

Article

“You’re Not the Police. You’re Providing a Library Service”: Reflections on Maintenance and Repair in/of Public Libraries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Holly Randell-Moon, Jane Garner, Simon Wakeling, Mary Anne Kennan, Philip Hider, Hamid R. Jamali, and Yazdan Mansourian

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how services gaps between public libraries, governmental authorities, and other institutions were addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the labor of filling these gaps reveals the repair and maintenance work in and on the public good of the library. The site for this exploration is the project *Australian Public Libraries During the COVID-19 Crisis: Implications for Future Policy and Practice*, which used mixed-methods questionnaires and interviews to understand the library and information science (LIS) profession’s response to the pandemic. During the pandemic, public institutions labored to maintain services and repair any gaps arising from disrupted services. The extraordinary labor instigated by the pandemic can be used to theorize the ordinary labor of maintaining public institutions such as libraries and how notions of the public good are reaffirmed through individual and institutional acts of care. The maintenance and repair

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of public libraries as institutions with community service obligations reveals assumptions about essential services, which communities are disadvantaged, and the policing role of libraries. Understanding the repair role of libraries helps researchers and practitioners to theorize and conceptualize their work and service to the community in new ways.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how services gaps between public libraries, governmental authorities, and other institutions were addressed during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the labor of filling these gaps reveals the repair and maintenance work in and on the public good of the library. The site for this exploration is the project *Australian Public Libraries During the COVID-19 Crisis: Implications for Future Policy and Practice*, which used mixed-methods questionnaires and interviews to understand the library and information science (LIS) profession's response to the pandemic. During the pandemic, public institutions labored to maintain services and repair any gaps arising from disrupted services. The extraordinary labor instigated by the pandemic can be used to theorize the ordinary labor of maintaining public institutions such as libraries and how notions of the public good are reaffirmed through individual and institutional acts of care. In this paper we explore how the maintenance and repair of public libraries as institutions with community service obligations reveals assumptions about essential services, which communities are disadvantaged, and the policing role of libraries. Understanding the repair role of libraries helps researchers and practitioners to theorize and conceptualize their work and service to the community in new ways.

This paper draws on data from the *Australian Public Libraries During the COVID-19 Crisis* project and focuses with a reflective and theoretical lens on how this project can help us to understand the repair role of libraries. The key theoretical lens for this paper is repair and maintenance.¹ Focusing on repair and maintenance illustrates how public institutions are sustained by ongoing labor that attends to problems and issues through repair. Repair and maintenance do not necessarily indicate an institution, infrastructure or system is "broken." Rather these systems function precisely because repair and maintenance work enable them to do so. In our research project, participants provided examples of how libraries covered gaps for communities experiencing disadvantage during the pandemic and ensured compliance with emerging COVID-19 protocol. After outlining how our project was conducted, we discuss its findings, through our theoretical lens, in three sections. The first section considers how libraries repaired and maintained services for communities and library users experiencing disadvantage by leaving the building's wifi on after shutdown to enable people experiencing homelessness to continue their access to this service and using online translation apps (in the absence of language resources) to assist linguistically diverse community members. The second section considers the community service obligations of public libraries and some of the

¹ See Ignaz Strebel, Alain Bovet, and Philippe Sormani, eds., *Repair Work Ethnographies: Revisiting Breakdown, Relocating Materiality* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019); Jérôme Denis and David Pontille, "Maintenance Epistemology and Public Order: Removing Graffiti in Paris," *Social Studies of Science* 51, no. 2 (2021): 233-258.

assumptions regarding which communities were disadvantaged, including First Nations. The final section recounts library workers' ambivalence in taking on a "policing" role in enforcing COVID-19 protocols and how this labor throws into relief the relationship of public libraries with governing institutions. Participants mentioned the examples canvassed in this paper as part of their everyday work. We highlight these individual and organizational acts of care as part of a wider infrastructure of work in the LIS profession centered on repair and maintenance.

The pandemic demanded extraordinary and unusual practices for serving communities and libraries users. This labor can also be viewed as consistent with the ongoing maintenance of public libraries and their community service remit. As such, the extraordinary offers an opportunity to reflect on the ordinary and how public libraries are sustained through actions and practices related to communities. By examining together seemingly disparate examples of care exercised during the pandemic through a lens of repair and maintenance work, we aim to highlight practices and functions of the public library in society that may get lost in more traditional outcomes-focused analysis where the frequency of practices, common themes, and recommendations are offered. The paper aims to bring considerations of repair labor, and the difference it makes to service provisions, to the forefront of both research and practice in LIS.

THE PROJECT

At the end of March 2020, public libraries were closed in Australia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.² Some public libraries closed their operations while others closed their physical premises to the public but continued to provide online or telephone services. Around this time, Charles Sturt University, the university of this publication's authors, offered a COVID-19 Research Fund to "explore the impacts of COVID-19 on our community health, wellbeing, business performance and the economy" and to deliver "solutions for post COVID-19 resilience and rebuilding".³ The publication's authors decided to submit an application for a project on public libraries' response and services during the pandemic. Several other institutions and government bodies in Australia also made temporary funding available to study the impact of the pandemic.

² Scott Morrison, "Update on Coronavirus Measures: Media Statement," Commonwealth of Australia, March 24, 2020, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/update-coronavirus-measures-24-March-2020>.

³ Charles Sturt University, "Charles Sturt University COVID-19 Research Fund," 2021, <https://www.csu.edu.au/office/advancement/giving-to-csu/active-funds/charles-sturt-university-covid-19-research-fund>.

Providing this funding in the immediacy of the pandemic was geared towards the production of solutions-based or outcomes-based research. Such funding can be considered repair work to ensure infrastructures, services, and institutions are maintained and protected during and after the pandemic. That the project was successful derived from the value attributed to the proposed sectoral and community responsive outcomes, which included a report and recommendations on planning and staffing for pandemics and the role of public libraries in future crises.⁴ The project was supported by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), the peak body for the Australian library sector, along with the Australian Public Library Alliance (APLA), which comprises senior public library leaders from across the states and territories. The sectoral support was necessary for the project as the research aimed to assist public libraries in understanding their own roles and performance in a community crisis, and to enable them to better prepare for and react to similar crises in the future so that community needs are met as efficiently and effectively as possible. The involvement of ALIA and APLA was important because it bestowed credibility on the project and gave us access to mailing lists to promote and carry out the project.

