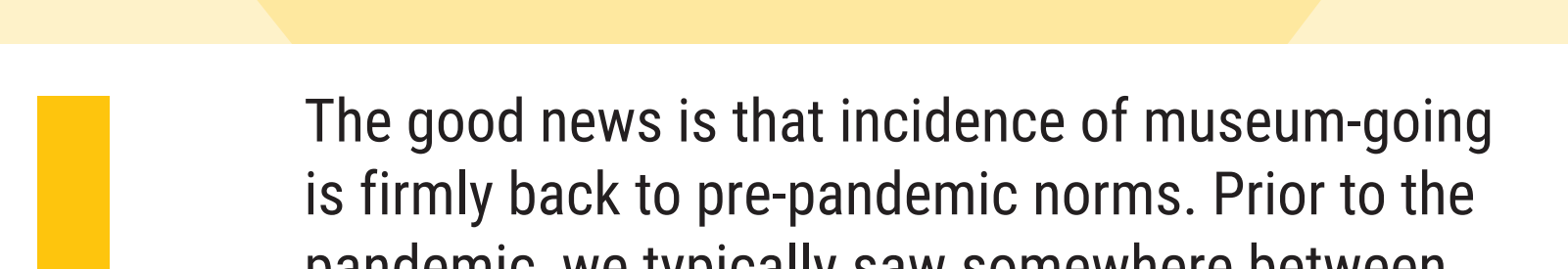


MUSEUM VISITATION: ONGOING RECOVERY TRENDS FROM THE PANDEMIC A 2025 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY UPDATE

IT'S BEEN OVER 5 YEARS since the COVID-19 pandemic devastated museum visitation. While increasing numbers of museums are back to pre-pandemic attendance norms, many museums are still recovering. As AAM's fall 2025 "National Snapshot of United States Museums" survey indicates:

Over half (55%) of U.S. museums have not returned to pre-pandemic attendance

81%: median pre-pandemic attendance levels for those 55% of museums



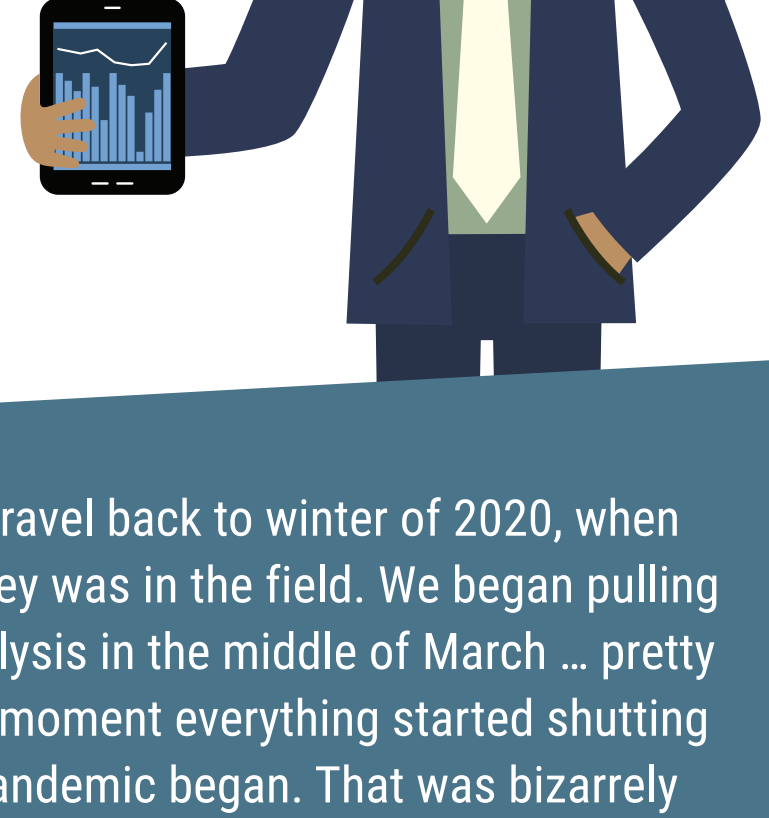
The good news is that incidence of museum-going is firmly back to pre-pandemic norms. Prior to the pandemic, we typically saw somewhere between 25% and 31% of U.S. adults reporting they had been to a museum in the past year.



For the second year in a row, 33% of U.S. adults reported having been to a museum in the past year ... slightly **exceeding** pre-pandemic norms.



So if incidence isn't the primary issue, what's responsible for ongoing attendance challenges? We've been tracking this via the Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, and **frequency** of attendance continues to be the culprit. Let's take a look.



First, let's time-travel back to winter of 2020, when the Annual Survey was in the field. We began pulling the data for analysis in the middle of March ... pretty much the exact moment everything started shutting down and the pandemic began. That was bizarrely fortuitous in terms of data collection, because it meant we had established a clean baseline for documenting pre-pandemic norms.

