

Public libraries provide critical resources and experiences for young children, increasing access to books and computers as well as providing meaningful learning opportunities. This role is particularly important for children living in poverty, whose limited resources are related to lags in academic achievement (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

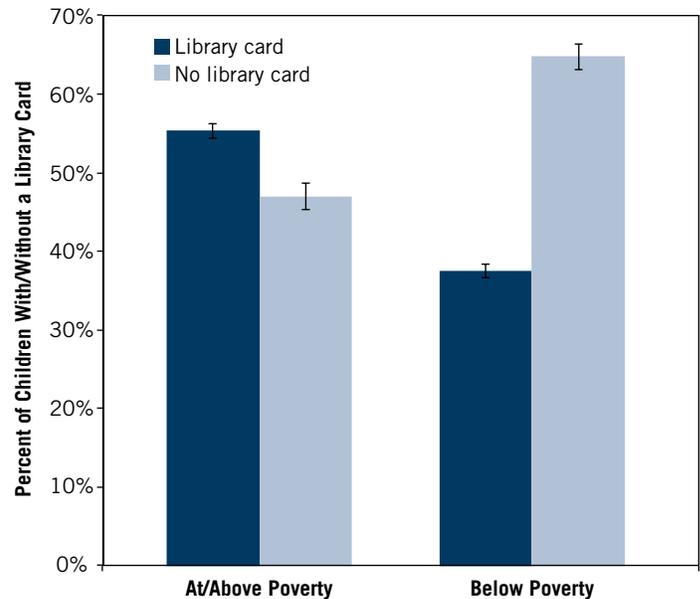
One rite of passage for young children is the acquisition of their first library card. Not only does it provide greater independence and access to literacy and information, but it also signifies the next step in increased responsibility and self-efficacy. However, there is little empirical evidence about the impact of library card ownership in young children. Are there differences between children who do or do not have a library card?

In this analysis, we used data from the [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 \(ECLS-K\)](#), from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The ECLS-K provides nationally representative data on children's development and early educational experiences. This study followed children from kindergarten through eighth grade. In the present analysis, we focused on children's library card ownership in the first grade.

Who Has a Library Card?

Half of all children in the study (50.2 percent) had library cards in first grade. However, this rate is not consistent across all demographics (**Table 1**). The most powerful demographic predictor of library card ownership in first grade was poverty (**Figure 1**). Rates of library card ownership differed significantly by poverty status. More than three out of every five children living below the poverty level (62.2 percent) did not have a library card in first grade. First grade children who were living at or above the poverty level were more

Figure 1. Percent of First Grade Children Who Have a Library Card by Poverty Status



Analysis by Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
Data Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education
Note: Statistics adjusted for complex sample design using cluster (C4TPWPSU), strata (C4TPWSTR), and weight (C4PW0) variables.

than twice as likely to have a library card than their more impoverished peers (OR = 2.03, 95% CI = [1.74, 2.37]).

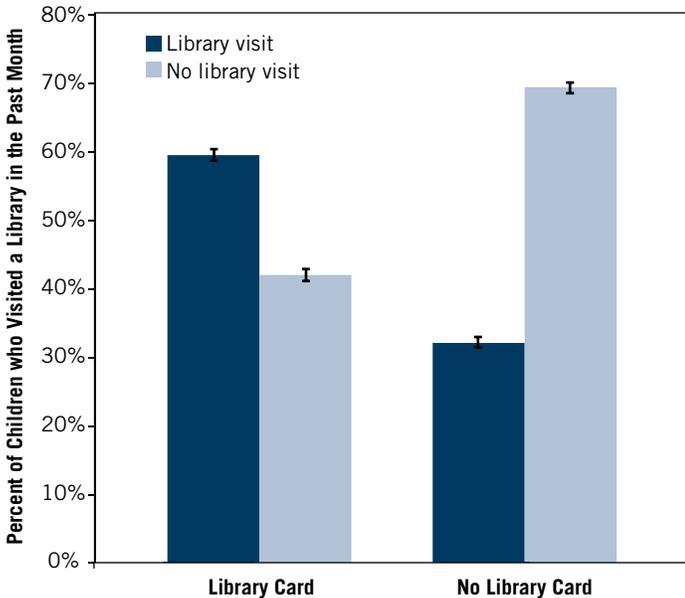
Library Card Ownership is related to Library Visitation

Overall, 45.2 percent of first graders had visited the library in the past month. Like library card ownership, visitation rates differ based upon children's characteristics. Most importantly for the present analysis, library visitation varied based upon whether or not a child had a library card (**Figure 2**). Almost 60 percent of first grade children who had a library card had visited the library within the past month. In contrast, only one-third (31.7

percent) of children who did not have a library card visited the library, a rate that is half that of their library card holding peers.

Although library visitation is related to income and socioeconomic status, the effects of children’s library card ownership on visitation were still present and profound. First grade children who had a library card were more than twice as likely (OR = 2.81, CI = [2.55, 3.10]) to visit the library within the past month as children without a library card, even after controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status (SES)¹.

Figure 2. Percent of First Grade Children Who Visited a Library in the past Month by Library Card Ownership



Analysis by Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
 Data Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education
 Note: Statistics adjusted for complex sample design using cluster (C4TPWPSU), strata (C4TPWSTR), and weight (C4PW0) variables

Conclusions

This brief analysis indicates that children who are living in poverty are less likely to have a library card than their more affluent peers. Furthermore, children who do not have a library card are less likely to visit the library, thereby missing out on the rich learning opportunities offered by libraries. Prior research (Swan, 2014) indicates that going to the library can have a positive effect on academic outcomes in reading and science, particularly for children living in low-SES households. Public libraries reach millions of children each year (Swan et al., 2014), providing valuable educational programming and materials. These resources are available with equal access to all children, who simply need to use their library card as the key.

References

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¹ Socioeconomic status (SES) is a composite measure that included children’s household income, parental education, and parental occupation.

Table 1. Demographics for First Grade Children by Library Card Ownership

Of children who...	Did Have Their Own Library Card	Did Not Have Their Own Library Card
Were In First Grade	50.2%	49.8%
Visited the Library...		
In the last month	65.1%	34.9%
In the last year	51.9%	48.1%
Were living...		
Below Poverty Threshold	36.7%	63.3%
At or Above Poverty Threshold	54.1%	45.9%
Were...		
White, Non-Hisp.	53.9%	46.1%
Black, Non-Hisp.	45.5%	54.5%
Hispanic	45.5%	54.5%
Asian	51.4%	48.6%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	48.7%	51.3%
American Indian / Alaska Native	20.2%	79.8%
Other	52.3%	47.7%
Lived in a...		
City (large to mid-size)	50.2%	49.8%
Suburb / Large Town	54.0%	46.0%
Rural / Small Town	41.6%	58.4%

Analysis by Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

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Note: Statistics adjusted for complex sample design using cluster (C4TPWPSU), strata (C4TPWSTR), and weight (C4PW0) variables

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Suggested Citation

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