Federal Depository Library Usage Statistics: Findings of a Survey

A Report of the Depository Library Council's
Statistics and Metrics Working Group

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Members of the Statistics & Metrics Working Group

Sarah Erekson, Chair
University of Florida
Depository Library Council

Gwen Sinclair,
University of Hawai'i at Manoa
Depository Library Council

Angela Bonnell
Illinois State University
Depository Library Council

Cynthia Etkin, DFO
Office of the Superintendent of Documents
Government Publishing Office

Susanne Caro
New Mexico State Library
Depository Library Council, Chair

Stephen Kharfen,
Metadata & Collection Services, LSCM
Government Publishing Office

Joshua Finnell
Colgate University
Depository Library Council

Ben Petersen, Chief
Projects & Systems, LSCM
Government Publishing Office

Stephani (Nia) Rodgers
Virginia Commonwealth University
Depository Library Council

Kate Pitcher, Chief,
Federal Depository Support Services, LSCM
Government Publishing Office

DFO: Designated Federal Officer
LSCM: Library Services and Content Management

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Introduction

The Superintendent of Documents convened the Statistics and Metrics Working Group (SMWG) in January 2024 to research and report on the state of usage statistics gathering in Federal depository libraries. Further, the SMWG is to recommend options for how the Government Publishing Office (GPO) can collect usage statistics for digital and tangible Government information products. To begin its work, a survey was sent to all depository library coordinators to determine a baseline of collection usage activities. This is a report of the survey findings and recommendations for the Depository Library Council's consideration.

Methodology

The SMWG conducted a survey of Federal depository libraries from August 8-September 16, 2024, to learn whether libraries collect usage data about their Federal depository collections. In addition, the survey asked about data collection by format, the methods used to collect data, and the barriers to data collection. The survey questions are listed in Appendix A. Aggregate responses are shown in Appendix B.

Survey Questions

The survey asked whether or not libraries collected usage statistics for depository collections and, if so, respondents were asked to indicate for which formats they collected statistics: Print, Maps, Microfiche, Tangible electronic (CD-ROMs, DVDs, floppy disks), and Digital/Online. The survey then asked respondents to indicate how they collected statistics for tangible and digital/online materials. Next, the survey asked respondents to describe systematic barriers to data collection. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether they could supply usage statistics to GPO if requested.

Response

There were 345 respondents out of 1,101 depository libraries, a response rate of 31%. Of the responding libraries 178, or 16% percent of depository libraries collect usage statistics for certain depository materials.

Formats for Which Data Were Collected

FORMAT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Print	159	89
Digital/Online	94	53
Tangible Electronic (CDs, DVDs)	90	51
Maps	80	45
Microfiche	67	38

Survey respondents were asked to select the formats for which they collect usage statistics. This table conveys the format breakdown of the 178 who indicated they collect

usage statistics. It is unknown if they don't count a particular format, or they don't have the format in their collection.

Methods Used to Collect Usage Data for Tangible Collections

There were 178 respondents who selected all methods they used to collect usage statistics. As the table on the right conveys, Circulation and Reshelving or In-library use counts were the most prevalent answers. The "Other" responses noted that they didn't

METHOD	NUMBER	PERCENT
Circulation statistics	151	85
Reshelving/In-library use	100	56
Interlibrary Loan requests	71	40
Reference/Research Assistance	50	28
Other	9	5

collect statistics for tangible materials because the collections were uncataloged, non-circulating, saw "little use," or they didn't have a tangible collection.

Methods Used to Collect Data for Digital/Online Materials

Federal depository libraries have more options for gathering usage data when providing access to digital/online Government information than with their tangible collections. Ninety-four (94) respondents said they collect data for digital/online materials. Survey respondents were asked to select all that applied.

METHOD	NUMBER	PERCENT
PURL referral reports (from GPO)	80	85
Finding aids/ library guides hits	52	55
Reference/Research Assistance	45	48
Separate, in-house digital collection usage tracker	24	26
Other	19	20

Some respondents who selected "other" noted they use COUNTER (an electronic database usage tracking standard) to track usage of other electronic resources and would use that standard if offered for digital/online depository materials. Others used their catalog or Library Management System, and others noted they did not know how to download PURL reports, or they were unaware that GPO's PURL usage reports were available.

Systematic Barriers Identified by Libraries

The survey asked respondents to identify their barriers to data gathering. They could choose from a list six and there was an opportunity for them to share other barriers by specifying them in an "Other" option. Barriers were reported by those who collect usage statistics and by those who do not. There were only sixty-five (65) libraries indicating that there were no systematic barriers to data collection. That means 82% of respondents

experienced systematic barriers of some kind. Libraries that indicated they collected usage statistics identified the following systematic barriers.

BARRIER	NUMBER	PERCENT
Time constraints	154	55
Difficult to extract data from systems	118	42
Training for personnel is needed	112	40
Collection is not cataloged	93	33
Lack of experience with data gathering	88	31
Other	59	21
PURL Usage Reports issues	43	15

Noted in the "other" category were staff turnover and organizational barriers, like the need to request reports from other departments. Libraries also mentioned interfiling FDLP materials in non-fiction meant they were hard to identify and track usage. The reverse situation was noted, where FDLP materials were treated differently than other collections – not circulating, having no barcodes, no systems for tracking re-shelving or in-house usage. Further, changes in procedures and personnel led to inconsistencies over time.

Location, lack of barcodes, and internal systems were noted as barriers that made it hard to collect data. Others noted lack of use as a justification for not collecting information. Others indicated they were all digital or were becoming all digital by withdrawing tangible collections. The least problematic of the barriers was GPO's PURL usage (aka referral) reports

Provide Usage Statistics to GPO

PROVIDE USAGE DATA	NUMBER	PERCENT
Yes	76	22
No	54	16
Maybe	215	62

All 345 respondents answered the question, "If GPO required usage statistics, would you be able to provide them?" A majority, 62%, "Maybe" was the majority response.

Discussion

As one respondent eloquently noted in their feedback to this survey, "Please remember, usage statistics are just that - measures of use. They are not capable of measuring the extent that information needs are being met effectively. Therefore, they are not a measure of collection value." With careful consideration of the distinction between *use* and *value*,

tracking the usage of government publications in depository libraries has been an ongoing topic of conversation in professional literature since the 1970s.[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

According to the [2019 Biennial Survey of Depository Libraries](#),[6] the tools and statistics used to track and evaluate depository services and usage remain inconsistent and not uniformly employed throughout the FDLP. Less than half of the 1,069 respondents to the 2019 survey collected statistics for depository content. Depository libraries that tracked usage used a combination of integrated library system (ILS) reports (432), finding aids/subject guides (306), reference interactions (286), and the FDLP PURL Usage Reporting Tool (221).

This Federal Depository Library Usage Statistics Survey underscores a continued lack of consistency and uniformity among depository libraries tracking usage of their collection and identifies several barriers, with only 178 (50%) of respondents collecting usage statistics for depository materials. While the majority of those respondents used a combination of their ILS reports (151) and reshelving (100) to track the tangible collection, far fewer tracked usage of their digital collections through PURL reports (80) or finding aids/subject guides (52).

However, the survey results revealed similar systematic barriers from both respondents that collect usage statistics and those that do not. From a personnel perspective, a lack of experience, training, and time were identified as significant systematic barriers to collecting usage statistics across all respondents. These barriers are reflected in the [2023 Biennial Survey of Depository Libraries](#) where several libraries indicated staffing changes had affected their depository operations in the past two years.

