

Mobile Library Vans: Reaching Underserved Communities with educational Programs

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Abstract

This theoretical study examines mobile library vans as a way of reaching underserved communities with educational programs. Mobile library vans face persistent gaps in library outreach and literacy access, and this study builds a clearer, evidence-based picture of how these services work and where they fall short. The paper has four objectives: to examine the role of mobile library vans in delivering educational programs to underserved communities; to identify the educational needs that these programs can address; to analyze the challenges that limit their effectiveness, including funding shortfalls, poor infrastructure, vehicle maintenance problems, weak technological resources, and insufficient user training; and to propose a theoretical and practical framework for strengthening mobile library vans as community learning platforms. The study draws on the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, developed by Everett Rogers, as its theoretical foundation, using it to explain how mobile library services spread through underserved populations over time. Drawing on existing research, the paper shows that mobile library vans reach communities that traditional, fixed-site libraries cannot reach, offering flexible, low-cost services that help close the digital and literacy divide. The paper also shows that, despite real operational barriers, mobile libraries are linked to improved literacy outcomes and can support wider community resilience when they receive steady funding, adequate technology, community involvement, and sustainable service models. The paper's contribution is an adapted framework for mobile library service delivery grounded in the principles of innovation diffusion, alongside practical recommendations on diversified funding, investment in technological infrastructure, volunteer training, planned routes, and thorough user education.

Keywords: Mobile Library Vans, Underserved Communities, Educational Programs, Diffusion of Innovation Theory, Library Outreach, Literacy Access

Introduction

Mobile library vans have become an important strategy for extending library and educational services to people who are often excluded from conventional library access because of distance, poverty, poor transportation, disability, conflict, or weak digital infrastructure. According to Bhoj (2020), in many communities, especially rural and peri urban areas, the presence of a library building does not automatically mean that every resident can benefit from its services, because barriers such as time, language, mobility, and cost still limit use. Mobile libraries respond to this challenge by taking books, information services, literacy support, and community learning directly to where people live, work, and gather (Nweke, Omoadoni & Omoisekejimi, 2024). This outreach role makes mobile library vans especially relevant in contemporary library practice, where equity, access, and community engagement are central concerns.

Educational programming is one of the strongest contributions of mobile library vans because it moves the library from a passive storage place for books to an active partner in learning. According to Udoh and Okorie (2021), modern outreach services can include story hours, reading clubs, homework support, digital literacy lessons, STEAM activities, and family learning sessions, all of which help build reading habits and support lifelong learning. Such programs are increasingly recognized as tools for educational equity because they reach children and adults who may not be served well by formal institutions alone Ali, Muhammad Adeel, Akhter, Qureshi, Kalsoom & Shah, 2025). Research on library outreach has shown that these services are most effective when they are tied to community locations, partnerships, and trust building rather than limited to occasional visits.

The idea of mobile library vans also fits within broader theoretical discussions of outreach, social inclusion, and equitable information access. Bhoj (2020) stated that libraries are no longer understood only as buildings that store materials, but as institutions that support learning across different social environments and life stages. The ecological view of outreach suggests that library services become more meaningful when they enter the everyday spaces of underserved communities and respond to real local needs. In that sense, mobile vans are not simply transport vehicles, but practical instruments for reducing informational and educational inequality (Akbari, 2019). They also support the digital divide agenda by bringing connectivity, digital tools, and learning opportunities to communities that may otherwise remain offline.

