

Volunteering in libraries: survey on Romanian public libraries

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Libraries are a natural hotspot for volunteer work, they can act as both beneficiaries and organizers of volunteers and their work. Volunteer programs in the libraries cover an important range of possibilities, from basic library work (moving books, assisting users that need help) to specialized activities (language courses, computer courses, specialized activities with persons with disabilities) and everything in between.

This study aims to offer an overview of the situation regarding volunteer work in Romanian public libraries. It seeks to find out whether and how the county libraries and the two national libraries use volunteers. This study presents a brief analysis of the online presence of Romanian libraries.

Keywords: *volunteering, libraries, study, Romania, Romanian libraries*

1. Introduction

Libraries are a natural hotspot for volunteer work, they can act as both beneficiaries and organizers of volunteers and their work. Volunteer programs in the libraries cover an important range of possibilities, from basic library work (moving books, assisting users that need help) to specialized activities (language courses, computer courses, specialized activities with persons with disabilities) and everything in between. While volunteering can be and is done in all types of libraries, public libraries in particular seem to be the most prone to use (and need) help from volunteers. Moreover, public libraries are (theoretically) more open to a wider variety of public than any other type of library, thus having the most significant potential impact. Especially in the case of small towns, libraries can be the only place that offers the opportunity to volunteer.

Volunteers are an important resource for any library: they can help with activities that require abilities not possessed by librarians; they can help with all sorts of work around the library, from moving books to offering basic information retrieval help for patrons and much more. Especially in the cases of libraries that have limited resources or have experienced budget cuts (as is the case in more and more countries), volunteers can help with keeping alive services that would otherwise be condemned.

This study aims to offer an overview of the situation regarding volunteer work in Romanian public libraries. It seeks to find out whether and how the county libraries and the two national libraries use volunteers.

2. Methodology

The study aimed to collect data from all the county libraries and the two national libraries (National Library of Romania and the Romanian Academy Library). We chose to analyze only these libraries because they are the largest and most important public libraries (or libraries that also fulfill a public library role - in the case of the national libraries). The data was collected in two steps, between February and March 2020. First, we collected data available on the libraries' websites and then we collected data directly from the libraries through a questionnaire created in Google Forms and sent via email (to the official email of the library - as stated on the website). From the websites we collected data regarding the volunteer programs (if any such information is available on the website, if information for prospective volunteers is available, the number of volunteer programs available at the library, the types of volunteer activities, and the depth of the volunteer programs/activities description - in number of words - see Annex 1 for full list of results). Through the questionnaire we collected data regarding the usage of volunteers in the libraries, the existence of a volunteer coordinator, a volunteer management strategy, and training for volunteers, the number of volunteers used in libraries (and if this number is considered to be sufficient), the types of activities done by them, and the reasons for using their work (see Annex 2 for full list of questions and results). From the total of 43 analysed libraries (the 41 county libraries and the two national libraries), we received responses for the questionnaire from 25. Only 21 of the libraries had information regarding volunteering on their websites.

3. Study results



Fig. 1. *Libraries that use volunteers*

The analysis of the questionnaire answers shows that 24 libraries use volunteers, while only 21 libraries offer information about volunteering on their websites. In total, a number of 31 libraries offer volunteer opportunities (there is partial superposition between the ones that responded to the questionnaire and the ones that have information on their websites). This number means that more than two thirds of the total number of libraries use volunteers. We consider this to be a good starting point, especially taking into account that we did not receive any kind of response for the questionnaire from a significant part of the total number of libraries.

