



STATISTICAL INSIGHTS ON THE ARTS
- SIA BRIEF -

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Artists in the pandemic: Recent and long-term labour force trends

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Key findings

This report examines recent and longer-term data on workers at the core of the arts sector: artists. Key labour force data and trends are examined, largely based on data commissioned from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (LFS). In keeping with Hill Strategies' previous work, "artists" include performing arts creators and interpreters, visual artists, artisans, craftspeople, and writers.

The report sheds light on important questions in the arts sector such as:

- Did the pandemic have an oversized impact on artists?
- Were freelancers the worst hit?
- In 2021, the overall labour force eventually rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Can the same be said for artists?
- Were women, Indigenous, Black, and other racialized artists affected even more strongly by the pandemic?

The national statistics in this report complement arts sector surveys that have outlined the challenges faced by the arts sector during the pandemic. For example, a survey conducted for I Lost My Gig Canada found that artists' opportunities for gigs decreased significantly in 2020 (with an average loss of 35 gigs and \$25,000 in income, representing a very large proportion of artists' usual incomes).¹

Key data from the Labour Force Survey highlight aspects of the working condition for artists in 2021:

- There were 152,000 artists in Canada in 2021 (0.8% of all workers).
- Artists worked a total of 3.9 million hours (0.6% of the total for all Canadian workers).
- Roughly two-thirds of artists are self-employed (65% in 2021), and this proportion has remained fairly consistent over time. This self-employment rate is more than four times higher than that in the overall labour force (typically 14% to 16%).
- Women represent a slight majority of artists (averaging 51% of all artists between 1997 and 2021). However, women artists have consistently had much less paid work than men, accounting for a much smaller share of hours worked (average of 44% between 1997 and 2021) than the number of artists (average of 51%). The proportion of women artists has remained relatively constant over the 25-year period, and women artists' share of hours worked increased only slightly.
- The Labour Force Survey captures salaries only, not self-employment earnings. Because of this limitation (and the high proportion of self-employed artists), income data was not requested.

¹ *Impact for Individuals: A summary of economic impacts from responses submitted between March 30 and August 15, 2020*. I Lost My Gig Canada, 2020, <https://ilostmygig.ca/>.

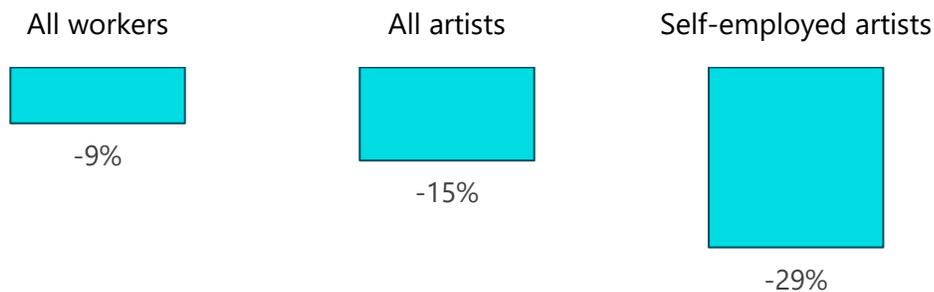
Findings regarding pandemic-induced changes in 2020 and 2021 include:

- Artists saw a 15% decrease in total hours worked between 2019 and 2020, which is a deeper decrease than the 9% decline for other workers (see Graph 1). For artists, the 3.3 million hours worked in 2020 represent the lowest level since 2000.
- Freelance artists were the worst hit during the depths of the pandemic. In 2020, there was a 29% decrease in hours worked by self-employed artists, reaching the lowest level on record. (The first year of the commissioned data was 1997.)
- In 2021, the overall labour force eventually rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, but this was not the case for self-employed artists. Hours worked by self-employed artists remained 12% lower in 2021 than in 2019, even though 2021 was a much better year than 2020 (with a 25% increase in hours worked from the record low in 2020),
- For all artists, total hours worked in 2021 slightly surpassed the 2019 level (by 3%).

