

An examination of spatial inequalities in the provision of Little Free Libraries (LFLs) in Spokane, Washington

Frank Houghton

Technological University of the Shannon, Ireland

April Gunderson

Eastern Washington University, WA, USA

Dilli Gautam

Eastern Washington University, WA, USA

ABSTRACT: The Little Free Library (LFL) organisation has gained significant positive media attention in the decade following its establishment. However, among a host of other concerns, some critics have noted the inequitable distribution in the provision of LFLs. This research explores the issue of inequitable provision of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in Spokane, Washington. The results show a geographical pattern of higher provision in areas with populations that are white, affluent, and highly educated. These findings support an increasing body of evidence that suggests that LFLs both reflect and reinforce rather than challenge access to reading materials.

Keywords: Little Free Libraries, access, spatial provision, inequity



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Introduction

Background

The history of the Little Free Library (LFL) organisation is particularly engaging. Its humble beginning was the 2009 creation of a single model of a traditional one-room schoolhouse by Todd Bol of Hudson, Wisconsin. Placed on a post in his front yard, he filled it with books for passers-by to take, borrow, or exchange. Bol then gave away more such LFLs to neighbours and friends. Following discussions with Outreach Program Manager Rick Brooks of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the potential of this initiative as a wider social enterprise was developed. Growing media attention meant that by the end of 2011, there were almost 400 LFLs in existence. The number increased more than ten-fold to over 4,000 by the end of 2012. The LFL organisation also became a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organisation in 2012, and numbers have continued to increase dramatically, both in the United States and further afield (Kirch, 2019). By the end of 2020, there were over 100,000 registered LFLs spread across more than 100 countries. The actual number of such structures is undoubtedly far higher, given that people and organisations have copied Bol's initiative, establishing their own non-affiliated versions (e.g. Free Wee Library, 2021). In the context of this examination, these will be referred to as non-affiliated clones. Figure 1 details examples of both an LFL and a non-affiliated clone.

The mission of the LFL organisation is:

to be a catalyst for building community, inspiring readers, and expanding book access for all through a global network of volunteer-led Little Free Libraries....

Our vision is a Little Free Library in every community and a book for every reader. We believe all people are empowered when the opportunity to discover a personally relevant book to read is not limited by time, space, or privilege (Little Free Library, 2021).

The LFL organisation aims to achieve its mission through having book-sharing boxes that “are open seven days a week, 24 hours a day and are freely accessible to all, removing barriers to book access” (Little Free Library, 2021).

Media coverage of the growth in the LFL organisation has been extensive (Webster et al., 2015), and it has garnered considerable accolades:

Little Free Library was honored to receive the 2020 World Literacy Award from the World Literacy Foundation... Little Free Library is a recipient of the Library of Congress Literacy Award, the National Book Foundation's Innovations in Reading Prize, Library Journal's Movers and Shakers Award, the Women's National Book Association's Second Century Prize, and the Force for Positive Change Award (Little Free Library, 2021).

