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NEW YORK CITY'S
**CREATIVE
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CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK

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Regional Arts Profile

New York City



NEW YORK CITY'S CREATIVE SECTOR REMAINS ONE OF its greatest economic engines and competitive advantages. In 2024, the city's creative sector—including advertising, film and television, broadcasting and media streaming, publishing, architecture, design, music, visual arts, performing arts, and independent artists—employed 326,093 people. Known as much for its world-class institutions as for its smaller, dynamic scenes, New York's creative sector also anchors an immense tourist economy and serves as one of the most important draws for talent in other city industries.

The city also boasts more cultural and creative jobs than any other city in the United States. New York is home to 16.8 percent of the nation's fashion designers, 15 percent of all producers and directors, and 12.2 percent of editors—far more than any other metro area. It also houses more than 10 percent of national employment in film and television (14.9 percent), publishing (14.4 percent), broadcasting (12.7 percent), performing arts (10.7 percent), advertising (10.7 percent), and music production (10.2 percent).¹

But New York City is now losing artists. Since 2019, the overall number of people working in the city's creative economy has declined by 6.1 percent. The decline has been steep: in the past five years, the city's artist population has dropped by 4.4 percent, including 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 25.9 percent, film and video editors 18.5 percent, graphic designers 13.8 percent, and art directors 6 percent. 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; since 2020, film and TV jobs in New York City are down by 19.1 percent.

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, despite his rising success, New York City had grown increasingly inhospitable.

"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.

New York City's national share of the creative economy is slipping, declining from 9.3 to 8.6 percent since 2019. 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. Meanwhile, just like St. Louis gaining Irving, other regions—many with significantly lower costs of living—have seen their creative workforces flourish since 2019, such as Nashville (+17.4 percent), Dallas (+14.3 percent), and Miami (+12.3 percent).²

The decline in New York City's creative sector is being driven in large part by the city's worsening affordability crisis. Creative workers in New York now earn about 26 percent less than the national average after adjusting for the city's high cost of living, down from 15 percent less than a decade ago, while housing and studio rents continue to climb: since 2019, asking rents have surged nearly 40 percent across Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. About 64 percent of New York City artists surveyed by Creatives Rebuild report that their financial stability is unstable or extremely unstable.

Squeezed for cash and forced to choose between housing and studio space, many artists are relocating to more affordable cities and towns.

"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.”

For artists who stay, it is also getting more difficult to find places to share their work, as skyrocketing operation costs—particularly in insurance—and declining revenues have forced dozens of venues to shutter. Since the pandemic, nearly 50 theaters, music clubs, museums, and galleries have closed. The effect has been particularly acute for organizations located in lower-income communities: 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.

Organizations contending with rising costs also have to deal with declining audiences. Even before COVID-19, streaming platforms 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 FY 2024, 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, shifting live performance from a regular part of city life to an occasional luxury—further straining venues and presenting organizations of all sizes.

While costs are rising and revenues are down, public and philanthropic funding has not kept pace. The New York State Council on the Arts FY 2025 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. At the same time, mounting threats to social safety nets are leading major philanthropies to shift their support to social services, reducing the amount of funding available to the arts.

While the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) 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 1 percent

of the city’s budget and cannot alone address the structural challenges reshaping the sector. Federal support is also eroding. In just one year, National Endowment for the Arts funding to New York City plummeted 59.8 percent from \$16.3 million in FY 2024 to \$6.5 million in FY 2025, while the number of grants fell sharply from 460 to 187. Federal policies toward immigration have also dampened tourism, shrinking the potential audience for New York City’s arts sector at a time when it desperately needs one.

Though this is a uniquely vulnerable time for the city’s creative sector, it’s not all bad news. 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. With new creative media driven largely by self-employed and freelance workers, one of the only creative industries to grow post-pandemic is independent artists, up 22.6 percent since 2019 and 65.6 percent over the past decade. Moreover, the city is 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. Fourteen of the 36 projects funded by New York City’s Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) are arts and culture projects, including both capital dollars and funds to market cultural institutions.

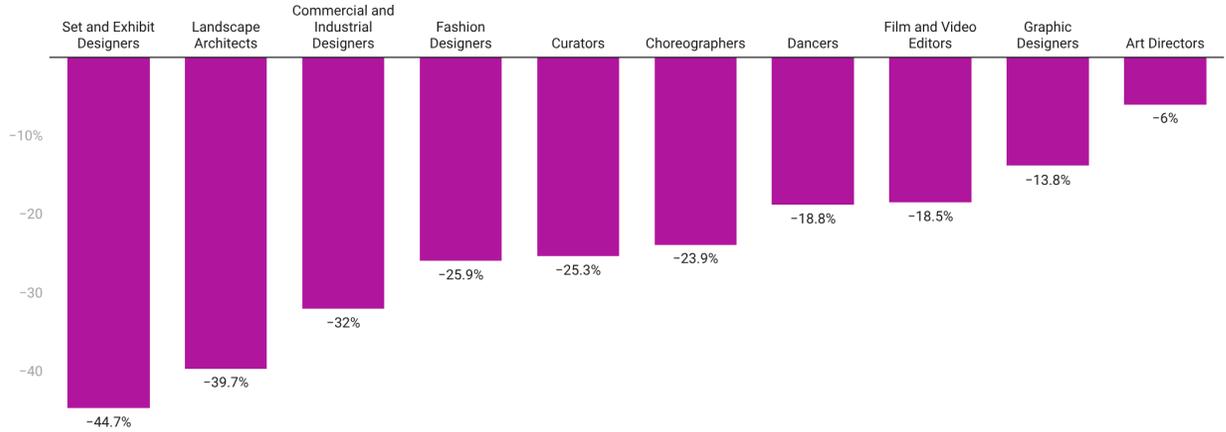
And across the five boroughs, new cultural spaces continue to open. The Bronx Music Hall—the borough’s first major independently-owned cultural venue in more than 50 years—opened its doors alongside a surge of new micro-galleries from the South Bronx to Chinatown and Bushwick. Ridgewood now boasts its 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 HOIO 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 has broken ground on a new multidisciplinary arts center in Inwood, and the Studio Museum in Harlem reopened this fall after an eight-year renovation.

While New York City remains the state—and the nation’s—undisputed cultural and artistic capital, its creative sector is 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—and throughout the affordability agenda under development in both City Hall and Albany.

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Center for an Urban Future, analysis of data from Lightcast. Other cities defined by MSA boundaries.

New York City has lost creatives since 2019

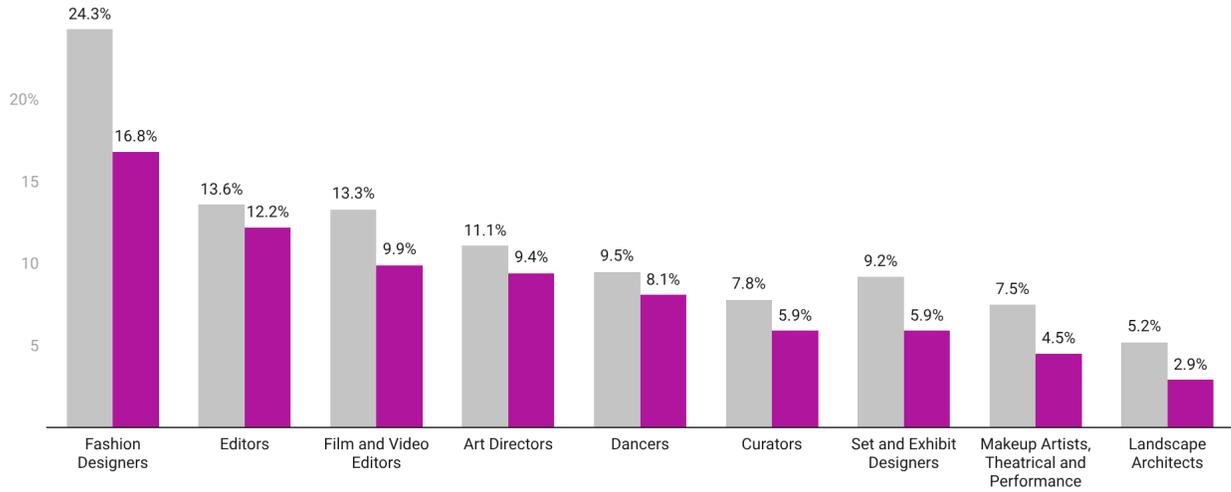
Change in resident jobs, 2019 to 2024 (%)



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

New York City's share of the nation's artists is declining across most fields

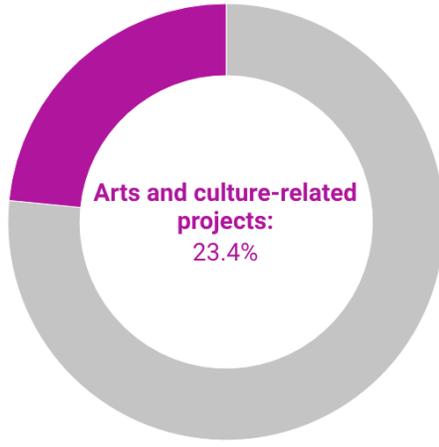
2019 share of nation's jobs 2024 share of nation's jobs



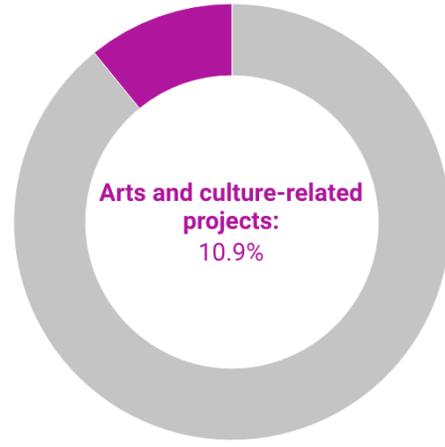
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Created with Datawrapper

In New York City, nearly a quarter of FY 2025 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) funding went towards arts and culture-related projects

Other projects Arts and culture-related projects



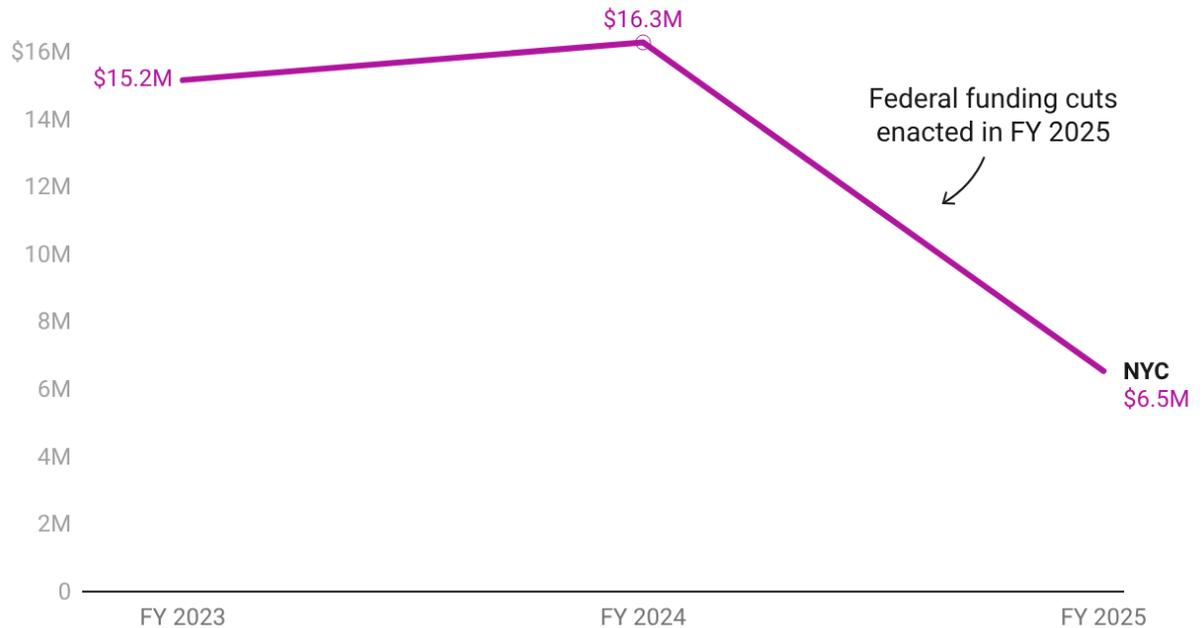
New York City



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

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to New York City falls 60 percent in FY 2025



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of the data from the National Endowment for the Arts Online Grant Search, available from <https://grantsearch.nea.gov/>. • 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

New York City'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