

# Changes in Public Library Services as the COVID-19 Pandemic Continued Through FY 2021

DECEMBER 2024

## Highlights

- Fewer public library systems closed buildings to the public due to COVID-19 policies in fiscal year (FY) 2021 (57 percent) compared to FY 2020 (90 percent) (**Figure 1**).
- Physical visits to the library per person declined between FY 2020 and FY 2021 (**Table 1**).
- Electronic material circulation rates increased through FY 2021, maintaining a trend first noted in FY 2018 (**Figure 7**).
- During FY 2020 and FY 2021, about two-thirds of libraries offered patrons the option to register for collection access online rather than in person. Online registration was most prevalent in cities, with over 90 percent of urban public libraries offering the service, while only 50 percent of rural libraries offered it (**Figure 5**).
- In FY 2021, libraries that permitted online registration had a median electronic material circulation per person more than double that of libraries that did not allow online registration (**Figure 8**).
- In both FY 2020 and FY 2021, nearly two-thirds of all libraries offered outside Wi-Fi access to their communities. Notably, libraries in rural areas and towns were more likely to offer this service than were libraries in cities or suburbs (**Figure 4**).
- Outside circulation of collection materials (e.g., curbside pick-up) remained a widely adopted service offered by libraries, with at least 80 percent offering it in both FY 2020 and FY 2021 (**Figure 6**).

## Introduction

By December 2021, the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had impacted all libraries surveyed in the Public Libraries Survey (PLS) for at least 12 months. Restrictions on public gatherings and mandates for social distancing forced libraries to adapt by offering modified and expanded services, striving to provide patrons with an experience as close to normal as possible. Libraries adjusted rapidly to the challenges posed by the pandemic by delivering virtual programming, expanding digital collections and services, and adopting new technologies to ensure continued access to library resources and services.

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in early 2021 revealed shifts in reading habits. Print book readership and audiobook listenership remained stable since 2019, but there was a noticeable increase in

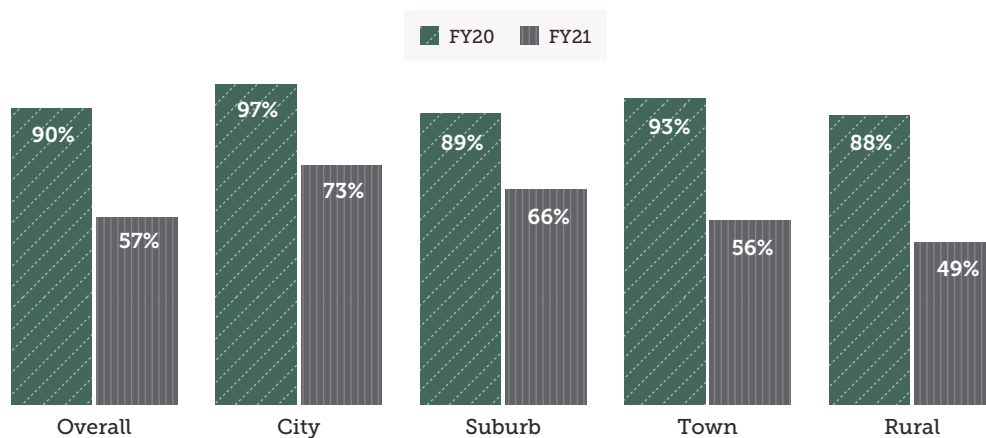
electronic book (e-book) readership from 25 percent to 30 percent (Pew Research Center, 2022). This trend mirrors findings from earlier Institute of Museum of Library Services (IMLS) research, including from *The Use and Cost of Public Library Materials: Trends Before the COVID-19 Pandemic* (IMLS, 2021) and *Access to Public Library Services and Materials During the First Nine Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (IMLS, 2023), providing evidence of a sustained rise in the use of electronic materials since 2018. This brief builds on past research to highlight how libraries kept adapting in FY 2021 using data from over 9,000 public library systems across the United States and the District of Columbia.

