

Research Proposal, Draft 2—Final, Special Library Group 1

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I. Research Proposal Cover Page

Title of Proposed Research Unlocking The Law: A Study on Access to Legal Information and Resources by the American Association of Law Libraries	
Abstract (less than 250 words) This research proposal seeks to examine the relationships between the common layperson and their accessibility to law libraries and resources. Per preliminary research, two key problems are sought to be addressed within this project: (1) whether the general population feels as though they can access and understand legal resources when they seek them out; and (2) in what ways can law libraries become more accessible to their communities, either through programming, inter-library relationships, or other sources. This team of researchers seeks \$16,000 for the completion of the investigation beyond the pilot survey. This would be by engaging with at least 1,000 participants via a quarterly-released survey that will implement mixed methods of survey and measurable data to gauge population intake of their access to legal materials, ability to comprehend sought-out resources, and how they feel regarding their community ties and programming with law libraries and resources. Partakers will be reached via an open call from a study firm, and preferably be equally split between laypersons and law librarian professionals. Early literature review indicates that layperson populations lean towards inaccessibility and limited understanding of legal resources, due to a combination of paywalls, lack of legal jargon understanding, and general inability to access law library facilities and staff. Studies also indicate a desire to obtain basic legal understandings, aside from federally granted rights, and that laypersons believe their communities could benefit from stronger relations and possible educational outreach from their law and public libraries. Given these prior understandings, this team of researchers aims to define actionable solutions and buildable relationships between law libraries and the communities they serve, as well as understand how general communities can grow their legal knowledge from these growing connections and programs. Keywords: Accessibility, Pilot Study, Law Library, Paywall, Legal Information, Outreach and Programming, Legal Education, Public Library, Barriers to access, Financial Access, Accessible language	
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Amount Requested \$16,000	Proposal Submission Date April 22, 2024
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II. Statement of Need & Significance of Study

As we expand through our highly digitized and polarizing information-heavy world, the typical individual's ability, and desire to research personalized topics grows in need of accessibility and understanding; one of these biggest needs lies in law and legal education (Rhodes, 2000).

Laypersons, people who do not have specific legal education or training, have increasingly sought to understand their individual rights and the laws that govern the communities in which they exist (Rhodes, 2000). When laws are enforced, broken, or changed, these same individuals take it upon themselves to use their voices in personal legal proceedings, protests, and in other related forums (Hadfield, 2014). As these communal legal informational needs grow, access to and understanding of these resources and information are decreasing (Bruce, 2000). This project is designed to target and understand the legal knowledge gaps that exist outside the legal profession across the nation and take word directly from these community members as to how they would benefit from educational outreach and institutional relationships between law libraries and their public counterparts.

Literature Review

A grand call for legal literacy and resource accessibility continues to grow within communities nationally. The roles of legal-information-based institutions have seen significant growth and change over time but have faced many problems regarding the use and comprehension of these sources when they are no longer available to the general population. What used to be capitals of information and resource have turned barren thanks to paywalls and mass digitization of knowledge. Multiple studies across the world touch on the implications of public libraries and other educational forums having seen a surge of restrictive means when accessing legal materials, as indicated by Bruce (2000), Vraneš (2007), Biasotti (2011), and Bopape (2016); these reports address the importance of informational access and resource comprehension of legal and general works within public and educational settings.

In the grand scheme of procurement and outreach surrounding legal materials, libraries should focus on the wants and needs of its community, so that those within the community may benefit (Vraneš, 2007). Bruce (2000) presents a wider scope on the issues surrounding legal institutions and their increasing disconnect from the communities they serve, in addition to informational resources are becoming further restricted for legal professionals. Biasiotti (2011) and others argue for increased access for citizens and laypeople. This includes clarity and access to legal terms, rulings, and, by extension, laws. Specifically pertaining to Italian law and legal papers, Biasiotti extends his argument to include international accessibility. Professionals have explored solutions to subscription-based resources and the financial barriers encountered by those seeking to access paywalled information. Biasiotti's 2011 book acts as a call to action for the European Union to push for more internationally accessible information to laypeople. In another international publication, researchers pushed for further action on open-access digital legal works. This argument extends beyond the accessibility of institutions that legal information, but also to the publication and sharing of this information to be open access and to be available to the international public.

