

Beyond the Branch

An Analysis of the Free Library of Philadelphia's Digital Resource and Service Provision During COVID-19



Fels Institute
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Executive Summary

After the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) system halted branch operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 15, 2020, it pivoted to an unprecedented model of exclusively digital service provision. The shutdown of non-essential services and schools drove up demand on FLP's digital holdings, and it acquired thousands of new cardholders and reached record numbers of checkouts on the eBook lending platform Overdrive. This evaluation of the FLP's digital lending and online engagement between March and June of 2020 finds that while thousands of eBooks were checked out daily, digital services were not an identical replacement for direct services. Socioeconomic and demographic factors affected who was able to utilize the many online resources provided by the FLP. There was a clear concentration of increased borrowing in ZIP codes that are predominantly white and more affluent, with some ZIP codes in South Philadelphia seeing an increase of digital lending over 80% compared to the same period in 2019. The data reveal that for each percent increase in the share of Black or Hispanic/Latinx residents in a ZIP code, average checkouts on Overdrive decreased by 74 and 100 eBooks, respectively. Extrapolating these results to the branch cluster-level, these ZIP codes were primarily concentrated in the North, North Central, and West Clusters.

This gap in service provision is indicative of larger systemic issues of racial inequality, and the pandemic has further exacerbated economic issues that disproportionately affect communities of color. As the FLP approaches reopening, strategies should be informed by the results of lending trends and by identifying best practices from other public library systems facing similar demands. These findings and best practices include: conduct a survey and host focus groups to collect qualitative data on stakeholder experience and needs; minimize staff and patron exposure through contactless pickup; target branches in under-resourced clusters to selectively open for limited computer access; and work with a coalition of cross-sector partners to launch services geared toward closing the digital divide and supporting distance learning.

Introduction

On March 14, 2020 the entire FLP system—including 54 branch libraries and The Rosenbach—announced it would shutdown in-person operations due to the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2020a). The activities and services of the FLP range from item lending (e.g. books, DVDs, audiobook CDs), public computer/Wifi access, and public programming, to homework assistance for children and teenagers, English classes, and job training. Branch libraries are community assets that provide a safe space, digital utilities, and a sense of social cohesion in addition to educational resources; without physical space available to patrons, public libraries across the country have had to rapidly adapt service delivery to a fully remote model. When the core services of FLP branch libraries are disrupted, how does that affect its ability to continue meeting the needs of the community, and how do patrons adapt to new services? Furthermore, which patrons are not adapting, and why? While some programs and items can be translated to a digital environment thanks to preexisting technological infrastructure—eBooks, audiobooks, and livestreamed author events—a majority of in-person,

branch-specific services cannot be replicated have not been available to the patrons who rely on physical service.

At the beginning of the national shutdown in mid-March, a survey of US public library systems found that 98% had fully closed all branches. 15% of respondents expected to be closed for 1–2 months, while 35% expected to be closed indefinitely (American Library Association, 2020a). By May, a second survey found that while many libraries had bolstered digital service provision through online reference assistance and social media content, 99% were operating at limited capacity—62% were still closed to the public, and 26% had begun curbside pickup (American Library Association, 2020b). As libraries commence reopening, leadership must plan phased approaches to address patron needs under the constraints of state and local policies mandating operational protocols.

The pandemic has affected portions of the country differently, with outbreaks in the tri-state area of New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey leading to a severe concentration of cases in the mid-Atlantic region from March–May, prolonging the inability to reopen non-essential businesses (Adeline, 2020). As some states in the south and west began to reopen library service in May, lessons are being learned in real time about what is feasible and how to best serve community needs. These phased reopening steps include reactivating the lending and returns of physical items, allowing reduced occupancy within buildings for computer use, and redeploying staff members to assist with other local needs that can be done from home such as contact tracing or Census enumeration outreach (Pandolfi, 2020b).

This report is intended to guide the FLP as it navigates its medium- to long-term reopening strategy, based off of an analysis of the system’s digital lending activity between March–June and a literature review of reopening plans for comparable public library systems’ in the top 25 most populous US cities. In order to better understand patron habits, retention, and needs, this evaluation will explore and answer the following: what were the most effective policies that other systems implemented to provide materials while maintaining social distance, and how can the FLP scale these practices during the next phases of reopening to address gaps in its digital service provision? Through an analysis of administrative data and an understanding of national best practices, this paper will outline findings related to usage trends within FLP’s nine regional branch clusters, and propose operational recommendations aligned with the FLP’s strategic goals, focusing on equity, community engagement, customer experience, and innovation.

Methodology

This report draws upon both quantitative and qualitative data to inform findings and recommendations. FLP’s administrative data is used to evaluate both lending trends and web traffic to gain a deeper understanding of patron activity during the pandemic. Additionally, a qualitative literature review was conducted to provide a national perspective on library activities during shutdown and into reopening. Lastly, to provide demographic context on poverty rates

and the racial/ethnic makeup of ZIP codes within Philadelphia, this report references data from the 2018 American Community Survey¹.

Administrative Data

The FLP uses a variety of platforms to share digital materials. These include, but are not limited to²: 23 digital media databases including the Overdrive lending platform for eBooks, and 8 online learning databases. This report focuses specifically on eBook checkouts from Overdrive’s lending data between March–June in 2019 and 2020 obtained through two sources: access to the library’s online collections management database, CollectionHQ, and aggregated data visualizations on Tableau from March 24–June 7, 2020 (with comparative data from 2019) generated by Jennifer Maguire-Wright, Chief, Materials Management Division at the FLP.

The second set of administrative data provided for this report is online traffic to the FLP website, primarily its homepage and subpages including the “Ask” page and the FLP Blog. This data was provided for March–June 2020.

Literature Review

The literature review included articles, surveys, and reopening plans relating to public libraries’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic published between March–July 2020. Keywords searched included: Public libraries, COVID-19, Reopening, and Digital divide. Criterion for inclusion in the survey of reopening plans and protocol was based on population size, using the top 25 most populous cities in the US as a gauge for comparable operational considerations and demographic diversity. These plans were obtained directly from the libraries’ websites and those cities’ respective local government’s COVID-19 response sites.

Demographic Data

In order to map lending data with demographic data to provide a comprehensive understanding of demographic context, this report references data from the US Census Bureau’s 2018 American Community Survey five-year estimates, focusing specifically on the measure of population percent below the poverty level and racial and ethnic demographics, disaggregated by ZIP code. Similarly to the Impact Evaluation Report commissioned by FLP in 2017, demographic categories reflected the four largest racial and ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and White) (Gallagher, 2017). It also references research conducted by The Pew Charitable Trusts’ “State of the City: Philadelphia 2020” report for more contemporary data on overall household broadband connectivity³.

¹ For a full description of data sources, dates, and use within this report see **Appendix C**.

² For a complete list of FLP lending databases, see: <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/databases/>.

³ This information was not disaggregated by ZIP code.

Limitations

The data collected for this report, in tandem with the literature review, was enough to identify overarching local and national trends during the initial phases of COVID-19 response and reopening. However, there are gaps in the data that limit a comprehensive analysis of patron lending and activity over the period of March–June 2020.

This evaluation of digital use is intended to inform the FLP’s decision-making on digital service provision in the medium-term under the constraints of social distancing. A core component to the initial design of this report was to conduct a system-wide survey of cardholders⁴ in order to gain a qualitative understanding of and collect feedback on patron habits, user retention, and medium-term needs scheduled to be conducted in June. In light of the national response to protests calling for social justice and racial equity in support of the Black Lives Matter movement after the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, the FLP postponed administering the survey in order to prioritize the urgency of the moment. This action was appropriate and suitable as the FLP is an inclusive public space and addressing the concerns of the community and staff regarding racial equity is imperative. As internal priorities shifted to addressing “institutional work ... to confront structural racism, both inside our organization as well as in all of our public-facing and public-service efforts” administration of the survey has been put on hold indefinitely (Reardon, 2020b).

Another area of the report’s data collection facing limitations is the duration of, and access to, FLP administrative data. This paper primarily analyses use of Overdrive from March–June in 2020, however the system-wide shutdown is ongoing through July and August. The Overdrive data provided conveys checkout numbers, but no details on genre. Furthermore, only summative web traffic data was provided, leaving in-depth analysis of visitor habits out of consideration. Lastly, this paper was not able to obtain and incorporate data from all FLP databases, such as Libby for information on audiobook use, or Hoopla and Kanopy for information on TV and film streaming. The data was also not disaggregated by device type (e.g. iPad, tablet computer, smartphone) or cardholder demographics, which are not collected by FLP or Overdrive⁵. Other sources of data not obtained or included that would provide a deeper understanding of audience engagement are social media metrics and virtual event attendance to gauge programming popularity.

Regarding the literature review, as the pandemic is ongoing, reopening plans are subject to change in response to case surges throughout the summer and fall. Some activities may need to cease as local governments change policies regarding which spaces may operate. Furthermore, the place-based nature of branch libraries means that some solutions are not as feasible or applicable. Reviewing the policies of the top 25 cities in the US is a start but it is by no means

⁴ See **Appendix B** for the content of full user survey, updated to reflect FLP feedback.

⁵ FLP does track the number of cards it issues for patrons under 18, and to sign up for a library card online, a user must be over 13 years old. However, Overdrive data did not contain cardholder account number, so it was not possible to disaggregate checkouts by age groups.

comprehensive of the creative solutions librarians in smaller towns and cities are employing to connect to patrons and serve their communities.

Lastly, the “digital divide,” which is “the uneven distribution of broadband service and adoption” is a growing concern for library systems nationally (Sanchez, 2020). In order to get a sense of patron habits, it is vital to consider both populations that are and *are not* able to access digital resources during this period. While this report is able to study the habits of patrons using the online lending system, it is unable to capture the counterfactual behavior of patrons who rely on physical items without broadband connectivity at home or a personal computer to work on and access digital materials. For further analysis of the role of FLP in addressing the digital divide, see Discussion and Recommendations.

Comparative Literature Review

A survey of the reopening plans of the top 25 most populous cities along with a review of articles and reports on the national response of libraries as the pandemic progressed provided context for reopening recommendations and trends that concern not only library administrators, but also can help tailor the FLP’s medium-term service provision based on the findings of its administrative data. **Key findings include best practices for contactless pickup, computer accessibility, incremental branch reopening, phase determination, and virtual programming.**

As the national shutdown began, all but 2 of the top 25 public library systems had closed to the public by March 16. In a survey conducted by the American Library Association (ALA), from March through mid-April, operations were pivoting to prioritize virtual service—41% of libraries were expanding online virtual help and 38% were expanding phone reference service (ALA, 2020b). In Minneapolis and San Francisco, some librarians who were unable to accomplish their work from home were reassigned to support municipal efforts that could be safely conducted remotely via telephone, such as contract tracing and census enumeration work (Pandolfi, 2020b; San Francisco Public Library, 2020).

As of July 1, 84% of the top 25 city library systems have begun contactless pickup

While most large public library systems lent items exclusively through digital platforms for March and April (all 25 systems included in the literature review did not circulate physical materials through the end of April), smaller library systems, such as Altoona, Wisconsin’s Altoona Public Library, were able to continue their “books by mail” distribution, despite closing their space to the public (Pandolfi, 2020a). By mid- to late-May, many systems began to roll out reopening plans that included a mix of updated lending and return policies beginning in June and outlining phases for welcoming guests back inside branches eventually. CDC guidelines and state policies determine much of the safety and sanitation protocols (mask wearing and item

quarantine time) and timeline variables (for example, determining what businesses can operate during “yellow” and “green” phases).

