CENTER FOR LIBRARY AND INFORMATION iNNOVATION

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

COMMUNITY ACCESS

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS
Public libraries offer free access to workstations, broadband, and Wi-Fi

EXPERTISE
Public libraries offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet-enabled services

DIGITAL LITERACY
Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer, Internet use, and resource instruction. They also help people meet their life-long learning needs through resources and education.

E-GOVERNMENT
Public libraries help people complete immigration and citizenship, social service, emergency benefit, and other online forms

EMPLOYMENT
Public libraries help people create resumes, search for jobs, and apply for job online

With 99% of public libraries offering public access to the Internet, public libraries provide a vital community link to the Internet, technology, and information. Public libraries are essential providers of E-government, employment, and educational services and resources.

88.8%
Libraries help people understand and use government websites

67.1%
Libraries help people apply for jobs online

66.6%
Libraries report they are the only free provider of public Internet access

82.2%
Libraries offer wireless Internet access (Wi-Fi)

The public access roles public libraries play are particularly important for those who do not have high speed Internet or computer access in the home, lack the technology skills and expertise, or have difficulty understanding and using Internet-enabled services that can help people find jobs, interact with government, or achieve their educational goals.
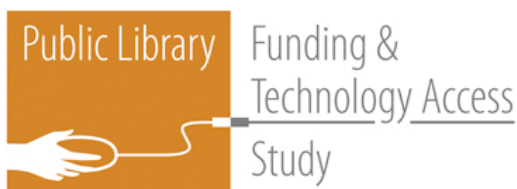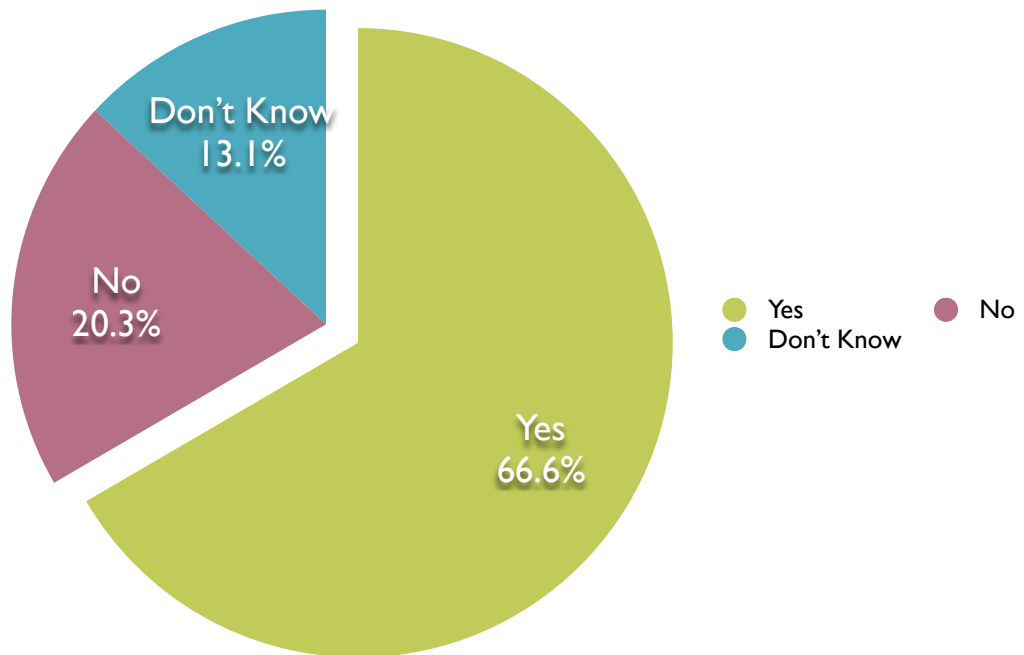
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Figure 1. Public Library as Provider of Free Public Internet Access

Community Access

With 16,802 library buildings in communities, and 702 bookmobiles (some of which serve as mobile Internet access points), public libraries are essential community institutions that deliver Internet-enabled services and resources their communities need to thrive in the 21st century. This service and technology infrastructure allows libraries to offer their communities a range of public access technologies, digital literacy training, education, health, employment, and E-government services on which millions of people rely.

Public Libraries and Community Access

For most of their existence as a social institution, public libraries in the United States have filled many important community roles, ranging from guaranteeing access to reading materials presenting diverse viewpoints to hosting community events, and from providing assistance for job seekers to introducing children to reading.

The advent of the World Wide Web created a vital new role for libraries – community access point for computers and the Internet.[1] As the Internet became more widely used in the 1990s, public libraries embraced the role of providing access to and training for using the Internet and related technologies.[2] Libraries have also found new ways to support their communities through the Internet, including guaranteeing access to E-government and providing support in emergency situations.[3]

In 2009, 99.0 percent of public libraries now offer free public access to Internet-enabled workstations. This near universal provision of Internet access demonstrates the commitment of public libraries to ensuring that communities have access. In fact, in 66.6 percent of communities in the United States, public libraries are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet (see Figure 1).

Libraries across the country are providing a number of community access services:
- 95.0% of libraries provide access to databases;
- 88.2% to homework resources;
- 82.5% to audio content;
- 72.3% to digital reference; and
- 65.9% to e-books.

Public libraries are also increasingly providing users the opportunity to generate their own content through library workstations:
- 91.6% allow usage of portable drives and storage devices;
- 70.9% provide access to gaming consoles and software;
- 67.6% support the use of digital cameras and manipulation of user content; and
- 56.3% allow burning of CDs and DVDs.

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To meet these needs, public library branches average 14.2 workstations for public use, a number that has increased from last year. In addition, 82.2 percent of public libraries now offer free wireless access for people (see Figure 2).

Key Issues and Challenges

In spite of these increases, 73.5 percent of libraries still report having an insufficient number of workstations some or all of the time. Demand for increased community access via public libraries is a result of several factors:

- More government, education, and employment activities being made available online,
- More people applying for jobs online, and
- More people seeking free sources of entertainment online due to the economic downturn.[4]

Given these demands on access, most public libraries face increases in usage of many Internet-related functions:

- 75.7% of libraries reported increased usage of workstations over the previous year,
- 71.1% reported increased usage of wireless access,
- 45.6% of libraries reported increased usage of electronic resources, and

- 26.3% reported an increased number of requests for training services.

To manage the scope of access demands, 92.3 percent of public libraries have established time limits for access to workstations.

In meeting all of the community access needs, public libraries face some serious challenges. Budget cutbacks have negatively affected library hours for the past two years. In 2009, 14.5 percent of all libraries reported decreased hours from the previous year; 23.7 percent of urban libraries, the most affected, reported decreased hours (see Figure 3).

Libraries also face numerous long-term challenges in terms of maintaining and updating workstations and improving community Internet access.[5] In 2009, many public libraries noted challenges in terms of increased cost, limited physical space, limited capacity for outlets and wiring, and lack of dedicated technical staff.

