Libraries, Trust and Social Capital

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By John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., ULC Senior Research Advisor

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Methodological Note

This white paper brings together data from three separate sources on how libraries deliver a range of services to people in their communities. First, there is national survey data from the Pew Research Center on how Americans use and view libraries. Much of that data come from surveys on the public's views on libraries from 2015 and 2016, as well as surveys about people's attitudes about information and digital skills. Second, the Aspen Institute, International City/County Management Association and Public Library Association conducted a survey in 2016 of over 2,000 local government officials. That survey examined community priorities and where libraries fit in meeting them.

Finally, the ULC Edge data discussed in this report reflects the 81 ULC Edge Collaborative members who used Edge in 2017. Though these libraries are a small subset of total Edge users, they represent a diverse range of tech-forward communities from across the U.S. and Canada, offering a wide view of how today's public libraries are promoting digital inclusion, information literacy and engagement in their communities.

About the Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council, founded in 1971, is the voice for public libraries and the force that inspires them to evolve. ULC creates the tools, techniques, and ideas to make ongoing improvements and upgrades in services and technology. ULC also speaks loudly and clearly about the value public libraries bring to communities, and secures funding for research that results in the development of new programs and services. And by serving as a forum for library leadership, ULC produces innovative ideas and best practices that ensure community impact.
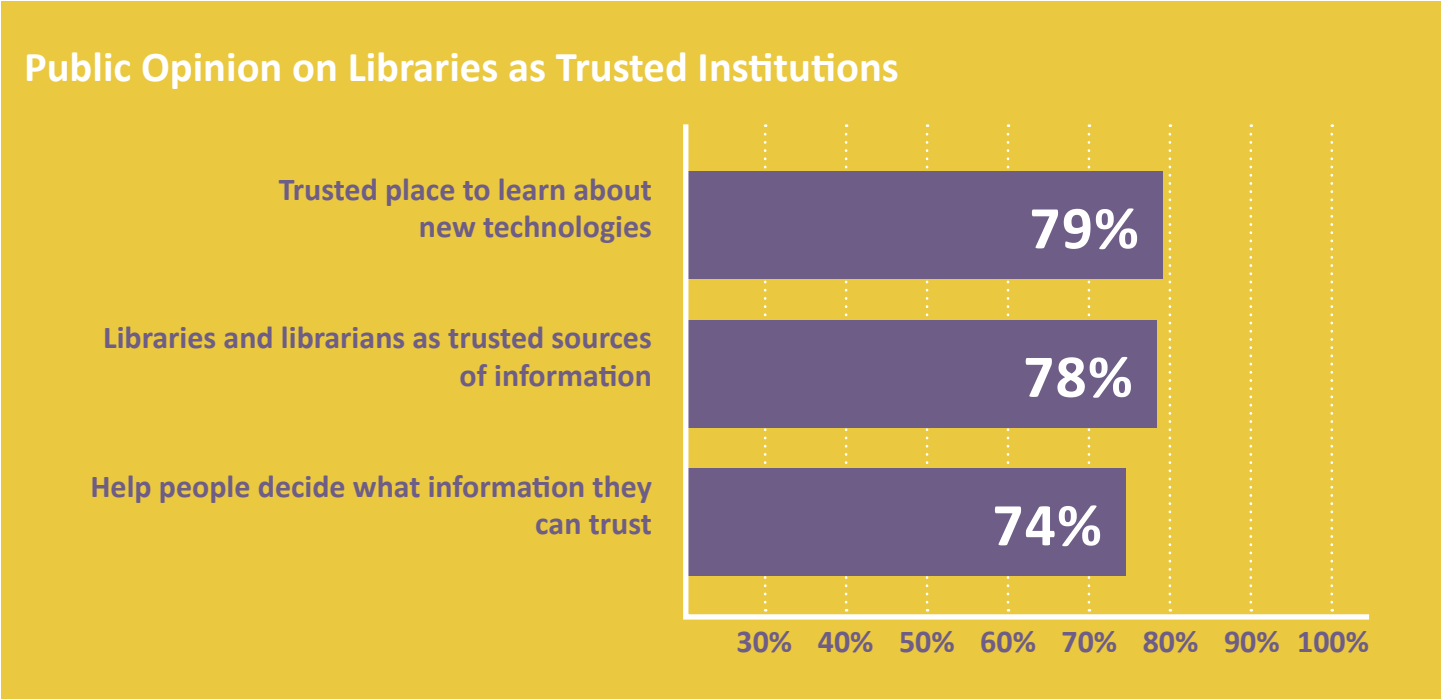
Executive Summary