There were two stages to the project. The first stage involved a national survey of all Australian public library authority managers and was designed to understand how libraries responded to and managed services during the closures.⁵ APLA piloted the survey and provided feedback on the questions and helped to distribute the survey. A total of 477 invitations to participate were sent directly to public library managers, and a total of 213 responses were received, representing a response rate of 45 percent. The second stage consisted of in-depth case studies of three public libraries, one in an urban setting, one in a regional area, and the third in a “remote” Australian community. This included interviews with library personnel in the case study locations as well as user surveys and user data from the libraries.⁶ The project team is multidisciplinary, including researchers from library and information studies and Indigenous studies, with a range of professional experience. The team has worked with different communities and library and information users enabling them to ask critical questions about institutions, social

⁴ Jane Garner et al., *Understanding Australian Public Library Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis: Report and Recommendations* (2021c), <https://librariesresearchgroup.csu.domains/projects/australian-public-libraries-during-the-covid-19-crisis-implications-for-future-policy-and-practice/>.

⁵ Jane Garner et al., “‘Steady Ships’ in the COVID-19 Crisis: Australian Public Library Responses to the Pandemic,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 70, no. 2 (2021a): 102-124.

⁶ Simon Wakeling et al., “The Challenge Now is For Us to Remain Relevant’: Australian Public Libraries and the COVID-19 Crisis,” *IFLA Journal* 48, no. 1 (2022): 138-154. DOI: 10.1177/03400352211054115.

inclusion, and how the profession is constructed during the design, implementation, and analysis phases of the project.

Public libraries from across Australia participated in the project. In order to ensure the anonymity of participants, specific libraries were not identified. In this paper, we attribute quotations as follows: for survey responses we use the format S[response ID]; for interviewees, we use the following identifiers:

Location	Participant role	Identifier in findings
Remote	Team Leader	Remote TL
Regional	Library Manager	Regional LM
	Technical Services Coordinator	Regional TSC
	Team Leader Programs	Regional TLP
	Children’s Services Coordinator	Regional CSC
	Youth Services Coordinator	Regional YSC
Inner City	Library Manager	Inner City LM
	Operations Manager	Inner City OM
	Content & Community Manager	Inner City CCM
	Branch Manager	Inner City BM
	Collections Coordinator	Inner City CC
	E-Resources Librarian	Inner City EL
	Library Marketing and Frontline Officer	Inner City MF
	Senior Library Programming Officer	Inner City SPO
	Branch Assistant	Inner City BA

Table 1: Interview Participant Location, Role, and Identifier

We have identified elsewhere the number of libraries from each state and whether libraries were in a major city, inner regional, outer regional, remote, or very remote location.⁷ We acknowledge that the reality of public libraries is that each has their own leadership, purpose, locality, and bureaucracy with specific nuance. Because of the large number of participants, it was not always possible to realize this level of specificity in the analysis. Nevertheless, the broad range of responses and more in-depth interviews in phase two did enable the generation of data with detailed and individual practices as discussed below. Our focus in the project was not so much on the individual libraries themselves but rather how library practices related to the broader exigencies of the pandemic.

The project's outputs include a report with recommendations on how to support and prepare public libraries for future emergencies⁸ and journal articles on the results of phase one on the responses of public libraries to the pandemic,⁹ the open-text comments from the phase one national survey on how libraries managed the continuation of services during physical closure,¹⁰ and the results from phase two in terms of the lived experiences of staff during the pandemic.¹¹ This article provides an opportunity to further explore the complexity of the project's research findings (from both phases one and two) and consider some of the qualitative data and unique experiences of the librarians, which may not fall within thematic scoping for solutions and recommendations. The data analyzed below addresses questions regarding how public libraries and their associated social and community value are maintained by the repair work of both challenging and smoothing over institutional, community, and individual expectations of library service.

MATERIALIZING ESSENTIAL SERVICES THROUGH REPAIR AND CARE

Public libraries are complex institutional spaces and have been positioned and evaluated as contributing social value to communities.¹² Loretta Lees explains that public libraries are viewed "as a cornerstone of democratic institutions" because they ostensibly provide "all citizens equal access to the knowledge necessary to participate in a democratic

⁷ Garner et al., "'Steady Ships' in the COVID-19 Crisis."

⁸ Garner et al., Understanding Australian Public Library Responses.

⁹ Garner et al., "'Steady Ships' in the COVID-19 Crisis."

¹⁰ Wakeling, et al., "The Challenge Now is For Us to Remain Relevant."

¹¹ Jane Garner et al., "The Lived Experience of Australian Public Library Staff During the COVID-19 Library Closures," *Library Management* 43, no. 6/7 (2022): 427-438.

¹² Svanhild Aabø and Ragnar Audunson, "Use of Library Space and the Library as Place," *Library & Information Science Research* 34, no. 2 (2012): 138-149.

society.”¹³ This view of libraries serving a public good influences the physical location of libraries as well as their collections. Kirsten Thorpe has argued that libraries play an institutional and ideological role in shaping public memory and understandings of history.¹⁴ Institutions such as libraries also reinforce systemic behaviors and practices such as institutional racism.¹⁵ As public institutions, public libraries form part of municipal and governmental assemblages that can work to exclude some communities from constructions of the public good.¹⁶

Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift argue that “Repair and maintenance are not incidental activities”¹⁷ and form the foundation for the operation of “modern societies”.¹⁸ Similarly, public libraries are also maintained through repair work that can serve to reinforce existing institutional structures or challenge them. The work of First Nations and peoples of color in critiquing institutions and improving them constitutes a form of repair and maintenance. Existing critical race and feminist research in the LIS field has found that reflexivity is central to questioning and contesting dominant practices, which often occur at individual rather than institutional levels.¹⁹ Anne Cong-Huyen and Kush Patel further argue that constructions of LIS as “inclusive, ‘nice’, or ‘neutral’”²⁰ function to dismiss and devalue the critical work undertaken by critical race LIS professionals. This is

¹³ Loretta Lees, “Ageographia, Heterotopia, and Vancouver’s New Public Library,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, no. 3 (1997): 329.

¹⁴ Kirsten Thorpe, “The Dangers of Libraries and Archives for Indigenous Australian Workers: Investigating the Question of Indigenous Cultural Safety,” *IFLA Journal* (2021): 2.

¹⁵ Kirsten Thorpe, “The Dangers of Libraries,” 6.

¹⁶ Loretta Lees, “Ageographia, Heterotopia, and Vancouver’s New Public Library”; Lisa M. Freeman and Nick Blomley, “Enacting Property: Making Space for the Public in the Municipal Library,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 2 (2019): 199-218.

¹⁷ Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 3 (2007): 19.

¹⁸ Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order,” 1.

¹⁹ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81, no. 1 (2016): 23-43; Renate L. Chancellor, “Racial Battle Fatigue: The Unspoken Burden of Black Women Faculty in LIS,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60, no. 3 (2019): 182-189; Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, eds., *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2018).

²⁰ Anne Cong-Huyen and Kush Patel, “Precarious Labor and Radical Care in Libraries and Digital Humanities,” in *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies Through Critical Race Theory*, eds. Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 264.

also confirmed by Gina Schlesselman-Tarango who argues that “insisting ... whiteness exists and that it is oppressive” often falls to LIS peoples of color.²¹

In the context of the pandemic in Australia, our research demonstrated the rapid change to the administration and organization of library work to serve community as well as municipal government needs.²² Our findings show library workers responded to this extraordinary change with flexibility and innovation.²³ Based on one participant’s comments, we used the notion of “steady ships” to describe how public libraries’ pandemic responses attempted to preserve the stability of the institution of the public library despite the fluctuating circumstances surrounding it.²⁴ This laboring towards the notion of a steady ship can be understood as the maintenance and repair work required of public institutions where the gaps between the social values and ideals of public service and their operation on the ground are reconciled and materialized through the individual labor of library workers.

In our study, participants provided several examples of both individual and organizational repair work demanded by the exigencies of the pandemic and which often resulted from the gaps left by other municipal services. One key tension between public libraries and broader governmental responses during the pandemic was the lack of recognition by the latter that public libraries are essential services. Public or business enterprises deemed essential meant they were viewed as necessary for consumers and citizens and these services were kept open during the lockdown stages of the pandemic.²⁵ Lockdown required citizens to stay home and leave only for essential purposes such as for food, work, or medical reasons.²⁶ As explained earlier, public libraries were ordered to close their physical premises but many stayed open to serve customers through online and other forms of remote service.²⁷ Participants were frustrated that essential services designations seemed to overlook the importance of library services to the community. As one participant reported in the survey:

²¹ Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, “Introduction,” in *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science*, eds. Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017), 2.

²² Garner et al., “‘Steady Ships’ in the COVID-19 Crisis.”

²³ Wakeling, et al., “The Challenge Now is For Us to Remain Relevant.”

²⁴ Garner et al., “‘Steady Ships’ in the COVID-19 Crisis.”

²⁵ Amelia Dunn, “Who is Deemed an ‘Essential’ Worker under Australia’s COVID-19 Rules?” *SBS*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/who-is-deemed-an-essential-worker-under-australia-s-covid-19-rules/abe2a779-34fb-4f4e-a5b3-b84774a816bb>.

²⁶ See Gus Bruno, “What is an Essential Worker? NSW COVID-19 restrictions and Greater Sydney Lockdown Rules Confusing Residents,” *7News*, July 14, 2021, <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/what-is-an-essential-worker-nsw-covid-19-restrictions-and-greater-sydney-lockdown-rules-confusing-residents-c-3397676>.

²⁷ Garner et al., “‘Steady Ships’ in the COVID-19 Crisis,” 7.

Absolutely frustrating to customers that they could go to a Bottle Shop [to purchase alcohol because such stores were an essential service] but not get library materials. We really needed wifi available “outside our walls” to assist those in need during Iso [isolation]. But could not get this set up. (S84)

A number of library workers, across geographically dispersed locations, were able to action public wifi service by keeping it on in the building after closure to service people experiencing homelessness as well as others who did not have access to the internet from a home dwelling.

We continued to provide free wifi which in some locations is available outside public buildings so that the homeless (or anyone else) could continue to access information while libraries were closed. (S46)

Wifi was continually offered so residents could use the wifi outside when the buildings were closed. Staff contacted the most vulnerable within the community to check if services were required and the home delivery service was offered in addition to HAC [Home and Community Care] Services. (S70)

however we never turned off our wifi so customers sat outside and used the service if they needed to. (S78)

Free public WiFi (extending outside the library) continued to be provided, and was in high demand. (S98)

While generally occurring in major cities, and in some cases, inner regional areas, the prevalence of this practice indicates how participants demonstrated the essential nature of library services for the public by performing acts of labor that maintained services despite or perhaps because of institutional directives that closed physical access to libraries. One manager discussed how the lines and crowding of government services such as Centrelink (which provides social security and a range of other services to the socio-economically disadvantaged) increased because people did not have access to public libraries to complete paperwork online.

