

# The Third Space Impact of Public Libraries on Children's Wellbeing and Development

Mathilde Vega

## Introduction

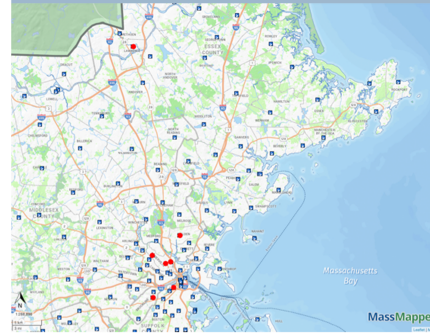
feelings of belonging and togetherness, creating and maintaining social connections, and relaxation and recreation. These places include parks, coffee shops, cafes, salons, bars, shopping centers, places of worship—and public libraries. Public libraries are a cornerstone of American society. They provide free and inclusive access to knowledge, literature, and community programming. They require no special qualifications — every age, race, and faith is not only welcomed, but celebrated. This celebration includes curated programming for patrons of all ages, from toddler storytimes to technology classes for seniors, as well as intentionally displaying and offering books with a diverse range of languages, cultures, and topics.

Through my interviews with the librarians and supplementary literature review, I have found the impact of public libraries on children's wellbeing and development to be significant. This project explores qualitative data to identify three dominant themes - the public library as an educational space, a social space, and the beneficial design and infrastructure of children's rooms and libraries in general. Librarians occupy a unique role, acting as a teachers, a mentor, and a friend. My research beyond librarian interviews showed a concerning trend over the past decade of public library defunding — federal funds are at risk and public library services will be imminently impacted. I hope this project can be utilized as a local-scale report to advocate for libraries importance and their need for funding and legislative support.



The "third place" is a concept first used by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place*. The home is the first place, work or school is the second place, and other community gathering places are third places. Third places are essential for encouraging

## Library Sites



### Boston

The Boston Public Library (BPL) was founded in 1848, and was the first free large municipal library in the United States. The Boston Public Library has one central location and twenty-five neighborhood locations. According to the Boston Public Library (n.d.), the library serves more than four million patrons a year with over 23 million items in their collection. I chose to interview at the BPL as it is uniquely positioned within this case study due to its size and metropolitan placement.

### Brookline

The Brookline Public Library was founded in 1857. I chose to interview in Brookline because I wanted to understand how their public library operates in an inner-ring suburb community with a significant municipal budget and library funding, due to the predominantly affluent population.

### Lawrence

The Lawrence Public Library was opened to the public in 1892. I chose to interview in Lawrence because I wanted to understand how their public library operates in a city with a high poverty rate, and significant Hispanic and immigrant populations. According to the United States Census Bureau, the Hispanic population of Lawrence makes up roughly 80% of the total population, immigrants make up 46.5% of the total population, and the median household income is \$58,079 in comparison to the general state median income of \$99,858. The poverty rate is 16.9% in comparison to the state average of 10.4%.

### Malden

The Malden Public Library was founded in 1879. I chose to interview in Malden because I wanted to understand how their public library operates in an inner-ring suburb that is considered moderately economically and racially diverse.

### Somerville

The Somerville Public Library was opened in 1914. I chose to interview in Somerville because I wanted to understand how their public library operates in a city that has undergone significant gentrification in the past twenty years, as well as a transient population of students and young adults and families.

## Methods

Considering the six-week timeframe of this project, I decided to narrow my scope to public libraries in the Greater Boston area. By keeping my research predominantly in Middlesex County (with the exception of Lawrence) I was able to conduct my librarian interviews in-person and personally explore the design and infrastructure of the physical library space. I chose five public library systems, ensuring that I included libraries that operated in communities with varying socioeconomic statuses, racial and ethnic groups, immigrant populations, and other factors. Considering the qualitative nature of the project, I wanted to follow the interview recommendations from the library team over quantitative factors such as position or education. The theme of participants tended to follow full-time children's librarians with a formal education — typically a Master's in Library and Information Sciences. I also interviewed library staff in positions such as assistant librarian and youth and literacy programming coordinators.

