



CREATIVE ROOTS, EQUITABLE FUTURES
LATINO ARTS IN CHICAGO



**Great Cities
Institute**

University of Illinois Chicago

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Executive Summary

Chicago's Latino arts ecosystem is rich, deeply rooted, and nationally recognized. From the mural movements of the 1960s to today's prominent institutions and festivals, Latino artists have shaped Chicago's cultural identity through community expression, heritage preservation, and artistic innovation. Long-standing institutions and long-running festivals have helped anchor this ecosystem, alongside hundreds of smaller groups offering theater, dance, music, visual art, and multidisciplinary work rooted in Latino experiences.

Philanthropic Funding

From 2020 to 2023, 56 Latino arts organizations in Chicago received a total of 655 philanthropic grants, amounting to \$21.9 million. Despite this, Latino groups received only 6.6%, 4.2%, and 5.4% of total arts foundation funding in the city during 2020–2022—well below their share of the population. Funding patterns reveal a mix of one-time major investments and recurring small grants, with four organizations receiving over 70 separate grants. Most grants supported general operations, but few were explicitly for capacity building, infrastructure, or strategic growth—areas consistently identified by Latino leaders as essential to organizational sustainability.

Public Funding

City and federal funding sources show similar trends. In 2022, the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) expanded its arts grants budget from \$2.7 million to \$12.7 million, increasing access for artists of color and community-rooted organizations. By 2024, that progress had come under threat: budget cuts, leadership turnover, and a return to less stable funding sources prompted advocacy efforts from the arts community, including many Latinos. In response, the 2025 city

budget included a modest increase to preserve grantmaking at prior levels, but the experience revealed how vulnerable public investment in community-based arts remains.

At the federal level, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awarded 424 grants to Chicago organizations between 2020 and 2024, totaling \$17.65 million. Only 31 grants—approximately 7% of the total—explicitly supported Latino arts or communities, accounting for just 3%–4% of NEA dollars awarded in the period. Most grants were small and project based. Latino organizations received consistent but modest support each year, with a brief spike in 2022 likely related to pandemic recovery. The vast majority of large, recurring NEA funding flowed to major institutions, revealing structural inequities in access and scale of support.

Other Challenges

In addition to funding disparities, Latino arts organizations face structural challenges that can undermine growth and visibility, such as affordable venues and narrow leadership pipelines. Media coverage and civic recognition are inconsistent.

Economic Impact

Despite these challenges, Latino arts organizations contribute significantly to Chicago's creative economy and cultural life. They span all scales—from volunteer-led ensembles with \$24,000 budgets to multimillion-dollar institutions—and provide employment, education, and audience engagement citywide.

Latino cultural events and festivals attract thousands of visitors, support neighborhood businesses, and contribute to Chicago's identity as an international arts destination. Independent research shows that for every \$1 spent or invested in the arts sector, \$1.30 is returned in local economic impact. Latino organizations are part of this multiplier effect, despite receiving a disproportionately small share of resources.

Increasing Equity

Recent philanthropic trends suggest growing attention to equity in arts funding. From 2013–2015 to 2020–2023, the share of Chicago arts funding directed to organizations serving historically excluded communities more than doubled, and general operating support grew from 30% to 71% of grant dollars. Dedicated initiatives and foundation-led programs have expanded access for Latino arts organizations, especially those rooted in neighborhoods with limited prior funding history. Local and national donor coalitions have also advocated for sustained support and leadership inclusion.

Still, many Latino organizations operate with limited staff, thin reserves, and few resources to pursue long-term planning or capital investments. Achieving meaningful equity in the arts sector will require more than closing annual funding gaps—it will require sustained investment, broader recognition, leadership inclusion, and greater visibility in civic and media narratives.

Latino arts organizations have played an essential role in shaping Chicago's past and present. With consistent support and inclusion, they will continue to shape the city's future—not only as creators of cultural value, but as anchors of community, contributors to the economy, and drivers of a more equitable cultural landscape.

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Setting the Stage: Chicago's Latino Arts and Culture

Latino population growth has had dramatic impacts and influence on the city's cultural landscape.

Chicago has long been home to thriving Latino communities. The city's Latino arts scene began in the city's Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities, stemming from cultural expression and a striving for visibility. In the 1960s and 1970s, Latino artists began using walls as canvases, sparking a vibrant mural movement in neighborhoods like Pilsen and Humboldt Park. Their work blended art with activism and drew attention to, and preserved, Latino heritage in public. The year 1968 saw Pilsen's first "Mexican mural," *Peace (Metafísico)*, by Mario Castillo, which reflected and validated Mexican identity.¹ Similar artistic expressions emerged in Puerto Rican Humboldt Park: Murals and posters voiced neighborhood residents' pride and protest.

By 1980, Latinos from a diversity of heritages accounted for 14% of Chicago's population; today, the Latino population has grown to account for nearly 30% of city residents, a shift in

demographics that has had dramatic impacts and influence on the city's cultural landscape.² During that period of growth and increased influence, Latino communities established their own cultural institutions. The Segundo Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center, founded in 1971, is the city's longest-running Latino cultural center, created to promote Puerto Rican arts and heritage.³ In Pilsen, a group of educators spent \$900 to launch the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in 1982; the museum opened to the public in 1987. The Chicago Latino Film Festival launched in 1985, projecting 14 films onto a concrete wall.⁴

By the 1990s, new Latino theater companies were amplifying Latino voices on stage. Edward Torres and Henry Godinez founded Teatro Vista in 1990 to create opportunities for Latino artists and other artists of color to "explore the new work" of Latino writers.⁵ Aguijón Theater Company (founded in 1989) is another enduring Spanish-language theater ensemble. Founded by the Colombian actress and director Rosario Vargas, Aguijón has presented more than 150 diverse productions in Chicago over the years.⁶ In 1995, the City of Chicago officially acknowledged the Puerto Rican community's

cultural corridor, Paseo Boricua, installing two monumental Puerto Rican flag gateways on Division Street, symbols of the neighborhood's pride and identity.⁷

By the 2000s, Latino arts and culture organizations and productions were achieving national prominence. In 2000 in Humboldt Park, Billy Ocasio and supporters established the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, which opened to the public in 2009 and later became the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts & Culture.⁸ The Goodman Theatre's Festival Latino launched in 2003. In 2006, the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum rebranded as the National Museum of Mexican Art: Today, it is "the most prominent first-voice institution for Mexican art and culture in the United States."⁹ In 2016, Myrna Salazar, with the International Latino Cultural Center, the National Museum of Mexican Art, and the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance, cofounded the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance to boost local theater groups.

In 2025, the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance's Destinos festival celebrates its eighth anniversary. The Chicago Latino Film Festival, led by Pepe Vargas, founder of the International Latino Cultural Center of Chicago, has since evolved into a major cultural bridge, showcasing cinema from across Latin America; the festival celebrates its 41st anniversary in 2025.¹⁰

Countless other Latino arts groups have contributed to Chicago's cultural vitality, from visual art galleries and community studios to dance companies and festivals. This diversity of organizations shares a common thread: to amplify Latino voices, to celebrate heritage, and to engage community through the arts. These organizations have worked collaboratively to build up a robust ecosystem of education, entertainment, inspiration, and representation. They all are advocates for inclusion in the broader arts sector. Latino arts and culture have enriched Chicago's cultural tapestry and left lasting impressions on the city's and the region's arts landscape—and they will continue to do so.

THE CITY HAS MORE THAN...

315 INDEPENDENT ARTISTS, WRITERS & PERFORMERS

176 PERFORMING ARTS COMPANIES

82 THEATER COMPANIES & DINNER THEATERS

70 MUSICAL GROUPS AND ARTISTS

51 MUSEUMS

14 DANCE COMPANIES

Source: US Census Bureau, 2022 Economic Census, released in December 2024, tabulated by UIC Great Cities Institute.

Spotlight on Latino Funding

Chicago's Latino arts and culture organizations have long relied on a patchwork of funding sources: individual donors, corporate sponsors, private foundations, city and state programs, and federal support through the National Endowment for the Arts. Yet across all levels of funding—private and public—Latino communities have historically received less support relative to their population size and cultural contributions.

This section explores patterns in philanthropic and public (both city and federal) support for Latino arts organizations in Chicago. It begins with a broader look at philanthropy, where there has been systemic underfunding of Latino communities as a whole.

In 2022, Latino arts and culture received about 5% of total grant dollars to arts in Chicago.

Philanthropy

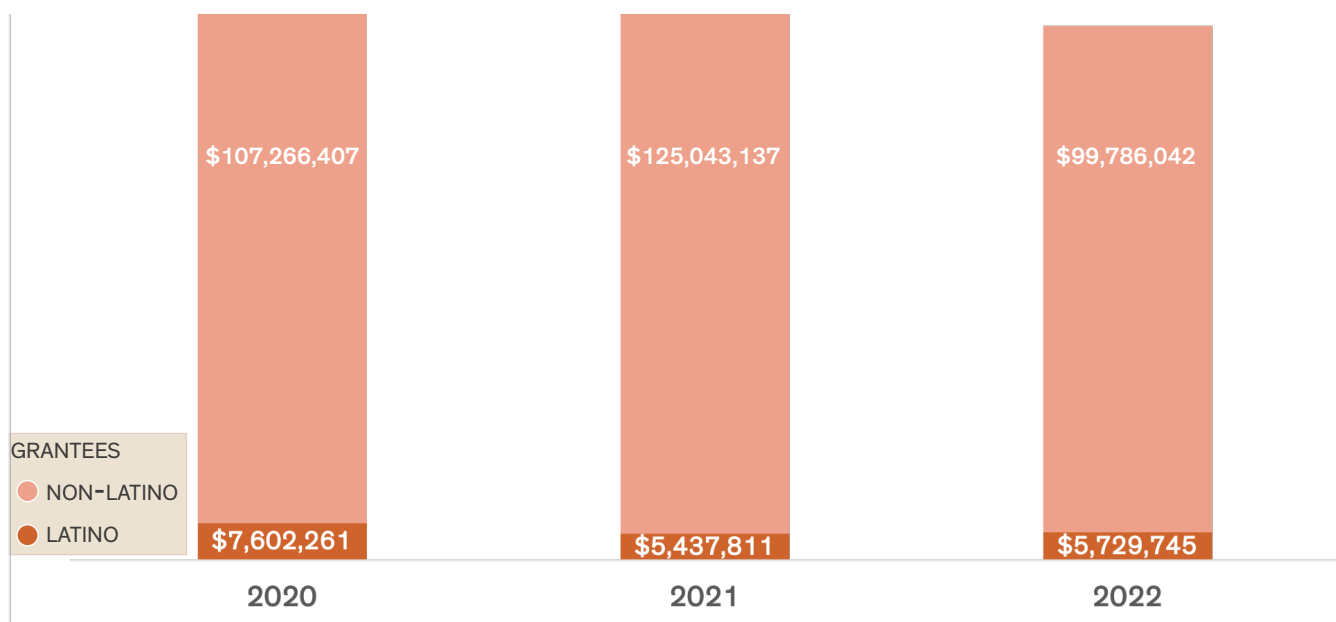
Historically, across all areas, Latino organizations have received only a small slice of the philanthropic pie. For example, despite Latinos making up about 30% of Chicago's population, there has been persistent disparity in philanthropic funding directed at Latino communities.¹¹ At a national scale, research has likewise found that just 1.3% of all U.S.

