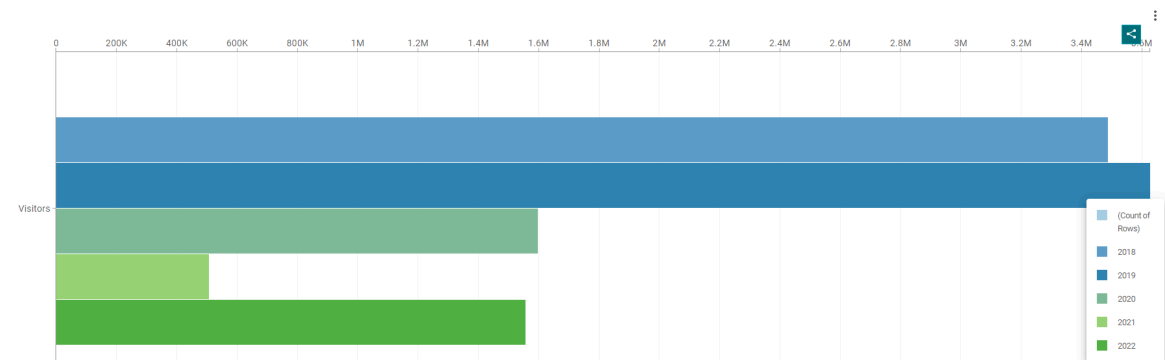


Austin Public Libraries - A Case Study

Austin has expanded into a large city with a variety of neighborhoods that have diverse needs from the city government, and access to those resources is an important subject. All communities have the right to urban amenities, but some communities do have better access to these services than others. Public libraries are a hub of resources, from information and books to assistance in learning English. Because public libraries have several branches and are run by the city, they are the perfect place to offer services to help facilitate efficiency in the city. In the city of Austin, the public library system offers a range of services and programs such as youth programs, new immigrant assistance, special community events, and of course the option to check out books and obtain information. With this infrastructure already in place, there is room to improve and expand the reach of these branches in their communities to offer services the city provides in an efficient and accessible manner to all areas of Austin.

The infrastructure of these public libraries have a wide reach in Austin. There are 20 branches of libraries in Austin, offering services to a variety of neighborhoods. They are dispersed fairly evenly throughout all of Austin, with 4 library branches in Central Austin, 4 in South Austin, 5 in East Austin, 2 in West Austin, and 5 in North Austin. (*Austin Public Library Locations / Austin Public*, 2017) The Central branch downtown offers the most services, but is not in a very residential neighborhood so the question of how efficient that is can be debated. It offers computer classes, citizenship classes,

language practice, youth gaming programs, and other events unlike most of the branches. Only 5 branches offer language practice (called Talk Time), and similarly only 7 branches offer youth gaming programs. (*Welcome / Austin Public Library*, n.d.) The Central Library is accessible through public transportation on several different Cap Metro bus routes, so even if one branch doesn't offer the specific program that they need, it can be accessed easily enough. The services that are offered in total include computer classes, citizenship classes, language practice, youth gaming programs, movies, homework help, early literacy tools, resources for new immigrants, and craft events for children. With the system already built to support these programs, it offers the opportunity to also move and expand programs such as help on taxes, state identification and passport photos, food pantries, and more citizenship assistance to better reach and assist in community development. While we don't have any statistics to know who or how many people are using the existing services, we do know that these additions to public library programs would be helpful.

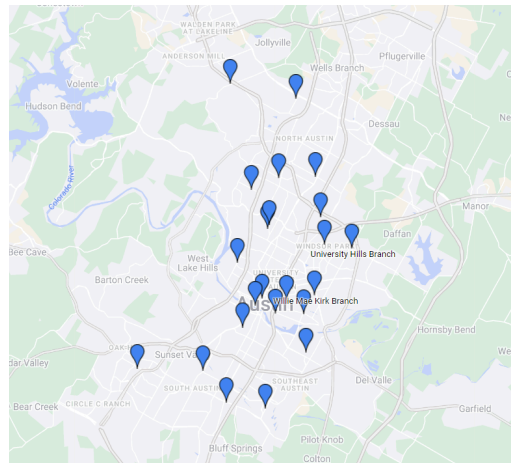


(*Austin Public Library / Open Data / City of Austin Texas*, n.d.)

Spatial justice in the city is just as important as social justice, with everyone having the right to access the needed amenities that the city provides. This means that the people that need these amenities most need to be able to access them at a nearby place. You see failures of this in places where there are food deserts, schools with less apt building facilities and teachers, and a lack of sidewalks and street lamps. One easy place to provide the needed services, even in these areas that have less of a positive city presence, is public libraries. Everyone has a right to the city and the public programs that the city can offer and one way to ensure that everyone is able to access these services is to offer them at a common city space that has reach in every community. The mission of Austin Public Library reads “The Austin Public Library provides knowledge, technology and inspiration to the Austin community. The Library is a hub of books and education, a meeting place of minds and an incubator of ideas.” This mission statement aligns with the proposed idea of making the library a more focused and intentional hub for the communities to access all of the resources they would need in close proximity to their own homes.

The number of people that visit public libraries has varied over the past five years due to COVID-19, and has resulted in less people visiting public libraries in general, but the programs being advertised properly to students in public schools and at places of employment would encourage people to continue to go to the library. There is little information about what goes on at each branch throughout the year in terms of statistics, but the city does provide a number of visitors per year. In 2018 there were 3,488,021 visitors, 2019 had 3,627,832, 2020 had 1,596,937, 2021 had 505,913, and 2022 had

1,556,603 visitors. (*Austin Public Library / Open Data / City of Austin Texas*, n.d.) These are the only statistics that the city has provided, and it does not include a breakdown of how many people visit each branch or what they visited the library for, but it is still valuable to know that there are millions of visitors at the public library. The budget for the libraries comes from the city of Austin, with no contribution from taxes paid to Travis County. The 2021 Fiscal Year Budget for expenditures was \$58,868,376, an increase of 7.6% for inflation. (*Austin Public Library Fiscal Year 2020-21 Approved Budget*, n.d.) The city would have to budget differently in order to make advancements in making the libraries more impactful and helpful to their communities. The budget for the programs that are not involved in the specific library functions could come from a different budget as well. The use of the libraries and their services have room for improvement but there are obviously many factors at play that affect this.



(*Austin Public Library Locations / Austin Public*, 2017)

The city has not focused on obtaining statistics on who uses the current services at the library, and how many guests visit each branch. There is lots of room for additional

research and information on the demographics of the people that use the library programs, research that could provide substantial information that would be relevant to the maintaining and expanding the resources that the library offers. Knowing how many people attend the classes that are offered and the special events versus the number of visitors that use the library strictly for checking out books would help identify if the library is truly a good place to house all of these operations. There is a question of whether or not the library is an efficient hub for the community and is an accessible vessel for the city to reach people in their own neighborhoods rather than only offering assistance in central Austin. Because the city has not provided these statistics, we can not answer the question of whether or not the city of Austin public libraries are meeting the needs of their communities as an accessible and usable hub for books and other city resources.

Important to note, there is very limited existing research on the people using the public library services in Austin. Given the importance of libraries on surrounding communities, it is alarming that more research hasn't been done. Despite this, one can still make inferences about the services provided and how those services are acting in their respective communities. The public libraries have a good existing infrastructure to reach the different needs of each neighborhood in Austin because of their locations, accessibility through public transportation, existing programs for new immigrants, and their public internet access. There is lots of untapped potential in the uses of public

libraries that can be unlocked by the city to make public city libraries more accessible and helpful as local hubs within their neighborhoods.

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