

MUSEUMS
FOR ME.



**Museums For Me: Engaging Canadians
on the Future of Museums**

What We Heard Report

Prepared by Hill+Knowlton Strategies

June, 2021



Acknowledgements



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Report prepared by Hill+Knowlton Strategies Canada on behalf of the Alberta Museums Association.

Contributing Partners:

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Alberta Museums Association
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Executive Summary

At a time of increased urgency around discussions about social change and with lives disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Alberta Museums Association (AMA) wanted to examine the role of Canada's museums in an uncertain future. In late 2020 and early 2021, the AMA consulted more than 3,000 Canadians to find out what people think about the museums of today and how they serve (or don't serve) their communities, what museums could become in the future, and how to turn that vision into reality.

Previous research conducted in 1974 and 2016 revealed that Canadians had a very high level of trust in their museums. Most people thought they contributed to the quality of life in their community and almost everyone wanted museums to preserve the past and help people learn about art, nature and history. Although a lot has changed since then, the AMA's engagement process showed that museums continue to enjoy considerable respect among Canadians and tell stories that matter to them and their communities.

Today's Museums

Two-thirds of survey respondents said they visit a museum at least three times a year, and almost two in five visit more than six times a year; just one in six say they never visit a museum. National or regional museums are the most popular, with nine out of 10 people visiting museums when travelling, while two in five say they have never visited a local museum. Most people get personal enjoyment from visiting a museum, with the relevance and quality of exhibitions – both permanent and temporary – the top consideration when planning their visit, along with the availability of learning programs and activities for children. Other important considerations are special events (such as festivals) and museum tours. Membership benefits are an important consideration for roughly half of museum visitors, as is the cost of admission.

Museums are seen as a place to learn and be inspired, to preserve and care for art and objects, to help tourists and visitors explore a region or place, and to help people understand other cultures and communities. While most people, including youth, say museums make them feel welcome and reflect their interests and needs, there was general agreement that more should be done to help people understand today's world and address a variety of social and economic issues, such as inclusion and accessibility, technological and digital advancement, and Indigenous reconciliation. More than three-quarters of people say museums should help people understand and accommodate people from other regions and cultures, but a significant minority, particularly younger Canadians, feel museums are too Euro-centric in their approach.

We also heard about some of the challenges currently faced by Canada's museums, including an over-reliance on volunteers, a funding system that remains primarily collections-focused, insufficient communications among museums, and a lack of attention to sustainability issues.

Tomorrow's Museums

Several people told us that today's museums are perceived to cater to mostly middle-class, educated people and need to become less "stuffy" to appeal to a larger demographic. They want museums of tomorrow to continue to serve their community, be flexible in adapting to changing situations and requirements, and provide digestible information that laypeople can relate to and understand. Many people want museums to be more representative of all Canadians, to tell more relevant stories, and to work with the cultural groups to whom those stories belong. This should include substantive roles for Indigenous communities and LGBTQ2+¹ and other groups to direct and guide museums, perhaps through the creation of advisory bodies that would include representatives of those groups.

There was general agreement museums should remain neutral in how they tell stories and not try to force a particular perspective on visitors, although a significant minority want museums to be more active in advocating for social change and to better represent Canada's colonial past. This is particularly true among youth, who see museums as archives and conservators of the past but also show more interest in museums becoming more activist, progressive teaching institutions that are engaged with society and which deliver a more contemporary focus.

We heard that more needs to be done to make museums accessible to all Canadians, not only through reducing or waiving admission fees but also by creating a mix of physical and virtual spaces. People told us that online options can feel more approachable and allow museums to reach audiences who might not otherwise visit them, offering a "sneak peek" that could entice more people to purchase a ticket for admission, while physical spaces could be enhanced with more immersive experiences, including audio-visual features.

We also heard that museums should do more to raise awareness of what they have to offer and to bring them to the forefront of people's minds, including through a stronger social media presence and by "taking the museum to the streets" with traveling exhibits throughout the community and in schools and other community spaces. It was suggested that a national registry for museums and galleries be created to allow them to share their success stories with each other.

"Museums should be a "Lieu de vie," meaning a place of life. A place that makes you learn, feel, reflect and a place you leave thinking differently."

– Dialogue Session Participant

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Two-Spirit

While some people said museums need more financial support from governments, others said more support should come from foundations and institutions. Regardless of which approach is taken, however, it was agreed that building financial resilience requires museums to become more meaningful to their community so people see the worth of the establishment. One way to do this is for communities to be consulted to find out what they are looking for in their museums and to develop programs that resonate with community interests. Another is for museums to reconceptualize their physical space as a community gathering place rather than just a building housing their collections.

Adapt and Change

This engagement process has confirmed that museums remain highly valued by Canadians, both as places to learn and be inspired and as places that help Canadians understand themselves and others. People have placed a lot of trust in Canada's museums, but they want them to become more inclusive and representative of an increasingly diverse country, to contribute to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and to become agents of social change. The AMA is grateful for the many comments and suggestions it received during this process which will be invaluable as it continues to reimagine Canada's museums for the future.

Project Overview

Purpose

Events over the past few years have created an urgency to discussions around social change. From Indigenous reconciliation to Black Lives Matter to climate change, things are changing quickly. And while the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of everyone, it's important to examine how Canada's cultural institutions, including our museums, can be a part of what has become an uncertain future. As part of this examination, we wanted to engage with Canadians of diverse backgrounds, regions and experience to gather meaningful input about what museums mean to them, why they matter and what they should look like in the future to maximize their value, relevance and engagement in our communities and society. We also wanted to understand some of the barriers to Canadians' engagement with museums and how they could be addressed.

Methodology

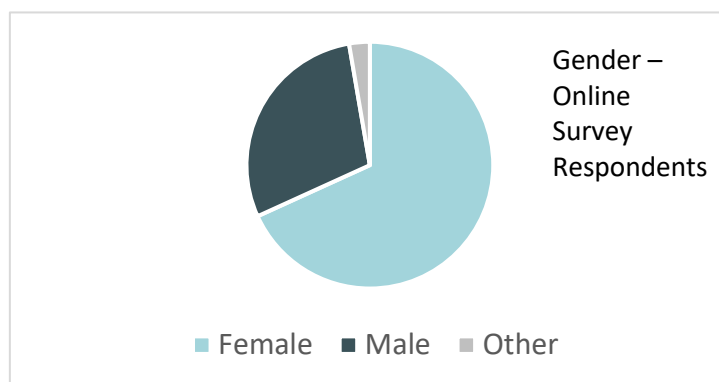
Over a period of six months, from October to March 2021, Hill+Knowlton Strategies undertook a series of consultations on behalf of the Alberta Museums Association² using an online survey, online dialogue sessions and public opinion research to explore where museums are today and where they need to be to maximize value. The Alberta Museums Association also convened a meeting of several Fellows of the Canadian Museums Association to gain their insights into the challenges and opportunities for museums in Canada.

1. Online Survey

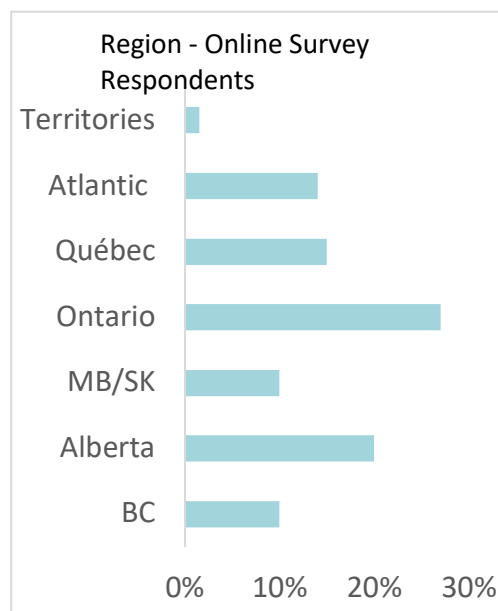
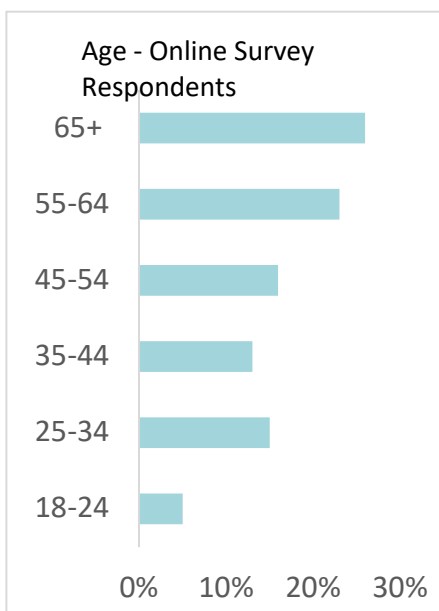
When panel respondents were asked to identify up to three of the most valuable functions of museums, nearly three-quarters listed museums as places to educate people about history and the natural world (73%) and to preserve history (71%). Two in five (41%) said museums help visitors and tourists explore a region or place and one-third (33%) said they help people understand important cultural and social issues. Fewer than one in five included museums as places to advance knowledge as research institutions (19%), places for personal or family recreation (18%) or community spaces, like public libraries (17%) in their list of top 3 functions, while providing context and inspiration regarding today's most pressing issues such as climate change was included by about one in seven (14%). While youth and seniors (those aged 65 or older) both selected "educating people about history and the natural world" (69%) and "to preserve history" (64%) most often, seniors were the most likely to see these roles changing in the future, and youth were the least likely.

² This project is lead by the Alberta Museums Association in partnership with a consortium of Provincial and Territorial Museum Associations as well as the Canadian Museums Association. Together, the consortium represents the Canadian museum community from coast to coast to coast and works collaboratively to address the needs of the Canadian museum sector.

Two-thirds (68%) of respondents were female, 29% were male and 1% identified themselves as “other.” Just under half (46%) said they have children and three in five (62%) said they work with people under the age of 18, although only 20% said they work in education.



Almost half of respondents (49%) live in urban areas, 22% in semi-urban areas, 27% in rural areas and 2% in remote areas. Roughly a quarter (27%) were from Ontario, one in five (20%) were from Alberta and one in six (16%) were from Quebec. The rest were from British Columbia (10%), Nova Scotia (7%), Saskatchewan (6%), New Brunswick (5%), Manitoba (4%) and the rest of Canada (4%). The age distribution of respondents was fairly even, with 26% aged 65 or older, 23% aged between 55 and 64, 17% between 45 and 54, 16% between 25 and 34, and 14% between 35 and 44. Five per cent of respondents were aged 18-24.



Of those who chose to provide some additional information about themselves, about one in 11 respondents (9%) said they have a disability, 7% identified as LGBTQ2S+³, 4% identified as

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Two-Spirit

BIPOC⁴, 5% as Métis and 1% as First Nations. Four per cent said they were recent immigrants to Canada, and another 4% said they were from a linguistic minority.

Dialogue Sessions

In November and December 2020, Hill+Knowlton Strategies supported the Alberta Museums Association in hosting four online dialogue sessions (three in English, one in French) to hear from interested Canadians about their vision of the future of museums. Participants had to register to take part.

A social media campaign promoting opportunities to participate was supplemented by direct outreach to Consortium member associations, provincial and territorial museum association member museums, and civil society organizations, educators and the arts community. A small honorarium was offered to members of the public who took part but who did not represent a business, organization or institution. A total of 87 participants from across Canada took part in the four sessions.

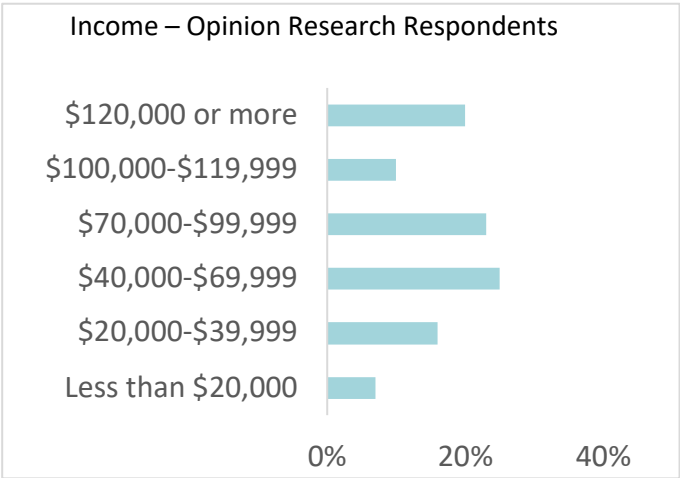
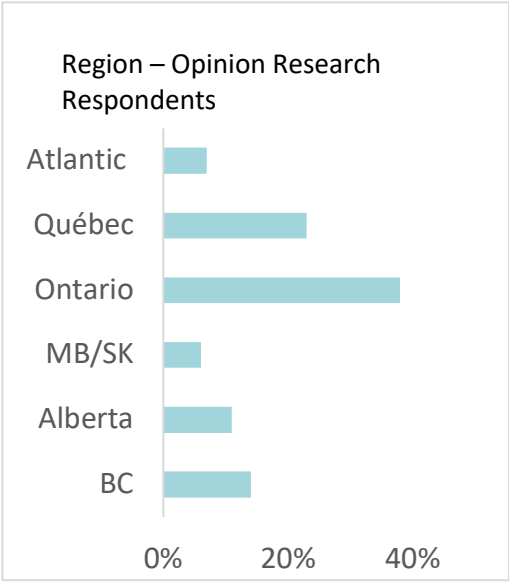
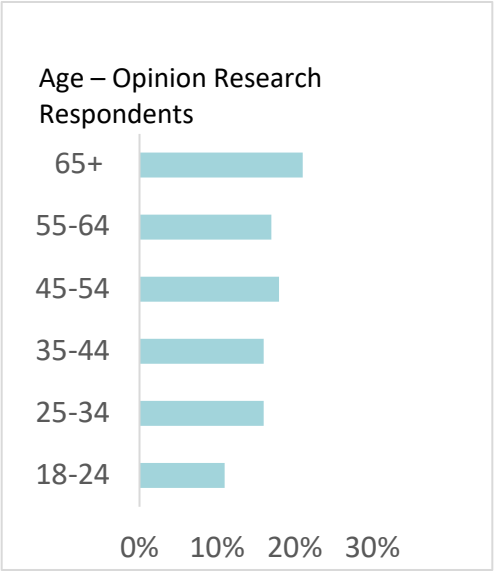
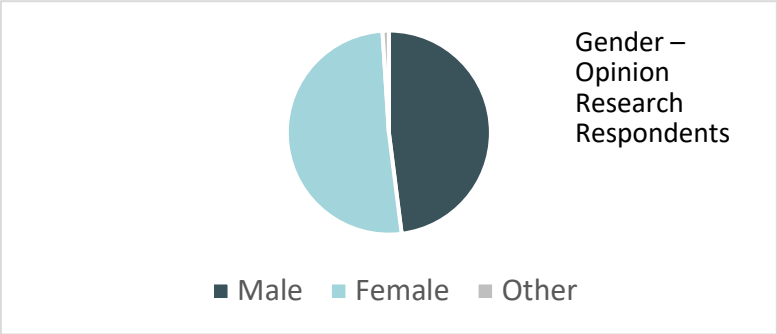
CMA Fellows' Meeting

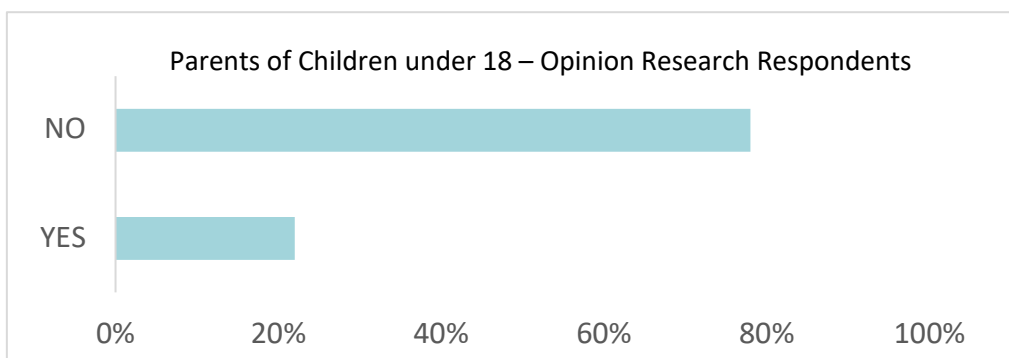
On December 16, 2020, the Alberta Museums Association hosted an online meeting with some Fellows of the Canadian Museums Association to hear their views about what the museum of the future should be to deliver value to communities and what needs to be done to get there. The seven Fellows who took part were from British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec.

Public Opinion Research

To enhance the input contributed through the online survey, dialogue sessions and CMA Fellows' meeting, Hill+Knowlton Strategies conducted additional public opinion research via Leger Opinion's online panel to survey 1,400 Canadians over the period March 12-17, 2021. The sample was randomly selected based on the quotas to reflect census data for age, gender and regions in Canada. Respondents who identify as "Indigenous" and those with a household income below \$40,000 were oversampled by an extra 200 cases each. The data was weighted to ensure representativeness by age, gender and region. An associated margin of error for a probability-based sample of n=1,400 is $\pm 2.6\%$, 19 times out of 20.

⁴ Black, Indigenous and People of Colour





Hill+Knowlton Strategies collated the information from the online survey, dialogue sessions, Fellows’ meeting and public opinion research and summarized the findings in this report. Additional detailed information is provided in the appendices to this report.

Findings

What We Heard: Museums of Today

An important step in imagining what the museums of tomorrow should look like is to understand how they are perceived and used today, and how those perceptions and uses have changed over time. Research conducted in 1974 found that four out of five Canadians thought museums contributed to the quality of life in their community and that almost everyone (96%) wanted them to preserve the past and offer opportunities to learn about art, nature and history.⁵ Similar research in 2016 showed these perceptions were continuing, with 96% of Canadians believing museums are trusted sources of information about history.⁶

Since then, a lot has changed, including a more diverse and aging Canada, and an increasingly more educated and connected population. There is also a growing urgency to discussions about such things as reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, Black Lives Matter, and climate change.

As part of our engagement process, we asked respondents to our online survey and the Leger Opinion online panel to tell us about their experiences with museums in their communities. The CMA Fellows also spent part of their meeting reflecting on the current situation of Canada’s museums.

⁵ Dixon, B.; Courtney, A; Bailey, R., *The Museum and the Canadian Public*. Toronto: Published for Arts and Culture Branch, Dept. of the Secretary of State, Government of Canada by Culturcan Publications, 1974

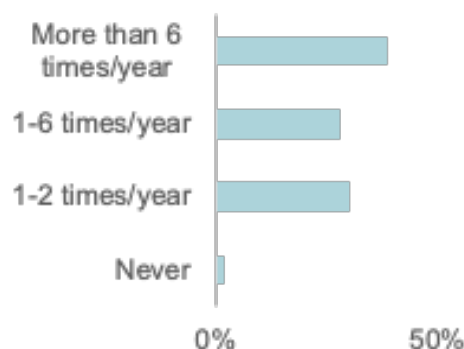
⁶ *Arts and Heritage Access and Availability Survey 2016-17*, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2017.
<https://canadacouncil.ca/research/research-library/2017/07/arts-and-heritage-access>

The museum experience

Almost all survey respondents (94%) live near a museum, with two-thirds (67%) visiting one at least three times a year and 39% visiting more than six times a year. Most people (89%) visit museums when travelling and almost as many (83%) visit when there are special exhibits. Two-thirds (67%) visit for special museum events, such as exhibit openings, talks and galas, and three in five (61%) say museums are somewhere they go when hosting visitors. About one-third (35%) visit to attend specific programs such as camps, classes and tours, and one in seven (14%) attend special occasions and events (e.g., weddings, birthday parties, etc.) held at museums. A small number of respondents (6%) said they only visit when admission is free.

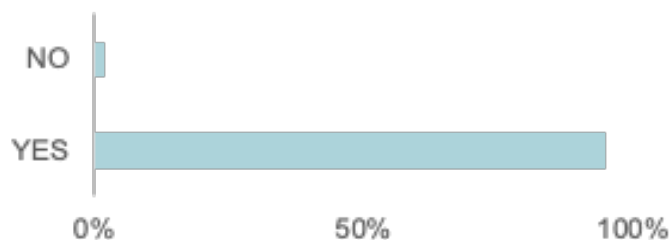
For those who took part in the Leger Opinion panel, one in five (20%) say they visit museums often, with 19% visiting between two and six times a year and 1% who visit more than once a month. This figure is down by about a quarter since before COVID-19, however, when one in four (26%) of panel respondents visited museums often. About three in five (62%) now visit museums occasionally, either once a year (19%) or once every few years (43%), slightly higher than before the pandemic, when 57% visited museums occasionally. Those who say they never visit museums has stayed the same at about one in six (16% before COVID-19, 17% after).

Museum Visitation - Online Survey Respondents



Almost all survey respondents (94%) say museums make them feel welcome and provide what they need for their visits, while only 2% say they did not. For online panel respondents, 83% say museums make them feel welcome and 5% say they do not.

"Do you feel welcome" - Online Survey Respondents



Youth (respondents aged 18-24) who took part in the panel said they visit museums at rate comparable to that of the general public, with more than 40% having visited at least once in the year before COVID-19 and 21% having visited between two and six times. Youth also said they feel welcome in museums, but at a slightly lower level (87%) than overall survey respondents.

The top consideration for survey respondents when planning a visit to a museum is the relevance and quality of exhibitions, cited by 88% of respondents. The cost of visiting is a consideration for just over half (53%) of respondents, followed by whether the museum offers a safe environment in the context of COVID-19 (43%). Roughly one-third considered the programs that are available at a museum (36%) and whether there are places to sit and rest (33%). About one in four people planning a visit to a museum consider the places to eat there (27%), accessibility issues (25%), activities for children, such as interactive exhibitions, discovery programming and day camps (23%) and outdoor spaces (23%). Just over one in five (22%) take into account the places to shop at a museum.

