

FAST FACTS

Recent Statistics from the
Library Research Service

Colorado Public Libraries Outpace National Trend on Circulation Per Capita, 1988-2000

State's Per Capita Circulation Nearly Doubles

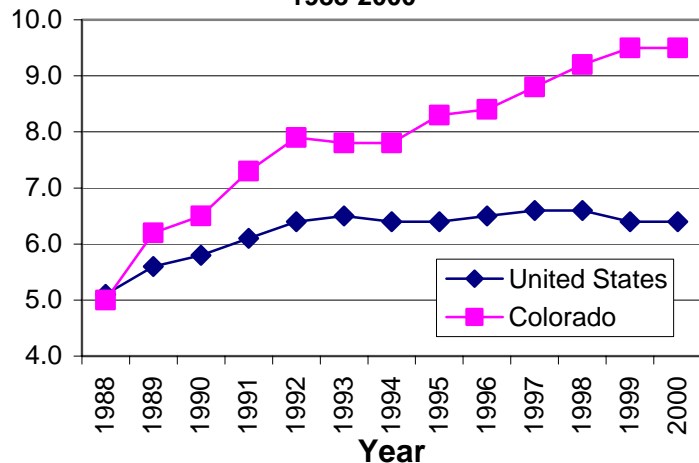
By Andrea Hamilton, LRS Research Analyst



Colorado residents check out books and other items from public libraries at a higher rate than Americans in general. While the national trend has increased relatively modestly, from about 5.0 to 6.5 items per resident between 1988 and 2000, circulation per capita for public libraries in Colorado has nearly doubled, from about 5.0 to 9.5. (See Table 1.)

What factors influence the varying levels of public library usage from state to state? Both the level of educational attainment among the adult population and the level of spending on new library books and other materials seem likely explanations. In fact, almost two-thirds of the variation in circulation per capita (64%) is explained by collection expenditures per capita. (See Table 2.) Educational attainment follows a distant second, explaining only another 14 percent of the variation in circulation per capita by state.

Table 1. Circulation Per Capita for Public Libraries in Colorado and the United States, 1988-2000



Several public library directors commented on this Colorado trend. Three respondents included Rick Ashton of Denver Public Library, Jamie LaRue of

Douglas Public Library District, and Eloise May of Arapahoe Library District. Together they identified reasons for the high level of public library usage in Colorado.

- **A resource-sharing library community.** May observes that Colorado libraries share their resources. She attributes the state's high level of resource sharing to the fact that Colorado has an active State Library, an innovative Resource Sharing Board, a statewide reciprocal borrowing agreement (i.e., the Colorado Library Card program), and a statewide network linking library catalogs (i.e., the Colorado Virtual Library). Projects undertaken by major academic and public libraries, such as PLUS and

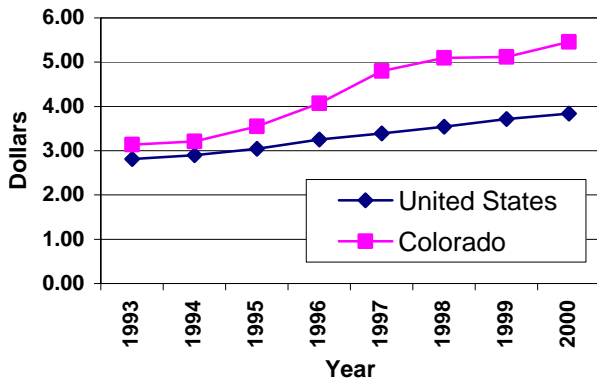
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 Circulation Per Capita by Public Libraries, 1988-2000**

Prospector also contribute. She believes that, as a result of libraries working together, Coloradans feel all library doors are open to them. LaRue concurs: "The big five or six public libraries... do a lot of community surveys and share our results widely with each other." Ashton summed it all up by saying: "Libraries in Colorado don't fight with each other."

up other items. "Surprises also move." He adds that successful libraries must back up these resources by also paying for "serious service." Denver Public Library, he reports, spends about \$60 per capita.



Table 2. Collection Expenditures Per Capita for Public Libraries in Colorado and the United States, 1993-2000



• **Colorado library funding.** Reliable and adequate funding is crucial to the livelihood of all public libraries. But these directors emphasized *where* the money is spent. LaRue believes that "Because so many of our libraries are new, so are our collections. Colorado front range libraries ... spend 12 to 18 percent of their income on new materials. So, our collections look very current and appealing. I suspect that we also buy heavily in formats whose use has grown faster than the use of books: videos, books on tape and CD, etc." (See Table 3.)



When purchasing new books and other materials, Ashton recommends leading with what customers know they want. A library customer who finds what he or she wants is also likely to pick

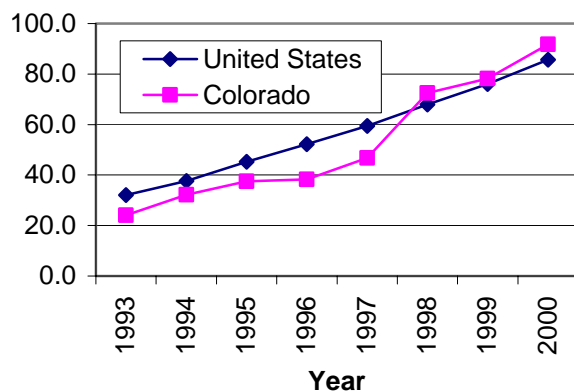


Sources of funding are also very important. May reports that, in the late 1980s and early 1990s—when the economy was good—libraries gained funding through the creation of new library districts, enabling libraries to go directly to the voters for additional revenue. The remarkable degree of success in forming and funding library districts is dramatic testimony that "Everyone in Colorado loves libraries!"

Ashton observed that city funding is also important, especially to libraries such as his. The bulk of the growth in DPL's budget comes from the city, not from private sources. DPL also serves as the Colorado Resource Center, providing the state's major resource collection as part of \$ 2.2 million annual contract with the state.

Two years ago, the General Assembly established State Funding for Libraries, a \$2 million annual grant program for school and academic as well as public

Table 3. Videos Per 1,000 Population for Public Libraries in Colorado and the United States, 1993-2000



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libraries. State Librarian Nancy Bolt observed that this program “will enable small, rural libraries to increase dramatically their spending on new materials, spurring Colorado’s circulation rate even higher in the future. The average State Funding for Libraries grant—about \$6,500—equaled or exceeded the previous book budgets of the poorest third of the state’s libraries.”

All of these funding streams help to strengthen the collections offered by public libraries.



- **The Internet.** As Ashton phrases it, “High tech, high touch.” The Internet has become essential for in-house library service: it provides high tech access not only to the collection, but also to online information

sources. The growing technological capacity of public libraries is also enabling Coloradans to discover and gather information from the library remotely, thus broadening the library’s user community. May also feels that the Internet, if used well, brings people in. (See **FAST FACTS** no. 163, Dec. 21, 1999.)

May also emphasizes the important funding Colorado public libraries have received, specifically for getting connected to the Internet, from the federal Library Services and Technology Act and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. As a result, no libraries are left out, and community residents can count on their library to provide faster access to better online information—and a helping hand.

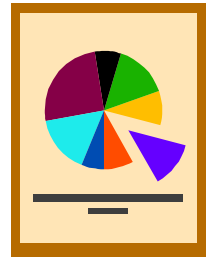


- **Colorado suburbs.** Ashton points out that Colorado is more suburban than many other states and “suburbs are where the action is for public library use.” He

continues, “although Denver is an exception, most central libraries don’t have as much use as the branches.” Larue agrees: “Most suburban developments feature houses, a mall, some big box stores, schools, and rec centers. Public libraries are among the few non-commercial choices. As such, we stand out in the suburban landscape.” May adds that Colorado members are also leaders in the Urban Libraries Council, whose main focus is establishing community-centered libraries.

- **Colorado demographics.**

LaRue reports that “population growth along the Front Range has disproportionately increased the numbers of white collar, college educated people with small children, a prescription for library use.” He also—rightly—hypothesizes that Coloradans have high incomes. According to the 2000 edition of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, published annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, Colorado ranked sixth in the United States in terms of personal income per capita.



Ashton also points out that Colorado is skewed towards a younger population (only 9.7 percent of Coloradans are 65 years and over, according to the 2001 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*).

All of these factors may contribute to the fact that “people in Colorado feel pretty good about life in general,” according to Ashton. As a result, he believes, they are more inclined to visit their public library.

Sources: 1988-99 data: National Center for Education Statistics; 2000 data: Library Research Service.

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