Evolving Equitable Access: Evaluating the Los Angeles Public Library System's Impact on Wealth Inequality

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Abstract

Despite chronic underfunding nationwide, public libraries have become more utilized than ever with extensive digital resources and adapted programming. Including the perspective of the Covid-19 pandemic, this work aims to answer how recent changes have shaped the impact of resources provided by public libraries that impact the prevalence of wealth inequality. Serving the largest and most diverse population out of any library system in the United States, the Los Angeles Public Library System is used as a case study to understand the impact of public library systems on wealth inequality. Previous literature on the role of public libraries explains public libraries as an example of "third places" argued to support upward mobility by providing space for the exchange of social capital and free access to information. A series of semi-constructed interviews were conducted with ten respondents and supplemental observation of data from the California State Library database. Public libraries were found to alleviate digital divides and inequities in information access through increased technology, and support and strengthen communities by providing essential career-related and financial services. The findings also prove the importance of adaptability as an essential quality of public library systems. Understanding library systems' impact on wealth inequality helps to explain how public libraries are valued as essential community organizations, which can be used to justify investment in public libraries nationwide to expand their impact.

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Introduction

From its conception, the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL) system has continuously evolved to provide resources that cater to the needs of the city of Los Angeles. Serving the largest and most diverse populations out of any library system in the United States makes the LAPL a valuable case study for evaluating how public library systems serve to address modern pressures of expanding wealth inequality. Examining the response to the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic including increased technological demand and a loss of shared space helps to explain the necessity of accessible library resources. This work aims to explain the importance of maintaining equitable access to library resources amongst widening wealth and digital literacy gaps.

Previous literature helps to understand how the role of the public library has been conceptualized in reference to its impact on wealth inequality. This writing explains how public libraries exist as "third space," build social capital and support community resilience. Including the context of the Covid-19 pandemic provides a new perspective on these concepts. These ideas frame the importance of understanding the impact of the LAPL system on wealth inequality in the city of Los Angeles. This analysis of the LAPL system offers a response to how recent evolutions of the library systems' operational capacities have affected accessibility to resources that impact the prevalence of wealth inequality. Conversations around these topics are meant to expand the perceived value of public libraries as essential community organizations.

A series of semi-constructed interviews were conducted with a selection of LAPL branch librarians and Central Library employees. Analysis of these interviews provides three main findings that explain how public libraries have adapted to continuously interrupt systems of inequity. This work concludes with a set of policy recommendations applicable for capitalizing

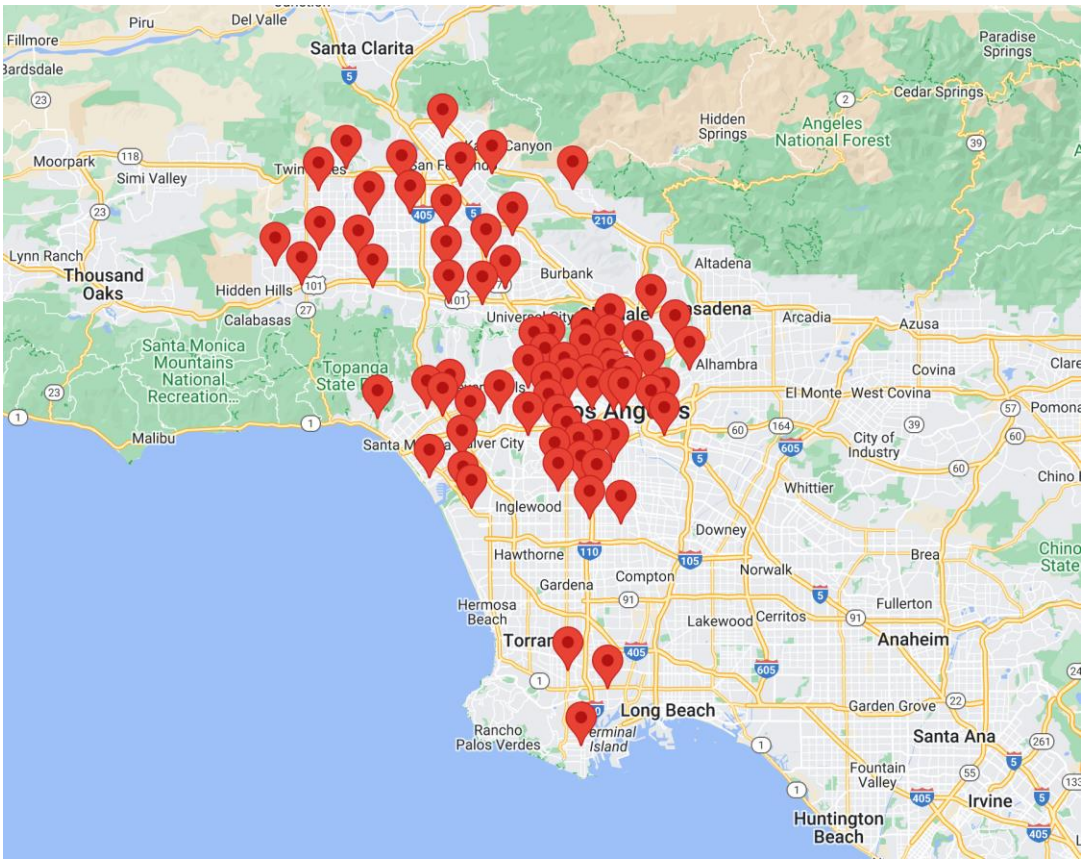
on the ability of public libraries to guide and serve communities through difficult times and promote the equitable well-being of community members.

Background Information

Current State of the LAPL

As of 2023, the LAPL system includes 73 locations: 72 branches and the Central Library, serving the largest population of any public library system (Los Angeles Public Library, 2015). The branches are located to serve equal proportions of the population of the city of Los Angeles based on a standard ratio designated by the LAPL - 1 square foot of library space for every 4 people based on a population of 50,001 (City of Los Angeles, 2001). See Figure 1 for a map of all LAPL locations.

Figure 1. Map of All LAPL Locations as of 2023



The red icons each represent one LAPL branch library location.

*Source: Los Angeles Public Library Branch Map

Covid-19 Pandemic

On March 13, 2020, the LAPL closed all of its physical locations. “Library At Home” and “Library To Go” initiatives were created as initial responses. To account for social distancing, libraries focused on shifting all resources and programming to be accessible from people’s homes (Los Angeles Public Library, 2020). During the pandemic, the LAPL was still able to hold many online events and classes (Lelyfeld, 2020). It was also possible to use the library’s free internet access, socially distanced, outside of the library building. Patrons were able to request books in advance and set up safe times to pick them up.

While the building was completely inaccessible for months, these changes created new forms of convenience and expanded opportunities for some to engage with the library in new ways. As a test of the limits of accessibility, the pandemic serves as an opportunity to examine how impactful the library’s resources are to people’s well-being. Without the availability of shared spaces, the value of accessibility to library resources both digital and physical can be studied with a new perspective.

