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Public Libraries and the Pandemic

Digital Shifts and Disparities to Overcome

Lisa Guernsey, Sabia Prescott, & Claire Park

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About Teaching, Learning & Tech

Teaching, Learning & Tech focuses on how educators and other professionals can use new media and technologies to promote more equitable systems of learning, from pre-K through 12th grade and into the post-secondary years.

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Executive Summary

In the fall and winter of 2020, New America embarked on a snapshot study to gather data on how—or if—people were discovering, accessing, and using their public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on materials that libraries made available online. We also explored how various libraries were adapting to the crisis. Our methodology included a nationally representative survey of the general public (n=2,620) conducted from September 25 and October 13, 2020; a convenience sample of educators (n=118), surveyed from December 1 to December 31, 2020, and interviews with library leaders at selected sites around the country.

Results from the study show a meaningful shift toward the use of online resources and high levels of goodwill for public libraries and what they make available online. But the study also illuminates a host of significant challenges for libraries to overcome, particularly in improving their outreach and services to people of color, people in low-income households, and those who do not have adequate access to the internet at home. We found:

- Mixed awareness of the public library’s online resources
- A shift toward online resources
- Mostly positive attitudes toward the public library and its online resources
- Disparities in access to and use of the public library’s online resources

The pandemic has laid bare the extent of social and educational disparities by racial group, income, and education level. It has particularly affected those without high-speed home internet access, a group in which people of color, low-income Americans, and rural communities are over-represented. These disparities are the legacies of systems that were not built with everyone’s welfare in mind—such as library systems that were originally segregated and educational systems and technology networks designed by and for those able to afford and connect to the internet. The disparities are affecting the way people become aware of, connect to, and use their public libraries, and they need to be addressed head-on by libraries, education leaders, and policymakers both during and after the pandemic.

Our findings highlight the need for more inclusivity, more focus on providing internet access, and more awareness-raising initiatives with local organizations and schools. The stories in this report—of libraries developing mobile Wi-Fi options, creating digital navigator programs to support digital literacy, launching more online programs, and making use of outdoor spaces—show the possibilities

of transformation and partnership. The report concludes with eight recommendations for investment in library transformations, expansion of policies such as E-Rate and the Emergency Broadband Benefit to provide better internet access at home, and more collaboration with local schools and organizations. With these changes, libraries can leverage the lessons of the pandemic to help launch more equitable ecosystems of learning across communities, providing access to knowledge, resources, and training, online and off.

Introduction

When COVID-19 became a global pandemic in March 2020, libraries had to act fast. Most library leaders halted any service or program that could potentially spread the virus, which, for many, meant shutting off access to their buildings and stopping the circulation of all books and other tangible materials. Two months later, as the death toll rose across the United States and hopes of containment evaporated, many public and private institutions around the country continued to keep doors closed, shifting to socially distant and online approaches. By May of 2020, according to the American Library Association (ALA), 99 percent of libraries had limited access to their materials, and 62 percent had fully closed their buildings.¹

Library leaders were also bracing for, or already having to cope with, deep cuts to their staffing and hours.² In some places, such as the Santa Monica Public Library, cuts were already underway, with 26 positions eliminated.³ The emergency also led to sudden shifts in staff responsibilities: some city and county governments, for example, reassigned public librarians and other staff at public libraries to assist with food distribution and responding to COVID-19.

Most public libraries, however, were still determined to continue with their primary mission: to provide services to residents seeking knowledge, learning opportunities, and connections to information. This meant “ramping up the virtual,” as *Atlantic* writer Deborah Fallows noted last spring,⁴ and focusing on online resources as much as, if not more, than off-line ones. Since the 1990s, public libraries have been augmenting their holdings to ensure that they are able to give patrons the opportunity to check out ebooks and other digital media, to get to the internet via free Wi-Fi and computer stations, and to tap into “ask a librarian” services offered via phone, chat, or email. Many public libraries have also hosted educational programs to help adults gain skills in using online tools. As the Information Policy & Access Center put it seven years ago, libraries had become “vital hubs,” providing public access to technologies and digital content.”⁵

By the summer of 2020, with public buildings closed, reliable health information more pertinent than ever, jobs drying up, and millions of Americans trying to run their lives almost entirely online, these vital hubs of digital materials would be more important than ever. But did enough people know about these free resources? Would they find them and use them? Who would have internet access at home adequate to be able to tap in? And what would happen to those who were able to get online because of the facilities’ free Wi-Fi access and computer labs, services now closed because of the pandemic?

Background on the State of Public Libraries

Public libraries hold many responsibilities within their communities. They are free, non-commercial, and neutral spaces for seeking resources and information, whether for school, work, personal enrichment, or skills development.⁶ In a 2015 Pew Research Center survey on the role of libraries, 65 percent of respondents said closing their local public library would have a major impact on their community.⁷ Thirty-seven percent with incomes lower than \$30,000 a year said a library closure would have a big impact on them personally.⁸ And, according to the Pew study, lower-income, Black, and Hispanic Americans, were more likely to say that “closing their local public library would have a *major impact* on them or their family.”⁹

Long before the arrival of the coronavirus, libraries were seen as key sources of information about health and jobs—two topics that the pandemic and its economic repercussions have brought front and center. The 2015 Pew survey showed that among those who used a library’s computers, internet connections, or Wi-Fi, 42 percent were using those tools for health-related searches,¹⁰ whether to seek out information about troubling new diagnoses or to find books and support groups on how to help loved ones battling depression or other health issues. Libraries are also key sources of support for community members looking for work, since they offer a place to search the job market online, get assistance in filling out applications, and update computer and technology skills.¹¹

Libraries are seen as key sources of information about health and jobs—two topics that the pandemic and its economic repercussions have brought front and center.

As journalist Linda Poon wrote in a Bloomberg CityLab article last year: “public libraries are, in fact, one of the last free spaces in the U.S. where vulnerable populations can seek out unemployment assistance, internet and computer access, and daytime shelter from the streets; for some, they’re also de facto child-care centers.”¹² They are also seen as a critical part of the infrastructure necessary to help people avoid falling for misinformation and disinformation. Libraries and their staff have a reputation for helping people “decide what

information they can trust,” according to 65 percent of respondents in the Pew study.¹³

But libraries have also been facing existential challenges over the past few decades. The internet and its never-ending stream of digital media, available via smartphones at any time anywhere, have altered the way people read and gather information. The arrival of Amazon.com gave higher-income Americans the ability to order books that arrive in 24 hours or that immediately appear on a tablet or e-reader. Pew data on library visitation from 2012 to 2015 (the only time period in which comparable national data is available on this question) raised concerns that the share of Americans using public libraries “has ebbed somewhat.”¹⁴

Some institutions themselves have been pushing to rectify the generational harms of the public library’s segregated history, including but not limited to the restrictions of the Jim Crow era designed to exclude Black people from using library facilities.¹⁵ Librarians have pushed to develop modern makerspaces, to renovate children’s areas to be more inviting and conducive to active play-based learning, and to work more intentionally at becoming relevant places for immigrants, low-income families, and people of color.¹⁶ Public libraries have also been working to shake the stereotype that they are somber, antiquated facilities where people worry about being “shushed.” ALA’s *Intersections* blog (tagline: “a blog on diversity, literacy, and outreach”) published a call in 2019 for an improved definition of outreach and much more attention to outreach across the library field. As the authors wrote, “we tend to focus on our brick and mortar buildings: we build collections for our buildings; we hire staff for the buildings; we create programs for within our buildings; and we design our policies and procedures for our buildings. These big-ticket items need to be reworked a little—or a lot—to translate well in Outreach.”¹⁷

Access to online resources offered by a public library fundamentally depends on whether or not people are adequately connected to the internet. Having a smartphone is often not enough.

That call for less of a focus on buildings was prescient, given that a quarter of a year later the pandemic would lead libraries to close those buildings or drastically reduce how many people could enter at one time. Libraries would need to

emphasize their digital technologies and online resources to retain, recruit, and support their patrons. Those technologies include online catalogs that enable people to search for books to be picked up curbside; the apps and other software programs that enable people to borrow ebooks and immediately read them on their devices; virtual programming like story times over Facebook Live; and online exhibits (or links to exhibits) of digitized artwork, manuscripts, or photographs.

Yet access to online resources offered by a public library fundamentally depends on whether or not people are adequately connected to the internet. Having a smartphone is often not enough. Access may be unreliable, and taking part in virtual events or online trainings or downloading large files may lead users to exceed the monthly data limits in their mobile plans.¹⁸ More than 77 million people in the U.S. lack an adequate home internet connection; they may have no internet access at all or rely exclusively on a connection through their smartphone and mobile wireless plan.¹⁹ A disproportionate number of them are older Americans or veterans, are Native American, Black, or Hispanic, or live in low-income households and are members of communities already marginalized and under-resourced.²⁰ Families of color are hit particularly hard. One out of every three Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native households with children do not have high-speed home internet access.²¹

The Impact of Unaffordable Internet Access at Home

Improving broadband access and broadband capacity at home is essential to ensuring that people can access online and digital resources.²² How can policymakers make headway in improving home broadband access? First, they should consider cost.

Cost is one of the major barriers to getting people connected, and with the high average price of internet service in the United States, low-income households are particularly vulnerable to falling on the wrong side of the digital divide. In its annually published reports on the state of broadband deployment in the country, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has found that, on average, the proportion of the population with access to different speeds of service is highest in counties with the highest median household income and the lowest poverty rate.²³ A study from early 2019 found that while 92 percent of U.S. adults with an annual income greater than \$75,000 have home broadband service, only 56 percent of adults making less than \$30,000 are home broadband users.²⁴ There is a clear causal relation between income level and cost of service—in that survey, 51 percent of six million U.S. households with annual incomes under \$25,000 did not have home internet because it was too expensive.²⁵

The federal Lifeline program could help. But the program's current subsidy is paltry; it currently offers a \$9.25 monthly subsidy to qualifying households, which

can use the subsidy towards telephone service, a home internet subscription, or a bundled wireless phone and data plan.²⁶ This covers only 14 percent of average monthly costs for fixed home internet service in the United States.²⁷ A household is restricted to just one subsidy, even if multiple eligible individuals live there.

In December 2020, recognizing the dire need to get more people connected during the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress allocated \$3.2 billion for the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, designed to help get low-income and vulnerable households online during the ongoing crisis. The program subsidized low-income households up to \$50 per month for broadband service, and it also expanded the criteria for eligibility to include those on the National School Breakfast Program/Lunch Program, those experiencing COVID-related loss of income, and federal Pell Grant recipients.

Lowering the cost of service would help too. Advertised monthly prices are just the start of what consumers have to pay for internet service. Service providers also charge activation, installation, equipment, and contract termination fees that can sometimes add up to 1,000 percent more to the advertised price per month.²⁸ These kinds of hidden fees not only produce higher monthly bills, but they make it more difficult for people to comparison-shop for the best deals. More transparency is needed. Disclosing all the costs of broadband internet plans—like the format of a nutrition label, an idea floated in *Slate* in December 2020—will not only help consumers better understand their monthly bill, but also make it more difficult for companies to charge consumers hidden fees concealed in hard-to-find terms and conditions pages.²⁹

Another lever that can lower the cost of broadband service is allowing new entrants to the marketplace. Research demonstrates that municipal networks deliver some of the most affordable and fastest internet service in the U.S.³⁰ However, in at least 20 states, municipal networks are not fully permitted.

Methodology

This project used both quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand the shifts in use of and access to libraries (primarily public libraries³¹) and their online resources before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted two online surveys. The first was of the general public (n=2,620), fielded from September 25th to October 13th, 2020. It was conducted with a cross-section of adults in the United States chosen to be representative on age, race and ethnicity, gender, and geography using SurveyMonkey’s opt-in database of approximately 15.5 million users. The second was fielded from December 1st through 31st, 2020, with educators and professionals who worked for community-based organizations (n=118), called “educators” for short in the results to follow. These educators learned about the survey through newsletters and social media channels associated with members of our project’s work group, including the Digital Public Library of America, the National Association for Media Literacy Education, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, and Data & Society Research Institute.

The purpose of the surveys was to gauge awareness and attitudes toward libraries (with most of the questions related to *public* libraries), usage of their online resources, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these usage patterns. In addition to the surveys, we conducted virtual focus groups with members of the general public and informal one-on-one interviews with public library experts (representing a diversity of geographic regions, communities, and programming) to better understand their challenges and opportunities during the pandemic. For complete descriptions of the methodologies used, see appendices 1 and 3.

Limitations

Both surveys were conducted online, with respondents answering questions via smartphones or computers; results therefore do not include people who have no access to a device or internet connection. Eighty-eight percent of respondents to this general public survey said they had high-speed internet access at home, a higher percentage than the 73 percent of respondents to the Pew Research Center’s annual survey who report having broadband access at home.³² Since the survey asks about online use of library assets, this is an important limitation in these findings and indicates potential for further work. If anything, we believe it is logical to assume that a fuller sampling of the American public designed to include those with no access to a device or internet connection would underscore the trends shown in the data. For more information, see **About Our General Public Respondents**.

The educator survey—displayed as **The Educators’ Perspective** in the findings section of this report—was not designed to be representative of the universe of professionals who might interact with or communicate about the public library, and thus the findings are not generalizable. Both surveys were conducted in English.

About Our General Public Survey Respondents

The majority of the 2,620 adults who took our survey had experience with their public library and other libraries before the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to connect with their local libraries in some way during the pandemic. The table below provides more detail on our respondents’ relationship with the public library, their use of other types of libraries (such as school libraries), the degree of access to the internet they have at home, and the devices they used to take the survey.

