

# Shared Prosperity Study with the Gee's Bend Quilters: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Income and Cost of Living



Photo Credit: Stacy k. Allen

## **BACKGROUND**

Gee's Bend, also known as Boykin, is a small town along the Alabama River with around 250-300 residents. Most residents in this town trace their lineage back to slaves and shareholders of the Pettway Plantation. The Gee's Bend community is renowned for their exceptional artisanal skills in quilting which are believed to have been passed down through generations over the last two hundred years and their story constitutes a crucial chapter in the history of American craft.

While this community has earned global acclaim for their countless patchwork masterpieces, the fame has not translated into economic advancement. The average annual income in Gee's Bend remains at about \$12,000<sup>1</sup>. Some residents live without the basic amenities of mobile and internet access, limiting the quilters' ability to expand the sale of their goods. Inspired by the concept of Shared Prosperity and the potential to make productive and sustainable contributions to empowering the Gee's Bend community with the support of Souls Grown Deep, this study was proposed to identify the barriers to economic advancement within the community and to develop effective solutions and partnerships to address these barriers.

## **PRIMARY OBJECTIVES**

- 1 Assess quilters' average annual earnings, asset ownership, and identify income sources
- 2 Establish a strong understanding of the cost of living in Boykin, Alabama
- 3 Understand the community's intentions and aspirations around future earnings (especially around income from the sale of quilted items)
- 4 Learn about the quilters' interests in sales opportunities and any barriers they face to earning their optimal earning potential

## **RESEARCH APPROACH & IMPLEMENTATION**

Applying national, state-level, and even local municipal benchmarks to this context is challenging, as the geographic isolation of communities like Gee's Bend result in disproportionate access to public services. The nature of informal employment through craft and piece-rate payments compounds the need to assess income and cost of living through a hyper-customized approach. Nest performed comprehensive desk research on socio-economic measures and cost of living indicators used globally, in order to design inclusive and appropriate data collection tools for this study,

Exploring economic status as a combined measure of income, asset ownership, and cost of living, Nest referenced data from the US Census Bureau, metrics used in Asian Development Bank's (ADB) pilot survey on Measuring Asset Ownership and Entrepreneurship from a Gender Perspective<sup>2</sup>, the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS)<sup>3</sup>, and Nest's Worker Wellbeing survey to develop the tools and questions included in this study. Data collection was designed using a mixed-methods approach, by developing a culturally-sensitive survey that included both quantitative and qualitative questions to collect data directly from the quilters around their income sources, asset ownership, monthly expenses, sales opportunities, and individual perceptions.

### *Phase 1*

The first phase of the study was implemented in April–May 2021 with 10 quilters who participated in Nest & Etsy's market access programming in the Bend in 2020–21. Based on an estimated total of 40 active quilters in the community (primarily women), Nest surveyed 10 quilters for a representative sample size. As the first study of its kind in this community, convenience sampling methodology was the most appropriate and efficient approach to ensuring complete participation. Quilters were invited to participate by Nest's local

Community Manager and an informed consent form was signed by each quilter prior to participation. This round of conveying was conducted with 10 quilters between April 29 and May 6, 2021 as conversational in-person interviews.

### Phase 2

Building on the findings from the first phase, the study was expanded to include an additional 20 quilters, 15 of whom had not engaged in Nest programming prior to this study. The participant invitation and recruitment process from phase 1 was replicated and the same Nest Community Manager conducted the surveys with these new quilters to ensure integrity and consistency of the data collection methodology. The increased sample size and diversity of quilters included in this study expansion allowed for deeper insight into the key topics of interest, and also set up a more representative sample of the overall community granting higher validity to the data and findings. The second round of surveying was conducted between October 2021 to February 2022. The data collected from both phases were aggregated and analyzed together for a total sample of 30 quilters.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

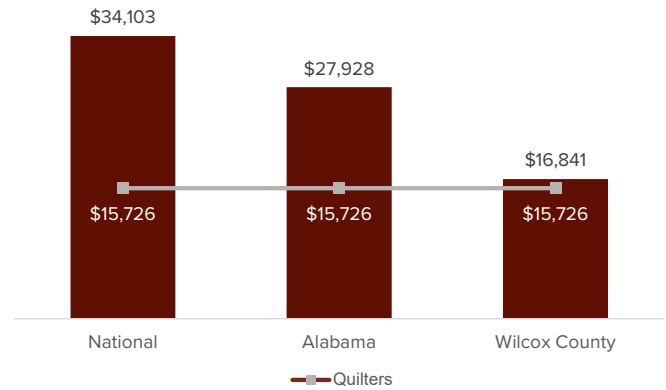
*Demographic and worker wellbeing data about the 30 quilters included in this study is presented in Tables 1 and 2 of the Appendix.*