# Access to Public Library Services During COVID-19

There was a significant decrease in the overall percentage of library systems that physically closed their outlets in FY 2021 compared to FY 2020. Only 57 percent of libraries were closed to the public in FY 2021, down from 90 percent in FY 2020. This pattern was observed across locale types: the percentage of libraries reported as closed in cities fell to nearly 73 percent in FY 2021, down from 97 percent in FY 2020; and fewer than 50 percent of rural libraries reported closed outlets in FY 2021, down from 88 percent in FY 2020 (**Figure 1**).

Guidance and changing regulations from local, state, and federal agencies regarding the pandemic may have contributed to fewer library closures in FY 2021. The widespread availability of vaccines and improved understanding of COVID-19 transmission also likely played a crucial role. These developments allowed libraries to operate with fewer restrictions in FY 2021 compared to FY 2020.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of libraries that closed outlets to the public, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021



NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.  
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

Although fewer library systems closed due to COVID-19 during FY 2021, library visits continued to decline overall from FY 2020 to FY 2021 across all locales, as shown in **Table 1**. Library patrons may have remained hesitant in FY 2021 to visit public spaces, including libraries, due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns. Libraries that stayed open may also have operated with limited occupancy to enforce social distancing, reducing

the number of visitors allowed inside at any given time. In addition, some library users may have found that electronic resources continued to meet their borrowing needs, even after libraries reopened their physical locations in FY 2021. It is worth noting that the FY 2020 data used in **Table 1** includes libraries with FY 2020 reporting periods not significantly affected by COVID-19 (e.g., July 2019–June 2020).

**Table 1.** Median number of library visits per person, overall and by locale: FY 2018–FY 2021

| Category | FY 2018 | FY 2019 | FY 2020 | FY 2021 |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Overall  | 4.5     | 4.3     | 2.3     | 0.4     |
| Locale   |         |         |         |         |
| City     | 4.0     | 3.9     | 2.1     | 0.4     |
| Suburb   | 5.0     | 4.8     | 2.5     | 0.5     |
| Town     | 4.3     | 4.2     | 2.2     | 0.3     |
| Rural    | 4.3     | 4.2     | 2.3     | 0.3     |

NOTE: Median values were used. As a result values reported here may not match values found in other publications that report using other methods.  
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2021.

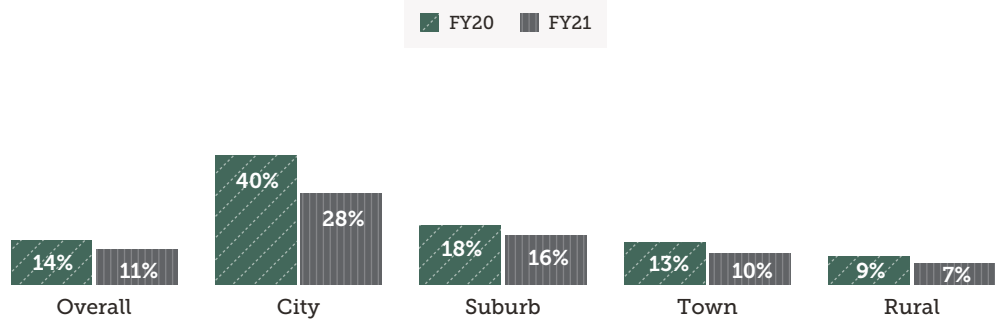
The percentage of libraries that reassigned staff to other agencies or organizations due to COVID-19 saw a modest decrease from 14 percent in FY 2020 to 11 percent in FY 2021 overall. However, the response varied by locale in that city libraries continued to be more likely than libraries in any other locale to reassign staff during the pandemic, although their rate of decrease was also the greatest (**Figure 2**).

With library buildings physically closed due to COVID-19, libraries pivoted to provide virtual reference services in FY 2020. As libraries reopened their doors in FY 2021, fewer libraries tended to offer this service, decreasing from 82 percent to 74 percent overall, though virtual reference services were still offered in over two-thirds of libraries across all locale types (**Figure 3**). Suburban libraries had the smallest decrease (86 to 84 percent), while libraries in towns had the largest (88 to 76 percent).