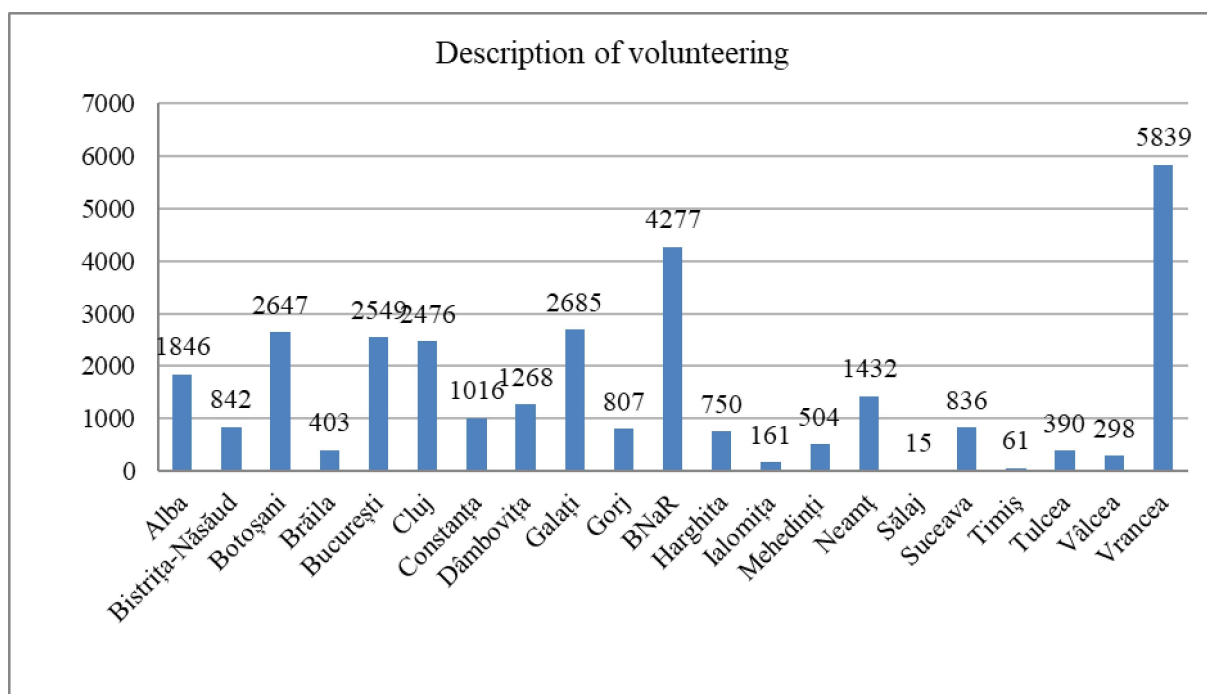


Fig. 2. Description of volunteering activities on the library websites in no. of words

The length of the description of the volunteer activities or any volunteer-related aspects (in number of words) can offer us a glimpse into the way in which libraries see volunteering. Some libraries write quite extensively about volunteering (the National Library and the County Library of Vrancea each have a more than 4000-word description). The average description is 1481 words long, while the median description is 842 words long. This difference clearly indicates that the average is significantly influenced by the libraries that have extensive descriptions and that an „average” library has a 800-word description. Two libraries have short descriptions (under 100 words), one of which has a barely 15 words description. We must keep in mind that this is only a quantitative analysis, therefore we cannot make judgements regarding the quality of the descriptions but we cannot wonder what can be said in 15 words and what does this say about the seriousness of the library and its attitude towards volunteering?

