

BEYOND BOOKS: LIBRARY PROGRAMMING ACROSS THE URBAN-RURAL
DIVIDE

A Research Paper

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Regional Planning

by

Louisa Tornari

May 2025

© 2025 Louisa Tornari

ABSTRACT

Modern public libraries have evolved beyond their traditional role as book repositories to become community hubs offering diverse programming. This study explores how urban and rural libraries leverage their unique community capital to deliver programming that reflects their constituents, using Tompkins County, New York, as a case study. Through semi-structured interviews with librarians at the urban Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL) and the rural Newfield Public Library (NPL), alongside analysis of Public Library Survey (PLS) data, this research highlights disparities in resources and strategies. Despite these differences, both libraries adapt creatively to their contexts. Urban libraries function as cultural anchors within dense institutional networks, while rural libraries serve as all-purpose social infrastructure. This study contributes to broader conversations about the urban-rural divide, the role of public institutions in fostering social cohesion, and the urgent need to support libraries as essential democratic spaces.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Louisa Tornari is a second-year student in the Master's of Regional Planning program at Cornell University. Before her time at Cornell, Louisa studied history, working as a museum assistant at the Massachusetts State Archives. Additionally, she spent some time doing environmental advocacy work around the Charles River, taking kids on kayak trips and touting the benefits of native wetland plants. During her time at Cornell, Louisa helped out at the Fine Arts Library and took classes in historic preservation, affordable housing, and more.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank my boyfriend, Johnny, for seeing me through my grad school journey with love and compassion. I'd like to thank Hammy and Spitunia for providing comfort on the hardest days. I would also like to thank Jenni Minner, my exit project advisor, who was nicer to me than she should have been. Lastly, I'd like to thank my classmates who made my experience at Cornell so lively. Maybe I'll see you around.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT.....	5
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY.....	19
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS.....	22
CHAPTER 6: THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES.....	37
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION.....	40
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	40

Chapter 1: Introduction

Across the United States, public libraries have undergone a remarkable transformation from simple book repositories to vibrant community hubs. Where their value was once measured primarily by the size of their collections, today's libraries are increasingly judged by their ability to meet diverse community needs through innovative programming in addition to robust collections and resources. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts: the digital revolution, growing inequality, and the erosion of traditional community spaces. Libraries now routinely offer everything from job training workshops and health screenings to maker spaces and cultural festivals, becoming part of social infrastructure. The American Library Association's 1992 establishment of its Public Programs Office marked a watershed moment in this transformation, formally recognizing programming as central to library missions in an increasingly complex information landscape. This programming, which is now so integral to the purposes of the public library, ranges from supporting practical needs like knowledge acquisition and skill development to fostering a sense of place and belonging.¹

Yet this national story unfolds differently in different contexts. Perhaps nowhere is this variation more pronounced than in the persistent divide between urban and rural libraries. These differences mirror and sometimes exacerbate America's broader urban-rural disparities in health outcomes, educational attainment, and economic opportunity.² Urban

¹ Gregory Gilpin, "Public Libraries Continue to Adapt, Enriching Communities across America," Brookings, June 1, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/public-libraries-continue-to-adapt-enriching-communities-across-america/>.

² Brian Real and R. Norman Rose, "Rural Libraries in the United States: Recent Strides, Future Possibilities, and Meeting Community Needs" (Office for Information Technology Policy at the American Library Association, July 2017),

libraries, embedded in dense networks of institutions and flush with municipal resources, can offer extensive programming calendars featuring high-profile partnerships. Rural libraries, meanwhile, often operate with skeletal staff and tight budgets while serving as the only civic institution for miles around. As Brian Real and R. Norman Rose note in their study of rural libraries, these institutions frequently "punch above their weight," providing essential services far beyond their official mandates.³ This paper argues that urban and rural libraries develop distinct approaches to programming not merely due to resource disparities, but as adaptive responses to their communities' geographic, economic, and institutional contexts. These differences reveal how libraries leverage their unique accumulations of community capital and reflect America's urban-rural divide.

Tompkins County, New York, offers a complex setting through which to explore the urban-rural programming divide. The county blends the vibrant, academic energy of Ithaca, which is home to Cornell University and a hub for higher education, with the pastoral landscapes of rural communities like Newfield, where farmland stretches across the rolling hills of Upstate New York. This contrast between an educated, relatively affluent urban center and its more isolated rural neighbors creates a natural laboratory for studying how library programming adapts to different community contexts. Ithaca's Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL) benefits from the city's robust nonprofit ecosystem and academic partnerships, allowing it to offer nearly 1,000 programs annually. Just fifteen miles away, the Newfield Public Library serves its community with just six employees and a small programming budget, relying on local volunteers and creative grant applications.

<https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/content/pdfs/Rural%20paper%2007-31-2017.pdf#:~:text=In%20total,%206,408%20of%20America%E2%80%99s%2016,695.>

³ Real and Rose.

These differences reflect more than resource disparities. The differences reveal distinct approaches to library service shaped by community geography and needs. Urban libraries like TCPL function as information and cultural centers within rich institutional ecosystems, while rural libraries like Newfield become all-purpose community anchors, filling gaps in social services and civic infrastructure. Through interviews with librarians, analysis of programming and financial data, and historical context, this project demonstrates how both models serve vital but differing roles in their communities. While urban and rural libraries both emphasize community service, their programming strategies diverge due to disparities in funding, staffing, and institutional partnerships. These differences reflect and reinforce the broader urban-rural divide in access to public resources, yet both models demonstrate how libraries adapt to serve as essential social infrastructure in their unique contexts. The findings have important implications for library funding and policy, suggesting that equitable support requires recognizing these contextual differences rather than applying one-size-fits-all standards.

The implications of this study extend beyond Tompkins County. As America's urban-rural divide widens on political, economic, and cultural fronts, libraries remain one of the few institutions with a presence and credibility in both contexts. Understanding how they adapt their programming to these different environments offers insights into how other public services might bridge geographic divides. Moreover, in an era when physical community spaces are increasingly rare or come with a price tag attached, the library's role as a gathering place and service provider takes on new urgency. This paper contributes to ongoing conversations about the state of rural America, the evolving role of public

institutions, and strategies for maintaining social cohesion in an increasingly fragmented nation.

Chapter 2: Historical Development provides a broad historical context for the development of urban and rural libraries and the emergence of public programming, setting the stage for a detailed exploration of the urban-rural divide in library services. This historical perspective will help illuminate the origins of the disparities observed today. Chapter 2 also provides a foundation for understanding the current challenges and opportunities faced by libraries in both urban and rural settings, and sets the stage for *Chapter 3: Literature Review*. Chapter 3 synthesizes relevant research on the effects of library programming, the landscape of rural libraries within the United States, and the role of public libraries as public institutions that facilitate community togetherness and social service delivery through offering like programming. Chapter 3 also explores the community capitals framework that provides an understanding of the differing strengths of rural and urban public libraries and their services. *Chapter 4: Methodology* explains how each case was collected, the methods for collecting data, and the limitations of the cases. *Chapter 5: Analysis* includes case studies and interviews with librarians from Tompkins County Public Library and Newfield Public Library, respectively, giving insight into the differences between the urban and rural libraries. *Chapter 6: The Future of Libraries* covers the recent changes to the delivery of library services from the angle of federal and general funding changes, and digitalization. Finally, *Chapter 7: Conclusion* summarizes findings on urban-rural library disparities.

Chapter 2: Historical Development

The evolution of public libraries in the United States represents a significant shift in public access to knowledge and information, one that gradually broadens to wider audiences over many years. Before the Revolutionary War, books were primarily accessible only to the wealthy and clergymen. Public libraries had various predecessors. Literary salons were one such precursor to the public library. Literary salons started in Europe, acting as outlets for discussing arts, politics, and literature.⁴ Private book clubs also predated the American public library. Private book clubs, like literary salons, were reserved for wealthy patrons and came about amid a surge in literacy rates and the popularity of non-religious texts. These book clubs soon morphed into subscription libraries.

The establishment of subscription libraries was a significant milestone in the evolution of the American Public Library, with Benjamin Franklin's Library Company of Philadelphia (1731) serving as a pioneering model. These early subscription libraries operated on membership fees and donations, making their collections accessible primarily to paying members. Until the Civil War, these institutions remained out of reach for most of the population. That is not to say that public libraries were not developing before the 1860s. The first public library in the modern sense – meaning funded by tax dollars and open to the general public– opened in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833. The Boston Public Library, the first large metropolitan library, was established from 1848-54.⁵

⁴ “A History of US Public Libraries,” Digital Public Library of America, accessed October 9, 2024, <https://dp.la/exhibitions/history-us-public-libraries>.

