

# Go Ahead, Name Them: America's Best Public Libraries

By Thomas J. Hennen Jr.

ARMED WITH STATS AND DATA,  
A LIBRARYLAND PUNDIT ATTEMPTS  
THE IMPOSSIBLE TASK OF RANKING  
THE TOP 20 IN FOUR CATEGORIES

**W**here is the best place to live in America? What is the best college, hospital, graduate school, or place to work? What these questions have in common is that each is subjective and open to infinite interpretation. But that has not stopped magazines from routinely trying to provide rankings to answer them. *Money* magazine's 1998 annual report on the "Best Places to Live in America" ranks them—and uses "library books per capita" as one of its 89 indicators.

With a rating and evaluation scheme devised specifically for public libraries in the United States, Hennen's American Public Library Rating Index is also subjective and open to debate. Nevertheless, it is an attempt to answer the question, what are the best public libraries in America?

The HAPLR Index uses six input and nine output measures. They are calculated from the latest Federal-State Cooperative System (FSCS) public library data, which will be published in final form by the U.S. Department of Education in March. Each factor was weighted and scored. The scores for each library within a population category were then added, to develop a weighted score. The HAPLR Index is similar to an ACT or SAT score, with a theoretical minimum of 1 and a maximum of

THOMAS J. HENNING JR. is administrator of the Lakeshores Library System in Racine, Wisconsin. More information about the tabulations in Hennen's American Public Library Rating Index can be found on the Web at [haplr-index.com](http://haplr-index.com).

1,000, although 90% of libraries in each population group scored between 260 and 730.

So are the libraries listed here the best in America? Perhaps, but we all recognize that data alone cannot and never will define excellence in library service. The data measurement cannot capture a friendly smile and warm greeting at the circulation desk. Nor can data alone measure the excitement of a child at story time or a senior surfing the Internet for the first time. The way in which population data is assigned puts some libraries at a disadvantage in the rankings. Because nonprint and electronic service data are not yet adequately reported in the FSCS data, libraries that are in the forefront of such service may have lost out in rankings that by necessity favor more traditional service.

The HAPLR Index is a composite measure of both inputs and outputs. It may be asked whether there is a correlation between the two. Does the user get what is paid for? Are libraries efficient public services? Donald E. Vitaliano, in his 1997 article in *Public Finance Review*, describes libraries as more efficient than highway departments or nursing homes, less efficient than power plants, and about as inefficient as banks! Library trustees, elected officials, and the public frequently ask

librarians for assurances that the tax dollars appropriated for libraries are well spent. Examination of the relationship between input and output measures in the data examined appears to indicate a very strong correlation between them.

## Where the data comes from

Of the 8,950 public libraries included in the FSCS data, only 7,128 reported data in enough detail to calculate the 15 input and output measures used to produce the HAPLR Index. The results were tabulated in four different population categories, in order to provide a more consistent basis for comparison. The population categories chosen are: over 100,000; 10,000 to 99,999; 2,000 to 9,999; and under 2,000.

The information on how a library compares nationally

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TABLE 1: WEIGHTING FACTORS\*

Measure	Weight	95	90	75	50	25	10	5
Expenditure per capita	3	\$57.78	\$43.30	\$26.96	\$16.56	\$9.77	\$5.96	\$4.21
Percent budget to materials	2	25%	22%	19%	15%	13%	10%	8%
Materials expenditure per capita	2	\$8.82	\$6.70	\$4.35	\$2.57	\$1.46	\$0.84	\$0.55
Periodicals per 1,000 residents	1	24.1	17.4	11.2	7.0	4.2	2.6	1.8
Volumes per capita	1	6.1	5.2	3.9	2.8	1.9	1.3	1.1
Cost/circulation (low to high)	3	\$1.28	\$1.52	\$2.06	\$2.79	\$3.97	\$5.54	\$6.90
Visits per capita	3	11.5	9.0	6.3	3.8	2.2	1.3	0.9
Collection turnover	2	4.6	3.9	3.0	2.2	1.5	1.0	0.8
Circulation/FTE staff hour	2	13.0	11.1	8.8	6.7	4.9	3.6	2.9
Circulation per capita	2	15.2	12.8	9.2	6.0	3.7	2.2	1.6
Reference per capita	2	13.0	11.1	8.8	6.7	4.9	3.6	2.9
FTE staff per 1,000 population	2	1.14	0.91	0.64	0.43	0.28	0.18	0.14
Circulation per hour	2	136.8	104.7	65.9	39.2	23.2	14.3	10.5
Visits per hour	1	94.2	75.4	47.7	25.5	13.4	7.1	5.3
Circulation per visit	1	3.8	2.9	2.1	1.5	1.2	0.9	0.7

\*Examples for libraries in 10,000–99,999 population category.

on standard measures can be important for strategic planning. The standing joke for many engineers in the 1980s was “having lost sight of our objectives, we redoubled all our efforts.” Knowing where a library stands by comparison can help it avoid wasteful redoubling of efforts and allow it to target time, energy, and resources where that effort is needed. For example, if the level of visits is high, but circulation per visit is low, perhaps more merchandising is needed in the library.

### **Population factors to consider**

Population numbers are always problematic, even leaving aside the continuous complaints that national census takers misrepresent the data for cities. The FSCS data system had no choice but to ask states to make some rather arbitrary assignments of population. The population served often extends beyond the population of the community that established it and provided its initial support. Left to their own devices, libraries could claim wider service territories that, when added together, would far exceed the actual total population. Hence, the FSCS had to insist on states making assignments of population that are arbitrary.

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Consolidated county and regional library systems are more prevalent in some states and regions than in others, skewing some population data. Take the author's home state and the 15 largest communities there: One community is assigned one additional person for every 100 city residents while another is assigned 75 persons for every 100 city residents. The former community, with fewer additional residents assigned, will fare better than the latter in any per-capita comparison. Nearly half of

the HAPLR Index is sensitive to population as reported in the FSCS data, so this fact should be considered when interpreting the results.

### **Weighting the factors**

Many measures could be extracted from the available data. The question is how should the factors be weighted? For instance, is the number of volumes per capita more important than periodicals per capita? Collection turnover is important, but is it more or less important than reference?

Members of the PubLib listserv on the Internet were queried on these issues. The responses, though limited in number considering the thousands of subscribers, were useful in deciding on the weights to assign to each factor. 

## HIGHEST HAPLR INDEX SCORES

## Over 100,000 Population Category

Rank	Library	City	State	Population	Index
1.	Naperville Public Libraries	Naperville	IL	100,422	886
2.	Johnson County Library	Shawnee Mission	KS	307,634	873
3.	Columbus Metropolitan Library	Columbus	OH	758,012	861
4.	Schaumburg Township District Library	Schaumburg	IL	124,773	849
5.	Hennepin County Library	Minnetonka	MN	689,744	845
6.	St. Joseph County Public Library	South Bend	IN	167,477	833
7.	Santa Clara County Library	San Jose	CA	380,030	827
8.	Saint Charles City-County Library District	Saint Peters	MO	255,066	823
9.	Loudoun County Public Library	Leesburg	VA	108,300	819
10.	Montgomery County Department of Public Libraries	Rockville	MD	813,100	815
11.	Central Rappahannock Regional Library	Fredericksburg	VA	181,100	808
12.	Prince William Public Library	Prince William	VA	276,900	805
13.	Dakota County Library	Eagan	MN	287,321	802
14.	Denver Public Library	Denver	CO	497,007	802
15.	Indianapolis–Marion County Public Library	Indianapolis	IN	770,684	799
16.	Chesapeake Public Library	Chesapeake	VA	177,900	794
17.	Boulder Public Library	Boulder	CO	114,712	794
18.	Toledo–Lucas County Public Library	Toledo	OH	452,691	788
19.	Beaverton City Library	Beaverton	OR	108,351	782
20.	Medina County District Library	Medina	OH	115,930	774

## 10,000–99,999 Population Category

Rank	Library	City	State	Population	Index
1.	Bexley Public Library	Bexley	OH	15,636	932
2.	Washington-Centerville Public Library	Centerville	OH	38,530	923
3.	Porter Public Library	Westlake	OH	18,224	896
4.	Hays Public Library	Hays	KS	17,363	895
5.	Morley Library	Painesville	OH	36,175	887
6.	Staunton Public Library	Staunton	VA	24,500	872
7.	Dover Public Library	Dover	OH	13,845	871
8.	Greenfield Public Library	Greenfield	IN	11,657	869
9.	Brown Deer Public Library	Brown Deer	WI	12,526	866
10.	Newport Beach Public Library	Newport Beach	CA	69,100	866
11.	Cary Memorial Library	Lexington	MA	29,108	865
12.	James Prendergast Library Association	Jamestown	NY	34,681	865
13.	Carmel Clay Public Library	Carmel	IN	43,007	865
14.	Lower Merion Library System	Ardmore	PA	58,003	859
15.	Acton Memorial Library	Acton	MA	15,983	856
16.	Darien Library	Darien	CT	19,171	856
17.	George F. Johnson Memorial Library	Endicott	NY	13,531	851
18.	Urbana Free Library	Urbana	IL	36,383	850
19.	Pittsford Community Library	Pittsford	NY	24,497	848
20.	Fergus Falls Public Library	Fergus Falls	MN	12,596	847

## HIGHEST HAPLR INDEX SCORES

## 2,000–9,999 Population Category

Rank	Library	City	State	Population	Index
1.	Hagerstown–Jefferson Township Public Library	Hagerstown	IN	3,331	940
2.	Twinsburg Public Library	Twinsburg	OH	9,021	932
3.	East Syracuse Free Library	East Syracuse	NY	3,343	913
4.	Wright Memorial Public Library	Oakwood	OH	9,150	901
5.	Delphos Public Library	Delphos	OH	9,695	899
6.	Williamson Free Public Library	Williamson	NY	6,540	881
7.	New Glarus Public Library	New Glarus	WI	2,731	877
8.	Berne Public Library	Berne	IN	3,559	871
9.	Mary Lou Johnson–Hardin County Public Library	Kenton	OH	8,216	870
10.	Falconer Public Library	Falconer	NY	2,653	869
11.	Kirtland Public Library	Kirtland	OH	7,815	867
12.	Vineyard Haven Public Library	Vineyard Haven	MA	3,171	866
13.	J.R. Clarke Public Library	Covington	OH	5,443	865
14.	Worch Memorial Public Library	Versailles	OH	5,784	863
15.	Dorcas Carey Public Library	Carey	OH	5,542	863
16.	Centerburg Public Library	Centerburg	OH	4,468	861
17.	Chewelah Public Library	Chewelah	WA	2,338	860
18.	Perham Area Public Library	Perham	MN	2,204	856
19.	G A R Memorial Library	West Newbury	MA	3,930	855
20.	Conrad Public Library	Conrad	IA	2,198	855

## Under 2,000 Population Category

Rank	Library	City	State	Population	Index
1.	Brownsville Public Library	Brownsville	WI	777	911
2.	Lynnville Public Library	Lynnville	IA	393	900
3.	Poland Public Library	Poland	NY	456	888
4.	Edith B. Ford Memorial Library	Ovid	NY	660	886
5.	Mill Pond Public Library	Kingston	WI	570	886
6.	Falls City Public Library	Falls City	TX	716	882
7.	Westbank Community Library	Austin	TX	1,726	875
8.	Easton Library	Greenwich	NY	230	865
9.	Takotna Community Library	Takotna	AK	46	859
10.	Newfield Public Library	Newfield	NY	692	855
11.	Plum Lake Public Library	Sayner	WI	576	856
12.	Jones Memorial Library	Orleans	VT	1,395	852
13.	Harpers Ferry Public Library	Harpers Ferry	IA	284	852
14.	Clayville Library Association	Clayville	NY	463	849
15.	Bancroft Public Library	Salem	NY	958	848
16.	West Winfield Library	West Winfield	NY	871	846
17.	Holland Patent Free Library	Holland Patent	NY	486	845
18.	Union Public Library	Union	IA	1,748	842
19.	Bemus Point Public Library	Bemus Point	NY	383	841
20.	Heuvelton Free Library	Heuvelton	NY	771	839

The weighting amounts, from three to one, are listed in Table 1. When calculating a composite score for each library, the factors were weighted as indicated. Cost per circulation, visits per capita, and revenue per capita were each given three times as much weight as the lowest-rated factors. Note that cost per circulation was rated from lowest to highest. All other measures are

scored high to low.

It might be said that for the HAPLR Index a 95th percentile score was a “grade” of A, while a 5th percentile rating was an F. The HAPLR Index score is a composite average that can be compared to the score of all other public libraries.

An example of how to read the data: Regarding expenditure per capita, the table tells us that the HAPLR

Index is weighted at 3 for this factor. An amount of \$57.78 or more would put a library above the 95th percentile, whereas an amount below \$4.21 would put it in the 5th percentile. A standard HAPLR Index report for an individual library would include a comparison of the specific library to four other libraries in the state or nation closest to its population size.

### ***Dewey or don't we?***

Melvil Dewey had a vision of a day when one could go to any town and ask the locals not *if* they had a library but rather *where* it might be found. That vision is largely true today. Most citizens have at least one library somewhere that they can call their own.

Just 50 years ago the authors of the National Plan for Library Services decried a world in which a quarter of the population, mostly rural, received little or no library service. In the intervening years much progress has been made in assuring legal access by most citizens to at least one library in a convenient location.

For the third millennium, the quest for library excellence will become far more important to public library planners than the 20th-century issues of location and legal access. It is hoped that the HAPLR Index will contribute to advancing the quest. ❖

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

> ***Money Magazine's Places Rated*** ([pathfinder.com/money/bestplaces/](http://pathfinder.com/money/bestplaces/)). The 1998 report on “Best Places to Live in America” uses “library books per capita” as one of its 89 indicators.

> **Federal-State Cooperative System** ([nces.ed.gov/surveys/public.html#contents](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/public.html#contents)). Nationwide public library statistics are collected and disseminated annually through the Federal-State Cooperative System for public library data.

> ***X-Inefficiency in the Public Sector: The Case of Libraries***, by Donald E. Vitaliano, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. *Public Finance Review*, November 1997, Vol. 25, Issue 6, p. 629+.