ORAL HISTORY WORKER SURVEY

Results & Recommendations

Hello

Oral History Worker Survey: Results & Recommendations
A program of the Oral History Worker-led Survey & Solidarity Project
Written and designed by Sarah Dziedzic
Queens, NYC // seized Munsee Lenape and Canarsee land

First edition © 2023

A machine-readable version of this document with text descriptions of charts is available at bit.ly/OralHistorySurveySolidarity

With gratitude to all who helped with the survey

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Dziedzic, Sarah, "Oral History Worker Survey: Results & Recommendations,"
      Oral History Practitioner Worker-led Survey & Solidarity Project, 2023.

Contents

Survey & Solidarity Project

The Oral History Worker-led Survey & Solidarity Project collects resources and data to develop a cross-profession advocacy strategy that supports oral history workers.

Organized in response to a call for independent research about the field of oral history, the Survey & Solidarity Project was a long time coming. Initially blooming in moments of both abundant colleagueship and professional desolation over a decade-plus of oral history work, some projects in recent years––especially the Independent Practitioner Task Force of the Oral History Association and the Equity Budgeting consultancy––have provided opportunities to funnel these experiences into resources that are both immediately practical and speculative for the future we are dedicated to building. That history and energy is present here.

Cultural workers in adjacent fields of practice, where oral history work often takes place, have launched phenomenally important campaigns to call out bad practices, decry neutrality, make pay transparent, and abolish unpaid internships. The Survey & Solidarity Project is indebted to this leadership with regard to worker rights and power, and maintains Labor Resources for Cultural Workers as an open and growing library. While this report is primarily for oral history workers and the field of oral history at large––to see what we've said about what it's like to do this work––it's also an effort to prepare for the cross-profession and inter-community organizing we've been dreaming about for years.

The recommendations spelled out here are in response to the data revealed by the Oral History Worker Survey. They're not necessarily all-new recommendations; they've sprouted and grown through past work, informal conversations, and various manifestos, and now we have the data to guide and support us. It's time to make our work conditions better.

Solidarity forever.

Project Strategy

RESOURCE LIBRARY

A curated library of resources created by cultural workers in various fields of practice enables peer learning, growth from existing work, cross-profession knowledge-sharing, and citation and crediting of ideas and labor in the movement.

WORKER SURVEY

A survey for oral history workers generates information on demographics, career level, years of experience, job type, satisfaction, and income, and allows people to report on discrimination, and other challenges experienced in the workplace.

ACTIVATE RESULTS

A public discussion and white paper with results, analysis, and recommendations invites feedback on the survey findings and proposed next steps, while broadening leadership and investment in the goals of the project.

ADVOCACY & SUPPORT

Plans outlining strategies for targeted support of oral history workers take the form of additional data collection, advocacy campaigns, and independent worker organizing. Advocacy is informed by needs, investment, and capacity of workers, professional associations, and cultural institutions.

Oral History Worker Survey Design, Distribution, & Data

The Oral History Worker Survey was developed by Sarah Dziedzic in consultation with Ellen Brooks, Catherine Czacki, Alissa Rae Funderburk, Jess Lamar Reece Holler, and Amy Starecheski. Its approach and content were informed by the 2019 OHMA Alumni Survey (by Ellen), the 2018 AASLH Emerging History Professionals Survey (by Jess) the 2019 Art + All Museums Salary Transparency Spreadsheet (by Michelle Millar Fisher), and the 2021 A*CENSUS II All Archivists Report (by Makala Skinner and Ioana G. Hulbert at Ithaka S+R).

The survey included 121 questions within 8 sections: Oral History Work, Career in Cultural Work, Compensation for Oral History Work, Budgeting Oral History Work, Ranking Interest in Workplace Issues, Training in Oral History, and Demographic Information. Questions were multiple choice and short answer format designed to collect facts and impressions about oral history work, and many questions included the option to "select all that apply" and/or to input a write-in response in a field labeled "Other: _____." The survey was anonymous and run through Google Forms. It was open for 12 weeks to people who had engaged with any form of oral history work in any field over the last five years. It collected responses from 114 participants.

The survey was sent to members & followers of the following networks: Oral History Association, National Council on Public History, American Folklore Society, Society of American Archivists, Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Columbia Oral History Master of Arts, National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, American Association for State and Local History, The HistoryMakers, Southwest Oral History Association, New and Emerging Museum Professionals Network, Oral History Summer School, H-OralHist listserv, and r/MuseumPros. It also circulated via friends & family, and flyers that were handed out at the 2022 Oral History Association Annual Meeting in Los Angeles, the 2023 Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region Conference in Philadelphia, and the 2023 National Council on Public History Conference in Atlanta.
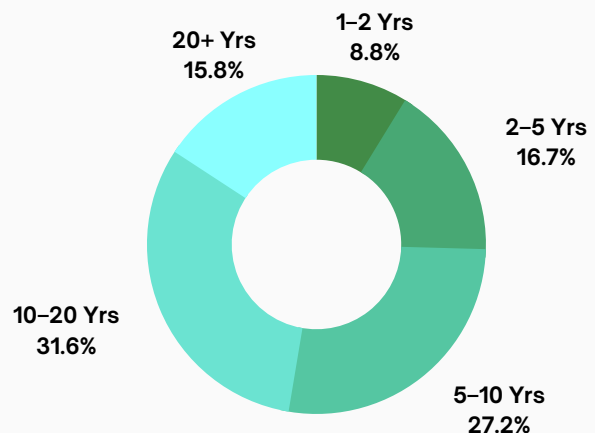
Raw survey data is available at bit.ly/OralHistorySurveySolidarity. All of the survey data informed this document; only a small portion is presented here. Some charts have been reformatted or adapted to accommodate write-ins.

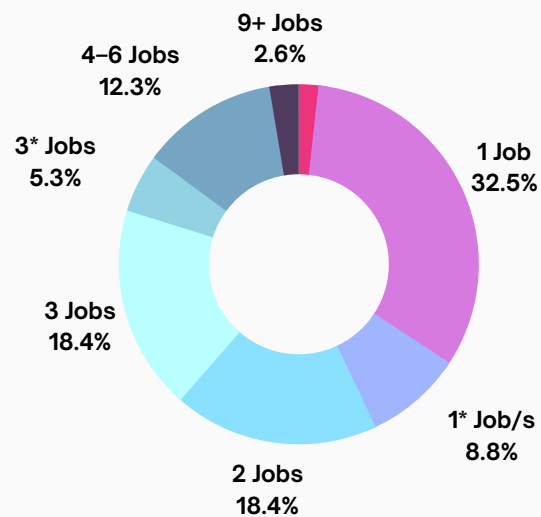# Survey Participants: Position, Activities, and Experience

Participants engage with multiple fields of practice, and are nearly evenly divided between full-time work and limited-term contract work. Two thirds currently work more than one job.

Who is this group of people reporting on their experiences of oral history work? The majority of survey participants work in mid-level positions and/or as consultants, with just over half of participants doing limited term project or contract work. As a group, their assessment of oral history work draws both on different kinds of employment status and many years working, with nearly a third of participants engaged in oral history work for 10–20 years, and a significant amount doing oral history work for over 20 years.

Altogether, participants appear to be an experienced bunch, in a professional sense, although no baseline data exists within the field to assess the accuracy of this group as a sample——one of the numerous reasons behind the creation of this survey was to generate a benchmark.