⁵ Michael Kevane and William A. Sundstrom, “The Development of Public Libraries in the United States, 1870–1930: A Quantitative Assessment,” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 49, no. 2 (2014): 117–44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lac.2014.0009>.

The American Library Association (ALA), the most influential body shaping library policy, sputtered to life in 1853 with the nation's first library conference, though it was short-lived and would not be revived again until the 1870s.⁶ Librarianship became professionalized as the institutions spread. Bodies dedicated to policy re-emerged, and educational programs were established. In 1876, during the Philadelphia Exposition, the Convention of Librarians occurred, and the ALA, first conceived at that 1853 meeting, was officially established “to enable librarians to do their present work more easily and at less expense.”⁷ The ALA proved to be, and still is, important for shaping library policies. Many librarians look to the ALA as the authority for professional standards.⁸ The cultivation of librarianship, as bolstered by the ALA, began 10 years later following the establishment of the very first school for library science.

Before the establishment of Columbia University’s School of Library Science in 1887, librarianship was relegated to a passion for elites. These often male elites viewed librarianship as akin to missionary work, with intentions to civilize and reform constituents. However, schools began shifting the populations represented by librarians, namely women. Though schools were run by men, the faculty was often comprised of women, also elite.⁹ The makeup of the profession continued to change, as did attitudes about the library’s mission. After 1900, women came to dominate library operational roles and would also come to dominate library administration later in the century.

⁶ Patti Gibbons, “THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION: Advancing Library Science and Safeguarding Information Since the 19th Century,” *Information Today* 41, no. 3 (April 2024): 17–31.

⁷ “A History of US Public Libraries.”

⁸ “American Library Association Fact Sheet | ALA,” accessed February 20, 2025, <https://www.ala.org/news/american-library-association-fact-sheet>.

⁹ “A History of US Public Libraries.”

Modern librarianship developed, albeit slowly. However, following the aftermath of the Civil War, a library boom occurred. This period marked a crucial transition as public libraries began spreading across the nation, establishing the model of board-governed, tax-funded institutions open to all citizens without charge. During the early years of the boom, libraries were being established at a higher rate across Northern and Western states following increasing urbanization and immigration, which attracted wealthier residents. In contrast, Southern states lagged behind their Northern and Western peers, bogged down by lower income and lower rates of urbanization.¹⁰

Libraries also spread with the help of the wealthy industrialist Andrew Carnegie. At the turn of the 20th century, Carnegie gave away \$60 million to fund over a thousand libraries across the United States. Carnegie envisioned “public and free” libraries in a time when subscription libraries were still commonplace, proving to be a barrier for the poor who wanted access.¹¹ Public libraries had been committed to this idea of “public and free” as well as to bringing the resources of the institutions to all Americans. Libraries in larger cities conducted English and citizenship classes to cater to the influx of immigrants coming to the United States in the 20th century.¹² The 1920s saw libraries provide reading courses and book lists for borrowers. These functions were not just educational, they were social. In 1924, William Learned in *The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge* spoke of the library as a “community intelligence center.” Learned stated of the public library, “It will be a center as familiar to every inhabitant as the local post-office, and as

¹⁰ Kevane and Sundstrom, “The Development of Public Libraries in the United States, 1870–1930.”

¹¹ Susan Stamberg, “How Andrew Carnegie Turned His Fortune Into A Library Legacy,” *NPR*, August 1, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/01/207272849/how-andrew-carnegie-turned-his-fortune-into-a-library-legacy>.

¹² Michael S. Blayney, “‘Libraries for the Millions’: Adult Public Library Services and the New Deal,” *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)* 12, no. 3 (1977): 235–49.

inevitably patronized.”¹³ Learned supported the ideas that the activities of a library should cultivate knowledge, and in turn cultivate community around it, akin to running into a neighbor in the town square.

Still, more changes were to happen to the missions and administration of public libraries. Following the Great Depression, the New Deal Era sought to culture the American public, to educate more than just the elite, and create a more informed and “culturally democratic” American public. Bringing expanded library services to adult education and a rural presence was meant to even the playing field between the rich and poor, the urban and rural, leading to a more equal democratic society.¹⁴ The New Deal enabled federal programs like the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, or FERA.¹⁵ FERA provided relief from the devastation of the Depression by funding state-run library projects, employing librarians to conduct literacy programs, distribute books, and establish rural library services in places like Mississippi that had never before had access to books.¹⁶ The American Library Association (ALA), initially wary of federal involvement, shifted its stance as New Deal programs demonstrated their value. By the late 1930s, the ALA had become a vocal advocate for federal aid, marking a permanent change in library advocacy and policy.

Moving through the 20th century, libraries continued to cultivate adult education programming as a major component of their functions. Libraries became an important center of study for adult education in the 1980s, though the study of the subject first occurred in the early 1960s with the publishing of *Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea* by

¹³ William Learned, *The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), <https://archive.org/details/americanpublicli00lear/page/n105/mode/2up>.

¹⁴ Blayney, “Libraries for the Millions.”

¹⁵ Blayney.

¹⁶ Blayney.

Margaret Ellen Monroe.¹⁷ But even before studies emerged, discussions of adult education, or “extension work” in Britain, existed in the zeitgeist. According to British scholar Ernest A. Baker, the library should be “the people’s institute.”¹⁸ Adult educational activities supported a common sentiment at the time that the library should be in service to a greater good. Baker says of extension work, the British equivalent of adult educational activities in the U.S., “This work relies on cooperation with agencies and intellectual institutions like schools, local organizations, and clubs, among other places.”¹⁹ This interest in adult education goes hand-in-hand with programming and provides context for the ultimate proliferation of public programming in public libraries.

Youth educational programming also blossomed in the 20th century, following the movement for universal education. Following the rise of universal education and the movement of children’s labor out of factories, children had leisure time to enjoy. Children’s story hour was a popular offering targeted toward child enrichment. As early as 1896, the Pratt Institute in New York hosted a children’s story time hour.²⁰ Reading clubs for older children and young adults became popular as well. The clubs, often separated by gender, occurred one to two times a month and were often the only social center for children in a given area.²¹

¹⁷ Mia Høj Mathiasson, “Studying Community Librarianship through Historical Writings on Public Library Programming Activities: American, British, and Anglo-Scandinavian Perspectives,” *Library Trends* 72, no. 4 (May 2024): 643–68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2024.a949575>.

¹⁸ Mathiasson.

¹⁹ Mathiasson.

²⁰ American Library Association, “History of Preschool Storytimes,” December 1, 2014, <https://www.ala.org/tools/history-preschool-storytimes>.

²¹ Harriet Long, *Public Library Service to Children: Foundation and Development* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1969), <https://archive.org/details/publiclibraryser0000long/mode/2up>.

In keeping with the growing awareness of the library as a supporter of adult education, the ALA began facilitating a program model called “Let’s Talk About It” in the 1980s, which entailed group reading and discussion of a series of books under an overarching theme. By the 1990s, the ALA established its Public Programs Office in response to an increase in library usage, after which programming increased dramatically.²² Today, programming is a core service provided by libraries.

²² “Public Programs Office History | ALA,” accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/ppo/history>.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In this section, I explore the functions of libraries and their programming generally and in the context of urban and rural communities. I also explore the role of libraries as a public forum representative of democratic systems, as well as socioeconomic patterns within library users.

The Purpose of Programming

In the modern context, the public library is not just a place to borrow books, but a critical resource that acts as a venue for community events and a place of connection for individuals, communities, and society as a whole.²³ Libraries are avenues for entertainment in their provision of book groups, movie nights, and craft activities. Library programming serves educational purposes and social purposes of facilitating human needs for connection and community.²⁴ Programming bridges the barriers between language and reading ability.²⁵ Additionally, the library and its programs have also been shown to improve the social well-being of its community members.²⁶ All these programs indirectly make an impact, or a “long-term, large-scale social or technological change,”²⁷ which can ideally lead to a more connected community. The many forms and purposes of programming, in addition to

²³ Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums” (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2021), <https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/swi-report-accessible.pdf>.

²⁴ Terrilyn Chun, “Get with the Programming,” *American Libraries Magazine*, January 2, 2020, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/01/02/get-with-programming-librarians/>.

²⁵ Chun.