Literature Review

Public libraries continue to be challenged to adapt to cultural and technological shifts. As common and steadfast community organizations, the public library’s ability to adapt to serve the developing demands of a community is an essential quality. A selection of literature on this topic has generally categorized the public library’s role and its potential to impact wealth inequality by its ability to serve as a space that fosters community resilience and provides essential information and services. The role of libraries in addressing the roots of inequality is explained by

Habermas's Theory, as he asserts the importance of access to public space for free information exchange. This theory is built upon by the concept of the "third place," a categorization of libraries among places that foster upward social and economic mobility. The importance of libraries as a place to address inequality specifically in times of crisis is examined by conversations around the idea of community resilience. This explains public institutions as a major contributor to communities' adaptive capacity. Recently, the ability of public institutions to address inequalities has been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic. This work will build on previous notions of the importance of the public library system as explained by earlier literature with a new perspective in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Habermas' Theory: The Foundation of Valuing Information Access as an Essential Condition of Democracy

Much early research in the Information Services field about the value of public libraries in the United States during the second half of the 19th century centered around the importance of libraries as information providers (Wiegand, 2003). These works focus on how individuals interact with the library in terms of acquiring education and information, which introduces the value of accessibility. However, this dominating perspective was limited to English-language research (Audunson et al., 2019). Jürgen Habermas, a notable Norwegian writer, had been expanding these ideas by thinking more about the role of the public library in communities as a space where social capital is built. This work was translated into English in 1989, 17 years after its original publication in Norwegian, and became a popular addition to the mainstream discourse around public libraries.

Habermas' theory explains the public sphere as an essential condition of democracy. He asserts that for people to be empowered it is essential to have protected spaces where free speech

and debate can take place, and information can be freely shared. He theorizes that inequality stems from the exclusion of certain groups from these spaces (Habermas, 1993). Public libraries embody Habermas's theory by providing spaces open to the public centered around information discourse. This idea has since dictated the direction of much research about the value of public libraries (Audunson et al., 2019).

The rise in popularity of Habermas' theory in the 90s coincides with the rise of the internet as it greatly expanded information access. Technological shifts forced literature to re-evaluate the role of the public library in a new light as information access was no longer as exclusive to the public library. This opens up discourse to think more broadly about the role of public libraries in larger networks and their greater impacts on social and economic inequities.

How Public Libraries Have Adapted to Technological Changes: The Importance of Digital Literacy and Maintaining Free Access to Digital Resources

Digital Resources Increasing the Popularity of Public Libraries

Within library systems, the concept of accessibility has remained a constant goal. Public libraries have modernized over the last century to provide access to relevant sources of information. Digital resources have since become increasingly essential tools for educational and economic advancement. In the late 90s in the United States, internet access became a more common resource for information needs. Public libraries, as dedicated providers of free access to information, took on the role of providing public internet and computer access. In a 2007 survey, 73.1% of libraries reported that they were the only provider of publicly accessible internet in their area (Bertot et al., 2008). Increased personal access to the internet has since shifted the role of libraries.

With digital resources largely dominating information access, visits to libraries and the number of books checked out have declined since 2009 (Rizzo, 2022). However, the ability to provide digital resources has made libraries more relevant than ever. The Institute of Museum and Libraries' survey shows that 53.7% of the US population is registered with a library as of 2022, which makes up the highest number of patrons recorded to date. With digital resources now making up the largest portion of library resources, the use of these resources is also at its highest rate to date with the highest amount of resources checked out per patron ever reported. By providing access to technology and digital resources, libraries continue to work to improve the digital divide as well as digital literacy.

Maintaining Accessibility Through the Increased Cost of Digital Resources

As public libraries responded to the public's interest in internet access and technological resources in the late 90s, debates about the structure and cost of public libraries became relevant. With the increased costs of providing these resources, some argued for restructuring public libraries towards a more economically centered model that would capitalize on the potential earnings of charging fees for the more valuable technological resources (Young, 1994). Others advocated for little to no fees, maintaining equitable access to all types of information access. This was referred to as the free-vs-fee debate, as libraries expanded their resources and programming the opportunity for greater profit called into question the importance of libraries operating at no additional cost to the public.

Buschman argued that imposing additional costs would dismantle the idea of libraries as pure representations of Habermas' theory (Buschman, 2005). He asserts the importance of accessibility, despite the way information access has changed. The value of public libraries over time is understood as not only a place to access information but a welcoming space for the

interaction of thoughts and cultures where ideas can be challenged and expanded. Buschman's analysis remains relevant as libraries continuously adapt and evolve to the conditions of rising wealth inequality in the United States and the prevalence of digital divides. The continual commitment to equitable access, despite increased demands and decreased funding, asserts the modern value of the public library.

How Public Libraries Support Upward Mobility by Providing a Space for the Exchange of Social Capital

Public Libraries as a "Third Place"

Research based on the importance of built environments helps to place the value of public libraries in the context of wealth inequality. The "third place" is a concept used in urban planning to describe a space other than the typical social environments of the first place - home - and the second place - work. It is a place that is supposed to be separate from these stressful and structured environments. They are centers of communication that provide opportunities for diverse connections (Oldenburg, 2005). The third place provides space for the public sphere to exist. Literature on the value of the third place can be used as another way to conceptualize the role of the public library since it falls under the definition. The third place has been argued as a way to support upward social mobility by equalizing the availability of social capital and shared information (Galster & Sharkey, 2017).

How Third Places Strengthen Social Capital

Social capital can be defined as the quality or amount of resources that an individual can access through their social network (Cook, 2014). This is an important concept to understand the role of third places in addressing wealth inequality. Third places expand an individual's access to greater and more diverse social capital. Social capital is explained as economically beneficial by

providing access to knowledge about economic opportunities, technologies, and markets and by facilitating collective action (Collier, 1998).

Samuel J. Adams asserts the importance of third places in providing social capital and strengthening communities. However, he argues that libraries are insignificant as third places because, he claims, "development incentives and conditions for private investment are a must" in order for a place to provide community satisfaction (Abrams, 2022). These claims are based on the fact that visits to the library have been declining since 2009 (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2020). This is an oversight, as explained earlier, public libraries are more popular than ever due to digital resources and still maintain a very high amount of visitors. Adams references that 59% of people in the United States report seldom or never visiting their local public library. This overlooks the 41% of people that do visit their public libraries making up the highest number of patrons to date (Rizzo, 2022). To argue that privatized third places are the most significant contributors to social capital is a limited perspective on significance, ignoring the importance of equitable access. Privatized third places only contribute social capital to select socioeconomic parts of communities resulting in a limited network of ideas. Including economic incentives in the conversation around valuing spaces that provide social capital goes against the essential quality of an equitable public sphere as being freely accessible to everyone (Habermas, 1993). Public libraries existing as accessible spaces and providing resources and programming that address inequity make them extremely significant third places.

