

ALA American Library Association

2021

STATE OF AMERICA'S LIBRARIES

SPECIAL REPORT: COVID-19



EDITOR'S NOTE

Nothing about 2020 was business as usual in any part of American society, and libraries and their workers, users, and services were all deeply impacted by the pandemic. In reflecting on the year, the only way to tell the stories of America's libraries is through the lens of the challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19.

Every year, *The State of America's Libraries* report aims to present a complete picture of the activities and trends in libraries of all kinds during the previous calendar year. This year, we are taking a different approach. Rather than a broad focus, we have narrowed our scope, and the result, we hope, provides library users a more nuanced understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on libraries in their schools, communities, and campuses and offers library workers, and everyone associated with the profession, some insight into best practices during an extraordinary and challenging year.

Although there are statistics and figures in this report, our primary goal was to spotlight the resilience, determination, and innovations of library workers in unprecedented circumstances. These human stories, ultimately, can tell us more than numbers ever could.

Writing a report about the impact of the pandemic on libraries while we are still in the thick of it is a bit like flying a plane while still building it. We know that we cannot possibly capture everything that happened in 2020. Our hope, instead, is to provide a snapshot of a moment in time that might encourage conversation, reflection, and ultimately, action. While historical in nature, this report is also about change and perseverance. We hope it will inspire appreciation for the essential role that libraries play in our world and persuade you to take steps to help them thrive.

Stephanie Hlywak

Director, Communications and Marketing Office
American Library Association



STATE OF AMERICA'S LIBRARIES — 2021 —

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ABOUT ALA

American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, ALA has been the trusted voice of libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. For more information, visit ala.org.

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INTRODUCTION

LIBRARIES SERVE AS “FIRST RESTORERS”

Julius C. Jefferson, Jr., ALA President

In 2020, libraries of all types stepped up to meet the needs of their communities as they responded to the impacts of COVID-19, a national financial crisis, and social unrest. They were at the center of some of our nation’s most consequential work, including supporting accurate counts in the US Census, fighting political disinformation, and facilitating free and fair elections.

Libraries also extended necessary lifelines to community members facing job losses, healthcare crises, and remote work and learning during an unprecedented and uncertain time. As we assess the state of America’s libraries, we find 2020 was a year when library professionals answered the call to serve amid multiple emergencies and a year when library workers again proved to be essential “first restorers” or “second responders.”

It also proved to be a year of opportunity, as libraries kept Americans connected in ways that brought our communities closer. Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed.

I was lucky enough to see this work in action myself when I embarked on a [national virtual tour](#) meant to understand the needs of libraries on the ground. What I saw was awe-inspiring, even for someone like me who has spent decades in the profession.



Libraries kept Americans connected in ways that brought our communities closer. Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed.

At the [Cambria County \(PA\) Library in Johnstown](#), for instance, workforce development programs, services, and local partnerships supported patrons with finding jobs and building careers. At the time of my visit with them, the state’s unemployment rate was 16 percent, and the library’s career center was essential for residents seeking economic advancement, digital literacy, and professional certifications.

Rural communities across the country faced and continue to confront tall hurdles to connect residents often scattered over large geographic areas. In [Zanesville, Ohio](#), the [Muskingum County Library’s](#) parking lot was filled most days with families, jobseekers,

telecommuters, and students taking advantage of free Wi-Fi to participate in Zoom meetings, distance learning, job interviews, and telemedicine appointments.

From the Midwest to the Southwest (and everywhere in between), people who didn’t have access to reliable, affordable broadband internet found themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. In 2018, the Federal Communications Commission estimated that more than one in three residents living on tribal land lack access to broadband. During the pandemic, rural New Mexicans used the [Jemez Pueblo Community Library’s](#) parking lot to access Wi-Fi, and librarians there helped community members with



Libraries Transform graphic.



Jemez Pueblo Community Library.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEMEZ PUEBLO COMMUNITY LIBRARY.

unemployment and stimulus forms and even auto license renewals.

Social justice is an issue that is close to my heart, and as the nation faced a racial reckoning, the work of our libraries as centers for engagement and community dialogue came into sharper focus. The John Brown Watson Memorial Library at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, a historically Black university, takes its role in preserving history that is not always visible in white institutions very seriously. In Oakland, California, community programming like the Father Circle, a non-judgmental family setting where fathers can share their feelings, and bike repair workshops that resist gentrification and support youth entrepreneurship are just two examples of the countless ways libraries demonstrate their commitment to diversity and community empowerment.

Of course, we can't speak of the past year without acknowledging the significant role of school librarians in supporting their community's remote learning needs.

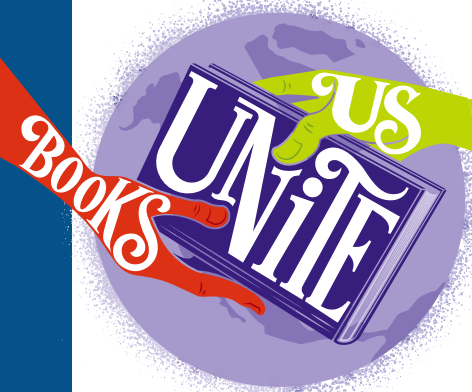
In Texas, I met creative and innovative librarians like those at Castleberry Independent School District's Grab & Go Library, who provided families with activity packs so they could create and learn at home, and at Dallas's Franklin Middle School, who distributed laptops to students when in-person learning was cut short by lockdown orders.

In Hawaii, school librarians had to be flexible long before coronavirus made remote learning the default for students across the country. School librarians at Kamehameha Schools told me students are offered three modalities of learning—traditional in-class instruction, distance learning, and a blend of both—because some of the students travel as far as sixty-eight miles just to get to school.

As we move into the future, I realize that last year was not the first time librarians and library workers have been challenged. Yet libraries are still standing. Read on for more about how these fundamental institutions are serving our communities during a most unusual time. And I hope you'll join me in advocating for their success. ▀

FOR MORE ON HOW STRONG LIBRARIES—and a well-supported library workforce—are essential to the recovery of communities devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, check out resources developed and updated by units across the American Library Association designed to help communities, library workers, and library supporters plot the best course forward for their libraries. See ala.org/tools/covid-19-recovery.





CENSORSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

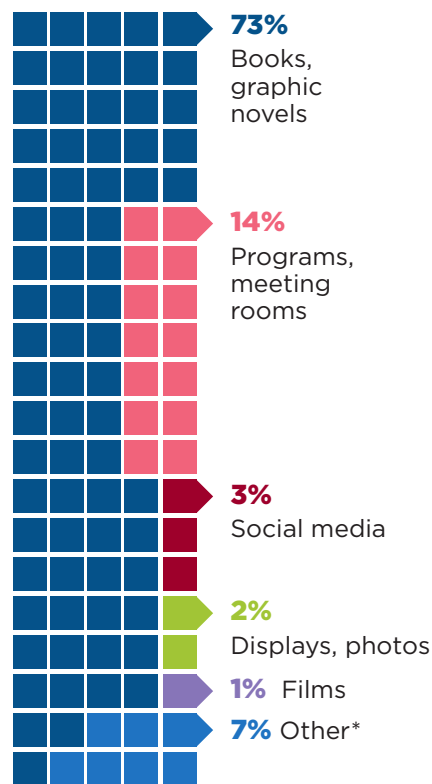
Books unite us. They reach across boundaries and build connections between readers. Censorship, on the other hand, divides us and creates barriers. In 2020, 273 books were affected by censorship attempts. [Learn more at ala.org/bbooks](https://ala.org/bbooks).

REASONS FOR CHALLENGES



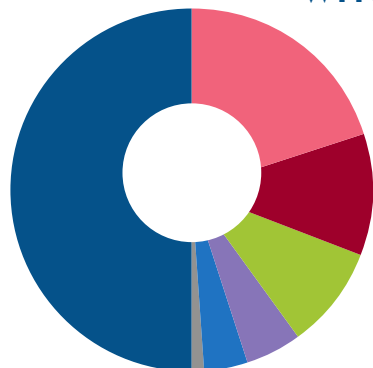
BOOKS AND BEYOND

The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 156 challenges in 2020. Here's the breakdown:



* Includes filtering, access, databases, magazines, online resources, legislation

WHO INITIATES CHALLENGES?



- 50% Parents
- 20% Patrons
- 11% Board/administration
- 9% Political/religious groups
- 5% Librarians/teachers
- 4% Elected officials
- 1% Students

Statistics based on 147 responses

WHERE DO CHALLENGES TAKE PLACE?

Statistics based on 156 responses



43%
Public
libraries



38%
Schools



15%
School
libraries



2%
Academia



2%
Other

CENSORSHIP
STATISTICS
COMPILED BY:



OFFICE FOR
Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association

TOP 10 MOST CHALLENGED BOOKS OF 2020

The American Library Association tracked 156 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services in 2020. A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials or services based on content. Overall, 273 books were targeted. Here are the “Top 10 Most Challenged Books in 2020,” along with the reasons cited for censoring the books:

1

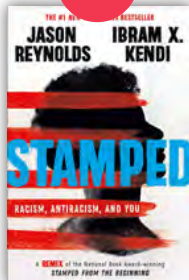


George

by Alex Gino

Challenged, banned, and restricted for LGBTQIA+ content, conflicting with a religious viewpoint, and not reflecting “the values of our community”

2



Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You

by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

Banned and challenged because of author’s public statements and because of claims that the book contains “selective storytelling incidents” and does not encompass racism against all people

3



All American Boys

by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

Banned and challenged for profanity, drug use, and alcoholism and because it was thought to promote anti-police views, contain divisive topics, and be “too much of a sensitive matter right now”

4

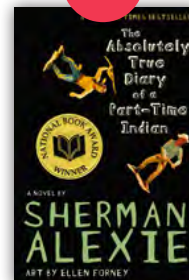


Speak

by Laurie R. King

Banned, challenged, and restricted because it was thought to contain a political viewpoint, claimed to be biased against male students, and for the novel’s inclusion of rape and profanity

5



The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

by Sherman Alexie

Banned and challenged for profanity, sexual references, and allegations of sexual misconduct by the author

6

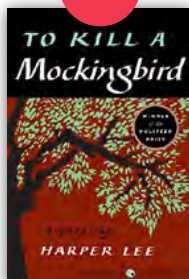


Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice

by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard, illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin

Challenged for “divisive language” and because it was thought to promote anti-police views

7



To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

Banned and challenged for racial slurs and their negative effect on students, featuring a “white savior” character, and its perception of the Black experience

8



Of Mice and Men

by John Steinbeck

Banned and challenged for racial slurs and racist stereotypes and their negative effect on students

9



The Bluest Eye

by Toni Morrison

Banned and challenged because it was considered sexually explicit and depicts child sexual abuse

10



The Hate U Give

by Angie Thomas

Challenged for profanity, and it was thought to promote an anti-police message



OFFICE FOR
Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association



Staffers at Chicago Ridge (IL) Public Library, which closed its doors March 16 because of COVID-19, advertise the library's remote-reference services in a group Zoom call. PHOTO: CHICAGO RIDGE (IL) PUBLIC LIBRARY

LIBRARY USE AND ACCESS

During times of crisis, libraries take pride in staying open as vital community centers.

The novel coronavirus made gathering together indoors unsafe, however, and in March, out of concern for the safety and well-being of library staff and the communities they serve, many libraries closed their doors to the public, a move supported by the Executive Board of the American Library Association (ALA). They wrote, “Although closing a library is a local decision, we urge library administrators, local boards, and governments to close library facilities until such time as library workers and our communities are no longer at risk of contracting or spreading the COVID-19 coronavirus.”

For libraries, however, closing didn’t mean shutting down; rather it required finding new ways to serve and continue supporting their communities—often at a distance.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES PIVOT

The Public Library Association (PLA), an ALA division, conducted a survey March 24–April 1 to understand how

public libraries were responding to the pandemic. Although 99 percent of respondents confirmed that their libraries had closed, most of them had extended online renewal policies, expanded online checkout services, and added virtual programming.

Many distributed such materials as free craft supplies and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) kits, supported distance learning, and, significantly, boosted their technology offerings by checking out laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots and extending Wi-Fi to their parking lots.

Emblematic of the trend, the McArthur Public Library in Biddeford, Maine, offered virtual storytimes, read-alouds, and cooking demos.

Still, as centers of lending, libraries also had to develop new policies for handling library materials. The Bertha Bartlett Public Library in Story City, Iowa, was among those that devised a detailed procedure for handling books and money to keep staff and the public safe.

Respondents to the PLA survey expressed concern about the loss of tax revenue and the strain on their budgets.

Many responded they would need state and federal financial support because local governments were stretched thin.

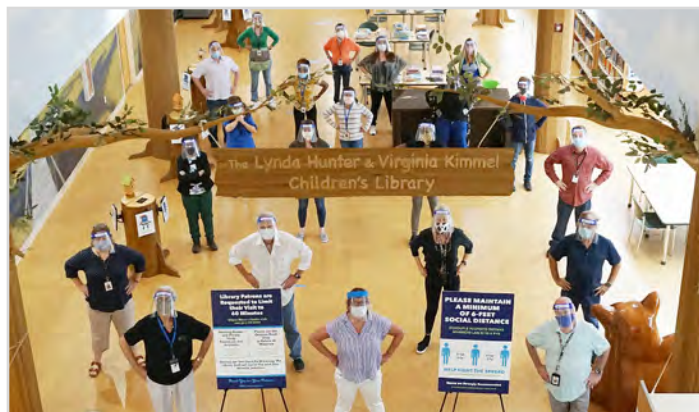
A few libraries managed to stay open. At the Idaho Falls (ID) Public Library, which canceled its programming but remained open to the public for browsing, checkout, and computer use, Director Robert Wright told *American Libraries* magazine, “We’re paid to be public servants, and we are leaving the decision about whether to open or close to the people who are experts in epidemiology.”

Wright’s library followed recommended social-distancing measures, including moving furniture to maintain six feet distance between patrons and staff, directing employees to stay six feet away from each other, sanitizing surfaces every ninety minutes, placing returned materials in quarantine for five days, and offering curbside checkout service on request.

Even for libraries that were closed but offered curbside pickup, concerns about safety preoccupied workers. Meagan McLendon, library assistant at the Kyle (TX) Public Library, pointed out that part-time employees posed the greatest threat for COVID-19 transmission. “A lot of us have other jobs [such as pizza delivery], and we take those jobs into this job,” she told *American Libraries*.

COLLEGE, RESEARCH, AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES PROVE RESILIENT

It wasn’t just public libraries that felt the impact of COVID-19. A survey developed by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe (University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign) and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg (Ithaka S+R) chronicled the impact of the pandemic on academic libraries. It found that libraries pivoted reference services to online or phone delivery. Meanwhile, access to print collections, whether onsite or via



Delray Beach (FL) Public Library staffers, wearing masks and face shields, welcomed users back on May 21 to a partially reopened building. Stacks were closed, a limited number of computers were available, and each visitor could stay an hour. The first people to enter were homeless and others needing access to free computers and internet. PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBYN HUFF

delivery, declined significantly. An ALA survey showed that more than half of college and research libraries had seen eliminations or reductions in planned hiring, professional development funding, print collection budgets, and program budgets.

School librarians demonstrated their resourcefulness, despite the fact that two-fifths of school libraries did not expect to reopen during the 2019–2020 school year. Vancouver, Washington, librarian Traci Plaster Chun said, “We have been supporting parents in this pandemic, which has been a shift. Teachers and parents are working so hard; I feel it’s my role to help make their jobs easier with tech, resources, e-books, and whatever they need. We know our students, our curriculum, our teachers, and so it makes sense that we jump in. We can personalize for our families.” Van Meter (IA) Community School District librarian Shannon McClintock Miller hosted webinars to spark ideas and share best practices. ▶

HOW AND WHEN TO REOPEN

Guidelines for reopening were developed by Theresa Chmara, an expert on First Amendment and public forum issues related to libraries and general counsel for the Freedom to Read Foundation, and approved by the ALA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee in June. The guidelines included reviewing federal, state, and local laws, including agency recommendations, such as those of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. It also addressed such questions as whether a public library can terminate an employee who refuses to return to work and whether it has the authority to mandate mask-wearing for patrons or employees.



