Public library systems in the United States

Alfred Baird

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Abstract
The term "public library systems" has different meanings for both the lay and professional person. To the writer, it meant a large municipal system such as the Chicago Public Library with its forty-one branches\(^1\) or a cooperative effort of small Iowa libraries working together.

In reviewing the literature concerning library systems, one finds professionals like Kenneth B. Shaffer stating: "The library system has been an accepted as a reasonable and viable concept for half a century ... While we have employed the term, decade after decade, the meaning of the term "library system" has changed significantly to the point, certainly, where it is semantically useless.\(^2\)

This paper is an attempt to clarify the term and relate facts concerning public library systems in United States.
PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS
IN THE
UNITED STATES

A Paper
Presented to
Mrs. Ada McLeod of the Department of Library Science
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Course
Library Science 35:110

by
Alfred Baird
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS

INTRODUCTION

The term "public library systems" has different meanings for both the lay and professional person. To the writer, it meant a large municipal system such as the Chicago Public Library with its forty-one branches or a cooperative effort of small Iowa libraries working together.

In reviewing the literature concerning library systems, one finds professionals like Kenneth B. Shaffer stating:

The library system has been an accepted as a reasonable and viable concept for half a century ... While we have employed the term, decade after decade, the meaning of the term "library system" has changed significantly to the point, certainly, where it is semantically useless.

This paper is an attempt to clarify the term and relate facts concerning public library systems in United States.

In 1969, the American Library Association published Public Library Systems in the United States by Nelson

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Associates, Inc. This book was the result of a 1966 study which was the first comprehensive study of library systems.

The writer is deeply indebted to the authors for this important source of information. Footnotes at the end of chapters or sections indicate where more detailed information might be found.

I. HISTORY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS

At the end of the nineteenth century, some library leaders were vigorously speaking in behalf of library cooperation. The first county libraries were established in 1898 in Van Wert County, Ohio and in Washington County, Maryland. Wisconsin, Oregon, and Minnesota followed with county libraries.

However, California took the lead after passing a library organization law in 1911. Under the direction of State Librarian James L. Gillis, California developed thirty-seven county libraries. By 1920 twenty-six states had passed similar library legislation. In spite of this long tradition of county library service, the development of county systems has been rather slow.

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Carleton B. Joeckel's book in 1934 discussed the "large units of library service" and the difficulty in developing the system concept. Recommendations for organizing large units, serving more people, and providing more finance were made in A National Plan for Library Service. In 1950, Leigh advocated library systems and pointed out the problems associated with single unit libraries.

At the present time, aside from the municipal systems, there appears to be five predominant patterns of public library systems: the county library, the multi-county or regional library, the special district library, the state supplementary library, and the state-wide system.

The county library is the most common type of library after the municipal or city libraries. It is usually governed in a consolidated fashion, but often the cities and towns within the county have refused to join the county system.

The multicounty or regional system is usually found in areas that realize their need for additional resources. They are normally found in rural areas and are never completely consolidated as far as government or finances. Contracted arrangements and cooperation are

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quite common.

The library district is usually founded for the purpose of consolidation in areas generally weak in resources or because they have difficulty in uniting with other libraries because of political fragmentation. The district might be a county or parts of counties that are unincorporated. This type often raises its own revenue by tax levy and contracts its services from a stronger library unit.

State supplementary systems serve public libraries through services such as, centralize purchasing, cataloging, development of a union catalog, and borrowing from the state book collection. Some states have established resource or region centers around the state to serve several public libraries.

There are few state wide or state governed public library systems. New Mexico and Hawaii appear to be the most distinct cases. In Hawaii all public library services are handled by the state government. New Mexico operates a state-wide service, which provides services to its unserved population areas. It does not provide services to established libraries.9

CHAPTER II
THE STUDY METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

In 1966 the Interlibrary Cooperative Committee of the Public Library Association and the American Library Association obtained a modest grant from the Council on Library Resources. Nelson Associates, Inc. were then contracted to do a study of library systems in the United States.

The objectives of the study, as set forth by the Public Library Association, were:

1. To collect information on multijurisdictional public library systems throughout the country, especially on their governmental-legal-administrative structure, base of financial support, materials and resources, personnel, and services

2. To compare, for a sample of such systems, the financing and services prior to establishment of the system with financing and services provided by the system, with the aim of assessing the success to date of the system concept

3. To reveal, by means of intensive analysis of six selected systems, the most critical problems in system development and some of the possible alternative solutions

4. To propose a framework of policy guidelines on future system development for further consideration by the Public Library Association and the ALA.10

The first task was to define the term, public library system. It was decided to include as many systems as possible...

