The Urban Libraries Council

2026 Library Insights Survey Guide

The Urban Libraries Council's annual **Library Insights Survey (LIS)** gathers key quantitative and qualitative data from ULC member libraries across four core categories:

- **Attraction and Attendance**
- **Location Experience and Use of Space**
- **Programs and Services**
- **Staffing and Budget**

The following **definitions**, **survey instrument** and **FAQ** are to help your library participate in the 2026 Library Insight Survey. By participating, your library not only gains valuable insights to support operational decisions and strategic planning—you also help shape a powerful, collective narrative about the health, growth, and impact of urban libraries across North America.

Each year, once the annual survey data is analyzed, member libraries gain **access to interactive and exportable dashboards in ULC's Data Hive.** Members can use the Data Hive for **year-over-year trend analysis and data visualization** of key LIS metrics, exploring and **benchmarking** with peer library systems to filter by library service area population, budget, number of branches, region, country, and state. ULC also publishes an accompanying annual **Library Insights Survey Report**, which breaks down the trends of this year's data.

Updates for 2026: The inaugural Library Insights Survey explored how library patron engagement changed following the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2022, the first year of data collection, libraries have continued to adapt in a shifting landscape in both action and terminology. The process of updating the survey to reflect these changes began in January 2026, with both internal and external stakeholder feedback. Updates have been made thoughtfully for continuity with prior years, while also reflecting field-wide shifts since 2022 and member-requested changes.

Interested in providing feedback for next year's Library Insights Survey? Want to learn more about the process for updating the survey? Please reach out to Corissa Goodrich, Research and Data Manager (corissagoodrich@urbanlibraries.org).

Acknowledgments – Special thanks to Elizabeth McChesney, Vicky Varga, as well as staff at Houston Public Library, Jackson County Library System, New York Public Library, Prince George's County Memorial Library System and San Francisco Public Library.

Survey Definitions

Survey definitions are provided in the order they appear within the survey.

FSCS Key – If located in the US, the FSCS Key is the library identification code assigned by IMLS. This can be found on the IMLS website using the library name and location

Branches – Generally, as listed and labeled as a branch on the library website. Do include the main branch (if applicable) and locations that are currently functioning as a branch due to temporary branch closure as a one-to-one replacement. Do not include deposit collections, bookmobiles, kiosks, locations without paid staff, or locations without regularly scheduled hours for public use.

Visits – In-person system-wide library visits.

Library Service Area Population (LSA) - As defined by the IMLS, "The number of people in the geographic area for which a public library has been established to offer services and from which (or on behalf of which) the library derives revenue, plus any areas served under contract for which the library is the primary service provider" OR the most accurate library service population estimate the library uses.

Internet Computer Usage - The total number of patron sessions on library-provided public computers during the reporting period. Include all patron sessions.

Wireless Sessions - The total number of wireless sessions initiated inside library facilities on provided Wi-Fi networks. Include all sessions, patron wireless sessions initiated on patron-owned devices on the library's Wi-Fi network, as well as wireless sessions initiated on library-provided devices.

Physical Circulation – Per IMLS, "The total annual circulation of all physical library materials of all types, including renewals."

e-resource Accessed – Total sessions, downloads, or access events of digital materials accessed online, such as e-books, e-audiobooks, electronic databases, e-learning platforms, digital magazines, comics, and streaming media. Count each session, download, or access event as defined by the vendor or platform, regardless of whether there is an associated loan period.

e-book and e-audiobook Circulation - Total circulation of e-books and e-audiobooks during the fiscal year (e.g., OverDrive/Libby, Hoopla, Boundless). Do not include access events to databases, online learning platforms, streaming video, comic subscriptions, or electronically accessed magazines or newspapers if possible.

Reservable Rooms – Fully enclosed separate spaces of any size that are intended to be reservable and reserved by patrons. This can include meeting rooms, study rooms, "pods", or event spaces. Do not include spaces which can be reserved but are not enclosed (e.g. reservable desks or tables within a large open area).

Room Reservations - All room reservations (individual or group). The total number of reservations made for library rooms, including study rooms, meeting rooms, and event spaces, whether reserved by individuals, groups, or library staff.

Incident Reports – Number of submitted library incident reports or documented incidents of all types as tracked and defined by the library system.

Programs – Library programming offered and promoted by the library. Programs can be library created, co-created, facilitated, sponsored, or co-sponsored.

> **In-Person, In-Branch** – Programs which occur at a library branch in person with library staff support. Hybrid programs can be included here, but any virtual attendance should be excluded.
>
> **In-Person, Off-Site** – Programs which occur offsite but are facilitated with library staff support. Refer to the definition of branch to determine which programs are off-site.

Outreach Activities – Events or activities primarily designed to increase library awareness or community relationships, such as tabling or presentations at community meetings. Include all outreach activities, if tracked separately by the library from programs.

Summer Learning/Reading Programs – Seasonal programs offered to promote reading and/or learning outside of the school year, Summer Reading/Learning Programs including all summer services, programs and interventions.

