





# Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS): Reflections on Conference Surveys

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## Abstract

Established in 2020, the Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS) Working Group was formed by cultural heritage, safety, and health professionals with a shared interest in finding multidisciplinary solutions to “detrimental visitor interactions (DVI),” defined as “any incident where an individual engages with an exhibit and harms themselves, others, or a collection item.” The Working Group is composed of individuals from various private and non-profit organizations that connect to international, national, regional, local, and tribal audiences. In 2021, the Working Group surveyed attendees at four cultural heritage conferences to get a broader perspective on what institutions are already doing at the intersection of access and safety. The following article is a presentation and analysis of the survey results which comprises both quantitative and qualitative data.

## Keywords

risk analysis, case study, access, research and topics, research about collections, activities, collections, exhibition, data evaluation, preservation, social engagement, history of display

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## Introduction

In 2020 the Promoting Exhibit Access and Safety (PEAS) Working Group formed with the intention of considering benefits and harm to collections and visitors equally. The Working Group is composed of individuals from various private and non-profit organizations that connect to international, national, regional, local, and tribal audiences. They represent large, medium, and small museums, federal and non-federal, and come from a variety of specialties, including architecture and design, collections management, conservation, facilities management, security, safety and health, visitor services, and more. The group defined safety as the absence of “detrimental visitor interactions (DVI),” including “any incident where an individual engages with an exhibit and harms themselves, others, or a collection item.” This is a broad term used to encompass safety for collections and people in exhibit spaces, and risks to people from collections and vice versa, risk to collections from people.

An initial outreach initiative in 2021 involved presenting the PEAS Working Group at allied professional conferences to engage their interest. As part of these presentations the audiences were asked to answer a series of survey questions (Appendix 1). After presenting at four conferences, including the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), Mid Atlantic Association of Museums (MAAM), National Conference on Cultural Property Protection (NCCPP), and Safety and Cultural Heritage Summit, the results of the survey were thought to be useful for understanding the range of issues and perspectives. Our team, the Data Gathering Team which is a subgroup of the PEAS Working Group, set ourselves the task of learning as much as possible from the survey response data. Using the surveys as a point of departure for discussion about the comments, the team discussed how they relate to one another and what these relationships tell us about safety, museum experiences, and audience engagement. This article shares the Data Gathering Team’s reflections through an analysis and discussion about and around the informal survey data.

As museum professionals, we have all heard stories of damage to objects in museums. Media, in recent years, have sensationalized some of these events, particularly in the context of climate activism or the accidental damage to objects.<sup>1</sup> This has led many museums to shore up their security or for collectors to be apprehensive about loaning their collections.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, we are seeing renewed and urgent calls for cultural institutions to be inclusive, accessible, and participatory with their local communities and visitors. Despite these calls, museum practitioners continue to grapple with balancing the new museology that calls for visitor-centeredness with the long-held missions and values of protecting cultural property.

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1. A few examples include Treisman, “Protests at Art Museums Are Nothing New. Here Are 3 Famous Examples from History”; Cole, “Visitor Accidentally Breaks a Jeff Koons ‘Balloon Dog’ Sculpture Worth \$42,000.”
  2. The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events, “In the Wake of Climate Protests and Pandemics, Collectors Are Growing Wary of Loaning Art to Museums.”

## Surveying Peers and Allied Professionals

The four cultural heritage conferences, at which the survey was distributed, occurred between May and November of 2021. At each one, a representative introduced the PEAS Working Group and the mission, before inviting individuals to participate in the survey. These conferences primarily serve a regional or national audience of cultural heritage and allied professionals, and may also reach some international colleagues. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary. It should be noted, that as with any anonymous survey, participants may have elected not to self-report DVI. And in this particular situation, participants may not have been the responsible party at their institution for managing and responding to incidents.

The survey was created in Google Forms. A QR code was provided on the last slide of the presentation and a hyperlink to the form was dropped in the chat. Due to COVID, they were all virtual presentations and attendance was not taken. Consequently, the total number of attendees is unknown.

There was a total of seventy-nine survey participants, most of whom (58 percent) work in a collection-facing role (registration, management, conservation, etc.). Other specializations represented include curatorial, exhibits, safety, security, and visitor services. Participants came primarily from history museums (24 percent), universities (13 percent), natural history museums (16 percent), and art museums (15 percent). A few stated they worked at zoos, science centers, libraries, historic houses, and children's museums, and some stated they came from general or other types of cultural heritage organizations. The institutions were fairly evenly distributed in terms of size, ranging from small (less than 20,000 visitors/year) to medium (20,001–50,000 visitors/year) to large (50,001–100,000 visitors/year) to very large (more than 100,001 visitors/year).

## “Detrimental Visitor Interactions” (DVI) by the Numbers

A majority of the respondents (73 percent) said that their organizations have experienced DVI with collections. Only 5 percent said their organization has “not,” and the remainder of respondents (22 percent) said they were “not sure.”

When asked if they had successful strategies, less than 40 percent of respondents had examples of successful strategies for protecting collections on exhibit while not impeding visitor access and 20 percent said they did not have successful examples. The remaining 41 percent of respondents stated that they were “not sure.” Respondents determined for themselves what was considered successful.

When asked if their organization documents or tracks DVI, the majority of respondents (75 percent) said that their organizations tracked DVI in some way, whether that be by form, email, incident report, condition report, etc. Approximately 16 percent of

respondents said their organization does not document or track incidents and 9 percent of respondents were not sure about their organization's process.

## **Discussion and Reflections on the Challenges and Strategies**

The survey included several open-ended questions asking respondents to briefly describe the challenges they face with protecting visitors and collections on exhibit and any successful strategies their organizations have implemented. Approximately, 75 percent of the seventy-nine respondents wrote in answers to these questions and their responses provided a wide variety of examples, more so of challenges than of successful strategies.

### *Challenges*

Respondents provided a wide array of challenges that they face. Many examples fell into the two categories of intentional (e.g., theft) or unintentional (e.g., accidental impact) damage to objects. As the Data Gathering Team discussed their individual codes (this process will be discussed in detail in the next section), several other categories emerged including the nature of the objects, design of the museum or space, communication issues, and lack of resources such as gallery attendants.

Examples include:

#### *Nature of the Objects or Space*

- “Large campus with walking paths, many opportunities for visitors to fall, bee stings, heat issues, etc. (Respondent 60)”
- “Several pieces are on open, outdoor display with little staff supervision. (Respondent 53)”
- “Big specimens, radioactive minerals and asbestos. (Respondent Column E)”

#### *Communication Issues*

- “Visitors, especially younger ones, not knowing how to interact safely or not paying attention to suggestions as to how to keep art and others safe. (Respondent 33)”
- “People not seeing signage or ignoring signage. (Respondent 29)”
- “Trying to communicate to visitors any potential risks they may have in touching objects on display, etc. (Respondent 76)”
- “Language barriers. (Respondent 26)”

### Resources

- “Not enough gallery attendants (security staff) or security cameras and technology. (Respondent 38)”

### Strategies

Respondents also described a number of successful strategies for protecting collections on exhibit while also balancing visitors’ access. Responses generally fell into six categories: using physical barriers (display cases, guard rails, plants), programming (self-guided tours, education), automated surveillance (cameras, motion sensors), staff (gallery attendants, security), alternative objects to touch (handling objects, open storage), and communicating museum policies (signage, guidelines).

## Interpreting the Data and Points of Departure

The Data Gathering Team initially examined the open-ended responses, coding them using key words taken from the survey questions, but found this did not capture the richness of the responses. Respondents described a wide array of challenges. We placed these in the category of visitors’ intentional motivations, such as theft, and unintentional incidents, such as falling onto objects. Touching and climbing over barriers led to a discussion about intentionality. The team wondered if these are always problems and should be considered as DVI, as the survey participants assumed, particularly since respondents did not indicate any detrimental results. Context in these situations is critical and would distinguish between damage to a collection item, inadequate access for visitors, and visitor safety issues. Some respondents framed the issue in terms of protecting visitors (e.g., bee stings) versus protecting objects. Lastly, some challenges expressed underlying factors and institutional issues, such as lack of security staff or staff to engage visitors.

Some respondents expressed the tension between being visitor-centered and caring for objects:

Many of our exhibits are on display in enclosures rather than cases, and we’ve received pushback from museum administration on changing this method of display, despite our documented problems with dust, leaks, visitor touching and dropping things in[to] the enclosures (Respondent 14).

Another respondent mentioned that those responsible for collections items express a dislike for having to reprimand visitors “because it can turn a visitor’s experience into a negative one and is stress inducing for our employees (Respondent 20).”

We began to explore different ways to code the data and to see the limitations of the survey questions formulations as well as the sample. The process of coding looked for

emergent themes, that is of taking an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis. The Data Gathering Team also took a constructivist approach.<sup>3</sup> Team members wrote memos to note their thoughts about the data and the design of the survey. The team discussed these memos and through those discussions, agreed to the new categories coded from the existing data. Some of the reflections from various team members' memos are highlighted in the Call Outs below.

The team came to see that given where the surveys were administered, our sample largely skewed toward specializations in collections or conservation. These responses served as a point of departure, and as new information arose during our discussions, we grew further away from the framing of the questions and we began to ask more critical questions about the responses. In searching for additional context, we began to create different themes from the qualitative responses:

### *Creating Barriers Between Visitor and Objects*

- “Placement of artificial plants in specific trouble areas to prevent visitors from reaching over barriers (Respondent 8).”
- “Placing security cameras and officers inside the galleries (Respondent 31).”
- “We took everything that was within hand-reach and either put it away or moved it further back. . . (Respondent 71)”

As the team discussed the responses, we realized that the question wording created a negative framing by using phrases and words like “detrimental visitor interactions” (DVI) and “challenges” and that may have impacted the types of responses. Therefore, beginning with this paper and going forward we will use the term “detrimental interactions” (DI).

#### *A Systemic Bias We Revealed to Ourselves:*

The original survey used the term “detrimental visitor interactions” (DVI) to prompt ideas about adverse incidents. Later, while writing this report, we noted that the term DVI, due at least partly to simple word order, connotes a sense that it is the visitor who is detrimental. To maintain historical accuracy we use the term DVI when discussing the survey and responses to it, but going forward within this paper and beyond, we will instead use the more neutral term “detrimental interactions” (DI) which better reflects the idea that an interaction could be detrimental to the visitor, the collection, the institution, or any combination.

- Data Gathering Team

3. See Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015).

## *Toward Creating Connections or Bridges*

At the same time, a few of the responses, whether intentionally or not, hinted at something different, wanting to reframe the relationship between visitor, object, and museum. Rather than creating barriers between visitors and objects, they sought solutions to make connections. For example,

Our exhibit interpretation staff are on the floor most of the time for many of our exhibits. This allows them to keep an eye on our collections pieces while also entertaining and educating the public. . . (Respondent 17)

While this quote can still be seen as creating distance between the visitor and the collections, it offers a way to connect the visitor more with the museum through its staff. This suggests that the barrier and connection models are not fully independent and solutions may be available by addressing the issue from both perspectives at once.

Our intent was to consider benefits and harm to collections and visitors equally, but most responses focused on damaging collections. However, one respondent framed the challenge of visitors being endangered, “. . . Large campus with walking paths, many opportunities for visitors to fall, bee stings, heat issues, etc. (Respondent 60).” The lack of balance in concern over collections versus visitors may have been a result of the survey participants mostly being involved in collection care. However, this would also suggest that working to find a better balance of those two concerns could be beneficial.

## **Discussion**

The Data Gathering Team’s initial takeaway was that DI are, if not a universal experience, a common one across all cultural heritage organizations regardless of type and size. However, through our process of discussing the findings over several months, the team began to appreciate the nuances of the data, the spoken and unspoken implications, and the unanswered questions. This discussion attempts to frame some of the wide-ranging conversations the team had in the pursuit of analyzing this survey, the results, and the methodology.

To begin, framing the issue as simply “detrimental interactions” was too simplistic. Understanding variability, across populations and over time, became fundamental to our discussion.

*On Variability:*

In the case of exhibit access and safety, populations of interest clearly include both visitors and items on exhibit. As extensions, even sets of knowledge, ideas, values, and so on, could be considered as populations having variabilities such as breadth, complexity, intensity, and so on. As extremes, conveying the visual aesthetic value of a highly fragile item to a mostly elderly audience will present very different challenges and opportunities than conveying tactile impressions of practically expendable materials to children. Of course, these extremes are well recognized and met with a range of approaches from secure display cases to docent educator's carts with touch objects. Still, it might be fair to question whether our exhibit planning adequately considers the full range of audience interests, item values and vulnerabilities, and consequently appropriate means of presenting items to audiences. Combining appreciations of variabilities with awareness of risk appetite and tolerance could lead to a wider and more refined range of options for exhibit access and safety.

- Robert Waller

Most institutions have strategies for mitigating or preventing DI, but the success of those strategies is unclear. In gathering information through a survey, we had a limited window into the perspectives of the individual. What was perhaps missing was the broader context of their institution's mission and tolerance for risk.

*On Risk Tolerance and Risk Appetite:*

It can be helpful to recognize that both individuals and organizations can harbor two distinct attitudes toward risk. One of these is risk tolerance and the other is risk appetite. On an individual level, risk appetite could be indicated by how often one visits a casino, how much one spends on lottery tickets, or how much one is willing to exceed a posted speed limit while driving. An individual's risk tolerance is how much they are willing to lose before they take corrective action, such as leaving the casino when losing, spending less on lottery tickets, or reducing the number of speeding tickets they expect to receive. While activities will be different, the same attitudes apply to organizations as to individuals. An organization will extend its resources to increase its reach among, and benefit to, potential audiences. The degree to which it is willing to incur risk, including depletion of its resources, public liability for visitor access, and so on, in order to better fulfill its mission, is a measure of its risk appetite. The amount of risk-related loss realized, that would lead to an organization halting or restricting an activity, is a measure of its risk tolerance. Inevitably, both the risk appetite and risk tolerance of an organization as a whole will be higher than those of functional departments and individual professionals within an organization. That is a natural result of risk events that are of significant concern to one, or just a few, functional departments or individuals being relatively small from the perspective of an organization managing its entire pool of resources for overall fulfillment of its mission. This is the reason we want to maintain an attitude of equanimity when considering risk-benefit tradeoffs between parts of an organization.<sup>4</sup> We strive to maintain equanimity in case-by-case negotiations even though we may allow ourselves to be emotionally aroused to advocate for our functional or individual objectives in a more general sense.

- Robert Waller

4. Waller and Henderson, "The Problem of Compromise in Conservation and Exhibit Decision Making."



In the open-ended responses, survey participants discussed challenges in exhibit spaces, and shared anecdotes about negative interactions with visitors. What was not explicitly said was that there is a set of positive behaviors and interactions that staff wanted or expected in the exhibit spaces. Some respondents mentioned signage which indicated what kinds of behaviors were not acceptable, but the kinds of behaviors staff did want to see in exhibit spaces was never explicitly addressed in this survey.

*Protection Bias:*

When reflecting on the role of the museum professional, collection stewards often perceive their responsibility as being to preserve their collection items in perpetuity. Often in the preservation ethos, we hear the turn of phrase, “we are the advocates [or voices] for the collections.” This mentality is amplified in an emergency scenario. After experiencing an incident that causes damage to the facility or a collection, many collection staff express the feeling of personal loss, failure, and guilt as if the collections were their own. On a smaller scale, when visitors interact with collection items and accidentally cause damage, the staff feelings are likely similar. This may lead to a feeling of us versus them. This could drive staff to increasingly see the role of the visitor as a bystander, someone to witness but not participate and someone to enjoy but not contribute to the heritage and work being done.

- Melissa Miller

Collecting open-ended responses and looking at them anew allowed us to think: “what if museums framed this concern as an opportunity to find novel ways of connecting objects, visitors, and the museum?”

The visitor’s own voices are glaringly absent from our survey results. Some questions for our further work could include:

- Why do visitors touch objects? See for example, Henderson and Lingle (2023).
- What do the objects mean to visitors? See for example, Wood and Latham (2014).
- What relationship do visitors want to have with the object and museum? See for example, Smith (2021).

As well, we suggest that the cultural sector collectively needs to take the following questions seriously:

- How are the visitors perceived by a museum? What is the role of the visitor to and in a museum?
- Do museums view the visitor as part of their ecosystem or as something (someone) that they need to control?

- How can museums foster visitor engagement without unacceptable risk to collections?

Lastly, there is the larger issue at play in the cultural sector and within our society. We may want to ask ourselves if we continue to see visitors as a risk to the museum, what is the risk of missed opportunities for real inclusion, community engagement, and the museum's relevance to society?

*Museums and Society Today:*

Advocates of causes ranging from climate change to the opioid crisis have seized upon the value of collections, particularly familiar masterpieces in prominent museums, to create spectacles to garner media and public attention. Their argument is compelling: the world is in crisis (or faces crises) and this act of vandalism is intended to disrupt complacency. The public, fueled by the media coverage, reacts with horror as a beloved piece of cultural heritage is ruined: who are these people and how can they be so crazy and insensitive?

At the same time, recent protests at museums have not damaged the Van Gogh, the Munch, or the da Vinci. Protestors seem to have targeted institutions that have the resources to protect collections with appropriate enclosures, electronic security and staff who can respond quickly to repair any damage. What if the protagonists planned these performances on stages where they could maximize the attention they would draw and minimize the risk their actions imposed on the collections?

If that's correct, how should we feel? Climate change, for example, is an existential threat to our society - one that might be worth risking the integrity of an important painting in order to affect change. Particularly now that some time has passed, can we look at these protests as an opportunity to remind ourselves that collections are valuable, that museums are places for dialogue, and that art and culture reside in a world filled with conflict and turmoil?

Museum professionals should continue to find better ways to protect visitors and collection material from damage. But perhaps we should simultaneously appreciate that people see museums as significant places to address critical issues. We must try to resist a knee-jerk response that further fortifies institutions, if that reaction inhibits the connections we want between people and collections.

Should we label this type of activity community engagement?

- Jeff Hirsch

Clearly, we have discovered more questions than answers. We hope this article will prompt conversations within your museums, as well as with other museum and allied professionals, visitors, and other members of the public. Rather than creating new types of barriers, we hope that this will inspire you to create new ways to facilitate access and connect your items, objects, and spaces with your current and new visitors. Lastly, we invite you to join us in this effort to grapple with and understand the intersection of access and safety for people and objects. To that end, we provide a Zotero Resource Library that we've populated with literature we've found on this topic (Appendix 2).

## Appendix I: Survey

See the Survey Questions here:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdKihSzyNfYT4gQA0o-rCdMt-W4ovYn0qaZOVg8i-tPB5jOP0g/viewform>

## Appendix 2: PEAS Library in Zotero

Access the Zotero here: [https://www.zotero.org/groups/4754124/promoting\\_exhibit\\_access\\_and\\_safety\\_peas/library](https://www.zotero.org/groups/4754124/promoting_exhibit_access_and_safety_peas/library)

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**Pei Koay** is the in-house social scientist at the National Museum of the American Indian. As part of the Executive Planning Office, since 2017, she works across departments leading and collaborating with staff on museum research and evaluation. She designs audience research, advises on evaluation strategies, and works to further reflective practice through evaluative thinking. Pei earned her Ph.D. in Science & Technology Studies, focused on the politics of knowledge creation. Prior to SI, she worked in academia and in diverse arenas—public humanities, public health, science policy—devising approaches to facilitate better outcomes, collaboration, and engagements between larger publics and researchers. She has lectured and presented widely on technology and society; gender, race, and science; and public engagement in research endeavors.

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