

I II / / / / /

Libraries Change Lives

Inside our public libraries

Findings of the Victorian
Public Library Survey
and Victorian Public
Library Census



Introduction

Inside our public libraries is a groundbreaking report based on two major research projects: a Census of 16,464 onsite library users taken on Tuesday 24 May 2022, and a longer form Survey of 18,131 library users conducted in libraries and online over two weeks in March 2022.

Together, these projects provide a highly accurate snapshot of ‘a day in the life’ of the public library system, and rich detail about the perceptions of Victorians using 281 library branches in every corner of the state.

Inside our public libraries tells the story of who uses libraries; how they use the library; and what they most value about library people, spaces and programs.

Who uses Victorian public libraries?

The research shows Victorians of all ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, and socioeconomic groups use public libraries. More than 1.15 million different people – or one in every 6 Victorians – visit public libraries in person each year (Victorian Public Library Census 2022). About 84% of visitors are library members, indicating many Victorians use the space to work, study or relax without borrowing from the collection.

Age and gender

The Census provides the most accurate snapshot of the age and gender of library visitors. It shows women and girls outnumber men and boys using library services 3:2, with age varying dramatically depending on location.

- Across the state, 60% of library visitors identify as female and 39% identify as male, with 0.6% identifying as another gender
- Almost 30% of library users are children, with 14.5% aged 0-5 years, 7.3% aged 6-11 (primary school students), and 7.6% aged 12-17 (secondary students)
- Adults of every age visit the library; 7.3% of library users are aged 18-24 years; 11% are aged 25-34 years; 17.1% are aged 35-59, 18% are aged 50-69 and 17.2% are aged 70 or over
- In growth corridors, library users are younger, with 46% aged under 25
- In regional and rural areas, community members aged 70 and over make up more than 40% of library users.

Language and cultures

People using Victorian libraries reflect the diversity of the Victorian community. The Census found:

- Library users speak 183 different languages
- Across the state, 32% of library users speak a language other than English at home (39% in metropolitan Melbourne, 13% in rural and regional Victoria)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library users made up 1.1% of library users in the library Census, which is slightly higher than the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the broader community (0.8%).

Accessing services

The Census found visiting the library was a core life activity for most patrons:

- More than a quarter of library users (26%) visit the library more than once a week
- 56% visit at least weekly
- 86% visit at least monthly
- 24,456 downloads of eResources were made on Census day, which translates to 8.9 million a year
- On Census day, 53% of visitors borrowed an item; 26% read, studied or worked; and 19% used computers, internet or Wi-Fi.

Employment and income

The Victorian Public Library Survey 2022 found library users are equally split between those in and out of the labour market.

- 20% are in full-time employment, 23% have part-time or casual jobs, while 5% are self employed
- 36% are retired
- 6% receive a disability pension
- 4% are carers or perform home duties
- 2% are jobseekers

While library users are spread across all salary brackets, about a quarter of respondents came from families earning less than \$49,000 a year.

Accessing the internet

Libraries bridge the digital divide by providing free access to computers, internet-linked devices, and free Wi-Fi. While internet access at home is increasing, libraries remain an important access point, especially for rural and regional Victorians. The Survey found:

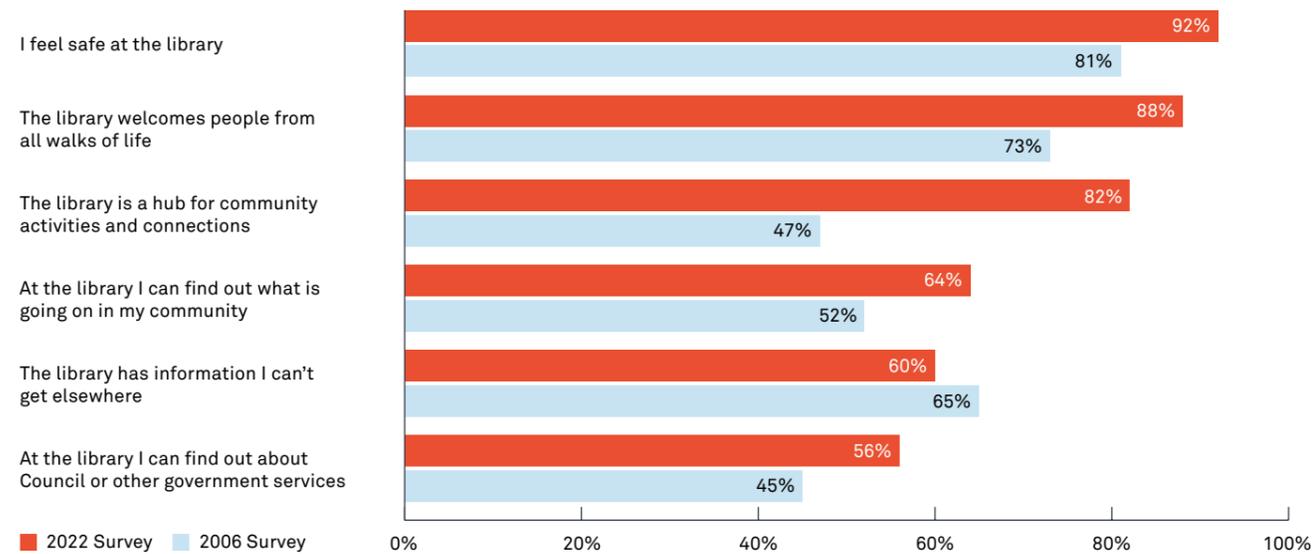
- More than 700 people said the library was the only place they could access the internet and most of these people lived in rural and regional Victoria
- The proportion of respondents with no access to the internet outside the library was 15% in Mildura and Goulburn Valley, and 11% in Wodonga and Warrnambool.

The value of public libraries

Libraries continue to be about place – 94% of library users physically attend their local branch – but people are not just visiting to access a collection; they are coming to be part of a community.

In a 2006 library poll, less than half (47%) of library users believed libraries were a hub for community activities and connections. In 2022 that figure leapt to 82%. This reflects and endorses the deliberate evolution of Victorian public libraries over the past 16 years.

More people feel that libraries are safe (92% compared to 81% in 2006), that libraries welcome people from all walks of life (88%, up from 73% in 2006), that they can find out what is happening in the community at the library (64% today, up from 52%), and that they can find out about Council or government services at the library (56% compared to 45% in 2006).



The data demonstrate the role of libraries in increasing social connection, especially for those experiencing social isolation.

72% of respondents agree they feel better when at the library and 59% feel connected to other people when they are at the library.

Overall, 82% of respondents gave their library a score above 8 out of 10 in terms of its importance to them personally.

Respondents had an average satisfaction score of 8.74/10, confirming that libraries are one of the highest rated services provided by local councils and supported by the State Government.

In open questions about the value and meaning of public libraries, users shared diverse views:

'They connect to an ever digital world, and help me to connect when I don't think I can.'

'It has things we don't have and couldn't afford. It's warm in winter and cool in summer.'

'A welcome, democratic and above all profoundly civilized personal, family and community asset.'

'Libraries celebrate books and literature without a profit motive and this is a very noble contribution to make to our lives.'

'I can borrow books and the staff always say hello to my baby and talk to him. This means a lot when we have otherwise been stuck at home all day.'

Understanding what's important to library users

Providing access to books, helping children's literacy, supporting access to educational resources, and helping people to learn new things are the most important benefits of Victorian public libraries, according to survey respondents.

