

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & DIGITAL LITERACY

BROADBAND ACCESS

TECHNOLOGY

Public libraries offer free access to computers, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet (WiFi)

AVAILABILITY

Public libraries offer free Internet access for people to meet their economic, learning, health information, and E-government needs

SPEED

Public libraries offer broadband Internet connectivity speeds that are often greater than what is available at work or in the home

SKILLS

Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer and Internet use instruction that depend on broadband access

RESOURCES

Public libraries offer their communities learning, health, employment, and other Internet-enabled resources

With 100% of public libraries offering public Internet access, public libraries provide a vital community link to the Internet, technology, and information. Public libraries are essential providers of employment, learning services and resources, and E-government.

86.5%

Libraries report offering classes on general Internet use*

66.1%

Libraries report that technology training is important in their communities

82.7%

Libraries report offering point-of-use technology training

87.0%

Libraries report offering classes in general computer skills*

Public libraries play a vital role in ensuring digital equity and readiness by providing free access to a range of public access technologies, broadband, and Internet-enabled services to those who could not otherwise access these resources. Public libraries also provide training and assistance to those who lack technology skills or who have difficulty using and creating digital content.

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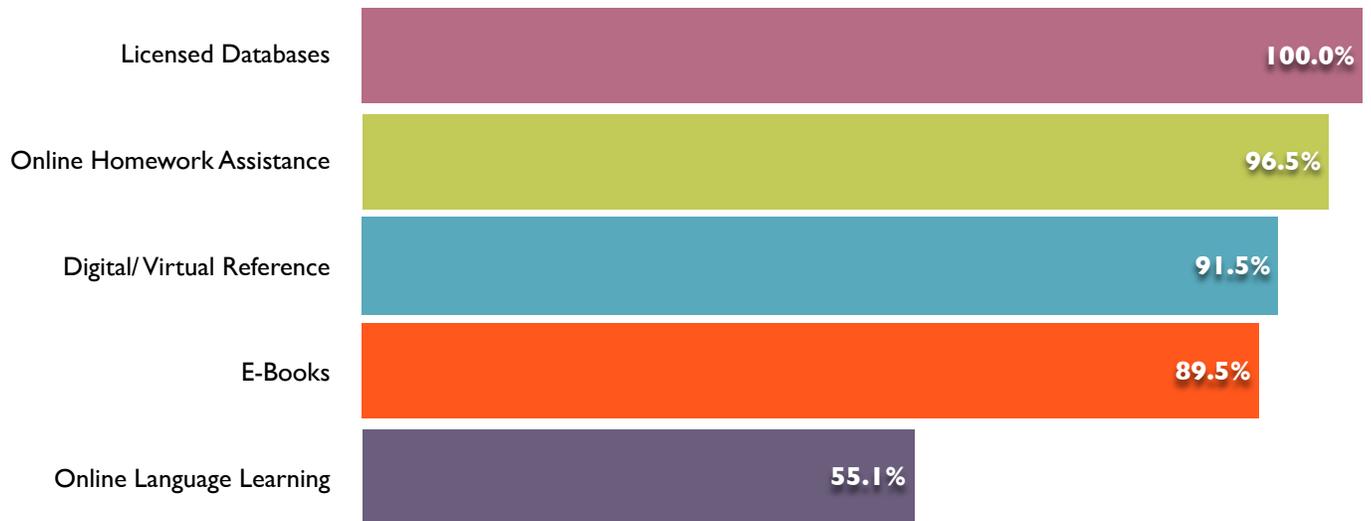


Figure 1. Number of Libraries offering Technology Services.

Digital Literacy

In general, digital literacy means the ability to locate, evaluate, and use digital information. Those with digital literacy skills can efficiently find the information they seek, evaluate that information, and use that information effectively. The ability to recognize what information is needed and when to use it are additional components of digital literacy.¹ Digital literacy also includes the ability to effectively use a range of technologies (e.g., computers, tablets, mobile devices) and Internet-enabled services (e.g., Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube). These different components of digital literacy are of equal significance. Without access, people cannot develop digital literacy; without digital literacy, they cannot gain maximum benefit from online resources.

Digital Divide

In an information and Internet-driven age, where information, services, and resources are increasingly available only online, people without access to technology or the Internet are at a considerable disadvantage. They may lack the ability to access information resources, or the knowledge to use these resources effectively.

This lack of ability or knowledge is likely to have a negative impact on their ability to succeed by limiting their access to employment and E-government resources, educational achievement, as well as informational and recreational resources. Public libraries play a vital role in providing people with both access to computers and Internet and instruction in the use of resources, helping to bridge these gaps.

Technology Training

The technology training services offered by libraries are an important component of the services they provide to the community, with 98.0% of libraries offering some type of training. 7.9% of libraries offer this training in a language other than English. Although many libraries offer formal classes in technology training, libraries most commonly offer help as informal point-of-use in the areas of general computer skills and general internet use. Roughly a tenth of libraries offer online training materials for all instructional topics in technology training.

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Types of Service

Public libraries offer a variety of patron technology training opportunities, and they offer these services in different ways:

- 98.0% of libraries offer either formal or informal technology training to patrons;
- 49.3% of libraries offer formal technology training classes in general computer use ;
- 12.4% offer online training materials in general computer use; and
- 30.6% offer individual help by appointment in general computer use.

Of those public libraries offering formal technology training classes, a range of topics are covered. Most of these libraries report offering classes in general computer software use (89.8%) as well as in general internet use (93.8%). Additionally, many libraries offer classes on accessing and using online databases and services (98.3%), and on social media use (45.8%).

Building the Next Generation Workforce

Information and technology skills are essential for developing a competitive workforce. In 2011, the Obama Administration created an initiative - www.digitalliteracy.gov - a digital

literacy portal for practitioners, such as librarians, who are delivering digital literacy to their communities.² The initiative was born out of the digital demands of today's job market and seeks to provide resources and tools to teach and foster digital literacy skills.

Public libraries teach people how to find and use the information they need, use technology, use the Internet and Internet-enabled technologies and services, and enhance their knowledge. Public libraries combine these workforce development skills with a number of critical services and resources:

- 72.2% of libraries provide programs that assist patrons with access to jobs databases and job opportunity resources;
- 77.1% of libraries provide access to civil service exam materials³;
- 78.0% of libraries offer programs to help patrons create resumes and other employment materials.

In doing so, public libraries create a skilled and knowledgeable workforce able to meet the challenges of today's economy.