...when you see those lines of people outside Centrelink in COVID, I don't think it was all because people needed to line up. You've got to remember that Centrelink normally sent everybody to a public library to fill in all their forms and all their paperwork. Guess what, we're all closed. (Inner City CCM)

To meet the digital needs of customers, this manager explained that they kept their building's wifi on but were asked to turn it off by police:

... But it was really hard to see, because when the Police asked us to turn off the wifi, because there's lots of renters [requiring social security], there's probably people out there, that was their lifeline and we couldn't give it to them. But the crowds were becoming a problem, so the police asked us to turn it off so they wouldn't congregate. And that's where you see some disadvantage. But then you know there's people out there who don't even have a computer ... (Inner City CCM)

The manager explained there were two locations where police requested the wifi to be switched off, which then led to the difficult decision "to turn it off across all of them". Here the maintenance and repair work of library staff relates not just to realizing the social and public value of the institution of the public library but repairing gaps in the municipal services of other institutions. Social security and other government services have increasingly moved online in the past decade, causing service problems for lower socio-economic customers and those with limited or no access to the internet who are most likely in need of these services.²⁸ Under privatizing and neoliberal exigencies, social services (and public libraries to some extent) have been reframed as customer services that responsabilize individual clients for their circumstances in an erasure of systemic responsibility for structural inequality.²⁹ Libraries play a role in servicing these communities due to the gap created by privatizing governmental rationalities. At the same time, in providing this gap service, libraries can be smoothing over and normalizing these gaps, thereby leaving the erasure of systemic responsibility intact. The capitulation to police regarding the wifi services illustrates the structural power imbalances of public libraries and the communities experiencing disadvantage they serve. The maintenance and repair work of library staff can only go so far in addressing institutional and technological inequalities, which was demonstrably frustrating and upsetting for participants. As one manager put it: "we have been distressed to find it very difficult to meet the technology/digital literacy needs of our community remotely" (S152). Some participants reported "breaking the rules" (Regional TLP) to continue to serve their communities where directives that did not enhance safety but hindered organizational responsiveness were ignored.

Where the examples of leaving the wifi on represent a collective library response to communities in anticipation of their needs, other examples illustrate how individual

²⁸ See Lyndal Sleep and Kieran Tranter, "The Visiocracy of the Social Security Mobile App in Australia," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law—Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 30 (2017): 495-514.

²⁹ Holly Randell-Moon, "Social Security with a Christian Twist in John Howard's Australia," in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 203-215.

library workers exercised considerable attention to the individual requests and personal situations of some community members. One library worker explained:

One family of small children has a mother with no English – staff printed and delivered PDF children’s books in mum’s language as well as some edible plants from her home country with Google translate notes to accompany. We hope they made sense! (S176)

Another outlined how:

The Library lent laptops to a family who were stranded in [name of city] during the pandemic, as they were unable to get home to China. This enabled the kids to continue their schooling during the pandemic. (S38)

Despite the lack of specific language services for these members of the community, staff attempted to address this gap with the resources they had (and with much faith in Google translate!). This individual attention is mobilized within the broader service remit of public libraries to include excluded communities³⁰ and provides evidence for the comments above regarding how essential these services are. These examples show how the position of public libraries as serving a public good and producing social value are materialized through a labor of care that patches up gaps between institutions and their treatment of communities experiencing disadvantage. In so doing, this labor also maintains the institutional value and role of public libraries in society.

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES

Diverse communities are a core component of the constitution of public libraries’ social value and their remit for public service. Within this economy of public good and social values, diverse communities carry cultural capital (per Pierre Bourdieu)³¹ that can be converted to funding and other resources for libraries to continue their work in serving these communities. As noted above, public libraries are complex institutions that play a mediating role between communities and individuals who are disadvantaged and the state vectors meant to serve them. Public libraries can also reaffirm or maintain institutional structures of inequality and social exclusion by not overtly challenging these structures and instead “adding” different communities onto existing services. The terms

³⁰ Darrin Hodgetts, et al., “A Trip to the Library: Homelessness and Social Inclusion,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 9, no. 8 (2008): 933-953.

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

“marginalized” and “disadvantaged” can be associated with diverse communities. These terms are all socially constructed and historically specific as different groups fall into and out of these categories depending on policy and funding contingencies. The categories “marginalized”, “diverse” or “disadvantaged” can erase systemic responsibility by focusing on the identification of communities that fall under these designations as opposed to the structures and institutions that create inequality. In providing services to specifically identified communities, libraries may reify and essentialize these categories even as the retraction of library services to these communities would further entrench inequalities.

Originally, Holly’s suggestion for the project’s questionnaire was to leave it open for libraries to identify who they designated as “disadvantaged”. Piloting by the partner groups indicated that this was too non-specific and would result in participants being unable to determine what was meant by the question or how to respond. A question was devised with suggested communities:

10. Have any specific actions been taken to address the needs of the following groups during the crisis?

- The elderly
- People with English as a second language
- People with disabilities
- Indigenous Australians
- People experiencing homelessness
- Children
- People with limited access to technology
- People who require literacy support

There was also an open question: “Please specify any other groups”. Other groups identified included customers requiring telehealth information, residents who self-isolate or were “remote” (geographically “isolated”), and young people.

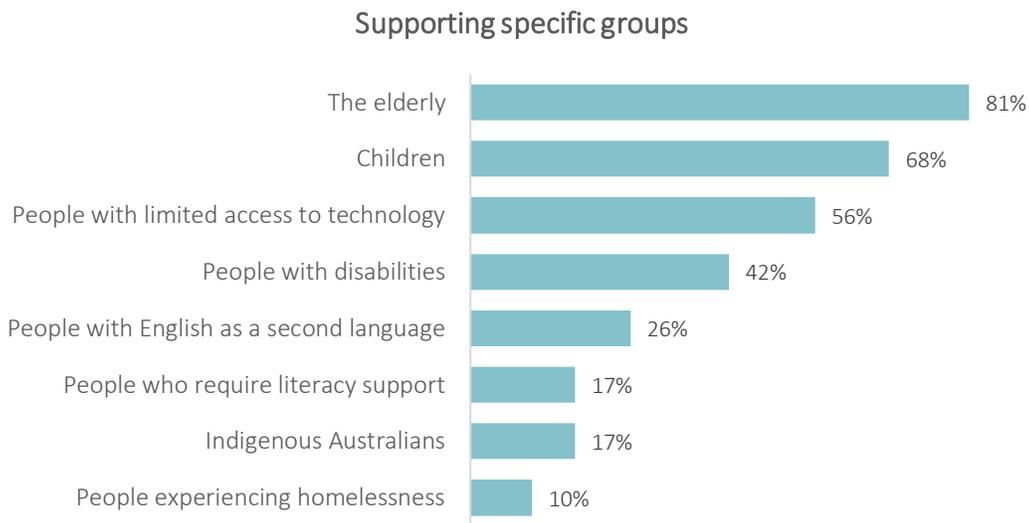


Figure 1. Have any specific actions been taken to address the needs of the following groups during the crisis? (%)

