



15 years of IMLS figures

For the Freckle Project

All the data in this presentation is direct from IMLS published information

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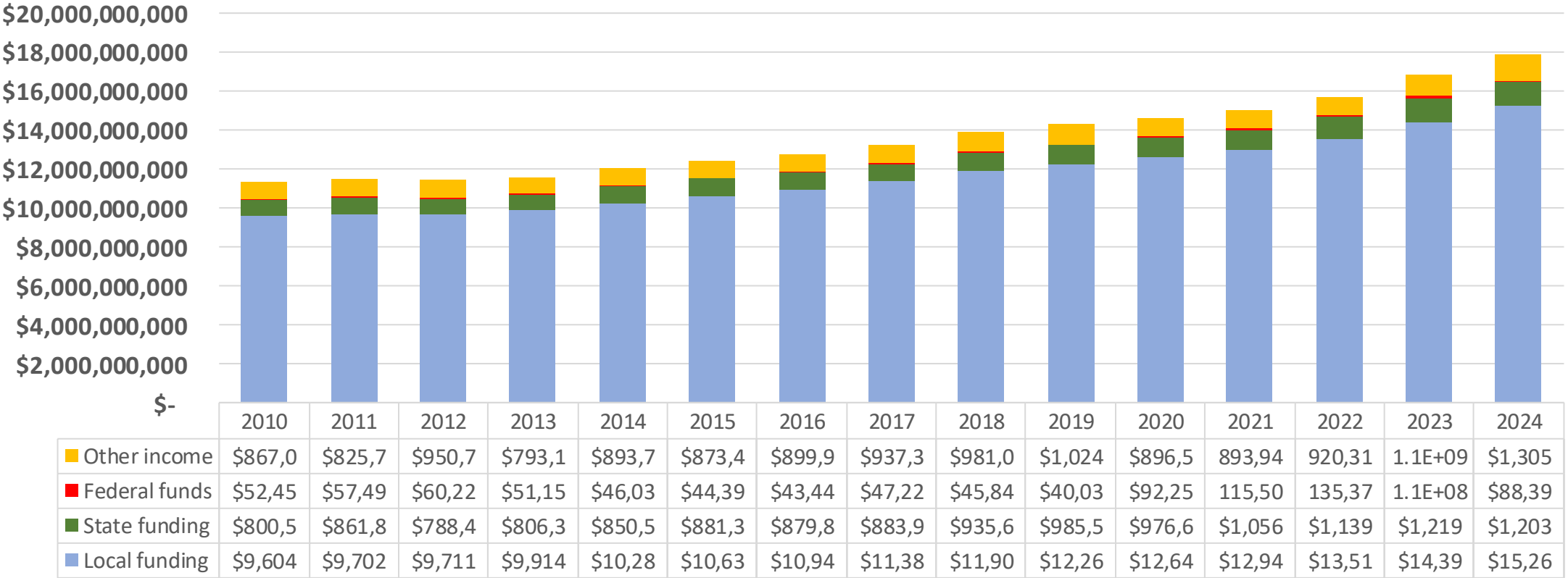
August 2026

Review of IMLS public library figures from 2010 to 2024

- 2024 has the highest number of library facilities
 - 9,046 Central Libraries
 - 7,769 Branch Libraries
 - 765 Mobile libraries
 - TOTAL 17,580
- 2024 has the highest number of library staff
 - 34,382 librarians with master's degrees
 - 53,058 other qualified library staff
 - 94,151 other library staff
 - TOTAL 147,289 employed staff

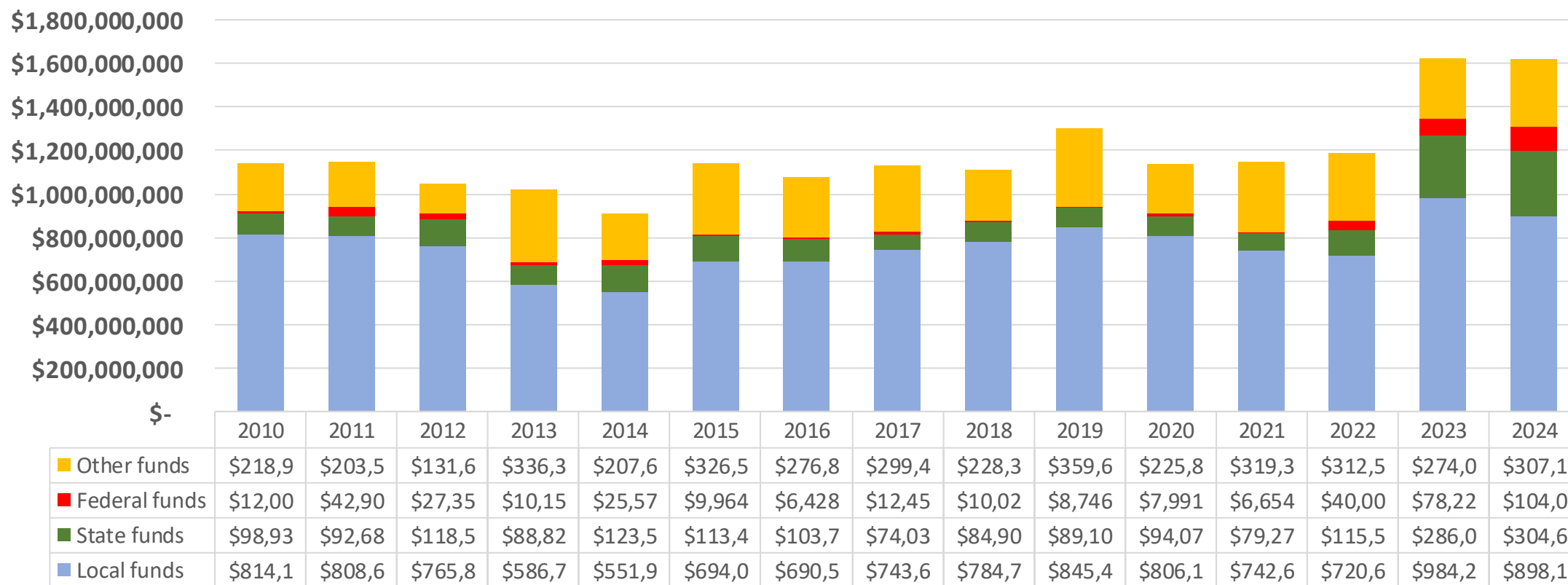
In 2024 public libraries received nearly \$18bn: the highest ever levels of funding for operations

