

Public Health at the Public Library: Preventative Health Programs Implemented in Large Public Libraries

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Background

While many public libraries have closed their doors during this time of turmoil and uncertainty, many are offering remote programs to promote wellness and prevent illness.

Even before the pandemic, American public library systems were providing preventive health programming on a variety of conditions in partnership with health professionals.

Methods

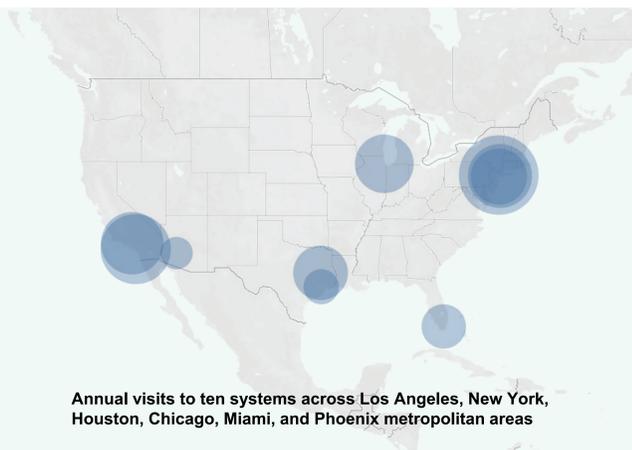
This study systematically analyzed such programs offered in the largest public library systems nationally.

Using public web calendars and social media accounts (i.e., Facebook and Twitter) of main branches, the authors identified preventive health programs in 2019.

This research also summarized event distribution across library systems, by health topic and risk factors, and by preventative education level.

While heart disease, cancer, accidents, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and stroke are the leading causes of death, the leading causes of disability (or lost quality of life) include opioid use, major depression, migraines, and lower back pain.

In 2019, **101 programs or series** were held throughout the **10 largest library systems** (by population served and visitation).



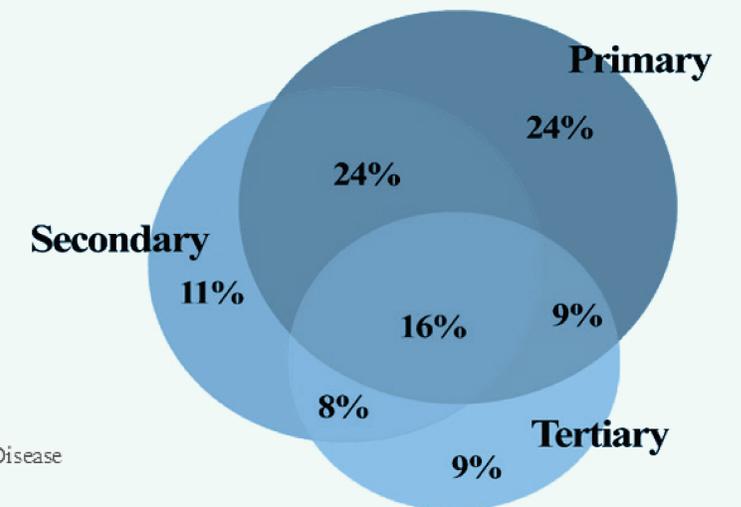
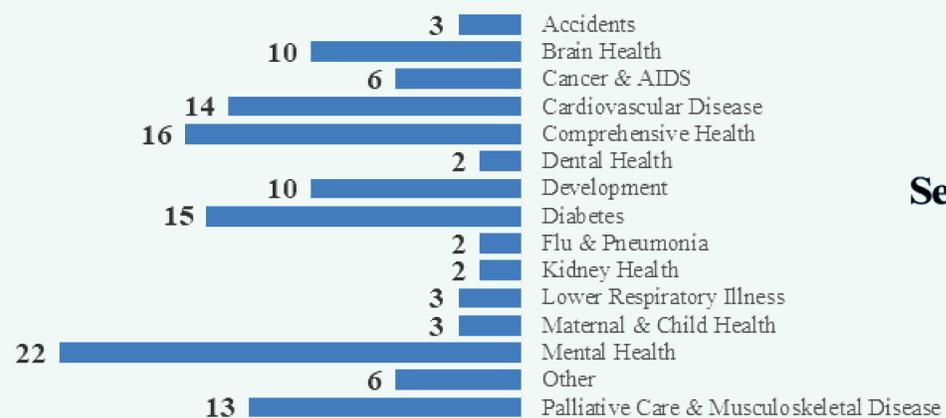
Annual visits to ten systems across Los Angeles, New York, Houston, Chicago, Miami, and Phoenix metropolitan areas

Most of 101 programs were robust and operated on multiple health promotion levels (57%)

Primary: helping eliminate disease causes or increasing protection (72%)

Secondary: detecting and addressing health issues early (58%)

Tertiary: assisting in mitigating pre-existing conditions (42%)



Conclusions

- Programming aligned well with community health needs, as determined by national and state-level data detailing top causes of death and disability.
- Events focused on improving mental health, holistic wellness, cardiovascular health, and diabetes were well represented.
- Notably absent were programs addressing the opioid epidemic — a major health concern of 2019 — and programs on communicable disease.
- Major risk factors that preceded health conditions addressed in programming (e.g., alcohol and tobacco use, poor nutrition) were not specifically targeted.

Limitations

Many limitations of the methodology and sampling constrain the applicability of these findings, and it remains to be seen how preventive health programming can be effectively deployed in the current state of social distancing and remote learning.

Additionally, every library system offered potentially beneficial programs (e.g., yoga sessions, guided meditation, cooking classes, martial arts) that were not included in this study, as they usually were not explicitly advertised as health promoting events.

References & Further Reading

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