



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Surveying the Post-Pandemic Path Forward for Milwaukee County Artists, Creatives

Responses detail pandemic's harm, point to opportunities to bolster the region's arts scene

The COVID-19 pandemic decreased the earnings of many Milwaukee County artists and creatives, and while their income opportunities partially rebounded by the second half of 2021, they remained shy of pre-pandemic levels, according to the results of a new Wisconsin Policy Forum survey.

A majority of survey respondents also cite increased public support – including bolstering Wisconsin's lagging level of public arts funding – as a top priority for governments in the region to create a better climate for arts and culture.

Meanwhile, investing in creative place-making and employing artists are seen as ways the region's businesses could contribute, the survey results show.

Designed to improve understanding of Milwaukee's creative community, the Milwaukee Artists and Creatives Survey was developed by the Forum and Imagine MKE, a nonprofit that supports the arts community in Milwaukee. It was distributed by 40 organizations, generating nearly 400 responses between July and September 2021 from Milwaukee County residents in a wide range of creative disciplines.

Arts scene hard-hit by pandemic

While few have been spared from the pandemic's impacts, [previous Forum research found](#) that arts and cultural organizations and individual artists and creatives have been particularly hard-hit. Arts, cultural, and entertainment venues were shuttered at least temporarily, resulting in thousands of canceled visits, events, and performances.

Responses to our survey underscore this. Key findings include:

- Most survey respondents indicated they earn income from their creative work, though it is not their primary income source. **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.**
- 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 in the second half of 2021, **43% said they had opportunities to earn income** from their art at least monthly.
- Many local artists want to see increased public funding for the arts. [Previous Forum research found](#) on a per-capita basis, **Wisconsin's state government ranked last nationally in this category;** the most recently updated figures show the state ranking second-to-last – while neighboring Minnesota puts more public funding into the arts than any state.

- Asked to identify specific ways in which city and county governments in Milwaukee could better support artists, the other most common responses were to **provide grants** and other funding opportunities and to **create a city or county office for arts and culture**.
- When asked to identify how local businesses could better support artists, **nearly half of our survey respondents included “invest in creative community development (creative placemaking)”** among their top two. Nearly as many **suggested local businesses should advocate for policies that support creative workers** and **employ creatives** as artists-in-residence.

Finding solutions

The report notes that the Greater Milwaukee Committee established a Creative Placemaking Committee that has attracted grants to support projects featuring local artists, including the Beerline Trail and Newaukeew’s Milwaukee Night Market. Also, Imagine MKE has formed a Public Policy and Engagement Work Group 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 act in response to these survey findings, but could instead seek to broaden participation in the existing committees, and/or expand their scope.

Arts and culture are critical both for Milwaukee County’s quality of life and its economic competitiveness. As its artists and creatives continue to navigate the lingering impacts of the pandemic, we hope these findings bring their challenges to the attention of Milwaukee’s civic and elected leaders.

[Click here to read the full report: “The Work of Art: A Survey of Milwaukee’s Artists and Creatives.”](#)

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