

Beyond Books: The Library as a Lifeline for Older Adults

Isabella Hankins

Community, Environment, and Planning, University of Washington
College of Built Environment, University of Washington

Abstract

With the growing older adult population in Seattle, the harmful health implications of the loneliness epidemic, and the accessibility and prevalence of the public library as a third place, this research sought to address the following question: What is the role of the Seattle Public Library (SPL) in mitigating loneliness and social isolation among older adult patrons (ages 60+)?

I used a mixed-methods approach to portray both patron and staff experiences and to identify areas of growth for SPL. In a survey of older adult library patrons, I captured rates of loneliness using the UCLA-LS-3 loneliness scale, library usage frequency, and perceived social benefits of the library. Further, I interviewed five Seattle Public Library staff and conducted a comparative program analysis of other libraries with unique specialized programming and resources for older adults.

This research yielded limited and inconclusive results from the patron's perspective. Meanwhile, interviews determined that many older adults turn to the public library for social support. Still, the SPL is in many ways not equipped to meet older adult patrons' needs, given its limited staffing, funding, and resources. Comparative program analyses identified how social services and specialized programming can be integrated into library practices to better serve older adults' social health. Future research should employ a qualitative research approach to engage older adults, such as focus groups.

Keywords: public library, older adult, social isolation, loneliness, health, Seattle Public Library

Introduction

The global population is aging. Seattle is projected to experience a 300 percent increase in adults aged 85 and older by the year 2050 (City of Seattle, 2024, p. 15). Following an aging population is a diverse, complex set of needs that most cities are not built to meet.

Undeniably, one primary challenge faced by older adults is feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is the subjective, emotional experience of having unmet social needs, while social isolation is the objective amount of social interaction one has in their life (OSG, 2023, p. 7). Loneliness and social isolation are not uniquely experienced by older adults. However, adults 65 and older have been found to experience the highest rates of social isolation of any other age group (Kannan and Veazie, 2023). Approximately 57% of older adults report feelings of loneliness (Taylor, 2020). Further, both loneliness and social isolation have been associated with many negative health outcomes, including dementia, stroke, premature death, depression, and cardiovascular disease (OSG, 2023, p. 4). While social isolation and loneliness are not mutually exclusive, they have been identified as correlated for some individuals (Taylor, 2020).

Using the public library as a means to support older adults is not an original concept. Within Seattle's 27 public library locations, a variety of programs are offered for adults 50 and older, providing information and support across topics such as technology, employment, and healthy aging (The Seattle Public Library, n.d.). The American Library Association (ALA) first published guidelines for supporting the older adult population in 1975 (Lenstra et al., 2019). The most recent rendition, published in 2017, outlines a series of eight best practices for American public libraries to follow when developing programs and serving older adult library users (American Library Association, 2017). In addition, the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy, and

Outreach Services has provided public library staff with information to help support older adults (Lenstra et al., 2019). These guidelines and practices have been implemented varyingly across the United States (Bennett-Kapusniak, 2013) and fall short in providing library staff funding, training, and specific regional support.

Literature Review

Given the growing older adult population and the prevalence of social isolation as a public health crisis, exploring how the public library meets a community's social needs and older adults' engagement with this resource becomes increasingly relevant. To comprehensively address the role of the public library, the current scientific understanding of loneliness and social isolation, community health and space, and the relationship between older adults and the public library, the following literature is explored.

Public Library Theory

The public library has been tied to Oldenburg's concept of the third place (Dalmer et al., 2020), or a space outside of the home and workplace that is the nexus of community building and social interaction. Habermas's public sphere theory similarly describes a space that facilitates public discussions and debates. Within the context of these sociological theories, academics have researched the use of the public library to determine its role in societies around the world.

Notably, the public library has been identified as a meeting place (Aabo et al., 2010), a contributor to social capital (Chen and Ke, 2017), and a promoter of relationship building and social interaction (Appleton and Hall, 2023). The influence of staff, clubs, the diversity of its users, and the intergenerational connections the space facilitates have each been cited as important elements to foster social health in the library. In one study, inclusion was found to be the most critical aspect of a library that fosters social connection (Appleton and Hall, 2023).

Given this research, it can be concluded that the public library is capable of gathering community members and meeting their social needs.

The public library patron has also been surveyed in previous studies. In surveying the psychosocial needs of library patrons in 2022, Wahler et al. found that social connections were the most important unmet psychosocial need among all respondents, particularly among those without stable housing. This speaks to the complexity of gauging how a space influences and is used by different individuals, as each subset of the population may be exposed to different risk factors that make them vulnerable and provide them a unique positionality when entering a space. The understanding that each person will show up to a space differently and is shaped by their personal experiences is foundational to creating spaces that can meet a plethora of diverse needs. Further, there is research that demonstrates the potential for bibliotherapy, or the use of books to support mental health, comparable to art or music therapy, as an effective tool (Zanal Abidin et al., 2023).

