

Rural Libraries in America

Overview Rural libraries serve approximately 30 million Americans, helping their communities solve persistent challenges with broadband access, early learning, workforce development, and access to reliable information.

This summary, and its accompanying State Data Tables, updates a 2013 IMLS report that used Public Libraries Survey (PLS) data to present analyses based on the FY 2017 PLS, with some comparisons to FY 2008.

The PLS data show that rural library resources are more than ever within reach for their communities, with the expansion of eBooks and downloadable audio content. Rural libraries address the information needs in their communities with content-rich programming, focusing on issues of importance. Rural library staff answer questions and provide valuable programs on topics as diverse as children's storytimes, health literacy, and workforce development.

Rural is defined as it was in the 2013 report: using National Center for Education Statistics urban-centric locale codes that incorporate the U.S. Census Bureau's characterization of areas as rural.

RURAL LIBRARIES ARE WITHIN REACH OF THEIR PATRONS



Almost four out of ten of America's public libraries are located in rural communities

Just over

30 million

Americans are served by the nation's approximately 4,000 rural library systems



Rural Americans visited libraries more than 117 million times in FY 2017

In addition to leveraging their library buildings and bookmobiles, rural libraries partner with other community organizations to serve patrons "where they are"

State libraries provide support with bookmobiles, books-by-mail, and remote lockers to better reach residents in rural areas



The rapid expansion of electronic resources, with cooperation facilitated by state libraries, has increased rural patrons' access to eBooks and other library materials

More than 14,000 rural library staff members answered almost 18 million questions for their patrons in 2017



4.9

The average American lives about 2.2 miles from a library. In rural America, the average person is 4.9 miles from a library



ABOUT THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES SURVEY (PLS)

The PLS, collected annually since 1988 via the Federal-State Cooperative System, examines when, where, and how library services are changing to meet the needs of the public. These data, supplied by more than 9,000 public library systems that operate more than 17,000 library facilities across the country, provide information that policymakers and practitioners can use to make informed decisions about the support and strategic management of libraries. To access PLS reports and data, visit: <https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey>.



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RURAL LIBRARIES ANCHOR THEIR COMMUNITIES

Rural libraries provided their patrons with access to more than:

- 100 million books,
- 154 million eBooks,
- 65 million downloadable audio materials,
- 11 million DVDs, VHS, and streaming videos



Rural libraries often house local history collections

State libraries facilitate cooperation across libraries

within their states, developing best practices for delivering community-focused programming

Almost 4 in 10 rural libraries have one staff member who wears many hats – but staff are not alone because state libraries help by:

- Providing professional development activities
- Helping rural library staff network with others both inside and outside their state
- Supporting summer reading programs at rural libraries, helping to fight the “summer slide”.



Programming to connect people to information resources is increasing to meet local needs

- Rural libraries offered 34% more programs in 2017 than in 2008
- In 2017, rural libraries ran nearly 750,000 programs with 12.5 million attendees.
- About one of every ten visits to a rural library included attending a program
- Of these programs:
 - » Over 400,000 were focused on children
 - » More than 61,000 targeted young adults
 - » They covered topics of local interest such as children’s storytimes, makerspaces, health literacy, and workforce development



RURAL LIBRARIES LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD IN A CHANGING DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

Rural libraries provide access to a wealth of resources

Rural libraries support lifelong learning to users of all ages and levels

The number of eBooks and downloadable audio materials has more than doubled between 2008 and 2017, expanding resources available for rural residents



State libraries support digital literacy programs. Some states use their IMLS Grants to States funding to enable libraries to provide mobile hotspots for patron check-out to bridge the digital divide in communities that lack broadband coverage

Rural libraries provide Internet access:

- More than 46,000 Internet computers (14% increase since 2008) were used more than 23 million times by rural library patrons
- One-in-five library visitors used an Internet computer at a rural library
- WiFi – patrons bring their own devices or borrow ones from the library; more than 33 million sessions were logged at rural libraries
- Rural library staff help patrons navigate the increasingly complicated web of online information
- Internet resources provided by rural libraries support economic development, entrepreneurship, students during after-school hours, formal on-line education, telehealth, access to government and community information, and lifelong learning for their communities