²⁶ Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums.”

²⁷ John Voiklis et al., “From Local Outcomes to National Impacts: Tracing How Library Programs Change the World” (American Library Association, 2024), https://programminglibrarian.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/NILPPA_From_Local_Outcomes_to_Natl_Impacts.pdf.

informal services, show the public library's role as a social/cultural institution with educational, cultural, recreational, or informational roles and functions.²⁸

Rural and Urban Communities and Their Libraries

Rural and urban communities do not just differ in density; they differ in residents' health outcomes, educational achievement, and income, among many other factors.

Outmigration has depleted the local workforce in rural communities, leaving those left behind with fewer opportunities.²⁹ Despite the hardship associated with a rural existence, rural communities maintain strong community bonds and attachments.³⁰

City and Regional planning is often framed as a discipline concerned with cities, yet its policies and spatial decisions have profound consequences for rural communities, particularly in shaping access to vital institutions like public libraries. While urban libraries benefit from concentrated resources, dense populations, and interconnected infrastructure, rural libraries operate within a context of systemic disinvestment, geographic isolation, and planning policies that treat them as afterthoughts. This divide is not accidental but the result of policies and paradigms that prioritize efficiency over equity, urban growth over rural sustainability. The marginalization of rural communities by urban centers leaves reliable hubs, like libraries, to combat systemic disinvestment through providing social infrastructure. This geographic context of deterioration, the needs of residents, as well as served communities, inform the kinds of contributions to social well-being that libraries

²⁸ Connie Van Fleet and Douglas Raber, "The Public Library as a Social/Cultural Institution: Alternative Perspectives and Changing Contexts.," ed. Kathleen M. Heim and Danny P. Wallace, *Adult Services: An Enduring Focus for Public Libraries*, 1990.

²⁹ Raquel Taylor, Andrew J. Van Leuven, and Shane Robinson, "The Role of Community Capital in Rural Renewal," *Local Development & Society* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 60–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2023.2258453>.

³⁰ Taylor, Van Leuven, and Robinson.

carry out.³¹ Beyond social contributions, the amount and types of circulating materials, the types of those materials, the number and conditions of library buildings, the number of computers, the access to databases, open hours, the number of staff members, and the number and variety of programs offered by the institution vary. Budgets allotted to each library, the makeup of their constituency, their membership or non-membership to a library system, and even state or local regulations inform a library's capital. Proximity to other resources also dictates the type of programs and services offered by public libraries. Urban libraries, because of their proximity to other resources like hospitals, food pantries, or other non-profits, tend not to provide as many social services as rural libraries. Not every rural town has a concentration of essential services like grocery stores or a pharmacy.³² Statistics point to poorer proximity and access to key services, like health care. 77.2% of rural counties are designated as health professional shortage areas (HPSAs), limiting access to primary care and specialists.³³ However, most rural towns have a school, a fire department, or a library, positioning these institutions as critical to delivering services that might not otherwise be available.³⁴

Rural libraries face unique challenges and opportunities in serving their communities. These institutions typically operate with limited budgets and serve high-need patrons, often functioning as one of the few "third places" in their communities, locations that are separate from home and work where people can go to connect with their

³¹ Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums."

³² Xue Zhang and Mildred E. Warner, "Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging: The Role of County Government," *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 36, no. 2 (March 3, 2024): 302–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2230088>.

³³ Real and Rose, "Rural Libraries in the United States."

³⁴ Zhang and Warner, "Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging."

communities. Challenges abound. Some issues include limited access to broadband internet, with capacity decreasing in more remote areas, fewer formal programs and after-school services due to transportation barriers, aging facilities affecting program delivery, and a need to maintain broader, more varied roles compared to urban libraries' specialized focus.³⁵ One study by Sei-Ching Joanna Sin highlights major inequities in library funding and services, with rural and low-income neighborhoods receiving fewer resources like professionally trained staff and digital materials.³⁶ Rural libraries, in part because of limited resources, also have smaller staffs to take on library functions than those at bigger Urban libraries. Rural fringe libraries, libraries located in a “Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster,”³⁷ only had 4.2 full-time employees on average in 2017.³⁸ The most geographically isolated libraries, located in rural remote areas, defined as a “census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster,”³⁹ had on average 1.3 full-time staff members.⁴⁰

Despite these challenges, rural libraries have shown strength in providing basic computer skills training and supporting distance education initiatives, helping bridge educational gaps in their communities. In rural Tompkins County, digital literacy classes

³⁵ Real and Rose, “Rural Libraries in the United States.”

³⁶ Sei-Ching Joanna Sin, “Neighborhood Disparities in Access to Information Resources: Measuring and Mapping U.S. Public Libraries’ Funding and Service Landscapes,” *Library & Information Science Research* 33, no. 1 (January 2011): 41–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2010.06.002>.

³⁷ “Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User’s Guide” (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2024).

³⁸ Real and Rose, “Rural Libraries in the United States.”

³⁹ “Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User’s Guide.”

⁴⁰ Voiklis et al., “From Local Outcomes to National Impacts.”

have shifted to focus on one-on-one tech assistance.⁴¹ Free internet service in the library also caters to library-goers who might not have reliable access to wi-fi at home. Some states have implemented innovative solutions, such as state-funded regional library systems and resource centers, to address these rural-urban disparities. The Finger Lakes Library System (FLLS), which serves Tompkins County, is one of these many systems that have sought to address gaps in resources across its communities. FLLS has a mobile hotspot program that benefits those without internet access, as well as travelers and seasonal residents.⁴² The mobile hotspot program also helps connect rural residents to virtual services like telehealth appointments or virtual prescription filling. Library systems allow wider access to materials for rural communities, which might not have the robust funding or collection of urban libraries. Generally, however, rural libraries are less likely to be a part of systems with many branches, removing them from the resources available to bigger systems in metropolitan areas.⁴³

Rural library workers often have a more direct stake in promoting and maintaining well-being in their communities. The success of the library is deeply intertwined with the success of its communities in rural areas. When libraries operate as one of the few public resources in their community, then the town's success will be the institution's success as a core institution in a place that might be isolated from support agencies.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Chenming Zhang, Kanij Fateema, and Kathy Lim, "Age-Friendly Public Services: Rethinking Libraries & Fire Companies in Rural Tompkins County," Fall 2023.

⁴² Zhang, Fateema, and Lim.

⁴³ Real and Rose, "Rural Libraries in the United States."

⁴⁴ Margo Gustina and Michael Norton, "There Are No Lanes: Rural Libraries Do It ALL | Backtalk," Library Journal, June 14, 2022, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/There-Are-No-Lanes-Rural-Libraries-Do-It-ALL-Backtalk>.

The Public Sphere and Democracy

Public libraries have long been conceptualized as public sphere institutions that facilitate civic engagement, knowledge dissemination, and social cohesion. Libraries are seen as critical spaces that promote democratic participation, providing access to information and opportunities for discourse. As public sphere institutions, libraries fulfill three crucial criteria: status equality, providing a common ground for discussion, and universality of participation. This role becomes increasingly important as society becomes more fragmented, with libraries serving as vital meeting places that promote social inclusion and shared civic values.⁴⁵ Public libraries are frequently cited as democratic institutions. The status of libraries as venues for the free exchange of ideas and lifelong learning is crucial to supplying a voting public information everyone needs to participate in government. Educational programming provided by libraries is one way that libraries support lifelong learning and social inclusion. However, the free exchange of ideas has also made the library a battleground. Censorship in libraries exhibits itself in their book collections. Libraries often experience book challenges, in which constituents request the removal of books from shelves by questioning their appropriateness. In 2023 alone, the ALA documented a 1,269% increase in book challenges since 2020. 90% targeted multiple titles, and 40% sought to remove 100+ books at once.⁴⁶ The dramatic rise in book challenges underscores libraries' critical role as battlegrounds for democratic values, where the struggle to maintain open

⁴⁵ Andreas Vårheim, Roswitha Skare, and Noah Lenstra, "Examining Libraries as Public Sphere Institutions: Mapping Questions, Methods, Theories, Findings, and Research Gaps," *Library & Information Science Research* 41, no. 2 (April 2019): 93–101, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2019.04.001>.

⁴⁶ American Library Association, "The State of America's Libraries," 2023.

access to information reflects larger societal tensions over knowledge, inclusion, and public space.

