

**ADOLESCENT READING:  
A STUDY OF TWELVE RURAL PENNSYLVANIA TOWNS**

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The reading behavior of young people is, or should be, of interest to librarians who seek to serve the informational and recreational reading needs of youth in small town and open country locations. This is true not simply because adolescents represent an important library clientele, but also because rural libraries, perhaps more than their metropolitan counterparts, are often seen as community service facilities with some responsibility for contributing to the development of productive and successful citizens (Loomis and Beegle, 1957; Vavrek, 1985). Moreover, it seems likely that youthful reading habits may affect later adult reading patterns, and hence may have long-term relevance to the support and usage of rural libraries (Razzano, 1985).

While studies have documented the incidence of reading by various adult groupings in the nation's population (Gallup, 1978; Harris, 1979; Yankelovich and White, 1978), there is little research on the incidence and nature of the reading behavior of adolescents (Wood, 1988), and even less dealing specifically with rural youth. Those few studies that have been done in this area have dealt with small samples and limited geographic areas (e.g., Jackle, 1984). The availability of data from a survey of the leisure-time activities of young people from selected rural communities in Pennsylvania provided an opportunity to obtain some information

on the reading behavior of youth in small town and open country areas of the state (Crider, Willits, and Funk, 1985).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this analysis was to describe the reported amount of time which these adolescents spent reading books and magazines and ascertain the personal and social characteristics of the youth associated with reading time.

### **The Data**

In 1983, a total of 3294 students in the 8th and 11th grades of public schools in the county seats of twelve non-metropolitan counties in Pennsylvania answered questionnaires dealing with their leisure-time activities. County seat locations were chosen as study sites because of their generally central location in the counties and their traditional definition as hubs of area activities. The towns ranged in size from 700 to 16,000 inhabitants.

Frequency of reading was assessed by the following item: How many hours each week do you spend reading books and magazines? Less than two hours; 2-4 hours; 5-9 hours; 10 or more.

The relationships of reported reading frequency to the following types of variables were assessed:

Personal and Family Characteristics (grade level, number of siblings, father's occupation, mother's employment status, and mother's occupation, if employed).

Work Responsibilities (chores at home, holding of a summer job, working for pay now).

Other leisure-time activities (time spent with family, time with peers, number of school sports participations, number of school organizations belonged to, number of community organizational memberships, and hours spent watching television).

Statistical significance was tested by chi square analysis. Because of the large sample size, differences could be judged to be statistically significant, even

though they were too small to be substantively important or interpretable. As a result, relationships were required to be significant at the .001 level to be judged "significant" for this analysis.

### Analysis

Over half of the youth sampled reported reading books and magazines 2 or more hours a week, more than one in four reported reading 5 or more hours a week and about one in ten said they read more than ten hours a week, Table 1. Thus, while overall, reading was not a dominant pastime, some young people did report fairly high levels of reading participation; others spent very little time reading.

There were pronounced differences between males and females in the incidence of reading. While more than half of the boys sampled spent less than two hours a week reading books and magazines, only 37 percent of the girls indicated so little time reading. Moreover, girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to indicate that they spent 10 or more hours reading in a week. The gender difference in reading frequency found for these rural adolescents parallels that found for teenagers and adults in the general population.

Grade level, number of siblings, and whether or not the young person's mother worked outside the home were not significantly related to reading frequency. However, both father's and mother's occupations were associated with reading frequency of their offspring. Sons and daughters of professionals and managers read the most; blue collar teenagers read the least. Although information on parent's educational level was not available in the current data, it seems likely that the noted occupational differences reflected both socioeconomic status and educational distinctions among the youths' parents.

It was anticipated that the more hours a youth spent working, either on chores at home or at a paying job, the less time he/she would spend reading books and magazines. Moreover, some previous research has suggested that, at least for urban young people, the work experience serves to divert them from leisure and studying activities and toward goals focused on the acquisition of material goods

(Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986). However, when the number of hours spent on working at a paying job now and during summer months were cross-tabulated with hours spent reading, neither relationship was statistically significant, Table 2. Hours per week spent on chores at home was significantly related to reading, but the relationship was positive rather than negative as had been anticipated. The greater the number of hours spent on chores, the more hours the youth spent reading.