Data on hours worked and stress levels point to a risk of burnout in the arts sector. Employed artists saw a substantial increase in their hours worked between 2019 and 2021 (+32%), but there was a much smaller increase in the number of employed artists (+11% between 2019 and 2021). As a consequence, the average weekly hours of employed artists (at their main job) increased from 26.0 hours in 2019 to 30.7 in 2021 (an 18% increase). The heavier workload has been accompanied by a significant increase in stress levels, according to a 2020 survey of arts workers.²

Women artists have been particularly affected by the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, the hours worked by women artists decreased by 5%, while hours worked by men artists increased by 9%.

Graph 1: Decrease in hours worked, 2019 to 2020



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey annual averages, analysis by Hill Strategies Research Inc.

² National Arts and Culture Impact Survey: Organizations Report, PRA Inc., January 2021, <https://oc.ca/en/national-arts-and-culture-impact-survey/>. 79% of responding

organizations indicated high or very high levels of stress and anxiety in late 2020, compared with 25% who reported such levels before the pandemic

A recent report indicated that Indigenous artists and cultural workers have experienced heightened precarity during the pandemic.³ A report on Black and other racialized artists in the screen-based industries found a “dearth of BIPOC stories and of BIPOC professionals in creative leadership positions” and major employment impediments for Black and other racialized artists.⁴ These findings could not be substantiated using the Labour Force Survey,

because reliable data on Indigenous or racialized artists and trends over time are not possible given the small sample sizes and limited data collection for these workers.. (The LFS, which has a much smaller sample size than the census, captures data on Indigenous workers only every three months and only started capturing data on racialized workers in the summer of 2020.)

Limitations of the Labour Force Survey

The monthly LFS provides timely estimates of employment and unemployment in Canada. However, given the relatively small sample size of the monthly survey (56,000 households), data on smaller population groups (such as artists) have higher margins of error. To counter this limitation, this report focuses on annual averages (not monthly data) on artists in the labour force.

Given the relatively small sample size, only very limited demographic information was requested related to artists.

For the arts community, another significant drawback of the LFS is that the survey captures only salaries, not self-employment earnings. As such, income data was not included in the custom request.

Full report: Introduction

This SIA Brief analyzes statistics on artists and other cultural workers based on Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) from 1997 to 2021. Hill Strategies requested custom data on artists for this report. In keeping with our previous work, “artists” are defined to include nine occupation groups:⁵

- Actors and comedians
- Conductors, composers, and arrangers
- Dancers
- Musicians and singers
- Producers, directors, choreographers, and related occupations
- Other performers not classified elsewhere
- Artisans and craftspeople
- Visual artists
- Authors and writers

Information is available for these nine occupations as a group only (not for individual occupations).

First, we outline some general (but interesting) statistics from the Labour Force

³ *A Culture of Exploitation: “Reconciliation” and the Institutions of Canadian Art*, Lindsay Nixon, Yellowhead Institute (Ryerson University), August 2020, p.10, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/a-culture-of-exploitation-reconciliation-and-the-institutions-of-canadian-art/>.

⁴ *Changing the Narrative: 2020 Status of Canadian Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in Canada’s Screen-based*

Production Sector, Maria DeRosa and Marilyn Burgess, Reelworld Screen Institute, 2021, p.2, <https://www.reelworld.ca/reportsignup>.

⁵ For full details of the occupation groups, see Appendix 2 of our report on artists based on the 2016 census (<https://hillstrategies.com/resource/statistical-profile-of-artists-in-canada-in-2016/>).

Survey data. Then, we address some key questions about artists during the pandemic that we have heard from the arts community.

Artists in the labour force

Table 1 introduces some of the interesting findings regarding artists and other workers that will be discussed further in this section.

Number of workers and total hours worked

In 2021, there were 152,000 artists, which represents 0.8% of all 18.9 million workers in Canada’s labour force.

Artists worked a total of 3.9 million hours in 2021, accounting for 0.6% of the 608 million hours worked by all Canadian workers.