Sources of funding of library operations



In 2024 public libraries received a further \$1.6bn of income for capital works

Sources of funds for library capital works

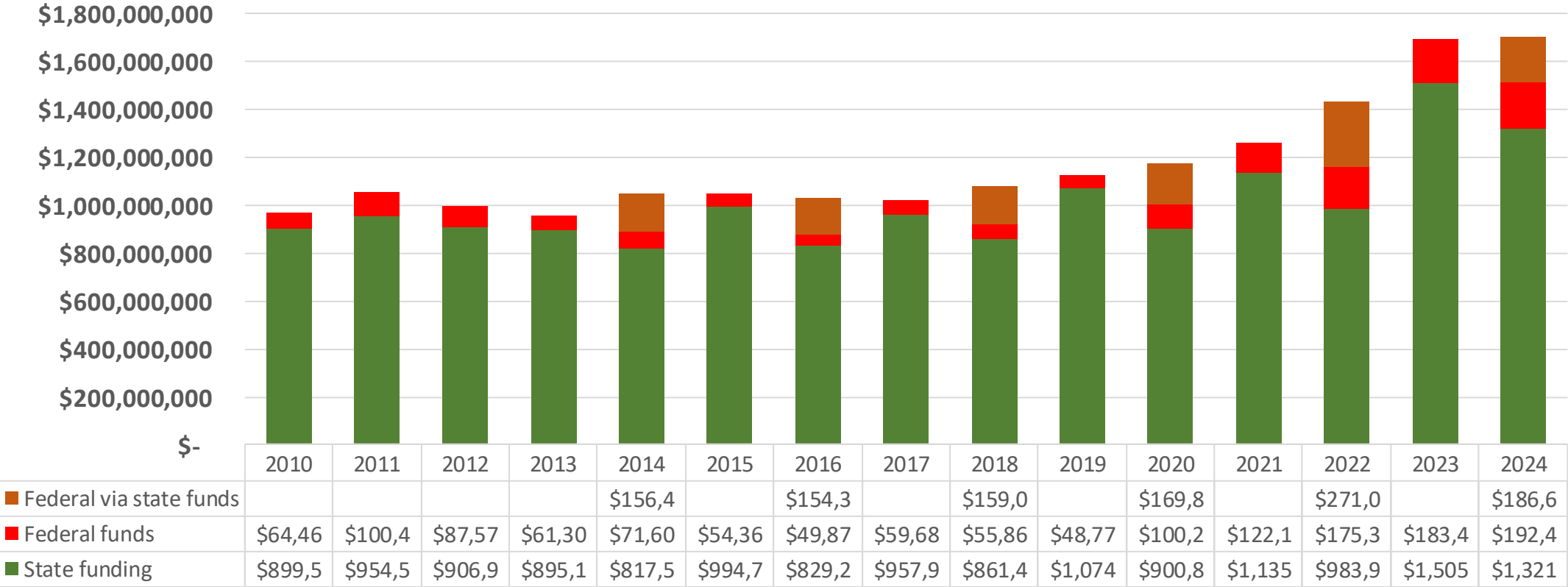


2024 : Sources of public library funding (operations plus capital)

- Total : \$19.5bn
- Local funding \$16.2bn (83.0%)
- State funds \$1.3bn (6.8%)
- Federal funds \$0.4bn (1.9%)
- Other income \$1.6bn (8.3%)

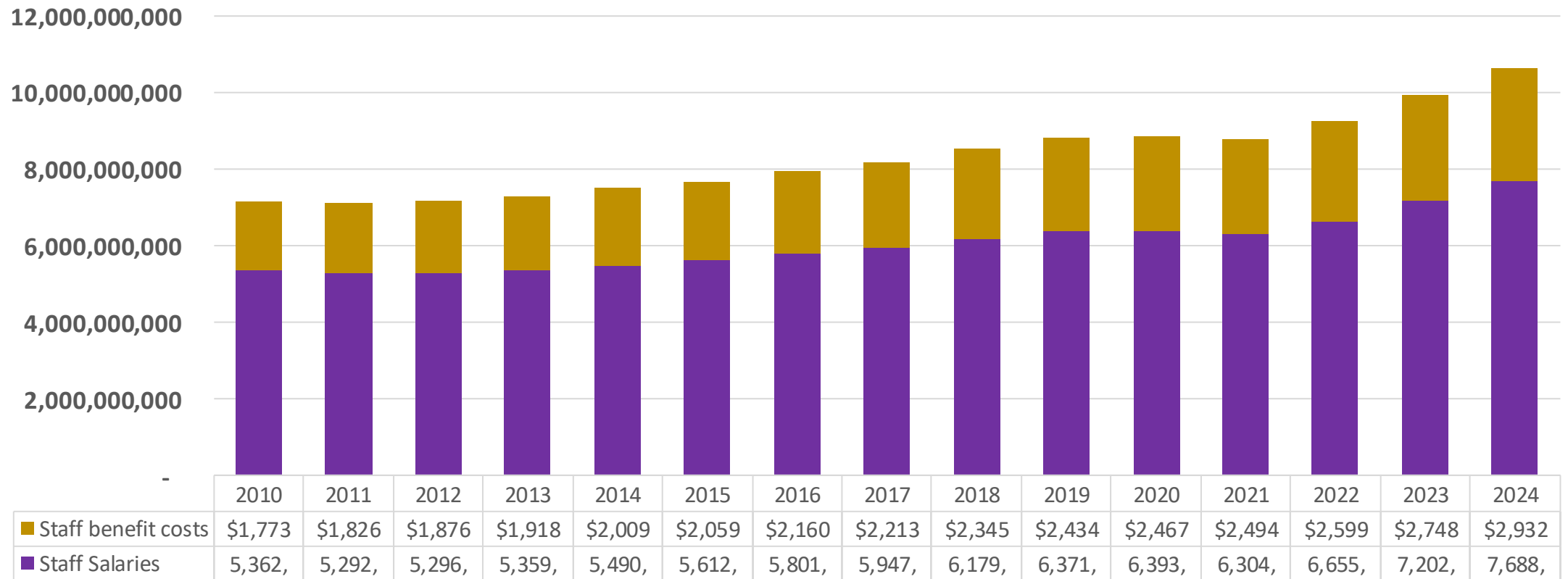
State and federal funding of public libraries:

State and federal Sources of funding of public libraries

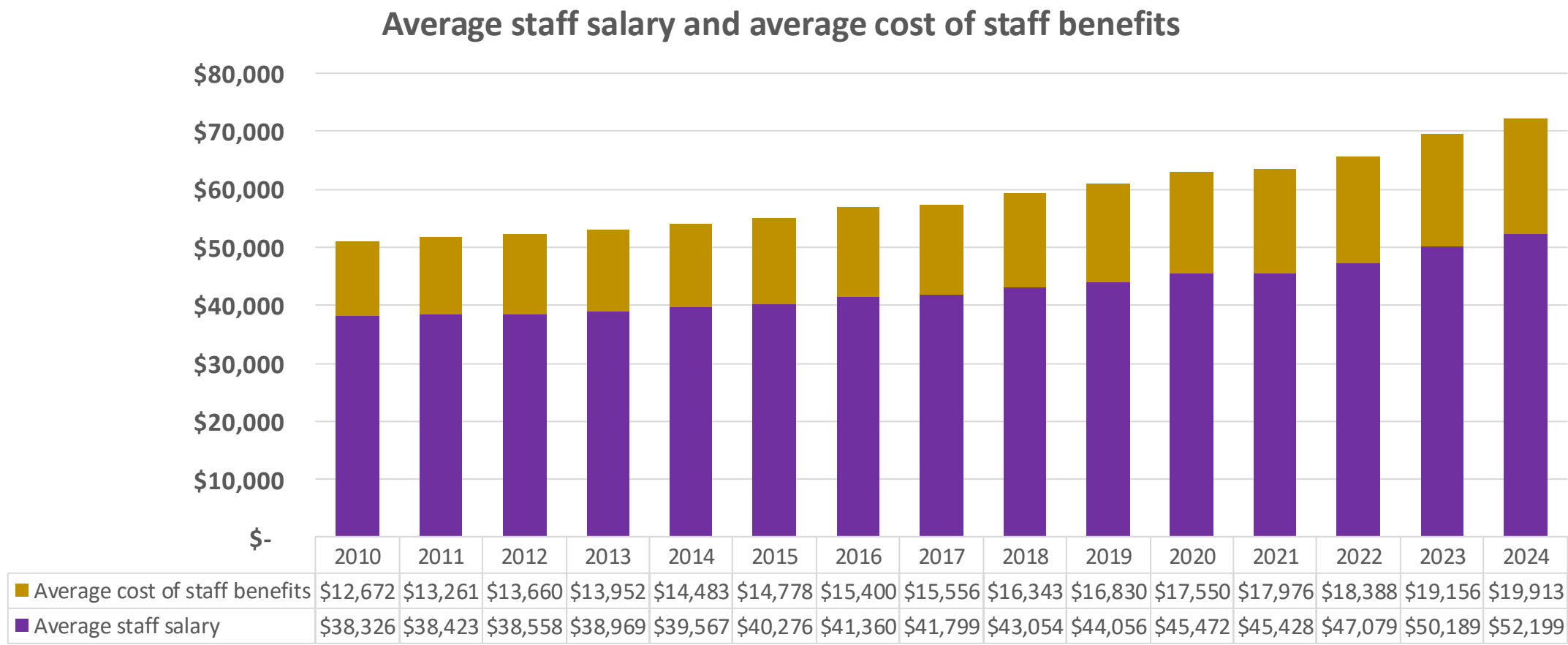


Annual expenditure on staff has exceeded \$10bn for the first time

Expenditure on salaries and benefits

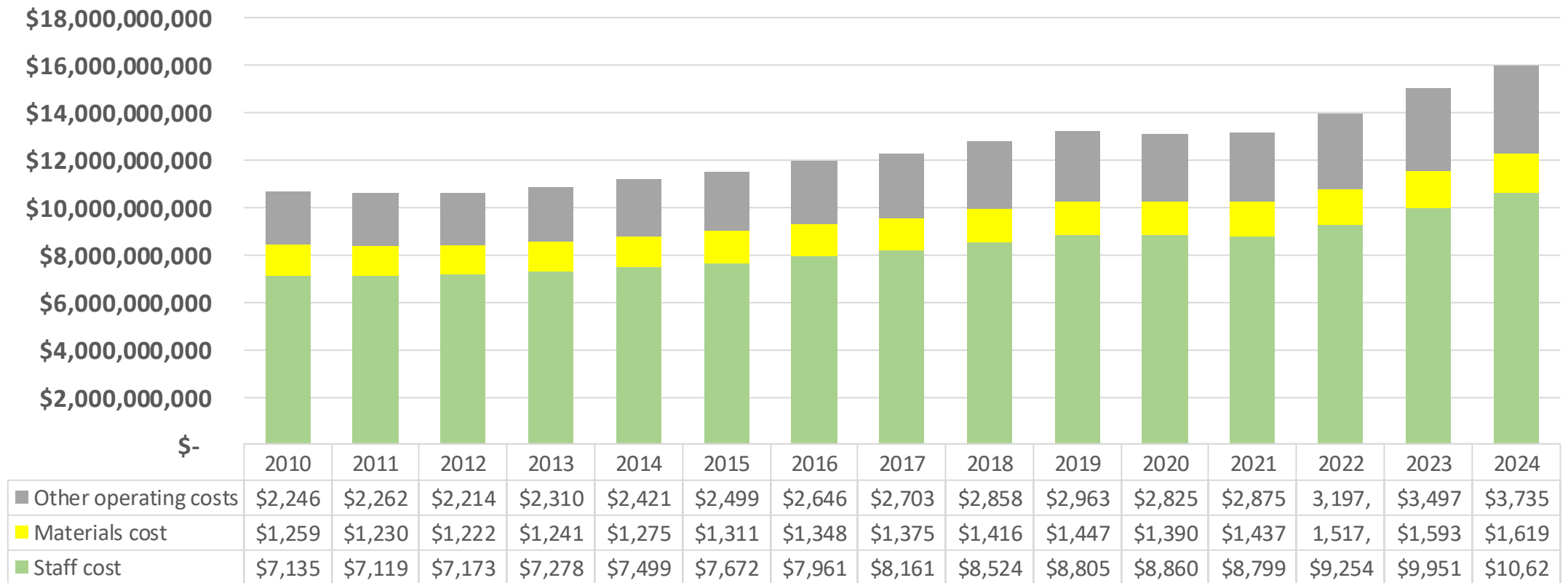


Salaries and benefits are at their highest level



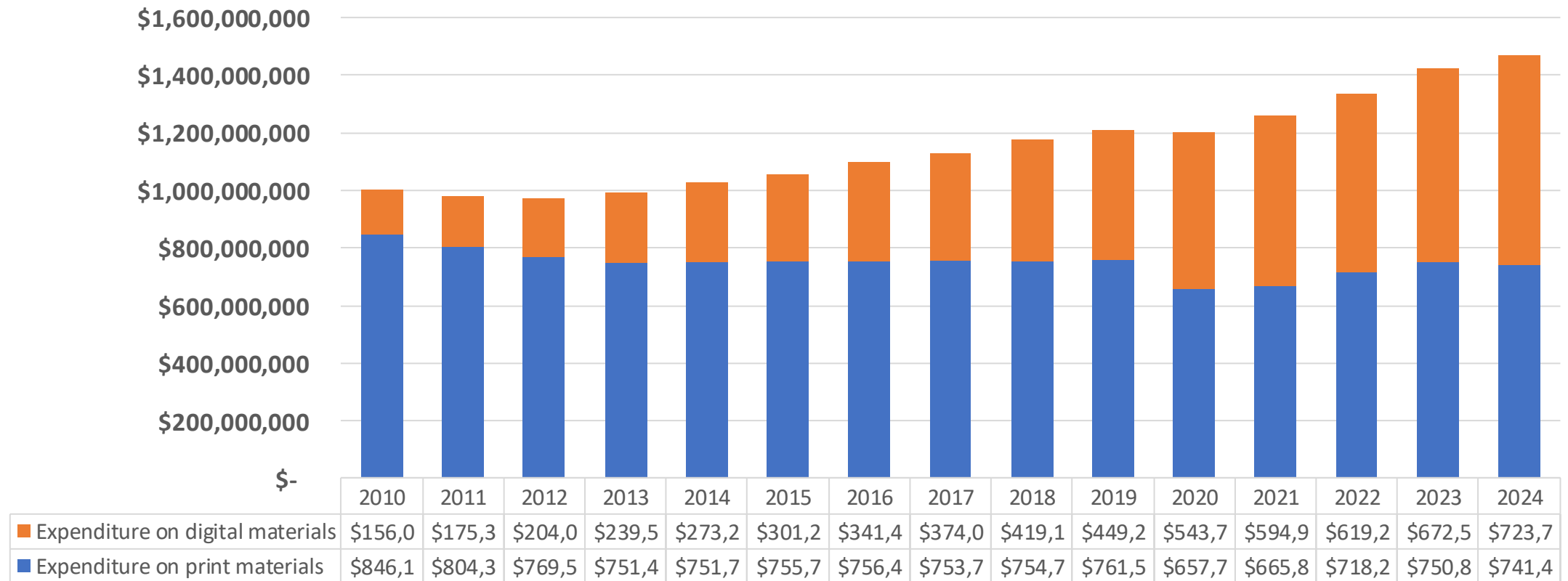
Staff costs are the largest operational costs

Operating costs of public libraries



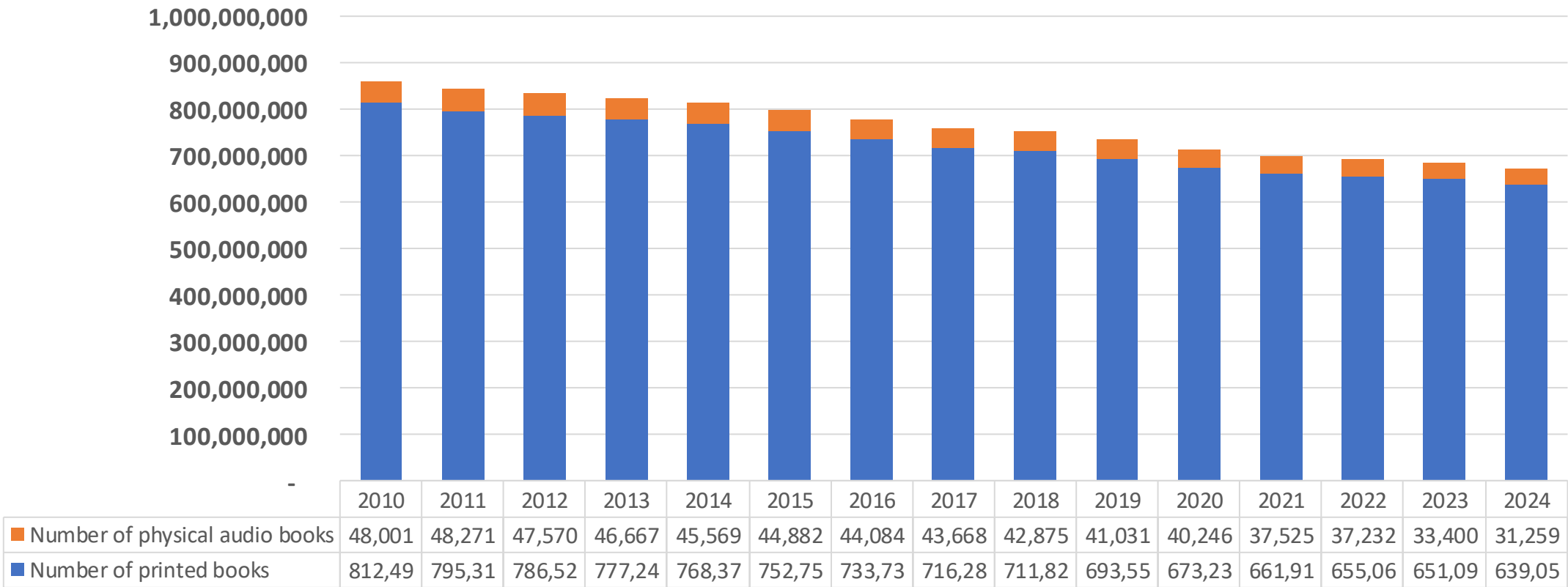
Expenditure on printed materials has fallen

