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INCOME INEQUALITY IN THE U.S. ARTS SECTOR BY GENDER, RACE, AND AGE, 2014–2023

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Abstract

Income in the arts is often discussed through extremes: the "starving artist" at one end and the superstar at the other. This paper studies what the broader distribution of total personal income among arts-sector workers looks like and whether it differs by gender, race, and age. Using 409,879 individual records from the 2014–2023 American Community Survey, obtained through IPUMS USA, we compare weighted means, medians, and income percentiles across demographic groups. The results show a strongly right-skewed distribution. Most arts-sector workers have much lower total personal incomes than the small group at the top. Mean income is higher among men than women and among White workers than Black workers or workers in the Other category; workers aged 22–35 have lower mean income than those in the two older groups. These patterns point to substantial inequality within the arts sector, although the data do not reveal what produces the gaps.

Keywords

Income Inequality; Artists; Gender Income Gap; Racial Income Gap; Age Income Gap

1. Introduction

This paper studies income inequality in the arts sector. Research on superstar markets shows how relatively small differences in talent or appeal can translate into large differences in earnings (Rosen, 1981). These patterns motivate an examination of the broader distribution of total personal income among arts-sector workers.

Exceptional financial success represents only the peak of the profession. This study examines the broader income distribution. We collect annual income data from a sample of artists and examine the inequality among them. We then analyze how income is distributed by gender, age, and racial group to describe demographic differences in income within the field. Artists are grouped along three dimensions: gender (male or female), race (White, Black, or Other), and age (22–35, 36–50, or 51–65). These comparisons describe income differences across demographic groups but do not explain their causes.

The income distributions are strongly right-skewed. Mean income exceeds median income in each subgroup, reflecting the long upper tail. The 99th-percentile income is approximately 1.9 to 2.5 times the 95th-percentile income across the demographic groups. These figures indicate substantial dispersion in the upper tail and show why medians and upper percentiles are useful alongside means when describing total personal income.

The disaggregated results reveal systematic gaps along all three demographic dimensions. By gender, men have mean total personal income about $17,000 higher than women (roughly $60,900 versus $43,900). Male incomes are also more dispersed at the top. The absolute spread between the 95th- and 5th-percentile incomes is smaller among women. By race, White artists report the highest mean (about $53,400) and median ($37,000) as well as the highest observed maximum (a maximum of $1.64 million and a 99th percentile of $378,000). Black artists report the lowest mean (about $44,400) and median ($30,000). The "Other" group falls in between. Black workers and workers in the Other category both have a 99th-percentile income of roughly $280,000.

By age, mean total personal income is higher in the two older groups: the 22–35 group has markedly lower mean income (mean about $42,200, median $33,900) than the 36–50 (about $63,900) and 51–65 (about $63,300) groups, and the 90th-, 95th-, and 99th-percentile incomes and observed maxima increase across the age groups, with the highest values in the oldest group. These descriptive comparisons show income differences by gender, race, and age, but they do not identify the causes of those differences.

Previous research on artists' earnings has approached inequality from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Rosen (1981) explains how superstar markets can turn relatively small differences in talent or appeal into very large differences in earnings. Using 1980 Census data, Filer (1986) finds little support for the idea that artists are universally "starving," based on comparisons with workers with similar training and personal characteristics. Stern (2005) examines six U.S. metropolitan areas between 1980 and 2000, describing the arts as a winner-take-all labor market and finding particularly high within-group income inequality among women and Black artists. The National Endowment for the Arts (2008) broadens this picture by showing that artists are highly educated but earn less than other professional workers and remain less racially diverse than the labor force as a whole. More recent work has focused on the possible sources of these inequalities. Kabanda (2019) connects inequality in the arts to technology, globalization, and the growth of superstar markets, while Zhen (2023) finds high reported levels of gender and racial discrimination among U.S. musicians, though not a clear effect on their music-related earnings.

This paper contributes to the literature by drawing on 409,879 individual records from the 2014–2023 American Community Survey for workers classified as being in the arts sector, updating a literature that has otherwise relied on older or narrower data. Additionally, this paper compares income distributions separately by gender, race, and age within a consistent descriptive framework, allowing the three dimensions to be compared on the same basis.

2. Data

The data for this study come from the American Community Survey (ACS), an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, which describes the ACS as its premier source of detailed information about the nation's people and housing. The survey records a wide range of demographic and economic information, including age, sex, race, education, occupation, employment, and income. We use individual-level public-use records obtained through IPUMS USA, which harmonizes variables to support comparisons across survey years. This is particularly useful because our analysis brings together ten annual survey files. Each observation is a person-level record from one survey year. All calculations use PERWT, the ACS person weight, so that each record contributes to the estimates according to the number of people it represents in the population.

We pool the annual ACS files from 2014 through 2023 and restrict the sample to people working in the arts sector. The resulting sample contains 409,879 observations. Our main income measure is INCTOT, which records a person's total income and includes income from sources other than arts-related work. We compare income by recorded sex, using male and female categories; by race, using White, Black, and Other categories; and by age. Although the full sample covers a wider age range, the age analysis focuses on workers aged 22–65 and divides them into three groups: 22–35, 36–50, and 51–65. We report summary statistics for the full sample and selected income percentiles from the 1st to the 99th percentile for the full sample and demographic subgroups.

3. Results

Figure 1 displays the distribution of total personal income up to approximately $200,000. The bars show income density, with higher density toward the lower end of the displayed range. The distribution has a long right tail. Incomes above the displayed range are not visible; Table 1 reports an observed maximum of $1,640,000. The figure therefore does not display the full income range.

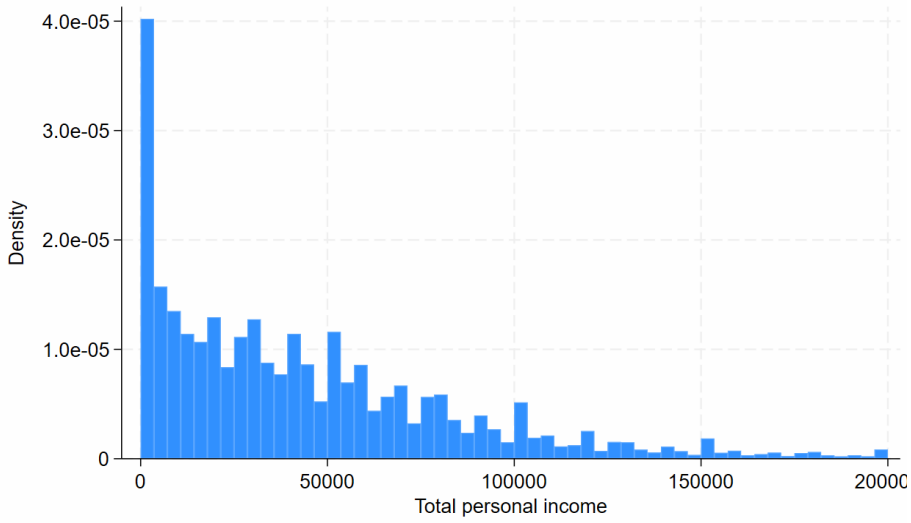

Figure 1: The distribution of total personal income

Table 1 reports summary statistics for the full analytic sample of 409,879 individual records. The sample is roughly evenly split by sex, with a mean of 0.49 on the binary sex indicator. Racially, the sample is predominantly White (79.8%), with 5.3% identifying as Black and 14.9% as Other. Age ranges from 22 to 65, with a mean of 43.7 years and a standard deviation of 16.7 years. Total income averages $52,249, but its standard deviation of $71,098 is larger than the mean itself, indicating substantial dispersion; the income distributions also show pronounced right-skew. Individual incomes in the sample range from $0 to a maximum of $1,640,000.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Stats	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Sex	0.49056	0.49991	0	1	409879
White	0.79796	0.40152	0	1	409879
Black	0.05307	0.22418	0	1	409879
Other	0.14897	0.35606	0	1	409879
Age	43.7424	16.7279	22	65	409879
Total income	52249.1	71098.5	0	1640000	409879

Table 2 reports income percentiles by gender. The reported mean total personal income among men is $60,935.60. The percentile figures, however, show a much wider range, from $600 at the 5th percentile to $425,200 at the 99th percentile, a very large span. This indicates that men's incomes are not consistently concentrated around an "average level"; there are substantial disparities. The increases between the reported percentiles are larger in the upper tail. The 99th-percentile income is approximately 2.5 times the 95th-percentile income, indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail.

Among women, average income is $43,884.32, though the percentile figures again show a very large span, ranging from $0 at the 5th percentile to $282,300 at the 99th percentile. The reported percentiles show substantial dispersion, particularly in the upper tail. The 99th-percentile income is approximately 2.3 times the 95th-percentile income, indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail.

Based on the reported means, women's mean total personal income is approximately $17,051 lower than men's. Using the values in Table 2, the difference between the 95th- and 5th-percentile incomes is smaller among women ($125,000) than among men ($168,390), indicating a smaller absolute spread across these percentiles among women. These descriptive comparisons do not account for differences in occupation, hours worked, or other characteristics.

