

August 2026

# Collective Funding with Intention

Lessons from America's Cultural Treasures  
Regional Grantmaking Initiative

**SMU DataArts**

Ted Russell Consulting, LLC

# Authors & Key Contributors

## Researchers & Authors

**Dr. Jennifer Benoit-Bryan**, SMU DataArts

**Daniel Fonner**, SMU DataArts

**Monica Lewis**, SMU DataArts

**Ted Russell**, Ted Russell Consulting, LLC

## Report Design

**Monica Lewis**, SMU DataArts

## Steering Committee

**Sixto Wagan**, BIPOC Arts Network and Fund\*

**Bao-Long Chu**, Houston Endowment

**DeAnna Cummings**, McKnight Foundation

**Mia Khimm**, Joyce Foundation

**Giles Li**, Barr Foundation

**Stephania Ramirez**, Perenchio Foundation

**Kristin Sakoda**, Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture

*\*Sixto Wagan also served as project manager*

**SMU DataArts**

Ted Russell Consulting, LLC



# Contents

Contextual Factors for this Historic Investment  
Study Framework & Methodologies

The Starting Point for the Regional Initiatives

Evidence of Change and Impact

Unfolding the Process, its Milestones, and  
Adaptations

Call to Action: Activating This Knowledge for  
Ongoing Work and Future Investments

# National Crises in 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious threat to the survival of nonprofit organizations and arts institutions across the country as public health priorities necessitated the closure of many organizations in early 2020. In addition, after the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, there was a heightened demand for racial justice and systemic reforms in the cultural sector and beyond.

These crises rocked the cultural sector, and the survivability of nonprofit organizations was at risk on a significant scale. This was especially true for arts and cultural organizations led by and serving communities of color.



# America's Cultural Treasures Initiative

In response, the Ford Foundation launched a two-pronged initiative - national first, and then regional- to address these crises.

ACT was designed to recognize and honor the diversity of artistic expression and excellence in America and to provide critical funding to organizations that have made a significant impact on the American cultural landscape, despite historically limited resources.

# Regional Cultural Treasures Overview

In this regional Treasures initiative, a wide range of foundations were invited to develop a customized regional approach aligned with the national grantmaking initiative.

The scope and recipients were determined largely independently by local foundations in each region.

Regional Cultural Treasures was launched across nine regions, with more than 40 funders and philanthropies, and distributing more than \$276 million to support Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American-led and serving arts organizations.

# Regional Cultural Treasures Map

[BIPOC Arts Network and Fund in Houston](#)

[Chicago's Cultural Treasures](#)

[First Americans Cultural Treasures with First Nations](#)

[Los Angeles Arts Recovery Fund\\*](#)

[Minnesota Cultural Treasures](#)

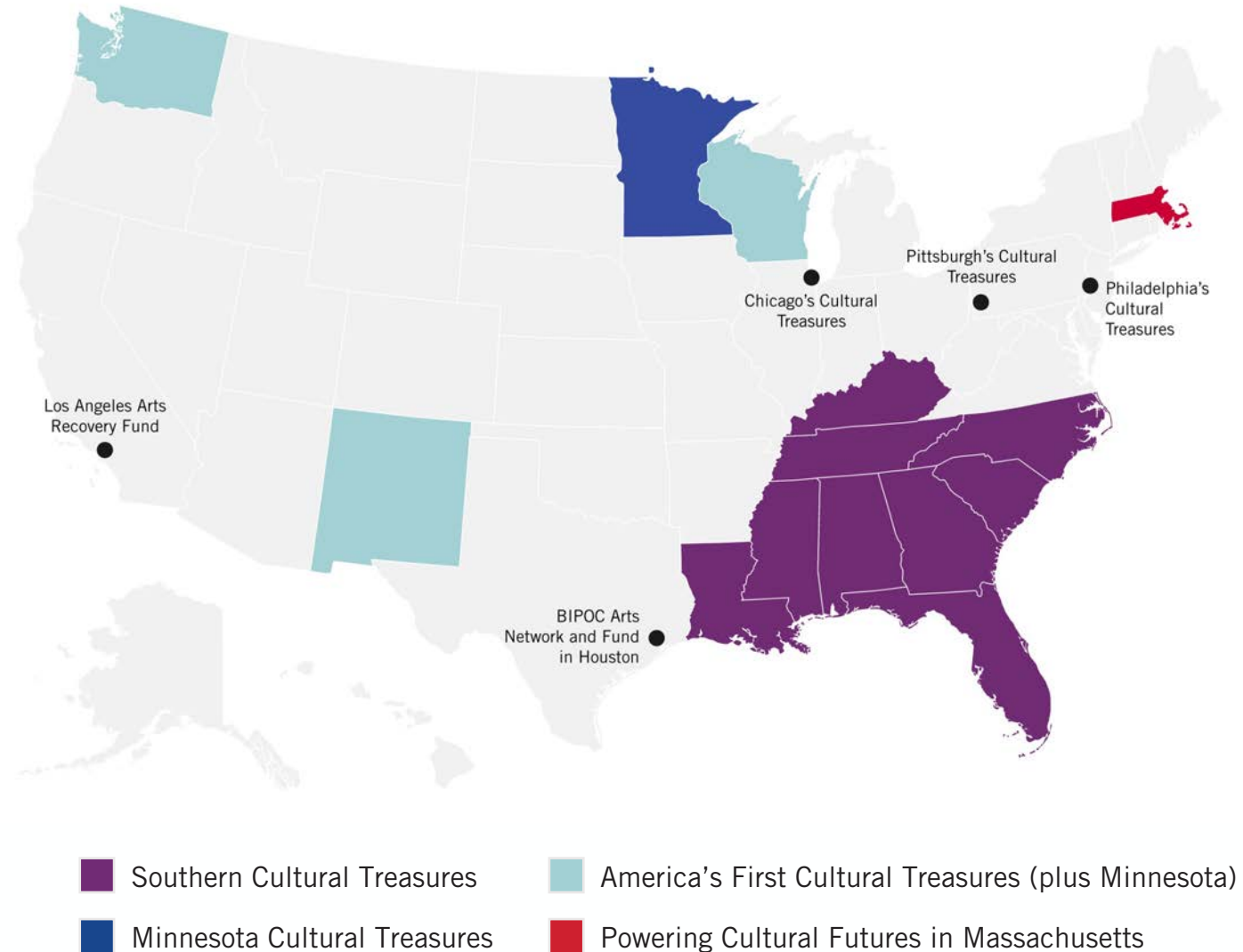
[Philadelphia's Cultural Treasures](#)

[Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures](#)

[Powering Cultural Futures in Massachusetts](#)

[Southern Cultural Treasures with South Arts](#)

\*Regional program included all of Los Angeles County



# The Purpose of This Study

The emergency nature of this funding initiative – spurred by the crisis of the pandemic –enabled funders to work outside typical partners and practices. Learnings from this research could make the next crisis response and/or funding collaborative more effective.

We hope funders will take away tested strategies to advocate for sustained philanthropic investment in BIPOC-led arts organizations in their regions.



Image courtesy of Heard Museum, Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market, Phoenix, AZ (2019).

# Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis included four main threads of exploration:

- Descriptive analysis of the population diversity across regions and of each cohort of grantees
- Comparative analysis over time of BIPOC majority vs. White majority zip codes for each region, and Longitudinal quantitative analysis
- **Comparative analysis over time of total revenues for ACT grantees compared to all cultural nonprofits within each region**
- National contextualization of total revenue (dollars and % change) over time, flowing to BIPOC-mission focused vs. General-mission focused cultural organizations



# Qualitative Insights

Qualitative methods provided the majority of the insights and included three key stages:

- Document Gathering & Preliminary Review
  - Collect program documents
  - Review & inventory documents to share discussion guide and questions
- Stakeholder Insight Sessions
  - 75-minute virtual sessions with regional funding partners and intermediaries
  - Invitation list determined by the lead funder in each region and varied from 2-9 people per region
- Additional Document Collection post Virtual Session & Synthesis

---

# Rewinding to the Starting Point



Image courtesy of The Other Theatre Company, Chicago, IL. Photo by Carin Silkaitis.

