Statistical Trends for Connecticut Public Libraries

The charts below help identify important trends in the use and management of Connecticut Public Libraries over the past 10 or more years.

Library Use

Libraries are still seeing high levels of use, but this use is not reflected in the traditional borrowing of library materials. Circulation has declined in the last eight years after spiking upward during the recent recession.

And though e-books are now offered by most Connecticut public libraries, they still represent a small percentage of total circulation. Library users mostly borrow physical library materials. The often-predicted exponential rise in the use of e-books and other downloadable content in libraries is just not happening. The physical book is definitely holding its own in libraries, but we have to wonder if the ease of buying and renting e-books is driving readership away from libraries.

It is clear that even though the borrowing of library materials is in a decline, other uses of libraries are not. In particular, attendance at library programs has increased substantially in recent years. Libraries are offering more programs because communities want libraries to provide a gathering place for cultural and intellectual events.
Besides programs, there is a continuing critical demand for internet access and internet computers. Libraries have responded with more wifi and more public access computers.

Also, as library materials budgets shrink, libraries have become very adept at supplementing their own collections by sharing with other libraries. For many years there was a steady increase in interlibrary loans as libraries took advantage of shared collections. Unfortunately, funding for the statewide deliverIT CT service which ILL depended on was shrinking during these years. FY2017 saw a steep decline in ILL as the delivery system was reorganized and reworked to make it more sustainable.

Library Staff

Library personnel have become more productive in order to respond to increased demand for library service. Despite the upward movement in library use measures, the number of full-time equivalent library staff has fallen back to levels not seen since the early 90’s. In contrast, the number of positions requiring a Masters Degree has bounced back to a previously high level. Recent staff cuts have been largely to support staff.

There are currently 122 fewer full-time-equivalent employees than there were 10 years ago, and many more positions are part-time. 61% of library staff positions are now part-time.
Library Budgets

Libraries do more with fewer staff partly because they just don’t have the budgets to support more staff. Operating income (when adjusted for inflation), including the portion of this income coming from municipal government, is about the same as it was 15 years ago.

And as municipal budgets tighten, libraries are getting a slightly larger share of their income from private sources.

The squeeze on library budgets has had its biggest effect on library materials expenditures. The declines here have been dramatic.
As libraries move their available funds to meet the growing demand for other library services, the percentage of operating expenses going to library materials continue to drop.

A steadily increasing portion of these limited funds are devoted to electronic materials like e-books and database subscriptions.

Relative to other operating expenditures, program expenditures continue to increase to meet rising demand.

Overall, the budget situation has improved since the recent recession, but there are signs that library budgets are getting tight again. More libraries saw their budgets cut this year, and the percentage of town/city revenues that ended up as library expenditures has dropped recently.
Libraries and the Economy

Experience tells us that recessions lead to more use of public libraries and that when times get better library use tails off. Based on circulation figures only, this certainly seems to be true in Connecticut over the last 18 years. But the post-recession decline in library borrowing may have as much to do with the effects of the usual budget squeeze when material expenditure falls, hours are cut, and staff levels are stretched as it does with a decline in the need for libraries. Furthermore, library use seems to be changing over the years. As borrowing has declined recently, other use measures such as program attendance and the use of public access computers keeps rising. It is undeniable that public libraries play an important role in our communities at all times, good times or bad. (June Unemployment Rates from the Connecticut Department of Labor - Office of Research)

Highs and Lows for FY2018

Highs
1. Program Attendance per capita again this year and is 27% higher than it was in FY2011 and 68% higher than in 2001.
2. The number of public access internet computers rose again this year. That is 15 consecutive years of increases.
3. Thanks largely to the Fiber to the Library Grant Program, the number of libraries with a fiber connection to the internet rose from 110 to 126.
4. Despite some dramatic falls in circulation recently, library visits have fallen only slightly over the past few years.
5. Of the 97 libraries that reported, libraries hosted 40,274 non-library sponsored meetings. That is a median of 156 meetings and an average of over 415 meetings per library reporting.
6. The average child or young adult in Connecticut borrowed about 12 items from libraries during FY2018 (based on a juvenile and YA materials circulation per capita using the Connecticut population of under 18s only).
7. 38 libraries have Spanish language collections and 15 libraries have Chinese language collections.
8. Filled Interlibrary Loan requests rebounded by 57,700 from last year.
1. Circulation per capita in public libraries has fallen for 8 consecutive years, is now 29% lower than in FY2010, and now stands at levels not seen since 1990.
2. Libraries reported 19 fewer full-time equivalent library positions than last year.
3. Only 60% of public libraries saw an increase in their municipal appropriation last year compared with 74% and 82% in the previous two years.
4. When adjusting for inflation, municipal appropriations to public libraries is about at the same level it was in 1999. Revenue from gifts, donations, and endowments account for much of the revenue increases over the last few years.
5. borrowIT CT circulation (loans to non-residents) decreased for the eighth consecutive year.
6. Adjusted for inflation, public libraries are spending 31% less per capita on library materials than they did in 2001.
7. Nearly all libraries have wireless internet available to users, but only 24% can report the number of wireless sessions. This critical measure of library use should be counted whenever possible.
8. Back in 2014 the State Library surveyed librarians and asked them what percentage of total circulation would be represented by e-content (e-books, etc.) in FY2018. 60% predicted the percentage would be above 10%. In reality, e-content circulation represented just 8.9% of total circulation.

The statistics in this report are based on the annual “Connecticut Public Libraries: a Statistical Profile” which compiles statistics from the Annual Report and Application for State Aid that public libraries complete each fall.

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