2023 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

For the fifth consecutive year, the Public History Research Lab of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) presents our *National Visitation Report*. This report is the only national effort to analyze trends in visitation at history organizations of all types and sizes, all across the United States. Through an annual survey, we gather visitation data to better understand year-to-year shifts in the way Americans engage with history organizations and to provide organizational decision-makers with benchmark data against which they can compare their own institutions.

Gathering data on a field as vast and institutionally diverse—in terms of size, structure, and purpose—as public history is no easy task. Some very small organizations lack the capacity to accurately track the number of visitors they serve, while some large institutions question the value of visitation metrics altogether. Indeed, tracking visitation trends is not the only way to measure public engagement or institutional health; it may not even be the best way. With well over 20,000 history organizations nationwide, however—including thousands of all-volunteer museums, historical societies, and other entities—there are few metrics comparable across the huge range of different institution types and sizes that make up our field. So, we present the findings below as a way of assessing how varied institutions have engaged with their audiences over the past two years, as the cultural sector and the nation continue to recover from the pandemic.

The results below are based on responses to the "National Visitation Survey for History Organizations," collected through an online form in February and March of 2023 from 663 history organizations.

Overview

The results of the 2023 National Visitation Survey reveal that visits to history institutions increased in 2022, a continuation of an ongoing recovery from the disruptions of the pandemic. The number of in-person visits to history organizations increased by 37 percent from 2021 to 2022, adding to the visitation increases that began in 2021. Although this overall number represents substantial growth and is a positive sign for the field, most history institutions still received fewer visitors last year than they did before the beginning of the pandemic.

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Annual Visitation to History Organizations

	2021	2022	Pct. Change
Mean	23,645	32,505	+ 37.4%
Median	3,378	5,000	+ 48.0%

As we have seen with previous reports, year-to-year visitation changes varied considerably by an institution's budget size. For example, the smallest institutions—those with annual budgets of less than $250,000, which are most likely to be operated entirely by volunteers—reported some of the largest visitation increases: 43 percent for institutions with budgets of less than $50,000 (149 respondents), and 62.5 percent for institutions with budgets between $50,000 and $250,000 (190 respondents). These comparatively large increases, however, must be considered alongside the fact that smaller institutions reported longer closures in 2021 and sharper visitation declines during the height of the pandemic.

Analysis by budget level also reveals that the timing of visitation recovery from the lows of the pandemic might also vary by institution size. For example, although visitation to institutions with annual budgets in the $250,000 to $500,000 range (98 responses) saw the smallest increase of all budget levels last year (14 percent), these institutions also reported some of the largest increases in last year's survey. Similarly, institutions with an annual budget between $500,000 to $1,000,000 (70 responses) reported a comparatively small increase (17 percent) last year, but this group also reported the smallest declines in visitation during the pandemic.

Finally, though we received fewer responses from the largest institutions, all reported substantial visitation increases. Institutions with annual budgets between $1 million and $2.5 million (68 responses) saw a 42 percent increase in visitation. Average visitation to institutions with budgets between $2.5 million and $5 million (26 responses) rose 34.5 percent. Visitation rose 34 percent for those with budgets between $5 million and $10 million (42 responses). The largest institutions, those with annual budgets over $10 million (20 responses), reported an increase in average visitation of 45 percent.

Average Annual Visitation, by Budget

Budget	2021	2022	Pct. Change
<$50k	1,503	2,148	+ 42.9%
$50k–250k	3,994	6,489	+ 62.5%
$250k–500k	10,982	12,516	+ 14.0%
$500k–1M	25,305	29,652	+ 17.2%
$1M–2.5M	40,752	57,945	+ 42.2%
$2.5M–5M	45,973	61,846	+ 34.5%
$5M–10M	61,104	81,856	+ 34.0%
>$10M	265,668	385,452	+ 45.1%

