

# BY THE BOOK

## How Wisconsin's libraries are adapting in 2020 and beyond

*Despite a shifting media landscape, the state's public libraries still play a critical role, especially for those who are low income, rural, and people of color. Some library usage trends have fallen from their peak during the recession. Others – including the use of public Wi-Fi, electronic materials, and attendance at various programs – are rising sharply. However, libraries face challenges from shifting staffing trends and an increasing reliance on local government revenues.*

With the advent of Netflix, YouTube, podcasts, and Amazon, one might expect usage of public libraries to be in decline. But in Wisconsin, residents appear to be using libraries to a similar degree, although they are doing so in different ways. While the number of visits to public libraries and circulation of books and other traditional materials fell in 2018 to levels similar to 2000, attendance at library programs has more than doubled over the same time span, and the use of library Wi-Fi more than doubled from just 2013 to 2017. The usage of electronic books and other online materials managed by libraries also continues to climb.

Though overall usage of libraries has not changed much since 2000, people are using them for different reasons. Many library services peaked during the last recession, indicating that Wisconsinites turn to libraries in times of economic downturn for activities such as finding a new job or social services, or as an inexpensive source of leisure activity. Meanwhile, polling and state data show not all state residents use libraries in the same way – in Wisconsin, certain underserved groups use their libraries at higher rates than their neighbors.

On the financial front, state data show that public library systems are holding their own in terms of overall funding. Yet, deeper analysis also reveals some financial and staffing challenges that may become more onerous in the future.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) collects data each year related to the services and finances of Wisconsin's nearly 380 municipal, county,

and tribal libraries. DPI also publishes summary reports that each public library system (PLS) authors each year on the same topics.

In Wisconsin, PLSs coordinate services across all libraries in a county or multi-county region, including technology, databases, professional training, and more. Every public library – including large ones with multiple branches like Madison and Milwaukee – belongs to one of 16 PLSs (see Figure 1 on page 2). A key role of the PLS is to manage interlibrary loans; for example, should a resident of Walworth County want a book only available in the Racine Public Library, staff from the Lakeshores Library System would coordinate the interlibrary loan for that patron.

Using the DPI data, we look back to 2000 to examine how Wisconsin residents use their libraries today versus 20 years ago. Additionally, we provide insight from two recent Marquette Law School polls into how Wisconsinites use and view their public libraries.