Survey of Top 25 US Cities Public Library Reopening Plans

Table 1: Reopening Plan Survey (As of July 1, 2020)		
Activity	# of Cities	Description
Curbside Pickup ⁶	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 by appointment - 12 drop-in, all require calling upon arrival for contactless delivery - 1 both by appointment and drop-in
Drop off Returns	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 18 impose 72-hour quarantine for returns - 9 returns accepted only at open branches - 9 returns accepted at all drop boxes
Computer Use ⁷	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 offer printing only - 5 implement a 1-hour limit - 2 by reservation
Inside Service	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 8 reduced occupancy (25–50%) - 3 exclusively use self-checkout
Enhanced Mobile Services	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boston “BPL To Go” iOS app - El Paso “EPPL” iOS app in development - Austin launched “APL+” on their website with video resources from librarians
Restroom Use	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seattle has kept 5 restrooms open for unsheltered residents throughout shutdown - Washington DC allows restroom use in reopened branches - Charlotte Mecklenburg branches offer in-person service but do not allow restroom use
Summer Lunch Service	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - San Jose is participating in a Summer Food Program from 6/15–8/7 at 4 branches - In Phoenix, children can get a free breakfast and lunch at 10 branches
“Redeploy” Staff	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some San Francisco staff have been reassigned to assist in various activities, including: contact tracing; working at food banks, and at the City’s Emergency Operations Center

Specifically examining the top 25 cities in US, and how their library systems are approaching reopening, seven major trends appear. These trends relate to lending protocol, in-branch operations, and adjusted service priorities. **Table 1** details the most common pandemic-

⁶ See **Appendix D** for comprehensive table of Curbside Pickup policy overview

⁷ See **Appendix D** for comprehensive table of Computer Use overview

driven service adjustments and how many library systems were participating in them. The regional variation in COVID-19 cases throughout the nation—in addition to the institutional capacity of each system’s city- and institution-specific challenges—inevitably make activities particular to the populations and communities they serve. However, the most common actions and trends are generally applicable and worthy of consideration as FLP plans its reopening through a patron-centered approach. These include the following findings:

- **Digital Demand has Skyrocketed Nationally**

Libraries across the country have seen demand for digital resources soar during the months of shutdown, due both to the inability to borrow hard copies and the closure of schools.

According to national data from Overdrive, “Weekly library e-book lending... has increased by nearly 50 percent since March 9” and audiobook checkouts have increased by 14% (Wilburn, 2020). New York City Public Library has seen a “236 percent increase in views of ... educational resources” as households support homeschooling (Marx, 2020). This has led libraries to increase investments in digital holdings as users have shown a willingness to adapt to digital lending platforms.

- **Incremental, Contactless Pickup is the First Step to Reopening**

The most pressing goal for libraries has been to resume circulating physical materials. By July 1, **18 out of the 25 libraries had launched variations on contactless lending**, with 4 more planning to launch curbside service in July and August. The variations of book delivery include: curbside pickup outside of the library; book delivery by mail; and self-checkout for systems with in-branch service (specifically in Chicago, Charlotte, and Boston). Some systems, like Seattle, are not yet ready to resume book by mail or bookmobile lending yet, though they may selectively reactivate those services during the closure “depending on staffing levels” (Seattle Public Library, 2020).

Another important component of beginning reopening is that all systems with pickup options have limited their hours of operation and **incrementally opened a few select branches at a time**. 13 out of 25 systems have resumed lending at partial capacity in this manner.

Related to circulation, **return policies for book drop returns vary**. Of the 18 systems that have resumed lending, all have also opened their book drops. 50% of these libraries only accept returns at operational branches, the other 50% accept them at any branch. Some cities are lending, but keep their book drops closed and only accept returns at designated receptacles during hours of operation, such as Charlotte’s system, which only allows one patron in at a time to use the self-checkout machine (Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Library, 2020).

- **Computer Use is the Second Most Significant Reopening Service**

Beyond contactless pickup, in states where non-essential businesses have been allowed to reopen, **10 out of 25 systems have begun to open their doors at a select number of branches for computer use and printing.** In San Antonio, library leadership chose to reopen branches with the stated intention “to assist residents in areas of San Antonio with less internet and computer access” (Villarreal, 2020).

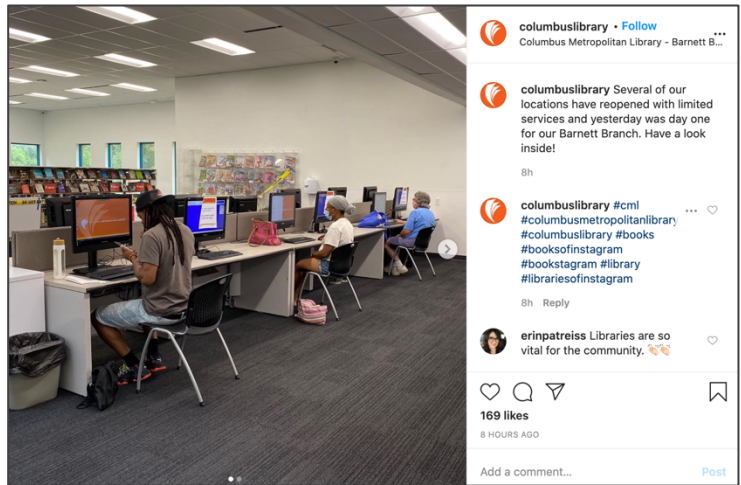


Image 1. Reconfigured computer terminals within the Columbus Library

As social distancing is a concern to protect the health and safety of staff and patrons alike, libraries that have opened their doors to the public have retrofitted their space or removed furniture to ensure that patrons use public computers with minimal exposure (see **Image 1**). Accordingly, **50% of branches that offer computer use impose a 1-hour limit.**

- **A Mix of Scheduled Versus Drop-in Use**

For both curbside pickup and computer use, **there are a variety of pre-scheduled pickup and drop-in during business hours policies, however drop-in is most common.** 83% of curbside pickups operate using drop-in and 80% of computer use policies operate by first come, first served. From a crowd-control and contact-tracing perspective, as all open branches are operating at reduced capacity, scheduled pickups and appointments for computer use may help librarians to control demand and limit exposure. In terms of equitable access, it may not be easy or possible for all users to schedule their pickups through a mobile app or online. Other limitations to appointment scheduling at this juncture are the prospect of budget cuts⁸ or the lack of technological infrastructure to launch a reservation system.

- **Libraries Are Responding to Sustained Wifi Demand**

Prior to shutdown, many patrons relied upon libraries to provide public internet access. The need for reliable internet during social distancing measures has left citizens without it at home dependent on public Wifi. While branches are closed, not only have all 25 libraries kept their Wifi on so patrons can access it when nearby, they have also augmented their provision by providing access points outside their buildings. The Columbus Metropolitan Library has boosted its Wifi to extend to its parking lots so community members without

⁸ In the May ALA survey, of the 3,850 libraries surveyed, 44% reported that they expected some or significant reduction to their budgets for resuming operations through May 2021 (ALA, 2020c).

broadband access at home can safely connect from inside of their cars (Melendez, 2020). Other systems are helping to bridge the digital divide beyond branch-based Wifi—for example, in Chicago and Seattle, **public libraries are lending Wifi hotspots for patrons to use at home** in response to the pandemic (Kirchner, 2020).

- **In Order to Address Multiple Needs, Libraries are Co-locating Services**
Libraries also serve as a community hub that address a variety of needs when their doors are open beyond internet access, and during this time **many are expanding and co-locating activities such as food provision and voting services to limit patron exposure and address new areas of need**. San Jose and Phoenix have partnered with local food banks to distribute children’s meals at their branches over the summer, and staff members at the San Francisco Public Library have been helping to provide food at the San Francisco-Marín Food Bank. In Chicago and Seattle, patrons can drop off their vote-by-mail ballots at collection boxes located at branches. By combining multiple services at once, libraries are addressing multiple needs of patrons and deepening civic engagement efforts without even having to open their doors.
- **Staff Roles Are Changing to Support Civic Engagement**
In all 25 city plans, in-person programming will be the last activity to resume under the final stage of reopening, the date of which has yet to be determined. In the absence of full time in-person services, some **cities have redeployed staff members to address new and changing patron needs**. Much of this work can be done from home and advances civic engagement, keeping patrons socially connected to staff in a time of social isolation. This goes beyond having staff shift events and programming like story times, workshops, homework help, and author talks to a virtual model. In addition to working with a local food bank, many librarians in San Francisco have been reclassified as “Disaster Service Workers” for the city, assisting in contract tracing efforts (San Francisco Public Library, 2020). In Oklahoma City, librarians are assisting patrons who need help completing their absentee ballot applications, and other cities are continuing to communicate on their websites and social media channels the importance of completing the 2020 Census (Metropolitan Library System, 2020).

Librarians are not only receiving and answering inquiries remotely regarding digital collections, job training, COVID-19 resources, voter registration, and the Census while branches are shutdown, but many are also reaching out to vulnerable members of the community. In the city of Rochester, MN, “Staffers are making ‘social connectedness’ calls to library users, to check in on them and make sure they have [the] resources they need, be that food, medicine...or access to the library’s digital collection” (Pandolfi, 2020b).

As libraries react to the pandemic and make plans to continue serving the community in the short- to long-term, a review of the literature shows that the main priorities regard lending

operations (both digital and direct), bolstering broadband connectivity, and utilizing staff and physical space for hybrid service provision. The varied ways libraries are approaching contactless pickup and returns, selectively opening up branches for limited computer use, and incorporating community outreach into the work from home responsibilities of staff can serve to inform the FLP's plans in the months ahead. Slowly resuming services by focusing on sustainable practices that minimize risk for all will ensure that the FLP can continue to support patrons and remain a community asset in a turbulent time.

Digital Resource Analysis

Taking national post-closure and reopening activities into consideration, a detailed look at FLP's patron habits and retention guided by administrative data will help the FLP to identify which digital resources have been utilized the most and which areas of service—both digital and geographic—need more support. An analysis of Overdrive data between March and June reveals sustained high demand for digital resources by residents of Philadelphia. As the FLP reached new milestones in digital lending, the data reveal that the geographic distribution of use was not equitable, and that checkouts between clusters varied greatly.

FLP's portfolio of digital offerings goes beyond lending, with its web presence becoming a figurative gathering space for patrons. The library's website, freelibrary.org, is a resource for Philadelphians looking not only to find items, but also to learn skills, ask questions of librarians, explore topics, and stay informed regarding current events. Between March and June, FLP's homepage garnered over 230,000 pageviews and its blog had over 120,000 pageviews. Lastly, the shift to virtual programming for audiences of all ages provided patrons with informative and entertaining content and a level of continuity of service. While branch locations are closed to the public, the library's web presence is providing a digital hub for community and connection.

Patron Habits

In tandem with the physical closure of libraries, schools and bookstores were shutdown in March, driving many residents of the city to interact with the FLP in new ways. Key findings from an analysis of the data reveal two major themes in user habits from website traffic and Overdrive activity:

- **Thousands of New Patrons Turned to FLP for Virtual Content**
During March through June, **FLP acquired over 9 thousand new virtual cardholders, and daily checkouts of eBooks increased by 18.4% on average.** Much of the awareness for these services were driven by content produced on FLP's websites and social media. Within the first month of closure alone, FLP issued 7,639 virtual cards, 373 of which were registrations for users under 18 (FLP Materials Management Division, email communication, April 16, 2020). And over 11 thousand patrons also interacted with Overdrive for the first time.

- **Online Lending Was Not Equally Embraced, and Varies by Cluster**

One challenge to continuity of service is that online lending and web content are exclusively accessible to patrons with an internet connection and compatible devices. Upon closer inspection of Overdrive activity by ZIP code, even though the FLP increased its number of eBook users, not all geographic areas of the system saw as much of an increase in lending as others. **Patrons in the South, Northwest, and Central branch clusters accessed digital materials the most, while patrons in the North, Northeast, and West clusters accessed them the least.** Further analysis of lending reveals systemic inequalities that contribute to the digital divide hamper the FLP’s ability to serve patrons in neighborhoods that are under-resourced.

Website Traffic

Web traffic analysis from March through June shows that in the immediate weeks after the closure, FLP’s website was also a resource, providing information on learning from home, posting guides to using eBooks and audiobooks, and aggregating information on state and local resources.

Between March and April, traffic to the Free Library blog increased by 11%

In March, FLP’s homepage drew 105,349 pageviews, however, by April, this number decreased by 58% and stayed constant through May. One hypothesis to explain this change is that homepages on in-branch public computers are set to freelibrary.org, and with branches shutdown, the number of pageviews on the site decreased. This would indicate that computer sessions in branches are numerous and high-volume as the difference between March and April/May is over one standard deviation from the mean. Between April and June, web traffic to the homepage hovered around 41,000 pageviews per month, indicating that FLP is retaining its core audience.

