



BNC RESEARCH

Borrow, Buy, Read: Library Use and Book Buying in Canada



**BOOKNET
CANADA**

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Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, Canadian libraries, like their counterparts in the US,¹ are not in competition with book retailers; in fact, libraries are known to help increase book sales. To shed light on this relationship, *Borrow, Buy, Read* explores how Canadian readers, book buyers, and library borrowers discover, obtain, and buy books. The study also looks at reading habits, format preferences, digital reading, and popular subjects to explore the intersection of and similarities between library use and book buying in Canada.

Data for this study has been gathered from BookNet Canada's consumer and leisure surveys, both of which are regularly fielded to English-speaking adults (18 and older) from across Canada who are representative of the Canadian population based on age, gender, and geographical location.

Consumer survey – This quarterly survey asks about book discovery, book purchasing, and library use. The 14,159 respondents surveyed throughout 2018 are referred to as “all respondents.” Within this group:

- 21% bought at least one book in the past year and are referred to as “buyers”;
- 28% checked out at least one book in the past year and are referred to as “borrowers”;
- 8% bought and borrowed at least one book and are referred to as “buyer-borrowers”; and,
- 59% neither bought nor borrowed a book in the past year.

There is a margin of error of 0.83% for “all respondents,” meaning that statistics for this group could fluctuate about 1% in either direction if this survey were fielded to the entire Canadian population. Specific groups and questions, may have a smaller sample size and a different margin of error.

Leisure survey – This annual survey asks 750 respondents about their free time and leisure activities. Readers are asked about their book-related habits, library use, and how they discover and acquire books.

- 78% of respondents read or listened to at least one book in the past 12 months and are referred to as “readers”;
- 56% of readers used a public library (in person or online) in the last year and are referred to as “library users”;
- 80% of library users checked out at least one book in the past year and are referred to as “borrowers.”

There is a margin of error of 3.58% for “readers,” meaning that statistics for this group could fluctuate about 4% in either direction if this survey were fielded to the entire Canadian population. Specific groups and questions may have a smaller sample size and a different margin of error.

We colour-coded our graphs to show borrowers (from either our consumer or leisure surveys) in purple and all other groups in grey.

¹ R., Kramer Bussel. 2019. “How Libraries Help Authors Boost Book Sales”. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelkramerbussel/2019/04/12/how-libraries-boost-book-sales> April 17, 2019.

The report also includes data from BookNet Canada's SalesData and LibraryData services.

BNC SalesData – This service tracks print sales for an estimated 85% of the Canadian English-language trade book market. SalesData is used to investigate market trends, identify sales opportunities, plan book orders, and more. We used 2018 data for this study.

BNC LibraryData – This is a forthcoming library circulation tool that examines loans, holds, renewals, books on order, and collection holdings data in Canadian libraries. LibraryData gives libraries the ability to compare information between their branches and other participating library systems. LibraryData will be integrated with SalesData once launched, allowing users to compare library circulation to the retail market. For this study, we used a limited data sample available from June 2018 to December 2018.

Library Use

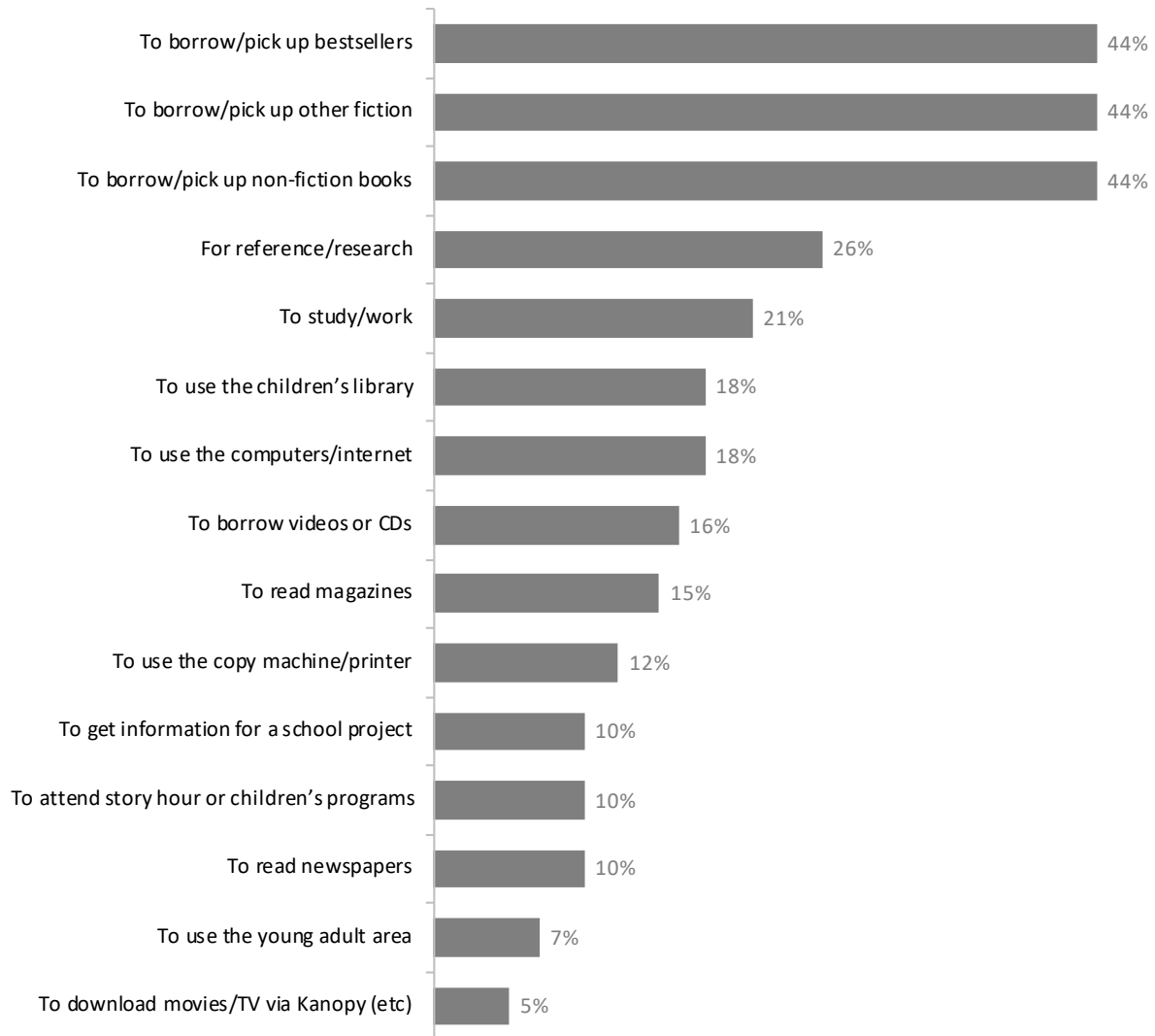
"I think libraries are really important to communities. I regret that I don't use my local one more."

