

THE WORK OF ART

A Survey of Milwaukee's Artists and Creatives



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The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Policy Forum is committed to those same activities and to that spirit of nonpartisanship.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was undertaken to provide a snapshot of Milwaukee's community of artists, including the types of creative work they do, how they support themselves and their creative pursuits, how the pandemic has impacted them, and how stakeholders can better support their work. We hope this research will inform business, community, and elected leaders pursuing strategies to strengthen Milwaukee's arts ecosystem.

Report authors would like to thank the individuals who took the time to share information and their views by completing our survey. We are also grateful to the many organizations that helped to distribute the survey to their networks of local artists and creative workers.

Finally, we wish to thank Imagine MKE for spearheading this project and the Heil Family Foundation for its generous support, which helped make this research possible.



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INTRODUCTION

The arts are vital to Milwaukee's vibrancy and economy, providing a wide range of unique educational and cultural opportunities while employing thousands of individuals. To date, however, relatively little work has been done to understand who the city's individual artists, performers, and creators are, how they support themselves and their creative pursuits, and how they view Milwaukee as a place to live and work.

Likewise, previous Wisconsin Policy Forum [research](#) has documented how the arts and culture sector has been one of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic both locally and nationally, but less is known about how individual local artists and creatives have been affected and their outlook for the future.

This report – commissioned by Imagine MKE – is designed to improve understanding of Milwaukee's artists and creatives and their views and experiences. It summarizes the results of a survey that was distributed to the local arts community by Imagine MKE and 39 partner organizations via email and social media. The 393 responses collected between late July 2021 and late September 2021¹ provide a snapshot of the characteristics of artists in Milwaukee County, the challenges they face, and their perceptions of how local governments, businesses, and the general population could strengthen support for their work.

By shedding new light on the challenges facing an important sector of Milwaukee's local economy and an important contributor to its quality of life, we hope to provide useful information to policy makers and civic leaders and prompt renewed consideration of the potential need for new strategies to strengthen support for local artists and creative workers now and in the future.

¹ Soon after the survey was initiated in late July, it was inundated with spam responses and had to be closed temporarily. It was relaunched in mid-August and remained open for five weeks before closing permanently in late September.



SURVEY OF ARTISTS & CREATIVES

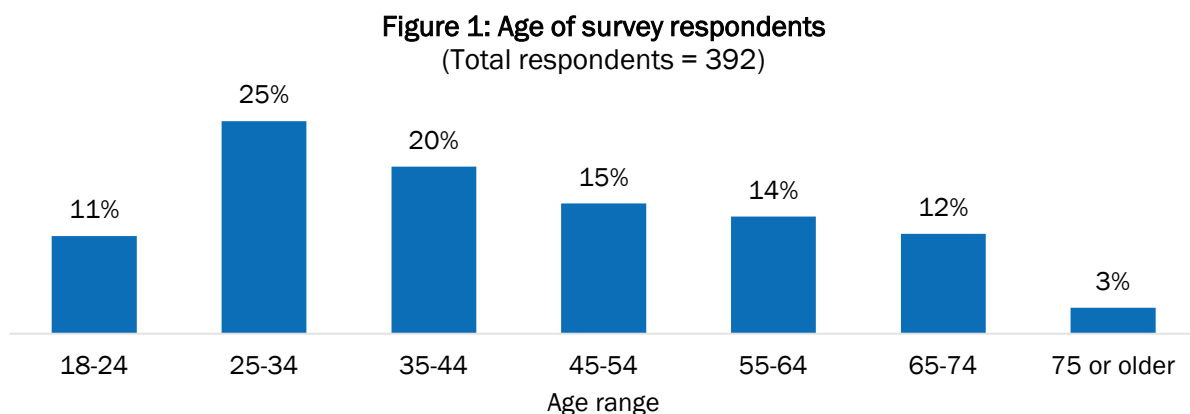
To reach a broad group of artists and creatives, Imagine MKE distributed the *Milwaukee Artists and Creatives Survey* directly and worked with 39 other organizations to share the survey with their contacts. Those organizations cover the spectrum of arts disciplines and include umbrella and membership groups, arts organizations that produce work and/or provide arts education, other organizations that serve and support individual artists, and galleries. A list of the organizations that distributed the survey can be found in the **Appendix**.

A total of 393 individuals based in Milwaukee County completed the survey between July and September 2021.² Below, we summarize their responses. We begin with demographic and general questions about the respondents and their creative practices and then dig into the survey's core questions, which are organized into four categories: employment and compensation; economic impacts of COVID-19; pandemic impacts on individuals and their artistic practices; and challenges and opportunities to strengthen Milwaukee's creative community.³

Demographic Information

Our survey included a handful of questions that asked respondents to cite their demographic characteristics. For some traits, such as age, the respondents are quite diverse and reasonably representative of Milwaukee County's overall population. On other traits, like educational attainment and race/ethnicity, our respondents are less reflective of the broader population. However, the differences we observe appear to align with recent national research by the Urban Institute, which found that arts workers are more likely to have higher levels of educational attainment and are less racially and ethnically diverse than the overall workforce.⁴

Age. The survey captured responses from artists of all ages. While more respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 than in any other age cohort, we received a strong number of responses across the age spectrum (**Figure 1**).



² Respondents citing zip codes outside of Milwaukee County were not included.

³ Most survey questions were required, but those about demographics were optional. This explains why fewer than 393 respondents completed many of the demographics questions.

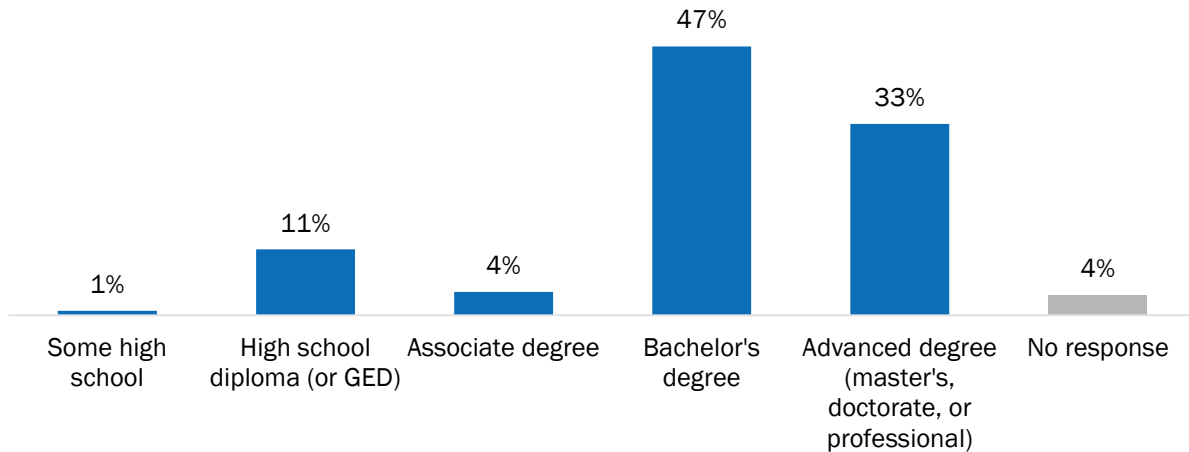
⁴ Urban Institute. "Arts Workers in California." January 2021.

https://www.cciarts.org/_Library/docs/Arts_Workers_in_California_FINAL.pdf



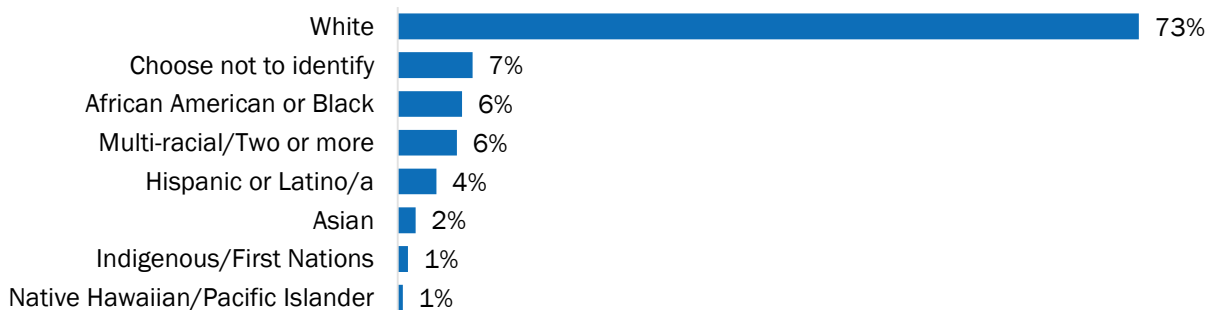
Educational attainment. Our survey respondents are highly educated, with 80% having completed a bachelor’s or advanced degree (**Figure 2**). By comparison, only 31% of all adults ages 25 and over in Milwaukee County have completed a bachelor’s or advanced degree, meaning our survey respondents tend to be more highly educated than the county’s general population.⁵

Figure 2: Educational attainment of survey respondents
(Total respondents = 379)



Race/ethnicity. Similarly, 73% of respondents identified as white (**Figure 3**), which is far higher than the 51% of Milwaukee County’s population that identifies as white and not Hispanic.⁶ The next most common response to our question about race/ethnicity was “Choose not to identify.” Meanwhile, Black (6.4% of respondents), Hispanic (3.8%), and Asian (1.8%) individuals were underrepresented relative to their share of the county’s overall population.

Figure 3: Race/ethnicity of survey respondents
(Total respondents = 392; respondents could select multiple)



⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 5-year estimates.

