

## Survey of U.S. Literary Translators’ Working Conditions in 2022

In October 2022, the Authors Guild and other organizations, including the American Literary Translators Association, as well as numerous other translators’ and writers’ organizations, MFA programs, and translation publications,<sup>1</sup> distributed a survey to better understand the working conditions of literary translators in the United States today. It was also widely publicized on social media. We received 279 responses, an increase of 36 percent over the response rate for our [2017 survey](#) (the first of its kind in the United States). The pool for the 2022 survey, however, was smaller than for the 2017 survey because it was limited to translators residing in the United States, with the goal of assessing the viability of literary translation as a means of livelihood in light of the U.S. cost of living.

During the five-year interval between the surveys, the Authors Guild engaged in various forms of advocacy and education for and on behalf of literary translators. Key among these was the 2021 release of the [Literary Translation Model Contract](#), with its extensive commentary, aimed at raising awareness of translators’ rights and supporting their efforts to secure fair terms from publishers. Given these efforts, and an overall increase in translators’ visibility and recognition, we had hoped to find a concurrent improvement in their pay and other terms. Unfortunately, the results of the 2022 survey indicate that the economic status of literary translators has stagnated and, in many cases, deteriorated. The key findings of the 2022 survey are available below.

Please note that wherever percentages add up to more than 100, it is due either to rounding or because respondents selected multiple options.

Special thanks to Authors Guild members Jessica Cohen, Julia Sanches, and Alex Zucker for their passionate and unerring work conducting this survey, and for their thoughtfully written analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> To wit, the American Translators Association (Literary Division), the PEN America Translation Committee, the Northwest Translators and Interpreters Society, the Northern California Translators Association, the DC-Area Literary Translators Network, the Association of Danish-English Literary Translators, Swedish Translators in North America, the Swedish-English Literary Translators’ Association, the Portuguese-English Literary Translators Association, the BIPOC Caucus (US), the Columbia University MFA Program in Literary Translation, the University of Arkansas MFA Program in Creative Writing and Translation, the University of Iowa MFA Program in Literary Translation, the Center for the Art of Translation, Words Without Borders, and *World Literature Today* magazine at the University of Oklahoma.

## Demographics

### Age:

- 0.4 percent aged 24 or younger
- 20 percent aged 25-34
- 22 percent aged 35-44
- 17 percent aged 45-54
- 14 percent aged 55-64
- 26 percent aged 65+

*We are not including an age comparison to the results from the last survey, because in 2017 we used different tiers.*

### Racial/Ethnic Identity:

- 80.6 percent white
- 7.4 percent Asian American or Asian
- 6.9 percent Hispanic or Latinx
- 3.2 percent African American
- 0.9 percent Native American/Indigenous
- (Other: 2.8 percent, Prefer not to say: 3.7 percent)

*While the percentage of literary translators who identify as Black/African American is twice as high in 2022 as it was in 2017, and the percentage of those who identify as Asian American or Asian is now five times higher than five years ago, it is worth noting that the percentage of respondents identifying as white remains virtually unchanged, indicating that the profession remains overwhelmingly white—much more so than the population of the United States at large.*

### Gender Identity:

- 64 percent identify as female
- 31 percent identify as male
- 10 percent identify as trans, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, nonbinary or other
- 2 percent prefer not to say

*In our 2017 survey, 59 percent of respondents identified as female and 37 percent as male (with the remaining respondents selecting “prefer not to say”). In light of the increasing (and long overdue) attention being paid to who is translating literature into English and the impact this has on what is translated, how it is received, and how the labor of translation is compensated, in the 2022 survey we offered respondents a broader range of options.*

### Sexual Identity:

24 percent of respondents in 2022 identify as LGBTQ+, double the 12 percent from 2017. [This aligns with changes in U.S. society at large](#). The percentage of literary translators who identify as LGBTQ+ is more than three times higher than among U.S. adults as a whole.

