

The background features a stylized, textured map of Berkeley, California, in shades of brown and tan. On the right side, a dark silhouette of a person is shown standing on a set of wide, dark stairs that lead upwards. The overall aesthetic is artistic and layered.

CITY OF BERKELEY

ARTS & CULTURE PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY ASSESSMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | DECEMBER 2025



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ARTS & CULTURE PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY ASSESSMENT

CONTEXT



Between 2020 and 2022, the City of Berkeley awarded over \$3 million in emergency relief and recovery grants to arts and culture organizations and individual artists in Berkeley facing severe financial hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These investments were extraordinary in scale. By comparison, the City’s annual Civic Arts Grants program distributes nearly \$700,000 to arts and culture organizations, festivals, and individuals in a typical year. The pandemic-era funding programs for arts and culture organizations and individuals, granted more than \$1 million in 2020 and over \$1.8 million in 2022, more than doubling its Civic Arts Grants investment in a typical year.

For many Berkeley organizations and individual artists, the pandemic relief and recovery programs were more than simply helpful—they meant the difference between shuttering permanently and surviving long enough to rebuild.

PROGRAM	PROGRAM YEAR	RECIPIENT TYPE	NUMBER OF GRANTEES	TOTAL AMOUNT AWARDED	AVERAGE GRANT AWARDED
Arts Organization Continuity Grants	2020	Nonprofit or fiscally-sponsored arts and culture organizations	63	\$954,543	\$15,151 per organization
East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund for Individuals in the Arts*	2020	Individual artists and arts workers	47	\$64,500	\$1,372 per individual
Berkeley Art Works Project (BAWP)	2021	Individual artists, performers, and community members	32	\$182,339	\$5,698 per individual
Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) for Arts Organizations and Festivals	2022	Nonprofit or fiscally-sponsored arts and culture organizations and festivals	74	\$1,532,345	\$20,707 per organization
Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) for Artists and Cultural Practitioners	2022	Individual artists, culture bearers, teaching artists	114	\$276,250	\$2,423 per individual
Total Amount Awarded to Arts & Culture Individuals (2020-2022)				\$523,089	
Total Amount Awarded to Arts & Culture Organizations (2020-2022)				\$2,486,888	
Total Berkeley Pandemic Relief and Recovery Funding (2020-2022)				\$3,009,977	

* The East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund was a regional grant program administered by the Center for Cultural Innovation that provided grants to 515 artists and cultural workers across Alameda and Contra Costa counties. The table includes only the portion awarded to 47 individual Berkeley artist residents leveraged with City of Berkeley funds.

Source: City of Berkeley, CVL Economics.

ARTS & CULTURE PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY ASSESSMENT

SCALE OF COVID-19 DISRUPTION



The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a wave of regionally mandated closures that reshaped daily life and severely disrupted arts and cultural activity.

On March 17, 2020, Berkeley joined Alameda County and five other Bay Area counties to issue shelter-in-place orders. Under these orders, residents were required to remain in their places of residence except to perform essential activities. All non-essential business—like retail, entertainment, cultural, and recreational facilities—had to close to the public. This marked the beginning of what would become one of the most disruptive periods of widespread closures and halted activity in recent history.

In this environment of sudden and prolonged shutdowns, the timing of Berkeley's pandemic support for arts organizations and individuals was especially critical. The first round of funding (Arts Continuity Grants) for organizations distributed in May 2020 arrived at the height of shutdowns and, for many organizations, served as their first—and in some cases only—source of external aid. In parallel, the City also contributed to the East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund for Individuals in the Arts, a regional effort launched in May 2020 to provide direct cash assistance to artists and cultural workers. These local dollars often reached grantees before county, state, or federal relief programs such as the California Arts Council's Cultural Organizations Emergency Relief Fund, Shuttered Venue Operators Grants, Alameda County Arts Relief Grants, and the Paycheck Protection Program.

Things began to stabilize and reopen in October 2020, but a December resurgence quickly triggered a new regional stay-at-home order. As cases declined and vaccines rolled out in early 2021, cultural and recreational facilities reopened in phases—25% capacity at first, then 50%, and by spring up to 75%. By May, most museums and

indoor spaces were operating under expanded limits, and nearly all restrictions were lifted on June 15, 2021, allowing businesses statewide to fully reopen. Recognizing the toll of lost work opportunities on local artists throughout this period, the City of Berkeley launched the Berkeley Arts Works Project (BAWP) in 2021. The program provided paid opportunities for artists, performers, and community members to produce temporary public artworks.

