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OPINION // **EMILY HOEVEN**

## Young San Franciscans aren't going to bars. They're hanging at the library

Is it any surprise that young people like me are forgoing moody bars for free books when a glass of wine can set you back \$20?

By **Emily Hoeven**, Opinion Columnist

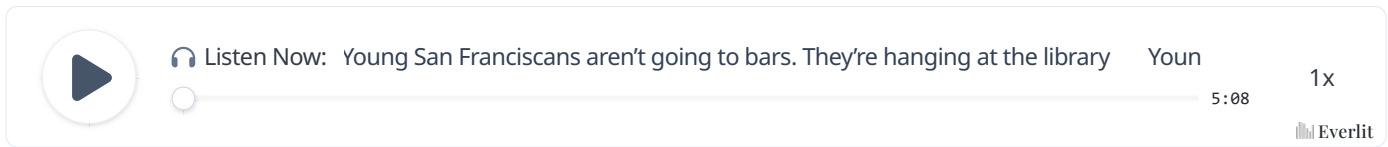
Aug 16, 2025

 Gift Article



San Francisco Main Library, photographed in 2023. The library's marketing and community engagement teams have made concerted efforts to capture the attention of millennial and Gen-Z audiences.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle



It's no secret that young people in San Francisco don't frequent bars and nightclubs the way they once did.

This has left many perplexed. If the city's dwindling population of 20-somethings isn't drinking and dancing, what are they doing?

This 20-something has spent much of her time this summer at the San Francisco Public Library. And based on my observations, plenty of other young adults have, too.

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No, we aren't geeks. The library is cool.

To start, it's a free third space — a perk that cannot be overstated in this ridiculously expensive city.

I recently visited the Chinatown library shortly before it closed at 8 p.m. There was barely an empty seat in the house. And it was impossible not to notice the sizable number of young adults.

Is it any surprise we'd forgo a moody bar when a glass of wine can set you back \$20 these days?

Meanwhile, the library's marketing and community engagement teams have made concerted efforts to capture the attention of millennial and Gen-Z audiences.

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Their smart gamification strategy is working.

The library offers a tote bag as a prize for completing its Summer Stride program — which challenges residents to complete 20 hours of reading from [June through August](#).



This year, the San Francisco Public Library offered a mini version of its tote bag prize for completing a summer reading challenge.

Pocholo Carsi-Cruz/San Francisco Public Library

I was already excited to see the design. Then I discovered the library would also be offering a Trader Joe's-style mini tote this summer.

“We really got on board with the idea that we needed to try and compete with Trader Joe’s,” Michelle Jeffers, the library’s chief of community programs and partnerships, recently told me, laughing.

The grocery chain's \$3 mini tote bags [became a viral social-media sensation](#) this year, with people waiting for hours in line for the chance to snag one. The bags sold out in minutes and are now being hawked online with [asking prices as high as \\$49,000](#).

Library Community Engagement Manager Alejandro Gallegos told me he was “skeptical” of the mini tote plan at first, but as soon as he saw the tiny bags, he was sold.

San Francisco readers are, too. When I talked with Jeffers and Gallegos in late July, almost all of the library branches had already run out of the mini totes.

It's a sign that, despite the prevailing winds of our digital age, libraries can still succeed at getting people of all ages to engage with that most analog of pleasures: reading books.

