

FAST FACTS

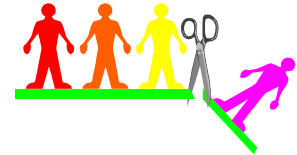
Recent Statistics from The Library Research Service

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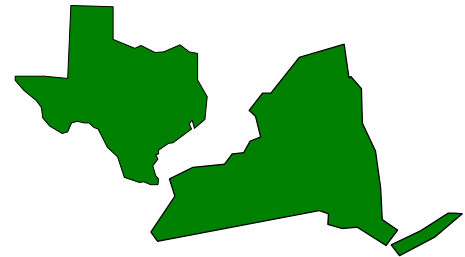
Almost 7 Million Americans “Unserved” by Public Libraries

According to 1996 data from the National Center for Education Statistics (with some corrections from a few state library agencies), 6,908,844 Americans in 24 states live beyond the legal service area of any public library—roughly the equivalent of the entire Washington, DC, or San Francisco metropolitan area. These individuals are “unserved,” as there is no public library legally responsible for meeting their needs for reading matter, information, and access to the “information superhighway.” Reasons for this situation, include, but are not limited to, the following:



- In many U.S. counties, there are only municipal libraries, and no provision is made for countywide service that covers residents of unincorporated areas.
- Some units of government (e.g., counties, cities, towns, townships) that are not part of larger units of service (e.g., library districts, county library systems) cannot afford to support libraries.
- A few local governments have even closed public libraries due to fiscal problems.
- Beyond such circumstances, which explain the actual absence of any public library service, some public libraries are so inadequate in terms of local support, staffing, hours of service, or the like, that they are not recognized by the state library agency as a public library.

The accompanying table reports, for 1996, the state population estimate, the unduplicated total population of legal service areas (i.e., the population living within library service areas—excluding overlaps), the difference between those two figures, and that difference both as a percent of the state population estimate, and as a percent of the national difference.

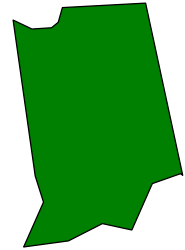


Highlights:

- Two states, Texas and New York, account for 40 percent of “unserved” Americans. Each state reports over 1.3 million “unserved” residents.
- Six states—South Dakota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Maine, Idaho, and North Dakota—report between 18 and 30 percent of their state populations as “unserved”. At the extremes of this group, three out of 10 South Dakotans and one out of five North Dakotans live outside public library service areas.

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- Seven states—Indiana, Vermont, Texas, Missouri, New York, Alabama, and Oregon—report between five and ten percent of their state populations as “unserved”. At the extremes of this group, about one of every ten Indianans and about one of every 17 Oregonians live outside public library service areas.
- Another seven states—Washington, Florida, Pennsylvania, Colorado, New Jersey, Kentucky, and California—report between one and five percent of their state populations as “unserved”. At the extremes of this group, one of every 25 Washingtonians and one of every 100 Californians live outside public library service areas.
- Four states—Virginia, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Kansas—report negligible “unserved” populations—less than one percent of each state’s population.
- Typically, among states with “unserved” populations, the number of “unserved” individuals ranges between 100,000 and 300,000. (The median is about 200,000.) Such figures approximate the populations of metropolitan areas, such as Boulder, CO; Galveston, TX; Manchester, NH; Racine, WI; and Santa Cruz, CA

The good news is:

- The remaining 27 states report no “unserved” populations.
- In many of the states that reported “unserved” populations, there are statewide reciprocal borrowing programs (e.g., the Colorado Library Card) as well as other formal and informal arrangements that provide some kind of access to library services to the “unserved.”

Still, these findings should serve as a wake-up call to those who erroneously believe that the now-defunct Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) brought all Americans into the public library “fold.” While an even greater number of Americans are “underserved” by public libraries that lack adequate resources, the “unserved” are still with us. Such individuals should be counted among the many eligible to be labeled under the new Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) as “persons who have difficulty using libraries.”

