

WHY DO WE STILL NEED PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

Canada is very different than it was twenty years ago. A lot has changed. As a nation we have redefined our notions of what constitutes a bank, a clothing store and even a public library.

What has changed?

In the 1980's "mom-and-pop" grocery stores were replaced by supermarkets, which are now being supplanted by even larger superstores like [Loblaws](#) or huge warehouses like [Costco](#). The average size of a grocery store is now 7,000 square feet larger than it was in 1980.

The hometown movie theatre has given way to huge facilities like [Cineplex](#) with 1,630 screens across Canada serving 77 million movie goers annually. Local video stores like [Blockbuster](#) have been seriously impacted by online movies and the increasing popularity of [Netflix](#) and [Redbox](#).

Independent local bookstores, once the staple of every small town in North America, have closed or been replaced by huge chain bookstores like [Chapters/Indigo](#).

Why do we need a public library?

So why with all these changes, do we still need a public library in the 21st century? Why do we need large public buildings to house unused books and staff to help navigate dusty stacks? After all, people are reading less and those who are choosing to read are using the Internet, eBooks and tablets, not books. Search engines have rendered library staff obsolete because information can now be easily found simply with the click of a mouse. The internet and mobile technologies have made public libraries redundant because almost everything worth knowing is now conveniently available online.

So honestly, why do we still need public libraries?

Some people may be skeptical of the need for a public library in the 21st century. Maybe they have their own computer, smartphones and high-speed internet connection at home and the skills to use them. Maybe their children have quiet places to read or study and have the funds to purchase their own books, magazines and eBooks. Or maybe they think libraries are just for "older people" who are not proficient or comfortable using technology and prefer to cling to outdated ways of doing things.



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What makes libraries so necessary?

Whatever the reasons these skeptics have for questioning the value of public libraries in today's society, they have totally overlooked the role libraries play in the community and in the lives of individuals who rely on their services. The reason public libraries have a future is simple: in the 21st century we all need information and skills to read, learn and discover. Education is not just for the young, but rather a continuous process of adaptation and lifelong learning, which is at the very heart and soul of public library service. Ironically, it has been the rise of information and communications technology that has transformed public libraries. The 21st century public library:

- ▶ provides equitable access to information, breaking down [literacy](#) barriers and bridging the [digital divide](#).
- ▶ is a community information centre that supports [reading](#), early literacy and lifelong learning.
- ▶ supports a healthy and resilient community. Public libraries have a direct impact on personal well-being with open doors and 24/7 access to online databases to support informed decision making.
- ▶ is an [economic generator](#) returning to the community \$4 to \$6 for every dollar spent. The public library is a good investment.
- ▶ serves the whole community including: the poor, the marginalized, the technologically illiterate, the unemployed, local businesses, new Canadians, and the whole family from preschoolers to seniors.

▶ is a community gathering place. Even in a virtual, mobile and online world, the public library requires a physical location within the community.



What does that mean in Ontario?

Over 5 million Ontarians, or 40 % of the population, have a public library card and borrow more than 116 million items every year. 78 million visits are made to an Ontario public libraries each year - more than 3 times the annual attendance at all North American NHL hockey games. Virtually every public library in the province also provides access to the internet with 10,825 public computer workstations available in public libraries across the province.

13,000 Ontarians get job-seeking help at the library and 120,000 times per month, business owners use resources at the public library to support their small businesses.

For all these reasons and many, many more Ontario communities and individuals thrive where there is a public library.

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