

Enabling Torontonians to grow and thrive:

**Measuring the
social impact of
Toronto Public Library**

May 2024

Libraries are the heart of their communities. With online services and 100 branches to serve every corner of the city, Toronto Public Library (TPL) means so much to so many – especially for those who have no other access to the services and spaces it provides. At a time when discord often prevails, the library provides social cohesion – it reminds us of what connects us, rather than what divides us.

We know the library has tremendous value to all who use it. We also know the importance of accountability, and over the years, we've demonstrated the value of the library in terms of economic benefits. But we also know that the library's value is more than just dollars and cents.

We asked ourselves: what if we could go beyond a traditional value-for-money approach in assessing the value of TPL? What if we could value the impact the library has on the lives of people in our city?

It is by no means a simple thing to attach metrics to a feeling of belonging, to combatting loneliness, or to the enrichment of a mind. Yet we know that Toronto Public Library does all of these things and more.

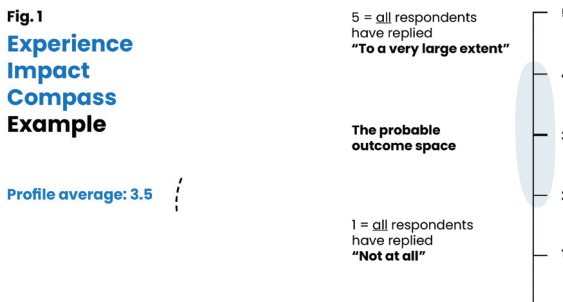
TPL has taken on this challenge and uncovered a rich world of data that speaks to value in a very different way. Funded by the Toronto Public Library Foundation thanks to a generous donation from Richard and Joan Boxer, TPL partnered with innovative Danish firm Seismonaut to deliver a Social Impact Study.

Overall, the study found that TPL is:

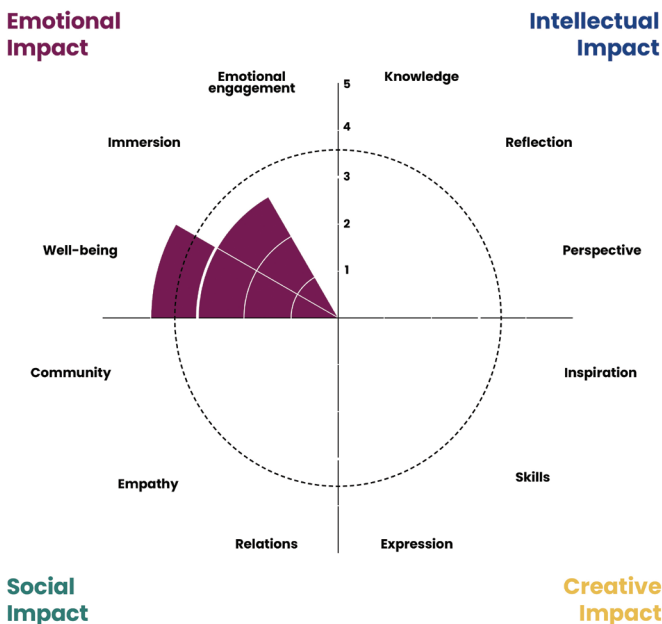
- 1. an incredible force to combat social isolation** – in a lonely city, it's a place where everyone is welcome, and different communities and viewpoints converge.
- 2. a place for people to better themselves,** where they can tap into programs, services and collections that expand their world and help them achieve their goals.
- 3. a critical portal to resources and services for the most vulnerable people in our city,** who cannot access them anywhere else.

To uncover these insights, we applied Seismonaut's Experience Impact Compass for the first time in a North American library context to provide an empirical evidence base that captured first-hand individual experiences of people who use the library.

The Compass uses a unique five-point scale measurement system. It assesses impact across the four dimensions of Emotional, Social, Intellectual and Creative Impact, and three parameters within each dimension. A score is based on the average response, and is likely to fall between 2 and 4, with 4 being extremely high. Average responses rarely climb above 4 as some respondents may score an element as 1 or 0 – not because the service isn't valuable, but because it may not be how the respondent uses the library. For example, an individual may use technology to fill out forms for taxes, and score that experience high in the Intellectual dimension, but give it a low score in the Creative dimension.



Learn more about the methodology on pages 22-23 of the report.



