

2022 National Visitation Report

An analysis of visitation trends at history organizations in the United States

Prepared for the Public History Research Lab of the American Association for State and Local History by W. Maclane Hull and John Garrison Marks

Since 2018, the Public History Research Lab of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) has surveyed United States history organizations of all types and sizes to understand in-person visitation trends. Through this effort, AASLH has been able to assess in broad terms how Americans' engagement with history organizations changes from year to year, while also providing benchmarks against which individual institutions can evaluate their own visitation numbers.

This effort began in response to frequent queries from organizational leaders and interested observers about whether attendance at history organizations was growing or declining. Over the past two years, however, this research has been critical for understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted in-person engagement with history and the progress of the field's ongoing recovery. That continues to be true with this year's report, which analyzes changes in visitation from 2020 to 2021.

The findings below are based on responses to the "National Visitation Survey for History Organizations" collected in Spring 2022 from 773 history organizations across the United States. You can find the full survey instrument at the end of this report.

VISITATION UP IN 2021

The results of our 2022 National Visitation Survey show that in-person visits to history organizations increased last year from their nadir in 2020. In-person visitation increased nearly 75 percent from 2020 to 2021, a result of history organizations' gradual return to typical operating capacity, as well as some Americans' growing comfort with in-person activities.

Annual Visitation to History Organizations

	2020	2021	Pct. Change
Mean	11,459	20,026	+ 74.8%
Median	1,434	2,835	+ 97.7%

Although this large increase in visits is a welcome signal about the health of the field, there remains cause for concern. Our data suggests that by the end of 2021, visitation at history organizations' had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels; with the exception of the very largest institutions, it was not even close. Following the extreme decline in visitation during the height of the pandemic, even the substantial increases organizations reported for 2021 left visitation levels at about half of what they were in 2019.

Finally, recognizing the critical role of virtual programming over the past two years, the 2022 survey asked history organizations which types of programming they offered—tours, talks, field trips, and more—and how many people attended. This, too, yielded mixed results: while our research revealed major growth in the number of institutions offering virtual programming, public engagement with those programs plateaued or declined in many cases from 2020 to 2021.

BUDGET

As we have seen in previous years, assessing visitation trends requires careful consideration to institutional size. History institutions of every annual budget level saw large increases in their average in-person visitation from 2020 to 2021. Yet, analysis by budget size also reveals some major differences. Our research suggests that organizations with annual budgets under \$50,000—by far the largest segment of the field, according to AASLH's [National Census of History Organizations](#)—have experienced some of the slowest recovery. Among those organizations (209 responses), visitation rose only 47.9 percent from 2020 to 2021.

Average Annual Visitation, by Budget

Budget	2020	2021	Pct. Change
<\$50k	884	1,308	+ 47.9%
\$50k–250k	2,840	4,895	+ 72.4%
\$250k–500k	5,341	10,025	+ 87.7%
\$500k–1M	16,623	23,299	+ 40.2%
\$1M–2.5M	23,410	41,030	+ 75.3%
\$2.5M–5M	27,666	49,768	+ 79.9%
\$5M–10M	37,041	65,749	+ 77.5%
>\$10M	164,271	310,216	+ 88.8%

Institutions in the next two budget levels saw much larger increases. On average, visitation to organizations with annual budgets between \$50,000 and \$250,000 (228 responses) rose 72.4 percent; those in the \$250,000 to \$500,000 range (105 responses) saw an 87.7 percent rise. Again, while still below the peak averages of 2018-19, these institutions showed a marked rebound in visitation. Recovery for institutions with an annual budget between \$500,000 to \$1 million (71 responses) was more stagnant, with average visitation rising only 40.2 percent, the lowest of every budget group. However, this group also saw the smallest decline in visitation in 2020 (only 40.6 percent), according to our survey from last year; the precise reason for the uniqueness of this budget range remains unclear.