Between March and April, traffic to the Free Library homepage decreased by 58%

Visits to the FLP Blog also remained consistent, spiking in April. Between March and June, posts relating to online learning increased along with posts about library resources and digital media⁹. While the in-person interactions with librarians were put on hold, FLP librarians were able to transition support for inquiries through three various channels while working remotely: form inquiry, telephone helpline, and online chat. Traffic to the “Ask” page averaged 1,700 pageviews per month.

⁹ The top five tags on the FLP Blog between March and May were: Digital Media (35), eBooks (26), Children’s Books (25), Recommendations (22), and Digital learning (16).

Between May and June, traffic to the "Ask" page increased by 98%

Overall, patrons that had the ability to borrow books and other digital items online adjusted their habits to utilize the FLP's resources, turning both to lending platforms and online services such as "Ask," the FLP blog, and virtual programs to supplement the activities they would utilize the library for under normal circumstances.

Overdrive Activity

The initial weeks of shutdown saw a large jump in new Overdrive users and checkouts. Immediately prior to the system shutdown in early March (3/1–3/13), the average number of new Overdrive users per day was 55. After March 13, the number of new Overdrive users jumped from 59 on the 13th to 117 on the 14th; **after the 14th, FLP acquired an average of 144 new Overdrive users per day in March.** This number continued to rise in April, with sustained growth—the largest number of new users was on April 1, with 192 signing up for the app—the average number of new users per day in April was 117. April saw the largest growth in user acquisition, with 3,533 new users, a 162% increase from the same time in 2019.

Between March and June, the Free Library gained 11,640 new Overdrive users

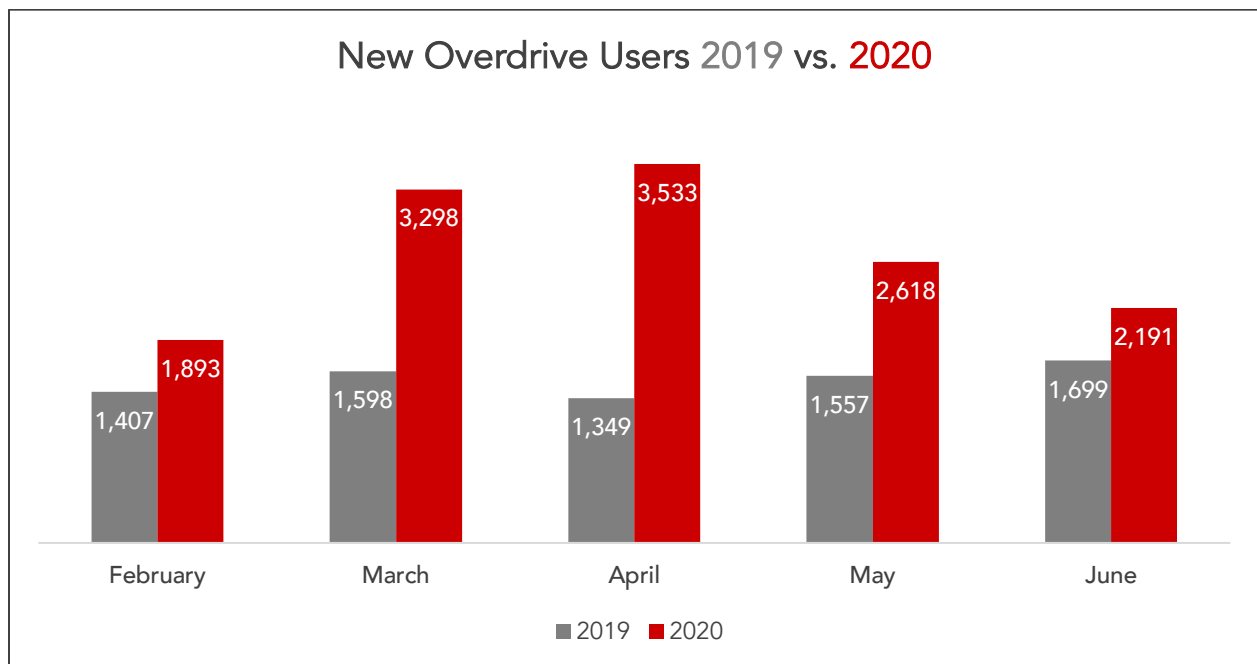


Figure 1. New Overdrive users between February and June in 2019 and 2020

Figure 1 shows the difference in user acquisition over a five-month period between 2019 and 2020 to see the effect of shutdowns on digital users relative to activity when branches were

open. When faced with an exclusively digital option of borrowing, patrons were willing to utilize the FLP’s systems, if they were able to. **Between February and March 2020, there was a 74% increase in new users on Overdrive.** As more patrons transitioned to borrowing eBooks, user acquisition declined. May and June saw decreases in new users, with an average of 84 and 73 new users per day, respectively.

While increasing virtual cardholder signups are an indicator of growing demand, checkouts signal user habits. The data available for the number of checkouts per ZIP code between March 13 and May 13 reveal that **the average increase of digital checkouts across all ZIP codes between 2019 and 2020 was 51%.** However, this number is skewed by the concentration of growth in online checkouts from the ZIP codes of branches that comprise the South, Central, and Northwest Clusters. ZIP codes that had the smallest increase in online borrowing were concentrated within the North, North Central, and West Clusters.

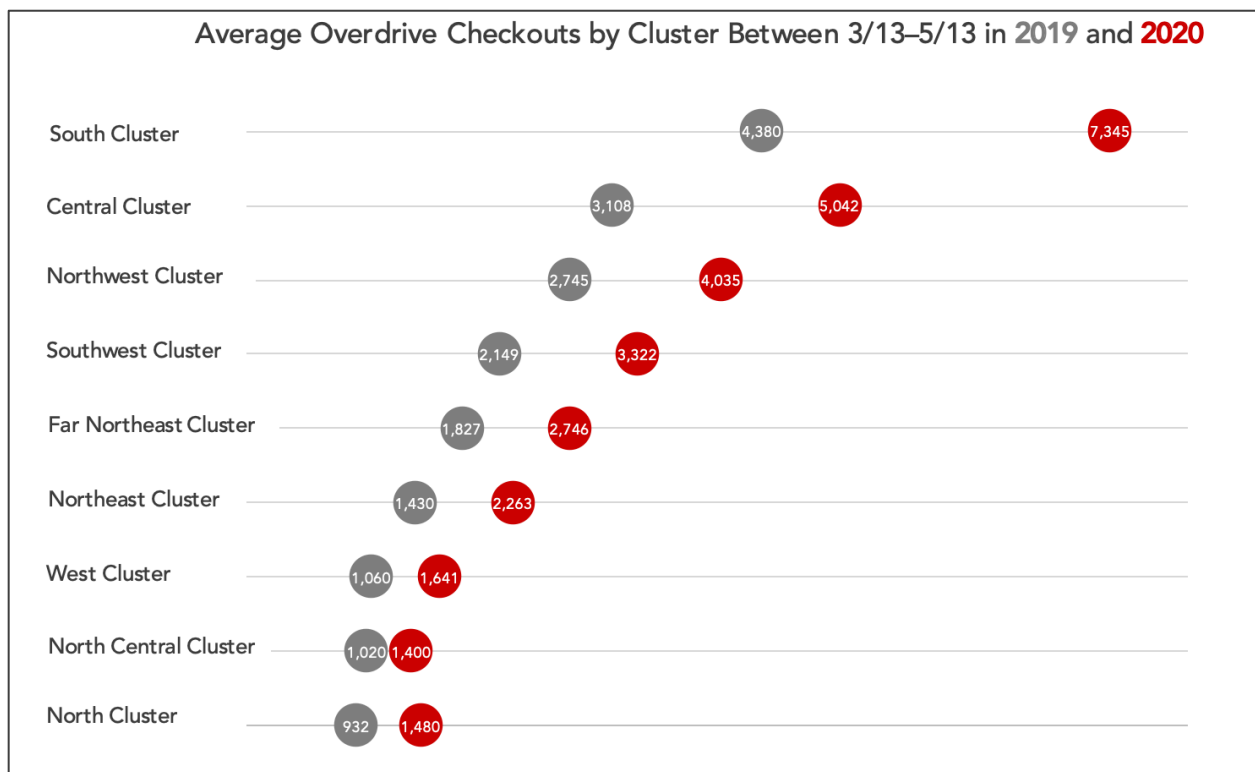


Figure 2. Difference in average Overdrive checkouts by ZIP codes within each cluster, March–May in 2019 and 2020

Figure 2 illustrates the disparities in average Overdrive checkouts by cluster¹⁰. While Cluster growth is an indicator of general concentrated trends, it masks some of the ZIP-level variation. Most clusters serve approximately the same number of residents, but contain ZIP codes with varying population sizes. Furthermore, they have different socioeconomic or demographic factors (such as age, broadband connectivity, or literacy levels) that might affect user adoption. This difference in growth may indicate that in clusters with larger

¹⁰ For a full breakdown of Overdrive checkout activity by Cluster, ZIP code, and branch, see [Appendix A](#).

increases in checkouts, there was a pre-existing capacity to access digital materials that had previously been underutilized until it became the only means of borrowing; whereas in clusters that did not see a major change in online borrowing habits, patrons may not have the ability to do so or the awareness of the option. If possible, one area for further research would be to examine if ZIP codes in these higher-use clusters also had a concentration of new users on Overdrive during this period of time, or if the high-growth clusters had a pre-existing concentration of Overdrive users, and perhaps a bigger population than low-growth ZIPs.

User Retention

For patrons who signed up to participate in virtual lending, retaining and engaging them involved bolstering lending capacity to address hold times and increased demand for eBooks. Examining lending over this period reveals two key findings about patron retention and service disparity throughout the period of shutdown:

- **Average Daily Checkouts Increased, but Cluster Activity is Unequal**

By mid-April, the FLP had “over 41,000 unique titles available to loan and over 102,472 total items,” though the average waiting period for items on hold was 43 days (FLP Materials Management Division, email communication, April 16, 2020). A long hold period is inevitable when a system meets unprecedented demand, however for students or families that rely on accessing books from the library, long wait times may be an obstacle to guiding their learning and literacy development. FLP has responded to increased demand by spending \$74,000 on holds between March 13 and April 16, compared to \$42,000 the previous month (FLP Materials Management Division, email communication, April 16, 2020).

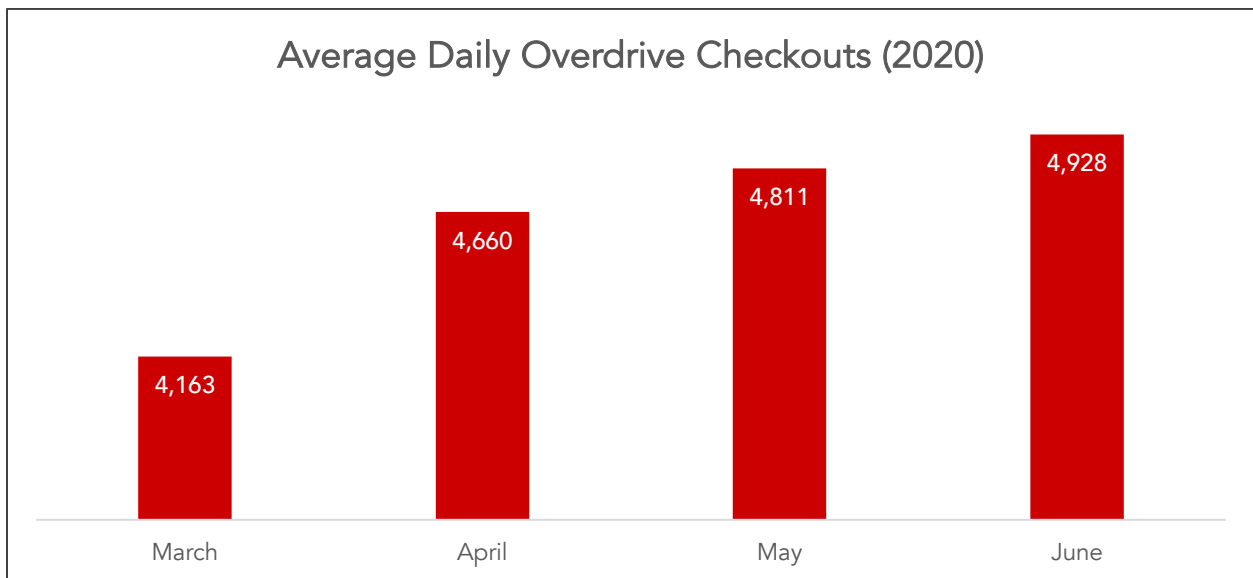


Figure 3. Average daily checkouts on Overdrive between March–June, 2020

Figure 3 shows the increasing demand reflected in the number of daily checkouts. **Between March and June, average daily checkouts on Overdrive increased by 18.4%.** Between March and May, the *total* number of overdrive checkouts increased by 10,000 items per month. By May 2020, cumulative Overdrive checkouts year-to-date were up 13% from 2019¹¹. While the positive trend in checkouts reveals that users continue to access eBooks consistently throughout the duration of branch closures, at the cluster level, Overdrive use is not equitably distributed.