The literature reveals public libraries as dynamic institutions that have evolved significantly from their historical roots to meet changing societal needs. While facing various challenges, particularly in rural areas, libraries continue to serve as essential community resources, contributing to social well-being and democratic discourse. The digital transition presents challenges and opportunities for libraries to maintain their role as crucial public sphere institutions while adapting to contemporary needs and technologies. Libraries have evolved to offer things outside of traditional informative sources like books, magazines, or databases. Many have taken on other services, from “libraries of things” to language classes. Libraries also act as community spaces, being one of the few free institutions still present in both cities and rural areas alike.

Community Capital

CCF provides an alternative way to take stock of possibilities to invest in social infrastructure that focuses on the strengths of a place’s existing resources, with less emphasis on its shortcomings.⁴⁷ This framework emerged from empirical studies of entrepreneurial communities and has since been widely adopted by researchers and practitioners to evaluate strategic interventions, partnerships, and community development

⁴⁷ Cornelia Flora and Mary Emery, “Spiraling-up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework,” *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 17.

outcomes.⁴⁸ The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) analyzes the strengths of a community and its development through seven interconnected forms of capital:

- *Built: Infrastructure, utilities, and physical facilities supporting community functions*
- *Cultural: shared values, heritage, and that foster collective identity*
- *Financial: Economic resources like income, investments, and credit.*
- *Human: Skills, education, health, and leadership capacities of individuals*
- *Natural: Environmental assets like Air quality, land, water and water quality, natural resources, biodiversity, scenery*
- *Political: Access to power, inclusion in decision-making, and ability to influence policies.*
- *Social: Networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that enable collective action.*⁴⁹

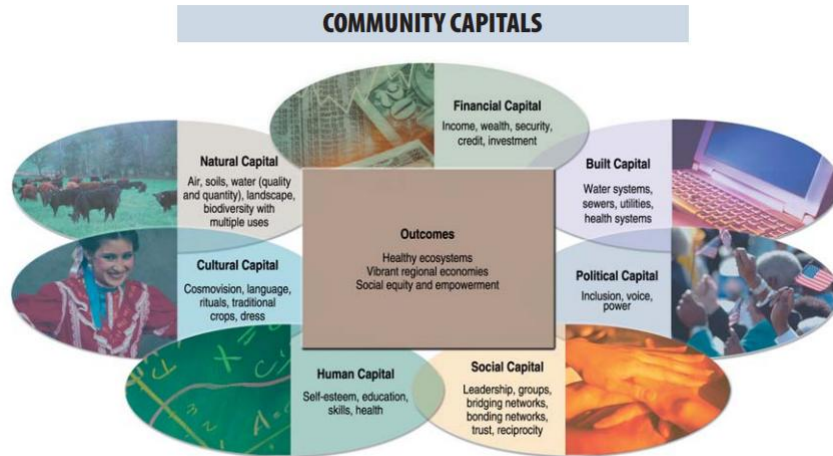


Figure 1. Community Capitals Framework. Source: Community Capitals: A Tool for Evaluating Strategic Interventions and Projects by Flora et al, 2014.

The framework emphasizes the dynamic relationships among these capitals, where investments in one often catalyze gains in others. For example, leadership training (human capital) may enhance social networks (social capital) and improve access to grants (financial capital).

⁴⁸ Cornelia Flora et al., “Community Capitals: A Tool for Evaluating Strategic Interventions and Projects” (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2014), <https://aae.wisc.edu/ced/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/01/204.2-Handout-Community-Capitals.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Flora et al.

The Community Capital Framework is often used as a way to think about community development in rural areas. In the context of this study, urban libraries like Tompkins County Public Library demonstrate strengths in built capital, such as modern facilities, human capital through a large professional staff, and cultural capital in its diverse programming supported by academic partnerships. Rural libraries such as Newfield Public Library, while often lacking in financial and built capital, frequently excel in social capital, or the networks of trust and reciprocity that enable them to mobilize volunteers and local partnerships. The CCF helps explain why these institutions develop divergent programming strategies: urban libraries use their institutional connections to offer specialized programs, while rural libraries leverage their embeddedness in tight-knit communities to provide their programming.

Chapter 4: Methodology

I employed a qualitative case study approach, combining semi-structured interviews with local librarians and analysis of Public Library Service Data. These methods were chosen to capture the perspectives of library professionals and examine institutional strategies, using survey data and library information to support the interview narratives.

Case Selection

To better understand the urban-rural divide between institutions, I focused on two contrasting libraries: Tompkins County Public Library and Newfield Public Library. In many ways beyond location, the libraries differ. The served area and population surrounding TCPL is large, comprising the whole county, whereas Newfield only serves the small village of the same name. The urban TCPL also has a robust programming schedule, whereas

Newfield hosts significantly less. These sites represent the spectrum of library service models within a single county while highlighting urban-rural disparities.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with key staff at each library. At the Tompkins County Public Library, the interview was with the Head Youth Librarian, Kat Savage, for her insight on programming creation in the urban setting of Ithaca.. Sue Chaffee, the Library Director of Newfield Public Library in Newfield, NY, gave insights into the functions of the library in her small community.

The librarians were given sample questions in an outreach email prior to conducting interviews. The questions are listed below:

1. How does ___ go about creating programs? (Requests? Specific Funding Requirements? Librarian Interests?)
2. How do community issues/circumstances inform the types of programming implemented at ___? Do they?
3. How does ___ categorize its programming for the Public Library Survey?
4. What programs are most effective in your eyes? Most popular?
5. What programs would you like to see implemented at ___ if given the chance?
6. What programming options or resources are the most pressing for ___? How do you think that differs across the county/state/country?
7. Why do you think library programming is important to a library's mission? Do you think it is?
8. Over your time in librarianship, have you seen any changes to the library programming landscape?
9. What are the barriers to implementing effective programming? To public libraries generally?
10. What are the unique benefits/challenges of offering services in a(n) urban/rural area?

These questions were intended to focus on programming goals and design. The questions were constructed to identify differences or similarities between the libraries and determine what factors affect their programming, as well as what kind of capital, as referred to in the community capital framework, could be leveraged for the delivery of library

programming. Other topics the questions addressed were possibilities for further programming, meant to determine what considerations employees might take in creating programming if there were no barriers. The questions were also intended to identify specific existing barriers to programming that might differ between urban and rural. Metrics of success and programming evolution were also touched upon to better understand what effective programming looks like and to contextualize the work of TCPL and NPL within broader changes across the field of librarianship and American society at large. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

This paper also analyzes data from two key sources: the federal Public Library Survey (PLS) and the New York State (NYS) Annual Reports for public libraries. The PLS, administered annually by the independent federal agency, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), has been conducted since 1988. This comprehensive survey collects data from public libraries across all U.S. states and territories, capturing metrics such as collection sizes, operating hours, staffing levels, expenditures, and program offerings. These statistics provide valuable insights into the condition and trends of public libraries nationwide.

Additionally, the study incorporates data from NYS Annual Reports, which are mandatory for all chartered libraries in New York State. While the NYS survey covers fewer institutions than the PLS, it gathers more detailed information, including granular data on programming, funding sources, staff demographics, operating hours, and circulation statistics. Together, these datasets offer a robust foundation for assessing library operations at both the national and state levels.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the urban-rural divide in library programming, it has several limitations. First, the focus on two libraries within a single county (Tompkins) limits the generalizability of findings, as rural and urban libraries elsewhere may face distinct challenges or adopt different strategies. For example, an urban context in Southern California differs considerably from one in Upstate New York. Second, the qualitative methodology of relying on interviews with librarians and document analysis captures institutional perspectives but cannot quantify broader patterns or causal relationships. Additionally, the most recent supporting quantitative data from the Public Library Data reflects 2022 data, and not the context of U.S. libraries in 2025.

Chapter 5: Analysis

This section examines the roles of two libraries in Tompkins County, New York: the urban Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL) and the rural Newfield Public Library (NPL). Both libraries are members of the Finger Lakes Library System (FLLS), a regional library system facilitating resource sharing, staff training, and cost-effective services across 33 libraries in five counties. This section highlights TCPL's and NPL's programming, partnerships, challenges, and community impact, and what kind of community capital each library leverages to execute its functions. Despite their differences, both libraries serve as vital community hubs, fostering learning and connection through adaptation to their unique environments. The comparative analysis underscores how libraries, whether urban or rural, play a crucial role in strengthening their communities.

