



Library Profile

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY

MILWAUKEE COUNTY, WISCONSIN

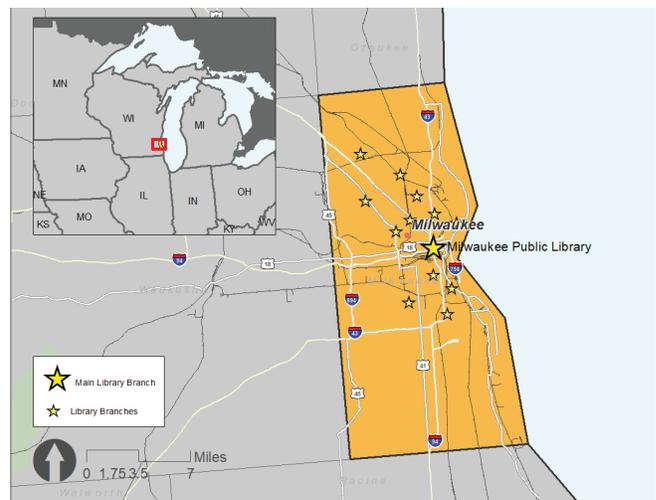
Library Profile: Milwaukee Public Library



MILWAUKEE COUNTY, WISCONSIN

The Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) is a large, complex library system that serves the city of Milwaukee. MPL has 14 physical locations throughout the city, including a large Central Library, and an annual budget of \$22,951,785 (2019). MPL is also a member of the broader Milwaukee County Federated Library System, which facilitates cooperation between member libraries throughout Milwaukee County. In 2019, MPL hosted 1,661,130 in-person visits and more than 742,051 website visits. Annual circulation in 2019 included 2,271,678 physical materials and more than 869,470 e-downloads and database retrievals.

MPL's overarching mission—"Inspiration starts here—we help people read, learn, and connect"—feeds into three organizational values that inform its activities: (1) Creating a city of readers and lifelong learners through an emphasis on 21st-century literacies; (2) Anchoring healthy and vibrant neighborhoods that are safe and connected, with successful business districts, quality of life, and cultural respect; and (3) Contributing to a strong Milwaukee: a strong economy and job market, an informed and educated workforce, and thriving families.



MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Milwaukee County has a population of 955,306; the city’s population is 592,025. The median household income is about \$45,263 a year, and the poverty rate is 16.7 percent, well above the national poverty rate. In Milwaukee County, just more than half of residents are White, more than

one-quarter are African American, and about 14 percent are Hispanic. Compared to Milwaukee County, residents in the city of Milwaukee are more racially diverse, earn far less income, and have a much greater share who live in poverty.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Merrimack County	147,715	8.4	93.4	1.1	1.9	1.7	1.9	\$67,181	5.5

Compared to other urban counties across the country, the K–12 educational sector in the city of Milwaukee experiences extremely high needs, reflected in students’ performance across a range of publicly available measures of success. Milwaukee County fell in the bottom quartile

of the School Effectiveness Index.¹ Health Care & Social Assistance, Manufacturing, Education Services, and Retail Trade are the largest employment sectors in the county, employing nearly half of all working adults.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Manufacturing	% Education Services	% Retail Trade
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	9.3	9.2	10.9
Milwaukee County	459,365	18.0	11.0	9.0	9.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

¹ Data elements included in the School Effectiveness Index, along with measures for Milwaukee County, can be found in the Technical Appendix.

SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In December 2019, the study team conducted interviews with 18 current library staff and representatives from 12 different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with MPL staff and partners focused on understanding the MPL programming and partnerships that support formal and informal learning as well as MPL's institutional approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create the network map included in this profile:

- 2018 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction training materials
- Public Library Annual Report
- 2018 Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 990 forms for the MPL Foundation
- Program evaluations for several MPL programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select MPL programming and partnerships that support access to formal and informal education and the overall educational capacity of the broader community
- MPL institutional approaches to measuring and assessing the contributions its efforts have in the local community
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections MPL maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

PROMOTING SOCIAL WELLBEING THROUGH SUPPORTS FOR FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION IN MILWAUKEE IS A CORE FUNCTION AT MPL

MPL staff who participated in the study repeatedly pointed to the library's focus on capacity building and deep community engagement as qualities that enhance overall formal and informal education throughout the city. MPL offers programs that address both formal education (e.g., homework help, adult educational programming, early childhood literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL) and cultural immersion classes, and informal education (e.g., makerspace programming; technology, science, and art workshops; workforce development trainings; and preventative health care education). These are targeted to the communities served by different branch libraries and reflect strong partnerships with area educators, community

groups, and service providers. Across different types of programs, MPL addresses formal and informal education by providing information and resources, building capacity among educational providers, and creating an inclusive and collaborative atmosphere in which to "read, learn, and connect."

