Public library engagement in the United States

An overview of three years of research into Americans' relationships with public libraries in the digital age
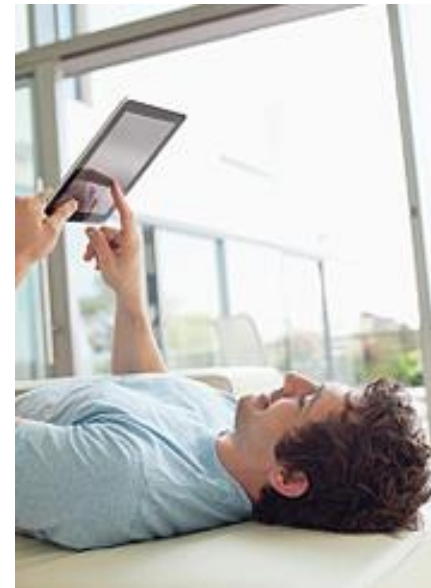
Pew Research Center's Internet Project

@pewinternet | @pewresearch

About our libraries research

Three phases:

I. State of reading

II. Library services

III. Typology

Three-year grant from the
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to study the
changing role of public libraries in the digital age

About our libraries research

Nationally representative telephone surveys

Landlines and cell phones

English and Spanish

Americans ages 16 and older

libraries.pewinternet.org

Overview

- Relationships to libraries are part of Americans' broader resource networks

- Once libraries are a part of their networks, services are especially important to low-income households

- Books, browsing, and librarians are still central to how people use libraries and what they expect from them.

- However, technology (computers, internet) is also a common use and a high priority.

- Public libraries are also used and viewed as important community spaces.

Americans' reading habits

Report: The rise of e-reading (2012)

Report: Libraries, patrons, and e-books (2012)
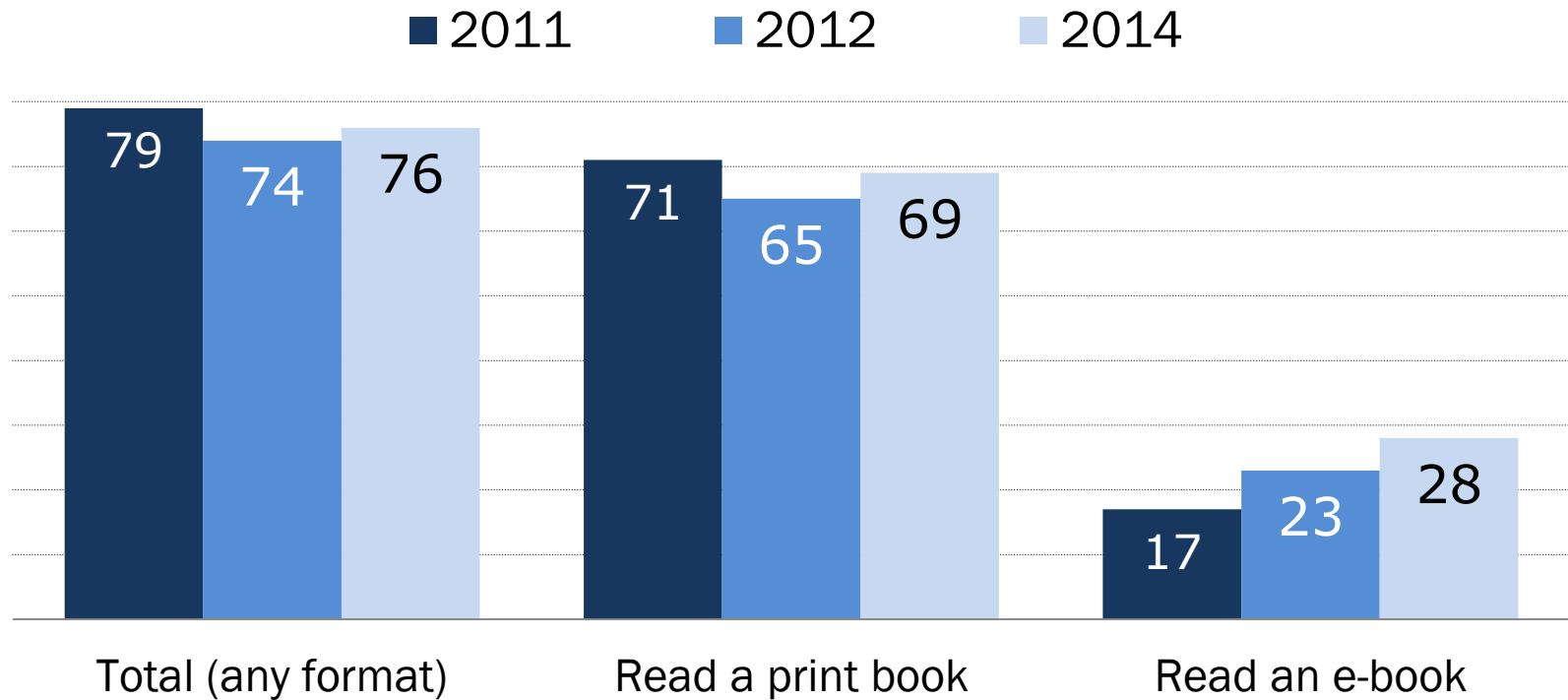
Report: E-Reading Rises as Device Ownership Jumps (2014)

Americans' reading habits

Print is still the anchor of Americans' reading habits, but e-reading is growing more popular.

- 76% of adults read a book in some format over the previous year.
  - The typical American read five books in the last 12 months (median)

- 28% of Americans read an e-book in the previous year.

Most adults read a book in the past year. Print remains most popular, but e-reading is on the rise

■ 2011 ■ 2012 ■ 2014

Total (any format)
- 2011: 79
- 2012: 74
- 2014: 76

Read a print book
- 2011: 71
- 2012: 65
- 2014: 69

Read an e-book
- 2011: 17
- 2012: 23
- 2014: 28

Among American adults 18 and older, the % who read at least one book (in total, in print, or as an e-book) in the past year ([Source](#)). Total includes audiobooks (not shown).

Put another way: Almost half of readers under 30 read an e-book in the past year

Legend: ■ Dec 2011 ■ Nov 2012 ■ Jan 2014

Age group	Dec 2011	Nov 2012	Jan 2014
18-29	25	31	47
30-49	25	41	42
50-64	19	23	35
65+	12	20	17
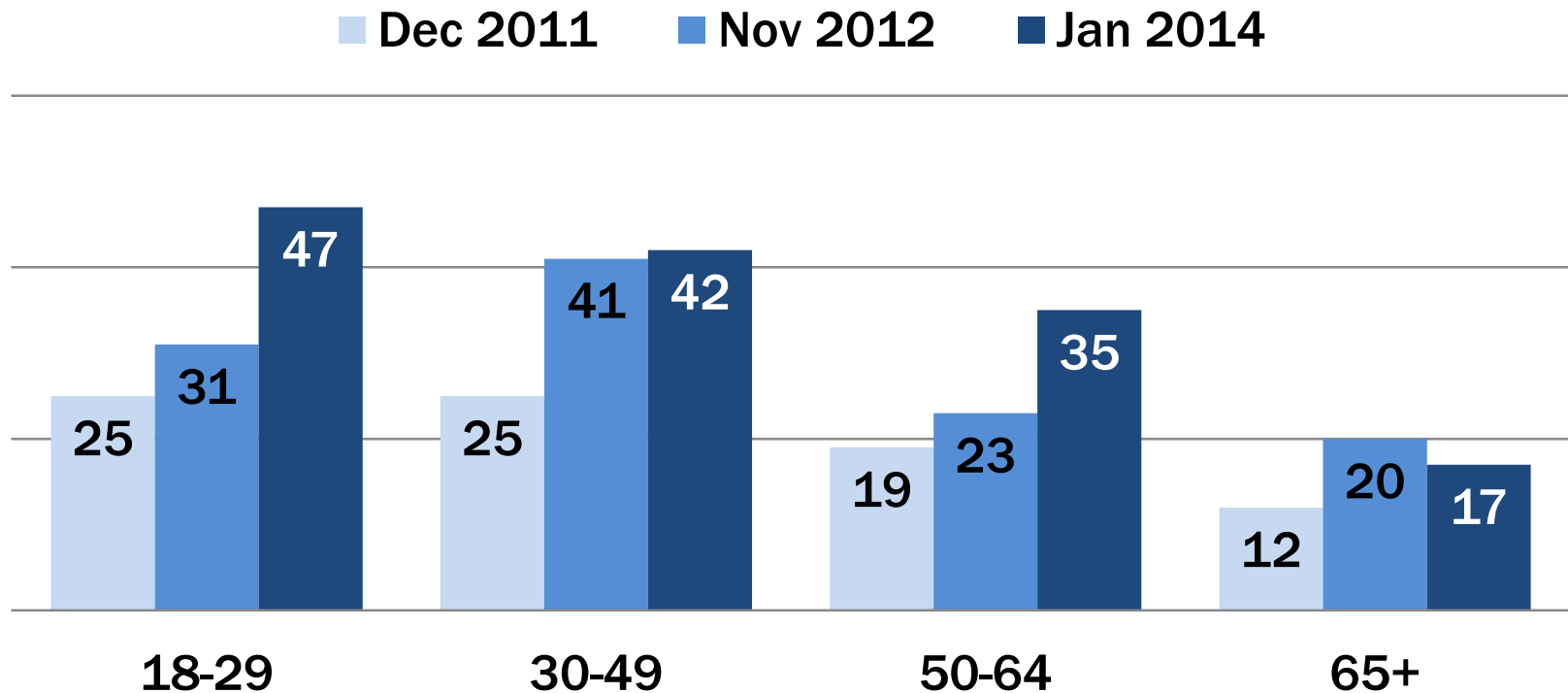
Among those in each age group who read at least one book in the past year, the % who read an e-book during that time (Source).

