iPAC
INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

PUBLIC LIBRARIES, BUILDINGS, & DIGITAL INCLUSION

DIGITAL INCLUSION

TECHNOLOGY
Public libraries offer free access to technology, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet

EXPERTISE
Public librarians offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet-enabled services and resources

SKILLS
Public libraries offer a wide range of free technology instruction, including courses on employment and health resources

E-GOVERNMENT
Public libraries help people complete immigration, citizenship, social service, emergency benefit, and other online forms

EMPLOYMENT
Public libraries help people create résumés, search for jobs, and apply for jobs online

Public libraries build digitally ready and inclusive communities with their public access technologies, technology instruction, and programs in health & wellness, education & learning, employment, and civic engagement. But their buildings can be a barrier to digital inclusion for all.

87.6%
Libraries rate their buildings as poor/fair for maker spaces

21.3%
Libraries were renovated in the last five years

43.1%
Very small libraries offer instruction on new technology familiarity

71.1%
Renovated libraries offer programs on identifying health insurance resources

The public access technology, resources, and services provided by public libraries are essential for those without access or the ability to use technologies and information resources. Small libraries, or those that have not been updated recently, are less likely to provide increasingly critical digital services and resources in key areas of instruction and programs — creating an access, skills, and use divide.

DIGITAL INCLUSION SURVEY

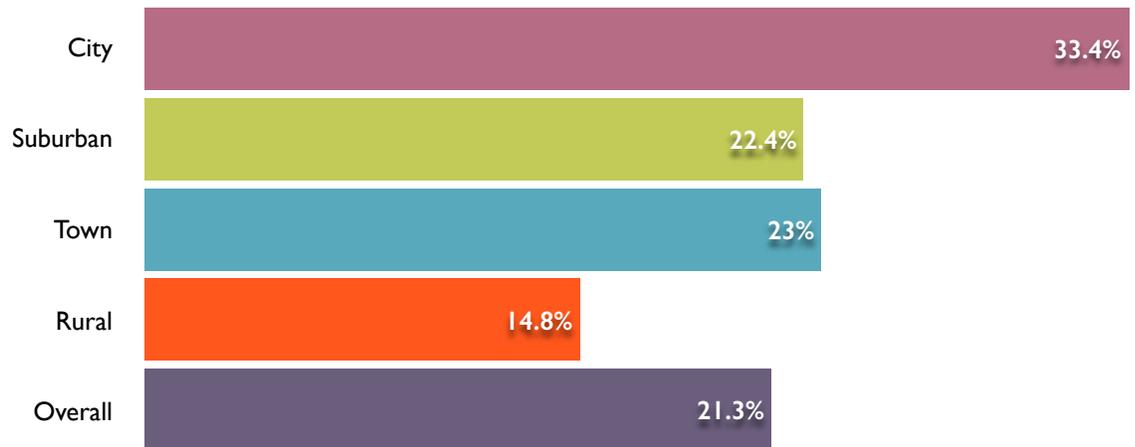# PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING ADEQUACY

Figure 1. Public Libraries Renovated in the Last Five Years.

The State of the Building

The average opening year of U.S. public libraries is 1970, with a range of 1965 for Town libraries and 1975 for City libraries. Just 21.3% of public libraries reported being renovated in the last five years (see Figure 1), with 33.4% of City libraries and only 14.8% of rural libraries indicating renovations to their buildings in the last five years. As Figure 2 shows, just over 60% (61.9%) of libraries rate their building adequacy as good or excellent in terms of general use space, and a majority — 53.8% — report that their electric supply and network capacity are good or excellent. Nearly an equal percentage of libraries report that their availability of meeting rooms is good or excellent (50.4%) or poor/fair (49.3%). A vast majority of libraries, however, report that their buildings are poor or fair in terms of the adequacy of maker spaces (87.6%) or work/office spaces for business users (79.1%).

When public libraries did renovate their buildings in the last five years, 72.3% upgraded the physical plant (e.g., electric supply, electric outlets), 68.7% enhanced their general use space, and 49.7% enhanced/added meeting room space. Just 11.9% enhanced or added maker spaces and 19.0% enhanced/added work/office spaces for business users.

