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Nearly 900 professional artists in B.C.'s Columbia Basin

The region has an above-average concentration of artists in its labour force

Based on custom data that Hill Strategies requested from Statistics Canada's 2021 long-form census, this article examines the demographics, employment characteristics, and incomes of artists in British Columbia's Columbia Basin, as well as summary information about workers in arts leadership occupations and all occupations in the arts, culture, and heritage (a category that includes artists and arts leaders).

The [Columbia Basin](#) is a distinct physical region in southeastern B.C., but its borders are not perfectly aligned with municipal geographies. Thanks to the support of the West Kootenay Regional Arts Council, as much of this region as possible is examined in this article, with some limitations due to the need to define the Basin based on municipal borders (to be consistent with Statistics Canada datasets). In this article, the Columbia Basin comprises all of the Regional District of Central Kootenay, all of the Regional District of East Kootenay, and a portion of the Columbia Shuswap Regional District. Separate data are provided here for the two Regional Districts that are fully contained within the Columbia Basin.



Details of the occupational categories and other notes regarding methods are provided at the end of the article.

Hill Strategies Research retained full editorial control of the content of the article.

Nearly 900 professional artists in B.C.'s Columbia Basin

1 in every 93 workers in the region is an artist

Over 8/10 are self-employed

Almost 2/3 are women

Median personal incomes are 47% lower than other workers

Source: Hill Strategies analysis of 2021 census data, available at statsinsights.ca

Note: The Columbia Basin, in southeastern British Columbia, includes the Regional District of Central Kootenay, the Regional District of East Kootenay, and a portion of the Columbia Shuswap Regional District.

Provincial and national context: Artists, arts leaders, and all cultural workers

There are 39,700 professional artists who reside in B.C., representing 20% of the 202,900 artists in Canada. As a percentage of the overall labour force, artists account for 1.4% in B.C., the highest percentage among the provinces and well above the national average (1.0%). In B.C., one in every 72 workers is an artist, compared with one in every 102 Canadian workers. (Articles related to [B.C. artists](#) and [Canadian artists](#) are available. The Canadian post provides a list of the 10 artist occupation groups.)

56,200 Canadians, including 10,100 British Columbians, work in five occupation groups that are classified as arts leaders. B.C. accounts for 18% of Canada's arts leaders, higher than the province's share of all workers (14%). For more information on the occupation groups included as arts leaders, please see [this Canada-wide article](#). Two of the arts leadership occupations (those including conductors and composers as well as producers, directors, and choreographers) are also included as artists. As such, the number of arts leadership workers should not be added to the number of artists in any jurisdiction.

The broadest analysis relates to the 154,800 British Columbians and 914,000 Canadians who work in [arts, culture, and heritage occupations](#). These workers represent 5.4% of B.C.'s labour force, the highest proportion among the provinces and well above the national average of 4.4%. One in every 18 B.C. workers and every 23 Canadian workers has a cultural occupation. The 52 occupation groups in this category include the 10 artist occupation groups as well as the 5 arts leadership occupation groups, other cultural occupations (e.g., graphic designers, print operators, editors, translators, architects, and professionals in fundraising, advertising, marketing, and public relations), and heritage occupations (e.g., librarians, curators, and archivists).

870 professional artists in the Columbia Basin

There are 870 professional artists in the Columbia Basin, including 570 in the Regional District of Central Kootenay (hereafter “Central Kootenay”) and 250 in the Regional District of East Kootenay (hereafter “East Kootenay”). The other 50 artists in the Columbia Basin live in part of the Columbia Shuswap Regional District, north of Central and East Kootenay.

As a percentage of the regional labour force, artists represent:

- 1.1% of the Columbia Basin’s overall labour force (slightly above the national average of 1.0%)
- 1.7% of the overall labour force in Central Kootenay (above the provincial average of 1.4%)
- 0.7% of the overall labour force in East Kootenay

Examined differently, the artist statistics mean that:

- 1 in every 93 workers in the Columbia Basin is a professional artist
- 1 in every 59 workers in Central Kootenay is a professional artist
- 1 in every 152 workers in East Kootenay is a professional artist

Over 8 in 10 artists in the Columbia Basin are self-employed, a much higher rate than other local workers and a very high level compared with all B.C. artists.

Artists in the Columbia Basin have a very high self-employment rate

Table 1 shows the percentage of artists in each of the three regions with certain demographic characteristics, with comparisons to all workers in each region’s labour force. Some highlights from the table:

- In each region, over 8 in 10 artists are self-employed. The self-employment rate among artists is many times higher than the rate among all regional workers and is higher than the rate among all B.C. artists (72%).
- Artists in each region are much more likely to have at least a bachelor's degree than other local workers.
- Women ([including some transgender and non-binary people](#)) make up nearly two-thirds of artists in all three regions. Women are a much higher percentage of artists in these regions (63% or 64%) than in B.C. as a whole (55%).
- In East Kootenay, artists are more likely to be Indigenous than the overall labour force. In the other two regions, artists are about as likely as the overall labour force to be Indigenous. Indigenous Peoples are a higher percentage of artists in these regions (between 6% and 10%) than in B.C. as a whole (4.5%).

- In East Kootenay, artists tend to be younger than the overall labour force. In the other two regions, artists are about as likely as the overall labour force to be 55 or older.

Table 1: Characteristics of artists in the Columbia Basin, Central Kootenay, and East Kootenay

Characteristics	Columbia Basin		Central Kootenay		East Kootenay	
	Artists	All workers	Artists	All workers	Artists	All workers
Number of workers	870	80,600	570	33,200	250	37,200
Self-employed	86%	19%	87%	23%	84%	16%
Bachelor's degree or higher	38%	22%	37%	22%	37%	20%
Women	64%	47%	63%	48%	63%	47%
With a child at home	39%	36%	41%	35%	43%	37%
Indigenous Peoples	7%	7%	6%	6%	10%	8%
Racialized people	5%	6%	Not reliable	5%	Not reliable	6%
Immigrants	17%	11%	19%	11%	12%	10%
55 years of age or over	28%	27%	32%	30%	18%	27%

Source: 2021 census, custom data request by Hill Strategies.

Women represent almost two-thirds of artists in the Columbia Basin, which is a much higher proportion than other local workers and all artists in B.C.

Professional artists in the Columbia Basin had very low median incomes in 2020

The following statistics and graph relate to median personal income, which includes all sources of income for individuals, such as employment income, net revenue from self-employment, pandemic supports, rental income, investment income, and others.

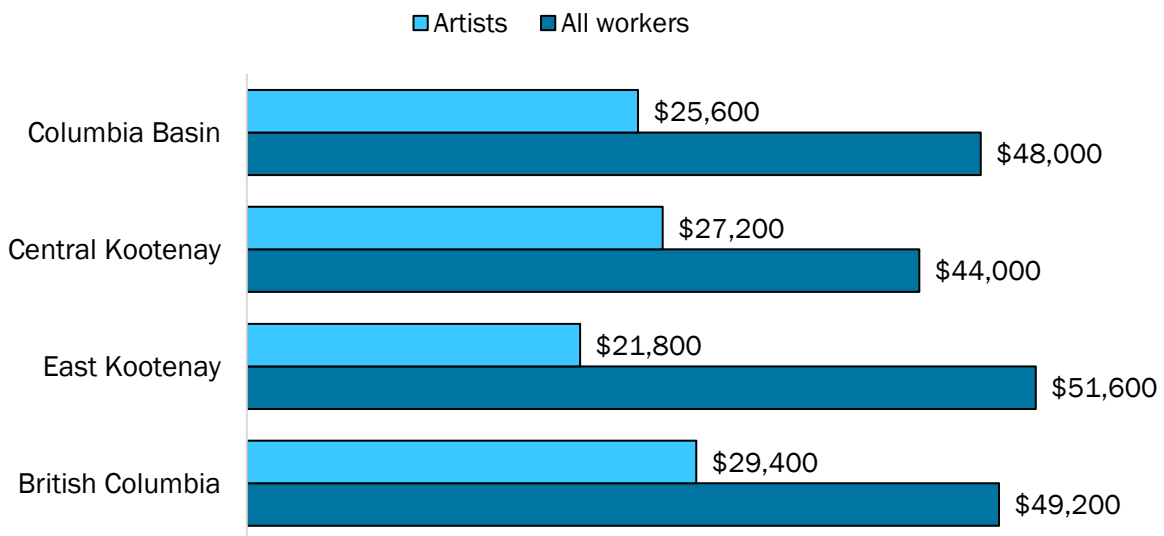
As the graph shows, the median personal income of all artists in the Columbia Basin is \$25,600, which is 47% less than the median of all local workers (\$48,000).

