

MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: March 21, 2024
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Meeting Date: March 27, 2024

TO: Library Board
FROM: Tim Bottomer, Chair, SFHR Committee
SUBJECT: Collection Trends and Intellectual Freedom Challenges 2023

PURPOSE

This report provides an overview of recent trends in collection use at VPL, in response to trustees' request in 2023, and a summary of intellectual freedom challenges from the past year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Board receive this report for information.

POLICY

The applicable policy is the [Collection Development Policy](#).

INDIGENOUS CONSIDERATIONS

VPL is committed to supporting learning and action for Truth and Reconciliation by providing strong Indigenous collections and sharing Indigenous voices and culture at every library branch, in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action on Education for Reconciliation; UNDRIP Articles 15 and 21; and relevant objectives from the City of Vancouver's UNDRIP Strategy and VPL's Indigenous Rights and Reconciliation Strategy.

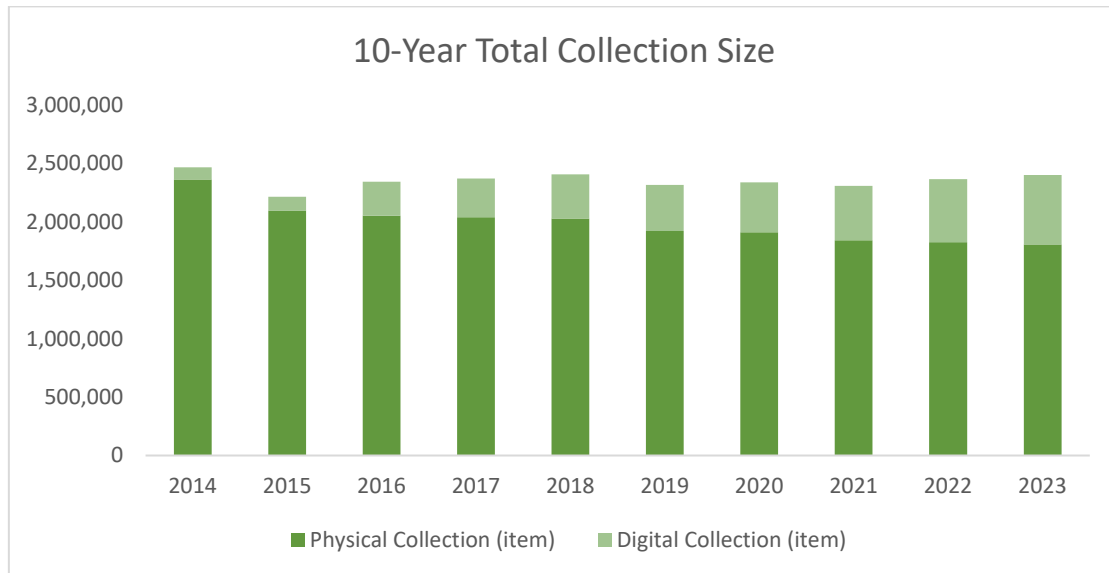
VPL is committed to working with x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sḵwəxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwəta† (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations and local Indigenous community groups to inform the materials that are selected and de-selected from library's Indigenous Collection.

BACKGROUND

Collection Composition

The following chart shows the size and composition of VPL's collection over the past ten years.

Figure 1: Total Collection Size 2014-2023



In 2023, the total collection size was 2.4 million items with 75% of this total comprised of physical items, and 25% digital. The overall size of the collection has remained consistently in the 2.3 to 2.4 million range over the past ten years, with some fluctuations within this range caused by operational activities such as preparations for the new Oakridge branch.

