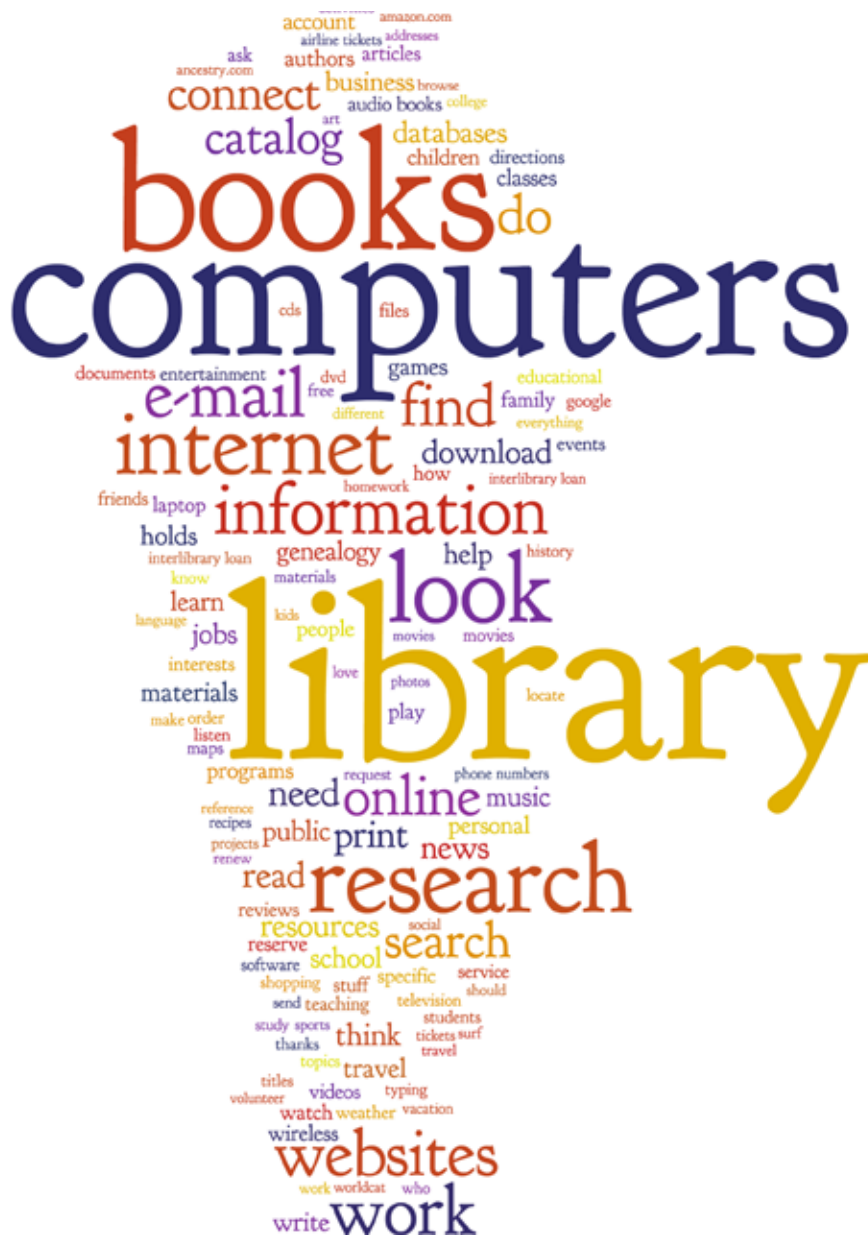


Opportunity for All

How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries



The U.S. IMPACT Study

A research initiative examining the impact of free access to computers and the Internet in public libraries.

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**This report and its appendices can be downloaded at
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Foreword

The rapid adoption of the Internet and computing technologies by all sectors of modern society has made them an indispensable part of our daily work and life. Access to these resources is taken for granted by public agencies providing services to the community, by those who conduct business and commerce, and by those who use them to stay current on public affairs and in touch with their families and friends on a daily basis. Yet not all individuals have consistent access to these resources—they may be unable to afford them, they may need basic training in how to use them, or they may be displaced from their normal access points.

Fortunately, public libraries have taken on the role as the provider of free public access to the Internet and computers for those who are not able to gain access elsewhere, for whatever reason. Whether it's a business traveler who needs to check his or her office email when out of town or a homeless person who has no other means for finding social services to meet his or her needs, all Americans can count on the public library in their community for access to the Internet and computers, supported by staff trained to help users be successful in their interactions. This access has also proven to be critical in times of disaster, where libraries may be the only access point still operating that can provide a delivery point for government and social services to those displaced.