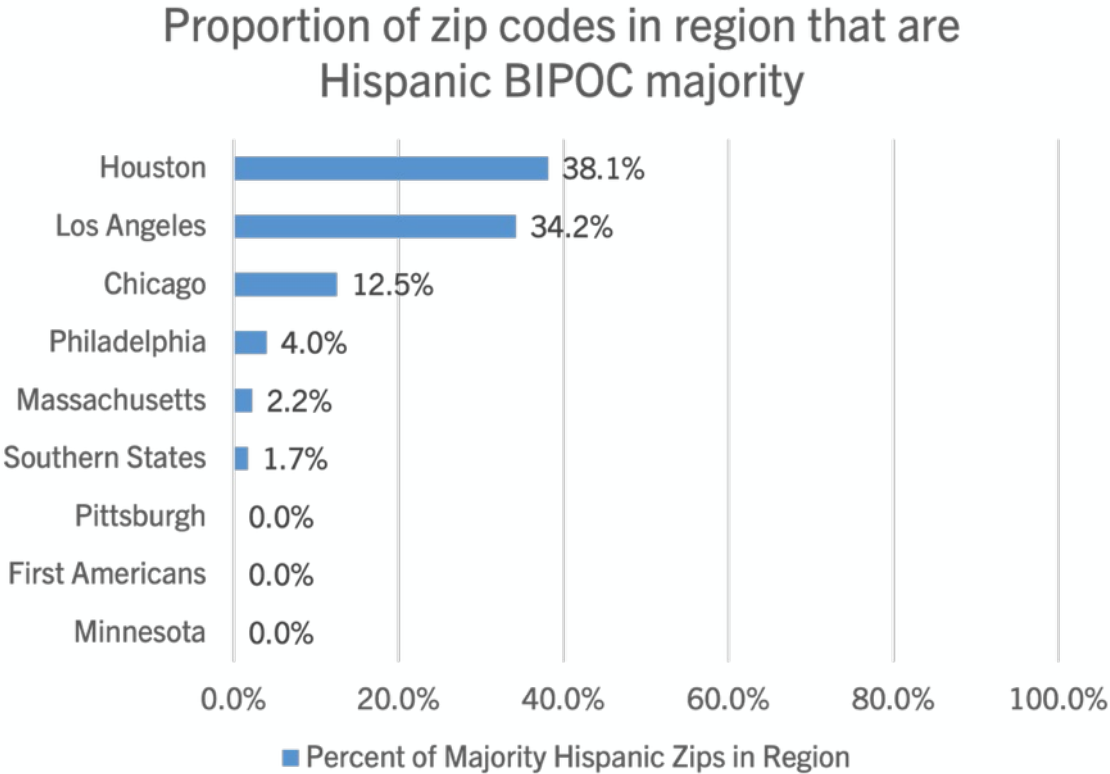
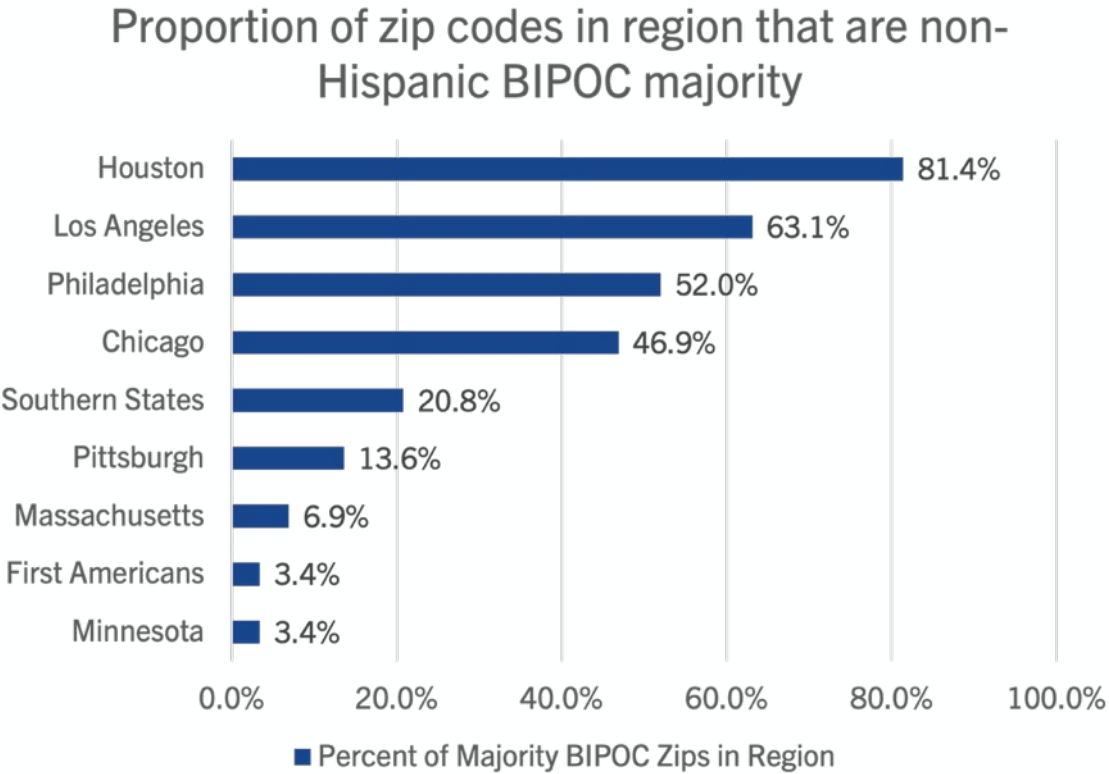
# Historic Disinvestment

In 2019, arts organizations in BIPOC-majority zip codes were receiving less median foundation funding than those in White majority zips in four of the five ACT cities.

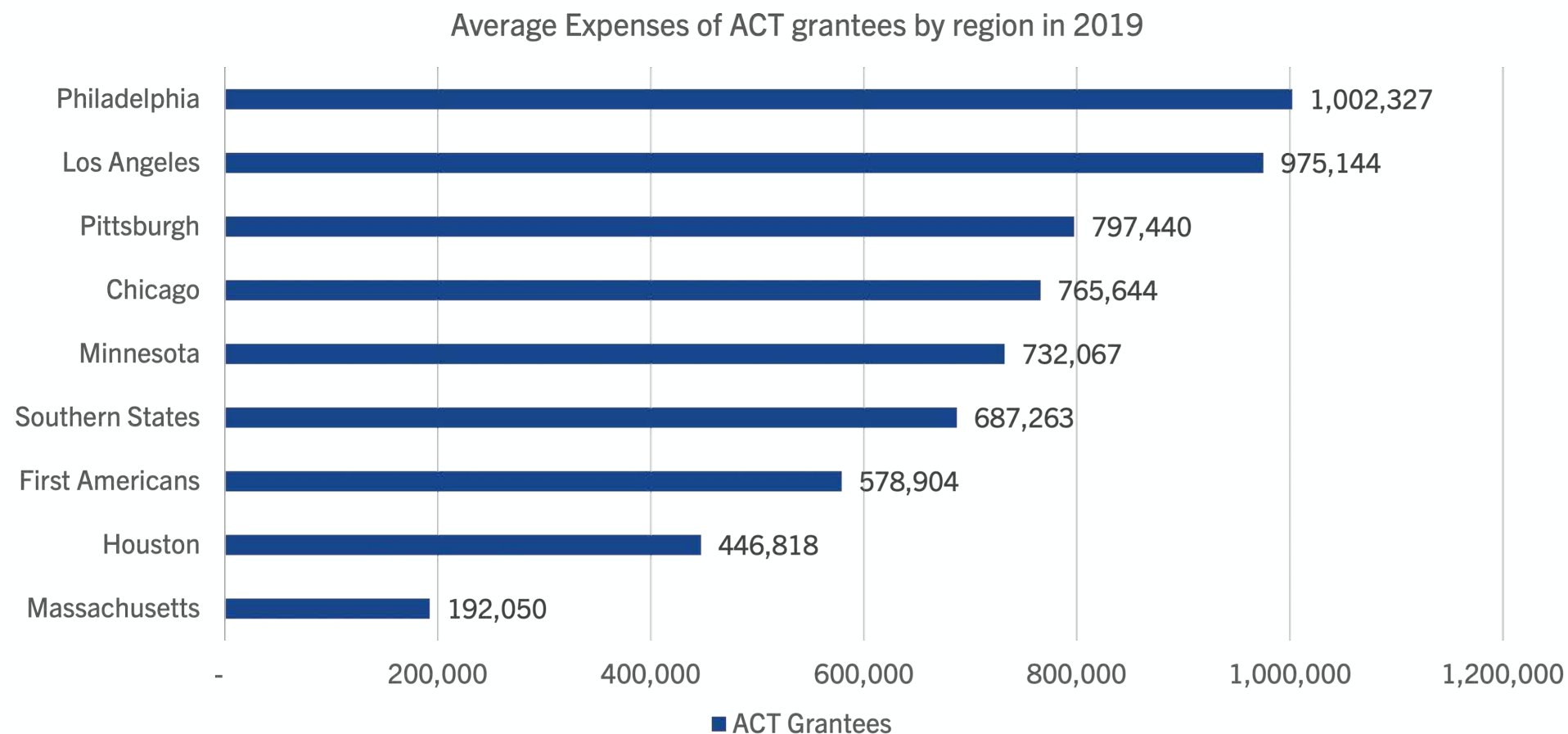
Median levels of funding to arts orgs in BIPOC-majority zips were lower in four out of five cities:

- Chicago: 24% lower
- Houston: 21% lower
- Pittsburgh: 16% lower
- Philadelphia: 5% lower
- Los Angeles: 96% higher

**NOTABLE DIVERSITY:** The nine ACT regions reflect a wide range of levels of racial and ethnic diversity that enable insights on implementation across contexts.



**SIZE VARIATION:** Regions also varied substantially with respect to the average budget size of grantees from less than \$200k to more than \$1 million.



---

# Intentional Intervention

Image of Silambam Houston, Houston, Texas. Courtesy of BIOC Arts Network and Fund.

## **Funders viewed ACT investments as critical to the survival of grantees through five main mechanisms for impact.**

**Cross Organizational Connection:** Building ecosystems of support among the network's BIPOC-led treasures so that no group works in isolation. This allows amplifying each other's work through joint programming, shared communications, and coordinated outreach, exchanging resources, and the opportunity to increase collective visibility and advocacy.

**Self Determination:** The ability to define, shape, and sustain their missions, practices, and measures of success based on their own cultural values, community priorities, and visions for the future.

**Internal Validation:** The recognition, affirmation, and valuing of their cultural practices, histories, and contributions by the community they serve and represent.

## Funders viewed ACT investments as critical to the survival of grantees through five main mechanisms for impact. (con't)

**External Validation:** Affirmation from beyond the community often relates to access and opportunity. It includes recognition, legitimacy, and support from institutions, stakeholders, or audiences outside their immediate cultural group—such as funders, policymakers, mainstream cultural institutions, media, or the broader public.

**Capacity Building:** The process of enhancing skills, structures, relationships, and resources that allow organizations to maintain their missions, increase impact, and succeed on their own terms. It emphasizes not just technical or financial growth but also the development of culturally rooted, community-focused support systems.



## REFLECTIONS FROM REGIONAL FUNDERS

"We wanted to recognize that we're building [this initiative] from the lived experiences of our arts leaders and workers. Yes, we're scaffolding and learning [as we go]. Now we have the data, the language, the histories to say 'We know this now'. [Treasures] have some space to dream."

---

"[This initiative] is helping to shift philanthropy from an outcomes-based model ... It was exciting for organizations and organizational leaders to see themselves as more vision/mission driven instead of product-oriented."

**This initiative, at a time of crisis, opened new pathways for funding partnerships and practice in many regions, and funders invested in trusted relationships where they existed.**

**New grantmaking partners vs. trusted relationships:** The path to the funding partnership in many regions included forging new relationships across funders without a history of collaboration. In other regions, existing partnerships were scaled up between funders, building on positive relationships.

**New grantees vs. scaling resources to existing grantees:** The regional ACT initiative significantly broadened the set of grantee organizations touched by many funders across the regions. In some regions, ACT funds reinforced and strengthened support to existing grantees.

**Reducing barriers and creating space for self-determination:** Most regional funders explored options to reduce barriers for grantees, such as reducing application length or complexity, eliminating or cutting interim and final reporting requirements, or making it easier to access professional development resources. In some regions, self-determination was also centered in new ways around determining grant goals, success metrics, kinds of professional development support needed, and who provides that support.



## REFLECTIONS FROM REGIONAL FUNDERS

"Our partnerships with our Cultural Treasures existed before COVID-19. The number one goal as a team is to maintain trust and customer service. We felt like the more they trust us, the more the cultural treasures would learn, and the more we would learn.

[We] made it known – we are ok with failure. We are risk takers. We understand that to succeed, you have to be able to fail – and to tell us something didn't work or that failed."

---

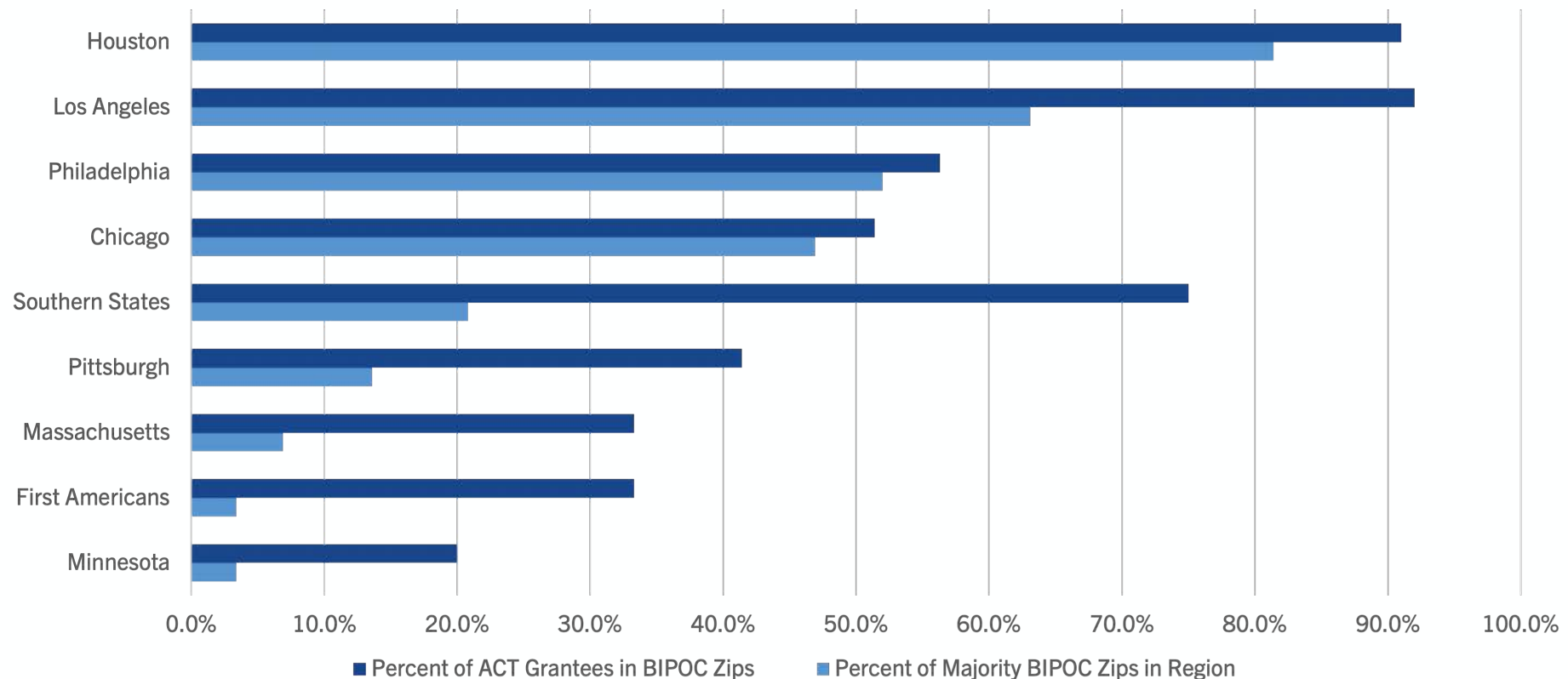
# Evidence of change

Image courtesy of Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL (2014).

## ACTIVE INVESTMENT: ACT funding flowed at greater rates into organizations located in BIPOC-majority zip codes in every region.

