

A Survey Report of Public Library Services to Asian Americans

The Ad Hoc Committee, AALC*

This survey is a result of a proposal submitted to the Asian American Librarians Caucus to study the library needs and usage of Asian Americans. The proposal suggested that more attention be given to the improvement of public library services to Asian Americans. At the Midwinter Meeting of the American Library Association in January 1976, the Caucus adopted the proposal and created an Ad Hoc Committee charged with investigating and reporting on the library needs and usage of Asian Americans and the extent of library services available to them. The present report deals with public library services. A survey of library needs and usage is planned and will be conducted if adequate funding is available.

All costs for preparation of the survey's questionnaire, mailing, and follow-up letters were taken care of by the ALA's Office for Library Service to the Disadvantaged. Miss Jean E. Coleman arranged for the Committee to meet a number of times at the ALA Headquarters Library, and the Committee wishes to thank Miss Coleman for her assistance and generous support. Thanks are also due to Dr. Barbara Slanker for her suggestions on the content and format of the questionnaire. The Committee is most grateful to the libraries that replied to its questionnaire.

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Without such cooperation the survey could not have been carried out.

In October 1976, the Committee mailed its questionnaire (reproduced at the end of this article) to thirty-nine selected libraries which were presumed to serve a considerable number of Asian-Americans. A follow-up letter was sent out in November. Twenty-nine libraries, nearly 75 percent of the total, sent back replies. Six of these were excluded from the tabulation, because they gave incomplete information or none at all, or because they came from branch or division libraries. That left usable replies from twenty-three libraries, whose names are listed in Table I. (In Tables II-VIII, the libraries are not identified. In Tables II, III, and VII they have been assigned purely arbitrary numbers as an aid in tabulation.)

Library staff

Four of the twenty-three libraries do not employ any staff members with ability in an Asian language. Three other libraries replied that they employ *some*, but failed to specify which languages these staff members could handle. The remaining sixteen libraries employ a total of 7002.07 FTE, ranging from 33.5 to 1526 FTE. As indicated in Table II, the number of staff members with ability in an Asian language appears to be very small, except in one library. In all, 305 persons with such ability are employed by the sixteen libraries, accounting for 4.3 percent of the total number of employees in those libraries. The percentage of total staff would be much less--3.1 percent--if the four libraries which do not employ anyone with ability in an Asian language were included in the tabulation. The figure of 305 denotes not only Asian Americans but also non-Asian Americans who are competent in an Asian language. We can assume, however, that the number of non-Asian Americans with such competence is very small, and not of significance to the result of our survey.

Library resources

Fifteen libraries, or 65 percent, have special collections for

Asian Americans in English or Asian languages. As Table III shows, all of these libraries have special collections for Japanese, followed by Chinese (14 libraries), Koreans (11 libraries), Vietnamese (10 libraries), Filipinos (9 libraries), and Thais (3 libraries). One library reported that it had a collection for a group other than those mentioned above, but it did not tell which one. The types of materials held by the libraries vary. Table IV lists the types of materials in twenty libraries. Table III indicates that not many materials in Asian languages are found in public libraries. Fifteen libraries have a total collection of 31,992,899 volumes, of which 48,162 (or 0.15 percent of the total) are in Asian languages.

Reasons for the small amount of material in Asian languages are not hard to identify. An obvious one is budget. Eleven libraries reported that *no* funds were allocated for Asian materials; five libraries mentioned making such an allocation, but failed to indicate its size; and one library failed to answer the question (No. 6b). Only seven libraries allocated funds for Asian materials and told us what percentage of the total materials budget was thus allocated. As Table V shows, the percentage ranged from less than 1 percent to a surprisingly high 13.5 percent. It should be noted that the library which spends 13.5 of its budget on Asian materials is the recipient of an LSCA establishment grant for service to the Asian community. As it explained to us, its *regular* budget allocation for Asian materials is considerably lower: "Eventually, when the materials allotment is dependent entirely on local funds, the percentage will be somewhere between 1.5 percent and 2 percent."

A second reason might be a lack of need for Asian materials. As one librarian commented: "Our other foreign collections are small because we have little demand at present for those languages." Third, perhaps because of lack of demand, there seems to be no formal policy concerning the selection and acquisition of Asian materials. Thirteen libraries were content to base their selection and acquisition on patrons' suggestions. Only two libraries took a positive approach, asking the Asian

community for suggestions. One of them had set up a more or less formal procedure: its librarian asked Asian clubs to send him a list of the titles of works that their members would like to have in the library.

Although materials in Asian languages constitute a small portion of the collection, nearly all of the twenty-three libraries have materials *in English* for Asian Americans. In Table VI, these English-language materials are broken down by subject.

Readers' services

Table VII shows the percentage of the Asian American population served by libraries and their branches. The relationship between the population served and the need for branch libraries is not clear. In Chicago, where Asian Americans constitute 1.25 percent of the population, one branch library serves the Chinese American community. On the other hand, the Stockton - San Joaquin City Public Library has no branch to serve the Asian American community, which makes up 5.11 percent of the population.

Most libraries do not have special programs for, or services to, Asian Americans. Nine libraries listed various programs for Asian Americans, including cultural festivals, art exhibits, dance lectures, children's programs on certain Oriental holidays and festivals, and arts and crafts. One library appears to be very active in providing special programs, as it reported offering Chinese shadow puppet shows, films about Asia, Asian American poetry readings, Asian cultural performances, bilingual stories, films, and crafts for children. As is shown in Table VIII, special programs for Asian Americans are offered weekly, monthly, or irregularly, with the number of patrons in attendance ranging from ten to over forty.

