

## **The Social and Economic Impact of the Arts on Philadelphia**

We have long recognized that the arts and culture are important influences on the quality of life in American cities, but it is only in recent years that social researchers have begun to document the breadth and magnitude of their impact. Current research—much of it done on the Philadelphia metropolitan area—provides a convincing case that investments in the arts and culture can influence youth development, the vitality of the regional and neighborhood economies, and significantly improve the quality of community life.

### **Youth development and the arts**

Philadelphia's youth have been facing declining opportunities for exposure to the arts. A study commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts in 1997 found that few public schools provide the full range of cultural opportunities. Specifically, the study found that in 1996:

- 29 percent of public schools in the city offered no visual arts classes;
- 17 percent of public schools offered no vocal music; and
- 91 percent of public schools offered no instrumental music classes.

At the same time, although more than two hundred nonprofit cultural organizations provided arts opportunities for children and youth, as a whole these organizations could offer courses to *less than ten percent* of the children living in their immediate neighborhood.

There is considerable research pointing to the significant contribution that cultural opportunities make to children's social and cognitive development. According to educational researchers Shirley Brice Heath and Elisabeth Soep: "In effective youth organizations . . . the arts promote cognitive, linguistic, socio-relational, and managerial capacities." Compared to a national sample of teenagers, young people in arts programs, studied by Heath and Soep, are:

- 25 percent more likely to report feeling satisfied with themselves;
- twice as likely to win an award for academic achievement; and
- 31 percent more likely to say that they plan to continue education after high school.

Yet, the direct effect of cultural training on individual children is just part of the contribution of the arts and culture to youth development. Cultural engagement makes a significant contribution to the *social environment* within which children are raised and develop. In Philadelphia, neighborhoods with many cultural organizations are more likely to have higher numbers of other social and community organizations as well. The high rate of community participation stimulated by these organizations provides a safety net that offers material and emotional support to the neighborhood's children.

Empowered neighborhoods provide the environment for the rearing of empowered young people. Recent findings by Harvard public health researcher Felton Earls and his

collaborators have focused on what they call “collective efficacy”—the willingness of neighborhood residents to enforce behavior norms in their local community. The trust and commitment that flows from community involvement lead to this sense of efficacy, even in neighborhoods in which poverty and unemployment are common. What is more, Earls and his collaborators have found that “collective efficacy” improves kids’ chances for growing up healthy and safe. For example, Earls and his colleagues discovered that collective efficacy affected the level of violence and other forms of social disorder in Chicago’s neighborhoods.

We have at least some reason to believe that cultural engagement contributes to this sense of collective efficacy in Philadelphia. Based on a preliminary analysis, the rate of regional cultural participation in the city’s neighborhoods is a significant predictor of the rate of out-of-home placements for delinquent behavior. That is, in low-income areas of the city, higher cultural participation predicts lower juvenile delinquency. By stimulating a sense of commitment to one’s neighborhood, cultural engagement strengthens the web of concern and resources that support young people and prevent violence.

Young people are often “defined” as problems in neighborhoods. It is easy for youth to be identified with delinquency, drugs and alcohol, truancy, and vandalism. Yet, young people are also an invaluable asset to our neighborhoods. They bring imagination, vitality, and limitless energy to whatever tasks they set for themselves. When young people are engaged in youth-focused cultural programs, they realize their own potential and make an invaluable contribution to the communities in which they live.

### **Culture as economic stimulus**

There is a clear and substantial economic impact of the arts and culture. In its 1998 study of this impact on Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Economy League (PEL) reported that the region’s nonprofit cultural sector is a \$300 million industry that directly employs more than 5,500 full- and part-time workers. PEL estimated that the industry further supports:

- \$564 million in spending,
- more than 11,000 jobs, and
- more than \$16 million in state and local tax revenue.

Yet, these direct effects of the arts and culture are only a fraction of the real importance of the culture industry to the region’s economy. Not only do the arts stimulate investment and consumption, they provide the Philadelphia region with a valuable “competitive edge.” The culture industry, according to PEL, helps define the region’s image of quality and creativity. On a more concrete level, local culture helps employers recruit and retain valuable employees and contributes to the expansion of cultural tourism. In short, the “economic” impact of the arts is more than just jobs and dollars; the arts create a *social* environment in which economic expansion and regional leadership are more likely.

