

Delayed Retirements and the Youth Movement among ARL Library Professionals

Stanley Wilder, Dean of Libraries, Louisiana State University

Library professionals have never been older.

The average age of library professionals in the most recent Association of Research Libraries (ARL) demographic data (2015) was 49, making this the oldest population in the 29-year history of this data series.¹ More to the point, the 2015 ARL population had an unusual skew towards the oldest age cohorts: 24% were aged 60 and over, up from just 9% in 1986.

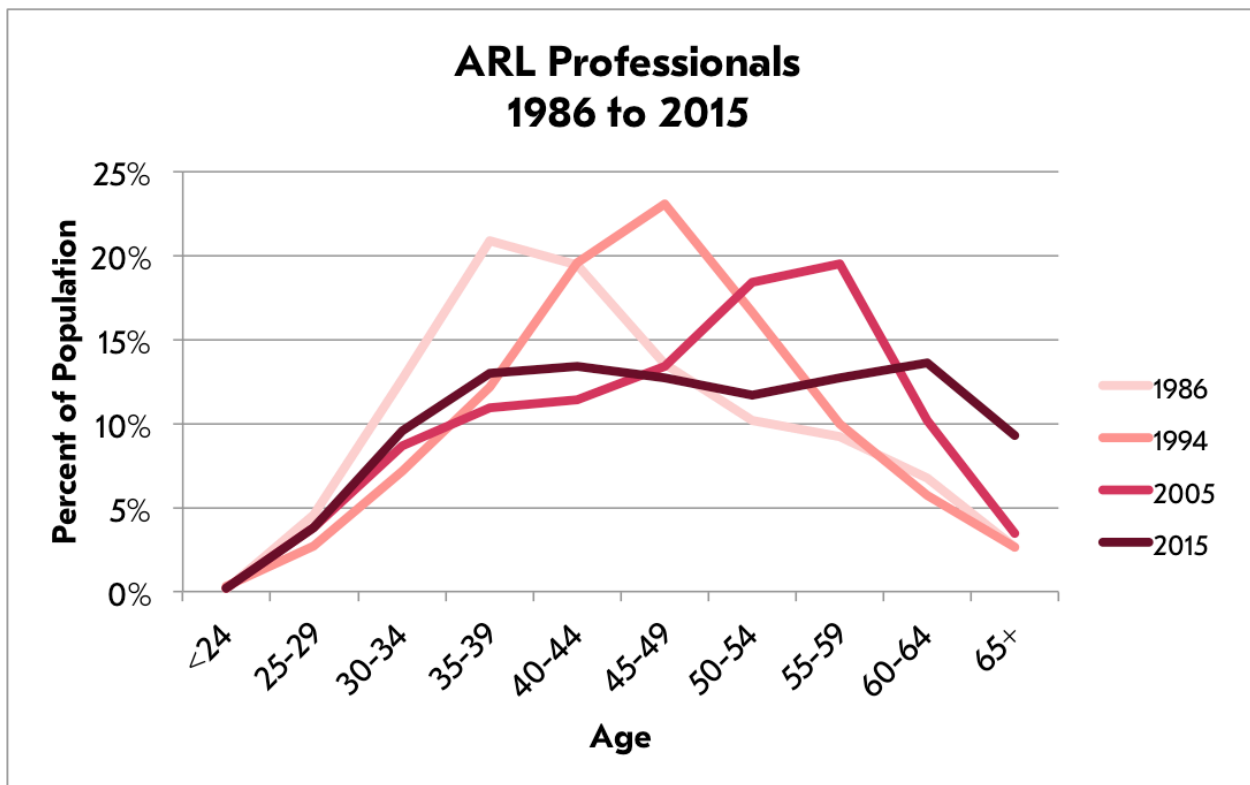


Figure 1

Over 9% of ARL professionals in 2015 were aged 65 and over, nearly three times the number in the population just 10 years earlier.

The aging of librarian populations in the US is a long-standing phenomenon, so much so that we might be tempted to conclude that the 2015 population is just more of the same.² But the 2015 data **are** surprising, for the simple reason that a professional population cannot age indefinitely. If the profession is to avoid outright extinction, it must at some point fill the vacancies created by retirements, refreshing its ranks with younger individuals.

