

# **Difficult Knowledge and Children's Museums: Programming, Practices, and Principles across the United States and Canada**

**Executive Report  
Screen Reader-Friendly Version**

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**Canada** 

# Introduction

This report presents the findings of a survey that examined programming, practices, and principles in children's museums across the United States and Canada. Specifically, the report considers how children's museums are using programming and practices to engage difficult knowledge and social issues, including racism and discrimination, truth and reconciliation, and culturally relevant and accessible pedagogies. Findings share dominant trends in programming topics, examples of meaningful pedagogical practices, and reflections on challenges and areas of potential improvement in efforts to represent social issues and difficult knowledge with children.

## The Survey

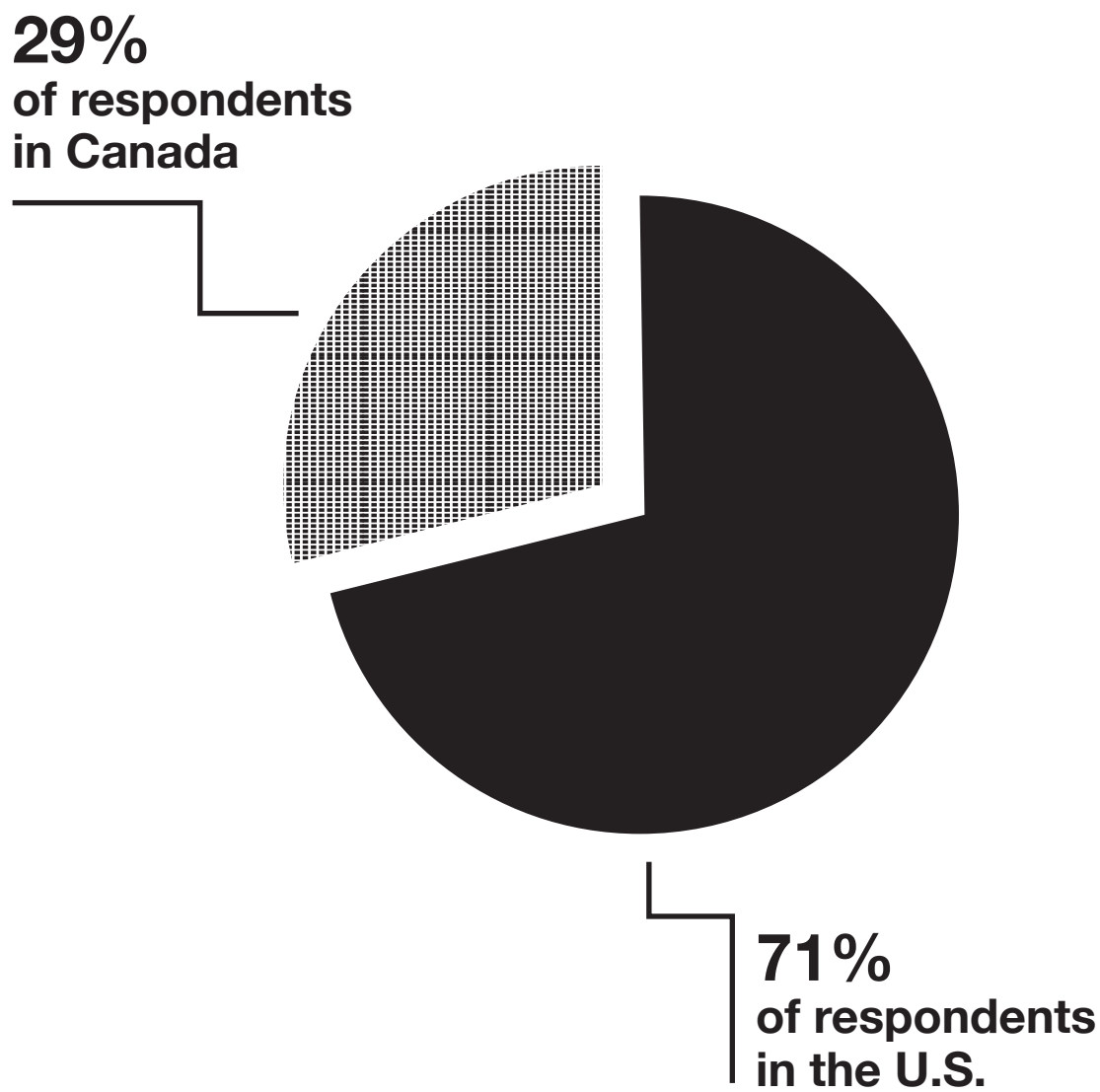
The survey included a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions that were developed in consultation with the Director of Field Studies and Research at the Association of Children's Museums (ACM), researchers of social studies education, childhood studies, disability studies, museology, and Indigenous curriculum studies, and a focus group of museum educators and directors. Survey questions, design, programming, and data analysis was supported by Impact Research/Recherche, and specifically Laurence Richard. Early discussions about survey design were also supported through consultation with the *Institute for Social Research* at York University.

## **Ethics Approval**

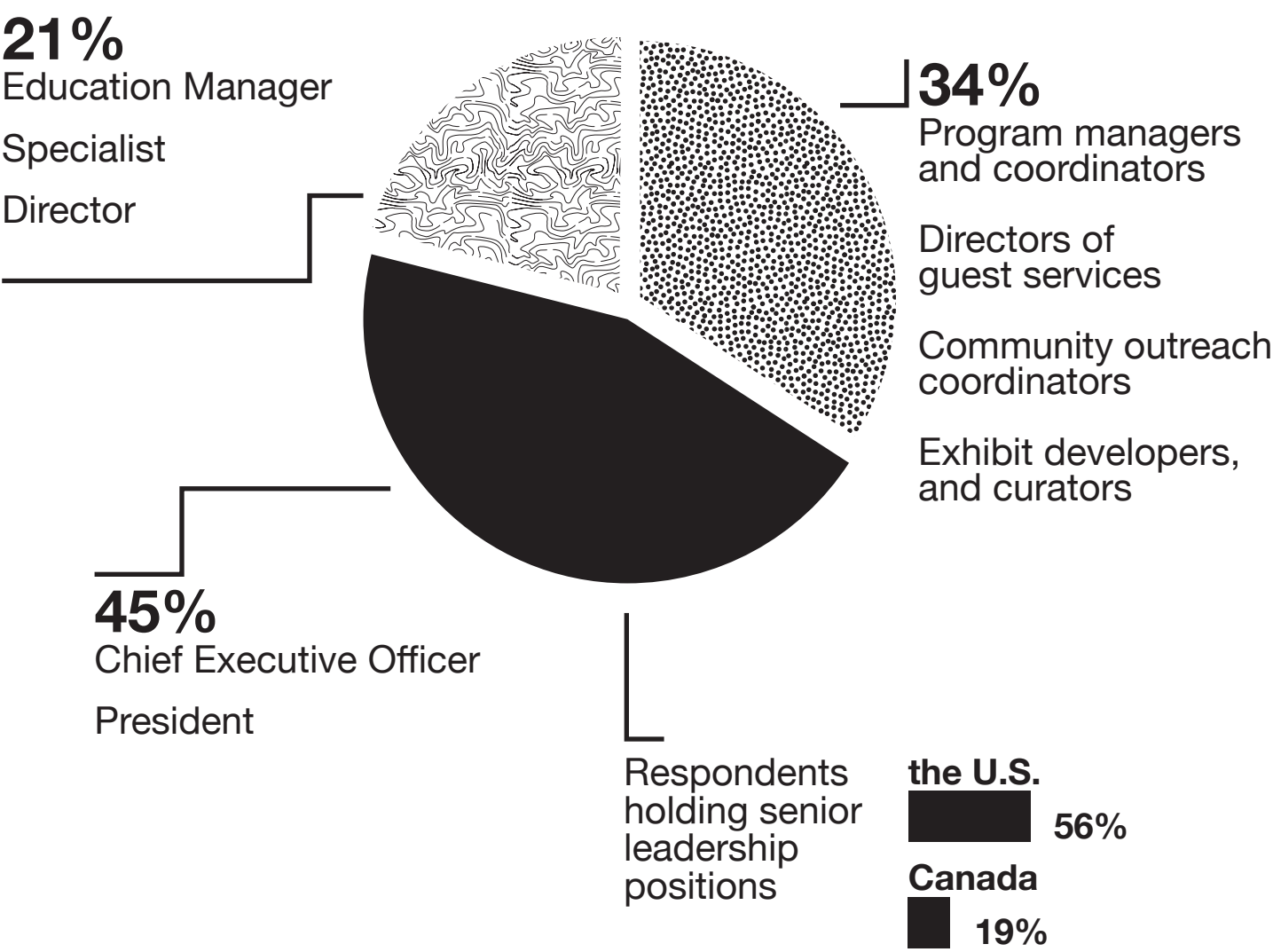
This research was approved by York University's Human Participants Review Committee (HPRC), certificate number e2023-330. Between February-May 2024, participants were recruited via email invitation using ACM's wide network of membership. Since there are fewer ACM museums in Canada, the research team did a wide search of children's museums in Canada to achieve a greater balance in representation across nations. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. After clicking on the survey link, respondents were directed to the Informed Consent Form with details about the study, confidentiality, risks and benefits, emotional supports where needed, and the Principal Investigator's information should they have questions. Upon indicating their consent to participate in the study, participants could then access the survey questions.

# Respondents

Between February-May 2024, 106 museum staff working in the United States and Canada responded to the survey. Overall, 71% of respondents were in the United States and 29% in Canada.



Of respondents, 45% held the position of Chief Executive Officer or President, with significantly more US respondents than Canadian respondents holding senior leadership positions (56% vs 19% among Canadian respondents). Additionally, 21% of respondents held positions as Education Manager, Specialist, or Director. Program managers and coordinators, directors of guest services, community outreach coordinators, exhibit developers, and curators comprised approximately 34% of the participant pool.



Respondents were racially homogenous, with 90% identifying as White. The mean age of respondents was 47 years old, and the mean duration of employment was a little over 9 and half years. In terms of sexuality, 18% of respondents identified as 2SLGBTQIA+ and significantly more respondents who identified as such had held their position for less than 6 years. Most respondents (85%) also did not identify as a person with a disability.



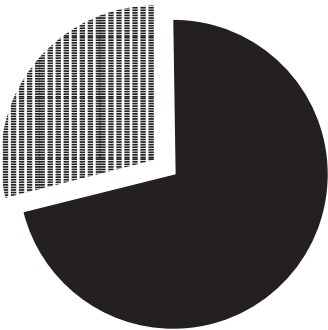
### **Respondent Demographics**

**A Note on Respondent Bias:** Participation for this study was voluntary. Since many respondents held the position of CEO or President (45%), they may have brought institutional perspectives that differed from those holding other roles in the museum. Museum respondents were also invited to comment on the related question of whether and how their social identity impacts their work with children. These responses are examined further on in the report.

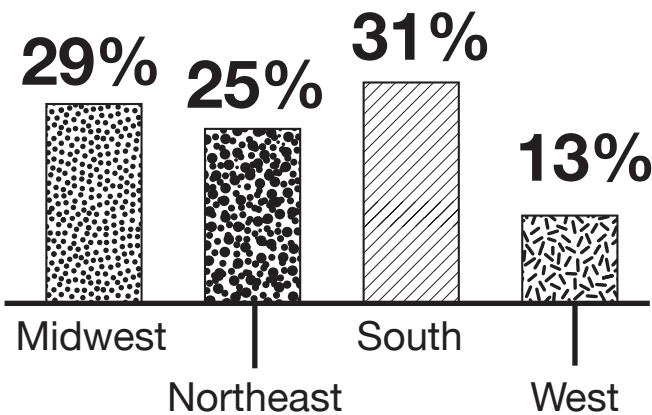
# The Museums

Most museum respondents were located in the US (71%) with 29% in Canada. US museums were evenly distributed across the Midwest (29%), Northeast (25%), the South (31%), with fewer in the West (13%). Canadian museums are evenly straddled between the West (48%) and the East (including Ontario and Quebec) (52%).

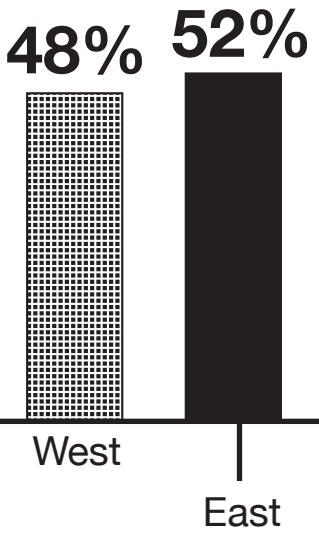
**29%**  
of respondents  
located in Canada



**71%**  
of respondents  
located in the U.S.

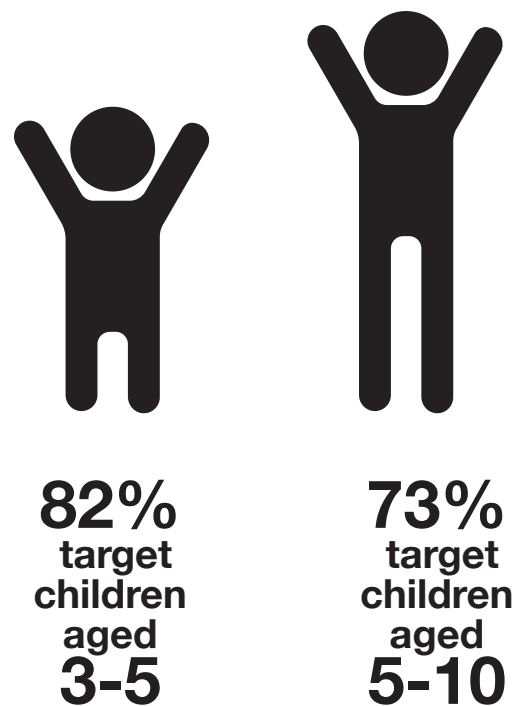
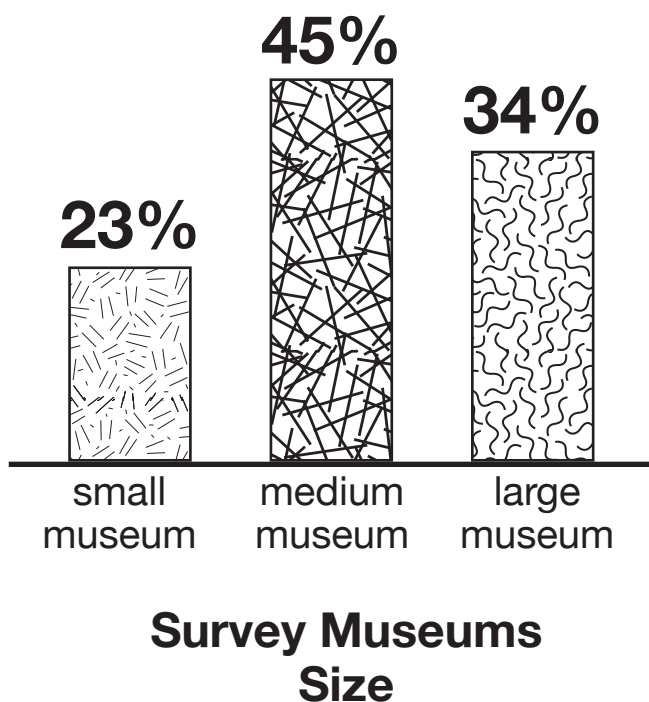


**US Museums**

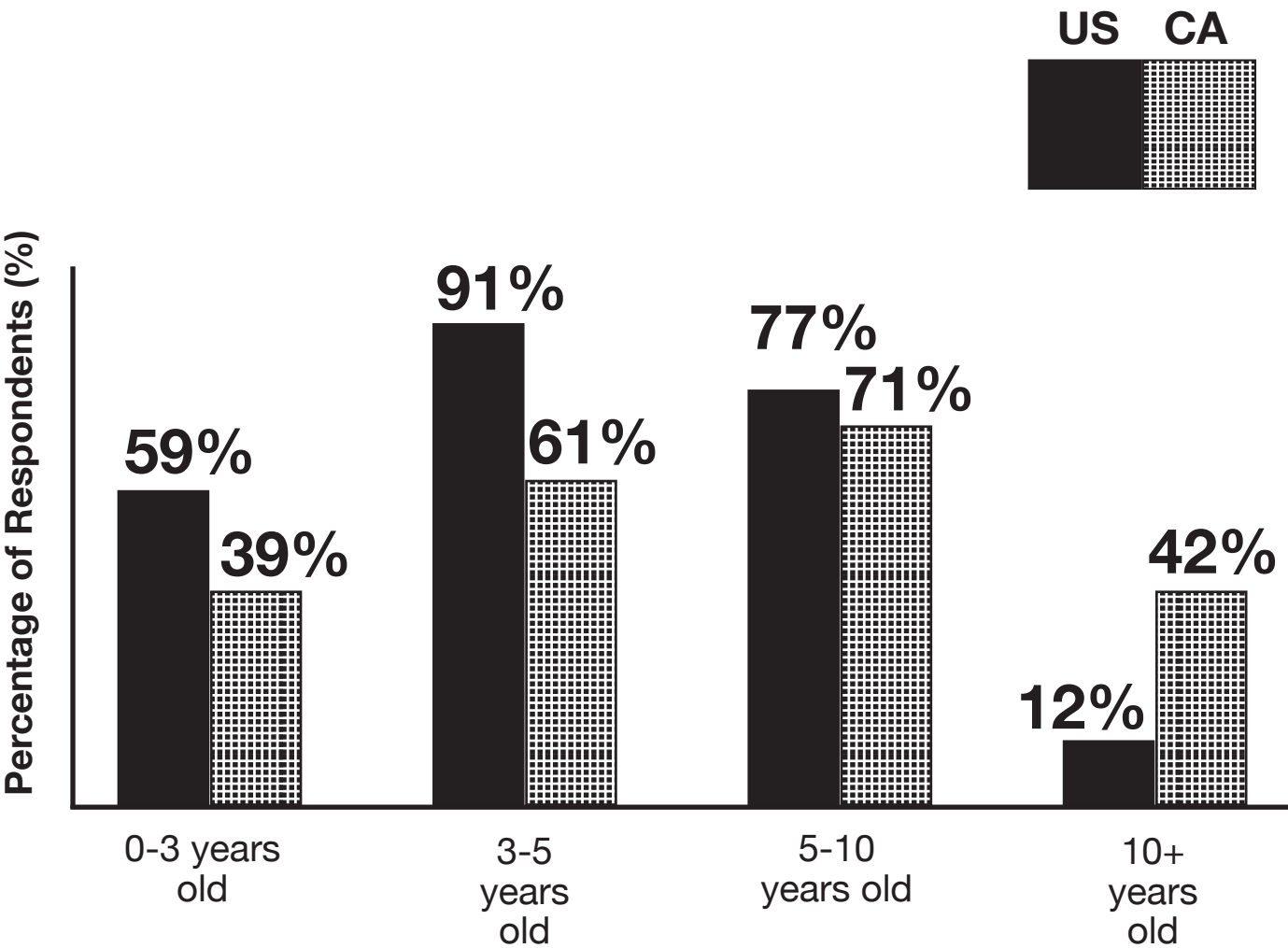


**Canadian Museums**

Museums represented in the survey varied in size, including small (23%), medium (45%) and large (34%). Children aged 3-5 years were the primary target audience of most museums represented in the survey (82%), with children aged 5-10 (73%) as a close second.



**Age of target audiences varied by nation.** Significantly more US respondents reported that their institutions geared programming toward younger children (0-10 years old), and they were also significantly more likely than Canadian respondents to target the youngest children of 0-3 years old and 3-5 years old. Significantly more Canadian respondents than US respondents reported targeting older children as their primary audience (10+ years old).



**Primary Target Age by Nation**

# The Big-Five: Key Findings

## 1. Programming

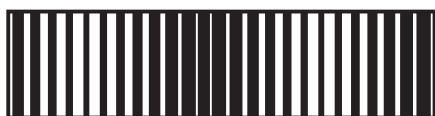
**84%** Respondents most frequently identified self-expression and/or exploration (e.g. play, manipulatives) as the primary topic programmed at their museum.



The topic of self-expression was followed by the natural world and social-historical topics. These foci mirrored progressive pedagogies and developmental scaffolds that begin with children's experiences of self and then move to the larger world comprised of plants and animals including a child's immediate surroundings and/or local community.



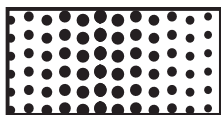
**49%** **natural world**  
e.g. animals, plants,  
minerals



**33%** **local/regional history**  
community, landmarks, places



**18%** **indigenous knowledges,  
issues, and rights**  
e.g. land pedagogy, traditional  
medicines, language revitalization



**16%** **social issues**  
e.g. racism, discrimination,  
climate change

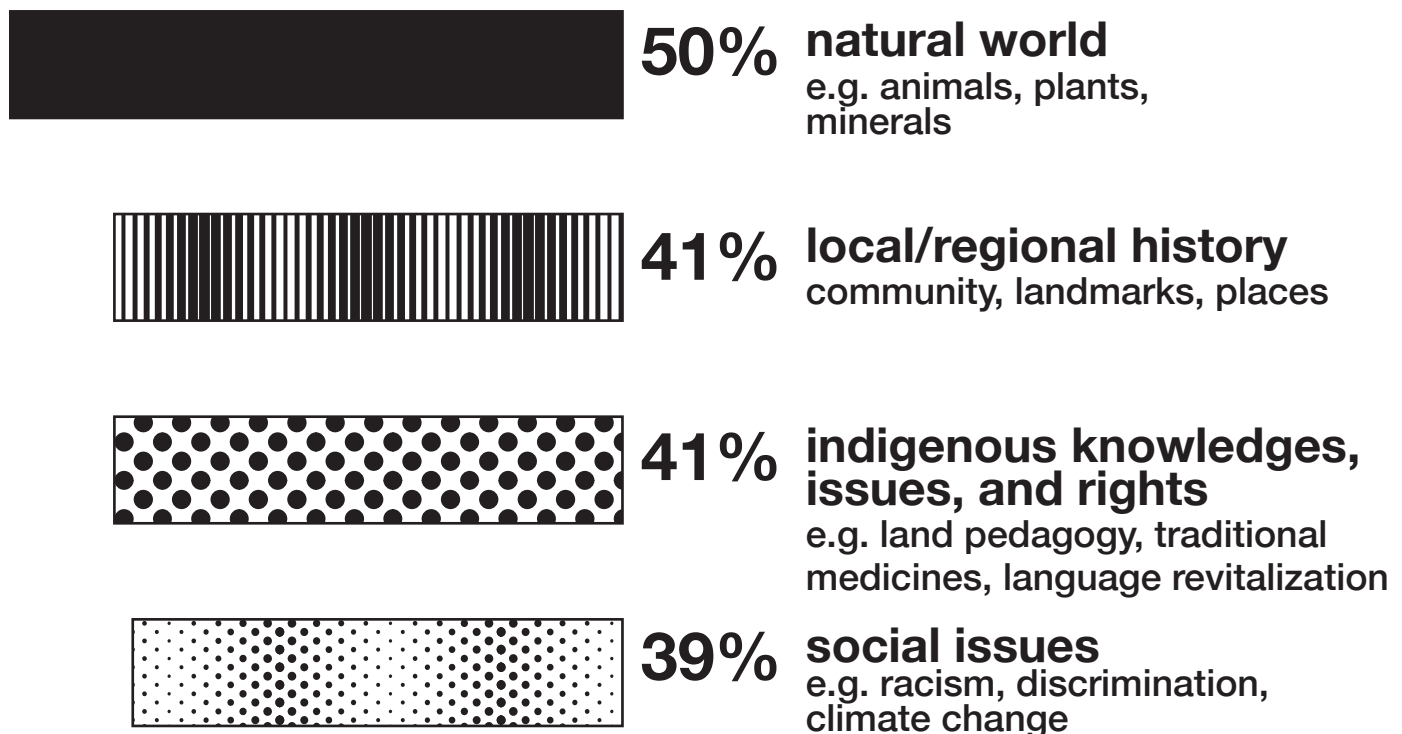


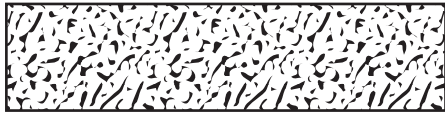
**15%** **national history**



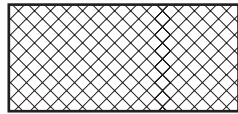
**9%** **histories of violence  
and colonialism**  
residential schools, the holocaust,  
sixties scoop, transatlantic  
slave trade, chattel slavery

**Secondary programming topics more frequently included socio-historical issues and events that were evenly distributed across a range of areas.** For instance, 50% of respondents identified social issues (e.g. racism, discrimination, climate change), 41% identified the natural world (e.g. animals, plants, minerals), 41% identified local/regional history (e.g. community, landmarks, places), 39% said national history (e.g. major events, celebrations, monuments, wars), and 36% named Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights (e.g. land pedagogy, traditional medicines, language revitalization) as secondary programming topics.



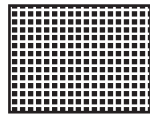


**36%** national history



**18%** histories of violence and colonialism

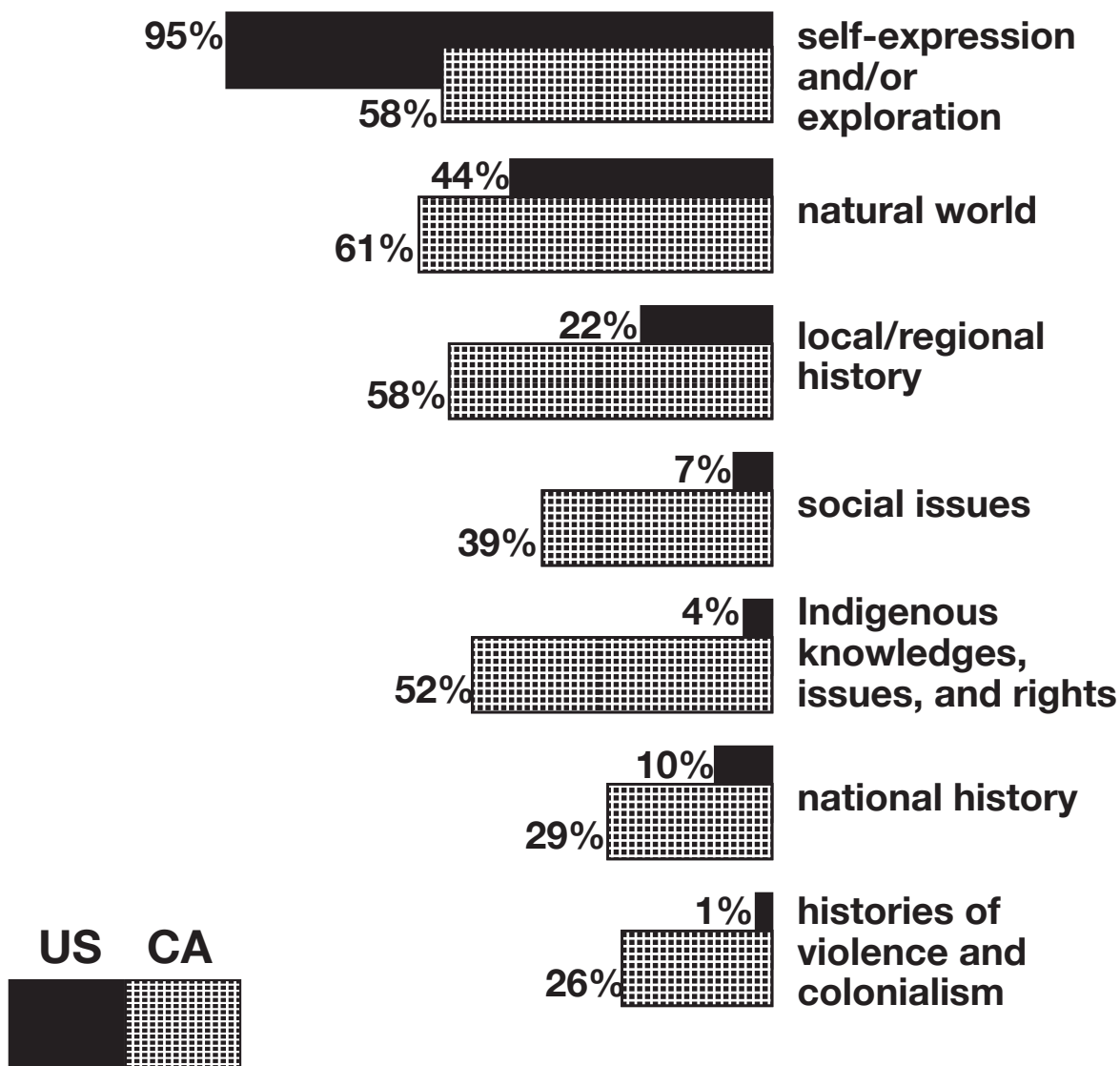
residential schools, the holocaust, sixties scoop, transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery



**11%** self-expression and/or exploration

**The topic of historical violence and colonialism was marginal in both Canadian and US programming.** Of respondents, 9% named histories of violence and colonialism as a primary programming topic, and 18% named it as a secondary programming topic. The marginal status of violent and colonial history was more pronounced in US responses.

**Programming topics varied by nation.** US respondents were significantly more likely than Canadian respondents to name self-expression and/or exploration as a primary programming topic, whereas significantly more Canadian respondents than US respondents named socio-historical topics as primary. This distinction may be confounded by the fact that significantly more Canadian museums programmed for older children and significantly more US museums geared programming toward younger children. The graph below shows a ranked list of programming topics by country (U.S. and Canada):



**Age of child audiences was linked to programming.** Museums that programmed for younger audiences (0-10 years) were significantly more likely to focus on the topic of self-expression. Museums that targeted older audiences (10+) were more likely to foreground broader topics, such as the natural world, local/regional history, social issues, Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights, national history, and histories of violence and colonialism.



**Age of Child Audiences and Percentage of Self-Expression as Primary Topic**



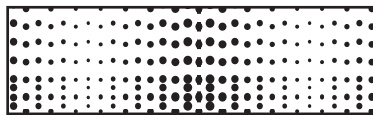
**73%** **natural world**  
e.g. animals, plants,  
minerals



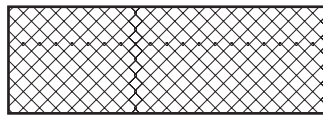
**50%** **local/regional history**  
community, landmarks, places



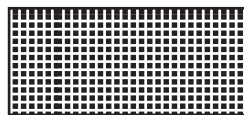
**45%** **social issues**  
e.g. racism, discrimination,  
climate change



**41%** **indigenous knowledges,  
issues, and rights**  
e.g. land pedagogy, traditional  
medicines, language revitalization



**36%** **national history**



**27%** **histories of violence  
and colonialism**  
residential schools, the holocaust,  
sixties scoop, transatlantic  
slave trade, chattel slavery

## Primary Topics for Children 10+

When museums targeted younger children, programming was more often influenced by children’s development and readiness (84%, 0-3 years; 84%, 3-5 years) and feedback from children and families (66%, 0-3 years; 66%, 3-5 years; 53%, 5-10 years). Programming in museums targeting older children was more often affected by commitments to Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights (55%) and school board/district curriculum (45%).



**Programming Influences by Target Age Group of 0-3 years and 3-5 years**



**Programming Influences by Target Older Children**

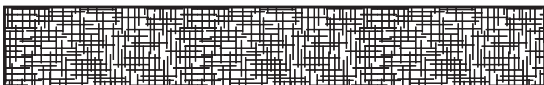
## 2. Storytelling Practices

**Museum respondents reported using a variety of storytelling practices.** Most notable among these are tactile (artefacts and objects), written (narratives on placards, short stories, poetry, prose, picture books, oral forms (telling or reciting stories, legends, folk tales, singing, chanting), and visual (images, movies, films, television shows) forms.



**Tactile 84%**

artefacts and objects



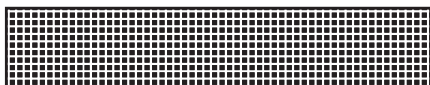
**Written 70%**

narratives on placards, short stories, poetry, prose, picture books



**Oral 66%**

telling or reciting stories, legends, folk tales, singing, chanting



**Visual 55%**

images, movies, films, television shows



**Interactive 38%**

in-person digital – storytelling that combines multimedia, multimodal, or interactive elements



**Performance 35%**

historical re-enactments, stage plays



**Testimony 33%**

eyewitness accounts, survivor narratives



**Online 33%**

virtual programs, pre-recorded programs, educators' guides, museum website, social media

**Overall, museums use storytelling primarily to activate children's curiosity and build empathy for diverse perspectives.**

**Storytelling was least likely used to challenge colonial narratives.** This was especially the case for museums that programmed for younger audiences.

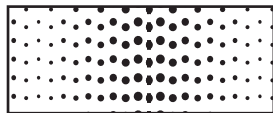
**Testimonial practices were linked to socio-historic programming topics.** Museums using testimony were more likely to program local or regional history, Indigenous knowledges, and issues and rights, social issues, national history, and histories of violence and colonialism.



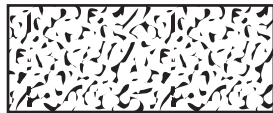
**53%** **local/regional history**  
community, landmarks, places



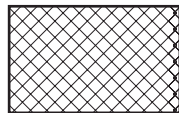
**38%** **indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights**  
e.g. land pedagogy, traditional medicines, language revitalization



**29%** **national history**



**29%** **social issues**  
e.g. racism, discrimination, climate change



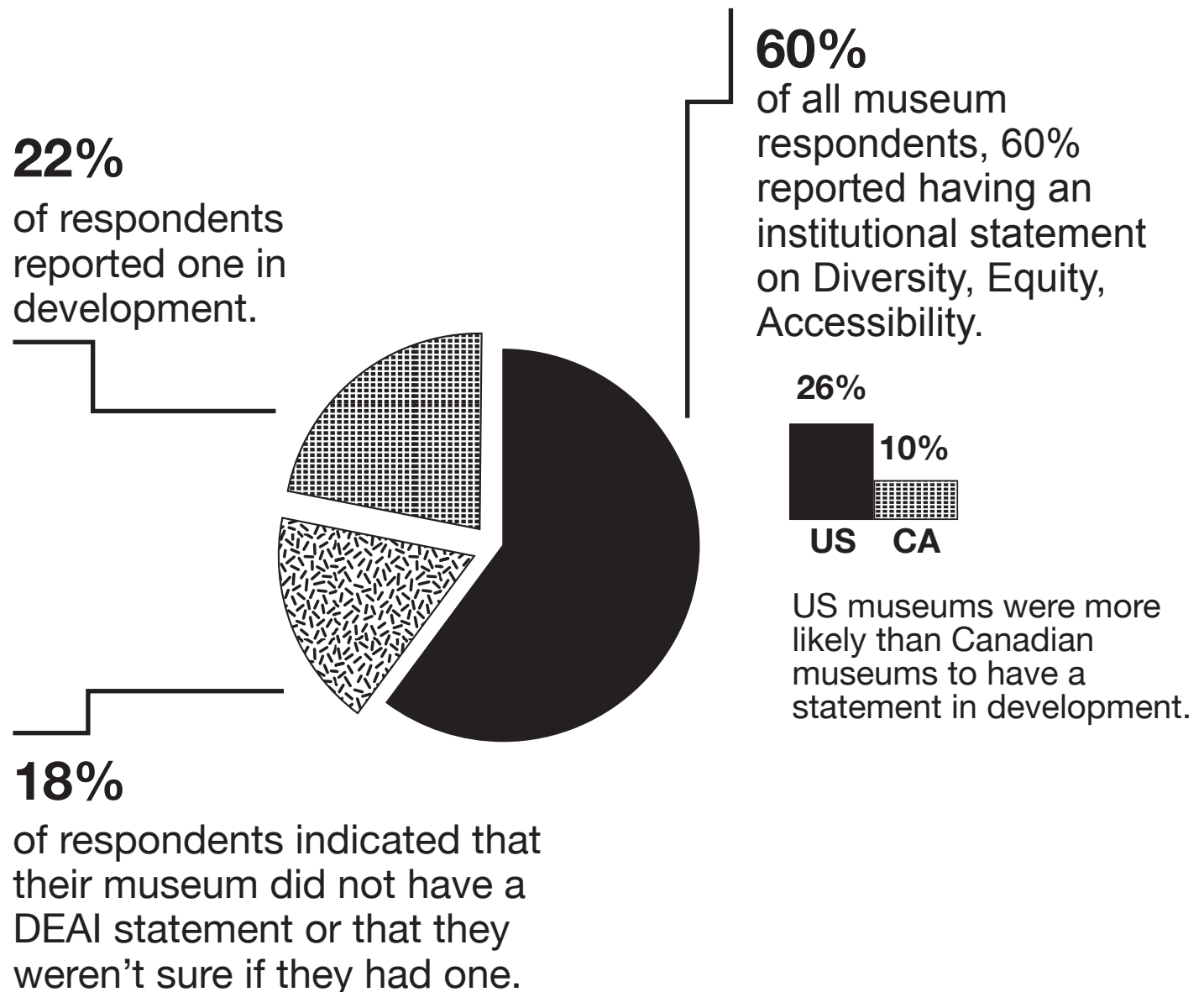
**18%** **histories of violence and colonialism**  
residential schools, the holocaust, sixties scoop, transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery

## Topics Addressed by Museums Using Testimony

**Testimonial practices were also linked to inclusive strategies.** For instance, museums using testimonial practices were also more likely to integrate culturally responsive curriculum and instruction as an inclusive strategy.

### 3. Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI)

The following data outlines the prevalence and development status of institutional DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion) statements among museum respondents, with differences between Canadian and US respondents noted.



Since the US Presidential election of 2024, it is likely that these policies will come under scrutiny and even erasure, creating further obstacles to equity work.

**Museum size was correlated to the status of DEAI statements.**

Large museums were more likely to have a DEAI statement than small museums (71%), and small museums were less likely than large and medium museums to have a DEAI statement (30%).

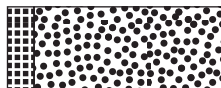
**Age of target audiences was linked to museum DEAI**

**statements.** Museums targeting younger children (24%, 0-3 years; 24%, 3-5 years; 21%, 5-10 years) were more likely to have a DEAI statement in development than museums targeting older children. The graph below illustrates the distribution of museum DEAI statements based on the age of their target audiences.



**70%**

of all museums targeting older children (10+ years) had a DEAI statement.



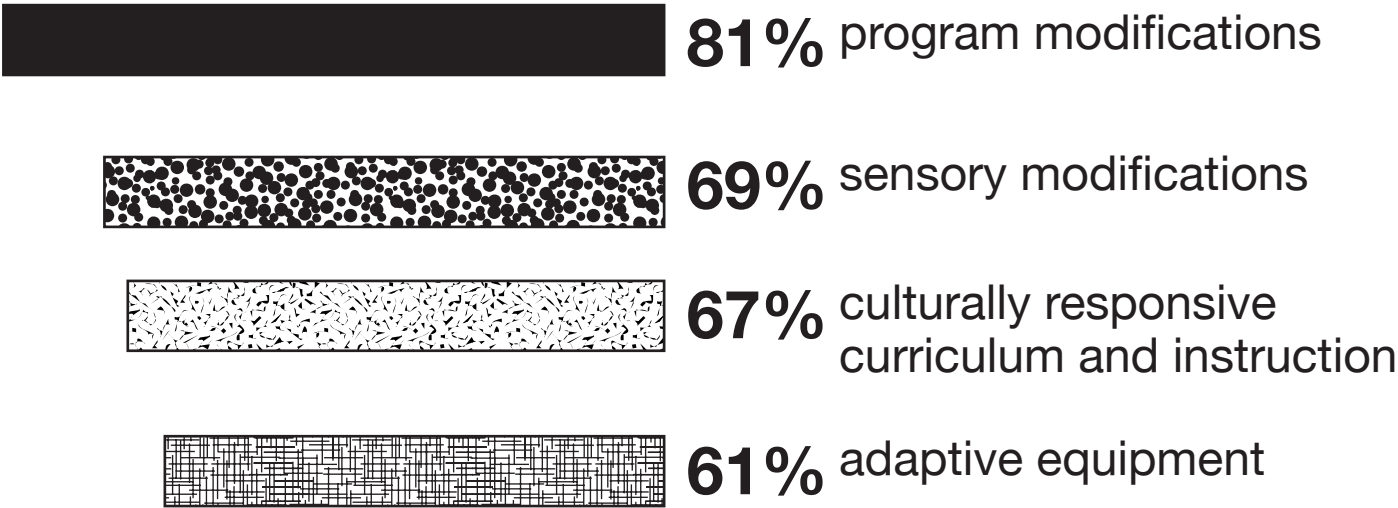
**21-24%**

of all museums targeting younger children (0-10 years) have a DEAI statement in development.

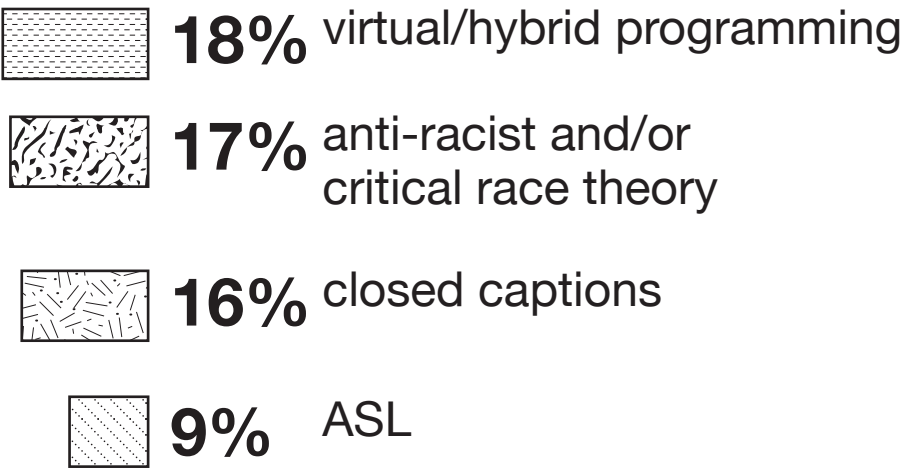
**DEAI statements did not affect programming topics.** Museums with DEAI statements were as likely as those without statements to gear programming primarily toward the development of children's self-expression and exploration through play and manipulatives.

# 4. Inclusive Strategies

Most museums surveyed used program modifications, sensory modifications, culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, and adaptive equipment. Least utilized strategies included virtual/hybrid programming, anti-racist and/or critical race theory, closed captions, and ASL.

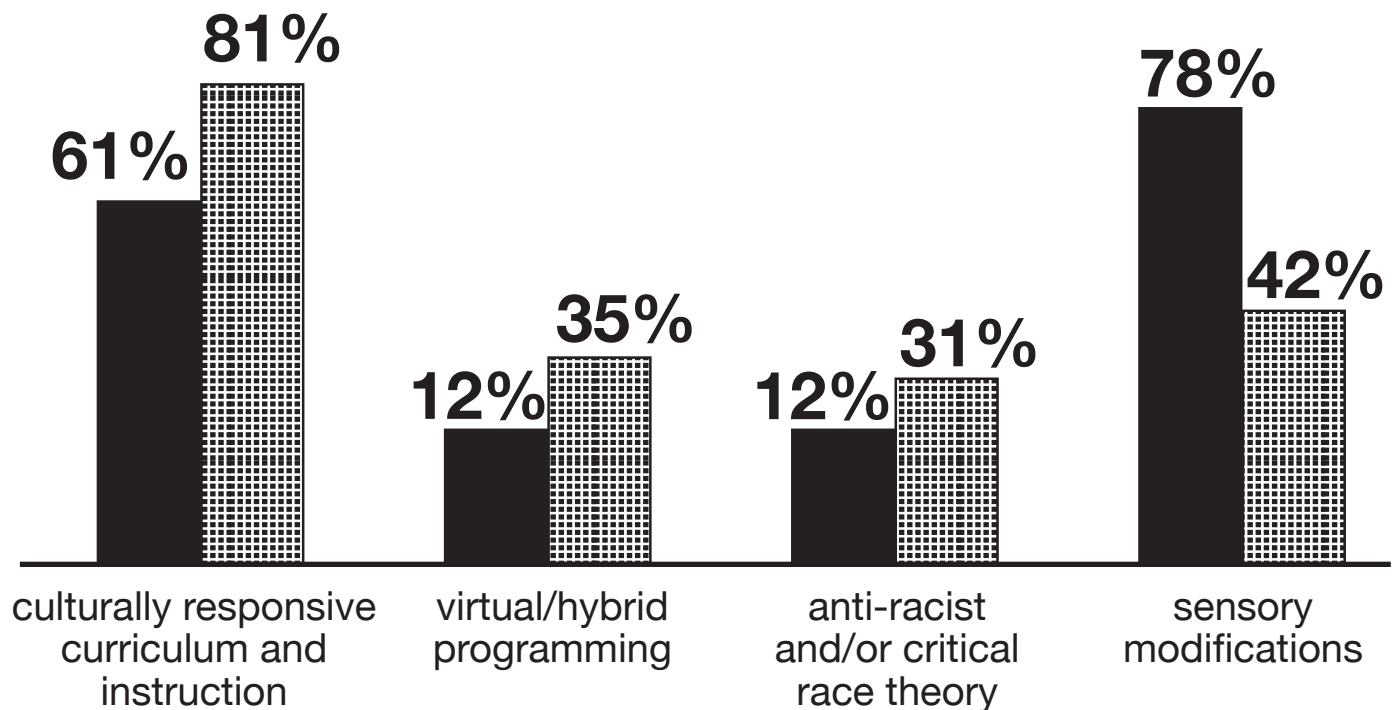


## Most Used Inclusive Strategies among Surveyed Museum



## Least Utilized Strategies among Surveyed Museum

**Inclusive strategies varied by nation.** Significantly more Canadian than US respondents incorporated culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, virtual/hybrid programming and anti-racist and/or critical race theory. Significantly more US museums than Canadian museums included sensory modifications.

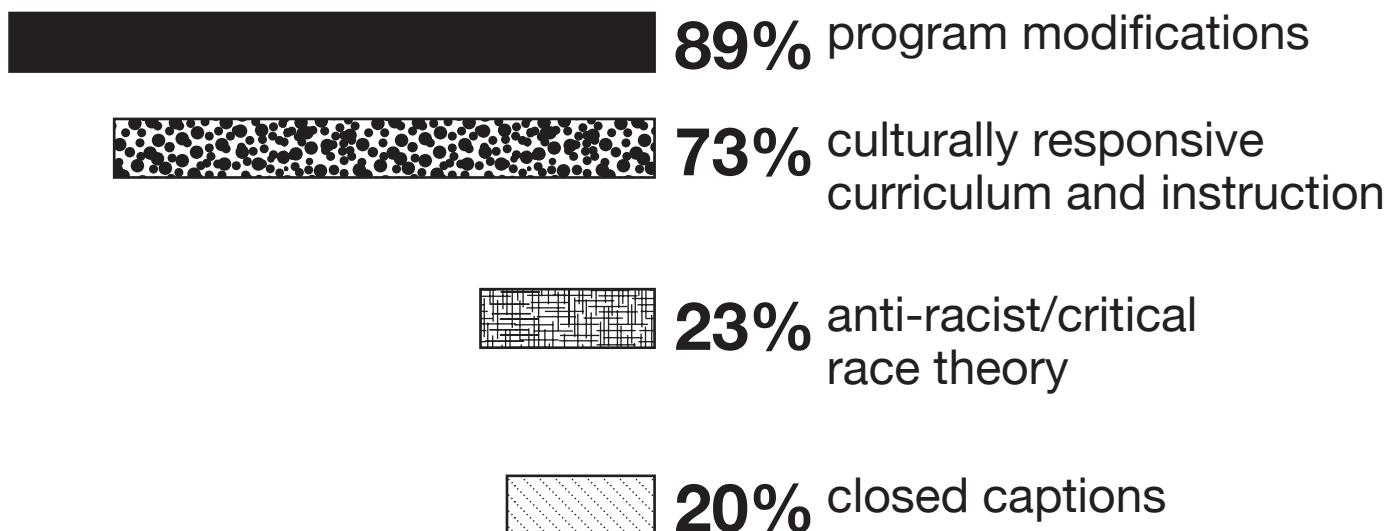


**Comparison of Inclusive Strategies  
in US and Canadian Museums**

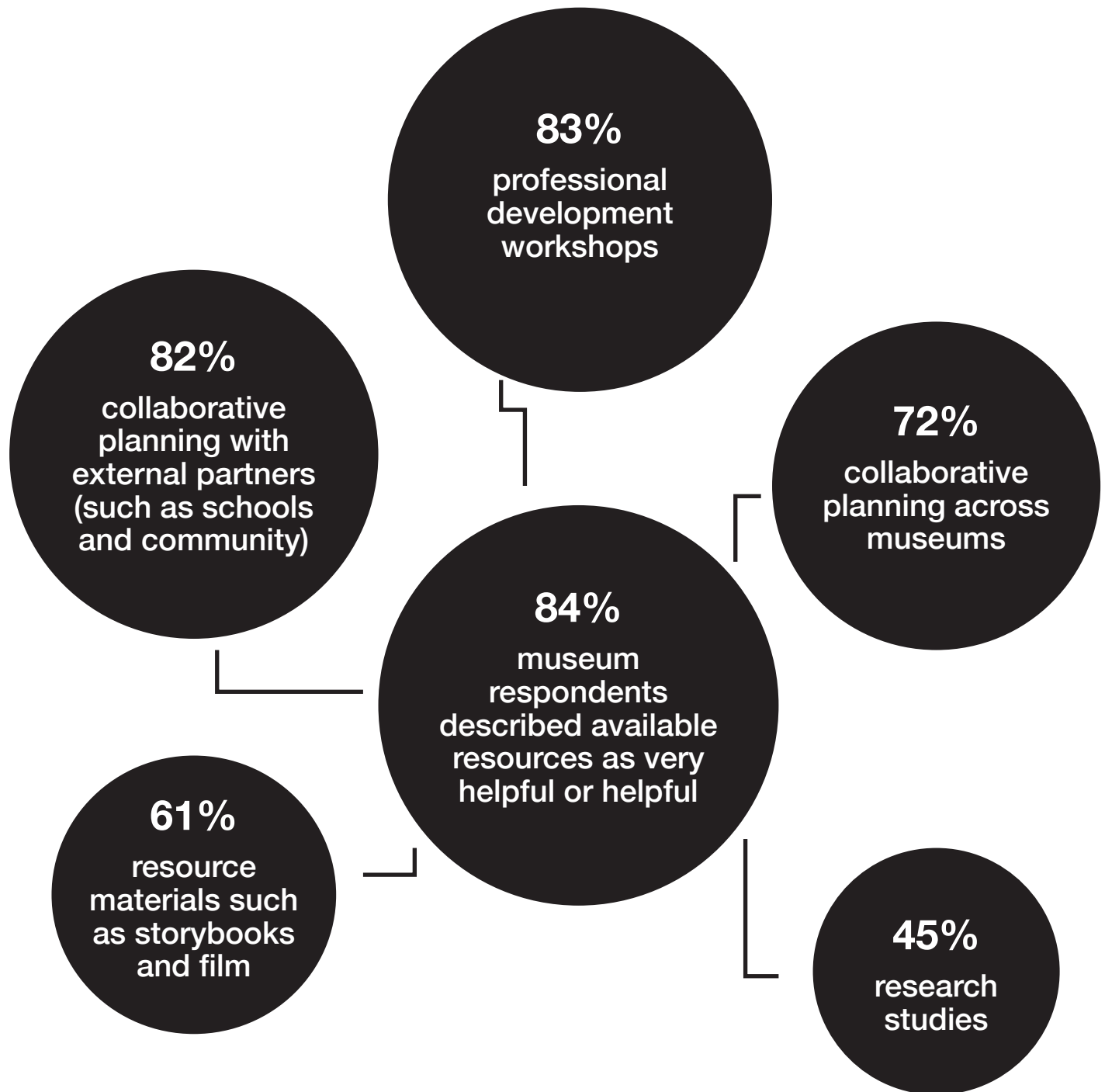
**Critical race theory and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were most often used to represent socio-historic programming topics** (such as local/regional history, Indigenous knowledges, issues, and rights, social issues such as racism and discrimination).

**Critical race theory and culturally responsive curriculum and instruction were most often used in museums that also identified their commitments to Indigenous communities as a factor shaping programming.**

**DEAI statements were correlated to the integration of inclusive strategies.** Museums with a DEAI statement were significantly more likely than those without or in development to use the following inclusive strategies:



**Museum respondents had access to multiple resources in support of DEAI work with children, including:**



**Most museum respondents described these resources as very helpful or helpful.** Only 8% of respondents described available resources as a little helpful or not at all helpful.

## 5. Challenges

Despite DEAI statements and available resources, respondents reported several challenges, such as framing stories that are understandable to children, representing communities that are not one's own, involving Indigenous knowledge keepers, storytellers, and Elders, representing difficult topics or traumatic content, and involving storytellers from diverse and/or marginalized communities. No single challenge emerged as significant, indicating that respondents viewed many challenges as important.

## So What? Conclusions and Implications

This survey provided insights about the place of social studies – including diverse and sometimes difficult topics – in children's museums located in the US and Canada. A key theme running through the survey was the importance of children's museums in supporting children's self-expression and exploration as well as the value of storytelling practices to activate curiosity and promote empathy for diverse perspectives and experiences. Another key theme running through the findings was a tension between institutional commitments to Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion and pedagogical concerns about children's development, including their perceived readiness to engage certain topics. Often, programming topics addressing socio-historic events were reserved for older children while programming for younger children were less likely to engage these topics. Children's age and developmental readiness appear to remain major factors – and challenges – in efforts to represent diverse and difficult knowledge.

In addition, findings pointed to variations across national borders that suggest differences in political milieus with respect to truth and reconciliation and anti-racist approaches to education. At the time of the survey, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's "Calls to Action" (2015) – while themselves imperfect – had been in circulation for nearly 10 years, with the possible effect of creating conditions within public institutions that encourage reflection about their implication in ongoing colonial legacies. At the same time, deep political polarization in the US has led to increased challenges and sometimes attacks of institutions that seek to engage a critical redress of past historical violences. Emboldened attacks, book bans, and concerted efforts to take down Critical Race Theory have become more pronounced since the Presidential elections of 2016 and 2024, and the Movement for Black Lives. In Canada, too, we note a rising tide of the conservative Right and coinciding backlash against decolonial and anti-racist initiatives. Our findings should be read in the context of these shifting landscapes and volatile times, particularly in the US, where there have been significant closures of programs and initiatives geared toward issues of equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion. While museums offer and utilize a range of professional development resources and supports, respondents articulated concerns and challenges. These included concerns about how social identity – and in particular race privilege and the implication of museums in colonial legacies – creates obstacles in making connections to community, representing diverse topics, and engaging families and children themselves. Museum respondents also raised concerns about resistance from certain communities

in response to museums' efforts to engage diverse topics that were considered difficult or inappropriate for children. In this context, respondents often drew on personal experiences, whether immediately their own or their relationships with family, friends, and communities to inform their commitments to “do better” in addressing diverse and difficult topics.

Overall, the findings document museums' efforts to address, challenge, and subvert the colonial legacies they also inherit. Findings also demonstrate a need for continuing efforts to diversify programming (particularly with younger children), including the need to diversify representation among museum educators, directors, and staff, and to create and care for communities of practice guided by principles of allyship and solidarity.

# Recommendations

## 1

**Provide professional learning/workshops on issues and resources relating to the representation of social difference and difficult knowledge with children.**

## 2

**Invite continuing reflection on social positionality in relation to museum work; include professional development on self-reflection, solidarity, and allyship.**

## 3

**Diversify staffing without tokenism.**

## 4

**Support the integration of counter-stories in museum programming and practices by sharing examples, resources, and models across institutions and borders.**

## 5

**Include children in programming – particularly from marginalized communities.**

# The Research Team

The research team is comprised of 4 education researchers with specializations in social studies and history curriculum, childhood, and disability studies. The team also includes the Director of Field Services and Research of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM).

## Research Leads

**Lisa Farley** is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research examines the status of difficult knowledge in learning from history, the emotional aspects of education, and theories of child development in relation to curriculum and pedagogy.

**Debbie Sonu** is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College and The Graduate Center at the City University of New York. Her research examines how teachers engage social conflicts and difficult histories with children in public schools.

**Gillian Parekh** is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Disability Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research draws on critical quantitative and institutional ethnographic methods to trace patterns of inequity experienced by children and young people from kindergarten to postsecondary education.

**Sandra Chang-Kredl** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University. Her research explores children's popular culture and play, with a focus on teachers' efforts to support children's understandings of difficult topics such as hate speech and othering.

**Jennifer Rehkamp** is the Senior Director of Field Services and Research at the Association of Children's Museums. She has extensive experience in leading projects that support museum educators in thinking about the role of museums in children's learning and community engagement.

## **Collaborators**

**Kiera Brant-Birioukov** is from Kenhtè:ke (Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario). She is a Senior Consultant and Co-Founder of Ridge Road Training and Consulting, with expertise in Indigenous thought, educational research, and professional development.

**Michael Harcourt** has been a social studies teacher and is a lecturer at the University of Wellington, New Zealand.

**Tasha Henry** is an Inclusive Education teacher and writer of truth and reconciliation curricula.

**Joana Joachim** is an Assistant Professor at Concordia with expertise in Black feminist art histories and critical museology.

**Andrea Milligan** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Wellington and Learning Manager at Experience Wellington.

**Jessica Ticktin** is a public radio producer of stories about race and reconciliation from the perspectives of children and youth.

## **Research Assistants**

**Suad Ahmed** is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research focuses on the experiences of Somali children in schools and the emotional and social impacts of anti-Black racism.

**E.Y. Zipris** is a doctoral candidate and adjunct faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University and former Director of Education at the Museum of the City of New York. Her research focuses on creative technologies and social justice practices in museum contexts.