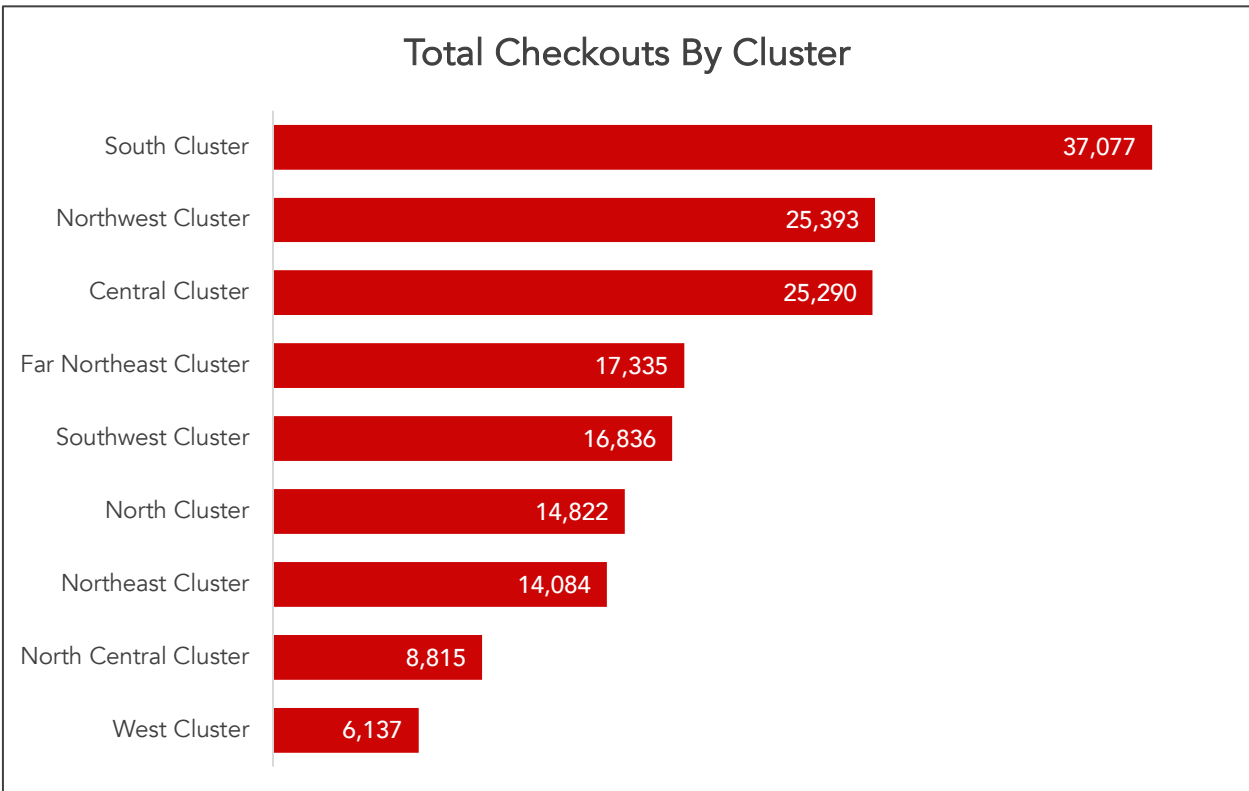


Figure 4. Total Overdrive checkouts by branch cluster, from March 13–June 7, 2020

Figure 4 reflects the total number of checkouts within each cluster between March 13–June 7, and the disparities in lending among clusters exposes the need for more outreach or institutional support to better serve lower-performing clusters. Of the nine clusters, the South, Northwest, and Central Clusters not only saw the greatest increases in online checkouts between March and May, but also checked out the most materials through June. There could be a number of reasons for this result, from user preferences to home internet access. Though the vast difference in use between the South Cluster accessing 37,077 items and the West Cluster accessing only 6,137 merits a closer examination about socioeconomic factors that may be driving disproportionate lending.

¹¹ Checkouts January–May, 2019: 590,652; Checkouts January–May, 2020: 669,050.

What regional differences could account for this lending gap? Looking at the intersection of poverty, race, and user retention, correlations arise between use and poverty rates, and demographic data reveal that the clusters with the least amount of activity have higher rates of minority residents. According to Pew’s *Philadelphia 2020 State of the City* report, nearly 380,000 Philadelphians live in poverty, and 20% of households lack broadband internet connection.

Table 2: Poverty Rates and Checkouts by Cluster		
Cluster Name	Poverty Rate	Checkouts
South Cluster	27%	37,077
Northwest Cluster	15.1%	25,393
Central Cluster	22.3%	25,290
Far Northeast Cluster	16.4%	17,335
Southwest Cluster	40.3%	16,836
North Cluster	44.2%	14,822
Northeast Cluster	29.2%	14,084
North Central Cluster	32.6%	8,815
West Cluster	30%	6,137

Table 2 shows the average poverty rate of each cluster and its respective checkouts. Interestingly, the relationship between poverty rates and lending is not direct; clusters with the highest rates of poverty—North (44.2%) and Southwest (40.25%)—are in the middle range of checkout performance, perhaps the importance of accessing free materials actually increased patron activity. In the same vein, the Far Northeast Cluster, which has the second lowest rate of poverty among the group (16.4%), only checked out about 500 more items than the Southwest Cluster—perhaps because patrons in this cluster turned to buying books instead.

- Demographics Have More of an Influence on Checkouts than Poverty Rate**
 A ZIP code’s poverty rate may have a correlation with the number of households that have broadband access, but it is not the only criterion determining who accesses FLP’s digital resources. Factoring in racial and ethnic makeup of patrons within each ZIP code serviced by the FLP reveals that the racial and ethnic demographics of a ZIP code had a bigger impact on checkouts than the poverty rate.

Table 3: ZIP-level Socioeconomic Effects on Checkouts	
With Controls	
Constant	7615.596*** (1707.111)
Poverty Rate	38.570 (58.336)
Black	-74.036*** (26.656)
Hispanic/Latinx	-100.366* (50.744)
Asian	-6.033 (124.578)
Num.Obs.	38
R2	0.332

Table 2 shows the results of a regression analysis of ZIP-level data on the effects of the average poverty rate and demographic makeup on Overdrive checkouts between March 13 and June 7. The model reveals that the demographic composition of a neighborhood has more of an influence on checkouts than the poverty rate. **The data show a statistically significant negative correlation in Overdrive checkouts for each percent increase in the share of Black or Hispanic/Latinx residents in a ZIP code, by 74 and 100, respectively¹².** Though all minority groups had negative correlations with the number of items borrowed, for each percent increase of Asian residents within the cluster, there is a much smaller decrease in checkouts by 6, which is not statistically significant. Taken together, the data paint a picture of inequitable access that falls along the lines of under-resourced communities primarily affecting Black and Hispanic/Latinx patrons.

One noteworthy limitation of this analysis is the timeframe of American Community Survey data from 2018. Given the current economic impact of mass unemployment due to the pandemic, many neighborhoods already experiencing high rates of poverty have been even more devastated by the economic shutdown. As libraries across the country struggle to serve patrons lacking broadband access at home, who are often concentrated in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty, the financial strain of mass unemployment may be compounding

¹² The correlation between the percent of Black residents and checkouts is statistically significant at the 1% level, and the correlation between the percent of Hispanic/Latinx residents and checkouts is statistically significant at the 10% level.

cluster (in)activity. Especially as the physical and economic ripple effects of the pandemic have disproportionately affected communities of color—in May, the unemployment rates for Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx Americans were 15%, 16.8%, and 17.6%, respectively—neighborhoods with the highest rates of poverty may need to rely on library services beyond digital lending more than ever (Burns, 2020).

Similarly, analysis of FLP patron engagement with online lending must take into account the different cultural contexts of the communities served by each cluster. The intersection between demographics, poverty, and digital use reveals inequitable outputs at the system-level. **Clusters with the highest minority populations—West (90.7%) and North Central (90.5%)—also utilized Overdrive the least.** See **Appendix E** for a detailed breakdown of demographics and poverty rates of each ZIP code by branch clusters. As the long-term economic effects of the pandemic continue to unfold and develop, focusing on the high poverty, low lending clusters this should be a priority for community engagement and lending services.

Discussion

The role of the branch library as a community center is changing and evolving in a time of social distancing. While the core outputs of the public library model—physical item lending and public programming—are disrupted, the FLP has pivoted to provide virtual simulacrum of these outputs through online lending, web content, and livestreamed events. Yet for patrons without the ability to access these services online, it creates a detrimental service gap. Moreover, this service gap disproportionately affects minority residents living in poorer neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

Libraries don't just provide free access to books and other cultural materials, they also offer things like companionship for older adults, de facto child care for busy parents, language instruction for immigrants and welcoming public spaces for the poor, the homeless and young people.

— Eric Klinenberg (2018)

In terms of balancing priorities, safety concerns—for both staff and patrons—are paramount, and not exclusive from equity concerns. In the immediate aftermath of the shutdown, libraries responded to community needs through bolstering digital support: keeping Wifi on, augmenting digital holdings, and making librarians more accessible through online chat and phone service. As one librarian from Ohio put it, “right now we need to focus on being a utility” (Harris, 2020). For many systems, this has translated into incrementally launching

contactless/curbside pickup (accommodating delivery for patrons that do not have a car), allowing a limited number of patrons inside to use computers and print documents (where permissible by state regulations), and co-locating services such as meal pickup. Similarly, in an attempt to both maintain connection with the community and get a sense of what patrons need, some library systems have been reaching out to senior patrons through regular phone calls (Harris, 2020).

Taking a closer look at Philadelphia specifically, prioritizing this “utility” aspect of service at the branch-level can provide targeted support to those who primarily rely on FLP to access the internet and gain literacy skills. In a 2017 Impact Evaluation Report commissioned by the FLP, evaluators found that “visitors are largely representative of Philadelphia residents overall” (Gallagher, 2017). However, an analysis of Overdrive lending rates shows that clusters with majority white residents are checking out eBooks at disproportionate rates. ZIP codes making the least use of FLP’s digital collections are majority Black and Hispanic/Latinx, and live in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty. And in Philadelphia, the digital divide falls along racial lines, “22% of Latinxs and 15% of Blacks access the internet solely via a smartphone, compared to ... 9% of whites” (Pinder, 2020). While FLP cannot solve all these issues alone, there are a number of actions that can be taken to work toward achieving more equitable outcomes in service provision during this period of modified service and beyond.

Recommendations and Further Research

Many of the actions proposed below reflect the FLP’s need to balance reopening with increased digital demand. Similarly, these recommendations reflect and are aligned with the organization’s broader strategic goals to: build a culture of literacy in Philadelphia, deliver an exceptional customer experience, embrace creativity and innovation, and promote diversity and inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic is causing many nonprofit organizations to rethink and reimagine core services, focusing on addressing the most immediate needs of the communities they serve and using this juncture as an opportunity to incorporate different and more equitable outcomes into their programming. Each of the following recommendations come with suggestions for short-, medium-, and long-term activities that will help build capacity and advance FLP’s four goals.

