



# The Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Public Libraries Across Victoria

State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria  
May 2023



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# Executive Summary

This research paper highlights and quantifies the value that Victorian public libraries contribute to community health and wellbeing. Following an online community survey, choice modelling and cost benefit analysis, the research finds that engaging with public libraries improves an individual's Subjective Health and Wellbeing by 8 per cent.

## Background and purpose

Public libraries deliver numerous benefits to users and the wider community. Inherently, Victoria's public libraries know that they have a positive impact on individual and community health and wellbeing, whether through traditional core services such as access to physical collections, meeting spaces, and technology and internet, or more recent offerings targeted at holistic social, physical and mental health and wellbeing.

To date there has been a lack of data and evidence to demonstrate the value of the health and wellbeing benefits gained from engaging with public libraries and their services in Victoria. This research seeks to evidence and articulate the value that public libraries contribute to health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in Victoria.

Specifically, the research seeks to identify the:

- Extent to which community members link public libraries with improved health and wellbeing
- Which public library services and programs are most associated with improved health and wellbeing
- The value community members place on public library services and programs, and
- The value that individual library services generate for their respective communities, reflecting the demographic composition of their communities and the library services on offer in that location.

The approach focuses on valuing the primary benefits of public libraries, which accrue to Victorian community members, including both those who engage with libraries and those who don't.

The primary research utilises a choice modelling approach to estimate the value generated by libraries given their contributions to health and wellbeing.

This research builds upon extensive work undertaken by the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria.

Notably, this research project forms part of the state-wide Public Library Development Project (SPLDP) Libraries for Health and Wellbeing, which has been developed in recognition of the role that public libraries play in supporting the health and wellbeing of their communities. By estimating the value of improved health and wellbeing gained from engaging with public libraries and their services, it is anticipated that improved decision making about library development, programming and resourcing will result.

## Key research findings

### **Engaging with public libraries improves an individual's Subjective Health and Wellbeing by 8 per cent.**

Victorians who engage with public libraries enjoy a better Subjective Health and Wellbeing<sup>1</sup> score than those who don't. That is, engaging with a public library is associated with a statistically significant and material improvement in Subjective Health & Wellbeing. After controlling for other factors such as age, gender, household type, income and location, engaging with public libraries lifts the Subjective Health and Wellbeing of Victorian adults by 5.4 points (or 8 per cent).

<sup>1</sup>Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to an individual's personal evaluation of their own life satisfaction and happiness. It is a subjective measure of well-being because it is based on the individual's own perceptions and evaluations of their life, rather than an objective measure based on external factors.

**Victorian adults believe<sup>2</sup> that public libraries help with health and wellbeing** in the following ways:

- Are important for their literacy, creativity and knowledge (63 per cent)
- Are a place where they feel safe or belong (56 per cent)
- Help them feel connected to their community (49 per cent)
- Help with their mental wellbeing (44 per cent), and
- Helps them access government and business goods and services (43 per cent).

**Almost half (48 per cent) of Victorian adults engaged with public libraries in the past 12 months** either by visiting libraries or using their online resources. On top of this, 40 per cent of Victorian households with children, had a child who engaged with public libraries in the past 12 months.

Other than borrowing books, the most common reasons for visiting public libraries are:

**56%** To be in a safe and comfortable place

**52%** To do research, study or learn

**44%** To access WI-FI/Internet and computers

**Public library service awareness is an important influence on service usage**

The most used public library services are also the most well-known among Victorians, namely:

- Staff assistance
- Physical and digital collections, and
- Technology and internet access.

These services were also highly correlated with components of health and wellbeing such as feelings of safety and belonging, assisting with literacy, creativity and knowledge.

**The average value that community members place on public libraries across Victoria is \$73.10 per adult each year.**

Community value is the amount community members are willing to contribute for a particular product or service. For public libraries, community value (CV), increases as the frequency of public library use increases.

In terms of the composition of this community value, public library services can be split into three tiers:

- Physical collections CV = \$24.00 per annum
- Digital collections, staff assistance, technology and internet access CV = \$7.00-\$9.00 per annum each
- Meeting spaces, social programs, mental health programs and physical health programs CV = \$3.00-\$5.00 per annum each.



<sup>2</sup>Strongly or moderately agree with the statement.

### The annual benefits of Victorian public libraries are twice the annual costs

Across all Victorian public libraries the annual benefits generated are twice the annual provisioning costs. The annual benefits of public library services are \$475.3 million whereas the costs are \$240.6 million per annum; meaning that a net annual benefit of \$234.7 million in health and wellbeing benefits are generated each year.

TABLE 1: COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS RESULTS (\$M)

	Value (\$M)
Benefits	475.3
Costs	240.6
<b>Net benefits</b> (or benefits less costs)	<b>234.7</b>
<b>Benefit Cost Ratio</b> (BCR)	<b>1.98</b>



Applying the analysis across individual library networks, all locations generate net benefits for their communities and record Benefit Cost Ratios (BCR) greater than 1; meaning they are well worth funding from a broad community perspective.<sup>3</sup>

Variations in BCR reflect differing cost structures, as well as differences in community value values and the size of the population serviced. Future investment in library services is expected to generate positive returns for Victoria, with an additional \$1.98 in benefits expected to accrue for each dollar of investment.

<sup>3</sup>Previous studies have estimated higher benefit cost ratios for Victorian public libraries, e.g. Dollars Sense & Public Libraries (SGS Economics & Planning, 2011) estimated a BCR of 3.56 while Libraries Work! (SGS Economics & Planning, 2018) estimated a BCR of 4.30. The results of this study cannot be compared directly with these earlier studies, as a different and more robust estimation methodology (choice modelling) has been employed. Moreover, there is no evidence that the net benefits of libraries have reduced.



# 01 Introduction, methodology and research design

# 01 Introduction, methodology and research design

## 1.1 Purpose

Victoria's public libraries inherently know they have a positive impact on individual and community health and wellbeing. However, to date there has been a lack of data and evidence to demonstrate the value of the health and wellbeing benefits gained from engaging with Victorian public libraries and their services.

This research seeks to evidence and articulate the value that libraries contribute to the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities across Victoria.

Specifically, the research seeks to identify:

- The extent to which community members link libraries with improved health and wellbeing
- Which library services and programs are associated with improved health and wellbeing
- The value community members place on public library services and programs, and
- The value that individual library services generate for their respective communities, reflecting the demographic composition of their communities and the library services on offer in that location.

The approach focuses on valuing the primary benefits of public libraries, which accrue to Victorian community members, including both those who engage with libraries and those that don't.

## 1.2 Method

The research tasks and method adopted are outlined in the table below, some of which are described in further detail overleaf.

TABLE 2: METHOD STAGES

Stage	Method
Services offered by public libraries	Library audit review
Benefits generated by public libraries	Literature review of published studies
Suitability of techniques for valuing benefits	Literature review and assessment
Establishing links between libraries and health & wellbeing.	Primary research (online questionnaire)
Community value for services	Primary research (choice modelling)
Evaluation of costs and benefits by public library research	Cost benefit analysis



## Categorising services offered by libraries

Libraries provide many services which impact health and wellbeing directly and indirectly. For the purposes of this research, services and programs have been categorised into traditional ‘core’ services which libraries universally provide and ‘non-core’ services which some libraries provide, see Table 3.

TABLE 3: CORE AND NON-CORE SERVICES

Core Services	
Physical collections	Books, magazines, newspapers, DVDs and other publications.
Digital collections	Websites, apps or online resources such as e-books, audiobooks, academic journals.
Library programs	Literacy or skills programs, children’s story time, digital training, home library services.
Technologies & internet	Access to computers, photocopiers/printing, makerspace equipment, and Wi-Fi services.
Staff assistance	Help finding information, accessing available services and activities.
Meeting or study spaces	Reading lounges and rooms, meeting rooms and activity spaces, casual spaces, bookable spaces.
Complimentary Services	
Physical health programs/ resources	Active Arvos kid’s playtime, plus Yoga, Tai Chi, Pilates and other health classes, and dedicated resource collections.
Mental health programs/ resources	Programs around managing stress and anxiety, dealing with conflict, etc., and dedicated resource collections.
Social programs	Meeting groups like Arvoes conversation circles, craft groups, book clubs, chess/bridge/puzzles groups.



## Primary research to identify the value the community places on health and wellbeing benefits

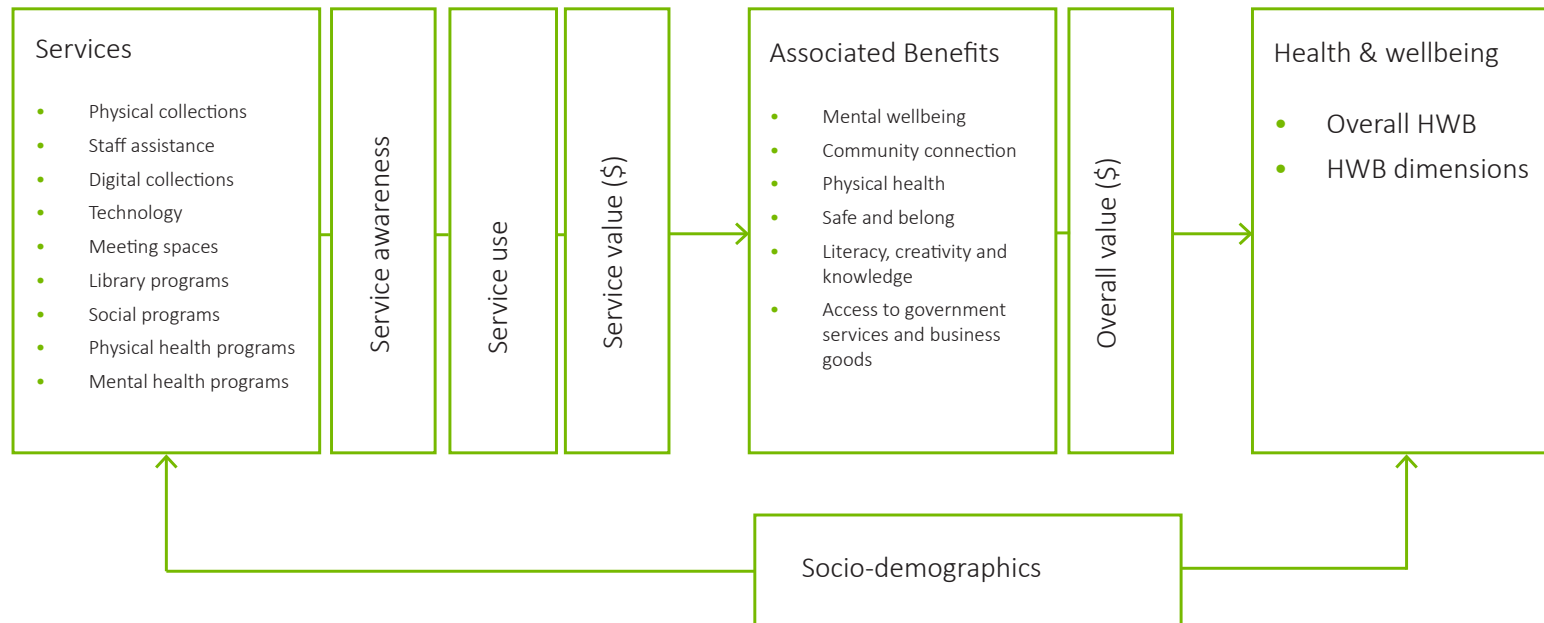
The research results are based on a survey of 1,422 Victorian adults being:

- A random sample of 1,002 adults (some of whom use libraries and others that don't)
- Library member sample of 420 members
- The samples were combined and weighted to represent the Victorian adult population in terms of library visitation, age, gender, and regional location.

The main survey measures were:

- Overall public library visitation and use and associated benefits
- Use of various public library services
- Public library value – established through choice modelling
- Subjective health and wellbeing
- Socio-demographic measures.

FIGURE 1: PRIMARY RESEARCH DESIGN FRAMEWORK



### Choice modeling applied: calculating community value

A choice model was used to estimate the community value for public libraries and their main services. The choice model asked survey respondents to repeatedly choose their preferred public library from a set of three hypothetical libraries, each comprising a set of available services and a funding level that would be required from each adult in Victoria. See an example of the choice model task below.

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLE OF CHOICE MODELLING TASK

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Physical collections	X	✓	X
Digital collections	✓	✓	✓
Technology & internet	X	✓	✓
Meeting spaces	X	X	X
Social programs	✓	X	X
Library programs	X	✓	X
Funding on behalf of each adult in Victoria	\$15 per year	\$20 per year	\$5 per year
<b>Your choice (select one option)</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Community value for each survey respondent reflects the amount of funding necessary for each of the library services the respondent desired, as represented in the task.



## 02 Health and wellbeing benefits of public libraries

# 02 Health and wellbeing benefits of public libraries

Libraries generate benefits for community members in a variety of ways. This section identifies the benefits that are generated and summarises how public libraries influence the health and wellbeing of Victorian community members.

## 2.1 Scoping the benefits – past literature

Public libraries deliver numerous benefits to the community. Table 4 outlines the different types of benefits associated with library services, as summarised in SGS Economics and Planning (2011). Although subsequent studies have nuanced the descriptions, the types of benefits identified have remained constant, thus the following provides a sound framework for describing benefit categories.

TABLE 4: IDENTIFIED BENEFITS OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

<b>Type of Benefit</b>	<b>Use</b>	<b>Direct</b>	The direct benefits to library service customers, including access to a wide range of services free of charge and the social interaction that these services enable.
		<b>Indirect</b>	The flow-on benefits of library services, including the contributions towards improved language and computer literacy, community education and health, and career development. Also included is improved local area amenity, as well as the environmental savings generated through the recurring use by community members.
	<b>Non-use</b>	<b>Option</b>	Preservation of option for future use by individuals
		<b>Existence</b>	Perceived value and significance for fellow community members
		<b>Legacy</b>	Preservation of use for future generations

Source: SGS Economic and Planning 2011, Dollars, Sense and Public Libraries, report for the State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria Network.



## Use benefits

The key benefit provided by public libraries is the services they offer.

## Access to materials and collections

The 2022 Victorian Public Library Survey shows that activities relating to borrowing or downloading books, magazines, DVDs, and newspapers account for the bulk of respondents' reported use of library services. Libraries provide free access to collections and technologies which the community would otherwise be unable to acquire or would have to seek at retail prices. This delivers cost saving benefits to users, and ensures knowledge and information is shared with those in the community who could otherwise not afford to purchase the materials or technology.

## Education

Libraries deliver educational benefits by providing access to a variety of materials and resources which allow users to discover new topics and acquire knowledge and information. Students use library resources to further their formal education, and as a quiet place where they can study and access the internet through public computers and freely available Wi-Fi.

In addition to the knowledge that can be acquired through their physical and digital collections, libraries offer programs aimed at helping users develop skills or adapt to new technologies. This can have numerous flow-on benefits for users, including helping them to overcome a fear of technology or improving their employment prospects. Libraries also encourage early learning and children's literacy through programs targeted at parents with young children.

71 per cent of respondents to a survey on the health and wellbeing benefits of libraries<sup>4</sup> said libraries directly focus on education through the provision of information, programs or services.

## Access to information

Libraries provide access to vital information, including for vulnerable members of the community who might struggle to engage with other sources of information. Libraries provide multilingual resources to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and play a significant role in areas where literacy rates are low. Libraries also serve as a place for information for people with mental illnesses or carers who are seeking to address specific health or welfare issues.

## Social engagement

Public libraries act as community hubs where people can meet and exchange ideas or information. The 2022 Victorian Public Library Survey shows that libraries are used as a place to catch up with others, hold meetings, or engage in social or entertainment programs. Libraries have been found to be highly interactive, with many users seeking assistance from library staff<sup>5</sup> and users also engaging with other library patrons.<sup>6</sup>

89 per cent of respondents to a survey on the health and wellbeing benefits of libraries<sup>7</sup> said that libraries make a positive contribution to social and cultural connectedness.

<sup>4</sup>Spark Strategy, 2021, Libraries for Health and Wellbeing Strategic Framework, report on behalf of State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria.

<sup>5</sup>2022 Victorian Public Library Survey

<sup>6</sup>State Library of Victoria, 2005, Libraries Building Communities Report Two: Logging the Benefits.

<sup>7</sup>Spark Strategy, 2021, Libraries for Health and Wellbeing Strategic Framework, report on behalf of State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria.

## Physical collections and a sense of belonging – Monash Libraries

The Glen Waverly Library (Monash Library Service) carries a collection of Chinese language books. This collection has helped an elderly patron feel connected to her culture after migrating to Australia.

Mrs Tiah, Soo Hoon has been borrowing Chinese language books for years and has seen the collection grow, something that has given her great joy.

She describes:

*“The librarians have always been very helpful in looking out for novels that I might enjoy. As I age and am unable to hold big heavy books, the librarians have introduced me to Chinese magazines. These magazines have given me another avenue to continue to read unhindered. The short stories about family lives gives me insights about how others live today and their experiences. I now borrow my Chinese novels from other Monash Council libraries as well.”*

*“Being able to borrow Chinese novels has not only given me hours of reading pleasure but also helped me continue to remember Chinese characters; keeping me mentally active. Reading helps me pass the time and keeps me occupied, especially now as I become less mobile. At times, reading is a way for me to escape for a few hours and immerse myself in a good book.”*

### Non-use benefits

Although non-users will not experience the same benefits enjoyed by library users, non-users typically place some value on public library services, including the following.

### Option value

Although an individual may not use or ever visit a library, the knowledge that it will be accessible in the future creates value as it represents an option for the individual to consider, and take up if they wish. In this case, there is an understanding that if the library services were discontinued, the individual would feel a quantifiable loss of this option.

### Existence value

Existence value reflects individual perceptions of how public libraries contribute to the basic and essential elements of a local community. It stems from the fact that some non-users are willing to pay for public libraries so others can benefit from their services.

### Legacy value

Individuals and communities value maintaining public libraries so future generations can benefit from their existence. This cultural and historical legacy stems from a feeling of obligation and responsibility towards future generations, particularly around places that have perceived community value and/ or operate to meet community needs.

The primary research analysis includes both library and non-library users, so as to capture both use and non-use benefits.



## 2.2 Linking benefits with services and programs – community survey

### Benefits of library engagement

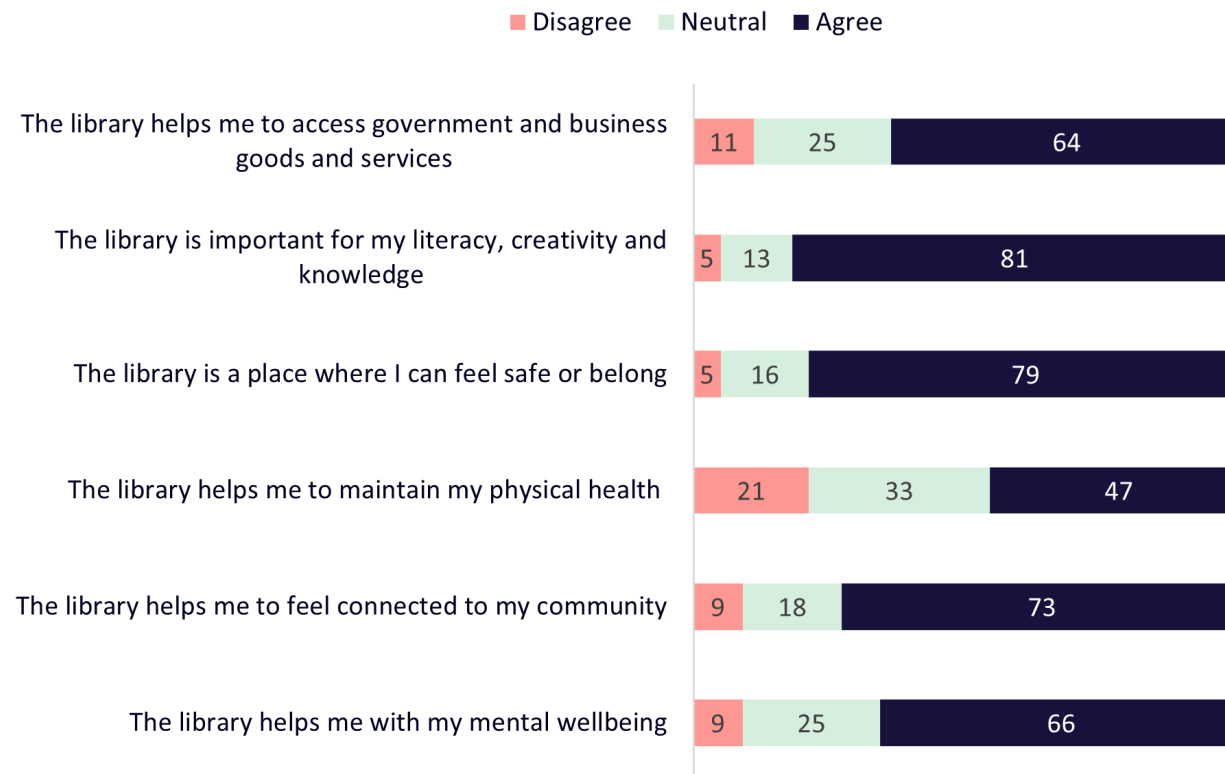
An online survey was undertaken to identify links between services and programs and specific health and wellbeing benefits (see Section 1.2) for further survey method details.

