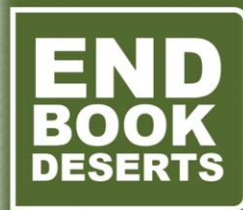


Understanding Book Access:

The Impact of Book Deserts of Children Reading Development

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Book Access
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We are at a pivotal moment in our nation’s literacy landscape, as conversations about the science of reading appear in documentary films, podcasts, social media, popular press, and even state legislatures. With the focus on ensuring all children have evidence-based reading instruction, we cannot afford to overlook an essential component in improving our children’s reading proficiency: access to books in their homes, schools, and communities. Access to books is a necessity in children’s development, not only as lifelong readers but as engaged, productive members of societyⁱ. Yet a staggering number of American children lack books in their homes, schools, and communities, with profound disparity in the availability of books between high-income and low-income neighborhoods. These children live in *book deserts*: ‘underresourced or underserved areas and homes with little access to written materialsⁱⁱⁱ.

In a high-poverty area of Washington, DC (with poverty levels above 60%) there is one book per 833 children^{iv}. A 2006 study showed that children in the top 5% of socioeconomic status had five times the number of books than children in the lowest 5%^v. A 2019 study of 153 preschoolers from low-income, ethnic-minority families revealed that children had an average of 31.95 books at home, with children of English-speaking parents having about 20 more books - of greater variety - than children of Spanish-speaking parents^{vi}.

Book access outside of children’s homes is compounded by structural inequalities that result in gaps in opportunity and academic achievement^{vii}; when examining the book collections of day care centers in low-income neighborhoods, researchers found an average of one or two books per child, mostly of mediocre or poor quality^{viii}. Scholastic reports that classroom libraries are only available for 43% of school-aged children^{ix}. Students attending schools in high-income neighborhoods had access to eight times as many books in their classrooms as did students

attending schools comprised of students from low-income and black communities^x. Further, public libraries in high poverty communities too often have reduced hours and limited funding, impeding their ability to update and replenish materials. With 32.4 million American children lacking books in their homes, schools, or communities, the issue of book access is worthy of attention and policy implications.

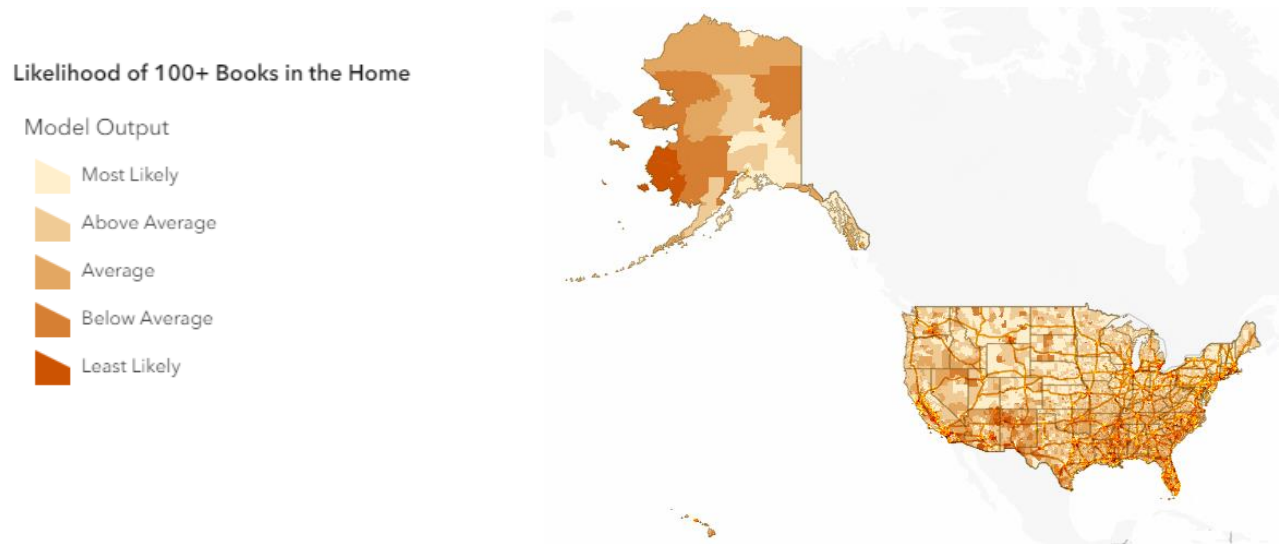


Figure 1: Unite for Literacy – The Book Desert Map (Esri, TomTom, FAO, NOAA, USGS | U.S. Census Bureau, Esri | U.S. Census Bureau (USCB))

The Implications of Books on Students

To realize their potential as readers, children must own books and have personal libraries in their homes. There is tremendous importance in book ownership; owning a personal library promotes *scholarly culture*, the practices and habits that promote reading and learning and growing

up with at least 20 books has a significant impact on educational attainment^{xi}. Further analysis revealed that children who grow up in homes with many books get three years more schooling than children from bookless homes, independent of their parents' education, occupation, and class. Over their twenty-year study across 27 countries, findings indicate that children with more books in their homes progress further in secondary schooling, develop stronger literacy and numeracy skills, and are more likely to complete college.

Because of the environmental influence on behaviors and habits, children need both physical and psychological proximity to books as the presence of books improves children's literacy development and academic achievement^{xii}. Access to books in school and public libraries was a significant predictor of 2007 fourth grade NAEP reading scores^{xiii}, and positively impacts children's motivation and attitudes towards reading^{xiv}. Access to books increases children's emergent literacy skills^{xv}, the frequency of shared book experiences with parents / caregivers^{xvi xvii}, and reading fluency in later years^{xviii}. This collective body of research signifies that the most successful way to improve the reading achievement of low-income children is to increase their access to print^{xix}.

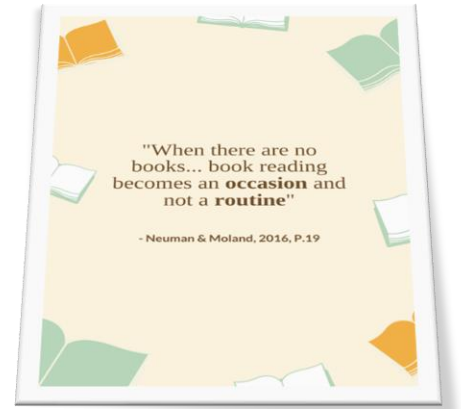
On the flip side, the absence of books has significant negative repercussions, constraining young children's opportunities to start school ready to learn^{xx}. A lack of books deprives children of important literacy skills, including vocabulary acquisition and content knowledge, as well as the socioemotional benefits of shared read alouds. Research links a dearth of book exposure at home to less language-rich experiences and less frequent shared book experiences^{xxi}.



The Solution

To change the odds for children who lack access to books, the following implications are provided:

1. *Increase local, state, and federal funding for book distribution programs.* Growing in visibility and reach, book distribution programs support children's literacy development by providing books through various venues and points of distribution. A relatively low-cost intervention, book distribution programs positively impact children's literacy development, increase in children's reading interest, and yield higher literacy scores for young children^{xxii}. As state legislatures move forward with policy around the science of reading, we must consider book distribution in these efforts – such as proposed in New York State legislation in support with the [New York State Campaign for Early Literacy](#).
2. *Encourage family participation in book distribution programs.* Families involved in book donation programs for longer than a year not only increased reading-related behaviors, but also improved the frequency of language-rich interactions between parent and child^{xxiii}.
3. *Focus on impact-based and longitudinal research.* Much of research conducted by book access organizations focuses on the number of books distributed, rather than linking book access to measures of school readiness and literacy achievement. No doubt this research is more complex, but we must better understand how these programs prepare our students for early literacy. We can look to the research initiatives of Reach Out and Read for their research designs. We must also support national efforts to measure book access through



data sources like the American Time Use Survey, census data, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

