The U.S. Public Library System: The Third Place Impact on Children's Wellbeing and Development

Mathilde N. Vega

Tufts University

Dr. Julie Dobrow

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Introduction

> The publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don't charge any money for that warm embrace. The commitment to inclusion is so powerful that many decisions about the library hinge on whether or not a particular choice would cause a subset of the public to feel uninvited.
>
> — *Susan Orlean, The Library Book*

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. These places include parks, coffee shops, cafes, salons, bars, shopping centers, and places of worship. Third places are essential for encouraging feelings of belonging and togetherness, but many have recently become concerned with their prevalence. The concerns primarily consist of the cost barrier to most of these places, and their relevance post-pandemic and in the era of social media. Allie Conti attributes the waning of third places as the "consequence of a culture obsessed with productivity and status, whose subjects might have decent incomes but little recreational time" (Conti, 2022). Where does one turn when it's freezing outside and they have no disposable income? Public libraries have long since answered that question.

Public libraries have been and continue to be a viable solution to the third place conundrum. The core tenets of public libraries are free and inclusive access to knowledge, where you can borrow and read books, participate in community programming, or simply get out of the hot sun or icy wind. Furthermore, public libraries require no special qualifications — every age, race, faith, and ability 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.

I spent the greater part of my childhood moving across cities, states, and countries. While I learned so much from every community and classroom I was in, the library stands out. In a landscape that was constantly changing, the library was a reliable and comfortable place that I could go to to read books not only for fun, but to learn. I prepared myself for the world around me, starting with picture books about sharing and to short chapter books with names and places I had never heard of before. I gained confidence about myself as I read about characters who looked like me, my ability to embrace cultural differences and diversity grew, and I felt more ready in my classes. The libraries I went to, the librarians I met, the library books I borrowed, were all an integral part of why I am the person I am today.

Through my literature review and my interviews with the librarians, I have found the impact of public libraries on children's wellbeing and development in the greater Boston area and beyond to be invaluable. They promote learning of all kinds, from literacy and educational enrichment to developing socioemotional skills. They provide a social space for children, caregivers, and families to be in and build community. The librarians occupy a unique role,

acting as a teachers, a mentor, and a friend. My visits to the sites showed how effective and intentional the interior design and infrastructure of the libraries were.

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 my paper can be utilized as a local-scale report to advocate for libraries importance and their need for funding and legislative support.

For every patron has a place at the library; and every public library has a place in our society.

Methodology

Project Overview

This research project is a qualitative report based on interviews with children's librarians paired with a supplementary literature review.

Participants

Considering the six-week timeframe of this research 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 situated in a diverse range of communities, ensuring that I included libraries that operated in communities with varying socioeconomic statuses, racial and ethnic groups, immigrant communities, and other factors. To ensure I followed library privacy protections, I emailed the director of each library and once my project was cleared by the proper channels, I followed the recommendations of the team lead on who to interview. 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.

Interview Protocol

The interview questions the librarians were asked related to their personal and professional experiences with libraries (see appendix for interview protocol). 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. The interviews started at half an hour and extended depending on what the interviewee chose to share. Verbal consent was given prior to each interview, and all interviews were recorded in-person or via Zoom and transcribed by me, personally.

Data Sites: The Five Public Library Systems

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 it's 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.

Data Collection and Literature Review

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.

Research Findings

Statistics

2024 Data Report from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

- In 2024, children's holding of all materials including books, e-books, downloadable music, physical video units, and other borrowed materials was at 14.7 million statewide.
- There were 7.7 million book holdings by children in the Massachusetts public library systems in 2024. There were 4.4 million e-book holdings.
- Public libraries statewide offer 19.3 million children's books, with total borrowable material circulation being at 21.4 million.
- 32,768 children participated in calendar year reading programs at public libraries in Massachusetts.
- The total number of children's programs for ages 6-11 was 37,219 statewide. Attendance was at 735,983.
- The total number of children's programs for ages 0-5 was 46,950 statewide. Attendance was at 1.1 million.
- There are 1,115 public use computers with internet access in children's rooms and areas statewide.

Literacy and Learning

Literacy Development

There are multiple ways in which public libraries across the five systems address early literacy and literacy development. In encouraging reading and writing skills, Alison of Somerville Public library says, "we, as children's librarians, do that in our everyday."

Every library across the five systems offers storytime programming specialized for different developmental stages, from baby lap-sit to pajama storytime for toddlers and young children. The research team of the three-year study Valuable Initiatives in Early Learning that Work Successfully (VIEWS2) found that that there was a positive correlation between early literacy content delivered by storytime providers and children's early literacy behaviors.