Relationship with the Public Library	
<i>% of General Public Respondents Who...</i>	
66%	have their own public library card
82%	used the public library “in the past, before COVID-19 became widespread” (either in-person or online)
57%	used the public library “since the COVID-19 pandemic” (either in-person or online)
15%	lost their main source of internet access when the library closed due to the pandemic
3%	continued to use the public library’s Wi-Fi from outside the building after the library closed
2%	were unable to find another Wi-Fi connection after the library closed

Use of Other Types of Libraries	
<i>% of General Public Respondents Who...</i>	
20%	used a website/app from a college or university library since the COVID-19 pandemic
14%	are parents of children under 18 who used a website/app from a K-12 school library since the COVID-19 pandemic

Access to the Internet in Their Home	
<i>% of General Public Respondents Who...</i>	
88%	have high-speed internet service at home
14%	are parents of children under 18 who used a website/app from a K-12 school library since the COVID-19 pandemic
2%	have only dial-up service
2%	have no internet access at home

Device Used to Take This Survey	
59%	used a computer
40%	used a phone or tablet

Findings

Below we highlight several key findings and provide 10 charts to help visualize the data. For the full reports on top-line findings and complete survey results, see appendices 1-4.

Mixed Awareness of the Public Library’s Online Offerings

Two out of three respondents to the general public survey—68 percent—said they were aware of a public library in their area that offered online resources, as shown in **Chart 1**. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) were not sure. Among the respondents who had used a public library’s online resources, 42 percent said they found out about them from a library website and 39 percent from the library itself (this included examples such as seeing a library poster that informed them of online resources). About 1 in 4 pointed to a librarian or teacher (24 percent) or a search engine like Google (25 percent). See **Chart 2**.

When asked what their library did to encourage people to use the library during the pandemic, relatively low numbers—no more than 1 in 4—were aware of such offerings as curbside delivery, the elimination of late fees, or the provision of Wi-Fi outside of the building. Thirty-six percent were unsure whether the library had done any of those things.

→ ONLINE RESOURCES DEFINED

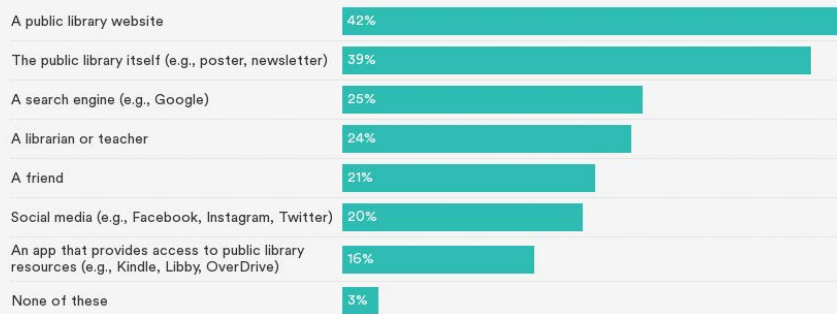
In the survey questions, “online resources” were defined as resources that are available on the internet and that include things like audio books, e-books, databases, podcasts, videos, virtual events, and webinars.



Chart 2: Discovery of public library's online resources

How did you find out that the public library has online resources? Did you find out from: (Choose all that apply.)

(n=1,150)



This represents the limited base of respondents who indicated having used the library's website or app before or since the start of COVID-19. Online resources are defined as resources that are available on the internet and include things like audio books, e-books, databases, podcasts, videos, virtual events, and webinars.

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→ THE EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE

There is room for improvement in how libraries publicize their programs and services.

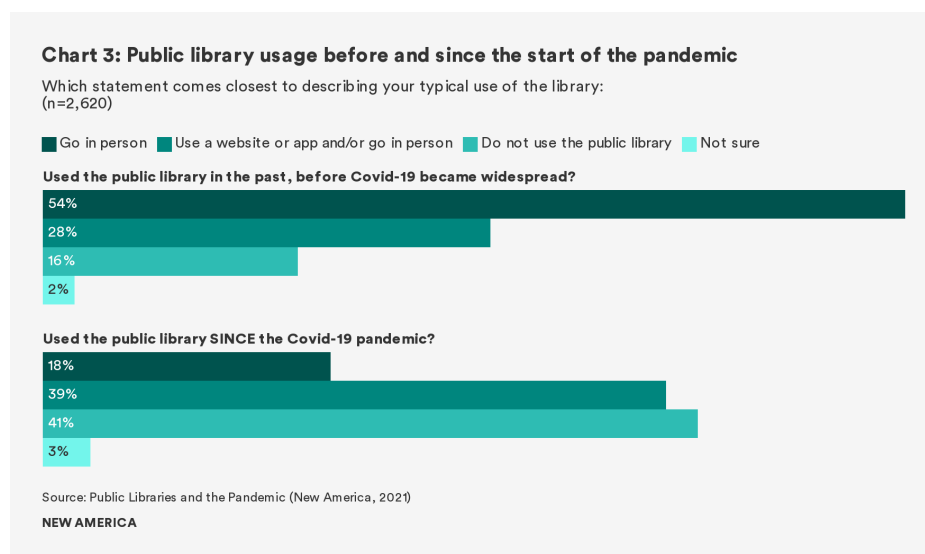
- Only about 1 in 7 educators think that “virtually all” (3 percent) or “most” (11 percent) of their clients³³ use the library’s online resources—they are far more likely to say it is “some” (31 percent) or “few” (39 percent).
- 58 percent believe that the main reason their clients do not use the library’s online resources is because their clients do not know about them.
- The vast majority (80 percent) agree that it is important for a person in their position to be knowledgeable about the library’s programs and services, but a surprisingly high percent (38) think the library does a *poor* job getting the word out.

A Shift Toward Online Resources

In-person visits to the public library obviously dropped as COVID-19 closed down daily life. Survey respondents who said visiting the library in person was the typical way they used the public library went from 54 percent pre-pandemic to 18 percent during the pandemic. But the question we were most interested in

answering was: What was the effect of COVID-19 on the use of the public library’s website or app and the online resources (such as e-books) offered within them?

According to the survey results, the impact is indisputable. Twenty-eight percent of survey takers indicated that they had used the public library’s website or app before COVID-19 became widespread, compared with 39 percent who said they did so after the pandemic started, for a net increase of 11 percentage points, shown in **Chart 3**. Moreover, among those who said they started to use online resources after COVID-19 happened, 2 in 3—67 percent—said the pandemic was a major reason.



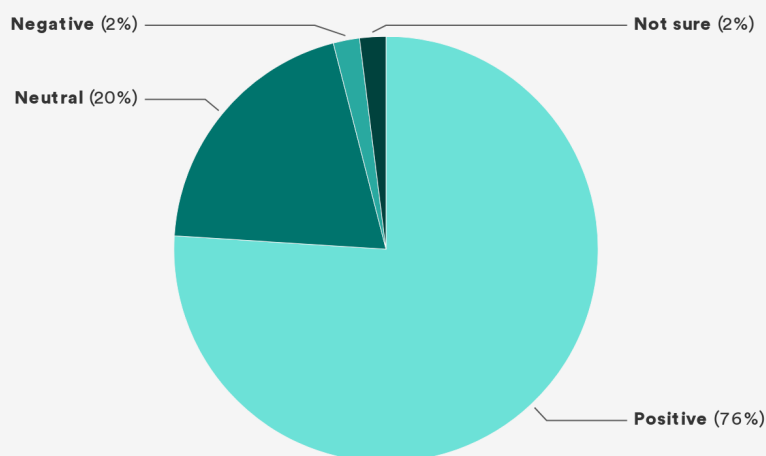
Mostly Positive Attitudes toward the Public Library and Its Online Resources

Three-quarters of respondents said they have a positive impression of the public library, as shown in **Chart 4**. Fully 2 out of 3 (66 percent) report that they currently have a public library card. And among those respondents who have used the public library’s online resources, the vast majority give them positive ratings—47 percent rated online resources “good” and 43 percent rated them “excellent.” A similarly large percentage said it is “very easy” (41 percent) or “somewhat easy” (45 percent) to find online resources from the public library.

