

# National Snapshot of COVID-19 Impact on United States Museums

Fielded December 8, 2021  
through January 20, 2022



Research Conducted By:



**American  
Alliance of  
Museums**



**Wilkening Consulting**

audience research | knowledge curator

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## Introduction & Topline Findings

Between December 8, 2021, and January 20, 2022, AAM and Seattle-based research firm Wilkening Consulting conducted a survey of museum directors to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on the museum field. This is the fourth survey tracking key metrics the Alliance began to collect in June 2020 and assessing the overall impact to museums’ financial condition in the past year. Museum directors responded to the AAM survey on behalf of their organizations, which represented a broad cross-section of the field in geography, size, and discipline.

The response pool of **710 museums** provides a confidence level of 95 percent with a confidence interval of 3.6 percent for the population of AAM member museums. The data filters (by museum type, geographic region, and museum operating expenses) have smaller numbers and therefore higher margins of error.

The results of this survey reveal that the past year has compounded the damage inflicted on US museums and museum professionals by the pandemic. They also suggest reason for cautious optimism about recovery, that museums are taking forth lessons learned during the pandemic, and what challenges to expect on the horizon.

# COVID-19 Health & Safety

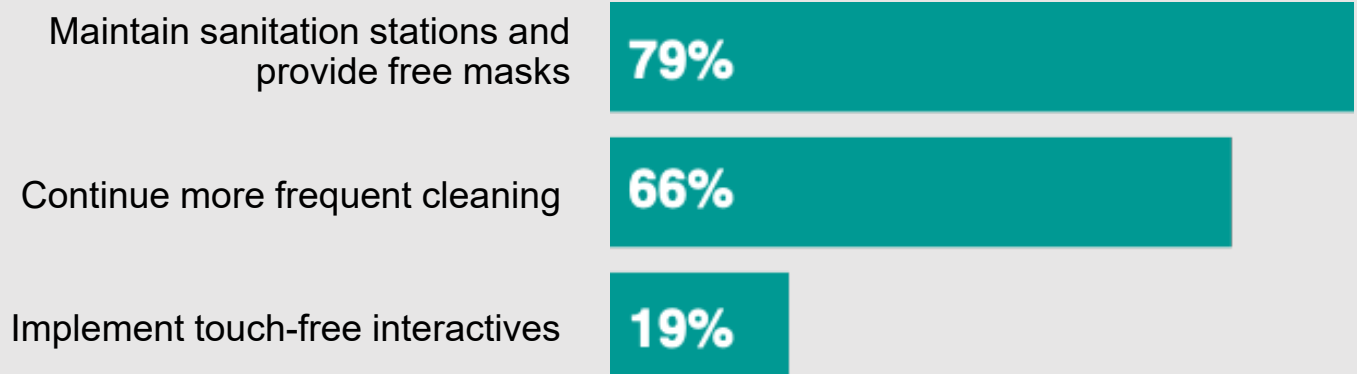
During the response period, over half (55 percent) of respondents were requiring face masks for adults and older children.

30 percent encourage, but do not require, masking; and 4 percent provide no guidance at all.

Three quarters of respondents were not requiring proof of vaccination status or a recent COVID test for admission to exhibits, programs or events.

Almost half (48 percent) of respondents were required to follow policies regarding masking or proof of vaccination set by a higher authority (such as a local or state government, or parent organization).

More than three-quarters (79 percent) intend to maintain sanitation practices such as providing hand sanitizer stations and free masks. 66 percent intend to continue more frequent cleaning and nearly one-fifth (19 percent) have pivoted to touch-free interactives.



# The Pandemic's Impact on Operations

Almost all respondents said they plan to continue some of the practices that they implemented or amplified during the pandemic.

Some practices that served a safety function may be continued because they also proved to be more effective and efficient ways of serving visitors. For instance, nearly a third (32 percent) of respondents indicated they intend to reduce their maximum capacity for visitors long term, and 24 percent that they will continue timed ticketing practices they implemented during the pandemic.

Other pandemic-era practices respondent said they would continue centered on supporting needs in their communities. For instance, over the past two years, museums also reached out in new ways to support needs in their communities. 39 percent of respondents intend to maintain facilities or programs they created to support online learning or schooling based in the museum, and 18 percent intend to maintain initiatives such as food banks or wellness programs they created to meet other community needs.