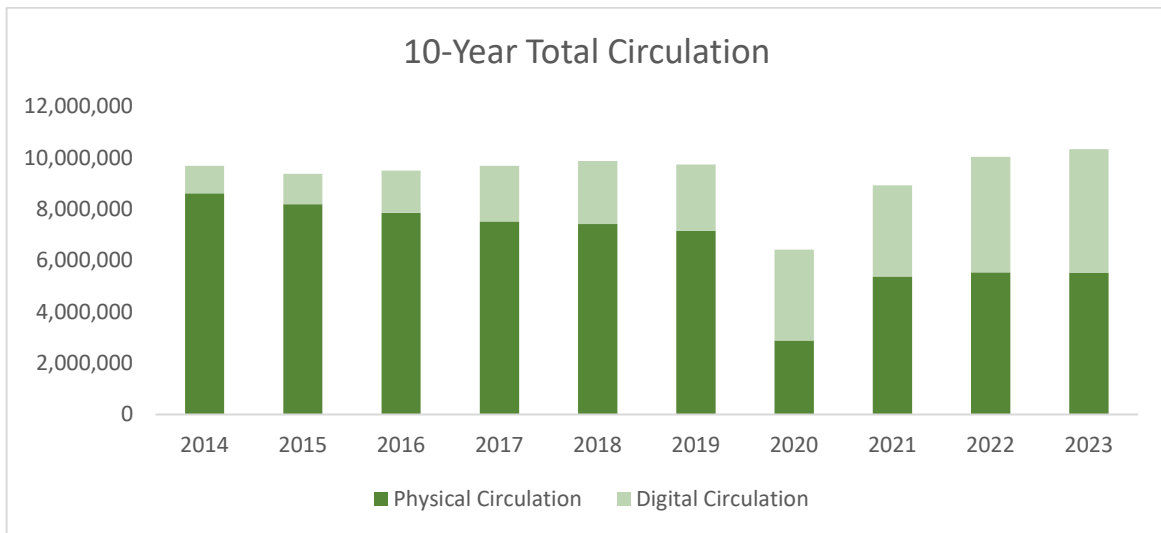
Digital materials have been increasing as a proportion of the overall collection as interest in and use of digital formats has increased, and more digital content has become available for libraries to purchase.

Circulation Trends

Physical circulation remains below its pre-COVID levels, having fallen from 73% of total circulation in 2019 to 53% in 2023. Digital circulation has increased from 27% of circulation in 2019 to 47% in 2023. Overall circulation (physical and digital combined) has returned to pre-COVID numbers.

Until 2020, VPL's materials circulation had been following the same broad trend for the previous ten years. Total circulation had remained stable, with slight annual decreases in physical circulation offset by slight increases in digital circulation. Digital content had been on a steady growth trajectory since the introduction of VPL's downloadable ebook and eaudio collection, VPL-to-Go, in 2012.

Figure 2: 10 Year Total Circulation 2014-2023



In 2020, physical circulation was tremendously disrupted by the four-month COVID-19 closure of all library buildings and the subsequent gradual recovery of physical library services. The VPL system returned to its full pre-COVID opening hours in April 2021.

During the closure and subsequent months of the pandemic when in-person interaction was restricted or discouraged, VPL users turned to digital content. More than 3,000 people registered for library cards online during the four months that the library was closed, and digital circulation saw a 37% increase in 2020. As physical locations re-opened, digital circulation remained high, and began a gradual climb from its new high point. Digital circulation increased 87% in the five years from 2019 to 2023.

DISCUSSION

Format Shifting

The growth of digital content has led to shifts away from some physical formats, because of both availability and trends in use. In the past five years VPL has reduced spending on music CDs and virtually eliminated spending on spoken word CDs as streaming music and eaudiobooks have largely replaced these formats. Current growth areas are digital newspapers (32% increase in collection available 2019-2023) and downloadable magazines (1244% increase in collection available 2019-2023). VPL staff track circulation trends and availability of titles to ensure that the annual budget is appropriately divided between formats.

The DVD collection has been experiencing a gradual decline in size for a number of years due to lack of availability as content goes direct to streaming services without being released in a physical format. However, until 2020 circulation remained strong. This was likely due to the

ongoing closure of rental stores, leaving the library as one of the few remaining places to obtain this format.

Since 2020, DVDs have not seen use recover, suggesting that many patrons who switched to streaming services during the pandemic – either library provided or paid –have been happy with this change. The library remains committed to providing DVDs as an equity issue for those who cannot afford the technology and connectivity for streaming services, although it is anticipated that the range of content available to purchase will continue to erode over time.

The following charts show the failure of DVD circulation to rebound following the COVID-19 closure and re-opening, and the growth in the use of streaming services since 2020.