Library expenditure on print and digital materials

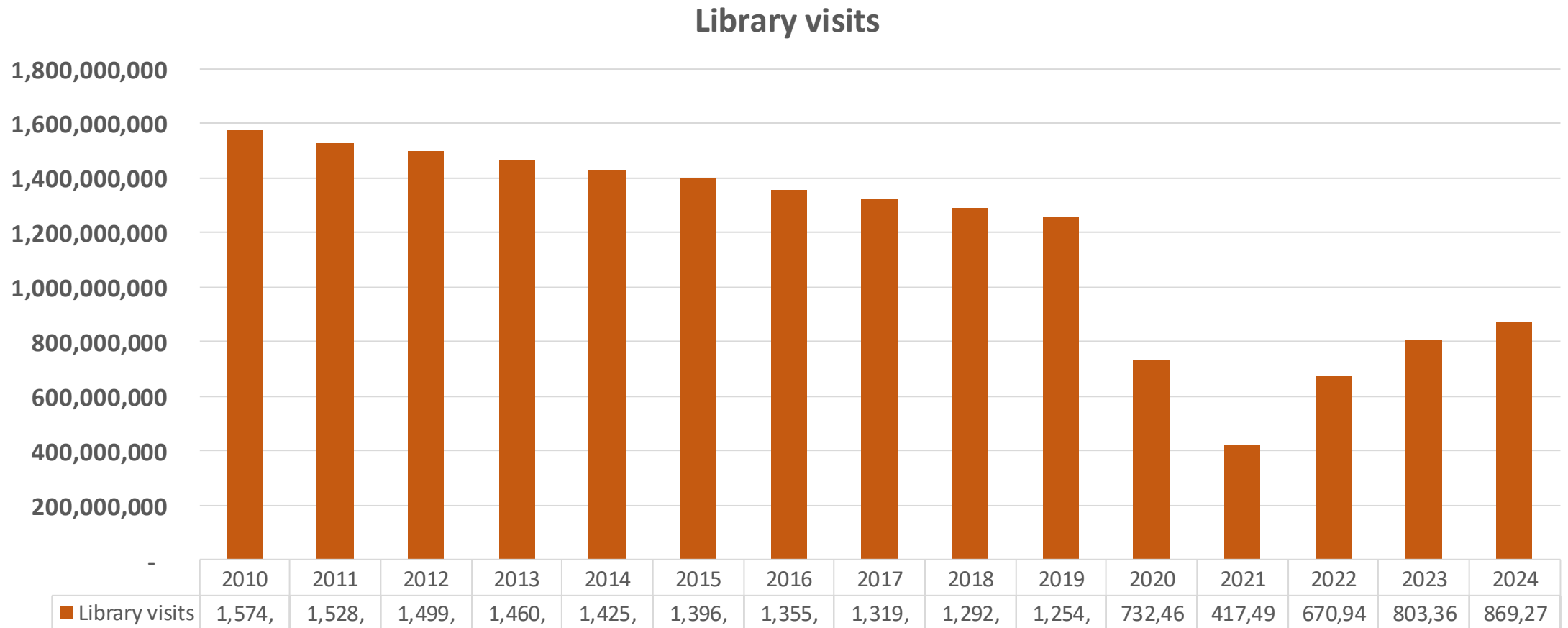


The number of books available has fallen

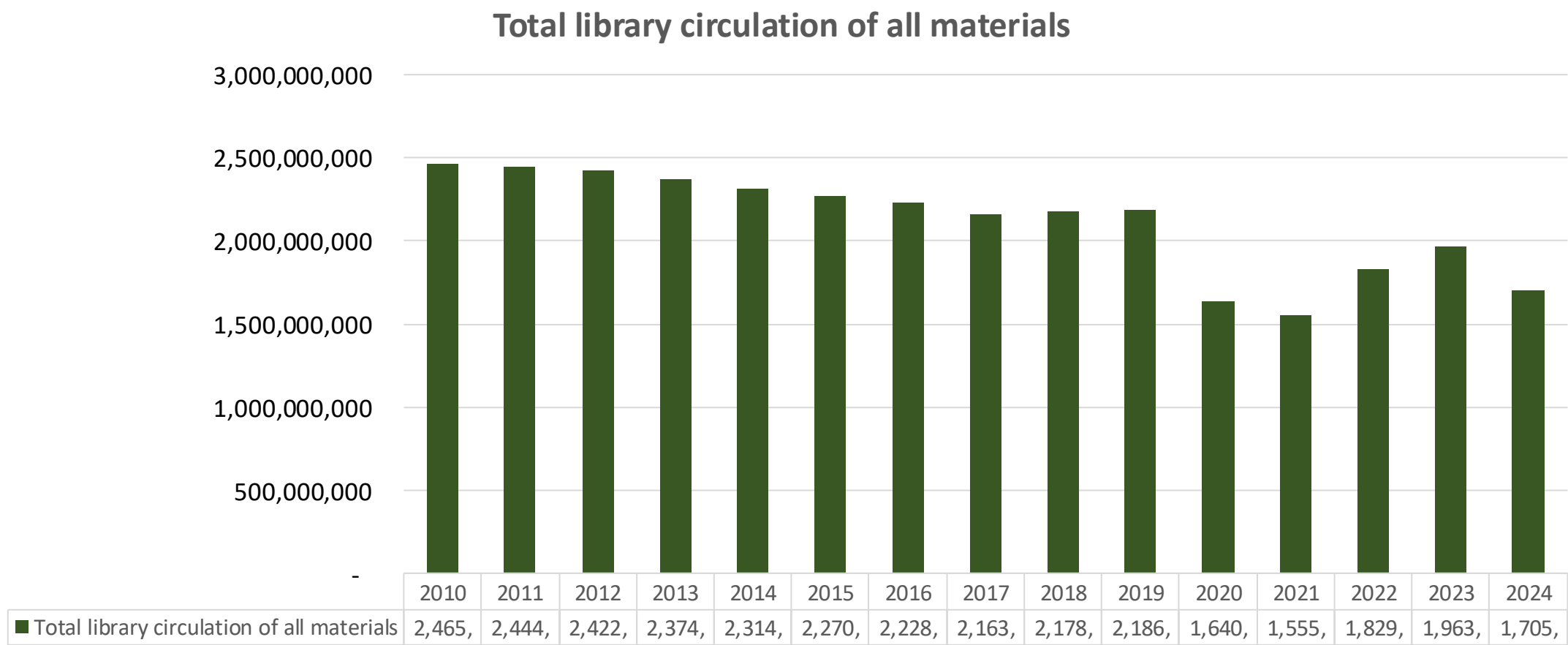
Numbers of books in US public libraries



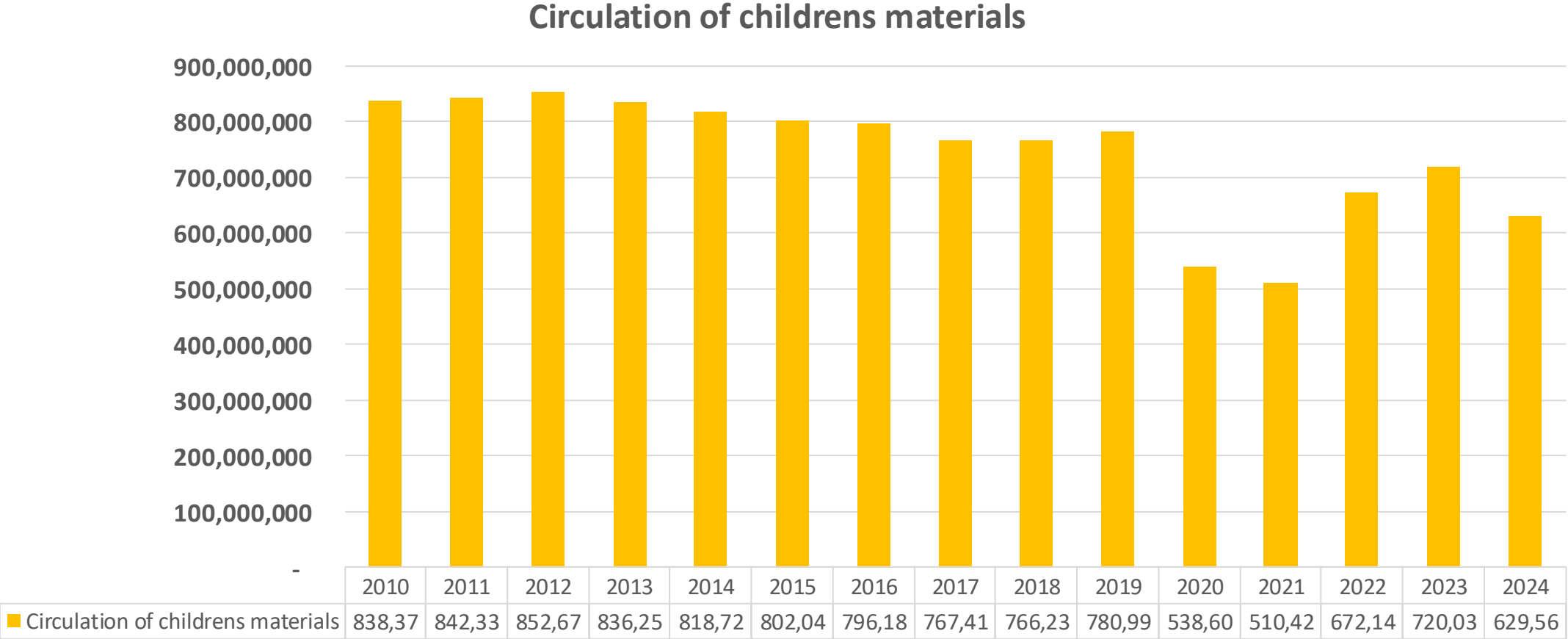