From an infrastructure perspective, uncataloged collections and difficulty extracting data from various systems (proprietary database, ILS, etc.) were identified as barriers to collecting usage statistics across all respondents. Though issues with PURL reports were

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[1] Weech, Terry. "The Use of Government Publications: A Selected Review of the Literature." *Government Publications Review* 5 (1978): 177–184.

[2] Cook, Kevin. "Gathering Useful Circulation Data in the Documents Department." *RQ* 25 (1985): 223–228.

[3] Caswell, Thomas. "Studies on Government Publications' Use, 1990–1996." *Government Information Quarterly* 14 (1997): 363–371.

[4] Brown, C. Knowing where they're going: statistics for online government document access through the OPAC. *Online Information Review*, (2004): *28*(6), 396–409.

[5] Das, T. Measuring scholarly use of government information: An altmetrics analysis of federal statistics. *Government Information Quarterly*, (2015): *32*(3).

[6] Federal Depository Library Program. 2021. *State of the Federal Depository Library Program 2018-2019. Executive Summary. State of the Federal Depository Library Program. Executive Summary.* Washington, D.C: Office of the Superintendent of Documents, Library Services & Content Management, U.S. Government Publishing Office.

identified as a less significant barrier from respondents, several comments specifically mentioned difficulty in configuring PURL usage reports with their existing ILS.

Though the overwhelming majority of respondents to this survey represent academic libraries (186), methods of and identification of systematic barriers to collecting usage statistics were consistent across institutional size (large, medium, small) and the National Collection Service Areas. Moreover, 215 of the 345 responded with "maybe," when asked if they could provide usage statistics if GPO required it. This response suggests that depository libraries are both willing and open to exploring new methods and means of collecting usage statistics for government publications in both tangible and digital formats with assistance from GPO.

Recommendations

As noted in the discussion portion of this report, respondents were generally willing to provide usage statistics to GPO if needed or required. However, assistance in gathering such statistics would be useful to respondents and encourage compliance with GPO requests. Toward that end, SMWG offers the following two recommendations for Council's consideration:

Recommendation 1

GPO should provide guidance and webinars on best practices in data collection and management. This would potentially be an effort spearheaded by a combination of DLC and GPO to build a community of data collection mentors possibly via the NCSAs Activities. This could include gathering practices into a LibGuide connecting librarians who already have robust practices with those that do not and creating community-driven webinars for best practices. GPO should also provide updated webinars and guidance on best practices in data collection and management on the topics of generating accurate PURL reports and creating reports in LibGuides.

Recommendation 2

GPO should initiate an effort to collect stories of collections and their usage. These stories tell more of the importance of the FDLP in everyday lives of citizens than straight forward numbers and statistics. "Stories" could include anecdotes, photos, and oral histories.

This committee stands ready to assist in fleshing out and creating materials that would help libraries provide statistics for both internal and external use.

Next Steps/Future Plans

This group would like to explore the possibilities of gathering samples of usage data from varied institutions to build confidence in statistical reports. The aim would be to generate consistent and reliable statistics for GPO from the FDLP community. Building from a scaffold of consistent definitions and methods, statistics could be produced at a variety of levels (high gatherers, medium, and simple stats).

Depending on how government information usage data is collected, it may be leveraged for a variety of purposes such as showing the value of the National Collection of U.S. Government Public Information and its supporting programs. The data can also inform prioritization for collection management services such as preservation and digitization.

Additionally, this group would like to explore possibilities for gathering high impact qualitative data on the usage of government information products. Qualitative data can be combined with quantitative data to provide context and compelling and persuasive use cases showing the impact of having government information products readily available to achieve an *America Informed.*

Appendix A
Federal Depository Library Usage Statistics Survey

The Depository Library Council's Statistics and Metrics Working Group is conducting this survey of depository library coordinators to learn about capturing collection usage data. There is a need to know if libraries are capturing usage data, and if they are, by what means. Only the responses of the seven survey questions will be reported and made accessible via FDLP.gov.

