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- By partnering with practitioners, communities, and policymakers to identify and inform key information and knowledge needs
- By advancing research and innovative methods in support of these efforts

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## ISSUE BRIEF

# The status of artists and creative workers

By Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard & Arpita Banerjee  
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Artists and workers in artistic and creative industries have been amongst the hardest hit by the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Early relief efforts sought to address the immediate ways that artists and creative industry workers were negatively affected amid the rapid changes brought on by the pandemic and now longer-term recovery efforts seek to advance systemic change to address the unique impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on artists and creative industry workers. Despite overall improvements in economic circumstances for the U.S. labor force, there are signs that recovery for artists and others in the creative sector lags that of other workers.<sup>2</sup> To help further inform recovery efforts, we ask what is known about the current status of artists and creative sector workers.

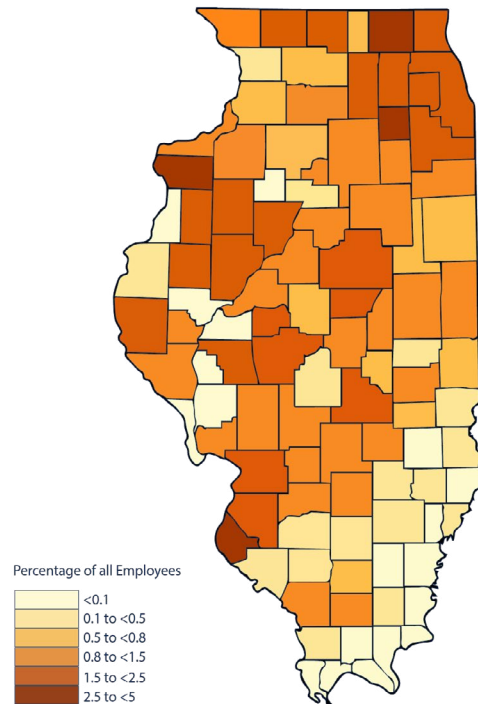
The purpose of this issue brief is to expand the current understanding of the status of individual artists and creative workers. Specifically, we focus on insights that can be garnered from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, the primary data source on employment and unemployment in the United States, and its Annual Social and Economic Supplement to offer an initial look at the following topics on the national level:

- unemployment and receipt of unemployment benefits,
- self-employment, and
- multiple job-holdings and mixed earners.

While it is often desirable for regional recovery and workforce development efforts to have regionally-specific data, the national perspective offers insights for Illinois given that it recently ranked amongst the largest of states employing artists and creative sector workers. Just prior to the pandemic, in 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis estimated that over 200,000 workers - around 3.5% of all Illinois workers - were employed in the arts and creative sector throughout Illinois (see Figure 1), ranking as the fifth largest state in terms of this sector's employment.<sup>3</sup>

## Data & Methods

The primary data sources used in this brief are the Current Population Survey and its Annual Social and Economic Supplement. The [Current Population Survey \(CPS\)](#) is the primary source for labor force statistics in the United States, sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and administered monthly to around 60,000 U.S. households. The [Annual Social and Economic Supplement \(ASEC\)](#) is an annual supplement to the CPS administered in February, March, and April that captures further details about employment and related social and economic matters, providing data on the prior calendar year. The CPS offers a monthly lens that provides valuable information on shifts brought on by the changing conditions of the pandemic, and the ASEC offers longer term perspectives on the cumulative experiences over a year's time and enables comparisons between years.



**Figure 1. Arts, Entertainment & Recreation employees as percentage of all employees, by county**

Source data: County Business Patterns, 2019, NAICS Code 71

In this brief, we use two lenses on artists and creative workers, defined in terms of (1) creative industry-specific workers, referred to as the Arts and Culture Sector labor force and (2) in terms of artists. The former considers those in the labor force for arts and cultural industries, regardless of their specific job or occupation within the industry, and the latter considers those in the labor force working in specific artistic occupations regardless of industry. Within this brief, the Arts and Culture Sector labor force is defined as workers in the following industries, as defined by North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) codes:

- 7111-Performing Arts Companies
- 7113-Promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events
- 7115-Independent artists, writers, and performers
- 7121-Museums, historical sites, and similar institutions

The artists labor force is defined by Standard Occupation Codes (SOC) designated by the National Endowment for the Arts for the study of artists' employment. The Technical Appendix contains the list of SOC codes used for analyses in this brief.

