

FAST FACTS

*Recent Statistics from the
Library Research Service*

Library Districts Are Best-Funded Type of Public Libraries

In 1996, there were 8,950 public library jurisdictions in the United States. The five most common types are city, county, non-profit, multi-jurisdictional, and special district. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1 – U.S. Public Libraries by
Type of Legal Basis, FY 1996**

Type of legal basis	Number	Percent
City	4,800	53.6%
County	1,067	11.9%
Non-profit	955	10.7%
Special District	717	8.0%
Multi-jurisdictional	511	5.7%
Various other types	900	10.1%
Total	8,950	100.0%

As library managers and decision-makers struggle to make ends meet as well as fulfill the needs of their customers, many wonder: On the average, which of these public library types is the best funded?

This question is not easy to address, because of the idiosyncrasies of public library financing and statistics about it.

A Fair Comparison?

City, county, and multi-jurisdictional (usually city-county) libraries often do not have to pay all of their operational costs from their own budgets. Such costs might include: utilities, telecommunications, security, and office furniture, equipment, and supplies. Often, for example, a small city library may share a building with other government agencies, and, therefore, does not receive separate bills for some of these costs. Usually, however, library districts (i.e., special districts) do have to pay such costs, because they are autonomous governmental units and are more likely to occupy their own buildings. For these reasons, comparing different types of public libraries based on "total operating expenditures" may not be fair. As just described, some libraries' budgets may have to cover more than others.

CONTACT ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Keith Curry Lance – Director
Library Research Service
201 East Colfax Avenue, Suite 309
Denver, Colorado 80203-1799
Tel.: 303.866.6737
Fax: 303.866.6940
E-mail: lance_k@cde.state.co.us
Web site: www.lrs.org

Reality Check Needed

So, how can the expenditures of different types of libraries be compared fairly?

For this analysis, three statistics were averaged by legal basis type: total operating expenditures per capita, staff expenditures per capita (salaries and benefits), and collection expenditures per capita. The latter two statistics serve as a check on the validity of the first, as those categories are relatively comparable across types. (Comparisons shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4 below.)

Special district libraries are the best-funded type at almost \$25 per capita. (See Table 2.) Non-profit libraries have the second-highest average for per capita spending at just over \$21 dollars. City and county libraries follow at almost \$20 and just over \$16 dollars per capita, respectively.

Table 2 – Average Total Operating Expenditures per Capita for U.S. Public Libraries by Type of Legal Basis, FY 1996

Type of legal basis	Number	Total operating expenditures per capita
City	4,800	\$19.48
County	1,067	\$16.08
Non-profit	955	\$21.44
Special District	717	\$24.88
Multi-jurisdictional	511	\$18.93
Various other types	900	n/a
All U.S. public libraries	8,950	\$20.05

Explaining Superior District Funding Levels

Some observers assume that special district libraries receive generally superior funding levels simply because they are autonomous governmental units that must cover all of their own costs. To test this possibility, similar average per capita statistics were calculated for both staff and collection expenditures.



Tables 3 and 4 indicate it does not appear that the higher per capita expenditures of special districts are attributable to their greater fiscal responsibilities. The figures indicate that special library districts spend more than do other library types for staff and collection development.

**Public Support
Is Key**

Beyond the simple fact that special district libraries tend to be better funded than other types of public libraries, what conclusion can be drawn from these findings? Apparently, the voting public — which must endorse almost any significant increase in special district taxes for libraries — tends to be more generous than the city councils, county commissions, and other decision-making bodies to whom other public libraries must go for funding. Perhaps this knowledge will embolden library advocates in such bodies who may not have realized the full extent of public support for high-quality public libraries.

Table 3 – Average Staff Expenditures per Capita for U.S. Public Libraries by Type of Legal Basis, FY 1996

Type of legal basis	Number	Staff expenditures per capita
City	4,800	\$11.85
County	1,067	\$9.94
Non-profit	955	\$11.04
Special District	717	\$13.45
Multi-jurisdictional	511	\$10.76
Various other types	900	n/a
All U.S. public libraries	8,950	\$11.79

Table 4 – Average Collection Expenditures per Capita for U.S. Public Libraries by Type of Legal Basis, FY 1996

Type of legal basis	Number	Collection expenditures per capita
City	4,800	\$3.68
County	1,067	\$2.53
Non-profit	955	\$3.70
Special District	717	\$4.12
Multi-jurisdictional	511	\$3.37
Various other types	900	n/a
All U.S. public libraries	8,950	\$3.60