In Figure 1, the groups mentioned the most frequently in terms of specialized services are the elderly and children. The most common forms of service implemented during the pandemic were click-and-collect (or curbside pick-up) and online programming (including storytime for children). These services aligned with the needs of communities requiring library resources and learning and entertainment content during lockdown. Children featured predominantly as a group requiring specialized support likely due to gaps in child caring arrangements created by pandemic responses that required children to school from home, often while their carers were working.³² A number of participants spoke about the need to continue children’s programming and translate it for an online and at-home audience.³³ One youth coordinator in a regional library also spoke about liaising with youth mental health organizations and maintaining outreach activities during the pandemic.

³² Jordan Baker, “‘No Consideration from Either Side’: The Parents Wedged between Work and School,” *The Sydney Morning*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/no-consideration-from-either-side-the-parents-wedged-between-work-and-school-20210721-p58bnc.html>.

³³ Wakeling, et al., “The Challenge Now is For Us to Remain Relevant.”

Generally, libraries located in major cities were able to offer multiple language services and technologies. It is difficult to know if the groups from Figure 1 that fall below 50% result from the small number of customers in these communities or if they are underserved more generally. Major city and inner regional libraries appeared to have already existing service plans for diverse communities:

Cater to all these groups all the time before and after the crisis level of service has been the same. (S65)

Our expanded home delivery service was for all our customers, which include people with ESL [English as a second language], disabilities and Indigenous Australians. (S127)

Some insisted that:

[A]ll groups [are] treated equally. Services provided to all customers. (S106)

Treating all groups “equally” is not recognized as equitable professional service because some community groups require “unequal” and specialized services due to their different social standing in the community and their relationship to institutions. A few libraries located in outer regions stated they did not have diverse community groups to serve. In this comment from the survey, a respondent from a remote Western Australian library stated:

[W]e are not aware of any ESL persons in our community, nor homelessness. many of these groups not represented in our community (S42)

There may be assumptions in comments such as this that rural communities are not “diverse” or do not need specialized services. The rate of homelessness per capita in Australia is actually greatest in rural areas, with the highest homelessness rate found in Western Australia.³⁴ It is possible that the wording of the question, which lists different community groups separately, may have contributed to a lack of intersectionality in considering how First Nations may constitute communities who speak a language other than English. Statistically, “One in four (26%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

³⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/client-geography>.

in small towns reported speaking an Australian Indigenous language at home”.³⁵ Many First Nations peoples are multi-literate but may not necessarily speak standard Australian English and use Aboriginal English instead.³⁶ Use of the latter can be misidentified as a “lack” of literacy. The concept of homelessness for First Nations people can be more complicated than for others due to cultural mobility.³⁷ There may also be a perception that language groups other than English are not large outside of the major cities.³⁸ Even if small, these groups’ reliance on library services would be even more critical in a pandemic as indicated in the examples from the section above regarding language services. Others stated they did not have large enough communities to service, but they would have met their service brief if applicable:

We don’t have a large CALD [Culturally and linguistically diverse] or Indigenous population, so there wasn’t any real change in these areas, however if it was applicable, we’d have tried to accommodate in any way we could. (S12)

Again, comments such as this may reproduce different communities as falling into separate categories rather than being intersectional and overlapping where for instance, First Nations may have language needs and existing users may use a diversity of Australian English. First Nations service provisions did not appear to be prevalent but were mentioned by a few libraries:

We have supported our Indigenous Australians with food and book deliveries and family packs. (S28)

Indigenous Australians – we have purchased a lot of materials recently written by or targeted at indigenous Australians. (S120)

³⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2071.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016,” July 12, 2018, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Small%20Towns~113>.

³⁶ See Celeste Rodriguez Louro and Glenys Dale Collard, “10 Ways Aboriginal Australians Made English Their Own,” *The Conversation*, June 16, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/10-ways-aboriginal-australians-made-english-their-own-128219>.

³⁷ Carole Zufferey and Donna Chung, “‘Red Dust Homelessness’: Housing, Home and Homelessness in Remote Australia,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 41 (2015): 13-22.

³⁸ Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA), “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities in Rural and Regional Australia,” 2020, <http://fecca.org.au/www/culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-communities-in-rural-and-regional-australia/>.

[V]irtual indigenous language sessions (new). (S134)

The use of lower case “i” for Indigenous peoples is not culturally appropriate terminology and has historically been used to catalogue First Nations as grammatically similar to flora and fauna. The complexity of serving groups that are structurally disadvantaged means they can be “added onto” existing systems and institutions without the former being overtly challenged. The inclusion of First Nations as a group requiring specialized services is not unproblematic as libraries operate on First Nations Country and as First Peoples, they are central to services and institutions in Australia rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, library workers do the best they can in making use of existing services and systems. These complexities are illustrated in the following comment describing services for First Nations:

Much help on travel passes between here and NT particularly with low level literate indigenous clients (S138)

Noting the use of lower “i”, this comment could be interpreted as reproducing deficit discourse which positions First Nations’ engagement with public institutions as a “problem” to be resolved.³⁹ The respondent may mean that Indigenous clients have literacy abilities that differ from standard Australian English. While there is research on First Nations archives and collection content in libraries in Australia,⁴⁰ only a relatively small amount research has been conducted on the specific needs of First Nations LIS workers.⁴¹ Research on cultural safety for First Nations and libraries has also been identified as limited.⁴² Cultural safety broadly refers to organizational practices that promote client or customer determined safety. In the context of this research project, First Nations communities were particularly poorly served by the lack of governmental pandemic preparedness plans despite being at risk due to structural health inequalities

³⁹ William Fogarty, et al., *Deficit Discourse and Indigenous Health: How Narrative Framings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People are Reproduced in Policy* (Melbourne: The Lowitja Institute & National Centre for Indigenous Studies, 2018).

