PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE POOR
DOING ALL WE CAN

Leslie Edmonds Holt & Glen E. Holt
Public Library Services for the Poor
Doing All We Can

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American Library Association
Chicago 2010
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Holt, Leslie Edmonds
Public library services for the poor : doing all we can / Leslie Edmonds Holt and Glen E. Holt.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Z711.92.P66H65 2010
027.6—dc22
2009045798

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Printed in the United States of America
14 13 12 11 10  5 4 3 2 1
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Preface

PUBLIC LIBRARY Services for the Poor: Doing All We Can addresses the immediate needs of policy makers and line practitioners charged with delivering library services to the temporary and chronically poor.

The book is published during a profound economic shift in U.S. society. Through the past two decades, this nation has experienced a relative decline in the wealth held by its historic middle class and an increase in the number of families who are poor. The winners in this redistribution are the very wealthy. The political turmoil that we are currently experiencing is one manifestation of this huge change.

Public libraries are caught in these shifts. The massive economic shifts have brought many and varied demands for information, reading, and literacy services to public libraries. Institutional responses might have been quicker if public libraries had not been in a real-dollar income decline since at least 2002.¹

LIBRARY LITERATURE ABOUT SERVICES TO THE POOR

Along with this rationale derived from shifting economics, this book’s character is shaped by the shortage of prior research designed to improve...
library services to the chronically and temporary poor. We approached ALA Editions to publish this book because we recognized a need for a unified book-length treatment of how public libraries could improve the quantity and quality of public library services to their increasing numbers of poor constituents.

Our search for a helpful literature on how libraries should serve the poor began when each of us began our tenure at St. Louis Public Library. Since both of us came from academic backgrounds, we sought out the professional literature that would help us establish, offer, and evaluate our successes in providing library services to the poor. From the standpoint of practitioners, that literature is at best disappointing.

Most reports of library services to the poor are synopses or cryptic overviews about “how our library is going to serve the poor with this new grant” and “how we did it best.” These picaresque accounts usually come with minimal details and without any mention of qualitative or quantitative evaluation of user adoption. Nor do they analyze the broader impact of the innovation on the community whose taxpayers are the primary funders of libraries. Once announcements of the new programs appear, their story line is lost. Follow-ups occur only by research on individual library websites, contact with previously unidentified staff, or references found in the invaluable electronic Internet files of local newspapers.

There have been a few prior collections of essays on library services to the poor, such as editor Karen Venturella’s outstanding Poor People and Library Services (1998), but no recent attempt by one or two authors to write a unified monograph. We review some of the best recent literature on aspects of library services and poverty in chapter 15, and other literature is cited throughout this book.

This brief discussion helps explain the subtitle of this book: “Doing all we can” suggests that U.S. public libraries can do a lot—in many cases, a lot more—to assist the chronically poor and working poor as they deal with the essential economic issues of their lives.

“Doing all we can” begins with respect—for individuals as inherently valuable because of their humanity and their past, current, or potential contributions to society. Librarians demonstrate respect when they take time to learn about the rich and often intricate cultures organized by people in poverty. Such learning needs to be based on the willingness to listen, to interpret, and to undertake research. This integrative effort to match library services to constituent needs is very different from approaching the poor as archetypical “experts” who offer instant “library solutions” to change something that seems weird about poor lives from an outsider’s viewpoint.

Reiterating the same thoughts another way, we believe that successful library work with poor individuals and families requires a degree of intentionality, proactivity, and attentiveness that has seldom been demonstrated
by our national government, much less by the nine thousand public library systems awash in the perils (and the opportunities) of their own localism. We hope that our book makes librarians’ work with poor constituents more productive and more beneficial to the poor, to public libraries, and to society generally.

AUTHORS’ EXPERIENCE

The primary basis of the book is experience, our combined thirty years developing and operating programs and services for the poor at St. Louis Public Library. In our old, highly segregated, midwestern industrial city, this library’s core constituency is predominantly poor, as it has been for at least two generations.

In addition, both of us worked with the poor and working poor in our “other careers.” We both have been university teachers, administrators, and independent consultants. We each have worked with, researched, written about, and provided policy advice to universities, foundations, government agencies, Head Start projects, historical societies, museums, and libraries for many different purposes. Establishing and improving programs for poor constituents often have been a significant part of these assignments.

Both of us chose to work in St. Louis as much because of its poor population as because of the vanities broadcast by the city’s boosters or the resources promised by the library’s board members. Unlike most of the foreign-born refugee newcomers and the multitude of second- and third-generation poor (those who are poor through the accident of birth), we were not in St. Louis because we had to be but because we wanted to be. We each came in the hope of doing good work for the people of St. Louis and for the St. Louis Public Library.

We confess this point of view in our introduction so that you know at the outset that we both saw and still see ourselves as agents of change. We have written this volume to improve the quality of library services to the poor. We believe that such work is important, not just in bad economic times but all the time. And we hope that readers find much that they can use to improve the library services of their public library districts and consortia as they consider the policy implications of this book.