In the findings, there was consensus that public libraries contribute to health and wellbeing in a variety of ways. Figure 3 shows how the health and wellbeing of library users benefit from public library engagement. In this figure, Victorian adults have responded to six statements by positioning themselves along a continuum ranging from strongly agree (dark blue) through neutral (grey) to strongly disagree (red).

The most prevalent view of benefits was for literacy and creativity, with 65 per cent of users having a strong to moderate agreement. Safety and belonging, connectedness, mental wellbeing and access to government also lie in the range where 45-57 per cent of library users either strongly or moderately agree that libraries generate benefits.

Among the health and wellbeing metrics, physical health was the least associated with public libraries with only 29 per cent of users agreeing that there is a benefit gained from public libraries.

FIGURE 3: PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF LIBRARIES (PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS)





## 2.3 Library services and improved health and wellbeing

Figure 4 shows that more than half of Victorian adults believe that library services help with their mental wellbeing, community connection, physical health and safety and belonging.

It also shows that:

- People strongly associate library services with safety and belonging, while there is a weak association with physical health.
- Across all four categories of wellbeing, staff assistance was a key driver in contributing to the health and wellbeing of library users.

FIGURE 4: RELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARY SERVICES WITH HEALTH AND WELLBEING OUTCOMES, PERCENTAGES

	Mental wellbeing	Connection	Physical health	Safety / belonging
Physical collections	65.0	66.8	57.3	66.2
Digital collections	58.2	55.5	49.6	58.6
Library programs	63.6	69.3	54.3	68.0
Technology & internet	62.3	62.4	52.3	65.6
Staff assistance	67.7	71.6	57.5	74.6
Meeting spaces	57.9	63.6	50.0	64.6
Physical health programs	58.0	59.8	57.6	61.2
Mental health programs	64.0	60.5	54.6	62.2
Social programs	63.4	67.2	55.9	67.1

Interpretation aid: For example, 74.6 percent of Victorian adults believe Staff assistance either somewhat or very much helps with the feeling of safety/ belonging. This is the library service that most contributes to the feeling of safety and belonging, followed by Library programs (68.0 per cent). Staff assistance contributes less (57.5 percent) to Physical health accordingly to library users.

## Safety and belonging

According to the survey, safety and belonging is one of the top reasons why Victorians visited libraries. Figure 5 reveals the percentage of Victorian adults who said that their sense of Safety and belonging was somewhat or very much helped by public library services, broken down by specific library service and frequency of library visitation.

For frequent users (more than 5 times in 12 months), the library services most associated with Safety and belonging were:

- Mental health programs (93.4 per cent)
- Social programs (91.2 per cent), and
- Library programs (90.9 per cent).

Consistent with the results in Figure 5, Victorian library users believed Staff assistance helped most with their Safety and belong. Interestingly, this association increases with frequency of library use.

FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARY SERVICES WITH SAFETY AND BELONGING, PERCENTAGE

		Never+Not in last 12 mths	5 times or less in 12 mths	More than 5 times in 12 mths
Physical collections	66.2	63.4	68.4	76.3
Digital collections	58.6	56.3	61.8	71.1
Library programs	68.0	65.3	80.5	90.9
Technology & internet	65.6	62.7	75.1	79.8
Staff assistance	74.6	72.0	79.3	89.5
Meeting spaces	64.6	62.9	67.8	81.8
Physical health programs	61.2	59.7	75.3	89.2
Mental health programs	62.2	60.2	86.2	93.4
Social programs	67.1	64.8	79.9	91.2

Interpretation aid: For example, 74.6 per cent of Victorian adults believe Staff assistance either somewhat or very much helps with the feeling of safety/ belonging, irrespective of frequency of library use. This reduces to 72.0 per cent for adults who had not used a public library for at least 12 months, while it increased to 89.5 per cent for adults that used libraries more than 5 times in 12 months.

## Literature and Inclusion - Yarra and Darebin Libraries

Bargoonga Nganjin, North Fitzroy Library collects a diverse range of literature to insure inclusivity in reading material. The library also hosts programs focused for members of the LGBTQI+ community such as Rainbow Playgroup to establish safe spaces where people can feel a part of a network.

Emilie (she/her) visits this library to borrow books specifically for this reason. She says:

*“Despite moving to Reservoir a few years ago, we still travel to North Fitzroy to borrow books because their children’s books are super diverse and full of LGBTQI+ representation. This is very important for my family. We’ve borrowed books on gender-diverse parents like “She’s My Dad” by Sarah Savage, and a few more that go beyond the standard ‘my two mums’ narrative, which is great because my partner is non-binary.”*

Emilie describes a high value in attending literary events that celebrate diversity of their family and the broader LGBTQI+ community.

## Craft, shared interest and connection - Merri-bek Library

The Art Connection is an arts-based social group in Merri-bek Libraries for people with disability. The goal of this library program is to increase connection and well-being, reduce social isolation and improve the confidence of participants.

The program was co-designed by community members interested in being part of the program and did not require them to have any art experience to participate. Of the participants in the trial program (July to December 2022), the following percentages either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- 60% felt less isolated
- 70% increased their social connection and social networks
- 80% felt an increased sense of belonging in their community
- 80% felt more confident to try new things, and
- 90% had more opportunities to make art.

## Engagement with participants revealed:

*“When you come here ‘it’s not just about doing art and learning something, it’s about being with other people and socialising.”*

*“It was difficult during Covid doing art on my own. I prefer to be in a group. I just thrive in a group.”*

*“It’s got me doing new things in my life.”*

*“I think that it’s good for me to try new things. I’d have never tried anything like this before.”*

*“I was ringing up my LAC [Local Area Coordinator] and saying ‘Thank you for sending me the link!’ It’s not just about making things. It’s about meeting new people, making friends and being creative together.”*

## Community connection

Figure 6 looks at the relationship between the library services that are offered and an individual's sense of community connection for Victorian adults. This association is broken down by the frequency of visitation.

The services most associated with Community connection outcomes were:

- Staff assistance (71.6 per cent)
- Library programs (69.3 per cent), and
- Social programs (67.2 per cent)

Again, the association between health and wellbeing outcomes and library services increased with the frequency of library usage.

FIGURE 6: RELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARY SERVICES WITH COMMUNITY CONNECTION, PERCENTAGE

		Never+Not in last 12 mths	5 times or less in 12 mths	More than 5 times in 12 mths
Physical collections	66.8	64.1	71.0	74.7
Digital collections	55.5	53.0	65.4	62.9
Library programs	69.3	66.2	85.5	91.1
Technology & internet	62.4	60.4	67.9	74.4
Staff assistance	71.6	67.8	79.3	89.2
Meeting spaces	63.6	61.2	71.6	83.0
Physical health programs	59.8	58.2	75.3	83.9
Mental health programs	60.5	58.5	84.6	87.7
Social programs	67.2	64.5	84.6	91.2

Interpretation aid: For example, 71.6 per cent of Victorian adults believe Staff assistance either somewhat or very much helps with Community connection, irrespective of frequency of library use. This reduces to 67.8 per cent for adults who had not used a public library for at least 12 months, while it increased to 89.2 per cent for adults that used libraries more than 5 times in 12 months.

## Mental wellbeing

There was a strong and broad association of library services with mental wellbeing outcomes. Figure 7 details the percentage of Victorians who view the library services as helpful, broken down by specific library service and library usage frequency.

For frequent users it was found that Physical health programs, Social programs and Library programs were the most helpful in aiding mental wellbeing. When considering the average across frequent and infrequent users of libraries, Staff assistance had the largest impact on Mental wellbeing.

FIGURE 7: RELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARY SERVICES WITH MENTAL WELLBEING, PERCENTAGE

		Never+Not in last 12 mths	5 times or less in 12 mths	More than 5 times in 12 mths
Physical collections	65.0	59.5	70.3	83.8
Digital collections	58.2	53.4	70.9	79.1
Library programs	63.6	59.9	83.0	90.6
Technology & internet	62.3	58.7	75.2	79.8
Staff assistance	67.7	64.7	74.2	81.2
Meeting spaces	57.9	54.5	67.8	86.8
Physical health programs	58.0	55.5	83.0	95.0
Mental health programs	64.0	62.6	78.9	88.7
Social programs	63.4	60.6	80.8	91.5

Interpretation aid: For example, 67.7 per cent of Victorian adults believe Staff assistance either somewhat or very much helps with Mental wellbeing, irrespective of frequency of library use. This reduces to 64.7 per cent for adults who had not used a public library for at least 12 months, while it increased to 81.2 per cent for adults that used libraries more than 5 times in 12 months.

## Libraries and Mental Health – Melbourne City Library

City of Melbourne is running an Australian-first program which provides support services to at-risk people.

The program works with people who are experiencing multiple and complex challenges including but are not limited to homelessness. The program works with a network of agencies to connect library patrons to resources and care that they need.

*‘A library social worker has the opportunity to provide a holistic, well-rounded response which isn’t in a clinical setting that can often be a barrier to entry for people to approach and ask for help.’*

Recently the program has been able to directly help someone exit out of rough-sleeping and homelessness. A community member who was homeless for three years was not eligible for income support due to visa requirements. They reached out to the library staff, who helped them access library resources, such as shower, and short-term storage, while connecting them with short-term accommodation services.

