

FAST FACTS

*Recent Statistics from the
Library Research Service*

It Pays To Belong: Small Public Libraries Benefit from Membership in Systems, Federations, and Cooperatives

Few, if any, public agencies can claim to cooperate to the extent that public libraries do. The perceived benefits of such cooperation can vary dramatically from state to state and from one type of system, federation, or cooperative to another, but some types of benefits are fairly common. Such benefits include: continuing education, cooperative projects (such as cooperative purchasing agreements), resource sharing (interlibrary loan and networking), and a wide variety of technical assistance. Some of these organizations are multi-type (like Colorado's Regional Library Service Systems), while others focus exclusively on a single type of library, usually public.

How do the perceived benefits of membership in systems, federations, and cooperatives affect the fiscal health and performance of the nation's public libraries—especially the "small" ones—those serving populations under 25,000?

This question is answered using 1996 data from the Federal-State Cooperative System (FSCS) for Public Library Data, a joint project of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS), and the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA). Of the nation's almost 9,000 public library jurisdictions, 7,059 serve populations under 25,000—5,130 of these jurisdictions identified themselves as members of a system, federation, or cooperative; and 1,929 identified themselves as non-members of such organizations.

Greater Fiscal Resources. Small public libraries that are members of systems, federations, or cooperatives have greater fiscal resources than their non-system counterparts. (See Table 1.) System libraries receive almost four dollars per capita in additional local income, and their total operating costs are similarly higher. System libraries spend almost two dollars per capita more on staff than their non-system counterparts, and they have a 50-cent per capita edge on collection spending.

Table 1 – Selected Financial Statistics for U.S. Public Libraries Serving Fewer than 25,000 by System Membership, 1996

Selected Financial Statistics	Average (Mean)	
	System	Non-System
Local income per capita	\$16.68	\$12.86
Total operating expenditures per capita	\$20.80	\$17.16
Staff expenditures per capita	\$11.85	\$9.95
Collection expenditures per capita	\$3.86	\$3.36

Note: All means tested using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and t-test for Equality of Means. $p < .001$

Performance Benefits. As a result, it is little surprise to find that small public libraries that are members of systems, federations, and cooperatives also generate higher service outputs than their non-system counterparts. On a per capita basis, system libraries generate 12 percent higher circulation, 20 percent more visits, approximately 50 percent more reference transactions and almost twice as many interlibrary loan transactions.

Table 2 – Selected Output Measures for U.S. Public Libraries Serving Fewer than 25,000 by System Membership, 1996

Selected Output Measures	Average (Mean)	
	System	Non-System
Visits per capita	4.8	3.6
Circulation per capita	8.3	7.4
Interlibrary loans received per 1,000 served	153	88
Reference transactions per capita	.75	.49

Note: All means tested using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and t-test for Equality of Means. $p < .001$.

Staff and Technology Impacted. It appears that systems, federations, and cooperatives have the greatest impact on services that are the most labor- and technology-intensive. This is consistent with the focus of many of these organizations on developing staff and encouraging library participation in electronic networking as well as library access to the Internet and the World Wide Web.

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