But once they get into those online resources (such as a database or e-book library), many report having trouble finding what they want. Just half (49 percent) say that the statement “I easily find what I’m looking for” describes what usually happens when they try to get online resources.

Chart 4: Opinions of the public library

When you think about the public library, is your impression generally:
(n=2,620)



Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

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→ THE EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE

More than half the educators surveyed agreed with the statement: “My clients would be more likely to use the public library’s online resources if the interface was more user friendly” (15 percent strongly and 41 percent somewhat), although another 28 percent were unsure.

Disparities in Access to and Use of the Public Library’s Online Resources

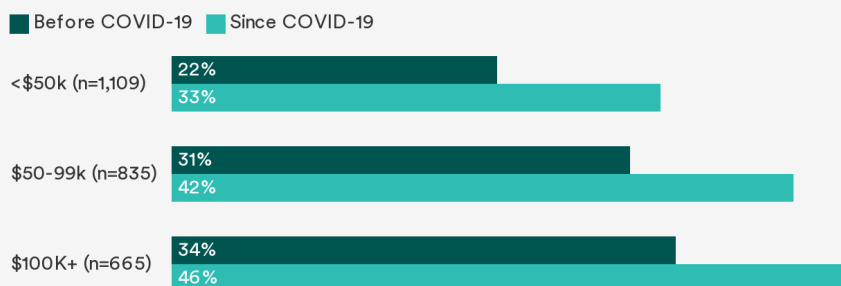
Survey results showed disparities in access to and awareness of public library resources across a variety of variables, including income, age, and racial identity. The results showed almost no meaningful differences across education levels or whether respondents lived in an urban, suburban, or rural area; respondents across these measures responded similarly to questions regarding library access and use.

Differences by Income

The higher the household income respondents reported, the more likely they were to answer *yes* when asked if there is a public library in their area that offers online resources: 62 percent for those whose annual household income is less than \$50,000 annually, compared with 71 percent for incomes of \$50,000–\$99,000 and 74 percent for incomes of \$100,000 or more. **Chart 5** shows that, similarly, those with higher incomes are more likely to say they used a public library’s website or app both before and after the pandemic. For example, 33 percent of respondents with a household income of less than \$50,000 said they used a library’s website or app since the pandemic started compared with 46 percent of those with incomes of more than \$100,000. Though this question cannot be used to draw objective conclusions about whether or not there are more often libraries that offer resources in proximity to households with higher income levels, it does indicate that both access and awareness may be predicted by income level.

Chart 5: Relationship between income and use of a public library's website or app

Income levels of respondents who said they used a library website or app:



Respondents were asked to give their best estimate of their annual household income in 2019.

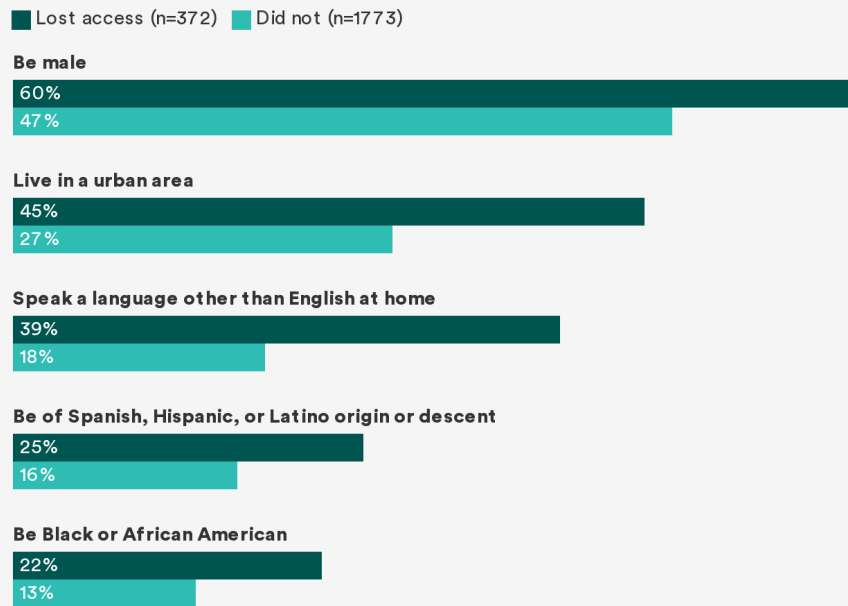
Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

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Lost Main Source of Internet Access

Furthermore, the survey shows meaningful differences between those who lost their main source of internet access when many public libraries shut down in March 2020 (15 percent of the sample) and those who did not (85 percent). Those who lost access were much more likely to be male, to live in an urban area, to say there is a language other than English spoken in their home, and to be a person of color. This finding is one of very few in the survey to show a meaningful difference between respondents living in urban and non-urban areas. **Chart 6** shows the proportions of respondents in each category.

Chart 6: Differences between those who lost their main source of internet with library closures and those who did not



“Lost access” refers to respondents who personally lost main internet access when the public library closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

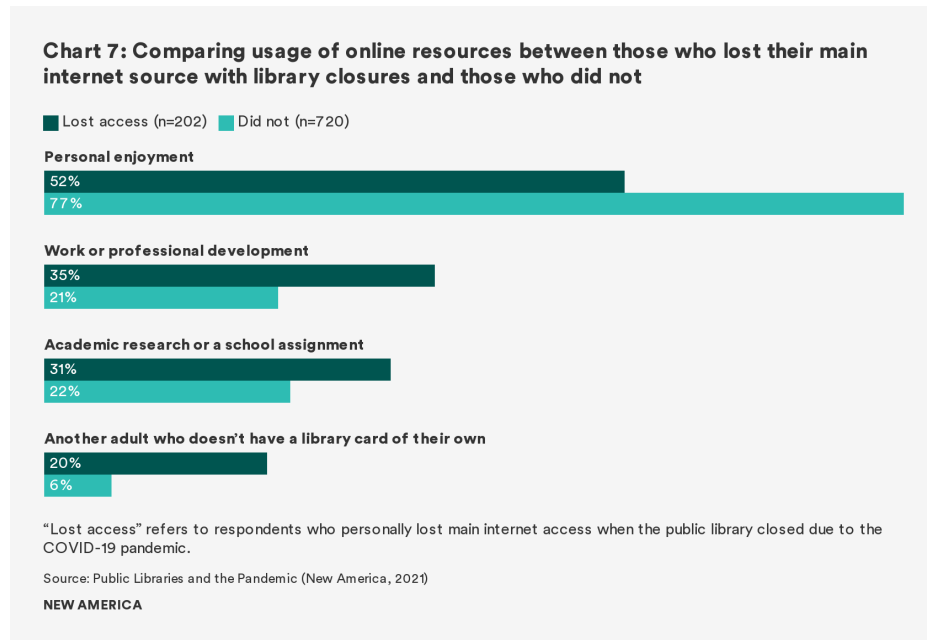
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→ THE EDUCATORS’ PERSPECTIVE

These findings are corroborated by the educators surveyed.

