



# Live from Your Neighborhood

*A National Study  
of Outdoor  
Arts Festivals*

**National Endowment for the Arts**  
Research Report #51

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **Acknowledgments**

The National Endowment for the Arts would like to thank the Association of Performing Arts Presenters for providing valuable advice and feedback throughout the course of the study.

Thanks are also due to the following individuals who composed an informal working group for the study: Michael Alexander, Philip Horn, Steve Schmader, Robb Woulfe, Stephanie Hughley, Huong Vu, Ted Russell, Helen Sause, Claudia Norman, David Rivel, Jennifer Lena, and Angela Han. Finally, the NEA would like to thank the organizations that helped to generate the list of festival organizers surveyed for the national study and/or that helped to distribute the survey to festival organizers. For details, see page 67 of *Live From your Neighborhood: A National Study of Outdoor Arts Festivals: Summary Report*.

# Live from Your Neighborhood

## *A Message from the Chairman*

When I arrived at the NEA, I knew two words to be true: “art works.”

Over the past 12 months, I have used these two words to mean three things. They are a noun—works of art—the stuff that artists produce. They remind us of the ways that art works on audiences to engage and inspire us, to challenge us, to comfort us. And they are a bold declaration that arts workers are real workers who are part of this country’s economy and communities.

And as I have travelled around over the past year, I have seen again and again that art works everywhere.

It works in Memphis, Tennessee, and in San Francisco, California. It works in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and it works in Chelsea, Michigan.

It works in the iconic arts buildings—the museums, concert halls, and theaters—where many of us have had seminal experiences.

It also works in schools, community centers, and houses of worship, where many of us have important “informal arts” experiences.

Informal arts participation was the subject of a recent NEA Research Note, one that was especially important to me because it was not an area that the NEA had previously examined.

Similarly, this report is important for its very existence. This is the most comprehensive survey of America’s outdoor arts festivals that we know. And it is an important examination because earlier research has shown us that some 102 million people attend arts and cultural festivals annually in this country. That’s a lot of art working for a lot of Americans every year, and it is time that we started to examine these festivals more closely.

It is always my hope that NEA research reports spur questions, conversation, and action, and the data presented here are rich fodder for all three. After you finish reading *Live From Your Neighborhood*, I hope you will consider sharing your reactions with us on the Art Works blog at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov).

**Rocco Landesman**

Chairman

National Endowment for the Arts

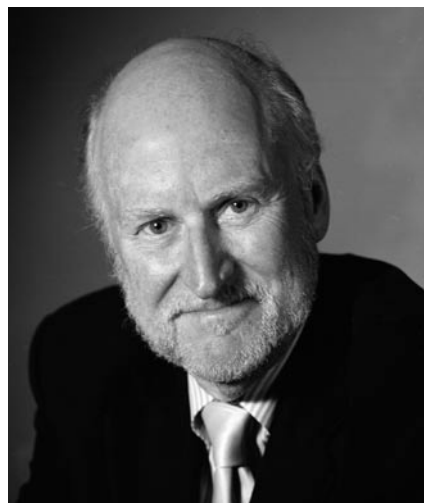


Photo by Michael Eastman

# Preface

This study began with a readily understandable impulse: to enumerate the nation's outdoor arts festivals and to identify their shared and divergent traits, considering factors such as event programming, staffing, finances, and audience demographics.

The reason for this query is also straightforward. To date, no single report or database carries such comprehensive information about arts festivals nationwide. Given their pervasive role in American cultural life, this discrepancy is something more than a matter for regret. Repeat iterations of the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) have shown that festivals and fairs collectively attract more unique audience members per year than most arts events.

In 2008 alone, more than 55 million U.S. adults attended at least one arts-and-crafts fair or festival in the past year, and 47 million attended at least one outdoor performing arts festival. (Approximately 14% of Americans attended both.) In sheer numbers, attendance rates for festivals far exceed those for many single types of art activities—classical music concerts, for example, or theater, ballet, or opera.

But the size of their audiences is not the only characteristic that merits serious study of arts festivals. Festival audiences, on average, are more diverse than those for many other types of live art events. As the SPPA data reveal (and as the present study observes), festival audiences seem to more closely resemble the general population than do other groups of art-goers. This finding is notable as arts organizations strive not only to build new audiences but, what may be more important, to actuate potential audiences that already exist among groups who engage in art through a variety of ways not often acknowledged or studied.

Over the last decade, arts presenters have learned to respond to shifting expectations among live audiences, particularly young adults. These audiences crave a new level of interactivity, they value personal

creation and performance as part of the overall arts experience, and they appear to prefer those activities in informal settings. Outdoor arts festivals are uniquely poised to bridge those expectations with innovative arts programming. As the case studies in this report illustrate, festival audiences derive special satisfaction from encounters with artists and art forms in an open space that reinforces choice, experimentation, and free movement.