The country's largest institutions—those with annual budgets larger than \$1 million, making up less than 10 percent of all organizations nationwide—all saw increases in visitation over 75 percent. Institutions with annual budgets between \$1 million and \$2.5 million (71 responses) saw 75.3 percent increases in average visitation. Average visitation to institutions with budgets between \$2.5 million and \$5 million (35 responses) rose 79.9 percent. It rose 77.5 percent for those with budgets between \$5 million and \$10 million (41 responses). The largest institutions, those with annual budgets over \$10 million (13 responses), also saw the largest increases in average visitation at 88.8 percent. These institutions have frequently proven the most volatile in our surveys, a result of both the fewer number of these institutions (they make up only about 1 percent of private nonprofit history institutions) and the much higher total number of visitors.

As we explore in greater detail below in our multi-year analysis, this survey of visitation suggests that some of the largest history organizations were able to recover lost visitation relatively quickly, while the return to pre-pandemic visitation is taking substantially longer at smaller organizations.

REGION

Analysis of visitation change by region reveals broad consistency, with one major outlier.¹ In the Mid-Atlantic region (120 responses), average annual visitation rose 68.3 percent; that region, however, reported some of the greatest declines from 2019 to 2020 (72.9 percent). Visitation to Mountain Plains institutions (126 responses) increased 68.2 percent, along with a more modest decline in 2019–20 (59.9 percent). Visitation to Midwest institutions (239 responses) increased 71.1 percent. New England average visitation saw the largest increase at 168.9 percent. Much of this could be due to volatility of a small sample size (only 60 responses). However, New England also reported some of the largest declines in 2019–20 (80.6 percent), perhaps offering more room for recovery. Annual average visitation to Southeast institutions (138 responses) rose 77.2 percent. Finally, visitation to Western institutions (88 responses) rose 67.6 percent.

Average Annual Visitation, by Region

Region	2020	2021	Pct. Change
Mid-Atlantic	8,879	14,931	+ 68.3%
Mountain Plains	8,431	14,177	+ 68.2%
Midwest	12,292	21,038	+ 71.1%
New England	4,209	11,319	+ 168.9%
Southeast	19,805	35,088	+ 77.2%
West	9,141	15,319	+ 67.6%

Continuous Visitation: 2013-2021

In the four years of our visitation survey, 305 institutions have responded to at least two surveys. As in previous years, we have continuously updated this list to examine multi-year trends in visitation. Below are these institutions' visitation averages from 2013 through 2021. After