philanthropic dollars between 1999 and 2009 went to Latino organizations, even though Latinos accounted for roughly 18% of the U.S. population in that time.¹²

This disparity is broadly mirrored in the arts, where large, mainstream institutions attract the lion's share of foundation grants, while Latino arts groups are more likely to operate with leaner budgets and fewer reserves. For instance, in 2020, 2021, and 2022, Latino arts organizations received just 6.6%, 4.2%, and 5.4%, respectively, of total arts funding in Chicago.¹³ While these percentages exceed those reported in broader philanthropy studies, they still remain disproportionately low relative to Latino representation.

From 2020 to 2023, 56 Latino nonprofit arts organizations in Chicago received philanthropic support. The organizations collectively received 655 grants, totaling \$21.9 million in funding.¹⁴ Latino arts groups actively leverage that funding to amplify their communities' voices, histories, and cultural identities. Through theater (130 grants), cultural awareness initiatives (97), musical ensembles (90), arts education (75), and art museums (49), the organizations create vital platforms for storytelling, community engagement, and intergenerational learning.

Figure 1. Philanthropic funding of Chicago arts and culture organizations



Source: IRS data, downloaded via Candid's Foundation Directory, tabulated by UIC Great Cities Institute.

Organizations with high numbers of separate grants stand out in the data—not simply because of frequency but also because sustained support is likely to show stability, trust, and community impact. Several Latino nonprofits received funding repeatedly. Four organizations received more than 70 grants each across years, and others secured dozens of individual grants.

However, organizations with the highest grant counts were not always those with the largest overall funding amounts, which reveals a trend of giving more smaller, ongoing grants than fewer large ones. This pattern of repeated funding may reflect an understanding that positions Latino nonprofits to move beyond short-term survival toward strategic growth.

Repeat funding enables organizations to better position themselves to retain skilled staff, deepen community connection, innovate, and expand their reach. Ultimately, repeated grants reflect

fundors' confidence in the organizations to drive meaningful impact.

The data show foundations taking two approaches to funding Latino arts. One prominent national foundation provided the largest total amount (\$3.8 million) in three grants, largely driven by a single major investment. In contrast, a local Chicago foundation awarded

nearly \$3 million across more than 60 smaller grants, demonstrating ongoing support. Several other Chicago foundations contributed between \$500,000 and \$1.3 million each,

typically in multiple smaller grants. This balance of large, one-time investments with smaller, steady support highlights how diverse funding strategies combine to fund Latino arts in Chicago.

Repeat funding may position some Latino nonprofits to move toward strategic growth.

All Latino arts organizations in our dataset are located in Chicago, and accordingly, about 69% (449 of 655) of grants originated from Illinois foundations. Foundations from other

Table 1. Latino and Non-Latino Arts Funding: A Year-by-Year Comparison

Year	Latino Organizations				Non-Latino Organizations			
	Dollars		Grants		Dollars		Grants	
	Granted	%	Number	%	Granted	%	Number	%
2020	\$7,602,261	6.6%	180	6.4%	\$107,266,407	93.4%	2,614	93.6%
2021	\$5,437,811	4.2%	182	6.8%	\$125,043,137	95.8%	2,489	93.2%
2022	\$5,729,745	5.4%	174	6.6%	\$99,786,042	94.6%	2,462	93.4%
2023	\$3,163,988	4.9%	119	6.8%	\$60,969,204	95.1%	1,628	93.2%

Note: 2023 data are likely incomplete at the time of collection.

Source: IRS data via Candid's Foundation Directory, tabulated by UIC Great Cities Institute.

states—such as New York (48 grants) and Massachusetts (32 grants)—also made large contributions, an indication of complementary national support.

Grant funding for Latino organizations varied from year to year. The year 2020 saw the highest total funding authorized, at approximately \$7.6 million, boosted by an unusually large grant from a major foundation. For grant volume, around 179 grants were made in 2020. The years 2021 and 2022 also saw high grant numbers (182 and 174 grants, respectively), but lower total funding (about \$5.4 million in 2021 and \$5.7 million in 2022).

The year 2023 shows a notable drop, with about 119 grants totaling \$3.2 million—this might indicate a real decline in funding or simply that 2023 data was incomplete at the time of reporting.

Overall, the number of grants per year stayed relatively robust (in the high hundreds through 2022), demonstrating consistent support even as dollars fluctuated.

More than half of the grants to Latino arts organizations in this dataset were for general operating support—about 288 grants—with another 114 designated for program or project support. Few indicated a focus on capacity building, facilities, or other strategic needs.

General operating support may suggest flexibility, but another study of Latino nonprofits more broadly—not limited to the arts—indicate that many organizations need capacity building, infrastructure, and staffing and retention supports to achieve sustainability.¹⁵

Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events

The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) is a major force in public arts and culture funding in the city, especially as it prioritized equity from 2021 to 2023.¹⁶ During that time, the number of organizations receiving city support in neighborhoods doubled, and DCASE expanded its reach to artists of color.

A major milestone came in 2022, when \$10 million from the city's corporate fund was dedicated to arts and culture, boosting DCASE's grants budget from \$2.7 million to \$12.7 million.¹⁷ Combined with federal COVID-19 recovery funds, the infusion significantly increased grants to local artists and groups, including many Latino initiatives.

But by 2024, the progress was under pressure. The city's proposed budget for 2024 removed the \$10 million contribution, pushing DCASE to return to hotel tax revenue and onetime federal grants.¹⁸ At the same time, DCASE

was facing leadership shake-ups and high employee turnover, raising concerns about its future directions and progress in supporting communities of color.¹⁹

Still, DCASE awarded about \$8 million in grants to roughly 500 recipients in 2024. According to the department, more than half of individual artists receiving grants were first-time applicants and 60% lived in low- or moderate-income neighborhoods.²⁰

DCASE is currently undergoing significant upheaval, including mounting criticism and questions about transparency and oversight. In 2025, as public funding remained uncertain, the arts community mobilized.

Arts Alliance Illinois spearheaded a letter-writing campaign urging the mayor to protect DCASE’s granting capacity. More than 1,000 artists and organizations, including many Latino leaders, signed on, framing arts funding as a racial equity issue.²¹ In response, the final 2025 city budget modestly increased DCASE funding, intending to maintain grants at prior levels despite budgetary challenges.²²

This outcome shows how advocacy can help preserve public investment in Latino arts and culture across Chicago’s neighborhoods, but it also shows how precarious that public support is. Many Latino arts organizations are already underfunded and relying on patchworks of support, making them especially vulnerable to shifting public priorities.

National Endowment for the Arts

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has long been an important arts funding source in Chicago.²³ However, the future of federal arts funding is unstable and uncertain. While the NEA has historically been a steady, if limited, source of arts funding in Chicago, current volatility is concerning, especially for smaller organizations that rely on modest grants.

Moreover, organizations with any diversity or equity work are no longer eligible for funding consideration, and grant applicants are expected to show impact through programming and through media attention and audience reach, requirements that can disadvantage community-based work.²⁴ In this shifting landscape, it is unclear whether Latino arts groups will continue to receive even the modest support they once did.

The following analysis examines NEA grantmaking to Latino organizations in Chicago from 2020 to 2024, before the current administration’s political interventions altered the terms of federal support for the arts.

Table 1. NEA funding of Chicago’s Latino arts as percentage of total grant number and total dollars

	% of grants	% of total dollars
2020	7.7%	2.40%
2021	6.5%	5.40%
2022	8.2%	3.40%
2023	6.7%	4.20%

Source: NEA GrantSearch, tabulated by UIC Great Cities Institute.

Between 2020 and 2024, the NEA awarded 424 grants to Chicago arts organizations, a total of about \$17.65 million. Only about 31 of these grants (roughly 7%) focused explicitly on Latino communities, artists, or cultural traditions, and the grants represented just 3%–4% of total NEA dollars awarded in the city during the period.

Most Latino grants were in the range of \$10,000 to \$20,000 to support annual festivals and performances rooted in Latino film, theater, literature, and music; community-based arts programs serving predominantly Latino neighborhoods; public art installations and exhibitions exploring Latin American or Caribbean themes; and youth and intergenerational arts education grounded in heritage and identity.

These awards provided crucial federal support for Latino cultural work, even if at a small scale. Many were repeat grants, showing a pattern of NEA investment in community programming year after year. Even though funding levels were not proportionate to Latino representation in the city, the consistency signals recognition of Latino cultural contributions.

Funding in 2020–2024 was volatile because of the pandemic. Even so, the NEA consistently supported a small number of Latino projects. Chicago Latino organizations received between 6 and 10 grants per year of the total, and their share of total NEA funding remained modest, never exceeding 5.4% of annual dollars.

The brief spike in 2022, driven by pandemic recovery efforts, stands out as a moment of increased support that seems to have quickly receded. The table provides a closer look at these patterns, illustrating how Latino organizations were navigating an already-limited funding landscape.

The 2022 recovery year marked a high point for Latino NEA funding, with more projects funded than any other year in the period. But this was not new trend; by 2023, the share of grants to Latino organizations had returned to typical levels.

Some Latino organizations received grants every year or every other year, but most of these awards were small and for individual projects. In contrast, large mainstream institutions regularly secured multiple six-figure awards, sometimes across multiple NEA programs. This disparity points to structural inequities baked into federal arts funding, even before recent political shifts.

The data for 2020–2024 provide a clear baseline for government funding for Latino arts before the current administration narrowed the scope of support. In this period, Latino organizations in Chicago received consistent but modest funding—a small share of total grants and dollars awarded. Their work was visible, valued, and often supported across multiple years, but not equitably resourced.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of NEA funding flowed to major institutions and general arts programming. The discrepancy reveals persistent structural gaps in federal arts funding, even in years of stability.

Still, the recurrence of Latino arts grants signals that organizations are a recognized part of Chicago's cultural fabric. The data reflect a steady, if limited, commitment—one that may be increasingly difficult to maintain as federal priorities pivot.

Backstage Challenges

Chicago's Latino arts and culture face challenges beyond money, challenges that can undermine sustainability and growth no matter the artistic excellence on display.

Accessible Venues and Space

Securing affordable, appropriate venues is a persistent hurdle. Groups that do not own facilities must rely on borrowed or rented spaces, which are increasingly cost-prohibitive in gentrifying neighborhoods. As an example, in 2013, Pilsen's historic Casa Aztlán community arts center lost its building amid rising debt and real-estate pressures.²⁵ Without being able to control their venue, groups are limited in generating revenue and building audience. Gentrification augments this pressure, driving development that displaces cultural organizations and their supporters. Casa Aztlán's fate illustrates this: After the organization was forced out, the property was converted to luxury apartments and its murals painted over.

Intertwined Barriers: Representation, Access, and Visibility

Latino representation in decision-making—on boards, in executive leadership, on funding panels—is low across Chicago's major arts institutions and philanthropies. As a result, a small circle of Latino leaders is repeatedly tapped to take on multiple leadership roles. This highlights their dedication and talent but also points to a bottleneck: There are only so many boards a person can sit on, and many other capable individuals with valuable lived experience and insights are left out.

A Great Cities Institute study on Latinos in philanthropy found in interviews of Chicago philanthropy and nonprofit leaders that Latino representation is a major issue—from foundation boards and grant panels to leadership at major cultural institutions.²⁶ The same study noted a continued “need for more Latine representation in decision-making roles” to ensure that diverse communities are recognized and served. The scarce representation affects not just who leads but also who gets access to resources, visibility, and influence.

Media coverage and visibility are also limited for Latino arts and culture. Even with high-quality work, some Latino arts and culture groups have a hard time gaining mainstream attention. For example, searching the Chicago Sun-Times archives since 2000 shows that Latino arts and culture appeared in only 16% of all news items related to arts and culture.²⁷

In 2024, Latino individuals, productions, or organizations accounted for only 5% of Jeff Awards nominations in both equity and non-equity categories.²⁸ (As an example of impactful advocacy, the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance was key in changing Jeff Awards policies—the Jeffs introduced a “short run” category and began recognizing non-English-language productions—policy shifts that directly benefited Latine and smaller theater companies across the city.) These gaps are more than symbolic—they contribute to real challenges in fundraising, audience building, and long-term sustainability.

The Mellon Foundation noted that Latinos are “the largest majority missing from most museum collections, exhibitions, scholarship, and programming.”²⁹ Locally, the Raíces Chicago Story Coalition is just one organization working to correct that by archiving and sharing Latino histories.³⁰ Another is the Chicago Latino Arts and Culture Summit, which featured a breakout session in 2022 on public relations and media strategy, pointing to the need to increase visibility of Latino artistic work.³¹

The visibility gap also crops up in civic planning. For example, the Chicago Park District’s Cultural Asset Map visualizes neighborhood public arts resources.³² The map reflects much activity and knowledge in historically Latino areas like Pilsen

and Little Village, but far fewer resources in other neighborhoods with significant or growing Latino populations, such as Gage Park and East Side. This is more than a data issue; it reflects who gets recognized or invited and included in official narratives about where arts and culture happen.

In short, visibility and representation are not separate problems but mutually reinforcing ones. When visibility is concentrated on some or recurring voices, there is the risk of overlooking new or different perspectives, and of placing repeat demands on the same organizations. It will take more than just funding to fix this. Intentional strategies are needed to diversify leadership,

amplify marginalized voices, and challenge structural blind spots in public and institutional narratives.

• • •

Structural challenges—space, leadership, visibility—do not exist in isolation from one another. Instead, they intersect with, and are compounded by, funding inequities. Even when

Latino artists and organizations achieve artistic excellence, community acclaim, or community impact, they may struggle to gain the institutional support necessary for long-term sustainability.

Overcoming these barriers requires more than financial investment. It demands intentional change: inclusive policies, equitable representation in leadership and decision-making, and a sustained commitment to amplifying Latino voices across the city’s cultural landscape. Only by addressing these gaps can Chicago fully realize the creative, economic, and civic potential of its Latino arts community.

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Economic Impact

Illinois's arts and culture sector makes a major contribution to the state's economy. In 2022 alone, it added more than \$36 billion in economic value and supported over 216,000 jobs—roughly equivalent to the workforce of some major industries.

Illinois ranks sixth nationally in total arts-related impact, and the sector has grown faster than the U.S. average since 2021, particularly in publishing, advertising, design, and independent performing arts. The average arts and culture worker in Illinois earned about \$92,700 in 2022, slightly higher than the statewide average for all jobs. Despite this strength, Illinois's arts economy remains less concentrated than that of other leading states, indicating room for growth—especially in areas like compensation, investment, and national visibility.³³

Latino arts contribute significantly to Chicago's creative economy and community well-being. The financial footprint of Latino arts organizations is modest compared to the city's largest cultural institutions, but collectively those organizations represent a meaningful economic force. Dozens of Latino arts nonprofits and public programs

provide employment for artists, administrators, and educators. For example, a professional company like Teatro Vista supports work for over 100 predominantly Latino artists each season, fostering career growth in the Latino community.³⁴

Larger institutions like the National Museum of Mexican Art have full-time staff and year-round operations. The museum, for example, welcomes over 150,000 visitors annually (pre-pandemic), and its educational programs reach over 50,000 Chicago students each year, which implies dozens of school partnerships and educator jobs.³⁵ Visitors to arts and culture organizations like these generate substantial economic activity by patronizing local neighborhood businesses.

Latino arts organizations span a wide spectrum—from small volunteer-run ensembles operating

on minimal budgets to multimillion-dollar institutions. A 2021 survey of 40 Chicago BIPOC arts organizations revealed annual budgets ranging from \$24,000 up to \$11 million.³⁶

Consequently, Latino arts organizations impact the local economy at various scales: Grassroots groups provide community-based artistic opportunities supported by part-time and volunteer efforts, while larger nonprofits employ full-time staff, manage facilities, and host extensive audience engagements. Even smaller community ensembles provide social value, offering free classes and youth stipends that foster community well-being beyond purely economic measures.

In terms of consumer behavior, Chicago households demonstrate strong spending on arts and culture. Similarly, consumer data from Cook County shows nearly \$905 million spent on cultural “fees and admissions,” reinforcing the role of arts as a key part of the region’s broader entertainment economy.³⁷

According to ESRI’s Spending Potential Index, local spending on entertainment and recreation admissions totaled over \$930 million in 2022, with above-average spending on tickets to theater, concerts, operas, movies, and museums.³⁸ For example, spending on live performances was indexed at 102 (with 100 as the national average), totaling nearly \$89 million annually.

Museum and park admissions also exceeded national averages, with Chicagoans spending more than \$44 million. These figures highlight the city’s vibrant cultural demand and suggest that

the arts are not only economically productive—but also highly valued by residents.

Chicago’s broader arts and culture sector has a significant impact on the city’s economy. The sector supports approximately 11,000 jobs, including more than 9,000 direct jobs within arts organizations, independent artists, and performing arts companies, and generates about \$490 million annually in labor income.³⁹

Additionally, the arts contribute roughly \$1.15 billion to Chicago’s gross domestic product. The total economic activity linked to the arts sector reaches nearly \$1.72 billion when accounting for organization revenues, supply chain and supplier interactions, and local spending by employees.

Every \$1 spent in the arts sector generates approximately \$1.30 in economic impact—a 130% return on investment—highlighting the value and potential effectiveness of arts funding.

Every \$1 spent in the arts sector generates approximately \$1.30 in economic impact—a 130% return on investment.

However, even as the overall arts sector generates nearly \$1.72 billion in economic activity, Latino arts organizations receive a disproportionately small share of philanthropic support. The disparity highlights the need for greater investment in Latino arts.

Even modest increases in funding would likely yield measurable gains for arts and culture broadly, and given the broader multiplier effect of arts spending (\$1 of investment = \$1.30 in economic impact), additional support could strengthen the city’s economy and its cultural infrastructure.

Beyond direct employment and financial spending, Latino arts significantly amplify Chicago's economy through cultural tourism and neighborhood revitalization. Major events such as the Chicago Latino Film Festival and Destinos Latino Theater Festival draw thousands, stimulating local businesses.

The presence of vibrant cultural districts like Pilsen and Humboldt Park's Paseo Boricua further fuels economic activity, enhancing neighborhood vitality. Infrastructure revitalization projects, such as the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture's restoration of Humboldt Park's stables and The Miracle Center's conversion of a Belmont Cragin church into a New Arts & Media Center to provide a dedicated space for BIPOC creatives to thrive and contribute to the cultural fabric of the community, generate construction jobs and strengthen community assets.⁴⁰

Additionally, Latino arts organizations substantially contribute to human capital development through robust training programs, internships, and mentorships, preparing community members for careers in creative industries. Alumni of these programs are likely to pursue employment in creative sectors or initiate entrepreneurial ventures, expanding economic and cultural capital within Chicago.

In summary, Latino arts organizations are a vital component of Chicago's creative economy. Their multifaceted contributions—spanning employment, tourism, local economic stimulation, infrastructure development, and community education—clearly underscore their indispensable role in the city's broader economic and cultural landscape.

Conclusion: Toward Funding Equity

In recent years, Chicago's arts funding landscape has begun to shift. Public departments, private foundations, and advocacy coalitions are increasingly prioritizing equity, directing more support to organizations that have historically been excluded from major funding streams—including those led by and serving Latino communities.

This momentum reflects growing recognition that Latino arts organizations play a vital role in Chicago's cultural life but have long operated on the margins of philanthropy. In response, several funders have taken concrete steps: initiatives like Chicago's Cultural Treasures and the Chicago Community Trust's *Nuestro Futuro* have directed millions in new funding to organizations of color, including Latino ones.⁴¹

Between 2020 and 2023, the share of Chicago arts grants going to BIPOC organizations rose from just 27% in 2013–2015 to 54%, according to *Funding Equity*, a study commissioned by Enrich Chicago based on self-reported data from funders and organizations. General operating support—critical for stability—rose from 30% to 71% of grant dollars in that same period.⁴²

Foundation-led mentorship programs, such as those launched by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation in 2024, aim to help build long-term capacity by pairing larger Latino institutions with smaller ones for support in fundraising, governance, and marketing.⁴³ National funders like Ford and MacArthur have adopted equity frameworks, while local entities like the Field Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust have shifted priorities to neighborhood- and community-based leadership, often benefiting

Latino arts groups on the West and Southwest Sides.⁴⁴ Donor networks such as Chicago Latines in Philanthropy (CLIP) and Hispanics in Philanthropy have also played a key role in sustaining momentum and advocating for Latino inclusion across the philanthropic sector.⁴⁵

These investments mark real progress—but the funding gap remains wide. A 2024 report by Nuestro Futuro and the UIC Great Cities Institute confirmed what many Latino leaders have long argued: Philanthropic support for Latino organizations in all fields continues to lag the community’s size and impact.⁴⁶ Many groups still operate with minimal staff, limited reserves, and heavy reliance on volunteers. One Latina theater director described her organization as “surviving on a shoestring budget”—making magic with minimal resources, even as funding flows elsewhere. As she put it, “Funding is leaving underrepresented organizations with nothing but shoestrings. It means artists aren’t getting paid, or paid enough.”⁴⁷

These disparities stem from well-documented structural factors: smaller organizations often lack access to grantwriting support or donor networks; funders have historically overlooked culturally specific groups in favor of “universal” institutions; and Chicago’s legacy of segregation has kept many Latino arts organizations outside traditional power and funding circles.

Beyond financial limits, these gaps mean fewer opportunities to shape public narratives, participate in capital campaigns, or influence arts policy. Large cultural institutions often hold media attention and decision-making access; Latino organizations must fight for visibility, even as they anchor artistic life in their neighborhoods.

Still, Latino arts leaders continue to push for meaningful change. The second annual Chicago Latino Arts & Culture Summit, held in 2023, brought together over 50 leaders

for direct dialogue with major foundations.⁴⁸ In response, a new philanthropy initiative was announced, including dedicated staffing, targeted mini-grants, and renewed commitments to transparency.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, coalitions such as the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance and Enrich Chicago foster collaboration, shared advocacy, and infrastructure-building across communities.

Achieving equity is not just about closing funding gaps—it’s about sustained support, leadership inclusion, and visibility. Latino arts organizations contribute significantly to Chicago’s economy and cultural fabric, to grow and thrive they need the resources, recognition, and long-term investment. As the field continues to evolve, there is great optimism that Latino cultural contributions will not only endure but expand—shaping Chicago’s future as vibrantly as they always have.

Methods Appendix

Philanthropy Funding

This analysis draws on data from Candid’s Foundation Directory Online, which aggregates institutional grantmaking from IRS Form 990 and 990-PF filings, covering private foundations across the United States. The dataset used here includes grants awarded from 2020 through 2023, and uses the year the grant was authorized—not the year disbursed—as the basis for year-over-year comparisons.

Grants were filtered to include only those supporting arts and culture organizations headquartered in Chicago, with Latino organizations identified through a combination of grantee names, known affiliations, mission language, and descriptive fields. Due to inconsistencies in how funders report target populations, cultural identity, and purpose areas, these classifications were made conservatively and may undercount grants to Latino-serving organizations, especially those that are newer, smaller, or not explicitly labeled as culturally specific.

The dataset was cleaned and analyzed to do the following:

- Remove duplicates or multi-year installments of a single grant
- Distinguish between general operating support and program-specific grants, when that information was available
- Group grants by focus area (e.g., theater, music, cultural awareness) based on purpose fields and narrative summaries
- Identify grants from Illinois-based vs. out-of-state funders

- Separate high-frequency funders (those giving 60+ grants across years) from one-time or infrequent contributors

Grants from large-scale institutions (e.g., major museums or citywide festivals) were included in overall funding totals but not attributed to the Latino category unless the grant explicitly named a Latino focus or recipient.

It is also important to acknowledge that many philanthropic investments in general-purpose or citywide cultural organizations serve diverse audiences, including Latino communities, even if those impacts are not categorized as Latino-serving in grant records. Philanthropy often prioritizes mission-based or discipline-specific funding rather than demographic targeting. As such, broad-access programming that benefits Latino residents may not be captured in the data as explicitly Latino-serving.

Finally, grant data for 2023 were still being finalized at the time of analysis. The lower number of grants reported for that year may reflect delayed filings or incomplete records. Future updates should revisit 2023 figures and evaluate how emerging post-pandemic funding trends shape the longer-term landscape of Latino arts support.

National Endowment for the Arts Funding

This analysis draws on data from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) GrantSearch database, which provides publicly accessible information on all NEA-funded grants. The analysis focuses on grants awarded from 2020 through 2024, using the year of award as the reference point.

