

Reference Report

Reference statistics are reviewed annually to examine details of interactions between Library reference staff and Library patrons. The resulting information may be used to modify reference response procedures, desk staffing schedules, and other elements of Library reference provision.

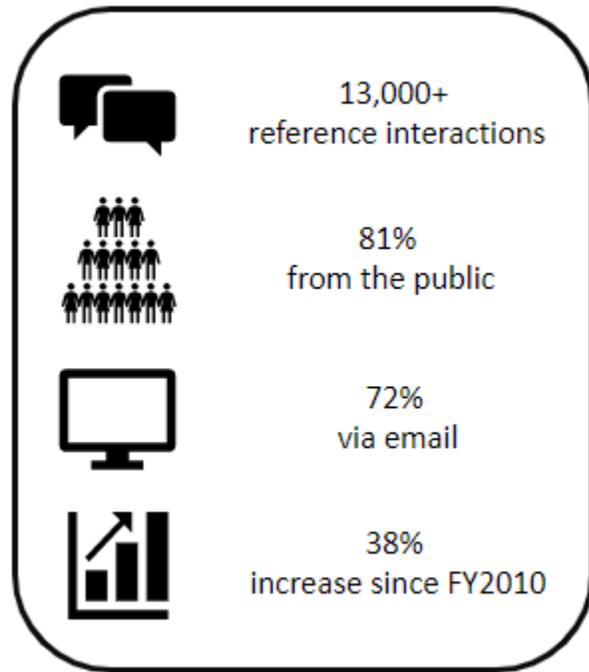
The Reference Report examines only direct interactions between reference staff and patrons, as when a patron contacts the Library with a question related to legal information, resources, or research (“information interaction”). The Report does not touch upon other avenues of patron/library contact, such as website or database use, circulation and physical collection usage, or educational and outreach programs offered by the Library. Nor does the Report include information about Library visitors who do not interact with staff, such as Judiciary staff or local attorneys who occupy research carrels and use Library resources, but do not consult with staff for research assistance, or public patrons who use the Library’s public computer access independently. The Report should not, therefore, be considered a full picture of all Library staff activity and workflow.

Information on overall Library activity during the fiscal year is available in the Library’s *Annual Highlights*.

Services

The Library provides reference and research assistance to Maryland Judiciary judges and staff, attorneys, librarians (public, corporate, and special), government agencies, students, and members of the general public, including self-represented litigants, correctional facility residents, and others in search of legal information for many purposes. Patrons are mainly either Maryland residents or have questions about Maryland law.

Reference staff interact with patrons through in-person visits, telephone, email, and standard mail. Interactions with patrons range from brief directional questions (“Where can I find the Maryland Code in print?”) to lengthy research queries (“What is the applicability and scope of Title IX?”). Staff assist through provision of informational materials, instructional assistance, and evaluation of resources. Reference staff adhere to Library guidelines for reference provision, including the [Guidelines for Information Service to the Public](#) and the [Guidelines for E-Mail Reference Services](#).



