



**BookBrowse**  
Your Guide to exceptional books

# BOOK CLUBS IN LOCKDOWN



An investigation into how book clubs  
are responding and adapting to  
the extraordinary events of 2020,  
and the implications for the future.



# BOOK CLUBS IN LOCKDOWN

An investigation into how book clubs  
are responding and adapting to  
the extraordinary events of 2020,  
and the implications for the future.



---

*Book Clubs in Lockdown*, © 2020, BookBrowse LLC

All rights reserved

BookBrowse LLC hereby grants revokable and non-exclusive rights to freely reproduce and distribute this report, “Book Clubs in Lockdown” (“Report”), in any medium or format on the conditions that (1) any such reproduction or distribution is not for commercial purposes and (2) Report is reproduced or distributed in its entirety and without modification, including this copyright notice, with the sole exception stated below.

Under no circumstance may Report be reproduced or distributed with any purpose of direct or indirect commercial advantage or monetary compensation, in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, without permission in writing from BookBrowse LLC.

Report content may be reproduced in part in print and electronically when in accordance to “fair use” guidelines and representing a total of no more than 5% of the complete Report. Each extract (such as text, tables, graphs or images) must be accompanied by the copyright notice:

Book Clubs in Lockdown, © 2020 BookBrowse LLC.

Nothing in this notice constitutes or may be construed as permission to assert or imply that you are, or that your use of Report is, connected with, or sponsored, endorsed, or granted official status to represent BookBrowse or to receive attribution.

Report has been compiled from market research conducted by BookBrowse LLC. While our intention is to provide a complete and objective analysis of the responses received, the report is provided “AS IS,” with no guarantee of completeness or accuracy. **BookBrowse LLC assumes no responsibility for any misinterpretation, errors or omissions, and makes no representations or warranties of any kind. BookBrowse LLC hereby disclaims any and all warranties, express or implied, concerning Report and the contents therein.**

ISBN-13: 978-1-7336192-3-3

LCCN: 2020923426

e ISBN-13: 978-1-7336192-4-0

If you wish to reproduce images/graphs, please contact us (see below) and we will provide the appropriate image files.

For more information about BookBrowse, and this report, contact:

**BookBrowse LLC**



19630 Allendale Ave, #2157  
Saratoga, CA 95070



**[bookbrowse.com/contactus](mailto:bookbrowse.com/contactus)**



**(+1) 408-867-6500**

Rev 1.0

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

About This Report .....	2
Who Should Read This Report .....	3
About the Survey .....	3

## SURVEY RESULTS

### 1. Key Findings

Report Summary .....	4
----------------------	---

### 2. Book Clubs During the Pandemic

Breakdown of Groups Meeting/Not Meeting .....	6
Meeting Frequency and Attendance .....	7
Where Book Clubs Meet, Before and During the Pandemic .....	7
Precautions When Meeting in Person .....	9
Sourcing Books During the Pandemic.....	9
How Groups Resolved Their Book Supply Issues .....	11

### 3. The Book Club Experience in 2020

The Influence of Current Events .....	14
Book Club Satisfaction .....	16
Meeting in 2020: The Good and the Not So Good .....	18
Meeting Virtually .....	23
Discussing Books Virtually.....	30

### 4. Book Clubs that Are Not Currently Meeting

Why Book Clubs Stopped Meeting .....	33
Conditions Required to Meet in Person .....	35

### 5. After the Pandemic

How Book Clubs Expect to Meet .....	36
When Book Clubs Expect to Meet in Person .....	37
The Future of Virtual Book Clubs .....	38

### 6. General Reading Habits

The Pandemic and Reading Habits .....	39
---------------------------------------	----

## APPENDICES

A: Demographics .....	41
B: The Inner Lives of Book Clubs (2019) .....	42
C: Book Clubs in the USA (2015) .....	43

---

# INTRODUCTION

## About This Report

For 20 years, BookBrowse ([bookbrowse.com](http://bookbrowse.com)) has provided a curated resource of the best in contemporary fiction and nonfiction, with an emphasis on books that not only engage and entertain but also deepen our understanding of the world around us. BookBrowse offers free and premium content, with subscription options for individuals and libraries, so that all patrons have access.

BookBrowse has surveyed readers and book club members for more than 15 years, and over this time we have seen a number of relatively slow shifts, including the growth in book clubs themselves, how people buy books and the formats they read them in. This report builds upon the experience and insights gained from this earlier research (see Appendices B and C for recent published reports).

The fast-moving events of 2020 have impacted all of us, and have dramatically changed how book clubs meet and operate. During 2020, BookBrowse has participated in a number of virtual conferences through which it has become clear that many people are interested in better understanding this new environment. We therefore launched this comprehensive research project to explore how book clubs are responding to these events.

## Who Should Read This Report?

This report is recommended for librarians, booksellers, publishers and authors; and for book club members looking to gain insight into how other groups have responded to the events of 2020.

## About the Survey

The survey was open on SurveyMonkey for two weeks between October 14 – 27, 2020. An invitation to take part in the “Book Clubs in Lockdown” survey was placed on [bookbrowse.com](http://bookbrowse.com) and also sent to subscribers of our book club newsletter.

Overall, 90% of those who started the survey completed it, for a total sample size of 4,586. 3,417 of the respondents described themselves as currently in a book club; responses from this group form the bulk of the report (Sections 1–5). The remaining 1,169 have either never been part of a book club or stopped being in one for reasons unrelated to the pandemic. They were filtered directly to general questions at the end of the survey which were also answered by those currently in book clubs. The combined responses can be found in Section 6.

See Appendix A for demographics.

---

## Interpreting the Numbers

When reviewing any statistical data, it is important to assess the source of the information and understand the potential for bias in order to interpret the results through the correct lens. Participants responded to an invitation to take part in a survey that they knew would be focused on book clubs; thus, the responses are generally reflective of readers with an interest in book clubs.

In our past research we have found that 22% of current book club participants are in more than one group. For the purposes of this survey we asked people to respond about the book club they consider to be their primary group.

90% of respondents live in the US, 5% in Canada and the remainder mainly in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Where there are significant differences, we have broken out the information from US respondents; where there is not, we have treated respondents as one group irrespective of location. However, it is important to remember that there have been considerable differences in the way regions (both at the country and state level) have responded to the pandemic.

## Terminology

Respondents use a variety of terms to describe their group that meets to discuss books, including “book club,” “book group” and “discussion group;” and thus these terms are used interchangeably in this report.

In this document, the word “pandemic” is used as a generic term to include the various restrictions put in place across the world in an attempt to reduce the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome which causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2). Restrictions in some locations began as early as late January 2020, and by April 2020 about half of the world's population had been asked or ordered to stay at home by their governments.

---

# 1. Key Findings

## The Book Club Experience in 2020

Three-quarters of the 3,417 respondents who say they are in a book club are in groups that are currently meeting. Some have experienced sickness, quarantines or fatalities among those close to them, and many feel drained by current events; but they also feel supported by their book club and buoyed by a greater sense of friendship and community.

The great majority of groups had previously met in person and indoors. Now, 65% of those that are currently meeting are doing so virtually, almost all on Zoom, and 17% are meeting outdoors (with some looking for a new winter location).

A quarter of those who are currently meeting say their group's attendance rate is lower than last year, mostly due to technical issues meeting virtually or not feeling safe meeting in person. But 14% of virtual groups have gained members, mainly due to the ease of meeting online and former or part-time members being able to join virtually.

Looked at as a whole, the resilience of book clubs shines through. Of course, they would prefer not to be meeting with restrictions, but the majority have persevered and found a way forward, with many saying they have a greater appreciation for their group. In fact, although a third of respondents in groups that are currently meeting say that their overall book club experience is not as good as it was last year, half say their group is more important to them.

## Meeting Virtually

Respondents meeting virtually greatly appreciate that technology allows them to stay connected and maintain a sense of community.

In general, technology adoption is viewed as positive, with Zoom frequently described as a lifeline. However, some groups still struggle with technical issues and virtual etiquette, and many are temporarily missing members who are unable, or sometimes unwilling, to meet virtually.

Virtual discussions tend to be less free-flowing. This is seen as a benefit by some who feel their group's book discussions are more focused and inclusive due to fewer side conversations; but others miss the organic flow of an in-person meeting.

## Sourcing Books During the Pandemic

Many groups that are currently meeting have taken advantage of their library's ebook collection, often for the first time, with Hoopla frequently mentioned for its unlimited downloads. However, wrangling the technology has been a challenge for some, who look forward to returning to borrowing in print.

One-fifth say they have bought books this year when they would previously have borrowed; and many are sharing bought and borrowed books more than previously. In general, they plan to revert back to borrowing books from the library as soon as it is practical to do so.



---

## The Influence of Current Events

Among groups that select books six months or less ahead and are currently meeting, 28% are reading more books on racial justice than last year and 17% are reading more books that provide an escape from current events. Politics is a challenging topic for many US groups. Although 37% of US respondents say their group has discussed politics in 2020, when asked whether there were any topics that their group had agreed not to discuss, 27% of US respondents said that politics was off the table. This is up from 11% when the same question was asked of US respondents in 2018. By comparison, just 3% of non-US respondents say their group avoids politics.

## Book Clubs That Are Not Currently Meeting

A quarter of respondents are in groups that are not currently meeting. The one key difference between this cohort and those in groups that are meeting is that they are more likely to be part of a group that would normally meet in a public location. For example, 24% are in groups that met in a public library in 2019, compared to 15% of those in groups that are currently meeting.

90% in book clubs that are not currently meeting say they were happy in their group in 2019, and 89% say their group is important to them. This indicates that, when conditions allow, most will be ready and eager to reconvene.

## After the Pandemic

Although the great majority are looking forward to meeting in person when conditions allow, about one-third of those currently meeting virtually expect their group will retain a virtual element. 3% expect all their meetings will be virtual; and 29% expect to continue using video technology to allow absent members to join in-person meetings or to host the entire meeting virtually, such as when weather conditions are poor or when many of the members are elsewhere.

In our past research we have found that some former or potential book clubbers were not in a book club due to reasons such as childcare, frequent travel and disabilities; an all-virtual or hybrid group would likely be an appealing option for many such people.

## General Reading Habits

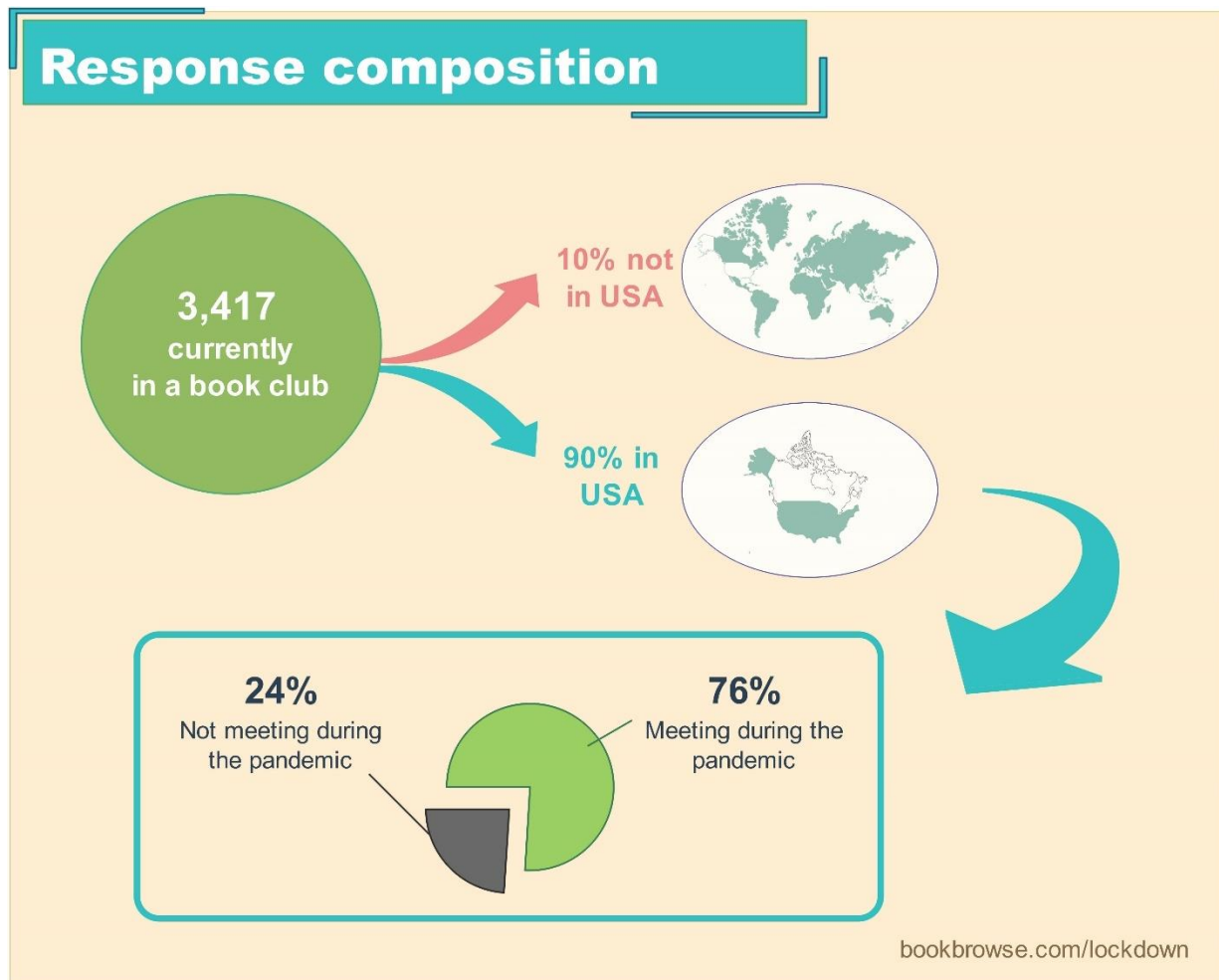
Looking at all respondents (the 3,417 currently in a book club plus the 1,169 who are not or have never been in a book club, whose responses are included in Section 6), 70% of those aged 65+ and 53% aged under 65 say they have more time to read than last year; consequently, 63% are reading more books. Compared to last year, 36% say it is more difficult for a book to hold their attention and 58% are consuming more news.