This topic is timely because educational inequality continues to widen in many settings where residents lack easy access to books, learning resources, and technology. Mobile library vans can help close this gap by combining access to reading materials with structured educational programs that encourage participation, curiosity, and community learning (Elton, 2015). They are also useful for building trust between libraries and underserved populations, especially where formal library use has historically been low or where service points are physically inaccessible. Therefore, a strong empirical paper should therefore show how mobile library vans can function as inclusive educational interventions rather than occasional welfare services. This is the need for the study

Statement of the problem

Ideally, mobile library vans should serve as regular, well resourced outreach platforms that bring books, literacy support, digital access, and educational programs to underserved communities, especially where residents cannot easily reach fixed library buildings. In reality, many communities still experience limited or irregular mobile library provision, weak program design, poor funding, inadequate staffing, and minimal integration of educational activities into outreach practice. As a result, the service often falls short of its promise as a mechanism for educational inclusion and community development. The consequence is that children, youth, and adults in hard to reach communities continue to face restricted access to reading materials, digital resources, and learning support, thereby deepening educational disadvantage and social exclusion. Although existing studies have shown that library outreach and bookmobile services can improve access and educational equity, much of the literature focuses on general outreach, urban or suburban settings, or descriptions of service delivery, with less theoretical attention to how mobile library vans can be framed specifically as educational program platforms for underserved communities.

Objectives

1. To examine the role of mobile library vans in delivering educational programs to underserved communities.
2. To identify the educational needs of underserved communities that can be addressed through mobile library van programs.
3. To analyze the challenges affecting the effectiveness of mobile library van educational programs.

4. To propose a theoretical and practical framework for strengthening mobile library vans as community learning platforms.

Concept of Mobile Libraries

A mobile library van is defined by Lakshmi, Nanda, Choudhary, Prabhu, Tuteja and Biswal (2025) as a vehicle devised, equipped, and operated to provide as far as reasonably practical a service compared to a part-time library branch. These mobile libraries are sometimes commonly known as bookmobiles or book buses and may appear as boats, vans, buses, RVs, or bikes that carry library materials to users. According to Ali, Muhammad Adeel, Akhter, Qureshi, Kalsoom, and Shah (2025), a mobile library is any vehicle that conveys information resources to the users at any place and anywhere, and the journal further explains that a mobile library service is a vehicle especially equipped and furnished to provide a professional library service direct to the people. Lo and Stark (2021) stated that mobile libraries are vehicles that can be used to take library resources from the main or central library to clients that live far away from the library. Kolawole and Umoren (2021) noted that the term mobile library is mainly used by British and Australian librarians to describe a motorised vehicle carrying library material, and they use it in its broadest sense, where any library service that does not stay in one place is classed as a mobile library. Bikos and Papadimitriou (2018) defined it simply as a large road vehicle that travels around, especially in the countryside, carrying books for people to borrow.

Across these definitions, three points stand out. First, a mobile library is defined by what it does rather than by any single vehicle type: vans, buses, boats, RVs, and bikes all count, provided the vehicle brings a professional library service to people rather than requiring people to come to it. Second, the definitions agree that a mobile library exists to close a distance, whether that distance is measured in kilometres, in cost, or in the time it takes to reach a fixed building. Third, the specific form a mobile library takes tends to follow local geography and infrastructure, which is why British and Australian usage of the term covers ordinary motorised vehicles while other settings rely on boats or bikes to reach the same populations. What unites these accounts, then, is not the vehicle but the intent behind it: extending a library service to people a fixed building cannot reach. That intent becomes concrete once a van arrives at a community and begins running programs, which is the focus of the next section.

Educational Outreach

Educational programs delivered through mobile library vans give underserved communities structured, ongoing access to learning, rather than a one-off visit. Udoh and Okorie (2021) describe outreach services that include story hours, reading clubs, homework support, digital literacy lessons, and family learning sessions, all of which build reading habits and support learning throughout life. Uzuegbu (2016) states that these programs help children and young people, whether in school or out of school, build a wider acquaintance with books and develop a taste for reading, while also giving special attention to the needs of individual users. Oghenetega, Erimieleagbon, and Ugulu (2014) describe this type of programming as a way of preparing people with the knowledge and skills needed to find, organize, and use information for their own purposes.