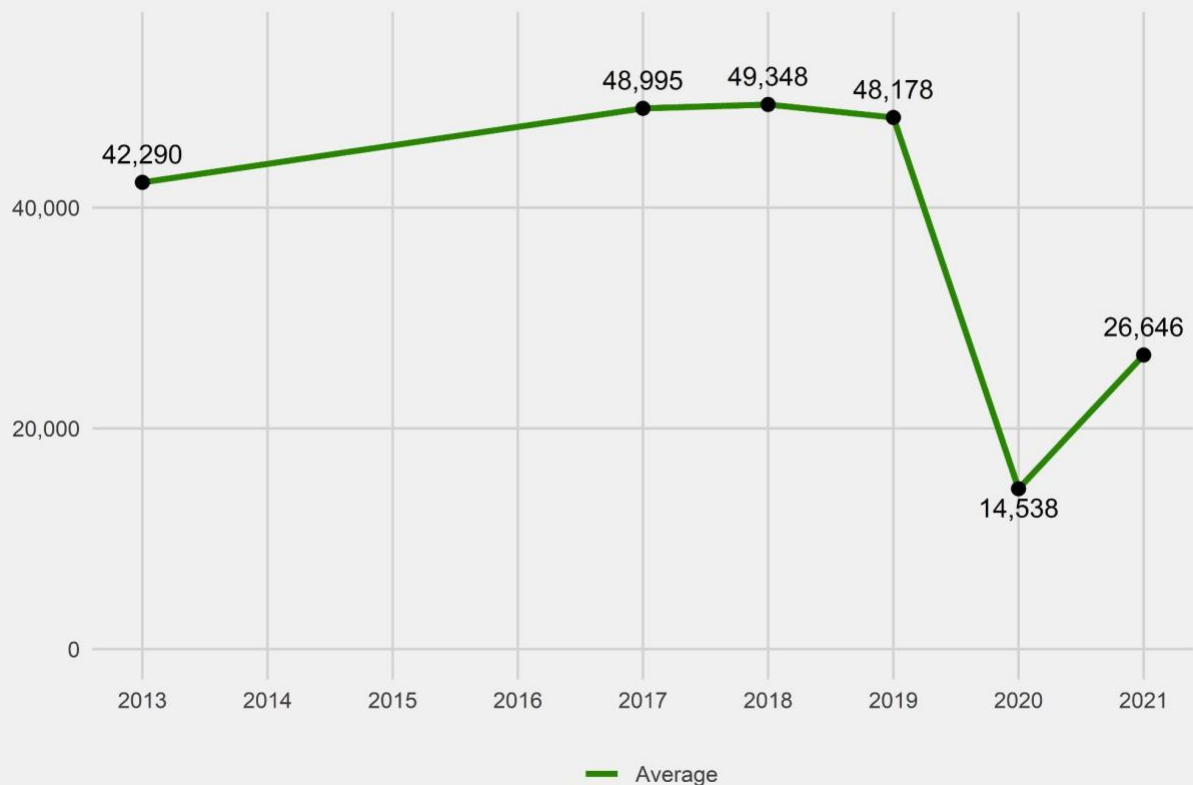
¹ For regional analysis, we use the designations of the American Alliance of Museums and the regional museum associations.

general rises in visitation in the 2010s, the COVID-19 pandemic caused visitation to plummet. However, since 2021, as states have loosened restrictions, more institutions have reopened, and individuals have grown more comfortable with a return to in-person activities, visitation has begun to recover.² Of course, visitation levels (as many institutions reported in their responses) are still not near the peaks of the 2010s. Indeed, 2021's mean of 26,807 is still only 54.1 percent of the reported highest average visitation in 2018 (49,512). The remainder of this section's analysis focuses strictly on the 305 "repeat" institutions and their reported visitation averages.

Average Annual Visitation to History Organizations, 2013–2021

2013	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
42,440	49,162	49,512	48,337	14,608	26,807

Average Visitors 2013-2021



² On average, institutions were fully closed 13.3 weeks and partially closed 15.6 weeks in 2021, an improvement from 2020 when institutions were fully closed an average of 22.5 weeks and partially closed 16.1 weeks.