While the statewide June 2021 reopening marked a turning point for most cultural and recreational facilities, performing arts venues had endured some of the longest closures. Classified as among the highest-risk settings, they were the last to reopen, allowed to return only when the rest of the economy was cleared to resume operations.

The City's next major rounds of recovery funding came through the Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) two years later in 2022, arriving at a moment when federal and state programs wound down and organizations were confronting new pressures: inflation, workforce shortages, and lower levels of consumer engagement that had not fully recovered since the pandemic.

Together, the launch of these programs over three years created a phased response that moved from emergency relief to longer-term recovery. This approach helped preserve Berkeley's cultural ecosystem and sustain its creative workforce during one of the most disruptive periods in recent history.

TIMELINE OF PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY GRANT DISTRIBUTION



15 months of mandated closures and restrictions





ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

GRANTS FOR ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS



Two rounds of Berkeley pandemic relief and recovery grant programs were administered to 88 arts and culture organizations, totaling almost \$2.5 million. The two rounds were the Arts Organization Continuity Grants (\$954,543) in 2020 and the Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) for Arts Organizations and Festivals (\$1.5 million) in 2022.

BERKELEY PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY GRANTS FOR ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

PROGRAM	PROGRAM YEAR	RECIPIENT TYPE	NUMBER OF GRANTEES	TOTAL AMOUNT AWARDED	AVERAGE GRANT AWARDED
Arts Organization Continuity Grants	2020	Nonprofit or fiscally-sponsored arts and culture organizations	63	\$954,543	\$15,151
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Source: City of Berkeley, CVL Economics.

ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS COVID-19 IMPACT



Smaller organizations were the most vulnerable to initial pandemic disruptions.

At the onset of the pandemic, organizations with annual budgets of \$500,000 or less saw their revenues drop by nearly 50% on average, compared to a 30% decline among mid-sized organizations (\$500k-\$1M) and about a 40% decline among large organizations (over \$1M).

This sharper decline highlights how limited reserves and thinner margins left smaller organizations far more vulnerable to the initial shock.

GRANTEE REVENUE LOSS BY ORGANIZATION SIZE | 2019-2020



Source: City of Berkeley, CVL Economics.

IMPACT OF BERKELEY PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY: ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

GRANT IMPACT



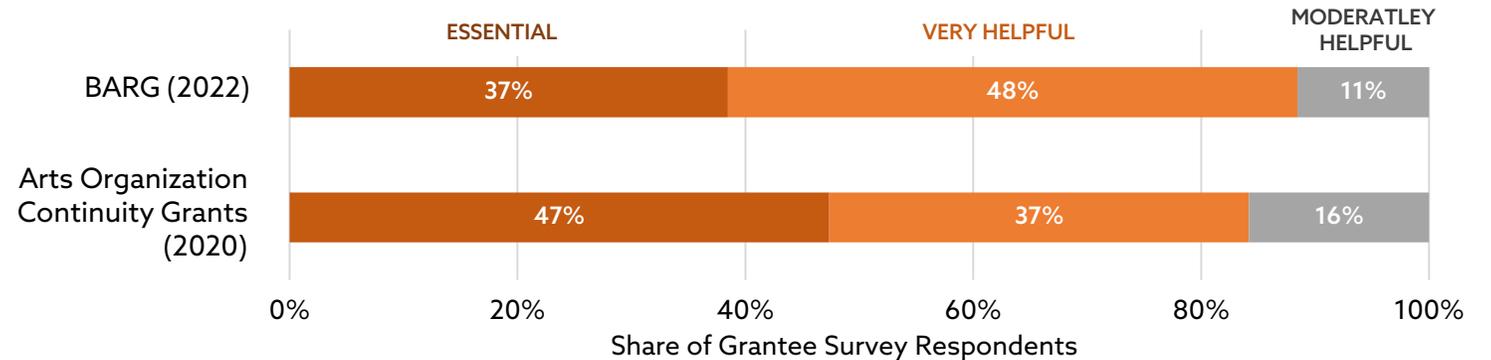
Relief and recovery funding was broadly seen as critical, helping most organizations avoid layoffs and business closure entirely.