⁴⁰ Kirsten Thorpe and Alex Byrne, “Indigenous Voices in the State Library of New South Wales,” *The Australian Library Journal* 65, no. 1 (2016): 17-29; Martin Nakata, et al., “Libraries, Indigenous Australians and a Developing Protocols Strategy for the Library and Information Sector,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 36, no. 2 (2005): 185-199.

⁴¹ See Kirsten Thorpe, “The Dangers of Libraries.”

⁴² Maeva Masterson, “Finding the Space Between: Leading for Cultural Safety in Australian Public Libraries,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 69, no. 3 (2020): 316-329.

and the experience of First Nations communities in previous pandemics.⁴³ Further research on crises and public library responses could focus on the opportunities and benefits of engagement with First Nations, who are adept at managing the ongoing crises of settler colonization. One manager spoke about these opportunities:

Interviewer: OK. So, you closed the doors, but you tried to continue some of the service?

Respondent: We did.

Interviewer: So, you said that the council just made the decision, do you know just what their decision was based on?

Respondent: I'm pretty sure it was because that we are very vulnerable community. Our community is predominantly Indigenous and so they're very vulnerable for a start and then they are a lot of elderly people and people with diseases. Like I actually am a person at risk because I have a liver-lung disease. So, I was probably one that had a chronic disease. We have a lot of the community with chronic diseases and then a lot of them were Indigenous, so that was, I'm quite sure, how the council based that decision. (Remote TL)

This participant co-locates their vulnerability with the communities who use the library and identifies the particular risks for First Nations. They went on to explain how partner organizations were important for serving the libraries' First Nations communities:

We partner with the Indigenous Literacy Foundation every year and they provide us with boxes of books so that we can get books into the community because as I said, being a predominantly Indigenous community, a lot of the children simply don't have access to books in homes. So that was another thing we did. When the cartons of books came from the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, we sorted them all out. What families might like what books and worked out two books per family and ... [local First Nations health organization] went and delivered all those for us well. So even though we were closed, our children's area were closed we were still getting books into the homes of the families. (Remote TL)

Actually, at the start of the pandemic ... [local First Nations health organization] and I'm not sure whether it was council, actually did some calculations about, what potentially, the amount of people that could die if it got into ... [the town]

⁴³ See Fiona Stanley, David McAullay and Sandra Eades, "Urban Aboriginal People Face Unique Challenges in the Fight against Coronavirus," *The Conversation*, April 24, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/urban-aboriginal-people-face-unique-challenges-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus-136050>.

and it was just horrific the amount. It was most of our town because most of town is either Indigenous, vulnerable, have chronic diseases. (Remote TL)

As this response indicates, libraries which had existing partnerships with Indigenous organizations were able to respond in constructive and affirmative ways with First Nations communities. At the same time, library workers are also situated within the vulnerable communities they serve and their experiences illustrate the complex ways pandemic governing rationalities were negotiated.⁴⁴ Overall, the questionnaire received many comments in the open section for services directed to specific groups. The number of comments for this question clearly indicates libraries' willingness to serve the diverse needs of communities as best they could. As one manager explained: "There is no additional budget for anything – any of this stuff. It's about staff being creative" (Regional LM).

Respondents also highlighted the fact that while they were able to provide some services to support specific groups, there was often no way of properly evaluating their effectiveness: "we have no mechanisms in place to measure any outcomes" (S189). Given the role and value of diverse community needs in securing the public good of libraries, the complex responses here indicate the importance of carefully, and in an intersectional manner, identifying the communities that make up a library's client base and including evaluation frameworks for assessing the effectiveness of service to these communities. As we have argued, libraries executed extraordinary individual and collective efforts to serve diverse communities and address gaps in institutional responses. This repair work is valuable but not necessarily sustainable for either library workers or communities without further supporting frameworks, policies, and funding that adequately recognizes the diverse needs of communities and the labor of library workers.

POLICING IN/THE LIBRARY

As noted above, public libraries are situated within an assemblage of institutions tied to governmental provision and reconstruction of social services. We have suggested this situatedness materializes as repair and maintenance work in and on the social value of public libraries as serving a public good. This is particularly heightened in the context of communities experiencing disadvantage because servicing the latter (or not) throws into relief how the public good is constituted through processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the context of the pandemic, these processes are biopolitical (related to health policy per

⁴⁴ See Garner et al., "The Lived Experience of Australian Public Library Staff."

Michel Foucault)⁴⁵ because engagement with public institutions and services constitute a site for intervention and reinforcement of “correct” health behavior.⁴⁶ Workers engaging with the public also take on a governmentality⁴⁷ role where they are responsible for reproducing governing pandemic mentalities. Not all workers are necessarily trained for monitoring and interceding with customers in this manner. This is exemplified in the comments used for the title of this paper where library workers felt they were required to take on a “policing” role. One manager explained:

And so I had received instruction from our CEO, “You’re not the police. You’re providing a library service.” But people were moving chairs and sitting together and the staff wanted very clear instructions on what they should be telling people they could do and what they couldn’t tell people what they could do. (Inner City LM)

This was also echoed by another library worker:

But for the longest time we were actually standing at the front door and monitoring people coming in and out. So you had a staff member basically doing nothing but watching people sign in. We’ve now moved one step away, so we’ve got our QR [quick response] codes there, we’ve got our hand sanitizers, all our products, we’ve got our sign on sheets, but we don’t physically stand at the door and make absolutely everyone sign in, because we we’re not the police, we’re not, you know, we can’t be everywhere at all times. So yeah, so I’d rather we didn’t have to sign in, but I do understand why we do. (Inner City SPO)

While this interviewee understands the rationale for this monitoring work, others experienced a lack of clear guidance: “It was like, where are you enforcing the rules and where are you not and I don’t know what the answer to that is because it was like, difficult and areas of grey” (Inner City LM).

