


# Museum Visitation as a Leisure Time Choice

## A Background Report to the Smithsonian Board of Regents

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## **Preface**

For most visitors, visiting a Smithsonian museum represents a choice about the use of leisure time. Visiting a museum is a leisure activity that competes with other activities such as reading, exercising, watching movies, attending sports events, shopping, and so on. In this paper, OP&A Social Science Analyst James Smith summarizes trends in available leisure time in the United States; reviews the available data on how Americans use their leisure time, with a particular emphasis on museum visitation; and examines why people may choose to use their leisure time on a museum visit.

This report was prepared in response to a request from members of the Smithsonian Board of Regents who are interested in visitation trends and patterns. It was reviewed by several other Office of Policy and Analysis staff members, who often go beyond the call of duty in assisting one another.

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Visiting museums is a leisure activity that competes with other leisure activities for perhaps the most precious resource in a rapidly changing and fast-paced world: time. The competition includes not only other cultural options, but any activity that people choose to pursue in the time available for discretionary activities—reading, exercising, watching DVDs at home, socializing, shopping, and so on.

This paper will address three questions that pertain to museums as a leisure activity:

- What is happening to the overall amount of leisure time for Americans?
- How do people use their leisure time, and what are the trends for the future?
- Why do people choose to use their leisure time to visit museums?

## I. Leisure in America: Background

There is a perception in some quarters that Americans are increasingly squeezed for leisure time (Schor 1993). The truth however, is more complex.

What do we mean by “leisure time”? We might define it simply as hours *not* occupied by paid work or the basic biological necessities of life (such as eating and sleeping), where time spent on the latter is more or less fixed for an individual.<sup>1</sup> However, this definition of leisure time is misleading, because it includes time spent on activities that are *not* generally considered leisure: home maintenance, meal preparation, paying bills, washing clothes, taking sick children to doctors—all the tasks required to maintain a household. A more narrow definition of leisure time, and the one generally preferred by leisure industry analysts and social scientists, subtracts time spend on such household

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<sup>1</sup> It may, of course, vary considerably among individuals, based both on individual biology (for example, some people need eight hours of sleep a night, while others can get by on six) and on ingrained behavioral preferences (some people prefer sit-down meals, while others are happy to eat on the run).

maintenance tasks, reserving the term “leisure” for activities that are pursued for fun, relaxation, or personal enrichment.<sup>2</sup>

A crucial insight about household maintenance tasks is that the amount of time an individual or household needs to devote to them is *not* fixed, and may be reduced through the use of technology or paid assistance. For example, time spent on yard work can be reduced by hiring a lawn service. Time spent washing dishes can be reduced by using an automatic dishwashing machine rather than washing by hand.

This insight is key to understanding the confusion about leisure time trends in the United States in recent decades. The focus of the debate about a time squeeze tends to be on one particular class of households: those with two working-age adult partners, which we will call “families” for convenience.<sup>3</sup> It is widely recognized that, for the average family, hours of paid work have increased over the past few decades, driven by the mass movement of married women into the paid labor force (Jacobs and Gerson 2004).<sup>4</sup> However, alongside this increase in paid work, hours spent on household maintenance tasks have *declined* dramatically for the average family, as new or improved technologies (for example, microwave ovens) have made some of these tasks less onerous, and professional assistance (for example, lawn services and day care workers) has increasingly been hired to do other tasks. Studies based on time-diary data have concluded that the net effect has been an *increase* in leisure time for the average adult family member. In other words, the increase in hours of paid work has been more than offset by the decrease in hours spent on household maintenance tasks. In this sense, *working-age Americans have more time to pursue discretionary leisure activities today than at any other time in modern history* (Robinson and Godbey 1997; Aguiar and Hurst 2006; Roberts and Rupert 1995).

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<sup>2</sup> This more narrow definition, while conceptually more defensible, can be somewhat ambiguous in practice. For example, raking leaves or mowing the lawn would not typically be considered “leisure” on the narrower definition, but many individuals enjoy yard work.

<sup>3</sup> A “family” in this sense may or may not include children, and the partners may or may not be married.

<sup>4</sup> This increase is limited to families in which partners are in their prime working years, from approximately 25-55 years of age. Hours of paid work have generally decreased for younger adults (because people are staying in school longer) and for older adults (because people are retiring earlier).

Does this mean that concerns about a time squeeze on American families are just the whinings of a generation of Baby Boomers with an outsized sense of entitlement and undersized sense of historical perspective? Not necessarily, because an hour of paid work is not the same as an hour of household work. The most important difference is that paid work is generally more rigidly scheduled; it typically requires being in a certain place at a certain time, with limited scope for rescheduling. Thus, an individual who trades household work for paid work loses scheduling flexibility, even if he or she comes out ahead in terms of total leisure time. He or she may be forced to forgo leisure activities that conflict with a formal work schedule, or may find it more difficult to coordinate leisure activities with friends or a partner.

The result, to use a word sometimes mentioned in the literature, is that leisure time has become more “fragmented” for adult family members. Total hours available for leisure activities may have risen, but these hours increasingly tend to be broken up into rigid blocs that may, individually, be too small to accommodate anything except casual leisure activities at home. This appears to be a significant influence on leisure-time choices. To quote Robert D. Putnam, an influential Harvard social scientist best known for his work on the decline of civic engagement in the United States<sup>5</sup>:

Our extra “free time” has arrived (and then disappeared) in tiny packets scattered across the workweek—long enough to channel-surf, but not enough for deep relaxation and leisure, ... and not enough for social intimacy and civic engagement, both of which are declining, according to time use studies. (Foreword to Robinson and Godbey 1997, p. xvii.)

To the extent that leisure time has been subject to such fragmentation, a disconnect exists between the economic measurement of leisure time—according to which a few extra minutes here and there can be aggregated to produce a seemingly considerable increase in leisure time over the week, month, or year—and the ordinary person’s desire for useable blocks of free time. Clearly, what matters from the perspective of museum visitation is that available leisure time is sufficiently aggregated and situated to provide a window of several free hours, typically in the late morning through evening.

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<sup>5</sup> See Putnam (2001).

## II. How Americans Use Their Leisure Time

It difficult to say exactly how museum-going has fared in comparison with other leisure activities in recent years, because no single source exists that allows precise quantitative comparisons. What follows is a rough picture drawn from a number of sources, each of which provides a limited and incomplete perspective.

