

Library Services to America's Poor People

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Summer 2005

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the role of public libraries in providing services to the poor and homeless populations in the United States. I will review the ALA's official policy on this issue as well as report on how some libraries have interpreted the ALA mandate. In particular, I will review programs developed by public libraries in Cleveland, Minnesota, Denver, Florida, Ohio, New York and California. A brief review of some of the literature on information needs of the poor is also included. Implications for future actions are discussed in conclusion.

Introduction

The question of how libraries can serve the needs of the poor is complex. One reason for the complexity is that the term "poor" refers to the socio-economic classification of a widely disparate group of people with a widely diverse set of information needs. When the American Library Association (ALA) issued a "Policy on Library Services to Poor People", as it did in 1990, it issued more of a philosophical framework than a program initiative to the nation's libraries. This resulted in many different interpretations of the ALA policy as libraries struggled to define the mandates in terms relevant to their local constituents.

The ALA policy, as stated in section 61 of its Policy Manual, states:

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the

effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies. Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people's needs and deliver relevant services. And within the American Library Association the coordinating mechanisms of programs and activities dealing with poor people in various divisions, offices, and units should be strengthened, and support for low-income liaison activities should be enhanced. (ALA, 2000).

America's poor represent a full spectrum of ethnic and racial profiles, urban and rural locations. Information needs and barriers to information are quite different.

Identifying those needs and barriers is a task that is best achieved at the local level.

Critics of the ALA's policy argue that enough is not being done to identify and provide services to this segment of the population. Sanford Berman, the then chairman of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association (SRRT) Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty and a well-known radical librarian, has taken public libraries to task for failing to provide for the needs of poor people. In an impassioned article entitled "Libraries, class and the "poor people's policy" he mentions a statement made by Charles Robinson, Director of the Baltimore County Public Library, who "candidly declared...that he and his deputy director are 'middle-class people serving the middle class' ". (Berman, 2001). He deplors such administrative policies as doubling overdue fines on juvenile materials as a "revenue generation tactic. (Berman, 2001).

The elemental truth is that poor people do not enjoy the same access to library resources and information that people with adequate incomes do. The basic cause, certainly, is poverty itself and a socioeconomic system that permits it.

But that doesn't let librarians off the hook. There are many things we can do to serve poor people directly and to direct public attention to the continuing problem of poverty and how it can be lessened, if not eradicated. It is a lie to talk about the "free public libraries" and "equality of service" when large parts of the population can't afford to get to the library, can't afford video and other fees, can't afford fines and are often so ill-housed and fed and without health insurance that they cannot even exploit or enjoy library resource. (Berman, 1998).

According to Berman's account, although the ALA approved a "Policy on Library Services to Poor People" in 1990, it wasn't until 1996 that a group was formed to try to implement the policy. The SRRT initiated conferences, resolutions and distributed information to resurrect and promote the ALA guidelines. The policy objectives include removing barriers to service such as fees and overdue charges, including relevant materials in library collections, promotion of funding for programs that proactively provide services to the poor, increased training for librarians and other members of the public to sensitize them to issues affecting poor people, as well as promoting volunteer efforts among the library, including performing needs assessments that include both anti-poverty experts as well as poor people themselves.

But the fundamental task facing each local library is to identify the information needs of its service population and to equitably serve all its constituents. In the case of the poor, who generally are not library patrons and who must be approached through proactive outreach programs, this can be a daunting task. Some academic efforts have been made in this area and several are briefly reviewed in the next section, which discusses the information needs of the poor.

Information needs of the poor

In an article about the information needs of Latino day laborers, Jensen listed many needs, including language-appropriate and understandable information on such topics as chemical safety, first aid, health issues, local health resources, labor laws, job opportunities English language study resources, immigration laws, news and legal aid, as well as more recreational topics such as music, news and sports. (Jensen, 2002.)