Nearly 83% of Arts Organization Continuity Grant (2020) and 90% of BARG (2021) recipients rated their Berkeley pandemic relief and recovery grant(s) as either “very helpful” or “essential.” The remaining organizations, which were larger in size, described the funding as “moderately helpful.”

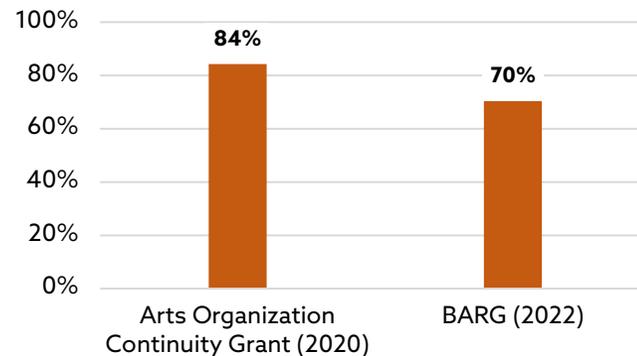
The vast majority of grantees (up to 84%) credited the grants with preventing both organizational shutdowns and employee layoffs during the most acute months of the pandemic.

Source: CVL Economics Survey (2025). N = 30.

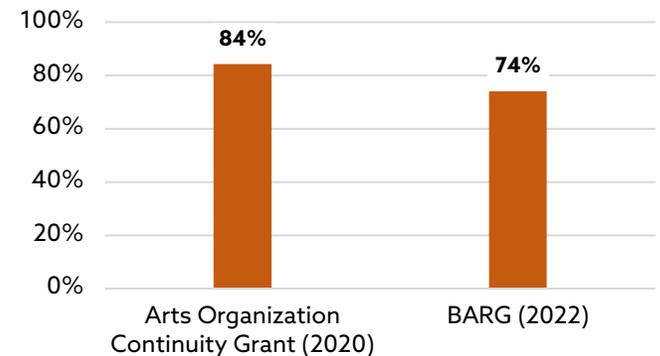
EXTENT TO WHICH PANDEMIC RELIEF AND RECOVERY FUNDING WAS ESSENTIAL



AVOIDED LAYOFFS DUE TO GRANTS



AVOIDED CLOSURE DUE TO GRANTS



GRANT IMPACT



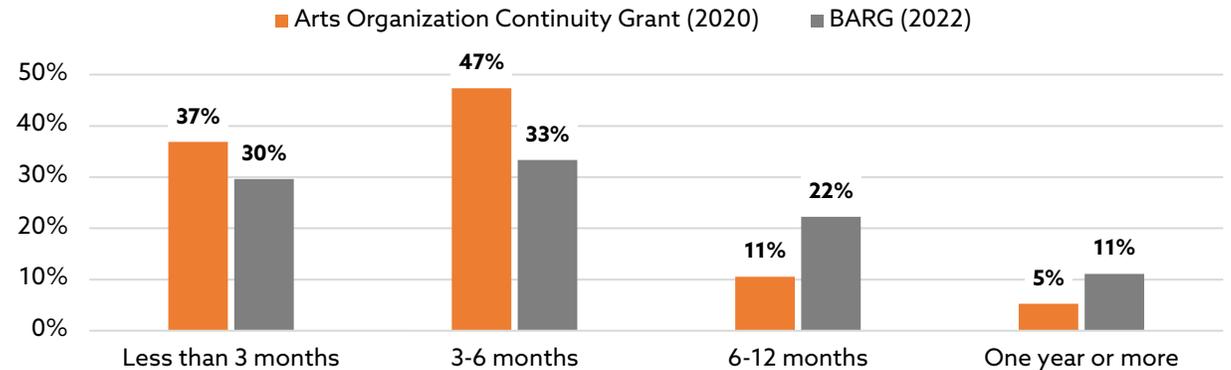
Timing mattered: Arts Organization Continuity Grants (2020) served as an immediate lifeline while Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (2022) offered stabilization and transformation.

Issued at the height of uncertainty, Continuity Grants kept doors open during the first wave of shutdowns, often before other relief arrived. Their impact was short-term—84% of grantees said funds lasted less than six months—but critical: 53% credited the grant with helping them survive the pandemic period.