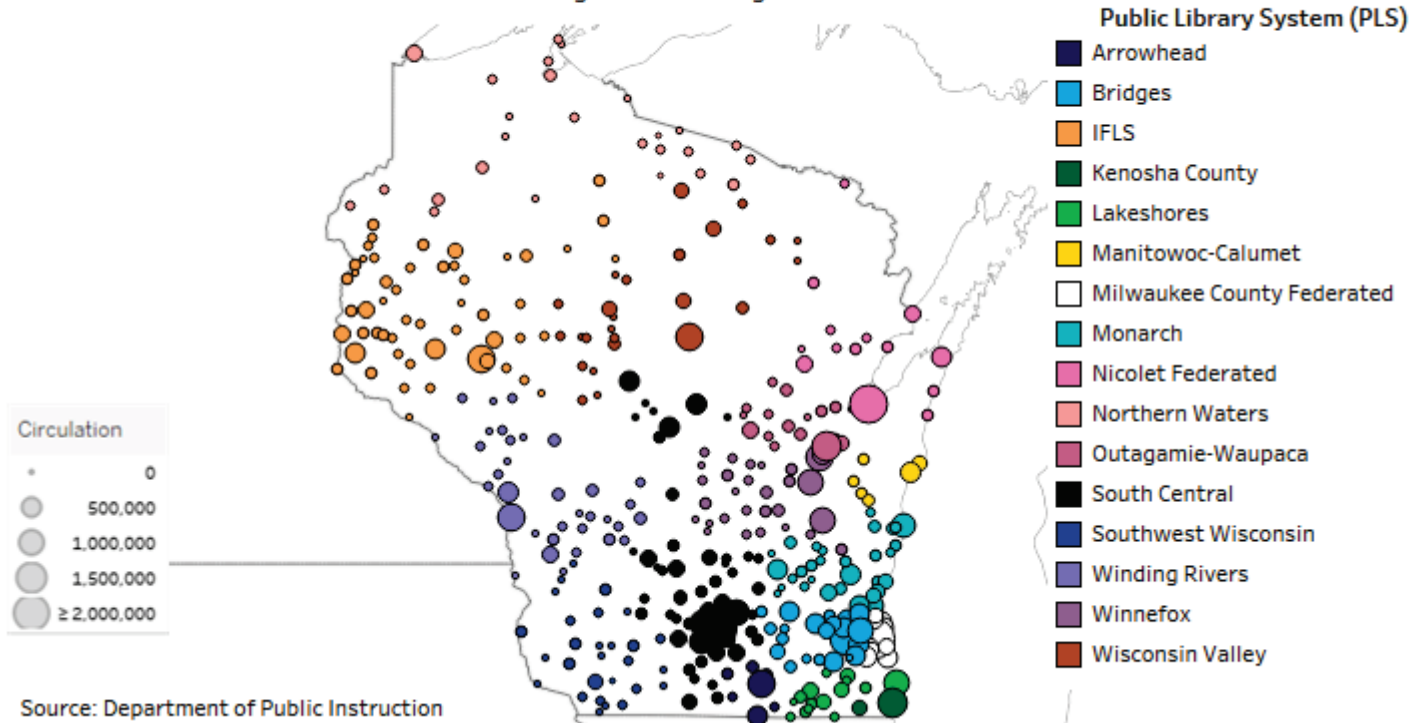
### HOW LIBRARIES ARE USED NOW

Library visits are perhaps the most obvious metric in determining overall usage. DPI provides data from most of the state's libraries (all but 5-15% each year), which allows us to conduct a detailed though not complete analysis of visitation trends.

In 2018, there were almost 28 million visits to the 332 Wisconsin public libraries that have visit numbers, or about five per Wisconsin resident. Overall visits are down less than 1% since 2000 but have dropped 22% since a peak in 2009. Slightly more libraries reported

**Figure 1: Wisconsin's Public Libraries in 2018**

Larger bubbles = higher circulation



Source: Department of Public Instruction

visit numbers in both of these years than in 2018, meaning that overall visits are likely up slightly since 2000. That said, median visits statewide confirm that visits are generally flat since 2000 but have declined substantially in the past decade.

Visit trends differ somewhat by region. Whereas visits to libraries in cities, suburbs, and towns grew slightly from 2000 to 2009 and then began a more dramatic drop-off, rural libraries experienced a steeper increase in the earlier part of the century. All four locale types have seen an 18-25% drop in visits since 2009, but rural libraries had 40% more visitors in 2018 than 2000, while visits to suburban libraries grew just 0.5% and visits to libraries in cities and towns dropped over the full time span.

Figure 2 on page 3 shows trends at the 10 most-visited municipal libraries in Wisconsin. Visits to the various branches of the Madison Public Library peaked at 2.35 million in 2009 but are still up 15% since 2000. The Milwaukee Public Library has seen gradual decreases in visits to its branches since a peak of 2.81 million in 2004, and visits in 2018 were down 27.6% from 2000.

Circulation is also a key metric in determining library usage. DPI data show that circulation (i.e. materials checked out) is up 7.4% in Wisconsin public libraries

since 2000, but down 23.6% since the height of the economic recession. In city libraries, circulation is down overall since 2000, but it is up nearly one-quarter in both suburban (24.9%) and rural (23.2%) libraries. Recession peaks are a statewide trend: since 2009 circulation dropped by 15-35% in all 15 PLSs that existed in both that year and 2018. The public libraries in Milwaukee and Madison also experienced large drops in circulation: from 2009 to 2018, Madison's circulation declined 34.8% from 4.85 million to 3.16 million, while Milwaukee's fell 32% from 3.03 million to 2.06 million. Still, public libraries in Wisconsin had a total circulation that remained above 50 million in 2018, or almost nine books or other materials per state resident.

On their own, these two variables might suggest that public engagement with Wisconsin's libraries is in decline. But other metrics suggest that rather than declining, library usage has evolved since 2000.

