

DECEMBER 11, 2013

# How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities

## Summary of Findings

Americans strongly value the role of public libraries in their communities, both for providing access to materials and resources and for promoting literacy and improving the overall quality of life. Most Americans say they have only had positive experiences at public libraries, and value a range of library resources and services.

## The importance of public libraries to their communities

 If your library closed, what impact would that have?

Some 90% of Americans ages 16 and older said that the closing of their local public library would have an impact on their community, with 63% saying it would have a “major” impact. Asked about the personal impact of a public library closing, two-thirds (67%) of Americans said it would affect them and their families, including 29% who said it would have a major impact.

Moreover, the vast majority of Americans ages 16 and older say that public libraries play an important role in their communities:

- 95% of Americans ages 16 and older agree that the materials and resources available at public libraries play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed;
- 95% say that public libraries are important because they promote literacy and a love of reading;
- 94% say that having a public library improves the quality of life in a community;
- 81% say that public libraries provide many services people would have a hard time finding elsewhere.

Meanwhile, while most Americans feel that libraries have done a good job embracing new technology, they are split on whether public libraries are as essential as they were in the past for finding information:

- Just 34% of Americans ages 16 and older say that public libraries have not done a good job keeping up with new technologies, while 55% disagree.
- 52% of Americans say that people do not need public libraries as much as they used to because they can find most information on their own, while 46% disagreed.

### **Though many library services are seen as important, there are varying levels of enthusiasm for different services**

Some 91% of Americans say they have had some exposure to libraries in the past, and we asked these respondents a series of questions about the importance of various library services to them and their families. <sup>1</sup>

 How important are these library services to you and your family?

Americans strongly value library services such as access to books and media; having a quiet, safe place to spend time, read, or study; and having librarians to help people find information. Other services, such as assistance finding and applying for jobs, are more important to particular groups, including those with lower levels of education or household income.


Women, African-Americans and Hispanics, adults who live in lower-income households, and adults with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely than other groups to declare all the library services we asked about “very important.” Adults ages 30-64 are also more likely than younger or older respondents to say many of the services are “very important,” as are parents with minor children.

Libraries are also particularly valued by those who are unemployed, retired, or searching for a job, as well as those living with a disability and internet users who lack home internet access:

- 56% of internet users without home access say public libraries’ basic technological resources (such as computers, internet, and printers) are “very important” to them and their family, compared with 33% of all respondents.

- 49% of unemployed and retired respondents say they librarian assistance in finding information to be “very important,” compared with 41% of employed respondents.
- 47% of job seekers say help finding or applying for a job is “very important” to them and their families.
- 40% of those living with a disability say help applying for government services is “very important,” compared with 27% of those without a disability.

## **Most Americans know where their local library is, but many are unfamiliar with all the services they offer.**

 How well informed do you feel about the different services your public library offers?

Libraries are well known in their communities and they are usually easy to get to and relatively easy to navigate. Asked about their ability to access public libraries and public library websites:

- 91% of Americans say they know where the closest public library is to where they currently live; among these respondents, most said the closest public library is five miles or less away from their home.
- 93% of Americans say that it would be easy to visit a public library in person if they wanted to, with 62% saying it would be “very easy.”
- Similarly, 82% of Americans overall say it would be easy to use their local public library’s website, with 47% saying it would be “very easy.”
- 91% of Americans who have ever used a public library say it is not difficult to find what they’re looking for, including 35% who say it is “very easy.”

Despite the fact that libraries are easily available to most, there are large numbers of Americans who say they are not sure about all the services libraries offer. Echoing the findings of our 2012 survey, 23% of those who have ever used a public library said they feel like they know all or most of the service and programs their library offers, while a plurality (47%) said that they know some of what it offers. About one in five (20%) say they don’t know very much about what is offered, and 10% say they know “nothing at all.”

## **54% of Americans have used a public library in the past 12 months, and 72% live in a “library household”**

Over half (54%) of Americans ages 16 and older have used a public library in some way in the past 12 months, whether by visiting in person or using a public library website:

- 81% of Americans ages 16 and older have visited a public library or bookmobile at one point or another in their lives; 48% of Americans have done so in the past 12 months, down from 53% in 2012.
- 44% of those ages 16 and older have visited a public library website; 30% of Americans have done so in the past 12 months, up from 25% in 2012.

Additionally, among parents with minor children living at home, 70% say that a child in the house has visited a public library or bookmobile in the past 12 months.

Taken together, this means that 72% of all Americans ages 16 and older have either used a public library in the past 12 months or live in a household where another family member or a child is an active recent user of the library.

## **Most Americans who have ever used a public library have had positive experiences**

Among all Americans who have ever used a public library:

- 94% said that based on their own experiences, they would say that “public libraries are welcoming, friendly place.”
- 91% said that they personally have never had a negative experience using a public library, either in person or online.
- 67% said that the public library nearest to where they live could be described as a “nice, pleasant space to be”; another 22% say it’s an “okay space, but could use some improvements.”

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Next: About this Report

1. This includes the 86% of Americans ages 16 and older who have ever visited a library or used a library website, and the 54% of Americans who say other members of their household are library users. ↩



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