Quilters in this sample earn a median per capita income of \$1,310.5 per month, which is 54% below the national median income and 44% below the state's median income

On average, the quilters earn an individual monthly income of \$1,606 (median \$1,310.5) from all income sources including welfare schemes. The incomes reported per quilter varied significantly, ranging from \$0 to \$4800. 50% of quilters participate in income-earning activities other than quilting, including part-time and full-time employment and 60% receive financial assistance from social welfare schemes or from their retirement funds.

While the national median per capita income is \$34,103 annually<sup>4</sup>, the median per capita income in Alabama is \$27,928 which is almost 20% lower. There are wide differences in income within the state with the median per capita income per county ranging from \$15,055 (Perry county) to \$38,549 (Shelby county). Gee's Bend (Boykin) is located in Wilcox county which has one of the lowest median per capita incomes in the state at \$16,841, and falls within the lowest 1% of counties nationally on the basis of per capita income. In spite of Wilcox county reporting one of the lowest median per capita incomes, the quilter's median income was 7% lower than this figure (Chart 1).

**CHART 1: COMPARATIVE MEDIAN INCOMES**



The average household income reported was \$2,359 (ranging from \$794 to \$6,000 per quilter). Incomes for almost half of the quilters vary throughout the year, depending on the type of work available and ability to make sales. Over 50% of quilters note that they receive compensation from social welfare schemes, including SSI (40%), SNAP (30%), and Medicare/Medicaid (47%). On average, the welfare compensation received by these quilters is \$899 per month (ranging from \$167 to \$2000). Social welfare income makes up the total individual monthly income for ten quilters (30% of the study sample).

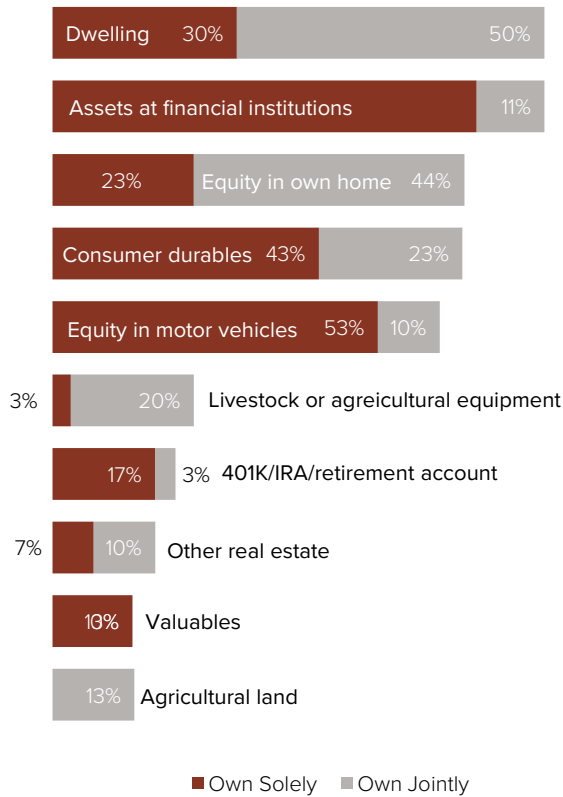
Of their reported income, 80% of quilters did not attribute any percentage of their steady monthly income to quilting due to how recent their increased sales opportunities have been and the unpredictable nature of the work. Their steady and consistent monthly income reported comes from social security payments (53%) and a combination of full-time jobs (23%) and consulting opportunities (23%).



Majority of the quilters own at least one asset solely, however almost one-third have recurring liabilities

The majority of quilters (80%) own their dwellings and have assets at financial institutions, and about two-thirds have equity in their homes and motor vehicles, as well as consumer durables. Assets at financial institutions and equity in motor vehicles were mostly owned solely, and other assets were split between sole and joint ownership (Chart 2).

