Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field

Survey fielded March 9–17, 2021.

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Introduction

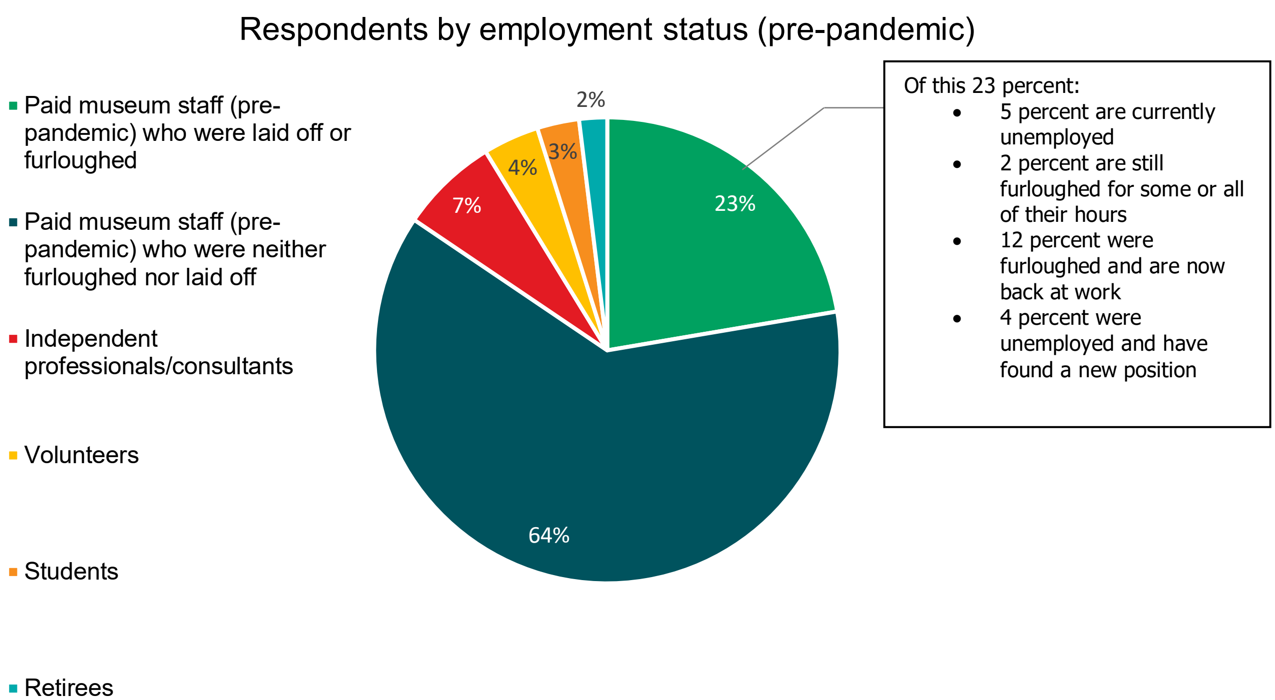
The COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating effect on the US arts and culture sector—both on the nonprofit organizations that form an essential part of our civic infrastructure and on the individuals who work for them. The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies Nonprofit Economic Data Project estimates that the nonprofit arts, entertainment, and recreation sector lost over 36 percent of its jobs to the pandemic-induced financial crisis between February and December 2020, and predicts that at current rates of regrowth it will take more than twenty-five months to fully recover them. To illuminate the impact that the pandemic is having on people in the museum field specifically, AAM surveyed current paid museum employees, employees who had been furloughed or laid off, independent contractors, volunteers, students, retirees, and board members.

