The Role of Libraries in Settlement

This issue of Migration Matters explores the role of libraries in supporting newcomers' settlement and integration. It details the range of library programs and services that are available to newcomers and showcases library services for newcomers in BC.

Introduction

Public libraries are an important community resource for many community members—as a source of reading and viewing materials, reference information, and information about community events, as well as a place for social interaction.[1] Public libraries are usually perceived as open, egalitarian, and welcoming institutions, placing them in an ideal position to welcome newcomers.[2] In Canada, they play an integral role in the settlement of newcomers, both through services directed specifically at newcomers as well as through their role as a general community resource.[3]

Libraries and settlement

Research on the role of libraries in newcomer settlement in Canada is scarce, so this information sheet draws on international evidence in addition to Canadian-based research. In an international context, research has found that newcomers are as likely as native-born people to use libraries to borrow materials, but newcomers are more likely to use libraries to meet a broader range of needs, including as a social meeting place.[4] One study of library users in Toronto found that 89% of newcomers in Canada ten years or less had used the library in the past year.[5]

> **Libraries and Social Capital**
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> *Social capital* is a term used to describe the resources a person has access to due to their connections and networks with other people. Higher social capital is associated with many positive aspects of individual and societal wellbeing, but immigrants typically have lower levels of social capital. International research suggests that as spaces for cross-cultural interaction, and as trusted, impartial public institutions, libraries have the potential to generate social capital for newcomers.[6]

Newcomers to Canada are diverse in terms of their skill sets and information needs. Research has shown that newcomers' information needs change over time, and needs may be strongest in the early stages of settlement.[7]

General library services

Many services that libraries provide for the whole community are of particular use to newcomers as they begin the process of settlement and integration:[8, 9]

- *Library collections* including books, periodicals, and multimedia materials provide access to information as well as a free source of entertainment.
- *Extended opening hours* mean that newcomers can access support outside of the time they must spend working or studying.
- *Library information staff* can help newcomers understand and navigate various systems in Canada.
- *Internet access* can enable newcomers without stable internet connections to look for housing and employment, and keep in touch with family members.
- *Workshops* teach important skills such as working with computers or job search strategies.
- *Children's services* support newcomer children's literacy and help prepare them for school.

In addition, the act of attending the library itself supports settlement by providing a time and place for newcomers to interact with other community members.[10]

Multilingual collections

Many public libraries seek to provide collections in the major languages used in their service areas.[11] Multilingual collections can help newcomers with limited official-language ability access needed information and enable newcomers to maintain a connection to their home culture and pass this connection on to their children.[12] In addition, the existence of multilingual collections can serve as a powerful signal of the openness and inclusivity of the receiving culture.[13]

References

[1, 3, 8, 14] Frisken, F. and Wallace, M. (2002). *The Response of the Municipal Public Service to the Challenge of Immigrant Settlement.* Report prepared for Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

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[4, 12, 13] Admunson, R. et al (2011). Public libraries: A meeting place for immigrant women? *Library & Information Science Research* 33(3), 220-227.

[5] Newman, W. (2008). Third Generation Public Libraries: Visionary Thinking and Service Development in Public Libraries (to 2020) and Potential Application in Ontario. Report for the Ontario Ministry of Culture.

[6] Varheim, A. (2011). Gracious space: Library programming strategies towards immigrants as tools in the creation of social capital. *Library & Information Science Research* 33(1), 12–18.

[9, 10] Varheim, A. (2014). Trust and the role of the public library in the integration of refugees: The case of a Northern Norwegian city. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 46(1), 62–69.

[7] Caiti, N. and Allard, D (2005). Social Inclusion of Newcomers to Canada: An information problem? *Library & Information Science Research* 27 (3), 302-324.

[11] Canadian Library Association (1987). Position Statement on Library Services to Linguistic and Ethnic Minorities.

Disclaimer: The following summaries have been compiled by AMSSA.

