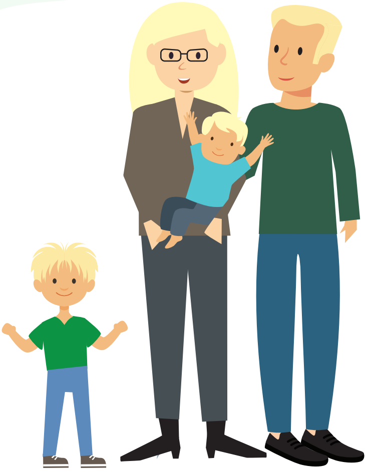
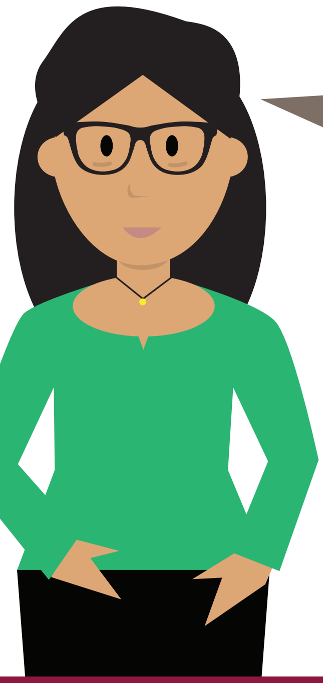
FAMILIES – A STRUGGLING AUDIENCE:
MUSEUM VISITORS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, PART 3
A 2026 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

FOR YEARS, families have been the segment of the population most likely to have visited a museum in the past year. And that remains true in 2026.[1]



Families have proven to be a relatively stable and resilient audience, viewing museums as educational and fun destinations for their children.



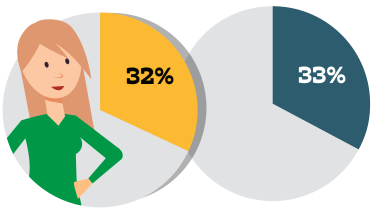
> *"Museum memberships are a way to budget for quality educational and cultural experiences for my family and me."*

But the data suggests cracks are developing within this crucial audience.

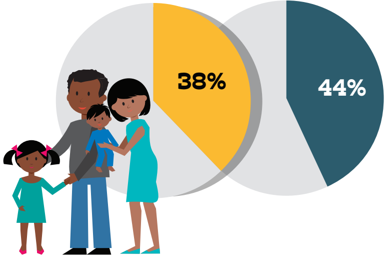
When we asked U.S. adults in early 2026 if they had visited a museum in the past year, visitation was stable across most life stages. The exception was parents and guardians of minor children, whose visitation **significantly decreased** from 44% to 38%.

