Funding Our Priorities: Comparisons of Public Library Funding and Services with Other Sectors in Post-COVID America

A.J. MILLION

JENNY BOSSALLER

 ABSTRACT

Libraries generally have high levels of public support and satisfaction—they are seen as a valuable and trusted part of local government and communities. For example, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2016 found that 84% of American adults said that public libraries were "very" or "somewhat" important to their communities. In addition, 90% of respondents said that libraries were important for children and families, and 86% said that they were important for providing access to technology and the Internet. In comparison, other parts of local government, such as city hall, schools, and parks, received a lower level of support and satisfaction. The survey also found that Americans had a high level of trust in their local libraries. More than 80% of respondents said that they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in their local library.

Yet, libraries are often put in the position of justifying investment in them, despite providing a wide range of community services in addition to the usual library services and receiving far less funding compared to many other public sector areas. Coming through the pandemic, and with unprecedented support for state and municipal budgets provided in the *CARES Act* and *American Rescue Plan*, governments now have surpluses for the first time since the 1990s. But what will happen to municipal and state budgets if or when there is a return to economic austerity? How can libraries better demonstrate their value to obtain additional funding from that surplus, especially if decision-makers face tough questions about local spending allocations?

In this report, we attempt to tackle these questions by 1) comparing library budgets to budgets of other public services, especially policing; 2) discussing national trends in library resource allocation; and 3) discussing emerging, non-traditional library services and their budgets.

Policymakers continually debate about the priorities of states and municipalities to fund public libraries, education, and the social safety net relative to public safety, including police and sheriff services. This report presents a point-in-time, multi-state snapshot of public library expenditures, staffing, and revenue data and compares that snapshot with other local government agencies. We compare state and local government investment in public libraries to other local services in fiscal years (FY) 2018 and 2019. We chose to examine these pre-COVID years because they paint a picture of municipal funding before the pandemic and without the significant infusion of federal funding from pandemic relief and recovery programs. Data describing these years is characteristic of an economy similar to the past 10 –

Core vs. Discretionary Framework for Library Funding

15 years, with low inflation rates.

Some public libraries provide "core" services to their patrons, while others function as providers of "discretionary" services. Core governmental services refer to the basic services that a municipality is responsible for providing to its residents *as required by law* (e.g., waste removal, voting services, and K–12 public education). Note that contracted service providers might provide some core services. Additionally, core services are supported by mandatory government spending; mandatory expenditures are automatic and are included in federal, state, and municipal budgets. In contrast, discretionary services are optional, and they sometimes augment core services. Discretionary services are generally funded with discretionary spending allocated through appropriations processes.

Note that there is some overlap between core and discretionary services, as well as mandatory and discretionary spending – elected officials at all levels of government must interpret what is core, mandatory, and discretionary in cases of ambiguity. This means public services do not always fit into neat or well-defined categories.

Library Expenditures vs. Other Government Services

Increasingly, public libraries deliver services that support or enhance the work of other government and/or nonprofit agencies, and many of these services were created to fill a void when existing services were unavailable or inadequate. Below, we compare state and local government investment in public libraries to different categories of public services[1] (13 sectoral categories from the U.S. Census Bureau's *Annual State and Local Government Finances Survey*); *Appendix 1* lists and defines each class we examined. [2]

Table 1 maps individual library services with other government sectors that have a stake in the outcomes of these library services. The services that libraries provide are generally

Library service	Identified sectoral overlap
Computer and internet access	Other governmental administration
Materials and programming for young children and families	Elementary and secondary education: Other education
Social Services	Public welfare; Health
Supporting local leaders	Financial administration; Other governmental administration
After-school STEM education programming	Elementary and secondary education; Other education
Healthcare access	Public welfare; Hospitals, Health
Crisis and disaster management	Police protection; Fire protection; Other governmental administration
Access to information for immigrants, English-language learners, and people with disabilities	Other education; Other public welfare
Libraries of "things"	Other and unallocable

Table 1. Overlap between discussed library services and other state and local service areas

[1]Our analysis excludes U.S. territories and the District of Columbia.
[2]The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) *Public Library Survey* (PLS) reports data for federal fiscal years, but the *Survey of State and Local Government Finances* is based on local fiscal years.

considered discretionary ones, but we argue that municipal decision-makers ought to treat them as core services when they are foundational to community needs.

