

SO FAR PAST THE BRINK

COVID-19
and the
Ongoing Conditions
that keep
Creative Workers
in Free Fall



by **Isaac Fitzsimons** and **Clay Lord**
Americans for the Arts

“
It's time to understand that
we live in a time of pandemics.”

Michael Tubbs
Special Advisor for Economic
Mobility and Opportunity
for the Governor of California

“
We have to do a better job of articulating
what it actually costs to be alive today.”

Deana Haggag
former President and CEO
United States Artists

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INTRODUCTION

On March 10, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. By April, 62% of the U.S. creative workforce was unemployed. By June, the creative sector had contracted by 58%.

Since then, so much has changed and so many have been impacted. At the time of writing in early 2022, the virus has spread to every continent including Antarctica and has resulted in the deaths of over 6 million people, including nearly 1 million Americans.^{1,2} The U.S. economy shrank by 32% in *one quarter* in mid-2020 and even now, two years later, has not fully recovered.³

Since January 2020, when the first case was reported in the United States, COVID-19 has devastated many sectors, but very few have been so decimated for so long as the American arts and cultural sector. Within the creative sector, which incorporates 5.2 million workers in the United States,⁴ a unique combination of long-term systemic inequities and required remediations to mitigate the pandemic—including social distancing, isolation and lockdown, and economic crisis—hit hard, making it one of the most severely impacted sectors in the country and amplifying and laying bare a general (pre-existing) backdrop of poverty, general inequity, and deep dysfunction in both public and private policy related to the core workforce of the sector.

A free fall that had gone under-recognized prior to the pandemic has become undeniable in its severity. The purpose of this report is to document quantitatively not only the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on creative workers, but also to highlight the longstanding (and ongoing) roots of those impacts with the hope that flagging them might encourage change and safeguard against the next such crisis.

In addition, even among the extraordinarily impacted creative sector, where seemingly everything fell apart, things fell *most* apart for the most marginalized and discriminated against among us, who consistently experienced more frequent and stronger effects than others with more systemic privilege.

As with other humanitarian crises (and life in general), the impacts of the pandemic were harder, stronger, and more sustained for historically and currently marginalized groups generally. In the United States, for example, the mortality rate from COVID-19 has been higher for Black Americans than for white Americans and has been higher in high-poverty counties than low-poverty counties.⁵ Over the course of the pandemic, billionaires grew \$2.1 trillion wealthier even as 89 million Americans lost their jobs.⁶ These vast differences in

¹ <https://covid19.who.int/>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093256/novel-coronavirus-2019ncov-deaths-worldwide-by-country/>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-99712-z>

⁴ <https://www.bea.gov/news/2021/arts-and-cultural-production-satellite-account-us-and-states>

⁵ <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2021/01/race-income-inequality-fuel-covid-disparities-us-counties>

⁶ <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>

experience stem from the systemic structural inequities endemic in the United States. They were equally prevalent within the creative sector—before, during, and after the pandemic.

Several factors contributed to the vulnerability of the arts and cultural sector. A third of creative workers identify as self-employed (compared with approximately 9% of the overall U.S. workforce), which disadvantages them in various ways in terms of policy, fair treatment, and access to programs and services.

Creative workers in the United States earn very low wages from their creative work, which means that hundreds of thousands of them must work other jobs in addition to their creative practice. Of those with additional jobs, over half (56%) maintained those jobs in sectors that are generally lower paying, more minimally protected, and were *also* significantly affected by the pandemic—sectors such as hospitality, education, and healthcare.⁷

“The system is flawed (to put it mildly). Independent contractors are treated like silly tools and then discarded, and the business gains from my creativity.”

- Survey respondent

In addition, both public policy and, in very real ways, the conditions and intentions of the creative sector’s own systems of compensation, credit, and value have consistently stacked up against creative workers, meaning that for many, they entered the perils of the pandemic already economically anemic and generally unprotected by society.

These and other unique circumstances, coupled with the fact that the public health and safety measures required to address the pandemic proved almost diabolically targeted at necessities of artmaking—communal experience, collaboration, audience revenue, travel, etc.—created a perfect storm that spun millions of already precariously-tipped creative workers from the cliff’s edge right out into the air.

At the time of writing at the end of 2021 and into the first quarter of 2022, the pandemic and subsequent fallout are ongoing, and conditions are changing constantly. Thus, data collected in 2020 may feel historical. But the findings, particularly those related to the systemic inequities that set the stage for the dramatic meltdown of the cultural sector, are germane, and provide strong guideposts for going forward. If we do not address the *why*, our sector will continue to be vulnerable to crisis.

About This Report

With the pandemic unfolding in real time, researchers at Americans for the Arts,⁸ a national arts advocacy, research, and policy non-profit, set out to document the financial, social, and creative impact of COVID-19 on artists and creative workers in the United States and surrounding territories. The goal was to collect a wide range of data that could be used to inform advocacy and policy, both immediately and in the future, as well as to document the economic, social, and artistic impact of the pandemic for posterity and future analysis.

⁷ https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists_and_Other_Cultural_Workers.pdf

⁸ <https://americansforthearts.org/>

Between April 8 and November 24, 2020, Americans for the Arts, as research partner for Artist Relief,⁹ a coalition of national arts grantmakers who distributed close to \$23.4 million in emergency grants to 4,680 artists from April 2020 to June 2021, conducted an online survey of 33,001 creative workers. These are the results of that research.

The following report details the experiences of artists and creative workers during the pandemic from April through November 2020 through the lens of quantitative analysis of the aggregated survey results. It also specifically examines five sector-wide socioeconomic inequities that have long pervaded the creative sector but were exacerbated and exposed by COVID-19: economic insecurity, job insecurity and exploitative working conditions, inequities in the digital environment, limited access to healthcare, and housing and food insecurity.

- **Structure.** “So Far Past the Brink” includes an introduction, an executive summary and illustration of core findings, the main body of the report, a set of public policy and creative sector recommendations, and a conclusion. It also includes four brief Appendices outlining methodology and limitations, sample distribution, the full set of data tables, and report authorship and contact information.
- **Additional data sets.** Occasionally, the report will reference other data sets, information on what has occurred between the close of the surveying process and this report’s publication, and other contextual information. All those references are clearly marked, and any other data in the report is drawn from the survey analysis itself.
- **Deployment.** To reach as many artists and creative workers as possible, the survey was shared through various communication channels by both Artist Relief and Americans for the Arts, as well as other agencies, advocacy groups and funders in the arts community who distributed it to their networks. Additionally, because of the importance of real-time data for advocacy and policy purposes, live results were made available via an online dashboard, and preliminary summary results were released on a weekly basis through a research one-pager published by Americans for the Arts.
- **This report in context.** This report was created as part of a larger portfolio of work entitled, *We Are Bound* that was collaboratively developed with Yancey Consulting, Artist Relief, and Collaborators Consulting Group. That portfolio of work compiles a deep and expansive review of both qualitative and quantitative information on the conditions of creative workers before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic’s onset, as well as a comprehensive exploration of the reasons that workers in the field chronically suffer and recommendations to break that cycle.
- **Funders.** The overarching *We Are Bound* project was supported by the Artist Relief founding coalition organizations: Academy of American Poets, Artadia, Creative Capital, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, MAP Fund, YoungArts, and United States Artists. In addition, funding was generously provided by Ford Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Joan Mitchell Foundation, and Jerome Foundation. *So Far Past the Brink* and its underlying research were supported

⁹ <https://www.artistrelief.org/>

by the Ford Foundation, the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, and the Artist Relief founding coalition organizations.

- **Acknowledgements.** The authors are grateful to all the survey respondents, our collaborators on this body of research, and those in the funding community who supported this work and made these reports possible. We would particularly like to thank Heather Pontonio of the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation, who initially proposed this survey and provided seed funding for its creation, and Deana Haggag, now of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and formerly head of United States Artists, for collaborating on and championing this work along the way. We would also like to thank our collaborators both within and outside Americans for the Arts, particularly Randy Cohen, Ben Davidson, Lisa Yancey, Kelli Lane, and the team at CCG.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Economic Insecurity

COVID-19 had a devastating economic impact on artists and creative workers, almost three-quarters of whom said they had no financial safety net to fall into. It has particularly impacted chronically marginalized populations within the creative sector.

→ **Poverty and savings.** Going into the pandemic, creative worker respondents were almost three times as likely to live in poverty as the general population, and two out of three creative worker respondents had less than two months savings prior to the pandemic.

- 29% had zero savings—a number that rose to 55% during the pandemic.
- Respondents with less formal education, Black and Indigenous respondents, transgender respondents, and respondents with disabilities all had significantly elevated percentages of creative workers entering the pandemic without any savings.

→ **Wages.** During the pandemic, creative workers suffered significant financial losses; 95% of survey respondents lost creative income. Total income for creative worker respondents fell from about \$33,000 to just over \$13,500 (\$800 above poverty level) between 2019 and 2020. 2020 income levels for creative workers were \$30,000 less than the median earnings of a U.S. worker.

→ **Disproportionate impacts and insulating characteristics.** Respondents with lower household incomes, less formal education, in urban areas, with disabilities, and BIPOC respondents all experienced disproportionately significant negative economic impacts from the pandemic. Higher income and more education generally provided insulation against the most severe impacts—but the data suggests that these insulating characteristics were less effective based on racial demographics; being wealthier did not insulate Black respondents as well from losses, for example.

→ **Working to support community, often without pay.** Despite the financial hardships experienced by artists and creative workers, 77% stated that they have used or plan on using their creative or artistic practice to help address the needs of their community. Of these, 65% were not compensated at all for that work.

- Respondents from backgrounds that experienced more severe economic impacts were consistently more likely to contribute to recovery.

Job Insecurity and Exploitative Working Conditions

Inaccessible support structures and precarious, often lost, employment have long been part of making a creative living in the United States—the pandemic made everything worse.

“Black and Latino and everything that goes with it.”

- Survey respondent on pre-COVID-19 conditions

→ **Independent or gig work.** 34% of all workers in the creative sector are independent or gig workers (3.6 times the national rate). These independent contractors are paid on a project basis and generally cannot access employer-supported health or life insurance, workers compensation, unemployment insurance or taxes, or retirement funds. They generally cannot access employee benefits and are less protected by the current laws governing fair labor, workplace safety, paid medical and family leave, and anti-discrimination.

- 8% of creative workers respondents reported having access to paid family leave (vs. 78% of the general worker population).
- 34% of creative worker respondents entered the pandemic without comprehensive health insurance (vs. 15% of the general population).
- 25% of respondents said they had been discriminated against in a way that prevented them from earning money during the pandemic.

→ **Unemployment.** Among creative worker survey respondents, 63% reported that they became fully unemployed because of COVID-19. In comparison, the national unemployment rate was never higher than 15% in the same period.

- 83% of respondents to a separate, unemployment insurance-specific survey applied for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance when it was offered to independent workers for the first time under the CARES Act—two-thirds of them for the first time.
- Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Arab/Middle Eastern, Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian/Asian American creative workers all experienced higher rates of unemployment than white creative workers.
- Respondents with disabilities, with lower rates of formal education, and who were younger all experienced higher rates of unemployment as well.
- White, older, and/or wealthier respondents reported more job stability.
- Respondents' place of employment and discipline of work also influenced the unemployment rate.

→ **Inequitable layoffs and furloughs.** The arts and cultural sector contracted by 58% between January and June 2020. Independent creative workers were laid off or furloughed first and at a higher rate than other cultural workers (83% vs. 69%). They were rehired at about two-thirds the pace of other cultural workers.

→ **High-risk non-creative income.** 34% of creative workers held supplemental non-creative jobs, often in other highly impacted sectors such as food services, retail/wholesale, education, and hospitality. Many of these jobs disappeared at the same time as creative income dried up.

“Every time I get my feet under me and start doing well, the economy destroys my career. 2008, 9/11, now this. Every single time, I was at the precipice of major things happening for me that I had worked hard for, and it all went away.”

- Survey respondent

Inequities in the Digital Environment

As creative workers grappled an inability to engage in-person, the challenging economics and systemic inequity issues of online creative product delivery were clear and immediate.

→ **Online earnings.** Prior to COVID-19, 40% of respondents earned money online; those active online averaged about 30% of their creative income from online sales. The percentage of respondents earning money through online sales dropped to 27% during the pandemic, although for those selling online it made up almost half of their income during that period.

→ **Online sales as insulation.** While still hit hard financially by the pandemic, creative workers earning online revenue suffered about 10% less financial loss than those not selling online.

→ **Staying analog.** About a quarter of respondents did not produce work online, saying their work could not translate to an online interface (47%), that they could not access necessary materials (28%), technology (18%), or sufficient internet (10%), or that they lacked an audience or market (17%).

- Systemic limitations that existed pre-pandemic informed barriers to transitioning online: low-income and/or rural respondents were 1.5x as likely to lack sufficient technology and 2x as likely to lack sufficient internet.
- Creators in different genres were also impacted differently both in terms of being able to translate work to online and to generate revenue.

→ **Distribution without compensation.** A quarter of respondents had work distributed online through an organization. 70% of those creative workers received no revenue for that use of their creative work.

- Among all respondents who distributed work online (via an organization or directly), the percentage who earned revenue for work decreased from 49% pre-pandemic to 43% during COVID-19.

Limited Access to Healthcare

A third of all creative workers identifying as self-employed but access to healthcare in the U.S. is largely tied to employment, creating another systemic issue for the sector.

→ **Lack of health insurance entering the pandemic.** 34% of creative worker respondents did not have comprehensive health insurance prior to the pandemic, compared with 15% of the general U.S. population.

- White respondents were more likely to have insurance than other respondents: a quarter of white respondents did not have health insurance pre-pandemic, while half of Black and Indigenous respondents, 4-in-10 Hispanic and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander respondents, and a third of Asian/Asian American and Arab/Middle Eastern respondents did not.

“As a queer, black, female visual artist and with all the challenges that these identities carry, it has been hard.”

- Survey respondent

- Younger respondents, respondents with less formal education, and respondents with lower household incomes were all also less likely to have had health insurance entering the pandemic.
- Half of respondents avoided visiting a medical professional due to inability to pay prior to the pandemic; 34% were unable to pay for medication. A quarter indicated that, pre-pandemic, they had been denied a recommended medical procedure for lack of ability to pay; 18% said the same had occurred for them during the pandemic.
- All of these numbers remained essentially constant during the pandemic.

↳ **Mental strain and inability to access psychological/psychiatric care.** Mental health strain was rampant both before and during the pandemic for creative workers—as was an inability to care for their mental health.

- Approximately 40% of respondents identified mental health issues that they had not been able to appropriately treat prior to the pandemic because of inability to pay; a third of respondents identified the same issue during the pandemic.
- Two-thirds overall said they were experiencing debilitating stress, anxiety, or depression during the pandemic, including disproportionately high percentages of respondents with disabilities (79%), female respondents (71%), less affluent respondents, and older respondents.
- Three-quarters of respondents experienced trouble sleeping during the pandemic, compared to 60% pre-pandemic.

“Lost my self. Lost my feeling of purpose. Lost my sense of dignity. Disappointed my children. And so much more.”

- Survey respondent

Housing and Food Insecurity

Even before COVID-19, housing and food insecurity were significant issues for artists; the pandemic exacerbated it significantly.

↳ **Homelessness and eviction.** Prior to the pandemic, 23% of creative worker respondents indicated they had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. A quarter had faced the threat of eviction, and 1-in-10 had been evicted.

- Transgender respondents reported experiencing homelessness at a much higher rate than the average (45%), as did those born after 1996 (41%), Indigenous (39%), and disabled respondents (34%).
- 1-in-3 respondents indicated they had been threatened with eviction during the pandemic, and 7% had been evicted. 1-in-10 said they had been or were homeless during the pandemic period.

↳ **Food insecurity.** Creative worker respondents were twice as likely as the general population to indicate they had experienced food insecurity at some point pre-pandemic. Nearly a quarter of respondents had struggled to secure sufficient food.

- While the percentage of the overall U.S. population experiencing food insecurity remained relatively steady throughout 2020, the percentage of creative workers more than doubled to over half.
- Younger (75%), transgender (72%), LGBTQ (69%), and disabled (66%) creative workers more likely to seek food assistance than others.

➔ **Worsening conditions.** As the pandemic continued, more creative worker respondents reported needing both housing and food assistance.

Summary Recommendations

This report closes with a set of recommendations in two categories: public policy interventions and creative sector recommendations.

Public Policy Recommendations

- **Realign U.S. labor policy to be more equitable to independent or gig workers.** Permanently expand access to unemployment to independent or gig workers. Retool federal labor policy under reauthorization/review. Safeguard and support creative coalitions that are articulating and pursuing pro-creative worker policies.
- **Drive for better and more universal support of basic human needs through policy.** This includes healthcare, childcare, access to leave, affordable housing and food, steady income, universal broadband and technology access, and debt relief.
- **Improve access to the dollars needed for creative workers to build, expand, and improve their ventures.** Ease access to capital for people with limited collateral, improve loan terms, amend or replace inequitable public policies around creative workers and businesses and disaster relief and recovery funding, and employ and pay creative workers to address public policy issues.
- **Reduce debt.** Ameliorate or forgive existing debt and address the mismatch between the cost of and wages resulting from advanced degrees in the field.

“I fall between all of the cracks—freelance artist, not working for any organization, 1099 or gig-to-gig, not part of a union, not able to apply for unemployment. Now I'm stuck many ways.”

- Survey respondent

Creative Sector Recommendations

- **Recognize what it means to be a sector in need of constant relief.** This includes recognizing our complicity as producing/presenting organizations, funders, educational institutions, service organizations, and workers in perpetuating a system that requires constant relief and places the burden of that shortfall onto creative workers.

- **Improve creative worker compensation baselines.** Exert influence to ensure that creative workers are always paid for their labor and are paid at least the prevailing living wage, increase transparency around funding and budgeting, list salaries or fees on job postings (and ensuring they meet or exceed prevailing living wage), and fund general operating support, benefits, and wages.
- **Realign the public value and revenue equation for the creative sector.** Educate consumers and realign pricing and fees, consider bridge subsidies for creative businesses trying to improve pay equity, recognize the complexity of this issue, and proliferate successful examples.
- **Prioritize long-term income for creative workers.** Consider royalty-sharing agreements for longer-term income for artists, support retirement savings and financial education.
- **Develop plans now for weathering future crisis conditions.** Encourage rainy day funds and savings, help organizations to purchase or long-term lease spaces, underwrite or secure insurance, prioritize and employ the most vulnerable in the system.
- **Coordinate research efforts and create databases of local, state, and federal creative economy policy and research.** Encourage increased replication and more reputable case studies of both policy and practice.
- **Craft labor agreements in emerging areas that are fair and achievable to artists and organizations.** Encourage unions, cultural organizations, and public and private sector funders to come together now to craft effective, equitable, and sustainable agreements to ensure that the sector does not get stuck in old patterns with new media.

***“I am capable, I am deserving,
but the world seems to be
crashing down on me and the
determination to get back up,
brush myself off, and continue on
is not financially sustainable.”***

- Survey respondent

DETAILED FINDINGS

Economic Insecurity

COVID-19 has had a devastating economic impact on artists and creative workers.¹⁰ Among the over 131,000 Artist Relief grant applicants, 72% said they had no financial safety net; the quantitative survey research confirms that reality. From the start of the pandemic through November 24, 2020, 95% of survey respondents lost creative income, 72% experienced unanticipated expenditures, 55% depleted their savings, and in a supplemental survey fielded towards the end of 2020 and into early 2021, respondents reported spending 60% of their monthly income on paying off debt and mortgages.

Given the percentage of respondents reporting a loss of income, savings, and increased expenditures, COVID-19 has undoubtably worsened the financial conditions for the majority of survey respondents, especially those who were in a precarious financial situation prior to the pandemic—often more so than the general population.

Survey respondents, for instance, were nearly three times as likely to live in poverty as the general population; 28% of respondents had a pre-pandemic household income below the U.S. poverty line,¹¹ compared to 11% of all Americans.

Prior to the pandemic, three out of four U.S. adults reported doing at least ok financially, a figure which has increased each year since 2013.¹² This experience of financial wellbeing differed depending on education level, race, and income. For instance, 63% of individuals with a high school degree or less reported doing at least ok, compared to 88% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher. In terms of race, the figure was 79% for white adults, 66% for Hispanic, and 65% for Black. With household income, 55% of those making less than \$40,000 reported doing at least ok financially compared to 81% of those making between \$40,000 and \$100,000, and 95% of those making more than \$100,000.

One indicator of financial wellbeing is the amount of emergency savings a person has access to, with financial experts generally recommending three to six months' worth.¹³ Prior to the pandemic, only 35% of U.S. adults reached that benchmark, with 28% having

Creative worker respondents were nearly 3 times as likely to live in poverty as the general U.S. population—before the pandemic.

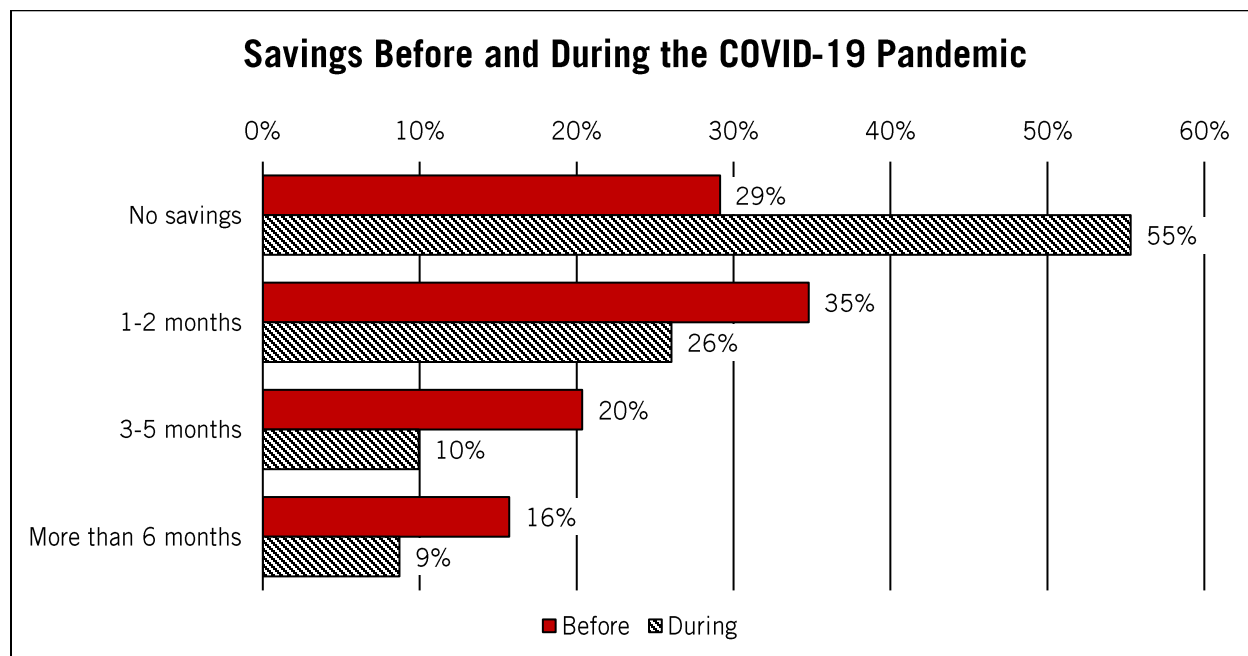
¹⁰ We are using the Americans for the Arts Creative Economy definitions of artist and creative worker where an *artist* is “someone who uses their imagination and creative process to manifest something original,” and *creative worker* is “an individual earning income from creative, cultural, or artistic-based pursuits.” Source: <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/creative-economy>

¹¹ The poverty line for a family of four living in the 48 contiguous states and District of Columbia in 2020 was \$26,200. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2020-poverty-guidelines>

¹² <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2020-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2019-overall-economic-well-being-in-2019.htm>

¹³ <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/savings/starting-an-emergency-fund/>

no savings at all.¹⁴ Similarly, two out of three creative worker respondents had less than two months savings prior to the pandemic, and 29% had zero savings.



Certain demographics entered the pandemic more financially vulnerable than others. For example, respondents without a college degree were twice as likely to enter the pandemic without savings as respondents with a college degree (43% vs. 23%). Black (40%) and Indigenous (40%) respondents were most likely to have entered the pandemic without savings and were almost twice as likely to have had no savings as white respondents (25%). Among other races/ethnicities, the percentages that lacked savings pre-pandemic were as follows: Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (39%), Hispanic/Latinx (35%), Asian/Asian American (26%), and Arab/Middle Eastern (23%).

Transgender respondents were more likely to report entering the pandemic with no savings (42% vs. 28% of cisgender respondents), as were respondents with disabilities (38% vs. 26%).

Finally, a higher percentage of respondents aged 25-40 reported no savings prior to COVID-19 (32%) compared to other generations; except for respondents under the age of 25, age correlated with likelihood of having savings (which is to say, older respondents were more likely to have savings).

Creative workers entered the pandemic with similar amounts of savings as the general population, but as the pandemic went on, creative workers diverged significantly. While nationally 25% of adults reported no savings in July of 2021,¹⁵ over half of creative worker respondents (55%) reported having no savings at the time of surveying.

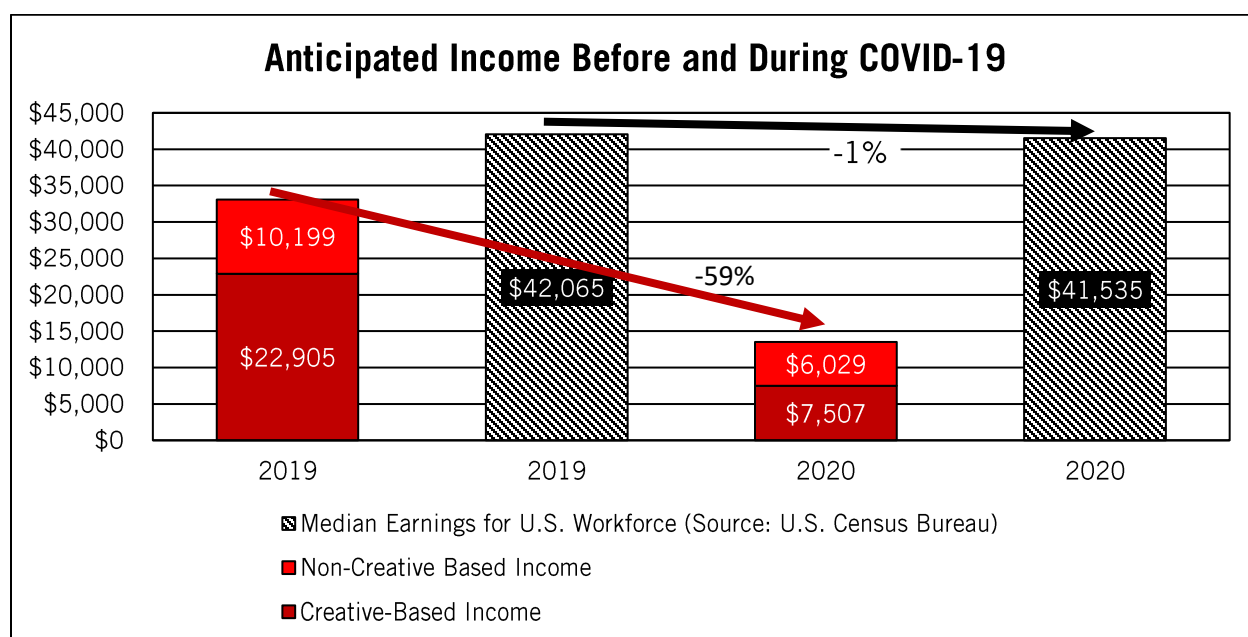
¹⁴ <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/savings/financial-security-june-2019/>

¹⁵ <https://www.bankrate.com/banking/savings/emergency-savings-survey-july-2021/>

During the pandemic, creative workers suffered significant financial losses. Respondents were asked to estimate what they believed their 2020 individual income would have been without COVID-19, as well as to estimate their 2020 income with the impact of COVID-19.

On average, respondents reported a “normal” individual income (without COVID-19) of \$33,104, of which \$22,905 would have been derived from creative work and the remaining \$10,199 from non-creative work. In comparison, among total U.S. workers, 2019 median earnings for full-time work were \$41,537.¹⁶

The anticipated effect of COVID-19 was profound: respondents anticipated a total individual income of \$13,536, of which \$7,507 would be derived from creative income and the remaining \$6,029 from non-creative income. For reference, an annual income of \$13,536 is about \$800 above the 2020 U.S. poverty line and is about \$30,000 less than the median earnings of a U.S. worker in 2020.¹⁷



This decline in revenue for creative workers amounts to an anticipated average loss of 59% of anticipated 2020 revenue because of the COVID-19 pandemic; in comparison, overall per-person earnings in the U.S. decreased by 1.2% from 2019 to 2020.¹⁸

While the economic impact of COVID-19 was generally devastating, not all respondents experienced that impact at the same magnitude. Respondents from households that, prior to COVID-19, had lower household incomes, respondents with less formal education, respondents in urban areas, respondents with disabilities, and BIPOC respondents all experienced disproportionately significant negative economic impacts. Higher percentages of respondents in these categories indicated they had incurred financial loss and/or experienced unanticipated expenditures as a result of the pandemic.

¹⁶ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2020/demo/p60-270/figure4.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2021/demo/p60-273/figure4.pdf>

There are indicators in the data, too, that certain insulating characteristics were less effective based on demographics. Black respondents with higher pre-COVID-19 household incomes, for example, were similarly affected by the pandemic as lower-income Black respondents, suggesting that, for Black respondents, a higher income prior to COVID-19 provided less of a financial insulator than for other races.

In response to the pandemic, congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020, which provided, among other things, direct payments to eligible individuals. While valuable in the short-term, these forms of relief are temporary plasters over long-term chronic issues. Additionally, the aid is not guaranteed to go to those who need it most. For instance, 58% of respondents in households making less than \$15,000 reported not receiving CARES Act funding (compared to 48% overall), likely because receiving the direct payment required filing income tax, and an annual income of \$15,000 is below the 2019 standard deduction for married people filing jointly and head of households.¹⁹ The direct payments were also not able to go to those without social security numbers including undocumented immigrants.

Despite the financial hardships experienced by artists and creative workers, 77% stated that they have used or plan on using their creative or artistic practice to help address the needs of their community. Of these, 65% were not compensated at all for that work. This highlights a difficult conundrum of being a creative worker in the United States: various data, from this study and elsewhere, makes clear that creative workers are underpaid for their work even in normal circumstances, that their work status increases their vulnerability by keeping them from fully accessing policies and benefits that could serve as formal or informal supplements to that insufficient revenue, and that their work and product can be, and often are, taken advantage of by a marketplace that is itself ill-suited in various ways for the tenets of capitalism.

Even with all that said, individually and institutionally the primacy placed on creating artistic product first for individual, social, or community benefit, and secondarily for the economic benefit and ability to make a living and a life, have exacerbated the conditions of artists in the pandemic—and it is often those with the least who are most generous with their artistic work.

The lower a respondent's reported household income, the more likely they were to both assist in recovery and to do so without compensation. In fact, respondents from backgrounds that experienced more severe economic impacts were consistently more likely to contribute to recovery. For example, 80% of respondents with disabilities said yes, compared to those without (76%), and 79% of urban respondents said yes, compared to suburban (75%), and rural (74%).

Respondents with lower incomes, with disabilities, and/or who were not white were the most likely to say they'd help their community rebuild through creative practice.

¹⁹ The 2019 standard deduction was \$24,400 for joint filers and \$18,350 for heads of households.

This echoes findings from research²⁰ on New York City cultural organizations that found that BIPOC-led/serving/accountable organizations were the most likely to have increased expenditures during the pandemic, were the least likely to have furloughed or laid off staff and were the most likely to have delivered direct relief to artists and/or communities. And just as in the case here of individual BIPOC and other systemically marginalized creative workers, who experienced outsized negative effects from the pandemic, BIPOC cultural organizations experienced the same, and received an estimated 60 cents for every dollar in relief funding received by organizations who were not BIPOC-led/serving/accountable.

The benefits of engaging with the arts has been well-documented, from increasing civic engagement,²¹ to unifying communities,²² and even improving well-being during the pandemic.²³ Thus, the 5.2 million creatives in the U.S. are well poised to address vital needs like infrastructure, community development, innovation, and public health.

When asked, 83% of respondents said that they would be interested in assisting with recovery. While a third said they would assist only if they were paid for their labor, nearly half (46%) said they would help regardless of whether they were paid.

Given that the arts and cultural sector contributes more to the economy than other industries such as agriculture, construction, and transportation,²⁴ and that it has been devastated more than any other sector, putting creatives to work in rebuilding and reimagining our nation and ensuring that they are fairly compensated would have far-reaching rewards for the entire country.

Job Insecurity and Exploitative Working Conditions

About a third of all workers in the creative sector are gig workers (3.6 times the national rate)²⁵, meaning they work as independent contractors and are paid on a project basis. Employers of independent contractors are generally not required to pay into (or pay for) health or life insurance, workers compensation, unemployment insurance or taxes, or retirement funds. This type of employment, even without a pandemic and economic crisis, creates significant disparities. Gig workers also generally are not obligated to get access to employee benefits including laws governing fair labor, workplace safety, paid medical and family leave, and anti-discrimination laws.²⁶

The lack of paid sick leave was reflected in the survey findings with fewer than one-in-ten creative worker respondents having access to paid sick leave going into the

**Creative workers were
10 times less likely to
have access to paid
sick leave going into the
pandemic compared to the
general U.S. workforce.**

²⁰ "The Crisis Was There and Waiting to Happen," page 1. Americans for the Arts for the Gilman Foundation.

²¹ <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/98.pdf>

²² <https://www.americansforthearts.org/news-room/press-releases/americans-speak-out-about-the-arts-in-new-public-opinion-poll>

²³ <https://art-wellbeing.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Research-Art-Well-being-during-Covid-19.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/COVID-Outlook-Week-of-1.4.2021-revised.pdf>

²⁵ https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists_and_Other_Cultural_Workers.pdf

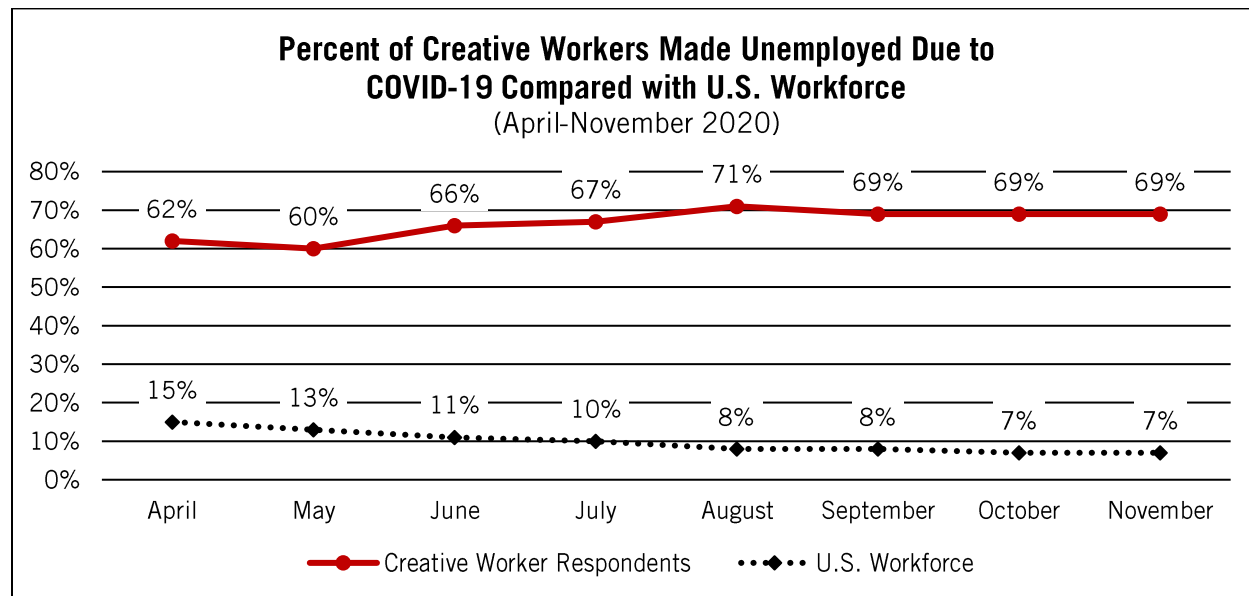
²⁶ <https://bench.co/blog/operations/independent-contractor/>

pandemic (8%). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 78% of all U.S. workers have access to paid sick leave,²⁷ and globally, out of 22 countries with the highest living standards according to the United Nations' Human Development Index, the U.S. was the only one without guaranteed paid sick leave.²⁸

Until the CARES Act, unemployment insurance was another benefit denied to independent or gig workers. During the pandemic, access to unemployment insurance has proved to be critical. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unemployment crisis for artists and creative workers. In fact, according to Johns Hopkins University, for much of the pandemic and even continuing to late 2021, the nonprofit arts sector was the hardest hit in terms of job losses and continues to have an unemployment rate 3 times that national average.²⁹

83% of respondents to a separate, unemployment insurance-specific survey applied for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance when it was offered to independent workers for the first time under the CARES Act—two-thirds of them for the first time.³⁰

Among the 135,000 Artist Relief grant applicants, 92% reported losing full-time, part-time, or contract-based work; this echoes the core survey findings, in which 95% of respondents reported having lost revenue due to the pandemic. Among creative worker survey respondents, two-in-three, or 63%, reported that they became fully unemployed because of COVID-19 (this included both creative and non-creative employment). This number stayed uniformly high over the course of 2020, peaking in August, when 71% of respondents stated they were fully unemployed. In comparison, the national unemployment rate was never higher than 15%, and declined steadily over the course of 2020.³¹



²⁷ <https://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/factsheet/paid-sick-leave.htm>

²⁸ <https://cepr.net/report/contagion-nation-2020-united-states-still-the-only-wealthy-nation-without-paid-sick-leave/>

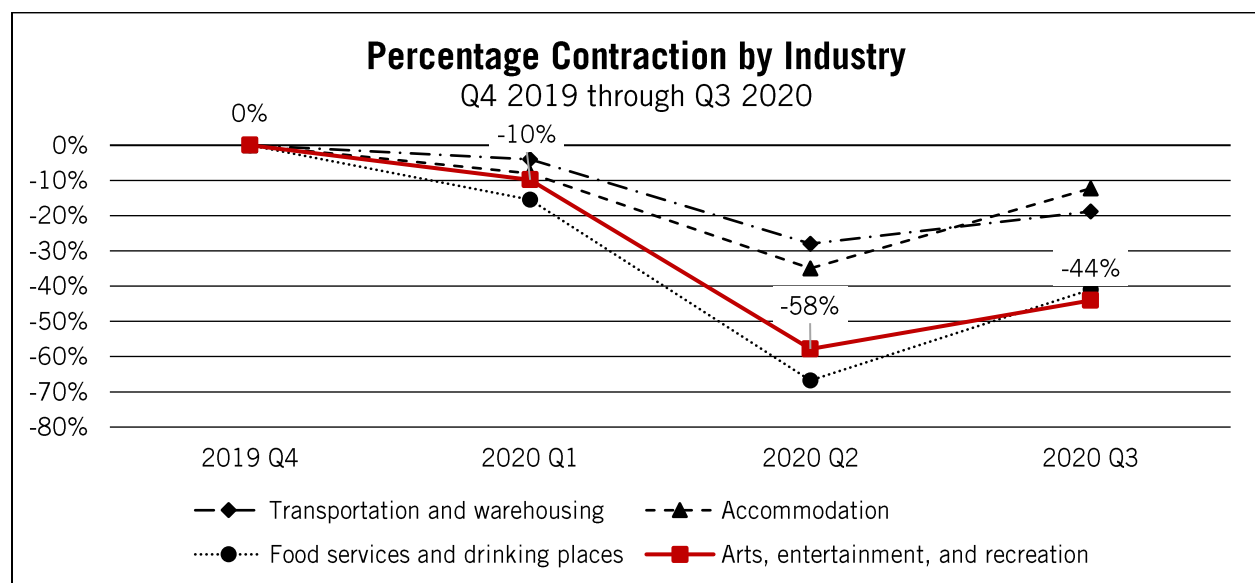
²⁹ <http://ccss.jhu.edu/september-2021-jobs/>

³⁰ "Pandemic Unemployment Insurance and Independent Creative Workers," forthcoming from Americans for the Arts.

³¹ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/national-employment-monthly-update.aspx>

Respondents' place of employment influenced the unemployment rate. Respondents employed by an educational institution (55%), or government arts and cultural agency (57%) experienced lower unemployment rates than those working for for-profit creative businesses (70%), or for-profit non-creative businesses (67%). Artists working in disciplines that relied more on in-person events such as film (72%), theater and performance (68%), dance (67%), and music (65%) experienced higher rates of unemployment than other disciplines.

Unemployment hit creative workers on two fronts. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the arts and cultural sector contracted by 58% between January and June 2020.³² Research on the behavior of cultural organizations indicates that artists and creative workers were laid off or furloughed at a higher rate than other cultural workers (83% of creative workers vs. 69% of all paid cultural workers) and were on track to be rehired about a third as quickly as other cultural workers.³³



Additionally, 34% of creative workers held non-creative jobs to supplement income generated through their creative process. These jobs were often in customer facing sectors such as food services, retail/wholesale, education, and hospitality,³⁴ all of which have been deeply affected by COVID-19. For instance, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for restaurants and hospitality spiked to 34% in May 2020 and stayed about double the national unemployment rate throughout 2020.³⁵

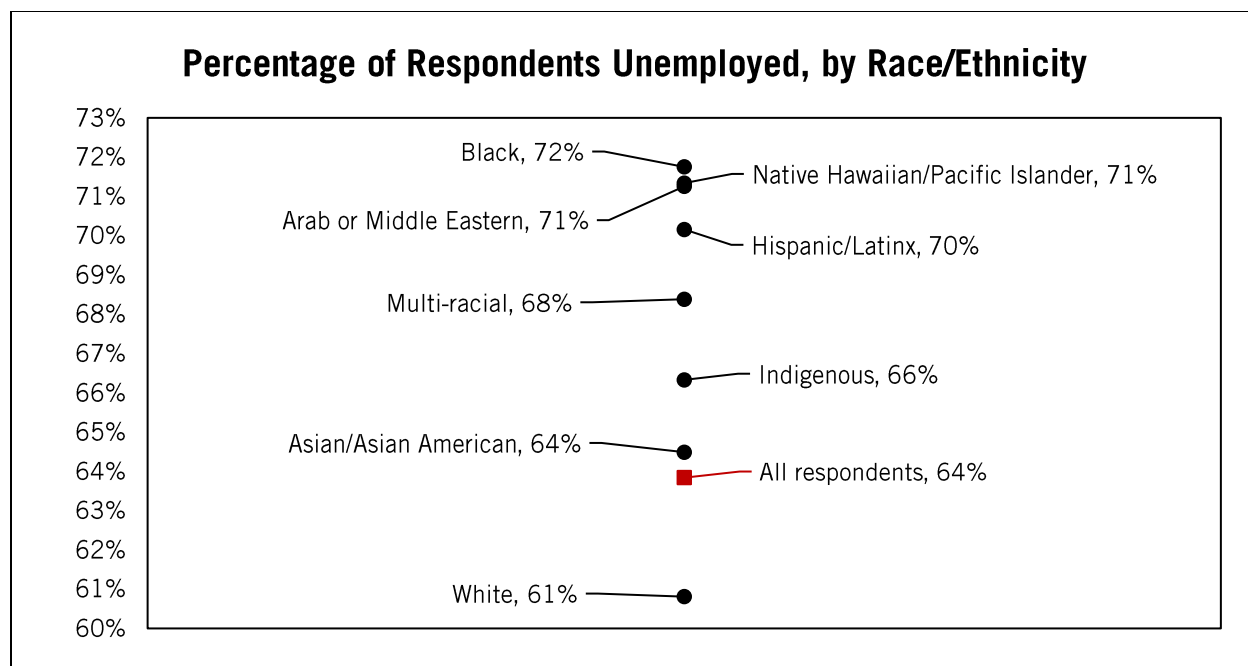
Unemployment, like many other impacts, hit historically and currently marginalized populations more acutely. Black respondents reported the highest rate of unemployment (72%), followed by Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (71%), Arab/Middle Eastern (71%), Hispanic (70%), Indigenous (66%), Asian/Asian American (64%), and white (61%).

³² https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/index_industry_gdpIndy.cfm

³³ "The Crisis Was There and Waiting to Happen," page 2. Americans for the Arts for the Gilman Foundation.

³⁴ https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists_and_Other_Cultural_Workers.pdf

³⁵ https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU04034256?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&output_view=data&include_graphs=true



Respondents with disabilities were also more likely to report having become fully unemployed, as were respondents with lower rates of formal education or who were younger.

Contrarily, populations with more systemic privilege, including white respondents, respondents older than 40, and respondents with higher household incomes reported more job stability. White respondents, for example, were more likely to report that their jobs were unaffected by the pandemic (13% vs. 9% for all other races), and respondents over the age of 40 were twice as likely to express the same stability as people under the age of 40 (16% vs. 8%). Finally, 24% of those in households earning \$100,000 or more indicated that their jobs were not affected by the pandemic, compared to 10% of those earning lower amounts.

Inequities in the Digital Environment

While an embrace of the virtual/digital/online space as a venue or marketplace for arts and culture has been in the field dialogue for decades, the specific circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic created a perfect storm for immediate, radical attention to the space. As creative workers grappled with revenue models that generally required in-person engagement, as well as employment opportunities with cultural organizations that had pivoted into online content delivery, the challenging economics and systemic inequity issues of online creative product delivery were clear and immediate.

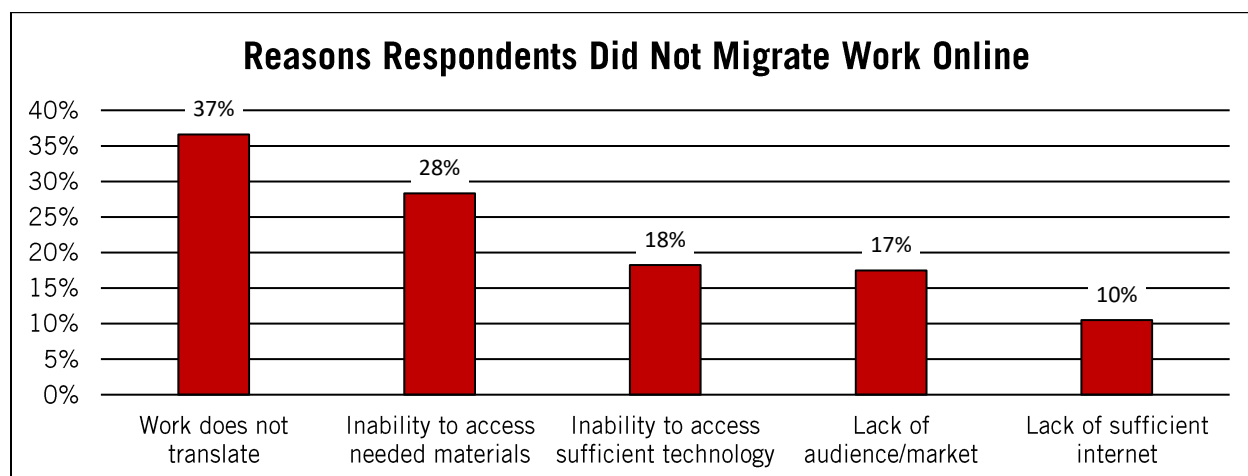
About 3 out of 4 creatives distributed work digitally—a number that stayed relatively steady during the pandemic (78% pre-pandemic, 74% during-pandemic).

Prior to COVID-19, 40% of respondents earned money through online sales; those who were selling work online prior to the pandemic were making approximately a third of their creative income, on average, that way. These respondents were more likely to work in disciplines such as media, craft, and writing/literature, and reside in rural areas, rather than urban and suburban.

Since COVID-19, the percentage of respondents earning money through online sales decreased to 27%, but among that smaller group, respondents reported an increased percentage of their total income coming from online sales (47%), although there are indications this had more to do with a decline in total income than an increase in online income.

Across artistic disciplines, respondents working in film experienced the largest decrease in the percentage who earned money online during the pandemic (45%), followed by visual art (40%), and media (39%). Dancers experienced the smallest percentage decrease (8%); however, they were also the discipline least likely to have earned money online prior to the pandemic. Concerning age, respondents born after 1981 experienced the lowest percent decrease (26%). Finally, Hispanic/Latinx respondents experienced the highest decrease compared to other races (39%), while Asian/Asian Americans experienced the lowest decrease (23%).

While they still experienced a significant decrease in creative income during the pandemic, creative workers who reported earning online revenue were able to mitigate some of that negative impact; they averaged a 62% decrease in creative income, compared to a 71% decrease for respondents who did not sell their work online.



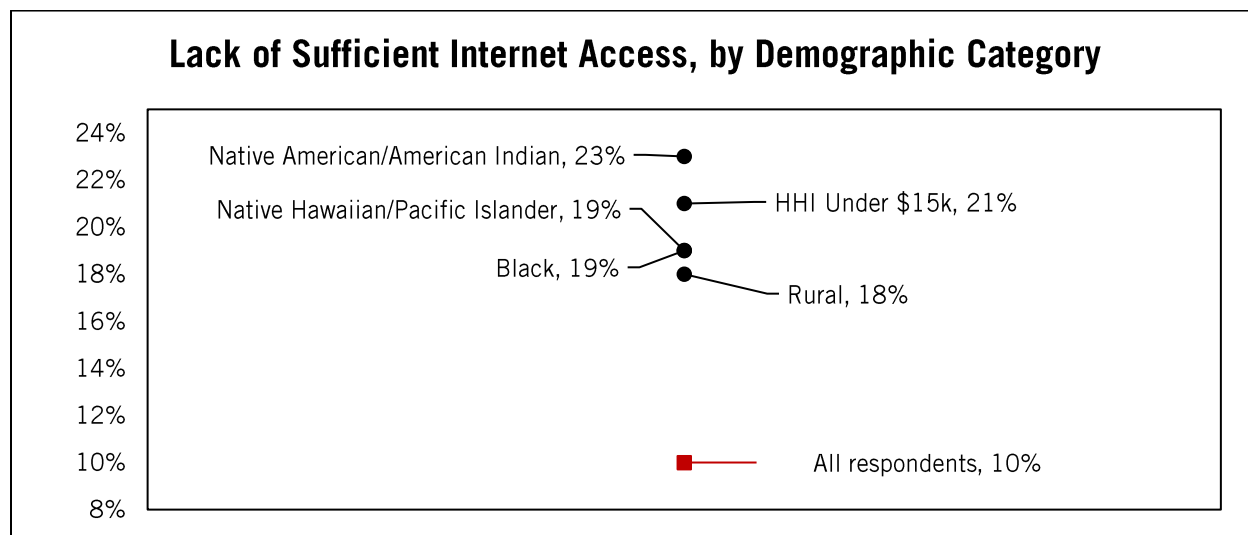
Transitioning to the online marketplace, particularly in the pressure cooker environment of the pandemic and economic shutdown, was fraught and often somewhat or totally unsuccessful. Among those who did not pivot their work online, 47% said their work could not translate to an online interface, 28% said they could not access necessary materials, 18% said they lacked access to necessary technology, 17% said they lacked the audience/market for their work online, and 10% specifically cited a lack of access to sufficient internet.

Certain groups encountered these limitations at a higher rate than others, particularly related to the systemic limitations that pre-existed the pandemic, such as those related to technology and reliable internet. According to a 2020 study,³⁶ an estimated 42 million people, or 13% of the U.S. population lack access to broadband internet. This lack of access specifically and disproportionately impacts rural, less formally educated, and less affluent people—a condition reflected in the responses of creative workers. For instance, 28% of respondents in that study earning less than \$15,000 reported not having sufficient technology, compared to 18% across

³⁶ <https://broadbandnow.com/research/fcc-underestimates-unserved-by-50-percent>

all income brackets. In that same low-income category, 21% reported not having sufficient internet access, compared to 10% across all income brackets.

This pattern was also seen with rural respondents, where 22% did not have sufficient technology and 18% did not have sufficient internet access, compared to suburban and urban respondents. It also held for Black and Indigenous creative workers, who were more than twice as likely to report lack of internet as a barrier.



Genre and artistic discipline significantly impacted the ability to pivot to online work. Theater and performance practitioners stated that their discipline did not translate to an online interface at the highest percentage (57%), followed by dance (48%), and film (41%), while visual art (32%), writing and literature (32%), media (32%), and craft (27%) held the lowest percentages.

A quarter of respondents had their work distributed online through an organization such as a theatre, orchestra, gallery, online clearinghouse, incubator, etc. For context, the production of online cultural experiences was a decidedly mixed bag financially for cultural organizations during the pandemic. According to a study on producing and presenting organizations in New York City, 94% of organizations reported delivering content online during the pandemic, including 70% who were doing so for the first time. Among that 94%, however, 80% indicated that they earned either zero revenue or, at least, insufficient revenue to cover costs for those online events.³⁷

All that said, 70% of creative workers respondents whose work was distributed by a cultural organization had not received revenue for that use of their creative work. Likewise, in the general category of “everyone who distributed online” (both individually and through an organization) in the current survey, the percentage of respondents getting paid for that work done online

70% of creative workers respondents whose work was digitally distributed by a cultural organization were not paid for it.

³⁷ “The Crisis Was There and Waiting to Happen,” page 2. Americans for the Arts for the Gilman Foundation.

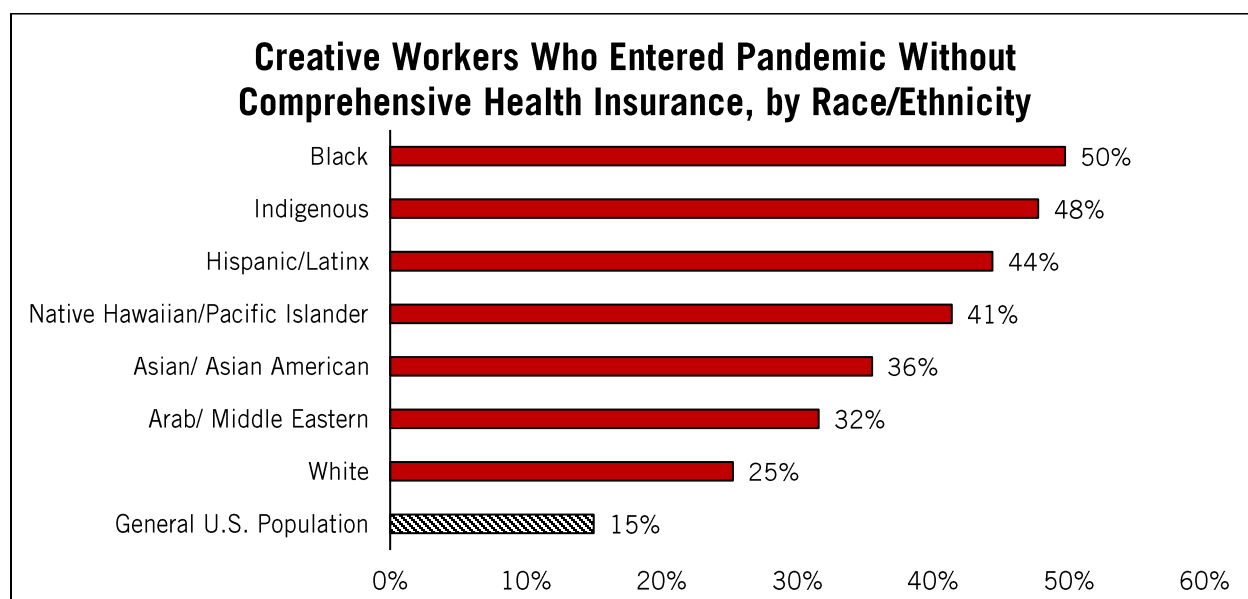
decreased, with 57% of respondents sharing their work for free compared to 51% prior to COVID-19.

Limited Access to Healthcare

According to a 2021 report released by The Commonwealth Fund, despite spending significantly more on healthcare as a percentage of GDP, the United States healthcare system ranks last overall when compared to other high-income countries.³⁸ The study compared 12 countries on five indicators: 1) Access to care, 2) Care process, 3) Administrative efficiency, 4) Equity, and 5) Health care outcomes, and the U.S. ranked last in all but one (care process). A heavily contributing factor to these low rankings is the fact that the U.S. remains the only high-income country that lacks universal health insurance coverage, leaving 30 million people uninsured and another 40 million potentially underinsured.

With the passing of the Affordable Care Act, businesses with more than 50 full-time employees are required to provide health insurance. According to 2019 Census data, 50% of insured Americans received health insurance through their employers.³⁹

But with 34% of creative workers identifying as self-employed, a lack of health insurance is another systemic issue affecting the cultural sector. The significant percentage of independent workers in the creative sector is mirrored in the higher-than-average percentage of respondents who entered the pandemic without comprehensive health insurance (34% vs. 15% of the general population⁴⁰)—a condition that was significantly more prevalent when crossed with race: the percentage of respondents without comprehensive health insurance prior to COVID-19 was highest for Black respondents (50%), followed by Indigenous (48%), Hispanic (44%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (41%), Asian/Asian American (36%), Arab/Middle Eastern (32%), and white (25%).



³⁸ <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/fund-reports/2021/aug/mirror-mirror-2021-reflecting-poorly>

³⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/health-insurance/group-health-insurance/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/health-insurance.htm>

Younger respondents, respondents with less formal education, and respondents with lower household incomes were all also less likely to have had health insurance entering the pandemic. This lack of health insurance meant that prior to the pandemic, half of respondents avoided visiting a medical professional due to inability to pay, and 34% were unable to pay for medication. A quarter indicated that, pre-pandemic, they had been denied a recommended medical procedure for lack of ability to pay; 18% said the same had occurred for them during the pandemic.

Across the board, these numbers stayed relatively steady during the pandemic, including both the percentage with health insurance and the percentage who could not access needed medical care or medication.

Even for those with health insurance, the pandemic has exposed the fragility of the current system. In New York City, the Equity-League Benefit Funds supplies health insurance to 6,700 professional actors and stage managers in the Actors' Equity union.⁴¹ 88% of the fund comes from nonprofit and commercial theater producers who employ unionized actors and stage managers, but with the closure of shows throughout 2020, no revenue came in. Thus, the fund began the pandemic with \$120 million in reserves, but is down to \$91 million, and as a result increased the employment requirements for coverage from 11 weeks to 16 weeks.⁴²

In addition to COVID-19, we are also in the midst of a mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic.⁴³ When asked about experiencing a lack of productivity, 68% stated that they were unproductive due to stress, anxiety, or depression about the state of the world. This experience was more common among respondents with disabilities (79%), female respondents (71%), less affluent respondents, and increased with age. Furthermore, 74% experienced trouble sleeping during the pandemic, compared to 60% pre-pandemic. Given all this, it is particularly troubling that 34% were unable to access necessary psychological or psychiatric help due to inability to pay.

Housing and Food Insecurity

In March 2020, states across the country began issuing shelter-in-place orders to keep people at home to “flatten the curve.”⁴⁴ As the virus spread, more affluent residents living in densely populated urban areas like New York City fled to the suburbs.⁴⁵ Conversely, 21% of homes lacked the appropriate number of bedrooms and bathrooms per person to meet the WHO and Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for quarantine should a member of the household

“Of all the creative small business owners I know, I am the only one with health insurance. The lucky ones are covered by a working spouse; the not-so-lucky are just hoping they don't get sick or hurt.”

- Survey respondent

⁴¹ <https://equityleague.org/about-us/>

⁴² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/01/theater/stage-actors-health-insurance.html>

⁴³ <https://tcf.org/content/report/mental-health-crisis-covid-19-pandemic/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-what-does-flattening-the-curve-mean-and-why-it-matters.html>

⁴⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-16/the-truth-about-american-migration-during-covid>

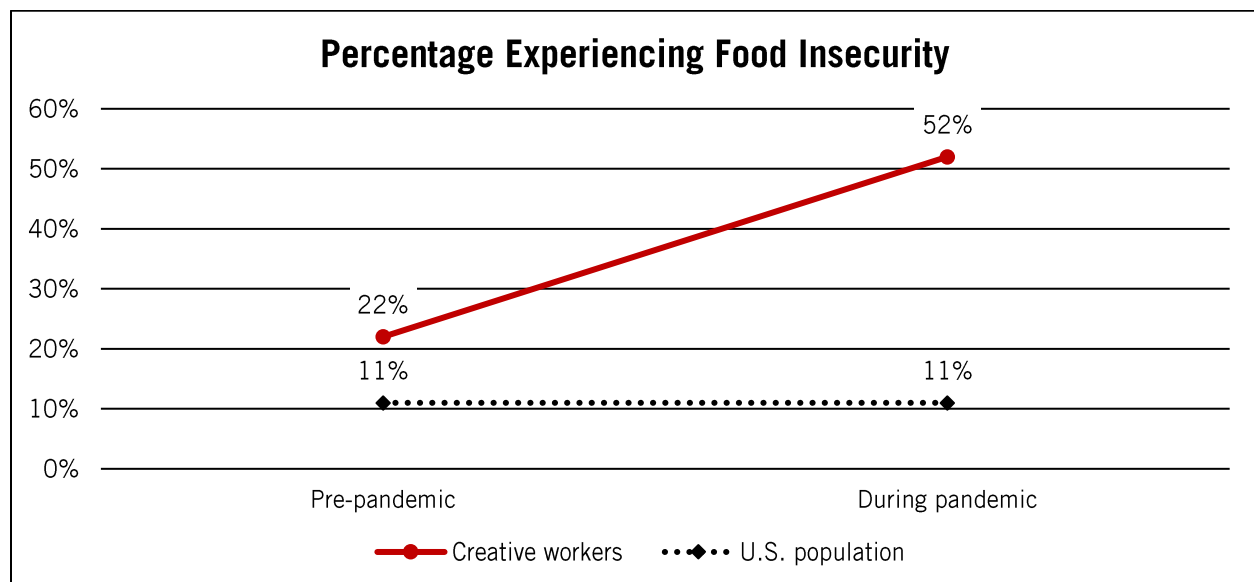
become infected.⁴⁶ And for the most vulnerable, the closure of vital public facilities such as libraries, parks, and recreation centers left people experiencing homelessness without shelter and resources.

Even before COVID-19, housing insecurity and a lack of affordable housing was a significant issue for artists, many of whom required additional studio space to carry out their creative work. A recent Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance survey conducted prior to the pandemic found that 76% of artists reported high costs and lack of space for living and working as primary barriers to creating art in New York City.⁴⁷ This lack of affordable housing is present across the country and can lead artists to seek substandard and dangerous living arrangements, such as the Ghost Ship, an Oakland warehouse turned artist collective with an illegal living space, where a fire broke out killing 36 people in 2016.⁴⁸

Prior to the pandemic, 23% of creative worker respondents experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. Additionally, 27% had faced the threat of eviction, and 12% had been evicted. Transgender respondents reported experiencing homelessness at a much higher rate than the average (45%), as did those born after 1996 (41%), indigenous (39%), and disabled respondents (34%).

Among the Artist Relief grant applicants, 86% reported a financial need for housing, with transgender respondents reporting this need at the highest rate (92%). While the pandemic has led to positive changes in housing policies, such as eviction moratoriums and rent freezes, experts anticipate that over the next four years we will see a 49% increase in chronic homelessness in the wake of the pandemic.⁴⁹

1-in-3 respondents indicated they had been threatened with eviction during the pandemic, and 7% had been evicted. 1-in-10 said they had been or were homeless during the pandemic period.



⁴⁶ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/were-american-homes-ready-for-the-pandemic.html>

⁴⁷ https://createnyc.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/CreateNYC_Cultural_Plan.pdf

⁴⁸ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/benjamin-wallace-wells/what-happened-exactly-in-oaklands-ghost-ship-fire>

⁴⁹ <https://economicrt.org/publication/locked-out/>

Creative worker respondents were twice as likely as the general population to indicate they had experienced food insecurity at some point pre-pandemic (22% vs. 11%),⁵⁰ and while the percentage of the U.S. population experiencing food insecurity remained relatively steady throughout 2020, the percentage of creative workers who experienced food insecurity more than doubled during the pandemic, from 22% pre-pandemic to 52% during the pandemic.

Additionally, 62% of grant applicants reported a financial need for food, with younger (75%), transgender (72%), LGBTQ (69%), and disabled (66%) applicants more likely to have this need than the average. As the pandemic continued, more creative worker respondents reported needing both housing and food assistance.

⁵⁰ Data on the general U.S. population via the US Department of Agriculture, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>

RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 has more fully exposed the need to address the systemic inequities plaguing the arts and culture sector, and the United States as a whole. While the impact of the pandemic on creative workers was catastrophic, it was in part so catastrophic because of long-term, deeply rooted systemic challenges within both the country's public policies and within the creative economy and non-profit cultural sector.

The following recommendations emerge from reviewing the data, understanding the pre- and during-COVID-19 conditions of the creative workers who took part in this research, and reflecting on broader research and trends around the treatment of independent workers, historically and currently marginalized demographic groups, and creative workers in particular.

Public Policy Recommendations

- **Realign U.S. labor policy to be more equitable to independent or gig workers.** Current U.S. labor law centers significantly on people being employed by a company. Key public programs and policies, like healthcare, worker protections, anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws, paid family leave, retirement savings, unemployment, and disability support are all tied to—or at least substantially easier to attain through—employers. This is antiquated and, in the context of creative workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (and before), has had significant consequences.
 - Drive for adoption of federal and state legislation that permanently expands access to unemployment to independent or gig workers.
 - The predominant federal labor policy, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, is due for reauthorization in the first part of 2022. Support efforts to ensure it is retooled to more fully recognize and incorporate independent or gig work, and creative work in particular.
 - Safeguard and support creative coalitions that are articulating and pursuing pro-creative worker policies on the collective level, particularly as they pivot from a relief/recovery frame to a systemic one.
- **Drive for better and more universal support of basic human needs through policy.** The data on this score is stark: across many significant, basic human needs, ranging from healthcare to childcare, from access to leave to affordable housing and food, from steady income to debt relief, creative workers, and particularly marginalized creative workers, entered the pandemic worse off than the general population, and have disproportionately struggled under the weight of those inequities. Redressing these policy differentials is essential to making the creative life more possible, and to ensuring more resiliency in the face of future disasters.
 - Pursue policy solutions that expand universal healthcare, affordable healthcare that can be accessed separate from an employer, paid sick, parental, and family

leave, and robust mental health coverage.

- Encourage investment in affordable housing and space access, including bolstering tenants' rights and rent subsidy and stabilization programs.
- Expand food assistance programs and ensure access for independent workers.
- Support pilot programs that explore implementation of a universal basic income or guaranteed income, including particularly the documentation of economic and social ripple effects of such efforts.
- In an age that seems to require an increased online presence, and in which the digital divide is disadvantageous and inequitable both to creatives and to many who might be their audiences, support local, state, and federal efforts to implement universal broadband or other access to high-speed internet, as well as access to needed hardware and/or software.
- **Improve access to the dollars needed for creative workers to build, expand, and improve the viability of entrepreneurship, micro and small businesses, and other ventures.**
 - Pursue public and private policy changes that ease access to capital for people with limited collateral, improve loan terms to make them buoys for growth instead of anchors, and re-center the worker or entrepreneur instead of the lending institution.
 - Support specific efforts to amend or replace inequitable public policies around disaster relief and recovery funding as it relates to independent or gig workers, creative workers in particular, and creative businesses.
 - Employ and pay artists and creative workers to work on addressing these public policy issues.
- **Investigate opportunities for debt reduction.** School debt, regular debt, and other forms of owing are debilitating to many creative workers, and student debt is, per research conducted by the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), the number one reason that people do not enter, or leave, the creative field.⁵¹
 - Debt reduction, in this context, may be about ameliorating or forgiving existing debt, but it also, in the context of education, needs to include a dialogue about the mismatch between the perceived need for advance degree, the cost of that degree, and the associated wages upon exiting that degree.

⁵¹ <https://snaaparts.org/findings/reports/careers-in-the-arts-who-stays-and-who-leaves>

The policy recommendations above are worthy of pursuing in any context and would have far-reaching and positive implications in moving towards equity nationally were they achieved. The scope and length of the list as it relates to creative workers, however, begs core questions about the inability of the sector itself to provide some modicum of appropriate stability, support, and compensation to its workers. Why, one must ask, is expanding access to food security programs as a public policy measure crucial to the betterment of creative workers; why, at the core, are so many creative workers in need of food assistance? Housing assistance? Mental healthcare? Supplemental income?

In that spirit, it is important for the field to also look to itself, its policies and practices, and its own inequitable structures. To that end, we offer the following field recommendations.

Creative Sector Recommendations

- **Recognize what it means to be a sector in need of constant relief.** Recognize our complicity as producing/presenting organizations, funders, educational institutions, service organizations, and workers in perpetuating a system that requires constant relief, and often disproportionately places the burden of that shortfall onto those producing the creative product. In general, recognize that cultural organizations should not be considered functional, and are not fully fulfilling their obligation to be in service to the public good, if they are not supporting a thriving ecosystem of creators.
- **Improve creative worker compensation baselines.** Exert our individual and organizational influence to ensure that creative workers are always paid for their labor and are paid at least the prevailing living wage. This includes increasing transparency around funding and payment by making budgeting more transparent; listings salaries or fees on job postings (and ensuring those salaries or fees meet or exceed prevailing living wage); and unlocking more grant dollars to fund general operating support, benefits, and wages.
- **Realign the public value and revenue equation for the creative sector.** Make and support efforts to, over time, educate consumers and realign pricing and fees to support the financial burden of your organization (inclusive of living wage for creatives) more accurately. Consider bridge subsidies for creative businesses that are making the effort to compensate and support creative workers more fairly as they navigate the revenue side of that equation. Publicly recognize the thorniness and complexity of this issue and proliferate and celebrate successful examples of navigating to a better model.
- **Prioritize long-term income for creative workers.** Consider implementing or supporting royalty-sharing agreements that allow for longer-term income for artists. While this has been piloted in pockets, such as with the original cast of *Hamilton* and is becoming more prevalent in the virtual/digital art space, where most contracts have a percentage of resale reverting to the artist in perpetuity, redesigning the terms and contracting process for artwork to implement better terms for the generative artist(s) is possible in real-world spaces too, and could have profound impact.
- **Develop plans now for weathering future crisis conditions.** Encourage rainy day funds and savings, help organizations to purchase or long-term lease spaces, underwrite or

secure insurance against such disasters, and generally create a priorities list for the sector that is headlined by protecting and employing the most vulnerable in the system.

- **Better coordinate research efforts by national creative economy organizations and support the creation of accessible databases of local, state, and federal creative economy policy and research.** Such efforts would improve and amplify data collection efforts, reduce redundancy, allow for increased replication and more reputable case studies of both policy and practice, more successful case making, and increase the possibility of successful meta-analyses down the road.
- **Craft labor agreements in emerging areas that are fair and achievable to artists and organizations.** The digital space suddenly and immediately became crucial for distributing work during the pandemic and will likely remain so going forward—likely with many ongoing permutations as the sector begins to more directly engage not just with digital repurposing of in-person work, but hybrid work, fully virtual work, virtual currencies, AI, and more. Unions, cultural organizations, and public and private sector funders should be encouraged to come together now to craft effective, equitable, and sustainable agreements to ensure that the sector does not get stuck if and when future tipping points arrive. This is not an outlandish notion—a decade or more of groundwork laid in England around digital recording and distribution of work meant that they were much better prepared and had agreements in place as the pandemic shut down in-person presentations.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has laid bare the longstanding inequities entrenched in the cultural sector and the United States as a whole. Creative workers entered the pandemic more vulnerable than the greater population, experienced higher rates of unemployment during the pandemic, and suffered physically and emotionally due to a lack of access to medical care, housing security, and food.

This moment of crisis has shone a light and has allowed a clearer understanding of some of those systemic challenges. While none of the challenges made more visible by COVID-19 are new, and it is important to acknowledge the advocates and organizations, including in the cultural sector, who have been agitating for change related to these issues for decades, we are now, potentially, in a moment of inflection where significant change is possible, should we take steps to make it so.

As former Stockton, CA mayor and universal basic income champion Michael Tubbs has said, “We know we live in a time of pandemics.” In saying this, he was invoking the original definition of *pandemic*, which relates to anything that affects *pan demos*, all the people.

COVID-19 was a wave—a big wave—but is one in an ongoing series of such waves buffeting our society and our field. We must shore up our grounding, address our shaky foundations, and prepare ourselves for the pandemics to come, if we are to emerge from this pandemic into a better situation for creative workers, creative organizations, and American communities.

While philanthropy and government support provided an essential lifeline, these stop-gap measures perpetuate a cycle of requiring constant relief, and do not address the root causes of these systemic issues.

We have a unique opportunity to reimagine our sector with these concerns in mind. Only then will artists and creative workers truly thrive.



Appendix 1: Methodology and Limitations

Sample

The survey was hosted on the Americans for the Arts website from April 8, 2020, to November 24, 2020. Respondents were invited to participate using convenience sampling, utilizing communication channels from Artist Relief and Americans for the Arts to reach as many participants as possible. Because some of these channels relied on network-to-network distribution, social media, and other mass-disbursal channels, the total number of people reached is not known.

Convenience sampling, where participants are chosen based on ease of access, is not without limitations. A non-exhaustive list of possible limitations includes:

- Individuals who applied for grants from Artist Relief were likely experiencing financial insecurity, thus the survey respondents may have been more financially insecure than the general population of artists and creative workers.
- While it was made clear that the grant applications and survey responses were not related,⁵² it is possible that some respondents felt pressured to complete the survey.
- The survey was only administered online, thus excluding respondents without access to the internet, and was only administered in English.
- To ensure comprehensiveness, the survey was lengthy, and even though it was engineered to be as efficient as possible within that length, may have created a burden for participants.
- The survey asked questions about finances and other sensitive information, which may have impacted the accuracy of responses.

While it is important to acknowledge such limitations, and to account for these limitations as context for the resulting data, in total 33,001 individuals participated in the survey, making the margin of sampling error plus or minus 1% at the 95% confidence level, well in the acceptable range.

Survey Instrument

The survey was designed in collaboration with Americans for the Arts and Artist Relief. A draft was shared with select Americans for the Arts staff with research expertise and whose work pertains to individual artists and creative workers. Their feedback resulted in modifications in question wording and answer options. There were 67 questions in total,

⁵² Language on the survey invitation stated: “This survey is entirely anonymous and is not connected with any application to Artist Relief or any other funding application.”

however the survey used branching logic based on answers to previous questions, thus not every question was shown to every respondent. Two additional questions about social conditions faced before and during the pandemic were added in November 2020. These questions were only seen by a subset of respondents and while the findings may not be representative, they still provide valuable information. To maintain privacy and reduce burden, not all the questions required an answer. The survey, on average, required approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Secondary Data Sources

This report occasionally references findings from the 131,253 Artist Relief grant applications submitted April 8, 2020, through December 11, 2020. The grant applications were open to practicing artists 18 years or older in all 50 states and territories, regardless of citizenship status. The grants were awarded in monthly cycles, and at the end of each cycle, all unawarded applicants were removed and were eligible to apply again in the next cycle.

This report also occasionally references findings from a second survey of 3,035 artists and creative workers conducted by Americans for the Arts from November 2020 to March 2021. The survey was conducted online in an identical manner as the primary survey.

Appendix 2: Sample Distribution

All demographic questions were optional and some allowed respondents to select more than one option.

- **Race/Ethnicity.** Most of the respondents identified as white (63%). The next largest group was Black (15%), followed by Hispanic/Latinx (11%). Indigenous respondents made up 5% of respondents and Asian/Asian Americans made up 4%. Arab/Middle Eastern and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders both made up 1% each. Whenever possible, this report will present the results in a way that reflects the unique experiences, histories, and culture of each racial group; however, occasionally the term BIPOC will be used to refer to individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color.
- **Age.** Respondents between 24-39 and 40-55 both made up the largest percentage (32% each), followed by those between 56-73 (29%). Those 74 and older made up 3% while 23 and younger made up 4%.
- **Disability.** 20% identified as disabled.
- **Gender.** 58% identified as female; 38% identified as male; and 4% identified as non-binary. 2% identified as transgender.
- **Education.** 66% received a bachelor's degree or more; 27% received some college or associate's degree; and 7% received a high school diploma or less.
- **Household Income.** 43% had a household income prior to the pandemic of less than \$35,000; 56% had a household income between \$35,000 and \$100,000; and 11% had a household income higher than \$100,000.

- **Population Density.** 57% identified as living in an urban area, 27% in suburban, and 15% in rural.
- **Artistic Discipline.** Visual art made up the largest discipline with 18%, followed by teaching artists/teachers/professors (11%). Community arts and music both made up 10% each. Craft made up 8%; media, theater/performance and writing/literature both made up 7% each; design and film both made up 6% each; traditional arts made up 4%; dance made up 3%; and art conversation/historical preservation made up 2%.

Appendix 3: Data Tables

Below is a list of the questions for which data tables are provided. For ease of use, please download the full set of data tables at <http://www.americansforthearts.org/covidartistdata>.

All datasets have been parsed by the following crosstabs: status as a creative worker, genre(s) of work, source of pay, race/ethnicity, union membership, birth year range, disability status, educational attainment level, home/work population density, gender identity, transgender status, pre-COVID-19 household income, and geographic region.

- Sample distribution.
- Have you experienced a loss of income from your artistic/creative practice as a result of the coronavirus pandemic?
- Have you experienced any unanticipated expenditures to your artistic/creative practice as a result of the coronavirus pandemic?
- How many months of savings did you have prior to COVID-19?
- How many months of savings do you have now in the midst of COVID-19?
- What was the approximate total amount of creativity and non-creativity-based income you (alone) anticipated earnings in 2020 at the start of the year (PRIOR to COVID-19)?
- What is the approximate total amount of creativity and non-creativity-based income you (alone) NOW anticipate earning in 2020?
- Were you utilizing online tools to share/distribute your creative/artistic work (including both new and existing work) prior to COVID-19?
- Roughly what percentage of your creativity-based income was generated online prior to COVID-19?
- Please select any of the following that you had prior to COVID-19 (insurance).
- Please select any of the following that you have now, in the midst of COVID-19 (insurance).
- Have your non-creative job(s) been negatively affected by COVID-19?
- Have you become fully unemployed because of COVID-19?
- You indicated a decline in your creative productivity. What do you attribute that decline to?
- Are you utilizing online tools to share/distribute your creative/artistic work (including both new and existing work) now, during COVID-19?
- Roughly what percentage of your creativity-based income is generated online since COVID-19?

- Please select any of the following reasons that you are not currently deploying your creative or artistic practice through online tools.
- You indicated that your creative product is being distributed by an organization. Is that work being sold for a fee by the organization or made available for free?
- Are you receiving revenue from the organization for the use of your creative work in their online streams?
- Have you applied for COVID-19 financial assistance from any of the federal CARES Act funding programs?
- Please indicate whether you would take advantage of the following opportunities to support the recovery of the United States in the aftermath of COVID-19.
- Do you work non-creative jobs?

Appendix 4: Authorship and contact information

This report was authored by Isaac Fitzsimons, Research and Evaluation Manager, and Clayton Lord, Vice President of Strategic Impact for Americans for the Arts, as part of the *We Are Bound* project documenting the impact of COVID-19 on artists and creative workers and the systemic inequities that preceded and exacerbated them.

The core survey data upon which this report is based was collected in a survey built by Lord, Fitzsimons, Randy Cohen, Vice President of Research, and Ben Davidson, Senior Director of Research for Americans for the Arts in support of Artist Relief, with substantial input from Heather Pontonio of the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation and Deana Haggag of United States Artists. This survey data was analyzed by Fitzsimons.

To contact the research team at Americans for the Arts, please email research@artsusa.org.



ECONOMIC DEVASTATION

COVID-19 has had a devastating economic impact on artists and creative workers, particularly on marginalized populations within the creative sector.



1-IN-3 ENTERED THE PANDEMIC WITH NO SAVINGS—A NUMBER THAT JUMPED TO OVER HALF DURING THE PANDEMIC.

WHO WAS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE NO SAVINGS GOING INTO THE PANDEMIC?

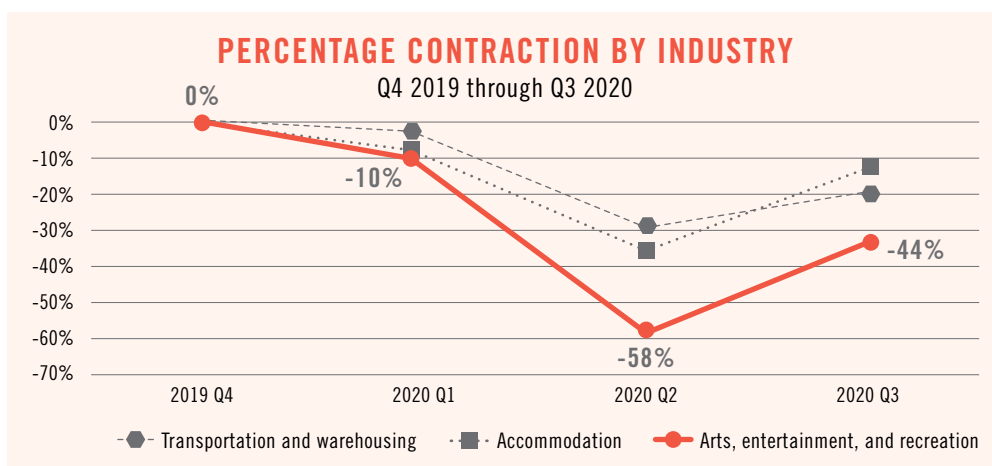
Creative workers without a college degree, Black and Indigenous creative workers, and/or transgender creative workers (2x as likely) and creative workers with disabilities (1.5x as likely).



DESPITE ECONOMIC DEVASTATION, 77% OF CREATIVE WORKERS USED THEIR CREATIVE PRACTICE TO HELP THEIR COMMUNITY—IN TWO-THIRDS OF CASES, THEY DID NOT GET PAID FOR THEIR WORK.

And here's the kicker: creative workers that had been hit hardest by COVID-19—BIPOC, poorer, disabled—were consistently more likely to help.

THE CREATIVE SECTOR CONTRACTED BY 58% BETWEEN JANUARY AND JUNE 2020—MORE THAN TWICE AS MUCH AS OTHER HARD-HIT INDUSTRIES LIKE TRANSPORTATION AND HOSPITALITY.



GOING INTO THE PANDEMIC CREATIVE WORKERS WERE 2.5X MORE LIKELY TO LIVE IN POVERTY THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION.

WHO WAS MOST NEGATIVELY IMPACTED ECONOMICALLY?

Creative workers with lower incomes, less education, disabilities, and/or who were BIPOC. They were more likely to report losing income and incurring unplanned expenses.

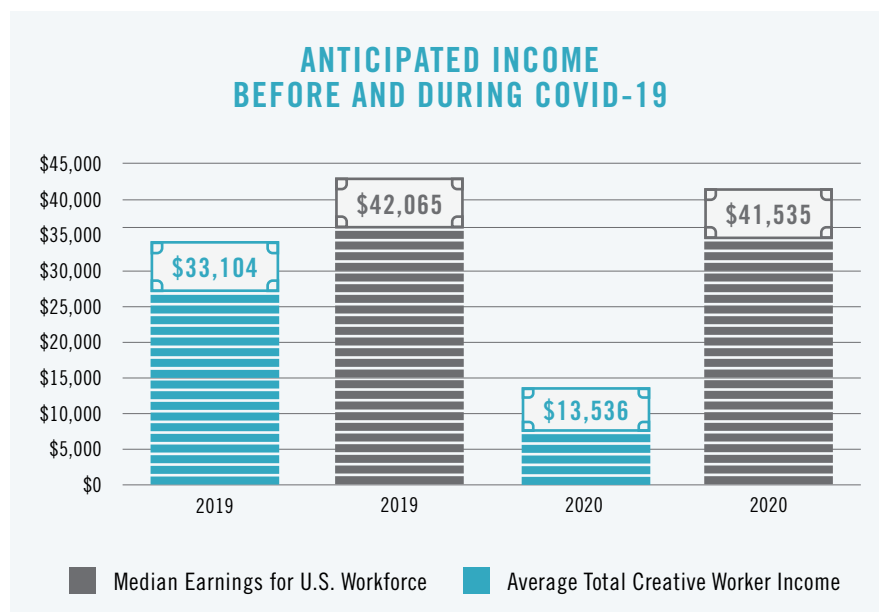


MORE INCOME AND EDUCATION INSULATED AGAINST THE MOST SEVERE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19. THESE INSULATORS WERE LESS EFFECTIVE FOR BIPOC CREATIVE WORKERS.

Being wealthier did not insulate Black respondents from loss the way wealthier white respondents were, for example.

TOTAL INCOME WENT FROM \$33,000 TO \$13,500 (\$800 ABOVE POVERTY LEVEL) BETWEEN 2019 AND 2020.

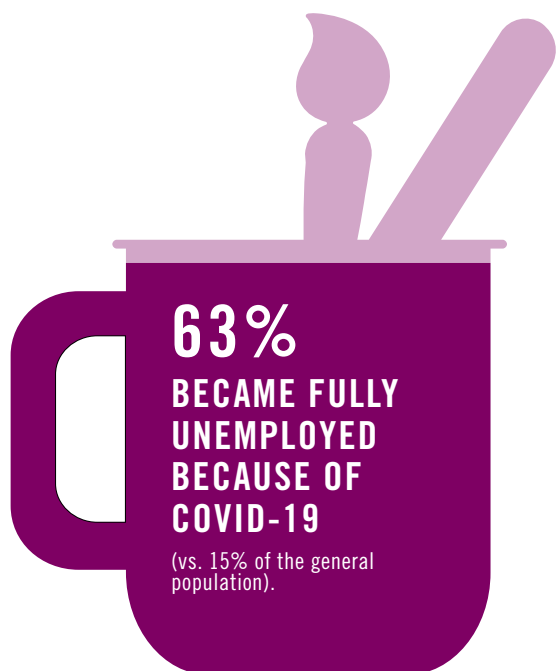
2020 INCOME LEVELS FOR CREATIVE WORKERS WERE \$30,000 LESS THAN THE MEDIAN EARNINGS OF A U.S. WORKER.





JOB INSECURITY AND EXPLOITATION

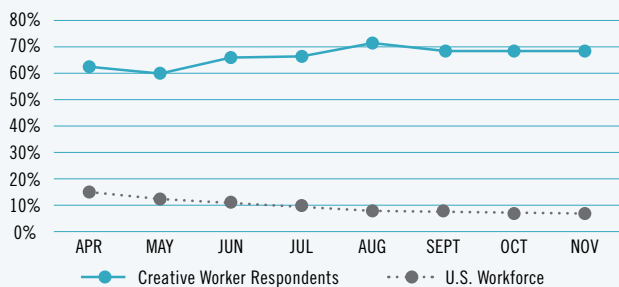
Creative workers couldn't access support when millions of them lost their jobs during the pandemic—a long-standing challenge of making a creative living in the United States.



Except for an 18-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic, independent workers have not ever been able to access most unemployment assistance.

UNEMPLOYMENT OF CREATIVES STAYED HIGH THROUGHOUT 2020. IT PEAKED IN AUGUST AT 71%. IN COMPARISON, THE NATIONAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE WAS NEVER HIGHER THAN 15% IN 2020.

PERCENT OF CREATIVE WORKERS MADE UNEMPLOYED DUE TO COVID-19 COMPARED WITH U.S. WORKFORCE
APRIL-NOVEMBER 2020



INDEPENDENT CREATIVE WORKERS WERE LAID OFF OR FURLOUGHED FIRST AND HAVE BEEN REHIRED MORE SLOWLY THAN OTHER CULTURAL WORKERS. THEY LOST THEIR JOBS AT A HIGHER RATE THAN OTHER CREATIVE WORKERS (83% VS. 69%).

They were also rehired more slowly—at about two-thirds the pace of other cultural workers.

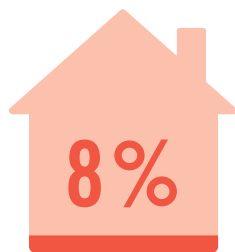


1-IN-3 OF THE COUNTRY'S 5.2 MILLION CREATIVE WORKERS ARE INDEPENDENT OR GIG WORKERS (3.6 TIMES THE NATIONAL RATE).

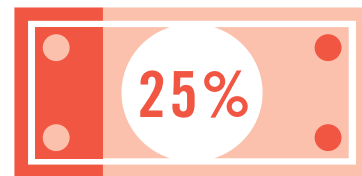
WHAT'S THAT MEAN?



34% ENTERED THE PANDEMIC WITHOUT HEALTH INSURANCE
(vs. 15% of the general population).



HAVE ACCESS TO PAID FAMILY LEAVE
(vs. 78% of the general worker population).



LOST MONEY BECAUSE OF DISCRIMINATION DURING THE PANDEMIC.

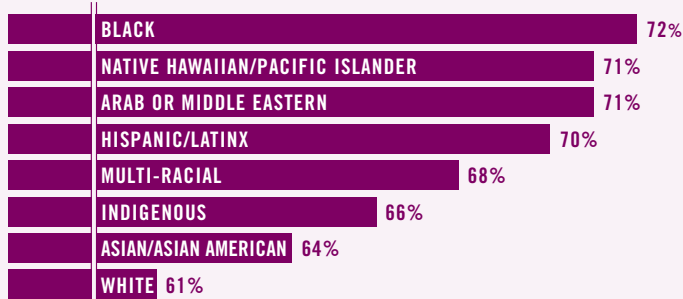
(Gig workers are less protected by the laws governing fair labor, workplace safety, and anti-discrimination.)

EVERYONE GOT HIT HARD, BUT UNEMPLOYMENT HIT MARGINALIZED GROUPS HARDER.

Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Arab/Middle Eastern, Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian/Asian American creative workers all experienced higher rates of unemployment than white creative workers.

Creative workers with disabilities, less education, and/or who were younger all experienced higher rates of unemployment as well.

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS UNEMPLOYED BY RACE/ETHNICITY



0% 10% 60% 61% 62% 63% 64% 65% 66% 67% 68% 69% 70% 71% 72% 73%

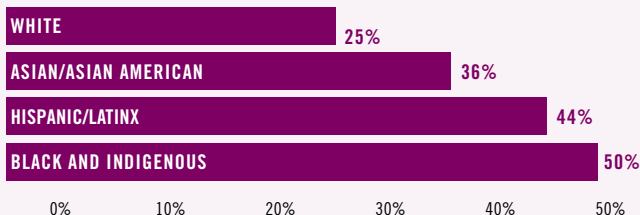


UNMET BASIC NEEDS

Basic human needs of creative workers related to health, housing, and food were severely impacted by the pandemic, particularly for marginalized populations.

HEALTHCARE

CREATIVES WHO ENTERED THE PANDEMIC WITHOUT HEALTH INSURANCE, BY ETHNICITY



PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, 34% OF RESPONDENTS DID NOT HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE.

(vs. 15% of the general U.S. population)

WHO LACKED HEALTH INSURANCE PRE-PANDEMIC?

A quarter of white creatives did not have health insurance pre-pandemic, vs. half of Black and Indigenous respondents, 4-in-10 Hispanic and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander respondents, and a third of Asian/Asian American and Arab/Middle Eastern respondents.

Younger, less educated, and/or less wealthy creative workers were all less likely to have had health insurance entering the pandemic.

PRE-PANDEMIC, HALF OF CREATIVE WORKER RESPONDENTS HAD AVOIDED VISITING A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL DUE TO INABILITY TO PAY.



50%
could not visit a doctor



34%
could not get needed medication



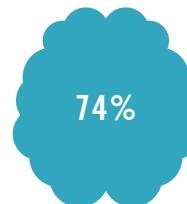
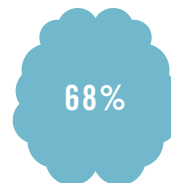
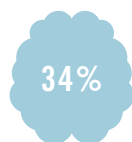
39%
could not access needed mental health care



25%
were denied a recommended medical procedure

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health strain was rampant both before and during the pandemic for creative workers—as was an inability to care for their mental health.



Respondents with disabilities, female respondents, less affluent respondents, and older respondents all reported elevated mental strain.

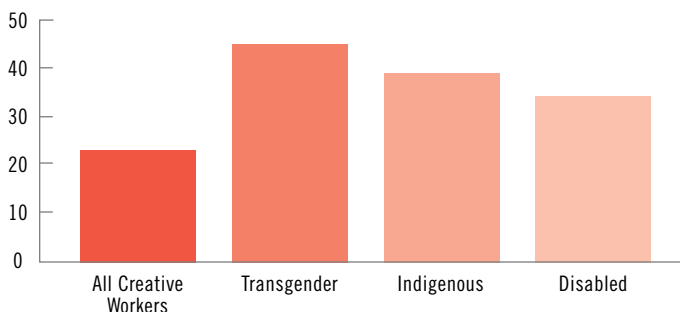
HOUSING

Even before COVID-19, housing and food insecurity were significant issues for artists; the pandemic exacerbated it significantly.

PRE-PANDEMIC, 23% OF CREATIVE WORKERS HAD EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS.

(vs. 17% of the general U.S. population).

WHO WAS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS PRE-PANDEMIC?



DURING THE PANDEMIC...

32% of respondents were threatened with eviction, 7% were evicted, and 11% became homeless

FOOD SECURITY

PRE-PANDEMIC, 22% OF RESPONDENTS HAD EXPERIENCED FOOD INSECURITY.



22%
PRE-PANDEMIC



While the overall U.S. population experiencing food insecurity remained relatively steady at about 11% before and during the pandemic. The percentage of creative workers doubled from 22% pre-pandemic to 52% during.



52%
DURING PANDEMIC



3-in-4 young and/or transgender respondents, and a third of LGBTQ and/or disabled respondents sought food assistance during the pandemic.



GOING DIGITAL

As creative workers grappled with an inability to engage in-person, they also struggled with the economics and technology requirements of going digital.

BARRIERS THAT EXISTED PRE-PANDEMIC HELD BACK CREATIVES FROM GOING DIGITAL.

LOW-INCOME AND/OR RURAL RESPONDENTS WERE 1.5X AS LIKELY TO LACK SUFFICIENT TECHNOLOGY TO GO DIGITAL. THEY WERE ALSO 2X AS LIKELY TO LACK SUFFICIENT INTERNET.

BLACK AND INDIGENOUS CREATIVES WERE MORE THAN TWICE AS LIKELY TO NOT HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY OR INTERNET NEEDED TO TRANSLATE WORK ONLINE.

CREATIVES WHO SOLD THEIR WORK ONLINE WERE INSULATED FROM SOME OF THE PANDEMIC'S ECONOMIC IMPACTS.

While still hit hard financially by the pandemic, creative workers who sold online earned almost half their income that way during the pandemic, and suffered about 10% less financial loss than those that did not sell online.

ABOUT 3 OUT OF 4 CREATIVES

DISTRIBUTED WORK DIGITALLY PRE-PANDEMIC—A NUMBER THAT STAYED BASICALLY THE SAME DURING THE PANDEMIC.

But the number of creatives *making money* from online sales dropped from 40% pre-COVID to 27% during the pandemic.

A QUARTER OF CREATIVES DID NOT GO DIGITAL, EVEN DURING THE PANDEMIC. WHY NOT?



17%

They lacked an audience or market



47%

Their work could not translate to an online interface



10%

They lacked sufficient internet



28%

They could not access necessary materials



18%

They lacked sufficient technology

PRODUCING ONLINE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC WAS RARELY PROFITABLE FOR EITHER WORKERS OR CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS.

25% of creative workers had their work distributed online through an organization. 70% of those creatives did not get paid for that usage.

OF THE 94% OF ORGANIZATIONS THAT DELIVERED CONTENT ONLINE DURING THE PANDEMIC, 8-IN-10 SAID THEY EARNED NOTHING OR DID NOT COVER COSTS.

