

# The Impact of the Recession on Public Library Use in Colorado

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During the latest recession (December 2007-June 2009), many Coloradans found that an old friend could serve them well in times of financial crisis: the public library. It is a place where those who are casualties of a bad economy can turn for much-needed information, community, and help, whether they are looking for a job, returning to school, starting a business, or simply trying to “get by” through economizing and doing things for themselves. Many public libraries reported higher usage patterns during this time, and these observations were confirmed by an

**Who determines when a recession has occurred?**  
The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) is the organization responsible for identifying recessions in the United States and determining their start and end dates. NBER is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research organization.

*Good public library service is not just a quality of life issue; it is an economic issue as well.*  
Paula J. Miller, Executive Director  
Pikes Peak Library District

analysis of library visits, circulation, program attendance, and public Internet computer use in Colorado public libraries before and after the onset of the recession. This Fast Facts shares the results of this analysis.

## Library Visits

In 2006 and 2007—before the recession’s onset—visits per capita for Colorado public libraries serving legal service area (LSA) populations of 25,000 or more<sup>1</sup> was fairly static, but trending downward (-2%) (Table 1). For the same interval, at resort libraries,<sup>2</sup> this statistic reached a peak (13% in 2006) and then dipped (-6% in 2007). After the recession began (2008 and 2009), visits per capita at larger libraries increased by at least 5% each year, while visits per capita at resort libraries recovered to pre-recession levels.

**Table 1**  
**Visits Per Capita & Percent Change from Previous Year, 2006-2009**

|  | Pre-Recession |       | Recession |       |
|--|---------------|-------|-----------|-------|
|  | 2006          | 2007  | 2008      | 2009  |
| <b>Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population</b> |               |       |           |       |
| Visits per capita                            | 5.99          | 5.86  | 6.14      | 6.49  |
| Percent change from previous year            | -2%           | -2%   | 5%        | 6%    |
| <b>Resort Libraries</b>                      |               |       |           |       |
| Visits per capita                            | 17.86         | 16.74 | 16.58     | 17.69 |
| Percent change from previous year            | 13%           | -6%   | -1%       | 7%    |

## Circulation

Between 2006 and 2007—before the onset of the recession—circulation of library materials at libraries serving 25,000 or more was actually trending downward (Table

<sup>1</sup> Libraries serving LSA populations under 25,000 were not included in this analysis because of a high prevalence of missing data and outliers.

<sup>2</sup> Resort libraries are public libraries located in a county that has 20% or more employment in the “arts, entertainment, recreation, lodging, and food services” as reported in the 2000 Census; or are public libraries located in a county whose largest city has 20% or more employment in the “arts, entertainment, recreation, lodging, and food services” as reported in the 2000 Census.



2). Once the recession took hold in 2008, however, demand for this basic library service saw an uptick (5% over 2007), and rose by an even larger percentage in 2009 (7% over 2008). For resort libraries, during the same periods, similar patterns occurred, only more exaggerated. In 2007, for instance, the decline in circulation per capita was at a rate three times that of larger libraries (-7% vs. -2%). The reverse was equally true: Circulation per capita for resort libraries increased as the recession deepened at twice the rate seen for larger libraries (10% vs. 5% in 2008, 17% vs. 7% in 2009).

**Table 2**  
**Circulation Per Capita & Percent Change from Previous Year, 2006-2009**

|  | Pre-Recession |       | Recession |       |
|--|---------------|-------|-----------|-------|
|  | 2006          | 2007  | 2008      | 2009  |
| <b>Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population</b> |               |       |           |       |
| Circulation per capita                       | 10.78         | 10.56 | 11.13     | 11.96 |
| Percent change from previous year            | 4%            | -2%   | 5%        | 7%    |
| <b>Resort Libraries</b>                      |               |       |           |       |
| Circulation per capita                       | 12.94         | 12.09 | 13.28     | 15.48 |
| Percent change from previous year            | -3%           | -7%   | 10%       | 17%   |

### Program Attendance

Immediately before the recession hit, program attendance per 1,000 served at libraries serving populations of 25,000 or more was trending downward (-5% from 2006 to 2007) (Table 3). The year the recession hit, this statistic increased at a double-digit rate (12%) and maintained that higher level as the recession wore on. As with circulation per capita, resort libraries experienced even more dramatic trends for program attendance per 1,000 served. Just before the recession's onset, this statistic dropped at twice the rate for larger libraries (-11% vs. -5%). As the recession settled in, program attendance per 1,000 served at resort libraries rose by 7% in 2008 and 17% in 2009.

**Table 3**  
**Program Attendance Per 1,000 Served & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009**

|  | Pre-Recession |        | Recession |        |
|--|---------------|--------|-----------|--------|
|  | 2006          | 2007   | 2008      | 2009   |
| <b>Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population</b> |               |        |           |        |
| Program attendance per 1,000 served          | 375.91        | 358.19 | 402.15    | 400.32 |
| Percent change from previous year            | 6%            | -5%    | 12%       | 0%     |
| <b>Resort Libraries</b>                      |               |        |           |        |
| Program attendance per 1,000 served          | 828.59        | 739.02 | 787.59    | 919.85 |
| Percent change from previous year            | 3%            | -11%   | 7%        | 17%    |

### Internet Computer Use

For the years covered in this study, comparable statistics on Internet computer use were not available from a critical mass of libraries serving populations of 25,000 or more; but such statistics were available for most of the state's resort libraries. While



Internet computer use per capita saw steady, but modest, gains from 2006 to 2008, the percentage increase in demand for these services as the recession deepened in the national psyche (2009) reached double-digit levels (Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Internet Computer Use Per Capita & Percent Change From Previous Year, 2006-2009\***

|                                   | Pre-Recession |      | Recession |      |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|------|-----------|------|
| <b>Resort Libraries</b>           |               |      |           |      |
| Internet computer use per capita  | 3.95          | 4.09 | 4.18      | 4.62 |
| Percent change from previous year | -1%           | 4%   | 2%        | 11%  |

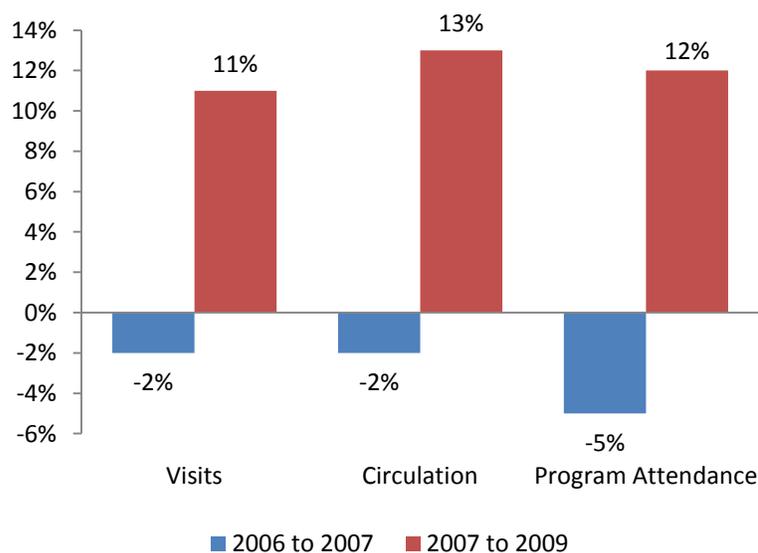
\*Internet computer use per capita could not be analyzed for libraries with 25,000+ LSA populations because of a high prevalence of missing data and outliers.

### Public Library Use Before and After the Onset of the Recession

The recession's impact on public library use is illustrated most dramatically when examining the percent increase for each of the usage statistics from the year prior to the recession's onset (2007) to the final year of the recession (2009). This may be due at least in part to the fact that Colorado entered the recession late (third quarter of 2008), as mentioned earlier. In most instances, percent increase for each of the two groups of libraries—those serving populations of 25,000 and over and those serving resort communities—was in the double digits.

