

Tucson State of Reading

2026 BASELINE EDITION • EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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.



The Tucson Reading Health Index™ is a 0–100 composite of five weighted components. Its bands are interpretive civic ranges chosen by this project to make the score legible — not clinically validated, and not normed against any other community. The numeric score, not the band, is what future waves are measured against.

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. The full report 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 full report and the methodology documentation explain 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.

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This is an extract of the *Tucson State of Reading 2026: Baseline Edition*, a 65-page report in thirteen sections with three appendices and fourteen figures. Every figure quoted here appears in the full report with its base, its question wording and its caveats. The full report, the *Methodology Documentation, Wave 1* — which carries the fielded instrument architecture, quality-control protocol, weighting mechanics and dated decision record — and a *Findings and Reporting Guide* to the correct use of these figures are published together at theplaceandpage.com/tsor/2026.

Unless a figure is labeled otherwise, every percentage here is a weighted estimate describing Pima County adults age 18 and older. Tucson and Pima County name the same place: the Tucson metropolitan area, as the federal government defines it, is Pima County alone.

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. 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 dated before any finding was written. The report stops short of recommending solutions, including any that would favor a bookstore.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

The Place & Page. (2026). *Tucson State of Reading 2026: Baseline edition*.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22714565

Edition page: theplaceandpage.com/tsor/2026

Cite the full report rather than this summary. Wave 1.0 — September 2026.

Corrections after publication are documented in a public errata and version log maintained by The Place & Page.

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