Americans' trust in institutions has been strained in recent years. Just 20 percent of Americans said they trust government to do the right thing always or most of the time in 2017, down from 44 percent in 1984. A broader measure of trust in a number of institutions, such as schools, banks and businesses, shows that 35 percent of Americans trust institutions a great deal or quite a lot as of 2017, down from 43 percent in the early 2000s.

Exceptions to these patterns are libraries. Nearly four in five Americans (78 percent) trust libraries or librarians as sources of news and information a lot or somewhat, far outpacing the local or national media as information sources. This doesn't mean that libraries by themselves are going to beat back a tide of mistrust in institutions in our society. But it does mean that libraries are in a unique position to offer the public a safe haven to learn about a dizzying array of new technologies and services, help veterans and military personnel learn about services for them or meet the needs of first generation Americans or immigrants Here are some data points to support these ideas:

The library is a highly trusted institution poised to support social capital in the digital age.

When asked what sources of information they trust, 78 percent of Americans say they trust libraries or librarians. Some 40 percent say they trust libraries and librarians a lot — more than twice the rate registered for local and national media and the highest figure across eight information sources.

Public Opinion on Libraries as Trusted Institutions

Trusted place to learn about new technologies	**79%**
Libraries and librarians as trusted sources of information	**78%**
Help people decide what information they can trust	**74%**

30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Trust in News and Information Sources

Percent of U.S. adults who trust the following news and information sources a lot or somewhat

	A LOT	SOMEWHAT	TOTAL
Local public libraries or librarians	40	38	78
Health care providers	39	44	83
Family and friends	24	58	82
Local news organizations	18	54	72
Government sources	18	43	61
National news organizations	17	48	65
Financial institutions	14	54	68
Social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram)	3	31	34

These data show how public libraries help cultivate social capital — that is, the resources that help people connect to one another, their communities and find the information that helps them get by.

Libraries are civic connectors.

As community anchor institutions, public libraries are key parts of civic life. Three-quarters (73 percent) of the general public say libraries help promote a sense of community among different groups in their area and over half (53 percent) of local government officials say that fostering civic engagement is a high or very high priority for the public library.

The public views the library as a primary player in several areas of civic life. Some 74 percent of the public say libraries should offer programs for active military personnel or veterans and 59 percent say the same with respect to immigrants or first-generation Americans. ULC Edge Collaborative member libraries see the importance of engaging with their communities. Some 93 percent of ULC Edge Collaborative libraries have resource-sharing partnerships with local governments or service organizations and nearly all attend meetings of local governing bodies.

This new report from ULC analyzes data from surveys of the public (from the Pew Research Center), local government officials (from a survey sponsored by

the Aspen Institute, Public Library Association and International City/County Management Association), and libraries (from ULC Edge Collaborative members who use the Edge assessment tool).

Libraries, Anchor Institutions and Civic Life

"Anchor institutions" is a common label for libraries these days, but not one that has been around a long time. The term dates to the early days of this century as scholars started to look at libraries, universities and museums as fixed assets in a community that can contribute to its renewal. The term was enshrined in statute in 2009 with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) that provided funds for schools, libraries and other anchor institutions from the portion of the stimulus package lawmakers designated for broadband.