Despite the core and discretionary services they provide, libraries receive comparatively little money next to nearly all other sectors of services funded by U.S. state and local governments. In 2019, spending on police was $123 billion ($123,278,878,000). Fire protection totaled $55 billion ($55,248,918,000), despite being a significant beneficiary of volunteer labor in many locations. Libraries spent $13.3 billion ($13,313,607,233) that same year (2019).[3] Average per capita spending by state and local governments on police was $380.66, fire protection $170.60, and libraries $41.11.[4]

We found similar trends in education spending. In 2019, state and local spending on higher education and elementary and secondary education totaled $311 billion ($311,455,794,000) and $718 billion ($718,262,767,000), respectively. Spending on other forms of education, such as professional and non-school-based training programs, totaled $62 billion ($62,696,969,000). Per capita, higher education spending was $956.46, K–12 expenditures were $2,205.75, and "Other" education spending was $192.53. *Figure 1* shows the small scale of overall library spending compared to K–12 education, higher education, other education, policing, and fire protection categories.

Figure 1. State and local government per capita spending, 2019

Survey data in 2019 revealed equally similar trends in the areas of healthcare ($112,440,957,000; $345.30 per capita), hospitals ($211,479,875,000; $649.44 per capita), public welfare benefits ($745,837,989,000; $2,290.43 per capita), and housing and community development ($57,235,193,000; $175.76 per capita). Even a mundane area like governmental administration (financial, $49,920,770,000, $153.30 per capita; general $37,755,625,000, $115.95 per capita, and undefined services, $140,332,453,000, $430.95 per capita) was exceptionally well-funded.

State and Local Government Revenue Sources

The sectors described above receive funding from a variety of government sources. Following is a look at where the funds for libraries, policing, fire protection, higher education, and secondary education come from. Sectoral funding portfolios vary quite a bit, and funding portfolios may shape what each sector "counts" as core or discretionary services.

[3]Spending on all sectors, except libraries, comes from the U.S. Census Bureau and excludes capital expenditures. Library data is from the PLS.
[4]Used POPUSTATE variables from the *PLS* to calculate per capita spending in all following figures.

Note that we used published data from the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) *Public Library Survey* (PLS), the *American Community Survey* (ACS), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's *Uniform Crime Reports* (UCR). One limitation to comparing these data sources is that they vary by reporting period and sampling method.

Public Libraries

Voters and taxpayers are generally under- or ill-informed about the ways that local public libraries are funded. Fully 60% of voters incorrectly believe that library funding comes from non-local sources (Rosa, 2018, p. 11). In reality, public libraries in the U.S. are funded through local tax revenue, state and federal funding, private grants, charitable donations, and other sources. See *Table 2* for a breakdown of funding sources in 2018. Traditionally, libraries have had significant latitude in choosing the services they deliver and how, but exceptions exist. In the 2000s, for instance, Bertot et al. (2006) pointed out that public libraries providing reference assistance for online e-government services (without receiving additional funding) amounts to an unfunded mandate. Jaeger et al. (2013) documented that while federal aid to libraries is limited, this funding has been used as leverage to determine what services libraries provide and how.

Source	Total	Percent
Local Tax Revenue	$11.9 billion	85%
State Sources	$935 million	6.7%
Federal Sources	$45.8 million	0.3%
Other Sources	$981 million	7%
Total Revenue	$13.87 billion	
Operating Expendituress	$12.85 billion	
Capital Outlays, Debt Servicing, and Rainy-Day Funds	~$1 billion	

Table 2. 2018 Revenues and Expenditures for Public Libraries

Policing, Fire Protection, and Higher and Secondary Education

Funding for public safety and education in the U.S. are also highly local, although, in education, there tends to be more aid provided by state and federal governments. The IMLS PLS demonstrates that 85% of funding for public libraries comes from local taxes. The same is generally true for public safety. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that local governments typically provide most of the funding for fire services in the United States. In 2019, local governments provided about 87% of fire department funding, with the remaining funding coming from state and federal sources. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in 2019, federal grants made up an average of 3.5% of total state and local law enforcement expenditures.

