

Australian Street Libraries: Research finding summary

Peter Chen, University of Sydney, peter.chen@sydney.edu.au revised as at 16 February 2022

About

This document provides a summary of findings into street libraries and street librarians in Australia. It has been written for participants who kindly contributed to the information collection for the study, either as part of the two focused discussions, and/or who completed the questionnaire.

Finding summary

While the practice of communal exchange of books is not new, street libraries as commonly seen in Australia – the small fence line box – are a relatively new phenomena, predominantly modelled on the Little Free Library® initiative in the United States. In Australia, the number of street libraries has rapidly increased over the last six years following the establishment of Street Library Incorporated and the active promotion of the idea through that non-profit organisation, as well as social media and conventional media reporting of the phenomena.

The research estimates 4,993 of these libraries were in service at the start of 2021, projecting continued strong growth in the number of libraries in future years.

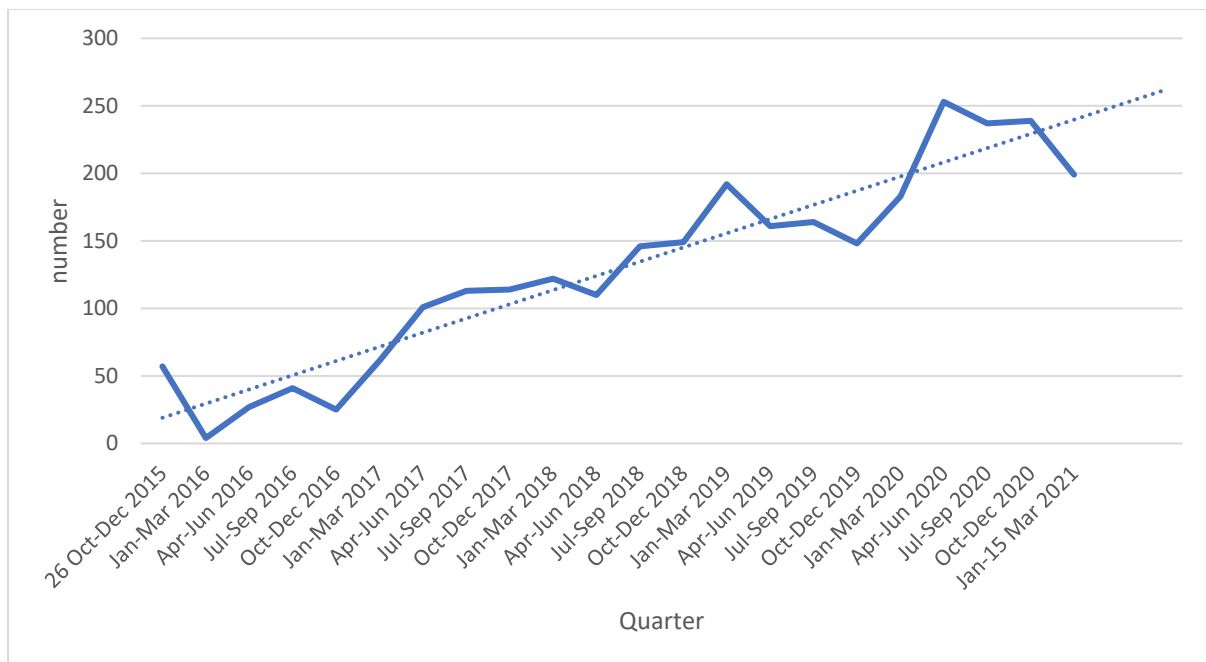


Figure 1: Quarterly registrations of street libraries 2015-2021 (with trendline)

The average library is less than two years old. It is estimated that the average street library has a 5% probability of being decommissioned per year.

While often presented as an “urban” phenomenon, street libraries are spread across Australia proportionately to the population of the area: regional and remote areas are no less likely to have libraries than Australian cities when measured on a per capita basis.

Australian Street Libraries

Table 1: Distribution of street libraries, by ABS remoteness classification

	n	% Street libraries	% Australian population	Differences
Major Cities of Australia	1,838	66.0	72.0	-6.0
Inner Regional Australia	583	20.9	17.8	3.2
Outer Regional Australia	294	10.6	8.2	2.3
Remote Australia	41	1.5	1.2	0.3
Very Remote Australia	28	1.0	0.8	0.2

Street libraries are, however, disproportionately located in areas with higher levels of socioeconomic advantage, with the most affluent local areas four times more likely to have street libraries than the least affluent.

