

Beyond the Books: Libraries as Essential Community Spaces

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Societies survived and flourished long before developed infrastructure, governing bodies, and 24-hour convenience stores entered the equation. While no established civilization, be it a town or a city, is exactly alike, they share a sense of community that has allowed them to transcend centuries of change. From a sociological perspective, the most basic idea of community is a group of people living near one another and collectively experiencing their daily lives. A successful community may require support and accessibility. These characteristics align with the core values upheld by public libraries, which are spaces that roughly 95% of the United States has close access to (American Library Association, 2025). Behind their quiet, reserved demeanor, libraries may be the key to supporting a community's well-being. Libraries are vital to communities because they provide literacy, education, and accessibility, but funding cuts and social challenges threaten their ability to function effectively.

Literacy takes many forms beyond the rudimentary ability to read and write. Financial literacy, digital literacy, and health literacy are a few examples that affect one's day-to-day life. However, many people will admit they are not as informed as they would like to be on these topics (TIAA Institute, 2025).

Libraries serve as key spaces for promoting health literacy and providing health information to their surrounding communities. Rural and low-income regions have a particular need for accessible health information but face steep barriers, such as limited internet access or inadequate health literacy. A growing number of public libraries have begun hosting health-related programs, including health fairs, health screenings, and immunization clinics, through programming and partnerships with local health organizations. A 2024 study found that health-related events held in libraries have proven effective, especially as mistrust and skepticism towards healthcare have increased following 2020. Aside from factors like mistrust, economic

barriers significantly affect one's ability to access healthcare. Research also shows that communities with lower health literacy are less likely to seek healthcare; accessible health education could prevent unnecessary death and severe, prolonged medical concerns (Fleary et al., 2024).

One of the barriers preventing people from accessing health information or other kinds of information is a lack of internet access, technology, or insufficient digital literacy. This scarcity of resources is known as the "digital divide", an obstacle that can be detrimental to one's quality of life by limiting opportunities to education and employment. Despite living in the digital age, 1 in 5 Americans lacks home internet access. Moreover, reliable broadband internet coverage is not the standard for rural and low-income areas (Grimes & Porter, 2023). The digital divide has led many to seek digital resources through the library, as it is a widely trusted public institution with free internet access and technology. A 2023 report from the American Library Association highlighted how libraries are partnering with other community resources to extend access to technical resources. Collaboration goes far, as seen in Shreveport, Louisiana, where the Shreve Memorial Library partnered with the city to implement a no-cost program that provides home internet access and devices to citizens in need (American Library Association, 2023).

Not only do the digital resources provided by libraries address everyday needs, but they also contribute to student success. Reliance on technology in K-12 and higher education gradually became more common following the turn of the century, but accelerated almost overnight during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academic success is threatened without a reliable device or internet access to support remote learning. A 2021 study conducted by Montana State University examined how librarians in Montana responded to the digital divide in higher education through increasing digital accessibility, providing technology loans, and offering

remote services. The librarians at Montana State University reported a drastic increase in requests for digital services following March 2020 and prioritized efforts to advance digital equity. The library already offered a technology loan program for iPads, laptops, and mobile hotspots, which is a common practice for public and academic libraries. However, the program had limited availability and loan periods. During the summer of 2020, the Montana State University library quickly worked to obtain 100 additional laptops with extended loan periods for students in need (Frank et al., 2026). Similarly, a community college library in Iowa reported checking out 143 laptops to students over a short period. Efforts by librarians to support students enabled them to continue on their academic paths during an unprecedented time, and this support has only grown stronger since 2020 (American Library Association, 2023).

Although it is clear that libraries' services extend far beyond books, it would be unjust to minimize their influence on a person's development of crucial reading literacy skills. Early childhood library exposure can have an outstanding impact on a child's future success, both as a student and throughout their adult life. The National Institute for Literacy concluded in a 1999 study that young children who are read to at home are twice as likely to recognize and understand words; this remains relevant and supported by new research two decades later (National Institute for Literacy, 2008). This finding enabled research into a correlation between library usage and early literacy. A 2016 study surveyed 200 parents in pediatric clinics about their public library use; 66% of respondents had a public library card, and 37.5% visited the library at least once per month. The 37.5% of parents who visited the library at least once a month were 3.5 times more likely to read to their children at home. Additionally, almost all parents in the study were interested in learning more about children's programs at libraries (Chen et al., 2016). Almost all U.S. public libraries (99%) offer children's programs, and around half of

all programs hosted by public libraries are for children, the most common types being summer reading, early literacy, and STEM programs (Public Library Association, 2023).

Children's programs may garner the most attention in libraries, but libraries offer equal educational opportunities for teens and adults. Developing literacy and becoming a lifelong learner can happen at any stage of life, regardless of education level, age, or background. Teen programs account for about a tenth of annual library programs, with most programs focusing on literacy and skill development. Adult education programs, including GED classes, are also a common offering in urban areas. Additional popular programs include book clubs, art and music programs, and other general-interest programs for library patrons of all ages (Public Library Association, 2023).

Libraries' dedication to supporting all members of their communities often takes unconventional forms that may seem unrelated to library work. Since libraries are fundamentally open, accessible spaces, it is logical that they would be grounds for outreach. Outreach is not limited to educational programming, however. The Public Library Association reported in 2022 that workforce training was one of the most prominent non-educational outreach services provided by libraries (Public Library Association, 2022). Not only do many libraries provide workforce training, but they also host services such as job fairs, food banks, and tax preparation clinics (Holcomb, 2025).

