

Staying Engaged: Health Patterns of Older Americans Who Engage in the Arts

A report based on results from the Health and Retirement Study



[*Staying Engaged: Health Patterns of Older Americans Who Engage in the Arts*](#) presents the first detailed look at arts participation habits, attitudes toward the arts, and related health characteristics of adults aged 55 and older. *Staying Engaged* is based on results from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), conducted by the University of Michigan with primary support from the National Institute on Aging within the National Institutes of Health.

Background

Staying Engaged furthers knowledge of issues that were raised in a 2012 workshop of the National Academy of Sciences. The workshop was co-sponsored by the NEA and the National Institutes of Health and centered on a series of studies that showed a positive relationship between arts activities—in theater, music, and storytelling, for example—and health outcomes of older adults. The workshop identified research gaps and challenges that have impeded a fuller understanding of the relationship between the arts and aging.

A summary report from that workshop, [*Arts and Aging: Building the Science*](#), recommended future research questions. The workshop and report resulted from meetings of the NEA's Interagency Task Force on the Arts and Human Development, a partnership of federal agencies interested in learning how the arts can influence health and educational outcomes across the lifespan.

Key Takeaways from the *Staying Engaged* Report

Health Outcomes

In analyzing data from the 2014 HRS, the authors of *Staying Engaged* identified several positive associations between arts participation and favorable health outcomes. Notably, older adults who both created art and attended arts events reported higher cognitive functioning and lower rates of both hypertension and limitations to their physical functioning than did older adults who neither created nor attended art. In fact, among older adults who both created and attended, cognitive functioning scores were seven-fold higher than for adults who neither created nor attended. Moreover, the frequency with which these adults attended art or created art is seen as a factor in the positive relationship with health.

Similarly, older adults who reported in 2014 that they both created and attended art experienced slower *rate of declines* in cognitive functioning since 2002. Over the same period, they also reported slower growth in their rates of hypertension and physical limitations than did the non-creating, non-attending adults.

For the health outcomes studied, *Staying Engaged* finds that even adults who frequented arts events, but did not report creating artwork of their own, enjoyed some health advantages over adults who neither created nor attended art.

Given how prevalent conditions such as poor cognitive health, limited physical function, and high levels of hypertension are among older adults, the possibility that arts participation can improve health should interest anyone charged with designing or implementing strategies to promote well-being among this population.

Arts Participation

In the HRS, arts creation was defined as visual art-making; dancing (including social dancing); singing or playing a musical instrument; acting; photography, graphic design, or film; or writing stories, poetry, or plays. Attending arts activities could be listening to a live concert, going to a museum or gallery, or seeing a film.

In the report, 84 percent of older adults reported either creating art, attending arts events, or doing both creating and attending. Among this group, 64 percent created art of their own, 68.7 percent attended arts events, and 48.6 percent *both* created and attended.

Among the various types of arts creation that older adults did over a 12-month period:

- 39.5 percent participated in the visual arts (painting, sculpting, making pottery or ceramics; weaving, crocheting, quilting, needlepoint, knitting, sewing, or jewelry-making; or leatherwork, metalwork, or woodwork.)
- 38.4 percent did a form of performing arts (dancing, singing or playing a musical instrument, or acting)
- 57.7 percent read literary fiction (novels, short stories, poetry, or plays)

Attitudes about the Arts

Staying Engaged reports the share of older adults who agreed with series of statements about the arts, including:

- I feel a sense of appreciation for the arts (77.2 percent)
- I enjoy the arts (66.8 percent)
- The arts are important (63.8 percent)
- The arts help me to socialize (58.6 percent)
- The arts help me to be active and engaged (54.9 percent)

Despite the generally positive feedback, 37 percent of survey respondents also said they experienced difficulty accessing the arts (e.g., getting to a venue). This figure roughly corresponds with data in the NEA's report [*When Going Gets Tough: Barriers and Motivations Affecting Arts Attendance*](#). As that previous report notes, "Retirees' greatest barrier to attendance is difficulty getting to the exhibit or performance location, a common complaint among older individuals in poor health or with physical disability."