Half of American adults now own either a tablet or an e-reader

Legend:
- Have an e-reader (red line)
- Have a tablet (blue line)
- Have either tablet or e-reader (dotted gray line)

50%
42%
32%

2010   2011   2012   2013
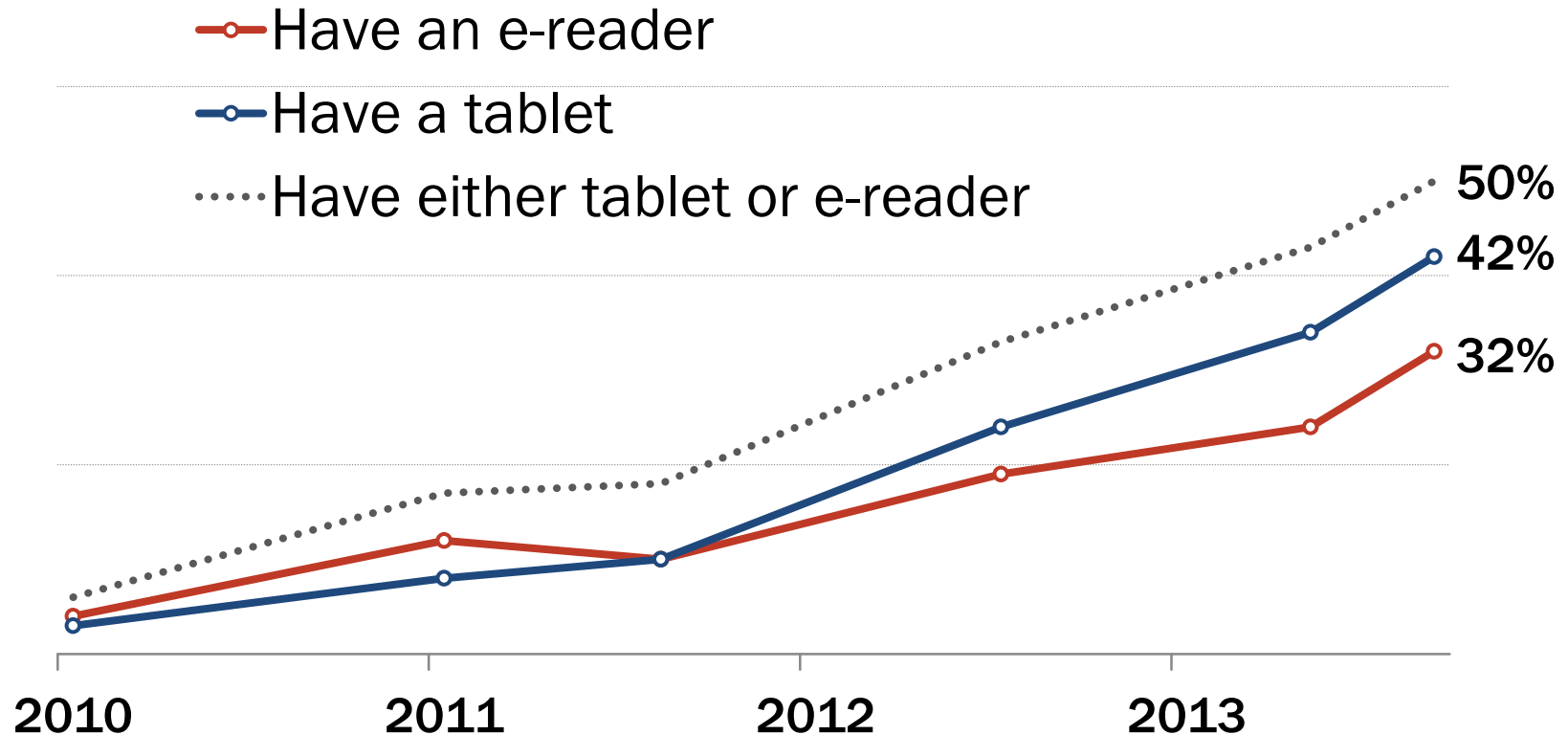
Among American adults 18 and older (Source).

As tablet ownership grows, more Americans use them for e-books
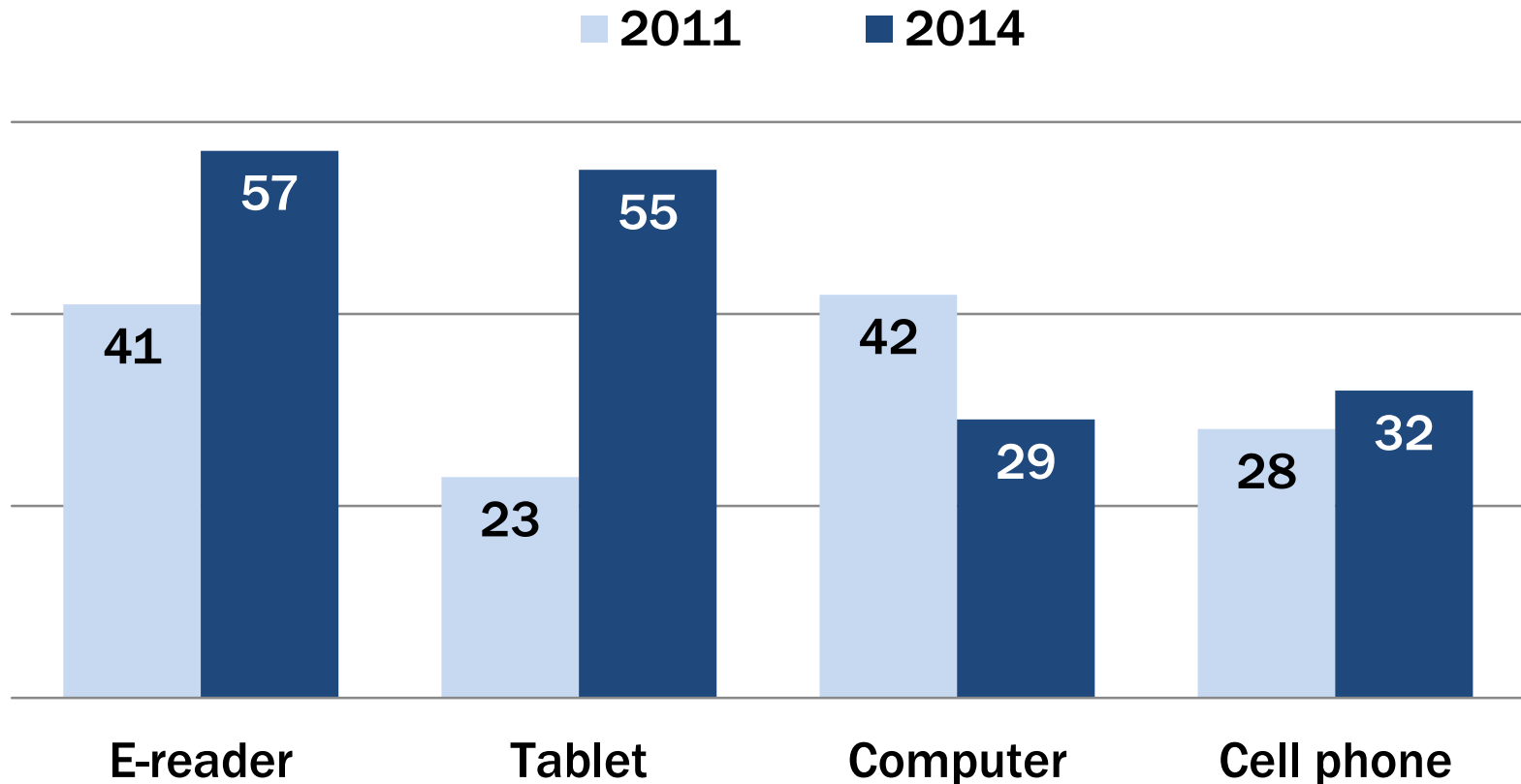
Among all e-book readers ages 18 and older, the % who read e-books on each device (Source).

Which is better for these purposes, a printed book or an e-book?

Among those 16+ who read both a print book & an e-book in the past year (2011)

■ Print ■ E-books

Purpose	Print	E-books
Reading with a child	81%	9%
Sharing with others	69%	25%
Reading in bed	43%	45%
Having a wide selection	35%	53%
Reading while traveling	19%	73%
Get books quickly	13%	83%
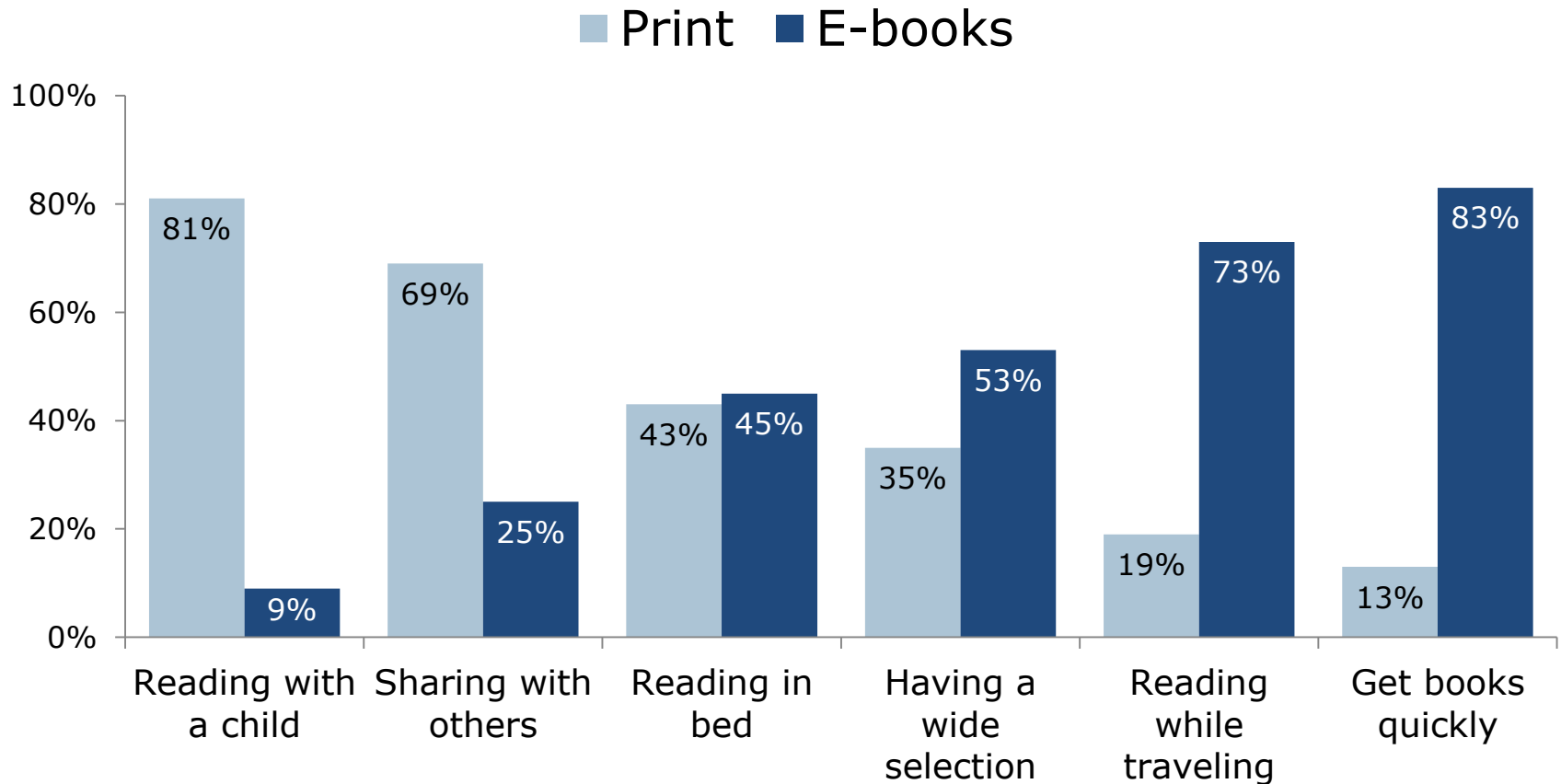
How Americans use public libraries

