

Social Services in Public Libraries: Librarian Agency, Identity, Practices

Melissa Gross, Don Latham, and Brittany Baum

Florida State University, USA

mgross@fsu.edu, dlatham@fsu.edu, bbaum@fsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This presentation, based on an IMLS-funded project, reports on how public library administrators, adult services librarians, and youth librarians see the role of librarians in the provision of social services information. To this end, a survey was conducted to learn first-hand how libraries are responding to their communities' social services information needs, how public librarians feel about performing this work, how they compare professional librarianship to the profession of social work, and their attitudes toward responding to the social services information needs in their communities. The overarching goal of this work is to canvass librarians to assist the profession in decisions about the scope of public librarianship in the face of increased social services-related needs in communities.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; Community engagement; Social justice; Critical librarianship; Education.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Public libraries; Library social work; Survey.

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.1951>

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, community members are seeking help from libraries in obtaining social services information, and “many librarians live with the ambiguity of the librarian/social worker dichotomy” (Westbrook, 2015, p. 6) even as public libraries turn to social workers and other personnel to improve services and relieve librarians from the tensions emanating from this work. On the one hand, librarians have been providing services and outreach in response to social issues for as long as there has been librarianship (Jaeger et al., 2014; Maack, 1998). On the other hand, social services-related needs in communities continue to grow.

The current idea, that the provision of social services information in libraries can be enhanced by placing special personnel in the library to take the weight off librarians, can be traced to Levinson (1988), who reported on a new model of information and referral (I & R) services for seniors. The I & R model, called Senior Connections, brought together a team that included older volunteers and student interns from library and information science and social work to assist senior community members. At the time this article was published, the Senior Connections program had expanded to 22 public libraries in Nassau County. The idea of bringing social workers into the public library to provide services can also be linked to the establishment of e-government, which had a huge impact on public libraries (Cathcart, 2008). Although providing online government services is complicated by issues of cybersecurity, usability, and the need for Internet access, customer support was largely eliminated, and government agencies began pushing people to visit the library for help. The library, for its part, did not necessarily have the staff or other resources to support e-government. Another related issue is the digital divide, as the people most likely to need help with government resources are those who often don’t have the connectivity or technology skills to navigate these services, such as immigration applications, tax forms, disaster recovery assistance, etc.

In 2009, the San Francisco Public Library hired a social worker in response to the growing homeless population (Knight, 2010). In the intervening years, other libraries have followed suit. According to the Whole Person Librarianship website on March 19, 2025 (<https://wholepersonlibrarianship.com/>), there are 119 full-time social workers and 188 social work interns in public libraries in the United States. (These numbers are no longer prominently displayed on the webpage.) In 2015, Westbrook's iconic article, “I’m Not a Social Worker,” made clear the ambiguity many librarians feel in their role as they work with “the situated information needs of their in-crisis patrons” (p. 6). She went a step further though, and presented a service model for assisting patrons in crisis. It is unknown to what extent this model has been adopted in public library, reference, or other courses in LIS curricula.

As interest in library social work has grown, research has begun to concentrate on describing and understanding the evolving role of librarians and social workers in the public library, but the literature is neither extensive nor conclusive. While research has looked at the point of view of community members (Provence et al., 2021; Wahler et al., 2022), library social workers (Finch & Real, 2023; Garner et al., 2021), librarians (Addison et al., 2024; Crabtree et al., 2024), and administrators (Baum et al., 2023; Gross & Latham, 2021), there is still no clear assessment of the impact of library social workers, no agreement on whether social workers

belong in the library, and no clear enunciation of the role or educational needs of public librarians related to the provision of social services information. The opinions of public librarians have not been sufficiently canvassed, and the profession has not fully considered what role librarians should take in the provision of social services information, what the relevant issues are for assimilating social workers into the workplace, and/or how to disambiguate the professional scope of the two professions.

This presentation, based on an IMLS-funded project, reports on a survey of public library administrators, adult services librarians, and youth services librarians on changes to their professional scope of practice based on the increasing social services information needs presented by the community. The overarching goal of this work is to assist the profession in making decisions about the scope of public librarianship in the face of increased social services-related needs in communities.

METHOD

The survey was developed based on data collected in six online focus groups tailored to three groups: public library administrators (Gross et al., 2025), adult services librarians (Latham et al., in press), and youth services librarians (Baum et al., under review). In addition, focus group findings were triangulated with findings from the literature and related data previously collected by the research team. The survey instrument was pretested with academic librarians and by staff members at a state library agency. The project's advisory board then reviewed it before it was deployed for data collection. This project was deemed exempt by the Florida State University internal review board. The survey was launched on November 18, 2024, and closed at the end of February 2025. The survey comprised 47 questions and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. It included a mix of closed, fixed-response questions, open-ended questions, and Likert-type questions. The survey asks several demographic questions, followed by questions about the kinds of social services-related needs libraries are seeing; staffing changes and partnerships that have been established based on those needs; outreach activities; issues librarians face in providing social services information; librarians' comfort level with providing social services; how to better prepare librarians to provide social services information; and how public librarianship might need to change in response to the issues community members are bringing to the library.