### *Market Research Data*

Several market-research firms track participation in leisure activities. Unfortunately, their data are generally available only to paying clients at a (typically steep) price. However, data from one such firm, Mediamark, have been summarized in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* since 2000, with a two-year lag; data for 1998-2005 are available publicly through this channel.<sup>6</sup> These data track participation in leisure activities ranging from popular pursuits such as reading books, going to the beach, and attending concerts to niche interests such as model-making, flying kites, and playing bingo. Museum visitation and zoo visitation are tracked as separate items.

According to these data, the five most popular leisure activities in 2005—in terms of activities undertaken *at least once in the previous 12 months*—were dining out (48.3 percent of survey respondents), entertaining at home (37.5 percent), reading books (35.4 percent), barbecuing (34.3 percent), and surfing the net (27.9 percent).<sup>7</sup> Going to museums was cited by 12.6 percent of respondents, and going to zoos by 11.7 percent—similar to the figures for musical concerts<sup>8</sup> (11.9 percent), live theater (13.2 percent),

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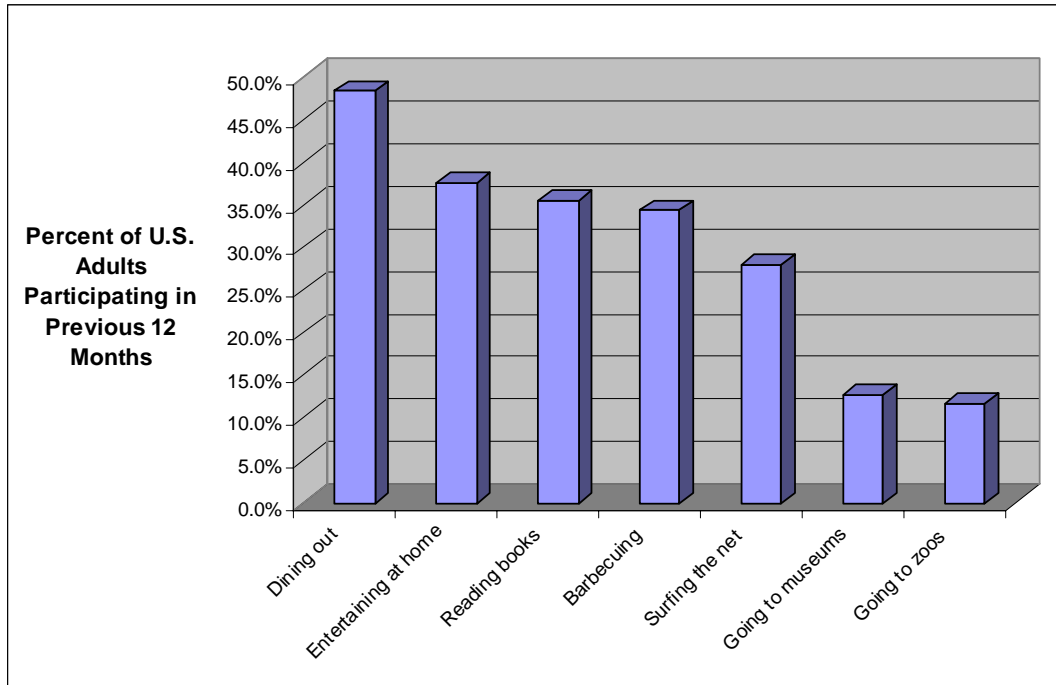
<sup>6</sup> The *Statistical Abstract* published Mediamark's data only on a limited subset of categories for 2000, 2001, and 2002; these did not include museum and zoo visitation.

<sup>7</sup> The activities undertaken most *frequently* were reading books and surfing the net, which were done at least *twice per week* by 19.9 percent and 18.2 percent of respondents, respectively. In this report, we will follow the general convention of using the once-in-the-last-12-months figure to judge the relative popularity of leisure activities. While admittedly arbitrary, this appears preferable to using frequency-of-participation figures, which are heavily biased toward easily-accessible, home-based activities such as watching television and reading.

<sup>8</sup> Other than rock or country concerts, which are tracked as separate categories.

picnicking (10.9 percent), photography (11.8 percent), and video games (11.8 percent).<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Most Popular Leisure Activities in 2005  
(Plus Museum and Zoo Visitation for Comparison)**



Source: Mediamark, Inc. Reproduced in *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2007 edition.

Because the Mediamark data are publicly available only for the years 1998-2005, they provide at best limited insight into trends over time.<sup>10</sup> However, to get some sense of what these data might suggest about trends, the study team looked at the following over this eight-year span:

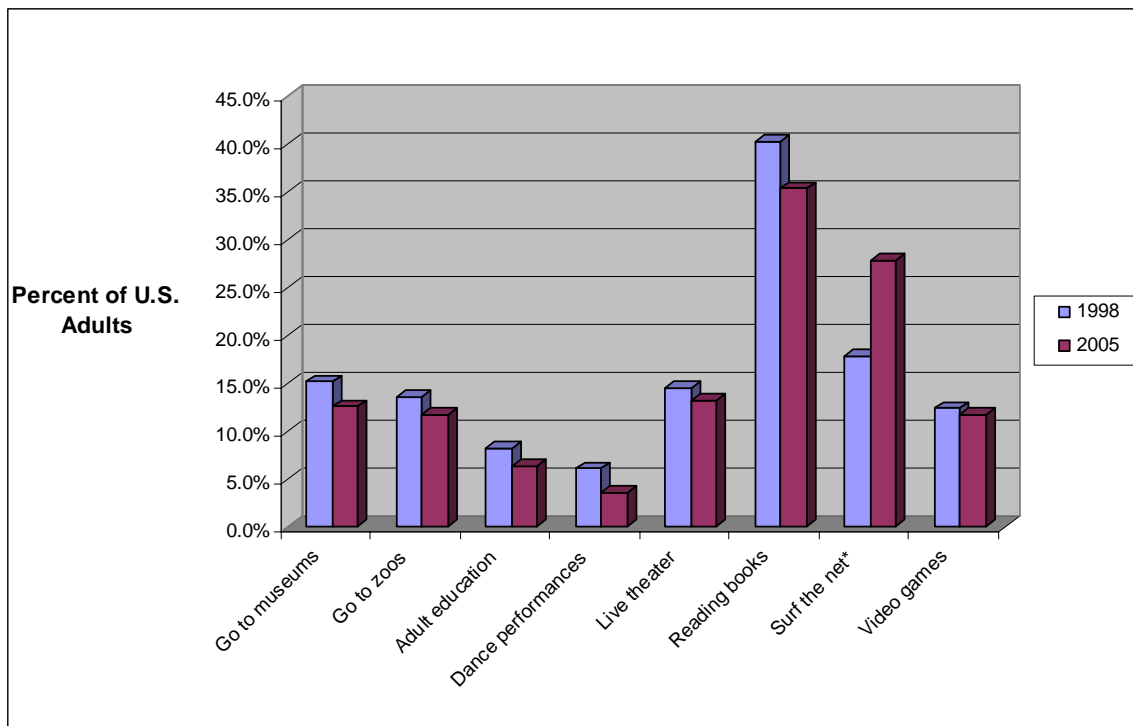
<sup>9</sup> Note, however, that participation in photography and video gaming tended to be far more *frequent* than museum and zoo visitation. While only 0.1 percent or less of the population attended museums or zoos two or more times per week, the comparable figures for photography and video gaming were 1.6 percent and 4.4 percent, respectively. This, of course, should not be surprising, considering the logistics of participation in these various activities.

