

COST OF ADMISSIONS AND MUSEUM VISITATION

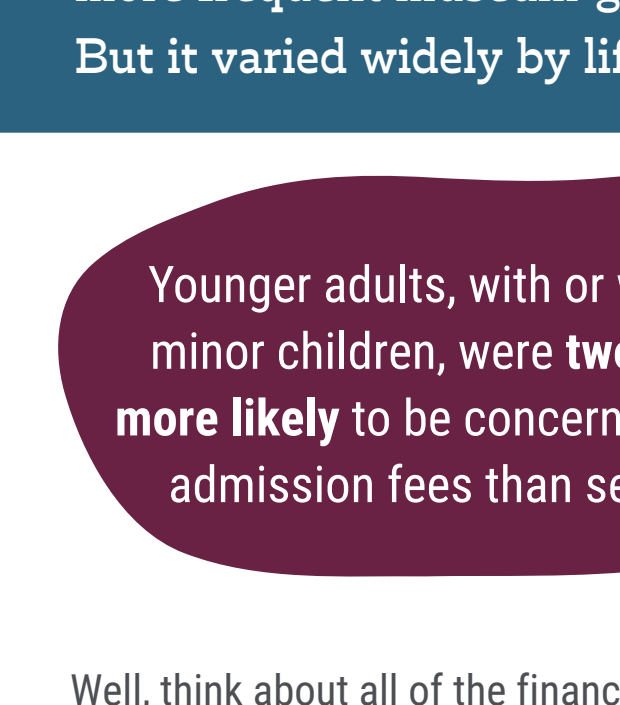
A 2024 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



The cost of admission has always been a concern for museums. While some museums are free, others generate a significant portion of revenue from admissions that support their mission-driven work.

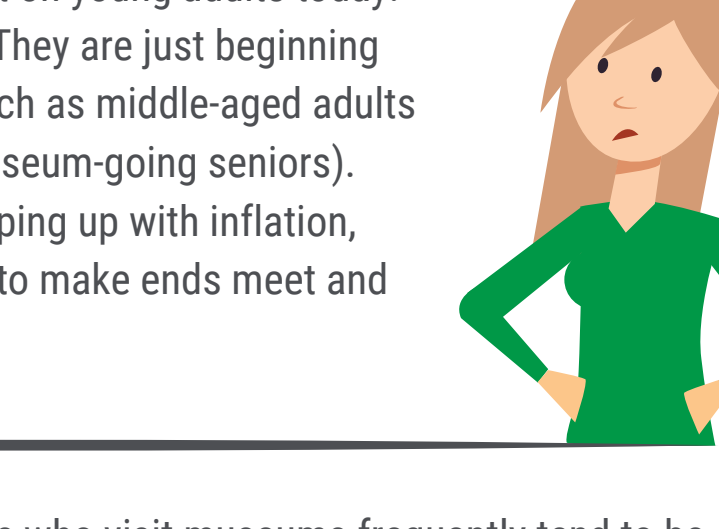
And admissions fees can vary widely, from a few dollars to between \$40 and \$50 for adults at some museums.

In the 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, we looked at why people don't visit museums more frequently. Unsurprisingly, cost was a significant factor for many. Let's take a look at what potential visitors to museums think about admission fees, and the financial tradeoffs they consider.



First, let's look at the frequent museum-goers that we sampled. These are individuals who are already highly engaged with museums, on communications lists, and took time to take a survey on behalf of a museum.

Most frequent museum-goers did not cite cost as a barrier to even more frequent museum-going. But it varied widely by life stage.



Younger adults, with or without minor children, were **two times more likely** to be concerned about admission fees than seniors.

Why is this?

Well, think about all of the financial constraint on young adults today: expensive housing, student loans, childcare. They are just beginning their careers, so are not earning nearly as much as middle-aged adults (and likely have lower incomes than many museum-going seniors). Additionally, incomes are not necessarily keeping up with inflation. Young adults are more likely to be struggling to make ends meet and less likely to have significant savings.

Meanwhile, the seniors who visit museums frequently tend to be well-educated, have reached (or passed) their highest-earning years, are more likely to own their homes outright, and have had significant time to accrue wealth for their retirement. Even if they are retired, incomes may be keeping up with inflation (Social Security adjusts yearly and retirement investments have been doing quite well).



Bottom line, older adults visiting museums seem to be in a much more comfortable financial position than younger adults.