Table 2: Distribution of Total Personal Income by Gender (USD)

Percentile	Income-All	Income-Male	Income-Female
1%	0	0	0
5%	280	600	0
10%	2000	3000	1200
25%	12000	16601	9600
50%	35700	41000	30000
75%	67000	75000	60000
90%	107000	120000	95000
95%	150000	168990	125000
99%	360000	425200	282300

Table 3 reports income percentiles by race. Among White workers, average income is $53,373.43. However, looking at the percentile numbers, income ranges from $400 at the 5th percentile to $378,000 at the 99th percentile, a very large span. This means the income is not consistently concentrated around an "average level"; there are large gaps within the group. Also, the bottom end is very low: the 1st percentile is $0, showing some people have zero income. For most people, the numbers stay relatively moderate: the median (50th percentile) is $37,000 and the 75th percentile is $69,000. The bigger jump becomes clear after the 90th percentile: from $110,000 ($90^{th}$ percentile) to $150,000 ($95^{th}$ percentile) and $378,000 ($99^{th}$ percentile). The 99th-percentile income ($378,000) is approximately 2.5 times the 95th-percentile income ($150,000), indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. Overall, the disparity is stark: total personal income at the 90th percentile is approximately $110,000, about 55 times the $2,000 at the 10th percentile. The reported observed maximum is $1,640,000.

Among Black workers, average income is $44,419.90, below the mean for White workers. The percentile figures again show a wide range, from $100 at the 5th percentile to $280,000 at the 99th, so the "average" does not represent most people well. The low end is also very low: the 1st percentile is $0. In the middle, the median (50th percentile) is $30,000, and the 75th percentile is $60,000. The big jump is mostly at the top: $95,000 (90th) →

$122,000 (95th) → $280,000 (99th). The 99th-percentile income ($280,000) is approximately 2.3 times the 95th-percentile income ($122,000), indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. Also, the gap between the 10th percentile ($1,400) and the 90th percentile ($95,000) is striking. The reported observed maximum is $1,152,000.

Among workers in the "Other" category, average income is $47,207.41. The percentile figures range from $0 at the 5th percentile to $280,000 at the 99th, a wide range showing incomes are not tightly grouped around the average. The bottom is especially low here: even the 5th percentile is $0, meaning a noticeable portion has no income. In the middle range, the median (50th percentile) is $32,000, and the 75th percentile is $65,000. The 99th-percentile income ($280,000) is approximately 2.0 times the 95th-percentile income ($137,000), indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. Across the distribution, the contrast is sharp: $1,000 at the 10th percentile compared with $100,100 at the 90th percentile. The reported observed maximum is $1,232,000.

Comparing the reported averages, White workers have the highest mean, followed by workers in the Other category, while Black workers have the lowest. Mean income among White workers is approximately $8,954 higher than that among Black workers and $6,166 higher than that among workers in the Other category. Looking at the middle (medians), the pattern is similar: $37,000 (White), $32,000 (Other), and $30,000 (Black). At the 99th percentile, White workers have higher incomes: the 99th percentile is $378,000 for White, but $280,000 for both Black and Other. The maximum values also show White has the most extreme top end: $1,640,000 (White) vs $1,232,000 (Other) vs $1,152,000 (Black). At the bottom, all groups have very low incomes (the 1st percentile is $0 for all), but the 5th percentile differs: $400 (White), $100 (Black), and $0 (Other). Overall, White workers have higher incomes across most percentiles and also have a higher observed maximum; Black and Other are closer to each other, especially at the 99th percentile (both $280,000).

Table 3: Distribution of Total Personal Income by Race (USD)

Percentile	Income-All	Income-White	Income-Black	Income-Other
1%	0	0	0	0
5%	280	400	100	0
10%	2000	2000	1400	1000
25%	12000	13000	10000	10000
50%	35700	37000	30000	32000
75%	67000	69000	60000	65000
90%	107000	110000	95000	100100
95%	150000	150000	122000	137000
99%	360000	378000	280000	280000

Table 4 reports income percentiles by age. For workers aged 22–35, average income is $42,205.33, but the percentile figures show a huge spread, from $320 at the 5th percentile to $200,450 at the 99th. Income is therefore not tightly clustered around this average; substantial differences remain within the group. The bottom is extremely low, with the 1st percentile at $0, meaning some people have zero income. In the middle range, the median (50th percentile) is $33,900, and the 75th percentile is $56,000. The stronger jump appears after the 90th percentile: from $84,000 (90th percentile) to $106,000 (95th percentile) and $200,450 (99th percentile). The 99th-percentile income is approximately 1.9 times the 95th-percentile income, indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. The reported observed maximum is $1,118,000.

For workers aged 36–50, average income rises to $63,870.79, and the percentile spread is even more striking, from $330 at the 5th percentile to $414,000 at the 99th. This suggests the "average" does not describe most people well, since incomes are spread out with large gaps. The bottom is still very low, with the 1st percentile at $0, meaning some people here have zero income as well. In the middle, the median (50th percentile) is $48,000, and the 75th percentile is $81,500. The top-end jump becomes clear after the 90th percentile: from $128,000 (90th percentile) to $175,000 (95th percentile) and $414,000 (99th percentile). The 99th-percentile income is approximately 2.4 times the 95th-percentile income, indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. The reported observed maximum is $1,557,000, exceeding the observed maximum in the younger group.

For workers aged 51–65, average income is $63,333.08. The percentile figures again show a very wide spread, from $660 at the 5th percentile to $433,300 at the 99th. Income is therefore not tightly clustered around this average; large differences remain within the group. The bottom is extremely low, with the 1st percentile at $0, so some people have zero income. In the middle range, the median (50th percentile) is $44,000, and the 75th percentile is $80,000. The higher end becomes much more obvious after the 90th percentile: from $130,000 (90th percentile) to $180,000 (95th percentile) and $433,300 (99th percentile). The 99th-percentile income is approximately 2.4 times the 95th-percentile income, indicating substantial dispersion in the upper tail. The reported observed maximum is $1,640,000.

Comparing the reported averages, the 36–50 group has the highest mean income at $63,870.79, the 51–65 group is very close at $63,333.08, and the 22–35 group is much lower at $42,205.33. Median income is highest in

the 36–50 group: the median is $33,900 for ages 22–35, $48,000 for ages 36–50, and $44,000 for ages 51–65. This suggests median total personal income is highest in the 36–50 group, while the 51–65 group is still higher than the younger group but a bit lower than the 36–50 group. At the top end, the differences get much larger. The 99th percentile is $200,450 for ages 22–35, $414,000 for ages 36–50, and $433,300 for ages 51–65. So the older two groups have about twice the 99th-percentile income of the 22–35 group, and the 51–65 group is slightly higher than the 36–50 group at the very top. The same pattern appears at the 90th and 95th percentiles: $84,000 (90th) and $106,000 (95th) for ages 22–35, $128,000 (90th) and $175,000 (95th) for ages 36–50, and $130,000 (90th) and $180,000 (95th) for ages 51–65. These figures show higher upper-tail incomes in the two older groups. The observed maximum also increases across the age groups: $1,118,000 (22–35), $1,557,000 (36–50), and $1,640,000 (51–65). These are differences between age groups and do not show how individual workers' incomes change over time. At the bottom, all three groups still include people with zero income because the 1st percentile is $0 across all groups. But the 5th percentile is $320 (22–35), $330 (36–50), and $660 (51–65), so the oldest group has a slightly higher 5th-percentile income.

Table 4: Distribution of Total Personal Income by Age (USD)

Percentile	Income-All	Income-Age 22-35	Income-Age 36-50	Income-Age 51-65
1%	0	0	0	0
5%	280	320	330	660
10%	2000	2820	4000	4500
25%	12000	13000	20000	18000
50%	35700	33900	48000	44000
75%	67000	56000	81500	80000
90%	107000	84000	128000	130000
95%	150000	106000	175000	180000
99%	360000	200450	414000	433300

4. Conclusion

Overall, income in the arts sector is very uneven. Median total personal income is substantially lower than mean income, and differences between upper-percentile incomes are large. The group comparisons also show clear differences. Mean total personal income is higher among men than women and among White workers than Black workers; it is lower in the youngest age group than in the two older groups. These results do not mean that every person in one group has a higher total personal income than every person in another group. Instead, they show that some groups tend to be in higher parts of the income distribution.

This study also leaves several important questions unanswered. The ACS is useful for showing the size and location of income gaps, but it offers limited information about the experiences behind them. Professional reputation, access to networks, time devoted to artistic work, family support, discrimination, and interruptions in a person's career may all matter, yet these factors cannot be studied in enough detail with the current data. The ACS files also contain different respondents each year, so we cannot follow the same workers as their careers develop. In addition, INCTOT measures total personal income rather than income from artistic work alone, and the broad Other racial category may hide important differences among the people placed within it. Future research could combine longitudinal or administrative income records with interviews of artists, employers, and arts organizations. This could help connect the patterns found in the data with the personal experiences and institutional practices that may help produce them.

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