What separates these programs from simple book lending is structure. A single visit that hands out books has some value, but the outreach literature points to repeated, curriculum-linked contact as the feature that produces lasting change. Story hours and reading clubs work because they recur on a schedule that children and caregivers can plan around, and digital literacy lessons work best when they build on a skill introduced during a previous visit rather than starting over each time. Family learning sessions extend this structure beyond the individual user by drawing in parents and older siblings, which helps a reading habit take hold at home between visits rather than depending entirely on the van's schedule. Programs of this kind work best when they are tied to specific community locations and partnerships rather than delivered as isolated, occasional events, since repeated contact builds the trust that keeps residents coming back.

These programs only succeed, however, if they are designed around the specific populations they aim to reach. A story hour pitched at literate, book-owning households will not serve a community where most adults have had little formal schooling, and a digital literacy lesson assumes a level of access to devices that many communities do not have. That makes it necessary to define, with some precision, what counts as an underserved community in this context, since the term covers more than simple geographic distance from a library building.

Underserved Communities

According to Hisham and Abdullah (2018), Tonya Badillo, director of the Long Branch Free Public Library, defined underserved communities as groups that do not have equal access to programs and services, and stressed the need to balance core traditional services with the ability to provide relevant services to every population within a community. The Office of Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services (ODLOS) defined those whom public libraries underserve as individuals who are not the most visible or vocal members of the community, emphasizing that libraries should create inclusive spaces representing each library's whole community rather than just those who are most visible or vocal (Nwokocha & Chimah, 2018). Onyenachi, Akidi and Onyekweodiri (2015) explained that underserved communities are difficult to identify and difficult to access, since they are precisely those individuals who are not using existing services and with whom a library does not already have a relationship.

These accounts point to three overlapping dimensions of underservice rather than a single cause. A geographic dimension covers residents who live too far from a library building to visit it regularly, which is common in rural and peri-urban areas (Bhoj, 2020). An economic dimension covers residents who could reach a library physically but are kept away by the cost of transport, or by work and caregiving schedules that leave no time for a visit. A digital dimension covers residents who lack the devices, connectivity, or skills needed to use a library's online resources, even where those resources exist. A community can experience one of these barriers or all three at once, and the barriers that apply shift what kind of mobile library program will actually help.

Reaching these populations effectively takes more than good intentions. It requires outreach approaches suited to the specific barrier a community faces, whether that barrier is distance, cost, or lack of digital access. The next section reviews the models mobile libraries use to reach communities under each of these constraints.

Library Outreach Models

Mobile library vans are one of the clearest examples of an outreach model built specifically for populations with restricted access to formal learning institutions. According to Udoh and Okorie (2021), Library on Wheels programs work by fostering a love of reading in children and adults alike while bridging the gap in access to books and educational resources. The model itself is simple: vehicles such as buses or vans are stocked with books and learning resources

and travel to remote areas on a schedule, so that people who would otherwise be cut off from educational content can reach it (Bhoj, 2020).

The exact form this model takes varies with local conditions. Akbari (2019) describes libraries on wheels as transportable services that bridge the digital and educational divide by offering flexible, accessible, and cost-effective service across multiple locations. Nweke, Omoadoni, and Omosekejimi (2024) note that the vehicles used range from vans and boats to, in some settings, pack animals, all carrying books, digital resources, and educational programs to people who lack regular library access. Lakshmi, Nanda, Choudhary, Prabhu, Tuteja, and Biswal (2025) add that these varied initiatives share the same underlying goal, which is expanding access to information, education, and knowledge resources in remote and underserved areas.

Looking across this literature, three broad delivery models recur. An embedded model commits a van to a small, fixed set of partner sites, such as schools or health centres, and returns to them on a predictable schedule. A circuit model rotates a van through a wider set of stops across a district or region, trading depth of contact at any one site for broader geographic reach. A demand-responsive model deploys a van to a location only when a community requests it, which keeps costs down but depends on communities already knowing that the service exists. Most of the initiatives described in this literature combine elements of the first two, since regular contact matters more for building trust than for covering the widest possible area (Udoh and Okorie, 2021; Bashaw, 2010). Which model a program follows has direct consequences for literacy outcomes, the subject of the next section.

