

New data on U.S. libraries shows almost two billion served

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

CHICAGO - Ten years after some experts predicted the demise of the nation's system of libraries as a result of the Internet explosion, the most current national data on library use shows that the exact opposite has happened. Data released today by the American Library Association (ALA) indicates that the number of visits to public libraries in the United States increased 61 percent between 1994 and 2004.

According to the 2007 State of America's Libraries report, there were nearly two billion visits to U.S. libraries in fiscal year 2004. The study was released today by the ALA as the nation begins its observance of National Library Week, April 15-21. In the case of academic libraries, the number of visits exceeded more than one billion for the first time in 2004, up more than 14 percent in just the previous two years.

"Far from hurting American libraries, the Internet has actually helped to spur more people to use their local libraries because it has increased our hunger for knowledge and information," said Loriene Roy, president-elect of the American Library Association. According the ALA report, virtually every library in the United States -- 99 percent -- provides free public computer access to the Internet, a four-fold increase in the percentage of libraries providing such free access over the last decade. By comparison, Roy pointed to another study released in March showing that only 69 percent of U.S. households have Internet access.

But unlike the Internet, particularly when accessed at home, Roy said libraries still serve a unique function in providing those who seek knowledge and information with guidance from trained and educated professionals.

Even as libraries continue to evolve their services in response to changing needs and technologies, the report shows that people continue to go to their public library to read or check out a book in record numbers. Overall circulation at public libraries in the U.S. rose by 28 percent during the decade, partly driven by significant growth in circulation of children's materials, which grew by 44 percent. Attendance in library programs for children was also up 42 percent for this same period.

The 2007 State of America's Libraries reports that while use of libraries continues to increase and while the general public supports strong funding for libraries, many school library media centers are experiencing

budget cuts resulting in staffing reductions, shortened hours, and even closures. The new federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act are cited most frequently as the reasons for these funding cuts.

"Our libraries are investments in our communities and in our future, with an incredibly high return on each dollar spent," said the ALA's Roy.

Roy pointed to the report's findings from studies in Florida and Ohio that provide a compelling case for the return on public investment in libraries. Every dollar of public support spent on Florida's public libraries produced an increase of \$9.08 in gross regional product and an increase of \$12.66 in total state wages. A similar study of nine public library systems in southwestern Ohio reported an annual economic impact nearly four times the amount invested

in their operations. Other data in the report describes how public libraries build a community's capacity for economic activity and resiliency.

The report also highlights the library community's continued work in defense of the First Amendment against intrusive legislation, including the USA Patriot Act, and to refute challenges that would restrict the free flow of information and ideas to all adults and children.

The 2007 State of America's Libraries also follows up on last year's report, which described the library community's response to Hurricane Katrina. Since its creation, the ALA's Hurricane Katrina Library Relief Fund has raised more than \$500,000 in donations, which has been distributed to libraries by ALA chapters in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. By August 2006, 62 percent of the libraries in metropolitan New Orleans that were open before Katrina had reopened their doors.