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## THE JOURNAL RECORD

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Though many people have stepped up to help people in need this year, especially perhaps in places like Tulsa recognized for generosity, researchers express concerns that fewer and fewer middle-class Americans are positioned these days to make charitable donations. *Courtesy Photo/Unsplash*

# Pandemic has led to decline in charitable giving; help needed

By Steve Metzger

The twin crises of the pandemic and crash of the economy may lead to a decline in charitable giving even as needs rise across the nation and world, according to the principal investigator for the Philanthropy Outlook for 2020-21 report.

Though many people have stepped up to help, especially in places like Tulsa recognized for generosity, researcher Una Osili expressed concerns in recent testimony before Congress

that fewer and fewer middle-class Americans are positioned these days to make charitable donations. She said numbers of people inclined to give regularly have actually been trending downward for a while.

“A concerning trend is that the share of American households that give to charitable organizations has declined significantly,” she said. “Declines in participation rates among low- and middle-income Americans as well as younger Americans have been evident since the Great Recession.”

Osili said the initial response to the pandemic was “unprecedented” in its speed, size and scope, but concerns have risen as COVID-19 has continued to weigh heavily on American lives and the economy.

Leaders at several charitable organizations in Oklahoma have expressed hopes that contributions will keep pace with rising needs through the upcoming holiday season. As the pandemic has dealt its worst this year, Cathy Nestlen, director of communications and marketing at the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, said many





Courtesy Photo/Unsplash

Oklahomans have done what so many seem so likely to do in troubled times – they’ve pitched in to help out neighbors in need. Many businesses, too, have kept up with contributions to sustain operations at the food bank.

“But that doesn’t mean we don’t need financial donations. We certainly do,” she said.

Needs have risen sharply this year, Nestlen said. As many Oklahomans have lost jobs or suffered other financial setbacks related to the pandemic, ranks of the food-insecure have swelled by some 30%. Many people who may never have had to reach out for assistance before have had to do so this year.

The Regional Food Bank helps to meet needs of children, senior citizens and others who quite often don’t have enough to eat in communities across 53 counties in central and western Oklahoma. A counterpart organization, the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, helps to meet needs for food in the state’s remaining 24 counties.

“Hunger is everywhere,” Nestlen said, “even in neighborhoods that you might think are very affluent.”

At Community Action of Oklahoma City, Executive Director Jessie Thompson said funding, including some extra that came in this year from the government as pandemic relief, has helped to meet needs. However, she, too, said needs have risen. Since June 1, more than 10,000 applications have been received for assistance with mortgage, rent payments or with utility bills from people who reside in Oklahoma or Canadian counties.

“The need has shown that that (funding) increase was definitely needed,” she said.

During the upcoming Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons, as needs may rise even more, she said she hopes other organizations that depend on donations will get the help they need.

At the Jesus House in Oklahoma City, Executive Director Mike Bateman said he, too, hopes donations keep up with needs. Last year, Jesus House distributed 2,007 food baskets. This year, hopes are to provide 2,500.

“We’re in need of generosity from the Oklahoma City community,” he said.

In Tulsa, John 3:16 Ministries President and Senior Pastor Steve Whitaker reported that the charity will need much more food this year than it has in the past to fill out Thanksgiving baskets.

“This year, the pandemic has increased the needs of everyday people who have never needed our help before,” he said.

According to Osili, who is affiliated with the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, while about two-thirds of American households were doing well enough to

be able to give to charitable organizations in 2000, only a little more than half were similarly positioned by 2016. Fortunately, those with means have been giving more on average in recent years. In 2000, families who donated gave an average of \$2,041. By 2014, that amount had increased to \$2,514 in inflation-adjusted dollars.

And there are places in the country where people are more prone to giving. SmartAsset, which offers consumers advice on finances online and tracks charitable giving, reported recently that cities in Utah topped its list of places where giving is most prevalent. Tulsa ranked eighth, with residents donating 3.59% of their income to charity.

The Oklahoma City Community Foundation and the Great Nonprofits organization maintain lists of area charitable organizations that people might want to think about through the holiday season. They can be accessed online at [www.occf.org/centraloklahomacharities](http://www.occf.org/centraloklahomacharities) and at <https://greatnonprofits.org/state/Oklahoma>.

**“This year, the pandemic has increased the needs of everyday people who have never needed our help before.”**

— John 3:16 Ministries President and Senior Pastor Steve Whitaker





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Julianna, 3, and Dylan, 5, Lasczak visit with Santa through a transparent barrier at a Bass Pro Shop in Bridgeport, Conn. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

# Here comes Santa Claus – with masks, plexiglass

## STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

NEW YORK – Santa Claus is coming to the mall – just don't try to sit on his lap.

Despite the pandemic – and the fact that Santa's age and weight put him at high risk for severe illness from the coronavirus – mall owners are going ahead with plans to bring him back this year.

But they are doing all they can to keep the jolly old man safe, including banning kids from sitting on his knee, no matter if they've been naughty or nice.

Kids will instead tell Santa what they want for Christmas from 6 feet away, and sometimes from behind a sheet of plexiglass. Santa and his visitors may need to wear a face mask, even while posing for photos. And some malls will put faux gift box-

es and other decorations in front of Saint Nick to block kids from charging toward him.

Other safety measures include online reservations to cut down on lines, workers wiping down holiday-decorated sets, and hand sanitizer aplenty. Santa's hours are also getting cut to give him a break from crowds.

Macy's canceled its in-person visits this year, saying it couldn't provide a safe environment for the more than 250,000 people that show up to see Kriss Kringle at its New York flagship store.

But malls, which have struggled to attract shoppers for years, are not willing to kill a holiday tradition that is one of their biggest ways to lure people during the all-important holiday shopping season.

"You have to give them a reason to come or

they'll stay home and shop online," says Michael Brown, who oversees the retail team at consulting firm Kearney.

At Oklahoma's largest mall, the two-story, 1,063,000-square-foot Penn Square Mall at 1901 Northwest Expressway in Oklahoma City, guests are strongly encouraged to make reservations in advance to see Santa, to use contactless payment options, and to maintain a 6-foot distance from other patrons while waiting on line. Face coverings are required for children 2 and up and for Santa himself. Santas will also have their temperature checked prior to their scheduled shift, and cleaning procedures include spraying down Santa's suit with disinfectant between shifts, though children will not come into direct contact with the character.



"It is our top priority to ensure the health and well-being of our guests & Santa, therefore, this year guests will not sit on Santa's lap during their interaction, but will still have the opportunity to engage in conversation and a magical experience with Santa, while maintaining physical distance," reads guidance posted to the website. The company providing the Santas, New Jersey-based Cherry Hill Programs, provides a similar experience in 800 venues nationwide with a "network of more than 1,300 authentic, real-bearded Santa Claus characters."

"The Magic Santa Shield is an acrylic barrier in place between Santa and families at all times," reads the posted guidance for how photos will be taken during a "Contactless Claus Visit" with Santa at Bass Pro Shops, 200 Bass Pro Dr. in Oklahoma City's Bricktown entertainment district. Santa's Wonderland at Bass Pro requires both employees and visiting families to have their temperature checked prior to entering, as well as face masks and physical distancing.

More than 10 million U.S. households visited Santa in a mall or store last year, according to GlobalData Retail's managing director Neil Saunders. Nearly 73% of them also spent money at nearby restaurants or stores, he says.

"Santa is the magnet that attracts people to malls and without that attraction, malls will struggle more to generate foot traffic," says Saunders.

Mall operator CBL, which filed for bankruptcy earlier this month, plans to bring Santa to nearly 60 malls at the end of November, about three weeks later than last year.

The company decided against a plexiglass barrier because it didn't look right in photos. But Santa will be socially distanced and wear a face

mask. He may also put on a plastic shield to protect his face.

"We're doing everything possible so that he stays healthy," says Mary Lynn Morse, CBL's marketing vice president.

Mall owner Brookfield started planning in-person Santa visits at 130 of its shopping centers in April, opting for sleighs and gift boxes where visitors can sit away from Santa.

At one of its malls, The SoNo Collection in Norwalk, Connecticut, a round piece of plexiglass will be placed in front of Santa so it looks like he's inside a snow globe.

But the precautions may not be enough to convince some shoppers.

"It just seems like such a bad idea, just being in a mall," says Emma Wallace of Alexandria, Virginia, who decided against taking her toddler to his first visit with Santa this year.

"We're just so sad," she says. "We were really looking forward to that picture that seems like every parent has, where they're sort of terrified or just bemused by the whole Santa thing."

Malls realize many people may stay home. Cherry Hill Programs, which will bring Santa to more than 700 malls, is also offering Zoom calls with him for the first time in its 60-year history. And Brookfield teamed up with virtual Santa company JingleRing, giving people a way to chat with Santa from home.

Ed Taylor, a Santa who typically spends several months in Los Angeles filming TV spots and making mall appearances, will stay at home in southern Oregon this year.

"When you think about the high risk profile for COVID, you're kind of drawing a picture of Santa," Taylor says.

He'll be doing video calls with families and has been holding online classes to get other Santas camera-ready. Meeting kids virtually means getting them to speak up more, since the calls usually run seven minutes – about twice as long as mall visits, where the main objective is to snap a good picture.

Going online gives Santa a chance to experiment with his attire. Some may ditch the formal red suit for vests and rolled up sleeves, since Santa is presumably calling from the North Pole and running a toy workshop full of busy elves.

"Up at home, we're working," says Taylor. "We have presents to make. We've got reindeer to feed."

But there's some parts of Santa's look that can't change. JingleRing, which has signed up more than 400 Santas, held online training sessions on how to use at-home bleaching kits to transform gray hair and beards into Santa's snow white hue. They were also advised to buy teeth whitening strips.

"Santa can't have smoker's teeth," says Walt Geer, who co-founded JingleRing this year after realizing people may need a new way to meet Santa.

Stephanie Soares is sticking to the old way. She brought her daughter, Gia, to a Bass Pro Shops store last week in Bridgeport, Connecticut, to take a picture with Santa, who wore a clear plastic face shield and sat behind a glare-free acrylic barrier that sometimes made it hard to hear what the kids were saying. A worker sprayed down the barrier after each visit.

"Even though we're in a pandemic, it's important that the kids are still able to be kids and still keep up with the regular traditions," says Soares.

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Nick Jones, left, sits with his wife, Mindy Jones, and their daughter Gracelyn Jones at their home in Louisville, Ky. The Jones family is among a growing number of people who have gone full-on Christmas weeks early. Usually Mindy waits until the Saturday after Thanksgiving to jump-start the holiday. (Jade Ware via AP)

# The year that Christmas really came early

**BY LEANNE ITALIE**  
*Associated Press:*

Lindsey Catarino is the talk of her neighborhood. She put up her Christmas tree, lights and all, in mid-September. By Oct. 1, her mantel was decorated. Since, she has added more trees and decorations in just about every room of her Connecticut condo.

The goal for the 42-year-old Catarino, like other newly minted early birds, is to bring on the warmth and comfort of Christmas by beating back “an otherwise insane world.”

As some holiday tree sellers fear they’ll sell out and parcel shipping companies worry about gridlock, a growing number of people on a quest for joy have bucked tradition and gone full-on Christmas weeks earlier than they normally would.

“It has definitely overtaken me, and very

early,” said Catarino, who lives in West Hartford. “I enjoy being home in a different way. It just gives me a chance to be busy on something that’s happy. I wanted my house to bring me that peace, and we just want to tune out. The election was the final straw.”

She’s definitely not alone.

Brandon Stephens, president of the professional holiday decorating company Christmas Decor, said early business is up 15% to 20% compared to the same period last year. Orders came in as early as April – for April, he said. The company’s franchises serviced more than 43,000 homes and businesses last year around the country and expect a jump to about 52,000 this year. Most of the early activity is residential.

“We knew that it was kind of an emotional response. People were looking for hope. People were looking for something to feel good about

while cooped up in their houses,” he said. “Lots of folks are not traveling for the holiday so they are celebrating at home.”

Jacob Pinkham, a new father in Huntington Beach, California, said he and his wife had a hardfast no-Christmas-’til-December rule, until this year amid pandemic fatigue, election turmoil and the economic devastation hitting millions around the world.

The couple got to thinking about their Christmas trip to Cork, Ireland, a few years back and the all-Christmas radio station they discovered there, Christmas FM. They’ve been listening for weeks.

“Our daughter was born just before COVID hit so having to deal with being a new parent, a new family and with a highly contagious virus circulating, we decided we needed some Christmas cheer earlier than usual,” he said. “We also have two dogs. I don’t know how they feel about





Lindsey Catarino stands in front of her decorated Christmas tree in her condo in West Hartford, Conn. (Kate Tortland Fine Art via AP)

Views of the Christmas-decorated exterior of Danielle Martin's home in Manteno, Ill. Martin is a big Christmas person but usually waits to decorate until the day after Thanksgiving. This year she got busy on Nov. 1 with a candy cane themed front porch. (Danielle Martin via AP)



the Christmas music but they're not barking, so that's a positive sign."

Pinkham's favorite holiday tune? If he had to choose, it would be Nat King Cole's The Christmas Song.

In Louisville, Kentucky, 29-year-old Mindy Jones has about 1,100 square feet and an additional 400-square-foot basement in a new home she moved into about a month ago with her husband, their 3-year-old daughter and the family dog.

In the past, they'd hold the holiday to two Christmas trees, including a 7-footer adorned with all their special ornaments standing post in the living room. This year, the tree count is five. The first two went up Nov. 11. There may be more by the time Christmas rolls around. Usually, Jones waits until the Saturday after Thanksgiving to jump start the holiday.

"I wanted to spread the 'holly jolly' feeling a little longer than just December," she said. "With everything going on this year, if it brings a little more joy and excitement to what's been a really tough year, why not?"

The drive in Jones and many others to push the holiday cheer is in part the desire to connect with rituals, especially now when so many traditions and so much holiday fun at work and

among extended family has been upended.

Erica Keswin, a business consultant with a new book out in January, "Rituals Roadmap," describes the benefits with three P's.

"We feel psychological safety and a sense of purpose, which leads to increased performance," she explained, noting that the power of our senses – smell, taste, touch etc. – helps lead the way.

That might go a long way toward explaining Lisa Torelli-Sauer's cookie stash in Aschaffenburg, Germany, where the American lives with her husband and two boys, 9 and 7.

"We're experiencing partial lockdowns and will likely have limits on our ability to celebrate the holidays with family," she said. "I've found early and intense solace in one thing: Christmas cookies."

She's buying, not baking, the stash of gingerbread, cinnamon stars and spiced coconut cookies she has kept on hand since the beginning of November.

"I haven't left the grocery store without picking up multiple packs of cookies," Torelli-Sauer said. "After a long and stressful day, it's deeply satisfying to settle down with a cup of coffee and the perfect assortment of Christmas sweets."

Danielle Martin, 42, in Manteno, Illinois, is

a big Christmas person. But usually she waits to decorate until the day after Thanksgiving. This year she got busy on Nov. 1, a candy cane themed front porch included.

"It's probably earlier than most but we love it," she said. "It definitely made a change in our moods," she said of herself, her husband and her three kids, ages 10, 7 and 5. "The world is so difficult right now for everybody, so we were ready."

Martin put up a hot cocoa bar, their stockings on the fireplace mantel, a large framed sheet of music for the song "Jingle Bells" and a 9-foot tree, among other decorations. And that's just the living room.

Each of her kids will soon have their own tree in their rooms. When she's done, Martin said there will be seven trees in all.

Early Christmas is also on the minds of folks in and around Grapevine, Texas, near Dallas. Also, wine. Tickets went on sale Nov. 10 for the city's adults-only Christmas Wine Train excursions next month in decorated vintage rail cars – wine and a visit from Santa included.

"We sold out in six minutes," said Ana Chavez, a spokeswoman for the Grapevine Convention and Visitor's Bureau. "There's Christmas crazy in Texas!"



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