Case Studies

Libraries serve as vital community hubs, offering spaces for learning, connection, and engagement. TCPL in Ithaca and NPL in Newfield share a commitment to serving their communities, but their approaches to programming, community engagement, and overcoming challenges differ due to their urban and rural contexts. Through interviews with Kat Savage, Youth Librarian at TCPL, and Sue Chaffee, Executive Director of the Newfield Public Library, this analysis explores how these libraries navigate their unique environments to meet the needs of their patrons.

Finger Lakes Library System

The Finger Lakes Library System (FLLS) is the regional library system that serves the counties of Cayuga, Cortland, Seneca, Tioga, and Tompkins. FLLS has a total of 33 member libraries. FLLS was established in accordance with state education law passed in the 1950s. Regional Library systems were established through state law for the purpose of helping local libraries better serve their communities through cooperation, sharing resources, and by offering cost-effective services.⁵⁰ FLLS contributes to member libraries not just as an oversight entity, but also provides guidance and training to librarians to improve services, as well as coordinates resource sharing between its member libraries. Notably, FLLS provides small grants in service of expanding outreach and programming and helps connect the constellation of rural and small urban libraries across the Finger Lakes. FLLS helps enables libraries, as they put it, to be “yes” organizations, partnering with organizations to address community needs for their constituents, which span children to older adults.⁵¹

⁵⁰ “About Us | Finger Lakes Library System,” November 7, 2012, <https://www.flls.org/about-us/>.

⁵¹ Zhang and Warner, “Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging.”

Tompkins County Public Library

Tompkins County Public Library, located in downtown Ithaca, New York, is the central library of the FLLS. TCPL's early history is closely entwined with that of Cornell University, a major economic and institutional force in Tompkins County. Both TCPL and Cornell University were founded by Ezra Cornell, and early lectures associated with the university took place at the library. TCPL was chartered by the New York State Legislature in 1864 and opened its doors two years later in 1866. The library grew and was chartered as to serve the entirety of Tompkins County in 1967.⁵²

In the present day, TCPL serves both the broader county population and the urban core in Ithaca, Tompkins County's seat. TCPL serves 100,000 residents and 33,450 registered borrowers as of 2023.⁵³ Ithaca's locale is designated as a City, Small. The locale designation is defined as "the geographic location in terms of the size of the community in which it is located and the proximity of that community to urban and metropolitan areas."⁵⁴ Locale designations are based on the latitude and longitude of the administrative entity, in this case, TCPL. "City, Small" is defined as a "territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population less than 100,000."⁵⁵ It is within this context of a small city, tied to Cornell through its origins and its constituents, that TCPL creates its programming schedule.

⁵² "About TCPL | Tompkins County Public Library," accessed May 8, 2025, <https://www.tcpl.org/about-us/about-tcpl>.

⁵³ "About Us | Finger Lakes Library System."

⁵⁴ "Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User's Guide."

⁵⁵ "Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User's Guide."

Programming and Partnerships

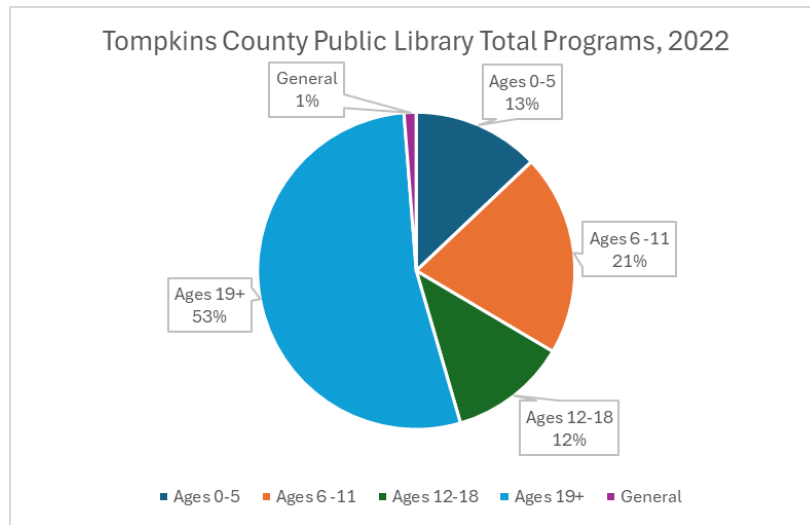


Figure 1. Tompkins County Public Library Total Programs, 2022. Source: Public Library Survey by Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2022.

TCPL offers extensive programming, hosting 957 programs in 2022 alone. These programs cater to a wide range of audiences, from toddlers to adults, and include story times, teen programming, tax assistance for low-income adults, and more. TCPL's programming is heavily influenced by partnerships with local organizations, such as public broadcasting station WSKG, and Cornell University. The relationships between TCPL and partner organizations like WSKG constitute a form of social capital. By leveraging its social capital, TCPL can offer specialized programs, such as sensory-friendly screenings of children's shows like "Carl the Collector," an animated series about a raccoon with autism and his navigation of life with neurodivergence, and coding workshops facilitated by Cornell students.⁵⁶ These collaborations not only enhance the library's programming but also strengthen its ties to the community.

⁵⁶ PBS Publicity, "CARL THE COLLECTOR, PBS KIDS' First Series Centering on an Autistic Main Character, Premieres Nov 14," About PBS - Main, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/carl-the-collector-pbs-kids-first-series-centering-on-an-autistic-main-character-premieres-nov-14/>.

In addition to external partnerships, TCPL draws inspiration from larger library organizations, such as the New York State Library, which supports events like Reading Rainbow screenings. Librarian interests also play a role in shaping programming. Savage noted that a past librarian’s skills in art led to craft activities for youth, demonstrating how staff expertise and interests can inform programming decisions in addition to partner organizations, and demonstrating the use of human capital in programming.

Challenges

Tompkins County Public Library Revenue Sources, 2022	Dollar Amount
Tompkins County	\$3,618,972
Other	\$230,000
Gifts and Endowments	\$124,592
Fund Raising	\$38,000
LLSA	\$31,000
City of Ithaca	\$17,893
Library Charges	\$15,763
Town of Ithaca	\$15,000
Federal Aid	\$10,000
Income from Investments	\$5,402
Misc. Cash Grants	\$2,000

State Aid	\$1,510
Grand Total	\$4,110,231

Figure 2. Tompkins County Public Library Revenue Sources, 2022. Source: Tompkins County Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022 by Tabor, 2022.

TCPL has the largest budget in Tompkins County. The bulk of TCPL’s budget is provided for by Tompkins County, but it also receives money from the Town and City of Ithaca. A notable amount of money comes from “Other,” which is money that does not come from any federal, state, or local agency, or from gifts, fundraising, investments, or library charges. Though TCPL has many resources, funded by various revenue streams as outlined in Figure 2, the quantity and intensity of programming preparation require a lot of resources. Savage explained, "I can’t be running programs every single day after school because there’s so much time for planning, execution, evaluation."

Community Role

TCPL serves as a community hub outside of home and work where people can gather, learn, and connect. This is particularly important for youth, who benefit from programs like Maker Mondays and the queer youth group, which provide safe spaces for social interaction and skill-building. The library’s central location in downtown Ithaca makes it easily accessible to many, though parking and safety concerns on the Commons are occasional issues. Savage highlighted the importance of creating a sense of community, especially for teens, stating, "What we’ve been trying to build in there is just like having that space for teens... It’s always kind of hard to do, but at the same time, when you’re a teen and you have like no other place, it’s important." Despite some logistical challenges, TCPL’s

commitment to providing a safe, inclusive hub demonstrates the library’s essential role as a community anchor beyond its traditional functions.

Newfield Public Library

The Newfield Public Library serves a small, rural community in southwestern Tompkins County. Newfield Public Library serves the Hamlet of Newfield, a smaller settlement within the larger town of Newfield. NPL is authorized under state law as a Non-profit association/agency library, meaning the library acts as a privately controlled entity but meets the statutory definition of a library within the state.⁵⁷ With only 903 registered borrowers, the library is classified as "Rural Distant", meaning it is geographically isolated from urban centers.⁵⁸

Newfield resembles rural libraries across the country in its status as a “go-to” space for community members. NPL serves the Town of Newfield in various capacities through formal programs in addition to informal assistance provided by staff. Applicable areas of programming and assistance span food security, literacy, employment, and health insurance.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ “Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User’s Guide.”

⁵⁸ Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Public Libraries Survey,” 2022, <https://www.ims.gov/research-evaluation/surveys/public-libraries-survey-pls>.

⁵⁹ Zhang, Fateema, and Lim, “Age-Friendly Public Services: Rethinking Libraries & Fire Companies in Rural Tompkins County.”