Facilities and programs to support online learning  
and museum-based schooling

39%

Initiatives to support other needs such as food  
banks and wellness programs

18%

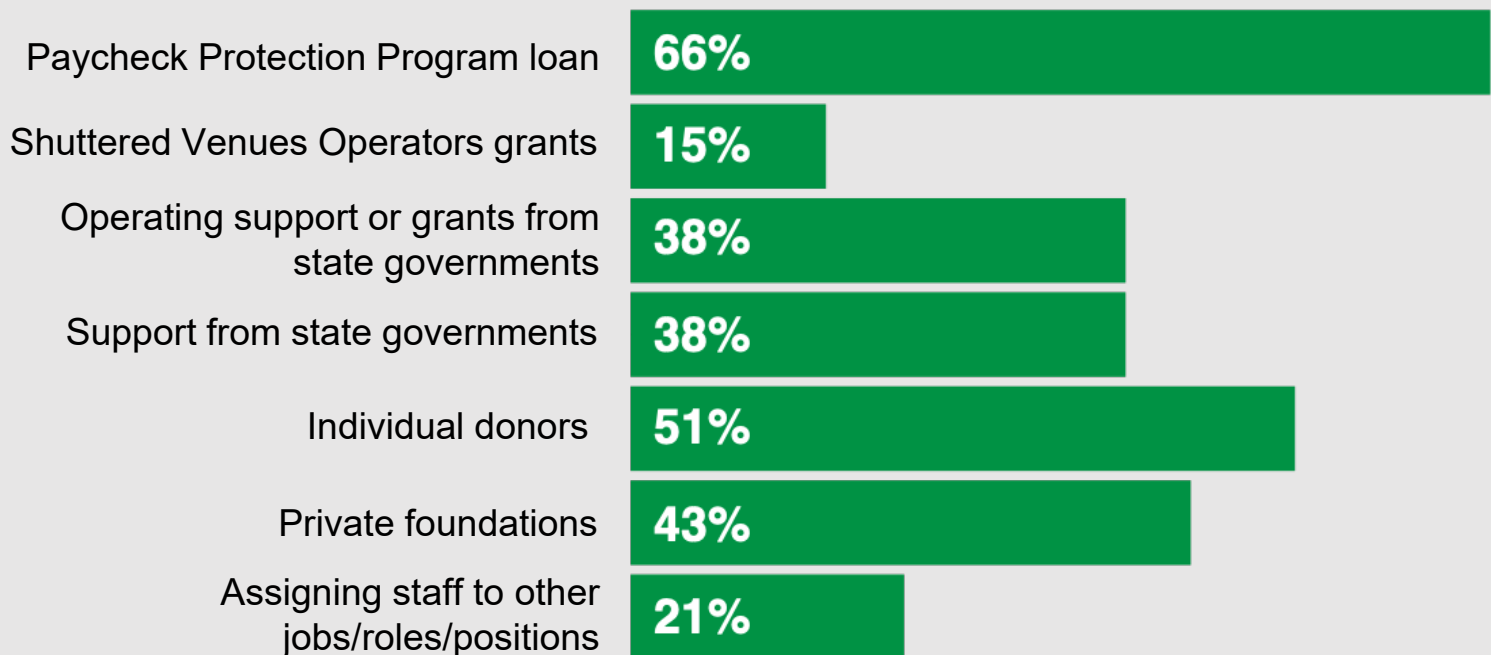
Many respondents indicated they would continue with virtual practices they adopted during the pandemic, which proved to have benefits for broadening engagement and increasing flexibility in the workplace. Seventy-six percent said they would continue the virtual/online practices they implemented for programming, and 29 percent said they would do so for fundraising events. Meanwhile, 60 percent said they intend to continue offering new or expanded telework options for staff, having seen that it is a viable and in many cases preferable option for some employees.

# Staffing

In April of 2021, only 44 percent of museums reported that they had not furloughed or laid off any staff since the start of the pandemic. Twenty-two percent of museums reported having laid off full-time staff, and 28 percent having laid off part-time staff.

As of this survey, **nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of responding museums reported that they had been able to retain or restore all of their staff.** For those museums that have achieved this, government funding proved vital, with museums indicating federal relief funds helped them the most to retain staff.