## Education

- 41 percent hold a master’s degree or equivalent
- 37 percent hold a Ph.D. or equivalent
- 14 percent have a degree in translation

12 percent have a certification in translation

*Although the exact percentages changed slightly from 2017 to 2022, the proportion of respondents with a master's degree or Ph.D. remains virtually unchanged (78 percent up from 77 percent), and there are only slightly more respondents with a degree or other certification in translation (26 percent vs. 24 percent). Literary translation in the United States remains a profession dominated by highly educated people and is therefore predominantly accessible only to those with the privilege and means to afford a higher education.*

## Experience

9 percent have been translators for two years or less

42 percent have been translators for 3-10 years

22 percent have been translators for 11-20 years

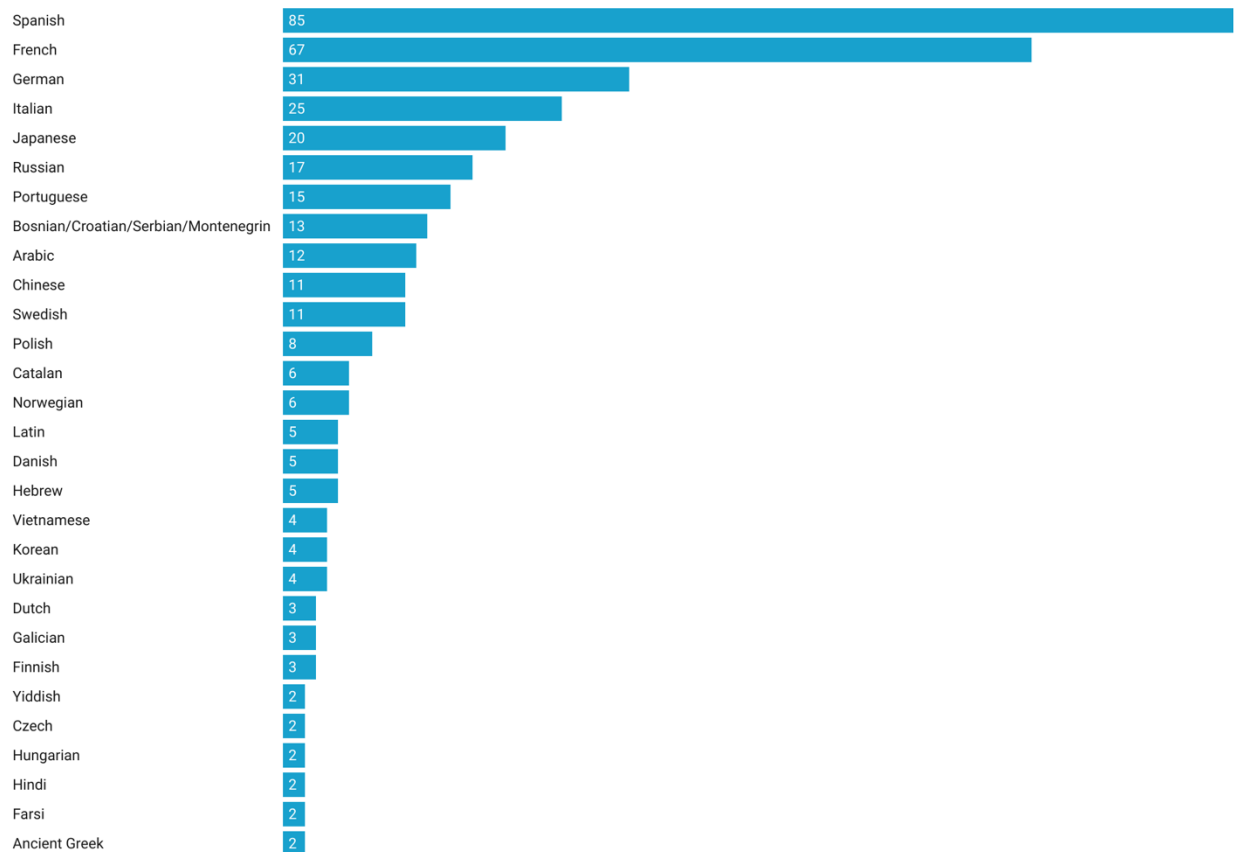
27 percent have been translators for more than 20 years

*There has been a marked increase in relative newcomers to the field among survey respondents: just under half (49 percent) have more than a decade of experience in the field (as opposed to 62 percent in 2017), while just over half (51 percent) have been practicing literary translation for less than a decade (compared to 37 percent in 2017). One likely reason for this is the proliferation of literary translation degrees in academic institutions, non-degree workshops and training, mentorship programs, and a growing number of formal and informal support networks for emerging translators.*

## Languages Translated

Respondents to the 2022 survey are a highly multilingual group. More than half of them, 59 percent, translate from more than one language (2 languages: 40 percent, 3 languages: 13 percent, 4 languages: 5 percent). In total, respondents translate to and from 50 languages. The following chart shows the number of responses for each individual language:

### Languages Translated



Other responses: Basque; Assamese; Gujarati; Slovenian; Romanian; Kurdish; Urdu; Bulgarian; Esperanto; Uzbek; Burmese; Indonesian; Bengali; Albanian; Turkish; Modern Greek; Amharic; Thai; Icelandic; Indigenous languages

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## Translation Genres

Roughly 68 percent of respondents translate fiction (as opposed to 76 percent in 2017). The percentages of respondents translating nonfiction (42 percent) and poetry (46 percent) are comparable to those in 2017. Approximately 9 percent translate theater, 12 percent children’s and young adult literature, and 7 percent graphic novels.

