
A Social Infrastructure Plan for New York City

By Eric Klinenberg

*Professor of Sociology, Helen Gould Shepard Professor in Social Science, Director of
the Institute for Public Knowledge*

October 2021

SUMMARY

QUESTION: HOW CAN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS BOLSTER NEW YORK CITY'S RECOVERY POST PANDEMIC?

WHY IMPORTANT:

- 1. Investing in social infrastructures (private and public spaces) create new opportunities for interaction, civic engagement, community-building, and mutual support. It is also the material foundation we need to build social capital, cohesion, and trust.*
 - 2. The branch library (libraries) is among the most ubiquitous and neglected by policymaker. Yet this institution has the greatest potential to help revive New York City's social and civic life.*
 - 3. Libraries provide the widest possible variety of cultural materials to people of all ages, from all ethnicities, in all social classes and groups.*
 - 4. In the case of New York City, the library systems and their employees are overwhelmed because so many people are using the libraries for wide variety of purposes. From 2008 to 2018, the number of full-time librarians in New York Public Library's branch libraries has decreased 19.9% while library program attendance has shot up 158%.*
-

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. Prioritize policies that encourage new social infrastructure to restore social and civic life.*
 - 2. Expand and update library systems as not only social collateral, but pillars of resilience.*
-

CONSTRAINTS:

- 1. Today, there are some city leaders who see the library as a luxury amenity, less important now that we have Amazon and Google and all the information we need on our screens.*





NEW YORK CITY NEEDS A SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

One year into this historically devastating pandemic, New Yorkers in every borough cannot wait to stop social distancing. We understand why we've spent so much time in lockdowns and quarantines; why our favorite restaurants, bars, and gyms have been shuttered; why libraries, schools, and senior centers are remote operations; why, from Broadway to Brighton Beach and the Apollo, the shows must not go on. But enough of all that. When the virus is no longer a lethal threat to our city, New Yorkers will be eager to gather together – not on Zoom or Skype or Facebook Live, but in-person, in real life, face-to-face.

Social infrastructure is the set of physical places and organizations that shape our interactions. When we invest in social infrastructure – when we design it well, when we build it well, when we maintain and program it – we create new opportunities for interaction, civic engagement, community-building, and mutual support. We do the opposite when we fail to invest in social infrastructure, reducing opportunities to connect and making it far more likely that city residents will hunker down, physically distanced and home alone.



DEFINITION OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

I define social infrastructure capaciously. It refers principally to public places, such as libraries, parks, schools, senior centers, and recreational facilities. These places have a special status in city planning, not only because they are open and accessible, but also because they are directly shaped by democratic decisions that we make in City Hall. Social infrastructure also includes private places, from nonprofits like churches, mosques, synagogues, union halls, and neighborhood organizations to businesses like diners, coffee shops, hair salons, and theaters. A social infrastructure plan requires developing different policies to support these different types of gathering places. New York City can be most effective by directly supporting the creation, maintenance, and programming of public institutions and spaces, but it can also do more to encourage the construction of open and accessible gathering places in the nonprofit and private realm.



Today, the word infrastructure usually makes us think of big, buried systems for transit, electricity, gas, oil, food, finance, sewage, water, heat, communications, and storm protection. Sometimes experts call these systems the “critical infrastructure,” because policy makers perceive them to be essential for functioning societies. Social infrastructure is no less real than these other infrastructure systems, and it is every bit as essential. Social infrastructure is the material foundation we need to build social capital, civic engagement, cohesion, and trust. We ignore it at our peril.

If the concept of social infrastructure seems fuzzy, consider the neighborhood playground. How many relationships in New York City exist because two families began using the same local playground on the same afternoons, day after day, week after week? At first, the caregivers (be they parents, grandparents, siblings, or sitters) keep to themselves, but after a few days at the swing set someone nods or smiles. A conversation ensues. The kids laugh, and both families walk to the slide. The grown-ups exchange phone numbers and plan a playdate. A friendship develops. The new friends introduce each other to other neighbors. Before long, a community forms. Policy makers like to count things. Costs and benefits. So seriously, try to calculate the number of relationships in New York City that started because a good playground is such a fertile social infrastructure. Or just guess. Is it one hundred? One hundred thousand? One million? More, surely. But how often does the city account for that when we choose where to spend public resources? That’s not a rhetorical question. In the post-pandemic, rebuilding period, local government must do more than ever to help New Yorkers engage and support each other. Building new playgrounds in neighborhoods that need them, or just improving the facilities and programming in those that we’ve neglected, is an urgent public task. New York currently ranks 92nd amongst the United States’ 100 largest cities for parkland per 1000 residents.

THE BRANCH LIBRARY

The social infrastructure with the greatest potential to help revive New York City’s social and civic life is among the most ubiquitous and neglected: the branch library. Libraries are not the kinds of institutions that most policy makers and community leaders usually bring up when they discuss how to build trust, social capital, and civic engagement. But in New York City, neighborhood libraries and librarians do all kinds of unexpected things for surprisingly great numbers of people. Their core mission is to help people elevate themselves and improve their situation. Libraries do this, principally, by providing the widest possible variety of cultural materials to people of all ages, from all ethnicities, in all social classes and groups. What’s more, in a city organized around inequality, where people in every borough fear that they no longer belong, libraries are open and accessible, free for all. Libraries are rare places where everyone feels welcome, and everyone is accorded dignity and respect.



