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Millennials rely on the Free Library for more than books

by TyLisa C. Johnson, Updated: January 28, 2019



HEATHER KHALIFA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



To Amelia Longo, the city's public libraries are more than just a book repository.

Longo, 35, says the library is "expansive," offering not just books and materials, but free events and programs, as well as a free space to read, hang out, do work, meet up, and reorient between travels. It's "a space that I can be for free and that has WiFi," she said.

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COURTESY AMELIA LONGO

Amelia Longo attends the Dec. 12, 2018, rally at City Hall for increased funds for the Free Library. Longo says she uses the libraries for more than just books and materials.

Longo, of Point Breeze, is one of many millennials across the city who rely on libraries as public spaces that provide free WiFi and programming, digital services, and the chance to connect with their community.

The city's millennials hold 222,225 library cards — the most when compared with baby boomers and Gen Xers — but they borrow fewer items, data from the Free Library show, suggesting the group engages with branches in ways that go beyond simply renting materials.

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In 2018, millennials borrowed 703,589 items, placing them third behind Gen Xers (756,718 items) and boomers (934,221). Across the board, the generations borrowed fewer items at the Free Library from 2017 to 2018, the data showed.

Millennials Visit the Library for More Than Books

Millennials in Philadelphia outnumber other generations in the number of cardholders at the Free Library but tend to borrow fewer items, suggesting they engage with libraries in different ways.

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Millennials	222,225	776,684	703,589	3.2
Gen Xers	152,992	843,378	756,718	4.9
Boomers	119,485	1,020,374	934,221	7.8

SOURCE: Free Library of Philadelphia, fiscal-year data

Staff Graphic

Millennials are the generation of Americans [most likely to visit public libraries](#), Pew research shows.

These trends may be related to the significant changes many public libraries have undergone in the last few decades to emphasize social and community aspects, experts say.

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There's "no doubt" that community-related services at libraries and programming are "particularly compelling to millennials," said Lee Rainie, director of internet and technology research at the Pew Research Center in Washington.

National research has shown that millennials are relatively heavy users of libraries and that they are more likely to not just check out books and use the reference desk, but also to use computers and check out technology-related materials.

"So many people suppose, number one, that libraries are a thing of the past, and number two, that young people aren't book readers anymore, don't have any connection to libraries because they're living online, especially on their smartphones," Rainie said, but data tell a different story.

Much of how millennials use libraries can be traced back to their watching libraries transform as they grew up, he said. Young people watched libraries reinvent themselves: adding computers and internet connection; reconfiguring spaces to emphasize tech, social gatherings or community; and offering more programs built around community activities.

Now, their use habits have aged with them, and millennials — many of whom are now in their late 20s and early 30s — are "doing things that people have always done at libraries," such as taking young children to story times.

As a child, Temple University senior Rebecca Roman was carted to libraries by her grandmother every few days.

Roman, now 22, remembers that even then, the library felt welcoming; always positioned as "a space for community"; and a "nice way to just see new faces." When she grew up, the library became a place to study and finish homework assignments.

"It's really kind of a place of refuge sometimes," said Roman, who says these days she mostly uses the library to meet up with friends and hold study sessions.

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The Free Library has tried to embrace its new role as a digital hub, and to reimagine branches to meet the shifting needs of patrons.

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activism.

“We have a lot of [young] people who will come in and set up, and they’ll be here for hours and hours,” working on their devices, said Vicki Szondy, a library assistant at the branch.

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JEFFREY TOTARO

The interior of the renovated Logan branch library in North Philadelphia features a living room-like seating area and bright colors.

“There are lots of ways that libraries didn’t stand still as the digital tsunami was washing over the culture, and millennials were observant of that,” Rainie said. “They knew that libraries were places to meet up with folks.” Libraries were “these third places where these community activities could take place.”

Audrey Ellis is one of many who see the library as a third place — a place besides home and school or work where she and others can gather for free.

Ellis, a 34-year-old South Philadelphia resident, lives within walking distance of three Free Library branches, and visits at least once a week, mostly to “cobble together activities” for her 14-month-old son.

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Ellis’ young family uses the library “as a community center,” she said. “It’s a place to go that’s warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and we love it when there’s programmed activities there. But we also just go there as a third space.”

“For us, it’s really about the actual space and the resources that the space [has], and the programming they provide,” she said.