

Public Library Trends Between FY 2018 and FY 2023: From Pandemic Disruption to Steady Recovery

MAY 2026

Highlights

- **Public Library Building Closures Declined:** The percentage of libraries that temporarily closed buildings due to COVID-19 fell from 90 percent in FY 2020 to 15 percent in FY 2022¹ signaling a steady return to in-person access (**Table 1**).
- **Service Adaptations Evolved:** As facilities reopened, fewer libraries offered virtual reference services and curbside pickup, while electronic materials circulation remained strong (**Table 1** and **Figure 6**).
- **Hours Near Pre-Pandemic Levels:** By FY 2023, libraries were open nearly as many hours as in FY 2019, with city libraries fully returning to pre-pandemic schedules (**Figure 1**).
- **Visits and Engagement Rebounded:** Median library visits per person increased from 0.4 in FY 2021 to 2.8 in FY 2023, reflecting patron demand for in-person services (**Figure 2**).
- **Programs and Attendance Increased:** Libraries offered over 2.5 times more programs in FY 2023 compared to FY 2021, with attendance approaching pre-pandemic highs (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**).
- **Physical and Digital Material Circulation Increased:** Physical material circulation grew in FY 2023, while electronic material circulation continued its upward trend, increasing 84 percent since FY 2018 (**Figure 5** and **Figure 6**).

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruptions for public libraries and changed how they delivered services to their communities. Temporary building closures, rapid shifts to virtual services, and evolving health guidance required libraries to adjust operations in real time. As conditions improved, libraries gradually

restored in-person access and services. Against this backdrop, this brief examines trends in public library operations and services between Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 and FY 2023, with special attention to the service adaptations used during FY 2020–FY 2022¹. The research focuses on key indicators such as hours open to the public,

¹ COVID-19 specific questions were included on the Public Libraries Survey (PLS) from FY 2020 to FY 2022.

in-person visits, program offerings, program attendance, and circulation of physical and electronic materials. By comparing these indicators across city, suburban, town, and rural library systems, the brief provides a comprehensive picture of how public libraries adapted to the challenges of the pandemic. For context, in FY 2023 the analysis reflects over

9,000 library systems, 6 percent of which are in cities, 26 percent in suburbs, 25 percent in towns, and 43 percent in rural areas (see Data and Methodology section on p. 9 for more detail). PLS data reveal the resilience of public libraries and their continued role in providing essential community services.

Library Service Adaptations During the Pandemic

Most libraries (90 percent) physically closed at some point in FY 2020; this closure rate fell to 57 percent in FY 2021 and 15 percent in FY 2022 (**Table 1**). Updated local, state, and federal guidance likely contributed to the sharp decline in temporarily closed public library buildings. As a result, the overall median visits per person rose from 0.4 in FY 2021, to 2.5 in FY 2022 (**Figure 2**).

Public libraries responded to COVID-19 by expanding alternative services, including virtual reference services (82 percent in FY 2020), online registration (64 percent), curbside or outside material distribution (83 percent), and increased access to Wi-Fi outside of library buildings (62 percent) (**Table 1**). As library buildings reopened to the public, the percentage of public libraries that offered virtual reference services decreased by 25 percentage points to

57 percent by FY 2022. Online registration also decreased to 50 percent of libraries across all locale types; suburban libraries experienced the largest drop, falling from a high of 86 percent in FY 2021 to 63 percent in FY 2022.

Libraries also facilitated access to physical materials through outside services such as curbside pickup and porch drop-off. By FY 2022, these services declined compared to prior years, with 61 percent of libraries offering outside circulation services—down from 83 percent in FY 2020. Town and city libraries saw the largest drops, each falling by 25 percentage points.

Wi-Fi access offered outside library buildings remained a common service overall, even though libraries in towns saw the largest decline (ten percentage points) between FY 2020 and FY 2022 in this offering.