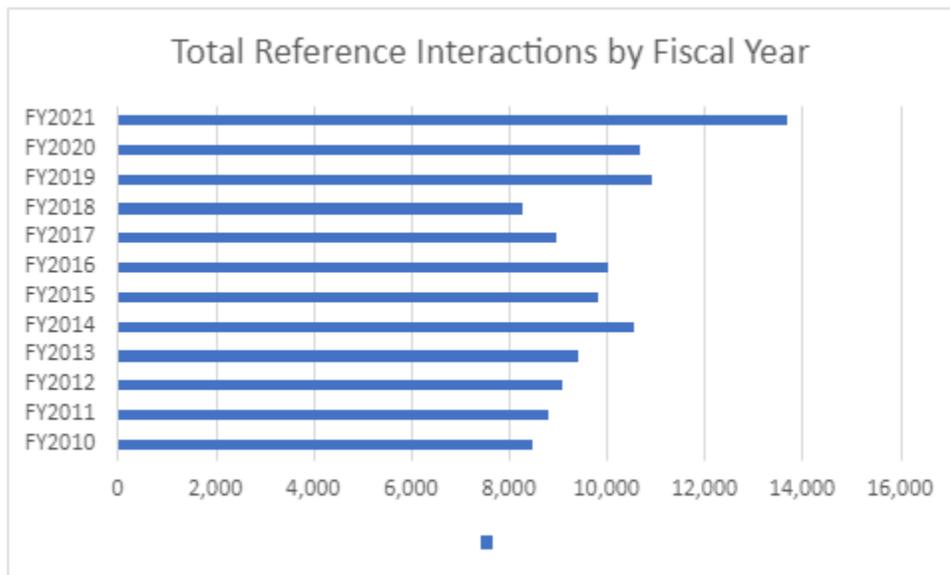
Statistical Summary

Patron interaction statistics are tracked through categories based on those recommended by the Conference of Maryland Court Law Library Directors (CMCLLD). These include format, location of inquiry, patron type, question type, and duration for each interaction. Pre-set identifiers (tags) help staff to record additional details of interest, such as referrals to the Maryland Court Help Centers or requests for assistance with MDEC e-filing.

FY2021 included the largest single-year increase, and second largest percentage increase, since FY2010.

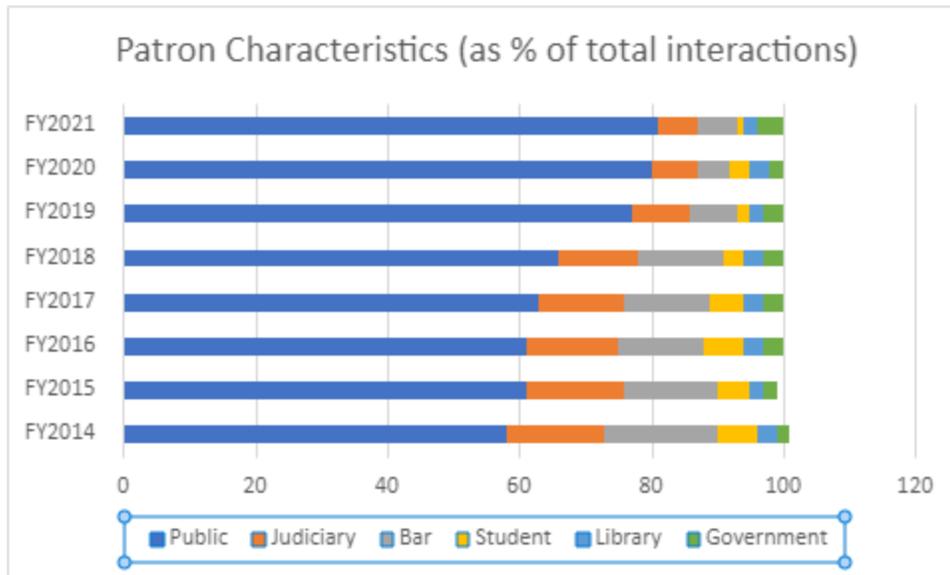
- 13,678 total interactions, an increase of 2,923 from the prior year
- 28% growth over FY2020, the second largest since FY2010 (average change in prior years ranged plus or minus 3% to 12%)
- 38% overall rise in demand for information services since FY2010

The steep rise for FY2021 is generally accorded to consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the required restrictions on in-person services, many people “discovered” the library while browsing for information on their devices.



Patron Characteristics

Library staff track patron type information for all inquiries. The Library’s patrons include the Maryland Judiciary (judges, law clerks, staff), the Bar (attorneys, paralegals, and law firm staff), government agencies, and the public (self-represented litigants, students, historians, genealogists, general legal researchers, and staff from public libraries).



Library patrons are not required to identify themselves, thus “Public” is the default category. The Library takes particular note of the percentage of inquiries from public patrons because they often lack legal backgrounds. Consequently, library staff exert additional time and effort to explain concepts and processes. Thus, from a service perspective, the high and increasing percentage of public patrons requires a proportional increase in staff reference workloads.

The percentages of inquiries from the patron categories have stayed essentially the same as in FY2020. However, as the overall numbers rose significantly, this translated to more than 2,500 more inquiries from the public in FY2021 than in FY2020.

The Library works to meet our patrons where they are, with a particular focus on our Judiciary patrons. For example, Library materials are increasingly available remotely through databases and the Library’s digital initiatives. Many of the Library’s fee-based access points (databases) are accessible via the Judiciary’s network or are not limited to Judiciary staff. Connection to these resources often means Judiciary staff require less in-person interaction with staff, though extensive staff time and involvement are required to make these resources available and accessible.