"I love going to the library on a regular basis. I tend to get into the habit of borrowing several books at once and plowing through them at a pretty good rate of speed."

"Being able to have access online to local public libraries is essential as I travel a lot. Love the convenience."

We asked library users in the leisure survey to select the main reasons they use public libraries. We found that borrowing books occupied the top three positions: 44% of library users mainly use the library to borrow bestsellers; 44% to borrow other fiction; and 44% to borrow non-fiction. Studying, researching, and using reference materials came in next, with 26% for "reference/research" and 21% for "study/work". Library users are also keen on using the library for activities related to children: 18% use the children's library and 10% go to children's programs.

Main library uses



Question: What were your main reasons for using a public library? (Check all that apply.)

Profile of a Canadian Borrower

Let's take a closer look at the 28% of Canadians who reported in our consumer survey that they had checked out, or borrowed, at least one book in any format from a public library in the past year.

In that time period, these borrowers checked out a total of 13,373 books: 82% were print books, 13% were ebooks, and 5% were audiobooks.

Demographically, the average Canadian borrower is:

- female-identifying (58%);
- in her mid-fifties (on average);
- partnered (59%);
- living in central Canada (58%);
- not living with kids (51%);
- a university graduate (51%); and
- living in an urban area (47%).

"I prefer library use to buying books. If I need to buy, I prefer ebooks."

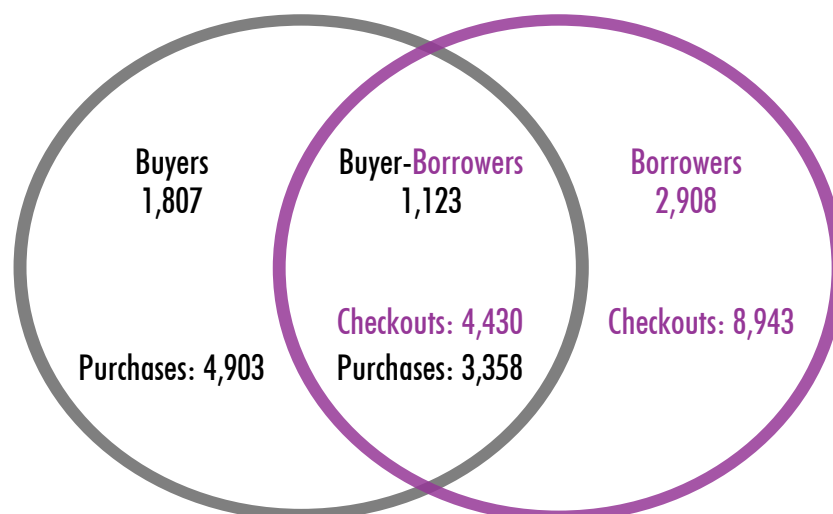
The Link Between Buying and Borrowing

Do library users buy books? Yes, borrowers are also buyers of books ("buyer-borrowers").

In the past year, out of all respondents:

- 4,031 (28%) checked out at least one library book, either online or in person (borrowers).
- 2,930 (21%) bought at least one book (buyers).
- 1,123 (8%) checked out and bought at least one book (buyer-borrowers).

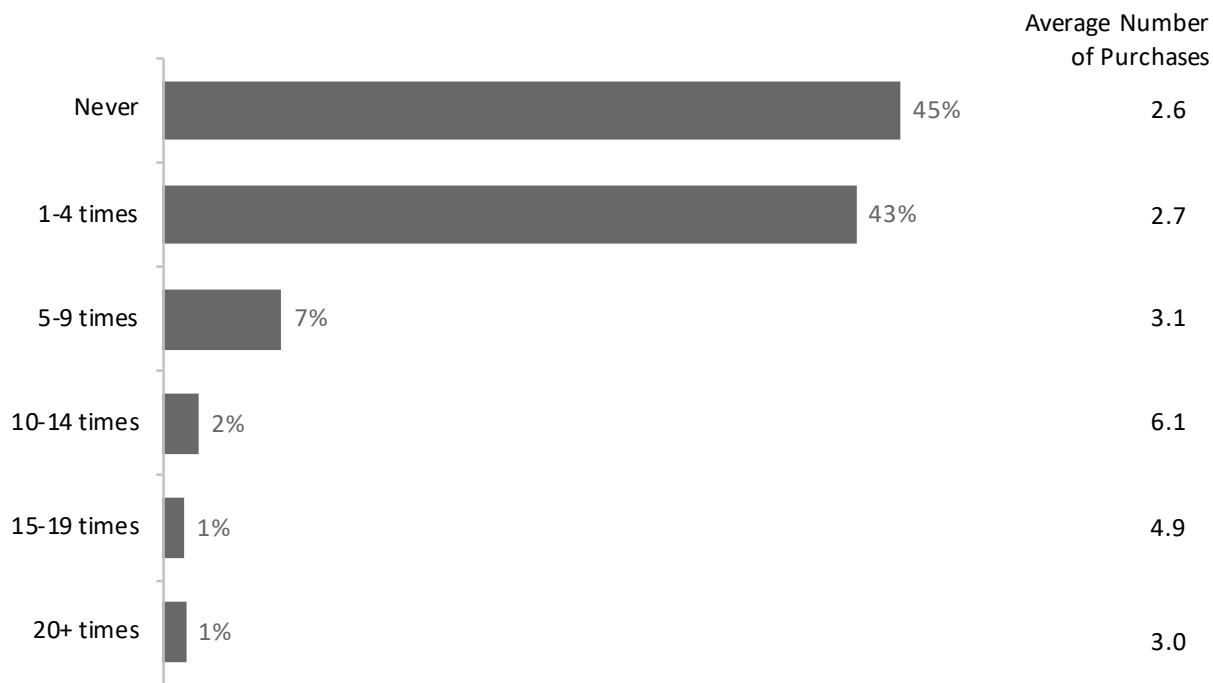
Overview of buyers and borrowers



Looking at all buyers and their purchases in the last month, we found that:

- Buyers bought an average of 2.8 books a month.
 - Buyer-borrowers bought an average of 3.0 books a month.
- Buyers who visited the library at least once in the last month bought an average of 3.0 books.
- Buyers who had not visited the library in the last month bought 2.6 books.

Buyers: Monthly library visits and book purchases



Question: How many times did you visit a public library (in person or online) in the last month?

See the [Appendix](#) for a detailed comparison of library visits between all respondents and borrowers.

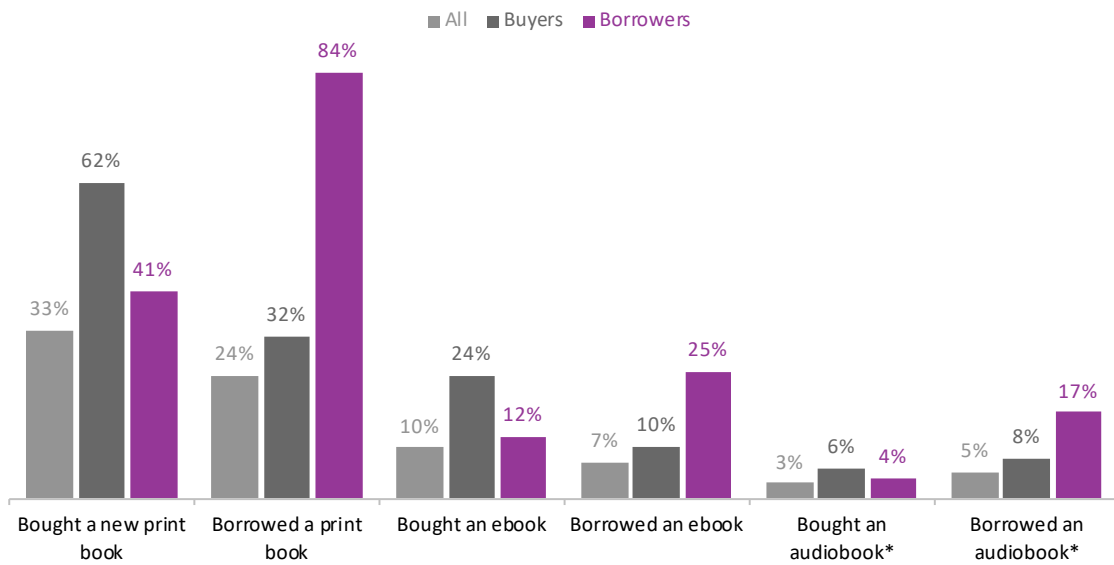
Book Formats Bought and Borrowed

We asked respondents to select the ways in which they generally obtained books in the prior year. Unsurprisingly, borrowers checked out books more than buyers did: 84% of borrowers borrowed a print book while 32% of buyers borrowed a print book. This difference is similar for ebooks and audiobooks.

Looking just at buyer-borrowers:

- 41% bought a print book;
- 12% bought an ebook; and,
- 4% bought an audiobook.

Buying and borrowing by book format



*Data from June to December 2018

Question: In which of the following ways have you obtained books in the last 12 months, either for yourself or for someone else?

Creating Awareness for Book Purchases

A vast number of books can be borrowed for free or read right in the library, which makes it a great place to browse books, in person or online, and get to know new authors and subjects. Here are some stats we'll dive deeper into:

- 28% of buyer-borrowers bought a book because they liked the subject or author.
- 23% of buyer-borrowers became aware of the books they bought because of previously reading other books by the same author.
- 3% of buyer-borrowers became aware of the book they decided to buy because the book was recommended by library staff.

The main ways buyer-borrowers become aware of the books they buy is by previously reading other books by the same author (23%); through browsing (22%); and from a recommendation or review (19%) — and of those recommendations/reviews, 3% were received from library staff, which is 0.7% more than for all buyers.

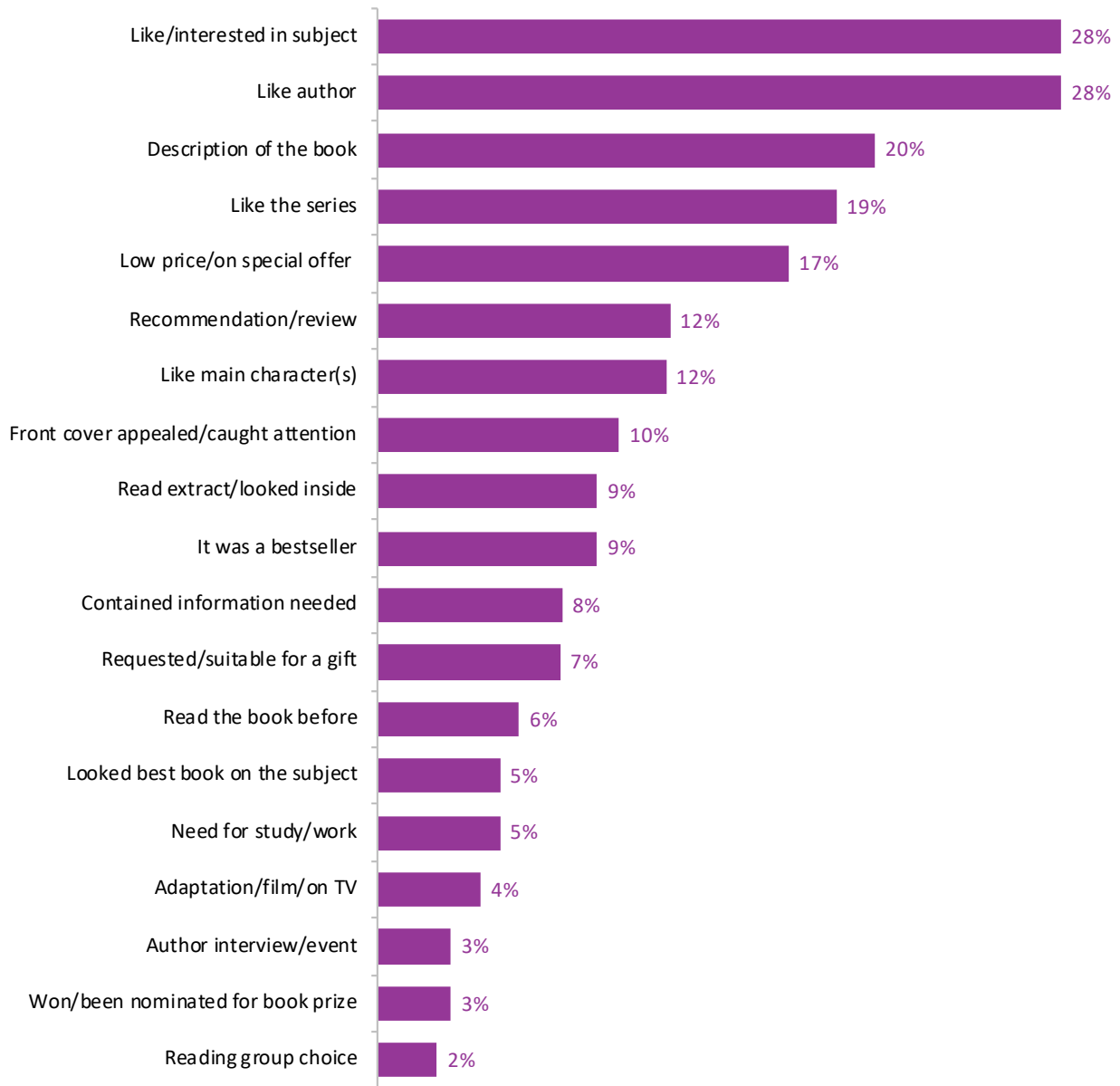
How buyer-borrowers become aware of the books they purchased



Question: How did you become aware of this book?

Buyer-borrowers tend to buy books because they like the subject (28%) or the author (28%). Other popular reasons borrowers buy books is because of the book description (20%), the series (19%), or a low price (17%), while 7% of their book purchases were gifts. Compared to purchases made by buyers, 26% were made because they liked the author, 15% because of the low price, and 4% because they had read the book before.

What influenced buyer-borrowers to buy



Question: What made you decide to buy this book?

"I am learning to rely on the library more to save money and just buy books that I feel will be really special."

"I mostly borrow fiction from the library and purchase nonfiction, to keep as reference."

"I only buy books I have read before. Otherwise, I read them online or borrow it from the library."

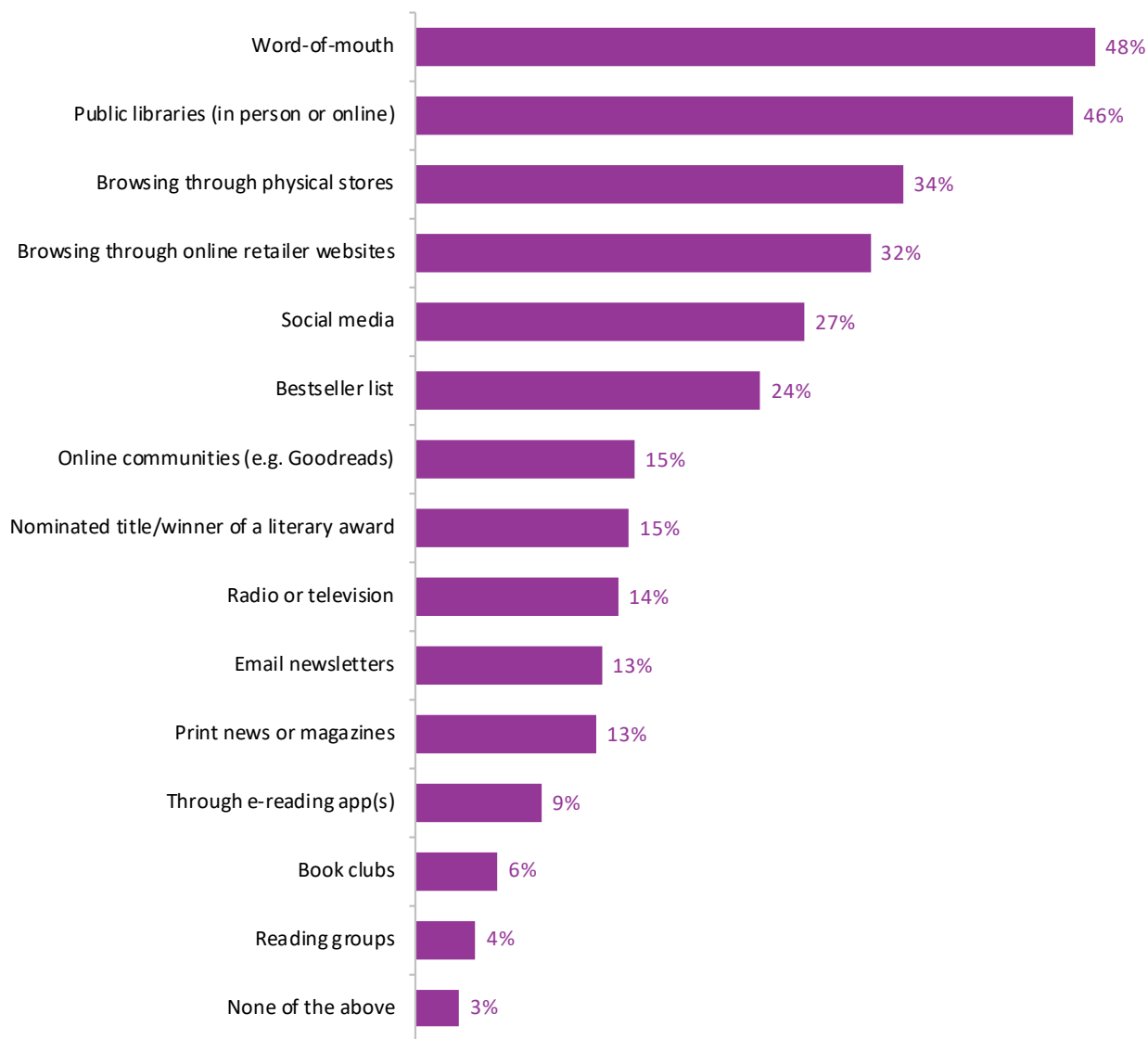
How Books are Discovered and Why They're Read

Results from our leisure survey also showed that libraries are a fantastic resource for discovering new books to read:

- The public library is the fourth most popular way readers generally discover books.
- For borrowers, public libraries are even more popular, coming in second most popular (46%).
- The most popular way borrowers discover books is through word-of-mouth (48%).

Other popular methods for borrowers are: browsing through physical stores (34%); browsing retailer websites (32%); social media (27%); and bestseller lists (24%).

How borrowers discover books



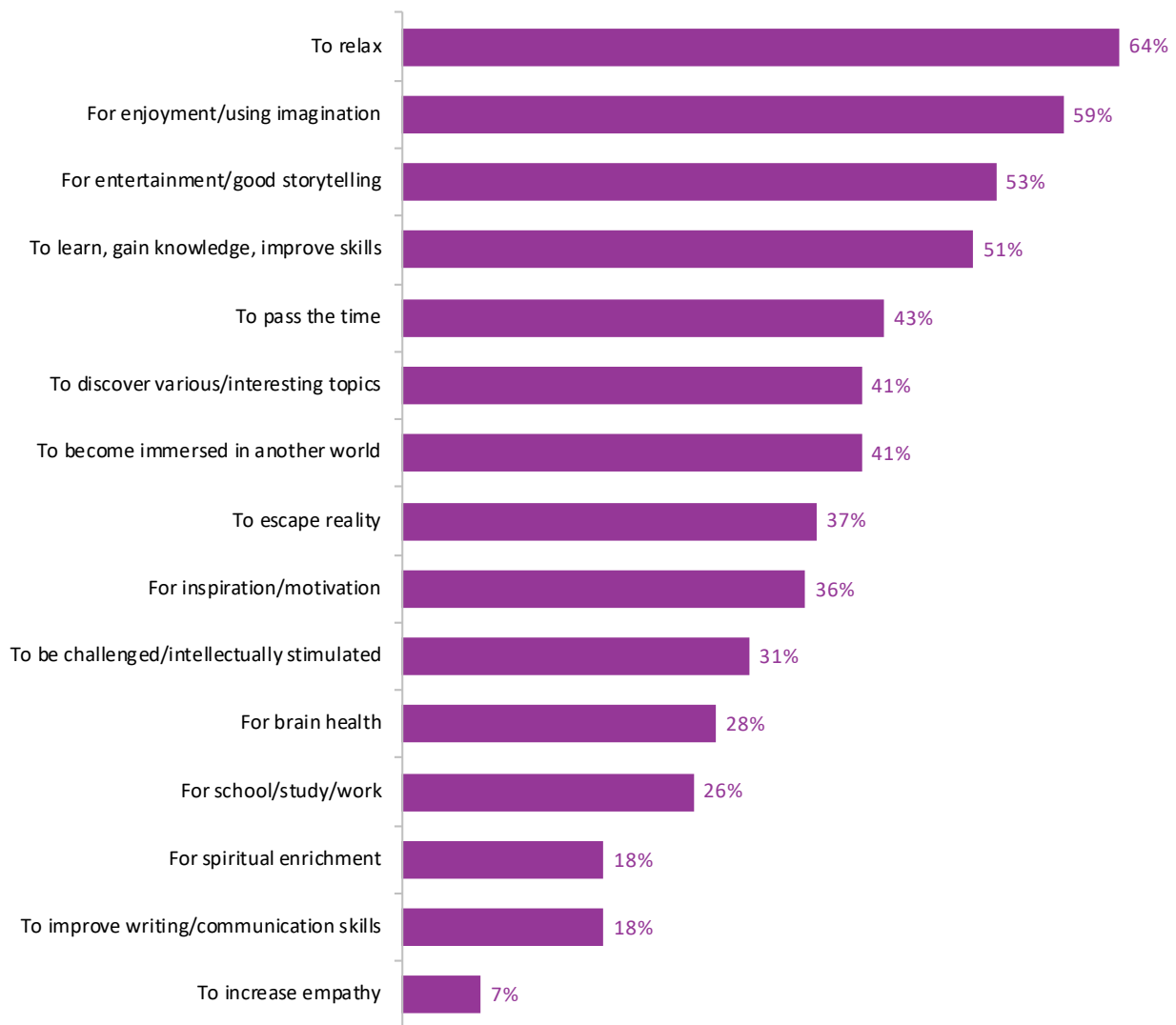
Question: How do you generally discover the books (of any format) that you purchase and/or read

Either finding materials in the library is really easy, or more than 75% of borrowers are determined or asking for help. When it comes to library borrowers finding the books they want, the majority of borrowers “often” or “always” find the books and other materials they are looking for (77%). About one in five borrowers “sometimes” find what they are looking for while only 1% “rarely” or “never” do.

Borrowers read for the same reasons all readers do, with the top reasons being to relax (64%) and for enjoyment or to use their imagination (59%) However, some reasons for reading were significantly more popular with borrowers than with all readers:

- More borrowers read to learn (51%) than all readers do (46%).
- Reading mainly to discover topics or to become immersed in another world was more popular with borrowers (41%) than with all readers (36%).
- Borrowers mainly read for inspiration/motivation (36%) more than all readers do (29%).
- More borrowers mainly read for work or study (26%), compared to 19% of all readers.

Main reasons borrowers read



Question: What were your main reasons for reading? (Check all that apply.)

Reading and Leisure Time

The majority of borrowers (60%) said that the amount they read in 2018 stayed the same as in 2017, while 28% felt that their reading time had increased. Only 12% reported that the amount of time they spent reading in 2018 decreased from 2017.

Is reading time staying the same because leisure time is staying the same? This may be the case. Most borrowers (53%) said that their amount of leisure time had not changed over the previous two years.

Almost half of all borrowers reported that they had enough free time, while 36% reported that they didn't.

Changes in borrowers' reading and leisure time

	Reading time	Leisure time
Increased	28%	22%
Stayed the same	60%	53%
Decreased	12%	25%

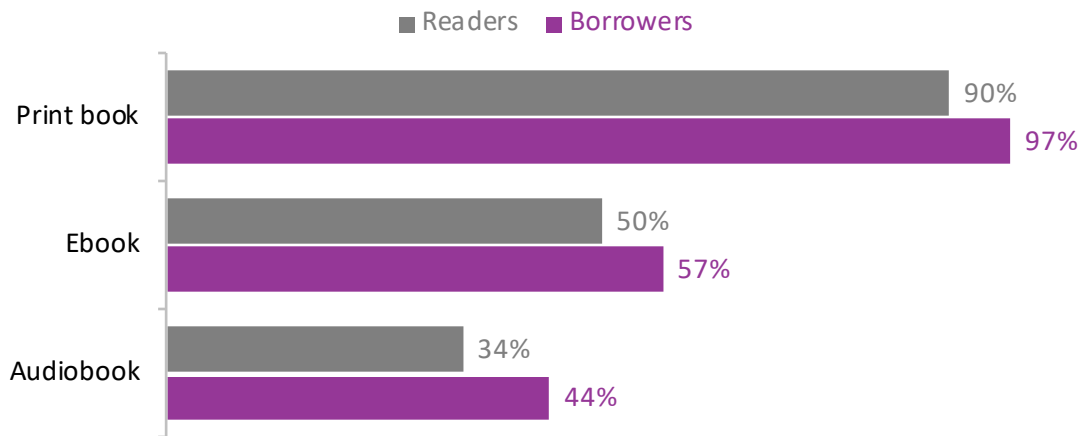
Questions: Would you say that the amount of reading/listening (either print, digital, or audio) that you did last year... How has your leisure time changed from two years ago to last year?

Reading Habits by Format

We asked respondents to our leisure survey if they had read a print book, an ebook, and/or an audiobook in the last year. As outlined previously, “readers” are those who reported that they had read a book in any of these formats and “borrowers” are a subset of that group.

Library borrowers consistently answered “yes” for each format at a higher percentage than did readers overall. So readers who borrow consume more of each book format.

Formats read by borrowers vs. all readers

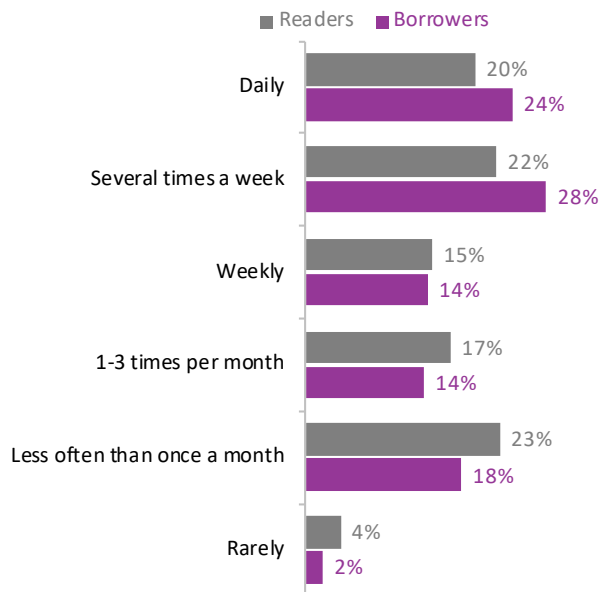


*Questions: Did you read a print book (not audio or electronic/digital book) in the last year?
Did you read an ebook in the last year? Did you listen to an audiobook in the last year?*

We asked readers how often they read print books and listen to audiobooks. When comparing the reading frequencies of all readers against those who are library borrowers, we see some minor differences.

Notably, the percentages of borrowers who read print books daily (24%) or several times a week (28%) are both higher than for all readers, who are more likely than borrowers to read less often than once a month or rarely.

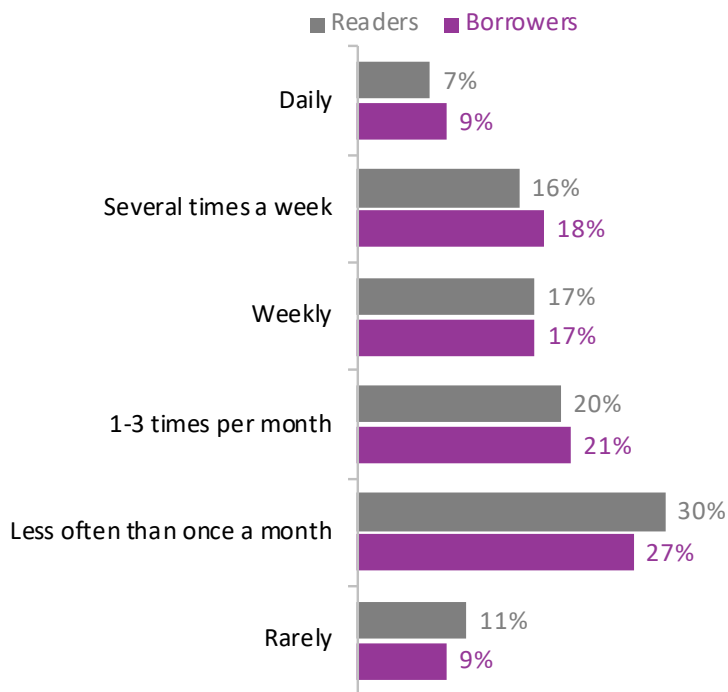
Frequency of reading print books



Question: How often did you read print books (not audio or electronic/digital books)?

Similar differences hold true for audiobooks, with 27% of borrowers listening daily or several times a week versus 23% of all readers, though “less often than once a month” was the most popular answer for both.

Frequency of listening to audiobooks



Question: How often did you listen to audiobooks?

Among those who borrow ebooks from the library, tablets are the most popular device for digital reading (32%). E-readers are a close second, with 29% of borrowers using them, followed by smartphones (22%) and computers (17%).

When it comes to apps for digital reading, 26% of borrowers use an internet browser and 20% read ebooks on OverDrive/Libby.

“At this point in my life I really enjoy audiobooks and wish there were a larger selection at libraries”

Popular Subjects

What subjects are borrowers reading? How does this compare to what subjects buyers are reading? What about backlist books and other trends?

Let's take a look at popular subjects among Canadian readers by comparing tracked sales from BNC SalesData and tracked loans from BNC LibraryData (from which we used a limited dataset of loans from June to December 2018).

Frontlist vs. backlist

Comparing backlist and frontlist titles in SalesData and LibraryData, we found that books tend to stay popular for a longer time in the library:

- 75% of loans were for backlist titles (i.e., books that had been published more than one year previous).
- 55-60% of sales were for frontlist titles, compared with 25% of loans.

"I really love series but find that I'm always waiting for them at the library."

Subject market share

According to [The Canadian Book Market 2018](#), which uses data from SalesData, the market share of top-level subjects in the Canadian retail market in 2018 was:

- 39% Juvenile & Young Adult;
- 34% Adult Non-Fiction;
- 26% Adult Fiction.

The public library market reported more than 8.5 million loans to LibraryData from June to December 2018:

- 48% Juvenile & Young Adult;
- 27% Adult Fiction; and,
- 25% Adult Non-Fiction.

Looking at the number of unit sales and loans from June to December 2018, we found that certain subjects are more popular in the library market than in retail, and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, Juvenile Fiction and Adult Fiction / Thrillers topped the lists for both SalesData and LibraryData.

Top 10 subjects in SalesData and LibraryData

SalesData	LibraryData
1. Juvenile Fiction / Humorous Stories	1. Juvenile Fiction / General
2. Fiction / Thrillers / Suspense	2. Fiction / Thrillers / Suspense
3. Fiction / Literary	3. Juvenile Fiction / Humorous Stories
4. Juvenile Fiction / Media Tie-In	4. Juvenile Fiction / Action & Adventure / General
5. Biography & Autobiography / Personal Memoirs	5. Juvenile Fiction / Comics & Graphic Novels / General
6. Fiction / Women	6. Fiction / Literary
7. Juvenile Fiction / General	7. Juvenile Fiction / Readers / Beginner
8. Juvenile Fiction / Fantasy & Magic	8. Fiction / General
9. Fiction / Historical / General	9. Juvenile Fiction / Media Tie-In
10. Juvenile Fiction / Comics & Graphic Novels / General	10. Fiction / Women

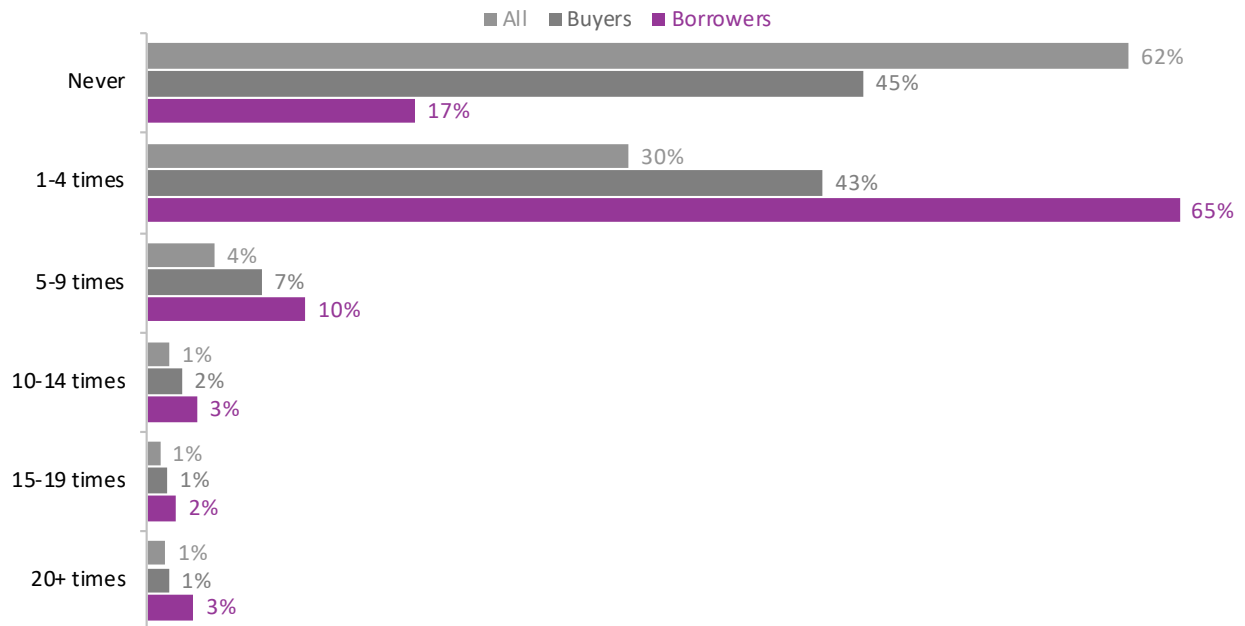
See the Appendix for the most popular subjects borrowed and bought between June and December 2018 within Adult Fiction, Adult Non-Fiction, Juvenile Fiction, Juvenile Non-Fiction, Young Adult Fiction, and Young Adult Non-Fiction.

Appendix

Using the Library

In our consumer survey, 39% of all respondents and 83% of borrowers (i.e., those who had borrowed at least one book in the last year) reported that they visited the library in person or online at least once in the last month. Note: There are respondents who had not visited a library in the last month (“Never”) but reported having borrowed a book in the last year.

Frequency of library visits in the last month



Question: How many times have you visited the public library (in person or online) in the last month?

[Go back to Buyers: Monthly library visits and book purchases](#)

Popular Subjects

The table below explores the 10 most popular subjects in terms of loans, purchases, or both loans and purchases between June and December 2018 within Adult Fiction, Adult Non-Fiction, Juvenile Fiction, Juvenile Non-Fiction, Young Adult Fiction, and Young Adult Non-Fiction.

Top subjects borrowed and bought

Adult Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thrillers / General • Romance / General • Mystery & Detective / Women Sleuths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fantasy / Epic • Thrillers / Psychological • Mystery & Detective / Police Procedural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thrillers / Suspense • Literary • General • Women • Mystery & Detective / General • Historical / General • Romance / Contemporary

Popularity

For the top subjects in both LibraryData and SalesData, General and Mystery & Detective / General were more popular to borrow, while Historical / General and Romance / Contemporary were more popular to buy.

Adult Non-Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education / General • Humor / Form / Comic Strips & Cartoons • Biography & Autobiography / General • Crafts & Hobbies / Needlework / Knitting • Comics & Graphic Novels / General 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sports & Recreation / Hockey • Cooking / Methods / Quick & Easy • Political Science / American Government / Executive Branch • Business & Economics / Leadership • Self-Help / Personal Growth / General 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comics & Graphic Novels / Manga / General • Comics & Graphic Novels / Superheroes • Biography & Autobiography / Personal Memoirs • Cooking / General • Self-Help / Motivational & Inspirational

Popularity

For the top subjects in both LibraryData and SalesData, Self-Help / Motivational & Inspirational, Biography & Autobiography / Personal Memoirs were more popular to buy than to borrow.

Juvenile Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Themes / Friendship • Readers / Chapter Books • Animals / General 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holidays & Celebrations / Christmas & Advent • Classics • Readers / Chapter Books 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General • Humorous Stories • Action & Adventure / General • Comics & Graphic Novels / General • Media Tie-In • Fantasy & Magic • Readers / Beginner

Juvenile Non-Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readers / Beginner • Readers / Intermediate • Animals / Dinosaurs & Prehistoric Creatures • Curiosities & Wonders • Animals / Marine Life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crafts & Hobbies • Study Aids / General • Concepts / Alphabet • Games & Activities / General • Holidays & Celebrations / Christmas & Advent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity Books • Science & Nature / General • Animals / General • Concepts / General • General

Popularity

For the top subjects in both LibraryData and SalesData, General and Animals / General were more popular to borrow, while Activity Books and Science & Nature / General were more popular to buy.

YA Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science Fiction / General • Thrillers & Suspense • Mysteries & Detective Stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Themes / Dating & Sex • People & Places / United States / African American • Media Tie-In 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fantasy / General • Fantasy / Dark Fantasy • Fantasy / Epic • Dystopian • Romance / Contemporary • Action & Adventure / Survival Stories • Romance / General

Popularity

For the top subjects in both LibraryData and SalesData, Romance / Contemporary and Romance / General were more popular to borrow. Young Adult Fiction / Fantasy / General, Fantasy / Dark Fantasy, and Action & Adventure / General were more popular to buy.

YA Non-Fiction		
LibraryData	SalesData	Both LibraryData and SalesData
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crafts & Hobbies • Comics & Graphic Novels / Biography • Cooking & Food • History / Holocaust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biography & Autobiography / Sports & Recreation • Computers / General • Media Tie-In • Social Topics / Drugs, Alcohol, Substance Abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People & Places / Aboriginal & Indigenous • Computers / Entertainment & Games • Social Topics / Depression & Mental Illness • Biography & Autobiography / Women • Girls & Women • LGBT

Popularity

For the top subjects in both LibraryData and SalesData, Computers / Entertainment & Games, Biography & Autobiography / Women, Girls & Women, and LGBT were more popular to borrow. People & Places / Aboriginal & Indigenous was more popular to buy.

Looking for More Research?

Has this report piqued your interest in finding more book stats? BookNet Canada has extensive research available [on our website](#), available for free and for purchase. Multi-user editions are available to be purchased for library use as well.

About BookNet Canada

BookNet Canada is a non-profit organization that develops technology, standards, and education to serve the Canadian book industry. Founded in 2002 to address systemic challenges in the industry, BookNet Canada supports publishing companies, booksellers, wholesalers, distributors, sales agents, and libraries across the country.

BookNet Canada's services and research help companies promote and sell books, streamline workflows, and analyze and adapt to a rapidly changing market. BookNet Canada sets technology standards and educates organizations about how to apply them, performs market research, and tracks 85% of all Canadian English-language print trade book sales through BNC SalesData.

Industry-led and partially funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage, BookNet Canada has become, as The Globe and Mail puts it, "the book industry's supply-chain nerve centre."

If you have any questions, please contact the research team at research@booknetcanada.ca.