



THE AEP WIRE

NEA *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts:* Summary of Results and Implications for Arts Learning

January 27, 2010

National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research and Analysis (2009). *National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*. Available for free download at:
<http://www.arts.gov/research/2008-SPPA.pdf>.

BACKGROUND

The National Endowment for the Arts has conducted a Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) periodically since 1982. The survey assesses an array of specific participation indicators, including: attendance at performing arts events; reading of literature; visits to art museums or galleries, art and craft fairs, outdoor performing arts festivals, and parks and historic sites; creation or performance of art; participation as learners in arts classes or lessons; and involvement in other leisure activities not necessarily involving the arts. Results of the latest survey, conducted in 2008, are reported in *National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Apart from serving as a general report on the wellness of the nonprofit arts field, the SPPA reveals important trends in arts learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the current status of participation in arts activities among Americans?
- How does this participation vary by region?
- How has it changed historically?
- How has participation in arts learning changed?
- What are the possible explanations for changes in participation?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Audiences for performing arts in the U.S. are both declining and growing older.
- Participation in key “benchmark” activities (e.g., attending live performances, visiting museums) has declined from 39% in 1982 to 34.6% in 2008.
- Americans are increasingly participating in the arts through newer media, including the internet, recordings, photography, videography, and filmmaking.
- From 1982 to 2008, lifetime participation of 18-24-year-olds in arts learning has declined from 61.2% to 37.6% in music, 41.2% to 21.4% in visual arts; and 30.8% to 17.7% in creative writing.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The 2008 SPPA was administered by the U.S. Census Bureau as part of its Current Population Survey (CPS). The survey includes questions about attendance and participation in the preceding 12 months. The survey elicited 18,444 responses. Demographic data, including gender, income, educational level, age, and race/ethnicity, were used to weigh the results to reflect the total U.S. adult population.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The latest *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* still reflects a somewhat conservative and limited definition of the arts based on the number and type of arts experiences included in the survey categories. While NEA is working to broaden the survey to encompass participation both through new media and in newer and more diverse art forms, methodological consistencies compel the retention of common questions and formats over time. This necessitates the conservative approach and also tends to preclude some questions that might reflect the increasingly diverse and mediated arts environment.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

General Findings Related to Arts Participation

- In the U.S., audiences for performing arts (ballet, classical music, jazz, and theatre) are declining and growing older. Adults who attended a performing arts event during the previous year fell from 40 percent in previous years to 35 percent in the latest survey. Participation in key “benchmark” activities (e.g., attending live performances, visiting museums) has declined from 39% in 1982 to 34.6% in 2008. The arts audience has grown older than the general population.
- These trends are not primarily due the recent downturn in the economy but reflect deeper and more systemic trends. For example, persons with higher levels of education have reduced their participation in nearly all the surveyed art forms since 1982.
- Americans are increasingly participating in the arts through newer media. In the current survey, 47 million adults said they downloaded, watched, or listened to music, theater or dance performances online. More Americans view or listen to broadcasts and recordings of arts events than attend them live (with the exception of theater). Photography, videography, and filmmaking increased in popularity as art-making activities, from 12 percent to 15 percent, since 1992.
- Arts participation correlates with higher civic participation. People who participate in the arts are twice to three times as likely to engage in positive civic and individual activities—such as volunteering, attending sporting events, and participating in outdoor activities—than non-arts participants.
- Participation in most leisure activities (except volunteering and charity work) among all adults declined from 2002 to 2008.
- Significant differences exist across regions and ethnicities. For example, nearly 11 million adults attended a live Latin, Spanish, or salsa music performance in the previous year; audiences for these performances were younger and less affluent than audiences for other art forms.

Findings Related to Arts Learning

From an arts learning standpoint, a key finding of the SPPA is the overall decline in participation by all adults in any kind of arts lessons or classes over the last quarter century. For example:

- From 1982 to 2008, lifetime participation of 18-24-year-olds in music learning has declined from 61.2% to 37.6%.
- Lifetime participation of 18-24-year-olds in visual arts learning has declined from 41.2% to 21.4%.
- Lifetime participation of 18-24-year-olds in creative writing has declined from 30.8% to 17.7%.

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

While not providing recommendations, as such, the significant findings in the report point the way toward a deeper analysis of the data. In fact, the NEA's Office of Research and Analysis is currently exploring the relationship between arts participation and (among other factors) arts learning. Results of these additional analyses will become available in 2010 via the NEA's Research web page (www.nea.gov/research/index.html).

AEP ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

As the report acknowledges, the reasons for the declines charted in the 2008 survey are not clear. Several possibilities may explain these long-term changes:

- (1) Regional gaps in access to arts opportunities, as revealed by disparities between the participation rates of certain geographic areas, skew the overall data.
- (2) The traditional base of arts participation is aging, and succeeding generations are not flocking to traditional arts venues—preferring perhaps, more mediated and technological modes of consumption.
- (3) Learning in the arts in school years, or the lack of it, predicts later patterns of participation. This interpretation would seem to logically reflect the parallel reduction in arts education opportunities and arts participation over the last 28 years.

Since limited access to arts learning leads to overall lifetime patterns of lessened participation—a finding previously uncovered by NEA-supported researchers Bergonzi and Smith (1996)—the findings of the current survey should be a source of concern, not only for supporters of arts education, but for more mainstream adherents of fundamental social and personal values. The finding that arts participation correlates with higher civic participation is significant: People who participate in the arts are twice to three times as likely to engage in positive civic and individual activities as non-arts participants.

AEP Recommendations

The AEP recommends the following:

- Arts organizations should support further analyses of the data, including relationships between arts participation, arts learning, and other variables. The complete 2008 SPPA dataset and questionnaire can be downloaded from Princeton University's Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive website at www.cpanda.org.
- Several other current studies suggest that students' access to arts learning has declined over the last decade. The findings of the SPPA in respect to arts learning should provide additional

confirmation of this trend. Advocates for a complete curriculum including the arts should communicate these findings in appropriate contexts.

- In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education will launch its Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) study of the status of arts education in U.S. schools. Advocates should be prepared to use these findings, in combination with the SPPA data and other studies, to leverage more effective policies at state and district levels.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

A press release specific to the SPPA with quick summaries of the findings is available from the Endowment via <http://www.arts.gov/news/news09/SPPA-release.html>.

Bergonzi, L., and Smith, J. (1996). *Effects of Arts Education on Participation in the Arts*. National Endowment for the Arts:

<http://www.arts.gov/research/reports/NEA-Research-Report-36.pdf>

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The Arts Education Partnership was founded in 1994 and is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education in cooperation with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies.