

A Review of Research on Public Library Services for the Elderly in China: Postprint

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Date: 2024-04-03T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To implement the national strategy of actively addressing population aging and meet the requirements of relevant national policies and regulations, as well as to fulfill the mission of public libraries, public libraries should further investigate how to better serve the elderly.

[Method/Process] This article conducts a literature review of research on public library services for the elderly. Commonly employed research methods in this field include questionnaire surveys, case analysis, and others. Research topics encompass studies on the elderly population, elderly service programs, elderly service systems, and elderly service facilities and equipment.

[Results/Conclusion] Existing research exhibits deficiencies in research standardization, requires enhanced scientific rigor in data collection methods, and lacks sufficient research depth. Future recommendations include further improving research standardization, strengthening the scientific nature of data collection methods, subdividing studies on the elderly population, exploring service model innovation, conducting effectiveness evaluations of elderly services, formulating service standards for the elderly, and investigating information resource development oriented toward the elderly, among other aspects.

Full Text

A Review of Research on Public Library Services for the Elderly in China

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[Purpose/Significance] To implement the national strategy and relevant policies and regulations for actively responding to population aging, and to fulfill the mission of public libraries, public libraries should further study how to better

serve the elderly. **[Method/Process]** This paper conducts a literature review of research on public library services for the elderly. Common research methods in this field include questionnaire surveys and case analysis. Research topics include studies of elderly groups, service projects, service systems, and service facilities/equipment for the elderly. Among them, research on service projects encompasses theme space and branch library construction, outreach services, health information services, reference services, user education and training, digital services, information literacy services, and volunteer and intergenerational service programs. **[Results/Conclusions]** Existing research suffers from insufficient standardization, the need for more scientific data collection methods, and lack of depth. Future research should improve standardization, enhance the scientific rigor of data collection, segment studies of elderly groups, explore service model innovation, conduct service effectiveness evaluations, develop service standards, and study information resource construction oriented toward the elderly.

Keywords: public library; the elderly; library service; health informatics; information behavior research

1 Introduction

According to National Bureau of Statistics data, at the end of 2022, the proportion of China's population aged 60 and above reached 19.8%, while those aged 65 and above reached 14.9% [2]. China has been an aging society since 2000, characterized by a large elderly population and rapid aging speed [3], with deepening aging degree and increasing pressure on social security and public services [1]. During the "14th Five-Year Plan" period, China's aging degree will progress from mild to moderate, population structural contradictions centered on population aging are becoming increasingly prominent, and the demand structure of the elderly is shifting from survival-oriented to development-oriented [3].

To implement the national strategy of actively responding to population aging and fulfill the requirements of relevant national policies and regulations, public libraries should further research how to better serve the elderly and carry out their mission. The State Council issued the *National Plan for the Development of Undertakings for the Aged and the Elderly Care Service System*, proposing to enrich elderly cultural and recreational life and expand the supply of cultural services for the elderly [3]. The *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China* requires government-established public libraries to consider the characteristics of elderly groups and actively create conditions to provide literature, services, and accessible facilities suitable for their needs [6]. In 2020, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Notice on the Implementation Plan for Effectively Solving the Difficulties of the Elderly in Using Smart Technology*, requiring improved age-friendly services in cultural venues and enriched intelligent channels for elderly participation in cultural activities [4]. The *Outline*

of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives Through 2035 also emphasizes implementing the national strategy of actively responding to population aging.

To understand the current status of research on public library services for the elderly in China, the author conducted a thematic search in CNKI's China Academic Journals Network Publishing Database using terms such as "elderly," "aged," "older adults," "public library," and "library service," limiting the search to CSSCI core journals. The search was conducted on October 9, 2022, covering literature published up to that date. After screening titles and abstracts and removing duplicate and irrelevant documents, 99 articles were obtained as the research sample. This paper aims to review the academic achievements in this field, summarize the current research status, identify shortcomings, and provide references for further research.

2 Analysis of Research Themes

Through intensive reading of the selected literature, the research themes on public library services for the elderly in China can be categorized into four areas: study of elderly groups, service projects, service systems, and service facilities/equipment.

2.1 Study of Elderly Groups

Understanding users is the foundation for service delivery. Only by fully understanding user characteristics and information needs can libraries more accurately provide required services. Some scholars have used questionnaire surveys to investigate the basic conditions, needs, and other aspects of the elderly, finding that elderly people's awareness, utilization rate, and frequency of public library use are relatively low. They suggest that public libraries should facilitate convenient access for elderly readers and provide diversified, targeted services [9-12].

Other scholars have used questionnaires and observation methods to analyze how demographic and lifestyle characteristics such as gender, age, and reading interests affect elderly people's use of digital services, finding that information skills have a relatively large impact. They propose strengthening publicity to raise elderly people's awareness of digital reading, eliminating artificial barriers to digital reading, and emphasizing network information literacy education for the elderly [13-16]. Some studies have focused specifically on the digital reading behavior of elderly reader groups, while others have further segmented subgroups such as empty-nest elderly for research. For instance, Sun et al. conducted a survey of 32 empty-nest elderly households in Runzhou District, Zhenjiang City, from perspectives of age and economic status, proposing community information services targeted at empty-nest elderly [18]. Li Chao verified causal relationships between variables in a hypothetical model through multiple path analysis, finding that elderly people's information anxiety is the most serious

issue, and recommended that libraries formulate service plans for the elderly, provide information education and services, extend services to aging communities, and reduce elderly people's information anxiety [17].

2.2 Research on Service Projects for the Elderly

Service projects for the elderly in public libraries include theme space and branch library construction, outreach services, health information services, reference services, information literacy services, and volunteer and intergenerational service projects.

Theme Spaces and Branch Libraries: Zhu Sanyun pointed out that public libraries could establish elderly reading rooms, preferably located on the ground floor or first floor of buildings with accessible passages [19]. Wu Jiaopeng introduced the background, service measures, and effects of establishing an independent branch library for the elderly at Wenzhou Library [20]. Chen Tongfang analyzed the achievements and existing shortcomings of Wenzhou Library's elderly branch and proposed suggestions for sustainable development [21]. Chen Qiuyan suggested establishing reading rooms in places where elderly people gather, such as senior activity centers and parks, and providing book delivery services to extend library service positions and facilitate elderly people's access to library services [22].

Health Information Services: Tan Dajun surveyed and analyzed the current status of health information services for seniors at 14 U.S. public libraries, noting that these services follow standardized procedures, segment elderly user groups, and focus on relatively concentrated themes, with the main goal of improving users' health literacy, especially e-health literacy [24]. Dai Yanqing pointed out that community libraries could provide health information services for the elderly through health lectures, computer training, or proxy search services [25]. Xiong Huan et al. analyzed survey results of health information services for the elderly in Chinese public libraries and suggested optimizing services by clarifying service subjects, positioning service objects, exploring service methods, and timely evaluating service effects [26].

Reference Services: Public libraries should establish dedicated telephone consultation services for elderly or physically weak readers and provide tracking consultation services for elderly readers engaged in research projects, delivering relevant literature or historical materials according to the needs of experts and professors [27-28].

User Education and Training: Xiao Xue et al. noted that public libraries could conduct training for the elderly on library utilization methods, reference tools, and equipment use [9]. Zhang Yali et al. suggested that community libraries could better provide electronic information technology education for elderly groups by publicizing network resources through multiple channels, improving librarians' electronic information service capabilities, perfecting hardware and network environments, and strengthening cooperation with various

elderly organizations [29].

Digital Services: Zhu Sanyun pointed out that libraries should accelerate computer network construction and carefully design webpages favored by elderly readers [19]. Li Yujia proposed that smart reading for elderly readers should be achieved through comprehensive construction of smart reading rooms, integrated service models suitable for elderly readers, and construction of mobile smart reading platforms [30]. Hou Guanhua et al. used experimental methods to study how digital library navigation structure affects elderly readers' emotional experience, usability, and task performance [31].

Information Literacy Services: Zhu Jieying proposed improving middle-aged and elderly readers' reading ability and information literacy by fully leveraging libraries' educational and communication functions, cultivating good reading habits, stimulating reading interest, and providing effective information services [32]. Yang Minwen et al. introduced information literacy education experiences for elderly readers in public libraries in the U.S. and Japan [33].

Volunteer and Intergenerational Service Projects: Bai Xingyong introduced the participation of American elderly volunteers in libraries, assisting with shelving and homework guidance [34]. Miao Meijuan used email, interviews, and field research to study the development status and characteristics of intergenerational programs in U.S. public libraries [35-38]. Niu Yong et al. analyzed the current status of international ICT intergenerational learning practices for the elderly and proposed strategies for libraries to carry out intergenerational learning services [39]. Tan Bin et al. proposed basic paths for libraries to conduct intergenerational reading promotion [40]. Zeng Yanlin and Xu Lili studied the social support system for ICT intergenerational learning and proposed that public libraries should actively participate in co-constructing this system [41].

2.3 Research on Service Systems for the Elderly

Service systems related to public library services for the elderly can provide direction and practical norms. At the international level and in some foreign countries, relatively complete institutional designs such as guidelines for library services for the elderly already exist. Li Nong introduced service guidelines for elderly readers formulated by the UK's Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the American Library Association (ALA), discussing conceptual changes in library services for elderly readers in both countries [42]. Xiao Xue qualitatively studied library association guidelines for elderly services in the U.S., UK, and Australia, summarizing their content framework covering eight aspects: guideline objectives, understanding aging and the elderly, library service principles for the elderly, understanding elderly needs, library planning and budgeting, staff and services, facilities and equipment, and cooperation and publicity. She proposed that China should formulate its own library service guidelines for the elderly as soon as possible [43]. Xiao Xue also selected 75 Chinese institutional documents related to public library services

for the elderly, using content analysis to examine their forms, normative objects, distribution differences, and service positioning, principles, and methods reflected in the texts, proposing improvement ideas [44]. The national cultural industry standard *Guidelines for Public Library Services for the Elderly* is currently being developed, led by the Capital Library [45].

2.4 Research on Facilities and Equipment for Elderly Services

Wang Yu used case analysis to study services for elderly readers at public libraries in New South Wales, Australia, introducing equipment such as audio output devices and document reading software, and noting that library design considerations from shelving to lighting fully accommodate elderly users, providing comfortable and safe environments. She suggested that China should strengthen infrastructure construction for elderly services in public libraries [46]. Chen Tongfang pointed out that in public libraries without elevators, elderly reading rooms should be arranged on lower floors, stairs and other facilities should be barrier-free, signage should be conspicuous and easy to identify, shelves should not be too high, large-print reading equipment should be configured, and reading tables and chairs should allow elderly readers to rest while reading, providing comfortable reading environments from detailed perspectives [21].

3 Research Gaps and Future Prospects

3.1 Improving Research Standardization and Enhancing Data Collection Scientificity

Questionnaire surveys and case analysis are commonly used methods in research on public library services for the elderly in China. However, existing research suffers from insufficient standardization and needs to strengthen the scientific rigor of data collection methods. Regarding sampling methods in questionnaire surveys, many studies are limited to the author's local community or library, using convenience sampling, resulting in reported library utilization rates far higher than those in more methodologically rigorous studies. Interview methods are mostly used as supplementary data collection, lacking in-depth interviews that could help understand elderly people's habits, culture, and needs more deeply and accurately. In data analysis, case analysis is frequently used but often remains at a basic level of introduction, with insufficient standardization and depth of analysis, leading to relatively vague conclusions sometimes disconnected from case analysis. Methods such as grounded theory and content analysis for deep textual analysis are rarely used in this field.

Future research should further enhance data collection methods and improve research standardization by: paying attention to the rationality of sampling methods; ensuring compatibility between research methods and research questions; using in-depth interviews and other research methods; increasing depth in case analysis; and comprehensively applying multiple research methods to

obtain more effective and credible conclusions.

3.2 Aligning with National Strategy and Social Development to Deepen Research Themes

China's population aging is accelerating, with the degree of aging progressing from mild to moderate. Population structural contradictions centered on aging are increasingly prominent, and elderly demand structures are shifting from survival-type to development-type [3]. The national strategy of actively responding to population aging is being deeply implemented. Public libraries should align with China's population development trends and national strategies to further deepen research on elderly services.

Segmenting Elderly Group Studies to Match Service Supply and Demand: Existing research has segmented subgroups such as empty-nest elderly, but further segmentation would help achieve effective matching between service supply and user demand. With China's accelerated urbanization, the number of elderly migrants accompanying their children is increasing annually. Research on their characteristics and information needs is needed.

Studying Service Model Innovation: Existing research mostly introduces service projects at home and abroad, with recommendations often remaining at the level of what services Chinese public libraries should provide, lacking practical operational guidance. Future research should explore service model innovation in areas such as service promotion, helping elderly with digital technology, outreach services, intergenerational services, and social integration. For example, how to publicize services in ways elderly can accept and understand; how to effectively conduct digital training for elderly in the context of Digital China construction; how to embed library services in communities; and how to develop Chinese solutions for intergenerational services based on China's aging conditions and elderly characteristics.

Conducting Service Effectiveness Evaluations: Most existing research remains at the stage of introducing service projects, lacking evaluation of service effectiveness. Future research should study how to effectively evaluate service outcomes.

Developing Service Standards: While international and some national guidelines exist, China has not yet issued specialized service standards for public library elderly services. Developing standards can provide guidelines for elderly services and promote effective dissemination of service experience.

Studying Information Resource Construction for the Elderly: Information resources are the foundation of public library services, but few scholars have deeply studied information resource construction oriented toward elderly groups. The newly revised *Public Library Law* includes principles for literature collection that consider elderly characteristics. Future research should explore how to develop information resource construction adapted to elderly characteristics

from perspectives of collection, organization, and evaluation.

4 Conclusion

This study reviews academic achievements in public library services for the elderly, examining data collection methods, data analysis methods, research topics, identifying existing research shortcomings, and proposing issues and directions for future research, providing references for further studies. However, due to the author's limited understanding, there may be shortcomings in the analysis of research methods and topics, with possible subjective influences. The academic and professional communities should continue in-depth research on elderly groups, service model innovation, service effectiveness evaluation, standard development, and information resource construction. Elderly services can help elderly migrants adapt to and integrate into urban life, promote elderly social participation, and provide elderly care information services. The field should contribute wisdom and strength to actively responding to population aging and improving service quality for the elderly.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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