Five libraries mentioned special library services to Asian Americans. One library reported that it had Dial-A-Story in Chinese, and planned to add stories in Japanese in the near future. Another said that it housed files of a Chinese Historical Society and supervised members of the society who were

preparing them for use. One library reported having ordered, at the community's request, Chinese language films on Chinese arts and culture. Another reported its special services as books, recordings, and periodicals in Asian languages; English language materials on Asia and Asian Americans; and a bookmobile. These federally funded projects had come into being at the community's request, and as a result of initiative on the part of the librarians.

Suggestions

This survey represents a modest attempt to find out the extent of library services to Asian Americans. It must be admitted that some pertinent questions were neither asked nor answered in the questionnaire.

First, the questionnaire asks about the employment of staff members with competence in Asian languages, but fails to ask about the employment of Asian Americans and their percentage of the total professional staff. The questionnaire also fails to distinguish between professionals and non-professionals. Whether Asian Americans are employed in the lower ranks or at a professional level makes a considerable difference in the library services offered to Asian Americans.

Second, the questionnaire asks what population is served by the library, and what percentage of that population is made up of Asian Americans. Further studies should be conducted to determine the effect of demographic characteristics, such as the concentration of Asian Americans in a particular area, on the need for or usefulness of branch libraries.

Third, more than 60 percent of the replies came from California. Little information was acquired from the East Coast, and more information is needed on the library situation in that area, where more than one-third of the Asian American population lives.

Last, but not least, some parts of the questionnaire should be clarified or rephrased. For example, what is the difference between special programs and special services, and are special

programs a part of special services? Some libraries were obviously confused by this. They answered the questions on special programs and then repeated those answers for the questions on special services.

The survey suggests that library resources for, and services to, Asian Americans are disproportionately low, in view of the percentage of Asian Americans in the total population. Services, in particular, should be improved. It must be noted, however, that the adequacy of library resources and services depends primarily upon the needs and demands of users. Further study, assessing these needs and demands, will be necessary before a judgment can be made on the quality of library resources and services. In general, the library response to the needs of Asian Americans seems to be positive.

The survey enables those concerned to take a close look at the extent of public library services to Asian Americans. It will well serve its purpose if it makes us aware of the need to improve library services to Asian Americans. As one librarian commented: "It [the survey] has served a useful purpose in heightening our awareness of service needs for the Asian American communities."

TABLE I

A List of Library Replies Used in the Report

California

Anaheim Public Library
Fresno County Free Library
Long Beach Public Library
Los Angeles County Public Library
Los Angeles Public Library
Oakland Public Library
Pasadena Public Library
Sacramento Public Library
Salinas Public Library
San Diego Public Library
San Francisco Public Library
San Jose Public Library
Santa Ana Public Library
Stockton - Jan Joaquin County Public Library

Hawaii

Hawaii State Library System, Library Services Branch

Illinois

Chicago Public Library

New York

Brooklyn Public Library

Oregon

Library Association of Portland (Multnomah County Library)

Pennsylvania

Philadelphia Free Library

Texas

San Angelo Tom Green County Library

Virginia

Norfolk Public Library

Washington

Everett Public Library
Seattle Public Library

TABLE II

Staff Members with Asian Language Ability Employed in 16 Libraries

Libraries	Total Staff FTE	Chinese	Japanese	Korean	Filipino	Thai	Vietnamese	Others	Sub-total	% of the total
1	108.5	1	1						2	
2	153.72	2	1		2				5	
3	1087.5	18	13	4	7		1		43	
4	163.87	7.5	1	1	1.5				11	
5	101.85	1	1						2	
6	296.7	3	4					2	9	
7	33.5								1	
8	276.35	2	1		1				4	
9	252.9	3	2		1			3	9	
10	117	4	3		2				9	
11	469.95	5	63	2	10	1		1	82	
12	310		1						1	
13	1526	10	6	1	7			1	25	
14	1010	14	14	3	5				36	
15	426.8	33	1		14			1	62	
16	66.5	1			1			2	4	
TOTAL	7002.07	104.5	112	11	52.5	1	2	22	305	4.3

TABLE III
Special Collections in Asian Languages for Asian Americans by Volume

Libraries	Total Collections	Asian-Americans										Sub-Total	% of the Total			
		C	J	K	F	T	V	O	C	J	K			F	T	V
1	683,103	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	49	445	300	62	169	1,025		
2	4,997,373	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	3,601	2,530	548	25	7,004			
3	730,680	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	5,000	2,000	1,000	50	8,550			
4	1,421,927	X	X	X	X	X	X	X								
5	877,525	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	250	180	5	10	160	620		
6	456,466	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	900	320	50	15	25	1,310		
7	1,623,132	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	2,363	9,981	1,167	1,240	14,751			
8	5,943,148	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	1,800							
9	3,720,839	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	300	90	1		391			
10	1,092,711	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	30	40	10		80			
11	2,950,779	X	X	X	X	X	X	X								
12	1,500,000	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	639	1,409	127	3	20	2,198		
13	4,097,618	X	X	X	X	X	X	X								
14	1,581,115	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9,000	1,200				10,200		
15	316,483	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	77	109	11	2	13	17	4	
Total	31,992,899								24,309	18,304	2,869	2,110	38	334	198	0.15

C=Chinese
 J=Japanese
 K=Korean
 F=Filipino
 T=Thai
 V=Vietnamese
 O=Others
 * = In Process