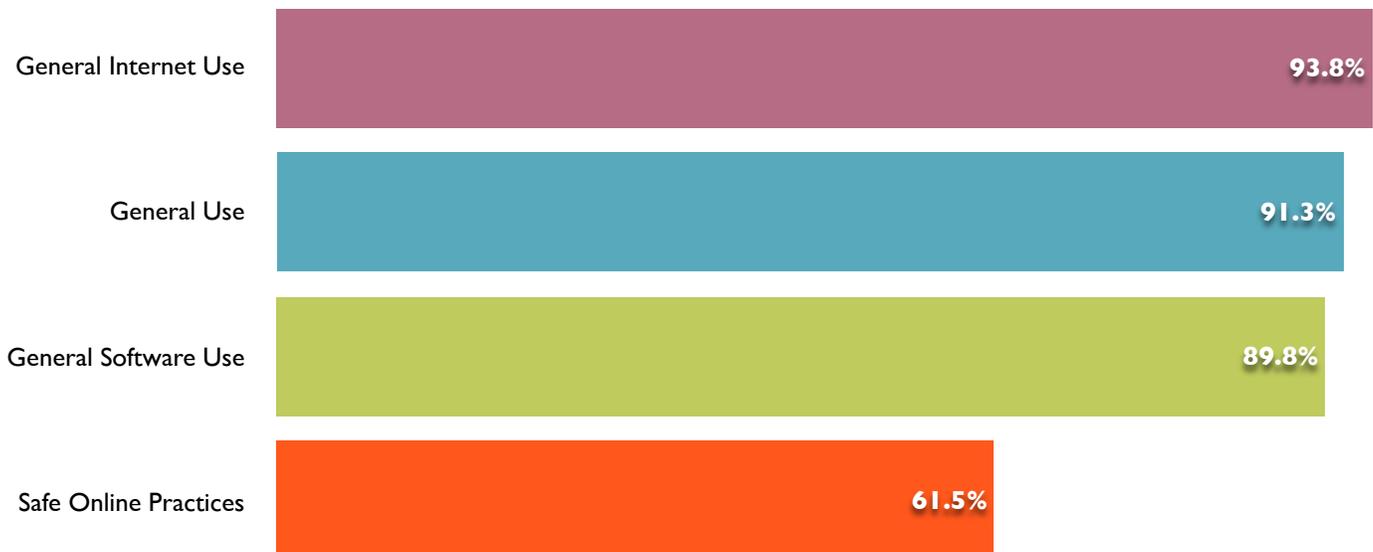


Figure 2. Public Library Formal Technology Training Classes.

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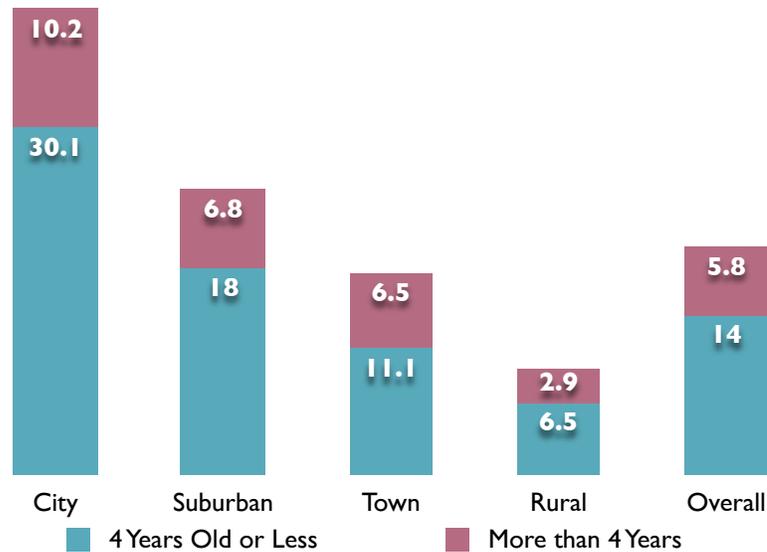


Figure 3. Number of Public Access Computers, by Locale.

Key Issues and Challenges

Despite the importance of these services, public libraries face a number of challenges in their efforts to provide access to and instruction in digital resources. Increased use of technology training classes coincides with increased use of library resources across the board, representing an increase in demand on library resources and staff.

With great prevalence, 35.9% of libraries report having wait times for public access computers. However, most libraries (97.5%) now also offer public access WiFi. Increasing demand means many libraries have established time limits for patrons using public access workstations, which has a significant impact on people who lack other means of access this information.

Technology training competes with other library services in its importance to the

community. Job seeking services and E-government services are consistently ranked amongst the most important services to the community provided by libraries. That the public library is the only, or one of few, community resources addressing these issues means librarians often must combine digital literacy instruction with other services.

Conclusion

Just as community access has become an important component of public library services, so too has patron technology training. Although public libraries face many challenges in their efforts to provide access and instruction services, they are embracing their role in ensuring digital equity and readiness, and as such, in building digitally inclusive communities.

References

¹ American Library Association. *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. Final Report.* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.)

² DigitalLiteracy.gov. *About Us.* Retrieved from: <http://www.digitalliteracy.gov/about>

³ From Bertot, J.C., McDermott, A., Lincoln, R., Real, B., & Peterson, K. (2012). *2011-2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey: Survey Findings and Results.*

* Percentages are out of those libraries that reported offering formal technology training classes.