The number of library visits has fallen



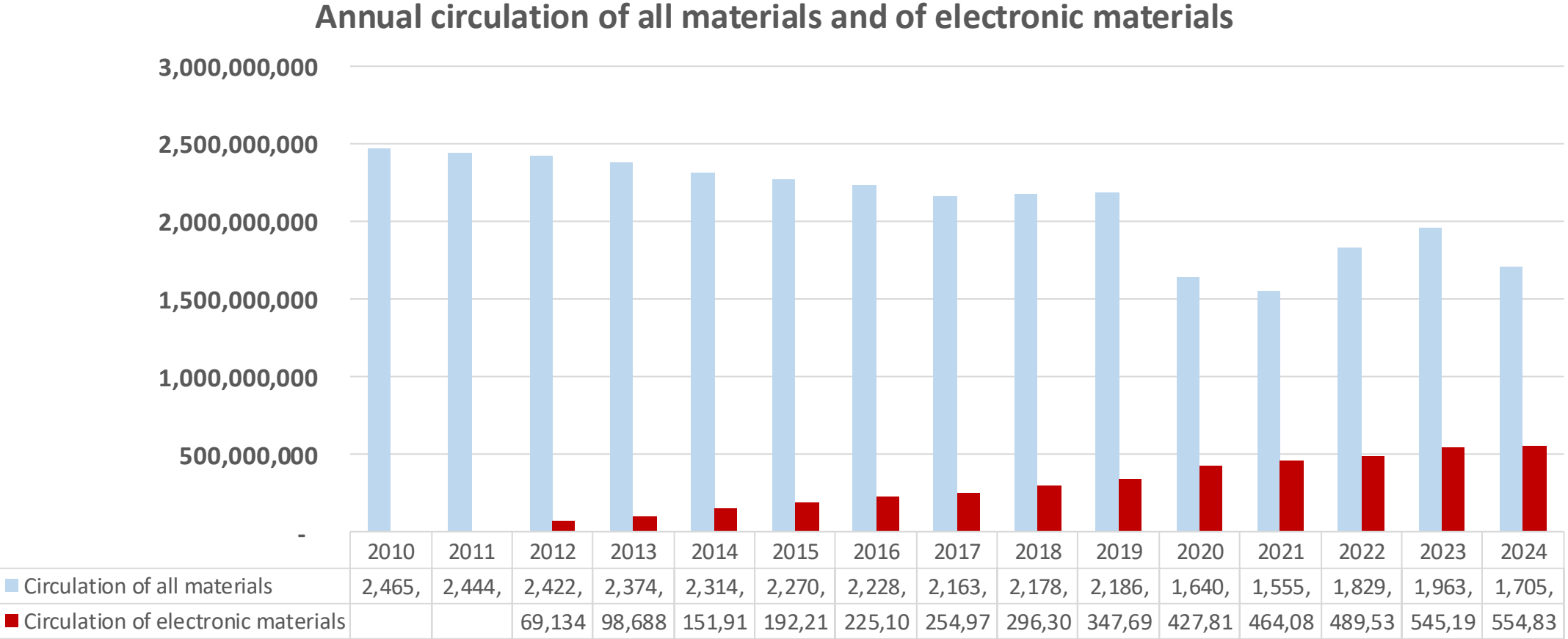
Total circulation of library materials has fallen



Circulation of children’s materials has fallen



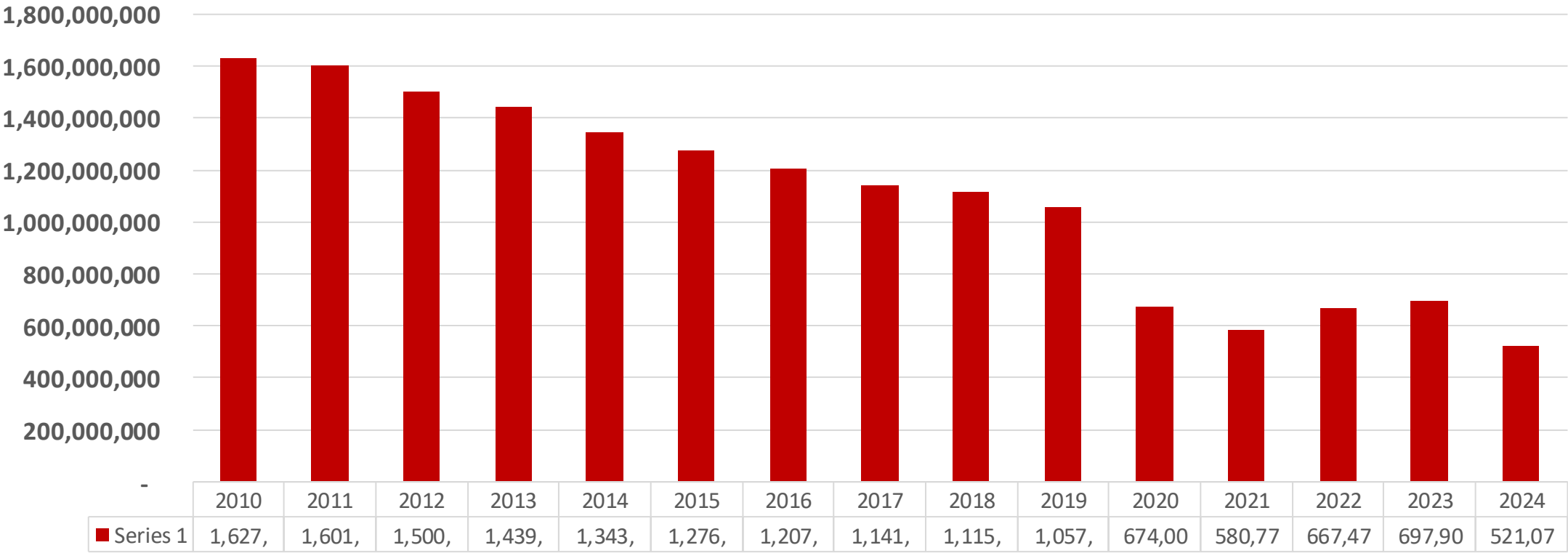
Circulation of electronic materials has risen



