

## Artists in the Workforce: Selected Demographic Characteristics Prior to COVID-19

### Background

This research brief is based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), covering 2015 through 2019.<sup>1</sup> Although the 2020 PUMS data file was released while this brief was in production, it is still too soon to evaluate changes to the sample after COVID-19, as the ACS is a rolling survey. For now, the 2015-2019 ACS PUMS data permit us to view detailed demographic characteristics of U.S. artists immediately prior to the pandemic.

Even with this limitation, the data are valuable for understanding how differences in demographic composition and earnings are manifest in the nation’s workforce of artists. This brief is flanked by two others: 1) an analysis of “special tabulations” from the U.S. Census Bureau, showing demographic differences among artists at the state level; and 2) an analysis of demographic disparities among manager occupations in the arts. This trio of reports is meant partly to support a broader movement among arts and cultural funders and organizations to examine issues of access and equity within the larger sector. To this end, the trio stands on a key plank of the NEA’s five-year agenda: to monitor the state of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the arts.

### Summary

- **Pre-pandemic, there were 2.4 million artists in the U.S. workforce.**
  - Designers were the most numerous; dancers and choreographers, the least.
- **Artists remained far more likely than U.S. workers as a whole to be self-employed.**
  - Self-employed workers accounted for more than half of all fine artists, art directors, and animators (a category that includes painters, sculptors, and craft artists), and more than half of all photographers.
- **Women were underrepresented in the comparatively high-paying artist job of architect, with only 28 percent engaged in this occupation.**
  - They also made up fewer than 35 percent of musicians, though women accounted for over 77 percent of all dancers and choreographers.
- **Women artists who worked full-year, full-time, earned \$0.80 for every dollar earned by men artists.**
  - Women photographers earned \$0.77. Women producers/directors and musicians, respectively, earned \$0.91 and \$0.92.

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<sup>1</sup> More than 119,000 artists (unweighted) were included in this dataset. [For more information, see “Public Use Micro Data Sample \(PUMS\), Accuracy of the Data: 2015-2019.”](#)

- **Relative to the U.S. workforce as a whole, artists were less likely to be non-white or Hispanic.**
  - Only 17 percent of writers were non-white or Hispanic. These groups were represented at higher rates among dancers/choreographers and announcers (44 percent and 36 percent, respectively).
- **Non-white and Hispanic artists working full-year and full-time earned \$0.94 for every dollar earned by white artists.**
  - However, among producers and directors—one of the best-paying artist occupations—non-whites and Hispanics earned \$0.84.
- **Artists were slightly less likely than U.S. workers as a whole to report having disabilities.**
  - Architects reported the lowest incidence of disability (just over 3 percent), while rates of roughly 7-8 percent were reported for the following artist occupations: fine artists, art directors, and animators; dancers and choreographers; musicians; entertainers; and announcers.

### U.S. Artists as Workers—A Statistical Overview

The primary aim of this brief is to report differences in gender and race/ethnicity across artist occupations and between artists and the U.S. workforce. The following section, however, summarizes general characteristics of artists nationwide. To a large extent, these characteristics remain unchanged from those provided in the NEA’s comprehensive report published in 2019, *Artists and Other Cultural Workers: A Statistical Portrait*. That report drew from many different statistical sources, but demographic data on artists came from the 2012-2016 ACS PUMS dataset, not the 2015-2019 version, which is the source of the current research brief.

#### *Size of Artist Workforce, Self-Employment Rates, Educational Attainment*

In 2015-2019, the U.S. workforce contained 2.4 million artists—defined as workers whose primary job (in terms of number of hours worked on a given week) fell into one of 11 distinct occupations. As with prior survey periods, designers far outnumbered other types of artist. This occupation, which includes fashion, floral, industrial, graphic, interior, and other types of design, accounted for more than 933,000 workers. The next largest share of artists—the occupation of writers and authors—tallied just under 250,000.

