Services to the Disadvantaged

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One of the most significant developments in urban public librarianship has been the library's effort to reach out to that part of the population broadly described as disadvantaged.

Data gathered by Berelson in the 1940s as a part of the *Public Library Inquiry* documented that the public library was serving not the whole community, but rather a narrow segment of it—about 10 percent—who were white, middle-class, economically stable but not rich, fairly well educated, but not intellectually elite. Public librarians could not deny the validity of Berelson's research, but they rejected angrily his explicit recommendation that they concentrate upon the public for whom their services were structured and revise their dreams about serving the whole community. In response to Berelson's research, efforts began in the 1940s to broaden the impact of the public library.

Within the last fifteen years, several factors have converged to cause public libraries to intensify these outreach efforts. Among them were: (1) the social climate of the 1960s which made everyone more aware of the injustices perpetrated on Blacks, Indians, Spanish-surnamed and other minorities; (2) the "war on poverty" initiated by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations with federal funds earmarked for service to the poor; and (3) a radical change in the population of the great cities. Beginning with the World War II years, there has been a continual migration of the rural southern and Puerto Rican poor, both Black and white, into the major cities and, at the same time, a movement of white, middle-class families out of the central cities and into the suburbs.

Mel Ravitz, a professor at Wayne State University’s College of Lifelong Learning and for many years a member of Detroit’s Common Council, observes “American cities are changing from being the centers of social, political, economic, cultural, educational life to being merely catchment areas for the old, the poor, and those nobody else

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wants or even wants to see." "The central city," he writes, "is where we plan to house the Other America, with the hope that 'out of sight is out of mind.'"2

Major urban public libraries—New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, etc.—find their traditional public seriously eroded and are thus forced to seek new users.

The extent of the library's effort to adapt to its new public is evidenced by ERIC's selective bibliography on Library Service to the Disadvantaged3 which records over 350 books, articles and reports. As recently as 1971 when Allie Beth Martin queried the libraries studied by Berelson, she found that among twelve critical problems they included "the problems of society—change—urban problems;" and "failure to serve all publics (minorities, deprived . . .)."4 Although the majority of librarians feel now that the public library today is serving most effectively "the middle class general reader,"5 there is consensus that the first goal of the public library should be "to provide service to all," especially "reaching unserved."6

Who are the unserved, the unreached, the urban disadvantaged about whom public libraries are concerned? Eugene Johnson suggests five types of American citizens who are disadvantaged: (1) the young, especially school dropouts under 21 years old, (2) the old, (3) the functionally illiterate, (4) the "new immigrants" who move from rural areas into cities, and (5) the Blacks who are the majority in each of the other four groups.7 Benjamin Bloom, et al., in education define the culturally disadvantaged as the 33 percent of all high school entrants who drop out before graduation, and immigrants to the cities from Puerto Rico, Mexico and the rural South.8 Casper Jordan, in attempting to summarize various definitions of the disadvantaged, includes "those Americans who belong to sub-cultures which are different from and generally less advanced than the dominant culture." He would also accept as disadvantaged "all those Americans who belong to the lower socio-economic group and who are disadvantaged in the sense that they have fewer opportunities than the average American."9 One would need to add to the above groups the physically and mentally handicapped living in the community and in institutions, as well as alcoholics, drug addicts, the delinquent and the criminal. All of these target groups—ethnic minorities, including Blacks, Hispanos and Indians, the functionally illiterate, the recent immigrants to the city, the aged, the handicapped, the institutionalized and the shut-in—have in common that they are not the library's traditional users and that they require some restructuring of the
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It is important to realize, however, that one cannot stereotype all individuals within these target groups. Many people over 65, for example, are in no sense disadvantaged. Not all poor people are illiterate and not all holders of advanced degrees manage to succeed in the economic jungle. Although the precise extent of the civil rights thrust has not been measured, it has been estimated that about 50 percent of the Black population now falls into the middle class. Also, the various target groups tend to overlap and are, at best, only ways of thinking about an extremely complex situation. With these caveats, this paper will explore the library and information needs of two disadvantaged groups who are potential users of metropolitan libraries, what their special needs imply in terms of library service and what presently is being done to serve them. The aged and the functionally illiterate have been chosen as typical of the urban disadvantaged since they include the handicapped, the poor, and ethnic minorities. Solutions found in serving these groups are relevant to the problems of out-reach generally.

THE AGED

According to the 1970 census, there are now approximately 20 million Americans 65 years of age or older, almost two-thirds of whom live in metropolitan areas—one-third in central cities. The aging as a group are increasing faster than the general population (a 21 percent increase between 1960 and 1970, compared with a 13 percent increase in the general population). By 1985, it is estimated that there will be 25 million Americans 65 and over, and by the year 2000, 28 million. Clearly, the metropolitan public library needs to recognize the needs of the aging in present and future plans.

Although stereotypes are dangerous, there are characteristics of the aging as a group which define them as disadvantaged and which dictate special library services. The aging tend to have less formal education than the younger adult population. Approximately 60 percent of those over 65 have completed only 8 years or less of schooling, compared with about 25 percent in the 14-64 age group. One-fifth of the aging are regarded as functionally illiterate. However, as the present population of better educated individuals ages, the level of educational attainment in the 65-and-over age group will rise, although it may always lag behind the level of younger generations.

In 1969, approximately 74 percent of the men and 90 percent of the
women 65 years of age and older were not in the labor force. This fact has obvious implications for greater leisure and reduced income among the aging. The median income of the aging is significantly lower than that of the total population. Fifty percent of the households headed by aging persons have incomes of less than $5,000 (compared with 15 percent of the households headed by younger adults), and 25 percent of the aging are living below the poverty level as defined by HEW. Most aging people depend on federal and state pensions and assistance, private pensions and income from investments—relatively fixed incomes particularly vulnerable to inflation. Approximately one-fourth of the aging live alone, or with nonrelatives. Five percent live in institutions.

About 30 percent of those over 75, and 10 percent of those 65-74 suffer from long-term disabilities. A significant proportion, approximately 25 percent, of the aging are relatively immobile. Although precise statistics are not maintained, it has been estimated that more than one-half of the users of the Regional Libraries for the Blind and Physically Handicapped are aging. Today's street crime in the big cities often makes even healthy old people prisoners in their own homes.

Within the context of the above facts, as gathered in the 1970 census, the final report of the White House Conference on Aging held in November, 1971 provides a blueprint for library planners on the needs and concerns of aging Americans as they themselves and the people who work with them perceive these needs. Survival issues—income and employment, health care, transportation, housing, nutrition—surfaced as the central concerns of the aging.

Related to the battle for physical survival, and perhaps even more crucial, is the battle old people wage for psychological survival. In a section on "retirement roles and activities," 306 delegates to the White House Conference (34 percent of whom were retired persons) pondered such questions as: Does our society need its older citizens at all? What are they good for? Do they have a right to a place in our social order? What are older people to do with the rest of their lives after they are no longer working? Does our nation have any responsibility for helping the elderly to find greater meaning and personal satisfaction in the later years? The very fact that such questions were debated reflects the psychological climate in which older people live. This group proposed fifteen recommendations including better preparation for retirement, leisure and life off the job, greater involvement of older
people in community and civic affairs and in formulating goals and policies on their own behalf, and special effort by the mass media to enhance the image of older persons.\textsuperscript{12}

Against this grim picture of lonely old age, psychologist Evelyn Duval emphasized the importance to most aging people of their family relationships. The great majority of persons over 65, she told the delegates, live in families; most are married and living with their spouses; some are making homes for their adult children or elderly parents. She cited many recent studies which document a "two directional, three-generation flow of emotional and financial support common between older parents and grandparents and their grown children." Disengagement, Duval asserted, "tends to be into rather than out of the family."\textsuperscript{13}

Throughout the discussions on major physical and psychological survival issues at the White House Conference were recommendations of great relevance for libraries about the need for (1) information about and referral to community resources; (2) information about how to minimize the difficulties of old age and maximize its opportunities, to the aging themselves and their families; (3) information about the special needs of the aging in the areas of housing, income, employment, health care, nutrition, etc. to citizens responsible for planning, policy making, appropriation, legislation, etc.; (4) pre-retirement preparation, including education on creative use of leisure, and how to plan for life on a reduced income addressed to middle aged people; and (5) education toward more constructive attitudes about aging as a part of life to be respected and enjoyed, to people of all ages.