Notes

A Library Commitment to the Poor

Public librarians need to understand how poverty levels are defined. Different agencies that provide information or partnership organizations with which your library may collaborate use various poverty standards. When your organization undertakes research on your poor constituencies, you may have to adjust national or state poverty standards to match local conditions. Such adjustments are frequently criticized when economic issues about employment and poverty make it into public policy discussions. Identifying or defining the poor locally is the first step in designing library services for low-income citizens.

Defining Who’s Poor

Poverty is an economic condition: persons and families are poor when they lack money to buy goods and services. Throughout this volume, when we use the words poor or in poverty, we are referring to such persons.

New federal poverty levels are published each year at the end of January. The 2009 federally defined poverty levels in the forty-eight contiguous states and the District of Columbia are
Think and Plan

- For a single person, a monthly income of $902.50, or $10,830 annually
- For a family of four, $1,837.50 monthly, or $22,050 annually

The federal definition of poverty was created by a staff member in the Social Security Administration in 1964. It was based on multiplying by three the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s estimate of food costs for an average family in 1959. Each year the numbers are adjusted against shifts in cost-of-living figures.¹

Many government program administrators use the current federal statistical standard of poverty by applying a multiplier to the base figure. For example, children qualify for free school lunches paid for by the federal government if their family income is no more than 133 percent of the federal poverty guideline.

Naturally, there is disagreement among individuals and organizations over the amounts that constitute poverty. Some advocacy organizations for the poor, for example, think that individuals and families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to cover basic expenses. Using that definition, the number of those living in poverty, of course, would double.²

Librarians should be comfortable with this variability, because many terms in their own operational domain have a similar fuzziness. When you read any account that mentions a basis in the official definition of poverty, remember that in reality the figure is an estimate, and that officials adjust that figure on a regular basis.

DIFFERENCES IN HOW STATES DEAL WITH POVERTY

One other element that librarians will do well to know is how their state governments deal with poverty. The differences begin in the state-to-state variations of cost-of-living estimates. At minimum, the variation is hundreds of dollars per month (see table 1.1).

Furthermore, policies on how the poor are treated vary greatly from state to state. In a small town in Kansas, where faith communities regard charity as a religious imperative, or in a large city in Minnesota, where state officials legislate to assist the poor in a relatively generous way, there is quite an array of government and charity services to help the poor: senior centers and Meals on Wheels, Goodwill and Salvation Army shelters, well-stocked food banks and homeless feeding stations, church holiday baskets,
and local law enforcement officials who may know and treat poor offenders by name and with respect.

In such states, it may be possible for a single oldster to live on a widow’s Social Security check, occasional credit from local stores, and income from babysitting, taking in some ironing, or cleaning houses. The same woman trying to maintain the same standard of life in an urban center in another state, one that prides itself on “limited charity” for its poor, even when receiving the same categories of charity, may need to earn twice or three times as much.

Differences in states’ policies about help for persons in poverty can be seen initially in cost-of-living indices. St. Louis, Missouri, in the first quarter of 2009, had the fifth-lowest cost of living (index = 96) in the nation. California indexed at 110 and Maine at 117, both among the highest.\(^3\) State and local governments often adjust income qualifications for services to

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<td>12,460</td>
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<td>14,570</td>
<td>18,210</td>
<td>16,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18,310</td>
<td>22,890</td>
<td>21,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>22,050</td>
<td>27,570</td>
<td>25,360</td>
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<td>25,790</td>
<td>32,250</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>33,270</td>
<td>41,610</td>
<td>38,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>37,010</td>
<td>46,290</td>
<td>42,560</td>
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\(^a\)For families with more than 8 persons, add $3,740 for each additional person.
\(^b\)For families with more than 8 persons, add $4,680 for each additional person.
\(^c\)For families with more than 8 persons, add $4,300 for each additional person.
allow for geographic variations in living costs, but they also may adjust
definitions of poverty downward to reduce the acknowledged financial
needs of the poor to fit the budget realities created by the politics of parsimony or by revenue shortfalls.

A CRITIQUE OF POVERTY STANDARDS

Critiques of poverty standards sometimes are longer than technical definitions of poverty. Expert critiques are important, however, since they often lead to revisions and help those who use poverty terms know what they are talking about. A current and quite justifiable critique of poverty standards comes from the Columbia University–based National Center for Children in Poverty:

WHY IS THE CURRENT POVERTY STANDARD INADEQUATE?
The current poverty measure is flawed in two ways.

The current poverty level—that is, the specific dollar amount—is based on outdated assumptions about family expenditures.

[First,] food now comprises far less than a third of an average family’s expenses, while the costs of housing, child care, health care, and transportation have grown disproportionately. Thus, the poverty level does not reflect the true cost of supporting a family. In addition, the current poverty measure is a national standard that does not adjust for the substantial variation in the cost of living from state to state and between urban and rural areas.