This is exactly what should have happened in ARL libraries between 2010 and 2015, according to the projections produced from the 2000 data set.³ Those projections described a population with an apex cohort (the largest age group within the population) that would age rapidly through 2010, when it would reach the 55–59 age cohort.

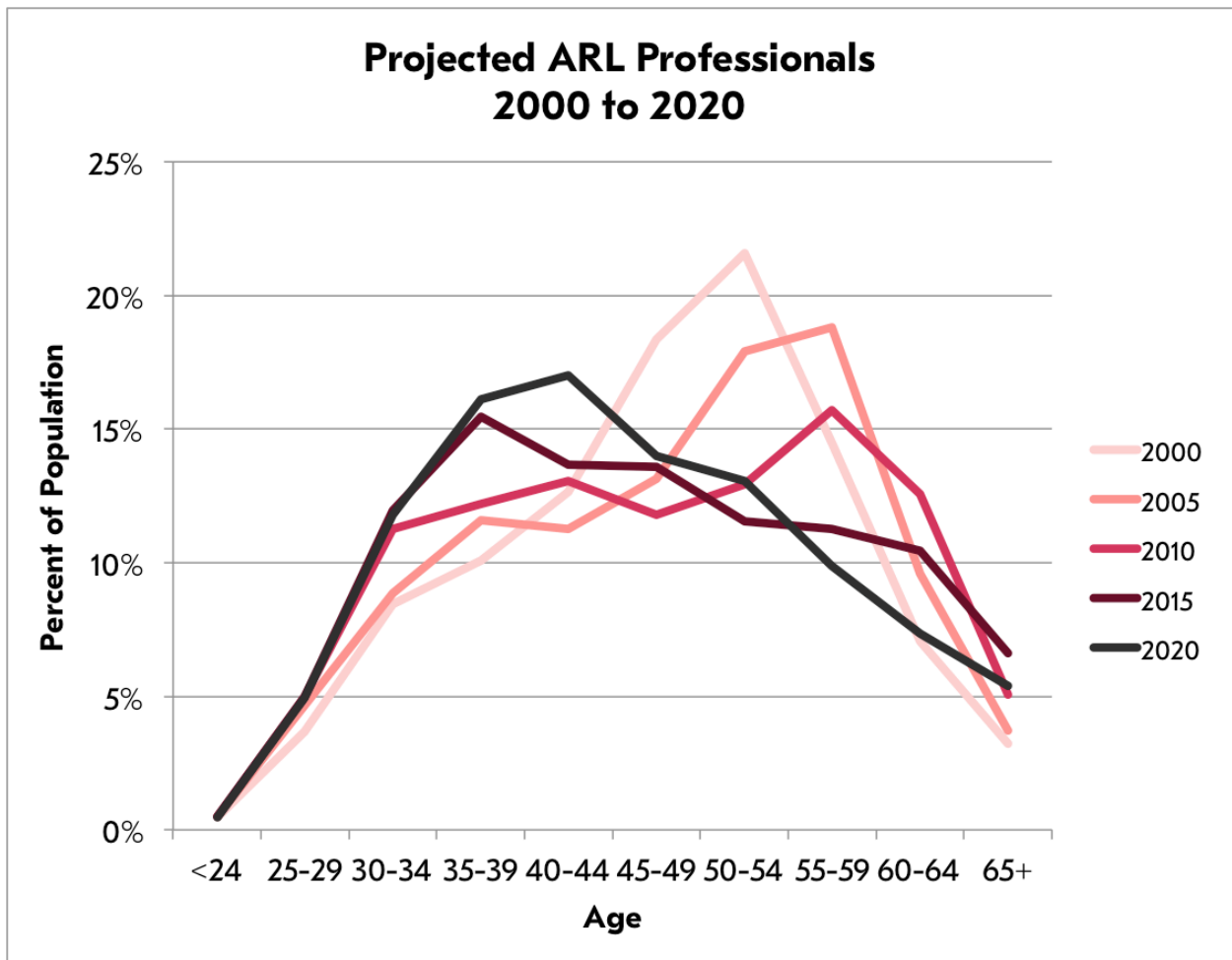


Figure 2

The projections predicted, however, that the five years beginning in 2010 were to be an inflection point. Already by 2015, the apex would shift to the 35–39 cohort, the beginning of a youth movement that would carry on through 2020. In that glorious year, a majority of the population would be aged 50 and under for the first time since 2000. At that point, the profession’s age profile would resemble the actual 1986 population of ARL professionals, the first and also the youngest population in the data series.