20+ Yrs 15.8%
1–2 Yrs 8.8%
2–5 Yrs 16.7%
10–20 Yrs 31.6%
5–10 Yrs 27.2%

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

9+ Jobs 2.6%
4–6 Jobs 12.3%
3* Jobs 5.3%
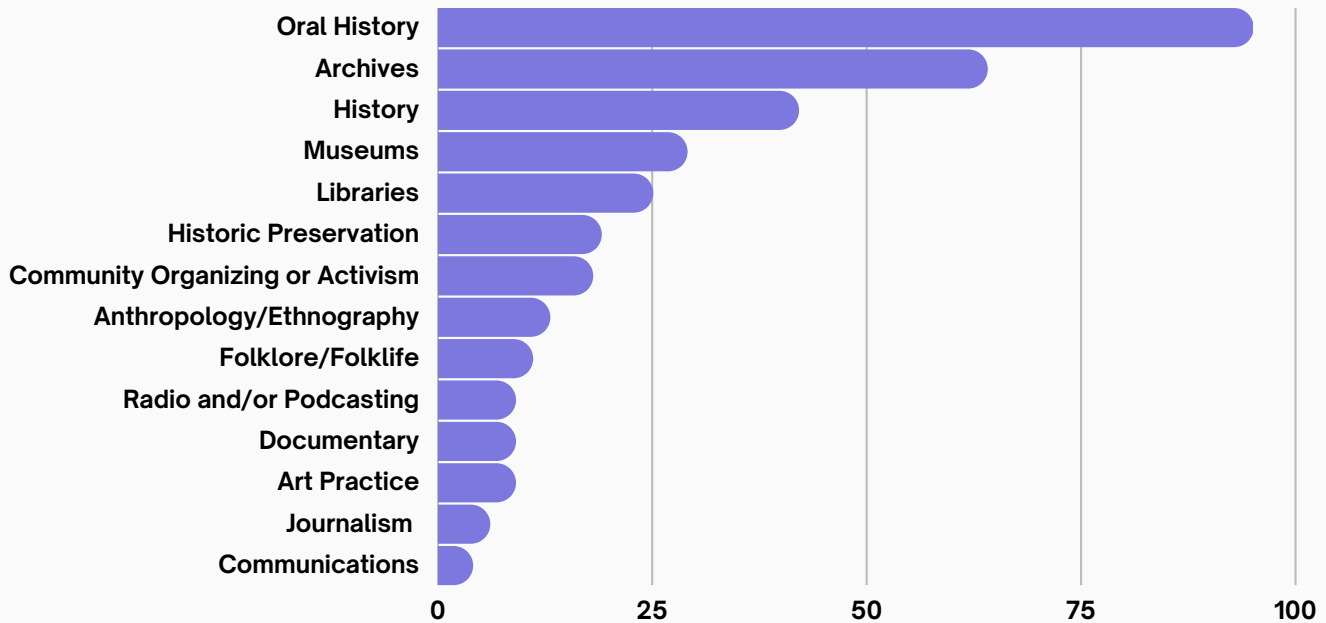**1 Job 32.5%**
3 Jobs 18.4%
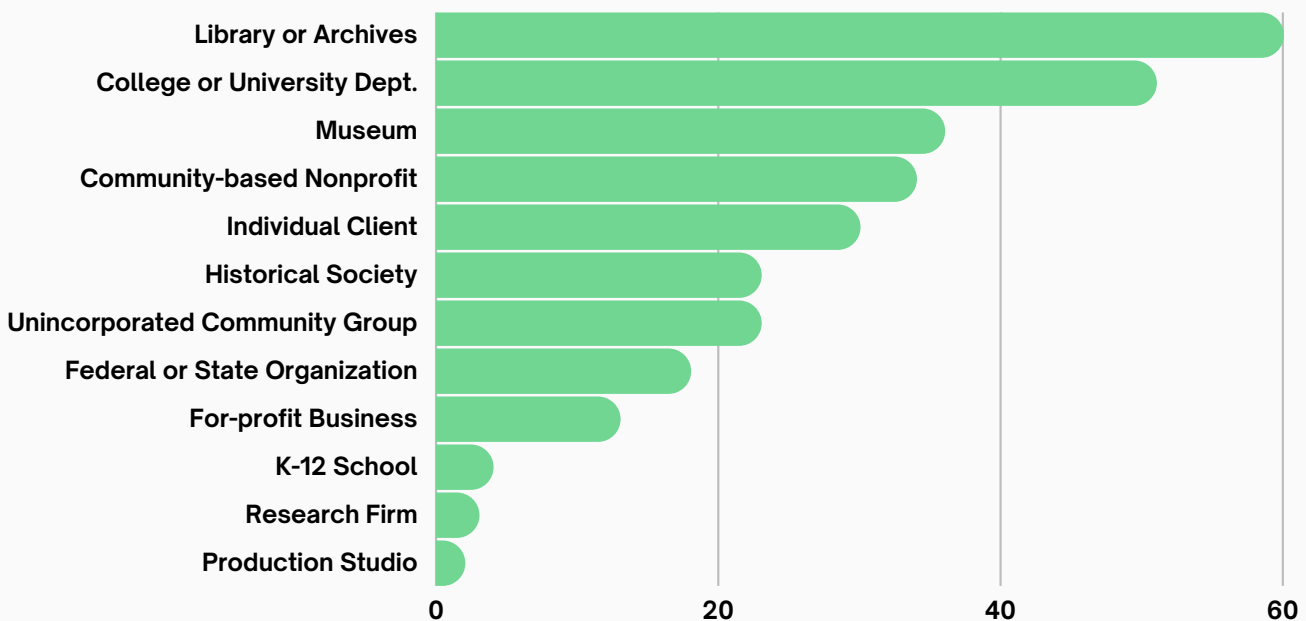**1* Job/s 8.8%**
2 Jobs 18.4%

NUMBER OF CURRENT JOBS

Participants work in or engage with a number of fields, especially oral history, archives, history, museums, and libraries. They most often work within libraries and archives, college or university departments, community-based non-profits, and with individual clients. The results of this survey can give us a solid representation of what it's like to do oral history work within these types of work environments.

## WHAT FIELD(S) DO YOU PRIMARILY WORK IN OR IDENTIFY WITH? (CHOOSE UP TO 3)

Field	Value
Oral History	95
Archives	64
History	41
Museums	28
Libraries	24
Historic Preservation	18
Community Organizing or Activism	17
Anthropology/Ethnography	12
Folklore/Folklife	10
Radio and/or Podcasting	9
Documentary	9
Art Practice	9
Journalism	6
Communications	4

WHERE DO YOU DO ORAL HISTORY WORK? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)

| Place	Value
Library or Archives	60
College or University Dept.	51
Museum	36
Community-based Nonprofit	34
Individual Client	30
Historical Society	23
Unincorporated Community Group	23
Federal or State Organization	18
For-profit Business	13
K-12 School	4
Research Firm	3
Production Studio	2

