



Museums in a Pandemic: Audience Experiences

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The ACM Trends Reports team has continued to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's museums. We have now conducted two surveys, with the first in May 2020. The second survey was offered to US museums from September 24 to October 18, 2020. The results illustrate the ways children's museums have adapted to the evolving national and local situations surrounding the pandemic, and likely other current events. This report focuses on the new and modified ways museums are engaging with their audiences, whether in-person or virtual.

Overall, 96 US-based children's museums participated in the survey. The data shows about half have opened their doors to in-person visitors, and many have continued to prioritize online exhibits, programming, and other virtual content. The financial costs of reopening have been complex, as institutions adopt increased safety practices and products, as well as maneuver through reduced occupancy rates and attendance. On the whole, the museum field is still in an upheaval, which makes trends difficult to identify. But there are also clear signs that museums are finding their footing, whether they are opening their doors for in-person visits or focusing on virtual experiences.

This report is the sixth in an ACM Trends series exploring the early impacts of COVID-19 on the field. ACM Trends Report #4.5 provided a snapshot of results from the fall 2020 survey. Future reports will examine personnel, collaborations, and funding.

ACM TRENDS

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Many children's museums reopened their doors to audiences for some type of in-person visit experience between mid-May and early fall of 2020. Of 83 museums that responded to the question *Is your museum currently open to visitors?*, 48 were open. Of those, most had reopened during the summer months. Four had to reclose for short periods ranging from three to fifteen days. Reasons for reclosure were personnel or visitors testing positive for the virus, city-wide closures, and financial reasons. Of the 35 that have remained closed for in-person visits since the beginning of the pandemic, 14 have reopening dates scheduled for late 2020 or in 2021.

Public Health & Safety Are Central to the Visit

Children's museums have always been dedicated to visitor safety. Institutions that reopened for in-person visits have continued to champion this priority. They have met this goal in a range of ways, guided by a mix of municipal mandates, public health protocols, and guidelines set by their own leadership. There were no differences according to museum size in safety practices.

Of the 48 museums open to in-person visitors, 46 museums provided information about safety practices for visitors in the survey. Nearly all require or provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for in-person visits, including masks, face shields, and gloves. Nearly three-quarters of museums provide cleaning materials for visitors' use, such as sanitization stations, as well as disinfectant wipes and floor mats. About half of museums undertake industrial cleaning, including closing off areas to

do deep cleaning, using electrostatic cleaners and UV light cleaning wands, and taking extra precautions with high-touch exhibit materials like interactive features. Two-thirds of museums conduct health checks with visitors that feature temperature readings and questionnaires. Less than half have reduced cash transactions.

Museums that are open for in-person visits also limit contact among visitors to increase safety. Nearly all institutions are operating with reduced capacity. They have experimented with techniques that encourage or force social distancing, such as one-way throughput and allowing only one visiting group per exhibit at a time. Over half of participating institutions have installed physical barriers in places where people congregate for extended periods, such as ticket booths.

With all of these changes to the visit experience, communications are a critical area of safety practice. About a quarter of museums described their efforts to effectively present safety information in signage and guide visitors through new procedures. Many museums have posted this information on their websites. Several also published extensive details of reopening plans, such as Glazer Children's Museum in Tampa, Florida (https://bit.ly/Glazer_Reopening_Plan). Museums have also paid attention to safety procedures for personnel, such as trainings and management updates. We will describe staff-focused safety practices in a later Trends Report.

Occupancy Regulations & Managing Visitors

In response to continuously evolving health regulations, museums, like other public institutions, have had to manage patrons within reduced maximum occupancy levels. At the time of this survey, museums that reported being open to visitors said they were permitted to have an average of one third of their standard indoor and outdoor occupancy levels. These levels may be influenced by size and geographic region, but we do not yet have enough data to understand these factors.

Before the pandemic, some museums used vendors and systems to manage visitor flow and ticket purchases. Since fewer people can visit at one time, these products might be more useful than ever. Two-thirds of institutions currently open to visitors have been relying on event

ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is the world's foremost professional member service organization for the children's museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children's museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

management and point-of-sale products to manage ticket reservations and visitor flow. Museums most commonly use Altru by Blackbaud and Versai Museum Management, although a variety of other programs are in use too. Fees and pricing for these products vary, with some charging based on size and usage. Some charge several hundred dollars each month, while others require a one-time fee of several thousand dollars.

Members

Members have long been an important part of museums' audiences and operations. In the beginning of the pandemic, children's museums reported making accommodations for their members. Membership extensions continued to be the most popular approach in fall 2020, with half of museums providing this option. A fifth of museums offered members free or reduced-price access to content or members-only hours.