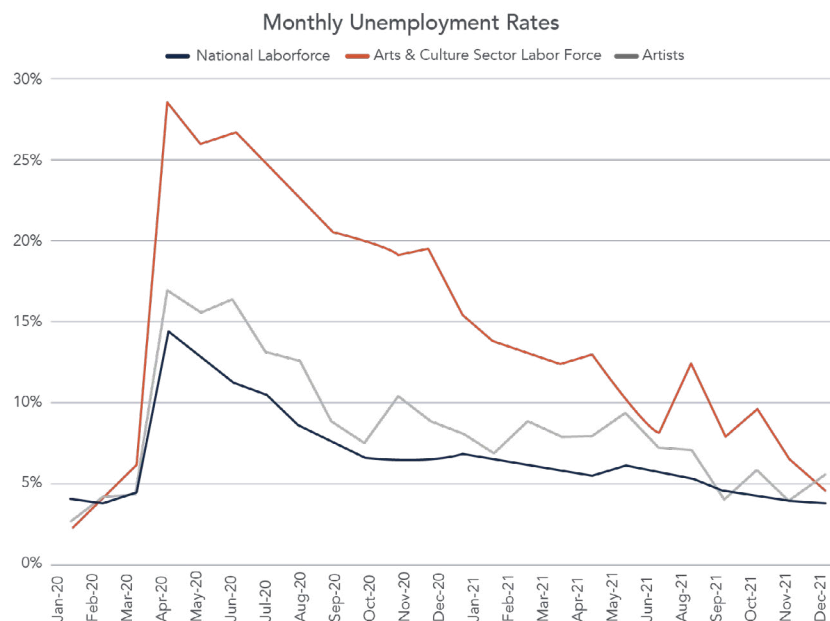
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/COVID-Outlook-Week-of-1.4.2021-revised.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/103614>

<sup>3</sup> <https://apps.bea.gov/data/special-topics/arts-and-culture/summary-sheets/Arts%20-%20Illinois.pdf>

# Unemployment & Receipt of Unemployment Benefits

Figure 2 illustrates monthly unemployment rates for the arts and culture sector labor force and for artists compared to the U.S. labor force as a whole. The dramatic increase in unemployment in the months following the onset of the pandemic in the U.S. has been well documented, with unemployment within the arts and culture sector reaching almost 30%.<sup>4</sup> Since then, there has been an overall decline in unemployment rates through December 2021, the most recent month for which data was available at the time of preparing this brief, for the U.S. labor force as well as for the arts and culture sector and for the more narrowly defined artist occupations.



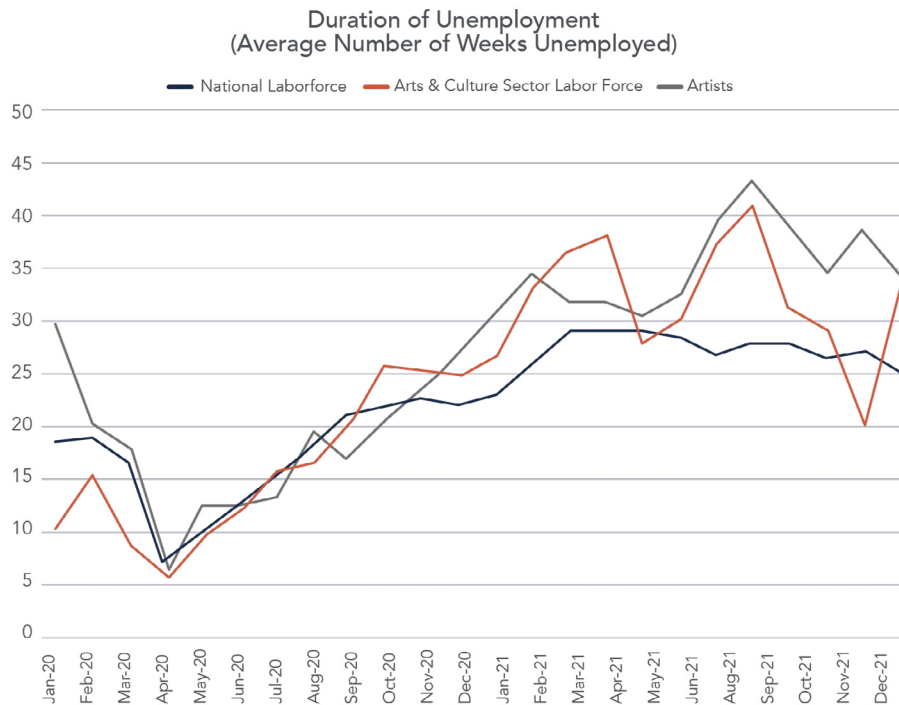
**Figure 2. Monthly Unemployment Rates**

Source data: Current Population Survey, Basic Monthly Data

While there are limitations to how well SOC and NAICS codes capture artists and creative industry workers, Figure 2 illustrates the devastating impacts of the pandemic on work in the artistic and creative sectors. These trends do not yet capture the impacts of the Omicron surge in January 2022.

Figure 3 illustrates monthly average weeks of unemployment - an important measure of economic impact and recovery. Since the widespread onset of the pandemic, the average number of weeks of unemployment has increased for the national labor force, with artists and arts and culture sector workers experiencing higher rates of unemployment when compared to the national labor force. In August 2021, the average number of weeks of unemployment for artists reached an estimated high of about 43.3 weeks, whereas the average number of weeks of unemployment for the overall labor force was estimated to be 27.7 weeks that same month. In December 2021, artists and those in the arts and culture sector labor force reported 34.1 and 32.7 weeks of unemployment on average respectively, whereas the average number of weeks for the labor force overall is estimated to be 25.1 weeks.

<sup>4</sup> Margins of error (MEs) are not reported for analyses of monthly data. The MEs are not included here given the nature of this brief to provide indicators on the status of segments of the labor force; all are publicly available for data sources for further consideration.

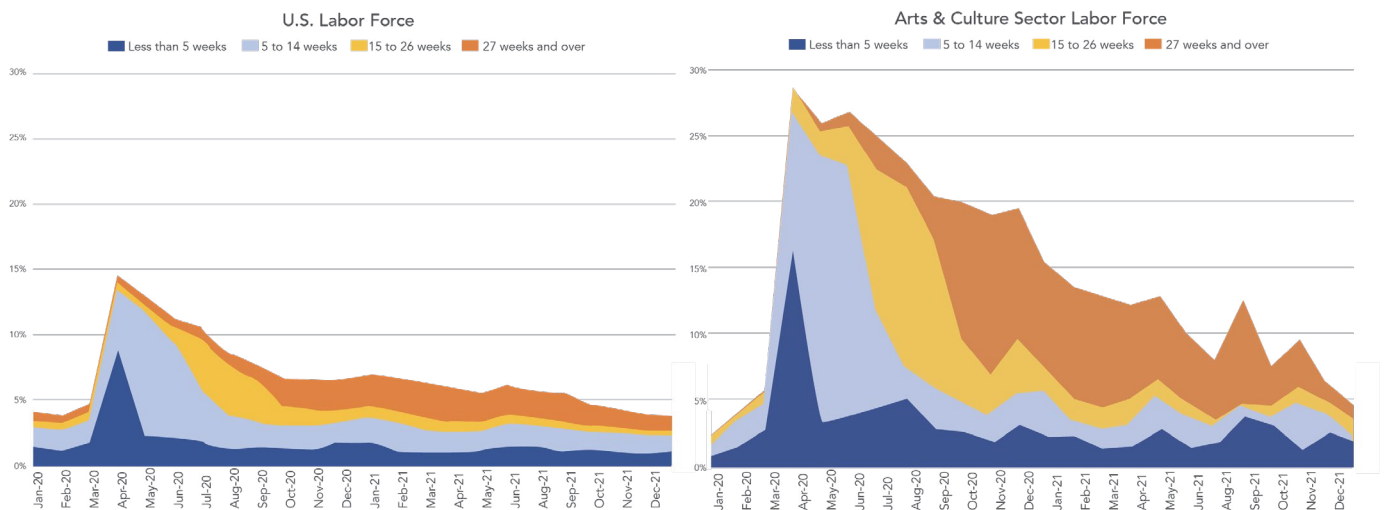


**Figure 3. Duration of Unemployment**

Source data: Current Population Survey, Basic Monthly Data

While the average weeks of unemployment are relatively high in the earliest months of 2020, these averages are based on overall lower rates of unemployment as shown in Figure 2. Figure 3A offers a combined look at unemployment rates and duration of unemployment, shown as the distribution of the number of weeks unemployed, for the U.S. labor force and for the arts and culture sector labor force.

