

# From indifference to enthusiasm: patterns of arts attendance in England



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Arts Council England works to get great art to more people by championing, developing and investing in artistic experiences that enrich people's lives.

As the national development agency for the arts, we support a range of artistic activities from theatre to music, literature to dance, photography to digital art, carnival to crafts.

Great art inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better.

Between 2008 and 2011, we'll invest in excess of £1.6 billion of public money from the government and the National Lottery to create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country.

# Executive summary

## Summary of report

Arts Council England is committed to ensuring that as many people as possible have access to exciting, challenging and enriching arts experiences. To help understand how this ambition can be achieved, the research department has collaborated with two sociologists from Oxford University to analyse data from Taking Part, an annual survey of cultural participation. This report explores how people attend the arts today, and the socio-demographic factors that have an impact on that attendance.

## Key points

- There are four main types of arts attender across the adult population in England:
  - Little if anything
  - Now and then
  - Enthusiastic
  - Voracious
- 84 per cent of the population fall into either the 'Little if anything' or the 'Now and then' groups, attending arts activities occasionally at most, and primarily attending the most popular, rather than niche, activities
- Two of the most important factors in determining whether somebody attends arts activities are education and social status – the higher an individual's level of education and social status, the more likely they are to have high levels of arts attendance
- Gender, ethnicity, age, region, having young children and health are also important factors. When all other factors are held constant women are more likely to attend the arts than men, older people more likely than younger people, white people more likely than Black or Asian people, Londoners more likely than those who live in other regions, people without children more likely than parents of young children, and people in good health more likely than those who define their health as moderate or poor
- When other factors – including social status – are held constant, income, social class (as measured by NS-SEC), and disability status have little or no significant effect on arts attendance
- Some of the barriers to arts attendance are practical, for instance having young children. However, many of the barriers appear to be psychological. The importance of social status in particular suggests that arts attendance is driven by some concept of identity – who

we think we are, the type of people we perceive as our social status equals and the kind of lifestyle we deem appropriate – and that many people believe that the arts are ‘not for people like me’

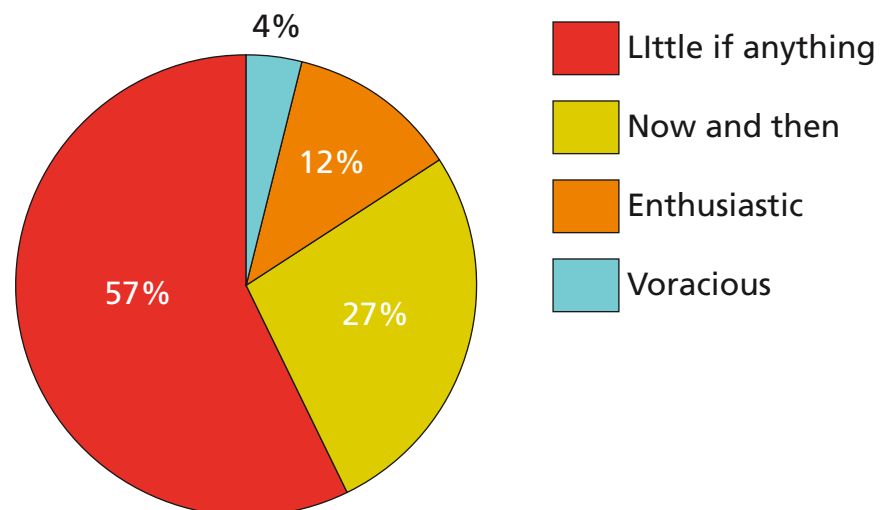
- Arts Council England must tackle both practical and psychological barriers if we are to achieve our mission of enabling as many people as possible to have exciting, challenging and enriching arts experiences. However, our analysis also indicates that even if we successfully reduce or remove these barriers, there will still be some people who choose not to engage in the types of arts activities that typically receive public funding. The Arts Council must therefore also consider whether there are opportunities to support arts activities of a different nature, that are relevant to the lives of more people

### **What we found – patterns of arts attendance in England**

Our analysis shows that there are four main types of arts attender within the English population:

- Little if anything, 57 per cent of the population
- Now and then, 27 per cent of the population
- Enthusiastic, 12 per cent of the population
- Voracious, four per cent of the population

#### ***Population breakdown into types of arts consumer, England, 2005/06***



Members of the ‘Little if anything’ group attend the arts and cultural events examined in this publication rarely, if at all. The small number of this group that do attend are unlikely to do so more than once or twice a year, and generally attend the more popular venues or events, such as cinema.

## **Confidence in the findings – how robust is the Taking Part survey?**

The Taking Part survey asks nearly 29,000 adults in England about their arts attendance. It includes people in every region, from every type of social group, and has been specially designed to be representative of the population. We can therefore be confident that the findings in this report are an accurate reflection of arts attendance in England.

Members of the 'Now and then' group are more likely to attend than those in the 'Little if anything' group. However, they still attend relatively few events, and do so infrequently – no more than once or twice a year. They are also most likely to attend more popular activities, such as cinema, museums/galleries or musicals/pantomimes.

Members of the 'Enthusiastic' group are frequent attenders, likely to attend several types of venue or event three or more times a year. They display preferences within a particular area – being particularly likely to attend music events for instance – rather than attending regularly across the whole range of events.

Members of the 'Voracious' group are the most frequent attenders. They regularly attend a broad range of events across the arts and cultural spectrum.

These four groups do not display preferences for completely distinct sets of activities. Rather they are distinguished primarily by the range of different types of arts and cultural events attended and by the frequency of attendance. In particular, there does not appear to be any evidence of a cultural elite that engage with 'high art' rather than popular culture: the groups that are most active in the more niche arts and cultural activities such as ballet are also the most frequent attenders of those activities that might be classed as popular culture, such as cinema.

## Crunching the numbers – how we analysed the Taking Part survey

The report is the product of a partnership between Arts Council England and Tak Wing Chan and John Goldthorpe, sociologists at the University of Oxford. It is based on analysis of data from the Taking Part survey, collected from interviews with 28,117 adults in England (aged 16 and over) between 2005 and 2006. The data provide information on engagement with cultural, leisure and sporting activities in the 12 months prior to interview, as well as socio-demographic information. In this report we look specifically at attendance at the following 16 arts and cultural events:

- play/drama
- other theatre (eg musical/pantomime)
- ballet
- contemporary dance
- African people's dance/Asian dance/Chinese dance
- cinema
- opera/operetta
- classical music
- jazz
- other live music event (eg rock/pop, soul, etc)
- art/photography/sculpture exhibition or collection
- craft exhibition
- video/electronic art event
- museum/gallery
- culturally specific festival
- street arts/circus

We used latent class analysis to investigate whether the data on arts attendance falls into any basic patterns. This produced the four attender types described above. We then used multivariate analysis to assess the importance of a range of variables in predicting how likely a particular individual is to belong to those four attender types. All estimates are weighted to ensure that the sample is representative of the adult population in England.

### **Influencing attendance – the important factors**

The strongest and most consistently significant factors that determine which of the four groups an individual is likely to belong to are education and social status. The more educated somebody is, and the higher their social status, the more likely they are to belong to the groups with the highest levels of attendance.

Other factors that are important are:

- gender – women are more likely to attend arts activities than men

- ethnicity – Black and Asian people are less likely to attend arts activities than white people
- age – attendance increases with age, up to age 70
- region – Londoners are much more likely to be ‘Voracious’ attenders
- having young children (aged 0–4) – parents of young children are less likely to attend arts activities
- health – the poorer their health, the less likely somebody is to attend arts activities

In contrast, once the above factors have been taken into account, income has very little effect on attendance, and social class (as measured by NS-SEC) and disability status have no effect.

### **Policy implications – tackling the barriers**

The report has identified a number of barriers that prevent people from engaging with the arts. Some of these are primarily practical – suffering from poor health, having young children, living outside of London. However, others appear to be more psychological in nature. The importance of social status suggests that some people feel uncomfortable attending arts events or do not perceive arts attendance as an accessible or appropriate lifestyle choice.

Qualitative research backs this up. The arts debate, the Arts Council England’s first public value inquiry<sup>1</sup>, found a strong sense among many members of the public of being excluded from something they would like to be able to access, and a belief that certain kinds of arts experiences were not for ‘people like me’. This feeling was found across the sample, even among those who already had some degree of engagement with the arts (Creative Research, 2007).

If we want to enable more people to engage with the types of arts activities considered in this report then the Arts Council, alongside our partners in government and the arts community, has a two-fold task: reducing the practical barriers preventing people from attending arts activities, while at the same time tackling the psychological barriers.

<sup>1</sup> See [www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/artsdebate) for more details about the project.

## **Social class and social status**

This report looks at the effect of both social class (as measured by NS-SEC) and social status. NS-SEC specifically aims to bring together, on the basis of their employment status and type of occupation, individuals who are involved in similar employment relations. Thus, employers, self-employed workers and employees are distinguished and, among the latter, those who have typically salaried conditions of employment are distinguished from those who typically work for wages. NS-SEC is directly predictive of a range of individuals' economic life-chances, such as their risk of job loss and of unemployment and their future income prospects.

In contrast, the social status scale, developed by Chan and Goldthorpe (2004), while also based on occupation, has a different objective. It aims to bring together individuals who would be likely to engage with each other in more intimate forms of social interaction – in particular, close friendship – and thus to treat each other as social status equals rather than as social status superiors or inferiors, and in turn be likely to share in a common lifestyle.

### ***Strategies for reducing the practical barriers***

The Arts Council and the arts community could work together to:

- make attending an arts event with young children practical and easy

The Arts Council could:

- continue to work to ensure that there is a breadth and diversity of arts opportunities available outside London

### ***Strategies for reducing the psychological barriers***

The Arts Council and the arts community could work together to:

- provide information about the practicalities of attendance, for instance dress code, etiquette, the length of the intervals, as well as about the content of the event itself
- ensure that arts venues are welcoming, rather than intimidating, and are part of the local community
- bring the arts into people's everyday lives – public spaces, local communities, workplaces
- find new ways to develop a greater sense of public ownership of the arts in England, for instance inviting members of the local community to become ambassadors for arts organisations, particularly individuals from those groups that are less likely to engage with the arts

The Arts Council could:

- explore ways to involve the public in developing policy and allocating funding, and promote a different kind of conversation about the arts, which everyone can be part of

### **Further research – the role of self-exclusion**

While addressing the barriers set out above may help to increase levels of engagement, our analysis also suggests that even if we manage to reduce or remove these barriers there will still be some people who choose not to attend the arts. Even among highly educated, high social status individuals there is still a substantial proportion of people who have little or no engagement with the arts. Should arts policy makers be concerned by this? If non-engagement with the arts became solely a matter of lifestyle choice, or 'self-exclusion', should the state still intervene?

We believe that even in these circumstances the Arts Council would have a role to encourage more people to engage with the arts. Our core mission is to bring the best art to the most people, whatever their backgrounds or circumstances. This aspiration is shared by artists, arts professionals and the public: the arts debate uncovered a broad consensus that the role of public funding should be to enable as many people as possible to experience challenging, exciting and enriching arts (Bunting, 2007).

This means that we need to understand more about self-exclusion. In particular, we need to understand how the arts sit in relation to the rest of people's lives and what alternative lifestyles people are choosing to adopt. Are those who do not engage with the more formal activities considered in this report actually experiencing challenging, enriching arts in alternative forms, for instance through participatory activity?

Taking Part data offers a number of opportunities to expand the context within which we examine arts attendance, providing insight into the kinds of alternative lifestyles that people adopt. The survey collects data not only on arts attendance but also on arts participation, engagement with heritage, museums, libraries, sport, gambling and watching television. Analysis with this scope would provide a more rounded picture of the other

## **Holding factors constant – an explanation**

Previous analysis of the Taking Part survey has suggested that certain groups are more likely to attend the arts than others. For instance, those who define their ethnic group as white are more likely to attend than those who define themselves as belonging to a Black or minority ethnic group. However, socio-demographic factors are inter-related, and examining them in isolation cannot tell us which is having the biggest impact. It may be, for instance, that people from a Black or minority ethnic group are more likely to be on low incomes than their white counterparts, and that the real reason this group is less likely to attend is due to low income rather than ethnicity. To find out which factors are most important we have used multivariate analysis to identify which factors have an effect, even when all the others are held constant. This helps us to identify whether it is, for instance, income or ethnicity that is affecting attendance.

activities people are involved in and the sorts of lifestyles they are choosing.

By analysing attendance and participation patterns across a range of cultural, sport and leisure activities we can better understand the extent to which people have opportunities to experience the arts beyond the established forms that typically receive public funds. This may lead us to consider whether public money could be used in the future to support arts activities and experiences of a very different nature. As McMaster points out, 'to be excellent, the arts must be relevant' (McMaster, 2008). If large numbers of people are self-excluding, even once the barriers associated with social status, education and so on have been removed, we should consider the extent to which current arts provision is indeed relevant to people's lives.

These are the questions we must continue to explore if the Arts Council is to achieve its mission: great art for everyone.

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