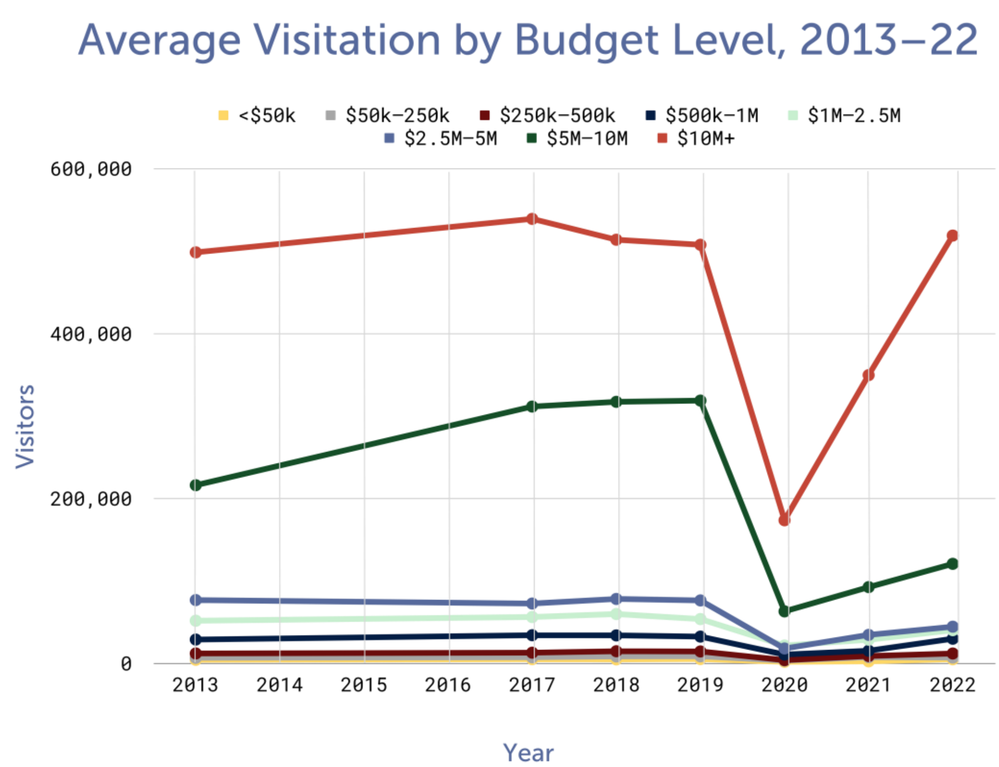
VISITATION TRENDS, 2013–2022

This year's visitation report represents the fifth consecutive year AASLH has reported on visitation trends at history organizations in the United States. Among thousands of respondents in that time, more than three hundred institutions have responded to at least two surveys, enabling us to estimate longer-term trends in visitation at history organizations. As the chart below shows, visitation had been increasing through the 2010s before a massive decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, visitation has recovered substantially, finally nearing pre-pandemic levels again in 2022.

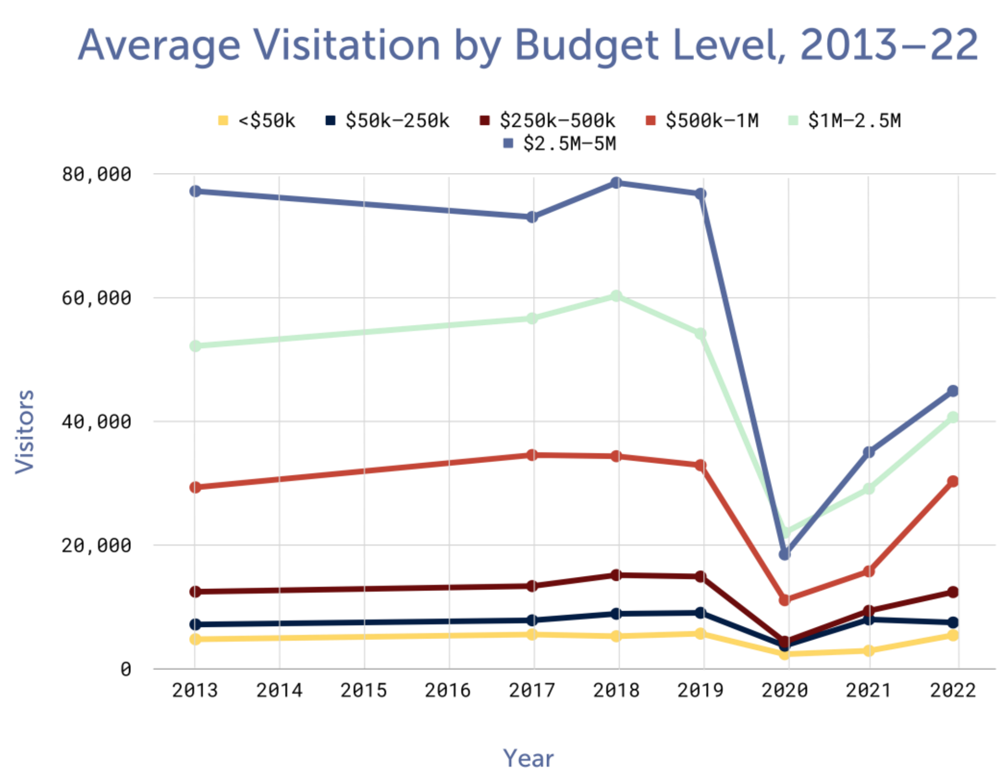
This high-level picture, however, obscures differences between budget levels. When visitation at institutions of different budget sizes are charted separately, it reveals that although the largest institutions (those with budgets over $10 million) have seen their visitation increase to higher than pre-pandemic levels, most smaller organizations are still reporting fewer annual visitors than they did before 2020.