**CHART 2: QUILTERS' OWNERSHIP OF ASSETS**

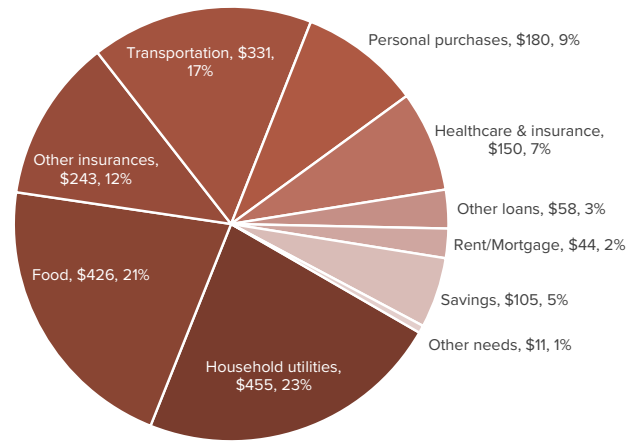


While the majority of quilters have some asset ownership we find that 30% of quilters also have monthly liabilities in the form of personal loans, mortgages, and auto loans.

54% of quilters reported a total cost of living that was higher than their monthly household income

The primary expenditure for most quilters (77%) is on essential needs such as food, shelter, and clothing. The average monthly expenditure was reported to be \$2,002 and included expenses on food, rent/mortgage, transportation, household utilities, personal purchases, healthcare, insurances, loans, and savings (Chart 3). The individual amount varies significantly, ranging from \$640 to \$4,505 per quilter. The quilters' primary monthly expense is identified as household utilities followed by food and groceries. According to the quilters, the residents of Gee's Bend must purchase their electricity through a co-operative, Pioneer Electric Cooperative, and pay higher rates than those who can purchase directly from Alabama power in other regions of the state.

**CHART 3: QUILTERS' MONTHLY EXPENSES**



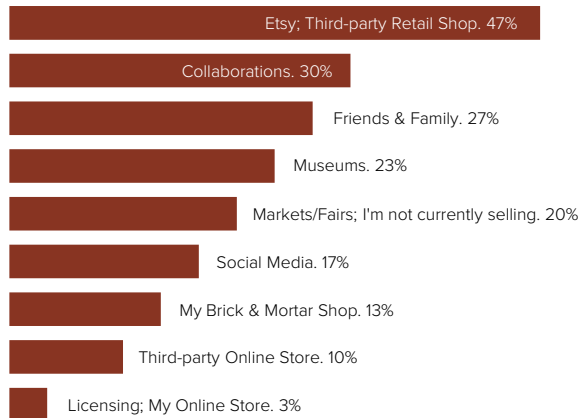
Analyzing the gap between income and expenditure at the individual quilter level, we observe that 54% of quilters reported a cost of living that is higher than their monthly household income. Among these quilters, the average gap is \$555 (ranging from \$48 to \$1610). 87% of quilters reported wanting to earn more per month through their craft income to cover their cost of living. Responses for how much desired income per month from craft-based income varied widely and ranged from \$800 to \$12,000.



New sales opportunities are of keen interest, and almost all quilters are seeking independent sales opportunities through their own shop or direct to customer opportunities

Quilters currently use a range of sales channels, the most common (47%) being Etsy and third-party retail shops (Chart 4).

**CHART 4: SALES CHANNELS CURRENTLY USED**



*None of the quilters use Amazon, Distributors or Interior Designers*

All the quilters are seeking new sales opportunities, and specific types of opportunities along with why they draw interest are included below:

- **Independent sales opportunities through own shop, or directly to friends/customers (89%):** easier production and logistics, less pressure and can set own pace, higher individual responsibility and agency/decision-making, can earn total compensation and own/run their own business
- **Independent sales opportunities to museums and galleries (82%):** value for an individual quilt is higher, more exposure, longer-term impact of own product, perception of product as art, free advertising
- **\*Third-party resale (79%):** exposure, less effort/logistics and can focus on production; six quilters noted that they currently only know of third-party resale opportunities for their quilts
- **Collaborations with designers and sales through their networks (75%):** diversity in production / use of product, exposure to different audiences and materials, enjoyed previous collaborations with designers
- **Independently at markets or auctions (64%):** opportunity to connect directly with customer and a good option for new sales

*\*Quilters indicated using the Quilting Collective as their current pathway for sales via third-party resale. However, inclusion in the Collective currently restricts quilters' ability to sell through any other platform which likely skews the percentage above.*

Half of the quilters shared they would be open to all of the opportunities listed above as they are looking to diversify their avenues for sales and would be open to any new ways they can connect with customers and sell their quilts.

More than half of the quilters felt that they have not achieved their optimal earning potential from quilting, primarily because they are not compensated proportionately to the time and effort put into production

Perception of fair pay is a critical driver of motivation, work engagement, effort and agency. Investigating fair pay is a sensitive topic, and to address this question, quilters were asked if they feel they have achieved their optimal earning potential. 76% of quilters do not feel that they are earning to their optimal potential, primarily because of the time and effort that is put into making the quilts. Some of the quilters who responded that they are meeting their optimal earning potential provided a rationale that was relative, stating that they are earning more now than they have in the past.