However, the notion that libraries are anchors in their communities dates back at least to the 19th century in the United States. The public library movement of the 1840s and 1850s was driven in part by the idea that the United States needed to have an informed citizenry to maintain its democratic form of government.[1] As the 20th century dawned, political authority's legitimacy increasingly rested on the impersonal authority of scientists, legal rights and experts, which in turn called on citizens to acquire the knowledge necessary to sort through information these parties generated for civic decisions. Libraries were part of the "institutional infrastructure to support reading" to spur citizens' participation in civic life.[2]

The importance of libraries in civic life in the 21st century is rooted in their trustworthiness. Four out of five Americans (79 percent) say libraries contribute to their communities by providing a trusted place to learn about new technologies. Three quarters (74 percent) say libraries contribute to helping people find out what information they can trust. And, as noted, 40 percent of Americans trust information from libraries or librarians a lot – the highest figure across eight different information sources and more than twice the rate for local or national media sources.

Community, Social Capital and Digital Inclusion

Social capital refers to information, social support and reinforcement of social norms from peer groups that help people negotiate day-to-day activities as well as meet larger goals.[3] More social capital, for individuals, tends to go hand in hand with better outcomes for themselves and their communities.[4] Information is the fulcrum for social capital; without the means and skills to transmit information, opportunities to develop and exploit social capital may be lost.

This is where libraries — and their role in enhancing communities and digital inclusion — play such a vital role. When asked about libraries' contributions:

● Seventy-three percent of Americans say libraries contribute either a lot or somewhat to promoting a sense of community among different groups in their local area.
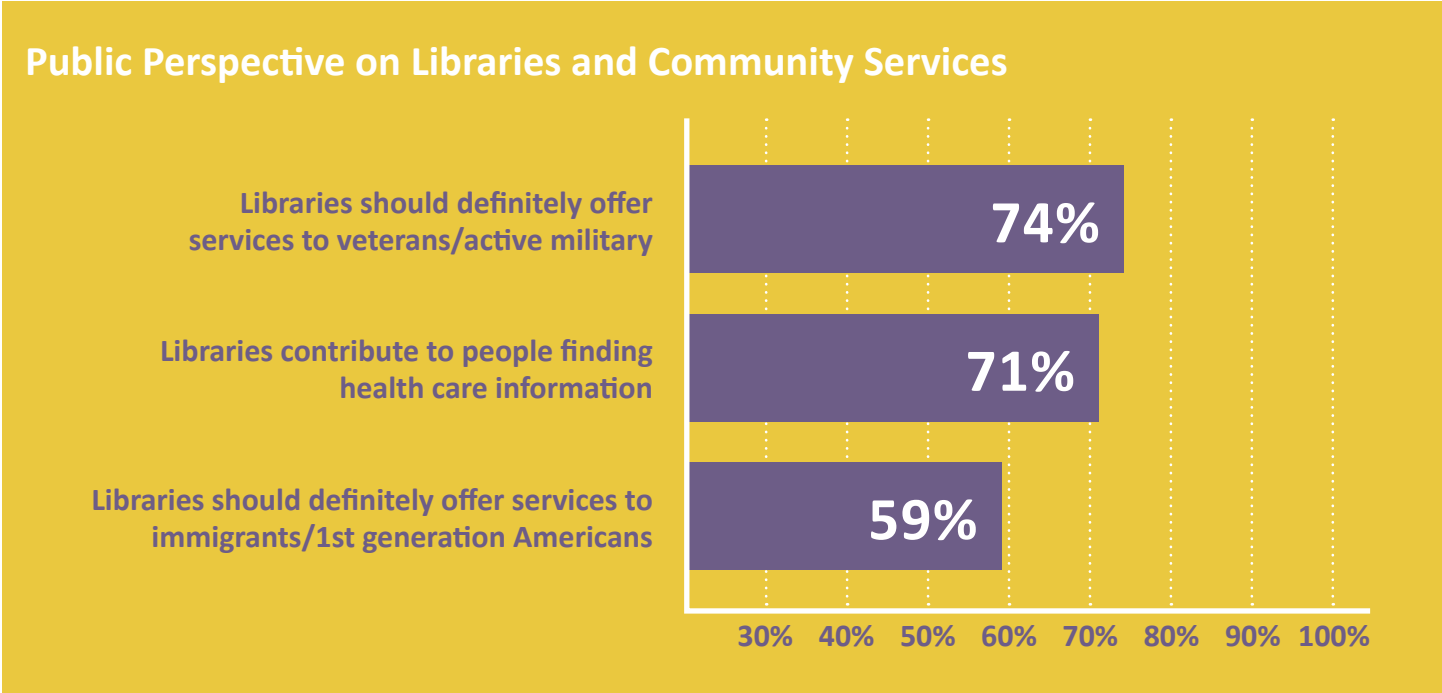
- Sixty-five percent of Americans say the library contributes either a lot of somewhat as a gathering place for addressing challenges to their local community.