There are many public libraries across the United States (Pelczar et al., 2021). Their physical abundance is another reason why it is an interesting site to explore social connectivity in—they already exist, are accessible to the public, and are completely free. Considering the low barriers to entering this space and their true alignment as a third place, this research seeks to address whether loneliness and social isolation among older adults are mitigated by the use of the public library in Seattle, and how the library can improve on serving the older adult community.

Older Adults in the Library

Research determining how older adults use libraries and how they can be supported by libraries is an emerging topic. Islam and Ikeda's exploration of the public library's role in supporting "positive aging" (2023) identified the potential for the public library to support older

adults in Bangladesh, but a lack of services developed for this population's use. This research highlights the public library's potential to serve older adults worldwide, as well as the limitations other cities are facing in providing thorough resources. Katagiri and Kim's analysis of the determinants of social participation among older adults in Japan and Korea (2018) found a gendered difference in risk for social isolation, with men being at a higher risk than women, and differing levels of social interaction between the two countries. In both countries, non-family networks were the leading determinant for higher levels of social participation. This research emphasises the role of these types of non-familial connections for promoting social connection; the type of social connection that other scholars have identified emerges from the use of the public library.

Moreover, De Armas (2019) determined that older adults who began participating in public library programming experienced more positive health outcomes and a greater overall well-being. While this topic is still new in research, and public library programs differ from library to library, these researchers highlight the public library's promise in serving older adults.

Within this area of research, the library-older adult relationship is often captured through the lens of library staff. Baluk et al. (2021) identify the restrictions faced by public librarians in serving older adults and articulate promising practices to increase older adult support, noting a lack of funding and support as the primary limitation in providing services to older adults. This research collected feedback on the unique limitations that Seattle Public Library staff members face in relation to serving older adults in this area.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

While loneliness and social isolation are found to be associated, they are not inherently tied. An older adult can socially connect regularly and still experience feelings of loneliness

(Taylor, 2020). This complicates the basic understanding that increasing social opportunities will eradicate loneliness and calls for a deeper understanding of the emotional needs of older adults, rather than simply analyzing their objective social connections. Despite this distinction, social connectedness is a widely understood deterrent for loneliness (Taylor, 2020) and is, by definition, the antithesis of social isolation.

A “social support network” describes the community members, friends, family members, and other people who act as supporters in one’s life. These can be formal and informal gatherings (Crume, 2019, p. 199). The Village Movement is one example of a formal social network, where people volunteer to be a part of an organization that supports older adults with a variety of life needs, such as their social, home, and transportation needs. These social networks are correlated with positive health outcomes among a variety of diverse populations, while the absence of a support network is associated with loneliness and reduced life expectancy. People with positive social interactions are often more highly motivated to make healthy choices such as eating healthily, exercising, and avoiding using drugs. This social network is also called “social capital” (Crume, 2019, pp. 200-3). The social isolation of older adults, even those living in densely populated cities, can be attributed to the inaccessibility of the built environment and a feeling of disconnection from predominant culture (Crume, 2019, p. 208).

Health and Community Spaces

The relationship between space and community health has been a topic of discussion amongst human thinkers for centuries. Hippocrates theorized that the environment impacts human health and distinguished between “healthy” and “unhealthy” places in his writing (Walker et al., 2017).

In modern psychological and design-related disciplines, the concept of “therapeutic spaces” or “therapeutic landscapes” is becoming increasingly predominant. This principle aims to connect the mental, spiritual, and physical elements of design to promote the well-being of the people who inhabit them (Winterbottom et al., 2015). Critics of therapeutic design contend that “therapeutic” is a far-reaching and inaccurate adjective from a psychological perspective (Walker et al., 2017), while its supporters cite research that suggests these spaces promote lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and improved mental wellbeing (Winterbottom et al., 2015). Therapeutic gardens have been implemented in a variety of public and private facilities across the country, many of which intend to support older adults specifically, such as in memory care facilities (Winterbottom et al., 2015). While there is not one baseline understanding of therapeutic landscapes or how to implement them, it is a growing subset of research that indicates that design decisions impact human health. The idea of a therapeutic landscape has been applied to the public library. Brewster (2014) determined that empowerment, familiarity, openness, and tranquility are therapeutic qualities that the public library possesses, and that the library is important to some people who use mental health services.

