

Study: Young adults heavy library users

By Anick Jesdanun, AP Internet Writer

NEW YORK — Young adults are the heaviest users of public libraries despite the ease with which they can access a wealth of information over the Internet from the comforts of their homes, according to a new study.

That's especially true for those who had questions related to health conditions, job training, government benefits and other problems. Twenty-one percent of Americans with such questions aged 18-30 have turned to public libraries, compared with about 12 percent among the general adult population with those problems to solve.

Education-related tasks -- making decisions about schooling, paying for it and getting job training -- are the most common problems drawing people to libraries, according to a joint study from the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

And people are going to libraries not only for the Internet computers there but also for library reference books, newspapers and magazines.

"The age of books isn't yet over," said Lee Rainie, Pew's director.

The study found that library usage drops gradually as people age -- to 62 percent among Americans generally aged 18-30 compared with 32 percent among those 72 and up, with a sharp decline just as Americans turn 50.

"It was truly surprising in this survey to find the youngest adults are the heaviest library users," Rainie said. "The notion has taken hold in our culture that these wired-up, heavily gadgeted young folks are swimming in a sea of information and don't need to go to places where information is."

Leigh Estabrook, a retired professor of information science and sociology at the University of Illinois, said young adults used to finding information online are likely to crave even more and realize they need to turn to libraries to get it.

Rainie added that young adults are the ones likely to have visited libraries as teens and seen their transformation into information hubs, with computers and databases alongside stacks of printed books.

A 1996 report from the Benton Foundation, a nonprofit group that studies the digital age, had warned that Americans ages 18-24 "are the least enthusiastic boosters of maintaining and building library buildings. They are also the least enthusiastic of any age group about the importance of libraries in a digital future."

That generation now uses libraries to solve problems at half the rate as the current 18-30 set, the new study found.

In the decade since the Benton report, Internet access has grown from about 44 percent of public libraries to more than 99 percent. Many libraries have rearranged spaces or moved into new quarters to accommodate the expansion in computers. In many places, individual study carrels gave way to long tables where patrons can interact.

"We're seeing a lot of conversion of what may have been stack areas, warehouse areas," said Loriene Roy, president of the American Library Association, which was not involved in the study. "Libraries are creating social spaces."

The study also found library usage lower among those without Internet access or only dial-up access, especially when their income also is lower, even though for them, the library might be their only source of high-speed Internet terminals.

But when they have a problem to solve, they turn to libraries as heavily.

"We know everyone has problems and needs for information, and libraries still need to reach out and make sure people know" about the resources available, Roy said.

The telephone survey of 2,796 adults, including 1,702 Internet users, was conducted June 27 to Sept. 4 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. To get meaningful conclusions on low-access users, past survey participants were called back to boost numbers, and the results were weighed to reflect the general population.

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