Across all five public library systems, there are reading challenges with prizes to encourage children to maintain literacy skills over the summer. At the central branch of Somerville Public Library "we ask them to show us their reading logs and we give them points to enter a raffle to win a big prize… you might have seen the big stuffed octopus hanging from the ceiling…last year when we got a stuffed animal, I think people really liked it," says Annie. The summer reading program encourages literacy beyond classroom instruction and testing, focusing instead on getting "kids really excited about reading, and to get excited to talk about reading and think about why they love reading."

Public libraries are uniquely situated to teach and encourage children to read and learn. While schools are restricted by over-enrolled classrooms, underpaid teachers, and strict educational standards that prioritize test scores, libraries are able to take a different approach. "Children have such a wide variety of reading tastes so we don't put any restrictions on what they read… I think that it is really important that we give them flexibility, and not making them feel like we're giving them homework," says Annie. Maggie, a Children's Librarian at the Boston Public Library, elaborates, "because I would say a teacher, there's certain expectations and there's certain standards you're supposed to be meeting… most of the time, we don't need to have that. Like, I can say, 'Is this book interesting to you? If not, tell me and we'll put it back.' They get to be in charge of what they're reading… we get to foster kids who become great readers, learn how

to read – in conjunction with school – learn how to read critically, but also you know, as an adult, maybe pick up a book for fun every now and then." says Maggie. By focusing on building a passion and love for reading, librarians are able to encourage commitment to reading beyond childhood and literacy as a byproduct of that process.

Imaginative Play

Public libraries encourage socio-emotional learning in a variety of ways, one of which is often overlooked: play. "We actually heard a parent say that to another parent recently 'Oh, this library is really great because they have so many toys.'" says Rebecca, a Children's Librarian at Malden Public Library. The Children's Room at Malden Public Library has a popular puppet theater with hand puppets, a train table with toy trains, a play kitchen with plastic and wood toy food. There are wood blocks, LEGO bricks, stuffed animals, and craft supplies for everyday use as well as for events. "I've often heard educators talk about really the importance of play nowadays, that many kids, especially with the predominance of screens and whatnot, just don't really engage in imaginative free play that much. So I like to think that our library is offering them a chance to do that," says Rebecca. Many of the toys and activities available are donated by patrons, showing a shared value of allowing children to create, build, and play.

Socio-Emotional Learning

Beyond developing imaginative play skills, Rebecca mentions socio-emotional skill development. Through the various activities and events that the Children's Room hosts, young patrons learn to socialize and share. "They fight over, you know, certain trains on the train table or whatever, and some kids have to be taken away in tears, but they learn about how to get along with other children," she mentions.

Community and Socialization

Social Space

The public library as an institution is central to a child's development in understanding community and socialization. While visiting research sites, it became immediately apparent how children's sections function as a social space. At the Malden Public Library, there was a very popular toy train table that was flocked with children. The large rugs allowed for story-time for all ages, and several libraries had various social event materials tucked away in corners or offices. The activities and stations available set the stage for forming friendships between children of all ages.

Caregiver Relationships

Caregivers such as parents and nannies watched their children read, babble, and play while forming friendships of their own. Alison, a children's librarian at a branch of the Somerville Public Library, remarked "this morning, I had my baby program that's every week. We get about fifty grownups and babies, so twenty-five pairs… and I would say it's one-third parents, one-third nannies, and one-third grandmas…That program – while it's great to introduce pre-literary concepts to these little kids – is really for the grownups, to have them make friends and form connections and realize they're not the only one whose baby is not sleeping or like, [for discussing] what teething is like." When the adult in a child's life builds community, the relationships extend into the child's life, allowing for direct and indirect benefit. The child is able to form long-lasting friendships with other children, through their adults' friendships, and has access to new resources such as babysitters or nannies. The indirect benefit is the emotional and social support their caregivers receive, from sources such as a mom group. "Today we had someone who just moved to Somerville and didn't know anyone and happened to come to the

baby program. I was like, all right, your baby's six months. You have to meet these people whose baby is also six months. An hour later, they're all just sitting here talking, and it's like, they're becoming friends," notes Alison. "People make friends here all the time. The grownups and the kids, and as children's librarians, we know that the grown ups need to be healthy in order to take care of their kids the best. So we're always trying to connect grown ups as well as serve kids."

The Unique Role of Libraries and Librarians

An outstanding theme in my conversations with librarians across the five public library systems was the unique role of libraries and librarians in a child's life. Librarians are able to embody the role of a kind of steward of community, a mentor, a friend. They host the storytime every week that gives children an opportunity to make friends, events for caregivers to bond with each other. With a librarians' help, children are able to practice listening, interpreting morals or lessons learned from the stories, and in general grow a fuller and more substantial understanding of the world around them.

When asked about a moment that resonated with them, that solidified their commitment and love for their job, every librarian's answer followed the same pattern. Firstly, Maggie of the Boston Public Library noted,

> There was a staff member who had been here for a very long time and it was quite common to have, like, a middle aged person come in and show off their child to her and introduce their kid to her and say, 'she was my librarian when I was a kid.' So she got to see the full range of a lot of people's lives. Helping them as a kid, seeing them come into their own, becoming parents, bringing their own kids back to that same space. That really resonated with me, and I was hopeful that that will also be the case for me.

The interim head of teen services at the BPL, Catherine, echoed something similar, that "watching kids grow through the years is a really special opportunity."

Alison of Somerville Public Library followed the same pattern, noting the significance of watching her patrons grow up:

> To see people bring their babies…they usually come from when they're like three months to a year or so, and when they start walking and to watch their development over that period of time is unbelievable… I've seen a lot of kids.. I mean, the teenagers that I have now, I remember them when they were eight. You know, it's really great to be a part of people's lives in that way.

Finally, Rebecca of Malden Public Library mentioned a similar story, demonstrating the impact of her role:

> Last spring, the salutatorian at the high school actually thanked the library in her speech and then named me and a couple of other staff members by name, as people who really had an impact in her growing up. And that was just so touching.

Design and Infrastructure

Positive engagement in public library's children's rooms is correlated with the design and location of the space. Gonzalo Oyarzún, director of the Santiago Public Library in Chile, noted the following while presenting "Environments in Public Libraries for Young Children around the World" at the 2009 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) General Conference:

> A children's and young adult library serves as a public square, where children and young adults can go and have fun; where they can feel free to choose, explore, and know; where parents and children can talk and know each other. It's an intimate place where children

> and young adults can meet and interact with others, assuming and respecting their differences and ages; an environment that teachers and students can experience together, reading far from the school's curricular pressure; a multimedia and interactive zone in which children have free access to books, new technologies, activities, highly trained professionals, comfortable furnishings, and state-of-the-art infrastructure—designed to their own scale (Oyarzún, 2009).

In the library spaces I visited, it was clear there was an emphasis on the room as a "public square." Every librarian I interviewed shared that all furniture used for community gathering, such as chairs, couches, beanbags, or small tables, can be easily moved to reconfigure the space. There are seating arrangements for patrons of different ages and needs, allowing for social interaction and community building; there are small chairs low to the ground, bigger chairs for children's caregivers, spots at the table that are accessible for a wheelchair user, and even soft window nooks for children to explore and read on their own ("kids love to barricade themselves in there," remarks Alison).

The School Library Journal (SLJ) published an article titled "Design to Learn By: Dynamic Early Learning Spaces in Public Libraries" on the "design revolution" of child-centered learning spaces. Author Sarah Bayliss writes:

> This new breed of literacy-packed play spaces in libraries is inspired by children's museums and the developmental theories that drive them. "You can call it interaction, you can call it theme design," says Sharon Exley, a designer and president of Architecture is Fun, a firm that has conceived spaces for both libraries and children's museums. "We're creating architecture in a way that children understand," she adds. "The

> underlying story or framework is always literacy, and how you make it fun and playful." (Bayliss, 2013, para. 3).

There were several overlapping themes in design choices I saw at the locations I visited, including an emphasis on designing in a way that children "understand". Every children's room or section had shelves customized to children's heights and needs; children's rooms shelves are significantly shorter to allow easy access, with more rounded corners and no sharp metal edges or materials. Every room had carpeted flooring with various rugs for storytime, designated stroller parking with a sign, and access to a restroom and a water fountain. Additionally, every library used bright colors and various posters and vinyl decals exhibiting popular fictional characters or basic designs such as a tree, birds, or children reading.

The engagement and visitor numbers of the library was directly correlated with proximity to public transportation as well as other institutions such as schools. The usage of the Teen Central space at the Boston Public Library is high partially "because we're so close to the green line and the orange line. We wind up being like a big access hub…" attributes Catherine, the interim head teen librarian at Boston Public Library.

Discussion

Before I continue with my recommendations based on my research findings, it is important that I highlight the fact that public libraries across the country are currently undergoing significant changes due to threats to federal funding. There is no understanding the impact of public libraries without highlighting the urgency of the crisis they are facing.

On March 14, 2025, the Trump Administration signed an executive order that aimed to "reduce the scope of federal bureaucracy." Among other independent agencies focused on education and social services for vulnerable communities, the Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS) was targeted. As the sole federal agency dedicated to funding library services, Trump's plan for the IMLS to "be eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law" leaves the 123,000 libraries and 35,000 museums who received funding at a loss of $266.7 million a year. This funding, which is only 0.003 percent of the federal budget, is crucial for maintaining public libraries in low-income and rural areas. The federal administration justifies the executive order as "a necessary step to fulfill that order and ensure hard-earned tax dollars are not diverted to discriminatory DEI initiatives or divisive, anti-American programming in our cultural institutions," as reported to Politico (Starcevic & Friedman, 2025, para. 13).