Conclusion

Providing community access to the Internet is now strongly engrained both in library patron and community expectations for public libraries and in the values of public librarianship. In spite of the challenges they currently face, public libraries will continue to serve this vital function that supports their individual patrons and communities.
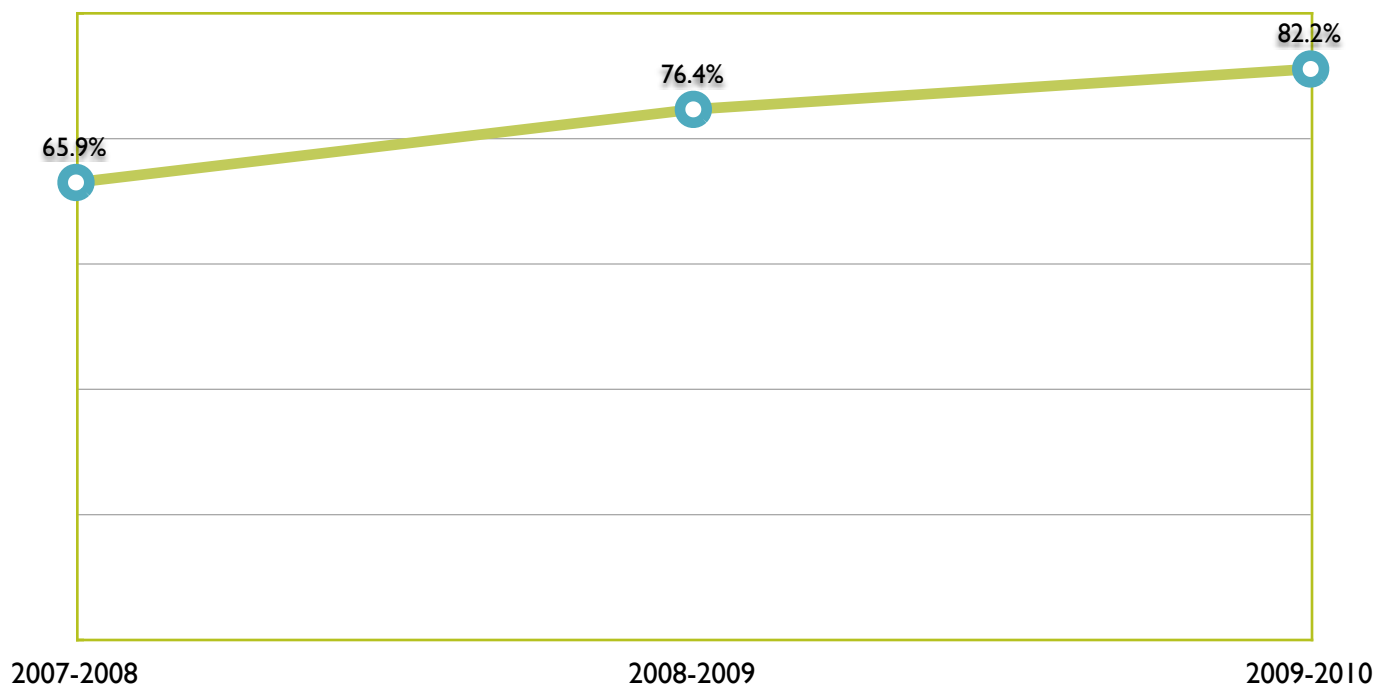
65.9%   76.4%   82.2%

2007-2008   2008-2009   2009-2010

Figure 2. Public Library Wi-Fi Availability.
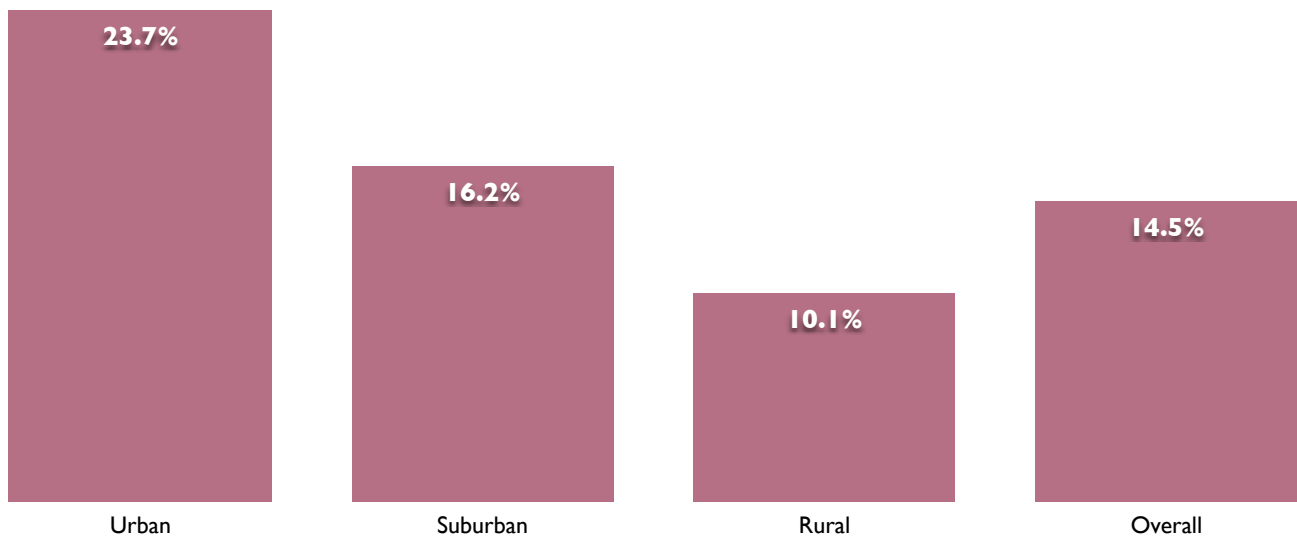
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Figure 3. Public Libraries Reporting Reduced Hours.

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