

New Research Underscores Role Museums, Libraries Play to Create Healthier, More Equitable America

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IMLS Studies Connection Between Museums, Libraries, and Community Wellbeing

Washington, DC—The Institute of Museum and Library Services, in partnership with Reinvestment Fund, have released a new study, [Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation's Libraries and Museums](#), which examines the role of museums and libraries in promoting social wellbeing in communities across the United States.

The multi-year, multi-market study found the presence and usage of public libraries and museums to be positively associated with multiple dimensions of social wellbeing—in particular, community health, school effectiveness, institutional connection, and cultural opportunity.



"Libraries and museums, their patrons and communities, have always known they have a powerful impact for the good on their communities," said IMLS Director Crosby Kemper. "With the release of the Social Wellbeing Report from our partners at the Reinvestment Fund, we hope this exploratory effort begins a serious ongoing engagement at the direct impact of libraries and museums on health, education, and economic development in various measurements. The current and future focus of our nation on equity will reveal the importance of the historic cultural and social influence of our institutions and show pathways to a more equitable world."

[The research](#), led by Reinvestment Fund, in partnership with the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice and HR&A Advisors, uncovered findings about the similarities of library and museum impact in communities but also underscored the differences and related challenges that come with applying the same analytical approach to two different sectors.

"This study reveals the deeper, more significant roles that museums and libraries play in communities—that which go far beyond art hanging on walls and books lining shelves," said Don Hinkle-Brown, President & CEO of Reinvestment Fund. "They are trusted institutions, safe spaces, and a place to access critical public health, social services, and technology resources. They are a reflection of what happens when inclusion and belonging are prioritized. Museums and libraries are indispensable connective tissue that keeps healthy communities together."

Highlights from the study include:

- **Libraries and museums are increasingly critical actors supporting social service provision in the communities they serve.** In many places these institutions are stepping into gaps left by depleted, or absent, public sector supports for education, public health, and social services. The roles they are taking on to fill these gaps often stretch their organizational capacity and missions in an effort to address resident needs that have historically been served by the public sector.
- **Libraries and museums are trusted institutions in their communities.** They are places people go to get information they know is reliable. They are places people go to meet other people, learn new things, engage with the institutions' collections, and to enjoy themselves and the company of others. These trusted community institutions function as a "third place" (or "third space") where people congregate outside of home or work in informal ways that build community.
- **Libraries and museums can be catalysts in their communities to promote racial equity and inclusion.** The reality that these institutions are highly networked in their communities, widely perceived as trusted organizations, and hosts to diverse populations who circulate through their spaces make libraries and museums potential catalysts to advance racial equity and inclusion in their communities.
- **It's all about the networks.** Libraries and museums are critical components of institutional and social networks. In smaller, more remote areas, they are often indispensable resources for local residents. The value these institutions provide flows from the connections they facilitate between individuals, groups, and other organizations. The vast majority of libraries and museums are not large employers and will never provide the muscle to significantly drive local economies, but they are indispensable connective

tissue that keeps healthy communities together.

“There’s no question that museums and libraries promote social wellbeing and provide critical resources to the communities they serve,” said Sara S. Bachman, Dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. “As the School of Social Policy & Practice tackles some of society’s most challenging problems and advocates for vulnerable populations, we rely on research collaborations like this one with the Reinvestment Fund, IMLS, and HR&A Advisors to bring to light the invaluable role that these institutions play and to inform SP2’s commitment to evidence-based practice and innovative social policy in pursuit of social justice and racial equity.”

From this report, IMLS is interested in exploring further research opportunities about libraries and museums and the roles they play in their respective communities, such as:

- The broader networks of support for wellbeing that libraries and museums inhabit and the importance these institutions play within these networks in different types of communities;
- the neighborhood-level factors that come into play when examining how libraries and museums influence social wellbeing in their communities; and,
- the more detailed and unique different contributions of museums and libraries within their respective sectors.

While this particular study took a county-level, multivariate approach to assessing social wellbeing impact of libraries and museums, IMLS looks forward to using these initial learnings to engage the research community about other possible research approaches, particularly for comparisons.

This research is published in advance of the final community development tools and case studies and an evaluation that are part of the larger Community Catalyst Initiative (CCI). The CCI effort will conclude in Fall 2022, and updates can be found on the [IMLS website](#).

About the Institute of Museum and Library Services

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation’s libraries and museums. We advance, support, and empower America’s museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development. Our vision is a nation where museums and libraries work together to transform the lives of individuals and communities. To learn more, visit www.imls.gov and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

About Reinvestment Fund

Reinvestment Fund is a mission-driven financial institution committed to making communities work for all people. We bring financial and analytical tools to partnerships that work to ensure that everyone has access to essential opportunities: affordable places to live, access to nutritious food and health care, schools where their children can flourish, and strong, local businesses that support jobs. We use data to understand markets, communities, and impediments to opportunity—and how investment and policy decisions can have the most powerful impact. Since our inception in 1985, Reinvestment Fund has provided over \$2.7 billion in financing to strengthen neighborhoods, scale social enterprises, and build resilient communities. Learn more at reinvestment.com.

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