

Stacking Up: A How-To Guide to Condition Surveys

Tori R. Gregory

ABSTRACT. Item level surveys have a place in both public and university library collections. Although rarely applied outside of special collections, item level surveys benefit both patrons and library staff in several ways. These benefits include the reference or subject librarian's increased knowledge of the collection, which passes to the patron through reference services and collection building; the ability to compile precise statistics about how the collection is used by patrons; and the identification of particular challenges the collection faces (such as theft, mutilation, or damage). doi:10.1300/J105v31n03_07 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Condition surveys have become commonplace in academic and some special libraries since the late 1970s. There are three types of condition survey: Large random samplings, which offer the most accurate results; small random samplings; and item level surveys, in which each item is examined, defects are noted, and individual recommendations are made (Walker 1989). In the literature, random sample surveys are done

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more often than item level surveys; the latter are commonly used for rare and special collections "where item level prioritization is desirable" (Teper and Erekson 2006).

At the most basic level, condition surveys are designed to identify the physical condition of a collection at a particular point in time. The process of a condition survey benefits the librarian in a number of ways. Primarily, it is an opportunity to check a shelf list against the actual holdings and make sure that the books are present, and an opportunity to remove books that need minor repairs before more extensive rebinding or replacement becomes necessary. For the librarian who is also a subject bibliographer, examining each book for the condition survey provides an unequalled opportunity to become familiar with the collection. If the librarian knows what topics are covered by the collection, and how heavily the books are used, she/he is better able to make additional purchases for that collection. If the librarian is a reference specialist, his/her improved knowledge of the collection will boost service to the patron.

Much of the literature addresses surveys done on university collections; however, the methodology presented here could also be applicable to public libraries, which have the same needs to track the condition of their collections, deal with damage, and identify holes in the collection for which collection building would be beneficial.

THE OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY SURVEY

Although condition surveys are often undertaken by students or staff members working under a librarian's supervision, the Oklahoma State University (OSU) survey was completed by the author working alone over a 15-month period, with approximately 450 working hours devoted to the task. There are approximately 2.2 million books in the Edmon Low Library collection, and 12,995 of them are fine arts books shelved in the 730.99-779 call number range. Despite having to work around many other tasks, I found that using a single examiner for the entire survey offers the advantage of consistency. This is particularly important for an item level survey for which no survey instrument is used and notes are taken on each volume. The benefit to the examiner is a deepened knowledge of the collection, which is of value to the subject bibliographer, selector, or reference librarian. The library benefits as well, since administrators will have a clearer picture of condition, loss, and circulation within a given collection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature established that condition surveys are fairly commonplace in academic libraries; however, there are no existing reports of item level surveys of an academic collection although some item surveys of special collections were found. The most common condition survey is a random sampling, a methodology that was established by large-scale surveys done at Yale, Stanford, and Syracuse Universities. These types of surveys have also been done at the University of Kansas (KU), the University of Kansas Law Libraries (KU Law), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). In these studies, a random sample of books is drawn from the collection and every book in that sample is examined for flaws such as loose, torn or brittle pages, broken binding, damage to the cover or spine, and intentional mutilation such as pages cut, torn out, underlined or defaced by paper clips. The condition of the sample survey can be assumed to be the condition of the entire collection within a certain degree of accuracy—usually 95%. Variables include the size of the random sample and how the sample is chosen. In 2003, Paul K. Green described a formula for choosing the sample: ($n = \text{collection size}/400$). Following this formula, the examiner pulls every n th book for the sample.

In 1997, Brian J. Baird, Jana Krentz and Brad Schaffner described a slightly different formula for which the shelves must be numbered: ($n = \text{total number of shelves}/\text{total number of items}$). The fourth volume on every n th shelf was included in the study.

Baird et al. also tracked the circulation of their sample volumes. They used an online survey with scripted answers; the examiner chose the most appropriate response. This necessitated moving the sample volumes from the shelves to a separate work area, thus taking them away from patrons for the time required to complete the survey.

Researchers at the University of Tennessee used a computer program to select their sample; beyond that, they used much the same method as Baird, including an electronic survey and several examiners (Starmer, McGough, and Leverette 2005). Teper and Erikson also did a sample survey in 2006, even though the subject of the survey was UIUC's rare book collection. They stated that they chose a random sample survey rather than an item level survey because of time constraints. Each randomly chosen volume was evaluated for condition, usability, missing pages, cut pages, previous repairs and bibliographic data including author, title, size, and publication date. Graduate students entered the data directly into database software. Each book in the sample was assigned

a "damage rating" on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "the least damaged" and 5 "the most." Sobucki and Drewniewska-Idziak also used a scale of 1 to 3 to record overall condition, with 1 indicating "good condition" and 3 indicating "heavy damage." The University of Tennessee did not assign a number rating but did assign each book an overall condition of "excellent," "good," "fair," or "poor" based on the amount of damage to each book and the time needed to clean and repair it (Starmer, McGough, and Leverette 2005).

In 1990, a survey was done at Trinity College Library (TCD) in Dublin, Ireland for the purpose of identifying brittle and acidic paper in their books published between 1840 and 1939. This was a random sample study, with the random numbers produced by a professor in the TCD statistics department. The books were removed from the shelves to a special climate-controlled room to be examined. The author, Paul Sheehan, noted that the maximum sample size of 500 books could be easily selected and evaluated by one person, and that using a single examiner to complete the survey reduces the variability of results (Sheehan 1990).

Of all the studies reviewed for this paper, only one covered an item level survey. Nicholas Pickwoad describes a survey of rare manuscripts in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Because of the extent of that collection and the limited time to work with the manuscripts, Pickwoad organized several teams to go to St. Catherine's. Working in teams of two, Pickwoad's volunteers examined every volume, filling out a detailed online survey for each. This survey had a twofold purpose: To record the condition of St. Catherine's one-of-a-kind manuscripts and make a plan to deal with damage found; and to create a record of the collection and its condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The decision was made to record as much as possible about each item within a 1-hour time limit. When the methodology was published in 2004, the teams were halfway through the collection of 11,079 items. It is worth noting that the size of the collection is comparable to the size of the OSU art collection, and the goals and methodology are the most directly comparable to OSU's as well.

METHODOLOGY

The examiner is seated in the stacks with a small book cart (a mobile workspace). A shelf list from Voyager, OSU's library management software, provides the call number, title, and status (not checked out, checked

out, lost or missing) for each book in the sample. The last circulation date, condition, and defects of each book are noted.

Using the list, each book is examined for condition and rated on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being "new or fine condition" and 5 being "poor condition." Books needing repairs are assigned a 6. The condition is an overall assessment of the cover, binding, and text block, and a rating is applied to each book based on the given descriptions. A double-fold test is applied to all books in good to poor condition to test for brittleness. In this test, a page corner is folded down then back two times. If the corner breaks off during folding, or tears away with a gentle tug after the folds, the paper is brittle. If the paper breaks on one or two folds it is very brittle. Brittle books are marked on the shelf list with a colored highlighter. It is advisable to use one color to mark brittle books, and a different color to mark missing books (Table 1).

There should be a space in the shelf list to record any notes related to the books' condition. The same notes and defects may be recorded over and over; therefore, the examiner may want to use shorthand for the more common conditions. The notations used in the OSU study can be seen in Table 2.

TABLE 1. Explanation of Conditions

Condition	Explanation
1—Fine (New)	A new book or one that approaches the condition of new without being crisp. There are no defects in binding or paper.
2—Very Good	A used book that does show some small signs of wear but no defects in binding or paper.
3—Good	An average used and worn book that has all pages or leaves present.
4—Fair	A worn book that has complete text pages (including those with maps or plates) but may lack end papers, half title, etc. Binding and/or cover may be badly worn. A book may also be rated as "fair" if its paper cannot withstand a double fold test. For this study, paper that tears away with a gentle tug is considered brittle.
5—Poor	A book that is sufficiently worn that its only merit is a reading copy. The text is complete, but the book may be soiled, scuffed, stained, spotted, or heavily marked up. It may have loose hinges, joints, pages, etc. A book may also be rated as "poor" if its paper cannot withstand a double-fold test. For this study, paper that breaks on one or two folds is considered very brittle.
6—Damaged	A book that has been mutilated, is missing pages, or has other damage in need of repair or replacement. These books may also be brittle or very brittle.

TABLE 2. Common Notations

Condition	Notation
Cracked binding	bi cr.
Spine damage	sp dam
Tom spine	t.s.
Loose cover	l.c.
Previous repair	p.r.
Previous repaired pages	p.r.p.
Foxing	fox
Badly worn cover	b.w.c.
Slightly worn cover	s.w.c.
Yellowed/aging paper	yell
Broken hinges	br. hin.
Brittle	britt.
Very brittle	v.b.
Faded	fad

After the condition is recorded, the examiner should check the circulation history of the book. At OSU, the date of last circulation is taken off the due date sticker in the back of each book. Books that have never circulated receive a notation of NC. Books that have circulated five times or more in the last 11 years (1995-2006) receive an asterisk (*) for each five circulations. These circulation statistics will not reflect in-house use of the books, but they do present a clear enough picture for selection purposes.

A book is considered to have high circulation if it has circulated 5 times between 1995 and 2006. Assuming students are enrolled an average of 5 years, a 10-year span offers data on the use patterns of two generations of students. The OSU study used circulation statistics spanning 11 years, because it took over a year to gather all the data, and accurate statistics required the inclusion of the extra year. As with the data gathered on condition, if the examiner is also the bibliographer of a collection, she/he can make more informed decisions about what books to purchase if she/he knows how the books are being used.

Although it deviates from the standard for academic libraries, the Oklahoma State University Library undertook an item level condition survey of its art collection: a total of 12,995 volumes. The criteria examined were nearly identical to the criteria from previous studies including covers, text block and binding, and circulation data. The item level methodology allows the study to produce data on missing and circulating

volumes that a random sample cannot provide with accuracy, which adds value to the process and makes the extra time committed worthwhile. The OSU examiner worked in the stacks rather than removing books to be studied, so there was no negative impact on patrons resulting from their being unable to locate books on the shelves.

RESULTS

Condition

The art collection was evaluated in three major areas: condition, holdings, and circulation: 1,869 (14%) were new or in new condition (1); 2,643 (20%) were in very good condition (2); 3,330 (26%) were in average condition (3); 1,704 (13%) were in fair condition (4); 1,715 (14%) were in poor condition (5); and 1,173 (9%) were in damaged condition (6). A total of 105 books (0.08%) were mutilated, meaning that pages were deliberately cut or removed; 389 books (0.03%) were missing, meaning that they could not be found even though they were not checked out. Books numbering to 110 (0.08%) were checked out at the time of the study.

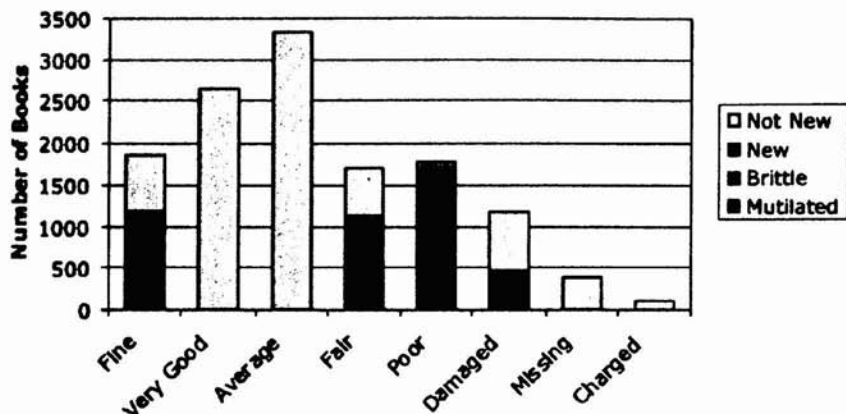
As shown in Figure 1, of the 1,869 books in condition (1), 1,186 (63%) were new, meaning that they were recently purchased, never circulated and showed no signs of use; of the 1,704 books in condition (4), 1,126 (66%) were also brittle; of the 1,776 books in condition (5), 1,715 (97%) were also brittle; and of the 1,173 books in condition (6), 460 (39%) were also brittle.

Because the author is the bibliographer for art the percentage of new volumes (63%) was not a surprise. Based on early results, it was also expected that most of the collection would be in average condition (Condition 3). The author plans to revisit the brittle volumes, particularly those that are very brittle (Condition 5), and decide on an individual basis whether they need special treatment. In most cases, treatment would be placing the item in an acid-free box, removing the item from the circulating collection and placing it in OSU's remote storage facility, or both. The degree of detail present in the OSU survey makes this level of analysis possible.

Holdings

When evaluating a collection, the age of the materials is always of interest. Figure 2 tracks the age of the books examined for this paper.

FIGURE 1. Condition Statistics—Call Range: 730-779 (Total Volumes: 12,995)



Twenty-three books did not have publication dates and were left out of this portion of the study. Of the remaining titles, 2,712 (58%) were published after 1970, which makes the collection fairly contemporary.

Because most of the collection rated a 3 (indicating average condition) and because the largest percentage of the collection was published in the 1990s, the OSU art collection is presently in good standing. This is welcome news to a large university library that does not weed its collection regularly because the percentages of new purchases in the collection indicate that present funding is adequate.

A comparison of the brittle volumes with their publication dates are shown in Figure 3. Twenty-three books did not have publication dates and were left out of this portion of the study, making the total number compared as 12,972. Of these, 3,301 (25%) were brittle and may require special attention in the future. At the present time, only OSU's valuable and one-of-a-kind items are candidates for de-acidification. Remedies for other brittle materials include placing them in acid-free boxes and moving them out of the circulating collection.

Some unusual results are provided in Figure 3. The high percentage of brittle books from the first part of the twentieth century is expected; however, the figure also shows a small number of brittle titles published after 1980, when acid-free paper became common in the United States. Robert A. and Brian J. Baird found in 2003 that three factors contribute to brittle paper: acid content, climate (e.g., humidity), and tight shelving. The Edmon Low Library is air-conditioned; therefore, overcrowding

FIGURE 2. Titles by Decade of Publication—Call Range: 730-779 (Total Volumes: 12,995)

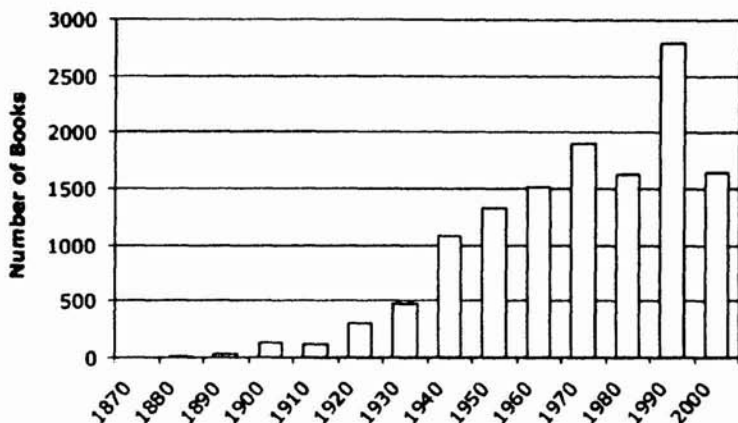
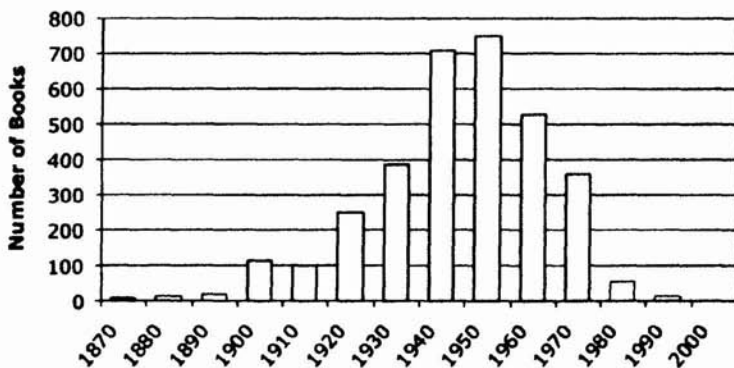


FIGURE 3. Brittle by Decade of Publication—Call Range: 730-779 (Total Volumes: 12,995)



the shelves is the more likely contributor to the incidence of brittle books were published in 1990 or later, when the decision to print books on acid-free paper became common in the United States. Only 15 books fell into this category, but it will be worth considering as the art collection continues to grow and shelf space is at a premium.

Circulation

Although some of the OSU art books have not been checked out in 30 years or more, 6,131 (47%) have been checked out at least once, and 3,053 (23%) have been checked out five or more times in the last 11 years. A notation of NC indicates books that have not circulated in 11 years, although they may have done before 1995. This activity is shown in Figure 4.

The numbers in Figure 4 indicate that the art collection is circulating satisfactorily, and that recent purchases are in use. Also the subject bibliographer can tell from records showing high circulation which topics are popular and whether added copies may be needed.

Subject Results

Figures 5-9 show the condition of each call range. When these are compared, one can see that the 740-call range is the largest (37%) based on the number of books that fall into the range. The majority of new books (37%) are also in the 740-call range, which indicates that the demand for these subjects is being sufficiently addressed.

Also, as shown in Figure 10, the majority of high circulating books fall into the 740-call range, which covers drawing, decorative arts, textile arts, interior design, glass, and furniture. Running circulation numbers on the

FIGURE 4. Circulation Statistics 1995-2006—Call Range: 730-779 (Total Volumes: 12,995)

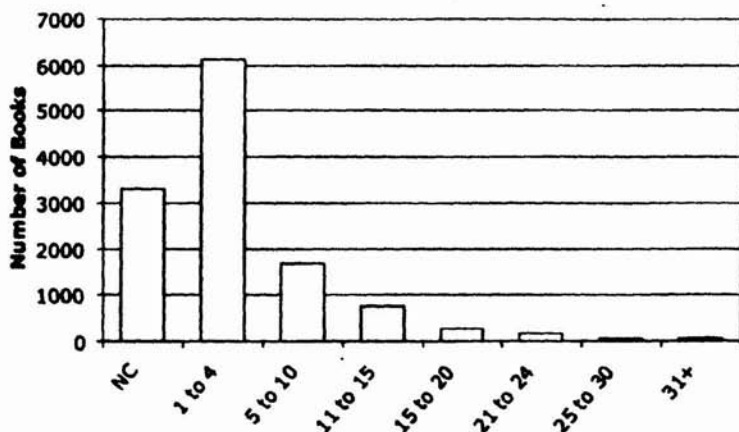


FIGURE 5. Condition of Call Range: 730-739 (Total Volumes: 2,181)