Mobile Libraries and Literacy Development

The educational needs that mobile library programs can address include basic literacy skills, access to reading materials, and opportunities for lifelong learning, needs that follow directly from the barriers described in the previous section. Mobile libraries serve populations with restricted access to formal learning institutions and provide essential educational content to those who lack regular access to books and learning resources (Oghenetega, Erimieleagbon, and Ugulu, 2014). Functional literacy development, reading habit formation, and access to diverse literary resources that support self-education sit at the centre of this work, and mobile

libraries pursue them by delivering educational materials directly to underserved populations rather than waiting for residents to travel to a fixed site (Yarrow & McAllister, 2018).

These needs translate into measurable outcomes when programs sustain contact with a community over time. Mobile library vans support literacy by cultivating a reading culture from the grassroots level, where early exposure to books encourages literacy and sparks curiosity in children while adults benefit from engaging with materials that build knowledge and skills relevant to their own lives (Suzuki, 2017). For children in underserved communities in particular, mobile library initiatives spark a love for learning and nurture reading habits while opening new doors of opportunity, reaching people that fixed-site services cannot reach and helping build a more literate and informed society (Mersand, Gasco-Hernandez, and Udoh, 2019).

The available evidence on outcomes, though still limited, points in a consistent direction. Woltjer (2018) frames this as a transformative role in expanding access to information, education, and knowledge resources, one that addresses large educational gaps in remote areas. Hisham and Abdullah (2018) report a statistically significant correlation between mobile library access and literacy improvement, with measurable effects on reading comprehension and functional literacy skills specifically. Yet these literacy gains do not accrue evenly or automatically. They depend on how consistently a program can operate, on whether it reaches the same households often enough to build a reading habit rather than a one-time impression, and on whether the resources it delivers match what a community actually needs. Those operational conditions are not guaranteed, which raises the practical challenges considered in the next section.

Challenges of Mobile Libraries

Mobile library van educational programs face significant funding and resource limitations that hinder their effectiveness and sustainability according to research findings. Mobile library programs often rely on government grants, donations, or non-profit funding, and limited budgets can restrict the ability to purchase new materials, maintain vehicles, and hire qualified staff, affecting service quality and reach (Lingel, 2018). These financial constraints prevent mobile libraries from expanding their operations and updating their collections to meet changing community needs. The infrastructure and accessibility issues present another major

challenge as poor road conditions, extreme weather, and geographic isolation can make it difficult for mobile libraries to reach certain areas consistently (Hart, 2012). In some regions, lack of electricity or internet connectivity poses additional barriers to service delivery and limits the types of educational programs that can be offered.

Vehicle maintenance and operational obstacles are a serious challenge that affects the reliability of mobile library van services. Key challenges include limited funding, poor infrastructure, difficult terrain, vehicle maintenance, and the need for sustainable community engagement according to mobile library research (Elton, 2015). The multiple regression analysis revealed that mobile library usage has strongest impact on literacy improvement, yet logistical constraints and insufficient technology impede regular and effective service delivery (Datta & Das, 2018). Despite their potential, challenges including funding shortages, logistical issues, and limited technological infrastructure hinder their full effectiveness in rural communities (Uzuegbu, 2016). These operational barriers prevent mobile libraries from maintaining consistent schedules and reaching all intended beneficiaries.

Limited technological infrastructure and inadequate user education further compromise the effectiveness of mobile library educational programs. Several challenges were identified including limited bandwidth, content ownership, licensing and digital rights management, privacy and security concerns, high costs of service provision, inadequate user education, restrictive library policies on mobile device usage, maintenance issues, and the need for better staff training on technology (Akbari, 2019). Mobile libraries serve communities in various ways but their contribution to supporting digital inclusion in non-urban areas has not been fully explored, yet mobile librarians provide digital inclusion services predominantly access to technologies and skills development (Bhoj, 2020). This shows that though proficiency level among students was high, there would still be the need for library management to train users to fully appreciate the use of these gadgets in accessing library services.

