

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: VIRTUAL LIBRARY EVENTS CATERED  
TOWARDS TEENS: SURVEYING EVENT  
WANTS AND IDEAS IN ORDER TO INCREASE  
ENGAGEMENT IN THE FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA  
LIBRARY SYSTEM

Melissa Bowman, Master of Library and Information  
Science, 2023

Thesis directed by: Jennifer Sturge, Adjunct Professor  
College of Information Studies

During the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020, public libraries turned to virtual programming to increase engagement during the time of lockdowns. Three years out of the pandemic, many libraries have scaled back the virtual programming catalog, focusing instead on in-person events. In the Fairfax County, Virginia Public Libraries System, a programming gap existed in the virtual events catered towards teens. This thesis uses interviews with Fairfax County Public Libraries staff and a survey of local teens to discern what kind of virtual programming teens attend; and what virtual events teens would like to see in the future. Library Staff indicated that virtual events were scaled back in favor of in-person events to increase engagement with the other library services. Teens surveyed stated that while in-person events were often attended, there was a need for more virtual events. The conclusion from the interviews and from the survey results indicate that library systems do not need to come up with a specific “virtual only” programming, but rather find a balance of in-person and virtual programming, perhaps by streaming in-person events, to meet the wants and needs of the teen users.

VIRTUAL LIBRARY EVENTS CATERED TOWARDS TEENS: SURVEYING  
EVENT WANTS AND IDEAS IN ORDER TO INCREASE  
ENGAGEMENT IN THE FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA  
LIBRARY SYSTEM

by

Melissa Bowman

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Library and Information Science

2023

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Jennifer Sturge, Chair

Dr. Beth St. Jean

Dr. David Weintrop

©Copyright by  
Melissa Bowman  
2023

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Tables.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Research Objectives.....	1
Background.....	2
Research Questions.....	4
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	5
Literature Review Conclusions.....	8
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	10
Research Design.....	10
Data Collection.....	10
Interviews with Library Staff.....	10
Survey of Teens in Fairfax County.....	12
Data Analysis.....	14
Limitations.....	14
Research Process.....	15

Chapter Four: Findings.....	17
Interview Results.....	17
Survey Results.....	19
Summary.....	27
Chapter Five: Conclusions.....	28
Implications.....	30
Future Study Considerations.....	32
References.....	33

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Questions for Library Employees.....	11
Table 2: Questions for the Teen Survey.....	13

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Self-Reported Gender Pie Graph.....	20
Figure 2: Gender and Ages Graph.....	21
Figure 3: Attendance of Any Library Events.....	22
Figure 4: Awareness of Virtual Events in the Fairfax County Library System.....	23
Figure 5: Participants Who Attended a Virtual Event.....	24
Figure 6: Categories of Attended Virtual Events.....	25
Figure 7: Categories of Wanted Virtual Events.....	26

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, libraries across the United States were closed due to state and county stay-at-home orders (Moreland et al., 2020). Libraries struggled to adapt to the new normal of curbside pickup, enhanced virtual lending, and the shifting of library services to online-only platforms. Libraries continued to serve their communities by providing online virtual events to replace in-person events, such as book readings, clubs, and cultural event nights. With the lifting of the stay-at-home orders and the reopening of libraries, many events returned to their in-person status, but others continued as virtual events to reach a wider audience.

When examining the Fairfax County Public Libraries system, a system serving 1.14 million people in Northern Virginia (United States Census Bureau, 2023), it is evident that there are many online events catered to adults and children, but only one recurring event catered strictly to teens (Fairfax County, Virginia, 2023). This study surveyed local Fairfax County teens to discover what virtual library services teens may have used, what virtual library services teens want, and offer suggestions on how to expand and promote the currently offered virtual events to increase teen engagement. In addition, Fairfax County library employees were interviewed to understand the current virtual offerings toward teens, and to compare their answers to the teen surveys.

### **Research Objectives**

The objective of the research is to understand what virtual services teens want out of their local public library system. Specific conclusions could be drawn given the age of the respondents, and by looking at the trends in the data. By interviewing the library employees,

conclusions could be drawn about what sort of events the Fairfax County library system is currently focusing on, what events were focused on in the past, and their engagement.

Furthermore, by gathering optional age and self-identified gender data, patterns may emerge in what sort of events teens of different age or gender groups desire. The ages are significant in relation to the lockdown of 2020—a 19-year-old would have been around 16 at the start of the pandemic. Would those who were in high school respond differently to those that were in elementary or middle school when the world went into lockdown? And are there significant trends in what sort of virtual events different age groups prefer? Though the age dataset is teenagers aged 13-19, due to the major cultural impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on youth, it is possible that some conclusions can be drawn as to what sort of events libraries provided then, and what events are being provided now, and whether teens are eager to return to more virtual or in-person events.

By analyzing the student surveys against the librarian interviews, patterns may emerge and allow conclusions to be drawn on what sort of events teens would like, and how to utilize this knowledge to increase engagement.

## **Background**

Because of the necessity of staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, lending, events, and clubs shifted more online than ever before. Zoom exploded in popularity due to the ease of creating virtual meetings spaces on a shared platform, increasing their revenues 326% over the previous year (Rushe, 2021). Fitness classes, worship services, even Dungeons & Dragons groups went virtual to continue activities and socialization but to also stay safe while the pandemic was raging. Libraries were no different.

Libraries are a unique function in society purely as a public good, with no expectation of a profit (The Hunt Institute, 2021). In many counties, libraries are a foundation of a community, providing social services to those most in need, including internet access, meeting rooms, or English as a Second Language groups. While the shuttering of the libraries for months at a time was a detriment to the good of the community, public library systems tried to make the best of it by moving many services online (The Hunt Institute, 2021).

In addition to online checkout services, many events like in-person groups and book clubs and events were moved online. At the height of the pandemic in the Summer of 2020, Fairfax County Libraries had pages of virtual events every day, including book clubs, fitness groups, language learning groups, homework help, and social events (Internet Archive, 2020). These events were catered to school-age children who may have been struggling with virtual learning, and could provide entertainment and social interaction that virtual schooling could not (Freudenberger, 2020).

Compared to the height of the pandemic, the online services in the Fairfax County are scaled back, but there are still a few virtual programs available. There are around six to seven events available per day, and most are book clubs, children's story time, or language learning groups. Virtual events catered solely to teens are lacking compared to the other online events. For the month of January 2023, there are 115 events scheduled. Fourteen of these were standalone or recurring events catered to children, 36 were standalone or recurring events for adults, and only one was a recurring event catered to teens (Fairfax County, Virginia, 2023).

In contrast, the number of events catered to teens during the pandemic, the Internet Archive shows at least three events for teens per day during August 2020 (Internet Archive,

2020). While some of these events have shifted back to in-person, when compared to adult and children programming, so few teen events are available virtually. Libraries need engagement to justify their existence in an increasingly hostile environment towards them, and by not offering more virtual services, there is a possibility the library system is missing out on a big engagement opportunity. With engagement comes interest and funding, so libraries need to utilize much data to target what sort of events will be the most successful (Hursh, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

The primary questions that directed this research were as follows;

- What virtual events for teens does the library system already utilize on a regular basis?
- What virtual events are teens currently attending?
- What is the reason for not attending certain virtual events?
- What virtual events do teens want out of their local library system?
- What is the reason for libraries to choose whether events will be virtual or in person?
- What are the reasons more virtual events are not utilized?

By surveying local teens and interviewing library employees, the answers to these questions would identify the driving force behind this thesis: how a library system can best improve their virtual event offerings for teens to increase virtual event attendance and engagement.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

COVID-19 was officially confirmed in the United States on January 20, 2020 (CDC, 2022). Fairfax County, Virginia confirmed its first official case on March 9, 2020 (Fairfax County, Virginia, 2020). By mid-March, many counties were part of major lockdowns as part of the “15 Days to Slow the Spread” initiative (CDC, 2020). While COVID-19 was a major historical event, due to it being relatively recent, there is very sparse literature available on the impact of virtual library services for teens during this time. As most library events were held in-person before the pandemic, by focusing solely on virtual services during COVID-19, there were some meaningful insights to be found into the engagement of teens to these library services.

A problem during the COVID-19 lockdowns for school libraries was how to engage students while everyone was at home. To engage the students the librarians at Campbell County Middle School in Piedmont, Virginia tried many virtual activities, including weekly challenges, book highlights, free digital books, library themed escape rooms, facts of the day, or student book reviews. The most successful activities were virtual office hours where student could ask questions, talk about books, or get help on assignments (Gardner, 2022).

Many library systems had the same problem of how to transition homework help to a virtual environment. Many libraries shifted to online spaces such as Zoom. One problem was the need to have parental waivers for some of the younger students to comply with online chatting protocols in their district. There were also issues finding volunteers to staff the homework help spaces. Many libraries were considering continuing the homework help online spaces after the pandemic because of the popularity, but more evaluation would have to happen due to the challenges (Mediavilla, 2021).

The San Antonio Public Libraries also had challenges of engaging teens during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The San Antonio Public Libraries wanted to encourage teens to interact with the library space and library programming. The San Antonio Public Libraries set up a Discord initially for teens to discuss how best to serve them during the lockdown. Teens moderated the Discord server themselves and brought about engagement. The findings from the server indicated the teens responded positively to a server created by themselves, for themselves, and responded positively to having their own place (Prukop & Loaiza, 2022). Teens made channels based on their interests, and at the end of the lockdown, there were 79 text channels and 15 voice channels. Some channels were geared towards specific interests, like a LGBTQ+ channel and a Dungeons & Dragons campaign. The library system found that by allowing the teens a high level of control in how the server was set up and what channels would be made; it allowed for more engagement. While the server showed decreased activity when the lockdown ended, the activity ticked up again during summer 2021, indicating that there is still enough interest that it will continue post-pandemic (Prukop & Loaiza, 2022).

Like Discord or Zoom, many librarians found themselves using new technologies. According to Panuncial (2021), the Wichita Public Libraries set up events on Twitch, including a workshop on how to set up a streaming channel and what sort of things to stream. Cleveland Public Libraries also set up their own Twitch channel to stream different games, discuss topics in the industry, or provide PC or game development workshops. Each weekly stream attracted anywhere from 50 to 100 teen viewers, who were happy to have programming available on familiar technologies (Panuncial, 2021).

Public libraries are often considered a social service—a free place where all are welcomed with a duty to serve the public and provide a space for learning, community, and

socialization (Keys, 2020). During the pandemic, the Brooklyn Public Libraries accepted the challenge of creating virtual programs to provide community engagement and a social outlet. During the initial days of lockdown, librarians initially consulted the teen community about what teens wanted in programming, and a full roster of activities from video game tournaments, digital writing workshops, book talks, and creative programs emerged. The activities were a success as a social outlet for teens starved of it during the lockdown, and the librarians interviewed hoped that the library system could keep some of the virtual programs in the future, due to the high engagement compared to the in-person events previously (Keys, 2020.)

Many public library systems had the same challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown, including finding ways to engage teens in library programming. *Publisher's Weekly* ran an article on April 28, 2020 about the virtual events many public library systems were running for teens. These included virtual trivia nights, turning scheduled talks into Zoom meetings, creating shared servers for online games, online scavenger hunts, virtual art shows, and more. While teens in those systems responded positively to the events during the lockdown, many public library employees agreed that the biggest challenge was advertising the events and getting the technology to work. According to Grochowski (2020), it was noted that many of the events were successes due to “the teens wanting to interact and see each other during the lockdown.” It also was a success in teaching the library employees about a whole new avenue to reach library patrons, and how to expand and continue to promote events that would be better scheduled as virtual rather than in-person (Grochowski, 2020).

The Zion-Benton Public Libraries system in Illinois realized the hardest part of offering online programming during the pandemic would be to get the word out, so the libraries system advertised on Instagram for the teens and Facebook for the adults. It started with popular

programs, but found there was a struggle to get teens engaged, until the events were featured on Instagram and YouTube (Abron, 2020). When the library re-opened, staff continued the online programming by turning the Makerspace into a filming studio. The programming also included remote book clubs and STEM projects, literacy, and community service. To obtain the highest engagement with teens, the staff had to go on platforms teens often used, such as Instagram. The librarians then asked what events the teens would like to have (Abron, 2020). The answers the teens gave directed the Zion-Benton Public Libraries System's virtual programming to better meet the needs and wants of the local population.

The *School Library Journal* also offered some advice for teen library programming during the pandemic, with ideas and examples for online escape rooms, digital art shows, volunteering hours, Eye Spy games, and virtual book talks (Jensen, 2020). *Children and Libraries* journal also had some best practices for online programs, including setting a hard program length, setting goals and outcomes, establishing logistics, audience engagement, and addressing feedback (Nolet et al., 2021). These articles on best practices and ideas seemed to stress that while virtual programming differed from in-person programming in many ways, the programming should be treated the same in the attention given to have high quality and interesting programming for teens to engage with during lockdown.

## **Literature Review Conclusions**

From these articles and literature review, several conclusions can be formed:

- The most successful events were homework help events, or events hosted on platforms teens already used (Discord, Snapchat, Twitch);

- Engagement increased during the lockdowns mostly because of teens wanting a socialization outlet, and then decreased afterwards;
- There was greater engagement when teens were involved in choosing the programming themselves;
- The most popular non-homework help events were those on specific interests or clubs (LGBTQ+, D&D, etc.);
- There was not a lot of information on virtual programming pre-pandemic, especially for teens, so many libraries did a lot of programming on trial and error. After the lockdowns were lifted, much of the programming shifted back to in-person and fewer virtual events were scheduled;
- There is less demand for virtual programming post-pandemic, but still many areas where virtual programming can fill a gap in current library services, or increase engagement in quick ways on social media;

With these conclusions, drawn in 2020 and 2021, there is now a need to see, almost three years after the pandemic, if these conclusions still hold. Do teens still want mostly homework or events hosted on their own platforms? Is socialization still the main reason teens utilize these services? What are the gaps in the services that would be better filled by a virtual event vs an in-person event? These are the questions this survey seeks to answer. In addition, the study seeks to find out what teens want out of virtual events versus what the Fairfax County Library System is providing, which virtual events are the most popular of the ones currently offered, and what can the Fairfax County Libraries system do to improve their catalog of virtual events to meet the needs of local teens.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The data for this study was gathered in two ways—through interviews with Fairfax County Library employees and through surveys of teens within that library system. The primary data was gathered through qualitative data techniques—a self-reported survey given to teens, in which parental permission was obtained for those under the age of 18. In addition, data was gathered through the librarian interview process. By comparing the data from the two sources, conclusions emerged about what sort of events the libraries are putting on, the success of these events, and what sort of events teens would like in the future.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Interviews with Library Staff**

Before the surveys were sent out, the researcher sought to interview employees of the Fairfax County library system to ascertain their views and current engagement regarding teens and virtual events. The director of the Fairfax County libraries system provided the researcher with two librarian employees to interview.

