

MAY 1, 2013

---

# Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading

*Parents of minor children have a special relationship with libraries. Most believe libraries are very important for their children and provide extra resources that are not available at home. Parents are also more likely than other adults to use libraries for services ranging from book borrowing to accessing the internet to attending classes and events – and mothers are considerably more engaged with libraries than fathers.*

**Carolyn Miller**  
*Research Consultant, Pew Internet Project*

**Kathryn Zickuhr**  
*Research Analyst, Pew Internet Project*

**Lee Rainie**  
*Director, Pew Internet Project*

**Kristen Purcell**  
*Associate Director for Research, Pew Internet Project*

<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/05/01/parents-children-libraries-and-reading/>

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project  
1615 L St., N.W., Suite 700  
Washington, D.C. 20036

Media Inquiries:  
202.419.4500

# Summary of Findings

The vast majority of parents of minor children — children younger than 18 — feel libraries are very important for their children. That attachment carries over into parents’ own higher-than-average use of a wide range of library services.<sup>1</sup>

The ties between parents and libraries start with the importance parents attach to the role of reading in their children’s lives. Half of parents of children under age 12 (50%) read to their child every day and an additional 26% do so a few times a week. Those with children under age 6 are especially keen on daily reading with their child: 58% of these parents read with their child every day and another 26% read multiple times a week with their children.

The importance parents assign to reading and access to knowledge shapes their enthusiasm for libraries and their programs:

- 94% of parents say libraries are important for their children and 79% describe libraries as “very important.” That is especially true of parents of young children (those under 6), some 84% of whom describe libraries as very important.
- 84% of these parents who say libraries are important say a major reason they want their children to have access to libraries is that libraries help inculcate their children’s love of reading and books.
- 81% say a major reason libraries are important is that libraries provide their children with information and resources not available at home.
- 71% also say a major reason libraries are important is that libraries are a safe place for children.

Almost every parent (97%) says it is important for libraries to offer programs and classes for children and teens.

## Library visits by children

Some 70% of parents report their child visited a public library in the past 12 months and 55% say their child has his/her own library card. Those children who are library visitors did the following:

- 87% visited the library to borrow books.
- 55% went to do school work — and 77% of the children ages 12-17 went to the library for this reason.
- 46% went to borrow DVDs or CDs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, the word “parents” refers exclusively to those who currently have a child under age 18. We use the term “other adults” to refer to those who do not currently have a minor child – even if they do have children 18 or older. For some questions, a small share of those “other adults” are ages 16 and 17.

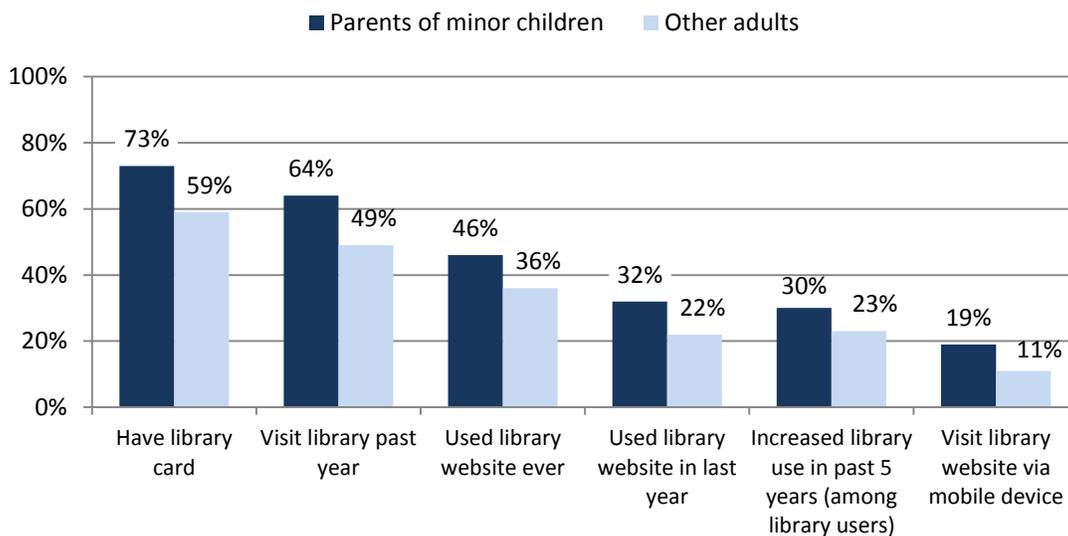
- 46% went to attend a library event — and 53% of the children under age 12 went to the library for this reason.
- 37% went to use the internet — and 43% of the children ages 12-17 went to the library for this reason.
- 37% went to socialize with their friends.
- 32% went to a library-sponsored book club or program.