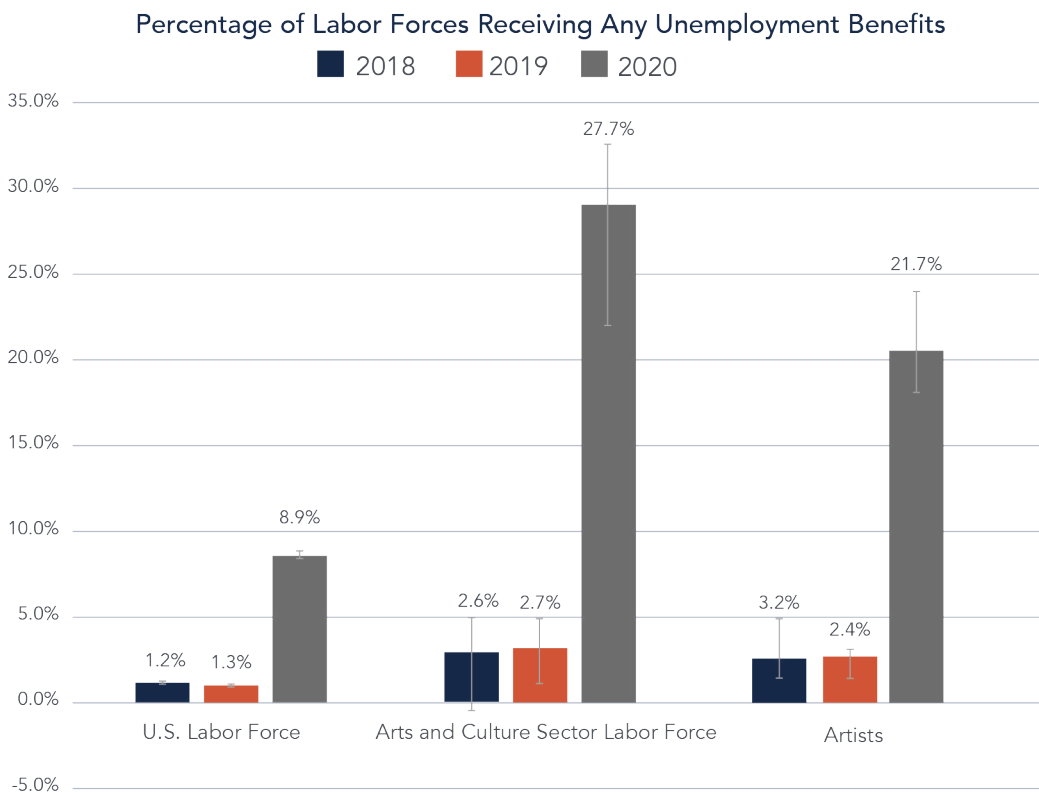
### Duration of Unemployment, Distribution of Weeks



**Figure 3A. Duration of Unemployment, Distribution of Weeks**

Source data: Current Population Survey, Basic Monthly Data

The rate of artists and creative sector workers receiving unemployment benefits in 2020 grew almost tenfold when compared to the previous year. Almost 22% of artists received some form of unemployment benefits in 2020,<sup>5</sup> compared to 2.4% receiving benefits in 2019. The Arts and Culture Sector labor force shared a similar experience, with almost 28% receiving benefits in 2020 compared to 2.7% in 2019 (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Percentage of Labor Forces Receiving Any Unemployment Benefits**  
 Source data: Current Population Survey's Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2019-2021<sup>6</sup>

The average unemployment benefits received by qualifying individuals in 2020 was \$9,237—the benefits on average for artists and those working in the arts and culture sector did not deviate significantly from benefits for the U.S. labor force as a whole.

