



NOVEMBER 2024

MUCH MORE THAN BOOKS

The case for robust funding for the Toronto Public Library

Carolina Aragão



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
ONTARIO OFFICE

Much more than books

The case for robust funding for the Toronto Public Library

Executive Summary 1

Torontonians and the Toronto Public Library—a love story 4

Recent history of the Toronto Public Library 6

The social role of libraries 7

Popularity contest 9

Circulation 9

Library users: who they are 10

Visits 13

Investment in programming and extended hours 16

Toronto Public Library’s financial impact 18

The TPL budget 18

Toronto Public Library staff: trends and experience 22

How to finance a thriving Toronto Public Library 25

A new framework for municipal finances 26

Provincial transfers: talk vs. action 26

Conclusion 29

Notes 31

Executive Summary

The Toronto Public Library is a vital institution that is deeply integrated into the cultural, social, and intellectual life of Torontonians. It not only provides access to knowledge but also plays a crucial role in supporting the community through programs that enrich lives, improve digital literacy, and help residents navigate the complexities of modern life.

Despite its critical role, the Toronto Public Library's budget has been stagnant at a time when the system faces growing pressures. Library funding has not kept pace with increased social needs and rising operational costs, leaving the library vulnerable as it confronts challenges such as aging infrastructure. At the same time, as population grows and unmet social demands rise, library staff are being asked to do more with limited resources, stretching the system's capacity to serve the public effectively.

Currently, the library depends overwhelmingly on the City of Toronto for its operational and capital funding. Over the past decade, provincial transfers have decreased, leaving the library increasingly reliant on constrained municipal resources.

- In 1992, the Provincial Library Operating Grant provided 6.3 per cent of the Toronto Public Library budget. In 2013, that number was just 2.4 per cent.

While investment from the City of Toronto has kept the library's overall inflation-adjusted revenue (although not its revenue per Torontonian) roughly unchanged, the over-reliance on city funding imposes several

constraints on the Toronto Public Library. Like every Canadian municipality, Toronto has few tools available to raise revenue, putting it in a vulnerable position when it comes to funding investment in services, including library systems.

At the same time, the Toronto Public Library is a beloved and popular institution, receiving more in-person visitors annually than the city's top tourist attractions. In 2023, data shows that:

- Toronto's libraries lend more materials overall and have a higher per capita circulation rate than those in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.
- 90 per cent of city residents agreed that the Toronto Public Library is "an important resource" for the community.
- 81 per cent of city residents use city libraries' services and facilities.
- The use of library services is highly democratic, with usage cutting across all income lines.
- Library branches had over 12 million in-person visits in 2023 and almost 1.2 million registered cardholders.
- The Toronto Public Library attracts more annual visitors than the Distillery District, the CN Tower, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Casa Loma and the Hockey Hall of Fame combined.
- Seventy-five per cent of users accessed its collections, while 50 per cent used branches for reading, studying, or access to technology.
- Over 740,000 participants attended more than 34,000 in-person and virtual programs and events.

Libraries play a crucial role in communities by fostering learning, civic development, and intellectual freedom. They provide educational spaces for all ages, support disadvantaged groups through digital literacy and skill-building programs, and serve the public's interests in ways that private platforms cannot. In cities like Toronto, where income inequality is evident, libraries act as inclusive spaces that bring together diverse populations.

As a cultural and intellectual asset, the Toronto Public Library also has a significant impact on Toronto's economy and productivity. Indeed, studies have shown that:

- The Toronto Public Library generates over \$1 billion in economic impact for the city.
- Each dollar invested in the Toronto Public Library returns \$5.63 in value to city residents.

For the Toronto Public Library to continue thriving and serving city residents, the provincial government must align its financial support with its professed enthusiasm for libraries. Queen's Park has consistently emphasized economic growth as a priority for the province, and the Toronto Public Library is a key agent of economic development within Ontario's largest city. By allocating more resources to libraries, Ontario can ensure the Toronto Public Library continues to serve as a pillar of the community, fostering inclusion, education, and productivity.

Torontonians and the Toronto Public Library—a love story

We live in an age of information abundance, where anyone with access to the Internet can search for, and find, extensive and detailed information about almost anything from almost anywhere. Despite this, libraries—the original institutions for sharing knowledge and wisdom—remain vital to the well-being of communities around the world. Public libraries are accessible, inclusive spaces for all city residents and stand as a critical resource in times of social and economic change.¹ Programs and strategies put in place by public libraries change lives for the better and, as such, they are essential community institutions, deeply embedded in the local cultural and social fabric.²

At nominal cost to the public purse, public libraries make knowledge free for all.

In a city as diverse as Toronto, where over 200 languages are spoken and people from all walks of life coexist, the Toronto Public Library (TPL) serves as a unifying force where everyone can feel included and supported. Library branches are places of learning and connection, but

also places where Torontonians find help navigating the complexities of modern life. Library staff provide information to patrons that may help them find work, access health care, and connect to a wide range of public services. The library is also a haven, a place to escape the stresses of daily life and— not infrequently— bad weather.

The Toronto Public Library is an active participant in the city’s cultural and intellectual life and Torontonians recognize its value. In 2023, 90 per cent of city residents agreed that the Toronto Public Library was “an important resource” for the community.³ In addition, library users also reported a high degree of satisfaction with the availability of books and other materials and with the library’s programs and classes. Whether by offering language classes for newcomers, story sessions for children, or study spaces for students, the 100 library branches spread across the city provide resources and services that enrich the lives of residents.⁴

In this report, we look at the social role of public libraries, the recent history of the Toronto Public Library, and how the Toronto library system performs with respect to number of visitors, material lending, program implementation, and other metrics. We cover Toronto Public Library budget trends and the current financial landscape and propose policy alternatives to ensure a thriving, well-resourced library system for all Torontonians.

Recent history of the Toronto Public Library

While the Toronto Public Library first opened its doors in 1883, the city library system as we know it today is the result of a restructuring process led by the government of former Premier Mike Harris, which forced the amalgamation of six municipalities into the new City of Toronto in 1998. This reorganization consolidated the five suburban library systems with the existing downtown Toronto Public Library, creating a single system.

The consolidation exacerbated funding struggles that the six municipalities' systems had been facing since the early 1990s. While the newly formed Toronto Public Library progressively recovered with reinvestments in materials, facilities, and extended opening hours, it became again the focal point of a crisis when the city government proposed a 10 per cent cut to the TPL budget as part of broader austerity measures in the early 2010s.⁵

The proposed cuts triggered the “Our Public Library” campaign, in which city residents showed themselves to be fiercely protective of their library and more than willing to fight for its services. The campaign succeeded—to a degree—pushing city council to reduce the scope and scale of the proposed cuts. However, budget cuts did occur at that time, and stagnant operating budgets and declining provincial support ever since remain substantial challenges for the system.

The social role of libraries

Libraries lay at the intersection of cultural, educational and social policies⁶ and, as such, they play several key roles within communities. Policy specialist Amy Garmer clusters the main functions of libraries into three main groups: (1) platforms for learning and innovation, fostering spaces for child, student, and adult learning; (2) infrastructures of civic development, providing social support for disadvantaged groups and access to infrastructure and programs for digital literacy and skill development; and (3) champions of intellectual freedom, i.e., the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society that respects each individual's rights to privacy and choice.

From an urban perspective, libraries are also sites of resistance that defy the logic of haves and have-nots, which characterizes cities like Toronto, where tent cities sit at the foot of bank towers and income inequality is on daily display. Public libraries bring together individuals from all ages, races, ethnicities, and classes. They are among the last public spaces that create opportunities for cross-class solidarity and offer support for vulnerable and marginalized city residents, providing a welcoming space for all in an urban landscape that is highly privatized and transactional,⁷ in which money opens doors and the lack of money keeps them firmly shut.

Because libraries are welcoming and open spaces, they also serve an important role for promoting social participation, cultural integration, and community ties for new immigrants. Libraries offer language classes as well as access to materials and programs that help immigrants navigate life in a new country.⁸ These services are essential for newly arrived groups and are particularly relevant in Toronto: in the 2021 census, immigrants who had arrived in the past five years made up more than 15 per cent of the total population born overseas and seven per cent of the Toronto population as a whole.⁹

The Toronto Public Library's 100 branches provide a wide range of physical spaces and activities tailored to the specific needs of several demographics and their local communities and neighbourhoods within the city. These spaces offer versatile environments for work, study, relaxation, recreation, and social interaction, and are an essential part of the daily life of many city residents.

A recent study showcases the multiple ways Torontonians use their library's services. These results show that in 2023, over 75 per cent of library users accessed Toronto Public Library's physical or digital collections through books, newspapers, CDs and movies. In addition, half of users visited branches to read, study, access the internet, or use tools like 3D printers and recording studios. Library programs like after-school clubs, personal finance workshops, and digital learning hubs are accessed by a smaller share of users (22 per cent) but were still seen as highly valuable experiences for both personal and professional development.¹⁰

Finally, beyond serving as a space for gathering, learning, and exploration, library users also say the Toronto Public Library branches are safe and inclusive environments for all community members.¹¹ As the number of unhoused individuals and residents experiencing various forms of social and economic distress keep rising, Toronto libraries are also increasingly spaces of shelter and refuge during difficult times. Recognizing this growing social role, in 2018 TPL hired its first full-time social worker tasked with supporting users experiencing homelessness.¹²

Popularity contest

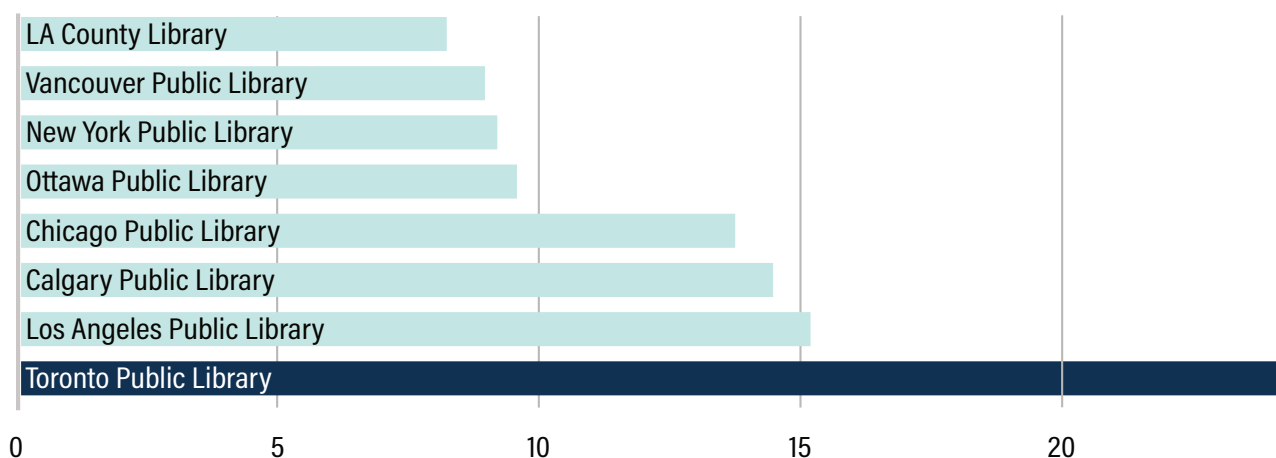
An overview of performance metrics and programs

In addition to being an essential and beloved city institution, Toronto Public Library is also a world-leading organization in several areas.

Circulation

One important indicator to assess library performance is circulation, which measures the lending of library materials—both digital and physical, such as books, audiobooks, and DVDs—to city residents. In this area, TPL consistently outperforms other major library systems in Canada and the United States. Toronto’s libraries lend more materials overall and have a higher per capita circulation rate than those in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.

Figure 1 / Library material circulation of busiest library systems in Canada and the United States, in millions

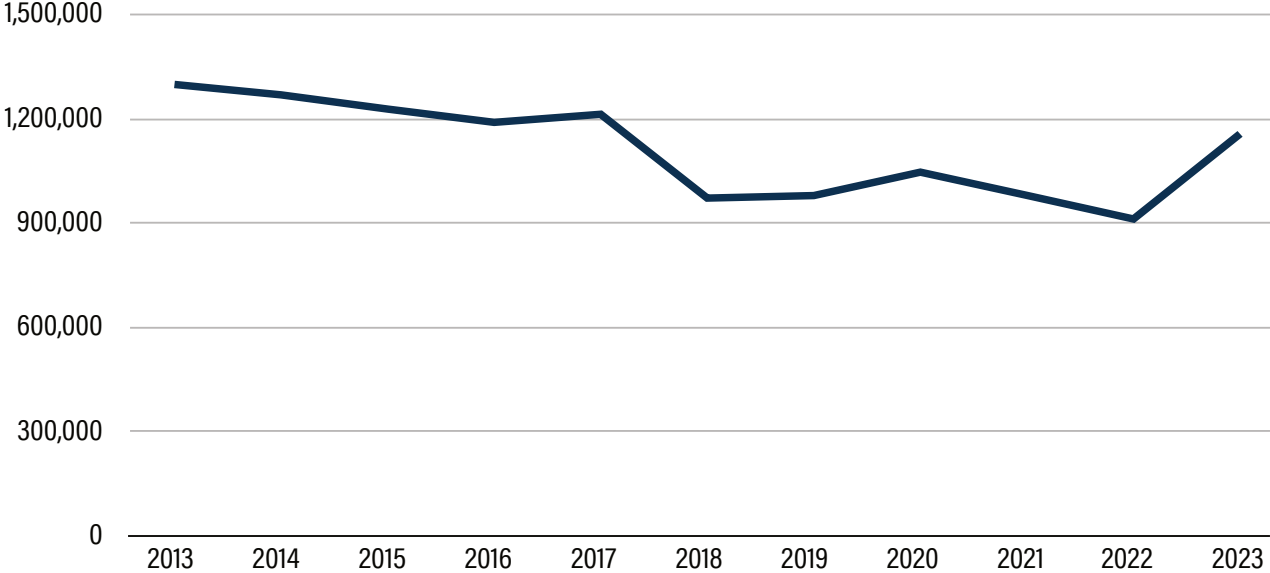


Source: U.S. Public Libraries Survey (2021) and Canadian Public Library Statistics (2022). Statistics (2022).

Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest million.

The number of cardholders also offers a valuable metric for assessing population engagement with the library system. These trends show that, following a period of decline during the pandemic, the number of active Toronto Public Library cardholders is steadily rising, signaling renewed interest in library services as the city recovers. In 2023, TPL registered over 1.16 million cardholders, representing approximately 37 per cent of the city’s population.

Figure 2 / Number of registered cardholders

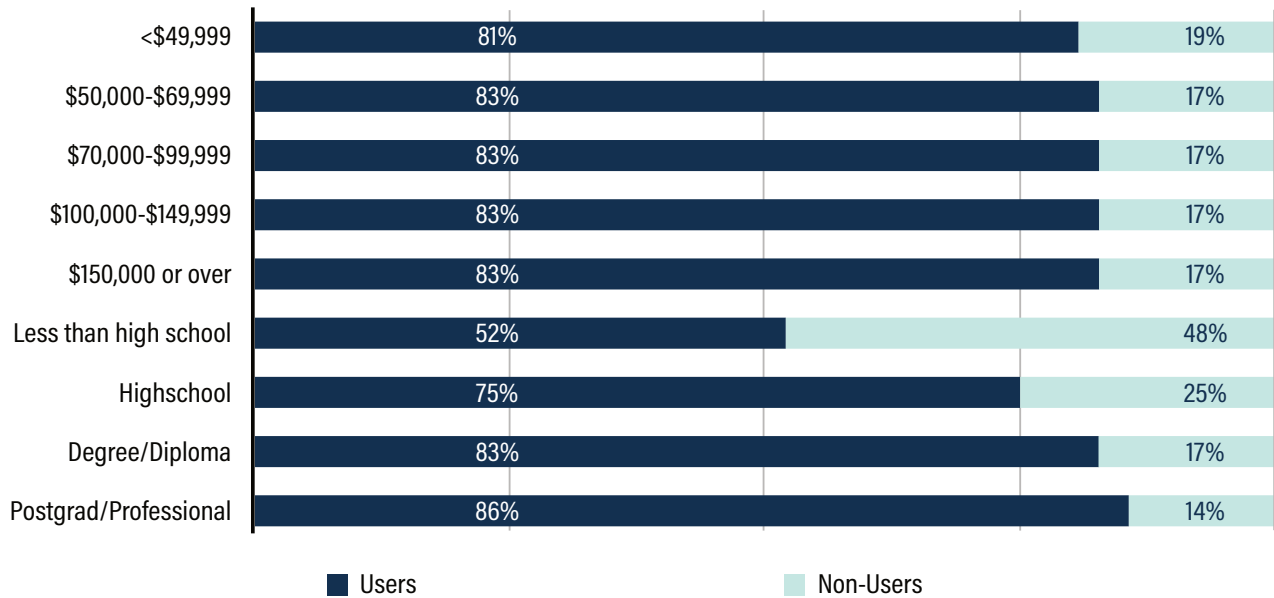


Source: Toronto Public Library Public Service Statistics, Trends & Comparisons.

Library users: who they are

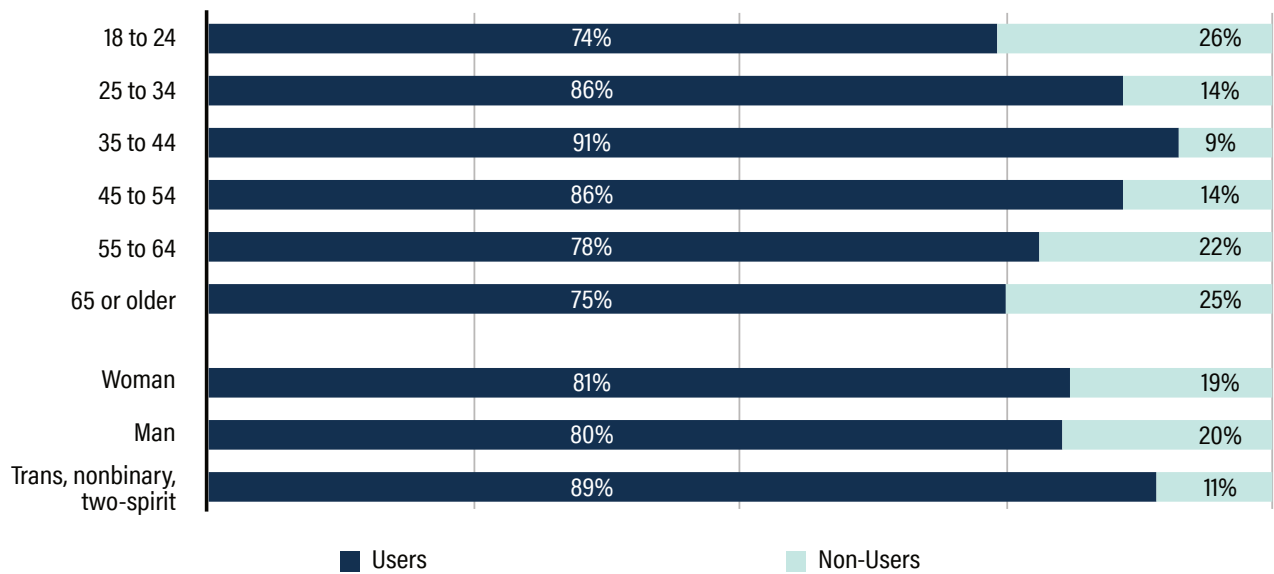
While card membership is a tool to estimate engagement with libraries, it clearly underestimates overall engagement since library services are also used by non-card holders. Looking at library usage beyond card membership, surveys carried out by the Toronto Public Library show that 81 per cent of city residents have used city libraries’ services and facilities in the past year.

Figure 3 / Library users and non-users, by income and educational attainment



Source: Strategic Plan 2025-2029: Results of Survey of Toronto Residents, 2001-2024.

Figure 4 / Library users and non-users, by age and gender



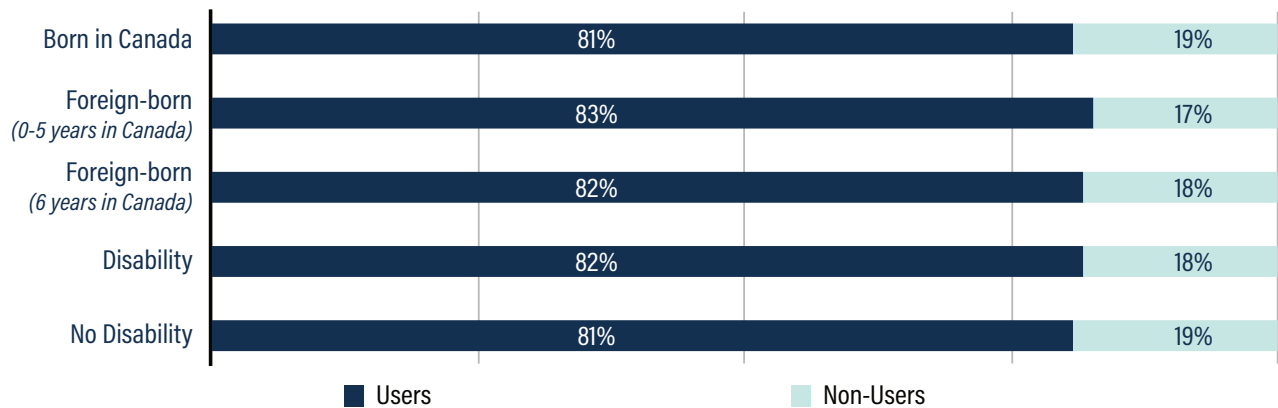
Source: Strategic Plan 2025-2029: Results of Survey of Toronto Residents, 2001-2024.

An analysis of users' profiles from 2001 to 2024 also shows the broad appeal of the Toronto library system, with usage cutting across all income lines.

Age-wise, survey results show that library engagement peaks among those aged 35 to 44, with 91 per cent saying they have used library services in the past year, followed closely by the 25-34 and 45-54 age groups. Library usage is lower among younger and older Torontonians, with about three-quarters of city locals aged 18-24 and 65 or older saying they have used the library.

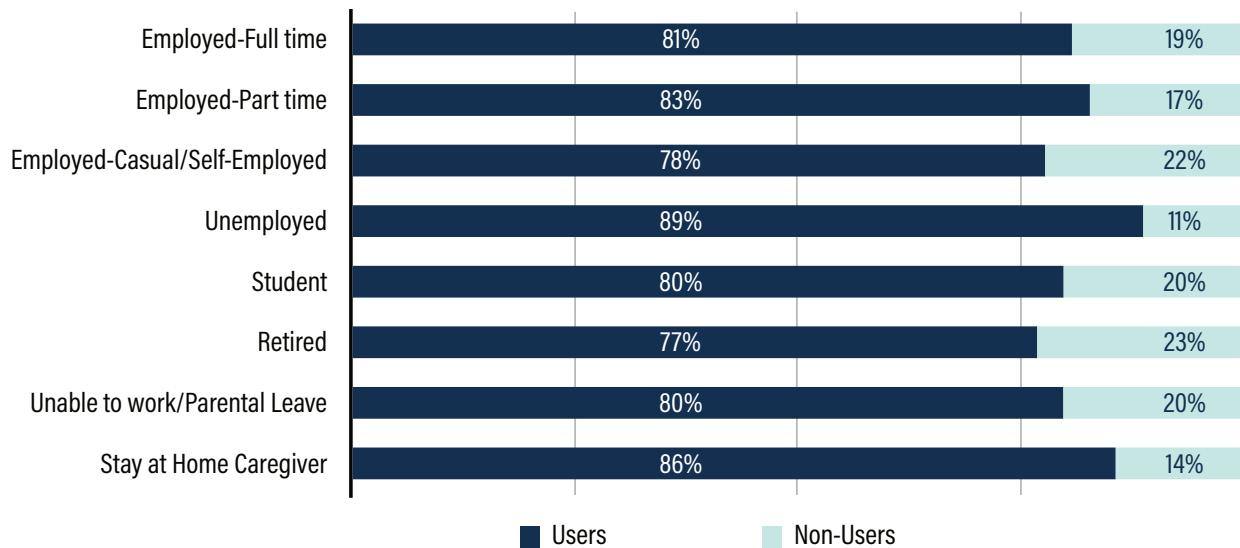
Although usage is similar across earning levels, city residents with a college diploma or university degree are significantly more likely to be users than those with less than a high-school education. In addition, while there is virtually no difference in library usage by male and female city residents, about nine in 10 Torontonians identifying as transgender, non-binary or two-spirit say they are library users, emphasizing the role of the Toronto Public Library as a welcoming space for traditionally marginalized communities.

Figure 5 / Library users and non-users, by country of origin and by disability status



Source: Strategic Plan 2025-2029: Results of Survey of Toronto Residents, 2001-2024

Figure 6 / Library users and non-users, by employment status



Source: Strategic Plan 2025-2029: Results of Survey of Toronto Residents, 2001-2024.

There are few differences in library use by country of origin or disability status. Very high usage is observed among unemployed residents and stay-at-home caregivers.

While these patterns highlight the broad appeal of the Toronto Public Library across various demographic groups, they also suggest potential areas for increased outreach and potential service investment, particularly among younger and older adults and those with less than a high school education.

Visits

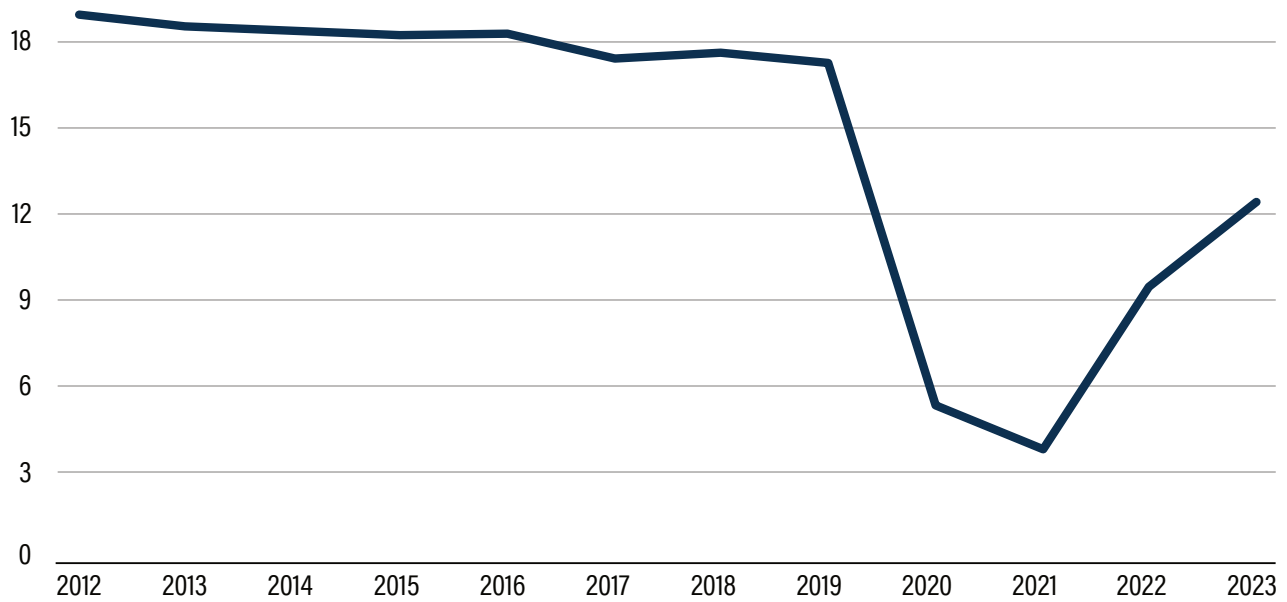
In recent decades, the Toronto Public Library has also expanded its services beyond traditional material lending, providing educational programs, digital resources, and community spaces that cater to a wide range of interests and needs. By targeting the interests of the population and increasing the catalogue of digital materials, the Toronto Public Library received over 46 million total visits (in-branch and digital) in 2023,

an 11 per cent increase when compared to 2022, and close to the levels of attendance recorded before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³

Looking only at in-branch visits, in 2023, city library branches received more than 12.5 million visitors. Branch visits are an important metric to assess in-person service and are influenced by library programming and in-person services such as access to materials, technology, and use of study spaces.

While the number of visits dipped in the past years due to pandemic shutdowns in 2020 and 2021, library visits started to rise again in 2022 and 2023 during the subsequent recovery process.

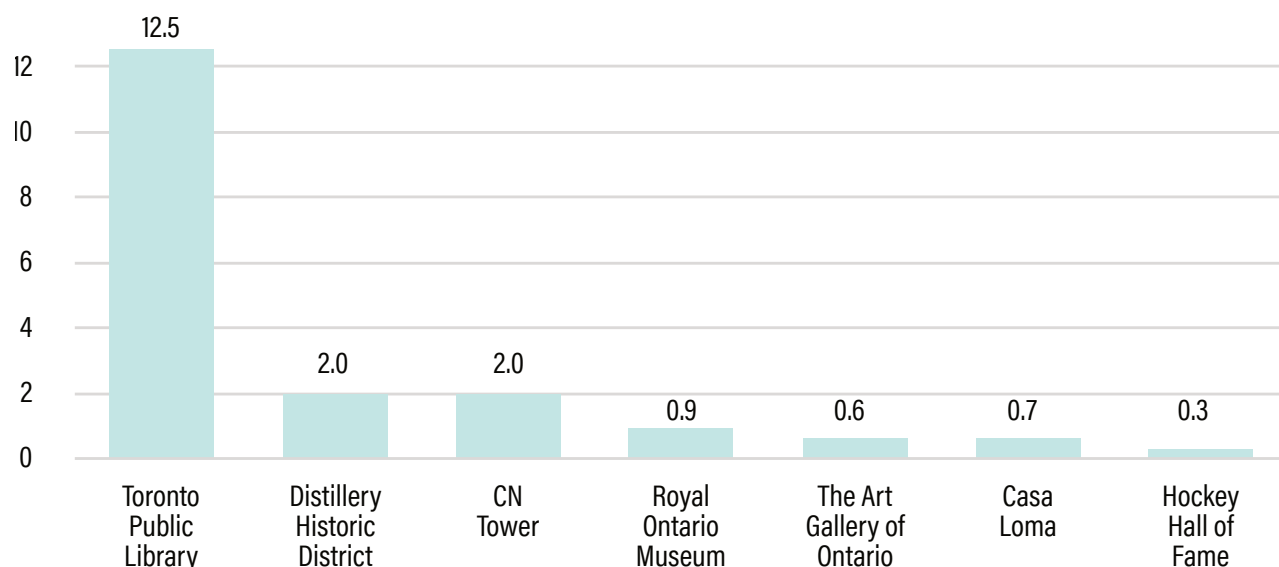
Figure 7 / Total number of branch visits, in millions



Source: Toronto Public Library Public Service Statistics, Trends & Comparisons.

To estimate the popularity of Toronto libraries, we compare the number of Toronto Public Library branch visits to other top tourist attractions across the city.

Figure 8 / Number of in-person visits—Toronto Public Library vs. major tourist attractions, in millions, 2023

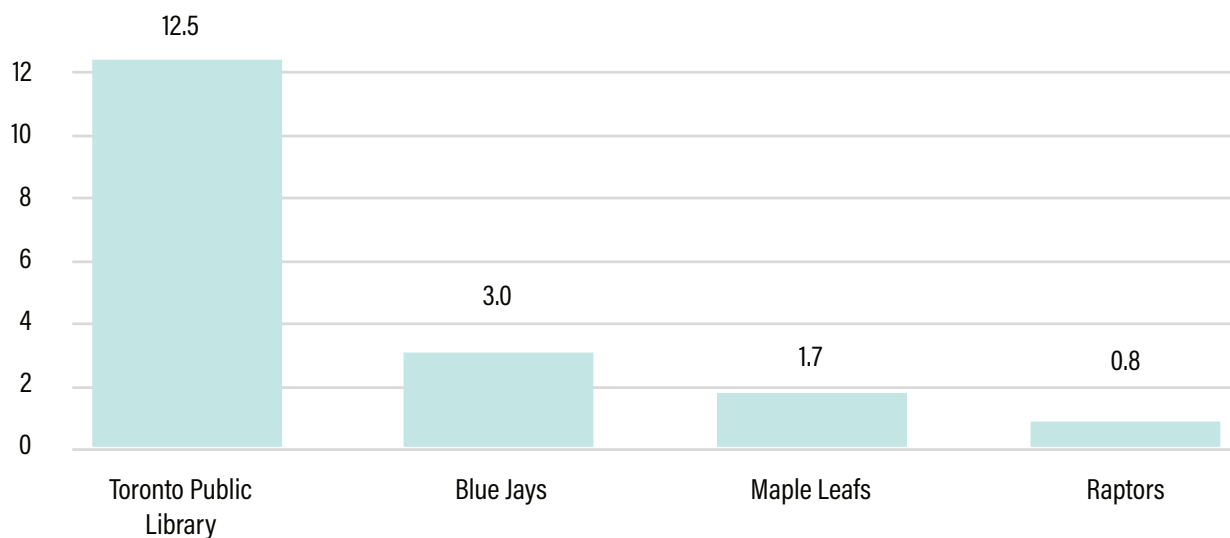


Source: Royal Ontario Museums 2022- 2023 review; Destination Ontario; Kvia News; Art Gallery of Ontario 2022-2023 review; Casa Loma website; Destination Toronto.

This analysis shows that the Toronto Public Library attracts more annual visitors than other major cultural, arts, and entertainment venues in the Toronto area. This includes popular destinations such as the Distillery District, the CN Tower, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Casa Loma and the Hockey Hall of Fame. However, while these attractions either charge entrance fees (all except the Distillery District) or provide private services, Toronto Public Library branches are free, democratic institutions open to all city residents.

Library visits also surpass by far the attendance of games played by the city’s major sports teams, further demonstrating TPL’s popularity among city residents.

Figure 9 / Number of Toronto Public Library in-person visits vs. attendance at games (home and away) of major sports teams, in millions, 2023



Source: hockey-reference.com, baseball-reference.com, and basketball-reference.com.

Investment in programming and extended hours

Promoting service diversification beyond material lending, the Toronto Public Library continues to invest in programming. In 2023, 741,298 participants attended over 34,000 in-person and virtual programs and events. There is growing public demand for these services, with average attendance rising for both in-person (27 per cent) and virtual (18 per cent) options when compared to the previous year.

Toronto Public Library programs seek to meet the demands and interests of several groups. They include initiatives comprising after-school clubs for children with extracurricular activities and programs, the availability of career coach appointments for young adults, classes in areas like 3D design, video and audio recording and editing, introduction

to software and coding, and seminars to support small business owners and entrepreneurs.

Participants attending Toronto Public Library programs highly rate their experience. TPL programs stand out for offering rich intellectual and emotional experiences, providing attendees with knowledge, encouraging reflection, and creating a sense of emotional connection. They also play a significant role in sparking creativity and motivating people to take on new creative projects, highlighting these programs' ability to inspire personal growth.

Interviews with participants also showcase the social impact of Toronto Public Library programs, which create opportunities for conversations, community building, and empathy. Participants say the welcoming environment of these programs helped them through personal challenges and created a safe space for connection with others going through similar life experiences, like parenthood.¹⁴ Another initiative of the system is the expansion of branches' open hours, which will significantly increase branches' service hours between 2024 and 2026 while expanding Monday-to-Saturday hours and the numbers of branches offering Sunday service.¹⁵

The extension of library open hours will provide greater access to educational resources, community programs, and digital services, providing more flexibility for users with multiple needs, such as working individuals, students, and families.

TPL initially planned to roll out this initiative in three phases from 2024 to 2026, increasing the provision of staff and resources across multiple branches.¹⁶ Mayor Olivia Chow recently reinforced the City's commitment to expand library hours, unveiling an updated proposal that seeks to provide seven-day-a-week service at all library branches by July 2026.¹⁷

Toronto Public Library's financial impact

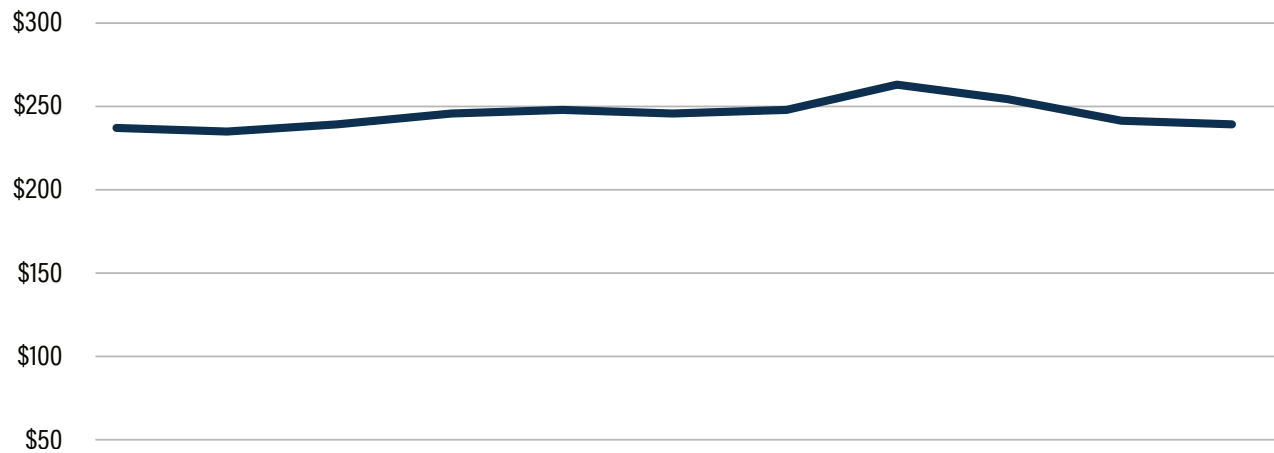
Besides serving a central community role for Toronto residents from all sections of the population, the Toronto Public Library is an investment with incredible economic returns. In 2013, a study from the Martin Prosperity Institute showed that the library system generates over \$1 billion in economic impact for the city, with each dollar invested in the funding of the Toronto Public Library returning \$5.63 to Toronto city residents. A significant portion of this impact derived from the library's extensive collection, with findings showing that for each open hour, branches generate a return to Torontonians of nearly four times the cost of keeping them open.^{18, 19}

The same study also showed that, in addition to concrete financial returns, TPL also fosters broader economic growth for the city by creating opportunities for lifelong learning, skill development, and workforce training, making the Toronto Public Library a key institution of Toronto's sustainable economic success.

The TPL budget

While investing in the Toronto Public Library provides great value for money, its inflation-adjusted operating budget has hardly changed over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2023, TPL's budget has oscillated between \$232 and \$250 million (in 2023 dollars), peaking during the pandemic years.

Figure 10 / Total operating budget, constant 2023 dollars, in millions



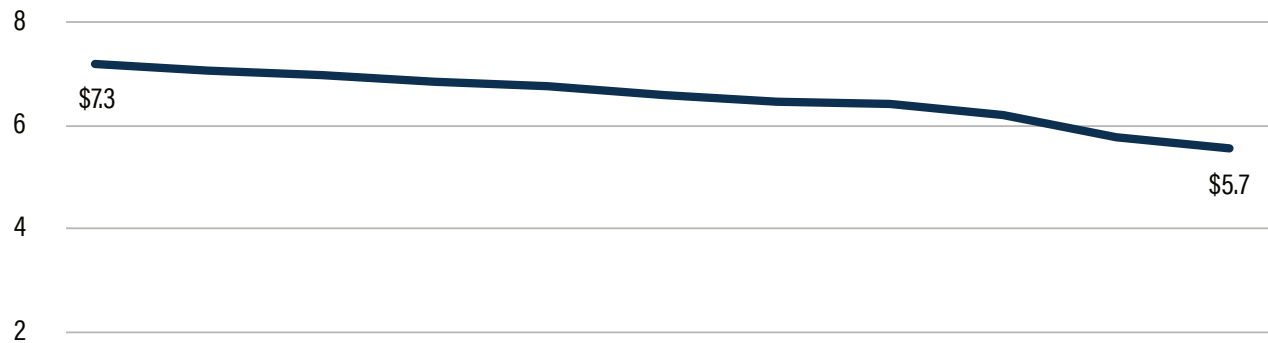
Source: Toronto Public Library Finance Reports. Note: Estimates rounded to the nearest million.

In 2023, the total operating budget of the library system was \$234.6 million. While the inflation-adjusted operating budget of the Toronto Public Library has remained virtually unaltered in the past decade, an analysis of the TPL operating budget on a per capita basis—i.e., spending per city resident—tells a more complicated story.

Between 2013 and 2021, the TPL budget per city resident oscillated yearly following changes in population and funding. In the past two years, however, the budget per capita has consecutively declined, a result of funding reductions post-pandemic coupled with population growth. (It is important to note that the period under analysis does not include the deepest cuts to the library budget made during the mayoralty of Rob Ford in the early 2010s, from which the library system is still recovering.²⁰)

While population growth in Toronto increases pressures for all services, including libraries, the provincial government has not stepped up to improve the financial picture for the Toronto Public Library. Indeed, the share of TPL revenue coming from provincial transfers has steadily declined over the years.