The impact the survey captures is clear, severe, and troubling. **Over 40 percent of respondents reported that they have lost income due to the pandemic—more than 30 percent of their total income, on average.** They also reported a grave toll on their mental health and wellbeing from the pandemic, rating this impact at an average of 6.6 out of 10 (where 10 indicates very strong negative impact). Nearly half of paid museum staff reported increased workload, and three-quarters reported having to adapt to working remotely for all or some of their hours. The strain has been particularly severe for independent consultants and contractors, who are an essential part of the museum workforce: over half have had contracts cancelled or indefinitely postponed and struggled to secure new contracts, losing them more than half of their pre-pandemic income on average. The data also reveals the role race and gender play in how people experience the pandemic. BIPOC respondents reported higher financial stress and fewer financial resources than white respondents. Women were more likely than men to report increased workload and adverse effects on hours, salary, mental health, and wellbeing.

In addition to the pandemic's financial and work-related impacts, experts warn of a second pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic: the current and delayed impacts on mental health including rising anxiety and depression. Demonstrating a deep care for one another, respondents to the survey highlighted the compassion and empathy that exists among the people that make up the museum field. Despite experiencing personal hardships, when asked to indicate how worried they were about various issues (on a scale from 0 = not worried to 10 = very worried), respondents' **greatest shared concern was for the wellbeing of colleagues** (average score of 7). As our field begins recovering from the pandemic, we urge museums as employers to embody these same values and vigilance by crafting equitable responses, practicing empathetic leadership, and taking actions that support the people who make museums possible. In addition to this report, we have used survey responses to build a webpage collating resources requested, or cited as useful during the pandemic, by respondents including career management, connection, and self-care resources, as well as a list of employer actions respondents cited as helping them to feel safe, valued, and supported during this time. If you have questions or comments about this report or suggestions for additions to the webpage, we want to hear from you, please contact us.

The Survey

On March 9, 2021, the American Alliance of Museums fielded the survey “Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 on People in the Museum Field,” inviting individuals to share their experiences during the novel coronavirus pandemic. The survey closed on March 17, having collected 2,666 usable responses, mostly from people whose primary employment status (pre-pandemic) was as paid museum staff (87 percent), and also representing people who self-identify as independent professionals/consultants (7 percent), volunteers (4 percent), students (3 percent), and retirees (2 percent). A small number of respondents opted to select more than one option which is why these numbers add up to 103 percent. 23 percent of these respondents had been furloughed or laid off at some point. Of this 23 percent, 5 percent are currently unemployed, 2 percent are still furloughed for some or all of their hours, 12 percent were furloughed and are now back at work, and 4 percent were unemployed and have found a new position.



In this report, “paid staff” refers to respondents who indicated that their primary museum employment status, pre-pandemic, was as paid part-time or full-time staff. This is to provide as a clear distinction from unpaid, volunteer staff and board members. It includes people who have subsequently been laid off and are unemployed, or now employed outside the museum field.

As with all surveys, this sample has some degree of sample bias. It is virtually impossible to field a survey that is truly representative of the entire field of museum workers, as many museum workers are not directly engaged with AAM (and thus difficult to reach). The survey was disseminated primarily through AAM's email lists and social media. Because of these constraints, it was more likely to reach people currently employed in museums than those who have been laid off, and more likely to reach those in upper or middle management than in front-line positions.

In some places in this report, percentages do not add up to 100. This may occur for several reasons. When the total falls short of 100, it is often because we are not reporting responses from people who selecting “other” or “not applicable.” When they add up to more than 100, it can be because people selected more than one option in the answer, and/or because of a rounding error.

Overall Impact on the Field

Impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing

When asked to rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing (on a scale from 0 = no impact to 10 = very strong negative impact), respondents gave an **average rating of 6.6**. Students reported the highest level of negative impact, at an **average rating of 8**.

Financial impact

When asked to rate the financial stress they or their families experienced during the pandemic on a scale of 0-10 (on a scale from 0 = no stress to 10 = extreme stress), respondents reported an **average rating of 3.2**. Twenty-seven percent indicated they are experiencing no stress, and 9 percent rated their stress at 8 or higher.

Forty-three percent of respondents indicated they had lost income due to the pandemic. Of those who did lose income, the average loss was 31 percent of their total income ($21,191).