## Contributing factors include relief from:



# Staffing

The effects of the pandemic on staffing can also be traced through changes in staff size in recent years. Since 2019:

- 12 percent of museums reported having increased their staff (by an average of 30 percent)
- 37 percent reported having decreased staff (by an average of 28 percent)
- Half (51 percent) reported no change.

Of those that did experience a change in staff size, most indicated the change was driven primarily (48 percent) or in part (26 percent) by the pandemic.

47 percent of respondents had plans to rehire and/or increase staff size over the coming year.

Of those museums recruiting for job openings, 56 percent reported they were having trouble filling open positions. The positions that were most difficult to fill were guest services/admissions/frontline/retail (56 percent), facilities/maintenance/security (40 percent), and education (26 percent).

Museum staff are coping with the tremendous financial and psychological stress the pandemic has placed on them (see the Alliance's April 2021 report on the [impact of COVID-19 on people in the museum field](#)). Respondents to the latest survey indicated that they had made or would make changes to their staffing, compensation, and benefits, including increasing the hourly rate of their lowest-paid employees (49 percent) and shrinking the gap between the lowest and highest salaries (15 percent).

Fourteen percent of respondents indicated they had or would make more use of contract labor in place of in-house staff, while only 2 percent indicated they would use less contract labor in place of in-house staff.



# Staffing

81 percent of respondents said they were allowing some staff to telework, while 19 percent said they were not. The option of telework was most often extended to staff in:

- Executive level (51 percent)
- Marketing/communications (50 percent)
- Curatorial/collections/exhibitions/publication (44 percent)
- Development (43 percent)
- Finance/administration (42 percent)
- Education (41 percent)

Only 6 percent of respondents allowed or encouraged guest services/admissions/frontline/retail staff to telework, and 4 percent extend this option to facilities/maintenance/security.

# Closure & Attendance

Since March 2020, museums had been closed to the public for an average of twenty-eight weeks due to the pandemic.

At the time of the survey, 12 percent of responding museums were still closed to the public. Of the museums that were closed:

- One-third (32 percent) were unsure when they would reopen.
- Twenty-eight percent said they planned to reopen in May 2022.

Of the museums that were open:

- They were experiencing an average of 62 percent of their normal, pre-pandemic, attendance.
- One-quarter are limited to a 30 percent capacity.
- 16% were operating under mandated capacity limits, which capped attendance at 54 percent of capacity on average.
- On average, these mandates cap attendance at 54 percent of capacity.

# Financial Impact & Projections

Sixty percent of respondents reported experiencing pandemic-related financial losses since March 2020, at an average of just over \$791,000.

One quarter percent of respondents indicated their bottom line (net operating performance) in 2021 had decreased compared to 2020, by a median of 27 percent and an average of 33 percent.

44 percent of respondents indicated their bottom line (net operating performance) in 2021 had increased compared to 2020, by a median of 25 percent and an average of 99 percent. (The top quartile of museums outperformed the others by a significant margin.)

On average, respondents reported having a median of seven months of operating reserves on hand, and an average of fourteen months (an increase from the comparable figures for October 2020, which were six and eleven months, respectively).

At this point, absent any additional financial relief, 83 percent of directors do not believe there is a significant risk of their museums closing in the next year, 11 percent are not sure, and 6 percent think their museum is at significant risk of closure. The comparable figures from the beginning of the pandemic (July 2020) were 67 percent/17 percent/16 percent.



# Volunteers

Seventy percent of museums reported that they suspended or downsized their volunteer programs during the pandemic, and almost half (48 percent) were having trouble finding enough volunteers for their needs. When asked when they anticipated their volunteer program would rebound to pre-pandemic levels, 13 percent indicated it already had, 25 percent projected this would happen next year, 18 percent thought it would never rebound to previous levels, and 35 percent were not sure.

Twenty-seven percent of responding museums were currently requiring volunteers to be vaccinated (6 percent of these allowed for medical exemptions, and 12 percent allowed medical or religious exemptions), and 55 percent were not requiring vaccinations.

# Looking Forward

Asked to identify the biggest disruptions they foresaw to their business strategies in the next twelve months, directors said:

