

# PUBLIC LIBRARIES – A WISE INVESTMENT

## MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT



Mesa County Public Library District recently participated in a Return on Investment study conducted by the Library Research Service at the Colorado State Library. This study found a substantial return for taxpayers when investing in their local library. **For every \$1.00 invested in Mesa County Public Library District, \$4.57 of value is returned to the community.**<sup>1</sup>

### Returns on Investment Mesa County Public Library District<sup>2</sup>

- 61%** Nearly two-thirds of Mesa County Public Library District patrons come to the library over 25 times per year.
- 50%** Half of Mesa County Public Library District patrons said they would have spent \$20 or more getting their information from another source if the library did not exist.
- 370,603** Patrons came to Mesa County Public Library District specifically to check out books over 300,000 times in the previous 12 months.
- 49%** Almost half of Mesa County Public Library District patrons connected to a Colorado public library from a home computer in the previous 12 months.
- 76%** Three out of four Mesa County Public Library District patrons have used a library computer.

<sup>1</sup> Data was compiled from surveys of the individual libraries, the 2006 Colorado Public Library Report (accessible at [www.LRS.org](http://www.LRS.org)), and a survey in which library users were asked to estimate their cost of using alternative sources to meet their library-related needs, as well as their non-library expenditures.

<sup>2</sup> Based on responses to the ROI patron survey.

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### Why Return on Investment?

In the spring of 2006 a need was identified in Colorado to describe the variety of benefits delivered by public libraries to their patrons and to quantify the return on investment to taxpayers for monies invested in public libraries. To provide this data, the Library Research Service (LRS) undertook “What’s It Worth to You? A Return on Investment Study of Selected Colorado Public Libraries” (ROI) in May 2006. Using a multiple case study approach, this research was designed to create such information for eight public libraries, representing geographically diverse regions of Colorado. Data were gathered using a combination of questionnaires, key informant interviews, and available data sources.

### ROI Methodology

This study follows a model of contingent valuation that has been used in similar studies to determine ROI for public libraries. Contingent valuation is an economic technique often used for the valuation of non-market resources. This figure was calculated by examining the ramifications of not having a public library for the communities served. It includes:

- **Cost to Use Alternatives:** The estimated amount of money that would have been spent using an alternative information source.
- **Lost Use:** The estimated value of the lost information for users who would not have tried to attain the information elsewhere.
- **Direct Local Expenditures:** Contributions made by the library to community businesses and individuals in the form of purchasing goods and services.
- **Compensation for Library Staff:** Library staff would not receive compensation and unemployment would be a factor for at least some period of time.
- **Halo Spending:** Purchases made by library users from vendors and business that are located close to the library. A recent study found that approximately 23 percent of these purchases would not occur if the library did not exist.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**

#### Return on Investment Factors – Mesa County Public Library District<sup>4</sup>

Cost to Use Alternatives	\$14,697,454
Lost Use	\$494,690
Direct Local Expenditures	\$1,114,478
Compensation for Library Staff	\$2,339,897
Halo Spending	\$1,365,269
<b>Total Return on Investment</b>	<b>\$20,011,788</b>
Total Local Investment	÷ \$4,377,983
<b>Return per Dollar Invested</b>	<b>\$4.57</b>

<sup>3</sup> Proctor, Richard, Bob Usherwood, and Gill Sobczyk. *What Happens When a Public Library Service Closes Down?* Library Management 18, no. 1 (1997): 59-64.

<sup>4</sup> Data were compiled from surveys of the individual libraries, the 2006 Colorado Public Library Report (accessible at [www.LRS.org](http://www.LRS.org)), and a survey in which library users were asked to estimate their cost of using alternative sources to meet their library-related needs, as well as their non-library expenditures. Estimates for alternative costs are conservative, as they do not include the value of extra time that might have been necessary to meet their needs elsewhere.

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### **Mesa County Public Library District at a Glance**

Mesa County Public Library District is located on the Western Slope of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. It is organized as a library district to serve residents of Colorado's only metropolitan county on the Western Slope.<sup>5</sup> It has a legal service area of 130,662. With a total of 8 outlets, Mesa County Public Library District has a central library located in downtown Grand Junction and 7 branches throughout the county. The collection includes over 200,000 print volumes, 17,000 audios, 17,000 videos, and 300 periodicals. To access electronic resources, it also has 48 public access computers.

