



# U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002-2017

A First Look at Results from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

September 2018

National Endowment for the Arts  
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Cover photo: 2015 DC Jazz Festival audience gearing up for live music at the Yards Park, Washington DC. Photo by Jati Lindsay



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# Preface

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This research booklet shows the rates at which adults in the United States have been attending arts events—and reading works of literature—over a 15-year period. Art-going (e.g., art museum visits, performing arts attendance) and literary reading (e.g., novel- or poetry-reading) are two conspicuous ways that well over 100 million Americans engage with art throughout the year. But there is also the use of electronic and online media to access and share artworks, the personal creation or performance of artworks (whether or not through electronic/online media), and formal or informal arts education. The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) is a reliable tool for measuring U.S. adults' rates of taking part in these varied and enriching arts experiences.

In partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Endowment for the Arts has conducted the SPPA seven times since 1982. This booklet is occasioned by release of data from the 2017 SPPA. Like previous waves of the survey, the 2017 questionnaire asked Americans aged 18 and older whether they had participated in distinct types of arts activity in the preceding 12 months. The present document focuses, however, on arts attendance and literary reading. The reason is that the survey question-items for these topics have changed minimally over the years, in contrast to other sections of the SPPA. Therefore, analysis of long-term trends is possible for these two broad types of arts activity.

How long is “long-term”? To introduce the 2017 SPPA findings, this brochure reports the rates of arts participation (i.e., attendance and reading) only for the 2002, 2008, 2012, and 2017 survey years—for the century so far, in other words. In discussing trends across those years, this “first look” emphasizes rate differences from 2012 to 2017, although the prior survey years are referenced in passing. Readers who want to review SPPA data from the last century may consult previous NEA research reports at [arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis](https://arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis) or go to the National Archive of Data on Arts & Culture ([www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NADAC](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NADAC)), where the SPPA's raw data are housed.

On the whole, the 2017 SPPA findings for arts attendance are positive, compared with five years earlier. In aggregate, the share of adults who attended at least one visual or performing arts event has grown since 2012 (by more than three percentage points). Much of that increase is due to greater attendance at art museums or galleries, at outdoor performing arts festivals, at unspecified types of performing arts events, and at parks, monuments, buildings, and neighborhoods visited for their design or historic value. In the past, these types of activity have drawn a broader cross-section of the U.S. adult population—one that is demographically more diverse—than have some other types of arts events. So it is fitting that relatively younger adults, those with a modest amount of formal education, and adults belonging to one or more racial/ethnic minority groups, often contributed to those increases in 2017.

Even in cases where no increases were reported, rates of arts attendance held steady when compared with 2012 levels. Specifically, between 2012 and 2017, the rate of arts attendance remained largely unchanged for the following activity types: musical plays; non-musical plays; classical music; jazz music; ballet and other dance performances; Latin, Spanish, and salsa music; and opera.

Although this is solely a year-to-year comparison, other survey data help us to characterize the intervening period. In 2013 and 2015, the NEA conducted—again in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau—the Arts Benchmarking Survey (ABS). This survey uses different measures from the SPPA, but nonetheless captured rates of adult attendance at visual and performing arts events in aggregate. Between 2013 and 2015, the share of adults attending art exhibits or live music, dance, or theater performances remained stable, while there was some growth in the share who had visited places for their design or historic value.

This period of relative stability, punctuated by some increases in attendance, occurred well after the economic recession of 2007-2009. It also marked a period of economic growth. Yet another NEA data collection permits us to explore this contextual factor in relationship to the arts. The U.S. Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, a research collaboration between the NEA and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, shows that from 2010 to 2015 (the most recent year for which data are available), consumer spending on performing arts admissions has trended upward. The same data source reveals that performing arts presenters constitute one of the fastest-growing industries tracked by the account.

Reading is a different story. For the first time in the survey's history, reading rates for poetry and plays have increased from the prior survey period. As with the visual and performing arts categories that saw growth in attendance, the surge in poetry-reading was experienced by diverse demographic groups. The share of adults reading any books not required for work or school has remained on par with 2008 and 2012 levels, while the share of those reading novels or short stories is now lower than in any prior survey period. The latter development conjures the titles of earlier NEA reports such as *Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. A forthcoming research report will address this topic in detail.