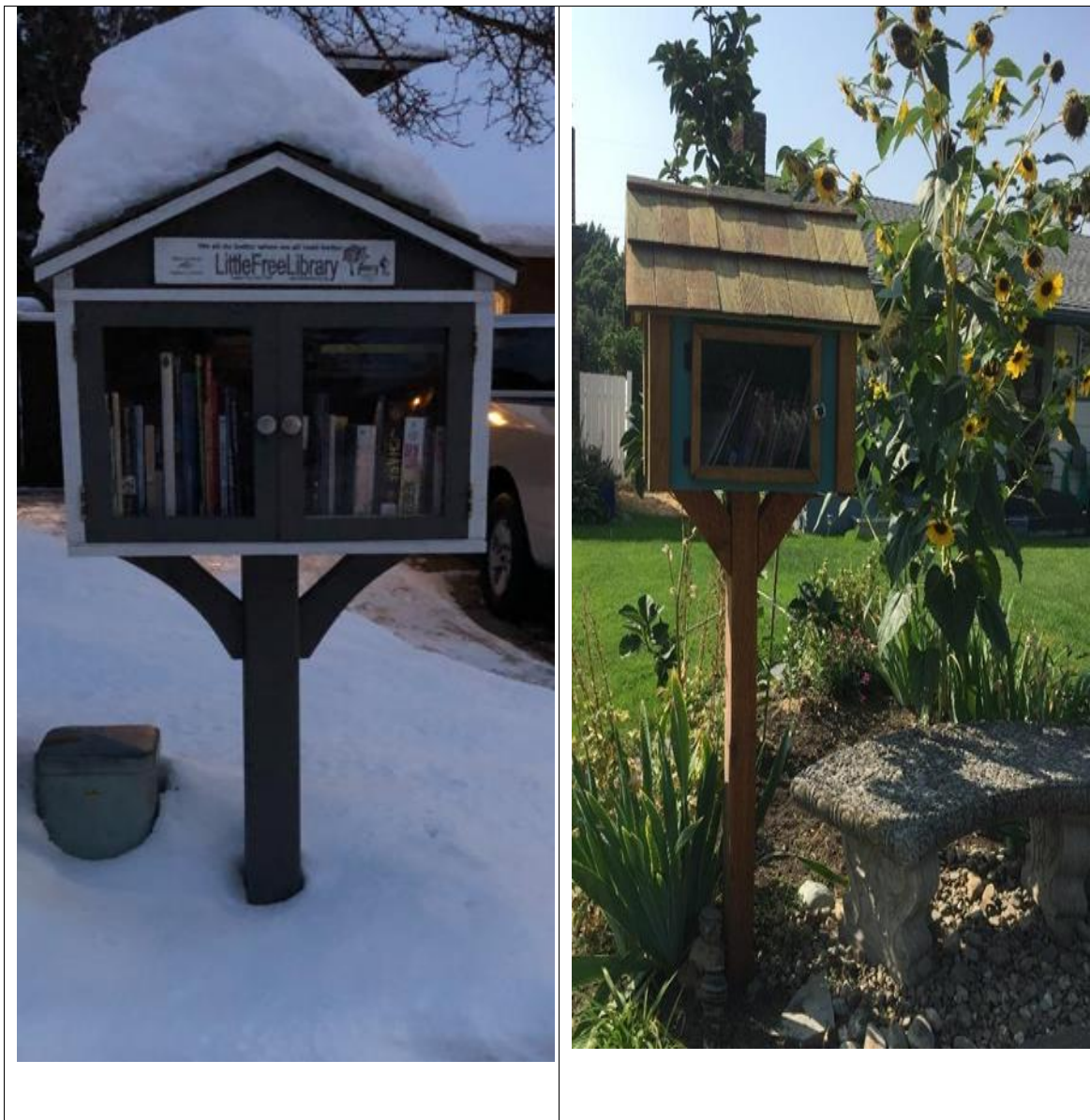
The media and popular reception to the LFL organisation has been so positive that it is possible to purchase both fan fiction on the topic (Aldrich, 2015; Paul 2019; Stevenson, 2019) and books for sale on how to construct one's own LFL (Schmidt, 2019). The coverage of LFLs to date has been largely uncritical (Schmidt & Hale,

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2017), unbalanced, and therefore somewhat misleading. This research seeks in part to explore if such positivity is appropriate. The following section examines some of the positive appraisals of the role and impact of LFLs. This section will be followed by an examination of the minority of papers that have outlined a range of more critical approaches to LFLs that apply much needed balance to any assessment of their role and potential. It should be noted that the vast majority of papers critical of LFLs are limited to the academic literature.

Figure 1

Examples of LFLs and their Non-Affiliated Clones in Spokane, Washington



Source: April Gunderson, Author

LFLs: Media Darlings

Webster et al. (2015) have examined the media framing of articles about LFL over a *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.25-40

two-year period. Their analysis recognized that LFLs are routinely identified as acting as both community catalysts and as agents of literacy promotion. Webster et al. (2015) also identified a small proportion of articles discussing LFLs in a positive light from a sustainability perspective, given the emphasis on sharing and re-using books. These authors also found articles that outlined how for some, an LFL was part of a broader resistance to digital and online technologies. Their examination also involved a series of interviews with stewards of LFLs. Their research also noted the potential of LFLs to both activate public spaces and promote physical activity as people walk or cycle to their neighbourhood LFLs.