The Exclusion of People for Third Places Produces Wealth Inequality: Public Libraries Offer a Solution

Habermas' theory explains that excluding groups from accessing spaces in the public sphere produces inequality. Third places strengthen social capital, which is an essential economic

resource. Therefore, it can be concluded that excluding groups from accessing third places contributes to producing wealth inequality.

Spatial opportunities and economic limitations exclude certain demographics' ability to benefit from third places. By examining the distribution of third places in the United States a significant gap was found in their availability in lower-income census tracts and tracts with higher populations of Black and Hispanic populations (Rhubart et al., 2022). This disparity is less applicable to public libraries since they are available in almost every community in the United States. Over 17,000 public libraries reach 96.4% of the United States population according to the 2013 Institute of Museum Library Services Survey (Badger, 2013). For scale, this is more locations than McDonalds or Starbucks, which is still true as of 2023.

The presence of a library in a community operates to provide space for equitable opportunity to engage freely with information, the exchange of ideas, and development of valuable skills and literacy for social and economic prosperity. Looking at the way libraries handle providing and adapting these resources in times of crisis solidifies their impact on communities.

How Public Libraries are Understood to Strengthen Communities

Defining Community Resilience

Community resilience is a measurement of a community's ability to adapt to adversity. It refers to the strength of interconnected systems in a community and how they respond to stress. While there are slight variations of definitions of community resilience, the most commonly used theory outlines a framework with four pillars: community competence, social capital, information and communication, and economic development. The theory explains community resilience as a possessed quality or ability that can be developed. (Norris et al., 2008).

Individuals, organizations, and institutions all play a role in building resilience. The idea of community resilience can be used to provide context for how the value of public libraries within a community is analyzed, importantly in this time period due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

How Theories of Disaster Response Have Become More Community-Oriented

The idea of community resilience has evolved over the last 20 years. Research on the topic of community resilience from 2001-2015 was found to focus on improving existing frameworks and models for recovery after a disaster. 9/11 marks the beginning of an increased interest in evaluating recovery systems. Criticism of previously used frameworks for recovery after 9/11 in 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 exposed the flaws in a top-down approach such as a lack of interconnectedness, communication, and coordinated effort (Bach et al., 2010). From 2016-2021 studies emphasized social capital and individual and governmental capacity (Fan & Lyu, 2021). This shifting perspective on disaster response takes into account the ability of entire systems to recover efficiently and the importance of parts of the system being oriented towards a collective solution.

Inclusion of Public Libraries in Community Resilience

To understand how libraries have evolved their capacity due to Covid-19 it is important to look at how libraries have responded to previous natural disasters and community stressors. A study to classify the many roles libraries take on in post-disaster situations, pre-Covid-19, found that libraries served mainly as "information disseminators; internal planners; community supporters, government partners, educators and trainers; and, information community builders." The study concluded that libraries typically did not have extensive disaster plans in place when

the event occurred, but responded in a localized manner, often repurposing existing resources (Patin, 2021). A localized response strengthens the process of community resilience by providing culturally and situationally relevant resources that aren't limited to the rigidness of a top-down approach as criticized earlier. This literature is helpful in evaluating the strength of public libraries' adaptation to the Covid-19 pandemic and how the implications of this response explain how libraries are able to address community-specific needs across varying demographics. It is important to understand libraries as part of a larger network that contributes to addressing wealth inequality, rather than a singular influence.

Public institutions, like libraries, are an essential part of a community's system of resilience because they provide a safe space to bring people together, distribute relevant information and resources, and connect individuals to all the benefits that come from engaging in larger response networks.

FEMA Designation of Libraries as Essential Community Organizations

In 2011 public libraries were officially recognized by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as "essential community organizations" which are defined as, "necessary to save lives, or to protect and preserve property or public health and safety." (FEMA, 2011, 2015). This designation resulted in a lack of clarity for librarians regarding the expectations of public libraries to adapt to this kind of responsibility (Patin, 2020). FEMA emphasizes the importance of a community-based approach to emergency response and names organizations that should be involved without clarifying exactly how.

Beth Patin criticizes the lack of clarity on this identification and suggests a framework of involvement based on the following ways libraries enhance community resilience: economic development, building social capital, information dissemination, and enhancing community

competence (Patin, 2020). Based on Patin's work, community resilience further develops the evaluation of a library's adaptive capacity to address specific community needs during times of crisis. As a "third place" specifically designated to aid people in difficult times, public libraries expand the social, financial, and technological resources community members are able to rely on.

The Issues of Wealth Inequality and the Role of Public Institutions

Wealth inequality remains a pervasive issue in the US with the top 10% owning 69.8% of the country's total wealth as of 2021. The extremity of wealth inequality has been further exacerbated by the global pandemic, with the top 1% expanding their share of wealth even more (Buchholz, 2021). With many places of work closed or shut down, unemployment rates reached a record high disproportionately affecting Black, Hispanic, and younger workers (Falk et al., 2021). The timing of this research makes wealth inequality a relevant issue to explore. The effects of the pandemic are an opportunity to examine the role of public institutions, like libraries, in addressing this issue.

Wealth inequality for the purposes of the work refers to systemic unequal wealth disruption. While it is a complex issue at the intersection of many socioeconomic distinctions including race and class, this work considers the availability of public resources, and how improving accessibility can include equity in order to target the most affected groups. The availability of public resources. Investment in support for public resources is explained to be relatively low in the United States (Pfeffer & Schoeni, 2016). This work examines public libraries' ability to provide specialized services and resources that target community-specific concerns like digital inequity, career and financial-related resources, and culturally relevant programming.

Further Research

A general framework for the value of public libraries based on literature published before 2018 defined three key facets of the public library that contribute to its social value: support for personal advancement, support for vulnerable populations, and support for community development (Stenstrom et al., 2019). This framework is mainly built on the conclusion that libraries have adapted to bridge the digital divide, provided resources for economic opportunities, and have been relevant in crisis response situations, among many other facets solidifying the public library as a key organization in communities. This work shows that there is a limited but growing interest in how to define the growing purpose of public libraries, which has become even more important considering the major shifts libraries were forced to handle due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With the new context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this work will aim to explore how moments of crisis affect accessibility to library resources that impact the prevalence of wealth inequality. This work is not to prove that libraries are the single most impactful determinant of an individual's economic success but to include addressing systemic wealth inequality in the conversation as one of the public library's major contributions to communities. This idea can help to inform policy recommendations that determine financial support for public libraries to expand funding and programming that will help to further their positive impact.

Methods

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with select librarians and LAPL employees across the City of Los Angeles and one anonymous respondent. The Public Libraries Survey from the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences was also used to examine the LAPL over time, visualizing and exploring the impact of library changes (California State Library, 2021).