After writers and authors, the following artist occupations each numbered more than 200,000: fine artists, art directors, and animators; musicians; and architects. Photographers and producers/directors accounted for slightly more than 190,000 and 170,000 workers, respectively, with announcers, actors, entertainers, and dancers/choreographers each numbering well below 100,000 (see *Figure 1*).<sup>2</sup>

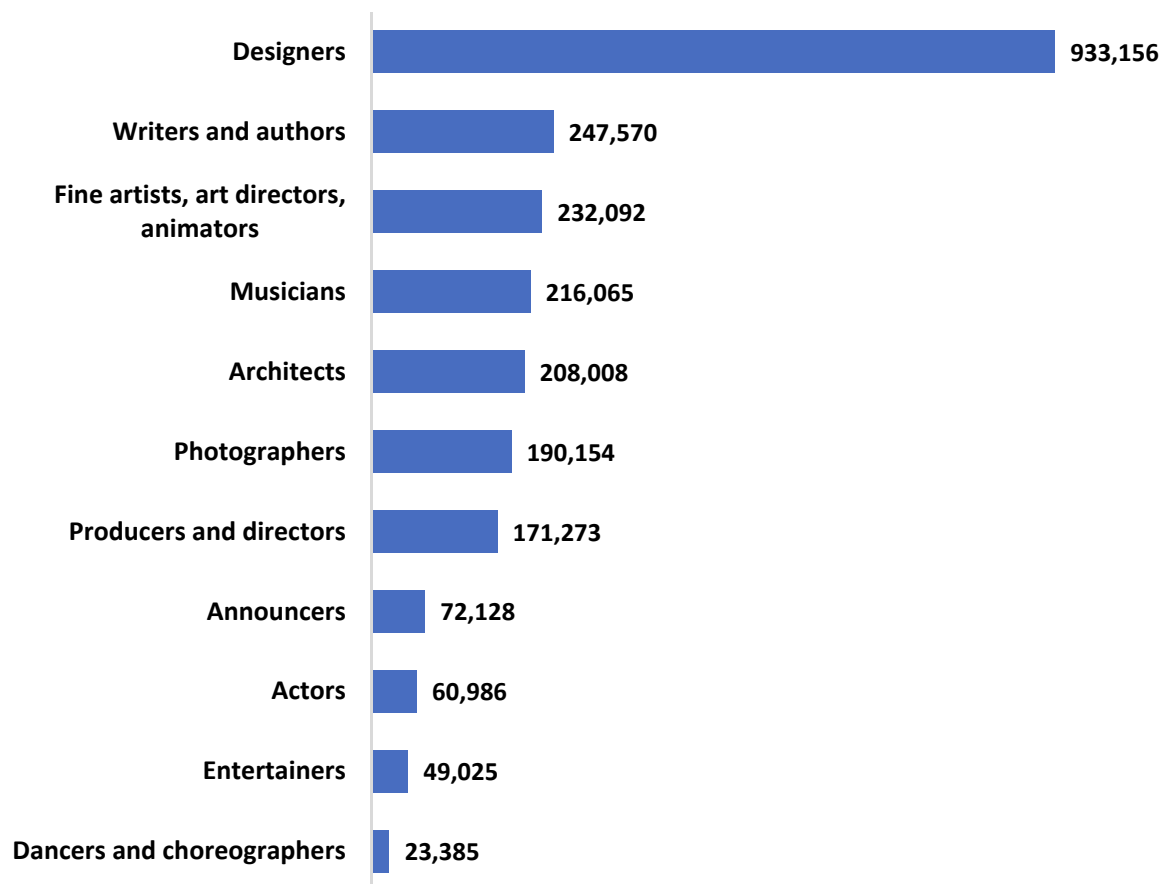
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<sup>2</sup> The occupation “entertainers” includes circus or magic show performers, jugglers, and comedians. For more information, see [Key to Artist Occupations](#).

Figure 2 presents a sharply different picture—the distribution of those artist occupations by self-employed status. As has been observed in prior NEA reports, artists are several times more likely than U.S. workers in general to be self-employed. Based on the 2015-2019 ACS PUMS data, nearly 34 percent of artists were self-employed, compared with just over 9 percent of all workers. Well over half of all photographers and other visual artists (i.e., “fine artists, art directors, and animators”) were self-employed.