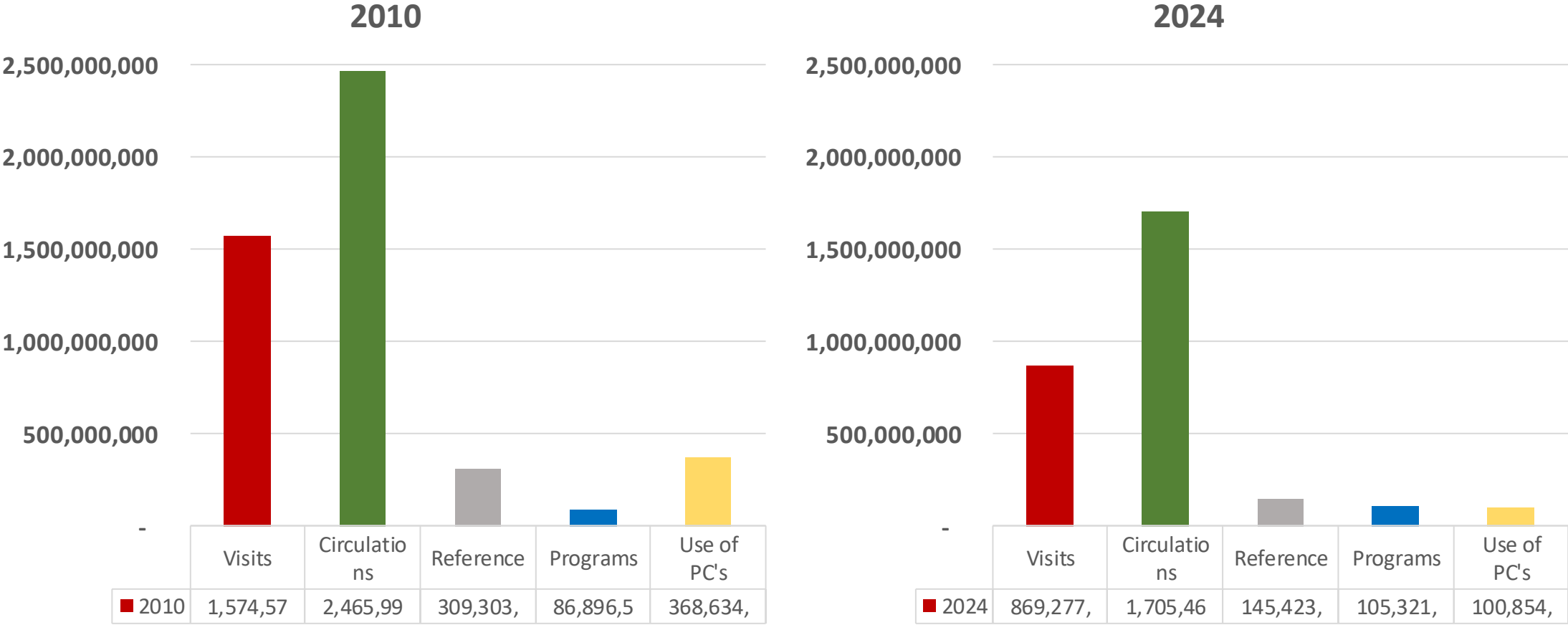
Circulation of physical material to adults has fallen by 68%

(about 15-20% of these circulations are of DVD films)
(Data from IMLS, US Govt June 2026)