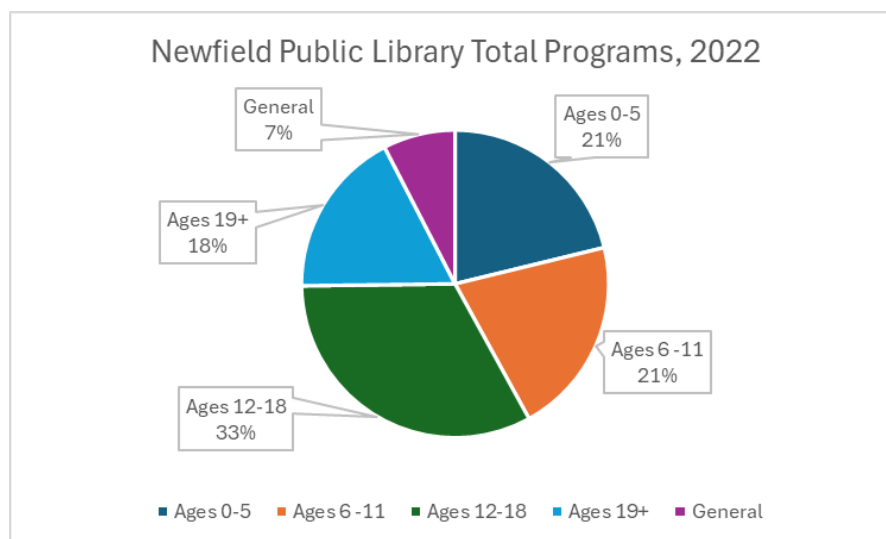


Figure 3. Newfield Public Library Total Programs, 2022. Source: Public Library Survey by Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2022.

Programming and Partnerships

Newfield’s programming heavily relies on partnerships and grants, as the library operates on a modest budget for programming. Running 250 programs in 2022, collaborations with organizations like WSKG and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology allow the library to offer engaging programs, such as story times and educational bird talks, without incurring significant costs.⁶⁰ Sue Chaffee commented about the reliance on grants for programming. NPL’s 2023 Community Report outlined the many grants provided by local entities, like the Ithaca-based Sciencenter, providing money for family programming or money from the Community Foundation of Tompkins County for summer reading and after-school programs.⁶¹ Chaffee emphasized the impact of these partnerships, stating, "Kids always have fun when they come to story time, but it’s extra special when there’s a

⁶⁰ Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Public Libraries Survey.”

⁶¹ Sue Chaffee, “Newfield Public Library: Report to the Community 2023,” 2023, <https://newfieldpubliclibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Community-Report-2023.pdf>.

professional program." The library also leverages the expertise of its patrons, hosting events like game nights and mahjong based on community interests.

Challenges

Newfield Public Library Revenue Sources, 2022	Dollar Amount
Newfield Central School	\$76,000
Gifts and Endowments	\$42,767
Tompkins County	\$36,750
Town of Newfield	\$25,000
State Aid	\$5,000
Other	\$2,782
Fund Raising	\$2,007
Misc. Cash Grants	\$2,000
LLSA	\$1,428
Library Charges	\$537
Income from Investments	\$459
Grand Total	\$194,730

Figure 4. Newfield Public Library Revenue Sources, 2022. Source: Newfield Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022 by Chaffee, 2022.

Newfield’s funding comes from many streams. The bulk of their funding comes from a public vote held in the Newfield Central School District, which appropriates money

generated from local taxes to fund the library. In 2022, the money equaled \$76,000. The public vote money increased to \$81,000 in 2024. Other significant sources come from gifts and endowments, as well as local streams like Tompkins County and the Town of Newfield. The library faces significant challenges due to limited funding and staffing constraints. In 2022, the operating budget for the library was \$194,730, much smaller than that of TCPL. In 2023, the operating budget shrank to \$152,984.⁶² Newfield struggles to organize and execute frequent or diverse programming because there are only six employees on staff, and not all of them are full-time. The library's reliance on grants also means that programming is often dictated by grant requirements, limiting flexibility. Chaffee explained, "We had come to the realization that getting a large number of people to come to a program does not necessarily measure its success." This shift in focus from attendance numbers to meaningful engagement reflects a broader trend in redefining success in library programming, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges, as part of FLLS, the system's resource-sharing model allows Newfield to access materials and training typically reserved for larger libraries. For instance, FLLS's rotating collections help Newfield maintain diverse offerings despite its modest staffing and space, which only spans 4,389 square feet in contrast to TCPL's 60,888 square feet.^{63,64} Though Newfield Public Library operates with constrained resources, its participation in the Finger Lakes Library System ensures it can still meet community needs through shared collections, training, and collaborative networks. By prioritizing meaningful engagement over scale, Newfield

⁶² Chaffee.

⁶³ Sue Chaffee, "Newfield Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022," 2022.

⁶⁴ Leslie Tabor, "Tompkins County Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022," April 2024, <https://www.flls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TCPL-2022.pdf>.

exemplifies how small rural libraries that are bolstered by regional support can be vital community anchors.

Community Role

Newfield Public Library serves as a central hub for community engagement, connecting residents to local news and events. The library's small size and close-knit community allow it to stay attuned to local needs, but its geographic isolation poses challenges for accessibility. Chaffee described the library's role as a community connector, stating, "The library serves as a primary source for local news and events, connecting residents to important town events." This role is vital in a rural area where other community hubs might be scarce.

Additionally, when funding is available, The Newfield Public Library also provides a meal service and food pantry when funding is available. Chaffee and NPL discussed the motivation for starting the pantry, "We wanted to offer something special for food pantry patrons, just so they could try different recipes with the food that they receive from the pantry." However, Chaffee also saw the meal service as a way to encourage acceptance of food insecurity in her community, saying that the service might reduce stigma associated with using food pantries by providing commonalities through "communities members that do go to the pantry and the ones that don't go to the pantry" through the meal of the month. Unfortunately, the program is currently dormant, NPL used all their programming budget in previous years to fund it. Thankfully, Chaffee said of the program, "We plan on resurrecting it."

Comparative Analysis

While both TCPL and Newfield Public Library share a commitment to serving their communities, their approaches and challenges differ due to their urban and rural contexts. TCPL, as a larger urban library, leverages its built capital, or its status as the county and the FLLS's central library hub. Financial and social capital allow TCPL to offer a wide range of programs, as municipal funding allows for professional staffing, and social capital drives partnerships with organizations like Cornell University and WSKG Public Media that fuel programming. Newfield also relies on community partnerships and their social capital to provide meaningful programming despite limited funding and staffing, because they leverage their community member and network in order to fill in programming gaps where their financial capital is not sufficient. Newfield also benefits from FLLS, leveraging its social capital as part of the system to take advantage of the financial capital of FLLS in the form of Newfield's access to its collection and small grants. Without that connection, NPL would work with even fewer resources, unable to connect residents with as many books or services.

TCPL's challenges are primarily related to balancing diverse community needs and accessibility, particularly for those in rural parts of the county. In contrast, Newfield faces more acute challenges related to funding and staffing, which limit its ability to offer frequent or diverse programming. Figure 3 shows the annual operating revenue of each library in Tompkins County. TCPL, highlighted in orange, has the highest operating revenue of the six libraries by far. TCPL's 2022 budget of \$4,110,231 serves a diverse urban population, requiring programming that caters to a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Newfield, on the other hand, serves a small, rural community, allowing it to

focus on hyper-local needs and interests, such as bird talks and game nights, and has a much smaller budget of \$194,730.

Though NPL has strength in its social network and serves its community purpose well, the stark difference in operating costs and county contributions between the Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL) and the Newfield Public Library (NPL) highlights an inequitable funding model. Rural residents are taxed to support TCPL, despite it not being their closest library and many are unlikely to use it due to distance and limits to its transit accessibility. Concurrently, Newfield also funds its own local library through additional school district taxes. However, the Ithaca City School District's budget shows no similar obligation to TCPL. This double taxation strains rural residents of Tompkins County, as residents pay for services to TCPL that do not ultimately benefit their community, while the local library struggles with poor funding. Lack of funds exacerbated by inequitable county funding causes small libraries to make difficult decisions in order to stretch their budgets, like cutting programs to save money. In the case of NPL, poor funding meant that their meal service had to end, at least for a little while.