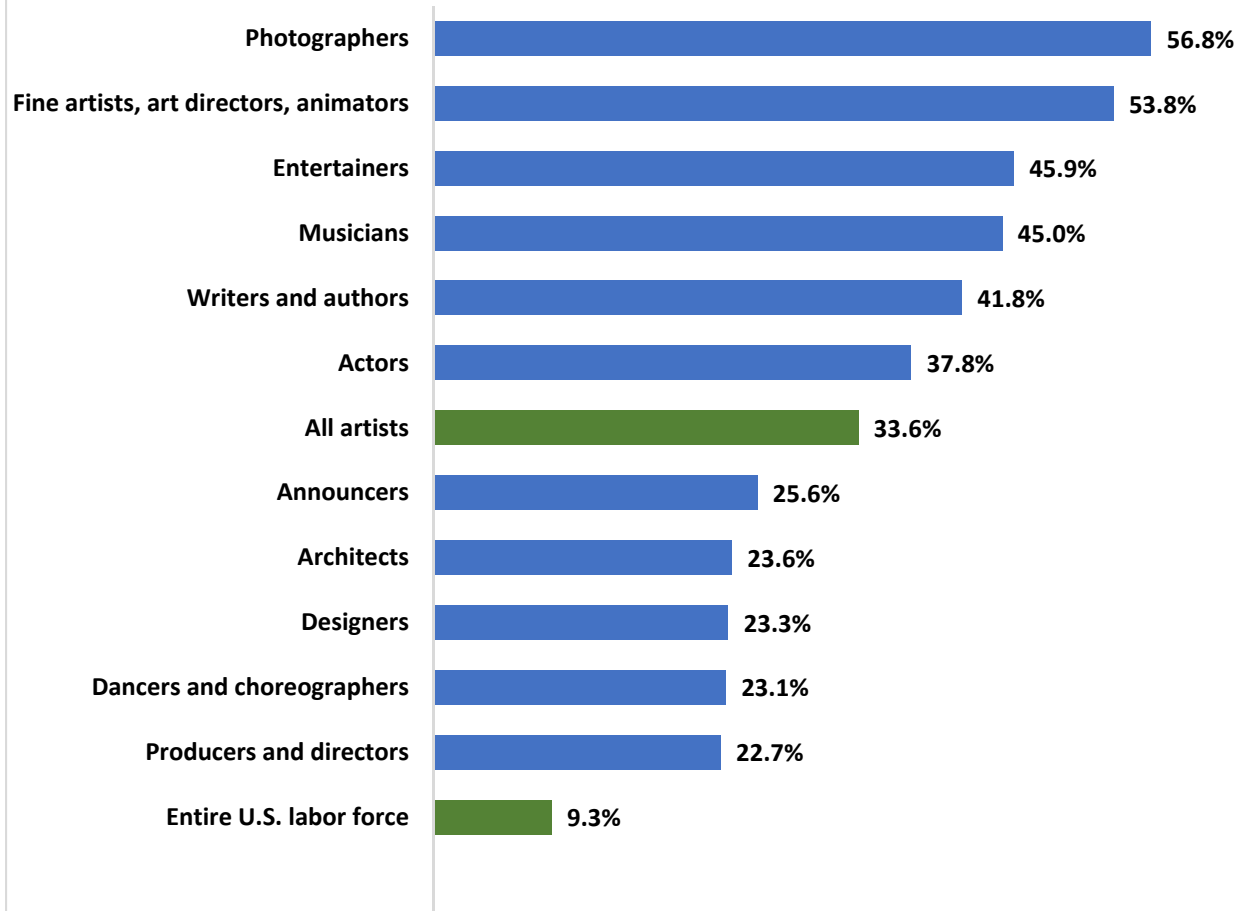
Entertainers, musicians, writers/authors, and actors also had higher self-employment rates than artists in general, while the remaining artist occupations (including architects and dancers/choreographers—two types of artists whose demographic differences will be evident later) all were less likely than artists as a whole to be self-employed.

**Fig. 1. Number of artists in the labor force: 2015-2019**



Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

**Fig. 2. Percent self-employed, by artist occupation: 2015-2019**



Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

One of the most distinguishing features of artists is their relatively high levels of education. While more than 37 percent of all U.S. workers hold bachelor's degrees or higher levels of training, the percent of artists with college degrees is over 64 percent. This share is roughly 7 percentage points below that for "professional" workers, an occupation category that includes artists and workers in jobs generally requiring a college degree or more specialized training.<sup>3</sup> Examples include engineers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and social workers.