The primary benefit of a survey of this type is to give the public a statistical snapshot of the critical elements of arts participation. For the NEA and other cultural providers and policymakers, the survey reflects sociological patterns that can help these organizations ensure that the arts reach all Americans through creative programming and communications. Alongside a comprehensive report that will be released in 2019, future monographs from this survey will analyze the use of media and technology to participate in the arts, the role of personal tastes and preferences in arts participation, related barriers and motivations, and reading and literary arts engagement. For now, researchers and arts practitioners are invited to query the data for more results.

Sunil Iyengar  
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National Endowment for the Arts  
September 2018

# About the Survey

The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) was administered in July 2017 as a supplement to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, and therefore is nationally representative. The 2017 SPPA included two core components and five modules designed to capture arts participation through electronic media, personal performance and creation of art, and participation in other leisure activities, among other subjects. To permit analysis of arts attendance and voluntary reading trends across previous SPPA survey years, this document relies on Core 1 of the survey questionnaire.

## Topics and Components of the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

Core 1	Arts attendance and literary reading
Core 2	Arts attendance, venues, and motivations
Module A	Consuming art via electronic media
Module B	Performing art
Module C	Creating visual art and writing
Module D	Other leisure activities
Module E	Arts education and arts access

The total sample size of the 2017 SPPA was 27,969 U.S. adults, aged 18 and over, of which 17.5 percent were represented by proxy respondents. The 2017 SPPA had a person response rate of 67 percent. Core 1 was administered to 8,844 respondents.

Unless otherwise noted, differences in estimates between the 2012 and 2017 surveys are statistically significant at 90 percent confidence.

# Key Findings

These statistics come from the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the nation's premier instrument for tracking adult patterns of arts engagement. The survey is conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau. For more information, see <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis/arts-data-profiles/arts-data-profile-18>.

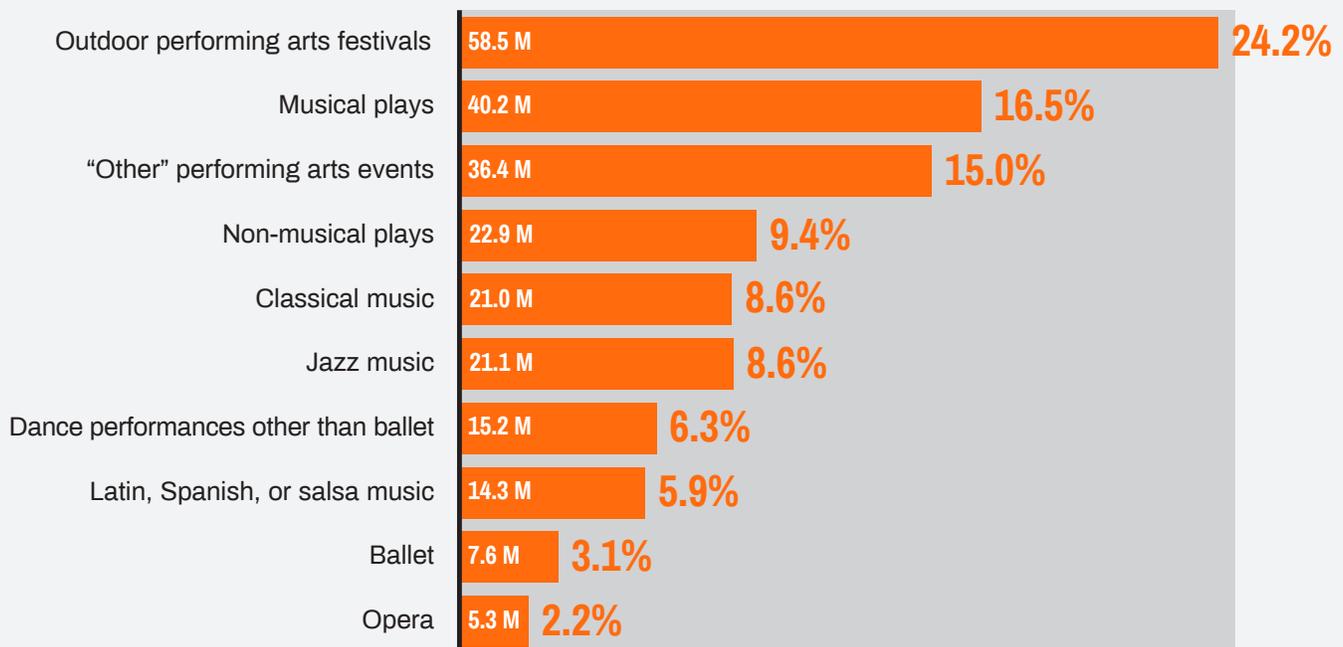
## A. ATTENDING ARTS EVENTS

1) In 2017, **53.8 percent** of U.S. adults (up from **50.2 percent** in 2012), or 132.3 million people, attended a visual or performing arts activity at least once in the past 12 months.<sup>i</sup>