Civic engagement is another often overlooked form of community outreach in libraries. The United States has seen a decline in civic participation since the late twentieth century, yet has grown more divided, causing concern among the most ardent supporters of democracy. Libraries' core values are closely aligned with democracy, perhaps making them among the strongest neutral sources for fostering a civically informed and engaged society. Libraries first

began to take a role in civic education during and after WW2, when civic engagement was of great concern, and have maintained that role since. By providing a space for open conversation and education, libraries can bring even the most dissimilar citizens together (Kranich, 2017).

Considering the various ways libraries show up for their communities raises the question of how far their support will go. A 2025 article published in a UCLA journal examined the role of public libraries in crisis response following weather-related disasters in communities. Of the 856 responses from librarians, 65% reported experiencing at least one weather-related disaster within the past ten years. After Hurricane Ian struck Florida in 2022, the Lakes Regional Library in Fort Myers, Florida, was designated as a disaster recovery center. In fact, libraries are considered essential services eligible for federal relocation funding under the Stafford Act. Libraries across the United States have worked to respond to disasters and provide shelter, resources, and stability when citizens need it most. Unfortunately, most libraries and their employees are not equipped to respond to crises and lack training in emergency response. Thus, many librarians undertake emergency response plans out of care for their communities, not obligation (Antonelli et al., 2025).

However, not everyone sees the value of public libraries. Funding cuts have only increased in recent years, highlighting a clear issue, given that funding was never easily obtained to begin with. The majority of public library funding is received locally through property taxes and municipal budgets, but a significant amount also comes from federal grants that support technology and literacy (I Love Libraries, 2025). The largest source of federal funding for libraries, IMLS, is currently at risk of elimination under the U.S. government's 2026 budget request. Eliminating IMLS funding would make local government funding even more crucial. Local government funding relies on active, engaged citizens to cast their votes, which means the

fate of many public libraries would rest in the hands of their communities (King County Library System, 2025). While libraries still largely have public support, there is growing resistance to funding them.

The resistance to funding libraries rests on several arguments. Some opponents argue that libraries are a waste of money and taxpayer dollars because they are not relevant in today's society. Other arguments take a political approach, particularly regarding book banning, which quickly becomes divisive. Some opponents may believe libraries are just books and nothing more, but others recognize what libraries offer and maintain their opposition. These opponents not only support cutting library funding but also work to shut down certain library services altogether.

Funding is not the only concern in the tirade against libraries. Groups that engage in what could be considered anti-library activism have begun to become more vocal across the United States. While school libraries are most likely to face the brunt of backlash, libraries across the board have faced increasing hostility in recent years. From verbal assaults to physical violence and lawsuits against librarians, libraries are undeniably under attack (Kuhn, 2024). Much of this hostility can be attributed to the politicization of library services, as libraries vehemently uphold the core values of the ALA: accessibility, equity, and inclusion, words which have become politically controversial (Sutherland, 2024). This politicization corresponds with the resurgence in the push to ban books that do not align with one's personal beliefs; a form of censorship that libraries have historically fought back against (Kranich, 2017).

Much of the argument for book banning rests on "protecting children from inappropriate and harmful topics". This reasoning fails to recognize that many of the books they are pushing to ban are not for children in the first place. Furthermore, censorship, particularly through book

banning, has historically failed to stop the distribution and consumption of materials (Kranich, 2017). If books can be deemed harmful, yet harassment, stalking, and violence against librarians are the lengths some will go to assert this claim, it is sound to question if the opposition is really about books and protecting children, or instead about control. Libraries recognize that censorship has no place in a free nation full of diverse voices.

In addressing the obstacles that affect libraries, one must examine the role of libraries as a public service funded by tax dollars and the efficiency of their operations. Libraries keep their communities informed and engaged, and provide a space to come together. They provide invaluable resources ranging from access to information to shelter and crisis resources. Additionally, many people can access employment and education through library resources, thereby contributing to their local economy. Libraries also typically deliver a measurable return on investment in dollars. For example, libraries in Missouri, Texas, and California, to name a few, return an average of \$4 for every \$1 spent (Every Library Institute, 2026). Larger libraries also typically lease spaces to local vendors and include a gift shop, bringing in further revenue. Regarding the economic value of libraries, the social and financial return on investment for public libraries is substantial.

Libraries have operated as publicly funded institutions for more than a century now, and have faced opposition from the beginning (Kranich, 2017). Defunding or threatening libraries does not solve problems; rather, it strips communities of one of the last free, public spaces available. Citizens must look past the agendas against libraries to see how libraries impact the world around them on a greater scale.

Libraries have proven themselves to be an essential part of an informed, equitable, and accessible society. The challenges that libraries face hurt not only libraries but also entire

communities. Communities rely on libraries for anything from everyday use to essential resources in times of need. While the impact of gutting library services may not be immediately visible, it will gradually worsen until it becomes too severe to ignore. When literacy declines, people become more isolated. When communities grow isolated, they become more divided. When communities fail to coexist, they very well may fall apart. Recognizing the ways that libraries benefit communities and advocating to protect them is the first piece of a larger puzzle. Whether it is showing up to vote to keep a local library funded or signing up for a library card, support for libraries does not go unnoticed. The future of American public libraries is something only time will tell, but in the meantime, the voices of librarians and library supporters must be heard and uplifted.

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