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the activity categories tracked by Mediamark do not remain constant even over this limited span. For example, in 1998, all musical concerts were considered as a single item; by 2005, country and rock concerts were separately tracked, with a third category for all other concerts.

- Museum and zoo visitation;
- Four selected activities (adult education courses, book reading, dance performances, and live theater) that might appeal to audiences similar to museum audiences—that is, people with an interest in leisure time activities with a cultural or intellectual/educative dimension; and
- Two activities selected as proxies for leisure pursuits undertaken via the home computer: video games and surfing the net.

Figure 2 shows participation in these activities in the first and last years for which data are available.

**Figure 2: Leisure Activities Undertaken in the Past 12 Months, 1998 and 2005**



Source: Mediamark. Reproduced in *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2000, 2001, and 2007 eds.  
 \* No figure for “surf the net” was available in 1998; the early figure here is from 1999.



Participation in *all* selected cultural/education activities (museums, zoos, dance, theater, adult education, and reading) was lower in 2005 than in 1998—although in at least some cases, this was surely due to random fluctuation rather than a sustained trend. The only activity that showed a large increase in 2005 was surfing the net, reflecting the dramatic increase in broadband home internet access in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Interestingly, the figure for video gaming was almost identical in 2005 and 1998, despite the popular perception of soaring popularity in computer-based leisure activities.<sup>11</sup>

The study team is not aware of any other comprehensive and publicly available quantitative market research data on participation in leisure activities. For obvious reasons, market research firms wish to retain control over data that are gathered at great expense. However, such organizations do sometimes disseminate qualitative analyses based on these data. One entertaining example is the *Loaf Book: Americans at Leisure*, published by the Leisure Trends Group in Boulder, Colorado. The most recent edition, *The Loaf Book 2* (Leisure Trends Group n.d.), is based on 2000 data and contains some insights that may bode ill for museum attendance. Two basic themes of this analysis (echoed in National Endowment for the Arts research discussed below) are that (1) Americans are becoming more home-bound, passive, and vicarious in their leisure preferences, and (2) flexibility in scheduling leisure activities is becoming an ever-more-important consideration:

[I]ncreasingly, we prefer our leisure at home and are basically sedentary. We are, in fact, even more home oriented and inactive [in 2000] than we were in 1990. Americans' top three leisure activities [television, reading, and socializing] share some traits which explain their continued popularity. None is complex or expensive, and all three are time flexible so they can be made to fit into our busy leisure schedules. (Leisure Trends Group n.d., p.7)

To support these contentions, the Leisure Trends Group notes that participation in skilled and team sports plummeted in the 1990s, while computer-based entertainment and leisure

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<sup>11</sup> The explanation for this may be that video gaming was already well-established by 1998. Certainly, it was *relatively* better established than the internet in the late 1990s. Despite huge leaps in the sophistication of video games in recent years—which might create the impression of a young genre—video gaming dates back several decades to games that seem primitive today, such as the “Pac-Man,” “Donkey Kong,” and “Super Mario” games of the 1980s, and even the Atari tennis games of the 1970s.

options experienced a huge leap in popularity.<sup>12</sup> One probable reason for these trends is the growing fragmentation of leisure time discussed above, although no doubt other technological, social, and economic factors contribute as well.

### *National Endowment for the Arts Data*

The most widely-cited data on leisure activities are those of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). NEA data from 1982, 1992, and 2002 were collected in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Census, and are based on a large sample of statistically representative U.S. households.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the NEA data track only art museum and gallery attendance, and offer no specific information on attendance at zoos, science museums and centers, or cultural and historical museums.<sup>14</sup> They do, however, track attendance at historic sites—which might be regarded as a rough proxy for interest in cultural and historical museums.

NEA data from the years 1982, 1992, and 2002 indicate that art museum and gallery visitation increased modestly over the two decades covered by the data, although the entire increase occurred between 1982 and 1992.<sup>15</sup> (See Figure 3, next page.) Historical site visitation shows a modest but steady decline over the same period. Most other arts activities tracked by the NEA show no clear trend, with the exceptions of attending

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<sup>12</sup> The dramatic decline in participation in organized sports is reflected in the National Endowment for the Arts data discussed in the next subsection.