*Live Performing Arts*—**43.4 percent** of U.S. adults (up from **40.2 percent** in 2012), or 106.8 million people, attended at least one of the activities listed directly below.<sup>ii</sup>

### Number and percent of U.S. adults attending performing arts events: 2017

(M = millions of adults)

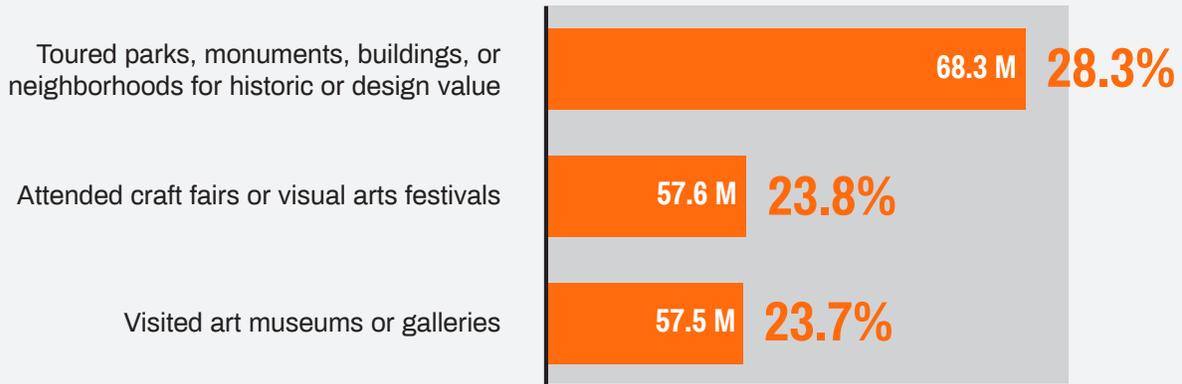


<sup>i</sup>"Other" refers to types of performing arts not listed in other SPPA question-items.

Visual Arts—42.3 percent of U.S. adults (up from 39.0 percent in 2012), or 102.5 million people, did at least one of the activities listed directly below.

## Number and percent of U.S. adults attending visual arts events: 2017

(M = millions of adults)



- Beyond attending the visual and performing activities listed above, **58.6 percent** of U.S. adults (or 137.8 million people) **went to the movies** at least once in the 12-month period. This is approximately the same share that attended five years previously.<sup>iii</sup>

2) Between 2012 and 2017, there was significant growth in adults' rates of attendance at **outdoor performing arts festivals** and at types of **performing arts events not listed by the survey**.<sup>iv</sup>

## Percent of adults attending outdoor performing arts festivals

2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
				Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
N/A	20.8%	20.8%	24.2%	+3.4 pp	+16.4%

## Percent of adults attending “other” performing arts events

2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
				Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
N/A	N/A	11.6%	15.0%	+3.4 pp	+29.1%

“Other” refers to types of performing arts not listed in other SPPA question-items.

- The 2012-2017 growth in attending outdoor performing arts festivals was particularly evident for **African Americans** and **25-44-year-olds**.<sup>v</sup>
- Contributing to the 2012-2017 increase in the share of adults who attended a type of performing arts event not listed by the survey were: higher attendance rates for **African Americans**, **Asian Americans**, and **25-54-year-olds**.

3) Also on the rise were the share of adults who visited art museums/galleries, or who toured places for historic or design value.

## Percent of adults visiting art museums/galleries

2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
				Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
26.5%	22.7%	21.0%	23.7%	+2.7 pp	+12.9%

## Percent of adults touring parks, monuments, buildings, or neighborhoods for historic or design value

2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
				Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
31.6%	24.9%	23.9%	28.3%	+4.4 pp	+18.4%

- Greater numbers of art-goers among **African Americans, 18-24 year-olds and 35-44 year-olds**, and adults who received only “**some college**” education contributed to the overall rise in art museum/gallery attendance rates between 2012 and 2017.
- Demographic subgroups that drove growth in the share of adults visiting or touring places of historic or design value are: **women, African Americans and non-Hispanic whites, 35-44 year-olds**, and those whose formal education stopped with a **high school diploma or a college degree**.