Some museums reported that members are making requests as well. Of 45 museums that provided information on this topic, a third said audiences requested a refund of their memberships. A quarter reported audiences requested membership extensions. Less common audience requests include a membership freeze, renewal discounts, and free or reduced-price access to content or members-only hours.

In-Person & Virtual Attendance

Of the 48 museums with facilities open to visitors, 36 provided monthly attendance data for 2019 and 2020. For June, July, and August of 2020, three-quarters of those institutions were below 28% of their 2019 attendance. According to ACM and museum leaders, attendance fluctuated over these three months based on several factors, including regional variation in positive virus test rates, ongoing efforts to navigate regulations, and communities' unique safety needs.

Museums have continued to ramp up their online presence through social media, websites, and online programming and exhibits. These efforts are helping institutions sustain and build their relationships with audiences. But understanding these relationships requires nuanced techniques that differ than those used for in-

person visit measurements. Nearly two-thirds of children's museums are tracking general website usage and social media engagement, using built-in or add-on analytical tools. Far fewer museums reported tracking attendance for online programming and virtual exhibits, whether free or fee-based. We will work with leaders to determine the best ways to measure online engagement so we can present comparable data in the future.

Re-Opening Costs at a Glance

Museums' investment in safety for visitors and personnel has a financial cost. As described above, museums have purchased a wide range of products or services. Spending appears to differ dramatically as a result, with museums reporting anywhere from \$1,000 to \$700,000 in re-opening expenses. Table 1 presents the average costs, as well as the proportion spent on reopening compared to overall expenses for March through August, 2020.

Table 1. Re-opening costs for March – August 2020, according to size.

Size	Number of Museums	Average cost of reopening to date	Average proportion of overall expenses
Small	3*	\$6,432	--
Medium	18	\$11,733	3%
Large	17	\$56,193	1.7%

Note. *n* = 38.

* We cannot draw conclusions with data from only three museums, but we include this detail to inform early impressions and encourage ongoing participation in ACM Trends surveys.

There's more to the story of reopening costs. Before the pandemic, more than a third of children's museums' income consisted of earned income, which included revenue from admissions, memberships, food service, gift shop, and special events (Fraser et al., 2018). While we have not yet collected financial data on every aspect of audiences' experiences in 2020, we know that ticket purchases have decreased, memberships are shifting, and food service has likely changed. We'll explore the details of the financial picture in a future Trends Report.

The Takeaway

Children’s museums have started to experiment with reopening their doors and continue to produce virtual offerings. For those that are currently open for in-person visits or plan to open soon, investments in public health and safety procedures have reshaped play activities to limit social interaction. While these interactions are an important part of public learning, separation also illustrates the value of sharing, turn-taking, and public safety practices to protect others. All of these lessons can contribute to child development. Museums can emphasize these learning outcomes in communications to help families appreciate their potential value and learn ways to navigate this new normal.

At this writing, even with promising vaccines in the pipeline, it is fair to assume that museums may not return to former in-person attendance capacity until summer 2021 at the earliest. This reality – and the need to manage members’ expectations for extended membership renewal – suggest that investing in virtual or distant relationship development will be essential to maintaining goodwill and nurturing families both during and after the pandemic.

Families with children under five, who have lived with limited social contact for more than eight months, will arrive with distinct social skills and expectations as the country moves beyond the pandemic. Children’s museums can reinvent their services in ways that prioritize the needs of this group. In-person visitors will likely be thinking more about safety, security, and sanitation than they have in the past. Institutions can use these topics as access points to provide resources on caregiving and child development before, during, and after visits. This approach can also help maintain member and public support of museums through ongoing uncertainty and lockdowns.

About This Research

Data for this report was collected by an online survey that ACM distributed through an email invitation to children’s museums in the US. The survey was open between September 24 and October 18, 2020. Overall, 96 museums responded to at least part of the survey, and not all museums answered every question in the survey. Researchers kept all responses that met a minimum threshold of questions answered. All participating museums are US-based ACM member institutions, representing 40% of membership. These museums represent all size categories, though only 7 Small museums participated.

Researchers conducted qualitative and quantitative analysis on the survey data. A researcher reviewed open-ended responses from the survey and coded themes in an iterative process to summarize information on safety activities and requests that museums have received from their members. The initial coding process produced a large number of codes, and subsequent coding led to aggregated and more meaningful themes. Researchers also calculated average (mean) occupancy levels and reopening costs, as well as proportions for other topics. Responses were consistent across size categories, unless otherwise noted.

ACM provided a sample of reopening plans and safety procedures that had been published on organizations’ websites. They also offered observations based on museum leaders’ input during ACM Leadership Calls.

References

Fraser, J., Flinner, K., Voiklis, J., & Rank, S. (2018). *Where’s the Money Coming from? Children’s Museums’ Operating Budgets in 2016*. ACM Trends 1(11). Knology & Association of Children’s Museums.

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Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.



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