

Library Access for Children in Rural Areas

Barbara Kasper and Robert Smith

According to available information, children use libraries in large numbers. In 1949 a landmark study of the nation's public libraries showed that forty to forty-five percent of the library circulation was juvenile titles. This study by Berelson demonstrated that "children use the public library in greater proportion than do others, but as clients of the library make disproportionately heavy demands upon library facilities."¹ Twenty years later a study of the Maryland Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area and a study of the Chicago urban area found that the public library had not changed from the earlier findings by Berelson.² In significant statewide surveys conducted in California, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin during the past five years, nothing was found to deny the original premise that children do indeed make heavy demands upon public library facilities.³

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Spanning the seventies, three studies were conducted in Indiana regarding libraries and children. The Wilder study in 1970 queried children and young adults in selected communities about their feelings toward their public library. It indicated that students in overwhelming majorities found the staff of their public libraries to be very or moderately helpful.⁴ A few years later Woolls compared the role of the school library with the role of the public library in selected communities. This study recommended that no "single library collection can or should attempt to meet all the needs of elementary school students."⁵ A 1979 statewide survey of Indiana public libraries by Kasper showed that most libraries offered children summer reading programs (78%), preschool story hour programs (63%), and other story hour programs (48%).⁶ These Indiana studies attest to a positive attitude towards libraries by children, the importance of a variety of library resources for children, and the emphasis on programming for children in the state's public libraries.

Libraries offer children many educational, social, and recreational opportunities. Since the early thirties, the American Library Association (ALA) has written and rewritten standards for public library service. The 1964 publication of *Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries* included the following areas for consideration: administration, personnel, services, materials, and physical facilities.⁷ These standards were qualitative in nature; they identify children as being from infancy to approximately thirteen years of age. In the years following, there have been no additional national standards published for children. In the eighties many believe that children have a right to have access to: 1) a variety of books and materials of quality with professional assistance and 2) a variety of programs including story hours, summer activities, reading programs, and storytelling.

Some library systems are able to provide a variety of programs for children which include toddler story hours, film programs, television participation programs, and craft activities. In addition to these activities, trained personnel are available to serve children. The Kasper study found that communities with high income levels and high educational levels provided more public library services to children. If wealthier library communities are offering varied activities and resources for children, a study of less wealthy library communities should demonstrate the opposite results.

Using Indiana and Kentucky as models, a study was conducted to test this theory. Each researcher selected a county in his/her state for comparison and examination. The two counties were selected because of their low family income levels and other similar socioeconomic characteristics. The populations of these counties show identical median age levels and approximately the same median family

income levels. Differences include only fifty-six children in total population between the ages of five and seventeen. (See Table 1)

The total 1980 population differs by 142 persons. (See Table 2) The difference in square mile area is fourteen, and the population density is different by only one person per square mile. (See Table 2) Both counties maintain extremely high unemployment levels—well above their state averages. (See Table 1) Their educational levels are also low. One county had 25% high school graduates with only 32% at the eighth grade level or higher. The other was lower: 25% high school graduates and 25% at the eighth grade or higher. In addition to these characteristics, the counties are both rural with very small communities.

When the counties were visited, the authors discovered the necessity of protecting the identity of these areas. Their local pride rejected the portrait "poor counties." Since the purpose of this study was to examine library services and resources for children and why they vary from area to area, the authors quickly agreed not to identify the counties by name.

Many people assume that children in rural areas use the library even more than children in urban areas where more activities compete for their attention. When the community served by the library is smaller as in the rural areas, people generally know each other. With this knowledge and the sense of community pride, one might assume that people would feel more welcome in the library and therefore make greater use of its resources and services.

Table 1
Socioeconomic Comparison of Counties

	County A	County B
Median age of population	30	30.7
Median family income	\$13,250	\$13,100
Per capita income	\$ 5,643	\$ 4,315
Percentage of unemployment in labor forces	21.1	19.9
Population in ages 5-17	2,238	2,294

Table 2
Geographic Comparison of Counties

	County A	County B
Land area (sq. miles)	312	298
Total population	9,820	9,962
Population density (sq. mile)	32	33

The services a library offers can be evaluated by comparing them to library standards. However, in recent years ALA has begun emphasizing the importance of total community library service that requires planning by public libraries, schools, and all community agencies concerned with children.⁸ A new publication of measurements for services includes a list of twelve output measures.⁹ Many of these output measures do not relate well to our selected counties.

Personal observations from on-site visits to the two libraries showed that library circulation statements could not be verified. One library counts its circulation according to how many estimated people might read the books checked out of the library, while the other used only the number of books circulated. Program attendance seemed as unreliable as circulation statistics. Attendance is estimated for both, and does not give a clear indication as to the exact number of children attending each type of program or the age range of the attendees. Registration counts are not separate for children and adults, so those statistics are not available.

