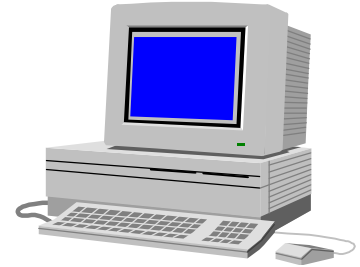


# **FAST FACTS**

*Recent Statistics from the  
Library Research Service*

## Public Internet Services More Likely to Boost Than Suppress Public Library Circulation

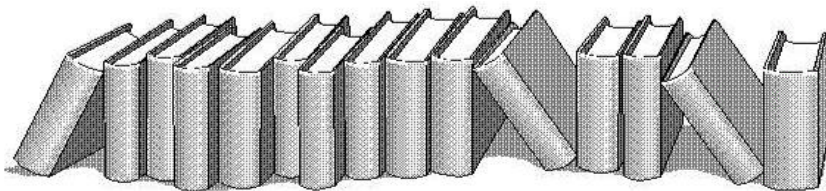


"Our circ. stats. are falling! Our circ. stats. are falling! And it's because of electronic services." For the last few years, many in the public library community have been exclaiming, like Chicken Little, that annual circulation statistics are in decline and have blamed this trend on the availability of Internet and other electronic services to the public. National public library data for 1996 and 1997—the two latest years available and the first two years for which questions about Internet services were asked—indicate that the assumed relationship between circulation and Internet services is incorrect. Indeed, those concerned about such a relationship have it exactly backwards. Public library Internet services appear more likely to boost than suppress circulation statistics.

Most U.S. public libraries report modest percentage increases in circulation from one year to the next. From 1996 to 1997, median annual circulation for libraries serving 250,000 and over rose three percent or more. For most smaller population ranges, typically circulation rose between one and two percent. See Table 1.

**Table 1. Median Percent Change in Annual Circulation by Population of Legal Service Area (LSA), 1996-97**

LSA Population Range	Median Percent Change in Annual Circulation, 1996-97	LSA Population Range	Median Percent Change in Annual Circulation, 1996-97
1 million & over	3.2%	10,000-24,999	1.9%
500,000-999,999	3.3%	5,000-9,999	1.9%
250,000-499,999	3.5%	2,500-4,999	1.2%
100,000-249,999	2.6%	1,000-2,499	4.6%
50,000-99,999	2.0%	Under 1,000	2.8%
25,000-49,999	2.0%		



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**Public Internet Services More Likely to Boost Than Suppress Public Library Circulation**

**Table 2. Percent Change in Annual Circulation for U.S. Public Libraries by Availability of Internet Services to the Public, 1996-97**

Availability of Internet services **	Percent of Libraries by Change in Annual Circulation, 1996-97			Total
	Increase	No Change*	Decrease	
1996 & 1997	1,158 55.1%	244 11.6%	699 33.3%	2,101 100.0%
1997 only	1,247 55.8%	243 10.9%	745 33.3%	2,235 100.0%
Neither year	2,043 50.3%	404 9.9%	1,617 39.8%	4,064 100.0%
Total	4,448 53.0%	891 10.6%	3,061 36.4%	8,400 100.0%

Pearson's Chi-Square = 38.859, p < .001

\* No change indicates an annual percentage change between -1.0 and +1.0 percent.

\*\* Data on Internet access do not appear in the document, **Public Libraries in the United States: FY 1996.**

\*\*\* Total number of U.S. public libraries for which both annual circulation and the availability of Internet services to the public was reported for 1996 and 1997.

**Table 3. Percent Change in Circulation per Capita for U.S. Public Libraries by Availability of Internet Services to the Public, 1996-97**

Availability of Internet services**	Percent of Libraries by Change in Circulation per Capita, 1996-97			Total
	Increase	No Change*	Decrease	
1996 & 1997	1,060 50.5%	223 10.6%	818 38.9%	2,101 100.0%
1997 only	1,175 52.6%	246 11.0%	814 36.4%	2,235 100.0%
Neither year	1,922 47.3%	384 9.4%	1,758 43.3%	4,064 100.0%
Total	4,157 49.5%	853 10.2%	3,390 40.4%	8,400 100.0%

Pearson's Chi-Square = 30.786, p < .001

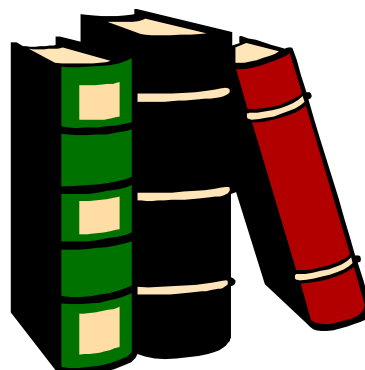
\* No change indicates an annual percentage change between -1.0 and +1.0 percent.

\*\* Data on Internet access do not appear in the document, **Public Libraries in the United States: FY 1996.**

\*\*\* Total number of U.S. public libraries for which population of legal service area, annual circulation, and the availability of Internet services to the public was reported for 1996 and 1997.

If one considers if and when public libraries added public Internet services, the positive impact of such services on the numbers of libraries experiencing circulation increases is even more pronounced. See Table 2.

The association of annual circulation increases with Internet services is only slightly diminished by controlling for differences in population from one library to another and changes in population for a library from year to year. See Table 3.



Another obvious question concerning this apparent relationship is how it is affected by the size of the legal service area (LSA) population of the jurisdiction. Not only do public libraries with Internet services generally experience larger circulation gains than those without such services, but such gains are generally more likely to be experienced by libraries serving larger LSA populations than smaller ones. See Table 4.

Another unexpected pattern revealed by this analysis is that it is not uncommon for some libraries to experience modest downturns in circulation from one year to the next. While at least 40 percent of public libraries reported circulation decreases from 1996 to 1997, for three-quarters of those the losses were in the low single digits. See Table 5.

**Table 4. Percent Change in Annual Circulation for U.S. Public Libraries by Availability of Internet Services, 1996-97**

Population of Legal Service Area (LSA) Range	Public Libraries with Internet Services & Circulation Increases, 1996-97*	
	Number	Percent
1 million & over	12	63.2%
500,000-999,999	28	58.3%
250,000-499,999	43	54.4%
100,000-249,999	136	52.9%
50,000-99,999	198	48.8%
25,000-49,999	341	50.6%
10,000-24,999	631	52.8%
5,000-9,999	480	52.8%
2,500-4,999	341	51.5%
1,000-2,499	342	49.7%
Under 1,000	131	46.5%

\* Derived from crosstabulations of Internet access and increase/decrease in annual circulation. For all population ranges serving fewer than 25,000,  $p < .001$ . Statistical significance not achieved for larger population ranges due to insufficient numbers of cases.

**Table 5. Percentile Statistics for Percent Change in Annual Circulation for U.S. Public Libraries, 1996-97**

Percentile	Percent Change in Annual Circulation, 1996-97
90%	18.9%
80%	10.8%
70%	6.5%
60%	3.9%
50%	1.6%
40%	-0.1%
30%	-2.7%
20%	-6.1%
10%	-12.9%

Notably, however, these drops in annual circulation do not coincide with the availability of public Internet services. Instead, it appears that the presence of such services appears may spur increased circulation. The findings of this analysis indicate that public library decision-makers concerned about declining circulation may want to consider explanations other than displacement by public Internet services.

**SOURCES**

Public Library Survey, Library Surveys, National Center for Education Statistics web site. 1996 file and 1997 early release file downloaded December 13, 1999. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/public/>

**NOTES**

- Cases in the 1996 file and the 1997 early release file were matched on the data element, FSCSKEY.
- Summary statistics for most data items in this survey are reported annually in **Public Libraries in the United States**. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=1999306>