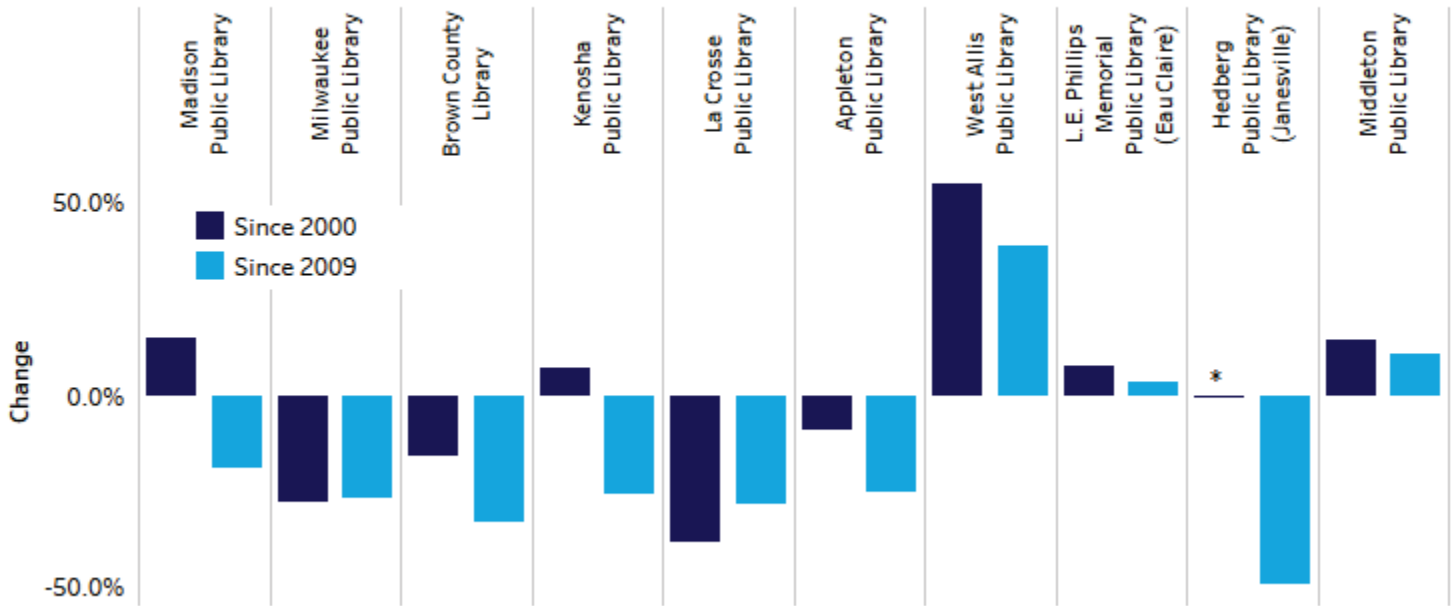
For example, online access to resources is not reflected in the figures on visits or traditional circulation. In fact, DPI has recently begun tracking uses of "e-content" such as electronic copies of print books or audio books as a metric comparable to circulation.

While circulation of traditional materials may have declined in recent years, the opposite is true of e-content. From 2015 to 2018 alone, e-content uses rose from 2.95 million to 4.47 million, an increase of 51%.



**Figure 2: Visits to Wisconsin Libraries Down Since 2009**

Visit changes in Wisconsin's ten most-visited public libraries



Source: Department of Public Instruction. \*Hedberg Public Library missing visits in 2000.

Though traditional circulation – which still dwarfs e-content use – dipped from 54.8 million to 50.0 million in the same time span, the rise in e-content use could be seen as making up nearly a third of that loss. As libraries move into the digital age, more and more traditional library material is becoming available online, meaning patrons can now access that material without visiting the library. Though this might signal a continued decline in library visits and traditional circulation numbers, it expands options for patrons, particularly those with physical disabilities, those without regular access to transportation, and those who live outside of walking or driving distance from a library.

Wi-Fi usage in Wisconsin's libraries has also increased. DPI began asking libraries to report the number of times someone used their Wi-Fi in 2013 and has reliable numbers up until 2017. Not all libraries have reliably tracked this information, but there were 106 that did from 2013 to 2017. In those libraries, Wi-Fi usage was up 103%, from 1.69 million uses in 2013 to 3.44 million in 2017. Wi-Fi usage at least doubled in the suburban (102%) and town (139%) libraries with all years of data, but only increased 30% in rural libraries.

Another bright sign for Wisconsin's public libraries is a steep rise in attendance at library programs, which has more than doubled over the past two decades, from 1.31 million in 2000 to 2.85 million in 2018. Attendance is up 66.6% in cities, but over 120% in suburb, town, and rural libraries (see Figure 3 on page 4). Eight of the 15 PLSs that existed across that time

span saw program attendance at least double, including two that more than tripled.

The Madison Public Library, which offered more than 6,000 programs at its branches in 2018, saw program attendance nearly quadruple, from 36,012 in 2000 to 142,709 in 2018. The Madison branches offer programs serving all age groups including topics like "Preschool Storytime" and "One-on-One Computer Assistance." One [national-level survey](#) suggests that the uptick in program attendance nationwide could be attributed to the idea that more people "recognized libraries as a resource for job training and language building" in the aftermath of the economic recession, as well as increased perception of the library as a "community hub" rather than merely a public space with free books.