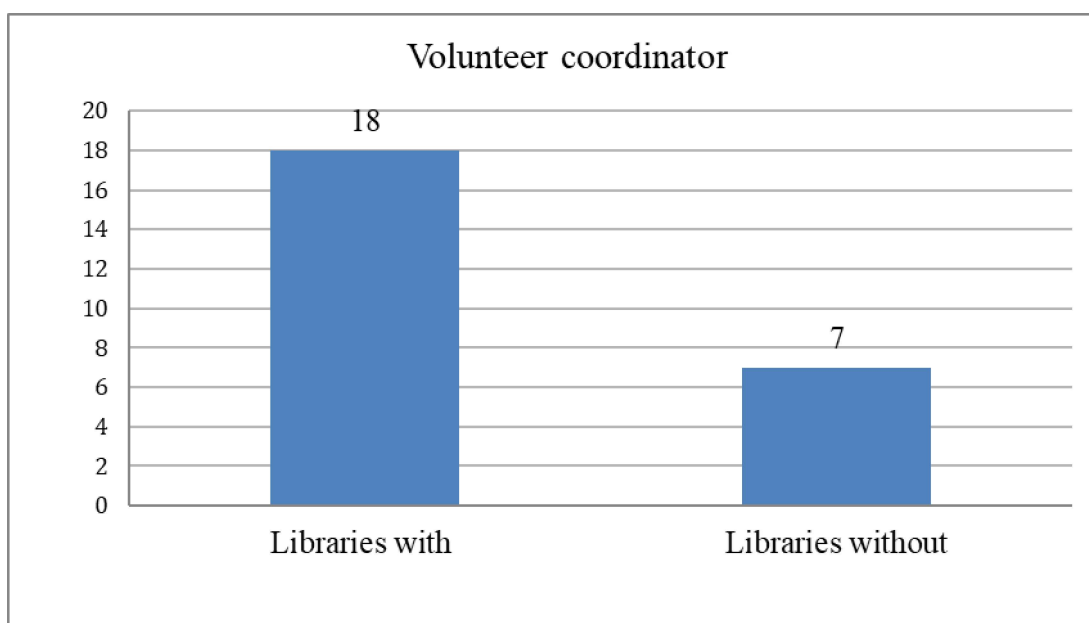


Fig. 3. Existence of a coordinator for volunteers

Eighteen of the 25 libraries that responded to the questionnaire have a coordinator for volunteers. This is a positive aspect, showing that the vast majority of libraries treat aspects regarding volunteering with seriousness.