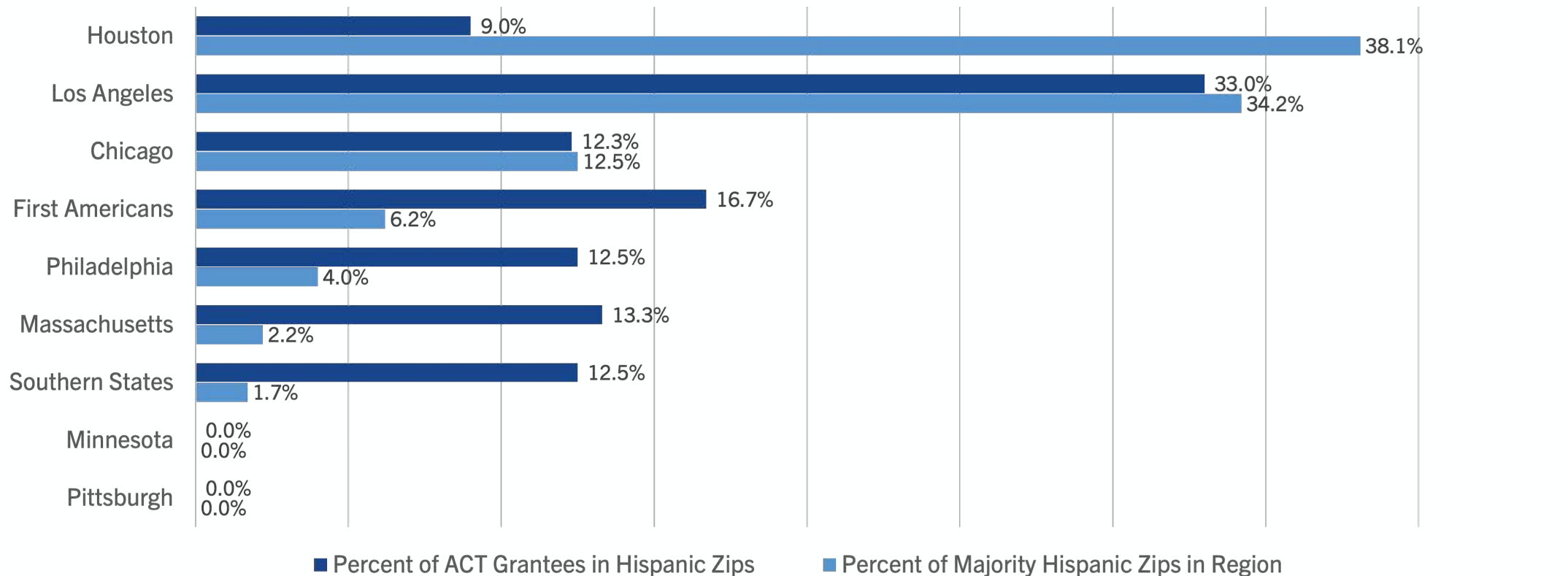
\*ACT Grantee zip codes were determined using the primary address for each organization in the IRS Business Master File

Comparing the proportion of ACT funding given in non-Hispanic BIPOC majority zip codes to their prevalence in each region



**ACTIVE INVESTMENT:** For Massachusetts, Philadelphia, the Southern States, and the First Americans regions ACT awards were awarded at higher rates to organizations in Hispanic-majority zip.

Comparing the proportion of ACT funding given in Hispanic majority zip to their prevalence in each region



# NEIGHBORHOOD FUNDING SHIFTS:

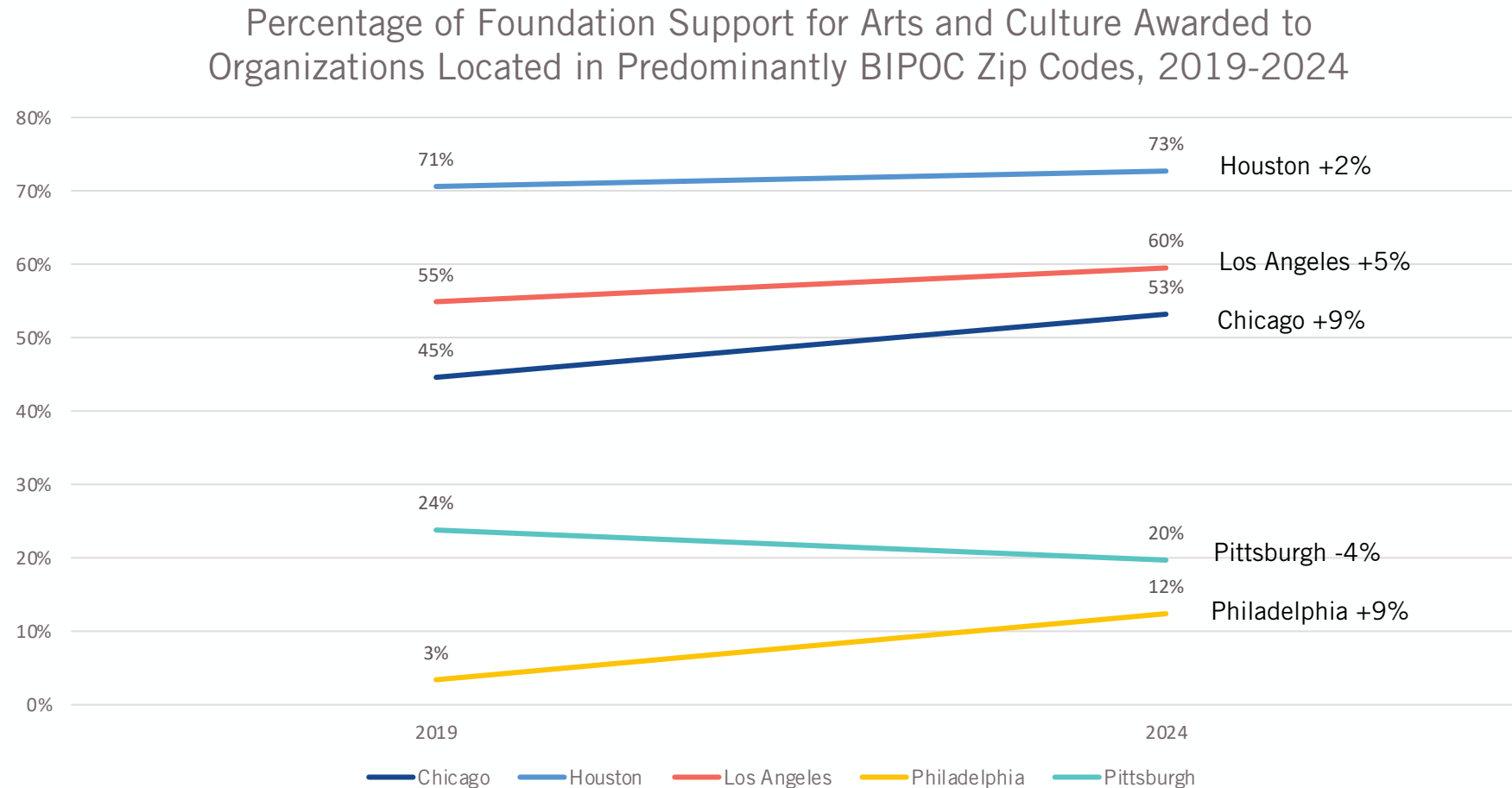
By 2022, arts organizations in BIPOC-majority zip codes were receiving more median foundation funding than those in White majority zip codes in 4 of 5 cities.

In 2022, funding to arts orgs in BIPOC-majority zip codes was higher in four out of five cities:

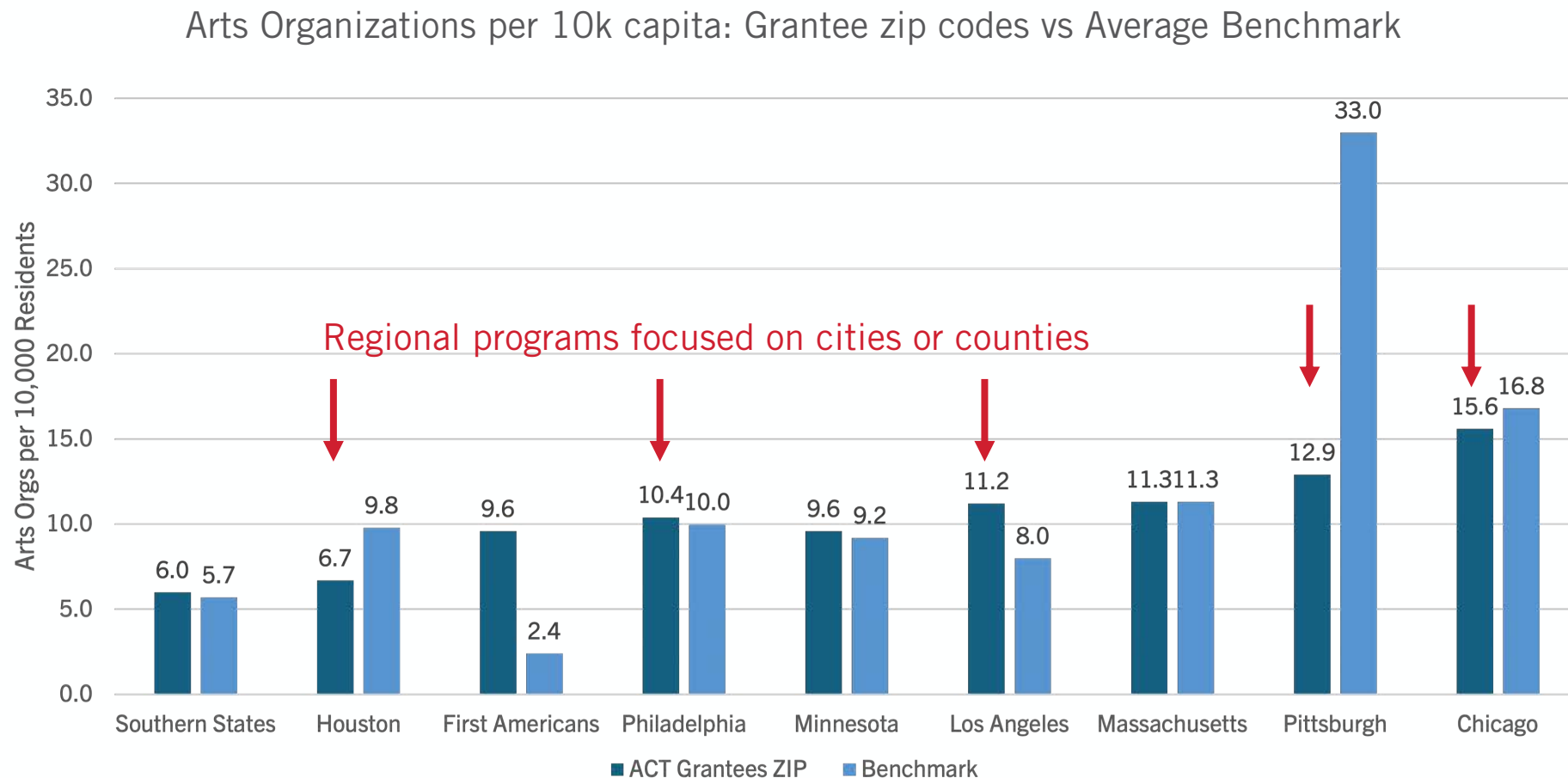
- Chicago: 24% **lower** → 60% **higher**
- Houston: 21% **lower** → 45% **lower\***
- Pittsburgh: 16% **lower** → 289% **higher**
- Philadelphia: 5% **lower** → 17% **higher**
- Los Angeles: 96% **higher** → 3% **higher**

Data from 2022 is used as most of the regional funds were disbursed in that year. Houston's ACT funding disbursement began in 2023.

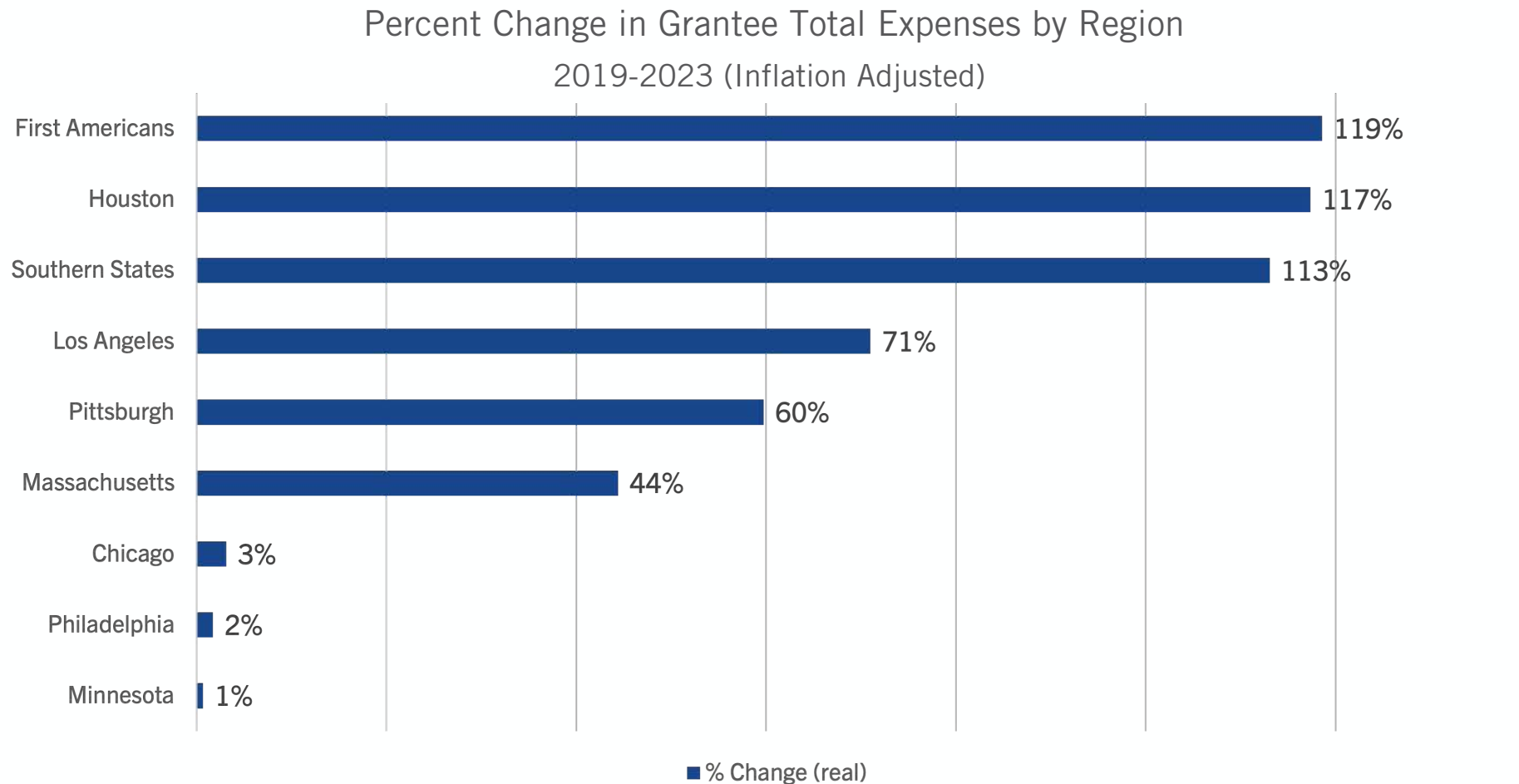
**ACTIVE INVESTMENT:** Extending the time horizon to 2024, the proportion of all foundation dollars supporting arts organizations in BIPOC majority zip codes has increased in four of the five cities.



**IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESS:** Looking specifically at programs in cities, funds went to zip codes with fewer arts resources than the city average in 4 of the 5 regions.