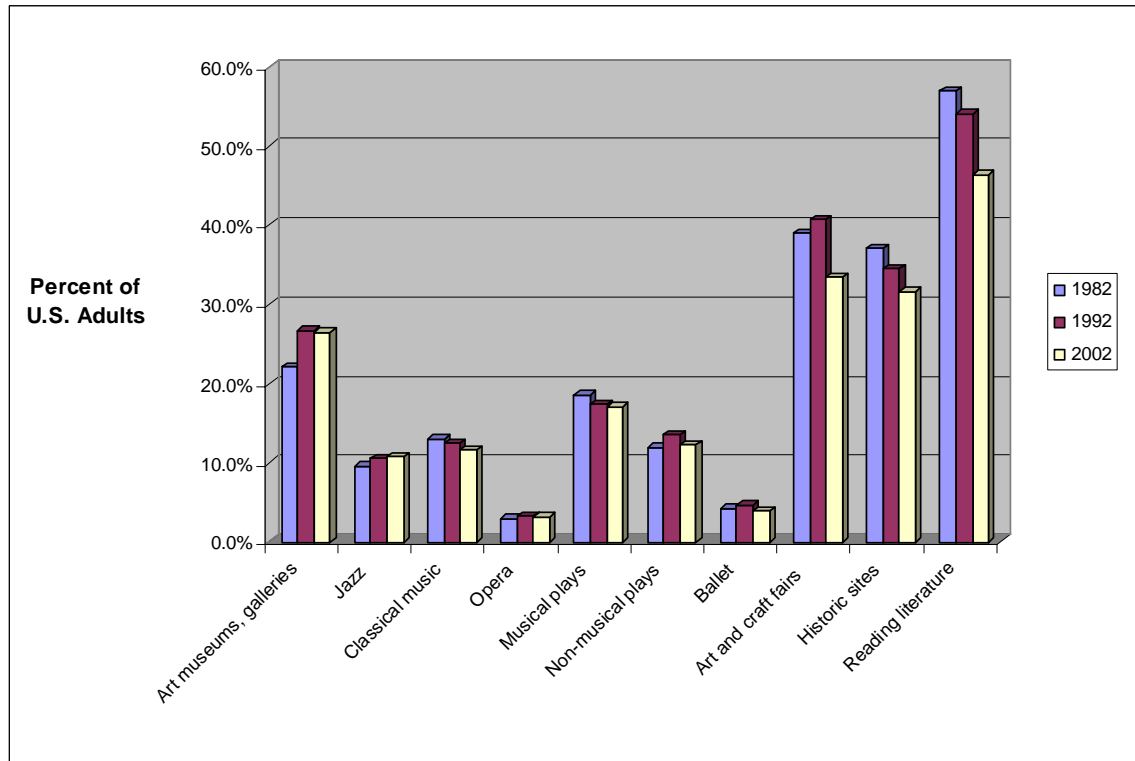
<sup>13</sup> The NEA also gathered data in 1997 using a different survey partner and methodology; as these results are not technically comparable to those from 1982, 1992, and 2002, they are discussed separately below.

<sup>14</sup> NEA data on art museums and galleries are *not* comparable to the Mediamark data on museum visitation cited above. Indeed, they appear to be inconsistent with Mediamark data, given that the NEA figures for art museum (and gallery) visitation are generally higher than the Mediamark data for *all* museums. The study team spoke with analysts at Mediamark and carefully examined methodological appendices on NEA reports, but was unable to definitively pin down a technical explanation for this apparent inconsistency. The study team therefore opted to consider the two data sets in isolation, for insight into the *relative* popularity of museum visitation over time and vis-à-vis other leisure activities, rather than to attempt to draw any conclusions about *absolute* levels of visitation.

<sup>15</sup> Note however that the results of the 2002 survey, which asked about participation in various activities *in the previous 12 months*, may have been affected by the 9/11 terrorism events and the subsequent disinclination of some members of the public to frequent public venues.

classical music performances and reading literature, both of which declined—the latter, quite dramatically (down 19 percent).<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3: Participation in Various Arts Activities  
At Least Once in the Previous 12 Months  
1982, 1992, and 2002**



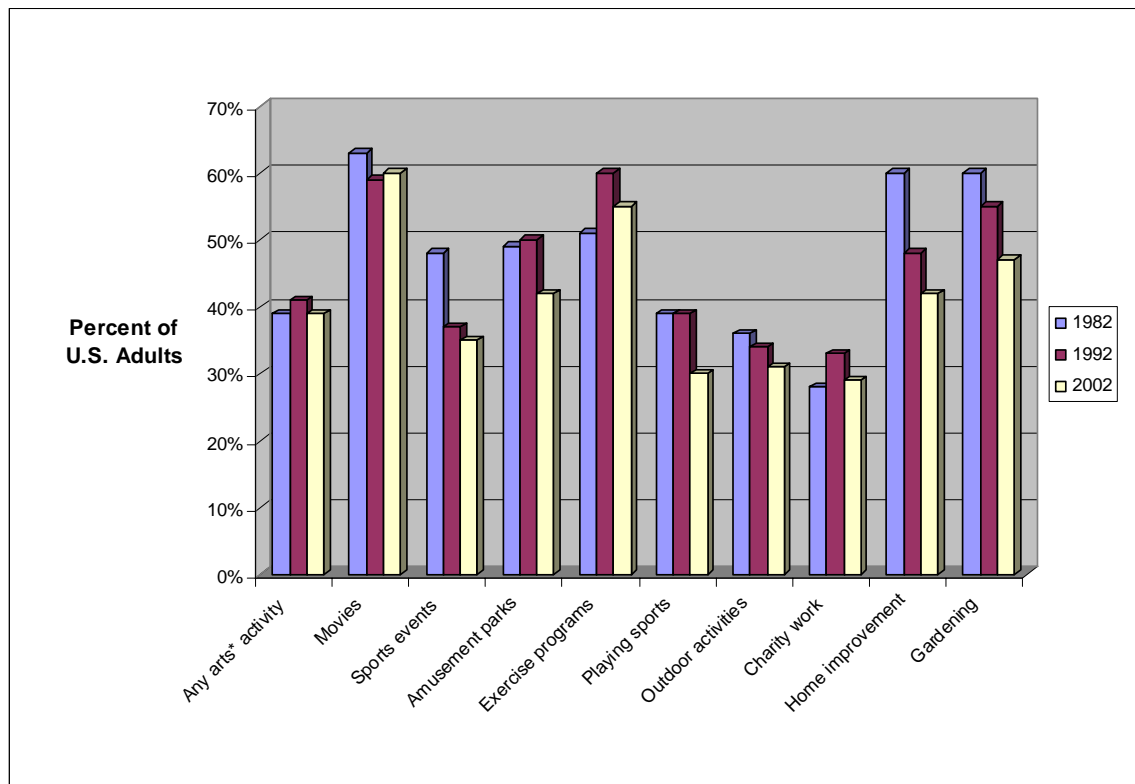
Source: NEA 2003.

Looking at the relative levels of participation in various arts activities, it can be seen that attending art museums and galleries lies at about the middle of the pack—less popular than reading literature, visiting historic sites, and attending arts and crafts fairs; more popular than attending performances of jazz, classical music, and both musical and non-musical plays; and far more popular than attending performances of opera or ballet.

