



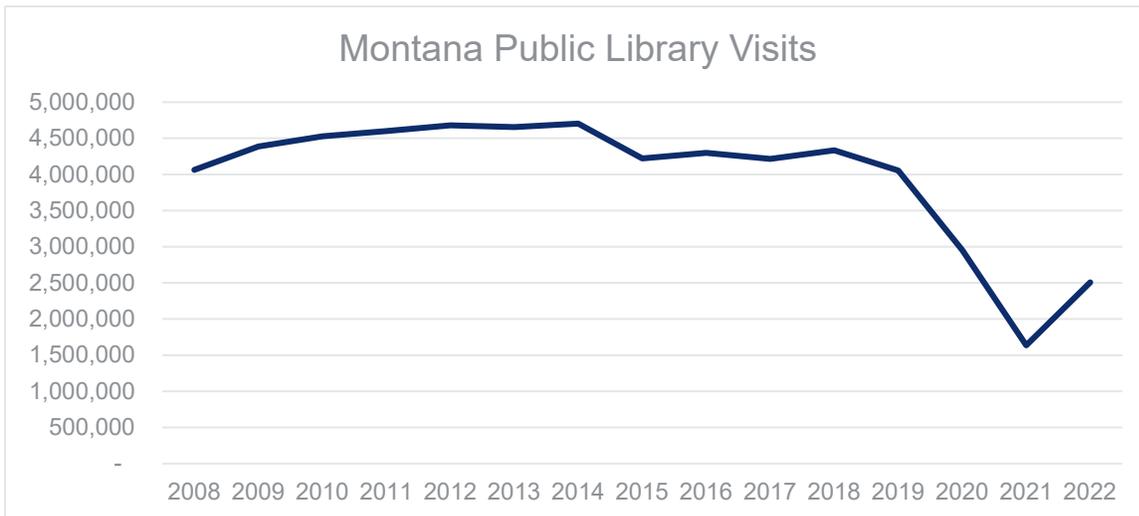
MEMO

To: Montana State Library Commissioners
From: Rebekah Kamp, Data Coordinator
Subject: Library Visit Trends
Date: July 31, 2023

The following summary is for informational purposes and is provided in response to the Commission’s request for data regarding library visits.

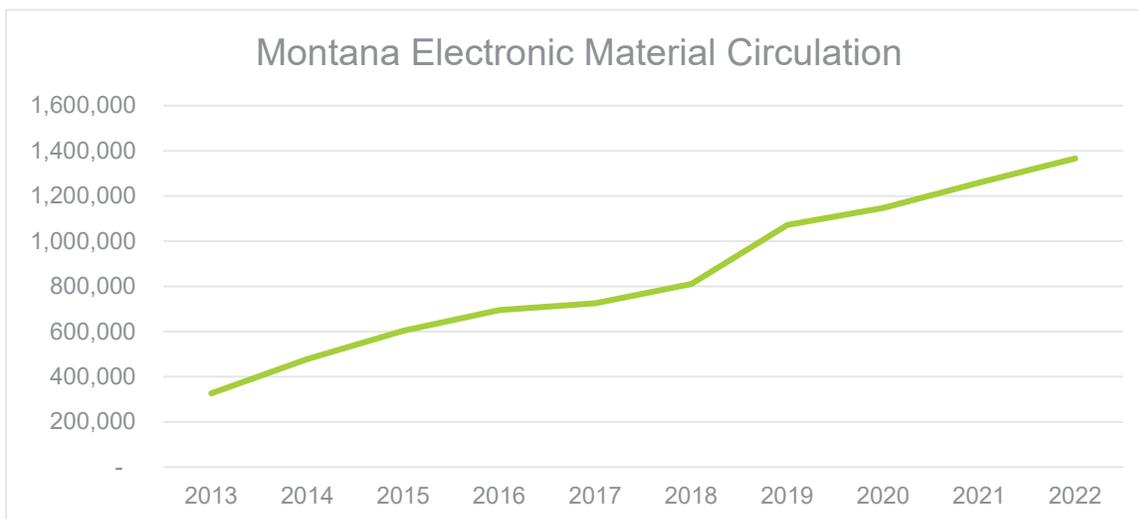
At the national level, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) reported in its annual report [Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2017 Volume 1](#) (June 2020), that library visits per person declined 17.5% between FY 2008 and FY 2017. While not an exception to the overall trend, Montana observed a much smaller decline, 5.5%, during this same period (pg. 48-49). However, Montana library visit counts were highly impacted by closures and reduced service hours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As demonstrated in the chart below, physical library visits in Montana sharply decreased in FY 2020 and 2021. Beyond the general decline in visits described by IMLS, Montana library visits have not fully rebounded to levels observed pre-pandemic, but the data indicates signs of recovery. In FY 2022, Montanans visited public libraries 2.5M times, an increase of 53% from FY 2021.





While the visit count is one useful metric, additional data should be examined to understand the overall trend of public library use. The Public Libraries Survey (PLS) defines a library visit as, “the total number of persons entering the library for whatever purpose during the year.” It is important to note that this metric does not include non-traditional service models such as virtual visits, curbside service, and offsite outreach. These service types were of relevance during the pandemic and continue to play an important role in how patrons access the library. In its report, IMLS notes that, although traditional markers of library use such as physical visits declined, “digital downloadable items have expanded access to library resources outside the physical buildings and hours of operation” (pg. 33). Electronic circulation was first collected via the PLS in 2013. Since that time, Montana public libraries have observed significant growth, including through the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Montana State Library will continue to monitor trends regarding public library visits and other models of use such as electronic circulation through this year’s Public Libraries Survey. Survey collection will begin in October with preliminary results available in early 2024.