For older people, especially the [424,000 New Yorkers over age 60 who live alone](#), libraries are places for culture and companionship, through book clubs, movie nights, sewing circles, and classes in art, music, current events, and computing. The elderly can also do some of these activities in senior centers, but there they can only do them with other old people, and often that makes them feel stigmatized, as if old is all they are. For many seniors, the library is the main place to interact with people from other generations. It's a place where they can volunteer and feel useful. It's where they can be part of a diverse and robust community, not a homogeneous one where everyone fears decline.

LIBRARIES AS A MODEL OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Libraries provide different benefits to young people. They expose infants and toddlers to books and stories that would otherwise be inaccessible. They help children inch towards independence, giving them library cards and letting them choose how to use them. Libraries offer refuge and safe space to teenagers who'd rather study or socialize than hang out in the streets. Librarians help students with homework and offers after-school programs in art, science, music, language, and math. They recommend books, authors, entire genres, even, to young people who are searching for something different but can't yet name it. Libraries help children and teenagers feel responsible to themselves and to their neighbors, by teaching them what it means to borrow and take care of something public, and to return it so others can have it, too.

By doing all this, libraries also help families and caretakers. They provide a social space and shared activities for new parents, grandparents, and nannies who feel lonely, disconnected, or overwhelmed when watching an infant or toddler by themselves. They help build friendships and support networks among neighbors who'd never met before taking a library class. They teach parenting skills to people who want or need them. They watch children, sometimes very young ones, whose parents work late or on weekends and who can't afford childcare. They give families confidence that their kids are in good hands.

The looming fiscal crisis puts all of this in jeopardy. To fulfill their potential as vital social infrastructure for everyone, branch libraries need to be open seven days a week, from morning until well into the night. They need to be accessible to people with disabilities. They need updated systems: more spacious bathrooms that are designed for the population that uses them; working elevators; efficient heating for cold winters and air conditioning for dangerous summer weather; generators for back-up power and wireless mesh internet networks for those rare but consequential crises when the hard infrastructure fails, and the library becomes a resilience center.



Today, there are some city leaders who see the library as a luxury amenity, less important now that we have Amazon and Google and all the information we need on our screens. In fact, the problem in New York City's branches is that so many people are using them, for such a wide variety of purposes, that library systems and their employees are overwhelmed. We know this because staffing and programming trends support this widening gap in service. From 2008 to 2018, the number of [full-time librarians in New York Public Library's branch libraries has decreased 19.9% while library program attendance has shot up 158%](#). According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center before the pandemic, about half of all Americans aged sixteen and over used a public library in the previous year, and two-thirds say that closing their local branch would have a "major impact on their community." (Surprisingly, for years, visiting the library has been [the most common cultural activity in the US](#), with more people going to libraries than attending a movie, concert, play, or sports event.) But in many neighborhoods the risk of this is palpable because both local library buildings and the systems that sustain them are underfunded and overrun.

Why have so many public officials and civic leaders failed to recognize the value of libraries and their role in our social infrastructure? Perhaps it's because the founding principle behind the library – that all people deserve free, open access to our shared culture and heritage, which they can use to any end they see fit – is out of synch with the political and economic logic that dominates our time. (If, today, the library didn't already exist, it's hard to imagine our society's leaders inventing it.) But perhaps it's because so few influential people understand the role that libraries already play in modern communities, or the many roles they could play if they had more support. Their resilience was on display in their immediate response to the March 2020 quarantine order when they [offered virtual learning tools and tutoring services to all New York area students with a library card](#). Or at the beginning of this year, when the NYPL launched a [dial-in story service for children without access to the internet](#). It's time to recognize just how much we rely on libraries and other parts of our social infrastructure, and how much we will need them to help the city bounce back.

My argument is not that social infrastructure matters more than conventional hard infrastructure, nor that investing in social infrastructure is sufficient to solve the underlying problems of economic inequality and environmental risk that make this moment so dangerous. It's that building new social infrastructure is as urgent as repairing our subways, airports, train stations, and tunnels. Often, we can strengthen both simultaneously, building lifeline systems that are also, to borrow the phrase that Andrew Carnegie used to describe the 2,500 grand libraries that he built across the world, "palaces for the people."

But first we need to recognize the opportunity.



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- From FY2017 to FY2020, federal contributions and grants to NYPL decreased [59.7%](#).
 - City contributions increased by [13.5%](#)
- [65.6%](#) of the NYPL's FY2020 operating revenues depend on local, state, and federal funding.
- [73.1%](#) of the BPL's FY2020 operating revenues depend on local, state, and federal funding.
- City Council advocates for "[Rightsizing the Libraries Capital Strategy](#)" stating that "Library buildings should be categorized as city infrastructure" to secure long-term funding under Mayor DeBlasio's Ten Year Capital Strategy FY20-29.

