how often has your library experienced prolonged arguing by patrons with staff or each other that required security or a call to the police?

- Every day
- A few times a week
- About once a week
- A few times a month
- Once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never

* 16. Before March 11, 2020, did your library have any security guards (choose one)?

- Yes
- No

* 17. Now that your library has re-opened, does your library have any security guards?

- Yes
- No

18. Thinking about the time since you re-opened, is there anything else about your in-person interactions with patrons or between patrons that you would like to share (optional)?

Re-Opening Public Libraries: COVID-19 Policies and Library Patrons

Demographic Questions

* 19. How would you describe your library type?

- Public
- Academic
- Other (please specify)

* 20. How would you describe your library location?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

21. [Optional] In what state or U.S. territory do you currently work?

Thank you for participating in this survey! For questions, contact Amy An, amyelizabethan@gmail.com

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