



synopsis:

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- The numbers shed light on a larger divide in our society between those with power, resources, and influence and those without.

- Recruitment issues are not the main problem for diversifying the industry; it's retention.

DOES DIVERSITY MATTER DURING A PANDEMIC?

Lee & Low Books releases the results of the second iteration of the Diversity Baseline Survey (DBS 2.0).

by Jason Low

Do issues like representation and equity matter during a global pandemic, when the world is closed for business and people are afraid? The short answer is yes, they matter, but it will take a longer answer to tell you why.

At the beginning of 2020, Lee & Low Books released the results of the second iteration of the Diversity Baseline Survey (DBS 2.0). It had been four years since the first survey, which was deployed in 2015, and the publishing industry's interest in diversity and the enthusiasm to participate in the second survey was palpable. When we originally launched the survey, we wanted to know statistically what the level of representation was behind the scenes among publishing's gatekeepers, including publishers and book reviewers. In DBS 2.0, we added literary agents and academic presses to the scope of the survey, which contributed to a 112% increase in participants.

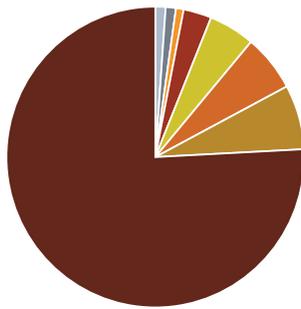
Having a larger data set at our disposal did not result in any statistically significant change. The results of DBS 2.0 revealed that 76% of people in the publishing industry identify as white; 74% are cisgender; 81% are straight; and 89% identify as nondisabled. As our co-author and data analyst Laura Jiménez, a Ph.D., at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, stated: "The industry is just as white as it was four years ago." The addition of academic presses and literary agents was a tangible

way for us to confirm that all segments of our industry conform to the same homogeneity: predominately white, cisgender, straight, and nondisabled.

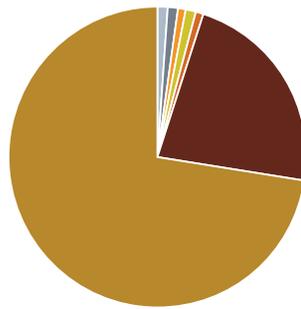
So, how is data from DBS 2.0 helpful to us in times like the COVID-19 crisis? The numbers shed light on a larger divide in our society between those with power, resources, and influence and those without. In publishing, it is predominantly communities of color and people with disabilities who are shut out.

COVID-19 also adds a new layer to another aspect of representation: materials and information access. While those who can afford up-to-date computers or tablets and fast internet can still enjoy a large range of books and content, others do not have this privilege. That becomes a serious problem when the majority of what publishers, educators, and librarians have to offer can only be accessed online. The "digital divide"—a term coined during the Clinton administration—was never solved and has hit marginalized populations particularly hard during COVID-19. "Shelter in place" keeps libraries closed, so local libraries cannot address access issues as they normally would. I reached out to various library leadership to ask how they saw their long-term role, as libraries have historically acted in the capacity of an essential service and have often stepped up during national emergencies. The leaders' responses varied but mostly reflected a wait-and-see approach, which is understandable since there is not much that can be physically done when the only way to slow down the virus is by staying far apart.

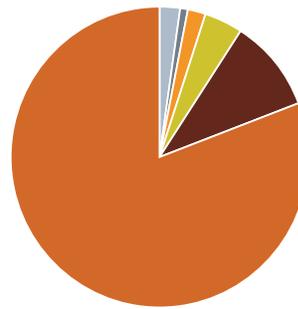
Publishing Industry Demographics



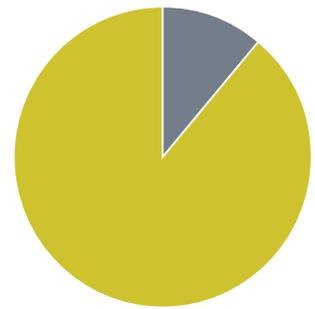
- 76% White/Caucasian
- 7% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/South Asian/South East Indian
- 6% Latinx/Latino/Mexican
- 5% Black/Afro American/Afro Caribbean
- 3% Biracial/Multiracial
- <1% American Indian/Alaskan Native/First Nations/Native American
- <1% Middle Eastern
- 1% Other



