

Museums For All boosts diverse crowds

San Francisco's museums are "a collective village," as Carol Tang puts it. When visitors come from all walks of life, the village flourishes.

"Without diversity, these spaces only reinforce the ugly parts of society," Tang, the executive director of the city's Children's Creativity Museum, told me. "People should feel like, in museums, their time matters, their families matter."

While local museums don't track visitors by race, museum professionals like Tang and city leaders say there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that San Francisco has a real problem when it comes to the diversity of its museum-going audience.

Based on community listening sessions they've held with local residents in recent years, the problem is rooted in accessibility.

Just to walk through the doors of the Exploratorium can cost a family of four (two adults and two kids) \$140, and that's only for general admission tickets. The same family visiting the California Academy of Sciences on a weekday can expect to pay \$89, and that doesn't include snacking on \$14 pretzels at the Terrace Restaurant, or grabbing a \$30 dinosaur T-shirt from the gift shop.

These costs are hard on families of color, who already disproportionately struggle to pay for necessities like food, transportation and housing in San Francisco, according to a June United Ways of California study examining the cost of living in the city in 2021.

It isn't only admission fees keeping lower-income people away from museums, but also a perception that museums are mostly for white people.

In 2008, Latino and Black people accounted for only 13.5% of U.S. museum visitors despite representing 25% of the U.S. population, according to the American Association of Museums, which was trying to figure out how museums could appeal to the country's increasingly diverse populace.

In a first-of-its kind survey



JUSTIN PHILLIPS
COMMENTARY

from 2015, the New York-based Andrew W. Mellon Foundation found that at least 80% of the people in conservation, education, curation and senior executive positions at 181 museums were white.

In 2019, a study from Williams College in Massachusetts revealed that 85% of the collections in major U.S. museums at the time were by white artists.

In San Francisco, which is home to both the Museum of the African Diaspora and the Asian Art Museum, both of which offer lower admission rates than some better-known museums and are entirely free on certain days, the civic- and artistically minded created the San Francisco Museums For All program to overcome the museum world's issues of access and exclusivity. And there are promising signs the program is a success.

Through SFMFA, low-income San Franciscans are provided free admission to 22 museums across the city, and \$3 tickets to the California Academy of Sciences where a weekday, daytime ticket costs more than \$40 for an adult under the age of 64.

In 2022, the SFMFA program was used 136,498 times, accounting for 3% of the overall 4.5 million museum admissions in 2022, according to a city report published this month. The California Academy of Sciences had the most overall program-affiliated visits with 75,767.

"I was blown away by that 130,000 number," said Anne Stuhldreher, director of the Financial Justice Project in the city treasurer's office. She added that when the program was launched as a pilot in 2019, it



Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Educator Tess Lahey-Buckley helps Liam Saavedra, 3, make his own noise shaker while spending time at Children's Creativity Museum in San Francisco last week.

was used 25,000 times over the course of that summer.

"The data is a confirmation that we should be thinking about removing barriers so these spaces become more welcoming and inclusive," she said.

SFMFA mirrors a national program — Museums for All — launched in 2014 by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. San Francisco's version is a joint collaboration between the mayor's office, the Human Services Agency, the Financial Justice Project, the San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco Recreation and Park and 22 participating "museums and cultural institutions."

The program is open to San Franciscans who rely on public benefits like Medi-Cal and CalFresh. Almost 1 in 3 city residents receive these benefits and people of color are disproportionately represented among them, according to city data.

Moira Dumo Rios told me the program helped her in-

roduce her family to museums in the city and that, without the program, she would have had a harder time affording the experiences.

"Just being able to take your kids, take your family, to these museums exposes them to all things San Francisco has to offer," she said. "It also shows that those things are for them as well, that they also belong in those spaces."

This idea of feeling comfortable in a museum is something Arthur Affleck thinks about often.

Affleck is the executive director of the Association of Children's Museums. Like me, he's Black, grew up in a low-income community and was introduced to art spaces by his parents. This wouldn't have happened for either of us if it hadn't been for programs that make museum admission affordable.

"All of us deserve to have our spirits enriched by these spaces," Affleck said. "Museums can do that for children, and they can do that for

adults."

Some of the program's creators told me that despite SFMFA's recent success and ongoing outreach efforts, there remain cultural institutions, which they declined to identify, that have yet to be convinced that SFMFA can be beneficial to both them and the community.

A 2018 evaluation of the national Museums for All initiative showed that when museums make it possible for low-income people to visit, they see an increase in membership sales and develop deeper connections with the surrounding communities. Based on the conversations I've had with officials who lead San Francisco's version of the program, the same is happening in the city.

"Museums are supposed to be places that bring people together," Tang said. "If they aren't doing that, then they shouldn't exist."

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