

Tucson State of Reading

2026 BASELINE EDITION

A countywide measurement of voluntary
reading culture in Pima County, Arizona

39.70

TUCSON READING HEALTH INDEX · EMERGING



Produced by The Place & Page
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Publication information

The Tucson State of Reading™ is an annual measurement of voluntary reading culture in Pima County, Arizona, and this first edition has found no prior countywide measurement of it. It is produced by The Place & Page.

The Tucson metropolitan area, as the federal government defines it, is Pima County — a single-county metropolitan statistical area. The two names describe the same place. This report says Tucson when it means the community and Pima County when it means the measured population, because Pima County adults are what every percentage here describes. Unless a figure is labeled otherwise, every percentage in this report is a weighted estimate describing Pima County adults age 18 and older.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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INDEPENDENCE AND DISCLOSURE

The Place & Page is a forthcoming independent bookstore in Tucson and therefore shares an interest in the literary ecosystem this report describes. Three safeguards apply.

The analysis is restricted to the civic research questions described in the methods section; questions collected for other purposes are excluded from this dataset and played no part in the findings or the editing. The index architecture, component weights, and survey routing were fixed before the survey was fielded. The decisions that could only follow fielding — weighting, quality control, and coding — were documented and frozen before any finding was written, and the date of each is

recorded in the methodology's decision log. And the report stops short of recommending solutions, including any that would favor a bookstore. What follows is a measurement and a set of questions.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

- Figures are weighted estimates for Pima County adults unless a different base is stated — adjusted so that the sample's age, education, and Hispanic-origin profile matches the county's. Where a question was asked only of some respondents, the base appears with the number. Section 13 explains how that adjustment works and what it can and cannot correct for.
- The survey's definition of voluntary reading is deliberately broad. It includes books, articles, audiobooks, scripture, and anything else a person reads or listens to beyond what work or school requires.
- The report's headline number is the Tucson Reading Health Index™, a 0–100 composite introduced in Section 3. Its score bands are interpretive civic ranges chosen by this project; they are not clinical thresholds and they are not normed against other cities, because at the time of publication this report has found no comparable city measurement.
- Outside data appears only as context. No external figure feeds the index, and definitions differ between sources; those differences are labeled where they matter.
- This is a first wave. Nothing measured by this survey can show improvement or decline, because there is nothing yet to compare it against. Where outside data in this report does show change over time, the change is in that source, not in this survey.
- The scoring rubrics, index formula, and weighting targets appear in Appendix A. The fielded instrument architecture, quality-control protocol, weighting mechanics, and dated decision record are maintained in the *Tucson State of Reading Methodology Documentation, Wave 1*, published alongside this report at theplaceandpage.com/tsor/2026. A separate *Findings and Reporting Guide*, published with them, sets out the correct framings for these figures and the claims this study does not support.

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Executive Summary

Tucson has the attributes of a reading city: a nationally visible book festival, a major research university, a countywide library system, independent and chain bookstores, and literacy organizations working across the county. None of that tells anyone what the county's reading culture actually looks like, or how much Tucson reads. Attributes are not evidence of reading, and a city can have all of them while its residents read less every year without anyone noticing. The Tucson State of Reading replaces assumption with measurement, and repeats it every year so the community can tell a one-year swing from a sustained change.

39.70 out of 100

TUCSON READING HEALTH INDEX • 2026 • EMERGING

The number is not a grade. It is the starting position every future wave returns to.

Wave 1 finds a county where reading culture is deeper in private and much thinner in public expression. Pima County adults read by choice at high rates, visit libraries and bookstores in large numbers, and describe reading as a real part of their lives. What happens far less often is everything that turns reading into something shared: the conversation, the club, the author reading, the festival, the program. That distinction matters because shared reading is the part of a reading culture a community can see and act on: what happens in a living room is a household matter, and what happens in a library meeting room is a civic one. Section 12 sets out the wider case for why reading is worth measuring at all.

The score is not a verdict on Tucson. It is a starting position, recorded carefully enough that a future wave can measure movement against it, and the components beneath it carry more information than the composite does.

Five things to know

84.2% Voluntary reading is widespread.

84.2% of adults say at least some of what they read or listen to is by choice. Another 9.2% read only what is required of them, and 6.7% say they do not read or listen at all. This is a broad measure that includes articles, audiobooks, and scripture — it should not be read as “84% read books.”

63.2% Institutional contact (libraries and bookstores) is common.

Nearly two-thirds of readers visited a bookstore or a library in the past year. The public library, visited in person, is the single most-used source of reading material in the county.

19.3% Organized participation is not.

Fewer than one in five readers took part in any organized literary activity — an author event, a book festival, a community reading program, or a book club. Among readers by choice, only about one in ten discusses or recommends a book as often as monthly.

47.7% Time is the barrier people name.

Time outranks cost (16.4%), lack of interest (7.3%), and lack of nearby access (3.4%). At the same time, 28.4% say nothing is stopping them: they already read as much as they want to.

18 pts Education is the sharpest divide.

The index runs from 30.82 among adults with a high-school education or less to 48.86 among adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. This is a descriptive gap, not proof that education alone causes it.

A reading city that hasn't decided whether it is one

Asked whether Tucson is a city that values reading, 46.7% of adults agreed and 17.3% disagreed. The most interesting group is neither: 36.0% landed in the middle. In a place with a nationally visible book festival, a major research university, a countywide library system and a durable independent bookstore scene, more than a third of adults have not formed a view. Reading is present in Tucson. It is not yet part of how Tucson describes itself.

Residents were then asked, in their own words, what would make Tucson a

stronger reading city. Their answers do not point at a single missing ingredient. Among responses containing a substantive suggestion, the leading themes were libraries (22.0%), events (19.1%), motivation and reading culture (13.9%), education and literacy (13.6%), bookstores (10.3%), and free or affordable books (9.5%). Read together, residents describe an ecosystem rather than a gap.

THE WAVE 1 FINDING, IN ONE SENTENCE

Pima County does not have a shortage of readers. It has a reading life that happens mostly at home, and only occasionally becomes something shared with anyone else.

What this baseline can and cannot support

This is a weighted online panel survey of 511 Pima County adults, fielded between July 30 and August 14, 2026. It is not a probability sample of the county, so it carries no formal margin of error; the methods section explains what that means and what it does not. It is weighted to Census benchmarks for age, education, and Hispanic origin, and the adjustment barely moved the result: the index is 39.69 unweighted and 39.70 weighted. That does not establish that the sample was representative, since differences can offset one another, but it does mean the headline is not an artifact of the weighting.

What the report can support is a documented starting point, a set of measurements that can be repeated identically, and a reasonably specific description of where Tucson's reading culture is thick and where it thins out.

Two things it cannot support, for different reasons. It cannot establish what *causes* any of these patterns; a single cross-sectional survey can show that things occur together, not that one produces the other. And it cannot say whether Pima County is doing better or worse than anywhere else, because this report has found no comparable community measurement to compare against — a limitation that repetition will not fix, since repeating a measurement produces a trend, not a peer group. What repetition will produce, beginning with Wave 2, is a direction of travel.

What This Report Measures

The Tucson State of Reading asks a narrow question on purpose: what is Pima County's relationship with the reading it chooses to do?

Not reading assigned by a job or a classroom, but reading picked up because someone wanted to. That is a cultural question rather than an educational one, and it has no good existing answer at the county level.

This is not a literacy study

Whether adults in Pima County can read, and how well, is a question other instruments already answer with more rigor than a single county survey could: the federal Skills Map models literacy proficiency at the county level,¹ and the Census Bureau tracks educational attainment.² This report does not duplicate that work. The distinction matters for interpretation — literacy measures capability, and this report measures use: whether people who can read choose to, how often, and whether that reading is ever shared.

Why a new instrument was needed

National surveys reach this territory but stop short of it. The National Endowment for the Arts reports reading and cultural participation nationally and, with limited statistical power, by state; its only sub-state reading estimates cover eleven large metropolitan areas, and Pima County is not among them;³ Pew Research Center measures book-reading habits precisely, but nationally.⁴ The indices that rank cities on reading are built from secondary data — counts of bookstores, library branches, newspaper circulation — which describe a city's shelf space rather than its residents' reading lives.

None of them can tell a county how many of its own residents think of themselves as readers, or what is actually stopping them from reading more — the things a library planning its hours or a festival planning its program would need to know, and cannot infer from a national estimate. Answering them requires asking residents directly, which is what this survey does.

Everyone counts, including people who don't read

The survey sorts every respondent into one of three groups, based on the kind of reading they do rather than the amount:

- **Readers by choice.** At least some of what they read or listen to is by choice.
- **Required-only readers.** They read, but only because work or school requires it.
- **Non-readers.** They do not read or listen, in any format, for any reason.

All three groups stay in the sample and all three count toward the headline index. This was a deliberate choice and it costs the project several points on its own score: a survey of people who already read would produce a more flattering number and a less useful one. Required-only readers and non-readers are not noise. They are adults who are not currently reading by choice, and why that is — capability, circumstance, or preference — is something this instrument can see only partly. Non-readers were asked about barriers, sources, and civic perception, but not the reading batteries, and at 32 respondents they are too few to report on their own. Understanding them is at least as civically interesting as the score.

Reporting thresholds: subgroups of 100 or more unweighted respondents are eligible for routine descriptive reporting; 50 to 99 are reported as directional only; below 50 are generally suppressed as standalone annual estimates. These thresholds are set out in the project's methodology and apply throughout this report.

Five components

The Tucson Reading Health Index (TRHI™) combines five measurements, each capturing a different layer of what a reading culture looks like in practice. The layers are concentric rather than sequential, widening from the individual outward: the act of reading and the identity built around it; then reading shared with one other person; then the book culture that surrounds it; then the institutions and occasions that make reading visible as a community practice. The order reflects that widening circle, not the strength of each signal — the weights carry that.

COMPONENT	WEIGHT	WHAT IT CAPTURES
Reading Frequency	35%	Time spent on voluntary reading or listening
Reader Identity / Relationship	25%	How centrally a person places reading in their own life
Social Reading	15%	Giving recommendations to others and discussing books
Ambient Cultural Engagement	10%	Book culture beyond reading — literary coverage, podcasts, recommendation lists, book-related social accounts
Local Ecosystem Participation	15%	Bookstore and library visits, and organized local literary participation

Table 1. The five components and their weights. Full scoring rubrics appear in Appendix A.

What the index is not

Three limits are worth stating plainly. The weights are civic design judgments. They were chosen because reading frequency is the most load-bearing evidence of a reading culture and ambient engagement is the least, not because a statistical model estimated them; another project could defend a different set.

The components are not psychometrically equated. They use different question structures and scoring rules, so point gaps between them are not equivalent; comparisons here are made in terms of underlying behavior instead.

The composite is a summary, not a diagnosis. It exists so a community has one number to track; everything useful is in the components and the behavior beneath.

One further boundary matters, because an academic reviewer might ask about it first. The index is built to measure reading-culture health consistently — not to predict wages, health, or educational attainment. Those are separate questions with a separate literature, summarized in Section 12: a community could score well here and badly on outcomes, or the reverse, and the index would still be working.

Built to be repeated

The scored core of this report — its wording, scoring rules, and weights — is held stable for longitudinal comparability; the publication format may evolve. Each edition measures the same things in the same order, so a reader in 2031 can lay six editions side by side. New questions can be added as unscored diagnostics; what stays fixed is the scored core, its wording and its weights. What changes year to year is which findings deserve emphasis, not what the index measures.

The 2026 Baseline

Pima County's Tucson Reading Health Index for 2026 is 39.70 out of 100.



Figure 1. The Tucson Reading Health Index band scale. The five interpretive bands, and where the 2026 score falls. Band boundaries are set out in Appendix A.

On this project's five-band scale, that falls in **Emerging**. The bands exist to make the number legible to a non-technical reader. Their boundaries are interpretive civic ranges rather than validated thresholds — subjective, but fixed in writing before any result existed and not subject to revision, which is what stops a band from being drawn around a number after the fact. At 39.70 the county sits near the middle of its band rather than close to an edge, so no boundary choice is load-bearing for this edition. The numeric score, not the band, is what the project will track over time.

A word about the name. “Reading health” is civic shorthand for the strength and breadth of a community's voluntary reading culture. It is not a clinical condition, it is not diagnosed, and it is not normed against a national standard, because this report has found none. The term has prior academic use: Gerčar and van der Weel proposed “reading health” and a “Reading Health Index” as a societal measurement concept in 2023. The Tucson Reading Health Index was developed independently and is not an implementation of that proposal.⁵

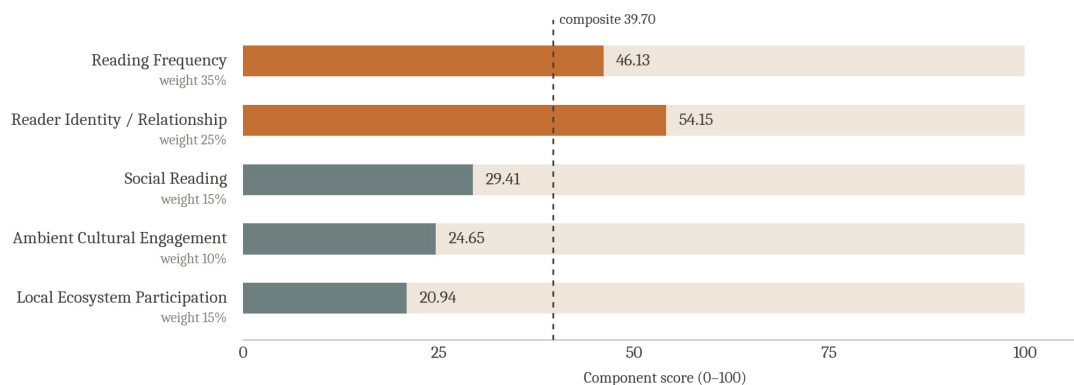


Figure 2. The five components of the 2026 index. Bars show each component's score on a common 0–100 scale; the dashed line marks the weighted composite. Component scores are weighted means across all 511 retained respondents. Because the components use different question structures and scoring rubrics, the distances between them are not psychometrically equivalent and should not be read as precise comparisons.

COMPONENT	WEIGHT	2026 SCORE
Reading Frequency	35%	46.13
Reader Identity / Relationship	25%	54.15
Social Reading	15%	29.41
Ambient Cultural Engagement	10%	24.65
Local Ecosystem Participation	15%	20.94
Population index	100%	39.70

Table 2. Component scores, 2026. Weighted composite across all retained adults, N=511. Band: Emerging (20–44).

What the pattern shows

Reader Identity is the strongest component and Local Ecosystem Participation the weakest. Reading is more present in how people describe themselves than in where that identity shows up outside the home. The tempting next step is to treat the distance between the Identity score of 54.15 and the Ecosystem Participation score of 20.94 as a measure of how large that difference is.

The identity component comes from a four-point self-description item that itself contains behavioral language, and the ecosystem component from a count of five past-year activities. They are not on the same measurement footing, and subtracting one from the other produces a number that looks meaningful and is

not. The instrument does not support a reading that precise.

The pattern is real; the arithmetic is the wrong way to express it. Stated in behavior rather than points, and starting from identity rather than the gateway: 55.4% of adults describe reading as a regular or prioritized part of their life, 63.2% of readers visited a bookstore or library in the past year, 19.3% took part in any organized literary activity, and among readers by choice about one in ten talks about books as often as monthly. That sequence is the finding, and Section 6 examines it directly.

The readers by choice diagnostic

Among readers by choice alone, the TRHI is **45.44**. This is reported as a secondary diagnostic, not a co-headline, because it answers a different question: once a person is already a voluntary reader, how deep and how socially connected is that reading life?

The difference between the countywide 39.70 and a readers by choice 45.44 separates two civic problems easily confused. One is bringing new people into reading; the other is deepening the reading lives of people already doing it. They call for different responses, and a single number hides which a community faces.

A note on non-readers

Respondents who said they do not read or listen at all were not asked the participation battery in Wave 1, so their Ambient and Ecosystem scores are set to zero as a scoring convention. That zero is an assumption, not an observation. Some of those adults may well walk into a library or a bookstore. Section 11 takes up how that zero should be replaced without breaking the series.

How future movement will be described

Before seeing any second wave, this project has committed to a simple interpretive rule, so that the standard cannot be adjusted after the fact to suit a result. A change of under 3 points on the headline index will be described as broadly stable unless several components move together. A change of 3 to 5 points will be treated as notable and will trigger a component-level review. A change above 5 points will be described as substantial, again subject to review of the underlying evidence. These are editorial guardrails, not statistical significance tests.

Who Reads, and How Much

This section describes the readers themselves — who reads, how much, in what format, for what reason, and how people characterize their own relationship with reading. Sections 5 and 6 turn to the institutions.

How many adults read by choice

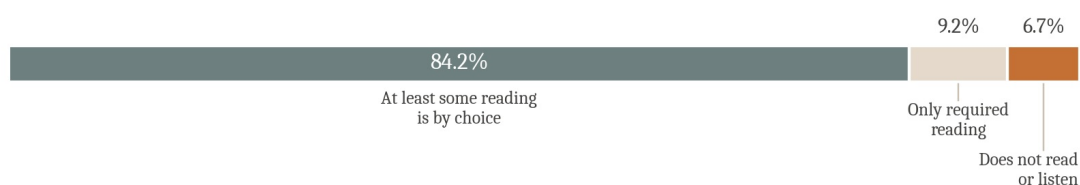


Figure 3. How adults divide by the kind of reading they do. All adults, N=511; weighted shares. These three groups are the reader paths used throughout the report.

The 84.2% figure is the broadest number in this report and the easiest to misuse. It should not be translated into “84% of Tucsonans read books.” The gateway question deliberately includes articles, audiobooks, scripture, and any other voluntary reading. It measures whether voluntary reading of any kind is present in a person's life, and by that standard it is present in most lives.

How much readers by choice read

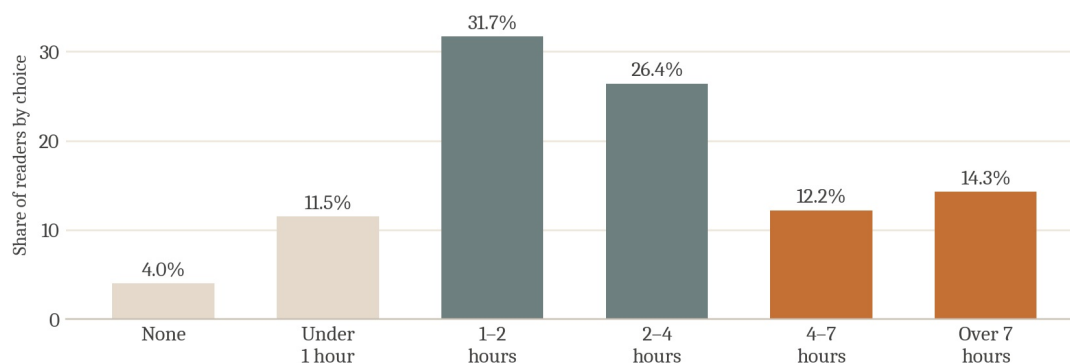


Figure 4. Weekly time spent on reading by choice. Readers by choice only (unweighted n=431); weighted shares. Just over half — 52.8% — report at least two hours a week, and 26.4% report four hours or more. Components are rounded independently and may not sum exactly to these totals.

The largest single group reads one to two hours a week. Add the two-to-four-hour group and well over half of Pima County's readers by choice land in a solid but modest middle: reading regularly, not extensively.

The tails are worth noting in both directions. At one end, 14.3% report more than seven hours a week, which is a substantial practice by any standard. At the other, 15.5% of people who identified themselves as readers by choice report less than an hour a week or none at all — a reminder that the gateway question measures orientation toward reading, not volume.

Format

Print is the largest single format and nowhere near a majority. Among everyone who reads at all, 38.9% say physical books are what they use most often, followed by online articles or longform writing at 16.2%, multiple formats used equally at 15.5%, e-readers and tablets at 12.4%, audiobooks at 10.9%, and magazines or newspapers at 6.2%.

Print leads, but it does not dominate. Three in five readers name something other than a physical book as the format they use most often, so reading culture in Pima County is not print-only.

The audiobook figure illustrates how much question wording drives a number.

Among everyone who reads here, 10.9% name audiobooks as the format they use most often. Pew finds that 26% of American adults listened to an audiobook in the past twelve months, and the Audio Publishers Association finds that 58% have ever listened to one.^{4,6} Those three figures are not in conflict. They ask about primary format, past-year use, and lifetime use, and the distance between them is the wording rather than the population.

Why people read

Pleasure dominates. Asked to select all that apply, 79.0% of everyone who reads at all cite pleasure or personal interest, 50.1% learning or personal growth, 39.1% staying informed, and 25.0% faith or devotional reading. Required work or school reading is selected by 15.2%, and 11.9% cite reading with or for children and family. For comparison on the devotional figure, Pew's 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study finds that 20% of Arizona adults read scripture outside religious services at least weekly, against 22% nationally.⁷

Among respondents who selected more than one purpose and were then asked to name the single main one, 51.9% chose pleasure or personal interest. Even under the survey's deliberately broad definition of reading, voluntary motivation is not a marginal feature of Pima County's reading life. It is the center of it.

Identity and belonging

The survey asks two related questions here and keeps them separate on purpose. The first asks respondents to describe their own relationship with reading; this is the scored Identity component. The second asks whether they agree that “people like me are readers,” which measures something different — whether reading feels congruent with a person's own reference group.

SELF-DESCRIBED RELATIONSHIP WITH READING

WEIGHTED SHARE

Reading is something I prioritize and do frequently	17.3%
Reading is a regular part of my life	38.1%
I read occasionally when something catches my interest	34.3%
Reading isn't part of my life right now	10.3%

Table 3. Self-described relationship with reading. All adults, N=511. The top two categories combine to 55.4%.