FEDERAL FUNDING AND LEGISLATION

Libraries, which provide a lifeline to communities coping with the ravages of COVID-19, received a much-needed boost from the federal government early in the pandemic.

In March, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus package, included \$50 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which then distributed the funds to help states and territories expand digital network access, purchase internet-accessible devices, and provide technical support services to their communities.

The institute's activities also included the REALM (REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums) project—in conjunction with OCLC, a bibliographic information organization, and the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio—to produce science-based information

about how materials can be processed to mitigate COVID-19 exposure to staff and visitors of archives, libraries, and museums.

The need for federal assistance grew urgent as thousands of library staff were furloughed or laid off due to COVID-19 and the demand for library services increased.

The CARES Act created the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which provided loans to help businesses—including libraries—weather the financial crisis due to the

The CARES Act included \$50 million for the IMLS, which then distributed the funds to expand community internet access.

economic slowdown. PPP funds could be used to pay staff, and many libraries accessed these forgivable loans that proved to be vital assistance for many organizations.

In July, Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) and Rep. Andy Levin (D-MI) introduced in their respective chambers the Library Stabilization Fund Act (LSFA) to establish a \$2 billion fund, administered by IMLS, to address financial losses and bolster library services, with an emphasis on the hardest-hit communities. The LSFA would have supported library operations and such urgent technology needs as broadband access and digital literacy training. It would have also provided funds for hotspots, laptops, printers, and other technology.

CONGRESS ACTS TO SUPPORT LIBRARIES

In December, for the eighth consecutive year, Congress increased appropriations to IMLS. The Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2021, passed on December 21 along with a \$900 billion stimulus relief package for COVID-19, included an additional \$5 million for IMLS, including \$2 million for the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). Appropriations for 2021 include increases for other library line items, including \$28 million for the Innovative Approaches to Literacy program, an increase of \$1 million, with at least half of this funding dedicated to school libraries. ▸

READERS BENEFIT FROM CHANGES TO E-BOOK LENDING

Readers who relied on e-books from libraries to stay well-read during the pandemic saw waiting lists for some top titles decrease significantly. That's because one of the big five publishers, Macmillan Publishers, announced it would end an embargo on sales of new titles to libraries, which had resulted in six-month-plus waiting lists for new releases.

In a statement, ALA Director of Public Policy and Government Relations Alan Inouye said, "Equitable access to digital content is more important than ever as libraries continue to serve their communities amid rapidly changing circumstances."

Publisher Penguin Random House (PRH) also made changes so that libraries could better afford to provide access to the digital content its users needed. In April, PRH announced that it was offering libraries e-book and digital audio book licenses for one year at a 50 percent prorated price, a move necessary to "meet the needs of patrons and homebound school kids," said Skip Dye, senior vice-president.

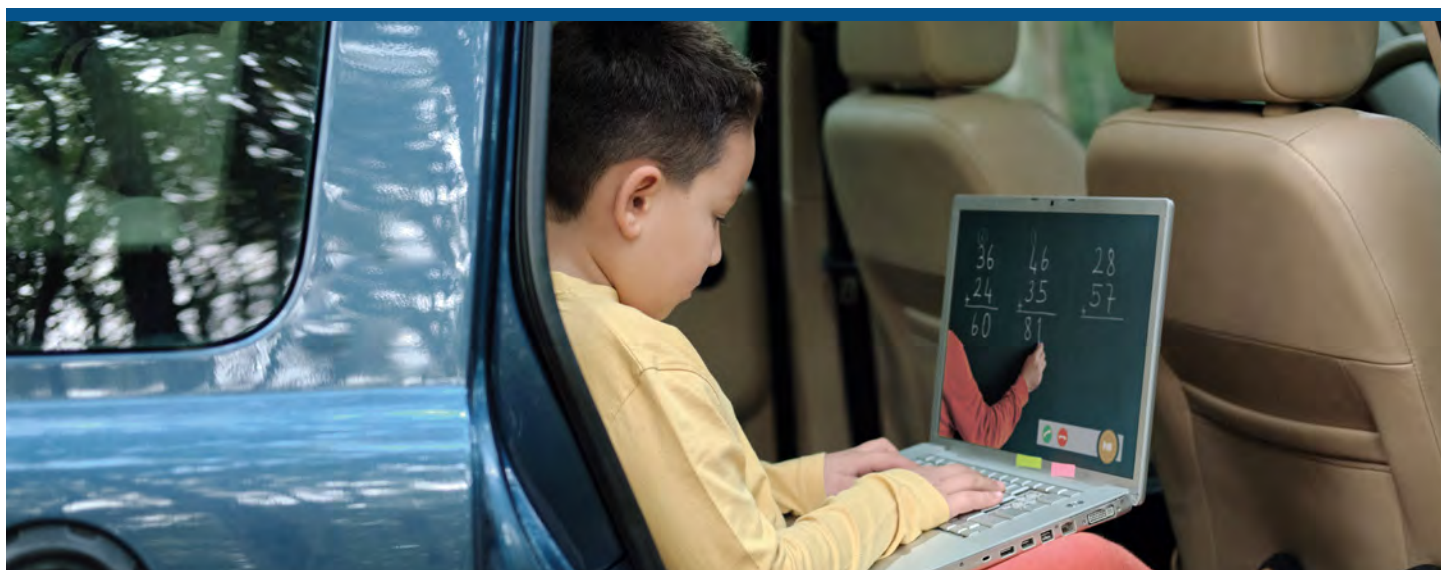
#eBooksForAll

ALA American Library Association



From left: ALA Past President Loida Garcia-Febo; former PLA Executive Director Barb Macikas; ALA Past President Sari Feldman; Alan S. Inouye, ALA senior director of public policy and government relations; and Tim Cherubini, executive director of the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, outside the offices of Macmillan Publishers on October 30, 2019.

PHOTO: DANIEL ROOT



WI-FI AND BROADBAND ACCESS

In the pre-COVID-19 era, America's 16,557 public library locations provided critical digital infrastructure to their communities. For many, the library's computers were their personal computers. Libraries offered internet hotspots to borrow, promoted digital literacy through specialized training, and assisted careers by allowing job seekers to access crucial online information.

Throughout the pandemic, the library's role as a digital provider widened. The American Library Association (ALA) recognized the importance of libraries as broadband service points early in the crisis. In a March statement, the ALA Executive Board recommended that "libraries can and should leave their Wi-Fi networks on even when their buildings are closed wherever possible."

During the pandemic, libraries like rural Marathon County (WI) Public Library and suburban Cuyahoga County (OH) Public Library compensated for closures by making their Wi-Fi networks accessible to patrons outside the building. Library users could sit in or near their cars and tap into the networks with laptops or smartphones, as long as they maintained six feet of social distance from passersby.

The Leominster (MA) Public Library took it one step further, installing mobile hotspots at the local senior center and veterans' center.

Santa Fe (NM) Community College and Pima (AZ) Community College played a vital role during the pandemic for students and communities that didn't have reliable internet access. They purchased and lent out hundreds of laptops and dozens of portable Wi-Fi hotspots. Expanded Wi-Fi also allowed students to safely access the internet outside closed buildings from the parking lot or other outdoor spaces.

The bookmobile, the classic vehicle for library outreach, reinvented itself as a conveyor of broadband to communities in need. Williamsburg (VA) Regional Library parked its bookmobile outside schools, grocery stores, and community centers, while the Topeka and Shawnee County (KS) Public Library deployed its bookmobiles as Wi-Fi hotspots to a local mobile home park and a correctional facility.

INEQUITIES LAID BARE

But even as libraries responded to the call, inequities in allocation were exposed—gaps that would affect communities in need of broadband during the pandemic for access to digital collections, e-government services, legal information, distance learning, telemedicine, and other essential community services.

The COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated these inequities. About 25 percent of Americans lack high-speed internet access at home, according to a [June 2019 study](#) by the Pew Research Center. Roughly 33 percent of rural Americans lack home broadband access.

In a [September case study](#) of two tribally owned and operated networks, the ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office reported that barely half of Native Americans living on tribal lands had access to high-speed internet. Six tribal libraries and two schools in six pueblos in north-central New Mexico aggregated their demand and built two sixty-mile fiber-optic networks. During the pandemic, [tribal libraries stepped up significantly](#) to form partnerships to connect diverse populations with broadband.

In Washington, DC, lawmakers proposed [several bills to address broadband needs](#), including the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act, passed by the House in May, which would have provided \$2 billion for hotspots and other devices for library patrons and K–12 students. This bill was never brought up for consideration in the Senate.

LEARNING GOES VIRTUAL

When learning moved online, school libraries like those in the Leander (TX) Independent School District [became tech hubs for teachers and students](#). There, librarians helped guide teachers during the initial weeks of the pandemic, sitting in on staff meetings, helping set up Google classrooms and Zoom calls, answering copyright questions, and curating digital resources.

“Everyone in the school turns to you,” when dealing with computers and setting up online learning, said Four Points Middle School librarian April Stone. “Librarians stepped in to help teachers navigate those new tools and shift what they were doing physically versus virtually. We



Eletha Davis, mobile library services outreach manager at Williamsburg (VA) Regional Library, drives a van that provides Wi-Fi. PHOTO COURTESY OF BETSY FOWLER

were always on the front lines for campus tech anyway, and it's the librarians helping not only navigate Zoom, but also best practices on how to use the tools.”

When its physical locations closed, the [Florida State University \(FSU\) Libraries demonstrated](#) the crucial educational role academic libraries play on their campuses. It began providing electronic resources, online instructional support, open education resources, online tutoring, and other remote services. FSU librarians also helped instructors identify digital, open, and primary-source resources to use in remote teaching.

Meanwhile, advocates called for the Federal Communications Commission to boost broadband connectivity during the pandemic to help school libraries. [FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel recommended](#) the FCC expand its E-Rate program, a subsidy created in 1996 for K–12 schools. She warned that without action students nationwide could be locked out of their virtual classrooms. ▮

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY

Estill County (KY) exemplifies the challenges many underserved communities face. “Grandkids are being raised by their grandparents by the hundreds Seven out of ten kids qualify for free lunch at school. Only 7.3 percent of homes have broadband access,” said Lesa Ledford of the Estill County Public Library. Getting more people online in her community means more opportunities for residents to access education, entrepreneurship, and employment—all essential to achieving social mobility. When informed her library would receive a [grant](#) that includes internet enabled hotspots, funding for financial literacy programming, and more she said, “This grant will change lives.”

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

The pandemic created many financial challenges for libraries, and library supporters mobilized to advocate for continued library funding. Their efforts resulted in an enthusiastic response from a public eager to support libraries, especially at the polls.

In more than 100 library-related referenda across 27 states, more than 90 percent of voters supported the library. In Ohio, 31 of 32 referenda passed, while in Michigan, 18 of 20 met with approval.

Public libraries reaped the benefits. In Antioch, Illinois, residents decided to issue \$9.6 million in bonds to upgrade the village's public library. The Riverside (IL) Public Library passed a referendum that overwhelmingly supported a bond issue for a new storytime and multipurpose room, a common area for children and youth services, a teen room, and an area for middle schoolers, along with an upgraded public meeting room. In Arizona, an education funding measure passed that could raise as much as \$827 million a year, with a portion of the funding earmarked for school librarians.

College libraries benefited at the polls as well. Measure Y passed in Glendora, California, allowing Citrus Community College District to issue \$298 million in general obligation bonds that generated \$16.3 million annually for projects, including the replacement of an existing library.

DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF LIBRARIES

Advocates developed new and effective strategies to highlight the value of libraries and library staff. Academic librarians gathered data that made the case to university administrators for prioritizing library workers' employment security. In particular, they used metrics to demonstrate the long-term costs associated with furloughs or layoffs.

United for Libraries, a division of the American Library Association (ALA), offered free webinars to promote ways that foundations and Friends of the Library groups could support their libraries during COVID-19. They offered advice on how to approach advocacy during a time of crisis, how to craft messages for success, and how to stay engaged with supporters and the community during the pandemic.

One librarian who kept in touch with her community during the pandemic was Michelle Jeske, Denver city librarian and president of ALA's Public Library Association. In October, Jeske wrote a "Dear Library Community" letter that pointed out the ways the library had served the community since it closed its doors seven months before. She wrote, "This pandemic has changed almost everything about all of our lives and has been challenging for all of us. We know the community relies on us for resources, services, programs, and safe spaces. Please know that your library is still here for you, just in different ways."

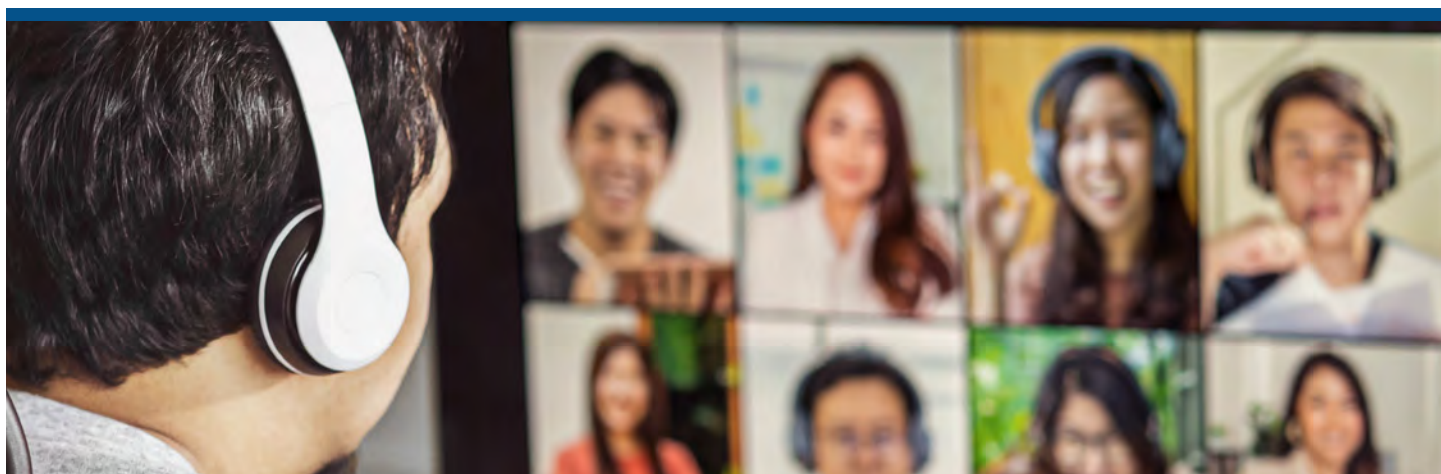
The pandemic called attention to the need for self-advocacy on the part of library workers. In her column in *American Libraries* magazine, Meredith Farkas, faculty librarian at Portland (OR) Community College, wrote, "I know many library workers who are fierce advocates for their patrons but are far more reticent when speaking up for their own well-being." She wrote about the valuable training provided by the Library Freedom Institute, founded by librarian and internet activist Alison Macrina with the support of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and pointed out the importance of strong online communities to promote collective action and self-advocacy. ▀



Fund Libraries graphic.

FUNDRAISING IN UNUSUAL TIMES

Public measures were supplemented by volunteer fundraising efforts, which continued unabated although COVID-19 had forestalled such fundraising staples as book sales. The King County (WA) Library System Foundation adapted by running a virtual giving campaign that used such tactics as email campaigns and social media posts, as well as the more traditional direct mail. The campaign generated \$110,000.



LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Although most library buildings closed as communities went into lockdown, library workers devised innovative outreach strategies to meet the needs of their many constituencies. From analog letters and alternate realities to birds and boats, librarians showcased their innovation under some of the most challenging circumstances.

