

Colorado Public Libraries – Historical Data

Since the earliest days, even before the territory achieved statehood, Colorado residents have supported libraries. In 1860 the Denver City and Auraria Reading Room was formed. On November 6, 1861 the first Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Colorado established the Territorial Library, which later became the State Library. By 1890 Colorado had 13 public libraries and by 1920, 41 more public libraries had been established. Today Colorado has 115 public library jurisdictions, two thirds of which were founded between 1890 and 1930. Most of the state's public libraries were started by private groups or individuals. Only after they were started did governments offer financial support to the libraries.



Table 1: Colorado Public Libraries - Historical Data

Year	Population	Books	Circulation	Operating Expenses
1920	939,629	490,924	2,189,706	\$246,480
1925	987,710	675,956	2,481,478	\$277,188
1930	1,035,791	691,961	3,359,124	\$390,050
1935	1,079,544	940,688	4,062,973	\$319,574
1941	1,123,296	1,146,013	4,067,121	\$365,717
1946	1,224,193	1,331,991	3,357,846	\$614,479
1951	1,325,089	1,613,753	4,289,930	\$1,057,657
1955	1,500,000	1,815,962	5,061,324	\$1,343,003
1960	1,753,925	2,182,585	8,031,690	\$2,352,730
1965	1,996,400	2,908,142	11,214,150	\$4,498,637
1970	2,207,259	3,918,879	11,932,504	\$8,466,530
1975	2,576,902	4,922,906	12,895,305	\$15,881,986
1980	2,889,735	5,838,581	14,140,189	\$29,525,725
1985	3,092,065	6,706,603	15,452,874	\$45,373,441
1990	3,294,394	8,255,363	21,258,654	\$68,054,878
1995	3,832,862	9,515,578	31,160,682	\$98,234,110
2000	4,301,261	10,849,269	39,110,357	\$158,660,351

Source: Colorado Department of Education, Colorado State Library

Colorado's public libraries have grown steadily since their beginnings. Table 1 shows historical data on the state's public libraries. The table shows the state population, number of books held by public libraries, circulation, and operating expenditures since 1920. The years of the Great Depression and World War II are the only years the state did not see steady growth in library use and support.

The number of Colorado residents using public libraries has also steadily increased. In 1941, 246,022 residents were registered public library borrowers, 22% of the state's population. By 2000, public libraries had 2,845,768 registered borrowers, 66% of the state's population.

Table 2 illustrates the long-term growth in public library resources available to and used by Colorado residents. Expenditures per capita for public libraries went up during each 5-year period included in the data. The only major exception was in the 1930's when the Great Depression was affecting Colorado and the rest of the country. The inflation rate between 1920 and 2000 was 801.55%. Using this figure to adjust the per capita spending figure for inflation, the data still show public library funding per capita has increased substantially since 1920. The \$0.26 per person spent in 1920 dollars is equivalent to \$2.24 in 2000 dollars. This means the \$36.89 per capita spent by public libraries in 2000 is 16 times as much as was spent in 1920.

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Since 1920, with only periodic exceptions, there has been a steady increase in volumes per capita available in public libraries. The long-term trend has certainly been for the state's public libraries to own more materials, a trend that is also reflected in the per capita circulation figures. Public libraries reported 2.33 circulations per capita in 1920 and 9.09 in 2000, close to a fourfold increase. The only significant decline in circulation per capita occurred during the World War II era, 1941-46, and the only stagnant period was between 1970 and 1985. This "flat" trend did not abate until the state recovered from the real estate and oil and gas "busts" in the early to mid-1980's.

Colorado residents obviously value the state's public libraries. Over the years more and more citizens have used public libraries and have directed their local governments to devote greater resources to them.

Table 2: Historical Per Capita Data, Colorado Public Libraries

Year	Expense/ capita	Volumes/ capita	Circulation/ capita
1920	0.26	0.52	2.33
1925	0.28	0.68	2.51
1930	0.38	0.67	3.24
1935	0.30	0.87	3.76
1941	0.33	1.02	3.62
1946	0.50	1.09	2.74
1951	0.80	1.22	3.24
1955	0.90	1.21	3.37
1960	1.34	1.24	4.58
1965	2.25	1.46	5.62
1970	3.84	1.78	5.41
1975	6.16	1.91	5.00
1980	10.22	2.02	4.89
1985	14.67	2.17	5.00
1990	20.66	2.51	6.45
1995	25.63	2.48	8.13
2000	36.89	2.52	9.09

Sources:

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