

# History Organizations in a Year of Disruption

a National Visitation Report

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION *for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

**PUBLIC HISTORY  
RESEARCH LAB**

## About AASLH

The American Association for State and Local History is a national professional association dedicated to helping the history community thrive. For the better part of a century, AASLH has provided leadership and resources to its members who preserve and interpret history to make the past more meaningful to all people.

## About the Public History Research Lab

The AASLH Public History Research Lab advances professional practice through research about the U.S. public history community and the role of history in American life. We equip history professionals, museum leaders, scholars, advocates, and others with data and insights they can use to fulfill their missions and more effectively champion the cause of history.

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# About the *National Visitation Report*

2020 was a year of disruption around the world, and history organizations were no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic forced history organizations to navigate extended closures, capacity and operating restrictions, and the public's uneasiness about gathering with others. Alongside these challenges, a national reckoning with racism put history at the center of many conversations, making the work of history institutions more relevant than ever.

How did these competing factors affect visits to history museums, historical societies, and other history organizations last year? How did institutions respond to the complex financial and operating challenges wrought by COVID-19? What might the future look like?

These are the questions the American Association for State and Local History's (AASLH) Public History Research Lab set forth to answer in the 2021 National Visitation Report. We received responses to our Spring 2021 survey from 968 unique institutions; you will find our results and analysis in the pages that follow. In addition to measuring visitation change, this report also addresses questions more specific to 2020's unique circumstances, such as length of closures, operating restrictions, and staffing changes.

This report marks AASLH's third consecutive year tracking year-by-year change in visitation at the nation's history institutions and publishing our findings for the field. These efforts enable us to assess trends at history organizations of all types and sizes, from the smallest to the largest and from coast to coast. Thus, we approached last year's unprecedented changes with several years of baseline data already in hand, helping us contextualize the massive visitation declines history organizations experienced in 2020.

We hope this national report will help you better understand what you've experienced at your own institution and help inform your efforts to chart a course forward through unfamiliar terrain.

For more information and to download our infographic summary, visit [aaslh.org/research](https://aaslh.org/research).



John Garrison Marks  
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# A Year of Disruption

For the third consecutive year, the American Association for State and Local History presents our *National Visitation Report*, an analysis of visitation at U.S. history organizations. This year’s report assesses how visitation changed from 2019 to 2020, a year full of unforeseen challenges that dramatically altered how history institutions operated and interacted with their audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic caused extended closures and operating restrictions at institutions around the country, while also making members of the public understandably wary of gathering in person at places like museums and historical societies. Because of the major effect COVID-19 had on history organizations in 2020, AASLH has also used this year’s survey to assess the impact of the pandemic and its disruptions in areas beyond visitation, such as staffing and operations. Our findings, broken down by budget size and region, are below.

## 70 PERCENT DECLINE

In 2020, history organizations reported a decline in visits of nearly 70 percent compared to 2019.



## Massive Visitation Decline in 2020

On average, visits to history organizations declined nearly 70 percent in 2020 compared to 2019. In other words, for every 10 visits to an institution in 2019, only about 3 visits occurred in 2020. This decrease in visits was spread evenly across the field, with institutions of different sizes and in different regions nearly all reporting substantial declines. This stands in contrast to our findings in prior visitation reports, in which small history organizations reported stronger visitation than their larger counterparts.

BUDGET	RESPONSES	2019 MEAN	2020 MEAN	PCT. CHANGE	2019 MEDIAN	2020 MEDIAN	PCT. CHANGE
< \$50K	258	4,103	1,347	-67.2%	1,000	101	-89.5%
\$50K-250K	295	8,128	2,838	-65.1%	4,707	1,031	-78.1%
\$250K-500K	131	23,344	6,333	-72.9%	10,722	2,955	-72.4%
\$500K-1M	92	32,272	19,176	-40.6%	19,602	4,404	-77.5%
\$1M-2.5M	86	46,379	15,562	-66.4%	28,766	7,841	-72.7%
\$2.5M-5M	43	99,072	35,000	-64.7%	75,000	19,144	-74.5%
\$5M-10M	40	101,962	35,502	-65.2%	75,563	21,524	-71.5%
> \$10M	23	602,818	137,433	-77.2%	323,779	81,055	-75.0%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>36,855</b>	<b>11,573</b>	<b>-68.6%</b>	<b>5,747</b>	<b>1,536</b>	<b>-73.2%</b>

For institutions of nearly every budget range, visitation decline was within five percentage points of the national average. Visitation to institutions with an annual budget of less than \$50,000 fell 67 percent, while visitation to those with an annual budget between \$50,000 and \$250,000 fell 65 percent. Average visitation to institutions with an annual budget between \$250,000 and \$500,000 dropped 73 percent, the second highest decline of any budget level. Organizations with budgets between \$500,000 and \$1 million reported a decline of just 40 percent; median visitation at these institutions, however, declined 77.5 percent, closer in line with the national averages.



