

RESEARCH REPORT

Centuries of Resilience: Public Libraries Still Crucial During COVID-19

Ever since COVID-19 forced so many beloved places to close their doors, libraries, like many valued institutions, have been forced to take a hard look at how to adapt to meet their communities' needs.

While expanding reach to patrons has been a top initiative for public libraries as they navigate an increasingly digital world, the arrival of the pandemic in 2020 accelerated the need to connect in new and creative ways.

Innovative recently commissioned research to explore the impact of COVID-19 on public libraries in the United States (U.S.). Through this study, we set out to understand how patrons are using the library in these circumstances and to determine where improvements can be made to better address community needs.

Public libraries have been an important part of the American landscape for 300 years, and have proven to be resilient. This research shows that libraries are still a valued part of the American fabric. We hope these findings help libraries compare and contrast their own offerings and offer insights to continue improving patron engagement.

Key Findings

In September 2020, we surveyed 1000+ people in the U.S. and found:



Confidence in public libraries is extraordinarily high

9 out of 10

Americans have a lot or some confidence in their local public library.

Fewer patrons visited or used online resources for six months



Only 21% of the Public say they visited or used their library from March through August.

The pandemic is keeping library patronage low



Only 4 in 10 people say they know their public library is now open.



Online library resources are seeing high demand

Critical to the pandemic, a majority of American adults say they have used the public library website or app, an **increase from 39 percent in 2016**.

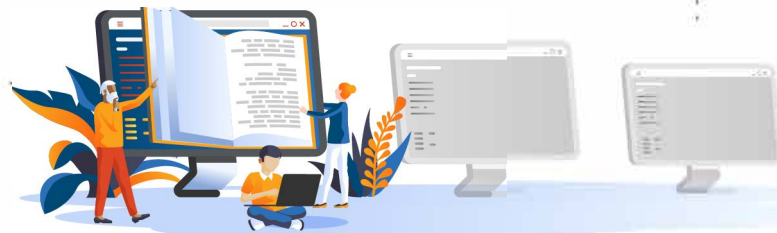
The discovery experience demonstrates major room for improvement



Half of library users say they sometimes cannot find what they want in the library.

Only 1 in 3 online library users

say most library resources are available online.



Americans lack familiarity with their local library



Only 1 in 5 Americans

say they are very familiar with what their local library offers.

It can be challenging for Americans to access their library



33%

of library users say "It is often hard to actually visit the library."

As always, confidence in public libraries remains high

Public libraries are in a strong position as they slowly reopen across the country, even with limited services. At a time when many U.S. public institutions face declining confidence from citizens, confidence in public libraries is at extraordinarily high levels. The survey finds nine out of ten people (90%) say they have a lot of confidence or some confidence in their local public library.¹

That is more confidence than the public expresses in their local government or in their local public schools (73 percent each).

At the same time, use of public libraries is strong. Three in five people (61%) say they have ever visited their public library or used its resources. Thirty-nine percent say they have not used the libraries.² For comparison, 69 percent have ever been to their state's department of motor vehicles office—a required visit for almost all adults—and the usage is not much more than that of public libraries.

Public libraries' push to make their resources available online has had a major impact: a substantial 55 percent say they have used their public library's website or app.⁸



Public library closures have had a huge impact

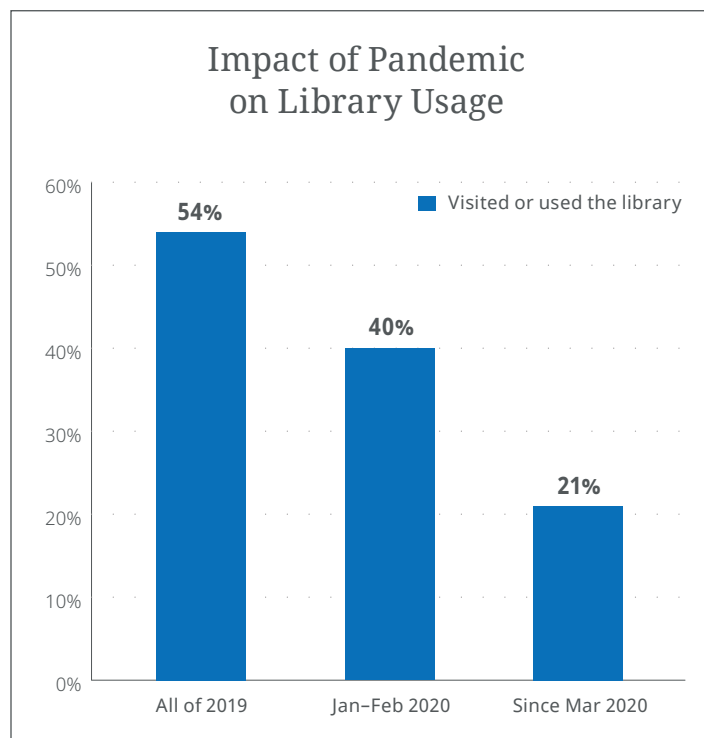
What we have seen in the news rings true in this research; the coronavirus pandemic devastated in-person usage of public libraries. Libraries pivoted quickly to increased online access, with creative reallocation to gain greater access to e-resources, but that effort did not fully compensate for the closures.

As of August 2020, libraries were slowly reopening along with many other institutions across the country after widespread shutdowns. Three-quarters of library users say their public library was closed at some point during 2020.⁴

Libraries are slowly reopening, but there is uncertainty. Only four in ten people (38%) say their public library is now open, and 24 percent say it is still closed. An equal number (38%) say they do not know.⁵ With the resurgence of the virus in certain hotspots across the country, how long libraries will remain open is to be seen.

For comparison, 87 percent of survey respondents said that, at some point in the last six months, public places in their community were closed due to COVID-19.

Those closures had a major impact on patronage. While 61 percent of people say they ever visited or used their public library, 54 percent of U.S. adults say they went to or used the library in 2019, and 40 percent say they went in January or February 2020, a mere 21 percent say they went in the six months between the COVID-19 lockdowns in March and August.³



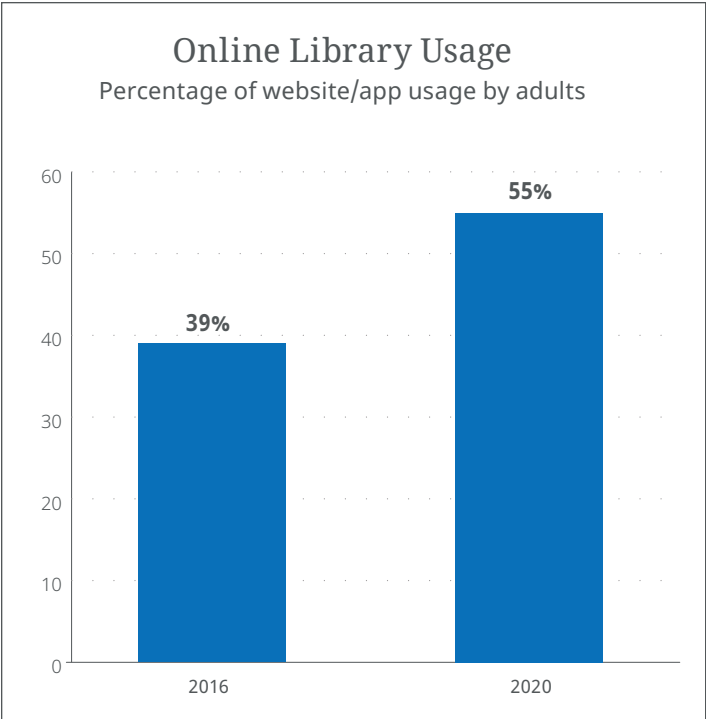
The substantial drop in usage certainly reflects the closures of the physical spaces. But it also reflects that library users did not pivot to online use as quickly as the libraries made those resources available. A lack of knowledge about online library resources may have been one reason, as explored later in this report.

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Online resources are in demand

The coronavirus pandemic not only impacted library use, it changed how patrons use the library and what they used it for.

Fortunately, public libraries had been moving in recent years to more robust online offerings, and that paid dividends during the pandemic closures. Most Americans (55%) in our survey say they have ever used a public library website or app. That compares to only 39 percent who say they had used a public library website in a Pew Research Center survey in 2016.⁸



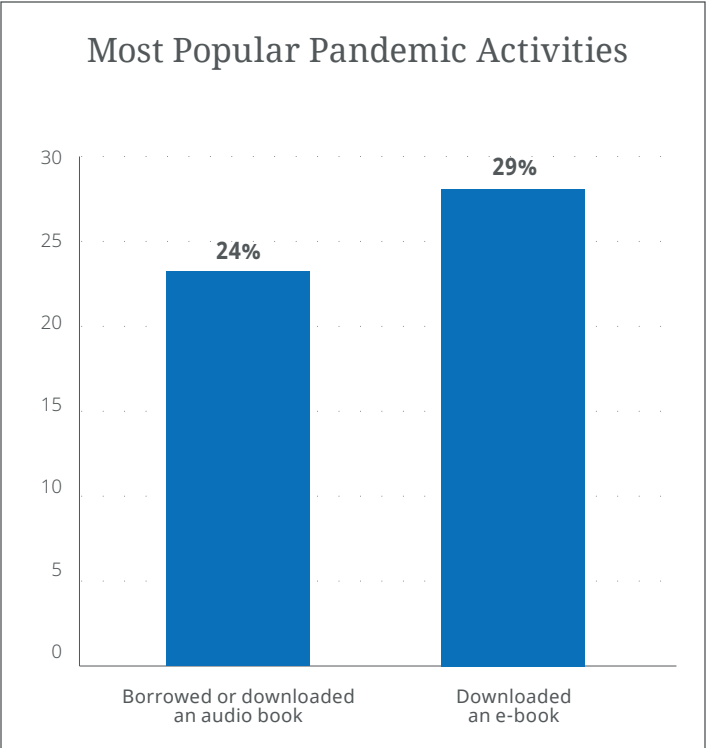
Even with high usage of online resources, borrowing print books was the most common activity during both 2019 and the COVID-19 shutdowns in 2020. Obviously, the frequency of physical book borrowing dropped precipitously, but many libraries are having success maintaining safety by adopting contactless book pick-up and return during the pandemic.⁶⁻⁷

Borrowing print books was the top activity for those who used the library in 2019, with more than two-thirds (68%) saying they borrowed a book during that time. In contrast, 46 percent of the smaller group who used the library

during the pandemic shutdowns say they borrowed a print book during that time.

The next three activities to top the list in 2019 were ones that can only be done in person at the library. Twenty-nine percent says they went to the library to sit and read or to watch or listen to media. Twenty-two percent say they used the library’s Wi-Fi and 21 percent say they used a computer at the library. Unsurprisingly, after March 2020, each of these activities dropped sharply, to 11 percent for sitting and reading and using the computer and 15 percent for using the library Wi-Fi.

In contrast, two activities that are often accomplished online were second and third on the list of activities during the pandemic. Twenty-nine percent say they downloaded an e-book during the pandemic, and 24 percent say they borrowed or downloaded an audio book.



Taking part in an online library program jumped from five percent in 2019 to 13 percent during the pandemic.

Predictably, attending popular in-person children's programs, such as Storytime, dropped from 11 percent to five percent. This highlights the need to determine how the library will continue to engage patrons online while still creating the sense of connection that makes it such a unique part of our communities.

