

## 7 surprises about libraries in our surveys

BY LEE RAINIE ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/LRAINIE/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/lrainie/))

The Pew Research Center's studies (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/>) about libraries and where they fit in the lives of their communities and patrons have uncovered some surprising facts about what Americans think of libraries and the way they use them. As librarians around the world are gathered in Las Vegas for the American Library Association's annual conference, here are findings that stand out from our research, our typology of public library engagement (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/library-engagement-typology/>) and the quiz we just released that people can take to see where they compare with our national survey findings: What kind of library user are you? (<http://www.pewinternet.org/quiz/library-typology/>)

### 1

---

#### Older Americans Least Likely to Use Libraries

*Among Americans ages 16+, the percentage who have...*

Ages	Ever visited a public library in person	Visited a library in the past 12 months
16-17	86%	59%
18-29	81	48
30-49	81	52
50-64	82	46
65+	77	39

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Library Services Survey of 6,224 Americans ages 16 and older conducted July 18-September 30, 2013. The margin of error for the overall sample is plus or minus 1.4 percentage points. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

---

(<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/>) Each time we ask about library use, we find that **those ages 65 and older are less likely to have visited a library** (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/>) **in the past 12 months than those under that age**. Equally as interesting is the fact that younger Americans (those ages 16-29) are just as likely to be library users as those who are older.

## 2 Although 10% of Americans have never used a library, they think libraries are good for their communities. We've identified this group of library users as "Distant Admirers,"

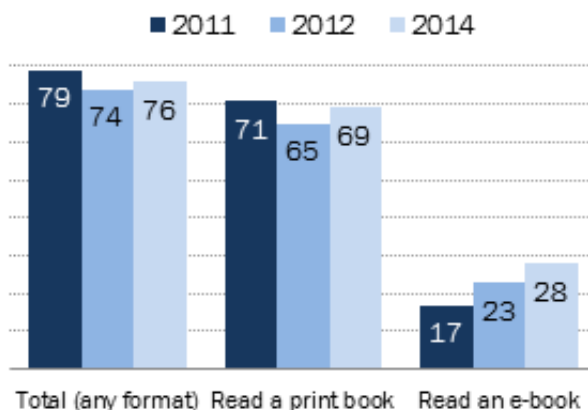
(<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/non-engagement/>) and they are the majority of the nearly 15% of Americans ages 16 and older who have never been to a library. Despite their lack of personal use of libraries, their positive views of libraries might stem from the fact that 40% of Distant Admirers report that someone else in their household is a library user. About two-thirds of them or more say libraries are important because they promote literacy and reading, that they play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed and they improve the quality of life in a community. Finally, 55% say the loss of the local library would be a blow to the community.

## 3

---

### Print Remains Popular, but E-Reading on the Rise

*Among American adults 18 and older, the % who read at least one book (in total, in print, or as an e-book) in the past year*



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet Project Omnibus Survey, January 2-5, 2014. N= 1005 American adults ages 18 and older. Interviews were conducted on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

---

(<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/e-reading-rises-as-device-ownership-jumps/>) **E-book reading is rising but just 4% of Americans** (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/e-reading-rises-as-device-ownership-jumps/>) are "e-book only" readers. The incidence of e-book reading has been steadily climbing during the course of our libraries research. It now stands at 28% of the population who have ever read an e-book. But this has not really affected the number of those who read printed books. The vast majority of e-book readers also enjoy printed books.

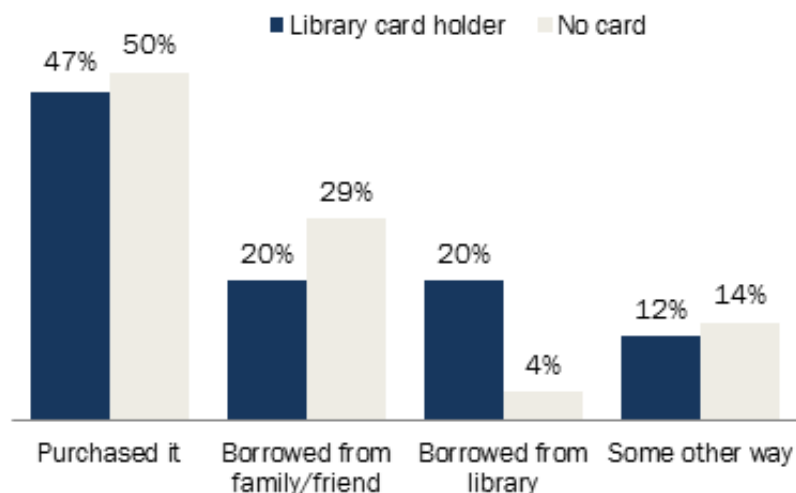
## 4 Those who read both e-books and printed books prefer reading in the different formats under different circumstances. One of the reasons many book lovers read in both printed and e-book formats is that they feel each format has its own virtues. In a head-to-head competition, people prefer

e-books to printed books when they want speedy access and portability, but print wins out when people are reading to children and sharing books with others. When asked about reading books in bed, the verdict is split: 45% prefer reading e-books in bed, while 43% prefer print.

## 5

### Borrowing vs. Buying Books

*Among Americans ages 16+ who read a book in the past 12 months, the percentage who got their most recent book from each source*



Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Reading Habits Survey of 2,986 people ages 16 and older conducted November 16-December 21, 2011. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones. N for people who read a book in any format in the past 12 months=2,474.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

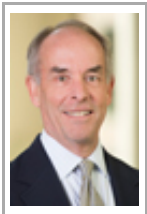
(<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/06/22/part-2-where-people-discover-and-get-their-books/>) One of the big concerns in the publishing industry about selling e-books to libraries is that allowing free access to e-books through libraries might eat into book sales. In fact, Pew Research data show that **those who use libraries are more likely than others to be book buyers and actually prefer to buy books, rather than borrow them.** Among the 78% of Americans 16 years and older who had read a book in the previous year, according to a survey we did in 2011, a majority of print readers (54%) and readers of e-books (61%) said they prefer to purchase their own copies of these books rather than borrow them from somewhere else.

**6** One of the foundational principles of librarians is supporting the privacy of patrons. Librarians have long resisted keeping or sharing records of the book-borrowing or computer-using activities of their patrons. However, in the age of book-recommendation practices on all kinds of websites, **many patrons are comfortable with the idea of getting recommendations from librarians based on their previous book-reading habits.** In a 2012 survey

(<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/01/22/part-4-what-people-want-from-their-libraries/>) , 64% of

respondents said they would be interested in personalized online accounts that provide customized recommendations for books based on their past library activity. Some 29% said they would be “very likely” to use a service if it were made available by their library.

**7** Many librarians are struggling to figure out how to think about their book collections in the digital age. The responses in a 2013 survey was the most divided verdict we got in the range of changes in the library world that we probed. **Some 20% of respondents said libraries should “definitely” make changes with the ways they arrange their books**, such as moving some print books and stacks out of public locations to free up more space for tech centers, reading rooms and cultural events, according to our 2013 survey. However, **36% said libraries should “definitely not” make those changes and 39% said libraries should “maybe” consider moving some books and stacks.**



Lee Rainie (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/lrainie/>) is  
*Director of the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project.*

[POSTS](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [BIO](#) | [@LRAINIE](#)

---

## 9 Comments



**Chels K** • 1 min ago (#comment-490691)

In the age of vastly diminished resources for many libraries, choices have to be made. It seems to smarter to focus those limited resources on the current and future users who use libraries the most. Families are the heaviest users of library services and most in need of reading, research and recreational support. It makes sense to choose them first when making service decisions.

Your comment is awaiting moderation.

[Reply](#)



**Pierre** • 8 hours ago (#comment-490631)

Availability to elders: BINGO!  
Comments are accurate when they say technology can be a barrier to this generation, but books and publications are not. Location, timing, transportation are all factors affecting the elderly that are sometimes ignored (or forgotten) by community management and/or library professionals during the planning sessions.

[Reply](#)



**Olivia** • 5 days ago (#comment-489584)

These aren't very surprising at all for those who work in libraries. Interesting comments about not focusing enough on older demographics. For a generation that isn't always tech-savvy enough to access materials from computers, tablets and phones, why can't libraries be encouraged to embed or insert themselves into nursing homes or senior residences instead? We hear about bookmobiles and other mobile ways to service our communities – why wouldn't this work for the older demographic? I can especially see the popularity of audio books and perhaps international language books being welcomed by seniors who can no longer head to the library due to physical challenges but nonetheless would love to continue to be ardent users. This doesn't have to be a high-cost investment.

[Reply](#)



**CAL** • 2 days ago (#comment-490139)

Our library provides “Homebound” services to seniors for just this purpose. We travel to nursing homes and residences where patrons are unable to travel on their own to the library. We bring books, audiobooks and “memory kits”, etc.

[Reply](#)



**Mary** • 7 days ago (#comment-489073)

As older Americans age, handicapped accessibility is an issue especially for those with walking issues. Originally my library had reserves right inside the door. Now I have to walk clear to the back of the library to get my reserves. I find now that my library usage has dropped considerably because picking up the things I reserved has become much more difficult.

[Reply](#)



**Packard Day** • 1 week ago (#comment-488658)

Let me go one step further and add this.

Here in Wisconsin (and also in Iowa) our small town public libraries are experiencing a fundamental rebirth that is changing their 100 year mission. The Carnegie days of people going to libraries to check out books and read current newspapers and periodicals are becoming less and less important. This old model is being replaced by the emergence of what might be called “community wide broadband cafes.”

If you live (or are traveling through) rural America and you need hi speed internet access, the public library is becoming your default option. Everything from distance learning, to government IRS/VA/SNAP correspondence, to Skype, email, google research, and Netflix are all being conducted at the local library. Welcome to the 21st century.

[Reply](#)



**Bill** • 1 week ago (#comment-488434)

Simple answer to #1: Libraries tend to ignore the older generations, catering to kids these days.

[Reply](#)



**Will** • 1 week ago (#comment-488714)

I really don't think that's true, Bill. As a librarian, I can tell you that the #1 user of librarians are new mothers, so families and children are certainly one of the types of patrons we focus on, but I wouldn't begin to say that we don't cater to the older generations. Seniors make great use of our library, not only for materials like DVDS, books and large-print books, but also as a gathering and community space. Seniors make up the majority of the Friends of our Library, and we have excellent ties to several senior organizations. To characterize libraries as ignoring the older generations is very far from the mark, at least in most libraries.

[Reply](#)



**Troy Johnson** • 1 week ago (#comment-488910)

Are there services not being offered for you? If so what services would you like to see?

[Reply](#)



**Lidya** • 6 days ago (#comment-489118)

Libraries do cater to children more than they do older adults. There are more programming for babies, toddlers, teens and preschoolers. They might get an adult author to come in to do a book signing. The other thing is that senior adults are afraid to come out at night. All libraries are not in a safe zone.

[Reply](#)