

**Who Attends Our Cultural Institutions?**

**A Progress Report**

**Based on the  
Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study**

**INSTITUTIONAL STUDIES**



**Smithsonian  
Institution**

# **Who Attends Our Cultural Institutions?**

**A Progress Report**

**Based on the  
Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study**

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## Introduction

This document summarizes a presentation made at the 1995 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums (AAM) in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> It reproduces the illustrations that were projected during the talk and introduces them with brief comments. By convention, material that was shown at the AAM meeting is reproduced here in **bold**.

\* \* \*

## Background

American museums have become increasingly sensitive to the issue of whether the public they serve is representative of the total population. In the report *Excellence and Equity Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, adopted as a policy statement by the AAM in 1991, the second of ten action principles is "Reflect the diversity of our society by establishing and maintaining the broadest possible public dimension for the museum."<sup>2</sup> Many cultural institutions have been concerned that some members of the public might think of them as exclusionary bastions of elitist privilege. This mistaken image can be particularly painful for those in the museum profession who sincerely believe that the benefits of their educational efforts should be available to all without regard for distinctions of race or ethnicity, class, age, or physical disability. Out of this deep concern has grown the impression that the audiences to our museums, zoos and aquaria are not yet representative of the diversity of America. The authors of *Excellence and Equity*, for example, contend that "surveys and even casual observation of visitors to most museums will usually reveal that they do not reflect the racial, ethnic, or economic heterogeneity of our society or even of museums' own communities." Exactly how diverse are America's museum visitors? Is the degree of diversity dependent on the subject matter of the institution?

Until now, accurate national data on the audiences to American cultural institutions has been limited to coverage of attendance at selected institutions. The data source generally considered most definitive is the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

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<sup>1</sup> Session T43, "Museum Attendance and Diversity: Implications from Research," held Tuesday, May 23, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>American Association of Museums. *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*. (Washington, D.C.: 1992), p. 7.

(SPPA), conducted for the National Endowment for the Arts in 1982, 1985 and 1992. Results from the SPPA were presented as part of this session. SPPA coverage, however, is limited to attendance at art museums. In 1982 and 1985, SPPA included very limited coverage of other types of museums. However, those items were excluded from the 1992 replication. Data on visits to science museums is also available from the *Public Awareness of Science* surveys (SCITEK) conducted by the Northern Illinois University's Public Opinion Laboratory for the National Science Foundation. The SCITEK data are not directly comparable to SPPA data. Since SPPA and SCITEK data are collected from different samples of people, analysis of complete participation patterns to all types of cultural institutions has not been possible.

This lack of accurate, national data on the audiences to all types of American cultural institutions has prevented us from establishing a clear picture of who is represented and who is not among museum visitors, and has made it impossible to analyze and confront the question of audience composition in a systemic manner. Fortunately, such data were collected as part of the recently completed Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study (SIMS). In 1996 the Smithsonian will celebrate the 150th Anniversary of its founding. As part of its planning it initiated several quantitative and qualitative studies, each of which were designed to increase our understanding of the meaning of the Smithsonian to its various constituencies. One of these studies, SIMS, was a national telephone survey on the behavior and attitude of Americans towards cultural institutions as a whole and the Smithsonian in particular. As a result we can now, for the first time, draw on a reliable national data base to address the question of who attends our cultural institutions.

The topics I will address are as follows:

## **WHO ATTENDS OUR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?**

### **PRESENTATION OUTLINE**

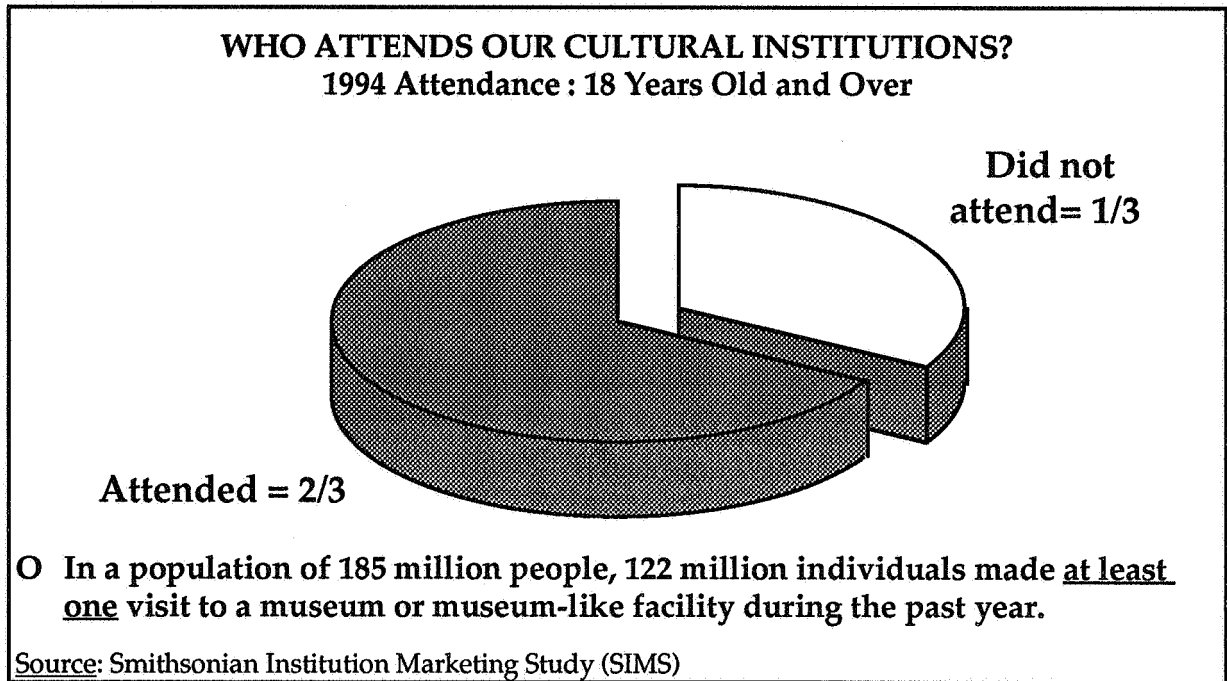
- 1. Attendance at Different Types of Cultural Institutions**
- 2. Patterns of Overall Attendance**
- 3. Characteristics of Those Who Attend**
- 4. Implications for Audience Expansion**