Table 1. Percentage of Public Libraries that Adapted Services due to COVID-19, Overall and by Locale: FY 2020–FY 2022

Percentage of Public Libraries that Due to COVID-19 ...	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	Percentage Point Change Between FY 2020 and FY 2022
Closed buildings to the public				
Overall	90	57	15	-75
City	97	73	22	-75
Suburban	89	66	19	-70
Town	93	56	13	-80
Rural	88	49	12	-76

Percentage of Public Libraries that Due to COVID-19 ...	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	Percentage Point Change Between FY 2020 and FY 2022
Offered virtual references services				
Overall	82	74	57	-25
City	95	87	67	-28
Suburban	86	84	60	-26
Town	88	76	57	-31
Rural	76	67	54	-22
Allowed online library card registration				
Overall	64	66	50	-14
City	92	93	72	-20
Suburban	81	86	63	-18
Town	66	65	48	-18
Rural	50	50	40	-10
Circulated physical materials outside the building				
Overall	83	80	61	-22
City	90	86	65	-25
Suburban	83	85	62	-21
Town	86	80	61	-25
Rural	80	76	61	-19
Offered Wi-Fi access outside the building				
Overall	62	64	56	-6
City	57	62	55	-2
Suburban	52	59	48	-4
Town	65	64	55	-10
Rural	67	67	61	-6

NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
 SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2020–FY 2022.

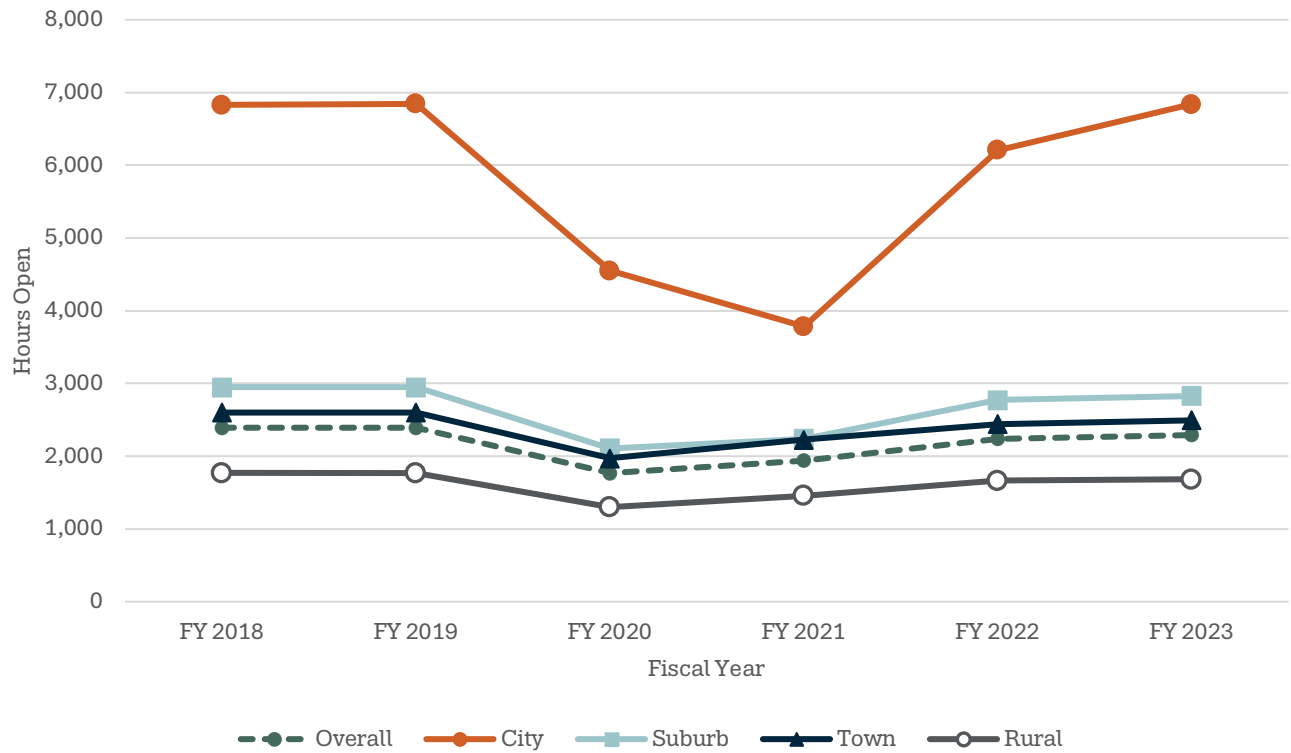
Public Library Services Returning to Pre-Pandemic Levels