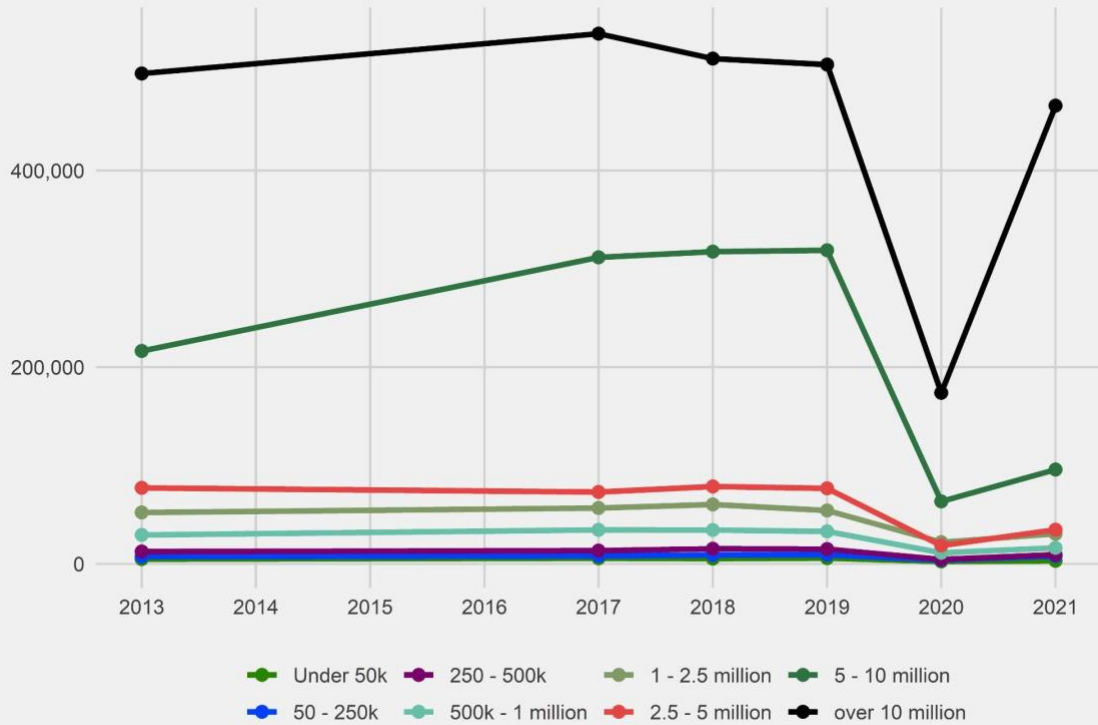
Budget

Institutional budgets provide a clear and consistent picture in our multi-year analysis. It reveals that the recovery of in-person visitation has been uneven, with the largest institutions nearly recovering to pre-pandemic visitation levels while smaller organizations lag far behind. With the exception of the largest institutions (with annual budgets over \$10 million), history organizations nearly all reported similar trends. Visitation grew slightly from 2013 to 2019, plummeted during the pandemic, and last year increased to about half of pre-pandemic visitation peaks. The specific totals and trend lines can be found in the tables and charts below. Institutions with budgets over \$10 million, meanwhile, are among the closest to a full recovery. 2021 visitation at these institutions is about 92 percent of where it was in 2019.

