

# FAST FACTS

Recent Statistics from the  
Library Research Service

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## Internet Access High in Colorado's Public Libraries

State outpaces national averages in providing public  
Internet access, helping close the Digital Divide

According to a February 2002 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) report, *A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*, 143 million Americans, or about 54 percent of the population, were using the Internet as of September 2001. With over half of the nation's population surfing the web, how have public libraries responded?

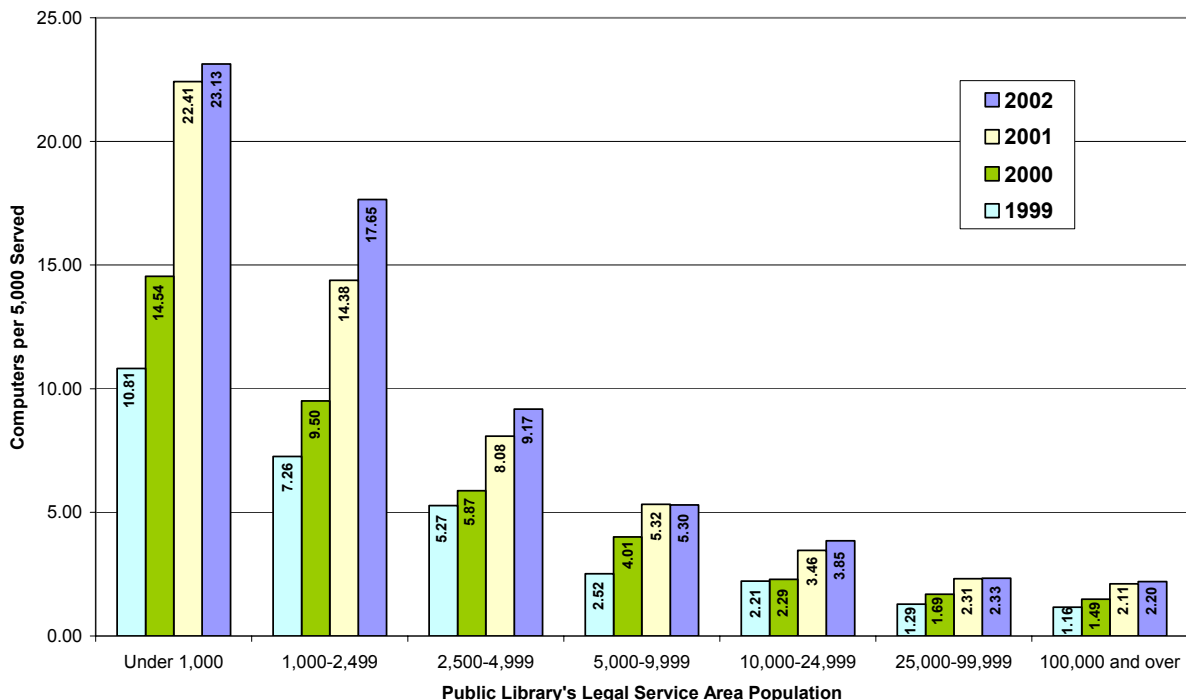
Colorado's libraries have responded strongly by greatly increasing the number of public access Internet computers. In 1999, Colorado's public libraries provided 1.43 computers for every 5,000 people served by those libraries, for a total of 1,146 Internet

terminals across the state. By 2002, when Colorado's public libraries housed 2,318 public Internet terminals, that ratio had jumped 87% to 2.67 computers for 5,000 people served. The largest one-year increase came between 2000 and 2001, when Colorado public libraries increased their public access Internet computers by 42% (See Table 1). It plateaued slightly in 2002, with only a 5% increase, and it will be interesting to see how budget constraints affect this progression in the next few years.

**Table 1: Computers per 5,000 Served:  
Colorado Public Libraries, by Year**

Year	Computers per 5,000 People	Percent Change from Previous Year
1999	1.43	N/A
2000	1.80	26%
2001	2.55	42%
2002	2.67	5%

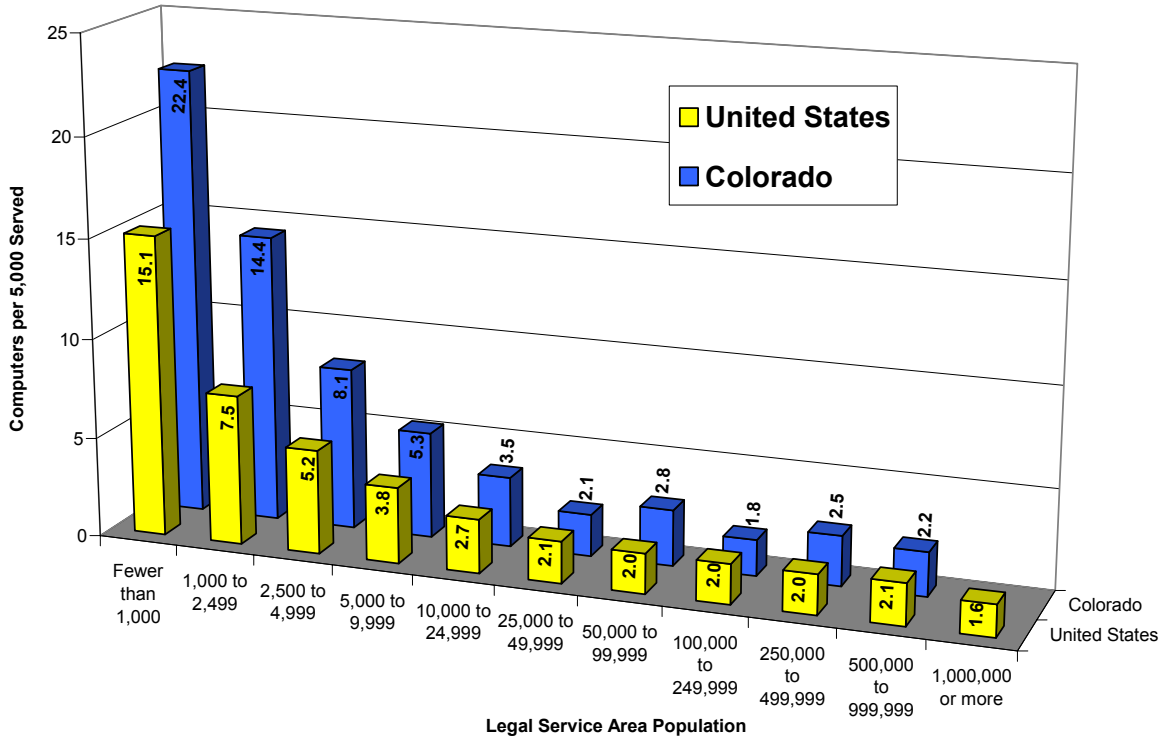
**Chart 1: Public Access Internet Computers in Colorado Public Libraries,  
by Year and Legal Service Area Population**