🟨 2026 🟦 2025

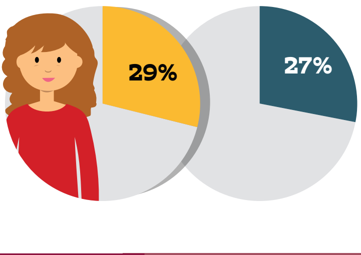
YOUNG ADULTS, NO MINOR CHILDREN



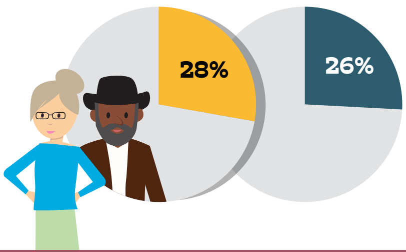
PARENT OR GUARDIAN OF MINOR CHILDREN



40 - 59, NO MINOR CHILDREN



60 OR OLDER, NO MINOR CHILDREN

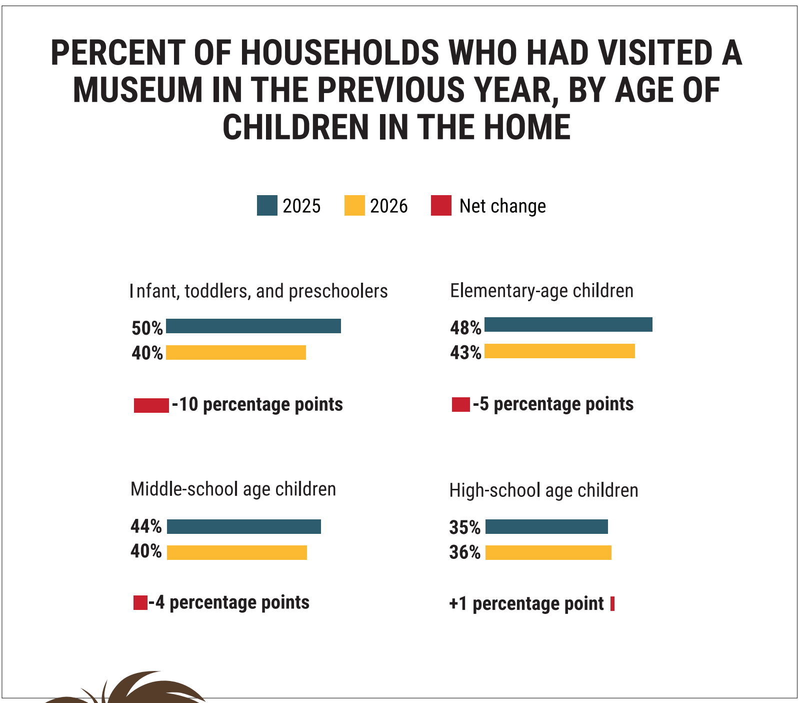


14%

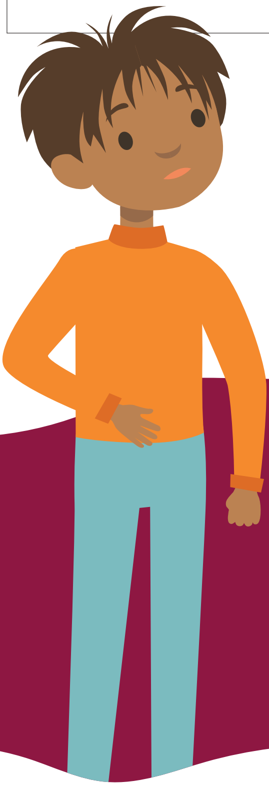
This decrease of six percentage *points* actually means **households with children were 14% less likely to report visiting a museum in 2026 than in 2025.** That's troubling.

The losses are not even across all families, either.

The biggest declines are among families with the very youngest children, while families with teenagers held steady.

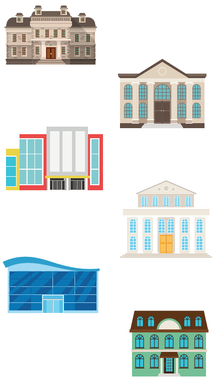


PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WHO HAD VISITED A MUSEUM IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR, BY AGE OF CHILDREN IN THE HOME



Even more troubling, our data shows that **repeat visitation is also falling** for family audiences, and falling most dramatically for families with very young children.

This suggests that museums primarily serving families, especially younger families, are likely facing more intense attendance pressures.



But this is a concern for *all* museums, as it means fewer children are being exposed to the unique and educational experiences museums provide. Additionally, it diminishes the likelihood of these children becoming lifelong learners who visit museums regularly as adults.

Why the pullback?

Since we were not expecting to see these results, we didn't ask questions specifically about it. But there are indicators that financial pressures may be a significant issue.

We have noted for several years that parents and guardians of minor children are more likely to be cost-sensitive. As inflation worries and childcare costs mount, some parents and guardians expressed that the cost of visiting museums has become more challenging.

"Looking ahead, I see a great decrease in our leisure and entertainment spending due to the economy and inflation."

"Museum membership and even just visits are a luxury we can't afford any longer. It's all too much when food and basics aren't affordable."

Additionally, parents and guardians are the most likely segment of museum visitors to say they are likely to cut back on future museum visits to save money this year. This suggests longer-term challenges on family attendance at museums.

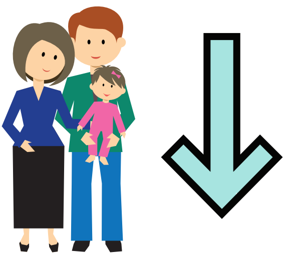
While we cannot say economic pressure is the *sole* issue, it seems to be a significant one to consider.

In addition to this behavioral shift, there are *demographic* shifts affecting family audiences.

So far, we have focused on the **choices parents and guardians are making** and how those choices may be contributing to fewer family visits.

But there are also demographic shifts affecting the **number of families in the United States,** which is resulting in a different pressure on family visitation.

Birthrates in the United States have been declining since 2007, and in 2024 the U.S. fertility rate was 1.6 children/woman. That is well below replacement level.[2]



This decline has been masked by immigration bringing new families to the country and increasing the number of children. Since 2025, however, there have been dramatic changes to immigration policy, and researchers project that the United States is now experiencing **net negative migration.** That means that in 2025, there were fewer children in the United States than in 2024 … and in 2026 there will be even further shrinkage of the population of children.[3]

The bottom line is, the population of children is shrinking, and there are declining numbers of families in the United States. On top of that, those families are now less likely to visit museums, and if they are visiting, they are visiting less frequently.

Because families are a core audience for the museum field, these overlapping pressures present challenges for all museums, but especially for museums that depend on family visitors the most. That makes it even more imperative to understand what is driving the pullback in visitation.

While leading indicators are that financial pressures appear to be the most likely reason for the declines in attendance from this audience, *we don't know for sure.* Research to date has identified the problem and provided hypotheses, but no answers.

The 2027 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers will follow-up. Has this audience challenge deepened, stabilized, or reversed? Has it extended to other audience segments? Are there challenges that go beyond financial constraints? We'll be exploring all of these questions so that participating museums have the most up-to-date information to navigate these challenges successfully.

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*

[1] Museum Visitation: Demographics of U.S. Museum-Goers, September 17, 2026.
[2] Centers for Disease Control, Births and General Fertility Rates, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data-visualization/natality-trends/index.htm
[3] Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-immigration-may-shape-america-after-250/

******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.**

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American Alliance of Museums

Wilkening Consulting
audience research | knowledge curation

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