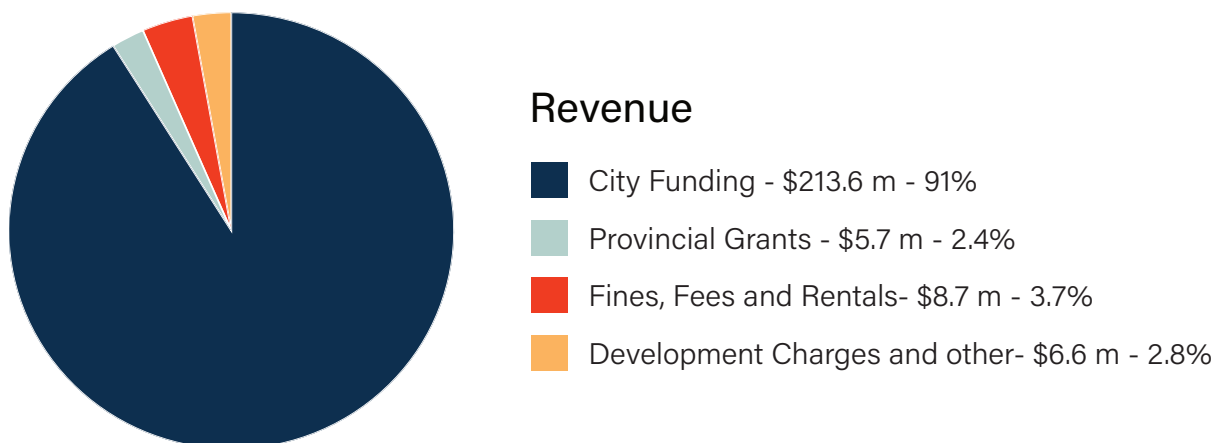
Figure 11 / Transfers from the Provincial Library Operating Grant, constant 2023 dollars, in millions



Source: Toronto Public Library Finance Reports.

A decomposition of the Toronto Public Library 2023 operating budget shows that the City of Toronto is the main funding source for the system, contributing 91 per cent of total revenue. Fines, fees and room rentals are the second-largest funding source at 3.7 per cent, followed by development charges and “other” (2.8 per cent). Currently, the Provincial Library Operating Grant is the smallest source of TPL funding, contributing only 2.4 per cent of its budget. In 1992, provincial funding accounted for 6.3% of Toronto’s libraries’ budgets, almost three times the current allocation.

Figure 12 / Sources of revenue of the Toronto Public Library, 2023, in \$millions



Source: Toronto Public Library Finance reports

While investment from the City of Toronto has kept the library's overall inflation-adjusted revenue (although not its revenue per Torontonians) roughly unchanged, the over-reliance on city funding imposes several constraints on the Toronto Public Library. With few financial tools at its disposal beyond the property tax and user fees, Toronto is heavily constrained in its ability to raise its own revenue, putting it in a vulnerable position when it comes to funding progressive investment in services, including library systems.

The current financial circumstances of the Toronto Public Library show an institution in need of support. In 2023, the Toronto Public Library faced substantial budget challenges, beginning with a council-approved operating budget that fell significantly short of the library's request. This shortfall, coupled with lingering effects from the pandemic, created \$5.013 million in unfunded budget pressures, largely related to a combination of necessary spending on the rehiring of staff and declining revenues from printing and venue rentals. To remedy the situation, the library implemented cost-saving measures through tighter attendance management, reduced discretionary spending, and close monitoring of payroll and operating costs, but still ended with a projected year-end deficit of approximately \$6.5 million.²¹

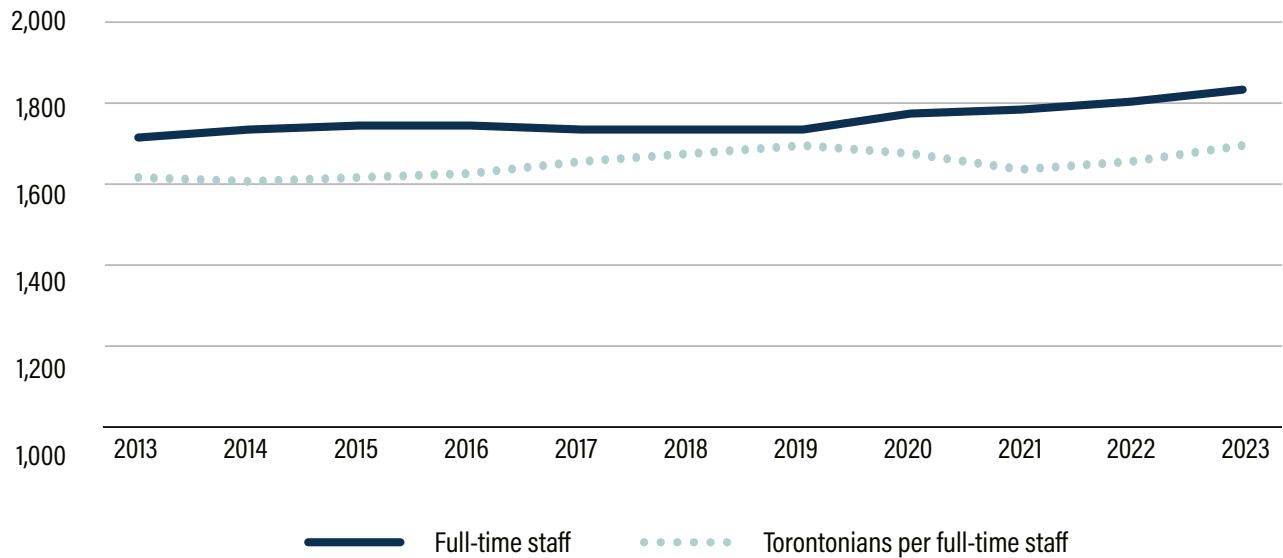
Current budget constraints not only hinder investments in the expansion and improvement of services but also challenge the Toronto Public Library's ability to maintain its ongoing operations. Over the next 10 years, the city's libraries will need an estimated \$197.6 million to attend to its aging infrastructure. This funding is crucial for branch renovations, structural maintenance, upgrades to building systems, and accessibility retrofits, all of which are essential to keeping the library system functional and up to date.²²

Toronto Public Library staff: trends and experience

A breakdown of the 2023 budget shows that most library resources (72 per cent) go into staff salaries and benefits.

In 2023, the Toronto Public Library employed 2,400 staff, with 1,838 of these positions filled by full-time workers. Looking at trends in full-time staff over time, despite the significant growth in library programming and current plans to expand library hours, full-time library staff levels have not largely changed since 2013. In addition, the incremental growth in full-time staff has not kept up with population growth; in 2023, full-time library workers served about five per cent more city residents than in 2013.

Figure 13 / Toronto Public Library full-time staff levels, 2013- 2023



Source: Toronto Public Library Workforce Overview; Statistics Canada Demographic Estimates.

At the same time, the needs of many library users have also become more complex and difficult to manage. Over the past five years, the number of violent incidents in the Toronto Public Library branches has tripled; staff often find themselves going beyond their typical duties to manage complex situations involving verbal abuse, harassment, threats, violence, drug overdoses, and theft.²³

Meanwhile, as more city residents face homelessness, mental health challenges, and addiction—and fewer resources available to help them cope with such challenges—library workers are increasingly stepping into roles that resemble social work. Torontonians view library workers as trustworthy and dedicated and appreciate the care and support these workers provide for vulnerable individuals. However, Torontonians also worry that these additional demands may place a severe strain on library workers and pull them away from their core duties and activities.²⁴

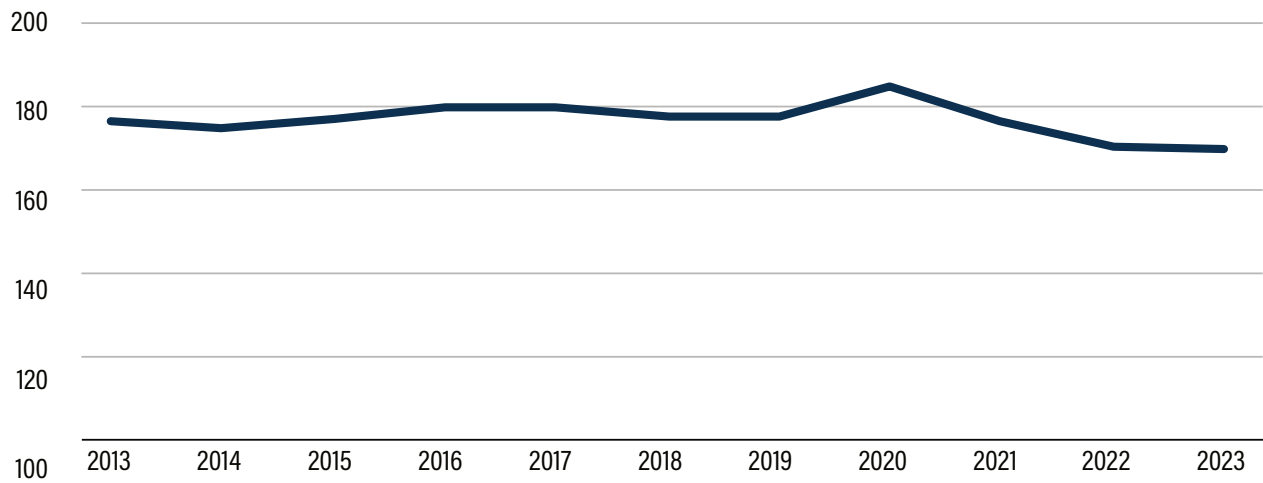
While library workers have been asked to step into more and more roles, the inflation-adjusted budget allocated to salaries and benefits has decreased, particularly since 2020 and the post-pandemic spike in inflationary pressures.

Recent interviews with library staff reveal concerns about insufficient staffing, lack of support for high-need users, stagnant wages, and deteriorating infrastructure.²⁵ Workers highlight the need for more staff to meet current and future program demands, as well as the need for social workers to support operations in high-needs branches. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of proper training and support to ensure the safety of both staff and users.

The plan to expand library hours is another concern, as staff feel they have not been adequately consulted or given the necessary support for its implementation.²⁶

Salary stagnation is a growing issue, with staff reporting that compensation is not keeping pace with the rising cost of living or industry standards. Infrastructure problems, such as leaking roofs, broken doors, and other physical damage are also increasingly affecting library branches.

Figure 14 / Toronto Public Library budget for salaries and benefits, 2013-23, constant 2023 dollars, \$millions



Source: Toronto Public Library Finance reports.

With the library system facing so many challenges, all of which come with cost implications, finding ways to increase the TPL budget must be a policy priority for the city and—as discussed below—the province.

How to finance a thriving Toronto Public Library

While the City of Toronto is the major financial supporter of the Toronto Public Library, the fiscal framework in which municipalities function poses serious financial challenges for the city to invest in its library system.

Ontario law requires municipalities to present balanced operating budgets, meaning they cannot run deficits and must fund operating and capital expenses separately. This structure creates substantial challenges for local finances: many budgets omit or postpone necessary services that municipalities cannot afford; municipalities are further limited by provincial rules that restrict their ability to borrow money or raise revenue through innovative taxation.

To manage shortfalls, municipalities rely on reserve funds to cover emergency events or future capital needs, but too often the financial strain is aggravated by growing responsibilities that go beyond the capacity of outdated and insufficient revenue sources to make ends meet.

A major challenge for Toronto—and all Canadian municipalities—is over-reliance on property taxes. Unlike with other revenue sources, e.g., income and sales taxes, property tax revenues do not grow automatically with economic growth or inflation. In Toronto and elsewhere, this has resulted in annual, highly political debates at city councils about “raising” property taxes. In recent years, at least until approval of the 2024 Toronto budget, that debate resulted in revenue increases for tax-supported services that failed to keep up with inflation and population growth. As a result, city budgets were simply not up to the challenge of maintaining, let alone expanding, public services.²⁷

A new framework for municipal finances

While cities in other countries can diversify their revenue sources through different tax sources, Canadian municipalities face limited options beyond property taxes and government transfers.

Tax experts have proposed some alternatives that could diversify the tax base of cities, including the sharing of sales tax revenue and the implementation of municipally based income taxes. For instance, in Toronto, the implementation of a one per cent city-based income tax could generate up to \$340.2 million in yearly revenue.²⁸

Such changes would require the cooperation and support of upper levels of government, in particular the province – under the division of powers in Canada, municipalities are all “children of the provinces” and have no options for raising money beyond those the provinces give them. Unfortunately for the Toronto Public Library, Queen’s Park has been decidedly unenthusiastic about funding library services. Provincial transfers to support TPL have fallen significantly.

Provincial transfers: talk vs. action

Neil Lumsden, Ontario’s Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport, has been publicly supportive of Ontario’s libraries, stating earlier this year that “Public libraries are a critical part of the infrastructure that makes our communities thrive.”²⁹

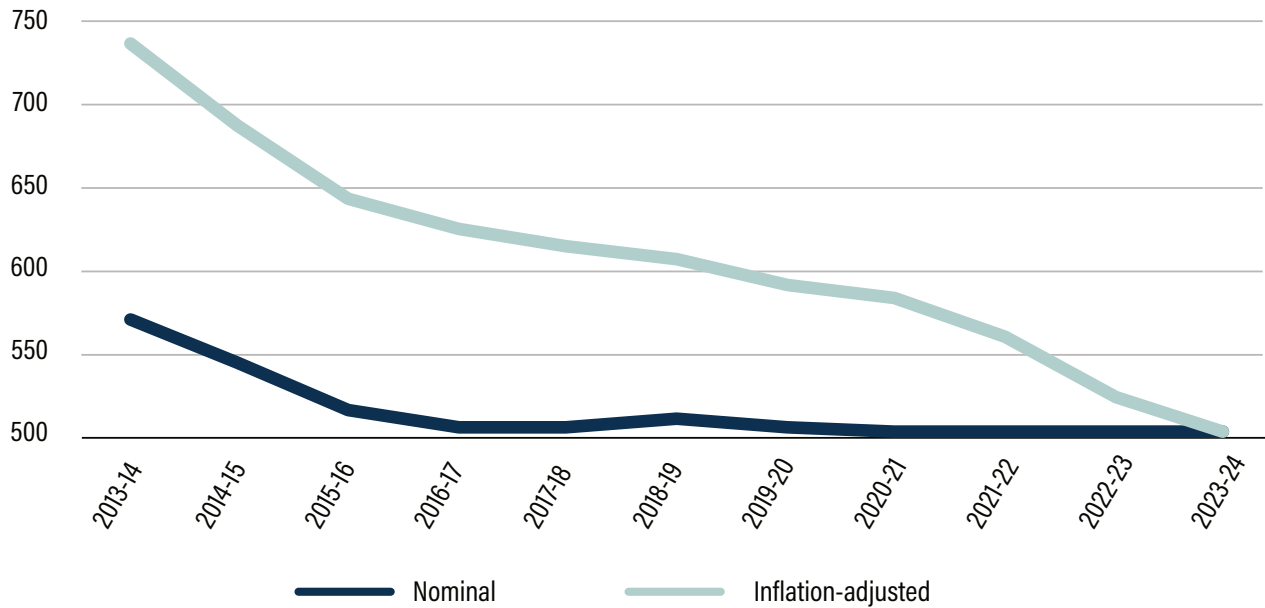
Despite these positive words, the decline in the (inflation-adjusted) Provincial Library Operating Grant (PLOG) to the Toronto Public Library indicates a lack of tangible financial support. Over the past decade, provincial grants to TPL have steadily decreased in real terms, with no current indication that the province plans to address these reductions.

This trend poses significant challenges for the sustainability and growth of library services across Toronto. However, there remains an opportunity for the Ontario government to align its actions with its words by increasing annual grants to libraries across the province. Such an investment would not only strengthen the Toronto Public Library but also benefit all public libraries in Ontario, enhancing access to vital services and improving the quality of life for millions of residents to help “make our communities thrive.”

Another strategy the Ontario government could adopt to support Toronto and other municipalities in funding their library systems would be to increase transfers from the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund (OMPF). The OMPF is the Ontario’s main general assistance grant to municipalities. The program primarily supports northern and rural municipalities across the province and directs funding to those with more challenging fiscal circumstances, areas with a limited property tax base, and municipalities that are adjusting to year-over-year funding changes.

Since the pandemic, high inflation levels, coupled with rising population and rising demand for essential services and infrastructure, have eroded the effectiveness of the OMPF to support municipalities, creating substantial financial stress for local governments.³⁰ Despite rising municipal expenses across the province, the nominal OMPF allocation has remained stagnant at around \$500 million for the past several years. The inflation-adjusted value of this funding shows a substantial reduction in provincial support to municipalities over the years. The Ontario government’s recent announcement of a \$50 million increase to the OMPF in 2025 is positive, but the finance minister’s remarks to the legislature gave no indication that any of the money would be allocated to Toronto or any major city.³¹

Figure 15 / Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund transfers, in millions



Source: Public Accounts of Ontario.

