

## RURAL LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION NEEDS

John W. Head, Associate Professor  
School of Library Science  
Clarion State College

During the fall of 1978, staff members of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship, School of Library Science, Clarion State College, conducted an exploratory survey of selected rural libraries to determine perceived information needs. Eighty libraries were chosen as a random sample of Pennsylvania libraries with urban populations of 25,000 and under. A total of forty-eight responses was received by February 1979.

The following table gives the average characteristics of the forty-eight libraries for which usable data were obtained.

<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>MEAN</u>
Actual population	4,785
Population served	10,520
Volumes (books only)	20,506
Operating budget	29,929
Per capita expenditure	\$3.11

"Actual population" refers to the population of the community in which the library is located. "Population served" includes the population of other nearby communities (usually townships) that are provided free service. Under Pennsylvania's plan for library systems, there is an attempt to provide service to all areas possible and to aid cooperating libraries with state

funds. Townships thus linked to a public library may contribute little or no local support, and their residents probably make less use of these libraries than the residents of the immediate community.

The survey contained questions on a wide range of topics designed by my colleague, Bernard Vavrek, and me. The analysis of survey results has been divided into two parts, with each of us discussing answers to a particular group of questions.\*

The questions discussed in this report deal with two areas:

1. Rural librarians' beliefs about the information needs in the areas their libraries serve.
2. Rural librarians' reports of other information services in their communities.

#### Questions on Information Needs

Three questions dealt with the area of information needs. The first of these was: "This is perhaps the most difficult question, but please try to answer it as best you can. Do you think that people in your area have information needs that they do not bring to the library? Comment, giving examples." The responses may be tabulated as follows.

YES	MAYBE	NO	DON'T KNOW
40	1	2	5

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\* Bernard Vavrek's paper, "Information Services and the Rural Library," appeared in the Spring 1980 issue of Library Trends.

Rural Pennsylvania librarians seem to feel that their libraries are not fully utilized as information sources. This, of course, is hardly a surprising result. We felt that question was worth asking, however, since so many rural librarians do not have formal education as librarians. Thirty-six of the forty respondents who answered "yes" offered comments about these information needs.

These responses were of two types: (1) people do not think first of the library and (2) lists of the kinds of information the librarians felt were needed.

Of the first type, the following responses are typical.

"Of course they have information needs they do not bring to the library, but there are people who just do not think to use the library. We started out with a strike against us since many people did not feel the library was needed."

"Yes. Many people are unaware of the scope or type of services offered and consider the library only as a pleasure reading source."

"Probably. Our population is a mix -- rural culturally deprived; middle class; wealthy suburbanites...first group, particularly young, extremely dependent on library facilities... second group enjoys use of the library...last group supports financially but seldom uses...most information needs in first group."

"Yes, for a number of years library staff did not truly serve the public. Therefore, they have been turned off, and we are desperately trying to win them back."

The second type of answer provided examples of the kinds of information the librarians believed were needed:

"Self help, hobbies, leisure reading, gardening, travel."

"Information on social agencies, political information, government services."

"I just had a man looking for a recipe for the old-fashioned buckwheat pancakes that is 'used from' and 'added to' each day. We found it easily, but as he left he said he had about twenty other people looking for the same thing."

"Recent patron was looking for addresses of companies. She had never heard of the Thomas Register and was able to locate the information she needed."

"Business information needs, e.g., Moody's, Dun & Bradstreet."

"Health care, merchandising, advertising, addresses -- everything!"

Many of the responding librarians feel that despite the small size of their libraries they have many resources that are under-used but are potentially of great value. Again and again, however, they stated that the information-seeking public was very hard to reach because the library was still viewed essentially as a lending library for leisure reading.

Our next question on information needs required librarians to plunge even deeper into the unknown. We asked, "Could your library at present handle these unspoken information needs?" The tabulated responses are:

YES (or mostly)	PARTLY	NO	NO RESPONSE (or don't know)
25	14	3	6

One respondent would simply have none of this and told us: "How can we know this if we do not know what questions they would be asking in the first place?" Far more of the librarians were willing to estimate how well they could succeed in doing this. Obviously, they felt that the kinds of questions that don't get to the library are not exotic, but usually would fall into the classes of questions that they could answer.

Some sample responses follow.

"Very often we could...we have a file for community information... on all sorts of subjects...where to get help from any community agencies."

"Sure."

"Since our library is an information center, we hope that we would be able to handle at least most of these unspoken needs."

"Given time and money, we can handle anything."

The last of this group of three questions dealing with information needs asked: "If your library could not presently provide the information needs discussed (in the first question) what additional resources (e.g., staff, reference tools, etc.) would be required to handle these problems?"

The responses may be tabulated as follows:

<u>RESOURCES NEEDED</u>	<u>NUMBER RESPONDING</u>
More Staff	6
More Reference Tools	10
More Reference Tools and More Staff	9
Adequate Now	1
No Response	21
Refer to Another Source	<u>1</u>
Total	48

Twenty-one librarians did not respond to this question. Perhaps the step from estimating information needs to estimating if they could be met and what additional assistance would be needed was simply too long. Not surprisingly, twenty-five responses called for more staff or more reference tools or both.

#### Questions on Community Information Services

A final section of the questionnaire dealt with other community resources by asking, "Are there any other information services in your community aside from your library (e.g., an information referral center, neighborhood information center, telephone hotlines, etc.)? If there are, please identify them with names and addresses." The responses are tabulated below.

<u>OTHER INFORMATION SERVICES</u>	<u>NUMBER RESPONDING</u>
Yes (more than one)	8
Yes (one)	7
No	23
No Response and Don't Know	<u>10</u>
Total	48

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the isolation of the small rural library. Fewer than one third of the librarians could identify any other organized information resource in their local communities. The contrast with the urban library is certainly striking. The problem for the urban library usually is to identify the large number of information resources. It may be, of course, that some of our rural librarians simply failed to iden-

tify the other information resources, perhaps even resources they knew of themselves.

This survey, as mentioned above, is only exploratory. We did, however, have some tentative hypotheses in mind. These included: rural librarians would feel their library resources were underused; rural librarians would have some ideas of information needs their libraries could fill; rural libraries are relatively isolated from other information sources. While the information collected tends to support these tentative hypotheses, this study is considered to be merely a starting point for further rural library research.