

Access to Internet Goes Hand in Hand with Other Public Library Services & May Attract Library Visitors

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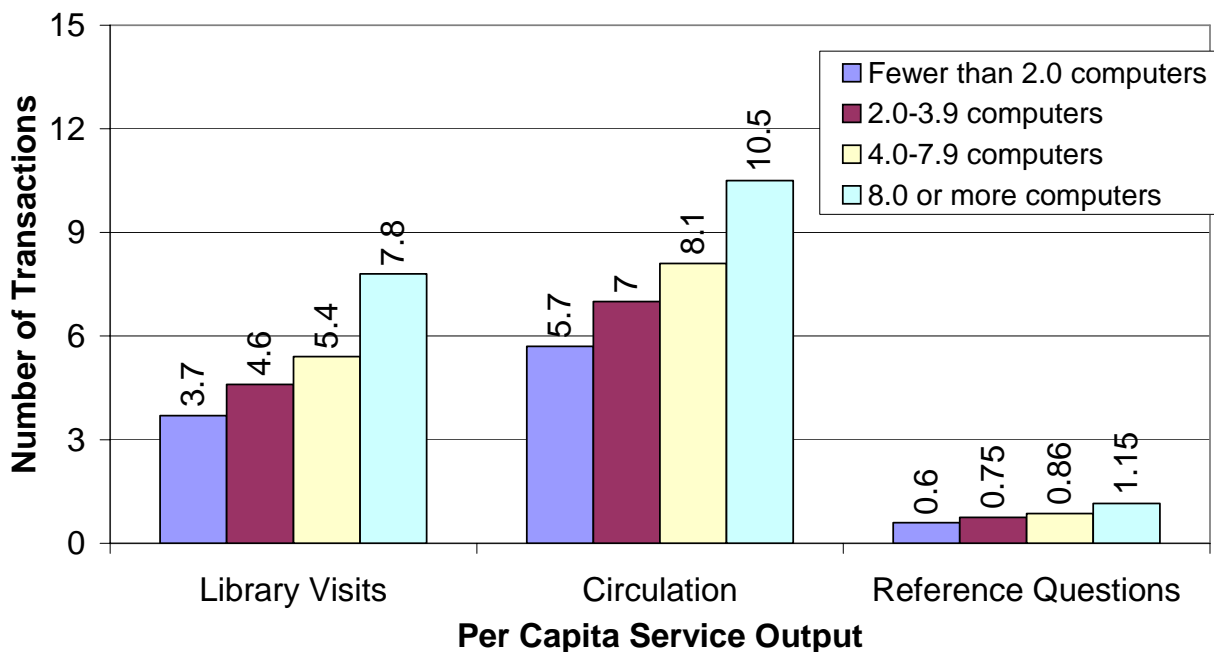
By Keith Curry Lance

With public sector budgets tightening in recent years, one might wonder if public library administrators and boards are having to make difficult decisions between traditional library services—lending books, audio books, music CDs, and DVDs—and Internet-based services. National data for 2003 suggests that providing public access to Internet computers is now part of the mainstream of public library services. Three major per capita service outputs—library visits, circulation, and reference questions—tend to increase with the number of public Internet computers per 5,000 of legal service area population.



This pattern does not necessarily indicate that the availability of public Internet computers drives other types of library use; but, it does suggest that, more often than not, libraries that do more business in traditional ways are also likely to provide more access to Internet-based services. (See Chart. Note: Each bar represents a quartile of U.S. public libraries on public Internet computers per 5,000 served: libraries with fewer than 2 computers, between 2 and 4 computers, between 4 and 8 computers, and 8 or more computers)

Per Capita Service Outputs of U.S. Public Libraries by Number of Public Internet Computers per 5,000 Served, 2003



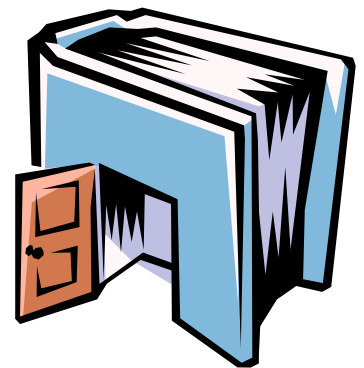


Indeed, an analysis of the correlation of each of these ratios with each of the others indicates that there are moderate to strong positive relationships between them all. Perhaps the most intriguing pattern is found for each of the three per capita service outputs and public Internet computers per 5,000 served. Notably, the positive,

statistically significant relationship between computer access and library visits per capita (Pearson correlation coefficient $(r) = .606$) is more than twice as strong as the relationship between computer access and either circulation ($r = .299$) or reference questions ($r = .292$).

The strength of this relationship may be explained by the general role played by public libraries in closing the digital divide—the gap between technology haves and have-nots—or by the fact that libraries frequently subscribe to licensed databases to which the typical home or office user of the World Wide Web might not otherwise have access. Almost certainly, the reason this relationship between library visits and computer access is not even stronger is because many public libraries enable their patrons to access online resources, especially licensed databases, from home, school, workplace, or another non-library location.

For the time being, however, it appears that as a library offers more public access to the Internet, it is likely to draw more visitors who, in turn, are also likely to use the library in other ways. At the very least, these findings indicate that traditional uses of public libraries (visiting libraries, borrowing books and other items, asking questions) tend to rise with use of Internet-based services. Traditional and Internet-based library services are not an either-or proposition.



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