The Community Capitals Framework reveals opportunities for greater equity between urban and rural libraries in Tompkins County. TCPL benefits from strong built, financial, human, and political capital reinforced by its former and current director's longstanding influence in county government.⁶⁵ However, TCPL could strengthen its social capital by adopting NPL's model of community-driven programming. Meanwhile, NPL's limited resources constrain nearly every aspect of its operations. Increased county funding

⁶⁵ Matt Butler, "County Legislator to Step down to Head County Library," *The Ithaca Voice* (blog), March 27, 2025, <http://ithacavoice.org/2025/03/county-legislator-to-step-down-to-head-county-library/>.

would enhance NPL’s financial capital, enabling investments in staff, facilities, and programs and ultimately improving its human, social, and built capital as well. to vital services and opportunities. To address these disparities, Tompkins County must reassess its library funding model. Equitable resource allocation would empower rural libraries to meet community needs while ensuring urban libraries remain robust. By bridging this gap, the county can foster a more inclusive library system, a system one where both urban and rural residents have equal access.

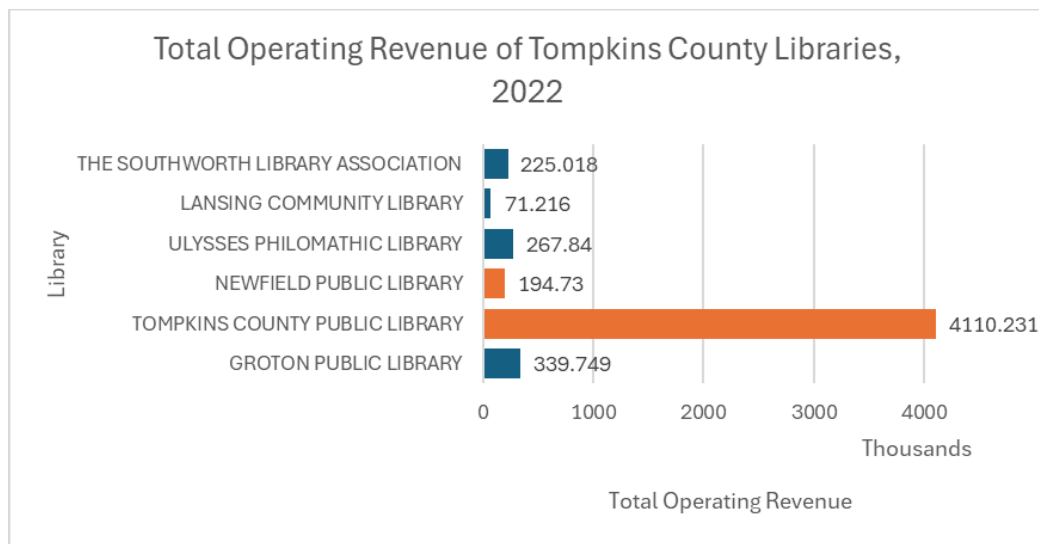


Figure 5. Total Operating Revenue of Tompkins County Libraries, 2022. Source: Public Library Survey by Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2022.

The interviews with Kat Savage and Sue Chaffee highlight the unique strengths and challenges of urban and rural libraries within the same county. TCPL leverages its size and resources to offer a wide range of programs, supported by partnerships and a focus on accessibility. In contrast, Newfield Public Library relies on community partnerships and patron expertise to provide meaningful programming despite limited funding and staffing. Both libraries, however, share a commitment to serving their communities and adapting to

changing needs, demonstrating the vital role libraries play in fostering learning, connection, and engagement, regardless of their size or location. There are inequities in funding and room for improvement with social engagement on behalf of TCPL. However, as Savage aptly put it, "A library is a library," underscoring the universal importance of these institutions in building stronger, more connected communities, no matter their resources.

Chapter 6: The Future of Libraries

Libraries underwent rapid changes over the last five years. As the interviewees indicated, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 has had long-lasting effects on both programming provisions, but also on the tangible materials available for loan in the libraries, the number of hours that the library is open, and even the number of employees. Changes in the funding and political perception of libraries might make these changes more severe in the coming years.

Digital Migration

As technology has intertwined itself in the everyday lives of American and global citizens, institutions everywhere have been migrating their operations to the digital sphere. Public libraries offer many digital services and products. Digital Ebooks and free subscriptions to streaming services are relatively recent additions to online library offerings. From a programming perspective, video conferencing apps allow constituents to participate in programming virtually. Though materials were increasingly digital before the pandemic, programming moved online suddenly as a result of it. In 2025, a lot of programming has moved back in person, but some libraries continue to hold virtual events. Virtual events are a way for constituents to engage with the community despite barriers to participation, which might include illness, lack of transportation, or simply proximity.

Federal Changes

In the last four months, the political landscape has changed dramatically. Part of this dramatic change has resulted in the defunding of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. IMLS is a crucial funding source and leader for American libraries. However, on

March 14th, the Trump Administration released an executive order calling for the elimination of the independent agency, or at least to “the maximum extent of the law.” The IMLS oversees and disperses grant funding to State Library Administrative Agencies, which go on to distribute those funds to public, academic, school, and special libraries in their respective states.⁶⁶ In recent years, the total amount of annual funding averaged \$200 million.⁶⁷ Without the help of the IMLS, long-running programs that benefit from federal funding will be greatly reduced, or disappear. The elimination of this funding will likely affect things like the availability of resources like e-books and database access, as well as summer reading programs. The cancellation of this funding will leave behind library users who have less mobility, those who cannot make it to the library because of poor proximity.⁶⁸ These changes are already taking shape. Libraries in South Dakota must now alter their interlibrary service model since funds for shipping ended with the dismantling of IMLS. Mississippi libraries cut access to their e-book and audio-book service.⁶⁹ Garland County in Arkansas uses IMLS funding to finance a bookmobile, enabling library services to reach the most rural reaches of the county.⁷⁰

Though the loss of federal funds will limit certain aspects of library services, the disappearance of the public library is unlikely. Funding comes from a variety of sources,

⁶⁶ Hallie Rich, “What Happens to Libraries If IMLS Goes Away?,” *Library Journal*, March 17, 2025, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/what-happens-to-libraries-if-imls-goes-away>.

⁶⁷ Hillel Italie, “What’s Happening with the Institute of Museum and Library Services after Trump’s Executive Order,” *AP News*, March 20, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/institute-doge-musk-museum-library-services-executive-order-trump-30ebde013ce3e9f97e2f4af72c869c0b>.

⁶⁸ Sarah Wire and Peter Kramer, “Federal Museum and Library Grants Abruptly Terminated,” 1744382602, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/federal-museum-and-library-grants-abruptly-terminated/ar-AA1CK1uy?ocid=BingNewsVerp>.

⁶⁹ Andrew Limbong, “Small and Rural Libraries Are Feeling the Cuts from President Trump’s Executive Order : NPR,” *NPR*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/22/nx-s1-5364825/small-and-rural-libraries-are-feeling-the-cuts-from-president-trumps-executive-order>.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Schneid, “How Libraries Are Faring Under the Trump Administration,” *TIME*, April 26, 2025, <https://time.com/7280715/how-libraries-are-faring-under-trump/>.

including local taxes, state funds, grants, and donations, among others. In the case of Newfield Public Library, as of 2022, none of its budget included federal funding sources. TCPL did receive federal funds, but they comprised less than a percent of its total budget of over \$4,000,000 in 2022. Though libraries in Tompkins County will not feel the outside effects of a loss in federal funding, other systems that rely on federal funding to disperse books to their communities through bookmobiles and e-books will have a lesser reach, isolating its less mobile constituents. In rural areas, the isolating effects will likely be more pronounced as sprawling communities, and older populations will make travel to the library harder.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This study has illuminated the profound ways in which urban and rural libraries, exemplified by Tompkins County Public Library (TCPL) and Newfield Public Library, adapt their programming to serve distinct community needs amid resource disparities. While TCPL leverages its urban setting, institutional partnerships, and robust funding to offer nearly 1,000 diverse programs annually, Newfield's rural context demands creativity, relying on hyperlocal collaborations and a modest programming budget to sustain its role as a vital community anchor. These differences are not merely logistical but reflect deeper systemic inequities in the distribution of financial, human, and social capital. Yet, both libraries share a commitment to ethical service, whether through TCPL's accessibility initiatives (e.g., virtual programming, sensory-friendly events) or Newfield's grassroots efforts to bridge gaps in rural social infrastructure.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Tompkins County. Libraries nationwide operate at the intersection of place and purpose, with urban institutions often functioning as cultural hubs and rural libraries serving as all-purpose lifelines. This duality underscores the need for policy frameworks that reject one-size-fits-all funding models in favor of equitable, context-sensitive support. The recent defunding of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) threatens to exacerbate existing disparities, particularly for rural libraries like Newfield that depend on grants to provide critical programming. Without federal intervention, the erosion of these institutions risk deepening the urban-rural divide, leaving already isolated communities further deprived of essential services.