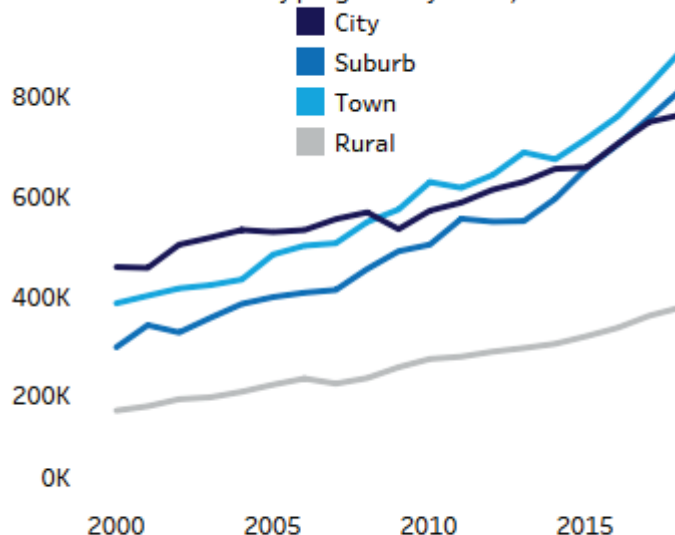
### THE POPULARITY OF WISCONSIN'S LIBRARIES

While visitation and usage statistics tell part of the story, understanding how citizens view and use their libraries requires additional context. The Marquette University Law School frequently polls Wisconsin residents on a wide range of issues, and polls conducted in both 2015 and 2017 included a number of questions regarding public libraries. Figure 4 shows pertinent results from both surveys.



**Figure 3: Program Attendance Rises Steadily**

Attendance at library programs by locale, 2000 to 2018



Source: Department of Public Instruction. Locale designations from National Center for Education Statistics.

In the March 2017 poll, 58% of the 800 survey respondents said they had been to a library in the past 12 months. Among them, 78% said they went to check out a book, the most popular answer (respondents could say they attended for more than one activity). In line with findings discussed above, the next most popular response was to take a child to a program (47%), and a quarter of all respondents went to libraries in the past year to attend a program themselves.

Whereas 27% said they went to use a computer or the internet in 2015, 35% answered the same in 2017.

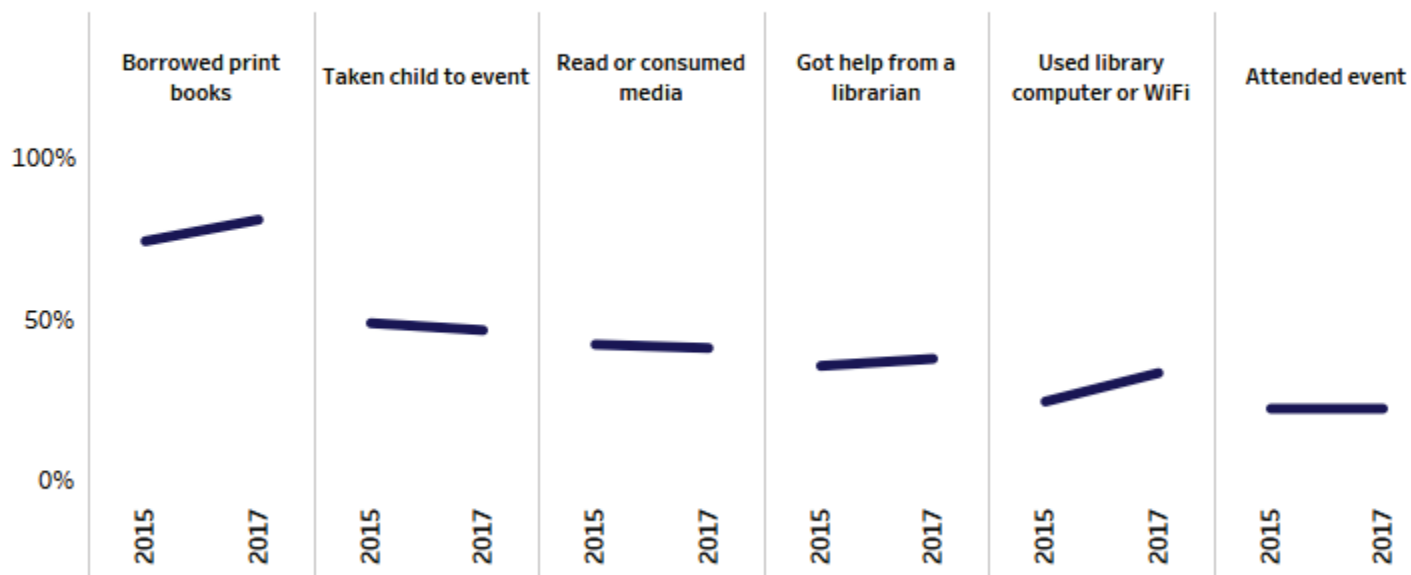
Marquette Law School also publishes cross-tabulations of its survey responses, so answers can be broken out across variables such as race, age, and education level, although the small sample sizes for some groups means we should be cautious about the results. Nevertheless, for further context, we looked at responses aggregated across both the 2015 and 2017 surveys in cross-tab categories including age, race, income, education, locale, and gender.