What those projections failed to anticipate was that 2010, far from marking a changing of the generational guard, would instead be the beginning of a sudden and dramatic turn towards delayed retirement. The retirement-prone 65+ age cohort, which had been stable at about 3% of the population since 1986, jumped to 5% in 2010, and then to over 9% in 2015. Delayed retirement is also evident in the librarian population tracked in the US Current Population Survey (CPS), where the 65+ cohort more than tripled between 2005 and 2015 to almost 11%.

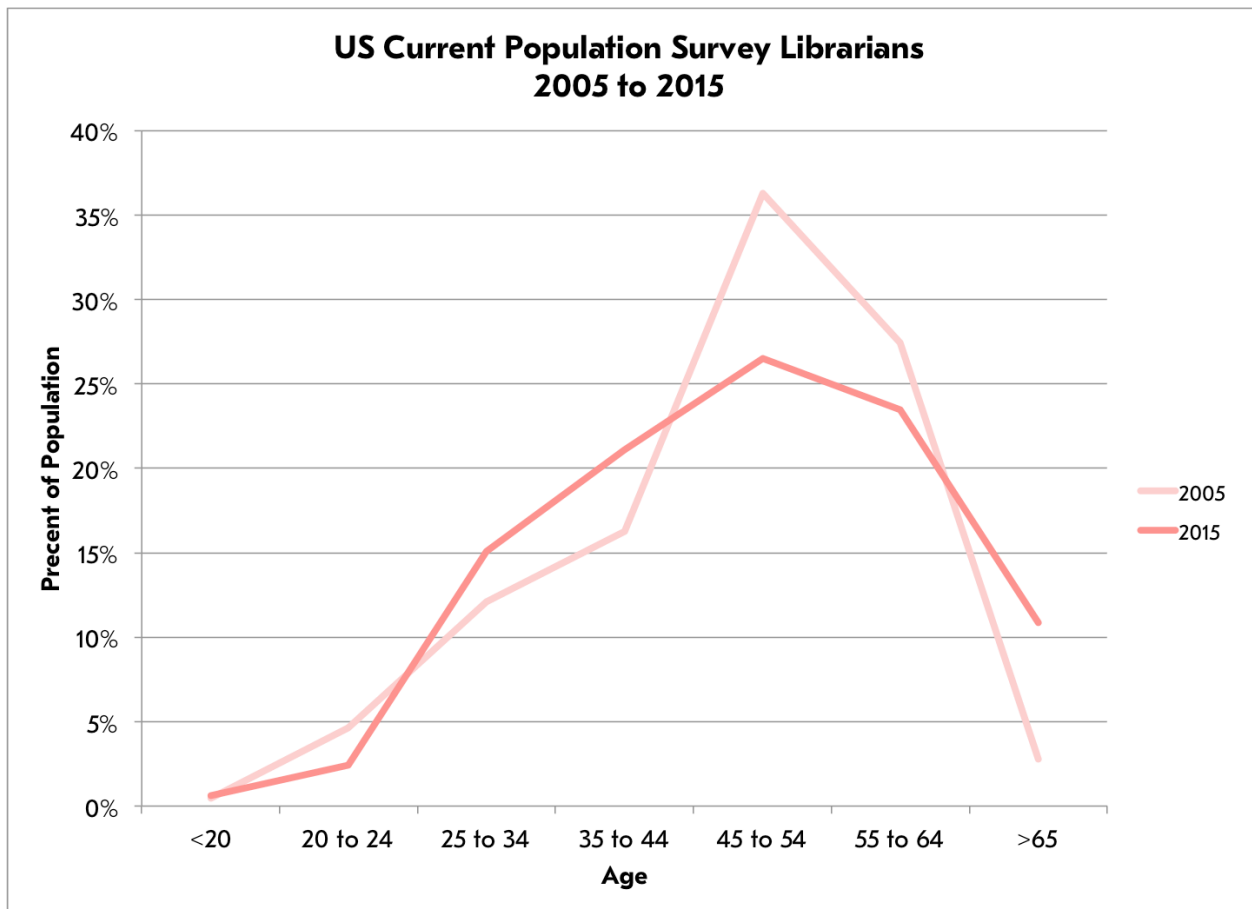


Figure 3

One explanation for the disconnect between the actual and projected retirement behavior among ARL professionals is the 2008 recession, an event that disrupted everyone’s idea of economic normalcy. In the US economy as a whole, the recession resulted in the loss of almost nine million jobs, and doubled the unemployment rate.⁴ In the process, the recession had a devastating impact on pension savings, and on perceptions of retirement preparedness.⁵ Coming as it did at a time of broad-based disinvestment in public infrastructure of all kinds, budget cuts to higher education were common, with some states reducing support by as much as 55% between 2008 and 2016.⁶ In such a climate, it seems reasonable that more individuals would consider their reduced wealth and the general economic uncertainty around them, and delay their retirements as a result.⁷

Alternatively, it could be that the 2000 projections simply missed a delayed retirement phenomenon that would have happened even without a recession. Labor force projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) have predicted rising numbers of individuals throughout the older age cohorts since at least 2000, a function of aging baby boomers.⁸ A 2012 BLS study acknowledged the recession, but discounted its impact.⁹ The notion that delayed retirement might be nothing more than a reflection of general demographic dynamics can be found in the CPS data noted above. Librarians in that data are just one of hundreds of professions in the US, and that larger population also shows signs of a recent trend towards delayed retirement. Basic population demographics must account for some of the delayed retirement among ARL professionals, and it may account for most of it.

It is worth noting that while Canadian ARL professionals can also be said to be delaying retirement, they do so at half the rate of their colleagues in the US. The portion of the Canadian ARL professional population that is 65+ rose from just 0.4% in 2005 to 4.7% in 2015.