Funding formulas for K–12 education are significantly different than they are for public safety and libraries, which brings with it debates about what services should be provided (e.g., what should and should not be taught). In general, the funding for K–12 education comes from a combination of local, state, and federal sources. The percentage of funding from each source varies depending on the state and the school district. According to the

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) most recent data available (2017–2018), 44% of K–12 education funding came from state sources, about 14% came from federal sources, and about 42% came from local sources. The Pew Charitable Trusts report that in 2017, federal funding paid 43.4% of higher education spending, states paid 48.8%, and local governments paid 7.8%. In education, the proportion of funding sources varies widely depending on the location and the specific state. Some states have a higher proportion of state funding, while others rely more heavily on local funding. Federal and state funding in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the funding ratios.

Spending Priorities

Although public services can be classified as "core" and "discretionary," and funding that supports these services is "mandatory" or "discretionary," the end result reflects state, local, and federal government priorities. Libraries must always justify investment in them relative to investments made in other public sector areas. Policing is one domain in which this negotiation may occur, and below, we provide an example of how existing priorities can and should be questioned by librarians and their advocates.

To compare investment in libraries with policing, it is necessary to understand that neither libraries nor police covers the entire population of every state. Acknowledging this, we reviewed statistics about the number of police and public safety personnel in individual states compiled by the FBI through its 2019 Uniform Crime Reporting program, in addition to our comparison of sectoral spending earlier. The UCR does not measure the cost of policing directly, but data the FBI collects can be used in conjunction with the ACS to estimate the cost of policing, including per capita costs and the ratio of staff to populations.

State and local governments invest significantly more resources in public safety and policing than libraries, as we detail in prior sections. Crime is a concern in many areas, but nationally, crime has declined since the 1990s (Gramlich, 2020). The data we examined in *Table 4* show that the per capita number of law enforcement employees was much higher than library staff. For every librarian in the U.S., there are seven police officers. Combined with the expenditure data we analyzed earlier, a coherent argument can be made that nationally, the U.S. overinvests in public safety: the Vera Institute (n.d.) demonstrates that policing dominates city budgets. An analysis by the *Washington Post* suggests that over the past 60 years, more spending on police has not necessarily resulted in reduced crime (Bump, 2020). Whether "defunding the police" is a wise course of action for public policy is beyond the scope of our analysis, but debates regarding funding priorities in this area illustrate a broader point – library funding and funding for other government services should ideally be tied to community needs.

Libraries and Police – Per Capita Expenditures		Public Libraries – IMLS		Police 2018 – FBI UCR, Table 74	
Libraries*	$39.57	Service Population for 2018***	323,479,676	Service Population for 2018****	287,702,296
Police**	$412.93	Staff	142,308	Staff	975,305
Libraries spending per employee*	$89,243	Ratio of Population to Staff	2,273 to 1	Ratio of Population to Staff	294 to 1
Police spending per employee**	$121,808	*ACS and IMLS PLS ** ACS and UCR ***Includes all 50 states plus Washington, D.C. ****Reporting agencies only			

Table 4. Library and Police Staffing and Associated Expenditure Comparisons

The State of Library Funding and Support

Public library requirements to provide specific library services (or access to other services) are found in state laws. Communities are not required to maintain libraries by federal law, but almost all areas of the U.S. have library services. Public libraries' ability to deliver core and supplemental services ultimately depends on their ability to hire and retain a skilled workforce, as well as consistent investment in libraries.

Our analysis revealed that the per-capita number of library staff has shrunk in the past decade. In 2012, public libraries employed 136,564 staff, and this number increased by 5% to 144,067 in 2019; meanwhile, from 2012–2020, the U.S. population grew by 9.6%. Explanations for library staffing levels not keeping pace with population growth include retirements, hiring freezes, automation, and decreased library staff spending. Meanwhile, library employee compensation is lower than many public-sector peers (in 2019, per-employee police spending was $123,494.87, compared to $92,412.61 for libraries). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) predicts an increased number of librarians hired in the next decade, but whether this occurs depends on resource availability and a willingness by libraries to hire.

