



LLOYD D. LEVENSON INSTITUTE
OF GAMING, HOSPITALITY & TOURISM

Atlantic City Visitor Perceptions and Preferences
Final Report - April 2021

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Background and Purpose of the Study

In response to the COVID-19 public health crisis, the casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey were shut down by Executive Order 104 from Governor Murphy at 8 p.m. on March 16, 2020. Operating and occupancy restrictions were placed on all activities where people could gather. This had a devastating impact on the recreation, travel, hospitality, and tourism industries – with an even more drastic effect on tourism-dependent-resorts like Atlantic City.

The shut-down order remained in effect until July 2, 2020, when Governor Murphy issued Executive Order 157 allowing casinos to reopen at 25% occupancy on the gaming floor. Executive Order 158 still prohibited indoor food and beverage service in restaurants and bars, and on the casino floor. The indoor dining prohibition included all resort establishments whether in a casino or non-casino location and remained in effect until September 2020, when service could resume with severely limited indoor occupancy levels.

In November 2020, food and beverage service would be subject to further restriction in the form of a curfew, which required establishments to close between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. All entertainment, sports and convention activities were also subject to strict occupancy and social-distancing limitations, effectively shutting out spectators and visitors. The industry was in an unprecedented and dire situation and faced considerable uncertainty.

The Lloyd D. Levenson Institute for Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at Stockton University undertook the development and administration of a survey exploring the perceptions and preferences of visitors to the Atlantic County region in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific goals of this survey were:

- A. Examine visitors' perceptions of safety, level of comfort and willingness to participate in key activities such as indoor dining, patronizing a public event, attending a trade conference or convention, and staying overnight in a hotel.
- B. Assess to what degree visitor preferences have changed since the start of pandemic related restrictions, whether preferences/behaviors will return to pre-pandemic norms, and, if so, how quickly.

This report presents the findings from the survey and will also make some observations and conclusions from the data.

Methodology

Between mid-January and early February, a convenience sample of visitors to the Do AC website was used to get responses to an online survey. The sample may have inherent bias as it was not selected randomly, nor is it proportionally representative of the population. A link to the survey was posted on the AtlanticCityNJ.com website and a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift certificate was offered as an incentive. There were 805 completed responses received after data hygiene was performed to eliminate duplicates and obvious false entries. On average, it took respondents about five minutes to complete the 20-question survey.

Executive Summary

Visitors remain anxious about the threat of COVID-19 and ongoing pandemic concerns continue to depress visitor volume to Atlantic City. However, findings indicate visitor numbers should strongly rebound as pandemic conditions ease.

Results showed 72% of all survey respondents - whether they have visited since the city's casinos reopened in July or not – reported planning to visit Atlantic City within the next six months. Those who have made a visit since July were even more likely to return within the next six months (82%).

Respondents who have visited the resort since July reported feeling safe from COVID-19 exposure while enjoying their normal activities. This suggests the city has been doing a good job of managing safety protocols.

Key Findings

- 43% of respondents reported at least one AC visit since the July 2020 reopening, with the threat of COVID-19 being the primary reason (67% for non-returners) the remaining respondents had not visited
- Visitors reported satisfaction with their post-reopening trip even with COVID-19 related safety restrictions: 78% reported being either “extremely satisfied” or “very satisfied”, while 9% expressed dissatisfaction.
- Most respondents believed they were safe from COVID-19 exposure while doing their normal activities such as dining, gambling, or walking the Boardwalk on their visit (s) to Atlantic City since the reopening in July.
- 72% of total respondents said they plan to visit Atlantic City within the next six months.
- Of those respondents who had visited post-reopening, 82% say they will visit again within the next six months.

Looking Ahead

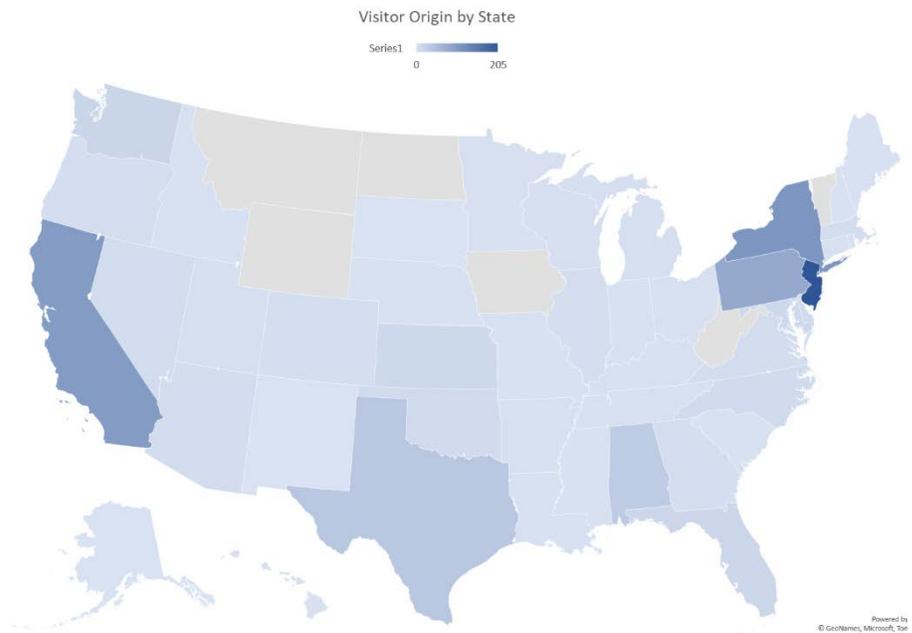
In summer 2021, Atlantic City should see a significant uptick in the number of visitors as pandemic fears recede. Recent news, increasing capacity rates at casinos and restaurants, lower COVID-19 hospitalization numbers and the rising vaccination rates can be viewed as positive signs.

Survey results showed that many respondents who stayed home due to COVID-19 concerns plan to visit Atlantic City within the next 6 months. This is a strong indicator of pent-up demand. People who have visited since the reopening perceive operators as having done a good job of enforcing safety protocols for mask-wearing and cleaning/disinfecting. Continuing these efforts, combined with easing occupancy restrictions, should make the guest experience much more enjoyable by summer 2021.

Detailed Findings

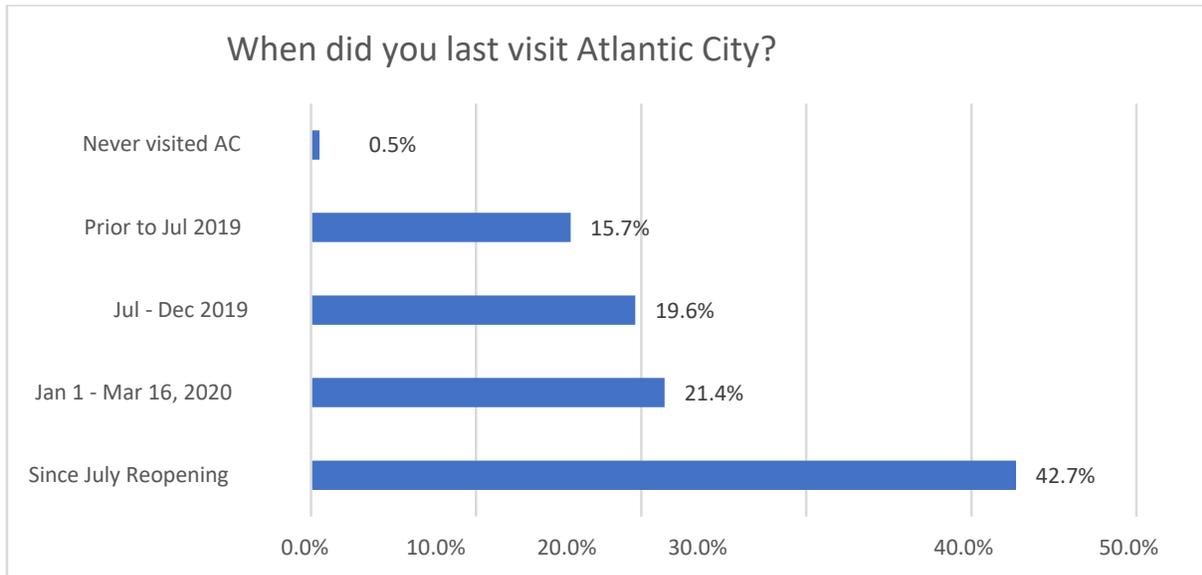
Responses By Region

Region	Sum of Frequency
Midwest	53
East North Central	28
West North Central	24
North East	387
Mid Atlantic	365
New England	13
North East	9
South	171
East South Central	48
South Atlantic	68
West South Central	55
West	164
Mountain	37
Pacific	127
Grand Total	775

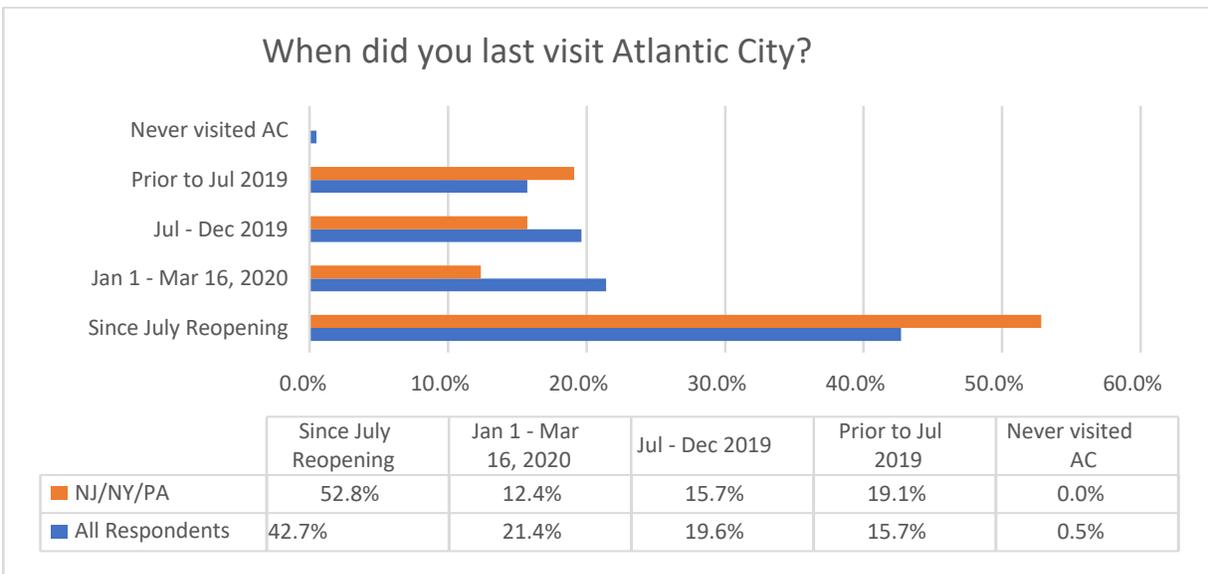


The responses were more geographically dispersed than expected with 365 coming from the Mid-Atlantic States of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Another 410 responses came from outside that area and another 30 did not enter a state of residence. Each survey question was tabulated to compare the Mid-Atlantic respondents to the total. Differences will be noted only where they are significant.

When Did You Last Visit Atlantic City?

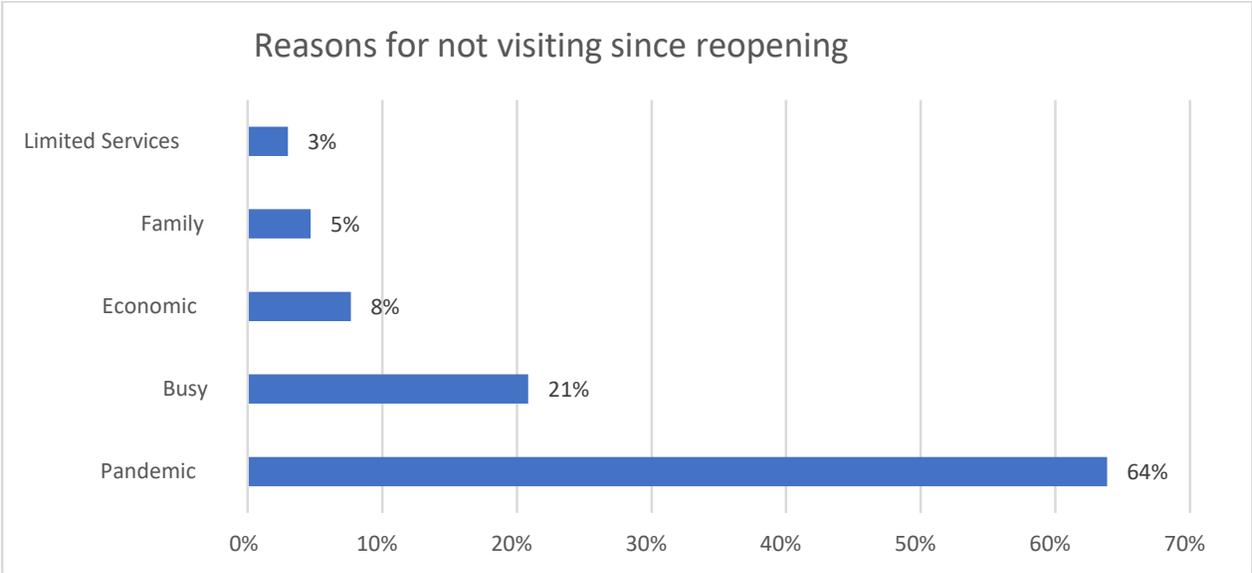


After being shut down on March 16, 2020, the casinos in Atlantic City reopened on July 2, 2020. Most other hotels, dining establishments, bars and entertainment venues had also been either shut down completely or restricted to outside activity with limited capacity. Of the 789 survey respondents who answered the question, “Approximately when was the last time you visited Atlantic City N.J.?”, 42.7% stated that they had visited since the casinos reopened in July with state mandated restrictions such as 25% occupancy for gaming, and outdoor dining only.



When we look at just the respondents who live in the Mid-Atlantic Region (New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania), more than half (52.8%) reported having visited Atlantic City since the reopening. This was a 10% increase in visitation incidence when compared to all respondents. This is logical, as the geographic proximity puts Atlantic City within easy driving distance for Mid-Atlantic travelers and it is therefore much easier and less expensive for them to visit.

Reasons for Not Visiting Since Reopening



The question, “Why have you not visited Atlantic City since the casinos reopened in July?” was asked of the 57% of total respondents who reported not having visited Atlantic City since the reopening. This was an open-ended question, and we coded the responses into logical categories and counted the frequency of responses. Overwhelmingly, 64% of respondents gave pandemic-related reasons for not visiting. If you also add the 3% of respondents who specifically identified limited dining or entertainment options due to shutdowns as being related to the pandemic, then the total goes to 67%, or two out of three respondents. The second most frequently stated reason for not visiting was that they were busy or too busy to take a trip (21%), followed by economic reasons (8%) and family reasons (5%). We view this as good news because there is no indication that previous visitation patterns will not resume once all venues are reopened and operating at normal capacity and normal hours, and peoples’ concern about COVID-19 diminishes. We view the 8% who responded that economic reasons kept them from visiting as a good sign because it is such a low number. If more people cited economic reasons that could indicate less discretionary income, leading to more concern for future visits.

Sample Quotes¹

“Covid shutdown”

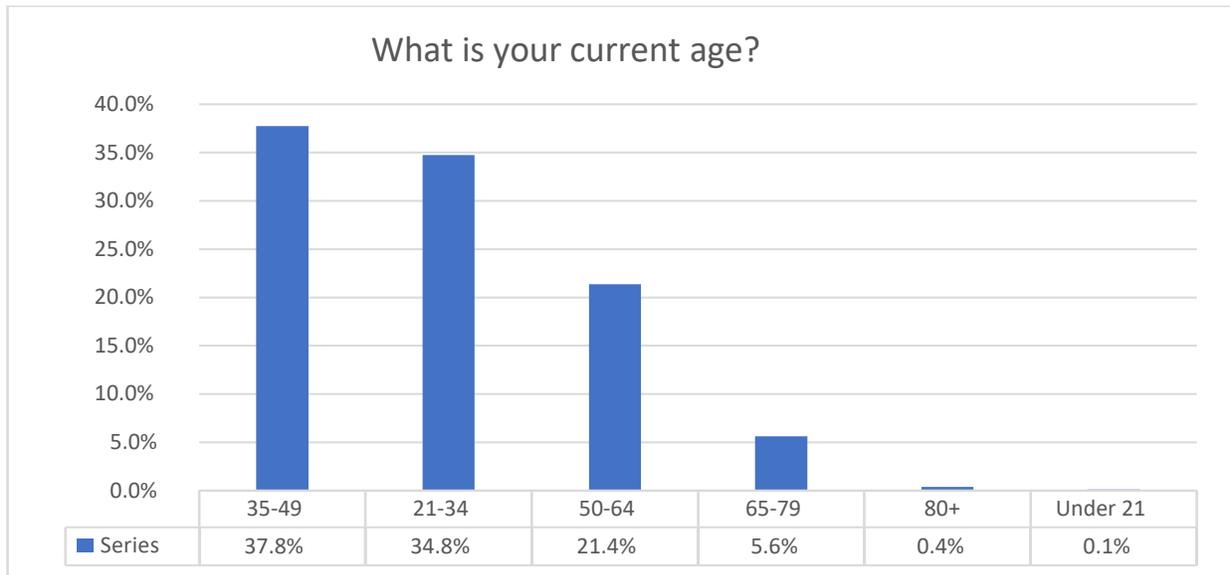
“Covid, busy being essential employee”

“No drinks and indoor dining, no clubs”

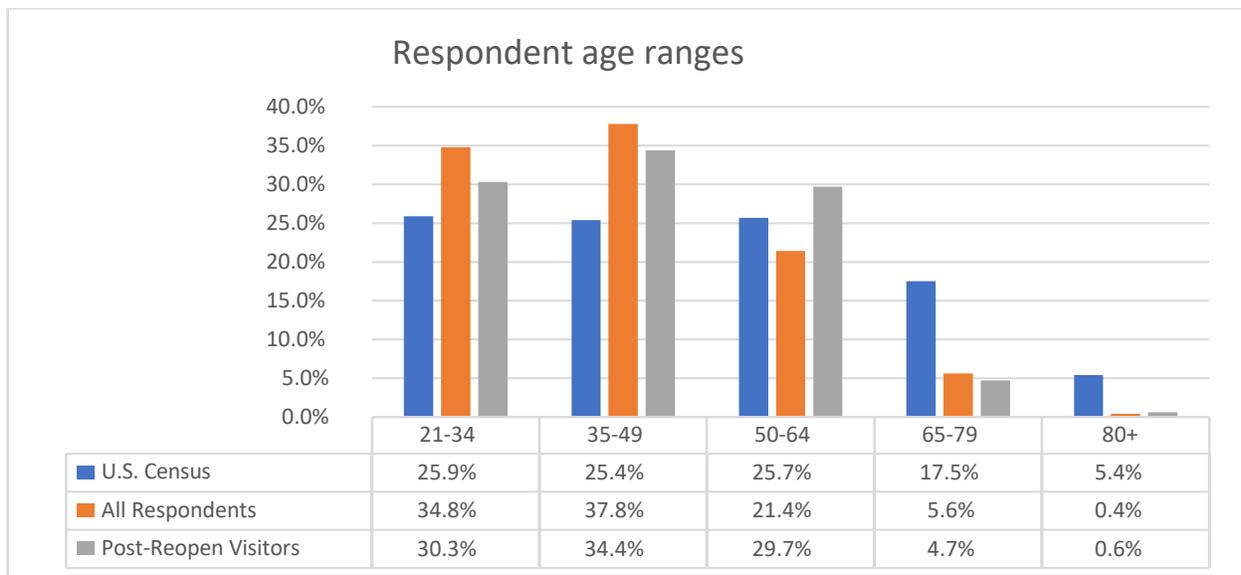
“Due to the serious epidemic situation, I seldom go out and recently choose to stay at home”

¹ The complete report of the open-end responses to the question, “Why have you not visited Atlantic City since the casinos reopened in July?” is included in the Addendum

Age of Visitors



The chart above shows a breakdown of all survey respondents by age range. We thought it more illuminating to add the total U.S. population proportions for those age ranges as well as the age ranges of respondents who visited after the July 2020 reopening for comparison purposes, as shown in the following chart.

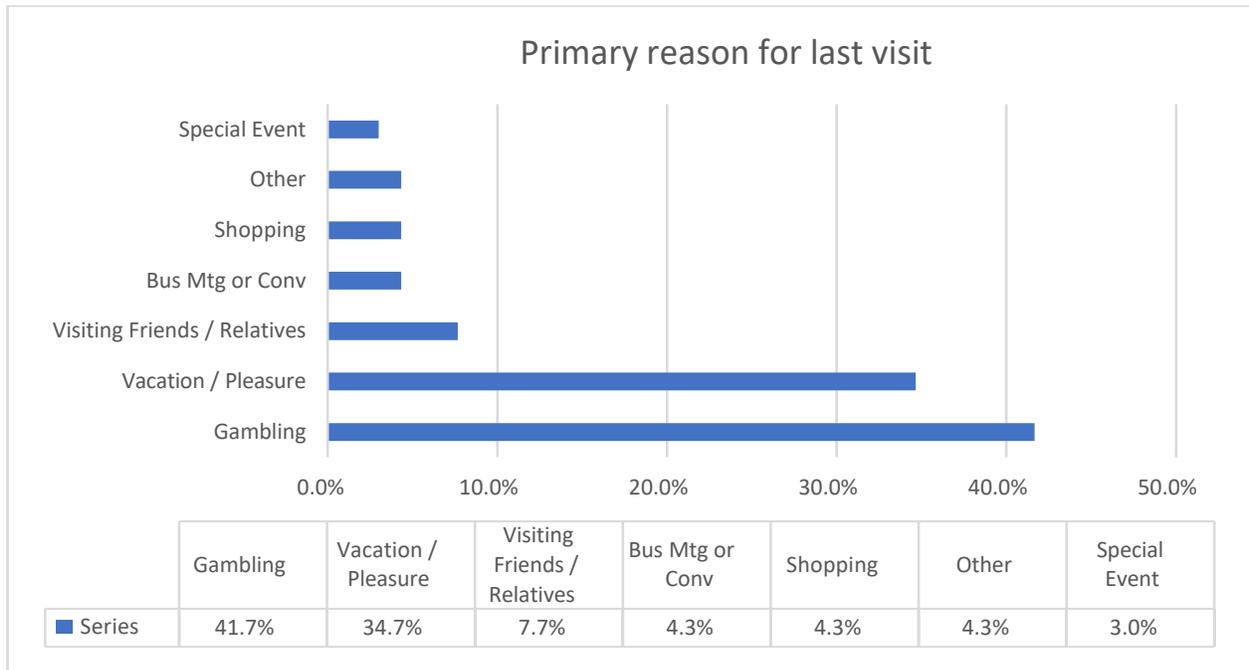


The total survey respondents and the post-reopening visitors skew younger than the U.S. population. For the survey, 94% of all respondents were between the ages of 21 and 64, which is a much higher proportion than the U.S. adult population for those same age ranges. Based on the 2019 estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau, adults ages 21 to 64 represent 77% of the U.S. Adult 21+ population. The post-reopening visitor age range also skewed younger than the U.S. adult age range with ages 21-64 representing 94%, the same proportion as All Respondents. We do see a 12% drop-off in the Age 65+ segment, but expected an even larger skew towards younger visitors in the post-reopening numbers because Age 65+ adults are significantly more at risk to adverse outcomes from COVID-19, and thought to be less likely to travel.

Post Reopening Questions

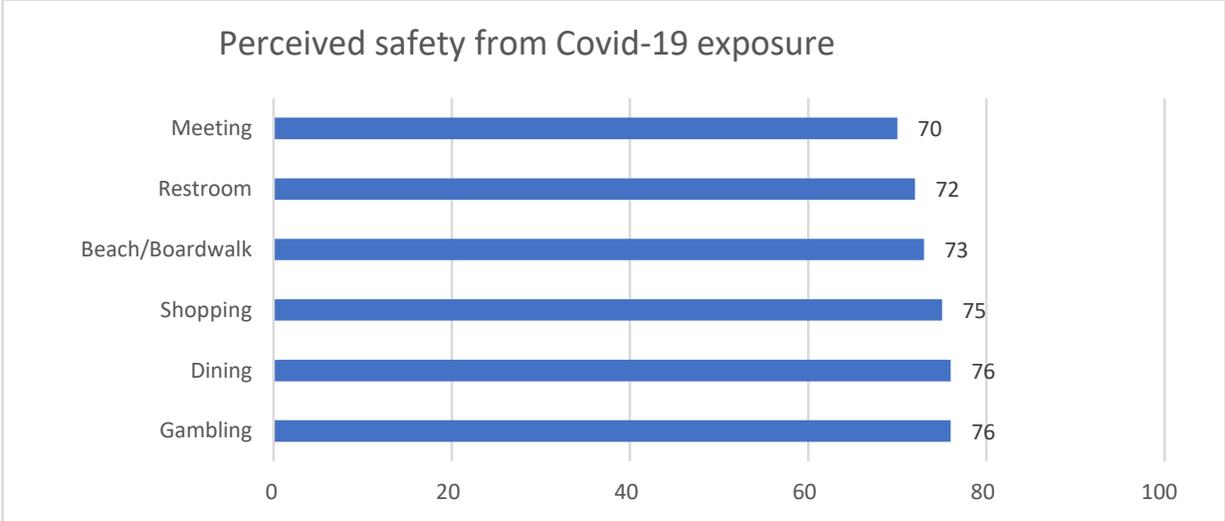
In this section we report the results from the questions asked only of the respondents who had visited Atlantic City since the July 2 reopening. We will show the responses from all who reported visiting since the reopening and will not show the Mid-Atlantic results broken out separately unless there is a significant difference from the total.

Reasons for Last Visit



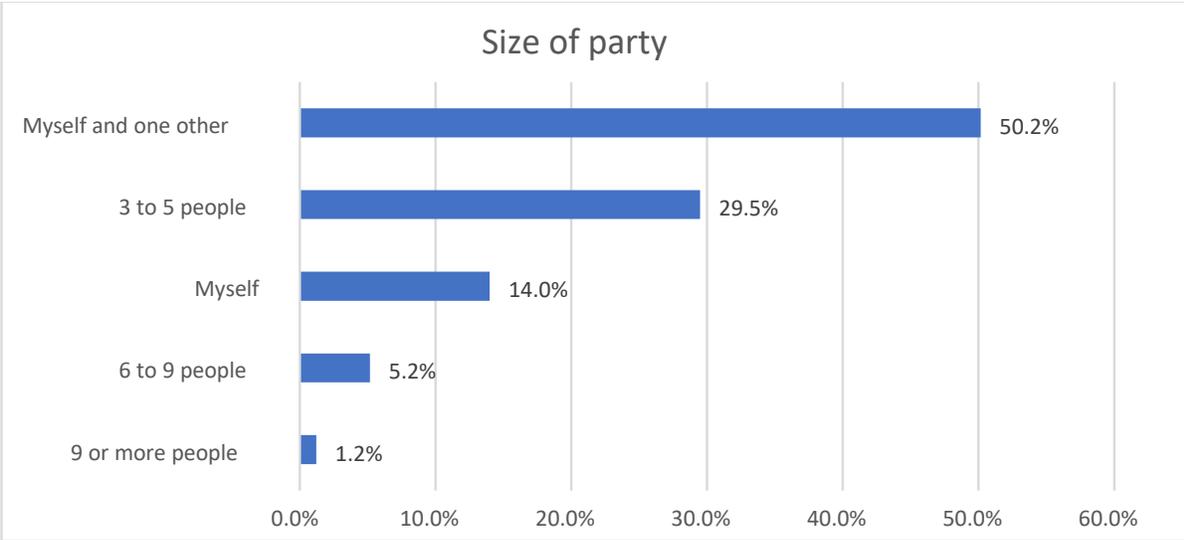
Approximately 75% of the respondents who had visited Atlantic City after the reopening stated that their primary reason for the visit was either “Gambling” (41.7%) or “Vacation/Pleasure (34.7%)”. It makes sense that the “Special Events” and “Business Meeting or Convention” numbers were low because those activities were canceled or very limited due to pandemic restrictions on occupancy.

Perceived Safety During Post-Reopening Visit



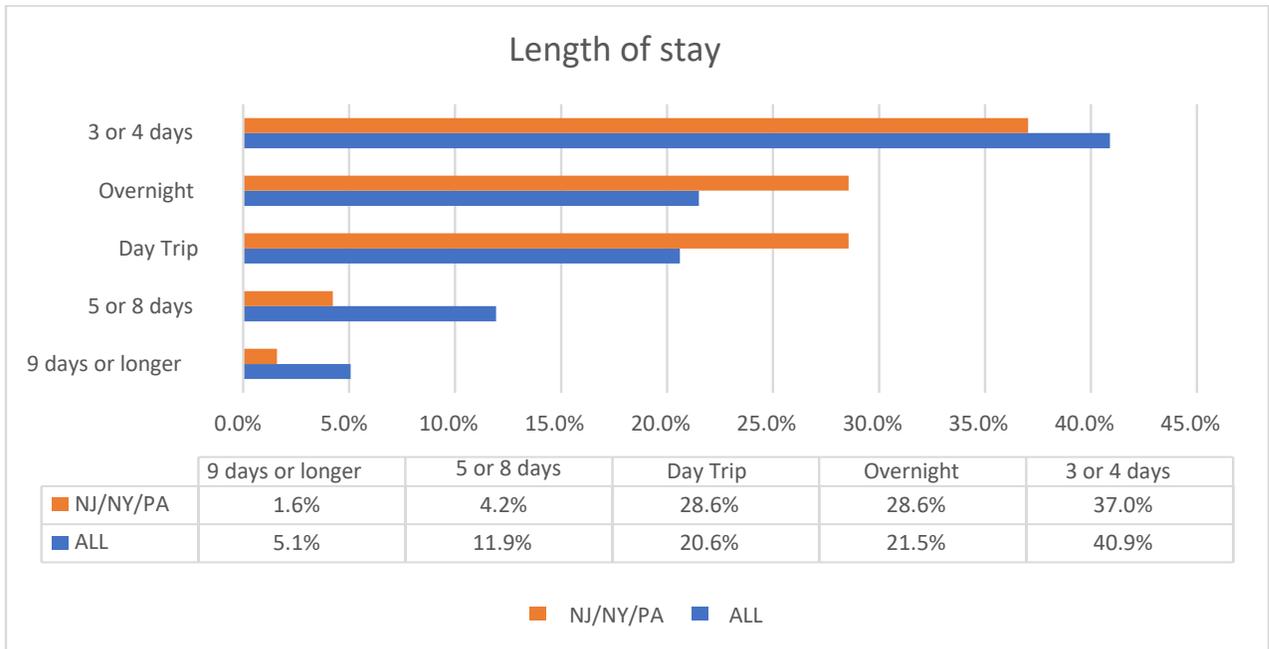
We asked the respondents who reported visiting Atlantic City after the July reopening their perception of safety regarding the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 coronavirus when participating in specific activities during their visit. The question used a slider with a semantic differential scale rating between “0” and “100”, where 0 was the low anchor labeled as “extremely unsafe” and 100 was the high anchor labeled as “extremely safe”. The mean scores ranged between 70 and 76 and are judged to be rated as “moderately safe”. There was not a large difference between the lowest rated activity which was attending “Meetings” (70) and the highest rated items of “Dining” and “Gambling”, both rated 76.

Size of Party on Last Visit



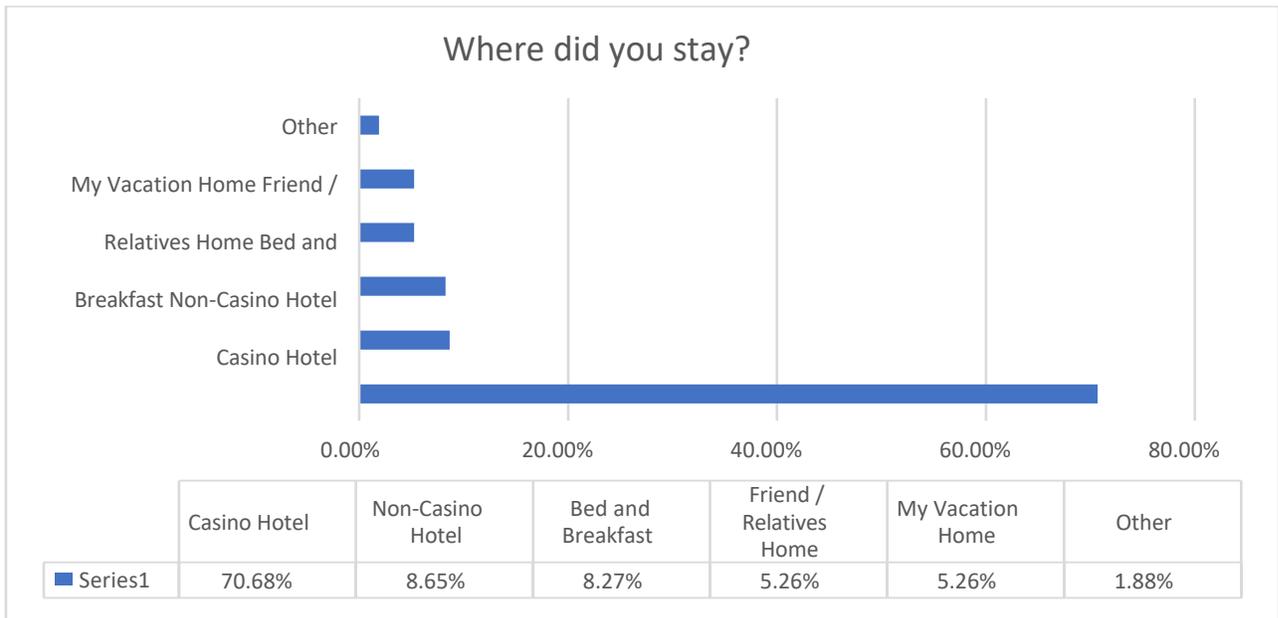
We asked survey respondents how many people they traveled with on their last trip to Atlantic City since the reopening on July 2, 2020. Half of the respondents said they traveled with one other person with just 14% stating that they came by themselves. About 30% said they traveled in a group of three to five people. Only 6% said they traveled in a larger group of six or more people. The small proportion reported for larger travel parties is consistent with what we would expect given the strict social distancing restrictions and small group gathering size limits mandated at the time.

Length of Stay



When asked how many days their stay was, only 21% answered “Day Trip” which means that 79% stayed at least one night and 43% of the visitors stayed three days or more. When drilling down to look at just the visitors from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, the majority stayed more than one day (71%), with day-trippers accounting for 29% of region visitors versus 21% for all respondents.

Place Stayed



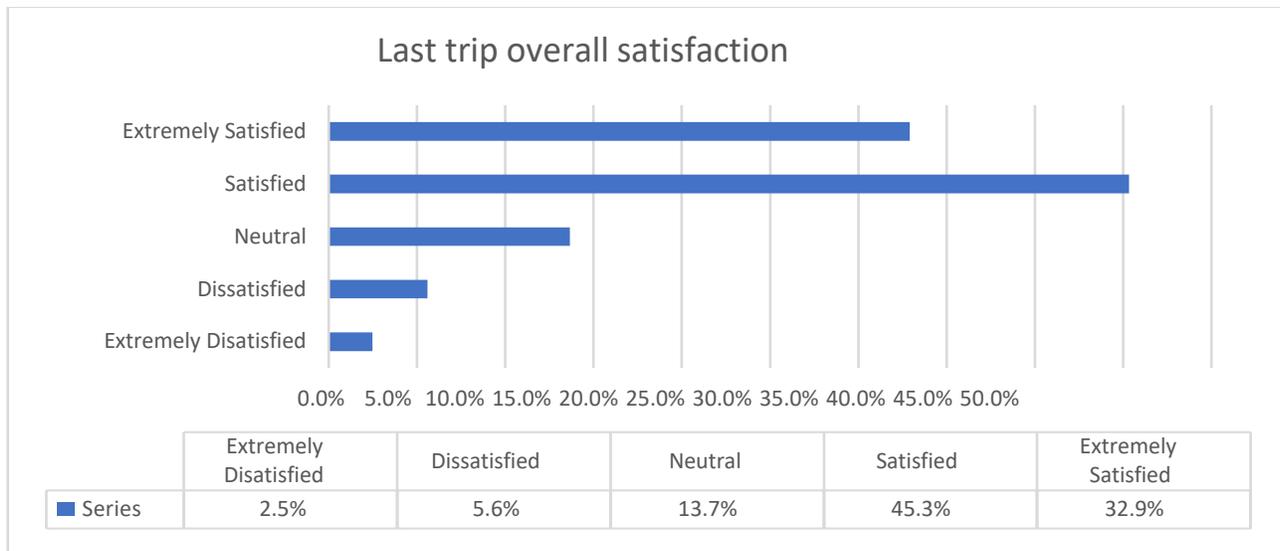
As shown in the previous chart, about four out of every five visitors reported staying at least one night in the Atlantic City area on their most recent visit. Of those who stayed at least one night, 71% reported staying at a casino hotel, with slightly less than 9% of the visitors staying in a non-casino hotel. Bed and breakfasts captured 8% of the overnight visits with another 10% reporting having stayed at non-commercial places such as a friend or relative’s home or the respondent’s vacation home.

Activity Participation on Last Visit



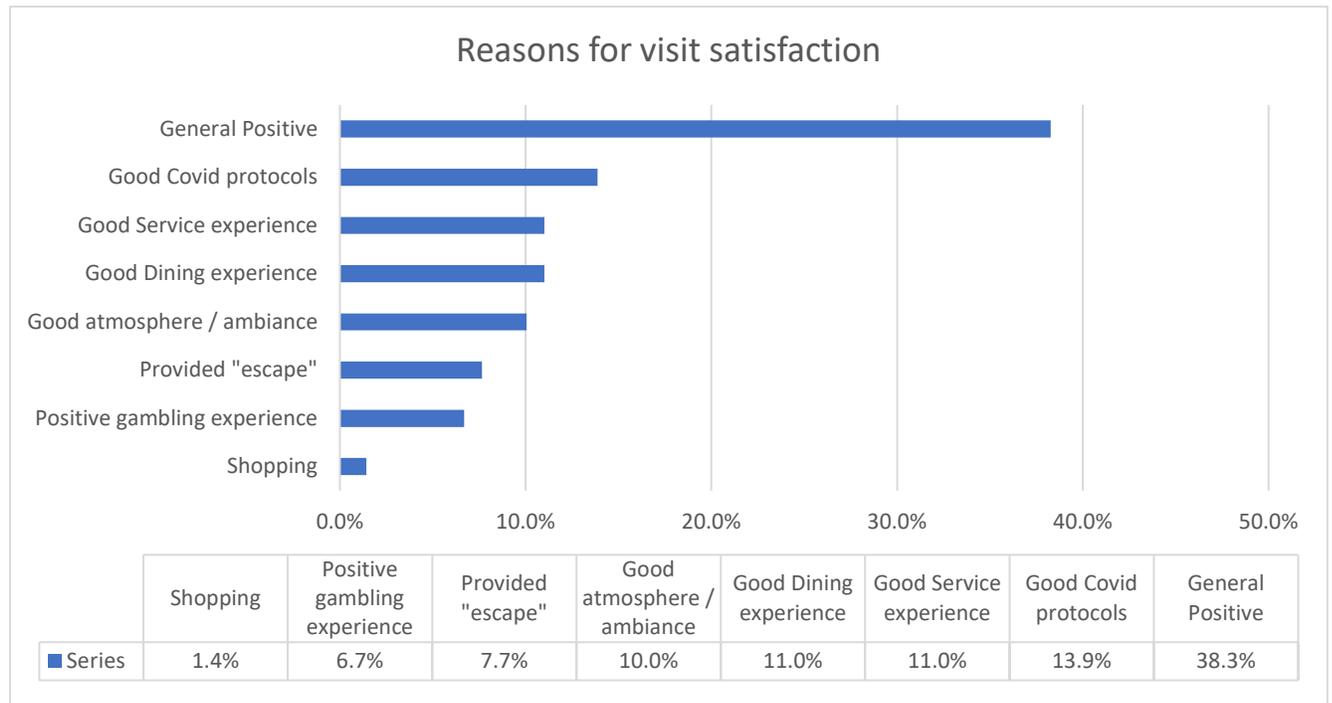
The 337 post-reopening visitors were asked about their participation in key activities on their most recent visit to Atlantic City. Four out of five respondents (80%) said they dined in the resort during that visit. Gaming was the next most popular activity (71%) followed by shopping (54%) and attending an event meeting or conference (12%). About 5% of respondents reported doing other activities such as strolling the Boardwalk, going to a bar, or sightseeing.

Overall Satisfaction with Last Visit



Post-reopening visitors were asked to rate their most recent trip to Atlantic City using a standard 5-point satisfaction scale ranging from “extremely dissatisfied” to “extremely satisfied.” Over 78% of respondents reported being either satisfied or extremely satisfied, whereas only 7.8% reported dissatisfaction. This ratio of 10:1 satisfied to dissatisfied respondents was a surprising, positive finding considering the COVID-19 restrictions endured by visitors during the evaluation timeframe from July 2020 to early February 2021. The next section will explore the reasons given by respondents for the satisfaction ratings.

Reasons for Satisfaction



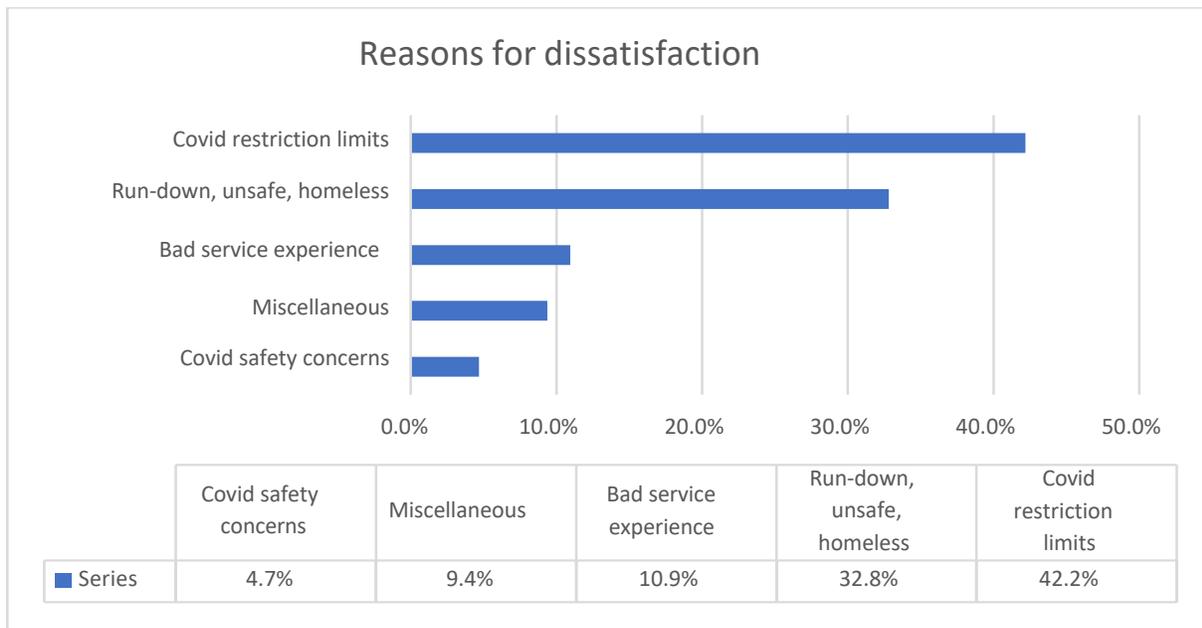
Over 240 individual open-ended responses were reviewed and organized into logical “buckets” so that we could determine the incidence levels. As with all open-ended “reason why” questions, respondents most often cite a general positive reason that is not specific. This survey was no exception; 38% of the overall positive ratings fell into that “general positive” category. Included in that grouping are responses such as, “*very satisfied with all aspects,*” or “*I really like the environment here,*” or “*I always have a great time when I visit Atlantic City,*” or “*everything was great.*” While these are nice to hear, they do not add much to our understanding.

The second most frequently cited reason for positive ratings were those that we grouped as “Good COVID-19 Protocols”, which made up 14% of the positive ratings. Examples of this grouping include, “*they were taking the proper precautions to make everyone feel safe*” or “*it was very refreshing to see Atlantic City up and running, safely within the guidelines set forth by the government. On one hand it was different than it had been before the pandemic, but everyone and every business we encountered was working above and beyond to make it feel normal, fun and relaxing.*” Another respondent stated, “*I had a great time. Stayed at Resorts Casino and Hotel. I honestly felt safe. I feel they are doing everything possible to keep us safe from COVID.*”

The third most frequently cited reason for satisfaction had to do with the guests’ dining experience. Examples of responses include, “*the weather was fantastic for November. I had a great time at Tropicana and Caesars. I enjoyed my meals at Gordon Ramsay Steak and the Ramsey restaurant at Caesars,*” or “*stayed at a nice hotel, had good food, much needed getaway,*” and “*met family at Harrah’s for Covid getaway. Harrah’s does a very good job with covid safety precautions - wonderful meals and gaming.*”

All of the open-ended responses for the overall satisfaction question are included in an exhibit at the end of this report.

Reasons for Dissatisfaction

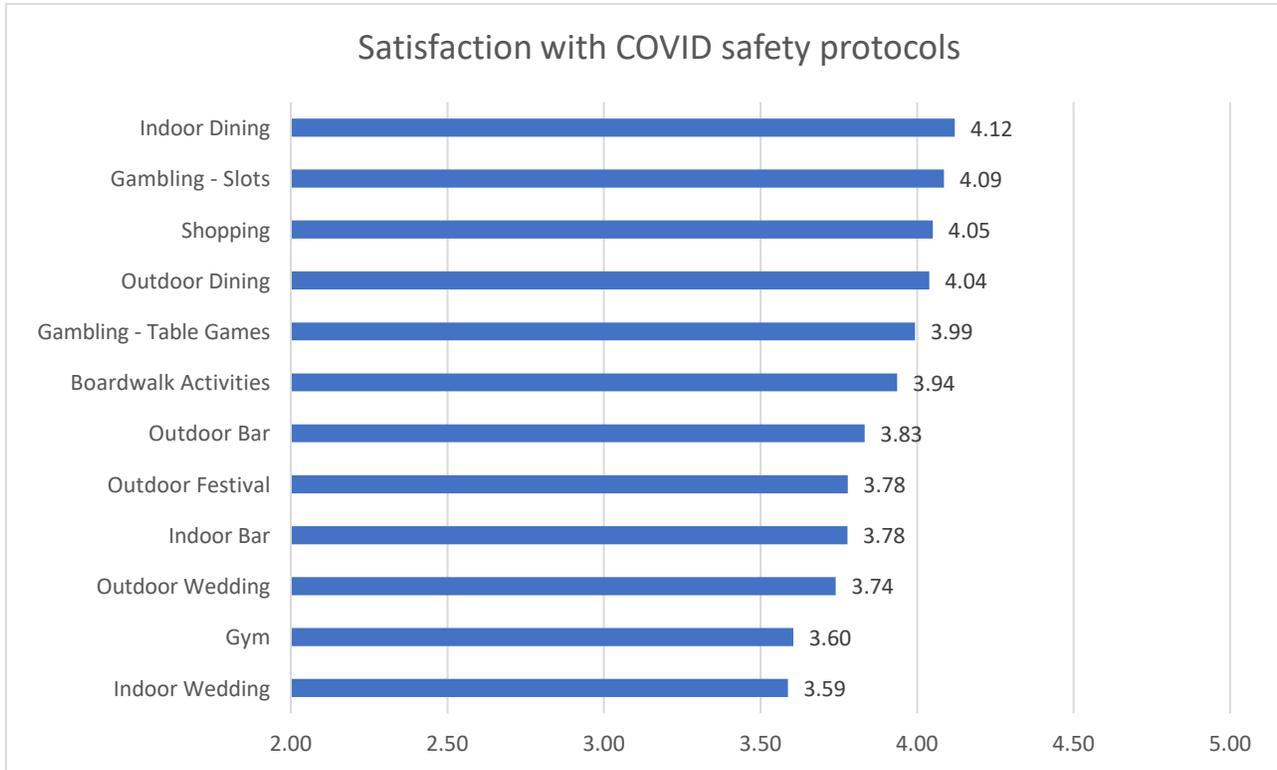


We included respondents who gave negative or neutral overall satisfaction ratings in the tabulations of the responses that we coded as being negative. These responses were organized into logical buckets or groupings in the same way that the positive response reasons were reported in the previous section. It bears repeating that the positive evaluations outnumbered negative evaluations by a 10:1 ratio.

The single largest negative grouping - with 42% of the negative comments - had to do with restrictions and COVID-19 protocols in place during the pandemic. Examples of those comments include, “*covid restrictions ruin a lot of our ability to enjoy ourselves, but we understood,*” or “*could not drink or eat after 10:00 PM,*” or “*bars were closed. The casino was empty. There was nothing to do at night. No girls,*” and “*based on the restrictions and lack of food options. We visit Atlantic City regularly and miss the music, restaurants and nightlife.*”

Of the negative comments, 33% had to do with the respondent’s perception that Atlantic City appeared to be rundown, unsafe and/or that they were disturbed by the sight of homeless people. Some examples of that comment grouping are, “*harassed by homeless, never saw a policeman, dirty, no security*” and “*town was filthy, dirty streets full of trash everywhere. Numerous people asking me for money. Junkies and prostitutes up and down Pacific Ave. I did not feel safe on the boardwalk. People were smoking pot openly under boardwalk the smell of pot was atrocious*” or “*the boardwalk was very dirty and felt unsafe*” and “*beggars, unmasked people, mentally disturbed roaming the streets, drunks, druggies constantly asking for money*”.

Safety Protocol Satisfaction with Specific Activities

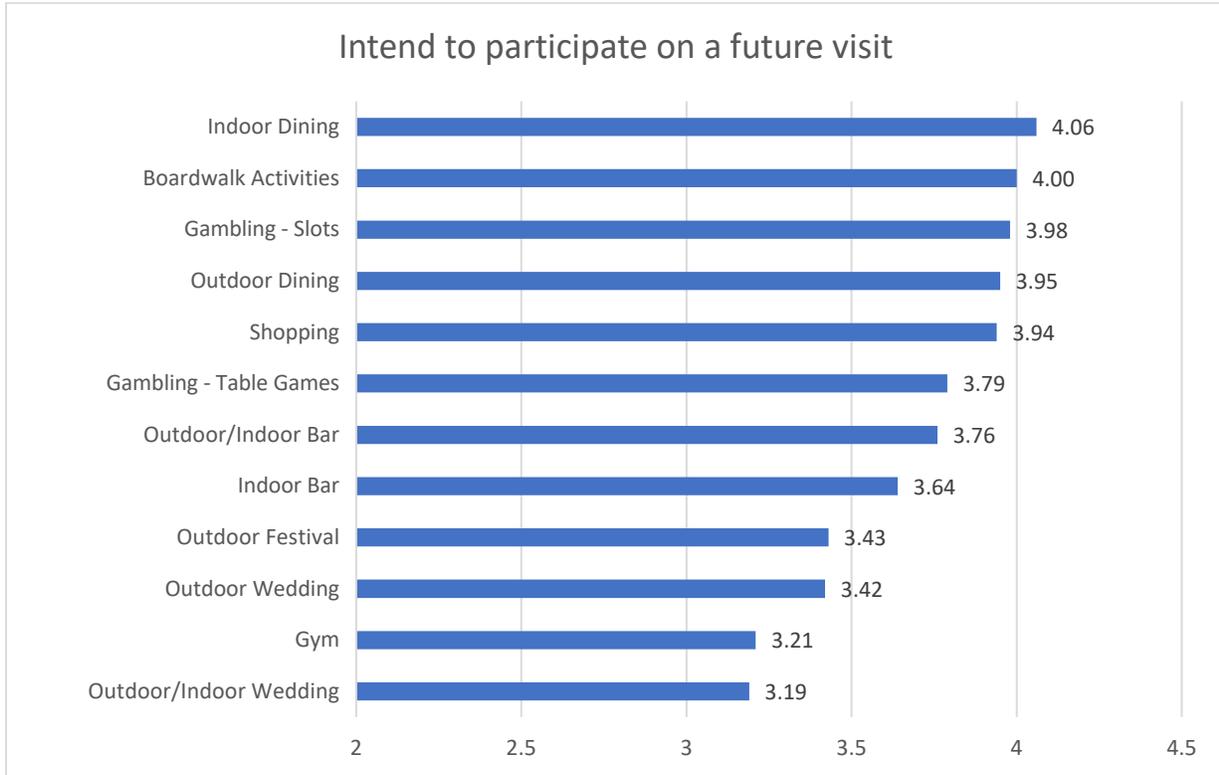


Scores in the chart above represent mean values. The 5-point semantic differential scale used 1 as “extremely unsatisfied” and 5 as “extremely satisfied” as the anchors.

Survey respondents who had visited Atlantic City after the July reopening were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the COVID-19 safety protocols that they observed as being in place for the activities they participated in. An interval scale was used for the rating, and the means were calculated. Based on the evaluations, respondents rated “indoor dining” the highest at a 4.1, with “indoor wedding” receiving the lowest score at 3.6. There was not a great degree of variance between the highest and lowest rated items, and the differences are not statistically significant; but can it be interpreted as directional.

Each of the rating means are interpreted as being either “somewhat satisfied” or “satisfied” with the COVID-19 safety protocols. Overall, respondents thought that the operators were doing a pretty good job adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols.

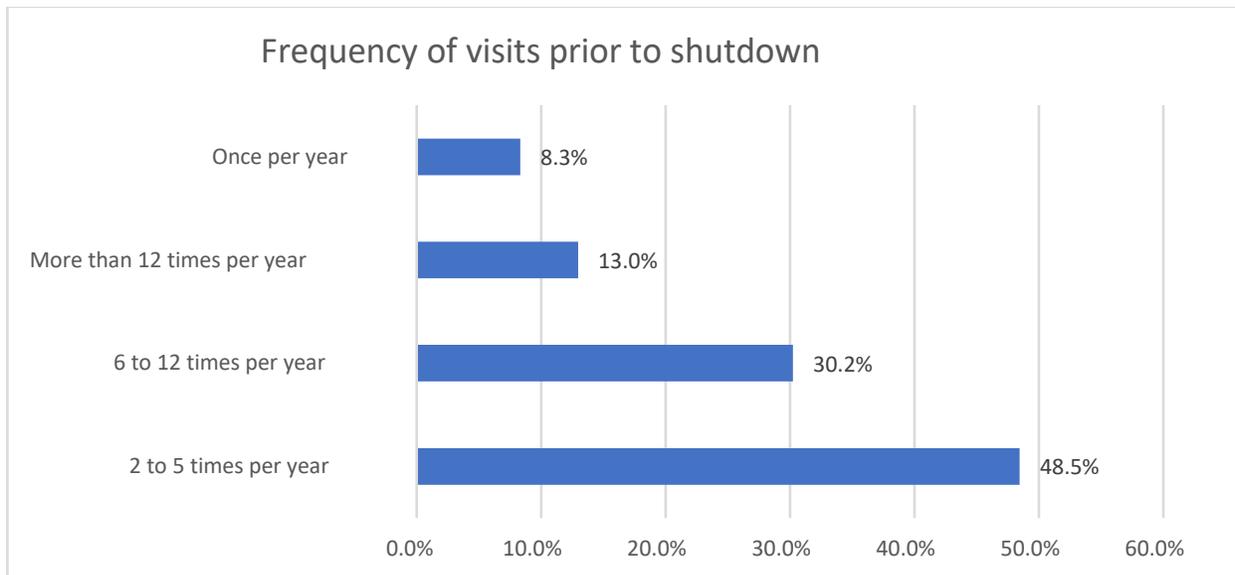
Future Intent to Participate in Specific Activities



Scores in the chart above represent mean values. The 5-point semantic differential scale used 1 as “Definitely Won’t Participate” and 5 as “Definitely Will Participate” as the anchors.

Respondents were asked to rate their intention to participate in specific activities on a future visit to Atlantic City. A five-point interval scale was used for this intention rating, and the rating means were calculated as a summary measure of intent, and to compare the activities. Indoor Dining rated the highest on participation intent, followed by Boardwalk Activities, Slot Machine Gambling, Outdoor Dining and Shopping. The two items on the bottom of the list were Gym activities and attendance at an Outdoor or an Indoor Wedding. There were no surprises in these ratings.

Past Visitation Frequency



The vast majority of respondents (92%) who had visited since the July 2020 reopening reported they made multiple trips to Atlantic City each year prior to the COVID-19 shutdown; 43% of the visitors could be classified as frequent visitors who made six or more trips each year in normal non-pandemic times, and 8% said that they visited just once per year.

Future Visitation Timing



Of those respondents who have visited post-reopening, 82% say they will visit again within the next six months. This is heartening news as the respondents took the survey during the winter at a time when the pandemic was spiking, there were tough capacity restrictions in place and the bars and restaurants had to close at 10 p.m. A three- to six-month window for return trips would see most respondents visiting Atlantic City during the spring and summer 2021 tourism season.

Addendums

Questionnaire - Click to View

Visit satisfaction question open-ended responses - Click to View

Reason for not visiting since reopening open-ended responses - Click to View