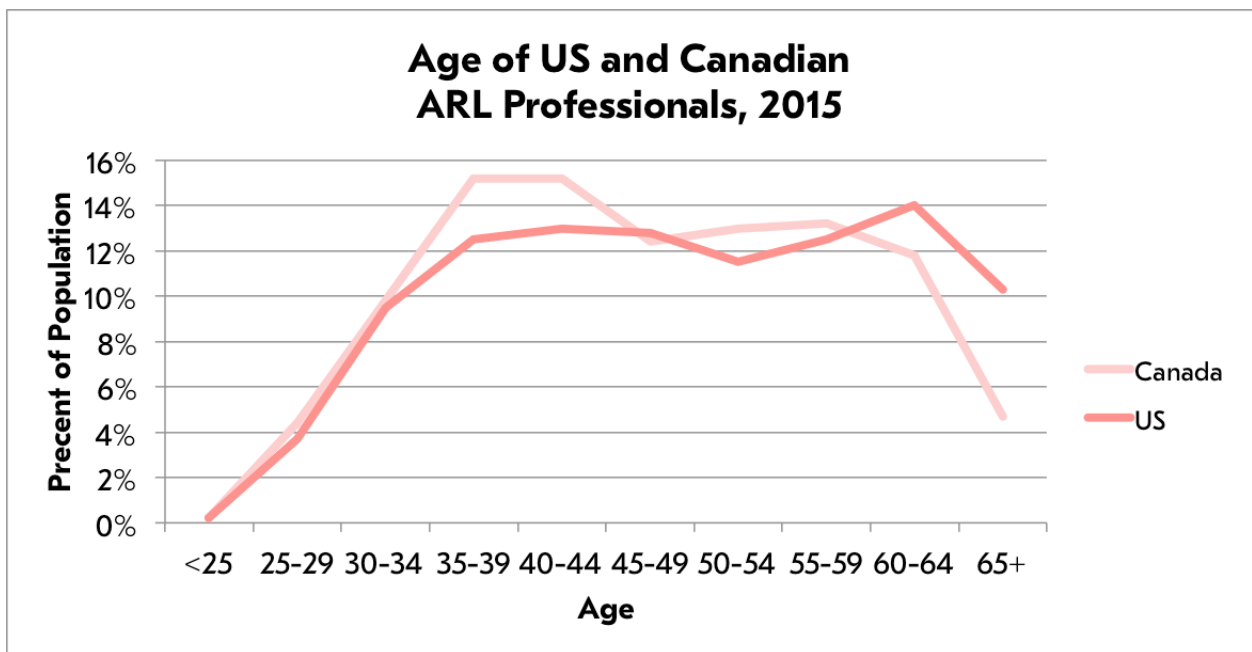


Figure 4

Retirements Delayed, Not Eliminated

Whatever the cause or causes of ARL’s delayed retirements, there is no evidence that people are foregoing retirement altogether. Retirement is a deeply rooted, cultural, even biological phenomenon, one that is affected but not determined by changing economic conditions or legal provisions.¹⁰ Among ARL professionals, a paltry 1.5% continued to work at 70 and beyond, and while that represents an uptick relative to 2005, this is still a very small number of individuals.

With eventual retirement a virtual certainty, what can we expect in the five years between 2015 and 2020? It is not possible to derive a formal retirement rate from the ARL demographic data, but given that net changes to the size of cohorts are fairly consistent from one data set to the next, rough estimates are possible. For example: in any given year, the percentage of the population aged 60–64 drops by about half relative to the 65+ cohort five years later.¹¹ Applying this calculation to the 2015 population, we would expect that by 2020, 689 vacancies will arise from the 60–64 cohort alone.

Another approach is necessary to estimate the number of individuals from the 2015 population aged 65+ who will leave the population by 2020. To calculate this estimate, I subtracted the percentage of individuals 70 and older who might remain in the population (1.5%) from the percentage in the 2015 65+ cohort (9.3%). This reduces the percentage of the 2015 population aged 65+ that can be expected to leave by 2020 to 7.8%, the equivalent of approximately 790 vacancies. Combining these two estimates, 689 vacancies from the 60–64 cohort and 790 from the 65+ cohort, yields a total of 1,479 for the period. Table 1 applies this methodology to previous years, and illustrates the dramatic uptick in departures possible in the current five-year period.

Estimated Departures from the Two Oldest Age Cohorts of ARL Professionals, 1986 to 2020

	Population size in prior year	60–64 departures	65+ departures	Total departures
1986 to 1990	8,168	278	90	368