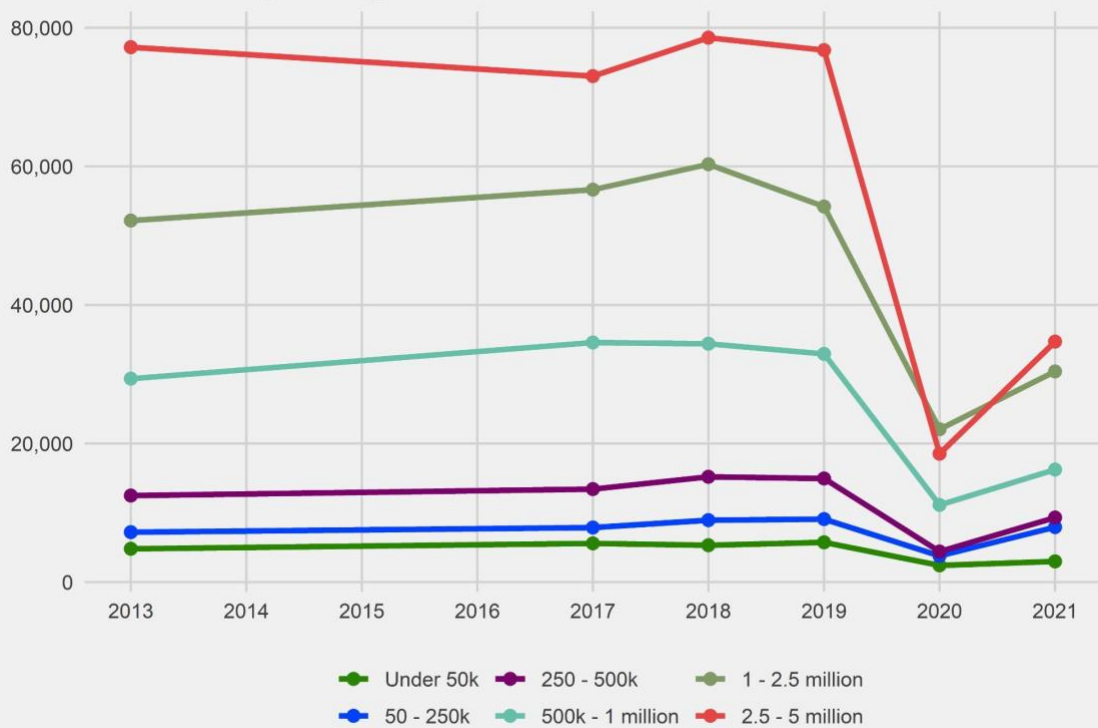
Average Visitation by Budget, 2013–2021

	2013	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<\$50k	4,817	5,595	5,313	5,734	2,408	2,980
\$50k–250k	7,213	7,878	8,934	9,093	3,783	7,835
\$250k–500k	12,495	13,412	15,191	14,950	4,416	9,305
\$500k–1M	29,356	34,587	34,397	32,938	11,134	16,235
\$1M–2.5M	52,194	56,657	60,304	54,204	22,050	30,405
\$2.5M–5M	77,216	73,034	78,580	76,788	18,522	34,716
\$5M–10M	216,458	311,807	317,549	319,051	63,500	95,873
>\$10M	498,741	539,325	514,057	507,889	173,931	466,076

Visitors by Budget Level - 2013-2021



Visitors by Budget Level - 2013-2021

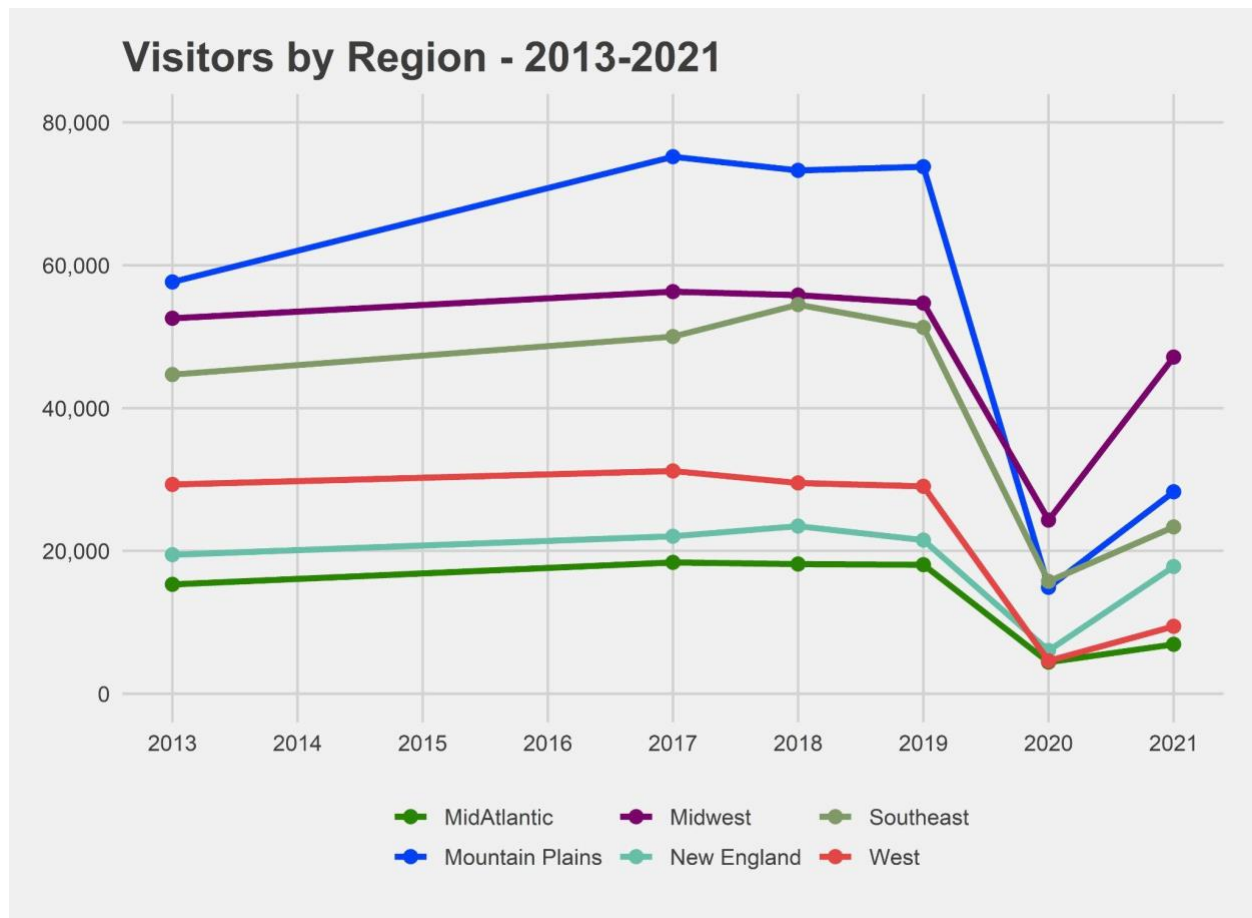


Region

Average Annual Visitation by Region, 2013–2021

	2013	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Mid-Atlantic	15,327	18,398	18,164	18,084	4,442	6,928
Mountain Plains	57,665	75,198	73,289	73,804	14,892	28,285
Midwest	52,591	56,311	55,831	54,704	24,313	47,142
New England	19,469	22,062	23,478	21,515	6,069	17,812
Southeast	44,698	50,012	54,492	51,294	15,734	23,366
West	29,311	31,193	29,518	29,044	4,629	9,439

These trends hold true when we analyzed responses by region as well. Most regions have seen visitation increase to just under half of their pre-pandemic peak, though the Midwest and New England are closer to fully recovering their visitation. Mid-Atlantic institutions reported that their average annual visitation remained in the 18,000s during the late 2010s before falling to 4,442 in 2020. Since then, they have reported minimal recovery, with only 6,928 average visitors in 2021. Mountain Plains repeat institutions reported average visitation around 73,000 during the 2010s before it fell to 14,892 in 2020. It roughly doubled in 2021 to 28,285, although this is still quite below their reported peaks. Average visitation to Midwestern institutions stayed around 55,000 during the 2010s before falling to 24,313 in 2020. In 2021, reported visitation rose 93.9 percent to 47,142, one of the best recoveries. New England institutions have recovered strongly as well. In the 2010s their average annual visitation hovered in the low-twenty-thousands before collapsing to 6,069 in 2020. However, they reported an average of 17,812 visitors in 2021, a near return to their 2013 numbers. Average visitation to Southeastern institutions peaked at 54,492 in 2018 before plummeting to 15,734 during the pandemic. Recovery has been slower here, only rising 48.5 percent to 23,366 in 2021. Finally, Western institutions, whose reported visitation stayed around 29,000 during the 2010s. Average visitation there fell to 4,629 in 2020 and rose to only 9,439 the next year.



VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

In 2022, AASLH asked for the first time about ways history organizations reach audiences beyond in-person visits. Unlike in-person visitation, which is recorded with at least some consistency between institutions of different types and sizes, virtual engagement presents a much more complex challenge. Some institutions count Facebook likes and YouTube views, while others stick more strictly to attendance at virtual tours or talks. While the numbers for these different types of virtual programming provide us with an important baseline for future years, the analysis below focuses primarily on the total number of virtual users across all program types.

Prior to 2020, only 85 of 774 respondents (10.9 percent) offered virtual programming. In 2020, that number grew to 341 (44.0 percent) and remained at 335 (43.3 percent) in 2021. While this huge growth in virtual programming led to a large increase in users in 2020, the total number of virtual users declined very slightly in 2021.