In terms of specific types of oral history work, participants most commonly interview, work with oral histories in archives, teach, curate, write about, and transcribe oral history. They showcase a broad range of skills, which serve as an important reminder that oral history isn't limited to interviewing (though many of us *do* conduct interviews).
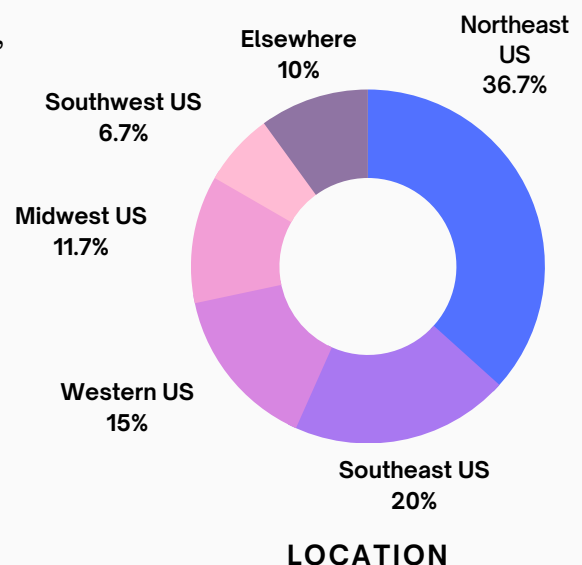
WHAT KINDS OF ORAL HISTORY WORK DO YOU DO?
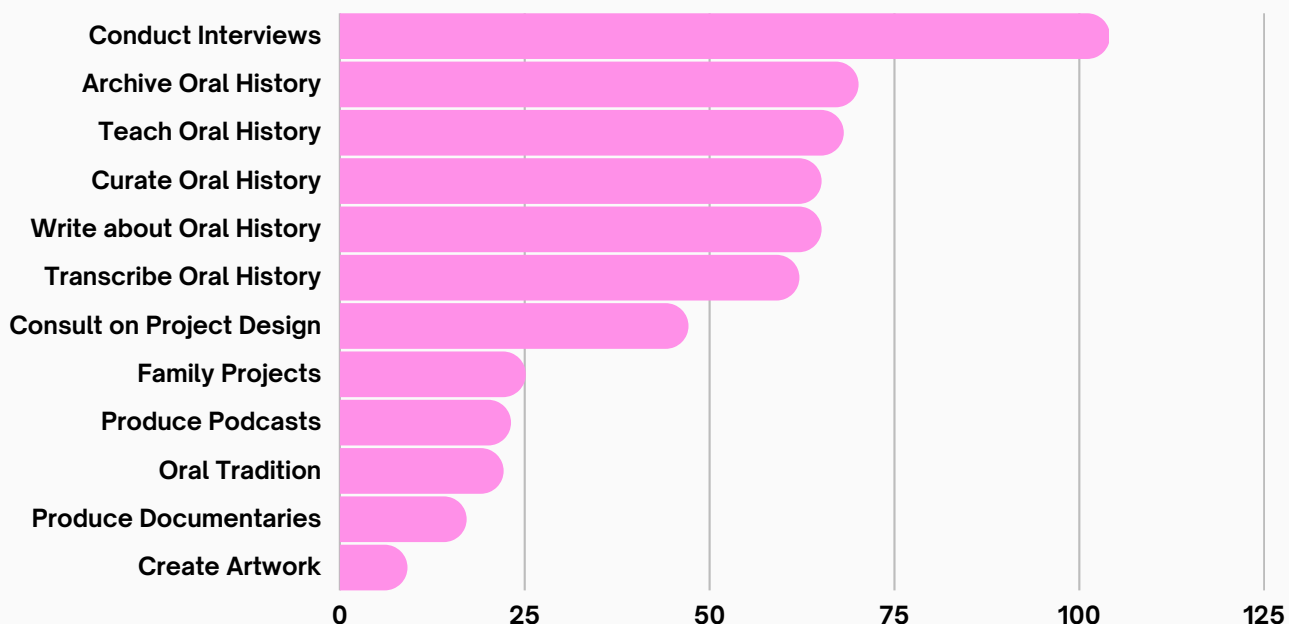
Job titles vary extensively. Searching for the commonalities yielded breadth by yet another measure. We are Oral Historians, Consultants, Professors, and Archivists. We are also Librarians, Directors, and Founders of our own businesses and consultancies. Any movement for advocacy will have to consider the different positions that we hold and reach us where we actually work.


JOB TITLES
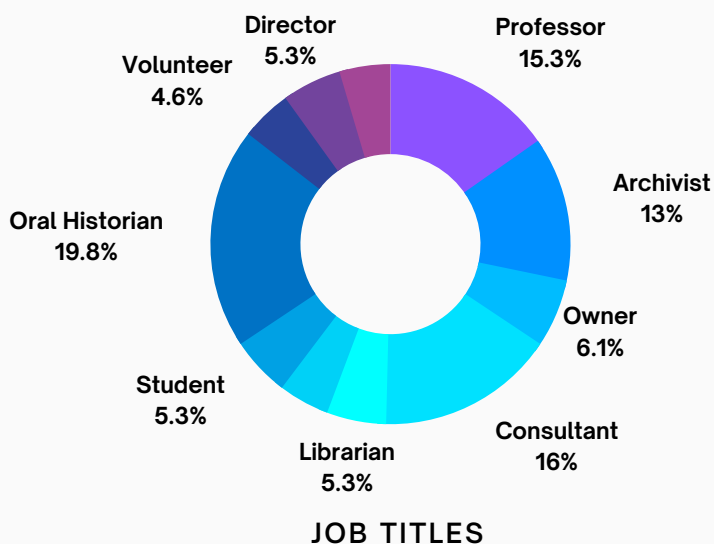
Survey Participants: Demographics Snapshot

The majority of participants are white, female, and work in the Northeast US. This demographic data will be an important touchstone as the field continues forward with goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

There are vibrant oral history programs, traditions, and practices throughout the United States. Programming at the annual meetings of the Oral History Association, held in different regions each year, makes that clear. However, responses came predominantly from the Northeast. While there is certainly a robust community of oral history workers there (where the Survey & Solidarity Project is based), the geographic distribution of the participants reveals a need to build stronger networks in other regions in order to better represent oral history work in these locales.

LOCATION

Elsewhere 10%
Southwest US 6.7%
Midwest US 11.7%
Western US 15%
Southeast US 20%
Northeast US 36.7%

In terms of race, three quarters of participants are white, and nearly a quarter are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). By the numbers, and for context, this is more diverse representation than the adjacent field of archives, where 16% identified as BIPOC in the 2021 A*CENSUS. As the field moves forward, through programs such as this that aim to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion, it will be meaningful to support the growth of BIPOC leadership and employment as oral history workers. It will also be important to ensure that projects such as this have diverse leadership who can help develop methods and outreach for collecting data that are accessible, respectful, and worthwhile within different spaces of professional and cultural practice.

Unknown or Prefer Not to Say
2.2%

BIPOC
22.4%

White
75.4%
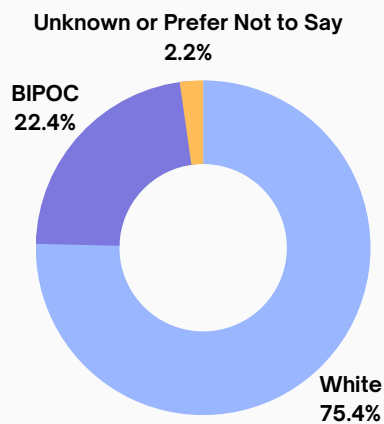
RACIAL IDENTITY
*see raw data for detail

Non-binary
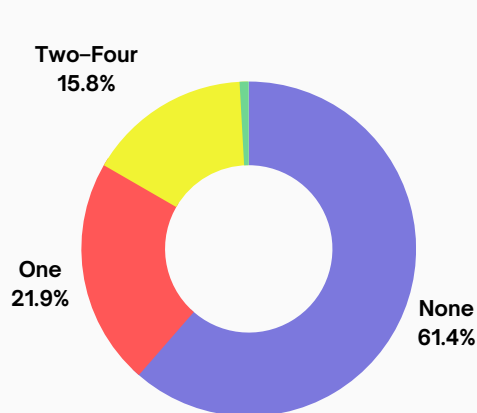**7%**
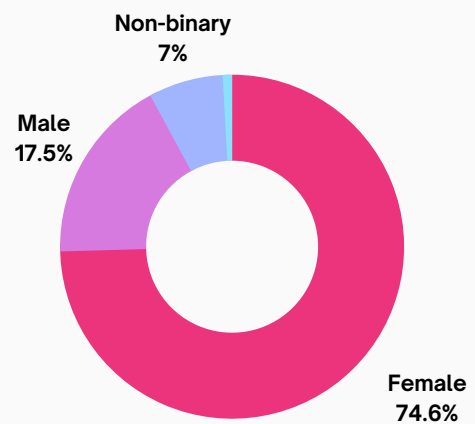
Male
17.5%

Female
74.6%

**GENDER**
*see raw data for detail

In terms of gender, three quarters of participants are female. A little under a fifth are male, and 7% are non-binary (femme, transmasc, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, and agender). To again use the 2021 A*CENSUS as a point of reference, 71% of archives and memory workers were women and 3% were non-binary.

By age, the largest block of participants is 35–46, followed by a third who are 23–34. The remaining quarter are between the ages of 47–82. In retrospect, especially given this data, the survey should have provided explicit options to report on age-related discrimination in the workplace in acknowledgement that many oral history workers are over age 40 (the age at which the Age Discrimination in Employment Act applies).

The majority of participants reported they have no dependents, while the remainder, over a third, have between one and four. The dependent care that participants said they most often provide is to spouses/partners, children, and parents. They also reported caring for community elders, siblings, nieces/nephews, and grandparents.