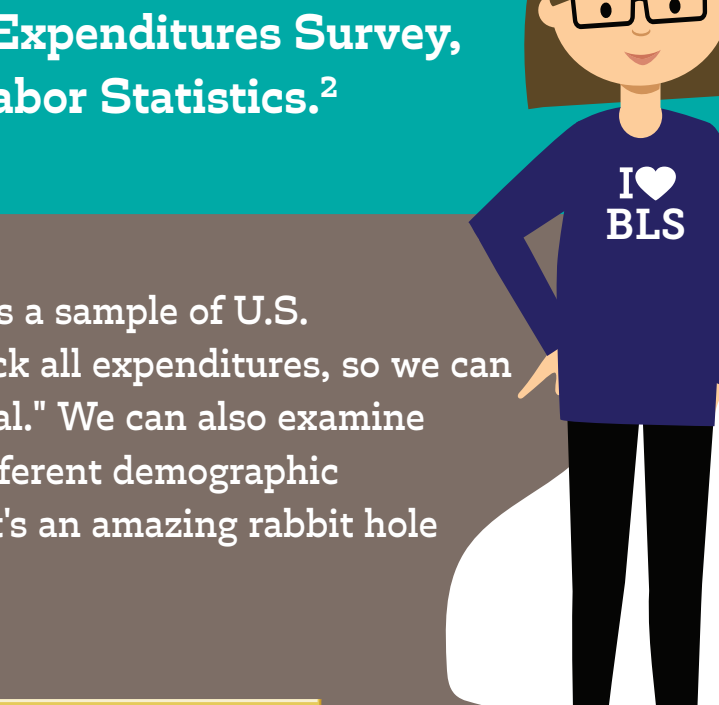
Thinking about offering a "young adult" discount now that you've looked at the data? Hold up. Seniors are considered a "protected class," meaning you can freely provide a discount to them without worrying about committing age discrimination. Children are also considered a protected class. But young adults are not, meaning a discount for them *could* open you up to age discrimination accusations.

Instead, consider ways you can target discounts and coupons to younger adults, but not make those discounts age-dependent.



Let's now look at the broader population of U.S. Adults. In our demographically-representative sample of U.S. Adults we found:

Among the 78% of U.S. Adults who say they visit museums at least "occasionally," cost was the #1 barrier to visitation, with 41% citing it. Interestingly, there were no significant differences by age among these much-more occasional visitors.



Instead, something else seems to be going on.

First, keep in mind that the vast majority of the "frequent museum-goers" we talked about earlier have college degrees. People with college degrees generally have higher incomes, and are more likely to visit museums.

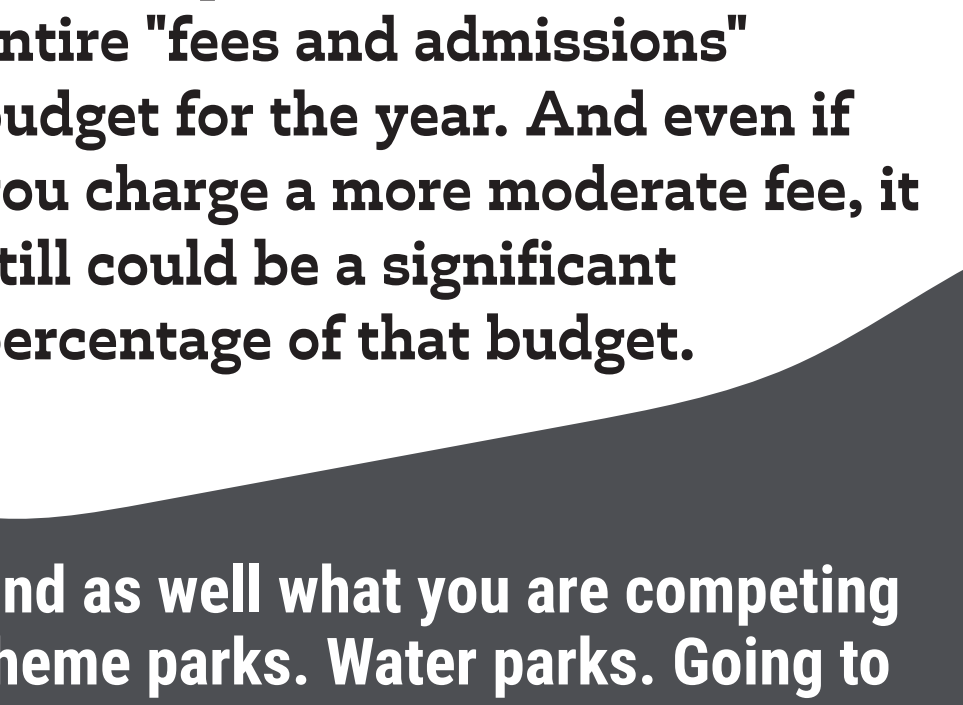
In the broader population, college attainment rates among "occasional" visitors is much closer to that of the U.S. population of adults.¹

