

Wisconsin Policy Forum: New roles emerge for Wisconsin Public Libraries in the digital age

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Wisconsinites are visiting their local library about as often as they did two decades ago, but the digital revolution has changed how they use libraries, with Wi-Fi and electronic content use and program attendance on the rise, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

Wisconsin's rural libraries have seen significant increases in visits and circulation relative to their counterparts in cities, suburbs or towns, the report finds.

"Rural libraries had 40% more visitors in 2018 than 2000, while visits to suburban libraries grew just 0.5% and visits to libraries in cities and towns dropped," the report finds.

Findings from the widely respected Marquette Law School Poll also show differences by race and income on why Wisconsinites use local libraries. Nonwhite, low-income and elderly respondents to the poll were more likely to say they visited the library to get assistance from a librarian, while nonwhite Wisconsinites also were more likely to say they visited libraries to participate in events.

These findings are based on analysis of data from the state Department of Public Instruction regarding services and finances of the nearly 400 municipal, county or tribal libraries in Wisconsin. Each of these belongs to one of 16 public library systems in the state, funded primarily by municipalities and counties.

The findings also come as national research suggests rising program attendance could be due in part to greater recognition of libraries as a source for job training

and language building. That research also indicates public perception of libraries is evolving toward them being seen as more of a “community hub,” as opposed to simply a public space with free books.

“Today, a regular (library) visit might involve an adult dropping off a child at a popular weekly program while he or she stays on site to use the public Wi-Fi,” the report says.

Two key measures of library usage, total visits and circulation (books or other materials that are checked out) rose from 2000 to 2009, the height of the Great Recession. From there they declined, reaching a level in 2018 near where they had been 18 years ago.

But even as total visits dipped in the last decade, other measures show sharp increases in Wi-Fi use, e-content circulation, and program attendance. Among 106 libraries that tracked Wi-Fi usage from 2013 to 2017, it increased 103%.

From 2015 to 2018 alone, use of e-content such as electronic copies of print books or audio books rose from 2.95 million to 4.47 million, an increase of 51%.

Attendance at programs also more than doubled from 2000 to 2018. The increase was about 67% at city libraries and more than 120% at suburban, town, and rural libraries. The Madison Public Libraries saw program attendance more than quadruple during that period. It offers programs serving all age groups including topics like “Preschool Storytime” and “One-on-One Computer Assistance.”

The report concludes that local and state policymakers need to understand these trends when making decisions about funding for Wisconsin’s libraries. New technologies may bring greater ongoing costs than did books, but they also assert the library’s ongoing value to the community.

“In the coming years, local and state leaders in Wisconsin will need to consider the changing role libraries play in the lives of citizens – especially those on the margins – when deciding on future programming, staffing, and funding” the report finds.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is the state’s leading nonpartisan, independent public policy research group. It is a nonprofit funded primarily by contributions from a diverse group of members that include businesses, local governments, school districts, nonprofits and individuals throughout Wisconsin.