<sup>16</sup> The decline in book reading is supported by the Mediamark data discussed above. This relative decline in reading seems to run counter to what we would expect on the basis of the fragmentation of leisure time, because reading is the most flexibly-scheduled of the activities covered here. The issue here may have more to do with the relative mental effort involved in reading literature, at a time when individuals are reporting a subjective increase in stress levels. See discussion below.

Also of interest are NEA’s data comparing an index of participation in seven “benchmark” arts activities (jazz, classical music, opera, musical plays, non-musical plays, ballet, and art museums or galleries) to participation in non-arts leisure activities over the same two-decade period. (See Figure 4.)

**Figure 4: Participation in Various Leisure Activities At Least Once in the Previous 12 Months, 1982, 1992, and 2002**



Source: NEA 2004.

\* Jazz, classical music, opera, ballet, musical plays, non-musical plays, and museums/galleries.

Between 1982 and 2002, attendance at benchmark arts activities remained essentially flat—rising slightly from 1982 to 1992, then falling back to 1982 levels by 2002. However, *none* of the leisure activities tracked by NEA displayed an unambiguous increasing trend over the two decades in question, and several showed clear and sometimes precipitous declines: attending sports events (down 27 percent); playing sports

(down 23 percent); engaging in outdoor activities (down 14 percent); undertaking home improvement (down 30 percent); and gardening (down 22 percent).<sup>17</sup> Thus, in comparison with other leisure activities, attendance at arts activities appears to have held up well over the past two decades.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that none of the activities tracked by NEA from 1982 through 2002 is computer-based, for the simple reason that personal computers were practically nonexistent in 1982. It is safe to say that computer-based leisure activities have seen an explosive increase over this period. A 1997 NEA survey—using a different survey partner, different questions, and a different methodology from the 1982, 1992, and 2002 surveys, and thus not technically comparable to them—found that 40 percent of respondents were already using home computers for entertainment in that year (NEA 1998). As this was before the mass penetration of broadband home internet access, the figure has surely risen in the ten years since the 1997 data were collected. For comparison, the 1997 survey indicated that attendance at any of three exhibiting arts activities (visiting an art museum/gallery, historic site, or arts and crafts fair) was 67 percent, and attendance at any of seven performing arts activities (attending a performance of jazz, classical music, ballet, a musical play, a non-musical play, opera, or dance) was 42 percent. Thus, ten years ago—with equipment and software that are primitive by today’s standards, and before most households had fast, reliable internet access—computer-based leisure was already roughly as popular as the performing arts.

Two other facts about the NEA data are worth noting in passing. First—and somewhat puzzlingly, in light of the rise of fragmented leisure time, which generally favors home-based leisure activities—arts participation via home media (radio, CDs, DVDs, television, and so on) declined sharply between 1992 and 2002, in contrast to the

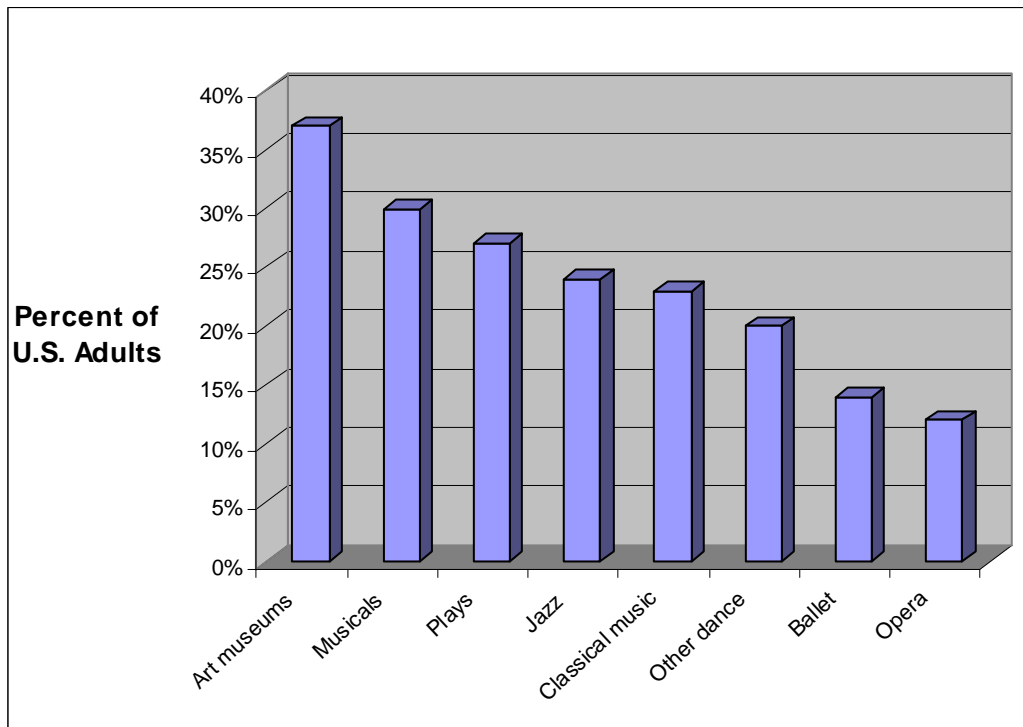
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<sup>17</sup> Two other leisure activities were at lower levels in 2002 than 1982, but not as the result of a steady trend including 1992 figures: amusement parks (down 14 percent) and movies (down 5 percent).

<sup>18</sup> Again, it must be noted that the results of the 2002 survey may have been skewed because the 9/11 terrorist events took place during the 12-month period covered by the survey, and may have led some people to stay away from public venues such as ballparks and museums.

approximately steady attendance at live arts venues (NEA 2004).<sup>19</sup> Second, and encouragingly from the perspective of the Smithsonian, respondents to the 2002 NEA survey named visiting art museums as the cultural activity they would most *like* to do more often.<sup>20</sup> (See Figure 5.)

**Figure 5: Preferences for Attending Additional Arts Events in 2002**



Source: NEA 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, this finding does *not* imply that the use of home media for popular entertainment—watching professional sports or DVDs of popular movies, for example—has necessarily seen a similar decline. The NEA data do not track the use of home media for popular entertainment.