The Seattle Public Library

Within Seattle’s 27 public library locations, efforts have been made to support older adult patrons. A variety of programs are offered for adults 50 and older, providing information and support across topics such as technology, employment, and healthy aging (The Seattle Public Library, n.d.).

The SPL 2024-2033 Strategic Plan articulates values in alignment with this research. Namely, goals in alignment with serving older adults in their social needs include to “help people

build social capital,” “deliver digital learning and literacy opportunities more equitably,” and “provide more programs, classes and workshops for older adults.”

There is one full-time social worker at the Central branch of the SPL (The Seattle Public Library, n.d.). In 2023, four “social services librarians” were added to the SPL workforce, specializing in inquiries related to finding shelter and other resources. Additionally, some librarians are trained in de-escalation techniques (Jimenez, 2023).

Survey and Interview Formation

Survey formation and interview structure are guided and evaluated by Tracy’s (2010) qualitative research practices. In the survey for older adult library patrons, the UCLA-LS-3 loneliness scale gauges the loneliness of survey participants, selected for its brevity and designation as equally valid as its 20-item counterpart (Gosling et al., 2024; Hughes et al., 2004). This is the most popular measure of loneliness, though its ability to capture accurate results in diverse populations is debated.

The remaining survey and interview questions were also developed with insights from Baxter et al. (2015). Baxter et al. provide scripts and specific guidelines for conducting each of these methods of research to ensure unbiased, representative results and research methods that are accessible to their intended audience.

Gaps in Literature

Among the current research on this subject, capturing the point of view of the library patron is largely uncommon, because it is harder to access library patrons than staff members, and therefore more time-consuming and expensive (Wahler et al., 2022). Further, older adults face ageism, or discrimination based on their age, which negatively impacts their mental health (Kang et al., 2022) and their ability to be heard and taken seriously across spaces and situations.

Additionally, some researchers explain that the connection between the theoretical and the research-based functions of the public library is underexplored in current research. The role of the public library in multicultural and pluralistic societies is also understudied (Vårheim et al., 2019). In response to these identified weaknesses in current research, this research aimed to illustrate the perspectives, ideas, and feelings of library patrons in the multicultural city of Seattle to connect the theoretical functions of the public library to the real impact it has on its patrons.

The relationship between the public library, older adult library patrons, and the social needs of older adults is an underdeveloped and ongoing area of research. However, this intersection of ideas is developing alongside the growing older adult population and the pressing need for understanding the determinants of social connection. While libraries are not only constructed for community congregation, it is a relevant and critical feature that deserves exploration and consideration to better meet the needs of a diverse subset of the population.

Methodology A - Survey

To address the gap in current research concerning the impact of the public library on older adults' social health, a survey was distributed centering on the following guiding questions: Is an older adult's loneliness correlated with the time they spend in the library? Do older adults view the library as important to their socialization?

Surveys were chosen as a methodology given their ability to reach wider audiences and collect larger amounts of data. Survey questions had four main components: demographic questions, UCLA-LS-3 loneliness scale, library usage frequency, and perceived impact of the library on social health (see Appendix A for complete survey). Demographic questions, including age, gender, ethnicity, education level, household income, marital status, employment status, health status, and zip code, were included in the survey to account for confounding

variables. The UCLA-LS-3 loneliness scale is a standardized metric for loneliness, chosen for its short length and proven effectiveness. Questions regarding how often they use the public library were included to see whether they correlated with feelings of loneliness. Lastly, the perceived impact of the library on social health was to measure the felt experiences of older adults, regardless of their objective loneliness and reported library usage.

The survey was written using plain language and distributed in English. Three randomly selected survey respondents were compensated with \$25 VISA gift cards, which was made known on the flyers to encourage survey completion.

The survey flyer was distributed using the following avenues from January to April:

In-Person Outreach

This included printing multiple flyers and asking older adult library-goers at the Capitol Hill and Central Library branches to complete the survey. Using this method, approximately 10 older adults were asked to complete the survey.

Flyer Distribution

Flyers were posted at the Lake City, Capitol Hill, and Central Library locations.

Email-Based Outreach

The following eight senior and community centers were emailed the survey flyer, requesting them to distribute it to their visitors: SouthEast Seattle Senior Center, Central Area Senior Center, Greenwood Senior Center, Pike Market Senior Center, Wallingford Community Senior Center, Sound Generations, Center for Active Living, and Lake City Senior Center. Two locations confirmed that they posted the flyer (Wallingford Community Senior Center and Lake City Senior Center). Further, survey links were distributed via the City of Seattle's Age Friendly Seattle listserv (with 400+ older adults), and posted on their Facebook.