## 2. BOOK CLUBS DURING THE PANDEMIC

### Breakdown of Groups Meeting/Not Meeting

Of the 3,417 respondents who described themselves as currently in a book club, 90% live in the US and 10% live elsewhere (about half in Canada).

Of those living in the US, 76% said their book club was meeting at the time they completed the survey (October 2020) and 24% said their group was not meeting because of the pandemic. Among those living outside the US, the ratio was 80:20.



For the purposes of this report, we have treated respondents who are in book clubs that are currently meeting and those who are not meeting due to the pandemic as distinct cohorts. However, the reality is that there is some fluidity between them. For example, some respondents were in groups that had only recently started meeting again; others were in groups that were not currently meeting but had met at some point earlier in the pandemic (e.g. some groups tried meeting virtually or in person with social distancing but decided it was not for them). In Sections 2, 3 and 5, we look at the responses of those in groups that are currently meeting. In Section 4, we look at groups that are not currently meeting.

---

## Meeting Frequency & Attendance

77% of book clubs that are currently meeting are doing so at about the same frequency as they did last year. 6% are meeting more frequently, 14% are meeting less frequently and 3% are in groups that have started in 2020.

25% of book clubs report declining attendance in 2020.

A quarter of respondents say their group's attendance rate has fallen this year. Commonly cited reasons are that some members have technical issues or simply do not want to meet virtually, or are not comfortable meeting in person for health reasons.

On the flip side, 7% of those meeting in person and 14% meeting virtually say their group's attendance rate has improved; in general, respondents point to fewer commitments as a factor. In virtual book clubs, many say their group has regained members who had moved away permanently or who live in a different location for part of the year; and some say that their group has attracted new members because of the flexibility of the virtual format.

The remainder feel that their group's overall attendance rates are about the same as last year; but some note that there have been fluctuations within their membership for reasons such as those noted above.

## Where Book Clubs Meet: Before & During the Pandemic

Among respondents whose book club met in 2019 and was meeting at the time of the survey, 98% belonged to groups that met in person\*, with 54% meeting in a private home and 15% at the library.

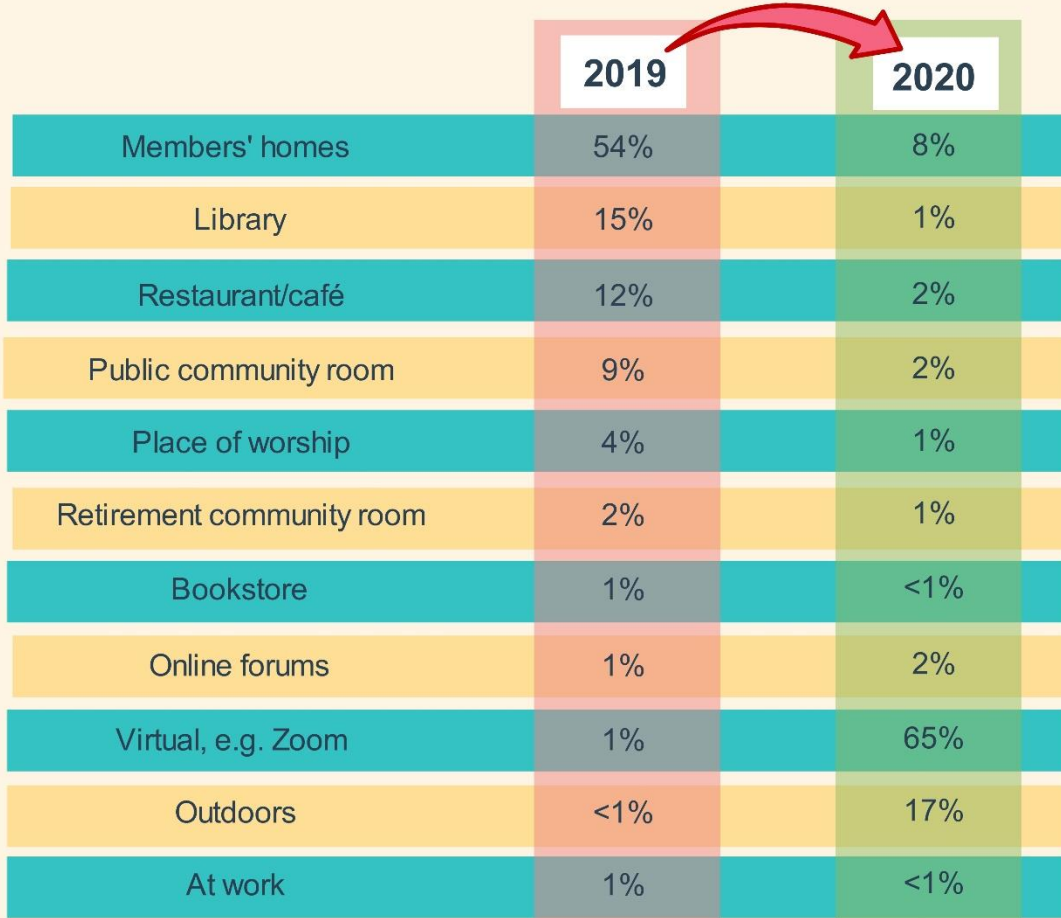
This has changed dramatically due to the pandemic. As of October 2020, 82% of respondents say their book club is meeting somewhere different from where they did in 2019. Overall, 65% are usually meeting virtually and 17% are usually meeting outdoors (with some looking to find a new location as winter sets in). See chart on next page for breakdown.



Of the 3% who say their group started in 2020, many did so in direct response to the pandemic; and two-thirds are meeting virtually.

\*In our 2015 research report, we found that 22% of book clubbers participated in at least one online forum they considered to be a book group, but when asked to pick the book club they thought of as their primary, the great majority chose an in-person group. For the purposes of this survey, we asked people in more than one book club to respond about the group they consider to be their primary group, which largely accounts for only 2% saying that their group met online/virtually in 2019.

## Where does your primary book club usually meet?



	2019	2020
Members' homes	54%	8%
Library	15%	1%
Restaurant/café	12%	2%
Public community room	9%	2%
Place of worship	4%	1%
Retirement community room	2%	1%
Bookstore	1%	<1%
Online forums	1%	2%
Virtual, e.g. Zoom	1%	65%
Outdoors	<1%	17%
At work	1%	<1%

bookbrowse.com/lockdown

Of book clubs that are meeting remotely, 96% are doing so on Zoom. The remainder are spread across a wide range of platforms (including FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, Google Hangouts, Webex, Skype and Microsoft Teams).

The majority of these respondents look forward to returning to meeting in person after the pandemic, but significant numbers indicate that they expect their meeting arrangements to be different for the long term; for example, many have discovered that they enjoy meeting outdoors, and 32% of participants in book clubs that are currently meeting virtually anticipate that their group will maintain a virtual element some of the time; more on this in Section 5.

---

## Precautions When Meeting in Person



Of respondents in the US whose groups are meeting in person, only 3% say their group is not taking any precautions.

14% report a decline in attendance due to some of their group having concerns about meeting in person at all, or meeting with the degree of safety measures that the rest of the group prefer.

Overall, 88% of groups are socially distancing and 53% are not sharing food or drink (for more on the topic of food see Section 3).

58% of groups are wearing masks (with about 2% of respondents noting that they pose particular issues for group members who are hearing impaired, as there is no possibility of using lipreading to provide visual cues and voices tend to be muffled).

## Sourcing Books During the Pandemic

In our 2019 “Inner Lives of Book Clubs” report, we found that in at least 84% of book groups some members borrow from the library; this includes 5% of private groups and 51% of library groups that usually use “book club in a bag” kits.

One-third of respondents say their book club has experienced issues during the pandemic because they were unable to borrow books from the library. Many of these relate to the early months of the pandemic; but significant numbers of respondents say they are still experiencing longer than usual wait times for books due to quarantining, increased demand and slow movement of books through inter-library loan systems.



However, frustration is very much tempered with understanding and much appreciation for public libraries and staff.

Book clubs have found many ways to resolve their book supply issues. We will look at some of these next:

- Changing reading schedules
- Borrowing ebooks/downloading free ebooks
- Purchasing and sharing books
- Discovering new library resources
- Flexible discussion formats

---

*As chair of the book group, I need to order the books much earlier due to the library holding books in quarantine before releasing them to me.*

*Keeping books for 72 hours before release is taking forever, book loans are being extended by the library for no apparent reason, some of my holds have been "in transit" for weeks, library changes my suspensions so I can't plan when they should arrive.*

*Now library is open but returned books have 2-week wait period before being put back in circulation, which clogs up the online book reservations.*

*Wait lines are longer, and turnaround times are longer too. No complaints, though -- we have a wonderful library system and we are grateful for the wonderful job they are doing.*

*Our libraries are open for book borrowing, not for browsing the shelves or being inside. Bless the libraries.*

*We can request a hold on a book. When it is at the chosen branch, you choose an appointment time M/W/F, and pick it up. All non-contact. I think the library has done a great job figuring this out.*

## How Groups are Resolving Their Book Supply Issues

### Changing Reading Schedules

Some book clubs have been changing their reading schedules, shifting the dates they had planned to discuss specific books earlier or later depending on availability, or changing to different titles that are available to borrow.

*At the beginning of the pandemic, the group was unable to borrow from the library the book to be discussed. The first two months we chose a different book to discuss. The third we purchased or shared copies of the book. After that the library was available for "no contact book pickup." That is still how the group is checking out books.*

*Books weren't available so we switched to a book scheduled for later on in the year.*

*There was no intra-library loaning of books in our library system until September. We had to use sets of books that the system already provided for book clubs, and so had to leave our scheduled reads, but we're very happy with the choices. Now back to "normal."*

*If a book was not available for all we went on to the next book and put a hold on the one that we wanted to read for next month.*

*We switched the order of books to allow people to get the book, or if some couldn't get the book, they skipped the meeting. It varied.*

However, not all book clubs are willing to deviate from their planned schedule. About 40% of groups choose their reading at least four months ahead, and about half of these (i.e. one-fifth of all groups) plan a full year ahead.

20% never change their reading schedule;  
74% rarely change it.

Among respondents in groups that are currently meeting and plan at least four months in advance, 20% say their group never changes its schedule and 74% say they rarely do. Schedule rigidity has been a significant factor for some of these groups and, by extension, for some of the groups that are not currently meeting.

## Borrowing eBooks / Downloading Free eBooks

About one-third of respondents say that many of their group would normally borrow print books from the library but when print has been unavailable, they have been borrowing electronic copies: mostly ebooks, occasionally audio. Some will continue with ebooks but others have either found downloading them a challenge or simply prefer to read in print, so they have, or will, revert back to print.

Hoopla is widely praised by librarians and book club members as a valuable resource because there are no limits on the number of copies that can be checked out, so all members of a group can download a title at the same time. Overdrive and its app Libby are mentioned by some, but less frequently; as is Project Gutenberg.

*During the first few months of the pandemic (through July) we were unable to obtain physical copies (or enough physical copies) of books for our members. We instead substituted titles that were available through the library's Hoopla eLibrary platform.*

*Before, most members of the book club checked out print copies of library books to read...now we have changed to only selecting books that are available for all members to read as e-books.*

*We only choose books available on Hoopla. So, no problem there.*

*As a librarian leading two book groups, our library has added Hoopla because they offer simultaneous use. Before adding Hoopla, we had to suspend book clubs for about two months.*

*Used to use only book club kits (10 copies of a title) - now using Project Gutenberg and older ebooks.*

*Our library was closed for three months, so we switched to ebooks that were available from free platforms (e.g. Project Gutenberg).*



## Purchasing and Sharing Books

About one-fifth of respondents say that their book club members have been purchasing books where previously they would have borrowed. This boost in book purchases is likely to be temporary as most who previously borrowed say they plan to return to doing so.

More book club members are buying books; but most plan to return to borrowing.

Many book clubs are sharing bought and borrowed books among the membership more than they previously did.

Oftentimes, if a member has managed to borrow a book from the library, they will pass it on to others in the group before returning it, so as to get around the long wait times. Some book clubs have even taken to sharing ebooks by passing their e-readers on to other members of the group.

*Many have taken to buying books online if our library doesn't offer them as an ebook and if they are not available via Hoopla or another library app.*

*I had to buy more books this year than before.*

*I have had no choice except to buy the Kindle version and learn to accept reading from it, having always wanted only to read a physical book.*

*In the beginning when libraries were closed more of us bought books and shared them with other members.*

*It has been next to impossible to get books from the library so we have had to try other ways to obtain the book for the month—online, buying, sharing more than usual.*

*There seems to be more people reading, which makes for more competition for the newer books especially. One person would get the book and pass it on to members instead of returning it.*

*Books are less available as they are kept for one week between readers to disperse any viruses. We share library books—if you get one you read and then offer to others. If necessary, buy book and again share.*

*Our local library had only electronic books available for about 3 months. Some members got books from an adjacent county (and shared), some purchased used copies (and shared), and most managed with the electronic versions.*

*Before the library reopened, we had to choose books that people already owned and could pass around.*

*In some cases, we passed books and a Kindle around.*

*Some of us would get books from Amazon and then share...some share Kindles.*



---

## Discovering New Library Resources

In addition to ebooks, some book clubbers have discovered other library resources, most notably “book club in a bag” kits. Others are learning to work their library’s lending system to their advantage.

*We could no longer get a quantity of books drawing from several suburban libraries. Then a member whose library has book bags started checking them out for a month—the perfect solution for us.*

*We advised everyone to put holds on all the books that were currently unavailable and then to manage the holds by specifying when they wanted them. In our library system you still move up the line, but don’t have to get the book until you are ready.*

## Flexible Discussion Formats

There have always been book clubs that choose to vary the standard formula of discussing one book per meeting, whether on an ongoing basis or just on occasion for a change of pace. During the pandemic, particularly in the early months, many more groups have been finding alternate ways to discuss books, or have been discussing topics other than books. The most popular format is to discuss what each book club member is currently reading, followed by members picking a book from their shelf that fits a particular theme.

*Our group has changed its format. Rather than the host selecting that month’s book we each discuss whatever book we have chosen to read.*

*We had two months when we chose different books—American classics and Brit lit—and gave reviews of what we each had read.*

*We each shared a book we had been reading and created a recommendation book list.*

*We chose a genre and then discussed the book each of us read.*

*We decided to have a “member’s choice” meeting. Each member chose to review a book that was his/her favorite as a child or adult. It was a big hit; we did this twice.*

*We include questions for discussion that are more “thematic” now. If a member hasn’t read a book, she can contribute to these broader, more open-ended questions.*

*We find it difficult to focus on books, so we’ve been discussing New Yorker articles or provocative things on TV, with a lot of focus on racial issues.*

*We’ve also started recommending good movies or television shows to our fellow members.*

In April 2020, in response to questions from book clubs struggling for ideas about what to discuss when they were unable to borrow print books, BookBrowse suggested [15 alternatives](#) to the traditional book club formula; see [bookbrowse.com/bcwb](http://bookbrowse.com/bcwb).

### 3. The Book Club Experience in 2020

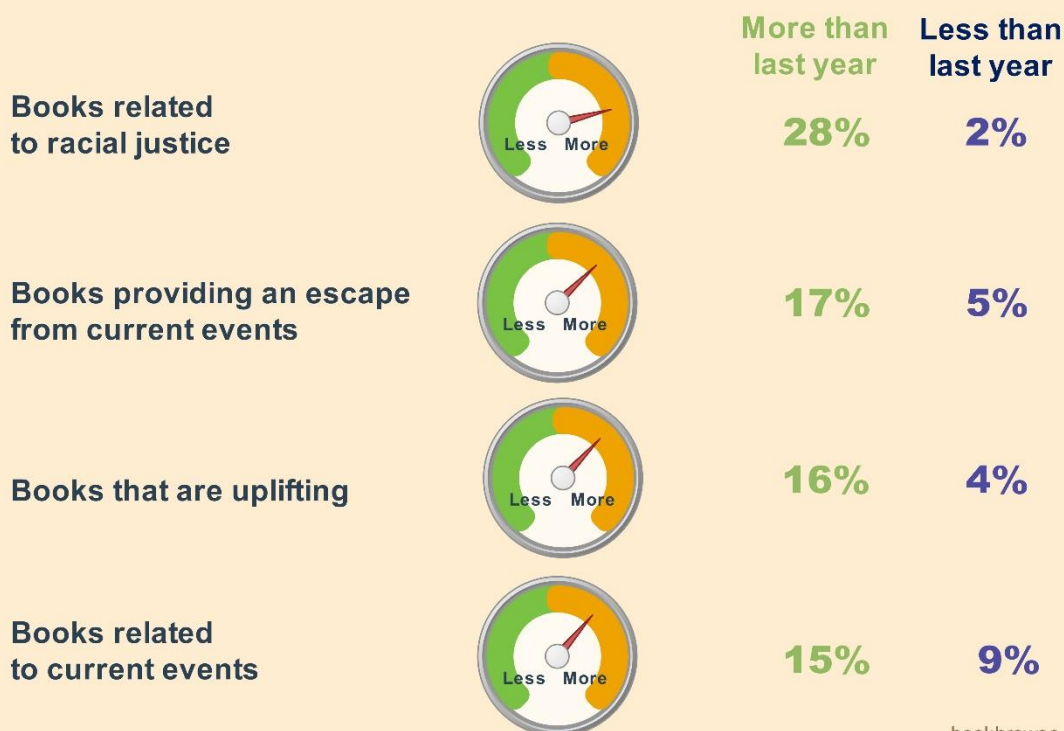
#### The Influence of Current Events

##### Book Selection

The turmoil of 2020 has resulted in notable shifts in book selection. Among those in groups that choose their books six months or less ahead, 28% say they are reading more books on racial justice than last year and 15% are reading more books related to current events. Some are looking for a respite, with 17% reading more books that provide an escape from current events and 16% reading more uplifting books.

28% of book clubs are reading more books exploring racial justice.

#### Reading habits of book clubs in 2020 that choose their books 6 months or less ahead



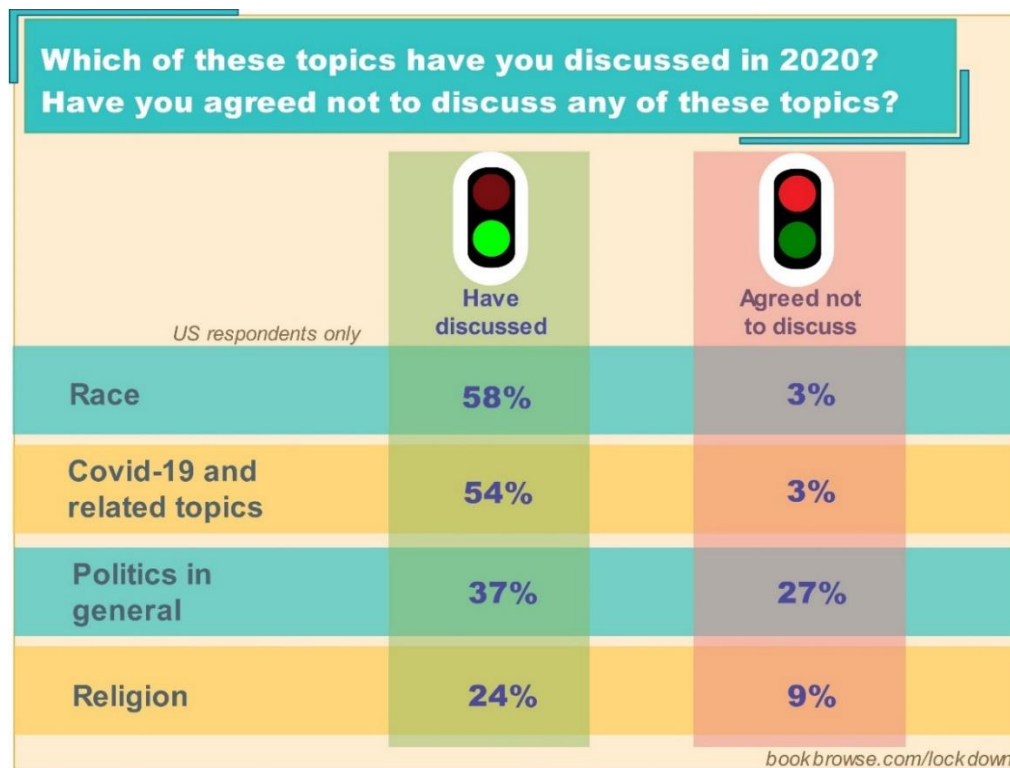
[bookbrowse.com/lockdown](https://bookbrowse.com/lockdown)

## Topics Discussed

Because many groups choose their books far ahead, book choices tend to lag current events, but discussion topics can shift more quickly. 58% of respondents in US groups that are currently meeting say their group has discussed race in 2020.

27% of US book clubs agreed that their group will not discuss politics, up from 11% in 2018.

Politics is a challenging topic for many US groups. While 37% of US respondents say their group has discussed politics in general in 2020, in a separate question we asked if there were any topics that their group had actively agreed not to discuss: 27% of those in US book clubs said politics was off the table, compared to 3% of non-US groups. This is up from 11% of US groups when we researched the same question in 2018.



*We tend to avoid political books as in the past there have been upset feelings and we want our group to be a safe haven for us all.*

*We have one member who is sensitive about her political views since they are different from the rest of us, so unfortunately, we avoid controversial issues.*

*We've changed some of our titles this year to be less stressful and not so political.*

*We are reading several books this year related to racial injustice, but typically we do not read books that might lead to a difficult discussion.*

*We prefer to escape in our book choices. Weary of social justice and real-life topics.*

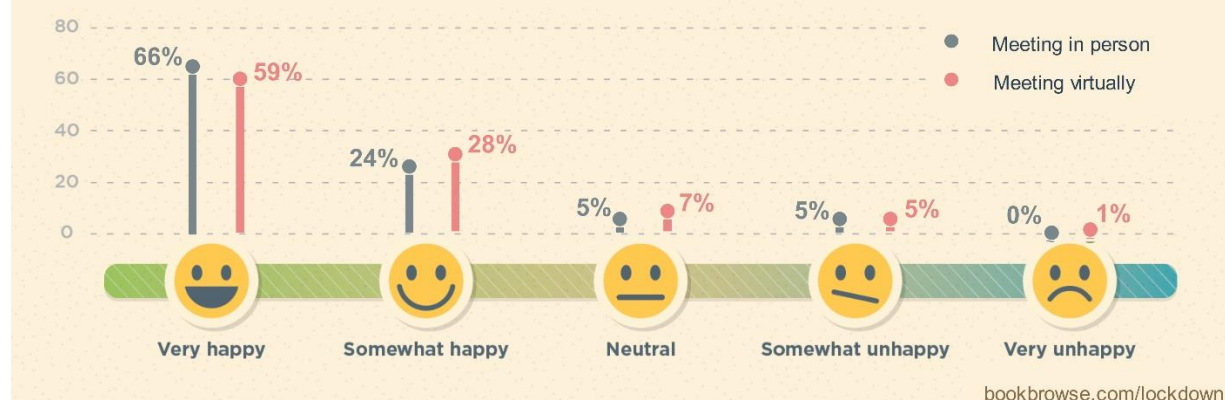
## Book Club Satisfaction

Among those who were meeting at the time of the survey, 61% describe themselves as very happy in their book club and 27% somewhat happy. Those in groups that are usually meeting in person are slightly more likely to say they are very happy than those meeting virtually: 66% vs. 59%.

61% of respondents are very happy with their book club, down from 73% previously

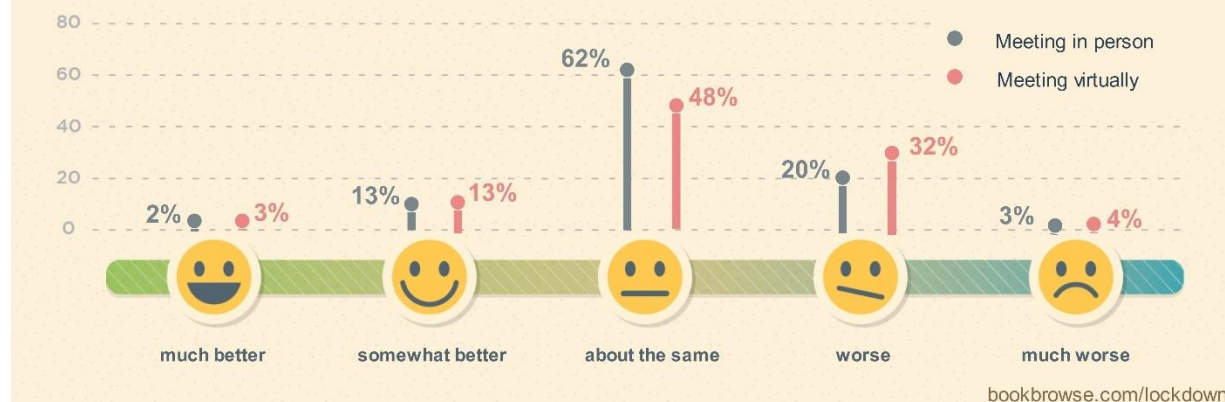
This is a more muted response than when we asked the same question for our 2019 “Inner Lives of Book Clubs” survey of in-person book clubs. At that time 73% reported being very happy and 21% said they were somewhat happy.

**Thinking back over the past 6 months of 2020, how happy are you with your book club?**



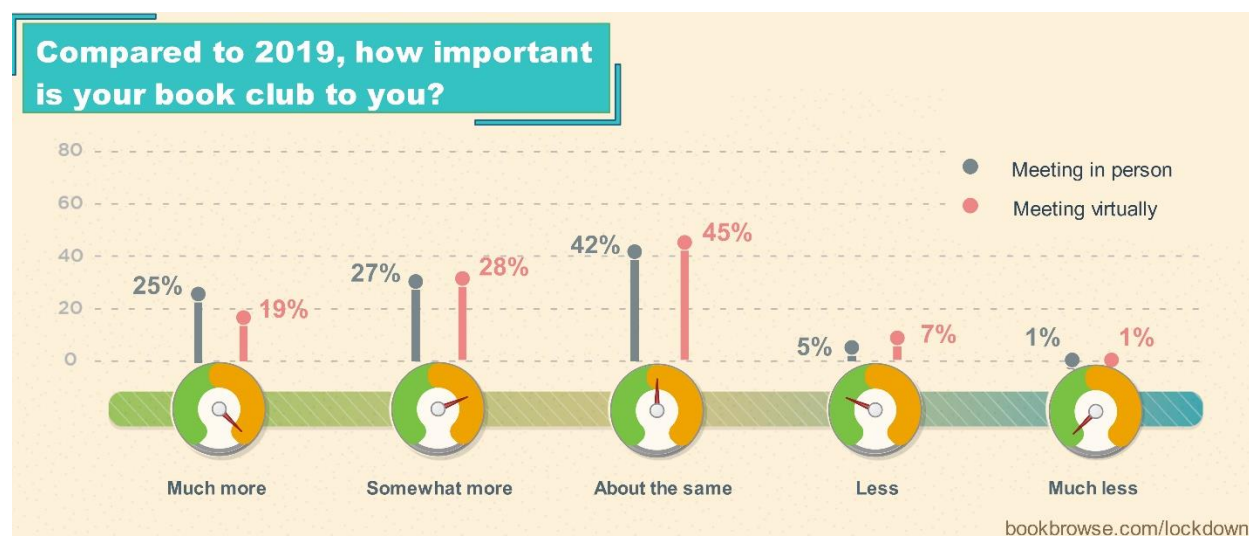
23% of respondents in groups that are usually meeting in person and 35% in groups that are usually meeting virtually say that their overall book club experience is worse than last year.