The discussions at the White House Conference most immediately relevant to libraries, however, were those about the educational needs of the aging. Despite the fact that, in general, older persons did not perceive education as having any direct relevance for their interests and needs, delegates to the education section stressed the importance of lifelong learning directed toward an acceptance of the dignity and worth of nonwork pursuits, the development of leisure skills, maximum use of community resources, more successful adjustment to aging and training for political action. They recommended that the elderly should be involved in the planning of educational programs and that special effort be made to reach those who because of low income, poor health, foreign language or illiteracy are "less likely to respond voluntarily." Although the delegates favored programs in which the young and the old learned together, they affirmed that "alternatives must be provided which emphasize the felt needs of the aged at their particular stage in the life cycle."\textsuperscript{14}
Among the twenty-three recommendations about education adopted by the conference were two that refer specifically to public libraries. Recommendation VII: *Public Libraries, A Community Learning Resource*, states: "Public libraries serve to support the cultural, informational and recreational aspirations of all residents at many community levels. Since older adults are increasingly advocating and participating in lifetime education, we recommend that the public library, because of its nearby neighborhood character, be strengthened and used as a primary community resource. Adequate and specific funding for this purpose must be forthcoming from all levels of government and, most important, from private philanthropy." Recommendation VIII proposes that a title be added to the Library Services and Construction Act to provide library services for older adults. This recommendation has now been adopted, although as of June 1974 funding was not yet available.

How well are urban libraries today meeting the needs of the aging so clearly defined at the White House Conference? An inventory of special services to the aging offered by all public libraries serving 25,000 people or more was completed in November 1972 by Booz, Allen, & Hamilton under the sponsorship of the U.S. Office of Education. The inventory defined a program or service to the aging as "any library program or service (1) which is offered specifically for the aging or (2) in which 50 percent of the participants are 65 years of age or older." The study thus did not attempt to gather data on routine services to individual library patrons who happened to be aging.

About 80 percent of the responding libraries reported some special service to the aging. Most of this service (61.7 percent) was to the handicapped, homebound or institutionalized—a group who constitute about 25 percent of the aging. Services include delivery of books by mail or in person, and deposit collections in nursing homes, residences for older people and service centers. Slightly less than one-half of the libraries conducted some special group programs for the aging either in the library or in some other center. Seventy-four percent of the libraries provided special materials for the aging, usually books in large print and/or talking books. Outstanding among the nation’s libraries offering services to the aging are Cleveland Public Library with its shut-in service which began in 1941 and its "live long and like it" group for the well aged; Boston Public Library which conducts a similar informal education program at both main library and branches; and Detroit Public Library with its recently acquired "mainstream" bookmobile serving residences for the aged. St. Louis
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and Milwaukee Public libraries also offer comprehensive programs for the aging.

Funds budgeted annually by the responding libraries, specifically for services to the aged, amounted to $1,448,000—slightly over 1 percent of their total budget. Most of this, $969,000, came from sources other than local operating budgets (usually grants from LSCA or other federal programs).

The total number of aging reached by all these services was only 204,541, or less than 2 percent of the aging in the reporting libraries’ service areas. Even granting that the inventory does not reflect the libraries’ primary service to individual users, the record is deplorable. The libraries admitted that they now give service to the aging the lowest priority among the five age groups in the population (preschool, children, young adults, adults (21-64) and aging (65 and over). They anticipate, however, that service to the aging within the next five years will be ranked on a par with that to children and young people, after service to adults 21-64.

Insufficient funds were cited by the libraries as their chief constraint in serving the aging. Other constraints were difficulty of access to the library caused by architectural barriers and transportation problems, inadequate coordination between all community agencies serving the aging, lack of staff and difficulty in identifying the aging.

