

# The Value of California's Public Libraries

August 2021

**1,130** Libraries

**23.4 Million** Library Cards

**113.7 Million** Virtual Visits

**435,000** Public Programs

**10.6 Million** Program Attendance

**24.2 Million** Uses of Public Internet Computers

**119 Million** Total Collection Items

**35.5 Million** E-Books

**24,000** Public Internet Computers

California's public libraries are visited over **138 Million** times per year with a cost of just \$12 per visit<sup>1</sup>

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## TEN REASONS TO VALUE LIBRARIES

1. **Public libraries are community hubs that bring people together and close the opportunity gap by connecting people to essential services and resources.**
2. **Libraries build and support communities of lifelong learners and help Californians enjoy the social and economic benefits that learning brings.**
3. **Public libraries deliver a positive return on the funds invested in them. Every \$1 invested in a library yields between \$2 and \$10, with the most common return being between \$3 and \$6.**
4. **Libraries are economic engines. They support personal economic development and community development.**
5. **Books are just the tip of the library iceberg. Through digital labs, makerspaces, career centers and business resources, memory labs, public programs, community partnerships, and online resources, public libraries help communities explore, learn, connect, and have fun beyond their traditional “library” brand.**
6. **Libraries help individuals and communities stay healthy and well.**
7. **Public libraries support vulnerable community members, including early learners and families, teens and seniors, veterans, people new to the United States, and people experiencing homelessness or mental illness.**
8. **Library technology increases digital equity and supports the information needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century society.**
9. **Library workers are “second responders” in a crisis. Library programs and services build community resilience year-round.**
10. **Public libraries are free and open to all.**



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## INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are community hubs and community partners, connecting people to essential services and resources and building communities of lifelong learners.

Books are just the tip of the library iceberg. Walk into a California public library and you'll find technology labs, makerspaces, career centers and business resources, memory labs, and tens of thousands of public programs.



Visit your library online and you'll find e-books, databases, and virtual programs and events. Technology in libraries, including high-speed broadband in many cities and counties, supports the information needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century society and increases digital equity in communities.

Library workers are “second responders,” supporting communities during crises like wildfires and earthquakes and helping to build community resilience all year round.

Libraries support our most vulnerable community members, including early learners and families, teens and seniors, veterans, people new to the United States, and people experiencing homelessness or mental illness.

Investing in public libraries also generates a solid financial return on taxpayer dollars. For every dollar invested, between \$2 and \$10 in direct and indirect benefits is created, with the most common return being between \$3 and \$6, studies show.

The services libraries provide align with the values held by Californians. The majority of Californians support the free availability of services that support crisis response and community resilience; education and learning; community connections; and services for veterans, youth, seniors, young families, people experiencing homelessness or mental illness, and new immigrants—all of which California public libraries provide.

Public libraries deliver services and value through a unique combination of resources, people, and space that is not replicated by any other government agency.

During the pandemic, with buildings closed, libraries continued to provide vital services—including literacy tutoring, meals for children, services for job-seekers, trusted information, learning resources and more—through their websites, on the phone, and in person, including curbside pick-up and home deliveries.



Given the resources, support, and opportunities libraries provide for learning and knowledge development, health and wellness, community engagement, and economic development, the vitality of public libraries is even more essential now than ever before.

The Value of California’s Public Libraries is a project of the California State Library. Research was conducted between January 2017 and December 2019. The project team used a bricolage approach—combining available resources to create an individualized and persuasive case—to create a public library value proposition that is grounded in data from a combination of sources, including extensive academic and professional literature, library usage data, survey data, and interviews with and written submissions from stakeholders, as well as direct observations.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Library usage data refers to the 2018–2019 fiscal year. It represents typical library usage before buildings closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data about physical resources refers to the 2019–2020 fiscal year. Data can be found at: [https://ca.countingopinions.com/index.php?page\\_id=3](https://ca.countingopinions.com/index.php?page_id=3).
2. A description of the study’s methodology and full analysis of its findings can be found in Natalie Cole and Cheryl Stenström (forthcoming), “The Value of California’s Public Libraries,” *Public Library Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1816054>.

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