Over this six week period, the program assisted the community member to access wider resources and apply for income support to secure private rental accommodation. Without any previous rental history, it is a phenomenal success that this community member has now signed a 12-month lease and reconnected with family members; demonstrating the role of library social workers in making important service connections.

Another recent example involved an elderly man who sought advice from the social worker. He had been sleeping rough for over 20 years and the library was able to help him begin his referral process to critical housing. He is now approved on the waitlist for critical housing and has accessed the medical attention needed.

This program expands upon the role of libraries as one of the few public spaces that are free and accessible to all. For many community members who are sleeping rough and experiencing tough times, they are a safe space that can help.



## Physical health

There are moderately strong associations of library services with Physical health outcomes among Victorians. Figure 8 shows the percentage of Victorians who view library services as helpful for improving or maintaining physical health, again broken down by specific library service and frequency of library use.

On average the Physical health programs, Staff assistance and the Physical collections are seen as the most useful services. For frequent users, who may be more aware of non-core services, the Mental health programs and Physical health programs were the most useful.

FIGURE 8: RELATIONSHIP OF LIBRARY SERVICES WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH, PERCENTAGE

		Never+Not in last 12 mths	5 times or less in 12 mths	More than 5 times in 12 mths
Physical collections	57.3	54.4	62.9	63.3
Digital collections	49.6	48.6	56.4	49.8
Library programs	54.3	51.3	68.8	77.8
Technology & internet	52.3	50.6	58.8	59.9
Staff assistance	57.5	56.3	59.5	64.0
Meeting spaces	50.0	48.4	50.9	69.8
Physical health programs	57.6	55.5	75.1	92.9
Mental health programs	54.6	51.7	90.5	94.7
Social programs	55.9	52.3	78.7	86.7

Interpretation aid: For example, 67.7 per cent of Victorian adults believe Staff assistance either somewhat or very much helps with Mental wellbeing, irrespective of frequency of library use. This reduces to 64.7 per cent for adults who had not used a public library for at least 12 months, while it increased to 81.2 per cent for adults that used libraries more than 5 times in 12 months.

## Libraries and Physical Health - Whitehorse and Manningham Libraries

The Healthy Me, Healthy Planet program aimed to improve participants' health and wellbeing while also contributing to resilient and sustainable communities.

The program generated a total of 38 free public education sessions, attended by 779 participants. A total of 179 people participated in the climate ready challenge, completing 727 challenge actions.

The study was conducted with support from Deakin University.

Personal wellbeing was measured through individual's responses to satisfaction with life. Responses from after the program all show an increase in satisfaction.

Participants also shared that they received mental health benefits through the connection with like-minded people and engaging in community. A quote from a participant highlights this experience:

*"For me, from a health and wellbeing perspective, I really enjoy being involved in community events and meeting some lovely people in the events I attended. So, for me it was more about that sense of belonging, being with like-minded people. From a wellbeing perspective, it was more on that level, I suppose mental health, you could say wellbeing".*





## 2.4 Calculating the impact on subjective health and wellbeing

Library programs are diverse and connect with individuals differently depending on their specific interests and needs. Subjective health and well-being (SHWB) refers to an individual's personal evaluation of their own life satisfaction and happiness. It is a subjective measure of well-being because it is based on the individuals' own perceptions and evaluations of their life, rather than an objective measure based on external factors. The primary research conducted for this report explored the association between library engagement and SHWB. It did this through regression analysis; a statistical process whereby associations between different phenomena can be measured in isolation from confounding factors. In this case, the analysis measured the association between SHWB and engagement with a public library, controlling for factors including age, income, literacy level.

It was found that the use of public libraries is a significant influence on overall SHWB. All other factors being equal, engagement with a public library is associated with a 5.4 point increase in SHWB from 65.3 points to 70.7 points (out of 100) for Victorian adults. This equates to a substantial eight percent increase in SHWB.

Library engagement is associated with an eight percent increase in Subjective Health and Wellbeing.

Those that visit public libraries frequently did not have a notably higher SHWB than those that visit less frequently. This points to a measurable increase in SHWB from any form of engagement with libraries.

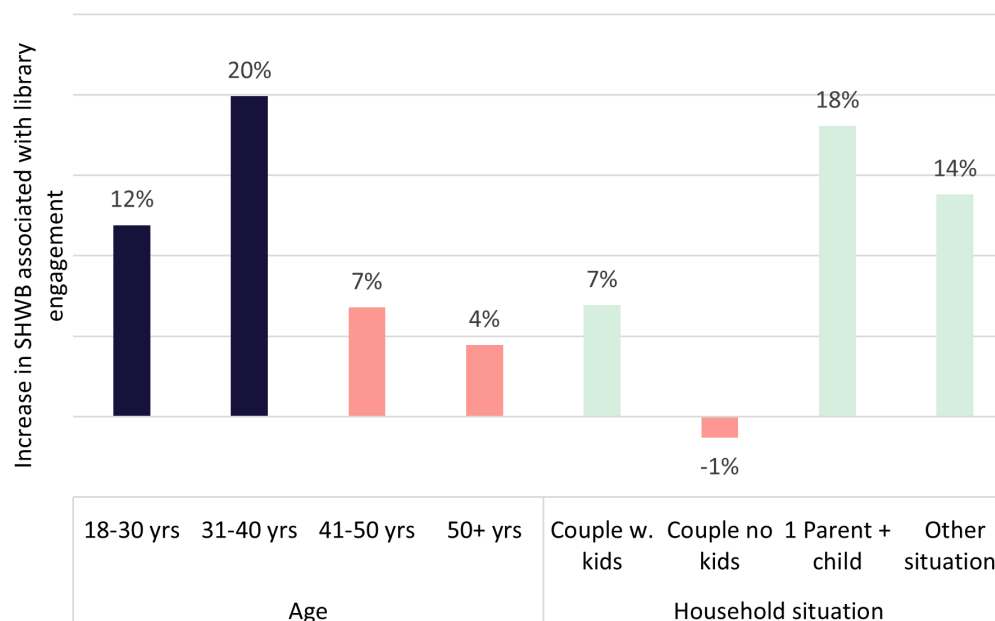
## Subjective health and wellbeing for various cohorts

The figures below outline the results of the analysis, noting that they are derived from a separate regression analysis of each library user cohort. Figure 9 breaks down the influence of engagement with public libraries on SHWB across age groups and household types.

The largest impact was among people aged 31-40 years. In this age group those who had engaged with library services over the last 12 months had a subjective health and wellbeing score 20 percent higher than those who had not engaged. As colour coded in the chart, some of the cohort increases were not statistically significant; meaning we could not conclude that the impact was true for these cohorts in the Victorian population as a whole. The result for all Victorians is statistically significant, meaning that there is a positive and significant association of health and wellbeing benefits with library engagement regardless of library user age.

In terms of households, single parent households (18 percent) had the highest subjective health and wellbeing benefits from library use. This was followed by couples with kids, who had a positive result of 7 percent.

FIGURE 9: LIBRARY USER AGE AND HOUSEHOLD TYPE: ASSOCIATION OF BENEFITS

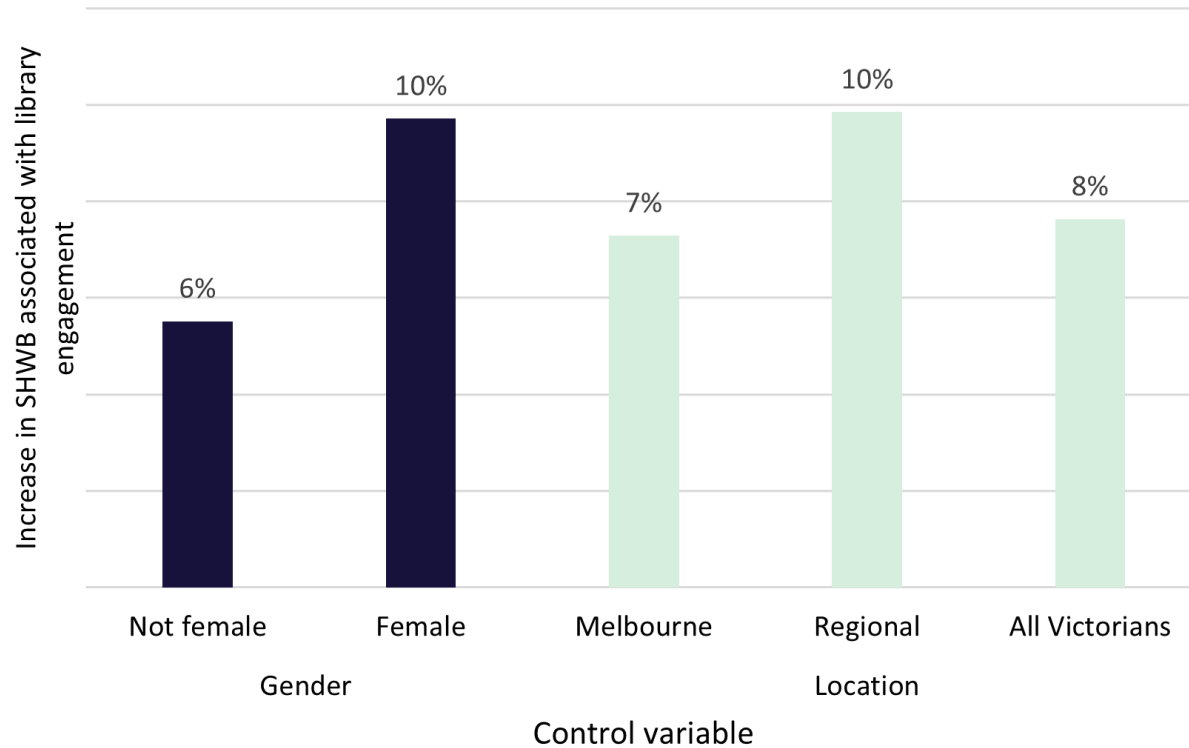


Note: Columns in red indicate that the control variables results were not statistically significant enough to draw conclusions about the whole population.

Figure 10 breaks down engagement with public libraries across gender and location.

The analysis showed that the association between health and wellbeing benefits and library use was higher for females than males (10 percent compared to 6 percent). Library users from regional areas derive larger subjective health and wellbeing benefits (10 percent) than those from Melbourne (7 percent).

