

# Who's Using the Public Library?

By Jim Scheppke

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1948: Public librarians were looking for a boost to their postwar aspirations for fundamental, widespread improvement in library services. Their opportunity came in the form of the The Public Library Inquiry (PLI), conceived by the American Library Association and funded by the Carnegie Corporation. The library community was counting on this landmark study to demonstrate convincingly public libraries' benefit to American society. As part of the PLI, a national public library use survey was commissioned in 1948 from the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center.

But what the survey revealed was not what the library community had in mind: Instead of showing that public libraries were heavily used by a diverse audience, the survey showed that only 18 percent of adults and less than 50 percent of children had used the public library in the preceding year.

The results of PLI's national public library use survey were reported and analyzed in Bernard Berelson's *The Library's Public* (Greenwood, 1949). Not only were the use figures much smaller than librarians had hoped, the demographic of library users that emerged from the survey showed that library users were overwhelmingly white,

middle class, and better educated. The results, along with other data he analyzed, led Berelson to the controversial conclusion that "it may well be that the proper role of the public library is deliberately and consciously to serve the 'serious' and 'culturally alert' members of the community rather than attempt to reach all the people."

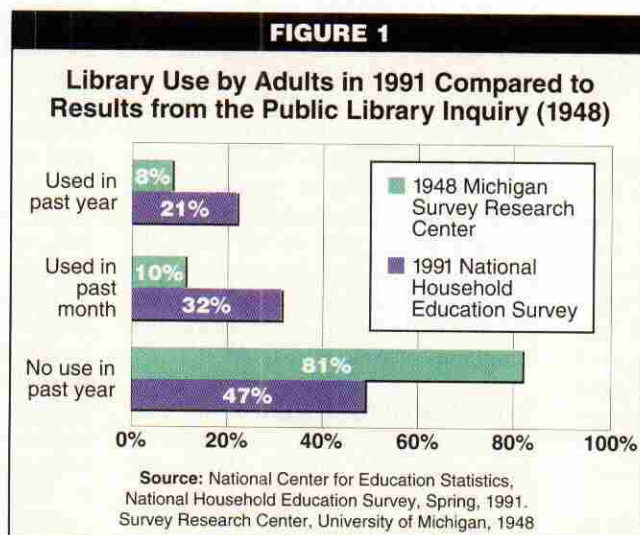
## "Shocked and demoralized"

The impact of the 1948 survey, along with Berelson's analysis and recommendations on postwar library planning and development, was described

nity as a whole. The inquiry made it impossible for librarians to contemplate and to talk about the public library in the old way with the old conviction, and offered nothing satisfactory by way of replacement. The public library community was cast adrift from the old moorings and has been trying to deal with the consequences ever since.

Almost half-century later, librarians have had an opportunity to revisit the potentially painful question of "who our patrons are" by studying some contemporary statistics, gleaned from a newer, previously unpublished survey conducted in the spring of 1991 by the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education. Called the National Household Education Survey (NHES), it asked a random sample of adults questions that were part of a much longer survey designed to gather data that were relevant to a wide range of education issues. The survey also yielded information on the respondents' racial and cultural background, education and income level, and employment status. The data,

never released to the public, allow us to examine the same sorts of important correlations between library use and demographic characteristics that were evident in the 1948 survey. The survey asked patrons whether they had "used a public library or public library program in the past month" or "in the past year." Another question asked adult respondents whether they or someone else in their family had "visited a li-



by Patrick Williams in *The American Public Library and the Problem of Purpose* (Professional Reading, LJ 4/1/89):

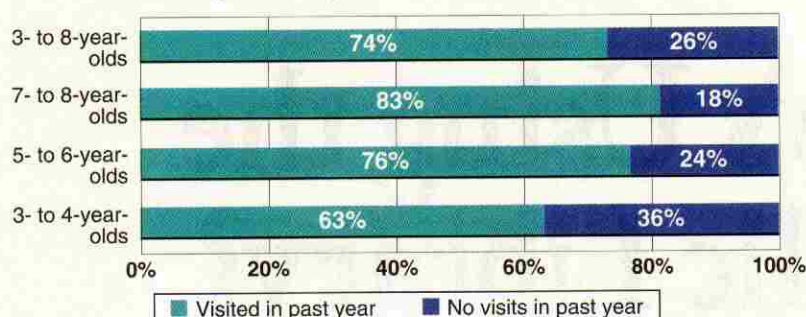
The findings and recommendations of the inquiry had a profound and lasting impact on the public library community. It destroyed the traditional faith and confidence of leading intellectuals in the library community; it shocked and demoralized the public library commu-