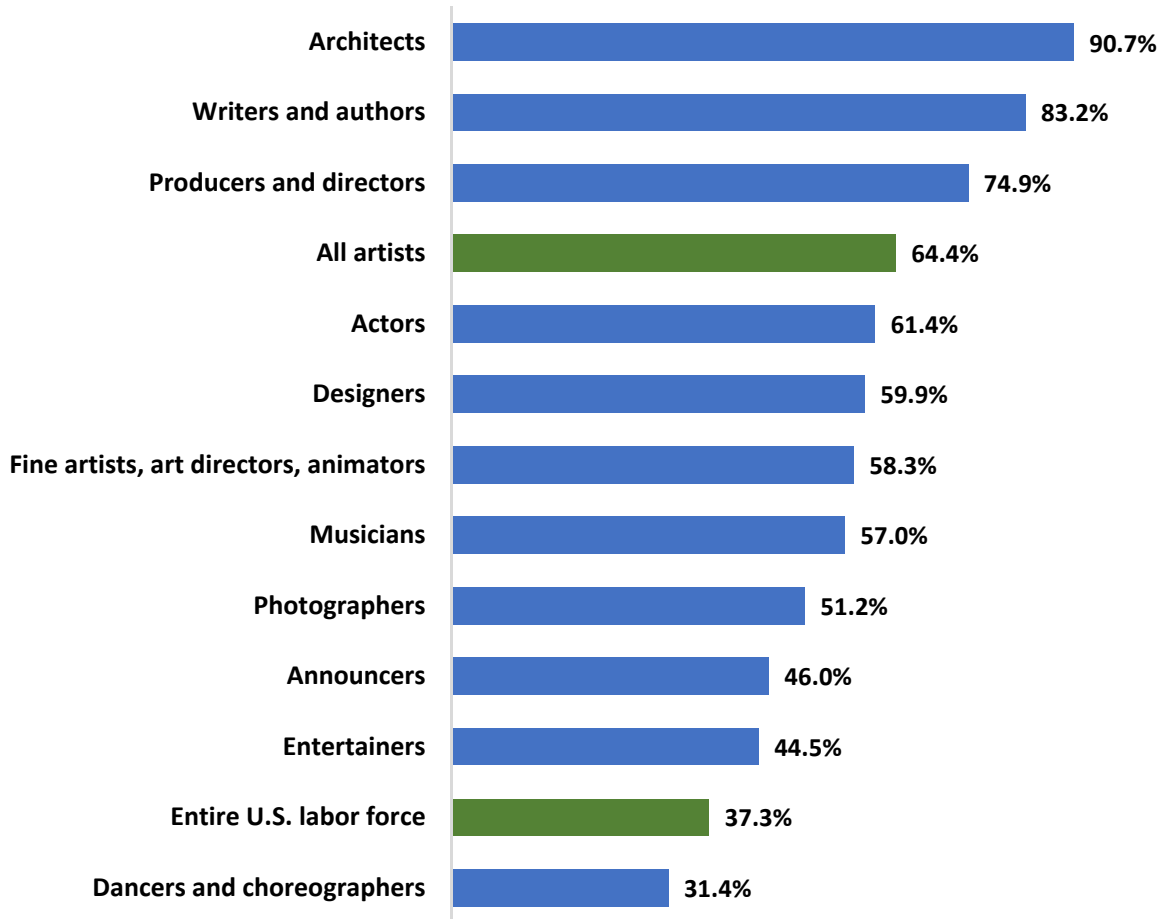
Architects, writers and authors, and producers and directors are among the best-educated artists (see *Figure 3*). Over the 2015-2019 period examined, more than 90 percent of architects held college degrees, as did more than 83 percent of writers and authors and 75 percent of producers and directors.

Alternatively, just over 31 percent of dancers and choreographers held bachelor's degrees or higher levels of college training. The share of entertainers and announcers who hold college degrees was also relatively low (roughly 45-46 percent of workers in both occupations).

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<sup>3</sup> The ACS PUMS data show that 70.9 percent of workers in professional occupations held bachelor's degrees or higher levels of education in 2015-2019.

**Fig. 3. Percent of artists with a bachelor's degree or higher level of education: 2015-2019**



Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau  
Note: Estimates are for workers aged 25 and older.

## Differences in U.S. Artist Demographics and Earnings

### *Gender, Age, Race/Ethnicity, and Disability Status*

Similar to the workforce as a whole, artists were distributed more or less evenly by gender (48 percent are female). Yet individual occupations showed wide disparities: over 77 percent of all dancers/choreographers were women, as were nearly 60 percent of writers/authors (*see Table 1*).

Meanwhile, men composed more than 72 percent of architects—the best-paying artist occupation, as we will see later—and over 66 percent of musicians.

ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	47.2%
All artists	47.6%
Dancers and choreographers	77.4%
Writers and authors	59.8%
Designers	55.3%
Photographers	47.6%
Fine artists, art directors, animators	46.1%
Entertainers	45.7%
Actors	45.4%
Producers and directors	37.6%
Musicians	33.6%
Announcers	28.8%
Architects	27.6%

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

Possessing a median age of 40 years old in 2015-2019, artists were somewhat younger than the average U.S. worker, whose median age was 42 (*see Table 2*).

Among workers in specific artist occupations, however, age varied. For example, architects, musicians, and writers/authors were generally older than workers as a whole—44-45 in 2015-2019—while dancers and choreographers averaged just 27 years old. With median ages of 33 and 36, respectively, entertainers and actors also were younger than most other types of artists.

<b>Table 2. Median age of artists: 2015-2019</b>	
ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	42
All artists	40
Dancers and choreographers	27
Entertainers	33
Actors	36
Photographers	37
Producers and directors	39
Designers	40
Announcers	40
Fine artists, art directors, animators	42
Writers and authors	44
Architects	45
Musicians	45

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

When it comes to race or ethnicity, artists are less likely than are other workers to be either non-white or Hispanic.<sup>4</sup> In 2015-2019, nearly 38 percent of U.S. workers fell into these racial/ethnic groups. For artists, the share was just under 27 percent.

Still, as with other demographic characteristics, this pattern varies by specific artist occupation. Dancers/choreographers include non-white or Hispanic workers to a far greater extent than does the U.S. labor force as a whole (*see Table 3*).

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<sup>4</sup> In this document, a non-white or Hispanic worker is defined as: Hispanic; Black or African American, alone, not Hispanic; Asian, alone, not Hispanic; and “other,” which combines American Indian or Alaskan native, alone, not Hispanic; native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, alone, not Hispanic; some other race alone; and people of two or more races.



ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	37.9%
All artists	26.5%
Dancers and choreographers	44.1%
Announcers	36.1%
Actors	33.2%
Entertainers	31.7%
Musicians	28.9%
Designers	27.6%
Photographers	26.1%
Producers and directors	25.2%
Architects	25.1%
Fine artists, art directors, animators	24.6%
Writers and authors	17.3%

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

### *Disability Status*

Compared with all workers in the labor force, artists are somewhat less likely to report having disabilities.<sup>5</sup> During the 2015-2019 period, nearly 7 percent of U.S. workers had one or more disabilities—for artists, the share was just over 5 percent (*see Table 4*).

Architects reported the lowest incidence of having a disability (slightly more than 3 percent), while rates of roughly 7-8 percent were reported for: fine artists/art directors/animators; dancers/choreographers; musicians; entertainers; and announcers.

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<sup>5</sup> The American Community Survey collects data on the following disabilities: Hearing—is deaf or has serious difficulty hearing; Vision—is blind or has serious difficulty seeing; Cognitive—because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, has serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions; Ambulatory—has serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs; Self-care—has difficulty dressing or bathing; and independent living—because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, has difficulty doing errands alone, such as visiting a doctor’s office.

ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	6.6%
All artists	5.3%
Entertainers	7.8%
Announcers	7.6%
Musicians	7.4%
Fine artists, art directors, animators	7.3%
Dancers and choreographers	6.6%
Writers and authors	6.1%
Actors	5.5%
Photographers	5.2%
Designers	4.6%
Producers and directors	3.3%
Architects	3.2%

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

#### *Earnings and Pay Discrepancies by Artist Type and Demographic Characteristic*

Fewer than 60 percent of artists worked “full-year, full time” (defined as working 50-52 weeks for at least 35 hours per week). This compared with 66 percent of all U.S. workers (see Figure 4). Actors were the least likely to work full-year, full-time—just 23.5 percent reported having done so in the period under consideration. Musicians, dancers/choreographers, and entertainers all worked full-year, full-time at rates below 50 percent. Architects, by contrast, were the most likely to work full-year, full-time (82 percent), followed by producers/directors (72 percent) and designers (68 percent).