The Lewis and Clark Library in Helena, Montana, for example, reached out to seniors in isolation at assisted living facilities, helping children to send cards, postcards, drawings, and words of encouragement to residents as part of its “Mail to Our Seniors” program. A virtual karaoke event organized by Madison County (KY) Public Library, was music to the ears of those at a local assisted living community.

One librarian leveraged the popular video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to engage players via this virtual community. In the game, players move to a deserted island, construct buildings and infrastructure, and create their own furniture and decorations. Players across the world can then visit each other’s islands. When Tina Chenoweth logged on to start construction on her island, the young adult services manager at the Baxter-Patrick James Island branch of Charleston County (SC) Public Library chose to construct a library, complete with a children’s room. The library’s patrons responded enthusiastically, visiting the island and donating virtual items to the space.

While Chenoweth used a virtual space to build her library, Johnson Elementary School Librarian Rebecca Flowers and woodworker Kevin Cwaline created a

library out of the natural habitat of their backyard in Charlottesville, Virginia. Inspired by a Norwegian café-themed birdfeeder that went viral the year before, the *Bird Library* pre-dated the pandemic but found grateful audiences while people were in quarantine. It features handmade, bird-sized bookshelves and a circulation desk strewn with birdseed.

Academic libraries are known for supporting students during stressful academic stretches. When finals moved online, Florida State University Libraries made its end-of-semester stress busters digital. Students could participate in an online escape room, play quarantine bingo, or learn how to tie-dye at home.



Online karaoke with seniors. COURTESY MADISON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES BRIDGE THE DISTANCE

School libraries quickly pivoted their instructional roles when students moved to online learning. Calvert County (MD) Public Schools, for one, transitioned many pre-COVID-19 activities, such as the Amazing Race scavenger hunt and National History Day online, to Zoom.

School libraries became incubators for innovative programming ideas and key resources that engaged both students and teachers, bridging the distance between the living room and the classroom. They offered access to tech tools that allowed users to create or access video content, communicate via digital discussion platforms, and stay on top of assignments and class information via texts.



Book Yak on a Kayak at Russell Library in Middletown, Connecticut

Author visits, another favorite in-person activity, also went digital. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, school librarian Amanda Jones didn't let building closures stop her from giving students the gift of meeting the people behind the books they love. "It's always an amazing experience to witness the wonder in students' faces when they get to ask their favorite authors questions about a book they've read," she said. Students, authors, and teachers came together for Zoom discussions about the writing process, upcoming books, and pop culture with writers of young adult and middle-grade books.

UNEXPECTED ESCAPES

Even those libraries that returned to in-person programming devised socially distant ways to offer their pre-COVID-19 activities. McMillan Memorial Library in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, created a no-touch escape room in an outside corridor, enabling participants to solve puzzles using their phones and making chalk drawings on the walls.

BYOB took on a new meaning when Russell Library in Middletown, Connecticut, adapted their book club program to facilitate social distancing in the great outdoors—and asked their patrons to bring their own boats. Book Yak on a Kayak featured selections focused on kayaking and canoeing. The boaters wore masks for the event, but they couldn't mask their enthusiasm—without the library's innovative spirit, their book club would have been canceled. ▮

ONLINE STORYTIMES GO MAINSTREAM

Perhaps the most ubiquitous program pivot necessitated by the pandemic involved digital storytimes. Libraries across the country took their beloved read-alouds online, often with help from some famous faces—authors, actors, musicians, and even a former President and First Lady of the United States. The Chicago Public Library's "Live from the Library" Facebook series featured Chicagoans Barack and Michelle Obama as guest readers to bring to life *The Word Collector*, written and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds.

Michelle Obama shared her thoughts about the importance of the library in her life. "I remember my first trip to the library and how important I felt," she reflected. "My library card was a key that unlocked a world of knowledge and experiences."



Michelle and Barack Obama as guest readers for Chicago Public Library's "Live from the Library" Facebook series.



A customer picks up her reserves at the drive-through window at Columbus (OH) Metropolitan Library's New Albany branch.

HOW WE READ IN 2020

Libraries in 2020 saw a significant shift in borrowing habits as e-book usage soared. OverDrive, a major distributor of e-books, audiobooks, and streaming video to libraries, reported that its clients worldwide collectively loaned out more than 289 million e-books, a 40 percent increase from 2019. The company attributed this shift to the pandemic. After all, no-contact e-book lending is the perfect way to get content from a safe social distance.

Digital book borrowing reached record highs, with readers in 102 public library systems each checking out 1 million or more e-books. Twenty-nine of those systems hit that mark for the first time.

With buildings closed to the public, libraries accelerated or adopted plans to issue digital library card ("eCard") offerings. Sarasota County (FL) Libraries, for example, were able to create and launch their eCard within a few weeks of branches being closed to the public.

In March, with eighty-six locations closed to the public, the Los Angeles County Library offered temporary digital library cards, valid for ninety days. The cards enabled access to all of the library's digital offerings—e-books, audiobooks, magazines, movies, TV, homework help, and online classes.

HIGHLIGHTING COMMUNITY HEROES

Faced with the challenge of celebrating Library Card Sign-up Month in September, librarians at the Gail Borden Public Library District in Elgin, Illinois, decided to turn the annual campaign into a way to honor Hometown Heroes who worked on the front lines during the COVID-19 outbreak. The library collected their photos and added superhero capes and face shields to the images. The heroes, along with "Secret Superhero Words," were posted on the front windows or entrances of local businesses that were participating in a socially distanced scavenger hunt in which each Superhero Word directed people to such virtual library services as "eAudiobooks" or "streaming."



The "Hometown Heroes" campaign in Elgin, IL.

Librarians also performed heroic deeds in making sure community members in need had access to resources. Jayanti Addleman, director of library services at the Hayward (CA) Public Library, worked with staff to streamline the process for registering for a library card online, paying particular attention to eliminating barriers for undocumented individuals. She also oversaw the distribution of hundreds of tablets, hotspots, and other devices to help bridge the digital divide. Moreover, she secured funding for a new bookmobile to meet the needs of those residents who lacked transportation and could not take advantage of curbside pickup.



Curbside Larry of Harris County (TX) Public Library.

CURBSIDE PICKUP AND CURBING LATE FEES

With buildings closed or users uneasy entering them, curbside pickup became popular, and libraries got creative promoting this service that is more often associated with retail shopping. Donning a cowboy hat and aviator sunglasses and adopting the persona of Curbside Larry, Harris County (TX) Public Library's Program Production Specialist John Schaffer delivered a pitch in the style of a

bombastic used car salesman, touting the library's curbside services in a video that attracted more than 50,000 views on YouTube, as well as mentions in *Texas Monthly* and *Southern Living*.

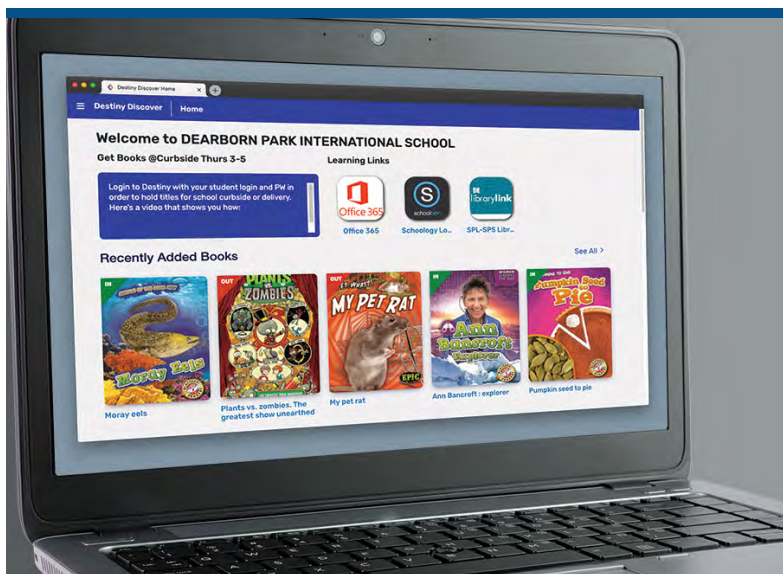
Even before the pandemic, libraries were going fine-free. Library fines “present an economic barrier to access of library materials and services,” according to an American Library Association resolution adopted in 2019, and the pandemic urged many districts to action. Since March, 91 of the Urban Libraries Council's roughly 160 member libraries have opted to go fine-free. ▶

SAFE HANDLING OF LIBRARY MATERIALS

The pandemic raised questions about the safety of library materials, and answering them was key to regaining trust in the age-old practice of borrowing books. It was uncharted territory for conservators, who lacked historical information on sanitizing materials. They were also faced with conflicting information about how long the coronavirus would persist on library books and video cases.

As the pandemic continued throughout 2020, many libraries adopted a quarantining protocol of seventy-two hours for returned materials. While necessary to prevent disease contamination, these protocols in academic libraries exacerbated wait times for pricey textbooks.

The REALM project conducted eight phased tests over the course of 2020 to understand how the virus spreads, its survival on materials and surfaces, and the effectiveness of various prevention and decontamination measures. (See page 10 of this report for more information.)



Digital interface for school book holds and curbside pickup.



Elizabeth Moreau Nicolai conducts a virtual storytime at Anchorage Public Library.

LEARNING IN THE AGE OF CORONAVIRUS

In 2020, one-room schoolhouses returned—not the nineteenth-century buildings with wood-burning stoves, but home classrooms with personal computers, laptops, and tablets loaded with apps and remote instruction software.

With distance learning, school librarians still fulfilled all five of their roles as instructional partners, teachers, leaders, information specialists, and program administrators. Their unique skillsets proved invaluable to teachers and students as schools worked to provide continuity through the disruptions of a lockdown.

The school library extended itself into the home, providing virtual hours via webcam conferences, email, phone, and instant messaging. Librarians continued to foster reading development with virtual book clubs, storytimes, and read-alouds. Even gaming and makerspace activities evolved as virtual learning programs.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) conducted several surveys that documented the valuable work of school librarians during the school closures of 2020. In an April survey, most respondents said they had expanded access to online resources for students, extended check-out periods (noting that books would be due when school opened again), and offered virtual assistance.

Throughout 2020, AASL found, school librarians and school libraries were contributing to their communities no matter the conditions. In subsequent surveys, school librarians spoke of playing many roles during pandemic learning conditions (PDF), whether for remote learning, hybrid, or in-person instruction. Adaptations included encouraging e-book checkouts, taking bookcarts to classrooms for in-class checkouts, and co-teaching with classroom teachers.

School librarians brimmed with such innovative concepts for meaningful instruction as pandemic journals. Steve Tetreault, a school librarian from the Holmdel Township (NJ) School District, taught a cross-disciplinary unit in English and social studies that involved middle-school students writing about their pandemic experiences as an exercise in self-directed learning.

ACADEMIC AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES GET CREATIVE

The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries embraced community partnerships to widen the reach of their activities. Peer coaches—students mentoring classmates

in research skills and technology—worked with the local literacy organization Gemini Ink to promote the Big Texas Read online book club. They spread the word throughout the academic community and provided technology support to Texas authors.

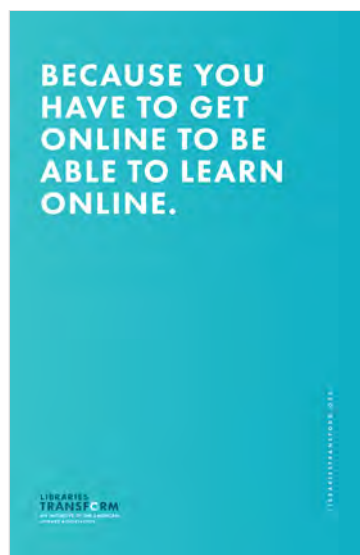
College students accustomed to using academic libraries as quiet places to study alone or in groups needed encouragement to remain engaged as classes moved online and libraries closed. Librarians at Frostburg (MD) State University continued to provide services virtually.

Wayne State University Libraries in Detroit created an orientation video for freshmen who had not yet visited campus in person due to the pandemic. Student Success Librarian Veronica Bielat explained that the video was intended to help students feel comfortable in a new

environment during an uncertain time. The video, she said, “sort of takes that fear away.”

In public libraries, children’s librarians embraced new technologies to enrich the remote learning experience. Liza Purdy, senior children’s librarian for the Santa Clarita (CA) Public Libraries, wrote, “Everything I did as a librarian needed to go through some form of technology in order to

reach the public that I so desperately missed, loved, and wanted to serve.” Experimenting with her phone and



Libraries Transform graphic.



Some librarians even delivered books via drone.

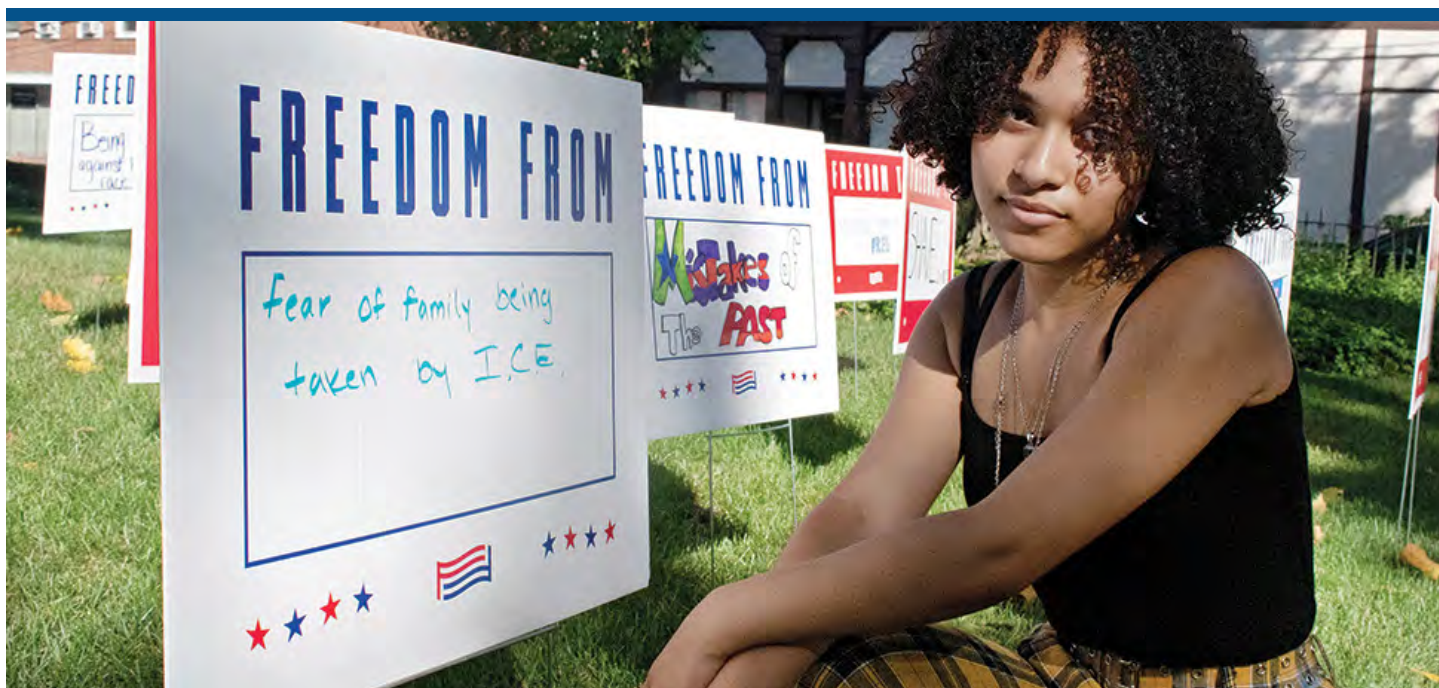
computer and using green screens, she developed rich content that included stop-animation music videos.