The idea that libraries cultivate community shows up in other ways as well, particularly when people think about military veterans, immigrants and health services. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Americans say libraries should definitely offer programs for active military personnel or veterans. A strong majority (59 percent) say libraries should definitely offer programs for immigrants for first generation Americans.

With respect to health care, 71 percent of Americans say libraries contribute to people finding health care information and, among those who go online using library computers, 42 percent conduct health-related searches.

Local government officials have a clear interest in neighborhood and community development. Some 59 percent of government officials say that neighborhood and community are high or very high priorities, with 71 percent of local officials in cities whose populations exceed 100,000 saying this. Government officials see libraries as part of the effort to address neighborhood and community development; 39 percent say libraries play an important or highly important role in neighborhood and community development.

Similar patterns emerge when the question addresses civic engagement. Just over half (53 percent) of government officials say that fostering civic engagement is a high or very high priority in their communities and 45 percent say that this should be an important or highly important priority for libraries. Some 59 percent of government officials from places with populations over 100,000 say libraries should

Public Perspective on Libraries and Community Services

Libraries should definitely offer services to veterans/active military	74%
Libraries contribute to people finding health care information	71%
Libraries should definitely offer services to immigrants/1st generation Americans	59%

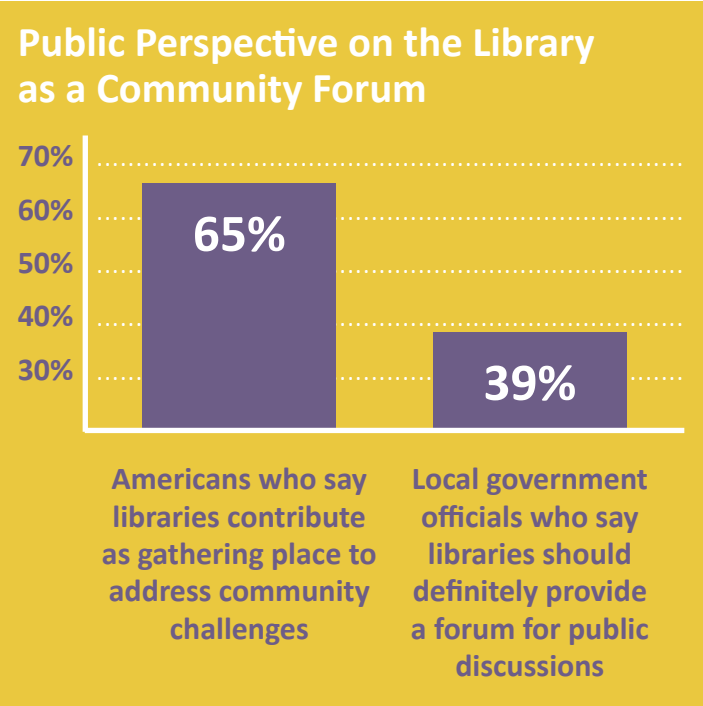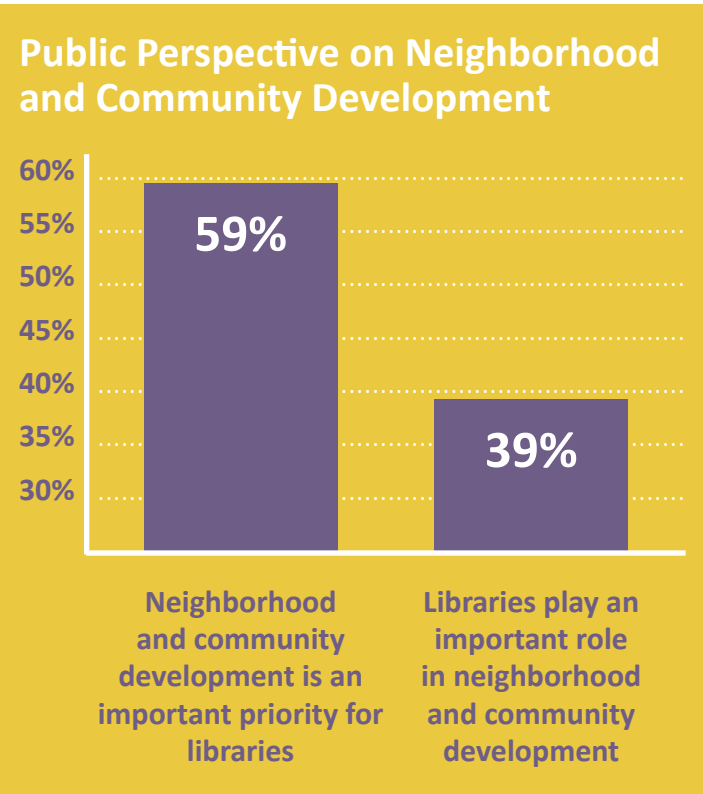30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