Participants

Survey participants were self-selected, responding to messages posted to professional association lists (ALA Connect, PLA, ALSC, YALSA, the Black Caucus American Library Association (BCALA), REFORMA, Asian Pacific American Libraries Association (APALA), Rainbow Round Table (RRT), the Ethnic & Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT), and the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT)). State library associations and heads of state libraries were asked for assistance in distributing recruitment emails in their states.

Reminders were posted once a month to all these lists, and again one week before the survey closed. Information about the survey and the project are available on the project's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/people/Social-Services-in-Public-Libraries/61551463018017/>). All recruitment emails included an information sheet about the study.

In all, 951 people began the survey. Of these, 230 records were removed as the participants quit the survey after providing demographic information. One record was removed as the answers were not serious. Of the remaining 720 records, 132 are incomplete surveys that were retained as the participants answered more than just the demographic questions, but did not complete the entire survey. In all, the data set includes 720 participants: 215 public library administrators, 216 adult services librarians, and 230 youth services librarians. There were 59 respondents who chose the Other option, mainly to indicate that they had multiple responsibilities (e.g., administration and direct service; working with both adults and youth). The survey skip logic sent respondents who chose Other as their main role down the librarian path. For this reason, their responses were counted as librarians, rather than administrators in the analysis. As indicated above, respondents did not complete every question in the survey. Percentages reported below are based on how many respondents answered the specific question being discussed.

About two-thirds of participants (n= 478, 66.4%) had fifteen years or less of public library experience. The other 242 participants (33.6%) had between 16 years to more than 30 years of experience in public libraries. When asked if they had a master's degree in library and/or information science, 459 (74.8%) respondents said yes, and 119 (19.4%) said no. There were 36 (5.9%) who indicated that they are currently enrolled in an MLIS program, and 106 (14.7%) who declined to answer the question. The majority of respondents work in suburban libraries (n=323, 44.9%), others work in urban locations (n=218, 30.3%), and 179 (24.9%) respondents work in rural libraries. All five regions of the country are represented in the data.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Survey data agrees with understanding from the literature that community members are asking for assistance in public libraries with government forms (n=200; 93%), employment (n=200; 93%), housing insecurity (n=159; 74%), food insecurity (n=163; 75.8%), health/mental health (n=169; 78.6%), and youth specific social service information needs (n=142; 66.05%) some or most of the time. In assisting community members with these needs, the majority of respondents report feeling neutral, comfortable, or very comfortable assisting community members with the above categories of need. However, a sizable number of respondents reported being uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the topics of housing insecurity (n=126; 20.5% Uncomfortable; n=57; n=17; 2.8% Very Uncomfortable), Health/Mental Health (n=113; 18.3% uncomfortable; n=18; 2.9% very uncomfortable), and youth (n=119; 19.3% uncomfortable; n=38; 6.2% very uncomfortable).

Difficulties experienced in providing social services information mirror those reported in the literature. The major concerns are lack of time (n=262; 61.8%), lack of funds (n=284; 67%), and lack of training (n=333; 78.5%). Unrealistic expectations about what a library can do (n=282; 66.5%) is also an important concern. All other difficulties were reported by less than half of respondents, however “lack of social worker support” was identified by 49.8% (n=211) as an issue. Difficulties were reported by more than ten percent of respondents include difficulty working with external collaborators (n=95; 22.4%); lack of understanding/support on the part of boards, administrators, etc. (n=148; 34.9%); concern about potential negative perception of the library (n=67; 15.8%); concerns related to aggressive or violent users (n=162; 38.2%); concerns about privacy issues (n=152; 35.8%); and boundary concerns in working with youth (n=146; 34.4%). There were 13 respondents (3.1%) who reported no difficulties experienced.

When asked to compare librarianship with social work, more than three-quarters of respondents agreed with the statement that the two professions share some skills and knowledge, but social workers are better prepared to handle social services-related needs (n=450; 76.1%). There were 126 respondents (21.3%) who agreed with the statement, “The two professions represent completely different skills, knowledge, and professional objectives.” Less than one percent agreed with the statement that “the two professions are essentially the same; they both provide information and services” (n=5; 0.8%), and some answered “not sure” (n=4; 0.7%). Five “other” responses made the points that both are gendered professions and both are helping professions.

Despite difficulties discussed above, more than half (n=393; 54.6%) agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I am willing to support library community members dealing with a mental health crisis.” In addition 145 respondents (20.1%) took a neutral stance on this question. On the other hand, 250 (34.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed (n=122; 16.9%) with the statement, “I prefer not to be asked to provide social services information.” There were 146 (20.3%) respondents who took a neutral stance.