Data were retrieved using discipline and keyword filters within the GrantSearch portal. Grants were limited to those awarded to organizations based in Chicago. Projects serving Latino communities or focused on Latino cultural expression were

Methods Appendix, *continued*

identified through manual review of project descriptions, which are typically clear and specific in the NEA database. As a result, Latino-specific projects were selected with a high level of confidence. However, determining whether a grantee is a Latino-led or Latino-directed organization is more difficult, as organizational demographics are not consistently available or identified in the data. This analysis therefore emphasizes Latino-focused projects over assumptions about leadership identity.

Each grant record was reviewed to extract the following:

- Organization name and location
- Year of award and grant amount
- Discipline or grant category (e.g., Theater, Music, Arts Education)
- Narrative description of the project to determine Latino cultural relevance

Subgrants distributed by intermediary organizations were not included, as these are not tracked individually in NEA GrantSearch. The resulting dataset was analyzed to identify overall funding levels, year-over-year changes, and discipline-level patterns in support for Latino-focused arts activity in Chicago. Because NEA funding reflects federal-level recognition and prioritization, these grants provide insight into national visibility for Latino arts alongside local and philanthropic trends.

Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events

The analysis for City data differs from the Foundation Directory and NEA datasets

used elsewhere in this report due to a lack of data transparency from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE). Unlike other public agencies, DCASE does not publish structured grantmaking data through the city's open data portal. Instead, grant recipient information must be manually extracted from PDFs or compiled from separate program-specific web pages. No consolidated or machine-readable data is available for public use.

For example, the grant data available omits key elements needed for meaningful analysis, including grant amounts, racial or ethnic identity of recipients, and neighborhood of residence—factors that are especially important in a city where geography often mirrors racial and cultural boundaries. While project descriptions indicate continued investment in culturally specific and neighborhood-based arts programming, particularly in Black and Brown communities, the lack of standardized demographic or funding data makes it impossible to systematically evaluate how city resources are distributed across racial or geographic lines.

As a result, this report does not include a quantitative analysis of DCASE grantmaking. The absence of accessible data prevents comparison with foundation and federal funding sources and limits broader assessments of equity in local public arts investment. FOIA requests appear to be among the few other available methods for accessing more detailed information.

Chicago Media Sources

Media coverage and online sources were reviewed to identify Latino arts visibility across major local platforms. Searches were conducted using Access World News, limited to the *Chicago Sun-Times* and filtered by year. To approximate arts-related coverage, keyword searches included terms such as art, music, theater, film, and related topics. To identify content specific to Latino communities or Latin American cultural references, an additional

Methods Appendix, *continued*

layer of filtering included terms such as Latino, Mexican, Colombian, and the names and demonyms of Latin American countries. Because Access World News does not support filtering by newspaper section, the resulting dataset reflects keyword presence across full articles, including non-arts content.

The *Chicago Reader* is one of the city's primary sources of cultural reporting, but its website does not support archival or advanced keyword searches. A keyword search for "Latino" across its site returns 2,021 results since 2000. Many of these articles are individual reviews or brief features tied to larger events, such as the Destinos festival or the Chicago Latino Film Festival. These findings suggest sustained but diffuse coverage of Latino arts, with limited opportunities for longitudinal or quantitative analysis based on available search functionality.

In addition, the Jeff Awards website was reviewed to identify nominations and wins by Latino artists and Latino-focused companies. However, the Jeff site does not include demographic data on artists or organizations, and records are not easily searchable by cultural focus. Mentions of Latino artists or companies are drawn from publicly available nomination and award listings, supplemented by organization websites and media coverage where applicable. Due to these limitations, findings related to representation in the Jeff Awards are illustrative but not comprehensive.

IMPLAN

This report uses IMPLAN, an input-output economic modeling tool, to estimate the economic effects of arts-related activity in Chicago. To model city-specific outcomes, all ZIP codes within the boundaries of the City of Chicago were aggregated into a custom region within the IMPLAN platform. The model uses 2022 data to estimate direct, indirect, and induced impacts on employment, labor income, value added (GDP), and total economic output. All results are adjusted to 2024 dollars.

The scenario modeled here estimates the overall economic impact of the arts and culture sector in Chicago. To avoid overstating the influence of large-scale commercial activity, the analysis excludes promoters and arena venues. This provides a more accurate picture of economic activity driven by nonprofit and community-based arts organizations, independent artists, and cultural institutions.

The IMPLAN outputs reflect employment across the sector (including full-time, part-time, and contract roles), labor income paid to workers, total value added to the economy, and overall economic output. In addition to direct effects within the arts sector itself, the model captures ripple effects in other industries—such as suppliers, contractors, and local businesses that benefit from arts worker spending.

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demographics in a consistent way, and many fields rely on unstandardized narrative descriptions. As a result, the data likely underrepresent grants to culturally specific organizations, especially smaller or newer groups. It is also important to note that many philanthropic investments in general-purpose or large-scale institutions—such as museums, orchestras, and theaters—serve diverse audiences, including Latino residents, even if those impacts aren’t captured in the data as explicitly Latino-serving. Philanthropy does not always operate with a mandate to fund by demographic group, and broad-access cultural programming may benefit Latino communities in ways this dataset cannot fully reflect. Finally, grant data for 2023 were still being finalized at the time of writing and may not reflect all funding activity for that year. Future studies will be needed to incorporate finalized 2023 data and integrate ongoing trends into this analysis.

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