Elfreda Chatman has done much research on the information behavior of the poor, exploring information needs as well as search behavior and information channels. In discussing the knowledge gap between the poor and the non-poor, Chatman and Pendleton discuss the difference between information “needs and wants”, describing a “need” as being linked to a state of dependency, meaning that our well-being is dependent upon the information’s availability as opposed to a “want” which describes information that enhances our state of being. Impoverished people are in a state of information need, and it is their inability to resolve this need that perpetuates their impoverishment. (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995, p. 130) The information media of first choice for the poor are television and newspapers. Such mass media is not helpful in assisting the poor to resolve their problems as it is more a “source of recreation, to give them a general sense of local and national affairs and as topics of pastime conversations” (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995, p.130). They cite the finding of multiple researchers that “social exchanges among poor people are ones astonishingly devoid of support or mutual caring” and that interpersonal sources of information are not a significant channel for the poor who “live alienated from each other” in an “impoverished information world” (Chatman & Pendleton, 1995, p.139).

The information environment thus described by Chatman's research is a bleak reality with a steady stream of impersonal (and personally meaningless) mass media information providing merely a distraction from the isolation of everyday life.

Knowledge gaps occur partly because of mistrust by poor people of sources that originate outside their information environment" and that one way to bridge the gap is to make the library and its services "trustworthy, reliable and useful to their situation" (Chatman, p.14).

In a related study on opinion leadership and information sharing, Chatman observed that her findings "suggest that there is a need for practical, timely information within their [poor people] reach. If information and referral services were developed to include a focus on job search and career information, they might broaden the opportunity for low-income populations to acquire this information." (Chatman, 1987).

In analyzing the needs of low-income residents in South King County in Washington, Armstrong, Lord and Zelter found that although libraries were not highly ranked as a source of information, there was a relatively high usage of libraries. The information needs identified by the study fell into four categories, career search, job advancement, culturally appropriate and translated materials and internet skills. Recommendations for the library included having a career section of the library with resources in appropriate languages, as well as information on local companies and opportunities. Other needs include information on childcare, banking, healthcare and news about one's home country for recent immigrants. Participants cite their children's use of the library as the "best thing about the library" (Armstrong, Lord and Zelter, 2000, p2)

In summary, it is possible to generalize that the information needs of the poor are practical in nature, being largely related to the fundamentals of life such as making a living and negotiating society's requirements. This argues for literacy programs as well as vocational resources and community networking resources. The large and varied immigrant population requires that resources be provided in the appropriate languages. Chatman's research among America's urban poor indicates that extensive outreach efforts are required to build credibility among the information disenfranchised poor. As is true with all library services, it is essential that libraries identify the needs of their own constituents and tailor their services to meet those needs.

Current controversies

Current controversies surrounding the issue of providing services to poor people center on defining the appropriate levels of service, and defining the appropriate use of the services by the patrons.

The term "poor people" includes many different types of people from many different contexts, from skilled workers who have lost jobs in an economic downturn, to those who are virtually unemployable due to educational impoverishment. Libraries must provide very different services to those very different patrons. (Flagg, 2000).

"Traditionally, the role of libraries toward the poor was seen as providing a means of self-improvement. Libraries, perhaps naively, were envisioned as a "people's university" that would enable the underclass to "better themselves" by lifting themselves out of poverty" (Flagg, 2000).

Patrick Grace, in an article entitled "No place to go (except the public library)", examines the situation from all perspectives: library patron, homeless patron, library staff

member and the library director. The needs of the homeless are straightforward and elemental: warmth, shelter and safety. The regular library patron is seeking information to enhance his well being, the library staff is trying to serve all patrons and the library director does not want the library to be perceived as a “homeless shelter”. During the Depression, the library served much the same purpose, but that is the romantic past and not the gritty present. Needs include a place to be, as well as a place to keep such things as personal records, addresses and personal writings in an online environment. Librarians can partner with homeless advocates and work within the community to ensure that resources are well known. Providing “food and shelter for the spirit” is both a mandate of the profession and a goal of libraries. (Grace, 2000).

The library’s role in the issue of service to the poor and homeless is controversial. The case of Kreimer vs. Morristown is a representative microcosm of the controversy. In 1991 a homeless man, Richard Kreimer, sued the town of Morristown, New Jersey, its public library and the Police department for harassment, claiming that his ejection from the library by library staff who found his body odor offensive was a violation of his rights. He won a large settlement after a federal judge ruled that the library’s policies on patron hygiene were unconstitutional. This led to much soul searching, including a report from ALA’s Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force which expressed “concern about public libraries adopting punitive policies clearly targeted at homeless people. Odor policies of the sort enacted by San Luis Obispo County, California and the civility campaign launched by Salt Lake City (Utah) Library to ‘teach the homeless, children and others how to behave’ are at best misguided and at worst, contribute to the criminalization of the poor” (ALA, 2005).