What are people worried about?

When asked to indicate how worried they were about various issues (on a scale from 0 = not worried to 10 = very worried), respondents' **greatest shared concern was for the wellbeing of colleagues** (average score of 7), followed by:

- workload (6)
- lack of community/isolation (6)
- health and safety upon returning to on-site work (5)

(Some additional options were presented only to certain segments of respondents—that data is shared in separate sections below.)

Attitudes about the future

What do these survey results mean for the future of the museum sector? Overall, **57 percent of respondents are cautiously optimistic** about the future of the museum sector and **28 percent are somewhat pessimistic**. (The remaining respondents split evenly between being very optimistic and very pessimistic.)

Just over 20 percent of paid staff and students think it is unlikely they will be working in the sector in three years, with some of the biggest barriers being compensation, burnout, and a lack of opportunities for advancement. Still, two-thirds of respondents are optimistic about the future of the museum sector.

Impact on Full-Time and Part-Time Staff

In this report, “paid staff” refers to respondents who indicated that their primary museum employment status, pre-pandemic, was as paid part-time or full-time staff. This is to provide as a clear distinction from unpaid, volunteer staff and board members. It includes people who have subsequently been laid off and are unemployed, or now employed outside the museum field.

Employment status

Seventy-six percent of respondents indicated that their primary museum employment status (before pandemic furloughs or layoffs) was as full-time paid staff. Eleven percent identified as part-time paid staff. Of these people:

- Fourteen percent were furloughed at some point.
- Two percent are still furloughed for some or all of their hours.
- Nine percent were laid off at some point.
- Five percent are currently unemployed.

Full- and part-time employees at museums report that they are currently experiencing:

- Increased workload (48 percent)
- Reduced hours (9 percent)
- Reduced base/hourly salary (9 percent)
- Reduced benefits (8 percent)

Thirty-nine percent reported experiencing none of the above.

As of when they answered the survey, 22 percent of full- and part-time staff reported their museums were entirely closed to the public, 61 percent reported operating at reduced hours or capacity, and 12 percent reported their museums were entirely open.

Of museum staff currently employed in a museum, 26 percent were working on-site, 24 percent were working remotely, and 50 percent were working a combination of remote and on-site.

Financial conditions

Thirty-nine percent of full-time staff reported having lost income due to the pandemic, with a median of ten thousand dollars lost due to reduced salary, benefits, or hours for a median reduction of 11 percent (Averages = $16,710 and 23 percent).

Sixty-one percent of part-time staff reported having lost income due to the pandemic, with a median of eight thousand dollars lost due to reduced salary, benefits, or hours for a median reduction of 50 percent. (Averages = $12,564 and 52 percent).

When asked to rate the **financial stress** they or their families experienced during the pandemic (on a scale from 0 = no stress to 10 = extreme stress), part-time staff ranked their stress at 4 on average, while full-time staff ranked their stress at 3 on average.

When paid staff were asked to describe their financial situation:

- Around half (51 percent) said they had enough for basic necessities and a **small amount** of disposable income they could save or spend on leisure.
- Just under a third (32 percent) said they had enough for basic necessities and a **fair amount** of disposable income they could save or spend on leisure.
- 13 percent said they only had enough for basic necessities and were **living paycheck to paycheck**.
- 2 percent said they did not have enough for basic necessities and were **struggling to make ends meet**.

Part-time staff were likely to face **greater instability** than full-time staff. Part-time staff were:

- much more likely to indicate that they were living paycheck to paycheck (21 percent compared to 12 percent of full-time staff)
- less likely to indicate they have a small amount of disposable income to save or spend on leisure (40 percent compared to 52 percent)

Employer support

When asked how valued and supported by their employer they have felt during the pandemic (on a scale from 0 = not valued/supported to 10 = highly supported) **paid staff gave an average rating of 6**.

Choosing from a list of common supportive actions, 65 percent of paid staff reported that their employers had provided telework options, 54 percent reported they were provided with flexible work schedules, and 13 percent reported they were given additional time off or parental leave. Some respondents also used a free text field to share other ways their employers helped them feel safe, valued, or supported. Their answers included candid, proactive, two-way communication; compassionate listening; actively fostering self-care and wellness; prioritizing staff retention; offering flexible work options; and helping staff who were laid off to find new jobs. For a longer summary of these answers, see the survey's landing page.

Mindset

When asked to indicate **how worried they were** about various issues (on a scale from 0 = not worried to 10 = very worried), paid staff gave the following average scores:

- The wellbeing of colleagues: 7
- Workload: 7 for full-time, 5 for part-time
- Lack of community/isolation: 6
- Personal/family finances: 5

- Health and safety upon returning to on-site work: 5
- Racism/discrimination in the workplace: 5 for full-time, 4 for part-time
- Possibility of being laid off/furloughed: 4 for full-time, 5 for part-time
- Lack of childcare/continued virtual learning: 3

However, paid staff who were furloughed, laid off, or had not held a museum position in the previous year **ranked the ability to get a new job as their greatest concern by far (average score of 8)**.

The future of the museum sector

Overall, 46 percent of paid staff think it is very likely they will be working in the museum sector in three years, slightly over one-third (34 percent) think it is somewhat likely, **12 percent think it is somewhat unlikely, and 9 percent think it is highly unlikely.** Part-time staff are slightly less likely than full-time staff to think they will continue to work in the museum field.

When asked what they see as potential barriers to remaining in the museum sector, paid staff identified:
- Compensation that meets their needs/expectations (59 percent)
- Burnout (57 percent)
- Opportunities for advancement (53 percent)
- Availability of employment (51 percent)
- Racism/discrimination (14 percent in aggregate, 35 percent of BIPOC paid staff; see section on racial and ethnic differences in impact on page 13)
- Disillusionment about the value of museum work (34 percent)
- Lack of autonomy/empowerment in their work (25 percent)
- Cost of training/education needed to enter and/or advance in the field (14 percent)

Ten percent of respondents did not see any potential barriers to remaining in the museum sector.

When asked what their next job might be if they were to move to a different sector, paid staff selected:
- Nonprofit program management (30 percent)
- Higher education/academia/research (28 percent)
- Non-profit fundraising, development, foundations (20 percent)
- For-profit commercial sector (20 percent)
- Community development (19 percent)
- Independent business owner/consultant (17 percent)
- Self-employed maker/artist/creator (17 percent)
- Nonprofit program delivery (17 percent)
- K-12 education (13 percent)
- City planning/management (7 percent)
- Technology (7 percent)

- Architecture/design (5 percent)

Twenty percent indicated they had no plans to leave the museum sector, and 13 percent indicated they plan to retire when leaving the museum sector.

Experiences with unemployment

Five percent of respondents reported that they had been laid off and were currently unemployed. These respondents:

- Ranked their financial stress as **5.2** (on a scale from 0 = no stress to 10 = extreme stress), compared to 2.8 for peers who had not been furloughed or laid off.
- Rated the **negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing at an average of 7.4**, compared to 6.5 for peers who had not been furloughed or laid off.
- Were much less likely to believe it is "very likely" they will be working in the museum sector in three years (**16 percent, compared to 51 percent for peers who had not been furloughed or laid off**).

Four percent of respondents reported that they had been laid off and had since found a new job. These respondents:

- Were rehired at their museum or found work at another museum in 32 percent of cases, found work in a job related to the museum sector in 21 percent of cases, and found work outside the sector entirely in 46 percent of cases.
- Were more likely than those who were never furloughed or laid off to be **experiencing reduced hours, reduced base/hourly salary, and reduced benefits**.
- **Rated the negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing at an average of 7.8,** compared to 6.5 for peers who had not been furloughed or laid off.
- Were less likely than those never furloughed or laid off to believe it is "very likely" they will be working in the museum sector in three years (**21 percent compared to 51 percent**).