4) For several other activity types, arts attendance rates increased slightly but not significantly.

- In the case of **non-musical plays**, this stability comes after a period of two consecutive declines in attendance rates, as captured by the survey (in 2012 and 2008).<sup>vi</sup>

## Percent of adults attending performing arts events, by art form

Performing arts events	2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
					Percentage point (pp) change*	Rate of change*
Musical plays	17.1%	16.7%	15.2%	16.5%	+1.3 pp	+8.6%
Non-musical plays	12.3%	9.4%	8.3%	9.4%	+1.1 pp	+13.3%
Classical music	11.6%	9.3%	8.8%	8.6%	-0.2 pp	-2.3%
Jazz music	10.8%	7.8%	8.1%	8.6%	+0.5 pp	+6.2%
Dance performances other than ballet	6.3%	5.2%	5.6%	6.3%	+0.7 pp	+12.5%
Latin, Spanish, or salsa music	N/A	4.9%	5.1%	5.9%	+0.8 pp	+15.7%
Ballet performances	3.9%	2.9%	2.7%	3.1%	+0.4 pp	+14.8%
Opera	3.2%	2.1%	2.1%	2.2%	+0.1 pp	+4.8%

\* These changes are not statistically significant at 90 percent confidence.

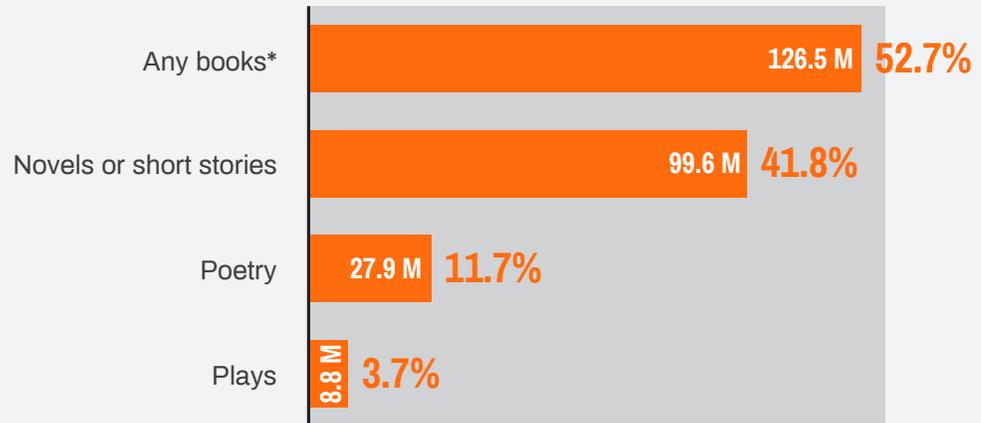


## B. READING BOOKS AND LITERATURE

1) In 2017, 57.1 percent of U.S. adults (or 137.7 million people) did one or more of the types of reading listed directly below.<sup>vii</sup>

### Number and percent of U.S. adults reading books and literature: 2017

(M = millions of adults)



\*Includes only books not required for work or school.

2) Book-reading rates remain on par with those in the two preceding survey years (2008 and 2012).

### Percent of adults reading any books

2002	2008	2012	2017	2012-2017	
				Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
56.6%	54.3%	54.6%	52.7%	-1.9 pp*	-3.4%*

Note: Includes only books not required for work or school.

\* These changes are not statistically significant at 90 percent confidence.

- Nevertheless, there were significant declines in the percentage of book-readers among **women** and/or those had attended or graduated from college but had pursued **no graduate or professional degree**.

3) A smaller share of adults read **novels or short stories** in 2017 than in 2012, 2008, or 2002.

## Percent of adults reading novels or short stories

				2012-2017	
2002	2008	2012	2017	Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
45.1%	47.0%	45.2%	41.8%	-3.4 pp	-7.6%

- Between 2012 and 2017, the declines in novel- and short story-reading registered mainly among **women, African Americans, and 18-24-year-olds**.

