

## About the Census of Boulder Artists

### STUDY GOAL

The Census of Boulder Artists is a series of studies to better understand the lives of professional, practicing artists: how they are surviving and thriving as workers and small business owners in Boulder. The Artist Census is designed to a) clarify and expand our understanding of the lives of artists, b) confirm anecdotes that have been heard in the community, and c) give direction to community leaders and organizations who are working to improve the lives of artists, particularly regarding the recommendations in the City of Boulder's Community Cultural Plan.

### THREE RESEARCH PROJECTS

To answer the question of the study goal, staff of the Office of Arts and Culture used three tools:

1. CENSUS SURVEY: The survey was open in 2017 to any artist working or living in Boulder who made at least a portion of their income from their artistic practice. Approximately 300 surveys were completed.
2. COMPLIMENTARY RESEARCH: Staff also reviewed research from other studies in Boulder as well as research from other communities:
  - [Creativity Connects](#): a study of artists by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
  - [Creative Vitality Suite](#) (CVS): a tool by WESTAF which includes findings on creative professionals
  - Information from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS)
  - [Arts and Economic Prosperity 5](#), a study of nonprofits by American's for the Arts (AFTA)
  - Other research and assessments
3. FOCUS GROUPS: The Office of Arts and Culture contracted the Qualitative Research Centre (QRC) to conduct small group discussions with a total of 32 artists in 2018. The two-hour meetings were open conversations with visual and performing artists. The focus groups were also used to fine-tune the results of the survey. Comments included in this report are in random order.

In the findings, below, these tools appear by section: the data, comparative findings, and focus group analysis.

### DEFINING "ARTIST"

For the purposes of this study, the definition of "artist" was based on the following BLS categories:

- Craft artists (SOC Code: 27-1012)
- Fine artists, including painters, sculptors, and illustrators (21-1013)
- Artists and related workers, all other (27-1019)
- Actors (27-2011)
- Dancers (27-2031)
- Choreographers (27-3032)
- Music directors and composers (27-2041)
- Musicians and singers (27-2042)
- Writers and authors (27-3043)
- Photographers (27-0421)

Also responding in the surveys and focus groups were jewelry designers, graphic artists, film and video, professionals in the contemplative arts, and others.

It is important to note that many people self-identify as artists. These are important individuals to our community. However, for the purposes of this study, the close definition of a "practicing, professional artist" includes only those that earn a portion of their income from their art and report those earnings to income tax filings. In this way, the Census of Boulder Artists can focus on artists which can be considered workers or proprietors of small businesses.

## One: Boulder is an inspiring home for artists. But, it is not an “arts city.”

Artists have chosen Boulder because of the lifestyle and the inspiring natural backdrop to the city. They continue to move into Boulder in increasing numbers. However, they do not find it a great place for their business. They find it increasingly difficult to thrive, and most struggle to stay afloat. In addition to the financial challenges, they wish for more community support and comradery with fellow artists.

### WHAT THE DATA TELLS US ABOUT BOULDER ARTISTS

- About 4,500 professional artists live in Boulder. That is about 3.5% of the city’s workforce. (BLS)
- Boulder has the nation’s third-highest concentration of artists, right behind Los Angeles and Santa Fe. (NEA)
- About 71% of our artists are residents of the City of Boulder and 29% live elsewhere, usually around Boulder County. Nearly 43% of artists who identify as Latinx live outside the City of Boulder. (Census Survey)<sup>1</sup>

### HOW THAT COMPARES TO OTHER PLACES AND INDUSTRIES

- Like artists, other gig-economy workers face murky rules, competition and oversupply, payment issues, and real hassles of running a business.<sup>2</sup>
- Also similar to many other industries, artists face a new and challenging landscape for their businesses due to technology, the growth of Income inequality, rising rents in many major cities, uncertainty about health insurance and other government programs, debt, and more. (NEA)

### FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS BY QRC

“I came here for the Boulder lifestyle... but, it is hard to make a living.” (Focus Group Participant)

- Our artists choose Boulder because it is a good place to live... but not because it is a great place to work as an artist.
- For most, it feels like a constant struggle to stay afloat.
- Despite the high number of artists living here, Boulder is not perceived as having a thriving, vibrant or highly visible arts scene.
- Boulder is largely defined by its outdoor lifestyle, technology, science and commercial success (all of which dominate and overshadow the role and influence of the Arts in local culture).
- Many artists report their colleagues are leaving Boulder. Though the data does not conclusively back that up, this perception is important to exposing how artists feel about their city.
- Most feel they must sell, perform, or market their art outside of Boulder. They feel that people here are reluctant to buy art or attend performances by local artists, but will readily do so when traveling. They feel that outside talent, coming to Boulder, has greater credibility than local artists.
- There is a very real “tension” between the desire to create and produce art and the practical business of making a living from it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: the survey respondents who identified as Latinx represent a smaller portion of all surveys than is representative of the population of the City of Boulder.