**FIGURE 10: GENDER AND LOCATION: ASSOCIATION OF BENEFITS**





# 03 Engagement with public libraries

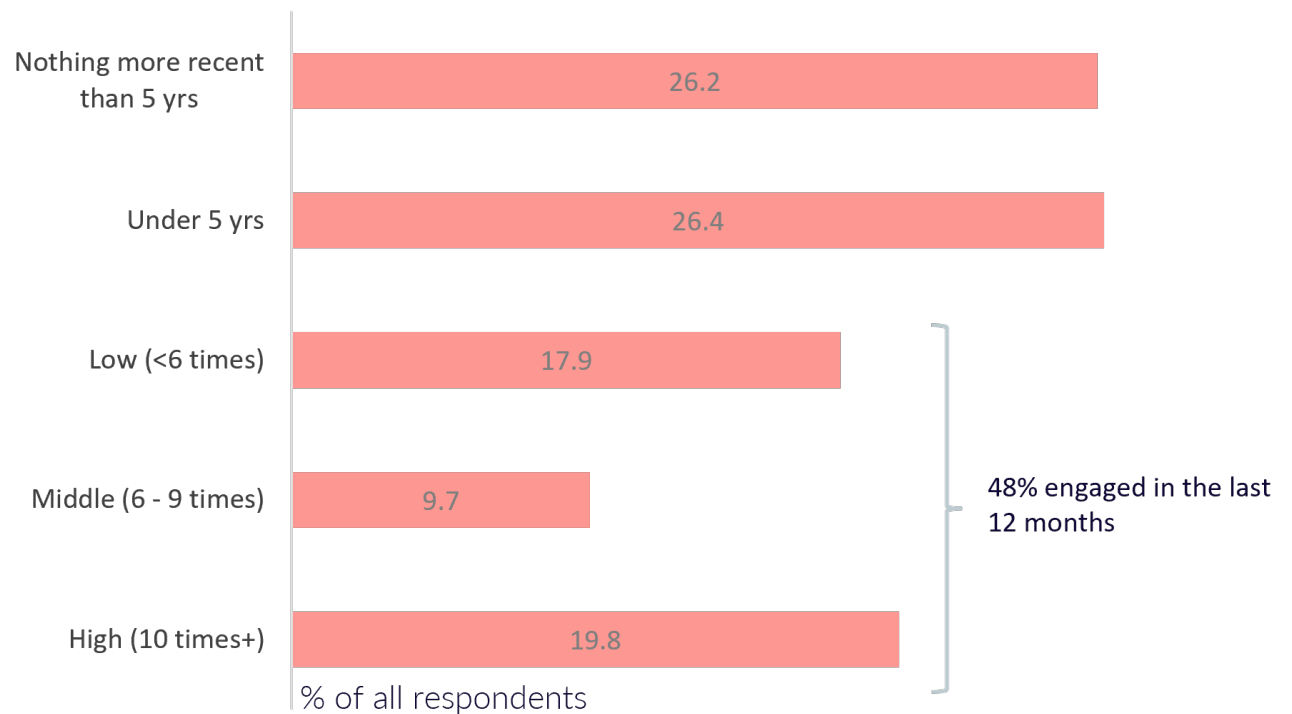
# 03 Engagement with public libraries

Libraries provide a range of accessible services. Accordingly, there is a wide variety of reasons why people engage with libraries.

## 3.1 Frequency of library engagement – community survey

The primary research found about half (48 per cent) of Victorian adults have engaged with a library in the last 12 months. About 20 percent of Victorian adults regularly engage with the library, i.e. more than 10 times a year. About a quarter of Victorian adults do not use libraries (i.e. not in the last five years). Figure 11: shows the frequency of library engagement amongst Victorian adults.

FIGURE 11: FREQUENCY OF LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT



### 3.2 Mode of library engagement – community survey

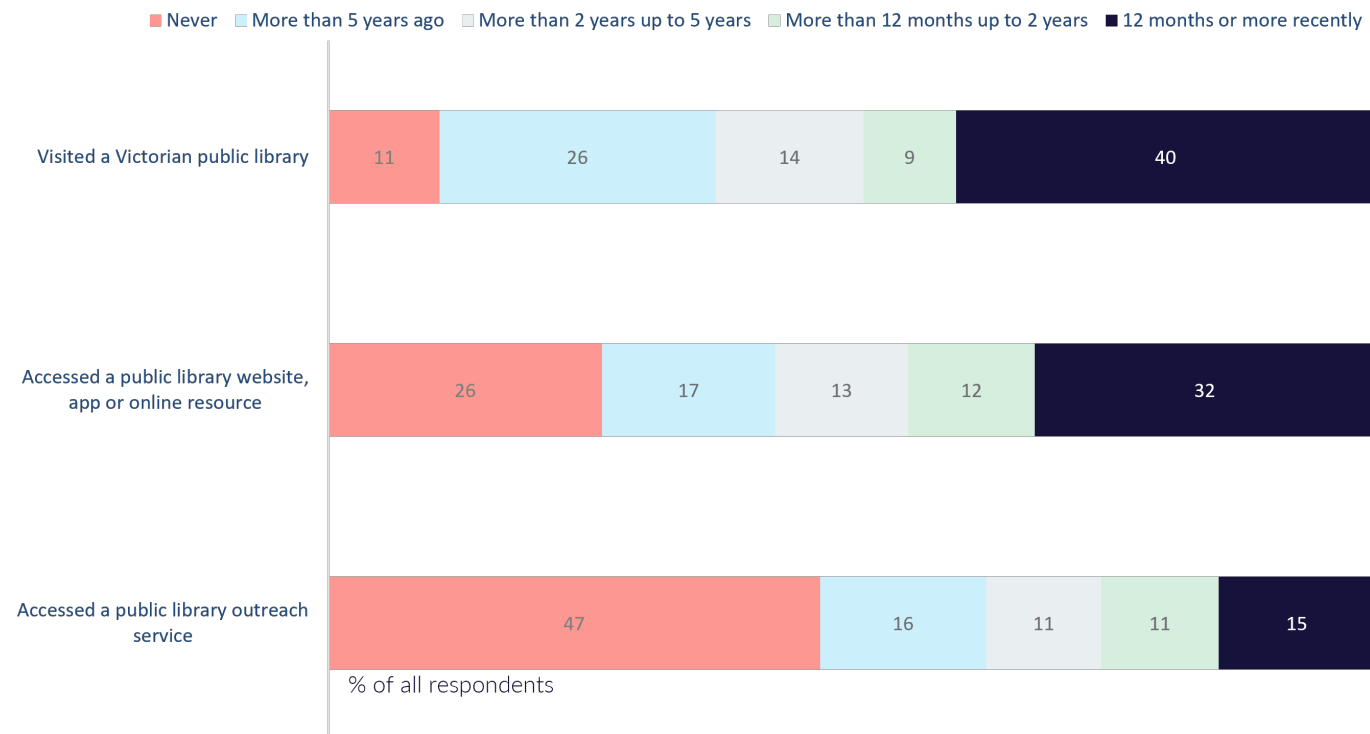
The most common way of engaging with libraries is physically visiting a library, with 40 per cent of adults having done so in the past 12 months. Accessing online resources is the second most popular way of engaging (32 per cent have done so in the past 12 months), while 15 per cent of adults had accessed a library outreach service, see Figure 12 overleaf.

Of adults with children:

- 40 per cent had visited a public library in the last 12 months
- 27 per cent accessed public library online resources
- 23 per cent used an outreach service.

It's worth noting that 67 per cent of Victorian adults do not have children living at home.

FIGURE 12: MODE OF LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT



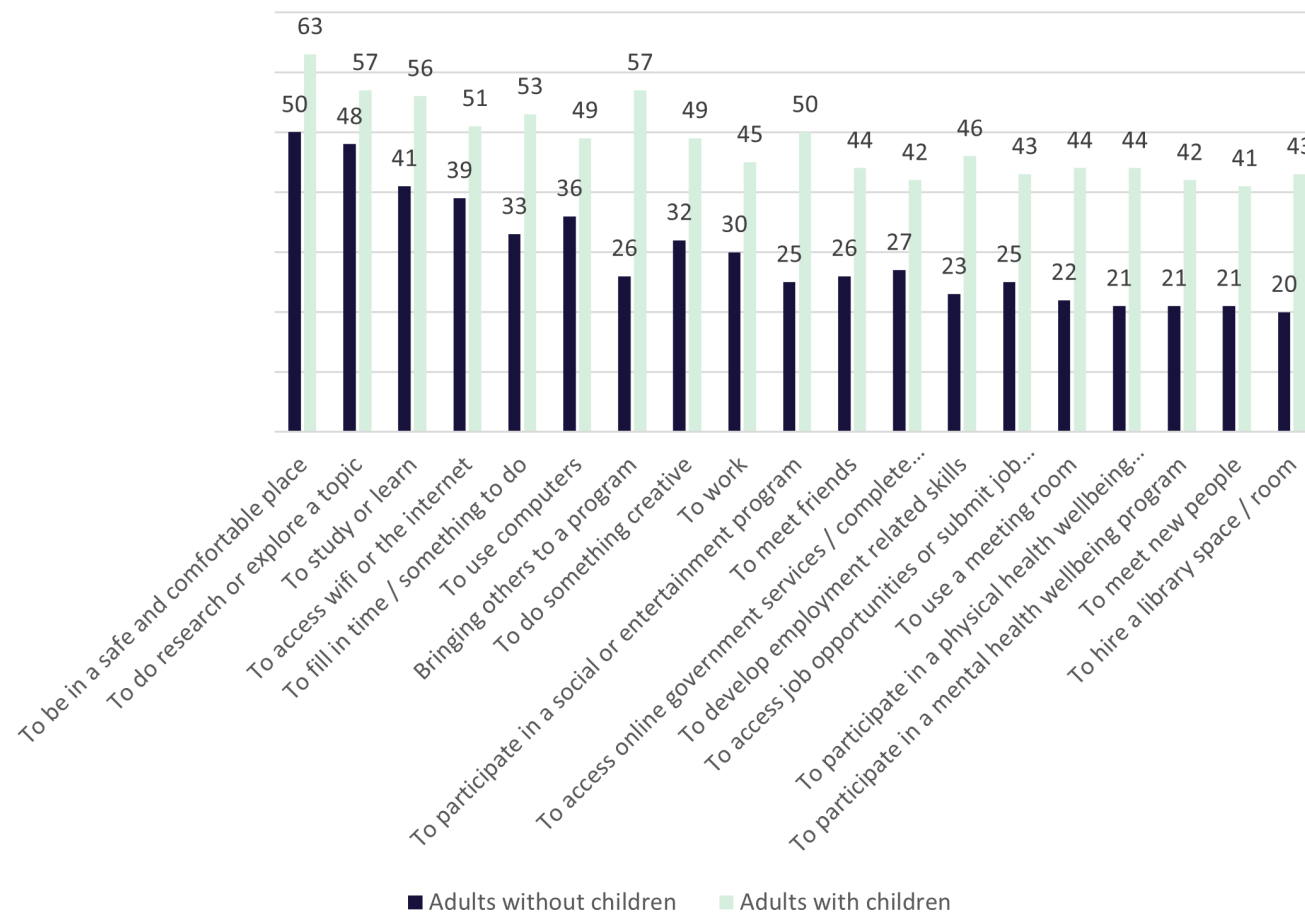
### 3.3 Reasons for visiting libraries – community survey

