

# The Humanities in Our Lives

## THE VALUE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In his memoir *Black Boy*, Richard Wright describes how a borrowed library card opened a new world to him, especially as a young man living in the Jim Crow South of the 1920s. “In buoying me up,” he wrote, “reading also cast me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed.” His eyes opened by his reading, Wright moved to Chicago in search of greater freedom. The public library changed Wright’s life.

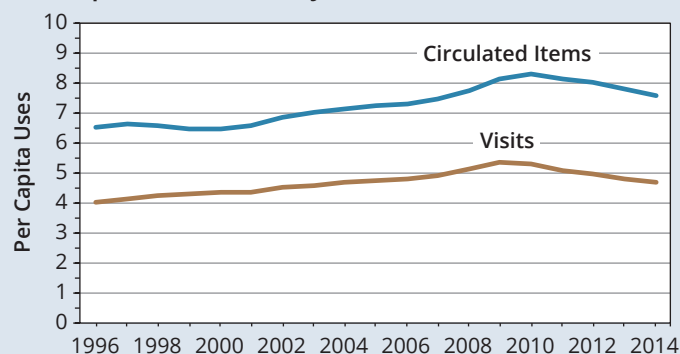
## PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The country has around 16,500 public libraries and thousands more at colleges and schools. The nation’s public libraries serve a dizzying array of functions: hosting book clubs, story hours, lectures, and other programming; providing assistance with research and digital literacy; lending books, e-books, music, and other media; and serving as places to study, work, and meet.

## KEY FACTS

- Per capita visits to and borrowing from public libraries declined in the first half of the 2010s—falling 13% for visits, and 9% for circulation.
- At the same time, attendance at library programming has been on the increase, especially for key children’s programming.

Per Capita Public Library Use



## INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

At the Washington, D.C., public library (DCPL), librarians have pioneered a new program to help library users preserve memories and media they have saved on cellphones, VHS tapes, floppy disks, and Facebook, as well as in journals and photographs. Called the **Memory Lab**, the program allows library users to digitize a wide range of personal records and gives them guidance about managing their digital collections.

*“Personal archiving education and transfer services empower users to decide what to do with their own and their family’s legacies.”*

The city’s librarians are working to export the Memory Lab model to seven libraries around the country. As Jaime Mears, the project manager for the effort, puts it, “Preservation of memories should not be a privilege.”

The Humanities in Our Lives series (#HumInOurLives) highlights the many and diverse forms of humanities activities in the nation, and key facts about the health of the field.

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For more on the broad trends that mark American engagement with various forms of the humanities, visit [humanitiesindicators.org](http://humanitiesindicators.org) or email [humanitiesindicators@amacad.org](mailto:humanitiesindicators@amacad.org).

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