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New Research Identifies Most Vibrant Arts Communities

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What factors make up a community's arts vibrancy, and which cities possess them? These are the questions that researchers at Southern Methodist University's National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) recently addressed in the first-ever [Arts Vibrancy Index](#). Now available as a free resource, it ranks more than 900 communities across the country, measuring the level of supply, demand and government support for arts and culture on a per capita basis.

In discussing the index, Dr. Zannie Giraud Voss, director of NCAR and chair and professor of arts management and arts entrepreneurship in SMU's Meadows School of the Arts and Cox School of Business, said: "The numbers are only the start of the story, not the end. Each city in our report is unique in what makes it a vibrant community for the arts. Our intention in developing this report is to stimulate conversation about what makes a city vibrant in the arts and how arts vibrancy varies across cities."

The Arts Vibrancy Index is a set of data-based indices that highlight metropolitan areas whose arts and culture scenes "pulsate with vigor and activity in a variety of ways." The data available in the Arts Vibrancy Index — increasingly sought after by civic and government leaders, funders and stakeholders — sheds light on the critical role arts and cultural organizations play in the communities they serve. The report highlights the top 20 large markets and top 20 medium and small markets with specific details that are bound to spark both debate and discussion.

To determine rankings, NCAR combined data from nonprofit arts and cultural organizations with data on the communities in which they exist. By linking the two, NCAR identified factors that impact the health and sustainability of arts organizations. To offer a complete nationwide picture, NCAR also published rank scores on all data measures for every U.S. county on the [Arts Vibrancy Index Heat Map](#). The Heat Map offers a comprehensive picture of the impact of arts and cultural organizations, as well as funding, in communities nationwide.

Did your city make the list?

Among cities with populations of 1 million or more, the five most vibrant arts communities are:

1. Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV
2. Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin, TN
3. New York-Jersey City-White Plains, NY-NJ
4. Boston, MA
5. San Francisco-Redwood City-South San Francisco, CA

For medium and small cities with populations of less than 1 million, the top five cities are all in the West:

1. Glenwood Springs, CO
2. Santa Fe, NM
3. Jackson, WY-ID
4. Breckenridge, CO
5. Edwards, CO

Building the Arts Vibrancy Index

Before residents of any city raise an outcry that they did not make the list, it is essential to review the data used by NCAR to create the Arts Vibrancy Index. The overall index is composed of three dimensions: supply, demand, and government support. Supply is assessed by the total number of arts providers in the community, including the number of independent artists, arts, culture and entertainment employees, and arts organizations; demand is gauged by the total nonprofit arts dollars in the community, including program revenue, contributed revenue, total expenses, and total compensation; and level of government support is based on state arts dollars and grants and federal arts dollars and grants.

Geographically, the rankings utilize Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), which are delineated geographic areas consisting of one or more counties that have high social and economic integration with an urban core as defined by the Office of Management and Budget. By focusing on MSAs, the index captures the network of suburbs that rise up around a city or town rather than considering them separately.

What cities have cornered the market on arts vibrancy?

Beyond the specific rankings, select key findings in the Arts Vibrancy Index include:

- No region has cornered the market on arts vibrancy. Cities large and small from every region appear in the top 40 cities, although there is high representation from Western communities in the set of Medium-Small cities.
- Arts vibrancy takes many shapes and forms. Some cities have impressive financial resources invested in nonprofit arts and cultural institutions, others are filled with many smaller organizations and venues, some are tourist destinations and still others are artist colonies. Some cities are strong in numerous arts sectors while others are capitals of a particular art form.
- There are interesting differences across very large Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). Those that made the list tend either to have a strong concentration of arts vibrancy in an urban core and less going on in surrounding communities, or they are vibrant throughout the greater metropolitan area, and less so in the city center.
- The majority of arts vibrant cities have a population either less than 300,000 or between 1,000,000 and 3,000,000.

Arts Consulting Group encourages you to review the full version of the report, which is available at no cost. You can also review your city's ranking, as well as those of your neighbor's, on the [Heat Map](#). To learn more about NCAR and explore other free reports and research findings, connect with the Center at smu.edu/artsresearch.



Vice President Margaret Williams is a sales and marketing expert based in ACG's Denver office. Ms. Williams partners with nonprofit cultural institutions, educational organizations and public agencies across North America to optimize earned revenues, improve the efficacy of sales and marketing programs, build audiences and enhance patron loyalty. In addition, she supports arts and cultural organizations with professional interim management services, providing leadership during times of management transition. Ms. Williams' extensive experience includes successful leadership roles with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Omaha Performing Arts Society, Rocky Mountain Arts Association, and Colorado Symphony Orchestra, where she provided expertise in direct marketing, social media, customer service, and optimizing use of technology and branding together to increase earned revenues. Ms. Williams is an Adjunct Professor of Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

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