MPL Supports for Early Childhood Education Promote Wellbeing of Children and Families and Build Capacity across the Sector

MPL's Ready to Read program illustrates a strong commitment to working in partnership with educators. The program has several relational components: In addition to branch programming for parents and young children, the library

also hosts free workshops for Early Childhood Education (ECE) practitioners (e.g., trainings on topics like early childhood brain development and literacy). These address an observed gap in the under-resourced Milwaukee ECE sector.²

The program also demonstrates MPL's commitment to working beyond its doors. As part of Ready to Read programming, the library sends skilled, practice-based coaches into the field to work directly with multiple childcare providers; each individual provider receives an hour of training per week. These coaches provide support, technical assistance, and professional development to providers. They also bring collaboratively developed curriculum and materials into the classroom to model high-quality ECE programming. The program targets underserved areas experiencing intergenerational poverty, with the aim of getting children "ready to read" by kindergarten.

Typically, the connection between a library and ECE is through story time or in-house library activities. Here, the focus shifts to building capacity among the adults in a child's life and within the community. This reflects MPL's strategic vision of "contributing to a strong Milwaukee" through supporting thriving families. MPL is viewed as a critical source of support in the field, as noted by the city's Office of Early Childhood Initiatives (OECI): "I see the library as the driver of early childhood programming. For infant, toddler, and group centers, there's not another entity you can turn to."

MPL works directly with the OECI, which was created in 2018 to ensure that Milwaukee children ages 0–3 have access to quality ECE programs. OECI's goals include engaging parents, supporting sustainable careers for ECE providers, improving access to high-quality childcare, and providing policy recommendations and programs that support these aims. The OECI office recently moved from

its initial location at the library to the mayor's office as a reflection of the importance of its work, although the director reports directly to MPL's executive director. This structure ensures alignment between the library and city-specific efforts to support early childhood literacy programming and avoids duplication.

MPL Promotes Wellbeing through Supports for Formal Education That Focus on Literacy, Increasing Access to Library Resources and Building the Capacity of Teachers and Out-of-School Time Providers

One of MPL's flagship programs is LibraryNow, a large-scale collaboration between MPL, the Milwaukee Public School District, and a number of charter schools in the city. LibraryNow provides full digital access to MPL's online resources for every teacher and student from grades 1–12. Every student is automatically set up with a digital library account by using their student ID number as their library card.

LibraryNow makes online tutoring, homework help, videos, writing labs, e-books, music, and other resources available to more than 70,000 students (roughly 90 percent of all Milwaukee Public School students) on any networked device. The program's success relies on library staff going into schools to work with educators in person. LibraryNow training is integrated into teachers' regular professional development schedules, and library staff conduct regular trainings on how to utilize LibraryNow in the classroom. Teachers receive their own accounts and are introduced to data sets and a range of online resources, from virtual science experiments to video series. This is a critical support in a public school system with tremendous needs. As a library staff member observed, "Everything we're trying to do is removing barriers to access . . . the major outcome is removing barriers between schools and libraries; we're both partners in the same overall process."

² For further information on the resource gap, see the State of Wisconsin's YoungStar Rating system for childcare centers at <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar>.

LibraryNow's success relies on close cooperation between partners. MPL and the school district formalized a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and data sharing agreement, and the program has expanded to some area charter schools. The process is instructive for other large institutions, and their model has been used by libraries in the rest of the state. A Milwaukee Public School District staff member noted that:

"Making two big institutions collaborate in this kind of way is super instructive. There was a fair amount of administrative bureaucratic work . . . but the payoff is high. We're creating access to resources to educate kids."

During the summer months, MPL's Summer Reading Program coordinates a Super Reader Squad program. About 25,000 children register each summer. A key part of engagement is MPL's partnership with the school district and out-of-school time providers like the Boys and Girls Club, 21st Century Learning Centers, community centers, and childcare camps that support summer reading. MPL contracts with teachers during the summer months to make weekly visits to summer programs throughout the city. MPL provides training to these contract teaching staff, who engage in a range of activities and supports, including "read-alouds," facilitating activities and sharing interesting books, and simply checking in with program staff.