In Central Kootenay, the median personal income of artists is \$27,200, or 38% less than all local workers (\$44,000).

In East Kootenay, artists' median personal incomes are \$21,800, which is 58% less than the median of all local workers (\$51,600).

In comparison, the median personal income of the nearly 40,000 professional artists in all of B.C. is \$29,400, which is 40% less than the median of all workers in the province (\$49,200).

Median personal incomes of professional artists and all workers in the Columbia Basin, Central Kootenay, East Kootenay, and B.C., 2020



Note: Personal incomes include all sources for an individual during the 2020 calendar year.
Source: 2021 census, custom data request by Hill Strategies.

The financial analysis in this article focuses on median incomes, which are believed to provide a better indication of the typical situation of professional artists than the average (i.e., the "mean"), a statistic that is more strongly affected by a few individuals with very high incomes.

It should be kept in mind that the income statistics from the 2021 census relate to the 2020 calendar year, which included many pandemic related lockdowns and significant slowdowns in artistic activity.

Artists in the Columbia Basin make significant financial sacrifices to practise their craft

Table 2 provides two other measurements of the incomes of artists and all workers in the Columbia Basin, Central Kootenay, and East Kootenay. Employment income shows the work-related earnings (including net self-employment income), and household income provides a measure of workers' family situations.

These statistics indicate that the Columbia Basin's artists make significant financial sacrifices to practise their craft, especially in 2020, when the median employment income of artists was roughly one-fifth of the median in overall labour force (shown in the table as -80% or more). This has an impact on artists' median personal income (47% lower than the overall labour force) and on their total household income (25% lower than the overall labour force).

East Kootenay artists have lower employment and personal incomes than artists in Central Kootenay and all artists in the Columbia Basin. (It was shown above that East Kootenay artists also tend to be younger than their counterparts in other areas of the Columbia Basin.) However, East Kootenay artists appear to have significant support from other family members, as their household incomes are higher than those of artists in Central Kootenay and the Columbia Basin.

Table 2: Median and household incomes of artists in the Columbia Basin, Central Kootenay, and East Kootenay

Characteristics	Columbia Basin		Central Kootenay		East Kootenay	
	Artists	All workers	Artists	All workers	Artists	All workers
Median employment income	\$6,800	\$38,000	\$6,900	\$33,600	\$6,300	\$42,000
Difference between artists and all workers	-82%		-80%		-85%	
Median household income	\$86,000	\$115,000	\$78,500	\$103,000	\$92,000	\$124,000
Difference between artists and all workers	-25%		-24%		-26%	

*Note: Income data from the census relate to the 2020 calendar year.
Source: 2021 census, custom data request by Hill Strategies.*

Professional artists by occupation and industry

Across B.C., musicians are the largest artist occupation group. This is not the case in the Columbia Basin, however, where craftspeople are the largest artist occupation. Painters and other visual artists are the second largest artist occupation in the Basin.

Forty people is the threshold of reliability for census counts. With 250 artists divided into 10 occupation groups, the counts by occupation group are not reliable for East Kootenay. In the Columbia Basin and Central Kootenay, there are fewer than 40 residents in four artist occupation groups: actors, comedians & circus performers; conductors, composers & arrangers; dancers; and other performers.

From most to least common in the Columbia Basin as a whole, the occupation groups with at least 40 artists are:

- Artisans & craftspeople: 210 in the Columbia Basin (24% of the region's artists), including 150 in Central Kootenay (27%).
- Painters, sculptors & other visual artists: 150 in the Columbia Basin (17%), including 110 in Central Kootenay (19%).
- Musicians: 140 in the Columbia Basin (16%), including 70 in Central Kootenay (13%).
- Writers: 110 in the Columbia Basin (13%), including 90 in Central Kootenay (16%).
- Photographers: 110 in the Columbia Basin (13%), including 50 in Central Kootenay (9%).
- Producers, directors, choreographers & related occupations: 70 in the Columbia Basin (8%), including 50 in Central Kootenay (8%).

