E-Books are having a real impact in public libraries.
The biggest impact e-books are having in libraries is
more in the materials budget and less on the
circulation numbers. Although e-content circulation in
Connecticut public libraries increased from 1,620,207
in FY2016 to 1,857,287 in FY2017, this circulation still
only represents 7.5% of total circulation. There are
various reasons for this underwhelming performance.
Not all e-book titles are available to libraries. Many
library users don’t know about these collections. And
many “available” e-book titles are actually in
collections shared by many libraries and availability is
often a problem. E-books are having a bigger impact on what libraries spend for library materials.
When adjusted for inflation and population, library materials budgets have been on a steady decline
while the percentage of the materials budget dedicated to electronic materials, including ebooks and
databases, has risen to 24% from 8% in 2001.

Circulation in public libraries falls after recessions are over and library users have less motivation to
borrow rather than buy.
Library circulation does seem to surge during recessions. And circulation often tails off as times get
better. But the decline in circulation probably has more to do with libraries being poorer than it does
with library users being wealthier. Library budgets fall in bad times and library materials are one of the
first items to be affected. In Connecticut public libraries, materials expenditure per capita is lower now
than it was just a few years ago (e.g.,$5.51 in FY2008 to $5.08 in FY2017). The squeeze on materials
budgets can last a long time. Often the budget for materials remains lower for years, well into the
“good times.” A library with fewer new books will have less circulation, even when the library is as busy
as ever. Perhaps circulation won’t rise again until the expenditure on materials increase.
Libraries are losing the battle for limited town resources. There is a perception that libraries are the first thing cut from municipal budgets during recessions, and that libraries do not compete well when battling for funding with other municipal departments. Though many libraries did see shrinking budgets in the past few years, the percentage of municipal budgets dedicated to libraries in FY2017 was just about the same as it was in FY2007. On average, libraries received just 1.19% of total municipal revenue in FY2017.

With all the new media in public libraries, books aren’t as popular as they once were. Library users have many more borrowing options now than they ever had before. Audio and video collections in libraries are bigger and better. Internet availability is a major draw. So are people still taking out books? Yes they are. Book circulation, at 69% of total circulation in FY2017, hasn’t budged at all in the last eight years.

Children’s materials circulation is just a small part of total circulation. If you believe 36% is a small percentage, then maybe you could believe that children’s circulation isn’t important. And when you consider that the median children’s materials budget is only around 25% of the total materials budget, then maybe libraries would do well to invest more in this well-used part of their collections.

The number of staff in public libraries doesn’t change much. The number of staff working in Connecticut public libraries probably hasn’t changed much in the last fifteen years, but if measured by “full-time equivalency” (FTE), the numbers have dropped from 2,427 in FY2003 to 2,133 in FY2017. Libraries now employ more part-time employees (2,450) than they do full-time employees (1,529). And if you look at the FTE per capita, the number has decreased by 13% since 2003.
The number of M.L.S librarians has dropped because libraries downgrade M.L.S. positions when budgets are tight.

We know it happens that when staff retire or leave a professional position requiring a Masters Degree, libraries sometimes downgrade the position in order to save money. The number of Full-Time-Equivalent Library Employees is down 142 positions from the pre-recession days in 2007. But the percentage of MLS employees to total library employees has risen from 31% to 33%. Libraries may have lost staff positions, but the downgrading of professional positions has not taken place statewide. This may be one reason why Connecticut now has one of the highest number of M.L.S. librarians, per population, in the nation.

borrowIT CT loans are much higher for libraries in wealthy communities with large budgets.

The libraries with the highest borrowIT loans (i.e. loans to non-residents) are usually larger libraries in central locations and not necessarily libraries with robust budgets. For example, of the top 10 libraries in borrowIT circulation, 4 are libraries in the lower half of the AENGLC wealth rankings.

Small libraries don’t do much programming.

7 of the top 10 towns with the highest per capita library program attendance in Connecticut have a population under 5,000 people. Even small libraries in less wealthy communities often do an impressive quantity of programming. Windham County, which has many libraries fitting this description, has a combined per capita program attendance about the same as the other counties. If there really is a “big thing” in public libraries these days, it is programming. Programming attendance rose 14% in the last 5 years as libraries increased their programming budgets to meet an increasing need for this library service.

Connecticut has a large number of small libraries serving a significant population of the state.

There are 192 separately-administered public libraries in Connecticut. Maryland, a state with 2 million more people, has just 24 separately-administered public libraries. Connecticut certainly does have a lot of small public libraries, but these libraries do not serve a lot of people. Of the 165 principal public libraries, half of those libraries serve just 16% of Connecticut's population.

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January 2018

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