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Analyzing Public Library Cardholder Signup to Increase Access

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ABSTRACT

As attempts to restrict or remove books in libraries continue to proliferate across the United States, Brooklyn Public Library has taken steps to bring attention to a crucial set of policies that libraries can use to protect access and advance the right to read: how patrons get library cards. In 2023, BPL undertook a national research project to study the practice of cardholder registration in American public libraries, with findings and analysis published in spring 2024. This is the first known national dataset collected and shared in this area of practice. The research findings further informed the development of a set of guiding principles developed for public libraries to consider when restructuring policy and process in the area of cardholder signup in order to reduce barriers and increase access to their collections and services.

Keywords: Access, Intellectual Freedom, Policy, Operations, Administration

RESEARCH AND GUIDANCE FOR INCREASING CARDHOLDER ACCESS

In 2022, amid growing concerns around efforts to censor and ban books in schools and public libraries, Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) launched the Books Unbanned initiative (www.booksunbanned.com), which issued free BPL library cards to anyone aged 13-21 across the U.S. with access to more than 500,000 eBooks and audiobooks in the Library's collection. Young readers requesting a Books Unbanned eCard also began sharing stories with BPL that highlighted a pattern of compounding barriers for teens and young adults to access free books, ranging from lack of school library access, limited library collections, and difficulty accessing the physical public library, including transportation challenges to age-related barriers to getting a library card. The nature and impacts of these access challenges for young readers were further documented in a report issued by Brooklyn Public Library, in partnership with Seattle Public Library and the University of Washington Information School, in April 2024 (www.booksunbanned.com/youthvoices).

Driven by a commitment to continuously improve equity and access to library resources and services, Brooklyn Public Library launched a comprehensive effort that same year to simplify the process of library card signup, which included identifying and addressing scenarios which commonly led to an unsuccessful or unwelcoming library card signup experience, frequently for those in transitional living situations, those who cannot easily visit a library in-person, those with non-traditional names or gender identities, and for children and teens.

While the American Library Association (ALA) clearly lists Access as a core professional value of librarianship (www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues), supported by other foundational documents like the Library Bill of Rights and Code of Ethics; in practice, public libraries across the country are governed locally and structure operational policies as they see fit. Recognizing the varying complexities and factors impacting cardholder policies in public libraries across the U.S., BPL sought to partner with a research firm to comprehensively examine library card policies nationwide as well as generate standards of practice—centered through the lens of access—for all public libraries to benefit from.

In May 2023, with generous support from the Mellon Foundation, Brooklyn Public Library launched an 18-month research project to collect and study cardholder signup policies from public libraries across the nation. The project aimed to identify the range of policies and procedures which govern cardholder access in American libraries as well as the rationale used for establishing, revising, or protecting those policies. Research findings were shared with the field in a comprehensive report issued in Spring 2024 (bklynlib.org/library-study).

BPL then convened a diverse working group of public library leaders to develop a framework of guiding principles and best practices for cardholder registration. The draft policy framework was published in Summer 2025 (bklynlib.org/library-study), containing a set of recommendations for barrier-free, equitable cardholder signup along with several in-depth policy briefs in key areas for consideration. The guidance is intended to support libraries as they work within their own governance structure, unique communities, and local regulations and laws to establish policy and operational procedure for cardholder signup. Regardless of size, budget, or structure, libraries can benefit from this common reference point for cardholder registration policies that are reflective of our shared professional value of access, privacy, and intellectual freedom.

DATA COLLECTION

The project began with a data collection process designed by Brooklyn Public Library and research partner Avenue M Group. BPL partnered with the Public Library Association (PLA), the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) to share information about the project and encourage as many public libraries as possible to participate. In the end, over 2,000 libraries representing every state and the District of Columbia contributed to the dataset, a fair representative sample of the estimated 9,000 administrative library units (inclusive of main libraries, branches, and bookmobiles) in the United States, according to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMSL) Public Library Survey (PLS) (www.ims.gov/research-evaluation/surveys/public-libraries-survey-pls).

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey, fielded between September and December 2023. The online survey questionnaire was approximately 60 questions (taking about 25 mins to complete). In order to maximize the potential for data collection, anyone who currently or recently worked in a U.S. public library with some knowledge of their cardholder signup process was eligible to respond. Library name and location were linked to the IMLS PLS dataset (the PLS 2021 dataset was most recently available at the time), allowing the research team to cross-reference contextual data points about each library such as budget, population size and more without

prompting for this information through the survey; meaning survey questions were almost primarily centered on a library's cardholder registration policy and process. (The survey questions in full are made available in the final research report).

Qualitative data was collected through a series of three focus groups conducted by Avenue M Group. In September 2023, a focus group was held with select attendees of the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL) Conference in Wichita, Kansas. In October 2023, a focus group was held at the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) Forum in Seattle, Washington. Finally, in November 2023, Avenue M Group conducted an asynchronous focus group hosted on an online forum.

In addition to collecting a representative sampling of the library profession's rules and standards in this area of practice, BPL's research attempted to reflect the broad justifications for library policies (whether known or unknown), how (and how often) the cardholder signup process is revisited or revised, and the methods used to train staff and communicate with new or potential patrons. This is the first known national dataset collected and shared in this area of practice.

ANALYSIS

Data collection was completed by the end of 2023, and Avenue M Group spent the following months cleaning, analyzing, and synthesizing the collected dataset for publication. A comprehensive report was published with analysis in April 2024, and made freely available on the Brooklyn Public Library website (bklynlib.org/library-study). Avenue M Group also delivered the cleaned, raw dataset, which BPL made available to libraries by request. The data was also configured into a public dashboard, also freely available on BPL's website, allowing users to drill down into the analysis by activating a variety of filters, such as state, population size, number of cardholders, and library budget.

While the research analysis was meant to be informative and not prescriptive, the data collected did shed some light on areas where standard library policy and practice may serve to create barriers to the public's ability to get a library card, further justifying the need for recommendations and guidance for policies which can be adjusted to increase access. For example:

Signup Process

A library's method or process for collecting cardholder information and creating a library card was analyzed, ranging from the length of time for completion, method (online application, paper application or both), requirements for in-person signup, and whether the application was available in other languages.

- Nearly all (98%) libraries represented in the survey reported that general library card signup usually takes 15 minutes or less before the patron receives a physical card.
- More than two in five (43%) libraries require patrons to apply in person for a full-access library card.
- About three-quarters (76%) of libraries offer an alternative signup option to patrons who are homebound or otherwise unable to visit the library in person, with a variety of

accommodations used including registration over the phone, or allowing a caretaker or other proxy to provide cardholder information to the library.

- The majority of libraries offer their cardholder application (62%) and introductory information or materials (72%) only in English.

Library Card Eligibility

One key data point analyzed is how libraries determine eligibility for a library card. This set of questions extended to both *who* is considered eligible for a library's typical full-access card but also *how* that eligibility is determined by the library at time of signup.

- More than three-quarters of libraries surveyed ask to see proof of eligibility in order to receive a standard full-access library card.
- Of that subset that require proof of eligibility, more than half (55%) require a patron to prove eligibility to receive a library card, with no exceptions or workarounds.
- Three in five libraries surveyed require adults to show government-issued photo identification (ID) in order to receive a full-access library card: nearly two in five (39%) always require this piece of information.
- 53% of libraries offer temporary cards or guest passes to anyone who cannot obtain a library card. More than two in five (45%) do not offer this option.

Data Collection

The research team asked questions about the kinds of data or information libraries do or do not collect that might get stored in the patron record.

- Excluding libraries that do not require legal ID, nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents indicated their library does not give any consideration to patrons whose name preference does not match their ID.
- More than nine in ten (93%) require a primary mailing address in all cases.
- Two-thirds (66%) of libraries require a phone number in all cases.
- More than one-quarter (27%) require an email address in all cases.
- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of libraries optionally collect a preferred patron name (different than name on legal ID), with nearly one in five (19%) not offering this option.
- For 11% of libraries surveyed, gender is a required field in the patron account record.
- The majority of libraries do not collect gender, race and/or ethnicity, identification number (such as Driver's license number), employer/place of employment, or community references.

Youth Access

An area of cardholder signup with the most variation across libraries was regarding the process for children and teens, or minors (generally youth under the age of 18).

- About half (53%) of libraries surveyed do not have an official minimum age requirement for receiving a library card. 14% of libraries have a minimum age requirement of 5 years old to get a library card. Almost one in ten (9%) libraries have a minimum age requirement between 10 and 18 years old to get a library card.

- Most libraries require youth up to a certain age to have stated permission from an adult in order to receive a library card. Among these libraries, more than half require adult permission until the minor is 18 years old.
- For two-thirds (67%) of the libraries that require adult permission, only parents and legal guardians can provide permission for a child/teenager to receive a library card. 23% of the libraries that require adult permission allow other adults to provide permission—but only those with certain relationships to the child/teenager. One in ten (10%) libraries allow any adult (age 18 or older) to provide permission for a minor to receive a library card.
- 16% of libraries issue youth cards with some form of limitation on access, either by limiting the types of items that youth card is able to check out, or limiting the number of items that can be checked out as compared to adult cards.

POLICY GUIDANCE

The draft policy framework published in Summer 2025 (bklynlib.org/library-study) contains a comprehensive set of recommendations for barrier-free, equitable cardholder signup across a variety of patron scenarios and situations.

Key Recommendations

- Anyone living in the library's service area should be eligible to receive a free full-service library card, regardless of housing situation, documentation status, age, or ability.
- The signup/renewal process should not be a barrier to accessing library services. The process should be as welcoming as possible, particularly for children and families, those living in non-traditional housing situations; and those with limited literacy, low digital literacy, difficulty accessing the library in-person, or who may speak a language other than English.
- Libraries should only collect the minimum amount of information from patrons as needed for justifiable business reasons. Examples may include first and last name, date of birth, address, contact preference and contact method. Libraries should only collect gender and other demographic information if absolutely necessary for other reporting requirements.
- Libraries should carefully consider the function of a parent/guardian signature on youth library card applications. This function should be clearly stated during the registration process. An official workaround should be in place for granting youth access without a parent/guardian signature, if possible.
- Libraries should provide comprehensive information to the public, in a variety of formats and languages, detailing how to get a library card and how to access library resources and services.
- Circulation policies and procedures should be internally documented, regularly reviewed and updated, and frequently communicated with staff. Libraries should have a process, whether formal or informal, for public-facing staff to share concerns or suggestions about improving the process for cardholder signup and to access resources and services.

There are a handful of key policy areas which provide opportunities for public libraries to potentially create a more welcoming and inclusive experience for potential cardholders:

- **Eligibility Requirements:** who is “eligible” to get a card in the library’s service area (full-time residents vs. temporary residents, students, workers, etc.) and how is that eligibility determined during cardholder signup? How does the library welcome those without traditional ID, and/or in a variety of living situations, like those in transitional, rental, mobile, or rural housing?
- **Patron Data Collection and Retention:** how does the library accommodate those who use a different name from that issued on legal documentation, such as transgender patrons, those who have a preferred name or nickname, or those who follow cultural naming practices that deviate from the American norm? Has the library considered in what cases an email address and/or phone number should be required for library card signup, and why? How frequently do libraries perform maintenance work (cleanup and deletions) in patron data records?
- **Digital Access:** does the library provide an alternative signup option for those who cannot or do not want to physically visit the library to receive or renew their library card? Does the library restrict digital access (extending to digital collections as well as computer use) for patrons with fines & fees on their accounts?
- **Youth Access:** what are the terms for youth under the age of 18 to get a library card? Why has the library set the terms in this way? What options does the library have to be flexible for what information is required at signup (ID and address verification) and lost materials on minor accounts? Why has the library chosen to limit the terms of access on youth accounts (either number of items or types of items as compared to adult cards)?
- **Information, Outreach and Training:** does the library provide information about cardholder signup and terms in a variety of formats (website vs. printed material)? How regularly are library policies and procedures reviewed with staff to ensure compliance and consistency? Does the library regularly provide staff training (extending to administrators and board trustees) in the areas of Intellectual Freedom, Privacy, and the value of the Public Good? Do staff have a process they can follow to submit recommendations for changes to the process for cardholder signup?

Further considerations include those who speak a language other than English, other required information collected during signup (driver’s license number, community references, gender, email address), and how the library proactively shares the process for card signup and the range of resources available with potential patrons.

FURTHER RESEARCH

In addition to the resources provided by Brooklyn Public Library as a result of this research, professional organizations like the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), PLA, ULC, ARSL, and State Library Agencies may wish to do further analysis and reporting on the range and justification of cardholder signup policies.

More research will be needed to understand the social justice implications of overly restrictive library card signup policies and avail risk-adverse decision-makers of their hesitation to open up access even at the real or perceived risk of strained budgets or materials loss. The overall goal with this work is to provide the incentive and tools for public library staff, leaders, boards, and community stakeholders to have informed and productive conversations about cardholder

access policies that reflect the common good and better align with the library profession's stated values.

About the author

Amy Mikel is the Senior Director of Customer Experience at Brooklyn Public Library, responsible for implementing exceptional customer access strategies -- especially pertaining to reference, circulation and collections -- across 62 branch locations. She leads all areas of collection management, executing a vision for acquisition, collections movement, and patron discovery and engagement.