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Palaces for the People: Mapping Public Libraries' Capacity for Social Connection and Inclusion

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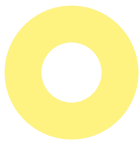


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“PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE”: MAPPING PUBLIC LIBRARIES’ CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION AND INCLUSION



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BACKGROUND | Public libraries are trusted sociocultural hubs for enabling lifelong learning and fostering community relationships. As public facing organizations that are open to the widest range of individuals, libraries seek to create safe and welcoming spaces for individuals of different socioeconomic statuses; ages; abilities; ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds; and sexual and gender identities. Located in diverse settings (e.g., urban, rural, and Indigenous on-reserve communities), public library branches offer tailored resources and programs to meet the specific needs of their communities who are navigating the effects of our increasingly asocial society. Library staff have been and continue to be at the frontline, engaging with individuals who are contending with higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, as well as increased rates of mental illnesses and antisocial behaviours. Accordingly, public libraries are community hubs that create social capital that can facilitate resilience, helping communities withstand and potentially prosper during challenging times.

OBJECTIVES | We examined trends in public library-focused Library and Information Science (LIS) research from 2012 to 2022 to answer the following 4 research questions:

1. How do public libraries help patrons create or maintain connections in their communities?
2. What population groups are included in public library research and in what ways are they differently impacted by public library services, materials, and/or spaces?
3. How are public library virtual programming and services (especially prominent during COVID-19) changing the ways in which patrons engage with public libraries?
4. In what ways does the Canadian public library research landscape compare or differ from that in European and Australasian countries, and what lessons can we glean from these differences?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RESULTS | Our analysis of 235 articles highlights public libraries as agencies of community building: libraries as conduits to information and learning, libraries as spaces of social inclusion, libraries as fostering civic engagement, libraries as bridges to community resources and involvement, and libraries as promoting economic vitality. Public libraries **foster connection** with their communities through multiple means:

- Encouraging feelings of belonging through library services
- Creating connections through technology
- Reinforcing cultural identities
- Creating safe physical spaces
- Addressing issues of accessibility

There were many **different populations** studied in our sample: older adults, library workers, children, teenagers, individuals without permanent or stable housing, immigrants and recent migrant populations, individuals without permanent employment, formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals living with different abilities, and library staff. Library workers must consider and incorporate the unique circumstances, needs, and expectations connected to each patron population group in their programs, collections, arrangements of physical and virtual spaces, and administration. Library workers encountered difficulties and tensions as they aim to engage with all patrons equally, especially when different patrons have different and more complex needs. Library workers called for more robust training in responsively working and engaging with patrons with more complex needs.

Studies centered on **COVID-19** spoke to the development of strategies designed to extend remote access to digital materials, services and programming to patrons including those excluded from such access by social location or status. The physical place of the public library was a hot topic too, with renewed calls for its centrality for connecting with patrons. The mental health and wellbeing of individual patrons, broader communities, as well as of library staff was another key focus in many of the studies. Strategies for coping with new patron needs and demands while negotiating the effects of the pandemic on staff morale, training and development are major concerns. Finally, there was a high sense of renewal for the value and rewards of community-engaged librarianship as a way forward through recovery into the future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In looking at the **public library research landscape across countries**, there are 3 lessons for scholars seeking to understand Canadian public libraries' capacity for social connection and inclusion:

1. Several themes are well-addressed across geographic regions meaning that Canadian findings can be put directly into conversation with findings from elsewhere in the world.
2. Some themes are not well-addressed in the Canadian context, but there is a robust body of work in other regions that Canadian researchers might build on.
3. There is a growing body of comparative multi-national studies of public libraries that provide insight into the structural and policy contexts within which public libraries can support social connection and inclusion. Canadian public libraries have not yet been well-represented in comparative international studies, and there is significant opportunity for gaining a deeper understanding of the unique features that shape their social connection work.

KEY MESSAGES

- Public libraries occupy an increasingly visible role in how individuals and communities learn, interact, connect, and share with one another.
- The feelings of connection that public libraries can create, foster, and/or sustain can only occur if patrons have access to these services.
- Public libraries are important and unique public spheres that can function to support democratic processes, which in turn, become critical grounds for freedom of expression, rights to education, rights to information, which in turn support cultural identity, social capital, social connectedness.
- Library patrons want and value the informal knowledge exchange that happens between library workers and patrons, as much as they want and value library as place and library as place for books and reading.
- Public libraries and library staff are being asked (implicitly and explicitly) to step into new social inclusion roles, as front-line staff.
- Public libraries and their workers are rarely adequately resourced and/or trained to do this increasing array of work.

1. Background

Public libraries are trusted sociocultural hubs for enabling lifelong learning and fostering community relationships¹⁻⁴. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg⁵ includes public libraries among his list of “palaces for the people”: social infrastructures that serve as the underpinnings of social life. Social infrastructures are physical places and organizations that shape communities' resilience and connection and the way people act and interact (see: Mattern^{6,7}). As public facing organizations that are open to the widest range of individuals, libraries seek to create safe and welcoming spaces for individuals of different socioeconomic statuses^{8,9}; ages; abilities; ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds¹⁰; and sexual and gender identities^{11,12}. Located in diverse settings (e.g., urban, rural, and Indigenous on-reserve communities), public library branches offer tailored resources and programs to meet the specific needs of their communities who are navigating the effects of our increasingly asocial society¹³. Library staff have been and continue to be at the frontline, engaging with and catering to individuals who are contending with higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, as well as increased rates of mental illnesses and antisocial behaviours^{14,15}. Public libraries, in short, attract all segments of the Canadian population, including those individuals most impacted by emerging patterns of social exclusion¹⁶. The shift to online environments during COVID-19 has exacerbated feelings of disconnection. During these times of change, public libraries facilitate resilience, helping communities withstand and adapt to difficult circumstances.

Public libraries “provide a sense of place, a refuge, and a still point; they are a vital part of the public sphere and an incubator of ideas”¹⁷. Research has likewise shown that they are trusted hubs of sociocultural connection, with relationships between patrons, library staff, and the surrounding community cultivating social capital and nurturing social inclusion¹⁸⁻⁻²⁵. They are thereby well-situated to provide inclusive support to individuals given their distribution in high- and low-income neighbourhoods^{26,27} and rural and remote locales; their long history of social inclusion in their values and mandates^{28,29}; their range of materials, programs, and services; and their spaces that can be used without expectation of payment^{30,31}, of particular importance given the preponderance of cost of living increases. Even individuals who do not use their public

library have reported that they do not want to live in a community without one³². Accordingly, public libraries are community hubs that create social capital that can facilitate resilience, helping communities withstand and potentially prosper during challenging times^{33,34}. Extant research also consistently demonstrates that public libraries have a long history of outreach to underserved and marginalized communities. This includes providing outreach and digital literacy support at long-term care facilities³⁵, training opportunities for previously incarcerated individuals seeking employment³⁶, inclusive programming for LGBTQ2+ individuals³⁷, sessions to support patrons as they search for affordable housing³⁸, and early literacy kits for low-income households³⁹.

Beyond scholarship that examines what might be considered more “traditional” library services (access to books, storytimes, book clubs, etc.), research is beginning to examine how public libraries as community spaces are evolving as they negotiate many of the immediate and more long-term consequences of an increasingly asocial society. Individual studies explore how libraries support people in voting and circumventing misinformation during elections⁴⁰, provide services to assist with newcomer and refugee resettlement⁴¹, support individuals living with addictions or without stable housing⁴², teach and loan new technologies⁴³, reach out to those unable to physically visit the library⁴⁴, and engage with rural, remote, and northern communities^{45,46}. Yet while studies in each of these topics have productively broadened the field of library studies, there is to date no consolidated understanding of the collective significance of these individual studies. This synthesis, then, is of particular importance given the difficulties libraries have traditionally encountered in communicating their value in meaningful ways⁴⁷. Moving away from traditional measures of library use or library value, including circulation and collection counts, gate counts, reference questions, which fail to capture libraries’ impact on the lives of their patrons, we approach libraries’ engagement with an “asocial society” in this synthesis (and thus libraries’ value and use) based on our understanding of *public libraries as social infrastructures that can and do foster connection*. This knowledge synthesis is a step forward in addressing this need of differently understanding libraries’ value and use for both scholars and those engaged in library work and policymaking.

This synthesis is not only rooted in the growing interest in public libraries as social institutions and community hubs, but also in the more immediate context of changes brought about by COVID-19. Emerging research reveals that physical distancing mandates in Canada, and the associated shifts to an exclusively online environment, have added new challenges for how libraries operate, particularly the ways in which they seek to bridge consequences of inequality. COVID-19 has exposed the multifaceted role of libraries as community spaces, as connectors, as service providers, as bridgers of the digital divide⁴⁸, and as community care partners^{49,50}. The importance of public libraries' engagement with vulnerable populations, who may not otherwise have access to information or the digital devices needed to stay informed, continues to be especially notable^{51,52}.

2. Objectives

This knowledge synthesis on the intricate, collaborative, and creative ways public libraries are embedded in a range of asocial-related issues (examining, for example, the impact of public libraries on patrons' sense of inclusion and belonging) is the first effort of its kind.

More specifically, this knowledge synthesis critically examines trends in public library-focused Library and Information Science (LIS) research from 2012 to 2022, paying particular attention to the ways in which public libraries are reported to foster relationships or feelings of connectedness among patrons and/or the communities they serve. This synthesis sought to illuminate the different ways in which public library systems and branches (whether through their materials, spaces, programs, or outreach initiatives) are mitigating growing feelings of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness in Canadian society. Leveraging the international expertise and networks of the research team, the synthesis was especially attuned to public library engagements and supports (or gaps therein) with vulnerable and marginalized patrons who are contending with our increasingly asocial society.

While several individual studies have separately examined libraries' outreach efforts, what remains unknown is the broader knowledge landscape regarding public library practices, spaces, and activities that collectively create and reinforce social connections in an increasingly asocial society. In response, we examined scholarly literature to answer the following four research questions to bridge existing knowledge gaps:

- How do public libraries help patrons create or maintain connections in their communities?
- What population groups are included in public library research and in what ways are they differently impacted by public library services, materials, and/or spaces?
- How are public library virtual programming and services (especially prominent during COVID-19) changing the ways in which patrons engage with public libraries?
- In what ways does the Canadian public library research landscape compare or differ from that in European and Australasian countries, and what lessons can we glean from these differences?

3. Methods

As a state-of-the-art review⁵³, our findings are geared to outlining current trends in the state of knowledge as revealed by our reading of the included articles. The core team searched the following five databases for peer-reviewed articles in English, published between 2012-2022: *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* (LISTA), *Scopus*, *Library & Information Science Source*, *Library Literature & Information Science Index*, and *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA).

After deliberation among team members regarding which terms to include in the database searches, a total of five searches were completed within each database using the exact same search strings, with each search targeting specific themes from the core research questions. Starting with “public library” (and its variants) as the primary search term, the following strings were queried in each database:

- “social inclusion” OR “social exclusion” OR “asocial” OR “social role” OR “social relation*” OR “social connect*”
- "community engagement" OR "community hub" OR "community development" OR "community space" OR “community participat*”
- "democracy" OR "public sphere" OR "third place" OR "third space"
- "wellbeing" OR "well-being" OR "well being"
- "loneliness" OR "homeless*" OR "isolat*" OR "mental illness" OR "mental health" OR "belong*"

As outlined in Figure 1 below, we initially retrieved 2708 articles, first eliminating 1649 duplicates and then 388 articles based on abstract and title-level screening. A further 436 articles were subsequently removed upon closer screening and reading. Using Covidence, a systematic review management software, five core members of the team (Dalmer, Rothbauer, McKenzie, Oswald and Martin-Yeboah) read through the included articles and extracted key information from each (e.g., bibliographic information, information about library services, and pertinent information related to exploring an ‘asocial society’) in order to answer our research questions.