Recommendation 1:

Gather Qualitative Data to Assess Experience and Needs

Obtaining a comprehensive qualitative picture of patron’s experience using digital resources since mid-March is imperative to having a clear understanding of needs. Both patron and staff feedback should guide strategy and inform decisions on a range of issues from materials acquisition, programming gaps, and operational preferences.

- **Short-term: Administer a survey to patrons**, which can be completed both online and by phone, as to ensure that the results are not biased to patrons with broadband access. The library may even want to consider mailing surveys to a sample of patrons in clusters with lower rates of Overdrive use. A survey can give the library a better idea of the demographics of users engaging with online lending in addition to better understanding the strengths and challenges of the digital lending model. Involving patrons that have been engaging with virtual activities and those that have not may uncover gaps in service that administrators were previously unaware of.
- **Medium-term: Undertake a series of focus groups with patrons, FLP administrative staff, and branch librarians.** Focus groups can deepen the feedback provided from the survey, and are foundational to supporting the library’s strategic goal to promote diversity and inclusion. Groups should include community members that do not have internet access at home, and oversample from clusters with the lowest rates of digital engagement. Furthermore, involving branch librarians who are on the front lines of customer interactions in majority-minority neighborhoods will center the experiences of the staff and patrons in clusters that need the most resources, and empower them to elevate the ideas they think will succeed¹³.
- **Long-term: Create a formal theory of change to address the rapidly adapting service environment.** This is an opportunity to make even more progress on FLP’s strategic goal to deliver an exceptional customer experience, and work toward achieving its indicator of 100% incorporation of the community and staff in all major undertakings. Patrons understand that service disruptions are inevitable in a pandemic, but designing a strategy that is informed by patron and staff feedback to shape a customer-centered hybrid service model (for both digital platforms and contactless pickup) can deepen FLP’s relationship with all stakeholders in the long-run.

Recommendation 2:

Provide Targeted Support to Clusters with the Lowest Rates of Access

Library branches provide invaluable gathering spaces for the community with a range of activities beyond book lending. Until it is safe to resume regular service system-wide, FLP should target reopening clusters that are using digital services the least. In addition to book lending and computer access, FLP should work with city officials and institutional partners to co-locate services and provide academic and social support. As the library is committed to and “deliberate in its embrace of equity,” taking steps to work toward equitable outputs and outcomes is paramount (Reardon, 2020b).

¹³ A good roadmap to approaching feedback in program design is IAP2’s [Spectrum of Public Participation](#). Focus groups should not only be used in a consulting capacity, but also to increase the impact of investment in reopening activities by empowering patrons to weigh in on the decision-making process.

- **Short-term: Identify select branches in neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty and minority residents to support and increase digital access to the library’s resources.** Similarly to San Antonio’s approach, by focusing service to patrons that need internet access and books the most, the effect of limited service will have the most impact. Select branches within the North, North Central, and West Clusters will benefit in particular from computer access and in-branch lending.
- **Medium-term: Co-locate free meal pickup at targeted branches.** The pandemic has exacerbated the problem of food insecurity for households across America. To address need, cities like Phoenix and San Jose are using their branches as pickup sites for free meals. FLP has previously partnered with Philabundance to operate the “Fresh for All” program at the Lillian Marrero Branch (Neil, 2018). By implementing a food distribution program with an institutional partner, FLP can utilize its space in areas of higher poverty for meal distribution to students and residents experiencing food insecurity.
- **Long-term: Partner with the city to design a logic model for a recovery initiative focused on civic engagement.** The economic shutdown and social distancing have worsened quality of life and civic issues for many patrons beyond food insecurity and lack of broadband access. These issues include navigating unemployment, providing children with a robust remote learning experience¹⁴, accessing healthcare, and participating in local elections. Patrons of color in clusters with higher rates of poverty are at a higher risk to be adversely affected by the consequences of the pandemic. With recovery efforts led by the city underway, FLP’s Division of Cultural and Civic Engagement can be an invaluable partner in connecting patrons in the hardest-hit clusters with essential municipal services. Some initiatives that can be piloted in the short-term and scaled in the long-term include: assisting patrons to register for vote by mail and co-locating ballot drop boxes outside of more branches than during the June primary¹⁵; working with the School District to facilitate distance learning; and enhancing limited in-branch career services offerings.

¹⁴ A report from the Brookings Institute on the “COVID Slide”—the learning loss students will experience due to the disruption of a normal school schedule—found that “estimates suggest students could begin fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading from the prior year relative to a typical school year” (Soland et al., 2020). Not only will students be dealing with the academic obstacles from learning outside of the classroom, but many also have limited access to supplemental educational materials at home. As the Brookings staff put it, “the inequalities in our school systems are unfortunately anything but new. Our models cannot account for the reality that the crisis is having an unequal impact on our most underserved communities” (Soland et al., 2020). Two indicators of progress for FLP’s culture of literacy are a 2% increase in 3rd grade reading scores, and sponsoring 35 literacy-engagement activities targeted to youth. Helping elementary school students in underserved communities by providing them with in-home learning materials will make strides in service of educational equity.

¹⁵ In the June primary election, the Blackwell Regional, Wadsworth, and West Oak Lane Libraries served as drop-off sites for ballots, and five branch libraries also served as polling places (FLP Blog, 2020).

Recommendation 3:

Enhance Digital Capacity While Adapting Physical Lending Services

By May 2020, Overdrive checkouts year-to-date were up 13% from May 2019—with average daily checkouts close to 5,000 and hold periods lasting weeks to months. This juncture provides the FLP an exceptional opportunity to embrace creativity and innovation. Although resources are constrained, making investments in FLP’s digital and technological capacity will also help retain patrons and improve customer experience.

- **Short-term: Rollout curbside pickup at targeted branches and expand digital holdings.** The library has launched contactless pickup at 20 branches¹⁶ and future branches should be targeted in majority-minority neighborhoods that are engaging with digital lending at lower rates. In tandem with restarting circulation, adding more digital titles—and expanding the number of available titles in languages other than English—could help to reduce hold times for Overdrive checkouts as demand remains high, and address the cultural differences of patrons in lower-use clusters.
- **Medium-term: Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to invest in self-checkout kiosks.** FLP already has self-checkout kiosks in select branches, and installing more kiosks throughout every cluster is an opportunity to reduce person-to-person exposure when in-branch service resumes again. The latest fiscal year report available to the public (FY 2019) shows that “technology services and support” expenditures were 4.9% of FLP’s overall operating expenses (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2020b). Without in-branch public programming, perhaps some previously earmarked funds can be redirected to technology services. Enhancing the organization’s technical capacity will also help to support a culture of data-driven learning as administrators and branch managers can use kiosk data to track community-specific checkout trends to inform programming and collections management.
- **Long-term: Design a “Free Library to Go” app.** A dedicated mobile app is both an innovative product for patrons to use, and can also increase access for patrons who rely primarily on their mobile devices for internet access. The app can generate short, in-app surveys, convey institutional messaging, and have a direct “Ask a Librarian” function. These short surveys can provide an up-to-date understanding of patron habits and inform rapid-cycle evaluation to improve service provision. A non-trivial limitation to moving beyond the design phase is that launching an app takes a considerable investment of time and resources. Certain foundations prioritize grant funding for technological enhancements, and so this project could be a good fit for philanthropic underwriting.

¹⁶ As of August 3, 2020.

Recommendation 4:

Collaborate with Public and Private Partners to Address the Digital Divide

Addressing the digital divide requires cross-sector collaboration that concerns more than simply connecting to the internet. Especially with Philadelphia’s schools continuing remote learning into the fall (Wolfman-Arent, 2020), students without Wifi at home will rely upon the library’s public network as school resumes. FLP is well-positioned to leverage local partnerships to advance its commitments to equitable service and innovation by increasing the number of patrons who can access its resources online.

- **Short-term: Acquire Wifi hotspots to lend to patrons in clusters with limited digital access.** In FY 2019, FLP provided internet access to millions of visitors, hosting over one million Wifi sessions (Free Library of Philadelphia. 2020b). One way to provide continuity of service is by lending out Wifi hotspots, which help households to connect to the internet. Other library systems are investing in this service to bridge the digital divide; the New York Public Library’s HotSpot lending program is sponsored by the Google.org Charitable Giving Fund and the New York City Department of Education (New York Public Library, n.d.). FLP could work with Comcast¹⁷—based in Philadelphia—to receive an in-kind donation of hotspots, and perhaps receive funding to cover the affiliated costs of the program.
- **Medium-term: Join Mayor Kenney’s Digital Literacy Alliance.** An initiative run through the Mayor’s Fund, the Alliance is a group of organizations within Philadelphia that are working to close the digital divide. In light of the pandemic, the fund disbursed grants to organizations to act as “Digital Navigators,” narrowing the divide within their communities (Mayor’s Fund of Philadelphia, 2020). In the future, FLP could apply for Navigator funding to pilot programs related to distance learning efforts or app development.
- **Long-term: Evaluate the use of branch Wifi pre- and post-shutdown to show the extent to which the public relies upon library resources.** With city budgets across the country facing strain from the economic shutdown, decreased government funding is an existential concern for public libraries. Calculating the value and demand of these services will be useful evidence when advocating for funding. By demonstrating how many people used computers at the library or connected to its Wifi prior to shutdown, and how many patrons are still utilizing the Wifi from outside of branches, FLP could quantify how valuable its role as a utility provider is in meeting the demand of the communities it serves.

Conclusion

Public libraries are cornerstones of the community—providing educational enrichment, programming, social services, and a safe place to shelter for all. Branch closures throughout

¹⁷ Comcast’s community impact efforts are focused around increasing technology access, and their “Internet Essentials” program was launched with the mission to close the digital divide and enhance digital literacy (Comcast, 2019).

Philadelphia due to COVID-19 have shown just how essential these spaces and services are to every patron, and especially for those without internet access at home. The FLP responded to this crisis by pivoting its in-person activities to a wholly virtual model, and thousands of patrons adapted to this all-digital service with unprecedented demand, as the number of Overdrive checkouts between March and May increased by 17% compared to 2019. Taken at the ZIP- and cluster-level, however, engagement with digital collections has not been uniform throughout the region. Regression analysis reveals that in ZIP codes with majority Black or Hispanic/Latinx populations experiencing higher levels of poverty than majority White neighborhoods had a statistically significant negative correlation to the average number of checkouts.

As the FLP plans to continue reopening branches and modify activities in the weeks and months ahead, it can look to the strategies of other major cities to inform its practices, bearing in mind the chief concerns of safety and equity. One way to produce equitable services geared toward patrons in under-resourced areas is a phased plan that begins with contactless lending and resuming limited computer access in targeted branches within the North, North Central, and West Clusters as an opportunity to address the disparity in online lending. Another way FLP can inform medium- and long-term strategies, is to undertake a comprehensive qualitative data collection effort, surveying patrons who have and have not used digital resources and hosting focus groups with patrons, branch librarians, and leadership in order to better understand the experiences and perspectives of a diverse range of users. It can also continue to serve as a community hub offering vital services by co-locating services such as food distribution and vote-by-mail ballot boxes outside of branches in under-resourced ZIP codes. Over time, the Library can work with city officials and strategic partners from the private and philanthropic sectors to spearhead innovative approaches to close the digital divide and invest in its technological assets.

While the pandemic is far from over, recovery efforts are underway and FLP's services—both digital and direct—will be instrumental in helping citizens navigate the challenges arising from this crisis. Demand for digital content indicates that patrons view FLP's core services as indispensable. Through shoring up its focus on equity and inclusion and closing the lending gap, leveraging its status within Philadelphia to lead civic engagement efforts, and investing in and aiding distance learning, FLP will remain central to the patrons and communities that rely on it. FLP is entering a new chapter in its history, but it is one that is filled with opportunities to strategically and innovatively pursue its mission and ensure a more equitable and prosperous future for every Philadelphian.

Appendix A: Increase in Overdrive Checkouts by ZIP Code and Branch

The following figures and tables reflect overdrive checkouts by ZIP code, grouped into branch clusters. The data compares lending rates between the period of March 13–May 13 in both 2019 and 2020. **Figure 5** shows the overall variation in Overdrive growth within clusters, and **Figures 6–14** break down results in detail.

