

Starving artists? That's not far from the mark

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Earnings by most Canadian artists are hovering at poverty levels and the situation is likely to worsen as the worldwide recession deepens, according to a statistical profile of the country's artists released yesterday.

The findings of the 43-page study, prepared by Hill Strategies Research of Hamilton for Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, are derived from the 2006 census. It identified 140,000 Canadians as artists – defined as those who spent most of their working time in nine occupational categories, including actors, dancers, authors/writers, visual artists and producers/directors/choreographers.

The study reports that artists over all are working for near-poverty-level wages, with an average annual earnings in calendar year 2005 of just \$22,731, compared with \$36,301 for all Canadian workers – a 37-per-cent wage chasm.

In fact, of the 140,000 artists analyzed, 43 per cent earned less than \$10,000, whereas in the overall labour force that percentage was 25 per cent. The study notes that the \$22,700 average is only 9 per cent higher than the \$20,800 that Statistics Canada has identified as the "low-income cutoff" for a single person living in a city with 500,000 people or more.

What makes the situation even more distressing is that artist earnings have been decreasing since 1990 – a decline likely to intensify over the next two years. While average earnings for the overall labour force rose by almost 10 per cent from 1990 to 2005, artists experienced a slide of 11 per cent – to \$22,731 from \$25,433 – at the same time as the cultural-sector work force tripled in size. Actors experienced the sharpest decline in average earnings among artists, dropping 34 per cent to about \$18,000 in 2005.

According to the Hill study, the poorest-paid Canadian artist category is that of female visual artist, with average earnings in 2005 of \$11,421, closely followed by female artisan/craftsperson (\$12,307), female musician/singer (\$12,449), and female dancer (\$12,502).

Indeed, while there are more female artists than males (74,000 versus 66,000) in the country, female artists over all earn much less than their male counterparts: In 2005, a female artist earned on average \$19,175, a male \$26,714 – a span of close to 30 per cent.

If there is a “labour aristocracy” among artists, it's those 22,370 individuals who identified themselves as “producers/directors/choreographers” in the 2006 census. Males in that category averaged earnings of just under \$45,000 while females received \$42,000. Francophone artists in Quebec over all are better remunerated than their anglophone equivalents, but not significantly better: According to the survey, they earned an average of \$24,520 in 2005, a gap of about 7 per cent.

Other highlights:

Artists are aging along with the rest of the labour force: In 2006, 61,000 artists – 43 per cent of the total analyzed – were 45 years of age and older. This was a 121-per-cent increase in that category from the early 1990s.

Aboriginal artists are especially poor earners – just \$15,900 on average, 30-per-cent lower than the average for all artists.

Forty-two per cent of the artists analyzed described themselves as self-employed, compared with 7 per cent for the economy as a whole.

Unsurprisingly, given the low earnings from their art, Canadian artists rely on part-time work to get by: In 2005, 42 per cent of artists said they took part-time jobs, compared with 22 per cent for the overall labour force.

While artists earn much less than the overall labour force and outnumber the workers directly employed by the Canadian automotive sector (140,000 versus 135,000), they're better educated than most Canadians. The Hill study reports that 39 per cent of all Canadian artists have at least a university degree at the bachelor's level, whereas for the overall labour force the percentage is 21.

The full report can be found at www.HillStrategies.com.