Results A - Survey

Despite efforts to make the survey short, accessible, and well-distributed, the survey received eight responses from January to May. Only three of these eight responses were complete enough to produce any substantial data, demonstrating a low completion rate. While this data set is not statistically significant or in any way representative of all older adults in Seattle, the three respondents who did complete the survey expressed a positive perception of the public library on their social health.

Figure 1

Response to Survey Question 16: “Visiting the public library has no impact on my health or overall wellbeing.”

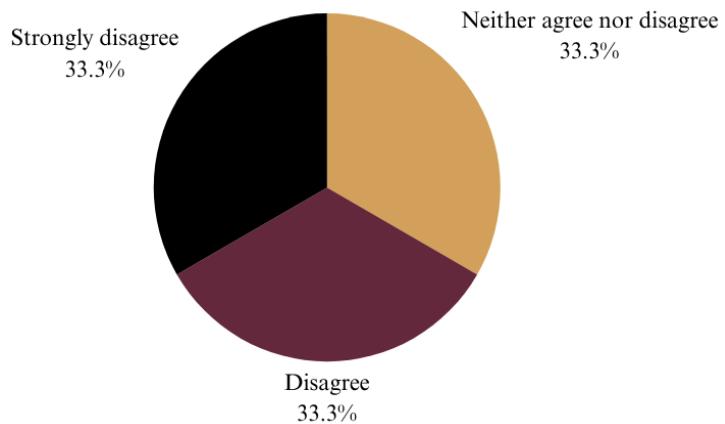
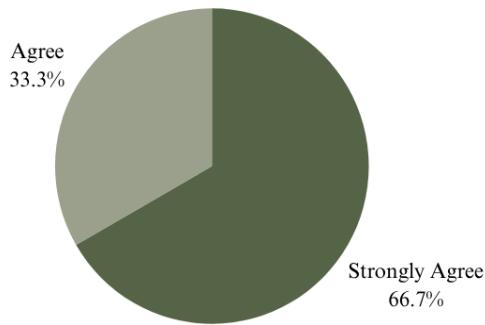


Figure 2

Response to survey question 18: “I have made new friends and acquaintances through visiting the library.”



Ultimately, this survey’s low response rate was itself its most significant finding. This indicates that this is not the most effective method of reaching this population, highlighting qualitative engagement methods like focus groups as likely preferred by this demographic.

Methods B - Interviews

To understand how older adults use the public library for their social needs, five Seattle Public Library staff members were interviewed. The guiding questions for this element of research were: How do librarians view the relationship between older adults’ social needs and the public library? What limitations or barriers to library staff experience in serving older adult patrons?

An Older Adults Program Manager for the Seattle Public Library coordinated the group interview with four other Seattle Public Library staff. This interview was virtual for accessibility purposes. A circle facilitation process was employed to allow each staff member an equal opportunity to contribute their voice and promote active listening. The six interview questions

were prepared under the guidance of *Understanding Your Users* (2015) (see Appendix B for specific questions).

Information regarding interviewees' specific roles and branches they serve is outlined in Table 1. Additionally, if the library staff is affiliated with a specific location, their location's Race and Social Equity Index priority level is included to contextualize their area's historical investment (or lack thereof) (Seattle GeoData, n.d.).

Table 1

SPL Staff Interviewee Information

Interviewee Number	Title	Location	Census Tract	Race and Social Equity Index Priority Level
1	Librarian	Northgate	12.01	Highest
2	Librarian	West Seattle	96	Lowest
3	Librarian	Central	81.02	Second Highest
4	Librarian*	Mobile Services	N/A	N/A
5	Older Adults Program Manager*	N/A	N/A	N/A

*This SPL staff is not affiliated with one location.

Results B - Interviews

From this group interview, four key themes emerged: social connection, older adult patrons' needs and interests, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and barriers that Seattle Public Librarians face in serving older adult patrons.

Table 2*Interview Data from Theme 1: Social Connection*

	Social connection				
	Library as a social hub	Connection with staff	Routine	Influence of local communities	Taking their time, not being rushed
Staff 1 (Northgate)					
Staff 2 (West Seattle)					
Staff 3 (Central)					
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)					
Staff 5 (Program Manager)					

Note. Tables are color-coded as follows: **Agreed**, **Mixed response**, **Disagreed**, and **Not addressed**.

Among all five library staff, there was a clear consensus that older adults use the Seattle Public Library for social connection. Interviewees described the library as a “social hub,” “anchor,” “lifeline,” “ritual,” or “second home” in the eyes of older adults. One staff member reflected, “At my branch, I've actually had patrons directly tell me that the library is a really important part of their day, that it's a lifeline for them, for connection.”

Interestingly, two staff members recognized another unique quality about older adults’ social habits: they do not like to be rushed. An interviewee shared the following:

They know our names... we have a deeper connection, just because they take the time for that. You know, we try to be respectful of our patrons' time when they come in, and we want to be as efficient as we can and give them the answers that they need so they can go

on with their day. And sometimes [interactions with older adults are] a good reminder to maybe slow down and have that connection with somebody.

The mention of the personal touch of staff members and the routine of seeing the same people regularly allows for a unique relationship between staff and older adults. One librarian explained that the Mobile Services bus route moves significantly faster when there is a substitute driver because there is a decreased social element to the book drop-offs. They reflected, "That little visit is really, really important to some people."

Another librarian mentioned how the staff-to-older adult patron connection impacts their work:

We have a lot of people that come in every single day and they tell us everything about their lives, and it's really like a ritual for them to be out in the community and interacting and so and, you know, we notice if they don't come in for a day, and that kind of thing too.

Table 3*Interview Data from Theme 2: Older Adult Patrons' Needs and Interests***Popular activities among older adults**

	Research	Reserve a book	Mobile Services	Job resource center	Browse newspapers	Caregiver support	Libby/ebooks	Technology support
Staff 1 (Northgate)								
Staff 2 (West Seattle)								
Staff 3 (Central)								
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)								
Staff 5 (Program Manager)								

Note. Tables are color-coded as follows: **Agreed**, **Mixed response**, **Disagreed**, and **Not addressed**.

Popular programs among older adults

	Author-related programs	Concerts	Book group support	Medical services/health programs	Educational programming
Staff 1 (Northgate)					
Staff 2 (West Seattle)					
Staff 3 (Central)					
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)					
Staff 5 (Program Manager)					

Unique needs and interests of older adults

	Older adults have unique interests	Older adults have unique needs
Staff 1 (Northgate)		
Staff 2 (West Seattle)		
Staff 3 (Central)		
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)		
Staff 5 (Program Manager)		

Note. Tables are color-coded as follows: **Agreed**, **Mixed response**, **Disagreed**, and **Not addressed**.

Each of the interviewees identified specific programs, services, and needs that older adult patrons use the library for. Many of them noted educational programs, like tax preparation, Medicare, estate planning, and disaster preparedness, as popular among older adult patrons. Programs developed around the arts and book group support were also highlighted as important to older adults. Additionally, resources like job resource centers and the Talking Book and Braille Library are reportedly highly used among this demographic, as well as any program that features an author. Specifically, the Ladies Musical Club performances are popular at the West Seattle Library branch.

Another topic that emerged was the access needs of older adults. One librarian at the West Seattle Library branch mentioned that the accessible entrance to their building is not easily found, leaving many patrons with access needs inconvenienced. Further, the importance of language access, particularly among older adult immigrant populations, is key to accessing the

educational and social opportunities of the public library, and was especially highlighted by the older adult program manager who hosts events around Seattle.

Despite the programs, services, and access needs that the librarians uplifted as important or unique to older adults, one librarian emphasized that older patrons' interests are essentially the same as any other patron:

I keep thinking about this all the time, and I feel like it's important to note that the older adults that we serve are largely interested in the same things that everybody else is interested in. Everybody's engaging in similar activities. Because it's really easy to look at older adults who have greater needs, particularly like around technology or around like physically getting to something in the collection, or like being able to see or hear it, and kind of lump all older adults in with that.

However, another library staff member disagreed, explaining that older adults do have unique preferences or experiences that are not often relevant to other age groups. This staff member explained:

I think educational preferences change as you get older, because you want to know more about the systems that are going to affect you... That's just a unique need, knowing how Medicare works, knowing how Social Security works, knowing how to plan for your estate. Those types of questions come up more later in life, although everyone should know how they work, but you don't really need to know, I guess, until you're, you know, faced with turning 65.

Responses within this theme of questions differed between interviewees' job descriptions and SPL branches.

Table 4*Interview Data from Theme 3: Influence of the Pandemic*

	Influence of the pandemic			
	Fewer gathering spaces	Decreased staffing	Older adults need more social support	Increased comfort with technology
Staff 1 (Northgate)				
Staff 2 (West Seattle)				
Staff 3 (Central)				
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)				
Staff 5 (Program Manager)				

Note. Tables are color-coded as follows: **Agreed**, **Mixed response**, **Disagreed**, and **Not addressed**.

Furthermore, another theme that emerged is the changes that librarians have seen post-pandemic. Technology has improved, like the SPL's e-library app Libby, which has reduced the barrier for older adults to access this technology in many cases. Interviewees also noted a motivation among this population to learn how to use e-books.

Administratively, the Seattle Public Library saw staffing decrease during and after the pandemic, which strains their ability to meet the needs of their patrons. This change was experienced alongside a shift towards an increased interest in social connection from their patrons, including their older adult patrons. Two of the librarians attributed this to the decreased gathering opportunities outside of the library, putting more pressure on the library to meet that need.

Many library staff interviewed expressed that boundaries between library staff and patrons changed because of the pandemic. However, one librarian disagreed, explaining that the lack of boundaries and need for social connection among older patrons existed pre-pandemic in Mobile Services. They remarked, “I’m trying to think if that aspect [boundaries with patrons] has changed. I feel like a lot of what you three have already said are things that I felt we experienced in Mobile before COVID.”

Another library staff member highlighted the impact of COVID on older adult caregivers and how they responded to that at the library.

I think what we've really learned... is just how isolated caregivers were during the pandemic, and how programs like [bookclub for caregivers], where you're talking about your caregiving experience in a supportive space with we have a social worker and a librarian leading the group, is so important to feel less isolated and to feel more connected to people around you.

Table 5*Interview Data from Theme 5: Barriers*

	Barriers									
	Time	Boundaries	Staff capacity	System navigation	Tech access	Physical access	Language access/ cultural competency	Restricted to in-house programs	Funding	Need for institutional support
Staff 1 (Northgate)										
Staff 2 (West Seattle)										
Staff 3 (Central)										
Staff 4 (Mobile Services)										
Staff 5 (Program Manager)										

Note. Tables are color-coded as follows: **Agreed**, **Mixed response**, **Disagreed**, and **Not addressed**.

The barriers that the library staff expressed overlapped significantly with one another.

The intertwined barriers of a lack of time and staff capacity were mentioned by all five interviewees. Four interviewees commented on their limited budget. Library staff expressed frustration with their inability to spend the time older adult patrons want to receive at the library, and felt that they cannot deliver as many programs where they want, or as frequently (such as in senior housing facilities or senior centers). A lack of staff also makes it difficult to stay present with patrons. Two interviewees noted a desire for SPL to “rise to the mission” and to demonstrate their mission with more meaningful actions. The librarian in Mobile Services explained:

I would echo time and boundaries, which are interesting, how they're kind of in tension with each other as well, and then serving older adults in immigrant communities and really understanding what their wants are and how those align with what we're able to offer in the mobile library setting is a challenge.

Barriers experienced by older adult patrons, such as technology barriers (not having a computer or wifi), transportation and mobility limitations, and language barriers, were also flagged by librarians in this interview:

So are we just interpreting to interpret, or are we interpreting so that they have a better understanding from where they sit? It takes a lot of time and funding to do that and also make sure that you're, you know, presenting it in a way that... they're going to understand and want to listen to.

In response to the barriers identified, the staff expressed where they felt their library could better meet the social needs of older adults. Namely, improvements in budget, staff capacity, navigator support, physical accessibility of the buildings, and institutional support from the Seattle Public Library were universally discussed.

Methods C - Comparative Program Analysis

To identify feasible solutions for the Seattle Public Library to implement, research about other public library programs was conducted. Specifically, programs that served older adults, or could be modified to the benefit of older adult patrons, in innovative, health and socialization-centered methods were selected to be included in this research. Other factors considered were the program or service's replicability, sustainability, and potential for impact. The guiding questions for this aspect of research were: How are older adults being served by

other public libraries? What implementations are innovative and successful in meeting the needs of older adults, and how can these learnings be applied to the Seattle Public Library?

Based on these criteria, the following three public libraries had programs worth considering for implementation in Seattle:

- Athens Comics Library (Athens, Greece)
- Hamilton Public Library (Ontario, Canada)
- San Francisco Public Library (San Francisco, CA)

Results C - Comparative Program Analysis

Athens Comics Library (Athens, Greece)

Service: Libraries on Prescription.

Social prescribing is a concept originating in the United Kingdom, where professionals are trained to meet the holistic needs of people seeking resources and mental health support. One collaborative project executed by Refugee Week Greece, Athens Comics Library, and The Europe Challenge, titled “Libraries on Prescription,” offers support through “psychosocial and creative services” to promote healing. This program was piloted at one library location, but has since created a toolkit and implemented its program in at least five other European libraries (Tsene et al., 2023). While this research is not directly aiming to determine the public library’s therapeutic qualities, nor overtly practice social prescribing, the idea that a place can promote positive health outcomes through social interaction is a fundamental understanding that underscores the importance of authentically understanding the wants and needs of the people utilizing these spaces.

Hamilton Public Library (Ontario, Canada)

Services: Phone programs, centralized online resource center.

The Hamilton Public Library offers phone programs for Hamilton residents 55+. These meetings are conference calls, which are especially approachable for those who may be comfortable with a phone call, but not a virtual meeting. They offer a variety of short health- and socialization-centered activities over the phone, including Story Times, Family Feud, and Trivia (City of Hamilton, 2025). Further, Hamilton Public Library's website was particularly accessible and resource-oriented for older adults. While the Seattle Public Library links community centers and other resources on one of their pages, the Hamilton Public Library has a centralized research center embedded into their site, meaning that older adults only have to visit one site to find out which older adult events are happening in their community (City of Hamilton, 2025). Both of these activities are unique, accessible, affordable, and sustainable, making them ideal for the SPL to consider.

San Francisco Public Library (San Francisco, CA)

Services: Computer Corps, Workshops, Library Health and Safety Associates.

The San Francisco Public Library developed a pilot program to increase access to technology and technological support. Select library staff at each branch were designated as Computer Corps members, where they specialized in creating materials, curricula, and providing on-site technology assistance. The SFPL reports high metrics of success for patrons. While this program was not developed only for older adult library patrons, it was created to address the technology gap experienced by people over 50 (Urban Libraries Council, n.d.). This library also offers an Aging Mastery Program (AMP) Workshop series and a Healthier Living six-week workshop for older adults who experience a chronic health condition.

Further, SFPL's Library Health and Safety Associates conduct outreach to unhoused library patrons. These health and safety associates are formerly unhoused themselves, providing lived experience, empathy, and workforce development opportunities (National Association of Counties, n.d.). This model is currently unique to SFPL, but has the potential to work for other American libraries. While this research is not focused on unhoused patrons specifically, this model of employing people with specialized knowledge of what patrons experience is a transferable model that can be used to better support older adult patrons.

Discussion

These findings suggest that older adults visit and utilize the Seattle Public Library for socialization. However, this research did not determine whether these visits mitigate feelings of loneliness and social isolation among this population.

The comparative program analysis and discussion with SPL staff highlighted avenues of improvement for the SPL as an institution to better support its staff and older adult patrons alike. Thus, the results of this research were shared in a summary report with the Seattle Public Library to encourage discussion about the needs of this population and provide ideas on how to implement these recommendations. Below are the recommendations derived from this research.

Older Adult Engagement

As learned from the low survey response rate, older adults experience barriers to participating in online surveys, and/or are not comfortable with this medium. Integrating opportunities for feedback into programs SPL hosts from trusted sources is key to ensuring this population's voices are heard. Qualitative methods such as focus groups are recommended for this demographic. Engagement with older adults also serves to produce data for the SPL to justify increased funding for older adult programs and resources.

Navigator Role and Social Services

Considering the barriers SPL staff are facing in serving older adult patrons, more support for navigating resources and the presence of social services at library locations is critical. According to the experiences of fatigue from librarians, and the knowledge that they are frequently interacting with patrons with needs they are unable to support, four “social services librarians” is a step in the right direction, but not enough.

Similarly, librarians expressed that they are not confident in their ability to be a resource navigator for patrons with complex needs. Librarians refer patrons to other resources, but they expressed that they wished they were more confident in the follow-up aspect of resource navigation. Thus, a more fleshed-out strategy for supporting librarians in supporting their patrons would benefit older adult patrons who seek their resources, for social isolation or otherwise.

Training and Strategic Planning

Moreover, more detailed training for staff and a stronger institutional commitment to serving older adult patrons would help staff serve older adults and justify investment in older adult resources. In the Seattle Public Library Strategic Plan, older adults are only mentioned once. Librarians mentioned that if the institution were to better “rise to the mission,” they would feel more supported.

The SPL could promote a stronger culture of service for older adults through more thorough training on how to serve older adults. This could include cultural elements of serving older adults, like encouraging staff members to lengthen their time interacting with older adult patrons who indicate wanting that kind of support, and leaning into the “personal touch” aspect of their interactions. It should also address boundary-setting and connect to the stronger

navigator role: where to refer to older adults when they approach a librarian with specific questions or issues, and what the follow-up process is for those interactions.

Funding, Staff Capacity, and Programming

Having more explicit support for older adults in SPL mission statements and frequent engagement would help justify the need for increased spending on specialized staff and increased older adult programming. Expanding older adult programs is aligned with the SPL Strategic Plan, and following through on this goal does not necessarily require programmatic feats. As demonstrated by the Hamilton Public Library, phone programs are successful in reaching older adults. Hiring more library staff, especially those with a specialization in resource navigation or serving older adults, is another important step SPL should take to support all library parties.

Additionally, the SPL should improve physical access to library branches that have any form of physical barrier, such as the Central Library branch. This should also involve more budget directed towards staffing and programming specialized for older adults, based on older adult feedback.

Limitations

There are many limitations within this research. Firstly, the survey results are not statistically significant given the small sample size. The survey itself was also limited because it was largely distributed online, leaving older adults who do not have access to technology or are not comfortable with technology largely out of the research. The survey was also limited in that it was only offered in English due to the limited research budget. Furthermore, only three survey respondents were able to be compensated for their time, an improvement that could be made with more financial backing.

Notably, the voices of five Seattle Public Library staff do not represent the entirety. There were no staff members interviewed from South Seattle. Furthermore, for the third element of research, programs that produced a public report of their older adult services in English could be included in the research.

It is worth noting that no public library will ever be the complete answer to meet all people's needs. However, given that it is a readily available public space that people trust and turn to for support, it should be better equipped to respond to these needs.

Next Steps

With more time and funding, next steps would include conducting focus groups with older adult library patrons at diverse library branches around Seattle to get richer feedback from older adult patrons. Additionally, more interviews with SPL staff members outside of librarians and program managers would consider a more diverse and representative staff perspective.

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Appendix A

Survey

You are invited to participate in a research study examining how older adults use public libraries and their social habits. **You must be at least 60 years of age to participate.**

Procedures: If you choose to participate, you will answer some questions about your public library usage and your feelings of social connectedness. The study is expected to take approximately 15 minutes.

Potential Risks and Benefits: It is unlikely that you will experience any risks or discomfort by participating, though this survey will ask you to share potentially sensitive feelings. There are no specific benefits associated with participating.

Compensation: Three raffle winners will receive a \$25 VISA gift card for participating. If you wish to enter this raffle, there will be an additional survey linked at the end for you to enter your email. This secondary survey will not be connected to this survey in any way, so confidentiality is maintained.

Confidentiality: The data collected in this study is completely confidential. No personally identifiable information will be collected, and the information you choose to provide in this study will not be connected back to you. Results from this study may be published or presented at research conferences.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or end your participation at any time without penalty.

Questions or Concerns: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact the researcher, Isabella Hankins, a University of Washington student, at [email address redacted].

Consent: I have read and understand the above consent form. I certify that I am 60 years old or older. I understand that all questions are confidential and completely optional. By continuing to take this survey, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in this study.

Thank you for completing my survey. To enter a raffle to win a \$25 VISA gift card, please write your **first and last name** and **email address** below.

1. What is your age?

- 60-69
- 70-79
- 80-89
- 90 or older
- Prefer not to answer

2. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary/third gender
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

3. What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

4. What is your education level?

- No schooling completed
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma, or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Prefer not to answer

5. What was your annual household income before taxes in the most recent year?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$19,999

- \$20,000 to \$29,999
- \$30,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more
- Prefer not to answer

6. What is your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Prefer not to answer

7. What is your employment status?

- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work and looking for work
- Out of work but not currently looking for work
- Retired
- Prefer not to answer

8. How would you rate your current state of health?

- Poor
- Fair
- Good
- Very good
- Excellent
- Prefer not to answer

9. What is your 5-digit zip code? (Write below.)

10. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

- Hardly ever
- Some of the time
- Often

11. How often do you feel left out?

- Hardly ever
- Some of the time
- Often

12. How often do you feel isolated from others?

- Hardly ever
- Some of the time
- Often

13. In the last month, how often did you visit a public library?

- Never
- One time
- 2-3 times
- Once a week
- Multiple times per week

14. Of those visits, how often did you visit a public library to attend a specific program or event at the library?

- Never
- A few times
- About half of the time
- Most of the time
- All of the time
- I did not visit a public library in the past month.

15. Visiting the public library makes me feel socially connected to others.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

16. The public library makes me feel less lonely.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

17. Visiting the public library has no impact on my feelings of loneliness or social connectedness.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

18. Visiting the public library has no impact on my health or overall well-being.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

19. I have made new friends and acquaintances through visiting the library.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What do your daily interactions with older adult library patrons typically look like?
2. Which activities and programs do you find most successful among older adults?
3. What unique needs or preferences do older adult library patrons have?
4. How relevant is the “loneliness epidemic” in serving older adults in the library? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how you see older adults using the library, if at all?
5. What barriers or limitations do you experience in serving older adult library patrons?
6. From your perspective, how could SPL better meet the needs of older adult library patrons?