

Chapter 6: Collections Storage

Every effort must be made to minimize the level of risk facing specimens and artifacts as a result of storage and use.

–*Guidelines for the Care of Natural History Collections*, Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, 1998

Librarians must be committed to preserving their collections through appropriate and non-damaging storage....

–*American Library Association Preservation Policy*, American Library Association, 2001

An accreditable museum must demonstrate that it allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collection....

–*A Higher Standard: Museum Accreditation Program Standards*, American Association of Museums, 2005

Storage is a critical component of preventive collections care because, with few exceptions, it is the environment in which collections are held much of the time. At archives, libraries, archaeological repositories, and scientific research collections, most collections are held in storage areas until accessed by researchers or occasionally placed on exhibit. While museum and historical society collections are more likely to be exhibited, it is often temporary, after which they are returned to storage. Most museums and historical societies hold many more collections items than could ever be exhibited at one time.

The Heritage Health Index asked institutions to report the percentage of collections held in adequate storage, which was defined as large enough to accommodate current collections with

safe access to them and appropriate storage furniture. Respondents were given a range of percentages from which to select. Given the importance of proper storage, it is troubling that only 11% of institutions have adequate storage facilities for all their collections (figure 6.1). An additional 25% have less than ideal storage—80% to 99% of collections stored in adequate areas—but even on the low end of this range, this could be considered acceptable if institutions are consistently working to improve storage conditions. The remaining institutions, 59%, have more significant storage concerns: 8% have no collections in adequate storage; 12% of institutions have only 1-19% of their collection stored properly; 10% of institutions have 20-39% in adequate storage; 12% have about half of their collection stored appropriately (40-59%); and 17% have 60-79% in adequate storage. Six percent don't know the adequacy of their storage facilities.

Seen by type of institution, museums (9%) and libraries (8%) are slightly more likely to have no collections stored in adequate areas (figure 6.2). Museums (6%) and historical societies (3%) are least likely to have 100% of their collections stored appropriately, as well as least likely to have 80%-99% stored correctly (16% for historical societies, 21% for museums). Archives (42%), libraries (47%), and archaeological repositories/ scientific research collections (44%) are more likely to have

Fig. 6.1 Percentages of Institutions' Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately

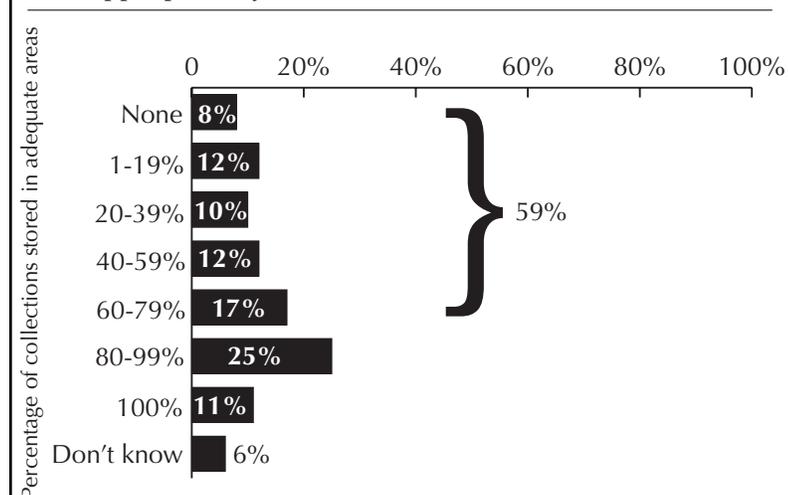


Fig. 6.2 Institutions' Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately (by type)

