

Wealth Inequality

Emma McKechnie

Department of Urban and Environmental Policy, Occidental College

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Professor Bhavna Shamsunder

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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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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

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 asse

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

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

the event occurred, but responded in a localized manner, often repurposing existing resources
(Patin, 2021)

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

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).

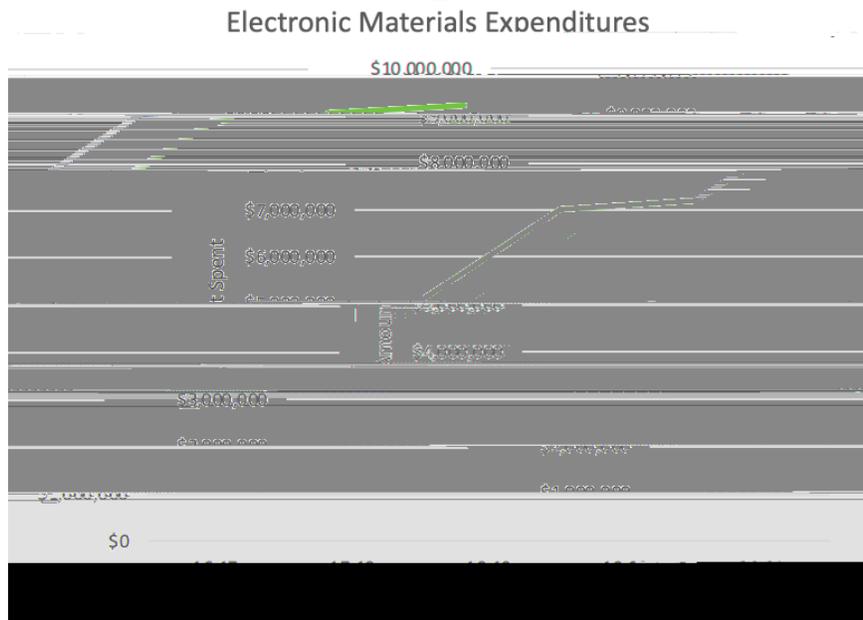
response to Covid-19. The increase in e-media, the expansion of the Tech2Go program, and the impact of virtual programs all evidence this idea.

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

Audience

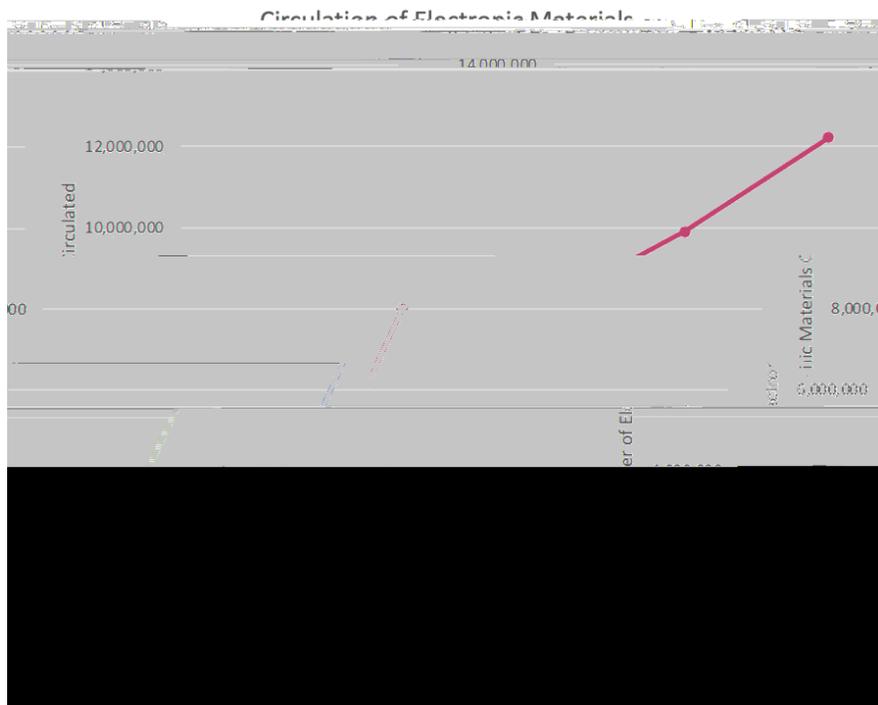
The LAPL system increased expenditure on electronic materials during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). The amount of new material available from this investment and the conditions of the pandemic also contributed to an increase in e-media usage. This follows the same trajectory as earlier years. 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

The Importance of Personal Access to Physical Technology

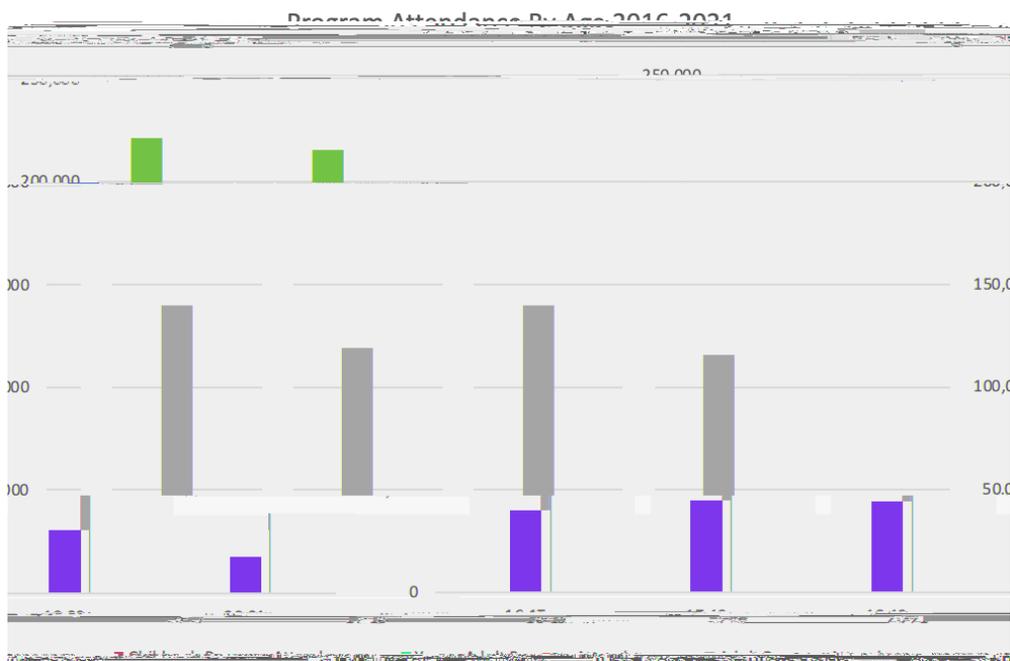
Started in 2018 the Tech2Go program responded to digital inequities by offering a bundle that includes a Chromebook or an iPad and an internet hotspot. Respondents identified the Tech2Go program as a resource created to target the digital divide, specifically for adults. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, 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

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

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 whe

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 i

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

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 top

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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?