Consistent with the very high self-employment rate of artists in the region, the largest industry sector is arts, entertainment, and recreation, which employs 39% of them. This industry sector includes a category for "independent artists, writers, and performers".

The next-largest industry sectors are educational services (where 15% of Columbia Basin artists are employed) and information and cultural industries (8%).

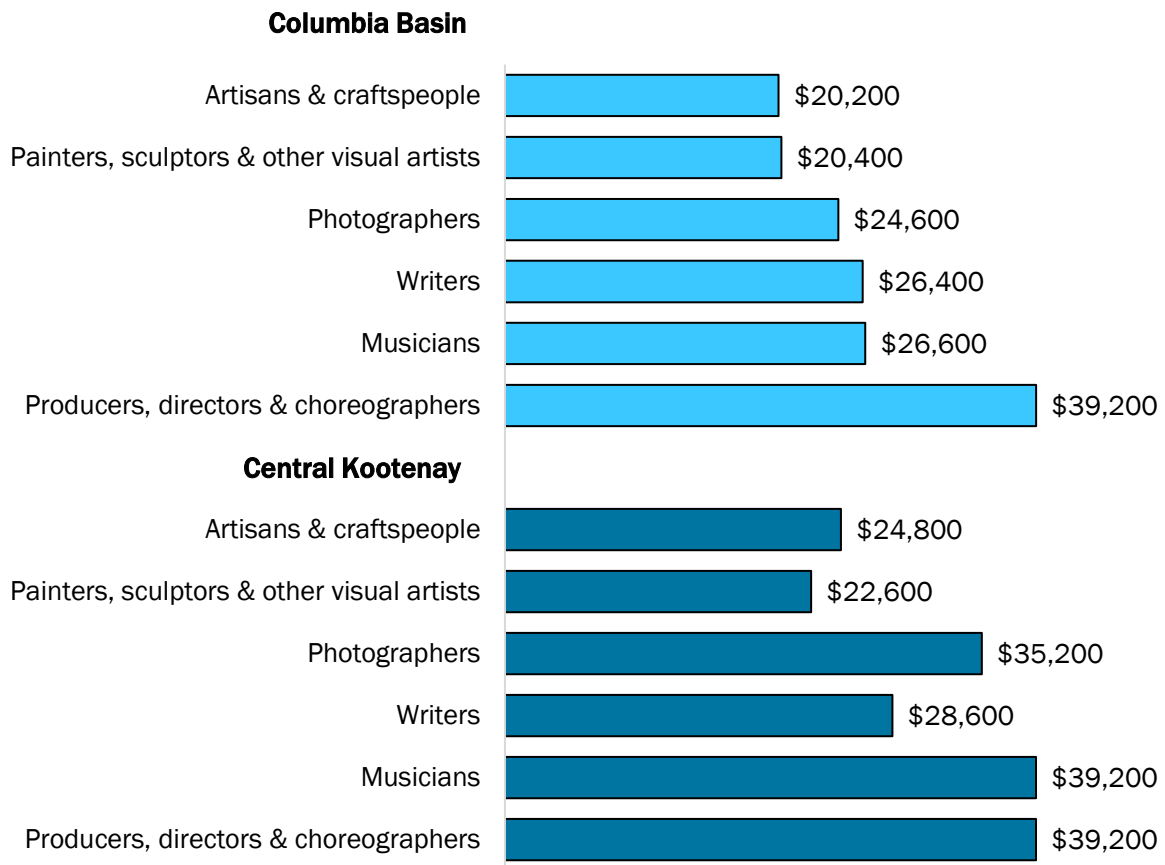
Many Columbia Basin artists work in other sectors of the economy: all other industries (excluding the three largest ones) employ 39% of artists. This very high percentage is related to the region's high proportion of craftspeople, many of whom are classified in industries such as manufacturing and retail trade that are outside of the arts and cultural industries.

In Central Kootenay and East Kootenay, the proportions by industry sector are similar to the overall Columbia Basin, with one exception. East Kootenay artists are somewhat more likely than other artists in the region to be employed in educational services and slightly less likely to be in arts, entertainment, and recreation.

