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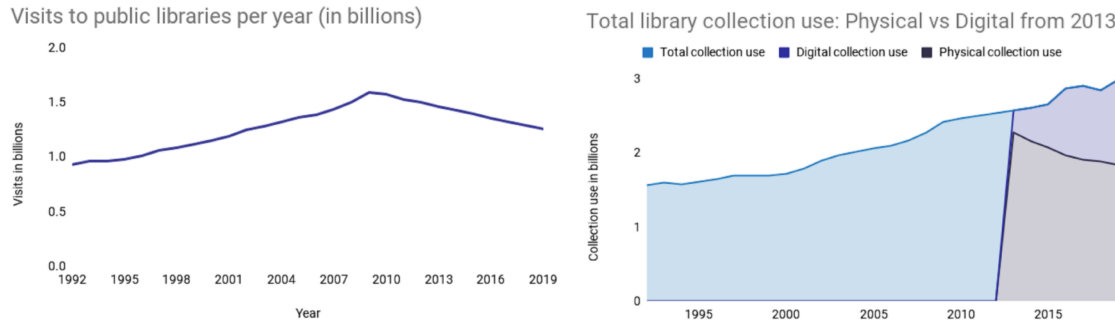
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Libraries as Lifeblood: Defibrillating the Nation's Literary Heart

Normally, pretending to be a ninja has no repercussions. Little kids can crawl and creep to their heart's content, carefree and full of covert glee anywhere they please. However, one sneaky second-grader had a goal on his ninja mission: infiltrate his local library and deliver a special handwritten package. He never anticipated just how successful his mission would be. A few days later, the package — a festive 81-page book entitled *The Adventures of Dillon Helbig's Crismis*, written and illustrated by the little ninja “Dillon His Self” — had charmed the librarians and was integrated with permission into the library catalog. The 8-year-old's book had a 55-person waitlist, and Dillon was ecstatic.¹ At last, the world could see his story, all thanks to his local library. The results of his mission were better than he ever could have imagined, adding one more shining light to the literary world. In much the same way, the results of motivated actions can create waves and even tsunamis in the ocean of change, especially when executed by people in positions of power. In particular, precise actions carried out by ambitious legislators and policymakers to support the fundamental vitality of struggling libraries will keep doors open and society thrumming.

Infrastructural Importance of Limitless Libraries

Despite the modern-day ubiquity of fast food chains, the United States boasts more public libraries than it does Starbucks or McDonald's locations.² Clocking in here at over 17,000 buildings including branches,³ libraries embody the American values of freedom, education, and countless others. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which oversees federal funding for libraries, likens these places to "community anchor institutions . . . second homes—refuges where individuals can contemplate, change, and broaden their own horizons, and also come together and feel at ease with each other."⁴ Indeed, the new WordsRated 2019 report with over 12.5 million data points states that community-building library programs have increased in both quantity and attendance in recent years, standing at about 6 million and 125 million respectively. These numbers, the report notes, are higher than they have ever been.⁵ A Gallup survey from 2019 indicates that visits to public libraries are America's most popular cultural activity, lending credence to the indispensable nature of libraries.⁶ These organizations are not dying, at least according to the WordsRated report. In fact, physical and digital library collection use soared to 2.98 billion in 2019, which is not only the highest ever but also highlights a 6-year 153% increase in digital collections.⁷ Library visits are down, it seems, and yet library usage is up. This seemingly contradictory statement has layers to it; peeling them back reveals widespread effects. As the WordsRated report describes, trips to libraries have recently diminished since the 1.59 billion high in 2009, declining by 21.2% over these past ten years to 1.25 billion visits in 2019.⁸



Figures 1 and 2, both from Rizzo's WordsRated report, highlight the simultaneous downward and upward trends of public library visits and collection use, respectively.

While the data from recent years remains to be fully aggregated and analyzed, the contrasting simultaneous trends showcased in the above figures have one quite plausible reason behind their behavior: COVID-19. When the pandemic hit, 99% of libraries across the country shut their doors as lockdowns reigned supreme.² Instead of remaining dormant amidst life-altering quarantines, determined librarians chose to pivot, shifting their activity and efforts to the digital world. Essentially, they implemented a two-pronged plan: expand the scope of their digital book collection and increase the breadth of their digital social presence.¹⁰ As libraries promoted their enhanced digital collection, a library e-media distributor called OverDrive noted a 40% jump in loans as the number of checked-out e-books surged past 289 million in 2020.¹¹ People reached for their libraries, and their libraries reached back.