Report: Library Services in the Digital Age (2013)

Report: Parents, Children, Libraries, and Reading (2013)

Report: How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities (2013)

Americans and public libraries

- 54% of Americans used a public library in the past year
  - 48% visited in person
  - 30% used a library website
- 72% of Americans live in a "library household"

- 91% of Americans say libraries are important to their community as a whole; 76% say libraries are important to them and their family

- Relationships to libraries are part of Americans' broader resource networks

If your local public library closed, what impact would that have?

■ **Major impact**   ■ **Minor impact**   ■ **No impact**

Impact on you and your family

| 29 | 38 | 32 |

Impact on your community

| 63 | 27 | 7 |
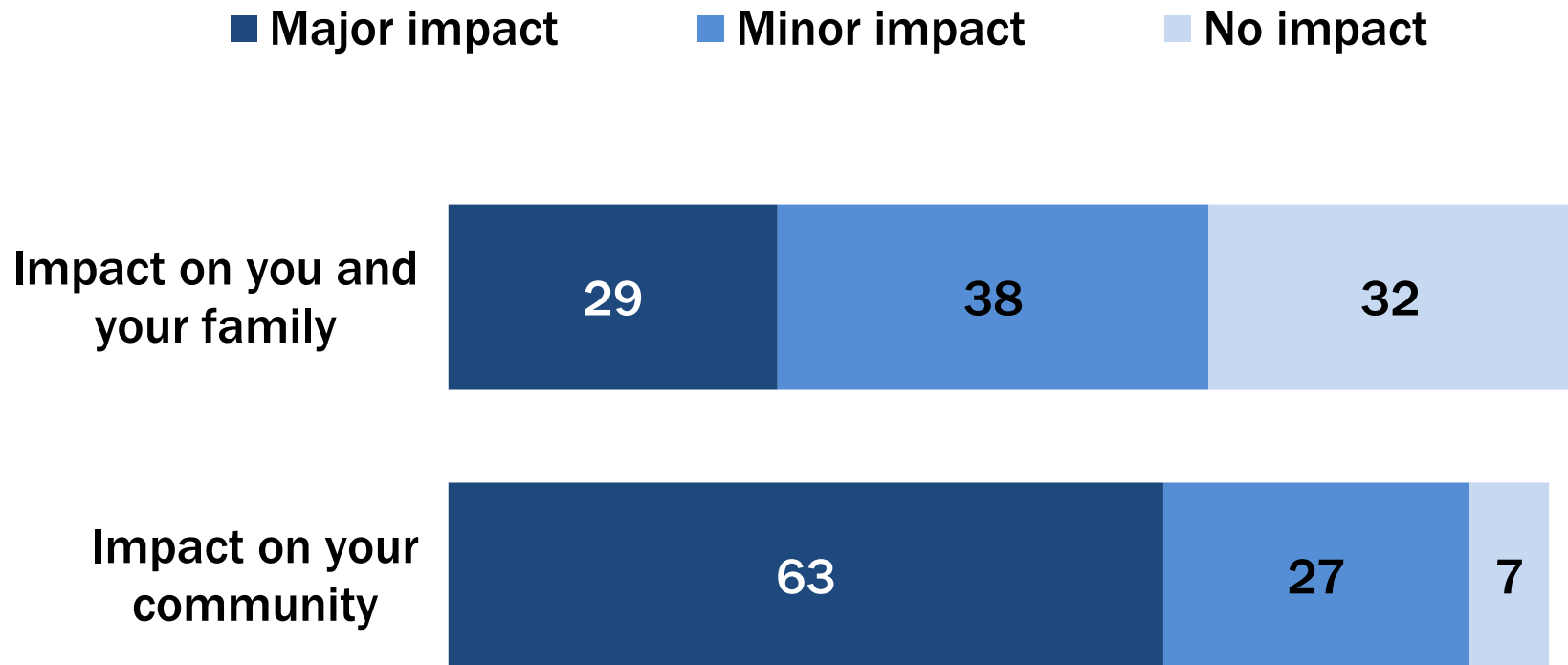
Among American adults 16 and older (Source).

Library services that are "very important"

Among Americans who have ever used a public library or had a household member use one

Service	Value
Books and media	54
Having a quiet, safe place	51
Research resources	47
Programs for youth	45
Librarian assistance	44
Internet, computers, printers	33
Help finding, applying for job	30
Help applying for gov't services	29
Programs for adults	28
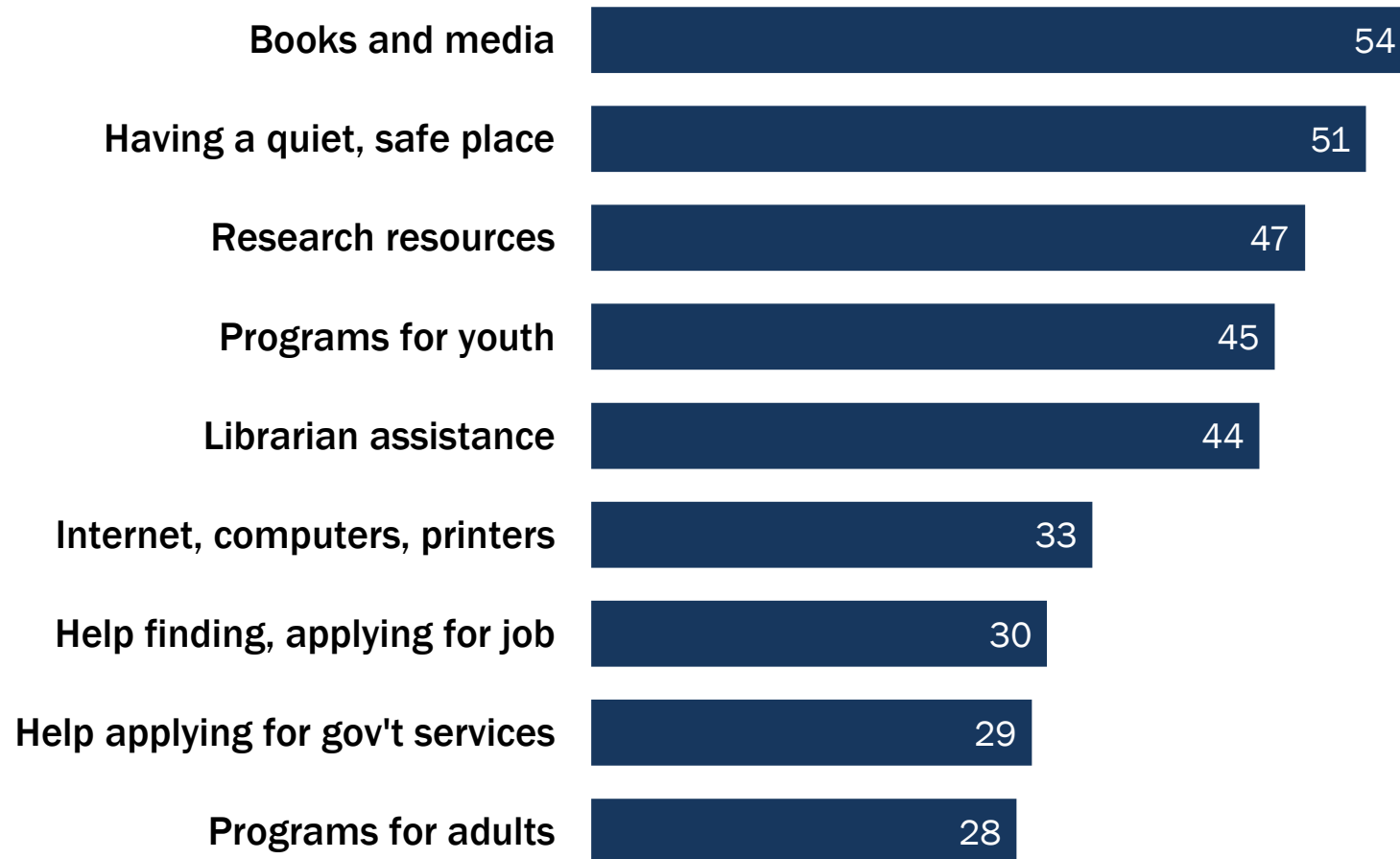
Adults living in lower-income households are more likely to say public library services are very important to them and their families