**Table 2**  
**Selected Statistics for**  
**Mesa County Public Library District<sup>6</sup>**

<b>Description</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Ratio<sup>7</sup></b>
Circulation	765,507	5.9 per capita
Visits	487,668	3.8 per capita
Library Programs	1,338	334 Program attendees per 1,000 served
Public Access Computers	48	.37 per 1,000 served

Funded primarily through local revenue (92%), Mesa County Public Library District receives \$4.4 million in district mill levy funds and just over \$380,000 in other operating revenue.<sup>8</sup> Local revenue per capita is \$33.51. Because this study examines the return on investment for each library's community<sup>9</sup>, only local revenue is used in calculating the monetary contribution of community members to each library.

<sup>5</sup>Metropolitan status, legal basis, and geographic area are defined by the Federal-State Cooperative System for Public Library Data and the National Center of Education Statistics (accessible at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/public.asp>). These definitions are also used in the Colorado Public Library Annual Report (accessible at [www.LRS.org](http://www.LRS.org)).

<sup>6</sup> 2006 Colorado Public Library Annual Report (accessible at [www.LRS.org](http://www.LRS.org)).

<sup>7</sup> Per capita is figured using legal service area (LSA) population (accessible at [http://www.lrs.org/pub\\_stats.php](http://www.lrs.org/pub_stats.php)).

<sup>8</sup> 2006 Colorado Public Library Annual Report. "Other operating revenue" refers to funds not reported under local, state or federal revenue and may include, but are not limited to, monetary gifts, donations, and grants (accessible at [www.LRS.org](http://www.LRS.org)).

<sup>9</sup> A library's community is defined as the legal service area as specified in the library's establishment documents.

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## **MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT**

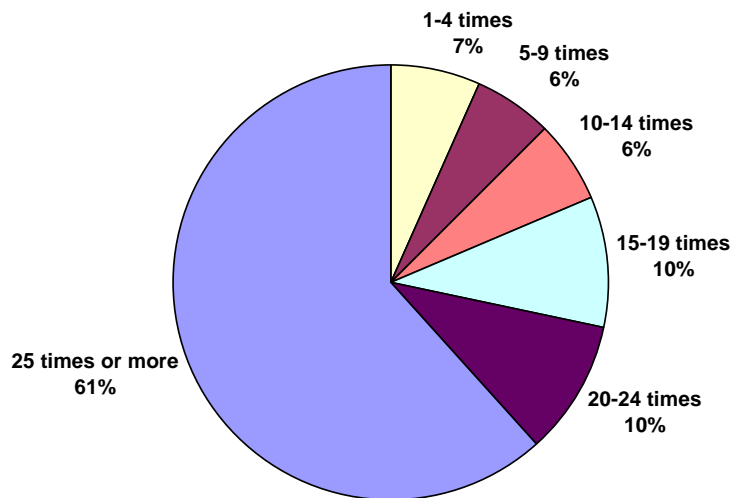
### **SURVEY RESULTS**

#### **Library Use**

Once through the doors, visitors to Mesa County Public Library District tend to be heavy users of library resources. Of the library visitors who responded to the ROI survey, three out of five of them had visited the library 25 times or more over the last twelve months; essentially, these patrons come to the library at least every other week (see Chart 1). Another one in four had visited on about a monthly basis over the previous year - between 10 and 24 times. Only 7 percent of respondents said that they visited the library fewer than 5 times in the previous 12 months.

**Chart 1**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Respondent's Number of Visits to the Library in the Last 12 Months**



#### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

"I visit the library once a week - it is one of the most important buildings in Grand Junction."

"Public libraries are one of the single most important resources for a community. They are an invaluable tool for personal empowerment and knowledge."