Data from the past decade also calls into question if increased funding is sufficient for libraries to meet their staffing, and thus their service, needs. Libraries reported increased revenue from 2012–2019; per-capita library operating income grew too, and in both cases, the increase was faster than inflation. Library operating revenues in 2019 totaled $14,244,029,079, compared to $13,313,607,233 in expenditures. Despite running surpluses and increased funding, library staff levels remained flat despite population growth because many created rainy-day funds. According to the 2018 Budget Survey by *Library Journal*, libraries also spent money to give raises when they did invest in staff (Peet, 2018).

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2019) describes rainy-day funds as mechanisms for governments to weather crises. The Tax Policy Center (2020) reports that only three states do not require rainy-day fund payments, but many library administrators maintain them to protect their institutions. We cannot explain why libraries did not hire

more staff from 2012–2019, but conservative spending was a factor. In 2019 alone, public libraries saved $930,421,846, which may have helped them weather crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unit	2012	2016	2017	2018	2019
Per capita library staff					
Library service area	1:2,327.76	1:2,368.60	1:2,356.47	1:2,354.88	1:2,331.91
State	1:2,348.37	1:2,352.98	1:2,342.27	1:2,343.48	1:2,324.75
Per capita library operating revenue					
Library service area	$36.11	$39.29	$40.49	$41.67	$42.81
State	$35.03	$39.10	$40.23	$41.29	$42.37
Per capita library operating expenditures					
Library service area	$34.14	$37.26	$37.96	$38.82	$40.60
State	$33.90	$36.37	$37.54	$38.92	$39.90

Table 5. National library statistics (per capita basis), 2012, 2016–2019

Funding Traditional and Emerging Library Activities

Over the past two decades, public libraries have weathered three storms:

•   First, libraries dealt with economic austerity following the 2007–2009 "Great Recession." In 2012, 57% of libraries reported flat or decreasing operating budgets, and 40% of state libraries said that states had cut aid to public libraries during the previous three years (ALA, 2012a). IMLS also reported increased demand for library services, despite libraries operating with fewer resources (ALA, 2012b).

•   Second, libraries have navigated disruptive changes to their business model as publishers, technology companies, and the media industry digitized content and distributed it via online platforms. Libraries also provided content online, and some have become publishers (Moulaison, 2016), but their impact and reach were limited, either by competition from for-profit entities or publishers constraining libraries' lending of e-books (Neary, 2019).

•   A third and still emerging challenge is in adapting to COVID-influenced changes to patron behaviors. In many places, patron visits, in-person circulations, and program attendance have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. While libraries report more digital and online use, statistics do not show that these types of engagements are taking the place of all missing in-person activities (Chrastka, 2023).

Shifts in patron behaviors predate the pandemic, but like so many societal changes over the past two decades, that shift appears to have accelerated. As a result, research increasingly documents a transformation in public libraries, which now offer services that cement their role as part of the social infrastructure. Transformations in libraries are a direct response to challenges they have encountered since 9-11.

Today, libraries provide many services that have *emerged organically in response to unmet*

community needs not filled by other agencies or institutions that are government-funded but which would logically fulfill the need. These include free access to the Internet (Becker et al., 2010), social services (Wahler et al., 2020), and after-school programming (Moellman & Tillinger, 2004). Perhaps for this reason, in 2017, 55% of American voters viewed the library as an essential public institution (Rosa, 2018). In 2019, a Gallup poll found that "the most common cultural activity Americans engage in by far" is visiting the library (Zalulsky, 2020).

Despite libraries' success and popularity, they often receive little funding compared to other sectors of government (as we demonstrated earlier). Libraries' reliance on local funding constrains the services they provide in proportion to municipal tax bases, and library advocates must simultaneously justify funding, sometimes at the expense of other government services.

Nontraditional Library Services

Following are some examples of services many libraries provide and where they overlap with other sectors of local government identified in the *Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances*. This list of services (initially provided in *Table 1*) is not comprehensive. Instead, it is meant to highlight some of the offerings that public libraries have developed, either in-house or through collaborative efforts with other agencies or nonprofits that extend services far beyond what the public might consider traditional public library services.

Free computer and internet access

For years, researchers have documented how public libraries offer internet access to the public, enabling citizens to engage with online government services (Jaeger & Fleischman, 2007; Bertot, 2010). This has been called an unfunded mandate (Bertot et al., 2006) because it is expected, yet libraries never received increased federal funding to become e-government service providers.

ALA's 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey (https://www.ala.org/tools/research/digitalinclusion) found that nearly all U.S. public libraries offer internet access, technology training, learning programs, summer reading programs, and assistance to patrons in completing online government forms (Becker et al., 2010). In 2020, the Public Library Association found more than half of public libraries report circulating technology (e.g., tablets) for offsite use. More than 93% of libraries offer high-demand digital collections, over 88% offer formal or informal digital literacy programming, and more than one in five provide classes or informal help related to coding, computer programming, robotics, and 3D printing.

Materials and programming for young children and families

One of the main focuses of public libraries' services since the early 1900s has been on young children and families. Libraries have continued to evolve and improve services for young children as they incorporate recommendations from researchers about early literacy and child development. For instance, Family Place Libraries is "a nationwide network of children's librarians who embrace the fact that literacy begins at birth" ("About Us," Family Place Libraries, 2022). They offer a model for transforming U.S. public libraries into "welcoming, developmentally appropriate early learning environments for very young children, their parents, and caregivers," concentrating on multiple aspects of child

development. As part of this initiative, trained specialists also develop library and outreach programs for low-income families by working with health, education, and human services agencies ("What is a Family Place Library," 2022).

Social services

Libraries hiring or partnering with social workers has also become common in recent years (Wahler et al., 2020). Public librarians frequently help people find health and wellness resources and might refer people to addiction counseling. Additionally, as the opioid crisis spread, librarians saw a need for more training in that area (Feuerstein-Simon et al., 2022). Libraries also serve as warming and cooling centers. Additional examples of library-based social services include coordinating outreach on behalf of homeless shelters and organizing life-skills training programs for nonviolent criminal offenders (State of America's Libraries, 2014, p. 8–9).

Most libraries cannot deliver social services at scale. A 2021 survey of libraries in the southeastern U.S. found that only 12.5% employed a social worker. Half of the libraries that did not employ a social worker said limited funding prevented them from doing so (Gross & Latham, 2021).

Support for local policymakers and entrepreneurs

Libraries in Chattanooga (TN) and Boston (MA) each serve as hubs for their city's data, demonstrating that they help citizens and policymakers engage in region-wide planning. Local business owners also use this data to start businesses (ALA, 2019, p. 24). For instance, rural libraries in Tennessee developed a *Public Library Small Business Toolkit* that provides resources to citizens about financing startups and other information about running a small business (Mehra, Bishop, & Partee, 2017).

After-school programming, tutoring, STEM, and advanced technologies

Children flock to libraries after school, and public libraries often collaborate with local schools to improve resource development to support curricula. Libraries might host after-school tutors and have extensive after-school educational programs. Learning environments have continued to evolve to keep up with emerging technologies, and libraries have responded by creating "maker spaces to promote science and technology learning" (ALA, 2019, p. 13).

The American Library Association's (ALA) "Libraries Ready to Code" initiative provides a more concrete example of how libraries support after-school learning, especially as it relates to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Recently, this program awarded 250 libraries money to "plan and implement [software] coding activities" (ALA, 2019, p. 22).

The Young Adult Library Services Association's Future Ready Project also brings staff from small and tribal libraries to learn how to create resources and programs for middle-school teens, especially for youth in low-income families. The Memphis Public Library offers sound and video production labs, a maker space, a robotics lab, an art studio, and more in its two-story teen space, Cloud901 (Memphis Public Library, 2022). Such initiatives can be expensive but offer an incredible array of resources that enrich the lives of youth.

Access to healthcare

Caring for one's body includes activities that range from researching diseases, diets, and exercise strategies to participating in yoga and self-defense classes. Patrons can do all these things in public libraries. For example, the Libraries Connecting You to Coverage initiative helps people apply for health insurance through the *Affordable Care Act*, and hundreds of libraries participate (ALA, 2020). Additionally, many more libraries have configured spaces that patrons can use for telehealth services (e.g., kiosks, private rooms, etc.), sometimes involving partnering with healthcare organizations or providers. Riggs (2022) explains that this is a valuable service in rural areas because patrons often travel long distances to appointments that they might instead complete online.

A hub for disaster and crisis management

In the aftermath of both natural and man-made disasters, many libraries become "ad hoc Disaster Recovery Centers" (Stricker, 2019, p. 11). Because public libraries are technology and information hubs, they provide a space for communities to gather and for volunteer groups to organize. Libraries also provide the means and assistance for community residents to file Federal Emergency Management Agency forms and insurance claims (Bishop & Veil, 2013). Libraries acting as disaster hubs is infrequent, but it is essential in times of crisis, and they must have a resilient infrastructure in place to be effective (Scholl & Patin, 2014).

Access for immigrants, English-language learners, and people with disabilities

The American Dream Starts @Your Library initiative, funded with a one-time grant from Dollar General, supports adult education and literacy programming for English language learners. In 2016, ALA reported that "more than 160 public libraries have received grants since the program's inception in 2007" (ALA, 2016, pp. 15–16). This program is just one example of how libraries often expand services to meet the needs of ethnic or cultural minority groups.

Many libraries also work to meet the unique needs of people with disabilities. The Maryland State Library's Deaf Culture Digital Library, for example, offers professional training on the topic to librarians around the state. Brooklyn (NY) and Bloomfield Township (MI) have acquired "adaptive toys with large buttons for easy activation" and "message communication devices that can record answers to questions… so that children who are nonverbal can participate actively in programs" (ALA, 2020, p. 23). Finally, public libraries often co-locate services as they try to make other public services more accessible. The Chicago Public Library has partnered with the Chicago Housing Authority to open three new city-owned facilities that combine housing developments and libraries. Likewise, the District of Columbia Public Library is working to "create a city within a city" with room for municipal agencies to "provide services like D.C. Health Link with a physical office space within the library for direct connection with city residents" (ALA, 2020, p. 26).

Libraries of "things" and household object repair

Beyond the various services described above, increasingly, libraries report developing collections of "things" to check out, such as career clothing for job interviews, cake pans, fishing poles, musical instruments, blood pressure monitoring kits, and camping equipment (Darty, 2018; ALA, 2020). Their libraries might include seldom-used or bulky items, or they might provide the opportunity for people try out a new hobby. Many libraries also collect seeds, allowing patrons to trade heirloom seeds or supply them with commercial seeds

(Peekhaus, 2018). Some libraries provide garden spaces.

An increasingly popular activity in public libraries is the repair event (Cottrell, 2017). These are often run through partnerships with repair experts, like electricians and sewists, who bring in the tools to fix items while they teach patrons how to fix household objects and other items. Repair events keep broken but fixable items out of the trash and landfills while saving people money.

Guidance for Delivering Collaborative Services

Between 2000 and 2021, the New York State Library policies shifted from supporting or building electronic collections to leveraging library spaces for services and programs (Yamagishi, Koizumi, & Widdersheim, 2022). These services and programs addressed emerging societal problems, much like those addressed by the eight areas of library services presented above.

Given the many societal, technological, and economic changes of the past several decades, it stands to reason that libraries are increasingly delivering nontraditional services to meet community needs. Libraries offer spaces ideal for "one-stop shops," where users can complete government tasks (e.g., apply for passports, file taxes), apply for jobs, pick up a book or a movie, take a class, and enjoy people-watching. However, funds are needed to provide those services; financial support from other state and local government entities could fund space and salaries. Where libraries fill a gap or meet a need, services should not become unfunded mandates or expected responsibilities just because public libraries exist to support community needs.

Collaborative governance models provide guidance for libraries about how to procure resources, which is especially relevant given that funding allocations to other government sectors dramatically exceed those made to libraries and much of the work public libraries do aligns or overlaps with work in these sectors.

Collaborative governance is defined as "a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 444). This approach describes networks or coalitions of actors working together. Most importantly, research examining collaborative governance also documents what makes collaborations effective and beneficial to all parties involved and the people they serve.

The strength of a collaborative governance model comes from its focus on involving multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process and the implementation of public policies. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations have shifted to virtual meetings and collaboration, which significantly flattens access to government and creates new transparency in decision making. With a focus on stakeholder engagement, collaborative governance can emphasize the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including community members, non-governmental organizations, and business stakeholders. Collaborative governance is increasingly employed to address social inequalities to develop inclusive policies that benefit all members of society.

Ansell and Gash present six criteria for collaborations (p. 445):

- Public organizations like libraries should initiate collaborations and set agendas.
- Participants should include community residents.
- Decision making should be engaging.
- Collaborations should be formal.
- Decision making ought to be by consensus.
- Collaborations should focus on policy-related issues like improving community health or literacy.

The takeaway from these criteria is that collaborators should try to work together to solve shared problems, which involves formally pooling resources and knowledge and "sharing discretion" for decision-making (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2012).

Why and when libraries deliver nontraditional services will likely always depend on localized needs and unpredictable circumstances. Collaborating with other government agencies, however, provides a critical method to reach more people and extend services, simultaneously sidestepping challenging debates at the federal, state, and local levels about what should be a "core" or "discretionary" activity. Libraries offer an ideal space to deliver many public services, such as serving as an informational hub for social services and government services, but the city or county could provide funding for the staff to deliver the services. Similarly, libraries are providing spaces for telehealth, but the space could be subsidized by the health department. Space and staff to support local entrepreneurial activity might be sponsored and staffed part-time by the small business association, and spaces for tutors could be supplied for a small fee, or with some funding from the education department. Many libraries engage in creative funding, but not all do, and overextending staff and space leads to unrealistic expectations as well as staff burnout. To ensure libraries are positioned for the future, we recommend careful attention paid to their services and the potential to fund or support new services. Other state and local entities possess the resources to augment these services through collaborations.

Conclusions

Ideally, library funding and funding for other government services should be tied to services provided and community need for them. Yet library funding is often disproportionately low when compared to sectors providing the same or related services.

Policing, for example, is particularly well-funded compared to libraries, but research shows that more spending on police does not necessarily decrease crime. Other public sectors are significantly better funded than libraries as well: Elementary, higher, and secondary education; hospitals; health; public welfare; financial administration; and other governmental administration categories receive a significant amount of public funds. Whatever the cause of these disparities, spending in these areas are a function of state, federal, and local policy priorities reflected in mandatory and discretionary spending decisions. However, we also found the services libraries provide frequently overlap with work done in these and other sectors.

Anecdotal and professional reports suggest that public libraries increasingly fill gaps in social services (Rosen, 2020) and meet other community needs (Pew, 2013) in addition to their traditional roles. It is well-documented that the U.S. social safety net is a patchwork of systems – barring an effort to fill this gap, libraries will likely continue acting as stopgap

community resource centers, and their work will continue to support "core" work in other domains. Funding models by themselves do not address community needs, so needs for library services will likely continue to grow.

So, how then, can libraries position themselves for the future? Answering this question is difficult, but based on our analysis, we conclude that they need continued integration with other social services and a commitment to collaborative governance for shared services to maximize impact. This integration is called for based on the overlap in services we identified and existing funding disparities.

It is too soon to say whether states and municipalities are likely to return to an era of austerity comparable to the period between 2000 and 2020. Pushing for more direct support from states or the federal government may help libraries deliver services independently, but this will be unlikely to occur if austerity returns. Thus, we conclude that it falls to individual districts to communicate why investment in libraries matters enough to reallocate funding, or procure it from partner sectors, such as education. We also conclude that these same libraries must address questions about internal spending prioritization because, despite increased revenue over the past decade, libraries hired few staff who could provide needed services.

Some public services will always receive more support than others, so librarians should be willing to engage within and outside of government to draw attention to aligning government spending portfolios with community needs. Even among libraries within states, there are disparities and differing needs. Different local economies all have different resources, federal funding cannot address all disparities – so, absent increased aid, it falls to local librarians to identify how to bridge gaps. Future research should attempt to examine the impact public libraries have on communities, which will open the door to potentially important decisions about adopting new models of library funding justified by the role of community centers that libraries increasingly play. We believe looking at state funding and support models may provide paths forward for librarians to position their institutions.