As Figure 5 shows, the median annual earnings of full-year, full-time artists in 2015-2019 were \$58,005, about \$10,000 greater than for all workers (\$48,305).<sup>6</sup> Designers, who accounted for 38 percent of all artists, earned \$55,560, while the three highest-paying artist occupations were architects (median earnings: \$83,195), producers/directors (\$69,605), and writers and authors (\$60,115). These three occupations were also, in that order, the ones with the highest educational attainment. Although representing the third highest-paying artist occupation, moreover, writers/authors ranked fifth among artists who worked full-year, full-time.

Dancers and choreographers, who had the lowest levels of educational attainment in comparison with other artist types, also earned the least (median earnings: \$36,365). Other artist occupations earning less than U.S. workers, on average, were actors (\$41,060), entertainers (\$41,260), photographers (\$42,940), and musicians (\$45,875).

Earlier, we saw that women vastly outnumbered men in the lowest-paying artist occupation (dancer/choreographer), while men dominated the most lucrative occupation for artists (that of architect). Across artist occupations, similarly, dancers/choreographers contained the largest share of non-whites and Hispanics (44 percent). Yet these racial/ethnic groups combined accounted for only 17 percent of writers/authors—the third highest-paying occupation for artists.

<sup>6</sup> Earnings derived from the American Community Survey are adjusted to constant dollars for the 2015-2019 period.

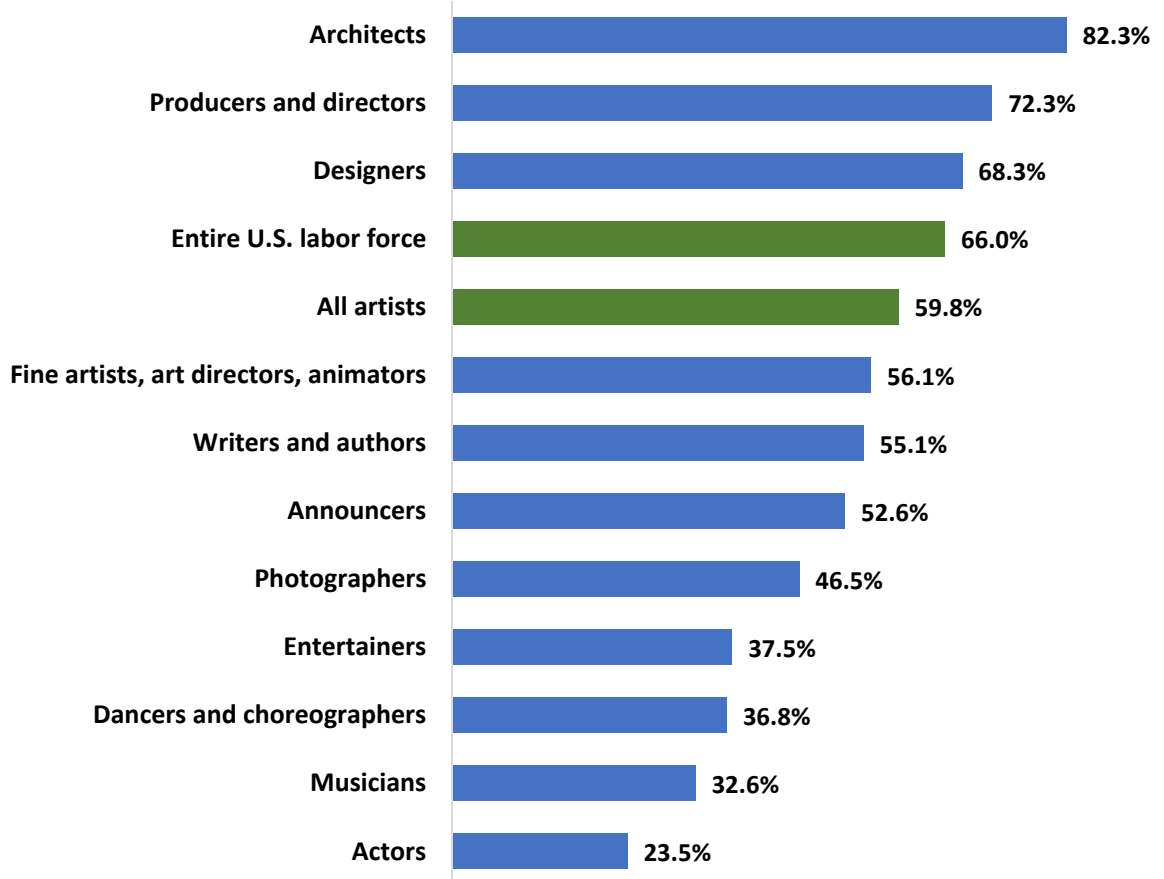
Beyond the distribution of women, non-white, and Hispanic workers across artist occupations, there is pay inequity by gender and race/ethnicity. In 2015-2019, women artists (working full-year, full-time) earned \$0.80 for every dollar earned by men artists; the same ratio is reported for all women workers in the labor force (see *Table 5*). The situation was somewhat better—if still unequal—for women producers/directors, musicians, and announcers, who all earned roughly \$0.90 for every dollar earned by men artists in those occupations. Women photographers earned only \$0.77 on the dollar.