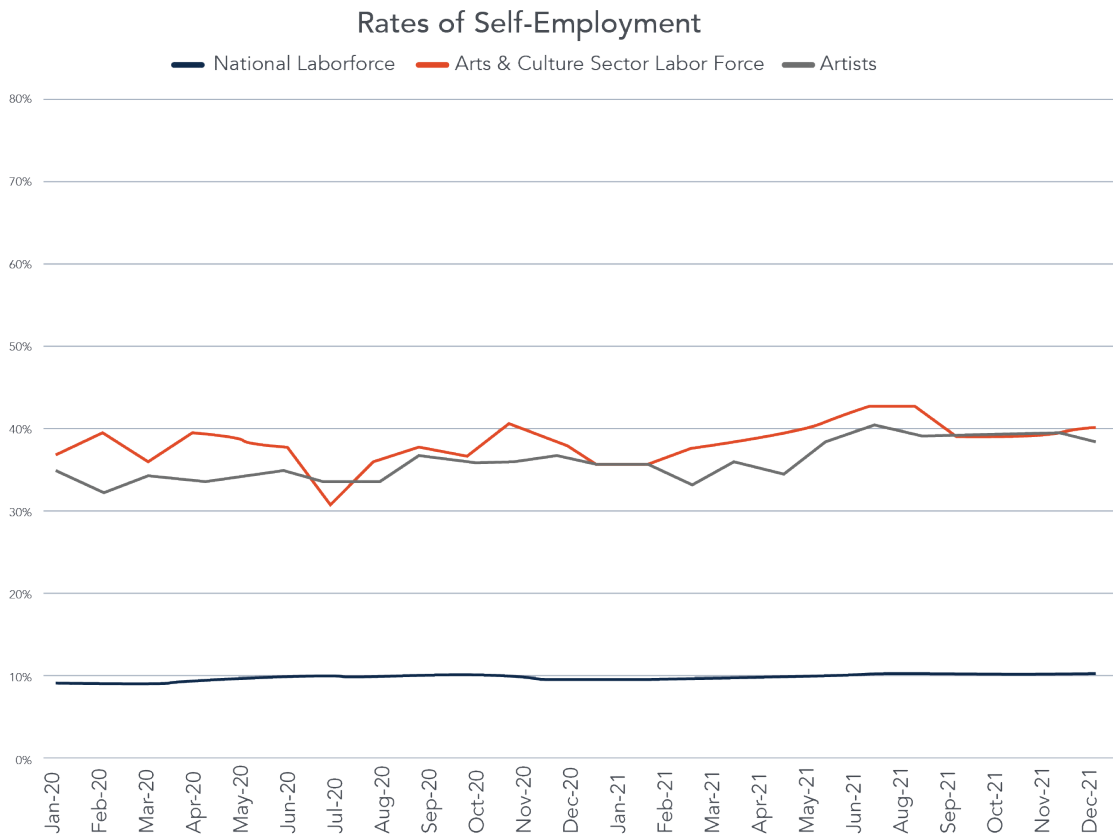
<sup>5</sup> This measure of unemployment benefits includes those received through supplemental unemployment, unions, or other sources.

<sup>6</sup> Error bars in figures represent 95%-confidence intervals for point estimates. Statistical significance is assessed at the 95%-confidence level.

# Self-Employment

A vital part of early relief efforts was Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), a provision of the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security) Act. PUA enabled self-employed gig and freelance workers to seek public unemployment benefits - a resource that self-employed workers were not previously eligible to receive.<sup>7</sup> PUA was of particular importance to the creative sector, as self-employed artists constituted 34% of the artist labor force—3.6 times the rate of self-employment for other workers<sup>8</sup>—at the onset of the pandemic.

Whether the pandemic would alter the portion of the artist labor force that is self-employed has been a question in discussions about possible shifts in the overall creative workforce. Figure 5 shows that the rates of self-employment<sup>9</sup> for the national labor force, and for artists and those working in the arts and culture sectors held steady over 2020 and 2021; self-employment rates for the arts and culture sector held steady at around four times the rate for the national labor force.