Library Hours Open and Visits

By FY 2023, median hours open were near pre-pandemic levels across all locales; city libraries exceeded FY 2018 levels (**Figure 1**). As library buildings reopened and hours increased, library visits began to rebound in FY 2022, and patrons

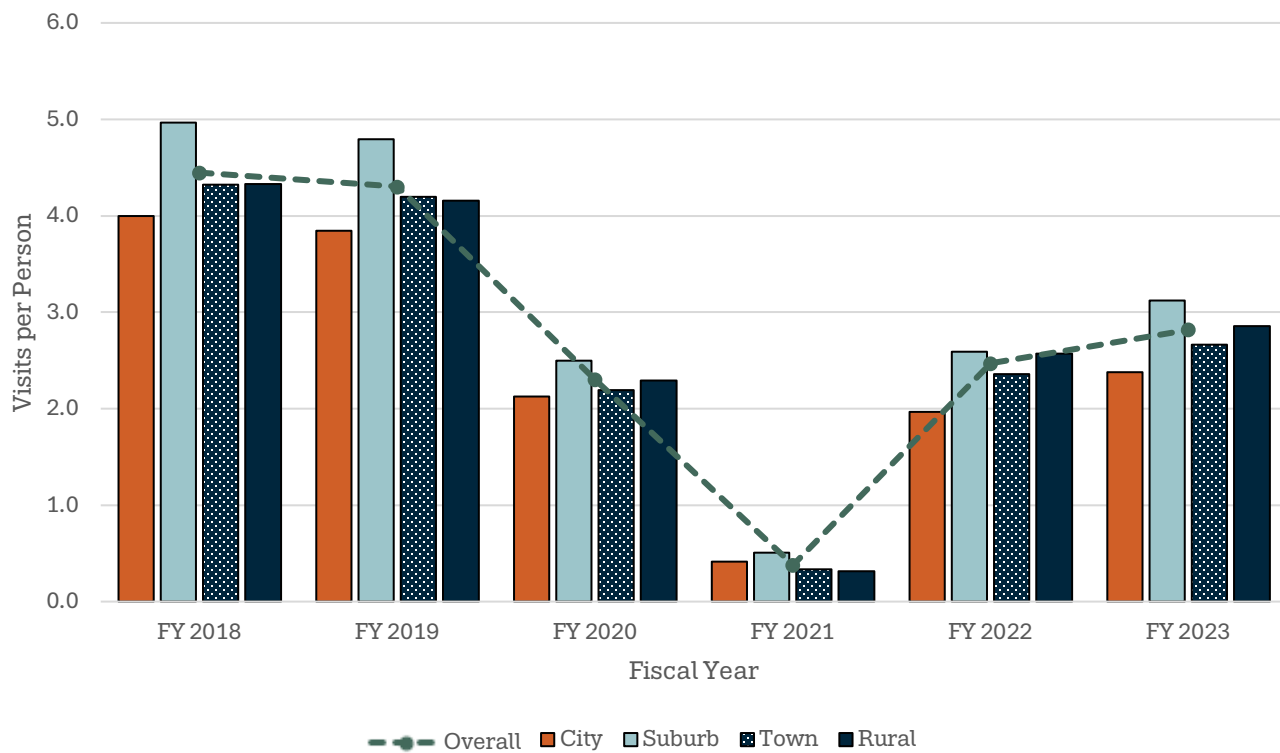
returned to physical spaces in all locale types (**Figure 2**). From FY 2021 to FY 2023, the median number of visits per person increased seven-fold, from 0.4 to 2.8.