More accurate estimates of typical family expenses, and adjustments for local costs, would produce a substantially higher poverty threshold.

[Second,] the method used to determine whether a family is poor does not accurately count family resources.

When determining if a family is poor, income sources counted include earnings, interest, dividends, Social Security, and cash assistance. But income is counted before subtracting payroll, income, and other taxes, overstating income for some families. On the other hand, the federal Earned Income Tax Credit isn’t counted either, underestimating income for other families. Also, in-kind government benefits that assist low-income families—food stamps, Medicaid, and housing and child care assistance—are not taken into account.\(^4\)
THE POOR MAY BE OTHER THINGS

There is another complication to working with poor persons, especially highly visible groups like the homeless: often individuals and even elected officials tend to associate noneconomic social pathologies with persons in certain income categories. Like other income categories, such as “middle class” or “rich,” those who are poor or in poverty may be unemployed, underemployed, single parents, latchkey kids, homeless, mentally ill, physically ill, addicted to gambling, lacking in interpersonal or work skills, overweight, undernourished, addicted to drugs or alcohol, convicted felons, practicing pedophiles, chronic “flashers,” abusive in relations with others, sexually or psychologically abused by others, prostitutes, parolees, new immigrants, pitiful because of recent tragedy, visually dirty, vermin ridden, contagious disease carriers, or nauseatingly smelly. Or not, as the case may be.

Any of these other conditions distorts patterns of family life—including influencing whether or not and how individuals use their public libraries. That is because these conditions—just like being poor—influence human behavior, and therefore how people approach a library-using experience.

LABELS AND CATEGORIES

Two different practitioners, one a teacher-administrator, the other a librarian-library scholar, provide a sense of the power of a single word when someone is called “poor.”

The first usage involves the stigma of the words poor and poverty noted by Sister Gail Trippett, Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet and, until mid-2009, principal of the Central Catholic/St. Nicholas School in the heart of the city of St. Louis. This “mission school” is adjacent to a large public housing complex. Sister Gail warns teachers, volunteers, and visitors alike that within the school’s walls they will not hear the word “poor.” She says,

The first breach to a child’s dignity is to teach them they are poor. . . . If people say the word “poor” they often think of someone who is not intelligent, not self-activating, doesn’t have dreams and won’t accomplish much in life. When we label a child as “poor” that child begins to assume the myth that goes along with that word.5

A famous, now-deceased educator, Wendell Wray, provides a different perspective on the word poor. Wray borrowed this quote from cartoonist
Jules Feiffer to start a 1976 Catholic Library World article titled “Library Services to the Poor: Implications for Library Education”:

I used to think I was poor.
Then they told me I wasn’t poor, I was needy.
Then they told me it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy. I was deprived.
(Oh, not deprived, but rather underprivileged.)
Then they told me that underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged.
I still don’t have a dime. But I have a great vocabulary.

Wray uses Feiffer’s words to proclaim that, although social conventions of naming change, the reality of being poor remains. This situation exists in libraries because all staff members have value opinions about the poor and how their institutions ought to be involved with them.

WHY WE USE THE TERM POOR IN THIS BOOK

Some librarians prefer to handle poverty with euphemisms, which—as Feiffer and Wray show—usually conceal as much as they reveal.

One of our grandfathers was fond of telling a story about euphemism, which he called “perfumed language.” The story concerned one of Grandfather’s friends, who had a father who had been hung as a horse thief. The friend, Grandfather said, remained sensitive about this hanging, and never more so than when he was filling out an application for life insurance. On that form, of course, was the standard question, “How did your father die?” After some thought, Grandfather’s friend answered this way: “Father died when he fell from a platform while attending a public event.”

That’s euphemism. And that’s perfumed language.

Following Wray’s admonition, we stick with using the term poor in our book title and write about library services for the poor rather than use terms with different and fuzzier nuances. Like Sister Gail, we do not characterize poor children in negative personal ways. We do, however, believe that libraries ought to handle the matter of poverty openly—as a matter of policy and operations (see more on this point in chapter 2.)

As the authors of this volume, we encourage library professionals to face poverty head-on in their institutions. Acting as if poverty is invisible
or nonexistent only obscures its reality and the real action libraries ought to take to deal with it.

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Among public institutions, the library has great potential for helping the poor and disenfranchised. For many poor people, the library is their only resource for information, literacy, entertainment, language skills, employment help, free computer use, and even safety and shelter. While recognizing the financial crunch libraries are under, Leslie and Glen Holt offer concrete advice about programs and support for this group, showing you how to

- Train staff to meet the unique needs of the poor, including youth
- Cooperate with other agencies in order to form partnerships and collaborations that enrich library services to the poor and homeless
- Find help, financial and other, for your library

This groundbreaking work demonstrates how five key action areas adopted by the ALA Council (Diversity, Equity of Access, Education and Continuous Learning, Intellectual Freedom, and 21st Century Literacy) apply especially to this disadvantaged population, and it motivates librarians to use creative solutions to meet their needs.