Reference and Research Questions

Questions received by the Library range from quick inquiries (“ready reference”) to requests for lengthy research assistance and cover a wide range of law-related topics. Some examples of topics and research inquiries from patrons include:

- Landlord-Tenant (late rent, rent increases, back rent, landlord duty to repair)
- Divorce (filing for divorce, modifying a divorce decree, calculation of alimony, impact on life estates)

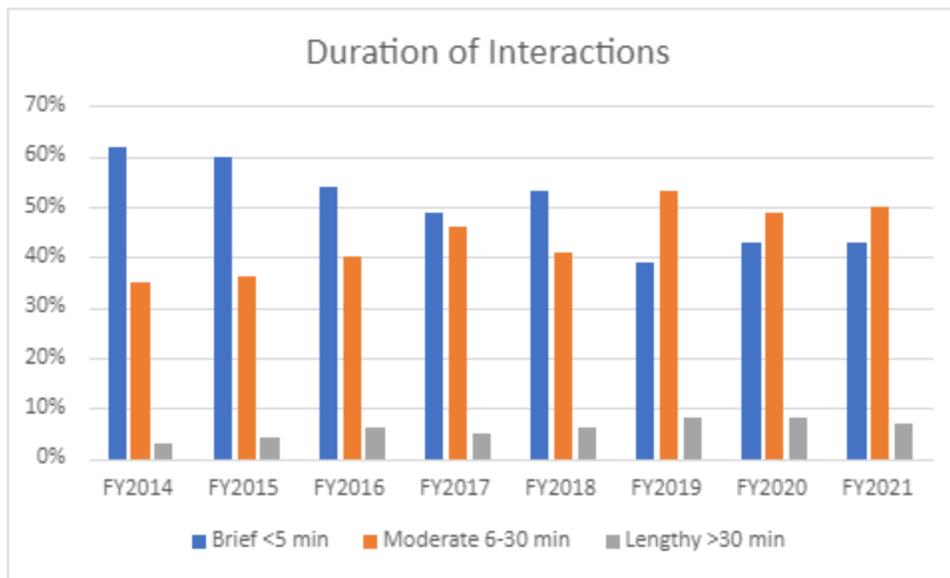
- Employment (discrimination, benefits, pension systems, liability of independent contractor)
- Motor Vehicles (online payment of citations, provisional license limits)
- Real Property (deeds, time limitations on contracts, ownership disputes)
- Civil Actions (responding to a complaint, judgment collection, compelling witness testimony)

Question Duration

For an overall view of reference staff workload, the Library tracks how long interactions take for staff to complete. Interactions are tagged at several levels according to how much time is needed to complete a request. In the most recent fiscal year, the percentages in each category have remained essentially the same since the prior year (FY2020).

However, since 2014, interactions categorized as “brief” – taking only a few minutes to complete – have decreased significantly, from 62% to 43% of total interactions. Thus, the amount of time needed per interaction has increased. Combined with the increase in overall number of requests, the result is a significant increase in overall reference staff workload.

For example, though the percentage of moderate duration questions were similar in both FY2020 and FY2021 (49% and 50%, respectively), the difference in overall number of interactions means this is almost 1,600 questions, constituting several hundred hours of work time.



Patron Communication Methods

The Library assists patrons through several communication methods, including in-person, telephone, email, and standard mail. In FY2021 staff were present in-person and full time for the full fiscal year. However, the Maryland Judiciary had operation restrictions* in place throughout most of the year,

Maryland Thurgood Marshall State Law Library
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limiting the number of patrons who could be present within the Library simultaneously. In addition, concerns about possible exposure to COVID-19 likely kept some patrons from visiting in person. As a result, the number of in-person visitors was limited.

The FY2020 Reference Report noted that the Library provided reference services through email only (no telephone, in-person, or letter communications, and no interlibrary loan interactions), from March 16, 2020 to June 8, 2020. The combination of remote-only and pandemic protocols after staff returned to the building likely accounted for the sharp increase in the percentage of remote (telephone and email) services even after reopening.

Question Format	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21
Telephone	33%	27%	23%	25%	23%	21%	21%	23%	21%	15%	18%
In Person	35%	35%	35%	29%	26%	25%	25%	24%	21%	13.5%	9%
Email	30%	34%	39%	41%	46%	47%	46%	47%	55%	70%	72%
Letter	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	.5%	1%
Other	1%	3%	2%	4%	4%	6%	7%	4%	2%	1%	1%

**Operation restrictions were in flux throughout the fiscal year. For specifics on restrictions, see the Library's Scanned Collections, Maryland Judiciary Administrative Orders, under Administration – Closing of Courts.*

Summary

The 2021 Fiscal Year included the largest rise in reference workload since current statistical categories were established over a decade ago.