Data reported by mid-sized to large institutions reveal difficulties returning to pre-pandemic visitation. For these institutions, with annual budgets between $1 million and $10 million, the average number of annual visitors reported in 2022 still remains well below the levels reported throughout the 2010s. These institutions reported very large declines during the pandemic and, though they have seen substantial growth in visitation in 2021 and 2022, still appear far from returning to pre-pandemic visitation levels. For example, institutions with budgets between $5 million and $10 million reported that visitation nearly doubled between 2020 and 2022, from about 63,000 to about 121,000; the latter figure, however, is only 56 percent of the number of visitors reported in 2013. This comparatively slow recovery suggests a need to pay closer attention to the operations and sustainability of these mid-sized to large institutions in the coming years.

Finally, the largest institutions, with budgets greater than $10 million, have reported the most complete recovery in visitation figures. Following a visitation decline of more than 65 percent during the pandemic, visitation among these institutions has nearly tripled in the two years since. In 2022, the average number of visits reported by institutions in this budget category was the highest of any year in our data except 2017, indicating a full recovery of in-person visitation.



Average Visitation by Budget Level, 2013–22
<$50k
$50k–250k
$250k–500k
$500k–1M
$1M–2.5M
$2.5M–5M
$5M–10M
$10M+
600,000
400,000
200,000
0
Visitors
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
Year



Average Visitation by Budget Level, 2013–22
<$50k
$50k–250k
$250k–500k
$500k–1M
$1M–2.5M
$2.5M–5M
80,000
60,000
40,000
20,000
0
Visitors
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
Year

VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

Like last year, our survey this year asked respondents about whether and how they were engaging with their audiences virtually. Although forms of virtual engagement vary widely, from live events to online exhibits to virtual tours—and while a lack of standardization for measuring what constitutes virtual "visits" poses challenges for this type of analysis—assessing forms of virtual engagement helps us understand the extent to which the experience of engaging with history organizations has shifted into virtual formats.

In 2022, fewer than half of our survey respondents (43 percent) reported using virtual programming to reach their audiences, the same in 2021. This somewhat surprising figure reveals that, while virtual events, online exhibits, and similar programs have become commonplace for some, mostly larger institutions, they serve as a complement to more traditional forms of in-person engagement, not a replacement. This is particularly true for smaller institutions. Few institutions with budgets under $50,000 (21 percent) or between $50,000 and $250,000 (38 percent) reported offering some kind of virtual programming, while between 50 and 60 percent of institutions in all larger budget ranges reported doing so. Further, institutions in several budget ranges reported serving fewer people through their virtual engagement, perhaps signaling an ongoing continued return to in-person programming as Americans continue to move past pandemic-related health and safety concerns.

Pct. Offering Virtual Programs, by Budget

Budget	Pct. of Orgs. Reporting Virtual Users
<$50k	21%
$50k–250k	38%
$250k–500k	58%
$500k–1M	54%
$1M–2.5M	54%
$2.5M–5M	58%
$5M–10M	52%
>$10M	55%

CONCLUSION

In closing, this picture of visitation trends at history organizations reveals encouraging signs about the state of the field. Visitation continues to increase at institutions of all sizes, even if the size of that growth relative to recent benchmarks might differ considerably depending on institutional budget size. While many organizations offered virtual programs in 2022, the number of organizations providing such options has not grown, nor have the number of users such programs serve. Such offerings seem to serve as a complement to traditional programs for certain types of institutions and visitors, but the bread and butter of in-person experiences remain the norm. Finally, while all budget levels reported substantial visitation growth between 2021 and 2022, the figures reported by institutions in the middle of our budget ranges continue to lag well behind pre-pandemic visitation, raising some cause for concern.

Moving forward, the National Visitation Survey will shift from an annual effort to a more intermittent schedule, as part of an effort to increase our response rate and provide more useful analysis. We plan to conduct the next survey in 2025.