A related attribute of arts festivals is a blurring of boundaries. Nowhere is this feature more evident than in the relationship between festivals and the greater community. Local governments and businesses have invested in outdoor arts festivals as a token of civic pride, a pledge redeemed by the high level of volunteerism that propels festivals year after year, season after season. Studies by sociologists Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, coupled with the NEA's own research on the statistical links between arts participation and civic engagement, provide a context for this understanding.<sup>1</sup>

The word *festival* is etymologically allied with *feast*. Festivals convey a smorgasbord of arts experiences and opportunities that would baffle even the most intrepid researcher. Yet this study is a modest start. By examining a cross-section of U.S. festivals—self-identified as predominantly “outdoors” and featuring “arts and cultural” programming—we hope to have established a basis for future exploration into their significance for artists, audiences, and communities. Ideally, the survey and case study results will prompt other arts organizations to ask: what are festivals doing right and how can we replicate it?

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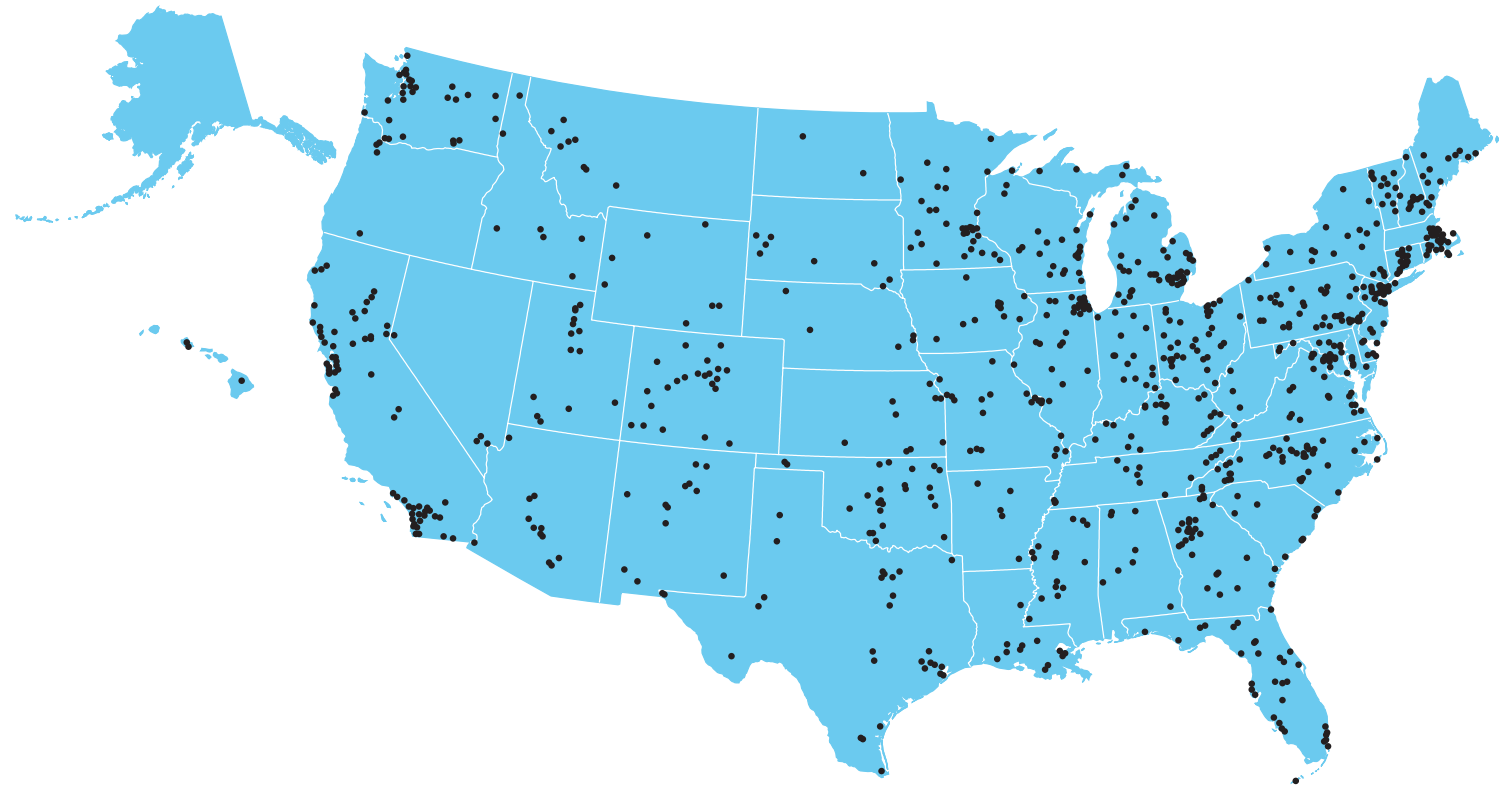
# Introduction

From April through October of 2009, the NEA conducted an exploratory study of outdoor arts festivals in the United States. The purpose of the study was to characterize the number and variety of outdoor arts festivals nationwide, the artists they employ, the communities they serve, and the role they play in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

The study used a mixed-methods approach that consisted of a) an online survey of arts festival administra-

tors across the U.S., and b) case studies at seven festival sites. Although festivals from 49 states participated in the online survey, the results are not necessarily representative of the entire field; rather, they reflect a cross-section of U.S.-based outdoor arts festivals. The report provides baseline information about a vital, relatively unstudied segment of the nation's arts sector. It can serve also as a tool for arts and civic leaders to discuss festival planning in their communities.