Figure 1. Median Hours Open, Overall and By Locale: FY 2018–FY 2023



NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Figure 2. Median Library Visits Per Person, Overall and by Locale: FY 2018–FY 2023



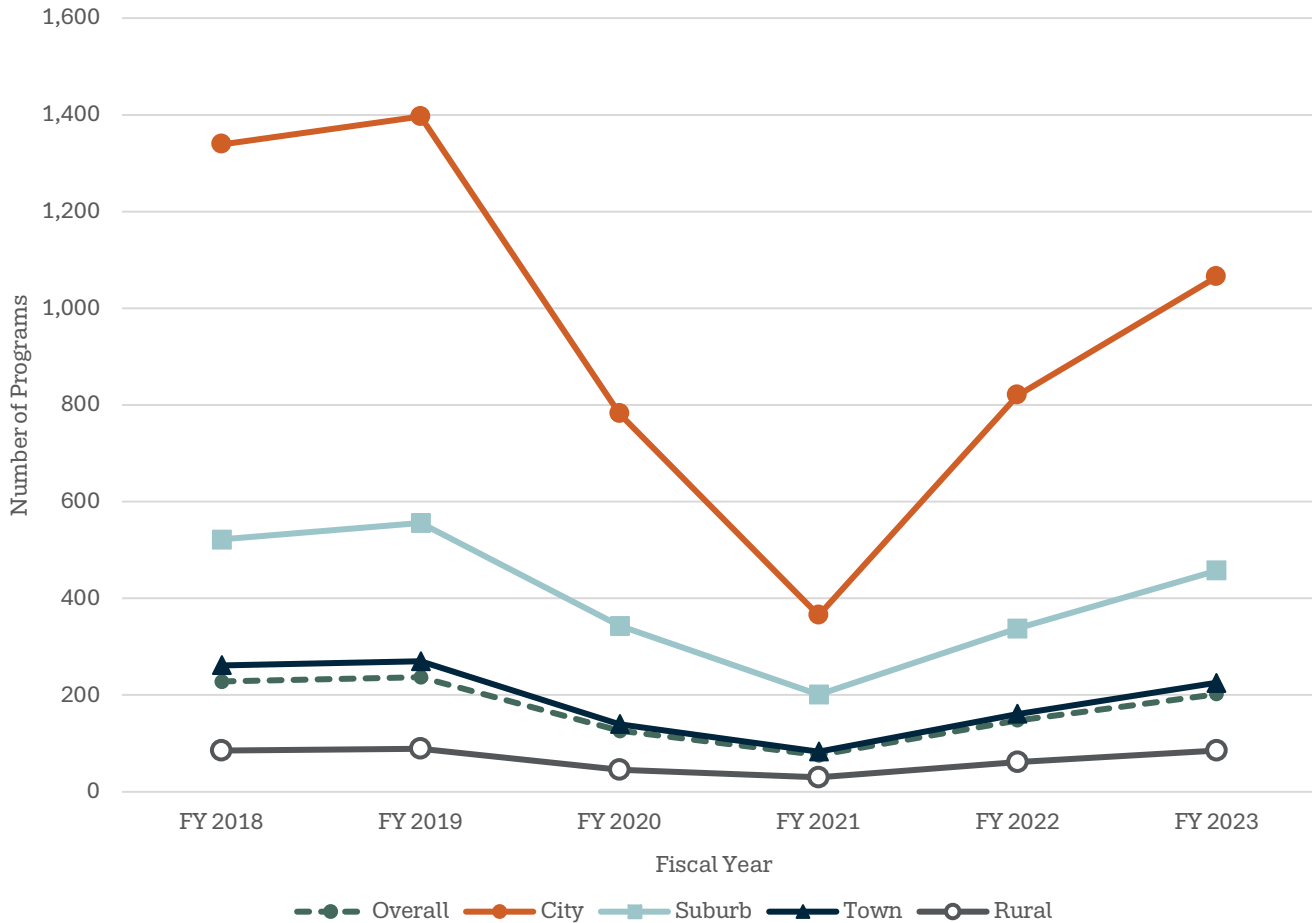
NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Library Program Offerings

In FY 2023, public library programming increased across all locales. Public libraries offered a median of 202 programs overall, more than double the 76 programs reported in

FY 2021 during the pandemic (**Figure 3**). City libraries offered more programs (median 1,065) than suburban (458), town (225), and rural systems (85).

