

Social Policy Resources for Social Work: Grey Literature and the Internet

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Abstract

Accreditation standards for professional schools offering social work degrees mandate curriculum content that provides students with skills to analyze, formulate, and influence social policies. An important source of analytical thinking about social policy is the “grey” literature issued by public policy organizations, think tanks, university-based research institutions, professional organizations, etc., that is increasingly available via the Internet. This research surveys library social work subject pages for content and links related to the social policy grey literature. A coding scheme was developed that counted the number of paths to relevant grey literature from the libraries’ subject guides. The results of the study suggest that there is a great deal of variance across institutions in how much help they provide users. Libraries must do a better job guiding users to the policy organizations that produce reports, briefs, newsletters, etc., that are important to social policy problem solving and implementation.

Keywords: grey literature, social policy, public policy organizations, Internet, policy practice

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As an applied social science, the social work profession strives to help people achieve psychosocial well-being and effect societal change that enhances the capacity for social functioning (Barker 2003). We tend to think of social work as a helping profession, mediating between individuals experiencing unusual and often overwhelming personal needs and the government agencies designed to help with those needs. Social workers are clearly on the front lines of *implementing* social policy.

But social workers also have a professional responsibility to try to *shape* social policy, and the concept of “policy practice” has encouraged social workers to become actively engaged in the policy-making process (Adams 2004; Jansson 1990; Keller, Whittaker, and Burke 2001; McInnis-Dittrich 1994; Sundet and Kelly 2002; Wyers 1991). The new federalism and the devolution of policy to the states as laboratories for social intervention (Kamerman 1996; Sundet and Kelly 2002) has opened opportunities for local activists, including social workers, to have real input into the policy process. Indeed, accreditation standards for professional schools offering social work degrees now include the ability to analyze, formulate, and influence social policies as an establishing principle, and list specific guidelines for curriculum content that provides students with knowledge and skills to understand major policies that form the foundation of social welfare policy; analyze organizational, local, state, national, and international issues in social welfare policy and social service delivery; analyze and apply the results of policy research relevant to social service delivery; understand and demonstrate policy practice skills in regard to economic, political and organizational systems, and use them to influence, formulate, and

advocate for policy consistent with social work values. (Council on Social Work Education 2001, 11).

The social work practitioner, administrator, or researcher who is interested in policy-formation and public problem solving can look to traditional sources such as journals and books for information. Indeed, there is a small literature on social work collection development that has focused primarily on such traditional resources (Jacoby, Murray, Alterman, and Welbourne, 2002; Swan, 2002). However, an additional and important resource for analytical thinking about social policy is the literature issued by public policy organizations (Abelson 2002; Levin 1989; Stone 1996). This specialized information is frequently distributed as newsletters, working papers, policy briefs, and research reports that have been referred to as grey or fugitive literature.

Grey literature includes documents that are not distributed through traditional commercial channels, are rarely indexed or cataloged, and are difficult to access or locate (Auger 1998; Denda 2002; Gelfand 1997, 2000). It is particularly important in the policy arena, where there are many issuing agencies such as think tanks, university-based research institutes, professional and trade organizations, advocacy groups, etc., all attempting to inform and influence the policy-making process. Think tanks and other policy groups contribute substantially to the policy-making process by pursuing basic information gathering, policy evaluation studies, program design, and so on (Levin 1989). Grey literature frequently can offer a more comprehensive view of a topic, placing research in a larger context. It can provide up-to-date information on research findings or timely analysis of policy (Weintraub 2000). However, the primary audience for this information is government officials, not the academic community. As a consequence, finding,

preserving, and cataloging grey policy research has traditionally been difficult (Levin 1989).

In the past, social work students, practitioners, and researchers would have encountered many of the problems associated with identifying, locating, and accessing print social policy grey literature. However, Internet technology has now made a tremendous amount of the information produced by public policy organizations freely available and deliverable directly to the user (Anderson, 2001). This has decreased problems in locating and accessing documents, but identification of germane policy-related grey literature remains difficult, particularly for the naïve or relatively inexperienced Internet user. For example, Google searches on “foster care for abused children,” “preventing teenage pregnancy,” and “assisted living for patients with Alzheimer’s disease,” three broadly different policy problems of concern to social work will retrieve thousands of results. While more refined search criteria such as limiting to PDF documents will make the amount of information retrieved less overwhelming, results are still very hit or miss, and one can never be very certain about how much of the relevant material is at hand.