To learn more about how education and income could be affecting museum visitation, we had to look to a different source: the Consumer Expenditures Survey, fielded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.²



This research asks a sample of U.S. households to track all expenditures, so we can see what is "typical." We can also examine households by different demographic characteristics. (It's an amazing rabbit hole to dive into!)

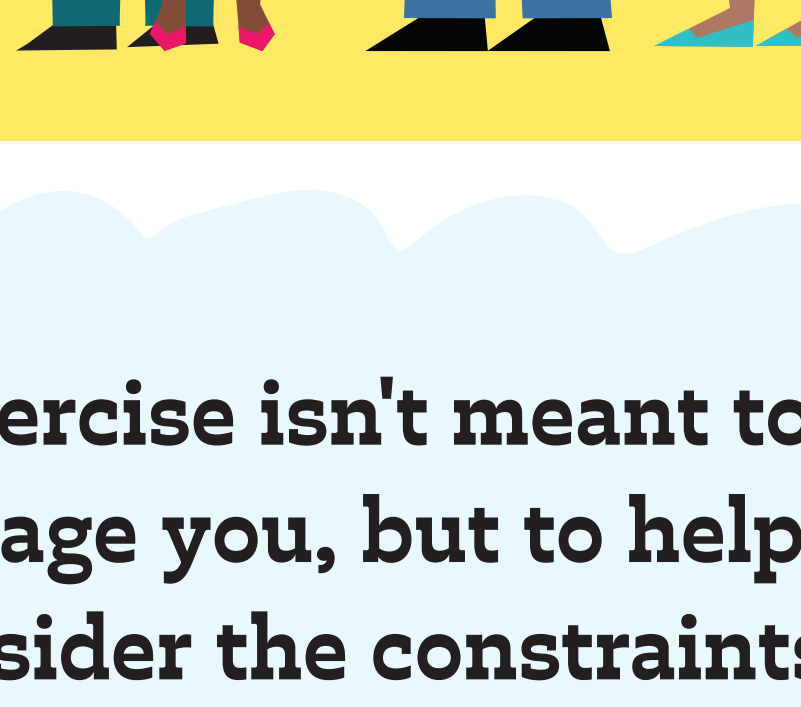
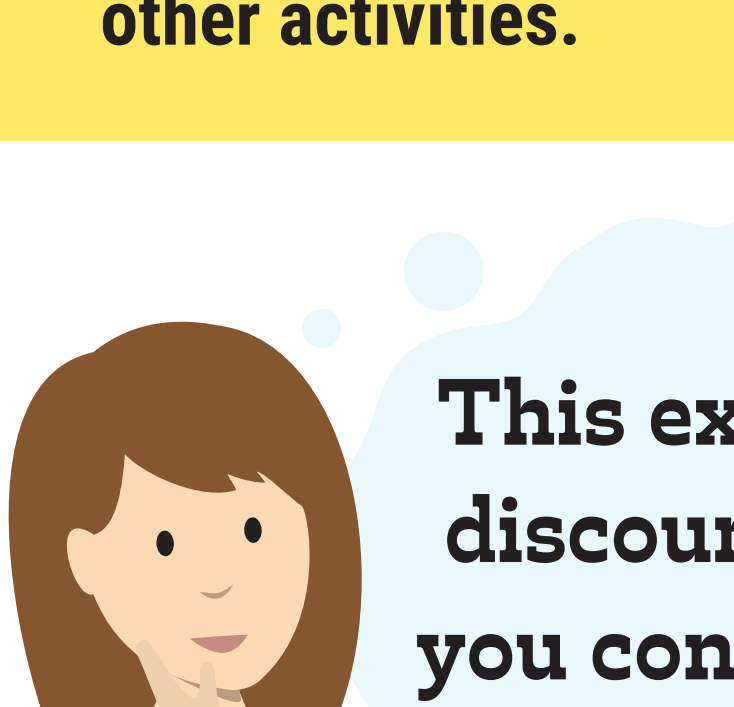
One of the things they track is "fees and admissions." This category includes a variety of things, such as tickets for movies, concerts and other performing arts, sporting events, and amusement parks. It also includes museums.