Commentators have also suggested that LFLs may appeal to individuals who feel as though they do not fit in or are not wanted in public libraries (ALA 2005; Gehner & Freeman 2005; Snow, 2015). LFLs have also been suggested as a low cost and relatively easy 'fix' to the problem of "book deserts," which are areas poorly served by the public library system (Olson Beal & Burrow, 2017; Snow, 2015). LFLs have also been commended for their low-tech approach and appeal (Aldrich, 2014). The popularity of LFLs may have been further developed through similarities with other initiatives such as pop-up guerrilla libraries (Davis et al., 2015; Mattern, 2012). The positive reception LFLs have received may also result from their obvious link to urban community activism (Sarmiento et al., 2017).

An interesting geospatial approach has also explored reading proficiency data in the United States alongside the locations of facilities offering public access to reading materials, including LFLs. It has been suggested that such approaches facilitate a strategic response to literacy issues (Rebori & Burge, 2017). However, depending on small-scale voluntary initiatives to tackle issues as important as literacy is both inappropriate and probably naïve.

Having explored the very positive reviews of LFLs, it is important to look at LFLs through a more critical lens.

LFLs: Critical Examinations

Although almost all appraisals of LFLs have been exceedingly positive, a minority of academic articles have challenged this dominant view. Schmidt and Hale (2017, p. 18) discuss LFLs as an example of the "corporatization of a grassroots phenomenon" and as being part of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). These authors also criticise the presumption that LFLs promote community cohesion, instead suggesting that LFL stewards prefer a distance between them and those using their LFL, and noting the "hyper-individualism" that is integral to LFLs (Schmidt & Hale, 2017, p. 25). Another major concern that has been routinely mentioned in relation to LFLs is the fear that they will be seen as a low-cost replacement for public libraries (Kozak, 2017; Mattern, 2012; Schmidt & Hale, 2017). Houghton et al. (2021) have examined the issue of access to LFLs from a pragmatic perspective, exploring the impact of weather, lighting, air quality, sidewalks, height and disability access, and further facets of diversity. They suggest that claims of 24/7 universal access made by the LFL organisation are unfounded and should be rigorously interrogated.

Some authors have critiqued the lexicon used around LFLs (Kozak, 2017), suggesting that a random collection of books is not a library, as well as librarianship being more than a part-time hobby (Mattern, 2012). Others have critiqued the lack of diversity in the characters portrayed in many LFLs (Snow, 2015), while other work has highlighted the tendency of LFL stewards to engage in censorship (Kozak, 2019).

Opposition to LFLs has also been noted from civic authorities (Kozak, 2017; Sarmiento et al., 2017). A variety of issues of concern have been noted, ranging from a lack of permits, to obstructions to rights of way, to roadside danger, to concerns over snow ploughing and snow storage in winter (Kozak, 2017).

An ongoing issue in relation to LFLs is concern over their spatial distribution, with some examinations revealing a markedly inequitable distribution. Anecdotal (Snow, 2015) and more formal examinations of access to LFLs (Schmidt & Hale, 2017; Samiento et al., 2017; Wilson, 2020) have reported an inequitable spatial distribution that favours more affluent, less diverse areas with a more highly educated populace. For example, Samiento et al. (2017) explored the spatial distribution of LFLs in both Santa Ana, California and Madison, Wisconsin. These authors identified more LFLs in economically advantaged areas and areas with fewer children. Schmidt and Hale's (2017) examination of LFL locations in the Canadian cities of Toronto and Calgary also noted their predominance in areas that were less racially diverse and had both higher incomes and higher levels of educational attainment. A similar analysis of LFLs in the two contrasting cities of Portland, Oregon and Detroit, Michigan found that LFLs were disproportionately concentrated in white, affluent neighbourhoods (Wilson, 2020). Bondi (2019) has recommended that further research on their distribution may be insightful.

The Study

This study sought to explore the distribution of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in Spokane, Washington. Spokane is a city with a population of approximately 220,000 people located on the eastern side of Washington State. It is roughly 20 miles from the border with Idaho, about 100 miles south of the Canadian border, and 120 miles north of the Oregon state line. The city is the second largest in Washington State, and it is also the largest city between Seattle, Washington and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Spokane has been described as a “mostly white city” (Criscione, 2017), with United States Census Bureau (2021) statistics for 2021 indicating that 83.7% of the population are white. Although Spokane elected its first black mayor, James E. Chase, in 1981 (Mack, 2014), racism is still prevalent there, albeit being described as “subtle” (Deshais, 2019). As late as 1970, Spokane County was still 98% white, and desegregation in the area has been described as a “slow process” (University of Washington, 2019). Kershner (2001) has written about the struggle for civil rights in Spokane, and it is important to remember that although Washington State did not have Jim Crow laws, racism is still prevalent in Spokane with ample evidence of such thinking, such as white only covenants on land and housing in the city (Vestal, 2016). Historically non-white populations were largely restricted to the downtown and East Central neighbourhoods of the city. As Rastogi and Curtis (2020) point out, Fairchild Airforce Base to the west of the city centre stands out as a local anomaly due to its stable yet mixed racial pattern.

