

Executive Summary

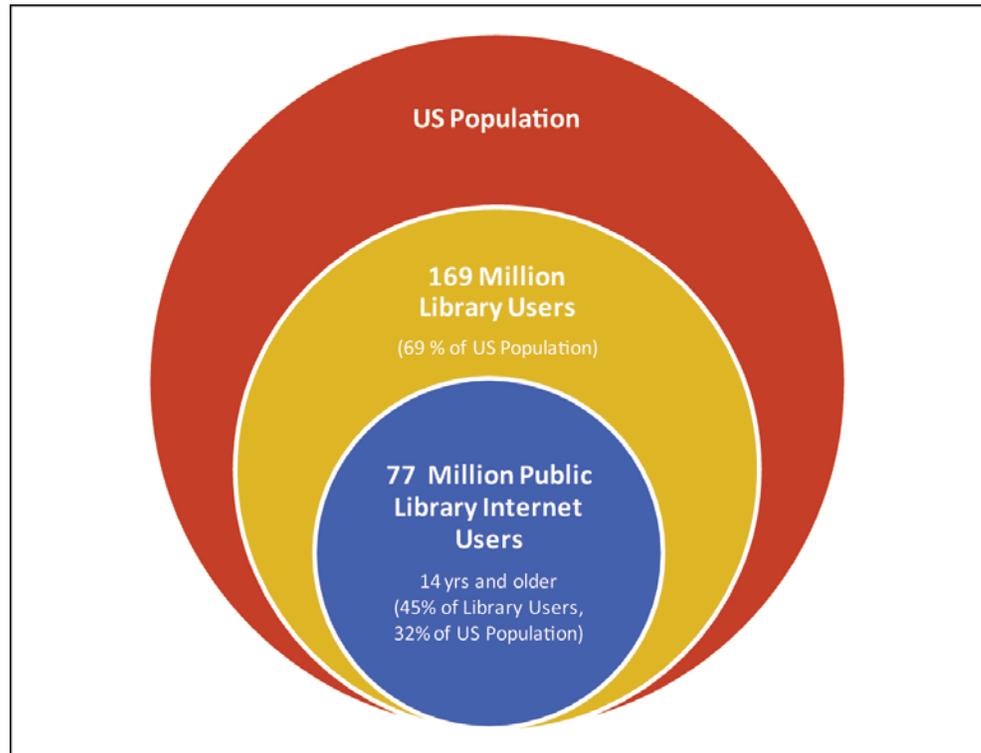
Over the past decade and a half, free access to computers and the Internet in U.S. public libraries evolved from a rare commodity into a core service. Now, people from all walks of life rely on this service every day to look for jobs, find health care, and read the latest news. As the nation struggled through a historic recession, nearly one-third of the U.S. population over the age of 14 used library Internet computers and those in poverty relied on these resources even more.

This study provides the first large-scale investigation of the ways library patrons use this service, why they use it, and how it affects their lives. A national telephone survey, nearly 45,000 online surveys at public libraries, and hundreds of interviews reveal the central role modern libraries play in a digital society.

The library's role as a technology resource and training center has exploded since 1996, when only 28 percent of libraries offered visitors access to the Internet. Today, almost all public library branches offer visitors free access to computers and the Internet, thanks to a sustained effort by federal, state, and local governments; private philanthropy; and the work of librarians. Until now, though, there has been no systematic study that provided a national picture of how people use this important community resource.

Internet access is now one of the most sought after public library services, and it is used by nearly half of all visitors. Over the past year, 45 percent of the 169 million visitors to public libraries connected to the Internet using a library computer or wireless network during their visit, even though more than three-quarters of these people had Internet access at home, work, or elsewhere. The widespread use of these services by people of varying age, income, and experience is an indication of the unique role that public libraries play in the evolving digital landscape. Public libraries stand out as one of the few community institutions that can address the computing and information needs of all kinds of users, from seniors who have never touched a keyboard to young entrepreneurs launching a new e-businesses strategy.

Chart 1: Library users and public library access users as a percentage of the U.S. population 14 years and older



Libraries offer a technological lifeline to children and families in need.