In 2023, the average U.S. household spent \$951 annually on fees and admissions.

But that masks a rather wide spread, with college-educated households spending 5.2x as much (\$1,645 on average) as households without a college graduate (\$315 on average).

When we break it down more granularly, you can see extraordinarily wide gulfs in average fees and admissions spending.



Now, consider your cost of admissions as a percentage of the "fees and admissions" budget for these different households. If your museum is charging only a few dollars, it may not represent a significant cost for many households.



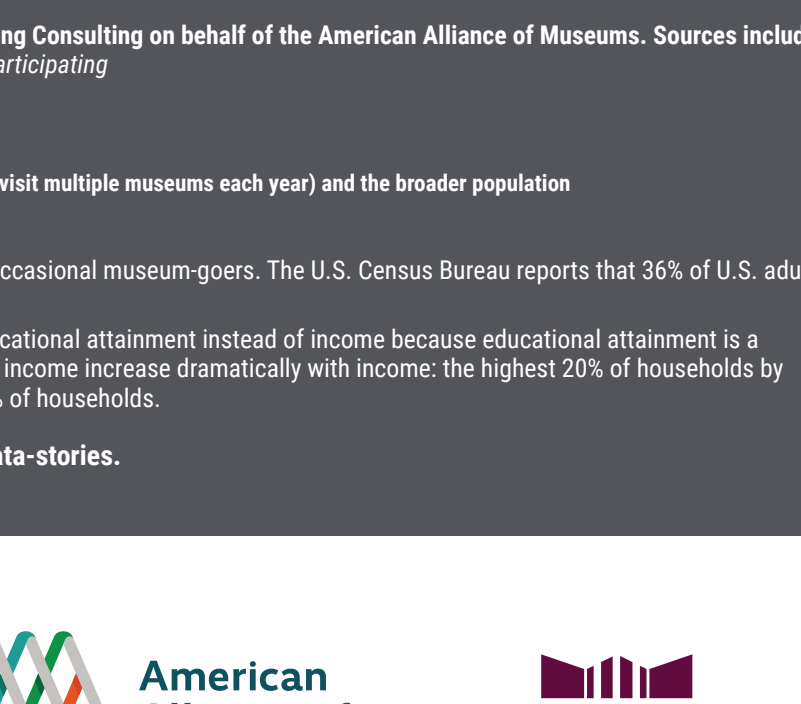
But if your museum is one that is charging \$30 or \$40 a person, consider that a family visiting could wipe out half or even their entire "fees and admissions" budget for the year. And even if you charge a more moderate fee, it still could be a significant percentage of that budget.

Keep in mind as well what you are competing against. Theme parks. Water parks. Going to a movie. Seeing a favorite sports team.

Are you worth it?

That is, to a typical family, are you going to make the cut over those other, competing interests? Are you worth blowing the entire budget on? Or even three-months' worth of the budget?

For some, you will be worth it ... but there will be many who make a different choice and who will not be willing to sacrifice those other activities.



This exercise isn't meant to discourage you, but to help you consider the constraints that families are experiencing when it comes to museum visitation. Additionally, doing away with admission fees typically doesn't immediately diversify museum visitation by socio-economic status either. Cost is only one barrier.

Programs like Museums for All are a great start to addressing the cost challenge, but consider that many families with limited budgets earn just enough to not qualify for Museums for All discounts. Think about other ways you can reach those households.

Instead, this exercise is meant to help you think through the economic choices potential visitors are making and better understand how cost can be a barrier to museum visitation.

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 * 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,178; 202 museums participating
 * 2024 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,154
 * 2017 - 2023 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

*Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums).

¹ 83% of frequent museum-goers have a college degree, and half of occasional museum-goers. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 36% of U.S. adults have a college degree.

² See <https://www.bls.gov/cex/> to explore yourself. Note, we use educational attainment instead of income because educational attainment is a stronger predictor of museum-going. Unsurprisingly, expenditures by income increase dramatically with income: the highest 20% of households by income spend 17x more on fees and admissions than the lowest 20% of households.

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.