<sup>20</sup> The Leisure Trends Group discusses what it calls the “desire gap”—the difference between the percent of people who say they *enjoy* a given leisure activity, and the percent who regularly *do* that activity. Ironically, people may not particularly enjoy some activities that they do quite often. The Leisure Trends Group notes that watching television falls into this category; that is, people tend to spend a lot of time on it, but few rank it as a particularly satisfying leisure experience. On the other hand, there are other activities that people claim to enjoy but do not pursue frequently, presumably because of constraints of time, money, or opportunity. The NEA 2002 survey data suggest this may be the case for art museums.

## *Discussion*

On the whole, the publicly available data seem to bear out the observation offered at the end of the previous section that Americans' leisure preferences have been fundamentally affected by the fragmentation of leisure time. In general, the trend appears to be toward more home-based and unstructured leisure activities.<sup>21</sup>

However, attendance at cultural activities in general—and museums in particular—appears to be holding up well in comparison with other leisure activities that place similar demands on individuals' time, such as playing sports, visiting amusement parks, or attending spectator sports events.

One reason museum visitation is doing relatively well may be because it is relatively more time-flexible than some of the leisure activities that have taken the biggest hits in recent years. A typical museum (or zoo) may be open for eight or more hours a day, most days of the year. Therefore, special programs and temporary exhibitions aside, people still have considerable leeway in choosing the time and date of a museum visit, if admittedly not so much as they have in choosing when to surf the web. By contrast, symphony orchestra concerts, professional baseball games, or bowling league matches are scheduled for specific dates and times; hence, the latter may be more deeply affected by the fragmentation of leisure time.

One anomalous finding noted above calls for a short discussion. This is the suggestion in the data that reading literature and participating in the arts via home media are in steep decline, both absolutely and relative to other cultural activities. This is precisely the opposite of what we would expect if the fragmentation of leisure time was the main influence shaping general trends, because reading and home media are far more flexibly-scheduled than actual attendance at cultural venues. How might this be explained?

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<sup>21</sup> Note that this trend may be to some extent self-limiting, particularly with regard to civic activities. As discussed in the next section, a few trend-spotters see the reassertion of a currently frustrated desire for community participation as an important emerging trend. Putnam (2001) is considered a definitive work on the vicissitudes of civic engagement in the United States at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One admittedly conjectural explanation involves the influence of general work and life stress on leisure choices. There is clearly a widespread subjective *perception* among American families that work and life are becoming more stressful.<sup>22</sup> This could be due to the dislocations and anxieties created by rapidly changing technologies, the effects of global competition on American workers, reduced job security, rising household income inequality, heightened competition for status goods (such as admission to elite universities), or any of a number of other factors. Whatever its cause, one possible implication of this growing subjective sense of stress might be a shift in leisure preferences toward activities that are *relatively less taxing* in terms of planning, logistics, and mental or physical exertion. To some extent, this would reinforce the shift of people's leisure preferences toward flexibly-scheduled at-home activities induced by the fragmentation of leisure time. But it would have a further implication as well: among the menu of possible home-based leisure activities, we might expect to see a further shift toward relatively less challenging and more passive activities. For example, after a long day at work, preparing a family dinner, and putting the children to bed, an exhausted couple may be more inclined to unwind by watching a light romantic comedy on DVD than to delve into works of literature.

Admittedly, this enters well into the realm of speculation, and should not be seen as anything more than one possible explanation for an unexpected finding. However, the study team would suggest that the effects of growing subjective stress levels on leisure time choices (including museum visitation) is a subject worthy of further study.

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<sup>22</sup> Numerous specialized and popular writings support this claim. Two organizations that bring together some of the relevant evidence are the American Institute of Stress and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (part of the Centers for Disease Control). The latter reports on its website that three fourths of U.S. employees believe that workers today experience more job stress than did workers a generation ago, and over a quarter report that they are "often or very often burned out or stressed by their work." Hochschild (1997) is often considered a seminal work on the "work-family balance."



### III. Choosing Museums as a Leisure Time Activity

The literature on arts participation tends to focus on how socio-demographic characteristics—income, ethnicity, age, marital status, and so on—correspond to participation (McCarthy and Jinnett 2001). However, this information has relatively little utility for arts institutions seeking practical strategies to increase participation, because it provides limited insight into what influences the *choice* to participate. In this section, we will therefore focus on the *choice* to use leisure time to visit a museum, rather than the demographic characteristics of the choosers.

That said, some demographic characteristics of arts participants are worth noting, as they provide clues about why some people choose to participate:

- The socio-demographic factor that is by far most closely correlated with arts participation is education. Age and gender also appear to matter, but less so than education. By contrast, the influences of marital status, political ideology, income, and race tend to disappear when education is controlled for. (See McCarthy and Jinnett 2001.)
- The literature agrees on the importance of “arts socialization” during an individual’s formative years. This refers to activities and factors that nurture interest in the arts, such as going to concerts or museums with parents; taking school trips to museums or historical sites; receiving formal training in the arts; living in close physical proximity to arts offerings; and so on. Childhood and adolescent exposure to the arts is unquestionably a major factor underlying leisure choices made as adults. (See McCarthy and Jinnett 2001; Orend and Keegan 1996.)

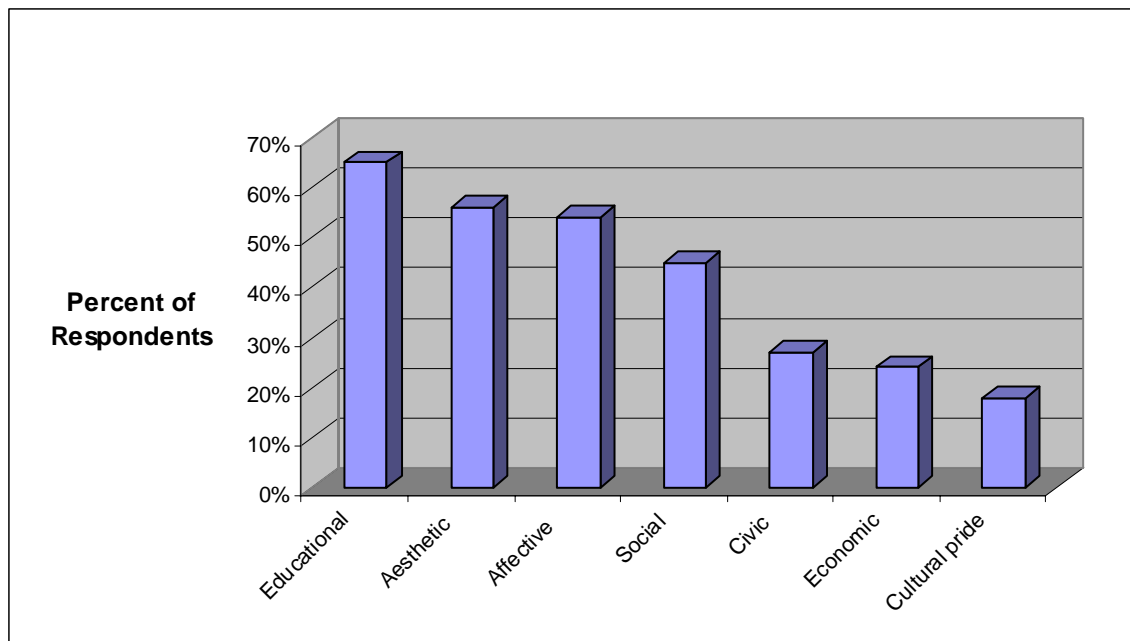
With these factors in the background, we will discuss the choice to participate in museums and arts activities more generally. However, it must be emphasized that what