Outside of those with at most a high school degree or no degree, at least 50% of respondents from all groups had been to a public library in the past year. However, they went for very different reasons. A total of 38% across both polls said they went to the library to get help from a librarian, but this number rose to 57% for black respondents, 48% for those with an income less than \$40,000, 48% for those 60 and older, and 42% for those identifying as living in a rural area. We observed similar responses for those who went to the library to use a computer or the internet: compared to a poll average of 31%, Hispanic (61%), black (55%), and low-income (40%) respondents said they did so at higher rates. Black (68%) and Hispanic (57%) Wisconsinites also were much more likely than the average citizen (48%) to take a child to an event. When asked how a library closing would impact them personally, black, older, and low-income respondents said it would have a major effect at higher rates than the statewide average.

**Figure 4: Why Wisconsinites Go to the Library**

Results from Sept. 2015 and Mar. 2017 Marquette Law Polls

Of those who said they had been to library in the last year - in the last year, have you...



Source: Marquette Law Poll



In national surveys from the same time period, researchers at Pew obtained similar findings. In 2016 polling, they found that young (ages 16-29), black, and low-income citizens were more likely to have visited a public library in the past year, as well as use a library computer. Pew also found that “23% of all Americans ages 16 and above” had gone to a library to use a computer, the internet, or a public Wi-Fi network in the past year, and 7% had gone to use a Wi-Fi signal from outside the library once it had closed – an acute issue in communities that have poor or no at-home Wi-Fi connection, such as rural areas or low-income households.

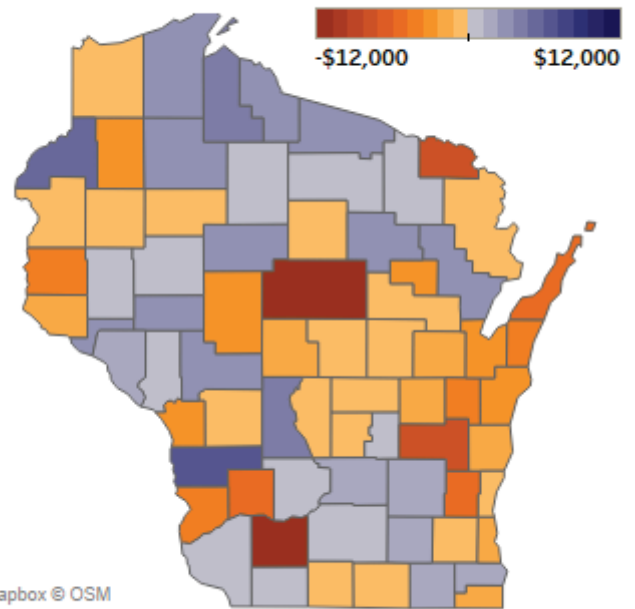
## FINANCIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

From the 30,000-foot level, the budgets of Wisconsin’s public libraries appear to have been stable over the past two decades. From 2000 to 2018, operating revenues and expenditures rose around 40% across city libraries, 70% across suburban and town libraries, and over 100% across rural libraries. By comparison, the Consumer Price Index rose 45.8% over those years.

That said, a few trends reveal some emerging challenges for Wisconsin libraries. First, public libraries will have to consider the appropriate mix of staffing they need to effectively serve patrons with varying needs. Over both decades, there was a slight gain in full-time equivalent (FTE) employees in Wisconsin’s public libraries overall, but city libraries – still the most visited of any locale – lost 8.8% of their staff.