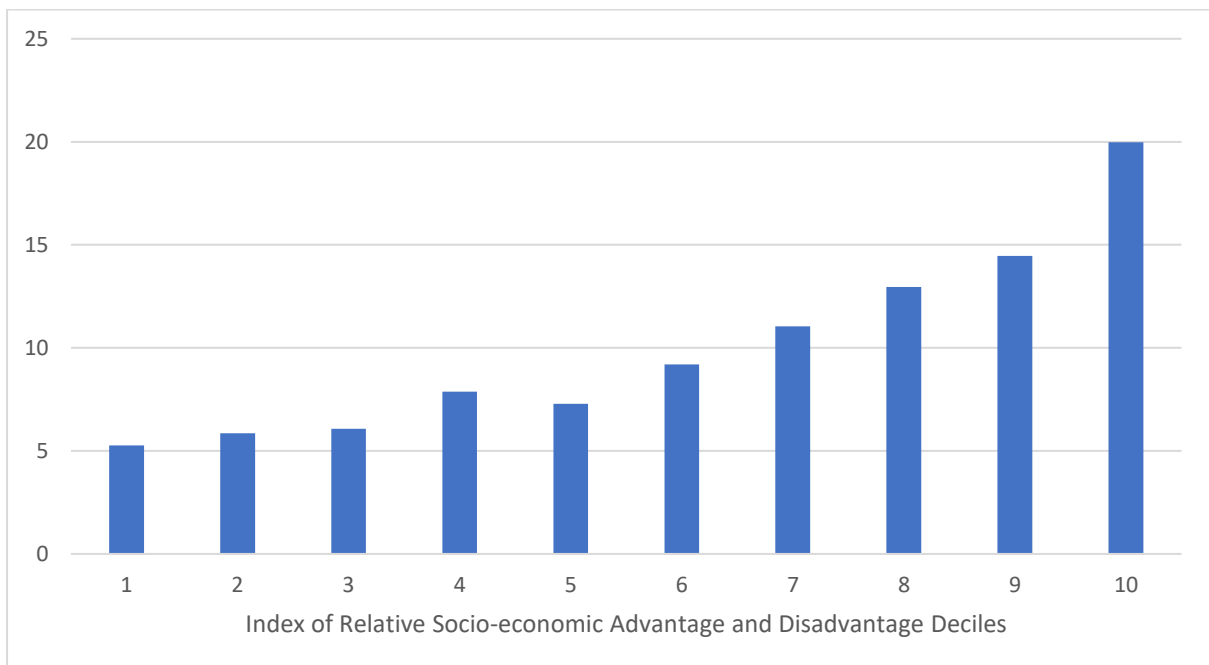


Figure 2: Distribution of street libraries by Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage deciles

Street librarians themselves are broadly representative of the wider community in terms of their income profile, but differ to the Australian community in that they are, on average, older women who are less likely to be of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, or speak a language other than English at home.

Australian Street Libraries

Table 2: Household income (per week) profile of street librarians

	Total street librarians %	Total population over 18 years %	Difference %	Quartile differences %
Nil income	4.0	1.5	2.5	-0.7
\$1-\$149	1.0	0.8	0.2	
\$150-\$299	1.5	2.3	-0.8	
\$300-\$399	2.3	3.1	-0.9	
\$400-\$499	2.5	7.2	-4.7	
\$500-\$649	5.3	4.8	0.4	-0.4
\$650-\$799	3.8	7.9	-4.1	
\$800-\$999	7.3	7.4	-0.1	
\$1,000-\$1,249	11.3	9.0	2.4	
\$1,250-\$1,499	6.8	8.1	-1.3	+0.3
\$1,500-\$1,749	5.8	6.6	-0.8	
\$1,750-\$1,999	8.3	6.3	2.0	
\$2,000-\$2,499	12.8	11.7	1.1	
\$2,500-\$2,999	8.3	7.1	1.2	+1.0
\$3,000-\$3,499	5.3	4.6	0.6	
\$3,500-\$3,999	3.3	4.2	-0.9	
\$4,000 or more	10.6	7.4	3.1	

Concern about books, literacy, and community significantly motivate street librarians in their establishment of street libraries and their role as maintainers of these community installations.