There are many reasons why people visit the library, ranging from using the physical resources to the social benefits of feeling in a comfortable space. Reasons for visiting the library in the past 12 months include:

- 33 per cent said they accessed physical collections- by far the most common reason
- Staff assistance (28 per cent), digital collection (23 per cent), technology / internet (21 per cent) followed among core service offerings
- Fewer said they experienced a program, varying from 15 per cent for library programs to social programs (12 per cent), physical health programs (8 per cent) and mental health programs (7 per cent).

Figure 13 outlines the percentage of Victorian adults with and without kids who visit the library and the reason why.

FIGURE 13: REASONS FOR VISITING THE LIBRARY



The most common reason for visiting libraries is to be in a safe and comfortable place. It is also evident that adults with children have a higher visitation level and may be more involved in library programs.

## Accessing library online services to find a long-lost brother – Melton City Libraries

Melton City Library facilitates the ‘Melton Family History Group’ which is an organisation that meets weekly to provide support for family history research, including access to a range of genealogy databases. The program also runs joint workshops and author talk programs throughout the year focusing on improving digital access.

In 2019, this program was successful in helping an individual reconnect with their long-lost brother. Bev Price, a local in her 70s, learnt as a younger teenager that she had a brother. However, it wasn’t until she was retelling this story to her children later in life that they encouraged her to reach out to him.

Bev spent months searching individually and came to a dead end. Finally, Bev came to meet Debby at the Melton Family History Group and they were able to find her brother and contact him thanks to the resources the library service offers. Bev said it was a “wonderful, really happy ending” and that she is “so thankful to Debby and the library for all the hard work”.

Bev now meets regularly with her brother.



### 3.4 Library services accessed – community survey

Libraries provide many services which impact health and wellbeing directly and indirectly. Figure 14 breaks down these services with respect to frequency of usage by the Victorian adult population. Physical collections and staff assistance were the two most widely used services. The non-core programs have the lowest use; however this may be more reflective of an individual’s awareness of the programs on offer.

FIGURE 14: LIBRARY SERVICES USED BY VICTORIANS (PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION)

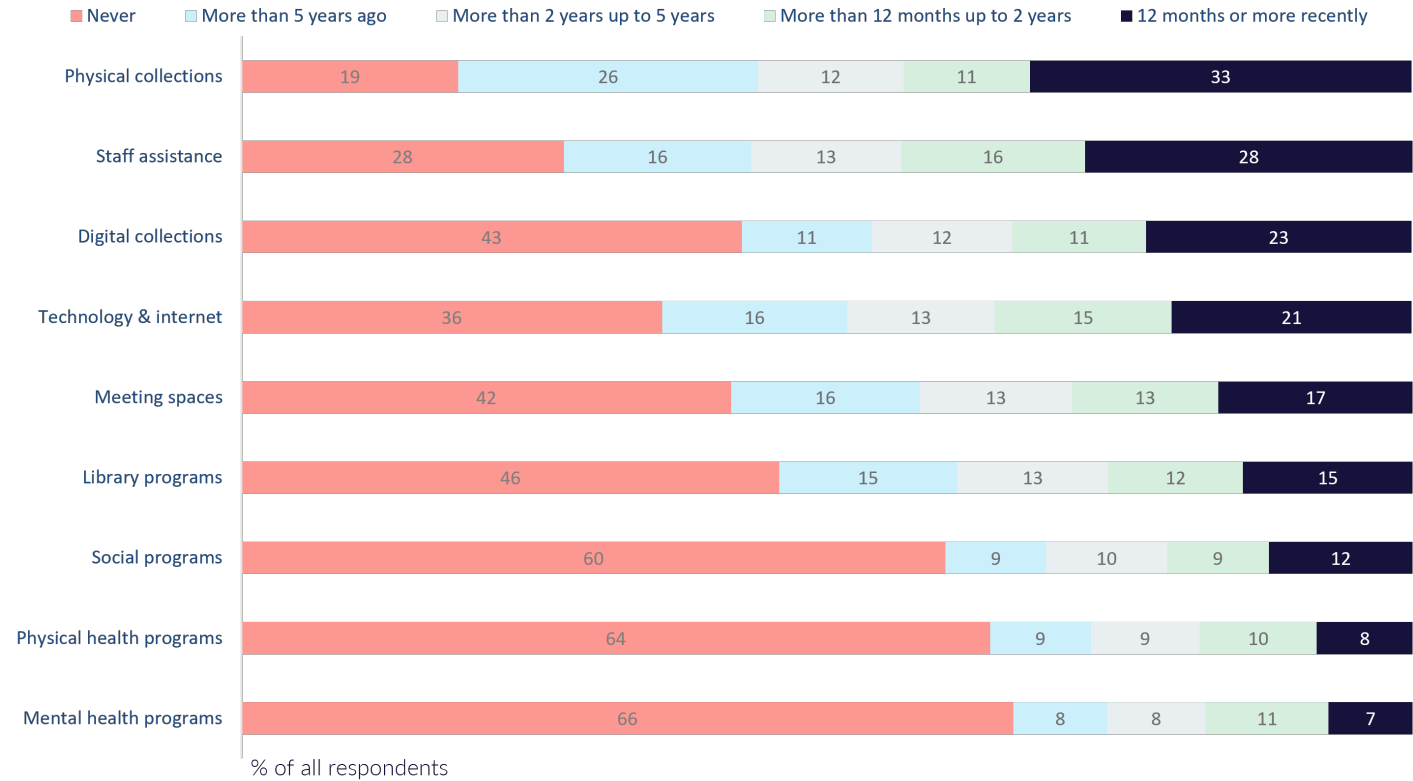
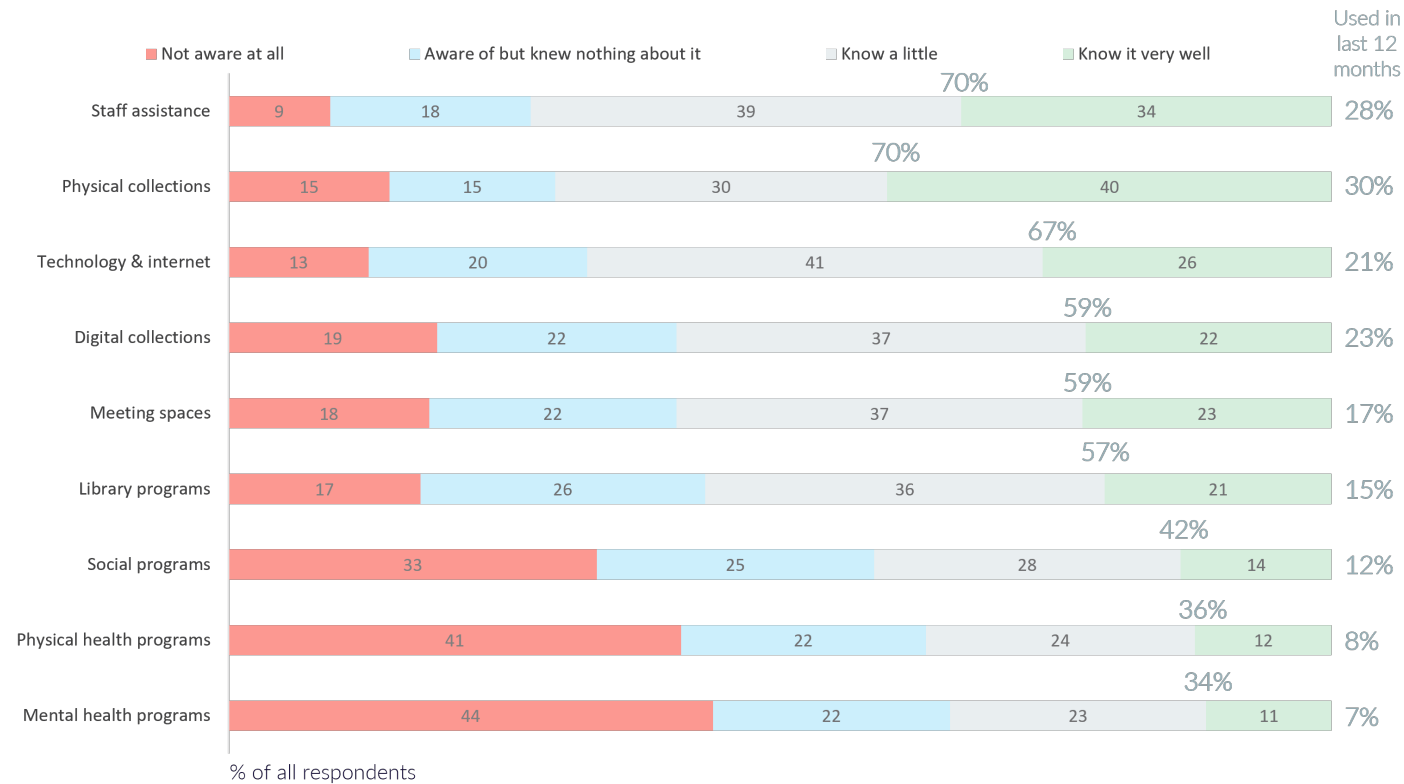




Figure 15 considers awareness of the services on offer. It shows that awareness of library services is correlated with service usage (Figure 14), with core services like the physical collection and staff assistance the most well-known. As expected, the social, mental, and physical health programs had relatively low awareness levels, which is expected to impact engagement.