**Figure 1.** Geographic Distribution of Festivals in the Survey



# Methods

## NATIONAL SURVEY

The questionnaire for the online survey contained approximately 40 items. A web link to the survey was sent to the more than 8,000 festival organizers that the NEA identified from its database of applicants and grantees, and from databases maintained by regional arts organizations, state arts agencies, art service organizations, and state festival and event associations. Topics ranged from the number and types of events held at the festival to sources of revenue to the number of employees and volunteers engaged.

Two “screener” questions asked organizations, at the start of the survey, whether their festival could be described as arts and/or cultural and what percentage of the festival’s activities occurred outdoors. Only organizations identifying their events as arts and/or cultural festivals with at least 50% of their activities outdoors were allowed to continue the survey. Of the 2,440 organizations that visited the survey website, over half (1,264) qualified to take the survey, based on the screening criteria above.

The 1,264 survey respondents reported on a total of 1,413 outdoor arts festivals.<sup>2</sup> The survey results in this report pertain to those festivals only; the 1,413 festivals—not the 1,264 responding organizations—are our unit of study and analysis.

## CASE STUDIES

In addition to the national survey, seven case studies were conducted. Researchers spent one to two days at each festival site. They collected quantitative and qualitative data about audiences and artists, the festival’s operations, and the festival’s interactions with the surrounding community. At each case study site, in-depth interviews were held with the festival administrator, focus group discussions occurred with festival artists and volunteers, and two surveys were given to festival audiences.

Case study sites were selected to provide diversity across the following dimensions: geography, governance structure, entrance fee, mission, and arts discipline. Festivals also must have been in existence for at least five years and demonstrated the capacity to support the kind of research undertaken for this project.

For more information on the results of the national survey and case studies as well as details on methodology, please see *Live from Your Neighborhood: A National Study of Outdoor Arts Festivals, Volume One: Summary Report* and *Volume Two: Seven Case Studies*, both available at [arts.gov](https://www.arts.gov).

# Key Findings

In aggregate, U.S.-based outdoor arts festivals surveyed by the NEA display the following characteristics:

## A. DIVERSITY OF ART FORMS AND AUDIENCES

### 1. Activities spanning a wide array of art forms converge in a single space.

- A typical outdoor festival showcases many different types of art forms. Music is the most prevalent, with 81% of survey respondents reporting some kind of music performance at their festivals. Visual arts and crafts, dance, and folk or traditional arts also are frequently on display.
- Even festivals that concentrate on a specific art form are multidisciplinary in nature.

### 2. Festival organizers describe a demographically diverse audience, one that appears to mirror characteristics of the U.S. population.

- By gender and racial/ethnic composition, festival audiences resemble the general population as described by U.S. Census figures. Proportionately, however, fes-

*“What is exciting is that there is a lot of cross-pollination because there are all these different disciplines together. There’s a real fueling that goes on.”*

– Festival artist

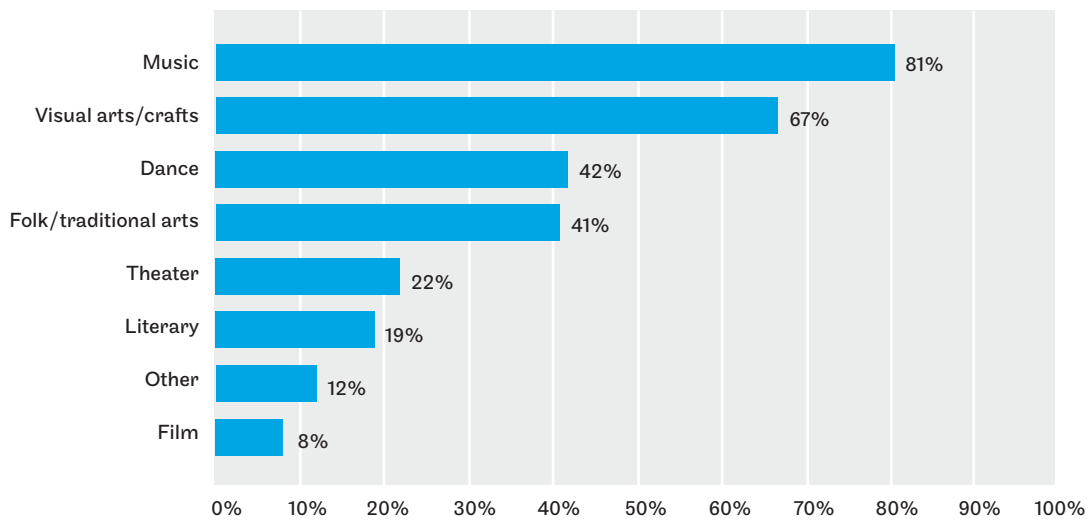
tival audiences have slightly more females and African Americans, according to estimates from festival organizers.<sup>3</sup>

- Festival organizers reported that 15% of audiences are Hispanic. This figure compares with 8% of “benchmark” arts audiences nationwide, as tracked by the NEA’s 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA).<sup>4,5</sup>
- African Americans are also in higher attendance at festivals than at most arts activities tracked by the SPPA: they compose 16% of festival audiences, compared with 7% of benchmark arts audiences.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1.** Percent Distribution of Events at Festivals, by Organizer’s Description of Festival Type

Self-Reported Festival Type	Type of Events Featured								
	Dance	Film	Folk/ Traditional Arts	Literary	Music	Theater	Visual Arts/Arts & Crafts	Other	
ALL festivals (n=1,376)	7%	1%	9%	3%	39%	6%	32%	3%	100%
Music festivals (n=309)	3%	<1%	4%	1%	87%	<1%	4%	<1%	100%
Arts & crafts festivals (n=255)	2%	<1%	8%	<1%	12%	<1%	77%	<1%	100%
Multidisciplinary festivals (n=188)	10%	3%	8%	4%	36%	5%	31%	4%	100%
Racial/ethnic festivals (n=97)	18%	<1%	24%	2%	37%	1%	13%	3%	100%
Visual arts festivals (n=95)	2%	<1%	2%	<1%	11%	1%	81%	2%	100%
Theater festivals (n=52)	2%	0%	<1%	1%	5%	91%	0%	0%	100%
Performing arts festivals (n=47)	9%	<1%	10%	8%	43%	14%	7%	9%	100%
Child/family festivals (n=43)	12%	3%	14%	4%	38%	4%	23%	2%	100%

**Figure 1.** Percent of Festivals, by Artistic Disciplines Represented  
(Percent of Festivals Presenting the Discipline) *(multiple answers allowed)*



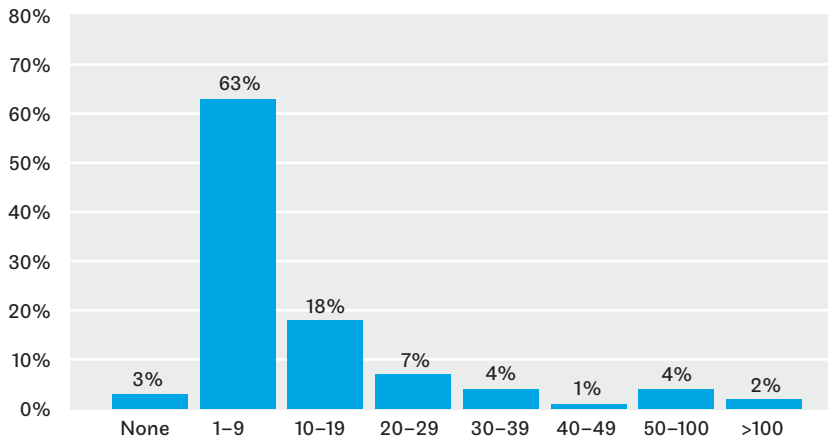
**Table 2.** Demographic Make-Up of Festival Audiences, as Reported by Festival Organizers, in Comparison with U.S. Census and 2008 SPPA Figures

	Percent of Festival Audiences, by Demographic Group (2009 Festival Survey)	Percent of U.S. Population, by Demographic Group (2008 U.S. Census)	Percent of Audiences at NEA Benchmark Arts Activities, by Demographic Group (2008 SPPA)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	45%	49%	45%
Female	55%	51%	55%
	100%	100%	100%
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	15%	16%	8%
Non-Hispanic	85%	84%	92%
	100%	100%	100%
<b>Race</b>			
White	73%	80%	86%
Black/African American	16%	13%	7%
Asian	6%	5%	4%
American Indian/Alaska Native	4%	1%	<1%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2%	<1%	<1%
Other*	n/a	2%	1%
	100%	100%	100%