Figure 3. Median Number of Programs Overall and by Locale: FY 2018–FY 2023



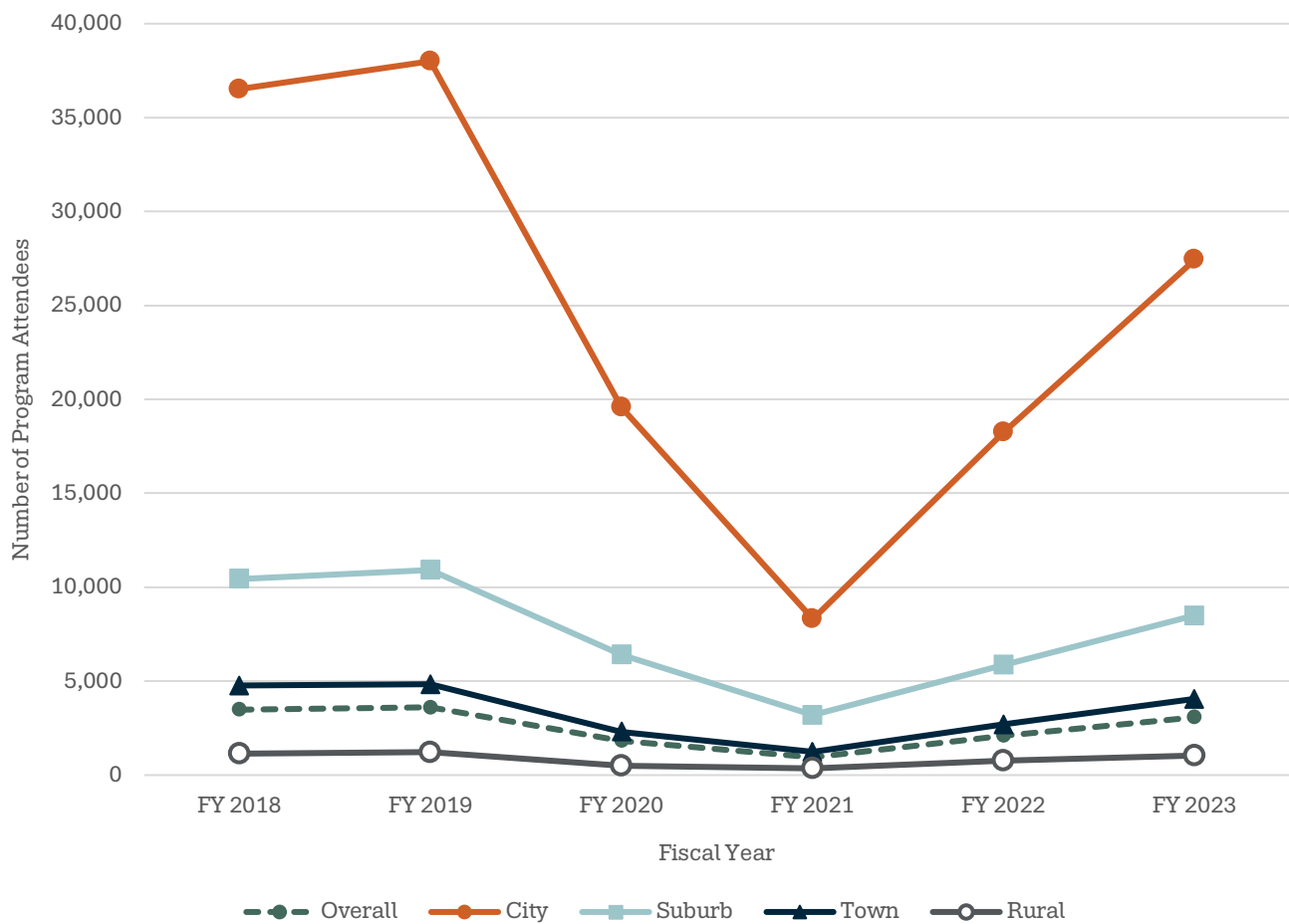
NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Library Program Attendance

Program attendance followed a similar pattern as program offerings (Figure 4). Median program attendance reached 3,087 overall in FY 2023, approaching the FY 2019 peak of 3,612, the highest median attendance in the past six years. Attendance varied widely by locale: city libraries

recorded a median of 27,434 program attendees, compared with 8,495 in suburbs, 4,049 in towns, and 1,038 in rural areas. Still, libraries in all locales saw steady recovery from the declines observed in FY 2020 and FY 2021.