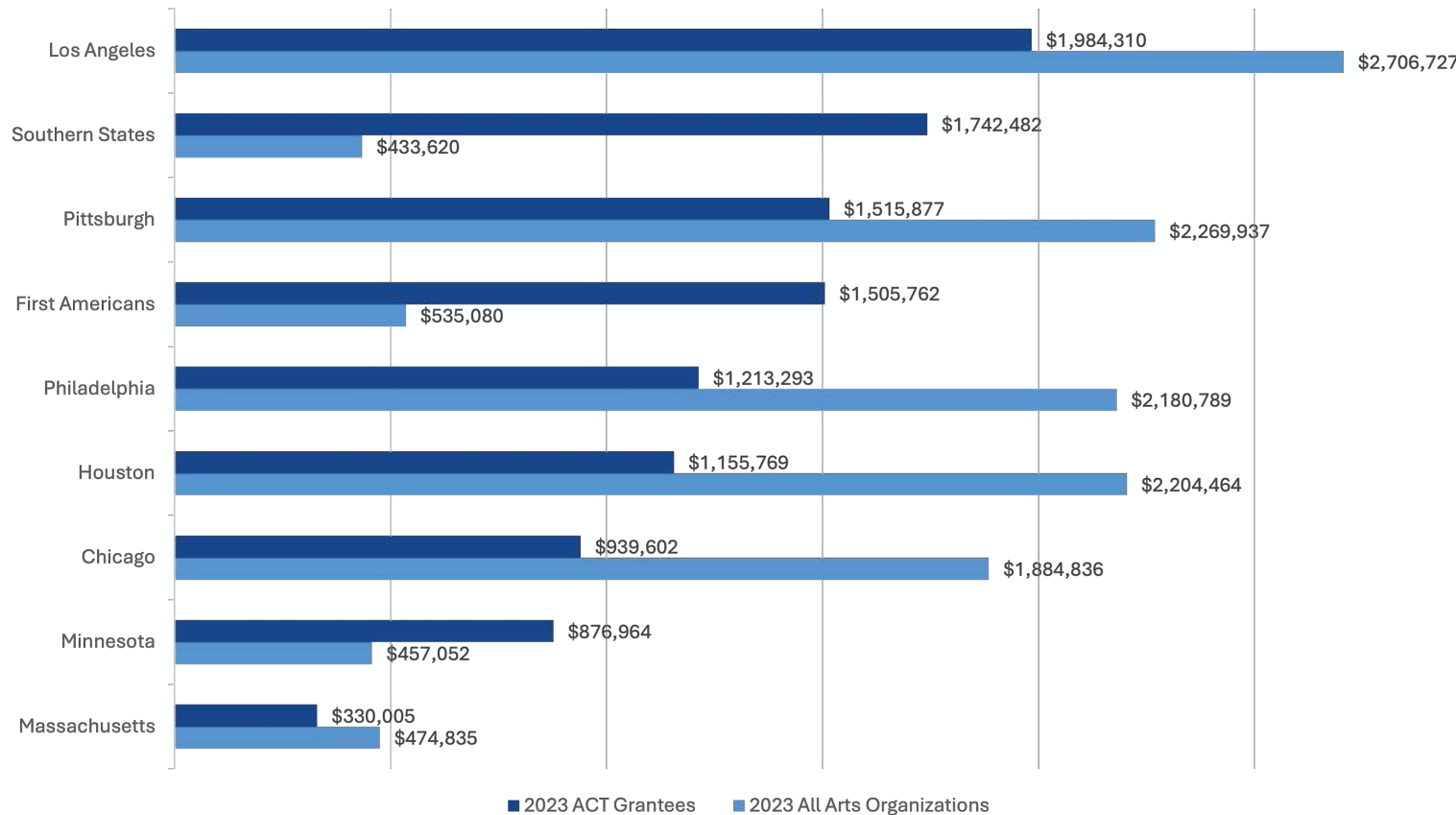


**GROWTH IN ACT GRANTEES:** By 2023, the organizational expenses of grantees had grown by an average of 34% compared to 2019.



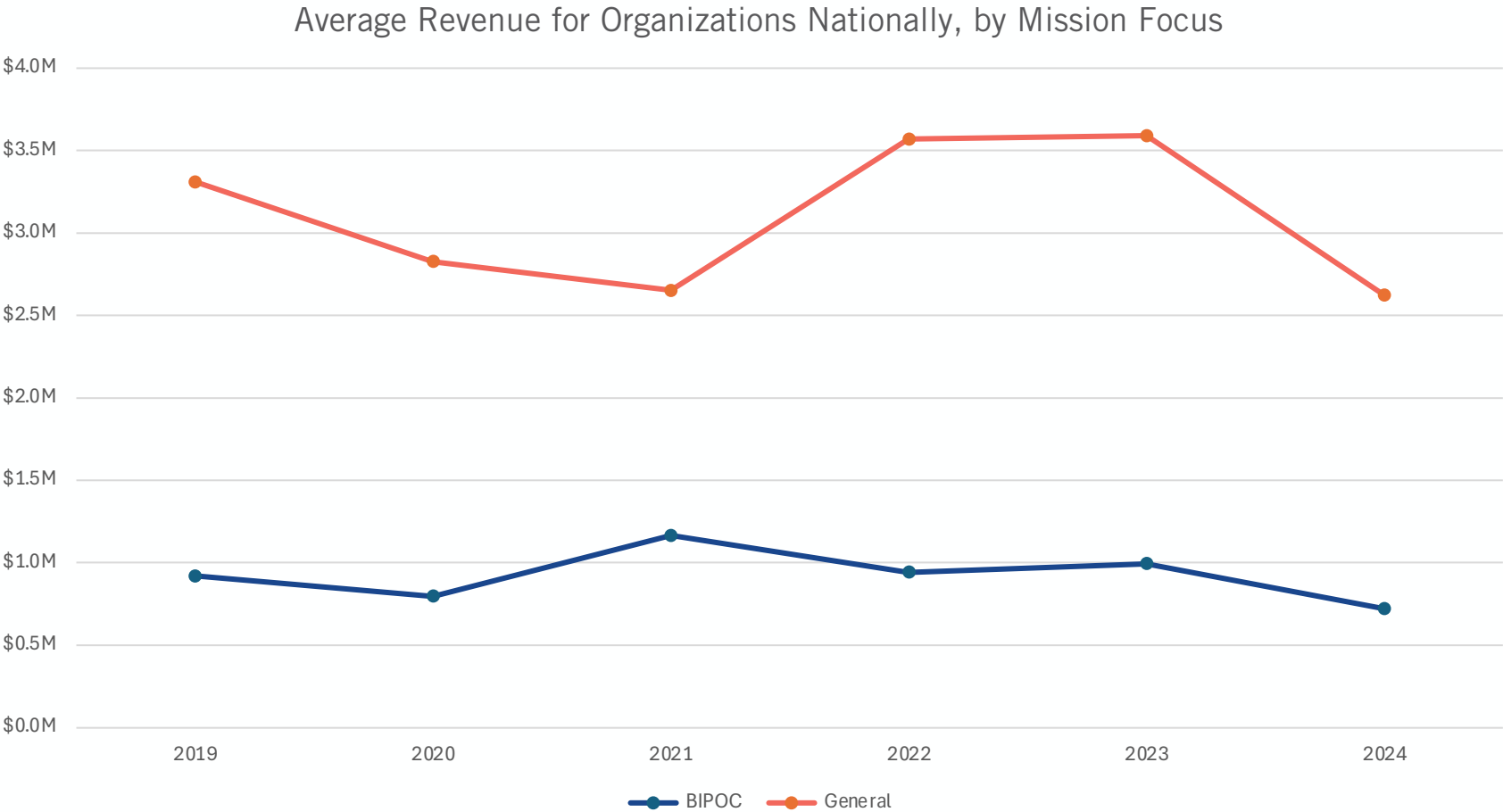
**GAPS PERSIST:** Even with these investments, ACT organizations had smaller budgets than the average arts organization in two-thirds of the regions in 2023.

Average Grantee Expenses by Region  
ACT Grantees Compared to all Arts Grantees (2023)



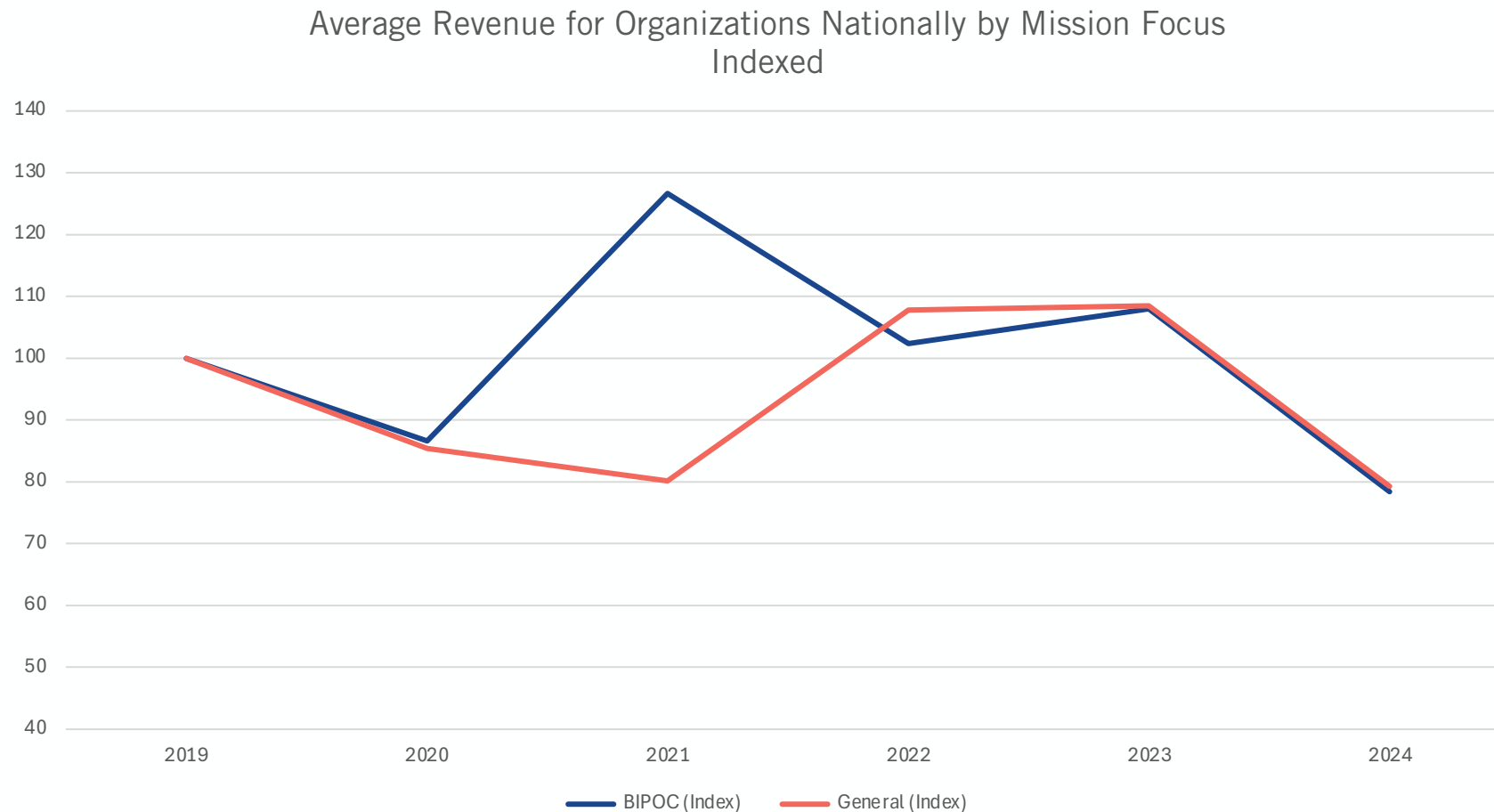
**NATIONAL GAPS:** Stepping back to look at average revenues for arts organizations nationally, organizations with a BIPOC—focused mission have consistently had lower revenues than general-focused organizations between 2019-2024.