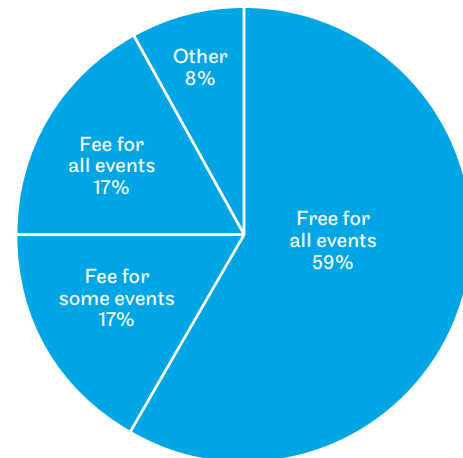
\* Two or more races



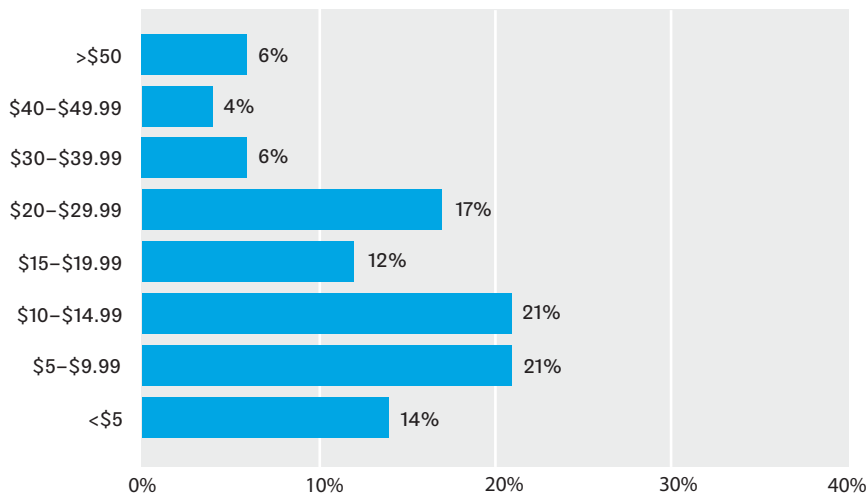
**Figure 2.** Percent of Festivals, by Number of Workshops, Lectures, or Other Educational Events Scheduled over Festival's Duration



**Figure 3.** Percent of Festivals, by Admission Fee Structure



**Figure 4.** Percent of Festivals that Charge for Admission, by Average Fee



## B. COMMITMENT TO QUALITY PROGRAMMING

### 3. Most outdoor arts festivals appear committed to achieving a high-quality arts experience for their audiences.

- 70% of festivals have an artistic staff or a staff person or volunteer whose primary role is arts curator or arts event programmer.
- 56% of visual arts festivals are juried.

### 4. Arts educational opportunities form a component of most outdoor arts festivals.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of survey participants said their festival offers formal educational activities or programming, such as lectures, artist demonstrations, and classes.

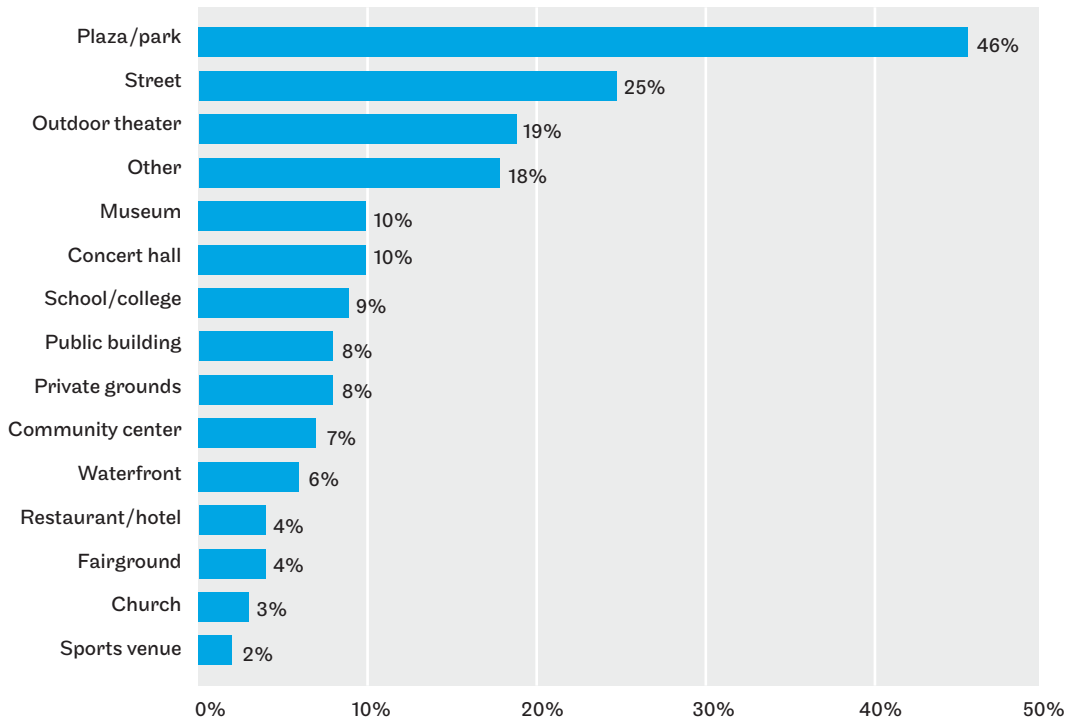
- Among arts festivals that offered educational programs, the majority (63%) held 1-9 educational events over the course of the festival.

## C. LOW OR NO-COST ADMISSIONS

### 5. Most outdoor arts festivals are free of charge. Most others offer some form of discounted ticketing.

- 59% of festivals have no entry fee.
- Of festivals that do charge an admission fee, 56% charge less than \$15 per ticket and 68% charge less than \$20.
- Three out of four festivals that charge \$5 or more for admissions have a formal program to distribute free or discounted tickets.