Certain portals that provide access to this free information have been established, e.g., the *GrayLit Network*, but these sites typically focus on scientific and technical grey literature (Mathews 2004). This body of information would most likely not match the concerns of students and professionals in social work. Two commercial products, *CIAO: Columbia International Affairs Online* and *PolicyFile* provide indexing and access to public policy grey literature; however, both focus extensively on international/foreign affairs policy. *PAIS International* does index social policy grey literature and organization web sites, but selectively. The ERIC-Educational Resources Information Center microfiche collection is a long-standing source of

grey literature in the field of education (Walter, 2003), but few of its materials would be relevant to the policy concerns of social workers. The American Psychological Association has recently introduced *PsycEXTRA*, its commercial database of grey literature in psychology, behavioral science, and health, which promises to be more relevant to social welfare, but it may be a too broad and costly tool for the average user.¹

Collection development specialists have responded to the tremendous growth of Internet accessible information by pointing to these resources on subject web pages (Gelfand 2000). The subject or research guides are meant to organize and make more accessible to the user resources relevant to a particular discipline or topic. They typically consist of annotated listings of reference materials in the library, important journals in a field, commercial indexing/abstracting databases, relevant government resources, and so on (Reeb and Gibbons 2004.) They may be organized by format and/or topic, and frequently include links to other related topic-specific web sites, e.g., government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Thus subject web pages can be an invaluable help getting students started in the research process by directing them toward the most germane resources within a specific discipline. The guides could also lead students to relevant material *outside* of standard library collections, including grey literature in the social policy field. But how well do they accomplish this last task?

The major goal of this project is to survey the library resources of academic institutions with accredited social work programs (as identified by the Council on Social Work Education)² for content and links related to social policy and more specifically, public policy organizations. The focus is on social work subject pages when they are available. Descriptive categories for coding the content of social work subject pages were developed to address the question: Do

current library subject guides lead social work students and professionals to the grey literature produced by public policy organizations? (Similar information was coded from the home pages of institutions without specific social work guides). If most subject pages include these links, then current library resources are largely sufficient for helping social workers engage in the policy-making process. But if the majority of such library subject guides include few or no obvious links to the relevant grey literature, then current library practices are largely deficient in performing an increasingly important task for the social work field. In the latter case, a real need for a searchable database focusing on the grey literature on domestic social policy would be identified.

Methodology

The Council on Social Work Education is the official accrediting organization for schools of social work. In the summer of 2004 it listed 164 accredited programs in the United States offering masters degrees (MSW) in social work. Many of the less populated states have only one such program within their borders (and Montana and South Dakota have none), while California and New York each have more than a dozen such degree-granting institutions. These 164 colleges and universities provide the data for the investigation.

This research explores whether library resources at these colleges and universities provide aids for social work students and practitioners to find grey literature on policy questions of interest to the profession. There is any number of different ways this could be accomplished, of course, but after examining the library subject guides at a small nonrandom sample of social work programs around the country, a coding scheme that captures the major variations was

developed. The coding scheme was systematically applied to the library home page for each of the 164 institutions.

In essence, the coding scheme asks six questions about library resources for social work students and practitioners:

1. Does the library home page provide access to a social work web guide? If the answer to this first question was “Yes,” the following questions were answered from the subject guide. If the answer to this first question was “No,” however, an attempt was made to answer those same questions directly from the library’s home page.
2. Are there links to a separate policy guide or guides? Does the social work subject guide direct users to other pages that describe resources useful for social policy research, or particular policy issues such as welfare, health or mental health policy?
3. Are there links to individual policy think tank sites on the social work subject guide, e.g., The Urban Institute, The Brookings Institute, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, National Center for Children in Poverty, etc.?
4. Are there links to government agencies or sites providing policy relevant information, e.g., *Green Book: Overview of Entitlement Programs*, *THOMAS-Legislative Information on the Internet*, *Administration for Children and Families (HHS)*, *GAO Reports*, *Office of Human Services Policy*, etc.?
5. Several social work programs around the country, Washington University in St. Louis, University of South Carolina, and NYU have developed extensive, detailed listings of resources, including policy relevant resources for social workers. One can think of these web pages as “super” or “megasites” for social workers. Rather than providing *direct*

links to this same information, some libraries will instead provide indirect links to these resources by listing the megasites. Therefore, the fifth question is: are there links to one or more of these megasites?

6. Does the web guide list links to specific *class* guides for policy relevant classes?

We also noted whether there was separate social work library at each of these 164 institutions. The presumption is that schools where social work is a large enough program that it warrants its own library would be particularly prone to provide extensive links to these web-based resources.

Although the presentation of the findings will be largely descriptive, it is not unreasonable to assume that the more “Yes” answers there are to these questions at any particular institution, the easier it is for social work students and practitioners to find social policy grey literature.