make fostering civic engagement an important or highly important priority.

When asked about things libraries should do (or not do), 39 percent of government officials say that libraries should definitely provide a forum for convening public discussions — a figure that rises to 60 percent for officials in places whose populations exceed 100,000. This figure contrasts with how the public views libraries; as noted above, 65 percent of the general public say libraries contribute to their communities as places to gather to address community challenges.

From the perspective of ULC Edge Collaborative members, engaging with the community is a clear priority. Basically all (99 percent) of ULC Edge Collaborative libraries say library leaders attend meetings of local governing bodies and 93 percent say the library engages in resource-sharing partnerships with local governments or social service organizations. Nearly all (96 percent) say they offer access to medical databases through their website.

ULC Edge Collaborative libraries also try to facilitate connections to local government. Three-quarters (77 percent) of ULC Edge Collaborative libraries select or organize e-government resources for patrons and two-thirds (65 percent) say staff have an opportunity annually to attend a training session with experts in e-government. To help cultivate community wellness, 74 percent of ULC Edge Collaborative libraries have a resource-sharing partnership with a local health or wellness organization and 78 percent say their staff has the chance to attend an annual training from experts on health or wellness.

Public Perspective on Neighborhood and Community Development

60% | 55% | 50% | 45% | 40% | 35% | 30%

59% — Neighborhood and community development is an important priority for libraries

39% — Libraries play an important role in neighborhood and community development

Public Perspective on the Library as a Community Forum

70% | 60% | 50% | 40% | 30%

65% — Americans who say libraries contribute as gathering place to address community challenges

39% — Local government officials who say libraries should definitely provide a forum for public discussions

Conclusion

People have long associated libraries with community-building. What comes across in this brief are the concrete ways in which people see libraries serving their communities. This includes providing services to veterans or active-duty personnel, helping immigrants or first-generation Americans and providing information about health care. Libraries' status as trusted institutions helps people cope with 21st century realities that place information burdens on people. In the context of low levels of trust for so many institutions, public libraries offer a foothold for pursuing the information people need to participate in society.

Endnotes

1 Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America 1650-1870*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996. See chapter five.

2 Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1998. P. 119.

3 Mario Small, *Unanticipated Gains.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

4 Ronald Burt, *Structural Holes.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

ULC Edge Collaborative Members Prioritize Digital Inclusion

Edge Collaborative Members that select or organize e-government resources for patrons — **78%**

Edge Collaborative Members that say staff have an opportunity annually to attend a training session with experts in e-government — **77%**

Edge Collaborative Members that have a resource-sharing partnership with a local health or wellness organization — **74%**

Edge Collaborative Members that say their staff has the chance to attend an annual training from experts on health or wellness — **65%**

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