Total circulations, less electronic, less children's

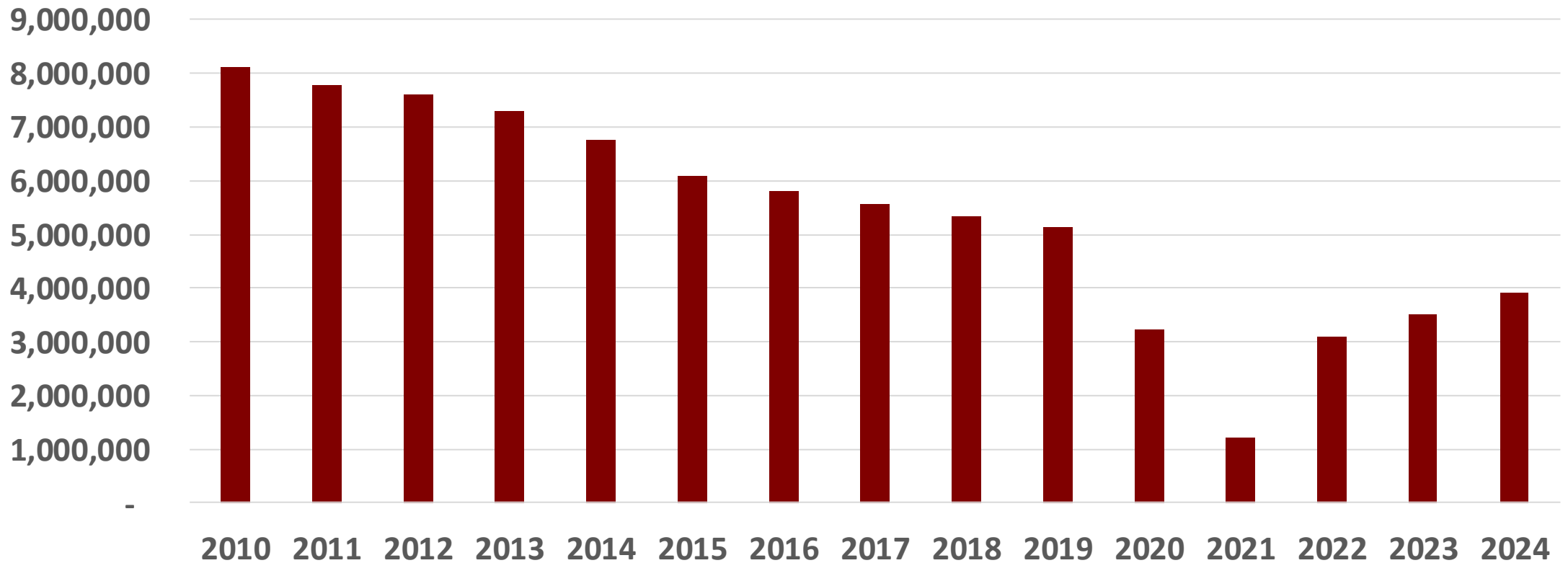


Programs and new technologies have not increased library use



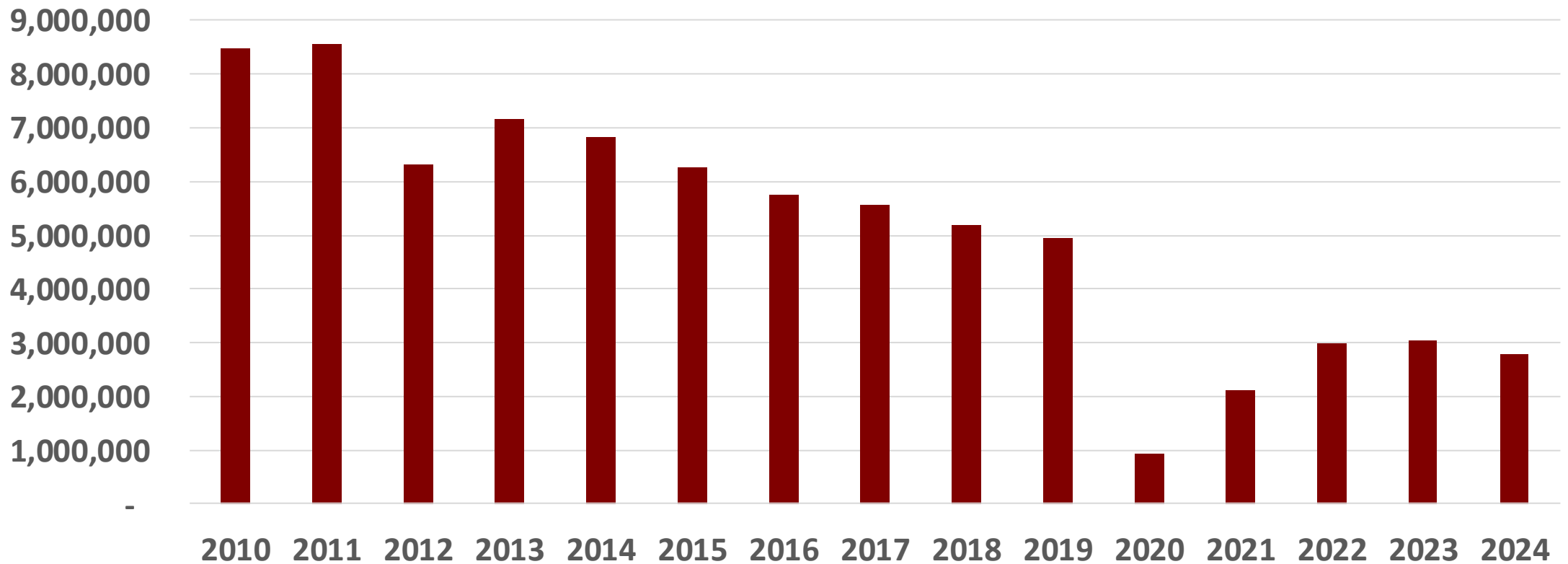
San Francisco Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



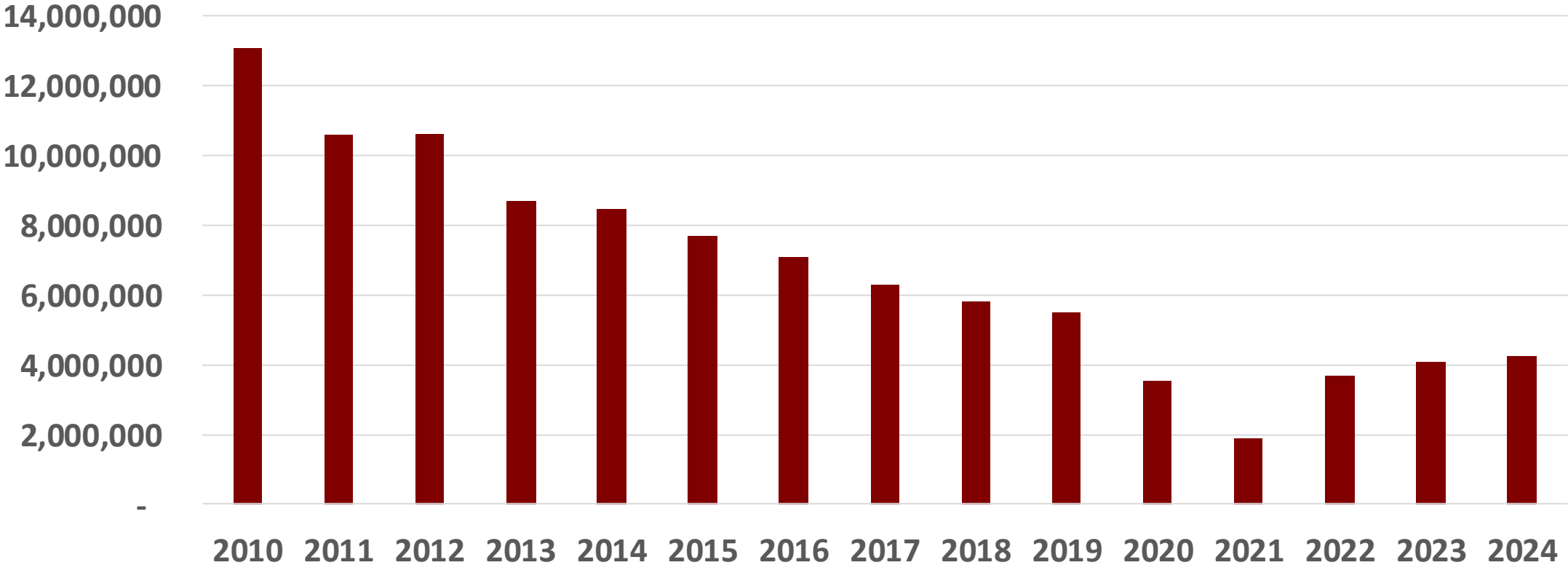
Seattle Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



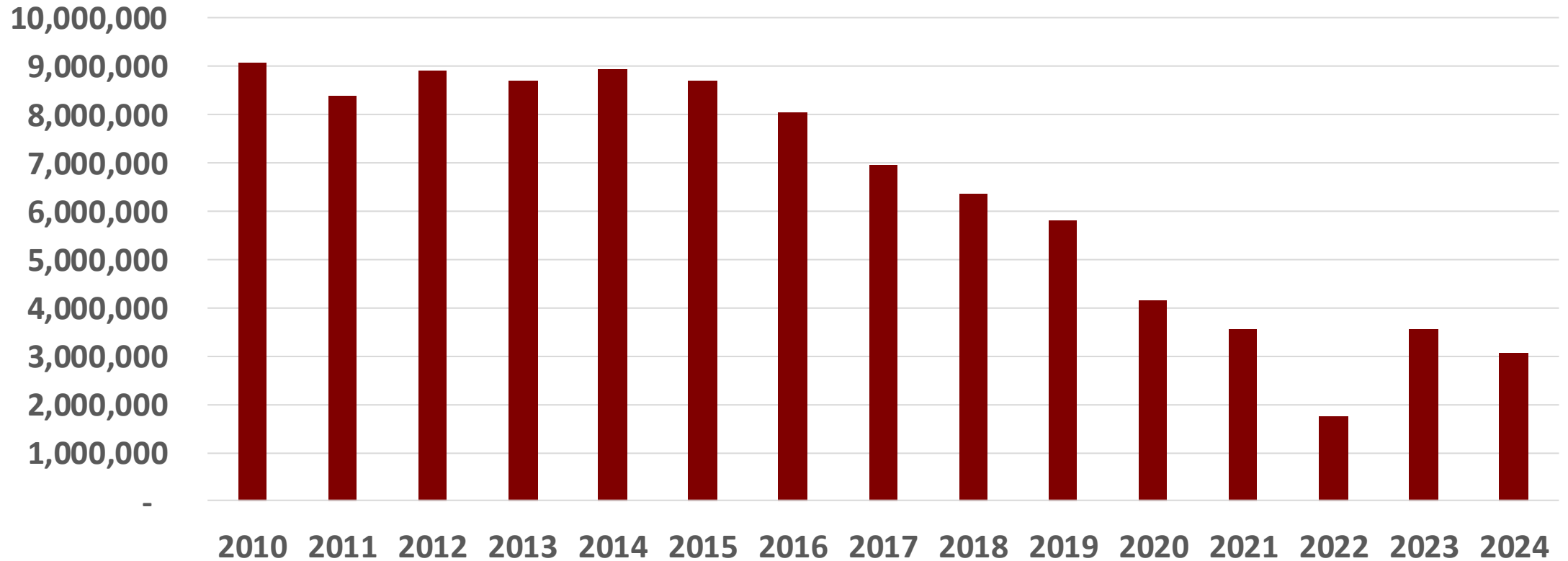
Los Angeles Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