Household income

Books and media

Less than $30,000	61
At least $75,000	49

Quiet spaces

Less than $30,000	66
At least $75,000	39

Research resources

Less than $30,000	61
At least $75,000	34

Youth programs

Less than $30,000	56
At least $75,000	37

Librarian assistance

Less than $30,000	55
At least $75,000	33

Internet/computers

Less than $30,000	47
At least $75,000	20

Job search help

Less than $30,000	46
At least $75,000	15

Gov't services help

Less than $30,000	44
At least $75,000	16

Programs for adults

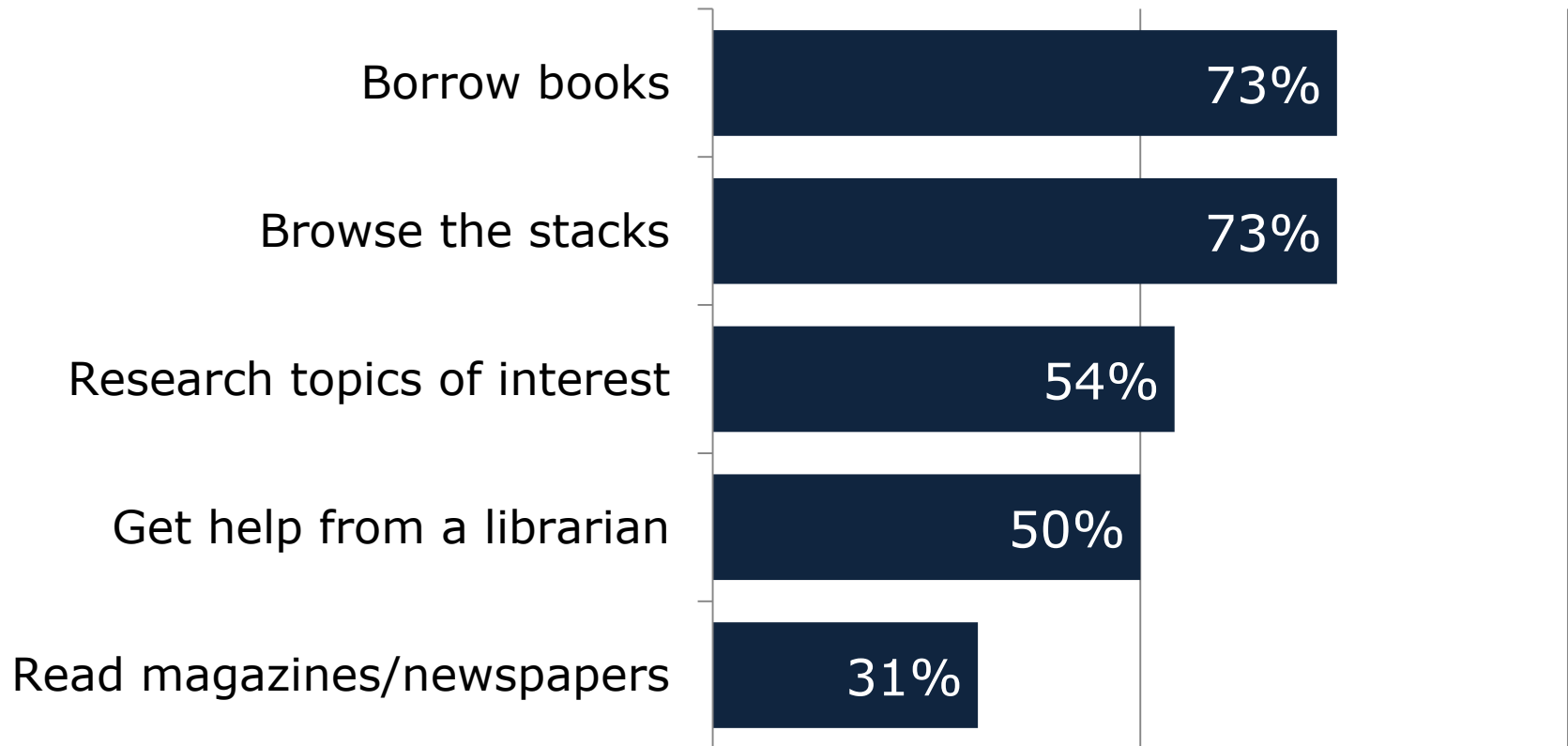|	
Less than $30,000	38
At least $75,000	18

Among American adults 16 and older (Source).

Books & browsing still central
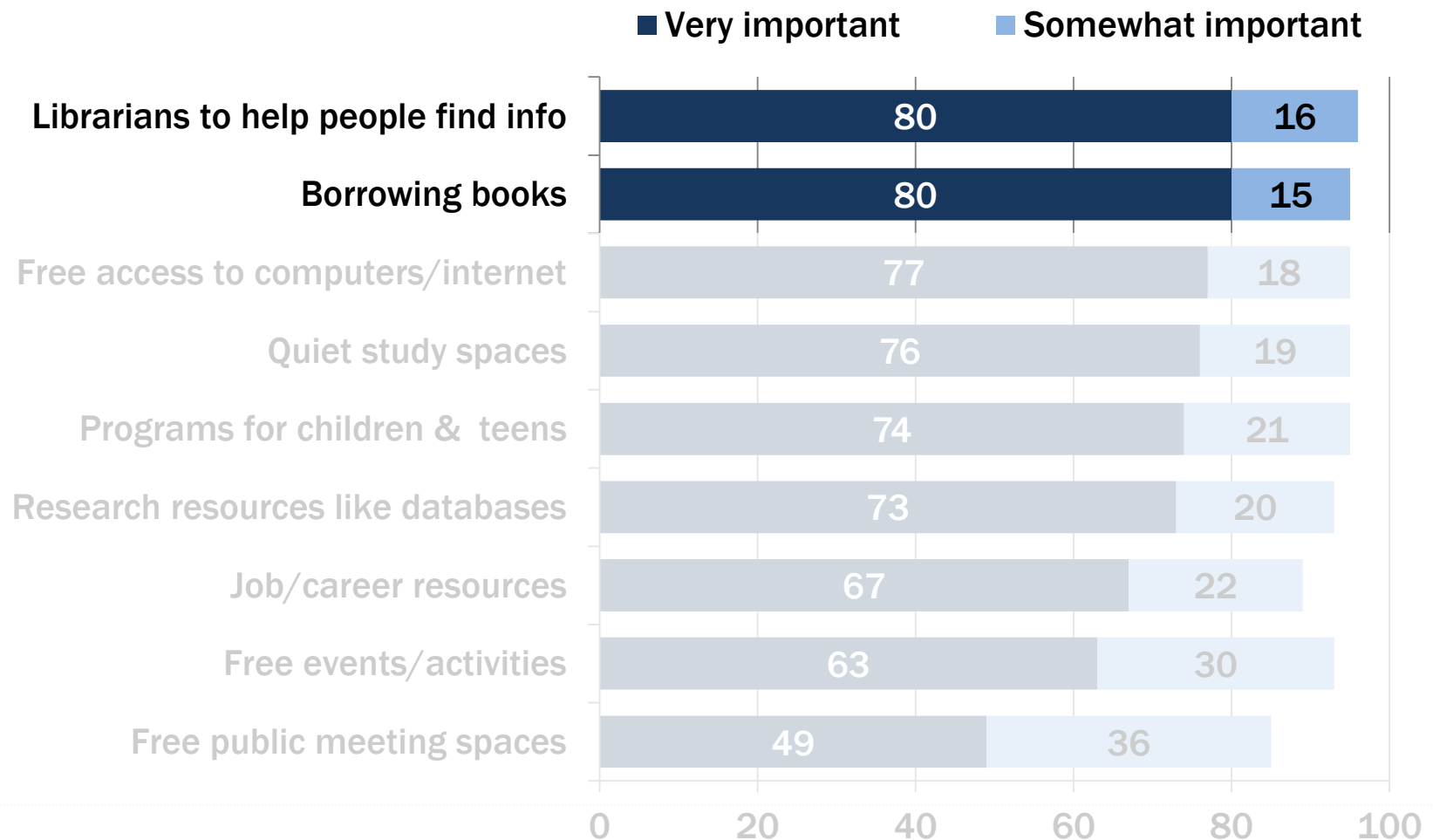
Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities

Activity	Percentage
Borrow books	73%
Browse the stacks	73%
Research topics of interest	54%
Get help from a librarian	50%
Read magazines/newspapers	31%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+.

What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer ([source](#))

■ **Very important**   ■ **Somewhat important**

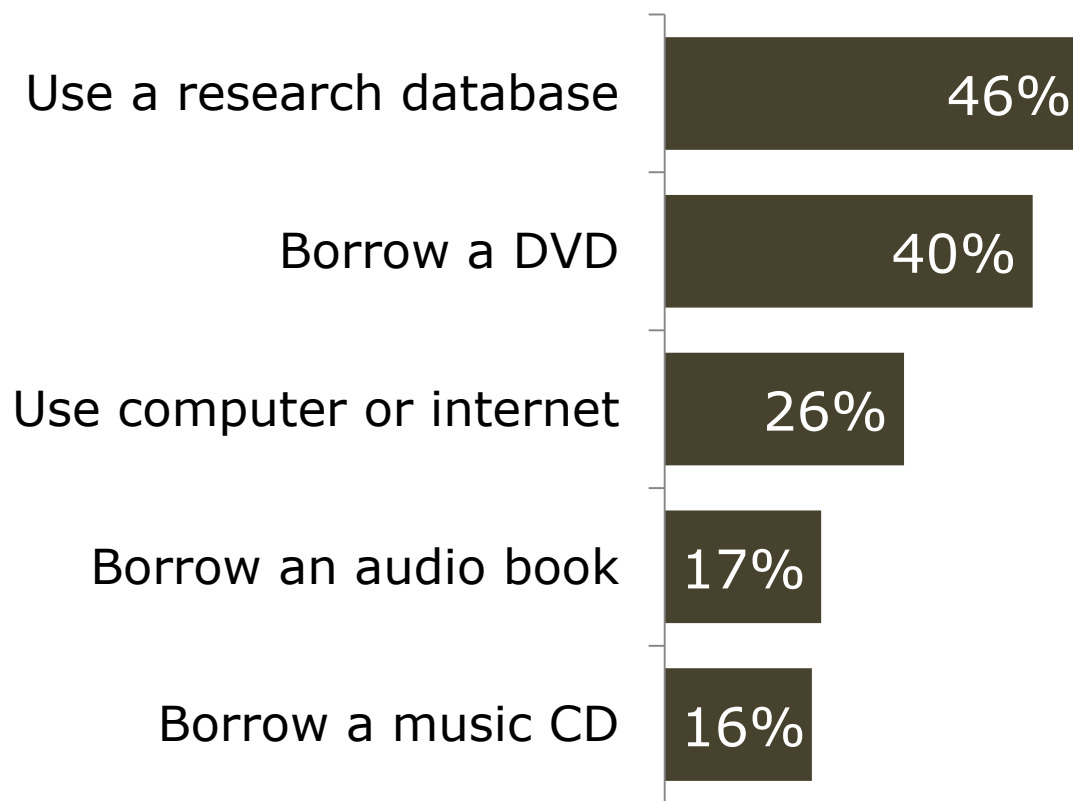|	Very important	Somewhat important
Librarians to help people find info	80	16
Borrowing books	80	15
Free access to computers/internet	77	18
Quiet study spaces	76	19
Programs for children & teens	74	21
Research resources like databases	73	20
Job/career resources	67	22
Free events/activities	63	30
Free public meeting spaces	49	36

0   20   40   60   80   100

"Our customers are still using the library but in different ways. They browse our catalog online, place reserves on the items they want, then pick them up at their location of choice... Fewer browse the collection in person."