On a weekly basis, average hours worked by artists at their main job (25.8 hours) were much lower than the average for all Canadian workers in 2021 (32.2 hours). It should be noted, however, that many artists work multiple jobs, often in industries that have been hard hit by pandemic restrictions (e.g., arts organizations, restaurants, other service industries). In addition, it is much more challenging to count work hours for self-employed people, particularly in the arts, than for employed workers in other parts of the labour force. Shannon Litzenberger has identified many unpaid activities of artists, including “sourcing opportunities, writing proposals, self-promoting, networking with presenters, producers, gallerists and publishers, ... ongoing training, finding ways to stay creatively inspired, and time for unstructured open-ended imagining”.⁶

Table 1: Key statistics on artists in the labour force (Based on the Labour Force Survey)			
Statistic	Artists	Overall labour force	Artists vs. overall
Number of workers in 2021 (Annual average)	152,000	18.9 million	0.8% of all workers
Total hours worked in 2021 (Annual average)	3.9 million	608 million	0.6% of all hours worked
Self-employment rate in 2021 (Annual average)	65%	15%	4.6 times higher
Women workers as % of total (25-year average: 1997 to 2021)	51%	47%	4% higher
Hours worked by women as % of total (25-year average: 1997 to 2021)	44%	41%	3% higher
<i>Source: Hill Strategies analysis of custom data commissioned from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey.</i>			

⁶ *State of Emergence: Why We Need Artists Right Now*, Shannon Litzenberger, December 2021, p. 5,

<https://shannonlitzenberger.medium.com/state-of-emergence-why-we-need-artists-right-now-e7958d705caa>.

Extremely high self-employment rate

Two-thirds of artists are self-employed (65% in 2021), and this proportion has remained relatively consistent over time. In contrast, the self-employment rate in the overall labour force was 14% in 2021, more than four times less than the rate among artists.

Given the extremely high self-employment rate among artists, this report has a significant focus on self-employed artists. The high self-employment rate means that the number of “jobs” for artists does not fluctuate as much with economic conditions as other sectors. In this situation, the total number of hours worked is a better indicator of sector growth and decline. Hours worked by artists is the primary focus of this report.

Long-term trends

Between 1997 and 2021, the total number of hours worked by artists increased by 17%, which is less than the growth in hours in the overall labour force (30%).

During the same timeframe, the number of artists increased by 28%, which is also less than the 38% increase in the number of workers in the overall labour force.

Long-term trends for the self-employed

Between 1997 and 2021, total hours worked by self-employed artists increased by 12%. This is in sharp contrast to the 5% decrease in the number of hours worked by all self-employed people in the labour force. In fact, in 2021, hours worked by the self-employed represented the lowest level since 2002.

During the same timeframe, the number of self-employed artists increased by 32%, which is much greater than the 14% increase in self-employed workers in the overall labour force.

Women and men artists

Until very recently, the LFS captured information related only to women and men, not other gender identities. Because of this limitation, this report only includes information on women and men.

Women represent a slight majority of artists (average of 51% of all artists between 1997 and 2021). This proportion has varied from year to year but has not varied significantly over the 25-year period: women represented 51% of artists during the first five years of the data and 52% of artists during the last five years of the data. (Because of year-to-year data fluctuations, this information is reported as five-year averages.)

Women have consistently had much less paid work as artists than men between 1997 and 2021: women account for a much smaller proportion of total hours worked (44%) than the number of artists (51%). Women represented 44% of total hours worked by artists during the first five years of the data and 46% of total hours worked during the last five years of the data.

On a weekly basis, women artists have worked an average of 23.3 hours at their main job, which is 25% less than the average of 30.9 hours for men artists between 1997 and 2021. The average weekly hours worked by women were 26% lower than the average for men during the first five years of the data and 22% lower during the last five years of the data.

Key questions related to artists during the pandemic

Table 2 highlights some of the important pandemic-induced changes for artists and other workers that will be discussed further in this section.