Major blocks such as paywalls, lack of understanding, and limited outreach opportunities stunt communities from being able to use legal resources in the few cases when they are available. The need for programming and educational outreach via legal and nonlegal informational institutions (*i.e.*, public libraries) are vital in a population's legal literacy development, as explored by Hadfield (2014), Bilson (2017), and Rhodes (2000). These authors address the systematic issues that laypersons face when conducting their own legal research and are unable to fully digest what they are reading.

Hadfield (2014) looks at the struggling relationship between the ability to glean legal information or advice in a palatable manner between legal and nonlegal institutions, citing to the lack of *ex ante* legal advice or beneficiary tools to decode legal jargon. Rhodes (2000)

touches on the important notion that other legal institutions such as firms, data sites, and journals can facilitate educational outreach and programming with communities and their public libraries. Bilson (2017) explores the possibilities available to public and academic libraries, and the role these organizations can play in making legal information accessible to the public. Reflecting similar concerns to ours, this group of researchers question the limited accessibility of legal information within law libraries but explore the role law libraries play in keeping legal information inaccessible. The solutions provided rely on public institutions and their librarians making information accessible through common-language presentation and in its practice.

While we reviewed seven key resources in our literature review, we analyzed twelve others that were integral to the argument of making legal information accessible; they observed the lack of accessibility not just within the legal field, but to citizens who find themselves at the greater fault or receiving end of laws, legal jargon, and other law related documents. Accessibility of legal documents, even though this brief literature review, is a source of great concern to legal institutions and the general public—both in physical/digital access to the material and its exclusive use of field-related jargon. The intimidating nature of the legal field, with its expensive resources and niche access points (like legal libraries or retrieving information directly from publishers), reinforce our accessibility concerns.

Overall, we are certain that our goal is to gauge how accessible American legal information is to the average U.S. citizen and our research seeks to define the American desire to obtain legal information. By exploring theories of access after obtaining this information, we can conclude reasonable asks and solutions for the inaccessible legal library as an institution here in the United States.

Research Goals

To understand the general American-population demand and comprehension levels of legal resources, and to identify the most commonly faced barriers—whether educational, financial, and/or demographic.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the general population’s understanding of U.S. legal information, law libraries, and other venues that provide access to legal information?

RQ2: In what ways should existing law libraries make themselves more accessible?

RQ3: Should there be institutional and/or educational relationships between public libraries and law libraries that would allow for easier understanding of and access to legal information?

Research Design

The survey was designed to capture the layperson’s subjective experiences and desires within legal literacy and how the lack or abundance of this information benefits or hinders their legal informational needs. The data sought from this survey model will provide insight on the opinions of the general U.S. population, while laying the groundwork for expanding this research to capture the opinions of individuals within the legal profession.

This pilot-study is intended to be conducted over a one-year period with data accumulation occurring every quarter. The initial survey will be distributed in January 2025, with redistribution every three months (April, July, and October 2025). Data analysis for the entire year will begin in December and be finalized by February 2026. Whenever the survey is distributed, it will be sent to up to 500 members of the general public to ensure that there is enough data to be collected; it will also be distributed through various U.S. research firms that employ the same survey generator, so data may be combined and analyzed sufficiently.

The data collected from this study will be analyzed with qualitative and quantitative structures in mind, allowing for the ability to address specific needs and wants and demonstrate current and future trends. Important demographic information such as age, race, and location may be recorded within the survey (with option to skip based on survey-taker's preference) to develop a full scope of law libraries' patrons; this demographic data will be collected only if respondents choose to provide it. The rest of the questions include Likert-scale questions and open-ended answer boxes that allow for individualization of each participant's response. All answers will be organized and analyzed through Microsoft Excel and MAXQDA based off of pre-existing standards.