Research Gap

Existing studies on mobile libraries cover three main areas. One group of studies describes what mobile libraries are and how they operate, covering vehicle design, service delivery, and day-to-day management (Lakshmi, Nanda, Choudhary, Prabhu, Tuteja, and Biswal, 2025; Bikos and Papadimitriou, 2018). A second group measures outcomes such as reading habits, literacy scores, and user satisfaction, often in a single country or region (Hisham and Abdullah,

2018; Datta and Das, 2018). A third group examines the operational barriers that mobile libraries face, such as funding, infrastructure, and staffing (Lingel, 2018; Hart, 2012).

These three groups of studies establish that mobile libraries matter and that they face real constraints, but taken together they leave a specific opening unaddressed. They do not examine mobile library vans specifically as educational program platforms, and few of them apply a theory of how these services spread and gain acceptance within a community. Most treat mobile libraries as a general outreach service rather than as a distinct educational intervention with its own adoption pattern, and few connect operational challenges directly to program design choices such as scheduling, staff training, or content selection. The studies that describe outcomes and the studies that describe barriers also rarely speak to each other, so a program can be shown to improve literacy in one study and to face funding shortfalls in another without either study explaining how the two are connected.

This paper addresses that gap by treating mobile library vans specifically as educational program platforms, and by applying the Diffusion of Innovation Theory to explain how these programs are adopted, who adopts them first, and what factors help or hinder that adoption in underserved communities. Framing operational barriers, such as irregular scheduling or weak user training, as barriers to diffusion rather than as separate logistical problems is what connects the outcome studies to the barrier studies described above. This gives the paper a theoretical basis and a specific focus that most of the existing literature does not provide, and it sets up the theoretical and practical framework developed later in this paper.

Practical Framework for Mobile Library Vans as Community Learning Platforms

A theoretical framework for mobile library service delivery can be developed using grounded theory approaches that investigate factors contributing to the delivery of library services to mobile users. Research indicates there is widespread acceptance that nomadicity of library users is a phenomenon that will continue to increase, yet mobile library service models must adapt to meet these changing needs (Yarrow & McAllister, 2018). A model developed during an investigation using a grounded theory approach provides factors that may contribute to the delivery of library services to mobile library users effectively. This theoretical foundation helps establish principles for designing mobile library programs that prioritize accessibility, flexibility, and community engagement as core values.

Community engagement and sustainable funding models are practical essentials for ensuring the success of mobile library initiatives as community learning platforms. According to Clark and Pan (2014), this explores the impact of mobile library services on rural dwellers, market women, farmers, adults, and children, highlighting their potential to promote literacy, economic development, and community empowerment by examining unique needs and showcasing successful case studies. A study by Bashaw (2010) underscores the importance of tailored services, community engagement, and sustainable funding models in ensuring the success of mobile library initiatives. Ensuring long-term sustainability and scalability requires innovative solutions, such as community partnerships and diversified funding sources that support program continuity.

The practical framework should incorporate community-based reading programs that train local volunteers and establish reading hubs through mobile library vans equipped with necessary resources. This is a community-based reading program designed to improve literacy rates among children aged 5-16 by providing accessible, engaging, and culturally relevant reading materials and activities through mobile libraries in Cameroon (Akbari, 2019). The program trains local volunteers as reading facilitators, establishes reading hubs, and hosts reading activities that encourage a love for learning and improve literacy skills through weekly reading sessions and interactive literacy activities (ALA, 2019). Mobile libraries improve reading habits, functional literacy, and lifelong learning by leveraging flexible service models and assessing effectiveness in underserved communities through accessibility, engagement, and educational outcomes. Results indicate statistically significant correlation between mobile library access and literacy improvement, with effects on reading comprehension and functional literacy skills (Hisham & Abdullah, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Everett Rogers developed the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, first published in 1962, and it provides the theoretical foundation for this study on "Mobile Library Vans: Reaching Underserved Communities with Educational Programs." The theory explains how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread through a social system over time through specific channels of communication. Its main elements are the innovation itself, the communication channels used to share information about it, the time it takes for adoption to occur, and the social system