To conflate the public library mission with "anti-American programming," sets a dangerous precedent that vilifies libraries. One of the most integral parts of public libraries is the exposure to new stories, new cultures, and new viewpoints; it is in the children's room and within a storybook that children learn and foster a sense of compassion, critical thinking, and community. Leo S. Lo, the president of the Association of College and Research Libraries and a dean and professor at the University of New Mexico, writes for The Guardian that this represents

“a troubling political shift… [that] threaten[s] to undermine America’s economic strength, educational equality and democratic foundations in ways we cannot afford” (Lo 2025 para. 11).

The public libraries that are feeling the impact of the budget cut the most are communities where access to diverse stories and perspectives is more limited: small and rural libraries, who make up a significant 77% of public libraries in the United States. South Dakotan libraries have had to cut courier services between their locations, and libraries in Mississippi have had to cancel their Hoopla subscriptions, a service that offers e-books and virtual media for borrowing. The Garland County Library in Arkansas’s “Bookmobile,” a mobile book checkout system that is transported through rural areas, is at risk of being cut due to it’s grant funding coming from the IMLS.

Massachusetts received $3.6 million in funding from the IMLS in 2025. While local taxes and state aid cover a large portion of library funding, there are still programs at risk. According to MBLC Director Maureen Amyot, $2.2 million of the IMLS funding was directed to funding databases for students and library patrons. This includes databases such as Britannica Encyclopedia, English learning programs, and early literacy programs. As of July 1st, only four of the thirty-four databases could be retained.

Key Recommendations

Engagement

The most significant recommendation I have based on my research findings is to visit and engage with your local library. By checking out books, attending programming, or volunteering for associated organizations such as Friends of the Library, you boost circulation statistics and provide evidence for impact reports that help protect library funding.

Advocacy

As of September 3, 2025, an amicus curiae brief was filed by a coalition of library supporters represented by the Democracy Forward legal team and Miner, Barnhill & Galland, P.C. This coalition includes library organizations such as the American Library Association, the Association for Rural & Small Libraries, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums, the Urban Libraries Council, and other organizations involved in advocacy related to IMLS funding. As litigation continues, the ALA recommends various ways to show support for maintaining federal funds: contact Congressmembers, spread the word on social media and in person, and write to your local news outlet to spread awareness.

Conclusion

My last interview was with Anyelley Herrera, a Youth Services coordinator at the Lawrence Public Library in Lawrence, Massachusetts. As the sole library system in this report existing outside of Middlesex County, it stands out not only geographically but economically and racially — Lawrence has the lowest income and highest Hispanic population per-capita in the entire state. I wanted to research and interview at Lawrence to gain a comparative perspective on how public libraries function as third spaces with less funding but high demand; as Herrera explains, the library provides a number of services that community residents frequently rely on. "Oftentimes, families are coming in with children that don't speak the language, or children are born here to parents who don't speak English… we understand that families have different understanding of the language and different access to it. I like to say we're like a bridge," says Herrera. The bridge she refers to is an analogy for the support the library provides to families who often struggle to communicate in English, or have to use their children as translators — but at the library, Herrera says "the weight completely lifts off… you can see how happy they are that we're able to talk to them and explain what books we have and just have conversations and interact with their kids, and they don't have to worry too much about not being understood."

The Lawrence Public Library is a exemplary model of the third space impact of public libraries on children's wellbeing and development. The library offers curated reading materials to help children improve their reading and literacy skills, play and bond with other children, and have access to a clean restroom and drinking water. "I think we offer not just resources but a space that is inclusive and safe, especially to our community of immigrants," notes Herrera.

The prioritization of equity and inclusivity is a hallmark of what makes public libraries so special, and Lawrence is just one of thousands of libraries across the country that emphasize

these values. I chose to discuss Lawrence in my conclusion because of the evidence of it's impact, but also because of its reliance on state aid and federal funding.

The defunding and dismissal of public libraries serves to undermine the values they uphold — the sanctity of knowledge and educating oneself, the importance of inclusivity and diversity, and our responsibility to each other to cultivate community. Without public libraries, we lose the right for every person to read, learn, grow, and change. When we reject libraries, the pillars of society that teach citizens they deserve to be acknowledged, cared for, and in community, start to erode. The impact of libraries on our most vulnerable and impressionable community, children, cannot be discounted; public libraries create leaders.

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.

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