## Parents themselves are considerably more likely than other adults to use library services

These parental feelings about the importance of libraries for their children are associated with higher levels of library use by the parents themselves. Indeed, the presence of a child or a grandchild in a family is the primary reason cited by the 30% of parents who say their patronage of libraries has increased in the past five years. Compared with other adults who do not have minor children, these parents are more likely to have visited a library in the past 12 months, have a library card, to have visited a library website in the past year, and use a mobile device to connect to a library website.

### Parents are more likely than other adults to use libraries

*The percentage of parents and other adults who do these library activities*



**Source:** Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project Library Services Survey. October 15-November 10, 2012. N=2,252 Americans ages 16 and older. Total N for parents=584; other adults=1668. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

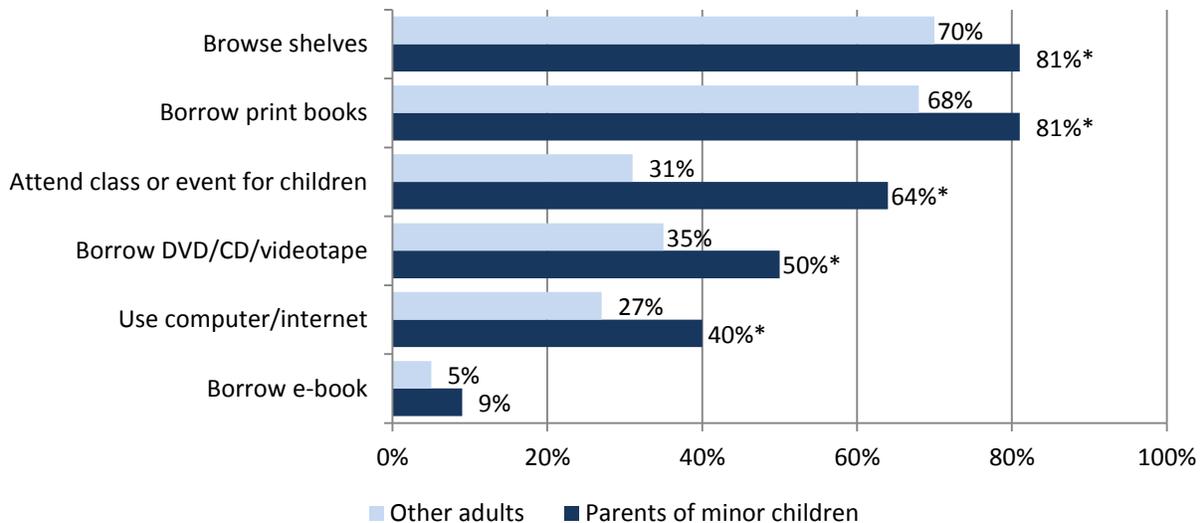
**Note:** All differences are statistically significant

Once at the library or on the library website, parents are more likely than other adults to do a notable number of activities, including browse shelves, borrow printed books, attend classes and events for children, borrow DVDs and CDs, use computers and the internet, and borrow e-books.