The pilot study will take over the course of a year and utilize a four-person team to meet the established goals. The main bulk of expenditures will be covered through employer subscriptions and data analysis abilities, including use of work laptops and facilities. The requested \$16,000 is to cover contractual obligations and payments to the research firms who produce, distribute, and store our survey and responses, and to cover any additional subscriptions to analysis software or resources needed throughout the pilot run.

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Appendix A. Unlocking the Law: A Survey on Access to Legal Information and Resources by the American Association of Law Libraries

Introduction

Welcome to "Unlocking the Law: A Survey on Access to Legal Information and Resources"

Our research group seeks to understand the usage of law libraries and legal resources. While law libraries function as a repository for legal information, they also serve as an establishment where the general public may research answers to their legal questions. This survey is our means to learn the who, what, and why surrounding the use of law libraries and the general public's reflection on their ability to access and understand the information presented by these institutions.

We invite you to participate in this important survey conducted by the American Association of Law Libraries; your experiences and opinions are invaluable. As a member of the general public, your insights will help us identify areas for enhancement and ensure our law libraries serve everyone effectively and inclusively. This survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete, and your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. Thank you for contributing to the betterment of law library services and accessibility.

If you have any concerns or questions, please contact us at speciallibrarygroup@aall.org.

Survey

Disclaimer Pop-up Box, Before Survey Questions

We hope to collect demographic information to better understand and analyze the responses across different groups. Please be assured that your privacy is of the utmost importance to us; therefore, providing the requested information is voluntary. Personal identifying information will not be collected, nor will it be disclosed or used for any other purpose other than this study. Thank you for your trust and participation.

Would you like to provide demographic details?

☐ Yes

☐ No

****If yes, respondent will continue with questions as numbered. If no, respondent will be directly led to section 2, *Law Library Usage*.****

Demographic Questions

1. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

☐ Less than high school degree

☐ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)

☐ Some college but no degree

☐ Associate's degree

☐ Bachelor's degree

☐ Graduate (e.g., M.A., J.D.) or post-graduate degree (e.g., Ph.D., M.D.)

☐ None of the Above

☐ Other: _____

☐ Prefer not to say

2. What language do you mainly speak at home?

☐ English

☐ Spanish

☐ Chinese

☐ French

☐ Arabic

☐ Other: _____

☐ Prefer not to say

3. How would you describe yourself?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

4. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

5. What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

6. What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18–24 years old
- ☐ 25–34 years old
- ☐ 35–44 years old
- ☐ 45–54 years old
- ☐ 55–64 years old
- ☐ Over 64

☐ Prefer not to say

7. Where do you live?

[Dropdown box for states, including Prefer Not to Say, DC, Puerto Rico, Guam, other American Territories, and an Outside the USA option, etc.]

Law Library Usage

8. Which of the following best describes your relationship to law libraries?

☐ General public

☐ Law librarian/staff member

☐ Law student

☐ Legal practitioner

☐ Other: _____

9. Have you ever been involved in any legal proceedings?

☐ Yes

a) If yes, select all that apply.

☐ Civil case (e.g., divorce, lawsuit)

☐ Criminal case

☐ Plaintiff

☐ Defendant

☐ Juror

☐ Witness

☐ Legal professional

☐ Other: _____

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to say

10. Have you accessed any law library services or resources through a local public library branch?

☐ Yes

☐ No

a) If yes, where?

[Open-ended response box requesting name of library branch, county, and state]

11. Have you ever used an institutional law library (e.g., law school, law firm, Library of Congress)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

a) If yes, what resources did you use? Select all that apply.

