

Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries

As the nation struggled through a historic recession, millions of people in the United States visited a public library to use computer and Internet services. A new groundbreaking study¹ (to be released March 25, 2010) reveals that people use this service to perform life-changing and life-enhancing tasks in the areas of education; employment and entrepreneurship; health and wellness; E-government and legal services; civic engagement; household finances; and communication.

Nearly one-third of Americans age 14 or older—roughly 77 million people—used a public library computer or wireless network to access the Internet in the last year.

- Teenagers were the most active users, with half of the nation's 14- to 18-year-olds reporting they used a library computer during the last year and one quarter saying they used one every week.

Libraries offer a technological lifeline to families who lack access.

- Forty percent of the users below the Federal poverty line reported that the public library was their sole source of access to computers and the Internet.

People gain unique value from accessing the Internet at local libraries.

- More than three-quarters of those who accessed the Internet at a public library had access at home, work, or elsewhere citing the need for greater bandwidth, assistance from a librarian or the desire to connect in the library setting.
- Regardless of income, patrons relied on library computers to find work, apply to college, secure government benefits, and learn about critical medical treatments.

Library computers link people to their families, civic organizations, and government and help local residents solve problems for themselves and others in their community.

Major Uses for Library Computers

Employment: 40% of the library computer users (an estimated 30 million people) used library resources to help address career and employment needs in the last 12 months.

- Among these users, 76% reported they searched for jobs on-line.
- Among job seekers, 68% went on to apply for a job or submit a resume.
- Twenty three percent used library computers to receive job-related training.

Education: 42% (32.5 million people) used library resources to help them with their education and training needs in the last 12 months.

- Among these users 37% (an estimated 12 million youth and adults) used their local library computer to do homework for a class.
- One in three used library computers to learn about college degree or certificate programs.
- Twenty-four percent used the computers for online classes or assignments.

Health and Wellness: 28 million people (37% of library computer users) made use of technology at their local libraries to access health and wellness information in the last 12 months.

- The vast majority of these users (83%) logged on to learn about a disease, illness, or medical condition.
- Sixty percent used the library to learn about diet and nutrition.
- More than one third of the users (37%) accessed these computers to find information about a doctor or health care provider.

- Thirty-four percent used library computers to get government or legal information or to access government services.
- 60 percent of users—46.3 million people—used a library’s computer resources for social connections or entertainment. Of these users, three-quarters communicated with family and friends in their local communities, across the nation, and even internationally.
- Two thirds of library computer users (63%) reported using these services to help others in their community.

Recommendations for Smart Investments

Public and private investments in library technology have made an extraordinary difference. While this study demonstrates that library technology creates opportunity for millions, it also highlights what is at risk if future public and private investment doesn’t keep pace with demand. Cuts in library service will certainly have the unintended consequence of making it more difficult for Americans to find work, get an education, and make good decisions about health. During difficult economic times, it is important to leverage existing resources. The recommendations below highlight strategies for policy makers to make smart investments in libraries and library technology:

- **Federal, state, and local government should include libraries in comprehensive broadband deployment and adoption strategies.** The National Broadband Plan will provide an important framework for achieving broadband capability for the U.S. public. State and local broadband strategies should account for the varied ways that libraries promote digital literacy and inclusion in their communities.
- **Business and government agencies should engage libraries in economic and workforce development strategies.** Libraries are an effective way to reach job seekers and connect them to employment support services. Partnerships among libraries and workforce and small business development agencies can broaden the impact of local economic development efforts.

- **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, NGOs, and libraries can extend learning opportunities for students of all ages and engage communities as partners in student success.
- **Public and private health officials should support and partner with public libraries to access a broader pool of active health information seekers and for targeted health communications research.** Not only are there large numbers of health information seekers in local libraries, but they also appear to be motivated for change. A stunning 84 percent of users who searched for fitness information decided to change their exercise habits; 83% of users who researched nutrition information reported changing their diets. Hospitals, doctors, public health agencies, insurance companies, and other health care providers should work with and invest in libraries to help people find health information and adopt healthy lifestyles.
- **Federal, state, and local government agencies should support libraries as points of access for government services.** Libraries are at the crossroads between citizens and government services. To be effective, public service outreach strategies must take into account the library as a partner and a conduit for service delivery, especially for reaching vulnerable populations.

1 This study was conducted by the University of Washington and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Findings were based on nearly 50,000 completed surveys, including 3,176 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. **For more information, contact Jeannine Mjoseth, mjoseth@imls.gov.**