Average Number of Virtual Program Users at History Organizations

2020	2021	Pct. Change
35,640	35,271	- 1.0%

Budget

Analyzing virtual engagement for institutions of different sizes reveals the extent to which virtual programs were concentrated among some of the largest institutions. More than 80 percent of most larger organizations offered virtual programs, while comparatively fewer institutions with budgets under \$250,000 per year offered them.

Average Virtual Program Users, by Budget

Budget	2020	2021	Pct. of Orgs. Reporting Virtual Users
<\$50k	1,157	1,121	+ 47.9%
\$50k–250k	11,480	4,895	+ 72.4%
\$250k–500k	2,657	10,025	+ 87.7%
\$500k–1M	33,212	23,299	+ 40.2%
\$1M–2.5M	23,140	41,030	+ 75.3%
\$2.5M–5M	20,327	49,768	+ 79.9%
\$5M–10M	128,943	65,749	+ 77.5%
>\$10M	1,114,431	310,216	+ 88.8%

Only 43.3 percent of institutions with an annual budget under \$50,000 reported virtual engagement of any kind. About 69 percent of respondents in the \$50,000 to \$250,000 annual budget range offered virtual programs, though the total number of users declined sharply from 2020 (11,480) to 2021 (7,316). Because these institutions have smaller annual budgets, it is likely that not all of them could afford to invest in virtual services, especially during the

pandemic which already strained finances. As well, since these institutions tend to be smaller and more localized already, it stands to reason that even their online footprint will also be somewhat smaller. What is encouraging, however, is that their average online visitation numbers for both years was higher than their average reported in-person visitation.

Among institutions with an annual budget between \$250,000 and \$500,000, 83 percent offered virtual programs with slight growth in total users from 2020 to 2021. Likewise for institutions with budgets between \$500,000 and \$1 million, 83 percent offered digital services, but this budget level saw much higher engagement and major growth from year to year: 33,212 visitors in 2020 and 88,927 in 2021. While slightly more institutions with budgets between \$1 million and \$2.5 million reported offering digital programs (85.7 percent), these had less engagement: 23,140 in 2020 and 20,722 in 2021. Institutions with budgets between \$2.5 million and \$5 million (91.4 percent offering services) saw similar numbers, with 20,413 average digital visitors in 2020 and 23,408 in 2021. Fewer institutions with budgets between \$5 million and \$10 million offered digital services, only 65 percent. However, they did report much higher average visitation numbers—128,943 in 2020 and 71,665 in 2021—although this could partially be a result of smaller sample sizes. Finally, 100 percent of institutions with annual budgets over \$10 million reported offering digital services, reporting an average of 1,114,431 visitors in 2020 and 1,039,548 in 2021, a slight decline.

CONCLUSION

In all, the picture of in-person visitation and virtual engagement these data reveal is one of a slowly moving recovery for most institutions. While in-person visits bounced back considerably from their 2020 lows, the vast majority of institutions welcomed far fewer visitors in 2021 than they did before the pandemic. Only the largest institutions, those with annual budgets of greater than \$10 million, have visitation within 90 percent of their 2019 levels; most institutions are at roughly half.

Virtual engagement, likewise, presents a mixed picture. The dramatic expansion of virtual offerings in 2020 and 2021 provided means of engagement and revenue generation at a time when in-person visits were limited or altogether impossible. Yet only about 40 percent of the smallest institutions offered any virtual programs at all, while it was 80 percent or higher at most larger organizations.

These findings provide an important benchmark for assessing the public history and museum field's ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic among institutions. The findings also highlight the need for our field to pay particular attention to the status of the many thousands of small organizations over the next several years, as their response to the pandemic and subsequent recovery appears distinct from that of their larger counterparts.

As history continues to feel powerfully—sometimes distressingly—relevant in the everyday lives of Americans, the health and vibrance of public history institutions is of critical importance. As the nation approaches its 250th anniversary in 2026, additional advocacy and assistance will be required to ensure the full recovery and ongoing success of these organizations.