*The results below are limited to literary translators of prose (fiction and nonfiction), since they have a reasonable expectation of earning a living from their translation work. This is not to slight or devalue the artistry and craft of poetry translators, but a reflection of the position of poetry in a market economy.*

## Full-Time vs. Part-Time Translators

Only 23 respondents (11.5 percent) report deriving 100 percent of their income from literary translation or related activities (workshops, lectures, readings, book reviews, and so forth). 137 respondents (69 percent) earned less than 50 percent of their income from literary translation, and 39 respondents (19.5 percent) earned more than 50 percent but less than 100 percent of their income from literary translation.

18 respondents (9 percent) state that they devote 100 percent of their work time to literary translation, whereas 104 respondents (52 percent) devote less than 50 percent of their time, and 79 respondents (39 percent) devote between 50 percent and 100 percent of their time. (For this summary, we have chosen to define “full-time translators” as those who spend more than 50 percent of their work time on literary translation.)

Of the 74 percent of translators who hold another job in addition to their literary translation work, 34 percent are in academia, 31 percent in professional positions, and 35 percent in various other fields.

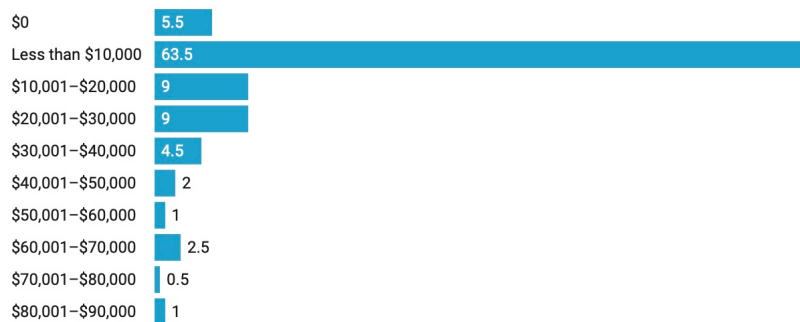
Although there has been an increase in the percentage of translators deriving 100 percent of their income from literary translation as of 2022 (11.5 percent, compared to just under 7 percent in 2017), the overall number of full-time literary translators remains extremely low.

## Income

### 2021 Translator Income Range

Total earnings of participating translators

■ Percent of respondents with this income



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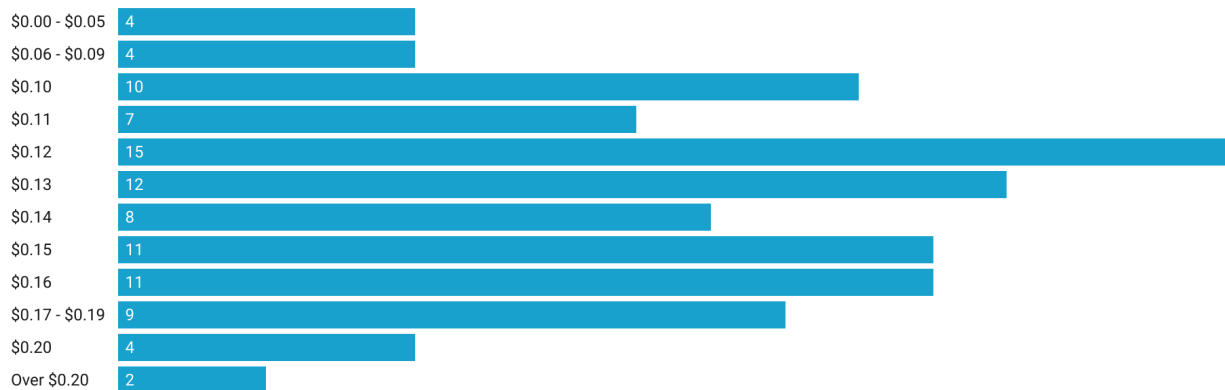
An alarming 63.5 percent of translators report an annual income of less than \$10,000 from literary translation for 2021, double the 32 percent who reported earning that little in 2017. So, even as a greater percentage of literary translators are earning income entirely from translation (as noted above) and more of them are working as literary translators full-time (45 percent now as compared to 39 percent in 2017), many are earning less for their efforts—a disturbing trend.