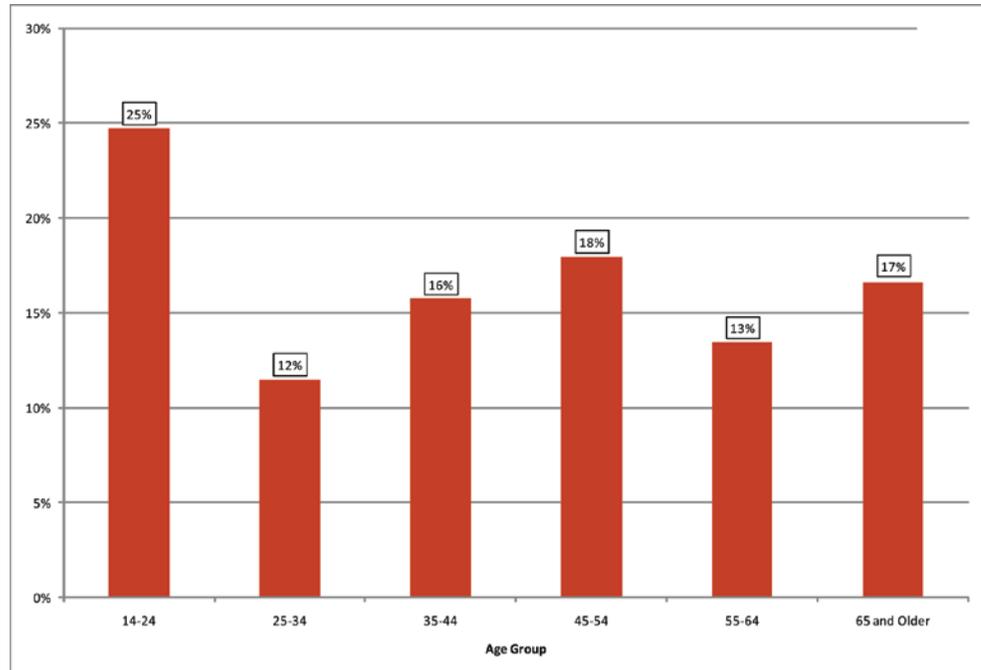
Although many different types of residents use public library computer and Internet services, libraries appear to be particularly effective in addressing the needs of families who still lack access elsewhere. But for libraries, millions of Americans would not have reliable Internet access in a digital age when a connection is often needed to complete school assignments, apply for jobs, or secure government services. Overall, 44 percent of people in households living below the federal poverty line (\$22,000 a year for a family of four) used public library computers and Internet access. Among young adults (14–24 years of age) in households below the federal poverty line, 61 percent used public library computers and Internet for educational purposes. Among seniors (65 and older) living in poverty, 54 percent used public library computers for health or wellness needs.

People of all ages, incomes, races, and levels of education go to the library for Internet access, whether they have a connection at home or not.

Users turned to computers at the public library for a wide range of reasons, whether it was because they did not have access elsewhere, needed faster Internet speed, wanted technical help from a librarian, competed for access to a computer at home, or simply wanted to work somewhere more peaceful and inviting than a crowded coffee shop or a hectic unemployment office.

The chart below displays the different age categories of public access users, as a percentage of all users. Overall, youth (between 14 and 24 years old) make up a quarter of all users. However, the distribution is not heavily skewed toward youth. There is a strong representation of users from youth to seniors. The second and third largest groupings of users are people in their middle years (45–54) and seniors older than 65, respectively.

Chart 2: Public library Internet users by age as a percentage of all users



Technology draws teens to the library. Young adults were among the most active, with nearly half of the nation’s 14 to 18 year olds (an estimated 11.8 million users) reporting they used a library computer during the last year, and one quarter did so once a week or more. One of the most common uses of library computers reported among these teenagers was to do homework.

Overall, people use library computers to perform both life-changing and routine tasks. Regardless of income, patrons relied on library computers to take fundamental steps in their lives. For example, they used these resources to find work, apply to college, secure government benefits, and learn about critical medical treatments. They also used library computers to connect with family and friends, plan family outings, manage bank accounts, apply for permits, start local clubs, and read the daily newspaper.

In extreme conditions, people turned to public library Internet terminals when they had nowhere else to go. In the wake of natural disasters, such as

Hurricane Katrina, public libraries were often some of the last remaining places where people could search online for housing and FEMA aid.