Two–Four
15.8%

One
21.9%

None
61.4%

NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS

71–82
7.2%

59–70
10.3%

47–58
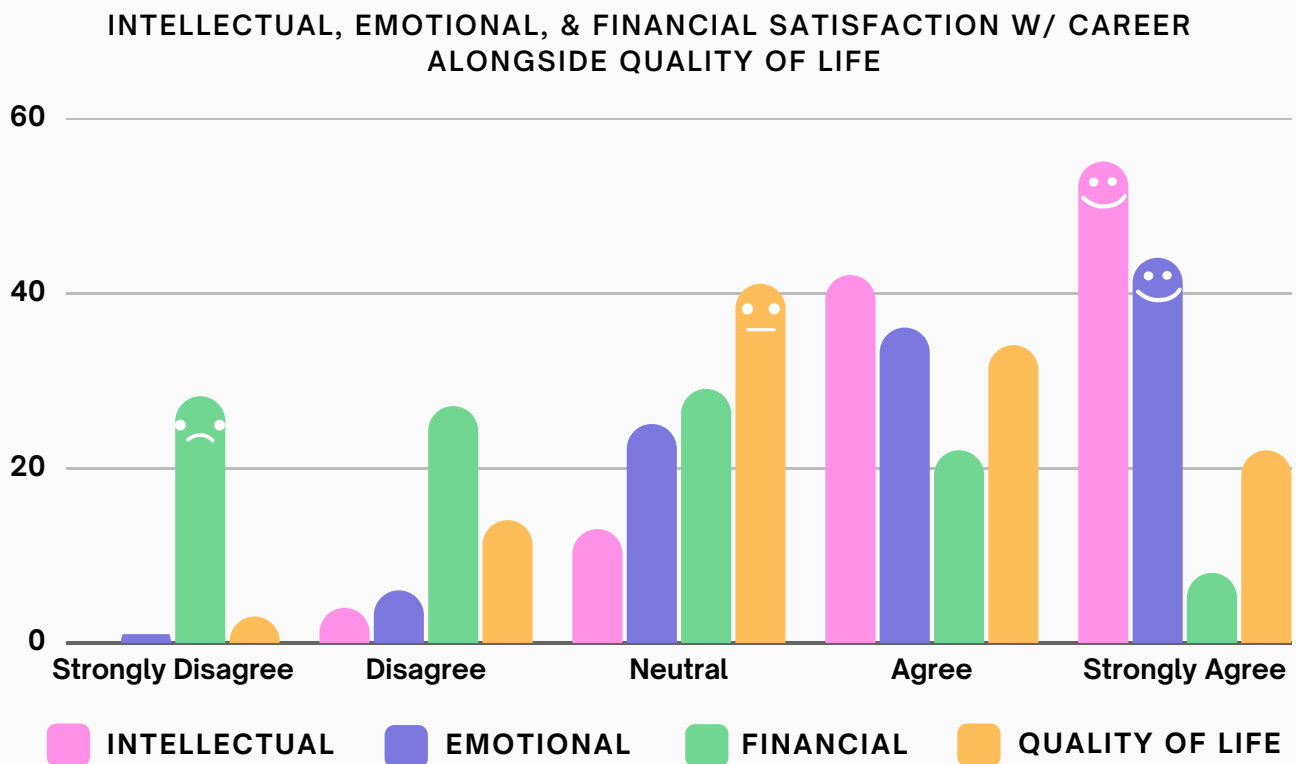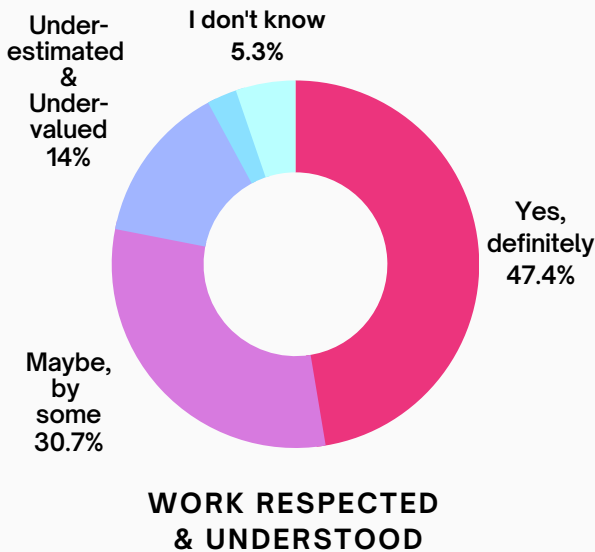**8.2%**

23–34
29.9%

35–46
43.3%
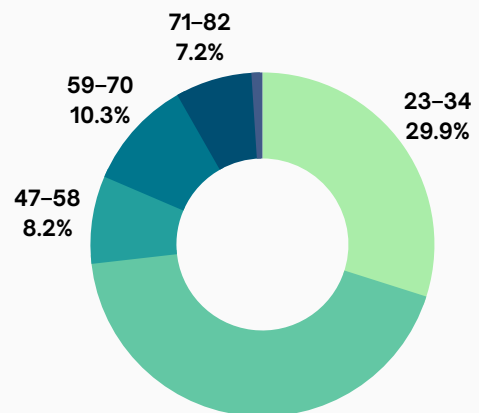
AGE

Job, Career,
& Financial Satisfaction

While the majority of participants feel intellectual and emotional satisfaction from their work, financial satisfaction is low. Coupled with limited opportunities for career growth, and that half of participants feel their work is not respected or understood, overall quality of life is okay-*ish*.

That so many oral history workers feel intellectually and emotionally satisfied with their careers is worth celebrating. However, even engagement with dynamic and personally meaningful work is not enough to fully balance financial insecurity and lack of access to benefits when it comes to assessing quality of life. Participants said that they struggle with being able to find jobs that offer health insurance, retirement benefits, and adequate paid time off. Jobs that provide disability accommodations and that qualify workers for loan forgiveness programs are also hard to find for those who need them.

INTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONAL, & FINANCIAL SATISFACTION W/ CAREER ALONGSIDE QUALITY OF LIFE

Legend:
- INTELLECTUAL
- EMOTIONAL
- FINANCIAL
- QUALITY OF LIFE

Categories: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

WORK RESPECTED & UNDERSTOOD

Under-estimated & Under-valued 14%

I don't know 5.3%

Yes, definitely 47.4%

Maybe, by some 30.7%

Another factor impacting quality of life in the context of career is how oral history workers said their coworkers thought about their work. While nearly half believe it is respected and understood, the other half didn't, expressing an optimistic uncertainty that it *might be* understood, or outright certainty that it's undervalued and underestimated with regard to the amount of labor that the work requires.

This is particularly striking given that the majority of participants work in more than one field within the broad sector of cultural work, and that two thirds currently have more than one job. That's potentially a lot of coworkers, with different training and background, to come into contact with oral history. Oral history workers may not be numerous across the fields where we work, but the data collected here shows that we are doing our work in a variety of places and spaces, and often in more than one place at a time. Without longitudinal data, it's just speculation, but the roughly 50/50 split could be better than it once was, as oral history work has grown as a field and as a practice. Still, there's a lot of work ahead towards increasing the understanding and value of our work, especially for cross-profession solidarity. It matters for quality of life.

FIELD(S) OFFER ADEQUATE OPPORTUNITY FOR CAREER GROWTH ALONGSIDE INDICATION OF WORK IN MULTIPLE FIELDS OF CULTURAL WORK

CAREER GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES   WORK IN MULTIPLE FIELDS
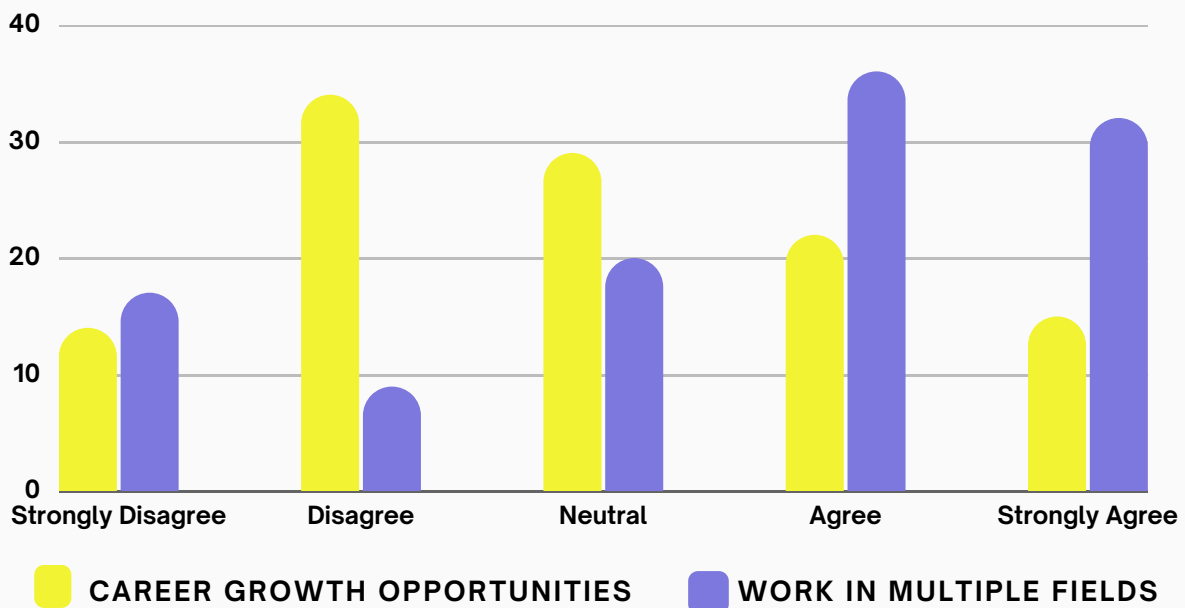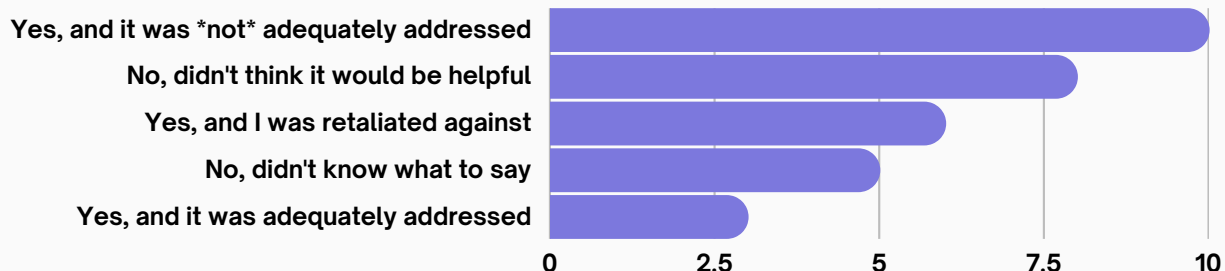
Challenges in the Workplace

Oral history workers struggle with burnout, mental health, caregiving responsibilities, and evolving or chronic medical conditions. We also experience discrimination in the workplace.

A quarter of participants reported that they had experienced bad or discriminatory treatment in the workplace, which was defined in the survey as "discrimination, microaggressions, unequal pay or opportunity, or other experiences you knew in your gut were based on your identity." Discrimination was most commonly due to gender, disability, race, and class, and was reported across people of all racial identities and genders.

Yes
26.3%

No
73.7%

WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION
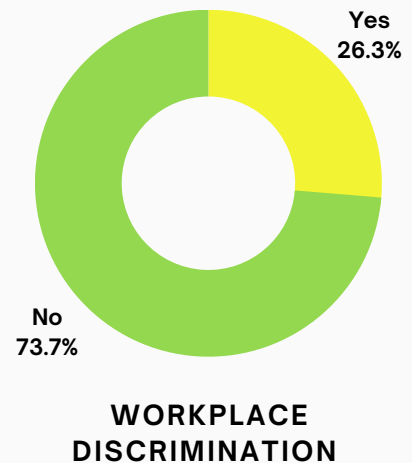
When asked if they had spoken out about incidents of discrimination or bad treatment, only a small percentage––less than 10%––said yes and that it was adequately addressed. The majority indicated a variety of outcomes, including not knowing how to report discrimination, to experiencing retaliation for speaking up. Even while the majority of participants said they had not experienced discrimination themselves, it's clear that, for those who have, better policies and practices are needed.

**DID YOU SPEAK OUT ABOUT THIS DISCRIMINATION OR BAD TREATMENT?**

Yes, and it was *not* adequately addressed
No, didn't think it would be helpful
Yes, and I was retaliated against
No, didn't know what to say
Yes, and it was adequately addressed

0   2.5   5   7.5   10

Discrimination and bad treatment aren't the only kinds of problems that workers face. Some workplace policies acknowledge the need for accommodations around situations that can be hard to predict––such as sick days, caregiving, and bereavement. Yet the policies can fail to provide options that are truly adequate, adaptive, and flexible. Another issue is that workplaces and their policies may lag behind an emergent and increasingly significant need––for example, mental health and burnout––and actively refuse to acknowledge how this impacts people's overall health. In light of weathering a global pandemic for three years and counting, it's especially callous when workplaces, clients, or colleagues don't recognize that we're all weary and managing new mental and physical loads that can result in crisis.

In response to a question about struggling with a lack of options related to such unpredictable and emergent factors, participants overwhelmingly indicated that burnout is a problem. Mental health, caregiving responsibilities, evolving or chronic medical conditions, sick days for COVID-19 or other infection illnesses, bereavement, and disability also are problems due to non-existent or inflexible policies. Our health takes a toll as responsibilities at work and home increase beyond the point of sustainability.

STRUGGLES DUE TO LACK OF OPTIONS RELATING TO THE FOLLOWING FACTORS AT PLACE(S) WHERE YOU WORK
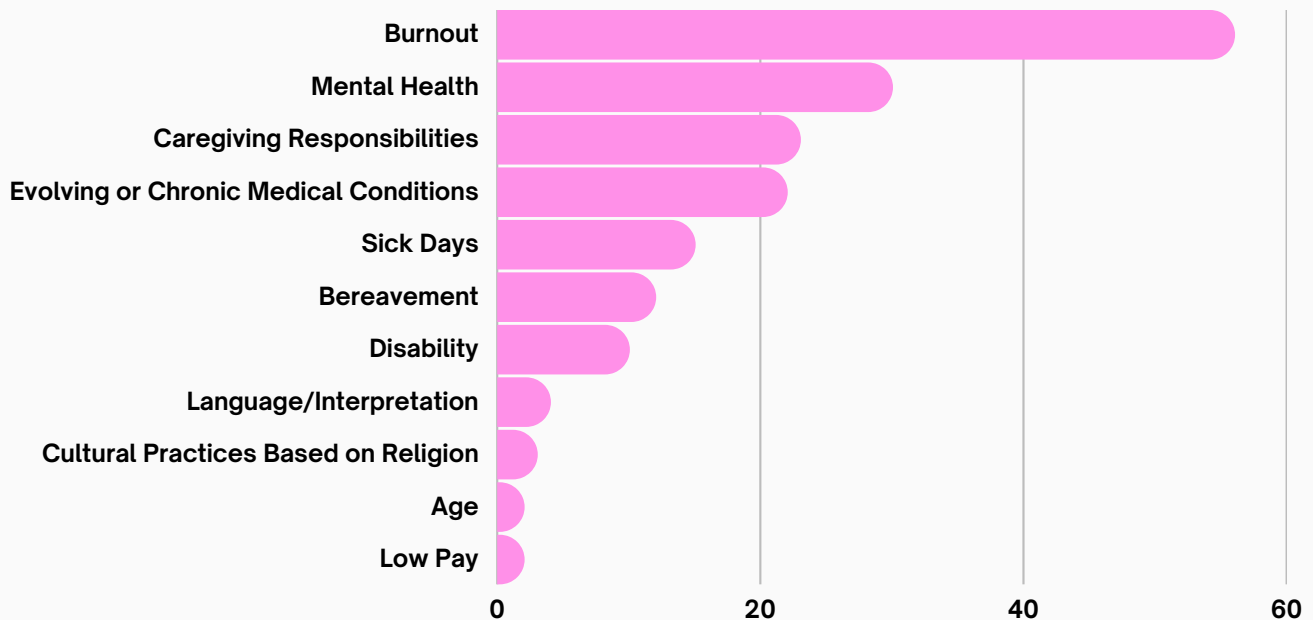
Some public movements have employed the strategy of calling out bad behavior and policies in their workplaces. The Instagram account, Change the Museum, is notable for anonymous worker accounts of racist, abusive, and/or demeaning leadership in museums and other public history institutions. Diversity in Academia is another space that features a mix of resources and examples of extractive, white supremacist, hyper-capitalist, and ableist "norms" across academic practice.