<sup>2</sup>Forbes, *Five Common Struggles You Will Face in the Gig Economy*, Abdullahi Muhammed (October 2018)

## Two: Earnings from arts professions is low.

Most artists do not make a sustainable wage from their creative practice. And, too many have a low household income: they are not typically off-setting low arts earnings with capital investments nor the income of a partner. Their earnings tend not to go up with inflation. Yet, expenses to run their business have increased. Many artists have multiple jobs, often outside the arts, to make ends meet.

### WHAT THE DATA TELLS US ABOUT BOULDER ARTISTS

- The average hourly earnings of Boulder artists, from their arts business, is \$15.29. (BLS)
- 36% of Boulder-resident artists have a household income below the living wage for a 2-person household: \$43,721.60.<sup>3</sup> 40% who report individual earnings below the living wage for a single adult also report a household income below the living wage. (Census Survey)
- Nearly 80% of artists must have a second job outside the arts industry to make ends meet. (Census Survey)

### HOW THAT COMPARES TO OTHER PLACES AND INDUSTRIES

- The median household income in Boulder is \$70,158.<sup>4</sup> Artists come up a little short of that, with about 59% of survey respondents reporting a household income below \$75,000. (Census Survey)
- Nationally, median incomes for fine artists, actors, musicians, dancers, choreographers, photographers, and “other entertainers” are below the median income of the labor force overall. (NEA)
- Artists are 3.6 times more likely to be self-employed than other workers: 34% vs. 9%. (NEA)
- The vast majority of US artists who earn their primary income from the arts earn less than \$39,280 per year, which is below the living wage in many cities.<sup>5</sup>
- Across the US, 66% of artists hold a second job while 21% hold two additional jobs. This pattern has not shifted substantially in the past decade.<sup>6</sup>

### FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS BY QRC

“I find it increasingly difficult to *BE* here...” (Focus Group Participant)

- For most, their art income has not kept up with rising costs. They feel a constant struggle to stay afloat.
- Boulder is an inconsistent marketplace for arts businesses. Many report multiple arts jobs, taking on work outside the arts. And, they are looking for much of their income in other cities.
- This puts the arts in a category with other professions that find Boulder expensive.

---

<sup>3</sup> Living Wage Calculator, Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier, MIT

<sup>4</sup> Boulder Economic Council. This number includes students at the universities.

<sup>5</sup> “Artists and Arts Workers,” National Endowment for the Arts, 2011

<sup>6</sup> “Artists and the Economic Recession Survey,” LINC, 2010.

## Three: Low incomes plus high housing costs and a modest local marketplace results in “The Squeeze.”

Artists report feeling “squeezed” between their relatively low earnings, high housing costs, low availability and high rents on studio and performing space, high cost of doing business generally, and uncertainty about the prospects for sustaining their business.

### WHAT THE DATA TELLS US ABOUT BOULDER ARTISTS

- The cost of studio space measured by the average industrial property asking rent is \$14.42 (sf/yr). That has increased by 44% in between 2013 and 2017.<sup>7</sup>

67% of survey respondents own their home. However, only 21% of those respondents under 35 own their home (Census Survey) which is below the national average of 36% for the same group.<sup>8</sup> For those that rent their home, costs continue to go up. The median rent rose from \$976 to \$1,436 between 2008 and 2016.<sup>9</sup>

### HOW THAT COMPARES TO OTHER PLACES AND INDUSTRIES

- Our studio space rent is higher, by about \$4 (sf/yr) than the rest of the County and in the Denver Metro area and nearly \$6 higher than the rest of the state.<sup>10</sup>
- Considering other occupations, 52.18% of Boulder residents own their home.<sup>11</sup> Artists appear much more likely to own their home. This may be because most survey respondents are long time residents. (Census Survey)
- As in Boulder, artists in the US tend to be highly educated: 59% have bachelors’ degrees or higher, compared to 31% of U.S. workers overall. Most working artists earn less than professionals with similar educational achievement in other Fields. (NEA)
- Affordability of renting a home is worse in Boulder, but by no means is isolated to this city. Across the state the median rent has risen by \$263 between 2008 to 2015. In Boulder during that same time, \$418.<sup>12</sup>

### FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS BY QRC

“It’s an every-day struggle and juggling act to figure out how to live and work here.” (Focus Group Participant)

- Our artists are surviving (barely) and feel “squeezed.”
- Housing costs are the number one challenge.
- Once they have figured out a place to live, the most important “practical felt need” is the scarcity and affordability of spaces to create, perform and show their work.
- The lucky ones make it work with the support of an income-earning partner.
- Many focus group participants feel they have no choice but to move outside the city. And, many feel they are hearing more artists who have had to move to surrounding communities to find affordability.
- Others turn to communal or collective options that are hard to find and may not comply with city regulations. The need to stay under the radar adding to the stress and uncertainty of their everyday lives.
- The business of art requires skills that they do not have, and don’t make enough to hire support.