The following overview is therefore based on a reading of 235 articles that met the inclusion criteria for this state-of-the-art review. The Canadian and international Collaborators on our team also reviewed the final 235 articles to ensure that our sample was not missing any obvious contributions and to ensure that our sample

included LIS research perspectives beyond the inevitable geographic limitations of Europe, North America, and Australia. Our large sample size aligns with the state-of-the-art review's aim of a comprehensive literature search. Given the large number of articles included in this review, we are able to report and relay a number of trends visible across the included sample.



Figure 1

4. Results

4.1 Bibliographic overview of included articles

The intention behind searching multiple databases was to ensure as much coverage as possible. Including Scopus in the search strategy allowed us to capture some multidisciplinary studies on public libraries. Given the search strategy, an expected majority of 89% (n = 208) of the 235 included studies originated from sources whose primary focus is LIS. Notably, other disciplines such as Geography, Gender Studies, Public Health, and Cultural Studies also contributed to the included studies. A total of 96 unique peer-reviewed journals were captured in our review with the following five journals appearing most frequently in our sample:

- *Public Library Quarterly*
- *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*
- *Journal of Documentation*
- *Library and Information Science Research*
- *Advances in Librarianship*

As outlined in Figure 2, publication years dating back to 2012 were included in the search parameters, with relatively even coverage noted throughout. Starting in 2019, there is a small but notable increase in thematically relevant resources. This increase aligns with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated many of the themes under study, and may also indicate that conversations related to our research questions are receiving more attention.

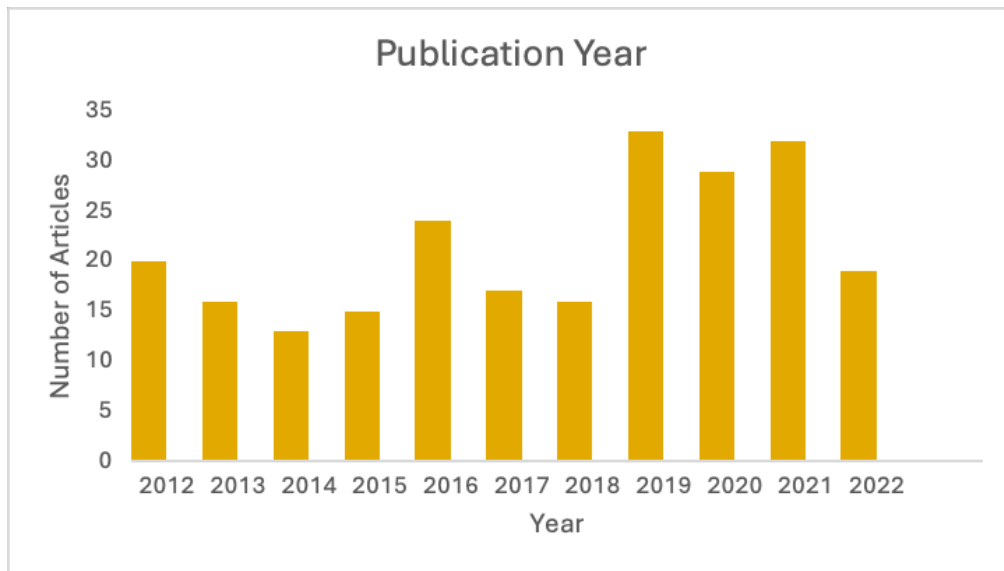


Figure 2

The research questions in this review created a slight geographic prioritization of countries, particularly in engaging with how the Canadian public library research landscape compares or differs from that in European and Australasian countries. An early decision was made to not limit searches by geographic region as there are important contributions to our themes that extend globally. As such, the geographic regions under discussion in each record were carefully recorded during data extraction. The primary regions under consideration in this review accounted for 52% of extractions (Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, n = 142). Importantly, the United States was covered in 28% (n = 71) of extracted records and provided important insights on many of the key themes under consideration in this review. Twenty studies were identified as focusing on diverse geographic boundaries, with coverage extending beyond country borders. A full breakdown of the geographic regions can be found in Table 1.

| Region | Number | Proportion |
|---------------------------|--------|------------|
| Europe | 76 | 28% |
| United States | 71 | 26% |
| Canada | 35 | 13% |
| Australia and New Zealand | 31 | 12% |
| Asia | 24 | 9% |
| Africa | 15 | 6% |
| South America | 1 | 0% |
| Other | 3 | 1% |
| Not Applicable | 12 | 4% |

Table 1

The included articles provided an array of study designs for consideration, with case studies (n = 56) accounting for almost 25% of the methods in use. The relevance of case studies is important as many of the resources examined the impact of specific programming on a library system or limited systems. In some scenarios, programming or library systems were examined across geographic boundaries^{35,54,55}, but most case studies focused on a single library system.

Additionally, more general qualitative research was noted in 21% (n = 50) of studies with library workers (n = 11) being the focus of these research questions most often with a variety of outcomes being measured with qualitative methods. Quantitative methods were utilized in 10% of studies (n = 23) with an additional 14% (n = 33) employing mixed methods. A full breakdown of study designs can be found in Table 2.

| Study Design | Number | Proportion |
|---------------------------|--------|------------|
| Case Study | 56 | 24% |
| Qualitative Research | 50 | 21% |
| Essay/Opinion | 35 | 15% |
| Mixed Methods | 33 | 14% |
| Quantitative Research | 23 | 10% |
| Lit Review | 12 | 5% |
| Theoretical | 8 | 3% |
| Systematic/Scoping Review | 1 | 0% |
| Other | 16 | 7% |

Table 2

This brief bibliographic overview has illustrated that the search strategy employed in this review delivered a significant mix of resources that captured many unique peer reviewed resources relatively evenly split between the targeted years of coverage. Additionally, authors employed a diverse mix of study methodologies in pursuit of their research questions, with case studies being the most used method.

4.2 How do public libraries help patrons create or maintain connections in their communities?

Underlying a majority of the 235 articles is an acknowledgement that the role of public libraries is changing, from operating as information repositories to now *also* operating as community hubs. The ways in which public library systems and branches engage with their communities and patrons are therefore also shifting. Focusing in particular on the current state of public library-related research knowledge on issues related to growing feelings of disconnection, isolation and loneliness, articles explored the multiple ways in which public libraries afford connection for and among their patrons.

Public libraries have the capacity to contribute to a “renewal of a democratic public sphere by providing free and ready access to knowledge and information, as well as safe and trusted social spaces for the exchange of ideas, creativity, and decision making”⁵⁶ (p. 295). In negotiating how to best and realistically work towards realizing this capacity, included articles found that public libraries foster connection with their communities through multiple means:

- Encouraging feelings of belonging through library services
- Creating connections through technology
- Reinforcing cultural identities
- Creating safe physical spaces
- Addressing issues of accessibility

Of note, these different avenues by which libraries seek to create, foster, or sustain connection vary, sometimes significantly, by library system, library location, funding and staff availability, and the needs of the community, among others.

4.2.1 Encouraging feelings of belonging through library services

Perhaps unsurprisingly, public libraries mobilize their many services and resources to afford patrons feelings of connection and belonging. Public libraries draw on their spaces, their staff, their collections and materials, their programs, and relationships with community organizations to bolster feelings of connection. Public libraries provide access to material (books and other media, computer and Internet infrastructure) and nonmaterial resources (knowledge, exchange, relationships). There are a number of different library services and materials that library staff draw upon, loan, and/or provide that were differently interpreted as mitigating the impacts of an increasingly asocial society among the included articles. These library services include:

- materials and collections,
- programs,
- technologies,
- community collaborations,
- makerspaces, and
- library spaces.

Ninety-one percent (n = 215) of all included articles addressed one or more library services as part of their study. A majority of articles (n = 176) studied more than one library service, perhaps indicative that library services are often intertwined or are used in tandem to highlight different facets of the library or community. This section explores library service trends related to materials and collections, programs, community collaborations, and makerspaces. Library services related to technologies and spaces are explored in greater depth in sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.4, respectively.

Articles examining *materials and collections* highlighted the multiple ways in which access to a public library's materials (whether books, databases, magazines, CDs, DVDs, tools, etc.) were differently experienced and used by patrons. Some looked at the ways in which newcomer and immigrant populations access books (for themselves, for their children) in their first language⁵⁷. Others examined particular types of collections, looking at, for example, how rural libraries provide patrons access to health information⁵⁸ or patrons' experiences of accessing Books on Prescription⁵⁹. Importantly and of note, library collections are not limited to print books. For example, one study's⁶⁰ library's tool collection was highlighted for its capacity to improve life in patrons' neighbourhoods, by supporting them and their neighbours in everyday life, by

supporting paid work as a means to become self-employed and by providing a way to learn new skills by doing. Others highlighted how public libraries can foster feelings of belonging among their patron groups by including and showcasing different collections. Bain and Podmore's⁶¹ study, for example, discuss how the size, variety, age, quality, content, organization and visibility of LGBTQ2+ collections can play a key role in fostering feelings of inclusion among patrons. Should LGBTQ2+ books and other resources be lacking or difficult to access, this invisibility can signal a certain degree of LGBTQ2+ exclusion in the library.

Articles highlighting library *programming* examined different programs, events, and activities that library staff create and/or host for a variety of different patrons and patron groups. Programs vary between library branches and library systems, depending on the needs and interests of the surrounding community, the relationships built with community organizations, the capacity of library workers, and available funding. There is a wide variety of programs covered in this sample, from programs created and hosted in-house in the library, to programs that draw on partnerships with outside organizations. One segment of programs focused on supporting patrons of different age ranges, focusing, for example, on early learning programs and school preparedness programs for younger library patrons (and their families)⁶² or the impact of tailored exercise programs offered at the library for older patrons⁶³. Other programs covered in this synthesis focus on particular segments of the population that libraries engage with through their programming: Tales and Travels Program⁶⁴ for individuals living with dementia, conversation-based programming in libraries to support integration in increasingly multiethnic communities³⁴, employability training programs⁶⁵, and a variety of programs that focus on supporting individuals who are economically disadvantaged or living without permanent housing^{66,67}.

Public libraries are often discussed in tandem with the communities in which they are situated. Unsurprisingly, there were a number of articles that focused on the *community collaborations* that facilitate and enhance existing library services and differently engage with patrons and community members. Articles focused on community collaborations appeared to focus on three trends:

1. community collaborations to facilitate access to and increased knowledge regarding particular topics (e.g., health information or digital literacy⁶⁸)

2. community collaborations to more effectively support different patron groups who may have different or more complex needs (e.g., collaboration with social workers to better engage with individuals living with mental illnesses or individuals without stable housing^{69,70})
3. community collaborations to reach patrons who may not be able to physically visit their public library^{71,35} (whether due to mobility or health issues or due to geographic locale).

Those studies focused on *makerspaces* examine the capacity and impact of this specific type of space in libraries on its patrons. Makerspaces, also called hackerspaces, hackspaces, and fablabs, are collaborative spaces inside a library where people with common interests can meet, socialize, invent, and create using high tech, low tech, or no tech tools. Makerspaces can include 3D printers, sewing machines, sound recording equipment, kitchen tools, and other craft and hardware supplies. Studies found that patrons frequenting makerspaces reported increased self-confidence and improved teamwork abilities⁷². The integration of these creative spaces was also interpreted as a way in which the library was actively responding to community interests - creating a community hub of creativity and also contributing to patrons' economic vitality - and was perceived as changing perceptions of how libraries are responding to their communities (some articles referred to this as “future-proofing” the library^{73,74}).