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The city has significant income inequalities and health inequalities (Spokane Regional Health District, 2012; US News, 2020). The downtown and adjacent areas are both poorer and more racially diverse. To the south of the city centre lies the South Hill, a neighbourhood that is predominantly white, well-educated, and affluent. In the north-west of the city lies the North Indian Trail and Five Mile Prairie neighbourhoods, which have a very similar composition.

This study sought to specifically explore the issues of inequitable access and provision of LFLs already raised by researchers on this topic (Snow, 2015; Schmidt & Hale, 2017; Samiento et al., 2017; Wilson, 2020). In part, this was to assess the replicability, or not, of the observed inequalities in provision identified elsewhere in the United States and Canada. As far as the authors are aware, this study is the first to explore this issue in Washington State.

Samiento et al. (2017, p. 8) suggests that the spatial inequalities noted in their research “reflect existing inequalities.” However, additional provision of a resource in more privileged areas must surely not only reflect, but increase inequalities. This study also sought to explore if Spokane’s LFLs may have increased inequalities.

This research aimed to improve on the methods used in other studies by also incorporating non-affiliated clones into the analysis. As noted by Sarmiento et al. (2017) in their analysis of LFLs in Madison, Wisconsin and Santa Ana, California, prior examinations to date have routinely been based solely on publicly available data provided by the LFL organisation.

Method

We collected locations of LFLs in Spokane from the LFL organisation’s website (n=55). We were aware of a small number of such structures that were not affiliated with the LFL organisation. In an effort to collect more comprehensive data on non-affiliated clones, we approached Spokane Public Schools for assistance. Spokane Public Schools were supportive of the research and agreed to send out a request via social media asking viewers to photograph and report the locations of LFLs and non-affiliated clones throughout Spokane. Residents reported locations of such libraries, and addresses were field checked to confirm accuracy and avoid duplication. Although many reports were either duplicates or did not provide enough information to facilitate mapping, a total of 11 clones not affiliated with the LFL organisation were confirmed and mapped. It is not possible based on just this one study to extrapolate and suggest an undercount in other studies. However, using only LFL data would have identified only 83% of such structures operating in the city. Such an under-enumeration could impact findings. The lead author examined one quadrant of the city to identify if the LFLs and non-affiliated clones identified were present and to determine if others had been missed. No such anomalies were observed, and it is probably fair to say that although the dataset may not be perfect, it is possible to have confidence that the findings reported are generally representative of the city.

Locations of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in Spokane were mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software produced by Esri called ArcGIS Pro alongside demographic variables such as educational attainment, poverty, and race to identify potential inequities in provision throughout census block groups in Spokane. *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 8 (2022) pp.25-40

Municipal boundaries were collected from the City of Spokane and census geographies were collected from the United States Census Bureau. Demographic variables were also collected from the United States Census Bureau.

Educational attainment was mapped by census block group and is displayed by the percent of the population 25 years and older with a Bachelor's degree. This indicator is usually presented for age groups of at least 25 years and older in order to ensure that the majority of the population has completed their education. Data on educational attainment was collected from the United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011-2015.

Poverty was mapped by census block group and is displayed by the percent of households below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. This measurement of income was selected because individuals with incomes below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level often qualify for benefits through financial assistance programs. Data on poverty was collected from the United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011-2015.

Race was mapped by census block group and is displayed by the percent of the population that is white. Data on race was collected from the United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011-2015. Given the relative racial homogeneity of Spokane, the decision was made not to explore racial groups in more detail given issues with small numbers.