These interviews took place via email for the convenience of the library employees. The interviews were done over the course of a single day, with another day allocated for follow up. Two different employees within the Fairfax County library system were interviewed—a Youth Services Information Assistant and a Library Information Assistant. The questions that were asked can be found below in Table 1.

**Table 1***Questions for Library Employees*

Question	Type of Response
What is your current title/responsibilities at Fairfax County libraries?	Open-ended
How many in-person events have you facilitated?	Numerical
How many in-person events for teens have you facilitated?	Numerical
How many attended the last teen in-person event you facilitated?	Numerical
How many virtual events have you facilitated?	Numerical
How many virtual events for teens have you facilitated?	Numerical
How many attended the last teen event you facilitated?	Numerical
During the 2020 lockdown, there were multiple virtual events for teens daily vs only one recurring virtual event for teens today. Is there a reason why certain events returned to in-person while others remained as virtual events?	Open-ended
How were these events chosen?	Open-ended
Which events were dropped altogether and why?	Open-ended
Are there numbers available for the attendance of events during the 2020 lockdown vs today?	Open-ended
What would you say are the challenges for creating more virtual teen events?	Open-ended
Are there more virtual events for teens planned in the future or less?	More/Less
Why?	Open-ended

The interviews with the Fairfax County library employees were carried out in August of 2023. The goal of these interviews was to obtain the perspective of the Fairfax County Libraries system regarding their virtual event programming, and teens engagement of such. Interview

questions were chosen specifically to target the perceived success of virtual events from the librarian's side. The researcher used the interview questions to identify ways in which the librarians measure success of virtual events, and to have a baseline to compare how teens view the success of virtual events.

### **Survey of Teens in Fairfax County**

The survey was created on the online service SurveyMonkey and were sent to teens through online links. Due to discussions within the Fairfax County Libraries System, the administrator was more comfortable with surveys given to underage participants online rather than in person. The surveys were sent out from June 20th to September 20, 2023 and in that timeframe received 91 qualified answers. There were three ways these surveys were advertised to reach the intended participants—first, the link was sent and emailed to specific Fairfax County teens that the researcher had already been in contact with. Secondly, a link was posted on the subreddit r/nova (2023; a Northern Virginia subreddit) asking for assistance in exchange for a \$5 Starbucks e-giftcard, to be emailed after the research was complete. Finally, the researcher contacted an adjunct English 101 professor at George Mason University, a university campus in Fairfax County, to distribute to their students. The SurveyMonkey link was sent from the professor's email to the students with a description of the study.

After the survey period of June 20th to September 20, 2023, a total of 91 surveys were qualified with the right age and location. The survey information was stored on the SurveyMonkey portal and exported to be analyzed, after removing the 11 responses that did not qualify under those guidelines.

The survey began with two optional age and gender questions (optional due to the main participants being minors and the need to have as little identifying information as possible) and then some open-ended questions about what library events teens attended and why. A list of the survey questions can be found below in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Questions for the Teen Survey*

Question	Type of Response
Age ( <i>optional</i> ):	Numerical
Self-Identified Gender ( <i>optional</i> ):	Open-ended
How long have you been coming to the Fairfax County libraries?	Open-ended
Have you attended any Fairfax County library events?	Yes/No
<i>(If yes)</i> Which ones have you attended?	Open-ended
<i>(If yes)</i> Which were your favorite events and why?	Open-ended
<i>(If no)</i> Why not?	Open-ended
Are you aware of the Fairfax County library virtual events?	Yes/No
<i>(If yes)</i> Which ones have you attended?	Open-ended
<i>(If yes)</i> Which were your favorite events and why?	Open-ended
What virtual events would you like to see Fairfax County Library host in the future?	Open-ended

By analyzing the open-ended responses against the demographic data, a picture emerged into what kind of trends were found in the type of events teens wanted by age and gender.

Conclusions were drawn into how a library could expand its current catalog of virtual events for the most engagement.

## **Data Analysis**

For the analysis of the data, first the interviews were qualitatively evaluated for similar or different answers to the interview questions. The similarities and differences were noted, and the information was put aside for comparison to the survey. The survey responses were exported off SurveyMonkey in a excel file. After removing all identifying information off the excel file, the survey answers were compiled, and tallied for yes/no answers, and answers to the open-ended questions were grouped. By tallying and noting percentages of the answers, conclusions could be drawn about how teens viewed virtual library events, and this was contrasted to the interviews with the employees, to paint a picture of how teens viewed virtual events versus how the library employees viewed them.

## **Limitations**

There were several challenges in gathering the data for this study, and it may affect the overall conclusions. The focus was on Fairfax County, a large county of 1.14 million people, just west of Washington D.C. It is a diverse county with a high immigrant and English as a Second Language population (United States Census Bureau, 2023) The Fairfax City branch (Fairfax City is an independent city and is a separate governmental entity from Fairfax County, but their sole library is run by the Fairfax County Libraries system [Fairfax County, Virginia, 2023]) is on the bus route from the local George Mason University (City of Fairfax, Virginia, 2023), and while younger college students in the 18-19 range would be applicable to the survey, the teens may not actually live in Fairfax County outside of the school year.

The county has many libraries its system, and while the county is generally high income, some local libraries have a substantial population who may not have a computer at home or who speak English as a second language (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Because of the unique factors of the county, the answers may not apply to all nationwide library systems.

While attempting to distribute surveys, Fairfax County Libraries only allowed permission for minors to be surveyed through online survey forms rather than an in-person form. While a total of 91 participants were surveyed and gave high-quality responses, the dataset was skewed due to the need for the participants to have a computer available to take the survey itself. The survey link was distributed to George Mason University English 101 students, and many responded. This meant that most data came from older teens who were admitted to a four year college, with ease of internet access. While older teens data counts, the ability to reach a wider audience of younger teens would have been useful for comparison and making conclusions.

Nevertheless, the high number of responses allows specific pictures to emerge, particularly when contrasted with the librarian interviews. Patterns in the data show a clear trend, even across age and gender lines. While it is impossible to get a clear picture of all teens in the Fairfax County Library System due to the digital nature of the surveys, a wide enough net of data was captured to contribute to conclusions on what sort of events teens in the Fairfax County Library System might be missing.

## **Research Process**

There were two processes used to gather data for this study. First, by contacting to the Fairfax County Libraries system to interview librarians who focused on virtual teen events. The questions asked would discern what sort of events the library has been putting on, what events

the library system considers a success, and other events there are ideas for in the future. This would start with a baseline of what events the libraries system perceived as successful, and how the staff perceived their virtual events catalog.