In considering the library services explored in this section, the feelings of connection and belonging that they can create, foster, and/or sustain can only occur if patrons have access (whether physical access, technological access, geographic access, etc.) to these services. It is the access to these services that will ultimately dictate their utility in shaping and, at times, mitigating our increasingly asocial society.

4.2.2 Creating connections through technology

A number of articles took up the increasing importance of technology for and to patrons and the access libraries afford to a variety of technologies and their supporting infrastructure. In doing so, libraries in this category of articles begin to reveal the ways in which libraries accommodate the “transactions of everyday life”⁷⁵ (p. 551) including the practical role libraries play in providing access to digital and technical infrastructures and resources (internet, printers, photocopiers, computers, Wi-Fi, Wi-Fi

hotspots, and instruction and support from library staff to be able to manoeuvre these tools, etc.) necessary for engaging not only in the various work, entertainment, education, and social elements that comprise our everyday lives, but also for navigating bureaucracy and governance that shape everyday life. Other articles highlighted the ever-present digital divide that patrons navigate⁷⁶ (whether through gaps in skills and/or access), and the role of the public library in providing internet and technological device access, thus addressing broader questions related to technological capital and social inequality. Some articles drew a direct link between public libraries' technology provision (including free internet access, training opportunities and library staff's assistance) to a reduction in the digital divide and a reduction in social exclusion among patrons in the community, particularly in rural areas⁷⁷. For example, using a unique model of virtual assistance to support customers remotely, Fahim and colleagues⁷⁸ discussed an open+ pilot program that virtually connected patrons at the rural branch with library staff at the system's Central Library when needed. This program allowed increased access to the library (library hours increased from 17 to 60 hours per week) and overall community use of the rural library branch, with increases in the use of the library space, resources, and services as a direct result of the virtual pilot program.

Importantly, access to technology and the connections that can be afforded through this access are not experienced uniformly across patron populations. Marler⁷⁹, for example, discusses how libraries' policies, practices, and settings can either support or constrain the benefits that accompany technological access. In many library systems, use of computers requires a library account, which itself requires an ID which can preclude unstably housed adults. Patrons with library fines can also be denied access to different library technologies. Finally, many library systems place time limits (using software installed on desktops) on library computer access out of concern over management of computers as a shared public resource. Different communities who use libraries need public internet access that enables socialization, connection and association with others without concern for time limits and, for example, noise restrictions.

Another body of articles in this sample examine technology access and provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further explored in section 4.4, a number of articles

explored the technologies that libraries lent during the pandemic (e.g., Wi-Fi hotspots, increases in e-book provision), recognizing that many individuals relied on the library for internet access and were without access during lockdowns⁸⁰; others examined how libraries used technology (e.g., social media) to keep patrons abreast of developments regarding library closures and changes to programming⁸¹; and yet others discussed the broader implications of the shift to digital programs, collections, and activities during the pandemic, highlighting the value of both digital *and* physical library services and underlining that these services are not interchangeable⁸².

4.2.3 Reinforcing cultural identities

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) advocates for the inclusion of ethnic minority communities in library spaces and services. IFLA's *Guidelines for Library Services in Multicultural Communities*⁸³, for example, promote fairness and equity of access in library services to multicultural communities.

Articles that explicitly examined the ways in which cultural identities can be reinforced and respected focused primarily on library programs that respond to different cultural patron groups' needs. This included examining how library staff's readers' advisory services can help immigrants with psychological and socio-cultural adaptation in a new country⁸⁴ or the social impact of mobile libraries for rural children living in Taiwan⁸⁵.

Recognizing that active public library patrons typically belong to fairly homogeneous majority groups in terms of race, class, age, and gender⁸⁶, other studies served as exemplars or offered suggestions for libraries to enhance their cultural competencies with different population groups as a means of bolstering community engagement^{87,88}. Blackburn's⁸⁹ work about two Australian public libraries and Indigenous communities underscores the needed and continued work that library staff and Library and Information Science as a discipline need to do in this area, finding that "for community engagement to be sustained and for full cultural competence to develop within an organization, the environment to be considered is much broader than that of the library's relationship with its user community" (p. 229).

4.2.4 Creating safe physical spaces

Public libraries are regarded as “relatively safe spaces that are busy, open to all, free of frenzy, and lightly regulated⁹⁰” (p. 9). Throughout the sample, the importance and value of public libraries’ spaces were heavily featured. Underlying a number of the articles⁹¹⁻⁹³ that explore the ways in which libraries’ spaces foster feelings of connection, inclusion, or belonging among library patrons and the communities they surround is an understanding of the library as a *third place*, borrowing from Oldenburg’s⁹⁴ concept where third places are distinct and separate from the home (a first place) or work environments (a second place), where social connection, social capital, and community building can be fostered.

As third places are in flux as society, broadly, and communities, locally are changing, public library spaces are moving away from traditional spaces for lending to community hubs and social meeting points of connection. Some of the library services outlined in 4.2.1 illustrate this shift (e.g., community collaborations, makerspaces, and the diversifying collections that libraries lend). Public library spaces are increasingly mobilized and recognized for their capacity to enable patrons to participate in public life. Audunson and colleagues’⁹⁵ recent analysis of the role of public libraries as institutions that underpin a democratic public sphere encapsulates a number of the meetings, encounters, and social activities people experience in the public library as found across our sample:

- Bumping accidentally into friends and neighbours
- Visiting the library with family, friends, and colleagues as a result of a mutual project or interest
- Attending meetings and events in the library
- Going to the library to locate information on community issues
- Visiting a library cafe
- Locating information at the library about community events and activities
- Using technology in the library for social purposes
- Having conversations with strangers.

The library’s space, then, as an evolving community hub, is key in fostering, sustaining, or sparking social connections, whether intentional or inadvertent. White and Martel⁹⁶, drawing on Putnam and Feldstein’s⁹⁷ earlier work, highlight the ways libraries not only reinforce existing social bonds and connections but also create opportunities for

making unexpected connections between individuals and different population groups who might not otherwise have contact with one another.

Included articles spoke to the intangible as well as the tangible elements of the library's space that are so key to its use and prominence as a third place. Tangible elements that are crucial to the enjoyment of the library as a safe space include: warmth (in cooler months), reprieve from heat (in warmer months), bathroom facilities, internet access, and shelter⁴². More intangible qualities that contribute to patrons' perceptions of library's space include an overarching "feeling of warmth for public libraries"^{29,98} given the important and esteemed space they occupy within the social fabric of communities and the importance communities' place in libraries' capacity to provide access to information that helps individuals learn, grow, and change⁹⁹.

Creating and sustaining these safe, accessible library spaces is not without challenges. Some articles speak to the difficulties of maintaining a space open and welcoming for *all* patrons. Some articles speak to the discomfort some library patrons and library staff have in sharing library space with other population groups. Williams¹⁰⁰, for example, highlights library staff's frustration and difficulty regarding community perceptions (whether direct comments from patrons or community media coverage of the public library) related to allowing individuals experiencing homelessness in the library's physical space. At times, the library as community hub is at odds with the traditional view of the library as a quiet, reverent, solemn place of learning. This conflicting understanding of the library's space also challenges and sometimes restricts the use of the library's space by some patron groups. Articles by Williams¹⁰⁰ and Marler⁷⁹ highlight the struggles public library staff contend with when regulating social interactions in the library, e.g., by using signs that restrict certain behaviours and/or using security services who enforce policies (such as noise policies).

4.2.5 Addressing issues of accessibility

The group of articles focused on issues of accessibility approached the notion of access from different avenues. Some articles focused on how public libraries enhance access to information (e.g., consumer health information) and services for patrons living in geographically rural and remote areas¹⁰¹. Access in and to the library is differently experienced based on a variety of factors, including locale and population. A

larger portion of articles in this category focused on how different library systems or library branches are aiming to enhance library access (whether in terms of space, digital access, training, outreach) with the intention to more fulsomely support and/or empower marginalized communities¹⁰², particularly individuals living in poverty^{103,104} or those without stable housing^{68,105}.

The changing role of public libraries, traditionally considered a solemn space for reading to now viewed as a community hub, is also changing understandings and possibilities of access. This includes opening up access to different kinds of programs or to new types of collections. Makerspaces in public libraries, for example, are shifting patrons' access to different tools, skills, and learning and creativity opportunities. Inclusion of different types of collections in libraries, such as tool libraries⁶⁰, library-hosted food gardens¹⁰⁶, and seed libraries¹⁰⁷, similarly provide access to enhancing patrons' everyday lives. Library programs that partner with different community or government organizations or with professionals like social workers^{108,109} provide access to knowledge about different events, workshops, programs, assistance, and knowledge that can support patrons in their everyday lives.

Issues of accessibility are differently experienced depending on different factors, including public libraries' geographic locale as well as the availability of funding to employ library workers. Some studies included in the sample, for example, examine how library systems are contending with the difficulties of reduced opening hours by implementing self-managed or community-managed^{110,111} libraries. These types of libraries, similar to the open+ pilot program⁷⁸ that virtually connects patrons at a rural branch with library staff at the system's Central Library described in 4.2.2, are unstaffed during some or all of its opening hours but open for registered patrons to enter and use their services. Studies examining these types of libraries, which are often instituted to enhance community access, question whether patrons' expectations, perceptions, and experience of libraries are altered if library staff's physical presence is removed.

Underlying each of these articles was a recognition, and, at times, a celebration of the role of public libraries in mediating access: "the importance of public libraries as spaces for social reproduction therefore arises from their role as a mediator of

inequality through free access to information”¹¹² (p. 114). And while other articles similarly praise the library for its “central role” in providing *equal* access in an increasingly stratified society, given the multitude of different individuals with different needs who visit the library¹¹³, providing equal access (whether to collections, programs, spaces, etc.) to all patrons may be more aspirational than an everyday, lived reality.

4.3 What population groups are included in public library research and in what ways are they differently impacted by public library services, materials, and/or spaces?

The diversity of library services outlined in section 4.2 are differently created, promoted, and received in response to the different needs and expectations from libraries’ patron communities. As Johnson and Griffis¹¹⁴ ask, do these different services create the necessary conditions wherein “everyone feels welcome, irrespective of personal circumstance?”. Given the distribution of public libraries across the country, in urban and rural locales and in neighbourhoods of high and low poverty, the ways in which public libraries both connect with and provide connection manifest differently depending on their contexts and the communities they serve. Research on this topic is indicative of the many different population groups that public libraries engage with and support on a daily basis.

As illustrated in Figure 3, there were a multitude of different populations studied in the synthesis sample: older adults, library workers, children, teenagers, individuals without permanent or stable housing, immigrants and recent migrant populations, individuals without permanent employment, formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals living with different abilities, and library staff. Patron populations categorized as “other” consisted primarily of studies that did not categorize patrons as belonging to one specific population type. Sixty-four studies identified multiple population groups as part of their sample, in which case multiple population groups would be counted in one study. This breadth of population groups, each with their own unique circumstances, needs, and expectations, is indicative of the range of factors and contexts library workers must consider and incorporate in their programs, collections, arrangements of physical and virtual spaces, and administration.

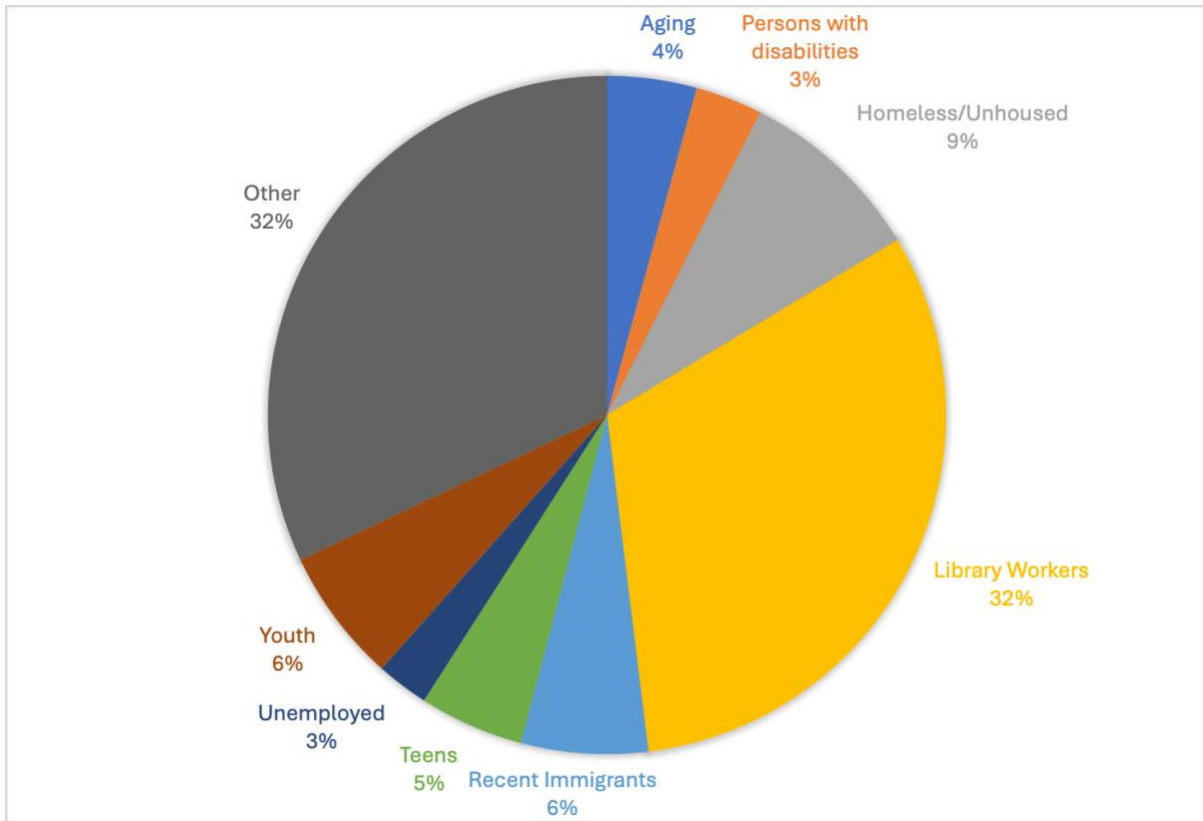


Figure 3

A majority of articles that answer this particular research question seek to identify or highlight the role of the public library in different patron populations' lives by talking either to the population in question or to library staff for their perspectives. Articles that focused primarily on speaking with library workers examined: a) the broader ways in which library staff view the public library as fostering connection¹¹⁵, digital inclusion¹¹⁶, resilience¹ and trust and social capital¹¹⁷ or b) library staff's perspectives on working with different population groups (including families,^{118,119} patrons in crisis⁶⁹, patrons without stable housing^{68,120}, patrons living in rural locales^{115,121}). Our team identified a concerning number of articles that study library workers' interpretations of user populations without also including the voices of those communities. This research approach risks moving away from Wiegand's¹²² prompt to focus on the library in the life of the user and instead falls back on what Zweig¹²³ labelled a persistent limitation of early public library use studies that studied the patron from the perspective of the library.

Articles focused on different populations largely examined the library services that respond to different patron populations' needs. How these needs are determined, however, was not always clear. Articles focused on individuals without stable or permanent housing or those living in poverty focused on the more tangible elements that the library can provide: warm spaces, bathroom access, quiet spaces, access to computers and Wi-Fi for correspondence or work searches^{105,124,125}. Research taking up this patron population group also reveals how different populations will differently experience and use library space with greater and lesser degrees of comfort (their own comfort as well as the comfort of library staff and other library patrons¹⁰⁰). Library programs and their capacity to foster social inclusion, learning opportunities, and lively conversation, were particularly salient for other population groups, including older adults^{126,127}, immigrants and recent migrant populations^{128, 129}, and children^{85,130}. Studies that examined teenagers as a patron population appeared to focus primarily on the ways that teens use technologies in the library, whether for education, connection, or entertainment^{131,132}. Individuals living with different abilities were studied in a broader and more aspirational context in this sample; studies examined models or best practices that libraries are using as they seek to be more accessible^{133,134}.

A key theme that resonated through articles that explore different patron populations is the difficulty and tension that library workers encounter as they aim to engage with all patrons equally, especially when different patrons have different and more complex needs^{42,124}. Also of note are library workers' calls for more robust training in responsively working and engaging with patrons with more complex needs¹³⁵. Not only do library staff engage with a wide variety of patron populations on a daily basis, but they are also tasked with supporting other patrons to be understanding and/or accepting of patrons who might be experiencing mental health challenges, extreme poverty, or other obstacles. Williams'¹⁰⁰ research articulates the many lines of work that are foisted upon library staff (whether they are adequately trained and compensated, or not), particularly as the library continues to evolve as a community space that invites all individuals from the community including, in this case, individuals experiencing homelessness:

“The library’s function as a third space brings large numbers of people experiencing homelessness into proximity with public library workers. As a result, library staff are often required to construct and enforce both physical

boundaries (e.g., seating, opening the library early on cold days) and interactional boundaries (e.g., determining whether answering a question is appropriate, or how much assistance one can provide)" (p. 708).

Wahler and colleagues¹³⁶, in their findings, thus call for libraries to find ways to support their staff to more effectively serve patrons with varied psychosocial needs.

4.4. How are public library virtual programming and services (especially prominent during COVID-19) changing the ways in which patrons engage with public libraries?

In their study of challenges faced by Australian public libraries during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns, Jane Garner and colleagues¹³⁷ found that public libraries functioned as the “steady ship during the crisis” and responded “rapidly and with agility” to the COVID-19 closures. In a general way, these early English-language studies of public library strategies under COVID-19 tell remarkably similar stories of challenge and response. Because the date range of this preliminary literature review stops at 29 August 2022, the recent surge in publications about library responses during the pandemic is not fully captured in this report. The fast-moving shifts and changes exacerbated by COVID-19 underscore the timeliness of identifying and compiling literature on public libraries as social institutions. This is especially so considering the growing volume of work (scholarly, professional, and grey) being produced during the COVID-19 pandemic that can be productively analysed through an ‘asocial lens’. Furthermore, as most of the studies are primarily concerned with institutional responses and strategies, we find that we are unable to fully answer the research question as we posed it: data on users and patrons is thin in the sample of articles included in our review.

In reports about public libraries during 2020 and 2021 the story begins with immediate pandemic responses to the crises instigated by fears and anxieties about personal and public health and by the consequences for library operations due to enforced lockdown measures. In some of the papers we read, authors align the disruptions in library mandates with ruptures in society more broadly to make calls for transformation in library services that redress inequities in services to BIPOC

communities, to poor and underemployed adults, to people experiencing housing stress and homelessness, and to people in need of social supports for their mental health and wellness. In a general way, these early studies are *all about* social connections in local library communities as library managers and workers were committed to letting their communities know that the library was still there, still available for information and knowledge, cultural and educational programming, for books and reading, and the internet. More recent reports take a longer view which makes sense after nearly three years of COVID-19 and the realization that the trajectories of isolation, anxiety, loss, and asociality will require ongoing efforts, resources, attention, and innovation in recovery.

Several themes emerge from our reading of the sample of 19 articles (a subset of our larger literature review) that directly addressed COVID-19. The first theme was found in one way or another in every article – namely, the development of strategies designed to extend remote access to digital materials, services and programming to patrons including those excluded from such access by social location or status. The physical place of the public library is a hot topic too with renewed calls for its centrality for connecting with patrons, especially those seen to be most in need of access to supportive, free, and safe community spaces. The mental health and wellbeing of individual patrons, broader communities, as well as of library staff is another key focus in many of the studies. Strategies for coping with new patron needs and demands while negotiating the effects of the pandemic on staff morale, training and development are major concerns. Finally, the story ends with a high sense of renewal for the value and rewards of community-engaged librarianship as a way forward through recovery into the future.

4.4.1 Digital literacy and addressing digital exclusion

Given the widespread, global lockdown during the early years of the pandemic it is not surprising that many studies report on the use of various online and digital technologies to deliver services to patron groups impacted by the pandemic. In fact, digital literacy initiatives to address digital exclusion is the overwhelmingly dominant theme within this sample of papers. Researchers made explicit calls for services that consciously address social exclusion, systemic racism, and communities of users previously invisible or neglected in public library mandates. The studies explore public

library pandemic responses in relation to communities of older adults⁸⁰, remote learners and recently unemployed adults¹³⁸, and adults marginalized from access to information and communication technologies⁸². Some studies^{139,140} theorize service impacts on racialized minorities, who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Studies¹³⁷ reported on the challenges of managing staff including their levels of technical skill to work remotely with library patrons with the appropriate technology.

4.4.1.1 E-borrowing and e-reading

Studies in our sample also report on increases in electronic borrowing of library materials that includes remote access to books, databases, textbooks, multimedia, and other kinds of services (e.g., Wahler et al.¹⁴¹). McMenemy, Robinson, and Ruthven⁸², in a national survey of public libraries in the United Kingdom, found the marked increase in e-book borrowing during the pandemic brought visibility to the role of the public library in meeting needs of patrons, although e-borrowing came nowhere near making up the shortfall in access. Of those almost 13 million active library users in 2018-2019, only just over 5 million were able to borrow from their library service in 2020-2021, leaving about 7.5 million previously active users with no service.

Berra¹³⁸ describes responses from one library case study to connect with users during lockdown that included processing remote applications for library cards to enable access to library resources and Wi-Fi hotspots, increased access, and ease of access to e-books for students, and the development of new remote, tutoring services.

4.4.1.2 Reaching out to community through social media

An early systematic review of literature related to public library pandemic response by Kostaglios and Katsani¹⁴² shows that there is renewed attention to communicating with communities through social media applications. However, while there is some evidence that public libraries increased their social media communications during the lockdown months of the pandemic, one U.S. study⁸¹ of library Twitter accounts found that “public libraries actively deployed technologies to continue their services and fulfill their mission to keep people connected to information and traditional services. However, public libraries need to evolve their adoption of the Twitter platform to

facilitate access to local community information, as well as relevant, critical, and timely knowledge and information with regard to current events” (p. 728)

Kou, Chen, and Pan¹⁴³ present an analysis of online library news and social media communications from three libraries in Wuhan, China during pandemic closure and reopening periods. Their findings give evidence of concerted emergency management efforts to “ensure internal team stability” (p. 287) while also sharing authoritative health and community information to the public. These libraries also offered online cultural programming and established reading “corners” in health sector locations to help with the long stints of isolation at home, social anxiety, and covid panic. Such initiatives were seen as ways to support and build community resilience when dealing with pandemic challenges.

4.4.1.3 Alleviating digital exclusion

In a study of Scottish public library responses to the pandemic during 2020, Reid and Mesjar¹⁴⁴ make several recommendations beginning with a need for a national conversation about digital content provision in public libraries and the role libraries have as digital “enablers” in the sense of supporting efforts to overcome the digital divide for many members of the public.