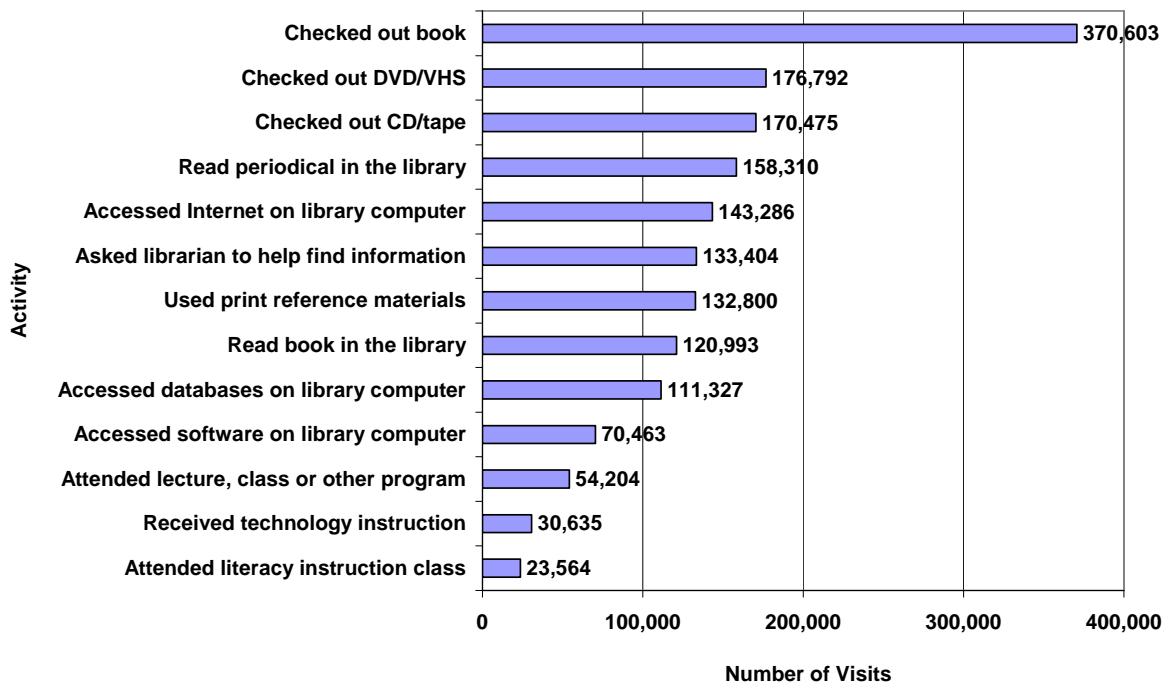
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## **MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT**

In 2006, there were 487,668 visits to the Mesa County Public Library District. Despite the changing ways in which the public uses libraries, checking out materials remains the primary reason for library visits. Over three-quarters of these visits (370,603) resulted in the library user checking out a book (see Chart 2). Additionally, the concept of “library as place” remains strong. At least one-quarter of respondent visits included reading a book (25%) or periodical (32%) in the library, and programs and instruction still draw a considerable number of people into the library. However, for many of these visits, library use patterns are changing, as computer use has grown to encompass a large part of the library user’s experience. Based on responses to the survey, during 29 percent of these visits the visitor accessed the Internet on a library computer. Accessing databases and software via library computers is a large part of use as well.

**Chart 2**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Number of Visits During Which Users Performed Specific Activities**



### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

“Couldn't live without it! I tell everyone else about services/materials available to them at the library.”

“The community would be lost without it. Children gain so much from the wonderful children's part. It helps so many people - books, computers, internet, reference, magazines, other programs, literacy programs. It is one of the best things in our whole town.”