On the belonging question, 52.7% agree that people like them are readers, 32.5% are neutral, and 14.8% disagree. The two measures are close in size but should not be treated as duplicates. A person can read constantly while feeling that nobody in their circle does, or read rarely while feeling firmly that reading is what people like them do.

What reading gives people

Readers by choice were asked what reading most often gives them, choosing up to three answers.

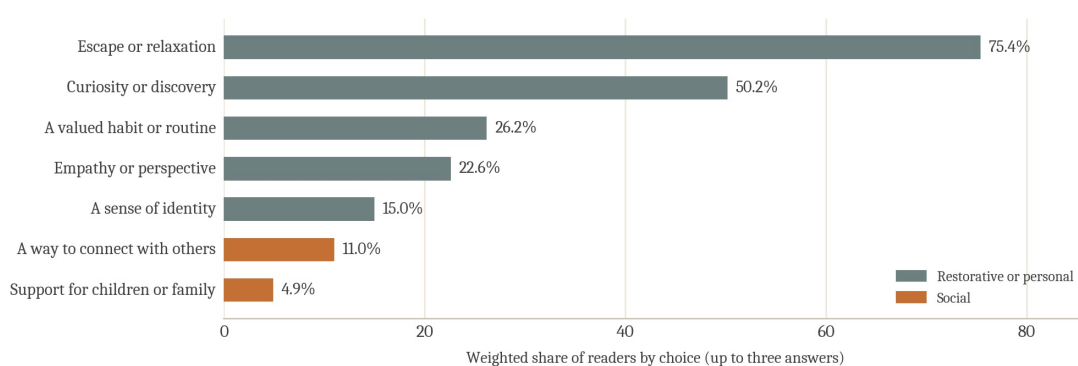


Figure 5. What reading gives people. Readers by choice; weighted shares; up to three answers allowed, so shares do not sum to 100%.

These are reported experiences, not demonstrated effects. What reading is *for* in most people's lives here is overwhelmingly escape or relaxation, and curiosity or discovery. The two most social answers — connection and family — sit at the bottom, the first appearance of a pattern that runs through this report.

Access and Friction

Access to reading is not one thing. It includes what is available, where people get it, how far they travel, what it costs, what language it is in, and whether a person has the time and health to use it. Wave 1 finds a broad supply ecosystem and a barrier profile dominated by a single answer.

Where people get their reading material

SOURCE USED IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS	WEIGHTED SHARE OF ADULTS
Public library — visited in person	42.4%
Used bookstore	32.5%
Online retailer	29.4%
Borrowed from a friend or family member	26.6%
Independent bookstore	21.7%
Chain bookstore	20.7%
Public library — digital books or audio	20.5%
Digital subscription service	17.4%
Received as a gift	16.4%
School or work library	7.4%
Little Free Library	7.4%
None of the listed sources	13.5%

Table 4. Sources of reading material used in the past 12 months. All retained respondents, N=511. Multiple answers allowed; shares do not sum to 100%.

The public library, visited in person, is the most-used single source of reading material in Pima County — ahead of every retail channel, physical or digital. Rolled up, 51.3% of adults used at least one library source, 49.7% used at least one bookstore source, and 65.7% used at least one physical library or bookstore. Online and digital sources reached 47.2%. School and work libraries are counted on their own line and in none of those roll-ups, since they are neither a public library nor a retail channel.

These categories overlap heavily, and that is the point. Pima County adults assemble their reading from a mixed network — a library hold, a used paperback, a borrowed hardcover, an audiobook subscription, a gift. There is no dominant channel, and no evidence of a county being served by only one kind of institution.

How people obtain what they use most

One caution about this question. Three of its five response options are phrased in purchase terms, so a respondent whose main route is borrowing from a library has no exactly matching answer and may select the mixed pattern or the nearest in-person option. Given that the public library is the most-used single source in the county, the shares below should be read as approximate. Nothing in the index depends on this item.

Asked how they typically get the reading material they use most, 31.8% mostly go somewhere in person to browse and buy, 25.0% use a mix depending on the situation, 22.1% mostly get material at home through digital access or delivery, 18.0% research online first and then go in person, and 3.1% browse in person but usually buy online.

The 250 respondents whose primary pattern involves going somewhere in person were asked how far they travel. Most do not go far: 37.3% travel under fifteen minutes, 51.6% travel fifteen to thirty minutes, and 11.1% travel more than thirty minutes.

What prevents people from reading more

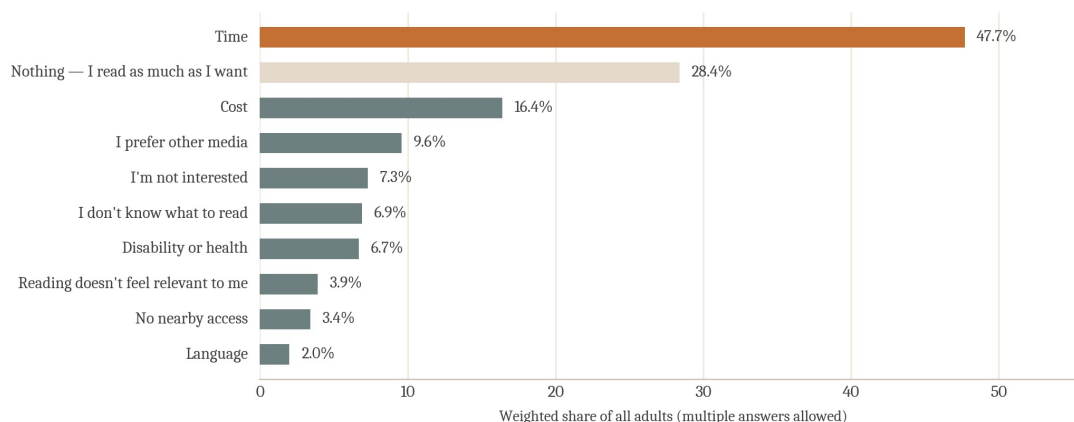


Figure 6. Self-reported barriers to reading more. All adults, N=511; multiple answers allowed. Time is named by nearly half of adults, roughly three times as often as cost. Structural barriers — nearby access and language — are named by very few.

Time is the answer, and it is not close. A respondent could arrive at a single biggest barrier by either of two routes: 260 named exactly one obstacle, which is their biggest by definition, and 119 named several and were asked which of them mattered most. Combining the two, **time is the single biggest barrier for 53.8%** of everyone who names a barrier at all — against 12.6% for cost, with no other reason reaching 8%.

The cost figure raises a question this survey cannot answer. Between 2015 and 2025 the consumer price index for recreational books fell 1.4% in nominal terms while all items rose 35.8%, which puts books roughly a quarter cheaper in real terms across the decade.⁸ That does not make the barrier less real, and it does not mean respondents are answering about something else: a price can fall in real terms and still sit outside a household's budget. What the comparison establishes is that the cost barrier is not explained by book prices alone, and this survey cannot separate the price of books from the pressure on the income that buys them.

Reading only the follow-up question would understate that and distort the runner-up: among the 121 respondents who answered that follow-up, time falls to 35.1% and cost rises to 25.0%. Both bases appear here because a reader who saw only the follow-up would conclude that cost rivals time countywide, and it does not.

Combined figures are weighted, on a base of the 379 respondents who named at least one barrier —

71.6% of adults. The remaining 28.4% reported no barrier and are excluded from that base.

National time-diary data point at the mechanism. In 2025 American adults living with no child under 18 spent about 19 minutes a day reading for personal interest; adults living with a child under 18 spent about 10.⁹ That is a measure of what people did rather than what they believe about their time, and it is the sharpest available explanation for why the time barrier falls hardest on younger adults.

Nearly as interesting is the second line of the chart. More than a quarter of adults — 28.4% — report no barrier at all. They read as much as they want to. That is a meaningful share of the county for whom the framing of “barriers to reading more” simply does not apply, and it is worth remembering before contemplating anything intended to remove obstacles.

A CAUTION ABOUT THIS FINDING

A low score on “no nearby access” is not evidence that structural access has been solved. A self-report question and an infrastructure audit answer different questions. People generally cannot report a barrier they have never encountered, and someone who has never lived near a branch library may not experience its absence as an obstacle to name. The list also could not capture a barrier it did not offer: safety and comfort in and around public reading spaces surfaced unprompted in the open-ended question examined in Section 9, and was not among the options here.

Disability or health is named by 6.7% of adults — a larger share than nearby access and language combined. The American Community Survey estimates that 15.0% of Pima County residents have a disability, above both Arizona at 13.8% and the country at 13.3%.² Nationally, the National Endowment for the Arts has found that adults with disabilities read books at 46% against 55% of all adults.¹⁰

The library picture complicates the access story

Administrative data from the public library system adds a second lens, and it points somewhere the survey does not. It also describes a different period: the most recent federal library data available is FY2024, two years before this survey was fielded, so it is read here as recent history rather than as a companion measurement. Between FY2019 and FY2024, Pima County Public Library card penetration fell from 52.8% of the system's service population to 43.1%, and visits per resident fell from 7.55 to 3.70.¹²

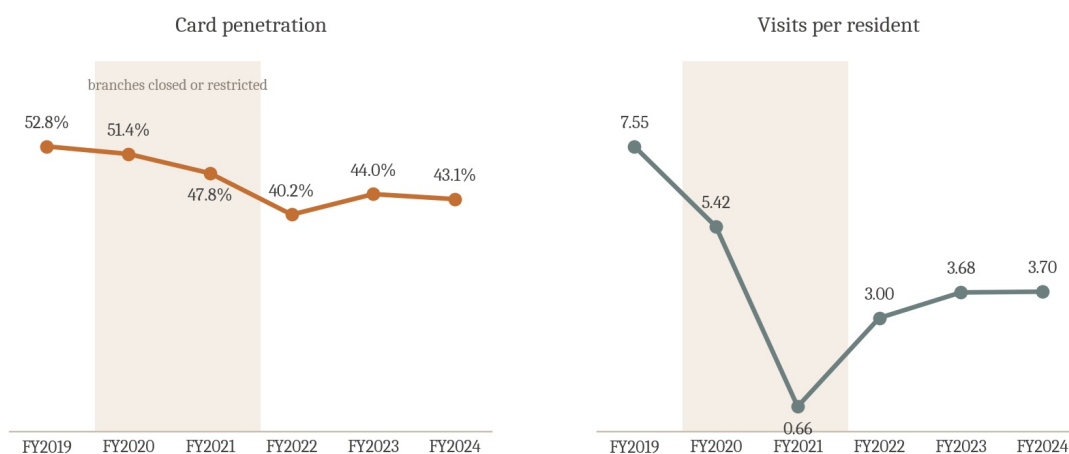


Figure 7. Pima County Public Library, FY2019 to FY2024. All six years are plotted. Card penetration uses the federal Public Libraries Survey unduplicated service population as the denominator. The shaded band marks the years in which branches were closed or operating under restrictions. Electronic circulation is not plotted: the federal survey discontinued its total and electronic circulation measures in FY2024, so the series cannot be drawn on consistent definitions across these six years.¹²

Plotted across all six years, neither measure describes a steady slide. Both collapse in the middle of the window and partly recover. Visits per resident fall to 0.66 in FY2021, when branches were closed or restricted, then return to roughly half their pre-pandemic level and sit flat for three years. Card penetration troughs a year later, in FY2022, and also partly recovers. Neither this survey nor the administrative data can separate a durable change from a disruption that has not fully unwound. What the flat FY2022 to FY2024 stretch does suggest is that the FY2024 endpoint is more likely to still describe the county in 2026 than a still-falling line would be.