Casselden¹⁴⁵ investigated the relative success of a digital literacy initiative for older adults in Newcastle, UK. Older adults who participated in the digital literacy programs were motivated by pandemic conditions to understand and navigate the digital world with confidence, independence, and skill. This study emphasises the effects of participation on their feelings of confidence and social connectedness. The study also sought to explore how organisational partnerships can work to alleviate digital exclusion amongst older people.

4.4.2 Physical place of public libraries: A contested ground

In general, the studies in this sample found digitized public library services met needs for information and sometimes for social connection. However, there is strong caution throughout regarding the physical place of the library. In a study of German public libraries and broader European contexts, Thiele and Klagge¹⁴⁶ found that the local physical space of the library is critical for participation in society, specifically its

function as a “third space” (via Oldenburg) and for educational justice. It still matters for communities in part because of the significant constraints of access to digital services due to users’ specific socio-spatial and socioeconomic living conditions. Similar findings are put forward by Reid and Mesjar¹⁴⁴. Garner et al¹³⁷. also note the role of locality in terms of the type and variety of services offered by Australian public libraries during crisis periods of the pandemic months.

Voices^{139,140} also call for caution in reifying the physical place of the public library as a safe place with abundant examples of how public libraries sustain the ideologies of white supremacy which endanger and alienate racialized minorities and other communities that continue to be systematically denied equitable levels of service.

4.4.3 Support for mental health and wellbeing

Some studies in the sample directly report on the role that public libraries play in regard to health impacts of living under pandemic lockdown conditions. Bradley⁴⁷ argues that public libraries can fundamentally contribute to the eight domains of wellness identified by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing – community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards, time use—especially during the period of post-pandemic recovery. Public libraries can play a role through traditional lines of service such as through provision of space, access to resources including technology, and programming.

Kou, Chen, and Pan¹⁴³ found that Wuhan public libraries explicitly designed and delivered information and cultural programming to alleviate mental health stresses caused by pandemic conditions. In one of the few studies to consider both academic and public library virtual programming in support of mental health and wellbeing, especially prominent during the pandemic, Hall and McAlister¹⁴⁷ noted key differences. They report that nearly three-quarters of the public library staff respondents indicated that their libraries offered virtual services and resources for mental health and wellbeing compared to just over half of staff at academic libraries. Not surprisingly perhaps, public libraries offered more virtual programming year-round compared to academic libraries that focussed more on high stress and anxiety periods such as during midterms and finals. Importantly, the authors note the value of the “strong and

enduring relationship between public libraries and social service agencies” suggesting that community partnerships and service alliances are critical.

Garner et al.¹⁴⁸ report that during just a four-month closure in Australia due to the pandemic, from mid-November 2019 to mid-March 2020 the Library Social Worker in the City of Melbourne Library completed 642 patron interactions. The study further analyzes case notes and statistics related to 43 patrons who were experiencing homelessness or housing stress and who received significant social work support during these months of lockdown. Furthermore, the relationships that library workers establish with their patrons create the secure ground for these kinds of positive social work interactions to occur.

A small case study based in the U.S. by Ogden and Williams⁶⁹ explored the impacts of trauma-informed approaches to working with patrons in crisis situations through a series of workshops co-designed and facilitated by social workers and librarians. These kinds of skills are seen as requirements by some for public library workers because of negative social and mental impacts of the pandemic.

Wahler et al.¹⁴¹ conducted a large-scale survey in the U.S. (n=3251) of library workers and patrons to understand their pandemic related needs and to explore how public libraries could promote local resilience as communities recover from the pandemic impacts. Findings indicate that patrons and staff, alike, experienced significant changes to their daily routines due to restrictions, social isolation, job losses, and work-from-home arrangements. Stresses were also reported due to difficulties using the library due to library closures, reduced hours, inability to physically browse materials, limited transportation, and a lack of internet access. This study also reports that the pandemic took its toll on library workers too due to changes in overall access to services, fewer patrons, different psychosocial needs, virtual/remote assistance, fear of being infected, COVID enforcement among others.

4.4.4 Renewal and recognition of community-engaged and people-centred librarianship

In their systematic literature review on global public library responses to COVID-19, Kostagiolas and Katsani¹⁴² found that public libraries immediately worked to serve their communities by developing and expanding online services and programs, aimed to provide trusted health information, provided opportunities for cultural and educational programming, and shared COVID-19 related research to the public. Further, they found that public libraries are striving to be accessible, community-engaged, and people-centred, playing a foundational role to support democratic processes/function, cultural expression, and information exchange of communities.

Reid and Mesjar's¹⁴⁴ findings suggest the critical requirement of continued strong advocacy for public libraries and the importance of the library as a physical space. They posit the importance of maintaining the flexibility, agility and autonomy which emerged during lockdown. Reid and Mesjar¹⁵¹ present compelling evidence for the social value of public libraries as free, safe, and public spaces within communities. The testimony from library managers also illustrates a particular culture of care in the relations between staff and library users, while at the same time, calls for recognition from local authorities for the breadth of public library services as well as their essential role for many users. Garner et al¹³⁷. further report that Australian public libraries stressed the value of strong relationships with and clear policies from governing authorities as well, especially in the context of rapid innovations being undertaken during lockdown periods.

Lenstra and colleagues⁸⁰ show similar findings and make related calls for advocacy, recognition, and funding for small town and rural public libraries in the U.S. Seventy-six percent of those surveyed (n=353) described concerted efforts to reach out to support older adults in their communities during pandemic lockdowns. In a case study of mobile outreach to youth in the Western Washington region in the US, Beckman¹³⁰ describes a small research study into mobile outreach services to youth during 2020. Not only did the library provide access to take-home "engagement" kits during the pandemic, by so doing, the library was "providing this space for community engagement [that] places the library at the center of relationships between

neighbors, communities, and individuals” (p. 22). Lenstra and Campana¹⁴⁹ extend this notion of mobile outreach to “outdoor librarianship” which is presented as one of the more novel public library responses to the pandemic restrictions. As with other innovative public library initiatives, outdoor library programming works best with meaningful community partnerships.

An Australian study¹⁴⁸ has some preliminary evidence to show that the unique qualities of the public perception of public libraries as “safe and welcoming” may allow for more positive interactions between library social workers and clients experiencing homelessness and housing stress than more traditional social work locations.

4.5 Deterrents to social connection

In addition to the many creative ways libraries foster feelings of social connection among their patrons, we must also acknowledge those aspects of public library systems that work against the creation of social connection among patrons. For example, many public library systems require identification and a fixed address to be able to create a library account to borrow materials or use computers, a difficult task for those without stable housing^{36,42,68}. Additionally, library collections that do not adequately reflect the community can also exacerbate feelings of social exclusion among some library patrons⁶¹.

The long lasting and ongoing struggle of library funding leads to questions of what librarians can realistically accomplish given constrained budgets and limited staff. The conversation around library funding is complicated and multifaceted. Of the articles reviewed, 18% (n = 42) included some degree of conversation about funding. Terrile¹⁵⁰ provides a powerful overview of funding concerns dating back the last 15 years:

Libraries can and should be that link for communities, but it is important to note that the same social and economic factors that contributed to increased rates of housing insecurity and homelessness in the last 10 years have also had a profound impact on public libraries. Budget cuts, layoffs, shortened hours, and reduced services are, in many areas, still a reality almost a decade after the

Great Recession, especially for small and/or rural public libraries (Kelley 2012; Peet 2016) (p. 134).

Indeed, the sentiment that librarians and library systems are required to do more in service to their communities while contending with shrinking budgets and staff constraints is a global theme. In the Canadian context, Frederiksen¹¹² examines the debate around library funding in Toronto and reveals that “controversy over Toronto's public library budget revealed intense disagreement over the role and value of public libraries. Keeping libraries open and public became the central challenge to what many activists began to call an austerity budget.” (p. 141). In the United Kingdom, the library system has been decimated partially under the guise of libraries becoming community managed. Goulding¹⁵¹ acknowledges that “at the core of the apparently irresistible tide of community managed libraries lies a drive for austerity and the localism rhetoric has become a convenient smokescreen for local councils for withdrawal from public library service delivery” (p. 489). Finally, in the Australian context, O’Hehir and Reynolds¹⁵² conclude that changing the needs of the Australian population will have, “a significant effect on how future Australian public libraries are funded, what services and facilities are provided and how they are utilised and staffed” (p. 318). Indeed, across the globe it is evident that a major deterrent to the public library evolution and universal access to knowledge, services, and programming is having the funds to do so.

In direct relationship with funding is the sustainability of fines within public library systems. While libraries have a longstanding tradition and relationship with enacting fines for overdue materials, it must be acknowledged that these arguably outdated practices create barriers to access for many groups. Many systems have chosen to reduce, eliminate, or forgive fines in some capacity. As Lopez et al.¹¹⁸ discovered in their study, “fine forgiveness in several Maryland libraries creates more equitable use of library resources” (p. 324). This is an important observation given that the system under study by Lopez et al. show “82% serve families from predominantly low-income homes” (p. 323). In a specific fine forgiveness program, children and teens can reduce their fines simply by reading: “at Baltimore’s Enoch Pratt Free Library (MD) when children and teens read in the library each week, they log reading hours that earn them fine forgiveness”¹¹⁸ (p. 324). It should be noted that fine forgiveness programs also need to be transparent and accessible. In the case of one unnamed library system that

served large populations of LGBTQ2+ youth, Winkelstein¹⁵³ found that while the library “had fines and fees attached to the late return or non-return of library materials [...] they offered unwritten, unspecified, subjectively applied alternatives to fines and fees” (p. 206). The issue identified by Winkelstein¹⁵³ was that “one had to feel safe already to be able to take advantage of exceptions to the rules” (p. 206). The inconsistent application of a forgiveness system in this case is a disservice to disadvantaged people by creating subjectivity by way of a power imbalance between patron and librarian.

One immediately observable connection between fine forgiveness and funding is that the former may lead to a reduction of the latter. Public libraries do not earn revenue and what little they may earn through fines is under fire as libraries evolve and prioritize accessible and free information. Indeed, in the Australian context, O’Hehir and Reynolds¹⁵² cite a government report that “proposes ‘developing different revenue streams may initially challenge the public’s perception of public libraries as a ‘social good’; however, applying fees to non-core services and programs is no different from charging for catering” (p. 315). While O’Hehir and Reynolds identify the ramifications of such a proposal, they also acknowledge the ongoing tension between funding and earning revenue.

Finally, few studies evaluated the impact of securitization of the public library space. Most notably, Selman and Curnow¹⁵⁴ argue that “Winnipeg’s downtown Millennium Library’s aggressive and invasive security screening practices set a dangerous and exclusionary precedent for Canadian libraries.” (p. 1). They go on to powerfully state that “We should deeply question a solution that touts its cost effectiveness at the expense of real investment in staffing, training, and other best practices that do not unfairly exclude and stigmatize patrons”¹⁵⁴ (p. 5). Indeed, the safety and security of patrons and staff requires addressing and there is much debate on the proper path forward. However, engaging with a policy that “undermines trust and reciprocity with the affected communities”¹⁵⁴ (p. 5) and provides no alternative is problematic for the authors. One library system in Chicago¹⁰⁹ is working with security and library staff to tackle this issue by training them to understand issues of mental health, trauma, and homelessness with the goal of “helping reduce expulsions [through the] equipping of library and security staff to help create a more welcoming space for patrons experiencing homelessness” (p. 442). Clearly, with proper care and training, there are

ways to implement safeguards to prioritize the safety of everyone without ongoing exclusion and marginalization of certain groups.