The inadequacy of public library buildings for maker spaces and serving the needs of the business community are key issues, as recent Pew data show that 52% of those 16 and older indicated that public libraries should create services or programs for local businesses and entrepreneurs and 45% indicated that libraries should buy 3D printers and other digital tools to allow people to learn how to use them/make different kinds of objects.[1]

Figure 2. Public Library Building Adequacy.

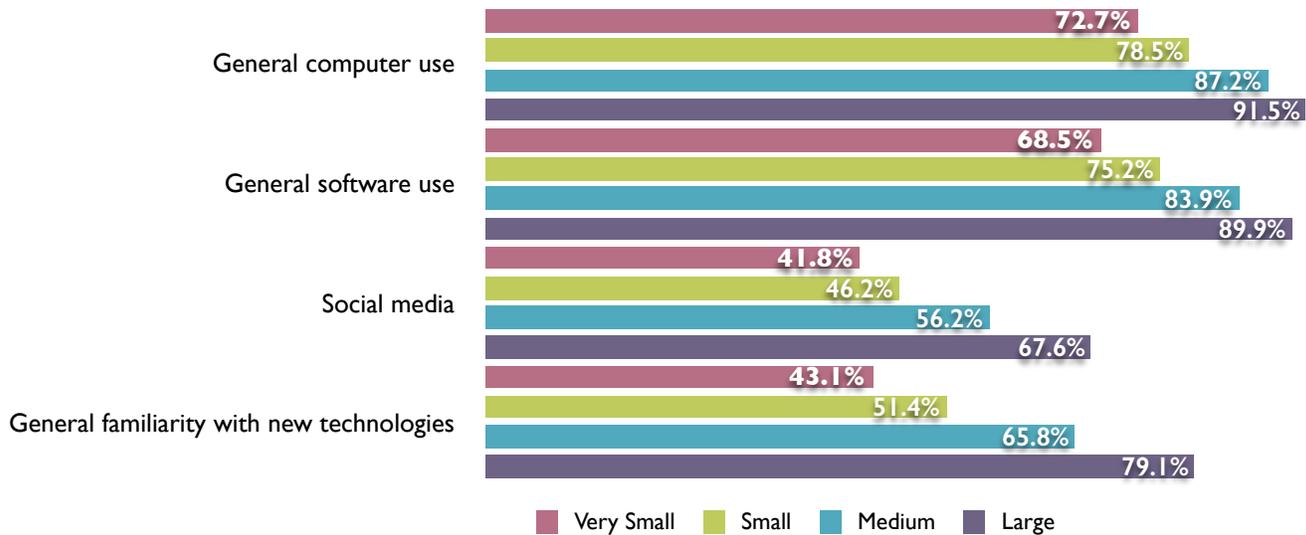# SPACE, BUILDINGS & DIGITAL INCLUSION

Figure 3. Public Library Technology Training by Library Size.

Among other factors that may contribute to the ability of public libraries to build digitally inclusive and ready communities, library size and its facilities play a role. Although nearly all public libraries provide a baseline of access to technology, broadband, Wi-Fi, technology instruction, and programs, small libraries and those not renovated in the last five years are less likely to provide various technology-enabled services and resources.

Many public libraries offer a range of technology training courses, however, there are differences by library size. For example (see Figure 3):

- 91.5% of large libraries offer general computer use training, versus 72.7% of very small libraries;[2]
- 67.6 % of large libraries offer training of social media, versus 41.8% of very small libraries; and

- 79.1% of large libraries offer training on familiarity with new technologies.

As Figure 4 shows:

- 63.9% of large libraries that offer general computer use training do so via formal training classes, versus only 23.8% of very small libraries;
- 63.2% of large libraries that offer social media training do so via formal training classes, versus only 17.9% of very small libraries; and
- 64.7% of large libraries that offer training on general familiarity with new technologies do so via formal training classes, versus only 25.7% of very small libraries.