Additionally, though DPI data does not indicate which staff are part- versus full-time, there are other indications that libraries may be hiring more part-time staffers. From 2011 to 2018, Wisconsin’s libraries paid \$2.1 million less in benefits to their employees, but gained 132.6 FTEs, an increase of 4.4% (see Figure 5). Some of the drop in benefits spending is likely due to 2011 Act 10, which required most public workers to make additional contributions for benefits such as pensions, thus lowering the cost for employers. Yet the data also suggest that, perhaps to hold down costs, a number of libraries around the state may be hiring part-time employees who do not receive fringe benefits. Whether this is an optimal strategy for staffing libraries – as opposed to a financially necessary one – is unknown. Regardless, a continued shift to part-time staffing may not be viable going forward in light of the extent to which it has already occurred.

**Figure 5: Libraries Paying Out Less in Benefits**  
2011 to 2018 Change in Benefits per FTE by County



Source: Department of Public Instruction

Another important financial consideration for libraries is their mix of funding. In 2000, 86.8% of the \$164.2 million in revenues that supported libraries in Wisconsin came from either municipal or county sources, such as the property tax. In 2018, that rose to 89.9% of \$256.4 million of overall funding (after removing \$5 million in unusual, one-time revenue to one library; see Figure 6 on page 6). In the same time span, libraries’ share of the funds allocated by counties and municipalities for culture, recreation, and education rose from 34.0% to 38.2%. These figures suggest that municipalities and counties have viewed libraries as a priority and have kept up their commitments of local taxes and discretionary state aid, but whether that prioritization can be sustained in the face of growing budget challenges is uncertain.

Also of note is slowing and inconsistent growth in the “all other income” category of revenue. According to DPI, this category includes “monetary gifts, donations, interest, fines, and fees...available for library use.” Statewide, there has been a [recent push](#) by library officials to begin to eliminate fines for overdue materials, as they have increasingly been seen as an economic barrier to access for some patrons as well as an administrative burden. Though fines do not account for large portions of total library funding, a continued push to eliminate them removes one stream of funding.



**Figure 6: How Wisconsin's Libraries Are Financed**  
Statewide revenues and expenditures in millions, 2018



Source: Department of Public Instruction

Consistent growth in revenues may have been a necessity for libraries to keep up with changing demands from patrons. As discussed previously, the function of the library has evolved since 2000. Outside of compensation, much of library spending then was comprised of the purchase of new materials in traditional forms. Today, libraries purchase technology that requires more regular upkeep as well as staff training. Programs to teach patrons how to use new technologies – ranging from Wi-Fi to 3-D printers – can be costly as well.

In line with that shift, spending increases across categories have varied since 2000. Compared to a 59.5% increase in overall library spending from 2000 to 2018, spending on library materials has only increased 11.9%. Though it remains a relatively small portion of library budgets overall, spending on contract services has skyrocketed, increasing 95.0% from \$6.1 million to \$11.9 million. Libraries may contract for various types of services, but numerous PLS reports suggest the spending increase may be linked with efforts to teach patrons how to use new software and technology.

## CONCLUSION

Wisconsin's public libraries remain important institutions in the state, from large municipal systems in Madison and Milwaukee to the small library in rural Vernon County that operates on a \$20,000 annual budget. While functions like police, fire, and public works often receive greater public attention, libraries

have held their own financially. They continue to be prioritized by government leaders and supported by citizens.

Library patrons may be visiting less, but they are packing their visits with more than just checking out books. Today, a regular visit might involve an adult dropping off a child at a popular weekly program while he or she stays on site to use the public Wi-Fi. With the rise of e-content, patrons no longer have to leave their homes to access library services.

The newer, multi-faceted library requires staff and librarians who are well-trained in new technologies and skills. But data indicate city libraries have lost staff in recent years, and statewide, there is some indication that part-time staff now make up a higher mix of all FTEs. Certain libraries – primarily in rural areas – continue to operate with only one or a few FTEs, who now are responsible for delivering more services than in the past.

In the coming years, local and state leaders in Wisconsin will need to consider the changing role libraries play in the lives of citizens – especially those on the margins – when deciding on future programming, staffing, and funding. Compared to books, new technologies bring greater ongoing costs, but they also “assert [the] library’s value and define [its] service to [the] community,” as one library system noted. Twenty years from now, Wisconsin’s public libraries will assuredly look different; how so will depend on public demand and the foresight of state and local leaders.