Nearly two-thirds of all libraries provided Wi-Fi access to patrons outside the library, with the service increasing from 62 to 64 percent between FY 2020 and FY 2021. As in FY 2020, relatively more libraries in rural areas (67 percent) and towns (64 percent) indicated that they provided this access. However, libraries located in cities and suburbs observed modest increases in the percentage of libraries offering outside Wi-Fi access, with a 5-percentage point uptick for city libraries and a 7-point increase in suburbs (**Figure 4**).

While some responses about access to public library services indicated decreases between FY 2020 and FY 2021—such as building closures and virtual reference services—outside Wi-Fi access increased across the United States. The first two years of COVID-19 allowed libraries to transform the way the users access their local library services, and these initial findings could indicate a desire for continued virtual connection, even as libraries reopen their buildings.

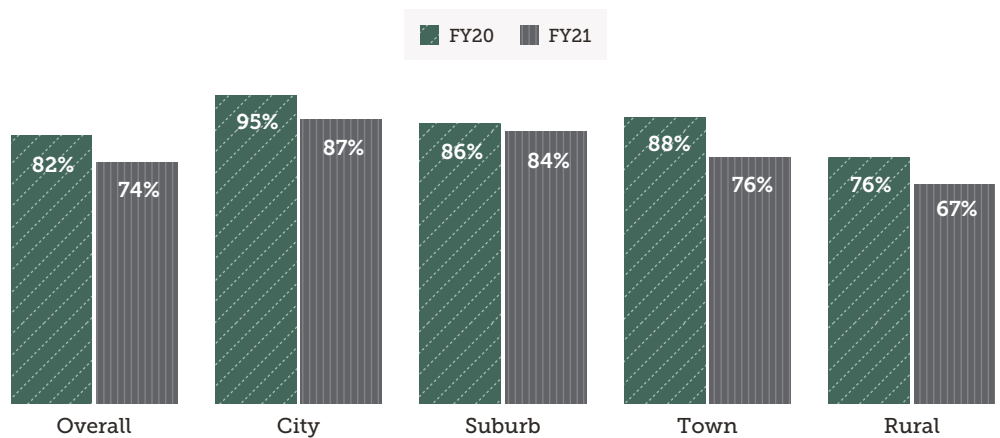
**Figure 2. Percentage of libraries that reassigned staff to other agencies, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021**



NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.

SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

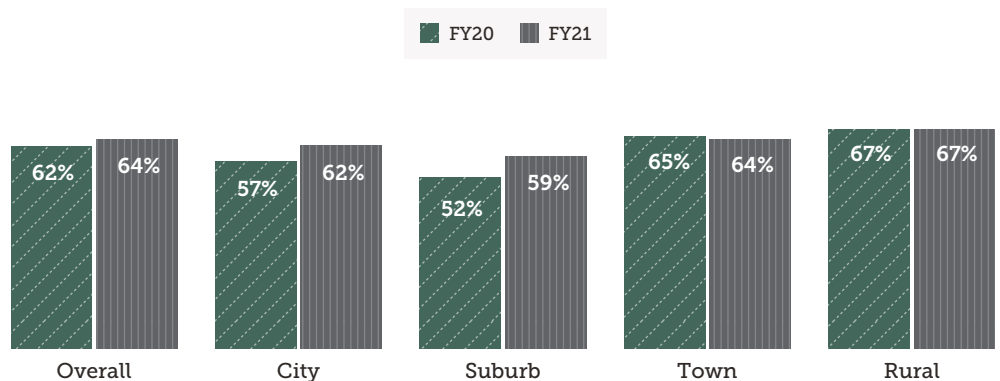
**Figure 3. Percentage of libraries that offered virtual reference services, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021**



NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.

SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

**Figure 4. Percentage of libraries that offered outside Wi-Fi access, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021**



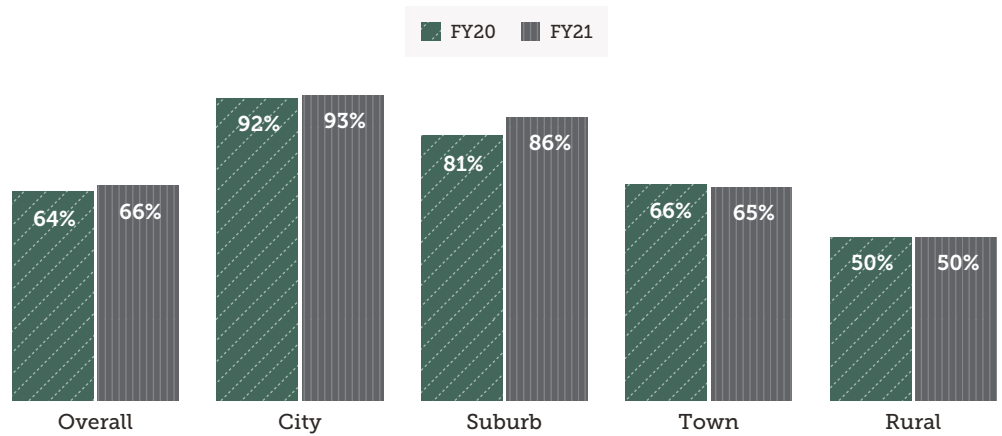
NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.

SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

# Access to Physical and Electronic Library Materials During COVID-19

Throughout the first two years of the pandemic, public libraries continued to evolve how they provided access to collection materials, including books and e-books. **Figure 5** highlights a notable change in how libraries promoted access. In FY 2021, two-thirds of public libraries allowed patrons to register for library cards online without the need to be physically present, marking an increase from FY 2020. More than 90 percent of city libraries offered online registration service, compared to half of rural libraries. Suburban libraries saw the most significant growth, with the percentage offering this service increasing from 81 percent in FY 2020 to 86 percent in FY 2021. While the change is largely consistent across locales between the two years, there are significant differences among them.

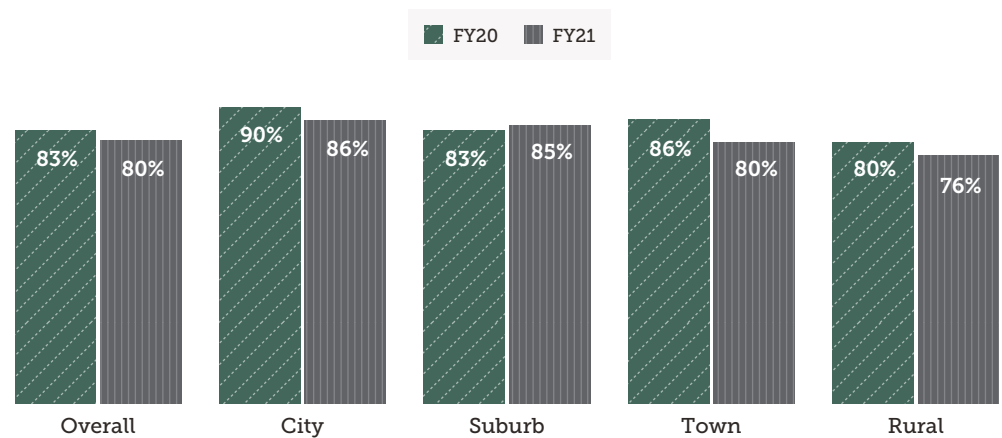
**Figure 5.** Percentages of libraries that allowed online registration for library cards, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021



NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.  
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19's social distancing requirements, public libraries continued to provide access to physical materials. There was a minimal decrease from FY 2020 to FY 2021 in the overall percentage of public libraries offering some type of "outside" service for the circulation of physical materials (**Figure 6**). These services could include a variety of options, from porch drop-off to curbside pick-up. Though most locales saw minor decreases, suburban libraries increased their outside services in FY 2021 (85 percent) compared to FY 2020 (83 percent).

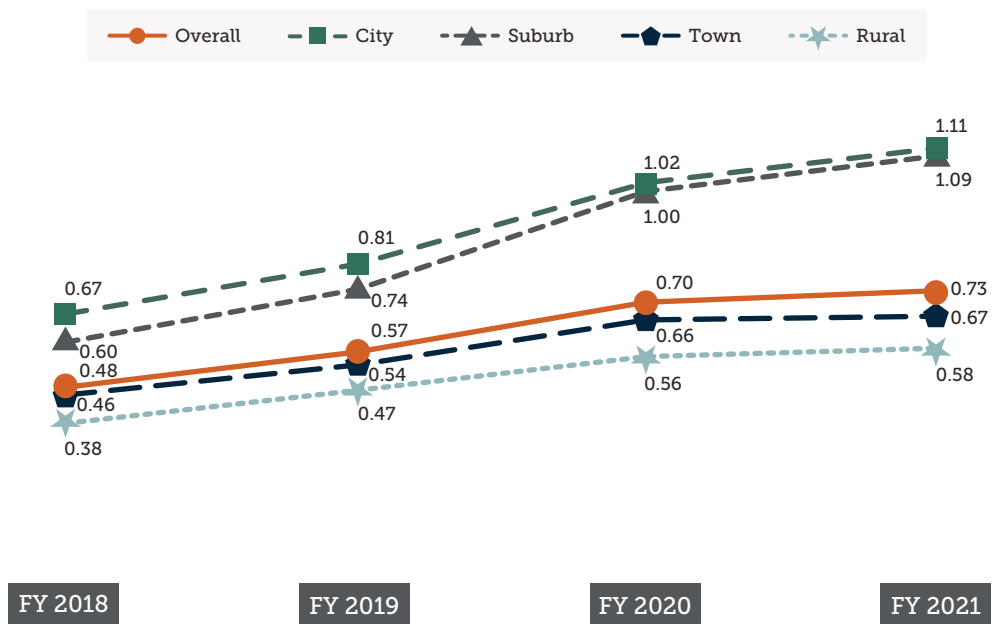
**Figure 6.** Percentages of libraries that distributed physical materials outside the building, overall and by locale: FY 2020 and FY 2021



NOTE: FY 2020 n = 8,426 public libraries and FY 2021 n = 9,021. The FY 2020 analysis only includes libraries affected by COVID-19; libraries with missing data are excluded from analysis in both years.  
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020 and FY 2021.

The median circulation of electronic materials per person continued to rise in FY 2021, a trend observed since the PLS began reporting on electronic material circulation in FY 2018. From FY 2018 to FY 2021, the median electronic circulation per person increased from 0.48 items per person to 0.73, an overall increase of 52 percent (**Figure 7**). Suburban libraries experienced the largest relative change, with an 82 percent increase from 0.60 items per person in FY 2018 to 1.09 items per person in FY 2021, followed by city libraries, with a 66 percent increase. In contrast, towns saw the smallest relative change over that 4-year period (46 percent), with an increase from 0.46 to 0.67 electronic items circulated per person. Rural libraries had just over half the electronic circulation rate (0.58 items per person) compared to city libraries in FY 2021.

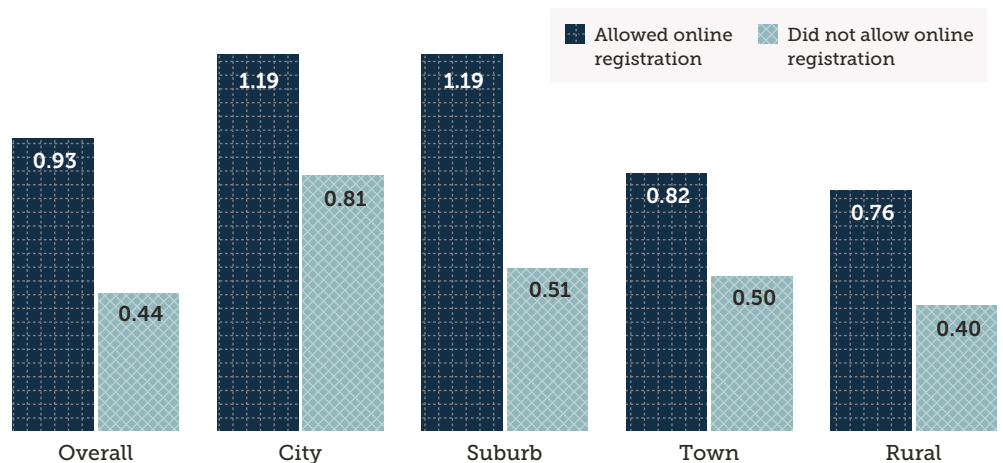
**Figure 7. Median electronic material circulation per person, overall and by locale: FY 2018–FY 2021**



When examining changes solely between FY 2020 and FY 2021, the median electronic material circulation per person increased only 4 percent overall, presumably impacted by COVID-19's effect on public library services. Public libraries in cities and suburbs experienced a 9 percent increase, whereas town and rural libraries experienced 2 percent and 4 percent increases, respectively (**Figure 7**).

Upward trends in electronic circulation may be correlated with locale and online registration policy, as libraries in cities and suburbs are more likely to offer online registration (**Figure 5**), which could lead to an increase in circulation of electronic materials. In FY 2021, the overall median electronic circulation per person for library systems that allowed online registration was more than double that of library systems that did not allow online registration (**Figure 8**). The largest difference in circulation rates by online registration policy was seen in suburban libraries, with a 0.68 median electronic material circulation per person difference between those offering versus not offering the service.

**Figure 8. Median electronic material circulation per person, by library's online registration policy and locale: FY 2021**



NOTE: Median values were used. As a result values reported here may not match values found in other publications that report using other methods.  
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2021.



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## Summary

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions in effect during FY 2021, public libraries in the United States continued to meet the needs of their communities by maintaining, and in some cases, expanding their existing access to library services and collection materials. This adaptation often took the shape of accelerating the digital transformation already underway prior to the pandemic. For instance, more libraries offered online registration for library cards or increased access to Wi-Fi outside their buildings in FY 2021, reflecting a continued shift toward digital services. Some services necessitated by the pandemic, such as curbside circulation due to closed buildings, remained popular through FY 2021, with only minor decreases overall. Finally, the use of electronic materials

continued to grow, as reflected in the consistent increase in median electronic circulation per person, particularly in libraries that offered online registration for library cards.

While the COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for public libraries, it also highlighted the essential role public libraries play in their communities and their ability to adapt and innovate in the face of adversity. IMLS continues to monitor changes to library services as they navigate the ongoing effects of the pandemic. Future directions for this research will investigate state-level variations in how libraries adapted services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in FY 2020 and FY 2021.

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## Data and Methodology

The PLS is a collaborative effort between IMLS and the state library administrative agencies of all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five outlying territories. To continue the trend analysis of the COVID-19 variables, the FY 2020 analysis presented in this brief include the 8,426 libraries that answered the COVID-19 questions and had fiscal years ending after April 2020, the period corresponding to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (IMLS, 2023). In contrast, the FY 2021 findings expand to include 9,021 of 9,203 public library systems that met the FSCS definition of a public library. This adjustment in the number of libraries analyzed allows for a more accurate assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on library operations.

Fiscal year reporting periods for public libraries vary by state and library system. Please see Table 2 in the [FY 2020](#) and [FY 2021](#) PLS Data File Documentation for a detailed breakdown by state or the PLS data files for detail by library system.

To ensure comparability, trend analyses of FY 2018 through FY 2020 visits and electronic material circulation data in **Table 1** and **Figure 7** are limited to the 9,021 library records in the FY 2021 analysis set, excluding any that did not meet the FSCS definition in each year.

The urban-centric locale code system, developed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, classifies geographic areas into four major locales (i.e., city, suburb, town, rural) based on U.S. Census Bureau definitions. Locale codes were assigned to each library system using two methods: (1) based on the geographic location of the library system's physical address, and (2) using the modal locale code among central and branch libraries of that library system (i.e., excluding bookmobile and books-by-mail-only outlets). This brief uses the locale code assigned based on the second method: the modal locale code of the library system's associated stationary outlets.

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# About the Institute of Museum and Library Services

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is the primary source of federal support for the nation's libraries and museums. We advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grant-making, research, and policy development. Our vision is a nation in which museums and libraries work together to transform the lives of individuals and communities.

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