Overall, survey participants indicated mostly neutral to good relationships with leadership at the places where they work. A few, but not many, indicated bad or very bad relationships. When considering this data, it's important to note that many participants work as freelancers, consultants, or run their own businesses, so some of this neutrality can be accounted for by the fact that many of us don't have any relationships to speak of with bosses, workplace executives, or boards.

A bright spot is that the majority of participants said their relationships with coworkers and peers is good or very good. This is the most important relationship to have in good alignment for supporting each other through experiences of discrimination, showing solidarity and cooperation with one another through times of burnout, accommodating disabilities, and organizing together to improve working conditions overall.
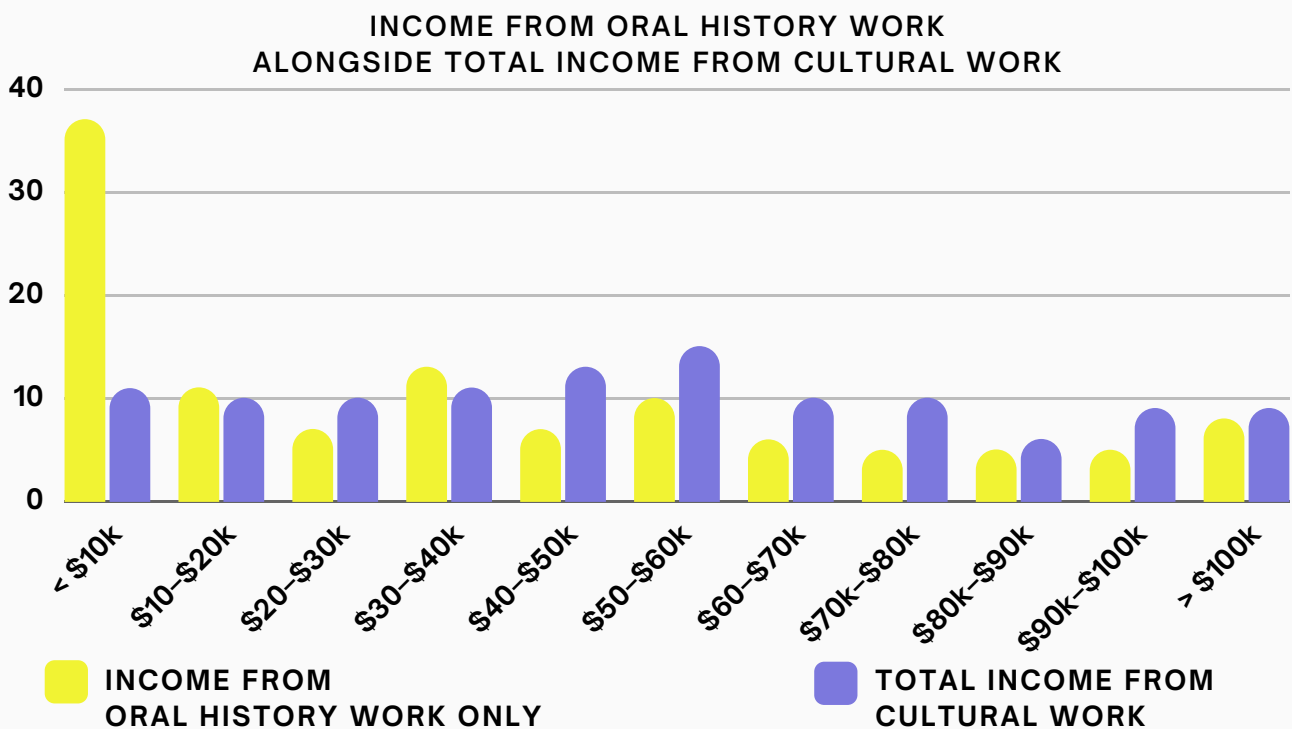
RELATIONSHIP AND ALIGNMENT BETWEEN LEADERSHIP, STAFF, AUDIENCE, & COWORKERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Legend:
- LEADERSHIP & STAFF
- LEADERSHIP/STAFF & AUDIENCE
- YOU & COWORKERS/PEERS
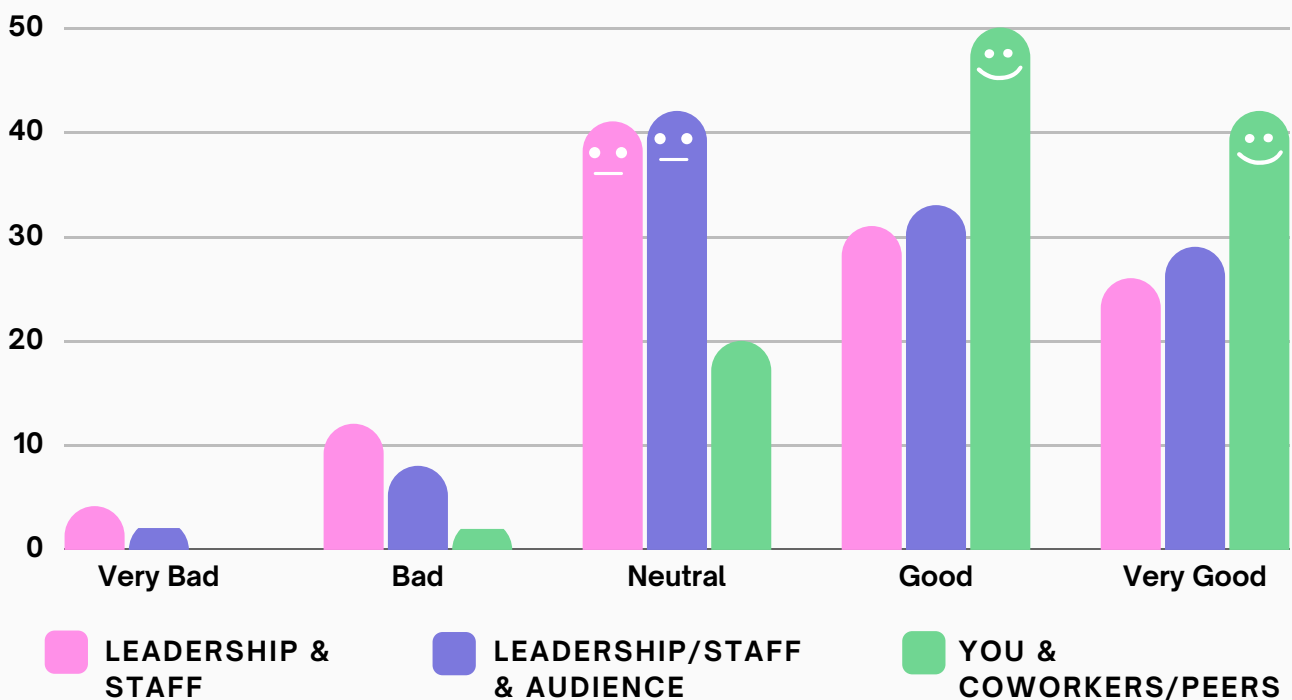
Compensation & Budgeting

The split between salaried and contract employment, alongside different practices for budgeting oral history work, make it difficult to collect an accurate snapshot of how oral history work is priced, compensated, and budgeted for in grants, contracts, and project planning.