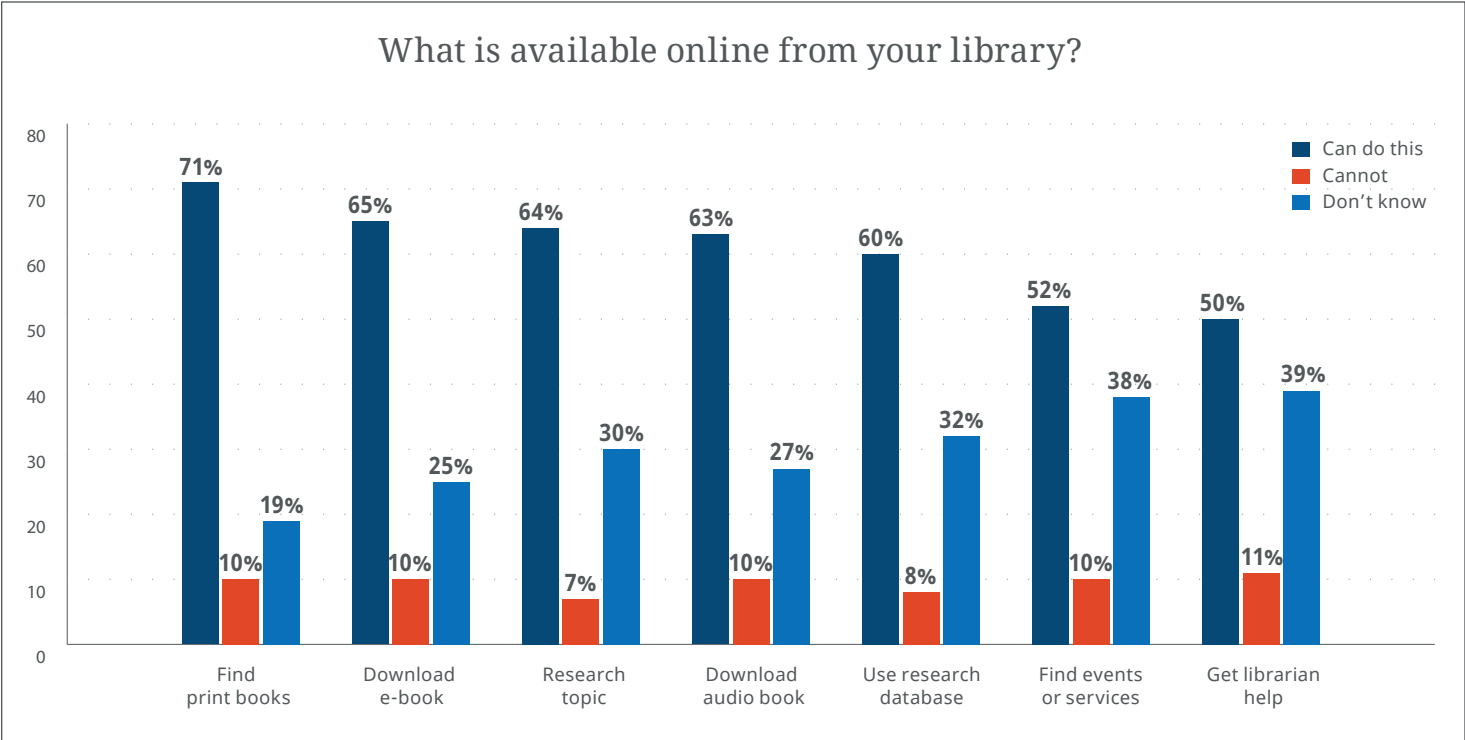
Library Activities in 2019 and during the 2020 pandemic

ACTIVITIES	2019	2020
Borrow print books	68%	46%
Borrow or download an e-book	18%	29%
Borrow or download an audio book	18%	24%
Use a research database	15%	19%
Use library Wi-Fi	22%	15%
Get help from a librarian	15%	13%
Take part in a library program online	5%	13%
Sit and read, study, or watch or listen to media	29%	11%
Use computer at the library	21%	11%
Research a topic that interests you	18%	10%
Attend a class, program or lecture	15%	9%
Consult physical reference materials	15%	6%
Borrow non-book resources (ie, tools, seeds, sewing machine, 3D printer, etc)	7%	6%
Attend children's programs such as Storytime	11%	5%
Use a makerspace	4%	5%

Online users say many library services are available online. Seventy percent say they can see online what books are available. More than three in five say they can download an audio book or download an e-book.⁹

Two findings from this list stand out. About one in ten of the online users consistently say certain information or services are not available online, when it is likely that the service is indeed available.

The larger opportunity for public libraries is that up to 40%, of online users just don't know if a service is available at their public library. This lack of knowledge lays out a major opening for libraries to educate their existing users on the already available online services.



Discovery experience leaves room for improvement

Public library users are a bit overly optimistic about how well library search tools work in general, and there are many library users who just don't know if a service is available online.

For example, only 36 percent of those who use the library online say most of the library resources are available online. Forty-seven percent say some of the resources are available online. Only 14 percent say a few of the resources are available online and three percent say none of the resources are.¹⁰

The schism in library users' views is apparent in two questions.

- 1) Seven in ten online library users (69%) say library search tools show you everything that the library has. Thirty percent say the tools do not show everything.¹¹
- 2) More than half of library users (53%) say they sometimes cannot find what they want in the library.¹³

The research shows there is a substantial opportunity for libraries to offer more services online and more complete search capabilities online to match those resources.

More than half

53%

of library users say they sometimes cannot find what they want in the library.

LIBRARY VS NETFLIX

Twenty-five percent of people say that using the library is harder than using Amazon or Netflix. This speaks to the opportunity libraries have to adopt more modern, familiar interfaces similar to the way tech companies design solutions for discovery.

This discovery challenge may be one of the many reasons that librarians are a much valued resource. Two-thirds of library users (66%) consult librarians at least a couple of times a year. That includes nine percent who consult librarians at least once a week and 15 percent who consult the librarians several times a month. Forty-three percent consult libraries several times a year.¹⁴ One underappreciated value of online library access is that half of the online users say they can consult their librarians online, without having to physically visit the library.

Patrons Lack Familiarity with Library Resources

Only about one in five Americans (21%) say they are very familiar with what their local public library offers. A roughly equal number is not familiar with library holdings. About half (57%) are somewhat familiar.

Why don't people use the library? **Those who do not use the public library say it is because they already have what they need (62%).**¹⁵ Given the incredible resources that libraries offer, this is another opportunity for outreach and education, to show the non-users that libraries do have resources they can use.

The picture is different for library users. Asked why they do not use the library more often, four in ten library users (39%) say they use the library as often as they like. Access is the main reason users do not use the library more often: 33 percent of users say "It is often hard to actually visit the library." Another reason is that 19 percent say they do not know enough about what the library offers and they do not know how to find out.¹²

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Libraries are uniquely positioned to safely engage and strengthen communities

As the nation continues to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, public libraries are in a strong position.

Libraries are highly trusted. Forty-one percent of Americans say they trust the information from the public library a great deal, compared to only 30 percent who have the same level of trust in search engines.¹⁶ In addition, about a third of Americans (30%) say libraries are more important in the wake of COVID-19.

As the pandemic continues, people say going to the public library is just about as risky as going to the grocery store. Forty percent see a small risk or no risk to going to the public library, with 54 percent saying a moderate or major risk. For grocery stores, 47 percent see low risk and 53 percent see a higher risk. For comparison, only 30 percent see a low risk in eating at a restaurant, while 70 percent see an elevated risk.¹⁷

The pandemic has had major economic impacts, particularly on local governments. Library leaders are bracing for the impact of reduced funding, considering reallocation or reprioritization of resources, while some have already had to furlough or reduce staff. **Even so, four in ten US adults (41%) say funding for public libraries should be increased in the wake of COVID-19, and one in three (33%) say funding should be kept the same.** One in nine (11%) say funding should be decreased.¹⁸

The rapid pivot to online use during the pandemic raises the question for some whether public libraries are too outdated to provide services in the 21st century. With the libraries' performance during the pandemic, Americans do not see that private enterprises like Amazon or online non-profit operations such as Wikipedia can replace local public libraries. **Seven in ten people (71%) reject the idea that Amazon or Wikipedia could replace public libraries.**¹⁹