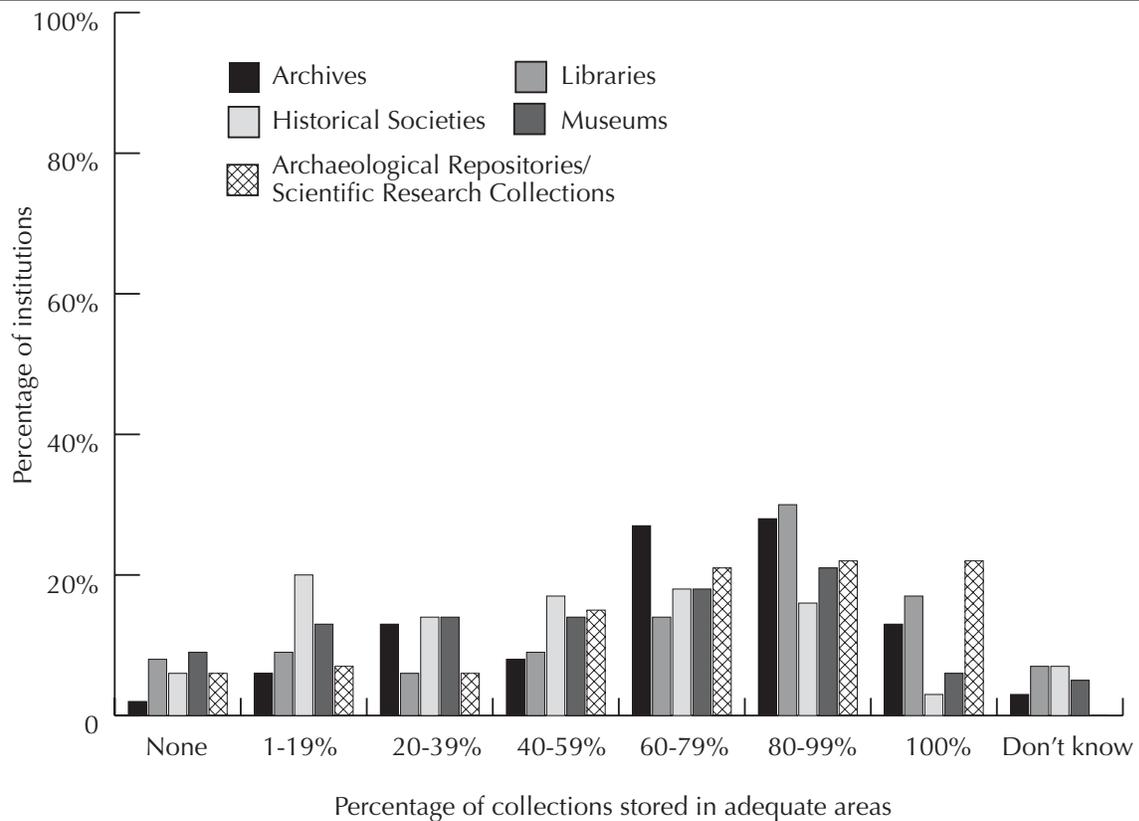
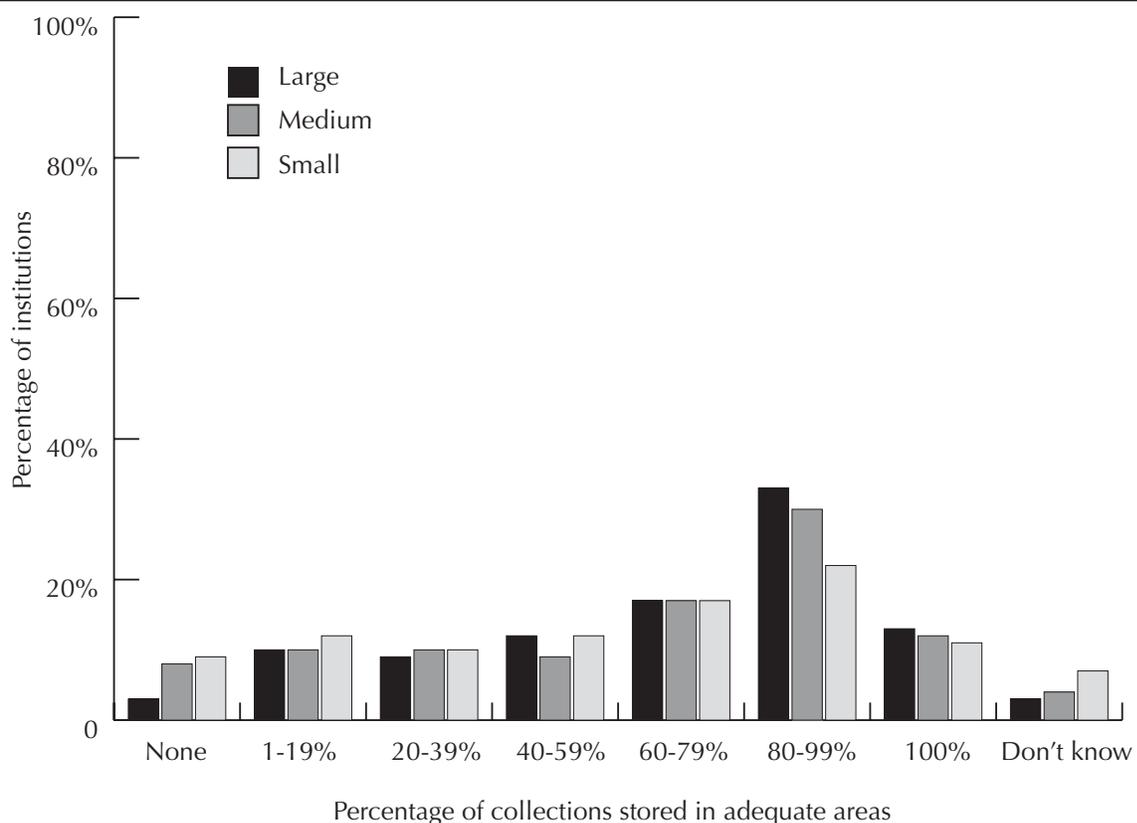