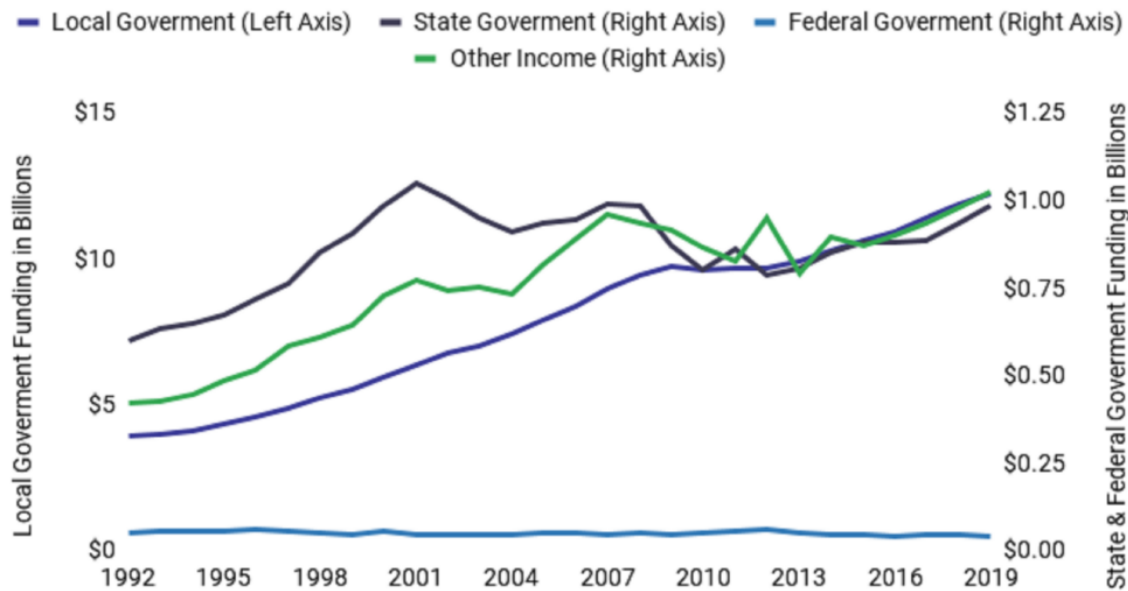
From digital book clubs and distance learning to advocacy and activism, libraries of all types stepped up for their communities.¹² Even before the pandemic, libraries administered all manner of essential services to the public, between resume workshops and research assistance all the way to preserving the past and providing programs for every age.¹³ They allow patrons from all walks of life to utilize their free computers and high-speed internet — an invaluable resource for the one in five Americans who do not have access to residential or smartphone access.¹⁴ As

the bleak reality of 2020 set in, the American Library Association's (ALA) Executive Director Tracie D. Hall found that "The persistence of the coronavirus pandemic continues to expose the degree to which societal inequities are inextricably linked."¹⁵ Hall later went on to reference a Deutsche Bank study, noting how "76 percent of the nation's Black residents and 62 percent of Latinx residents are slated to be shut out of or underprepared for 86 percent of US jobs by 2045."¹⁶ These underrepresented minorities, Hall asserted, are "experiencing a 'racial tech gap' that threatens their future economic mobility." The ALA piece also went on to explain how they called upon libraries to "me[e]t the moment with a focus on antiracism work" to combat misinformation and malignant bigotry, and those libraries listened.¹⁷ Aids like curated links for a Libraries Respond: Black Lives Matter website and a \$5 million selection of the COVID relief package for the library-funding IMLS ensured libraries remained attentive to and afloat in their communities amidst worldwide turmoil.¹⁸

Current Crisis of Costs

While allocations such as the aforementioned revitalized libraries,¹⁹ they might best be described as a good starting point for future — and quite necessary — endeavors. The WordsRated report clarifies how federal government funding has never been lower, having fallen 13.14% to \$39.66 million over the past 5 years.²⁰ At the same time, total operating income has only been growing, having crested an all-time apex of \$14.31 billion in 2019.²¹