In 2015-2019, non-white and Hispanic workers in the overall labor force earned \$0.72 for every dollar earned by white workers (see *Table 6*). The pay gap was smaller, however, for non-white and Hispanic artists, who earned \$0.94 for every dollar earned by whites in artist occupations.

Still, non-white and Hispanic actors earned less--\$0.78 for every dollar earned by white actors; non-white/Hispanic producers and directors and musicians earned \$0.84 for every dollar earned by their white colleagues.

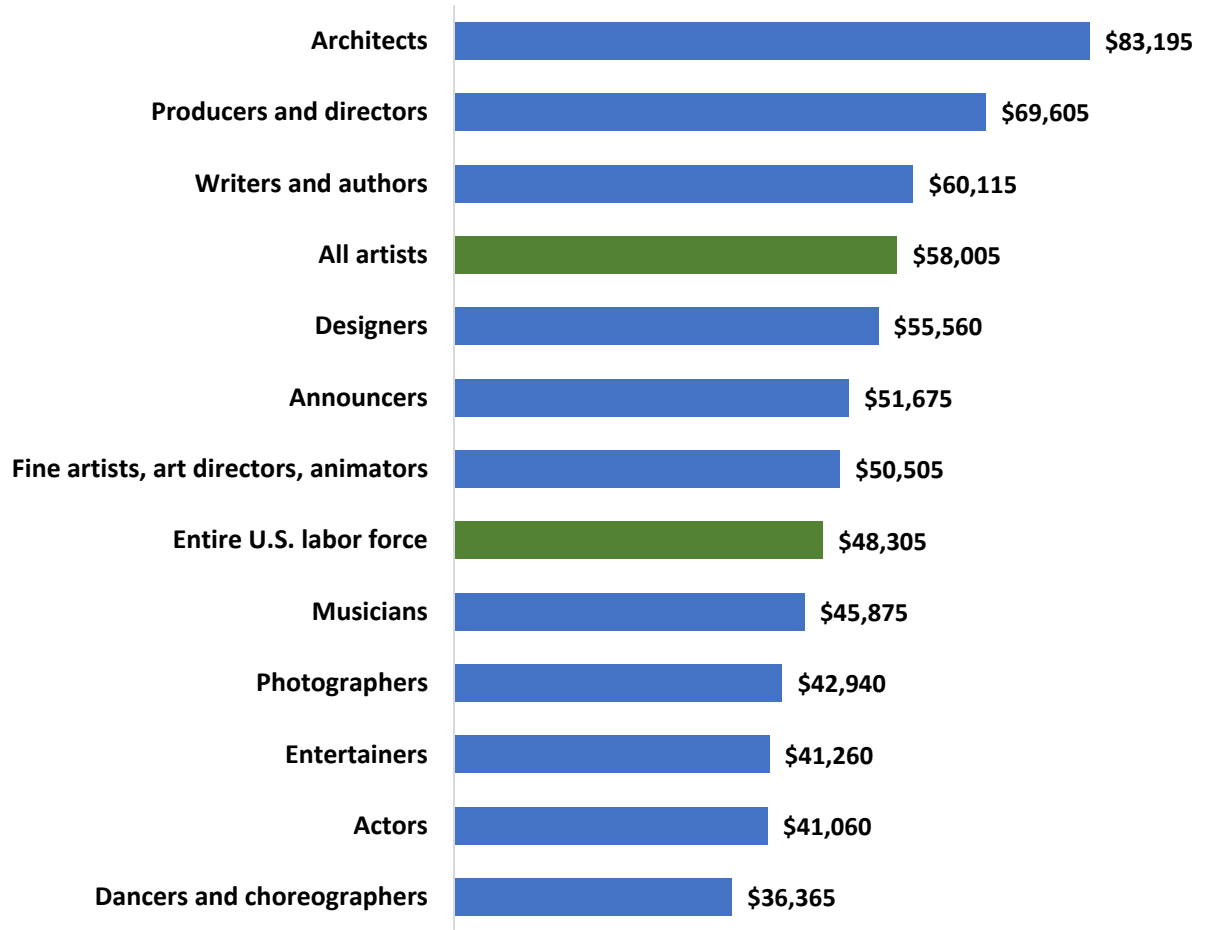
Far more work is needed to understand and address the causes for pay disparities among artists, relative to the U.S. labor force as a whole. For now, this brief provides necessary context for examining, in a separate brief, the state-level distribution of artists by race/ethnicity (see [State Locations of Artists, by Race and Ethnicity: 2015-2019](#)). Further, this national perspective is augmented by a demographic analysis of arts managers (see [Arts Managers by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: 2015-2019](#)). The time period covered by all three briefs is 2015-2019; future analyses will be able to detect how these dynamics may or may not have changed after the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Fig. 4. Percent of artists working full-year/full-time: 2015-2019**



