

“More Libraries Than Tim Hortons and McDonald’s”: Telling the Whole Story of Canadian Library Services and Benefits through the National Core Library Statistics Program

*Alvin M. Schrader, PhD
University of Alberta*

At the start of the new century, there are more libraries in Canada than Tim Hortons and McDonald’s restaurants combined—22,000 compared to 2,049 “Tim’s” and more than 1,200 McDonald’s. And for every 3 donuts sold by Tim Hortons in 1999, 1 book or other item was accessed by someone in a library somewhere in the country.

And in 1999 more Canadians went to libraries than to movie theatres.

What do libraries and librarians mean to Canadians? This is a surprisingly complex question that has as many answers as there are services and users.

For one thing, virtually 100% of Canadians over the age of two or three can recognize a library regardless of whether it is a company library, a school library, an academic library, a government library, or a public library. Perhaps this is because there are so many libraries in Canada, 22,000 of them, 22,000 in a vast network of librarians and staff finding answers and publications for clients.

Another way of answering the question of what libraries and librarians mean to Canadians is in terms of Canadians making choices. Think of libraries as library services, and then think of libraries as the many individual and personal choices made by Canadians of every age and every walk of life, every day everywhere. These choices are about where to look for answers to questions and where to look for publications. While there are lots of places that the individual might choose to try, the surest place is a library—it might be a library at work, a library at school, a library at college or university, a library in a government department, a library in a not-for-profit agency, or a local public library.

Millions of Canadians are making library choices every year. In 1999, Canadians asked librarians and staff a staggering 40 million questions—40 million choices. Each and every one of their questions represents an answer to the question of what libraries mean to Canadians.

And there is also the enormous use of the vast collections of publications and other materials that are made available by librarians and their staff in all of these libraries for on-site and off-site consultation. In 1999, it was 400 million uses—that means 400 million library choices, 400 million individual library user choices. These personal choices to borrow or consult library materials also answer the question of meaning for Canadian library users.

Canada’s National Core Library Statistics Program was initiated as a partnership venture by the National Library of Canada in the 1990s to provide at least a partial answer to the existing data gap about the activities and benefits of the library sector to Canadian society. This Program captures and analyzes key statistical indicators and measures of the overall broad impact on the people of Canada of the facilities and services provided by libraries and library staff across the nation.

These key indicators are question answering services, collection use, collection infrastructure, staffing, service points, and expenditures. Library service impacts are broadly conceived as cultural impacts and economic impacts.

Several reports have been published, the latest of which presents the findings for the 1999 survey. When all of the libraries in Canada are counted together, the research undertaken for the National Core Library Statistics Program makes it evident that librarians and their staff provide impressive cultural and economic benefits to the people of Canada.

Canadians are voracious and eager consumers of library expertise, services, and collections. Librarians and their staff contribute to our quality of life on a daily basis by making the records of human culture available to a wide range of people—the general public; post-secondary students and faculty; employers, employees, and other primary clientele in the government, not-for-profit, and corporate sectors; and children of all ages from pre-school to high school and their teachers.

An overview of the 1999 survey findings and the problems associated with national data collection are the subject of a session at ALC 2003. Come and find out more.