**IN OTHER WORDS...**

That means that for every 10 visits that occurred in 2019, there were only 3 in 2020.

Decreases in visitation at large institutions were comparable to their smaller counterparts. Average visitation to institutions with an annual budget between \$1 million and \$2.5 million declined 66 percent. For institutions with budgets between \$2.5 million and \$5 million and for those between \$5 million and \$10 million, visitation declined 65 percent. The largest institutions, those with budgets greater than \$10 million, experienced the largest drop in visitation: 77 percent.

Though there was some variation in the extent of decline, institutions of all sizes experienced a dramatic reduction in the number of visits they recorded in 2020 compared to the year prior.

## Visitation Changes by Region

Across all regions, visitation declined between 60 and 80 percent.

REGION	RESPONSES	2019 MEAN	2020 MEAN	PCT. CHANGE	2019 MEDIAN	2020 MEDIAN	PCT. CHANGE
New England	71	18,542	3,598	-80.6%	3,300	509	-84.6%
Midwest	229	41,270	11,555	-72.0%	5,000	931	-81.4%
Mountain Plains	185	24,155	9,689	-59.9%	5,500	1,794	-67.4%
Mid-Atlantic	124	64,663	17,554	-72.9%	5,313	1,477	-72.2%
Southeast	212	46,310	16,334	-64.7%	10,861	3,420	-68.5%
West	143	17,012	5,287	-68.9%	6,000	1,000	-83.3%

New England institutions saw the largest declines, with average visitation falling about 80 percent. The Mountain Plains region (running roughly between Texas in the south and Montana and North Dakota in the north) reported the smallest average decline in visitation at just under 60 percent. Though not as steep, other regions saw declines roughly in line with the national average, demonstrating the

widespread nature of the pandemic’s impact. The Southeast reported a decline of 65 percent, the West 69 percent, the Midwest 72 percent, and the Mid-Atlantic region 73 percent.

Although the peak of COVID-19’s impact on public health and the subsequent response from government, private businesses, and individual citizens varied considerably from state to state and region to region, over the course of the year institutions in all areas of the country were forced to deal with extended closures, a wary public, and ultimately, a major decline in visitation.

## COVID-19 Impact

In addition to visitation, this year’s survey also asked history institutions how the pandemic affected other areas of their operations and staffing. For example, institutions reported they were, on average, fully closed for just under half the year in 2020 (23 weeks), while they were partially open (with major capacity or operating restrictions) for about 16 weeks. That amounts to 9 full months operating at less than full capacity. These figures reflect the reality that, from the moment COVID-19

emerged as a national and global concern in March 2020 until the end of last year, museums and other history organizations continued to confront massive challenges.

**9 MONTHS BELOW CAPACITY**

Last year, history organizations were closed an average of 23 weeks, and only partially open for 16 more.



BUDGET	MEAN WEEKS FULLY CLOSED	MEDIAN WEEKS FULLY CLOSED	MEAN WEEKS PARTIALLY CLOSED	MEDIAN WEEKS PARTIALLY CLOSED
< \$50K	28.7	32	12.8	7.5
\$50K-250K	21.5	16	16.5	16
\$250K-500K	19.3	16	19.4	20
\$500K-1M	18.4	14	17.7	18
\$1M-2.5M	20.9	16.5	16.3	16
\$2.5M-5M	23.5	26	18.2	19
\$5M-10M	16.1	12	14	10
> \$10M	18.6	15	20.9	25
<b>Overall</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>14</b>

These effects could vary considerably for institutions of different budget sizes, however. For example, although the average length of closure for institutions in most budget ranges falls relatively close to the national average, the smallest institutions—those with annual operating budgets of less than \$50,000—

remained closed much longer at nearly 29 weeks. The largest institutions, meanwhile, reported some of the shortest closures and longest period of “partial” opening, reflecting the ways institutions of different sizes responded to last year’s challenges.

This year’s survey also asked about staff turnover during 2020, specifically whether an institution laid off or furloughed full-time staff or part-time staff last year. In total, 65 percent of institutions reported that they did not make staffing changes in 2020, including about 75 percent of small organizations and roughly half of larger ones. Just 8 percent laid off full-time staff and 10 percent furloughed full-time staff. 11 percent laid off part-time staff and 18 percent furloughed part-time staff.