How important is your library in ... ?	Level of importance*					NA
	1	2	3	4	5	
Providing access to books, magazines, DVDs and other resources	2%	2%	4%	12%	79%	2%
Helping with children's literacy and education	6%	2%	4%	12%	55%	20%
Providing access to educational resources and support	5%	5%	9%	20%	50%	12%
Helping you to learn new things	5%	6%	13%	25%	42%	8%
Supporting your mental health and wellbeing	9%	8%	12%	20%	41%	11%
Providing somewhere to just be	12%	8%	12%	18%	38%	13%
Connecting with your community	9%	9%	17%	21%	33%	10%
Providing access to computers and wifi	15%	8%	10%	16%	37%	14%
Providing somewhere to study	19%	6%	8%	14%	30%	24%
Supporting your physical health and wellbeing	18%	11%	14%	16%	25%	17%
Providing somewhere to work	21%	7%	10%	13%	24%	24%
Helping you use computers and wifi	22%	9%	10%	14%	27%	19%
Helping you to access online government services and complete forms	24%	8%	10%	12%	23%	23%
Connecting with friends	21%	11%	16%	15%	21%	15%
Helping you to access job opportunities	27%	7%	9%	9%	15%	33%
Helping you submit job applications	29%	6%	8%	9%	15%	34%
Helping you develop interview and job-ready skills	29%	7%	8%	8%	13%	34%

* 5 – Very important; 4 – Important; 3 – Moderately important; 2 – Somewhat important; 1 – Not important; NA – Not applicable.

In addition...

60%

More than 60% of respondents said the library was very important or important to supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

54%

54% said the library was important or very important to them in connecting with their community.

41%

41% said the library was important or very important to their physical health and wellbeing.

How do Victorians use libraries?

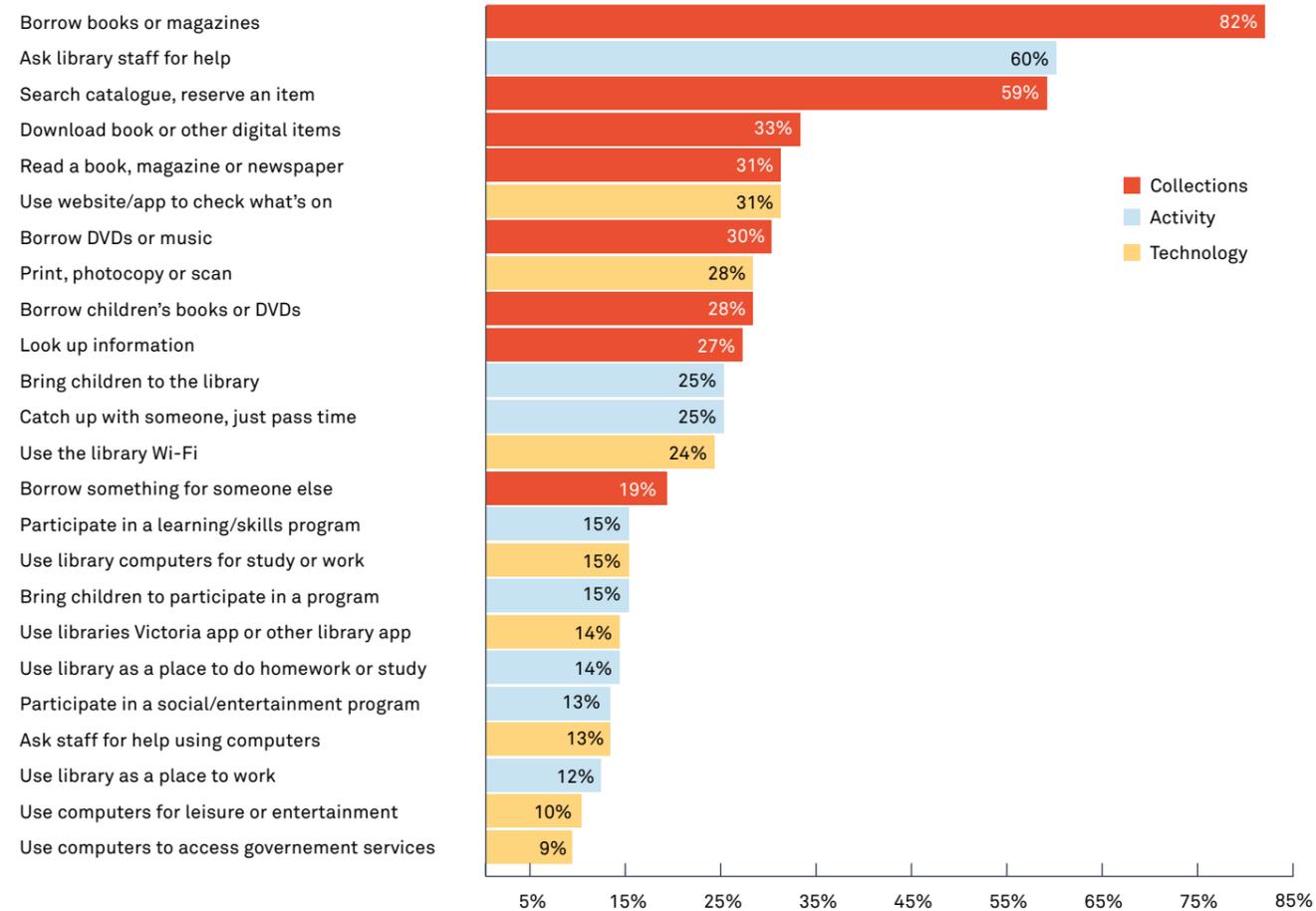
The way people use libraries is transforming in line with technology, and this has been accelerated by COVID-19 lockdowns.

