



CHAPIN HALL

Practice Bulletin

Social Service Providers' Media Choices: Results of a National Survey

INTRODUCTION

Chapin Hall connects research to action. We bridge the gap between research and practice by providing practitioners and policymakers the evidence they need to inform their decisions. To best build that bridge, we take an evidence-based approach to dissemination. When new research and policy calls for new practices, this evidence helps us communicate effectively with human service providers. Understanding their communication preferences allows us to target our communications, which can lead to accelerated adoption of new, beneficial practices.

To build our body of dissemination evidence, we conducted a web-based survey with human service providers to determine their preferred messengers, channels, and formats. Representing more than a dozen sectors and every state, 921 human service providers responded to the survey. A descriptive report provides complete results with details about significant correlations based on demographic characteristics and position within organizations.

This practice bulletin focuses on our findings about social service providers' use of mass media, including newspapers, radio, and podcasts.



MASS MEDIA PREFERENCES

Other practice bulletins describe social media use patterns and where human service providers prefer to get professional information. But we also asked participants about their general mass media use. Specifically, we wanted to know where they got their news—whether it was work-related or not. This will allow us to better target media outreach to reinforce messages to this audience.

We asked an open-ended question about respondents' news sources. They named 210 unique newspaper sources. However, only 12 sources were mentioned five or more times (see Table 1 below). They also named specific professional newsletters, also listed in Table 1.

A total of 428 respondents (46% of the sample) said they read newspapers, and of those, 151, or 16% of the sample, said they read a local or community paper or listed a specific local paper. While local newspaper readers were a relatively small percentage of respondents, 51% of them were in director-level positions. The sectors with the highest level of local newspaper readership were those who work on homelessness (56% of local newspaper readers) and poverty (47%).

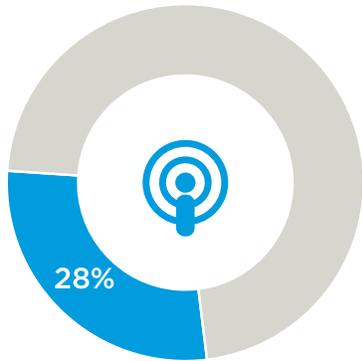
Table 1. Most Used Mass Media Sources

Source	# of mentions
Newspapers	
New York Times	112
Washington Post	52
Chicago Tribune*	13
Seattle Times	13
Wall Street Journal	8
CNN	7
USA Today	7
Baltimore Sun	6
Huffington Post	6
Observer	6
Herald Mail	5
Newsletters	
Community Action Partnerships	11
National Association of Social Workers	10
School House Connection	9
National Association for the Education of Homeless Youth and Children	7
ACF	5
American Public Human Services Association**	5
Child Welfare League of America**	5

* Includes 3 instances of "Tribune" that did not specify "Chicago Tribune."

**These organizations were specifically asked about previously, and therefore, might not have been named an additional time by some respondents

Respondents were asked specifically about National Public Radio (NPR) as a general news source. Sixty-eight percent listened to NPR at least sometimes, with 35% listening at least weekly (Daily, 15%; 4–6 times a week: 9%; 1–3 times a week: 11%). Seven respondents listed CNN as a news source.



of participants said they listened to podcasts

PODCASTS

We asked participants if they listened to podcasts, and 258 (28%) said they did. Of those who reported using podcasts, 48% were director level, with the largest proportion of listeners coming from the health and homelessness sectors (see Table 2). The largest age group among the podcast listeners was 35–49 years old (n = 83) followed by listeners 50–64 years old (n = 77).

Table 2. Characteristics of Podcast Listeners

	n	%
Position Type (n = 221)		
Director	107	48
Supervisor	26	12
Direct Service	49	22
Other	39	18
Sector (n = 234)		
Homelessness	118	50
Child Welfare	100	43
Early Childhood	81	35
Education	74	32
Out-of-School Time	27	12
Health	119	51
Age (n = 208)		
22–34	32	15
35–49	83	40
50–64	77	37
65+	16	8

WHAT IT MEANS

The dominance of The New York Times and NPR as news sources for the human service audience is the most relevant finding about media usage. These are both massive operations. *The New York Times* has more than 1,700 editorial staff and NPR has more than 1,000 local affiliates. Any organization seeking to communicate with human service providers would benefit from having a specific strategy for these two outlets. This strategy could include cultivating relationships with local and regional reporters and identifying reporters who have an interest in and history with your subject area. Given the size and power of these two outlets, it would be worth providing them first (exclusive) access to news, stories, and sources before providing them to other outlets. Their coverage could have outsize impact.

While the percentage of Americans who read newspapers continues to fall, newspaper readership was relatively high in this audience (46% of the sample). Of those respondents who read local or community newspapers (n = 151), slightly more than half of them were directors. These findings indicate that maintaining press lists and regularly getting human service news out to traditional news outlets is strategically valuable for reinforcing professional messages.

Of this sample, 28% said they listened to podcasts. Like local newspaper readers, directors were disproportionately represented among these listeners. Since this survey has affirmed the persuasive power of directors, supervisors, and trainers, it is worth the outreach effort to get evidence discussed on appropriate, topical podcasts.

Effective dissemination is key to ensuring that evidence is applied in practice. And that effectiveness is dependent on key variables, such as messengers and communication formats. While delivering persuasive messages from credible, personal messengers is the most important tactic for evidence dissemination, mass media channels provide a valuable platform for message reinforcement. No channel should be overlooked. Together, all of these strategies provide the level of dissemination necessary for evidence to affect practice and, ultimately, outcomes for children and families.

Citation

Randall, K., McMullen, M., & Morton, M. (2022). *Disseminating research to youth and family service professionals: Results of a national survey*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Correspondence

Marrienne McMullen, Director of Communications and Dissemination,
Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, mmcmullen@chapinhall.org