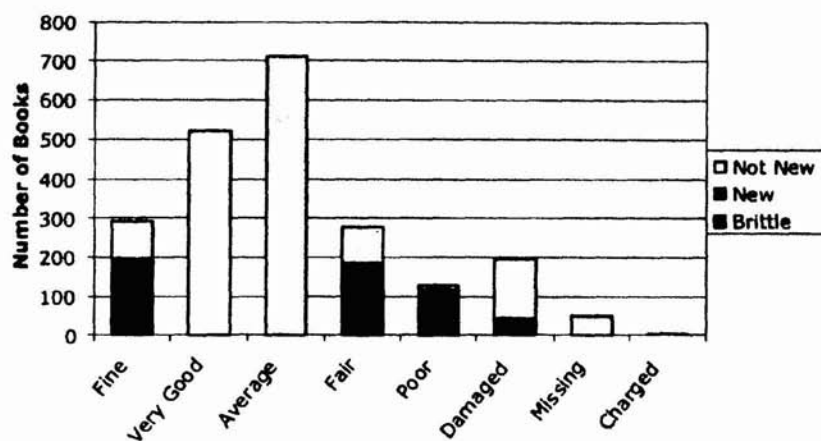
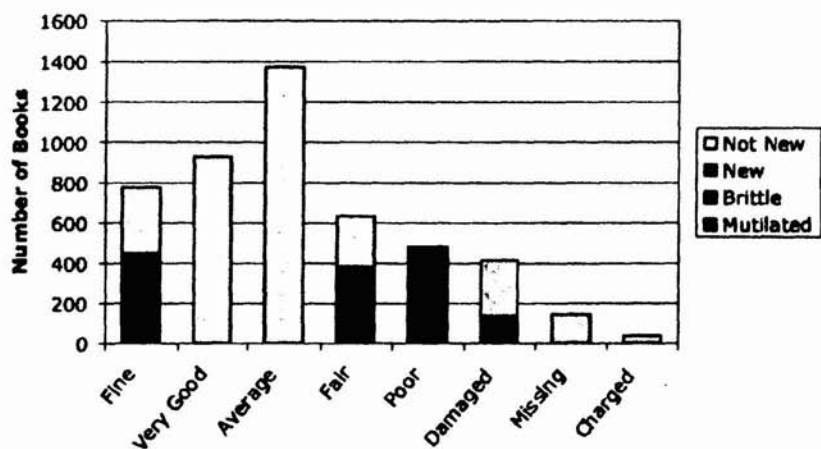


FIGURE 6. Condition of Call Range: 740-749 (Total Volumes: 4,790)



collection also indicates whether the collection is being used, which is the case here.

Problem books (those that are mutilated, brittle, or missing) are mostly from the 740-call range and the 750-call range. The majority of missing materials (37%) fall into the 740-call range. The 750-call range (paint-

FIGURE 7. Condition of Call Range: 750-759 (Total Volumes: 3,816)

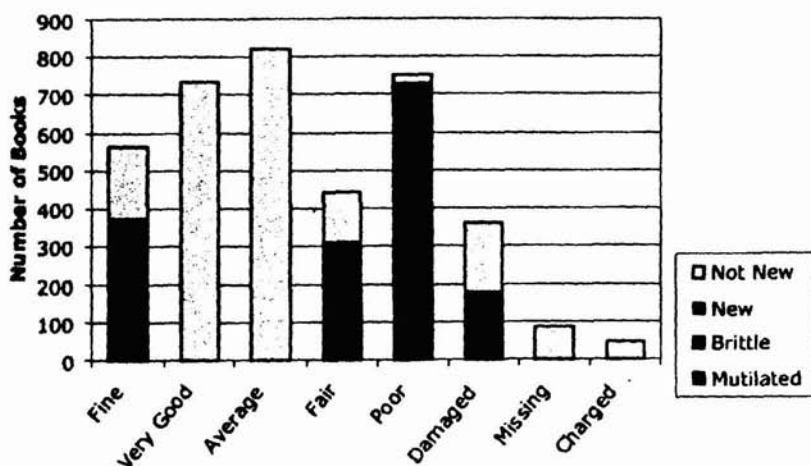
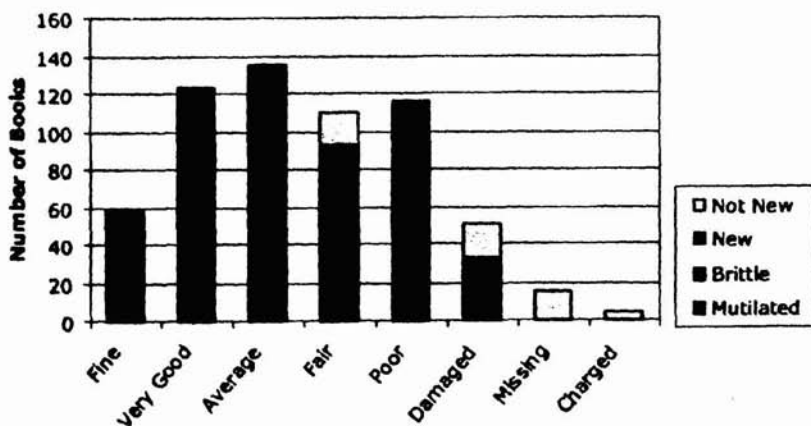