Figure 5: DVD Circulation 2019-2023

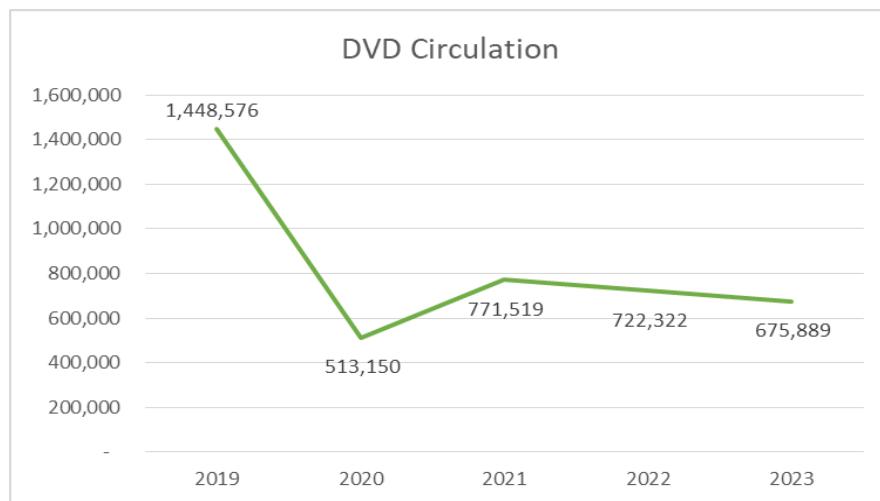
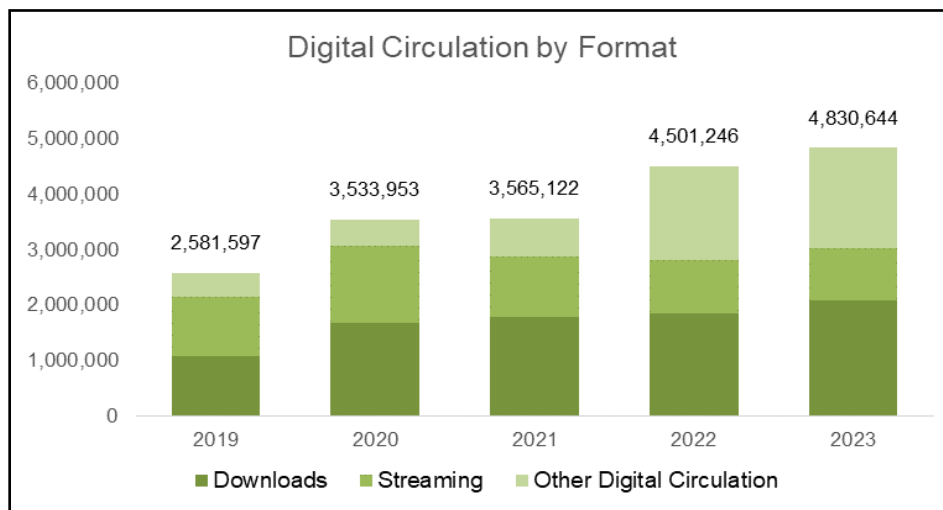


Figure 6: Digital Circulation by Format 2019-2023



Risks Related to Format Shifting

While the use data demonstrates that VPL's digital collections appeal to patrons, there are risks associated with this shift toward digital formats. These risks are related to the licensing models for digital content, and their impact on costs.

When the library purchases a print book, it owns that title. Library staff are able to decide whether the book should be a permanent part of the collection. For digital content, there is no model for library ownership. The library instead licenses its use from the publisher, with terms and conditions imposed by the publisher.

For the most popular digital content – downloadable ebooks and eaudio supplied by the Big Five publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, MacMillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) - the publishers impose either time-based or circulation-based metering, or a mix. After a certain period of time, or a certain number of circulations, the title will expire and the library must determine whether that title should be repurchased. In addition to the cost of repurchasing the title, there is staff time involved in conducting the review.

Digital content also comes at a much higher price than its physical equivalent. When a library purchases physical content, there is usually a discount applied for bulk purchases. For digital content there is no discount, and titles are typically priced 3 to 5 times higher than the consumer price for the same content.