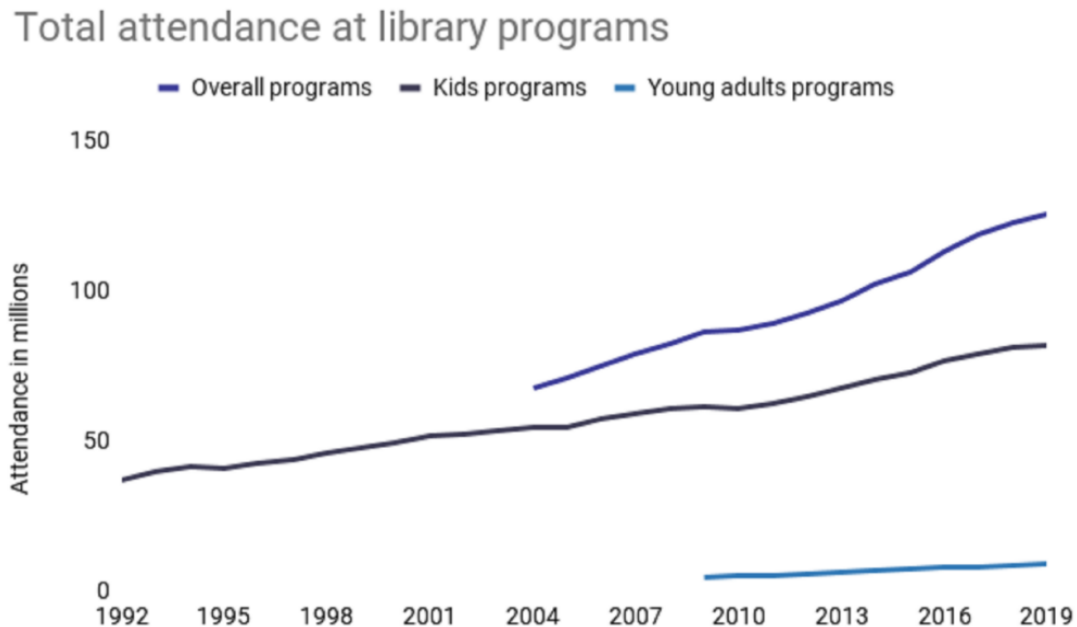
Operating income: Government funding vs other income



Utilizing Rizzo's WordsRated report as the source, figure 3 works to illuminate the stark contrast between library expenses and funds, especially those from the federal government.

These sobering statistics detail how it has never been more costly to operate a library. The expenses average \$765,715 per library, which is up over 17% since 2014. On top of that, the report clarifies, "Libraries would be in a \$4.38 billion deficit if relying on government funding alone."²² Instead, libraries have been scraping together alternative funds from donations and fines as best as they can, and all the while these diligent employees are still paid, on average, 35.07% below a livable wage for a three-person family.²³ The Book Riot article points out how this is not the case for every librarian in America, as 3 out of the 50 states pay library staff an average living wage: California, Nevada, and Washington.²⁴ Libraries in all 50 states, though, have been increasing the number of programming offerings in hopes of engaging more deeply with their communities and the nation as a whole. The WordsRated report saw more library programs than ever before, with the amount more than doubling since 2004 to reach 5.925 million programs in

2019. Consequently, library program attendance reached its own all-time high in tandem, again just about doubling since 2004 to arrive at 125.55 million in 2019.²⁵



Given how libraries have been finding hope and ingenuity in the face of scarcity, figure 4 (WordsRated) proves how they also continue to surpass both expectations and records. Libraries deserve more than the scraps.

Time and again, libraries have established themselves as trusted community centers and quintessential infrastructure.²⁶ Mark Smith, Director and State Librarian of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, found that civilian distrust for the government has starkly risen, yet their love of libraries and their programs has not suffered in the least.²⁷ This claim is supported by Pew’s Libraries 2016 study, which identified that 66% of Americans “say that closing the local public library would have a major impact on their communities.”²⁸ In the same vein, sociologist and best-selling author Eric Klinenberg wrote a book that characterizes libraries as “among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have.”²⁹ The writer of the Book

Riot article, acclaimed author and former librarian Kelly Jensen, ultimately concludes that America loves libraries but does not love paying for them.³⁰ This cannot stand.