The recognition of the role of the arts and culture to regional competitiveness provided a major rationale for the state's and city's investment in the Avenue of the Arts development on South Broad Street. Yet, this commitment to the Avenue of the Arts has led some to argue that investment in the arts ignored the city's neighborhoods. We have come to realize, however, that the Center City and neighborhood cultural scenes are part of a cultural "ecosystem" that includes large and small organizations, for profit and nonprofit cultural firms, and individual artists.

Neighborhoods with an active cultural scene are also the homes for the regional cultural audience. For example, in a 1994 paper, the University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) found that the presence of smaller cultural organizations in the city's neighborhoods was a strong predictor of the residents' level of regional cultural participation. In a 2000 paper, SIAP discovered that this same relationship of neighborhood cultural organizations and regional participation was present not only in Philadelphia, but in Atlanta, San Francisco, and Chicago as well.

The reasons for this *interdependence of regional and neighborhood cultural providers* are clear enough. On the one hand, neighborhood cultural providers stimulate cultural participation. Attendance at neighborhood festivals, community theaters, and informal cultural events makes it more likely that individuals and families will attend more established cultural venues. At the same time, by providing employment to local musicians and artists, the neighborhood cultural scene helps develop a base of skilled cultural workers upon which the larger and regional cultural organizations depend.

SIAP has discovered as well that community cultural providers provide a needed lift to the city's neighborhoods. Between 1980 and 1990, neighborhoods with many cultural organizations were *three times more likely* to undergo economic revitalization than other neighborhoods in the city. Specifically, the study found that:

- sections of the city with a strong arts presence had greater population growth and a more rapid decline in poverty during the 1980s than other sections of the city; and
- community cultural providers are strategically located to serve as facilitators of community economic revitalization.

### **Bridging the city's divides**

How do cultural programs stimulate revitalization? In contrast to other forms of civic engagement, cultural participation builds bridges across the city's ethnic and class divides. According to SIAP, approximately 80 percent of community cultural participants travel outside of their own neighborhood to attend cultural events. Adults from Chestnut Hill or the mainline might take classes at the Fleisher Art Memorial; teenagers from all over the city might take a graphics design class at the Brandywine Workshop. Outstanding cultural programs like Taller Puertorriqueno and the Asian Arts Initiative attract audiences and students from their immediate neighborhoods, but they also have a regional reach that pulls participants from other parts of the metropolitan

area. This combination of a strong local presence and a regional profile is a unique contribution of arts and cultural organizations to the region's quality of life.

### **Social diversity and the arts**

One reason why the arts and culture serve this important bridging function is because they tend to make the city's diverse neighborhoods their home.

The historical legacy of ethnic and class segregation continue to pose an immense challenge to those who wish to pull Philadelphia into the 21st century. Even today, it is easy to miss how many of Philadelphia's neighborhoods are ethnically and economically diverse. Thirty percent of the city's population live in economically or ethnically diverse sections of the city, but nearly forty percent of the city's cultural providers are located in these diverse neighborhoods. Organizations like the Community Education Center in West Philadelphia and Sedgwick Cultural Center in Mount Airy make a contribution not only to the social life of their neighborhood. They reinforce the stability of diverse neighborhoods.

### **Improving the quality of life for all Philadelphians**

The arts are simultaneously local and regional. Cultural providers are important social institutions in their neighborhoods. They provide classes and after-school opportunities for children and teens. They sponsor street festivals. They are visible symbols of a neighborhood's vitality and dynamism. This is the reason why residents who are active in cultural organizations are twice as likely as other residents to classify the quality of life in their neighborhood as "excellent."

Yet, the ripple effects of cultural organizations improve the lives of residents who have never taken a class or attended a performance. This contribution is evident in the improved economic circumstances of their neighborhoods. It appears in the sense of community engagement and efficacy that cultural participation stimulates. The stable diverse neighborhoods that are redefining the meaning of community in the city provide further evidence of the benefits of the arts and culture to all Philadelphians. The contributions of Philadelphia's arts and cultural sector to youth development, regional and neighborhood economic revitalization, and the quality of community life provide ample reason for public support of its work.