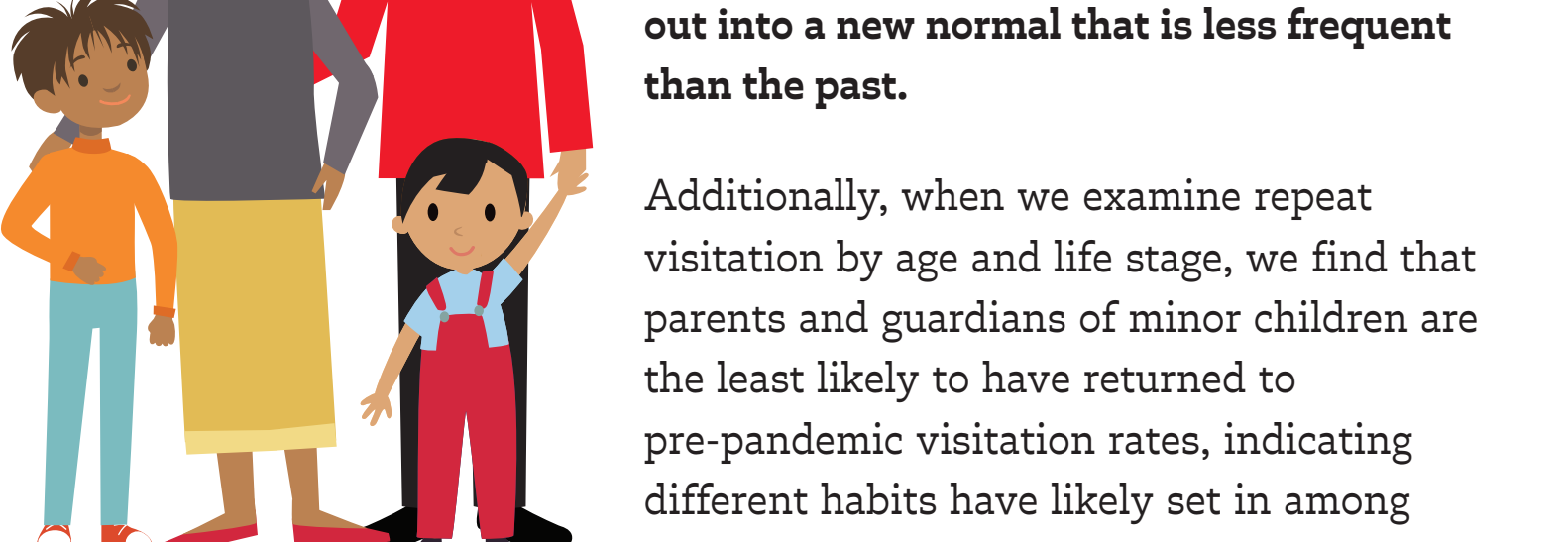
Our 2021 Annual Survey thus captured the first year of the pandemic (mid-March 2020 to mid-March 2021), 2022 captured year two, and so on.

Every year, the Annual Survey asks frequent museum-goers two questions about museum visitation.

1 Self-reported repeat visitation rates at "their" museum

The first question of the Annual Survey asks respondents to report their previous year *in person* visitation of the museum that invited them to take the survey.

When we aggregate responses by year, we can clearly see the devastating drop in attendance from pre-pandemic highs (March 2020) to pandemic lows (March 2021).

