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Center *for an*
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CENTRAL NYS
CREATIVE
SPARK

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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.

CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK

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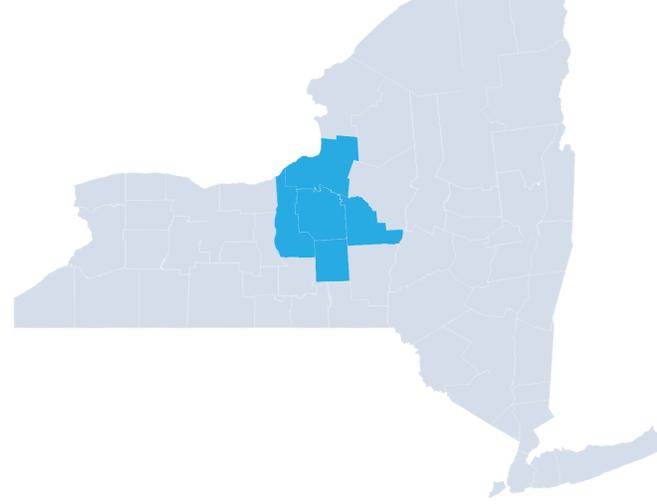
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Regional Arts Profile

Central New York



IN EVERY CORNER OF DOWNTOWN SYRACUSE, ARTISTS have been breathing new life into underused spaces. The atrium of a government building on East Washington Street was transformed into Art in the Atrium, a free performance and exhibition venue, in 2023. Two years later and one block away, the former storage room of a shoe repair shop became Brewer Harris Projects, a micro-gallery celebrating art by women, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ communities, and along three downtown streets, the contemporary gallery Midoma has enlivened vacant storefront windows with paintings by local artists.

The upstarts join a cadre of established arts and cultural institutions experiencing a revival in Syracuse. The Landmark Theatre, a former cinema originally opened in 1928, had its best sales year ever in 2023-2024, selling 142,629 tickets.¹ The Everson Museum of Art, an American art museum with a renowned ceramics collection, unveiled the renovation of its East Wing in 2024, featuring a cafe where diners can use ceramics from the new Louise Rosenfield collection. Redhouse Arts Center unveiled a new LED marquee—the first new-theater marquee shining over Salina Street in more than 100 years.²

Syracuse's prolific arts and cultural sector hints at a broader shift underway throughout Central New York, where artists and arts organizations have been growing their presence despite their own widespread financial instability. The Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown added 27 works, including a Georgia O'Keefe piece, to its fine art collection in 2024.³ The Schweinfurth Art Center—renowned for its fiber arts programming—and the Cayuga Museum of History & Art in Auburn celebrated the grand opening of West End Arts Campus, an expansion connecting the two institutions, in May 2025. And when Arts at the Palace, a nonprofit arts organization in Hamilton, launched Creative Endeavors, a six-week workshop for artists seeking to develop their creative process into a freelance business, in 2024, slots quickly filled with visual artists, musicians, writers, and podcasters.

"We have such an incredibly rich variety of cultural assets here, ranging from history and heritage to marquee venues that attract high profile entertainers," says Alex Korman, interim executive director of CNY Arts, a nonprofit organization that supports Central New York artists and arts groups through grant-making and capacity-building programs.

The region's cultural vibrancy is also attracting more young people. A USA Today analysis of 2021 Census Bureau data ranked Syracuse among the top 10 cities where Generation Z (ages 18-24) is moving. That year, the city welcomed 6,549 Generation Z transplants from other states, ranking 7th among cities nationally, and the most common destination in New York state.⁴

The number of artists living in Central New York has been booming for more than a decade. Working artists grew 34.5 percent from 1,381 in 2014 to 1,858 in 2024—even as the total population declined 1.5 percent.⁵ "What I love right now about the city of Syracuse is I am seeing so many Black and brown burgeoning artists pop up," says Jaleel Campbell, a Syracuse artist whose work includes digital illustration, dollmaking, painting, and fiber art. Campbell is also a co-founder of the Black Artist Collective, an advocacy organization that organizes community events and helps artists access resources. "When I first started out, in about 2012-2013, there were only a handful of young Black creatives out here doing this work," Campbell says.

Artists from Central New York have been demonstrating prowess across multiple forms to reach audiences that have often been overlooked. Joshua Sargent, a comedian from the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, has produced over 100 episodes of three podcasts by Native Peoples with support from Rematriation, a media company focused on Indigenous culture. Ellen M. Blalock, a multidisciplinary artist from Syracuse, became the first artist-in-residence at the Schweinfurth Art Center in 2022, helping connect the museum with Auburn's Black community and guiding locals in photography, oral history, and quilting projects.⁶

Syracuse-based writer Victor María Chamán convened immigrants from throughout Central New York for a collaborative book project titled *¡PA'LANTE!—Onward!—Glimpses of Immigrant Stories*. “I believe that the impact on the collaborators is immeasurable,” Chamán says. “They may be reminded of their power and the validity of their choices, not only as people, but as artists.”⁷

Campbell exhibited *In Secrecy*, a series of 14 digital-art illustrations examining the lives of gay Black men, at ArtRage gallery from November 2024 through January 2025.⁸ Theater and visual artist Martikah Williams self-produced her first full-length play, *Finals*, which premiered at the Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse in January 2024.

Laura Reeder, a visual artist and educator focused on the environment, became an artist-in-residence for Syracuse Parks & Recreation, using snow, leaves, and grass to create seasonal installations in city parks with help from local students. “I’m very interested in putting artwork in the parks. It meets the neighborhoods, because so many people who live in Syracuse don’t frequent downtown,” says Anne Cofer, the Syracuse Public Arts Coordinator, who facilitated Reeder’s project.

Arts and culture sector employment in Central New York has been driving growth in the region—jobs are up 23.1 percent over the last decade, from 1,353 in 2014 to 1,666 in 2024.⁹ By contrast, overall employment in the region has declined 1.1 percent over the same period, with some industries contracting dramatically—including finance and insurance (down 21.4 percent), retail (down 11.9 percent), and educational services (down 6.9 percent).

Korman, interim executive director of CNY Arts, is originally from the Syracuse area. He lived in New York City and toured as a theater actor for a decade after college before returning to Central New York. He sees “a very direct throughline” between the region’s thriving arts scene and more young people deciding to stay. “I have a number of creative peers who are from the area. They don’t want to feel that they need to move to New York (City) or Los Angeles by necessity. They would prefer to remain in the area, to the extent that there’s sufficient opportunity for them,” Korman says.

While the artist population has grown, about 68 percent of Central New York artists surveyed through Creatives Rebuild New York say that they could not cover a \$400 cash emergency.

Almost 40 percent say they have experienced housing insecurity, and 33 percent have experienced food insecurity.

Investments in the arts by Central New York cities and counties, as well as New York state, have lessened some of the burden, launched new arts organizations, and enabled new partnerships. Art in the Atrium, a free community art and culture space created by CNY Arts and ChaShaMa, a New York City-based organization, has been made possible because the City of Syracuse donated the space, and the County of Onondaga, Central New York Community Foundation, and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) have provided support. The Landmark’s unprecedented season—and projected ticket sales of 160,000 to 165,000 in 2024–2025—follows a \$300,000 grant that it received as part of a \$5 million FY 2024 New York State budget allocation for Alive Downtowns, a group of 13 historic theaters across Upstate that banded together to advocate for sustainable funding.¹⁰ The expansion between the Schweinfurth Art Center and Cayuga Museum of History & Art was funded by a 2018 New York State Downtown Revitalization Initiative award of \$10 million to Downtown Auburn.¹¹ Anne Cofer became Syracuse’s public arts coordinator in May 2024, marking the first time that the city has had a full-time public art coordinator since 2009-2010.

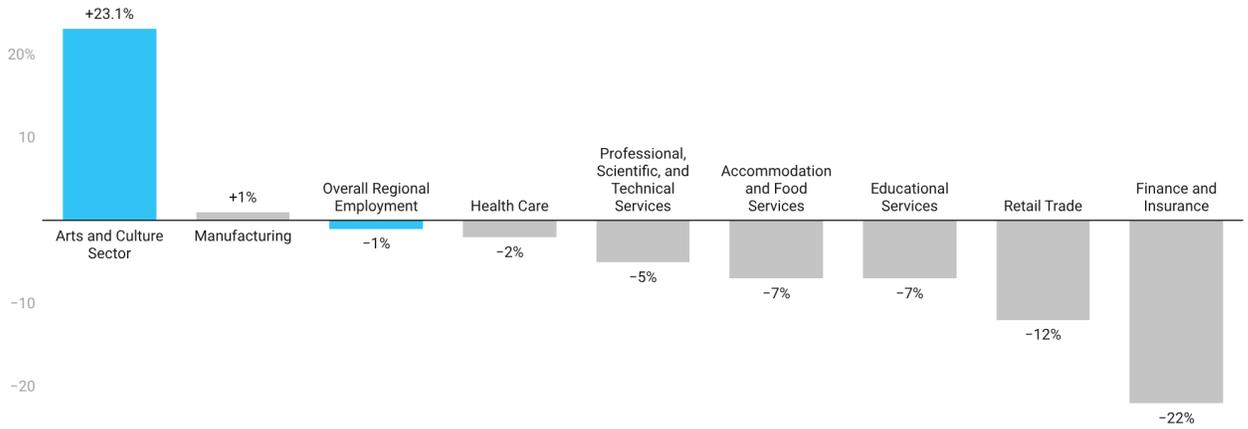
Central New York received \$2.29 million in NYSCA funding in FY 2025 (2.6 percent of total statewide funding), \$235,000 in National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding, and eight modest arts and culture-related grants as a part of its REDC funding, including \$100,000 for a three-day free New York State Blues Festival in Syracuse, funding for the Syracuse Orchestra, and grants for historic preservation.

With proposed cuts to NYSCA funding in the governor’s FY 2027 executive budget, and the cancellation of grants from the NEA, Central New York’s progress can’t be taken for granted, says Korman. “Private funders often follow the government’s lead,” he says. That could threaten venues like the 43,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art Redhouse Arts Center and the economic impact it drives: 50,000 people flock there annually, and at least 80 percent of hires for mainstage productions are local residents.¹² “Arts and culture is such a labor-intensive field and creates so many jobs, and it’s such an effective catalyst for economic development,” Korman says. “But in order to maintain that momentum, it does require a consistent degree of support.”

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2. "Why Investment in the Arts Is Critical to the Economic Revitalization of Downtown Syracuse," *CNY Vitals*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.cnyvitals.org/why-investment-in-the-arts-is-critical-to-the-economic-revitalization-of-downtown-syracuse/>.
3. "Masterworks at the Fenimore Museum," *The Magazine Antiques*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/article-masterworks-at-the-fenimore-museum/>.
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9. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
10. Tulloch, "Syracuse's Historic Landmark Theatre Celebrates Best-Selling Season Ever."
11. "Central New York: Auburn," *New York State Government, Downtown Revitalization Initiative*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.ny.gov/downtown-revitalization-initiative/central-new-york-auburn>.
12. "Why Investment in the Arts Is Critical to the Economic Revitalization of Downtown Syracuse," *CNY Vitals*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.cnyvitals.org/why-investment-in-the-arts-is-critical-to-the-economic-revitalization-of-downtown-syracuse/>.

Arts and culture surge as other sectors struggle in Central New York

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

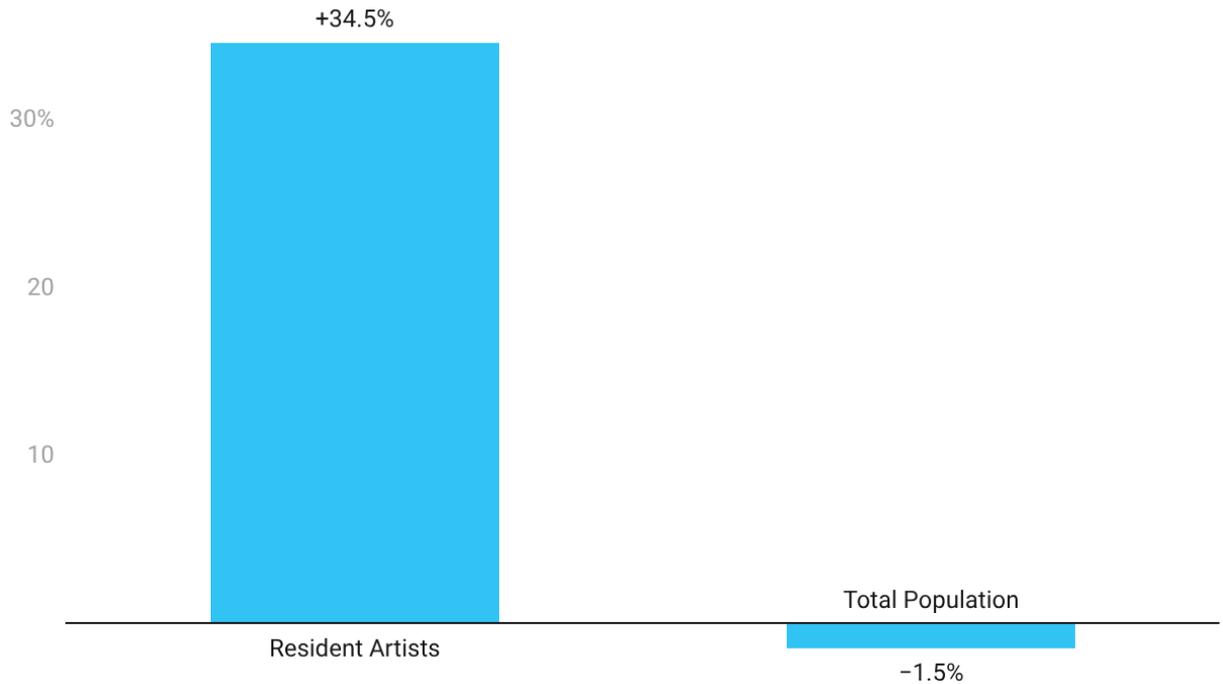


Arts and culture sector totaled 1,666 jobs in 2024.

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

Central New York's artist population booms

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

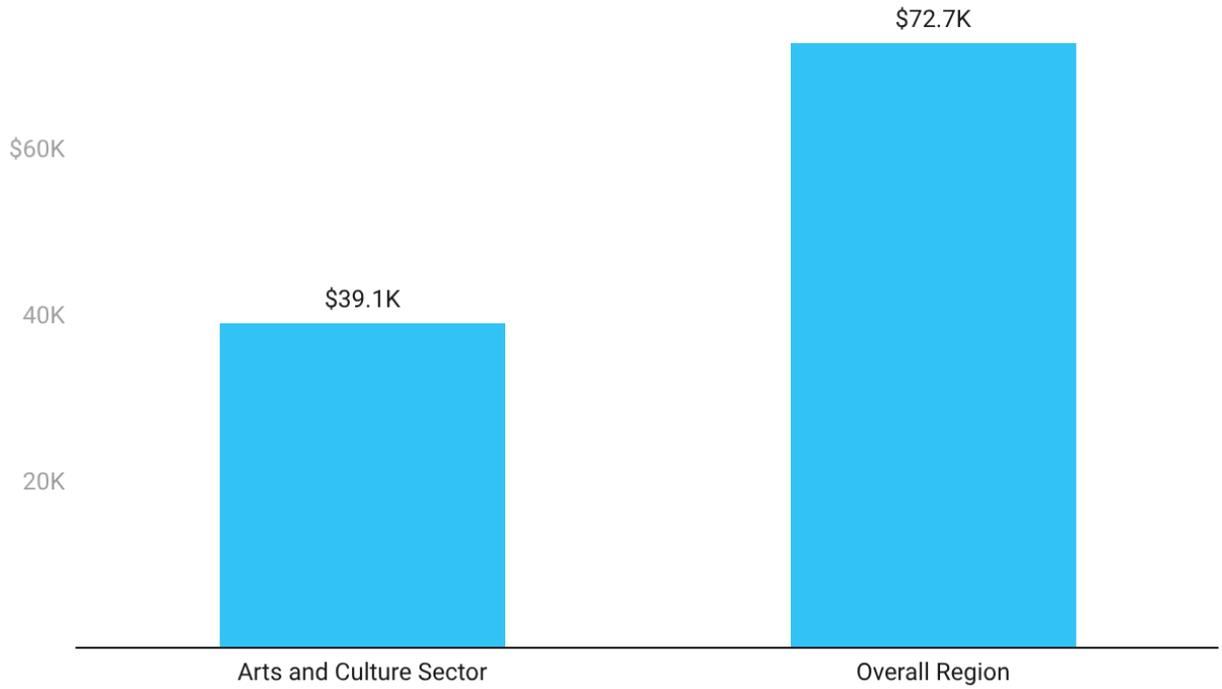


Artist population in Central New York totaled 1,858 in 2024.

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

Arts and culture workers in Central New York earn half the private-sector average annual wage

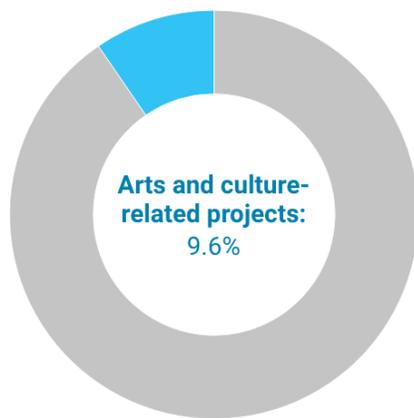
2024



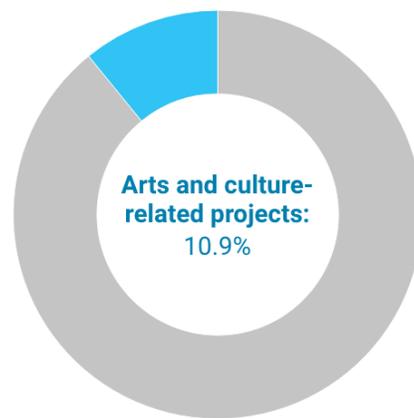
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

In Central New York, 9.6 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding went to arts and culture-related projects

Other projects Arts and culture-related projects



Central New York



New York State

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Round 15 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Awards • Created with Datawrapper

Recommendations

1. PROVIDE RELIABLE, INFLATION-ADJUSTED FUNDING FOR THE ARTS. New York's arts sector is playing a growing role in driving economic vitality across communities statewide, but public funding has not kept pace with rising costs or the sector's expanding impact. When NYSCA was at its peak in 1990, it provided the equivalent of \$133.4 million in operating support, adjusted for inflation; in FY 2026, that figure was just \$84 million. Recent budget proposals would move funding in the wrong direction, underscoring the need for a more stable and predictable approach. The state should commit to increasing annual aid to localities to \$150 million, indexed to inflation going forward, while sustaining capital funding at \$80 million annually. Without reliable operating support, the state risks weakening one of its most effective engines of regional growth.

2. INTEGRATE THE ARTS ACROSS THE STATE'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY AGENDA. Despite its growing impact, the arts sector still represents a small share of the state's broader economic development strategy. New York should make the arts a core pillar of its approach to inclusive growth—ensuring the sector has a seat at the table in regional planning and investment decisions and expanding the share of arts-focused projects within REDC and Downtown Revitalization Initiative funding. State agencies should also incorporate arts-based strategies into their core work. This could include engaging artists to support community outreach around major transportation and infrastructure projects, partnering with artists to design and deliver public health campaigns, and expanding technical assistance for affordable housing developments that include artist preference units and live-work space. Embedding these approaches across agencies will help reduce costs, improve program effectiveness, and expand opportunity across the arts ecosystem.

3. LAUNCH A PORTABLE BENEFITS PILOT FOR FREELANCERS AND SELF-EMPLOYED ARTISTS. The number of independent artists, writers, and performers in New York State has grown rapidly, yet most lack access to basic safety nets such as health insurance, paid leave, retirement savings, and unemployment protections. This is especially challenging given the intermittent nature of creative work and the volatility of income in the sector. The state should pilot a portable benefits system that allows workers to accrue and retain benefits as they move between gigs, employers, and sectors. Benefits should follow the worker—not the job—and be designed to minimize administrative burden while maximizing access. Expanding access to benefits would help stabilize creative careers and retain artists across New York's regions.

4. TAKE ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMS TO THE NEXT LEVEL. The state's recent launch of a statewide artist-in-residence initiative was an important and long-overdue step—the first time New York has embedded artists within state agencies at scale. Now is the time to build on that progress by expanding the model significantly. With leadership from the governor, New York should extend artist-in-residence programs across additional state agencies and into county and local governments, while also partnering with schools, community-based organizations, and cultural institutions to create a broader statewide network. Public-private partnerships can help fund and scale this expansion, bringing in philanthropic and institutional partners to support placements and program infrastructure. With sustained investment, the state could develop a true statewide artist corps—creating a lasting system for deploying artists in public service across New York.

5. FUND AND EXPAND THE SAVING PERFORMING ARTS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES (NY SPACE) PROGRAM. The governor's proposed \$10 million NY SPACE initiative would help nonprofit performing arts organizations acquire and stabilize permanent venues. The legislature should act to fund this program and position it as the foundation for a longer-term strategy to expand access to affordable space for the arts. Over time, the program should expand to support organizations seeking to create new spaces in development projects, activate vacant storefronts and underutilized buildings, and secure long-term affordable leases. It should also help address ongoing operating challenges, including rising insurance costs and maintenance expenses. Expanding access to stable, affordable space will be essential to sustaining the sector's recent growth.

6. GENERATE AND DEDICATE RECURRING REVENUE FOR THE ARTS. The arts ecosystem remains highly vulnerable to fiscal swings and one-time funding cycles. To improve long-term stability, policymakers should establish recurring revenue streams dedicated to arts and culture. Potential sources include billboard taxes, surcharges on overnight stays, ticket surcharges on events at major stadiums, and value-capture tools tied to new development. The state should also enable the creation of local cultural districts supported by modest, dedicated funding streams to sustain programming and maintenance over time. Establishing predictable revenue would allow the sector to plan, grow, and contribute more consistently to regional economies.

7. EXPAND AND STANDARDIZE NEW YORK'S PERCENT FOR ART POLICY STATEWIDE. New York City's Percent for Art program has, for more than 40 years, required that a share of major public construction budgets be dedicated to public art—transforming public spaces across the city. New York State has a more limited version of this policy tied to certain state building projects, but it does not apply broadly across economic development or infrastructure investments. The state should expand and standardize this approach to cover all major state-funded economic development and infrastructure projects. Doing so would ensure that arts and culture are integrated from the outset, enhancing public spaces while supporting local artists and creative economies.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Central New York's Creative Spark is part of a series of 10 reports—one for each of the state's economic development regions—documenting the growing power of the arts as a catalyst for economic vitality, as well as the challenges facing the state's arts sector.

For more, check out: nycfuture.org/NYCreativeSpark