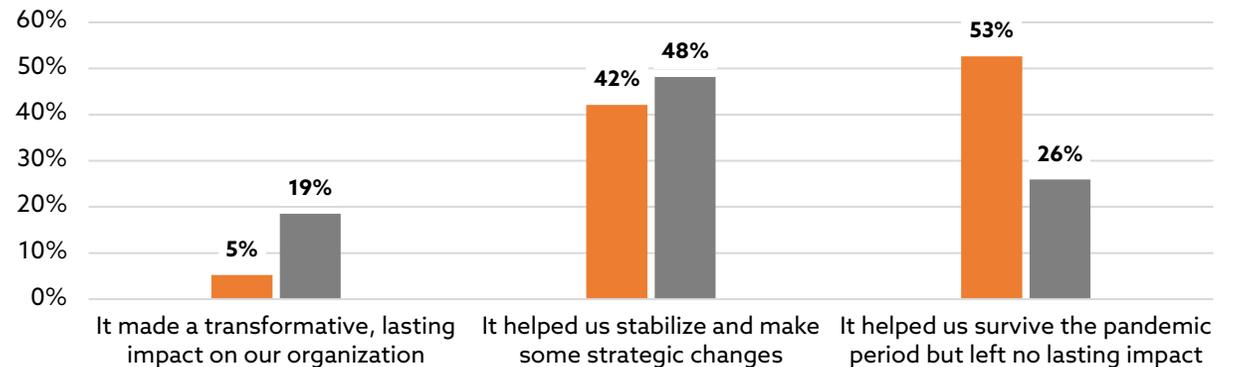
By 2022, BARG provided longer-lasting support. More recipients reported funding that lasted 6–12 months (22%) or a year+ (11%), and nearly one in five described the grants as transformative. Almost half credited BARG with stabilization and strategic change, while 70% said the funds helped avoid layoffs and 74% avoided closure.

Many (49 of the 88) grantee organizations received both rounds of funding, which extended impact beyond any single cycle. This sequencing mattered: the first round provided a lifeline in the immediate aftermath of shutdowns, while the second arrived during a difficult reopening phase marked by inflation, workforce shifts, and lagging consumer engagement. Taken together, the two rounds of support compounded one another, allowing organizations not only to survive the immediate crisis but also to weather the prolonged and unpredictable recovery period.

LENGTH OF TIME GRANTS SUSTAINED OPERATIONS



SCALE OF GRANT IMPACT



Source: CVL Economics Survey (2025). N = 30.



ARTS & CULTURE INDIVIDUALS

GRANTS FOR ARTS & CULTURE INDIVIDUALS



Three Berkeley pandemic relief and recovery grant programs were administered to arts and culture individuals residing and practicing in Berkeley, totaling over \$520,000.

The three programs were the East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund (\$64,500 to Berkeley residents) in 2020, the Berkeley Art Works Project (BAWP; \$182,339) in 2021, and the BARG for Artists and Cultural Practitioners (\$276,250) in 2022. While the East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund (2020) and BARG (2022) programs provided unrestricted funds to Berkeley’s arts and culture workers, BAWP (2021) supported paid temporary visual and

performing arts projects in public spaces. Instead of serving as direct stimulus assistance, BAWP (inspired by the depression-era Works Progress Administration) functioned more like traditional income, employing artists who might otherwise have been working locally in theaters or other cultural venues, and redirecting their talents into community-based creative projects.

BERKELEY PANDEMIC RELIEF & RECOVERY GRANTS FOR INDIVIDUALS

PROGRAM	PROGRAM YEAR	RECIPIENT TYPE	NUMBER OF GRANTEES	TOTAL AMOUNT AWARDED	AVERAGE GRANT AWARDED
East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund for Individuals in the Arts*	2020	Individual artists and arts workers	47	\$64,500	\$1,372
Berkeley Art Works Project (BAWP)	2021	Individual artists, performers, and community members	32	\$182,339	\$5,698
Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) for Artists and Cultural Practitioners	2022	Individual artists, culture bearers, teaching artists	114	\$276,250	\$2,423

*Table includes only the program’s Berkeley allocations.

Source: City of Berkeley, CVL Economics.

ARTS & CULTURE INDIVIDUALS GRANT IMPACT



Individual grants covered the equivalent of up to nearly four months of housing costs.