The perception of the Library System employees versus the perception of the teens who these events are catered to was going to be a large data point regarding the official findings, so after the librarian interviews, the survey was sent out to teens in the Fairfax County Libraries System. It was created on the website SurveyMonkey and was available for 90 days, in which 102 surveys were completed. Not all surveys qualified due to age or location data, as a result, 11 surveys were removed from the findings.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### Interview Results

Both interviews indicated a library system that is attempting to engage with teen programming, and dedicated to increasing their teen engagement, but having some struggles with that process.

The first interviewee was a female Youth Services Information Assistant, stationed at the Centerville Regional Library branch of the Fairfax Counties library system. This employee had been employed since 2016, and had facilitated around 200 in-person events since then. The employee indicated that most of the virtual programming was implemented during the 2020 pandemic, as previous research affirmed, and most programs for teens were gaming programs like virtual Dungeons and Dragons sessions. The virtual Dungeons and Dragon session continues every other month since 2021, and the average teen attendance is around six dedicated players.

One thing to note was that while I found few teen events on the Fairfax County Libraries System page, the employee indicated that most libraries do their own programming and it may not be reflected on the Libraries System main programming page (Internet Archive,2023). Because the communities in Fairfax County are diverse and vary wildly in needs and audience (United States Census Bureau, 2023), each branch conducts their own events and programming, though occasionally successful events spread to other branches.

One other piece of information from this interview is that there are more in-person events in the summer versus in the fall and winter, to meet teens needs and school schedules. The library system tried to schedule more in person events for the summer to bring teens to the library to increase engagement, but during school time, because teens' hours are limited, the

library system offers many more virtual events. This lines up with research of virtual events on the Fairfax County events page, with approximately one virtual event scheduled monthly in the summer, to four separate events planned for October (Fairfax County, Virginia, 2023).

The second Fairfax County Libraries System employee was a male Library Information Assistant, acting as a Youth and Teen Services Assistant. Despite the title, the employee does not work at the library branch; instead, the employee works at the Fairfax County government center helping all the separate library branches run their own programming. The responsibilities include creating programming kits to send to the library branches, facilitating and updating the library programming on the website, and checking out equipment for certain library programming. Another responsibility of the employee is to facilitate library events at community centers, after school programs, etc. The programming for these “Pop Up Libraries” is often in the forms of worksheets or short activities for teens and school age children to engage in for a few hours during the Pop-Up Library sessions. A Pop-Up Library “Teen Space” is being planned at a local mall for once-a-week programs catered only towards teens.

The employee indicated he facilitated in person events on a regular basis, approximately 60% of their job responsibilities. The employee has facilitated about 20-30 teen events, with the most popular events being game nights, like board games or laser tag night. While the employee was hired on after the 2020 pandemic, most events that went virtual during the pandemic returned to in-person at the teens’ request, though it was indicated that teens would like more virtual events available to accommodate busy academic schedules.

The employee gave their perspective on the challenges of creating virtual events—namely staffing hours and funding, in addition to finding the time for teens to engage. Fairfax County is unique in that it is one of the top school districts for teens in the nation (“High

Schools,” 2023) and the teens are heavily encouraged to focus on their studies by their families and their schools. Many are simply too busy for any programming that is not specifically academic. Currently, the library district is looking into creating more teen programming once there is information available into what would appeal most to teens within the Fairfax County Libraries System.

These two interviews provided a unique perspective into the issue of virtual programming from the Fairfax County Libraries System perspective. The greatest challenge into creating more programming was the lack of engagement, as well as the lack of man hours and funding. Teen virtual events have been supplanted by in-person events to facilitate more engagement with the library branches themselves. The library employees did see support for more virtual events, particularly in the gaming space. Both employees made a clear commitment to studying the issue and reaching out to see what teens might wish to be added to the programming calendar.

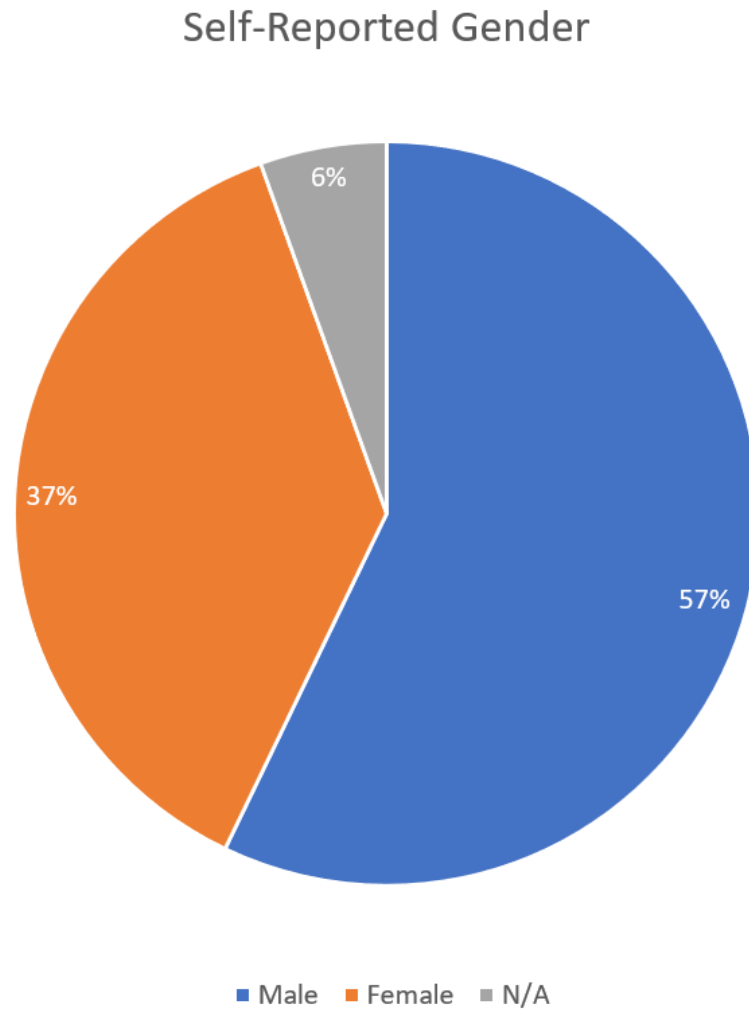
## **Survey Results**

One data point in judging the initial surveys was the optional self-reported age. Due to the targeting of minors, this remained an optional question, but of those that responded, the average age was 17. Students who responded to the survey would have been 14-15 during the height of the pandemic when all library events were virtual, and had seen the libraries adapt to reopening and returning to in-person events.