In a similar vein, we asked online survey respondents to tell us how important various elements are to their overall museum experience. Given their rankings of what they consider before visiting a museum, it is no surprise they put exhibitions at the top of their list. Just over nine in 10 people (91%) identified new, changing or temporary exhibitions as an important element, followed closely by a museum's permanent collections (88%) and special touring exhibitions (83%). Learning programs, such as demonstrations or docent talks, are important for 82% of respondents, along with activities for children, such as interactive exhibitions, discovery programming and day camps (80%), special events such as Open-Doors, festivals, etc. (75%) and museum tours (66%). The top amenities cited by respondents as important elements of a museum visit are places to sit (72%), shop (50%) and eat (48%). Membership benefits are seen as important for roughly half (49%) of respondents but not important for about one in five (22%). Spaces for events such as weddings, birthdays or corporate events were considered important by just one-third (33%) of respondents, while slightly more (37%) said they are not an important element.

The role of museums

Survey respondents say museums play many roles in people's lives and the life of their communities. Some almost universal roles are as a place to learn and be inspired (97%), a place to preserve and care for art and objects (95%), to help visitors and tourists explore a region or place (94%) and to help people understand other cultures and communities (93%). Most people say museums give them personal enjoyment (96%), are a place for family outings (89%) and a safe place (88%). Other significant roles include providing information and perspective on important cultural and social issues (88%), advancing knowledge as research institutions (87%), serving as a place for recreation, relaxation and entertainment (83%) and somewhere that helps with health and well-being, including mental health (81%). Museums are also seen as improving a community as landmarks or architectural fixtures (87%), community spaces similar to public libraries (85%), a space to think or be alone (79%) and a place for public gatherings

(76%). One in 10 respondents said museums create intergenerational links or links to history, and one in 20 said they are economic drivers in their communities.

Online panel respondents saw many important roles for museums, with nearly nine out of 10 (87%) agreeing they should preserve objects and knowledge from Canada's history. About four out of five agreed museums should preserve objects and knowledge from Indigenous history (81%) and show and explain important achievements in science and technology, important features of the natural world and important cultural achievements (82%). Just over three-quarters (77%) agreed museums should help people understand and accommodate people from other regions and cultures.

Our survey also revealed that there are many ways museums inspire people, including as places that spark curiosity, provoke wonder, and promote creativity and a "love of learning," cited by 92% of respondents. Museums are similarly seen as educational institutions that are great for children (88%), places that develop and sustain specific interests (87%) and inspire personal development and "well-roundedness" (82%). They also improve the quality of life in a community (84%), are good for mental health and provide restful and calm places (81%) and give people a sense of belonging and membership in a community (77%). When we asked people to identify any other ways that museums inspire them, 3% said they inspire conversation and action on important social issues and represent other cultures and differences, and 2% said they inspire tolerance, understanding or acceptance.

When panel respondents were asked to identify up to three of the most valuable functions of museums, nearly three-quarters listed museums as places to educate people about history and the natural world (73%) and to preserve history (71%). Two in five (41%) said museums help visitors and tourists explore a region or place and one-third (33%) said they help people understand important cultural and social issues. Fewer than one in five included museums as places to advance knowledge as research institutions (19%), places for personal or family recreation (18%) or community spaces, like public libraries (17%) in their list of top 3 functions, while providing context and inspiration regarding today's most pressing issues such as climate change was included by about one in seven (14%). While youth and seniors (those aged 65 or older) both selected "educating people about history and the natural world" (69%) and "to preserve history" (64%) most often, seniors were the most likely to see these roles changing in the future, and youth were the least likely.

On the specific issue of local museums in their community, most online panel respondents (83%) agreed they are a place to know the history of a particular area, while about three-quarters agreed they bring communities together by serving as a reminder of the achievements and discoveries located closer to home (77%) and bring value to their community (74%). Slightly fewer said local museums provide a sense of community (70%) and can be a place to engage with the community (68%). However, when asked if they are aware of local museums in their community, only two-thirds (65%) said they were and just one in eight (13%) said they visit a local museum often. More than one-quarter of panel respondents (27%) said they were unaware of their local museums and two in five (39%) said they have never visited a local

museum. Youth visit local museums more often than the average Canadian, with responses showing their age group has gone to one at least once every few years at a rate 10% higher than overall panel respondents and fewer than one in three (31%) youth never having visited a local museum.

Museums in society

Almost all survey respondents (92%) said museums can help them learn about the world around them, but only one in five (20%) said this is because they reflect today's world. (These figures differed slightly for online panel respondents, 78% of whom said museums can help them learn but 28% of whom agreed that they reflect today's world.) Just 3% of survey respondents said museums cannot help them and 5% were not sure. Four in five survey respondents (79%) said museums tell stories that matter to them and their community, and reflect their interests and needs through exhibitions, collections and programs, about one in 12 (8%) said they do not, and 13% were not sure. Youth respondents agreed that museums help people learn about the world around them but also agree they do not always accurately reflect today's world. Just over one-third (36%) of youth agreed that museums are most important in providing context for important contemporary cultural and social issues.

Online panel respondents were less sure about how well museums tell stories that reflect their values and those of their communities, with fewer than three in five who said that they did (57%) and that museums reflect their cultural needs in their exhibitions, collections and programs (54%). About one in six (17%) of panel respondents – and more than one-quarter (28%) of those aged between 18 and 24 – believe museums tend to only reflect European approaches to culture.

Digging deeper, we asked survey respondents to tell us how well museums help people understand and positively address a variety of social and economic issues. The three most cited issues were inclusion and accessibility (69%), technological and digital advancement (68%) and Indigenous reconciliation (67%). Other issues identified by more than half of respondents were globalization (61%), wellness, well-being and mental health (54%), socio-economic inequalities (53%), racial injustice (52%), gender inequality (52%) and climate change (51%). At the bottom of the list were economic or employment uncertainty, with 32% saying museums can help improve understanding of that issue and 27% saying they cannot, and the COVID-19 pandemic (31% think museums can help and 26% think they cannot).

CMA Fellows

Although the Fellows meeting focused mostly on what museums of tomorrow should be and how to get there, it did include some observations about the challenges faced by today's museums. These include a funding system that is still primarily collections-focused, insufficient communications among museums, an over-reliance on volunteers (including board members)

and a lack of sufficient attention to sustainability issues. Some Fellows expressed the view that museums are often irrelevant to Indigenous and migrant communities, and that traveling exhibitions are spectacle- and events-based experiences not usually related to the museum or the community. Fellows noted that museums have high levels of trust that can be built upon and that smaller museums are often more successful in innovating and making changes than larger institutions.

The Fellows also identified some museums they consider to be exemplary, such as the International Slavery Museum (UK), Museum as Muck (UK), Kvveener Museum (Sweden), Tenement Museum (USA), District Six Museum (South Africa), and several museums in Umeå, Sweden.

What We Heard: Museums of the Future

A key objective of this engagement process is to find out what Canadians think the museums of the future should look like to maximize their value, relevance and engagement in our communities and society – or, as one of the CMA Fellows put it in their meeting, “If we closed, would someone recreate museums? And if so, what would they create?”

Much of the discussion about museums of the future took place during the dialogue sessions and the Fellows meeting, but online survey and panel respondents also offered some views on whether and how museums should change.

Accessibility and Atmosphere

Dialogue session participants noted that museums currently cater to mostly middle-class and educated people, which makes them less-inviting spaces for many people in Canada. It was suggested museums need to become less “stuffy” and traditional so they become more inclusive and appeal to a larger demographic. (Interestingly, when we asked online panel respondents whether museums are only for elites, just one in 11 (9%) agreed while more than three-quarters (78%) disagreed.)

In the dialogue sessions, we heard that museums need to serve the community, be flexible in how they adapt to changing situations and requirements and cater to the public by including digestible and relatable information for laypeople to understand and connect with in some way. One participant said that providing services in multiple languages could be an important consideration as it might help connect people with their museums, impact how they view and absorb content, and keep them interested in what the museum has to offer.

There was considerable discussion about the “voice” of museums, with dialogue session participants generally feeling it should be neutral and not tell the public how to feel or try to force perspectives on them. The CMA Fellows tended to agree with this, with some noting museums should move from being places of objects or ideas to places that challenge and tell

difficult truths in addressing civil society issues. “We need to move from objects to subjects,” said one Fellow, citing Brazil’s museums in the favelas as a possible inspiration.

Online panel respondents were more divided in their views, with 70% agreeing that museums should be neutral and unbiased in their presentation of material and exhibits, 50% who support museums being progressive and teaching us new ways of thinking, 49% who want museums to be a record of old ways of thinking, and 40% who support museums taking a stand in their presentation of exhibits that challenge the status quo. (Four in five (80%) panel participants aged 65 or older agree or strongly agree that museums should be neutral in their presentation of materials, but only two-thirds (65%) of those aged 18-24 voiced this opinion.) About twice as many panel respondents thought museums should provide more “interpretation” of the material they present (40%) than those (22%) who thought there should be less. While the 57% of youth who agree that museums should be progressive does not drastically differentiate that demographic from the average, youth are significantly over indexed in their ambivalence and disagreement with the statement that museums are primarily records of old ways of thinking.

We also heard that more needs to be done to make it easier for people to access museums by waiving fees, either by offering free exhibits in part of the museum or free entry to the entire museum for certain groups, and by doing more to make collections and programs accessible online.

“Fees aren’t the only barrier, as even when exhibits are free it is still middle-class people who take advantage these opportunities. There’s a psychological barrier as well. People don’t think to go to museums either because they don’t feel represented, or they think museums are too stuffy.”

– Dialogue session participant

Online survey respondents agreed on the need for more relevant story telling when we asked them to identify up to three things that would encourage them to visit a museum more often. Their most popular suggestion was for museums to tell stories that are important to them (43%) and to different communities (39%), both well ahead of other suggestions such as having more museums near them (29%), having more open, admission-free spaces (29%) and making museums less expensive to visit (24%).

Survey respondents also had suggestions for how museums can better address societal issues such as Indigenous reconciliation, racial injustice, gender equality and climate change. Two-thirds (65%) say museums should play a prominent role in education and just over half (52%) say they need to be more representative of all Canadians. Forty-four per cent want museums to be more active in advocating for social change, 41% want them to better represent Canada’s colonial past and colonized institutions, and 31% say museums should be neutral and apolitical. One in seven respondents (14%) believe museums are “part of the problem” and 6% don’t think museums can have an impact on societal issues.

Collaboration

We heard from dialogue session participants that museums need to do more for the community in order to build trust and loyalty with the public, including having community members embedded within management and on boards. There should be more collaboration with community groups, local artists and the tourism industry, as partnerships and cross-promotional opportunities are important from a business and a cultural standpoint and to help people see the value in museums. This is especially important for small community museums with limited staff and resources.

We also heard that museums should be ‘decolonized,’ as there is likely more to each story, and that museums should work with, rather than just speak to, the cultural groups to whom these stories belong. There should be substantive roles for Indigenous communities, First Nations, Métis, LGBTQ2+ and other groups to direct and guide those cultural spaces, possibly through the creation of advisory tables. Indigenous communities need to have more narrative control over their stories.

Physical and Virtual Spaces

It was agreed in the dialogue sessions that the museums of the future need to be a mix of physical and virtual, as there are interpretive experiences in a physical venue that cannot be replicated online or virtually, but online options allow museums to reach audiences who might not otherwise visit them, including people living in the local community, as has been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical spaces should be more immersive, with more audio-visual experiences, while virtual spaces could offer a more comfortable, less “stuffy” experience, perhaps moderated by a lay person or member of the community.

“Museums should be the heart of the community. They should be multipurposed and seen as more than a museum. A museum should be used as a gathering place, a venue for events, a place to meet friends or conduct business meetings. It’s important to open it up to the public and make it more welcoming by adding in restaurants, cafes or free exhibit spaces so that locals are encouraged to visit again and again.”

– Dialogue session participant

What We Heard: How to Become the Museum of the Future

Accessibility

We heard that making museums more accessible involves both how people visit them and how much it costs to visit them.

Dialogue session participants stressed that art and culture belong to everyone but that fees can be a barrier or deterrent for some people. Virtual tours or programming that is offered for free

have been great ways to give people a “sneak peek” of the museum, after which they might be more willing to pay the entry fee to see the rest. Even free entry for a section of the museum or the gift shop or café can be a good way to interest people in paying for full admission. It was suggested that free entry programs could be initiated for certain groups or target demographics, or a system of “museum by donation” could be used where people are encouraged to pay a recommended amount for entry, but which allows them to pay what they think their visit was worth. Another suggestion was to establish a “pay it forward” program for people to pay the admission of others who cannot afford it, as this would encourage accessibility for those who do not think about going to museums or feel unwelcome. One participant thought museums could partner with local libraries so people with a library card could get a free pass to a museum.

Participants believe museums need to do more to bring themselves to the forefront of people’s minds, both through a stronger social media presence to raise awareness of what is available in someone’s community and by “taking the museum to the streets” through traveling exhibits set up in various locations in a community or through “museums in a box” that allow museums to go to the public rather than the public coming to them. This could include taking artifacts and collections to places such as seniors’ homes or schools.

Relatability and Collaboration

Building on the suggestion that museums of the future must create exhibits and experiences that better relate to diverse community groups, dialogue session participants stressed the need for museums to work with those groups to gain insight into their stories. People want to see themselves represented in their museums, particularly in small communities. One person thought it could be useful to create a national registry for museums and galleries to record and share their success stories online.

The CMA Fellows also saw the need to talk to the community to find out what they are looking for in museums and whether diverse communities see themselves reflected in them. A new governance model might be needed, with people from the community included in reevaluating and reimagining approaches, and to ensure any changes are visible. Online panel respondents supported this, with 58% agreeing that museums should have dialogues with local communities to develop programs that resonate with community interests and more than a quarter expressing interest in taking part in community engagement sessions conducted by nearby museums (29%) or a brainstorming session to share their ideas about the choice and content for exhibits (28%).

One Fellow said museums need to become more “vulnerable” and speak more about stewardship rather than ownership. Museums remain trusted institutions, which can be a foundation upon which new stories and approaches are built, but they need to maintain their credibility even as they may move away from perceived neutrality. Another suggestion was for funding bodies to assess their objectives, as decolonization projects can only happen if someone decides to fund them.

Financial

There was much discussion about how to finance the museums of the future, with dialogue session participants stressing that museums must become meaningful to their community in order to build financial resilience as people see the worth in the establishment. It was noted that museums have, to a large degree, created a business model that is defined by tourism, but COVID-19 has exposed the dangers in such a model. (When we asked online panel participants if museums are only for tourists, just 10% agreed, more than three-quarters (76%) disagreed and 11% were neutral on the question.)

While more funding is needed, there were different views about the best way to do that. Some dialogue session participants thought more financial support is needed from governments, but museums also need more support from foundations and institutions such as banks. A CMA Fellow took a different approach, suggesting Canada needs to move closer to the European Union model which is much less reliant on private-sector funding.

One participant said operational funding from governments would give museums the means to run their facilities and allow them to be creative and do more with other sources of funding. Another suggested that targeted grants should be available to incentivize museums to do specific things, such as provide more French-language content or increase ethnic group representation. Museum staff should receive better pay and benefits in order to maintain and sustain valuable, educated and passionate employees. As one person said, staff cannot bring value to the community through museums if they do not feel valued themselves.

Redefine – More than a Museum

A common theme in the dialogue sessions was the need to reimagine the museum of the future, both in terms of its physical space and its *raison d'être*.

Some participants said museums, like public libraries, must reconceptualize their physical space as a community gathering place, becoming a spot for people to meet and take part in activities and as a venue for events, while moving away from being only collections-based. The experiences they offer must be more immersive, experiential and interactive. One person pointed to the rise of private museums that create experiences for people in the leisure market and which are becoming places people can visit again and again. Many participants agreed with the International Council of Museum's proposed definition of a museum and would include zoos, science centres and other informal educational institutions in that definition.

Others said museums must position themselves as centres of expertise in various subjects, educating and entertaining visitors, but less focused on being the sole "authority of knowledge." They need to be the medium, giving voice back to the storytellers rather than being the storyteller themselves, and make sure that narratives are not exclusive. Museums should consider whether they will be neutral places where people feel comfortable, or whether they should take a stance, disrupt and make their audience reflect.

“One example of a different approach to a ‘museum’ is the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, Croatia. It’s very engaging and popular with attendees of all age. Visitors come eager to learn about how the objects and their stories which represent sad chapters in people’s lives. It grips people’s emotions and encourages reflection which is what a museum should do.”

– Dialogue Session Participant

What we heard museums do

- They tell a story
- They reflect the values of their communities and can take an infinity of roles (e.g., community space use, polling places for elections, growing food for their community)
- They educate visitors
- They can make history real and cultivate a sense of magic and wonder
- They keep the objects, buildings and land from being single-use resources
- They protect the community’s tangible past
- They provide a tourism draw that keeps the community viable

Conclusion

The past year has been a challenging one for Canadians. A global health emergency has transformed our day-to-day lives and created economic uncertainties for many people and institutions, including Canada’s museums. As we prepare to enter a post-pandemic future, it is important to be exploring how museums can be a part of that. This engagement process has been designed to help us find out what Canadians want from their museums and to gather ideas about how to meet those needs. We would like to thank everyone who took part and for their many comments and suggestions.

It is clear that museums are still highly valued, both as places to learn and to be inspired, and as places that preserve artifacts and help us better understand ourselves and others. It is also clear that museums need to adapt and change to remain valued, to become more inclusive and representative of an increasingly diverse country, and to become agents of social change. This What We Heard report is an important part of the process of reimagining Canada’s museums so they continue to be relevant, today and into the future.



Alberta Museums Association

***Museums For Me: Engaging Canadians on the Future of
Museums***

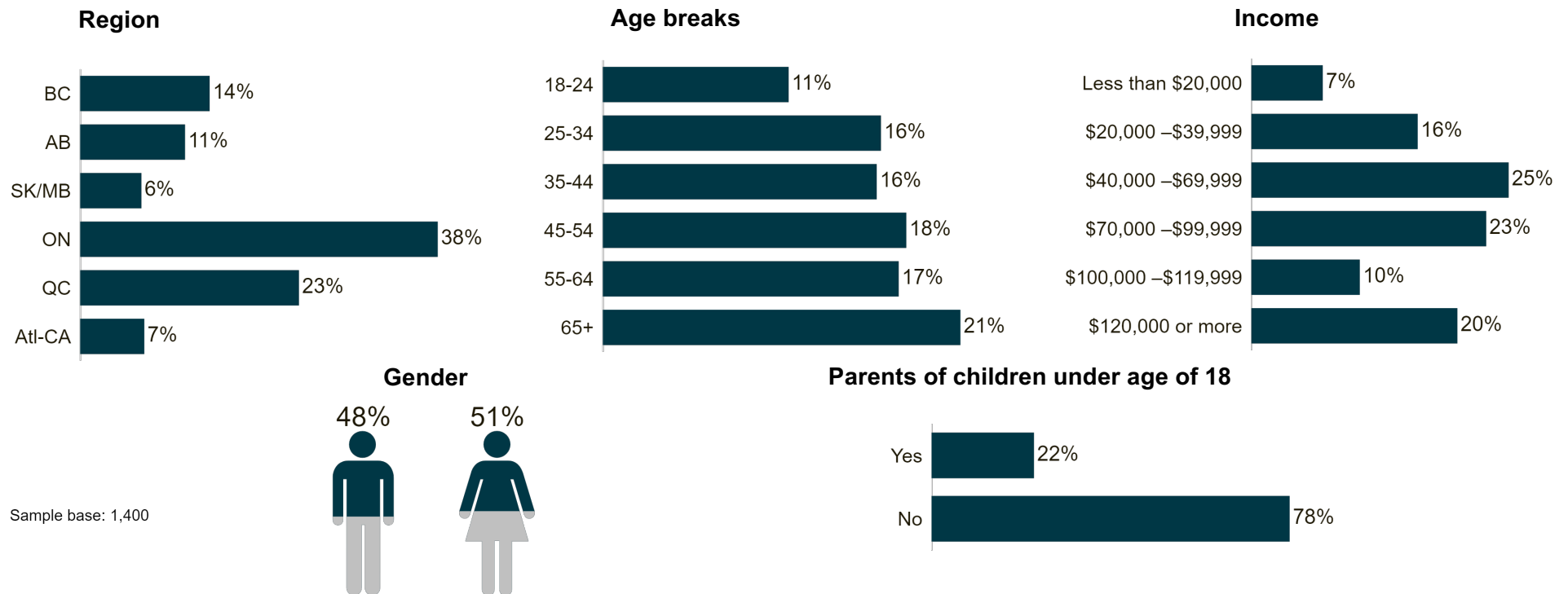
What We Heard Report

Appendix 1:

Public Opinion Research Results

Respondent Profile and Methodology

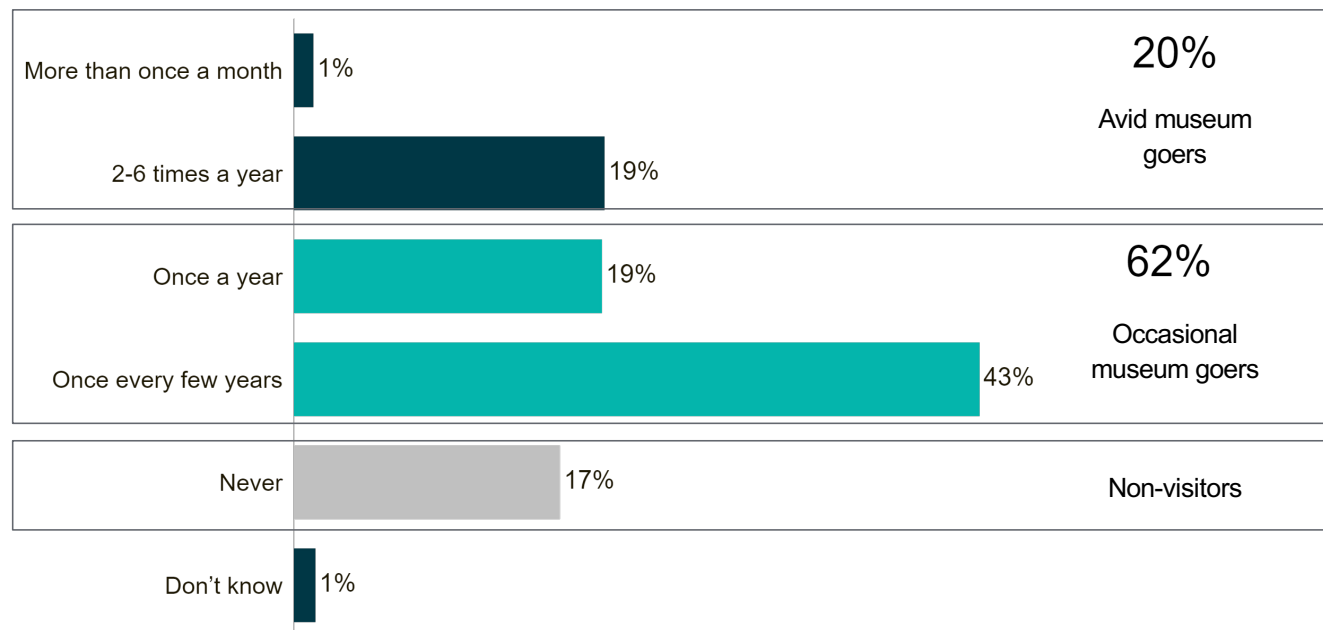
H+K Strategies accessed Leger Opinion (LEO)'s online panel to survey 1,400 Canadians over the period of March 12-17th, 2020. The sample was randomly selected based on the quotas to reflect census data for age, gender and regions in Canada. Respondents who identify as "Indigenous" and the ones who have an annual household income less than \$40k were oversampled by extra 200 cases each. The data was weighted to ensure representativeness by age, gender and regions. An associated margin of error for a probability-based sample of n=1,400 is $\pm 2.6\%$, 19 times out of 20.



Sample base: 1,400

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

In general, how often do you visit museums in Canada?



Subgroup analysis

- Respondents from the low-income group (<\$40K) are more likely to be non- visitors compared to the other income groups (27% vs. 14%).
- Younger respondents are more likely to be avid museum-goers compared to the older age groups.
 - Age 18-24 yrs. : More than once a month- 4%,
 - 25-34 yrs. : 2-6 times a year- 32%
 - 35-44 yrs.: 2-6 times a year - 29%
- Quebecers are more likely to be non-visitors when compared to the national average (25%).

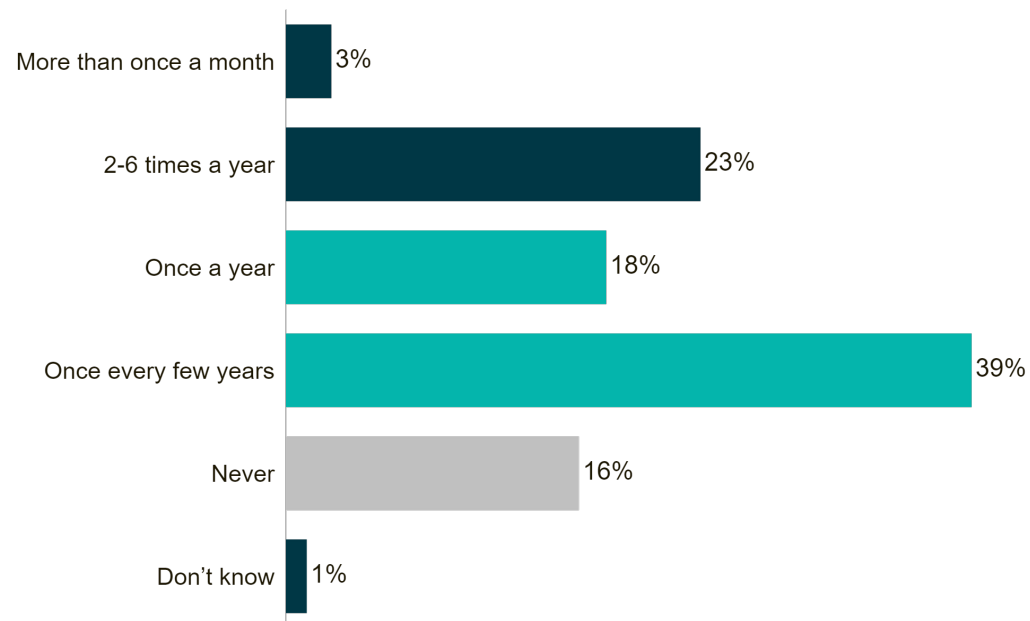
Sample base: 1,400

Q1 In general, how often do you visit museums in Canada?

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Before COVID-19, how often did you visit museums?

Subgroup analysis



- Results for museums visit before COVID-19 showed similar results for the sub-groups as the previous question.

Sample base: 1,400

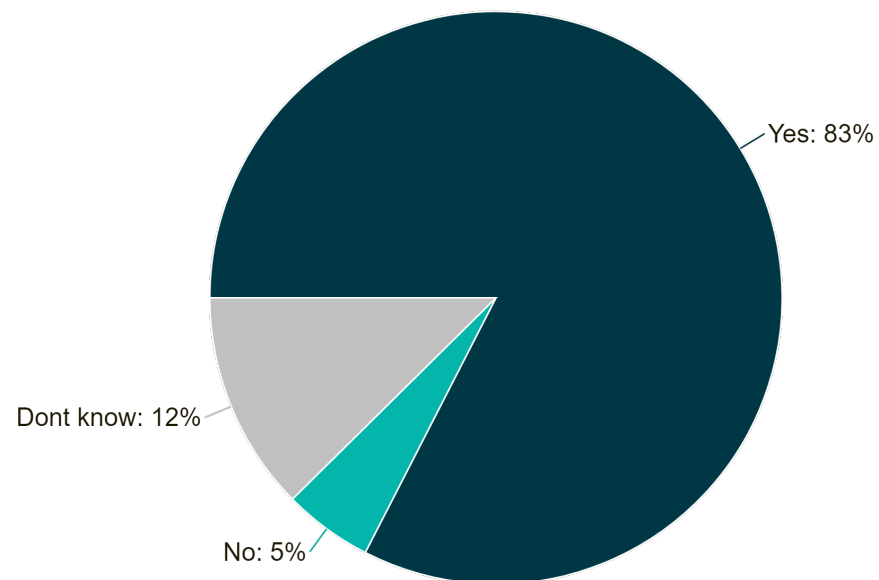
Q2 Before COVID-19, how often did you visit museums?

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

In general, do museums make you feel welcome?

Subgroup analysis

- Avid and occasional museum-goers agree that the museums make them feel welcome (98% and 90% respectively).



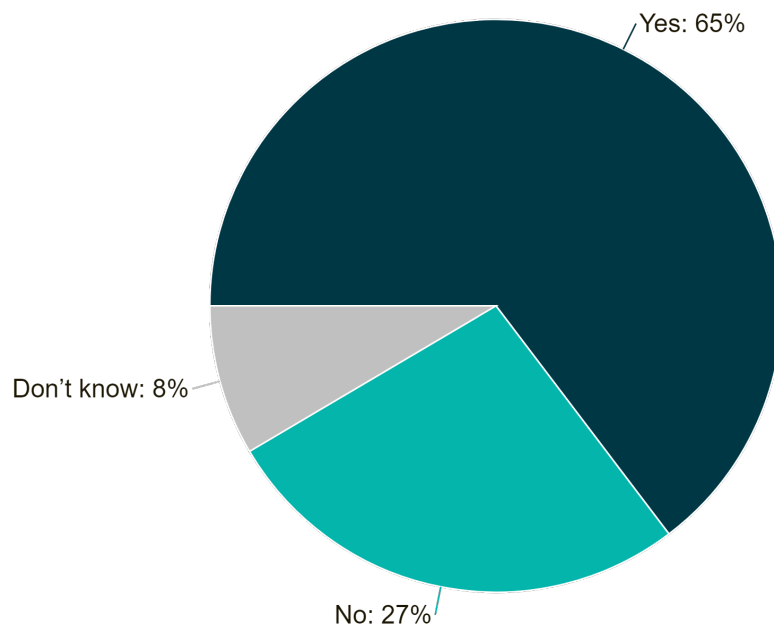
Sample base: 1,400

Q3 In general, do museums make you feel welcome?

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Are you aware of such (local) museums in your community?

Subgroup analysis



Sample base: 1,400

Q4 A local museum or local history museum has a collection that normally includes objects of local significance, and tells a community or region's story. Such museums are often small and run by volunteers. Are you aware of any such museums in your community?

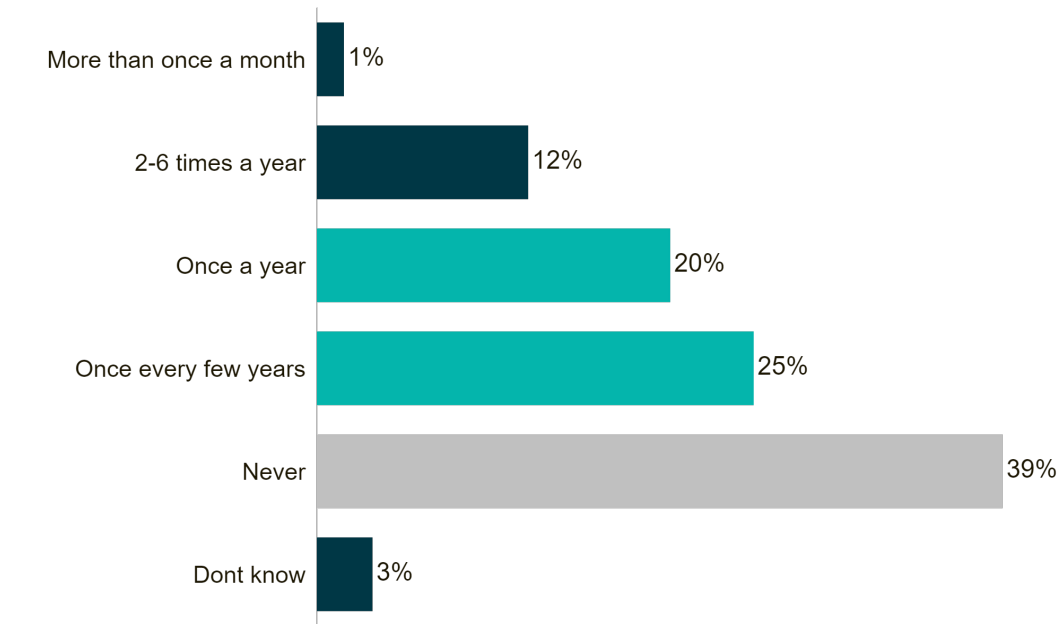
Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

- Respondents from BC are more likely to be aware of local museums (yes-79%).
- Quebeckers are least likely to be aware of museums in their community when compared to the national average (33% vs. 27%).
- Avid museum-goers are more likely to be aware of local museums (76%)

In the last 2 years, how many times have you visited a local museum in your community?

Subgroup analysis

- Quebeckers are more likely to be non-visitors (respondents who never visit the local museums) compared to the national average (50% vs. 39%).
- Low-income groups are also more likely to be non-visitors (44%).

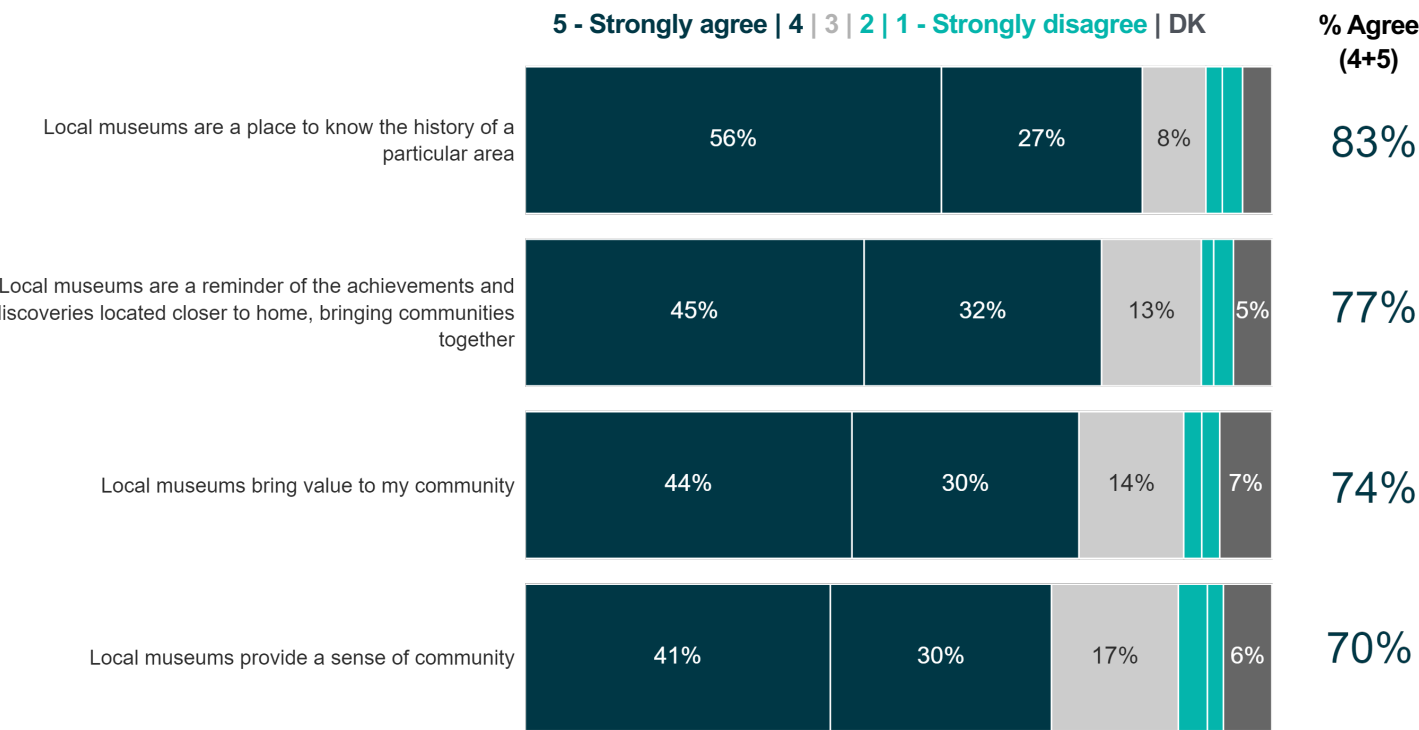


Sample base: 1,400

Q5 In the last 2 years, how many times have you visited a local museum in your community?

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement



Sample base: 1,400

Q6 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

Subgroup analysis

- Respondents from the older age group (65+) are more likely to **strongly agree** with the following statements:
 - Local museums are a reminder of the achievements and discoveries located closer to home, bringing communities together (56%).
 - Local museums bring value to their community (54%).

Highlights- Agreement statements in Q7

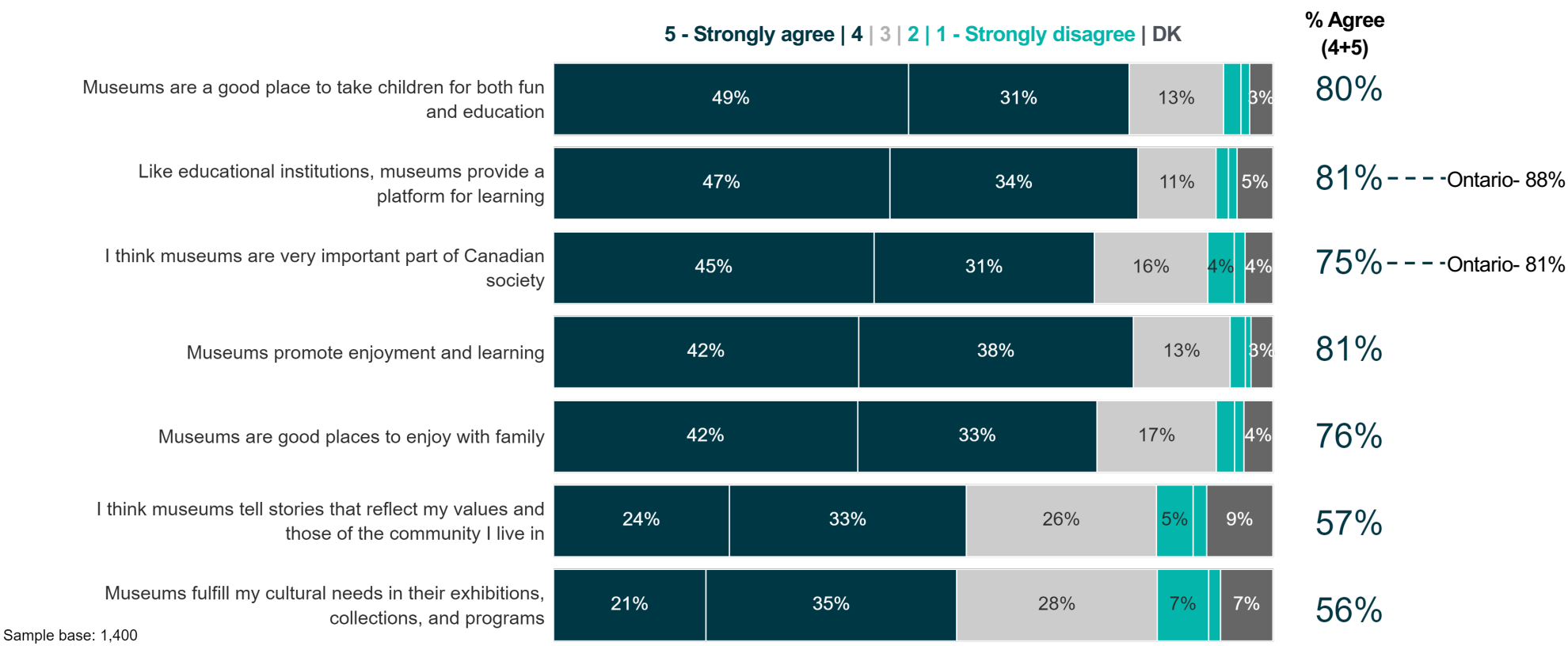
- Avid museum-goers are more likely to systematically agree on all the positive statements about the museums.
- As a part of an experiment, the sample was divided into 1/3 to show each of the following three statements.
 - Daily newspapers are a highly credible source of information.
 - Museums are a highly credible source of information.
 - Television is a highly credible source of information.

The results revealed that museums surpass daily newspapers and television when it comes to people perceiving it as a credible source of information. 80% agree that museums are a credible source of information, while only 48% agreed when it comes to the daily newspapers and only 33% for the television.

- Using the same approach, half the sample was shown each of the following statements:
 - Local libraries can be a place to engage with the community.
 - Local museums can be a place to engage with the community

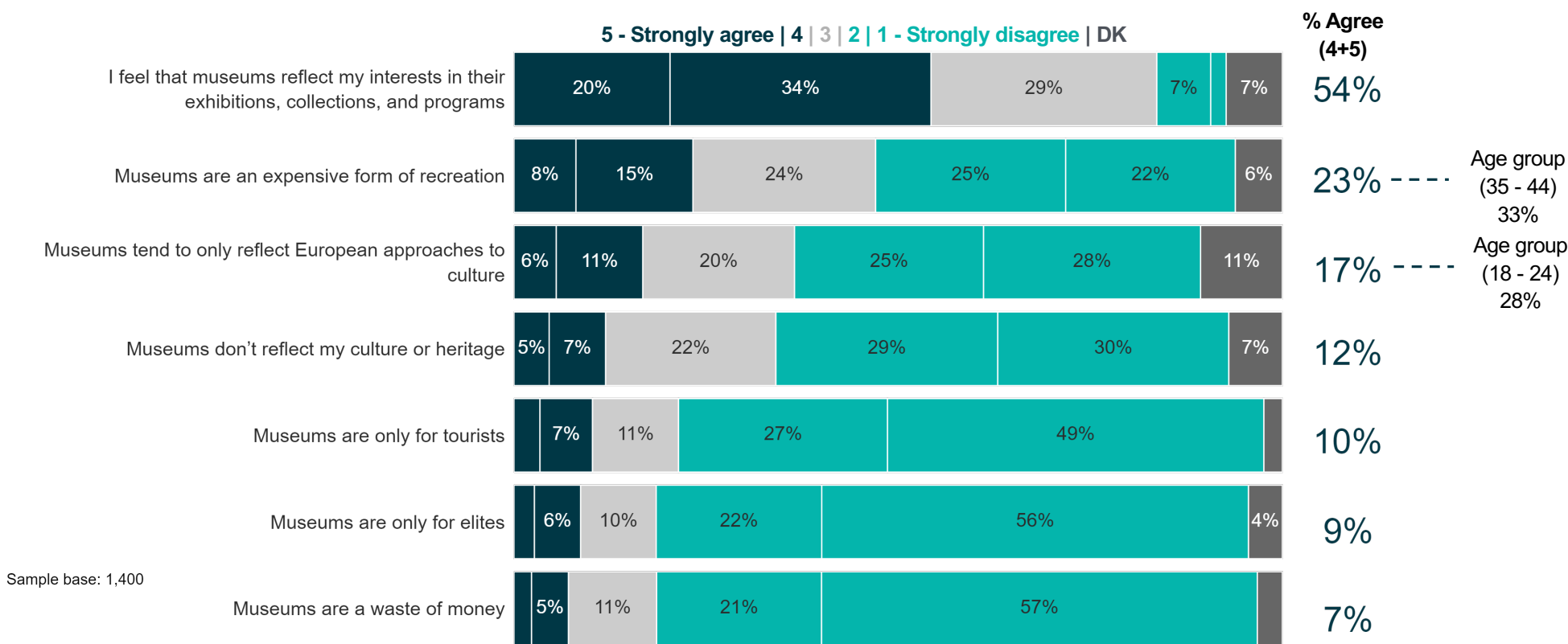
We did not see any significant difference between the agreement levels between both these statements.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement



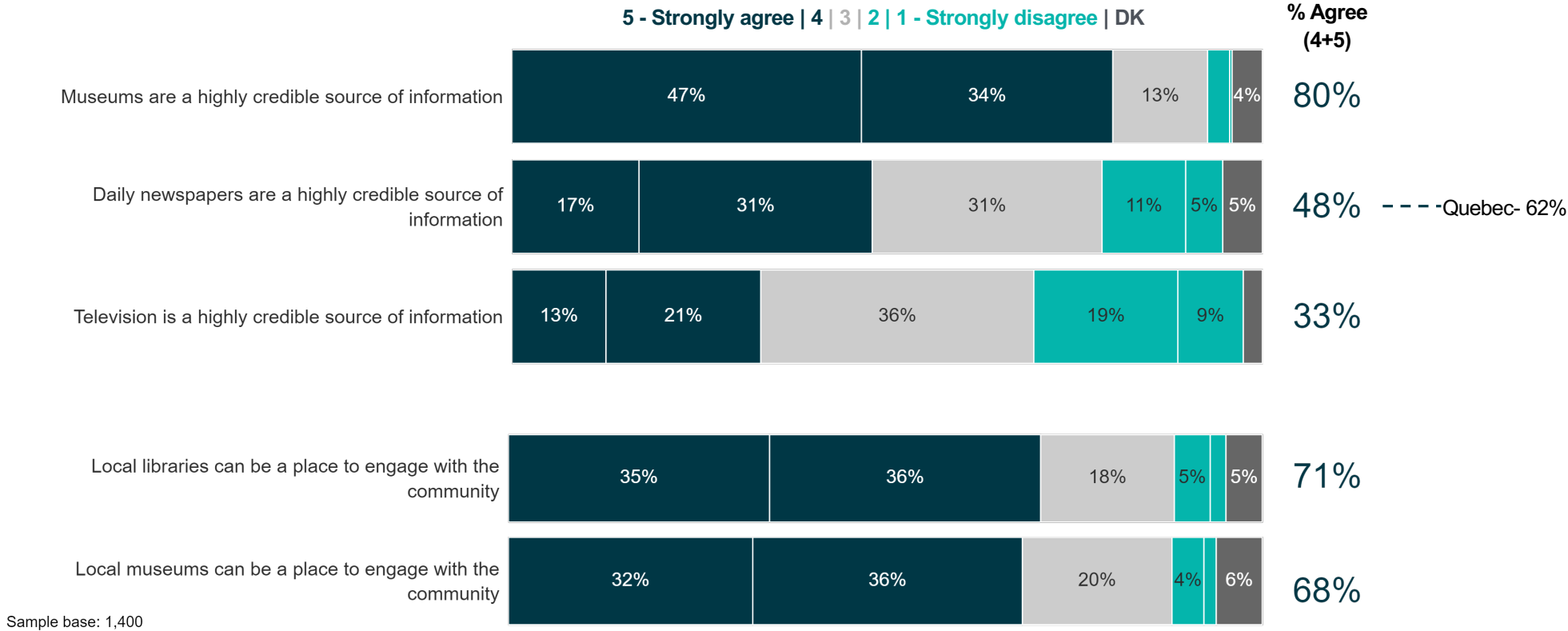
Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement



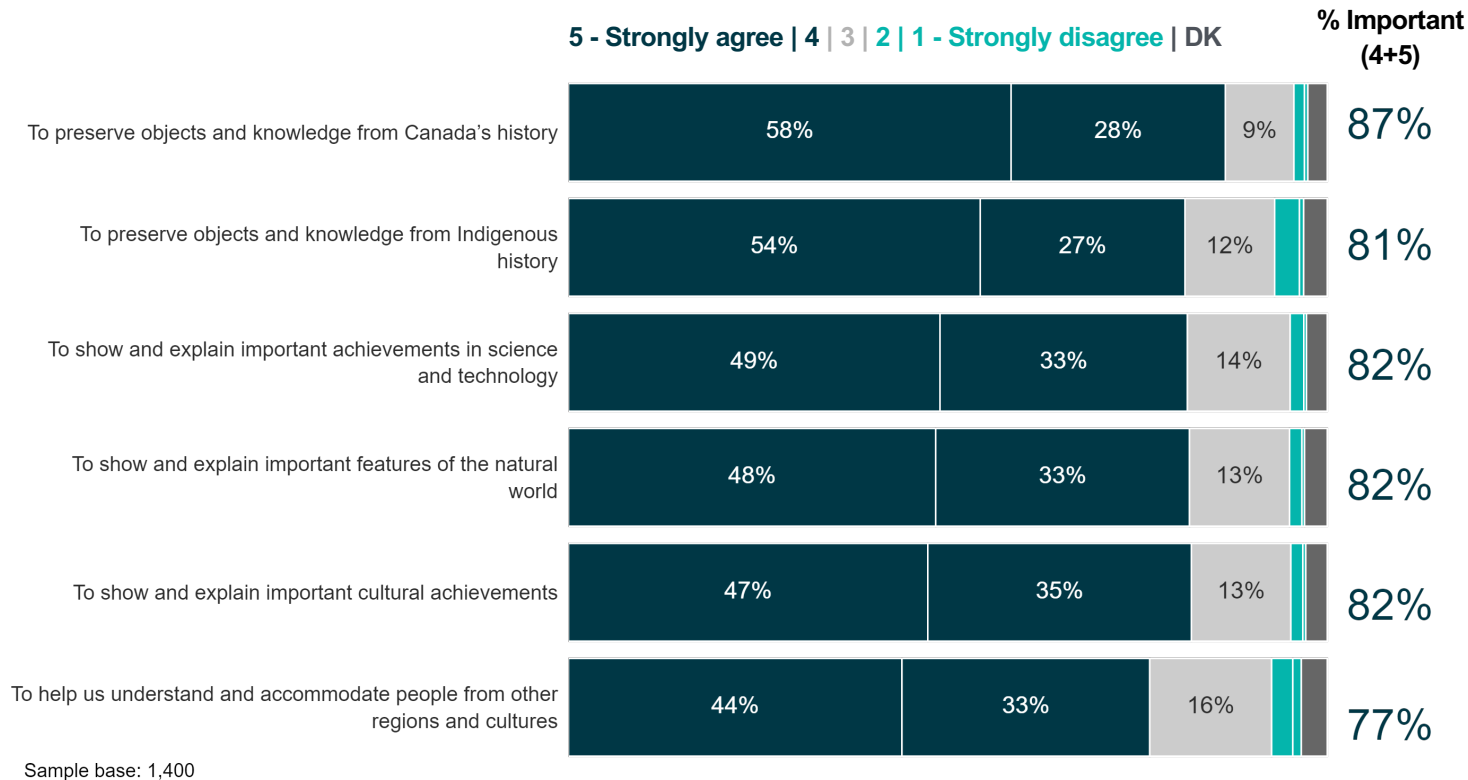
Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement



Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Please indicate the importance of the following functions that the museums serve



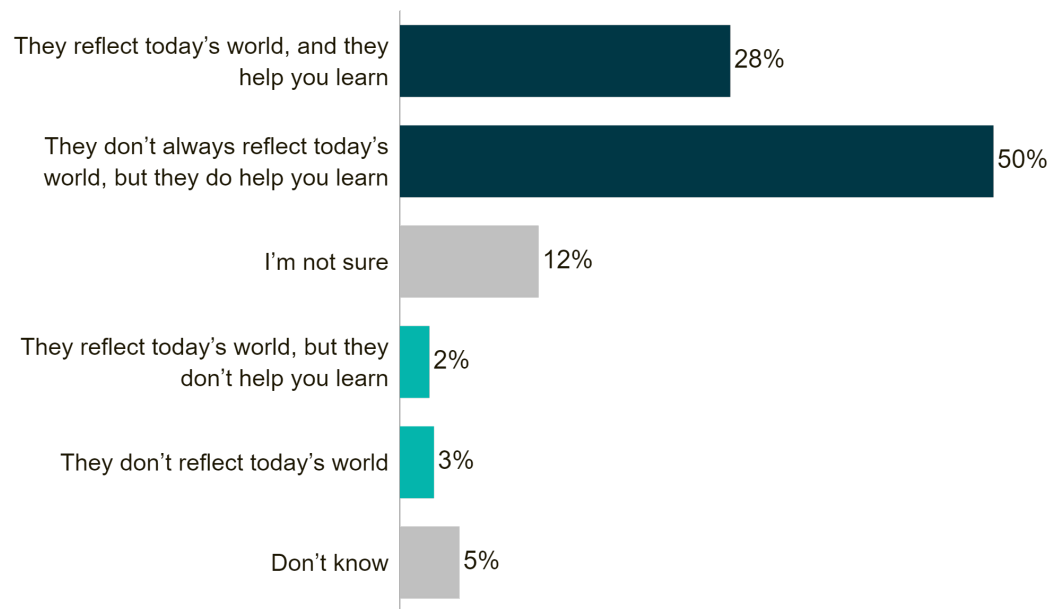
Subgroup analysis

- Respondents from the older age group (65+) are more likely to indicate that preserving objects and knowledge from Canada's history is an important function of the museum (94%).
- Respondents who identify themselves as indigenous and women are more likely to indicate that preserving objects and knowledge from Indigenous history is a very important function of the museums (66% and 60% respectively).

Q8 Museums serve many functions Please indicate the importance of the following functions

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Which of the following comes closest to your own views about museums?



Subgroup analysis

- Avid museum-goers are more likely to say that museums reflect today's world, and they help you learn (36%).
- Occasional museum-goers are more likely to indicate that museums don't always reflect today's world, but they do help you learn (55%).

Sample base: 1,400

Q9 Which of the following comes closest to your own views about museums:

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

In your opinion, what are the top three most valuable functions of museums? (Select three)



Sample base: 1,400

Q10 In your opinion, what are the top three most valuable functions of museums? (Select three)

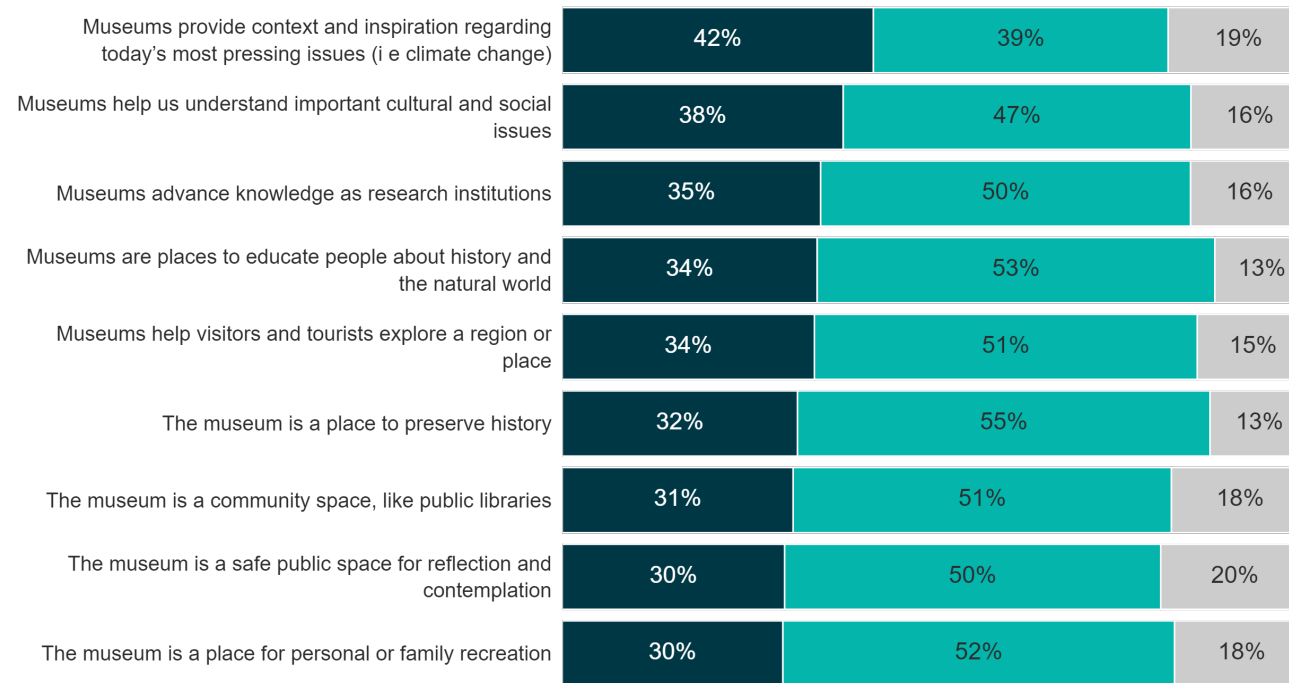
Subgroup analysis

- Age group 45-54 are more likely to indicate that museums are places to educate people about history and the natural world (84%).
- Occasional museum-goers are more likely to indicate that the museum is a place to preserve history (76%).
- Non-visitors are more likely to indicate that museums help visitors and tourists explore a region or place (51%).
- Parents are more likely to indicate that the museums are a place for personal or family recreation (27%).

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Do you see the importance of these functions changing in the future?

Yes | No | DK



Sample base: 1,400

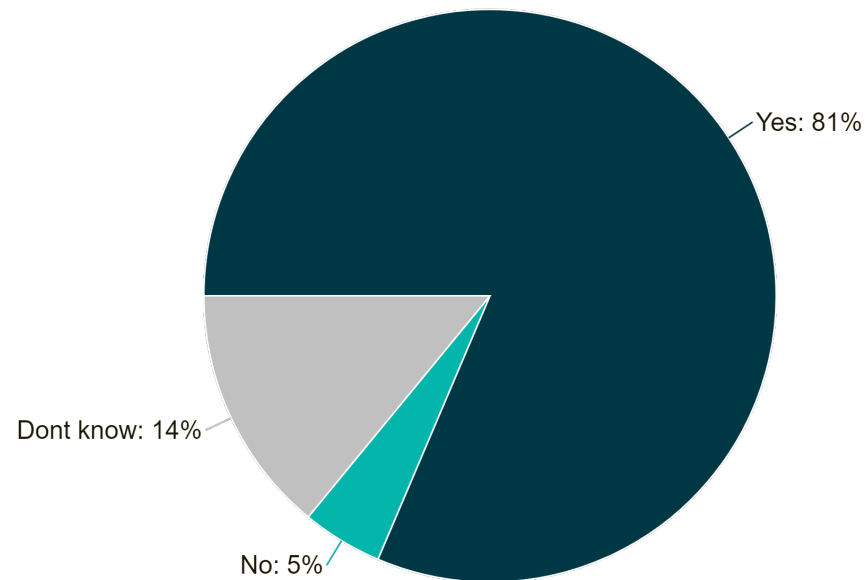
Q11 Do you see the importance of these functions changing in the future?

Subgroup analysis

- Men are more likely to indicate that museum's function to help us understand important cultural and social issues is changing (49%).

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

In general, do you trust museums to keep you safe?



Subgroup analysis

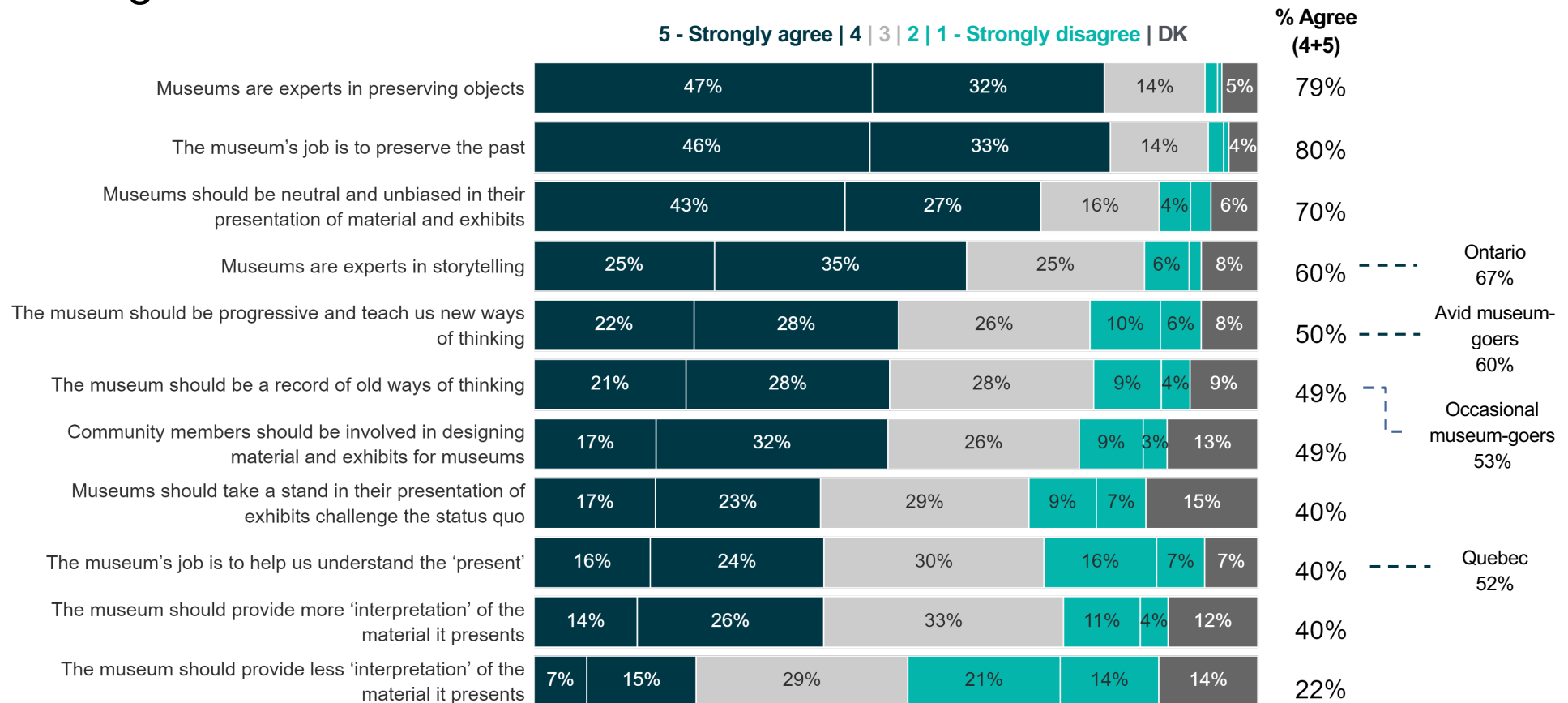
- Avid museum-goers, occasional museum-goers and respondents identifying themselves as parents are more likely to say yes (91%, 84% and 87% respectively).

Sample base: 1,400

Q12 In general, do you trust museums to keep you safe?

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

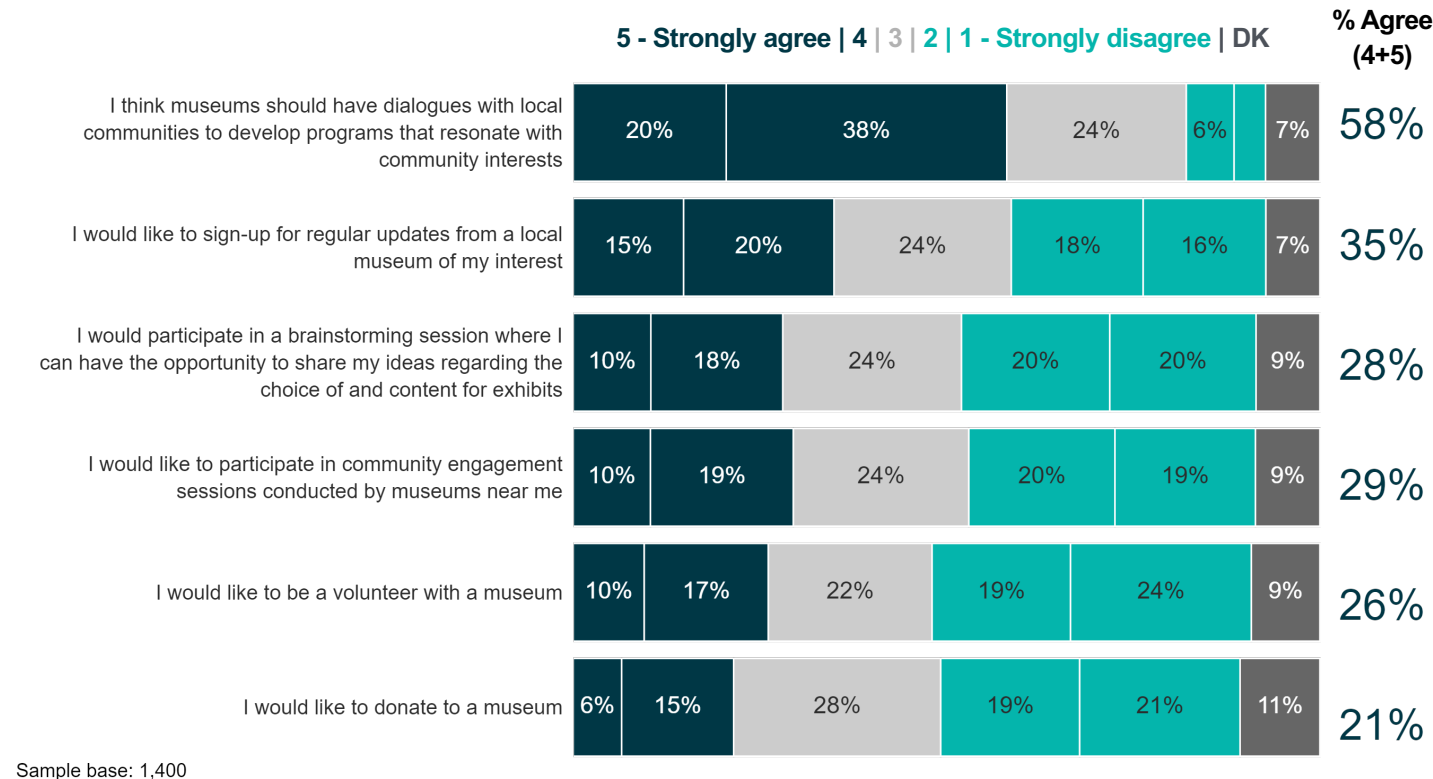
Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement



Sample base: 1,400

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Please indicate the importance of the following functions that the museums serve



Subgroup analysis

- Avid museum-goers are more likely to agree with all the statements.
- 35% of parents are more likely to participate in a brainstorming session where they can have the opportunity to share their ideas regarding the choice of and content of exhibits.
- Age group 25-34 years are more likely to volunteer (36%) and they are more likely to donate to the museums (31%).

Q15 Please indicate to an extent you agree or disagree with the following statements

Results from n=1400 respondents surveyed online, Mar 12-17, 2021.

Thank you