4) **Poetry-reading** has increased for the first time in the history of the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.<sup>viii</sup>

The share of adults who read poetry in 2017 grew **five percentage points** over the 2012 level, and three points over the 2008 level. The rate is now roughly equivalent to that of 15 years before.

## Percent of adults reading poetry

				2012-2017	
2002	2008	2012	2017	Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
12.1%	8.3%	6.7%	11.7%	+5.0 pp	+76.0%

- Between 2012 and 2017, the share of **18-24 year-olds** who read poetry more than doubled, placing this age group above all others when it comes to poetry-reading rates.
- Both **men and women** increased their poetry-reading rates.
- Among racial/ethnic subgroups, **African Americans, Asian Americans, and other non-white, non-Hispanic groups** now read poetry at the highest rates overall. Further, poetry-reading increased among Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites.
- Adults who had attended but **did not graduate from college** showed a sharp increase in their poetry-reading rate. Poetry-reading also increased among college graduates and those with graduate or professional degrees.

5) **The reading of plays** increased slightly but significantly in 2017.

Those gains are reflected in the percentage of **women, Hispanics, African Americans, and 35-44-year olds** who now read these works.

### Percent of adults reading plays

				2012-2017	
2002	2008	2012	2017	Percentage point (pp) change	Rate of change
3.6%	2.6%	2.9%	3.7%	+0.8 pp	+28.2%

6) In 2017, the NEA survey asked U.S. adults whether they had engaged with **books of other types and in different formats**.

For example, 23.3 percent of all adults (or 56 million people) read one or more books on e-readers, tablets, computers, cell phones, or other **electronic devices**.

### Percent of adults engaging with books of selected types and formats: 2017

	Percent of adults who read selected book types	Number of adults (in millions)
Religious texts	23.0%	55.3
History	21.8%	52.2
Biography	20.0%	47.9
Science/technology	12.9%	30.9
Graphic novels	6.7%	16.2
	Percent of adults who engaged with any books in selected formats	Number of adults (in millions)
Reading on electronic devices	23.3%	56.0
Audiobooks	16.5%	39.3

# Conclusions

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Between 2012 and 2017, the share of all U.S. adults (aged 18 and over) who attended at least one visual or performing arts event in the preceding 12 months grew significantly. These gains were realized for art museum and gallery visits, for outdoor performing arts attendance, for attendance at unspecified types of performing arts events, and for visits to places for historic or design value. In many cases, the increases can be attributed to greater participation by different demographic groups. For the remaining art forms tracked by this survey, arts attendance rates in 2017 did not change from five years previously. For most art forms, attendance rates remained below 2002 levels.

The share of adults who read any book not required for work or school is comparable to the 2002 and 2008 levels. Novel and short-story reading, in terms of the percent of adults who did this activity, have fallen below historical levels. Poetry- and play-reading, meanwhile, have increased in the U.S. adult population from 2012 to 2017.

Future analyses of the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts data will examine the frequency of attendance, the venues and motivations for attendance, the use of electronic or online media, personal creation and performance of artworks, and other variables that interact with attendance and reading rates, in an effort to expand public knowledge about these vital forms of arts engagement.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For these aggregate rates of live arts attendance in 2017, the trend comparison is made only with 2012 survey data. In prior years of the SPPA, there were fewer question-items about arts attendance. Accordingly, longer-term trend comparisons cannot be made by using the same construct of overall visual and performing arts attendance.

<sup>ii</sup> For all types of performing arts event—except outdoor performing arts festivals—survey respondents were asked to exclude elementary or high school performances.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2012, 59.4 percent of adults went to the movies. The change from the 2017 rate is not statistically significant.