Table 3: Street librarians' motivation for establishing the library

Motivation	%*
Distribute books (and other items)	23.4
To foster community/meet people	15.5
Personal love of reading	13.7
Have/had large number of spare books	10.8
Promote literacy/others' love of books	10.3
Children	6.4
Good location	5.4
Covid-19 pandemic	4.8
Personal / family / neighbourhood hobby/project	4.2
Environmental / reduction of waste	3.2
To be able to access books myself	2.1

* Due to rounding, this does not add to 100%

While this talks to external benefits as motivating factors behind the establishment of street libraries, street librarians do benefit from expanded social interactions because of their activities:

- Come to know another person who runs a street library: 23.0%
- Joined a social media group about street libraries: 23.2%
- Come to know a person who uses your library: 53.8%

The research identified a range of ways that street librarians maintain and manage their street libraries.

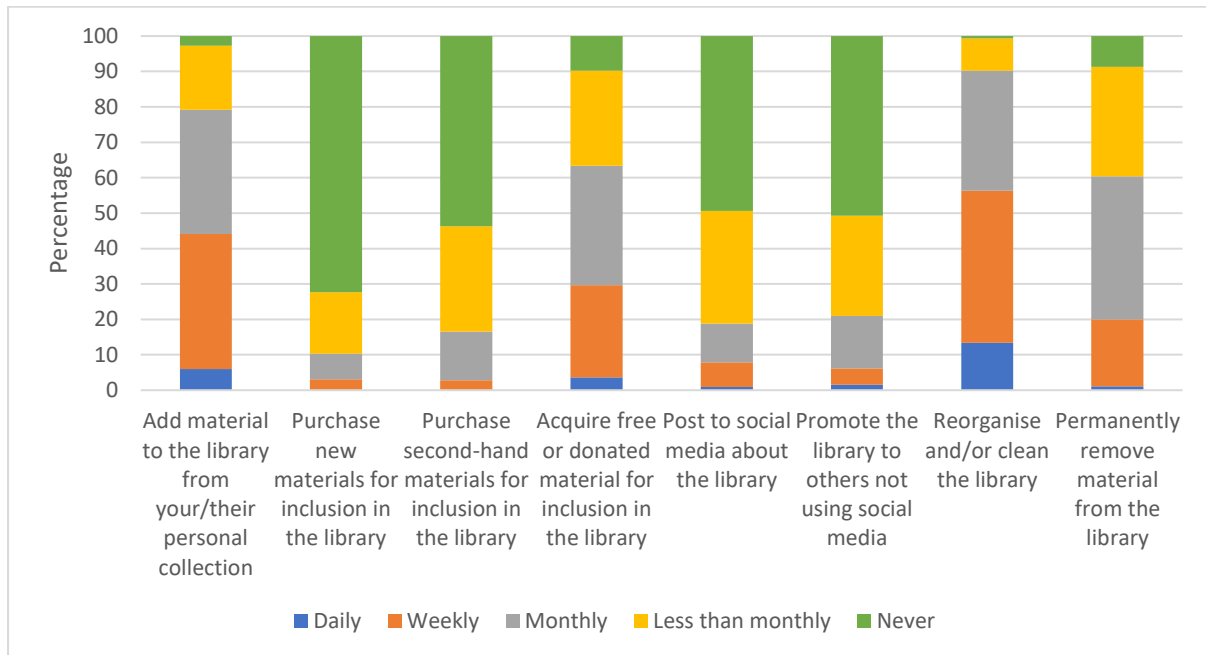


Figure 3: Frequency of library management activities

Street librarians encounter comparatively few problems with their libraries, the most common being “cleaning out”

Table 4: Frequency of problems faced by street librarians

	Cleaning out of materials	Vandalism (inc. graffiti)	Dissatisfaction from neighbours	Planning / compliance issues from local council
Frequently	3.5	0.0	0.0	0.2
Occasionally	24.0	12.2	1.5	1.0
Never	72.5	87.8	98.5	98.8

The average street library turns over fourteen books each week. Overall, this equates to over 3,500,000 per year nationally. This represents a good example of the “gift” or “sharing economy” that reduces waste. While the economic contribution of libraries is only part of their social impacts, this is estimated to be of equivalent value of AU\$10 million in 2021, projected to increase over time. Very little of this is estimated to be “new” expenditure, making this liberated value from previously “static” assets (unused books).