FIGURE 8. Condition of Call Range: 760-769 (Total Volumes: 613)



ing) has the highest percentage of brittle books (37%) and the highest percentage of mutilated material (53%). The majority of materials charged at the time of the study (43%) also fell into the 750-call range. This is shown in Figures 6-9. The mutilated material is broken down by call number range in Figure 11.

FIGURE 9. Condition of Call Range: 770-779 (Total Volumes: 1,571)

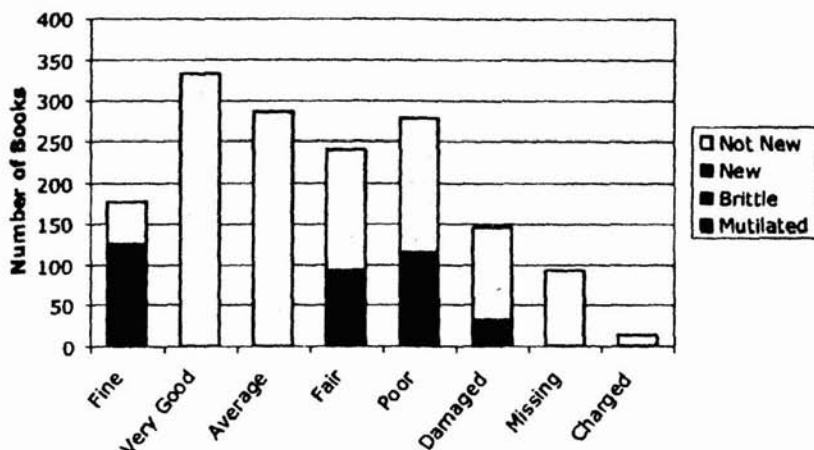
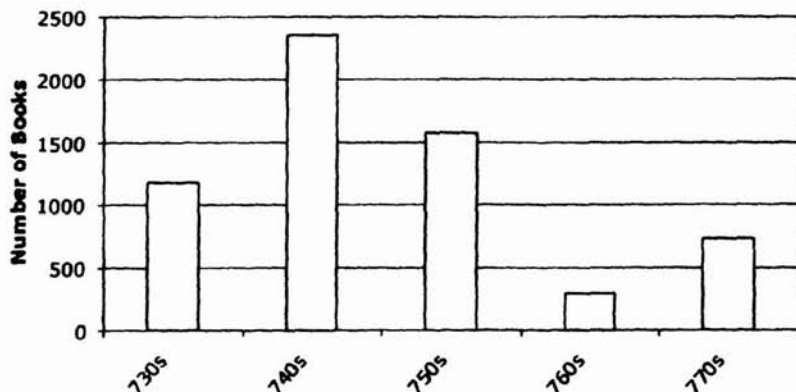


FIGURE 10. Circulation Statistics by Call Number—Call Range: 730-779 (Total Volumes: 12,995)



The mutilated books tended to be volumes on comics and figure drawing and some older books with glued plates. In this case, the study not only points out areas that need further development, but also shows that certain types of books may not fare well in the open stacks. However, moving the books to restricted collections such as reserve or special collections may not be possible owing to space constraints, demand for the materials, or