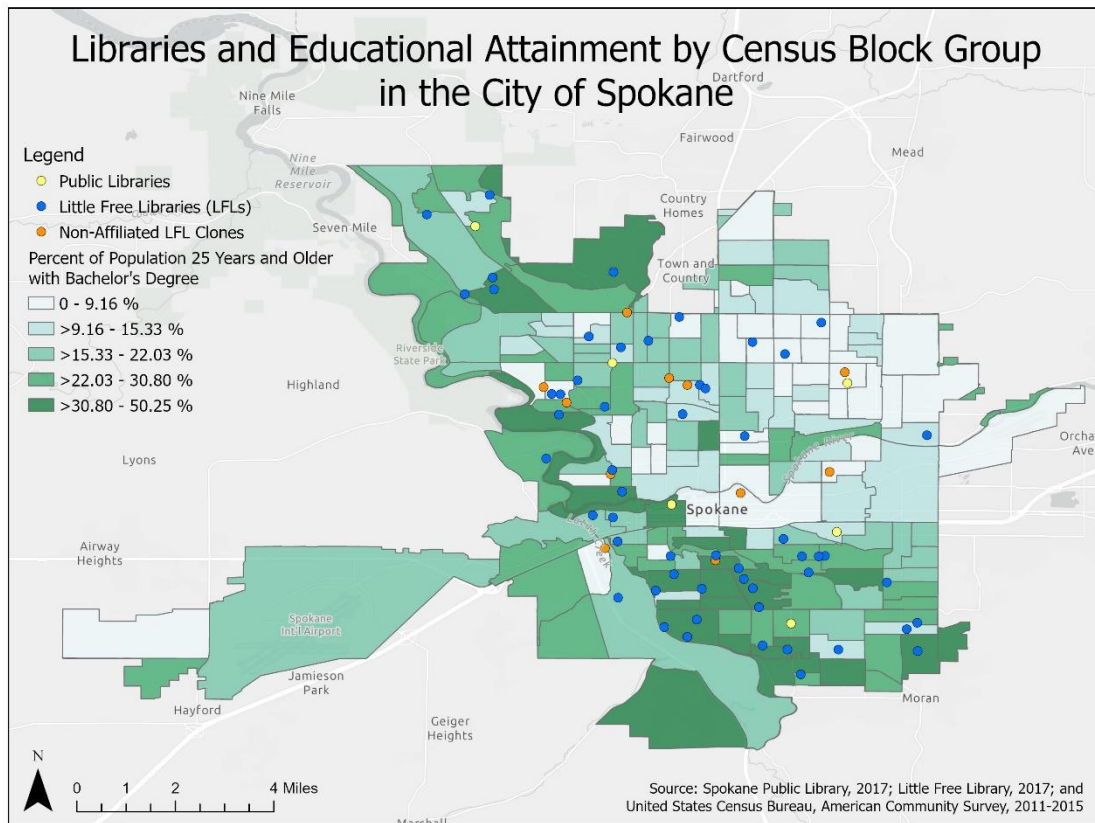
The three maps presented also include the location of Spokane's five public libraries. It is clear that although these libraries are not clustered, there is a clear dearth of public library facilities in the north-east area of the city.

Findings

Figure 2 details LFLs and their non-affiliated clones mapped against educational attainment by census block group in Spokane. It is evident from the map that the census block groups with higher educational attainment are in the south-east and the north-west areas of the city. These are the South Hill, North Indian Trail, and Five Mile Prairie neighbourhoods of the city, well known locally as affluent and elite areas. This map demonstrates the increased prevalence of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in areas with higher educational attainment, which are displayed as the darker census block groups on the map.

Figure 2

Educational Attainment and the Spatial Distribution of Public Libraries, LFLs, and Non-Affiliated Clones in Spokane, Washington



Source: April Gunderson, Author

Table 1 details the data portrayed in Figure 2. The general trend demonstrating the increasing average number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in census block groups with higher educational attainment is evident from the final column of the table with the average increasing from 0.10 for census block groups with lower educational attainment to 0.67 for census block groups with higher educational attainment.

Table 1*Number of LFLs and Non-Affiliated Clones by Educational Attainment*

Percent of Population 25 years and older with a Bachelor's Degree	Number of Census Block Groups with 0 LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones	Number of Census Block Groups with 1 or More LFL or Non-Affiliated Clone	Total Number of Census Block Groups	Average Number of LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones per Census Block Group
0 - 4.99	90% (9)	10% (1)	10	0.10
5 - 9.99	64.7% (22)	35.3% (12)	34	0.38
10 - 14.99	78.8% (26)	21.2% (7)	33	0.27
15 - 19.99	81.8% (27)	18.2% (6)	33	0.18
20 - 24.99	73.1% (19)	26.9% (7)	26	0.27
25 - 29.99	69.2% (18)	30.8% (8)	26	0.38
30 - 34.99	55.0% (11)	45.0% (9)	20	0.70
35 - 39.99	44.4% (4)	55.6% (5)	9	0.67
40 - 44.99	100% (2)	0% (0)	2	0
45 - 49.99	0% (0)	0% (0)	0	0
50 - 54.99	100% (1)	0% (0)	1	0
Total	139	55	194	N/A

Source: Frank Houghton, Author

Statistical analysis using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation identified a small but significant positive association between the percent of the population 25 years and older with a Bachelor's degree and the total number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in a census block group ($P=.144$, $N=194$, $Sig=.046$).

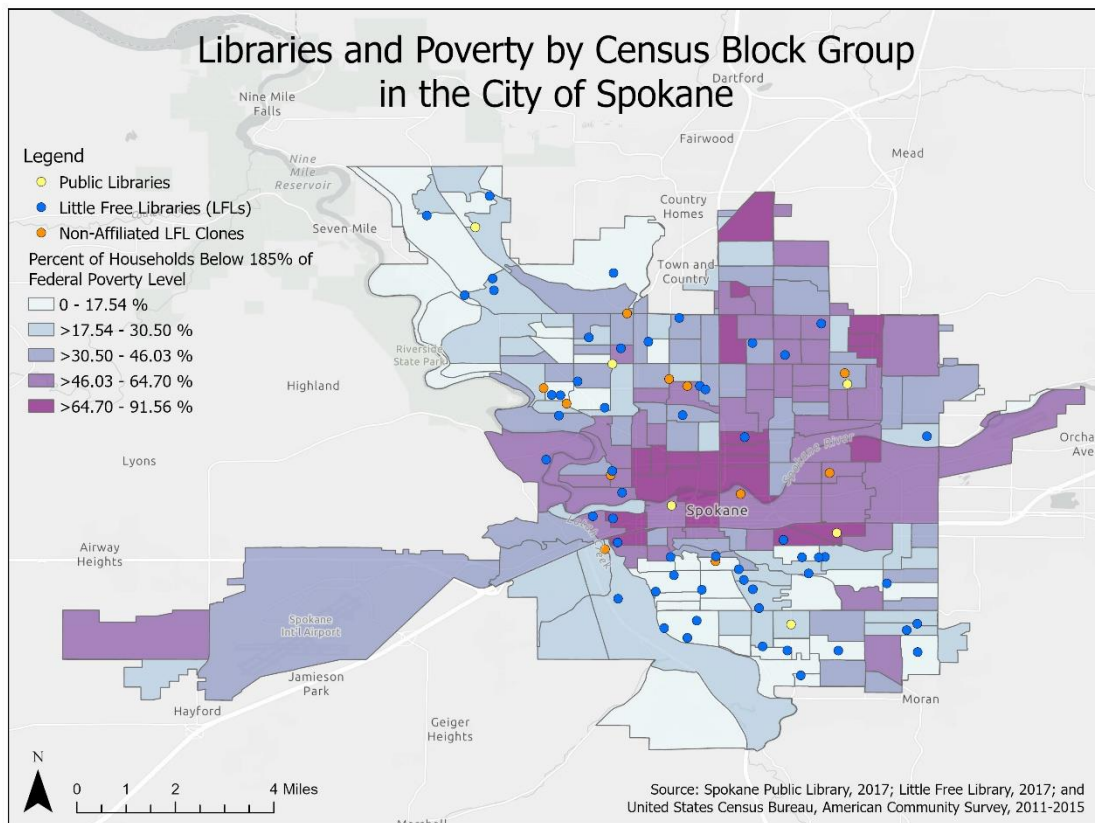
In a similar fashion, Figure 3 demonstrates the increased presence of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in more affluent census block groups of Spokane. This map is based

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on census block group data detailing the percent of the population below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. In this analysis, the scarcity of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in census block groups with a high percentage of households in poverty (displayed by darker census block groups) is evident.

Figure 3

Poverty and the Spatial Distribution of Public Libraries, LFLs, and Non-Affiliated Clones in Spokane, Washington



Source: April Gunderson, Author

Table 2 details the data portrayed in Figure 3. Although there is variation, the general trend demonstrating the increasing average number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in census block groups with fewer households in poverty is evident from the final column of the table with the average decreasing from 0.38 for census block groups with fewer households in poverty to 0 for census block groups with more households in poverty.