**How does your overall book club experience in 2020 compare to last year?**

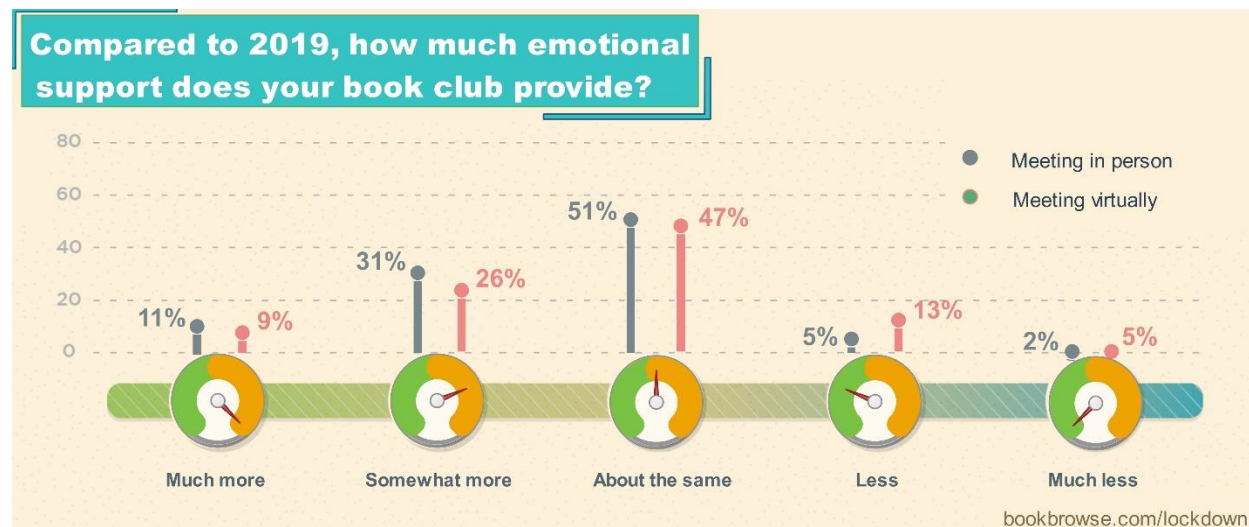




However, and significantly, even though some feel their book club experience is not as good as last year, 52% in groups that are usually meeting in person and 47% in groups that are usually meeting virtually say their book club is more important to them than last year.



One of the key reasons for this is because of the emotional support their group provides. 42% in groups that usually meet in person and 35% that usually meet virtually say their book club provides them with more emotional support than last year.



As a reminder, the responses in this section represent the 76% of respondents who are in book groups that were meeting at the time of the survey in October 2020. A few of the 24% in book clubs that were not meeting at that time have met at some point since the start of the pandemic, but most have not.

## Meeting in 2020: The Good and the Not So Good

About 32% of respondents in book clubs that are currently meeting answered an optional open-ended question: “Thinking specifically about your book group since the start of the pandemic, what positive things, if any, have come from the experience?” Some of these positives are likely to have a long-term impact on how their book club operates.

About 40% responded to a second open-ended question: “Has your book group experienced any negative aspects and/or challenges?”

Here we explore the responses to both these questions.

### Meeting in 2020

#### The Good...



Increased appreciation for my book club



Pride in being flexible and having adapted



Loving the outdoors  
(but worried about winter)



Virtual meetings

#### And the Not So Good...



Personal health concerns



Challenges due to current events and  
personal losses



Missing shared meals



Virtual meetings

[bookbrowse.com/lockdown](https://bookbrowse.com/lockdown)

---

Some of the observations are common to book club members whether they have been meeting in person or virtually in 2020. Others are unique to groups meeting virtually. So, we have broken this section into two parts. First, we look at the experiences shared by many respondents, irrespective of how their group has been meeting; then we examine the experiences of respondents in book clubs meeting virtually.

Many respondents who are in a currently active book club say their group experienced initial issues adapting to the new circumstances but, for the majority, these challenges (such as sourcing books, and working out how to meet in person with appropriate precautions or navigating virtual meetings) were overcome after a “startup period” of about three or four months. So, here we focus primarily on comments relating to their general experience after that initial period.

Looked at as a whole, the resilience of book clubs shines through. Of course, they would prefer not to be meeting with restrictions, but the majority have persevered and found a way forward.

## Increased Appreciation for Their Book Club

One positive element that comes across loud and clear, irrespective of how a book club is getting together, is an increased appreciation for their group. As we saw earlier, although 23% of those meeting in person and 36% of those meeting virtually think their book club experience is not as good as last year, about half say their book club is more important to them than last year.



*It has made me/us realize how important socializing and human interaction are.*

*We all realize what great friends we are. People laugh, cry, share jokes, talk about equity, idealism, election.*

*We watch out more for each other and help those who are having a hard time coping with the pandemic and the election.*

*A positive thing—listening to one another when a member needs to vent; appreciate one another; thank goodness for book club!*

*Caring for each other, actively listening, more communication outside book club has happened and we will take this into the future.*

---

## Pride in Being Flexible and Having Adapted

Necessity is the mother of invention and many book clubs are proud that their group has found ways to adapt, and expect that some of these changes will impact their group for the long term, particularly among those meeting virtually.



*I think we all realized that we want to meet—that we will adapt in order to keep the group active and intact. Since I am the organizer of the group, this makes me proud. The unity of a group of women who had never met before the group was organized is wonderful.*

*I would say flexibility of the group in terms of finding a way to meet: indoor, outdoor, patios, yards, driveways and virtual.*

*An awareness that despite our ages (65-80) we have embraced new technology to continue seeing each other with a specific focus on books.*

*I think everyone feels good that we are able to adapt to the challenge imposed by the pandemic.*

## Loving the Outdoors but Worried About Winter

Some have discovered that they enjoy meeting outdoors, although, as winter sets in, those in colder climes are looking for alternative locations (in person or virtual), or will go on hiatus.



*Love the outdoor setting for discussion, will continue as weather permits.*

*Book club only meets in an outdoor setting so weather dependent. We will most likely be unable to meet until spring 2021.*

*All members agreed to meet outdoors in a venue that all members can get to. No one will be left out.*

*We enjoyed meeting in people's backyards in the summer. We also got box lunches for the members so that we weren't sharing food. We also found Zoom was an alternative in a pinch.*

*Bad weather has been the biggest challenge to meeting face to face outdoors. Blankets and lots of laughter.*

*We are sitting in driveways and garages, backyards too.*

*Although we've enjoyed meeting outdoors in the warmer weather, it has been challenging not being able to sit close together or share food. Now that the weather is colder, we will have to start meeting virtually again, which is less optimal for us.*



---

## Personal Health Concerns

Some respondents say that they are sad that some members of their group are not able, or sometimes not willing, to attend meetings due to personal health concerns.



Many groups are doing their best to accommodate all their membership, but it is not always possible to find a solution that works for everyone.

*We have a couple of immunocompromised members who sometimes feel fearful about meeting. We accommodate them by being careful with social distancing and making sure they know that we will do this.*

*We have a wide range of COVID fear from minimal worry to never-leave-the-house fear.*

*I think each member has had a family member impacted by Covid-19, or not been able to do things because of restrictions and concerns for family and friends.*

*A few fell by the wayside because they did not want or were unable to meet via Zoom. Others are not comfortable meeting in person. This fall, we plan to try a hybrid of both as Covid cases rise.*

*We have lost members because some of those still in the club refuse to follow CDC guidelines.*

## Challenges Due to Current Events and Personal Losses

Many have experienced sickness, quarantines or fatalities among those close to them. Additionally, as we saw earlier, many groups have found the current political climate a challenge, with some saying they feel drained and exhausted; depression and lack of focus are mentioned frequently.



*Some group members have been quarantined; some have faced isolation from family members. Many are concerned about income and/or retirement income. All are feeling stressed and strained.*

*We are so drained. And we can't yet see an end to the mayhem. We wake up each and every day with looming uncertainty about what the day will hold. We are scared and we are tired. It is taxing to stay focused.*

*People are fried over current events and sometimes don't have bandwidth.*

*We had a member who died from COVID-19. Her hospitalization and death were extremely upsetting to all of us. We mourn still. With inability to visit her in hospital nor attend a funeral, there is little closure. She was only 60 with no underlying conditions. This virus is deadly and too many folks have treated it with a cavalier attitude that has resulted in the deaths of so many.*

*People with difficult jobs struggle with burn-out, long hours, and extra stresses this year, which makes it harder for them to find time to read.*

---

## Missing Shared Meals



Another theme that comes through strongly is how many people miss sharing food and drink. In our 2019 “Inner Lives of Book Clubs” report, we found that 91% of private book clubs have food at their meetings. 26% have a full meal, usually in someone’s home (either hostess cooked or potluck) and a further 16% meet in a restaurant, café or bar. Most of the remainder enjoy a snack, whether simple or elaborate.

Food is less of a factor in public book groups (most of which are run by public libraries) but, even so, about six out of ten would normally share something to eat.

Many respondents meeting virtually say how they miss the sharing of food and reminisce about meals their group used to enjoy. Among groups meeting in person, 52% say that they are not sharing food as a precaution, and some express sadness at missing this important part of their time together.

*We always served delicious, interesting foods and decorated the dining room in the theme of the book, if possible. Now we are on Zoom—no food, no big prep, not as much fun.*

*We did two meetings on Zoom which were uncomfortable and forced. Three meetings have been outdoor picnics and preparing pre-portioned food was a challenge.*

*We usually meet at restaurants or cook pot luck based on the cuisine that is a backdrop to the book we are reading. Food no longer plays any part in our meetings, and that is sad.*

*We definitely miss sitting around the table and breaking bread together. This month, as the weather turns colder, we are trying to locate to a restaurant with covered outdoor dining with heaters. Also, we are going to meet for lunch rather than dinner.*

However, some (particularly those who are meeting in person and thus do have the option to share food if they wish) say that they’re enjoying a scaled down approach.

*Less emphasis on the hostess feeling like they need to provide a spread of food for the meeting. Everyone brings their own food and beverage.*

*We meet in the evening after we have had our dinner. So, less food and less work for the hostess, which is good!*

*We will undoubtedly never again have the huge arrays of food at our meetings. Everyone is bringing her own at the current time and this probably will continue.*

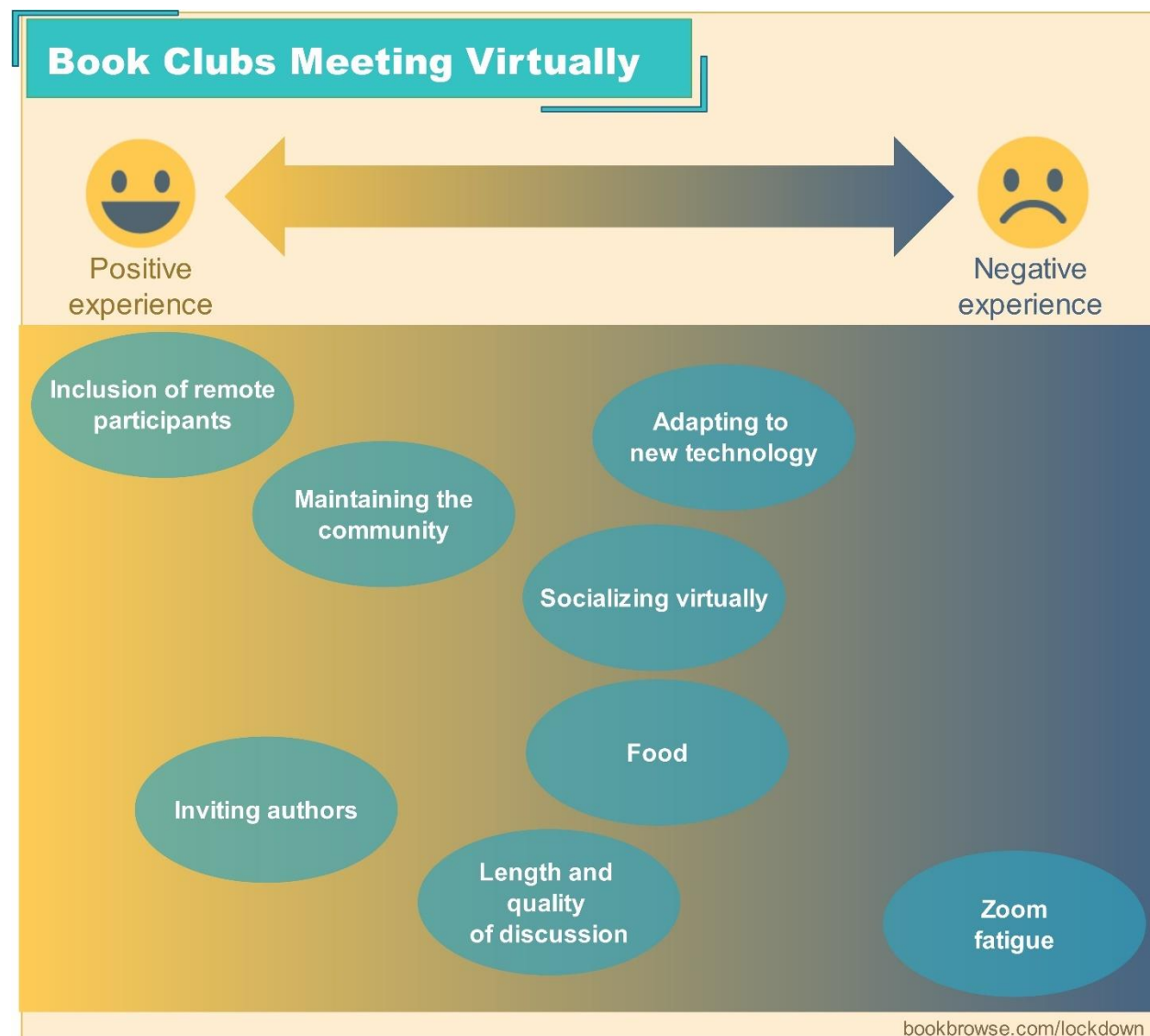
*We're now meeting outside and there is no food or wine involved beforehand. Love this! Socializing is at a minimum and we're very focused on book discussion with more members contributing to the discussion.*

*We had gotten too focused on serving food and I was one who overdid it when at my home. So now we are really simple and limited.*

## Meeting Virtually

As we saw earlier, 82% of respondents in books clubs that are currently active are meeting somewhere different than before the pandemic. Of these, two out of three groups are meeting virtually, of which 96% use Zoom.