Results

Over 83 percent of the colleges and universities with accredited MSW programs have a distinct social work web guide accessible via their library’s home page. This is a minimal first step to the social policy literature, but it is necessary before most of the remaining aids can be implemented.

The most direct route to the grey literature on policy questions of interest to social workers would come through either distinct and fairly broad policy guides, or through links to specific nonprofit organizations or think tanks that are concerned with some of those same issues. Less than nine percent of the programs with library social work web pages included links to general policy guides, but over forty percent included links to individual policy institutes or

think tanks. Even if there were no overlap between these two categories, this would still be less than half of the programs with dedicated social work web pages that include the most direct and obvious links to the grey policy literature. When we consider the number of programs that include *both* types of links to the grey literature, under 44 percent of the programs with their own social work web pages (and under 37 percent of all accredited programs) include the most direct links to the social policy grey literature.

An indirect route to the grey literature is to include links to social work megasites from which one can find numerous links to relevant grey literature. Over eighty percent of the social work web guides included links to one or more of the megasites. These megasites are thus by far the most common way that social work students and practitioners would become exposed to social policy grey literature. This is an indirect route – the targeted material is several clicks away, not just one – but it is not a large burden for the experienced user who knows what he or she is seeking to obtain. Every additional step is one more hurdle for the inexperienced user to overcome, however, and the more inexperienced the user, the higher those hurdles seem to be.

Government agencies provide much valuable information for social workers, including many reports or studies that would be classified as grey literature. Fully two-thirds of the programs with social work web pages included links to relevant government sites. This is one aid that even libraries without dedicated social work web pages can provide, and access to government resource guides was found on slightly more than half of the library home pages of the twenty-seven programs that did not have a social work subject page.

Finally, seven percent of the programs with social work web pages included specific links for policy-related classes. These links are another very explicit and focused way that librarians

can lead social works students to relevant grey literature. The only drawback to such links is that they are unlikely to be used by anyone *other than* students in the specific class in question. Thus class-specific guides are severely limited as links to policy relevant grey literature for the more general clientele utilizing social work web pages.

As a way of summarizing the findings, the number of routes by which a social work student or practitioner could get to social policy grey literature from the library web pages of the accredited MSW programs was counted. Broad policy guides, links to specific policy institutions or think tanks, links to social works megasites, and links for specific policy classes, all counted as distinct routes. Figure 1 summarizes these findings. Fully three-quarters of all the accredited programs include at least one route to social policy grey literature (although as we have already seen, the bulk of these are somewhat indirect, via social work megasites.) A third of all accredited programs include at least two distinct routes to social policy grey literature. Users of these latter libraries clearly have the best chance of finding relevant grey literature.

***** Insert Figure 1 about here *****

An even broader index of help for finding social policy grey literature useful to social workers was constructed, starting with the count of the number of routes to grey literature displayed in Figure 1, and adding to it an indication of whether there was a social work web page to begin with, and whether there were any links to appropriate government agencies. The resulting scale ranges from 0 to 5, with a median of 2.5. These data are shown in Figure 2. Eight percent of the library home pages of the colleges and universities with accredited MSW programs included no obvious direct or indirect links to the social work policy grey literature, and not even five percent of the programs included all five of the policy aids. Based on these

numbers, one would have to expect that many social workers are missing significant portions of the relevant social policy literature in their attempts to become engaged in the policy-making process.

***** Insert Figure 2 about here *****

Twelve of the accredited institutions have their own social work library. These libraries would certainly have dedicated social work librarians, in contrast to librarians with multiple collection development/liaison responsibilities, who are more likely to have the time and resources to develop extensive online guides and other resources that support MSW students. If so, we would expect these institutions to score higher on the index of aids for finding the social work relevant policy literature. Indeed they do, a full point higher on the summary scale (3.6 vs 2.6, $t(162) = 2.67$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The Internet has made it possible for those organizations actively engaged in policy research to disseminate their finding in a timely fashion, often in more detail than is allowed by conventional outlets. The cutting edge of policy research is almost always first available through such grey literature, and in many cases the only full documentation of this research comes from the issuing agency itself (Alberani and De Castro 2001; Berman, 1995). The Internet has thus had the paradoxical result of making grey literature far easier to access and retrieve than once was the case, but simultaneously making so *much* available that it is often much harder to find or identify *relevant* material in the first place. The challenge of grey literature is one of identification: there is no inherent order to the Internet, and very limited indexing of any particular topic, certainly including

social policy.³

Social workers increasingly believe they have a professional responsibility to be engaged in policy-making, and understanding policy research and the policy-making process has become a standard part of training in major MSW programs. Current policy research also informs professional social work practice, as it may identify new or alternative or better ways of providing for the needs of clients. This paper has addressed one very important question: How well do library social work subject guides help students and practitioners meet that responsibility, and in particular, how well do they provide useful, i.e., guided access to the burgeoning social policy grey literature now freely available on the World Wide Web? The results of this study suggest that there is a great deal of variance across institutions in how much guidance they provide to users. A handful supply numerous routes by which students and practitioners may be led to relevant material, but an even larger number provide no obvious links that could be identified. The median was 2.5 out of a total of five possible aids to finding relevant social policy grey literature, suggesting that there is much room for improvement.