Implementing Pivotal Policies

Dealing with pandemic-burdened budgets and gracefully meeting community needs prove to be full-time pursuits for these “one-stop shops,” so it is time for libraries to realize their full potential.³¹ A closer examination of library funding reveals that governments have not seen fit to fully fund public libraries in almost 30 years.³² The largest purveyor of federal government funding for libraries is the IMLS, which has a number of internal and external factors that prohibit peak efficiency, effectiveness, and understanding.³³ The internal component involves a lack of proper representation and diversity in the staff makeup.³⁴ While there is no shortage of qualifications amongst IMLS employees, the absence of minorities is glaring.³⁵ Even simply providing more opportunities for everyday librarians to interact with this organization would help settle the dilemma. In this manner, the barrier between funders and fundees will crumble as each side can put faces and stories to monetary distributions. The former can see the real-life effects of their allocations, and the latter have the chance to talk with and advocate directly to the people who can change the nation through library funding. On the other hand, the external IMLS setbacks have more to do with the traditionally lethargic, unconcerned nature of federal bureaucracy. The IMLS 2022-2026 Strategic Plan Report summarizes as follows:

“The general U.S. Government budgeting process impacts the timely execution of new initiatives given restrictions within the often regular and lengthy continuing resolution process. . . . IMLS is a non-cabinet level independent Agency, which

can influence the Agency's ability to effectively partner in large government initiatives."³⁶

All the same, what good is a diverse range of perspectives in IMLS if the agency holds such little sway in the system? Correcting for this stagnant federal apathy dictates more communication and deeper connection between the more mindful IMLS and the wider government, Cabinet and otherwise. Building these bonds between librarians, IMLS, and the larger government serve to promise — at the very least — healthy and constructive communication between multiple levels of society.³⁷ At the best, this fresh contact will pave the way for monumental improvements to libraries and, consequently, the nation as a whole.

Additionally, administering funds to libraries has been proven to increase financial returns to both governments and communities. In other words, putting money in gives money back, like how nutrient-rich foods yield healthier bodies. For example, the Bureau of Business Research for the Texas State Library and Archives Commission examined case studies of 40 libraries across the state. The organization's findings confirmed that these "public libraries collectively were found to provide \$2.407 billion in benefits while costing less than \$0.545 billion, a return on investment of \$4.42 for each dollar invested."³⁸ Across America, every dollar towards libraries returns anywhere from \$1.30 up to \$10, so the dividends are quite strong.³⁹ Released in 2019, an IMLS survey for the 2017 fiscal year observed that the average taxpayer puts about \$40 towards public libraries each year, which is about the price of two books.⁴⁰ Considering that citizens check out an average of over 7 books a year from their public libraries, that same chain-reaction payback is again extraordinarily evident.⁴¹

Mutual improvement for the betterment of one's country can also be sought after through other means. Keeping in mind that library expenses and program attendance have been on the rise while employees still do not make an average living wage, the American Library Association (ALA) suggests an innovative new bill to electrify the literary era.⁴² Introduced in January 2021, the Build America's Libraries Act (BALA) would infuse libraries with \$5 billion to "repair and construct modern library facilities across the nation, especially in underserved areas. The bill would enable libraries to rebuild, refurbish, and expand their facilities – as well as improve our digital infrastructure and purchase devices – to meet the needs of the community."⁴³ So far, though, the BALA bill has only been introduced on the floor and subsequently referred to the House Committee on Education and Labor — and that was at the start of last year.⁴⁴ It has not exceeded any of the ensuing steps to become law, having passed neither House nor Senate nor desk of the President. Voicing support for this lifeline bill will generate further chain-reaction benefits and reverberations throughout the nation. As ALA decreed, "Investing in libraries is investing in employment, literacy, health and the overall economy" of America.⁴⁵

Central Civility: Conclusion

As demonstrated, improving libraries improves communities in countless ways. It has been proven that citizens who read are more active and involved in their communities.⁴⁶ With social cohesion and engaged civic life as optimal American culture, these values are reinforced through libraries.⁴⁷ Thus, it is the duty of every American to uphold these ideals. With dedication and focused steps, the ability to kickstart both libraries and the country is well within reach. Just as little Dillon Helbig saw exceptional results from his ninja plan, anyone can experience the

incredible benefits of inspired actions for libraries.⁴⁸ They say people reap what they sow, and it's about high time to plant some seeds. After all, the seeds of diverse IMLS connection and BALA advocacy aren't going to plant themselves.

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