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**FIGURE 2**

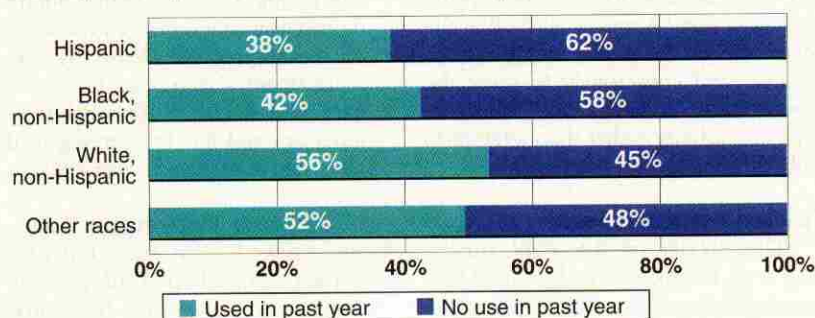
**Library Visits by 3- to 8-Year-Olds by Age**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Spring, 1991

**FIGURE 3**

**Library Use by Adults in the Past Year by Race and Ethnic Group**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, Spring, 1991

brary" with a child, three to eight years old, in the past month or the past year.

### Good news/bad news

The 1991 survey results, compared to the results from the 1948 survey, yield both good and bad news. The good news is that public library use has risen dramatically in the past 50 years. Unlike the results of the 1948 survey, which forced Berelson to conclude that "any overall evaluation of the role of the public library must start with the recognition that the adult library clientele is relatively small," use statistics from the 1991 survey—for both adults and children—are impressive.

But the bad news is that despite the overall gains of the past few decades, the typical public library user is still likely to be white, well educated, and reasonably well off. This assessment is not much different from the one given a half-century ago when Berelson concluded from his data that "the public library serves the middle class, defined either by occupation or by economic status . . ."

Figure 1 illustrates the overall results from the 1991 survey as compared to the results from 1948: According to the

1991 survey, 53 percent of adults reported using the public library in the previous year—nearly three times as many as in the 1948 survey. The increase would indicate public libraries' success over the past several decades in expanding their customer base. Nearly a third of all adults reported in the 1991 survey using the public library in the past month, a very encouraging result that conveys the importance of the public library in the lives of millions of American adults.

### Younger adult use highest

Contrary to what one might assume, the 1991 survey shows that younger adults are more frequent users of the public library than older adults. While only about one-third of adults over 65 were users of the public library, nearly two-thirds of 18- to 24-year-olds reported using the public library in the previous year. Surprisingly, the 18- to 24-year-old group contained the largest percentage of library users, followed by those in their 30s (62 percent), and those in their 40s (58 percent). Berelson reported that in the 1948 survey, "somewhat under 50 percent of children and young people" had used the public li-

brary in the previous year, while the 1991 survey revealed that 74 percent of three- to eight-year-olds went to the public library in the previous year.

In the aggregate, the results of the 1991 survey concerning public library "visits" by children (Figure 2) represent more good news, although a troubling aspect exists in the numbers: The percentage of nonusers in the three- to four-year-old age group is twice that of the seven- to eight-year-old age group. Given what early childhood development specialists tell us about the critical importance of early exposure to oral and written language, this relatively high rate of nonuse by preschool children should serve as a challenge to public libraries to do more for this age group.

### Long way to go for diversity

Despite public libraries' efforts across the country to reach out to diverse populations (with California being the best example), the results of the 1991 survey show we still have a long way to go in serving larger percentages of African Americans and Hispanics. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of use by adults in the past year according to reported race and ethnic background. The results for three- to eight-year-old Hispanic and African American children are somewhat more encouraging than for adults, and yet the pattern is largely the same. Hispanic children are about twice as likely to be nonusers of the public library as white children—41 percent vs. 22 percent. About a third of black children were reported as nonusers.

Interestingly enough, Berelson reported in 1949 that the public library was not used much by either the "very wealthy or the very poor . . ." The Public Library Inquiry's Household Survey results do not shed much light on library use by the "very wealthy," but they do show that public library use is still very highly correlated with income levels. Figure 4 illustrates the higher the income, the higher the percentage of public library use. For the lowest-income-earning adults, only about a third are reported as public library users. In the highest income categories, the percentages are almost the reverse, with only about a third being nonusers. Clearly, not enough has changed over the last 50 or so years, despite many well-intentioned efforts by public libraries to reach out to lower income populations in their respective communities.

In a similar vein, data from the 1991 survey show that little has changed since 1949, regarding Berelson's finding



that "in every case the proportion of the people registered with or actively using the library rises sharply with the level of schooling." Looking at public library use in terms of education provides us with a picture resembling the one we see when we look at public library use in terms of income. For example, only 17 percent of adults with less than a high school education were reported as users, compared to 71 percent of adults with a college education. If anything, the contrast is even more apparent between an institution that is very relevant to the most educated segments of our society but of much less relevance to the least educated segments of our society.

Not surprisingly, a similar pattern emerges from the 1991 survey for the children of adults with limited education. Again, the contrast is stark. Only eight percent of three- to eight-year-olds whose parents had graduate or professional school education were reported as nonusers, while 51 percent of the children whose parents did not have at least a high school degree were reported as nonusers. The cycle of underachievement and poverty—the tragic perpetuation of the American underclass—is clearly evident in these data. Public libraries must do more to break the cycle by reaching out, in every way possible, to these children. We must take our services to them, in home daycare facilities, in childcare and Head Start centers, and by partnering with other agencies already providing services to these children.