Median personal income by artist occupation group

Two of the most common artist occupation groups in the Columbia Basin – craftspeople and painters – have the lowest median incomes, as shown in the graph below. In general, artists in Central Kootenay tend to have higher median incomes than in the Columbia Basin as a whole. (Readers should keep in mind that artists in Central Kootenay comprise a relatively large proportion of all artists in the Columbia Basin.)

Median personal incomes of professional artists by occupation group in the Columbia Basin and Central Kootenay, 2020



*Note: Personal incomes include all sources for an individual during the 2020 calendar year.
Source: 2021 census, custom data request by Hill Strategies.*

150 arts leaders reside in the Columbia Basin

150 Columbia Basin residents work in the five occupation groups that are classified as arts leaders, including 100 residents of Central Kootenay and 40 residents of East Kootenay.

A breakdown by occupation is not possible, because there are fewer than 40 workers in each of the five occupation groups:

- Library, archive, museum & art gallery managers
- Managers in publishing, motion pictures, broadcasting & performing arts
- Producers, directors, choreographers & related occupations
- Conductors, composers & arrangers
- Conservators & curators

In keeping with their senior positions, arts leaders tend to have relatively high incomes. However, this is not the case in the Columbia Basin. In 2020, a typical arts leader in the Columbia Basin had:

- Employment income of \$27,800, 27% less than all Columbia Basin workers (\$38,000)
- Total personal income of \$32,000, 33% less than all workers in the region (\$48,000)
- Household income of \$99,000, 14% less than all workers in the region (\$115,000)

3,000 cultural workers in the Columbia Basin

There are 3,000 workers in [arts, culture, and heritage occupations](#) in the Columbia Basin, representing 3.7% of the 80,600 people in the regional labour force, below the provincial average (5.4%) but closer to the national average (4.4%). One in every 27 workers in the Columbia Basin has a cultural occupation.

In 2020, a typical cultural worker in the Columbia Basin had:

- Employment income of \$24,200, 36% less than all Columbia Basin workers (\$38,000)
- Total personal income of \$36,800, 23% less than all workers in the region (\$48,000)
- Household income of \$99,000, 14% less than all workers in the region (\$115,000)

Just over 1,500 cultural workers reside in Central Kootenay. Cultural workers account for 4.6% of the 33,200 people in the district's labour force. One in every 22 workers in Central Kootenay has a cultural occupation.

Central Kootenay's cultural workers had the following median income levels in 2020:

- Employment income of \$19,200, 43% less than all workers in Central Kootenay (\$33,600)
- Total personal income of \$32,000, 27% less than all workers in the district (\$44,000)
- Household income of \$95,000, 8% less than all workers in the district (\$103,000)

1,100 residents of East Kootenay work in cultural occupations, representing 2.9% of the 37,100 people in the district's labour force. One in every 35 workers in East Kootenay has a cultural occupation.

The median income levels of cultural workers in East Kootenay were as follows in 2020:

- Employment income of \$29,600, 30% less than all workers in East Kootenay (\$42,000)
- Total personal income of \$42,000, 19% less than all workers in the district (\$51,600)
- Household income of \$101,000, 19% less than all workers in the district (\$124,000)

Notes regarding methods and occupational groupings

The above analysis relates to professional workers, but with a very specific concept of professional. The census data on occupations include people who **worked more hours** as an artist than at any other occupation between May 1 and 8, 2021, **plus** people who were not in the labour force at that time but had **worked more as an artist than at another occupation between January of 2020 and May of 2021**. Part-time artists who spent more time at another occupation in May of 2021 would be classified in the other occupation. (The same would be true of workers in arts leadership occupations and all cultural occupations.)

The occupational perspective counts people who work across the economy, as long as they are classified into one of 10 artist occupation groups, 5 arts leadership occupation groups, or 52 cultural occupation groups. Details about [the occupation groups included in each of the categories](#) is available in a recent article, which also outlined the [methods behind choosing the 52 cultural occupation groups](#). Another article highlighted some [strengths and limitations of the census for counting artists and cultural workers](#).

To ensure confidentiality and data reliability, no estimates of fewer than 40 people are presented in this article.

The [challenging context of the pandemic in the spring of 2021](#) is important to keep in mind when interpreting census data on artists, which were collected in May of 2021. Income data from the census relate to the 2020 calendar year.