




Mapping Cultural Participation in Chicago

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Executive Summary

In early 2003, the Joyce Foundation and the University of Chicago's Cultural Policy Center began discussions on the need to measure arts participation in the Chicagoland area. At that time, there were no reliable baseline data to serve as a benchmark of audience participation.

Mapping Cultural Participation in Chicago provides this baseline for measuring arts participation.

The study also addresses several critical questions about Chicago's arts audiences:

- What is the current minority participation in Chicago's twelve largest cultural institutions?
- Can differences in participation by race and ethnicity be accounted for by other factors, such as household income, household structure, and educational attainment?
- How do participation patterns in the larger organizations compare to participation patterns in smaller, more localized, diverse and ethnically specific organizations?

The study analyzes more than one million records from sixty-one arts and culture organizations, representing almost six hundred thousand households.

The data are built from the records of the cultural institutions. Each individual-level piece of data is an administrative record of a transaction between the institution and an individual or household. The core data are those from the twelve largest not-for-profit cultural institutions in Chicago, supplemented by a sample of forty-nine smaller institutions. The generosity of our partnering institutions in sharing their data deserves special recognition.

We find that participation in Chicago's largest arts and cultural organizations is highest in predominantly white, high-income areas of the metropolitan area.

In these areas, roughly one household in two participates in some way in the city's largest arts organizations. By contrast, participation rates are low throughout much of the rest of the metropolitan area. They are consistently lowest in areas with large percentages of African-American or Latino households.

However, there are also many predominantly white areas, regardless of income, that are not significantly engaged with Chicago's largest arts organizations.

In all of these low participation areas, roughly one household in twenty participates in the city's large organizations.

The socioeconomic attributes of a neighborhood are the most important predictors of the density of arts participation.

Attributes of a neighborhood, such as its median household income, the percentage of residents with bachelor's or master's degrees, household structure, and the age of residents can explain much, although not all, of the variation in arts participation densities across Chicago.

Thus ethnicity represents only a part of the picture.

The socioeconomic characteristics are much stronger predictors of who does and does not participate in these organizations.

Even after we account for a neighborhood's socioeconomic characteristics, its ethnic composition still is a predictor of participation in the area's largest arts organizations.

When we compare predominantly white, Latino, and African-American communities with similar socioeconomic characteristics, we find that rates of participation with large organizations tend to be lower in predominantly African-American communities than in predominantly Latino or white areas. However, this is not systematically the case: we can identify some predominantly African-American areas in which arts participation is much higher than expected.

There is no earlier benchmark with which to compare the current situation.

Thus, we cannot address whether progress is being made. Indeed, a major purpose of this study is to provide that baseline for future studies. Currently, however, Chicago's large arts organizations appear not to be successfully engaging households in areas with poor socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding suggests that to engage such households, these organizations may have to reassess their audience development practices, which could include pricing structure, type of services, program delivery, and hours of operations, along with conducting further research on the barriers and motivations for audience participation.

Ethnic, diverse, and other smaller arts organizations successfully reach a different audience.

Not only do the diverse and ethnic institutions tap a different population, but their audiences are relatively unengaged with the larger institutions. This finding holds especially true for the smaller organizations whose missions target particular ethnic and diverse audiences.

There are still significant gaps in our knowledge of participation.

Despite our requesting data from Chicago's 496 small and medium-size arts and culture organizations, only forty-nine provided data for this study.

- This did not allow us to create a representative sample of small and medium-size organizations from which to draw conclusions.
- Furthermore, our data do not reflect the participation of schools and community groups with arts organizations because these data are not tracked on a systematic basis.

To improve our understanding of audience participation in Chicago's arts and cultural organizations, we recommend that these organizations, along with the arts community, work together to develop a more uniform system for collecting information about their participants. It appears that many smaller organizations may require some assistance in this regard if we are to establish a more reliable baseline of participation patterns in their activities. Many of the area's largest organizations already have relatively sophisticated systems for recording audience participation. However, even their information has important gaps. Most need to develop a system to collect information on school and community groups that participate in their activities. Many of the large museums do not systematically collect and maintain information on their visitors. We propose that the arts and culture community in Chicago address these and related issues prior to future research, studies, and evaluations of audience participation.