---

## Among library users, parents are more likely than other adults to do library activities

The percentage of parents and other adults who used the library in the past 12 months who have done these library activities



**Source:** Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project Library Services Survey. October 15–November 10, 2012. N=2,252 Americans ages 16 and older. Total N for parents=584; parents ever visited library =501; parents visited library past 12 months =375, Form A=201, Form B=174. Total N for other adults=1668; ever visited library=1419; visited library past year=863, Form A=415, Form B=448. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones. \*denotes places where the differences are statistically different

---

Parents' ties to libraries are all the more striking because parents are more likely than other adults to have computers, internet access, smartphones, and tablet computers — tools that might make them less reliant on libraries because they have access to information and media through other convenient platforms.

## Parents are more likely to be interested in expanding library services and adding future tech-related services

Parents' tighter connections to libraries likely accounts for the fact that they are more aware than other adults about the array of programs and services their local libraries offer. Some 74% of parents say they know about "all" or "most" of the services and programs their library offers, compared with 65% of other adults who feel that way.

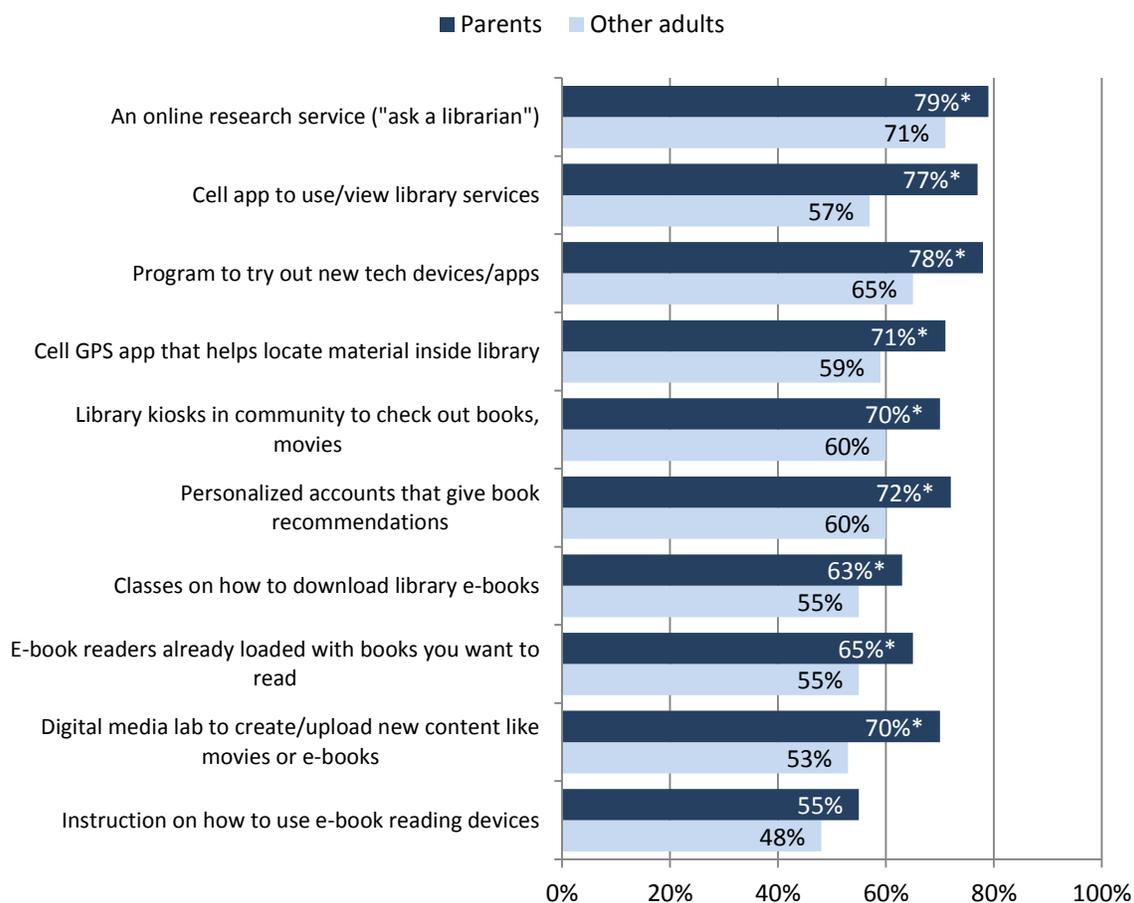
And parents are more likely to want libraries to expand their offerings. Compared with other adults, parents are more likely to say that libraries should definitely offer more comfortable spaces (65% vs. 56%). This attitude might stem from the fact that parents visit the library more. Parents are also more likely than other adults to think libraries should definitely offer a broader selection of e-books (62% vs. 49%) and definitely offer more interactive learning experiences (54% vs. 43%). Interestingly, other

adults are just as supportive as parents of library services for school children and these activities are supported by eight in 10 or more of both groups.

Parents express more interest than other adults in an array of tech-oriented services that are being discussed and implemented among some American libraries, including online reference services, cell phone apps to connect to library materials, tech “petting zoos” that would allow people to try out new gadgets, and library kiosks or “Redbox”-type offerings in the community to check out books and movies.

## Parents are more likely than other adults to say they would use new library offerings

The percentage of parents and other adults who say they would be “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to use each service



**Source:** Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project Library Services Survey, October 15-November 10, 2012. N=2,252 Americans ages 16 and older. Total N for parents=584; other adults=1668. N for Form A: parents=302; other adults=817. N for Form B: parents=282; other adults=851. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

\*denotes places where differences are statistically different

## Mothers stand out when it comes to reading and libraries

More than fathers, mothers in many respects are attached to their libraries, feel they are important for their children and their communities, and are eager to see libraries expand and add new tech-related services.

- Reading habits: Mothers are more likely than fathers to read to their children every day (55% vs. 45%).

Overall, mothers read books somewhat more often than fathers. In the past 12 months, mothers read an average of 14 books (mean), compared with 10 for fathers. Book-reading mothers are more likely than fathers to have read a printed book in the past year (90% vs. 82%).

Mothers are also more likely than fathers to feel it is very important for their children to read printed books in addition to digital content (86% vs. 74%).

- Family use of library services and activities: Mothers are more likely than fathers to report that their children have visited the library in the past year (74% vs. 64%).