### **DATA**

- A 2009-case random sample of the national population**
- Telephone interviews of adults age 18 and over**
- Study completed in Fall 1994 with an 80.3% response rate**
- Study conducted as part of the planning activities for the Smithsonian's 150th Anniversary in 1996.**

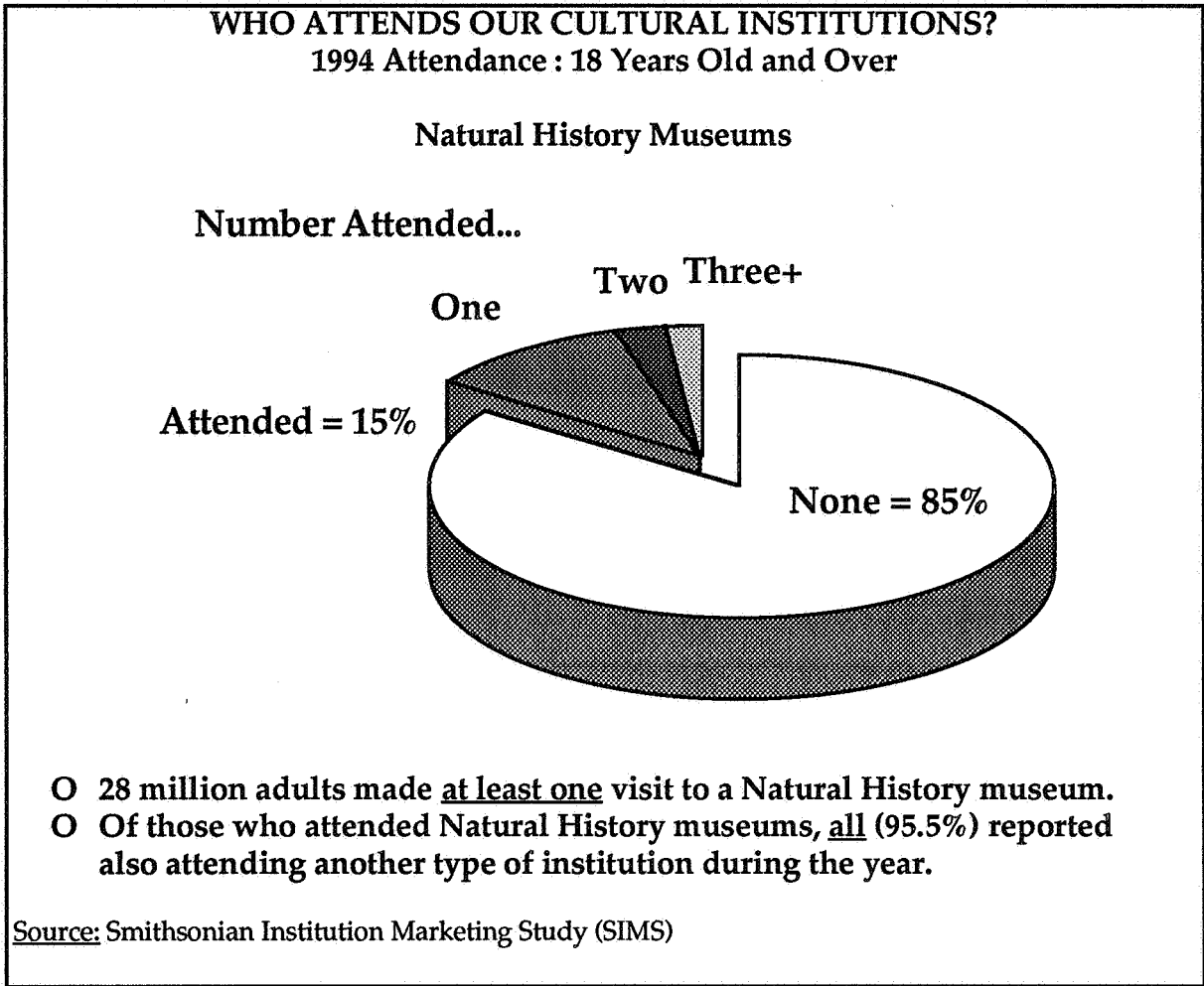
## 1. Attendance at Different Types of Cultural Institutions