10 op. cit. p. 2.
in the initial survey. Therefore, it was decided to limit the study only to multijurisdictional systems existing prior to 1964. The term multijurisdictional was defined to include only systems which provided services in more than one village, town, city, county or state.\textsuperscript{11}

The reason for confining the study to multijurisdictional systems was primarily due to the concerns of the Public Library Association which centered upon the problems of financing and services encountered by systems operating across political boundaries. Municipal system, therefore, were left out of the study. The decision to exclude systems begun after January 1, 1964, was based on the judgment that at least two years of records would be necessary for the study.

The research staff reviewed the American Library Directory and state librarians were contacted. Altogether 1,159 systems were identified. It is interesting to note that seven state librarians did not return questionnaires. These 1,159 library systems were sent questionnaires and resulted in 661 usable questionnaires.

At this time, it was decided to keep only systems with at least two stationary outlets, each open a minimum of ten hours. As a result only 491 systems now remained in the study. Furthermore, a survey of the initial questionnaire revealed that many systems did not have adequate records. Only a small percent of the entire 491 reported

\textsuperscript{11}Cp. cit. p. 2.
that they had the needed information and would be willing to provide it. Inspection of the list of the remaining library systems reveal that it was quite unrepresentative.

The survey was confronted at this point with a severe constraint. It was decided, therefore, to eliminate some and deliberately recruit the cooperation of other systems whose records were not complete, but were adequate for the system years.

The number of systems to be sampled was finally established at 58. A detailed questionnaire was then sent to central headquarters of the system and a simpler questionnaire was sent to the independent libraries affiliated with the system.

Six systems were selected for case studies; two rural, two suburban, and two that contained a major city.\textsuperscript{12}

CHAPTER III

MAJOR FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. CHIEF ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SYSTEMS

As a result of the study of the 58 selected systems, some major accomplishments were noted. The authors cautioned the readers to be aware that the generalizations made could not claim complete representativeness of all public library systems due to the previously mentioned limitations of the study.

**Access.** The most basic or fundamental accomplishment of many systems was providing library service to large numbers of people for the first time. The study indicated that 30 of the 58 systems had provided access to libraries for the first time to a substantial population.

**Collections.** There was a substantial rise in the number of volumes per capita. Although data for comparison was not available, it did appear that the books per capita were probably increasing at a more rapid rate in systems than in other libraries throughout the country.

**Circulation.** In the 58 systems a definite rise in per capita circulation has taken place. The authors noted that a firm conclusion was hazardous, but it appeared that circulation was probably increasing faster in the
system libraries than in other libraries in the nation.

**Services.** The analysis of the affiliate librarians' responses indicated that the chief benefits to affiliate libraries were more and better holdings, access to reference and other materials, and improved reference service.

**Finance.** Although the data on finance was difficult to obtain, it is obvious that most affiliated libraries have more funds, including local funds, because of the system.

**Professionalism.** The hiring of professional librarians has increased and the level of professionalism at the top has improved library service in many public library systems. In-service training and professional advice have improved the professionalism of the affiliates' staff.\(^{13}\)

II. PROBLEMS SYSTEMS FACE

**Structure.** A small population base and a combination of weak libraries are serious handicaps to any system. This is especially true if the consolidated or federated system fails to bring in a relatively strong library or libraries located within the area.

**Services.** Only a small number of the systems are connected to other libraries outside the system, except the state libraries, for additional reference resources. A lack of job training concerning references accounted for the most failures in reference service. The money saved by

\(^{13}\)Op. cit. pp. 241-244.
centralized processing was undone by the reworking of cards in affiliate libraries.

**Role of the state.** Federal funding in recent years has tended to strengthen the state libraries. However, the states are generally weak in providing the necessary support and planning that systems need. In a few states, such as New York, California, Illinois, and Washington, system development has moved forward more rapidly under proper state leadership.

**Finances.** A fair way must be found to reimburse the strong city library, with the eroding tax base, for services given to the many patrons that live outside the city’s border. Along with this problem, a tax policy must be developed to help meet the needs of poverty-stricken areas. In many systems there is a lack of cost-of-service data and few libraries are able to accurately determine the costs of the various service they provide. In rural areas where there is a fixed tax levy, it is very difficult to raise the millage.\(^\text{14}\)

III. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

**To system directors and trustees.** During the development of library systems more attention must be given to the plight of the central cities for these libraries must be reimbursed in a fair manner for service they offer to other member libraries, especially the nonurban areas. In other

\(^{14}\text{Op. cit. pp. 244-247.}\)
words tax support should be based on the largest possible political unit to simplify tax equalization, planning, crossing service boundaries, and to equalize local financial contributions.