### Taking pride, meeting the challenge

Public librarians and public library trustees should take pride in the considerable amount of good news from the 1991 household survey. At the same time, we should feel challenged, not "demoralized," by the news that we have a long way to go to realize our ideals and our aspirations to serve all our citizens. It is clear from the household survey results that many public libraries have worked very effectively over the past half century to serve a larger portion of our citizenry. We should celebrate because the public library has finally become an important service for the majority of Americans, particularly younger Americans. The trend of younger adults using the library most bodes well for the continuation of libraries as an essential service over the next several decades.

And yet we still have to be very concerned about who is not using the public library. Most of us really believe

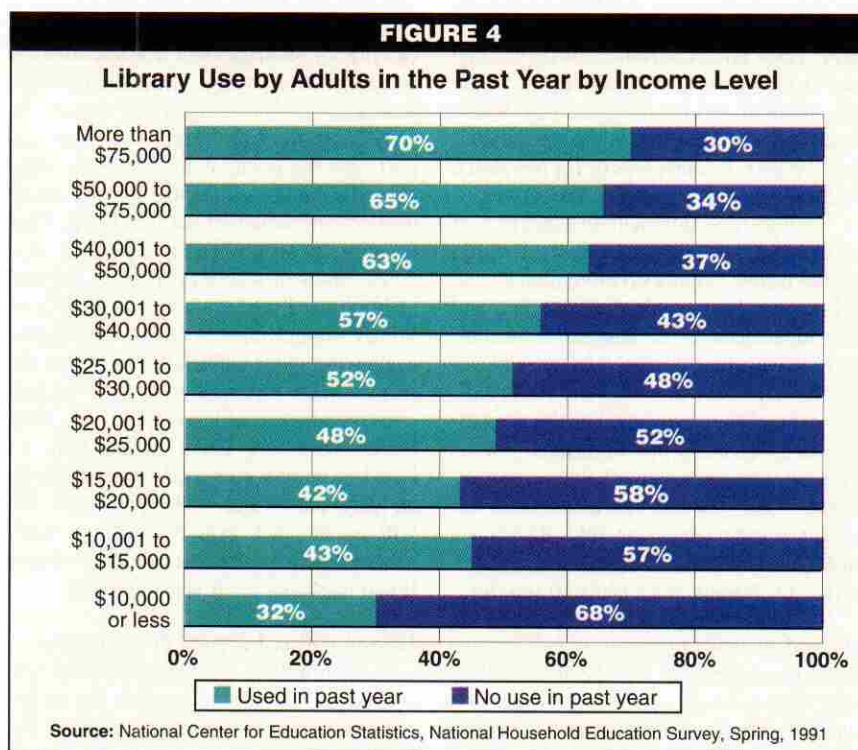
the American Library Association (ALA) slogan "Libraries Change Lives." We continue to believe that the public library can be vitally important to adults with low incomes and low levels of education, whom the survey shows are the least likely to be library users. We need to be particularly concerned about the youth from this segment of our population. We must find ways to serve all children, regardless of whether their parents or caregivers are inclined to seek our services.

### Serving those who need it most

The progress that the public library has made in the last several decades in

ally "change lives" in our communities.

We need to begin to target a portion of state and federal dollars to serve all of our children in need. It is encouraging to see that plans to reauthorize the Library Services & Construction Act (LSCA) being developed by the ALA, the Urban Libraries Council, and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies incorporate the idea of using some LSCA funds to target the library service needs of children in poverty. Oregon recently became the first state to target its state aid to public libraries in order to meet the needs of children. In Minnesota, public libraries recently succeeded in obtaining state funding to help them better serve their children.



broadening its customer base is impressive. It shows that Berelson's prescription that we simply resign ourselves to a small base of customers was wrong. But having achieved this impressive level of use, perhaps we now need to put more effort, and more resources, into targeting those groups who we are still failing to reach. We must have a greater commitment of resources from government at all levels to serve those who need our services the most. If we are really going to see a change in the demographics of public library use a half century from now, we may need to redirect local resources away from the "popular materials library" role that most public libraries have adopted as their first priority, in favor of the "preschoolers door to learning" and other roles that can re-

We need to leverage all of our limited resources by forging strategic alliances with public and private sector partners. The excellent work that John Y. Cole, from the Library of Congress Center for the Book, is doing with Virginia Mathews to promote public library partnerships with local Head Start programs across the country is a shining example.

It is a tribute to the idealism of public librarians and trustees that we did not accept Berelson's prescription. We have not been content to serve a small segment of the "serious and culturally alert" members of our society. Instead we have realized tremendous success over the past 50 years in reaching out to more and more of our citizens. The data tell us we must continue to draw on that idealism and renew our efforts to serve all Americans. ■