Services for newcomers

Some services at libraries are aimed specifically at newcomers. Libraries may partner with local settlement organizations to provide some of their general services in specific languages or to specific populations. In addition, many libraries provide some of the following programming:[14]
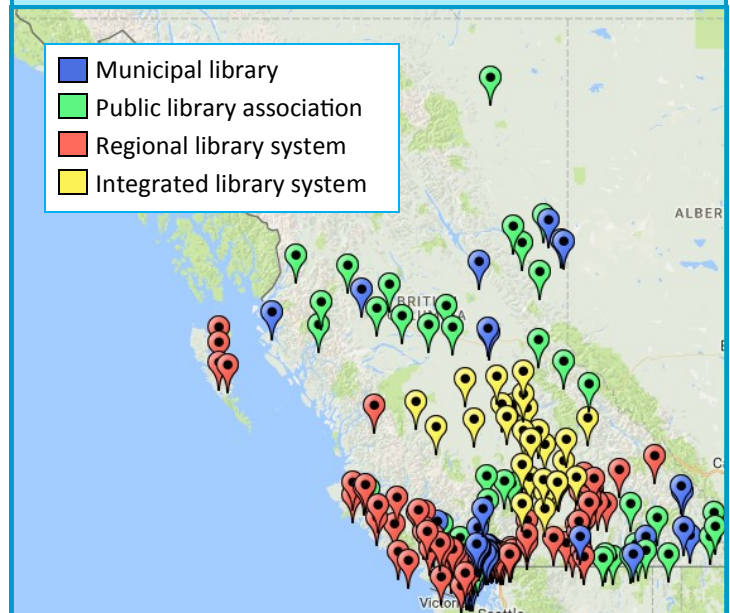
- *English conversation circles* and support preparing for English language tests;
- *Information resources and referrals* for newcomers on a range of issues including employment, housing, and health; and
- *Workshops and events* specifically for newcomers.

As a first point of contact for many newcomers, libraries can also be a source of referrals to settlement organizations.

Libraries in British Columbia

In 2015, libraries in BC offered over 2,600 activities for newcomers or English Language Learners. Total attendance for these events was over 29,000. In addition, across BC a total of 478,000 physical materials in a non-official language were available through public libraries in 2015.[15]

Map of Libraries in British Columbia[16]

Legend:
- Municipal library
- Public library association
- Regional library system
- Integrated library system

British Columbia Library Services for Newcomers

Program	Manager	Region	Description
Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre	Vancouver Public Library	Online: • Provincial In-person • Metro Vancouver and Fraser Valley	Online: • Occupation-specific employment guides • Information on alternative careers • Industry profiles • Job search resources In-person: • Workshops • One-on-one support
NewToBC	Public Library InterLINK	Online: • Provincial In-person • Metro Vancouver and Fraser Valley	Online: • Frequently asked immigration and settlement questions • Multilingual songs and rhymes • English language learning materials • Information on multilingual collections in the lower mainland • Library information sheet for newcomers (26 languages) In-person: • Library Champions volunteer program

Links to Local Library Services

The following libraries in British Columbia have specific areas for newcomers on their websites. Many other libraries also provide services to newcomers as part of their programming. See the British Columbia libraries directory.

- Burnaby Public Library: New to Canada
- Coquitlam Public Library: ESL Programs
- Fraser Valley Regional Library: World Languages
- Greater Victoria Public Library: Multicultural Services
- North Vancouver City Library: Newcomers
- North Vancouver District Public Library: Newcomer to Canada
- Okanagan Regional Library: For Newcomers
- Port Moody Public Library: Multicultural
- Richmond Public Library: Newcomers
- Surrey Libraries: New Canadians
- West Vancouver Memorial Library: Newcomers

References
[15] British Columbia Ministry of Education (2015). BC Public Libraries Statistics 2002-Present. OpenDataBC.
[16] British Columbia Ministry of Education (2013). Map of BC Libraries and Branches. The Commons.

See all issues of AMSSA's Migration Matters: *www.amssa.org/resources/Infosheet.*