within which diffusion happens. The theory sets out to explain how innovations are adopted, to identify what influences the speed of adoption, and to describe how new practices become accepted within a community. Rogers proposed that innovations spread through a population in a predictable pattern, that adoption depends on how potential users perceive five characteristics of the innovation, namely its relative advantage, compatibility with existing needs, complexity, trialability, and observability, and that a population sorts into five adopter categories: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The theory further holds that social systems have structures, formal and informal, that speed up or slow down communication, that individuals weigh costs and benefits before adopting an innovation, and that opinion leaders and interpersonal networks shape how quickly an innovation moves through a community.

In this study, the mobile library van itself is the innovation, and the underserved community is the social system through which it must spread. Applying Rogers's five characteristics of an innovation to this case sharpens the analysis: a mobile library van offers a clear advantage over having no library access at all; its compatibility depends on how well its books and programs match local languages, literacy levels, and daily routines; its complexity is low for basic borrowing but rises once digital tools are introduced; its trialability is high, since a resident can attend a single session at low cost before deciding whether to keep participating; and its observability is high in small communities, where one household's use of the van is visible to neighbours and can prompt word of mouth adoption. The theory's communication channels map onto the routes, schedules, and word-of-mouth networks through which communities learn that a van is coming and what it offers, while the time dimension maps onto how repeat visits build trust and move residents from awareness to regular use. The adopter categories help explain why some residents, often those already engaged with schools or community groups, use the van from its first visit, while others adopt it only after seeing reliable service over several months. Read this way, several of the challenges identified earlier in this paper, such as poor infrastructure, irregular scheduling, and weak user training, are not simply logistical problems. They are barriers to diffusion: irregular scheduling breaks the repeat contact that builds trust and moves communities along the adoption curve, and weak user training limits how well residents can use the technology aspects of the service, which lowers its perceived advantage and slows adoption of the digital components in particular. The practical and theoretical framework proposed later in this paper is built on this reading of the theory, aiming

to strengthen the specific factors, communication channels, trialability, and visible reliability, that Diffusion of Innovation Theory identifies as central to how communities take up a new service.

Conclusion

This study on "Mobile Library Vans: Reaching Underserved Communities with Educational Programs" has provided a clear picture of the role that mobile library services play in bridging educational and informational gaps for underserved populations. The research analyzed the challenges affecting the effectiveness of mobile library van educational programs, including funding limitations, poor infrastructure, vehicle maintenance issues, inadequate technological resources, and insufficient user education. The study also proposed both theoretical and practical frameworks for strengthening mobile library vans as community learning platforms, using the Diffusion of Innovation Theory as its foundation to understand how these services spread through communities and are adopted by target populations. Findings revealed that mobile library vans serve diverse communities by extending educational resources and information to places where traditional brick-and-mortar libraries cannot reach, offering flexible, accessible, and cost-effective services that help bridge the digital and literacy divide. Despite facing significant operational barriers, mobile libraries demonstrate statistically significant correlation with literacy improvement and have the potential to transform reading into a domino effect of social resilience when properly supported with adequate funding, community engagement, and sustainable service models.

Recommendations

1. Library administrators and policymakers should develop diversified funding sources beyond single government grants to ensure long-term sustainability of mobile library van programs.
2. Mobile library programs should be equipped with modern technological infrastructure including mobile internet connectivity, computer stations, tablets, and digital access points to support digital inclusion in non-urban areas.
3. Library organizations should establish community-based reading programs that train local volunteers as reading facilitators to support mobile library educational programs and create sustainable community engagement.

4. Mobile library services should implement strategic route planning that considers geographic challenges, poor road conditions, and community needs to ensure consistent and reliable service delivery.
5. Library institutions should design and implement comprehensive training programs for both mobile library staff and community users to maximize the effectiveness of educational programs and technological resources.

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