The interview questions the librarians were asked related to their personal and professional experiences with libraries. The interviewees shared their opinions and experiences with public libraries in general, the libraries they worked at, and their relationships with their patrons and their job.

After conducting interviews, I identified several dominant themes via keywords and anecdotal similarities. These themes and quotes are mentioned in the paper and supplemented by a literature review. The literature review consists of pre-existing research on the topics.

### In 2024...

**14.7 million**

Children's holding of materials (books, e-books, music, and other borrowable material) statewide.

**19.3 million**

Children's books available at public libraries in Massachusetts.

**32.8 thousand**

Children participated in calendar year reading programs at public libraries in Massachusetts.

**1.1 million**

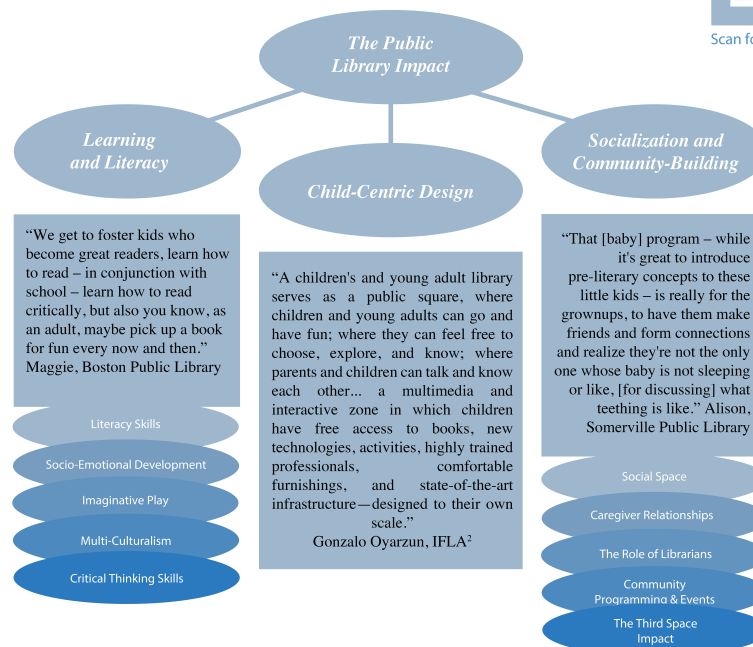
Patrons participated in public library children's programming for ages 0-5.

**735.9 thousand**

Patrons participated in public library children's programming for ages 6-11.

Massachusetts Library Board of Library Commissioners, 2024L. Children's Services Division. [https://web.state.ma.us/programs-and-support/library/infocenter/Reports/2024/2024-Childres\\_Services.htm](https://web.state.ma.us/programs-and-support/library/infocenter/Reports/2024/2024-Childres_Services.htm)

## Findings



Scan for paper!

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Oldenburg, R. (2023). *The Great Good Place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Berkshire. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.9561417>
- <sup>2</sup>Oyarzun, G. (2009, August). *Environments in public libraries for young children* [Conference paper]. IFLA World Library and Information Congress: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions.

## Conclusion

Public libraries foster leadership in children by instilling a number of implicit and explicit lessons. Children are taught that they have a capable mind and heart, and a voice worth listening to. They are encouraged to explore new interests and interpret new ideas. They start to become familiar with new places, cultures, languages, and people. They meet other children and build socioemotional and developmental skills, and their sense of imagination and creativity through play with each other. Their caretakers are able to feel supported in community with other adults, and take advantage of services that improve home life — such as career training. The library is the beating heart of our society, and children take the lessons learned there and carry them for the rest of their lives.

Read more:



## Acknowledgements

hopefully delve deeper into research. Additionally, I would like to thank the librarians and library staff who so graciously offered up their time to speak with me and make this project what it is. My passion for public libraries stems from your impact; the same children you spoke so warmly about in your interviews, was once me. Thank you.

I would like to thank Dr. Julie Dobrow for her invaluable mentorship and guidance during this project. Her impact has inspired me to continue this work beyond a pilot project and