Note: Full-year/full-time refers to working at least 50 weeks out of the year for 35 hours or more.  
Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

**Fig. 5. Median earnings of artists working full-year/full-time:  
2015-2019**



Notes: Full-year/full-time refers to working at least 50 weeks out of the year for 35 hours or more.

Earnings estimates rounded to multiples of 5.

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

	Median earnings of workers employed full-year/full time	Men	Women	For every dollar earned by men, women earn:
ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	\$48,305	\$53,670	\$42,940	\$0.80
All artists	\$58,005	\$64,405	\$51,575	\$0.80
Architects	\$83,195	\$87,675	\$70,710	\$0.81
Fine artists, art directors, animators	\$50,505	\$54,025	\$42,425	\$0.79
Designers	\$55,560	\$63,275	\$50,505	\$0.80
Actors	\$41,060	\$43,220	\$37,570	\$0.87
Producers and directors	\$69,605	\$70,710	\$64,405	\$0.91
Dancers and choreographers	\$36,365	*	*	*
Musicians	\$45,875	\$46,620	\$42,940	\$0.92
Entertainers	\$41,260	\$48,620	\$31,640	\$0.65
Announcers	\$51,675	\$52,730	\$48,485	\$0.92
Writers and authors	\$60,115	\$64,830	\$56,950	\$0.88
Photographers	\$42,940	\$47,455	\$36,465	\$0.77

\* Not estimated due to small sample sizes

Full-year/full-time is defined as working at least 50 weeks out of the year for 35 hours or more.

The earnings estimates reported are adjusted to constant dollars and are restricted to respondents with \$1 or more in total person's earnings.

The median earnings estimates are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.

Earnings *ratios* based on *unrounded* earnings data.

Data source: American Community Survey (ACS), PUMS, U.S. Census Bureau

	Median earnings of workers employed full-year/full time	White	Non-white	For every dollar earned by whites, non-whites or Hispanics earn:
ENTIRE U.S. LABOR FORCE	\$48,305	\$53,670	\$38,895	\$0.72
All artists	\$58,005	\$59,040	\$55,560	\$0.94
Architects	\$83,195	\$84,370	\$79,420	\$0.94
Fine artists, art directors, animators	\$50,505	\$50,505	\$50,130	\$0.99
Designers	\$55,560	\$55,820	\$55,105	\$0.99
Actors	\$41,060	\$45,455	\$35,355	\$0.78
Producers and directors	\$69,605	\$71,715	\$60,115	\$0.84
Dancers and choreographers	\$36,365	*	*	*
Musicians	\$45,875	\$47,475	\$40,075	\$0.84
Entertainers	\$41,260	\$42,940	\$37,275	\$0.87
Announcers	\$51,675	\$53,635	\$47,445	\$0.88
Writers and authors	\$60,115	\$60,610	\$59,425	\$0.98
Photographers	\$42,940	\$43,220	\$40,225	\$0.93

\* Not estimated due to small sample sizes

Full-year/full-time is defined as working at least 50 weeks out of the year for 35 hours or more.

The earnings estimates reported are adjusted to constant dollars and are restricted to respondents with \$1 or more in total person's earnings.

The median earnings estimates are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.

Earnings *ratios* based on *unrounded* earnings data.