

FAST FACTS

Recent Statistics from The Library Research Service

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Better-Funded Public Libraries Provide More Service to Individual Users

As for all tax-supported enterprises, a perennial issue for public libraries is the relative merit of smaller, lower-budget operations and larger, higher-budget ones. The former claim to be able to provide more personalized service, because they are closer to their clients. The latter claim to create "economies of scale" that enable them to provide more, cheaper services. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that the latter argument has some validity.

On the three major output statistics reported by the 8,948 U.S. public libraries for 1996—library visits, circulation, and reference questions—larger, better funded libraries excel over smaller, poorer ones. (See Table 1 below and the Charts 1, 2, and 3 on the next page.)

Table 1 ■ Average Per Capita Service Transactions of U.S. Public Libraries by Total Operating Expenditures, 1996

Total operating expenditures	Visits per capita	Circulation per capita	Reference per capita
Less than \$50,000	3.6	6.8	.54
\$50,000-99,999	4.3	7.9	.64
\$100,000-249,999	4.4	8.1	.69
\$250,000-499,999	4.6	8.2	.72
\$500,000-999,999	5.1	8.5	.79
\$1,000,000 or more	5.1	8.9	1.40

Highlights

- Compared with lowest funded public libraries, highest funded ...
 - handle almost three times as many reference questions per capita,
 - receive almost half again as many visits per capita, and
 - generate almost a third higher circulation per capita.
- Within peer population groups, higher funded public libraries consistently "out-produce" lower funded ones.



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Chart 1
Visits per capita

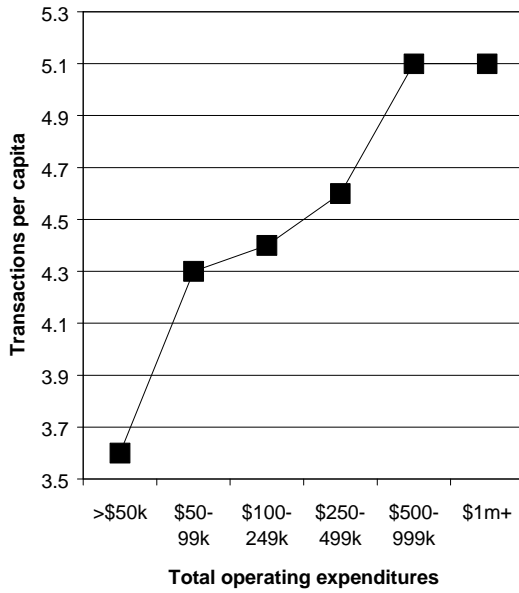


Chart 2
Circulation per capita

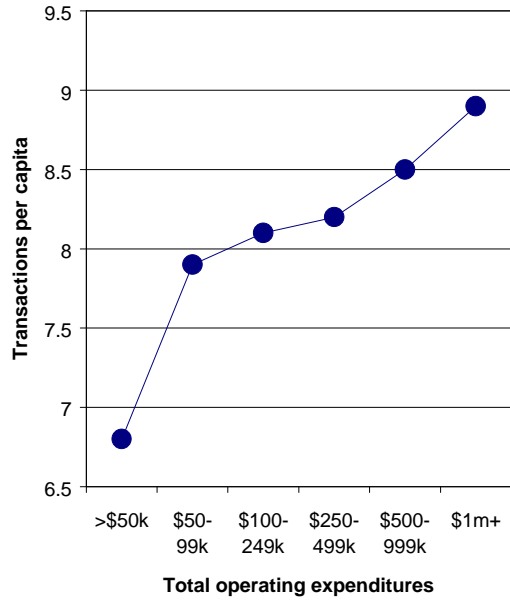
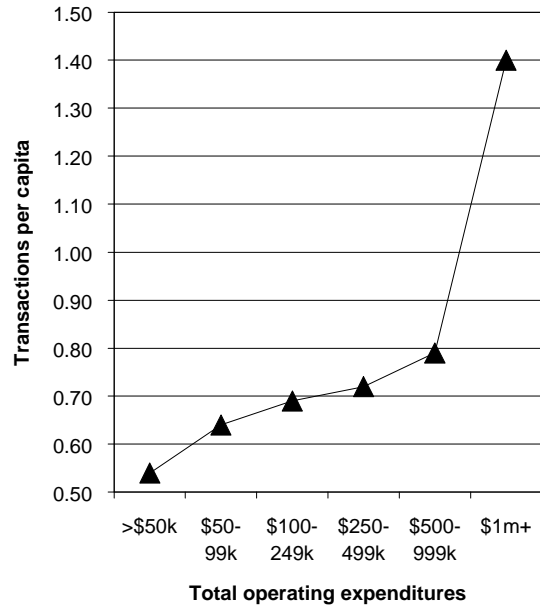


Chart 3
Reference per capita





The dramatic jumps on each of the charted statistics inspire some speculation: Both visits per capita and circulation per capita rise sharply once a public library's expenditures exceed \$50,000. (See Charts 1 and 2.) Why? Perhaps, because, until a smaller library's expenditures pass that minimal threshold, it must choose between

having the staff required to keep the library open to be visited and having a collection budget with which to purchase in-demand circulating materials. Once a larger library's expenditures top a million dollars, there is a sharp increase in reference questions per capita. (See Chart 3.) Why? Perhaps, because of the huge ongoing costs involved in maintaining both a large staff dedicated exclusively to reference service and a substantial reference collection (including both print and electronic resources).

What is the practical utility of these general findings about the relationship between spending levels and service outputs? Certainly, it is impossible for a particular library to move from the bottom to the top of the national funding spectrum. One might wonder if the patterns so apparent when examining the nation's public libraries as a whole are equally apparent within more comparable groups of libraries. Following are the results of this analysis for the smallest and largest groups of libraries—i.e., those serving populations of less than 1,000 and those serving populations of 100,000 or more. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

Among 973 public libraries serving populations of less than 1,000, the per capita outputs grow exponentially with increases in expenditures:

Table 2 ■ Average Per Capita Service Transactions of U.S. Public Libraries Serving Populations of Less Than 1,000 by Total Operating Expenditures, 1996

Total operating expenditures	Visits per capita	Circulation per capita	Reference per capita
Less than \$50,000	5.3	9.8	.72
\$50,000-99,999	13.1	23.2	1.36
\$100,000-249,999	46.5	49.4	3.68

Compared with small libraries that spend less than \$50,000 annually, those that spend \$100,000 or more a year ...

- receive almost ten times as many visits per capita,
- generate almost five times as much circulation per capita, and
- answer more than five times as many reference questions per capita.

Table 3 ■ Average Per Capita Service Transactions of U.S. Public Libraries Serving Populations of 100,000 or More by Total Operating Expenditures, 1996

Total operating expenditures	Visits per capita	Circulation per capita	Reference per capita
\$250,000-499,999	.13	.59	.02
\$500,000-999,999	1.70	2.95	.33
\$1,000,000 or more	3.33	6.39	1.19

Among the 475 public libraries serving populations of 100,000 or more outputs increase even more sharply with expenditures.

Compared with large libraries that spend less than half a million dollars annually, those that spent a million dollars or more a year ...

- receive more than 25 times as many visits per capita,
- generate more than 10 times as much circulation per capita, and
- answer almost 60 times as many reference questions per capita.

Colorado Postscript

It is impossible to replicate this analysis for Colorado in a meaningful way, because there are only 114 public library jurisdictions in the state and so few of them fall in some of the six ranges of total operating expenditures.

A simplified version of the national analysis is

possible, however, if the state's public libraries are divided into two groups, those that spend \$100,000 or more and those that spend less than \$100,000*. (See Table 4.) Higher spending libraries out-produce lower spending ones on three types of per capita usage statistics—visits, circulation, and reference questions. Similar findings result if the 25 top spending libraries are compared with the 25 lowest spending libraries. (See Table 5.)

* NOTE: That amount not only separates the state's libraries into two almost equal size groups, but approximates the costs of a minimal operation (one full-time librarian with a master's degree from an ALA-accredited program, one full-time support staff, a modest budget for print and non-print materials, and a technology budget big enough to support at least one Internet-accessible terminal).

Table 4 ■ Average Per Capita Service Transactions of Colorado Public Libraries by Total Operating Expenditures, 1997

Total operating expenditures	Visits per capita	Circulation per capita	Reference per capita
Less than \$100,000	5.4	7.4	.75
\$100,000 or more	6.6	8.3	.95

Table 5 ■ Average Per Capita Service Transactions of 25 Top and 25 Lowest Spending Colorado Public Libraries, 1997

Total operating expenditures	Visits per capita	Circulation per capita	Reference per capita
25 lowest spending	4.1	5.2	.60
25 top spending	6.6	8.9	1.20

For a link to the National Center for Education Statistics web site and the data analyzed here—as well as data on Colorado and other states—visit <http://www.lrs.org>.