Future research should explore how libraries in other geographic and socioeconomic contexts navigate similar challenges, employing mixed-methods approaches to quantify disparities while preserving the nuanced, community-driven narratives captured here. As this study demonstrates, libraries are more than repositories of books, they are a dynamic social infrastructure, fostering connection, equity, and resilience. Their survival depends on recognizing their contextual diversity and advocating for policies that honor it. In the words of TCPL's Kat Savage, "A library is a library." A library's ability to serve its community hinges on the resources and recognition it receives.

Bibliography

“About TCPL | Tompkins County Public Library.” Accessed May 8, 2025.

<https://www.tcpl.org/about-us/about-tcpl>.

“About Us | Finger Lakes Library System,” November 7, 2012. <https://www.flls.org/about-us/>.

[American Library Association. “History of Preschool Storytimes,” December 1, 2014.](#)

<https://www.ala.org/tools/history-preschool-storytimes>.

———. “The State of America’s Libraries,” 2023.

“American Library Association Fact Sheet | ALA.” Accessed February 20, 2025.

<https://www.ala.org/news/american-library-association-fact-sheet>.

Blayney, Michael S. “‘Libraries for the Millions’: Adult Public Library Services and the New Deal.” *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)* 12, no. 3 (1977): 235–49.

Butler, Matt. “County Legislator to Step down to Head County Library.” *The Ithaca Voice* (blog), March 27, 2025. <http://ithacavoice.org/2025/03/county-legislator-to-step-down-to-head-county-library/>.

Chaffee, Sue. “Newfield Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022,” 2022.

———. “Newfield Public Library: Report to the Community 2023,” 2023.

<https://newfieldpubliclibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Community-Report-2023.pdf>.

Chun, Terrilyn. “Get with the Programming.” *American Libraries Magazine*, January 2, 2020. <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/01/02/get-with-programming-librarians/>.

- Digital Public Library of America. "A History of US Public Libraries." Accessed October 9, 2024. <https://dp.la/exhibitions/history-us-public-libraries>.
- Flora, Cornelia, and Mary Emery. "Spiraling-up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework." *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 17.
- Flora, Cornelia, Mary Emery, Susan Fey, and Corry Bregendahl. "Community Capitals: A Tool for Evaluating Strategic Interventions and Projects." North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2014. <https://aae.wisc.edu/ced/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2014/01/204.2-Handout-Community-Capitals.pdf>.
- Gibbons, Patti. "THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION: Advancing Library Science and Safeguarding Information Since the 19th Century." *Information Today* 41, no. 3 (April 2024): 17–31.
- Gilpin, Gregory. "Public Libraries Continue to Adapt, Enriching Communities across America." Brookings, June 1, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/public-libraries-continue-to-adapt-enriching-communities-across-america/>.
- Gustina, Margo, and Michael Norton. "There Are No Lanes: Rural Libraries Do It ALL | Backtalk." *Library Journal*, June 14, 2022. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/There-Are-No-Lanes-Rural-Libraries-Do-It-ALL-Backtalk>.
- Institute of Museum and Library Services. "Public Libraries Survey," 2022. <https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/surveys/public-libraries-survey-pls>.
- . "Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums." Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2021.

<https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/swi-report-accessible.pdf>.

Italie, Hillel. “What’s Happening with the Institute of Museum and Library Services after Trump’s Executive Order.” AP News, March 20, 2025.

<https://apnews.com/article/institute-doge-musk-museum-library-services-executive-order-trump-30ebde013ce3e9f97e2f4af72c869c0b>.

Kevane, Michael, and William A. Sundstrom. “The Development of Public Libraries in the United States, 1870–1930: A Quantitative Assessment.” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 49, no. 2 (2014): 117–44. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lac.2014.0009>.

Learned, William. *The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924.

<https://archive.org/details/americanpublicli00lear/page/n105/mode/2up>.

Limbong, Andrew. “Small and Rural Libraries Are Feeling the Cuts from President Trump’s Executive Order : NPR,” April 22, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/22/nx-s1-5364825/small-and-rural-libraries-are-feeling-the-cuts-from-president-trumps-executive-order>.

Long, Harriet. *Public Library Service to Children: Foundation and Development*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1969.

<https://archive.org/details/publiclibraryser0000long/mode/2up>.

Mathiasson, Mia Høj. “Studying Community Librarianship through Historical Writings on Public Library Programming Activities: American, British, and Anglo-Scandinavian Perspectives.” *Library Trends* 72, no. 4 (May 2024): 643–68.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2024.a949575>.

PBS Publicity. “CARL THE COLLECTOR, PBS KIDS’ First Series Centering on an

Autistic Main Character, Premieres Nov 14.” About PBS - Main. Accessed April 25, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/blogs/news/carl-the-collector-pbs-kids-first-series-centering-on-an-autistic-main-character-premieres-nov-14/>.

“Public Libraries Survey Fiscal Year 2022: Data File Documentation and User’s Guide.”
Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2024.

“Public Programs Office History | ALA.” Accessed March 19, 2025.
<https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/ppo/history>.

Real, Brian, and R. Norman Rose. “Rural Libraries in the United States: Recent Strides, Future Possibilities, and Meeting Community Needs.” Office for Information Technology Policy at the American Library Association, July 2017.
<https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/advocacy/content/pdfs/Rural%20paper%2007-31-2017.pdf#:~:text=In%20total,%206,408%20of%20America%E2%80%99s%2016,695>.

Rich, Hallie. “What Happens to Libraries If IMLS Goes Away?” *Library Journal*, March 17, 2025. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/what-happens-to-libraries-if-imls-goes-away>.

Schneid, Rebecca. “How Libraries Are Faring Under the Trump Administration.” *TIME*, April 26, 2025. <https://time.com/7280715/how-libraries-are-faring-under-trump/>.

Sin, Sei-Ching Joanna. “Neighborhood Disparities in Access to Information Resources: Measuring and Mapping U.S. Public Libraries’ Funding and Service Landscapes.” *Library & Information Science Research* 33, no. 1 (January 2011): 41–53.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2010.06.002>.

- Stamberg, Susan. "How Andrew Carnegie Turned His Fortune Into A Library Legacy." *NPR*, August 1, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/2013/08/01/207272849/how-andrew-carnegie-turned-his-fortune-into-a-library-legacy>.
- Tabor, Leslie. "Tompkins County Public Library Annual Report For Public And Association Libraries - 2022," April 2024. <https://www.flls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TCPL-2022.pdf>.
- Taylor, Raquel, Andrew J. Van Leuven, and Shane Robinson. "The Role of Community Capital in Rural Renewal." *Local Development & Society* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2025): 60–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26883597.2023.2258453>.
- Van Fleet, Connie, and Douglas Raber. "The Public Library as a Social/Cultural Institution: Alternative Perspectives and Changing Contexts." Edited by Kathleen M. Heim and Danny P. Wallace. *Adult Services: An Enduring Focus for Public Libraries*, 1990.
- Vårheim, Andreas, Roswitha Skare, and Noah Lenstra. "Examining Libraries as Public Sphere Institutions: Mapping Questions, Methods, Theories, Findings, and Research Gaps." *Library & Information Science Research* 41, no. 2 (April 2019): 93–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2019.04.001>.
- Voiklis, John, Bennett Attaway, Melina Sherman, Elliott Bowen, Sarah Ostman, and Rebecca Joy Norlander. "From Local Outcomes to National Impacts: Tracing How Library Programs Change the World." American Library Association, 2024. https://programminglibrarian.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/NILPPA_From_Local_Outcomes_to_Natl_Impacts.pdf.
- Wire, Sarah, and Peter Kramer. "Federal Museum and Library Grants Abruptly Terminated," 1744382602. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/federal-museum->

and-library-grants-abruptly-terminated/ar-AA1CK1uy?ocid=BingNewsVerp.

Zhang, Chenming, Kanij Fateema, and Kathy Lim. “Age-Friendly Public Services: Rethinking Libraries & Fire Companies in Rural Tompkins County,” Fall 2023.

Zhang, Xue, and Mildred E. Warner. “Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging: The Role of County Government.” *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 36, no. 2 (March 3, 2024): 302–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2230088>.