The West Vancouver (BC) Library in Canada used Zoom to offer programs on augmented reality and artificial intelligence. Children identified some of the emotions they were experiencing by using augmented reality to create their own emojis. They also collaborated on a song using Chrome Music Lab’s Song Maker online tool. ▶

BOOK CLUBS GO VIRTUAL

Book clubs have adapted to the pandemic by going virtual. The Zoom room has replaced the living room as the arena for spirited literary discussions. Libraries like Santa Maria (CA) Public Library, which hosted monthly in-person book clubs for years, started the Book Club Over the Phone program. The Rochester (MN) Public Library has been hosting video book discussions over Zoom and WebEx.

School librarians are also getting into the book club act. Kristen Mogavero, a library media specialist at New York City’s John F. Kennedy High School, has been hosting Zoom meetings to discuss books with students and teachers. Community members can vote for future book selections on the school’s social media channel.



Teen leader Iris Alvarenga poses in front of yard signs at Waltham (MA) Public Library that depict issues youth patrons care about. The installation was a partnership between the library, civic organization For Freedoms, and local art group Blueprint Projects.

PHOTO: ERWIN CARDONA/WALTHAM (MA) PUBLIC LIBRARY

CONFRONTING STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES IMPACTING COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

The outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated structural inequities in access to high-speed internet, resulting in a crisis with widespread ramifications in many communities of color.

In an article in *American Libraries* magazine, “[Ending Information Redlining](#),” American Library Association (ALA) Executive Director Tracie D. Hall wrote, “The persistence of the coronavirus pandemic continues to expose the degree to which societal inequities are inextricably linked.”

The fallout from “information redlining,” the systematic denial of equitable access to information, affects everything from education and employment to health and housing and results in an inequitable justice system and high incarceration rates.

Hall cites figures from a Deutsche Bank study ([PDF](#)) showing that 76 percent of the nation’s Black residents and

62 percent of Latinx residents are slated to be shut out of or underprepared for 86 percent of US jobs by 2045. She wrote, “They are experiencing a ‘racial tech gap’ that threatens their future economic mobility.”

TWIN SCOURGES: THE PANDEMIC AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

During the global pandemic, the United States also came face to face with its history of systemic racism. An inflection point was the killing of George Floyd by police on May 25 in Minneapolis.

Shortly thereafter, the ALA Executive Board called on the library community to participate in protests and other



Laura Broderick, senior children's librarian at Pikes Peak Library District in Colorado, discussed a challenge to a Black Lives Matter display in her children's department. "Black history is not history," Broderick, said. "Black history is current, it is happening now."

PHOTO: AMERICANLIBRARIESMAGAZINE.ORG/BLOGS/THE-SCOOP

forms of activism, promote and create antiracist media content, engage actively in local policy development, exercise the right to vote, or run for office to be a voice for historically disenfranchised groups in a statement condemning violence and racism towards Black people and all people of color.

Public libraries across the country met the moment with a focus on antiracism work. Confronting the issue for many meant acknowledging the fact that during the twentieth century, many libraries, both in the North and

South, were often segregated facilities. John Lewis, the late US Congressman from Georgia, once recalled, "When I was 16 years old, some of my brothers and sisters and cousins [were] going down to the public library trying to get public library cards. We were told the library was for whites only, not for coloreds."

The Oakland (CA) Public Library responded to the murders of Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others with resource lists on topics like institutional racism; protest, social movements, and community solutions; police conduct, race, and the justice system; and talking to kids about racism and justice.

EXAMINING RACISM AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS ON CAMPUS AND BEYOND

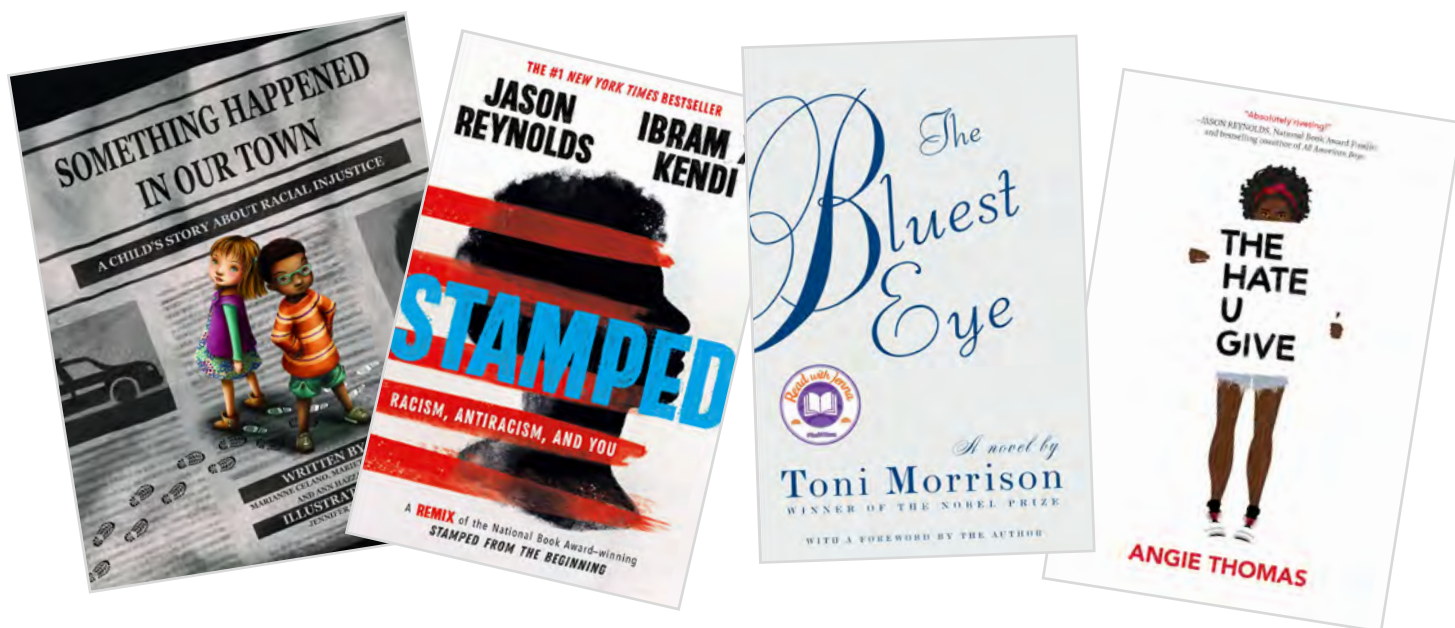
School librarians recognized the pivotal role they played in supporting students reeling from the twin traumas of the pandemic and racism. Writing in the summer of 2020, American Association of School Librarians president and lead school librarian for the Westwood High School Library Information Center in Blythewood, South Carolina, Kathy Carroll said, "Our students have lived through a global pandemic, national protests, societal shifts, and possible untold personal turmoil since we all were last together. Along with formal teaching and learning, our students will need to talk and we will need to listen. Some of those conversations may be difficult or even a little uncomfortable,

A CALL TO ACTION FOR LIBRARY WORKERS

ALA's Public Library Association issued a call to action for public library workers to address racism. It urged them to study, amplify, and align with the policy demands of the Movement for Black Lives; change library security policies that punish and criminalize patron behavior; and develop and fund programs, services, and collections that center the voices and experiences of people of color and shift power to communities for co-curation and co-creation.

Resources for librarians looking to center the voices and experiences of Black library workers and the Black community proliferated. A Libraries Respond: Black Lives Matter web resource provides curated links for librarians who want to support the broader BLM movement, fight against police violence, and help the cause of racial justice.





Some of the ten most challenged books of 2020 (See [page 7](#) for the complete list.)

but those types of interactions are often the ones that have the greatest impact on our students.”

The University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries’ racial justice efforts included developing a [reading list for disrupting whiteness](#) and decolonizing research in libraries, developed by Gender and Women’s Studies Librarian Karla J. Strand.

Pennsylvania State University Libraries devised “a centralized resource for [information about historical and current discrimination](#) of African Americans in the United States, Pennsylvania, and the Greater Philadelphia Region.”

