

**Research note: Across the
United States,
85,000 to 144,000
public computing sites**

by Kate Williams

A question was posed on the U.S.-based *Digital Divide* listserv [1] in February, 2003: How many community technology centers are there in the United States?

Based on past research counting such sites, I estimate that there are between 85,000 and 144,000 public computing sites across the country. These include but are not limited to:

- public libraries;
- Internet cafés;
- telecenters (community technology centers);
- copy shops;
- day care centers;
- churches;
- community centers;
- laundromats;
- hospitals;
- apartment complexes;
- museums; and,
- government offices.

This estimate does not include formal educational institutions from kindergarten through university level, generally accessible only to enrolled students. It also does not include public wireless zones where people have to provide their own computer.

This estimate is based on a census of public computing sites done in Toledo, Ohio (Alkalimat and Williams, forthcoming). This is the only study I know of which looks beyond the associations of such organizations such as digitaldividenetwork.org, CTCNet, HUD Neighborhood Networks, and others, to enumerate all the public computing sites that have come into existence over the last ten years. Surveys or census work has also been carried out by John Bertot and Charles McClure on computers in public libraries [2] and the U.S. Department of Education on computers in schools. Summary data from the Toledo study (gathered in 2001), and from the U.S. Census [3], is in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Data from the Toledo public computing census and the U.S. Census

Toledo public computing census data	
public computing sites found	253
minus sites at formal educational institutions, where access is limited to enrolled students (kindergarten to university level)	(135)
all other sites	118
public computing sites (extrapolated from response rate of 48 percent)	316
minus sites at formal educational institutions	(135)
all other sites, extrapolated	181

U.S. Census data	
Toledo, Ohio population	313,600
U.S. population, metropolitan areas only	225,000,000
U.S. population	248,000,000

Toledo is not a major center of technology. It is a post-industrial city in search of a new economic base and cultural lifestyle. At the same time, Toledo has a history of local community technology activism (both community networks and community technology centers or CTCs) that resulted in a metro-area association of CTCs beginning work in the mid 1990s.

As a result, this estimate assumes that Toledo is an average U.S. city in this regard. It also assumes that the entire Toledo metropolitan area has the same number of sites per person as I measured in the city limits. The estimate is a range, rather than one number, in order to incorporate a variety of assumptions. First, either rural areas have no public computing sites, or they have the same number of sites per person as Toledo. Second, either the found number of 118 sites in Toledo is more valid, or the extrapolated 181 sites in Toledo is more valid. This is detailed in the second table below.

The calculations in [Table 2](#) take the number of sites in Toledo, divide by the number of people in Toledo, and multiply by the U.S. population (either metro-only or the entire population). This results in the range of 85,000 to 144,000 public computing sites in the United States. 

Table 2: Four estimates for the number of public computing sites in the U.S., excluding student-only sites

	Assumption: Rural areas have no public computing	Assumption: Rural areas have public computing at same rate as metro areas
calculating from the 118 sites found in Toledo	84,662	93,580
calculating from the 181 sites extrapolated in Toledo	129,863	143,542

About the Author

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Notes

1. The listserv is moderated and hosted by the Benton Foundation. See digitaldividenetwork.org.
2. Multiple studies by Bertot and McClure are cited in Williams, 2001. The American Library Association reports that there are 16,298 library buildings (branches or locations). Bertot and McClure, 2000, page 3, found public access computing in 95.7 percent of library locations, so it is possible to estimate that 15,600 public libraries locations nationwide provide public computing.
3. Data from the U.S. Census American Fact Finder.

References

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