Sample is Cultural Data Profile Data from 6,513 cultural organizations between 2019-2024.  
For more information about methodology see our 2025 National Trends Analysis: <https://culturaldata.org/national-trends/national-trends-2025/>



**NATIONAL GAPS:** The rate of change for BIPOC-focused arts and culture organizations diverged dramatically from general-focused organizations through major investments in 2021 but snapped back to the same rate of change in 2022 and beyond.

Sample is Cultural Data Profile Data from 6,513 cultural organizations between 2019-2024.  
For more information about methodology see our 2025 National Trends Analysis: <https://culturaldata.org/national-trends/national-trends-2025/>



---

# Regional Approaches



Image of Dance Afrikana, Houston, Texas. Courtesy of BIOC Arts Network and Fund

# Funding Structures Varied Substantially by Region

## Single Funder

- A single funder defined metrics, chose intermediaries, and selected grantees.

First Americas Cultural Treasures with First Nations

## Strong Lead Funder with Partners

- Leadership and guidance are primarily influenced by a single funder, who leads the effort to connect other funders to the project.
- Leadership is influenced by the level of matching funds or historical power dynamics within the region.

Minnesota Cultural Treasures

## Funder Collaborative Structure

- Leadership, guidance, and overall influence are shared with a collaborative funding body.
- Structure, systems, and decisions are facilitated through a collaborative model.

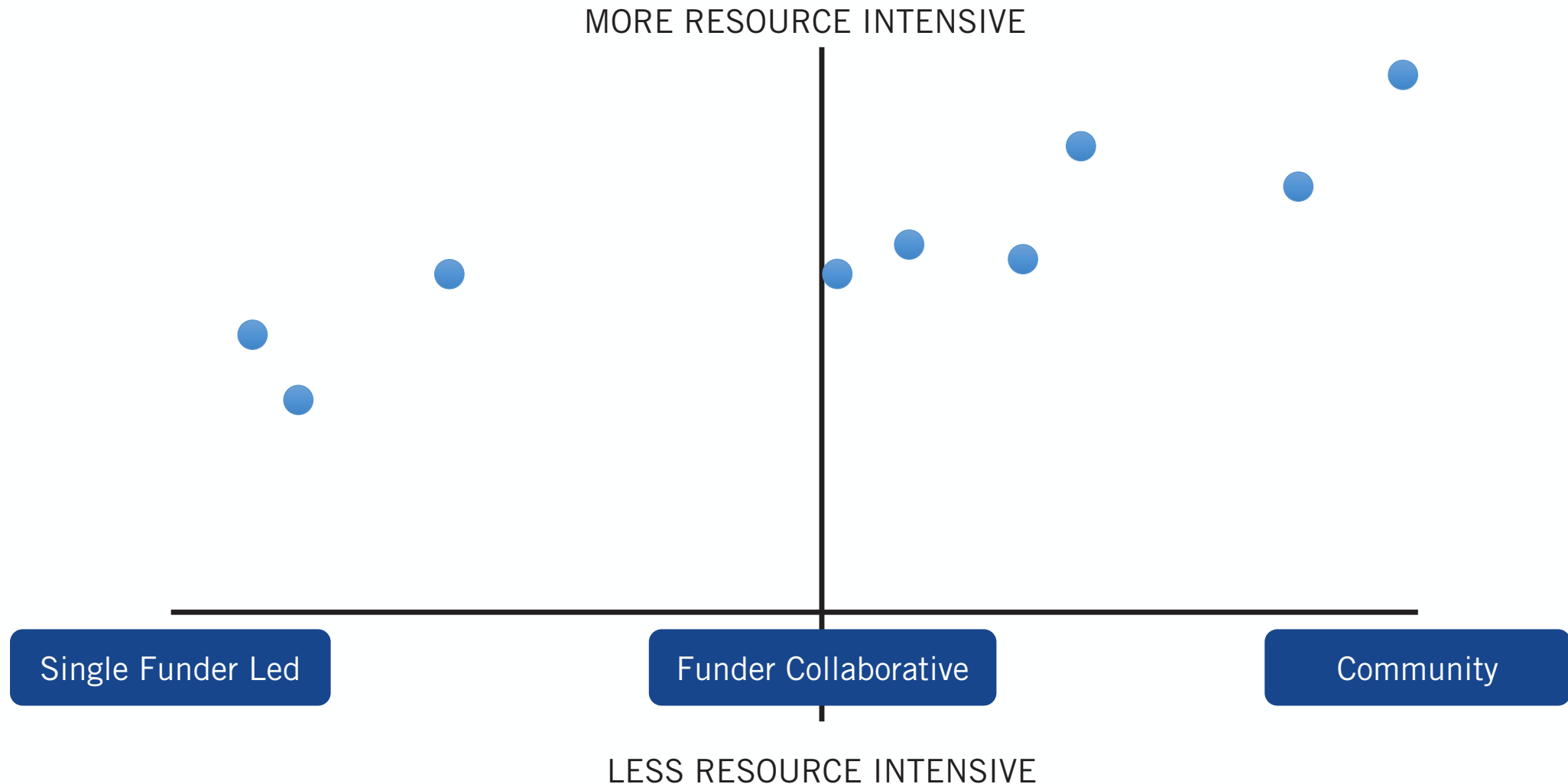
The Los Angeles Arts Recovery Fund

## Community Led Structure

- Leadership, guidance, and influence are provided by a delegation of community partners, leaders, and representatives.
- Community guidance and leadership are reflected within systems from the beginning to the end of the project.