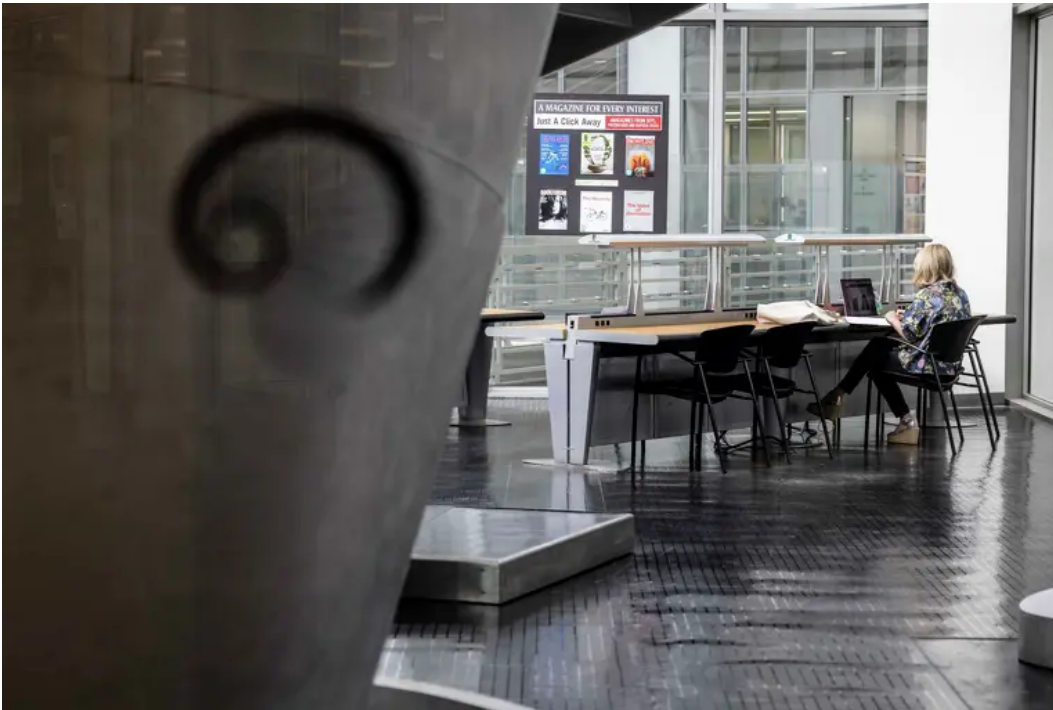
Since the pandemic, the number of people completing the Summer Stride challenge has steadily increased. In the 2022 fiscal year, 10,515 people claimed their tote bags, a nearly 328% increase from the prior year, [according to the library's annual report](#). By 2024, the total had boomed to 18,300 people — [a 14% increase from the year before](#).

So much for the idea that summer reading challenges are just a way to incentivize kids to crack open books when they aren't in school.

In recent years, a growing number of libraries, bookstores and literary groups [have begun letting adults in on the fun](#) — a sign of their craving for authentic community following years of isolation and [the app-ification of relationships](#).

The San Francisco Public Library expanded its summer-reading challenge to include teenagers and adults around 2008, when officials discovered “that a lot of people that weren’t kids wanted to participate,” Jeffers told me.

It turns out that when you offer “something really fun and exciting” with “no barriers” to entry, people will sign up in droves, Jeffers said.



Services the San Francisco Library offers include printing, access to major publications and streaming services, job training programs, and museum and park passes.

Stephen Lam/The Chronicle

I wasn’t thinking of these admirably democratic arguments last year, when I first learned about Summer Stride. I was focused on getting my hands on the adorable tote hanging over the check-out counter — with “READ” emblazoned in puffy blue cloud-like letters above a pigeon clutching an open book in its talons.

Yes, I already had a not insignificant tote-bag collection. But there was no way I was going to leave without this one. When I asked the librarian if it was for sale, she smiled and said it could be mine for free: I just needed to track 20 hours of reading across the next few months.

So that's what I did — with a level of fervor I hadn't displayed since elementary school, when my fifth-grade class participated in a challenge sponsored by the San Jose Sharks hockey team [called "Reading is Cool."](#) Whoever read the most books each month won a Sharks-branded medal with a vibrant teal ribbon. (Yes, I made nabbing those medals my entire personality.)

This summer, my pursuit of the coveted mini tote helped me realize how libraries can be a refuge from the crush and cynicism of contemporary society. Anyone can sit down and read in their cool and quiet embrace. No one is judging you for your age or aesthetic or your drinking choices. And the incredible amenities — [a daily printing allowance](#), [access to major publications](#) and [streaming services](#), [job training](#), [museum and park passes](#) — cost you nothing.

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There's also a surprisingly comfortable and peaceful companionship that comes from browsing the shelves with other readers or working quietly alongside others at long tables. You don't need to talk, but if you do, it doesn't feel like approaching a stranger. You intrinsically know you're part of a larger community.

Is it any wonder that so many of us are choosing the library over other social spaces?

*Emily Hoeven is a columnist and editorial writer for the Opinion section.*

Aug 16, 2025



**Emily Hoeven**

COLUMNIST



Emily Hoeven is an Opinion columnist and editorial writer at the Chronicle. She won the Sacramento Press Club's award for best commentary (2024), placed second and third in the Best of the West contest for general interest column writing (2025 and 2024), and placed second in the California News Publishers Association's contest for best editorial comment (2024). Her columns have also sparked changes to San Francisco and California law.

She wrote CalMatters' daily WhatMatters newsletter on California politics and policy from March 2020 to January 2023 and makes frequent appearances on TV, radio, podcasts and panels. Emily has reported across the West, from California to Utah to Montana, and got her start writing opinion columns for the Mercury News and the Daily Pennsylvanian. A Fremont native, Emily graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in English and French and taught English for a year in France.

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