**Figure 5.** Percent of Festivals, by Venue During the Most Recent Season *(multiple answers allowed)*



#### D. INTEGRATION WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES

##### 6. Most outdoor arts festivals occur in small to mid-sized communities.

- The majority of festivals (77%) take place in towns with fewer than 250,000 residents. Of those festivals, 39% occur in towns with fewer than 10,000 people.
- 17% of festivals take place in cities with a population of a half-million or more.

##### 7. They occur in publicly accessible places that are family-friendly.

- Nearly half (46%) of outdoor arts festivals take place in a park or plaza, while a quarter hold some of their events in the street.
- In focus groups, audiences suggested that the ability to enter and leave programs, to get up and move around, and to make noise and dance, renders festivals especially attractive to families with younger children.
- In all but one case study site,<sup>7</sup> more than half of survey respondents who live in households with children brought children to the festivals. In some cases, the percentage was very high: approaching 100% at Santa Fe Indian Market and 82% at the Houston International Festival and Lowell Folk Festival.

- Three-quarters (76%) of festivals in the national survey occur in the summer months (June, July, or August), when school typically is out.

##### 8. Most outdoor arts festivals (59%) have occurred in the same community for more than a decade.

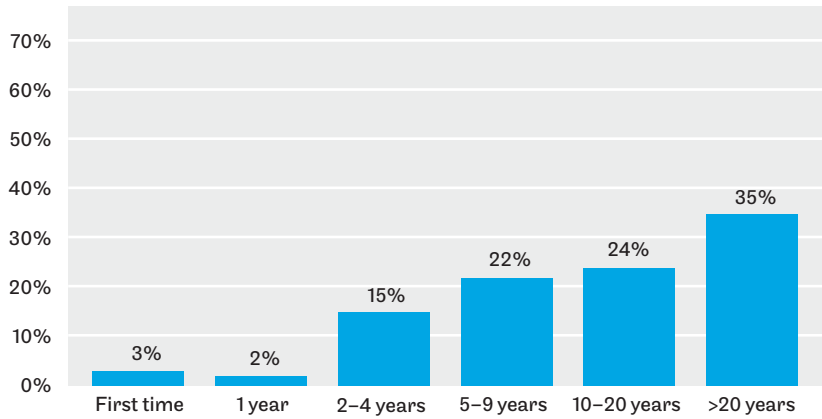
- At each case study site, more than two-thirds of audience survey respondents affirmed that the festivals have enriched community life.

##### 9. Support of local government agencies is crucial to the success of outdoor arts festivals.

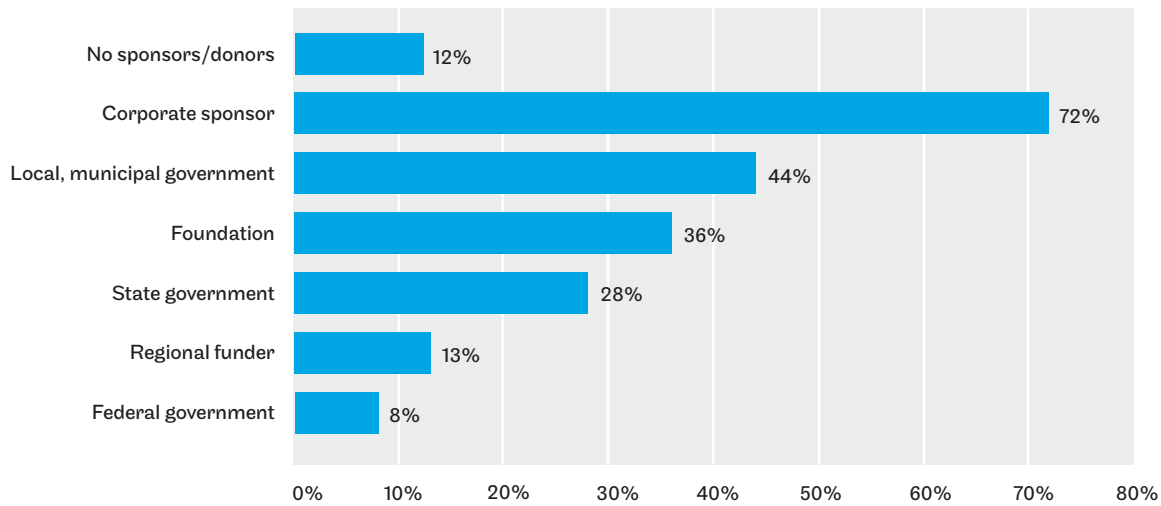
- Case study participants reported that healthy, long-term partnerships with local government agencies

*Outdoor arts festivals contribute to local communities in several important ways. According to case study participants, the festivals bring people from suburbs and surrounding areas into central cities. Festivals provide a place where segments of the community who may not often spend time together can assemble every year.*

**Figure 6.** Percent of Festivals, by Number of Years They Have Occurred in the Same Town



**Figure 7.** Percent of Festivals, by Source of Sponsorship/Donations During the Most Recent Season (*multiple answers allowed*)



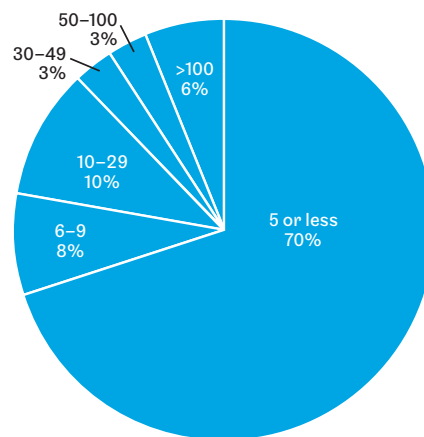
proved essential in sustaining festivals' contributions to community life. Local departments of parks and recreation, police, and street-and-sanitation departments offer critical services to festival organizers. Festivals simply cannot take place without the cooperation of public agencies to provide services, licenses, and permits.