follows can only be a general overview of a subject that to some extent will always defy precise explanation.<sup>23</sup>

### *Interest Is Not the Whole Story*

The most obvious reason people would choose to visit a museum is *an interest in the subject matter for its own sake*. Contemporary art aficionados go to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; people with an interest in aviation history and technology go to the National Air and Space Museum; stamp collectors go the National Postal Museum; kids who are fascinated by dinosaurs ask their parents to take them to the National Museum of Natural History; and so on. But the literature agrees that there is typically more to the decision to visit a museum than an interest in the subject matter.

**Figure 6: Motivations for Visiting Art Museums**



*Source:* Ostrower 2005. Figures represent percent of respondents citing a motivation as a “major” reason for visiting.

<sup>23</sup> The Office of Policy and Analysis is currently working on a detailed conceptual model of the museum-visit decision.

For example, a recent Urban Institute study (Ostrower 2005) identifies seven general motivations for visits to art museums and galleries. In the order in which these were cited in the Urban Institute's 1998 survey of arts participation in five communities, they are the following (see Figure 6 on the previous page):

- Educational: learning and gaining knowledge (65 percent);
- Aesthetic: seeing high-quality art (56 percent);
- Affective: having an emotionally rewarding experience (54 percent);
- Social: spending time with friends and family (45 percent);
- Civic: supporting a community organization (27 percent);
- Economic: low cost (24 percent);<sup>24</sup>
- Cultural pride: celebrating cultural heritage (18 percent).<sup>25</sup>

Several of these motivations are unconnected or only loosely connected to the question of subject matter. Perhaps most importantly, museum visitors motivated primarily by social considerations may be relatively indifferent to the subject matter of their socializing venue. Moreover, regardless of visitors' major motivations, the basic comfort and congeniality of a venue are likely to influence their inclination to engage in similar visits in the future; the two negative experiences identified by Walker, Scott-Melnyk, and

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<sup>24</sup> This factor would appear to be particularly relevant for the Smithsonian's free museums. We might imagine, for example, a cash-strapped young parent choosing the Presidential portrait collection at the National Portrait Gallery over a visit to Mount Vernon for an educational family outing, largely because the former is free and the latter is not.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, Scott-Melnyk, and Sherwood (2002) indicate that a substantial percentage of African Americans and Hispanics who participate in the arts do so because of a personal cultural connection; by contrast, few non-Hispanic whites do so. At the same time, the arts are commonly perceived as elitist and inaccessible by members of relatively disadvantaged groups (see O'Hagan 1996), such as blacks and Hispanics in the United States.

Sherwood (2002) as most highly correlated with a *lack* of desire to return to an arts venue—not liking the physical surroundings and not having an enjoyable social occasion—have nothing to do with visitors’ responses to the art itself.

A recent exploration of museum visitation in the United Kingdom (Davies 2005) also supports the idea that, while interest in the subject matter is important, it is by no means the only relevant motivation for a museum visit. This study supports the suggestion that civic and social motivations come into play for many visitors. For example, while a “general interest in the subject of the museum/collection” was cited as an important motivating factor by 35 percent of respondents to a 2004 survey of UK museum visitors, respondents also commonly cited that friends or family wanted to go (18 percent); that they wanted to take their children (17 percent); that their children wanted to go (16 percent); or that they were there to meet friends (12 percent). Overall, Davies draws the following conclusions about the factors influencing museum visitation:

First, content is king. If the product is not good, not well presented, and not promoted then a significant number of people who would like to come will not. Second, leisure visits—going somewhere to pass the time pleasantly—remain very important and the connection of museums to tourism will be a high priority in many, if not most, places. Third, the pull of the local is still important. People expect to be able to find out about the history of their town or locality in their local museum. Finally, museum and gallery visiting for most people is a social activity, something you do with children, family, and friends. (Davies 2005, pp. 92-93)

To all of these general reasons for visiting museums must be added another reason that narrowly applies to the Smithsonian and a handful of other museum and non-museum attractions: it is a national icon that is widely revered in its own right. Many visitors, especially out-of-area tourists, visit Smithsonian museums simply because these are seen as repositories of America’s treasures. As with standing at Lincoln’s feet in the Lincoln Memorial or ascending the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, many visitors go to the Smithsonian simply for the experience of *being there*, in a place of great historical and cultural significance.

## *Age and Generational Issues*

Among younger generations of visitors, interest in the subject matter itself seems to be a particularly weak motivation for attending an arts venue. For example, a 2006 report for the Arts Council of Indianapolis (McLennon, Marti, and Ryan 2005) found that people in the 20-40 age range often participate in arts for reasons other than the art itself. The report groups these reasons into three general categories:

- Learning (education and cognitive enrichment);
- Connecting (socially, with peers and artists); and
- Sensing (having non-cognitive experiences).

Conversely, the two main barriers to arts participation among the younger audiences surveyed for the study were *cost* and *time*, both of which are in relatively short supply for young adults struggling to finish their education, start a career, or set up a household.