☐ Books or other legal materials

☐ Non-lawyer resources

☐ Print/online

☐ Westlaw/Lexis

☐ Reference Desk

☐ Guides/Pathfinders

☐ AskLawLibrarian/Chat function

☐ Document delivery/E-filing

☐ Local Referrals List/Referral Systems

☐ Conference rooms

☐ Document assembly tools

☐ Onsite notaries

☐ Computer/Internet access

☐ Copy Machine/Printer/Scanner/Fax Machine

☐ Telephone

☐ Other: _____

12. How often do you use a law library?

- ☐ Daily
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Rarely (1-10 times per year)
- ☐ Only once
- ☐ Never

13. What was your primary purpose for using a law library?

- ☐ Academic research
- ☐ Legal practice (for yourself or others)
- ☐ Personal interest
- ☐ Professional interest
- ☐ Other: _____

14. When are you most likely to need access to a law library's resources?

- ☐ Weekdays (9am–5pm, Monday–Friday)
- ☐ Weeknights (after 5pm, Monday–Friday)
- ☐ Weekend days (9am–5pm, Saturday & Sunday)
- ☐ Weekend nights (after 5pm, Saturday & Sunday)
- ☐ 24/7

15. How are you most likely to access a law library's information systems?

- ☐ At the law library's physical location
- ☐ Through the law library's website
- ☐ Via telephone/email/chat services

16. What types of resources or access points would you like to see added to a law library?

[Open-ended response box]

Informational Access

17. When you search for information at a law library, how do you begin your search?

- ☐ Online catalog/research guide
- ☐ Ask a library staff member
- ☐ Browse the shelves

18. What challenges have you encountered when accessing a law library's information systems?

Select all that apply.

- ☐ Access to the building
- ☐ Navigating the building
- ☐ Access to the online catalog and resources
- ☐ Finding relevant resources...
 - ☐ at the library
 - ☐ in the online catalog
 - ☐ in my preferred language
 - ☐ in my preferred format
 - ☐ in my price range
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other: _____

19. How much do you agree with the following statements?

a) I understand the terminology and language used in the law library's catalog and databases.

*Strongly
Disagree*

☐

Disagree

☐

Neutral

☐

Agree

☐

*Strongly
Agree*

☐

- b) The language used in law library communications (e.g., AskALawLibrarian, signage, guides, websites, emails, newsletters) is accessible and free of unnecessary legal jargon.

*Strongly
Disagree*

☐

Disagree

☐

Neutral

☐

Agree

☐

*Strongly
Agree*

☐

20. Have you ever sought help or guidance in using a law library's resources?

☐ Yes

☐ No

a) If yes, was it helpful?

☐ Yes

☐ No

b) If yes, did law library staff explain things in a way that is easy to understand, without using complex jargon?

☐ Yes

☐ No

21. Have you used a law library's digital tools?

☐ Yes

☐ No

a) If yes, which tools do you find the most useful? Select one.

☐ E-books

☐ Online databases

☐ Search tools

☐ Citation tools

☐ Remote access

☐ Other: _____

22. What improvements or new features would enhance your experience with a law library's digital platforms?

[Open-ended response box]

Resources and Services

23. How relevant do you consider a law library's collection to your needs?

<i>Not at All</i>	→	<i>Somewhat</i>	→	<i>Very</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

24. How satisfactory do you consider a law library's in-person services to your needs?

<i>Not at All</i>	→	<i>Somewhat</i>	→	<i>Very</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

25. How satisfactory do you consider a law library's digital services to your needs?

<i>Not at All</i>	→	<i>Somewhat</i>	→	<i>Very</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

26. Overall, how satisfied are you with a law library's services and resources?

<i>Not at All</i>	→	<i>Somewhat</i>	→	<i>Very</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

27. How likely are you to refer a law library to a friend or colleague?

<i>Not at All</i>	→	<i>Somewhat</i>	→	<i>Very</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

28. Please provide any additional comments or suggestions for how we can improve access to and the quality of the law library's information systems.

[Open-ended response box]

Pop-up Thank-you Box, After Submission

We sincerely appreciate the time and effort you have dedicated to completing this survey; your insights are crucial in shaping the future of accessible law libraries. Please know

that your responses will play a key role in guiding our efforts to enhance access, improve resources, and foster an environment of inclusivity and support within law libraries. We are committed to making meaningful improvements based on your feedback.

Stay connected with us to see how your participation helps make a difference. If you have any further thoughts or would like to stay updated on the changes inspired by your feedback, please contact us at speciallibrarygroup@aall.org.

[Share Survey Option] button that allows the respondent to share a link to this survey via copying the link, email, X, Facebook, etc.