Because training in policy practice is now mandated by the Council on Social Work Education, there is a real need for better guides to relevant social policy research, and in particular information produced by think tanks and research institutes. This is not only an issue for the 164 currently accredited MSW programs, but even more so for the dozens of institutions actively seeking such accreditation. Libraries can no longer catalogue and store all relevant material in any domain, but we can do a better job guiding users to the policy organizations that produce reports, briefs, newsletters, etc. that are important to social policy problem solving and implementation. One possible way of addressing this need is developing an online database, not

of the reports and briefs themselves, but of the issuing agencies, that would allow users to search by topic, mission, political orientation, and so on, and find direct links to the specific think tank or policy institute. Web-database technology exists to implement this tool (Bell and Jantz 2003) and it could provide a more organized and easily accessible path to the social policy grey literature.

Notes

¹ This paper focuses on tools and methods that provide access to grey literature relevant to U.S. social policy. It should be noted, however, other bibliographic databases such as SIGLE, System for Information on Grey Literature in Europe, can be used to locate grey literature produced in other countries.

² <http://www.cswe.org>.

³ Long-term retention and storage is another very important issue associated with grey literature, not one not addressed in this paper.

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FIGURE 1

Number of "Routes" to Policy-Relevant Grey Literature from Library Home Pages of Accredited MSW Programs

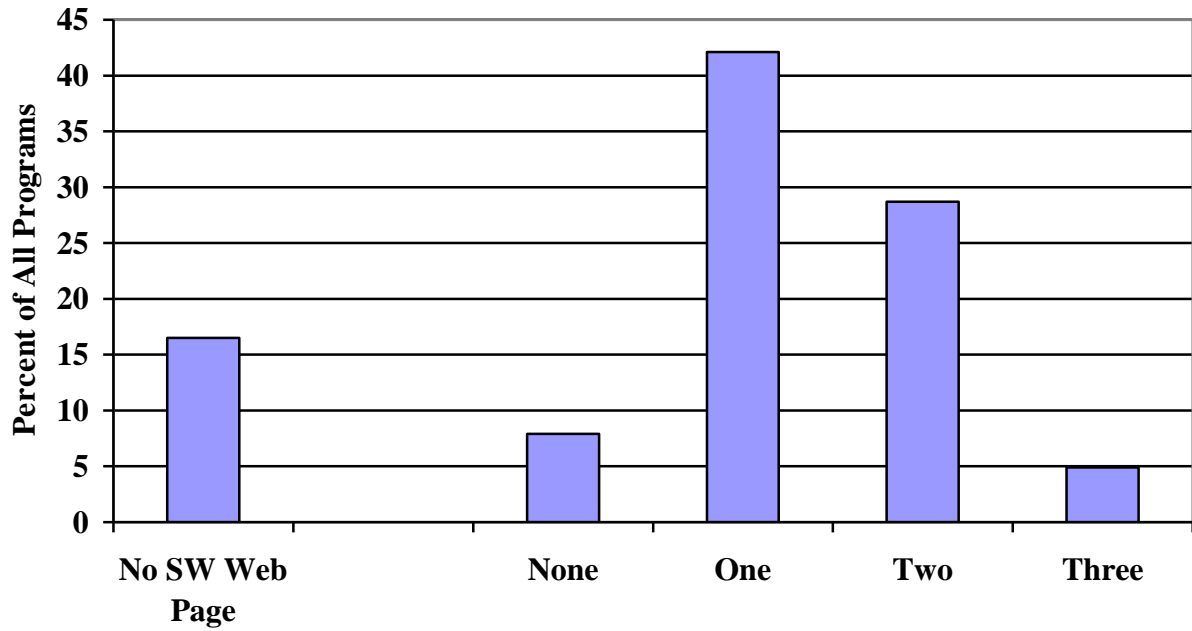


FIGURE 2

**Number of Distinct Links to Social Work Relevant Policy Literature
from Library Home Page of Accredited MSW Programs**

