Public library engagement in the United States

An overview of three years of research into Americans’ relationships with public libraries in the digital age

Pew Research Center’s Internet Project

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About our libraries research

Three phases:

I. State of reading
II. Library services
III. Typology

Three-year grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to study the changing role of public libraries in the digital age
About our libraries research

Nationally representative telephone surveys

Landlines and cell phones

English and Spanish

Americans ages 16 and older

libraries.pewinternet.org
Overview

• Relationships to libraries are part of Americans’ broader resource networks
• Once libraries are a part of their networks, services are especially important to low-income households
• Books, browsing, and librarians are still central to how people use libraries and what they expect from them.
• However, technology (computers, internet) is also a common use and a high priority.
• Public libraries are also used and viewed as important community spaces.
Americans’ reading habits


Americans’ reading habits

Print is still the anchor of Americans’ reading habits, but e-reading is growing more popular.

• 76% of adults read a book in some format over the previous year.
  • The typical American read five books in the last 12 months (median)

• 28% of Americans read an e-book in the previous year.
Most adults read a book in the past year. Print remains most popular, but e-reading is on the rise.

Among American adults 18 and older, the % who read at least one book (in total, in print, or as an e-book) in the past year (Source). Total includes audiobooks (not shown).
Put another way: Almost half of readers under 30 read an e-book in the past year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Dec 2011</th>
<th>Nov 2012</th>
<th>Jan 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among those in each age group who read at least one book in the past year, the % who read an e-book during that time (Source).
Half of American adults now own either a tablet or an e-reader

Among American adults 18 and older (Source).
As tablet ownership grows, more Americans use them for e-books.

Among all e-book readers ages 18 and older, the % who read e-books on each device (Source).
Which is better for these purposes, a printed book or an e-book?

Among those 16+ who read both a print book & an e-book in the past year (2011)

- Reading with a child: 81% print, 9% e-books
- Sharing with others: 69% print, 25% e-books
- Reading in bed: 43% print, 45% e-books
- Having a wide selection: 35% print, 53% e-books
- Reading while traveling: 73% print, 19% e-books
- Get books quickly: 83% print, 13% e-books

Source: Pew Internet December 2011 survey. libraries.pewinternet.org
How Americans use public libraries

Report: Library Services in the Digital Age (2013)


Americans and public libraries

• 54% of Americans used a public library in the past year
  • 48% visited in person
  • 30% used a library website
• 72% of Americans live in a “library household”

• 91% of Americans say libraries are important to their community as a whole; 76% say libraries are important to them and their family

• Relationships to libraries are part of Americans’ broader resource networks
If your local public library closed, what impact would that have?

Impact on you and your family
- Major impact: 29
- Minor impact: 38
- No impact: 32

Impact on your community
- Major impact: 63
- Minor impact: 27
- No impact: 7

Among American adults 16 and older (Source).
Library services that are “very important”
Among Americans who have ever used a public library or had a household member use one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books and media</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a quiet, safe place</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research resources</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for youth</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian assistance</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet, computers, printers</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help finding, applying for job</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help applying for gov't services</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for adults</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adults living in lower-income households are more likely to say public library services are very important to them and their families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household income</th>
<th>Books and media</th>
<th>Quiet spaces</th>
<th>Research resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30,000</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least $75,000</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth programs</th>
<th>Librarian assistance</th>
<th>Internet/computers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30,000</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least $75,000</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job search help</th>
<th>Gov’t services help</th>
<th>Programs for adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30,000</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least $75,000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among American adults 16 and older (Source).
Books & browsing still central

Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities:

- Borrow books: 73%
- Browse the stacks: 73%
- Research topics of interest: 54%
- Get help from a librarian: 50%
- Read magazines/newspapers: 31%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+.
What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer (source)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Librarians to help people find info</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrowing books</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free access to computers/internet</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet study spaces</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for children &amp; teens</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research resources like databases</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job/career resources</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free events/activities</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free public meeting spaces</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Our customers are still using the library but in different ways. They browse our catalog online, place reserves on the items they want, then pick them up at their location of choice... Fewer browse the collection in person.”

– Library staff member
Technology & media use at the library

Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities

- Use a research database: 46%
- Borrow a DVD: 40%
- Use computer or internet: 26%
- Borrow an audio book: 17%
- Borrow a music CD: 16%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+.
E-reading is on the rise
Borrowing is just getting started

28% of Americans read an e-book in the past year, up from 16% in 2011

5% of recent library users have borrowed an e-book in past year, as of late 2012
“We spend a significant part of our day explaining how to get library books onto e-book readers.”

– Library staff member
62% of Americans say they do not know if their library lends out e-books.

This includes 58% of library card holders.