## Translation Rates

Translators use various methods to charge for their labor, ranging from flat fees to hourly rates to rates per-word, per-page, or per-character. The majority of respondents report a per-word rate; note, however, that the figures do not differentiate between source word and target word, which may be significantly different from one language to another.

When asked to specify the rate for their most recent book translation, responses for prose translators varied from \$0.01 to more than \$0.40 per word, with the largest segment charging \$0.10 or less per word, followed by \$0.12 per word.

### Translation Rates (Per Word)



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The average rate is \$0.13 per word. This is 8 percent more than the average rate in 2017, which was \$0.12 per word. However, the cost of living in the United States has gone up by more than 20 percent, so translator pay is not keeping pace with inflation.<sup>2</sup>

A disaggregation of rates by various identity criteria yielded the following noteworthy results:

#### Average rates by gender:

Translators who identify as female:	\$0.13
Translators who identify as male:	\$0.15
Translators who identify as other:	\$0.14

#### Average rates by sexual identity:

LGBTQ+:	\$0.14
Other:	\$0.12

#### Average rates by racial/ethnic identity:

Translators who identify as white:	\$0.13
Translators who identify as non-white:	\$0.17

<sup>2</sup> The standard measure of cost of living in the United States is the [Consumer Price Index](#) (CPI). Using the [CPI Inflation Calculator](#), we find that \$1.00 in October 2017, when we conducted this survey for the first time, had the same buying power as \$1.21 in October 2022, when we conducted the current iteration.

*There is no standard translation rate in the United States, and U.S. professional organizations to date have not issued suggested rates for fear of exposure to an antitrust suit. The result is that translators are taken advantage of and the rates are far too low. A translator earning the average rate of \$0.13 per word would have to translate approximately 385,000 words a year (four to five average-length books) to earn an annual income of \$50,000.<sup>3</sup> Most translators agree that 1,000 words a day of polished literary text is the maximum a person can reasonably achieve. If a translator works 260 days a year (five days a week with no vacation), they would have to produce approximately 1,480 polished words a day; if they want to take two weeks off, their output would have to increase to 1,565 words a day. This is simply not feasible, especially considering how much time a translator needs to spend on administrative and other activities (email, reviewing edits, promotion and publicity, negotiating contracts, etc.).*

## Royalties

Roughly 46 percent of respondents who primarily translate prose report that their contracts always or usually include a royalty clause, 26 percent say that their contracts sometimes do, and 28 percent report never receiving a royalty clause. Royalty rates reported varied from 0.5 percent to 5 percent, with the vast majority earning 1 percent. Encouragingly, 45 percent report having received royalty payments. Of the respondents whose contracts do not usually include a royalty clause, 37 percent (down from 50 percent in 2017) report that this is because the publisher refused. As in 2017, there is no significant difference between male and female respondents in this regard.

There is, however, great variability in whether royalties are paid from the first copy sold or only after the translator has earned out their advance—in other words, if their translation fee is an advance against royalties. 50 percent of respondents say their contracts stipulate royalty payments only after earning back their advance, but a full 33 percent say it varies from one contract to the next.

*On balance, it is reassuring that such a large proportion of translators—nearly half—continue to have royalty clauses in their contracts, despite resistance to the practice in some corners of the publishing industry. With a decade-long view of the data now available, the idea that translator royalties are an anomaly can be put to rest once and for all.*

*On the other hand, while the most high-profile prizes uplift literary translation as a work of collaboration and co-authorship between author and translator (the International Booker Prize is shared equally between author and translator, as are the Dublin Literary Award and the National Book Award), these survey results indicate that there is still no consensus that translators should be treated as coauthors and benefit financially from the success of their work to the same degree as authors.*

## Copyright

73 percent of translators report that they always or usually retain the copyright to their translations, 13 percent say they sometimes do, and 13 percent say they usually do not. Almost

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<sup>3</sup> Translators' living conditions, of course, vary widely. Depending on where they live, whether they have a partner and/or dependents, whether they rent or own their home, etc., what constitutes a living wage will also vary. To find out what is a living wage where you live, visit the Living Wage Calculator, at [livingwage.mit.edu](http://livingwage.mit.edu).

half (44 percent) of those who do not retain the copyright to their work indicate that this is because the publisher refused. Once again, no significant differences were observed in male versus female responses in this area.