Here we look at what they think of their virtual book club experience, both good and bad, and what benefits are coming out of the experience that they might continue in the future.



---

## Inclusion of Remote Participants

Although 25% of those meeting virtually think their group's attendance rate is worse than before the pandemic—which is the same as in-person groups—15% meeting virtually say their attendance rate is improved (compared to 7% meeting in person).



A key contributing factor for improved participation is that members who have moved away, whether temporarily to second homes or permanently, have been able to join the group virtually. Also, some groups have gained new members who were unable to commit to an in-person book club previously (for example, due to disabilities, childcare issues, lack of transportation or traveling frequently).

*We are delighted that virtual meetings have allowed two long-term members of the group who moved away to join us once again. Also, this year several members have had some physical challenges that would make attending meetings in-person difficult. With virtual meetings, 100% of the members have been able to attend all the meetings since March.*

*It is easier to have all members attending. Often, members were traveling or spending winter in a warm climate and did not join the discussion. Now everyone joins no matter where they are.*

*I live in TN while other members are in CA. This might be the only plus to the pandemic.*

*I spend part of the year in a southern climate, so in the past I've been unable to attend winter book club meetings. Now that we meet on Zoom exclusively, I'm able to attend the meetings even when I'm far away.*

*Some of our original members have emigrated to Australia and Israel and now we are able to meet again through Zoom. Our book club has become international!*

Another advantage for groups meeting virtually is that they've discovered the ease of inviting authors to their meetings. Authors joining meetings via video chat is not a new phenomenon (for many years, the most commonly used platform was Skype), but the increased familiarity with virtual meeting technology has opened up the possibility to a wider range of groups.

*Our biggest change has been the ability to attract authors to attend by Zoom, particularly as a Canadian group. We have attracted several American authors including one very high-profile author who was willing to "zoom" with us.*

---

## Adapting to New Technology

2020 has posed significant challenges for book clubs. Unsurprisingly, for those currently meeting virtually, the biggest initial hurdle was the technology—a set of new skills which many needed to learn.



25% identified technology as a major obstacle for their group, with 7% saying that some members refuse to use Zoom. For 40% of groups meeting virtually, initial technology troubles were resolved through a combination of learning by doing, mutual support and some technical training; however, some still struggle.

Book clubs have also had to learn “zoom etiquette,” such as remembering to mute when not talking and raising their hands to speak.

*Organizing speakers and timing is essential. And encouraging “muting” when someone is not speaking.*

Many say that the pandemic gave them the impetus to become familiar with technology that they had previously avoided, which has led to wider benefits.

*We are able to continue on despite the problems and this felt better. Many members have learned how to use Zoom type technology who never expected to ever do so.*

*I had never had a Zoom video meeting before April—now I am hosting them for my local women's club! This technology definitely offers interesting benefits, going forward.*

*I think the participants have expanded their willingness to use technology. They all prefer print but are at least willing to try ebooks (or audiobooks) and I think they've all gained some confidence in their abilities to download books and access them.*

Some book club members have technical issues that have been showstoppers, and because of this they are currently not attending meetings. It is heartening to hear from others who describe how their group has gone to great efforts to help those with technical issues. In particular, there is gratitude for the many public librarians who run book clubs and have put in much time to help their group members get connected.

Technical issues generally fall into three main categories:

### Challenges in learning the technology; how to set up and use Zoom

*We held Zoom tutorials and practice Zooms to make sure everyone was good to go.*

*I run the club and am hugely impressed with the patience (with technology problems) and strong support that members have given.*

*Selected members had difficulty with the tech aspects. Resolved after a few sessions.*

*Getting the technology to work well is at times a headache but we have persevered.*

---

### *Problems caused by networking bandwidth, lack of equipment or similar*

According to the FCC, 19 million Americans lack access to fixed broadband services. In rural areas this amounts to nearly a quarter of the population and in tribal areas one-third. Even where available, somewhere between 42 million and 162 million do not subscribe. In addition, although 81% of the total US population have a smartphone, book club participation trends older and just 53% of those aged 65+ have one.\* Even those who do have the equipment to be able to meet virtually may not have the technical knowledge to get set up, and might be uncomfortable having someone come to their home to help during a pandemic.

*One person has a less-than-ideal internet connection and her speech is garbled.*

*Several members are not able to attend due to living in an area with less robust internet.*

*Difficulties with the technology, and the level of comfort different people have with computers and technology. Differences between people's wi-fi and internet access. We've moved along as best we could, helping each other when we can via Zoom.*

*At least one person has spent more time in a remote area so her internet connection is not good. So, we hear less from her.*

*As one would expect, technological difficulties sometimes prevent a participant from fully engaging. I have had people lose internet connectivity, and once a patron had computer updates that prevented her login.*

### *Reluctance to use Zoom*

Some are reluctant to use Zoom for various reasons, including finding it difficult to learn new skills, anxiety about hacking or a general unwillingness to participate in online meetings.

*One person refuses to join us because she does not like being on Zoom.*

*One senior in her 80s dropped out because she was too afraid to use Zoom having heard about hacking.*

*Some dislike the Zoom experience. They find it impersonal, disjointed, and often it has technical issues. Tech adverse group members tend to be the most vocal about their dislike.*

*A few people are not comfortable using Zoom so we have lost a couple members. They know they are welcome back when in-person meetings happen again.*

*Always technical issues—some people refuse to do anything online and they have slipped away from the group.*

\* Sources: FCC-20-50A1, 4/25/20; Pew Research, 2019; and <https://www.benton.org/blog/did-fcc-get-right-answers-broadband-deployment>

---

## Maintaining the Community Online

As previously discussed, maintaining the cohesion of the book club—the community, friendships and mutual support—is of paramount importance to most respondents. Despite the technological challenges, those who meet virtually emphasize how much they appreciate that virtual platforms have allowed them to stay in touch with their friends and maintain a sense of community.



*Being a widow living alone, unable to see or visit my family, reading books gives great pleasure, and the contact and discussion with club members makes life worth living during the pandemic.*

*Being able to meet on Zoom has been a real lifeline for our group to continue meeting. We all look forward to our meetings.*

*Everyone enjoys and appreciates the close support during lockdown through Zoom meetings.*

*I think we are all so grateful to have this group to get together with. Although we can't hug, we are thrilled to see each other much more than before.*

*It's fun seeing everyone on video chat platforms. Cats and dogs lurking in the background, children trying to sneak a peek—these things always make us happy.*

Many say that they have a greater appreciation for their group.

*I feel like our group has worked on their tech skills—and this is not a group that is very tech savvy—because they value coming together and value each other. I think that recognition is pretty moving.*

*The members who continue to meet via Zoom have developed stronger relationships and have become more open to sharing experiences. We also laugh together!*

*We feel closer and are pleased to be together via Zoom.*

*For a while we were gathering every two weeks on Zoom just to support each other. We are all of a certain age and are fairly isolated. So, I feel closer to the people in my group now.*

*Having an outlet of other women to look forward to sharing comments and life lessons regarding books we are reading with gives us something to look forward to during this pandemic. Even done virtually it is a joy to look forward to.*

*At first there was resistance to doing our meeting virtually. As Covid dragged on we realized how much we missed getting together so we started using Zoom. I think we will value our relationships even more when we start meeting in person again. That will be an emotional first meeting.*



## Socializing Virtually

Even with the benefits of virtual meetings, most respondents miss meeting in person. In our 2019 “Inner Lives of Book Clubs” report (see Appendix B) we found that almost all groups spend at least a small amount of time socializing, whether that be a few minutes at the start of the meeting while everyone gets settled (typical in public library groups) or up to 90 minutes or longer for groups that get together at home to share a meal.

Reduced social time: 50% spend less time socializing during virtual meetings.

50% of respondents in groups meeting virtually say that they are spending less time socializing (compared to 23% meeting in person). Aside from the time limit on the free version of Zoom, another factor is that many find the virtual format less conducive to relaxed discussion because they cannot hold multiple conversations or share food.

*When we met in person, we shared food and drink and the evening lasted two hours. Now it's difficult when more than one person wants to talk at the same time (which happens all the time). The online meetings only last about 45 minutes, one hour at the most.*

*Fewer people participate with Zoom. The socializing part of it has definitely changed. We aren't able to do our themed food and drink. Not much we can do about it.*

*Miss meeting in person; miss having the time to socialize in addition to our book discussions. We miss our hugs, miss the relaxed atmosphere when sharing food and beverage, miss the warmth and ambiance of homes and hearths. We are women, we are strong, we have the patience to survive this pandemic.*

*The big difference is not being able to meet in person. This makes everything more difficult and, personally, less enjoyable.*

While less social time is a point of sadness for many, some see a benefit as the balance of their meetings has moved more to discussion. Some groups have lost members who were there mainly for the social element and thus they are spending more time on discussion; others observe that because their group has reduced in size, they are able to have more in-depth discussions (more on this topic on pages 30-32).

*Members who were coming just to socialize are missing more meetings. Not a real problem since the group was becoming too large.*

*Too many people before made it difficult to have in-depth discussions as the moderator was busy trying to make sure everybody had a chance to contribute, and some were more interested in socializing anyway. The group is smaller now so we can get more stuck in.*

*Our Zoom groups are smaller than our normal discussion groups. It makes it easier to hear everyone and makes for better discussions.*

*I think our meetings are more focused on the actual book & discussing it vs. socializing at a restaurant.*



19% who are meeting virtually say that their group is spending more time socializing (compared to 29% meeting in person). On the whole, this stems from the isolated circumstances many find themselves in, which leads to more time and a greater desire to chat. Some point to their group having shrunk in numbers and, as a result, the remaining members have become closer.

19% of book clubs meeting virtually are spending more time socializing.

*We seem to spend more time checking in with each other at the beginning of our meeting since we don't see each other as frequently outside of the book club meetings.*

*Besides our once-a-month book discussion, we now meet weekly to check on each other. We practiced our patience as we learned how to navigate our devices and Zoom.*

*For a while we were gathering every two weeks on Zoom just to support each other. We are all of a certain age and are fairly isolated. I feel closer to my group now.*

*We all look forward to book club, maybe more than ever before, because it allows us a chance to "gather" socially (even if it's virtual) and have fun chatting and discussing.*

## A Few Have Discovered They Prefer Meeting Virtually

A minority have found meeting virtually such a positive experience that they would like to continue for the long term. In total, a third of respondents meeting virtually expect their group will retain a virtual element in the future. Commonly cited reasons include enabling members who are away from home to join and poor weather making driving unsafe (see Section 5).

*I am increasingly hard of hearing and it's tough to understand when there are side discussions and people talk at once in a room. I can hear so much better on Zoom with my hearing aid plugged directly in.*

*I lip-read which is impossible with masks, so meeting on Zoom has been really good. It's a more equal experience for me. I hope we stay this way.*

*More people are able to attend via Zoom. I'd actually like it to stay virtual.*

*I travel a lot for work and feel bad missing meetings. I hope my group stays virtual so I can join in wherever I am.*

## Zoom Fatigue Is an Issue for Some

Some suffer from Zoom fatigue, or just feel exhausted by their current situation.

*Some sisters have "Zoom fatigue" from working, education kids, etc. The last thing they want to do is get on a Zoom call. But they mostly do because the friendship connection is so vital.*

*We've had issues with Zoom fatigue and people having a hard time keeping commitments.*

---

## Discussing Books Virtually

### Discussion Length

While 20% say that their group's discussions are longer now that they are meeting virtually (with reasons ranging from having fewer demands on their time to a shift of focus from social to discussion time), 29% say that their discussions are shorter than they used to be in person. Some put this down to the virtual format being less spontaneous than meeting in person. By comparison, among those meeting in person, 15% say their discussions are longer, 20% shorter.

