What Works for Health Strategy

Public libraries for community building

Evidence Rating

✓ Expert Opinion

Strategies with this rating are recommended by credible, impartial experts but have limited research documenting effects; further research, often with stronger designs, is needed to confirm effects.

Disparity Rating

✓ Potential to Decrease Disparities

Strategies with this rating have the potential to decrease or eliminate disparities between subgroups. Rating is suggested by evidence, expert opinion or strategy design.

Public libraries provide community members with materials, resources, services, and support to meet their information needs, along with space to gather[1]. Resources often include computers with high-speed internet that can support job seekers, civic engagement, and overall enrichment, particularly for those without home internet access. Libraries can serve as a community gathering place by providing safe, quiet spaces for individual and group use for formal and informal programs and activities[2, 3]. Programs can include enrichment activities such as story time, arts and crafts, or exercise classes, as well as supportive programs on topics such as financial literacy, food security, or housing information[4]. Public libraries can partner with social support agencies and organizations to connect patrons with services and may also host these partners on-site[1]. Public libraries in urban, suburban, and rural areas can receive local, state, and federal funding from governments and philanthropic organizations[5].

What could this strategy improve?

Expected Benefits

Our evidence rating is based on the likelihood of achieving these outcomes:

- Increased community involvement
- Increased social capital

Potential Benefits

Our evidence rating is not based on these outcomes, but these benefits may also be possible:

- Improved access to social services
- Increased civic participation

What does the research say about effectiveness?   —

Public libraries are a suggested strategy to increase community involvement[2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9] and social capital[2, 8, 9] among patrons of library resources, gathering spaces, and programming. Additional evidence is needed to confirm effects.

Public libraries may increase community involvement through participation in formal and informal activities and meetings, along with unplanned interactions[6, 7], which may increase social inclusion[2]. Public libraries may also encourage patrons to use materials and forms of technology that are new to them (available on-site and often for checkout), such as computers, tablets, and e-readers, which may reduce the digital divide between older and younger users as well as those with lower and higher incomes[2]. Experts suggest that resources and support available in public libraries such as assistance for small businesses, career resources, and access to government and community services, may contribute to community involvement[3]. Public libraries can provide a natural hub for community partners and local stakeholders to come together to discuss and address community needs[10]. Additional research is needed about how libraries enhance reading, democracy, and culture in a community[2].

In public libraries, patrons meet and interact across different stages of life and socio-economic status through both formal and informal activities, which may build trust and increase social capital[2]. Public libraries may increase community collaboration by offering free, accessible, universally available meeting spaces and services, information and technological equipment, and supporting literacy skills for all ages[11]. Public libraries may support vulnerable populations, including refugees, by providing information and services that help them adjust to their new community; these efforts may increase trust, social capital, and community involvement[8]. Public libraries may also be used as cultural spaces to share local Indigenous knowledge such as languages, traditional tools and techniques, and for culture preservation[6].

Through community-based partnerships, public libraries may improve access to social services, whether by having social workers located on-site, social services training for library staff members, or linking library patrons to community-based social service partners[1]. Additional research is needed about how social services may be offered in libraries, particularly as the compounding social issues of poverty, trauma, and mental health challenges continue to grow[1, 9]. Experts suggest that partnerships between libraries, public health agencies, health care systems, and policymakers are needed to expand infrastructure, programming, and training to meet the needs of all community members utilizing library services[9]. Public libraries may also serve as shelters and resource hubs following natural disasters, coordinating with and leveraging their resources for use by first responders and other emergency services[12, 13].

Public libraries are generally perceived as trusted public institutions and are intended to be politically impartial[11]. Recent research has shown no significant relationship between public library usage and political affiliation[14]. A Tennessee-based study suggests that offering voter registration assistance and election information at libraries may increase civic participation[15].

How could this strategy advance health equity?

                                                                                              —

This strategy is rated **potential to decrease disparities: suggested by expert opinion**.

Public libraries are a suggested strategy to reduce disparities in access to resources, services, and public spaces for community involvement among residents with low incomes, youth, older adults, rural residents, and other vulnerable populations (e.g., veterans, immigrants, refugees, individuals experiencing homelessness, etc.)[7, 8, 9, 23]. Public libraries offer materials, resources, and services free of charge, which increases access to information and broadband for patrons with low incomes and can reduce the digital divide between people with higher and lower incomes[7]. Public libraries are a safe, free space for children to go for educational activities such as homework assistance and tutoring or for social activities such as story time, creative programs, and video games[3]. Youth from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience greater benefits than more advantaged peers[7, 9]. However, additional research is needed regarding how public libraries may best meet the resource and information needs of LGBTQ and gender variant youth[24]. Creating additional library branches or establishing mobile library branches in communities with larger populations of minoritized residents or residents with low incomes may

bring materials and programming directly to underserved neighborhoods[25]. Some community members, such as those experiencing homelessness, may seek out public libraries as a safe, climate-controlled place to take refuge from weather[9] and to access resources and connect to social services[7].