SUMMARY

While data analysis continues on this project, preliminary findings can be summarized as follows:

- Survey data matches reports of the major types of assistance provided in libraries (housing and food insecurity, government forms, employment, health/mental health).
- The majority of respondents are comfortable providing social service information.
- The most frequent difficulties reported by these librarians are lack of time, lack of funds, lack of training, lack of social worker support, and unrealistic expectations about what the library can do.
- In all 450 respondents (76.14%) agreed that the two professions share some skills and knowledge, but social workers are better prepared to handle social services-related needs.

- While the majority of respondents (n=214; 29.7%) agree and 221 (30.7%) strongly agree with the statement that “libraries are expected to be everything to everyone,” at the same time, 286 (39.7%) of respondents agree, and 225 (31.3%) strongly agree that libraries need to be responsive to social service information needs.
- More than half of the respondents say they are willing to support community members dealing with a mental health crisis.
- More than half of the respondents say they are willing to provide social services information.

Significance

The results of this project will impact multiple stakeholders. For library practitioners, new knowledge regarding how the profession is currently addressing their community’s diverse social services information needs will help inform the development of professional guidelines/service models for social services information provision and collaboration with social workers in the library. Understanding the perceptions, experiences, and needs of public library managers and adult services and youth services librarians in responding to patrons’ social services information needs will provide evidence to support more informed service provision, thus better enabling libraries to promote the inclusive engagement and well-being of their communities, especially for those individuals who may be marginalized and neglected within society. The project will ultimately benefit those community members seeking nontraditional social services-related assistance through the library, as the development of better practices, training, and collaborations with outside professionals will help improve service quality and promote a greater understanding of how best to support this population.

REFERENCES

- Addison, S. M., Gilster, M. E., Ronnenberg, M., Logsdon, K., & Witry, S. (2024). Examining library staff openness to social work collaboration: The role of empowerment and resilience. *Journal of Library Administration*, 64(7), 827-844.
- Baum, B., Gross, M., Latham, D., Crabtree, L., & Randolph, K. (2023). Bridging the service gap: Branch Managers talk about social workers in public libraries. *Public Library Quarterly*, 42(4), 398-423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2022.2113696>
- Baum, B., Gross, M., & Latham, D. (submitted). "Forced out of our box:" Public youth services librarians' perceptions and experiences responding to social services needs. *Public Library Quarterly*.
- Cathcart, R. (2008). Librarian or social worker: Time to look at the blurring line? *The Reference Librarian*, 49(1), 87-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763870802103845>
- Crabtree, L., Latham, D., Gross, M., Baum, B., & Randolph, K. (2024). Social workers in the stacks: Public librarians' perceptions and experiences. *Public Library Quarterly*, 43(1), 109-134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2023.2188873>
- Finch, B., & Real, B. (2023). Social workers in public libraries: Resource and referral practice and re-thinking patron engagement. *Public Library Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2023.2199671>
- Garner, J., Mitchell, L., Bell, K., Lockwood, A., & Wardle, S. (2021). Social work in Australian public libraries: An interdisciplinary approach to social justice. *Public Library Quarterly*, 40(6), 504-520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917>
- Gross, M., & Latham, D. (2021). Social work in public libraries: A survey of heads of public library administrative units. *Journal of Library Administration*, 61(7), 758-775. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1972727>
- Gross, M., Latham, D., & Baum, B. (2025). The scope of our ability: Administrators reflect on social services in public libraries. *Journal of Library Administration*, 65(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2025.2506149>
- Jaeger, P. T., Gorham, U., Taylor, N. G., Kettnich, K., Sarin, L. C., & Peterson, K. J. (2014). Library research and what libraries actually do now: Education, inclusion, social services, public spaces, digital literacy, social justice, human rights, and other community needs. *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 84(4): 491-493. <https://doi.org/10.1086/677785>
- Knight, H. (2010, January 11). Library adds social worker to assist homeless. *San Francisco Chronicle*. <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Libraary-adds-social-worker-to-assisthomeless-3275950.php>

- Latham, D., Gross, M., & Baum, B. (in press). Adult services librarians talk about social services in public libraries. *RUSQ: A Journal of Reference and User Experience*.
- Levinson, R. W. (1988). New I & R teams in library-based services: Librarians, social workers, and older volunteers. *The Reference Librarian*, 9(21), 121-134. https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v09n21_11
- Maack, M. N. (1998). Gender, culture, and the transformation of American librarianship, 1890-1920. *Libraries & Culture*, 33(1), 51-61.
- Provence, M. A., Wahler, E. A., Helling, J., & Williams, M. A. (2021). Self-reported psychosocial needs of public library patrons: Comparisons based on housing status. *Public Library Quarterly*, 40(3), 244-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1730738>
- Wahler, E. A., Rortvedt, C., & Saecker, T. (2022). Public library patrons' views of their psychosocial needs and how the library can help. *The Library Quarterly*, 92(2), 172-187.
- Westbrook, L. (2015). "I am not a social worker:" An information service model for working with patrons in crisis. *The Library Quarterly*, 85(1), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679023>