You are being asked to include your name and email address so we can contact you if we need clarification or have a follow-up question to learn more. Your depository library number will be used to mashup information like library size, library type, and National Collection Service Area from the Federal Depository Library Directory with your survey responses.

NAME

EMAIL ADDRESS

DEPOSITORY LIBRARY NUMBER

I understand that only the Federal depository library collections (digital and tangible) are to be considered when answering the survey questions. YES / NO

1. Do you collect usage statistics for FDLP depository collections in any format?
   ☐ No, my library does not collect usage data.
   ☐ Yes, my library collects usage data.

2. For which formats do you collect usage statistics? Select all that apply.
   ☐ Print
   ☐ Maps
   ☐ Microfiche
   ☐ Tangible electronic (CD-ROM, DVD, floppy disks)
   ☐ Digital/Online

3. How do you measure the use of your tangible depository collection? Select all that apply.
   ☐ Circulation statistics
   ☐ Interlibrary Loan requests
   ☐ Reference/Research Assistance counts
   ☐ Reshelving/In-library use counts

☐ Other: _____

☐ Do not have a tangible collection

4. How do you measure the use of digital materials (not including paid databases?). Select all that apply.

☐ Finding aids/ library guides hits

☐ PURLs referrals (report from GPO)

☐ Reference/Research Assistance

☐ Separate, in-house digital collection usage tracker

☐ Other, please specify: _____

5. What systematic barriers have you experienced with collecting usage statistics? Select all that apply.

☐ Collection is not cataloged

☐ Difficult to extract data from systems

☐ Lack of experience with data gathering

☐ PURL Usage Reports issues

☐ Time constraints

☐ Training for personnel is needed

☐ Other, please specify: _____

☐ No systematic barriers

6. If GPO required usage statistics, would you be able to provide them?

☐ Yes

☐ Maybe

☐ No

7. Please use this free text box to share any other information about Government publications statistics and usage at your library.

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Appendix B
FDL Usage Statistics Survey: Aggregate Responses

Review by Library Size [those indicating they do not collect usage statistics]

Q1. Do you collect usage statistics?

a.	Large No	41	Large Yes	90
b.	Medium No	69	Medium Yes	58
c.	Small No	<u>57</u>	Small Yes	<u>30</u>
	Total	*167*	*Total*	*178*

Q5. What systematic barriers experienced with collecting usage statistics?: Difficult to extract data
- a. Large No   19 (46%)
- b. Medium No   30 (43%)
- c. Small No   26 (46%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Training
- a. Large No   19 (46%)
- b. Medium No   32 (46%)
- c. Small No   18 (32%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Time constraints
- a. Large No   24 (59%)
- b. Medium No   38 (55%)
- c. Small No   22 (39%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: PURL Usage Reports issues
- a. Large No   5 (12%)
- b. Medium No   9 (13%)
- c. Small No   3 (5%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: No systematic barriers
- a. Large No   5 (12%)
- b. Medium No   12 (17%)
- c. Small No   8 (14%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Collection is not cataloged
- a. Large No   14 (34%)
- b. Medium No   12 (17%)
- c. Small No   7 (14%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Lack of experience with data gathering
- a. Large No   18 (44%)
- b. Medium No   19 (27%)
- c. Small No   13 (23%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Other
    a.   Large No   10 (24%)
    b.   Medium No   13 (19%)
    c.   Small No   13 (23%)

Q5. What systematic barriers with collecting usage statistics?: Other (Coded Comments)
    a.   Large No   10 (24%) with coded comments