Table 2*Number of LFLs and Non-Affiliated Clones by Poverty*

Percent of Households Below 185% of Federal Poverty Level	Number of Census Block Groups with 0 LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones	Number of Census Block Groups with 1 or more LFL or Non-Affiliated Clone	Total Number of Census Block Groups	Average Number of LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones per Census Block Group
0.00 -9.99	69.2% (9)	30.8% (4)	13	0.38
10.00 – 19.99	44.8% (13)	55.2% (16)	29	0.79
20.00 – 29.99	71.0% (22)	29.0% (9)	31	0.32
30.00 – 39.99	77.8% (28)	22.2% (8)	36	0.22
40.00 – 49.99	82.6% (19)	17.4% (4)	23	0.17
50.00 – 59.99	70.8% (17)	29.2% (7)	24	0.33
60.00- 69.99	85.7% (18)	14.3% (3)	21	0.19
70.00 – 79.99	60.0% (6)	40.0% (4)	10	0.4
80.00 – 89.99	100% (6)	0.0% (0)	6	0.0
90.00 – 99.99	100% (1)	0.0% (0)	1	0.0
Total	139	55	194	N/A

Source: Frank Houghton, Author

Statistical analysis using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation identified a significant negative relationship between the percent of the population below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level and the total number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in a census block group ($P = -.213$, $N = 194$, $Sig = .003$).

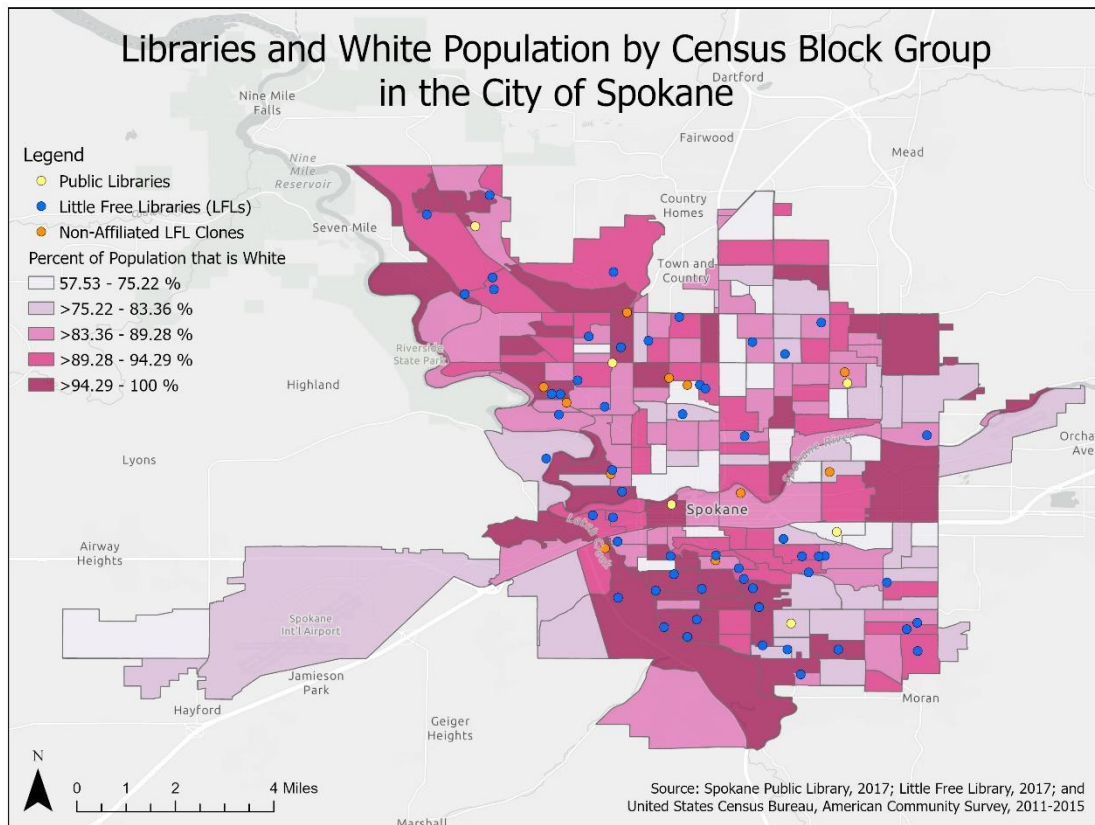
In a similar fashion, Figure 4 demonstrates the increased presence of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in census block groups with a greater percentage of white population. In this analysis, the scarcity of LFLs and their non-affiliated clones in less racially diverse census block groups (displayed by darker census block groups) is

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evident.