– Library staff member

Technology & media use at the library

Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities

Activity	%
Use a research database	46%
Borrow a DVD	40%
Use computer or internet	26%
Borrow an audio book	17%
Borrow a music CD	16%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+.

E-reading is on the rise
Borrowing is just getting started

28% of Americans read an e-book in the past year, up from 16% in 2011

5% of recent library users have borrowed an e-book in past year, as of late 2012

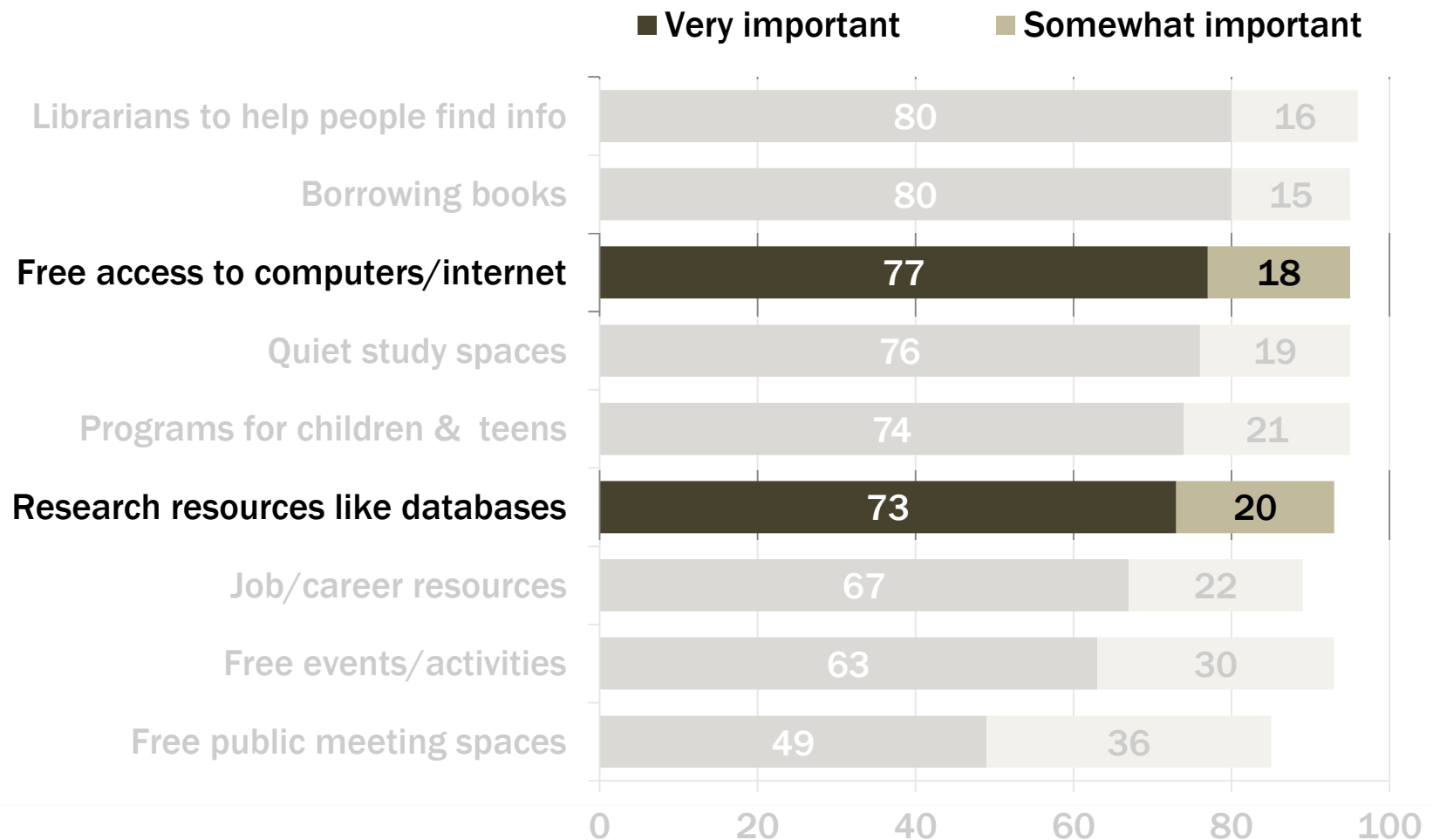"We spend a significant part of our day explaining how to get library books onto e-book readers."

– *Library staff member*

62% of Americans say they **do not know** if their library lends out e-books.
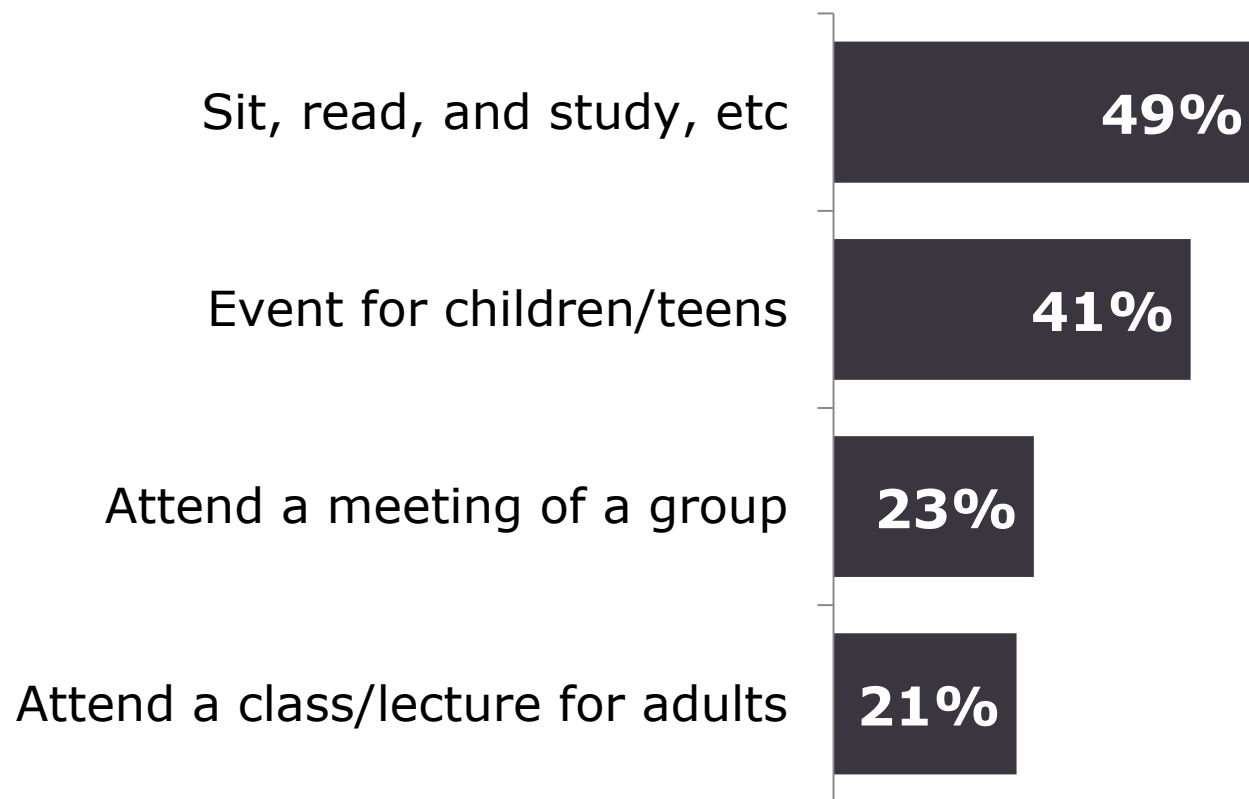
This includes 58% of library card holders.

What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer ([source](#))

■ **Very important**   ■ **Somewhat important**

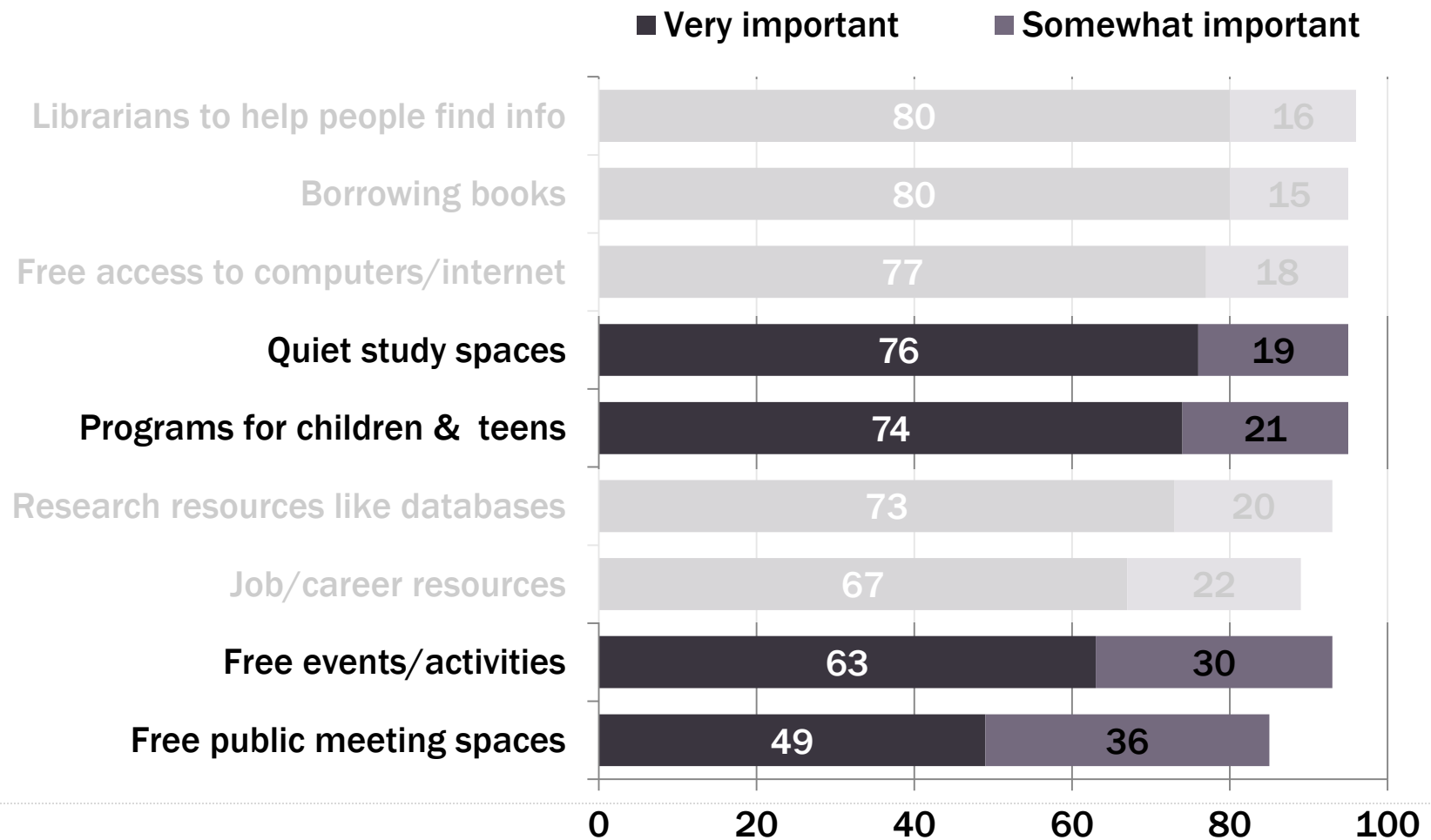|	Very important	Somewhat important
Librarians to help people find info	80	16
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0   20   40   60   80   100