Although the counties are similar in size and other socio-economic characteristics, the similarities end when library services are examined. The differences include the total number of library facilities and the number of library personnel trained to serve children. Each county contains one public library facility with trained personnel; however, one system has a bookmobile with a tri-weekly schedule of stops to schools and local communities. One county has two elementary buildings, one middle school, and one high school (four school facilities) with three trained librarians for all; whereas,

the other county has five elementary schools and one building for the upper grades (six school facilities) with only one trained librarian for the upper grades. (See Table 3)

Both public library systems provide programming for children. One county holds weekly programs in the summer, bi-weekly programs during the rest of the year, and semi-weekly or weekly programs for children in the Head Start. The other library holds monthly story hours. Library records indicate comparable attendance at each program event. Both systems encourage school visits; one system loans equipment and materials (films and filmstrips) to the school system. The children's materials budget for one system is greater than the total materials budget (both adult and children) in the other system. (See Table 4)

Table 3
Public School Libraries

	County A	County B
No. of elementary schools	5	2
Full-time librarians	None	1
No. of middle schools	None*	1
Full-time librarians	None*	1
No. of secondary schools	1*	1
Full-time librarians	1	1

*Combined facility (middle school and high school).

All of the advantages—more trained personnel, more programs, bookmobile service, and a larger materials budget—are in the same system. If two counties similar in socioeconomic characteristics offer very different library services and resources to their children, there must be another, heretofore, unaccounted factor. The “library advantaged” system receives assistance from the state (Kentucky) in greater proportion to its total budget than does the other system. The state aid provides the public library with bookmobile service, a greater materials budget, and additional personnel. The bookmobile

which travels to schools and local communities brings library resources to many children who would not otherwise be able to gain access to materials. Children who do not live within walking distance of the library must depend upon their parents for transportation and in a rural area this number includes the majority of the children.

This case study of a rural county in Indiana and a similar rural county in Kentucky found that the level of children's library services can substantially differ among rural areas. The study also indicates the importance of supplemental state support in providing adequate and effective library services to children in rural areas.

The communities on which the study focused are proud of their unique rural characteristics and their library systems. Yet, the level of their library services to children are indicative of the priority assigned to them by their respective state governments.

Table 4
Public Libraries

	County A	County B
Professional librarians	1	1
Library assistants/clerks	2	2
Current annual allocation for children's materials	\$3,300 ²	\$3,750 ¹
Bookmobile service to schools	None	Tri-weekly
Regular children's library activities	Monthly	Weekly in summer, bi-weekly in school year
Children's book collection	4,000	10,000
Children's nonprint media collection	150	243

¹\$500 local allocation, other funds from state.

²Combined budget for adult and children's materials.

Notes

¹ Berelson, Bernard. *The Library Public*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1949, 53.

² Bundy, Mary Lee. *Metropolitan Public Library Users*. University of Maryland, School of Library and Information Science, 1968; Lowell Martin, *Library Response to Urban Change*. Chicago: American Library Association: Chicago, 1969.

³ Grover, Robert and Mary Kevin Moore, *Children's Services in California Public Libraries*. Sacramento: California Library Association [1981], Selma K. Richardson, *An Analytical Survey of Illinois State Library*, 1978); Ohio Library Association, *A Survey of Children's Services in Ohio Public Libraries 1979*. Columbia: Ohio Library Association, 1981, Division for Library Services, *A Report of the First Statewide Survey of Children's Services in Public Libraries of Wisconsin 1981*. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1981.

⁴ Wilder, Jr., Philip S. *Library Usage by Students and Young Adults: Report Number Four of the Indiana Library Studies*. Indianapolis: Indiana State Library, 1970).

⁵ Woolls, Esther Blanche. "Cooperative Library Services to Children in Public Libraries and Public Library School Systems in Selected Communities in Indiana. Ph.D. dissertations, Indiana University, 1972, 191.

⁶ Kasper, Barbara. "Children's Services in Public Libraries," *Indiana Libraries*, Fall 1981, 108-111.

⁷ ALA, PLA, Committee on Standards, *Standards for Children's Services in Public Libraries*. Chicago: ALA, 1964.

⁸ ALA, Public Library Association, Standards Committee, "Community Library Services—Working Papers on Goals and Guidelines." *School Library Journal* September, 27, 1981.

⁹ Zweizig, Douglas and Eleanor Jo Rodger, *Output Measures for Public Libraries*. Chicago: ALA, 1982.