Impact on Independent Contractors and Consultants

Seven percent of respondents identified as independent contractors or consultants. Of these:

- Fifty-seven percent had contracts cancelled or indefinitely postponed.
- Fifty-one percent had struggled to secure new consulting jobs.
- Thirteen percent reported their workload remained about the same as in previous years.
- Ten percent reported their workload had increased.

Financial stress

Seventy-eight percent of independent contractors and consultants reported having lost income due to the pandemic, at a median of twenty-five thousand dollars, the equivalent of about 50 percent of pre-pandemic income. The corresponding averages are $38,067 and 54 percent.

When asked to describe their **financial situation**:

- Forty-one percent of independent contractors said they had enough for basic necessities and a **small amount** of disposable income they could save or spend on leisure.
- Twenty-eight percent said they had enough for basic necessities and a **fair amount** of disposable income they could save or spend on leisure.
- Seventeen percent said they only had enough for basic necessities and were **living paycheck to paycheck.**
- Four percent said they did not have enough for basic necessities and were **struggling to make ends meet**.

Taken as a whole, 35 percent of all respondents who were not currently independent contractors said it was somewhat likely or very likely they would **become independent contractors/consultants** if they did not have full-time museum employment.

Impact on Students

Three percent of respondents identified as students.

When asked to rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their **mental health and wellbeing** (on a scale from 0 = no impact to 10 = very strong negative impact), students responded an average of **8** (compared to an average of 6.6 for respondents overall).

Financial stress

When asked to rate the financial stress they or their families have experienced during the pandemic (on a scale from 0 = no stress to 10 = extreme stress):

- They reported an average financial stress rating of 4.3.
- Sixteen percent reported experiencing no stress.
- One-third (33 percent) reported a financial stress rating 2 or lower.
- **Seventeen percent rated their stress as 8 or higher.**

Their future in the museum sector

Thirty-four percent of students think it is very likely they will be working in the museum sector in three years, 45 percent think it is somewhat likely, 15 percent think is somewhat unlikely, and 6 percent think it is highly unlikely.

When asked what they see as potential barriers to remaining in the museum sector, students replied:

- Availability of employment (92 percent)
- Compensation that meets my needs/expectations (78 percent)
- Opportunities for advancement (57 percent)
- Disillusionment about the value of museum work (54 percent)
- Burnout (49 percent)
- Cost of training/education needed to enter and/or advance in the field (30 percent)
- Lack of autonomy/empowerment in their work (21 percent)
- Racism/discrimination (18 percent in aggregate, the number of students who self-identified as BIPOC was too small a sample size to support independent analysis; see section on racial and ethnic differences in impact on page 13)
- No barriers (3 percent)

Just under one-third (32 percent) of students said it was somewhat likely or very likely they would **become independent contractors/consultants** if they did not have full-time museum employment.

When asked what their next job might be if they moved to a different sector, students identified:

- Higher education/academia/research (55 percent)
- Nonprofit program management (37 percent)
- Nonprofit fundraising, development, foundations (31 percent)
- Nonprofit program delivery (29 percent)
- Community development (25 percent)
- Self-employed maker/artist/creator (19 percent)
- Independent business owner/consultant (17 percent)
- K-12 education (17 percent)
- For-profit commercial sector (15 percent)
- Technology (14 percent)
- City planning/management (9 percent)
- Architecture/design (5 percent)
- None of these/no plans to leave the museum sector (12 percent)

Optimism about the future of the museum sector

Seven percent of students were very optimistic about the future of the museum sector, 40 percent were cautiously optimistic, **42 percent were somewhat pessimistic, and 13 percent were very pessimistic**.

Racial and Ethnic Differences in Impact

Of the 2,402 respondents who self-identified their race and ethnicity, 80 percent identified solely as white and 20 percent as Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (including those who selected two or more races with white as one selection).

