



Get Tickets: Sacred Cod

Is your local library a bestseller? — Mass. circulation rates tell an interesting tale

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Boston Public Library in Copley Square.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

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In terms of circulation, some Massachusetts libraries are bestsellers. For others, it's a totally different story.

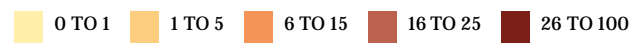
Data from the state Board of Library Commissioners show that certain communities see their library materials checked out far more frequently than others — in some cases, a startling 100 times more.

The following map suggests that some of the busiest libraries in the state are on Cape Cod and the islands, in a cluster of affluent suburbs west of Boston, and in a few smaller communities in western Massachusetts.



Library circulation per capita in Massachusetts

(Note: Thirteen towns have more than one independent library: Acton, Barnstable, Chatham, Dennis, Falmouth, Hardwick, Harwich, Natick, Northampton, Northfield, Shelburne, South Hadley, Warren. There are also three joint libraries, each shared by two towns: Washington and Becket; Hamilton and Wenham; and Charlemont and Hawley. Four towns do not participate in the State Aid to Public Libraries program and do not report their data to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners: Hancock, Monroe, New Ashford, and Savoy.)



SOURCE: Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners
MATT ROCHELEAU / GLOBE STAFF

Experts and state library officials say a number of factors affect per capita circulation.

Funding is a key factor. It can determine how many hours the library is open, the amount of space it has, the events and programming it offers, whether it belongs to an interlibrary network, and what it can purchase for its collection — all of which can draw people to the library.

In Weston, a wealthy town with one of the highest library spending per capita rates in the state, “We have a very good collection, and we’re also fortunate to have great support from the town, and we have a very active friends group and they’re very supportive,” said Susan Brennan, who has served as director for 13 years.

Built in 1994, the facility is relatively new. There’s plenty of space for programming, including well-attended concerts, art displays, and events for children, she said. The library is next door to a school so “a lot of students grow up in the library,” Brennan said.

Volunteers are also active at the library. “It takes a village to make this library as vibrant as it is,” she said.

In less-affluent communities, funding and circulation tend to be lower. But experts say those numbers don’t tell the whole story.

A [Pew Research Center report in September](#) said that borrowing printed books is significantly more common among the “well-off and well educated,” while “using the library as a place to sit, read, study or watch or listen to media is something library users who are young, Hispanic, and lower-income Americans do more often.”

Susan Neuman, a professor of education studies at the University of Michigan who has [researched the use of libraries](#) in [poor versus middle-income](#) areas around the country, said, “In low-income areas, the time people spend in the libraries is often much longer than in middle-income areas and it’s a lot



different.”

“This is where they do their job applications, where they do their gaming, and where they read and do all of their information-related activities. It’s where the kids do their homework,” Neuman said.

Experts said low-income users are less likely to check out materials because they don’t want to sign up for library cards due to privacy concerns or because they’re worried about late fees.

Another possible reason that they might prefer to review materials at the library: “It might be warmer, cooler, roomier, quieter, than their homes,” Kate Williams, an associate professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said in an e-mail.

Neuman said it’s important for policymakers not to rely too much on circulation data in making funding decisions.

“Because of low circulation figures, there’s a belief that people in low-income areas don’t prize their libraries. Very often some people will say, “These libraries are underutilized and we want to close them.” But those people, Neuman said, aren’t seeing the big picture.

In Chelsea, a struggling community with lower library spending per capita, library director Sarah Gay said the library’s low circulation rate did not reflect how busy it was.

“The library is actually very vibrant and very busy,” she said. “There’s just a different variety of things we’re offering as opposed to just traditional lending of books.”

Gay, who has worked at the library for eight years, including the last two as its director, said that, thankfully, city leaders have been good to the library, looking beyond circulation statistics when it comes to funding.

Experts say language barriers may also play a role when it comes to low circulation rates in places like Chelsea, which has a large Spanish-speaking population. Gay said the library there has been working to add more Spanish options to its collection.

One other pattern quickly emerges if you take a look at the data — and it may have something to do with the pleasures of reading a book on the beach.

Libraries on the Cape and Islands have extremely high circulation rates.

In fact, the tiny town of Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard has the highest rate in the state.

"It's our claim to fame," said Ebba Hierta, director of the Chilmark Free Public Library.

But there is a mathematical quirk that explains why it and other vacation communities score so highly.

In summer, such towns swell and vacationers take out stacks of books. But the per capita statistics are based on the communities' year-round population, which tend to be much smaller.

In the summer, "books are flying out the door," Hierta said.

Hierta said she also keeps busy in the winter.

"There's not a lot going on in Chilmark in the wintertime. It's the gas station, or the library. There's not a lot of places to go to get out of the house," she said. "So people come to the library and to some degree we serve as a community center during the winter."

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