As you view these slides, keep in mind that we are talking about people 18 years old and over. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, this is a population of 185 million individuals. Attendance by young people, including school groups, is excluded. Thus, our data pertain to individuals who made voluntary visits to cultural institutions, i.e., took the time to travel to them and, in most cases, paid admission fees. As shown, two-thirds of respondents reported that they had visited either a museum, an historical site, a zoo or an aquarium at least once in the past year.

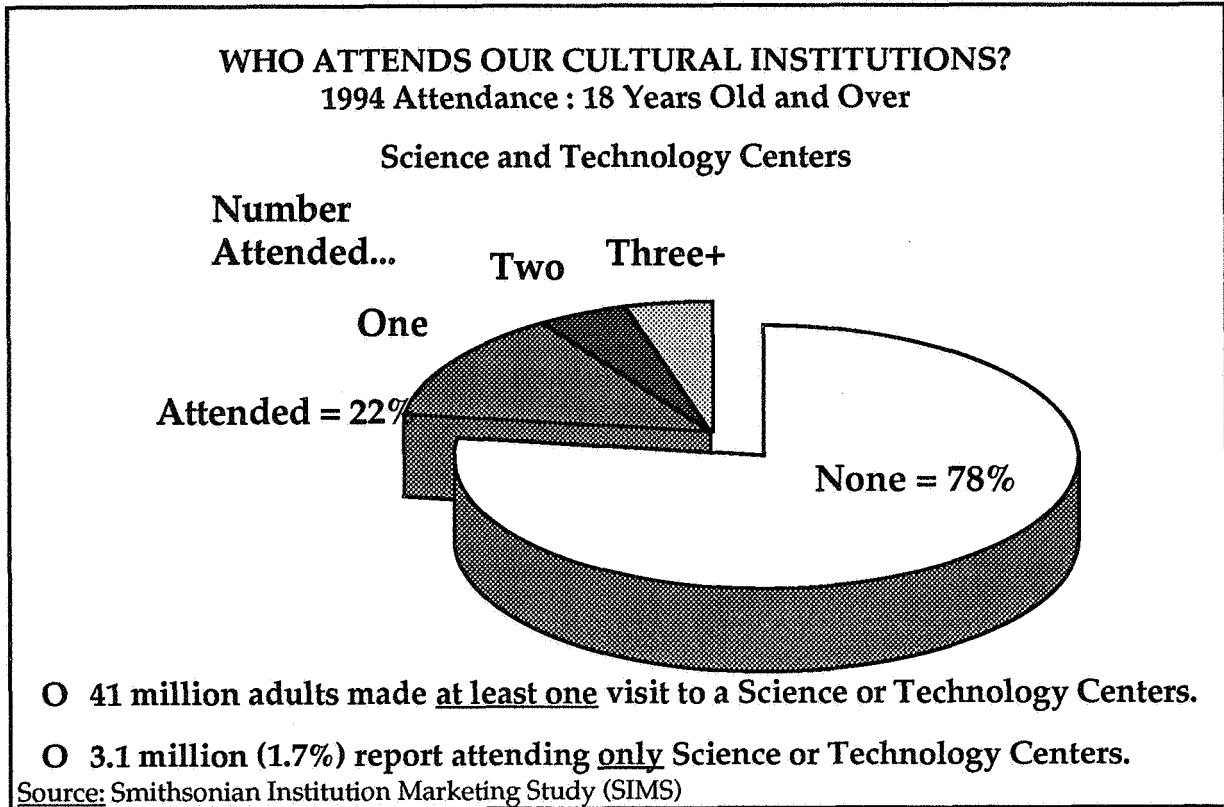


Most of those who come to cultural institutions visit more than one type in a year. This suggests that "museum-visiting" is an activity that, to some extent, can exist independent of a particular subject matter. *Over two out of five Americans visit two or more cultural institutions at least once in a year.*

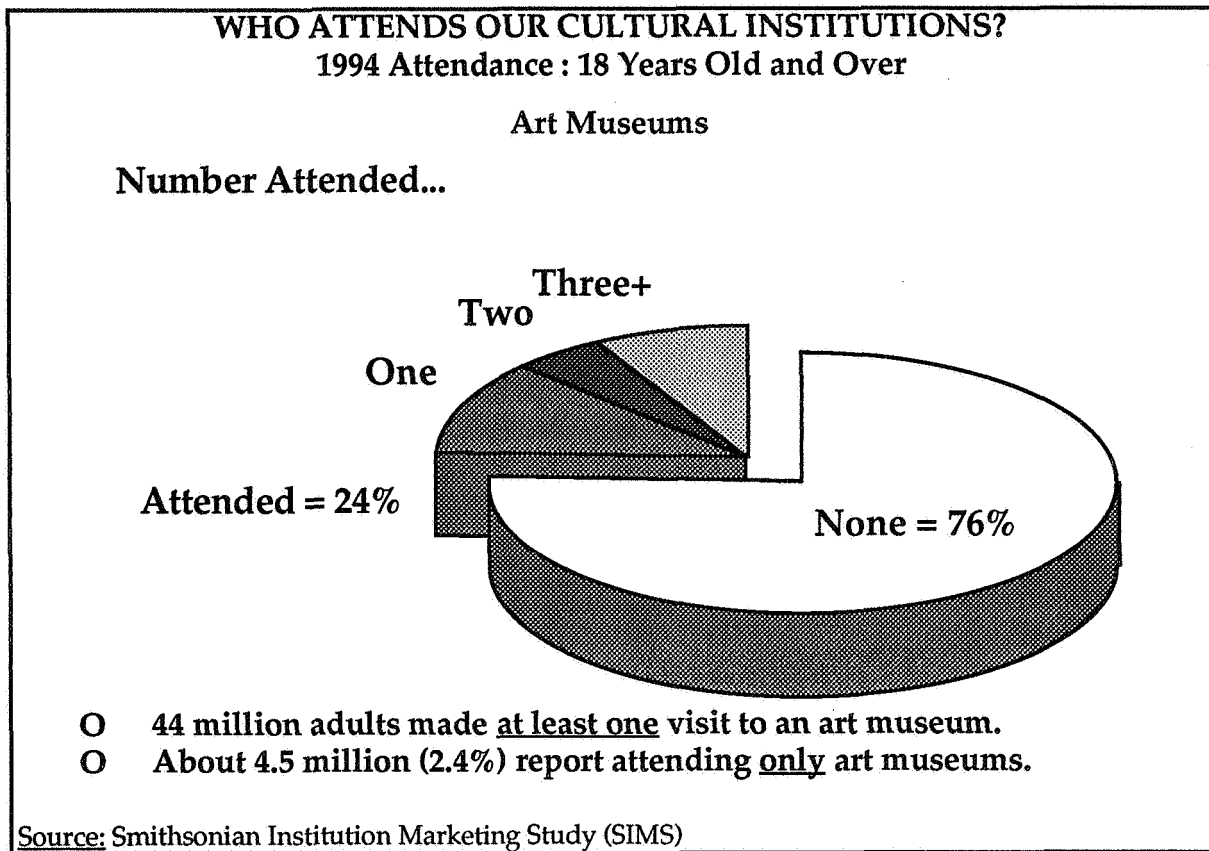
Natural History Museums. When we look at institutions by type, we find that Natural History Museums are least visited, probably because they are the fewest in number. In the past year virtually no respondents visited natural history museums exclusively, and very few visited two or more different natural history museums within the year.



Science and Technology Centers. Americans were more likely to visit one or more different science and technology centers. In general, those who visited science and technology centers also reported visiting other types of institutions; i.e., only a very small percentage of them did not visit other cultural institutions.

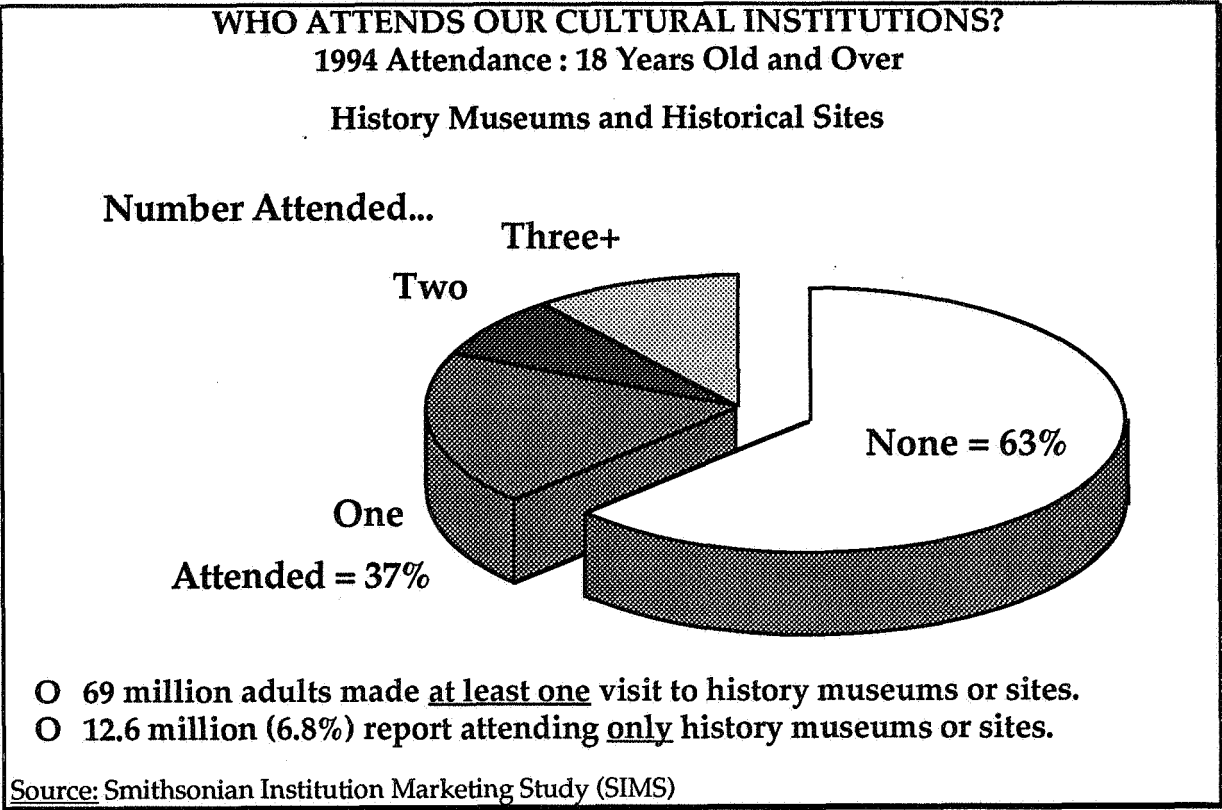


Art Museums. One-quarter of all American adults visited an art museum in the last year, and one in ten of those art museum visitors did not go to any other type of museum.

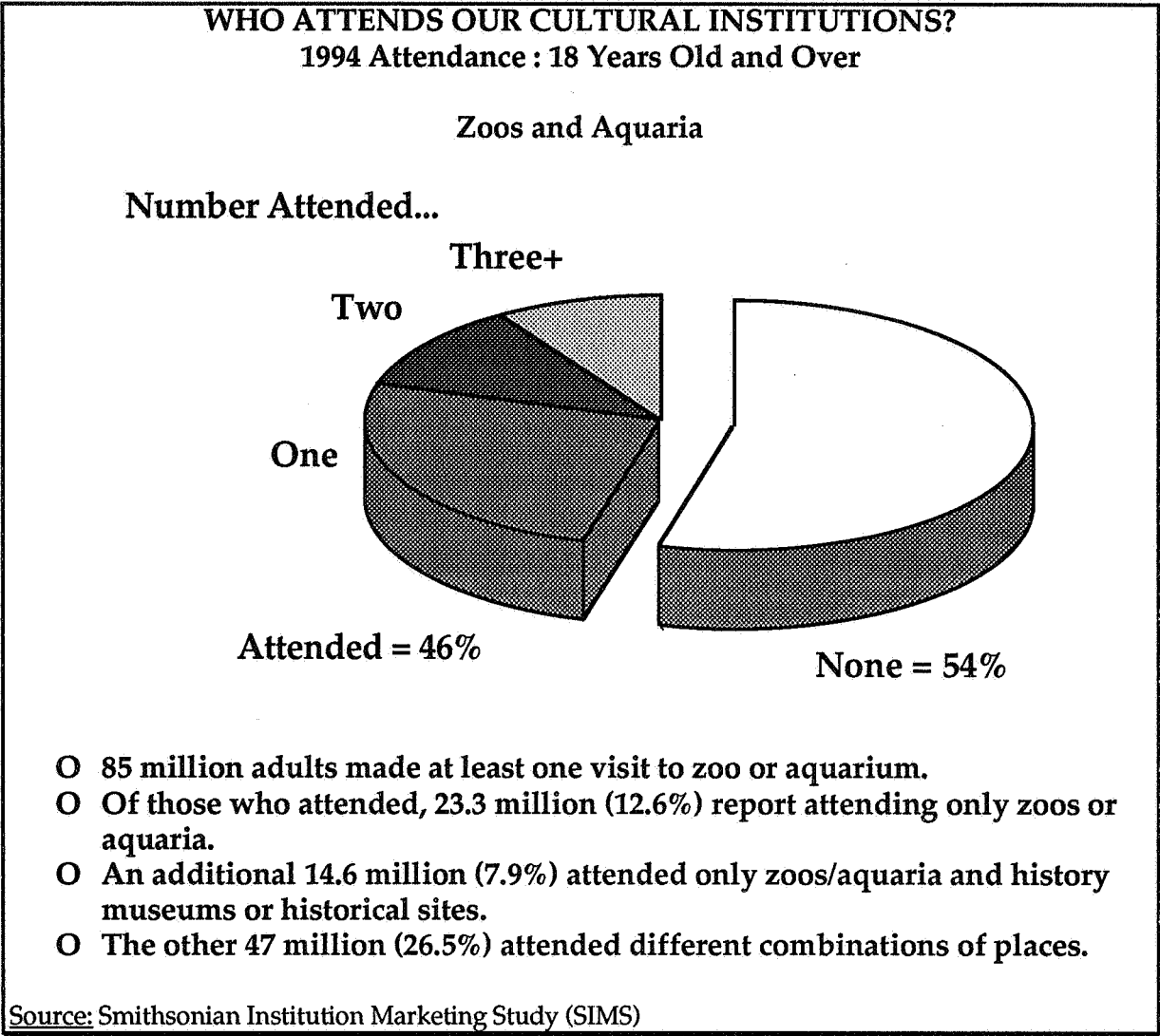




History Museums and Historical Sites are the most common type of cultural institutions, and welcomed a considerably higher percentage of respondents. Over one-third of Americans over 18 visited at least one in the past year.



Zoos and Aquaria. Nearly half of all American adults visited at least one zoo or aquarium in the previous year. Almost one in four who went to zoos and aquaria did not attend any other type of cultural institutions (12.6% of the total adult population).



## 2. Patterns of Overall Attendance

About one fourth of American adults visited only one type of cultural institution within the previous year, and about half of these "one-institution-only" visitors went to a zoo or aquarium and nowhere else. The cross-over between different types of museums is so great, in fact, that we can say that cultural institutions share a single audience among them.

### WHO ATTENDS OUR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

1994 Attendance : 18 Years Old and Over

O The study shows that 44 million adults, almost one-fourth of the population of 185 million, visited only one institution ...

	Millions
Natural History museums	0.5
Science and technology centers	3.1
Art museums	4.5
History museums and Historical Sites	12.6
Zoos and Aquaria	<u>23.3</u>
	44.0

- O About 72 million people (31.9%) attended 2,3 or 4 types of institutions
- O Another 6 million visited every type of institution at least once.

Source: Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study (SIMS)

To summarize...

#### CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS SHARE AUDIENCES

Therefore, expanding audiences will be most effective through joint, collaborative and cooperative ventures.

... BUT: Who are the members of the current audiences? How can audiences be expanded?

The SIMS data allow us to explore these questions.

### 3. Characteristics of Those Who Attend

We used six demographic characteristics to further describe who attends our cultural institutions: gender, age, household size, race/ethnicity, income, and education. Income and education were the two variables most strongly linked to attendance.