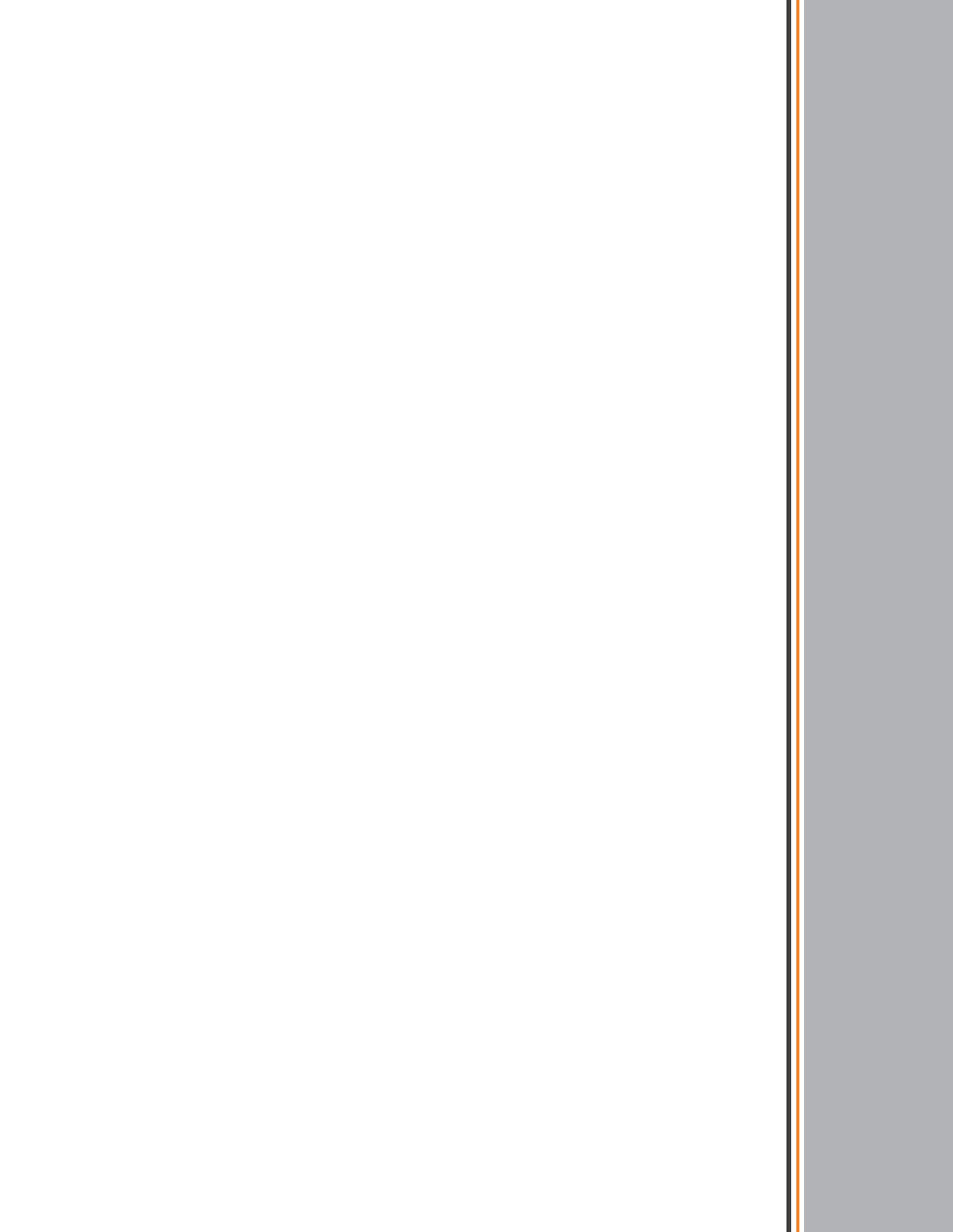
<sup>iv</sup> The survey question about attendance at “other” types of live performing arts event was asked immediately after a string of questions about attendance at the following types of live performing arts event: jazz music; Latin, Spanish, or salsa music; classical music; opera; musical plays; non-musical plays; ballet; and other types of dance performance. Respondents to all these question-items (including the one about “other” types of live performing arts events) were asked to exclude elementary or high school performances.

<sup>v</sup> For data on all demographic subgroups referenced in this booklet, see <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/SPPA-Tables-for-2012-and-2017.xlsx>.

<sup>vi</sup> In 2002, 12.3 percent of American adults went to a non-musical play; in 2008 this dropped to 9.4 percent, and in 2012 to 8.3 percent. Both decreases were statistically significant. For more information, see [A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002-2012](#).

<sup>vii</sup> This figure is comparable to the 58 percent of U.S. adults who read books and literature in 2012. See <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/highlights-from-2012-sppa-revised-oct-2015.pdf>.

<sup>viii</sup> The findings about poetry were first reported on the National Endowment for the Arts blog, “Art Works.” See <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2018/taking-note-poetry-reading-%E2%80%9494federal-survey-results>.





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