**FIGURE 15: AWARENESS OF LIBRARY SERVICES BY VICTORIANS (PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION)**





# 04 The community value of public libraries

# 04 The community value of public libraries

Given that community members engage with and benefit from public libraries, they clearly value public libraries. This section measures the value that the Victorian community places on public libraries using choice modelling.

## 4.1 Estimating the value the community places on public library services

Public library services are non-market goods. This means that they are not bought and sold directly, and subsequently have no clearly visible market price, which could otherwise be held to constitute their 'value'. In the absence of such prices, there are numerous methods for valuing non-market goods and services. The most relevant of these have been outlined in the Table 5.

Several valuation techniques were considered for this project, but ultimately choice modelling was selected as the most appropriate method.

Choice modelling:

- Largely overcomes the noted shortcoming of contingent valuation, i.e. benefit overestimation by motivated library users, by forcing survey respondents to trade-off different library service outcomes and a hypothetical 'cost' attached to these 'outcomes'
- Allows quantification of the benefits of specific library services (such as core versus non-core services), which enables comparison and identification of which services provide the greatest benefits
- Enables quantification of non-use values, being the value that people assign to a good even if they don't use it, which can form a significant part of total benefits, and
- Generates community values (willingness-to-pay values) which can be treated as sound proxies for health and wellbeing benefits.

TABLE 5: NON-MARKET VALUATION METHODS APPLICABLE TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Method	Summary	Limitations
<b>Stated preference</b>		
Contingent valuation	Uses surveys to estimate the highest amount that people would be willing-to-pay for a non-market good or service. Contingent valuation surveys ask respondents directly for their maximum willingness-to-pay, either as an open-ended question or by providing set values for respondents to choose from.	Respondents might not answer 'rationally', may exercise bias or strategic behaviour (e.g. free riding) Difficult to separate types of benefits (i.e., economic vs. health benefits) from single CV figures.
Choice modelling	Uses surveys to offer respondents a choice between different situations, through which their willingness-to-pay can be derived. In selecting one choice over another, respondents indirectly reveal which characteristics or attributes they value most.	Potentially choice overload for respondents Questionnaires are complex and results require sophisticated data analysis.
<b>Revealed preference</b>		
Travel cost method	Views the cost users incur accessing a non-market service as a proxy for the value they place on it.	Does not capture non-use values and limits library engagement to library visitors.
Hedonic pricing	Involves estimating prices for characteristics that make up a non-market goods or service, and then uses this to determine how much users would be willing to pay for one additional unit of the attribute.	Relationship between available prices and libraries may be statistically insignificant.
<b>Other methods</b>		
Subjective wellbeing	Uses statistical analysis to assess the level of association between a non-market good or service and an element of social wellbeing.	Unable to link value to specific services Time series data optimal, yet difficult to obtain (e.g. need observations over several years) Casual relationships can be challenging to establish.

## 4.2 Community value estimates

Choice modelling was used to estimate the value that Victorian adults place on public libraries and the services they offer in monetary terms. This approach allowed for an estimate of the value of public libraries given the services offered and the latent benefits derived from these. Library services were considered to either be core services, where it is a service universally provided by libraries, or complementary services, where it is a service only some libraries provide.

Core services include:

- Physical collections
- Digital collections
- Program delivery
- Technologies and internet
- Staff assistance
- Physical spaces

Complementary services include:

- Physical health programs/ resources
- Mental health programs/ resources
- Social connection programs.

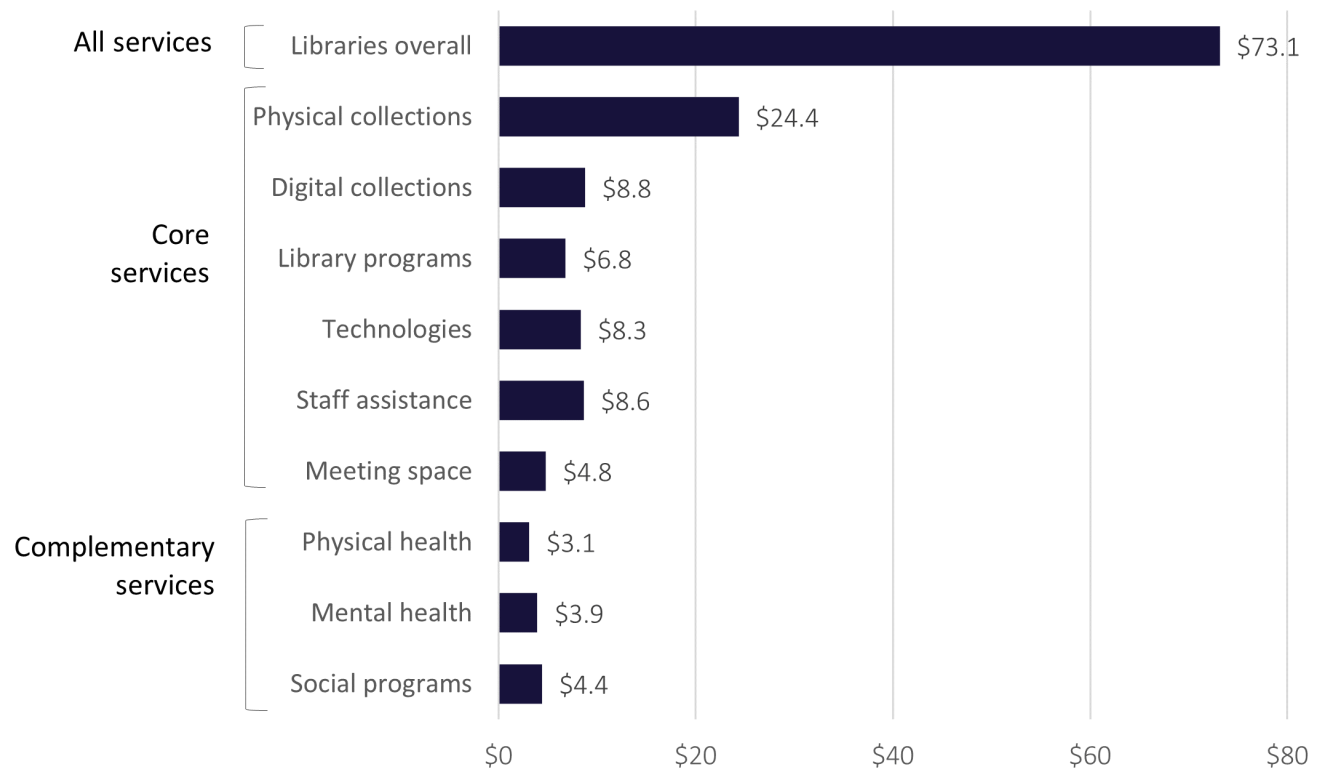
The choice model asked survey respondents to repeatedly choose their preferred public library from a set of three hypothetical libraries, each comprising a set of available services and a funding level that would be required from each adult in Victoria. Community value for each survey respondent was estimated from the funding equivalent that equated to the total perceived utility for all library services for that survey respondent.

The choice model found the average community value for public libraries was \$73.1 per year. This figure represents the average amount each respondent was willing to pay for all the services on offer from public libraries.

In terms of specific library services:

- Victorians placed most value on physical collections, at \$24.4 per year.
- Core services had a higher community value than complementary services, with aggregate core service community value at \$61.7 per year (84.3% of total community value), compared to \$11.5 for complementary services (15.7%).

FIGURE 16: VICTORIANS VALUE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES



Note: Includes the responses of both library users and non-users, and represents the average community value across Victorian adults.

Unsurprisingly, those who had accessed a public library service in the last 12 months had a higher community value than those who hadn't, at \$83.2 per year. However, the community value among non-users, at \$63.0 per year, is still considerable and demonstrates the value that libraries hold even among those who don't regularly use them. This non-use community value stems from the value that people place on having the option to visit a public library and access their services should they choose to, as well as the value of knowing this option exists for others and for future generations.

The choice model also captured variations in community value across different regions of Victoria. In general, metropolitan Melbourne residents recorded greater community value than their regional counterparts.