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey.
What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer (source)

- Librarians to help people find info: 80% very important, 16% somewhat important
- Borrowing books: 80% very important, 15% somewhat important
- Free access to computers/internet: 77% very important, 18% somewhat important
- Quiet study spaces: 76% very important, 19% somewhat important
- Programs for children & teens: 74% very important, 21% somewhat important
- Research resources like databases: 73% very important, 20% somewhat important
- Job/career resources: 67% very important, 22% somewhat important
- Free events/activities: 63% very important, 30% somewhat important
- Free public meeting spaces: 49% very important, 36% somewhat important
Libraries as community spaces

Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities

- Sit, read, and study, etc: 49%
- Event for children/teens: 41%
- Attend a meeting of a group: 23%
- Attend a class/lecture for adults: 21%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+. 
What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer (source)

- Librarians to help people find info: 80% very important, 16% somewhat important
- Borrowing books: 80% very important, 15% somewhat important
- Free access to computers/internet: 77% very important, 18% somewhat important
- Quiet study spaces: 76% very important, 19% somewhat important
- Programs for children & teens: 74% very important, 21% somewhat important
- Research resources like databases: 73% very important, 20% somewhat important
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- Free events/activities: 63% very important, 30% somewhat important
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What Americans want from libraries

Report: Library Services in the Digital Age (2013)
### How likely would you be to use...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
<th>Somewhat likely</th>
<th>Not too likely or not at all likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Ask a librarian&quot; online service</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library app</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech try-out program</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell GPS app</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library kiosks in community</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized accounts</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes on borrowing e-books</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-loaded e-readers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital media lab</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes on e-readers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not too likely or not at all likely
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestion</th>
<th>Should definitely do</th>
<th>Should maybe do</th>
<th>Should definitely not do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Move stacks out of public locations</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make MOST services automated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move MOST library services online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help users digitize own materials</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interactive learning experiences</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer more e-books</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate spaces for different services</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have more comfortable spaces</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free literacy programs</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate more with schools</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should definitely do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should maybe do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should definitely not do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do Americans want from libraries?

More activities, more separate spaces

...and print books, quiet

Convenience & tech (apps, e-books, kiosks)

... and closer relationships with librarians
The Library Engagement Typology

Report: “From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers–and beyond”

Quiz: “What kind of library users are you?”
Overview (Full report)

• Relationships to libraries are part of Americans’ broader resource networks
• Once libraries are a part of their networks, services are especially important to low-income households
• Books, browsing, and librarians are still central to how people use libraries and what they expect from them.
• However, technology (computers, internet) is also a common use and a high priority.
• Public libraries are also used and viewed as important community spaces.
Typology groups by level of library engagement

Among all Americans ages 16+ who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library

- Library Lovers: 10%
- Info Omnivores: 20%
- Solid Center: 30%
- Distant Admirers: 10%
- Off the Grid: 4%
- Rooted & Roadblocked: 7%
- Young & Restless: 7%
- Not for Me: 4%
- Print Traditionalists: 9%

Level of engagement with public libraries:

- High Engagement (30%)
- Medium Engagement (39%)
- Low Engagement (17%)
- No personal library use (14%)

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.
Urban typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in urban areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library.

Level of engagement with public libraries:

- High Engagement (30%)
- Medium Engagement (39%)
- Low Engagement (17%)
- No personal library use (14%)

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.
Suburban typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in suburban areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library

- High Engagement (30%)
- Medium Engagement (39%)
- Low Engagement (17%)
- No personal library use (14%)

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.
Rural typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in rural areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library

- Library Lovers: 8%
- Info Omnivores: 12%
- Solid Center: 27%
- Print Traditionalists: 21%
- Distant Admirers: 12%
- Rooted & Roadblocked: 7%
- Young & Restless: 4%
- Not for Me: 5%
- Off the Grid: 6%

Level of engagement with public libraries:

- High Engagement (30%)
- Medium Engagement (39%)
- Low Engagement (17%)
- No personal library use (14%)

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.
Public library engagement by community type

- Library Lovers
- Information Omnivores
- Solid Center
- Print Traditionalists
- Not for Me
- Young & Restless
- Rooted & Roadblocked
- Distant Admirers
- Off the Grid

Urban:
- Library Lovers: 11%
- Information Omnivores: 24%
- Solid Center: 30%
- Print Traditionalists: 4%
- Not for Me: 4%
- Young & Restless: 4%
- Rooted & Roadblocked: 9%
- Distant Admirers: 5%
- Off the Grid: 10%

Suburban:
- Library Lovers: 10%
- Information Omnivores: 21%
- Solid Center: 32%
- Print Traditionalists: 8%
- Not for Me: 8%
- Young & Restless: 4%
- Rooted & Roadblocked: 6%
- Distant Admirers: 7%
- Off the Grid: 10%

Rural:
- Library Lovers: 8%
- Information Omnivores: 12%
- Solid Center: 27%
- Print Traditionalists: 21%
- Not for Me: 5%
- Young & Restless: 4%
- Rooted & Roadblocked: 7%
- Distant Admirers: 12%
- Off the Grid: 6%
Public library engagement by community type

Level of engagement with public libraries:

- **High Engagement**
  - Urban: 11%
  - Suburban: 10%
  - Rural: 8%

- **Medium Engagement**
  - Urban: 24%
  - Suburban: 21%
  - Rural: 12%

- **Low Engagement**
  - Urban: 30%
  - Suburban: 32%
  - Rural: 27%

- **No personal library use**
  - Urban: 4%
  - Suburban: 8%
  - Rural: 21%
What kind of library use are you?

Take the quiz