Did the pandemic have an oversized impact on artists?

Yes. Artists saw a 15% decrease in total hours worked between 2019 and 2020, compared with a 9% decrease for other workers.

The 3.3 million hours worked by artists in 2020 was the lowest level in two decades (i.e., since 2000). In comparison, the hours worked by all Canadians reached the lowest level in a decade (i.e., since 2010).

With two-thirds of artists being self-employed, there was not a significant change in the number of people who worked as artists. In fact, there was a small increase (+2%) between 2019 and 2020.

Table 2: Changes in hours worked for different groups of workers between 2019 and 2021 (Annual averages from the Labour Force Survey)			
Workers	2019 to 2020	2020 to 2021	Overall: 2019 to 2021
Self-employed artists	-29%	+25%	-12%
Employed artists	+15%	+15%	+32%
All artists	-15%	+20%	+3%
All workers	-9%	+9%	0%
Women artists	-10%	+6%	-5%
Men artists	-19%	+34%	+9%
All women in the labour force	-10%	+11%	0%
All men in the labour force	-8%	+8%	-1%

Source: Hill Strategies analysis of custom data commissioned from Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey.

In late 2020, a survey of artists and arts workers found that 43% of respondents expected to have an income under \$20,000 that year. This extremely low level of earnings – below the poverty line in many jurisdictions – was only expected by 15% of respondents before the pandemic.⁷

During the pandemic, government income supports have been very important to many artists. Statistics Canada has estimated that 63% of eligible workers in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector received at least one payment from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in 2020.⁸

Were freelancers the worst hit?

Freelancers were indeed the worst hit during the depths of the pandemic-induced recession. In 2020, self-employed artists' hours were the lowest on record since 1997, the first year of commissioned data. This is due to the sudden 29% decrease in hours worked by self-employed artists between 2019 and 2020.

The pandemic was difficult for all self-employed workers, but not quite to the same level as self-employed artists. The decrease in hours worked for all self-employed workers was 18% between 2019 and 2020, which is much less than the 29% drop for self-employed artists.

Self-employed artists do not have a fixed job like employees. They tend to work often and with irregular hours, including some activities that offer little or no direct pay (e.g., networking, proposal writing, promotions, training, etc.). As such, self-employed artists can technically be employed even though they have no paid work opportunities.

In the labour force statistics, the key problem for self-employed artists is hours worked (as outlined above), given the substantial loss of opportunities for gigs (i.e., artistic engagements) in 2020. The LFS data indicate that the number of self-employed artists changed relatively little between 2019 and 2020 (+1%) and between 2019 and 2021 (-4%). However, a survey of 1,037 workers in the arts and culture (most of whom are artists) found that, on average, each respondent lost 35 gigs and \$25,000 in income in 2020.⁹ The \$25,000 loss in income is a substantial proportion of respondents' average arts-related income in 2019 (\$31,000). Almost all respondents (99.6%) indicated that their income would be reduced in 2020, compared with 2019. Respondents lost many different types of opportunities in the arts, with some of the most common being performances, educational activities, productions, festivals, rehearsals, creative activities, and sales.¹⁰

⁷ *National Arts and Culture Impact Survey: Individual Report*, PRA Inc., January 2021, p.5, <https://oc.ca/en/national-arts-and-culture-impact-survey/>.

⁸ *Workers receiving payments from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit program in 2020*, by René Morissette, Martin Turcotte, André Bernard and Eric Olson, Statistics Canada, June 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00021-eng.htm>. Note that these statistics only examine those workers who earned more than

\$5,000 in 2019, which was an eligibility requirement for the CERB. The 63% figure in the arts, entertainment, and recreation and the 67% usage rate among workers in accommodation and food services are close to double the estimated rate for all Canadian workers (35%).

⁹ *Impact for Individuals: A summary of economic impacts from responses submitted between March 30 and August 15, 2020*, I Lost My Gig Canada, 2020, <https://ilostmygig.ca/>.