Figure 4. Median Number of Program Attendees Overall and by Locale: FY 2018–FY 2023



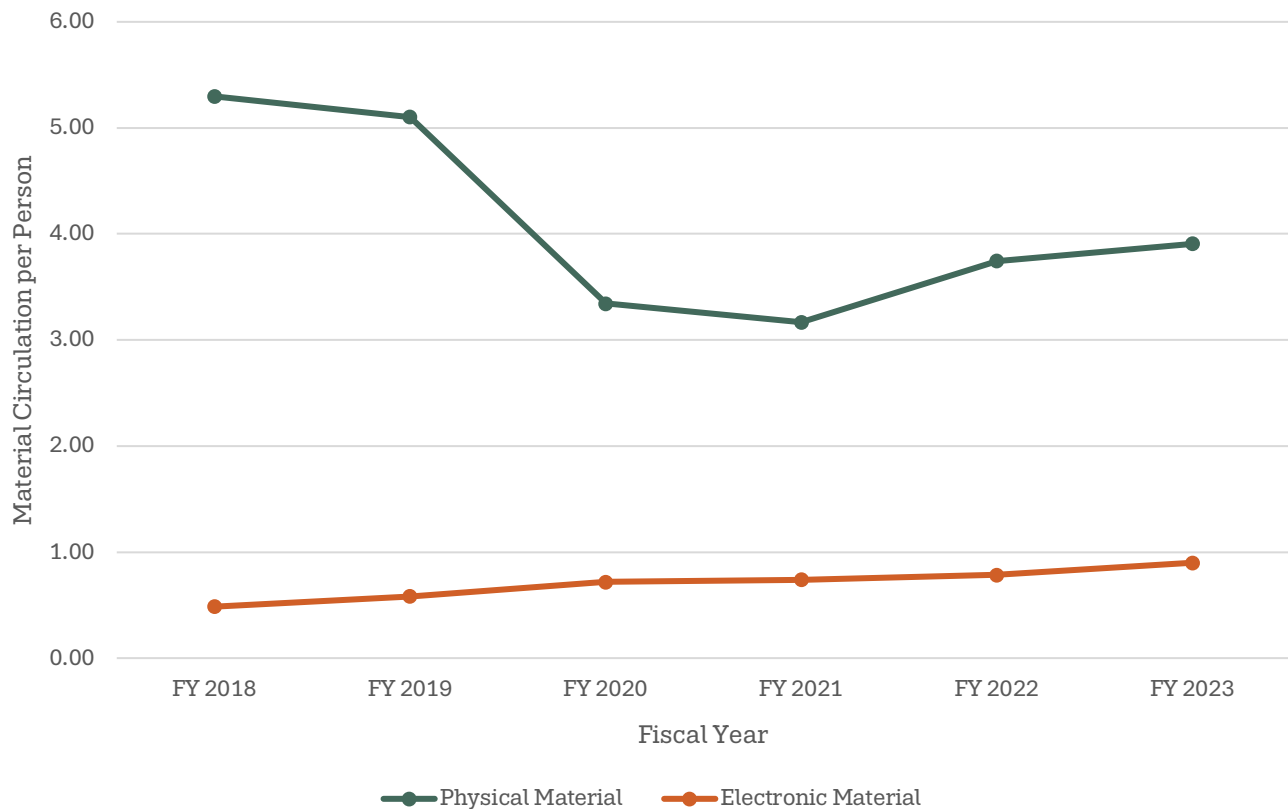
NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Library Material Circulation

Circulation trends further illustrate the post-pandemic recovery. Physical material circulation per person rose to 3.91 in FY 2023, a marked improvement from pandemic lows (Figure 5). While physical circulation began to rebound once

buildings reopened, electronic material circulation per person continued to grow each year, increasing 84 percent from FY 2018 to FY 2023 (0.49 to 0.90).