Looking to the future, 86% of quilters would like to see their production increase one year from now (an average rate of 50.0%), while the remaining quilters want it to stay the same. For sales prospecting, only two quilters are interested in keeping sales at the current level, while all other quilters would like to increase their sales over the next ten years (an average rate of 62.6%). The comparison between desired production and sales highlights that most quilters want to increase sales and production, however a higher number are interested in increasing sales compared to production solely. This ties back to the workers' perception that they should be compensated higher for their current production.

Quilters' ideal earnings from their craft varied significantly but a common sentiment was a desire to earn enough to ensure financial security. Further research is needed to establish an objective indicator of earnings that correspond to fair compensation

When the quilters were asked to share their ideal earnings from quilting per month, the responses ranged from \$1,000 to \$60,000. The rationale behind these answers varied to a certain degree, but the underlying motivation across all quilters was that this amount would sustain their livelihoods and help them live "comfortably"—a word that was used by more than half of the quilters. The quilters wish to increase their compensation in order to pay bills and household expenses, and allow them

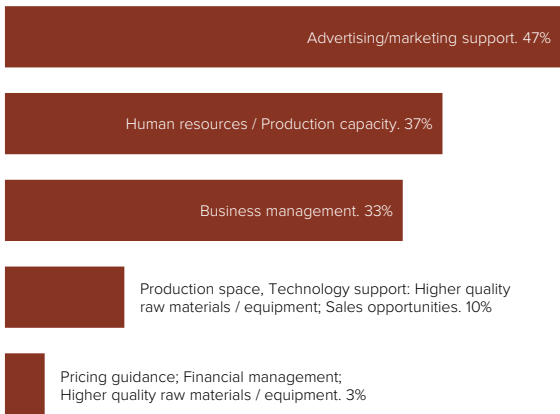
to build savings and emergency funds that would sustain them beyond simply covering their cost of living. Some quilters also feel that this level of income would allow them to spend on items beyond bare essentials, and help them improve their overall living conditions while also granting them more financial security.

The quilters face several barriers to earning their desired compensation. The most common barrier was insufficient time for production (reported by 37% of quilters), followed by inadequate sales opportunities (30%). An interesting finding from the second phase of the study was that many quilters (23%) also reported age and general health status as a barrier to production and earning.

Quilters are seeking diverse external guidance and support to help them achieve their earning goals and increase their utilization and ease with digital platforms

Quilters are turning to external guidance primarily for building capacity and human resources for example in the form of additional help with production or support with marketing their products (Chart 5). Many of them also seek additional business management support, production space, and technology support.

**CHART 5: SUPPORT TO MEET EARNING GOALS**



The quilters have a moderate level of digital access and currently utilize a range of technology platforms (Chart 6). On a scale of 0 to 10, the quilters ranked their comfort with utilizing technology platforms, at 7.2. The individual rankings ranged from 0 to 10, indicating the diversity in responses and variations in individual levels of technology literacy. 70% of quilters interviewed would like external guidance and support to increase their utilization and ease with digital platforms. They are interested in technology classes, written instructions, and one on one coaching as possible ways to learn. Specifically, some quilters are interested in learning to use platforms such as PayPal, Shopify, and LinkedIn, and some need general guidance on using the internet and apps on their mobile phones.



93% of quilters have access to a mobile phone



87% of quilters have an email account, and of these quilters, 4 set it up within the last year

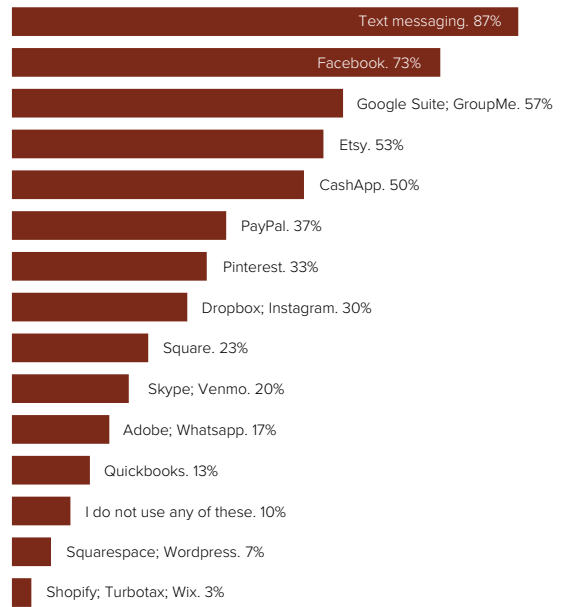


70% have consistent access to the internet at their homes



63% have access to a computer, laptop or tablet

**CHART 6: TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS USED**



All quilters are dedicated to their craft and wish to see it sustained for generations to come