¹⁰ Based on unpublished data from I Lost My Gig Canada, 2021.

In 2021, the overall labour force eventually rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Can the same be said for artists?

Only for artists with an employment position, not for the self-employed. The statistics for all artists mask this dichotomy.

In 2021, total hours worked by all artists slightly surpassed the 2019 level (by 3%). The number of artists did not change much between 2019 and 2021, increasing by just 1% over that timeframe.

For self-employed artists, 2021 was a much better year than 2020: hours worked increased by 25% in 2021 from the all-time low recorded in 2020. Despite this fact, the number of hours worked by self-employed artists was 12% lower in 2021 than in 2019.

In contrast to self-employed artists, the hours worked by employed artists did not decrease during the pandemic. In fact, employed artists' hours increased by 15% between 2019 and 2020 and by another 15% between 2020 and 2021 (for a total increase of 32% in hours worked between 2019 and 2021).

Are arts leaders burning out trying to keep their organizations going? Are many people retiring from senior artistic positions?

For this analysis, the one-third of artists who are employed is used as a proxy for "arts leaders", because we believe that many artists with an employment position are those who hold leadership positions, such as

artistic directors, music directors, gallery directors and curators, etc.

We do not have data directly related to burnout and retirement, but data on hours worked and stress levels do point to a risk of burnout and retirement in the arts sector.

Employed artists saw a substantial increase in their hours worked in 2020 and 2021 (by 15% each year). This resulted in an increase of 32% in hours worked between 2019 and 2021.

There were much smaller increases in the number of employed artists between 2019 and 2020 (5%) and between 2019 and 2021 (11%).

The average weekly hours of employed artists increased by 18% between 2019 and 2021 (from 26.0 to 30.7 hours).

Stress levels are high in the arts sector: 79% of arts organizations responding to the National Arts and Culture Impact Survey indicated that they were experiencing high or very high levels of stress and anxiety in late 2020, compared with 25% who reported such levels before the pandemic.¹¹

¹¹ *National Arts and Culture Impact Survey: Organizations Report*, PRA Inc., January 2021, <https://oc.ca/en/national-arts-and-culture-impact-survey/>.

Was there an artistic “she-cession”, with less work by women?¹²

While the demographic breakdowns of the LFS should be viewed with some caution (due to the relatively small sample size of the survey), the data on hours worked do point toward a particularly challenging time for women. Between 2019 and 2021, the hours worked by women artists decreased by 5%, while hours worked by men artists increased by 9%.

However, men artists experienced both a deeper decrease in hours in 2020 (-19%, compared with -10% for women artists) and a much stronger rebound in hours in 2021 (+34%, compared with +6% for women artists).

Were Indigenous artists affected even more strongly by the pandemic?

The Labour Force Survey provides data on Indigenous workers only every three months. Because of this, and because of particularly small sample sizes for Indigenous artists (i.e., artists are about 1% of the overall labour force and Indigenous Peoples represent about 3% of artists), Indigenous workers were not included in the custom data request.

Some recent qualitative reports have explored the situation of Indigenous artists.

Based on interviews with Indigenous artists and cultural workers, a 2020 report from the Yellowhead Institute indicates that the precarity of Indigenous artists and cultural workers (along with tokenism and exploitation) has been “amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic”.¹³ Interview respondents “expressed a general feeling of precarity and fear that cultural institutions are protecting themselves and not the occupational health of their workers” during the pandemic.¹⁴ For some Indigenous artists, the pandemic stopped the momentum that they had felt in their careers: “their careers were starting to take off after the increased visibility following the reconciliation year [2017], but now they are afraid they could lose the audiences they were building and potentially even their careers”.¹⁵

While not focused on pandemic-related impacts on Indigenous performing artists, a report entitled *Looking at Indigenous Performing Arts on the Territory Known as Canada* outlines the concern among the Indigenous performing artists interviewed for the project “about the current pandemic and the medium and long-term impact it will have on Indigenous performing arts. They all hope for a return to a continued and increased presence of Indigenous theatrical creation as a real, meaningful moment between creators and audiences.”¹⁶ The report indicates that “the need ‘to be more self-reliant’ has been highlighted in the current global pandemic, with its lack of

¹² Labour market analysts coined the term “she-cession” to highlight the particular challenges faced by women in the pandemic labour force, partly related to child care and elder care responsibilities that often fall on women’s shoulders.