To better understand how the provision of free access to the Internet and computers in public libraries is impacting the lives of individuals, families, and communities across the United States, the Institute of Museum and Library Services issued a request for proposals for research targeted at documenting, describing, and analyzing the use and results of this use in libraries throughout the nation. The present report outlines the first part of that research, describing the characteristics of people who use public access computers and Internet connections, the types of use they engage in, and the impact that use has on their own lives, that of their families and friends, and the communities they live in. A second report will follow that examines the effect of library characteristics and policies on public access computing use and impact, as a first step toward helping libraries understand how some of their services may be affecting the overall success of their efforts in providing public access services to their communities.

The results of this study clearly show that public libraries are a key element of America's digital infrastructure, and that large numbers of people are using libraries' public access services to meet their needs in health, education, employment, and other important areas. But it also shows that beyond the

Internet connections and computers that libraries provide to make this possible, the one-on-one help and other resources librarians, library staff, and volunteers provide to the users is an important element in the success of these services.

We are grateful to the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their support of this project, to our expert committee for their advice and counsel in shaping the research, to the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies for their assistance and enthusiasm in helping make the fieldwork possible, to the libraries across the country that donated their time and effort to help with data collection, to our research partners who helped with the design and analysis of the data, to the students who worked diligently in the field and the office, and to all the library users who took the time to complete our surveys and interviews.

We hope that this report and its forthcoming companion will be useful for libraries as an aid in informing the public of the value of their free public access services, and that funders and policy makers will find the results of interest as they consider future efforts in this area. Public libraries have become an essential part of the fabric of access to the Internet and computers in this country, and we believe the results of our research show that the impact of these services is well worth the investment of public dollars and resources to make this possible.

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As hosts of our case study visits, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Fayetteville Public Library, Oakland Public Library, and Marshalltown Public Library, as well as the Mount Vernon City Library (which served as our test site), provided unlimited access to their amazing librarians and information technology staff, board members, and patrons. We are incredibly grateful to the leadership teams and staff at each of these, and especially their directors and following key staff: Carla Hayden, Ann Smith, Pat Costello, Louise Schaper, Shawna Thorup, Carmen Martinez, Diane Satchwell, Carole Winkleblack, and Brian Soneda.

In addition to our case study libraries, we also want to express our deep appreciation to the 400 libraries and their directors and staff who made the U.S. IMPACT web survey available to patrons through their library computers and websites and for the work of the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, especially Suzanne Miller and Peggy Rudd of the Research and Statistics Committee and all the state librarians and designees who helped coordinate the web survey. Special thanks also go to the Seattle Public Library and Jennifer Giltrop for allowing us to conduct survey pretesting with their patrons and to Michael Shapiro and Jennifer Peterson from WebJunction who helped us communicate with the participating libraries. The web survey would not have been possible without the creativity and resourcefulness of the University of

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Executive Summary

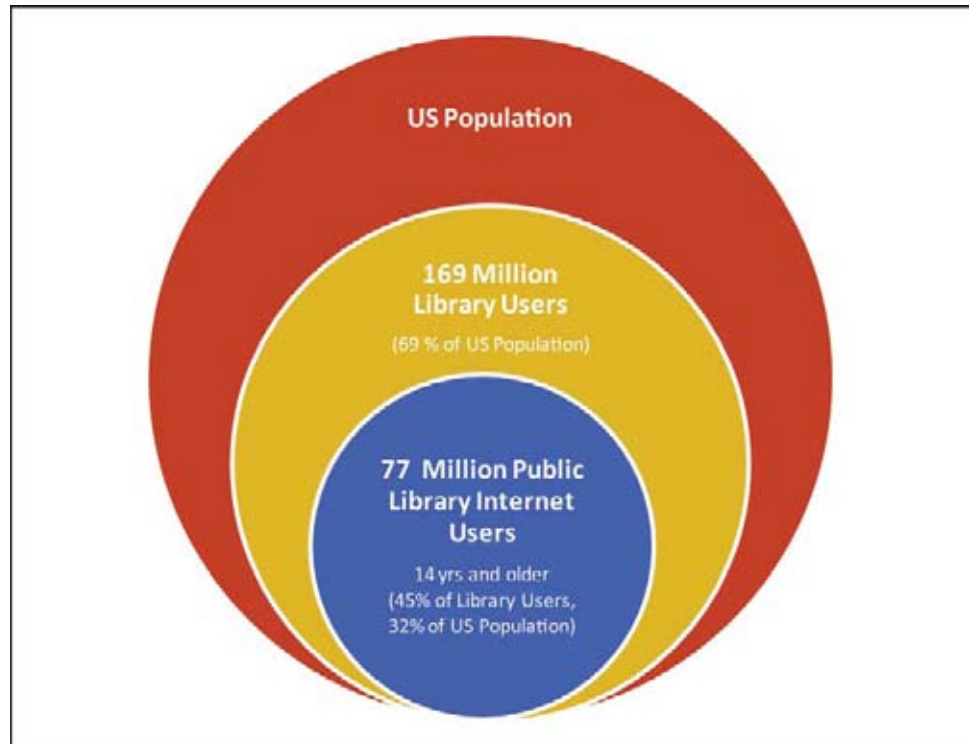
Over the past decade and a half, free access to computers and the Internet in U.S. public libraries evolved from a rare commodity into a core service. Now, people from all walks of life rely on this service every day to look for jobs, find health care, and read the latest news. As the nation struggled 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 eBusinesses 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.

