

**From Collections to Shelters: Libraries as Institutions of Resilience –
Learning from Best Practices in the Face of Weather Extremes, Economic Downturns, Epidemics**

Goals and Objectives

This applied research project addresses the National Leadership Grants program *Goal 2: to Build the capacity of libraries (...) to lead and contribute to efforts that improve community well-being (...)* and *Objective 2.3: to Establish or refine approaches that equip libraries (...) to contribute to the well-being of communities*. By focusing on libraries' contributions to local resilience to economic, climate, and health emergencies, the project also advances *Goal 4: to Strengthen the ability of libraries to provide services to affected communities in the event of an emergency or disaster*. The dissemination of findings will *support the training and professional development of the (...) library workforce* (IMLS Objective 1.2).

Summary

This project is led by the University of Iowa (UI) School of Library and Information Science (LIS), in partnership with the School of Planning and Public Affairs, as well as faculty in Sociology, Business, and Social Work. We request \$507,845 over three years to assess public libraries' impacts on community resilience using mixed methods: mapping, spatial and econometric analyses, surveys and interviews of library directors across the U.S. We will identify programs and practices that enhance resilience to economic, climate, and public health crises, especially for disenfranchised patrons; quantify the socio-economic impacts of those programs; and disseminate knowledge about best practices. The intended impact is to increase libraries' ability to meet their patrons' changing needs, and to provide guidance to libraries and their funders on the practices that best support community well-being and resilience.

Project Justification

Throughout the US, disenfranchised persons (e.g., low-income, minority, people with limited literacy, recent migrants, teenagers, elderly, isolated persons) struggle with economic hardships, the impacts of extreme heat and cold waves, public health threats, and accessing basic resources. Public libraries are free and welcoming local support centers that facilitate access to essential lifelines: training, job search support, internet access, social service referrals, shelter from extreme heat/cold, and, recently in response to COVID-19, reliable information, innovative services, and distribution centers. Those resilience-boosting services are common practices, but are poorly documented, quantified, and thus underestimated and underfunded. This project identifies libraries' resilience programs nationwide, quantifies their socio-economic impacts on local communities, disseminate information about the most innovative and successful programs, and publicizes those impacts to libraries, their funders, and LIS educators, so that those key stakeholders may advance best practices and support community well-being and resilience.

Research Questions

We ask: (1) What programs and practices do local public libraries adopt to meet their patrons' needs in times of economic, climate, and public health emergencies? (2) What direct and indirect impacts do those activities have on community well-being and resilience? (3) Which are the most impactful?

Project Work Plan

Our team includes experts in library and information science, urban affairs, sociology, social work, resilience, and analytical methods (GIS, spatial econometrics, survey and interview design) as well as practitioner librarians. The project uses mixed methods, including spatial, economic, quantitative, and qualitative analyses. We refined the methodology with input from a group of 16 public librarians and piloted the project for 13 midwestern states with UI seed funding (*Public Libraries for Disaster Resilience: Assessing Libraries' Community Impact in Times of Climate and Socio-Economic Crises*; \$150,000; 2021-22).

We focus on all libraries in the contiguous U.S. Between August 2023 and June 2024, we will identify relations between library openings, closures, and changing resources (staffing, budgets), and their communities' socio-economic characteristics. We will use the 2010 to 2020 IMLS Public Libraries Surveys and 2010 and 2020 census data at the county, city, and census tract levels, and longitudinal spatial regression analyses with strategic control group designs to quantify those relations.

In Fall 2024, we will conduct a nationwide survey of library directors to identify programs and practices supporting patrons who face economic, climate, and public health emergencies. We piloted this survey in 2022, with 505 responses. For each initiative (e.g., job training, social service access support, response to patrons seeking shelter, COVID-19 response) we ask about the patrons served, impacts on library staff, and outcome tracking mechanisms. We will then create a Library Innovation & Resilience Index (LIRI). We will secure IRB approval by Spring 2024, distribute the survey through IMLS-affiliated library organizations in Fall 2024, and analyze the data by summer 2025.

Based on survey results, we will identify the libraries with the most innovative programs. In 2025, we will interview the directors of the 50 most innovative libraries from all U.S. regions to identify the reasons for developing and adopting resilience-boosting programs, the supporting factors and barriers they faced in implementation, the number of patrons served, and their outcome assessment mechanisms. The semi-structured interviews will be conducted over the phone or Zoom, and interview data will be analyzed in the Spring of 2026. We piloted the interview protocol with ten interviews lasting 20 to 50 minutes. LIS graduate students will conduct the interviews, learning about effective libraries' strategies.

Project Results

We will share the results with library professionals and educators throughout the project, highlighting the most impactful practices. We will publicize results from the spatial analysis by summer 2024, findings from the survey by summer 2025, and findings from the interviews and integrated comprehensive findings by summer 2026. Results will be shared throughout the funding period through presentations and workshops at librarians and LIS educators' conferences: the American Library Association, the Public Library Association, the Association for Library and Information Science Education, and the Association for Information Science and Technology. We will also distribute short reports and one comprehensive report, 4 to 5 open-access papers, links to webinars, recorded trainings, and podcasts through IMLS newsletter and website, public libraries and LIS educator listservs, and to major public and philanthropic library donors. We will also share our findings via op-eds and media outlets, e.g., the *New York Times* and *National Public Radio*, with the support of the UI's Office of Strategic Communications.

Diversity Plan

We will engage in our research a mix of US, minority, and international faculty and students. SLIS typically has 10% minority graduate students and 25% first generation graduate students, and SPPA typically has 20% minority and 32% first generation graduate students. We will make every effort to recruit graduate research assistants from underrepresented groups. The graduate research assistants will be actively engaged in all aspects of the project. We will seek to involve undergraduate students from underrepresented groups in the summers of 2024 and 2025 through the Summer Research Opportunities Program.

Budget summary

We request \$507,845 over 3 years: \$178,932 for researchers' salaries and fringe (1.2 months per year for the faculty practitioner who will lead the dissemination of findings, 0.1 to 0.9 month for all others); \$123,739 for two graduate students who will assist in data collection, mapping, and analysis in Years 1 and 2 (including stipend, fringe, tuition and fees); \$36,750 for travel to national practitioner and educator conferences to disseminate results through presentations and workshops all three years; \$720 for data storage; \$6000 for open access publications; and \$161,705 in indirect costs. No cost share is required.