The disparities can mean that communities and individuals served by small/very small libraries may receive fewer opportunities to learn new technologies and basic technology skills.
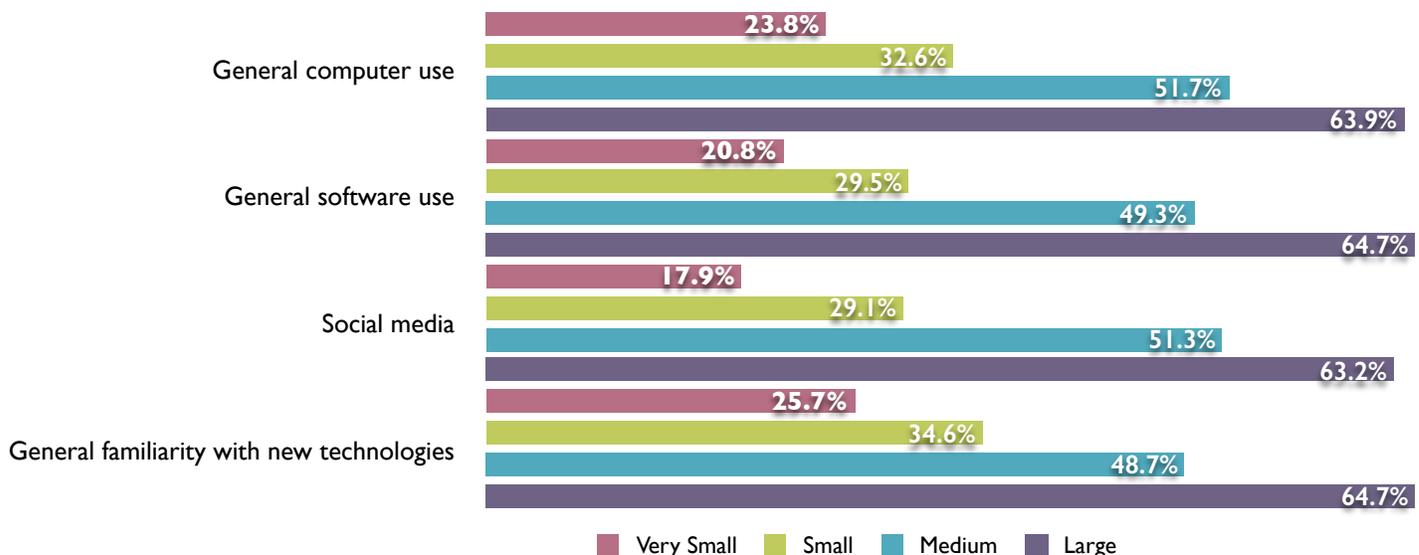

Figure 4. Public Library Formal Technology Training by Library Size.

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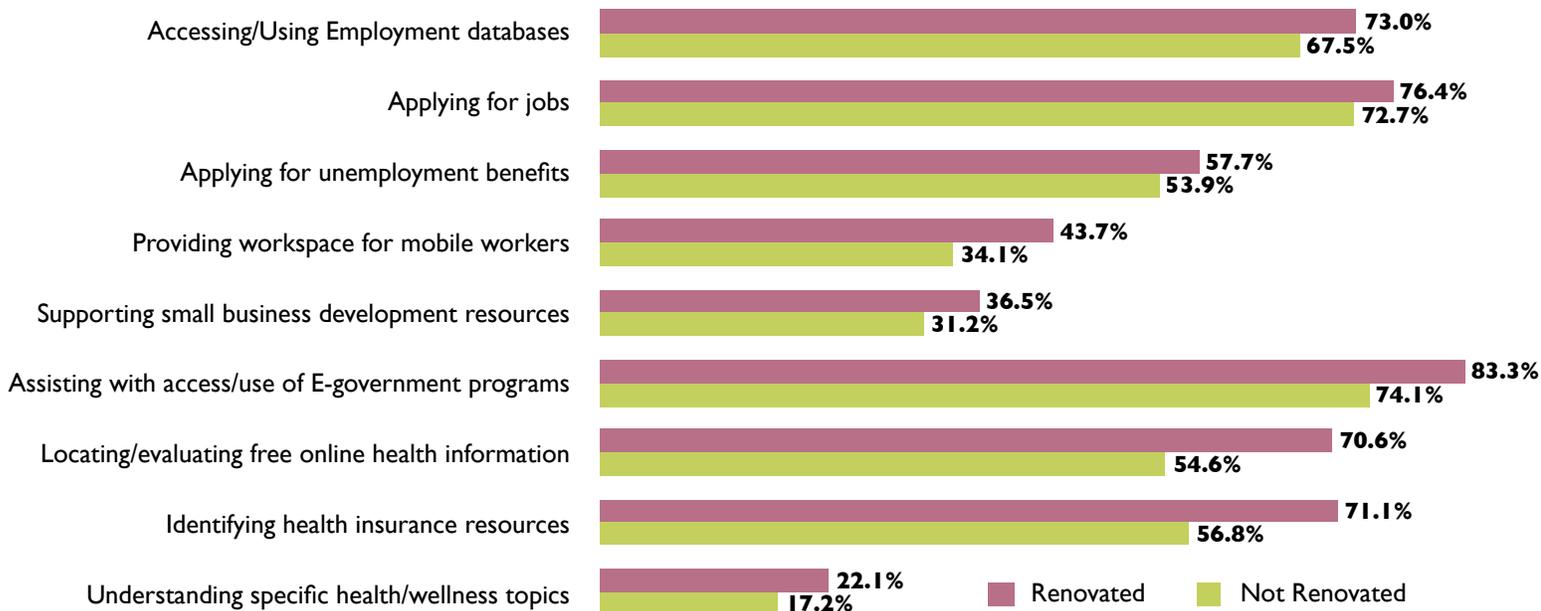
http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/

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Figure 5. Public Library Program Offerings Overall for Libraries Renovated and Not Renovated in the Last Five years.

The recency of library renovation also impacts the extent to which public libraries can foster and support digital inclusion and readiness. Non-renovated libraries are less likely to offer programs across the key areas of employment, economic development, civic engagement, and health & wellness. For some areas, the differences are small — for example, providing access to and using employment databases, applying for jobs, and applying for unemployment benefits (see Figure 5). In other instances, however, the differences are sizable:

- 71.1% of recently renovated libraries provide programs on identifying health insurance resources, as compared to 56.8% of libraries that were not recently renovated;
- 70.6% of recently renovated libraries provide programs on locating and evaluating free online health information, as compared to 54.6% of libraries that were not recently renovated;
- 83.3% of recently renovated libraries provide assistance with accessing and using e-Government

programs, as compared to 74.1% of libraries that were not recently renovated; and

- 43.7% of recently renovated libraries provide workspaces for mobile workers, as compared to 34.1% of libraries that were not recently renovated.

Conclusion

Among other likely factors (e.g., number of staff, funding), the recency of renovation and size of a library have an impact on the ability of public libraries to foster digital inclusion and readiness. With 70% of those 16 or older indicating that libraries should definitely or maybe move some print books and stacks out of public locations to free up more space for things such as tech centers, reading rooms, meetings rooms and cultural events,[3] there is a need to consider library space as part of public library digital inclusion efforts to ensure access and opportunity for all.

References

[1] Horrigan, J. (2015). "Libraries at the Crossroads. Pew Research Center. Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/2015/Libraries.

[2] Very Small = 2,500 sq. ft. or less; Small = 2,501-5,600 sq. ft.; Medium = 5,601-12,700 sq. ft.; Large = 12,701 sq. ft. or greater. These roughly correspond to square footage quartiles as reported in the FY2012 IMLS PLS Data File (the file used for drawing the 2014 Digital Inclusion survey sample) available at https://data.imls.gov/Public-Library-Survey-PLS-/Public-Library-Survey-FY-2012-Outlet/ewqs-tfck.

[3] Horrigan, J. (2015).

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