#### WHO ATTENDS OUR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

1994 Attendance : 18 Years Old and Over

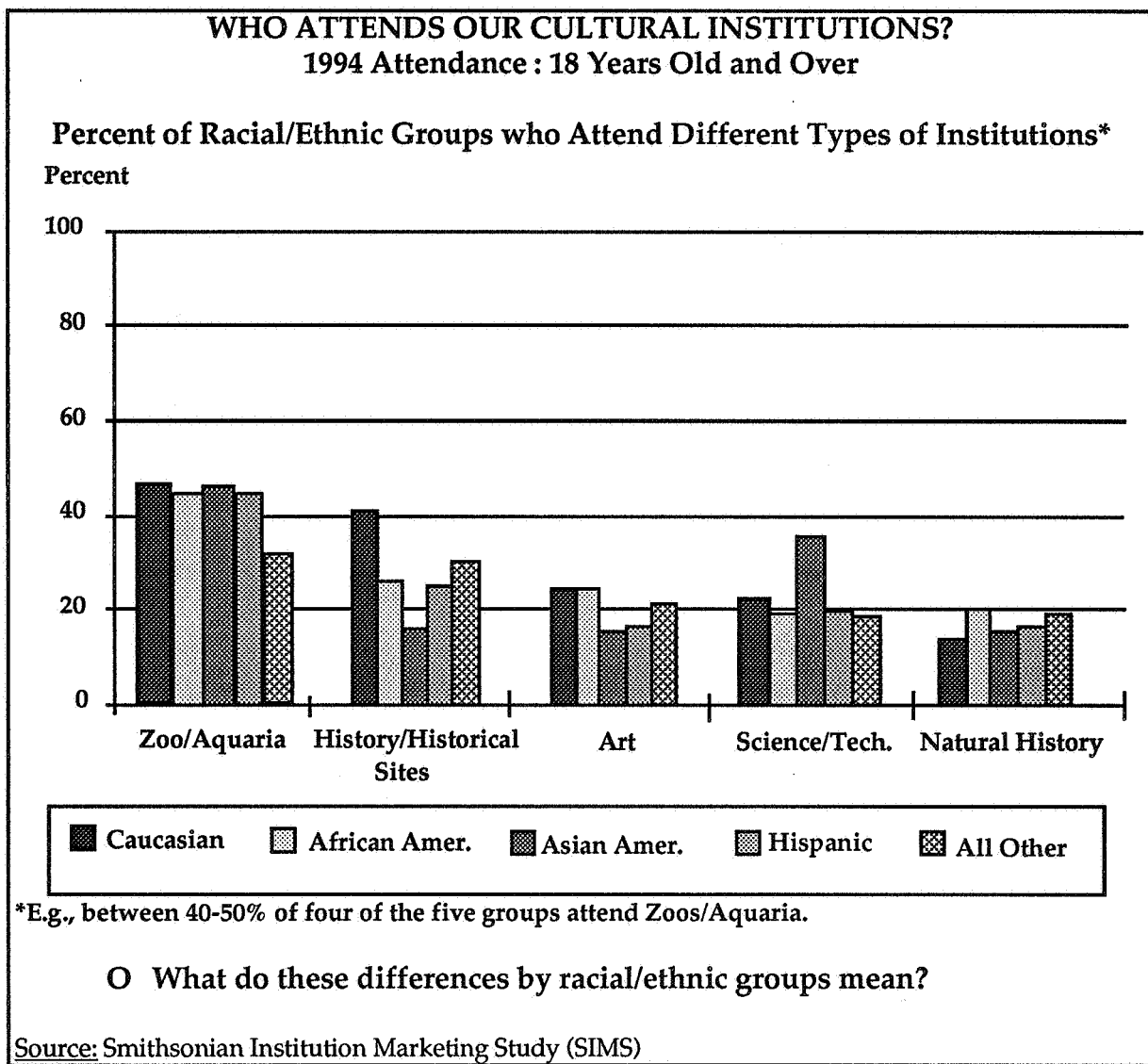
##### Separate Characteristics

- There is gender equity in attendance, except that men favor history museums and historical sites.
- Except among senior citizens, attendance is similar across age groups.
- Household size does not appear to discriminate overall attendance.
- Among broad racial/ethnic groups, Asian Americans have the highest attendance rates.
- As income increases, attendance at cultural institutions increases.
- As educational attainment increases, attendance at cultural institutions increases.

Source: Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study (SIMS)

When we look at race/ethnicity, we discover that, except for history museums and science museums, the percentage of each ethnic group that visits a particular museum type is nearly the same. **In other words, no ethnic group is significantly under-represented in museum-visiting as a whole.** However, Caucasians are over-represented at history museums and historical sites, while Asian Americans are over-represented at science and technology centers.

This bar graph is a composite of five different bar graphs, each showing the percent of the different racial/ethnic groups who attend a given type of institution. For example, the first set of bars shows attendance at Zoos/Aquaria. It shows that between 40-50% of Caucasians, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos attend these biological environments. Some of the racial/ethnic differences here reflect cultural preferences, others may well reflect the location of these institutions across the country. In a later analysis, we will explore geographical differences.



When we look at these characteristics more carefully we find that any differences in attendance among the particular ethnic categories can be "accounted for" by differences in education between these groups.

## WHO ATTENDS OUR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

1994 Attendance : 18 Years Old and Over

### Multiple Characteristics

Through statistical modeling we can measure the relative influence of different characteristics.

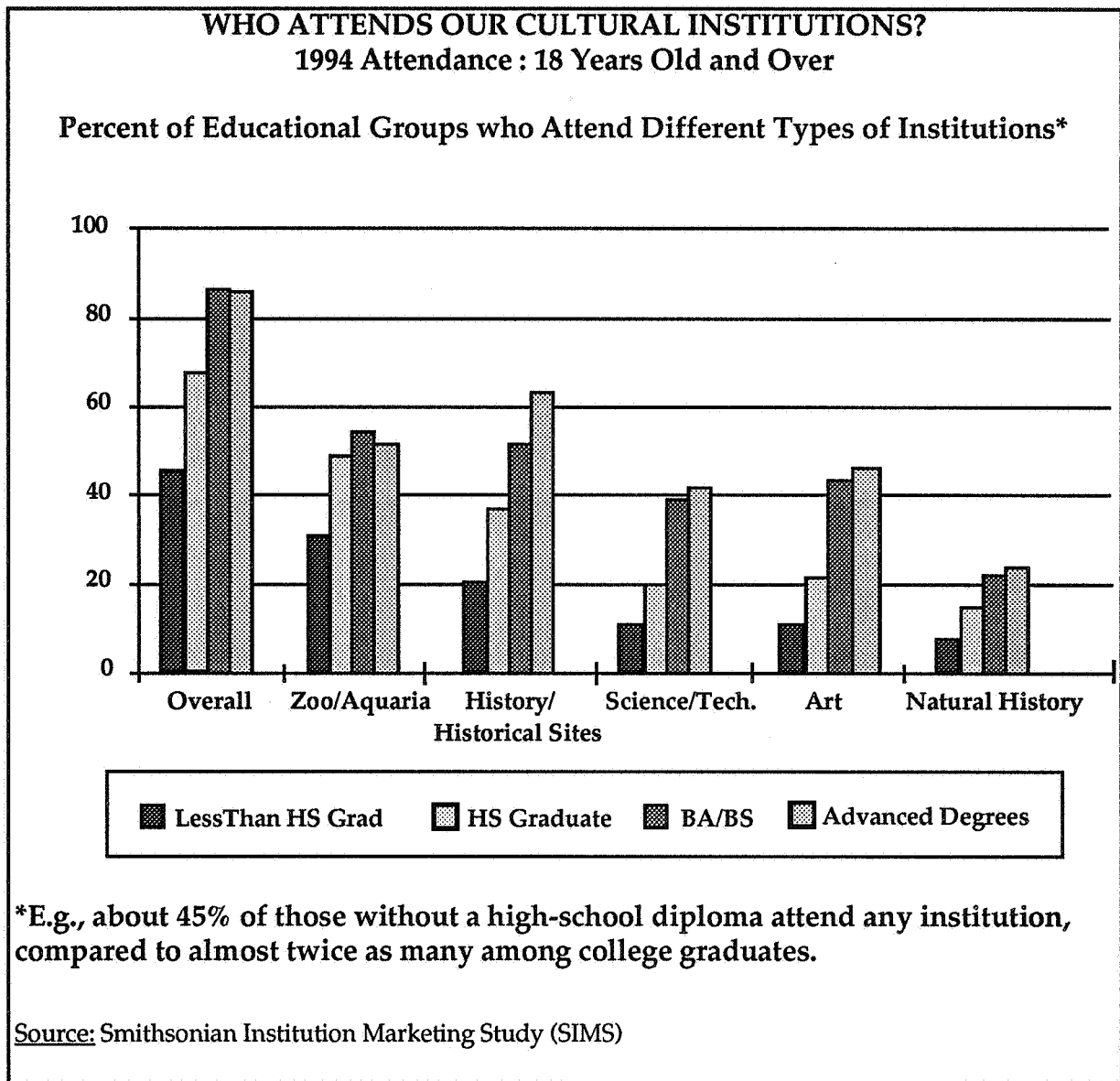
Analysis techniques which examine several characteristics simultaneously (e.g., regression analysis) show the following:

- Education has a significant positive impact on attendance -- attendance increases with increments of education (when all other characteristics are taken into account).
- Income also has a significant positive impact on attendance -- but less than education -- attendance increases with increments of income (when all other characteristics are taken into account).
- Age has a significant positive impact -- i.e., increased attendance -- until retirement, and a decline after that (when all other characteristics are taken into account).
- Race/ethnicity is not significant when education is included in the model.

In other words...

- When the differences in the educational attainment among racial/ethnic groups are taken "into account," differences in attendance vanish.

In the end, education has a powerful impact on museum attendance. Overall, individuals with a college degree are nearly twice as likely to visit a cultural institution as someone with less than a high school education.



#### 4. Implications for Audience Expansion

The link between college education and attendance at cultural institutions is clear and strong. Future research will determine the reasons behind this connection. For the time being, we can simply accept it as a given and consider its implications for developing audiences. There are altogether 63 million adults in America who did not visit a cultural institution within the last year. Nearly 90 percent of them have a high school education or less. Convincing a sizable percentage of these non-visitors to come to

cultural institutions would probably be very difficult and a long-term challenge. At least it would require a major investment of effort and, possibly, a complete re-definition of how museums relate to the public.

More likely immediate prospects for audience expansion are the 44 million visitors to cultural institutions who only visit one type of museum. It seems reasonable to suggest that a significant portion of these 44 million could be persuaded to visit one more institution each year. Imaginative collaborations among museums of different types could be wise investments for the increased stability of all cultural institutions.

WHO ATTENDS OUR CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS? 1994 Attendance : 18 Years Old and Over			
Group	Potential Audiences (In Millions)		
	In the US Population	Current Visitors	Prospective Audience
Less Than HS Graduate	33	14	19
HS Graduate	108	72	36
BA/BS	26	21	5
Advanced Degrees	<u>18</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>3</u>
Total	185	122	63

Source: Smithsonian Institution Marketing Study (SIMS) and 1990 U.S. Census Data

### 5. Afterthoughts

This presentation at the AAM meeting in May provoked lively discussion. Several individuals have also written or called since that time. Questions were raised and possible hypotheses suggested.

A recurrent theme in the discussion was "how and why does education have such a powerful impact on attendance?" Does formal education, especially advanced education, lead to a greater interest in one's cultural heritage and natural environment? Does education impart specific values about the importance of making connections with "real things?" Are there certain skills taught in colleges and universities which facilitate museum visiting?

Alternatively, are the same forces which discourage some young people from continuing formal education also present in the museum context? Most "adult" museums (e.g., art museums, history and natural history museums), present themselves as environments which place a high positive value on intellectual and conceptual activity. Some individuals, who through personality or background, tend not to place high values on the manipulation of abstract concepts, may feel alienated in such environments.



The increasing scarcity of leisure time in contemporary society makes leisure time choices even more difficult. While museums have always competed with other voluntary activities, they are facing ever more compelling alternatives. Unless museums better understand what draws people to them so that they can reinforce those effects, their attendance will inevitably decline in the long term.

Note

I would like to express my appreciation to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Institutional Advancement for use of the SIMS data, and to Adam Bickford and Andrew J. Pekarik, Institutional Studies Office for their technical assistance and suggestions. Comments should be addressed to Zahava D. Doering, Institutional Studies Office, MRC 405, Smithsonian Institution, 900 Jefferson Drive, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20560.