BUDGET	RESPONSES	FURLOUGH, FULL-TIME	LAY OFF, FULL-TIME	FURLOUGH, PART-TIME	LAY OFF, PART-TIME	NO CHANGES
< \$50K	258	6 (2%)	7 (2.7%)	15 (5.8%)	12 (4.65%)	190 (73.6%)
\$50-250K	295	15 (5.08%)	12 (4.1%)	40 (13.6%)	19 (6.4%)	215 (72.9%)
\$250K-500K	131	12 (9.2%)	7 (5.3%)	24 (18.3%)	20 (15.3%)	88 (67.2%)
\$500K-1M	92	11 (12.0%)	15 (16.3%)	29 (31.5%)	18 (19.6%)	43 (46.7%)
\$1M-2.5M	86	16 (18.6%)	14 (16.3%)	27 (31.4%)	22 (25.6%)	39 (45.3%)
\$2.5M-5M	43	15 (34.9%)	9 (20.9%)	15 (34.9%)	9 (20.9%)	25 (58.1%)
\$5M-10M	40	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	13 (32.5%)	8 (20%)	20 (50%)
< \$10M	23	10 (43.5%)	5 (21.7%)	8 (34.8%)	2 (8.7%)	11 (47.8%)
<b>Overall</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>93 (9.6%)</b>	<b>73 (7.5%)</b>	<b>171 (17.7%)</b>	<b>110 (11.4%)</b>	<b>631 (65.2%)</b>

Last year’s disruptions, however, had a much larger impact on staffing at large institutions than at small ones. At institutions with annual budgets larger than \$10 million, for example, 22 percent laid off full-time staff, 44 percent furloughed full-time staff, 9 percent laid off part-time staff, and 35 percent furloughed part-time staff. Layoffs and furloughs were similarly common at other very large institutions. Meanwhile, at the smallest organizations, only 2 to 5 percent laid off or furloughed full-time staff, and just 5 to 14 percent laid off or furloughed part-time staff.

**MOST KEPT STAFF**



65 percent of history organizations avoided staffing cuts like layoffs and furloughs, but the impact on individual history professionals remains unclear.

These figures reflect the reality that most of the nation’s history organizations are small operations. AASLH estimates that institutions with annual operating budgets of less than \$50,000 comprise about a quarter of the nation’s more than 25,000 history organizations. Their ability to stay closed longer with little effect on staffing offers critical perspective to consider when thinking about the pandemic’s impact on the field. Because they are accustomed to operating on shoestring budgets, with many of them employing few (if any) paid staff members, many small institutions were able to batten down the



hatches and weather the storm, expecting to resume operations when conditions allowed. Larger institutions, meanwhile, employ far more people, and certainly account for an outsized share of the field’s professional staff. Thus, large institutions faced an entirely different set of considerations when considering re-opening, and more frequently reported that they had conducted layoffs and furloughs in 2020.

Because this report focuses on institutions rather than individuals, it cannot assess the full toll 2020’s disruptions had on individual museum professionals. Though the metric used here—how many institutions took a specific action, like closure and layoffs—helps us assess in a broad manner how the pandemic affected the country’s history organizations, it may in some ways obscure the number of individual professionals affected by last year’s disruptions. Likewise, our data also cannot explore the ways layoffs and furloughs unequally affected different segments of an institution’s staff, so this report cannot (and was not designed to) assess the disparate effects of the pandemic on museum professionals by race, gender, area of responsibility, and other criteria. Those questions are ripe for additional analysis.

Regionally, there were a few major differences in how institutions responded to the challenges presented by the pandemic, though none remained unaffected.

REGION	RESPONSES	FURLOUGH, FULL-TIME	LAY OFF, FULL-TIME	FURLOUGH, PART-TIME	LAY OFF, PART-TIME	NO CHANGES
New England	71	4 (5.6%)	3 (4.2%)	13 (18.3%)	8 (11.3%)	44 (62%)
Mid-Atlantic	124	19 (15.3%)	9 (7.3%)	25 (20.2%)	13 (10.5%)	77 (62.1%)
Midwest	229	15 (6.5%)	11 (4.8%)	34 (14.8%)	19 (8.3%)	163 (71.2%)
Southeast	212	20 (9.4%)	28 (13.2%)	47 (22.2%)	27 (12.7%)	126 (59.4%)
Mountain Plains	185	18 (9.7%)	10 (5.4%)	24 (12.9%)	22 (11.9%)	132 (71.4%)
West	143	16 (11.2%)	11 (7.7%)	27 (18.9%)	20 (13.9%)	87 (60.8%)