Patrons use library computers to help others in their community. Apart from addressing their own computing needs, nearly two-thirds of library computer users (63 percent) logged on to help others. Fifty-six percent reported helping friends or family with health matters, 46 percent helped find information on education and learning opportunities, and 37 percent helping friends or family find employment or career information. An estimated 48 million people reported using library computers and Internet access to helping their friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers with a wide range of problems, from resolving tax questions to finding medical equipment.

Public libraries provide access to government agencies that now offer many forms and services online. More than 26 million people used public library computers to get government or legal information or to access government services. Of these, 58 percent downloaded a government forms, such as Social Security paperwork, tax forms, and Medicare enrollment documents. Nearly half of these people wound up submitting a government form using a library computer. When it came to government services, the vast majority who sought help from government officials over a library's Internet connection (84 percent) reported they received the help they were seeking.

Public libraries are extensions of the nation's education system. Another important use of computers at public libraries was to further one's education. More than 32 million visitors reported using library computers for a variety of educational activities: doing their homework, searching for and applying to GED and graduate programs, completing online courses and tests, and even applying for financial aid. More than half of library patrons who used library computers to seek financial aid received funding.

Librarians enhance the computing and Internet experience. The availability of the Internet at the library coupled with the vast number of online transactions has expanded the librarian's job and mission, creating a new set of opportunities and service challenges. Librarians have begun serving as informal job coaches, college counselors, test monitors, and technology trainers for the growing number of patrons navigating government aid, the job market, and all levels of education on library computers.

Many librarians have embraced this change as a natural extension of their role as highly trained information guides. They now offer beginning and advanced computer classes, host job training seminars, and provide countless patrons one-on-one computer training. Overall, two-thirds of people who used library

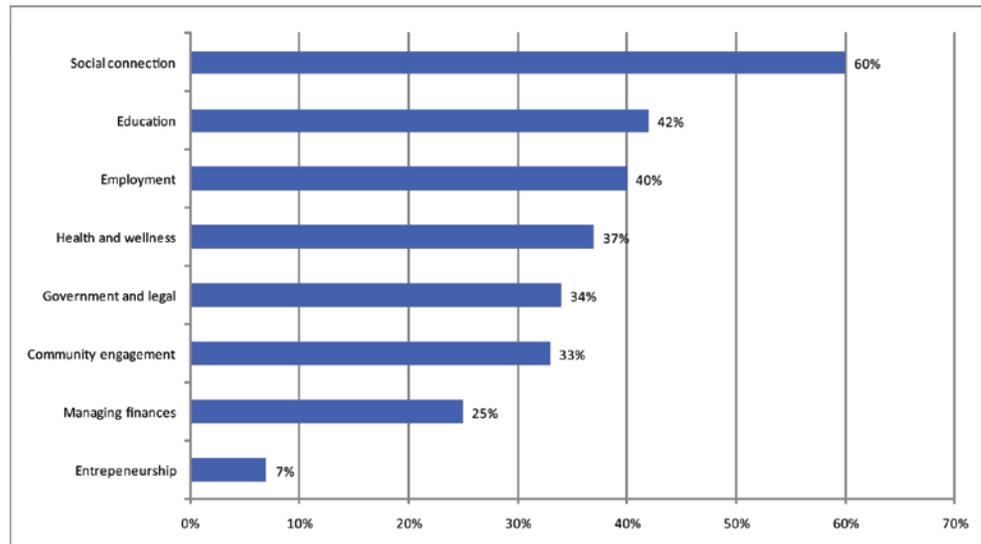
computers received help from library staff or volunteers on computer or wireless network issues.

Key Uses of Library Computers

The study explored eight areas where people reported using library computers in the past 12 months: education, employment, health and wellness, accessing government and legal services and information, participating in community life, managing household finances, entrepreneurship, and building and maintaining social connections. The most commonly reported use was social connection, which included connecting with family and friends, finding support for an issue or problem, as well as leisure activities such as watching videos, pursuing hobbies, or maintaining blogs and personal websites.

Library patrons reported using computers and the Internet to address a range of basic needs. The three most common uses were: education (42 percent), employment (40 percent), and health (37 percent). The sections below highlight report statistics for the largest use areas.

Chart 3: Rank of Library Internet Use by Subject Area



Social Connections

- Sixty percent of the public access computer users reported using library resources to maintain person connections. Among these users, 74 percent reported using library computers to connect with friends or family, 66 percent communicated with family or friends in the local community, and 35 percent reported connection with family outside of the United States.

A Fayetteville, Arkansas, user talked about growing closer to his family using library computers: *My mother, sister and father—I'm 12 hours away from anyone who could claim me as kin. They benefit from hearing that their son is still alive. I have more time to chat with my sister, we catch up when I don't have that much time during work hours. I've grown quite close to my sister because of those silly computers.*

Education

- Forty-two percent of the library computer users (an estimated 32.5 million people) leveraged the library technology resources to help them achieve their educational goals. For example, nearly 37 percent of these users relied on library computers to learn about college degree or certificate programs.
- Youth relied heavily on public library computers and internet access: 42 percent of 14 –18 year old respondents reported using library computers to do schoolwork.
- Twenty-four percent of the education users reported taking online classes or worked on online assignments at the library

A principal at an Oakland high school had this to say about the way the local library addressed his student's needs: "100 percent of our graduates are accepted to college...We work with largely disadvantaged and at-risk youth, and they don't have computers at home, so they come here to the library. They [the students] get support here. The librarians help them attain the online and print materials they need.

Employment

- In the study, 40 percent of the respondents (30 million people) used library computers and internet access for employment or career purposes.
- Among the employment users, 76 percent used on a library's computers or Internet connection specifically for their search for job opportunities.
- Sixty-eight percent of the users who searched for a job submitted an application online.
- Forty six percent or the employment users used library computers to work on their resumes.

- Twenty three percent of the employment users obtained job related training.

A computer user in the Oakland Public Library system summed it up this way: “You know how the economy is right now. But if you’re just out there filling out applications and walking around, you get so tired and you give up...But in the library, you can do what would take you a week to do in one day.”

Health and Wellness

- Overall, 37 percent of library computer users, an estimated 28 million people, focused on health and wellness issues, including learning about medical conditions, finding health care providers, and assessing health insurance options.
- Many of these people (83 percent) reported doing research about a disease, illness, or medical condition; 60 percent logged on to learn about diet and nutrition; and 53 percent used the library computers to learn about a medical procedure.
- Roughly half of the people who used a public library computer to find doctors or health care providers reported that they made follow-up appointments.
- Among the people who reported researching diet and nutrition issues online at the library, 83 percent decided to change their diet. Among users who searched for exercise and fitness information, 84 percent decided to change their exercise habits.

eGovernment

- For more than 26 million users, libraries serve as the neighborhood-based extension of a government agency, linking users to government officials, programs, and services.
- Among these users, 60 percent logged on to learn about laws and regulations, 58 percent reported using a library computer to download government forms, and 56 percent reported logging on to find out about a government program or service.
- Fifty-three percent of these users (over 13 million people) reported that they sought help from specific government official or agency. Many of these people found it. Approximately 83 percent of the people who looked for help from a specific government official or agency reported that they got the help they needed.

A Fayetteville Public Library staff member described the support his library provided to hurricane victims: “One story I remember after Hurricane Katrina—we’re only an eleven-hour drive north of New Orleans—the hotels were so full, people just kept coming and there was an older gentleman here. We had him on a research computer and our staff helped him fill out the FEMA paperwork.”

Community and Civic Engagement

- Many people (33 percent) used library computers to learn about politics, news, and their community. Among these users, 81 percent reported keeping up with current events, 80 percent reported learning about candidates or issues, and 25 percent reported managing a club or nonprofit organization.

A public library user in Fayetteville, AR: “I watched Obama’s inauguration here...I couldn’t go to Washington but it still felt like a historical moment watching it with the community here.”

Personal Finance

- A significant number of people (19 million or 25 percent of all public access users) logged on at their public library for commercial needs or to manage their personal finances.
- More than one quarter of these people (28 percent) reported that they did not have Internet access through other means.
- Two out of every five personal finance users (42 percent) were from low and moderate income households (at or below 200 percent of poverty).
- The majority of these users reported using library computers for online banking (62 percent) and 53 percent used the computer for making purchases online.
- Half of these personal finance users reported paying bills using library public access computers.

Recommendations

The U.S. IMPACT Study provides compelling evidence for the way in which one public library service—free computer and Internet access—helps address a wide range of needs for residents in communities large and small. This report demonstrates that libraries have been a silent partner in workforce

development, educational achievement, health information delivery, and bringing government services to citizens. It also documents the significant public benefit of investments in library technology and calls on policy makers to develop and implement coordinated strategies to more fully integrate libraries' roles in achieving positive public outcomes. The following recommendations highlight strategies that policy makers could help develop, fund, and implement to achieve positive policy outcomes. With library resources already stretched, new policies and mandates should be supported with both new funding and partnerships.