The overwhelming majority of library users continue to visit the library in person, but the use of online services is soaring:

- 94% of library users physically attend their local branch
- 54% of users access public library services through the library website
- 26% access services through the library app

- 33% of library users download e-books, e-audiobooks or other digital items
- 3% use mobile library services, and 2% use the home library and other outreach services.

The top three reasons people visited their library were to borrow books or magazines (82%), ask library staff for help (60%) or search the catalogue and reserve an item (59%). Free access to Wi-Fi and low cost printing and copying remain key services, particularly for those on lower incomes.



The standout observation from the library user Survey is the existence of this multi-dimensional set of benefits from a single library operation. The ability to expand the vocabulary and broaden the mind, to be transported to another world in your imagination, to fill in a Centrelink form, to update an app, to learn a new skill, to take a load off, or to just be.

Evolving to meet future needs

Thousands of ideas for improving local libraries were collected as part of the Survey. Some of the most common unprompted suggestions were:

To extend library opening hours, including evenings, weekends and public holidays	To provide 24/7 access to branches	Enhanced website and app experiences
Extended book delivery and outreach services	Improved short-term/drop off and disabled parking	New and bigger buildings, with cafes and bars
Removal of late fees and reservations fees	3D printers, virtual reality headsets and air printing	Wider programming in areas including digital literacy, jobseeking, self-improvement and workshops for families



About the research

The Victorian Public Library Survey was conducted as part of the *Libraries Change Lives* project, which aims to raise awareness of the role and value of Victorian public libraries.

Researchers hoping to secure 10,000 Survey responses were deluged with more than 23,000 – a testament to the strong engagement between libraries and their communities. The final report is based on 18,131 survey responses, using random selection to ensure balanced representation across the state, giving consideration to both geography and population. It includes library members and non-members who use library spaces or services.

The Survey was conducted over two weeks in March 2022. Library users could fill out a printed form in English, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Arabic, Italian or Greek, or complete an online survey using a library computer or iPad, or their own device.

The Census was conducted in 48 library services on, or close to, 24 May 2022. The total visitor number across public libraries on Census day exceeded 60,000, and 16,464 Census surveys were completed.

Both pieces of research were commissioned by State Library Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria.

||| / / / / /
Libraries
Change Lives



Public Libraries
Victoria

With support from



STATE LIBRARY
VICTORIA

LibrariesChangeLives.org.au