We collected data to assess the impact of the five service pillars of TPL: programs, collections, spaces, staff and technology. We engaged 2,800 TPL customers via online survey, 65 per cent of whom were library users in the past year. We conducted 64 qualitative interviews, and three focus groups in five branches across the city to dig further into survey results and help contextualize the data. Here's what we found:



Collections: A key to personal growth through learning and new perspectives

Our collections had the most profound impact on library users – they were the most used of all five service pillars. In fact, the collections score was unprecedented among all previous impact studies conducted by Seismonaut in the Intellectual dimension, scoring 4.0 or higher in each parameter. The Intellectual Impact was coupled with high scores of just under 4.0 in the Emotional dimension of the Compass, with most users experiencing positive impacts such as a sense of well-being, emotional engagement and feeling immersed. Overall, collections scored a very high 3.6 on the Compass. Users not only gained knowledge, they also exposed themselves to different perspectives and fostered newfound empathy with people dissimilar to them through their interaction with collections. The study found that collections are playing a critical role in protecting and promoting freedom of expression while also supporting TPL's commitment to advancing equity and inclusion.



Programs: Creating profound transformational experiences

TPL programs deeply enrich the lives of those who use them, from a newcomer looking for employment support, to a new parent looking for tips on getting their child to sleep through the night. Critically, programs offer a portal into a world of learning and connection for people who would not otherwise have access. The study found that programs engage only about a fifth of all users, but had the highest overall impact score across the entire study at 3.7, and was the only pillar that scored 3.5 or higher in all dimensions and parameters of the Compass. This tells us that there's significant room to grow and invest in our programs offerings to reach more people. Not only do programs provide transformational experiences for personal and professional growth and skill-building, they can also offer a cure for loneliness – the chance to build new relationships and socialize.



Spaces: A versatile and inclusive haven accommodating diverse experiences

The library's spaces allow people from all walks of life to gather and connect at a time when non-monetized space is scarce. Spaces were valued as much more than just a place to sit and read – the library is an immersive and inclusive environment that provides a place for diverse uses, from work and study to recreation and relaxation. Spaces particularly contributed to Emotional Impact, with a sense of well-being ranking at 3.7 for most users, followed closely by feelings of concentration and immersion. Spaces had the highest impact on youth across all parameters – digging into the qualitative data, we found that young people value the library as a safe and distraction-free setting to study, learn new information and skills, and connect with friends and supportive adults.



Staff: A trusted source of knowledge and empathy

Library users see TPL staff as an oasis of human connection in a city of strangers – staff provide expertise, and engage with library users from all backgrounds with courtesy and respect. The people who work at TPL are highly valued by library users, not only for their knowledge and helpfulness with collections and services, but also for their empathy, kindness and dedication to the social inclusion of some of the city's most vulnerable populations. Staff support had a high Intellectual impact score of 3.6 for most users who interacted with staff, and an Emotional impact score of 3.4.



Technology: Providing digital access, inclusion and literacy

The study found that TPL's technology is a lifeline for so many who don't have access to digital tools, or possess digital literacy skills. Technology scored high in the Intellectual (3.4) and Creative dimensions (3.3) among most users engaging with TPL's technological offerings, and qualitative data further reinforced the meaning and value of those services. For those who have access to and mastery of digital fundamentals, The library's Digital Innovation Hubs are providing a launching pad for users' creative and professional endeavours – access to specialized software and training helps them to get their dreams off the ground.

What we learned.

We're proud to say that Toronto Public Library scores on the Experience Impact Compass were very high. TPL scored 3.5 in the Emotional and Intellectual dimensions, 3.2 in the Social dimension and 3.3 in the Creative dimension – scores that outrank other libraries evaluated by these metrics, and provide empirical evidence of a world class library system that helps Torontonians to grow and thrive. The study also revealed new insights into the various ways that different library users value our services. **TPL doesn't just enrich lives, it changes lives – especially for the most vulnerable among us, many of whom would otherwise have no access at all to the tools, resources and community it provides.**

The results of this study provide concrete evidence of what we already knew: that Toronto Public Library and its services are vital to the lifeblood of the city and its people. It's a tranquil haven from a busy city, an unlimited source of knowledge, and a place to build skills and find community.

In an algorithmically-driven world that's curating our communities into ever-smaller bubbles, the library is a place to come together and encounter new ideas with people from different walks of life. The study succeeded in giving us exciting new perspective and concrete metrics to ascribe value to the impact of TPL to library users. It also reminds us that while the library's impact is measurable, it remains truly invaluable as a uniting force for all who live in our great city.



tplfoundation.ca/socialimpactstudy

