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# Public Libraries and the Economically Disadvantaged: A Bibliometric Assessment of Published Research, 1996-2016

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## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges that American public libraries have faced is serving the disadvantaged and homeless population (Ayers, 2006). There are various reasons people can become homeless, in which poverty and lack of shelter being among the prime reasons (Hersberger, 2005). Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. §11301, et seq. (1994) defines a homeless person as being an individual who: lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence and ... has a primary night time residence that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations ... (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. (Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. §11301, et seq. (1994).

Some of the key challenges that public libraries face with this population are rules that prohibit strong body odor, bringing large amounts of personal belongings into the library, and using library restroom facilities to sleep and bathe - rules that often seem superfluous to homeless patrons (Bardoff, 2015). Due to stereotypes and individual biases, members of this disadvantaged group can experience prejudice and resentment from library staff and other patrons (Wong, 2009). Hersberger (2005) asserts that libraries should be "social institutions of inclusion, not exclusion" (p. 200).

## Purpose Statement

This research project analyzed publication trends in LIS literature from the past 20 years pertaining to

research related to public libraries and the economically disadvantaged, specifically publication trend over time, core journals, most prolific lead authors, and focus of the studies.

## Research Questions

- R1. How many journal articles over the past 20 years have been published per year related to public libraries and the economically disadvantaged?
- R2. In which journals were the articles in this study published?
- R3. Which authors have published most frequently on this subject?
- R4. What is the focus of the articles in this study?

## Definitions

*Bibliometric Research:* Bibliometric research is a common research method which analyzes written publications of a discipline in order to determine the progress of a certain subject within that discipline (Maharana, 2014).

*Bradford's Law:* "The bibliometric principle that a disproportionate share of the significant research results on a given subject are published in a relatively small number of the scholarly journals in the field, a pattern of exponentially diminishing returns first noted by Samuel C. Bradford in 1934" (Reitz, 2017).

*Economically Disadvantaged:* For the purposes of this study, this term is used interchangeably with the term homeless, in that it primarily refer to the homogeneous homeless population and somewhat refer to poor who are not necessarily without shelter (Estrella, 2016).

*Lotka's Law:* "Accurate when applied to large bodies of literature over a significant period of time, Lotka's Empirical Law of Scientific Productivity means that in a field in which  $a = 2$ , about 61% of all published authors make just one contribution, about 15% have

two publications ( $1/2^2 \times .61$ ), about 7 percent make three contributions ( $1/3^2 \times .61$ ), and less than 1% produce ten or more publications ( $1/10^2 \times .61$ )” (Reitz, 2017).

### ***Importance of the Study***

While surveying LIS literature no other bibliometric study of this subject could be found. Study results and findings may contribute to filling a gap in the research literature and may also be helpful to public librarians and staff, social workers and various stakeholders. The results of this study can also be useful for collection development on the topic of public libraries and homelessness.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Homelessness and Public Libraries***

The treatment of economically disadvantaged and homeless patrons by public librarians and staff is a prominent subject in LIS studies and the media (Bardoff, 2015). Bardoff (2015) points out that the rules in a majority of public libraries are opposed to bad hygiene, bringing large amounts of personal belongings into the library, and using public restrooms for sleeping and bathing; these rules inordinately affect homeless patrons (p. 347). Hersberger (2005) contends that classifying a whole group of people as “problem patrons” is discrimination (p. 200).

Hersberger (2005) asserts that asking a patron to leave the library based on inappropriate behavior is legitimate; however, this is a separate concern from the patron’s social status. She compares this to the logic of classifying toddlers as problem patrons because they also “can be smelly and loud, are not in the library reading anything and are often asleep, but no one advocates that this is a problem patron group unworthy of library services” (p. 200). Leeder (2010) points out that all types of libraries can help homeless people if the negative stereotypes can be laid aside. He claims that libraries can create programs that target their needs by educating themselves on local organizations that can help and by providing the homeless with information such as

laws that pertain to them. Initiatives can be accomplished by contacting local organizations, providing space and other support (p. 5).

Serving the homeless can be challenging for public libraries because they are in a constant struggle between providing a safe environment and maintaining a relaxing and nonthreatening environment (Wong, 2009 p. 401). One challenge mentioned in LIS literature is that public libraries often have complicated policies in regards to user access and suitable behavior. Wong (2009) asserts that many libraries allow the homeless to use shelter addresses as proof of residency; however, some libraries do not specify and do not accommodate the homeless in obtaining a library card. As aforementioned, late fees and other fines can also hinder the homeless due to their unstable living conditions as far as losing library materials and being victims of theft.

