

Reaching 65: Lots of Librarians Will Be There Soon

By Mary Jo Lynch

NUMBERS REVEAL NEED FOR MAJOR RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

From the *Los Angeles Times* in April 2001 to the *New York Times* in August, several recent newspaper articles have noted the shortage of librarians. All note that libraries—especially public libraries—are having a hard time filling positions that require the master's degree in library and information studies (MLS). Journalists have interviewed librarians who mention several reasons for the problem, the chief ones being low salaries, competition from the private sector, and an increasing number of retirements.

Different estimates are given for the number of librarians who will retire in the near future, but no one really knows, as retirement is an individual decision that depends on many factors. What we can estimate is the number of librarians who will reach age 65—the usual age of retirement—over the next 30 years. Such data is available now from the 1990 Census of Population files and will be available in about a year from the 2000 census. ALA recently asked Decision Demographics of Arlington, Virginia, to tell us how many librarians would reach age 65 in each of the next 30 years. They computed the numbers through analysis of the 1990 Census Public Use Microdata File.

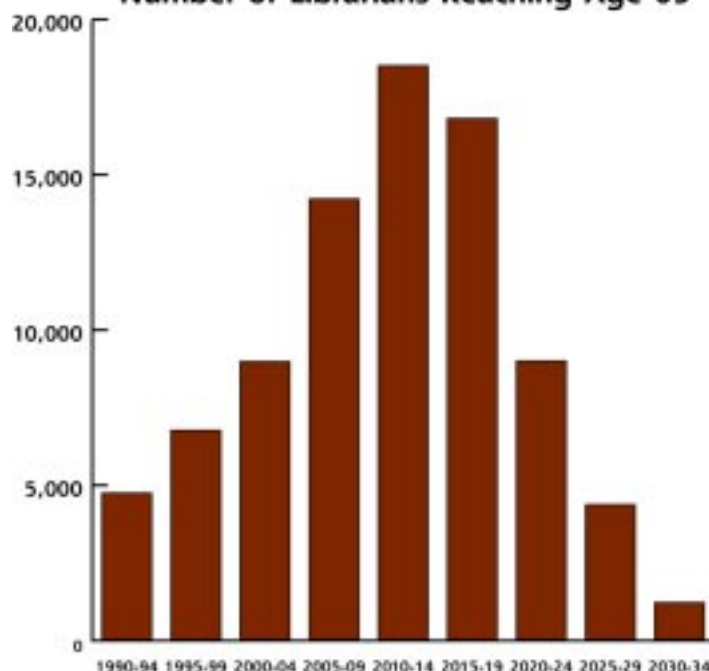
It is important to note that publicly available results from the decennial census report on what people say they do. In the 1990 census, 197,000 people said they were librarians, and this figure is often used in articles on the retirement problem. But in working with Decision Demographics on a project involving the demographics of various occupations, we learned that fewer than half of those 197,000 had the master's degree or higher. Specific degrees are not reported in the decennial census, so we do not know how many have the MLS itself. But possession of a master's degree or above in another field seems a reasonable surrogate for the MLS. In 1990, the number of people who said they were librarians and also said they had a master's degree or above was 87,409.

This lower figure seems more reasonable than the higher figure when compared to the total number of librarians

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Figure 1

Number of Librarians Reaching Age 65



reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1990 in the statistical reports for academic, public, and school libraries (academic: 26,101 + public: 21,305 + school: 49,909 = 97,315). A possible explanation of the differences is that although each of these surveys requests a count of professional staff and a separate count of support staff, respondents may include staff without the MLS in the first group. This is especially true in the largest category—school—where the criterion for professional on the survey form is state certification and many states do not require the MLS. On the other hand, there is no NCES survey of special libraries where many MLS librarians are employed. There is no easy way to reconcile the two figures. Only in the census file is it possible to link three variables: occupation, highest degree, and age. It seems reasonable to use the 87,409 figure to determine the incidence of reaching age 65 in future years.

Decision Demographics used the age of those 87,409 people in 1990 to project when each of them would reach age 65. Results are summarized in Figure 1, which shows the numbers reaching 65 in each of nine five-year periods, and in Figure 2, which shows the percentage who will turn 65 for each five-year period, reveals the highest number (18,469) will be 65 during the years 2010–2014. (Not shown are the 3,070 who were already 65 in 1990.)

These figures provide only some of the data needed to describe the recruitment problem in librarianship. There are many other questions to be considered, such as:

- How many people retire before age 65?
- How many people leave the field each year for reasons other than retirement (e.g., death, work in another field)?
- Will change in the workplace lead to a need for more MLS staff in years to come—or less?

The data presented here indicates that the shortage reported from coast to coast in 2001 is likely to become more troublesome in the immediate future, a situation that has not escaped the notice of First Lady Laura Bush, who recently announced a \$10-million initiative for the recruitment of librarians (*AL*, Feb., p. 18). ♦

Figure 2
Librarians Reaching Age 65
(Percentage of 87,409)