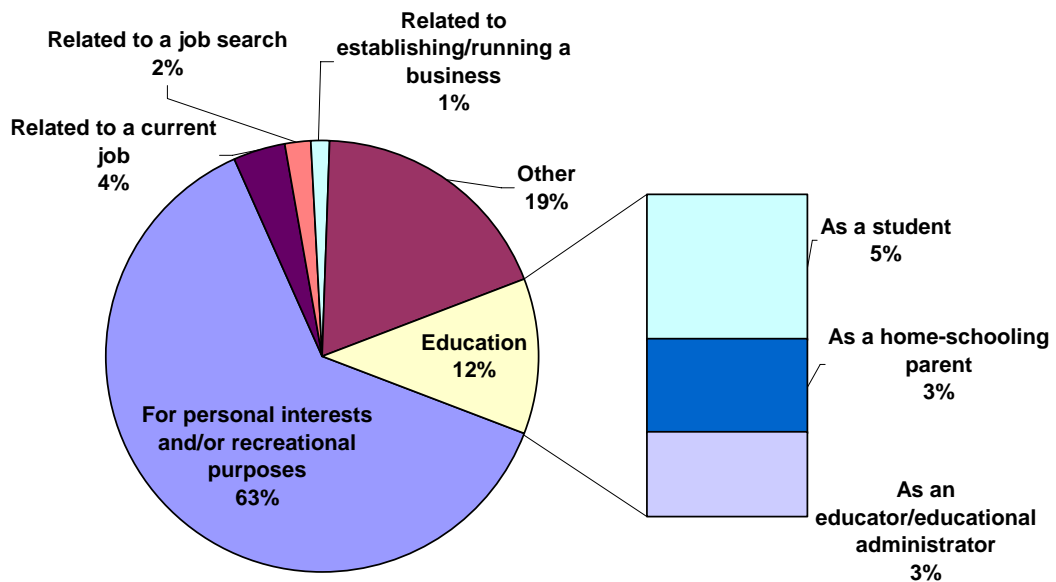
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The majority of respondents (63%) reported coming to the library primarily for personal interests and/or recreational purposes (see Chart 3). In addition, a large percentage of respondents came to the library for educational purposes (12%), meeting their needs as students, educators, and home-schooling parents. Job-related reasons also attracted visitors to the library (7%).

**Chart 3**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Primary Reason for Respondent's Trip to Library**



Note: Due to rounding percentages may not add up to 100%.

### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

“I was a high school drop out but I loved to read. The library provided me with reading material that prepared me to pass a GED and to obtain background for college.”

“One of the BEST POSSIBLE uses for tax dollars. Right there with education and medical care and roads and fire fighters and parks and art.”

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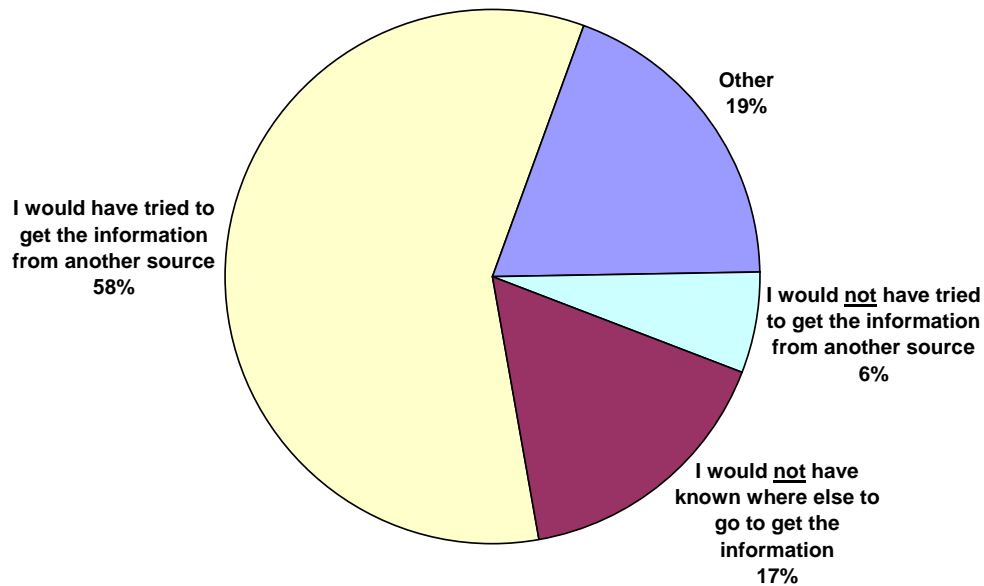
## **MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT**

### **Alternatives to Library Use**

When asked what they would do to meet their information needs if the library did not exist, a majority of respondents (58%) said that they would have tried to get the information elsewhere (see Chart 4). However, 17 percent would not have known where else to go to get the information they received at the library, and another 6 percent would not have tried to get the information from another source. Without the library, the information needs of these users would not have been met.

**Chart 4**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Respondent's Alternative Strategy for Meeting Information Needs  
If Library Did Not Exist**



### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

“It is an invaluable resource for people of all ages, races, genders and interests!”

