

Can better advice keep you safer online?

April 4 2017, by Elissa Redmiles



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many Americans are [worried about their online privacy and security](#). And rightly so: [Nearly half of Americans](#) have encountered at least one serious problem with online safety.

There are a wide range of potential problems: Some people fall victim to criminally malicious attackers who steal personal [information](#) like Social Security or bank account numbers, compromise [online accounts](#) and

conduct online scams stealing people's money. Other people find friends or family members have shared private information without their consent. And still others lose jobs or other opportunities because prospective employers find unflattering information about them online. What all these situations have in common is simple: We do not have control over the information we believe to be private.

One key to staying safer online may be getting [advice](#) from the right places – people and sources with accurate, helpful information that can let you take control of your [online privacy](#) and security. My own research, in collaboration with [Sean Kross](#) and [Michelle Mazurek](#), explores where people get their advice about online security, and how useful it actually is.

Those sources include librarians, government websites and co-workers. They offer a wide range of advice, such as customizing social media privacy settings and using password managers, which can make it easier to use strong, complex passwords without having to remember them.

[We analyzed a survey of 3,000 internet users across the United States](#), and found that where people get advice has a lot to do with their online safety experiences. We found that no matter how wealthy or how poor a person is, no matter her education level, the speed of her internet service or whether she has a smartphone, a person's online safety is closely related to where, and from whom, she gets advice about online security.

Finding good advice

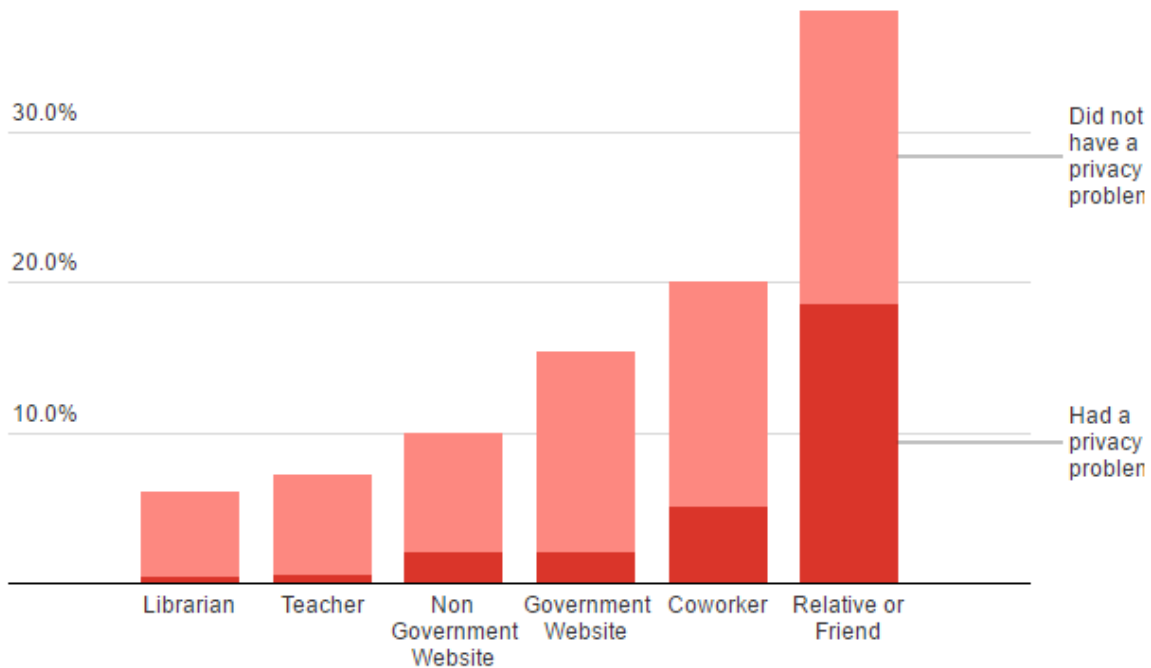
[Approximately 70 percent of Americans](#) learn about online security behaviors as a result of advice shared by friends, family and co-workers, or on websites they visit. Often they get this advice in casual conversation or web browsing, before having an online safety incident. That can influence their behavior, ideally making them better at

protecting themselves.

Many people get privacy and security advice from their friends and relatives: 38 percent of Americans received assistance from people close to them. But they may not get very good information: 49 percent of them reported at least one online safety incident, such as identity theft or falling victim to an online scam. Emotional closeness doesn't necessarily mean someone has good information to share.

Worst sources for advice about online security and privacy

In a survey of 3,000 internet users in the U.S., most people got online safety advice from relatives, friends or coworkers. But people who got advice from librarians and teachers were less likely to have problems.



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Twenty percent of Americans sought out advice from their co-workers. One in four of those who did so also reported an online safety incident – half as many as those who took advice from friends and family.

The 25 percent of Americans who take advice from websites report fewer incidents than those who took advice from friends and coworkers. Only 14 percent of people who took advice from a government website reported an online safety problem. And just more than one in five people who took advice from a nongovernmental website reported an online safety incident.

The 13 percent of Americans who get advice from teachers or librarians, however, report the lowest frequency of online negative experiences: 8 percent of them had an online safety problem.

Evaluate the source

With so much security advice available, of such varied quality, our research suggests people should not just follow their friends' advice, or do something they read about online. Instead, when asking for advice from co-workers, friends and family, people should also ask how they learned this information. And they should think critically about the answers they get. Do those answers jibe with other advice from other sources? Seeking out people who work in internet or technology fields can also give useful perspectives, either about others' advice or their own suggestions.

Our findings also suggest that librarians are underutilized but potentially very valuable sources of online [safety](#) information. We asked local librarians for a few suggestions of good resources for getting started with protecting your information. They recommended [Get Started With Privacy](#), the [Security Cheat Sheet](#) and [Security Starter Pack & Tutorials](#) as good first steps to making an online security plan.

To help keep children safe online, the librarians also recommended the [National Cybersecurity Alliance](#) website, with security and privacy activities and information for kids and parents alike. Our research also suggests that teachers may be a good source of high quality online [security](#) advice.

Research suggests that [people should keep their software updated](#), use a [password manager](#) to assist with having strong and unique passwords and use two-factor authentication to further secure their online accounts. With better advice from better sources, more [people](#) will stay safer online.

More information: Where is the Digital Divide? A Survey of Security, Privacy, and Socioeconomics, [DOI: 10.13016/M2FV4T](#)

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