Off the Shelf ... A review of selected law library resources

Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports

Have you ever wondered how Senators and Representatives stay informed about the multiple domestic and international issues which Congress addresses? In part, they rely upon their personal staff, but they also have access to an elite group of lawyers, economists, reference librarians, social, natural, and physical scientists, and other members of the Congressional Research Service (CRS).

CRS is organized into five interdisciplinary research divisions: American Law, Domestic Social Policy, Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade, Government and Finance, Resources, Science, and Industry. Unlike the permanent committees of the House and Senate (e.g., House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, etc.) which study issues and recommend legislation, CRS is a nonpartisan institution. In sum, “...its purpose is to inform, not to persuade.” Consequently, CRS’ main responsibility is “...to ensure that Members of the House and Senate have available the best possible information and analysis on which to base the policy decisions that the American people have elected them to make.”

As a result of its dedication to this mission, CRS is well known for producing accurate, objective, balanced, and dependable reports on a wide range of issues, events, laws and government programs.

So, if you’re interested in a straightforward and comprehensive overview of the most pressing current and historical issues which Congress has faced, CRS Reports are a great place to start your research. In the past it was extremely difficult for members of the public to obtain copies of CRS Reports. Happily, the internet has made CRS Reports far more accessible (although they are still not publicly distributed) than they used to be. For example, Open CRS provides direct access to all of the CRS Reports already in the public domain including these recent publications: Afghanistan; Politics, Elections, and Government Performance, Accelerated Vehicle Retirement for Fuel Economy: “Cash for Clunkers”, Judge Sonia Sotomayor: Analysis of Selected Opinions, Summary of Waxman-Markey Draft Greenhouse Gas Legislation. In addition to listing “Recent Reports” and allowing users to search for specific Reports or keywords, Open CRS also includes a Featured Collections page which links to other organizations (e.g., National Council for Science and the Environment) that have assembled collections of reports on the same topic (e.g., Biodiversity, Climate Change, Natural Resources, etc). The University of North Texas Libraries also includes a publicly accessible CRS Reports Archive by Subject, which includes 78 subject divisions from A (Abortion – Aged – Agriculture – Air pollution – Animals) to W (Water pollution – Water Resources – Weapons Systems – Welfare – Women).

Nevertheless, many CRS Reports are not publicly available online. However, several subscription based services including LexisNexis Congressional also provide access to CRS Reports. Although LexisNexis Congressional’s CRS database (1916 – Present) is not exhaustive, it does include many CRS Reports that are not otherwise available. Additionally, LexisNexis Congressional’s “Advanced Search Form” gives you far more control over your query (e.g., search by: keyword, title, subject, date, etc.) than the search interfaces available through Open CRS and other publicly accessible repositories of CRS Reports. See LexisNexis Congressional’s “How do I access Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports?” page to learn more about Basic, Advanced, and Search by Number options.

For more information on CRS Reports as a whole (including a brief history of CRS and the campaign for public access to CRS Reports) see Stephen Young’s Guide to CRS Reports on the Web or one of your friendly Research Librarians!

-Chris O’Byrne

2. Id. at 2.

ACTION ALERT!

Would you like more access to CRS Reports? The Government Relations Office of the American Association of Law Libraries recently posted an Action Alert asking people to write to their representatives in support of legislation that would require all of the CRS Reports, plus an index of these reports, to be made publically available online. Indiana’s Senator Lugar is a co-sponsor of this bill (S.Res. 118). Check out the AALL’s Action Alert and consider adding your voice in support of this issue.