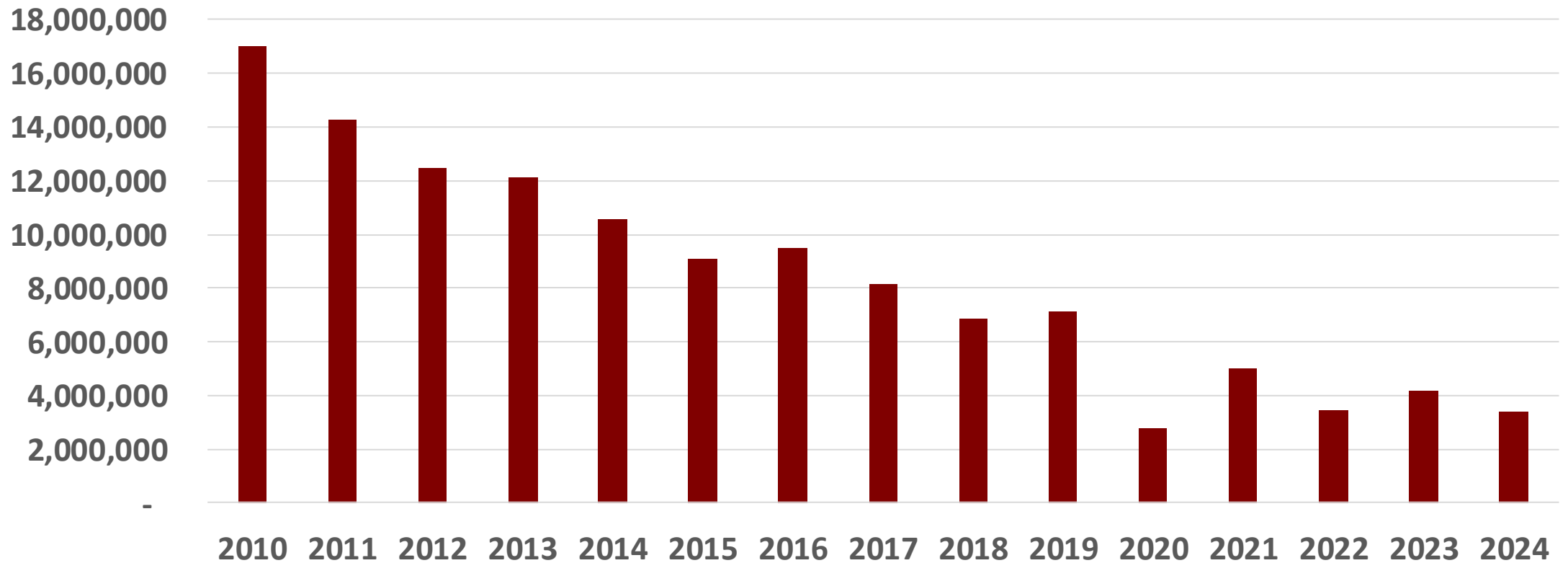
Las Vegas Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



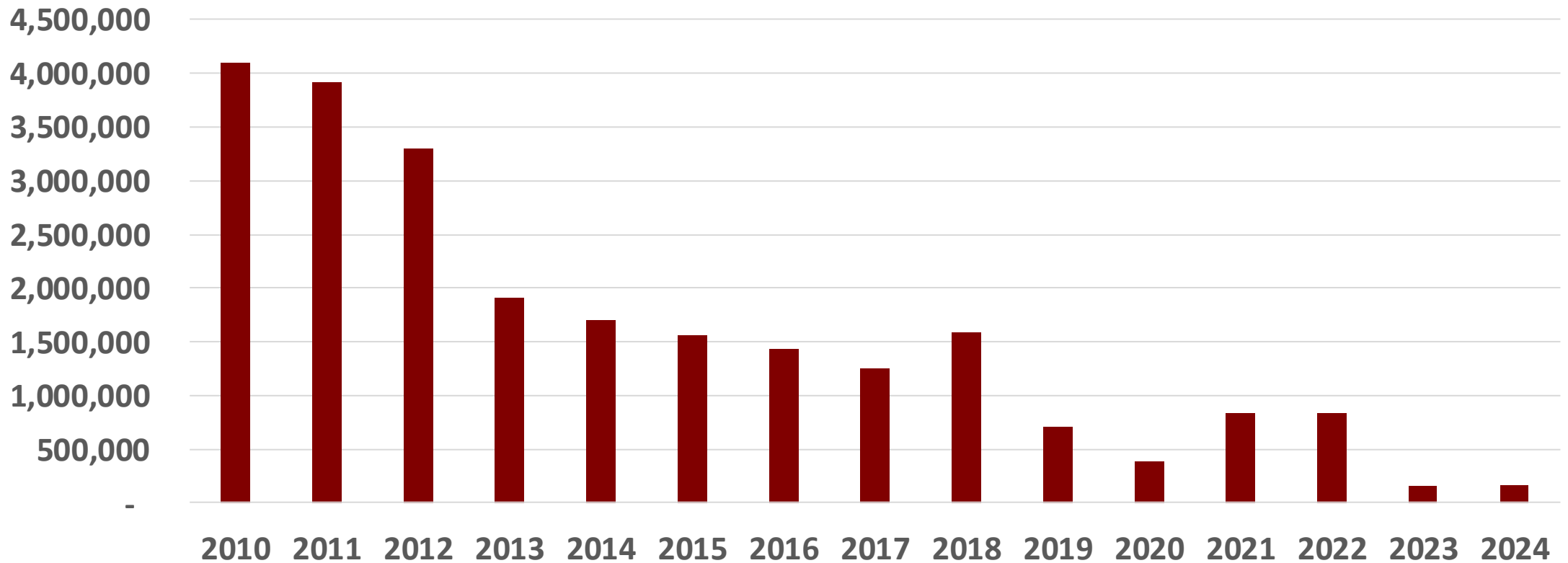
King County Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



Houston Public Library

Adult Physical Circulations



What has gone wrong?

- People don't find what they want to read
- Non-fiction collections are poor
- Fiction is not representative of what people actually read
- Signage is incomprehensible (Dewey numbers)
- Displays are not attractive

Why?

- Collection management is far too much about front list publishing
- Most new publications have lost interest after 3 months. Retailers return them, libraries allow them to fill shelves
- Book suppliers are interested in what libraries buy, not whether the library is successful
- Back list collections are very poor – but these are 80% of what people want

What to do?

- Core stock lists for both fiction and non fiction are essential
- What matters is not 'what circulates' – but what 'doesn't circulate because we haven't got it'
- Stop using Dewey – and stop sticking class labels on books whose subjects and authors are evident from the cover.
- Smarten up the appearance and lighting of displays

What are the basics?

- People, everywhere want their library to be for books and reading
- They want it to be attractive, welcoming, peaceful and dignified.
- They want to find what they want to read (not what someone wants to push at them)
- Libraries need to notice and take action when use goes down as it has

Conclusions

- The public library service in the US is extremely well resourced
 - It has substantial and established funding
 - It has a huge estate of public buildings
 - It has an abundance of well trained and well-paid staff
- Yet, by every measure available, use of the service has fallen a lot
- None, of many, of the initiatives of the past 20 years has succeeded.
- In particular – this year's figures highlight the low use of the service by adults.
- The greater part (over 80%) of the cost of public libraries lies in the buildings, and yet use of services in the buildings continues to fall. Emphasis on digital service, which is of limited appeal, does not help that.

Recommendations

- The problem of falling use needs to be addressed branch library, by branch library – and within those – shelf by shelf, until the needs of local people are seen to be met.
- Only then should that work be extrapolated to revised operating systems and allocation of financial resources
- In turn, that implies a change of culture, training and approach which will not be easy
- Key measures are missing, particularly one which tells what % of a local population are actually using the service.