



Photo by Mel Cardona, Ennis Carter, Social Impact Studios

Introduction

National survey data are used to allocate resources and recognize the activities and needs of groups throughout the country. Native people are often undercounted or underrepresented in such data, in part because most national surveys are not tested with Native populations before they are fielded. Such surveys' content validity—the extent to which respondents can understand and fully answer their questions—is therefore unknown. This study examines the content validity of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), the nation's pre-eminent source of data on arts and cultural attendance, consumption, creation, and learning. It focuses on how well the survey measures the artistic and cultural participation of Native adults. It identifies several ways survey questions may have led to incomplete or inaccurate responses by Native peoples and recommends revisions to make them more inclusive and valid.

What is the research context?

First Peoples Fund is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the cultural, artistic, and ancestral practices of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities. It supports Native artists and families through grants, fellowships, and residency programs.

Research Approach

Researchers interviewed Native-identifying adults to see how they interpreted questions from a national survey that has guided policy and resource allocation in the arts since the 1980s. Interviews assessed whether the survey questions functioned as intended. The researchers revised the questions after each round of interviews and learned from respondents in subsequent rounds whether the revisions made questions clearer or more relevant.

This study was conducted in partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago, an independent, nonprofit, social science research organization. The team included researchers from both organizations, as well as two expert advisors and two community-based consultants. The team conducted three waves of interviews with Native-identifying adults, including in-person interviews with respondents in the Santa Fe, N.M., area and virtual

Research brief based on *Measuring What Matters: Enhancing Native Representation in National Arts Participation Measures* led by Gwendolyn Rugg, Mitchell R. Barrows, Ellen Bloss, Justin Pequeño, and Lara Evans.

interviews with respondents throughout the United States.

What are the research findings?

The study suggests that some SPPA survey items, as worded, do not fully capture the artistic and cultural participation of Native people. Researchers found three types of limitations in how some survey questions are constructed. The first is a narrow recognition of *art forms and activities*. For example, some SPPA items implicitly or explicitly center Western art forms and activities, and to some respondents appear to exclude art forms and activities pertinent to Native communities, such as beadwork and ceremonial dance.

The second is a constrained description of the *physical contexts for artistic and cultural participation*. Several survey items emphasize arts engagement that happens in ticketed, entertainment, or commercial contexts. Many Native respondents engage in artistic practices in different spaces, such as ceremonial grounds, family kitchens, and community halls, which they sometimes felt were not reflected in the survey questions.

The third relates to how the survey asks about *motivations for participating in the arts*. Questions that frame participation chiefly as “leisure,” a “pastime,” or professional work overlook common motivations reported by Native respondents, such as cultural preservation, social responsibility, spiritual practice, and community healing.

As a result of these three limitations, many respondents inadvertently excluded central aspects of their artistic and cultural lives, because the language of the questions did not prompt those associations.

To address these limitations, researchers propose modest revisions to some SPPA questions to increase what they call the *cultural flexibility* of the questions and allow a wider range of interpretations of artistic and cultural participation. The study suggests that these revisions would help questions capture a fuller range of art forms, contexts for arts participation, and motivations for arts participation, positioning the SPPA to better reflect community-based or traditional modes of artistic and cultural engagement that are central to Native communities and many other people across the U.S.

Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation. (2025). *Towards Inclusive Data Collection in the Arts* led by Gwendolyn Rugg, Mitchell R. Barrows, Ellen Bloss, Justin Pequeño, and Lara Evans. New York: The Wallace Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A04954.001>

Read More

Measuring What Matters: How conventional arts surveys overlook Native creative practices & the call for more culturally responsive research. <https://www.firstpeoplesfund.org/research/measuring-what-matters>

Implications for Stakeholders

This study underscores the significant role that the phrasing of survey questions plays in shaping how people understand and answer the questions. It also demonstrates a need for greater cultural flexibility in the wording and structure of certain survey items to more fully capture the artistic, cultural, and creative activities happening in Native and other communities across the United States.

This study also takes a step toward enabling greater visibility of Native people in national data on artistic and cultural participation, which can inform federal policy and provide insights into the vitality of the arts in America.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.