Public libraries are designed to welcome residents from across a community, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, or gender, which may promote social interactions across groups and bridge cultural gaps[2, 7]. Experts suggest that public libraries may increase social capital within a community, especially among individuals with low incomes, older adults, parents of small children[2], and individuals with mental health and substance use conditions[9] and may also increase trust in society[11]. Through collaborations with social services providers, public libraries may connect patrons, including rural residents, with critical forms of social, financial, or medical assistance and to partners located on-site or in the community[1, 6]. Public libraries can offer specialized resources, programming, and services for older adults[7, 26] and veterans, which may include large print materials along with designated spaces to gather as a group or to meet with counselors or on-site social service providers[27].

Experts recommend that librarians have backgrounds similar to the community to facilitate relationship building, which may increase trust in public libraries both as institutions of learning and community support[7].

What is the relevant historical background?   —

Following the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), public libraries were established to address the public's demand for literature and to keep pace with the educational movement spreading across the nation[28]. The first tax-supported library was established in the city of Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1833[29]. The U.S. had more than 3,500 public libraries by 1920, in part through funding provided by industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie's funding helped establish over 2,500 libraries worldwide[29]. Yet, some communities, particularly in the segregated Southern U.S., rejected Carnegie's funding based on the assumption that these grants would stipulate admittance regardless of race[30].

State and local racial segregation laws prevented Black individuals from accessing public libraries and many other public facilities well into the 1960s. Segregated libraries were established for Black individuals after the Supreme Court upheld the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision that "separate but equal" facilities were constitutional; however, these libraries did not receive equal amounts of funding or resources[31]. Protests over many years influenced three critical events that led to the desegregation of public libraries: the Supreme Court ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965[31, 32]. Although segregated libraries legally ended, many public libraries in formerly redlined, segregated neighborhoods and rural communities still struggle with limited budgets and have fewer resources than public libraries in more affluent areas[33, 34].

Some state and local governments have attempted to reduce public library staff and funding in response to librarians' refusal to censor and remove materials regarding history, race, gender identity, sexuality, or reproductive health[35]. In 2023, the American Library Association reported 695 attempts to censor library materials; most challenges were to books written by or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community[36].

Equity Considerations   —

- What would equitable funding for public libraries by your state or local government look like? What should policymakers consider when making funding decisions?
- Who uses your public library? How easily accessible are your local libraries for all members of your community? How can your community ensure materials, resources, services, and programming address the needs of those who would benefit the most?

- How can your public library partner with local social workers, policymakers, public health, health care systems, local governments, or academic libraries to offer additional services?
- Does your public library's activities and programming reflect the voices and interests of all local residents? What efforts are needed to create inclusive environments?

Implementation Examples —

As of 2023, there are over 9,200 public library systems and 16,500 public library buildings nationwide[16], offering access to billions of books and providing services to communities, including broadband internet[17]. The number of libraries in a community varies, particularly the distribution between urban and rural areas, while the size of libraries and available resources depends upon funding[6].

Public libraries may establish partnerships with local social service agencies and organizations to meet the broader social and mental health needs of their communities. The Chicago Public Library (CPL) System partnered with AMITA Health to develop the Social Worker in the Library Program to address the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness, mental illness, and other challenges[18]. Additional partnerships with local government and the Chicago Department of Public Health established permanent funding for mental health services and programming, available at CPL locations across the city[19, 20, 21].

Some public libraries are incorporating knowledge shared by mental health professionals into programming and services for patrons. Public libraries in San Diego are training librarians in mental health first aid to identify mental health-related symptoms and administer de-escalation strategies. In New York City, public libraries' partnerships with mental health programs are increasing public access to mental health information and support[22]. Many libraries also offer naloxone kits for opioid overdose reversal that patrons can take home as one way to address increased substance use in their community[22].

Implementation Resources —

‡ Resources with a focus on equity.

ALA-Community engagement - Public Library Association, a Division of the American Library Association (ALA). Community engagement & outreach.

NYPL-Community resources - New York Public Library (NYPL). Community resources.

SLNC-Community engagement - State Library of North Carolina (SLNC). Community engagement: Public relations, outreach, volunteers/friends of the library.

MCLS-Extension - Monroe County Library System (MCLS) Outreach Department. Extension/outreach services: Bringing library resources to under-served members of our community. Rochester Public Library, Rochester, New York.

Footnotes —

* Journal subscription may be required for access.

[1] Lee 2022d - Lee S, Bae J, Sharkey CN, et al. Professional social work and public libraries in the United States: A scoping review. Social Work. 2022;67(3):249-265.

[2] Sorenson 2021 - Sørensen KM. Where's the value? The worth of public libraries: A systematic review of findings, methods and research gaps. Library and Information Science Research. 2021;43(1):101067.

[3] Scott 2011 - Scott R. The role of public libraries in community building. Public Library Quarterly. 2011;30(3):191-227.

[4] Hammock 2023 - Hammock A, Pandolfelli G, Samuel T, et al. Understanding how suburban public librarians respond to the health and social needs of communities. Library & Information Science Research. 2023;45(1):101217.

[5] EveryLibrary - EveryLibrary. Where does public library funding come from?