- After corporate sponsorship, support from local and/or municipal governments is the most common source of funding, with 44% of festivals saying they received such support.

**10. Outdoor arts festivals rely heavily on volunteers and a small number of dedicated staff.**

- 70% of festivals are run by five or fewer full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members.
- 61% of festivals have year-round volunteers (the median number is 2 volunteers), and 77% depend on seasonal volunteer staff (the median number is 20 volunteers).

**Figure 8.** Percent Distribution of Festivals,<sup>8</sup> by Organization's Number of FTEs<sup>9</sup>



# Case Studies

The seven case study sites were selected for diversity along the following dimensions: geography, governance structure, entrance fee, mission, and arts discipline. The festivals also must have been in existence for at least five years and have shown the capacity to support the type of research undertaken for this project. The following festivals were chosen as case study sites:

## **D.U.M.B.O. Art Under the Bridge Festival, Brooklyn, NY**



The annual D.U.M.B.O. Art Under the Bridge Festival is a multi-site, three-day visual arts festival in the D.U.M.B.O. neighborhood of Brooklyn (D.U.M.B.O. is an abbreviation of “Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass”). D.U.M.B.O. Art Under the Bridge Festival was initially established as a grassroots artists’ initiative in 1997. The festival celebrates fringe culture in the visual arts and includes 80 peer-reviewed projects, a video series, and an extensive tour of artists’ open studios. The festival’s sponsoring organization, D.U.M.B.O. Art Center (DAC), also runs an in-depth internship program that introduces students to contemporary art, artistic work, and arts and festival administration. DAC’s mission is “to engage a broad spectrum of society in the sensory and intellectual stimuli of emerging visual culture by providing artists and curators with the singular opportunity for both on- and off-site experimentation, innovation, presentation, and advancement.” Along with D.U.M.B.O. Art Under the Bridge Festival, DAC produces year-round exhibitions and events in its 3,000-square-foot gallery in the waterfront area of D.U.M.B.O. The D.U.M.B.O. neighborhood, with its large, abandoned industrial buildings, historically has been home to a community of artists since the 1970s.

## **Houston International Festival, Houston, TX**



The Houston International Festival, or iFest, is a world music and culture festival that takes place annually in downtown Houston. Each year, iFest chooses a country or culture as the focus of the festival and produces a comprehensive education program for students in elementary to high school. The Living Museum represents the cultural heart of the festival each year and offers a variety of iconic structures, demonstrations, and interactive hands-on exhibits immersing the festival attendees in the spotlighted theme. In addition to the educational exhibits and programs onsite, the festival produces a Teacher’s Curriculum Guide on the featured country or region. A visit to the Living Museum brings to life some of the historical and cultural information covered in the guide. In 2009, the music, dance, literature, food, heritage, and history of Ireland were celebrated. The festival included performances by traditional Irish bands and dance groups as well as interactive exhibits and demonstrations. Africa was celebrated in 2008 and in 2010 iFest featured the Caribbean. In addition to the annual focus on country, the Houston International Festival presents programs showcasing a diversity of cultural groups and heritages. An outdoor international market offers shopping experiences involving more than 500 artists from all over the world. The international food program component features cuisines including Cajun, Creole, Caribbean, Mediterranean, Thai, Italian, Japanese, and the Southwestern and Continental U.S. The international music and dance programs included groups performing in many styles and genres, ranging from world beat, Afro-pop, Cajun, zydeco, blues, and rock to country, folk, Latin, and reggae.

### **Santa Fe Indian Market, Santa Fe, NM**



Santa Fe Indian Market is one of the world's preeminent venues for seeing and purchasing Native-American art. The festival was first developed in the 1920s to preserve and enhance local art forms such as Pueblo pottery and Navajo jewelry and weaving, and to provide economic development opportunities to Native-American communities in New Mexico. Traditional forms such as jewelry, pottery, and textiles are emphasized at Indian Market. However, recent years have seen an increase in artists exhibiting painting, sculpture, and many newer styles and techniques. Today, Indian Market includes programming across virtually all visual arts disciplines. The 2009 Indian Market included a film series produced by the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and, for many years, a popular Indian Fashion Show has been a part of the programming.

