

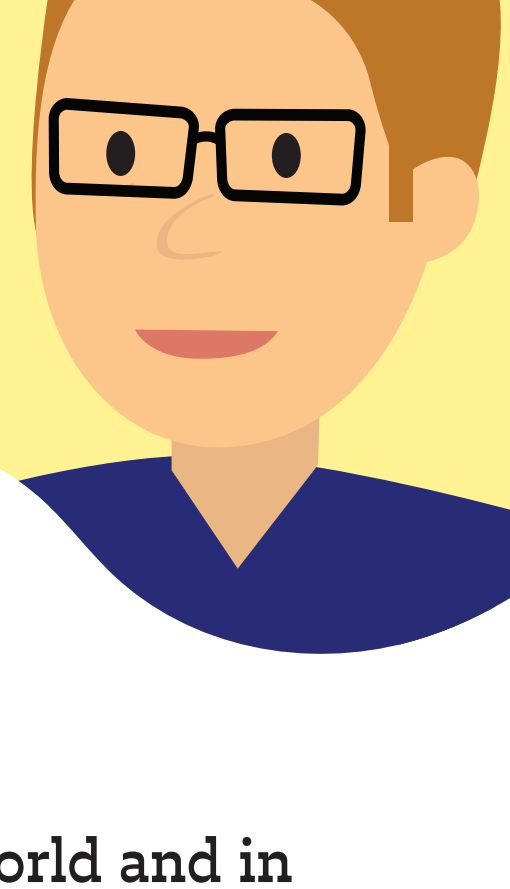
UNCERTAIN TIMES AND MUSEUMS

A 2026 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



"The worse the world gets, the more I want to be in nature and around art. I will always prioritize those two things, in fact more so. I bought my membership when I didn't really have disposable income because it is a cost-effective purchase. We need more museums."

"Museums are a respite from the turbulent complexities of these weird modern times."



We live in uncertain times.

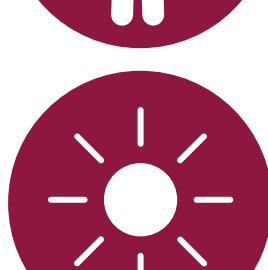
With so much happening in the world and in daily life, the past year has changed how people spend their time and money, including how they visit and engage with museums.



The war in Iran is affecting prices at the pump, and that can change when people travel and how often ... or if they can afford to travel at all.



Declining birthrates and changes in immigration policy in the U.S. affect demographic trends now and in the future.



Affordability is a critical issue for millions of households.



And a brutally hot summer and wildfires remind us of the increasing risks of climate change, while El Niño is also having short-term impacts on the weather.



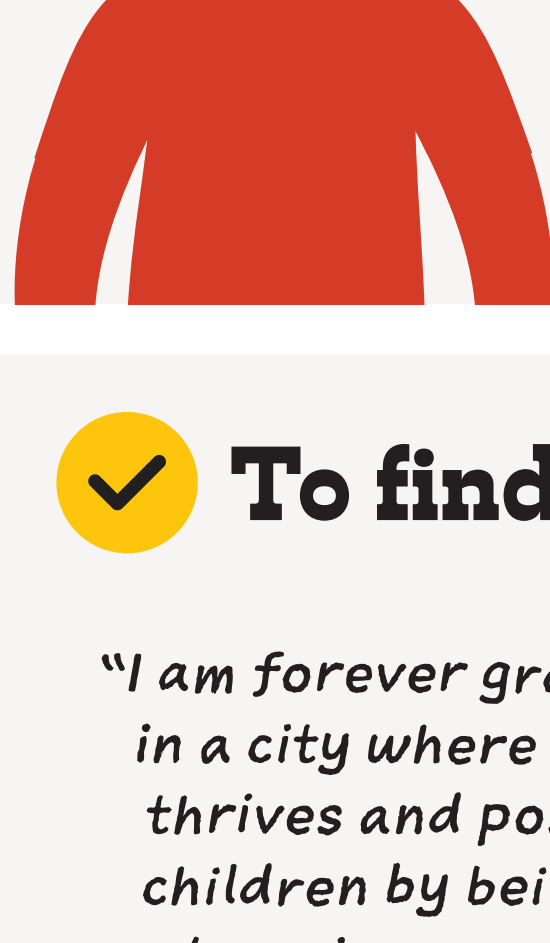
Oh ... and the United States is currently in the middle of mid-term elections.



Amid these uncertainties and challenges, people continue to visit museums.



To find respite.

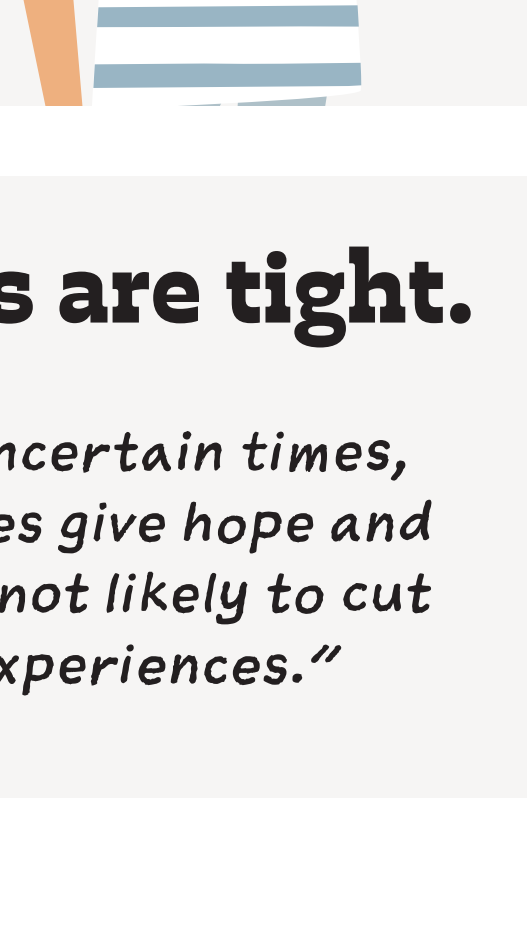


"It is an antidote to the news that overemphasizes how we are supposed to be incompatible and afraid of each other. Different yes, different circumstances and cultural contexts, but being able to reflect on shared humanity is important to me. Museums are a respite from the stress that says this is how it has to be."



To find awe and wonder.

"I am forever grateful I get to live in a city where museum culture thrives and positively impacts children by being part of their learning growth and human curiosity. When I get to visit now as an adult, that childlike wonder and curiosity returns to me; it returns to a place where it is safe, encouraged to learn and have fun."



Even when budgets are tight.



"I think in these uncertain times, museum experiences give hope and enjoyment and I'm not likely to cut back on those experiences."



Over the coming months, we will explore how museums can navigate uncertainty more effectively.

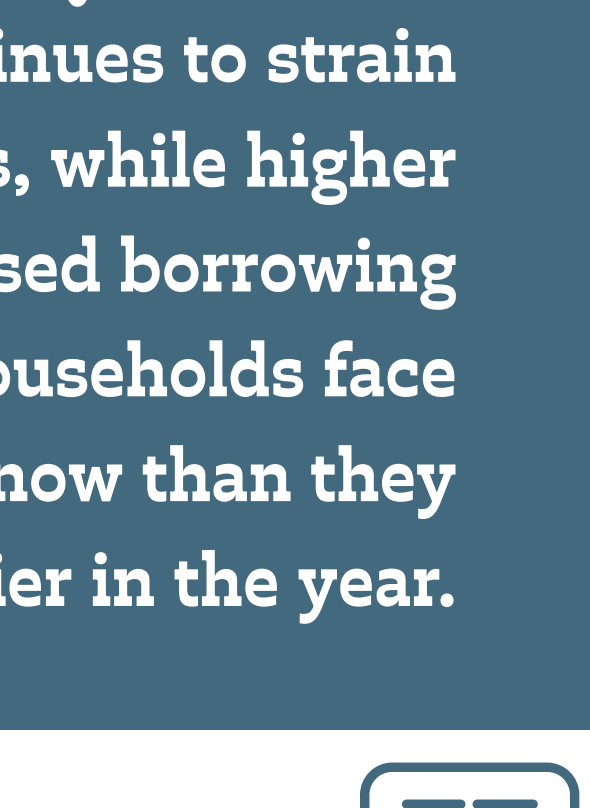
We'll start by considering the economic picture:

- ➡ Earned income
- ➡ Visitation trends
- ➡ Household budget considerations when times are tight

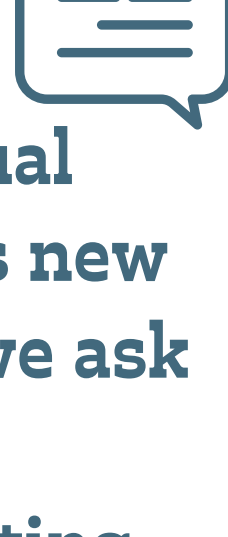
Then we'll look at why the public values museums, including:

- ➡ Awe, wonder, and meaningful museum experiences
- ➡ Respite, escape, and wellbeing
- ➡ Outcomes of museum visits
- ➡ And a few other topics that will likely pop up along the way

As researchers, we are very mindful that the data was collected at the beginning of this year. Circumstances have continued to change since then, including the war in Iran and subsequent increases in energy prices.



Inflation continues to strain household budgets, while higher interest rates have increased borrowing costs. As a result, many households face greater financial pressure now than they did earlier in the year.



The results from this year's Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, as well as new pressures, will shape the questions we ask in the 2027 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers. We want participating museums to have the most up-to-date information about how changing circumstances affect different groups of visitors and how museums can serve their communities most effectively.



Susie Wilkening,
lead author



American
Alliance of
Museums

WilkeningConsulting
audience research | knowledge curation

Data Story release date:
October 22, 2026
© 2026 Wilkening Consulting, LLC

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
• 2026 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 75,742; 186 museums participating
• 2026 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,045
• 2017 - 2025 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).
More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.