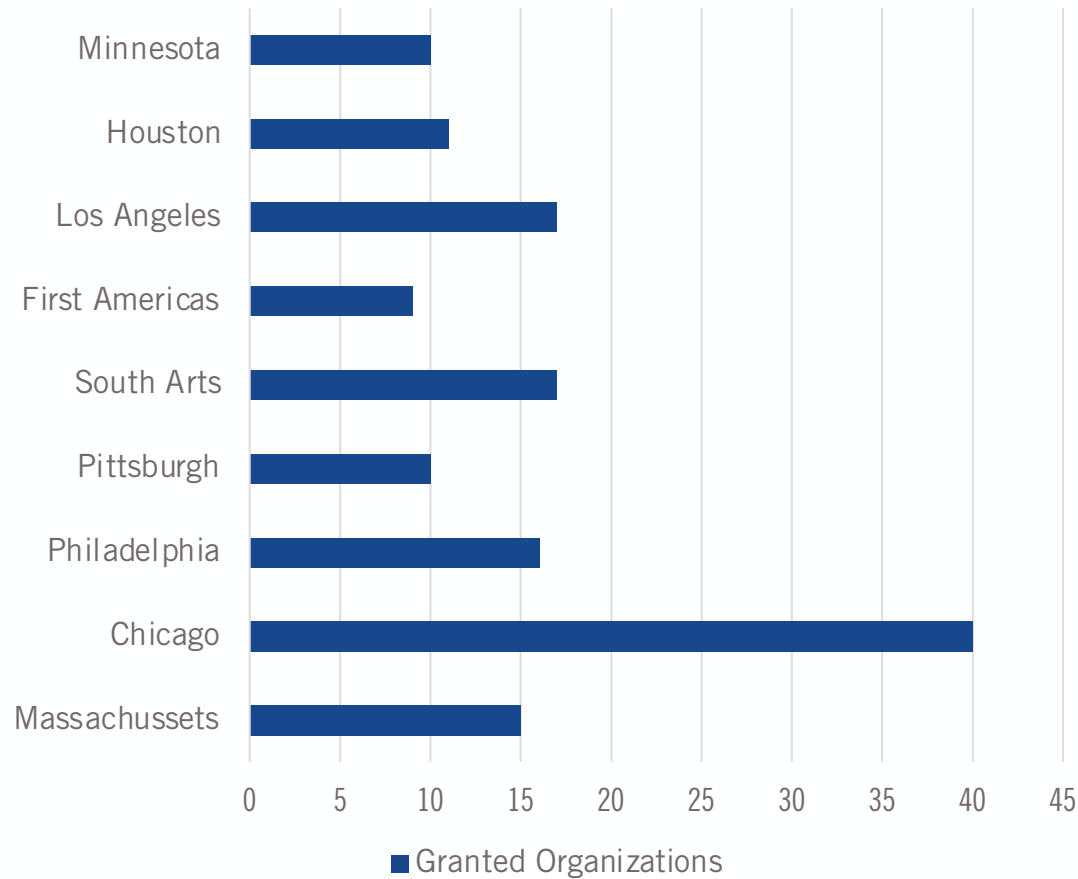
BIPOC Arts Network and Fund of Houston

**Collaborations with more partners and shared authority require intensive resources to launch and sustain.**

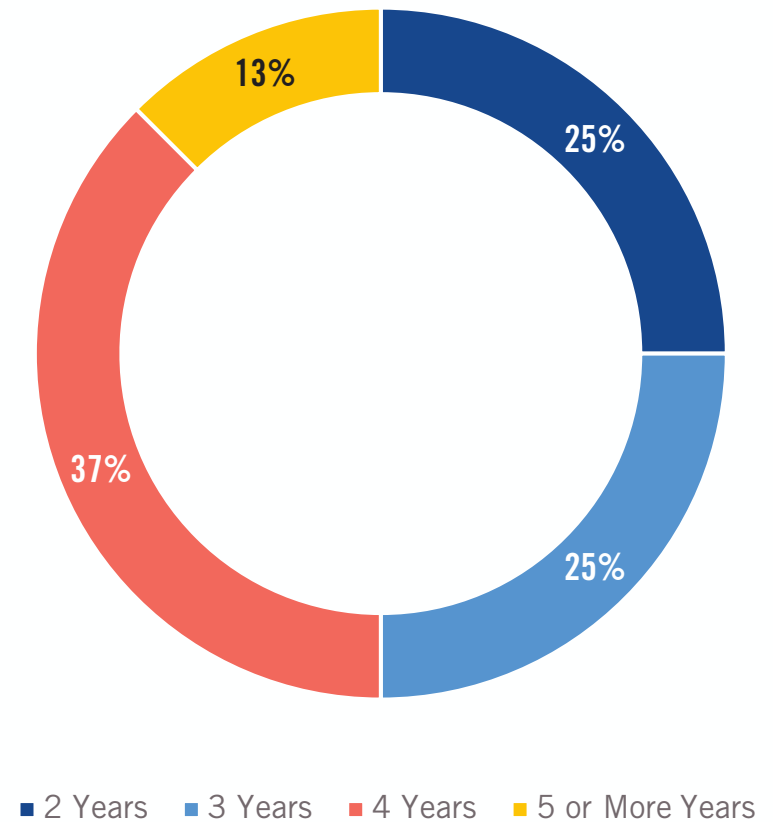


# Key components of ACT programs

Number of General Operating ACT Grantees



Grant Period For General Operating Grantees



# Intermediaries as critical connectors

## Benefits

- Increasing community connection and credibility
- Enhancing process innovation and experimentation
- Funding intermediaries increased grantmaking flexibility and agility
- Advocating for grantees' interests and prioritizing their needs and capacity to build trust
- Supporting self-determination for grantees

## Challenges

- Cultural competency gap
- Unclear roles and expectations
- Additional barriers for grantees and increased process complexity
- Staff turnover at foundations or the intermediary affecting relationships
- Relationship ownership questions

# Expanded Intermediary Roles Beyond Typical Patterns

## Typical Types of Support

- Developing applications & coordinating the selection process
- Managing award dollars
- Capacity building resources or facilitators
- Cohort connectors and conveners
- Evaluation partners

## Less Common Types of Support

- Advocates for the interests of the grantees through safe feedback loops
- Conflict mediator between funders
- Shared accountability with funders
- Self-determination for grantees in selecting partners



# **Leveraging Learnings and Maintaining Momentum**

# Five Key Impacts On Participating Funders

- ① Stronger cross-funder relationships
- ② New practices, tools, and connections for crisis response
- ③ Additional contexts/experience practicing trust-based philanthropy
- ④ Re-investment in long-term grantee relationships
- ⑤ Broadened familiarity with new and previously overlooked organizations

# Key Learnings For Building Funder Collaborations

Expect significant time investment in addition to monetary support

Make space to align around shared goals, roles, and processes among the funders

Build in pathways for relationship building between grantees and the cohort of funders

Align around clear priorities, roles, and decision-making powers with key partners

Consider the mechanisms for hearing and addressing community input

# Learnings for Supporting BIPOC Organizations

- Provide flexible, multi-year funding whenever possible
- Invest in organizational sustainability over project outcomes
- Involve community members in decision-making and be clear about their level of authority
- Incorporate long-term benefits like skill-building and network expansion that continue beyond funding

# Learnings for Supporting BIPOC Organizations

- Explore ways to share organizations' work via your communication platforms to raise their profile
- Consider persistent gaps, including affordable and sustainable spaces, when funding
- Reflect on the power of naming for your program—what does it convey about grantees? Non-grantees?

## REFLECTIONS FROM REGIONAL FUNDERS

“The case to make here is that we, funders, have dismissed BIPOC arts organizations’ way of making art. And it is evident with these orgs working on very small budgets, yet they continue to exist because the community wants them...That’s the truth. We’re living in a climate where “othering” is so easy. We belong. That’s the case to make.”



Image courtesy of Lyric Stage Company of Boston, Boston, MA. Photo by Glenn Perry (2015).



## Embrace the challenge and lean forward...

The current climate of arts funding is a very different landscape. Political, financial, and institutional realities have created new challenges, but **the need remains for systemic, sustained investment** in BIPOC arts organizations.

**How can you lean in to sustaining the momentum from this work:**

- **With new forms of collaboration?**
- **With renewed commitments to investing in BIPOC arts organizations?**

# SMU® DataArts

PO Box 750356  
Dallas, TX 75275-0356

[smu.edu/dataarts](https://smu.edu/dataarts)



SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

**#ArtsResearch**

**@SMUDataArts**

---

# Appendix

Image courtesy of Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, New York, NY. Violinist, Corin Lee, performs at the 6th Annual Marco Polo Festival, October 18, 2014. Photo by Sunny Kam Photography.

# Regional Summary of Grants

|                                                                         | BIPOC Arts Network and Fund in Houston                     | Chicago's Cultural Treasures                                                                          | First Americans Cultural Treasures with First Nations | Los Angeles Arts Recovery Fund                                       | Minnesota Cultural Treasures                       | Philadelphia's Cultural Treasures                                                                | Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures                   | Powering Cultural Futures in Massachusetts                                      | Southern Cultural Treasures with South Arts                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grant period for Cultural Treasures                                     | 2 years                                                    | 4 years                                                                                               | 2-3 years                                             | 2-3 years                                                            | 2 Years                                            | 2-3 years                                                                                        | 4 years                                           | 6 Years                                                                         | 3 years                                                                                  |
| Number of Cultural Treasures                                            | 11                                                         | 40                                                                                                    | 9                                                     | 17                                                                   | 10                                                 | 16                                                                                               | 16                                                | 15                                                                              | 17                                                                                       |
| Capacity Building Provided                                              | Yes                                                        | Yes                                                                                                   | Yes                                                   | Yes                                                                  | Yes                                                | Yes                                                                                              | Yes                                               | Yes                                                                             | Yes                                                                                      |
| Examples of Capacity Building                                           | Peer to Peer Arts Education, Mentoring, Community Building | Marketing, Branding & Positioning Training, Real Estate Planning                                      | The grantees determined the capacity-building focus.  | Peer Mentoring and Learning                                          |                                                    | Range                                                                                            | Strategic Investments Support, Consulting Support | Technology, Media Training, Peer Learning, Financial Literacy, Capital Building | Needs Assessment and Identification, Peer-to-Peer Learning, and Professional Development |
| Additional Cohorts outside of the Initial Cultural Treasures Initiative | Cultural Treasure Accelerator, Artist Network              | Additional ChiTreasures Cohorts, and continued Investments to Chicago arts and Cultural organizations |                                                       | Continued Investments in Los Angeles arts and cultural organizations | Seeding Cultural Treasures, and Individual Artists | Fellowship Program and Project Grants for the development and presentation of creative projects. |                                                   |                                                                                 |                                                                                          |
| Funding for Artists Beyond the Initial Cultural Treasures Initiative    | Yes                                                        | No                                                                                                    | No                                                    | No                                                                   | Yes                                                | Yes                                                                                              | No                                                | No                                                                              | No                                                                                       |