There is an analogy to policing work here which assumes certainty. Policing does involve discretion when engaging with the community and determining when or if an infringement has taken place. Although the police are often mediated as upholding binary notions of criminality and safety, their discretionary work is the site of contestation from

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 258-272.

⁴⁶ See Jeff Rose, “Biopolitics, Essential Labor, and the Political-Economic Crises of COVID-19,” *Leisure Sciences* 43, no. 1-2 (2021): 211-217.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

which Indigenous and people of color critiques highlight the police's role in including and excluding individuals and community groups from civil society.⁴⁸ These processes of inclusion and exclusion were performed by library workers and experienced as a different dimension to their usual library work and how they relate to customers and the community. "So people had to basically live with those areas of grey and some people found it easier than others" (Inner City LM). The discretionary work to policing the pandemic also involved additional labor related to calculation in managing risk:

We halved our capacities and then we learnt we could put some more chairs back.
(Inner City OM)

So when we first did the layout for the library we actually went around with a tape measure so that there was 1.5 meters between every seat. And then what we found was that people were moving the seats so that they could sit together even if they weren't a couple. And, in fact, this is going back to your questions about how I communicated with the staff and that was one of the issues. Was that, OK, so the staff were saying, "Well, is it 1.5 meters or is it not 1.5 meters? Because people are coming in together and should we be separating them?".
(Inner City LM)

In this balancing of service with compliance, library workers could realize some flexibility and autonomy in their operations and began to see pandemic compliance as discretionary. Others discussed the work involved in meeting pandemic hygiene requirements and whether the logistics of this work had been considered by governing authorities:

It's just on a piece of scaling machine so somebody has to scan them and then somebody has to delete them after 28 days. So it is an extra chore and it is time consuming and all the rest of it. We're quite lucky ... [this is] a smaller library, so we don't get the copious amount. I could imagine ... [the larger] library, somebody's pulling their hair out because they have over 3000 people a day going in, so if you know even two-thirds of those people sign in that's 2000 pieces of information. (Inner City SPO)

⁴⁸ See Holly Randell-Moon, ed., *Incarceration, Migration and Indigenous Sovereignty: Thoughts on Existence and Resistance in Racist Times* (Dubbo: Space, Race, Bodies, 2019), <https://www.spaceracebodies3.com/Incarceration,%20Migration%20and%20Indigenous%20overeignty.pdf>.

The manager is referring to sign-in practices which require a record of all people entering a building. Paper sign-in was required before QR codes were implemented and then after QR codes for people without smart phones. Customers had to sign in on paper kept on top of a piece of machinery and then a worker has to scan in the sign-ins, keep them for twenty-eight days and then delete, making the process very labor intensive. The following manager discusses the logistics and labor involved in sanitizing books:

That's a bureaucrat sitting somewhere who's never thought about that and eventually that got changed as we fed information back through the state library. We had some problems and we're like, "You've got to be kidding us. They're asking us to wipe every item down," and we said, "We are lending out hundreds of thousands of items." Now, a by-product of what we've been doing in an operational sense is we've spent 30,000 or more in the last eight months just on cleaning wipes and disinfectants ... So, I think the health orders coming from the health department, by and large, were really good. There were a couple of them that obviously someone had sat at a desk and not thought through and you went, "Really?" (Inner City OM)

While there has been research on public libraries' role in helping communities to manage crises,⁴⁹ including recent work on pandemics,⁵⁰ there is scope to consider the implications

⁴⁹ Robin M. Featherstone, Becky J. Lyon and Angela B. Ruffin, "Library Roles in Disaster Response: An Oral History Project by the National Library of Medicine," *Journal of the Medical Library Association: JMLA* 96, no. 4 (2008): 343-350; Lisa Peet, "Libraries from Puerto Rico to Florida Respond to Hurricane Irma," *Library Journal* 142, no. 17 (2017): 12-14, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=libraries-puerto-rico-florida-respond-hurricane-irma>; Donna M. Braquet, "Library Experiences of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Flood Survivors," *LIBRES: Library and Information Science Research Electronic Journal* 20, no. 1 (2010): 1-23, <https://www.libres-ejournal.info/528/>; Feili Tu-Keefner, "The Value of Public Libraries during a Major Flooding: How Digital Resources Can Enhance Health and Disaster Preparedness in Local Communities," in *Digital Libraries: Knowledge, Information, and Data in an Open Access Society*, eds. Atsuyuki Morishima, Andreas Rauber and Chern Li Liew (18th International Conference on Asia-Pacific Digital Libraries, ICADL 2016, Tsukuba, Japan, December 7-9, 2016, Proceedings), 10-15, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-49304-6_2; Sue McKerracher, "ALIA Leads Collaborative Effort to Help Bushfire Communities Rebuild with Books," *Incite* 30, no. 11 (2009): 8, <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/inCiteALIA/2009/320.pdf>; Maitrayee Ghosh, "Save the Society from an AIDS Epidemic: Indian Public libraries in the Current Perspective" (presentation, World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council, Oslo, Norway, August 2005), <https://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/papers/186e-Ghosh.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Jayne Cleave and John Geijsman, "LibraryCraft: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Led to the Growth of the WA Libraries Public Minecraft Server," *Digital Library Perspectives* 36, no. 4

of crisis enforcement and policing roles, particularly as some members of the community (and library workers themselves) may have harmful experiences with police. Stacie M. Williams and Jarrett Drake discuss a project where archivists worked with communities to document police violence.⁵¹ Although not captured in our project, there were instances of public libraries being sites of pandemic enforced exclusions such as this example of the Alice Springs Public Library in central Australia.⁵² Gabriel Curtin connects the pandemic compliance regulations used to exclude First Nations youths to “a long tradition of legitimizing racialized surveillance and normalizing white possessive logics under the impetus of public hygiene.”⁵³ Recalling that responses to library workers’ injunctions to follow rules were often met with “fuck this library”, Curtin reorients this response to the public service remit of libraries:

“Fuck this library” became a kind of catch cry among certain members of staff. It means fuck this library—fuck this library and the council that governs it, their violent management practices and possessive logics. But, also, fuck this library because we love it. Fuck this library because we believe in a better one.