Fiscal Year (FY) – The most recently completed fiscal year the system is reporting values for.

Total Budget - The total authorized budget for the library system across all budget categories. Do not include capital funds.

Total Security Budget - The total authorized budget on library security. Include contracted security personnel, in-house security staff, security technology (e.g., cameras, access control systems, alarms), and related training or equipment costs.

Library Materials Budget – The total authorized budget on library system collections and content. Includes all materials formats and grant funding as applicable.

Print Collections Budget – The total authorized budget on physical print collections materials during the fiscal year, including books, periodicals/newspapers, print serials, and other print formats.

e-Resource Budget - The total authorized budget on all e-resources during the fiscal year, including both one-time purchases and recurring subscription or license fees, include e-books, e-audiobooks, databases, online learning platforms, streaming video, comic subscriptions or electronically accessed magazines or newspapers if possible.

e-book/e-audiobook Budget – The total authorized budget on e-books and e-audiobooks during the fiscal year, including both one-time purchases and recurring subscription or license fees (e.g., OverDrive/Libby, Hoopla, Boundless). Do not include databases, online learning platforms, streaming video, comic subscriptions, or electronically accessed magazines or newspapers if possible.

Full Time Equivalent Library Staff (FTE) – The total number of paid library staff as a full-time equivalent value (1 part time employee = 0.5 FTE) by the end of the library's fiscal year.

Open Positions (FTE) – The total number of authorized, budgeted FTE positions that remained vacant as of the last day of the library's fiscal year.

New Construction - A new library branch resulting from either the complete demolition and rebuild of an existing branch, or the establishment of a brand-new building at a new location.

Substantial Renovation - A renovation of an entire section and/or 25% or more of library branch surface area. For the purposes of this survey, cosmetic updates alone (e.g., paint, flooring) do not qualify. Examples may include adding a new study pod area, a redesigned Storytime area, and/or branch-wide accessibility improvements.

Fixed-Site Conversion - A permanent library branch opened in an existing space not originally designed or built for library use (e.g., a retail storefront, strip mall, or floor of an existing building).

Cost per Square Foot - See article 6 of this AIA document for the definition of construction costs.

Survey Instrument

If you would like to organize all of your responses before submitting, please use this fillable Data Collection Worksheet.

Survey Section	Question(s)	Response Option
General Information	1) Library Name 2) Country 3) FSCS Key **if located in the United States* 4) Central Library Address **if none, select largest location in service area* 5) Total Number of Branches (including the main branch if applicable) 6) Respondents Name 7) Respondents Title 8) Email	1. Text 2. USA or CAN 3-8. Text
Attraction & Attendance	*Unless otherwise indicated, please provide all the following values for calendar year 2025.* 9) Total In-Person Library Visits 10) System-wide Library Service Area Population (LSA)	9-10. #
Location Experience & Use of Space	11) Internet Computer Usage by General Public 12) Total Wireless Sessions 13) Total Physical Circulation 14) Total e-resources Accessed 15) Total e-book and e-audiobook Circulation 16) Total Number of Reservable Rooms 17) Total Room Reservations 18) Number of NEW reservable rooms added and available in 2025 19) Total Incident Reports	11 –19. #
Library Services & Programs	20) Total Number of In-person and In-branch Library Programs 21) Total Attendance to In-person and In-branch Library Programs 22) Total Number of In-person Off-site Programs 23) Total Attendance In-person Off-site Programs 24) Total Number of Outreach Events: 25) Total Number of Summer Reading/Learning Programs Offered: 26) Total Number of Summer Reading/Learning Program Registrants: 27) Total Number of Summer Reading/Learning Program Attendees:	20-27. # 28. [Yes/No] 28(a). [Short Text]

	28) "Does the library system measure or track summer reading/learning outcomes?" [Yes/No] a. If yes - "Are there any outcomes you can report about your summer reading/learning programs?"	
Operations, Staffing & Budget	29) Please select the library's legal basis (select all that apply): 30) Please select the library's primary fundraising source (select all that apply): *Each of the following values should be fiscal year values. Please provide the values in the currency of the country which the library resides.* 31) Which currency are you providing fiscal values in? 32) Please select the fiscal year your library system is reporting in: 33) Total Budget 34) Total Security Budget 35) Total Materials budget 36) Total Print Collections budget 37) Total e-Resource Budget 38) Total e-book and e-audiobook Budget 39) Total Full Time Equivalent Library Staff 40) Total Count of Full Time Equivalent open positions by the end of FY25 *Each of the following values should be for CY2025.* 41) Did any of the following project types began construction in CY2025? (Select all that apply) 41 a)How many of each project type began construction? *41 b)If new construction selected* - Total Square Feet: *41 c)If new construction selected* - Total Cost per Square Foot: 42) Please share any main entrance full-color elevations or renderings if possible:	29. a. City/County, b. County/Parish, c. Library District, d. Multi-jurisdictional, e. Municipal Government (city, town, or village), f.Non-profit Association or Agency, g. Other [Text] 30. a. Library Foundation, b. Friends of the Library, c. Fundraising Professionals, d. Library Director, e. Not applicable, f. Other [Text] 31. a. USD, b. CAD 32. a. July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026 b. January 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025, c. October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025, d. April 1, 2025 – March 31, 2026 e. Other (please specify): 33 – 40: # 41. a. New Construction, b. Substantial Renovation, c. Fixed-Site Conversion 41.a) – 42. # 42. Upload