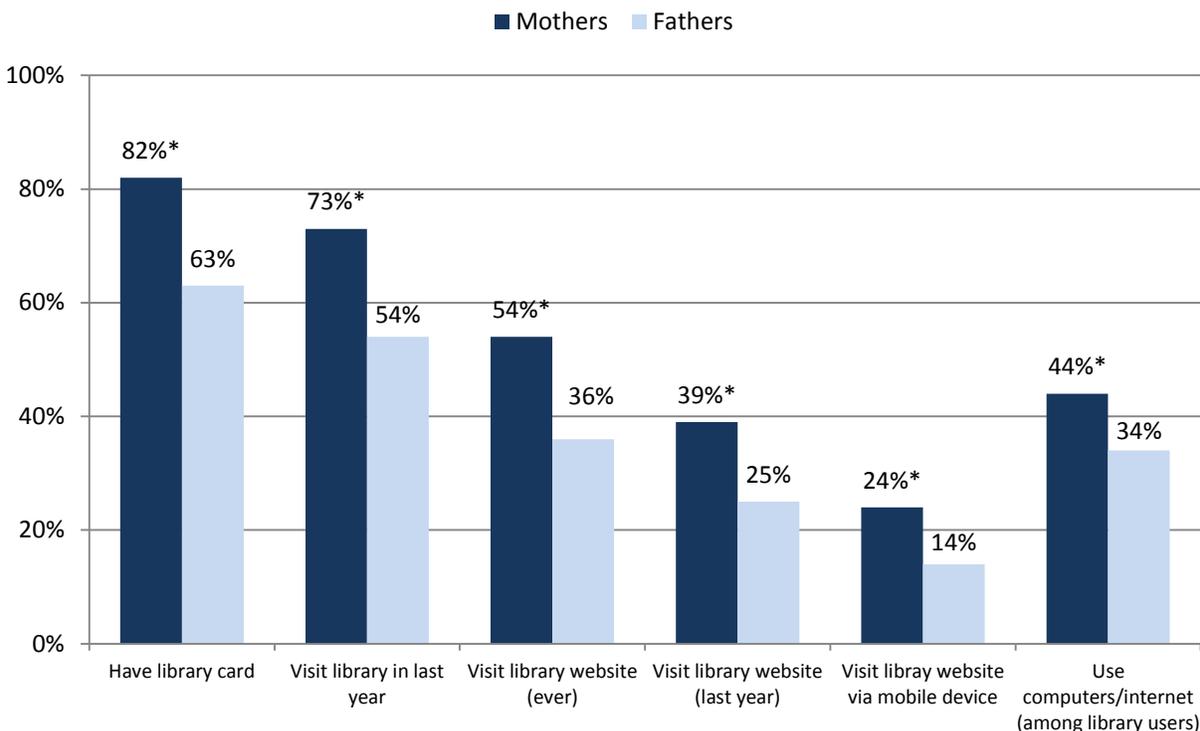
When it comes to parents' use of libraries, mothers are notably more engaged than fathers. They are more likely than fathers to have a library card, to have visited a library in the last 12 months, to have visited a library website in the past year, and to have visited a library website via mobile device.

At the library, mothers are more likely than fathers to have used the computers and internet access at the library and to use those computers to take an online class or certification course (26% vs. 7%). Mothers are also more likely than fathers to have gotten help from librarians in using computers and the internet at the library (46% vs. 30%).

---

## Mothers are more likely than fathers to engage with libraries

The percentage of parents who do these activities



**Source:** Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project Library Services Survey. October 15–November 10, 2012. N=2,252 Americans ages 16 and older. Total N for mothers of minors=321; for fathers of minors=263. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

\*denotes places where the differences are statistically different

---

Among library users, mothers visit more frequently than fathers: 21% of library-using mothers visit the library weekly, compared with 10% of library-using fathers who visit that frequently.

- **Importance of libraries:** Mothers are more likely than fathers to say libraries are important to their communities (94% vs. 87%). And they are more likely than fathers to say libraries are important to them and their families (87% vs. 80%).

When it comes to their own children, mothers are more likely than fathers to say a major reason why libraries are important is because libraries help children develop a love of reading and books (90% vs. 77%). Mothers also are more likely to believe libraries offer their children access to information and resources they can't get at home or school (86% vs. 75%).

- **Importance of library services:** Mothers are more likely than fathers to say it is very important for libraries to offer quiet spaces for adults and children (85% vs. 69%). They are also more likely to say it is very important for libraries to offer job, employment, and career resources (74% vs. 61%), for libraries to offer free cultural events and classes (74% vs. 60%) and libraries to offer free public meeting spaces (55% vs. 36%).

Mothers say they are better informed than fathers about what their local library offers: 32% of mothers say they know all or most of the services and programs the library offers, compared with 21% of fathers.

