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Center for an Urban Future

CREATIVE NEW YORK

The creative sector—from performing arts organizations to design firms—is more critical than ever to New York City's economy. But mounting affordability challenges threaten its future.

Center for an Urban Future

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Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading think tank focused on building a stronger and more equitable economy in New York City, and expanding economic opportunity for all New Yorkers.

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Table of Contents

Creative New York

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FROM BROADWAY THEATERS TO BUSHWICK STUDIOS, BRONX REHEARSAL SPACES TO QUEENS SOUND STAGES, the creative sector remains one of New York City's greatest economic engines and competitive advantages. The arts and creative industries employ more than 326,000 New Yorkers, attract millions of visitors each year, power the city's global brand, and arguably serve as the city's most important talent magnet in a talent-driven economy.

But after decades of steady growth in almost every part of the city's creative economy, this vital engine is now sputtering. Since the start of the pandemic, the city has seen an 18.8 percent decline in dancers, an 8 percent drop in actors, and a 2.8 percent decrease in musicians. But it's no longer just artists whose numbers are dwindling: fashion designers are down 28.9 percent, film and video editors 18.5 percent, graphic designers 13.8 percent, and art directors 6 percent.[1]

Meanwhile, creative industries that had been among the city's fastest growing sectors in the decade before the pandemic are now lagging well behind. Between 2005 and 2020, employment in the city's film and television sector increased by 113.7 percent. But since 2020, film and TV jobs in New York City are down by 19.1 percent. There has been a similar pre-and-post pandemic employment divergence in advertising (up 46.1 percent from 2005 to 2020, and down 15.7 percent since), architecture (+ 61.1 percent vs -9.4 percent), applied design (+12.5 percent vs -14.3 percent), performing arts (+30.2 percent vs -6.4 percent), and visual arts (+95.7 percent vs -1.3 percent).

The overall number of people working in the city's creative economy—including jobs and self-employment in more than a dozen cultural and creative industries, as well as creative jobs in fields outside the creative economy—has declined by 6.1 percent since 2019.

The city is also beginning to lose market share. New York City's share of all people working nationwide in the creative economy has declined from 9.3 percent to 8.6 percent since 2019. There have been particularly worrisome declines in the city's share of national employment in advertising (from 11.7 percent of the nation's jobs in 2019 to 10.7 in 2024), performing arts (11.5 percent to 10.7 percent), applied design (6.3 percent to 5.4 percent), film and television (15.5 percent to 14.9 percent) and music production (10.8 percent to 10.2 percent).

Behind the numbers, the city's arts and culture ecosystem has sustained difficult losses.[2] Many nonprofit arts organizations say they are more financially vulnerable than ever. And across the cultural landscape, venues are vanishing: Nearly 50 theaters, music clubs, museums, and galleries have shuttered since 2020, many pointing to lasting changes in audience behavior, soaring insurance costs, and other unsustainable operating pressures.

The causes run deeper than the pandemic. New York's broader affordability crisis—already pushing out thousands of working- and middle-class residents—is hitting the creative sector especially hard. While artists have long struggled to afford life in New York, today those pressures extend across the entire creative economy, squeezing professionals in fields like advertising, design, and fashion. Creative workers in New York now earn about 23 percent less than the national average after adjusting for the city's high cost of living, down from 15 percent less a decade ago, while housing and studio rents continue to climb.

Nonprofit and commercial venues alike face rising expenses on every front—from labor and materials to insurance, which for many organizations has multiplied several-fold since 2020. While costs are up, many performing arts venues have seen notable declines in revenues from ticket sales, driven by major audience shifts since the pandemic—with people opting for in-home streaming over in-person attendance. At the same time, creative employment is shifting toward freelance and contract work: self-employment in creative industries has grown 10.3 percent since 2019, and the number of independent artists, writers, and performers is up 65.6 percent over the past decade, creating greater economic insecurity. Meanwhile, artists of color earn about

37 percent less than white artists, underscoring how existing inequities make the affordability crisis even more acute.[3]

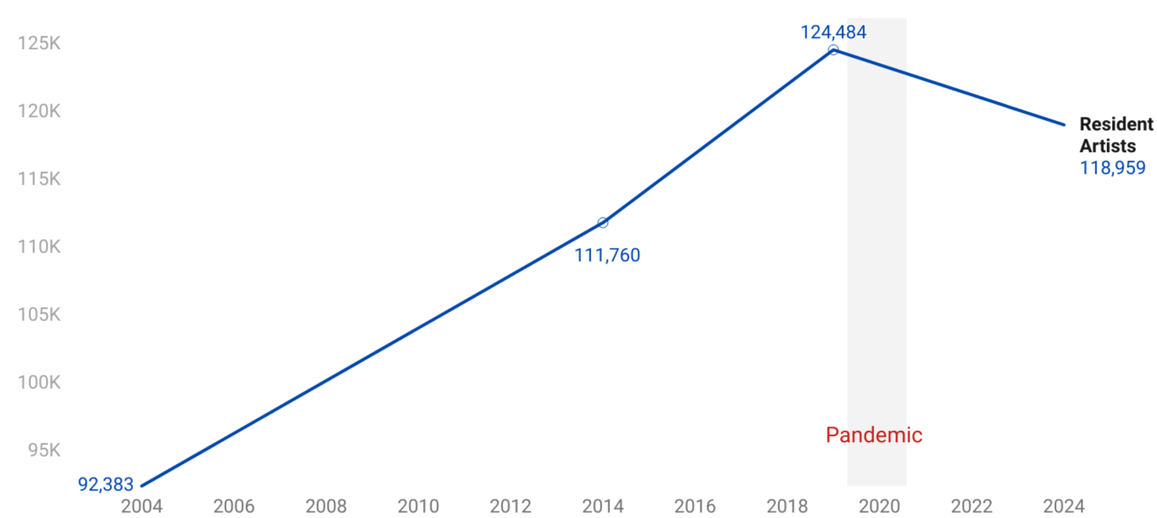
Yet this is not a story of decline alone. Across the five boroughs, nightlife remains remarkably vibrant, museums are expanding, and new cultural spaces are taking root—from the Bronx Music Hall and ArtBuilt in Brooklyn to the reopening of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Over the past few years, New York City has made record investments in arts and culture, including the largest-ever budget for the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and new permanent baseline funding. The city has expanded the Cultural Institutions Group and launched initiatives like the City Artist Corps to support working artists.

But sustaining this progress will require going further. Even with public cultural funding at record highs, city leaders have done too little to tackle the structural pressures undermining the creative sector—especially the affordability crisis that is pushing artists and creative professionals out of New York. Today, the forces reshaping the creative sector extend well beyond arts funding. Housing and studio costs, insurance, the insecurity of freelance work, and the rise of AI demand a broader, cross-agency strategy—or New York risks losing the creative core that fuels its economy and identity.

The next administration will need to act boldly: dramatically expanding affordable artist housing and workspaces; stabilizing small venues by addressing skyrocketing operating costs; piloting portable benefits for freelancers; launching the city's first annual five-borough cultural festival; and mobilizing agencies from housing, transportation, and parks to the Economic Development Corporation to fully integrate creativity into the city's economic and civic agenda.

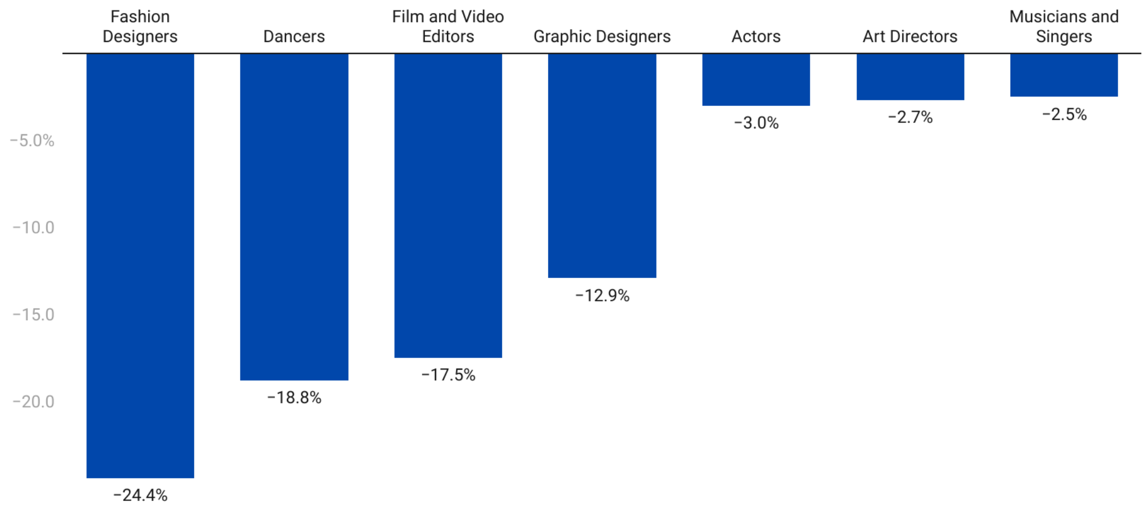
New York City's resident artist population falls in recent years

From 2004 to 2019, the city's resident artist population grew 34.7 percent, but has since declined by 4.4 percent



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

NYC has lost resident artists and creatives since 2019



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Two decades ago, the Center for an Urban Future published *Creative New York*, the first comprehensive report documenting the immense and growing economic and cultural impact of New York City's artists, cultural organizations, and for-profit creative industries. This third landmark edition of *Creative New York* finds a vital sector at a defining crossroads: its importance to the city's economy and civic life has never been greater, yet an intensifying affordability crisis has led to stagnant job growth, an exodus of artists, and a mounting challenge for the city's next generation of leaders.

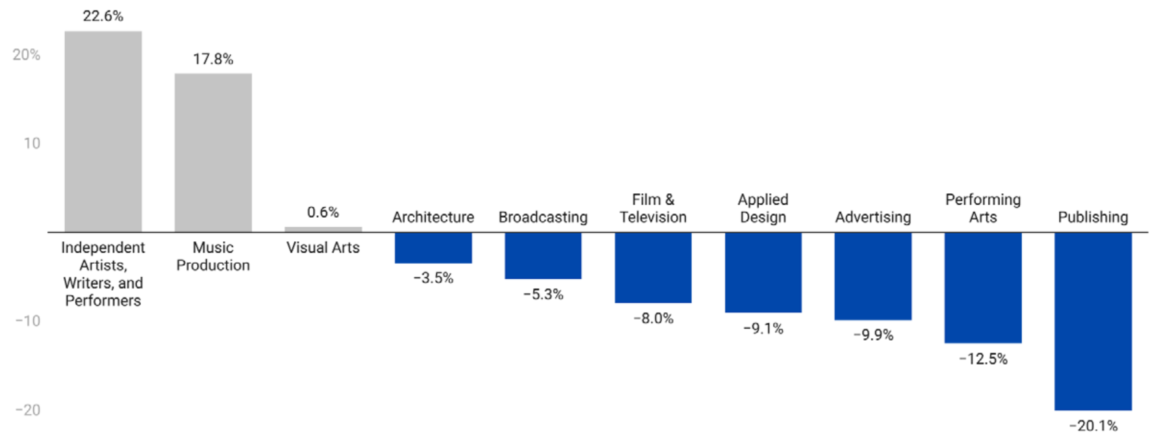
This report—supported by grants from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Howard Gilman Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Mellon Foundation—draws on more than 120 interviews with artists, cultural leaders, creative entrepreneurs, community-based organizations, business leaders, and policymakers across the five boroughs, as well as extensive analysis of employment, wage, and industry data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, New York State Department of Labor, Lightcast, and city, state, and federal budget documents.

Although much of this report details new challenges and threats facing artists, arts organizations, and creative industries, the central finding is a positive one: New York City boasts more cultural and creative jobs than any city in the United States, and this part of the economy—while often underappreciated—is more critical than ever to the city's economic future. Overall, New York City's broader creative sector—which we define to include 10 key industries: advertising, film and television, broadcasting and media streaming, publishing, architecture, design, music, visual arts, performing arts, and independent artists—employed 326,093 people in 2024 (including jobs in creative industries, creative jobs across the economy, and self-employment). That's 6.1 percent below its 2019 peak, but up a remarkable 24.6 percent since 2004 and 3.5 percent since 2014.

The creative sector also provides New York with what is arguably its greatest competitive advantage. The city is home to 21.9 percent of the nation's fashion designers, 14 percent of all producers and directors, and 12.3 percent of editors—far more than any other metro area. New York is home to more than 10 percent of national employment in film and television (15.2 percent), publishing (14.1 percent), broadcasting (12.7 percent), performing arts (10.7 percent), advertising (10.6 percent), and music production (10.2 percent). At the same time, creative nonprofits and businesses continue to put down roots here:

Nearly all of New York City's creative industries have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels

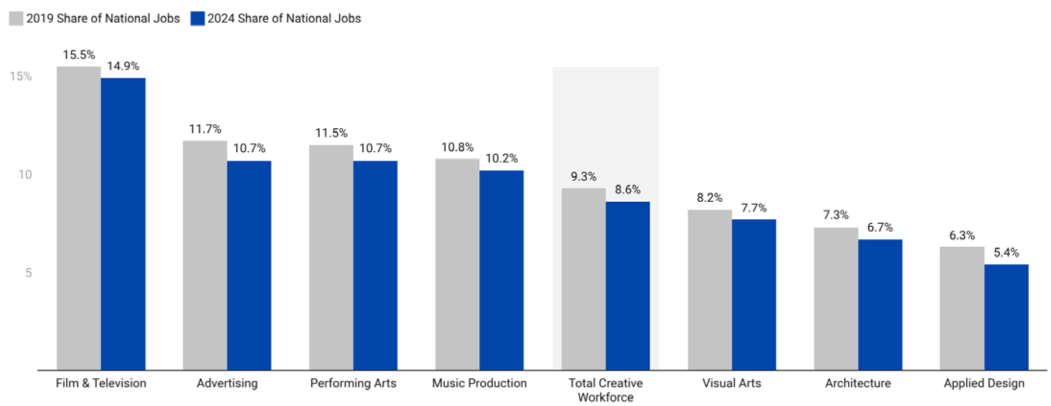
Change in jobs, 2019-2024



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

NYC's slipping share of national creative employment

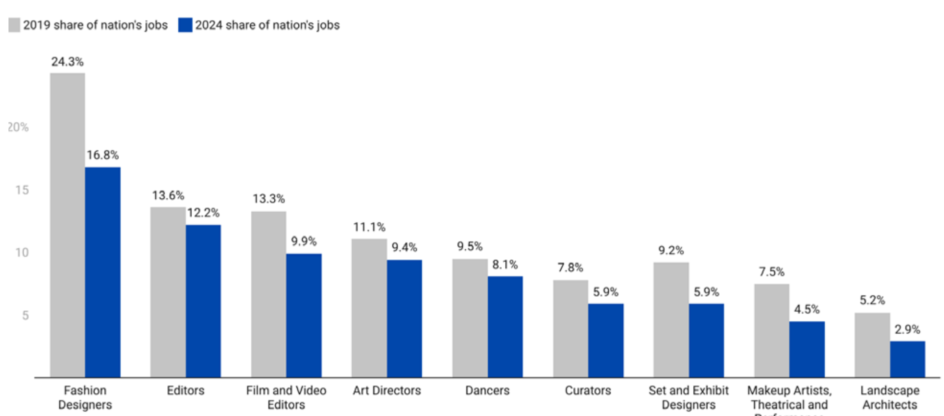
The city's share of national creative jobs has slipped in seven out of ten industries



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

New York is losing ground among creative occupations

NYC's share of the nation's artists is declining across most fields — these fields saw the largest losses.



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

creative firms accounted for 6.9 percent of all net new businesses formed over the past decade—more than in healthcare or education, and behind only technology and restaurants. The number of cultural nonprofits has also risen 32.1 percent since 2014, including an 18.9 percent increase since the pandemic, reaching a record 5,523 organizations.[4] And New York is leading the globe in the emerging creator economy: the five boroughs are home to seven of the top 25 creators on *Rolling Stone*'s 2025 list—more than any other city.

The city's unmatched cultural and creative ecosystem—powered by world-class institutions and thousands of small and mid-sized nonprofits with no parallel elsewhere—also anchors an immense tourism economy and serves as one of the most important draws for the talent that fuels industries from finance to tech. Indeed, the city's unmatched creative edge may be the single most important asset that helps New York counteract the many negatives of living here, including the city's astronomical cost of living.

But unlike in previous decades, New York is now losing share to cities across the country. Other regions—including many with significantly lower costs of living—have seen their creative workforces flourish since 2019, Nashville (+17.4 percent), Dallas (+14.3 percent), and Miami (+12.3 percent).[5] Although New York City's creative workforce is still larger than the combined totals for the Chicago, San Francisco, and Atlanta metro areas, the city's share of national creative jobs has slipped in seven out of ten industries, including film and television, advertising, music production, performing arts, and applied design.

Likewise, artists are relocating in record numbers to more affordable cities and towns, while arts organizations—large and small alike—find themselves on increasingly shaky financial ground. These losses are reverberating across the city. And while New York remains the nation's undisputed cultural capital, its creative foundation has rarely felt more fragile.

Or as Powerhouse Arts CEO Eric Shiner puts it, "If artists and creatives and actors and everyone else can't afford to live here anymore, then the magic dies."

The pandemic drove artists out—affordability is keeping them away

Affording life in New York has never been easy for artists. But since the pandemic, something fundamental has shifted. Work dried up, costs soared, and incomes failed to keep pace—pushing many artists past the breaking point and extending those same pressures across the broader creative economy. Now, the affordability crisis that once hit hardest for early-career strivers is squeezing established artists and creative professionals alike. The result is visible across nearly every discipline, from dance and theater to design, film, and the visual arts: artists left during the pandemic, and many haven't come back.

"We all know tons of artists that have moved upstate, moved out of the city, and don't really have plans to come back," says Lisa Gold, executive director of the Asian American Arts Alliance. "And it's not just the artists—it's the art handlers, the curators, the preparators. It's a whole economy."

Artist Kahlil Robert Irving, known for his tactile, immersive sculptures and installations, had gained national recognition through exhibitions at the Walker Art Center and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Yet by 2020, New York City had grown increasingly inhospitable, despite his rising success.

"Trying to survive and sustain in New York, the hustle gets complicated," Irving says. "How much of yourself may you have to lose just to continue to participate?"

Ultimately, Irving chose to return to St. Louis, where his family lives. Freed from New York's crushing costs, he was able to purchase a 13,000-square-foot warehouse studio—space and tools he could never have afforded in the city.

Irving is just one of thousands of artists who left New York since 2020 and have not returned. South Korea–born painter GaHee Park moved to Montreal in late 2020, citing diminished cultural vibrancy, the burden of renewing artist visas, and the appeal of more affordable studio and living space. Gregory Dolbashian, a New York–born dancer and choreographer, relocated his company, Dash Ensemble, to Dallas that same year, where he now runs a training program for young dancers. Even acclaimed novelist Zadie Smith left New York after more than a decade, returning to London in 2020.

Many assume New York has been losing artists and creatives for decades, but resident worker data reveals the real decline began only in the past five years. Between 2004 and 2019, the city's resident artist population increased by 34.7 percent—from 92,383 in 2004 to 111,760 in 2014 and 124,484 in 2019. But from 2019 to 2024, the city's artist population has declined by 4.4 percent (to 118,959).

The pre- and post-pandemic shifts are even starker in several creative professions. The number of fashion designers living in the city rose 38.4 percent from 2004 to 2019, but has since fallen 25.9 percent. Architects increased by 13.9 percent over the same fifteen-year span, but declined 4.6 percent from 2019 to 2024. The city's editor population grew 41.6 percent from 2004 to 2019, then dropped 13.2 percent; and the number of art directors rose 28.8 percent before 2019 but has since fallen 6 percent.

Organizations are shedding jobs or simply shutting down

Since 2020, arts organizations across the city have closed their doors or scaled back operations, shedding jobs and audiences in the process. These closures are stark warnings that business and funding models which sustained the arts for decades are faltering in a post-pandemic world.

CUF's research identified more than two dozen galleries that have shuttered in just the past two years, from stalwarts like Cheim & Read, Betty Cunningham, Jack Hanley Gallery, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash to younger spaces that championed emerging artists, including Deli Gallery, Fortnight Institute, Queer Thoughts, and DorDor.

Rising rents and uneven sales play a role, but gallerists also cite a deeper shift: the growing dominance of online sales and a diminishing need for physical space—changes with profound consequences for New York's creative ecosystem. "The pandemic hit a lot of small- to medium-sized galleries, and the aftereffects hit even more," says Eric Shiner of Powerhouse Arts. "So, a lot of smaller galleries are closing."

It's not just galleries. Small museums are buckling under economic pressures: Chelsea's Rubin Museum of Art and SoHo's Center for Italian Modern Art both closed in 2024, while museum employment overall is down 8.6 percent since 2019. Major institutions including The Guggenheim Museum and the Brooklyn Museum, have announced layoffs.[6]

Presenting organizations located in lower-income communities faced especially steep challenges during the pandemic. Fully 25 percent of arts groups in lower-income zip codes reported losing their sole physical space during the pandemic, compared to under 12 percent of organizations located in other areas.

Other pillars of New York City's cultural infrastructure are beginning to fall as well. More than 20 music, performance, and nightlife venues have shuttered since the pandemic—including jazz clubs like Jazz Standard and 55 Bar, legendary drag venue Pyramid Club, and theaters such as The Secret Theatre and Playhouse 46.

Creative industry employment has declined since 2019

It's not just nonprofit arts venues and institutions that are struggling. The fortunes of the city's for-profit creative industries have taken a U-turn since the pandemic.

One key finding from the previous edition of *Creative New York* (2015) was that "several creative industries have been among the fastest growing segments of the city's economy." Indeed, employment in six different key creative industries outpaced the city's 12 percent overall employment growth over the decade leading up to 2015—including film and television (growing by 53 percent over the prior decade), architecture (up by 33 percent), performing arts (26 percent), advertising (24 percent), visual arts (24 percent), and applied design (17 percent).

Most of these creative industries continued to add jobs at a brisk pace until 2020. But while the pandemic induced significant job losses in virtually every sector, employment in many creative industries has remained below pre-pandemic totals even as the city's overall economy has more than recovered. From the first quarter of 2020 to the first quarter of 2025, total city employment is up 4.6 percent but down notably in film and TV (-19.1 percent), advertising (-15.7 percent), applied design (-14.3 percent), publishing (-11.7 percent), architecture (-9.4 percent), performing arts (-6.4 percent), music production (-3 percent), and visual arts (-1.3 percent).

These losses threaten what had been an encouraging development in the city's economy: the emergence of a reliable new source of middle-class jobs. Behind the decline are major changes in how creative work is made and where it happens. The pandemic upended production models and accelerated a shift toward flexible, remote, and contract-based employment. As companies adapted to hybrid operations, many replaced full-time roles with freelance and project-based work. By 2025, just 45 percent of media workers report being in the office every day—the lowest share of any major industry. At the same time, companies have increasingly realized they can hire talent in other creative hubs—from Denver to Atlanta, and in cities around the world—where workers can plug into distributed teams and earn a good living at a fraction of a New York salary.

"It's about how hard it is for young people in New York to live on salaries they earn in a lot of creative businesses," says Andrew Robertson, chairman of BBDO Worldwide, a global creative agency headquartered in New York City. "These are cool jobs, but they don't get paid a lot. At the same time, other cities are opening up as creative centers. If you were going into advertising ten years ago, you were going to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. That was kind of it. Now, you have the option of getting a good job in a decent agency in Atlanta, Austin, and other places. That's a seismic shift that wasn't there 10 years ago."

It's no coincidence that one of the only creative industries to grow since 2019 is independent artists, up 22.6 percent. That growth reflects the rise of freelance and self-employed creative workers—a shift that has brought greater flexibility but also deepened challenges around financial stability, health insurance, and other essential benefits.

Meanwhile, rising costs in New York are colliding with growing competition elsewhere. Cities like Atlanta, as well as international hubs such as London and Budapest, have become increasingly attractive for film and television production, offering lower costs, robust local talent, and strong public incentives. As New York's affordability crisis worsens, more creative workers and companies are choosing to build careers and businesses elsewhere, or shift more of their buying and spending to other places.

New York's arts ecosystem faces new and growing threats

New York's arts ecosystem is inseparable from the city's identity and essential to its civic life. It animates neighborhoods, brings people together across lines of difference, and strengthens local economies—from filling restaurants and hotels to supporting thousands of small creative businesses in every borough. But after years of mounting costs, uneven audiences, and intensifying competition, this ecosystem is under serious strain. Without new solutions, these challenges will erode not just the city's cultural vitality but a key pillar of its civic and economic resilience.

The affordability crisis for artists has reached a breaking point.

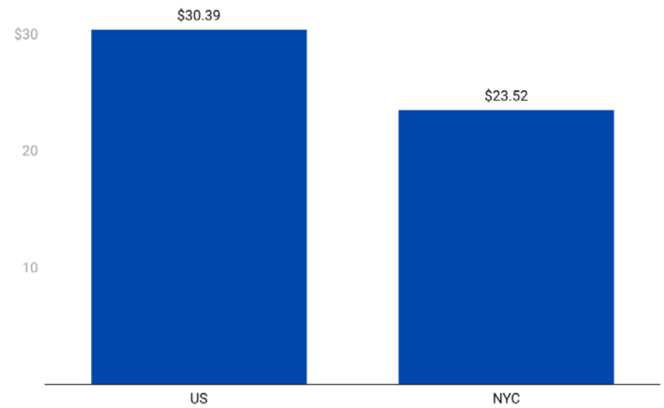
New York's affordability crisis has reached a breaking point for the city's creative workforce. Even though creative economy workers here earn higher nominal wages than their peers elsewhere, after adjusting for the cost of living they earn about 22.6 percent less than the national average—a gap that has widened from 15 percent a decade ago.[7] Meanwhile, asking rents have surged nearly 40 percent across Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx since 2019—forcing many artists to choose between housing and studio space.[8] To afford market rents in the Bronx, residents would need to earn more than $120,000 a year, more than double the typical artist's income.

Neighborhoods that long anchored the city's creative life are now losing artists at alarming rates. Since 2018, the artist population has fallen 5 percent in Bushwick, 17 percent in Harlem, and 18 percent in Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen, as median asking rents have jumped more than 30 percent.[9] Some neighborhoods have seen even steeper declines over the past decade: the artist population on the Upper West Side has fallen by nearly one-third, and on the Lower East Side it has plunged 55 percent while rents rose 46 percent. Meanwhile, over the past decade, U.S. cities have created more than 2,800 units of dedicated artist housing—with another 1,200 approved or under construction—and not a single one is in New York City.

At the same time, cities like Austin, Nashville, and Atlanta now offer something new: real opportunities in thriving creative sectors, paired with far lower costs of living. For many artists and creative professionals,

Adjusted for NYC's high costs, creative workers earn less than the U.S. median

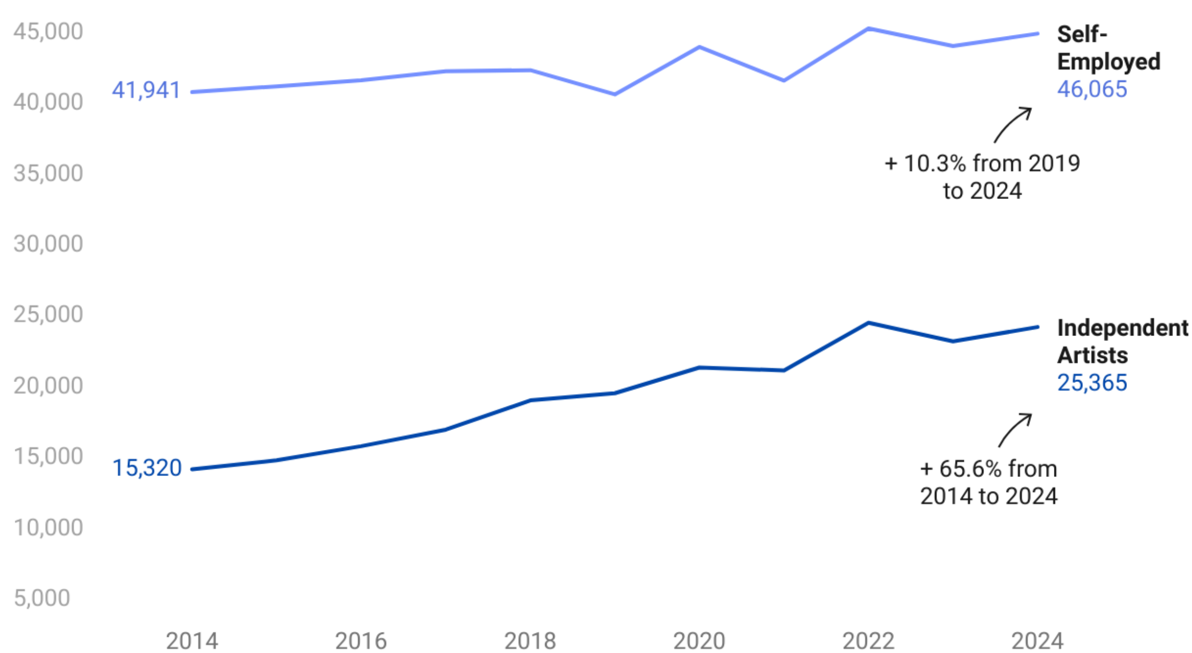
Creative workers in New York now earn 23 percent less than the national hourly median wage, down from 15 percent less a decade ago



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. The figures above represent the weighted average of median hourly wages of creative occupations. This calculation was based on Brooklyn's cost of living. Created with Datawrapper

Creatives shift towards freelance work

While workers employed in businesses in creative industries decline post-pandemic, self-employment and independent artists surge



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

that combination has become impossible to ignore—and New York is feeling the consequences. "We need New York to be a place that people want to come and build," says Ben Lerer, managing partner of VC firm Lerer Hippeau. "The pain of living in New York needs to be outweighed by the value of community and the cultural richness of living here. It's about safety and affordability, but also keeping the city interesting, fun, and cool, where diversity is celebrated."

Audience habits have changed, and the pandemic recovery remains uneven.

Even before COVID-19, streaming and shifting leisure habits were reshaping how New Yorkers engage with culture. The pandemic dramatically accelerated those changes—and five years later, many organizations are still feeling the effects. Broadway attendance has returned roughly to pre-pandemic levels, but other institutions continue to face volatility. The Guggenheim Museum welcomed 766,000 visitors in 2024—down one-third from 2019. And while the 39 members of the city's Cultural Institutions Group saw record attendance in FY2024, overall visits still fell 9 percent last year, reflecting the broader instability that many organizations are experiencing.

At the same time, high ticket prices—often necessary to offset rising production and operating costs—are straining audiences as New Yorkers grapple with day-to-day affordability challenges. It's not just Broadway or Madison Square Garden: at small venues in Bushwick or Greenpoint, a ticket to see a new band that cost $15 before the pandemic might now be $35, and an intimate off-Broadway performance can easily top $100. For many residents, live performance has shifted from a regular part of city life to an occasional luxury—with significant consequences for venues and presenting organizations of all sizes.

Costs for venues and organizations have gone through the roof—led by insurance.

It has always been hard to survive as an arts and culture organization in New York City, but today the costs of staying open are spiraling out of control. From insurance and wages to rent and utilities, expenses have surged since the pandemic. "New York is just so freaking expensive," says Sade Lythcott, CEO of the National Black Theatre. "It's more expensive to produce shows. It's more expensive to retain staff. And the city in general—with inflation and cost of living increases across the board—is more expensive to live in."

Insurance premiums, in particular, have become punishing. At Barbès, the beloved Brooklyn music venue, annual insurance costs have jumped from $4,000 to $22,000 over the past decade. Others have faced even steeper hikes: TBA Brooklyn, a now-closed Williamsburg club, saw its premiums soar from $25,000 to $125,000 before shutting its doors.[10] New York's high cost of insurance is driven in part by the city's unusually high volume of lawsuits and liability claims. The Partnership for New York City reports that premiums here average about 15 percent higher than the national rate, with liability claim costs more than six times the U.S. average. Survey data shows that insurance has become the second-biggest cost concern for bars and restaurants—just behind labor—a challenge all too familiar to nightlife venues, concert halls, and other performance spaces.

Funding isn't keeping up—and too often, it's not arriving on time.

While costs are rising and revenues are down, public and philanthropic funding has not kept pace. The New York State Council on the Arts' FY2025 budget for general operating grants—the most flexible and vital form of aid—is about $87 million, up from 2019 but still down 35.9 percent from its 1990 peak after adjusting for inflation. At the same time, New York City is home to a record 5,523 cultural nonprofits—up 32 percent over the past decade—meaning far more organizations are competing for a relatively flat pool of public and private dollars.

While the Department of Cultural Affairs has achieved historic gains, including a record $246.5 million in support for arts organizations and a permanent baseline increase, it still accounts for less than one-quarter of one percent of the city's budget and cannot alone address the structural challenges reshaping the sector. Federal support is also eroding. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded $15.7 million to 446 New York City groups in 2024, but many have since lost funding as the Trump administration moves to dismantle arts and culture programs—continuing a 48.4 percent decline in federal arts funding to the region over the past 15 years.

Meanwhile, philanthropic priorities are shifting as major foundations redirect resources toward social services and shoring up the safety net in response to federal cuts. This shift has left the arts especially vulnerable—once again struggling to be seen as essential to the city's well-being, even though the pandemic proved how vital culture is to recovery and resilience. "We are starting to see the erosion of foundation funding available to the arts, more drastically in the last two years," says Lucy Sexton, executive director of New Yorkers for Culture and Arts.

Compounding these challenges, many arts nonprofits simply aren't getting paid on time. While late payments to human services organizations have drawn long-overdue attention, arts organizations face the same problem—often with even less visibility. The city comptroller reports at least $1 billion in unpaid invoices across human services agencies, but that figure excludes the Department of Education, where many arts groups experience some of the longest delays, as well as the Department of Cultural Affairs, whose contracts are not included in those tallies.[11] When payments are held up, smaller organizations that depend on city contracts are forced to take on debt, cut staff, or scale back programs just to stay open. "It's really devastating to smaller groups," says Risa Shoup, co–executive director of the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York. "They rely disproportionately on public funding because they don't meet the threshold for private philanthropic support—and they need those contracts to come through quickly."

Federal threats and culture-war politics are adding new uncertainty.

After weathering the pandemic, New York's arts and creative sector now faces new threats from Washington. The Trump administration has begun slashing federal funding for arts and culture, putting at risk a vital source of support for hundreds of city institutions. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has already pulled grants from organizations including the Classical Theatre of Harlem ($60,000) and the Trisha Brown Dance Company ($40,000).[12] These cuts are the latest in a decade-long decline in federal arts funding, and the entire NEA budget is now under threat.

At the same time, a new federal policy requiring NEA applicants to be reviewed for compliance with the president's executive order on so-called "gender ideology" poses specific risks for LGBTQ+ arts organizations and raises broader concerns about free speech and artistic expression (though a recent federal court ruling found the restriction unconstitutional, a decision the government could still appeal). At the same time, a new federal policy requiring NEA applicants to be reviewed for compliance with the president's executive order on so-called "gender ideology" poses specific risks for LGBTQ+ arts organizations and raises broader concerns about free speech and artistic expression. And the impact extends beyond funding: federal actions have dampened international tourism, including a sharp drop in visitors from Canada—one of New York's largest tourist markets—and made it harder for foreign artists to secure visas or feel safe traveling to the U.S.[13] Together, these developments threaten not only the city's arts institutions but the broader creative economy that depends on cultural exchange and global engagement.

New York City's creative industries are also at risk

New York's for-profit creative sectors—film and television, advertising, design, fashion, architecture, and more—have been hit hard by pandemic-era disruptions and are now grappling with deeper structural shifts. While jobs have partly rebounded, many industries remain under severe strain as costs rise, technologies evolve, and competition intensifies.

Rising costs are squeezing firms at every level—but the biggest pressure point is people.

The cost of hiring and retaining creative talent has soared as rents, childcare, and everyday expenses make it harder for workers to stay in New York, even on solid salaries. Employers say they are losing mid-career staff to more affordable markets, from Atlanta and Denver to Philadelphia and Austin, while rising compensation expectations make it difficult to expand payrolls or invest in new projects. Facing both higher labor costs and clients demanding leaner budgets, many firms are rethinking where they hire—and where they grow.

Technological change is transforming the landscape.

Automation and AI tools are upending traditional creative roles, particularly in advertising and design, where influencer-driven content and algorithmic branding have replaced many labor-intensive campaigns. Streaming has also reshaped film and television, reducing the number of large-scale productions that once anchored local crews.

Global and domestic competition is intensifying.

Cities like Atlanta, Austin, and Los Angeles are investing heavily in creative infrastructure, offering tax incentives and lower costs to lure production. Internationally, Seoul, Shanghai, and Copenhagen have emerged as new fashion powerhouses, while Toronto, Vancouver, Budapest, and Prague are booming as production hubs. New York's creative dominance is no longer guaranteed.

Nowhere are the stakes higher than in the rise of artificial intelligence.

No city is more exposed to AI's impact on creative work than New York, home to both the nation's largest concentration of artists and a rapidly growing AI sector. Generative AI is cutting costs but also threatening jobs as companies automate tasks once handled by writers, designers, and musicians. Yet it is also fueling new creative frontiers—from Marc da Costa's interactive installation *The Golden Key* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) to Eunsu Kang's AI-driven visual experiments and exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Guggenheim, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The challenge for New York is to ensure that these breakthroughs spark new creative possibilities rather than hollow out the city's creative middle class.

Renewing New York City's creative spark

New York's creative sector stands at a crossroads. Without bold, coordinated action, the city risks losing the artists, organizations, and creative businesses that help power its economy and define its identity.

To realize this vision, city and state policymakers will need to go further—integrating the arts into economic development, transportation, and public space initiatives. That means expanding creative placemaking through New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) plazas, growing public art partnerships with Parks, ensuring affordable arts spaces through New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) projects, resourcing the promising Create in Place program, and fully implementing the city's Percent for Art law across its vast capital program.

This report lays out a series of recommendations to help artists not just survive but thrive in New York City over the next decade. To do so, city government should invest in and build deeply needed housing to improve overall affordability, while integrating an artist preference into affordable housing programs. It should partner with nonprofits to raise wages for arts workers, expand access to health coverage, and pilot portable benefits for freelancers and independent artists. At the same time, the city should launch a pooled insurance program to help small cultural venues and nonprofit theaters manage soaring costs, while directing agencies beyond DCLA—including NYCEDC, NYC DOT, NYC Parks, and Small Business Services—to fully integrate the arts into their economic development, transportation, and public space work. Finally, New York should launch the city's first-ever five-borough cultural festival to celebrate local talent, while expanding public art and cultural programming in schools, libraries, parks, subway stations, and senior centers.

Together, these actions would move New York beyond recovery—toward a stronger, more equitable creative future in which artists, cultural organizations, and creative businesses are recognized not as amenities, but as essential infrastructure for the city's continued vitality.

Section 2: Creativity as a Catalyst for New York's Economic Future

DESPITE MOUNTING CHALLENGES, THE CREATIVE sector remains one of the largest and most important parts of New York City's economy. It accounts for more than 7 percent of all private sector employment in the five boroughs, but even that greatly undercounts its vital role in today's economy. No other industry has more of a catalytic effect: the cultural and creative sector serves as a key driver of the city's now-massive tourism economy, it sparks the in-migration of highly educated workers and entrepreneurs in fields from finance to tech, and it has helped spark equitable economic growth in communities from East Flatbush to Jamaica. And no other part of the economy contributes more to the city's vibrancy and unique identity, helping New York stay steps ahead of other cities even as several factors—from the city's rising cost of living to the growth in chain retail—threaten to chip away at New York's advantages over other places.

The size and scope of NYC's creative sector

Our analysis shows that the city's creative workforce totaled 326,093 in 2024. This includes 241,735 workers employed at businesses and nonprofits in the ten industries that make up New York's creative core (performing arts, visual arts, independent artists, advertising, applied design, architecture, film and television, media streaming and broadcasting, music production and publishing), 46,065 self-employed workers in creative industries, and 38,293 creative workers employed in non-creative industries.

While a single industry—film and television—accounts for nearly a third of all jobs in LA's creative sector, New York City's is marked by an astounding diversity of creative fields. Nine of the ten industries that make up the city's creative economy have at least 18,000 jobs here, led by film and television (47,453), media streaming (46,520), and advertising (44,830).

New York boasts unparalleled occupational diversity in its creative sector. In 2024, the city was home to 15,203 people employed as editors, 13,765 graphic designers, 10,394 writers and authors, 9,325 musicians and singers, 8,231 art directors, 7,972 architects, 6,453 photographers, 6,399 actors, 5,309 fashion designers, 4,888 interior designers, 4,629 fine artists, 2,094 craft artists, and 1,236 dancers.

A vibrant sector that is expanding in innovative ways

This report documents a number of serious challenges and threats facing the creative sector, but there is also tremendous growth and momentum. Across the five boroughs, new cultural spaces are opening, creative businesses are expanding, and artists continue to define what's possible in the city that has long inspired them—while once again bringing New Yorkers together in the face of adversity.

The energy is visible nearly everywhere. The Bronx Music Hall—the borough's first major independently owned cultural venue in more than 50 years—opened its doors alongside a surge of new micro-galleries from the South Bronx to Chinatown and Bushwick. Ridgewood now boasts its first new movie theater in decades, launched by documentarian John Wilson. Electronic music is booming again, with the number of working DJs doubling citywide as venues like Nowadays, Public Records, and Basement have fueled a nightlife resurgence. Meanwhile, ArtBuilt has created more than 50,000 square feet of below-market studio space at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, the People's Theatre Project has broken ground on a new multidisciplinary arts center in Inwood, and the Studio Museum in Harlem has reopened after an eight-year renovation.

The creative economy is also expanding and diversifying geographically. Over the past decade, cultural nonprofits have grown 73.8 percent in Queens, 67.5 percent in the Bronx, and 55 percent in Brooklyn, while the number of creative businesses in Brooklyn alone has more than doubled. Altogether, the city is

NYC's Creative Workforce: 2004 – 2024

	2004	2014	2019	2024	Change '04-'19	Change '19-'24
Workers employed in businesses in creative industries	190,565	235,237	267,241	241,735	40.2%	-9.5%
Self-employed workers in creative industries	38,894	41,941	41,782	46,065	7.4%	10.3%
Creative workers employed outside of creative industries	32,163	37,826	38,396	38,293	19.4%	-0.3%
Total Creative Workforce	**261,621**	**315,004**	**347,420**	**326,093**	32.8%	-6.1%

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Total Workers in NYC's Creative Industries

Industry	2004	2014	2019	2024	Change '19-'24
Film & Television	25,519	43,525	51,594	47,453	-8.0%
Music Production	4,727	3,382	3,629	4,273	17.8%
Publishing	55,162	49,514	47,773	38,182	-20.1%
Broadcasting	30,362	38,986	49,115	46,520	-5.3%
Architecture	12,253	16,310	19,128	18,459	-3.5%
Applied Design	20,313	24,013	22,420	20,369	-9.1%
Advertising	35,244	46,763	49,748	44,830	-9.9%
Performing Arts	19,578	21,120	21,678	18,972	-12.5%
Visual Arts	12,976	18,245	23,244	23,376	0.6%
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	13,304	15,320	20,694	25,365	22.6%
Creative Industries	**229,438**	**277,178**	**309,024**	**287,800**	-6.9%

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Total Workers in NYC's Creative Sub-Industries

Sub-Industry	2004	2014	2019	2024	Change '19-'24
Motion Picture and Video Production	21,352	39,380	47,577	43,179	-9.2%
Motion Picture and Video Distribution	966	802	591	923	56.2%
Postproduction Services and Other Motion Picture and Video Industries	3,202	3,343	3,426	3,352	-2.2%
Music Publishers	844	769	675	916	35.8%
Sound Recording Studios	1,322	816	761	970	27.5%
Record Production and Distribution	2,192	1,409	1,923	2,072	7.7%
Other Sound Recording Industries	368	388	270	315	16.7%
Newspaper Publishers	12,024	10,503	10,424	8,449	-18.9%
Periodical Publishers	29,435	22,259	15,419	12,092	-21.6%
Book Publishers	12,296	12,310	11,467	9,496	-17.2%
Other Publishers	1,406	4,442	10,463	8,144	-22.2%
Radio Broadcasting Stations	2,770	2,950	2,680	2,288	-14.7%
Television Broadcasting Stations	3,901	4,473	6,647	6,123	-7.9%
Media Streaming Distribution Services, Social Networks, and Other Media Networks and Content Providers	23,692	31,563	39,788	38,110	-4.2%
Architectural Services	11,736	15,701	18,351	17,702	-3.5%
Landscape Architectural Services	518	608	777	757	-2.6%
Interior Design Services	4,983	6,196	6,581	6,449	-2.0%
Industrial Design Services	683	862	1,058	742	-29.9%
Graphic Design Services	8,541	8,740	7,331	5,946	-18.9%
Other Specialized Design Services	3,304	4,986	4,400	4,183	-4.9%
Photographic Services	2,795	3,229	3,050	3,049	0.0%
Advertising Agencies	31,452	42,826	45,934	41,022	-10.7%
Indoor and Outdoor Display Advertising	1,111	1,687	1,794	1,879	4.7%
Direct Mail Advertising	1,331	901	718	541	-24.6%
Other Services Related to Advertising	1,375	1,349	1,301	1,387	6.6%
Theater Companies and Dinner Theaters	11,314	13,191	15,176	13,617	-10.3%
Dance Companies	3,333	3,408	2,828	2,567	-9.2%
Musical Groups and Artists	4,584	4,086	3,469	2,644	-23.8%
Other Performing Arts Companies	348	436	205	144	-29.7%
Museums	5,814	7,474	10,408	10,054	-3.4%
Art Dealers	2,488	3,150	3,561	3,935	10.5%
Fine Arts Schools	4,674	7,620	9,275	9,387	1.2%
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	13,304	15,320	20,694	25,365	22.6%
Creative Industries	**229,458**	**277,178**	**309,024**	**287,800**	-6.9%

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

now home to a record 16,911 creative business locations—up 6 percent since 2019 and 13.4 percent over the past decade, outpacing overall business growth.

Brooklyn alone now has 60,201 artists who call the borough home. That's more than the total for Seattle (58,298) and San Francisco (41,012), nearly double the number of artists living in Austin (30,754), and well over twice the number living in Nashville (26,312), Portland (21,404), and Philadelphia (20,701).

Even factoring in job losses since the pandemic, New York City's creative workforce has grown 24.6 percent over the past 20 years, far outpacing employment growth in many of the city's other leading industries, including finance and insurance (which grew by 12.9 percent), retail (which increased by 7.5 percent), and legal services (which was unchanged).

Some of the strongest gains have come in fields tied to new media and creative technology. Music production jobs are up 16.4 percent since 2015, reflecting both the city's unparalleled concentration of recording studios and the growing demand from podcasting, content creation, and digital media. The number of DJs has increased by 14.1 percent since 2019, and by 106.8 percent over the past decade, fueled by the city's vibrant nightlife scene. The city has also seen increases in the number of fine artists (up 13.5 percent since 2019), special effects artists and animators (8.3 percent), and authors and writers (1.9 percent).

There are also several emerging areas of growth across the city's creative sector, including:

Podcast Production

New York has become a national hub for audio storytelling and podcast production. Leading companies like WNYC Studios, Pushkin Industries, Gotham Productions, and Blue Chalk produce some of the most popular and acclaimed podcasts globally. In the first quarter of 2025, New York–based producers were responsible for 22 percent of the shows on Edison Research's *Top 50 Podcasts in the U.S.*, including *The Daily*, *This American Life*, *Radiolab*, and *Serial*.[14] While the podcasting industry has gone through a period of consolidation and layoffs at major media firms, New York City remains its creative and technical epicenter—sustained by a deep pool of production talent, studios, and global media connections.[15]

Maker Economy

Since Etsy's founding 20 years ago, New York City's maker economy has flourished—spanning everything from handmade crafts and small-batch manufacturing to artisanal food products and design goods. Over the past decade, employment among craft artists has surged by 62.5 percent, one of the fastest growth rates of any creative occupation.

Today's New York–based makers are building global brands while maintaining roots in the city's arts community and broader creative economy. Brooklyn-founded APOTHEKE—launched by Chrissy Fichtl, an FIT graduate who began experimenting with soap-making in her Brooklyn kitchen—sold 100,000 candles in 2022 and is now carried by more than 600 major retailers worldwide.[16] She's joined by a growing cohort of artist- and designer-led studios shaping the city's maker economy—like Franca NYC, a Brooklyn ceramics studio whose hand-built pieces are now stocked by retailers nationwide, and Cold Picnic, a Queens- and Brooklyn–based textile design duo whose small-batch rugs and home goods have developed a cult following. Across the five boroughs, local vendors showcase their work at a growing number of markets like the Renegade Craft Fair, the Queens Craft Brigade—which just celebrated its eighth anniversary—and Cottage Row Curiosities in Staten Island's Snug Harbor, launched in 2021.[17]

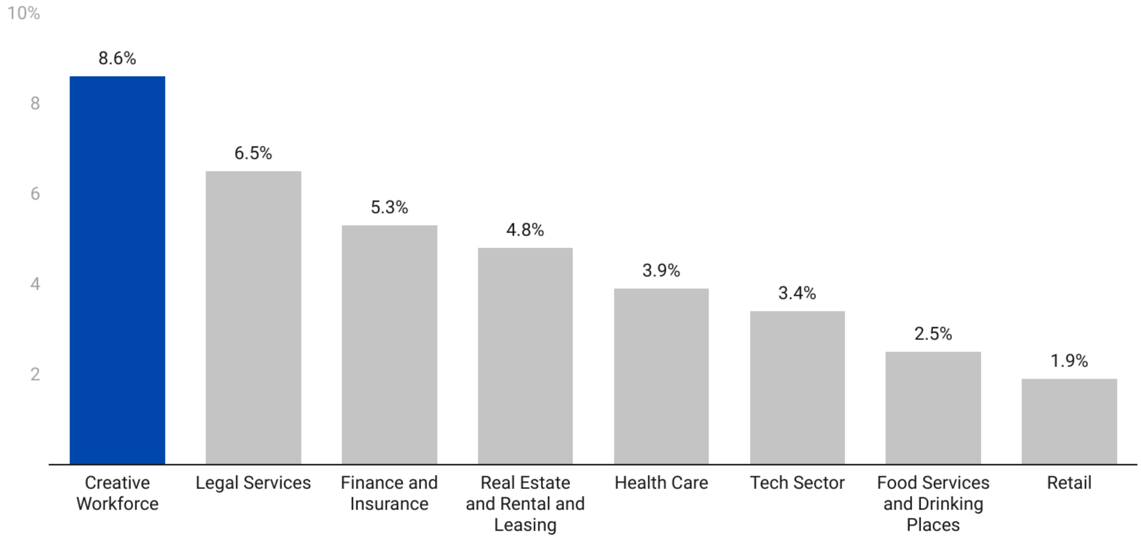
Creator Economy

The creator economy—made up of social media influencers and online content creators who turn clicks and views into income—is a relatively new addition to New York City's creative ecosystem. According to Influencity, 1.2 million influencers lived in New York State in 2022—second only to California's 2.1 million—but the gap has narrowed sharply in recent years as creators continue to flock to the Big Apple.[18] Seven of the top 25 creators on *Rolling Stone*'s 2025 list live in New York City—matching California's total.[19]

As the landscape of work and marketing continues to evolve, the creator economy is becoming an increasingly important part of New York's broader creative ecosystem—one that has the potential to support neighborhood businesses and local culture, and provide new income streams for artists and entrepreneurs alike.

NYC's biggest competitive edge

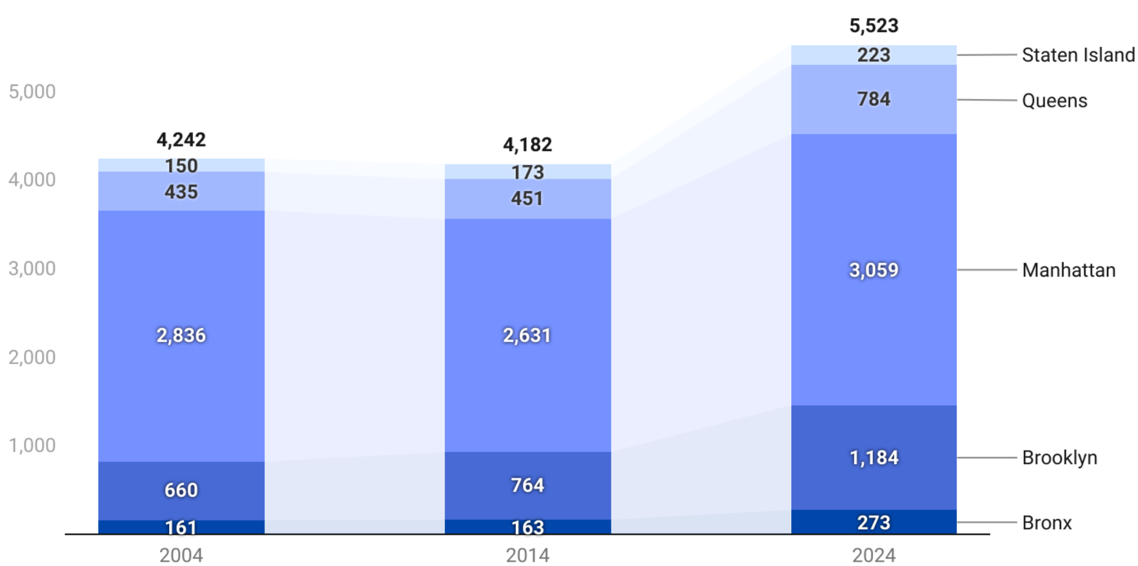
The creative sector in New York City has a bigger share of national jobs than most other major industries



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Cultural nonprofits grow by a third over the last decade

Including a 13 percent increase since 2019



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Culture Sparks Lasting Economic Growth

Key to New York City's tourism economy

Arts and culture are the backbone of New York City's $74 billion tourism economy—and one of its most powerful sources of tax revenue and job growth. In 2024, the city welcomed nearly 64 million visitors, nearly matching the pre-pandemic record, with tourism expected to surpass 68 million in 2025. Driving that recovery is New York's unmatched cultural landscape: 29 million visitors attended a museum, gallery, theater, or other cultural site last year, and nearly three-quarters of international travelers said they came specifically for arts and culture.

That cultural pull has helped revive surrounding industries—hotels, restaurants, retail, and nightlife—that together sustain hundreds of thousands of jobs. "Culture is really a major draw for tourists to New York City," says Julie Coker, president and CEO or NYC Tourism + Conventions.

Beyond the city's many museums and theaters, the city's creative vibrancy animates neighborhoods—from music festivals in the Bronx to galleries in Ridgewood and dance venues in Harlem—ensuring that the benefits of tourism ripple far beyond Midtown and Manhattan.

A magnet for talent and a vital competitive advantage

In today's mobile, talent-driven economy, New York's arts and culture ecosystem is one of the city's greatest competitive advantages. As remote work gives more people the freedom to live anywhere—and as the cost of living continues to rise—it's the city's creative energy and unmatched ecosystem of cultural assets that enables New York to continue attracting people from across the country and around the globe—and keeps people from leaving. From its theaters and galleries to its nightlife and design scene, the creative ecosystem is an outsized part of what makes New York worth the struggle.

A 2023 Partnership for New York City survey found that nearly two-thirds of private-sector employees ranked arts and entertainment among the top reasons they want to stay in New York—second only to the city's restaurants. "Young people want to work at a cool company, but mostly it's the dynamic and constantly changing cultural and entertainment offerings of the city," says Merrill Pond, executive vice president for research and policy at the Partnership. "Talented young workers can choose placements almost anywhere in the world. And New York is always the number one pick."

Increasingly, workers aren't just seeking jobs—they're seeking communities where life and work intersect. "If you think of Brooklyn as the quintessential live–work–play model, the arts community is what makes much of the 'play' possible," says Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Randy Peers.

Arts colleges as economic engines

New York's world-class art and design schools don't just educate artists—they power the city's creative economy. These institutions attract talent from around the world, create thousands of jobs, and sustain a steady pipeline of creative workers for the city's industries.

No other place matches New York's concentration of art schools. In fact, New York City boasts five colleges and universities among the nation's 30 best graduate schools for fine arts, according to U.S. News and World Report: Columbia University (#10), New School—Parsons School of Design (#15), Pratt Institute (#15), School of Visual Arts (#23), and CUNY—Hunter College (#23). Los Angeles is the only other city with more than one school in the top 30 (it has two).

Employment at New York City's art schools has grown 23.2 percent over the past decade—from 7,620 to 9,387—and now supports more jobs than the city's entire graphic design or newspaper industries. Meanwhile, demand keeps rising: Pratt Institute enrolled its largest-ever painting and drawing classes last fall—both with waiting lists—and applications to Parsons School of Design have jumped 64 percent since 2016.[20]

Graduates of these programs are helping to sustain and diversify New York's creative ecosystem—from exhibiting fine art to launching tattoo studios, galleries, fashion brands, and design firms. At LaGuardia Community College, students are taught not only to hone their craft but to navigate the realities of New York's creative economy and think entrepreneurially. "Students know the quantity of opportunity is greater here, even though the hustle is harder," says Dahlia Elsayed, director of LaGuardia's fine arts program

Export powerhouse, global brand

New York may be the world's financial capital, but its most influential exports come from the creative economy. From fashion and film to publishing, advertising, and design, the city's creative industries shape culture—and drive commerce—on a global scale.

In 2023, art exports from the New York metropolitan area totaled roughly $8 billion, making it the city's second-largest export by value after jewelry and precious gems, according to the U.S. International Trade Administration. From Chelsea galleries and Midtown auction houses to independent studios in Brooklyn and the Bronx, New York's creative output reaches every corner of the world.

These industries aren't just exporting culture, they're fueling growth at home. Creative businesses have been central to Brooklyn's economic renaissance, adding more than 2,100 new firms since 2014. "We're facilitating the creative economy in our own way," says Randy Peers, president of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce. "Visitors from across the country and around the world want to experience Brooklyn—it's become a brand in itself."

That global brand power extends citywide. From the I Love New York logo to skylines immortalized on screen and the sounds that have shaped generations—from hip hop and salsa to electronic cumbia and drill—the city's creative output has defined New York's image for decades. Even for those who have never set foot here, "New York" signals imagination, hustle, and reinvention—an identity inextricably tied to its creative sector.

Scene from HILDEGARD by Sarah Kirkland Snider, directed by Elkhanah Pulitzer which will premiere in NYC in 2026 at the PROTOTYPE Festival. Photo by Angel Origgi

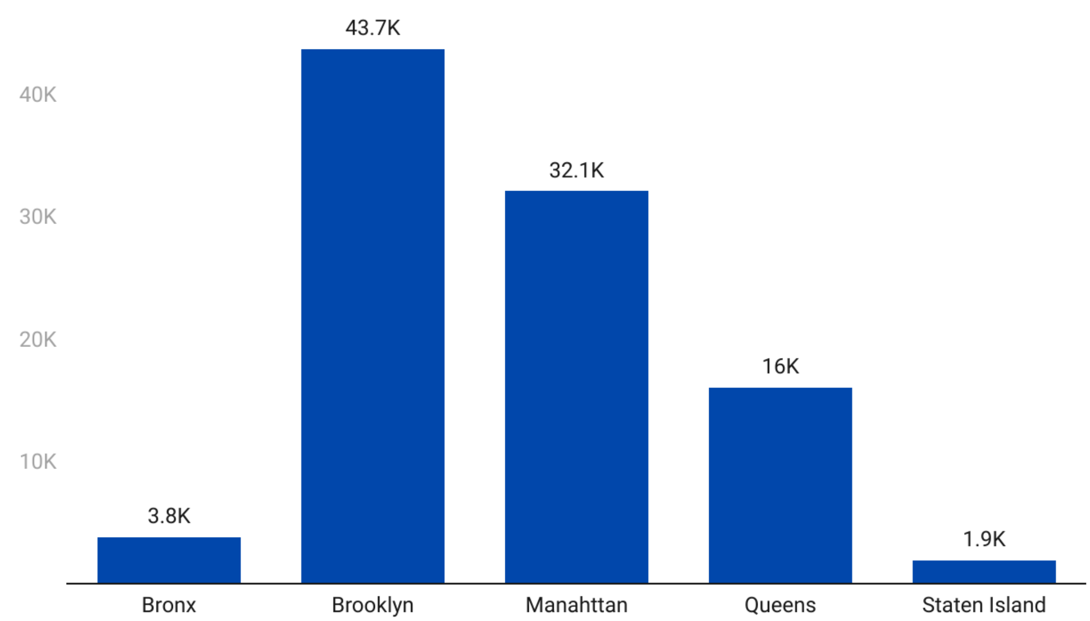
Section 3: NYC's Artists and the Arts Confront Major Challenges

Costs are rising much faster than wages, squeezing artists out

Artists in New York have long struggled to achieve financial security. But by working a part-time job as a waiter, editor, substitute teacher or some other side gig, many artists were able to devote sufficient time to their art while earning enough to make ends meet. Over the past few years, artists say, the calculus has shifted in New York—costs have far outpaced artist income. Many have had to take on second or third jobs just to afford the city's skyrocketing costs, leaving scant time to dedicate to their art.

"I think there is a bit of back-of-the-envelope math that every artist here does," says Moe Yousuf, president and CEO of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. "'How long can I do this before I need to get a full-time job?' Or, 'I'm working five jobs right now—how long before my artistic practice stops being fundamental,

Brooklyn is home to the most working artists in the city



Employed artists

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Created with Datawrapper and I need to leave New York City?' There are so many talented artists who stop making work because of that."

Roughly a decade ago, creative workers in New York earned 15 percent less than national average. Today, thanks to the city's fast-rising cost of living and flat incomes, they make 23 percent less. The median hourly wage for musicians and singers in the city is $10.28 less than the national average. For dancers, it is $6.63 less. For actors, it is $3.75 less.

Across dozens of interviews, artists described the rough calculations that dictate their lives—and how increasing costs, stagnant arts-related income, and diminishing institutional support have pushed even the most resourceful to a breaking point.

"If any one of those funding pipelines is slow or atrophies, your livelihood is at risk," says Rasu Jilani, executive director of the Brooklyn Arts Council. "That is a reality for most artists in the ecosystem. They are walking the tightrope of affordability and livability in New York City."

Soon after Jesús Benavente moved to New York City in 2013 after earning an MFA at Rutgers University, he realized that piecing together income would become a full-time job in itself. That challenge has become nearly impossible as costs have soared. His practice of *rasquachismo*—"cobbling things together to make it work" in the Chicano way—extends beyond his art into how he earns a living. He teaches a class once a week (about $300), works as an art handler, picks up jobs on TaskRabbit, and applies for grants and residencies whenever he can. But this constant hustle is no longer adding up.

"Before, I was like, 'If I live really cheaply, cut all the corners, I can get away with $2,000 a month.' I would be okay enough to survive. But inflation really messed up the game plan," Benavente says. "It's just no longer the case. Now I need $3,500 a month."

When faced with potential financial shortfalls, artists feel pressured to accept any gig or project. Many have expressed the need to work more—what was once a part-time hustle has now become a full-time job—to earn enough money to live and create.

After finishing graduate school, Zalika Azim, 34, a Brooklyn-born multimedia artist, "daisy-chained" a series of adjunct teaching positions at art schools to make money. Those adjunct roles—paying between $9,000 and $12,000 per semester—were nowhere near enough to cover rent, living expenses, and studio costs in New York. She took a full-time job to offset that gap. "My days are usually 5 a.m. to 11 p.m.," she said, completing studio admin before her 9-to-5 and working on a six-month residency after hours. "I do feel like that's really, deeply impacted my ability to be present in my practice."

Those who want to stay in New York and continue making their art describe their lives as a series of compromises and sacrifices. David Kennedy-Cutler, 45, credits his ability to live in the city to the relative stability of his long-term lease in East Williamsburg and his independent art-installation business. "The reality is that I have to do something else to cover those expenses," he says. He estimates that 80 percent of his income comes from art handling and 20 percent from selling his art. For Kennedy-Cutler and his wife, who also works in the arts, the trade-off is clear: "There's no chance, really, for us—with the money that we make every year—to raise a family and also continue to do the jobs that we do."

It's little wonder, then, that New York City's resident artist population is declining. Kahlil Robert Irving, 32, is among those who've left. He moved back home to St. Louis, Missouri, in 2020 for personal reasons and because rent had become untenable—despite a series of professional successes, including works exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the New Museum Triennial, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The move brought peace of mind, he says, but also distance from the networks and institutions that once fueled his career.

Housing is the biggest challenge, by far

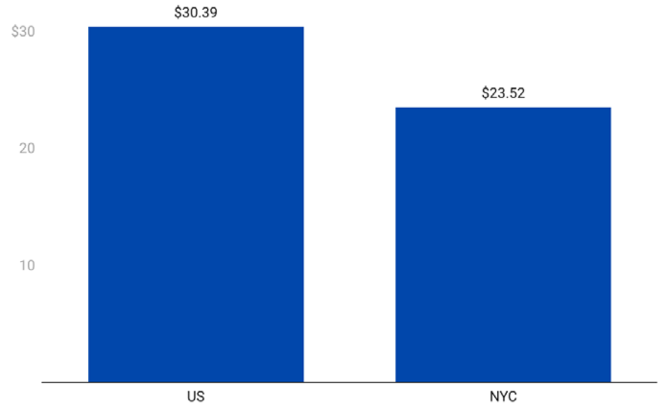
New York City's housing crisis is no secret—but its impacts are especially severe for the creative workforce, whose incomes have failed to keep up with the city's skyrocketing rents. Over the past decade, median household rent in New York City increased 42 percent, while the median income for workers in creative industries grew just 25 percent—far below the citywide gain of 44 percent.[21]

The gap is even wider for artists. According to an analysis of data from a statewide survey conducted by Creatives Rebuild New York, nearly 90 percent of New York City artists earned less than $50,000 in 2022—well below the city's $57,000 median income.[22]

"Artists can't afford an average median rent because there isn't enough investment in the New York City arts economy to achieve an average median

Adjusted for NYC's high costs, creative workers earn less than the U.S. median

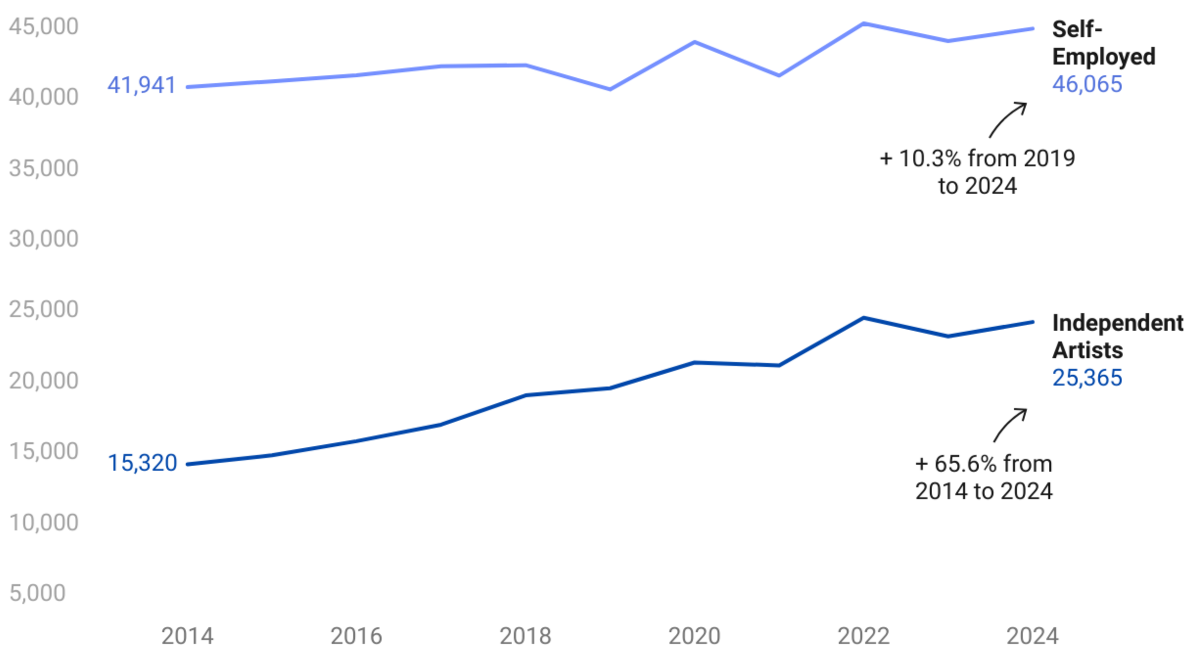
Creative workers in New York now earn 23 percent less than the national hourly median wage, down from 15 percent less a decade ago



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. The figures above represent the weighted average of median hourly wages of creative occupations. This calculation was based on Brooklyn's cost of living. Created with Datawrapper

Creatives shift towards freelance work

While workers employed in businesses in creative industries decline post-pandemic, self-employment and independent artists surge

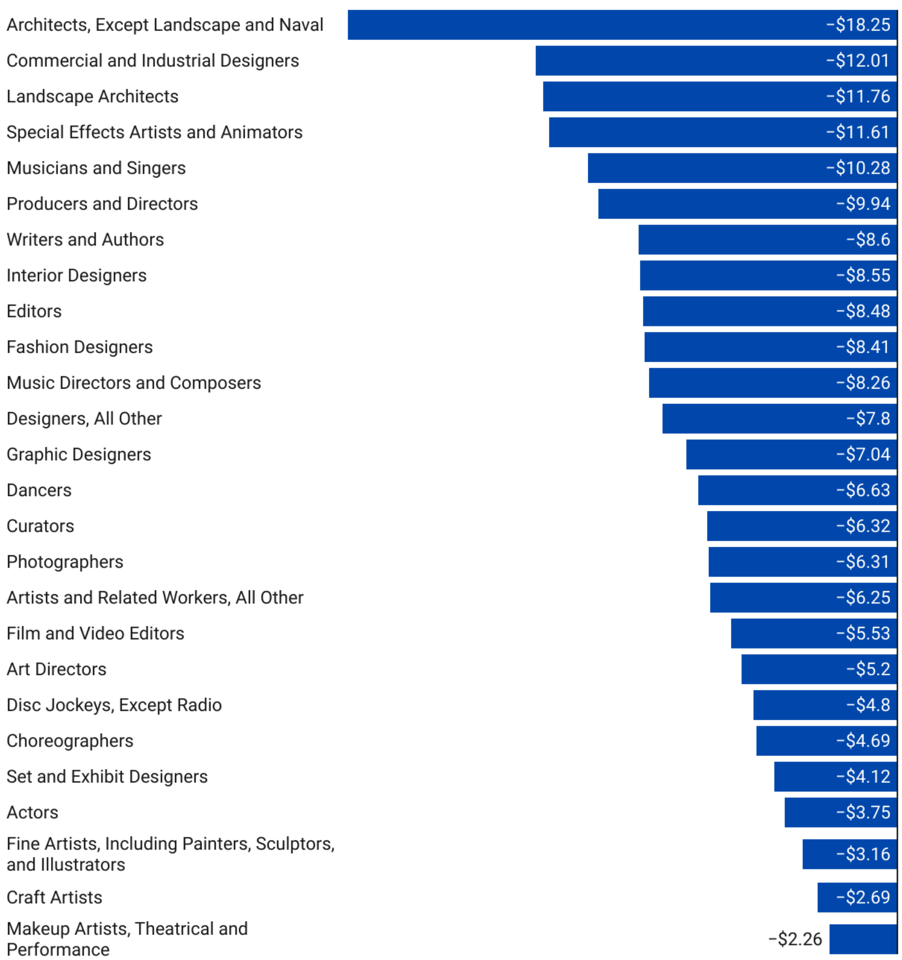


Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

> At the same time, creative employment is shifting toward freelance and contract work: self-employment in creative industries has grown 10.3 percent since 2019, and the number of independent artists, writers, and performers is up 65.6 percent over the past decade, creating greater economic insecurity

New York City's wage gap

When adjusted for the city's high cost of living, the median hourly wage for creative workers in NYC is less than the median for the country for every creative occupation analyzed



This calculation was based on Brooklyn's cost of living.

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Resident Artists by Neighborhood

Neighborhood	Total Artists 2023	Total Artists 2013	Change (#)
Upper West Side	5,255	7,692	−2,437
Midtown, East Midtown, & Flatiron	4,685	6,876	−2,191
Financial District & Greenwich Village	4,199	6,105	−1,906
Upper East Side & Roosevelt Island	2,537	5,661	−3,124
Park Slope & Carroll Gardens	5,478	5,424	+54
Williamsburg & Greenpoint	7,055	5,323	+1,732
Lower East Side/Chinatown	2,127	4,785	−2,658
Downtown Brooklyn & Fort Greene	4,969	4,536	+433
Chelsea & Hell's Kitchen	3,419	3,846	−427
Astoria & Queensbridge	4,347	2,867	+1,480
Crown Heights (North)	3,566	2,390	+1,176
Morningside Heights & Hamilton Heights	2,238	2,298	−60
Washington Heights & Inwood	3,775	2,156	+1,619
Sunset Park & Windsor Terrace	2,119	2,147	−28
Bushwick	3,174	1,530	+1,644
Harlem	2,413	1,494	+919
Long Island City, Sunnyside, & Woodside	1,794	1,120	+674
Forest Hills & Rego Park	1,262	1,059	+203
Bedford-Stuyvesant	4,818	1,017	+3,801
Flushing, Murray Hill, & Whitestone	583	925	−342
Flatbush & Midwood	2,427	823	+1,604
East Harlem	1,500	797	+703
Crown Heights (South)	2,469	783	+1,686
Borough Park & Kensington	1,966	772	+1,194
Bensonhurst & Bath Beach	899	726	+173
Co-op City & Throgs Neck	320	712	−392
North Shore	1,046	705	+341
Bay Ridge & Dyker Heights	1,074	653	+421
Fresh Meadows, Hillcrest, & Briarwood	848	652	+196
Sheepshead Bay & Gravesend (East)	851	617	+234
Jackson Heights & East Elmhurst	1,276	528	+748
Ridgewood, Maspeth, & Middle Village	1,880	516	+1,364
Riverdale, Kingsbridge, & Marble Hill	508	492	+16
Auburndale, Bayside, & Douglaston	687	483	+204
South Shore	665	381	+284
Kew Gardens, Richmond Hill, & Woodhaven	535	380	+155
Soundview & Parkchester	122	368	−246
Coney Island & Brighton Beach	193	306	−113
Queens Village, Bellerose, & Rosedale	747	305	+442
Canarsie & Flatlands	455	286	+169
Mid-Island	174	249	−75
Fordham, Bedford Park, & Norwood	401	248	+153
South Ozone Park & Howard Beach	330	215	+115
Pelham Parkway & Morris Park	364	199	+165
Morrisania, Tremont, Belmont, & West Farms	218	193	+25
Jamaica, St. Albans, & Hollis	472	191	+281
Elmhurst & Corona	831	190	+641
East Flatbush	968	163	+805
The Rockaways	412	147	+265
Wakefield, Williamsbridge, & Eastchester	317	144	+173
Morris Heights & Mount Hope	172	142	+30
Highbridge & Concourse	996	101	+895
Melrose, Mott Haven, Longwood, & Hunts Point	380	87	+293
East New York & Cypress Hills	684	67	+617
Ocean Hill & Brownsville	574	45	+529

Resident artists defined as those whose occupations include: Artists and related workers, Actors, Producers and directors, Dancers and choreographers, Music directors and composers, Musicians and singers, Disc jockeys, except radio, Editors, Writers and authors, Photographers
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2023 and 2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Created with Datawrapper

salary," says Karesia Batan, founder of the Queensboro Dance Festival.

The result is visible across the city: fewer artists are able to stay. "Over the years, as the cost of living goes up here, more and more artists leave because they can't survive," says Judith Insell, professional musician and executive director of Bronx Arts Ensemble.

Sade Lythcott, CEO of the National Black Theatre, puts it bluntly: "Without New York City bringing back true affordable housing—bringing back the artists preference, creating affordable workspaces for artists—there really is no way for artists to maintain a livelihood here."

Other cities have tackled this problem head-on. Since 2015, cities across the U.S. have built more than 4,000 new affordable artist housing units—but New York has built zero. That's a striking reversal from the 1970s, when the city pioneered affordable artist housing with Westbeth and Manhattan Plaza, two models that remain iconic examples of how artist housing can stabilize creative communities and revitalize neighborhoods.

That failure has ripple effects across the ecosystem, especially for organizations serving underrepresented artists.

"Keeping artists of color in the city and close to each other has been key to their ability to create," says Lythcott. "No one can imagine a more innovative, vibrant future than the artists. And if the artists can't live here, then this is no longer a city that's viable for all the reasons it's unique and singular in the world."

Audiences have returned to New York's stages—but not in the same way.

Theaters, music venues, and cultural institutions have seen their costs increase in recent years—for labor, insurance, electricity, and other things. But at the same time, revenues from ticket sales have taken a big hit due to fundamental shifts in who is attending live performances since the pandemic. The combination of higher costs and lower earned revenue has left many arts organizations financially vulnerable.

"Post pandemic, audiences are unpredictable," says Alyssa Alpine, director of the CUNY Dance Initiative. "It's harder to get people to come out to see a live show and you are counting on less earned revenue than you did in the past."

"Audiences are not returning to in-person programs at the levels before the pandemic," adds Sami Abu Shumays, deputy director of Flushing Town Hall.

At the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, executive director Caridad De la Luz recalls that in the 1990s, "the place was packed," but since the pandemic, "there's only been very few moments that that has happened."

Even before COVID-19, many organizations were already seeing their "typical, reliable audience member kind of aging out," notes Sade Lythcott, CEO of the National Black Theatre. "They're not being replenished at the same rate—and that's been exacerbated through the pandemic and growing incidents and concerns around public safety." The result is a younger but far less predictable audience, reflecting both New York's affordability crisis and broader changes in how people spend their time and money.

At The Billie Holiday Theatre in Bed-Stuy, executive director Shadawn Smith has seen those shifts firsthand. "Yesterday's economy is not today's economy," she says. "Yesterday's price is not today's price." Longtime patrons—often older residents—expect ticket prices to remain around $25, even as production costs soar. A newer audience, largely in their 20s and 30s, is willing to pay more but expects an immersive experience: music, drinks, and community. But with higher production values, the gap between revenue and expenses only grows.

"We're seeing larger gaps in terms of our costs and what folks are willing to pay," says Smith. "And with the instability and insecurity around institutional funding, whether it's from government or from philanthropy, everybody is struggling and reevaluating."

Changing audience behavior has also disrupted the economics of live performance. "Young people don't drink as much, which is very good—but not good for an economy that is based on liquor sales," says Olivier Conan, founder of Barbès, a performance space in Park Slope that opened in 2002. Meanwhile, subscription models have faltered. "The challenge today is getting people to commit," says Michael Royce, executive director of the New York Foundation for the Arts. "People may decide not to go to a play, a symphony, a ballet—they may decide to watch something on their screen. Young people especially don't want any controls on their culture."

For many performing arts organizations, that unpredictability makes planning nearly impossible. "If people no longer wish to go out in the way they used to, the vulnerability of putting together a dance piece for one night becomes even more vulnerable," Royce adds. "Dancers and choreographers find it harder and harder to do their work simply because they just don't know if anyone will show up."

At the same time, demand for cultural connection has not disappeared—it has simply shifted. Toya Lillard, executive director of 651 Arts, a hub for Black artists in Fort Greene, points to overwhelming demand for free and low-cost events. "BAM [has] a free music series and they had 1,200 RSVPs for 300 spots," she says. "People do want the option to just not come, not show up, and have no stakes involved." Yet 651 Arts' own performances have been packed since opening its new space in January 2025. "Our audiences, they're desperate for a reason to gather," she says.

Some organizations are responding by dropping ticketing altogether, with the aim of replacing the revenue with public and philanthropic funding. At Bronx Arts Ensemble, executive director Judith Insell says they realized they could serve Bronxites far better by eliminating admission fees entirely. "It became very clear that we had to get rid of the ticket to actually serve the community. So our concerts are free."

But for many institutions, this new reality has exposed longstanding fragilities. "It's not a big secret that COVID made a sector that was already unstable, even more unstable," says Leonard Jacobs, executive director of the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning. "What it really revealed is the lack of sustainability in the field."

Costs for performance venues and cultural nonprofits have gone through the roof—led by insurance

Even as the challenges of the pandemic receded, the economics of running a small venue or performing arts organization have become nearly impossible. Insurance costs, rent, wages, materials, and utilities have all surged since the pandemic, and with audiences still uneven, many organizations are caught in a losing equation—spending more just to bring in less.

For Dianna Mora, co-founder of the Brooklyn music venue Friends and Lovers, every week is a balancing act. Weeknight crowds have thinned, and even weekend audiences are leaving earlier, forcing her to add a third Saturday event just to stay afloat. She still owes roughly $50,000 in back rent from the shutdown years, and her insurance costs have tripled since opening a decade ago.

At Barbès, the beloved Park Slope bar and performance space, co-founder Olivier Conan says insurance premiums have grown from $4,000 to $22,000 a year—just one example of how expenses have spiraled.

New data from ArtsPool—an organization that provides workforce administration and financial management support to small and mid-sized arts nonprofits—underscores the widening gap: from 2019 to 2024, member organizations saw median revenue rise only 2.2 percent while median operating expenses climbed an astonishing 64 percent.

Some venues have already buckled under the pressure. Our Wicked Lady, a Bushwick music venue that opened in 2015, recently closed its doors after insurance costs more than doubled since before the pandemic. Co-founders Keith Hamilton and Zach Glass even scaled back programming in an attempt to manage expenses, cutting youth events that would have added roughly $50,000 in annual insurance costs.

But insurance is just one piece of the problem. "It costs about 50 percent more to put on a show today than before the pandemic," says Beth Morrison, President and Creative Producer of Beth Morrison Projects. "But with so many in our audience struggling to afford this city, really everyone is suffering. So I really feel there needs to be a massive intervention by the city and the state."

While costs are rising and revenues are down, public and philanthropic funding hasn't filled the gap

Given the widening gap between revenues and expenses, public and philanthropic funding is more vital than ever for New York City's arts ecosystem. But public funding has struggled to keep pace with an expanding cultural landscape and growing needs—and philanthropic funding is shifting away from the arts amid rising economic pressures and federal cuts to social programs.

While funding has grown at both the state and city level, it has not kept up with the demands of a rapidly expanding sector. The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), for instance, has a budget of about $87 million for operating grants—a critical source of general operating support for cultural nonprofits statewide. But even as funding has increased since 2020, NYSCA's operating grant budget has declined 35.9 percent since 1990 after adjusting for inflation.

At the city level, New York City's FY2025 budget includes $59.3 million for the Cultural Development Fund, which provides operating grants to hundreds of nonprofit arts groups. Yet these public dollars have not kept up with the rapid growth in the number of organizations. There are now more than 5,500 cultural nonprofits citywide, and hundreds—if not thousands—of additional community groups without formal nonprofit status. The number of cultural nonprofits has increased 32 percent citywide since 2014, including 55 percent in Brooklyn, 68 percent in the Bronx, and 74 percent in Queens.

Even when grants are awarded, many arrive late or inconsistently. "In the 20 years that I've directed, this is the most variable and unreliable that I've seen in the city," says one executive director of a dance company.

Meanwhile, major private funders have begun to scale back or shift priorities away from the arts—redirecting resources toward social services, basic needs, and other purposes in response to federal cuts. "We're actually losing funding for the arts, and we feel it acutely," says Karesia Batan, founder of the Queensboro Dance Festival. "Funders are turning away from arts and culture and funding other sectors—not in addition to the arts, it's instead of the arts. So that's been a looming problem that just continues to get a little bit bigger."

Fortunately, some funders are stepping up resources for the arts. For instance, the Howard Gilman Foundation—New York City's largest performing arts funder—increased its grantmaking budget by $5 million in 2025. However, many other philanthropic foundations are acting cautiously as they await the full toll of federal funding cuts to New York's social safety net over the next 12 to 18 months.

With public and philanthropic dollars falling short and arriving late, even established organizations are operating on thin margins. For smaller arts groups, especially those serving communities of color and low-income neighborhoods, the loss of a single grant can mean cutting programs—or closing altogether.

It's not just human services organizations that are struggling to get paid on time by government—arts organizations aren't getting paid, either.

New York City's failure to pay nonprofits on time has long plagued the human services sector, with at least $1 billion in unpaid invoices owed to providers contracted with just seven city agencies. But arts organizations are facing the same problem—often with even less visibility.

"The city has notoriously not gotten out award letters before December," says Gail Nathan, former executive director of the Bronx River Art Center. "That's half a year into the fiscal year. Not only do we not have any money coming down the pike from the city to do all our programming that we have to do starting July 1, but we don't even know what we're going to get until December." She adds that payments can take months after that: "Sometimes it's in June—the end of the fiscal year—and we still haven't received the 80 percent upfront for the grants we were awarded the previous July."

For smaller organizations that rely on city funding, the consequences can be devastating. "Our contracts are small, and especially in the scheme of New York City, we shouldn't have to wait months and months and months to get the money," says Risa Shoup, co–executive director of the Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York. "It's really devastating to smaller groups, and smaller groups rely disproportionately on public funding, because they don't meet the threshold for budget size for private philanthropic institutions, and so they really need those public contracts to come through and come through quickly."

The delays ripple across the ecosystem—from artists waiting for grant checks to organizations struggling to meet payroll. "It delays money to all of the different artists, individuals that art supports, and many organizations like myself that really depend on these more accessible redistribution grants because of the bureaucracy of applying for DCLA money," says STooPS Art & Community Founder/Director Kendra J. Ross. "These delays are causing lots of uncertainty and chaos. As a founder and director, how am I going to pay my team? How am I going to pay myself?"

The problem extends well beyond the Department of Cultural Affairs. "Once you become a vendor [with the Department of Education], you still have to go through a bidding process," says the executive director of one dance company. "If you ask the Department of

Education how long it takes, they tell you six months from beginning to end. We've been at it for a year, and we're still not done with the price negotiation."

Other city agencies have also contributed to the financial strain. "The Department of Transportation said, no, you should invoice us after your final event," says Emily Vartanian of General Mischief Dance Theater, which has hosted a series of free public performances and movement lessons. "That means that, if we do multiple events spread over four months, we are expected carry that payroll for seven months or longer before we receive payment which is not sustainable for most small businesses, especially nonprofits."

"Agency contracts have been super late in recent years," adds Sami Abu Shumays, deputy director of Flushing Town Hall. "That's affecting a lot of organizations in the city. So there are costs associated with late contracts—people are fronting money that they didn't have to before."

Each delay forces arts organizations—many already operating on shoestring budgets—to front payroll, take on debt, or pause programs just to deliver the services the city has contracted them to provide. For smaller groups in particular, these chronic delays can mean the difference between survival and closure.

The actions of the Trump administration pose unique threats to NYC's creative sector

An already difficult environment for New York City's creative community is being compounded by the actions and policies of the Trump administration. Sharp cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts, rising hostility toward immigrants, and new barriers to international travel all threaten to weaken the city's cultural ecosystem and global standing.

In May 2025, arts organizations across the country began receiving notices that their NEA funding would be canceled or withdrawn.[23] The NEA had awarded 544 grants in New York State for FY2024, totaling $15.8 million—at least 446 of them to New York City organizations.[24] A crowdsourced tracker maintained by theater director Annie Dorsen estimates roughly $6 million in NEA grants rescinded in the New York area alone. (Fortunately, some organizations have been able to spend down previously allocated funds or petition for grants to be reinstated, although major threats still loom on the horizon.) Cuts hit every corner of the arts landscape, from literary magazines and performing arts companies to education programs, residencies, and flagship institutions like Central Park SummerStage and the New York City Ballet.

While larger organizations may be able to weather the loss, smaller ones face existential consequences. Triangle Arts Association, an artist residency active since the 1980s, lost a $35,000 grant—17.5 percent of its annual budget.[25] The Trisha Brown Dance Company lost $40,000 for a production set to premiere weeks later. "We're already working on this project," says executive director Kirstin Kapustik. "This money, to my mind, had already been spent."[26] Leigh Mickelson of Dances for a Variable Population, which also lost a $40,000 grant, put it bluntly: "Nonprofits are used to being scrappy. But this is kind of existential."[27]

At the same time, the administration's punitive immigration policies are making it harder for international artists to work in New York. Even before new policies take full effect, legal fees and visa costs are rising sharply. "Progressive changes were made in artist immigration policy over the years of the Biden Administration," says Matthew Covey, co-founder of Tamizdat, a nonprofit that provides pro bono legal aid to international artists. "Since the Trump administration came into office, we are seeing their policies consistently making the artist visa process harder, more expensive, less reliable, and less equitable."

The situation is even more precarious for undocumented artists amid a surge in ICE arrests in New York City.[28] Some have withdrawn from public exhibitions or performances entirely. At BronxArtSpace's *¡Te Amo Porque S.O.S. Pueblo!* exhibition this spring, several invited immigrant artists declined to participate over safety concerns, while organizers omitted last names from credits to protect others. "We invited more than 45 artists and some of them did express a concern, and that's why they decided not to participate," says co-organizer Blanka Amezkua. Andrew Colwell of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance recalled that a community organizer he knew was stopped by ICE at Port Authority: "There [are] people who don't want to even take the train [from Brooklyn] to go to Queens because they're afraid of being detained."

For many, this growing fear undermines the very foundation of New York's identity as a global capital of culture. "It would be tasteless," says artist Saavedra when asked what New York would be like without immigrant artists. "Who could live here if we're not here?"

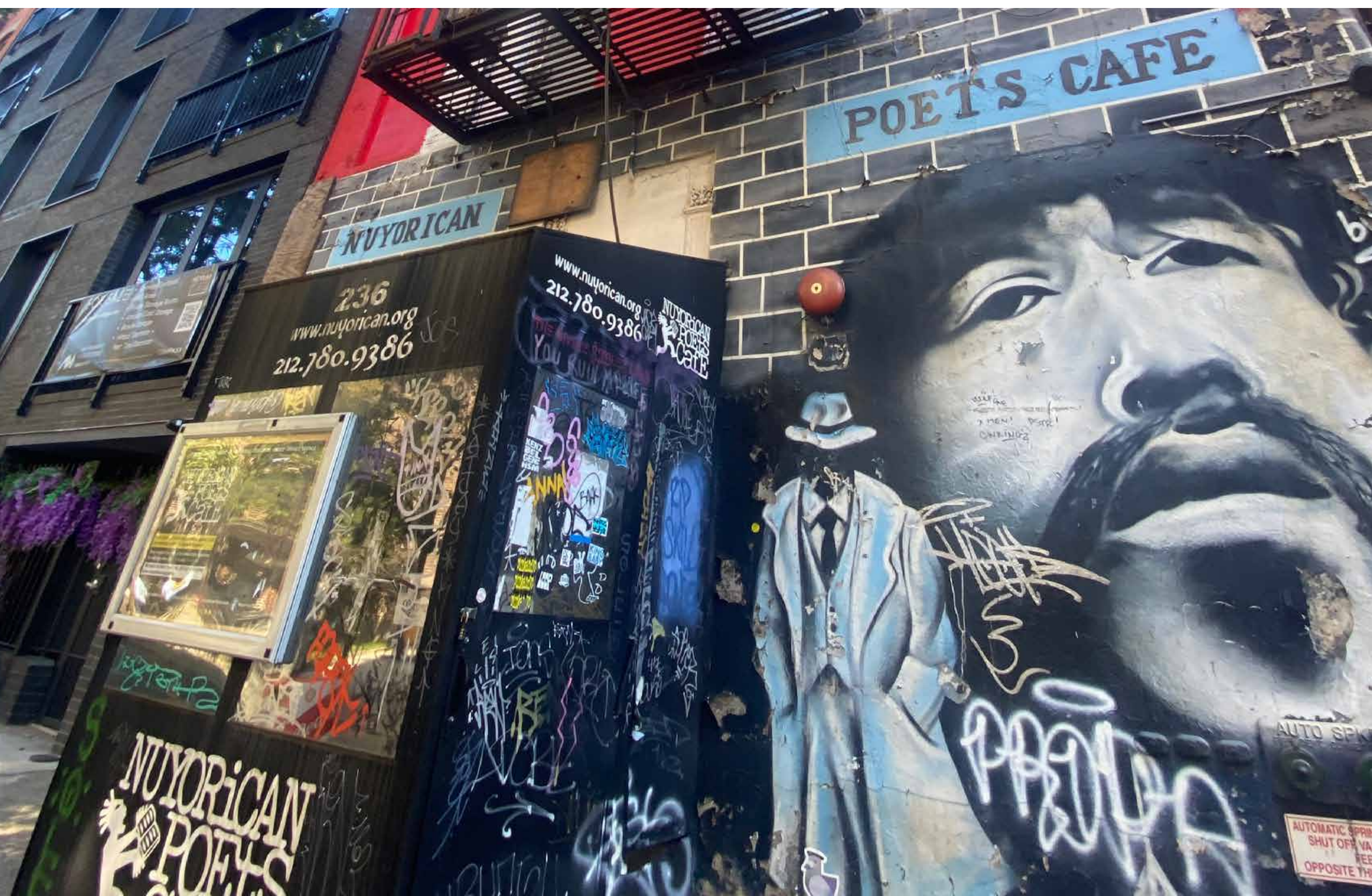
The same climate is discouraging international performers and audiences. While no major wave of visa denials has yet been recorded, Covey warns that new travel bans could further limit mobility. "Protectionism is obviously not useful in [the cultural sector]," he says, noting that New York stands to lose enormously if artists choose to perform elsewhere. Already, Hungarian-British pianist András Schiff canceled a performance with the New York Philharmonic, one of several European artists boycotting the U.S. over what he called Trump's "brutal takeover" of the Kennedy Center.[29]

International tourism is also taking a hit. New York City Tourism + Conventions recently cut its 2025 forecastby three million visitors, projecting 12.31 million international travelers—down from 12.913 million the year before and 13.5 million in 2019.[30] Those 13 million visitors accounted for nearly half of all tourist spending across the five boroughs, even though they represented only one-fifth of total visitors.[31]

The decline is especially steep from Canada, the city's second-largest international market. Just months into Trump's second term, summer bookings between major Canadian cities and U.S. destinations dropped nearly 20 percent compared to the previous year. At JFK Airport, arrivals from Canada fell 18.8 percent.[32] Nationwide, New York lost nearly 25,000 airline seats from Canada in the second quarter of 2025 after Canada issued, then only partially softened, a travel advisory warning its citizens to exercise "normal security precautions" when visiting the United States.[33]

These declines are not abstract. International tourists are disproportionately important to New York's creative economy: they account for roughly 21 percent of Broadway audiences[34] and help sustain 60 to 65 percent of jobs in the arts and entertainment sector.[35] With production costs up roughly 50 percent since before the pandemic, the loss of even a small share of international spending could have significant consequences for venues, theaters, and cultural institutions across the city.[36]

Nuyorican Poets Cafe before its $24-million renovation project, currently underway.



Section 4: NYC's Creative Industries Facing New Threats

IN THE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE PANDEMIC, creative industries were among New York City's fastest-growing sectors. While overall city employment increased 31 percent from 2004 to 2019, jobs in film and television more than doubled, jobs in architecture grew 56.1 percent, industrial design 55 percent, advertising 41.2 percent, and fashion 33.2 percent. But today, several of them are struggling, raising concerns about whether this vital part of the city's economy can regain its footing.

Each creative sector faces its own set of challenges, some that were already underway before the pandemic and others that emerged in its wake. National economic pressures are also pushing companies to cut costs—and in one of the country's most expensive labor markets, those consequences are being felt downstream. At the same time, other creative centers are growing across the country and overseas. Together, these forces threaten New York's long-standing position as the premier global creative capital.

Film and Television

Just three years ago, New York City's film and television industry was riding high, with jobs in the city's motion picture and sound recording industries reaching a record 57,200 in July 2022, nearly double its total from 2004 (33,400 jobs).[37] The industry had even regained all the jobs lost during the pandemic. But today, employment in the city's film and TV sector is 17 percent below that 2022 peak (with 47,500 jobs in August 2025) and is facing an array of challenges—from a slowdown in new streaming programming to the now widespread use of cheaper production facilities in Europe—that could make it difficult for New York to fully recover.

Following nearly two decades of sustained growth, the city's film and TV sector suffered a sudden slowdown in 2023 mainly due to the prolonged strike by the actors' and writers' unions and industry-wide cutbacks in production. In that one year, employment in the city's film and TV sector declined by nearly 20,000.

"My studio was at 100 percent occupancy for the last several years, prior to business just falling off the cliff," says Doug Steiner, chairman of Steiner Studios, the largest production complex in the country outside of Hollywood. "My workforce has contracted over the last year and a half. Prior to that it was only growing."

The problems are not unique to New York. Indeed, Hollywood has suffered even greater losses during this period.

The rise of streaming transformed the industry in the 2010s, with Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon pouring billions into original content while traditional studios scrambled to keep up. The pandemic supercharged demand, driving employment to record highs, but soon the market became oversaturated. By the early 2020s, streaming giants and studios began scaling back, ordering fewer shows and producing shorter seasons. Then, back-to-back writers' and actors' strikes brought production to a near standstill. At the same time, the pandemic caused the biggest attendance drop in movie history, and with film revenues still below that of 2019 studios are making fewer films.

"Companies are spending less, the overall number of productions is down, and they are producing fewer episodes per series," Steiner says. "All of that comes as traditional studios are still finding their way to compete in streaming—and most of all, with Netflix."

While film and TV production is down globally, the combination of rising costs, lagging revenues, and competitive tax incentives have pushed more American productions overseas to countries like the UK, Canada, Hungary, Australia, and beyond. "The business has offshored in a significant way," says Steiner. "Notwithstanding the hassle of shooting overseas, offshoring shoots is providing enough savings to make it worth it. These cities [overseas] are equipped with tax credits and have seen their film talent pools grow more skilled and educated in recent years, making production even easier."

There are reasons for optimism. Over the past two years, New York has recovered a decent portion of the jobs lost in 2023, and during this period employment in the city's film and TV sector has grown faster than nearly every other film hub across the country.

Nationwide, the film and TV sector is still down 10.4 percent from 2022. But in the past year, New York has pulled ahead of other cities in terms of job growth: jobs in the city grew 7.9 percent.[38] During the same period, film and TV jobs grew by just 0.3 percent in Atlanta, by 0.1 percent in San Francisco and by 1.7 percent in Atlanta. Some hubs, including Chicago (-1.8 percent), declined.

Advertising

For decades, New York City has been the undisputed center of the nation's advertising industry. Indeed, New York accounts for 12.1 percent of all advertising jobs nationwide and employs more workers in this industry than the advertising hubs of Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas combined. In the years leading up to the pandemic, advertising was also one of the city's fastest growing industries, with employment surging by a remarkable 56 percent in the fifteen years leading up to the pandemic, from 47,300 jobs in August 2004 to 73,900 in August 2019.[39]

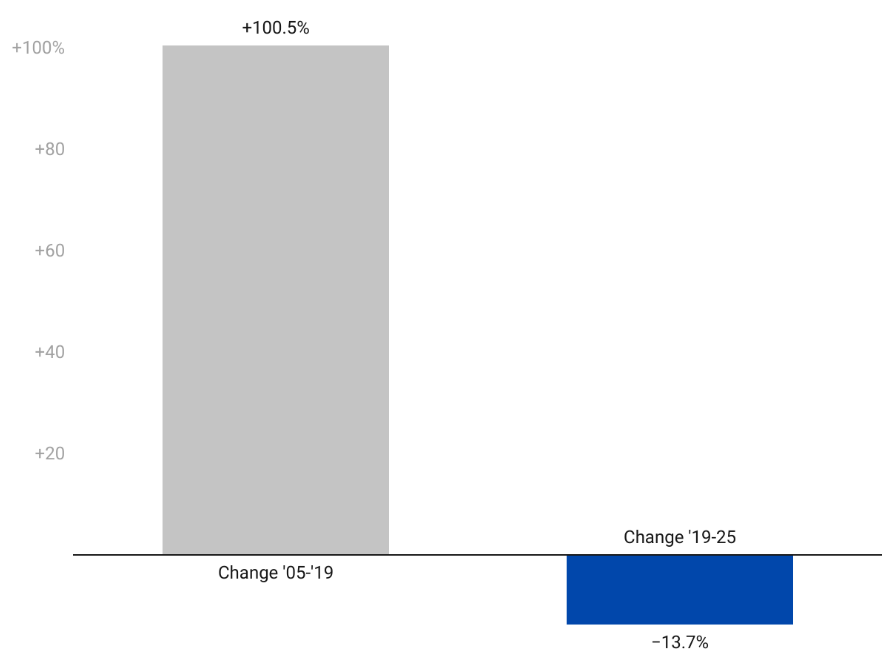
But over the past three years, employment in the city's advertising sector has declined by 10 percent, from 75,000 jobs in August 2022 to 67,500 in August 2025. There are fewer jobs in the city's advertising sector today than there were in 2014.

The pandemic dealt a major blow, but the sector recovered to pre-pandemic job levels in 2022 before shedding 5,100 jobs in 2023 and another 1,600 jobs in 2024. Industry experts cite the adoption of new technologies, including AI, as well as increasing competition from where costs are cheaper have contributed to the employment losses.

Advertising was already well-suited to remote work even before the pandemic, with global clients and computer-based tasks making online meetings routine. But the acceleration of remote work following the pandemic revealed to employers just how much more of the job could be done from anywhere.

"There's no question that New York is still the center of gravity, but New York is now not the only city," says Andrew J. Robertson , CEO of BBDO Worldwide, a global advertising agency headquartered in New York City.

NYC film and TV sector losing jobs after 15 years of gains



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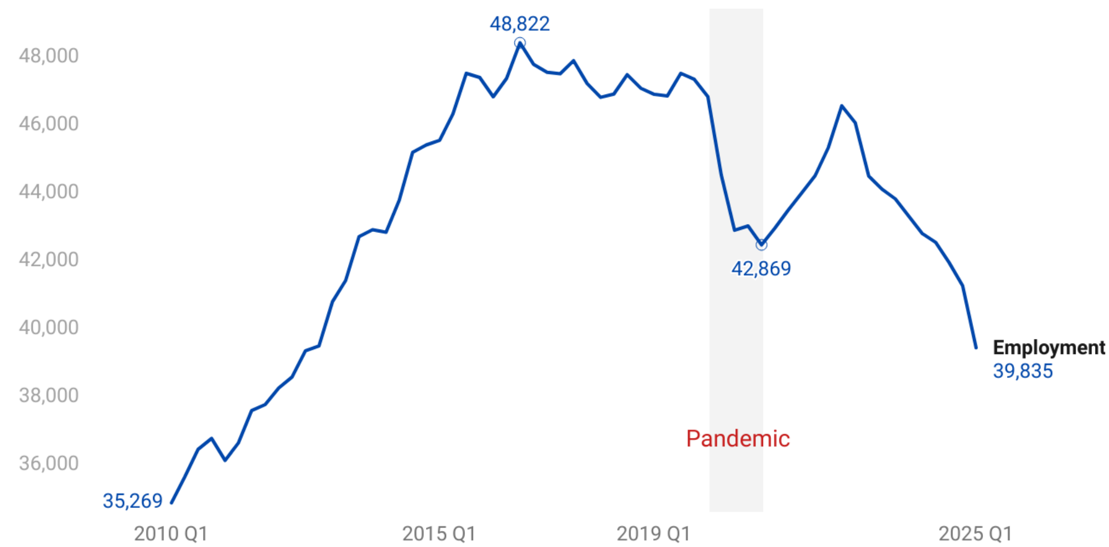
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Quarterly Cenuss of Employment & Wages. Created with Datawrapper

After a decade of growth, advertising tumbles during the pandemic - and continues to fall



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Quarterly Census of Empoyment and Wages.
Created with Datawrapper

In the past, individuals pursuing careers in advertising primarily headed to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Now, opportunities are more plentiful in several other cities, many of which have been attracting creative workers with their comparatively lower housing costs. In Miami, advertising jobs have increased by 2,054 (+20 percent) over the past decade—from 10,484 in 2014 to 12,538 in 2024—and by 1,583 since 2019 (+14 percent).[40] Since the pandemic, advertising jobs have also increased in Houston (+23 percent, up 1,180 jobs), Austin (+21 percent, up 1,007 jobs), Dallas (+16 percent, up 2,142 jobs), and Washington DC (+9 percent, up 798).

"These other cities are now emerging and taking some of [New York's market share]," says Robertson. "I don't believe New York is going to disappear as a creative center. It's just losing its absolute stranglehold. We should be worried. I just don't know how worried."

It's not just that several other cities now have a critical mass of creative workers that they lacked 10 or 15 years ago. Employers can reap substantial savings by shifting some of their work from New York to these cheaper locales. Factoring in taxes, healthcare, and real estate, Robertson estimates the cost of each desk in Dallas at $8,000 compared to $20,000 in New York. At the same time, more firms are getting comfortable with having offices all over the world: Colombia, India, and South Africa have become hotbeds for advertising work at a fraction of local costs.

AI and other new technologies may also be contributing to the industry's job losses in New York. In a recent book, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, is quoted as saying, "95 percent of what marketers use agencies, strategists, and creative professionals for today will easily, nearly instantly, and at almost no cost be handled by AI." While the true impact of AI on advertising jobs remains unclear, it is already changing workflows in significant ways.

To be sure, AI also has the potential to dramatically boost productivity, enabling agencies to create more campaigns in less time. But it could also mean producing that work with fewer people. The net effect on hiring is still unknown.

Despite the pressures reshaping the industry, New York still has an unmatched concentration of talent in advertising. "As markets grow more competitive, capturing consumer attention and building a distinctive brand has never been more critical," says Sam Appelbaum, Executive Vice President at WITHIN, a brand agency in Long Island City. "New York offers the environment that enables us to channel this energy into the ideas that make this possible."

Design

The diversity, energy, and creativity of design industries here in New York is not at the same level anywhere else", says Eileen Shaw, Executive Director of NYCxDesign, a week-long festival championing New York City's design sector. "But I worry about the shrinking pie."

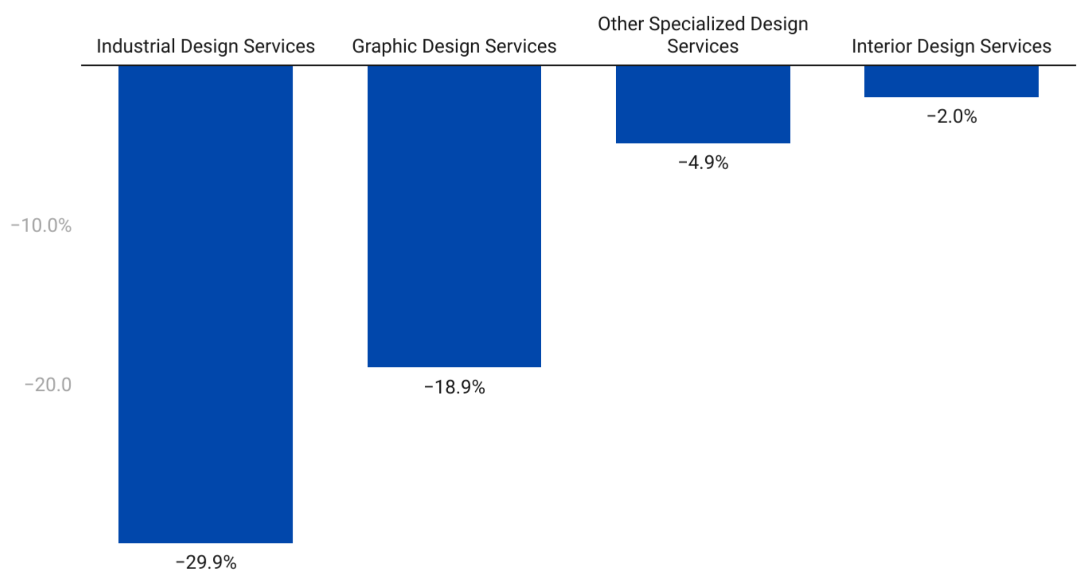
Disciplines from all ends of design are struggling. Graphic design has been hit the hardest, shedding nearly a third of its jobs over the course of the decade—from 8,740 in 2014 to 5,946 in 2024.[41] Employment in industrial design, which grew in the years leading to the pandemic, has dropped 29.9 percent from 2019. Even interior design, initially faring better by increased demand from the shutdown, remains 2 percent below 2019 employment levels.

Since the pandemic, New York City's share of all industrial design jobs in the nation declined from 4.2 percent to 2.9 percent, its share of graphic design jobs declined from 5.7 percent to 4.7 percent, and its share of interior design jobs declined from 6.4 percent to 5.7 percent. What was once a stronghold for design talent is losing ground to other regions.

Our analysis of occupational employment data confirms these troubling trends. Overall, there are nearly 5,500 fewer designers in New York today than in 2019. Indeed, while the number of designers increased by 24.1 percent from 2004 to 2019—reaching an all-time high of 39,266 in 2019—the number has since shrunk by 13.9 percent, to 33,811 in 2024. During this same five-year period, the number of graphic designers decreased by 13.5 percent, from 15,800 in 2019 to 13,667 in 2024; commercial and industrial designers fell by a third, from 1,499 to 1,012; and set and exhibit designers plunged by nearly half, from 2,907 to 1,586.

The sharp decline in designers in New York runs counter to national trends. Indeed, nationwide the number of designers has grown by 9.5 percent since 2019, increasing from 692,316 designers in 2019 to 757,871 in 2024. The result is that New York is losing some of its competitive advantage. As recently as 2019, New York City accounted for 5.7 percent of all designers in the nation; by 2024 the city's share was down to 4.5 percent. Similarly, five years ago, the city accounted for 9.2 percent of all set and exhibit designers; today it's just 5.9 percent. Its share of graphic designers fell from 5.7 percent to 4.9 percent, and its share of commercial and industrial designers fell from 4.2 percent to 3.2 percent.

Design disciplines struggle to recover to pre-pandemic levels
Change in jobs, 2019-2024



Source: Center for an Urban Future anaysis fo data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Our research suggests a mix of pressures is reshaping the field. Design has always had to adapt to new technologies, but recent advances—from the rise of AI to cheaper, more accessible design software—can make it easier to produce more work with less labor. In January 2025, the World Economic Forum predicted that graphic design will be among the fastest-declining jobs by 2030 due to advances in AI and broadening digital access.[42]

David Rhodes, president of the School of Visual Arts (SVA), observed that employers seem to be more cautious amid economic uncertainty and less willing to take chances on untested talent. And as routine tasks become more automated, the first rungs of the career ladder are becoming harder to climb. “There is a feeling among our recent graduates that they are entering a more challenged job market,” says Rhodes. “Right now, it’s harder for younger talent to break into the industry.”

Fashion

Few industries are as closely tied to New York’s identity as fashion. But that legacy is under threat today. “There is a huge recognition that the fashion landscape in New York is different from even five years ago,” says Tessa Maffucci, assistant chair of the fashion department at Pratt Institute.

Employment in the city’s fashion sector has steadily eroded over the last decade, declining by 16.2 percent, from nearly 5,000 jobs in 2014 to 4,180 in 2024.[43] And according to our analysis of occupational data, the number of fashion designers working in the city has shrunk by almost one-quarter in just five years. In total, there are now just over 5,200 fashion designers working in New York, compared with more than 7,000 in 2019.

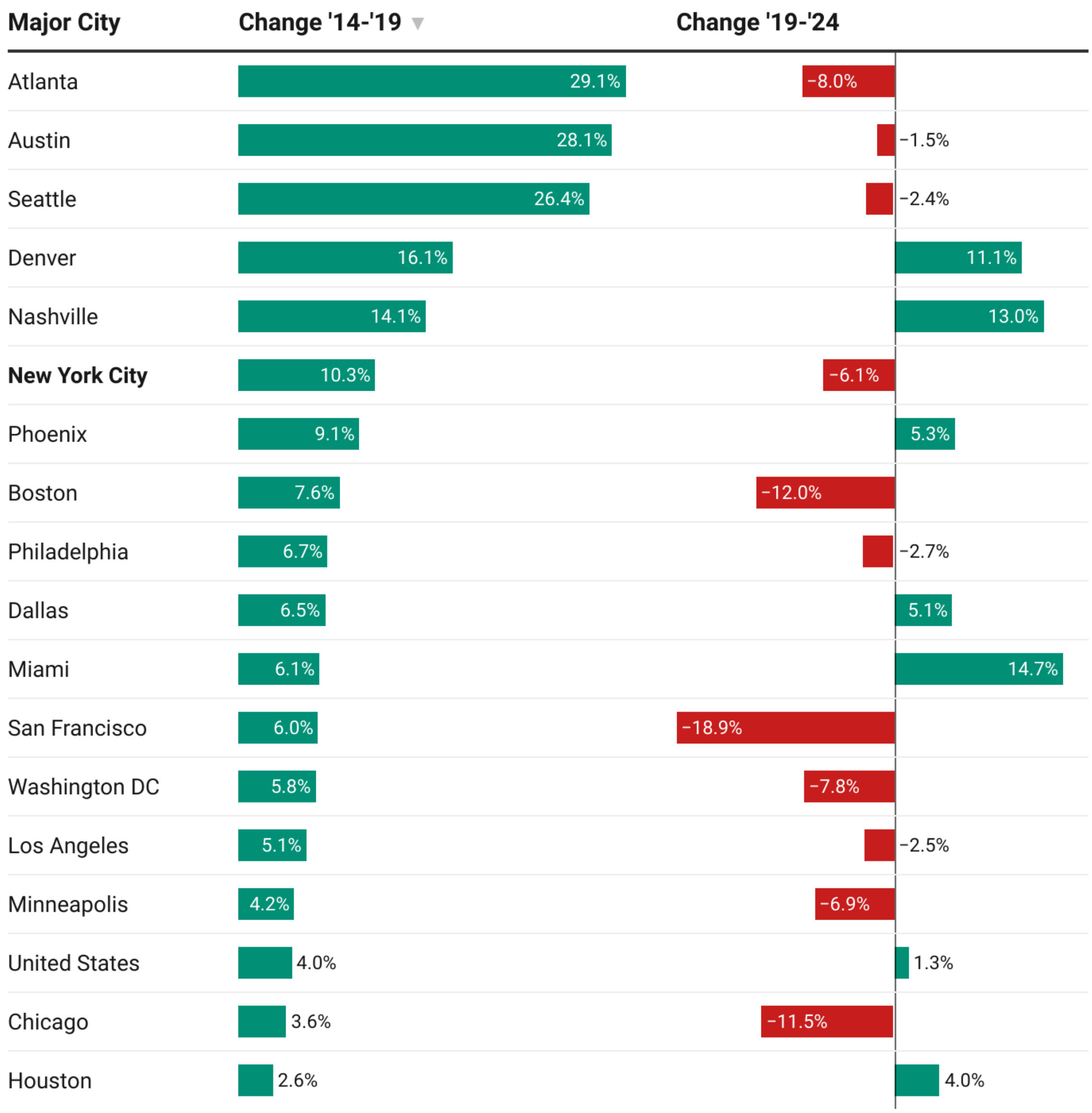
The shrinking pool is not just about total job losses, but also New York’s diminishing national influence. Ten years ago, nearly one in four fashion designers in the United States worked in New York (24.3 percent). Today, that share has slipped to fewer than one in six (16.8 percent).

A 2024 study by the Partnership for New York pointed to several key factors contributing to the decline: the rise of e-commerce and direct-to-consumer sales, which have reduced demand for in-person retail and showroom jobs; the closure of iconic specialty stores like Barneys and Henri Bendel, which once served as launching pads for emerging designers; significant consolidation among European-based fashion conglomerates; and the high cost of living and doing business in New York.[44]

At the same time, the city is losing ground to other hubs. “The fashion capitals used to just be Paris and New York—now, there’s also Shanghai and Seoul,” says David Rhodes of SVA. “These are not just big markets, but globally influential cultural forces.” The shift of fashion’s center of gravity from New York to other fast-growing markets are attracting away young talent and businesses that would otherwise find home in the city.

Once a leader, New York City's creative workforce growth has stalled

Percent change in creative workforces by city



Source: Center for an Urban Future anaysis fo data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

Section 5: The Vital Role of the Arts in Times of Crisis

No part of New York's economy was hit harder by the pandemic than the arts. Theaters went dark, galleries closed, and venues that doubled as workplaces for thousands of artists and creative workers shut down overnight. Yet even as artists lost jobs, gigs, and spaces, they became catalysts of recovery—helping New Yorkers heal, reconnect, and reimagine community life when the city needed it most.

With little official guidance in the pandemic's early days, individual artists mobilized through mutual aid. Out-of-work Broadway costumers joined the Broadway Relief Project, sewing more than two million protective gowns for city hospitals. Artists staffed many of the grassroots relief operations that sprang up across the city, from Bushwick Mutual Aid to South Bronx Mutual Aid. In Queens, the collective Little Manila responded to the crisis at Elmhurst Hospital—the epicenter of the city's pandemic response—by organizing meal deliveries for Filipino nurses and painting a bold mural reading "Mabuhay"—"long live!" in Tagalog—a message of solidarity and resilience in the city's hardest-hit neighborhood.

As streets emptied, murals and installations became New York's most visible form of civic expression. Across Chinatown, SoHo, and the Bronx, artists covered boarded-up storefronts with messages of solidarity and protest. One Chinatown mural—bright koi circling the phrase "Stop Discriminasian"—became a rallying symbol against anti-Asian violence.[45] Later that summer, artists filled entire city blocks with Black Lives Matter murals, transforming public space into a canvas for justice and collective mourning. "That's what artists have always done," says artist Sophia Victor, who designed a portion of the Foley Square Black Lives Matter mural. "The world stood still, but art kept moving."

Artists also drew attention to invisible crises. The Confined Arts, a nonprofit supporting incarcerated artists, collaborated with Brooklyn theater company The 24 Hour Plays to dramatize the spread of COVID inside prisons. Their online monologues, written from interviews with incarcerated New Yorkers, gave audiences a rare glimpse of life behind bars during the outbreak—and reminded the public who was being left behind.

As the city cautiously reopened, performers helped restore the social fabric. The NY Phil Bandwagon brought classical musicians to every borough in a repurposed pickup truck, staging 81 free outdoor concerts. "People needed a way to connect, to feel again," says founder Anthony Roth Costanzo, an opera singer. These performances—part concert, part civic ritual—helped reintroduce live art to a city struggling to imagine a future beyond day-to-day survival mode.

In 2021, City Hall formally recognized the arts' role in rebuilding with the launch of City Artist Corps: $25 million in grants to 3,000 local artists to create and present public work.[46] The results were as varied as the city itself—from *We the People*, a dance film about resilience by ZCO Dance Project founder Zazel-Chavah O'Garra, to Freak the Creek, an ecological art festival along Queens's Flushing Creek. Artists presented concerts in public parks, art exhibitions in empty storefronts, and public potlucks in closed-off streets—bringing communities together after months of shutdowns and isolation. It was the largest direct investment in artists since the Works Progress Administration and a model for how future administrations can integrate creative labor into broader strategies to drive civic engagement and local economic activity.

Section 6: The Impact of AI on NYC's Artists and Creative Economy

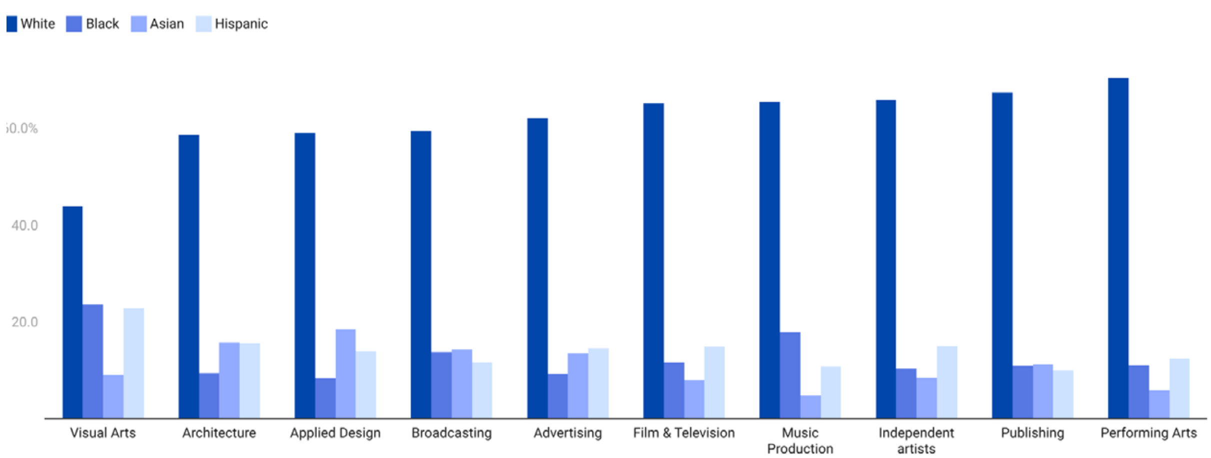
Already a global arts capital, New York City has emerged as a major center for the intersection of AI and art over the past decade. As early as 2019—before AI-generated art entered the mainstream—New York Live Arts hosted an AI x Art Symposium as part of its *Live Ideas* series.[47] That same year, ARTECHOUSE opened its Chelsea Market location, quickly becoming a destination for tourists and digital art enthusiasts.

The city's flagship institutions have since followed suit. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has featured installations by two rising stars of the AI art world—Refik Anadol in 2022 and Sasha Stiles in 2025—that use AI models to reimagine the museum's collection on its digital wall.[48] In spring 2024, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened an exhibit centered on Harold Cohen's *AARON*, the earliest AI artmaking program, accompanied by a live discussion among artists across disciplines—including a composer, an Oscar-nominated director, and a visual artist—about AI's role in their practice.[49] Smaller institutions across the boroughs are also engaging with the medium: in 2025, artist Lu Yang presented separate AI-influenced exhibits at the Queens Museum of the Moving Image and at Amant in Brooklyn.[50] For better or worse, AI art is here to stay—and New York City stands to both benefit from its promise and grapple with its risks.

AI tools offer dizzying creative possibilities, and many artists are finding innovative ways to use them. One is multimedia artist Marc da Costa, whose digital video installation *The Golden Key*—a collaboration with director Matthew Niederhauser—was on view at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in January 2025. Visitors spoke into a microphone, and da Costa's AI model responded by generating visuals and a storyline in real time, mythologizing audience input. He described the work as "an exploration of myth, mythology, and the mythic elements of AI," simultaneously using and interrogating the new medium.

AI-inspired projects like *The Golden Key* also allow artists to engage audiences with urgent social questions. At an October 2025 workshop at Asia Art Archive in America, the researcher–artist duo zzyw led partici-

The diversity deficit: creative industries



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.
Created with Datawrapper

pants through *Mountain of Many Voices*, an interactive model that lets viewers collaboratively build a world in real time. The project aimed to "lay the groundwork for deeper discussions about resisting computational control," followed by a presentation of the artists' critical research on autonomous AI.[51]

Growing interest in AI across industries has also translated into new funding opportunities for artists using the technology. In 2023, the Guggenheim announced a five-year partnership with LG to launch the LG Guggenheim Art and Technology Initiative, which includes an annual $100,000 unrestricted award for a groundbreaking artist in technology-based art.[52] The inaugural recipient was Brooklyn-based AI artist Stephanie Dinkins, whose work reached wider audiences through the partnership. Funding opportunities extend beyond the visual arts: in 2024, the Doris Duke Foundation launched its *Performing Arts Technologies Lab*, a first-of-its-kind accelerator supporting digital innovation in the performing arts. Of the 20 inaugural grantees, eight were New York City–based artists—more than from any other state—spanning ballet, jazz, lighting and sound design, and arts accessibility.[53]

Beyond the arts, creative industries such as advertising are also adapting AI tools to reimagine workflows. "Generative tools have quickly become a standby for us," says Lawrence O'Toole, head of creative innovation at The Working Assembly, a boutique agency that uses AI to visualize ad concepts on tight deadlines.

But just as AI can make creative work easier, it can also threaten it. One major concern is the use of AI to replace creative labor. Grammy-nominated producer Bill Meade was recently hired to assemble a soundtrack and asked to use AI to generate background instruments to save money. "I've been using AI tools for the last few years, but I [had] never been specifically asked to basically lose people," he says. Now chair of the AI Committee for the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) Local 802, Meade is advocating for industry-wide guidelines to protect artists.

In response to these concerns, Governor Kathy Hochul signed Senate Bill S7676B in December 2024, requiring contracts to secure an actor's consent before using their voice or likeness in AI-generated content. "That has been the basis of everything we've done in this space," says Rebecca Damon, SAG-AFTRA's New York executive director. "Not to be against AI, but to be figuring out how it works, and what the future of work looks like in light of it."

Equally troubling are AI's implications for copyright and intellectual property. Several lawsuits have been filed against AI companies that trained image-generation models on artists' work without permission.[54] Although no landmark ruling has yet been issued, Amelia Brankov, a New York–based art law and copyright attorney, believes the cases have merit: "When you're using a creative work to create another creative work that competes with the original, I think there is a strong argument that it's copyright infringement—or if it's not, then maybe the law should be changed to prevent that." Even creatives who use AI regularly remain cautious: O'Toole's agency, for example, prohibits presenting AI-generated material as original content because of its legal uncertainty.

These intellectual property concerns are fueling a growing backlash. When Christie's New York announced a February 2025 auction of AI-generated works, more than 5,700 artists signed an open letter demanding its cancellation. They cited the use of "AI models that are known to be trained on copyrighted work without a license," arguing that the sale would implicate Christie's in "AI companies' mass theft of human artists' work."[55] Composer Ed Newton-Rex, CEO of the nonprofit Fairly Trained, wrote on X that "at least nine or so" of the pieces likely relied on copyrighted data.[56] Despite the protests, the auction went forward, with total sales of $728,784.[57]

Facing economic precarity, many artists are experimenting with AI as a means of survival or innovation, while others remain deeply skeptical. "There's this asteroid that's coming to hit us," Meade warns. "Some people are paying attention, some people aren't, but it's still going to come whether you like it or not." With more creatives per capita than any other city, New York is uniquely poised to benefit from AI's possibilities—but also especially vulnerable to the disruptions it brings. It represents one of the most profound shifts in the city's cultural landscape in decades, and its full ramifications are only beginning to come into view.

Counting the Uncounted

While New York City is home to more than 129,12960 working artists, this figure doesn't reflect the full breadth of the city's arts community. Many artists are unable to financially sustain themselves through their creative work alone and instead rely on day jobs or seasonal employment to make ends meet.

"At least 90 percent of the artists we work with are not making the majority of their living on arts," says Pete Rushefsky, executive director of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, a nonprofit that supports performing arts traditions in immigrant communities. "But I wouldn't call them hobbyists. These are serious, serious artists."

These artists—those who do not make the majority of their income through their artistic practice—aren't counted under the Census label of artist and do not appear in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) artist occupation category. In practice, this means that Census and BLS data offer a distorted picture of New York City's artists—one that overstates Manhattan residency and greatly exaggerates how white and high-income the artist community is compared with reality.

While New York artists have always had to take day jobs to make ends meet—the playwright who's also a bartender, the photographer who's also a delivery driver—our research suggests that more than ever before, the uncounted artist population exceeds the number of counted artists. The pandemic and the city's rising unaffordability have only widened this gap.

The pandemic destabilizes the careers of many full-time artists, pushing some to stop making art full-time and to find other jobs to support themselves. Yawuza, a choreographer from Ghana, is one of New York City's newly uncounted artists, passionately creating art in the face of the city's challenges. Before the pandemic, he worked nearly full-time as the founder of the African dance group the Wuza Wuza Ensemble, booking performances twice a week and even going on tour around the state. Now, he only books gigs once a month or once every few months. Months behind on rent, affordability is a huge barrier to sustaining a full-time artistic career. "I had to go and find other jobs . . . I have no choice," he says.

Those jobs, while they help keep the lights on, leave artists like Yawuza physically worn out and with fewer hours to work on their craft. He currently works as a security guard, standing on his feet for hours a day. Willie, a musician specializing in Afro-Venezuelan drumming and the director of the musical group Tambor y Caña, spends hours in the blazing sun in the summer as a lifeguard and sometimes sells art on the street, when not being the primary caregiver for his child.

"Dancers are constantly grinding to find ways to survive in New York City while keeping their creative practice alive," says Karesia Batan, founder of the Queensboro Arts Festival. "They are gig workers, freelancers with sometimes four or five jobs at once, or have fulltime positions in a completely different sector and can only dance in their off time."

On top of juggling multiple jobs, many artists are on their own when it comes to managing their artistic practice and paying for space. During the cold winter months, when rehearsing outdoors is no longer an option, Willie pays $25 to $30 per hour to rent a practice space for his band of 15 to 20 people—a cost he absorbs almost entirely himself. Yawuza pays nearly $200 a month for a small 10x5 storage space for his instruments.

Yawuza and Willie make it clear that they don't want to just survive in New York City but to be active contributors to its arts and culture sector. "New York City's exciting art scene is what makes it attractive to the rest of the world," Yawuza says. "We want to be part of that."

While the city's uncounted artists aren't represented as artists in data from the Census or the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they are vital to the city's creative ecosystem. They are more racially, geographically, and economically diverse than the artists reflected in federal datasets, meaning that traditional data sources are missing huge swaths of the city's true cultural community.

Section 7: Creating a More Inclusive Creative Economy and Arts Sector

ALTHOUGH NEW YORK CITY'S CREATIVE ECONOMY has become a vital source of middle-wage jobs over the past two decades, the sector still has a long way to go before it reflects the diversity of the city—and to close glaring wage disparities.

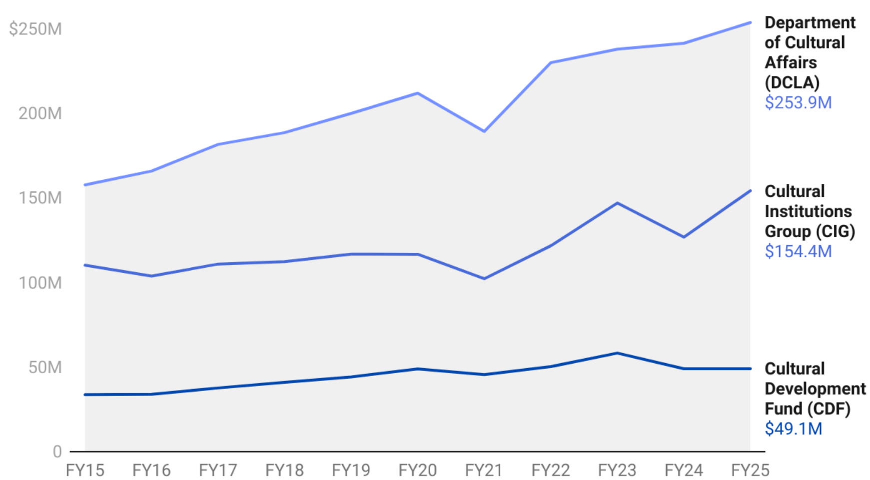
Overall, this report finds that white workers make up 61.5 percent of creative industry jobs, compared with 14.1 percent Hispanic, 11.8 percent Black, and 11.8 percent Asian workers.[58] This stands in sharp contrast to the city's overall workforce, which is 37.7 percent white, 26.6 percent Hispanic, 21.4 percent Black, and 15.3 percent Asian.

Across nearly all creative fields industries, New Yorkers of color remain underrepresented. In the least diverse field—performing arts—just 5.9 percent of workers are Asian, 11.1 percent are Black, and 14.2 percent are Hispanic, compared with 70.5 percent white. In film and television, 8 percent of workers are Asian, 11.7 percent Black, 15.3 percent Hispanic, and 65.2 percent white. In advertising, only 9.3 percent of workers are Black, 13.4 percent Hispanic, 13.5 percent Asian, and 62.2 percent white. In architecture, the workforce remains 58.7 percent white. Only the visual arts industry approaches the city's demographic mix, with 44 percent white, 24.3 percent Hispanic, 23.6 percent Black, and 9 percent Asian workers.

Despite numerous diversity pledges over the years, the overall racial makeup of the creative industries has barely changed in a decade. The share of Black workers in the creative sector actually declined by 1.9 percentage points from 2013 to 2023, while the share of Hispanic and Asian workers rose by only 0.7 and 1.8 points, respectively. (In the creative sectors, as in the economy overall, workers who identify as multiracial have notably increased.) A few industries bucked this trend—music production saw a 7.3 percentage point increase in Black workers, and Hispanic representation in architecture rose 3.6 points—but in most fields, the gaps remain entrenched.

These inequities extend beyond representation to pay. The median wage for white creative workers ($82,592) is 34.6 percent higher than for Black workers, 27.1 percent higher than for Hispanic workers, and 7.3 percent higher than for Asian workers. In architecture,

DCLA's budget nearly doubles over the last decade



CDF 's budget shown here is from FY24, the most recent data available
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.
Created with Datawrapper

white workers earn $87,465—nearly 50 percent more than Black workers and 21.5 percent more than Hispanic workers. In advertising, the median white worker earns $104,125, 39 percent higher than Black workers and 28 percent higher than Hispanic workers. In publishing, white workers earn $81,036, 31 percent higher than Black peers and 20 percent higher than Hispanic peers.

Artists of color living in financial precarity

New York's arts scene may be unmatched in scope and vitality, but its artists remain far less diverse than the city itself. Among full- and part-time artists, 67 percent are white, compared with 11.6 percent Hispanic, 10.3 percent Black, and 8.5 percent Asian.

White workers make up at least half of every artistic occupation discipline. The least diverse include music directors and composers (77.5 percent white), editors (75 percent), and writers and authors (73.3 percent).

Artists of color also face stark wage inequities in an already low-paying field. White artists earn an average of $61,121—37.1 percent more than nonwhite artists, who earn just $44,586 on average. These gaps persist across nearly every discipline:

- White dancers and choreographers earn 43 percent more than their nonwhite peers.
- White producers and directors earn 34.3 percent more.
- White photographers earn 33.4 percent more.
- White musicians and singers earn 30.2 percent more.
- White writers and authors earn 28.4 percent more.
- White editors earn 16.5 percent more.

Top-paying creative careers also tend to be the least diverse. Producers and directors, with mean earnings of $87,363, are 70.3 percent white; editors, earning $77,110, are 75 percent white. In contrast, DJs, one of the most racially diverse occupations (22.6 percent Black, 28.5 percent Hispanic), earn just $16,792 on average. Dancers, too, show greater diversity (26 percent Black, 16.6 percent Hispanic) yet earn a modest $38,644.

BIPOC-led arts organizations have faced renewed challenges since the pandemic

Artists of color are not the only ones facing inequities. Arts organizations led by and serving BIPOC communities continue to struggle disproportionately—with smaller budgets, fewer resources, and deeper pandemic losses.

A 2021 CUF analysis of 643 community-based arts organizations, using data from Americans for the Arts, found that in lower-income NYC ZIP codes—where most organizations are BIPOC-led—one in four lost access to their sole physical space during the pandemic, compared with just 12 percent of organizations in higher-income areas.[59]

Smaller organizations, often operating with limited reserves and without endowments, remain especially vulnerable. "A lot of the organizations that are rooted in communities of color and run by people of color are working with smaller budgets," says Pia Agrawal, former executive director of Staten Island Arts and current executive director of the Leeway Foundation. "If an organization's budget is $100,000 a year, for example, and they don't get $40,000 in grants they were relying on, it could shut an organization down. Without any longer-term financial commitment… [you lose] that ability to plan for the future."

As Museum Hue's *Brown Paper* notes, these organizations are vital cultural anchors in their neighborhoods—yet most operate without the stability of owning their own spaces—contributing to vulnerability in times of crisis like the pandemic, or when rents rise quickly. The report finds that the majority of POC-led arts entities in New York City rent space, operate online, or work from home offices, "often out of necessity, not choice," limiting their ability to build long-term roots in the communities they serve.[60]

Section 8: Progress in New York City Arts and Culture Policy: A Ten-Year Snapshot

Boosts in Funding for DCLA, CDF, and CIG

New York City has the largest cultural affairs budget in the country, with the city's Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) having more funds at its disposal than even the National Endowment for the Arts. And over the past decade—since the publication of the 2015 edition of our *Creative New York* report, the city has poured substantially more funding into the agency while establishing new programs focused on diversity and space.

Both DCLA and the Cultural Development Fund (CDF) have seen significant increases in funding. From FY15 to FY26, DCLA's budget rose by 89.8 percent (48 percent after adjusting for inflation).[61] Funding for the CDF—which provides more than 1,000 grants each year to cultural nonprofits and nonprofits that incorporate culture into their mission—has also grown substantially, by 45.7 percent from FY15 to FY24 (13.6 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars).[62] The number of CDF grants awarded annually increased 16.8 percent, and the median award amount more than doubled, rising 110 percent from FY15 to FY24 (63.8 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars).

In FY23, DCLA undertook a series of reforms to make the CDF application and award process more equitable. Changes included raising the minimum award amount from $5,000 to $10,000 and revising application criteria to elevate organizations in marginalized communities.[63] In the first year they were implemented, organizations with smaller operating budgets saw a notable increase in their award size, and a majority of POC-led or POC-founded organizations received higher baseline awards.[64]

The Cultural Institutions Group (CIG)—a coalition of 39 cultural organizations operating in city-owned facilities and on parkland—saw a more modest increase. CIG operational funding noticeably declined when adjusted for inflation from FY15 to FY24, but has now rebounded by 40 percent (9.1 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars) from FY15 to FY25.[65] Visitors to CIG institutions have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, increasing 21 percent from FY15 (21.6 million) to FY24 (26.1 million). Six new institutions were invited to join the CIG in recent years, including the Weeksville Heritage Center in 2020 and BRIC, the Bronx Children's Museum, the Louis Armstrong House Museum, the Noble Maritime Collection, and Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in 2025.[66]

City Programs: A Focus on Space and Diversity

Over the past decade, New York City has launched a series of ambitious initiatives to strengthen its creative ecosystem—expanding access to space, deepening equity, and better integrating the arts into city government.

In 2017, New York City released its first-ever cultural plan, CreateNYC, which surveyed the city's arts and culture landscape and identified key needs and priorities. The plan laid critical groundwork for many of the policies and investments that followed, although its enormous breadth made it difficult for city officials to prioritize among issues—and too many elements were left to DCLA to manage without sufficient funding or leadership from City Hall.[67]

The city has long recognized that access to affordable, stable space remains one of the biggest challenges facing artists and cultural organizations. Launched by DCLA and NYCEDC in 2018, the Affordable Real Estate for Artists (AREA) initiative was conceived to seed new affordable artist housing and workspaces in city-owned buildings. The city issued an RFEI and set aside capital to advance projects, but progress has been far slower than envisioned, with none of the promised housing units delivered and only a portion of the 500 planned workspaces materializing.

That same year, the city established the Mayor's Office of Nightlife, following in the footsteps of cities like Berlin and Paris. The office serves as a vital hub of support and resources for nightlife businesses, which contribute nearly 300,000 jobs and $35 billion in annual economic impact.[68] It helps maintain productive relationships between venues and surrounding communities while working to streamline permitting and improve safety

In the wake of the pandemic, the city took innovative steps to shore up vulnerable cultural organizations and strengthen the arts sector. To support artists hit hardest by the pandemic, DCLA launched City Artist Corps (CAC) in 2021, a $25 million initiative that provided 3,000 grants of $5,000 each to working artists.[69] The program funded community workshops, performances, and exhibitions in every borough, while also supporting artists who created murals in public schools, artworks in NYCHA developments, and installations for the citywide People's Festival.

NYC Create in Place, launched in 2024, coordinates interagency support for creative space retention, provides one-on-one casework for organizations at risk of displacement, and maintains a centralized online hub of technical and financial resources. The initiative has been effective in mobilizing agency support, including help from the Department of Small Business Services in response to a devastating fire in Red Hook that destroyed dozens of artists' studios and archives. Early activity has demonstrated strong demand for its services—but meaningful impact will depend on securing dedicated funding to act on the space numerous challenges the program has surfaced.[70]

DCLA has also expanded programs that embed artists directly into civic life. The Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) program, launched in 2015, pairs artists with city agencies to collaboratively design creative responses to public challenges.[71] Artists receive $40,000 to work alongside agency staff for at least a year, developing projects that engage New Yorkers and reimagine how government interacts with the public.[72]

Other programs aim to activate public space through art. City Canvas, launched in partnership with the Department of Buildings, allows property owners to transform construction sheds and scaffolding with temporary art installations. The program provides a pathway for artists to secure paid commissions while brightening the city's streetscape.[73]

DCLA has also invested in programs designed to diversify the city's cultural workforce. The CUNY Cultural Corps, launched in 2016 with Rockefeller Foundation support, connects CUNY students—among the most diverse higher education populations in the country—with paid internships at nearly 90 cultural organizations.[74] In FY20, it became a permanent line item in the DCLA budget.[75] For mid-career professionals, the CreateNYC Leadership Accelerator provided professional development and networking opportunities for emerging leaders from underrepresented backgrounds.

At the state level, policymakers have begun integrating artists more directly into government and economic development. The FY25 state budget allocated $500,000 to launch the first-ever artist residency program within state agencies. That same year, the state's Regional Economic Development Councils dedicated a record 10 percent of all funding to arts and culture projects—up from just 3.7 percent in 2021—reflecting growing recognition of the sector's role in driving inclusive economic growth.[76]

Bronx Arts Ensemble Strings (Jorge Ávila, Violin; Evelyn Petcher Brandes, violin; Eliot Bailen, cello; Sally Shumway, viola). Photo by Hector Olivieri

Section 9: Beyond DCLA: Cross-Agency Opportunities to Support the Arts

EVEN THOUGH NEW YORK CITY HAS INVESTED MORE in the arts since 2015, it doesn't always feel like it. The number of arts organizations has surged across the five boroughs, stretching funding thinner than ever, and many individual artists and cultural nonprofits have yet to fully recover from the pandemic. With DCLA representing just 0.26 percent of the city's $116 billion budget, the agency's resources alone can't ensure a sustainable rebound for the arts—or the vitality of the city's creative economy. Supporting artists and cultural organizations will require a broader, cross-agency commitment that embeds arts policy across the fabric of city government.

NYC DOT Arts: Getting Art Out of Galleries and Into the Streets

NYC DOT's Arts Program plays a crucial role in bringing art out of museums and into the public realm—transforming sidewalks, plazas, archways, and other urban structures into canvases. The agency runs several programs that commission temporary and permanent public artworks across all five boroughs, often in partnership with community-based organizations (CBOs) and business improvement districts (BIDs). Through its NYC DOT Art Partners program, local groups can collaborate with artists to create temporary installations on DOT-approved sites, helping bring more color and creativity to the city's streets.

Since 2015, NYC DOT Arts Partners has helped realize more than 190 installations citywide, according to data shared by DOT on NYCOpenData. Yet access remains uneven. A disproportionate number of projects have clustered in wealthier, better-resourced neighborhoods like Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene (49 installations), Midtown and Flatiron (46), and the Financial District and Greenwich Village (22). Meanwhile, areas such as Jackson Heights and East Elmhurst have seen just one, and Staten Island only two, over the same period.

The program's lengthy and complex application process has also proven a barrier for many groups. "If you're coming at it for the first time, it's really hard; and it creates a lot of barriers to actually get these projects done," says one leader of an organization that manages public space. Applicants often face a 90-day window between submission and installation, multiple rounds of agency review, and overlapping permitting requirements that deter smaller organizations.

Funding is another challenge. NYC DOT Art Partners does not provide financial support to community partners, leaving them to cover costs such as artist fees, insurance, and staffing. "It's just so expensive to bring these installations to New York City. It costs tens of thousands of dollars per installation. Funding support would be great," says the leader of the organization that manages public space. Well-resourced BIDs find the process costly, and smaller groups with limited capacity are effectively shut out. Easing administrative burdens and dedicating matching funds could help expand the program's reach to more neighborhoods across the city.

Public Art in NYC Parks: Expanding the City's Open-Air Museum

NYC Parks manages what is arguably New York's largest art gallery: more than 800 permanent monuments, including 250 sculptures, plus roughly 150 temporary art installations on view each year.[77] These range from murals painted on basketball courts to fiber sculptures installed in meadows and plazas—like the Richmond Hill Art Hub in Lieutenant Frank McConnell Park, which doubles as a stage, seating area, and little free library.

Despite its scale, the public art program operates with only two full-time staff members responsible for reviewing applications, ensuring safety compliance, and coordinating logistics. Their dedication has helped Parks increase temporary exhibitions by 76.5 percent since 2015[78], but the department lacks the capacity and resources to proactively commission new work—especially outside Manhattan, which hosts an average of 76 installations per year, compared to 29 in Brooklyn, 27 in Queens, 10 in the Bronx, and just three in Staten Island.

Bringing art to more communities will require additional investment. "I think we would like to do more to support emerging artists… or artists who don't have access to certain levels of funding," says Elizabeth Masella, senior public art coordinator at NYC Parks. "I think having the funding would entice artists to maybe think about those neighborhoods or give artists who may not otherwise have the opportunity the [chance] to do these types of things." Insurance costs—typically $1,200 to $2,000 per project—also remain a major barrier for individual artists.

Beyond sculpture and installations, NYC Parks oversees dozens of amphitheaters and bandshells that host musical performances but are vastly underutilized. The Seuffert Bandshell in Forest Park, for example, hosts only six summer concerts per year—four of them tribute acts. Expanding programming at these public venues could bring new cultural life to parks citywide and help make the arts a more regular feature of neighborhood life.[79]

NYCEDC: Boosting Support for Individual Artists

As the city's main economic development agency, NYCEDC plays a critical role in shaping the future of New York's creative economy. While not an arts agency, NYCEDC's investments in cultural infrastructure—from soundstages to studio space—help sustain the industries that make New York a global creative capital. In recent years, NYCEDC has supported the film and television industry, digital gaming, and fashion through initiatives like the Game Design Future Lab and the development of MADE Bush Terminal, which will house space for artisans and workforce programs in the entertainment sector.

NYCEDC also oversees major capital projects for cultural institutions, such as the renovation of The Bronx Museum, and helped deliver 26 artist studios through the Spofford Redevelopment Project. Yet to truly keep artists in New York, NYCEDC will need to expand its focus on individual creative workers—especially when it comes to space.

Through the Affordable Real Estate for Artists (AREA) initiative, NYCEDC and DCLA once set a goal of developing 500 artist studios and 1,500 affordable housing units for cultural workers by 2025. While the program delivered 50,000 square feet of affordable studio space at the Brooklyn Army Terminal and 293 individual studio spaces, it fell short of its ambitious targets.[80] Future NYCEDC-led redevelopment projects—like the ongoing transformation of Gansevoort Square, which will include 600 housing units, half of them affordable—could help correct that.[81] Designating a portion of those affordable apartments as artist housing would both honor the area's creative legacy and ensure that artists can continue to live and work in the neighborhoods that define the city's cultural identity.

EDC has also experimented with integrating artists directly into its work. In 2017, it hosted three Artists in Residence who collaborated with residents of Hunts Point and the South Bronx on climate resiliency projects.[82] Replicating this model across more NYCEDC initiatives could bring new perspectives to urban design, deepen community engagement, and infuse creativity into the agency's public projects. NYCEDC could also strengthen its commitment by dedicating one percent of all capital spending to public art—making the existing "Percent for Art" program the gold standard across all NYCEDC-managed capital projects.

PAIR Program: Artists Inside City Agencies

The Department of Cultural Affairs' Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) program demonstrates how embedding artists within city agencies can generate public value well beyond the arts sector.[83] Launched in 2015 and inspired by artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles's decades-long residency at the Department of Sanitation, PAIR has placed 27 artists across 20 city agencies.[84]
Residents receive $40,000 and desk space to collaborate with public servants for at least one year on civic challenges, engaging communities through creativity. Recent PAIR projects have reimagined public archives, illuminated hidden histories, and fostered civic pride. Brooklyn-based artist Kameron Neal, who completed his residency with the Department of Records and Information Services, created *Down the Barrel (of a Lens)*—a video installation built from digitized NYPD surveillance films that examined policing in New York between the 1960s and 1980s. After debuting at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in 2023, it went on view at Lincoln Center.

Other PAIR projects have tackled timely social issues. Artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, working with the Commission on Human Rights, launched a powerful public art campaign confronting anti-Asian hate during the pandemic, displayed on bus shelters and subway stations citywide. Artist sTo Len, in residence at the Department of Sanitation, invited New Yorkers to reconsider their relationship to waste through workshops and participatory art.

Now entering its second decade, PAIR remains one of the most inventive cross-agency arts programs in the country—but it could grow even further. Major agencies like Buildings, City Planning, Housing Preservation and Development, and Youth and Community Development have never hosted a resident, yet their work shapes New Yorkers' daily lives. Embedding artists there could spark new forms of civic engagement and help reimagine how government connects with residents.

To fully harness the potential of this model, the city could create permanent, full-time artist-in-residence positions within select agencies—allowing artists' insights to take root and generate long-term impact. These creative collaborations show that when city government makes space for art, it makes space for innovation, empathy, and community at every level.

Courtesy of the American Dance Festival Travelogue (1977), Performers: Catherine Kirk, Savannah Gaillard, Jennifer Payán, Burr Johnson, Claude CJ Johnson, Ashley Merker, Spencer Weidi; Photo by © Ben McKeown

Section 10: Policy Recommendations

WITHOUT BOLD, COORDINATED ACTION FROM CITY AND STATE POLICYMAKERS, THE CITY RISKS LOSING THE artists, organizations, and creative businesses that help power its economy and define its identity. The following series of recommendations will ensure artists not just survive but thrive in New York City over the next decade.

1. Make New York more affordable—for artists and everyone

The single most effective step city and state leaders can take to sustain New York's creative sector is to tackle the affordability crisis head-on. Soaring housing costs have made it nearly impossible for many artists and creative professionals to live and work here. Reversing this trend will require a massive increase in housing production citywide—including deeply affordable, workforce, and middle-income units—paired with reforms to unlock more supply in every borough. The City of Yes for Housing Opportunity is an important step forward, but far more will be needed to meaningfully expand the city's housing supply. Policymakers should build on City of Yes by extending as-of-right zoning to more transit-rich areas, fully eliminating remaining parking minimums, streamlining permitting and environmental review processes that continue to delay projects, legalizing accessory dwellings more broadly across low-rise neighborhoods, expanding opportunities for small-site and missing-middle infill, establishing a viable financing framework to support new rental housing production, and strengthening preservation tools to stabilize the city's existing affordable housing stock. Without these changes, ambitious new housing targets will fall short—and New York risks losing the creative core that powers its economy and civic life.

2. Create 5,000 artist-preference housing units by 2030

New York City has fallen behind the rest of the state—and the nation—when it comes to developing affordable housing for artists. To reverse this, the city should commit to building or designating 5,000 artist-preference units by 2030, achieved through modest set-asides in citywide affordable housing projects, prioritized on public land and in mixed-income developments. HPD should issue clear guidance on artist-preference policy modeled on state standards to ensure equitable, transparent implementation. The city should also create a biennial NYC Artist Survey and dashboard to collect better data on artists' housing and space needs. In parallel, policymakers should develop a citywide "Artist Live/Work Standard" that establishes zoning and code models for safe, practical mixed-use housing. Artist-preference units should also be incorporated into office-to-residential conversions, and a new Artist Housing Accelerator should help fund early-stage costs for projects serving this vital but vulnerable workforce.

3. Launch NYC's first five-borough cultural festival

New York is home to a rich array of annual cultural events—from Lunar New Year celebrations and the West Indian Day Parade to the Tribeca Film Festival and the Armory Show. But the city still lacks a signature, citywide festival on the scale of Austin's SXSW, the Venice Biennale, or the Edinburgh Fringe, which generates more than 3 million ticket sales and $630 million in economic impact for a much smaller city. A Five Borough Cultural Festival—coordinated by the city and designed to build on and amplify the many festivals and programs already happening throughout the year—would give residents and visitors a powerful new reason to explore the city's creative landscape.

With strong mayoral leadership, the festival would enlist hundreds of venues and organizations across all five boroughs and open streets, plazas, parks, historic buildings, and city-owned properties for music, dance, theater, visual art, open studios, and immersive experiences—while significantly easing red tape for outdoor cultural programming. The first iteration need not be prohibitively complex; simply identifying a week in the calendar, rallying existing partners, and putting the mayor's support behind a unified cultural moment could go a long way toward making this a reality. Over time, sponsorships, ticketed events, and festival passes could offset much of the cost, while the city focuses on coordination, access to public space, streamlined permitting, and resilience planning.

4. Launch a portable benefits pilot for freelancers and self-employed artists

Nearly one-third of New York's creative workers are freelancers, independent contractors, or self-employed—and they're part of a rapidly growing independent workforce citywide. Yet most lack access to the basic safety nets that full-time employees rely on: health insurance subsidies, paid leave, retirement savings, and unemployment support. To make creative work more sustainable and address deep inequities facing creative workers of color, the next mayor should launch a portable benefits system that allows independent workers to accrue and keep essential benefits as they move between gigs, employers, or sectors. Rather than building a new public agency, the city should partner with a trusted nonprofit like Freelancers Union to administer portable accounts, with proportional contributions from employers, platforms, and public funding.

A streamlined, universally accessible portable benefits system would reduce economic precarity across the arts while strengthening the broader freelance and gig workforce. Benefits should follow the worker—not the job—and include options such as health-insurance subsidies, paid leave, and retirement savings. By pooling contributions and simplifying enrollment, New York can ensure that independent workers receive meaningful, durable support without adding administrative burdens. This approach would help stabilize creative careers, boost equity, and keep more artists and freelancers in the city for the long term.

5. Establish a pooled insurance program for venues and cultural nonprofits

Insurance costs have become one of the most punishing—and destabilizing—expenses facing New York City's arts organizations and small venues, with premiums doubling or tripling since the pandemic. To prevent further closures, the next mayor should launch a city-facilitated pooled insurance program that allows cultural organizations to access affordable coverage through collective purchasing power. The city should partner with NYCEDC or SBS and a trusted nonprofit intermediary to negotiate discounted group rates for liability, property, event, and venue insurance, with additional subsidies for organizations under $1 million in annual revenue.

The pooled program could function similarly to group health purchasing alliances: organizations join voluntarily, the city helps secure better prices and stronger underwriting, and a nonprofit administrator handles enrollment and compliance. Over time, the city should commission a feasibility study on establishing a captive insurance entity or risk retention mechanism specifically for the arts and nightlife sector—creating a long-term, self-sustaining solution. In the near term, however, a collective purchasing pool would provide immediate relief, freeing up scarce organizational dollars for programming, staff, and community engagement—and helping small venues survive in every borough

6. Help cultural organizations build long-term stability and increase flexibility

For many small and mid-sized arts organizations, the rising cost of space has become a fundamental barrier to stability. While ownership is not the right solution for every group—particularly those without the balance sheet, staffing capacity, or financial cushion to manage a building—preserving existing cultural spaces and supporting the subset of organizations that are prepared to take on ownership can be essential to ensuring long-term community cultural assets. The city and state should launch a Cultural Ownership Fund focused on helping mission-driven cultural organizations retain space already in the sector and supporting those with the capacity to responsibly acquire or co-locate in permanent homes, with priority for groups rooted in lower-income communities.

At the same time, any ownership strategy must be paired with policies that help organizations keep their operations strong and adaptable. This includes scaling shared back-office services—such as accounting, payroll, HR, and benefits—by expanding cooperative models like ArtsPool, and supporting shared-space arrangements that allow multiple organizations to co-locate, program jointly, or share rehearsal, performance, and fabrication facilities. Flexibility is just as important as stability, which is why the city should also reform its overly cumbersome Temporary Place of Assembly permitting process so that arts and culture producers can more easily activate unused spaces for performances, exhibitions, and concerts.

7. Scale up NYCEDC's support for the creative economy

NYCEDC already plays a role in supporting the city's creative economy, but its focus and resources remain far smaller than those devoted to sectors like life sciences, green tech, or manufacturing. To meet the scale of the challenge, NYCEDC should elevate and expand its Creative Industries work into a core pillar of the agency's economic strategy, on par with other growth sectors. That means dedicating new staff and funding to coordinate investments across design, advertising, music, fashion, and film; embedding creative industry goals in every NYCEDC capital project; and integrating creative workforce development into the agency's training and entrepreneurship programs.

NYCEDC should commit to dedicating at least 1 percent of capital budgets to public art or creative placemaking in every capital project—building on the existing Percent for Art law but applying it more consistently and intentionally across EDC-managed developments. By involving artists much earlier in the design process, EDC can move beyond end-stage murals or sculptures and integrate creative elements from the start, from outdoor performance spaces to artist work areas or artist-designed architectural features, ensuring capital investments strengthen the city's cultural vitality. The agency should also expand shared production hubs for music, podcasting, and small creative businesses and launch signature initiatives such as Independent Film Week and a global NYC Music Summit to cement the city's standing as a creative capital. At the same time, NYCEDC should partner with industry leaders to stabilize struggling sectors—including advertising, design, and film—through business incubators, export assistance, and targeted workspace incentives.

8. Embed artists across city government

New York's Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) program has already shown the power of integrating artists into city agencies—but its reach remains limited, touching only a small share of the government. The next mayor should expand PAIR tenfold and create full-time civic artist positions embedded within high-impact agencies such as Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), Transportation (DOT), Youth and Community Development (DYCD), City Planning (DCP), and Buildings (DOB)—none of which have ever hosted a PAIR artist, despite their central role in shaping daily life. Each agency should develop a "+Art" initiative—DOT + Art, Parks + Art, Hospitals + Art—pairing artists with public servants to co-design creative projects, community engagement campaigns, and civic improvements.

These collaborations can transform everyday infrastructure into platforms for expression, from installations in civic buildings to youth engagement programs, public-space activations, and community-building cultural events. Embedding artists across these agencies would strengthen trust between residents and government, make civic spaces more welcoming, and help address complex challenges with new creative tools. Expanding PAIR beyond the handful of agencies that have participated to date would signal that creativity is a core city function—not an afterthought—and weave the arts more fully into urban problem-solving.

9. Generate dedicated, recurring revenue for the arts

Even with steadily increasing cultural budgets, the city's arts ecosystem remains vulnerable to fiscal swings—including federal funding cuts—even as the number of cultural nonprofits has surged over the past decade. To improve stability, policymakers should establish recurring revenue streams dedicated to arts and culture. One approach is a voluntary surcharge on overnight hotel stays with proceeds directed to a "Parks and Culture Fund" supporting both public art and recreation. The city could also pilot designated Cultural Districts, funded through modest assessments on nearby property owners, to sustain programming and maintenance in key cultural corridors. Together, these mechanisms would ensure predictable funding for the arts while aligning investment with the tourism, development, and quality-of-life benefits that culture generates citywide.

In addition to generating new revenue, the city should make its existing public funding more reliable and equitable. The mayor should prioritize reforms to the Department of Cultural Affairs' Cultural Development Fund to ensure timely payments, transparent reporting, and more stable multiyear operating support for midsized cultural organizations. Establishing a new tier of "Cultural Organizations Group" grantees—between the major Cultural Institutions Group and smaller nonprofits—would provide predictable funding to hundreds of midsized organizations that anchor local creative ecosystems but currently face chronic instability.

10. Launch a Creative Pathways Initiative across NYC public schools and CUNY

New York City's creative economy does not reflect the diversity of the city—and without deliberate action, those inequities will remain. To ensure that far more New Yorkers can access the well-paying careers in design, film and TV, advertising, creative tech, performing arts, and cultural management, city leaders should launch a Creative Pathways and Talent Pipeline Initiative spanning NYC Public Schools and CUNY. At the K–12 level, the next administration should make the creative economy the next major focus of FutureReadyNYC, building on the initiative's progress in business, technology, healthcare, and education. This should include establishing Creative Schools NYC, a new effort to guarantee meaningful, sequential arts and creative-skills learning in every grade band; expanding highly effective but small-scale nonprofit programs; integrating creative occupations into the city's youth apprenticeship efforts; and increasing creative-sector participation in the Summer Youth Employment Program. A centralized employer-matching effort—guided by a new creative-sector advisory council—would help ensure that work-based learning opportunities reach far more schools and students. At the postsecondary and early-career level, the city should establish a Creative Economy Talent Pipeline that connects CUNY students and adult learners with paid internships, mentorship, and clear routes into a full range of creative careers—building on and going beyond the CUNY Cultural Corps, which is exclusively focused on nonprofit arts. This effort should replicate the success of CUNY 2X Tech through a CUNY 2X Creative initiative, designed to bring career exploration, mentorship, and industry expertise to CUNY students interested in creative careers.

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