

The District 1 Library Access Gap by Ayushi Singh

Public libraries are designed to provide free and equitable access to information, technology, and educational opportunities for all residents. In District 1, which includes Fremont, Newark, and Union City, this mission is especially important given the region's high immigrant population and linguistic diversity. However, despite offering a wide range of services, these libraries are not being fully utilized by the communities they aim to serve. This paper examines the gap between available resources and actual usage, arguing that immigrant communities face persistent barriers to access due to language differences, limited outreach, scheduling conflicts, and digital literacy challenges. By analyzing both institutional constraints and community experiences, this paper demonstrates that the issue is not a lack of services, but a misalignment between library offerings and community needs.

Bay Area data reveals a clear imbalance between the availability of library resources and their effective use. The Alameda County Library system provides a wide range of services (e.g., ESL programs, homework centers, makerspaces, and free meal initiatives) specifically designed to support immigrant and youth populations, demonstrating strong institutional capacity. However, budget growth remains limited,

increasing only modestly from approximately \$44.9 million to \$47.0 million, which restricts the system's ability to adapt programming to shifting community needs. At the same time, while broadband access in Fremont is nearly universal at 96.8%, broader statewide data showing millions still lacking reliable internet underscores that access alone does not guarantee usability, particularly for populations with limited digital literacy. This gap highlights a key issue: even when resources exist, structural and informational barriers prevent immigrant communities from fully benefiting from them.

Interviews with local librarians further reveal operational constraints that contribute to these access gaps. One adult services librarian explained: "We run weekly ESL conversation groups in Fremont and Newark, but attendance is inconsistent. Even when classes are full, people drop out after a few sessions." Another noted funding limitations: "Our budget is mostly locked into fixed categories. There's no new money for, say, a weekend tech lab for teens. We have to reshuffle existing staff and hours." A youth librarian added, "We had a teen advisory board last year, but participation was low, and students said they didn't hear about it. We do some social media, but maybe not on the right platforms for high schoolers." These insights suggest that while libraries are committed to serving immigrant populations, limited flexibility in funding and outreach reduces their ability to effectively connect with those communities. As a result, services

remain underutilized not because they lack value, but because they are not reaching the people who need them most.

Interviews with community members highlight the user-side barriers that further reinforce this disconnect. Ravi Singh, a father of two, remarked: “I see the library offers English classes and computers, but they’re during my work hours. I’d love evening or weekend sessions, or help in Hindi.” Teenager Vedan Ramreddy observed: “My friends and I didn’t even know about the library’s tech workshops. We get info on Instagram and Snapchat, but the library mostly uses flyers and email.” Vedha Venkatesh (16) added: “I always thought libraries were just for storytimes or for studying quietly. I feel shy asking librarians for help, like I’d look dumb.” Emily Wang (17) said: “I have a card and use the free Wi-Fi, but my parents struggle with the online catalog and apps. There aren’t classes for ‘how to do this stuff’ in our language.” These perspectives illustrate how language barriers, lack of awareness, cultural perceptions, and digital skill gaps all contribute to limited engagement, reinforcing the argument that access is shaped not just by availability, but by usability and inclusivity.

To close these gaps without requiring major new funding, libraries can reallocate existing resources and staff to better align with community needs. Suggested strategies

include multilingual outreach and marketing, which involves dedicating a modest outreach budget (e.g., \$5–10K) for translated flyers, signage, and social media ads in languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and Hindi. This would directly address language and awareness barriers that prevent immigrant communities from accessing services.

Additionally, evening and weekend programming could be implemented by reassigning staff or volunteers, allowing working families and students to attend ESL classes and tech workshops outside of standard hours. Strengthening teen engagement through advisory boards and social media outreach on platforms like Instagram and TikTok would also help bridge communication gaps with younger users. Finally, expanding awareness of existing programs like the Summer Meal Program through partnerships with community organizations could increase participation among immigrant families. Each of these strategies targets specific barriers, language, scheduling, outreach, and digital literacy, thereby reinforcing the central argument that improving access requires better alignment, not just more resources.

District 1 libraries already offer valuable and well-developed services, but current usage patterns reveal a mismatch with the needs of a diverse and growing immigrant population. Both data and stakeholder feedback consistently point to language differences, limited outreach, inconvenient scheduling, and digital literacy challenges as

key barriers to access. By strategically reallocating portions of the existing \$45–47 million budget and adjusting program delivery, libraries can better align their services with community realities. Ultimately, improving access is not about expanding resources alone, but about ensuring that those resources are accessible, visible, and relevant to the populations they are meant to serve.