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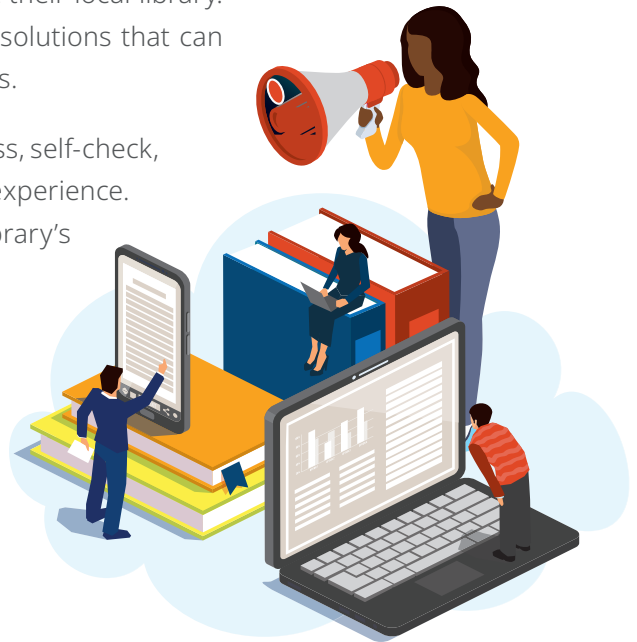
Conclusion

Libraries are long-standing, beloved civic institutions that, like other valued community organizations, have been immensely challenged by the pandemic. Yet confidence in public libraries remains high, despite a decline in overall usage.

As they look toward safely re-opening their doors to the public, libraries are in a unique position to re-engage patrons beyond their four walls. Based on this research, it is apparent that libraries could provide a better discovery experience and could better inform patrons about the breadth of resources available to them at their local library. That said, libraries can now be well served to consider compelling solutions that can virtually connect them with patrons and deliver on their expectations.

Expanding capabilities to create discovery experiences, account access, self-check, and even curbside pickup are all essential to optimizing the patron experience. Such tools are key to strengthening connections and advancing the library's role in the community, now more than ever.

A post-pandemic world will require reprioritization and, above all, higher levels of patron engagement than we have ever experienced.



Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted by Witt Associates LLC using the SurveyMonkey platform on Sept. 10–11, 2020. The sample was drawn from the U.S. portion of the SurveyMonkey Global Audience panel. A survey drawn in this manner does not have a sampling margin of error. If the sample had been drawn randomly, the margin of error would have been 3 percentage points plus or minus for results based on the entire sample.

Survey Questions Cited in This Report

- 1 We're interested in how much confidence you have in some local institutions. In general, how much confidence do you have in your local government, public schools, and public library?
- 2 Now thinking about local places that you may or may not have visited in person or used its resources online ... please indicate whether you have ever visited your public library or Department of Motor Vehicles.
- 3 Did you visit a public library or public library bookmobile in person or use the library's website, app or other resources online in 2019, January to February 2020 and since March 2020?
- 4 Many local businesses and institutions have closed temporarily because of COVID-19. As far as you know what you, has your local public library been closed at least for some period since March 2020?
- 5 What about this week: is your local public library open so you could physically visit it if you wanted to?
- 6 People use and visit public libraries for different reasons. During 2019, which types of materials did you use or visit a public library to obtain?
- 7 People use and visit public libraries for different reasons. Since March of this year, 2020, which types of materials did you use or visit a public library to obtain?
- 8 Many public libraries have websites or apps that allow you to access some of the libraries' resources. Have you ever visited a website or used an app to access a public library's resources?
- 9 What kind of activities can you perform on your public libraries' website, through an app such as Libby, or an app just for your library?
- 10 How much of the libraries' resources can you access from the website or app?
- 11 Whether searching in person at the library or online, do you think that the public library search tools show you everything available from the library?
- 12 Why don't you use the library more often?
- 13 Have there been times where you were looking for specific information at the public library, but you could not find that information, whether in person or online?
- 14 How often, if ever, have you consulted with librarians at your public libraries?
- 15 Why don't you use or visit the library?
- 16 Thinking about various potential sources of information you might seek out, how much do you trust these sources to provide accurate and authoritative information?
- 17 COVID-19 has had different impacts across the country. Thinking about your community right now, how much of a risk to your health and well-being are your various activities?
- 18 Do you think public funding for libraries should be increased, decreased or kept the same in the wake of the pandemic?
- 19 In the wake of the pandemic, do you think public libraries should be replaced by a corporation such as Amazon or online service such as Wikipedia?



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