The other optional question was self-reported gender. This was mostly for demographic purposes, as not all answered the question. While the question was open-ended and optional, most participants responded. In addition, most of the respondents were male. The breakdown of the self-reported gender responses can be viewed below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

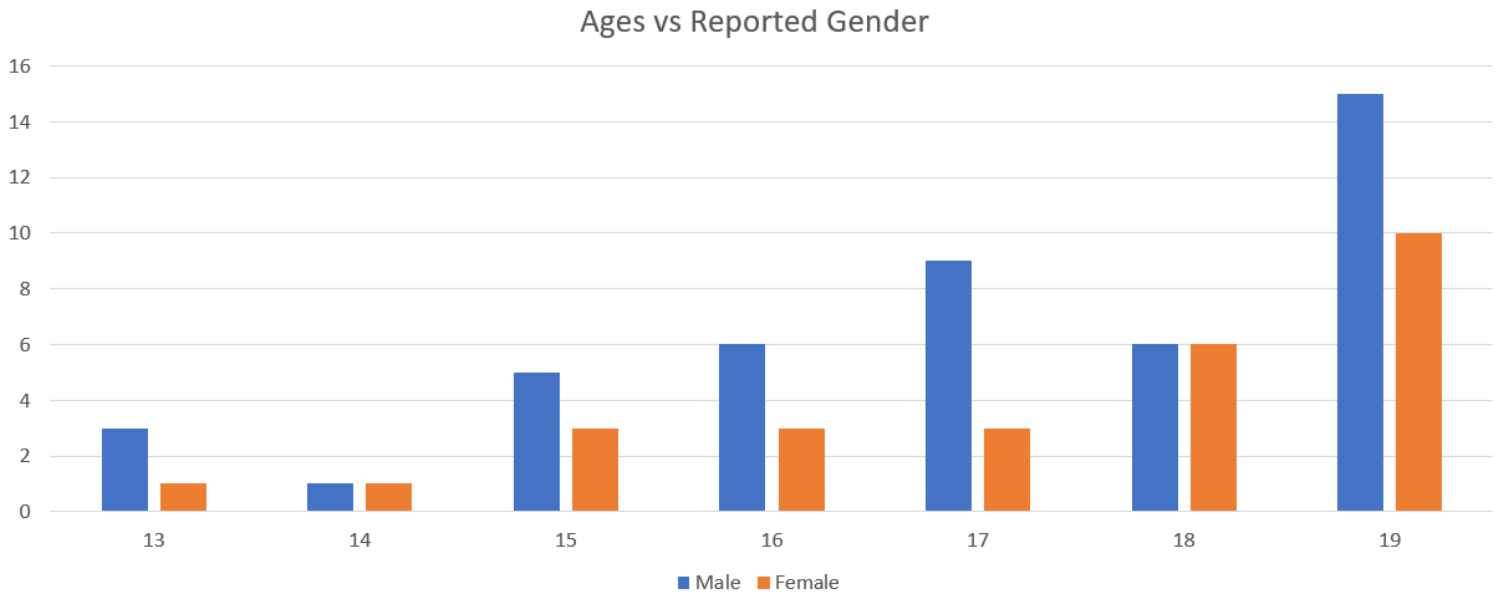
*Self-Reported Gender Graph*



This can be broken down further by looking at the ages in relation to the self-reported gender. Both questions were optional, but of the respondents that answered both, the skew in terms of age and gender are reported below in Figure 2. N/A indicates a respondent did not reply to the question.

**Figure 2**

*Gender and Ages Graph*



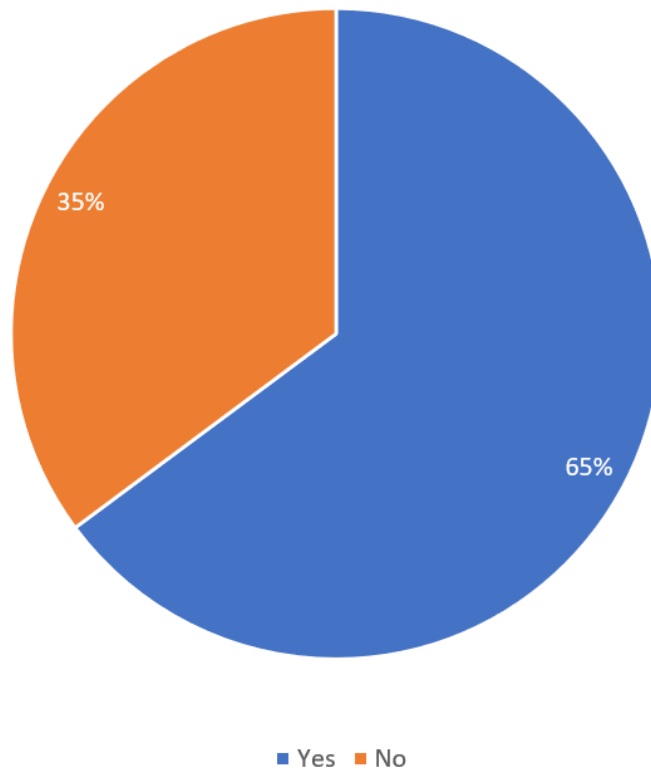
There were more male respondents than female respondents, and the average age of those who answered the question was 17. The average number of years the participants had been visiting their local county library was for 3.75 years.

The first question on the survey was whether the participant had attended any events at their local library—in-person or otherwise. The breakdown of responses is in the graph in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Attendance of Any Library Events*

Attended ANY Event



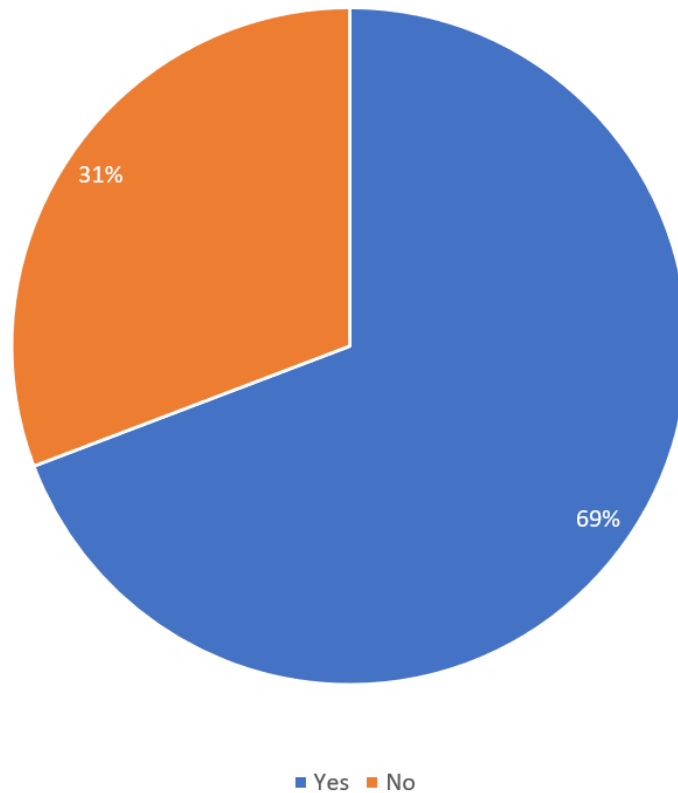
As shown, 65% of all participants had attended at least a single in-person or virtual event at their local library.