*We are missing the emotional connection/support compared to meeting in person. Most of us find Zoom discussions do not flow or allow spontaneous participation. They are definitely shorter.*

*Spontaneity is alive and well when meeting in person. It's nearly impossible in Zoom meetings. We are friends first, so we miss being able to share personal conversations in the limited time available on Zoom.*

*Usually, with in-person meetings, we have authentic natural discussions that meander from topic to topic, person to person, jumping and interesting. Many personal connections to characters or ideas are shared. And there are snacks and cocktails to share. While the Zoom platform enables us to meet, true discussion is difficult and we have resorted to using discussion questions with the host moving us along. And there are time constraints. Just not as satisfying, more listy.*

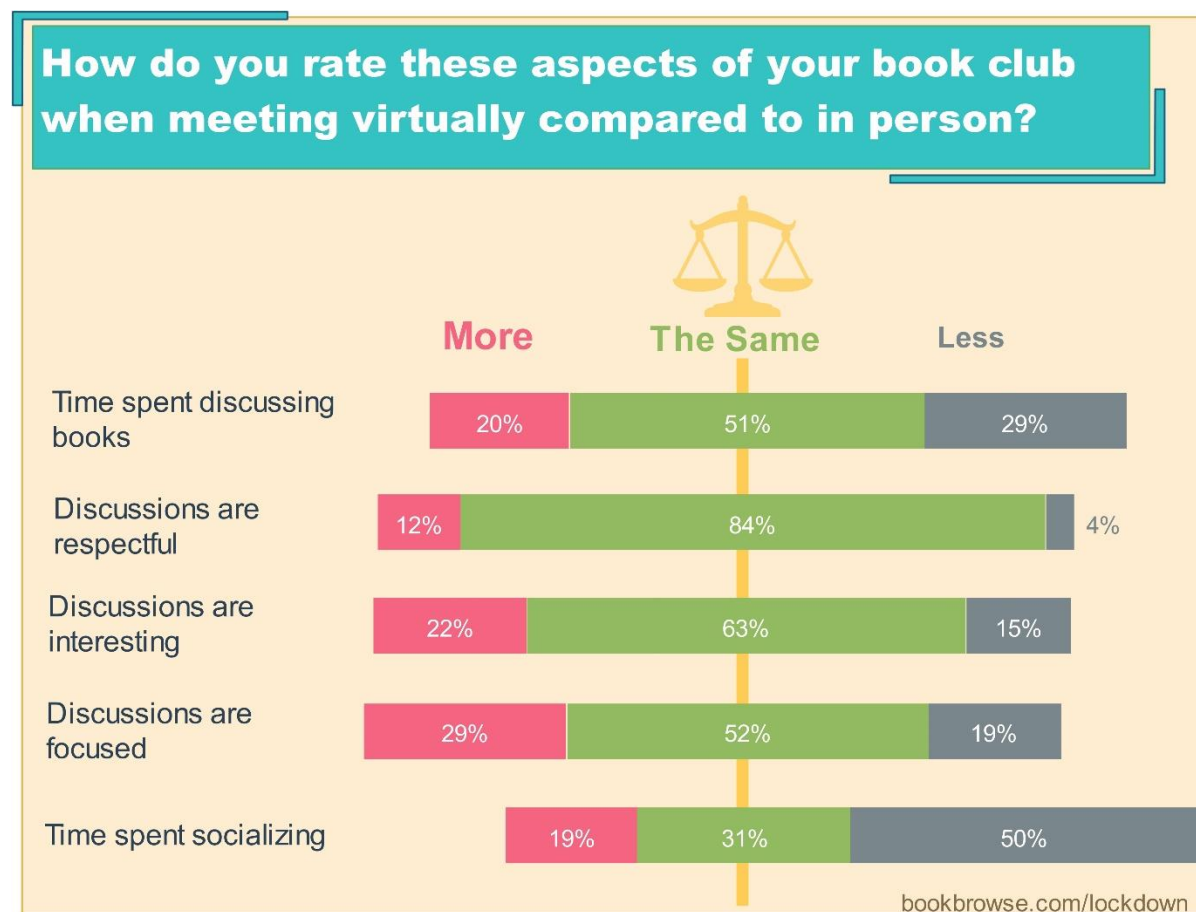
Another factor is that many groups are using the free version of Zoom, which has a 40-minute limit on groups of three or more. In our 2019 "Inner Lives of Book Clubs" report we found that 84% of private book clubs and 90% of public groups (most of which are run by libraries) spend at least 40 minutes of their meeting time discussing the book; and many spend longer (50–60 minutes being the most popular time length), so having to artificially limit meetings to 40 minutes is a frustration for some.

Some groups have clubbed together to buy a Zoom subscription so they can talk for as long as they want, others have a member who subscribes and some have worked around the time limit by scheduling back-to-back meetings, or splitting their meetings across multiple days.

*We are more respectful of time since we are using a free Zoom account, which has a time limit. We've worked around the short time by scheduling two meetings separated by a one-minute gap.*

*In the past, we always allowed 15–20 min. at the beginning of a meeting for socializing. But since Zoom limits us, we added an additional meeting. So now we meet twice a month, one for the book discussion and two weeks later for socializing via Zoom.*

## Discussion Quality



In our 2019 report, we found that 98% of book club participants said that respect for each other's opinions is very important to their book club experience, so it is good to see that just 4% of those meeting virtually in 2020 feel that their discussions are less respectful compared to last year, and 12% feel they are more so (approximately the same proportion as those meeting in person). In virtual book groups, some point to discussions being more respectful because fewer people talk over each other and side discussions do not happen.

Some feel that their group's discussions have become more inclusive and that the virtual format has been an equalizer, allowing quieter members to participate more and formerly dominant members to be less disruptive. For more about the challenges of overly dominant personalities, see Section 3 of our 2019 "Inner Lives of Book Clubs" report (Appendix B).

*Less interruptions since we raise hands to speak and wait for the facilitator to call on us.*

*Some of the quieter people have participated more via Zoom than they did in person.*

*There are fewer side conversations between people since all the discussion is available to all. We stay on task more. But that is also sad, because there is less conversation. It feels more like a class than a discussion.*

*Being virtual there seems to be an understanding that the person speaking gets full attention. So less interrupting and less wandering off topic.*

29% meeting virtually say their discussions are more focused and 22% say they are more interesting. Frequently, this is attributed to less time spent socializing. Some say that the restricted time limit with the free version of Zoom has caused them to become more focused when discussing books which has improved their enjoyment. Other factors are that side conversations are greatly reduced, which is seen as a benefit by many. Albeit others say that they miss the organic flow of their discussions and particularly of their social time. By comparison, 17% meeting in person think their discussions are more focused and 20% think they are more interesting.

29% of book clubs report more focused discussions when meeting virtually.

*Due to the nature of Zoom, we tend to be less distracted by side conversations.*

*Our meetings are shorter and more focused during the pandemic. We spend more time actually discussing the book we read for that month.*

*When we were meeting in person, separate discussions tended to break out between two or three different people as our table was so long. Now it's easier to hear everyone and focus strictly on the book being discussed.*

*Some have commented that they like the virtual meetings because the discussions stay on topic, and I have noticed the difference of no more distracting sidebar conversations.*

*I think we value the meetings more, and therefore the conversations are more enjoyable. I hope that feeling remains when we begin to meet in person again.*

However, 15% of those in book clubs meeting virtually say that their book discussions are less interesting (compared to 9% among those who are meeting in person), with some feeling that virtual meetings are less spontaneous and more disjointed than in person meetings.

Most of these respondents point to technical issues and discomfort with the format as a key factor. Some groups are still getting the hang of virtual etiquette or find it restrictive. Others say that not everybody's voice is being heard because some people find it difficult to break into the discussion in order to make their point. This is an area where having a facilitator can be a help (see BookBrowse's [blog](https://bookbrowse.com/blog) for more on this: [bookbrowse.com/facil](https://bookbrowse.com/facil)).

*Initial meetings were often very frustrating, resulting in some members dropping out; but once facilitators and members established "ground rules" for virtual participation, many issues disappeared—and some viewed this as a net positive.*

*The nature of Zoom itself has impacted our group. It is more difficult to understand comments if more than one person happens to respond at the same time (which happens frequently). We enjoy each other and laugh often—which becomes a bit disjointed when using Zoom. Book club is an important connection for our members, so we tolerate the inconveniences of using Zoom. We miss being in person.*

*Zoom has made our exchanges more awkward—there is always someone who can't hear, the camera is wonky or they are just frustrated with the format.*

## 4. Book Clubs That Are Not Currently Meeting

### Why Book Clubs Stopped Meeting

24% of the 3,417 respondents who describe themselves as in a book club were not currently meeting at the time of the survey (mid-October 2020). A few were in groups that had tried meeting at some point, but most had not met with their book group since the start of the pandemic.

A significantly high percentage of groups not currently meeting would normally be meeting in the library.

*We stopped because of the health risks. We actually met last month for the first time since March, but are already hesitating to meet again next month because of the uptick in cases.*

*Many in the group are older and didn't feel comfortable meeting together anymore; I would expect we would meet again after the pandemic, maybe fall 2021.*

*We had the type of book club where we would pass the books around to one another over a restaurant dinner, discussing them. A virtual format was not quite the same and we did not try it.*

*Book club kits have not been available and changing to ebooks is too much of a technical challenge for those who don't like ereaders.*

*We are divided in how/where to meet—this has caused hard feelings and is still unresolved.*

*Zoom meetings didn't work and members were too nervous to meet in person.*

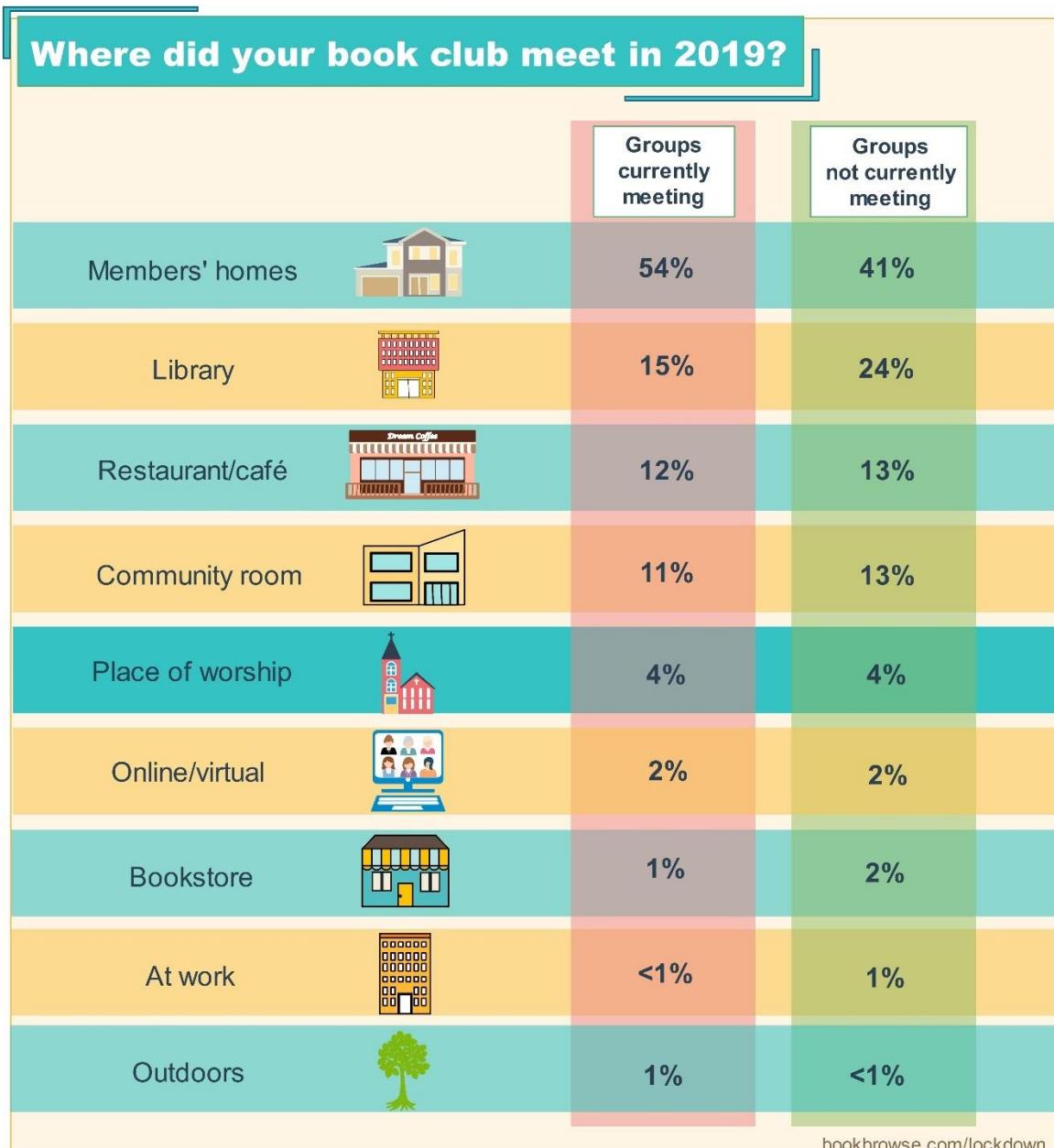
When we look at the profile of the groups that are not currently meeting and compare them to those that are meeting, there is no significant difference in terms of age, nor in terms of satisfaction with their book club prior to the pandemic.

The one key difference is that groups that are not currently meeting have a significantly higher likelihood of normally gathering in a library, bookstore or community room. The common denominator between library and bookstore groups (and some of the groups that meet in community rooms) is that they tend to be public groups reliant on an organization for most aspects of their book club, particularly the venue.

Most libraries and bookstores are not currently allowing groups to meet on their premises. As we have seen, some have been able to pivot their book clubs into virtual groups or have found a suitably spacious alternate venue to meet in person, such as the library grounds. However, others have not found meeting in person to be possible; for example, even if a library has a location where people could potentially congregate safely, some are reluctant to do so as they cannot be sure all participants will follow safety guidelines.