---

<sup>7</sup> Loopnet Market Trends ([www.loopnet.com/Boulder\\_Colorado\\_Market-Trends](http://www.loopnet.com/Boulder_Colorado_Market-Trends), data from June 2017)

<sup>8</sup> American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov))

<sup>9</sup> American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, [www.civicdashboards.com](http://www.civicdashboards.com))

<sup>10</sup> Loopnet Market Trends

<sup>11</sup> American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, [www.civicdashboards.com](http://www.civicdashboards.com))

<sup>12</sup> American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, [www.civicdashboards.com](http://www.civicdashboards.com))

## Four: Boulder has the ingredients to be a great home for artists and their small business enterprises. But we are not there yet.

Boulder has many events and festivals, theaters and galleries, a great tourism market, a variety of grants, an affluent community, new fellowships and awards, a large number of artists, and many other assets. However, artists are not feeling the benefits of all this activity.

### WHAT THE DATA TELLS US ABOUT BOULDER ARTISTS

- Artists continue to move to Boulder. The number of artists has grown by about 3% per year between 2011 and 2017. (BLS)
- A plurality of artists balances their income from inside and outside the city. One-third say they work primarily in Boulder. (Census Survey)
- Cultural nonprofits in Boulder support more than 1,800 jobs. (AFTA) Artists take advantage of that work: most arts professionals report 51% to 72% of their income comes from these organizations. (Census Survey)
- The audience for performing and visual arts in Boulder continues to grow, with over 1.3 Million cultural visitors in 2017. (AFTA)
- New education and recognition opportunities have emerged in recent years including the Dairy Center Honors, Boulder County Arts Alliance workshops, and the Arts Administration certification at the University of Colorado.

### HOW THAT COMPARES TO OTHER PLACES AND INDUSTRIES

- Nationally, training, fellowships, grants, and awards for artists are not responding to new ways of working, nor artists' needs and opportunities. (NEA)
- A specific challenge for artists in the US is the fact that the real estate pressures on small and mid-sized nonprofits and arts businesses tends to undercut jobs and income for artists, as well as limiting opportunities for rehearsal, exhibition, performance, and convening.<sup>13</sup> (NEA)

### FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS BY QRC

*"The money is known to be here... The challenge is to help the community see the value in nurturing and supporting the local arts scene."* (Focus Group Participant)

- Artists feel that the chances of getting a grant are low, with too many artists pursuing too few dollars.
- Applying for grants requires an investment of time that is hard to justify.
- The quality of artistic talent here is felt to be under-appreciated by the public.
- The practical business side of art today demands a lot of time and attention.
- The number one "emotional felt need" for artists in Boulder is greater connection to other arts professionals. They want to feel connected to a community that is valued and vibrant, to be inspired and to inspire, to connect and to collaborate. And, that is not happening enough.
- There are little pockets of creativity in the city, but no "happening art scene." Nothing with an edge, excitement, or buzz.

---

<sup>13</sup> The NEA's national categorization of small and mid-sized organization includes every nonprofit in Boulder, including the largest cultural organizations.

## What does the Community Cultural Plan recommend?

The 2015 Community Cultural Plan provided specific recommendations on what strategies and projects the City of Boulder Office of Arts and Culture will use to address the challenges faced by professional artists:

- Supporting and recognizing artists and creative professionals
- Working on issues of livability and affordability
- Providing professional development tools

Work has already begun including a project grant specifically for artists, artist forums, sponsorship of professional development programs, and support for the NoBo Art District as a platform for the success of artist businesses.

As staff and the members of the Boulder Arts Commission evaluate these programs, and launch new ones, the findings of the Census of Boulder Artists should be used to refine the work plan for the best outcomes in the community.

## Advice from QRC

Based on their analysis of the Focus Groups, the consultants at QRC recommend the following for consideration:

- Explore creative ways to support artists with their space and live/work needs... *or our artists will be forced out of Boulder.*
- Explore ways to shine a light on 'One Boulder Arts Community,' to promote and celebrate all facets of the arts here. *The goal = to evoke pride, enthusiasm and support from locals and visitors.* Develop a communications campaign to encourage the community to 'GET OUT' and the artists to get out of their silos.
- Challenge the business community to engage and support the arts. Help create bridges to foster connections.
- The initiatives of the Office of Arts and Culture are valued. There is a further need to provide business tools and resources to help artists forge connections with other artists within and beyond their disciplines.

## References and Notes

### GENERAL NOTES

This study is labeled a "census" because the survey is based on official US census questions. It is not a comprehensive count of every artist in Boulder, Colorado. The study also included research data from regional and national sources and focus group comments from local artists.

The survey respondents appear to be concentrated in certain demographic categories. When possible, the focus groups and comparative research analyses were used to correct the understanding of cohorts in the survey which may be underreported.

### RESOURCE

- The findings from survey data and analysis of the focus groups is summarized in a presentation delivered to the Boulder Arts Commission in September 2018. Please visit this link to download the presentation.
- Full data from the surveys is available by request: [culturalplan@boulderlibrary.org](mailto:culturalplan@boulderlibrary.org).

The staff of the Office of Arts and Culture and the Boulder Arts Commission wish to thank the survey respondents and focus group participants. Additionally, special thanks to Vicki Johns and Arnie Jacobson of QRC for their excellent work on the focus groups.