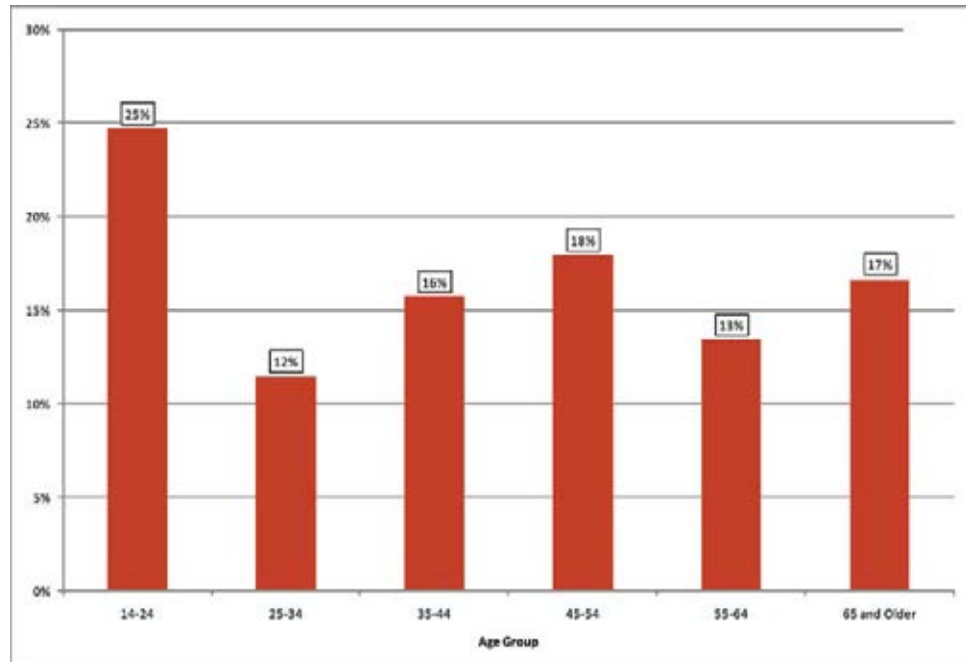
Although many different types of residents use public library computer and Internet services, libraries appear to be particularly effective in addressing the needs of families who still lack access elsewhere. But for libraries, millions of Americans would not have reliable Internet access in a digital 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

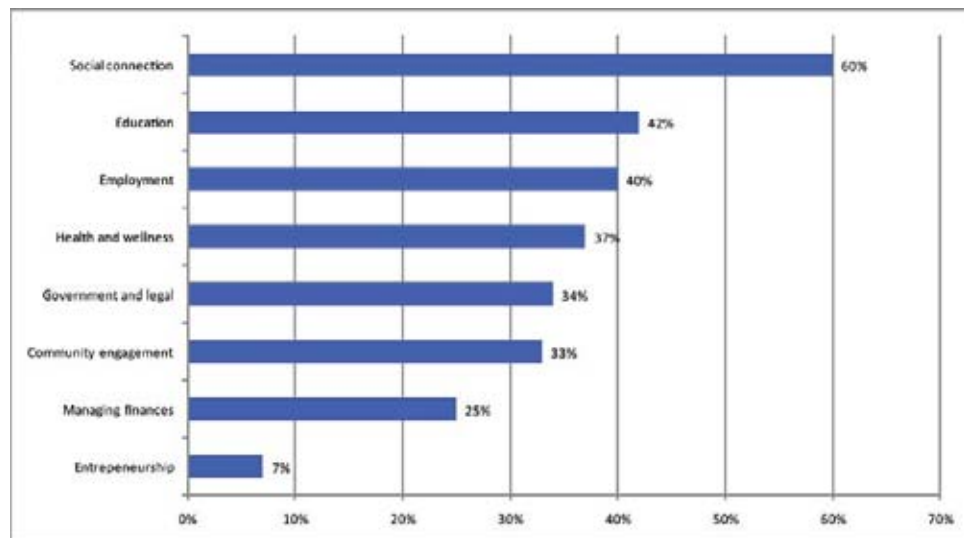
computers received help from library staff or volunteers on computer or wireless network issues.

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 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.

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