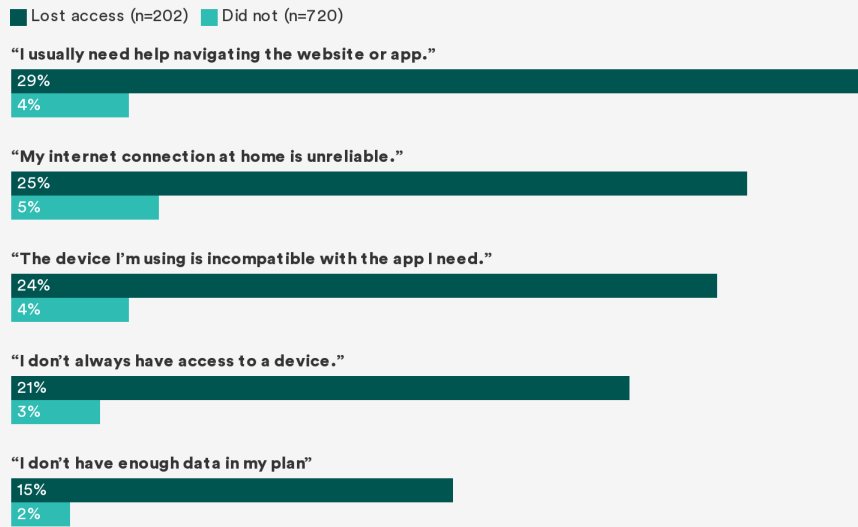
- Nearly 40 percent of respondents describe their client base as having a “low” or “very low” income, and more than 1 in 4 report “virtually all” or “most” of their clients speak a language other than English at home.
- A plurality of educators (42 percent) say “some” of their clients lost their main internet access as a result of COVID-19; another 4 percent said “virtually all” and 8 percent said “most.”
- Among those educators who say they have clients who lost access, 45 percent say their clients were most likely unable to find a new internet source.

There are also notable differences between those who lost their main internet access and those who did not when it comes to the reasons people use the public library’s online resources. Those who lost their main internet access are more likely to say they use online resources for school or work—or to help out another adult who is not a library card holder. They are less likely to say they use online resources for personal enjoyment. **Chart 7** shows reported reasons for using online materials by those who lost their main source of internet with the library closures and those who did not.



Those who lost their main internet access when the public libraries closed are far more likely to say they experienced five out of five technical obstacles when trying to get online resources, including restricted data plans, device incompatibility, and the need for assistance navigating the library website. **Chart 8** shows the proportions of respondents experiencing technical difficulties among those who did and did not lose internet access when libraries closed.

Chart 8: Respondents who experienced technical difficulties when accessing the library's online resources



"Lost access" refers to respondents who personally lost main internet access when the public library closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

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Differences by Age

Respondents over the age of 60 were more likely to report having experienced no issues in finding the materials they look for on their library's website, and more likely to say, "I easily find what I'm looking for" usually when they try to get online resources at the public library. These findings might contradict the common assumption that older citizens are less adept at using technology, pointing to possible differences in how different age groups utilize the library beyond the scope of this survey. **Chart 9** shows the proportions of respondents by age who reported ease in accessing online materials through the public library.

Chart 9: Challenges in accessing the library's online resources, by age

General public respondents	18-29 (n=458)	30-44 (n=679)	45-60 (n=606)	>60 (n=757)
Use the public library's website or app since Covid-19 happened	46%	49%	34%	32%
Have a generally positive impression of the public library	69%	74%	77%	83%
Say they lost their main internet access when the public library closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic	24%	22%	12%	5%

Limited base: Respondents who indicated having used the library's website or app before or since the start of COVID-19.	18-29 (n=236)	30-44 (n=365)	45-60 (n=234)	>60 (n=272)
Have used the public library's online resources for personal enjoyment	54%	66%	72%	86%
Say that "I generally have no problem getting online resources"	50%	50%	60%	72%
Say that "I easily find what I'm looking for" is what usually happens when they try to get online resources at the public library	43%	47%	42%	62%

Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

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Differences by Race/Ethnicity

The general public survey results showed some differentiation among racial groups in questions about barriers of access. White respondents were less likely than any other group to report needing help navigating the library website, struggling to find what they are looking for, and experiencing an inability to access the internet from home. Asked about specific barriers, Asian respondents were more likely than other racial groups to say, "I feel like I don't know where to begin" and "The search function is hard to figure out." Asian respondents were also more likely to say, "The library doesn't ever seem to have what I need online." Meanwhile, Black, African American, and Hispanic respondents were less likely to say, "I generally have no problem getting online resources" from the public library." **Chart 10** shows the proportion of respondents from each group who reported barriers to accessing the library's digital resources.

Chart 10: Challenges in accessing the library's online resources, by race

	Black (n=164)	Asian (n=111)	Hispanic (n=257)	White (n=780)
White respondents are less likely to say:				
"I usually need help navigating the website or app"	16%	13%	16%	9%
"My internet connection at home is unreliable"	18%	12%	14%	9%
"The device I'm using is incompatible with the app I need"	16%	10%	11%	8%
"I don't always have access to a device"	10%	11%	12%	6%
"I don't have enough data in my plan"	9%	10%	11%	5%
Asian respondents are more likely to say:				
"I feel like I don't know where to begin"	15%	20%	17%	12%
"The search function is hard to figure out"	16%	29%	18%	10%
African American and Hispanic respondents are less likely to say:				
"I generally have no problem getting online resources" from the public library	51%	61%	50%	59%

Respondents to this question indicated previously in the survey that they have used the public library's online resources, therefore the respondent base for this question is limited and does not reflect the entire population of survey takers. The four demographic categories listed appeared in the survey's response options as "Black or African American," "Asian," "Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin or descent," and "white."

Source: Public Libraries and the Pandemic (New America, 2021)

NEW AMERICA

→ **THE EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE**

Results from the educator survey echo these findings. For example, we asked:

There are many reasons people may NOT use online resources from the public library. Which of these do you think are true for your clients?