Deterrents are policies enacted within libraries that run contrary to goals of connectivity and accessibility to the public. Funding, and by extension the ability of librarians and library systems to produce the material and programming required to reach their goals is an ongoing challenge globally. Additionally, fines can be seen as a barrier to access and any implementation of fine forgiveness must be transparent to patrons. Lastly, securitization of the public library must be implemented with care, both for library employees and for patrons.

4.6 In what ways does the Canadian public library research landscape compare or differ from that in European and Australasian countries, and what lessons can we glean from these differences?

Overall, our sample of studies provides multifaceted evidence addressing our questions about how public libraries help patrons create or maintain connections in their communities, what population groups are included in public library research and in what ways they are differently impacted by public library services, materials, and/or spaces, and how public library virtual programming and services (especially prominent during COVID-19) has changed the ways in which patrons engage with public libraries. The included studies also provide evidence of the general deterrents to public libraries' ability to foster social connection and inclusion.

Models of public library service, library policy and governance, and the degree to which governments allocate resources to public libraries vary substantially between countries and regions. In order to understand the contributions Canadian public library scholarship can make to broader discussions of public libraries and social connection, it is important to consider the research through a geographic lens, noting international patterns of inquiry and findings that can inform research on the Canadian context.

This section briefly revisits our main study themes and our themes of connection/connectedness from a geographic perspective to identify promising places for Canadian researchers to build on, complement, or extend research being undertaken internationally.

4.6.1 In what ways does the Canadian public library research landscape compare or differ from that in European and Australasian countries?

Of the 235 articles in our sample, 37% (n=88) reported research findings that afford comparison between Canadian public libraries and those in other countries. The majority of these (n=76) addressed public libraries within a single geographic region and the remaining articles (n=8) reported on comparisons across regions. The number of items describing African (n=3) and Asian (n=3) public libraries is very small. This section therefore provides a general overview of coverage in all regions and more detail about studies of European and Australian/New Zealand libraries.

Not surprisingly given the high European population base, the number of countries with a long public library tradition, and the frequency of European scholars and professionals publishing in English, almost half of articles (n=42) addressed public libraries in Europe. It is noteworthy that the number of articles addressing Australian/New Zealand public libraries is nearly triple the number of articles about Canadian libraries; this points to an opportunity for Canadian researchers to build this body of scholarship on public libraries' capacity for social connection and inclusion.

4.6.1.1 Overview of key themes across regions

Of the articles affording comparisons between Canadian and international public libraries, most (n=84) addressed one or more of our key themes: A social society, Community connection, Libraries as Third Place, Upholding/Establishing Democracy, Community Resilience, COVID response, UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Table 3 shows the distribution of articles and key themes across regions.

| Region | Articles | Themes |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Europe | 42 | 78 |
| Australia and New Zealand | 21 | 39 |
| Cross-regional comparison | 8 | 12 |
| Canada | 7 | 24 |
| Africa | 3 | 18 |
| Asia | 3 | 7 |
| Total | 84 | 167 |

Table 3 | Articles addressing key themes under study

Figures 4, 5 and 5 show the relative proportions of these themes across articles addressing European, Australian/New Zealand, and Canadian libraries:

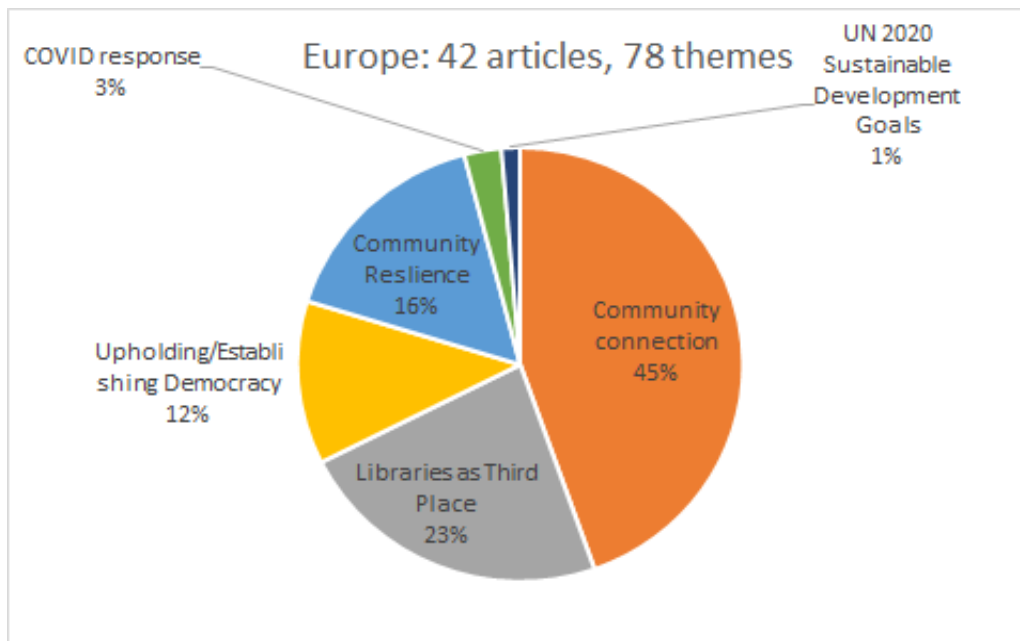


Figure 4

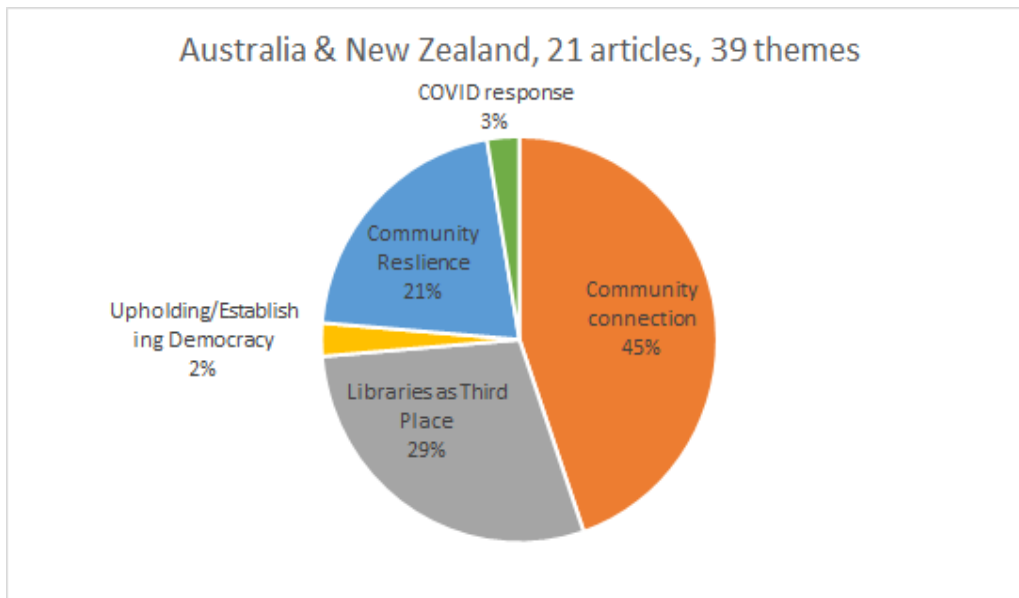


Figure 5

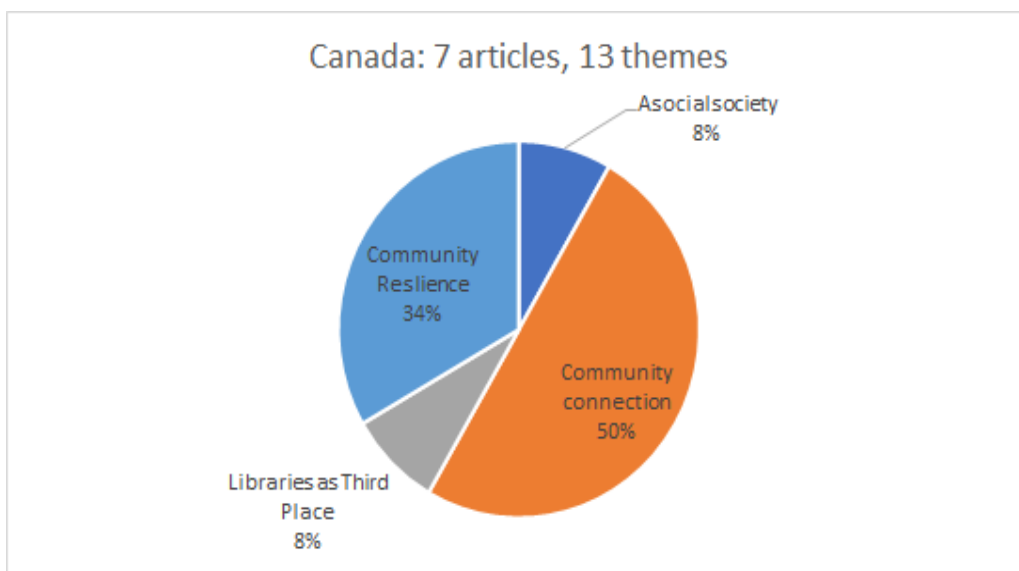


Figure 6

Across the three regions, scholarship focused on the Community Connection theme, with many descriptions and evaluations of programs, services, and outreach to specific demographic segments in public library catchment communities. The next section elaborates this finding by providing an overview of coverage of our Themes of Connections/Connectedness across regions.

The second- and third-most-common themes, Public Library as Third Place and Community Resilience, were closely associated with Community Connections, with

studies exploring whether and how the physical space of the public library supported community connection^{155,30}. The remaining themes received less attention overall. Upholding/Establishing Democracy is a greater focus in studies of European public libraries, particularly those situated in Nordic countries where library laws include an explicit emphasis on democracy, meeting places, and democratic expression^{9,93,95}. A small number of European studies addressed the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals^{156,157}, and a single Canadian study addressed a social society¹⁵⁸. Given our data extraction period, a very small proportion of this subset of articles (Europe n=2, Australia/New Zealand n=1) were devoted to COVID response.

4.6.1.2 Overview of themes of connection/connectedness across regions

Of the articles tagged as affording comparisons between Canadian and international public library findings, most (n=72) addressed one or more of our Themes of Connection/Connectedness: Addressing issues of accessibility; Creating connections through technology; Creating new educational programming; Creating new recreational/ social programming; Creating safe physical spaces; Encouraging belonging; Reinforcing cultural identities. The strong majority (n=68) addressed public libraries within a single geographic region and a small number (n=4) reported on comparisons across regions. Table 4 shows the distribution of articles and Themes of Connection/Connectedness across regions.

| Region | Articles | Themes |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Europe | 34 | 108 |
| Australia and New Zealand | 20 | 63 |
| Canada | 7 | 12 |
| Cross-regional comparison | 4 | 12 |
| Asia | 4 | 9 |
| Africa | 3 | 11 |
| Total | 72 | 215 |

Table 4 | Articles addressing themes of connection/connectedness

Figures 7, 8, and 9 show the relative proportions of these themes across articles addressing European, Australian/New Zealand, and Canadian public libraries:

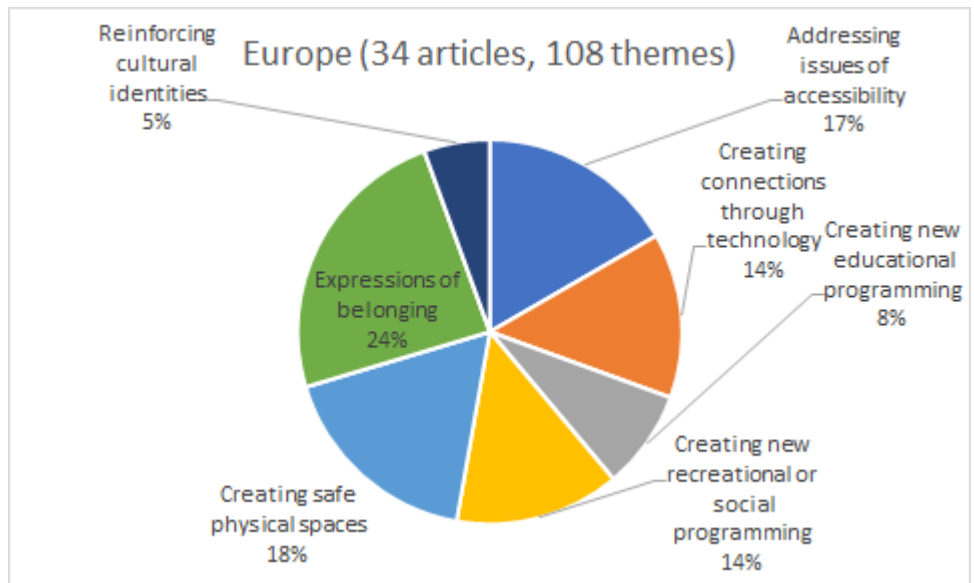


Figure 7

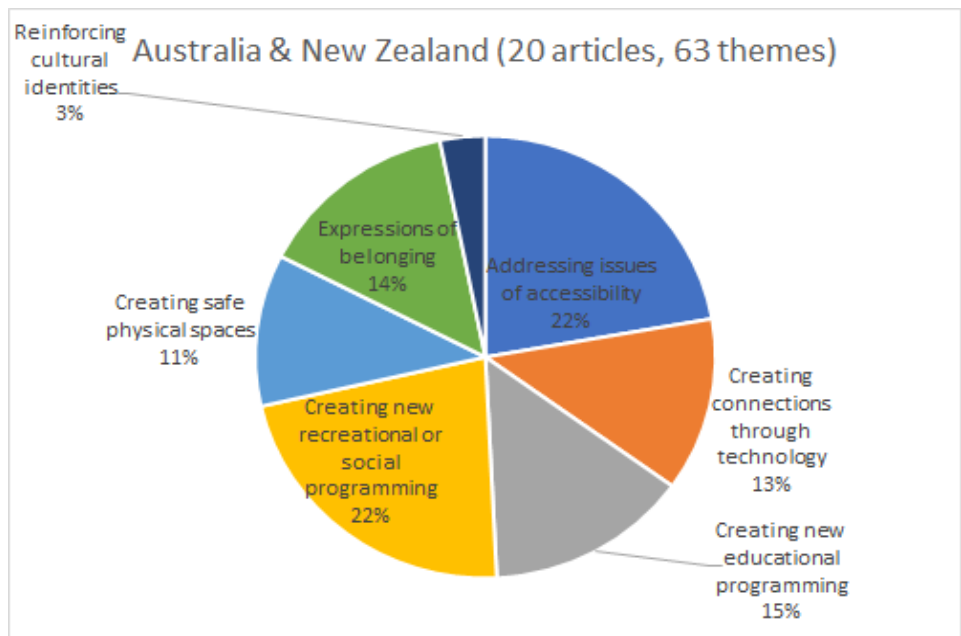


Figure 8

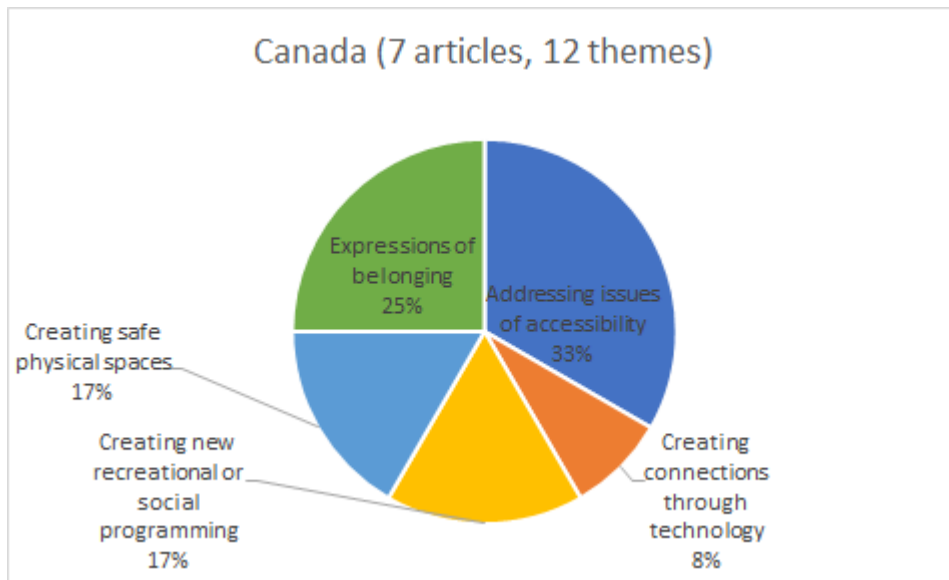


Figure 9

A notable pattern is that research focusing on Canadian public libraries addresses only five of the seven themes, whereas research on European and Australian/New Zealand public libraries addresses all seven. In comparison to the other two regions, research on themes of social inclusion in Canadian public libraries focuses more strongly on the overall issues (e.g., issues of accessibility, encouraging belonging) and less on the development and evaluation of specific programs and services (e.g., creating new educational programming, creating new recreational or social programming, creating connection through technology). For example, research on creating new educational programming is much more prominent in the Australia/New Zealand literature than elsewhere.

Despite the primacy of Encouraging Belonging in all three regions, there was much less emphasis on the cognate theme Reinforcing Cultural Identities. This theme was most prominent in studies of European libraries, where scholars like Briony Birdi¹⁵⁹ address collections, programs, and services for newcomers including refugees.

4.6.2 What lessons can we glean from these differences?

This body of scholarship provides three lessons for scholars seeking to understand Canadian public libraries' capacity for social connection and inclusion. First, several themes have been well-addressed across geographic regions. This means that Canadian findings can be put directly into conversation with findings from elsewhere in

the world. For example, there is a strong body of Canadian, Australian, and European research that shows how public libraries can prevent social isolation among older adults^{158,160}. Parallel Canadian^{161,162} and British^{145, 163,164} research shows how public library volunteering can contribute to social, geographical, and digital inclusion but may be unsustainable. Studies of Canadian and Australian programming show that public libraries in both countries offer similar kinds of programming for older adults^{35,64}, motivated by a similar desire to create opportunities and mitigate age-related challenges, achieved through trial and error and in the face of similar constraints. However, comparisons reveal important differences between countries about the degree to which identifying older-adult programs as such is seen as respectful or stigmatizing. The availability of such parallel studies permits triangulation and the assessment of transferability of Canadian findings.

Second, some themes are not well-addressed in the Canadian context, but there is a robust body of work in other regions that Canadian researchers might build on. As mentioned above, the theme of Reinforcing Cultural Identities was emphasized most frequently in studies of European libraries. For example, Birdi and colleagues' 2012 UK study¹⁵⁸ found that although public library staff generally recognize the importance of universal services for minority ethnic communities, most libraries take a narrow approach to implementation, focusing on the linguistic needs of newly-arrived immigrant groups rather than acknowledging the changing needs of more established communities. This results in an emphasis on providing materials in languages other than English to the neglect of English-language materials that represent "a multi-ethnic Britain" for both newcomers and the dominant community. Studies of Asian immigrants to New Zealand^{57, 165} similarly show how public libraries can support both integration into the host community and the fostering of the home language and cultural values. Rebecca Williamson's⁷⁵ study highlights the everyday practices and materialities that come together to carve out spaces of belonging and shows that inclusive social infrastructure is critical for creating the conditions for overcoming incivility in diverse cities.

Susan Macdonald's¹⁶⁶ study recognizes that Canadian public libraries represent a site where hegemonic struggles for power unfold. They thereby participate in practices that constitute immigrants in Canada and that can support their inclusion and exclusion.

However, no Canadian studies that met our inclusion criteria explicitly addressed the Reinforcing Cultural Identities theme. There is a very strong body of Canadian Library and Information Science scholarship on the role of public libraries in newcomer settlement (for example the work of Nadia Caidi and Lisa Quirke at the University of Toronto, Danielle Allard at the University of Alberta, and Nafiz Shuva at Queens College, CUNY, none of which met our inclusion criteria). There is therefore an excellent opportunity for Canadian scholars to make a more explicit connection between the work Canadian public libraries do to include people facing marginalization and the research from other regions that explicitly addresses the themes under study in this report.

Finally, there is a growing body of comparative multi-national studies of public libraries that provide insight into the structural and policy contexts within which public libraries can support social connection and inclusion. In 2019, Ragnar Audunson and colleagues⁹⁵ identified a deepening and broadening over the past 20 years of research on public libraries as institutions underpinning the public sphere and democracy. They identify social inclusion as one of four major topics of study. They caution that the relationship between public libraries and democracy in a digital and globalized world is complex and dynamic and call on researchers to go beyond normative proclamations of the democratic role of public libraries without empirical support.

Since 2014, Pertti Vakkari and colleagues¹⁶⁷ have undertaken an increasingly broader series of analyses of perceived outcomes of public libraries across Europe and beyond. Their work highlights both international commonalities and national-level structural features, such as policy frameworks and resource constraints, that shape the extent and perceived benefits of public library services. Johnston and colleagues⁹³ surveyed public librarians in several European countries about the extent to which they emphasize their institutions' public sphere, social, and digital roles as justifications for public library investment. Their results show evidence of both a unified international professional culture and of clear influences from national contexts. For example, they found that although librarians in almost all countries prioritized public libraries' public sphere role in promoting equality by giving access to knowledge resources, literary, and cultural experiences, Norwegian librarians emphasized libraries' role as public meeting places and arenas for debate in support of the public sphere^{30,168}.

Widdersheim et al.¹⁶⁹ argue that the Scandinavian model is rooted in public library-related cultural policy. In Nordic countries, public library policy is primarily directed downwards from centralized national ministries of culture. There is a strong connection between cultural policy, public libraries, democracy, and the public sphere and an emphasis on the importance of public library space as a physical, face-to-face meeting place for public debate. This model makes the democratic function of public libraries explicit and considers public libraries primarily cultural rather than educative institutions. In the U.S., cultural policy, the public sphere, and public libraries are shaped less by national decision-making bodies than by state and local governments. In Japan, there is more emphasis on the public library as contributing to a literary public sphere than on its function as a physical meeting space. American and Japanese public libraries are therefore seen more as recreational and educational institutions than are Nordic public libraries. Hider et al found that Australian public library mission statements¹⁵⁵ place the role of public libraries somewhere between the Norwegian and American models, emphasizing their provision of spaces and places that support social connection and most frequently positioning public libraries as community builders more broadly.

Delica and Elbeshausen⁵ compare the ways that the discourse and practice of inclusion have affected the development of British, Canadian, and Danish public library systems. In Denmark, the new library-led community centre combines the Nordic welfare model with information needs of newcomers: libraries bring together already existing but previously isolated institutional knowledge and competencies. In the UK, social libraries are needs-based, with a mission to reduce social inequality. In the Canadian community-led libraries model, communities become the catalyst for changes to public library organization, services, and values.

Canadian public libraries have not yet been well-represented in comparative international studies, and there is significant opportunity for gaining a deeper understanding of the unique contextual features that shape their social connection work.