“It is my resource in town.”

“I think the success of a community is in correlation to a successful library.”

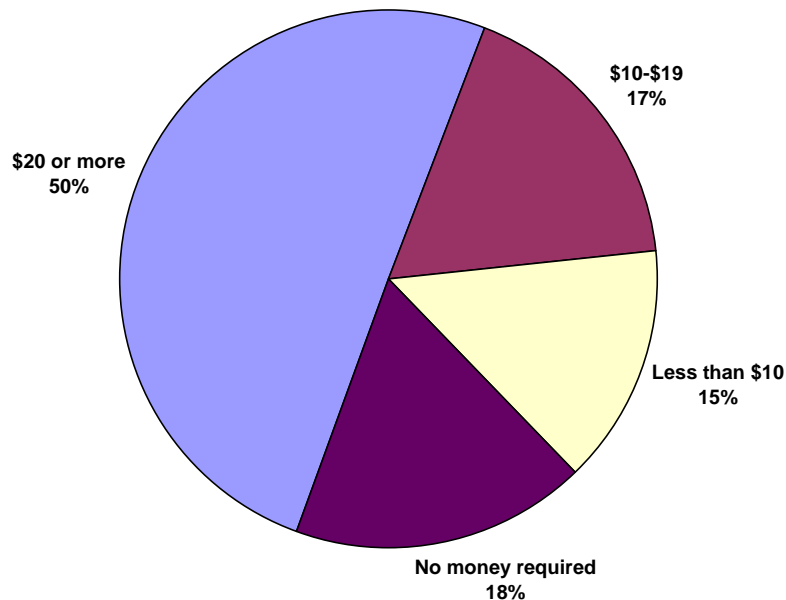
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Obtaining the information received during library visits would be expensive if acquired through alternative means. Respondents who would have tried to meet their information needs using an alternative source were asked to estimate how much money they would have spent using the other source. Half (50%) of Mesa County Public Library District respondents said that they would have spent at least \$20 to have their information needs met elsewhere. Fewer than one in five (18%) said that they would not have needed to spend any money to meet their information needs with an alternative source (see Chart 5).

**Chart 5**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Respondent's Estimated Cost of Alternatives to Library Resources**



### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

“Libraries are invaluable.”

“The library is the best all round public service a government can provide.”



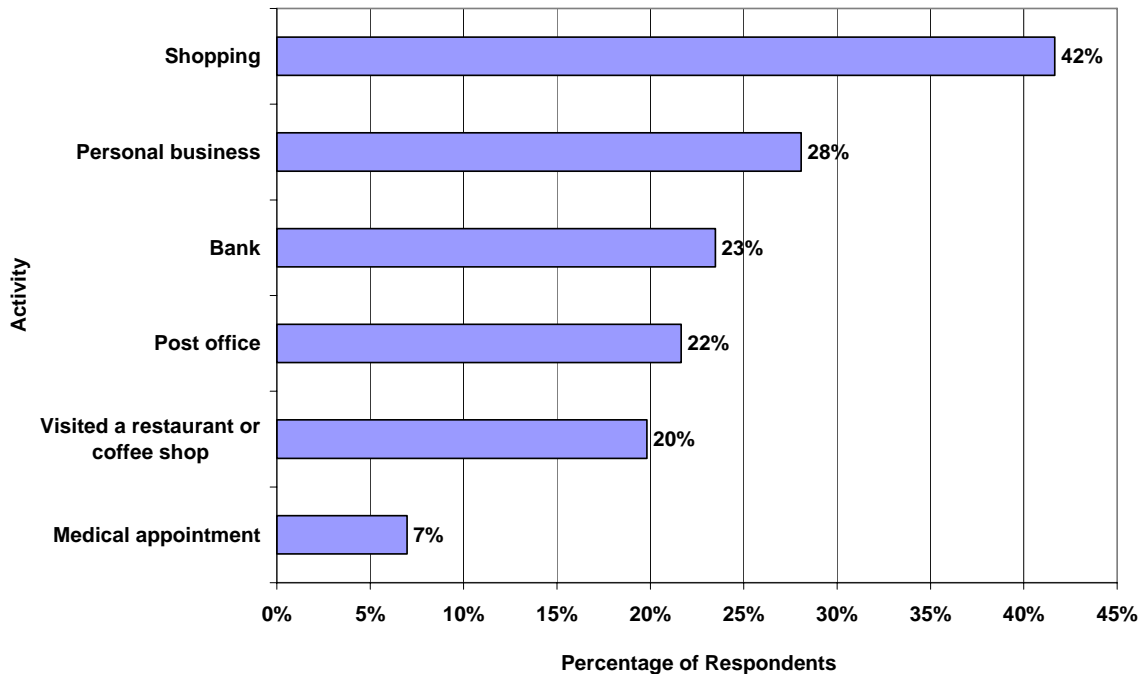
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Many respondents to the survey reported doing other activities or errands during the same trip as their visit to the library. The most likely peripheral activity, with 42 percent of respondents, was shopping (see Chart 6). Many respondents also reported attending to personal business (28%) or going to the bank (23%) during their trip. At least one in five said they went to the post office (22%) and/or visited a restaurant or coffee shop (20%).<sup>10</sup>