Figure 5. Median Physical and Electronic Material Circulation Per Person: FY 2018–FY 2023

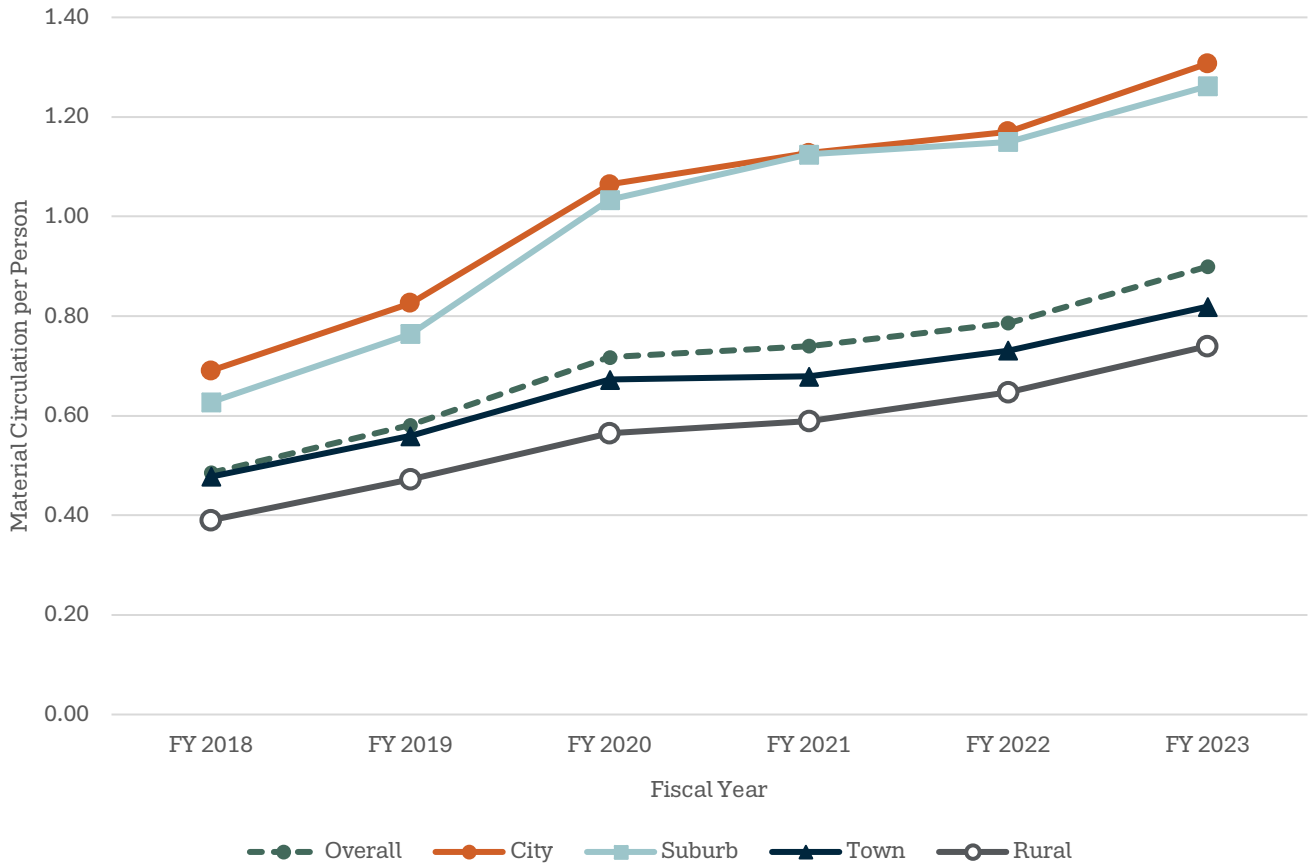


NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations. SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Suburban libraries experienced the largest relative change when viewing median electronic material circulation per person by locale (Figure 6), with an increase from 0.63 items per person in FY 2018 to 1.26 items per person in FY 2023. This was followed by city libraries, with an increase from 0.69 items per person in FY 2018 to 1.31 items per person in FY 2023.

In contrast, towns saw a smaller relative change over the same period, with an increase from 0.48 to 0.82 electronic items circulated per person. In FY 2023, the electronic circulation in rural libraries was more than half that compared to city libraries (0.74 items per person) compared to city libraries.