1990 to 1994	8,792	308	114	422
1994 to 2000	8,634	203	104	307
2000 to 2005	8,882	315	133	449
2005 to 2010	9,655	492	106	599
2010 to 2015	10,037	738	361	1,099
2015 to 2020	10,131	689	790	1,479

Table 1

Youth Movement Starts Now?

The delayed retirements of 2015 have almost certainly played a role in the muted hiring levels among ARL libraries in recent years, a topic I will address in a future chapter of my analysis. It is hard to see, however, how hiring could remain low. More likely, the peak vacancies we expected between 2010 and 2015 are actually happening right now, resulting in the best market for research library job seekers in memory.

The youth movement is almost certainly already in progress, but for ARL libraries, youth is not what it once was. New professionals are naturally the youngest subgroup in the population, and it is true that library schools continue to attract primarily young students, about 70% under the age of 35 in 2015.¹² But ARL libraries tend to recruit new professionals who are somewhat older, with an average age of 35. What's more, ARL libraries are increasingly likely to skip the hiring of new professionals and instead recruit individuals with experience: the percentage of new professionals among new hires has declined from 35% in 1986 to 26% in 2015.

A Case of Very Delayed Retirement?

Examining the age of subgroups in the ARL population reveals that delayed retirement is a remarkably consistent phenomenon throughout the data. With the important exception of the Canadian population noted above, in 2015 we find proportionally heightened numbers of individuals aged 65+ across ARL subgroups, such as Office of Equal Opportunity and Access (OEOA) status, public or private institution, sex, region, and most jobs. Previous analyses have noted unusual aging among department heads and administrators, but in 2015, these positions no longer stand out. They remain somewhat older than other positions, a natural function of the experience they generally require, but to judge by the 65+ age cohort, they are retiring along with everyone else.