**Chart 6**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Activities Performed by Respondent on the Same Trip as Library Visit**



### **Mesa County Public Library District Patron Comments**

“The library is probably my main source of information and is my only source for use of internet and email”

“It is indispensable to this community.”

<sup>10</sup> As noted in the section on methodology, a U.K. study reported that a portion of the spending on these “halo” activities would not have occurred if the library were not available.

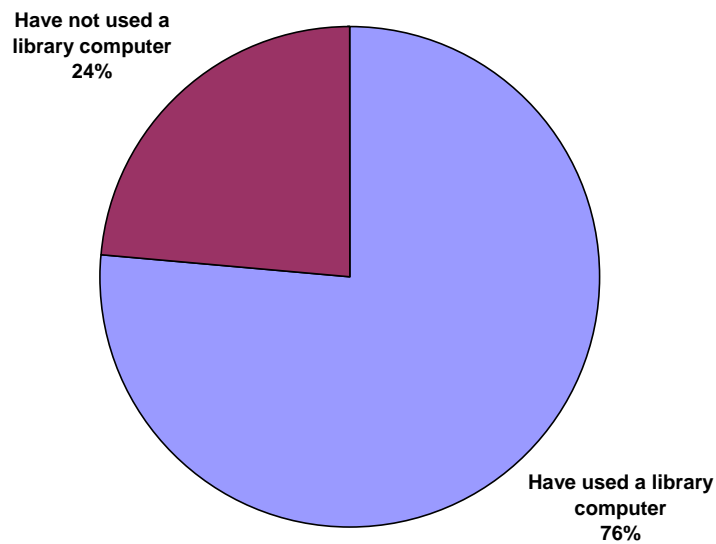
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Mesa County Public Library District's computers are extremely popular with their users. More than three out of four respondents (76%) reported having used a library computer at some point (see Chart 7). The fact that so many patrons are using computers suggests that Mesa County Public Library District is serving as a location to bridge the digital divide.

**Chart 7**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Percentage of Respondents Who Have Used a Library Computer**



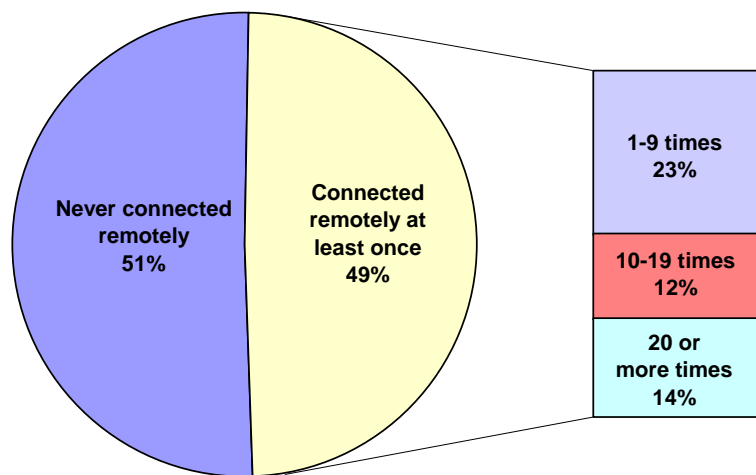
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In addition to in-library use, Mesa County Public Library District's users appear to frequently connect to libraries from home. Almost half of the respondents to this survey (49%) had connected to a Colorado public library from a home computer in the past twelve months (See Chart 8). As with visits, those that connect do so often. 14 percent of respondents had connected to a public library from home at least 20 times within the last year. Not only is the library a place to visit in the community, it is a place to visit in cyberspace as well.