Percent of respondents choosing the following answers

58 - They don't know about online resources

44 - They don't have reliable or regular internet access

42 - The website or app would be confusing for them

38 - They probably think the library doesn't have what they are looking for online

33 - It may be easier for them to look elsewhere

27 - There may be a lack of interest in online resources

12 - The waiting lists are too long

9 - They may have trouble seeing the words on a screen

Stories from the Field: Libraries are Innovating, Pivoting, and Collaborating

Library leaders around the country have been under extreme pressure to redirect resources and redesign services on the fly, all while keeping the health and safety of staff and patrons foremost in mind to avoid COVID-19 outbreaks and mitigate spread of the virus. Below we tell four stories to provide examples of how public libraries have innovated and built new programs and services, pivoted to move staff members and materials to better meet the challenges of the time, and collaborated with local organizations to ensure continued access—and where possible, expanded access—to the libraries’ offerings, online and off.

Spotlight: Wi-Fi on Wheels

Even before COVID-19, library leaders at the Mandel Public Library of West Palm Beach were seeking to improve services for community members who were in economically dire straits and rarely came to the library. Not to be confused with Palm Beach—a city nearby known for its affluence—West Palm Beach has a poverty rate of 17.5 percent and a median household income of just over \$51,000 a year.³⁴

Like many libraries around the country, the Mandel Public Library jumped at the chance to apply for new funding that came with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act that Congress passed in late March 2020. Late last summer, it was awarded a grant to try a new method. With \$99,447 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), it bought a hybrid minivan with a Wi-Fi emitter attached to the roof and developed a plan to bring the library to parks in three neighborhoods around the city. In addition to the van, the one-time grant enabled Mandel to purchase 12 Wi-Fi hotspot devices and 10 laptop computers and hire a staff member for community engagement through these mobile services.³⁵ The van brings the equipment and enables services to be set up outside each day. “It’s literally popping up library services with a tent and chairs, and, in addition, loaning the hotspots,” says Jennifer McQuown, Mandel Library’s youth services manager.

These mobile libraries are a modern iteration of the decades-old bookmobiles. But recently libraries have been modifying the concept to go well beyond books—bringing internet access, new forms of media, and access to technology training and social services. A *Public Libraries* article last summer highlighted examples in North Carolina, Maine, Colorado, and New Mexico, noting, “libraries are much more than can be contained in four walls.”³⁶

Mobile libraries are also being designed to better support communities that have been long underserved. For Mandel Library, usage data from prior to the pandemic showed that in one neighborhood, for example, only 2 percent of elementary students had come to the library for homework help. To help more children, the mobile library will include a certified teacher in grades K-12 where needed. “We can offset the summer slide,” says director Lisa Hathaway. And, she adds, books and Wi-Fi are not enough. “For a lot of kids, they are hungry for knowledge—and for food.” Snacks will be provided too. Throughout the next year, Mandel will conduct formal and informal surveys to assess whether they are making a difference. “We may think we know what our community wants and needs but we need to ask them,” Hathaway says. “This is another way to get a hold on what people want from their public library during COVID and post COVID.”

Spotlight: Developing Digital Navigators

Paying for a monthly internet bill is not the only barrier to using digital tools and online resources. People have to learn how to set up and log in to wireless networks, figure out drop-down menus and other software features, navigate through email inboxes and web browsers, and more. This kind of digital literacy usually requires access to people who show them the ropes—who, in the parlance of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), can be their Digital Navigators.³⁷

To respond to the COVID-19 crisis, Salt Lake City Public Library built a digital navigator program last fall designed to help people in underserved areas get access to free, tailored technical assistance in English and Spanish. With a \$411,084 grant from IMLS, via the CARES Act,³⁸ the library has hired six Digital Navigators, three of whom are working with social service organizations in communities hardest hit by the pandemic and in economic distress. To tap into the service, people call the library’s hotline, answer a few questions about what they need, and are routed to a digital navigator best suited to support them.

The program, which plans to reach over 450 individuals over the year, is partnering with University Neighborhood Partners, which helps connect households to social services and helps families trying to figure out remote schooling during the pandemic; Catholic Community Services of Utah, which works with refugees and new immigrants on digital literacy and other skills; and Suazo Business Center, which focuses on services for people starting small businesses. It opened on December 1, 2020, after two months spent on hiring and training the Digital Navigators using resources available through NDIA, one of the project’s national partners. The Urban Libraries Council will be spreading word about the digital navigator model across the country.

“We didn’t want to just do a device distribution program,” Shauna Edson, the library’s digital inclusion coordinator and director of the project, told us (though the program did receive funding to purchase 200 devices for distribution when needed). Nor was there any way to create a computer lab model, given that buildings were closed. But this way, people are matched up with someone whose sole job is to spend time with them, walking them through how to use new tools. As Edson puts it, “they are not just rushed through a public computer lab session in 15 minutes.”

Spotlight: Pivoting to Put Programs Online

Janie Hermann, the public programming librarian at Princeton Public Library, knows how to pivot. At the heart of one of New Jersey’s most densely populated areas, the Princeton Public Library sees about 860,000 visitors who attend more than 1,300 programs a year—during a typical year. When buildings shut down last March, Hermann and her staff were forced to pivot their programming online to keep pace with the high demand. Then, a few months later, they pivoted again, this time to new digital platforms that could sustain the volume of people engaging with the library’s online programming. Finally, in the fall of 2020, Hermann realized visitors to the library had become adept at using the technology but were still craving the social interaction of in-person events. Once again, the library pivoted, from primarily passive, “sit and get” programming to providing additional interactive and community-building events, such as podcast discussion groups and coding classes. Today, the library offers hundreds of fully online, interactive programs each month, with audiences steadily growing.

“Our existing partnerships with local schools, community organizations, and arts programs in Princeton made most of our programming possible,” says Hannah Schmidl, the library’s public humanities coordinator. They “have given us the support we needed when everything went virtual.” In addition to funding from local organizations, Princeton has also made use of CARES Act dollars and one-time IMLS funding to gain access to some of the technology it needs to sustain online programming, such as advanced Zoom accounts and other paid platforms such as Crowdcast. And while these influxes of cash have made some technological advances possible, they also mean that the library’s continued use of these platforms hinges somewhat on future funding. “Part of the reason we’ve used so many platforms is because we don’t want to become too reliant on any one of them,” Hermann says. “We don’t know when funding is going to run out and we’ll stop being able to afford them.”

Hermann and Schmidl advise that libraries plan for every scenario and remain cognizant of the needs of the community. New technology brings learning curves, adjustment periods, and inevitable technical difficulties. But above all else, Hermann says, the focus must remain on our community. Each pivot in the course of Princeton’s response to pandemic challenges has been in direct

response to the needs of their clients. As she puts it, “without the community, we wouldn’t be here, and without listening to and pivoting toward their needs, we wouldn’t be doing our job.”

Spotlight: Moving a Rural Library Outside

Like most schools and libraries around the country, Catawba County Library System, located in a rural area north of Charlotte, NC, closed down all in-person activities in late March. Unlike most libraries, it reopened just one month later. While groups around the country shifted their focus entirely to online programming, Catawba County libraries moved many of their programs outside. While some programs did shift online, library leaders moved other ventures outdoors, from children’s programming to book pick-up and voting information sites where guests could remain masked and socially distanced. Since the start of the pandemic, the county system has met thousands of library patrons outside the walls of its buildings.