Topics for Future Inquiry

Based on our analysis, we identified four future topics of inquiry:

1. How does the number of public library staff over the past decade compare against population growth? Against users?
2. Are public libraries able to produce substantial savings to contribute to rainy-day funds?
    - How equipped are libraries for crises?
    - What differences exist between libraries in different states/cities/etc.?
3. What models of local and state funding and other funding mechanisms are most effective for public libraries, and why?
4. Research should also look at the impact public libraries have on communities; we found major disparities in education spending and public safety spending.

Appendix 1

1. Elementary and secondary education
All activities associated with the operation of public elementary and secondary schools and locally operated vocational-technical schools. Special education programs operated by elementary and secondary school systems are also included as are all ancillary services associated with the operation of schools, such as pupil transportation and food service.

2. Financial administration
Activities concerned with tax assessment and collection, custody and disbursement of funds, debt management, administration of trust funds, budgeting, and other government-wide financial management activities. This function is not applied to school districts or special districts.

3. Fire protection
Applies to local government fire protection and prevention activities plus any ambulance, rescue, or other auxiliary services provided by a fire protection agency. Volunteer firefighters, if remunerated for their services on a "per fire" or some other basis, are included as part-time employees.

4. Higher education
Includes local government degree-granting institutions that provide academic training above grade 12.

5. Health
Includes administration of public health programs, community and visiting nurse services, immunization programs, drug abuse rehabilitation programs, health and food inspection activities, operation of outpatient clinics, and environmental pollution control activities.

6. Hospitals
Facilities providing in-patient medical care and institutions primarily for care and treatment (rather than education) of disabled people that are directly administered by a government, including those operated by public universities. Note that this definition does not include private hospitals, because the Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances classifies public spending in this area separately (i.e., Health).

7. Housing and community development
Construction, operation, and support of housing and redevelopment projects and other activities to promote or aid public and private housing and community development.

8. Libraries
Establishment and provision of libraries for use by the general public and the technical support of privately operated libraries.

9. Other government administration
Applies to the legislative and government-wide administrative agencies of governments. Included here are overall planning and zoning activities and central personnel and administrative activities. This function is not applied to school district or special district governments.

10. Other and unallocable
Activities that are not applicable to other functions of government or are multi-functional.

11. Other education
Support of special programs and institutions primarily for: training and education (rather than care) of people who are blind, deaf, or have other disabilities; programs for adult, vocational, or special education that operate outside school systems; and educational activities not assignable to other education functions.

12. Policing
All activities concerned with the enforcement of law and order, including coroner's offices, police training academies, investigation bureaus, and local jails, "lockups," or other detention facilities not intended to serve as correctional facilities.

13. Public welfare
Includes the administration of various public assistance programs for the economically disadvantaged, veteran services, operation of nursing homes, indigent care institutions, and programs that provide payments for medical care, disability transportation, and other services for the economically disadvantaged.

Note: Definitions adapted from the 2006 *Government Finance and Employment Classification Manual* and the *Annual Survey of Public Employee and Payroll Glossary*.

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Authors

A.J. Million is the Director of the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD) at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. In 2017, he earned his Ph.D. in Information Science and Learning Technologies from the University of Missouri where his dissertation tested the relationship between forms of bureaucratic organization and innovation in U.S. state department of transportation websites. A.J.'s research examines topics such as public-sector information technology use, scholarly communication, knowledge infrastructures, research data management, and libraries. He has published in Cataloging and Classification Quarterly, College and Research Libraries, First Monday, JASIST, the Journal of Library Administration, Political Librarian, and OCLC Systems and Services. Before joining ICPSR, A.J. was a Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Information at the University of Michigan and a Research Librarian for the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Jenny Bossaller is an Associate Professor at the iSchool at the University of Missouri. Her teaching and research focus on history of libraries and information, public libraries, information policy, and related social and technological phenomena. She has developed programs in the iSchool's LIS program focusing on public library leadership, health and wellness, and community engagement. She is co-author of Introduction to Public Librarianship, 3rd. ed., and 4th ed. (upcoming) and is recipient of the 2022 ALISE/Connie Van Fleet Award for Research Excellence in Public Library Services to Adults.