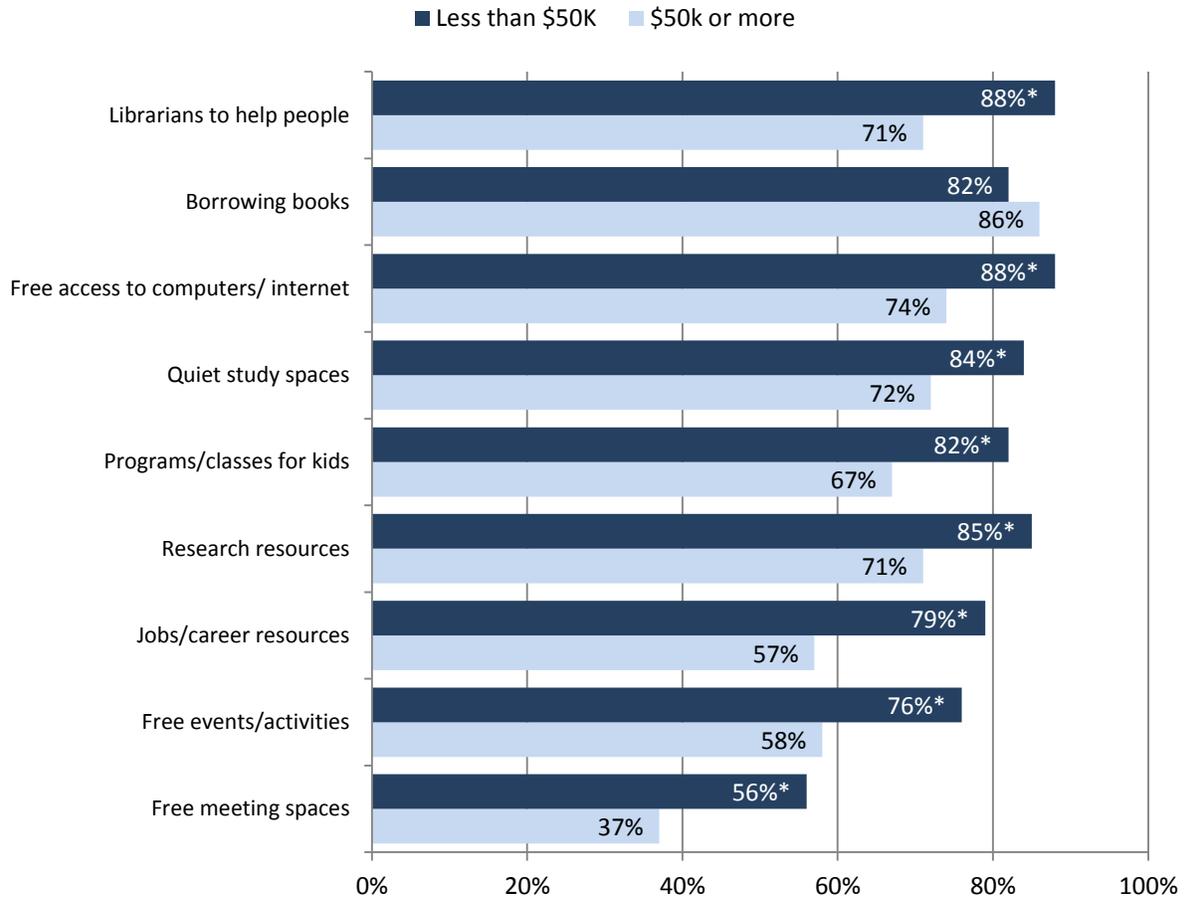
## Lower income parents are more likely to view library services as very important

When it comes to newer services that libraries might create, parents living in households earning less than \$50,000 are more likely than parents in higher income households to say they would be “very likely” to take advantage of:

- classes on how to download library e-books (44% vs. 29%)
- e-readers already loaded with library content (40% vs. 22%)
- digital media lab (40% vs. 28%)
- classes on how to use e-readers (34% vs. 16%)

## Lower income parents are more likely to view various library services as “very important”

Among all parents, the percentage of those living in households with income less than \$50,000 and those with \$50,000 or more who say it is “very important” for libraries to offer these services



**Source:** Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project Library Services Survey. October 15-November 10, 2012. Total N for parents = 584. Total N for parents with income under \$50,000 =273; total N for parents with income of \$50,000 or more=266. Form A parents total n=302; parents with income under \$50,000=140; parents with income \$50,000+=136. Total Form B parents = 282; Form B under \$50,000=133; Form B \$50,000+=130. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

\*denotes places where the differences are statistically different

# About this Research

This report explores the relationship that parents of minor children have with public libraries. In some ways, parents of minor children are similar to other Americans who do not currently have minor children (“other adults” as we refer to them throughout this report) in how they view and use the library. But there are key differences that will be highlighted and explored in this report.