Less than 10% of the quilters interviewed would be interested in moving to another occupation in place of their craftwork if they were to receive the same amount of financial compensation or even a higher amount. This highlights the economic opportunity of quilting in this community and the value that the quilters place in this craft. 100% of the quilters interviewed said that they are proud of the work they do and over 90% would encourage the next generation to take up this craft as a profession.



Photo Credit: Stacy K. Allen

**CONCLUSION**

Leveraging partnerships with key industry and government stakeholders to design and implement future programming within the Gee’s Bend community will be key to addressing the challenges identified by this research study. Based on the research findings shared, there are two clear pathways to further engagement and action for economic advancement within the Gee’s Bend community.

**1 | Primary Approach: Expanding Income Opportunities**

The research findings clearly highlight the quilters’ interests in diversifying their sales opportunities and increasing production. By fostering partnerships and bringing visibility to the quilter community, their exposure to sales opportunities can be increased, ideally in the form of their desired sales channels, which include independent sales, representation in museums and galleries, and collaborations with brands.

Currently several quilters are unable to expand their sales opportunities based on their current connection with the Quilting Collective. There can be an opportunity to engage the Quilting Collective leadership in finding ways to embrace additional sales pathways, as most quilters who have access to these opportunities are interested in pursuing them and have been positively impacted with these sales expansions.

To address direct sales, Etsy shops have proven incredibly effective for many quilters and the opportunity to engage others in launching independent shops with low barriers to entry exist. Current shop owners can also serve as peer mentors for those looking to engage in the platform at this stage.

Finally, by establishing an on-the-ground community organizer to support brand collaborations, the quilting community can take advantage of expanded brand collaborations. Promoting these collaborations through press, media, and social channels, can entice more brands to pursue collaborations with the community leading to more consistent and predictable income. It will be critically important to ensure that the storytelling and focus remains on the quilters and is quilter-led and approved.

**2 | Secondary Approach: Reducing Cost of Living**

Recognizing that the highest expense for the quilters are household utilities (23%), community or government level approaches can assess utility costs and opportunities for infrastructure upgrades to drive down ongoing costs. For example, community solar programs can help individual community members directly benefit from a solar installation in the community, allowing subscribers to receive a credit on their utility bill for the clean energy produced by the system, enabling them to save money each month on their electricity bills.

In regards to phone and internet access, the federal government has established an assistance program to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable telephone service which is run by individual states. In Alabama, two programs exist to help households in paying their phone bills, which are offered to families that receive some form of public assistance, such as food stamps, LIHEAP, or Medicaid. Many of the quilters in the Bend would qualify and enrollment in such programs can allow for cost savings up to 50% for phone and wireless installation and an average monthly savings of around \$10 or more.



Photo Credit: Stacy K. Allen

**REFERENCES**

1. Nest, Gee’s Bend Programs
2. Geostat & Asian Development Bank. *Pilot Survey on Measuring Asset Ownership and Entrepreneurship from a Gender Perspective.*
3. University of Washington. *Self-Sufficiency Standard.*
4. US Census Bureau, 2019.

**APPENDIX**

**TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

Total # quilters	30
Gender: female	100%
Average age (years)	55.6
Range of age (years)	18 to 85
Average age started quilting (years)	16
Range of age started quilting range	5 to 38
<b>Education</b>	
Some high school	3%
High school diploma or GED	40%
Some college	27%
Trade/technical degree	20%
College degree	3%
Postgraduate courses/degree	7%
Literacy (can read and write comfortably)	100%
Average household size	3.2
Range of household size	1 to 8
Average #contributors to household income	1.5
Range # contributors to household income	1 to 3
Quilters with dependents	43.3%

**TABLE 2: WORKER WELLBEING DATA**

Average empowerment score (scale of 3-12, lower is better)	4.8
Improved decision making ability since earning income through craft	50%
<b>Self-reported health status</b>	
Excellent	3%
Good	40%
Average	37%
Below Average	17%
Poor	3%
Have health insurance	86.7%
Medicaid/Medicare	46.7%
Employer-sponsored	30%
Access to consistent electricity	100%
Piped water supply for drinking water	100%
Toilet facilities with septic tanks	100%