As a nontraditional educational agency dealing with individuals in an informal mode, the urban public library could play a central role in the education of the aging. The content, the manner, the level and the mode of delivery are all clearly indicated by data in the census and in the White House Conference final report. The following conclusions seem almost too obvious. Public libraries must:

1. Plan library services with aging users and potential users;
2. Concentrate upon information/referral services which will aid the aging and their families to cope with survival problems—housing, income, health care, safety, nutrition, etc.;
3. Present a more positive image of aging as a part of life by creative promotion of materials and services;
4. Bring aging people together with others of their own age, and with younger people in programs designed for cultural enrichment and lifetime learning;
5. Emphasize adult basic education, reading, computing, coping skills;
6. Deliver library materials, services and programs to the aging where they are—to their homes, to senior citizen residences and centers;
7. Provide transportation to bring the aging to the library for individual reader guidance and group stimulation;
8. Exploit the potential of nonprint media for the benefit of the functionally illiterate and poor reader; and
9. Present educational experiences in an uncompetitive, nonthreatening, informal manner.

THE FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE ADULT

The functionally illiterate adult may be defined as a man or woman, 16 years of age or older, who cannot read, write and compute well enough to perform as an independent adult. Before the experience with literacy training which received a major thrust in the mid-1960s, the functional illiterate had been defined as a person with less than 5 years of schooling. The last ten years have convinced adult educators that the fifth-grade reading level as measured by most standardized tests simply is not adequate for accomplishing the functions of an independent adult in today's world, and that it cannot be assumed that years of schooling equate with reading level. Armed Forces experience confirmed that frequently young recruits were reading from three to four grade levels below their number of years of schooling.17 In April 1970, therefore, when the Adult Education Act of 1966 was amended, the definition of functional illiteracy was changed to mean less than high school completion. The 1970 census identified 57 million Americans with less than high school education, the majority of them living in metropolitan areas.

In general, most adult basic education experts agree now that the persons who can read and compute at the 10 to 10.5 level as measured on a standardized test such as the California Test of Adult Basic Education or the Iowa Test of Educational Development are less likely to suffer severe hardship from specific illiteracies in terms of the functions they must perform, because their skills will be advanced enough to allow for flexibility.18

David Harman, in a 1970 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* devoted entirely to illiteracy, estimated that as high as 50 percent of the American population were illiterate in some function they needed.19

In 1971, Louis Harris and Associates conducted a study of the literacy level of Americans for the National Reading Center,20 in which they defined literacy in terms of probability of survival in society. For testing they used tasks such as following directions for direct distance dialing or reading newspaper ads for jobs or housing. This study
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concluded that 13 percent of the population who were over 15 years of age (or 18.5 million) were at the marginal survival level, and 3 percent (or 4.3 million) were at low survival probability.21

Who are the functionally illiterate, where are they, in what ways are they similar to literate adults, and in what ways do they differ in their needs, values and abilities? Research has documented that the functional illiterate usually belongs to a minority culture—Black, Appalachian white, American Indian or Spanish-surnamed. He/she is most often poor (the 13 million employed adults in the United States with less than high school education account for 35 percent of the work force, but 62.3 percent of workers with annual income below $3,000).22 People with little schooling also account for a disproportionate percentage of welfare recipients.

Whether he lives down a dry creek bed or in a crowded urban slum, the functional illiterate is isolated. He moves from place to place frequently within a small neighborhood. Because he is poor, he usually lives in crowded, dangerous, cold, unsanitary quarters. In metropolitan areas, he is more likely to live in the inner-city than in the suburbs.

The functionally illiterate adult has all the normal adult roles to play—parent, spouse, church member, worker, friend, student, voter, etc. When and if he reads, he is interested in the same content areas as most adults—medicine (health), psychology, economics, religion, sociology, history, and civics, in approximately that order.23 In many ways, his learning patterns are like those of all adults. He is reluctant to take risks, especially risks which may lead him to look foolish, and this reluctance increases with age. As he gets older he experiences greater difficulty in switching his attention. This can mean that the overdue gas bill or the delinquent child or wandering spouse is likely to block out interest in reading or in any other kind of information-seeking behavior for a time. Like all adults, he learns slowly at first, but this initial plateau is more likely to cause the adult illiterate to panic and to drop out of educational programs.