Another challenge mentioned in LIS literature is the lack of awareness that the general public has of homelessness in regards to it being a community-based issue. Wong (2009) states how individual stereotypes and biases may cause some patrons to view the homeless as possibly dangerous and violent, in which case these patrons expect library staff to bar them from the library. Other challenges mentioned by Wong (2009) include the lack of administrative support and funding that would enable library services to be expanded to include the homeless and meet their needs.

The American Library Association’s policies and guidelines advocate equal access to information to everyone and acknowledge the pressing need to help the ever-growing number of economically disadvantaged people (ALA, 1990). ALA policy promotes the removal of all barriers to LIS services by exempting the economically disadvantaged from paying fees and late charges. Wong (2009) agrees and states: “Overdue and lost fines can also be a major hindrance for homeless users who have a tendency to lose their belongings because of their

unstable living situation...Due to their vagueness and inconsistencies, most library-access policies are not enforced equally for all users because the policies are often drafted without proper consideration of the users' right to access libraries and information" (p. 402).

### **Bibliometric Research**

Two classic types of bibliometric studies are descriptive and evaluative (Potter, 1988). Descriptive studies focus on "the production of a body of literature by country, time period, and discipline"; and evaluative studies examine "how a body of literature is used, usually by analyzing patterns of footnoting or citations" (Potter, 1988, p. 1).

According to Potter (1988), the majority of analyses conducted in descriptive studies is centered around efforts to retrieve data from certain subject areas and create general patterns or distributions which can be applied and assessed in other fields of study. In this area of bibliometrics, Potter (1988) discusses two of the primary distributions, which became known as laws: Lotka's Law of Productivity and Bradford's Law of Scatter.

Potter (1988) states that when Lotka's Law has been used in different disciplines, the results have varied; however, generally it has been most useful when testing a large body of literature that covers a wide span of time. Lotka's Law predicts that 60 percent of entries from all authors will emerge once, 15 percent will appear twice, and seven percent will appear three times, and so on, and that a few select number of authors will appear multiple times.

Potter (1988) states that Bradford's Law demonstrates how articles are dispersed in a collection of journals, that is, one-third of literature from any specific field is published in a small number of core journals. Potter (1988) discusses the similarities amongst these laws in how they are based on rank-free listings and how they demonstrate an inverse relationship that exists between rank and frequency. Ultimately, these laws of distribution may not be able to achieve a solid statistical fit between

observable data and the expected results; however, these laws are very useful for practitioners as far as approximating general patterns.

Patra, Bhattacharya, and Verma (2006) focus on the growth pattern, core journals, and author distribution of bibliometric literature indexed in *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA). The authors used Bradford's Law to identify core journals; and Lotka's Law to identify author productivity patterns. The authors analyzed 3,781 records from LISA and discovered that the majority of these were journal articles and that *Scientometrics* was the core journal that published 41 percent of the total articles. Results show that most of the literature growth occurred in 1999 in which 208 indexed articles were published.

The authorship pattern of these data revealed that 4,000 authors published 3,781 items (0.94 articles per author); 3,106 authors (77.65%) had one publication and 470 authors (11.75%) had two publications. Patra, Bhattacharya, & Verma (2006) used the general form of Lotka's Law and discovered "that bibliometrics literature does not follow Lotka's Law" (p. 30), at least in exact percentages, but it supports the general principle that most authors publish only one article and only a few authors publish more than one article on a specific topic.

Muzzammil and Asad (2016) identified and described the characteristics of 4,371 knowledge management items from the *Web of Science* (WoS) database from 2007 to 2014 to "identify the place, language, year of publication, subject areas, forms of documents, country of origin, etc." (p. 873). This study tracked the growth pattern of KM literature from 2007 to 2014, examined the types of publications, identified author distribution productivity, developed a ranked list of journals and identified core journals in KM. The analysis of authorship patterns indicated that Lotka's Law was not applicable to the literature of KM; however, Bradford's Law was partially supported (Muzzammil & Asad, 2016, p. 892).

The methodology of this study is similar to that of the two previous studies in that it examines publication pattern over time and identifies core journals and most productive authors of publications on a particular topic. It differs in that it examines a different body of LIS literature, that of public libraries and the economically disadvantaged and homeless.

### **Methodology**

A bibliometric analysis approach was used to assess the publication trends of journal articles, identify core journals, key authors, and focus of the articles that pertain to public libraries and the economically disadvantaged dating back 20 years.

### **Data Collection**

The following USM databases were used: *Library and Information Science Source*, *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*, *Academic Search Premier*, and *Google Scholar* to retrieve scholarly journal articles pertaining to public libraries and the economically disadvantaged from the past 20 years. The strategy used to retrieve these data included a Boolean search using the following keyword search terms: “public libraries” AND “homelessness” OR “economically disadvantaged.” Data collected for each article include publication year, journal title, author(s), article title, and article subject descriptors, which were used to determine article focus. Only the first or lead author was counted in determining authorship.