**Chart 8**

**Return on Investment - Mesa County Public Library District:  
Number of Times Respondent Connected to a Colorado Public Library  
from a Home Computer in Last 12 Months**



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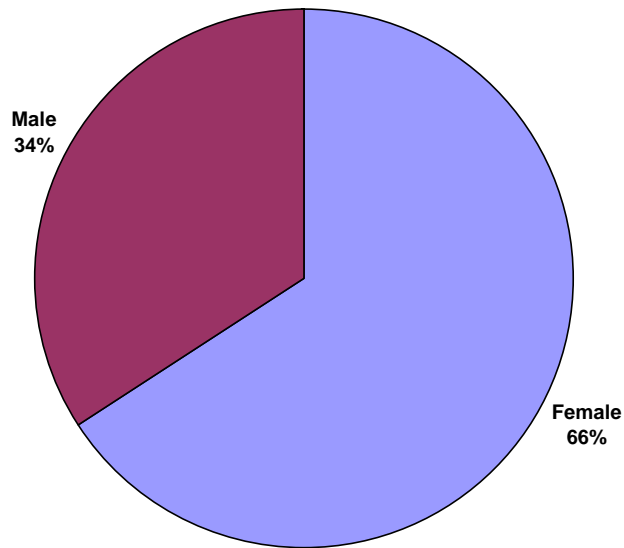
## **MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT**

### **Demographics**

The following five charts illustrate the demographics of the respondents to the Mesa County Public Library District ROI patron survey. Demographic data includes gender, age, highest level of education, race and ethnicity, and personal and household income.

**Chart 9**

**Return on Investment - Mesa Country Public Library District:  
Respondents by Gender**

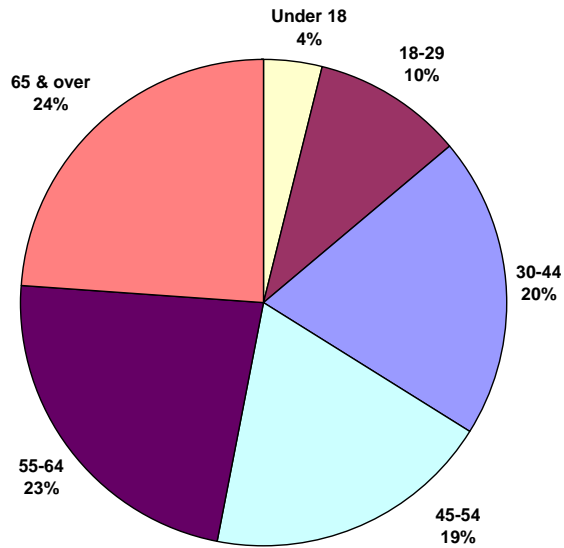


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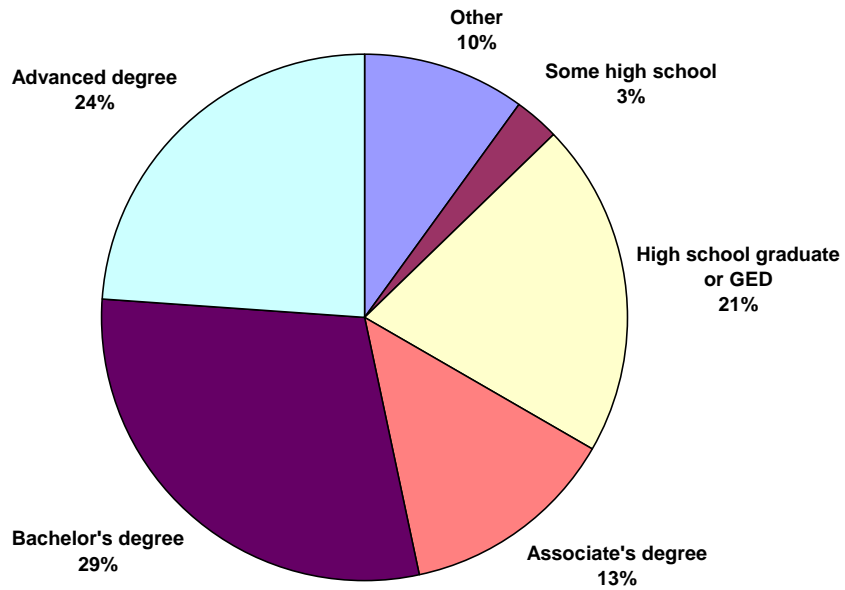
**Chart 10**