Grants provided immediate relief for artists facing significant reductions in income, often covering essential living costs like rent, groceries, and medical bills. When measured against the median individual housing cost in Berkeley (\$1,100/month), the impact becomes clear: East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund awards covered over one month of housing, BARG awards

covered more than two months, and BAWP awards stretched nearly four months. Even this short-term coverage of basic living expenses mattered enormously for artists, and in some cases represented the difference between staying in Berkeley or being displaced.

AVERAGE GRANT VALUE IN TERMS OF INDIVIDUAL HOUSING COSTS

PROGRAM	AVERAGE GRANT AWARD	EQUIVALENT MONTHS OF INDIVIDUAL HOUSING COSTS*
East Bay/Oakland Relief Fund for Individuals in the Arts**	\$1,372	1.3 Months
Berkeley Art Works Project (BAWP)	\$5,698	3.9 Months***
Berkeley Arts Recovery Grants (BARG) for Artists and Cultural Practitioners	\$2,423	2.2 Months

* Based on the median monthly per capita housing payment for Berkeley arts and culture workers, averaged across 2019–2023.

**Table includes only the program’s Berkeley allocations.

***: Since BAWP grants covered paid public art projects, this reflects the assumption that 25% of the grant covered material costs for the project.

Source: City of Berkeley, U.S. Census Bureau 5-Year American Community Survey Public-Use Microdata Sample (2023), CVL Economics.

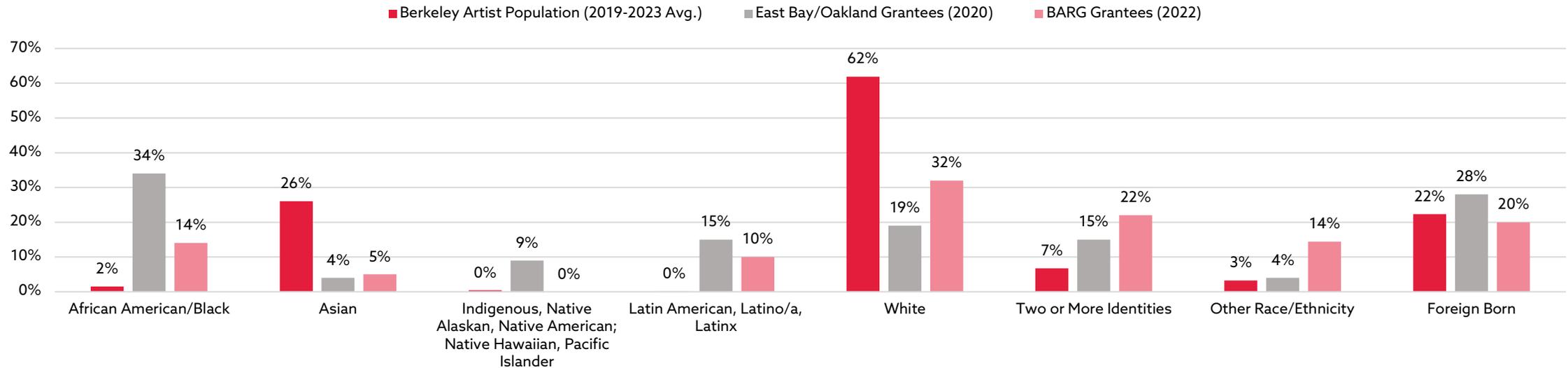
ARTS & CULTURE INDIVIDUALS GRANT REACH



Relief and recovery programs advanced equity and reached those most impacted.

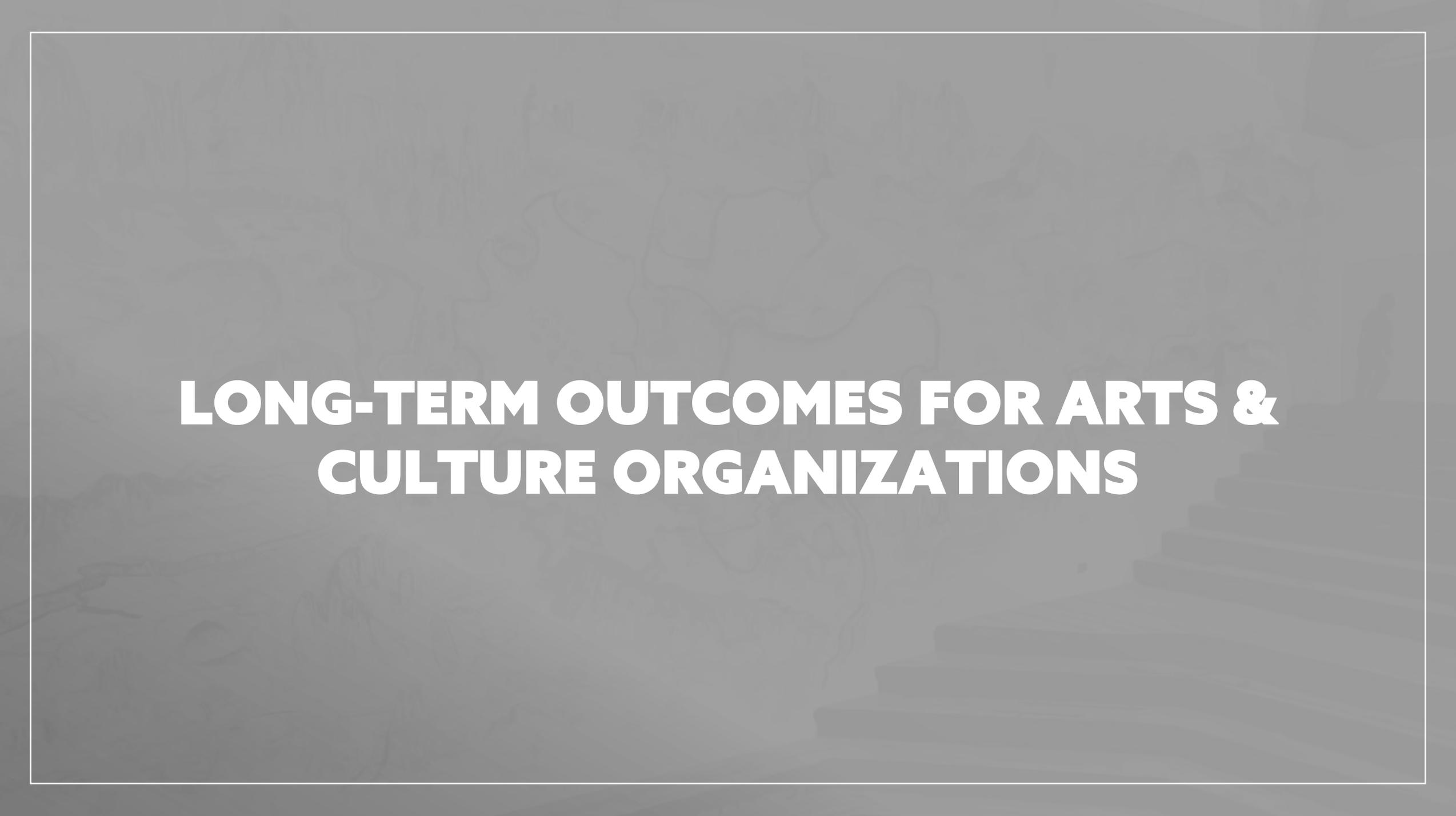
Grants were mostly awarded to historically underrepresented artists, including Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and multi-racial cultural workers. More than half of grantees reported losing at least 50% of their arts-related income in 2020, with nearly one-quarter losing 90–100%, showing funding reached those in greatest need.

DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF PANDEMIC-ERA GRANTEEES COMPARED TO BERKELEY'S TOTAL ARTIST POPULATION



Note: Includes grantee data for the BARG and East Bay/Oakland programs; these were the two largest programs in terms of number of grant recipients.

Source: City of Berkeley, U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (2023), CVL Economics.