4. *Establish book distribution programs in highly trafficked community areas.* When books are provided in areas including urban laundromats, WIC centers, community centers, churches, and barbershops and salons, we meet parents /caregivers where they are to increase the number of books and increase child engagement in literacy activities^{xxiv xxv}.
5. *Provide funding to distribute books through mobile libraries, direct mail, and digital access.* In the COVID pandemic, many book distribution programs shifted their delivery to direct mail. Participation in these programs – including the Imagination Library (founded by Dolly Parton) – has been linked to children’s increased reading motivation and interest^{xxvi}, improved early literacy skills (including letter knowledge and phonological awareness)^{xxvii}, and increased frequency of family reading^{xxviii}.
6. *Increase partnerships across programs.* When programs come together and spearhead efforts, parents / caregivers receive multiple messages about the importance of literacy. A collaboration between Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read, a national book distribution program which relies upon pediatricians and primary care providers, yielded increases in family engagement, children’s language outcomes^{xxix}, and kindergarten readiness scores^{xxx}.



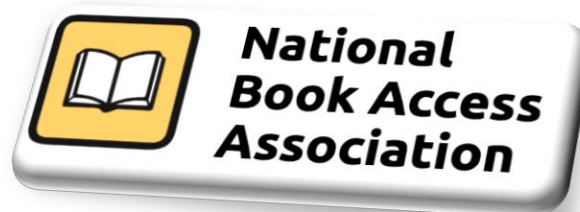
7. *Encourage literacy programs to include multiple contact points with caregivers and increased duration.* Because changes to family literacy behaviors increased with extended participation, programs should consider how they engage participants over time^{xxxix}. Additionally, book distribution programs must listen to and adhere to caregivers' perspectives and intentionally target families who wish to receive books, while being cognizant of the unintended messages and pressure that parents might feel^{xxxix}.
8. *Evaluate the kinds of books distributed, with these important considerations:* (a) increased number of narrative books and of books in various languages^{xxxix}, (b) concerted inclusion of books depicting characters of various race and ethnicities, (c) student-choice of books, as less than half of book distribution programs included student self-selection^{xxxix}, and (d) more distribution of shorter, concept books to support parents/caregivers with limited time and reading skills^{xxxix}.
9. *Investigate community-based literacy needs,* so that efforts can better focus on creating reading cultures within neighborhoods^{xxxix}. Undoubtedly book distribution programs will increase in effectiveness and relevancy as they understand the context where they operate and the specific needs of their stakeholders; programs must develop an approach of 'inside out' rather than 'outside in'^{xxxix}.
10. *Create a well-coordinated database for national book distribution programs to increase targeted approaches.* Though well-intentioned, book distribution efforts often overlap, operate without cross-programmatic



coordination, and can be fragmented. In fact, a 2021 study of Philadelphia’s Read by 4th consortium revealed that 453,045 books were distributed in one year, across 74 organizations. Geospatial findings, however, indicated that children living in the most impoverished neighborhoods received the smallest number of books, with more books going to working-class / middle-income neighborhoods^{xxxviii}.



11. *Prioritize a national coalition of literacy projects and book donation programs.* As book distribution programs bring together literacy advocates spanning education, public health, for-profit industries, and non-profits, there must be concerted efforts to coordinate, collaborate, and communicate across programs to maximize and systematize reach, operate with intentionality and effectiveness, share best practices, and contribute meaningful research. Until recently, there “had “never been an effort to weave programs together into a collective, strategic goal: to ensure that children, particularly from economically distressed homes, own a personal book library (p. 27).” Thus, a national coalition of literacy projects and book donation programs – like that of the [National Book Access Association](#) - is valuable – improving the interdisciplinary efforts for literacy advocacy and equity and ultimately benefiting the populations being served.



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