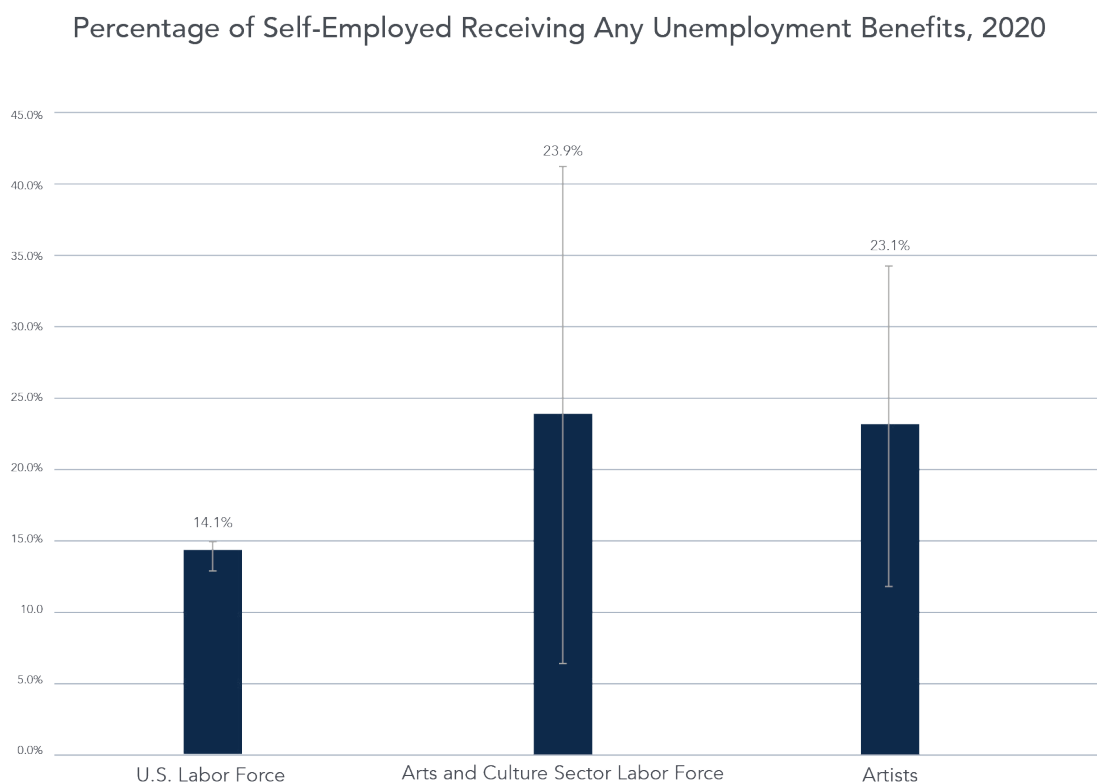
**Figure 5. Rates of Self-Employment**  
Source data: Current Population Survey, Basic Monthly Data

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists\\_and\\_Other\\_Cultural\\_Workers.pdf](https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Artists_and_Other_Cultural_Workers.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Self-employment as presented here includes both incorporated and unincorporated self-employment as one's primary job. If a person holds multiple jobs, then the CPS defines the primary job as the one where the person usually works the most hours.

To understand what portion of self-employed workers received unemployment benefits from PUA or other sources, Figure 6 shows that approximately 23% of self-employed artists and self-employed arts and culture sector workers received unemployment benefits in 2020 compared to 14% for the U.S. labor force. Despite higher estimates of unemployment, these estimates are not statistically different from the estimate for the U.S. labor force. In comparing Figure 6 to the estimates for 2020 in Figure 4, a larger percentage of the self-employed U.S. labor force received unemployment benefits relative to the labor force at large; however, we did not discern significant differences between the percentages of self-employed arts and culture sector labor or the artists labor force who received unemployment benefits, and the whole of each of these labor forces that received benefits.