LONG-TERM OUTCOMES FOR ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS

CLOSURES AMONG GRANT RECIPIENTS



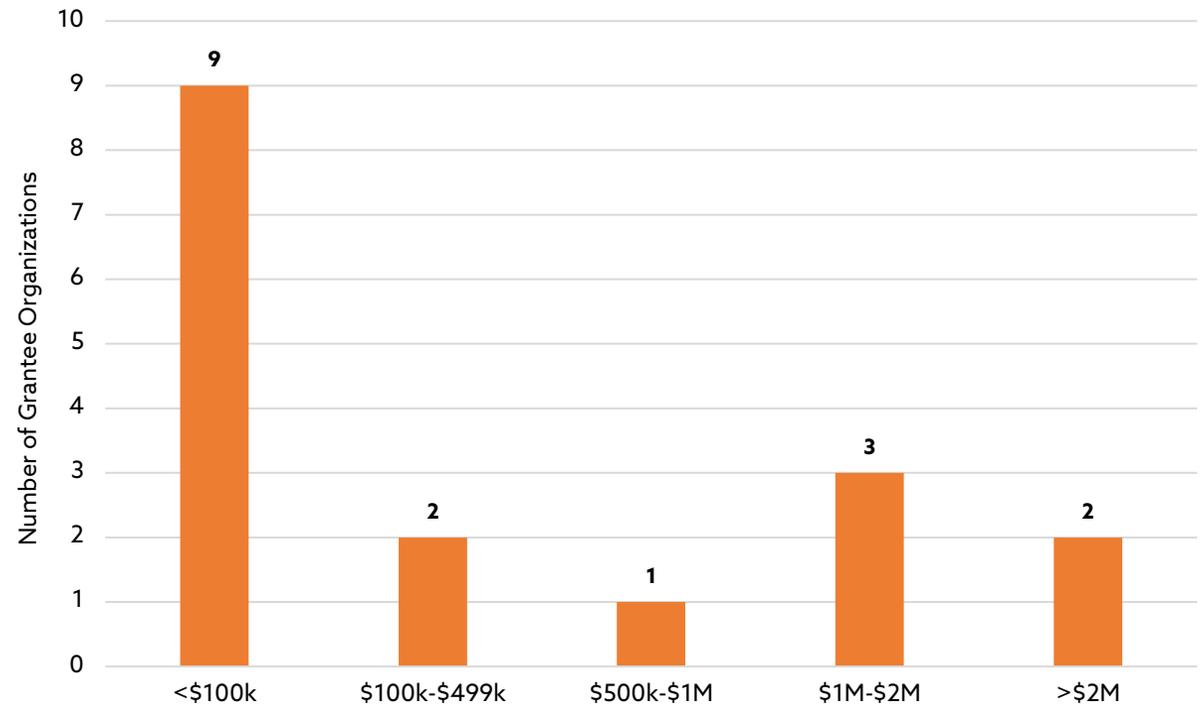
17 of the 88 grantee organizations, or 19%, closed permanently between 2020 and 2024, the majority of which were very small organizations.

Small organizations were most vulnerable to initial pandemic disruptions. Nine of the 28 grantee organizations with operating budgets under \$100,000 closed, the highest number of any group.

But large organizations were also not immune; two of the 13 institutions with revenues between \$1M-\$2M also shut down, as did two of the 11 organizations with operating budgets over \$2 million.

This pattern shows that while scale and resources provided some resilience, no segment of the sector was fully insulated. The loss of larger organizations—typically those with the broadest audiences or consumer base, most extensive programming, and greatest fundraising capacity—underscore the vulnerability of even the city’s established cultural institutions.

CLOSURES AMONG GRANT RECIPIENTS BY ORGANIZATION SIZE



Source: City of Berkeley, CVL Economics.

ARTS & CULTURE ORGANIZATIONS LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