MPL also provides training to partner programs on book selection, youth engagement, and professional development. Each summer program receives a "book bundle"—books specifically selected to be good "read-alouds"—and a "tub of books"—50–100 popular titles that students can access during the summer. Many of the students would not otherwise have access to these titles, or to the library, and librarians see this outreach as critical. As one librarian put it:

"One thing we are really aware of when training our [contract] staff is talking about—who are the frontline folks there and how do you support them and meeting them where they're at? That we're not perceived as the expert and the only ones that can do this."

The emphasis is on building confidence and capacity for partners in the field, providing curricular support around literacy, and making resources available and accessible. Getting children off on the right foot and providing adults with the skills they need to help children be ready to learn are both critically important foundations for the overall wellbeing of individuals and the broader community. Through facilitating partnerships, providing resources, and otherwise supporting educational providers in the field, MPL's educational focus promotes social wellbeing for its broader community.

MPL Libraries Facilitate a Diverse Range of Connections in Broader Community Networks That Support Social Wellbeing

MPL clearly defines its role and relationship to the broader educational network. By implementing its strategic plan, MPL aims to "create a city of readers" through developing a love of reading and a culture of interest in and enjoyment of books. To do this, librarians target dual audiences: providing direct service to children and concurrently building adults' capacity to support children's literacy development. MPL supports practitioners who might otherwise be overwhelmed or under-resourced, helping with programming and curriculum and coaching teachers on skills and content delivery.

The library inhabits a very different "lane" than its education partners—while curriculum mandates and standardized testing require teachers to spend time on technical aspects of reading skills, librarians are able to focus more on the creative, imaginative side of reading. A Milwaukee Public School staff member noted that:

"I think [MPL and the School District] complement each other. Certainly, having a district that has various professionals doing many specific roles, the library being a beacon of literacy and support for community access to resources, and a wealth of knowledge that can benefit these families and students . . . I haven't seen any places where it hasn't meshed. It's like a fine dance that has always been done really well."

MPL's commitment to promoting literacy in a range of creative ways enhances the social wellbeing of individuals and communities throughout the city. MPL also challenges and renegotiates traditional perceptions of the library through its commitment to community engagement and capacity building. Partners noted librarians' commitment to engage directly with surrounding neighborhoods and networks—as a host, convener, and leader. One partner explained:

"There's an absolute willingness to extend what they do, their true mission, and desire to help people. I think they're really committed to community and feel strongly about making connections and changing as times have changed."

MPL Designs Its Facilities to Be Integrated and Responsive to Its Neighborhoods' Social Wellbeing Needs

While MPL serves as a valued connector for partnerships, programs, and people, librarians are also active in finding and evaluating community needs and pursuing ways to make new initiatives happen. One innovative approach is the library's move toward rebuilding branches as mixed-use sites, including mixed-income and market-rate housing. This is in keeping with its strategic goal of "anchoring healthy and vibrant neighborhoods," encouraging successful business districts, quality of life, and cultural respect. Mixed-use developments save on operating costs but also redirect dollars back into neighborhoods. Perhaps most notably, MPL engages surrounding communities from the outset in the development process.

This was clear in the redevelopment of the Mitchell Street branch library, which is embedded in its neighborhood in a way that responds to local culture and needs. The building, a historic department store on Mitchell Street, was renovated into a state-of-the-art library, with a mix of 60 affordable and market-rate apartment units located on the top floors. As part of the redevelopment, librarians were tasked with going into the community and engaging teenagers, teachers, and residents around how the space could best serve the area and, in particular, its young people. The answers were overwhelmingly related to "jobs" and "space"—young people wanted spaces to build relevant college and career skills. The result was a makerspace that was designed in partnership with local teenagers: It includes resources for graphic design and technology training, a recording studio, a kitchen for community cooking classes, and space for art projects. The library offers daily open making time as well as programming led by facilitators and teen interns. Young people learn new skills and how these might apply to future college and career paths. They also develop relationships with positive mentors. There is a pronounced emphasis on informal education and creativity, as one library staff member noted: "We have this cohort of highly engaged teens who are learning in a different way and learning relevant skills in a different way."

Located in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, Mitchell Street also offers a variety of Spanish-language books, programming, and artwork. The branch reflects the neighborhood in which it is situated, is inclusive, and is culturally respectful. According to a library staff member, "It's a total integration into the community—we're working and living and coexisting with community."