Public library systems must also be large enough so that it is economically possible to hire competent professional and clerical staffs, plus increasing the size and depth of the collection and references.

The system's trustees and directors must give more attention to analyzing the needs of their community in regard to the system's services.

It would be helpful to single out the functions to be performed by the professional librarians from functions to be performed by other professional with management skills. In other words, it might be smart to hire accountants to keep financial records and systems analysts to help the library system become more efficient.

In federated systems the use of contracts should be fully exploited. Contracts offer the advantage of growing large in some respects, but the local library still has its ultimate freedom. The major drawback appear to be that such a system relies entirely on the contract to hole the system together and any member could leave the system whenever it wished.

Every system needs a strong headquarters staff so that both library services can be handled properly and system planning can be effectively undertaken.
In the technical services the greatest economies are found in cataloging. Therefore, even many public library systems should be looking to large units (regional or state) to handle their cataloging.

In-service training for both the professional staff and the non-professional staff should be strong and continuous. It appears that a substantial number of failures in service at outlets occurred because the staff did not understand such things as the policies, resources, and relationships developed by the system.

Although book selection committees seem to work best in relatively compact geographic areas, book selection checklists in federated systems should be shorter and, eventually, an improved acquisition policy should be developed.

There is a definite need to share resources and to develop better interrelationships among all libraries, but especially the larger libraries and library systems.

Finally, the public library systems must seize the opportunity to help define the role of the public library in this period of changing concepts of service.\(^\text{15}\)

To state officials and state library leaders. Each state should pass laws that are favorable to the development of good public library service. It is only natural to assume that state tax aid is necessary, but it should be given only after a local tax levy has mandated local support.

\(^{15}\text{op. cit. pp. 249-253.}\)
Interstate compacts and planning should take place in many areas. This will result in the necessity to remove restrictions such as the prohibiting the expenditures of state funds in an adjoining state.

States should assume the responsibility of planning, initiating, and helping support equitable arrangements for meeting reference and research library needs. Perhaps experiments with new technology of information storage and retrieval should be undertaken on a multistate basis.

The state library and the library systems should assume the responsibility in adjusting library services in regard to student use. Perhaps school libraries and public library systems should plan and work together to find some solution to their problems in relation to education.

On the state level, information networks should be planned to help systems handle the advanced reference and research needs of the users who need special academic resources.

In most cases, strong systems develop in states with a well-articulated statewide plan. At the present time, 20 states should give priority to the development of statewide plans for library development. In some sparsely settled states, state-operated systems should be considered.\textsuperscript{16}

To national library leaders, One of the greatest contributions to public library system development at this time would be an all out research attack on the problems of

definition, data collection, and standards by the professionals in library work. Every state, federal, and public library system should make a special effort to assemble and interpret meaningful data which will provide insight into the effectiveness of library programs.

This study provided information that was never available before and suggests the kinds of data that should be obtained on a regular basis. Therefore, a regular nationwide census of library systems should be taken. The author has listed a long list of questions that should help lead to appropriate research designs.\textsuperscript{17}

CHAPTER IV

FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM, FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA

I. BACKGROUND

The Fairfax County Public Library System in Virginia is a consolidated single-county with no service arrangements with adjacent counties. It was organized in 1939 with a one room facility, a bookmobile, and a collection of one thousand books. Little change took place in the first thirteen years. In 1952 it had grown to two rooms, a modified school bus was used to transport books, and books were circulated from volunteer deposits in private homes, stores, and schools. However, during this time Fairfax County developed into a suburban area for nearby Washington, D.C. As the population in the county grew, there was evidence of an increasing interest in library service.

In 1952 the Virginia State Library at the request of the Fairfax Library Board undertook a survey of library needs. The survey provided the basic analysis needed to plan the county service to meet the public demands. In 1953 Mrs. Mary Katherine McCulloch was hired as the first professional librarian. Due to pressure from groups of citizens in two areas in the county during 1953 and 1954, the library board authorized them to find quarters for a
branch library in their community. After reorganization in 1954, the Fairfax County Library opened two more branches and became a three-unit system.