[6] Samsuddin 2020 - Samsuddin SF, Shaffril HAM, Fauzi A. Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, to the rural libraries we go! - A systematic literature review. Library and Information Science Research. 2020;42(1):100997.

[7] Igarashi 2023 - Igarashi T, Koizumi M, Widdersheim MM. Overcoming social divisions with the public library. Journal of Documentation. 2023;79(1):52-65.

[8] Kosciejew 2019 - Kosciejew M. Information's importance for refugees: Information technologies, public libraries, and the current refugee crisis. Library Quarterly. 2019;89(2):79-98.

[9] Morgan 2016 - Morgan AU, Dupuis R, D'Alonzo B, et al. Beyond books: Public libraries as partners for population health. Health Affairs. 2016;35(11):2030-2036.

[10] Whiteman 2018 - Whiteman ED, Dupuis R, Morgan AU, et al. Public libraries as partners for health. Preventing Chronic Disease. 2018;15:170392.

[11] Ferguson 2012 - Ferguson S. Are public libraries developers of social capital? A review of their contribution and attempts to demonstrate it. Australian Library Journal. 2012;61(1):22-33.

[12] Ghorbanzadeh 2021 - Ghorbanzadeh M, Ozguven EE, Tenney CS, et al. Natural disaster accessibility of small and rural libraries in northwest Florida. Public Library Quarterly. 2021;40(4):310-329.

[13] Bishop 2013 - Bishop BW, Veil SR. Public libraries as post-crisis information hubs. Public Library Quarterly. 2013;32(1):33-45.

[14] Lund 2020 - Lund BD, Hendrickson BL, Walston M. Election voting and public library use in the United States. Evidence Based Library and Information Practice. 2020;15(4):4-15.

[15] Herbert 2021 - Hebert HS, Lambert FP. Providing voter registration and election information in libraries: A survey of public libraries in Tennessee. Public Library Quarterly. 2021;40(1):33-46.

[16] ALA-Library fact sheet 1 - American Library Association (ALA). Number of libraries in the United States: Library fact sheet 1.

[17] ALA-Broadband - American Library Association (ALA). Issues & advocacy. Broadband.

[18] CC-Library - Community Commons (CC). Social worker in the library Chicago.

[19] CPL-Mental health - Chicago Public Library (CPL). (2023, December 26). *Mental health and social services available at CPL locations.* Retrieved August 27, 2025.

[20] CDPH Mental Health Centers - Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). (n.d.). *CDPH Mental Health Centers.* Retrieved August 27, 2025.

[21] Lawndale News-CDPH MHS - Lawndale News. (2023, March 30). *Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) begins offering mental health services in select libraries.* Retrieved August 27, 2025.

[22] APA-Stringer 2020 - Stringer H. Libraries as mental health hubs. America Psychological Association (APA). 2020;51(3):26.

[23] Takyi 2023 - Takyi S, Antwi RB, Ozguven EE, et al. Measuring spatial accessibility of public libraries using floating catchment area methods: A comparative case study in Calhoun County, Florida. Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives. 2023;22:100944.

[24] Robinson 2016 - Robinson T. Overcoming social exclusion in public library services to LGBTQ and gender variant youth. Public Library Quarterly. 2016;35(3):161-174.

[25] Cheng 2021 - Cheng W, Wu J, Moen W, Hong L. Assessing the spatial accessibility and spatial equity of public libraries' physical locations. Library & Information Science Research. 2021;43(2):101089.

[26] Lenstra 2020 - Lenstra N, Oguz F, Duvall CS. Library services to an aging population: A nation-wide study in the United States. Journal of Librarianship and Information Science. 2020;52(3):738-748.

[27] Roy 2016 - Roy L, Barker M, Hidalgo LL, Rickard FA. Public library services for veterans: Selected brief case studies. Public Library Quarterly. 2016;35(3):222-242.

[28] Kevane 2014 - Kevane M, Sundstrom WA. The development of public libraries in the United States, 1870-1930: A quantitative assessment. Information and Culture. 2014;49(1):117-144.

[29] DPLA-US Public libraries - Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). A history of U.S. public libraries.

[30] Steele 2020a - Steele JE. A history of censorship in the United States. Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy. 2020;5(1).

[31] DPLA-Segregated libraries - Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). A history of U.S. public libraries. Segregated libraries.

[32] LOC-Brown v. Board - Library of Congress. Exhibitions. Brown v. Board at fifty: "With an even hand."

[33] Wheeler 2004 - Wheeler M, Johnson-Houston D, Walker BE. A brief history of library service to African Americans. American Libraries. 2004;35(2):42-45.

[34] Sin 2011 - Sin S-CJ. Neighborhood disparities in access to information resources: Measuring and mapping U.S. public libraries' funding and service landscapes. Library & Information Science Research. 2011;33(1):41-53.

[35] ALA-State of libraries - American Library Association (ALA). The state of America's libraries: Libraries adapt and innovate in the midst of record-breaking censorship challenges. 2023.

[36] ALA-Book challenges - American Library Association (ALA). Press release: American Library Association releases preliminary data on 2023 book challenges. 2023.