These pricing and licensing issues have huge impacts on how libraries build digital collections, and on the diversity of digital content that they are able to offer patrons. To manage waitlists for popular titles, the library sets rules that automatically trigger the purchase of an additional copy of a title once a certain number of people are waiting. Due to the higher costs of digital content, the library allows longer waiting lists for digital content, so that the most popular titles do not become over-represented in the collection. Additionally, because of the necessity of repurchasing content, the library cannot build the same diversity over time in a digital collection than it can in print.

Together with other Canadian Urban Libraries Council representatives, VPL is at the forefront of advocacy for improved licensing models for digital content for public libraries. While there are some encouraging signs such as the emergence of the Palace Project, a library-driven platform and marketplace for digital content that offers more flexible licensing terms, current licensing models remain a very real threat to the long-term viability of digital collections.

Holds

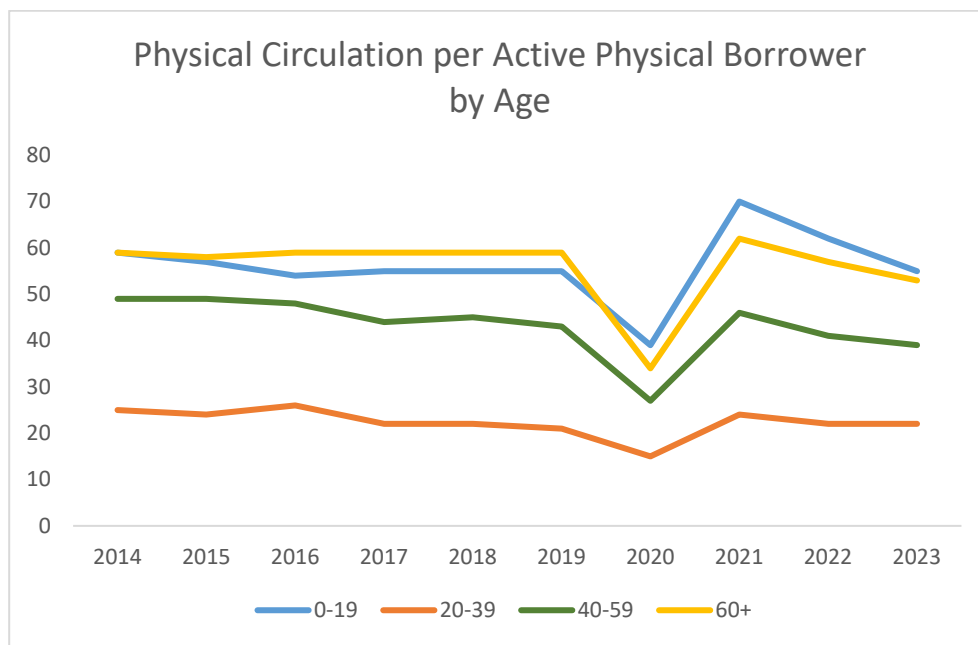
Holds or requests are a highly valued library service that enable a patron to use the online library catalogue to reserve books and have the library deliver them to a preferred library location. A

trend of note is the increase in holds as a proportion of overall circulation. Holds have been steadily increasing since 2018, when VPL removed the annual cap of 50 on free holds, and a general shift in user behaviour toward an “online shopping” model, where library patrons place holds to come in and collect rather than spending time inside branches browsing the collection. Currently, holds make up 24% of VPL’s annual checkouts, compared to 14% in 2016. More than half of all branches saw more than 50,000 holds picked up in 2023, with 166,000 picked up at Central and 122,000 at the busiest branch for holds, Kitsilano.

This is a trend that speaks positively to patrons being able to use online systems in a way that works well for them, but comes with considerable resource implications for VPL in handling and shipping.

Who is Borrowing?

Figure 7: Physical Circulation per Active Physical Borrower by Age



The average number of items borrowed is significantly higher for children and youth and age 60+ than for other age groups.

