



State of Vermont

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Telling Your Story*

Statistics can be an effective way of knowing if your library is doing a good job and of showing others what it's doing. Here are a few things to note about using statistics:

1. When comparing your library's statistics to previous years or to other libraries, **were the same things counted – and in the same ways?** This is the reason that the State Data Coordinators work through the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data to refine and document precise definitions for the data we collect in each state. If you collect data not asked for on the annual Public Library Report form, you should take care to define what you are collecting.
2. When you are telling your story, try to **tell the whole story, and don't skew the statistics or graphs to make things look better**, or worse, than they are. Someone will catch you at it, and there goes your credibility.
3. Make sure you **note the source** of your statistics, especially when comparing your library to another entity.
4. When comparing your library to other libraries, **select your peer group carefully**. Peers might be those libraries serving a particular population range, libraries in towns with similar Grand List figures, or even neighboring town libraries. The peer group may vary, depending on what you want to find out and to whom you are presenting the statistics. A selectboard may have its own idea of which towns are comparable to yours, and they may be suspicious if you throw in one that they perceive as much more or less wealthy than yours.
5. **When doing comparisons, ratios give a truer picture**. A large library probably has a larger circulation than a small library. When you look at their circulation per capita figures, however, the libraries may be very similar. Take a look at per capita figures, turnover rates, and expenditures per transaction to get better comparisons.

Use statistics to create charts and graphs to illustrate various aspects of library growth, change, and usage. Many librarians find the use of such visual demonstrations of data are an effective way of presenting library facts to library boards, selectboards, staff, and the public.

What statistics are most useful?

1. Statistics you already collect in your library and report to the state each year can be used to:
 - show and track performance and effectiveness over time

* based on Let's Tell Your Story, by Sandi Long, Utah State Library Division, 1994.

- justify keeping, adding, or eliminating programs
- lobby for increases or changes

2. Statistics you collect in-house can provide valuable information about how your library serves its community. Consider collecting or calculating:

- In-house use of library materials – many libraries find that many items (e.g., magazines, newspapers, reference materials) are used but not checked out. This use can have a great impact on staff time and the use of the building. Try conducting a "typical week" survey to collect this data.
- Materials availability – are people finding what they want when they come to the library? How many items did a patron search or browse for? This information can only be collected using a survey.
- Document delivery – how long do people have to wait to receive the materials they request? Do you need to buy more copies of popular items or change your patterns of collection development? Collect this data by tracking all requests for a period of time, perhaps once or twice a year. Repeat every year to monitor progress.
- Turnover rates – how many times a year does the average item go out? Do some things sit on the shelves for long periods of time? Are you buying what people want? Divide the number of items in the collection by the number of circulations.

3. Statistics available from other sources can also provide information about your community and peer libraries. The Department of Libraries compiles and publishes public and school library data each year. The U.S. Census offers valuable insight into community demographics. Other state and federal agencies also collect library and community data.

4. A few "snapshots" or "fun bites" of information can also be used to make a point. Think of these as educational snippets that compare libraries to other activities or every day things:

- *Americans go to school, public and academic libraries more than twice as often as they go to the movies*
- *There are more public libraries than McDonald's – a total of 16,090 including branches*
- *Americans spend more than three times as much on salty snacks as they do on public libraries*
- *As many Coloradans are registered to use public libraries as are registered to vote*
- *Visits to Colorado libraries outnumber ski lift ticket sales six to one annually*
- *95% of public libraries provide public access to the internet*

Sources: Library Research Service, Colorado State Library; American Library Association

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