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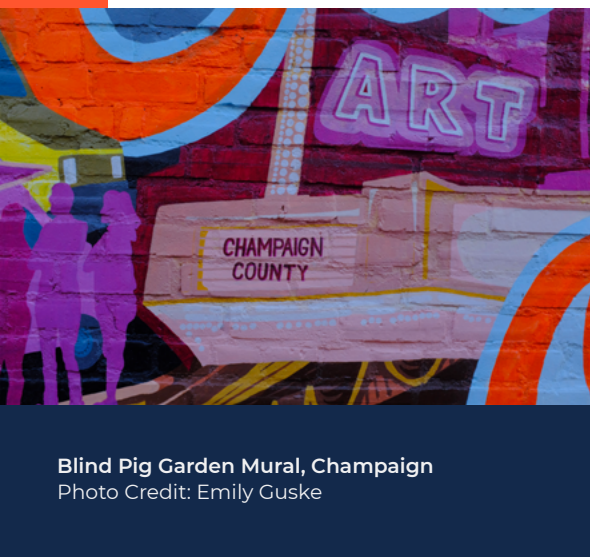
The Pandemic's Impact on Artists and Creative Workers in Illinois: Exploring Lived Experiences in the Urbana Champaign Area

By Magdalena Novoa and Emily Guske
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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, local and global institutions, nonprofits, and researchers have documented the impacts on the artistic and creative sectors' workforce and economy. In the U.S., in July 2020, four months after the global shutdown, the country's creative sector experienced a loss of \$150 billion in sales and 2.7 million jobs.¹ A new analysis from the National Endowment for the Arts (2022) showed that despite the arts continuing to represent more than 4 percent of the nation's economy, this relative stability conceals a tremendous decline for various subsectors of the arts.² Furthermore, there is no record of the effects on self-employed artists and cultural workers. A report by Arts Alliance Illinois shows that in the first year of the pandemic, Illinois was one of the states with the highest loss of creative industry revenue and employment in the nation.³



Blind Pig Garden Mural, Champaign
Photo Credit: Emily Guske

Research has shown how the pandemic has affected the U.S. creative sector's economy, changing employment and public engagement patterns on creative businesses and organizations with a particular focus on the bigger cities that concentrate this industry.⁴ However, despite the socio-economic significance of the creative sector, an in-depth look into the impacts of the pandemic on artists' and creative workers' lived experiences from a qualitative perspective remains relatively scarce.⁵

Focusing on large cities to understand the broader trends of the COVID-19 pandemic and creating a response model for future crises have obscured what is happening at other urban scales. Considering that small and midsize cities are home to twice as many people as large cities in the U.S. and face the same health concerns as larger-scale urban areas, studies suggest uneven economic growth and recovery between large, midsize, and small cities.⁶ This inattention to smaller urban centers has profound consequences for the creative sector at

different urban scales because it neglects how urban areas are interdependent. The growth of larger urban areas depends largely on smaller cities' socioeconomic, infrastructural, and socioecological transformation.⁷ This inattention also negates the potential of sharing learnings among different urban scales that can shed light on more integrated response approaches to strengthen the Illinois arts ecosystem during a crisis.

Given the critical instability brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to the arts and creative sectors and the gap in the literature on how these crises impact artists in their personal lives, combined with the lack of research at smaller urban scales, this issue brief examines how artists and creative workers in the Champaign-Urbana metropolitan area in central-east Illinois experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the 2020 census data, Champaign County has a population of 205,865, and 9.8 percent of the employment is in the arts and entertainment sector as defined by the American Community Survey. We focus on the Champaign Urbana area because of its relevance to the University of Illinois's location and our institution's responsibility to its local community.

Methodology

This issue brief draws on qualitative methodology combining different methods, such as semi-structured interviews, archival research, press and social media analysis, and photographs we collected from the artistic and cultural community of the Champaign Urbana Metropolitan area dating from 2020 to 2021. We conducted 12 interviews during 2022 and 2023 with artists and cultural workers from different disciplines and industries as defined by the National Endowment for the Arts primarily from outside the university. Because of the exploratory nature of this research, we decided not to focus on a particular artistic discipline or industry but rather keep the scope open to understand the differences and similarities in creatives' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. We recruited research participants through word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. Respondents vary in career trajectory and self-identify with various genders, races, ethnicities, and disabilities. We manually coded and categorized the information, identifying emerging themes or concepts that repeated through the data.

Key Findings

Loss of work and concern about their artistic future

Interviewees reported the arts have always been an unstable source of income in the Urbana Champaign area. They continuously dealt with the challenges of developing their art practices and businesses in their free time. However, the pandemic and its restrictions exacerbated the instability and created concerns and anxiety around their future as artists. This was particularly relevant for interviewees in the performance arts. They reported more difficulties than other artists and cultural workers coping with the distress of their career uncertainty, given that venues, shows, and festivals were closed. Moreover, playing in front of an audience was no longer possible, which they recognized as one of the most meaningful aspects of their careers. Additionally, many artists found themselves unable to rehearse with their bands or production teams, which made them fear that they would be under-prepared to perform again professionally whenever the pandemic was over.

For example, one drag artist described how isolated, insecure, and awkward it felt to perform in front of a screen and in their living room while their family members had to remain in a separate room to allow them to do their work. In this sense, for visual artists and writers, transitioning from in-person exhibitions or press festivals to exhibiting or selling their work in online markets and websites appeared to be a more natural transition than for performance artists to online and live-streamed shows.



A little contour and confidence.
Photo Credit: The Peach of the Midwest.

The pandemic-related loss of work was sudden and unprecedented for artists and cultural workers from all disciplines, having to halt their creative practice from one day to another and prioritize their other jobs unrelated to their artistic practice. This resulted in feeling lost and alone in their artistic careers, which participants acknowledged as emotionally overwhelming. One participant said, “[I felt] fear and confusion, as many of us didn’t know if we would be here the following year or the next month. We were uncertain how the art business would shift or even continue.” Interviewees also dealt with uncertainty about the state of the creative industry locally and nationally.

Financial impact and support

For individual artists, the pandemic financially impacted their general income but only to some extent, as most interviewees had always relied on another primary source of income. One participant noted that “[N]obody makes a living solely from their art here. Artists need to have side jobs to survive. Still, we do count on the extra income of gigs, and not having that anymore did hit us.”

However, three interviewees, all BIPOC from different disciplines, who at the beginning of the pandemic had more unstable jobs, reported significant financial hardships, which included living on minimum salary or less, food insecurity, and homelessness. One participant reported, “Food

insecurity was horrible for us, and I was concerned about how I would be able to feed my kids.” Small presses and publishers also reported being impacted greatly from not attending in person events.

Cultural workers employed by an institution or non-profit and owners of small arts businesses reported accessing grants that provided them with financial assistance to continue to pay salaries and acquire technological infrastructure and software to adapt programs or create new ones online. All participants mentioned that the financial and personal support of the City of Urbana’s Arts and Culture program and the mayor were central to implementing creative ways to adapt to the new reality and preventing their venues from closing. One participant recalled, “They called us and asked how we can help.” Another participant described how they could adapt their business and operate an outdoor venue in their parking lot by working closely with the mayor to arrive at this solution. Other entrepreneurs and non-profits recognized long-term local donors’ support, who assured them they would not lose it even if programs were halted. Yet since many relied on another income source, they often would not qualify for governmental relief support. They felt this situation related to the difficulty of living from their art practice in the local area.



Rose Bowl Bodega, mid-2020, during the stay-at-home order. Rose Bowl Bar transformed into a neighborhood grocery store to help mitigate the expenses of the venue’s bills. Photo Credit: Rose Bowl.

Additionally, individual artists that did seek help to apply to grants found it impossible to do so due to the information required for applications. One participant reported that “we were asked to demonstrate taxable income as an artist and I didn’t have the infrastructure to show that, because often I’m paid just in cash... Nobody in the arts world believes I exist as an artist.” Another participant said, “at the end most relief efforts in the arts privileged the privileged.”

Larger art businesses also found they could not benefit from relief grants, as they did not meet the criteria because they had earnings over the threshold or received donor support. Most individual artists whose primary income source was not related to arts and culture never learned about relief grants or support, or if they did, they found it overwhelming to apply while juggling other pandemic-related burdens. Most expressed a sense of injustice in the government's treatment of relief support, as they perceived these were targeted to the greater Chicago area only and did not consider other areas' needs. As one participant said, "[T]he government could have made more effort to understand what we needed ... getting out to the community informing us and asking us what we needed ... Particularly, for BIPOC artists, there are a lot more needs." This perceived lack of support from the federal and state governments made many feel undervalued as artists, increasing their anxiety over the future of their creative practice.

Accessibility and technology

According to participants, technology was a double-edged sword during the pandemic. On the one hand, technology constitutes a barrier for some people and everyone recognizes that in-person encounters are not replaceable. It also meant, in the words of one participant, "re-learning how to make our art, which was hard." However, technology also emerged as a tool to continue working and connecting with others during the pandemic and as a long-term opportunity and tool for creative development. Virtual

engagement also benefited the mental health of many artists who found ways of creating digitally and forming support groups during the pandemic, allowing them to find a sense of belonging with others.

One interviewee explained, "[T]here's just as much of a technological divide as a physical one ... those for whom it's difficult to come in person to things. And that ... could be due to ability status ... childcare, working three shifts." According to participants, the pandemic, remote work, and virtual engagements opened many doors for artists and audiences who had never engaged in cultural programming. Many things that were experimental for the pandemic in terms of technology have continued because they enable artists to connect widely.

Technology also enabled the wider community to enjoy the arts and culture while in lockdown, which at the same time showed the value and generosity of artists. Referring to how during the pandemic the need of the arts was made evident, one artist stated, "Most of the things that we do and offer to the community don't fit in a financial spreadsheet. The value of the arts is often depleted, yet everyone needs art. Arts is not just a side thing, is the very soul of the community."



Psychological effects, care, and personal wellbeing



Artist Patrick Earl Hammie's head shot taken mid-2020, during the stay-at-home order. "It represents the view from my computer, constantly reflecting me through Zoom and its black screen as I meet with classes and colleagues, and between and after, using it to research, draw, and collage." Photo Credit: Patrick Earl Hammie.

Participants across disciplines reported various detrimental emotional and health-related effects of the pandemic, including anxiety over balancing home and family care work with their daytime jobs and creative practice. Due to the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic and the social unrest due to George Floyd's killing, those participants who self-identified as BIPOC experienced greater fear, anger, and difficulty coping with the anxiety brought by the pandemic. Cultural workers with senior roles in businesses, institutions, or non-profits experienced exhaustion and stress due to their responsibility to keep their businesses going. All interviewees across disciplines and types of practice expressed concern and a sense of critical responsibility to help ameliorate the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and the political and social unrest at the time.

Participants in the arts education sector reported burnout, mainly due to suddenly adapting arts studios and workshops to online education when nobody imagined how such practices could work virtually. The anxiety and fear over the future of the arts sector were also detrimental to their psychological well-being.

However, all participants expressed positive impacts from collaborating on initiatives with the local and sometimes global creative community. One performance artist noted how, through Facebook, they created a global support platform where they shared their feelings, experiences, and resources with artists worldwide. They noted that they would have never met under normal circumstances. That opportunity also enabled them to adapt their practices to online platforms by learning from others and exploring digital media as a new form of creative practice. Others expressed the opportunity to join, contribute, and benefit from national campaigns like Save Our Stages.



Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Champaign in the summer of 2020. Photo Credit: Joaquin Vieira.

Several participants, especially visual artists and writers, appreciated their time during the pandemic to slow down and rethink their artistic work, with two interviewees mentioning the opportunity to explore new media and revamp their work, making it "deeper, more interdisciplinary" and "allowing themselves to express more openly feelings of marginalization and anger but also joy." Others valued lower stress levels by not traveling constantly to perform or participate in exhibitions or fairs in other locations. Regarding general health, interviewees associated the smaller-scale urban area as beneficial for coping better with the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Institutional responses to support the local arts scene

One key finding that appeared across all interviews is the disconnection between the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the local arts community. Despite that, participants appreciated the role of the university in keeping the general community safe and lowering the transmission of COVID-19 with their restriction policies and accessible testing innovations; they also resented that the university's creatives did not engage with artists locally.

The tight local community in the area made the participants feel less isolated in their concerns and hardships and more hopeful about the future. The small urban scale allowed people to connect, pass information through word of mouth, create, and join anti-racial and anti-LGBTQI+ discrimination campaigns, support crowdfunding initiatives, and assist people experiencing food insecurity or health issues.

The different venues launched many community-focused initiatives, such as the UC Independent Media Center (IMC) Sounds like Community, which helped to bridge the lack of social connection among artists. The city also revamped its arts and culture grant program and created tiers to differentiate the needs of different creative actors. They created new public programs to hire artists and support them financially, focusing on their collaboration in low-income neighborhoods and promoting community and belonging. These programs continue today. All participants acknowledged Urbana's strong focus on social justice and having built its identity around the arts. Despite the city being smaller and having fewer resources than Champaign, most interviewees, independently from where they live, identified more as artists with that city than with Champaign.⁸

Racial reckoning and social justice

The confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic exposing and intensifying historical racial and ethnic health inequities with the reckoning of police brutality, systemic racism in the United States and its intersections with other identity-based discriminations triggered significant responses in the local creative sector. All participants spoke about the political upheaval and George Floyd's and other BIPOC killings nationwide as impactful as the pandemic. Interviewees who self-identified as BIPOC said that for the first time, they began expressing their anger, hurt, frustration, and marginalization more openly through art. The local creative community also joined street protests to support anti-racism, anti-LGBTQI+ and policies against women rights and made their art more political.



Rattlesnake Maestra puppet, fashioned after the prairie plant known as Rattlesnake Master, visited a local park every week on Sundays at sundown during the winter of 2020-2021. Community members gathered to sing, connect, and walk to the pond and back. Puppet artist Miriam Larson. Photo Credit: Miriam Larson.



Outdoor, masked instrument petting zoo program hosted by the Urbana Arts and Culture program, summer 2021. Photo Credit: Urbana Arts and Culture Program.

At the same time, many local art institutions realized that they had been complicit in historical inequalities like “colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism,” as one interviewee expressed, so

they started shifting their programs and initiatives to target BIPOC, LGBTQI+ and women artists and give them a voice. Participants highlighted how many unknown BIPOC and LGBTQI+ local talents emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the City of Urbana initiatives “really took into account people’s ideas and put them into programs and projects.”



Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Urbana, summer 2020.

Photo Credit: Felipe Menanteu.

Interviewees also acknowledge the critical role of local independent media in making visible identity-based discrimination. Smile Politely was highlighted as one of the few local magazines “active in keeping the critical voice on the arts, reporting what was happening, providing a voice for the most marginalized.” One participant stated that “[T]he pandemic allowed me to get my voice put out there, that it’s okay to be angry or sad ... something that I didn’t know I was allowed to do before ... It allowed my truth to stay up front.” It is important to note that interviewees also highlighted that BIPOC artists and their allies simultaneously began to search and create spaces and expressions of collective joy and care “very much as it happened in movements of the 60s and 70s,” as mentioned by one participant.

Conclusion: Recovery and the future of the arts in Champaign Urbana

All participants recognized that the confluence of the pandemic and the reckoning of systemic racism and social injustices in the United States changed their art practice or programming in various ways. The focus of local venues and programs on BIPOC, LGBTQI+ and women artists continues, and individual artists recognize that their artistic practice has evolved and changed in unexpected and creative ways, with several integrating digital media into their artwork. “I have hope now. The pandemic taught me I can speak my truth. I cannot be quiet anymore. We can’t sit here and wait for you guys to give us prompts and for us to respond just because we always accepted it because we were afraid that we would get shut down or have funds magically taken away from us. COVID gave us the experience that if we don’t have the money, we can figure it out ourselves collectively.”

Most interviewees acknowledged that they became more aware of the disconnect between the university’s and the local arts community and that finding a way to bridge that gap is imperative. Similarly, while the City of Urbana appeared to



Artwork by Ja Nelle Pleasure.

Photo Credit: Ja Nelle Pleasure.

have played a critical role in the creative sector during the pandemic, the study highlighted a strong desire to connect more with Champaign and work toward an integrated effort to support the arts locally.

Finally, for relief and recovery efforts, it is essential to acknowledge and consider the different urban scales in how arts ecosystems exist, evolve, and develop in diverse and often unrecognized ways. Many interviewees manifested that since their primary income does not come from their art practice, they did not self-identify as artists in the American Community survey. This fact illustrates that the arts ecosystem in Illinois cannot be valued or measured by numbers only but also needs to consider the experiences and voices of those active in their local communities despite the scale of the cities they live in. Focusing on smaller-scale urban areas that may appear as contributing less to the state's arts ecosystem in survey data can help us better understand the reality, who the artists are, what constitutes their practice, and if it differs from larger cities. We can better understand where, when, and how they work and sustain their living and the range of values they offer to the community. A question that emerges from this preliminary research is what gaps do we need to consider when looking at and creating data to better understand the Illinois creative workforce and ecosystem better. Answering this question will inform policies and initiatives that are putting efforts toward improving working conditions for artists and creatives in Illinois.

Note: We use Urbana Champaign or Champaign Urbana interchangeably throughout the text to mirror how different community members refer to the local area and not privileging one over the other.

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The 2021 CU Small Press Fest was held in the fall of 2021, the first after public events were canceled during the pandemic. Masking was required, and tables were spaced out to allow as much distancing as possible.
Photo Credit: Jeff Putney.

Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Florida and Michael Seman, Lost Art: Measuring COVID-19's Devastating Impact on America's Creative Economy, Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings, August 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20200810_Brookingsmetro_Covid19-andcreative-economy_Final.pdf
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- ⁵ OECD, Culture Shock: COVID-19 and the Cultural and Creative Sectors, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=135_135961-nenh9f2w7a&title=Culture-shock-COVID-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors
- ⁶ NYU Langone Health, Department of Population Health. City Types for Improving Health and Equity: Understanding America's Small and Midsize Cities. 2020.
- ⁷ Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid. Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban?, *City* 19, no. 2-3, (2015): 151–182, DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2015.1014712
- ⁸ We reached out to representatives of the city of Champaign, but they declined to be interviewed at this time.