During the twelve years from 1954 to 1966, the system grew at a terrific rate. The population more than doubled from 142,614 to 381,000. It was estimated that the county population grew at the rate of 2,000 people per month during 1966. The branch libraries grew from two to nine, the collection from 42,022 to 351,848 volumes, the circulation from approximately 136,602 to 2,092,992, full-time personnel from 11 to 125, and the annual expenditure from $63,250 to $1,439,787. The bookmobile service remained important during this time for Fairfax's urban-suburban-rural population. 18

II. SYSTEM OPERATIONS

Professional-lay relationships. In 1966 the library board of trustees consisted of six members with the county board of supervisors appointing four, the city of Fairfax appointing one, and the superintendent of schools is a member of state law. Members serve no more than two consecutive terms of four years each and the terms are staggered. The administration of the library system is clearly in the hands of the director and the board's major task is to explain the needs of the library to the general public.

A countywide organization, Friends of the Library, have helped pass two bond issues, one in 1959 for $2,000,000 and another in 1966 for more than $5,000,000.

Role of the state. Virginia has no well-developed statewide plan for library service. Fairfax County Library is known as a regional library as it serves more than one local government, both the county and city of Fairfax. There is no strong relationship between the state and Fairfax County Library. Reports are sent to the state authorities and less than two percent of the library's income comes from the state.

System-unit relationships and staffing. In 1962 the headquarters library was formally opened and by 1966 there were nine branches with all units being open six days a week and every weekday evening. The library staff are employees of the county system, the book collection is owned by the county system, and the buildings are either owned or rented by the county system. The branch libraries are well located and some of the newest were being placed in or near shopping centers.

There appeared to be good communications among the staff. The director holds weekly meetings with the branch librarians. The staff has seven administrative positions besides the director. Assigned staff members are in charge of reference, purchasing, nonprofessional personnel, extension, technical processes, adult services and acquisitions, and children's services. The total staff (excluding
maintenance), was 162. The educational level of the staff was high as 160 had some college work and 121 hold either college or library science degrees. There were 32 full-time professional librarians and ten part-time.

Relations with nearby libraries. In Fairfax County are three small libraries with nonprofessional staffs which are not affiliated with the system. In addition, Falls Church Public Library is unaffiliated and serves the city of Falls Church with a population of 10,000. There is a good working relationship with these libraries and there are hopes of bringing these libraries within the system.

Communication is also maintained informally with other systems and libraries in the area. Fairfax County Public Library has formed a film cooperative, called Suburban Washington Library Film Service, with three other systems in the area. Selection of films are made together and they agree among themselves what films each will buy. The films are held by the purchasing library and become its property, but are loaned to the other systems. There are no formal relations with the library wealth of Washington, D.C. due to restrictions of these different libraries. However, informal relations and interloans have taken place with the special libraries of the nation's capital.

Service area and bookmobile. The Fairfax System covers 410 square miles. Two bookmobiles continue to serve areas without a readily accessible library. Service
has been extended, intervals between stops are shorter, and stops are longer.

Collections. There were 351,848 volumes in the system's collection. Each of the branch libraries has a collection of between 20,000 to 35,000 volumes. The book and periodical selection appeared to be well chosen. The collections of nonbook materials have increased as the system has grown.

Circulation. The circulation has increased from 136,000 in 1954 to 2,092,992 in 1966. In the twelve year span, this was a 1432 percent increase in circulation.\(^{19}\)

III. SERVICES TO LIBRARIES

Processing. Cataloging, purchasing, and processing are done at the central headquarters. Book selection and evaluation is done at the weekly meetings between the adult services librarian and the branch librarians. There are also meetings periodically between the supervisor of reference and children's services and the unit librarians.

Book catalog. The Fairfax System has resorted to a computer book catalog for greater convenience and because it can be made available in more places. In the long run, it is hoped it will be more economical.

In-service training. There appeared to be little in-service training, but more of learning by doing the job. Training for the nonprofessional was more common than for the

\(^{19}\) op. cit. pp. 120-127.
Record keeping. The statistics and records are kept at the central library. Records have been kept in a professional manner since 1956 and this has been a valuable aid in system planning.

Reference. The staff estimated that the branch libraries handled about 90 percent of the reference inquires. If the material cannot be found in the branch library, the book catalog is consulted. If the material is found in another branch, an interloan request is filled out or the patron may go to that library branch and pick up the material. When the materials cannot be located in the system, the headquarters library will attempt to secure it from other libraries or library systems. The headquarters library does have the strongest collection of reference materials. There are seven full-time and five part-time reference librarians in the system.