By further boosting this funding, the province could provide much-needed financial relief to municipalities, allowing them to better support vitally important services like public libraries. Expanding the scope and increasing OMPF transfers would help ensure that libraries have the resources necessary to meet the growing demands of their communities.

Conclusion

Investing in the future of the Toronto Public Library

The Toronto Public Library is far more than a repository of books or a collection of buildings—it is a cherished city institution that fosters personal growth, inclusion, and civic engagement. As a world-leading organization, TPL consistently outperforms many other library systems across North America. Beyond its extensive network of branches and vast collection of materials, in recent years, the library has also significantly expanded its programming, cementing its role as a vital public knowledge hub in Ontario. Today, the TPL offers a diverse range of programs and services, including early learning activities, skill development initiatives, digital literacy promotion, and entrepreneurial support for start-ups.

Despite the overwhelming demand for its services—the library is enormously popular—the Toronto Public Library faces ongoing pressures to do more with less. This includes keeping up with expanding digital access needs, maintaining branches, supporting special programs, and ensuring library spaces are safe and welcoming.

Unfortunately, growing financial pressures coupled with increasing social needs raise concerns about the sustainability of the TPL funding model and service capacity. Currently, the Toronto Public Library faces significant challenges in managing its aging infrastructure, with the demand for investment in maintenance and repairs projected to increase steadily over the next decade. Moreover, as Toronto's population continues to grow and social needs keep piling up, library staff have been asked to deal with increasingly complex situations in addition to their assigned jobs.

While the City of Toronto has long been the primary funder of the Toronto Public Library, and has a responsibility to provide robust support, the importance of the library to the city, the province, and indeed the country, calls for additional support from higher levels of government. As a major driver of Ontario's economy, Toronto plays a critical role

in fostering economic growth and prosperity across the province. Economic analysis has shown that the Toronto Public Library is an agent of economic development and an asset for economic growth through its provision of learning and educational services, skill development, job search assistance, and development of digital capabilities. Making sure that the Toronto Public Library continues to serve the community to the fullest should therefore not be just a municipal concern, but also a provincial priority.

The current Ontario government, like every provincial government in history, has stated repeatedly that economic growth is one of its central policy priorities. However, this enthusiasm is not reflected in provincial transfers for institutions that foster economic growth, such as the Toronto Public Library. On the contrary, Ontario's transfers to TPL have decreased when adjusted for inflation, leaving the system increasingly more reliant on the municipality. The time has come for Ontario to step up and align its funding priorities with its economic growth agenda.

At the same time, the City of Toronto remains the main funder of the library system and the city must do more to secure adequate funding for the institution. The significant budget cuts from the early 2010s continue to impact the financial health of the library system today while new demands continue to arise. Initiatives like the property tax increase in the 2024 city budget—coupled with increased advocacy in favour of more revenue tools for the city—can help ensure that the library and other vital municipal services receive adequate funding.

To address these issues and ensure the long-term sustainability of the Toronto Public Library, several key actions should be taken:

1. The City should continue to recognize the value of the public library and take steps in the budget process to ensure that it thrives in 2025 and beyond.
2. In addition to using existing funding tools, the City should actively research additional own-source funding options, such as a municipal income tax, sales tax, or other mechanisms, and make recommendations to council about the best options.
3. The City should work with other Ontario municipalities to engage with the province and advocate for increases in the Public Library

Notes

1. Amy Garmer, "Libraries in the Exponential Age: Moving from the Edge of Innovation to the Center of Community," 2016, [aspeninstitute.org/publications/libraries-exponential-age-moving-edge-innovation-center-community](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/libraries-exponential-age-moving-edge-innovation-center-community).
2. Margaret Walton-Roberts, "Immigration Regionalization in Ontario: Policies, Practices and Realities," *Our Diverse Cities*, no. 4, 2007.
3. Toronto Public Library Strategic Plan 2025-2029: Results of Survey of Toronto Residents, 2024.
4. Toronto Public Library Budget Notes, 2023.
5. Govind C. Rao, "The Great Equalizer: The Case for Investing In the Toronto Public Library," 2012, [policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/great-equalizer](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/great-equalizer)
6. Svanhild Aabo. "The Role and Value of Public Libraries in the Age of Digital Technologies," 2005, [learntechlib.org/p/67835/](https://www.learnstechlib.org/p/67835/)
7. Sofya Aptekar, "The Public Library as Resistive Space in the Neoliberal City," *City & Community*, 18, 2019.
8. Suzanne Grossman et al, "How Public Libraries Help Immigrants Adjust to Life in a New Country: A Review of the Literature," *Health Promotion Practices* 23(5):804-81, 2022.
9. Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.
10. Toronto Public Library, "Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive: Measuring the Social Impact of Toronto Public Library," 2023, [torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf](https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf)

11. Toronto Public Library, "Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive: Measuring the Social Impact of Toronto Public Library," 2023, torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf
12. Bob Hepburn, "How our libraries can help the homeless," Toronto Star, September 19, 2018.
13. Toronto Public Library Public Service Statistics, Trends & Comparisons, 2023.
14. Toronto Public Library, "Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive: Measuring the Social Impact of Toronto Public Library," 2023, torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf
15. Toronto Public Library, "Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive: Measuring the Social Impact of Toronto Public Library," 2023, torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf
16. Toronto Public Library Open Hours Implementation Plan, Toronto Public Library, 2024.
17. Shawn Jeffords, "Chow announces plan to open all Toronto libraries 7 days a week," CBC, October 27, 2024.
18. Toronto Public Library Operating Budget Monitoring Report, September 2023.
19. This estimated return on investment was calculated by taking the sum of direct tangible benefits and indirect tangible benefits to the City of Toronto and dividing them by the cost to provide the service (direct spending in the Toronto Public Library).
20. Govind C. Rao, "The Great Equalizer: The Case for Investing In the Toronto Public Library," 2012, policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/great-equalizer.

21. Martin Prosperity Institute, "So Much More: The Economic Impact of the Toronto Public Library on the City of Toronto," 2013, torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/social-impact/pdfs/tpl-social-impact-2023.pdf
22. Toronto Public Library Operating Budget & 2023 - 2032 Capital Budget & Plan, 2023.
23. Toronto Public Library Safety and Security - Update, 2022.
24. Toronto Public Library, "Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive: Measuring the Social Impact of Toronto Public Library," 2023, torontopubliclibrary.ca/about-the-library/social-impact
25. Documentation of Branch Visits provided by Toronto Public Library staff.
26. Documentation of Branch Visits provided by Toronto Public Library staff.
27. Federation of Canada Municipalities, "Making Canada's Growth a Success: The case for a Municipal Growth Framework," 2024, fcm.ca/en/resources/making-canadas-growth-a-success.
28. David McDonald, *A Modest Proposal: a Plan to Give Municipalities Access to Personal Income Taxes*, 2024, policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/modest-proposal
29. Neil Lumsden, Ontario's Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport.
30. The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, "Issues at a Glance: Municipal Financial Sustainability," 2022, amcto.com/issues-at-a-glance-municipal-financial-sustainability.
31. Peter Bethlenfalvy, *Building Ontario for You: Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review, October 30, 2024*, <https://budget.ontario.ca/2024/fallstatement/pdf/2024-fall-statement-en.pdf>
32. Open Hours Implementation Plan - Update, 2024.

This report is available free of charge at www.policyalternatives.ca. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) is an independent policy research organization. This report has been subjected to peer review and meets the research standards of the centre. The opinions in this report, and any errors, are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCPA or funders of the report.

We acknowledge that that this report was produced on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

Cover photo care of iStock

Acknowledgements

This report takes inspiration from *The Great Equalizer: The case for investing in the Toronto Public Library*, a 2012 report written by Govind C. Rao and published by CCPA Ontario. The author would like to thank Simon Collins, Trish Hennessy, Randy Robinson, and Ricardo Tranjan for their comments on an earlier version of this report as well as Alice Schonblum, South Chair, CUPE Local 4948, for helpfully providing access to interviews with Toronto Public Library staff.

About the author

Carolina Aragão is an economist and demographer with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' Ontario office (CCPA Ontario).





CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
ONTARIO OFFICE