**FIGURE 17: USE AND NON-USE VALUE OF VICTORIAN LIBRARY SERVICES**

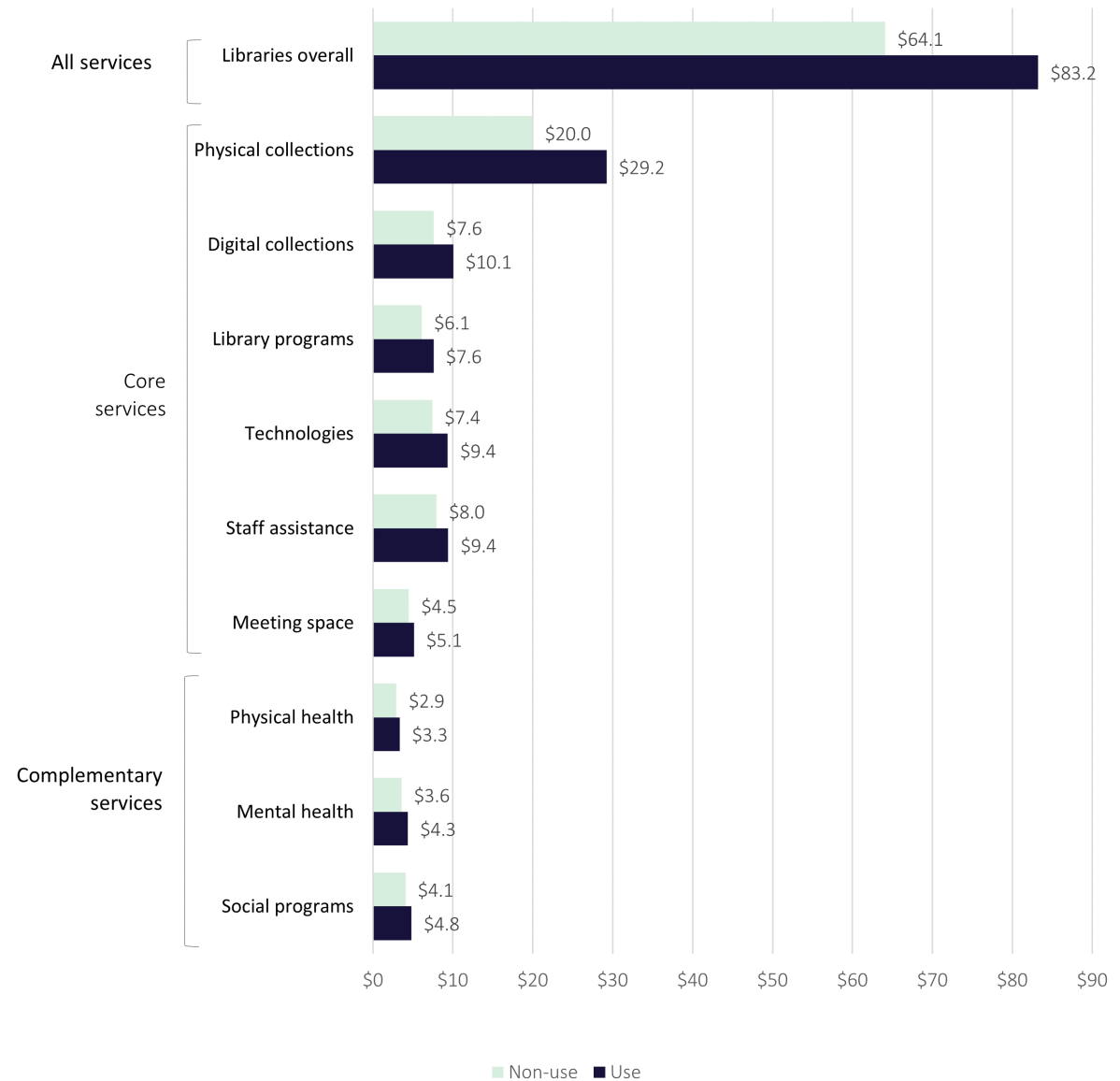


TABLE 6: NON-MARKET VALUATION METHODS APPLICABLE TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

	Gippsland	Goulburn / Owen Murray	Loddon-Mallee	Western District	Metro North	Metro South	Metro East	Metro West
Physical collections	\$21.69	\$23.26	\$25.10	\$25.33	\$27.06	\$25.96	\$25.15	\$21.06
Digital collections	\$9.15	\$6.01	\$7.82	\$9.97	\$10.04	\$7.71	\$9.19	\$7.99
Library programs	\$5.73	\$4.82	\$7.84	\$6.75	\$7.02	\$6.84	\$7.24	\$7.13
Technologies	\$7.08	\$6.20	\$8.16	\$8.85	\$9.33	\$8.57	\$8.28	\$8.50
Staff assistance	\$8.69	\$7.81	\$7.76	\$9.07	\$9.30	\$8.69	\$8.55	\$8.25
Meeting space	\$4.44	\$4.45	\$5.23	\$4.56	\$4.64	\$4.85	\$5.06	\$4.92
Physical health	\$2.85	\$2.63	\$3.27	\$3.33	\$3.06	\$3.39	\$2.99	\$3.21
Mental health	\$3.62	\$3.93	\$3.89	\$4.50	\$3.80	\$3.56	\$4.36	\$3.90
Social programs	\$4.28	\$3.87	\$4.29	\$4.39	\$4.39	\$4.67	\$4.29	\$4.63

Note: Includes the responses of both library users and non-users, and represents the average community value across Victorian adults.



### 4.3 Net benefits generated by public library services across Victoria

The annual value of Victorian public libraries was estimated by applying community value values to the population residing within the municipal area of each library service. To capture regional differences, the community value values in Table 6 were used.

Annual costs for each library service were derived from the latest PLV Annual Statistical Survey. A breakdown of annual provisioning costs at the state level can be found in Table 7.

TABLE 7: ANNUAL COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH VICTORIAN LIBRARY SERVICES (\$M)

Cost category	Annual costs (\$M)
Employee costs	167.0
Operating and corporate expenses	32.7
Physical collection costs	28.4
Digital collection costs	10.2
Other expenditure	2.3
<b>Total costs</b>	<b>240.6</b>

Source: PLV Annual Statistical Survey, 2020-21.

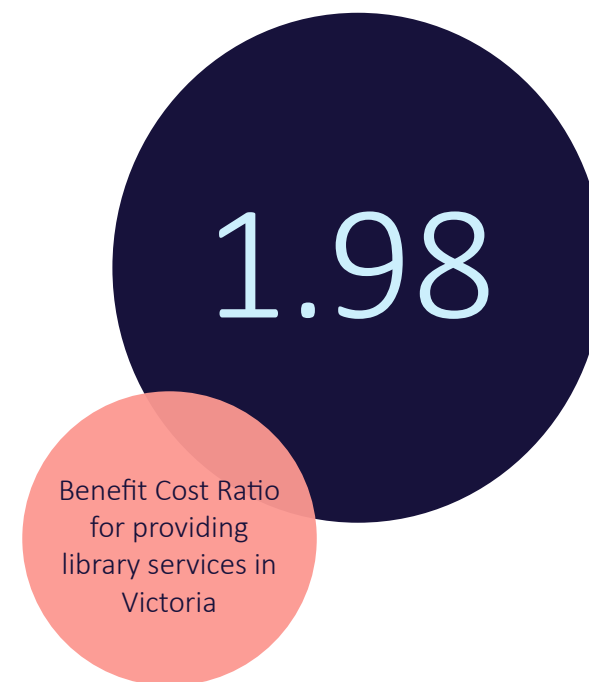


According to the analysis, across Victoria, library services are expected to generate \$475.3 million per annum in benefits. Costs relating to these services amount to \$240.6 million per annum, resulting in an annual net benefit value of \$234.7 million.

The Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) is 1.98, which indicates that investment in public libraries yields a positive return for the Victorian community. That is, for every dollar invested in public library services, \$1.98 in benefits is expected to be generated.<sup>8</sup>

TABLE 8: COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS RESULTS (\$M)

	Value (\$M)
Benefits	475.3
Costs	240.6
<b>Net benefits</b>	<b>234.7</b>
<b>Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)</b>	<b>1.98</b>

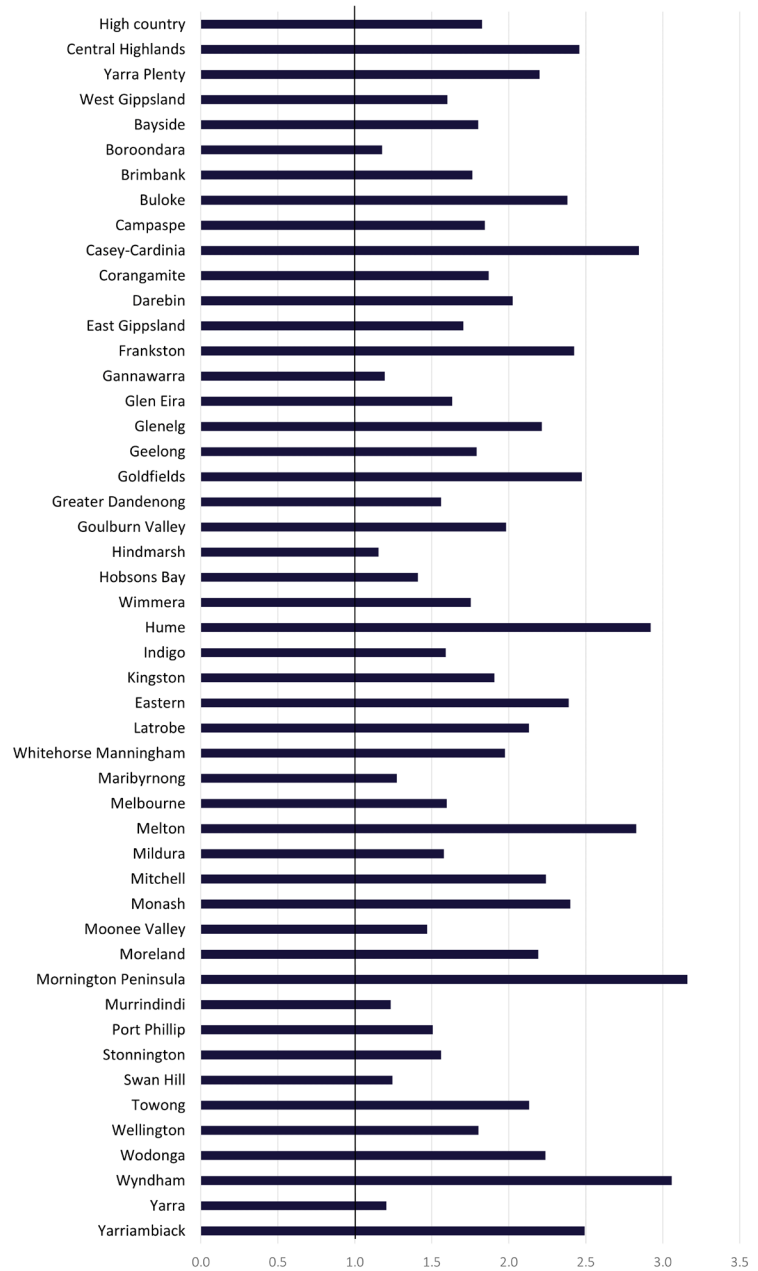


Results varied somewhat across individual library services, but all locations achieved a BCR greater than 1; meaning that all Victorian public library services are worth funding from a broad community perspective.

Variations in BCR across library services were due to differing costs, as well as differences in community values and the size of the serviced population. Figure 18, provides an overview of the BCR across public library services.

<sup>8</sup>Previous studies have estimated higher benefit cost ratios for Victorian public libraries, e.g. Dollars Sense & Public Libraries (SGS Economics & Planning, 2011) estimated a BCR of 3.56 while Libraries Work! (SGS Economics & Planning, 2018) estimated a BCR of 4.30. The results of this study cannot be compared directly with these earlier studies, as a different and more robust estimation methodology (choice modelling) has been employed. Moreover, there is no evidence that the net benefits of libraries have reduced.

FIGURE 18: ANNUAL COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH VICTORIAN LIBRARY SERVICES (\$M)





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