For libraries serving populations of 25,000 and over, visits per capita increased by 11 percent from 2007 to 2009 (Chart 1). Similar increases were seen for circulation

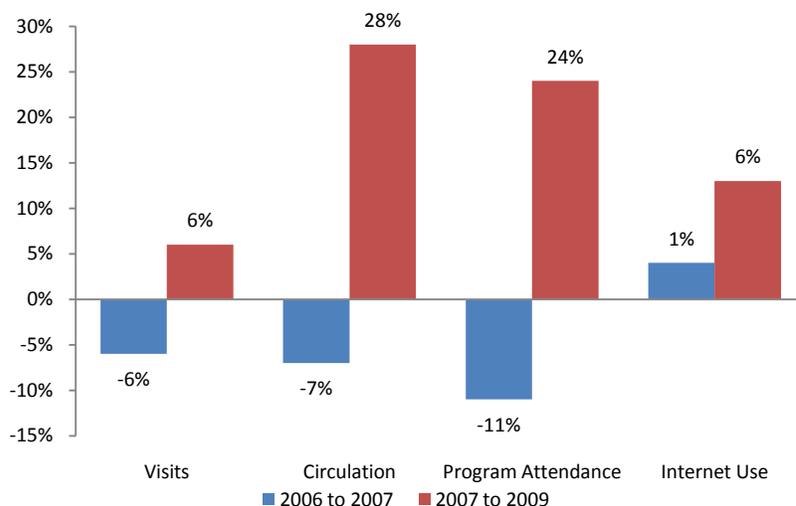
**Chart 1**  
**Percent Change from 2006 to 2007 (Pre-Recession)**  
**and 2007 to 2009 (Recession)**  
**Libraries with 25,000+ LSA Population**



per capita and program attendance per 1,000 served. Circulation increased by 13 percent and program attendance by 12 percent during this time period. In contrast, visits and circulation decreased by 2 percent and program attendance by 5 percent from 2006 to 2007 (just prior to the recession).

For libraries serving resort communities, visits per capita increased by 6 percent from 2007 to 2009, while circulation per capita, program attendance per 1,000 served, and Internet use per capita all had double digit percentage increases during this time period (Chart 2). Circulation increased by 28 percent, program attendance by 24 percent, and Internet computer use by 13 percent. In contrast, visits (-6%), circulation (-7%), and program attendance (-11%) all decreased during the time period just prior to the recession and Internet use remained relatively static.

**Chart 2**  
**Percent Change from 2006 to 2007 (Pre-Recession)**  
**and 2007 to 2009 (Recession)**  
**Resort Libraries**



### Conclusion

Clearly, the recent recession had—and, due to the sluggish recovery, continues to have—a dramatic impact on public library use in Colorado. When their communities needed them most, public libraries were there to offer the space, information, and assistance Coloradans needed to cope with psychological stresses, strained family budgets, changing retirement plans, and unemployment and under-employment. In addition, Coloradans who needed it were able to take advantage of libraries' resources and programs to gain new skills to become more competitive in the job market, and to become more entrepreneurial out of sheer necessity.

*We have heard patrons comment that the library is the best deal for families on a budget.*

Eve Tallman, Director  
 Mesa County Public Library District



As current American Library Association president Roberta Stevens (2010) concluded in a recent *Washington Post* commentary:

*Here's a message to elected leaders as they balance budgets: Today's libraries are ["a strategic investment." They are] an essential service and provide resources to ensure a competitive workforce. All of us—parents, families, seniors and businesses large or small—must speak up to keep libraries open and available...The resources in your local library have the power to change the world; but the doors must be kept open.<sup>3</sup>*

#### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

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<sup>3</sup> Stevens, R. (2010, November 8). Commentary: Technological and economic shifts have only made libraries more valuable. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/05/AR2010110507361.html>.

