

About the Library Journal Index of Public Library Service (LJ Index)

[\(http://keithcurrylance.com/lj_index/\)](http://keithcurrylance.com/lj_index/)

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Your library is not just a number

We know that. The library statistics that we collect don't always reflect how well you are serving your community, and many of the most important things you do cannot be counted. That said, library statistics do serve several useful purposes. They give some quantifiable idea of how busy the library is and the status of your collections, budget and staffing. They allow us to see trends over time. They give us data that appeals to the number-crunchers in the group when we are advocating for our libraries.

Finally, they allow us to compare ourselves to other libraries. The Library Journal Index of Public Library Service (LJ Index) is an effort to take multiple public library data elements that are collected nationally and distill them into a single measure of library "goodness."

What does my LJ score mean?

In general, libraries with generous operating and materials budgets, ample staffing and high circulation and visits are thought to be better than poorly funded, understaffed, poorly used libraries. LJ attempts to make this distinction between libraries. Scores should be viewed in ranges as approximate – a score of 1 higher doesn't necessarily mean "1 better."

To a certain extent, LJ is a "beauty contest," giving the libraries that end up at the top of the heap bragging rights. If your library scores highly, it's a good public relations opportunity to celebrate it. High-scoring libraries can also be seen as possible models of what good library service looks like.

If your library receives a low score, it doesn't hurt to take a look at why that might have occurred. It might be that the library is struggling with funding, or needs to update its collection to improve circulation. However LJ should be used to single out libraries as having poor performance. Because of the limitations of the data, a library may be doing an excellent job of serving its community, but in ways that are not fully reflected in it. These numbers are only one part of the picture.

What are some of the limitations in the ratings?

There are four major limitations in both rating systems:

1. Peer library groups: LJ groups libraries for comparison by operating budget. This can place disparate libraries in the same group.
2. Busyness vs. "Goodness": The two are not necessarily equal, but the library data that is available nationally measures activity rather than impact.
3. Legal service area vs. actual patrons: Both indexes rely on per capita measures using the library's legal service area population. Patrons, however, will go to the closest library that will have them regardless of legal boundaries.

4. Libraries that don't report can't play: If a library fails to report a data element that LJ uses to calculate scores, that library is not included in the rankings. The smallest libraries are also excluded.

The population issue is perhaps the biggest limitation. A library that serves a large population just outside its legal boundaries may have its per capita circulation, visits and other measures skewed high. When looking at libraries with a circ per capita of 50 or 60, it's possible that they may be serving a large population outside their legal service area. All of the LJ Index measures are dependent on the library's legal service area population.

How libraries are grouped

LJ Index groups libraries by total operating expenditures. Scores are only comparable *within* groupings. It is not valid to compare scores from one budget group to those in another group.

How libraries are scored

LJ Index uses 4 per capita measures: library visits, circulation, program attendance and public Internet computer uses. LJ's authors indicated that these 4 measures were used because they correlate "strongly, positively and significantly." These measures are not weighted, meaning that each counts equally toward the library's score.

Each measure is calculated individually within each group, and then all four measures are combined into a total score for your library. LJ Index uses a formula that starts with the statistical mean average of that measure for libraries in that group. Then, they look at how far above or below the average your library's score is, while also adjusting for the "spread" of the entire set of data by using the standard deviation in the calculations. A full explanation may be found here on the FAQ page; <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/stars-faq/>.

LJ Index gives the top libraries in each budget category five, four or three stars for the overall score and for the individual measures. Each star-rating group has 10 libraries, except in the top budget categories where the number of libraries is much smaller. LJ index makes spreadsheets available with all the data for rated libraries.

How do I maximize my score?

The simplest way to maximize scores in both systems is to serve a large community living outside your legal service area. This is clearly not, however, under your library's control.

The LJ Index uses service measures that focus on high volume – circulation, visits, etc. It's important to track these so that you do not under-report when this data is collected. It's also important not to over-report because of concern that a decline in circulation or reference will reflect badly. It is always important to collect accurate statistics for your library for use in managing services.

In addition, some library measures may decline not because the use of the library is declining, but because patron use is shifting. An increase in the number of public access computers may

result in fewer uses as patrons no longer have to end their sessions as often because someone is waiting. The addition of wifi may mean fewer computer uses. Visits might decline if more patrons are accessing the library's online resources from their home computers.

Although the libraries that rise to the top are clearly doing good things, it is important not to get too wrapped up in the HAPLR or LJ Index number. The more important thing is to evaluate how well the library is serving its community, not how high a score it gets. The LJ Index is just a way of looking at library data in an organized way to attempt to measure library quality. It can be useful, but is only one of the tools in the box.

Questions?

Library Journal has a good FAQ page with more detailed information at <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/stars-faq/>.

You may also contact Susan Mark, Wyoming State Library Statistics Librarian at susan.mark@wyo.gov or 307-777-5915.