The logistics of meeting online are also challenging; for example, the cost of a Zoom subscription could be prohibitive for a small organization, without which sessions are limited to 40 minutes. In addition, as previously discussed (p.26), some communities do not have access to fixed broadband internet, and even if they do many do not subscribe; and only a bit over half of those aged 65+ (who represent a large portion of book clubbers) have a smartphone. Even those who have both a device and internet connectivity to be able to join a meeting virtually may need one-on-one help to get set up, and may not be able to invite someone into their home to provide this help during the pandemic.

Given that 89% of respondents whose book clubs are not currently meeting say they were happy in their group last year and 90% say that their group is important to them, it seems likely that, when conditions allow, most will be ready and eager to reconvene.





*Our group was sponsored by the public library that closed because of the virus.*

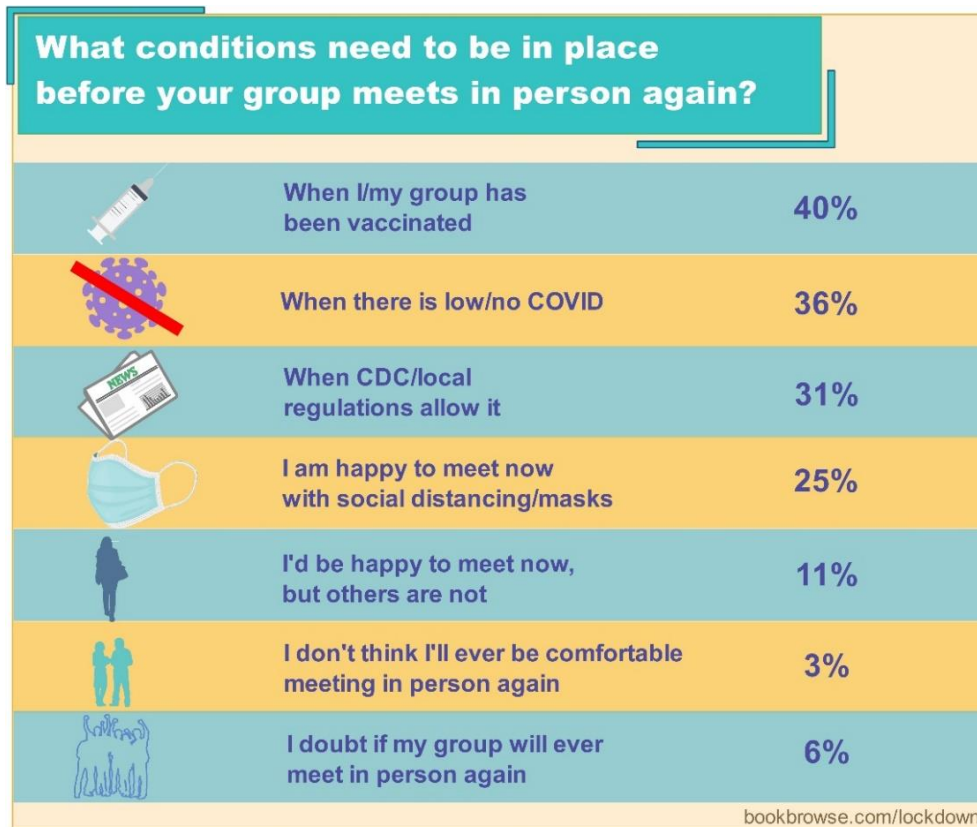
*We use the meeting room at the library which has been closed because of the pandemic.*

*Library is not allowing any groups to meet. Our book club is large, 20 of us regulars.*

*Our library system is only now reopening which has had a huge negative effect on our group. Curbside checkout has only just started.*

## Conditions Required to Meet in Person

We asked respondents who are not currently meeting what conditions would be needed before they would meet in person again. A quarter say that they would be happy to meet in person now with appropriate safeguards, 11% say that they would be happy to meet now but others do not want to, 3% say they will never feel comfortable meeting in a group again, and 6% doubt their group will meet again. Of the remainder, most plan to wait until there is either a low risk of COVID-19 and/or they or their group have been vaccinated.



Note: multiple answers accepted; thus, total adds to more than 100%

*When the library system allows us to meet again, we will.*

*When church opens up, because it won't open until the state and county give the okay.*

*If and when all members of the group are vaccinated and the vaccine has been shown to work effectively in our age group.*

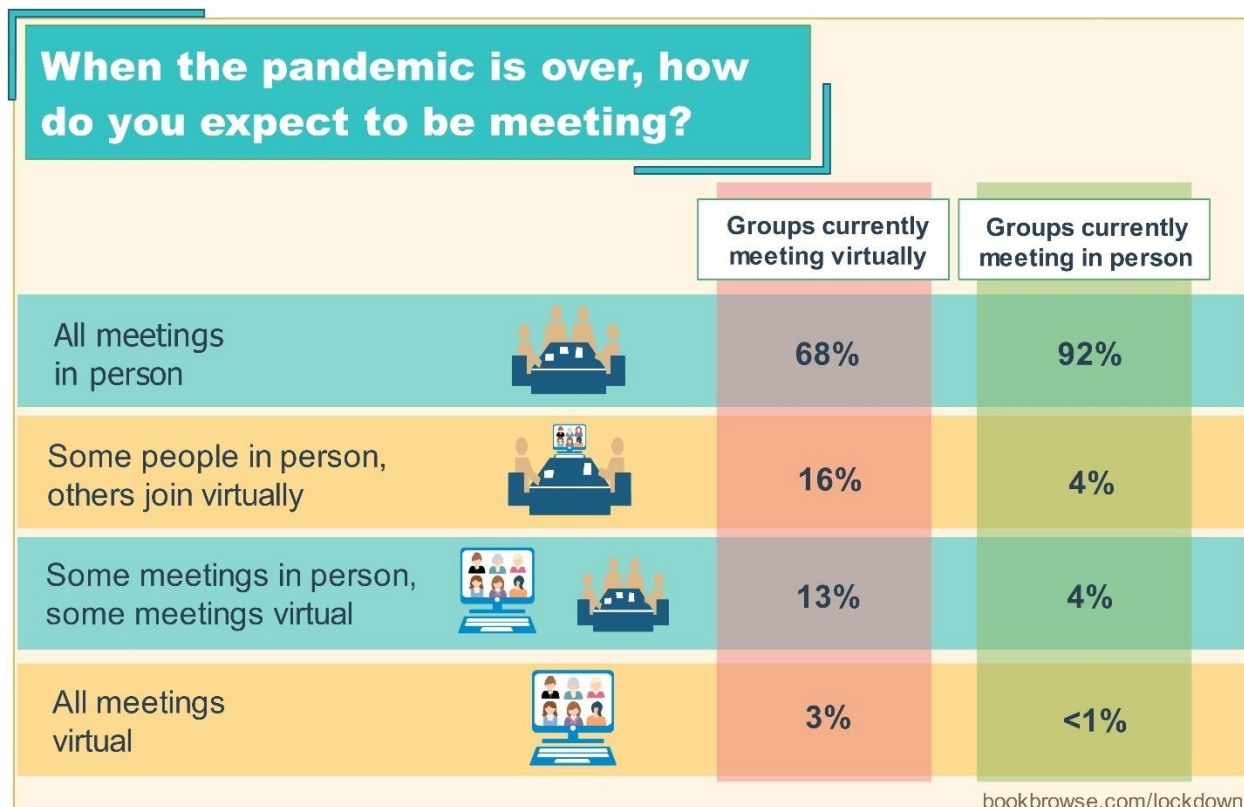
*I anticipate that some members will want to participate online indefinitely.*



## 5. After the Pandemic

### How Book Clubs Expect to Meet

When it comes to where their book club will meet post-pandemic, there is a clear difference in opinion between respondents in groups that are currently meeting virtually and those that are currently meeting in person. While the great majority expect to meet in person in the future, 32% of those who are usually meeting virtually during the pandemic expect to retain a virtual element.



Of respondents in groups that are usually meeting virtually during the pandemic:

- 16% anticipate a hybrid arrangement post-pandemic, with most of the group meeting in person but with the option for others to join them virtually; for example, if one or more members were sick or traveling.
- 13% think that some of their meetings will be in person and others virtual; for example, if weather conditions make it unsafe to drive; or to enable groups that have traditionally only met in certain seasons, because some of the membership split their time between locations, to be able to meet all year.
- 3% expect all their meetings to be virtual in the future; up from 1% who met virtually before the pandemic.

*I like being able to Zoom from home, and we plan to keep that as an option for anyone not wanting to venture out but who still wants to participate.*

*Now we're old Zoom hands, we'll be able to use it in case of inclement weather where people would previously have wanted to cancel or postpone.*

*People that don't drive at night will be able to attend virtually.*

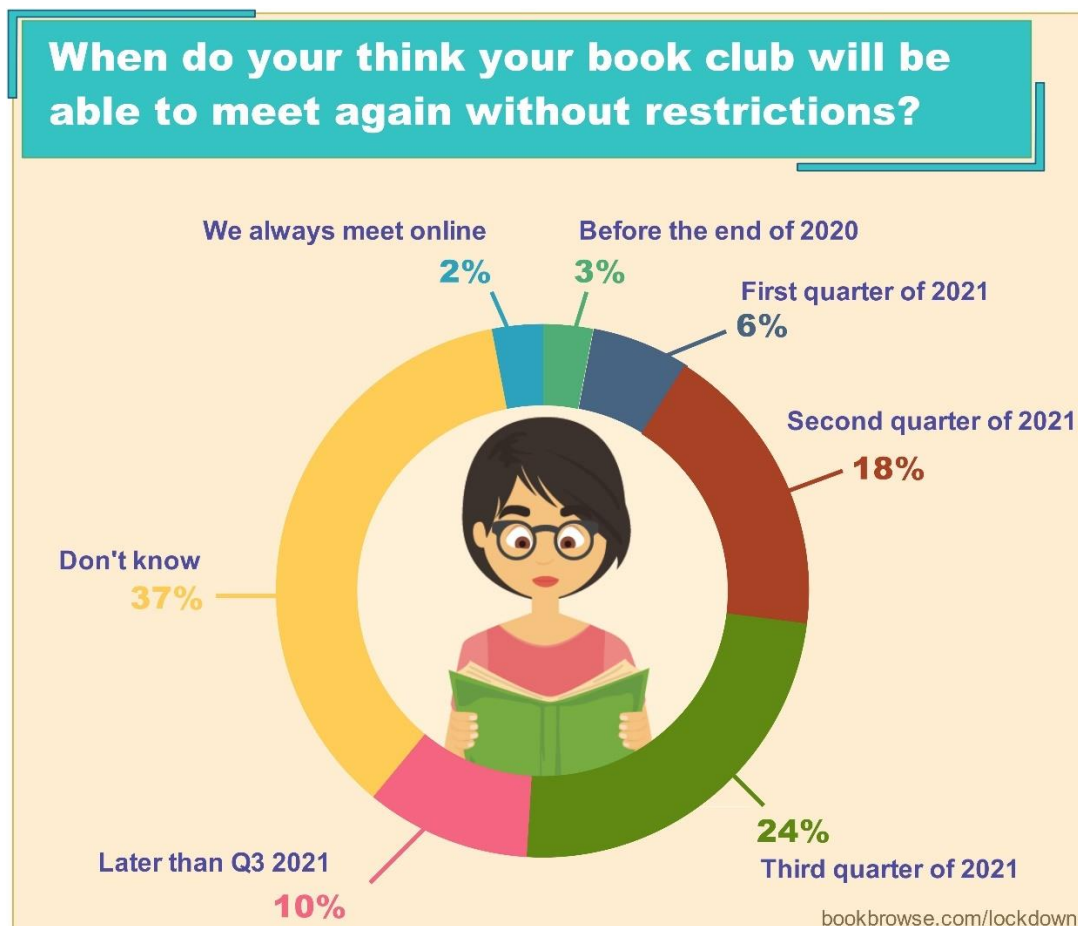
*I hope we can manage to include hybrid meetings so that those of us who don't want to meet can still participate.*

*Snowbirds will be able to join us during the winter months.*

*I will not be surprised if we meet every other month via Zoom or meet this way during the summer when so many are traveling.*

## When Book Clubs Expect to Meet in Person Again

We asked respondents whose book club was meeting virtually at the time of the survey (October 2020) when they expected to be able to meet in person without restrictions. Over a third simply weren't going to be drawn into giving an opinion. Of the remainder, most thought it would not be until at least the second quarter of 2021.



---

## The Future of Virtual Book Clubs

*My current preference is to remain virtual.*

3% of all respondents whose book clubs are currently meeting say their group formed in 2020, oftentimes as a direct response to the pandemic. Two-thirds of these are meeting virtually and some will stay that way after the pandemic.

One-third of book clubs meeting virtually expect to retain a virtual element.

Overall, as we saw on page 36, about one-third of respondents currently in a book club that is meeting virtually think their group will retain a virtual element in the future.

In addition, there is potential demand for a virtual format among those who are not currently in a book club but are interested in being in one.

In our 2019 report, “The Inner Lives of Book Clubs” (see Appendix B), we asked people interested in being in a book club but not in one what was preventing them from joining a group. 46% did not know of any book clubs to join, 15% did not want to be a part of the groups they knew about and 39% said they were unable to for a variety of reasons. Many of the reasons given would be resolved by a virtual book club, such as childcare issues, frequently traveling for work, lack of transportation and disabilities.