Frequent participation in leisure-time activities was also expected to curtail the young person's time spent in reading. Indeed, popular stereotypes portray adolescents who are avid readers as pale recluses with thick eyeglasses who withdraw from peer group activities and family socializing. While the number of sports activities in which the youth engaged was negatively and significantly related to frequency of reading, all of the other measures of adolescent leisure involvement presented a different picture, Table 3. The more hours a youth spent socializing with family members, the more hours spent socializing with peers, and the more the involvement in school and community activities, the more hours he/she reported reading. Thus, those young people who were the most involved with their families and peer groups, and who participated in formal organizations in school and in the community were also the most likely to spend time reading. The single exception to this pattern was sports activities.

Other writers have suggested that television has supplanted reading for teenagers and adults alike in our society (Robinson and Converse, 1972). It was true in the current data set that the youth reported many more hours watching television than reading. Thus, less than one in ten of the sample members indicated that they watched TV less than two hours a week; 45 percent said they spent less than two hours a week reading books and magazines; while 43 percent of the youth indicated they watched TV ten or more hours in a week, only 10 percent said they spent ten or more hours reading. Nevertheless, despite the differences in the reported hours these young people spent watching TV and reading, it was noteworthy that the frequency of television viewing was not negatively related to reading frequency. Indeed, those youth who reported the

most television viewing were also the most likely to report reading five or more hours a week. Such a finding calls into question the idea that those persons who watch TV cease reading, substituting television viewing for recreational reading.

### **Discussion**

While the rural youth in the sample reported fewer hours reading than watching television, more than one in four indicated that they devoted 5 or more hours a week to reading, and one in ten said they read 10 or more hours. Moreover, just as other studies have found a greater frequency of reading among females and those of higher socio-economic status (Wood, 1988), this study found that girls and adolescents from professional or managerial homes spent more time reading than did boys and those whose parents held lower white collar or blue collar jobs.

However, the present analysis goes beyond these general specifications to examine the relationships of reading involvement to the work and leisure activities of rural adolescents. It seemed reasonable to expect that youth who were heavily involved in other extra-school activities--work, other leisure-time pursuits, and/or participation in various organizations--would spend fewer hours per week reading than would their less involved counterparts. The current analysis, however, found a very different pattern. For these rural adolescents, the more the person was involved with his/her family and peers, participated in school and community activities, worked on chores at home, or watched television, the more hours he/she reported reading. Some other studies dealing with leisure-time usage have also reported this finding--the more the individual is involved in some things, the more he/she participates in other pursuits (Willits and Willits, 1986). While there may be limits in the extent to which this principle applies, these data suggest that active teenagers are also reading teenagers. Since youthful activity patterns are often reflected in adult behavior, it seems likely that these same adolescents are likely to continue to be relatively active as readers and as community leaders as they grow older.

In closing, it needs to be underscored that the present analysis has focused on reading behavior, not on library usage. The available data provided no information on the source of the young person's reading materials. Nevertheless, to the extent that rural libraries include as one of their functions the provision of books for recreational reading, it seems likely that those young people who read most often will be the most likely to be users. If nothing else, they represent the potential clientele and support system for rural libraries.

## NOTES

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Table 1. Relationships of personal and family characteristics to hours spent reading each week.