Figure 4

White Population and the Spatial Distribution of Public Libraries, LFLs, and Non-Affiliated Clones in Spokane, Washington



Source: April Gunderson, Author

Table 3 details the data portrayed in Figure 4. Although there is variation, the trend demonstrating the increasing average number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in census block groups with a greater percentage of white population is evident. As can be seen from the final column of the table, there are no LFLs or non-affiliated clones in census block groups with less than a 70% white population and a linear increase after this.

Table 3*Number of LFLs and Non-Affiliated Clones by White Population*

Percent of Population that is White	Number of Census Block Groups with 0 LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones	Number of Census Block Groups with 1 or more LFL or Non-Affiliated Clone	Total Number of Census Block Groups	Average Number of LFLs or Non-Affiliated Clones per Census Block Group
55 – 59.99%	100% (1)	0% (0)	1	0
60 – 64.99%	100% (1)	0% (0)	0	0
65 – 69.99%	100% (5)	0% (0)	5	0
70 – 74.99%	91.7% (11)	8.3% (1)	12	0.17
75 – 79.99%	82.4% (14)	17.6% (3)	17	0.18
80 – 84.99%	82.1% (23)	17.9% (5)	28	0.18
85 – 89.99%	69.8% (37)	30.2% (16)	53	0.34
90 – 94.99%	60% (24)	40% (16)	40	0.48
95 – 100%	62.2% (23)	37.8% (14)	37	0.51
Total	139	55	194	N/A

Source: Frank Houghton, Author

Statistical analysis using a Pearson Product Moment Correlation identified a significant positive relationship between the percent of the white population and the total number of LFLs and non-affiliated clones in a census block group (P= .238, N=194, Sig<.001).

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Discussion

This study is the first to systematically examine LFL provision in Washington State. It further develops previous findings by examining not only LFLs, but their non-affiliated clones as well. In line with previous research (Sarmiento et al., 2017; Schmidt & Hale, 2017; Wilson, 2020), this examination found that LFLs and their non-affiliated clones are more prevalent in affluent, white neighbourhoods with higher educational attainment. The maps clearly display a disturbing reality of LFL and non-affiliated clone provision in Spokane. The racial element of this provision is particularly problematic. Sarmiento et al. (2017: 8) suggest that the spatial inequalities noted in their research “reflect existing inequalities” and fail to counter them. However, a more accurate appraisal may be that LFL and non-affiliated clone provision may both reflect and serve to exacerbate such inequalities. The LFL (2021) organisation aims to provide access to books that is “limited by time, space, or privilege.” It is therefore an uncomfortable reality that they may instead simply be reinforcing privileged access to reading materials, rather than challenging it. The provision of additional reading materials via LFLs and non-affiliated clones in affluent areas characterised by white populations with higher educational attainment is probably providing them where they are least needed. It must also serve to heighten inequities in provision between less affluent areas with more racially diverse populations holding lower educational attainments, and more affluent white areas with populations holding higher educational attainments.

It should be noted that some of the inequities in the national provision of LFLs that have been highlighted by critics in recent years may have become apparent to the LFL organisation. Since 2018, the LFL organisation has initiated a series of interventions that reduce some of the inequitable distribution noted. For example, in 2018 it initiated a program to increase access on Tribal lands, as well as across a range of underserved populations (Little Free Library, 2021). Since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020, it has also developed a Read in Color program to help promote meaningful change. As noted on their website, the Read in Color program:

distributes books that provide perspectives on racism and social justice; celebrate BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized voices; and incorporate experiences from all identities for all readers (Little Free Library, 2021).

Given the questions raised by critical commentators (Houghton et al., 2021; Snow, 2015), more research is required to see if these developments substantively alter the profile of distribution of LFLs, or whether they are mere window dressing. Whatever the outcomes of such interventions, the reality is that LFLs are more prevalent in areas where the population is white, affluent, and educated. The provision of such additional resources in already privileged areas must not only reflect, but also exacerbate inequalities.

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