Selection of Interview Subjects

Over 30 LAPL branch librarians were contacted with a request for an interview. Six agreed to participate. Five of the participants were Senior librarians of their branch. One was a Young Adult Librarian. Additionally, several Central Library employees were contacted, and three agreed to participate. Participants included the Branch Library Services Director, a Senior Librarian in Emerging Technologies, and the Digital Collections Librarian. There was also one respondent who will remain unidentified. Respondents are identified throughout the work as "Librarian" with a corresponding number to respect their privacy (See Appendix A for a full table of respondents identified by the branch library they are affiliated with).

As impactful community members, librarians have a valuable perspective on the extent of the library's ability to affect their community. The interviews focused on examples of how the library has evolved its programming and resources to respond to hardships and cultural shifts that have affected their communities and what the use of these services implies about the changing role of the library as an institution. Questions covered how each library addresses the needs of their specific community, the kind of resources/programming that are most impactful and how they are used, how the use of technology and digital resources in the library has changed over time, and how changes made during the pandemic affected library use (See Appendix B for the full interview questionnaire). The purpose of the interviews was to explain how specific library changes over time have affected these communities in order to understand how libraries affect wealth inequality across the demographics of Los Angeles.

All interviewees were contacted via email using available online information to set up a web-conferencing meeting at a time that was convenient for them. The interviews were approximately a half hour long.

Supplemental Use of Observing Data

Available data on LAPL users over time was incorporated as a factual base for claims about the use and impact of library resources. Data was sourced from the California Public Libraries Survey for the years 2015-2021 on the California State Library database. This data is collected as a part of the National Public Library Survey conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences (California State Library, 2021). The national survey quantifies state totals of library users, visits, collections, hours, staff, revenue, and both physical and digital resources for all public libraries across the United States. It is used to provide library statistics for information services research, policy, and decision-making. For this project, it was necessary to use the California State Library database in order to isolate data for just the LAPL system. This data is only available as far back as 2015. Observing this data for the selected years helped to determine how the Covid-19 Pandemic has affected the way people use the library. This work provides a visualization of the use and expenditure of digital resources over the years. It also observes the way the LAPL system is used by varying age demographics. The variables observed include electronic materials expenditure per year, circulation of electronic materials per year, program attendance by children, young adult, and adult groups per year, and the number of available programs by children, young adult, and adult groups per year.

Findings

Interviews were written up by either transcribing audio recordings or note-taking. This writing was then organized by the topics discussed. The topics were generally guided by interview questions, but also by some commonly mentioned themes that were not anticipated. These topics include the use of technology in the library, how different age groups use the library, and how communities generally perceive their library. Interview transcriptions were

coded to find patterns of responses within the topics. Identifying these patterns helped to translate shared experiences and opinions into the librarians' main ideas about the impact of the library system. Three main findings based on these conclusions are listed below. These findings are then analyzed and expanded on within the context of addressing wealth inequality.

Table 1. Findings and Supporting Quotes

Public libraries alleviate the digital divide and inequities in information access through increased technology.

- Public libraries provide access to modern specialized technology, so no one is left behind.
- E-media and virtual programming open up information access to a larger but limited audience.
- Tech lending addresses one of the most important aspects of digital inequity, personal access to physical technology.

Respondent	Quote
Librarian 2	"We have always had patrons who cannot always/consistently access a physical library site (accessibility, ability, health, transportation, etc.). This is a sad but familiar refrain, but the pandemic has highlighted and magnified many of these issues, so offering additional pathways to the library helps address these existing issues."
Librarian 8	"What we lacked in the kind of in-person experience, we kind of gained by the broader audience we could reach."

Public libraries support and strengthen communities by providing essential career-related and financial services.

- Programs available for every age level impact future financial success.
- Public libraries directly impact career readiness and financial literacy for adults by helping to establish connections and providing necessary materials.

Respondent	Quote
Librarian 5	"Public libraries nurture and encourage the journey of lifelong learning in many ways, having this foundation early on can be invaluable."
Librarian 3	"The library is committed to connecting users to resources and assists as much as possible with resume building, job searches, and other tasks when approached.

The ability to address community-specific issues proves the importance of adaptability as an essential quality of public library systems.

- The LAPL system uses a branch-level decision-making structure to effectively serve a large and diverse population equitably.
- Adapting to timely and relevant community concerns goes beyond openness and accessibility to specifically address the most pressing issues.

Respondent	Quote
Librarian 1	"People is what we do more than books, more than anything, our job is about people. … now we are filling a gap in a lot of our communities that isn't being filled by anybody else."
Anonymous	"What we offer has changed what it means to provide access. Increased focus on diversity and voices in the community, the way we approach that has changed… creating an environment where everyone feels welcome, everyone can benefit is a major initiative."

The Impact of Increased Technology in Public Libraries

Five of the ten interviewees discussed the increase in technology in libraries as one of the most notable changes they've seen over time. Examples ranged from beginning to allow residents to charge personal devices to institutionalized STEAM programming (Librarian 3, personal communication, March 1, 2023; Librarian 5, personal communication, February 15, 2023; Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023). The shift to providing more specialized technology reflects changing cultural expectations about the necessity of access to basic technologies. **Public libraries help to bridge the gap in accessibility so patrons are not left behind by technological advances.** Speaking of the increase in specialized technology, one respondent said:

> Many technologies are not easily available to everyone, and spaces and technology borrowed from the library alleviate these obstacles. Programs with VR, AR, coding, and the use of spaces with 3D printers, laser cutters, audio recording studios, and other technology, have increased the value of libraries in patrons' eyes. (Librarian 3, personal communication, March 1, 2023).

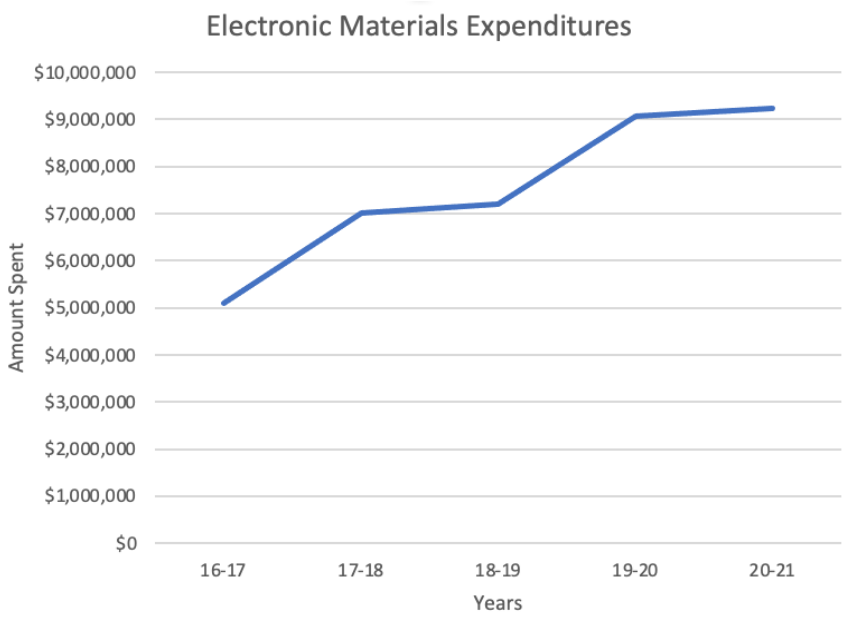
This response reflects the importance of libraries adapting to technological changes. Public libraries continuously work to provide equitable access to the most relevant forms of information access and technological resources. This opens up the opportunity for patrons to develop specialized interests and skills not commonly accessible to lower income households. The same patterns of equitable distribution of resources are reflected in the LAPL system's

response to Covid-19. The increase in e-media, the expansion of the Tech2Go program, and the impact of virtual programs all evidence this idea.

The Effect of E-media and Virtual Programming; A Larger but Limited Audience

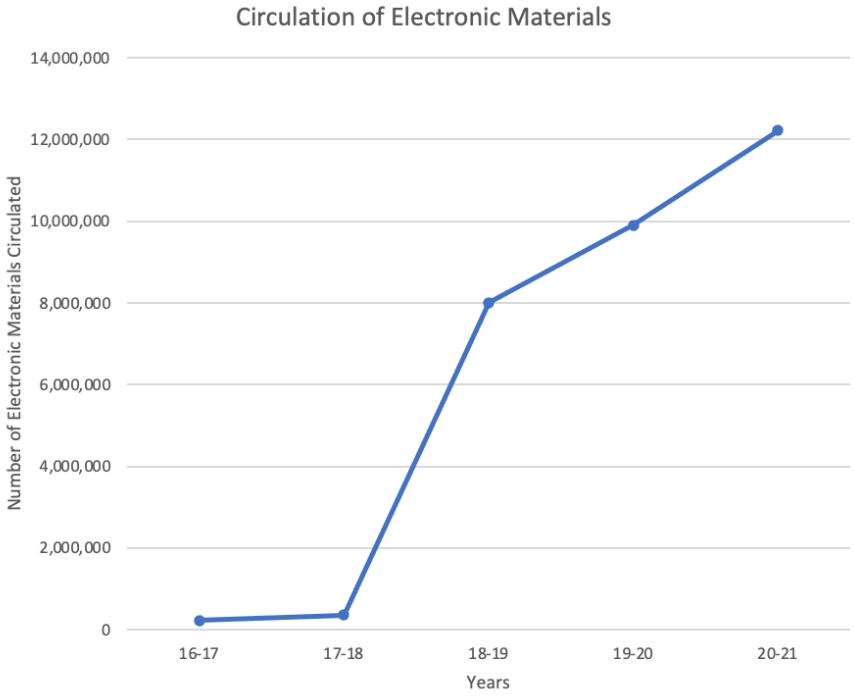
The LAPL system increased expenditure on electronic materials during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). The amount of new material available from this investment and the conditions of the pandemic also contributed to an increase in e-media usage. This follows the same trajectory as earlier years. While the data does not display a drastically greater increase of usage during the pandemic years, many respondents indicated that increased use of e-media was notable during this time (Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023; Librarian 3, personal communication, March 1, 2023; Librarian 5, personal communication, February 15, 2023; Librarian 6, personal communication, January 27, 2023). Figures 2 and 3 quantify these claims below showing the positive trend of increased electronic expenditure and circulation continuing through the pandemic. It is important to note for all of the observed data, data is collected per fiscal year which ends on June 30 so the Covid-19 Pandemic, reaching the United States. in March 2020, occurs within the 2019-2020 data set.

Figure 2.



*Source: California Public Libraries Survey 2016-2021

Figure 3.



*Source: California Public Libraries Survey 2016-2021

Virtual programming became a staple of operations for many institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, including public libraries. **Respondents explained how virtual programming was more accessible to a wider range of participants including nontraditional library users**, in some instances globally. Respondents agreed that hybrid programming is likely to stay in public libraries due to the increased accessibility (Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023; Librarian 2, personal communication, March 7, 2023; Librarian 3, personal communication, March 1, 2023),

Both the increased investment in e-media and virtual programming have the effect of making the library more accessible through digital platforms. As explained by one respondent, "What we lacked in the kind of in-person experience, we kind of gained by the broader audience we could reach" (Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023). While these changes expand the reach of the library to patrons who have internet access and personal devices, **respondents also recognized those being left out by the loss of the physical space** (Anonymous, personal communication, February 17, 2023; Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023).

Librarian 1 discussed that there are benefits of digital resources that won't go away, but it is important to find a way to bring people back into the building. There are aspects of the library that can't be replicated virtually (Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023). This conclusion is consistent with literature surrounding the importance of public libraries as physical spaces that provide social capital and promote democracy. Digital resources in this way may fall short as the most impactful way to address wealth inequality on their own. **Increased accessibility does not always correlate to being more accessible for everyone**, in this case especially those who benefit from freely accessible resources the most.

The Importance of Personal Access to Physical Technology

Started in 2018 the Tech2Go program responded to digital inequities by offering a bundle that includes a Chromebook or an iPad and an internet hotspot. Respondents identified the Tech2Go program as a resource created to target the digital divide, specifically for adults. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the program became an essential resource. While many academic institutions and workplaces provided tech-lending resources, Tech2Go is explained as filling the gap for adults who were left out of these opportunities.

The success of the program is hard to quantify since data on circulation is not yet available. As of December 2022, the Tech2Go program was expanded to all 72 branch locations (Mackey, 2022). While one respondent did say they were unaware if anyone had checked out a bundle yet, the increased investment and high praise from other respondents would otherwise imply positive results (Librarian 7, personal communication, February 21, 2023).

Long-term rental of a laptop and internet portal is an invaluable resource for patrons to work on digital academic and financial opportunities. The six-month loan period is also a thoughtful way to ensure patrons get the most use out of the program. The Tech2Go program represents an effective way for the public library system to use its reach to affect wealth inequality by increasing accessibility to these resources with the intention of targeting the digital divide.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the extent of the digital divide. Access to personal physical technology was more essential than ever. While the expansion of the Tech2Go program responds to this particular moment in time, it models the kind of structure necessary to enact long-term impacts on the prevalence of wealth inequality. The program provides individualized opportunities and long-term support. **It is important for people to have access to tools that can**

be beneficial in this way, on their own terms, with the ability to use them for their specific needs with no expectation of a cost for access. No one-size-fits-all approach can solve people's unique challenges that impact their financial success. Providing individualized tools is one important way public libraries support the well-being of the public.

The Impact of Essential Career-Related and Financial Services

How Programs for Early Ages Affect Future Financial Success

The LAPL system, like many libraries, offers a wide range of programming for all ages. In looking at how the library system provides resources that impact wealth inequality, respondents often categorized job and economic opportunities by their availability to different age ranges.

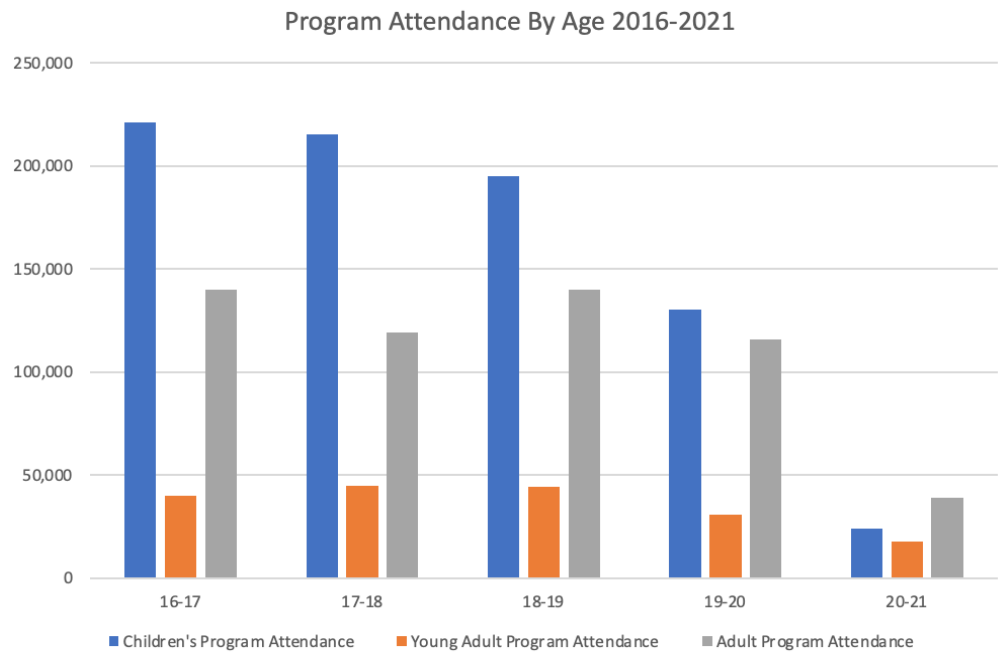
Public libraries are generally well-known for providing children's programming. Table 3 demonstrates that it is usually the most well-attended kind of program. Respondents also evidenced this by identifying the children's programming as the most popular and engaging among patrons (Librarian 4, personal communication, February 9, 2023; Librarian 5, personal communication, February 15, 2023). Public libraries are an essential foundation for early literacy. **These programs benefit families by offering additional educational support outside of a school setting that may otherwise not be available due to time and cost constraints.** Equitable access to resources that improve early literacy is essential for public institutions to provide because early literacy is one of the clearest predictors of well-being for a person later in life correlating with higher rates of academic and financial success (Rothwell, 2020).

Teen or YA programming was categorized as being more specific to the needs of the participants (Librarian 7, personal communication, February 21, 2023). These programs are described as seeing lesser numbers than children's programs, but higher levels of continual

engagement. Teen volunteer programs not only provide direct job resources in many cases with career workshops but also give participants the skills and experience necessary to translate into job opportunities (Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023).

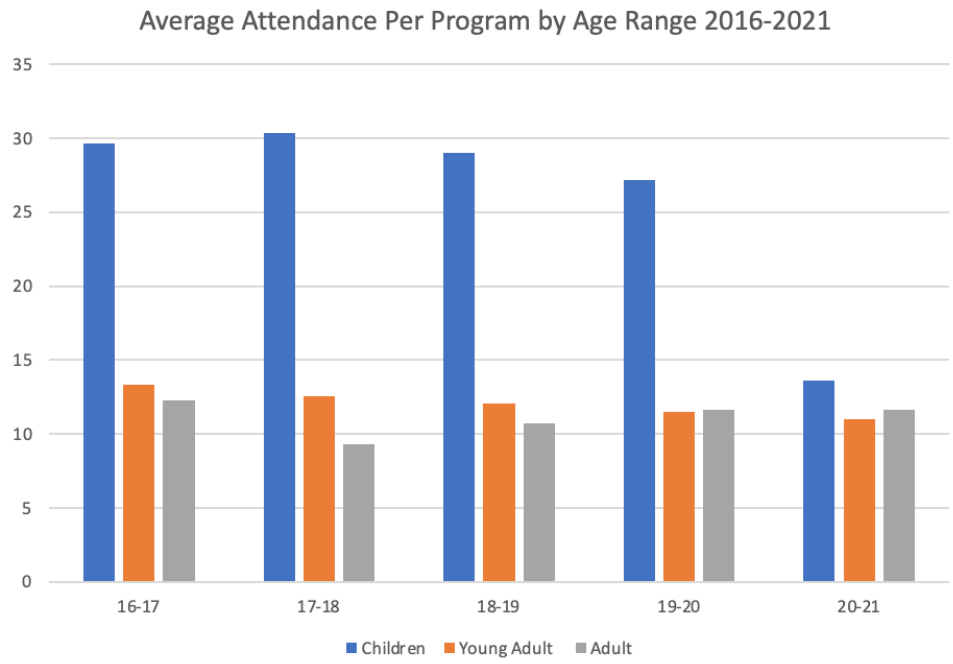
Figures 4 and 5 display the differences in program attendance by age. Most notably adults have consistently low attendance rates as compared to children or teens. Children's attendance rates are consistent until the pandemic in 2020, understandably due to safety concerns. This is consistent with responses regarding the popularity of children's programming.

Figure 4.



*Source: California Public Libraries Survey 2016-2021

Figure 5.



*Source: California Public Libraries Survey 2016-2021

As described by the respondents and supported by the data, engagement with programs that provide academic or financial resources is impacted by the varying levels of engagement within age groups. **Public libraries provide a lifelong support system for financial well-being** starting with the impacts of children's literacy through teen career readiness into the immediate impact of career-related resources for adults.

Essential Resources and Connections; The Direct Impact of Career and Financial Resources for Adults

Public libraries support job-seeking adults both through programming that helps to build the skills necessary to succeed as well as the physical space and resources necessary to connect with and apply to jobs. Respondents identified that these resources are currently available mainly in the Central Library. As explained by Librarian 6, "Pre-covid every branch used to be responsible to provide monthly types of programming and economics was one. Even though

Central was hosting a lot, the extending branches are [also] supposed to, but coming back slowly" (Librarian 6, personal communication, January 27, 2023).

While branch libraries may be slow to reinstate these programs, librarians are able to connect patrons to online resources as well as reference them to the opportunities available at the Central Library. Central Library Employee respondents described a robust system of career resources and opportunities through the Career Center, Digital Media Lab, and maker space (Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023). When describing these kinds of resources, respondents spoke highly of their ability to immediately and directly impact financial success (Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023). The success of programs at Central Library shows the LAPL system's capacity to effectively provide this kind of programming.