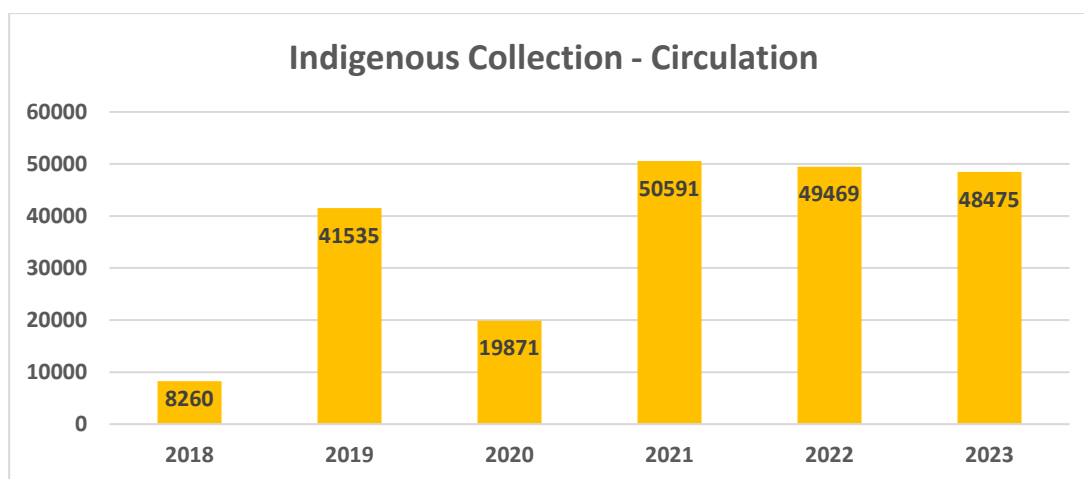
Indigenous Collections

VPL is committed to being a place to support learning and action toward Truth and Reconciliation. In 2016, the library began an expansion of its Indigenous collections to support this commitment, and introduced Indigenous collections at all branches in 2018. These collections are displayed prominently in every branch, and built and maintained using a collection profile that emphasizes Indigenous authorship and voices. Library staff developed this profile in consultation with local Indigenous community groups.

These collections provide a venue for Indigenous people to see themselves reflected in our spaces and collections, and provides non-Indigenous people a place to engage with Reconciliation, to learn about Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and to increase understanding of the impact of the residential school system.

There are currently 17,500 items in VPL's Indigenous Collections. This content has been circulating consistently well since it was introduced, with titles such as *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *The Marrow Thieves* featuring in the library's top ten most circulated titles in 2022 and 2023.

Figure 10: Indigenous Collection – Circulation



Intellectual Freedom Challenges

VPL did not receive any requests for the removal of items from the collection in 2023. The library did receive a request to move the following five titles from the Children's collection to the Adult or Young Adult collection:

- *The Gay Rights Movement*, by Eric Braun
- *Identifying as Transgender*, by Sara Woods
- *Pride: The Celebration and the Struggle*, by Robin Stevenson
- *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*, by Rachel Stukey
- *You are Not Alone: Finding your LGBTQ Community*, by Jeremy Qist

These titles were reviewed by the Manager, Collections and Technical Services; Head, Children's Library; and a Selections librarian. The review determined that *Identifying as Transgender* and *You are Not Alone* would be appropriate to consider part of the Young Adult collection given their reading level and the complexity and depth of the treatment of the issues. These titles were moved to the Young Adult collection. The other titles remained as part of the Children's Collection.

The subject matter of these titles is consistent with politicized collection challenges in the United States, where censorship efforts have focused on works with 2SLGBTQ+ characters and storylines, titles that cover issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, and books that discuss issues of race.

Similar ideological censorship efforts emerged in Canada in 2023, with letter writing campaigns seeking the removal of titles related to the SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) curriculum from school and public libraries and vandalism of titles and displays that feature these themes. While VPL has not received requests to remove books with these themes from its collection, the library has seen some vandalism and received some complaints related to displays with 2SLGBTQ+ and race-related themes.

VPL will continue to select materials in accordance with our [Collection Development Policy](#) and its stated commitment to building collections that respect and reflect communities of various cultural, ethnic, religious and philosophical backgrounds, and that enrich and empower lives and build community by providing universal access to the world's information and ideas.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

VPL's 2023 collection budget is \$5.3 million, and we have received an annual increase of 2% to address inflationary pressures for approximately ten years.

An ongoing concern in managing the collections budget is the pressure caused by the shift to licensing of digital content, discussed above. In recent years, the VPL Foundation has provided funds from donations that have helped to supplement the collection and address the high demand from library patrons.