

Arts Data Profile: The 2020 Arts Basic Survey

Research Brief: Arts Participation Rates from 2014 to 2020

According to data from the 2020 Arts Basic Survey (ABS), adults' rates of arts participation were largely unchanged since the survey's prior administration in 2014 and 2015. Notably, the 2020 ABS covered the period from February 2019 to February 2020, and therefore did not capture the effects of COVID-19 on arts participation patterns. In 2023 and beyond, the NEA will report findings from two surveys—the 2022 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) and the General Social Survey (arts module); data from both surveys will shed light on changes in arts participation during the pandemic.

The 2020 ABS asked several questions about attending arts events, creating or performing art, and reading literature. Some of those questions were also included in the 2014 ABS; others, in the 2015 version of the survey. The present research brief, and an accompanying table, illustrate points of comparison between the 2020 ABS and the 2014/2015 ABS surveys.

In 2020, for example, 39.9 percent of U.S. adults read novels or short stories, poetry, or plays in the previous year—down from 43.1 percent who reported doing so in 2015. By contrast, the share of adults who visited buildings, neighborhoods, parks, or monuments for historical, architectural, design value grew from 27.4 percent in 2015 to 30.8 percent in 2020.

While participation rates for most other types of arts activities remained stable, social dancing (e.g., dancing at weddings and clubs) became a less popular activity between 2014 and 2020. Over that period, the share of adults who reported doing so fell by 2.7 percentage points.

Summary

- Between 2015 and 2020, the share of adults who read literature—novels or short stories, poetry, or plays—fell from 43.1 percent to 39.9 percent.
- Over the same period, the share of adults visiting buildings, neighborhoods, parks, or monuments for historical, architectural, or design value rose from 27.4 percent to 30.8 percent.
- The share of adults who attended a live music, theater, or dance performance held steady between 2015 and 2020—little over 30 percent in both years.
- Attendance at live book readings or poetry or storytelling events increased modestly, from 5.0 percent in 2015 to 6.0 percent in 2020.
- Movie-going was down, as a proportion of U.S. adults reporting this activity: 58.4 percent in 2015 versus 57.0 percent in 2020.
- In 2014, 25.2 percent of adults did social dancing (e.g., dancing at weddings or clubs). By 2020, the share doing this activity dipped to 22.5 percent.
- The proportion of adults who created visual art such as paintings or sculptures rose modestly, from 6.8 percent in 2014 to 8.1 percent in 2020.

- The share of adults who engaged in activities such as working with pottery or ceramics, playing a musical instrument, and performing or practicing singing showed no significant change between 2014 and 2020.

Trends in selected forms of arts participation: 2020 versus 2014/2015				
	2020	2015	Statistically significant change (pp=percentage points)	Trend summary (2020 versus 2015)
Attendance:				
Live music, theater, or dance performance	32.2%	31.6%	-	No change
Visual art exhibit	20.2%	18.7%	+1.5	Small increase
Book reading or poetry or storytelling event	6.0%	5.0%	+1.0	Small increase
Buildings, neighborhoods, parks, or monuments for their historical or architectural or design value	30.8%	27.4%	+3.4	Increase
Movies or films	57.0%	58.4%	-1.4	Small decrease
	2020	2015	Statistically significant change (pp=percentage points)	Trend summary (2020 versus 2015)
Read novels, short stories, poetry, or plays	39.9%	43.1%	-3.2	Decrease
	2020	2014	Statistically significant change (pp=percentage points)	Trend summary (2020 versus 2014)
Personal performance or creation:				
Work with pottery, ceramics, or jewelry	3.6%	3.4%	-	No change
Do leatherwork, metalwork, or woodwork	6.5%	6.3%	-	No change
Do weaving, crocheting, and other textile art	9.2%	10.7%	-1.5	Small decrease
Play a musical instrument	9.6%	9.6%	-	No change
Do Acting	1.1%	1.4%	-	No change
Perform or practice dance	3.1%	2.9%	-	No change
Do social dancing	22.5%	25.2%	-2.7	Decrease
Perform or practice singing	7.9%	8.5%	-	No change
Create films or videos for artistic purposes	3.7%	3.5%	-	No change
Take photographs for artistic purposes	10.4%	11.6%	-1.2	Small decrease
Create other visual art such as paintings	8.1%	6.8%	+1.3	Small increase
Do creative writing	4.9%	5.7%	-0.8	Small decrease

Arts Basic Survey (2020, 2015, 2014), National Endowment for the Arts

Notes

The Arts Basic Survey (ABS) is a short-form edition of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), which typically has been conducted on a five-year basis. The ABS and the SPPA are designed by the National Endowment for the Arts and fielded by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the Current Population Survey.

The 2020 ABS covered the pre-pandemic period of February 2019 to 2020. Respondents to the 2020 survey were asked one of two sets of questions pertaining to either: (1) attending live arts events and literary reading; or (2) personally performing or creating art.

The 2020 ABS captured arts participation involving activities such as attending live performing arts events and at visual art exhibits, touring sites for their historical or architectural or design value, reading literature, and using devices to consume arts content.

The 2020 ABS also tracked: playing a musical instrument; performing or practicing singing; doing creative writing; making films or photographs for artistic purposes; working with pottery or ceramics, or creating jewelry; creating visual art such as paintings or sculptures; doing weaving, crocheting, sewing, or other textile arts; and doing leatherwork, metalwork, or woodwork.

Previous waves of the ABS contained questions about just one set of these activities. For the trend analysis presented in this research brief, 2020 ABS estimates are compared with results from the 2014 ABS (covering personal performance and creation of art) and the 2015 wave (which asked about attendance and literary reading).¹

Results from the 2022 SPPA and from an arts module of the 2022 General Social Survey are expected in 2023.

In this research brief, differences in arts participation by year were tested at 90 percent confidence.

¹ For a complete list of questions in each of the ABS waves, see the [ABS Supplement Data and Documentation](#).