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There is an inverse relation between the legal service area population of the public library and the number of public access Internet computers offered per person in that library. Chart 1 illustrates this trend for Colorado – note that the numbers for public libraries serving fewer than 5,000 people are actually multiples of the number of computers they have (e.g., a library that has 2 Internet terminals for 1,000 residents would show 10 Internet computers per 5,000 served). This chart also demonstrates the growth in number of public access Internet computers for all public libraries across the state, regardless of the size of their legal service areas.

**Chart 2: Public Access Internet Computers per 5,000 Legal Service Area (LSA) Population, 2001 Colorado and United States Averages by LSA Population**



The large computer boost from 2000 to 2001 pushed Colorado’s public libraries into good standing in relation to national averages. The state’s 1.8 public access Internet computers per 5,000 served was tied for thirty-second best in the nation in 2000, slightly below the national average of 1.9. For 2001, Colorado’s number of 2.6 was considerably higher than the national ratio of 2.2, and was greater than that of all but fourteen states. Chart 2 shows that for 2001 the state’s averages compared favorably with national trends for libraries of all legal service area sizes, again illustrating the tendency for smaller libraries to provide more Internet computers per population served.

Colorado’s libraries are doing well in serving those that have suffered the effects of the “Digital Divide,” helping to close the gap that separates the information “haves” from the “have-nots.” The Library Research Service’s study “Colorado Public Libraries and the ‘Digital Divide’ 2002” measured some of the effects of the divide within the state. In this survey of public library users throughout Colorado, 84% of respondents reported that the availability of computers in the library was one of the reasons that they had visited the library that day. In addition, 34% reported that their only access to the Internet was via public Internet terminals such as those found at the public library, underscoring the fact that, for many, the only access to the wealth of information available on the Internet is provided by their public library.

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Over the past eight years, NTIA has undertaken a series of reports titled “Falling through the Net” which chronicles and quantifies the experiences of Americans in relation to technology and information. An important finding from these studies is that people living in rural areas tend to have less access to information resources, specifically the Internet. Table 2, taken from NTIA’s 1999 report, demonstrates this, showing that in 1998 a person living in a rural area was much less likely to be using the Internet than someone living in a more urban setting. This lack of access is consistent across income levels. Considering this, it seems appropriate that Colorado’s public libraries – as well as those of the nation in general – offer a higher number of Internet computers per person in rural areas than do those in urban locales.

**Table 2: Percent of U.S. Households Using the Internet By Income  
By U.S., Rural, Urban, and Central City Areas, 1998**

	U.S.	Rural	Urban	Central City
Under \$5,000	8.1	4.3	9.1	9.5
5,000-9,999	6.1	2.9	7.2	6.8
10,000-14,999	7.4	6.0	7.9	8.1
15,000-19,999	9.8	8.4	10.3	11.0
20,000-24,999	12.1	10.0	12.9	14.4
25,000-34,999	19.1	15.4	20.4	22.5
35,000-49,999	29.5	26.4	30.6	31.8
50,000-74,999	43.9	38.7	45.7	44.0
75,000+	60.3	53.7	62.0	59.7

The fourth edition of “Falling through the Net,” published in 2000, reported that this gap was beginning to shrink. Rural households were still below the national average in terms of Internet penetration (38.9% as compared to the national average of 41.5%), but they were significantly closer to the average than in previous years. The more recent report showed that the issue has shifted slightly, from the existence of Internet access to the quality of that access. While rural areas might be catching up to the urban centers in terms of access, their connections tend to be slower and less reliable. In this study, rural areas showed broadband penetration at around seven percent, compared with twelve percent for urban areas.

As technology presses on, it is doubtful that the “Digital Divide” will ever close, and the gap between information “haves” and “have-nots” is equally likely to expand as contract. Public libraries have long held the mission of providing equal access to information for everyone. In the realm of the Internet, they will surely be expected to keep that information gap as narrow as possible.

**CONTACT ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

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**Sources**

National Telecommunications and Information Administration resources available online at <http://www.ntia.doc.gov>  
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