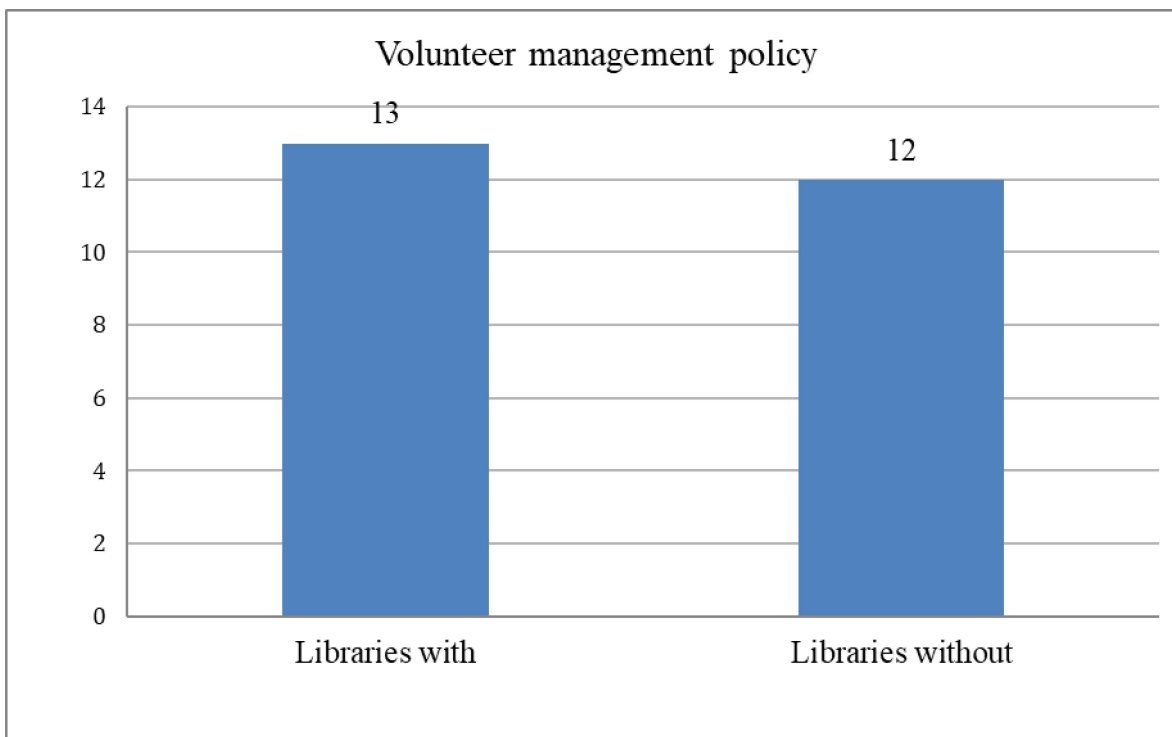


Fig. 4. *Libraries that created a management policy for volunteers*

Thirteen libraries from those that use volunteers have management policy for volunteers, the existence of which is a clear step forward in the professionalization of the work with volunteers. However, this shows that just over half of the libraries have a policy in place for volunteer work. Such a policy could help create a better environment for volunteering and ensure that the know-how and ability to work with volunteers is a library characteristic and not just a personal characteristic of one or more librarians (helping the library retain the ability to get and keep volunteers regardless of the existence a certain individual librarian).

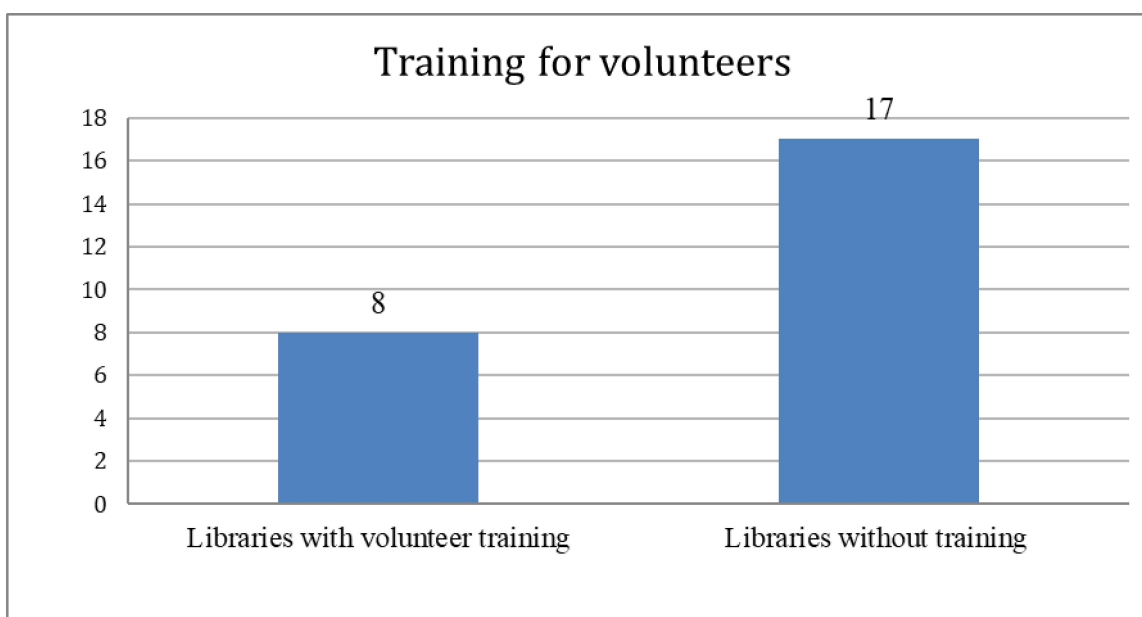


Fig. 5. *Training for volunteers*

Only eight libraries offer training for volunteers. We can assume that libraries either use volunteers for different activities that don't require any training (physical activities, for example) or that libraries prefer to use volunteers that already have knowledge and experience in their fields.

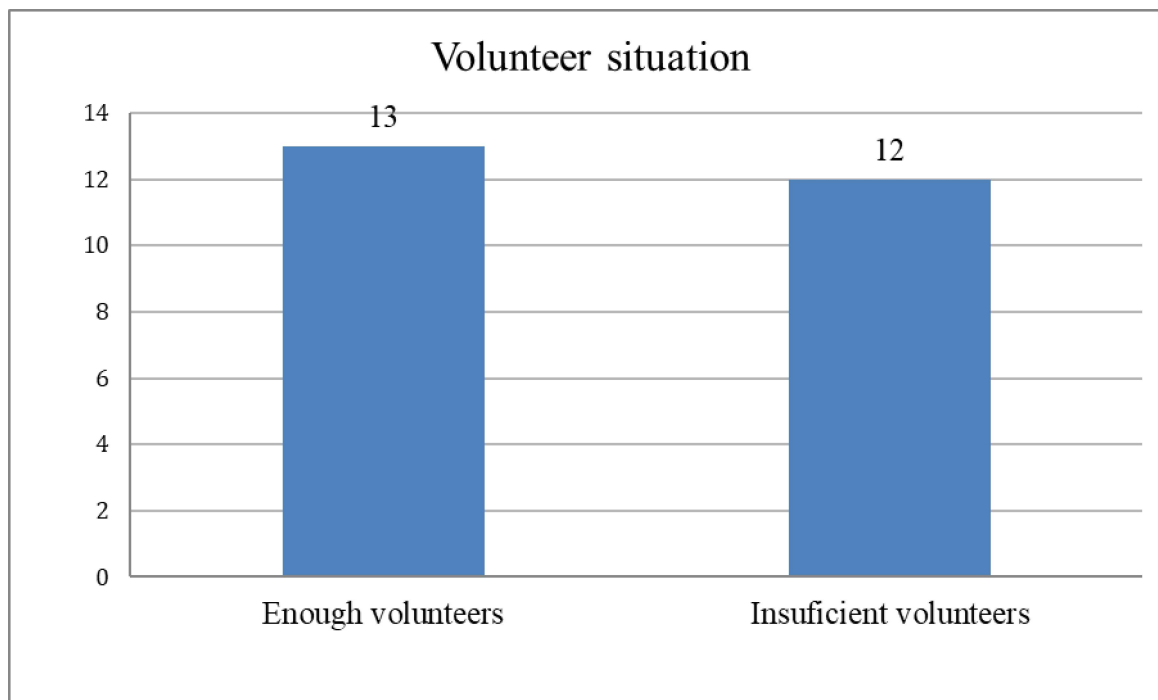


Fig.6 The situation of volunteers from a numerical point of view

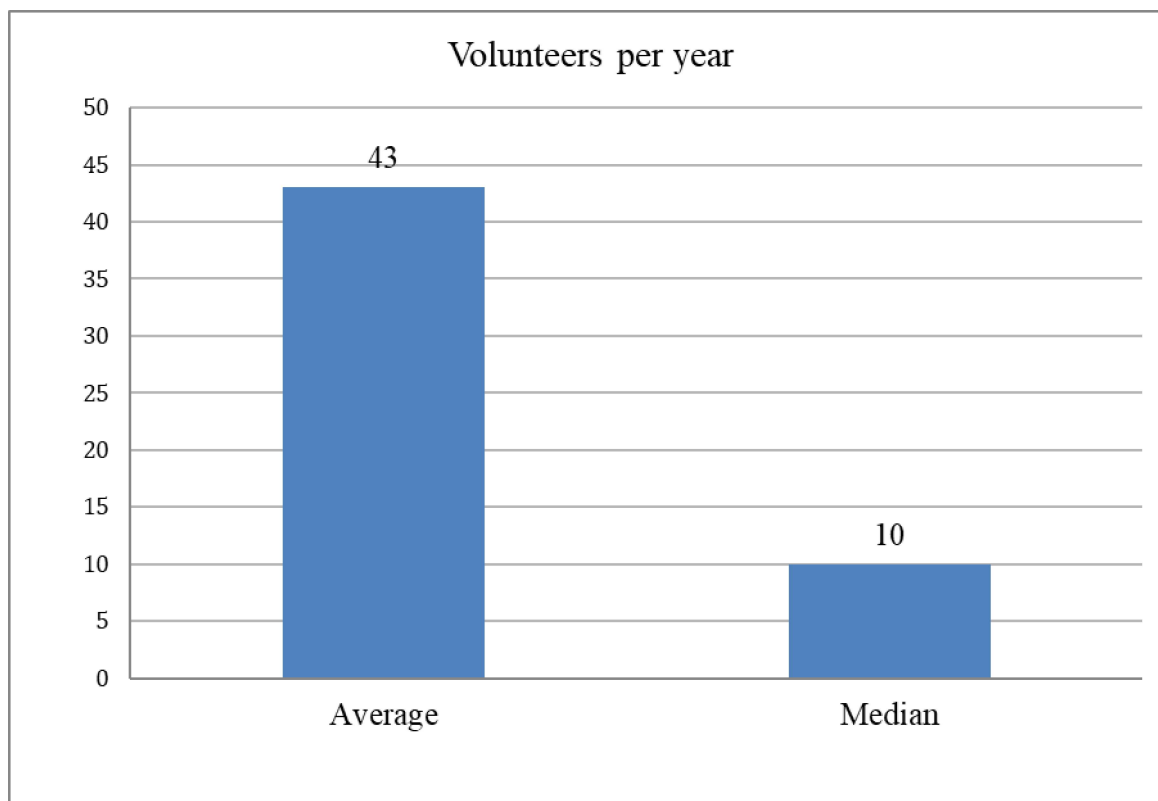


Fig. 7 Number of volunteers per year

Thirteen of the twenty-five libraries consider the number of volunteers as sufficient. This situation shows us that more volunteers are needed and, maybe, that libraries need to improve their appeal to volunteers.

In average, a library has 43 volunteers. However, this number is highly distorted by libraries with a large number of volunteers: the median number of volunteers is barely 10. This means that half of the total number of libraries has 10 or less volunteers per year, which is a low number, especially when we take into account the fact that the analysed libraries are big county libraries and the two national libraries.

There are libraries that have 200 volunteers each year, but also libraries with only two volunteers per year. This discrepancy is significant and should indicate that more can be done in certain cases to attract volunteers.

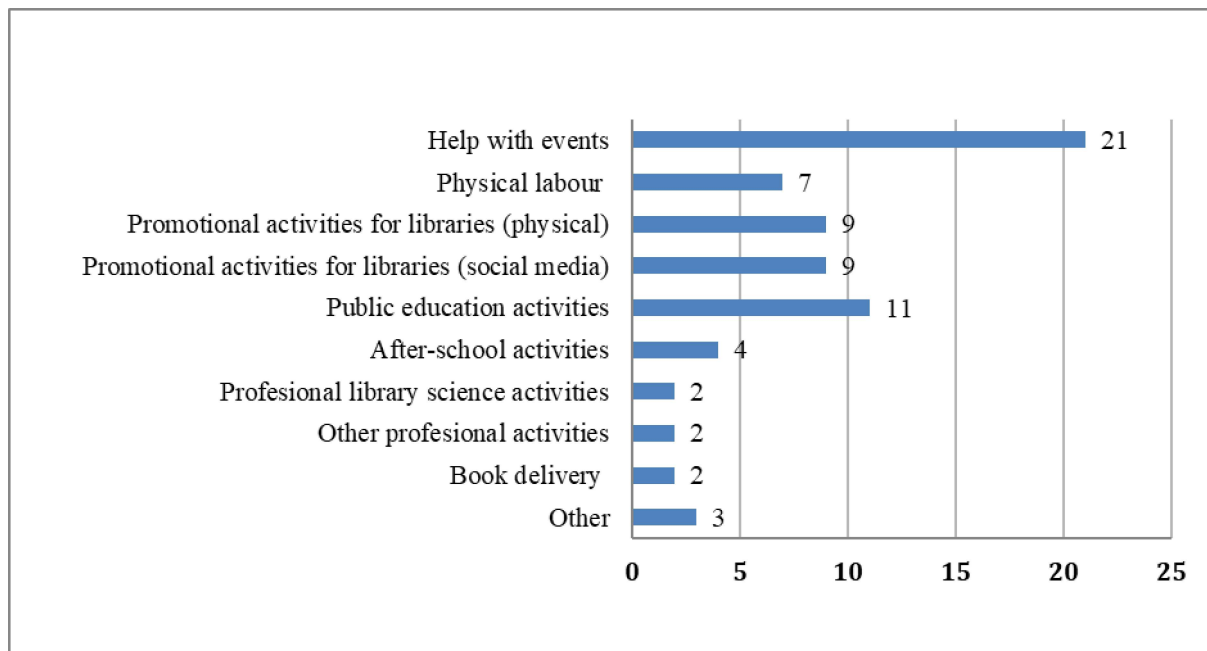


Fig. 8 Volunteers – activities

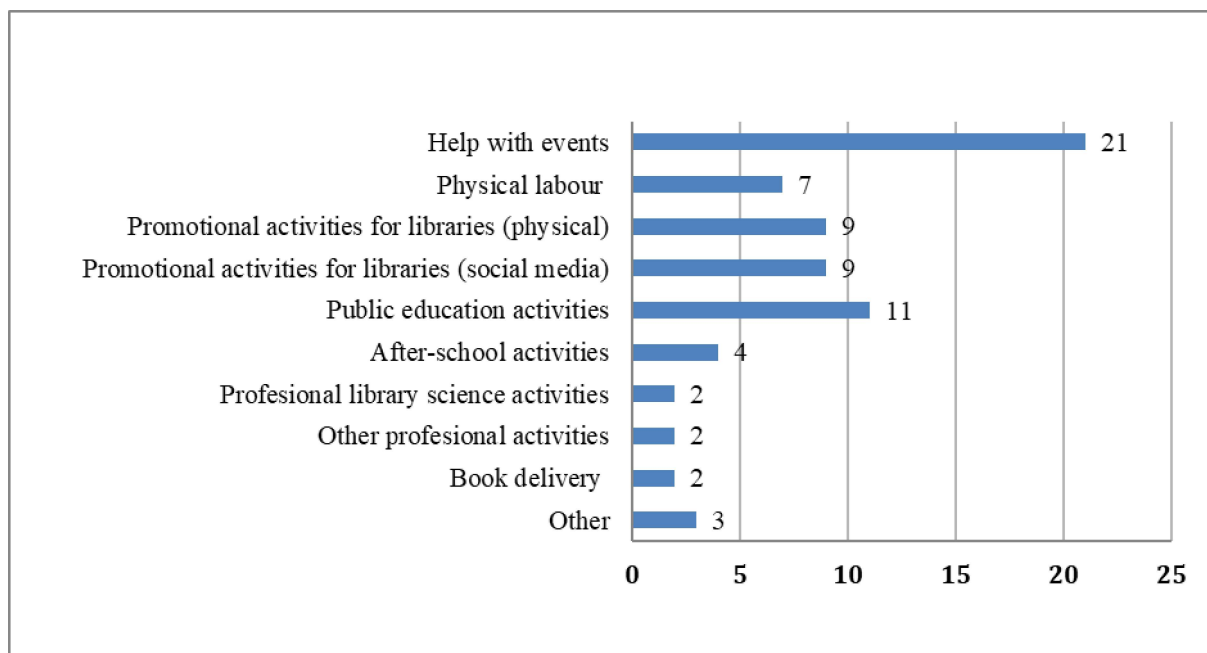


Fig. 8 Volunteers – activities

Volunteers are mainly used in to help with events (21 cases), in public education activities (11) and in promoting the library. Book delivery services (2 cases), professional LIS activities (2 cases) and after school activities (4 cases) are the activities where volunteers are used the least.

