



Dear Editor,

I read with great interest the article by Roger Henshaw in the May issue of *INCITE*. The article – ‘Public libraries: alive, well and loved!’ – provided feedback on a public survey conducted by Public Libraries Australia on the things people love about public libraries.

The comments were all positive, as would be expected from such a survey. And justifiably so. Given that Australia has a population of about 24 million and the survey elicited feedback from ‘more than 200 respondents’ (library patrons and staff), can we really say that public libraries are alive, well and loved based on such a tiny sample? From my experience I know they’re alive and loved, but I’m not sure they are ‘well’.

The article provides lots of statistics, but I thought I’d be mischievous and take on a devil’s advocate role. I know statistics can be misrepresented and that’s what I am about to do.

The survey showed that 75% of respondents (that would be just over 150 people out of 24 million) made positive comments about library resources. Does that mean 25% of respondents didn’t make positive comments? The survey also showed that 56% of respondents (library patrons and staff) made positive comments about library staff. I guess 44% didn’t make positive comments about library staff. Likewise almost 60% of respondents didn’t make positive comments regarding library buildings and facilities, given that over 40% did respond positively. Furthermore, 75% of respondents didn’t make positive comments about the range of programs and activities provided by public libraries, and approximately 77% of respondents didn’t comment positively on online access to e-resources.

Yes, I’ve deliberately not used the data correctly but statistics can always be used to slant an argument to advantage. They can be used to bite us on the backside if we’re not careful and especially if we continue to keep our head in the sand regarding the long-term future of public libraries.

The latest Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report – yes, more statistics – shows that over the past five years, total loans have dropped by 4.9%, items lent per capita have dropped by 10% and members as a percentage of total population have dropped from 46% to 44%. Over the same period, expenditure on public libraries including library materials has increased by 18.2%. Good news on the expenditure front, but how long will governments keep putting money into public libraries if usage percentages keep dropping?

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