Jenny Gerami-Markham, assistant director of the library system, attributes everything this shift to the library’s existing partnerships and culture of collaboration. “Nothing we do happens without working together.” Markham says. “From partnerships with the health department, to the Alzheimer’s Association, to local schools and museums—we’re all plugged into the community in unique ways and it takes all of us working together to make it happen.” Library leaders have also strived to collaborate with each other. As they see it, engaging all library system staff is not only a necessary way to retain personnel during a critical time, but also it strengthens the quality of programming.

Building and maintaining these types of partnerships and collaborative environments is not always easy, especially during a global pandemic. According to Markham, Catawba County leaders have made a critical effort to look for the needs in the community first, and then build programming around what they learn. This sort of community-first approach not only helps the library ensure that it is meeting the needs of the community, but it also garners buy-in among external organizations. Among so many constantly shifting challenges and priorities this past year, collaboration and community remain two constants for Catawba County.

Recommendations

The next few years will be critical for the viability and transformation of public libraries. Drops in state revenue have led to multimillion dollar deficits in budgets around the country, and the May 2020 ALA survey of library plans showed that the majority of libraries anticipated reducing or eliminating staff positions and cutting programs. Meanwhile, the pandemic has laid bare the extent of disparities in the U.S. by income level, by race and ethnicity, and by one's ability to get high-speed internet at home. These disparities have emerged both from the legacy of systems within the library world that did not welcome people of color *and* from systems in communities (including educational institutions and technology companies) that have their own legacies of racism and that have not prioritized access to the internet and to learning opportunities for all.

The possibilities of transformation are everywhere—if investments can be made to make them real. Most Americans have positive feelings about their public libraries. Those who have used a library's app or website feel generally positive about the online resources available to them. Libraries are a key part of building a more equitable ecosystem of learning across communities, providing access to knowledge, resources, and training that may not be otherwise accessible to people with lower incomes. Libraries also help bring internet access and devices to more people across their communities by providing Wi-Fi zones, devices for checkout, and hotspots to borrow for home internet use.

To build a brighter future for public libraries and for the people they serve who have been hardest hit by the pandemic, particularly low-income households and community members of color, we offer eight recommendations for policymakers and leaders across library and education communities.

For policymakers:

- **Invest in efforts by libraries and schools** to bring internet access, online resources, and other tools to underserved households and communities.
 - Expand the E-Rate Program so that libraries and schools can get discounts on the technology services that patrons and students need to get online from home.
 - Support schools, libraries, and community-based organizations in distributing devices such as tablets, laptops, and hotspots.
- **Improve broadband access** to low-income households.

- Make the new \$50-per-month Emergency Broadband Benefit permanent and integrate it into the Lifeline program.
- Require internet service providers to be more transparent about internet costs and hidden fees.
- Enable municipalities to provide internet service.
- **Encourage collaboration** by developing grant programs and other incentives for community-based organizations, libraries, and schools to work together in raising awareness and jointly delivering library services.
- **Provide funding for the expansion of tech-support programs** such as Digital Navigators and other programs that enable on-demand, one-on-one troubleshooting, mentorship, and guidance.
- **Provide funding for needs assessments** and other research to take stock of how public libraries are used within communities that are marginalized or underserved.

For libraries:

- **Increase outreach and communications efforts** to make more residents aware of offerings both online and off.
 - Target outreach so that low-income households; Black, Hispanic, and Asian households; and patrons whose first language is not English are welcomed and connected to the library.
 - Experiment with mobile offerings that bring the library to underserved communities.
 - Establish Digital Navigator programs and similar mentoring initiatives that help patrons build technological fluency, digital literacy, and media literacy skills.

For educators and leaders of community-based organizations:

- **Develop deeper partnerships with libraries** to build awareness of resources for clients and students.
- **Include library leaders in strategic planning** for programs and services.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Top-line findings from survey of general public:



Appendix 2

Results from survey of general public:



Appendix 3

Top-line findings from survey of educators:



Appendix 4

Results from survey of educators:



Notes

1 The ALA surveyed libraries of all types from May 12 to 18, 2020 and received 3,850 responses; the respondents included approximately 30 percent of U.S. public library systems as well as academic and school libraries. Data on building closures is on slide 4 of the ALA presentation titled “Libraries Respond: COVID-19 Survey Results,” http://www.ilovelibraries.org/sites/default/files/PLA-MAY-2020-COVID-19-Survey-Results_PDF-Summary-web.pdf

2 Declines in tax revenue for states and localities will likely spell cuts for public libraries. ALA’s survey in May 2020 asked public library leaders their predictions for the future and showed that 36.6 percent planned to decrease staff, 50.3 percent would decrease hiring, and 67.4 percent would decrease the number of programs. See slide 29 of the ALA presentation titled “Moving Forward,” http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/advocacy/covid-19/COVID_Survey_Results_2_Reopening_and_Financial_Details.pdf

3 Madeline Pauker, “Santa Monica Public Library to Lose Dozens of Employees under Proposed Budget Cuts,” *Santa Monica Daily Press*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.smdp.com/santa-monica-public-library-to-lose-nearly-60-of-full-time-employees-under-proposed-budget-cuts/190635>. For an in-depth look at the many cuts and hiring freezes in public libraries, see Lisa Peet, “Budgeting for the New Normal: Libraries Respond to COVID-19 Funding Constraints,” *The Library Journal*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=budgeting-for-the-new-normal-libraries-respond-to-covid-19-funding-constraints>

4 Deborah Fallows, “The Post-Pandemic Future of Libraries,” *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2020/05/post-pandemic-future-libraries/611458/>

5 For more, see Information Policy & Access Center (iPAC)’s report on a series of surveys about digital inclusion in public libraries, <https://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/>

6 In a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, for example, majorities of respondents felt strongly that libraries were integral to education and among those who had used a public library website or mobile app in the past 12 months, 42 percent had used it for research or homework help. For those who had used a public library’s computers or Wi-Fi signal to go online, 60 percent had used those tools for research or schoolwork. See John Horrigan, *Libraries at the Crossroads* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, September 15, 2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/2015/Libraries-at-crossroads/>

7 Horrigan, 6.

8 Horrigan, 6

9 Horrigan, 9.

10 Horrigan, 8.

11 Even a decade ago, according to ALA’s report, *The State of America’s Libraries*, “job-seeking resources are among the most critical and most in demand among the technology resources available in U.S. public libraries.” See page 3 of *The State of America’s Libraries* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, April 2010), http://www.ala.org/news/sites/ala.org.news/files/content/mediapresscenter/americaslibraries/soal2010/ALA_Report_2010-ATI001-NEW1.pdf

12 Linda Poon, “Coronavirus Tests the Limits of America’s Public Libraries,” Bloomberg CityLab (website), June 24, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-24/how-coronavirus-is-changing-public-libraries>

13 Horrigan, 6.

14 Horrigan, 4.

15 Maurice Wheeler, Debbie Johnson-Houston, and Billie E. Walker. "A Brief History of Library Service to African Americans," *American Libraries* 35, no. 2 (2004): 42–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25649066>

16 For photographs and stories about public libraries' innovations, see Deborah Fallows, "A Portrait of Public Libraries," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2019/12/looking-libraries/603646/>

17 Rick Medrano and Rosa Granado, "Defining Outreach," *Intersections* (blog), December 20, 2019, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity/odlos-blog/defining-outreach>

18 Increasingly, digital equity experts are calling for greater attention to the "underconnected"—people who may have access to the internet somewhere in their community or at some time during their day (and who therefore would be considered part of the population that has "access to the internet") but who rely entirely on a smartphone to connect or who face problems of poor access points, unreliability, and cut-offs in service. For more see Vikki Katz and Victoria Rideout's *Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Low-Income Households* (New York: Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, 2016), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED574416>

19 S. Derek Turner and Matthew F. Wood of Free Press in their comments submitted to the FCC in response to a notice of inquiry, September 18, 2020, page 4, https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2020-09/free_press_2020_section_706_inquiry_comments.pdf. On page 3, Turner and Wood write that "a growing number of households are reliant on mobile data subscriptions as their sole form of access, and are thus more likely to have an inadequate quality of connectivity and quantity of data, especially during these times when many families are working and schooling from home."

20 Jeremiah J. Underhill, "Consequences Could be Big for Seniors without Internet During COVID-19," American Bar Association (website), May 5, 2020, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_aging/resources/coronavirus-update-and-the-elder-law-community/covid-19-amplifies-isolation--lack-of-access-to-care--for-senior/; Rob Coons, "Veterans and Military Families Need Internet to Connect to Our Economy," *The Hill*, November 28, 2017, <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/361888-veterans-and-military-families-need-internet-to-connect-to-our-economy>; Jonathan Nez, Testimony of the President of the Navajo Nation Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce Full Committee Hearing on "Addressing the Urgent Needs of Our Tribal Communities," July 8, 2020, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IF/IF00/20200708/110874/HHRG-116-IF00-Wstate-NezJ-20200708.pdf>; <https://www.jbhe.com/2020/05/how-the-racial-digital-divide-impacts-online-education-during-the-pandemic/>; Profiles of Latinos and Technology 2015, National Council of La Raza, https://www.unidosus.org/Assets/uploads/Publications/profileslatinosandtech_issue1_42815.pdf; and Vinhcent Le, "Closing the Digital Divide for Low-Income Communities," *Greenlining* (blog), September 5, 2019, <https://greenlining.org/blog-category/2019/closing-the-digital-divide-for-low-income-communities/>

21 John B. Horrigan, "Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap," an analysis conducted by Horrigan, a national expert on technology adoption, for the Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed), National Indian Education Association (NIEA), National Urban League (NUL), and UnidosUS using data from the 2018 American Community Survey1 (ACS), https://futureready.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HomeworkGap_FINAL7.22.2020.pdf. See also Michael Calabrese and Amir Nasr, *The Online Learning Equity Gap: Innovative Solutions to Connect All Students atHome* (Washington, DC: New America, November 2020), <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/online-learning-equity-gap/i-pandemic->

disruption-from-homework-gap-to-remote-learning-chasm

22 See arguments for the availability of high-capacity broadband as critical to learning in the 21st century in Christine Mullins, *Connecting Anchor Institutions: A Vision for Our Future* (Washington, DC: Schools, Health, & Libraries Broadband Coalition, no date), <https://www.shlb.org/action-plan/papers/Connecting-Anchor-Institutions-A-Vision-of-our-Future/full/>

23 On January 19, 2021, the FCC released its 14th broadband deployment report. Figure 5 on page 25 shows associations between deployment and poverty rates: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-21-18A1.pdf>

24 Pew Research Center, Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/#who-has-home-broadband>

25 Rafi Goldberg, “Unplugged: NTIA Survey Finds Some Americans Still Avoid Home Internet Use,” National Telecommunications and Information Administration, April 15, 2019, <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/blog/2019/unplugged-ntia-survey-finds-some-americans-still-avoid-home-internet-use>

26 Individuals who are eligible for Lifeline include those with incomes at or below 135 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines or who participate in other federal assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, Veterans Pension, federal public housing assistance, Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, and Bureau of Indian Affairs general assistance. For more see Universal Service Administrative Co. (website), <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/do-i-qualify/>

27 Becky Chao and Claire Park, *The Cost of Connectivity* (Washington, DC: New America, July 2020), 58, <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/cost-connectivity-2020/focus-on-the-united-states>

28 See the “Focus on the Fees” section of the report by Chao and Park, <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/cost-connectivity-2020/focus-on-the-fees>

29 Amir Nasr and Austin Adams, “We Need a Broadband Internet Pricing Equivalent of Nutrition Labels,” *Slate*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/articles/we-need-broadband-internet-pricing-equivalent-nutrition-labels/>

30 See the FairlawnGig, NextLight, and YurokConnect case studies in Claire Park, *Community Broadband: The Fast, Affordable Internet Option That’s Flying Under the Radar* (Washington, DC: New America, May 2020), <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/community-broadband/the-success-of-community-and-tribal-networks-case-studies-of-fairlawngig-nextlight-and-yurokconnect>

31 Nearly all questions in the survey were explicitly about public libraries; a subset of questions asked respondents if they used a website or app from a college or university library or a K-12 school library. For more, see our sidebar on General Public Survey Respondents.

32 Pew, “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet.” The lower percentage of respondents with high-speed internet access at home in the Pew surveys (73 percent, vs. 88 percent in this survey) likely reflects the broader recruitment methods used by the Pew Research Center, which uses postal mail to invite people to join its panel, provides tablets and computers for those without digital devices, and supports languages other than English. Such measures were cost prohibitive for this New America snapshot study. Also note slight variation in the words used to describe high-speed access: the Pew survey asked about “broadband” whereas we asked respondents whether they accessed the internet at home via “high-speed internet service (wireless or wired).” See Q27 in appendix 2.

33 The survey of educators and community leaders used the term “clients” and not “students” to

encompass the universe of people of all ages who participate in educational programs run by all types of community organizations, not just those run by schools.

34 West Palm Beach, FL demographic data comes from NeighborhoodScout.com, which uses data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the U.S. Department of Justice, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the U.S. Geological Survey, among others. See <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/fl/west-palm-beach/demographics>

35 “IMLS Grant Provides for Mobile Library,” *ALSC Matters*, November 2020, <http://www.ala.org/alsc/alscconnectonline/bright-ideas-november-2020>; see also the description of the grant award at the Institute of Museum and Library Services website: <https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/cagml-247803-omls-20>

36 Michelle J. Fernandez, “Bookmobiles Navigate New Terrain,” *Public Libraries Online*, June 22, 2020, <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/06/bookmobiles-navigate-new-terrain/>

37 For more on the Digital Navigators model, see the National Digital Inclusion Alliance site: <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-model/>. Another approach that also focuses on personalized, on-demand support is emerging in “media mentorship” programs for children’s librarians and youth-services librarians who work with teachers and parents. For more, see Lisa Guernsey, “A Guide to Media Mentorship,” *New America*, December 2020, <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/guide-media-mentorship/>

38 For more details on the grant, see the IMLS website at <https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/lg-248566-ols-20>



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