*Under the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, “Translations, adaptations, arrangements of music and other alterations of a literary or artistic work shall be protected as original works without prejudice to the copyright in the original work.” This means the translator owns the copyright to a translation from the moment they create it. They may choose not to retain it—for example, in return for more money from a publisher—but it is theirs by virtue of having created the translation, and their business should be conducted on the same footing as the author of the work in the original language. U.S. copyright law, as we explain in our [Literary Translation Model Contract and Commentary](#), is also clear on this (see [Commentary on Section 1, Grant of Rights](#)).*

*Some publishers argue that they need to acquire the entire copyright in order to generate a profit from the translation. The Authors Guild will continue to educate publishers that this is not the case and, moreover, is unfair.*

## Name on Cover

A total of 58 percent of respondents who translate mainly prose say that the books they translate always or usually have their name on the cover, while 20 percent say they sometimes do, and 21 percent say they never do. A somewhat higher proportion of male respondents (62 percent) always or usually have their name on the cover than their female counterparts (57 percent). The most common reason for not having one’s name on the cover is that the publisher refused (47 percent). 21 percent responded that this is not an important issue for them or they prefer to negotiate for other terms.

*In the report on our 2017 survey, we observed that “the reasons publishers most often give for refusing to put the translator’s name on the cover are that it will clutter the design, that they do not want readers to know the book is translated because translations are a ‘turnoff,’ and that translations are hard enough to sell as it is without complicating things by putting another name on the cover.”*

*Anecdotally, we have not observed any significant change in this regard. Yet there has been a marked increase in public attention paid to the visibility of translators and translated literature.*

*In 2021, [Megan Clarke, at Oxford Brookes University, conducted a study](#) which showed that readers in the UK were “not significantly less likely to read translations” than readers in other parts of the world. “Added to this, when asked how their interest in reading a book would be affected if it were translated from another language, 73.2 percent said their interest would not be affected, 20.6 percent would in fact be more interested in reading the book, and only 6.2 percent answered that they would be less interested.” As Clarke wrote, “My research focused on fiction translated from Spanish, yet most of the findings are applicable to translated fiction in the UK from any language.” While the U.S. market cannot be assumed to be identical to the UK market, Clarke’s study at the very least puts a dent in the argument against including translators’ names on covers.*



Launched on International Translation Day in 2021, an [open letter in support of putting translators' names on covers](#) by translator and author Jennifer Croft and author Mark Haddon, was signed by more than 2,500 writers worldwide. Less than two weeks later, [Pan Macmillan UK announced](#) that it would include translators' names on the covers of all its books going forward.

*Many translators have offered examples of commercially successful books whose covers are crowded with blurbs and other information yet omit the translator's name, undermining the argument that the main obstacle to including translators' names is visual aesthetics.*

*Although having one's name on the cover is still no substitute for fair compensation, as we noted in 2017, it not only increases the likelihood of translators being mentioned in reviews of their work but serves as publicity that may lead to future income.*

## Grants

A substantial 36 percent of respondents in 2022 (down from 41 percent in 2017) report that payment of their fee sometimes depended on the publisher receiving a grant.

*Translators should not be hired and expected to start work until grants are secured. While we understand that many publishers of translated literature are small, independent presses and/or operate as not-for-profit entities, translators should never be expected to bear the financial risk of translating an entire book with no guarantee of payment for their labor.*

## Further Thoughts and Next Steps

The impetus for undertaking this survey, initially in 2017 and again in 2022, was to obtain some hard data about the working conditions of literary translators in the United States and to move the discussions out of the realm of anecdote and into fact. The 2022 survey confirms the findings of the 2017 survey: for most, earning a livelihood as a literary translator in this country is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

We must educate and empower translators to negotiate better contract terms that allow them to make a living and also educate publishers on the importance of providing living wages. The Guild's Literary Translation Model Contract will continue to serve as the basis for this work. We also continue to work on the broader issues affecting translators, including the impact that generative AI will have on the profession if appropriate guardrails are not quickly established. The increasing and disruptive presence of artificial intelligence has created an urgent need for all those involved in the production of literature in translation to guarantee its survival under conditions that are sustainable for all.