The second question addressed the awareness of the virtual events in the library system. The graph in Figure 4 shows the breakdown of responses:

**Figure 4**

*Awareness of Virtual Events in the Fairfax County Library System*

Aware of VIRTUAL Events

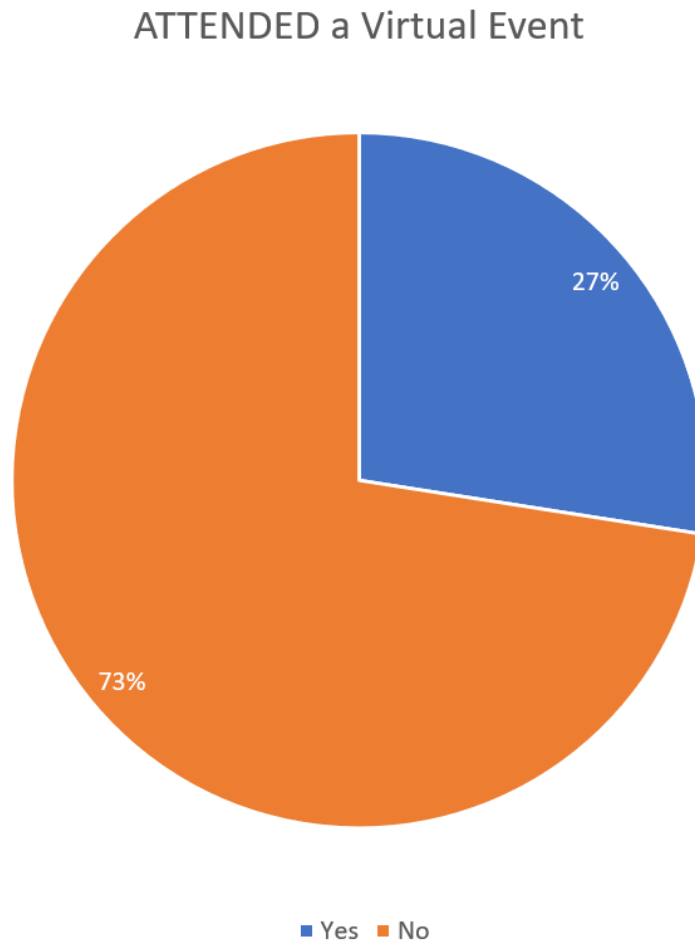


Similar to the above results in Figure 3, approximately 69% of participants were aware of virtual events put on by the Fairfax County Library system.

The next question asked which participants had attended a virtual event in their library system. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of the results.

**Figure 5**

*Participants Who Attended a Virtual Event*

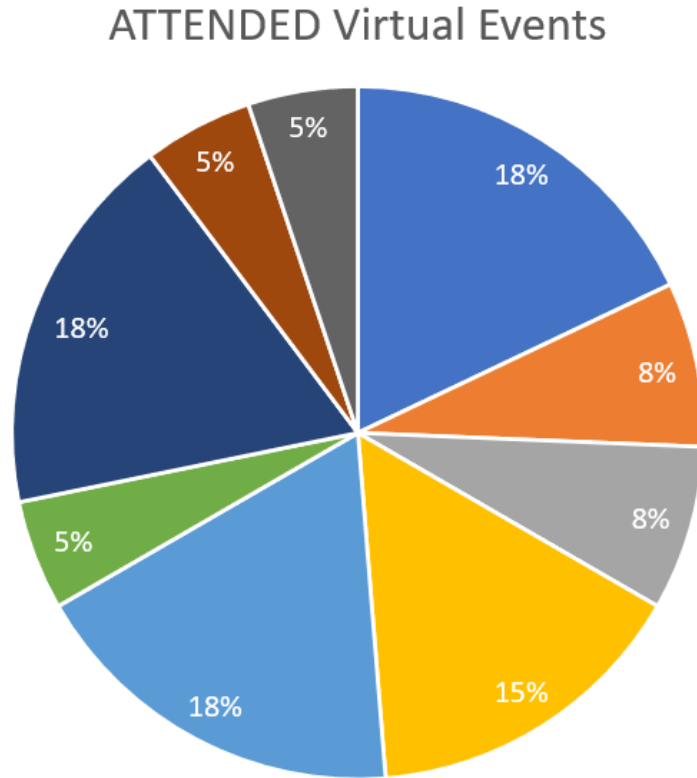


Overwhelmingly, 73% of respondents had not attended a virtual event. In addition, the overwhelming answer as to why events were not attended was that there were no events put on by the library system that interested them.

Of the virtual events that were attended, these were broken down further into categories. The categories of attended virtual events is shown in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Categories of Attended Virtual Events*



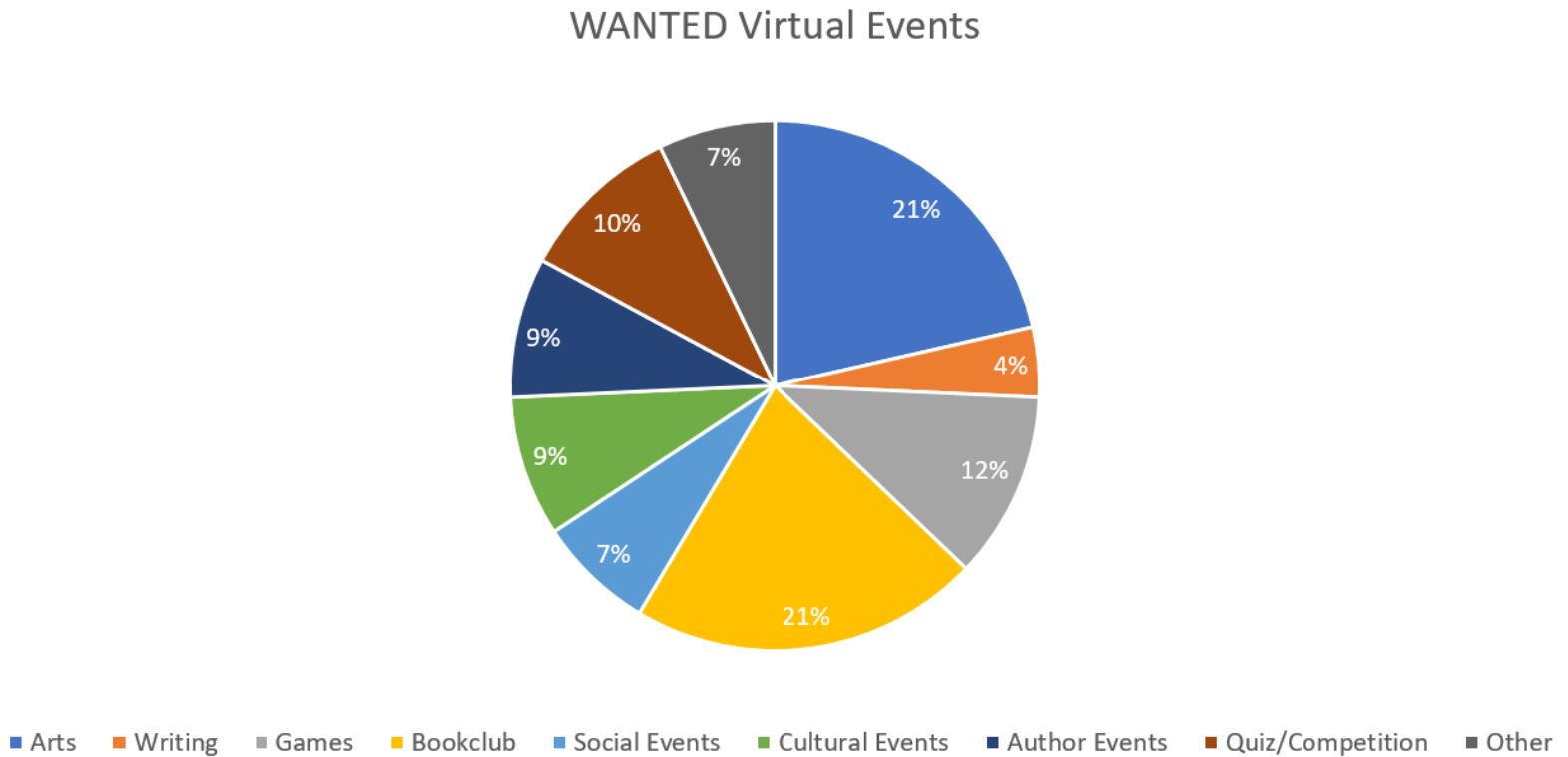
■ Arts Events ■ Gaming ■ Writing ■ ESL ■ Bookclub ■ Exercise ■ Author Events ■ Cultural Events ■ Other

Arts events, book clubs, and author events were the most reported attended virtual events, followed by ESL/language events and gaming or writing events. In terms of self-reported age and gender divisions, younger teens choose art events and older teens choose author events, with males leaning towards arts and gaming while females leaned towards author events and ESL. Both attended book clubs at about the same rate.

Finally, the survey asked what virtual events the Fairfax County Libraries System could advertise on that teens would be interested in attending. A summary of the responses is shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

*Categories of Wanted Virtual Events*



Specific arts and targeted book clubs were the most common responses, followed by more gaming events, quiz/competition events, and author events, respectively. Like the statistics from the attended virtual events, younger participants wanted more arts and gaming events, while older participants wanted author, social, or cultural events. “Other” indicates any event that could not be grouped into one of the above categories – animal events, life skills workshops, etc. Despite this, 21% of all ages and genders wanted more specific book clubs, the most common answer.

Respondents to the survey indicated that they most wanted book clubs about specific subjects—genre or topical book clubs, for example. Arts events were broken down into two

different wants—generic art/drawing events and events related to comics or drawing graphic novels. This focus on diverse genre/topic book clubs was unique, because while there is programming for different book clubs within the Fairfax County Library System’s programming, there is a want for more of these services to be virtual.

## **Summary**

Given the data provided, these are the observations regarding how teens responded to the survey:

- Demographically, 57% of the respondents were male, and the average age of the respondent was 17.
- 65% of all respondents had attended at least one in-person event.
- 69% were aware of virtual events in the Fairfax County Libraries system.
- Only 27% had attended a virtual event within the Fairfax County Libraries system.
- The most common reason for not attending a virtual event was no interest in the virtual programming provided.
- The most attended virtual events were art events, book clubs, and author events.
- The most wanted virtual events were more art events, and specific topic or genre-themed book clubs.

## Chapter Five: Conclusions

Given the data derived from the surveys and the librarian interviews, several conclusions can be drawn about what teens want out of virtual library events versus what county libraries are giving in terms of events. Library employees are focused on three main targets: engagement, increase of teen use of the physical library, and increase of usage of services. This researcher finds that while librarians want to increase the use of in-person engagement, especially in the face of decreased staffing and funding, these goals differ from what respondents of the survey would like to see in library services.

From the library employees' point of view, virtual events are secondary to in-person programming and a return to in-person programming should be encouraged in most cases. In the face of decreased funding and manpower, in-person programming is pushed to the forefront as the most important types of programming for the library system's overall objectives. While this makes sense from a library system's point of view, it was clear from the results of the teen survey that it does not entirely meet the needs of what teens want out of their library programming. Many teens who asked for virtual programming also regularly attended in-person events. Teens attended the same sort of events asked for in virtual programming, so while the library system is doing a good job of having a diverse catalog of programming, by focusing on in-person events as much as possible, the library system is missing out on engagement opportunities to attract those teens who may not be able to attend the in-person events but who might have otherwise participated.

In comparing the interviews of the library employees to the results of the teen survey, it was also clear that the library is prioritizing events that easily lend themselves to an online presence—the Dungeons & Dragons group, for example, as Dungeons & Dragons is a game built

on imagination and through spoken actions, and if a player has a dice nearby for rolling, the game can easily be taken to an online platform. Another common online event for the Fairfax County system was the “Teen Otaku Event” an event that prioritizes Japanese anime and manga culture (Wayback Machine, 2023.) While the celebration of Japanese culture became popular during the late 1990s and early 2000s, it is still a popular phenomenon among online teens today (Mendoza, 2022). It appears that, from the library employees’ point of view, the focus is “What online events can we add to the programming?” when it is clear from the survey results that the question teens want to be asked is “What normally in-person events can we make virtual?” Adding into the data that most teens also utilized the library system’s in-person programming, there is a gap in the services—not so much in the type of programming, but in how it is presented. In an increasingly online world, teens wanted highly tailored programming available at their fingertips. While this might present a challenge for a library system to implement, by targeting the most common asks as seen in the survey, the library could use the data to increase their catalog of programming and teen engagement.

The data brought about by this study has some surprising trends—trends that were not originally anticipated. Art events being the most popular across all age and gender groups was surprising, however, given the greater increase in teens and youth reading more graphic novels (Baron, 2023), perhaps not entirely unprecedented. Art programs are on the Fairfax County Libraries calendar, but only in-person events. Book clubs also returned to in-person programming after the pandemic. The interviews with the library employees indicated that as many events as possible were returned to in-person events to increase engagement with other services of the library; however, many teens regularly attended in-person programming as well as virtual events.

Despite the focus on in-person programming, teens wanted specific virtual programming to meet their needs. From the point of view of the teens, it wasn't that there was a gap in programming for certain types of events, it was that certain types of events were not available virtually if desired. In an increasingly online connected world, after an unprecedented pandemic where the world went increasingly virtual, for teens who would have come of age during the pandemic, it is quite a change to go from virtual at-home events to in-person. This was the fundamental ask of all those surveyed—the main issue was less about the type of programming, and more about the lack of access to the programming in an easily accessible way.

By focusing on this question, the library system can start thinking about their programming in alternative ways, in ways to increase virtual programming while continuing their commitment to bringing more in-person events. It is a question that, as stated in the Literature Review section above, many library systems have considered. In the section below, there are suggestions on how to increase programming, including a model based off the virtual programming by the Brooklyn Public Libraries System, that have embraced this idea of hybrid programming to cater to all needs.

### **Implications**

After looking at these two sets of conclusions supported by the data, it was clear there is a need for the Fairfax County Libraries System to reassess their virtual programming and how to bring more normally in-person events into a virtual context. While this might be hindered by problems with funding or staffing, the results of the survey clearly indicate the need to extend outreach to the teens who might not be able to attend in-person events with regularity.

The most popular asked for events were gaming events, arts and craft events, and specific book club events. This led to the search for a libraries system that already has these virtual events set up for their teen users. The Brooklyn Public Libraries System has a wide virtual catalog of events for all ages. When looking at virtual events that are catered toward teens, the top three events are a Virtual Crafting Circle, a Let's Play Gaming Stream, and a Virtual Book Club. These virtual programming events are also put on a variety of platforms, including Facebook Live Broadcasts, Zoom meetings, and Twitch Streaming by library staff. This not only meets the wants of teens wanting specific events, but also the need for these virtual events to be on social media and other websites that teens use often, like Facebook or Twitch. It was clear that the Brooklyn Public Libraries System has continued its virtual programming and attempted to meet the wants and needs of teens for their virtual events. (Brooklyn Public Library, 2023).