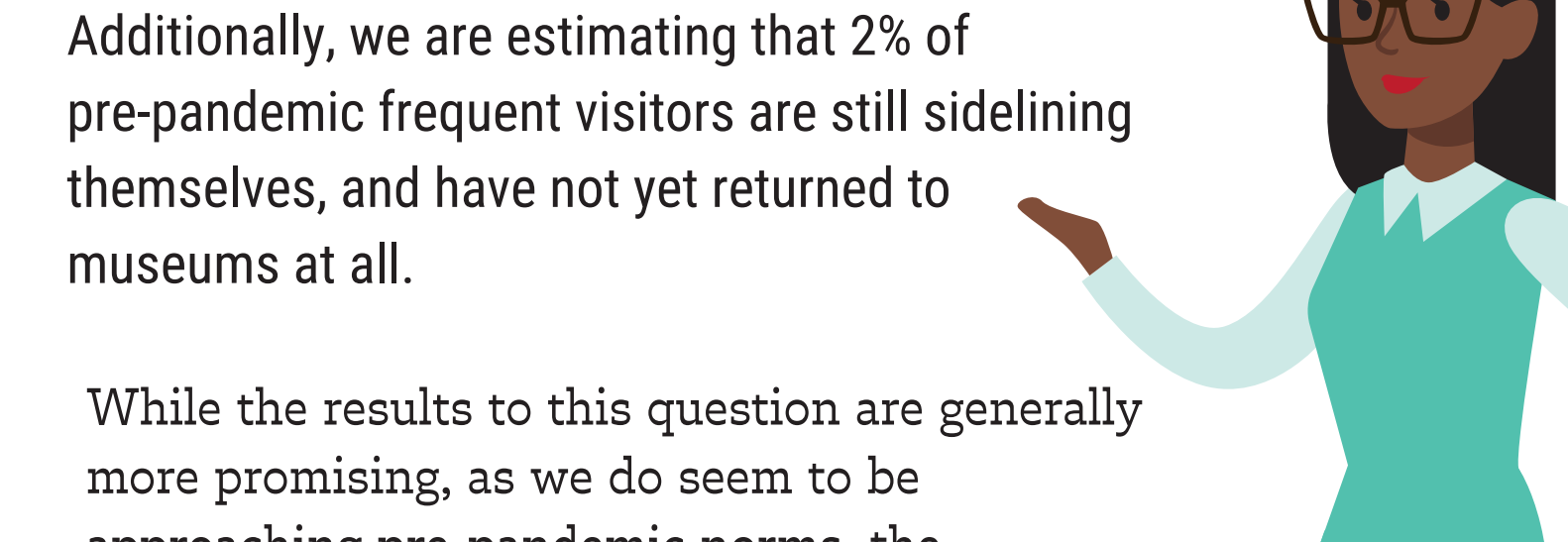


Since 2021, frequency has been increasing, but there is still a significant gap in frequency from pre-pandemic norms. Repeat visitation simply isn't back where it was six years ago. **Instead, it seems to have leveled out into a new normal that is less frequent than the past.**

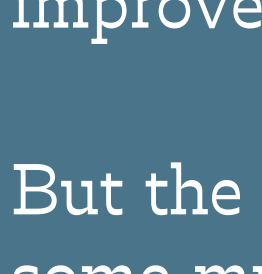
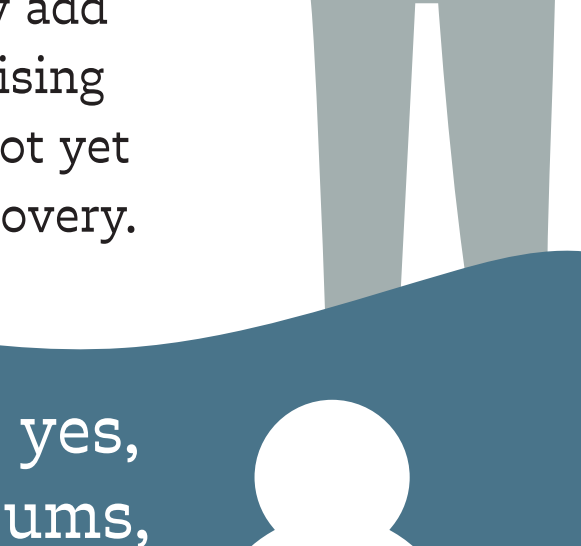
Additionally, when we examine repeat visitation by age and life stage, we find that parents and guardians of minor children are the least likely to have returned to pre-pandemic visitation rates, indicating different habits have likely set in among family audiences.

2 How many different museums they visit

We also track how many *different* museums a respondent reports visiting in the course of the previous year. Once again, we find that visitation at museums in general plummeted from 2020 to 2021. There was substantial recovery in 2022 and this has continued, putting this *breadth* of museum-going very close to pre-pandemic norms ... though we are not quite there yet.



Additionally, we are estimating that 2% of pre-pandemic frequent visitors are still sidelining themselves, and have not yet returned to museums at all.



While the results to this question are generally more promising, as we do seem to be approaching pre-pandemic norms, the reduction in frequency of visitation from our most avid visitors can really add up. Thus, it's not that surprising that many museums have not yet reached 100% visitation recovery.

The good news overall is that yes, people have returned to museums, and attendance is continuing to improve for most museums.



But the return continues to be bumpy, with some museums still reporting low levels of visitation while others are exceeding pre-pandemic visitation.

As we head into 2026, new external forces are arising that may also affect leisure time and museum visitation. Ongoing economic concerns, severe weather, and political uncertainty are factors for many, which may help some museums attract more local visitors ... or reduce visitation from other potential visitors.



Because of these challenges, our "repeat visitation" questions have evolved into benchmark questions, included every year in the Annual Survey. This allows participating museums to better understand what's happening with their visitation, while allowing us to share trends yearly with the field. Stay tuned.



Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 * 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 98,904; 202 museums participating
 * 2025 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,079
 * 2017 - 2024 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

*Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums).

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.



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American
Alliance of
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WilkeningConsulting
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Data Story release date:
October 02, 2025
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