Lawry in an article for the publication *Public Libraries*, discusses the value of a library card to the homeless- how it connects people with access to books and other resources and how that is often in conflict with other aspects of the library's fundamental mission of maintaining a "safe and clean environment in which to offer these services" (Lawry, 2002.) Rules governing circulation of materials, including fines for overdue materials and access charges for services such as loans and photocopying, can be prohibitive for the poor.

In an article envisioning the public library as it will exist in the year 2010, Stuart Comstock-Gay posits that the needy patrons will still require physical access to information resources while the more well-to-do patrons will have remote access to the same resources from the comfort, convenience and privacy of their own homes. He stresses the historical role of the library in serving the underprivileged, and acknowledges that the situation is growing in complexity. He advises libraries to focus on conduct (behavior) rather than appearance, and to adopt uniform, non-discriminatory standards that do not target the poor and homeless. When the *Morristown* judgment was overturned, the appeals court "held that the library is a limited public forum, designed for certain constitutionally protected activities. Those activities are reading, studying and using library materials." (Comstock-Gay, 1995.)

In the report to ALA at its annual conference in 1992, the Freedom to Read Foundation reiterated the purposes of libraries in light of the *Kreimer vs. Morristown* case that "libraries are public forums for the purpose of access to information. As such,

they should be subject only to reasonable time, place and manner restrictions and rules governing non-speech elements of conduct...” (Freedom to Read, 1992).

The Kreimer case indicates that libraries will be given the responsibility for creating fair and equitable use policies that are non-discriminatory, but that provide for a safe and beneficial experience for all patrons, which is a task worthy of Solomon. As libraries across the country struggle with this task, there are notable successes, a few of which will be discussed in the next section.

Success stories

Some successful programs share the characteristics of locally focused resources and community involvement. The Cleveland Public Library, the Hennepin (Minnesota) Public Library, the Clara Barton School Library in the South Bronx, the Denver Public Library, the Hialeah Public Library (Florida) and the Nelsonville (Ohio) Public Library all describe programs that actively involve the community in identifying and providing information resources to their poor constituents.

The Cleveland Public Library developed the Family Learning Connection Project in 1997, using funds received under the federal Library Services and Construction Act. The program was envisioned as a family literacy project, designed to increase the opportunities for parents and children to interact in playing, reading and using computers. The library spent its funds on computers, software, board books and remodeling two facilities. Staff and volunteers were recruited and trained to provide tutoring and skill building in reading and math. The most successful aspect of the program was the computers which were continually used during all hours of the library’s operations. The biggest challenge facing the project was reaching parents and caregivers, which was

ultimately achieved through partnerships with community agencies and schools. (Feldman & Robinson, 1999).

In Hennepin, Minnesota, Linhoff and Holden described an outreach program that provided services to people living in a variety of group residences, including senior centers, rehabilitation centers and nursing homes. Library staff provided preselected materials in coherent units to the patrons, at 15 items per box that included a variety of resources in various media including books and audio. In addition, the Library partnered with adult learning centers to establish “deposit collections” for their patrons in the literacy program who found it difficult to physically visit the library. “Not only did the new initiative meet the needs of the clients (as evidenced by their enthusiasm) but it also matched perfectly with Hennepin County Library’s five critical success factors: customer focus, diversity, partnerships, lifelong learning and system thinking.” (Linhoff & Holden, 2004).

The Clara Barton School Library in South Bronx, New York benefited from funding made available by a private philanthropy to expand and enhance its library facilities to better serve its poor constituents. Increasing the collection by a factor of three, enhancing the building space by doubling square footage and designing the space to promote learning, as well as providing updated computer access proved to be a success. The program emphasizes the collaboration between the libraries and the schools’ administration and faculty members to ensure that the library and its services are an integral part of the school and its curriculum. ((Lau, 2002).