A recent collaboration with the National Endowment for the Arts and a local organization—Artists Working in Education (AWE)—created Gathering Arts, Stories, and Place (GASP), which exemplified the branch's engagement with place. GASP supported two

artists in residence at Mitchell Street who worked with the surrounding community on projects that reflected local history and culture. GASP also supported a variety of programming around cultural placemaking and local history: Events highlighted the rich history of rapping and breakdancing in the '80s and '90s and featured stories about the Mitchell Street space and what the street used to look like. All the GASP programming centered around the community and connected back to the library in innovative ways.

MPL's new facilities, like the Mitchell Street branch, are all intentionally designed to be integrated into their neighborhoods and to tie into the social fabric of the city. Different branches work with different community partners to meet the unique needs of their neighborhoods, which include but are not limited to workforce development trainings with

Goodwill, community health access services with the city's Department of Health, immigrant and refugee services, a mobile legal clinic, environmental workshops, veteran outreach programs, and artist residencies.

Partners perceived the library's broad networks and geographic diversity as crucial for reaching their audiences. MPL also provides a platform for organizations to share their resources and skills. Partners identified how the library's reach has encouraged interagency networking and collaboration among, for instance, housing resources for homeless veterans, workforce development, and health. Milwaukee is made up of many diverse neighborhoods, and the branch libraries allow partners to reach residents in these places. The library facilities also provide common, safe spaces for people to meet within their neighborhoods.

MPL USES DATA TO TRACK OUTCOMES AND DOCUMENT IMPACTS

MPL programs routinely gather attendance data and stories of impact as well as participant satisfaction surveys. For instance, the Ready to Read program uses a survey where educators fill out an inventory of skills at the beginning and end of the program to gauge professional development. MPL also provides its ECE sites with standard tools of quality and indicators to help educators self-assess how they can improve their program in line with the state rating system. The Summer Reading Program also surveys site partner programs on the quality of their experience. LibraryNow tracks teacher account creation, the number of times that youth accounts have been used, and what resources students are using based on the LibraryNow web page. The school district and MPL also engaged an external consultant to conduct an evaluation of the LibraryNow program that was just getting underway at the time of the site visit. MPL has a robust system to track outputs: Yearly dashboards compile physical and digital circulation, program participation, training,

and consulting services. MPL tracks program contract costs, and externally funded programs are sometimes evaluated independently. Library staff routinely use the information collected through these efforts to better understand participants' experiences and preferences to inform and modify program offerings. There is also recognition among staff that this data could be used to improve internal processes and better understand programmatic impacts.

Library leaders and librarians widely expressed a desire to develop a more outcomes-based approach to assessment—and to do so in a systematic way. There was recognition that this approach would better shape programming and capture long-term impacts. To help the institution move from an outputs- to outcomes-oriented approach to assessment, MPL hired a data analyst in 2019 to strengthen and expand its capacity to collect and use data. This role will facilitate the connections between different data streams coming into the library in new ways.

MPL APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY REFLECT EVOLVING STAFFING AND FINANCIAL NEEDS

MPL is focused on responding to shifting skills and hiring practices within the library field. The library's increasingly flexible, outward-facing role—as a community connector and a nexus for health and education services and outreach—demands an adapted set of skills for librarians. Librarians suggested that experience in social work, early childhood, or adult education can prove just as valuable as a library degree. The institution is, therefore, experiencing a cultural shift in hiring priorities. As one librarian observed: “Change needs to be normal . . . if we're always responsive to community needs, opportunities, we shouldn't be standing still.”

Some suggested that librarians' roles could be restructured to be more externally facing, rather than just at the reference desk, “meeting people where they are.” MPL is designing a reinvented service philosophy training for staff that reflects its commitment to public service and community engagement.

Financial sustainability is supported primarily by the city budget and supplemented by the MPL Foundation, which supports much of the outward-facing work the library does. Library leadership expressed interest in moving toward a more academic model of diversifying funding streams. Program coordinators are increasingly responsible for finding grants to fund their programming, and program budgets must be costed out to include staff members' time, materials, external consultants, and other direct and indirect costs. This approach has the potential to create new internal positions for specific projects, rather than adding on to existing roles. Instead of doing one job and supporting half a dozen programs, librarians' time will be used and budgeted more intentionally by specific funding streams. The goal is that both dollars and time are used and accounted for more effectively.