- 74% Cis woman
- 23% Cis man
- 1% Genderfluid/Non-binary/Genderqueer
- <1% Trans man
- <1% Trans woman
- <1% Intersex
- 1% Other



- 81% Straight/Heterosexual
- 10% Bisexual/Pansexual
- 4% Gay
- 2% Lesbian
- 1% Asexual
- 2% Other



- 89% Straight/Heterosexual
- 11% Bisexual/Pansexual



Diversity in Publishing 2019
Diversity Baseline Survey 2.0
by Lee & Low Books
blog.leeandlow.com

Diversity Baseline Survey 2.0 (2019), created by Lee & Low Books with co-authors Laura M. Jiménez, Ph.D., Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, and Betsy Beckert, graduate student in the Language and Literacy Department of Wheelock College of Education & Human Development.

That leaves the parents who are sequestered at home in charge of keeping their kids engaged with the books they have on-site—and families who live on the fringes of the economy may have limited home libraries to begin with. When I spoke to Sarah Park Dahlen, Ph.D., of St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, about this issue, she commented there may be very few books

in the house, and the ones available may be of poor quality or sorely out of date. All of the great diverse books published in the last 10 years are likely to be missing from these home libraries. While the COVID-19 pandemic does present extra time for many families to become reacquainted with the joy of reading, many households will not be able to take advantage of that time because of their limited access to quality books.

The “digital divide”—a term coined during the Clinton administration—was never solved and has hit marginalized populations particularly hard during COVID-19.

The virus has also served as a good reminder of how fear can be used as an effective way to distract from the shortcomings of leadership and give the uninformed a group of people to blame, especially around issues of race. Many mainstream media early on referred to the virus as the “Chinese virus,” but other media outlets went further, with alarmist headlines proclaiming a “Yellow Alert.” As everyone in publishing will agree, words matter, and this choice of words has had dire implications. The intentional labeling of the virus as Chinese unsurprisingly resulted in misinformation, xenophobia, and scapegoating

that has led to widespread racism and even violence against Asian Americans and Asians in general in countries across the world.

When the COVID-19 pandemic finally abates, and the world emerges from their homes, our Diversity Baseline Survey will continue to serve its original purpose: an effective way to hold the industry accountable in stepping up inclusion initiatives in overall staffing across the board. There were certainly some bright spots worth celebrating: 49% of recent publishing interns identify as BIPOC, 49% are on the LGBTQIA spectrum, and 22% identify as having a disability. This shows that the publishing industry has made a concerted effort to reach out to marginalized groups for internships, and that should eventually lead to a more diverse pool of entry-level workers, as it is common practice to hire from internship programs.

At the same time, conversations that I have had with my co-worker, Jalissa Corrie, who is a member of the organization People of Color in Publishing, indicate that recruitment issues are not the main problem for diversifying the industry; it's retention. We see this reflected in the data. While the highest levels of representation were in the intern category, these gains did not carry over to permanent employees, much less the executive suite. Burnout, low pay, and uncertain career opportunities are just a few of the reasons POCs have chosen not to make publishing a career. If diverse candidates continue to leave the industry for greener pastures, publishing will continue to miss out on their valuable insights and different perspectives.

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Since Lee & Low Books was founded nearly 30 years ago, we have lived and worked through calamities like 9/11, Hurricane Sandy, and the 2008 recession. All of these adversities were brutal in their own ways, but we eventually got through them all, and we plan to do the same with COVID-19. Surveys like the DBS 2.0 represent our continuum of work to help make the publishing industry more inclusive, but the statistics can also inspire reflection on larger issues that relate to American society at large and help us understand why equity and access matter. ●



Jason Low is the publisher/co-owner of Lee & Low Books, the largest multicultural children's book publisher in the United States. The company's mission is to publish books about everyone and for everyone. Founded in 1991, Lee & Low celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2021.

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