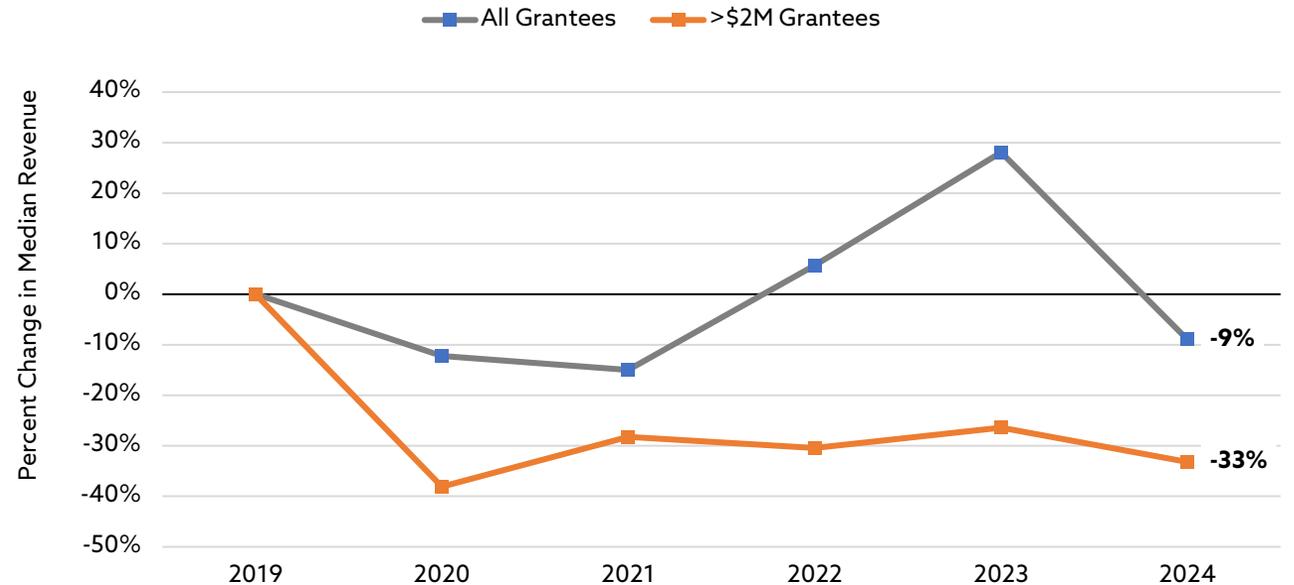


Revenue for the 71 surviving grantees sits 9% below pre-pandemic levels, though smaller surviving organizations fared relatively better over time.

For many of these groups, Berkeley’s relief and recovery funds represented a substantial share of their annual budgets—sometimes covering the bulk of operating revenue in a given year. This scale of support often made the difference between survival and closure, allowing small organizations not only to stay afloat but also to begin rebuilding sooner than larger institutions, which in some cases remain more deeply destabilized.

The 9 larger organizations with budgets over \$2 million that received grant funding faced deeper structural challenges, with current revenues sitting 33% below pre-pandemic levels.

PERCENT CHANGE IN MEDIAN SURVIVING GRANTEE REVENUE | 2019 - 2024



Note: Based on the median inflation-adjusted (2024 dollars) revenue across the 71 surviving grantee organizations.

RELIEF SUSTAINED ORGANIZATIONS, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN



The City's \$2.5 million investment in arts and culture organizations (2020-2022) helped preserve more than \$12.9 million in arts and culture revenues that would otherwise have been lost.

This translates to every \$1 of City pandemic emergency funding having leveraged at least \$5.64 in arts and culture economic activity. This return captures not only the direct operations of arts and culture organizations, but also the ripple effects through local suppliers, contractors, and service providers.

Broader economic challenges are compounding strain across Berkeley arts organizations of all sizes.

Expenses have risen much faster than income, and earned revenue has been slow to rebound, leaving organizations more reliant on contributed income. Additionally, performing arts venues in particular continue to struggle with reduced attendance and shrinking subscriber bases. As a result of both of these factors, and a changed federal funding for the arts landscape, competition for public sector and philanthropic support has intensified, making recovery uneven, precarious, and difficult for arts organizations. Compounding these challenges, downtown revitalization struggles—including empty storefronts, reduced foot traffic, and heightened safety and transportation concerns—have made it more difficult for some arts venues to fully reestablish themselves as hubs of community life.



Financial Pressures

Skyrocketing costs causing expenses to rise faster than revenue. Earned revenue slow to rebound, leading to a heavier reliance on contributed income.



Funding & Philanthropy

Increased competition for public and philanthropic support. Federal arts funding landscape has shifted, making recovery uneven.



Audience & Market Shifts

Performing arts venues face reduced attendance and shrinking subscriber bases.



Place-Based Challenges

Downtown struggles: empty storefronts, reduced foot traffic. Safety and transportation concerns limiting venues' role as community hubs

CVL Economics is an economic consulting firm that takes a data-driven, human-centric approach to equitable development and sustainable growth, with a focus on the creative economy. Founded in 2021, CVL Economics partners with communities, municipalities, organizations, and institutions to address today's most complex challenges and foster bold action. Coupling our robust economic models with innovative research methodologies, we provide decisionmakers with the actionable insights needed to effect change, expand opportunity, and improve economic well-being.

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