The data on BIPOC respondents includes the 8 percent of respondents who identified as Hispanic and Latinx, but this report also includes separate figures for Hispanic and Latinx respondents, which was the only single ethnicity or race other than white with a sample size sufficient to support independent analysis.

The survey data reveal some evidence of how race and ethnicity affect the impact of the pandemic on individuals. Some notable differences:

Financial stress

Hispanic and Latinx respondents were significantly **more likely** to report experiencing some level of financial stress (78 percent) compared to white respondents (73 percent). This may reflect the fact that Hispanic and Latinx respondents were less likely than white respondents to be in senior management/CEO positions and reported significantly lower median pay.

Both BIPOC and Hispanic/Latinx respondents were **less likely** than white respondents to say they have a **fair amount** of disposable income to save or spend on leisure (BIPOC 26 percent; Hispanic/Latinx 26 percent; white 33 percent), and more likely to say they are living paycheck to paycheck (BIPOC 19 percent; Hispanic/Latinx 24 percent; white 12 percent).

Experience in the workplace

When asked to rate how worried they are about racism/discrimination in the workplace (on a scale from 0 = not worried to 10 = very worried) **BIPOC respondents answered an average of 6, Hispanic/Latinx respondents answered an average of 7, and white respondents answered an average of 5**.

Hispanic/Latinx respondents were **less likely** than white respondents to say it is very likely they will still be working in the museum sector in three years.

BIPOC and Hispanic/Latinx respondents placed **more weight** than white respondents on some barriers to remaining in the museum field, including compensation, opportunities for advancement, racism/discrimination, lack of autonomy/empowerment, and cost of training needed to enter or advance in the field. In addition, Hispanic/Latinx respondents were **more likely** than white respondents to identify availability of employment as a barrier to remaining in the field.

Gender Differences in Impact

Seventy-nine percent of respondents identified as women and 18 percent identified as men. The number of people identifying as agender or non-binary or preferring to self-describe was too small a sample size to support independent analysis.

When asked about factors they were currently experiencing at work, men were **less likely** than women to report increased workload (41 percent compared to 50 percent) and more likely to report **not** having experienced any adverse effects to workload, hours, salary, or benefits (46 percent compared to 38 percent).

Women were consistently more worried than men about a range of issues, notably health and safety upon returning to work, workload, and the wellbeing of their colleagues.

Women were also **significantly less optimistic** about the future of the museum sector, with 63 percent saying they were very or cautiously optimistic compared to 76 percent of men.

Women were more likely than men to identify some potential barriers to remaining in the museum sector:

- Availability of employment (54 percent compared to 41 percent)
- Compensation that meets their needs or expectations (60 percent compared to 53 percent)
- Opportunities for advancement (52 percent compared to 40 percent)
- Burnout (56 percent compared to 47 percent)
- Disillusionment about the value of museum work (35 percent compared to 28 percent)

When asked to rate the negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their mental health and wellbeing (on a scale from 0 = no impact to 10 = very strong negative impact) women reported an average score of **6.8**, while men reported an average score of **5.6**.

Age Differences in Impact

Twenty-seven percent of respondents were under the age of 35, 25 percent between the ages of 35 and 44, 24 percent 45-54, 18 percent 55-64, and 11 percent 65 or older.

Age affected how respondents experienced the pandemic in several ways:

- People under the age of 35 were much more likely than people over the age of 55 to be experiencing increased workloads.
- People 45 or older were less likely than their younger colleagues to have been laid off or furloughed.
- People over the age of 55 are more likely to report they are working onsite, rather than entirely or partially remote, are less likely to have lost income due to the pandemic, and report being in a more secure financial position.

In terms of mental health and well-being, this survey parallels recent research of pandemic impact on the general public: younger respondents report experiencing the greatest negative impact from the pandemic on their mental health and well-being (average of 7.8, on a scale from 0-10, for people under the age of 35) with that impact falling steadily as people age. People over the age of 65 assign an average rating of 4.6.