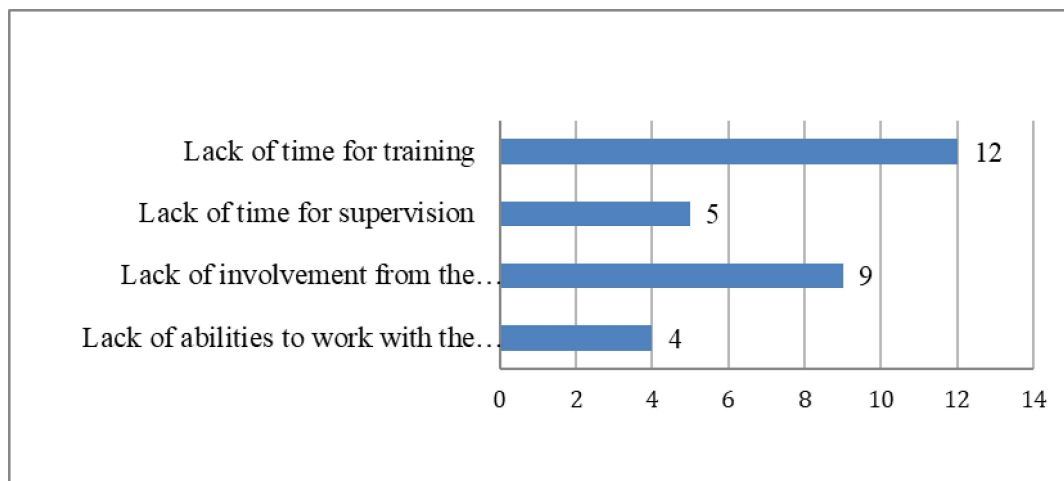


Fig. 9 Problems in working with volunteers

The main problems identified in working with volunteers are the lack of time for training volunteers and the low involvement from the volunteers. Lack of time for supervision and lack of abilities to work with the volunteers are not generally seen as problems.

3. Conclusions

The first conclusion of this study is the high number of libraries that did not answer the questionnaire (only 25 of the 43 libraries responded). This dramatically reduces the relevancy of this study but clearly shows us either a lack of interest in contributing to a library science study or a problem with internal institutional communication in the libraries that did not respond.

However, most of the analyzed libraries have volunteers (31 out of 43 – this includes data collected from the websites). This data is subject to upward change (because of the lack of responses) so we can consider this data as an encouraging starting point for the future of volunteering in Romanian libraries.

Most libraries do not provide information about volunteering on the site (22 out of 43). This includes some libraries that do use volunteers which makes us wonder how do they manage to get volunteers and if they would not profit from using the website to promote their volunteer programs.

We can identify a low involvement in organizing volunteering (the low number of libraries that offer training to volunteers, the fact that about half of the libraries do not have a volunteer management plan) with the existence of some situations in which volunteering is taken to another level (hundreds of volunteers, training etc.)

In general, there is a small number of volunteers (13 - median) per year that work in libraries. In our opinion, this should constitute a signal that more (and maybe not just more of the same but also different approaches) is needed to be done in order to attract volunteers in libraries.

Volunteers are mainly used in less intellectual activities (physical help in organizing events, other physical activities in the library etc.).

Lack of time has been identified as the main problem in working with volunteers and the second one is the low degree of involvement from the volunteers. Lack of skills to work with volunteers is not considered a problem (in only 4 out of the 24 libraries).

Overall, the situation of the volunteers in the Romanian libraries is highly heterogenous, a fact that, we believe, reflects the overall status of these libraries. Some probably (and we use *probably* because of lack of data) do not use volunteers, the majority uses volunteers but only to a certain degree and without taking the volunteer activity to a higher level of organization, while a few libraries have developed well organized and successful volunteer programs, involving hundreds of volunteers each year.

This study was presented at the conference *When the state sleeps, the citizens are involved!* organized by the Transylvania Evangelical Academy in collaboration with Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Romania.