If the Fairfax County Libraries wishes to increase their engagement and meet those teens who cannot attend in-person events as the survey indicated, the library system should look at what in-person events can easily be brought to a virtual context. Virtual events can be streamed on-line for those who cannot make the in-person events as a compromise to meet the needs of these two different groups. Likewise, the events that are most easily brought to online contexts are talks and discussions, and teens seemed eager for more author discussion events. In the future, the Fairfax County Libraries should consider this when booking events, and try to find a way to meet the needs of having an in-person event that focuses on library engagement as well as a virtual one for those that do not have the ability to appear in-person.

Despite this gap in programming, it was clear that the teens surveyed were mostly engaged in their local library programming, and did enjoy going to in-person events occasionally. Consideration could be brought to how many more people could be reached by

turning events virtual, and weighed against the need to increase in-person engagement. The want for virtual programming is there, if the Fairfax County Libraries chooses to embrace the model that the Brooklyn Public Libraries has and put on popular virtual events that cater to the wants of the local teen population. Because Fairfax County teens wanted more book clubs and art events, then a virtual crafting club and a virtual book club are good places to start.

### **Future Study Considerations**

Given the aforementioned limitations of this survey, future study considerations could be made on what sort of events younger teens (with an average age of 14-15) would like to see out of the Fairfax County Libraries System. In addition, while many teens voiced a want for specific book clubs on different topics and genres, this could be broken down further to provide concrete direction into which would be the most popular genre or topics.

The most common answer into why teens did not attend a virtual event was “no interest” – this could be broken down further in the future with specific questions targeting the root of the no interest response. Also, statistics could be taken on the most popular attended virtual events with specific attendance numbers, to find the most popular events per month or day of the week, to provide direction into how to schedule such events for maximum engagement.

All of these considerations, in addition to the provided data, would give the libraries more information on how to maximize the engagement of their virtual events that they currently provide, while balancing the need for future events on specific dates and times to accommodate teens with busy schedules.

## References

- Abron, D. (2020). The Switch Up: Remote Programming in the Age of Covid-19. *Young Adult Library Services*, 18(4), 7–10.
- Baron, M. (2023, May 2). “What Are the Actual Reading Trends for Gen Z?” Book Riot 2023, [bookriot.com/gen-z-reading-trends/](https://bookriot.com/gen-z-reading-trends/).
- Brooklyn Public Library, (2021, May 21). *Virtual Programming*. Retrieved October 13, 2023, from [www.bklynlibrary.org/event-series/virtual-programming?field\\_age\\_tid=4](http://www.bklynlibrary.org/event-series/virtual-programming?field_age_tid=4)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, March). *15 Days to stop the Spread*. Department of Justice. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.justice.gov/doj/page/file/1258511/download>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, August 16). *CDC Museum Covid-19 Timeline*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html#:~:text=January%2020%2C%202020,respond%20to%20the%20emerging%20outbreak>
- City of Fairfax Regional Library. Fairfax County Virginia. (n.d.). Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/branches/city-of-fairfax-regional>
- Fairfax County, Virginia. (n.d.). *Library Events*. Fairfax County Libraries. Retrieved October 13, 2023, from <https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov/calendar?cid=6524&t=d&d=0000-00-00&cal=6524&audience=2152&cm=6397&inc=0>

Fairfax County, Virginia. (n.d.). *Reciprocal Jurisdictions*. Fairfax County Libraries. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://research.fairfaxcounty.gov/c.php?g=726085&p=5445065>

First Fairfax Health District Case of COVID-19 Infection and Criteria for COVID-19 Testing and Test Request Process. (2020, March 9). *Fairfax County, Virginia*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/health/alerts/first-fairfax-health-district-case-covid-19-infection-and-criteria-covid-19-testing-and-test>.

Gardner, M. (2022). How My School Library Survived and Thrived During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Kentucky Libraries*, 86(3), 18–20.

Freudenberger, E. (2020, May 22). *Programming Through the Pandemic*. *Library Journal*. <https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/Programming-Through-the-Pandemic-covid-19>

Grochowski, S. (2020, April 28). *Library Programming for Teens Goes Virtual During Covid-19*. *Publishers Weekly*. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/83176-library-programming-for-teens-goes-virtual-during-covid-19.html>

*High Schools in Fairfax County Public Schools District*. (2023). U.S. News & World Report. [www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/virginia/districts/fairfax-county-public-schools-109481](http://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/virginia/districts/fairfax-county-public-schools-109481). Retrieved 14 Oct. 2023.

Hursh, A. (2021, July 1). *The truly engaged library user: Why it's critical that libraries focus less on transactions and more on relationships*. *Super Library Marketing: Practical Tips*

and Ideas for Library Promotion.

<https://superlibrarymarketing.com/2021/06/21/libraryengagement/>

Internet Archive. (2020, August 19). *Library Events*. Wayback Machine. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from

[https://web.archive.org/web/202300000000000\\*/https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov/](https://web.archive.org/web/202300000000000*/https://librarycalendar.fairfaxcounty.gov/)

Jensen, K. (2020, April 15). *Cindy Crushes Programming: 5 Virtual Programs You Can Do Right Now*, by Cindy Shutts. Teen Librarian Toolbox. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from <https://teenlibrariantoolbox.com/2020/04/15/cindy-crushes-programming-5-virtual-programs-you-can-do-right-now/>

Keys, K. (2020). Teen Librarians Build Community in Times of Crisis: What Our New Normal May Look Like. *Young Adult Library Services*, 18(3), 15–17.

Mediavilla, C. (2021). Transitioning From In-Person to Virtual Homework Help. *Public Libraries*, 60(1), 34–41.

Mendoza, S.A. (2022, July 29). “Manga in America.” *CCC International*, [ccci.am/manga-in-america/](http://ccci.am/manga-in-america/).

Moreland, A., Herlihy, C., Tynan, M., et al. (2020). Timing of State and Territorial COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Orders and Changes in Population Movement — United States, March 1–May 31, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 69(35), 1198–1203. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6935a2>

Nolet, A., Lockwood, J., & Gamble, S. (2021). Public Awareness and Advocacy Committee: Best Practices Online: Considerations for Successful Virtual Programs. *Children and Libraries*, 19(1), 36–37. <https://doi.org/10.5860/cal.19.1.36>

Panuncial, D. (2021). The Twitching Hour: Libraries Use Live Virtual Platform to Engage Teens, Early Adults. *American Libraries*, 52(9/10), 14–15.

Prukop, S., & Loaiza, M. (2022). Using Discord to Create a Harmonious Space for Teens. *Computers in Libraries*, 42(6), 8–12.

Reddit. Retrieved October 13, 2023 from [www.reddit.com/r/nova](http://www.reddit.com/r/nova)

Rushe, D. (2021, March 1). *Zoom Sees Revenues Soar 326% Year-Over-Year as Office Life Remains on Hold*. The Guardian. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/mar/01/zoom-revenues-results-coronavirus>

The Hunt Institute. *Impact of COVID-19 on public libraries*. (2021, April 30). <https://hunt-institute.org/resources/2021/04/impact-of-covid-19-on-public-libraries/>

United States Census Bureau. (n.d.) *Quickfacts: Fairfax County, Virginia*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fairfaxcountyvirginia>