Here “fuck this library” performs a restorative justice role in the maintenance and repair of the public library to do better in its engagement with First Nations communities. Because of the biopolitical dimensions to public institutions and service during the pandemic, libraries were required to work with the police. For instance, participants in our project reported:

We’d organized clearance from the local police to ensure that it was OK with Click and Collect. (Inner City BM)

We know we’re doing pretty well because we had a few instances where the police came and we had to explain to them what we were doing and they said,

(2020): 377-388; Delaney Daly, “The Heart of the Matter: Academic and Public Libraries Adapt to Pandemics through Time and Technology,” *Public Services Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (2020): 200-205; Marc Koscijew, “The Coronavirus Pandemic, Libraries and Information: A Thematic Analysis of Initial International Responses to COVID-19,” *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication* 70, no. 4/5 (2021): 304-324.

⁵¹ Stacie M. Williams and Jarrett Drake, “Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1-27.

⁵² Gabriel Curtin, “Conditions of Entry: COVID-19 and Exclusionary Tactics at Alice Springs Public Library,” *Infrastructural Inequalities* 2 (March 2021), <https://infrastructuralinequalities.net/issue-2/conditions-of-entry/>.

⁵³ Curtin, “Conditions of Entry.”

“You are doing wonderfully.” So that was some positive outside feedback from my point of view. (Inner City OM)

As with the wifi example mentioned above, not all interactions with police were desirable from the perspective of librarians. For example, in the case of a library in another state but on the border with the state of Victoria, which was in lockdown, residents from Victoria were not supposed to be crossing the state border or visiting the library but they did. Deciding whether to involve police in their engagement with customers was particularly difficult for librarians when customers did not appear to follow governing mentalities. Library staff reported:

...we got to the stage we were told that we had to call the police every time someone from Victoria came and we thought, what the police don't care. The police aren't doing anything about it. But we did feel that was a bit of pressure that we're calling the police and they're saying it's alright ... We didn't say to the people, “We're calling the police.” We'd just do it once they left, just to let them know but, yeah, that was a bit awkward. Yeah, there were whole different challenges that we didn't think we'd have to face. (Regional TSC)

As public institutions located within the governing frameworks of municipal services and the police, libraries and the work of libraries are connected to infrastructures of inclusion and exclusion. The labor detailed in this section on calculating risk, the logistical work of implementing pandemic hygiene, and enacting discretionary monitoring and intercession of customers' behavior throws into relief the institutional dimensions of public libraries and the tensions of maintaining these institutional dimensions. We chose the title to this paper, “You're not the police. You're providing a library service”, to reflect the complex positioning of library workers during the pandemic. The second person grammar of the statement disassociates the police both from an individual worker (“I'm not the police”) and collective organization (“we're not the police”) and renders the subject somewhat amorphous (who is the “you” in “you're”?). Is this a declarative affirmation of what libraries do and what they don't do? Is this a self-affirmation and reminder of library workers' roles? What work is being performed in this clarifying statement?

The previous section discussed library work in terms of repairing gaps, which can also be a form of maintaining institutional infrastructures and the erasure of systemic responsibility. Maintaining pandemic governing mentalities through policing more starkly situates public libraries within the productive role (per Foucault) of public institutions in utilizing service engagement to institute correct community behavior. This productive role is complex and the site of reflection for librarians. For instance, the following manager explained:

...so we're preaching to the converted. We've got people in there who are reading to their children, who are attending our programs. I know who we're not getting because I know the community. I live here. I grew up here. I know the community and I know that we're not getting this big group. And I want to do a lot more outreach. I know that other libraries are doing mobile libraries and outreach and I feel that is the way forward. (Regional CSC)

The reflection prompted by the repair and maintenance work on/in public libraries during the pandemic has motivated questions on the broader role and essential work of public libraries. This project is situated within funding exigencies that sought solutions and recommendations for post-pandemic institutional and professional practices. The data presented here illustrates the complexities of working with and around the governing pandemic rationalities and how this work impacted communities.

A central conceit of the maintenance and repair literature in infrastructure studies is to approach infrastructure as variable and multifaceted, owing to the ongoing labor needed to sustain it. We have suggested this approach is helpful for situating the labor examined here as part of a wider infrastructure of work in the LIS professions where asking questions, identifying grey spaces, and lingering on gaps and discomfort need not require solutions to be productive.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided examples of how our project captured data that can be analyzed as beneficial for the library sector both within and beyond a solutions-based focus. Public libraries' essential and social value is demonstrated by the outreach to vulnerable communities and communities experiencing disadvantage discussed here. We have suggested the data presented in this paper exemplifies repair and maintenance work in and on the public good of the library to fill the gaps of other governmental and institutional services. Given this work plugging service gaps, there is scope to consider more carefully how communities experiencing disadvantage are constructed and evaluated by libraries. We have discussed how the engagement with police and taking on a biopolitical and governmental policing role in libraries does not provide straight-forward solutions for public libraries' involvement with diverse communities. Library workers expressed ambivalence, and in some cases distress, in taking on the overt calculation and economizing of resources in relation to directives that fall outside the usual remit of library services. Participants discovered this policing role could be discretionary and "grey" leaving them unsure and concerned about how to fill the gaps in the pandemic governance communicated by authorities and the monitoring of customers on the ground. This data highlights the complexity of public libraries and how their social value is calculated by external agencies and the impact this external calculation has on library

work and library workers' perceptions of their public good and community service remit. While libraries are starting to address these issues in future plans for evaluations of pandemic responses, these complexities are ongoing and will need space for research and questions on the labor of care enacted in the repair and maintenance of the institutional assemblages that constitute public libraries and their communities.

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