*Comments from “The Inner Lives of Book Clubs” survey*

*Childcare is sometimes difficult to plan. Plus, I have a visual handicap and transportation is a problem.*

*I work two part-time jobs; I have a child with severe emotional issues and I have a genetic heart condition. I love reading, but do not have time to attend a meeting in person.*

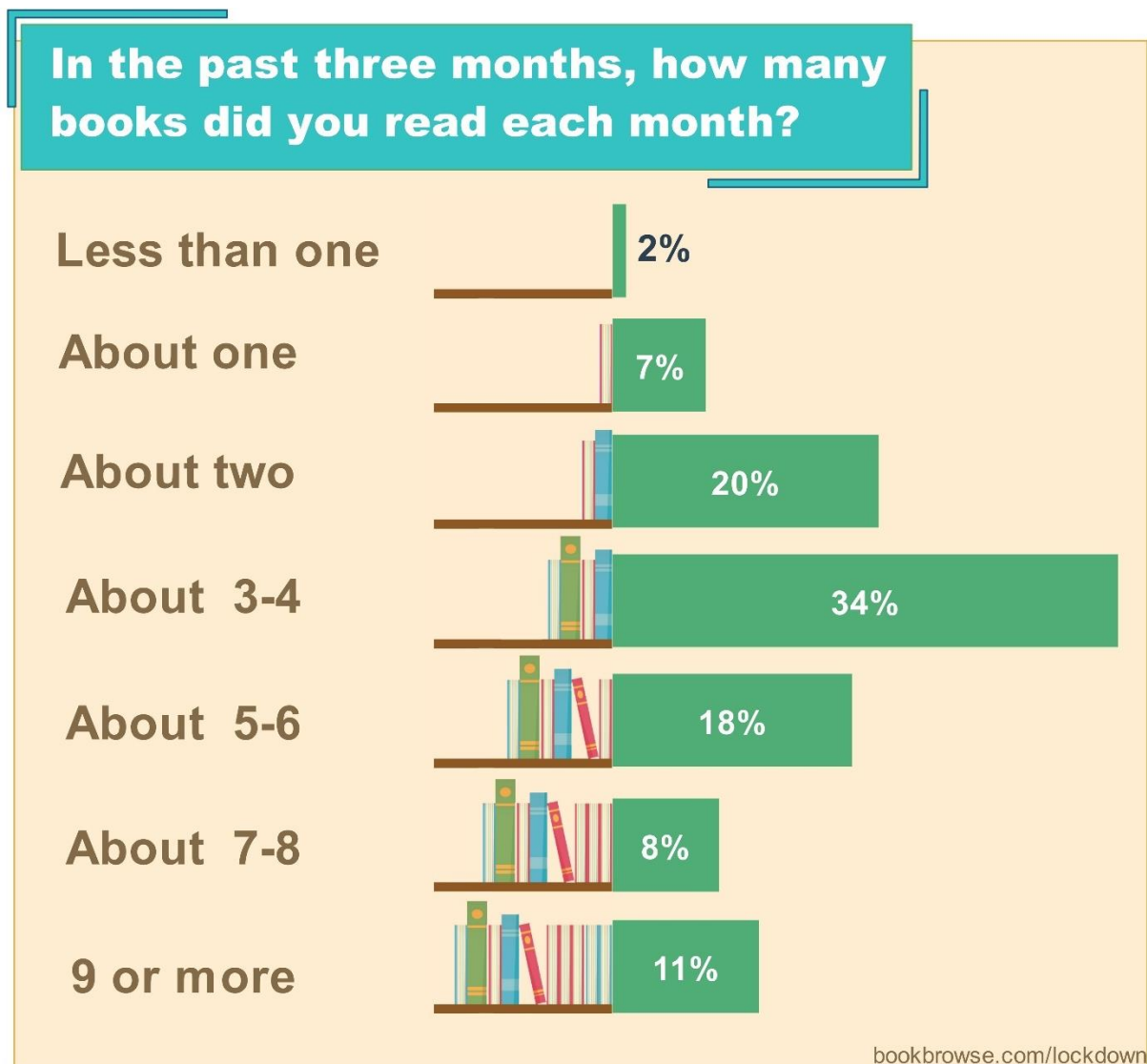
*I would like to, but I travel too much for my work so would end up missing many meetings.*

## 6. General Reading Habits

### The Pandemic and Reading Habits

In addition to book-club-specific questions, we also asked a small number of general reading questions to assess if people's reading habits have changed during lockdown. We asked these of the entire base of respondents, both those in book clubs (3,417) and those not (1,169), for a total sample size of 4,586.

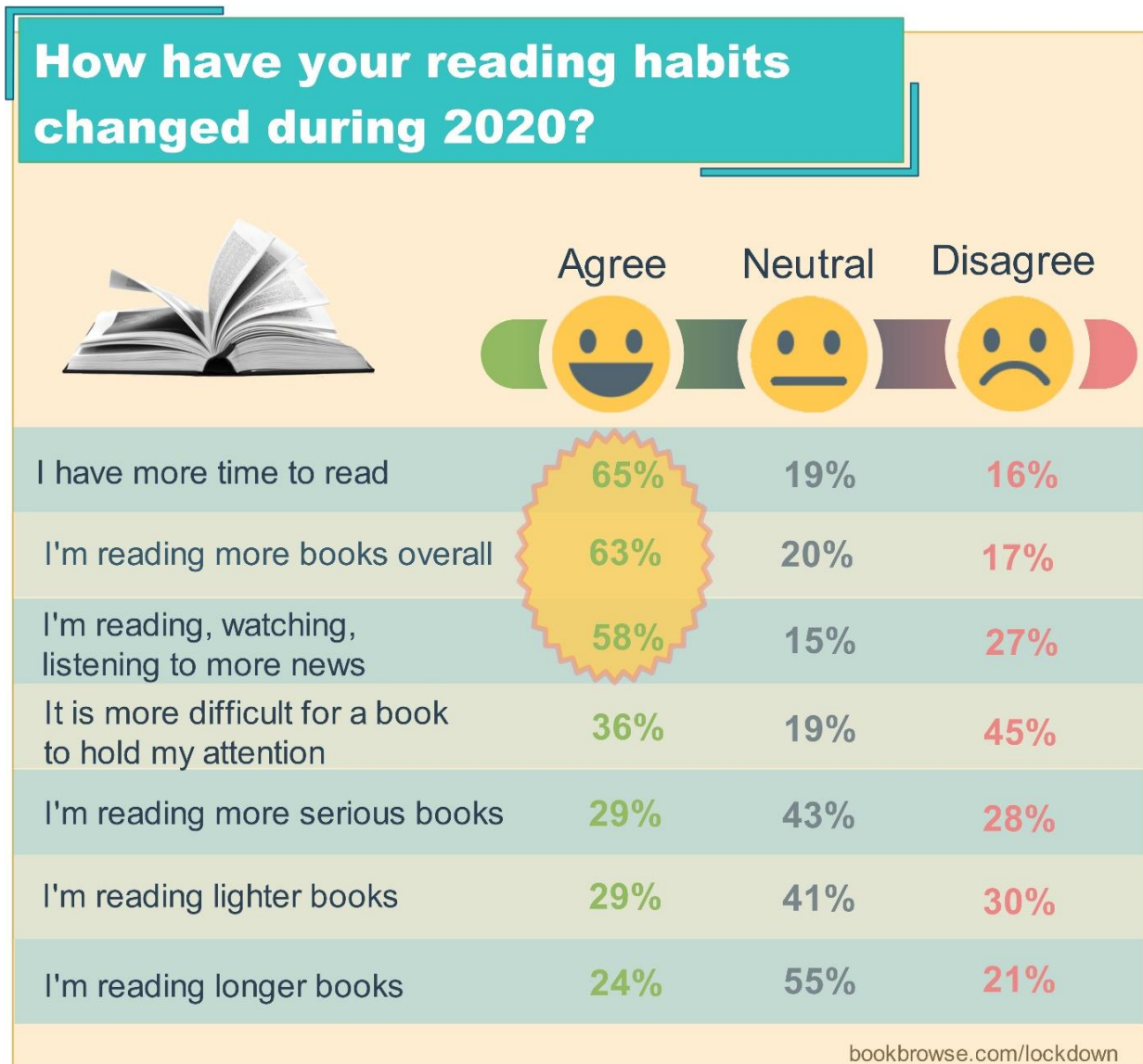
As a reminder, these findings are not representative of the general public, but only of participants in this survey—in keeping with the profile of BookBrowse's visitors, respondents are keen readers, with 71% reading at least three books per month.



Overall, 65% say they have more time to read than last year (70% among those aged 65+ and 53% in the under-65 age group), consequently, 63% overall report reading more than last year.

While 29% say they are reading more serious books, equal numbers say they are reading lighter books.

About a third agree that it is more difficult for a book to hold their attention, and 58% say they are consuming more news than last year.



---

## Appendix A: Demographics

The following demographics are for the 3,417 respondents who described themselves as currently in a book club; they have been reweighted to remove “prefer not to answer.” Their responses are covered in Sections 1–5.

### Gender

95% are female, 5% male.

### Age

29% are under 65 years, 71% are 65+.

In previous research we have seen that the proportion of people in book clubs increases with age. There is little correlation between the number of books read and book club participation; instead it seems to come down simply to having the time and desire to connect. For example, in our 2015 report (see Appendix C), we found that among BookBrowse visitors who read regularly, 39% of those aged 25-34 were in a book club, rising to 62% in the 65-74-year age group and to 68% in the 75+ age group. Even taking this into account, the 65+ age group is over-represented in the sample; so, where relevant, we have broken down the data by age and reported significant differences as we find them.

### Location

90% of respondents are based in the US, 5% in Canada, 2% in the UK, 2% in Australia or New Zealand and less than 1% elsewhere.

### Race/Ethnicity

95% of respondents identify as white/Caucasian.

### Relevant Employment/Volunteer Roles

7% of respondents are public librarians, 3% academic/other librarians, 1% booksellers, 21% “Friends of the Library” members and 24% lead a book discussion group.

### *Respondents Not in a Book Club*

The demographics of the 1,169 respondents not currently in a book club/never in a book club are statistically similar to those currently in book clubs, except in age (40% under 65 years) and sex (14% male, rising to 21% male among those who have never been in a book club). Also, a smaller proportion are “Friends of the Library” members (14%) and none are book club leaders. Their responses are combined with those of respondents in a book club in Section 6.

---

## Appendix B: *The Inner Lives of Book Clubs* (2019)

*The Inner Lives of Book Clubs* is the essential guide to all things book club. In it you'll discover the elements that most happy and successful groups have in common, solutions to a dozen common book club problems and much more. It combines the findings from two surveys of more than 5,000 book club participants with BookBrowse's 15 years of book club experience and research.

It is available at [bookbrowse.com/wp/innerlives](https://bookbrowse.com/wp/innerlives)

---

### Introduction

- About This Report
- About the Survey
- Key Findings

### 1. Book Club Logistics

- Private & Public Book Clubs
- When & Where Book Clubs Meet
- Book Club Size and Attendance Rates
- Membership Longevity
- Ratio of Women & Men and Age Range
- How Books Are Selected
- Meeting Duration & Discussion Length
- Book Club Kits
- Facilitators
- Off-Limit Topics
- Food and Drink

### 2. Book Club Dynamics

- What People Want from a Book Club
- Tell Us About Your Book Club

### 3. Book Club Issues

- Common Book Club Issues
- How Book Clubs Respond

### 4. Why People Leave Book Clubs

### 5. External Perceptions of Book Clubs



---

## Appendix C: *Book Clubs in the USA* (2015)

Since 2004, BookBrowse has regularly researched book clubs and readers. *Book Clubs in the USA* summarizes some of the findings from our first 10 years of research.

It is available at [bookbrowse.com/wp/wp2015](http://bookbrowse.com/wp/wp2015)

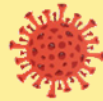
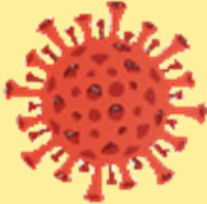
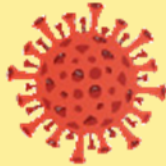
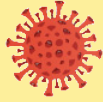
---

### Introduction

- What is a Book Club?
  - Who Should Read This?
  - Interpreting the Numbers
  - About BookBrowse
1. By the Numbers
    - The Rise of Book Clubs
    - Age Matters
    - Education as Indicator
    - Income Less of a Factor
    - What Men Want
    - Multiple Memberships
    - In-Person & Online Groups
    - Book Club Size
    - The Importance of Public Book Clubs
  2. What Book Clubs Read
    - Book Clubs Read Widely
    - Reading Local Authors
    - The Ideal Book Club Book
  3. Book Club Mechanics
    - Who Chooses the Books
    - How Many Books Read
    - Planning Ahead
    - Formats Read
    - The Role of Reading Guides
  4. Reading, Buying & Borrowing Books
    - Reading
    - Buying
    - Borrowing
  5. Channels of Influence
    - Book Discovery
    - The Influence of Book Clubbers
  6. Men and Book Clubs
    - Experiences of Men in Book Clubs
    - Perceptions of Men Not in Book Clubs
  7. Advice and Resources
    - Starting a Book Club
    - Setting Expectations
    - Leading Meetings
    - Choosing Books
    - Difficult Situations
    - Reading Guides
    - Inviting Authors
  8. Insights from Book Clubs
    - Library Book Clubs for Adults
    - Book Clubs for Younger Readers
    - Book Clubs that Meet in Bookstores
    - All Men and Mixed-Gender Book Clubs







## BookBrowse LLC

19630 Allendale Ave, #2157  
Saratoga, CA 95070



***[bookbrowse.com/contactus](http://bookbrowse.com/contactus)***



(+1) 408-867-6500



**[bookbrowse.com](http://bookbrowse.com)**



ISBN 9781733619240



90000



9 781733 619240