**Return on Investment - Mesa Country Public Library District:  
Respondents by Age**



**Chart 11**

**Return on Investment - Mesa Country Public Library District:  
Respondents by Highest Level of Education**

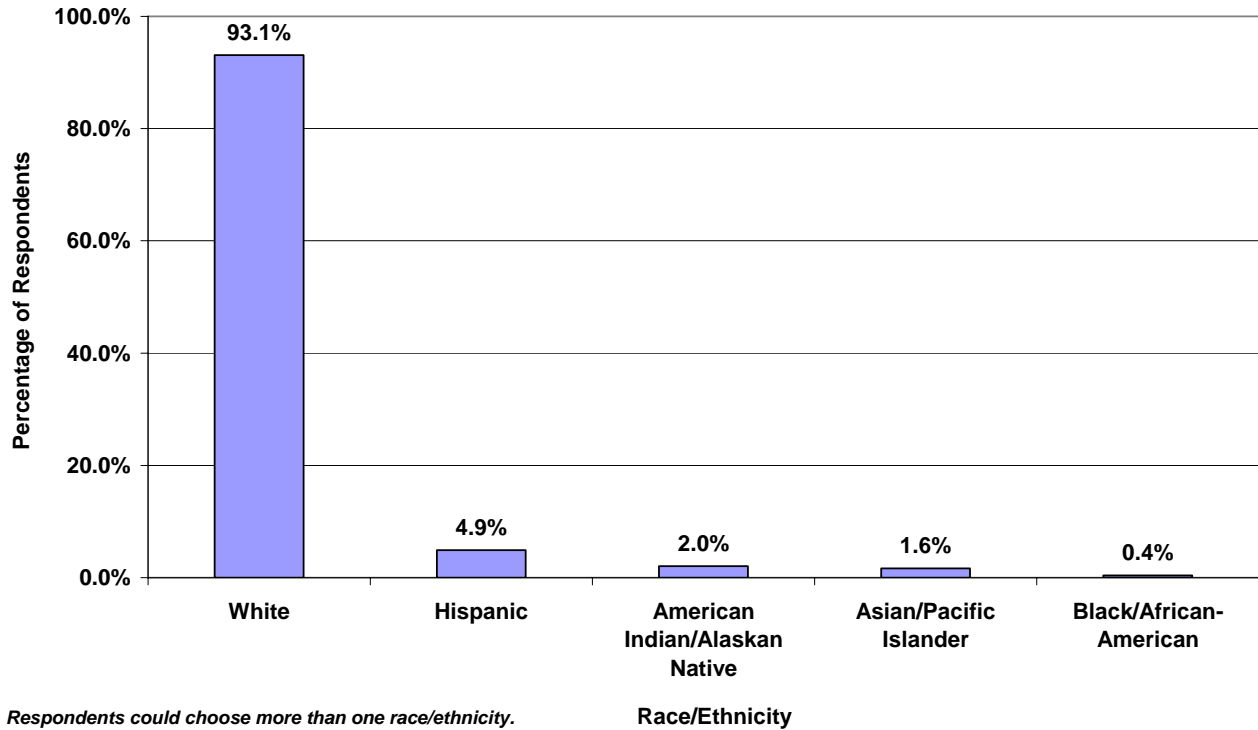


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## **MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT**

**Chart 12**

**Return on Investment - Mesa Country Public Library District:  
Respondents by Race and Ethnicity**



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## MESA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT

**Chart 13**

**Return on Investment - Mesa Country Public Library District:  
Respondent's Personal and Household Income**

