



UNLOCKING GROWTH: THE DYNAMICS OF YOUTH TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES

International youth travelers visit the U.S. for leisure, education, and cultural exchanges. These young visitors not only experience American life but also drive substantial economic impact. The “Profile of the International Youth Traveler to the U.S.” is a global survey of inbound travelers aged 15-29, conducted by the WYSE Travel Confederation for Hostelling International USA. Extensive findings reveal the motivations, attitudes, spending habits, and travel patterns of these young visitors. Key findings are shared here, with all data sourced from the global survey unless otherwise noted.



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delivers lodging and programs through our hostel network, fostering a deeper understanding of people, places and the world through travel. This research is sponsored as part of our efforts to promote youth and student travel worldwide.

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1. Young Travelers Often Spend More Than Other Visitors

Inbound youth and student international travelers have a higher average U.S. trip spend than other international visitors. The survey reports the average trip spend by these young travelers visiting the U.S. is \$2,987, compared to \$2,576 for international visitors¹ of all ages. And 68% of their total trip budget is spent within the USA (74% if spending with U.S. carriers is included) compared to 61% of all travelers. Like other travelers, the average U.S. trip spend of inbound youth travelers tends to vary depending on their region or country of residence.²

2. And Stay Longer Than the Average Visitor

The average stay of a young international traveler is nearly 30 days longer than all international visitors to the United States: 50 nights vs. 21 nights. Cultural exchange, study, and temporary work programs enable young travelers to stay longer with specialized visas. And their personal and career commitments at home are fewer during their stage of life.

3. Young Visitors Are More Likely to Visit Less-Traveled Places

Longer visits to the United States, cultural exchange programs, and educational studies in non-urban destinations provide opportunities to explore less-traveled destinations. Although inbound youth and student travelers still visit top U.S. tourist spots such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Orlando, their full itineraries tend to be far more extensive. They report visiting a decidedly diverse mix of U.S. destinations: major cities (43%), smaller cities/towns (34%) and rural areas (22%). This wider travel pattern with the U.S. can boost the economies of smaller, typically less-traveled destinations.

¹ Calculated from Survey of International Air Travelers (SIAT) 2022/2023, average for overseas, Mexico and Canada arrivals. Source data at: U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration (2024). Survey of International Air Travelers. <https://www.trade.gov/survey-international-air-travelers-siat> ² For instance, if the calculation excludes spending of youth travelers originating from neighboring countries Canada and Mexico, the U.S. Inbound Youth Traveler Survey found the average U.S. trip spend for only overseas youth travelers is \$3,665.

4. Young Travelers Embrace Education in its Many Forms

Language learning and study rank among the top five reasons for youth travelers to visit the U.S., with vacation holidays taking the top spot. Other popular education-related pursuits include cultural exchange programs that offer work experience as well as short-term programs like study tours and field trips. International visitors studying in U.S. educational institutions in 2023 generated over \$50 billion of spending, comprising nearly 22% of all travel and tourism related expenditures by international visitors during the period, more than all forms of business travel (17%).³

5. Young Visitors Have Travel Budgets Supported by Multiple Sources of Funding

Inbound youth travelers rarely fund all their international travel costs themselves. The top three funding sources are their own income and savings (43%), parents and family (24%) and scholarships and grants (14%). The younger the traveler, the more likely they are to rely on family, friends and other funding sources. Educational travel is often supported by family and scholarships, while holiday trips are typically funded from personal funds. The Bridge USA J-1 Work/Travel Program, operated to promote mutual understanding between the U.S. and other countries, allows college-aged students to work in sectors that struggle to fill temporary positions during peak seasons such as hospitality and tourism. Participants work and live temporarily in the U.S. during their academic breaks and return home afterwards.⁴

6. Young Visitors Travel to the U.S. for More Than a Vacation

For young visitors to the U.S., a vacation holiday was the single most frequent purpose (40%), but 60% of respondents were traveling for purposes other than leisure travel, including language learning (34%), work experience (26%) and academic study (17%). Among their motivations for visiting the U.S., the most common responses are exploring other cultures (54%), relaxing and avoiding stress (52%), experiencing everyday life (50%) and increasing my knowledge (49%). Relaxing and avoiding stress tend to be generally related to those on vacation.

7. Young Travelers Are More Likely to Come Back in the Future

Young visitors to the United States are very satisfied with their visit (8.7 on a scale of 10), with no significant differences by sex, race, sexual orientation, or region of origin; nearly 50% of respondents gave a perfect score of 10 out of 10. The elements most strongly associated with the intention to return to a city destination are cultural activities and value for money. Future trips are likely to involve holidays or work experience, and be less focused on developing language skills. A UNWTO study finds young travelers are likely to return and give more value to the destination over time.⁵

8. The Youth Travel Market Generally Shows Greater Resilience in Challenging Times

Over 65% of young inbound travelers report terrorism, war, and natural disasters would have “no impact” on their travel plans. Additionally, 58% indicate that public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, would have no impact. During the pandemic, travelers aged 18-34 were the most resilient inbound age segment to the U.S., with its share of all overseas arrivals rising to 33.5% in 2020 (up from 29.0% in 2019), while other age groups declined at a greater pace.⁶

9. Youth Travel to the U.S. is Declining as Global Competition Increases

About 3 million fewer overseas travelers aged 18-34 visited the U.S. in 2023, dropping from 11.7 million in 2019 to 8.7 million,⁷ and resulting in an estimated \$7 billion loss to the U.S. economy. The diplomatic loss of these young people not having the opportunity to experience all the U.S. has to offer is inestimable. At the same time, other countries like Australia and the United Kingdom already have recognized the value of the youth and student segment, and have developed specific plans to attract them.



The World Youth Student and Educational (WYSE) Travel Confederation

is the only global not for-profit membership organization that represents the youth travel industry. WYSE Travel Confederation connects the travel industry through research, education, advocacy and networking activities that focus on youth travel, its benefits and opportunities.

www.wysetc.org

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis (June 2024). U.S. International Transactions, 1st Quarter 2024 and Annual Update. <https://www.bea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/trans124.pdf>

⁴ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (2024). BridgeUSA. <https://i1visa.state.gov/> ⁵ UNWTO and World Youth Student and Educational Travel Confederation (2011) The power of youth travel, Vol 2, UNWTO, Madrid, p.3. <https://www.unwto.org/doi/book/10.18111/9789284414574> ⁶ U.S. International Trade Administration (2024), AIDS/I-94 COR Visitor Arrivals Monitor (downloadable Excel file). <https://www.trade.gov/i-94-arrivals-historical-data> ⁷ Ibid.