Report - March 2026

New York’s Creative Spark: 10 Data Snapshots of the Arts Across New York State

From Long Island to Western New York, artists and arts organizations are sparking new levels of local economic vitality and strengthening communities from the ground up. But amid growing financial challenges, state policymakers will need to step up with bold policies and increased investment to sustain this momentum.

by Rachel Neches, Eli Dvorkin, and Sarah Amandolare

- Read the 10 regional briefs here: Capital Region, Central New York, Finger Lakes, Long Island, Mid-Hudson Region, Mohawk Valley, New York City, North Country, Southern Tier, and Western New York.
- Read the policy recommendations from the series here.

For decades, state leaders have pursued strategies to revive communities across New York—from Buffalo to the Adirondacks to Long Island. While some have made a difference, few have matched the impact of a far less appreciated catalyst: the arts. Quietly and without fanfare, the arts have become one of New York State’s most powerful—and most overlooked—engines of local economic vitality. In communities across the state that have grappled with years of population loss and a decline in industry, artists and cultural organizations have helped revitalize downtowns, attract new visitors, and encourage young people to put down roots and stay.

Over the past decade, jobs in New York’s arts and culture sector grew by 20.5 percent—more than double the pace of statewide job growth (+9.2 percent).[1] Every region experienced an arts and cultural employment boom, including the Capital Region (+50 percent), Mid-Hudson (+33.7 percent), and Western New York (+32.6 percent).

In many cases, working artists have been among the few segments of the population consistently growing in upstate communities.[2] In fact, the artist population outpaced overall population growth in every region — including the Mohawk Valley (+57.9 percent), North Country (+45.5 percent), and the Capital Region (+43.5 percent).

At the same time, as costs rise far faster than artist incomes or organizational revenues, financial survival is becoming more precarious. The majority of artists (62.5 percent) surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that they could not scrape together $400 in an emergency, and report that their financial status is unstable or extremely unstable.[3] Most artists (82.1 percent) do not make a full living from their artistic practice, working also as teachers, restaurant servers, farm workers, or Uber drivers. Across the state, 33.8 percent of artists report experiencing housing insecurity, and 27 percent experience food insecurity.

These challenges are evident across every region of the state. A full 82 percent of artists in Central New York and 81.4 percent in Western New York say that their household income is below $35,000 a year. More than 41 percent of artists in every region say they carry an unmanageable amount of debt.

New York City, the arts capital of the country, provides distressing evidence of how growing affordability challenges could ripple statewide. The overall number of people working in the city's creative economy has declined by 6.1 percent since 2019, and neighborhoods which were artists hubs a decade ago are no longer. New York City's warning lights point to what other regions of the state risk losing as costs rise faster than incomes.

So far, public funding of the arts has not kept pace with need—and threats are mounting. Following federal cuts and new National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant guidelines, total NEA funding to New York State dropped 59 percent from $18.6 million in FY 2024 to $7.5 million in FY 2025.[4] This is the lowest level of funding directed to New York since 1998, the earliest year data is available. Two regions—the Mohawk Valley and North Country—received zero NEA grants for the first time in this period.

The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA)—the most important source of grant funding for many organizations across the state—is distributing record levels of capital funding. But its operating support, while an increase from pre-pandemic levels, reached $84 million in FY 2026—still 37 percent below its 1989–90 peak, adjusted for inflation.[5] And the governor's proposed FY 2027 executive budget would reduce NYSCA's core competitive grantmaking funding to $62.7 million, a roughly 25 percent decline from the prior year and 82.7 percent below its 1989-90 peak.

One bright spot is that a growing share of funding from New York's Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs) is going to arts and culture projects (rising from 3.7 percent in 2021 to 10.9 percent in 2025). These investments are helping to revitalize historic theaters and buildings in downtowns and support marketing campaigns that attract visitors to festivals, performances, and cultural destinations.[6]

To their credit, the governor and state legislature have made important investments in the arts in recent years, and overall NYSCA funding has increased under the current administration. The state has also launched new initiatives, including the first artist-in-residence program in state government agencies. But far more is needed. As one-time funding falls away, the reality is that core grantmaking resources are increasingly at risk—underscoring the need for a more comprehensive and sustained approach that integrates the arts across state agencies, expands support for freelance and self-employed artists, and establishes dedicated, recurring revenue streams.

This report, made possible with support from Creatives Rebuild New York, provides data-driven snapshots of the vital and growing role that artists and arts organizations play in regional economic vitality across New York State. Each regional profile is designed to stand alone as a tool for local and statewide policymakers—helping them better understand the arts sector's impact and make the case for stronger, more sustained investment.

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.

ENDNOTES

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. This report defines the arts and culture sector as the following industries: Arts Dealers, Fine Arts Schools, Theater Companies and Dinner Theaters, Dance Companies, Musical Groups and Artists, Other Performing Arts Companies, Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers, Museums, Historical Sites, Zoos and Botanical Gardens, and Nature Parks and Other Similar Institutions.

2. This report defines resident artists using the category of "art and design workers" as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which includes the following occupations: Art Directors, Craft Artists, Fine Artists, Including Painters Sculptors, and Illustrators, Special Effects Artists and Animators, Artists and Related Workers, All Other, Commercial and Industrial Designers, Fashion Designers, Graphic Designers, Interior Designers, Merchandise Displayers and Window Trimmers, Set and Exhibit Designers, and Designers, All Other. Resident artists are defined as resident workers in these occupations who live in the defined region.

3. Creatives Rebuild New York, Portrait of New York State Artists Survey (2022).

4. 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/.

5. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from NYSCA, available from https://www.nysca.org/grant_app/org_search.cfm.

6. Center for an Urban Future analysis of REDC awards, available from https://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/.

New York's Creative Spark: 10 Data Snapshots of the Arts Across New York State is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Rachel Neches, Eli Dvorkin, and Sarah Amandolare. Edited by Dorian Block. Additional research by Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro, Udonne Eke-Okoro, Rebecca Ortiz, Nora Lewis, Yona Litwin and Samuel Weidman.

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.

This report is supported by a grant from **Creatives Rebuild New York**. General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by **The Clark Foundation** and the **Altman Foundation**.

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