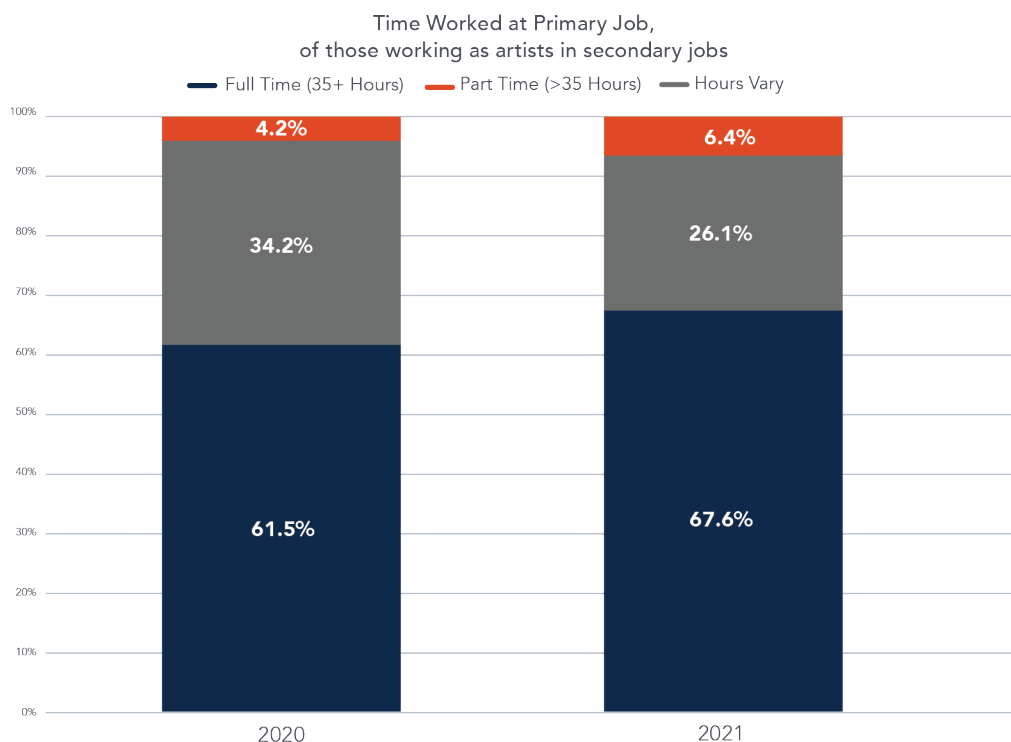
**Figure 6. Percentage of Self-Employed Receiving Any Unemployment Benefits, 2020**

Source data: Current Population Survey's Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2021

## Multiple Job-Holdings & Mixed Earners

Artists have long been known as a group that has a tendency to hold multiple jobs simultaneously, or to move between jobs due the freelance, gig, or project-based nature of much creative work.<sup>10</sup> As questions are raised about shifts in the overall creative workforce, we look at multiple job-holdings since the onset of the pandemic. While the prior analyses focus on primary jobs, those in which the worker (usually) spends the most time, the following analyses look at secondary jobs. Commonly, those working as artists in the secondary jobs are professional workers.<sup>11</sup>

In both 2020 and 2021, approximately 2% of the U.S. labor force held a secondary job within the arts and culture industries and approximately 4% held a secondary job in an artist occupation.<sup>12</sup> Of those who held a secondary job as an artist, about two-thirds worked full-time (35+ hours per week) in their primary job (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Time Worked at Primary Job, of those working as artists in secondary job**  
Source data: Current Population Survey, Basic Monthly Data

The reason for the higher percentage of those who held a secondary job as an artist working a full-time primary job in 2021 is unclear. This may suggest that people working as artists may be working less in these occupations and spending more time in other occupations, or perhaps that more workers are now pursuing their artistic interests and working in secondary jobs as artists in light of shifts in needs and interests brought on by the pandemic.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance>

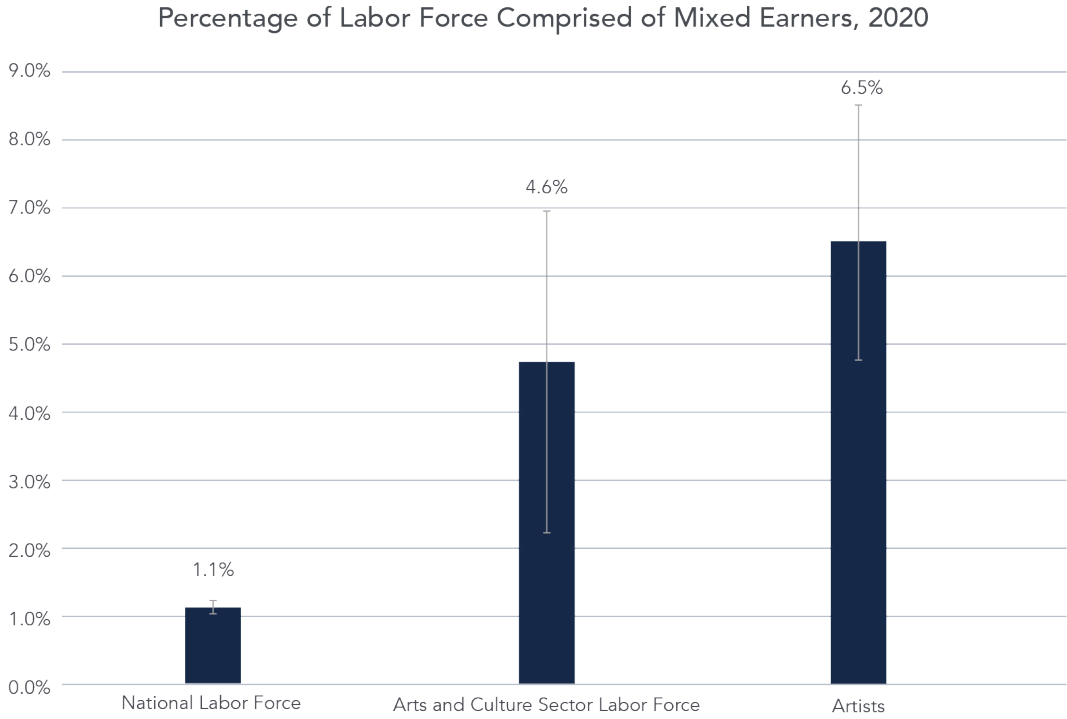
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/arts-data-profile-series/adp-3>

<sup>12</sup> These annual statistics are generated from the CPS Basic Monthly Data, averaged across the months within each year as done in <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/arts-data-profile-series/adp-3>



The majority of people working as artists in secondary jobs do so through self-employment. In 2021, an estimated two-thirds (63%) did so through self-employment; approximately 35% of people working as artists in secondary jobs did so working for private employers and 2% did so by working for a government entity.

Even though the CARES Act provided PUA for self-employed workers, the early benefit calculations and eligibility requirements disadvantaged workers earning income through a combination of salary or wages as reported on W-2 forms and of self-employment earnings, such as reported on 1099 forms, in terms of their access to unemployment benefits. While efforts to mitigate this matter were made through Mixed Earners Unemployment Compensation,<sup>13</sup> questions were raised about the mix of incomes earned by workers in artist occupations and about the percentage of the artist workforce that could be impacted. Figure 8 shows the estimated percentages of mixed earners within the labor force, with artists and arts and culture sector workers having significantly larger percentages of their labor forces composed of mixed earners compared to the U.S. labor force as a whole.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 8. Percentage of Labor Force Comprised of Mixed Earners, 2020**  
Source data: Current Population Survey’s Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2021

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20210105>

<sup>14</sup> For this analysis, mixed earners are operationalized as those who report earnings via wages and salary or self-employment in their primary job, and subsequently report additional earnings via the alternative of these two sources in their secondary job or jobs.

## Conclusion

This brief provides initial insights on the status of individual artists and creative workers enabled by recent data available from the Current Population Survey. Given the significant efforts underway in regions across the U.S. and at the national level to provide support, and to create sustainable structures that can provide support and opportunity, for artists and workers in the arts and culture sectors, we hope that these analyses can be informative. Based on these analyses, we see that large portions of the creative labor force remain vulnerable to economic shocks. This continued risk exists in addition to the cumulative hardships since the onset of the pandemic for this labor force.

## Acknowledgements

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## Technical Appendix

The Arts and Culture Sector is defined using the following NAICS codes:

Census Code	Industry	NAICS Code
8562	Performing arts companies	7111
8563	Promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events, agents, and managers for artists, athletes	7113, 7114
8564	Independent artists, writers, and performers	7115
8570	Museums, art galleries, historical sites, and similar institutions	7121

Artists are defined using the following SOC codes:<sup>15</sup>

2018 Standard Occupation Codes	Occupation	2018 Census Code
27-2011	Actors	2700
27-3011	Radio and Television Announcers	2805
27-3012	Public Address System and Other Announcers	*
17-1011	Architects, Except Landscape and Naval	1305
17-1012	Landscape Architects	1306
27-1014	Special Effects Artists and Animators (formerly Multimedia Artists)	2600
27-2031	Dancers	2740
27-2032	Choreographers	2740
27-1021	Commercial and Industrial Designers	2631
27-1022	Fashion Designers	2632
27-1023	Floral Designers	2633
27-1024	Graphic Designers	2634
27-1025	Interior Designers	2635
27-1026	Merchandise Displayers and Window Trimmers	2636
27-1027	Set and Exhibit Designers	2640
27-1029	Designers, All Other	2640
27-2041	Music Directors and Composers	2751
27-2042	Musicians and Singers	2752
27-4021	Photographers	2910
27-2012	Producers and Directors	2710
27-3043	Writers and Authors	2850
27-2099	Entertainers and Performers, Sports and Related Workers, All Other	2770