### **Data Analysis**

The data for this study were compiled in Excel spreadsheets, analyzed to address each research question, and displayed in tables and figures.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The databases used in this study were limited to *Library & Information Science Source*, *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*, *Academic Search Premier* and *Google Scholar*, which were accessed through The University of Southern Mississippi’s University Libraries. This study was

limited to a timeframe of twenty years and limited to journal articles; books and periodicals from professional journals were excluded. This study was limited to English language articles only.

### **Assumptions**

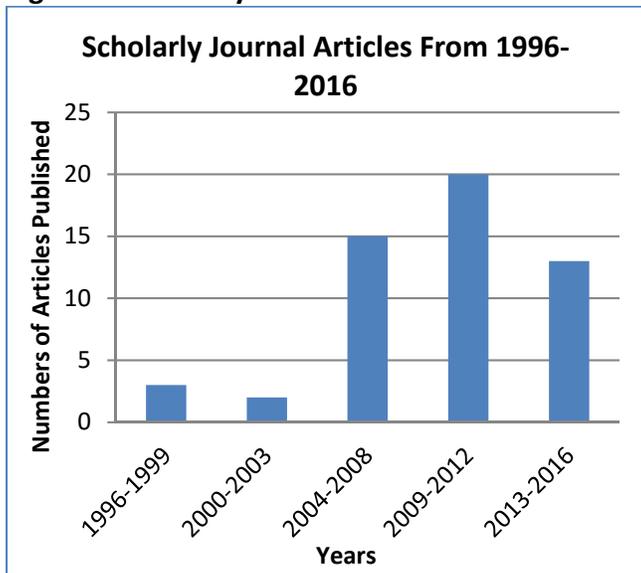
It was assumed that the databases in this study were comprehensive and indexed accurately so that relevant articles were retrieved. It was further assumed that the articles in this study are an accurate representation of the body of literature on public libraries and homelessness or economically disadvantaged in general.

### **Results**

#### ***R1. How many journal articles over the past 20 years have been published per year about public libraries and the economically disadvantaged?***

The total number of articles on public libraries and the economically disadvantaged from 1996 to 2016 retrieved for this study was fifty-three articles. In 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2014 there were no articles published. The greatest number of journal articles on this subject, five articles (9.43%), were published in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2013; four articles (7.54%) in 2015; three articles (5.6%) in 2006 and 2011; two articles (3.7%) in 1999, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, and 2016; and one article (1.9%) in 1996 and 2003. Figure 1 indicates the publication pattern over time in 3-year increments.

**Figure 1. Scholarly Journal Articles From 1996-2016**



**R2. In which journals were the articles in this study published?**

Table 1 lists in rank order the journals and number of scholarly articles on public libraries and the economically disadvantaged per journal. According to Bradford’s Law, about 1/3 of articles on a given topic will be published in a few core journals (Potter, 1988). Data from this study indicate that two journals *Public Library Quarterly* and *Library Review* published sixteen articles (30%), a percentage that is close to Bradford’s Law of 33 percent so these two journals could be considered the core journals that publish on the topic of public libraries and the economically disadvantaged.

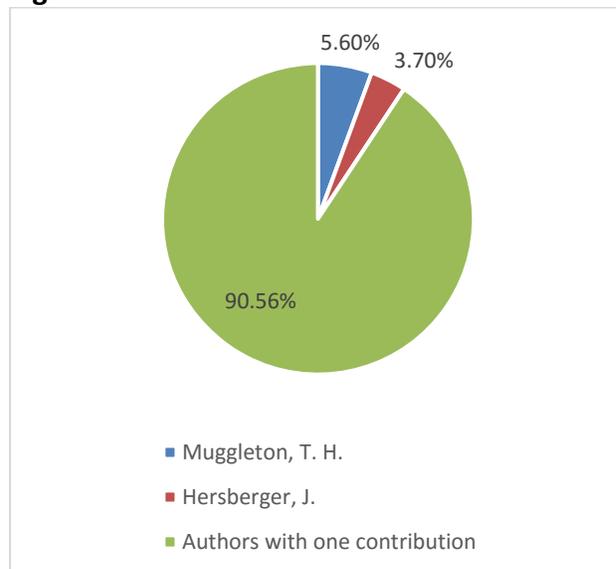
**Table 1. Journals and Number of Articles on Public Libraries and Economically Disadvantaged**

| Journals                                | # Articles | % Articles |
|---|------------|------------|
| <i>Public Library Quarterly</i>         | 10         | 18.8%      |
| <i>Library Review</i>                   | 6          | 11.3%      |
| <i>Aplis</i>                            | 3          | 5.6%       |
| <i>Current Studies in Librarianship</i> | 3          | 5.6%       |
| <i>Reference Librarian</i>              | 3          | 5.6%       |