5. Implications

This knowledge synthesis on the intricate, collaborative, and creative ways public libraries are embedded in a range of asocial-related issues (examining, for example, the impact of public libraries on patrons' sense of inclusion and belonging) was the first effort of its kind. As such, based on our reading and analysis, there are a number of implications that can inform Library and Information Science research and practice:

- Public libraries occupy an increasingly visible role in how individuals and communities learn, interact, connect, and share with one another.
 - Public libraries are increasingly understood, studied, and used as community spaces and community hubs that engage with and support a wide range of community members.
- The feelings of connection and belonging that public libraries can create, foster, and/or sustain can only occur if patrons have access (whether physical access, technological access, psychological access, geographic access, etc.) to these services.
 - It is the access to these services that will ultimately dictate their utility in shaping and, at times, mitigating our increasingly asocial society.
- Public libraries are important and unique public spheres that can function to support democratic processes, which in turn, become critical grounds for freedom of expression, rights to education, rights to information, which in turn support cultural identity, social capital, social connectedness.
 - The means by which public libraries bolster community connection and resilience was made that much more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Library patrons want and value the informal knowledge exchange that happens between library workers and patrons, *as much* as they want and value library as place and library as place for books and reading.
 - Accordingly, renewed and new research needed to explore the disconnect between what library workers think library patrons want and value, and what library patrons themselves want and value.
- Public libraries and library staff are being asked (implicitly and explicitly) to step into new social inclusion roles, as front-line staff: e.g., supporting unhoused individuals, responding to addiction and overdose, serving the public through changing masking and vaccine mandates.

- In addition to contending with neoliberal agendas and financialised logics, public libraries are rarely adequately resourced and/or trained to do this increasing array of work.
 - If municipal and provincial funders see public libraries solely as repositories of knowledge, libraries' increasingly expanding roles will not be sufficiently resourced. This can lead to staff burnout and to physical dangers for staff and library patrons.

- A majority of research included in this review is published in Library and Information Science-focused journals which may limit the exposure of this research outside this discipline, suggesting that trans-disciplinary knowledge exchange and mobilization are urgently needed to both position and extend the roles of public libraries and public library research knowledge.
 - Similarly, a majority of peer-reviewed research on this topic excludes research by library practitioners, which is often published in public library association magazines and other venues accessible to library workers. Research relationships and collaborations between academics and practitioners is advised to ensure that knowledge resulting from studies can be mobilized to different audiences.

- Our team identified a concerning number of articles that study library workers' interpretations of user populations without also including the voices of those communities.
 - There is therefore an urgent ethical imperative to understand the evolving place of the public library from communities' perspectives. Future work is needed on co-design and community participation in the planning and development of library services.

6. Limitations

Our study has some limitations stemming from inclusion criteria. Our reliance on only English language full-text articles means that relevant studies in other languages were missed. Similarly, as we have focused on the English language, we therefore have excluded certain geographic regions from our sample. As outlined in the previous section, our strict adherence to peer-reviewed articles has excluded articles published in various public library magazine-type publications, thus eliminating the voices and experiences of public library workers who may be more likely to write for these outlets. Additionally, our analysis did not explicitly account for the relationships and engagement that library staff build with library patrons and thus did not highlight this important component of public libraries' contributions to contending with an increasingly asocial society. Johnson¹⁷⁰ has previously noted the potential benefits that emerge from the relationships and interactions that occur between staff and patrons: "building patrons' trust in the library and its staff, connecting people to both community and library resources, providing social support for patrons, reducing social isolation, helping patrons gain skills to function in an increasingly online world, and providing a positive place for neighborhood residents to gather" (p. 52). To begin to compensate for these oversights, we have intentionally placed engagement with working library staff at the core of our knowledge mobilization plan (outlined in Section 8).

7. Conclusions

In our analysis of the 235 articles included in our sample, as we answered our four research questions, we simultaneously addressed the interconnected SSHRC-identified issues that encompass the global challenge of the emerging asocial society: **physical surroundings** (*What steps are being taken in public libraries in Canada and abroad to create safe, accessible spaces that bring diverse people together through education and recreational and social programs?*); **technologies** (*How might the use of new technologies accessed in or through public libraries—including increasingly common makerspaces—promote healthy connections between individuals?*); and **expressions of belonging** (*What library programs, spaces, or materials are used to create and reinforce social connections and cultural identities? How are library programs and spaces changing as a result of new technologies?*).

This knowledge synthesis made visible the intricate, collaborative, and creative ways public libraries are embedded in a range of asocial-related issues. Based on our understanding of *public libraries as social infrastructures that can and do foster connection*, we illuminated the different mechanisms (whether through their materials, spaces, programs, or outreach initiatives) through which public libraries foster relationships or feelings of connectedness among patrons and/or the communities they serve, thus mitigating growing feelings of disconnection, isolation, and loneliness in Canadian society. Our analysis corroborates Scott's⁹⁸ five facets of public libraries as agencies of community building: libraries as conduits to information and learning, libraries as spaces of social inclusion, libraries as fostering civic engagement, libraries as bridges to community resources and involvement, and libraries as promoting economic vitality. While the library services analyzed in this knowledge synthesis vary from library to library based on community needs, library locale, and available funding, among many other factors, what resonates throughout the sample are public libraries' function as a hybrid public-private sphere that accommodates the transactions of everyday life and that integrates work, home and public sphere activities^{75,171}.

8. Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Our planned Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) activities respond to calls from public library practitioners and associations, SSHRC, and academic researchers, all of whom share an interest in understanding and raising awareness about the many roles public libraries play in connecting individuals and communities who are negotiating an increasingly asocial society. The knowledge synthesis and the translation of our findings are bolstered by our carefully selected international team: the five Canadian and three international library workers and scholars are leaders in library and information science (LIS) and possess expertise in the precise subject areas investigated in this grant (e.g., public librarianship, library engagement with vulnerable or marginalized populations). As such, our KMb plan has been created to effectively mobilize the local, national, and international connections that our team brings. Additionally, the KMb plan benefits from the team's infrastructure of affiliated research Centres and extended networks which have memberships that include community stakeholders. This report is our first step in working towards mobilizing the knowledge we have accrued throughout this process. The multiple KMb-related elements described below will follow and will build on the release of our final report.

8.1 Project website

Key to this project and its utility across sectors will be the development of a dedicated project website. In addition to housing the primary deliverable (the Knowledge Synthesis Report), the project website will feature links to publications, a bibliographic database, and Research Snapshots that identify promising practices for public library workers and administrators, library associations (e.g., Canadian Federation of Library Associations [CFLA], Canadian Urban Library Council [CULC]), and researchers. Given the international composition of our research team, this website is especially crucial for knowledge to be discoverable and disseminated across the countries and communities we represent. The open-source, bibliographic database will contain bibliographic information on all articles included in the Synthesis in addition to coded keywords associated with each article. Researchers, for example, can use the database to address related questions about public libraries' roles in the community that are beyond the scope of the Report, such as additional tabulations or bibliometric

analyses of the bibliographic data to identify trends or patterns in the current body of published research.

8.2 Bridging the academic-practitioner divide: Direct communication and media contributions

Our KMB plan focuses on producing and communicating findings and suggested improvements to decision makers, stakeholders, and the public. As such, the team will directly communicate the Knowledge Synthesis Report and the Research Snapshots (explained further below) to various non-academic stakeholders, including the leadership and membership of public library associations (e.g., Ontario Library Association and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations), systems, and organizations (e.g., Ontario Library Service [OLS]) and governmental bodies (e.g., the Government of Alberta's Public Library Services Branch with whom Collaborator Dr. Oliphant has previously worked). This dissemination will draw on the team's extensive networks with public library systems and associations at local, national, and international levels. For example, as part of her SSHRC Insight Development Grant on the role of public libraries in older adults' everyday lives, Applicant Dr. Nicole Dalmer is engaging directly with CULC, the Ontario Library Association (OLA), and several library systems across Ontario (e.g., Toronto, Hamilton, Orillia and Peterborough Public Libraries). Co-applicant Paulette Rothbauer maintains active ties with the OLS and several Ontario public library systems including those in rural and First Nations communities. She also serves on the Executive Board of the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS), a scholarly association that actively bridges the scholar-practitioner divide in LIS. Collaborator Lorisia MacLeod, a practicing librarian and a member of the James Smith Cree Nation, will mobilize her connections with the CFLA-FCAB and with the Library Association of Alberta (she is on the Board of Directors of each of these associations) to share findings from this synthesis.

To bridge the academic-practitioner divide, we will disseminate our findings through multiple venues and means of access: **First**, in addition to the Knowledge Synthesis Report, to make our findings accessible for the public library community and other interested community organizations we will create Research Snapshots – short, plain-language summaries (housed on our project website, and advertised via social media and key library sites [e.g., *Public Libraries News*]) that highlight promising practices

that public libraries use to engage with diverse patrons who differently experience and negotiate our increasingly asocial society. These Research Snapshots will identify mechanisms through which public libraries may mitigate the impacts felt by the “loneliness epidemic”. **Second**, the research team will submit a proposal to present the findings from the Report at the January 2024 OLA SuperConference (the largest library conference in Canada) hosted in Toronto. This conference is an ideal forum to present findings because it attracts public library administrators, practitioners, and thinkers from around Canada: conversations at this conference lead the discussion on contemporary movements in public library practices. **Third**, principal findings will be disseminated via publications widely read by public library workers and administrators (e.g., *Public Libraries*, *Open Shelf*, and *Library Journal* magazines, *Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA] blog, the Community, Diversity and Equality Group of UK’s Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP], of which Collaborator Dr. Birdi is a member). To reach broader stakeholders, we will submit an op-ed based on the synthesis findings to a Canadian national publication (e.g., *Globe and Mail*) and to *The Conversation*. **Fourth**, the team will present its findings at public library association meetings as relevant or feasible (e.g., at the CULC annual meeting or an OLA webinar), and with community-focused think tanks (e.g., Canadian Urban Institute, C.D. Howe Institute) to share findings with policymakers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics.

8.3 Academic audiences: Peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations & knowledge synthesis report

To expand the reach of our knowledge synthesis, we will submit a proposal to present the findings from the Report at the annual Canadian Association of Information Science (CAIS) conference – the premiere gathering of information science scholars in Canada (held virtually). Following feedback from participants at the three presentations (the required SSHRC meeting and presentations at the OLA SuperConference and CAIS conference) and any feedback or comments received via the project website, the team will prepare two peer-reviewed articles (one on general findings and a second focusing on comparisons that emerge from conversations between the Canadian, European, and Australasian team members) for submission to

peer-reviewed journals (such as *Public Library Quarterly*, *Societies*, *Information Research*, or *Social Science Research*).

In addition to presenting the Knowledge Synthesis Report at the SSHRC-organized meeting in Ottawa, we will deposit open-access versions of our Report and other outputs in our respective institutional repositories and to The LIS Scholarship Archive (lissarchive.org) for global dissemination opportunities. Links to the Report hosted on institutional repositories will also be posted to the personal websites (e.g., University profiles) and social media (e.g., Twitter, ResearchGate, Academia.Com, LinkedIn, etc.) of the Applicant, Co-Applicants, and Collaborators and the Departments, Centres, and Institutes with which the researchers are affiliated (e.g., OLA, OLS, CFLA, CILIP). These sites and media are primarily used by other academic researchers, but can also be accessed and used by non-academic researchers (such as library administrators), and provide a more accelerated access to research than journal publication. This approach is especially appropriate for a knowledge synthesis, which can be rapidly out-dated as new articles are published.

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