State and local government should include libraries in comprehensive broadband deployment and adoption strategies. The national broadband plan provides an important framework for communities hoping to extend broadband access to all residents. State and local broadband strategies should account for the varied ways that libraries address the technology needs of many different groups in their community, including people who may have access but are in need of the value-added resources and services that libraries provide.

Business and government agencies should engage libraries in economic and workforce development strategies. Libraries are a very effective way to reach job seekers and connect them to employment support services. Partnerships between libraries, workforce development, and small business development agencies can strengthen the impact of local economic development efforts by building broader and more seamless workforce information networks for the public.

State and local education reform initiatives should partner with and invest in public libraries to broaden educational opportunities for K-12 students and adults. Strategic partnerships between schools, nongovernmental organizations, and libraries can help build stronger educational interventions by marshalling the resources and capabilities of a variety of community learning institutions toward a common set of educational goals.

Public and private health officials and organizations should support the public library as a partner in disseminating health and wellness information and as a resource for future health communications research. The report provides evidence that many people are turning to their local library as a resource when looking for health information and for making important decisions about their own health and wellness behaviors. Libraries provide access to a health information seeking public that can be leveraged for targeted health and wellness campaigns. Hospitals, doctors, public health agencies, insurance companies, and other health care providers should work with and invest in

libraries to build a stronger health communications network in urban and rural communities across the country.

Federal, state, and local government agencies should support libraries as points of access for eGovernment services. Government agencies are moving a tremendous amount of information onto the Internet. Given the high use of public library technologies, particularly among vulnerable populations, communication strategies developed with public libraries in advance of major Internet-based initiatives could lessen the burden on local libraries and further the goals of sponsoring agencies by reaching the broadest possible audience. The reliance on the public library as an emergency backup to other government and social agencies also should be considered in distributing emergency aid.

Support technology services that build communities. Respondents of all ages reported that library technologies helped them connect with family (locally and around the globe), keep up with current events, and identify volunteer opportunities. New technology services in libraries have preserved the role of libraries as the information commons in the 21st century. Local civic and government organizations should consider ways to promote and support this vital role that libraries continue to play in the information age.

Conclusion

The wiring of public libraries has transformed one of the nation's most established community resources into a critical digital hub, where patrons can compete more effectively for jobs, improve their health, find key government services, and manage their finances. Computer and Internet access allow librarians to go beyond library stacks to connect patrons to all of the resources, services, and tools available online. In a world increasingly defined by technology, the public library is one of the widest bridges to the Internet and computers, not only for those who cannot afford their own connection, but for those who find the library is an easier, faster, friendlier, or more effective way to use these tools.

Over the years, libraries have made significant investments to keep pace with digital developments, but surging demand quickly wears out equipment, taps available bandwidth, and strains library resources. As resources and services increasingly migrate online and devour greater bandwidth, more patrons will need access to fully participate in the digital age. That means libraries will require more resources, not less, to meet this growing need.

Unfortunately, some states are now cutting library budgets, which puts quality access in jeopardy. The situation is worsening because the lingering recession

leads state and local governments to cut library funding and libraries to cut hours, services, and staff—two developments that will only lengthen the growing lines of those waiting to use library computers.

This groundbreaking research shows people of all types not only use computers and Internet lines at the public library, but they rely on this access. The findings signal this is a moment when federal, state, and local governments should invest more, not less, in the computing capacity of the nation’s libraries to help advance a wide range of policy goals.

Methodology

This study’s findings were based on nearly 50,000 completed surveys, including 3176 from a national telephone survey and 44,881 web survey responses from patrons of over 400 public libraries across the country. Another 319 interviews were conducted with users, non-users, staff, administrators, funding agencies, and other community agencies in four case study sites around the country (Baltimore, Maryland; Fayetteville, Arkansas; Marshalltown, Iowa; and Oakland, California) to provide greater depth to the findings.

In addition to demographic characteristics and general use patterns, researchers looked at seven different ways people use Internet and computer resources at libraries in their daily lives: education, employment and entrepreneurship, health and wellness, accessing government and legal services and information, participating in community life, managing household finances, and building and maintaining social connections.