The functionally illiterate adult differs from other adults in that he needs more repetition, prompting and trials in order to learn; is slower to respond and to reach mastery; tends to be poor in both cognitive and motor or manipulative tasks; and learns more easily from listening than from seeing.

He is probably a person with some rather well organized defenses, expressed in apathy, hostility, or almost pathological attachment to his family, his ethnic group, or his religious convictions. These defenses
may be very necessary to him to separate him from chaos, and must therefore be tolerated and respected.

Although the illiterate adult plays all the usual adult roles, he tends to be socially off-time. As Troll and Schlossberg point out, middle-class professional people (including librarians) need to guard against making unconscious judgements about the 15-year-old mother and the 50-year-old beginning reader.24

The Appalachian Adult Education Center (AAEC), after seven years of intensive research and demonstration with illiterate adults, has defined four service groups among the 57 million adults in the United States with less than a high school education.25 Group one includes "those individuals who are economically and personally secure and believe there is a beneficial return from involvement in education, library and other services." This group is relatively easy to reach and serve, can profit from group activities and can be recruited through the mass media—television, radio, newspapers, etc. They tend to be registered library borrowers. Group two includes those who have suffered some disadvantage from undereducation such as continuous underemployment. They, too, are relatively easy to reach and serve and often show dramatic changes in economic levels and lifestyle as a result of education/library services. The chief adjustment many libraries need to make in service to this group is an extension of hours to accommodate to their long working hours. Group three includes those who are a long way from mastery in terms of both the reading and computation skills needed for high school equivalency and a living wage. If they are employed, it is in low-paying, dead-end and short-term jobs. However, they still believe that there is a return to be realized from involvement with public services. They require one-to-one recruitment and one-to-one services, although well-designed media campaigns do fortify personal recruiters. Group four is the smallest group, highest in priority on a need index. This group is unemployed, and unemployable and fatalistic. The AAEC refers to them as "the stationary poor." They must be approached in their homes, individually, if services are to be available to them. These four groups could provide library planners with a useful model in thinking about services for the disadvantaged.

What are libraries doing to serve the functionally illiterate adult? An American Library Association survey conducted in 1969 revealed that 99 percent of all public libraries serving over 500,000 people were conducting some programs to serve the poor.26 Federal funds—LSCA and others—were almost overwhelmingly the principal source of
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funding for these projects. The largest number of personnel hired to carry out programs to the disadvantaged were paraprofessional, indigenous personnel. One wonders how many of these programs will survive the demise of interest and funding at the federal level, how many will become institutionalized within local operating budgets. The 99 percent statistic must not be interpreted to mean that metropolitan public libraries have achieved an adequate, let alone superior level of service to the adult illiterate. In fact, after a study of services to the disadvantaged in fifteen major libraries, Claire Lipsman concluded in 1972: "In the communities in which libraries would most wish to penetrate, where the general level of education and literacy is low, the library service is least successful—the presence of adult users, who constitute roughly half of the libraries' clientele in middle class neighborhoods, decreases, in some black hard-core poverty areas to less than 10 percent."27

In 1963, the Adult Services Division of ALA established a standing Committee on Reading Improvement for Adults with the charge "to stimulate librarians to realize their responsibilities and their role in an all-out effort to combat illiteracy; to survey existing library programs for undereducated adults; to furnish information in support of legislation and cooperative action to extend adult literacy; to survey existing materials which meet the interests and needs of the undereducated adult, reinforce his skills and establish habits of continuing reading; to document the great need for more and better instructional and supplementary reading materials for the adult just learning to read."28 The following year, the committee obtained a small grant from the J. Morris Jones World Book Award fund to conduct a study of normative public library services to the illiterate adult leading to recommendations for their extension and improvement. Bernice MacDonald visited fifteen metropolitan libraries between November 1964 and March 1965 to obtain facts on current programs of service to adult illiterates. She found that all of these libraries were engaged in active planning with a wide variety of community agencies working to teach adults to read. She found that the librarians she visited were aware of the increasing opportunities for illiterate adults to learn and were seeking ways to participate, and that they were unclear about the library's role. Among the library programs she identified were an experimental project in basic research in literacy education at Cleveland Public Library, an adult reading center at Kalamazoo Public Library which not only acquired and commissioned a comprehensive collection of materials but also served as a catalyst bringing volunteer
teacher and adult nonreader together. She also found literacy classes promoted by the Cumberland County Public Library in North Carolina and increased work with publishers by New York, Brooklyn and Philadelphia Public Libraries. She questioned the future of library services to illiterates because librarians generally were “hampered by the fundamental lack of knowledge, skills and ideas in doing so.”

Most librarians would agree that, in cooperation with adult basic education programs conducted by the schools or other agencies, the most obvious contribution of the library is the identification and provision of materials. Research by the AAEC and by Helen Lyman at the University of Wisconsin on the reading interests of the adult new reader now are available to librarians. As more easy reading materials on an adult level become available, Lyman’s model on how to evaluate them becomes increasingly valuable.

Since libraries as a first step must coordinate their efforts with the schools and other agencies involved in adult basic education, the experiment-demonstration on Interrelating Library and Basic Education Services for Disadvantaged Adults, begun in 1972 by the Appalachian Adult Education Center in Morehead, Kentucky, is of great relevance. The project is a demonstration of four alternative working models for Adult Basic Education-Library cooperation, two of them involving metropolitan public libraries in Birmingham, Alabama and Columbia, South Carolina. Experience thus far in the project indicates that a cooperative approach can result in better service to the adult illiterate, that joint effort is not easy for a variety of administrative and philosophical reasons and that obstacles can be identified and overcome. Simply as a reflection of how the library profession looks to a sympathetic “outsider” from another discipline, the two-volume 1973 annual report of the project should be required reading for all librarians.

Given Lipsman’s finding that a major obstacle to better library services to the nonreading adult is the common lack of knowledge and skills in this speciality on the part of most public librarians, it would seem essential that there be more preservice and continuing education in this area. At a Seminar on Service to the Adult Illiterate held at Wayne State University in 1972, and attended by both library science students and practicing librarians, the participants reached consensus on the following guidelines for public library planning:

1) The Public Library should place high priority on developing services for the functionally illiterate adult.
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2) The Public Library should not offer direct instruction in reading but rather should provide a linkage between the functionally illiterate adult and existing reader development programs.

3) The public library should assume a catalytic role in encouraging the establishment of Adult Basic Education programs in the community if they do not already exist.

4) The public library should support adult basic education programs with materials and special services.

5) Librarians serving functionally illiterate adults should be “people-oriented,” and have personal qualities of patience, sensitivity, flexibility.

6) The library staff should reflect the ethnic composition of the community it serves.

7) Librarians should have a thorough knowledge of the community and its resources and a professional knowledge of all available materials in all media.

8) Library staff should be able to communicate with the functionally illiterate client in such a way as to give him confidence in using the library.

9) The library should offer in-service training to the staff to give them awareness of the needs of the functionally illiterate adult.

10) The library should hire or develop a reading specialist to seek out suitable materials and to promote programs and services for the functionally illiterate adult.

11) The library should give high priority to determining the reading interests and reading levels of its actual and potential users.

12) The library should provide materials for the illiterate adult which reflect his contemporary problems and life style.

13) The library should provide materials in audio and visual form as well as print.

14) The library should acquire bibliographies of material recommended for the functionally illiterate adult and conduct a continuous evaluation and review of the collection.

15) To inform functionally illiterate adults of public library services, the library should use a one-to-one personal approach as well as announcements in the mass media.

16) The library should maintain a two-way communication with adult basic education agencies in the community, becoming acquainted with their programs, goals and objectives.
17) The library should offer workshops on how to use the library for staff and clients of adult basic education programs.

18) The library should aid adult basic education agencies in evaluating materials.

19) The library should deposit materials in adult basic education agencies as well as make them available in the library itself.33

References


5. Ibid., p. 23.

6. Ibid., p. 46.


10. Ibid., p. 275.


12. Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 52-54.


15. Ibid., p. 7.


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