Characteristic	Number of Cases <sup>a</sup>	Hours Spent Reading				Chi Square
		< 2 hr.	2-4 hr.	5-9 hr.	10+ hr.	
		-----Percent-----				
Total Sample	3171	45.4	27.5	16.8	10.3	
Gender						
Male	1552	54.2	25.4	13.5	7.0	111.41*
Female	1577	36.7	29.6	20.1	13.6	
Grade						
8th	1778	45.0	26.5	16.9	11.6	7.88
11th	1393	45.9	28.7	16.7	8.7	
Number of Siblings						
None	680	46.6	28.5	15.0	9.9	19.22
One -	1064	41.7	28.9	19.5	9.8	
Two	780	46.4	25.4	17.2	11.0	
Three or more	572	49.7	25.9	13.6	10.8	
Father's Occupation						
Professional, Manager	929	34.2	31.5	20.8	13.5	69.06*
Clerical, Sales	139	45.3	21.6	21.6	11.5	
Blue Collar	1345	50.3	27.5	13.9	8.3	
Mother's Employment Status						
Doesn't work outside home	1299	46.3	27.6	16.2	9.9	2.63
Works outside home	1735	43.7	28.0	17.5	10.9	
Mother's Occupation						
Professional, Manager	452	33.6	29.2	22.1	15.0	40.26*
Clerical, Sales	490	42.7	28.6	19.0	9.8	
Blue Collar	725	50.1	27.3	13.7	9.0	

\*Significant .001

<sup>a</sup>Number of cases varies due to missing data.



Table 2. Relationships of work responsibilities to hours spent reading.

Work Responsibilities	Number of Cases <sup>a</sup>	Hours Spent Reading				Chi Square
		< 2 hr.	2-4 hr.	5-9 hr.	10+ hr.	
-----Percent-----						
Hours/Wk. Spent on Chores at Home						
< 1 hr.	852	57.5	23.9	11.3	7.3	90.81*
2-4 hr.	1354	43.5	28.7	18.1	9.7	
5+ hr.	942	37.0	29.1	20.0	13.9	
Hours/Wk. Spent Working on Summer Job						
None	1653	42.8	28.1	17.8	11.3	20.47
1-9 hr.	531	49.0	26.4	14.5	10.2	
10-29 hr.	463	43.0	29.4	17.5	10.2	
30+ hr.	380	51.3	27.9	14.7	6.1	
Hours/Wk. Spent Working for Pay Now						
None	2002	45.4	27.2	17.0	10.4	4.88
1-9 hr.	528	43.6	28.8	18.4	9.3	
10-29 hr.	410	45.1	29.5	14.9	10.5	
30+ hr.	130	48.5	27.7	13.1	10.8	

\*Significant .001

<sup>a</sup>Number of cases varies due to missing data.

Table 3. Relationships of participation in other leisure-time activities to hours spent reading.

Leisure-time Activity	Number of Cases <sup>a</sup>	Hours Spent Reading				Chi Square
		< 2 hr.	2-4 hr.	5-9 hr.	10+ hr.	
		-----Percent-----				
<b>Sports Activities</b>						
None	1590	46.5	25.0	16.4	12.0	27.61*
One	698	44.3	28.7	15.8	11.3	
Two or more	843	44.1	31.6	17.8	6.5	
<b>Hours/Wk. Spent with Family</b>						
< 5 hrs.	1057	58.6	23.6	11.4	6.4	168.29*
5-9 hrs.	989	44.4	30.5	16.4	8.7	
10+ hrs.	1110	33.8	28.4	22.3	15.5	
<b>Hours/Wk. Spent with Peers</b>						
< 5 hrs.	636	53.9	23.1	14.3	8.6	28.64*
5-9 hrs.	954	44.1	30.2	16.0	9.6	
10+ hrs.	1571	42.7	27.6	18.2	11.5	
<b>School Activities</b>						
None	1136	57.0	23.0	12.9	7.0	156.16*
One	927	45.1	30.5	16.2	8.2	
Two or more	1081	32.8	30.0	21.5	15.7	
<b>Community Activities</b>						
None	1638	52.0	25.5	14.0	8.5	78.56*
One	812	41.3	29.3	18.5	11.0	
Two or more	691	33.9	30.2	21.9	14.0	
<b>Hours/Wk. Watching TV</b>						
< 2 hrs.	286	62.2	16.8	9.8	11.2	122.43*
2-4 hrs.	601	55.1	25.5	13.0	6.5	
5-9 hrs.	923	43.0	33.8	14.2	9.0	
10+ hrs.	1353	39.4	26.4	21.7	12.5	

\*Significant .001

<sup>a</sup>Number of cases varies due to missing data.