There is one glaring exception to this rule, however, and that is library directors. Going back to 1986, we find that about 3% of directors placed in the 65+ cohort, matching the overall population year after year.

Then comes 2005, when the portion of directors 65+ jumped to 35%, from just 2% five years before. This extraordinary change in behavior carried on through the 2015 data, where a whopping 39% of ARL directors were aged 65+.

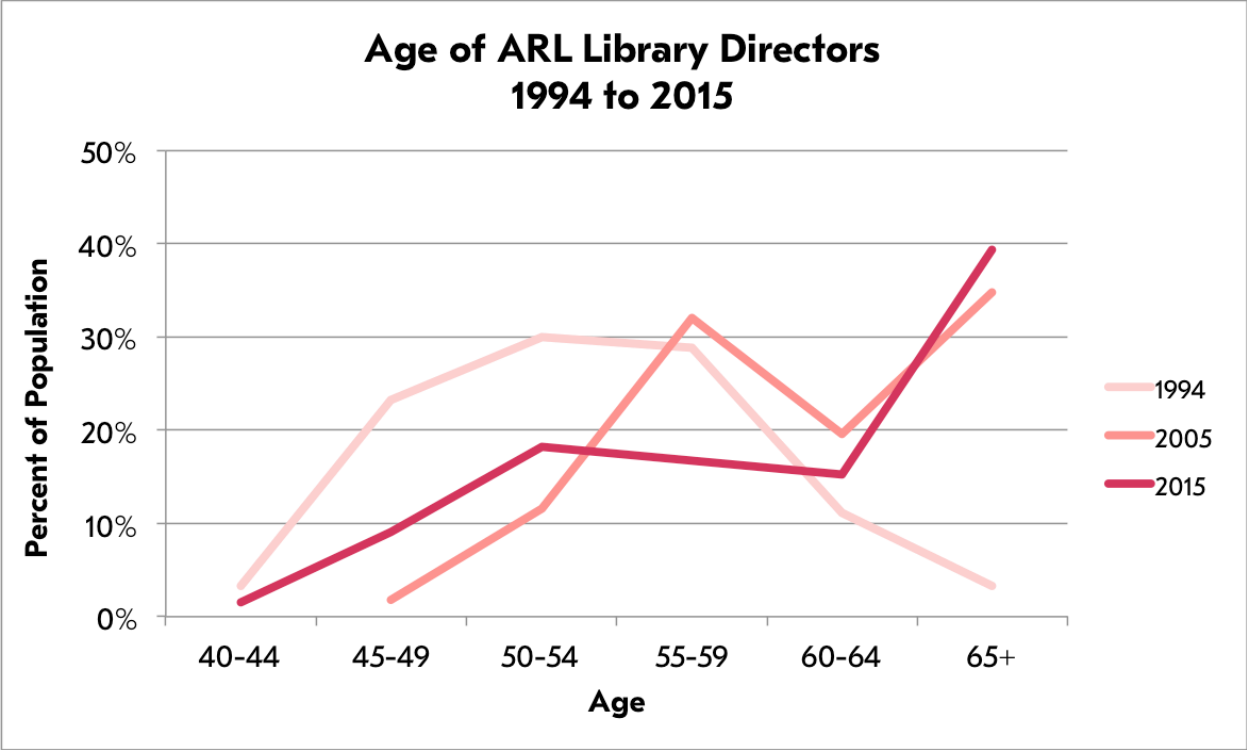


Figure 5

Mindful of the discrepancy between US and Canadians in this cohort, it makes sense to compare ARL library directors in both countries. Here we find that having isolated US directors, fully 45% of US directors were aged 65+ in 2015, compared to just 14% of their Canadian counterparts. Remembering that only 11% of the rest of the US ARL population was in the 65+ age cohort, we can say with certainty that as a group US ARL directors have recently and decisively changed their behavior as regards retirement. We know that the 65+ cohort of ARL directors is not seeing an influx of new people taking the place of retirees because the ARL Salary Survey collects data on each person’s years of experience in their current library.