AI Use in Libraries	43) Does the library have Artificial Intelligence (AI) use guidelines or policies for staff? 44) Has the library offered AI use or ethics training for staff members? 45) Has the library offered AI use or ethics programming for patrons? 46) Is there anything you would like to share about AI use or ethics programming within your library or community?	43 – 46. Yes, b. No, c. Currently Under Discussion 49. Text
Data Check	47) Is there anything else you'd like us to know about the data you reported? (For example: a new initiative or offering driving increased attendance, a cyberattack or technical issue like a broken door counter, environmental challenges like fire or flood etc.)	47. Text

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Can I view my library's prior submission values?

A: Yes, you can! Please visit the ULC Data Collection page for a tabular view of your system's historic responses. The ULC Data Hive Advanced View pages, also have all values submitted to the survey year-over-year for your library system. The pages all default to your library only.

Q: Can I close and return to the survey at any time?

A: Yes, as long as you **do not submit** the survey, you can return to the survey within the same browser. Do not clear your browser history, as Qualtrics uses cookies to track partial response progress. You can always reach out to the ULC Research and Data team at research@urbanlibraries.org for a direct link to the in-progress survey.

Q: I submitted the survey. Can I still update my answers?

A: Please reach out to the ULC Research and Data team at research@urbanlibraries.org. We can send you a link to access your submitted survey.

Q: Why does ULC ask for calendar year?

A. Calendar year is commonly used in impact reporting and trend analysis across industries and helps us standardize values between systems.

Q: How does ULC handle differing fiscal years?

A: In looking at fiscal values, we only compare them to each other or more stable reference points (like library service area). Because fiscal years can differ from system to system, ULC relies on data aggregation, confidence intervals, and multiple statistical tests to identify broader trends in budget behavior/inflation within the report. We are collecting fiscal year schedule this year to include in the Data Hive.

Q: What happens if my reported values differ significantly from prior years?

A: We will reach out to every library system that sees a significant increase or decrease in their reported value to confirm accuracy. Additionally, the final question of the survey now provides space for respondents to explain any data discrepancies or changes.

General Information

Q: What if my library system doesn't have a central library location or designated main branch?

A: Please provide the address for the largest branch within your system. If you only have one branch, please provide that address here.

Q: Should bookmobiles, deposit collections, or kiosks be counted as branches?

A: No, these should not be included in the number of branches; neither should locations without paid staff and/or regularly scheduled hours.

Location Experience and Use of Space

Q: We had a project start construction in FY2024. Do we include that in either the count of new projects OR the total square feet/cost per square feet?

A: For the purposes of the LIS, we are only currently tracking projects that have started construction in FY2025. Please use your library's fiscal year for this.

Q: We have reservable "pods" available for patron use. Do we include them in both reservable rooms and room reservation counts?

A: As long as the pods are fully enclosed reservable spaces, yes. You can include both the number available and reservations within your value.

Q: Should we include same-day reservations in our room reservation counts?

A: Yes, same-day bookings should be included in the room reservation counts.

Q: What kinds of incidents should we include in our incident report counts?

A: All levels/severity of incidents that were reported through the library systems should be included here. We know that incident reporting varies from system to system, and not all systems track or share a definition for incidents. Future years may take a deeper look at this issue.

Library Services and Programs

Q: We have many databases, and each tracks access differently. How should we include database access in e-resource access totals?

A: If possible, please report the values that most closely reflect patron use. This can be "sessions" (the number of times a patron connected) or "searches" (number of searches) if sessions are not available. Because database offerings vary widely across the ULC membership, please reach out to us if this value is difficult to determine.

Q: Should we only count "library card accessed" e-resources or can we count e-resources open to all like digital archives of local history?

A: Please count e-resources open to all if you have these values available.

Operations, Staffing and Budget

Q: Are you looking for what we are allowed to spend or what we actually spend?

A: We are looking for the total authorized budget, as depending on the library fiscal year, many member libraries do not have the most recent fiscal year's expenditures available yet.

Q: Why are you asking for e-book/e-audiobook budget separate from the e-resource budget?

A: E-book pricing is of continued concern to our advocacy and e-content action teams here at ULC. For advocacy purposes, an estimate of what our members budget for e-books/e-audiobooks is appreciated.

Q: Should I include only full-time or full-time equivalent counts for both current staff and open positions?

A: Please include the counts for full-time equivalent for both questions (1 part-time 20-hour employee = 0.5 FTE).