See, for example, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6907589/canada-coronavirus-she-session/>.

¹³ *A Culture of Exploitation: “Reconciliation” and the Institutions of Canadian Art*, Lindsay Nixon, Yellowhead Institute (Ryerson University), August 2020, p.10,

<https://yellowheadinstitute.org/a-culture-of-exploitation-reconciliation-and-the-institutions-of-canadian-art/>.

¹⁴ Idem., p.12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Looking at Indigenous Performing Arts on the Territory Known as Canada*, Primary Colours / Couleurs primaires, Sara Roque, France Trépanier, Denise Bolduc, Chris Creighton-Kelly, and Richael Laking, January 2021, p.12, <https://www.primary-colours.ca/projects/134-part-1-indigenous-arts-training-and-infrastructure>.

travel. In order for the arts scene to be more self-reliant, there need to be more resources.”¹⁷

How did Black and other racialized artists fare during the pandemic?

The Labour Force Survey started capturing data on racialized workers only in the summer of 2020. For this reason, and because of particularly small sample sizes for racialized artists (i.e., artists are about 1% of the overall labour force and racialized people comprise about 15% of artists), racialized workers were not included in the custom data request.

However, a recent report has outlined the situation “of Canadian Black, Indigenous and people of colour in Canada's screen-based production sector”, based on a literature review, interviews, and a survey. In the screen-based industries, the report found a “dearth of BIPOC stories and of BIPOC professionals in creative leadership positions (as showrunners, directors, producers)”, which presents “a major impediment to employment for BIPOC talent and other professionals”.¹⁸ The survey conducted for the study (with 663 respondents) found that “over a quarter of those surveyed described overt discrimination as a barrier to employment”.¹⁹

Concluding remarks

While the Labour Force Survey provides timely estimates – particularly for employed workers in the overall labour force – it falls short of enlightening us on many elements that are important to the arts community, such as self-employment earnings and demographic breakdowns related to Indigenous, Black, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, D/deaf, and disabled artists. The LFS can help us identify certain trends but cannot provide insights into the reasons for the trends (e.g., why and how have certain groups of artists been disproportionately affected by the pandemic?)

The Canadian census is a more robust source of information, including intersectional information and data on self-employment incomes. However, the census only takes place every five years. It also does not shed light on deeper questions behind the statistics.

Other studies of artists have tended to be one-offs, tailored to the needs of specific audiences and not repeated over time. Trend information is therefore lacking, but some quantitative and qualitative studies have delved into deeper questions behind the data (e.g., how and why).

In short, there are substantial gaps in our knowledge of the situations of artists in Canada, gaps that could best be filled by a regular and consistent survey of artists. Such a survey should have a robust sample size to provide significant granularity regarding

¹⁷ Idem., p.14.

¹⁸ *Changing the Narrative: 2020 Status of Canadian Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in Canada's Screen-based Production Sector*, Maria DeRosa and Marilyn Burgess,

Reelworld Screen Institute, 2021, p.2, <https://www.reelworld.ca/reportsignup>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

artists, including intersectional aspects that affect so many artists' working lives. It could also provide insights into the reasons behind certain findings.

The *Statistical Insights on the Arts* series, created by Hill Strategies Research in 2002, is part of Arts Insights Canada, a partnership with three leading foundations engaged in the Canadian arts sector: the [Azrieli Foundation](#), the [Rozsa Foundation](#), and the [Metcalf Foundation](#). We are honoured to be working with [an Advisory Panel composed of leaders within the Canadian arts community](#).