Figure 6. Median Electronic Material Circulation Per Person, Overall and by Locale: FY 2018–FY 2023



NOTE: See Data and Methodology section for information on analytic sample sizes, median calculations, and FY 2020 data considerations.
 SOURCE: IMLS, Public Libraries Survey, FY 2018–FY 2023.

Summary

By FY 2023, most public health restrictions had been lifted, allowing libraries to resume operations and programming closer to pre-pandemic norms. The percentage of library systems that closed buildings due to COVID-19 continued to decline in FY 2022, falling to 15 percent from 90 percent in FY 2020. As fewer buildings remained closed, the median number

of hours open increased and nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels. Visits, programs offered, program attendance, and physical circulation also rose from FY 2021 lows. At the same time, median circulation of electronic materials per person continued its upward trend observed since FY 2018, with the largest increases in city and suburban libraries.

Data and Methodology

The Public Libraries Survey (PLS) is a collaborative effort between the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and state library administrative agencies. This brief analyzes PLS data from FY 2018 through FY 2023, with analytic sample sizes varying by fiscal year based on survey participation and inclusion criteria. The FY 2018 and FY 2019 analyses include 8,456 and 9,057 public libraries, respectively, and serve as pre-pandemic baseline years. The FY 2020 analysis includes 8,426 libraries that responded to the COVID-19 questions and had fiscal years ending after April 2020, marking the onset of the pandemic (IMLS, 2023). FY 2021 findings draw on 9,021 of 9,203 public library systems. The FY 2022 findings include 8,982 of the 9,238 public libraries in the survey frame, and the FY 2023 analysis includes 9,045 of the 9,246 public libraries. All libraries included meet the Federal-State Cooperative System (FSCS) definition of a public library.

Median values are reported throughout the brief; as a result, estimates may differ from other publications that use alternative summary measures. In addition, FY 2020 estimates in this brief may not align with those reported in the FY 2020 brief (IMLS, 2023) due to the smaller sample size used in the FY 2020 research that excluded libraries not affected by COVID-19 or with missing COVID-19 data. The FY 2020 data

in this brief includes libraries with FY 2020 reporting periods not significantly affected by the pandemic.

In FY 2023, the analysis reflects 522 libraries (6 percent) in cities; 2,312 (26 percent) in suburbs; 2,281 (25 percent) in towns; and 3,930 (43 percent) in rural areas. These distributions provide essential context for interpreting locale-based trends throughout the brief. 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 in the PLS using two methods. The first is based on the geographic location of the library system's physical address while the second is based on the modal locale code among central and branch libraries of that library system. This brief uses the modal outlet method as in prior research.

Fiscal year reporting periods for public libraries vary by state and library system. Detailed fiscal year reporting periods by state are available in Table 2 of the [FY 2018](#), [FY 2019](#), [FY 2020](#), [FY 2021](#), [FY 2022](#), and [FY 2023](#) PLS Data File Documentation files. The PLS data files provide detail on fiscal years by public library system.

References

Institute of Museum and Library Services. (2023). *Access to Public Library Services and Materials During the First Nine Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Washington DC. Retrieved from https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/pls_fy20_research_brief.pdf.

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Acknowledgments

IMLS is indebted to the State Data Coordinators, Chief Officers of State Library Administrative Agencies, public library directors, librarians, and other public library staff who provided data for the Public Libraries Survey. IMLS would also like to extend a special thank you to members of the Library Statistics Working Group for their role in making this report a more valuable resource to the library community and the public.

IMLS is grateful to staff who contributed to this report as well as the team from the American Institutes for Research. The following individuals made important contributions to this research.

IMLS, Office of Research and Evaluation

Marisa Pelczar, PhD

American Institutes for Research

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Kathryn Barr

Public Information

This publication is available online at <https://www.ims.gov/publications>. IMLS will provide an audio recording of this publication upon request.

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Suggested Citation: Institute of Museum and Library Services. (2026). *Public Library Trends between FY 2018 and FY 2023: From Pandemic Disruption to Steady Recovery*. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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