

# Museums and the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Background

The pandemic has inflicted profound damage on US museums, the vast majority of which are 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organizations. The museum field will take years to recover to pre-pandemic levels of staffing, revenue, and attendance. Far fewer museums than initially expected are in danger of permanent closure and tens of thousands of jobs were saved thanks to several federal relief programs. However, according to a 2022 [survey](#), attendance was down nearly 40 percent for many of our nation's museums. Despite the tremendous financial and psychological stress caused by the pandemic, museum professionals demonstrated the critical role museums play in our country's infrastructure and deepened their social impact in their communities.

## Talking Points

- The museum field is facing a slow recovery that will take years to come back from due to the dire financial impacts of the pandemic.
- During the pandemic, one-third of museums were at risk of permanent closure without federal support. Because of the influx of financial assistance from federal, state, and local governments, this number reduced significantly. But negative impacts of the pandemic remain.
- Museums are struggling with the same unprecedented staff shortages that have impacted many industries.
- As essential community infrastructure, museums proved crucial to their communities' resiliency during the pandemic—from supporting vaccination to hosting food distribution.
- During the continued COVID-19 pandemic, museums across the country continued contributing to the ongoing education of our country's children by providing lesson plans, online learning opportunities, and drop-off learning kits to teachers and families. They used their outdoor spaces to grow and donate produce to area food banks, as well as maintained these spaces for individuals to safely relax, enjoy nature, and recover from the mental health impacts of social isolation. They provided access to childcare and meals to families of health care workers and first responders, have donated their PPE and scientific equipment to fight COVID-19, and are serving as vaccination centers.
- Early in the pandemic, essentially all museums were closed to the public. 33 percent of directors felt their museums were at some risk of permanent closure without immediate support—a threatened loss of 12,000 museums and 124,000 jobs.
- While PPP and SVOG have provided critical lifelines, a 2022 [survey](#) shows attendance remains down 38 percent on average from pre-pandemic levels.
- 60 percent of museums reported experiencing pandemic-related financial losses since March 2020, with the average being a little over \$791,000. 60 percent of responding museums have budgets of \$1 million or less.