Libraries as community spaces

Among those who visited a library in-person in the past year, the % who did the following activities

Activity	Percentage
Sit, read, and study, etc	49%
Event for children/teens	41%
Attend a meeting of a group	23%
Attend a class/lecture for adults	21%

Source: Pew Internet November 2012 survey. Data is for library visitors ages 16+.

What Americans say it is important for public libraries to offer ([source](#))

■ Very important   ■ Somewhat important

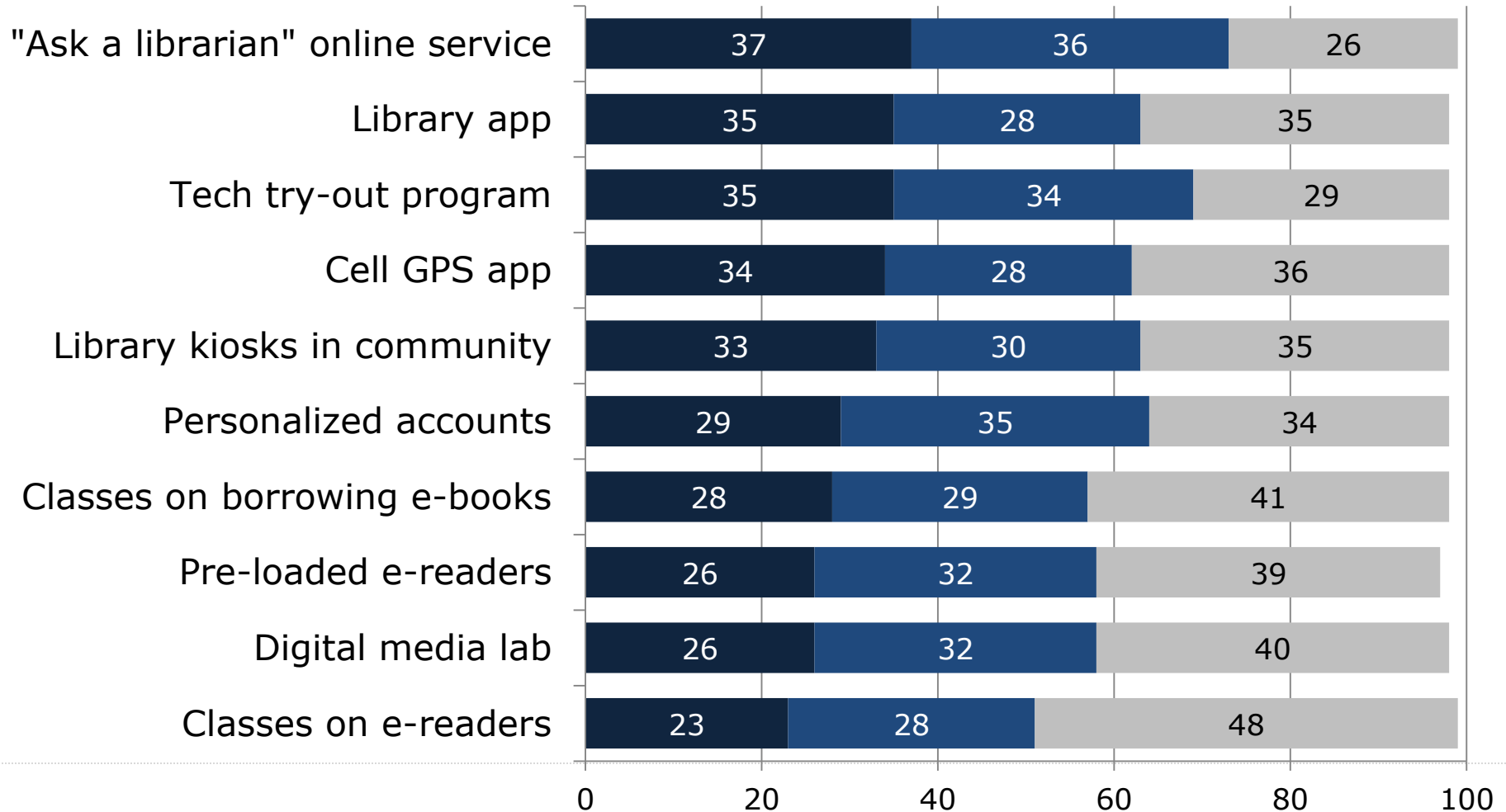|	Very important	Somewhat important
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0   20   40   60   80   100

What Americans want from libraries

Report: [Library Services in the Digital Age](#) (2013)

How likely would you be to use...

■ Very likely   ■ Somewhat likely   ■ Not too likely or not at all likely

Service	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Not too likely or not at all likely
"Ask a librarian" online service	37	36	26
Library app	35	28	35
Tech try-out program	35	34	29
Cell GPS app	34	28	36
Library kiosks in community	33	30	35
Personalized accounts	29	35	34
Classes on borrowing e-books	28	29	41
Pre-loaded e-readers	26	32	39
Digital media lab	26	32	40
Classes on e-readers	23	28	48

What public libraries should do

■ Should definitely do   ■ Should maybe do   ■ Should definitely not do

	Should definitely do	Should maybe do	Should definitely not do
Coordinate more with schools	85	11	2
Free literacy programs	82	14	3
Separate spaces for different services	61	27	9
Have more comfortable spaces	59	28	9
Offer more e-books	53	30	5
More interactive learning experiences	47	38	12
Help users digitize own materials	43	39	14
Move MOST library services online	42	34	19
Make MOST services automated	41	36	20
Move stacks out of public locations	20	39	36

What do Americans want from libraries?

More activities, more separate spaces

...and print books, quiet

Convenience & tech (apps, e-books, kiosks)

... and closer relationships with librarians

The Library Engagement Typology

Report: "[From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers–and beyond](#)"
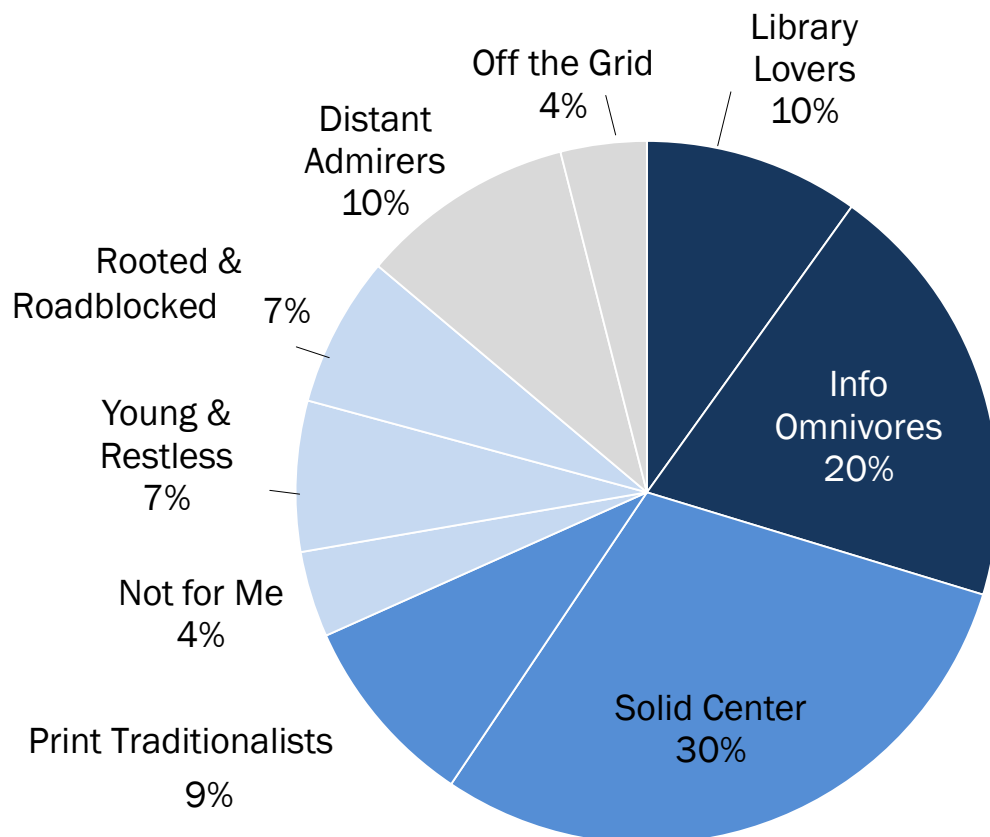
Quiz: "[What kind of library users are you?](#)"

Overview ([Full report](#))

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- Once libraries are a part of their networks, services are especially important to low-income households

- Books, browsing, and librarians are still central to how people use libraries and what they expect from them.

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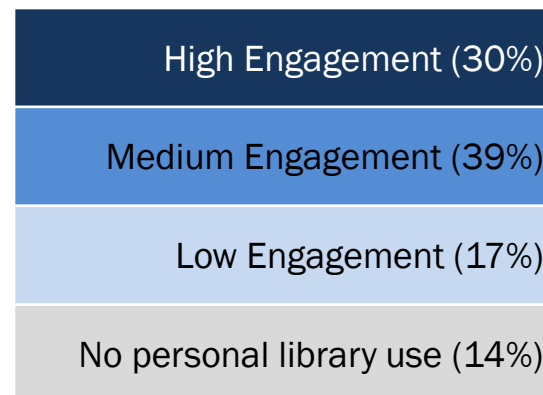
- Public libraries are also used and viewed as important community spaces.

Typology groups by level of library engagement

Among all Americans ages 16+ who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library
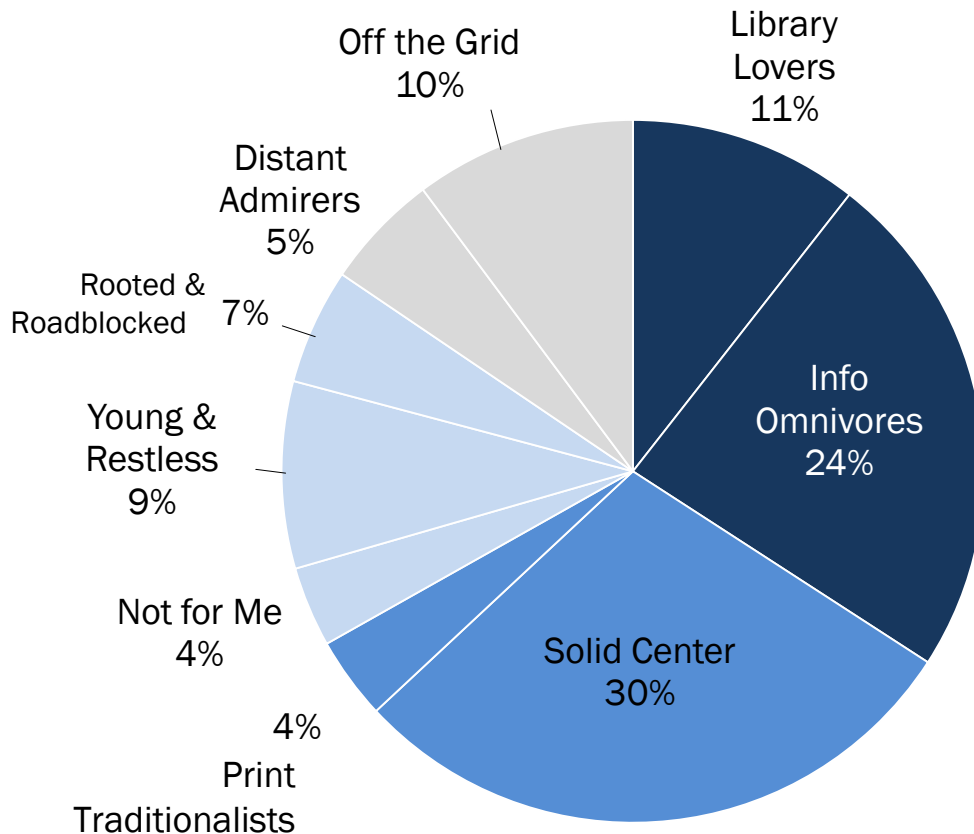

Level of engagement with public libraries:

High Engagement (30%)
Medium Engagement (39%)
Low Engagement (17%)
No personal library use (14%)

Pie chart labels:
- Library Lovers 10%
- Off the Grid 4%
- Distant Admirers 10%
- Rooted & Roadblocked 7%
- Young & Restless 7%
- Not for Me 4%
- Print Traditionalists 9%
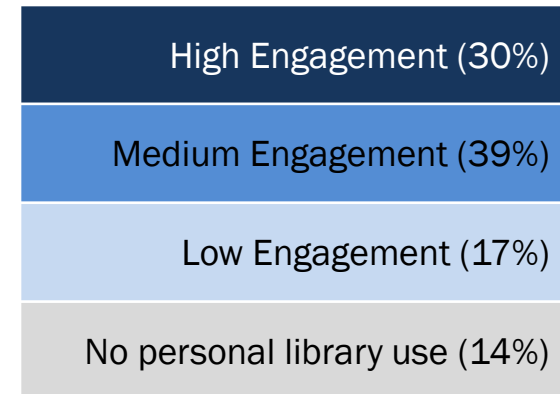- Solid Center 30%
- Info Omnivores 20%

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.

Urban typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in urban areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library
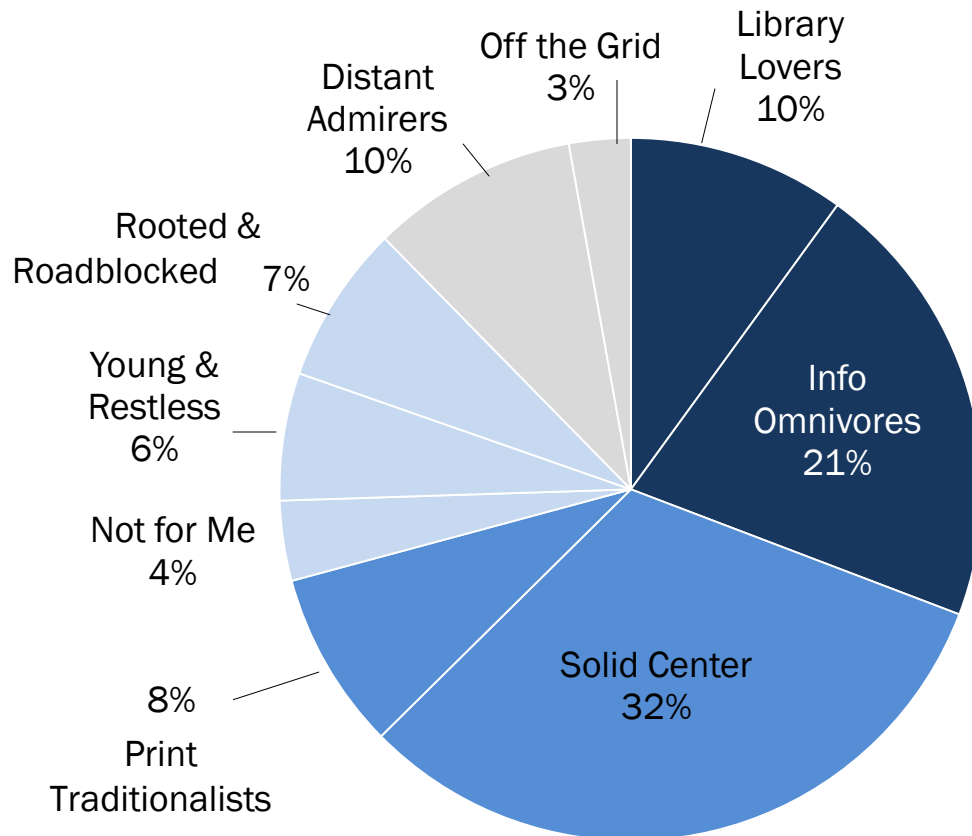
Off the Grid
10%

Library Lovers
11%

Distant Admirers
5%

Rooted & Roadblocked
7%

Young & Restless
9%

Info Omnivores
24%

Not for Me
4%

Solid Center
30%

4%
Print Traditionalists

Level of engagement with public libraries:

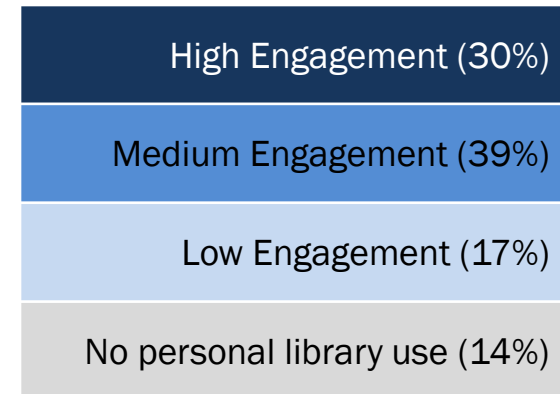| |
|---|
| High Engagement (30%) |
| Medium Engagement (39%) |
| Low Engagement (17%) |
| No personal library use (14%) |

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.

Suburban typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in suburban areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library
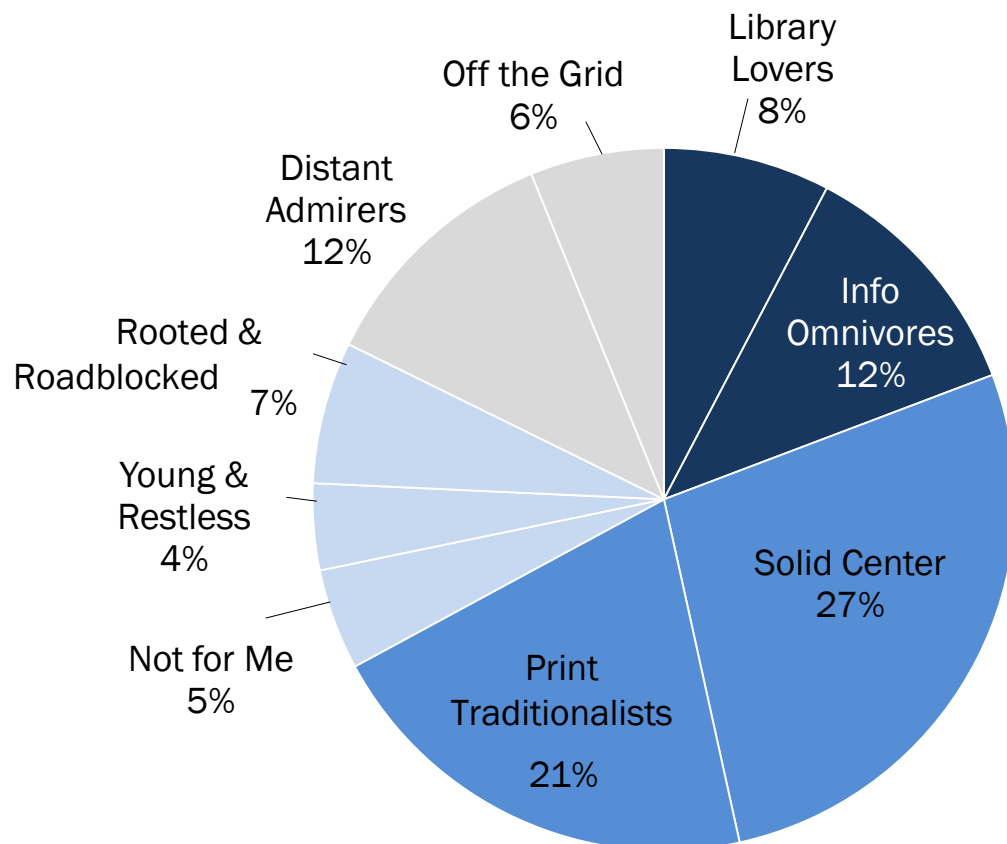
Off the Grid
3%

Library
Lovers
10%

Distant
Admirers
10%

Rooted &
Roadblocked
7%

Young &
Restless
6%

Not for Me
4%

8%

Print
Traditionalists

Info
Omnivores
21%

Solid Center
32%

**Level of engagement
with public libraries:**

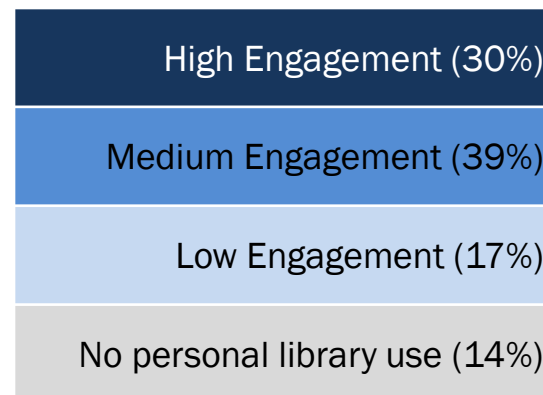| |
|---|
| High Engagement (30%) |
| Medium Engagement (39%) |
| Low Engagement (17%) |
| No personal library use (14%) |

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.

Rural typology groups by level of library engagement

Among Americans living in rural areas who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library
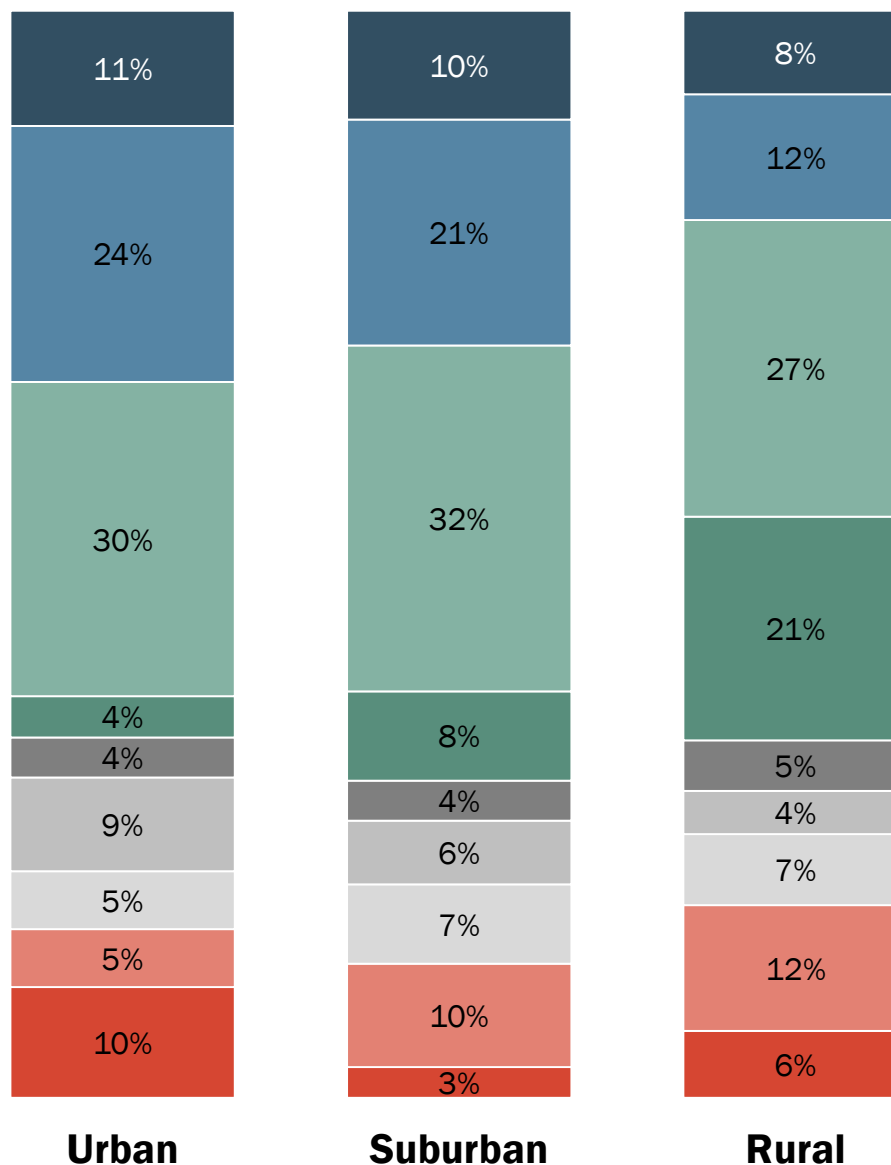

Library Lovers 8%

Off the Grid 6%

Distant Admirers 12%

Rooted & Roadblocked 7%

Young & Restless 4%

Not for Me 5%

Print Traditionalists 21%

Info Omnivores 12%

Solid Center 27%

Level of engagement with public libraries:

High Engagement (30%)

Medium Engagement (39%)

Low Engagement (17%)

No personal library use (14%)

Note: Percentages in the chart may not add up to the percentages in the legend due to rounding.
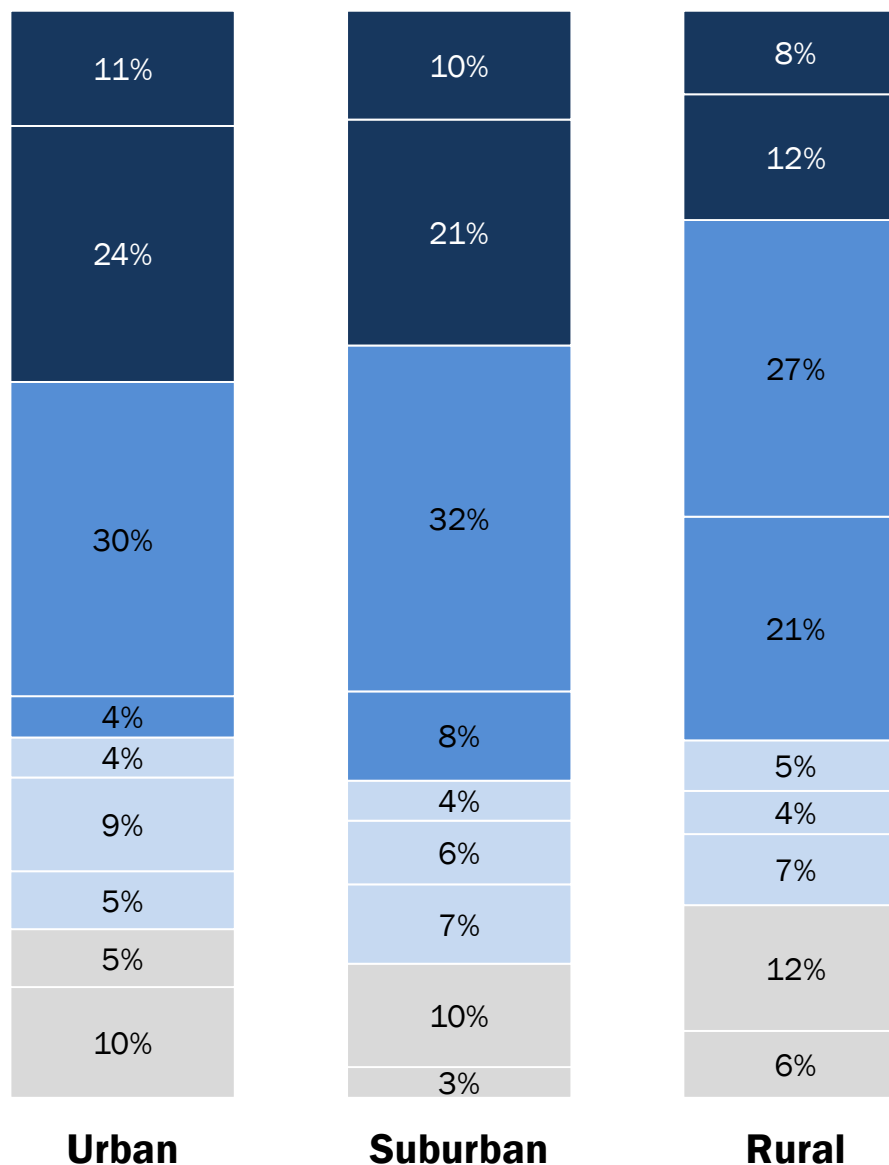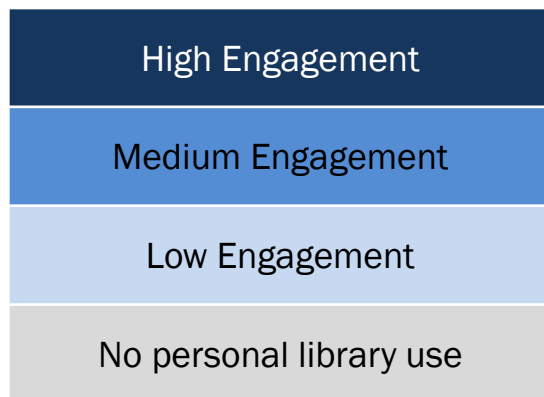
Public library engagement by community type

- Library Lovers
- Information Omnivores
- Solid Center
- Print Traditionalists
- Not for Me
- Young & Restless
- Rooted & Roadblocked
- Distant Admirers
- Off the Grid

Urban
- 11%
- 24%
- 30%
- 4%
- 4%
- 9%
- 5%
- 5%
- 10%

Suburban
- 10%
- 21%
- 32%
- 8%
- 4%
- 6%
- 7%
- 10%
- 3%

Rural
- 8%
- 12%
- 27%
- 21%
- 5%
- 4%
- 7%
- 12%
- 6%

Public library engagement by community type

Level of engagement with public libraries:

High Engagement	
Medium Engagement	
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No personal library use	

Urban
- 11%
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Suburban
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- 32%
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- 4%
- 6%
- 7%
- 10%
- 3%

Rural
- 8%
- 12%
- 27%
- 21%
- 5%
- 4%
- 7%
- 12%
- 6%

What kind of library use are you?

Take the quiz