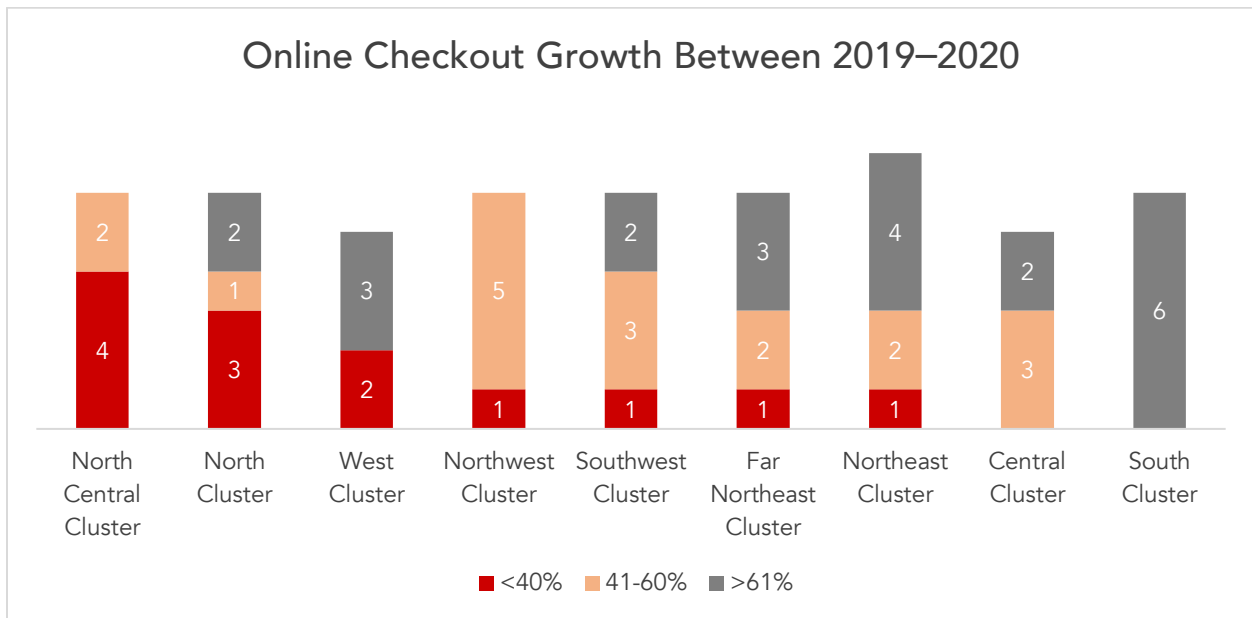


Figure 5. Growth in Overdrive checkouts by ZIP within clusters between 2019–2020

Central Cluster

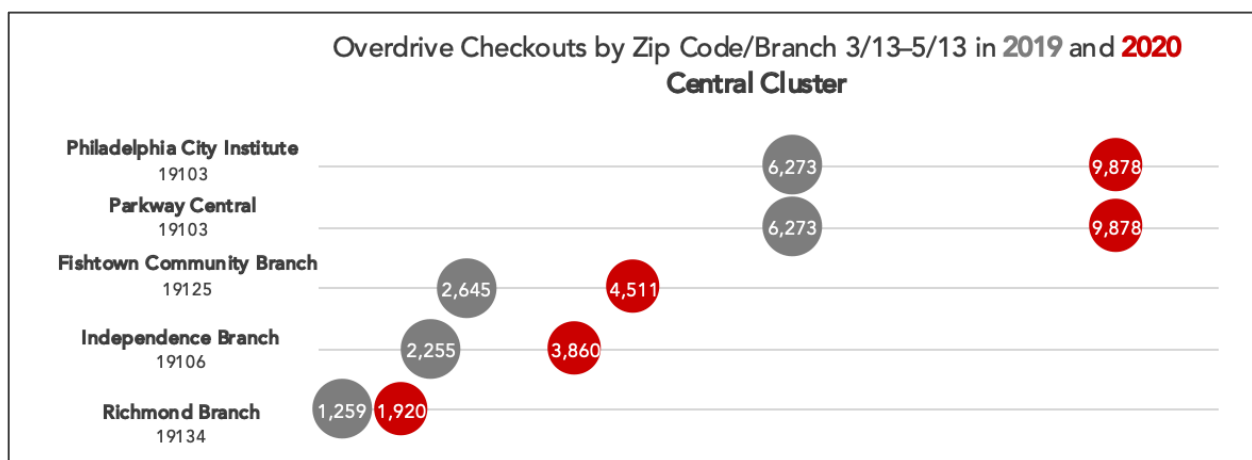


Figure 6. Overdrive Checkouts in Central Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Fishtown Community Branch	19125	71%
Independence Branch	19106	71%
Parkway Central Philadelphia City Institute	19103	57%
Richmond Branch	19134	53%

Far Northeast Cluster

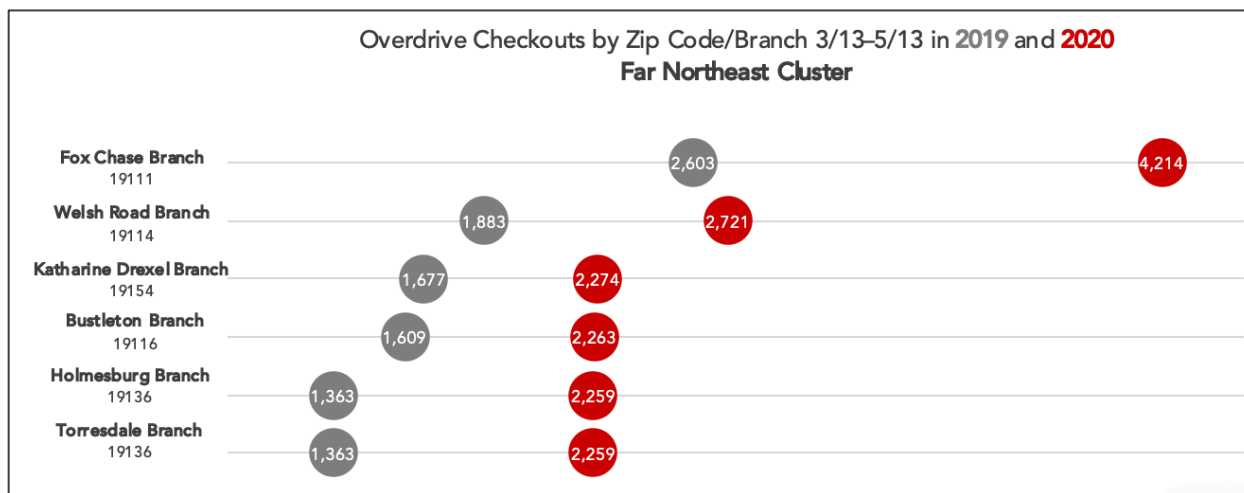


Figure 7. Overdrive Checkouts in Far Northeast Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Katharine Drexel Branch	19154	36%
Bustleton Branch	19116	41%
Welsh Road Branch	19114	45%
Fox Chase Branch	19111	62%
Holmesburg Branch	19136	66%
Torresdale Branch		

North Cluster

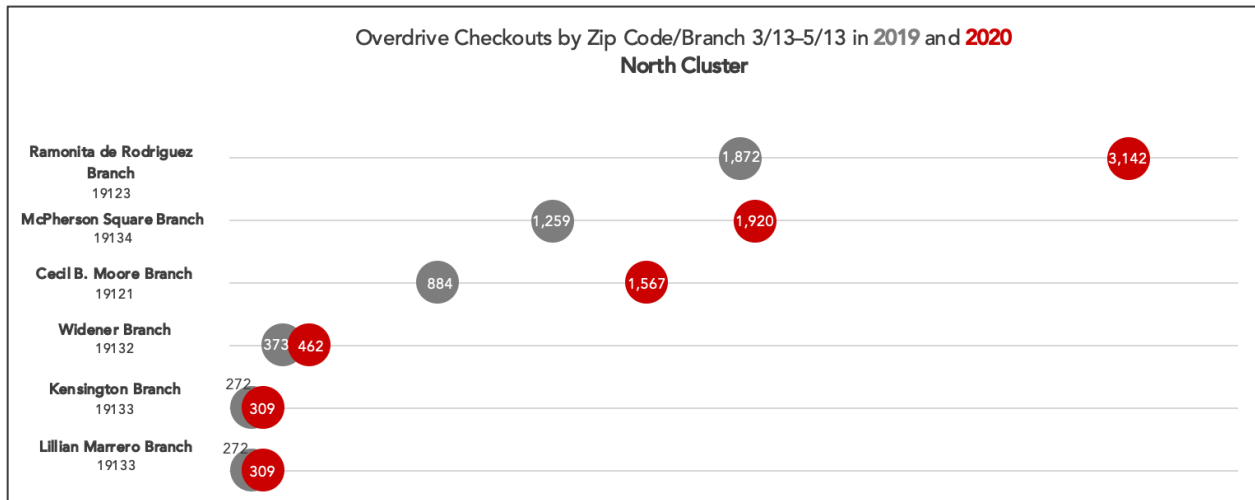


Figure 8. Overdrive Checkouts in North Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Kensington Branch Lillian Marrero Branch	19133	14%
Widener Branch	19132	24%
McPherson Square Branch	19134	53%
Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch	19123	68%
Cecil B. Moore Branch	19121	77%

North Central Cluster

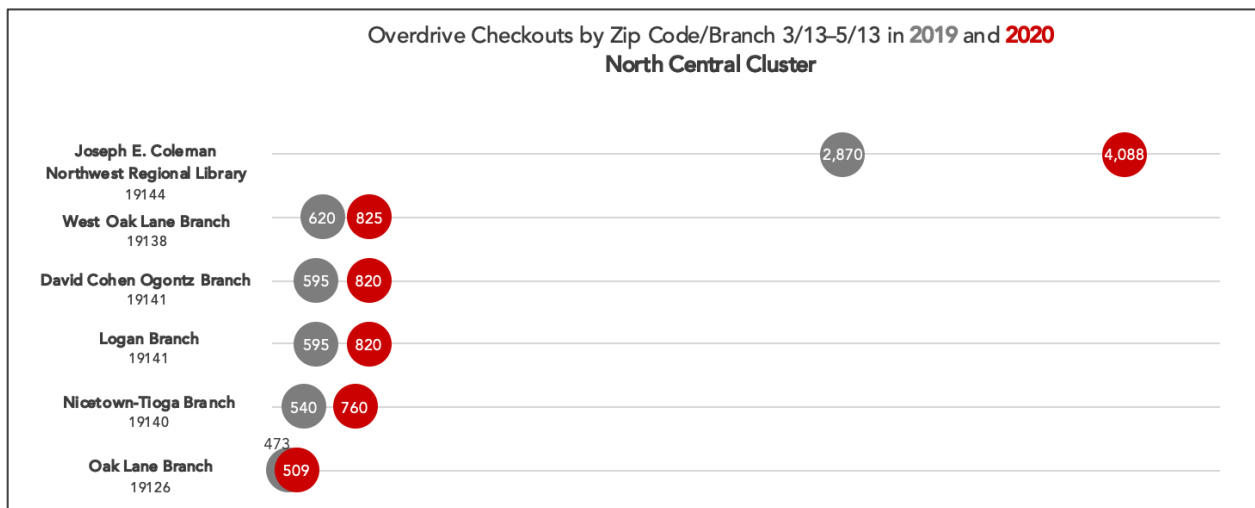


Figure 9. Overdrive Checkouts in North Central Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Oak Lane Branch	19126	8%
West Oak Lane Branch	19138	33%
David Cohen Ogontz Branch Logan Branch	19141	38%
Nicetown-Tioga Branch	19140	41%
Joseph E. Coleman Northwest Regional Library	19144	42%

Northeast Cluster

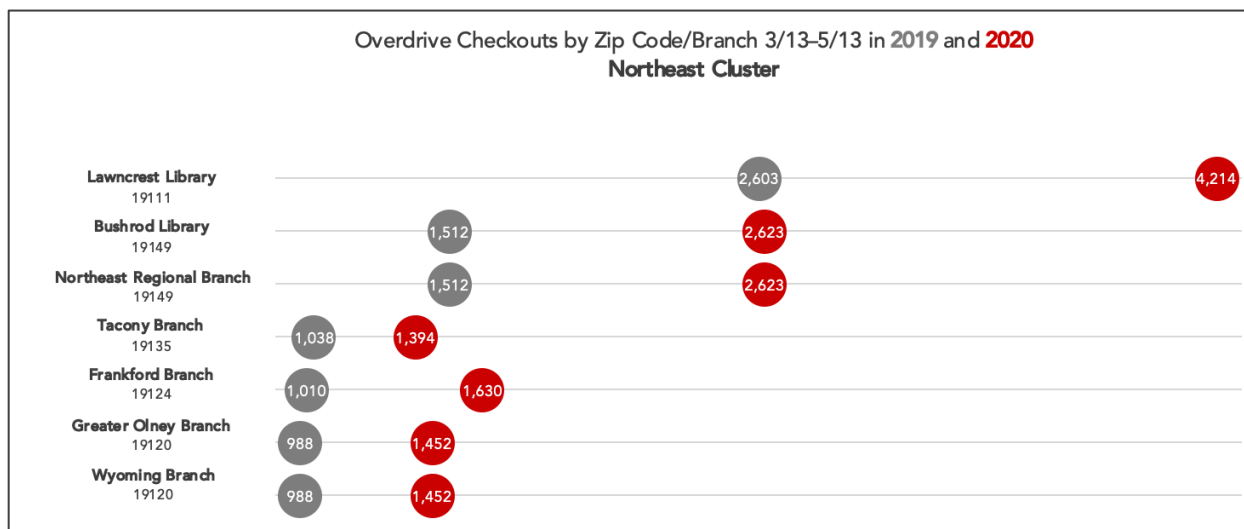


Figure 10. Overdrive Checkouts in Northeast Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Tacony Library	19135	34%
Greater Olney Branch Wyoming Branch	19120	47%
Frankford Branch	19124	61%
Lawncrest Branch	19111	62%
Bushrod Branch Northeast Regional Library	19149	73%

Northwest Cluster

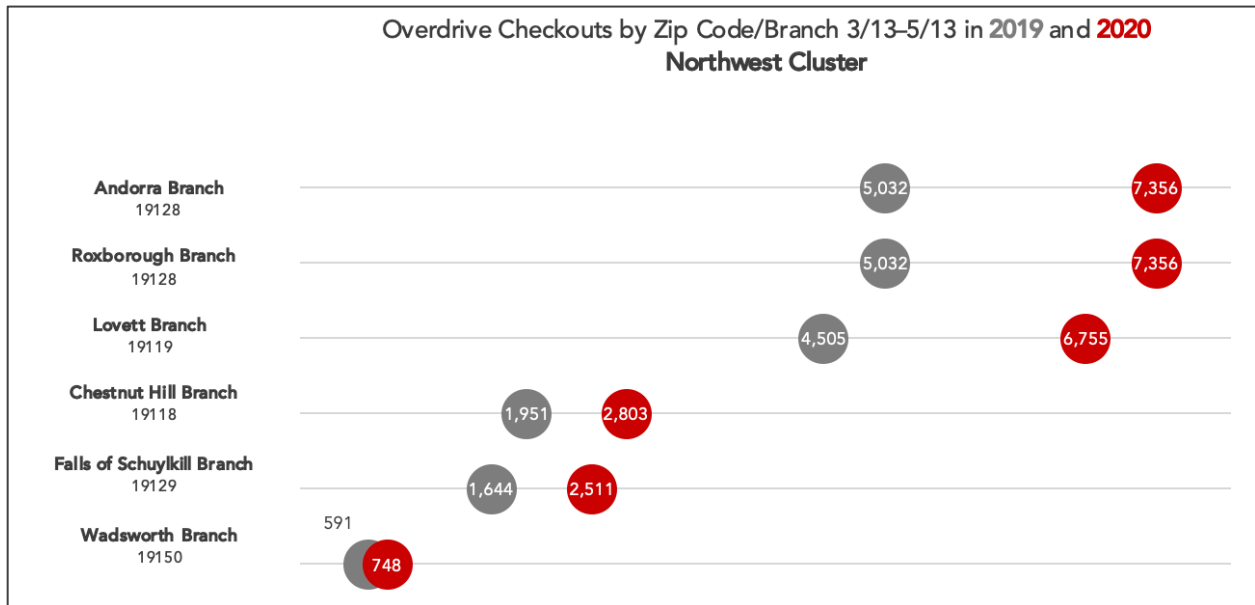


Figure 11. Overdrive Checkouts in Northwest Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Wadsworth Branch	19150	27%
Chestnut Hill Branch	19118	44%
Andorra Branch Roxborough Branch	19128	46%
Lovett Branch	19119	50%
Falls of Schuylkill Branch	19129	53%

South Cluster

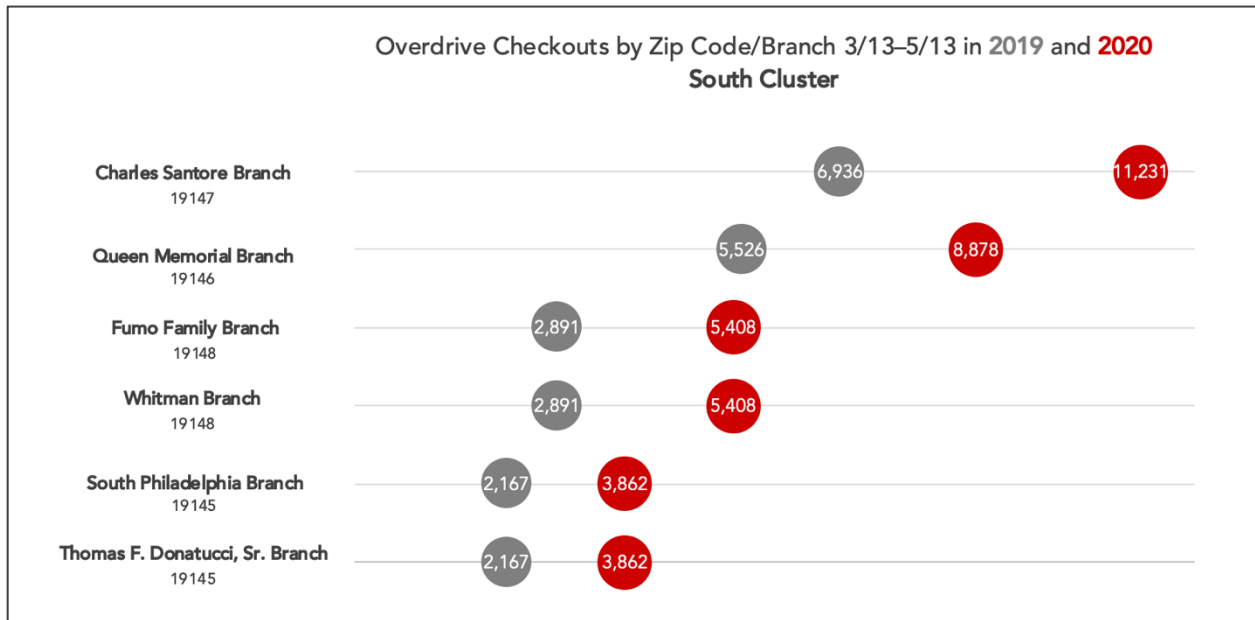


Figure 12. Overdrive Checkouts in South Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Queen Memorial Library	19146	61%
Charles Santore Branch	19147	62%
South Philadelphia Branch Thomas F. Donatucci, Sr.	19145	78%
Fumo Family Branch Whitman Branch	19148	87%

Southwest Cluster

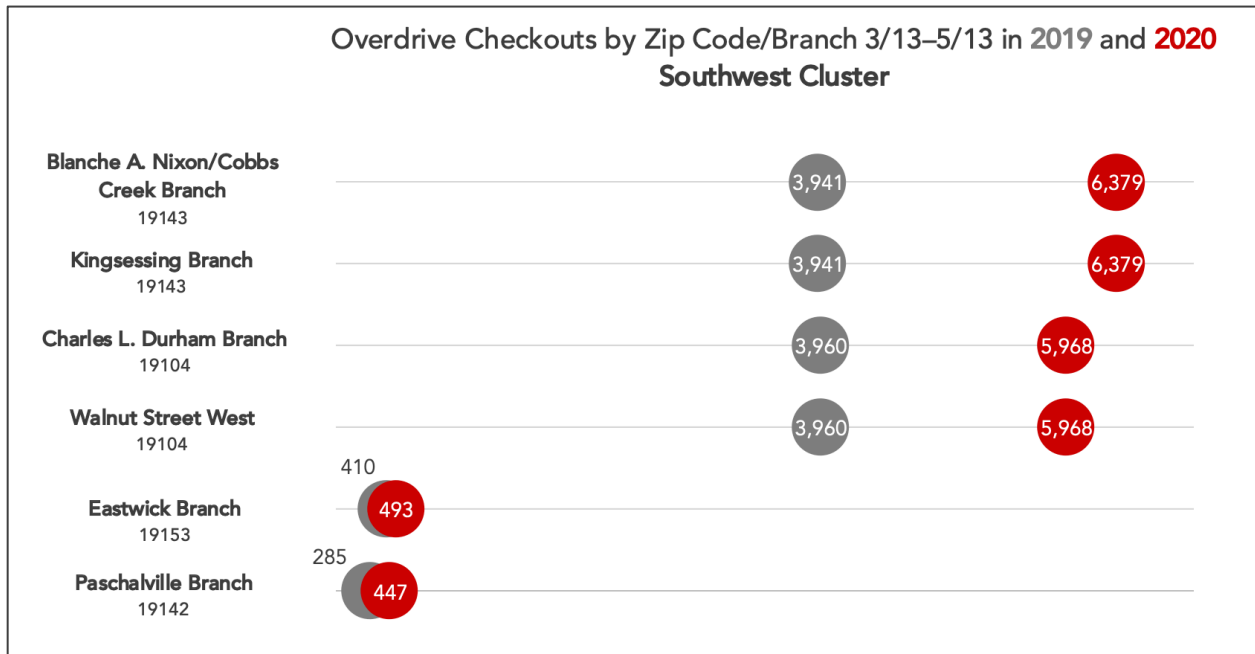


Figure 13. Overdrive Checkouts in Southwest Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Eastwick Branch	19153	20%
Charles L. Durham Branch Walnut Street West	19104	51%
Paschalville Branch	19142	57%
Blanche A. Nixon/Cobbs Creek Branch Kingsessing Branch	19143	62%

West Cluster

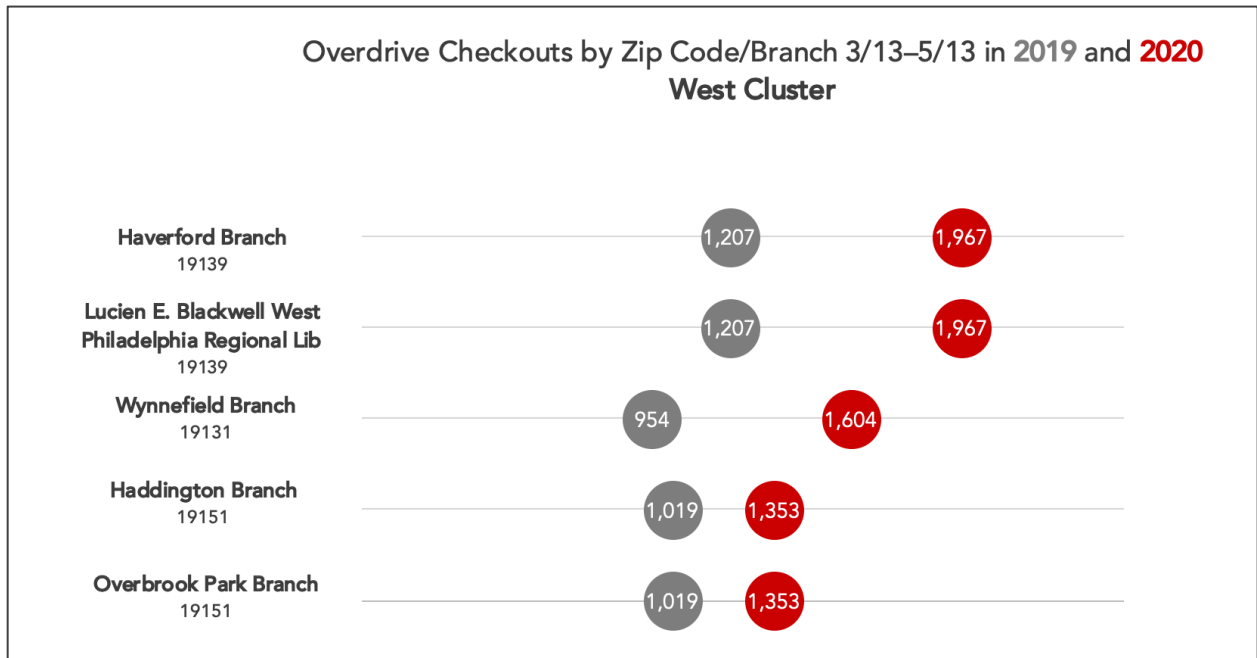


Figure 14. Overdrive Checkouts in West Cluster Branches, March to May 2019 and 2020