With nearly half of the US director population in a single age cohort (65+), it is worth examining that cohort more closely. I have noted above that while the ARL population in 2015 had an unusually high percentage in the 65+ age cohort, the number of individuals aged 70 and over was at most 1.5%. This proves not to be the case for US ARL directors, 14% of whom were aged 70 and over in 2015.

Where is that particular trend likely to go? Even research library directors can’t work indefinitely, but the assumptions underlying the estimate of departures in Table 1 clearly do not apply either. And what explains the abrupt change of behavior beginning in 2005? It could be the recession. Or maybe directors are facing increased pressure to remain in place from their administrations. It could be that the increasing gap between average compensation as reflected in the ARL Salary

Survey and the compensation of directors drives that group to make different choices as to retirement.

Or is there some other reason underlying delayed retirements for US ARL directors? How far might this phenomenon go in its present direction? Will it quickly reverse course such that the director age profile once again comes to resemble that of the population as a whole?

A Delayed but Significant Youth Movement

At this writing in early 2017, the age of the population of ARL professionals echoes that of US librarians generally, and points to a period of high demand for library expertise. The net effect of the recruitments to come will be a large and important youth movement, so large that it will have only one predecessor in our recent history, the mass recruitment of young baby boomers that accompanied the extraordinary growth of higher education in the 1960s. New librarians in the 1960s were adding significantly to the size of research library professional staffing, and it is hard to imagine that the 2015–2020 recruits will do anything but fill existing vacancies. The new recruits are thus not likely to reach those heights of decades-long dominance that the 1960s hires enjoyed, but they will be disproportionately important, injecting new experience, attitudes, and aspirations into our libraries, keeping them relevant in a climate of fundamental change and uncertainty.

© 2017 Stanley Wilder



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

“Delayed Retirements and the Youth Movement among ARL Library Professionals” is the first in a series of articles by Stanley Wilder to be published by ARL in 2017. The series, *Workforce Trends in Research Libraries*, will be hosted on the ARL website at <http://www.arl.org/workforce-trends> and collected in *Research Library Issues* when complete.

¹ The primary data source for this study is the demographic portion of the 2015 ARL Salary Survey, an unpublished data series collected by ARL. The Salary Survey includes data for all professionals working in university ARL member libraries in the US and Canada. The data tables used for the analysis presented in this article are available for download at <http://www.arl.org/storage/2017-03-09-rli-wilder-data.xls>.

² Stanley Wilder, *The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1995).

³ Stanley Wilder, *Demographic Change in Academic Librarianship* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2003).

⁴ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “BLS Spotlight on Statistics: The Recession of 2007–2009,” February 2012, https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2012/recession/pdf/recession_bls_spotlight.pdf

⁵ Brooke Helppie McFall, “Crash and Wait? The Impact of the Great Recession on the Retirement Plans of Older Americans,” *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3 (May 2011): 40–44.

⁶ Gordon Russell, “Special Report: How Startling, Unique Cuts Have Transformed Louisiana’s Universities,” *New Orleans Advocate*, February 12, 2016, http://www.theadvocate.com/new-orleans/news/education/article_6f841848-a09a-5ee7-818f-0d1a43627f55.html

⁷ Paola Scommegna, “US Baby Boomers Likely to Delay Retirement,” Population Reference Bureau, September 2014, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2014/us-babyboomers-retirement.aspx>.

⁸ Mitra Toossi, “Labor Force Projections to 2014: Retiring Boomers,” *Monthly Labor Review* 128, no. 11 (November 2005): 25–44, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art3full.pdf>; Mitra Toossi, “Labor Force Projections to 2016: More Workers in Their Golden Years,” *Monthly Labor Review* 130, no. 11 (November 2007): 33–52, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2007/11/art3full.pdf>.

⁹ Mitra Toossi, “Labor Force Projections to 2020: A More Slowly Growing Workforce,” *Monthly Labor Review* 135, no. 1 (January 2012): 43–64, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2012/01/art3full.pdf>.

¹⁰ Mo Wang and Junqi Shi, “Psychological Research on Retirement,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (January 2014): 209–33, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2632296>.

¹¹ See Figure 1.

¹² Association for Library and Information Science Education, *ALISE Statistical Reports*, 2015.