The Denver Public Library received a grant from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine to improve its websites for people seeking health information. In a

program known as Healthy People 2010. The program has two goals: one is to help people increase their life span and quality of life and the other is to eliminate the “health disparities among the different segments of the population” (Connell, 2004). The project began with community assessment surveys of local people and involved community resources, they found that key informants (health care providers and community group leaders) did not know about the Library’s existing resources but were enthusiastic about partnering with the Library to provide enhanced information resources to the poor. The final step in developing the library’s website is community outreach and training, and the library plans to supplement its budgetary constraints by enlisting the support of community leaders and volunteers, an excellent way to involve the constituents to be participants. “We are developing ‘Computer Comfort’ classes and training materials to be implemented through a focused outreach process, meeting community leaders and other residents where they already have connections and where they already go.” (Connell, 2004).

In Hialeah, Florida, the public library has created small e-library branches connected to police substations. They enjoy prime locations, easy accessibility and computers with Internet access. “In a city where more than 90% of the population is Hispanic and 34.6% is below the poverty level, computer access and free Internet are seen as some of the most important benefits public libraries offer. The innovative facilities share space with police substations and are adjacent to neighborhood parks. In addition, their centralized locations make them highly accessible for residents limited by transportation barriers.” (Aranda & Miro, 2004). Sharing space with the police department fosters a sense of safety and security, and the patrons have cited email

accessibility as one of the most important benefits offered by the library which offers direct connection to online reference support, an extensive English/Spanish reference collection, and an online collection that updates on a quarterly basis as well as interlibrary loans, children's story times, color printing, fax and copy facilities, scanning and bus passes. The e-Library branches also serve as local information hubs, providing a means to publicize events, programs and services offered by the main library and other community organizations. The computers are shared with neighboring schools to provide computer literacy and English classes during the hours that the e-Library is not open. "Libraries must be certain to keep improving customer service as the main objective whenever implementing new technological innovations. Applying technology to keep up with the customers' demands will allow for successful strategic planning and help broaden the ever-changing roles public libraries play in our communities." ((Aranda & Miro, 2004).

The Nelsonville (Ohio) Public Library incorporated food into its summer reading program in 1998, extended to any child who came in at lunchtime. The U.S. Department of Agriculture supported a program to replace school cafeteria food programs offered during the school year to be offered throughout the summer months. Relatively few public libraries participate, due to the bureaucracy and extra work involved in implementing such a program. The benefit is in attracting new patrons to the library and in serving an under-served segment of the public. "We realized this is what the library is supposed to do for its community- not just provide information but help people find out that the information is here." (Watkins, 2002).

In addition to programs on job hunting and literacy, the traditional services offered to the poor, the most popular program at the San Francisco Public Library, according to Flagg, is public Internet access. He notes in 2000 that 73% of public libraries offer this service, and that it is particularly popular among the homeless. Along with employment opportunities and local assistance for problems such as health and housing, the Internet access provides email to the homeless, which gives them a connection to a network of other homeless people across the nation, and a sense of community that might be otherwise absent from their lives. (Flagg, 2000).

Conclusion

In the summer of 2001, the ALA/SRRT Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty published recommendations for action in implementing ALA's "Library Services for the Poor" Resolution that enjoins all citizens to challenge public policy, join local advocacy groups, promote ongoing funding and promote a legislative agenda that will eliminate the socio-economic causes of poverty. The actions for library professionals include clarifying mission statements, avoid discriminatory policies, remove barriers to access, promote literacy and work with local literacy providers. In addition, sensitivity training for staff members and training in development funding techniques are encouraged. Libraries are urged to factor low-income programs into their regular budgets, rather than relying on special federal funding for such programs. Equitable distribution of budgetary funds is necessary. In the matter of community outreach, libraries must work with local welfare, consumer and antipoverty organizations to pool resources and ensure synergy and non-duplication of resources. Library staff should be encouraged in a spirit of volunteerism in service to the poor. Public awareness on issues

relating to domestic and global poverty, hunger and homelessness should be promoted through active measures such as the collection and display of current materials on these subjects. Library science programs should be encouraged to offer courses on services to the poor and the ALA must be held accountable for implementing its “Poor People’s Policy.”

From the research on this subject, as well as the examples of success stories, it is clear that poverty is a deep social issue and needs to be addressed at a community level in order to develop effective programs. Information needs are different from information wants, and the services that the poor need are quite fundamental to survival. Some of the most successful library offerings are related to bridging the technological gap in the digital divide, giving the poor access to a broader spectrum than that afforded by their limited information physical ground. That connection may be the key to the elimination of the information gap separating the poor from the non-poor.

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