The Arts Council report also argues that members of younger generations tend to see little distinction between the arts and entertainment, and that most arts organizations have yet to properly recognize this fact, let alone fully come to terms with its implications:

[A]rts organizations are slow to understand that ‘It’s not just about the art!’ ... When asked why their patrons attend their programs, 90 percent of arts organizations falsely believed that ‘personal interest in the material itself’ was the reason a ‘large’ or ‘very large’ number of people attended their events. Arts organizations are missing the point: art is a reason for people to be together, do something worthwhile, learn, experience, and participate. (McLennon, Marti, and Ryan 2005, p.7)

The report goes on to discuss recommendations for attracting younger audiences to art museums that fly in the face of the conventional wisdom that emphasizes the art itself.

At the other end of the age spectrum, a 2002 NEA study (Peterson, Hull, and Kern 2000) offers some insights into arts attendance among older generations. The most important of these is that for many elderly individuals, personal preferences are essentially *irrelevant* to the issue of arts participation. Rather, physical condition becomes the deciding factor at some point; statistically, this appears as a sudden and steep decline in arts participation among the elderly. Simply *getting to an arts venue* becomes increasingly problematic with age for many individuals; and museums can be particularly difficult for older people, because they require prolonged periods of walking and standing. As the report's authors note:

Arts participation does not go down gradually with advancing age[;] it plummets as one approaches 70 years of age. ... [A]rts participation tends to rise gradually from the 30s through the 60s and then falls rapidly after that age.

### *Museums as Community Space*

Finally, an important emerging theme—often implicit, sometimes explicit—in much of the discussion of arts audiences today is that arts venues can benefit from thinking of themselves more as community spaces and less as temples to art and culture. That is, establishing itself as an educational and social magnet for its local community can be an effective way for an arts venue to increase participation and support. For example, the market research firm Reach Advisors (2006) reports that

- A majority of Americans (especially those with young children) say they want to be more engaged with their communities; and
- Museums that have adopted a “community hub” strategy tend to be doing better than those that have retained a narrow focus on presenting art and artifacts.

Likewise, Walker (2002) emphasizes the strong link that exists between arts/cultural participation and community/civic life, noting that frequent participation in arts and cultural activities tends to correlate with involvement in civic, religious, and political

activities. Walker discusses strategies for arts venues that seek to use this community connection to boost participation.

Pursuing a “community hub” strategy would raise some special questions for Smithsonian museums, because they must serve national as well as local constituencies, and the national ones generally take precedence.<sup>26</sup> While most Smithsonian museums strive to serve both types of constituencies effectively, there can be no escaping the unfortunate fact that in a time of budgetary stringency, resources devoted to one audience often must be diverted from the other. For this reason, a community strategy for a Smithsonian museum would have to be very different from a community strategy pursued by, say, a local historical society or even a metropolitan art museum. The relevant communities would most likely be national “communities of interest” rather than communities defined by local geography—for example, the National Air and Space Museum as a hub for the national community of military aviators, the National Postal Museum as a hub for stamp collectors across the nation, and so on.<sup>27</sup>

### *Discussion*

Having some sense of *why* people choose to use some of their precious leisure time to visit museums is key to both satisfying current visitors and attracting new ones. Although our understanding of this choice is far from complete, the current literature on the subject does permit some cautious generalizations.

Perhaps the most important of these is that museums need to move beyond their traditional focus on presenting art and artifacts to a more holistic picture of the museum experience that includes the social, educational, and sensory dimensions. This will become even more imperative as current generations of museum-goers move out of the picture and are replaced by younger generations that, to a much greater extent than their

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<sup>26</sup> The Anacostia Community Museum is an obvious exception.

<sup>27</sup> The National Museum of the American Indian has explicitly pursued such a community-hub strategy, with generally favorable results. In addition to the many casual visitors it draws off the Mall, the Museum can rely on various types of support from Native American communities across the country, which see the Museum as a national focal point for their collective culture and cause.

elders, want to learn, socialize, and be emotionally and sensorially engaged as part of their museum-visiting experience.

The Urban Institute survey cited toward the beginning of this section (Ostrower 2005) indicated that in 1998, the experiences cited *ex post* by art museum visitors as satisfying did not match up particularly closely with *ex ante* motivations for visiting. For example, while 65 percent of respondents said they wanted to gain knowledge from their visit, only 51 percent strongly agreed in retrospect that they had done so. Similarly, 54 percent expected their visit to be emotionally rewarding, but only 35 percent strongly agreed after the fact that this had been the case. These results suggest that museums need to pay closer attention, and respond better, to the motivations that prompt individuals to visit them in the first place. Many museum professionals today do seem to accept the need to respond more effectively to the motivations and expectations of their visitors, but change has been relatively slow.

More so than most other museums, the Smithsonian will always attract a healthy level of visitation because of *what it is*. In this sense, most Smithsonian museums can afford to be somewhat indifferent to people's motivations for visiting them. Fortunately, however, the Institution's museums seem to have grasped that a strategy of simply setting America's treasures on display and waiting for the tourists to come is not a recipe for vitality or excellence, although the process of responding to this recognition is proceeding at different rates at the various Smithsonian units. If Smithsonian museums are to thrive in a world of increasing stress, restricted leisure time, and multiplying leisure time options, they must understand and respond to the factors that drive Americans' leisure choices.



## **Appendix on Sources of Time-Use Data**

Until recently, there was no “industry standard” source of time-use data in the United States. In 2003, however, the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the Department of Labor introduced the *American Time Use Survey* (ATUS), the first federally-administered, continuous survey on time use in the United States. The roots of the ATUS lie in the work done by the Americans’ Use of Time Project at the Universities of Michigan and Maryland, which resulted in detailed time-use studies for the years 1965-66, 1975-76, 1985, and 1992-94, and which developed the methodology employed by the ATUS.

The core of this methodology is a “time diary” approach, in which surveyed individuals note in detail how they used all available time in a specific 24-hour period. Reported activities are then coded by researchers into various categories to allow systematic analysis. (The ATUS uses eleven of these: personal care activities; eating and drinking; household activities; purchasing goods and services; caring for and helping household members; working and work-related activities; educational activities; organizational, civic, and religious activities; leisure and sports; telephone calls, mail, and e-mail; and other activities.)

Robinson and Godbey (1997) convincingly argue that the time-diary approach, while subject to certain inevitable limitations, is superior to the other methodology commonly employed in individual time-use research: the time-estimation methodology, which asks respondents to provide an estimate for the amount of time they “typically” spend on various activities over some given timeframe. Of course, data on one important component of time use, paid work, can also be obtained through business records and the summaries thereof compiled by government agencies such as the Bureau of Labor Standards.

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