Despite a 34 percent increase in books by diverse authors . . . those books represented only 15 percent of the total number available for young people.

city and community to “talk about, and invest in, the library” when working to refine community-first public safety, dismantle racism, pursue equity, and rebuild the workforce.

Friends groups also joined in the fight for racial justice. The Friends of the Saint Paul (MN) Public Library Advocacy Committee wrote a powerful public letter to the [mayor](#), urging the

OVERREPRESENTED IN CHALLENGES, UNDERREPRESENTED ON THE SHELVES

ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom pointed out that books with diverse content [frequently appear on its list of challenged books](#), including such works as the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley and *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

Libraries also encountered [inequities in collection development](#), often lacking a sufficient number of books by authors and illustrators of color. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison showed a [34 percent increase in books by diverse authors](#) between 2017 and 2018, but those books represented only about 15 percent of the total number of materials for young people received at the book center—this in a country where [more than 39 percent of the population is non-White](#), and where White children no longer make up a majority in their age group.

The library profession also worked to address internal inequities in 2020. As late as 2018, just 6.8 percent of librarians identified as Black or African American, indicating a persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity. ▸

BECAUSE FAKE NEWS CAN HAVE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES.

LIBRARIES
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FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

With the onset of the pandemic in the United States, librarians were mobilized as information first responders. “We’re really being proactive,” Lisa G. Rosenblum, executive director of King County (WA) Library System, told *American Libraries* magazine in March. “We’re information gatekeepers, so this hits us on a personal level,” said Rosenblum, whose library system created a web page with facts about the virus that includes links to local resources.

Misinformation about COVID-19 was infused with xenophobia and especially Sinophobia, resulting in a surge of bigotry against Asian and Chinese people. Chinese American Librarians Association President Fu Zhuo wrote in a March 5 email, “The enemy is not Chinese or Asian people. The Chinese American Librarians Association is firmly against any types of prejudices, especially in this critical moment of fighting the COVID-19.” In May, the Executive Board of the American Library Association (ALA) signed the Asian Pacific American Library Association’s pledge (and asked others in the library community join) to demonstrate a commitment to combating the rise in xenophobia and racism due to COVID-19.

Throughout 2020, librarians responded to misinformation about vaccines, the census, and the November election, as well as the demonization of the mainstream media as purveyors of “fake news,” by creating resources to fight disinformation. The Chicago Public Library

provided an online course, “Disinformation in Social Media,” which offered guidance on how social media algorithms foster implicit biases.

The University of Louisville (KY) Libraries’ Citizen Literacy project helped students become savvy information

consumers in a post-truth era. Launched to coincide with the final weeks of the 2020 election season, Citizen Literacy promotes essential information skills like algorithmic literacy, news literacy, how to evaluate expertise, how to investigate the veracity of online sources through lateral reading, and how to become an informed voter.

“We’re information gatekeepers, so this hits us on a personal level.”

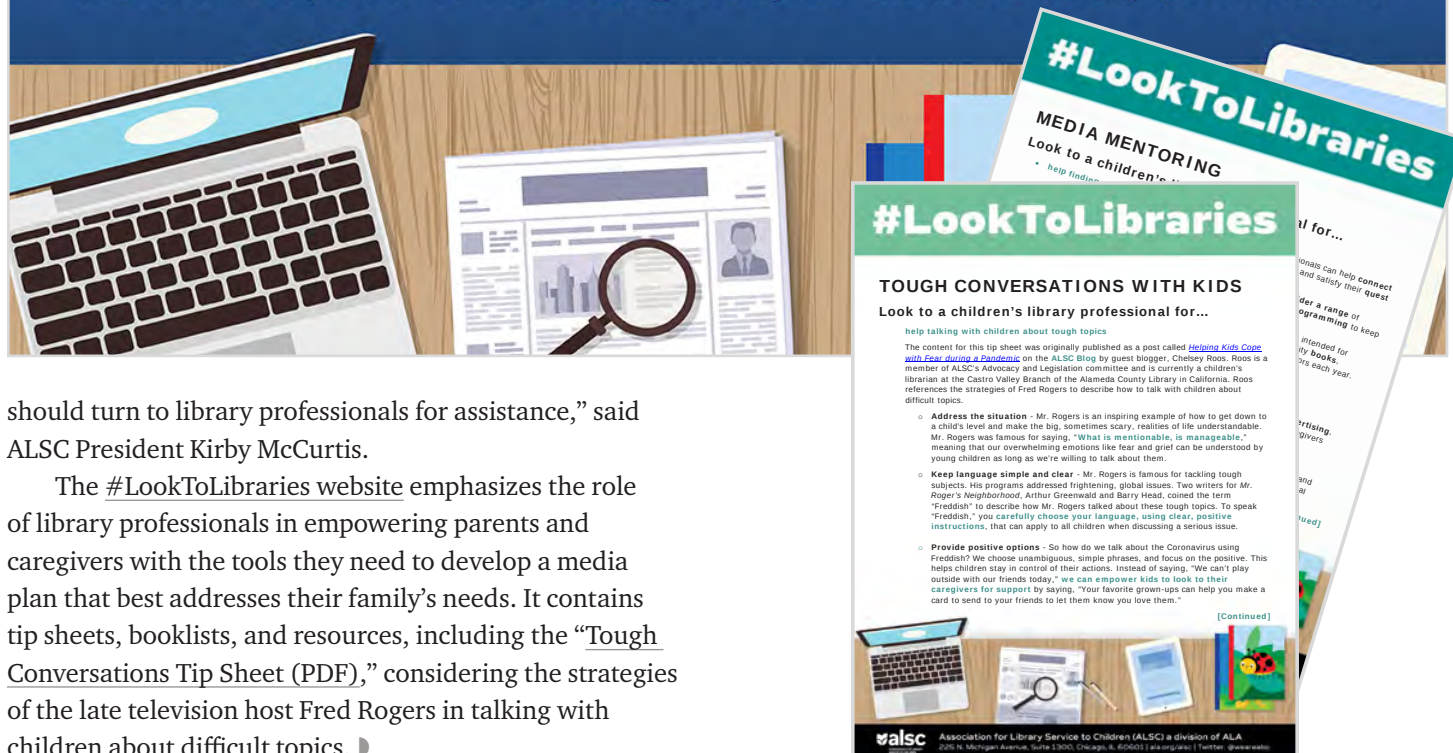
—LISA G. ROSENBLUM, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR OF KING COUNTY (WA)
LIBRARY SYSTEM.

LOOK TO LIBRARIES

In August, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of ALA, launched the #LookToLibraries campaign, highlighting the role of children’s librarians in serving as “media mentors” for kids and their parents and caregivers in times of crisis. “With families facing the increased pressures of needing to balance online learning, monitoring children’s activities, and for some, working from home, we felt it important to let them know they could and

#LookToLibraries

Discover the power of connecting with your children's library professional.



should turn to library professionals for assistance,” said ALSC President Kirby McCurtis.

The [#LookToLibraries website](#) emphasizes the role of library professionals in empowering parents and caregivers with the tools they need to develop a media plan that best addresses their family's needs. It contains tip sheets, booklists, and resources, including the “[Tough Conversations Tip Sheet \(PDF\)](#),” considering the strategies of the late television host Fred Rogers in talking with children about difficult topics. ▶

ALSC's #LookToLibraries campaign.

MEDIA LITERACY MATTERS

ALA, working with talented thought leaders across the library and media literacy sectors, created [Media Literacy in the Library: A Guide for Library Practitioners \(PDF\)](#) in November to aid library workers. The guide asserted that “a media-literate adult should be able to access, share, and create media across multiple formats and platforms while utilizing critical thinking skills to evaluate the purpose and potential impact of the material.”

The guide teaches library workers about filter bubbles, confirmation bias, and news deserts; gives guidance on how to answer questions about false or misleading news items in reference transactions; and supplies virtual and in-person program ideas covering topics like fact checking, cookies, internet privacy, the Freedom of Information Act, and local media.