These resources help patrons access materials that could pose a barrier for individuals lacking in job experience, career connections, or the basic materials necessary to apply for a job. This exemplifies the role of the LAPL system going beyond traditional expectations of libraries, engaging in essential services that directly influence a person's well-being through financial literacy and support. Public libraries in every community help set up this system of support by existing as a place for people to get help with applying for jobs and the materials necessary. They are also a site to find job listings and opportunities as a center of community connection. The LAPL capitalizes on this opportunity with specific programs that provide career and financial literacy. **A public institution taking on this kind of role serves to eliminate the difficulty and elitism of job opportunities that exist in limited spaces**. It creates a fair structure that strengthens communities by expanding opportunities to anyone who may need support.

The Importance of Adaptability as an Essential Quality of Public Library Systems

Branch-Level Decision-Making as a Model for Equitable Support

As Librarian 5 states, “The library strives to be relevant to the needs of the community” (Librarian 5, personal communication, February 15, 2023). Understanding how the library system contends with serving such a large and diverse area helps to identify some of the ideals that drive the structure of the LAPL and how these operate to serve unique communities. Branch-level decision-making is an essential factor in appealing to community-specific needs. As explained by Librarian 2, “A lot of [decision-making] originates from the branches themselves, they know their community better than anybody else” (Librarian 2, personal communication, March 7, 2023).

In terms of addressing the variety of communities served in terms of economic status, Librarian 2 also explained that a base level of funding is allocated equally among the branches. When it comes to allocating specific grants or resources, to alleviate inequities **decision-makers look at which communities need the specific services or resources the most**. “We do have branch profiles of each community to get a sense of who's living there with the income levels. The city is starting to do a lot of work around income [inequalities], and different regions of the city that really do need additional help” (Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023). Having a centralized source of funding distributed though institutions that are tailored to specific communities makes sure resources are allocated fairly and effectively.

Additionally, Los Angeles librarians recognize the importance of serving culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse areas. Respondents identified that both patrons and librarians wish there were more culturally relevant programs available. Understanding the demographics of the communities that branch libraries serve as well as the importance of culturally relevant

programming is an essential component of how the LAPL system works to provide programming that is tailored across the entire City of Los Angeles. These equitable goals exemplify the ability of the structure of public libraries to serve large areas effectively by allocating resources based on the needs and demographics of specific communities.

How Accessibility Becomes Equity: Adapting to Timely and Relevant Community Concerns

An increased focus on mental health is one example of an initiative in LAPL libraries that shows the importance of adaptability. As of February 2023, social workers will be introduced to the LAPL library system, starting in the Central Library. An anonymous respondent explains, "This is a response to the changes in the community like increasing mental health issues... Having people in the library who are trauma-informed help to create safe spaces for everyone" (Anonymous, personal communication, February 17, 2023). In order to create an effective safe space, public libraries build essential support systems that address every aspect of a patron's well-being.

Another way the commitment to openness has evolved in the LAPL library system was identified as the decision to stop charging late fees. One respondent explains:

> In the past, those struggling financially have sometimes been reluctant to borrow library materials or even visit. Potential late item fines were a major deterrent for many; a potential financial hardship. This was a key reason our system moved to a fine-free model in 2020; to make library access more equitable. (Librarian 4, personal communication, February 9, 2023).

While the library system was considering this change pre-pandemic, the pandemic exposed the reality of the impacts of wealth inequality for many and made it an essential and timely decision. The decision to eliminate fines as a barrier to accessing the library is consistent with the literature discussed emphasizing the value of the library as a third place. One respondent

explains, “We're kind of a rare place in society where people can use a space for hours on end without any expectations of opening up [their] wallet” (Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023). Adapting a fine-free model is a clear indication of the library’s adaptability to continuously be as open and accessible as possible.

This accessibility also makes public libraries a safe space for individuals experiencing homelessness to have a safe space to go with helpful amenities and resources. Beyond being free, public libraries are one of the few indoor public spaces where anyone is allowed to spend time regardless. With the homelessness crisis in Los Angeles, the LAPL system also offers specific resources and programs in order to assist. Four respondents discuss the Source as one of the most impactful programs the LAPL system offers, specifically in reference to economic resources (Anonymous, personal communication, February 17, 2023; Librarian 1, personal communication, February 2, 2023; Librarian 5, personal communication, February 15, 2023; Librarian 8, personal communication, February 7, 2023). The Source provides wrap-around housing, economic, and social services for unhoused and low-income community members.

The new fine-free approach, focusing on mental health, and providing for citizens experiencing homelessness encompass how the library system recognizes and works to address some of the most pressing issues facing the City of Los Angeles. These aspects of the LAPL system show that openness goes beyond just letting people in the library. Accessibility to resources is the first step in addressing inequity. **Having resources that specifically work to alleviate symptoms of inequity is a characteristic public institutions need to embody in order to translate the well-meaning goals of accessibility into tangible change.** Providing these resources encourages people to use the library as a community resource. As discussed earlier, the library is really about people, not just books. These programs have the potential to

enact positive impacts on people's lives by addressing issues that need the most generous attention.

Policy Recommendations

The last strategic plan for the LAPL system was published in 2015 for the years 2015-2020. With the disruption of the pandemic in 2020, it makes sense that a new strategic plan has not yet been released due to the uncertainty of the following years. In 2023, as operations begin to return to normal, the following recommendations can be applied to developing a new strategic plan post-Covid-19 that addresses some of the most pressing issues identified earlier.

Prioritize investment in improving digital literacy and access.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the impact of the digital divide in terms of inequities to information access, investment in e-media resources and physical technology lending has been a timely solution. While these investments served to address Covid-related issues as the pandemic required an increased reliance on technology for many, the digital divide remains an issue that public libraries are well-equipped to address. Continual investment in these programs will ensure that library users will be able to rely on their local branch to help with the technological demands of career, educational, and financial opportunities.

With the recent expansion of the Tech2Go program, the library system should evaluate the effectiveness of the program by comparing lending numbers to branch location demographics. While the program is now available at all locations, evaluating the demographics of program participants could help make sure tech lending is equitably distributed and accessible. Making sure information about the program is widely available could also be a priority in the case that it is not as popular in some locations.

Expand branch-specific services and hours in all locations.

The Central Library is currently the go-to location for financial services such as the Career Center, as well as the introduction of the first library social worker. As some respondents mentioned, financial programs were available at branch locations pre-pandemic. It should be a priority to return to regular programming post-pandemic so opportunities currently offered by the Career Center are made available at regular intervals across all branch locations. To start implementing the expansion of the Career Center, regional central locations could be the first step to making sure patrons can access the resources they are referenced to without the barrier of transportation.

As explained earlier, the importance of the physical location of the library buildings being available to patrons who need a safe space, or benefit from the interactions provided by a freely accessible learning space, it would be optimal that library hours are consistent system-wide to be open as much as possible. Hours currently vary by location. While staffing and funding may reasonably limit this, it should be a goal to have all branch locations open 7 days a week with standard hours so the physical space is optimally available as much as possible.

Improve community outreach while prioritizing cultural relevance, community input, and accessibility.

Prioritizing cultural relevance and community input when creating programming echoes the interest of the respondents interviewed. This is also consistent with the goals of the previous strategic plan. In the face of increased book bans and conservative efforts against LGBTQ+ and critical race theory books and programming, this remains a relevant priority of public institutions to equitably serve their communities. The structure of public library systems in this work is argued to provide an equitable system of support. For all patrons to benefit from this system,

community input and cultural relevance should be a consistent consideration of library programming decisions.

With the benefits of in-person and virtual programming outlined, hybrid events seem like a worthwhile investment for appealing to people's varying levels of comfort post-pandemic. For events that don't require physical attendance, offering a virtual option is a great way to continue engaging patrons who benefit from being able to attend from afar. This could also be used as an opportunity to expand event attendance nationwide and globally and create diverse connections that wouldn't otherwise be possible. For programs that have a structure that lends itself to hybrid attendance, there is no reason to stop offering that option.

With children's attendance rates suffering the most due to the pandemic, the impacts of focusing on early literacy as well as socialization are more important than ever. Public libraries have consistently been a valuable resource for parents, it is essential that children's attendance rates are targeted post-pandemic to return to the value of this resource. Increased community outreach is always a relevant goal to make sure the opportunities that public libraries provide are well known and utilized.

Increase Funding for Public Libraries Nationwide Through Redistribution of Property Tax

Public Library Systems receive varying levels of federal funding decided on by local political decisions. Supported by the public through Measure L, the LAPL system is one of the more well-supported library systems across the US with a higher rate of property taxes allocated for funding. As discussed earlier this funding is equitably allocated across Los Angeles based on community specific needs. This model of centralized support for equitable distribution of public resources is identified in this work as an effective way to target wealth inequality. This work can be used to argue that other library systems across the United States could also produce similar

results given this kind of governmental and public support. **Public libraries systems can be used as an avenue for equitably redistributing increased property taxes based on assessed value.** While this may be difficult to achieve in smaller communities, the model of a centralized system in charge of equitable distribution could be built by creating larger networks of support with smaller library systems.

Limitations

The original plan for conducting this research was to interview 15 LAPL librarians, five each from low, middle, and high-income household areas. Comparing responses from these categories would have helped consider how the topics discussed specifically impact wealth inequality. There were some setbacks in convincing LAPL administrators to allow librarians to participate in the interviews. A loss of time and participants led to a shift in methodology, interviewing available librarians and some Central Library employees instead.

The available data on library users is also limited and does not include much demographic information, because it is not collected. This limits the kind of conclusions that can be drawn about how impactful programs and resources are for specific demographics. Data on library usage by race and median household income could provide a more nuanced understanding and be used to make much more specific recommendations. While public libraries will likely not collect this data to maintain the privacy of patrons, further research could survey library users about their socioeconomic status and individual experiences to gain more insight.

Conclusion

Evaluating the evolution of the LAPL system over the last few years, particularly in the face of Covid-19, has helped develop several important ideas about the value of public library systems. Previous literature identifies public libraries as a staple of maintaining democracy

amongst widening inequities in the US. The ability to provide space for social capital, community resilience, and access to evolving technologies are all agreed-upon qualities of public libraries by previous works. The findings of this work support previous literature and also introduce a new perspective post-pandemic about the reality of implementing the kind of programming that supports library values of openness and accessibility.

Through interviews with LAPL employees, it is clear the LAPL system works to uphold a decided focus on accessibility as it applies to the needs of the city of Los Angeles. By investing in digital resources and evolving technologies, prioritizing community-relevant and diverse programming, and working to provide career and financial-related resources branch wide for all ages, the LAPL system is arguably well suited to impact the prevalence of wealth inequality in Los Angeles. Examining what has resulted from the pressure of the Covid-19 pandemic proves the ability of public libraries to uphold essential values of equity and accessibility through difficult times. This adaptability quality plays a central role in the public libraries' modern value. As communities globally recover from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important that people can turn to public institutions for support. The LAPL system serves as a valuable example of the potential of public libraries to fill this role.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Table 1. Participants and Library Affiliation

Location	Branch Name	Title	Named As
Downtown	Central Library	Branch Manager	Librarian 1
Downtown	Central Library	Digital Collections Librarian	Librarian 2
Downtown	Central Library	Tech	Librarian 3
Hyde Park	Hyde Park Miriam	Senior Librarian	Librarian 4

	Matthews Branch Library		
Jefferson	Vassie D. Wright Memorial Branch Library	Senior Librarian	Librarian 5
Eagle Rock	Eagle Rock Branch Library	Senior Librarian	Librarian 6
Tujunga	Sunland-Tujunga Branch Library	Senior Librarian	Librarian 7
Studio City	Studio City Branch Library	Senior Librarian	Librarian 8
Silver Lake	Silver Lake Branch Library	Young Adult Librarian	Librarian 9
N/A	N/A	N/A	Anonymous

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Can you tell me your name?
What kind of experience and training do you have for working in the library?
How long have you worked for [specific library], can you tell me a bit about your role in the library? What kind of programs have you been involved in over the years?
In your opinion, out of all the programs your library offers, what have been some of the most impactful and why?

Can you describe the role the library plays in your community beyond book lending?
In your experience what are some major ways you have seen the library change over time?
How have shifts in technology impacted the library's resources? Is there a higher demand for digital resources and/or physical technology? How do you think this affects the way people value the library?

Are there resources/programs in the library that help to provide economic or job opportunities?
Do people often rely on the technological services in the library, in what ways? How important are these resources for people's well-being?

Who is the largest demographic of people you serve, are there other groups that are harder to reach? What kind of outreach does the library use to engage these groups?
Are there any specific challenges in [specific area] the library hopes to address? What are some of the community programs you offer, how do you decide what to offer?
How do you make sure the needs of the community are being met?

What are some of the most impactful ways the library benefits the community?

What was your experience working at the library during the pandemic?
What were some of the ways the library changed and how did this affect the patrons?
What were some of the ways your job changed, and how was the library staff affected?
Were there any ways that increased reliance on technology during the pandemic affected the library, do you think these impacts will have a lasting effect?
Have any other changes due to the pandemic affected the way the library will continue to operate? Are there any valuable lessons to be taken from the pandemic experience?

Have you experienced any pressure from the public, specifically people who criticize the amount of funding directed towards libraries or the kind of programs being offered? How would you respond to these criticisms?

Is there anything else you would like to let me know about these topics that I didn't ask about?