Greater Houston Arts Forum
Deep Dive: Activate Your Data

Economics of the Arts and Culture Sector in Greater Houston

These estimates were developed by SMU DataArts and are derived from IRS Tax **990 filings** from **2,089 arts and culture organizations** in Greater Houston (Harris, Austin, Brazoria, Fort Bend, Galveston, Liberty, Montgomery, Waller, and Chambers counties) and 157,384 arts and culture organizations nationally.[1]

Total Staff in the cultural workforce in Greater Houston: 154,720[2]

- Staff employed in the creative sector broadly, beyond arts or culture nonprofits alone, make up 4.2% of the total workforce across all non-farming sectors in Greater Houston.
- Nationally, 5.4% of the total workforce is employed in the creative sector, *higher* than what we see in Houston.
- Employment in the creative sector statewide is projected to grow by 24% by 2032, creating approximately 225,000 new jobs.[3]

Total Staff at arts or culture nonprofits in Greater Houston: 8,955

- Staff size ranged from zero to 944 employees per organization with a mean of 25 and a median of 1.
- The gap between the mean (25) and the median (1) shows that a handful of large institutions account for most of the sector's paid workforce, while the typical organization operates with one paid staff member or none at all.

---

[1] These draw from the latest IRS filing year for cultural organizations, which was most commonly 2023. For staff and volunteers, data is only included for organizations filing full 990 reports (excludes organizations with revenues below $50,000).

[2] Estimates on the cultural workforce were drawn from the Census Bureau's Business Pattern Data and Nonemployer Statistics datasets, defining creative industries as those identified as "core" by the BEA/NEA.

- Greater Houston's staff size is *almost identical* to estimates for arts or culture nonprofits nationally with a mean of 25 and median of 2.

Total Volunteers at arts or culture nonprofits in Greater Houston: 29,850

- The scale of volunteers ranged from zero to 2,864 volunteers per organization with a mean of 102 and a median of 24.
- Volunteer numbers are also skewed by a few very large programs (a mean of 102 versus a median of 24), but volunteer engagement is far more evenly spread across the sector than paid staff. The typical organization relies on roughly two dozen volunteers alongside one or no paid employees, which means volunteers aren't a supplement to the workforce; for most organizations, they are the workforce.
- Nationally, there is a mean of 123 and median of 25 volunteers for arts or culture nonprofits – both estimates *similar to* those of Greater Houston's.

Total Income for arts or culture nonprofits in Greater Houston: $1.1 billion

- The average income of an arts or culture nonprofit in Greater Houston is $1.5 million and the median is $115,000.
- Arts and culture nonprofits in Greater Houston generated a collective $1.1 billion in revenue.
- Greater Houston's average arts or culture nonprofits' income is *higher* than national estimates for arts or culture nonprofits, which have a mean of $1.1 million and median of $109,000.

The following estimate is derived from the Texas Cultural Trust's 2025 State of the Arts Report, which presented data from 2023.[3]

[3] https://txculturaltrust.org/what-we-do/artcan/state-of-the-arts-report/

houston arts alliance

SMU DataArts

Taxable Sales for the arts and culture industry in Greater Houston: $1.06 billion

- The estimated local sales tax (1% sales tax rate) generated through this revenue is $10.6 million.
- Statewide, the total taxable sales is $7.3 billion, which puts 1/7 of the state's arts and culture taxable sales coming from Greater Houston.

Economic Contribution of City-Funded Arts and Cultural Organizations in Houston

These figures cover organizations funded through the City of Houston's Support for Organizations (SO) grants administered by HAA. Data comes from the Cultural Data Profile from SMU DataArts for organizations awarded 2026 SO grants.[4] Estimates of regional activity use the Bureau of Economic Analysis's RIMS II model for the nine-county metro.[5]

Direct spending by City-funded arts and cultural organizations: $581 million

- Operating spending in each organization's latest fiscal year, minus donated goods and services, depreciation, and funds passed through from fiscal sponsors.
- Includes $288 million in wages and benefits for 5,877 people on payroll.

---

[4]Each organization's most recent fiscal year available. Spending is operating expenses less in-kind contributions, depreciation, and payments passed through to fiscally sponsored projects.

[5]RIMS II, Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land MSA (2017 benchmark, 2024 regional data), Type I multipliers: direct and supplier effects. Jobs count full- and part-time positions alike. Dollars and counts are rounded down.

- In the smallest applicants for City funding (budgets under $150,000), payments to contractors and performers make up 40% of spending. [6]

Economic activity supported in Greater Houston[7]: at least $831 million

- As grantee spending moves through local businesses in the region, it supports at least $831 million in economic activity and $499 million in regional GDP (value added).
- That activity supports over 7,200 local jobs, including the 5,877 on grantee payrolls.
- Each dollar city-supported organizations spend supports about $1.40 in regional economic activity.

Demand for City arts funding: 180 applications, 142 grants last SO cycle

- For typical grantees, SO grants cover about 9 cents of each dollar: about 11 cents for organizations with budgets under $1M, and about 2 cents for those over $10M.
- For SO 2027, 179 organizations have applied. The 175 who submitted a CDP spent $601 million last year, supporting at least $860 million in regional economic activity and more than 7,400 jobs.

[6]SMU DataArts FY2025 report on SO 2027 applicants with budgets under $150,000 (50 organizations).

[7]These figures describe economic contribution, not net new impact: some of this spending would happen elsewhere in Houston without these organizations.