**R3. Which authors have published most frequently on this subject?**

Out of the fifty lead authors that have published scholarly journal articles on public libraries and the economically disadvantaged, two authors published more than one article: Muggleton with three articles (5.6%) and Hersberger with two articles (3.7%). The remaining 48 lead authors contributed one article (90.56%), a number that differs from Lotka’s Law, but supports the general principle that only a small number of authors will publish more than once on a specific topic (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Lead Authors’ Contributions**



**R4. What is the focus of the articles in this study?**

Around seventy-four percent of the articles in this study focused on four subtopics (Table 2): eleven articles (21%) on public library services for the homeless or economically disadvantaged, ten articles (19%) on services to homeless or economically disadvantaged youth, nine (17%) on outreach to the homeless or economically disadvantaged patrons, and nine (17%) on discrimination or social exclusion of the homeless or economically disadvantaged. The remaining articles focused on challenges serving homeless or problem patrons, ethical issues and human rights issues related to the homeless or economically disadvantaged, and LIS education

related to preparing librarians to serve the homeless or economically disadvantaged.

**Table 2. Primary Focus of the Articles in this Study**

| Primary Focus  | # Articles | % Articles |
|--|------------|------------|
| Public Library Services for the Homeless/ Economically Disadvantaged     | 11         | 20.7%      |
| Services to Homeless/Economically Disadvantaged Children and Adolescents | 10         | 18.9%      |
| Outreach to the Homeless/Economically Disadvantaged                      | 9          | 17%        |
| Discrimination/Social Exclusion of Homeless/Economically Disadvantaged   | 9          | 17%        |

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Fifty-three articles on the topic of public libraries and the homeless or economically disadvantaged were retrieved for this study (Appendix). From 2008 to 2012, Figure 1 indicates an increase in the number of scholarly journal articles on this subject, which may indicate that the Recession of 2007-2009 in the U.S. may have played a part in increased attention to the role of public libraries and the economically disadvantaged. The number of articles decreases from 2014 to 2016, which could be the result of improvements in the U.S. economy. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the most recent recession started in December of 2007 and lasted until June 2009; however, data indicate that a majority of statistics that describe the economy in the U.S. have not returned to their pre-recession values (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The BLS also reports that the national unemployment rates in the U.S. in December 2007 was 5.0 percent, which was at or lower than this rate 30 months before; when the recession ended in June 2009, unemployment was at 9.5 percent. The rise in unemployment rates after the recession could be one factor that explains why the greatest number of articles were published from 2009 to 2012.

Two journals that publish articles on the topic of public library and economically disadvantaged/homeless were indicated as the core journals: *Public Library Quarterly* and *Library Review*. These two journals published sixteen articles (30%), a percentage that is close to 33 percent of Bradford’s Law so the general principle of the law is supported but not the exact percentage.

The two most prolific authors in this study were Thomas H. Muggleton with three articles (5.6%) and Julie Hersberger with two articles (3.7%). While these percentages do not exactly match those of Lotka’s Law, they support the general principle that only a few authors will publish more than one article on a given topic.

The results revealed that the primary focus of the 53 articles in this study included general services provided to homeless/economically disadvantaged patrons, services for homeless/economically disadvantaged youth (children and adolescents), outreach to the poor or homeless, and discrimination or inclusion/exclusion of the poor or homeless.

To improve library services to the economically disadvantaged, Gehner (2010) suggests that libraries need to minimize social exclusion to decrease the negative perceptions that LIS professionals have of this group; this would change the way they approach these individuals.

Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) state that there is a gap in LIS literature when it comes to assessing how the role of access plays a part in identity formation and how the homeless socially interact; LIS literature tends to focus solely on information that revolves around meeting the basic physiological needs of the homeless, how they acquire this information, and the most effective ways this information is delivered.

However, Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) point out that even though information is critical to this physically vulnerable group, the danger lies in other needs of the homeless being neglected. The authors claim that the restrictiveness of their immediate

social networks has the potential to isolate the homeless from society in general; and only focusing on a person's individual needs as a "homeless person" perpetuates isolation and alienation. Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) suggest that the solution would be to "examine the extent to which homeless people are excluded from the informational mainstream and how this affects identity formation and social interaction among the homeless" (p. 224).

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Further bibliometric study of the scholarly literature on public libraries and the homeless/economically disadvantaged would be useful to determine publication pattern over a longer span of time. Future bibliometric research might investigate these research questions again to see if publication patterns or focus of the articles changed or remained the same.

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