### **Chicago Jazz Festival, Chicago, IL**



Chicago Jazz Festival, begun in 1979, was the first of the City of Chicago's now famous and extensive series of music festivals. The festival is held in Chicago's downtown Grant and Millennium Parks. Central to the mission of the Chicago Jazz Festival is celebrating and honoring the history of jazz in the city and providing exposure and performance opportunities for musicians from the Chicago area. Since the first festival, at least half of the programming has been exclusively for

local performers. Festival organizers design the programming to attract an audience that ranges from new listener to jazz aficionado. The organizers hope to build a broader audience for the genre. Each of the four stages present a carefully considered mix of artists: prominent and nationally known musicians; established, but not necessarily well-known artists; and emerging performers. A hallmark of the festival has been the variety of jazz on display: mainstream, traditional, experimental, vocal, and blues-based jazz. The Chicago Jazz Festival also has commissioned works from national and international artists including Danilo Pérez, Randy Weston, Gerald Wilson, and George Gruntz, as well as local artists Dee Alexander, Edward Wilkerson, and T.S. Galloway.

### **Lowell Folk Festival, Lowell, MA**



The Lowell Folk Festival originated when the city hosted the National Folk Festival from 1987 to 1989. Spurred by that success, event producers and community members decided to hold the inaugural Lowell Folk Festival in 1990. Although the origin of the festival is linked to the National Folk Festival, organizers cite Lowell's long tradition of ethnic celebrations as the first roots of today's event. Lowell Folk Festival built on smaller local ethnic celebrations that have been established since the early 1970s. The festival is sponsored by a highly collaborative group of producing partners: the City of Lowell, the Lowell Festival Foundation, Lowell National Historical Park, the National Council for the Traditional Arts, and the Greater Merrimack Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau.

### **Piccolo Spoleto, Charleston, SC**

Piccolo Spoleto is a 17-day celebration of the arts that takes place annually in Charleston, South Carolina, and coincides with the internationally renowned Spoleto Festival USA. While Spoleto presents national and international artists, Piccolo Spoleto connects the local community to Spoleto Festival USA by presenting artists of all disciplines mainly from the Southeast region of the U.S. The festival's organizers strive to present



performances and exhibits that are “admission-free or modestly priced so that the Spoleto Festival experience can be enjoyed by all people regardless of their age, ethnicity, economic background, or experience in the arts.” The City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA), a unit of local government, founded Piccolo Spoleto in 1979 and continues to produce it today. Piccolo Spoleto has a close but informal partnership with Spoleto Festival USA and is considered its official outreach program. The two organizations coordinate programming to limit overlap between the festivals, share a volunteer corps, and occasionally present programs together.

### Tamejavi Festival, Fresno, CA



Tamejavi Festival is a cultural and community festival sponsored by the Pan-Valley Institute (PVI), a program established in 1998 by the American Friends’ Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. The Tamejavi Festival was established with a mission to create a place where immigrants and refugees can gather, learn from each other, and rebuild their world. “Tamejavi” is best described as a process of cultural

development that includes principles of understanding, respect for differences, and engagement in collaborative community-building practices. Cultural development is understood as a resource for supporting immigrants in their efforts to become more socially and politically included in society. Tamejavi uses cultural exchange and artistic expression to open spaces for civic engagement. The Tamejavi Festival has been held biennially since 2002 in various parks and cultural venues around the city of Fresno.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stern and Seifert’s work can be found at [www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAP/](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/SIAP/) and NEA’s research on the arts and civic engagement can be found at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov).

<sup>2</sup> Survey organizers were contacted by postal and electronic mail and requested to participate in the survey. A full discussion of the research methodology can be found in *Live from Your Neighborhood: A National Study of Outdoor Arts Festivals, Volume One: Summary Report*.

<sup>3</sup> Age comparisons could not be made because of limitations on the age data for festival audiences. Survey respondents were allowed to check more than one age category to describe the festival audience. The “multiple response” nature of these data precluded comparisons to U.S. Census figures.

<sup>4</sup> To facilitate analysis of long-term trends, certain art forms have been designated in the SPPA as “benchmark” activities. There are seven benchmark arts activities: jazz, classical music, opera, musical plays, non-musical plays, ballet, and visits to art museums or galleries.

<sup>5</sup> The SPPA, a general population survey, measures only adult (18 years and older) attendees, whereas all age groups are included in the festival audience estimates from the national survey.

<sup>6</sup> The 2008 SPPA collected information on crafts fairs, visual arts festivals, and outdoor performing arts festivals. Demographic characteristics of individuals attending festivals and fairs are similar to those attending benchmark arts and, thus, are not reported separately. However, audiences for outdoor performing arts festivals in the SPPA showed greater racial/ethnic diversity than audiences for many benchmark live arts events.

<sup>7</sup> Chicago Jazz Festival was the only case study site where fewer than half of survey respondents (39%) who live in households with children brought children to the festival.

<sup>8</sup> The unit of analysis is the responding organization, of which there were 1,264, and not the 1,413 festivals that the organizers represented. Festivals, and not organizations, constitute the unit of analysis for the remainder of the report.

<sup>9</sup> The question asked about the number of people working for the festival. If the festival was part of an organization, then the survey asked also about the number of people working for the organization.





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