Data on yearly compensation for oral history work is almost evenly distributed across a range of $0 to $100,000, with one standout: one third earns less than $10,000 a year doing oral history work. How can we assess this data in context? First, some participants reported having jobs in other fields and picking up supplemental oral history or contract work. Second, others reported that oral history is supported by grants alongside their pay as, for example, teachers, students, or researchers. Finally, a significant portion––a fifth of participants––do oral history work unpaid, either as volunteers, interns, students, board members, and/or as part of a community, artistic, or care-based practice.

INCOME FROM ORAL HISTORY WORK ALONGSIDE TOTAL INCOME FROM CULTURAL WORK

Legend:
- INCOME FROM ORAL HISTORY WORK ONLY (yellow)
- TOTAL INCOME FROM CULTURAL WORK (purple)

X-axis categories: < $10k, $10–$20k, $20–$30k, $30–$40k, $40–$50k, $50–$60k, $60–$70k, $70k–$80k, $80k–$90k, $90k–$100k, > $100k

When a benchmark is set through a survey that shows a fifth of oral history workers are unpaid, it points to a problem that we need to address. While there are certainly oral history practitioners engaged in their cultural traditions, documenting their family history, or using oral history as a supportive and healing practice in community––roles that might exist outside the definition of employment and therefore be unpaid––not many participants described their work that way.

TOTAL INCOME COMMENSURATE W/COST OF LIVING

No 50%

Yes 50%
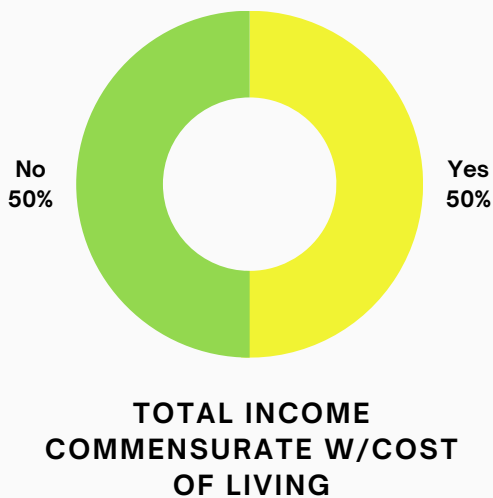
For those that are paid, the most common income range is $50,000–$60,000, and the most common salary for full-time oral history work is $55,000–$64,000. When asked to assess whether their total income is commensurate with the cost of living where they are based, participants were split. Half said that it is––and half said that it isn't. If we look back at that almost even distribution of incomes across a $100,000 range, alongside the 50/50 split related to cost of living, it's clear that we are at some kind of tipping point. But are oral history workers shifting towards adequate income? Or away from it?

Budgets for oral history work presented another set of questions, especially as differences in employment type, namely between salary and contract labor, can and should vary substantially. However, the design of the survey didn't allow for clear disambiguation between fee or budget based on employment type. It's also possible that the budget categories listed in the survey––interview session, transcription, audit-editing, project management, and project coordination––are less common budget categories than the designers realized.

**HOW ARE YOU PAID FOR YOUR ORAL HISTORY WORK?**
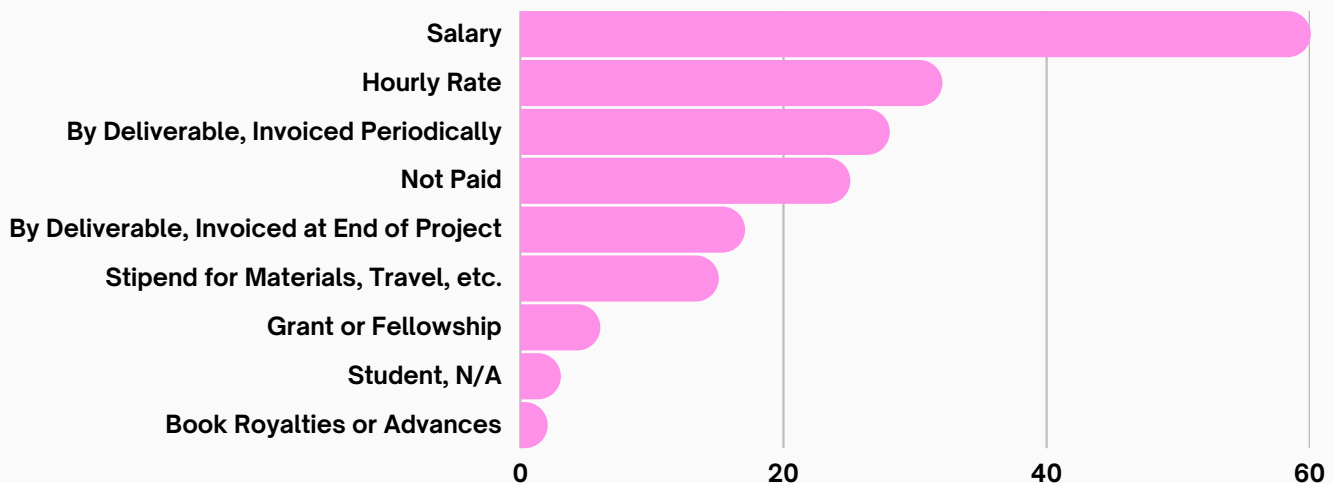
The most common response to the questions throughout the section on budgeting was "not applicable." And this reveals another issue with the design of the survey, which is that the meaning of "not applicable" is not clear. Based on comments and write-in responses to these questions, it means different things. It could mean the participant doesn't do that work as part of their practice, or that the work is unpaid, or that it's paid within a salary or deliverable fee but not itemized, or that the work is compensated beyond the range of what was listed, or simply that the participant didn't know or wasn't sure. Regardless, it's not possible to calculate an average, or the most common number, when so much of the mathematical equation is text.

The charts below present the budgetary ranges that were provided in numbers (rather than text) but more research is needed to better understand how different institutions estimate time and costs. *Note that this data alone should not be used to estimate oral history budgets, staff positions, or contractor fees.*
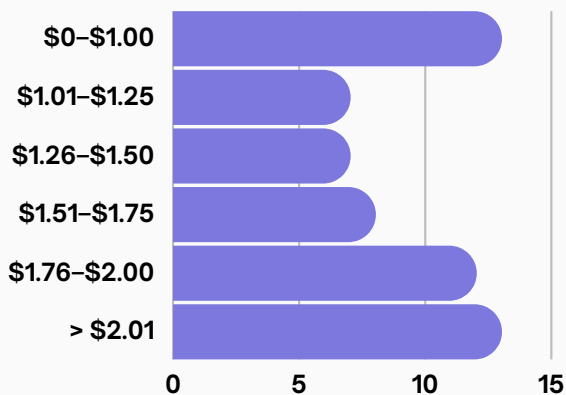
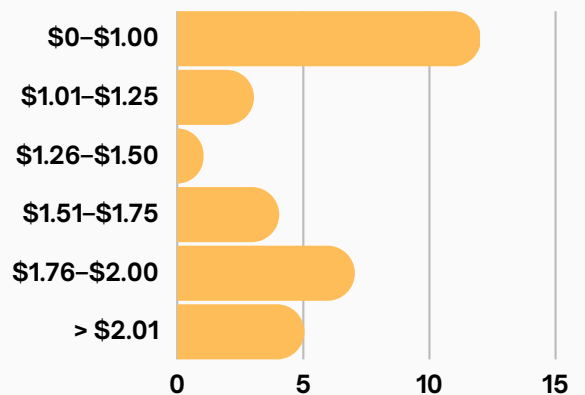### ORAL HISTORY PROJECT MANAGEMENT/HOUR
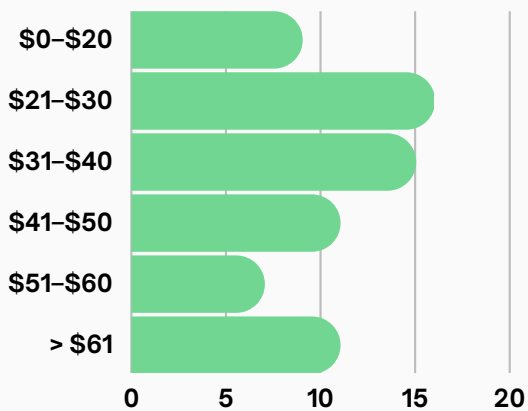
FEES OR BUDGETED COSTS OF 1 ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW SESSION
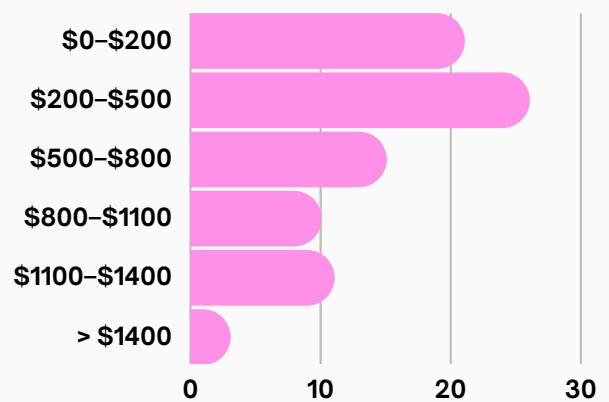
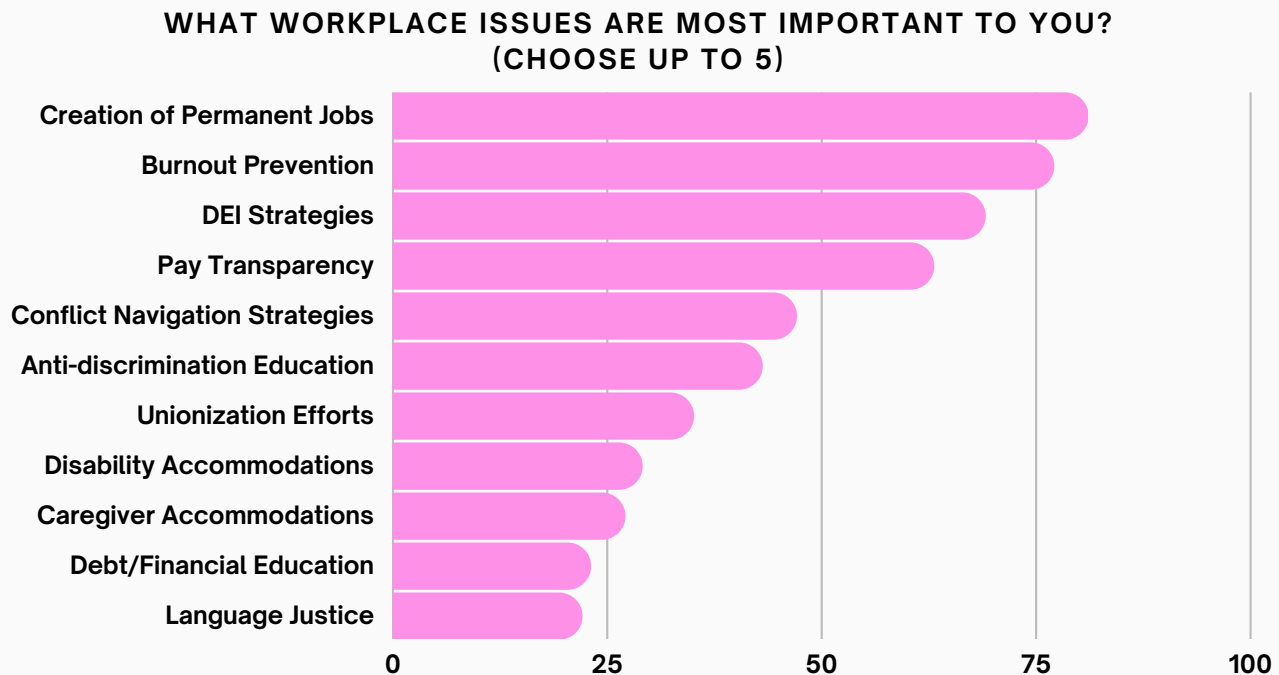### ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION/RECORDED MINUTE

FEES OR BUDGETED COSTS OF AUDIT EDITING/RECORDED MINUTE

Priority Issues for Oral History Workers

Participants prioritized the creation of permanent jobs, burnout prevention, DEI strategies, pay transparency, and conflict navigation strategies.

From a list of eleven workplace issues, participants chose five to represent their priorities. The question asked for priorities in order to take clear direction from the oral history workers that participated in the survey. Even while it's not clear the extent to which this collection of workers is representative of the field at large, it's the only directive we have coming straight from the people who are doing the work.

WHAT WORKPLACE ISSUES ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU? (CHOOSE UP TO 5)

Issue	Value
Creation of Permanent Jobs	~81
Burnout Prevention	~77
DEI Strategies	~69
Pay Transparency	~63
Conflict Navigation Strategies	~47
Anti-discrimination Education	~43
Unionization Efforts	~35
Disability Accommodations	~29
Caregiver Accommodations	~27
Debt/Financial Education	~23
Language Justice	~22

As we review this priority list, as well as the responses to the survey as a whole, what are the next steps that translate this data into a program of advocacy, and, where needed, further research? Where can existing resources for cultural workers serve as a guide and invitation for collaboration?

Recommendations

Create sample job descriptions that demonstrate an understanding of oral history work & assign a reasonable workload, preventing burnout

- Generate examples of full-time oral history jobs descriptions at various levels, representing the range of tasks that oral history workers do, the fields where we often work, and the workload we can ethically sustain

- Use existing worker-developed resources that provide justification and criteria for better and more equitable jobs

- Promote sample job descriptions and justification for more permanent jobs to cultural workers and grant writers, and especially granting agencies and grant reviewers

Develop a budgeting calculator for estimating costs and time for oral history projects & generate a fee guide for contractors and consultants, supporting pay transparency

- Plan a teach-in for staff of organizations, consultants, and contractors who conduct oral history work to talk through oral history budgets; without any guidelines, many who are new to the work will underestimate time and costs

- Create a set of resources, including time and cost estimates, that can serve as guidance for people doing oral history work and/or to justify costs, including payment to narrators, ending unpaid work and internships, and other emergent practices

- Prevent the undervaluation of time, experience, and funding needed to conduct ethical work and ensure equitable pay for oral history workers

Recommendations

Curate a kit of worker-supportive policies that prioritize mental health & well-being

- Assemble a kit of worker-supportive resources and policies that can be used by individuals and institutions practicing in various fields, with a focus on disability accommodations, expanded definitions of caregiving and mental health, and navigating conflict

- Highlight strategies for preventing burnout geared to supervisors, as burnout is a systemic, structural problem and not an individual failure

- Host Q&A's with lawyers, worker-supportive human resource managers, and other professionals to chat about questions related to discrimination, copyright, freelance law, accessible events, legal definitions of volunteering, conflict management, et al

Promote models for equitable and inclusive approaches to oral history work & strategies for de-centering whiteness that support structural change vis-à-vis individual work

- Implement flexible guidelines for reparative and accessible community-based oral history work, including shared leadership, co-defining community, post-custodial archives, adaptive timelines, and language justice, as part of a social justice approach

- Use existing tools (such as report cards, workbooks, and guides) to assess whether jobs and workplaces are equitable and safe for BIPOC staff and accessible for disabled workers

- For white oral history workers, commit to ongoing, lifelong anti-racist and decolonial education and praxis

Conclusion

So what's next? The Survey & Solidarity Project requests collaboration with workers and organizations alike.

As the Survey & Solidarity Project considers next steps, it's clear that we will need investment and participation from more people and organizations to further refine and carry out the vision demonstrated by our recommendations. Professional associations, community archival initiatives, university departments, archives, and of course, individual oral history workers and cultural workers in adjacent fields with a shared vision––we can only implement these changes with your collaboration and participation. Your solidarity.

For our work thus far, solidarity is as much about the process of how we come together as it is about the outcomes. We continue to recognize emotional labor, community care, and peer education as the fuel that got us to this point, and what will continue to propel us forward.

Anyone interested in joining the project in its next phase can express interest here.

Thank you for your labor reading and sharing this report.

Links & References

For a full collection of works consulted, see <u>Labor Resources for Cultural Workers</u>. Below is a list of projects & publications referenced and linked in this document.

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