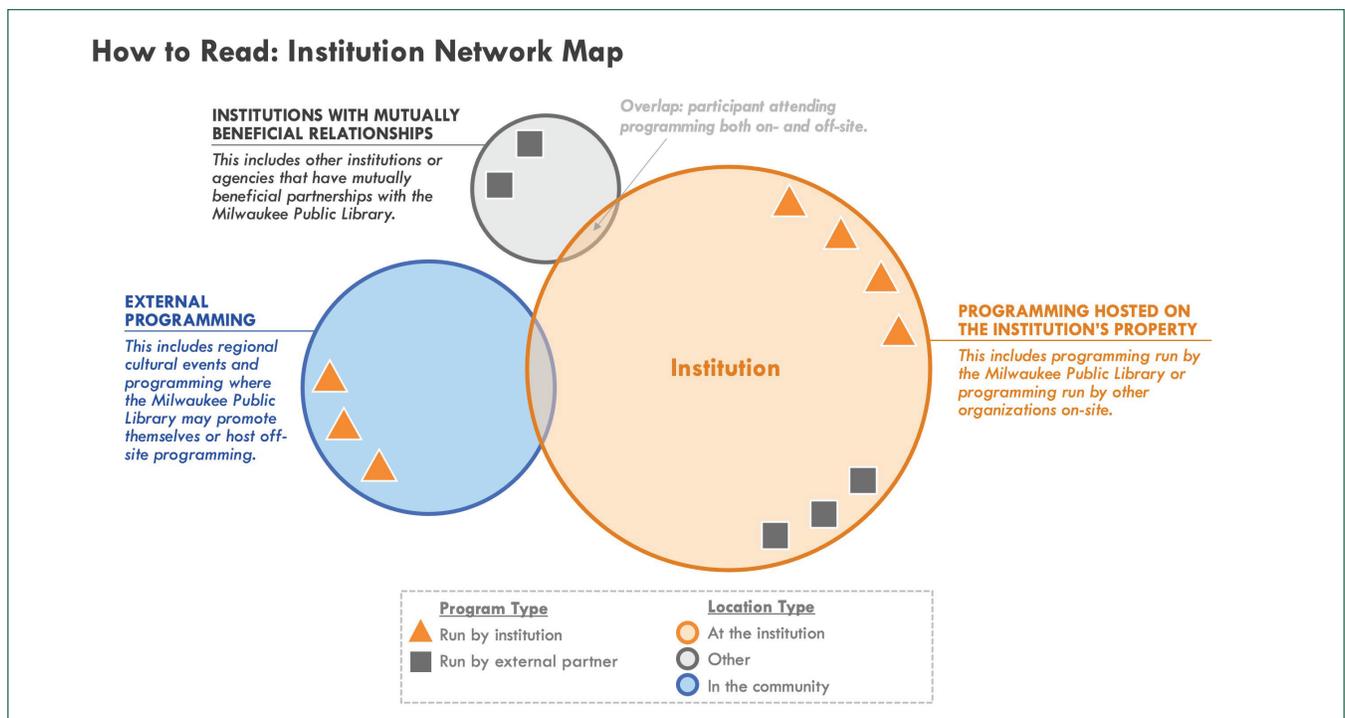
MPL's commitment to integrating an outcomes-based approach to data and its move toward externally facing staffing practices are designed to improve the effectiveness of its programming and partnerships as well as best position MPL to serve as a community connector. This has implications for how MPL contributes to social wellbeing. Social wellbeing flows through the social connections that MPL maintains and facilitates between individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions across Milwaukee. Whether the library is leading specific programs or initiatives, collaborating with a local partner to meet a specific need, or just providing a space for people and groups to meet—the libraries themselves provide spaces for these connections to happen. These connections strengthen the community's collective ability to sustain itself, care for its members, and thrive into the future. MPL's range of programs also shows that MPL is skilled in identifying community social wellbeing needs and creating targeted responses to those needs, whether it be in ECE, workforce development, or youth outreach and engagement. MPL's work impacts multiple facets of individuals' lives that collectively inform the capacity of those individuals—and their communities—to live a good life, making them a key driver of social wellbeing.

MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY NETWORK MAP

Using data provided by MPL, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections that MPL maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between MPL and those entities that offer programming at the library branches

and those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the library, and it includes examples of off-site, library-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the library's programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the library maintains.

NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between MPL and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the library in different ways.



Milwaukee Public Library Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the 6,392 programs offered across MPL's 12 locations. Within the orange circle are a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the institution, both programs produced by the institution, and those produced by others. These are organized in terms of key program areas identified by MPL. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by MPL and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other regional organizations that have reciprocal relationships with the library.