None of that contradicts the survey. Together the two sources describe a county where few respondents identify nearby access as a barrier, where the library is the single most-used source of reading material, and where in-person visiting fell sharply and has since held at about half its pre-pandemic rate. That is a more complicated story than either measure tells alone, and it is the reason this report declines to conclude that Pima County has an access problem or that it does not.

One further caution about the gap between these figures and this survey. The library system did not stand still between FY2024 and the summer of 2026. In September 2024 the Library director announced that proposed branch closures were being tabled while the system gathered further community input, and identified chronic staffing shortages that had curtailed program offerings and reduced hours of operation. The county later shelved the closure plans.¹³ A reader should not treat the FY2024 snapshot as a description of the library system Wave 1 respondents were actually using in 2026.

Library measures use the federal Public Libraries Survey unduplicated service population as the denominator, which is not the same as this report's adult-population base. The two should not be combined arithmetically. FY2024 is the most recent year available in that survey as of this report's publication; the Institute of Museum and Library Services released it in June 2026. Arizona's unit response rate for FY2024 was 77.5%, against 96.6% nationally, so Arizona aggregates from that year carry more uncertainty than the national file.

The Social Life of Reading

This is the center of the Wave 1 story. Placed next to each other, private reading behavior and public participation in Pima County look like two different communities.

Home is the gravitational center

Among everyone who reads at all, 89.0% say they most often read or listen at home, and 59.2% report home and no other listed setting at all. The remaining 40.1% name at least one setting outside the house: libraries (13.9%), commuting or exercising or doing other tasks (13.5%), work or school (11.3%), outdoors (11.2%), cafés or restaurants (8.7%), and bookstores (7.2%).

This is not evidence that reading is invisible in Pima County. Two in five readers do read somewhere else. But the center of gravity is unambiguous, and it sets up the civic question the rest of this section asks: what happens to reading once it leaves the house?

Talking about books is occasional

Readers by choice were asked how often in the past twelve months they had recommended a book to someone or discussed one with others. 18.6% say never, 37.5% say once or twice, 33.3% say several times, 6.6% say monthly or more, and 4.0% say weekly or more.

Four in five readers by choice did talk about a book at some point in the year, so book conversation is not rare. But it is heavily front-loaded toward the occasional: the single largest group did it once or twice in twelve months, and only 10.6% made it a monthly habit. Frequent book talk is a minority behavior even among people who already identify as voluntary readers.

Contact is common; participation is not

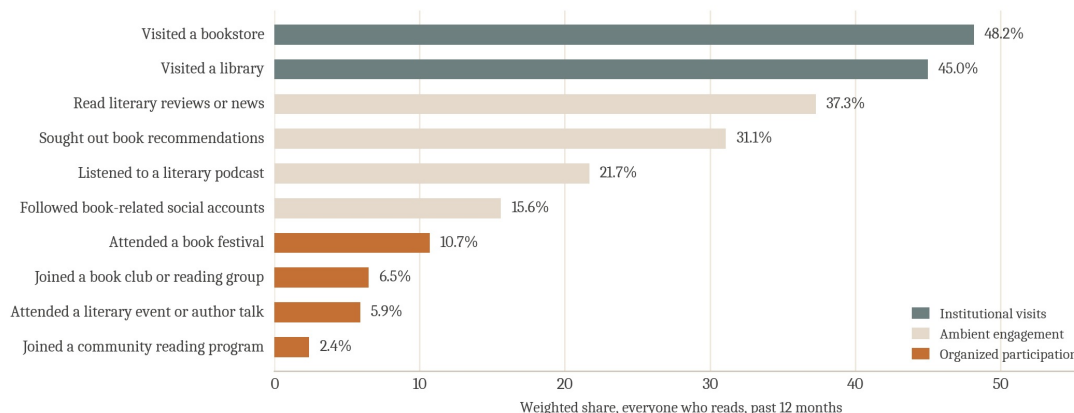


Figure 8. Past-year literary participation. Everyone who reads at all; weighted shares; multiple answers allowed. “Looked for book recommendations” means seeking them out — staff picks, lists, newsletters — and is distinct from the Social Reading component, which measures giving recommendations to other people. The drop between institutional contact and organized participation is the widest gap between two bands in the Wave 1 data.

The chart separates three different relationships with books. Visiting a bookstore or a library is direct institutional contact. The middle band is indirect — encountering or seeking out book culture without leaving the house or keeping to anyone's schedule. The bottom band is organized participation, where someone shows up.

Just under half of readers visited a bookstore in the past year and 45.0% visited a library; 63.2% did at least one of the two. Participation declines gradually from there, and is lowest for organized activities: book festivals draw 10.7%, book clubs 6.5%, literary events and author talks 5.9%, and community reading programs 2.4%. Across all four organized activities, 19.3% took part in any of them.

For scale on the middle band, Pew finds that 54% of American adults listened to a podcast of any kind in the past twelve months; at the time of publication this report has found no published national source that breaks out book or literary podcasts separately, so Pima County's 21.7% has no direct comparison.¹⁴

Participation decreases steadily as the commitment rises, and is thinnest at the point where it requires a calendar. Visiting a bookstore or a library requires only showing up sometime. The bottom band requires showing up at a particular place, at a particular hour, for a scheduled occasion, usually alongside strangers.

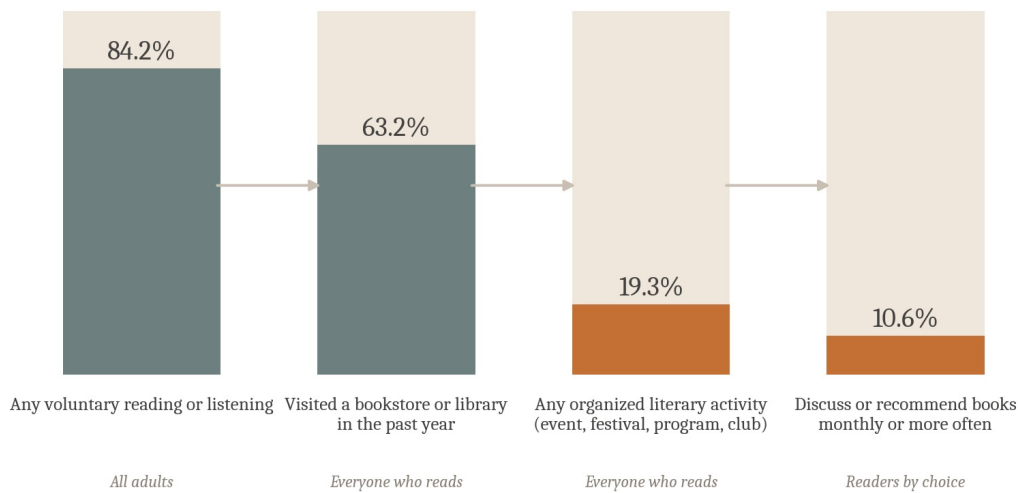


Figure 9. The narrowing. Each bar uses the question's own base, noted beneath it, so the four figures are not a single cohort tracked through four stages. Read as levels of a shared reading culture rather than as attrition from one group.

Breadth, not just presence

The Ecosystem component scores what a person does across five activities, not whether they crossed one threshold. That explains how the score can sit at 20.94 while bookstore and library visits are widespread: 68.1% of readers did at least one of the five scored activities, 33.4% did two or more, and only 7.5% did three or more. Meanwhile 13.8% did none of the ten participation items.

So the low ecosystem score is not a claim that residents avoid literary institutions. Most of them go. What almost nobody does is participate broadly — visit the library *and* attend the festival *and* join the club. Book talk here is an annual event, not a habit: four in five readers by choice discussed a book at some point in the year, and one in ten does it monthly.

WHAT THIS SECTION DOES NOT CLAIM

Nothing in this data establishes that low organized participation reflects low demand, poor programming, or insufficient supply. It establishes that the participation is low. Which explanation is right is a question for future waves and for the institutions that run the programming.

Reading Across Pima County

A countywide average can hide the thing worth knowing. This section looks at three dimensions where the sample is large enough to report responsibly: education, age, and Hispanic origin.

Everything here is descriptive. These are differences between groups, not explanations of them, and none of these characteristics should be read as the cause of the differences attached to it. Wave 1 was not designed to separate education from income, age from life stage, or ethnicity from either. The three dimensions reported here are also the three the sample is weighted to; income, though collected, is not among them and is therefore not reported as a separate cut. Wave 1 also did not collect sex or gender, which is a real omission and a priority for the next wave.

Education is the sharpest gradient

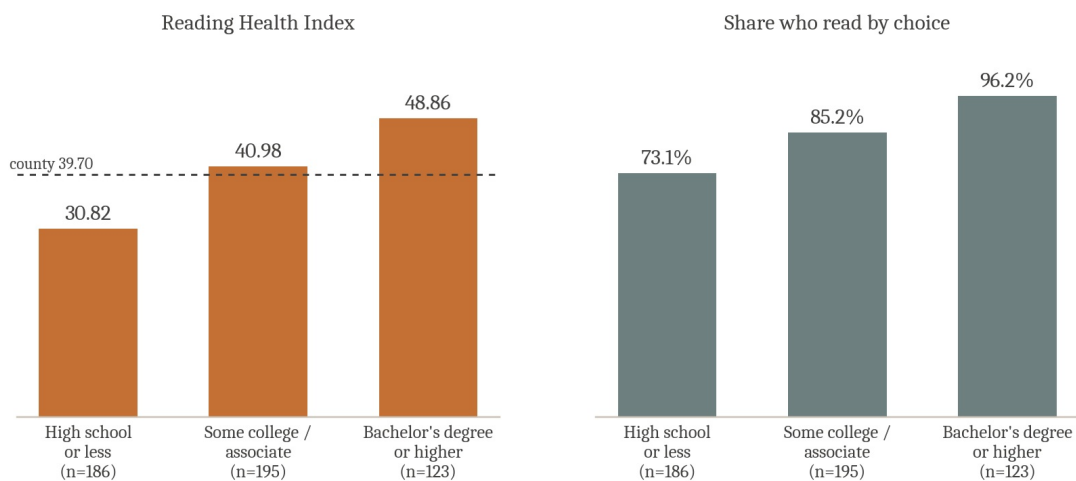


Figure 10. Reading health and voluntary reading by educational attainment. Weighted estimates; unweighted bases shown. The 18-point spread in the index is the widest of any subgroup comparison in Wave 1.

EDUCATION GROUP	N	READS BY CHOICE	TRHI	TUCSON VALUES READING	TIME BARRIER
High school or less	186	73.1%	30.82	38.3%	47.9%
Some college or associate	195	85.2%	40.98	39.9%	46.7%
Bachelor's degree or higher	123	96.2%	48.86	62.6%	48.3%

Table 5. Reading health by educational attainment. Weighted estimates within unweighted subgroup bases. “Tucson values reading” is the share agreeing that Tucson is a city that values reading; “Time barrier” is the share naming time as an obstacle to reading more.

Nearly every college-educated respondent qualifies as a reader by choice under the survey's broad definition, against roughly three-quarters of adults with a high-school education or less. The index gap between those two groups is about eighteen points — more than twice the widest of any other subgroup difference this report measures.

The last column is the one that resists an easy explanation. Time is named as a barrier at almost exactly the same rate by all three education groups — between 46.7% and 48.3%. Self-reported time pressure does not explain the education gradient in Wave 1. The mechanism could involve reading skill, occupational context, habits formed in childhood, income, household composition, or several of these at once, and this survey was not built to separate them.

Two outside measures describe the same gradient from different directions. National time-diary data show reading for personal interest rising from about 5 minutes a day among adults without a high school diploma to about 23 minutes among adults with a bachelor's degree or higher — a fivefold difference in how adults account for a single day rather than in how they describe their habits over a year.⁹ And the Arizona Department of Education reports that roughly one in nine Pima County adults lacks a high school credential, while the county's two largest adult literacy providers together enroll on the order of eight thousand adults a year.¹⁵ Those service counts are program-year enrollments from overlapping providers and cannot be summed into a served population, and no published estimate exists of how many Pima County adults need literacy services.

One column further left in Table 5 is worth pausing on too. Adults with a bachelor's degree are far more likely to agree that Tucson values reading — 62.6% against 38.3%. Whether Tucson looks like a reading city may depend considerably on which parts of it a person moves through.

Age differences run in more than one direction

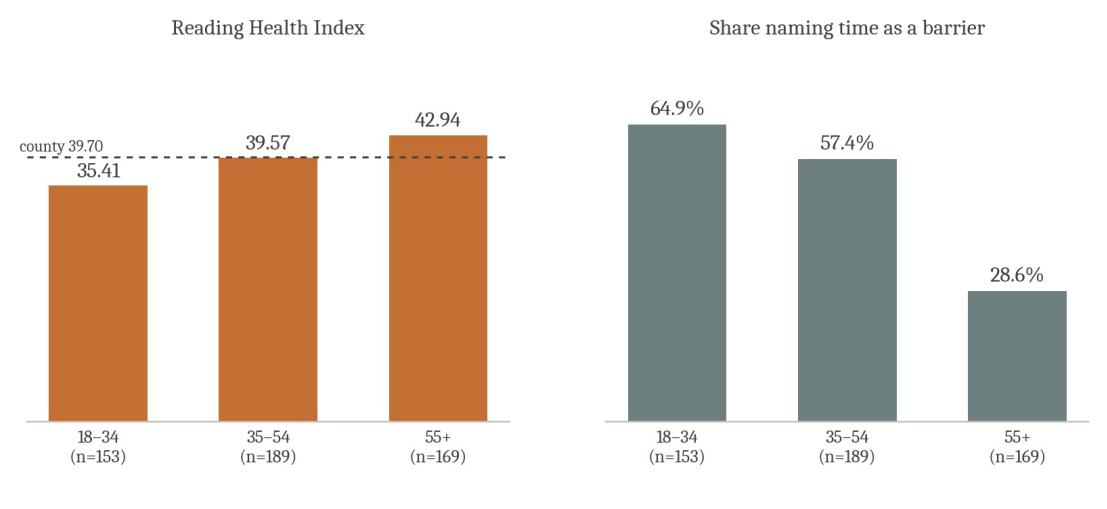


Figure 11. Reading health and the time barrier by age group. Weighted estimates; unweighted bases n=153, 189, and 169 respectively. Older adults score higher on the index; younger adults are more than twice as likely to name time as an obstacle.

AGE GROUP	N	READS BY CHOICE	TRHI	TUCSON VALUES READING	TIME BARRIER
18-34	153	74.9%	35.41	42.6%	64.9%
35-54	189	82.4%	39.57	46.5%	57.4%
55 and older	169	92.1%	42.94	49.9%	28.6%

Table 6. Reading health by age group.

The obvious reading — older people read more — is too simple. The time column shows something closer to the mechanism: 64.9% of adults under 35 name time as a barrier, against 28.6% of adults 55 and older. Work, small children, and shift schedules do not distribute evenly across a life. National time-use data show the same shape, with reading time rising steeply with age.⁹

What Wave 1 cannot answer is whether this is a life-stage pattern that today's 28-

year-olds will age into, or a generational one they will carry with them. That is exactly the sort of question an annual measurement is built to resolve, and it will take several waves.

Hispanic origin

GROUP	N	READS BY CHOICE	TRHI	TUCSON VALUES READING	TIME BARRIER
Hispanic or Latino	166	75.9%	35.10	43.8%	50.0%
Not Hispanic or Latino	338	88.6%	42.19	48.8%	46.1%

Table 7. Reading health by Hispanic origin.

Hispanic respondents show a lower index and a lower readers by choice share in Wave 1. The survey by itself cannot say why, and the honest answer is that these categories overlap with almost everything else on this page. Educational attainment, income, age structure, and language are all correlated with one another and with Hispanic origin.² Reading this as an effect of ethnicity would mean separating it from everything it overlaps with, and Wave 1 was not designed to do that: a statistical adjustment on a sample of this size and design would still be describing the pattern, not explaining it.

This is best used as a recurring equity indicator to watch rather than a conclusion to draw. It is also a direct argument for larger samples in future waves.

At an annual sample of roughly 500, ZIP-code and neighborhood estimates are not publishable under the reporting thresholds set out in Section 2, and none appear in this report.

Reading Across Generations

Family reading sits outside the index by design. It applies only to households with young children, so folding it into a countywide adult score would distort both. It is tracked alongside as a satellite measure, and in Wave 1 it is where the county looks strongest: in households with young children, reading is still being handed down.

Among the 206 respondents who report a child age 12 or under in the household, 58.2% say an adult reads or shares books and stories with them daily or a few times a week. Another 27.2% say occasionally, and 14.6% say rarely or never.



Figure 12. How often an adult reads or shares stories with a child. Households with a child age 12 or under, unweighted n=206; weighted shares.

Nearly six in ten is a substantial share. Whatever is thin about the county's public reading culture, the private transmission of reading to the next generation is happening in most households with a child.

Two cautions belong with it. The measure captures whether reading happened, not how long it lasted or whether the child engaged. Self-reported family reading is also the sort of behavior people over-report, because the socially approved answer is obvious. The figure is a baseline to watch.

It also has no comparison. The nearest national instrument, the National Survey of Children's Health, asks how many days in the past week a family member read to a child aged five or under.¹⁶ That is a different age range, unit of analysis and frequency threshold, and the two figures should not be placed side by side. Aligning this item to that wording in a future wave would give this measure the benchmark it lacks.

It is also worth watching in the other direction. Together with national time-use evidence, the barrier and age patterns make households with young children an important group to examine directly in Wave 2. If family reading declines in a future wave, time pressure rather than indifference is the first place to look.

Does Tucson See Itself as a Reading City?

A reading culture is partly what people do and partly what they believe about where they live. Institutions can exist for decades without becoming part of how a community describes itself.

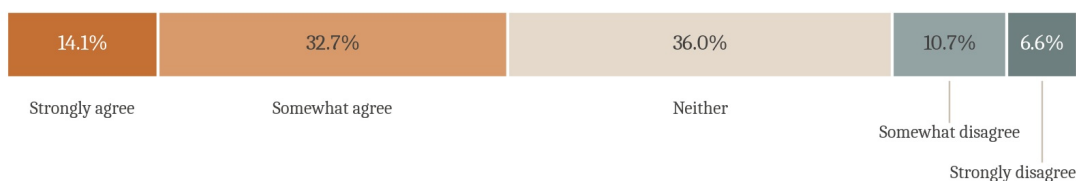


Figure 13. "Tucson is a city that values reading." All adults, N=511; weighted shares. Agreement totals 46.7% and disagreement 17.3%. The 36.0% in the middle is the largest single response. Components are rounded independently and may not sum exactly to these totals.

Agreement outweighs disagreement by nearly three to one, which is not a bad result. But the largest single group did not take a side. In a city with that much literary infrastructure, more than a third of adults have no view on whether it values reading.

That neutral third should not be turned into a deficit. Neutrality can mean unfamiliarity, ambivalence, indifference, or simply that reading is not one of the things a person thinks about when they think about Tucson. A third of the county has not made up its mind about whether reading is part of what Tucson is. That is consistent with limited salience or visibility, among several possible readings.

What residents say would make Tucson stronger

Every respondent was asked, without any list of options to choose from, what would make Tucson a stronger reading city. Of the 511 retained respondents, 479 wrote something. Their answers were coded against a fixed set of themes in two independent passes, with every disagreement resolved against the codebook.

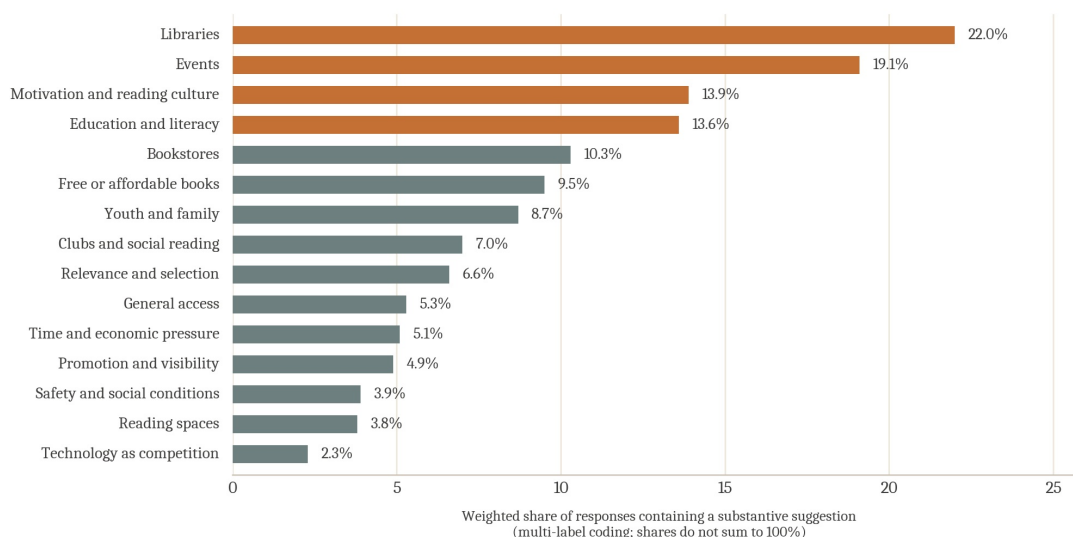


Figure 14. What residents said would make Tucson a stronger reading city. Weighted share of responses containing a substantive suggestion. One response could carry more than one theme, so shares do not sum to 100%. Among all non-blank responses, 20.0% offered no suggestion, 7.7% said current assets are already adequate, and 4.6% were off-topic.

Libraries lead, but the response is broader than a call for more branches. Residents ask for more occasions to gather around books, more visibility and encouragement, stronger literacy support in schools, more bookstores, cheaper access, and more attention to young readers. Taken together they describe an ecosystem rather than a single missing piece.

No individual response is reproduced here, in whole or in part. Respondents were told before the first question that results would be reported only in the aggregate, and that commitment governs this report throughout; Section 13 sets out what it covers. What follows is drawn from the coded themes rather than from any one answer.

Two things stand out about this list beyond its rank order.

The first is what residents did not ask for. Residents did not ask for anything new. They asked for more of what is already here — longer library hours, more of the festival Tucson already has, more of the bookstores already here.

The second is the size of the group with nothing to offer. One in five non-blank responses contained no suggestion — most of them a short “I don’t know” or “not sure,” and a few directed at Tucson generally rather than at reading. Combined with

the 36.0% who are neutral on whether Tucson values reading, that suggests reading is not yet a subject most residents think about civically — which is itself a finding, and a harder one to address than any specific request on the chart.

A theme that was not anticipated

A small but distinct group of responses — 3.9% — raised safety and social conditions in and around libraries and public reading spaces: concerns about drug use, security, and people experiencing homelessness in ways respondents found unwelcoming. No individual response is reproduced anywhere in this report, and these are no exception; they are also short, blunt, and about neighborhood conditions rather than about reading, so a summary conveys the theme more usefully than fragments would in any case. People experiencing homelessness are library users too, and a report on public reading culture that named them only as a condition others find unwelcoming would be incomplete on its own terms.

The appropriate response to this finding is not this project's to design. It is passed to library and civic partners as an observation, not a recommendation. The theme is reported because it emerged unprompted from an open question that said nothing about safety, and what residents experience as a barrier to using a public space belongs in a report about public reading culture. Its spontaneous appearance suggests salience for a small subset of respondents. Because respondents were not directly asked about safety, the 3.9% coded share should not be read as a prevalence estimate; a directly asked item in a future wave would settle it.

Reading in Context

There is no national equivalent of this index, so no outside source can say what a 39.70 ought to be. External data serves a narrower purpose here: placing individual pieces of Pima County's reading behavior against national and state figures, while respecting that the definitions do not match.

National reading measures use different definitions

The National Endowment for the Arts found that 53.0% of U.S. adults read books and/or literature of some kind in its 2022 survey,¹⁷ and that 48.5% had read at least one book, excluding books required for work or school, in the previous twelve months — down from 54.6% a decade earlier.³ Pew Research Center, surveying 8,046 adults in October 2025, found that 75% had read all or part of at least one book in any format in the prior year, including 64% in print, 31% as e-books, and 26% as audiobooks.⁴ Pew's own trend line carries a break: its earlier waves were conducted by telephone and the 2025 wave primarily online, with a change in question wording, so its year-to-year comparisons are not a clean series either.⁴

Neither of those is comparable to this report's 84.2% gateway figure, and the gap between them illustrates why. The NEA and Pew both ask about *books*. This survey asks about voluntary reading or listening of any kind, including articles and scripture. A broader question produces a bigger number, and the difference measures the wording, not the county.

One comparison does line up reasonably well. Pew found 7% of American adults participated in a book club in the past year, and the NEA's 2022 figure for book or reading groups was roughly 5%.^{3,4} Pima County's 6.5% sits between them. Organized reading participation in this county is thin, and it is thin nationally too.

Time-use data reinforce the age pattern

The American Time Use Survey measures what people actually did on a single diary day rather than what they recall over a year. In 2025, Americans age 15 and older averaged sixteen minutes a day reading for personal interest — 9.6 minutes among 15-to-24-year-olds and 31.8 minutes among those 65 and older.⁹ Two things stop this being a like-for-like comparison. The published age bands do not match this survey's, and the youngest of them includes people under 18, who are outside this survey entirely. More fundamentally, the time-use survey measures minutes on a single day across all adults, while this survey measures weekly hours among people who read by choice. The comparison is therefore to the direction of the gradient, not to its values.⁹

The 2025 time-use release carries an unusual data-quality caveat: federal operations were suspended from October 1 to November 12, 2025, no diaries exist for September 30 through November 11, the fourth quarter was reweighted to compensate, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics states that the effect on the estimates cannot be quantified.⁹ The differently binned 2024 and 2025 age tables should not be combined into a synthetic trend.

Literacy skill is related to reading culture but is not the same thing

The federal Skills Map models the share of Pima County adults ages 16 to 74 who fall at or below Level 1 literacy, and estimates it at 23.4%, with a credible interval of 19.1% to 27.6% — essentially the same as Arizona's statewide estimate.¹ Within that model the education gradient is steep: 53.9% among adults with less than a high-school education, against 5.6% among adults with a bachelor's degree or higher.¹

Those county figures rest on the first cycle of the federal assessment, collected between 2012 and 2017. A second national cycle has since been published, and the national share at or below Level 1 rose from 19% to 28% between 2017 and 2023.¹ County estimates from that second cycle have not been released, because only the first cycle supports the small-area modeling the county figure depends on. The Pima County estimate should therefore be read as the most recent county-level measure available, not as a current one.

Those figures help explain why education deserves attention in a reading-culture report. They are not interchangeable with the index. Skill and choice are different measurements, and this report measures the second.

What the proxies suggest, and what they don't

The available comparisons do not support a claim that Pima County is uniquely broken or uniquely exceptional. On the NEA's state-level measure — the share of adults who read novels or short stories in the past year — Arizona stands at 38%, identical to the national figure and not statistically distinguishable from it.¹⁸ The modeled literacy estimate for Pima is essentially the state's.¹ Local library data show both strengths and weaknesses: historically strong revenue and visit figures relative to the state, alongside falling card penetration and a sharp decline in visits from pre-pandemic levels.^{12,11}

That is a useful frame for a first edition. This report is not documenting a local crisis. Nor do the available comparisons place Pima County on a national scale, because they are not built to. What this report offers instead is the detail to see where this county's reading culture is strong, where it thins out, and what the community itself says it wants.

EXTERNAL SOURCE	KEY FIGURE	COMPARABILITY
NEA, <i>Arts Participation Patterns in 2022</i> ³	53.0% read books and/or literature; 48.5% read at least one book, excluding work or school reading; roughly 5% in a book club or reading group	Context — narrower, book-focused definition; national only
NEA, <i>50 States of Arts Participation: 2022</i> ¹⁸	Arizona 38% read novels or short stories; national rate 38%	Context — a narrower construct again, and state estimates carry limited statistical power
Pew Research Center, October 2025 ⁴	75% read all or part of a book; 7% in a book club	Benchmark context — book-only, national
American Time Use Survey, 2025 ⁹	16 minutes a day; steep age gradient	Context — single-day diary behavior
PIAAC Skills Map ¹	Pima at or below Level 1 literacy: 23.4% (19.1–27.6)	Not directly comparable — skill, not behavior
IMLS Public Libraries Survey / PCPL ¹²	Card penetration 52.8% to 43.1%; visits per resident 7.55 to 3.70, FY2019–FY2024, with a mid-window trough in both	Local ecosystem context — different denominator

Table 8. External sources and their key figures. No external figure is an input to the index. Each source differs from this survey in geography, vintage, universe, and question wording; see Appendix C.

What to Watch

A baseline earns its keep by producing questions that can be answered later. These are the recurring questions Wave 1 puts on the table. They are not recommendations, and they are not addressed to any particular institution.

Does the index move? The headline figure is 39.70. Under this project's pre-committed rule, movement under three points will be described as broadly stable. The more informative question is whether the components move together or against each other, since a flat composite can conceal a rising identity score and a falling participation score.

Does organized participation expand beyond 19.3%? This is the thinnest layer of Pima County's reading culture. It may be responsive to changes in programming, scheduling, or other conditions; Wave 1 does not identify which. If anything changes here, the ecosystem component should register it.

Does talking about books become more frequent? Only 10.6% of readers by choice currently discuss or recommend a book as often as monthly. Social reading is the component with the most room to move and the least infrastructure attached to it.

Does the education gradient hold? Eighteen points is a wide gap, and it is the finding most likely to matter for how public resources get aimed. Whether it narrows, holds, or widens is the single most important equity question this project can track.

Is the age pattern a life stage or a generation? Adults under 35 score lowest on the index and are more than twice as likely as adults 55 and older to name time as an obstacle. Whether today's 28-year-olds read more as they age, or carry this pattern with them, is the longest-horizon question this project can address and the one that most needs an annual series to answer.

Does the neutral third shrink? If reading becomes more visible in Tucson, the share of adults with no opinion about whether the city values reading should fall. That figure may turn out to be a more sensitive indicator of civic reading culture

than the index itself.

Does time remain the dominant barrier? Time is named by 47.7% of adults today, and by nearly two-thirds of adults under 35. Whether that holds, and whether cost rises alongside it, will say something about the economic conditions surrounding reading as much as about reading.

Does family reading hold? At 58.2%, this is one of the highest raw rates in the report. Strong measures have further to fall, and this one sits with the most time-pressed households in the county.

Does library use shift or shrink? The public library is the single most-used source of reading material in the county, and in-person visiting has held at roughly half its pre-pandemic rate for three years.¹² Whether that represents a change in how people use the library or a net loss of relationship is a question the administrative data and this survey can answer together, and neither can answer alone.

What should change before the next wave

Several improvements are already identified. The survey should add a measure of sex or gender, whose absence in Wave 1 is a genuine gap. It should ask the participation battery of non-readers as an unscored diagnostic, so their zeros stop being assumptions, while preserving the original scoring convention so the series stays comparable. It could add a direct self-identity item alongside the existing relationship question; the scored item mixes identity and behavioral language, and a clean companion would let a future wave test how much that matters. Such an item would be a diagnostic only, since Wave 1 cannot be rescored against it. The geographic target list needs the two Pima County ZIP codes that were absent from it in Wave 1 — both non-residential codes with no Census household population, one a post-office box range and one assigned to a single employer. And a larger sample would materially improve the subgroup analysis in Section 7, which is currently at the edge of what this design can responsibly report.

None of these changes should alter the Wave 1 series. New questions can be added as diagnostics; the existing scored items, their wording, and their weights stay fixed, because the value of this project is entirely in its comparability.

Why Reading Matters

A report that spends this many pages measuring reading owes the reader an account of why it's worth measuring. That account is placed here, behind the findings, because the findings do not rest on it. This section marks clearly where it is advocating rather than reporting.

A chain, not a list

The case for reading is usually made as an inventory of separate benefits — vocabulary, empathy, stress relief, better sleep. Most of those findings are real. Assembled as a list, they are also unpersuasive, because a list of unrelated perks does not explain why a community should care.

The stronger version is a sequence. Conditions in a community — the availability of books, libraries, schools, bookstores, affordable access — shape a reading culture. That culture shapes how reading develops in individuals. Development builds capability. Capability shows up, eventually, in the outcomes communities actually care about: educational attainment, earnings, health, civic participation.

WHERE THIS REPORT SITS

Reading conditions → reading culture → reading development → human capability → life and civic outcomes

The Tucson Reading Health Index measures the second stage. It is a midpoint, not an endpoint — which is why this report reports on behavior and identity rather than on test scores or income, and why it makes no claim to predict either.

What reading does for a person

The most important finding in this literature is not that reading is good for you. It is that reading compounds. A meta-analysis of 99 studies covering 7,669 people found that print exposure explained 12% of the variance in oral language among preschoolers, rising to 19% by middle school, 30% in high school, and 34% among college and university students.¹⁹ The relationship gets stronger with age, not weaker. Reading builds the vocabulary and background knowledge that make the next book easier, which produces more reading, which builds more capability.

For most of the last thirty years that evidence was correlational, and the obvious objection was that people who read a lot differ from people who don't in many ways at once. A five-year randomized trial published in 2026 addressed it directly: across sixty high-poverty schools, half received up to 34 free books per child across five years, in four distributions, and half did not. Students with partial exposure gained roughly a quarter to a third of a school year in literacy, at a cost of about two dollars a book.²⁰ In that trial, sustained access to free books improved literacy outcomes. The effect was largest where book access was not already most constrained, which the authors read as books complementing existing literacy supports rather than substituting for them. Access to books is not merely a symptom of advantage; supplying it changes outcomes.

One finding extends the point to reading done by choice, which is what this report measures. In a British cohort followed from birth, reading for pleasure between ages 10 and 16 predicted progress in vocabulary and mathematics more strongly than a parent's university degree did.²¹

A discipline this report holds throughout: reading proficiency, reading volume, reading for pleasure, fiction reading, and structured therapeutic reading are five different things with five different evidence bases. A finding about one does not transfer to another. Most of the strongest research above concerns children; this report measures adults. The chain is what connects them, and it should be read as a chain, not as a claim that these findings describe Pima County's adults directly.

What reading does for a community

The civic case is harder to measure and is worth stating with more caution. The strongest current evidence comes from the OECD's 2023 adult skills survey, which found that adults with low foundational literacy and numeracy are roughly a third less likely to be active in the labor market and earn substantially less — and also report lower interpersonal trust, lower life satisfaction, and lower rates of volunteering than adults with medium proficiency.²² Reading capability tracks with participation in community life, not just with income.

At the level of reading practice rather than skill, the pattern holds in the same direction on observational rather than causal evidence. A national survey of more than 17,000 American adults found literary readers about two and a half times more likely to volunteer than non-readers, and markedly more likely to attend performing arts and visit museums.²³ Whether reading produces civic participation or civically engaged people read more is not something that research can settle.

Libraries occupy a particular place in this. Research on public libraries describes them as generating both bonding and bridging social capital — connecting people to others like them and to people unlike them — and functioning as trusted civic third places, including for newcomers finding their way into a community.²⁴ That evidence is largely qualitative and case-based rather than causal, and should be read as such. It is also consistent with what Pima County residents said in this survey, unprompted, when asked what their city needs.

The backdrop

The national backdrop is not encouraging. The National Endowment for the Arts found that 48.5% of American adults read at least one book, excluding books required for work or school, in the year before its 2022 survey, down from 54.6% a decade earlier.³ That window contains the pandemic and does not isolate it, so the size of the decline is unsettled. What it establishes is that the direction of the last decade was not upward, and that nobody would have known the size of the change without a repeated measurement.

Why a city would want to know its own number

Reading culture is the kind of civic asset that erodes quietly. Nobody announces the closing of a reading habit. Library hours contract, a festival loses a sponsor, a bookstore doesn't reopen, and the loss registers years later as a general sense that things aren't what they were.

An annual measurement turns that into something a community can see while it is happening. It also gives the organizations working in this space — libraries and schools, literacy and adult-education non-profits, the festival organizers, funders, neighborhood groups, booksellers — a common set of facts to discuss, rather than competing impressions.

This section makes a civic argument and is labeled as such. The findings in this report do not depend on it, and readers who reject the argument can still use the measurement. Sources for the research summarized here, including evidence-strength assessments for each finding, are listed in the References.

How This Study Was Done

This section is a plain-language summary; the scoring rubrics, index formula, and weighting targets appear in Appendix A. The fielded instrument architecture, quality-control protocol, weighting mechanics, and dated decision record are maintained in the *Tucson State of Reading Methodology Documentation, Wave 1*, published alongside this report at theplaceandpage.com/tsor/2026.²⁵

Fielding

The survey was fielded to Pima County adults age 18 and older between July 30 and August 14, 2026. It was administered in English and Spanish through the Forsta/Decipher platform, with respondents sourced through the Cint Exchange panel marketplace.²⁶ The Spanish instrument was professionally translated and independently reviewed for regional dialect.

ITEM	WAVE 1
Target population	Pima County adults 18+
Fielding window	July 30 – August 14, 2026
Platform and panel	Forsta/Decipher; Cint Exchange
Qualified completes	520
Exclusions	9 (2 quality, 7 geography)
Final analytic sample	511
Readers by choice	431
Required-only readers	48
Non-readers	32
Completed in Spanish	4
Non-blank open-ended responses	479
Final weight range	0.505 – 2.419
Effective sample size (Kish)	425.5
Unequal-weighting design effect	1.201

Table 9. Wave 1 fielding and sample. The last two lines describe what the weighting costs in precision. The Kish effective sample size is the number of respondents an unweighted survey would need to carry the same precision as this weighted one — so weighting costs about 85 respondents' worth. The unequal-weighting design effect expresses the same thing as a multiplier: estimates vary about 20% more than they would in an unweighted sample of 511.

Quality control and exclusions

Nine of the 520 qualified completes were removed: two for convergent quality concerns and seven for confirmed out-of-area geography. The exclusion standard was deliberately conservative — no respondent was removed on a single vendor flag alone. Exclusion required agreement across several signals: whether open-ended answers bore any plausible relationship to the question asked, how long a respondent spent on a page relative to their own pace elsewhere in the survey, whether checkbox selection density stayed unnaturally constant across unrelated topics, and whether the self-reported ZIP code corresponded to actual Pima County geography.

Geographic verification was done independently rather than trusting the vendor dashboard, which had incorrectly flagged more than a hundred legitimate

respondents. Those flags were not generated against the 41-code Pima County ZIP list this project supplied; the vendor's internal geography check treated many valid Pima County codes as out of area. The same review found two further valid Pima County ZIP codes missing from the project's own list. Respondents from those two codes had been flagged for exclusion after fielding closed; on review the codes were confirmed as valid Pima County ZIP codes and those respondents were retained in the analytic sample rather than removed.

Two points of precision about that. The correction was to retention, not to coverage: because the project's list was the targeting frame supplied to the vendor, any resident of those ZIP codes who was screened out during fielding is invisible to this analysis by construction. That exposure is small for a structural reason: neither code carries Census household population. One is a post-office box range enclosed within a larger residential ZIP code, and the other is assigned to a single employer. And the working assumption — that the respondents identified were the only ones affected — cannot be verified from inside the data. The list is corrected for Wave 2.

Keeping all 520 completes would have moved the unweighted index from about 39.69 to 39.57. The exclusions are not driving the result.

Back-coding of write-in responses

Where a respondent chose “other, please specify” and the text they wrote clearly restated one of the options already on the list, that response was folded into the existing category rather than left in a residual bucket. Twelve such decisions were applied across four questions, each requiring an unambiguous match; write-ins naming something genuinely new were left as Other. Two of them change figures reported here, in the barrier and reading-purpose questions. The record-level decisions are retained in the project audit log and are available for methodological review; the barrier figures in Section 5 reflect them.

One further record surfaced after that pass, during independent coding of the open-ended responses: three of its “other, please specify” answers were non-substantive, while its closed-ended responses and its answer to the closing open question were sound. It was retained. Excluding it, or selectively voiding its text, would have meant applying a content standard fixed after fielding rather than before — and its effect on every figure in this report is immaterial.

Weighting

The sample was calibrated to 2024 American Community Survey benchmarks for Pima County using iterative proportional fitting, cycling through age, education, and Hispanic origin.² Age is calibrated across the full adult sample; education among adults 25 and older, which is the universe the Census attainment table describes; Hispanic origin among substantive responses, using an adult-specific benchmark derived from the age-by-Hispanic-origin table rather than a total-population figure, since Pima County's Hispanic population skews younger than the county as a whole.

Primary home language was considered as a fourth dimension and rejected. The survey's question and the Census language-at-home construct do not mean the same thing, and the relevant cells are too thin to calibrate stably.

Weighting changed very little: the unweighted index was 39.69 and the weighted index is 39.70. A prospective cap of three times the mean weight was in place and no case reached it. The largest final weight is 2.419.

What kind of sample this is

Technically, this is a nonprobability online-panel sample. No selection probability is known for every Pima County adult, because panel marketplaces recruit from many sources rather than from a complete county sampling frame.^{27,26} In public communication the study is described as a weighted online panel survey of 511 Pima County adults, which is accurate without being jargon.

That classification has a specific consequence: a conventional margin of sampling error does not apply to this design and is not claimed. A design-based margin of error quantifies random sampling error under known selection mechanics, and those mechanics do not exist here.

What the margin of error would be, if this were a probability sample

This is the question most readers will want answered, so it is answered directly rather than left implied.

FOR ORIENTATION ONLY

A simple random sample of 511 people would carry a maximum sampling error of about **±4.3 percentage points** at 95% confidence for a 50% estimate. Applying this study's weighting design effect of 1.201 gives an analogous benchmark of roughly **±4.8 points** — reasonably described as about ±5. That benchmark applies to a single percentage near 50%, not to the index. The TRHI is a weighted composite of five component scores, and a composite varies less than any one proportion: the same calculation applied to the composite gives roughly **±2 points**.

Both are scale references, not this study's margin of error. They describe what random sampling error would look like at this sample size. They do not quantify panel self-selection, coverage error, measurement error, or any other non-sampling error, and those are the larger uncertainties in a design like this one.

The practical implication is that differences of a few points between subgroups, or between this wave and a future one, should not be treated as established. That is why Section 3 commits in advance to describing movement under three points as broadly stable.

Coding the open-ended responses

The closing open question was coded against a fixed codebook of eighteen themes, developed and frozen before coding began. Each of the 479 non-blank responses could receive more than one theme. To guard against single-coder drift, the full set was coded twice independently — each pass using a large language model working only from the original text and the frozen codebook, with no access to the other pass's results.

The two passes assigned identical complete theme sets to 76.0% of responses, and agreed on 98.0% of the 8,622 individual yes-or-no theme decisions. The 115 responses with any disagreement were adjudicated against the codebook; three genuinely ambiguous cases were resolved by the project's principal reviewer.

This is an agreement and robustness check, not conventional human-to-human

intercoder reliability, and it is reported as such. The theme percentages should be read as a structured summary of what residents wrote, not as a vote or a ranking of policy priorities.

Before the first question, every respondent was told that their answers were anonymous, that no personally identifying information would be collected or shared, and that results would be reported only in the aggregate. That commitment is why the open-ended answers appear in this report as coded themes and characterizations only. No respondent response is reproduced anywhere in this report, in whole or in part, and none will be reproduced in any other public output of this project.

Limitations

- Weighting a nonprobability panel to demographic benchmarks does not establish representativeness on unmeasured characteristics. Panel members may differ from other Pima County adults in ways correlated with reading.
- All reading behavior here is self-reported and subject to recall error, differing interpretations of the questions, and social desirability. Reading is socially approved, and self-reports of it run high.
- A sample of 511 limits subgroup precision and rules out ZIP-code or neighborhood estimates. The commitment that no personally identifying information would be collected or shared independently requires that suppression: ZIP code crossed with age, education, and Hispanic origin is quasi-identifying at this sample size even though no single item is.
- Respondents were promised that results would be reported only in the aggregate, so no verbatim response appears in this report. The open-ended material is available only as coded themes, which limits what a reader can independently judge about tone, nuance, or the strength of individual views.
- Only four retained respondents completed the survey in Spanish. The American Community Survey estimates that 20.8% of Pima County residents aged five and over speak Spanish at home, and that 58,016 Spanish speakers report speaking English less than “very well.”² Offering a bilingual instrument is plainly not the same as reaching that population, and this report makes no Spanish-language estimates.

- Sex and gender were not collected, which is a meaningful omission in the baseline.
- Pima County contains two sovereign nations, the Tohono O'odham Nation and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. At this sample size their residents cannot be described separately, and under this report's own reporting thresholds no such estimate could be published. The absence is a limit of the design, not a judgment that the question does not matter.
- The scored identity item is not a validated pure identity scale; it mixes relationship and behavioral language.
- Non-readers were not asked the participation battery, so their Ambient and Ecosystem values are conventions, not observations.
- The five components use differently constructed ordinal rubrics, so point differences between them are not equivalent distances.
- Component weights are design judgments, not coefficients estimated from a validated model.
- Band boundaries are interpretive civic ranges, not externally validated thresholds.
- External sources vary in construct, population, geography, vintage, and sampling method, and none is an input to the index.
- There is no external city benchmark for this index. Outside data can test whether a finding is plausible; it cannot norm the scale.

How the Index Is Built

Each respondent receives a score from 0 to 100 on each of five components. The composite is a weighted sum of those five scores, calculated for each respondent and then averaged across the weighted sample.

$$\text{Index} = (\text{Frequency} \times 0.35) + (\text{Identity} \times 0.25) + (\text{Social} \times 0.15) + (\text{Ambient} \times 0.10) + (\text{Ecosystem} \times 0.15)$$

Scoring rubrics

COMPONENT	RESPONSE	SCORE
Reading Frequency	None / under 1h / 1-2h / 2-4h / 4-7h / over 7h per week	0 / 20 / 40 / 60 / 80 / 100
Reader Identity / Relationship	Not part of life / occasional / regular part / prioritize and do frequently	0 / 33 / 67 / 100
Social Reading	Never / 1-2 times / several times / monthly or more / weekly or more	0 / 25 / 50 / 75 / 100
Ambient Cultural Engagement	Count of 4 ambient activities in the past year	0 / 25 / 50 / 75 / 100
Local Ecosystem Participation	Count of 5 ecosystem activities in the past year	0 / 20 / 40 / 60 / 80 / 100

Table A1. Scoring rubrics.

How each path is scored

COMPONENT	READERS BY CHOICE	REQUIRED-ONLY READERS	NON-READERS
Reading Frequency	Observed	Structural zero	Structural zero
Reader Identity / Relationship	Observed	Observed	Observed
Social Reading	Observed	Structural zero	Structural zero
Ambient Cultural Engagement	Observed	Observed	Structural zero
Local Ecosystem Participation	Observed	Observed	Structural zero

Table A2. How each reader path is scored. A structural zero means the component was not asked of that group and is scored as zero by convention. The frequency and social zeros follow from the definitions. A person who reads nothing by choice has no reading-by-choice frequency, and the Social component measures sharing that arises from voluntary reading, which the same person has none of. The ambient and ecosystem zeros for non-readers are modeling assumptions and are the least defensible element of the scoring; see Section 3.

Score bands

RANGE	LABEL
0–19	Developing
20–44	Emerging
45–59	Healthy
60–74	Strong
75–100	Exceptional

Table A3. Score bands. These are interpretive civic ranges chosen by this project to make the score legible. They are not clinically validated or nationally normed, and the numeric score, not the band, is the longitudinal anchor.

Weighting targets

DIMENSION	UNIVERSE AND SOURCE	TARGETS
Age	All adults 18+; ACS 2024 5-year, Table B01001 ²	18–24: 14.40% · 25–34: 16.22% · 35–44: 14.48% · 45–54: 13.31% · 55–64: 14.74% · 65–74: 15.02% · 75+: 11.84%
Education	Adults 25+; ACS 2024 5-year, Table B15003 ²	Less than high school: 9.48% · High school or GED: 21.12% · Some college or associate: 32.61% · Bachelor's or higher: 36.79%
Hispanic origin	Adults 18+; derived from ACS 2024 5-year, Table B01001 ²	Hispanic or Latino: 32.69% · Not Hispanic or Latino: 67.31%

Table A4. Weighting targets.

Survey Items and Their Use

Every item in the civic instrument, who was asked it, and how it is used in this report.

QUESTION	ASKED OF	USE	SECTION
Gateway: which best describes you	All	Assigns reader path	4
Weekly time on reading by choice	Readers by choice (A)	Scored — Frequency (35%)	4
Format used most often	All who read (A+B)	Descriptive	4
Main reading purposes; single main purpose	All who read (A+B)	Descriptive	4
Relationship with reading	All	Scored — Identity (25%)	4
“People like me are readers”	All	Belonging diagnostic — not scored	4
What reading gives you	Readers by choice (A)	Descriptive	4
Past-year sources of reading material	All	Descriptive	5
How material is obtained; travel time	All who read (A+B)	Descriptive	5
Barriers to reading more; biggest barrier	All	Descriptive	5
Where you most often read	All who read (A+B)	Descriptive	6
Frequency of recommending or discussing books	Readers by choice (A)	Scored — Social Reading (15%)	6
Past-year literary activities, items 1–4	All who read (A+B)	Scored — Ambient (10%)	6
Past-year literary activities, items 5–9	All who read (A+B)	Scored — Ecosystem (15%)	6
Reading with children age 12 and under	All	Satellite indicator — not scored	8

"Tucson is a city that values reading"	All	Civic perception	9
What would make Tucson a stronger reading city	All	Open-ended thematic coding	9
Demographics: ZIP, age, Hispanic origin, home language, income, education, children	All	Weighting and subgroup analysis (age, education, Hispanic origin); income and home language collected, not used for either	7, 13

Table B1. Survey items and their use. Reader paths: A = readers by choice; B = required-only readers; C = non-readers. "All" means every retained respondent, including non-readers.

External Sources and Comparability

No external figure is an input to the index. Each source below appears in this report as context only, and each differs from this survey in ways that limit direct comparison.

SOURCE	USED FOR	COMPARABILITY CAUTION
U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2024 5-year estimates ²	Weighting targets; population denominators	Five-year vintage; 2020–2024 estimates. The Census language-at-home construct is not equivalent to this survey's home-language question, which is why language was not used for weighting. Language and disability figures cited in Sections 5 and 13 use the population aged five and over, and the civilian noninstitutionalized population, respectively — neither matches this report's adult base.
NEA, <i>Arts Participation Patterns in 2022</i> ³	National reading context	Measures “books and/or literature,” including audiobooks — narrower than this survey's gateway, which counts any voluntary reading or listening. National estimates only; this document reports no state figures.
NEA, <i>50 States of Arts Participation: 2022</i> ¹⁸	Arizona state-level context	Measures a narrower construct still: reading novels or short stories. The NEA cautions that state samples afford limited statistical power, that some state module samples fall below 100 respondents, that estimates are suppressed above a 50% coefficient of variation and flagged between 30% and 50%, and that comparisons are not adjusted for multiple testing.
Pew Research Center, October 2025 book-reading survey ⁴	National book-reading and format context	National probability panel; asks about books only. Not comparable to this survey's broad gateway.

Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey ⁹	Reading time and age gradient context	Single-day diary measure. Age bins differ from this survey. The 2025 release carries a data-quality caveat from suspended federal operations.
NCES, U.S. PIAAC Skills Map ¹	Literacy proficiency and education- gradient context	Modeled small-area estimate for ages 16–74, built from combined 2012, 2014, and 2017 assessment cycles with ACS data — not a current-year measurement, and a model prediction rather than a direct county measurement. Measures skill, not behavior. Credible intervals must be retained; NCES reports a median coefficient of variation of about 10% across counties, and treats overlapping credible intervals as insufficient grounds to call two areas different. These county figures rest on PIAAC Cycle 1; NCES has stated that Cycle 2 state and county estimates are expected during 2026 and would supersede them.
IMLS Public Libraries Survey / Pima County Public Library ¹²	Library trend and branch context	Per-capita measures use the survey's unduplicated service population, not this report's adult base. The FY2024 electronic- circulation definition changed.
Arizona State Library public library statistics ¹¹	State comparison context	Drawn from the same federal collection as the IMLS figures, so not an independent confirmation. State reporting lags: the most recent Arizona annual report retrievable from the state library covers FY2022, and its most recent data workbook covers FY2023, while the federal survey has published FY2024.

Table C1. External sources and comparability.

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A note on figures in this report

Every survey figure in this report derives from the Wave 1 analytic file of 511 respondents and the weighting described in Section 13. External figures are reproduced from the published sources above and were checked against those sources at the time of publication. Where a source has since been revised, the source controls.

Sources 19 through 24 support the argument in Section 12 and are not inputs to any measurement in this report. They vary in evidence strength, and that variation is described where each appears: sources 19, 20 and 21 rest on meta-analyses, randomized designs, or large nationally representative samples, while 22, 23 and 24 are observational, case-based, or otherwise correlational and are presented with that limitation attached.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks

This report exists because 511 people in Pima County agreed to answer questions about their reading lives, and because 479 of them took the trouble to write, in their own words, what they thought would make this a better city to read in. Several of them wrote at real length to a stranger who could offer them nothing in return. Their answers shape Section 9 and, indirectly, most of the rest.

Fielding and data collection were carried out by Cint, on the Forsta/Decipher platform.

The Spanish translation of the instrument was completed by Camila Kohen, ATA Certified Translator, with Mexican Spanish dialect review by Maura Miller, State Court Certified Spanish Interpreter.

Research direction, analysis, and report development: Damion Topping, Founder, The Place & Page. ORCID 0009-0005-7693-8614.

Responsibility for this report's conclusions, its limitations, its scoring decisions, and its publication judgments rests with the project alone.

The Tucson State of Reading is an independent annual measurement produced by The Place & Page, Tucson, Arizona.

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The technical methodology, an executive summary, and a *Findings and Reporting Guide* to the correct use of these figures are published alongside this report. Respondent-level data and custom tabulations are not released. Correspondence may be directed to The Place & Page, Tucson, Arizona, at tsor@theplaceandpage.com.

TUCSON STATE OF READING

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