Benchmark FAQs

If you have other questions that are not addressed here, please email plabenchmark@ala.org. This list will be updated periodically based on user questions.

General

*How does benchmarking benefit my library and my community?*

Peer comparisons, or benchmarking, can help library leaders better understand their performance and can support everyday decision making, such as establishing baselines and identifying opportunities to improve service. For instance, how does your library’s staffing numbers compare with other libraries in your region that serve communities of a similar size?

Benchmarking is a [critical practice](#) for good government and nonprofit management. PLA is investing in tools and resources (like Benchmark, [Project Outcome](#), and the [Benchmark Briefings](#)) that help libraries understand and use data to plan, make informed decisions, tell the story of their impact, and advocate for themselves.

*How are my “peers” determined?*

Peer groups are clusters of individuals or organizations that share similar features. Understanding how your peers perform can be a powerful tool to support continuous improvement. PLA’s new Benchmark tool provides subscribers two options for comparing your library to other similar libraries.

First, PLA invested in research by the American Institute for Research (AIR) to create 63 statistically valid and meaningful peer groups using nationwide data. The groups were developed and tested using key library measures such as expenditures, staffing and visits; library characteristics such as legal basis and community size; and community demographics. Simply pick a data point and easily see your library with this peer group and libraries nationwide.

Second, you can hand-select your peers and run custom reports. In Benchmark, view the resource on Peer Groups for more detail.

Subscriptions

*How long does a subscription last?*

Subscriptions last for one year from the date of initial subscription.
**What are the benefits of subscribing?**

As a subscriber, the value and power of your library’s data for planning and advocacy is vastly multiplied with user-friendly tools and customization. Benchmark subscribers receive:

- access to a robust set of interactive data dashboards with visualizations and filters,
- a custom report builder that includes historic metrics so you can see change over time and track progress,
- and the ability to create custom peer groups that allow you to tailor comparisons on a case-by-case basis.

View the Resources (login required) for further information and a preview of the functionalities offered to subscribers.

**How do I subscribe?**

Subscriptions are available here. If you have a problem with your subscription, please email PLAsubscriptions@omeda.com or call 800-293-6178 (toll free) or 847-513-6272.

**Can Canadian or other public libraries outside the US subscribe to Benchmark?**

Yes, public libraries outside the US are welcome to subscribe at the standard public library rate ($400 USD). Contact us (plabenchmark@ala.org) to start by setting up a free account for your library. However, please note that for the most part you will be benchmarking against US public libraries as much of the data in the system is US-based (including the IMLS Public Libraries Survey and 2020 PLA Technology Survey). If your library had previously participated in PLDS surveys (as some Canadian public libraries did), you will have access to those responses as well as historic PLDS data.

**Surveys**

**Does my library have to subscribe to participate in surveys?**

No, survey participation is open to all public libraries. In fact, we hope that every public library in the country will contribute data to build the most complete understanding possible of U.S. public libraries, library workers, and library programs and services.

**Why should my library participate?**

First, your participation will help make the results powerful and actionable for your library and libraries across the country. Your input will enable PLA and ALA to provide nationally representative data to engage and inform elected officials, the media, and funders about public
library initiatives and needs. PLA will share aggregate results widely with the field, and plan relevant professional development opportunities.

Second, all responding public libraries will be able to view select summary data for their library and peer group through the Benchmark tool. All public libraries have free access to complete surveys, view past survey responses, and manage their contact information. In addition, the survey questions may inspire new ideas for your library.

Finally, survey participants are eligible for discounted Benchmark subscriptions.

**How will survey results be used?**

The survey results will be incorporated into the Benchmark data dashboards, so your library will be able to see how you compare to your peers and to other libraries in the United States. PLA will also use the survey results to advocate on behalf of public libraries at the national level and develop and refine professional development resources and training. We will publish a free report summarizing the aggregate results on the PLA website for each survey cycle.

**When will the survey results be available?**

For the 2021 Public Library Staff & Diversity Survey, we anticipate making the data available via Benchmark by summer 2022.

**How are the new surveys developed?**

PLA’s [Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee](https://www.ala.org) works with PLA staff and other stakeholders in the field to develop and test our surveys. Based on feedback from virtual townhall meetings with PLA members and partners calling for better peer comparison data and less redundancy in data collection, PLA will gather unique data as a complement to the IMLS Public Library Survey and state library surveys.

**Is there a schedule for the surveys?**

Yes, PLA will annually rotate three surveys each fall/winter. The planned topics focus on public library technology (2020 and 2023), staff roles and diversity (2021 and 2024), and public programs (2022 and 2025).

**Can Canadian public libraries participate in PLA topical surveys?**

This may be possible in future. Unfortunately, in 2021 we do not have the capacity to support survey participation beyond US public libraries. You are still welcome to contact us (plabenchmark@ala.org) to set up a free Benchmark account for your library and learn more
about the tool. Understanding the level of interest from libraries outside the US will help us gauge what we can provide in future.

Dashboards & Reports

*Can I see data from other individual libraries?*

The data in Benchmark includes some potentially sensitive information, including data on salaries and staff demographics. To protect this information, you will only see your own library’s individual data. Peer group and national comparisons aggregate data from multiple libraries, protecting privacy.

*Can I view and export data tables?*

Absolutely. Any of the charts can be viewed as a table. All tables can be exported as Excel or CSV files. More information about viewing tables and exporting data can be found in the Resources (login required).

*What other libraries are in my peer group?*

The resource on Peer Groups describes the methodology used to create the peer groups and the characteristics of each. Benchmark subscribers can see a list of the other libraries in their primary peer group in the Survey Metrics Dashboard. It is important to note that the libraries within a peer group are *not* exactly the same. However, they share similar characteristics that have been shown to impact the library’s outputs and outcomes.

*How does Benchmark differ from other tools?*

Benchmark enables data analysis and peer comparison using multiple datasets including the Public Library Data Service (PLDS), IMLS’s Public Libraries Survey (PLS), PLA’s annual topical surveys, and the American Community Survey. All US public libraries have been assigned to peer groups developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to facilitate benchmarking. Libraries also have the option of selecting their own peers.

IMLS’s Library Search & Compare tool enables data analysis and peer comparison using Public Libraries Survey data. The Urban Libraries Council’s Edge tool enables technology benchmarking and planning based on libraries’ responses to a self-assessment. Gale Analytics provides information about libraries’ populations based on integrated library system (ILS) data and Experian’s Mosaic® USA proprietary household segmentation system. Finally, many state library agencies offer either Bibliostat Connect or Counting Opinions’ LibPAS to public libraries for purposes of data analysis using Public Libraries Survey data.