Percentage increase in Overdrive Checkouts (2019 vs. 2020)		
Branch	ZIP	% Change
Haddington Branch Overbrook Park Branch	19151	33%
Haverford Branch Lucien E. Blackwell West Philadelphia Regional Library	19139	63%
Wynnefield Branch	19131	68%

Appendix B: Digital Use Survey

Free Library of Philadelphia Digital Use Survey

Introduction

While COVID-19 has caused the Free Library to close our doors for the time being, we are still providing digital resources. This survey will help us to better understand how our patrons are accessing the digital collections, and enhance our services to your needs. This survey should take **no longer than 10 minutes** to complete, and all answers are anonymous.

Thank you for taking the time to help the Free Library of Philadelphia and we hope you and your family are doing well—we look forward to welcoming you in person again soon!

Section 1: Usage Habits

1. Prior to branch closures, had you used the Free Library's digital lending services?
 - Yes
 - No

2. Which of the following digital resources have you used since branch closures began? (Select all that apply)
 - Audiobooks
 - eBooks
 - Overdrive for Kids
 - Kanopy (movie streaming platform)
 - Databases
 - Newspapers
 - Free Library podcasts
 - Free Library blog
 - Free Library Virtual Programming (Author talks, Instagram live story times)
 - EBSCO LearningExpress
 - Other

3. I access digital resources on the following devices (Select all that apply):
 - iPad or tablet
 - Smartphone
 - Laptop
 - TV

Section 2: User Retention

4. How many times have you accessed the Library's digital resources?

	1-3 times	4-6 times	7-10 times	10+ times	Not at All
Audiobooks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
eBooks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overdrive for Kids	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kanopy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Databases	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Newspapers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free Library podcasts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free Library blog	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free Library Virtual Programming	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
EBCO LearningExpress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not sure
The Library's digital resources have been helpful for me during this time.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I enjoy using digital resources.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I use digital resources for entertainment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I use digital resources for educational purposes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Digital resources are more convenient to access.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can find what I am looking for in the digital collections.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Navigating digital resources is straightforward.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section 3: Medium-term needs

6. Have you been able to access the resources you need?
- Yes, immediately
 - Yes, but I had to wait for items on the hold list

- No

7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the titles in the Library's digital collection.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Three weeks is an acceptable time period to wait for a hold.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I intend to continue using digital resources after branches reopen.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to attend more virtual programming.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. How can the Library improve your digital lending experience? Are there any resources would you like access to? [Short answer]

Demographics

9. Age

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- Over 66

10. Race (select all that apply)

- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Native American
- Southeast Asian
- White
- Other race (please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

11. Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

12. ZIP code

Thank you!

Appendix C: Technical Appendix

Administrative Data Sources Referenced in this Report			
Data Set	Figure(s)	Date Coverage	Description
Overdrive Users	Figure 1	3/1–5/31/2019 3/1–5/31/2020	Overdrive user data via Jennifer Maguire-Wright Tableau visualization
Overdrive Checkouts	Figure 2	3/13–5/13/2019 3/13–5/31/2020	Overdrive lending data via Jennifer Maguire-Wright Tableau visualization
	Table 2	3/13–6/7/2020	
	Figure 3	3/1–6/30/2020	
	Figure 4	3/13–6/7/2020	
	Figures 6–14 (Appendix A)	3/1–5/31/2019 3/1–5/31/2020	
American Community Survey	Figure 5 Table 2 Table 3 Appendix E	2018	U.S. Census ACS 2018 5-year estimates: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Percent Below Poverty Level—Population For Whom Poverty Status Is Determined—Estimate (Table S1701) 2. Demographic and Housing Estimates (Table DP05)
Freelibrary.org Traffic	n/a	3/1–6/30/2020	Web traffic (pageviews and unique pageviews) to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> www.freelibrary.org freelibrary.org/faq/aska.cfm freelibrary.org/blog

Appendix D: City Reopening Survey—Detailed Results

Reopening Plan Survey (As of July 1, 2020): Branch Openings			
System	# of Operational Branches	Total # of Branches	Pickup Method
New York	On 7/13, 8 begin curbside pickup	88	Drop-in
Los Angeles	13 curbside pickup	72	Scheduled
Chicago	75 open for inside use— self-checkout only	79	Drop-in
Houston	11 curbside pickup	44	Drop-in
Phoenix	15 curbside pickup	16	Drop-in
Philadelphia	0	54	n/a
San Antonio	20 curbside pickup 9 open for computer use	20	Drop-in
San Diego	11 curbside pickup	33	Drop-in
Dallas	16 curbside pickup	27	Scheduled
San Jose	10 curbside pickup	25	Scheduled and drop-in
Austin	10 curbside pickup	20	Drop-in
Jacksonville	5 open for inside use 14 curbside pickup	21	Drop-in
Fort Worth	7 open for inside use— self-checkout only 16 curbside pickup	16	Scheduled
Columbus	11 operating in person 14 curbside pickup	23	Drop-in
Charlotte	All locations open— self-checkout only	20	Drop-in
San Francisco	0	27	n/a
Indianapolis	21 curbside pickup and in-person	23	Scheduled
Seattle	0	27	n/a
Denver	On 7/7, branches begin curbside pickup	26	Drop-in
Washington	8 curbside and in person lending On 7/13, 14 will be open	25	Drop-in
Boston	10 curbside pickup	24	Scheduled
El Paso	0 (6/29 opening delayed due to case spikes)	13	n/a
Nashville	8	20	Drop-in
Detroit	On 8/1, begin curbside pickup	21	Drop-in
Oklahoma City	5 curbside pickup	19	Drop-in

Reopening Plan Survey (As of July 1, 2020): Computer Use Policies

System	Computer Use Policy
New York	n/a
Los Angeles	n/a
Chicago	Reduced number of computers within branches Patrons limited to one computer session a day 1-hour limit “Express” computers are 15-minutes Keyboard and mouse sleeves are available upon requests
Houston	n/a
Phoenix	n/a
Philadelphia	n/a
San Antonio	9 out of 20 branches 1-hour limit Call to schedule an appointment
San Diego	n/a
Dallas	They are printing documents, but no computer use policy yet
San Jose	n/a
Austin	n/a
Jacksonville	Main branch open for use on first and fourth floors
Fort Worth	7 out of 16 branches 1-hour limit
Columbus	11 out of 23 branches 50-minute limit
Charlotte	Mobile printing available for pickup
San Francisco	n/a
Indianapolis	21 out of 23 branches 1-hour limit Printing, faxing, and copying available
Seattle	n/a—will resume in phase 3 (date TBD)
Denver	n/a
Washington	“Internet Café” service at 8 branches to pick up remote print jobs, and access public computers Number of branches open for computer use will increase to 14 in July
Boston	n/a
El Paso	n/a
Nashville	n/a
Detroit	n/a—scheduled for 9/8 when limited service begins
Oklahoma City	6/1 began by reservation, with a limited number for use and printing

Appendix E: Demographics by Cluster

The tables below use 2018 American Community Survey data from Census.gov to provide the percent of races and ethnicities of residents within each ZIP code within the FLP's nine clusters. They also provide the poverty rate of each ZIP code to give context to each area's larger socioeconomic situation. Data has not been disaggregated by sub-category, and does not include all race/ethnic groups, but includes the four largest populations: Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx. Data also is based on the ACS estimate and due to margin of error may sum to more or less than 100% in certain ZIPs.

Central Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Philadelphia City Institute	19103	15	6.2	72.1	11.7	5.7
Parkway Central Branch	19103	15	6.2	72.1	11.7	5.7
Independence Branch	19106	7	8.1	76.7	6.4	6.4
Fishtown Community Library	19125	22	3.9	74.7	6	13.5
Richmond Branch	19134	45	15.8	35	1.6	46.2

Far Northeast Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Fox Chase Branch	19111	27	23.1	43.7	10.1	19.7
Welsh Road Branch	19114	12	10.1	75.6	4	9
Bustleton Avenue Branch	19116	12	6	66.7	16.8	6.3
Torresdale Branch Holmesburg Branch	19136	23	15.3	63.7	3	14.5
Katharine Drexel Branch	19154	8	8.5	78	4	8.2

North Central Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Oak Lane Branch	19126	22	81.5	5.4	3.7	4.8
West Oak Lane Branch	19138	29	91.6	2.6	0.6	1.7
Nicetown-Tioga Branch	19140	42	52.5	3	1.1	41.7
Ogontz Avenue Branch Logan Branch	19141	30	84.1	4.3	5.1	4.3
Joseph E. Coleman Northwest Regional Library	19144	40	74.6	16.2	2.1	3.9

North Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Cecil B. Moore Avenue Branch	19121	51	74.7	13.3	3.9	6.3
Ramonita de Rodriguez Branch	19123	34	29.2	48.3	7.6	10.4
Widener Branch	19132	42	90.6	3.2	1.1	3.2
Kensington Branch Lillian Marrero Branch	19133	53	34.7	3.5	1.2	58.7
McPherson Square Branch	19134	41	15.8	35	1.6	46.2

Northeast Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Lawncrest Branch	19111	27	23.1	43.7	10.1	19.7
Wyoming Branch Greater Olney Branch	19120	37	50	6	11	30.8
Frankford Branch	19124	38	37	14.1	4.9	41.5
Tacony Branch	19135	20	24.2	45.4	4.5	23.4
Northeast Regional Library Bushrod Branch	19149	24	24.4	34.2	15.4	22.3

Northwest Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Chestnut Hill Branch	19118	15	18.9	65.5	5.3	6.9
Lovett Memorial Branch	19119	13	57.9	31.3	1.9	2.9
Roxborough Branch Andorra Branch	19128	15	12.2	76.9	2.8	4.2
Falls of Schuylkill Branch	19129	29	35.7	51.9	4.4	3.6
Wadsworth Avenue Branch	19150	12	93.6	2.4	0.6	1.4

West Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Wynnefield Branch	19131	33	80.4	10.7	3.5	3.2
Lucien E. Blackwell West Philadelphia Regional Library Haverford Avenue Branch	19139	35	87	5.7	2.6	2.8
Haddington Branch Overbrook Park Branch	19151	22	87.1	6.5	0.7	4.1

South Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Thomas F. Donatucci Sr. Branch South Philadelphia Branch	19145	41	30	48.4	13.5	6.3
Queen Memorial Branch	19146	21	42.7	44.6	4.4	4.6
Charles Santore Branch	19147	15	9	66.4	12.6	9.1
Fumo Family Branch Whitman Branch	19148	31	4.9	56	22.3	14.3

Southwest Cluster

Branches	ZIP	Poverty Rate	Black (%)	White (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)
Charles L. Durham Branch Walnut Street West Branch	19104	47	41.9	34.6	14.1	5.1
Paschalville Branch	19142	37	84	5.9	6.3	2.6
Blanche A. Nixon/Cobbs Creek Branch Kingsessing Branch	19143	39	79.3	11.6	2.4	3.6
Eastwick Branch	19153	38	73.2	12	4.1	7

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