Interlibrary loan. One of a system's greatest strengths is its ability to borrow from other libraries within the system. In Fairfax County the book catalog, which is coded to indicate which libraries hold each item, facilitates the interlibrary loan process considerably. Requests can be telephoned if urgent or a form card is used. Delivery of the materials is usually three or four days, but time is customarily shortened by one day if the material is in the headquarters library. At the time of the study approximately 600 books were on loan within the system.
In 1966 Fairfax County Library borrowed 1095 times from outside the system. As mentioned previously, the system has no formal arrangement with other libraries or library systems. However, these loans were made informally from other centers, such as Catholic University or the universities of Maryland or Virginia or the State Library.20

IV. BUDGETING AND FINANCING

A Fairfax County tax levy has provided most of the operating income for the system. In 1966 the budget was $1,444,760 for the system. Fairfax County contributed 93.2 percent, the city of Fairfax 5.1 percent, and the state and federal governments 1.7 percent. The expenditures for personnel amounted to about 68 percent of the total budget and books and materials accounted for approximately 16 percent.

The budget is prepared by the director, is then approved by the board of trustee, and then is presented to the county supervisors for approval. Although there has been little state or federal aid in the yearly budget, the federal Library Services and Construction Act monies have helped with the construction of two branch libraries. The federal money and a 1959 bond issue of $2,000,000 helped move a major part of the system out of rented store-fronts and into a headquarters library and six branch libraries.21

20 op. cit. pp. 128-132.
21 op. cit. pp. 132-134.
V. FAIRFAX COUNTY LIBRARY SINCE THE STUDY

The 1969-70 annual report indicates that Fairfax County Library is still growing. The budget was $2,346,762 and the volumes in the collection have grown to 617,988. Other materials such as periodicals, microfilm reels, and pamphlets had also increased significantly. Circulation records indicate that 3,176,375 items were borrowed during the year and 38.9 percent of the population were registered borrowers of the system. The system now had eleven branch libraries. Perhaps the library's growth is only natural, as the population has grown a little over a 100,000 to 485,255. The system now has a ten member Board of Directors. 22

In 1967 a library bond issue was passed which provided $5,160,000 for new building and the enlarging of present library branch buildings. However, only $1,100,000 of the bonds have been sold as increase in interest rates have left the county with $4,060,000 worth of bonds unsold. The selling of the first bonds has resulted in the construction of two branch libraries. 23

In 1971 Fairfax County Library implemented a new organizational structure based on a regional philosophy of library service. The Central Library acts as both headquarters and as a regional library and in addition there

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23 Ibid. p. 3.
are two other regional libraries. The three regional libraries in turn support thirteen other branch libraries. The central library will act as the heart and will provide an even more extensive and specialized reference and research source. The regional libraries are intended to serve areas with approximately 100,000 citizens and have a minimum collection of 50,000.

The system is now planning for the year 2000 and it is estimated that the system will need six regional libraries, which will in turn serve twenty satellite libraries. Guidelines and standards are now developed for this growth.24

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24Fairfax County Public Library. "Fairfax County Regional Public Library System." Fairfax: Fairfax County Public Library. (Mimeoographed), pp. 1-6.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In reviewing this study and reviewing the literature, one can realize the desperate need for definitions, standards, and further research in regard to library systems. Ferguson called attention to the "lamentable dearth of library statistical data."\(^\text{25}\) Minder is in agreement, when he stated:

We are frankly at the research level. We are beyond the conceptual stage in that we have a pretty good intuitive idea of what we want---more efficiency, and better service through joint efforts. But we have no design data, no standards, no models, and no operating personnel competence.\(^\text{26}\)

There has been disappointments in public library systems development and operation. For example, the headquarters library of the Ramapo-Catskill Library System in New York divorced itself from that system after ten years of operation. The problem centered around finances and some fear a similar trend in New York State.\(^\text{27}\)


An imperative of a system's success at this time is additional funds either from state or county sources, both to persuade libraries to join and to give the systems the resources to increase service. In the neighboring state of Illinois, state laws and state finances are helping in the development of public library systems.\(^{28}\)

The public library system concept has its proponents and its opponents. The writer believes the people, as individuals and political groups, will have to decide if they really desire adequate library service in the future. As Wight stated:

The notion that each level of government has a completely unique set of library functions to perform worked reasonably well for a hundred years. As applied to public library resources it is now unacceptable and is rapidly becoming completely inadequate...public library service should be allocated to those levels of government that are most competent to render them effectively and efficiently.\(^{29}\)

In a democracy the people finally have to decide the issues. The writer hopes good library service remains as one of the foundations of our democratic way of life.


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