⁶ Ibid.



Geography. We heard from artists throughout Milwaukee County, with respondents residing in 34 of the county’s 36 zip codes (**Figure 4**). However, roughly half (201 or 51%) of all responses came from four zip codes in and around downtown Milwaukee and near the lakefront (53212, 53211, 53207, and 53202). Those zip codes have relatively high population totals but are not among the most populous in the county, meaning the large number of responses there is not simply a reflection of population density.

Gender identity. Survey respondents were more likely to be female than male (**Figure 5**), and 7% of survey respondents identified as transgender or non-binary.

Additional characteristics. To gain a more complete picture of the survey respondents and their experiences, we also asked about disability status, veteran status, and whether respondents are caretakers. Nearly one in five (18%) cited a physical, cognitive, sensory, mental health, age-related, or other type of disability, while smaller percentages identified as sole caretakers for children, parents, or other dependents (9%) or as military veterans (1%).

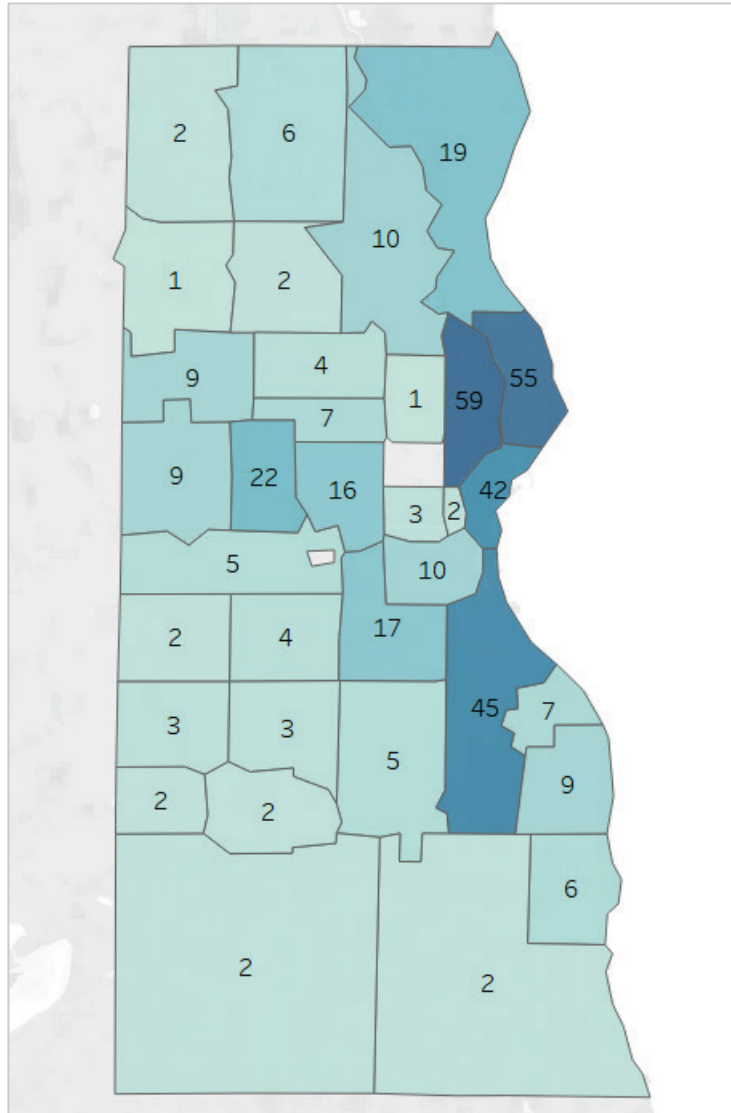
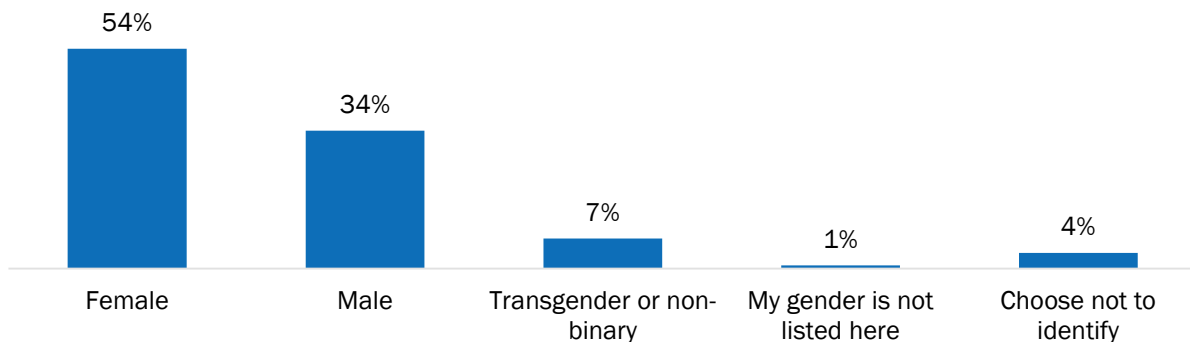


Figure 4: Survey respondents by zip code. We received responses from 34 of the 36 zip codes in Milwaukee County. (Total respondents = 393)

Figure 5: Gender identity of survey respondents
(Total respondents = 392)



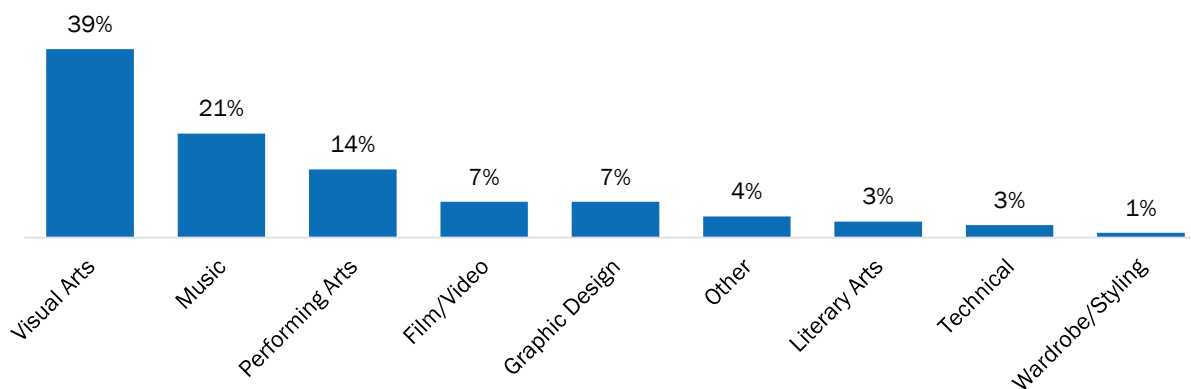
General Questions

Several survey questions were designed to collect basic information about the artists' creative practices and their involvement in arts organizations of various types.

Primary and secondary creative disciplines. The first such question asked individuals to identify their primary creative discipline from a list of broad categories. As shown in **Figure 6**, those who responded to the survey work across a wide range of creative mediums, though more than one-third (39%) identified visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, etc.) as their primary discipline. The other most common primary disciplines were music (21%) and the performing arts (14%), which includes theater and dance. Nearly one of every three respondents (30%) identified as self-taught in their primary field of artistic practice.

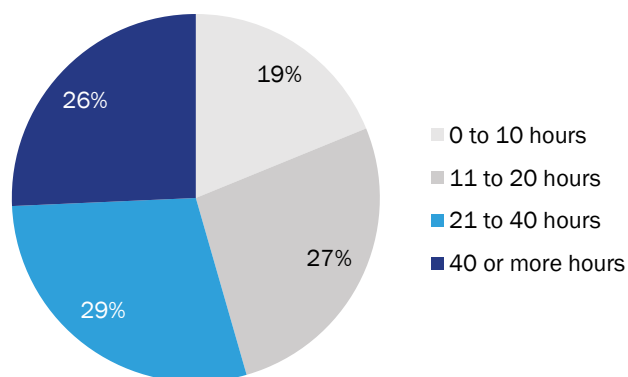
Visual arts were also the most commonly cited secondary arts discipline (15%) followed by literary arts (11%), which includes creative writing of all types. Interestingly, a larger share of respondents identified literary arts as their secondary rather than primary (3%) creative discipline. A secondary artistic practice was defined as one accounting for 50% or less of one's practice.

Figure 6: Primary creative discipline of survey respondents
(Total respondents = 393)



Time spent on creative work. The number of hours per week that survey respondents dedicate to their creative work varies widely (**Figure 7**). Just over half (54%) reported spending at least 21 hours per week on their artistic practice.

Figure 7: Average hours spent weekly on artistic practice
(Total respondents = 393)



Memberships. We also asked about memberships in arts organizations, unions, and guilds. About one in three (35%) respondents reported being part of an arts-related membership organization of some kind; the Milwaukee Artist Resource Network (MARN) was the most common organization by far, cited by 44 respondents. Roughly one in five (21%) are members of a union or guild, with the American Federation of Musicians the most frequently cited (39).

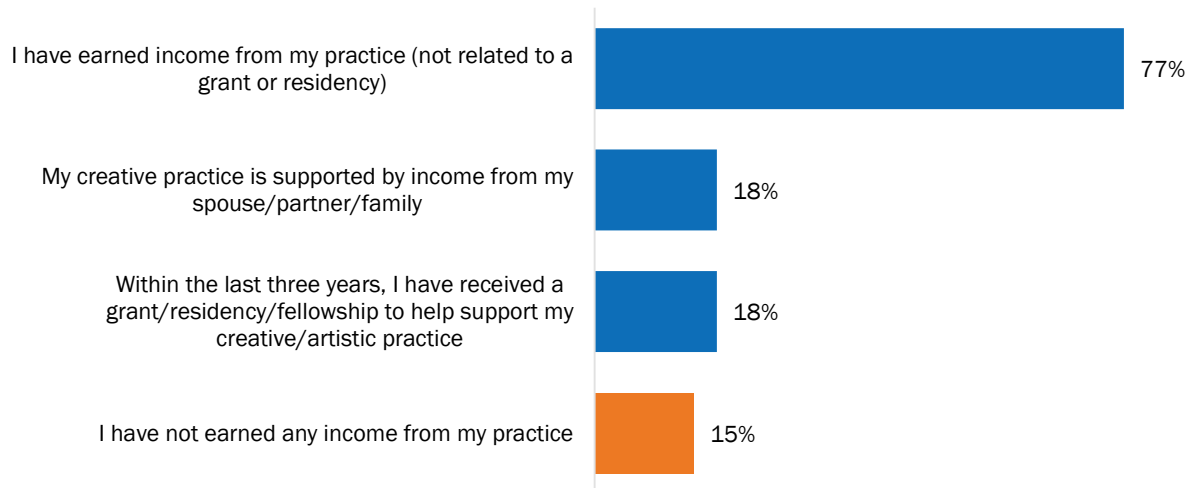
Employment & Compensation

Another section of the survey focused on how artists support themselves and their creative work. These questions addressed sources of household income, the specific types of work local artists do (if any) outside of their creative practices, and more.

Income sources. A substantial majority of respondents reported earning at least some income from their artistic practices (**Figure 8**), with only 15% reporting no income from that work. Among those who said they earned income from their practice, a majority (56%) are independent contractors while 39% said they are the sole proprietors of a legal business entity that markets and sells their talent/work.

Of those that have earned income from a grant, residency, or fellowship, nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that at least some of those opportunities were based in or originated from the Milwaukee area, with smaller shares reporting the same from other parts of Wisconsin (38%) or beyond (22%).

Figure 8: Income sources supporting creative work
(Total respondents = 393; respondents could select multiple)



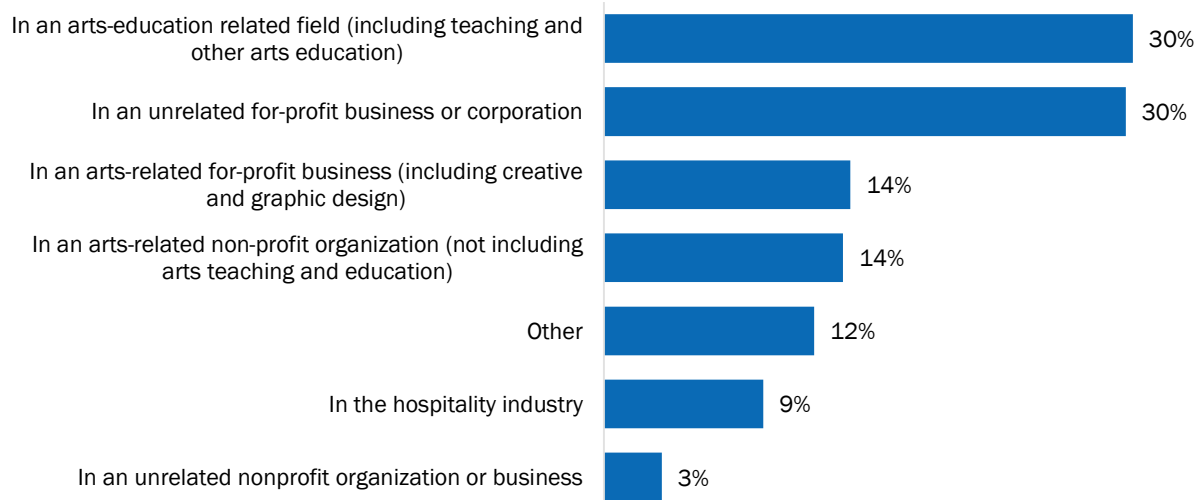
Note: The percentages in this and several other charts in this report add up to more than 100% because respondents were able to select multiple responses.

Employment types. A majority of respondents (61%) said they are employed outside of their primary creative practice. As shown in **Figure 9**, the most common types of outside employment are in arts education (30%) or with for-profit businesses or corporations whose work is unrelated to the arts (30%). Nearly as many are employed in arts-related businesses or nonprofits (28% combined).



Responses in the “Other” category spanned a wide range of employment including education, healthcare, maintenance, manufacturing, and personal training.

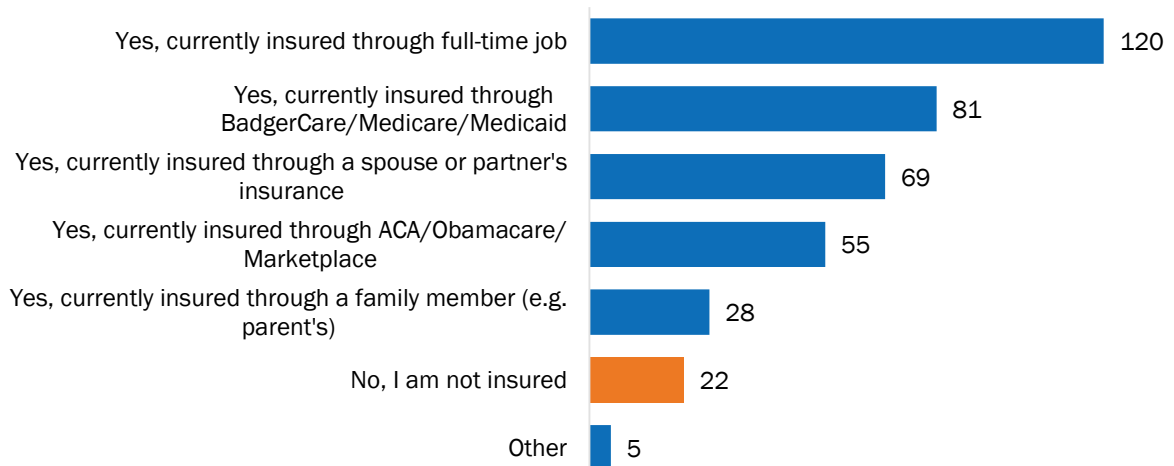
Figure 9: Employment outside of creative practice
(Total respondents = 240; respondents could select multiple)



About half of these respondents (50%) said they are full-time employees working at least 30 hours per week, while 40% said they are part-time employees and 22% are employed as freelance employees.

Health insurance. Most survey respondents (95%) reported having health insurance, with the source varying widely (**Figure 10**). Employers, partners and family members, and state and federal program and exchanges were all common insurance sources. All 22 respondents who lack health insurance indicated that cost was a barrier to obtaining it.

Figure 10: Health insurance status
(Total respondents = 380)



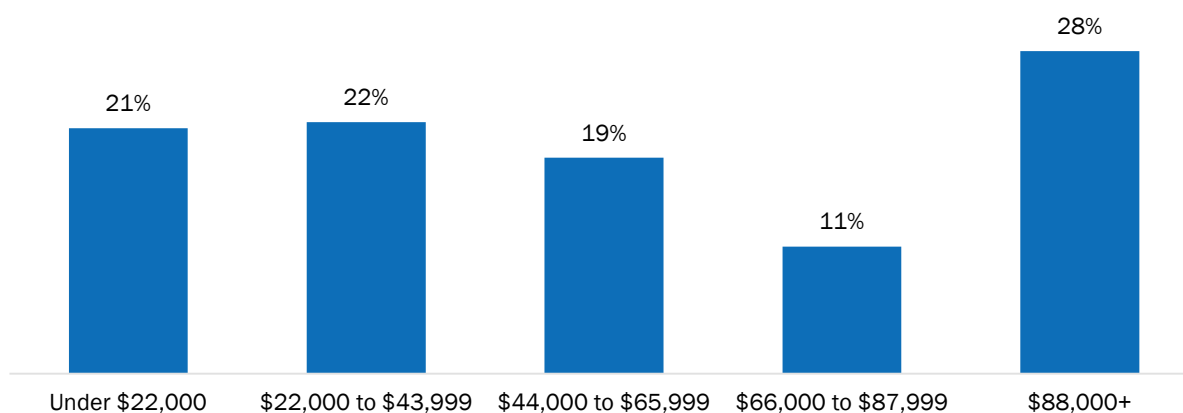
Economic Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caused employment to fall sharply throughout all sectors of the economy, but the arts were among the most impacted. Federal estimates show that in the Milwaukee metropolitan area, employment in the Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation sector fell by over 50% in April 2020. It has since recovered considerably but remained down 18.1% in October 2021 relative to October 2019, making it the most depressed among all sectors.⁷

In our survey of artists and creatives, we asked a number of questions to gauge how the pandemic has impacted their financial well-being and the extent to which they have accessed public assistance programs and special pandemic relief programs for help.

Pre-pandemic income. The annual household incomes of survey respondents prior to the pandemic were fairly evenly spread across the income spectrum, with 43% earning less than \$44,000 per year and roughly 39% earning at least \$66,000 per year (**Figure 11**). The incomes of the remaining 19% were between \$44,000 and \$65,999, which is the range that includes the county's median household income for all households (\$53,418).

Figure 11: Annual household income in 2019 (prior to pandemic)
(Total respondents = 393)

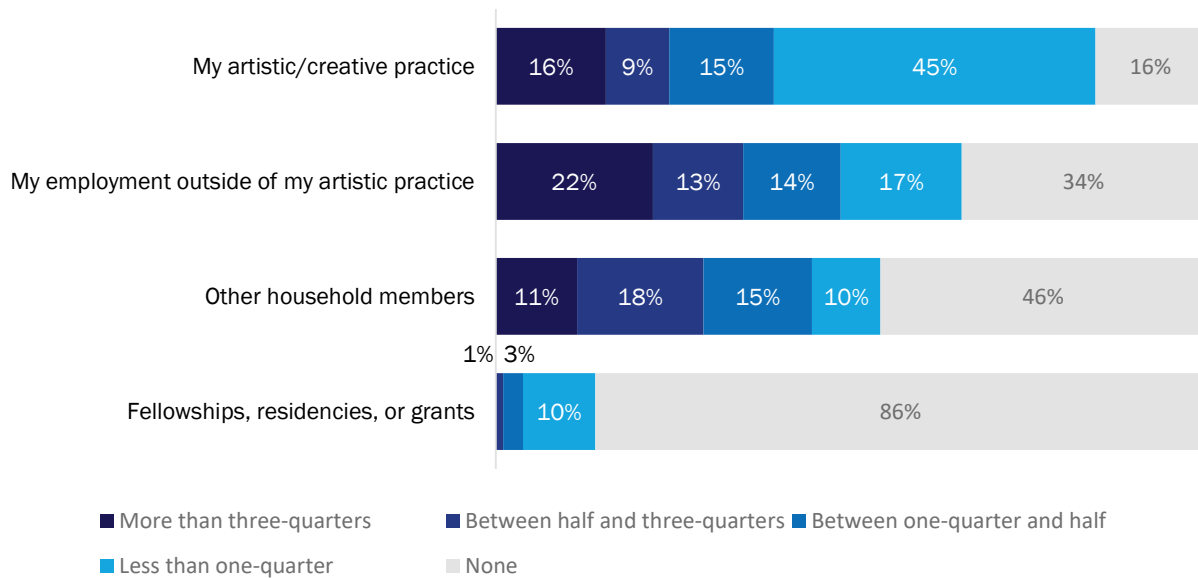


We also asked about the mix of various income sources that contributed to artists' overall household income prior to the pandemic. As shown in **Figure 12**, artistic practices were the most common income source, with 84% reporting at least some income from their practices. However, only 24% said at least half of their household income came from their artistic practices compared with 35% who said the same about their jobs outside of their artistic practices and 29% for whom at least half of household income came from other household members. Fellowships, residencies, and grants were the least common income sources and the least likely to contribute large percentages of total household income.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Current Employment Statistics.

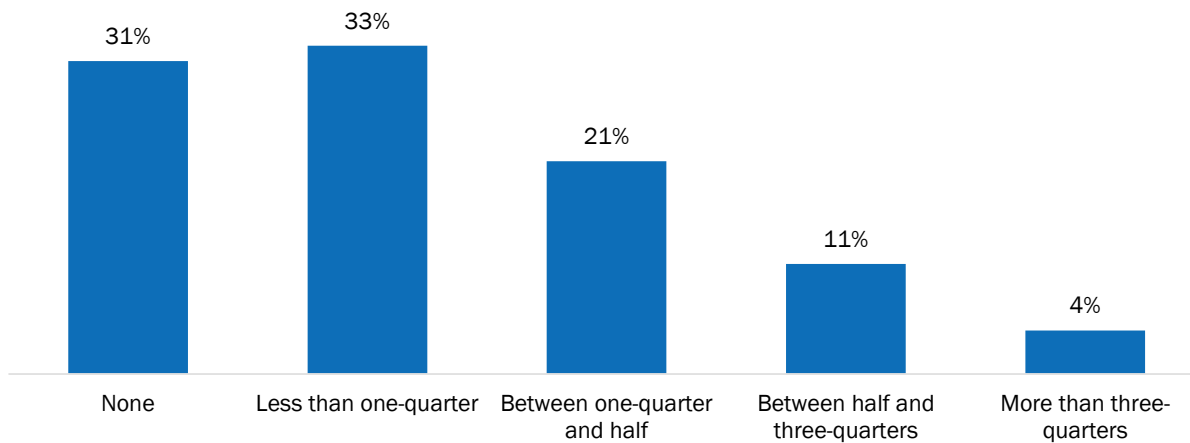


Figure 12: Share of annual household income by source (prior to COVID-19)
(Total respondents = 393)



Reduced income due to pandemic. More than two-thirds of respondents (271 or 69%) said their household income was reduced in 2020 due to the pandemic (Figure 13), including 60 (15%) whose income was cut by half or more. Impacts varied widely among those who said all or most (at least three-quarters) of their household income comes from their artistic practice, with 26% saying their income was reduced by at least half due to the pandemic while another 26% said they suffered no income loss.

Figure 13: Reduction in household income in 2020 due to pandemic
(Total respondents = 393)

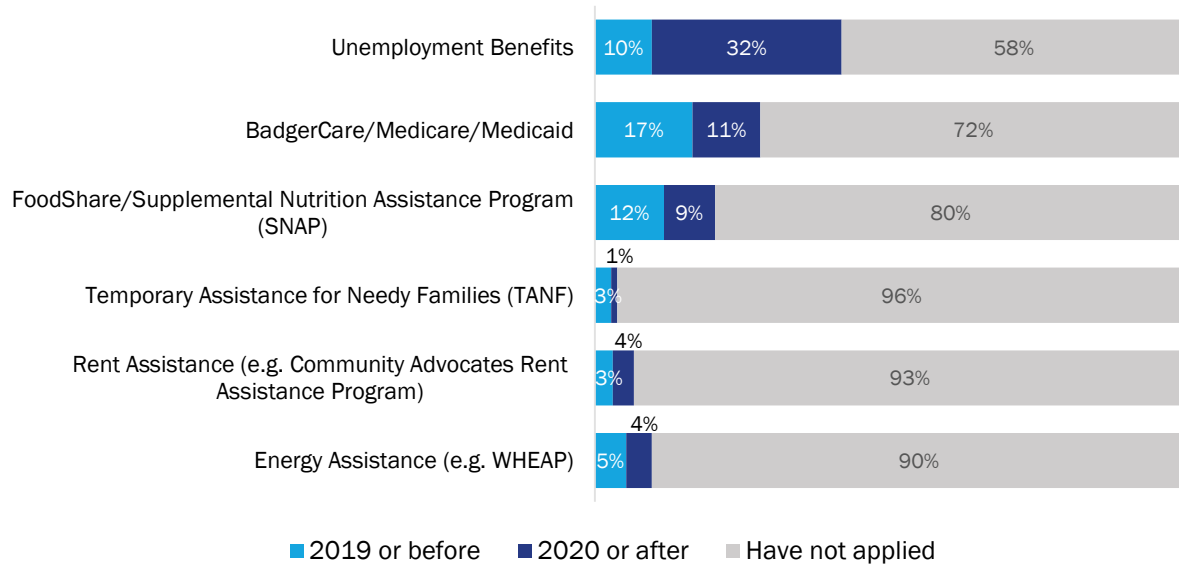


Public assistance and pandemic relief programs. The pandemic caused large numbers of respondents to apply for public assistance programs. As shown in Figure 14, while 10% of



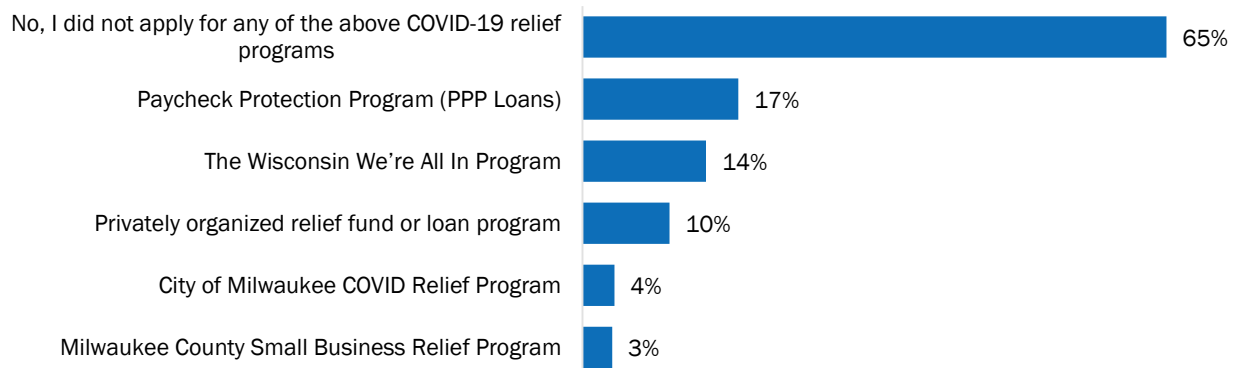
respondents had received or applied for unemployment benefits prior to COVID-19, an additional 32% reported applying in 2020 because of the pandemic. The share of respondents who said they applied for or received health insurance from BadgerCare, Medicare, or Medicaid – or nutrition assistance from FoodShare/SNAP – also increased considerably in 2020. A quarter of respondents said the process of applying for unemployment insurance was challenging, reflecting a [larger problem](#) that was widely reported in the news media.

Figure 14: Participation in or application for public assistance programs
(Total respondents = 393)



While nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) said they did not receive support from any of the COVID-19 relief programs established by the federal and state governments, more than 30% did access or apply for a federal PPP loan or a Wisconsin We’re All In grant (**Figure 15**). About 10% also said they received or applied for a grant or loan through a privately organized program.

Figure 15: Participation in or application for COVID-19 relief programs
(Total respondents = 393)



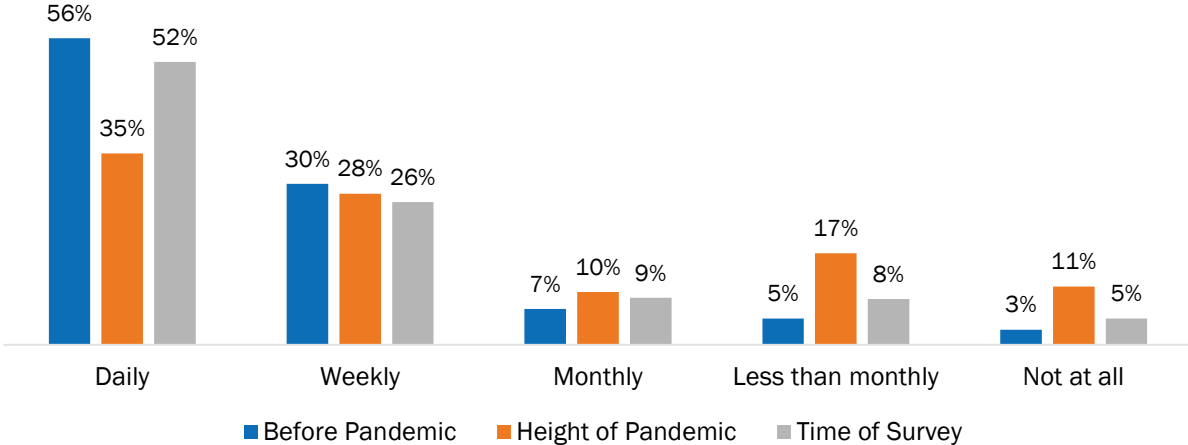
Pandemic Impacts on Individual Artists & Their Practices

Another set of survey questions focused on how the pandemic has impacted local artists and their creative practices. Among other goals, we sought to understand how the pandemic and associated restrictions affected artists’ professional opportunities, personal well-being, and outlook for the future.

Frequency of practice and opportunities for paid work. To gauge the impact of the pandemic on artists’ creative work, we asked how often they engaged in active practice or rehearsal prior to the pandemic, at the pandemic’s height, and “currently” (at the time of the survey). It is important to note that when the survey first opened in late July 2021, COVID cases were down considerably but the delta variant had recently been detected in the U.S. As the survey continued in August and September, new COVID cases (and uncertainty) were on the rise once again.

Still, the survey responses show that after decreasing in frequency at the height of the pandemic, artists had started working, practicing, and rehearsing much more by the time they took the survey (**Figure 16**). For example, a majority (56%) of respondents worked on their artistic practice daily before the pandemic. That share dropped to just 35% at the peak of the pandemic but had returned to nearly pre-pandemic levels (52%) by the time of the survey.

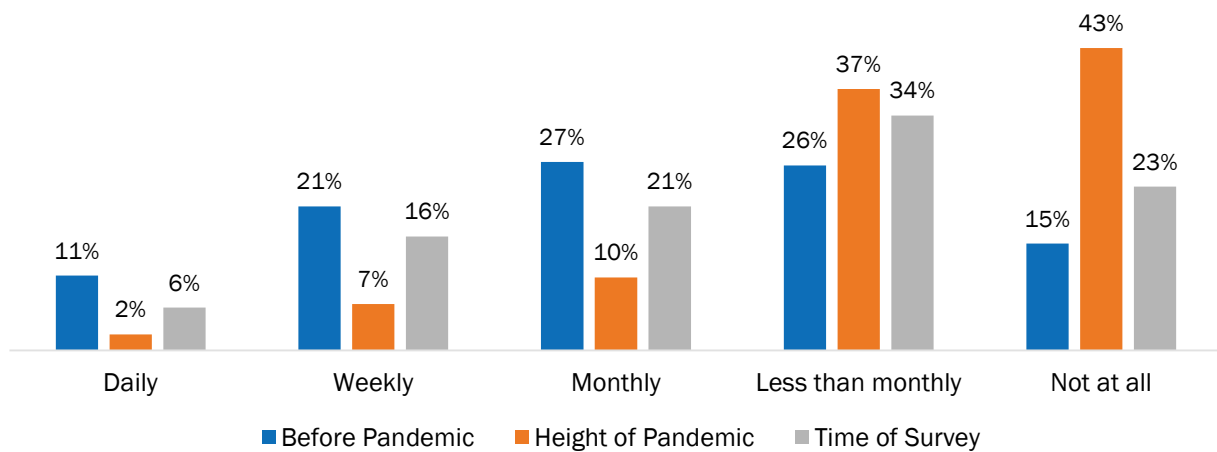
Figure 16: Frequency of active work/practice/rehearsal for creative practice
(Total respondents = 393)



A similar pattern emerges for the frequency of performances, exhibitions, and other opportunities for paid work, as shown in **Figure 17**. Those also dropped off dramatically at the height of the pandemic and had recovered considerably by the time of the survey. While a majority of respondents (58%) said they performed, exhibited, or otherwise earned income from their artistic work at least monthly before the pandemic, that dropped to just 19% at the height of the pandemic and had recovered to 43% at the time of the survey. Conversely, the share of respondents who did not perform, exhibit, or otherwise earn income from their artistic work at all nearly tripled at the height of the pandemic and had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels at the time of the survey.

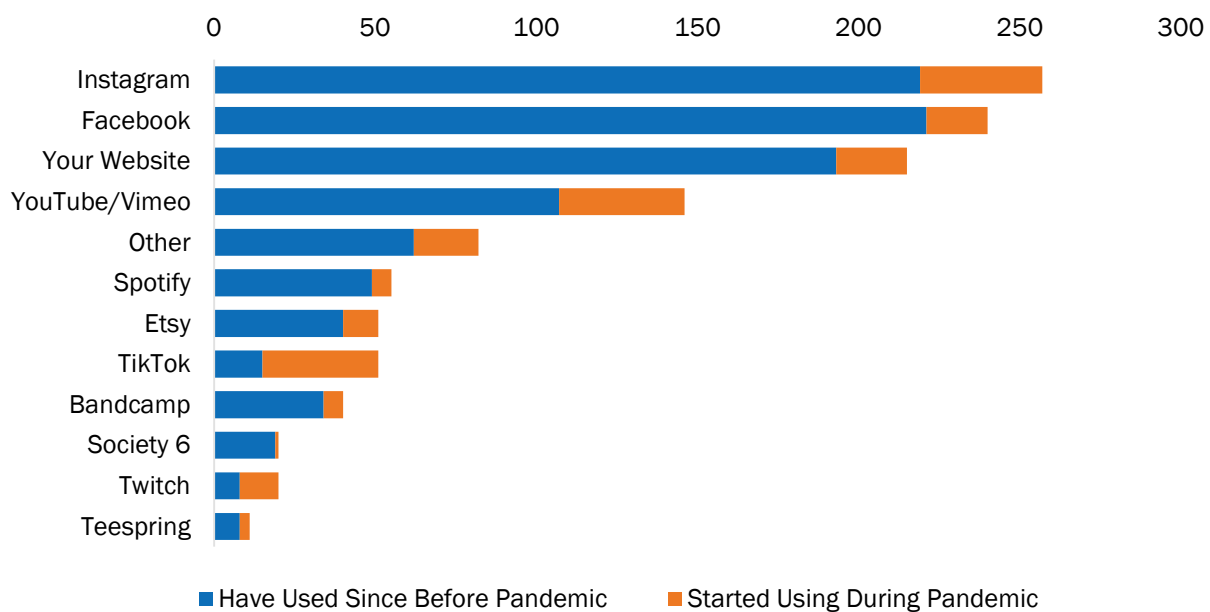


Figure 17: Frequency of performance/exhibition/transaction for creative practice
(Total respondents = 393)



Platforms used to share and sell art. The pandemic prompted many businesses to change the way they sold and/or delivered products and services, and that was true for many artists as well. As shown in **Figure 18**, dozens of local artists began using platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to share and/or sell their creative work for the first time during the pandemic. For example, the number of survey respondents using TikTok to show or sell their work more than tripled from 15 before the pandemic to 51 during the pandemic. Nearly one-third of all respondents (30%) said they earned revenue by selling their work through one or more of these platforms.

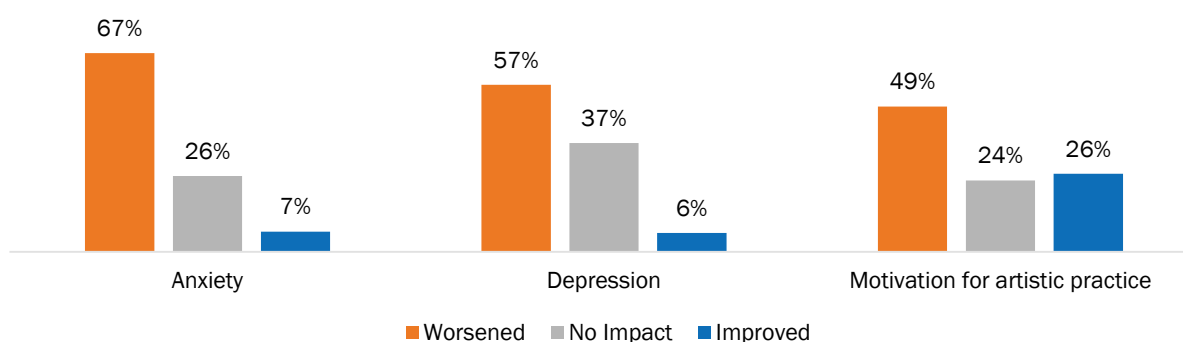
Figure 18: Platforms used to show, share, or sell creative work
(Total respondents = 393)



Impacts on mental health. The pandemic also affected the mental health of local artists and their motivation to practice and produce art. As shown in **Figure 19**, roughly half (49%) of survey respondents said the pandemic reduced their motivation to practice their art, while majorities of respondents said it worsened their anxiety and depression.

The mental health impacts of the pandemic were more likely to be felt among artists in some disciplines than others. For example, a considerable share of visual artists said the pandemic actually *improved* their motivation to practice and produce art (37%), while only 15% of musicians said the same. Still, more respondents in both groups reported negative impacts, with 58% of musicians saying the pandemic worsened their motivation and 41% of visual artists saying the same.

Figure 19: Pandemic impact on mental health and motivation for creative work
(Total respondents = 393)



As a result, nearly half of all respondents (47%) reported seeking new mental health services since the onset of the pandemic. Among 184 individuals who answered a follow-up question, only about half (52%) said they were able to access the mental health services they sought, with those who were not able to access services citing an inability to afford them (17%), lack of insurance (3%), or other reasons (27%).

Challenges and Opportunities to Strengthen Milwaukee’s Creative Community

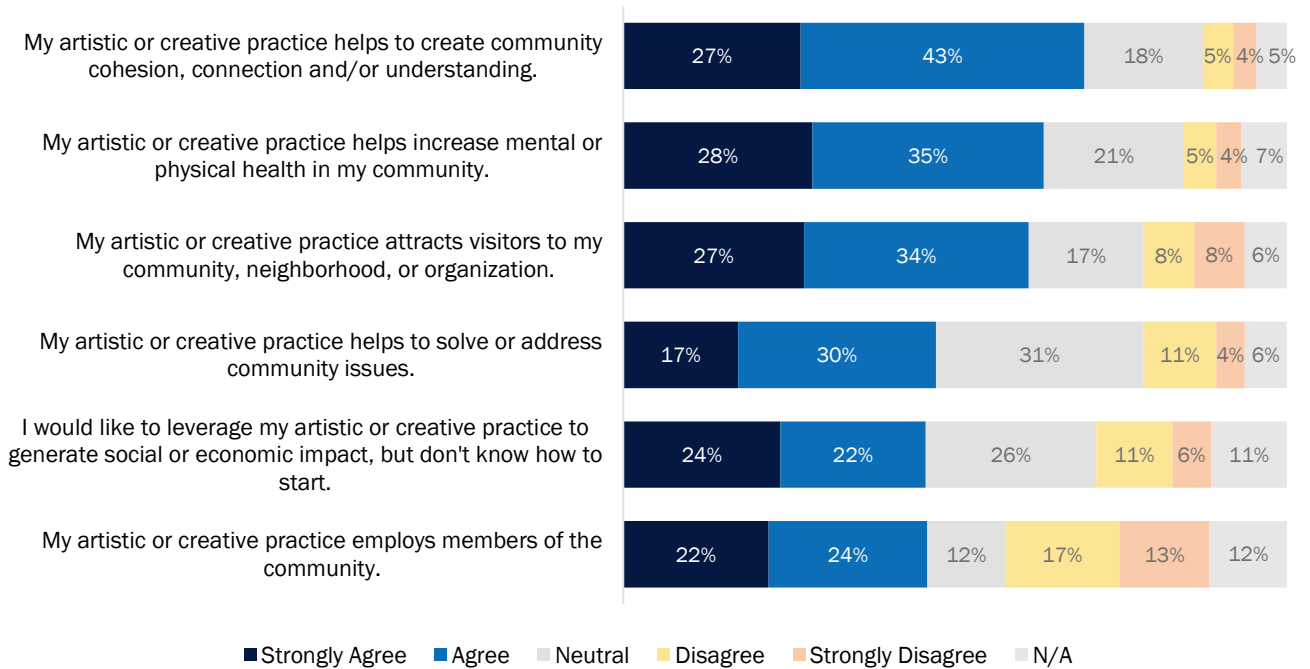
The final section of the survey sought to understand local artists’ views of their own artistic practices and of Milwaukee as a place to work in the arts. Among other objectives, we sought perspectives on the social and economic impacts of their creative work, what they feel they need most to build or maintain sustainable arts practices in Milwaukee, and what specific actions they believe local governments, businesses, and the broader community should take to help build a more thriving local arts community.

Impacts of creative work. Our survey respondents believe their creative work strengthens the community and local economy in a variety of ways. As shown in **Figure 20**, majorities of survey respondents said their artistic practices help to create community cohesion (70%); increase mental or physical health in the community (63%); and attract visitors (61%). Nearly half also agreed that their artistic practices help to address community issues (47%) and provide employment



opportunities for community members (46%), while just as many (46%) said they would like their art to make an impact in the community but don't know how to make that happen.

Figure 20: Artists' perspectives on the impacts of their creative practice
(Total respondents = 393)



Musicians were especially likely to say their artistic practice makes an impact in the community. Compared to visual artists, more musicians agree or strongly agree that their practice:

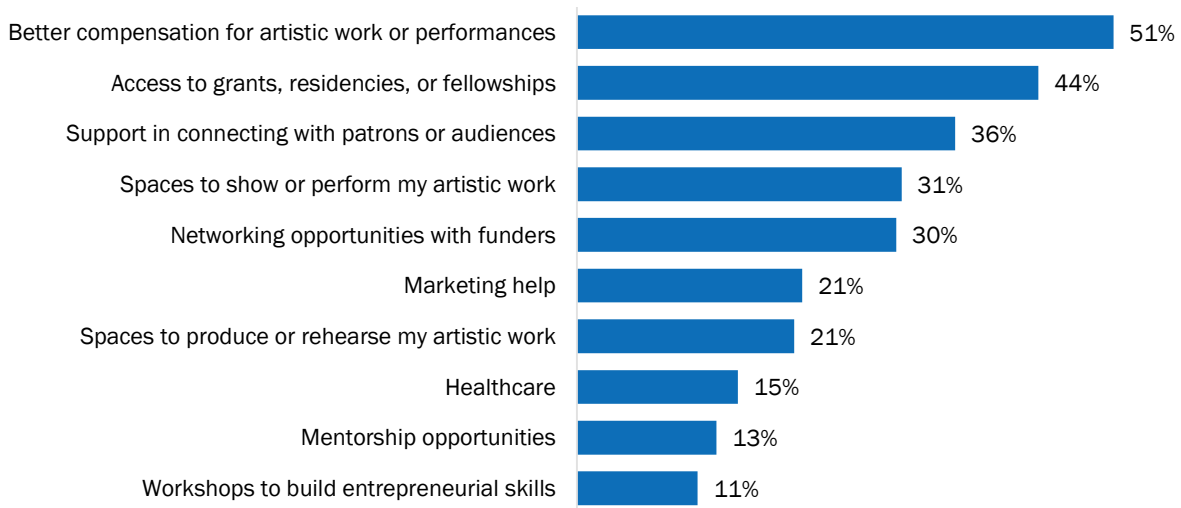
- Employs members of the community (68% vs. 26%)
- Attracts visitors to their community, neighborhood, or organization (83% vs. 52%)
- Helps increase mental or physical health in their community (79% vs. 52%)
- Helps to create community cohesion, connection, and/or understanding (81% vs. 60%)
- Helps to solve or address community issues (46% vs. 40%)

What artists need to build/maintain sustainable arts practices. Survey respondents identified a number of actions that could enhance their ability to support themselves through their creative work. As shown in **Figure 21**, the two needs most commonly selected pertain to more and better opportunities for paid work, with just over half (51%) citing a need for increased compensation for artistic work in general and 44% prioritizing access to opportunities for grants, residencies, and fellowships. More than one-third (36%) also said they need support to connect with patrons or audiences for their artistic work.

Musicians were most likely to identify better compensation as a key priority, with 76% including it among their top three needs compared with 41% of visual artists. In contrast, the most commonly cited need among visual artists was access to grants, residencies, and fellowships (selected by 49%).

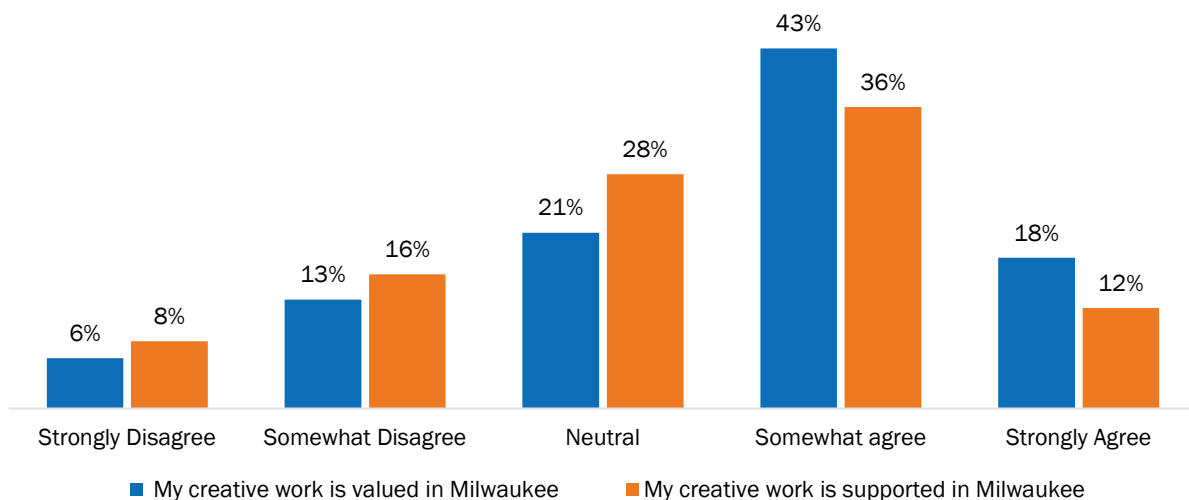


Figure 21: Top needs for building and maintaining sustainable arts practices
(Total respondents = 393; respondents asked to select top three priorities)



Perceived support for artists in Milwaukee. As shown in **Figure 22**, a majority of survey respondents (60%) indicated they feel their creative work is valued in Milwaukee, but just under half (48%) said their work is supported here. Compared to visual artists, musicians were more likely to say their work is valued (75% vs. 55%) and supported (56% vs. 46%).

Figure 22: Artist views on whether creative work is valued/supported in Milwaukee
(Total respondents = 393)



Differences in these responses also were evident based on the disability status and gender identity of survey respondents. Artists with disabilities were less likely than those without disabilities (47% vs. 63%) to agree that their creative work is valued in Milwaukee, while transgender artists also were



somewhat less likely to say their work is valued here (52% vs. 62% for both male and female respondents).

Reason(s) for considering leaving Milwaukee.

More than one in four respondents (28%) said they are currently considering moving to a place they believe would be more supportive of their creative work (Figure 23). When asked to explain the main reason(s) for contemplating a move in their own words, the most common reasons cited were lack of support for artists and limited career opportunities here compared with other cities. Respondents pointed to lack of support in many forms, from limited willingness among patrons to purchase art at a fair price to lack of support for the arts by local government. Those citing limited career opportunities often mentioned that

Milwaukee's market is too small to support its artists. Many stated that other (often larger) cities have better developed arts "ecosystems" that provide more opportunities for paid work and greater opportunities for those who work in less conventional art forms.

Some were critical of the local arts scene, which they described as insular, cliquy, and/or unwelcoming in general or for particular populations (such as Black or LGBTQ+ artists). Others stated economic factors like high cost of living, limited public transit, and lack of affordable studio space as reasons to leave Milwaukee. Some just wanted to expand their horizons after going to college in Milwaukee or spending many years here.

When those currently considering a move were asked where they wish to go, their responses were extremely varied, though Chicago was the most frequently cited city. Many respondents identified multiple possible locations.

How local governments could be more supportive. Survey respondents were asked to identify the top three things the city and county governments in Milwaukee could do to be more supportive of artists and creatives. The two most commonly chosen actions both involve funding, with a majority (57%) selecting increased public funding for the arts in general and 44% saying local governments should provide grants and other funding opportunities for artists (Figure 24). More than one in three also suggested that the city or county create an office dedicated to arts and culture.

Responses to this question varied somewhat by race, with white respondents most frequently choosing increased public funding for the arts (33%) and non-white respondents most often including grants and other funding opportunities (38%). Creating a city or county office for the arts was the second most common selection among white respondents (24%) but ranked fourth among non-white respondents (19%).

Figure 23: Share of artists considering moving to more supportive places
(Total respondents = 393)

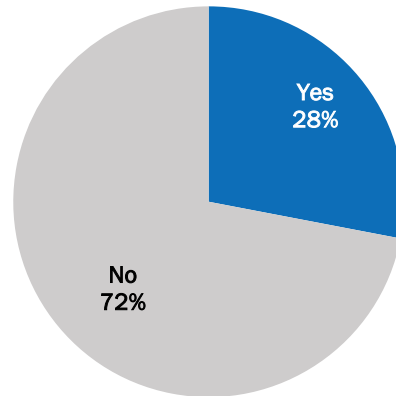
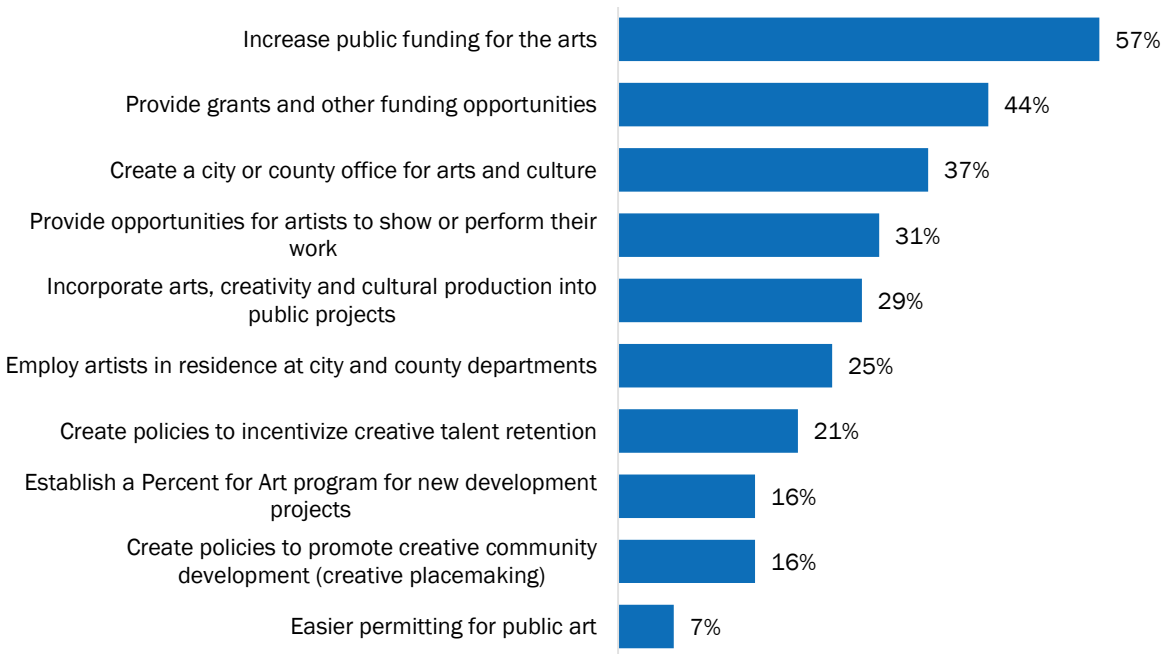
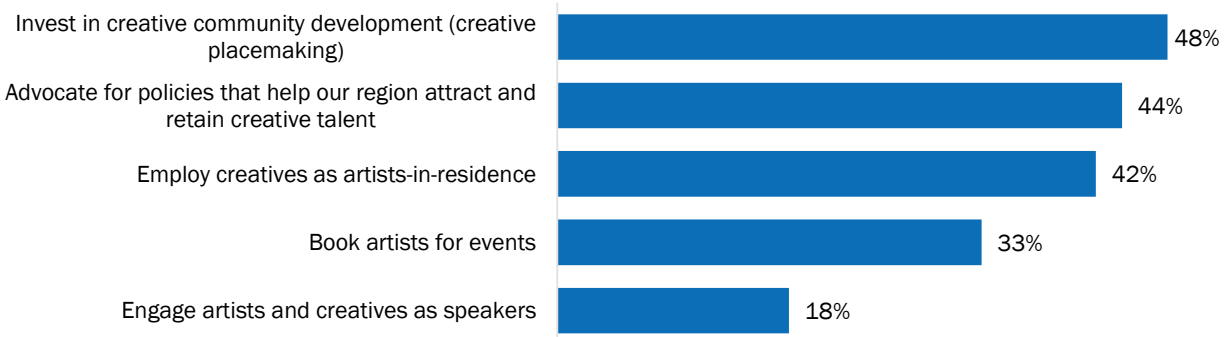


Figure 24: Tops ways city and county government can better support artists
(Total respondents = 393; respondents asked to select top three)



How Milwaukee businesses can be more supportive. Respondents also were asked to select the top two ways businesses in Milwaukee County can be more supportive of artists and creatives. As shown in **Figure 25**, nearly half (48%) suggested they invest in creative community development/creative placemaking,⁸ while nearly as many included advocacy for policies that attract and retain creative talent (44%) and employment of creatives as artists-in-residence⁹ (42%) in their top two.

Figure 25: Top ways Milwaukee businesses can better support artists
(Total respondents = 393; respondents asked to select top two)



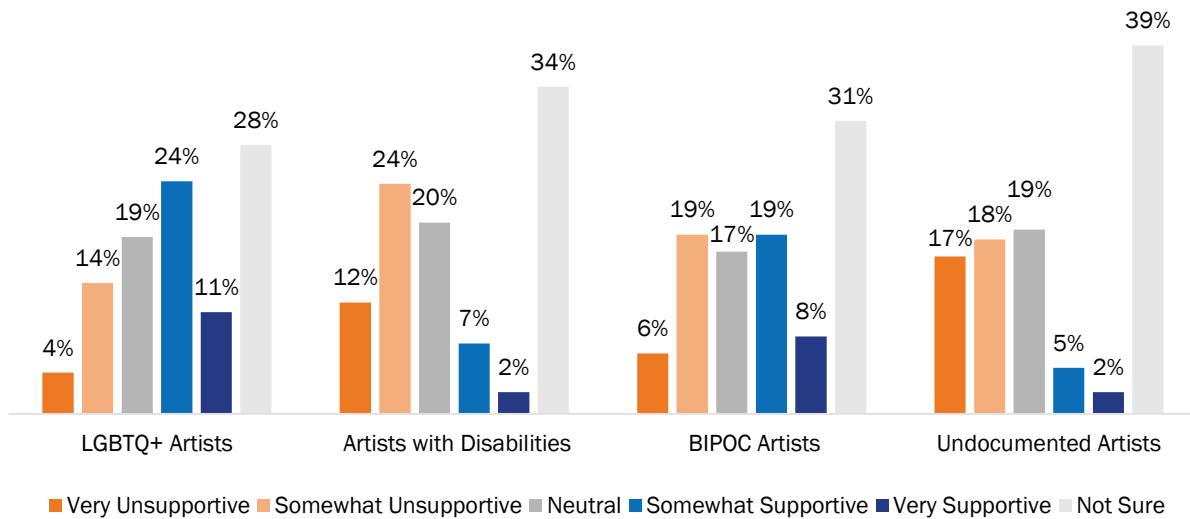
⁸ Creative placemaking is “the use of arts and culture by diverse partners to strategically shape the physical and social character of a place in order to spur economic development, promote enduring social change, and improve the physical environment.” <https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/ROW-Creative-Placemaking-handout.doc.pdf>

⁹ Artist-in-residence programs provide paid opportunities for artists to work (and in some cases reside) within the premises of an institution. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist-in-residence#cite_note-7



Support in Milwaukee for artists from marginalized communities. While 48% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that their own creative work is supported in Milwaukee (Figure 22 on p. 17), smaller percentages said artists from marginalized groups are supported here. For example, 35% somewhat or strongly agreed that LGBTQ+ artists are supported in Milwaukee, while 27% said the same for BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) artists, 9% for artists with disabilities, and 7% for undocumented artists (Figure 26). Notably, the most common response for every marginalized group was “Not Sure.”

Figure 26: How well Milwaukee supports artists from marginalized communities
(Total respondents = 393)



How Milwaukee can better support artists from marginalized communities. Answers varied widely as to how Milwaukee can better support artists of color, LGBTQ+ artists, undocumented artists, and artists with disabilities. The most common responses suggested the need for increased employment and grant opportunities specifically for those artists and increased opportunities for them to show their work in safe and accessible spaces. Several respondents said funding for arts in Milwaukee tends to go to larger arts organizations often led by individuals who are not a part of any marginalized group and that more funding should go directly to individual artists and smaller organizations with diverse leadership instead.

Another common theme was a need for individuals in these groups to be in positions of power (such as management of cultural organizations) and to be better represented on the staff and boards of local cultural organizations. Many respondents also suggested a need for increased and sustained outreach to hear directly from artists in these communities and for expanded arts education programming in Milwaukee schools.

Ideas from other U.S. cities. When asked which other U.S. cities are doing outstanding things to support the arts, the most common cities cited by respondents were Minneapolis/St. Paul (43), Chicago (31), and New York (26), followed by the west coast cities of San Francisco/Oakland, Los Angeles, and Portland. At least 10 respondents cited each of these cities or metro areas. Another peer Midwestern city, Kansas City, was mentioned by five respondents.



Many respondents pointed to much greater public funding as the most important thing Minneapolis/St. Paul is doing to support its artists across disciplines. That funding is used to provide grants for arts organizations and individual artists. They also suggested that corporations in the Twin Cities invest more in the arts and that local foundations offer more grant opportunities there than in Milwaukee. Others cited Minnesota’s [“Percent for Art”](#) program, which has been in place since 1984 and “encourages state building projects with construction or renovation budgets of \$500,000 or more to use up to one percent of the total construction budget to purchase or commission original artwork for the site.”

Regarding Chicago, several respondents cited the impact of the city’s [Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events](#) (DCASE) and suggested that Milwaukee could benefit from a cultural affairs office of its own. DCASE works to strengthen and market the local arts sector, recently led the development of a cultural plan for Chicago, provides grants for local arts organizations and artists, and presents free cultural programs for the public, among other activities.



CONCLUSION

The results of our *Milwaukee Artists and Creatives Survey* provide insight into the characteristics of 393 local artists, including how they support themselves financially and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected them and their artistic work. They also illuminate the personal views of local artists and creatives on how they perceive Milwaukee as a place to work and what they need to strengthen their artistic practices. Key findings that emerge from the survey include the following:

Most of the artists who responded to our survey earn income from their creative practices, but it is not typically their primary income source. While 84% of survey respondents said they earned income from their creative practices in 2019 (prior to the pandemic), only 24% said that at least half of their household income came from their creative work that year. Both employment outside of their creative practice and other household members were more likely to have contributed at least half of their total household income. A majority (61%) reported being employed outside of their creative practice.

The pandemic caused the incomes of local artists to drop, leading many to apply for unemployment and other public benefit programs. More than two-thirds of respondents (69%) said their household incomes were reduced in 2020 due to the pandemic, including 15% whose household incomes were cut by half or more. Roughly one-third of all respondents (32%) said they applied for unemployment benefits in 2020 due to the pandemic. The share of respondents who said they applied for or received health insurance from BadgerCare, Medicare, or Medicaid – or nutrition assistance from FoodShare/SNAP – also increased considerably in 2020.

At the time of the survey, opportunities for local artists to earn income from their creative practices had rebounded but not to pre-pandemic levels. While a majority of respondents (58%) said they performed, exhibited, or otherwise earned income from their creative practices at least monthly prior to the pandemic, that dropped to just 19% at the pandemic's height. By the time of the survey, 43% said they had opportunities to earn income from their art at least monthly.

Better compensation and expanded opportunities for funding and paid work are viewed by many local artists as key priorities for building and maintaining sustainable arts practices. Just over half (51%) of our survey respondents identified “better compensation for artistic work or performances” among the top three things they need to be able to support themselves through their creative work. The next most commonly cited needs were “access to opportunities for grants, residencies, and fellowships” (selected by 44% of respondents) and “support in connecting with patrons or audiences” (36%).

The survey results also illuminate the views of local artists on how local governments and businesses could enhance their support of the arts community now and in the future. They show that:

Many local artists want to see increased public funding for the arts and the establishment of a city or county office for arts and culture. When asked to identify specific ways in which city and county governments in Milwaukee could better support artists, a majority (57%) of our survey respondents included “increase public funding for the arts” among their top three. The other most common responses were “provide grants and other funding opportunities” (selected by 44%) and “create a city or county office for arts and culture” (37%).



Previous Forum [research](#) found Minnesota puts more public funding into the arts than any other state, while Wisconsin ranks last nationally. In addition, Wisconsin had a [Percent for the Arts](#) program for several decades – which directed two-tenths of one percent of the total construction budget for selected new state buildings or renovation projects to be used to commission or purchase art – but it was discontinued in 2011. These factors plus the activities and effectiveness of municipal or county arts and culture offices (like the one previously mentioned in Chicago) could be considered by state and local policymakers in Wisconsin who wish to enhance public sector support for the arts.

Many local artists would like Milwaukee businesses to expand their support by investing in creative placemaking, employing artists, and advocating for supportive policies. When asked to identify how local businesses could better support artists, nearly half (48%) of our survey respondents included “invest in creative community development (creative placemaking)” among their top two. Nearly as many selected “advocate for policies that help our region attract and retain creative talent” (44%) and “employ creatives as artists-in-residence” (42%).

The Greater Milwaukee Committee (GMC) created a [Creative Placemaking Committee](#) comprised of local business leaders and creatives in 2014 that has attracted national grants to support projects in Milwaukee neighborhoods that incorporate local artists, including the [Beerline Trail](#) and Newaukeee’s [Milwaukee Night Market](#). Meanwhile, Imagine MKE has formed a [Public Policy and Engagement Work Group](#) of artists and arts and culture organizations to identify and advocate for policy changes to support artists and creatives. The existence of these efforts means that local leaders may not have to start from scratch if they wish to respond to the sentiments voiced in the survey, but could instead seek to broaden participation in the existing committees and expand their scope.

The arts are critical not only for Milwaukee County’s quality of life, but also its economic competitiveness for businesses and talent. As artists and creatives in Milwaukee County continue to navigate the lingering impacts of the pandemic, we hope this report leads to improved understanding of their challenges. We also hope it encourages Milwaukee’s business and elected leaders to consider whether any of the strategies cited here by artists themselves or any additional new strategies are needed to sustain and strengthen the local arts community.



APPENDIX

Organizations that helped to distribute the *Milwaukee Artists and Creatives Survey*:

5 Points Art Gallery and Studios
88Nine Amplifier
Artists Working in Education
Arts @ Large
Bel Canto
Black Arts MKE
Black Box Fund
BookLive
Coalition of Photographic Artists
Danceworks
Ex Fabula
First Stage
gener8tor
Imagine MKE
Latino Arts Inc
League of Milwaukee Artists
LUNA (Latinas Unidas en las Artes)
Milwaukee Artist Resource Network
Milwaukee Chamber Theatre
Milwaukee Filmmaker Alliance
Milwaukee Theatre Alliance
Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra
Next Act Theatre
No Stress Collective
No Studios
Portrait Society Gallery
Present Music
Renaissance Theatreworks
South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center
Still Waters Collective
TBEY Arts Center
The Green Gallery
Tory Folliard Gallery
True Skool
United Performing Arts Fund
Var Gallery
Walkers Point Arts Center
Wisconsin Podcasters Association
Wisconsin Writers Association
WoLF Studios