REGION	MEAN WEEKS FULLY CLOSED	MEDIAN WEEKS FULLY CLOSED	MEAN WEEKS PARTIALLY CLOSED	MEDIAN WEEKS PARTIALLY CLOSED
New England	28	27	13.2	12
Mid-Atlantic	24.7	20	18.3	19.5
Midwest	24.2	19	17.5	19
Southeast	17.1	12	18.7	20
Mountain Plains	17.5	12	15	11
West	30	34	10.8	8

In New England, 5.6 percent of history institutions furloughed full-time staff and 4.2 percent laid off full-time staff; at the same time, New England institutions operated at less than full capacity longer than those of any other region, closing for an average of 28 weeks and operating with limited capacity for 13 more. Similarly, in the Midwest, 6.5 percent of institutions furloughed full-time staff and about 5 percent laid off full-time staff.

Among Mid-Atlantic institutions, 7 percent laid off full-time staff, with similar figures in the Mountain Plains (5.4 percent) and West (7.7 percent) and a higher instance in the Southeast (13.2 percent). Furloughs for full-timers were similarly spread out, with 10 to 15 percent of institutions reporting furloughs in the Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Mountain Plains, and West regions. Furloughs and layoffs for part-time and seasonal staff were far more prevalent in all regions.

Western institutions reported the longest closures at 30 weeks. The Southeast and Mountain Plains regions reported the shortest closures at just 17 weeks. There was less variation in partial closures, with all regions reporting between about 11 and 19 weeks of operating at less than full capacity.

## Conclusion

The findings of this report reveal the dramatic effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on history organizations last year, while also offering some reason for optimism.

Institutions around the country experienced a massive decline in visits. This decline cut across regional and size distinctions, leaving few institutions unaffected. Many institutions remained entirely closed to the public for half of the year, and only operated with significant capacity limits and other restrictions once they finally reopened. In addition to hampering efforts to carry out their mission, this lack of visitors (and in some cases, cuts in public sector financial support) had significant consequences, weakening organizations and sometimes resulting in furloughs or layoffs of full-time and part-time staff.

Yet the worst scenarios seem to have mostly been avoided. Though many institutions cut staff, most did not experience major staffing changes. About half of large organizations and three-quarters of smaller ones made no staffing changes last year, many likely helped in part by the robust federal support programs that emerged to mitigate the pandemic's impact on businesses and workers. Early warnings from the American Alliance of Museums that up to a third of museums were at risk of closure, thankfully, seem mostly not to have come to pass for most history organizations. The long closure and lack of staff turnover at the smallest history organizations also offers new perspective on the size and scope of our field, and the unique position of small history organizations—the single largest segment of the museum universe.

What's more, the pandemic unleashed an incredible outpouring of creativity from the history community as we sought out new ways to deliver programs to audiences. History organizations pivoted to online programming, moved exhibits outside, and embraced opportunities to try new things in ways that will permanently change the ways they operate. The shift to virtual programming, however, brings new challenges for measuring visitation and engagement, as there is still little consensus among institutions about what, precisely, we should be measuring online. Nevertheless, the success of many institutions in sharing their work in new formats speaks to the strong demand for history in communities across the country.

The challenges of the pandemic are ongoing, and it is possible that institutions who survived to the end of 2020 will be unable to withstand the length and scope of this crisis. Yet the ability of history organizations to endure such dramatic visitation declines offers reason to hope for the best in 2021 and beyond.

*For additional reading and resources on visitation and the impact of COVID-19, visit [aaslh.org/research](https://aaslh.org/research).*

## Methodology

The findings above are based on the 968 unique responses received for AASLH’s “National Visitation Survey for History Organizations,” circulated in Spring 2021. The survey asked for institutions’ visitation numbers in 2019 and 2020, as well as other details about the institution, such as budget size, type, and location. The survey instrument can be viewed at [aaslh.org/research](https://aaslh.org/research).

The survey was circulated through AASLH’s email list, on social media, and through the help of partners at other associations, state history institutions, and state museum organizations. The survey was not sent to a pre-selected sample of institutions, nor were responses weighted according to any pre-determined parameters. The sheer number of institutions in the public history community and the vast range of organization types and sizes make such approaches impractical at this time. The research team did assess the proportion of institutions at each of the budget levels and for each region, and found the responses align well with prior years’ surveys and with AASLH’s other estimates about the distribution of institutions across the field, providing a high level of confidence in the results.