

Circulation is Up in Colorado Public Libraries



Colorado librarians, like their colleagues in the rest of the country, are concerned about competing with super bookstores, the Internet and video stores for patrons. Are people staying at home looking for information on the Internet? Do they prefer to buy books online? Are they staying away from their local library more than ever before? In Colorado the answer is a resounding NO!

Average circulation per capita figures for our state show an increase from 6.9 items per capita in 1991 to 8.5 items in 1998. That is an increase of 23 percent during the 7-year period. Not only are circulation statistics showing a healthy increase, but average library visits per capita also rose from 4.9 visits in 1991 to 6.5 in 1998 for an increase of 33 percent. Chart 1 shows these results.

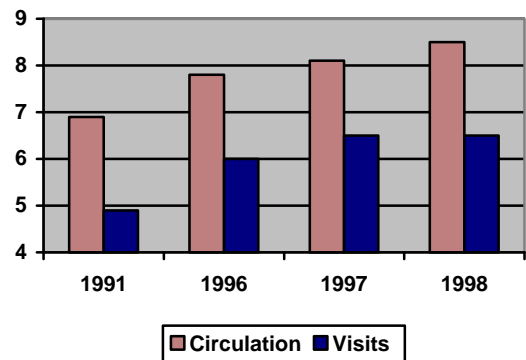
Patrons come to the library for many reasons, not always to check out materials. A poll conducted by the Gallup Organization for the American Library Association in 1998 found 66 percent of Americans used a public library at least one time during the year. Eighty-one percent of those people checked out a book. Other reasons for coming to the library included:

- 51% used reference materials
- 50% read newspapers and magazines
- 32% borrowed records, CD's or videos
- 19% called the library for information (Wallace and Kelly, 1998)

A recent study by the Douglas Public Library District, south of metro Denver, asked patrons who had not used their library cards for the preceding six months why they left and whether they still use the library for other reasons besides checking out materials. The results of the study showed 20 percent of "lost patrons" still use the library. Circulation figures will not show that these patrons come to ask a reference question, pick up income tax forms, or use the copy machine. These were the three most frequent uses of Douglas libraries by people who do not check out anything.

But doesn't some of this data improve because Colorado is a growing state? We calculated the data on a per capita basis; therefore, growth in population is not the reason. Rather, more Colorado residents are getting library cards. While it is true that the sheer number of registered borrowers increased 42 percent over the period (1,929,095 to 2,745,481), registration as a percent of population also increased from 64 percent in 1991 to 73 percent in 1998.

**Chart 1: Visits and Circulation per
Capita, 1991-98**



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Differences in Population Group Results

An interesting set of results that may spark some discussion is the dissimilarity in circulation and library visits per capita in different population groups. Table 1 lists the average circulation per capita for two population groups, 2,500-4,999 and 100,000 and over. Circulation per capita increased 11 percent in the 100,000 and over group while it went up 41 percent in the smaller population group! Why would there be such a sizeable difference in results for these two groups? Some obvious reasons jump to mind. Big city libraries compete for patron time with malls, super

Table 1: Average circulation per capita

	100,000 and over	2,500-4,999
1991	7.6	5.9
1996	8.4	8.2
1998	8.4	8.3

bookstores, multiplex theatres, and easily accessible and inexpensive Internet service providers. Small town libraries are not competing at this level. Small towns may have a video rental store or two and a neighborhood bookstore, but in these locales, libraries may be a major entertainment source or community center.

A similar result is found in the data on library visits. Table 2 shows the largest population group in Colorado with increased library visits of 74 percent, while smaller towns saw 84 percent more patrons from 1991 to 1998.

Table 2: Average library visits per capita

	100,000 and over	2,500-4,999
1991	2.7	4.3
1996	4.9	7.7
1998	4.7	7.9

Why are more people coming to public libraries in Colorado? Former ALA President Barbara Ford sums it up when she says, "Libraries today are better than ever. They offer more hours, more books, more online resources, story hours for kids and a variety of cultural programs for adults (Wallace and Kelly, 1998)."

References

"Statistics and Input-Output Measures for Colorado Public Libraries," State Ratios, Library Research Service Web site, <http://www.lrs.org/other/libraries/lrs/pdf/98plstat/StRatios.pdf> (Accessed Nov. 9, 1999)

Wallace, Linda and Joyce Kelly. "New Poll Shows 2 of 3 Adults are Library Users." ALA News and Views, July 7, 1998. Web page, <http://www.ala.org/news/archives/v3n24/v3n24a.html> (Accessed Nov. 9, 1999)