This report is part of a broader effort by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project that is exploring the role libraries play in people’s lives and in their communities. The research is underwritten by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This report contains findings from a survey of 2,252 Americans ages 16 and above between October 15 and November 10, 2012. The surveys were administered half on landline phones and half on cellphones and were conducted in English and Spanish. The margin of error for the full survey is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. The survey includes 584 interviews with parents of children under 18 years of age. The margin of error for the sample of parents is plus or minus 4.5 percentage points.

There were several long lists of activities and services in the phone survey. To minimize the burden on those taking the survey, we asked half the respondents about one set of activities and the other half of the respondents were asked about a different set of activities. These findings are representative of the population ages 16 and above, but it is important to note that the margin of error is larger when only a portion of respondents is asked a question.

There are also findings in this report that come from a survey of a non-scientific sample of librarians who volunteered to participate in Pew Internet surveys. Some 2,067 library staff members participated in the online survey between December 17 and December 27, 2012. No statistical results from that canvassing are reported here because it is based on non-probability samples of patrons and librarians intended to provide open-ended comments and other qualitative information. We highlight librarians’ written answers to open-ended questions that illustrate how they are thinking about and implementing new library services.

In addition, we quote librarians and library patrons who participated in focus groups in-person and online that were devoted to discussions about library services and the future of libraries. One set of in-person focus groups was conducted in Chicago on September 19-20. Other focus groups were conducted in Denver on October 3-4 and in Charlotte, N.C. on December 11-12.

# Acknowledgements

## About Pew Internet

**The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project** is an initiative of the Pew Research Center, a nonprofit "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world. The Pew Internet Project explores the impact of the internet on children, families, communities, the work place, schools, health care and civic/political life. The Project is nonpartisan and takes no position on policy issues. Support for the Project is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. More information is available at <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/>.

## Advisors for this research

A number of experts have helped Pew Internet in this research effort:

Daphna Blatt, Office of Strategic Planning, The New York Public Library

Richard Chabran, Adjunct Professor, University of Arizona, e-learning consultant

Larra Clark, American Library Association, Office for Information Technology Policy

Mike Crandall, Professor, Information School, University of Washington

Allison Davis, Senior Vice President, GMMB

Catherine De Rosa, Vice President, OCLC

LaToya Devezin, American Library Association Spectrum Scholar and librarian, Louisiana

Amy Eshelman, Program Leader for Education, Urban Libraries Council

Sarah Houghton, Director, San Rafael Public Library, California

Mimi Ito, Research Director of Digital Media and Learning Hub, University of California Humanities Research Institute

Patrick Losinski, Chief Executive Officer, Columbus Library, Ohio

Jo McGill, Director, Northern Territory Library, Australia

Michael Kelley, Editor-in-Chief, Library Journal

Dwight McInvaill, Director, Georgetown County Library, South Carolina

Bobbi Newman, Blogger, Librarian By Day

Carlos Manjarrez, Director, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Institute of Museum and Library Services

Johana Orellana-Cabrera, American Library Association Spectrum Scholar and librarian in TX.

Mayur Patel, Vice President for Strategy and Assessment, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Karen Archer Perry, Senior Program Officer, Global Libraries, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Gail Sheldon, Director, Oneonta Public Library (Alabama)

Sharman Smith, Executive Director, Mississippi Library Commission

## **Disclaimer from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**

This report is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.