5	Collection does not circulate
2	Collection/statistics shared with others and difficult to gather
2	Collection not fully cataloged
2	No internal need
1	Software problems
1	Lack staff
1	Not tracking in-library use

    b.   Medium No   13 (19%) with coded comments

5	Lack staff
2	Collection not fully cataloged
2	No internal need
2	Collection integrated with other collections
1	Not sure how to determine from system
1	Librarian left with information
1	Recent migration
1	Lack time

    c.   Small No   13 (23%) with coded comments

3	ILS does not record usage
2	Collection does not circulate
2	Too little use to justify data collection
1	Collection not fully cataloged
1	Not tracking in-library use
1	Collection integrated with other collections
1	Collection not available to public
1	Patrons reshelve
1	Current inventory project and can't track
1	Withdrawing tangible collection
1	Left blank

    d. Total Coded Comments from all Library Sizes

7	Collection does not circulate
6	Lack staff
5	Collection not fully cataloged
4	No internal need
3	Collection integrated with other collections
3	ILS does not record usage
2	Collection/statistics shared with others and difficult to gather
2	Not tracking in-library use
2	Too little use to justify data collection

1 Not sure how to determine from system
          1 Librarian left with information
          1 Recent ILS migration
          1 Lack time
          1 Collection not available to public
          1 Patrons reshelve
          1 Current inventory project and can't track
          1 Withdrawing tangible collection
          1 Left blank

Q6. If required, can you provide GPO usage statistics?
From those who do not now collect usage statistics:

Yes can provide
 a. Large   4 (10%)
 b. Medium   4 (6%)
 c. Small   4 (7%)

Maybe can provide
 d. Large   22 (54%)
 e. Medium   46 (67%)
 f. Small   42 (74%)

No cannot provide
 g. Large   16 (40%)
 h. Medium   17 (25%)
 i. Small   11 (19%)

Q7. Free text box for any other information about Government publications statistics and usage at your library.
A few notes that stood out to me:
Large
- "…By just counting depository numbers I would be giving a false picture of our communities overall use of government information."

- "Data extraction for cataloged material would have to be done by our Metadata Services team, which is severely understaffed. Gathering/reporting data would probably be possible, but I expect it would be a very low priority given other library needs. If GPO is interested in LibGuides usage data for federal information, I could easily provide that - though there is likely federal material on my guides that may not fall formally into the 'FDLP collection'.''

Medium
- "For digital items, GPO hosts the collections and publications of issue. GPO can do the data collection itself. We can provide local user IP ranges to help isolate direct depository access, if necessary, but there is no reason to offload the work on depository library personnel. For print materials, all you'll be able to get are circulation stats, which tell you pretty much nothing for documents, as most of them either don't circulate or are commonly used in house. Any attempts to collect data at a more discrete level will suffer dramatically from differences in reporting methods, staff availability, etc. This is a

ridiculous idea. If we were forced to dedicate staff time to these activities, we would leave the FDLP."

- "I like the PURL usage report, but I had to be told about it in a meeting. I wish there was a better training offered for FDLP managers that gave us a rundown of what to do and what we are looking at. Like one- or two-day basic overview "now you are gov docs librarian" kind of thing"

- "Our major use of tangible government publications is in-house use. We do capture in-house use, but it is mixed in with other types of publications. I am concerned that IP obfuscation that may be incorporated into popular browsers may make it impossible to track the use of digital items."

- "Right now, we collect usage data on our paid subscriptions only. Major barrier appears to be time constraints."

- "The University has no money, and the library staff has been cut to the bone. Plus, they put a lot more requirements on us, like teaching many more classes, teaching legal writing, publishing 40-page law review articles, etc. Personally, I would have to try and figure out how to collect stats. We share the catalog with main library, so maybe the catalogers over there know how. We do not order a lot in print anymore."

- "This is a fairly complex question. We do have some statistics. We use them year to year to see if changes need to be made. For example, perhaps a LibGuide needs to be changed. Some detailed thought should be given to why these statistics are needed? It would be unfortunate to collect statistics they may not reflect the importance of the materials. As an academic law library, we cannot overstate the importance of primary federal legal materials."

Small
- "We would be very interested in having access to statistics on the usage of our FDLP PURLs, but don't have the training/technical means. If gpo.gov could assist us, we would be happy to keep and report statistics."