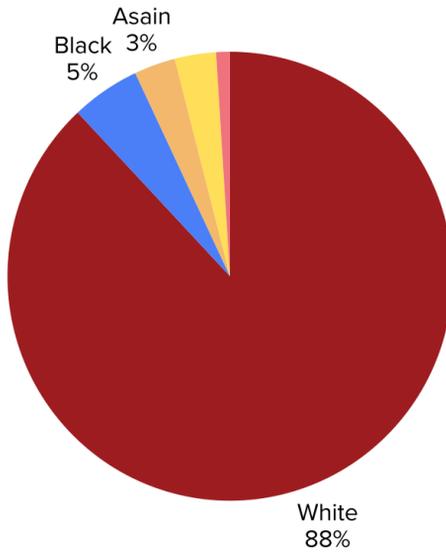


Who gets to be a Librarian?

Examining racial disparities within the Library profession: The underrepresentation of African Americans Librarians and its effects

Overview

Libraries are often described as inclusive institutions that provide equitable access to information and knowledge. However, the demographics of the library profession do not fully reflect the diversity of the communities libraries serve. This research examines the underrepresentation of African American librarians in the United States and explores the historical, educational, and institutional factors that contribute to this disparity. Understanding these barriers is important for a profession that aims to promote equity, representation, and access within information environments.



Representation Gap

African Americans represent **approximately 12.6% of the United States population**, yet they account for **only about 5.1% of librarians**. This disparity highlights a long-standing issue within the profession and suggests that librarianship has not kept pace with the demographic diversity of the communities libraries serve. The gap is not simply a numerical imbalance; it reflects structural barriers affecting recruitment, education, and workplace experiences within the Library system.

Key Factors Contributing to Underrepresentation

| LIS Education Pipeline | Structural Barriers in LIS Education | Workplace Climate and Professional Culture |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Entry into the library profession typically begins with enrollment in a Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program. However, African American students remain underrepresented in MLIS education. In 2017, only 4.6% of students enrolled in ALA-accredited MLIS programs were African American , limiting entry into the professional workforce. | Many LIS programs offer limited coursework addressing issues of race, equity, and social justice. As a result, students may graduate without a strong understanding of how systemic inequities shape access to information or influence library services. Scholars have also argued that LIS curricula often reflect dominant cultural perspectives rather than critically examining race and power within information systems. | African American librarians may encounter workplace challenges including professional isolation, microaggressions, and subtle forms of bias. Research also shows that librarians of color are frequently expected to take on additional diversity-related responsibilities, sometimes referred to as diversity labor , which can affect job satisfaction and retention. |

Why Representation Matters

Representation within librarianship influences how libraries connect with the communities they serve. A more diverse workforce can:

- strengthen community trust in library institutions
- support culturally responsive programs and services
- bring broader perspectives to decision-making related to collections, outreach, and policies
- improve the ability of libraries to respond to diverse community needs

When library staff reflect the populations they serve, libraries can better fulfill their mission as inclusive community information centers.

Moving Toward Greater Equity

Addressing racial disparities in librarianship requires coordinated efforts across multiple areas

- **Recruitment:** Increasing awareness of librarianship as a career path among underrepresented communities
- **Curriculum Development:** Expanding diversity-focused coursework within LIS programs
- **Workplace Support:** Creating inclusive professional environments that support retention and advancement

Key Takeaway

The underrepresentation of African American librarians reflects broader historical and structural inequities within the profession. Addressing these disparities requires attention to the entire professional pathway—from awareness of librarianship to educational access and workplace culture. Strengthening representation within the profession helps libraries better serve diverse communities and uphold their commitment to equity and access.