Fig. 6.3 Institutions' Collections Stored in Areas Large Enough to Accommodate Them Safely and Appropriately (by size)



more than 80% of their collections stored in adequate areas.

Considered by size, large institutions and medium-sized institutions are more likely to have more than 80% of their collections stored in adequate areas, but the figures for large and mid-sized institutions are relatively similar (large 46%, medium 42%, and small 33%) (figure 6.3). Viewed by governance, the results are relatively similar, with the exception of 25% of tribal-governed institutions having no collections stored in adequate areas. More than 80% of collections are stored properly at 42% of federal, state, and county/municipal institutions. The percentage of collections in adequate storage does not differ significantly by region.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate where improvements were needed for storage that is not adequate. They were given four categories of improvement: additional on-site storage, additional off-site storage, renovated storage space (either on-site or off-site), and new or improved storage furniture/accessories (such as shelves, cabinets, racks). Figure 6.4 illustrates the need and urgent need for storage improvements. About two-thirds of institutions indicated need in each of the four categories. There is an urgent need for additional on-site storage at 32% of institutions, storage renovations at 31% of institutions, new/improved storage furniture at 29% of institutions, and off-site storage at 23% of institutions. Among institutions that selected urgent need in more than one category, 3% selected urgent need for all four, 7% for three, and 11% for two areas of improvement to storage. Results are fairly equal across institution types, but one-third of archives, historical societies, and museums have an urgent need for new/renovated storage, compared with one-quarter of libraries and archaeological repositories/scientific research collections having an urgent need for storage renovations. By size, results are close to the totals, with the exception of large institutions having a greater urgent need for off-site storage (32%).

Fig. 6.4 Institutions' Need for Storage Improvements

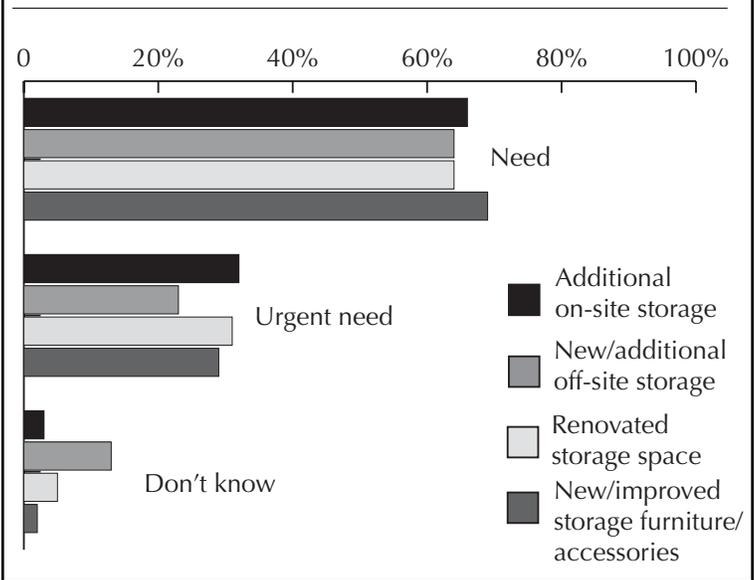
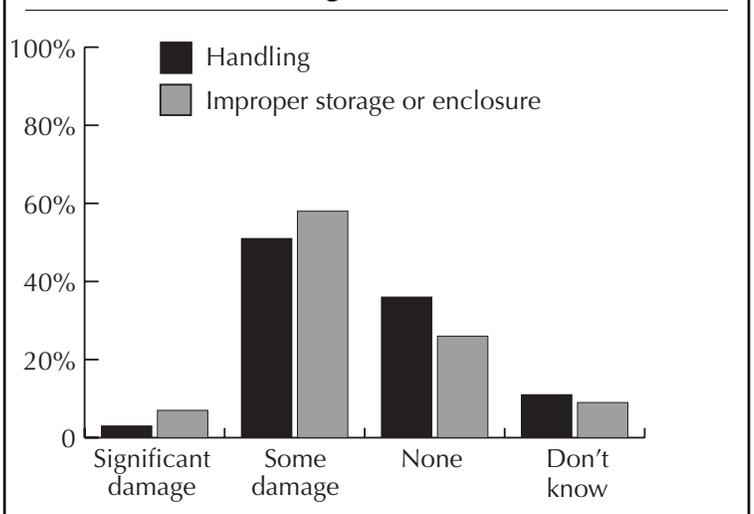


Fig. 6.5 Institutions Reporting Causes of Damage to Collections from Storage Conditions



Improper storage or enclosures, which could cause collections to be crushed, bent, creased, adhered together, broken, or otherwise damaged, ranks as one of the greatest threats to collections documented by the Heritage Health Index. As seen in figure 6.5, 7% of institutions have had significant damage to collections due to improper storage or enclosures, and 58% have had some damage. Damage from handling can also be related to improper storage because cramped conditions make item retrieval by staff or researchers risky. Significant damage due to handling has occurred at 3% of institutions, and some damage from handling has happened at 51% of institutions.

Not surprisingly, adequacy of storage and damage due to improper storage correlate. Institutions with 100% of their collections in proper storage report low levels of damage due to storage. As the number of collections stored in adequate areas decreases, the amount of damage due to improper storage or enclosures increases. The percentage of institutions that don't know about damage due to improper storage also increases as the percentage of collections stored in adequate areas decreases.

Storage can be a challenging preservation issue to address if collections have outgrown

available space and new facilities are necessary. This represents a considerable expense. Storage might be in areas known to have imperfect environmental conditions, such as basements, attics, or commercial storage warehouses, and to correct the problems would demand a significant investment. Improving storage conditions by re-housing items in proper enclosures or storage furniture requires extensive human resources. Since collections storage is often out of the public eye, many institutions may be deferring solutions to storage issues. To do so puts collections at undue risk.

Recommendation

Institutions must give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust.