

How Malls Can Win in 2026

Dive into the latest traffic data to see how indoor malls, open-air centers, and outlets are performing this year – and the factors shaping success across formats.



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Key Takeaways:

1. **Mall traffic is proving resilient across formats.** Indoor malls and open-air centers have posted consistent YoY visit growth, outlet declines have been modest, and early 2026 data shows renewed momentum across all three formats.
2. **Performance is increasingly defined by the convenience–experience divide.** Growth in short visits and extended stays – alongside declines in mid-length trips – shows that consumers are gravitating toward trips with a clear purpose, favoring either efficiency or immersion.
3. **Indoor malls are strengthening their role as experiential “third places.”** Rising dwell times and strong engagement from younger, contemporary households position indoor malls as leading destinations for longer, experience-driven trips.
4. **Open-air centers are winning the weekly routine.** A higher share of short, weekday visits – along with strong appeal among affluent families – underscores their role as convenient, essential retail hubs.
5. **Outlet malls are at a crossroads.** As off-price and online alternatives erode their treasure-hunt advantage and long-distance visitation softens, outlets face a strategic choice between deepening local relevance and reinvesting in destination appeal.
6. **Strategic clarity will determine the winners.** The malls that thrive will be those that intentionally optimize for convenience, experience, or a disciplined integration of both.

Here to Stay

Despite economic headwinds, intensifying e-commerce competition, and fragile consumer confidence, shopping centers continue to defy the “dead mall” narrative – reinventing themselves and, in many cases, thriving.

What can location analytics tell us about the state of the mall in 2026? Which trends and audiences are driving their performance – and how can operators and retailers best capitalize on the opportunities within the category?

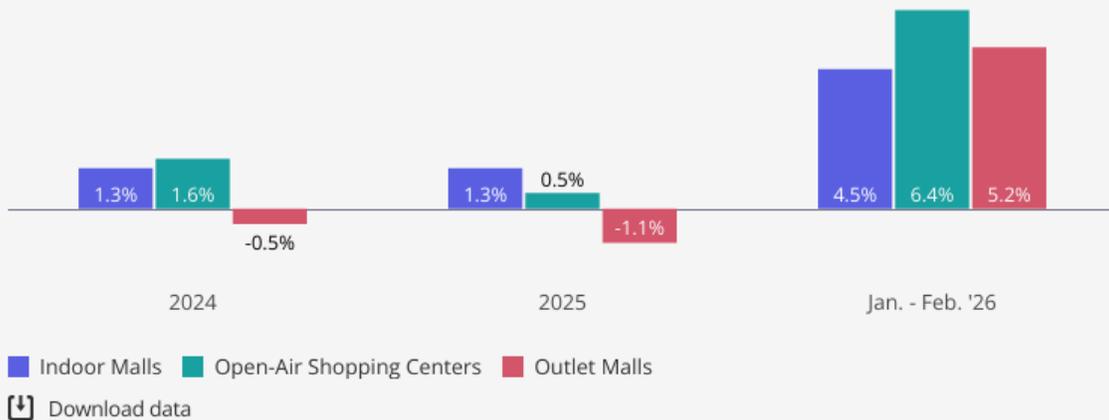
Traffic Resilience

Over the past two years, both indoor malls and open-air shopping centers have posted consistent year-over-year (YoY) traffic growth. And while outlet malls experienced slight declines, the pullback was modest – signaling a period of stability rather than erosion.

Early 2026 data also points to continued momentum, with all three mall formats recording mid-single-digit YoY traffic gains in the first two months of the year. Although it's still early days – and YoY comparisons in 2026 were boosted by an additional Saturday – the positive start suggests that the industry is entering the year on a solid footing.

Indoor and Open-Air Centers See Two Straight Years of Traffic Growth; All Formats Kick Off 2026 With Mid-Single-Digit YoY Gains

Visits to Mall Formats Compared to Previous Year (YoY)



 Placer.ai

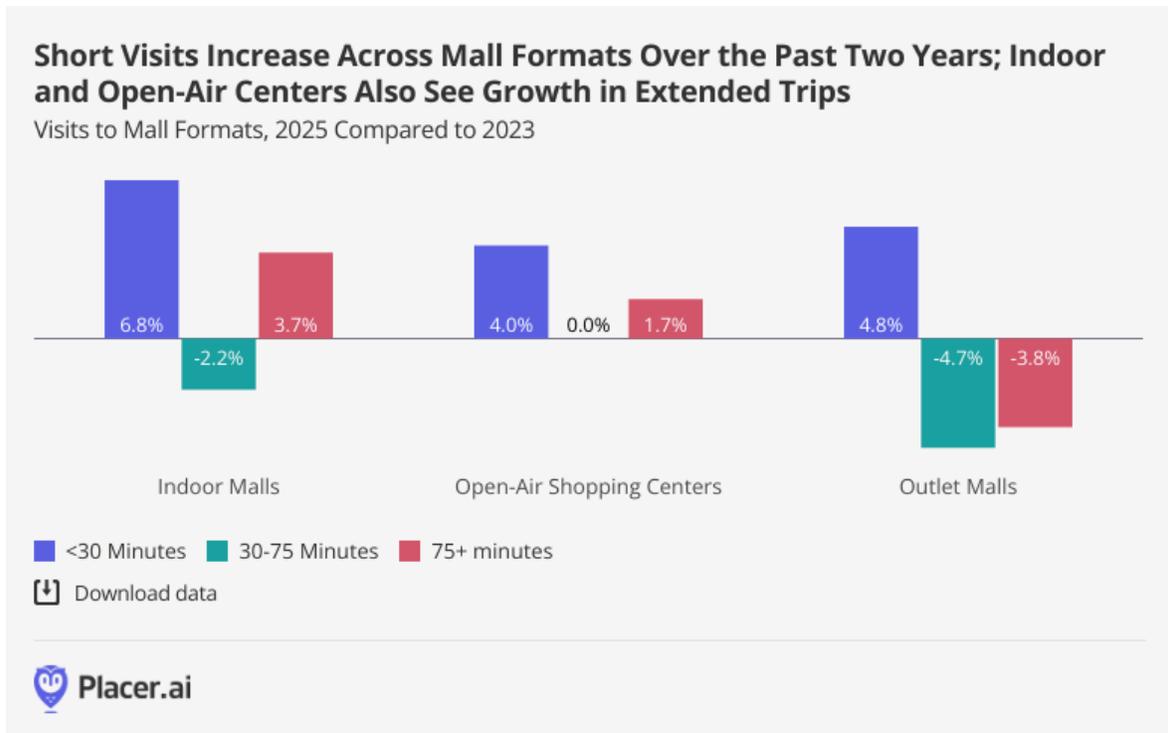
The Convenience / Experience Divide

With e-commerce always within reach, hybrid work anchoring more consumers at home, and ongoing economic uncertainty influencing spending decisions, trips to physical stores are becoming more [intentional](#). Shopping center visit data reflects this shift as well, with growth in both quick convenience visits and extended experiential outings – alongside a decline in mid-length trips.

In 2025, quick trips (under 30 minutes) increased across all formats, underscoring malls' growing role as convenient, high-utility destinations for picking up an online order, grabbing a quick bite, or making a targeted purchase. At the same time, extended visits of more than 75 minutes increased at indoor malls and open-air centers, reflecting sustained appetite for immersive, experiential outings.

Meanwhile, mid-length visits (between 30 and 75 minutes) lagged across formats – falling indoor malls and outlet malls and remaining flat at open-air centers –

suggesting shoppers are losing patience with undifferentiated trips that lack a clear purpose.

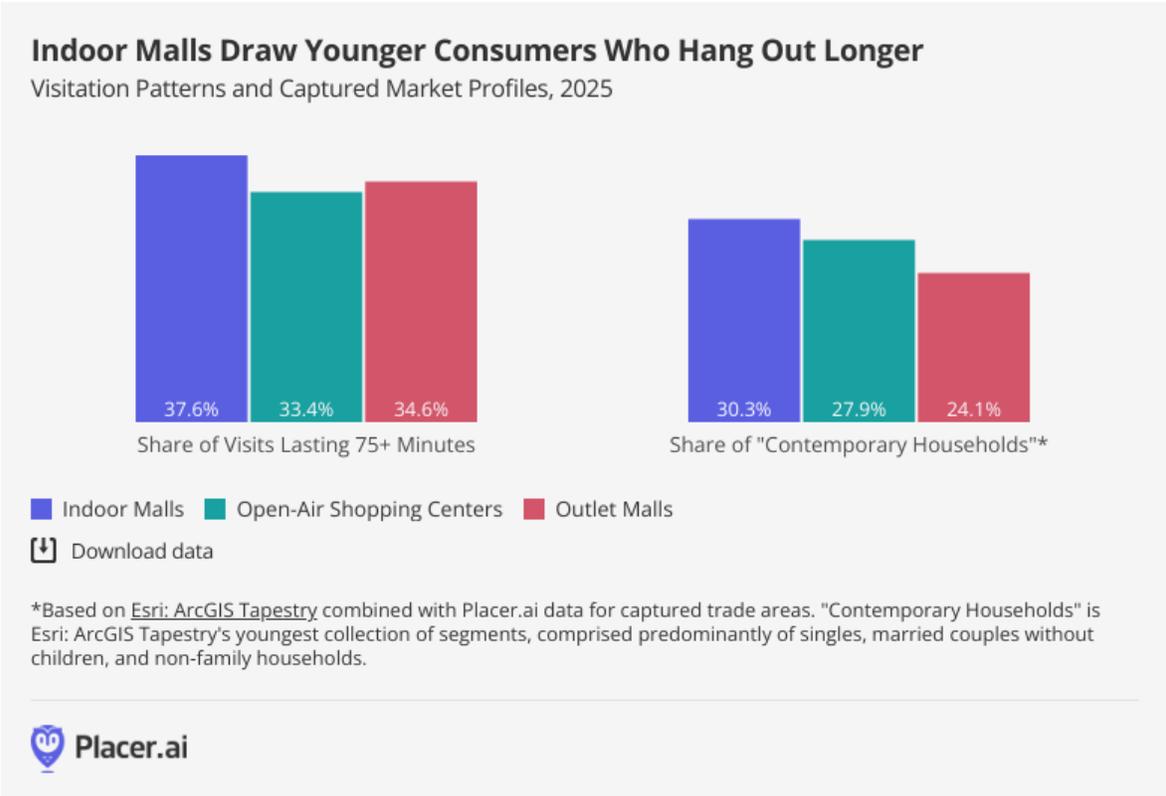


Still, although short visits increased year over year across all mall types, and long visits increased for both indoor malls and open-air centers, the distribution of dwell time varies by format. Short visits make up a larger share of traffic at open-air shopping centers, for example, while longer visits account for a greater share at indoor malls. This divergence underscores the need for format-specific strategies, with operators clearly defining the core shoppers and missions they are best suited to serve and aligning tenant mix, amenities, and marketing accordingly.

Indoor Malls Lean Into the Hangout Economy

Indoor malls, for instance, have increasingly positioned themselves as experiential hubs – particularly for younger [consumers](#). Recent survey [data](#) shows that 57% of shoppers aged 18 to 34 report visiting a mall frequently or often, and they are more likely than older cohorts to arrive without a specific purchase in mind.

Foot traffic patterns reinforce this experiential appeal. In 2025, 37.6% of indoor mall visits lasted more than 75 minutes, compared to 33.4% for open-air centers and 34.6% for outlets. Indoor malls also captured the largest share of visits from the young-skewing “contemporary households” segment – singles, non-family households, and young couples without children – indicating strong resonance with younger audiences.



Indoor Mall Dwell Times on the Rise

As indoor malls [expand](#) their experiential offerings, visit durations are rising even further – even as they hold steady or even slightly decline at other formats. For operators, this shift highlights a significant opportunity for indoor malls to deepen their role as climate-controlled third places. And for brands, it means high-impact access to Gen Z consumers in discovery mode – top-of-funnel engagement that is increasingly difficult and expensive to replicate through digital channels alone.

Average Dwell Time at Indoor Malls on the Rise

Average Annual Dwell Time Across Mall Formats in Minutes



Open-Air Centers Anchor the Weekly Routine

If indoor malls excel at capturing extended, social visits, open-air centers are finding success through convenience. In 2025, open-air centers had the highest shares of both weekday visits (64.0%) and short, sub-30 minutes (36.8%) among the three formats. Grocery anchors, superstores, and essential-service tenants like gyms – more common at open-air centers than at other formats – help drive steady, non-discretionary traffic.

Demographically, open-air centers drew the highest share of affluent families, a key demographic for daily errands. This alignment with higher-income households, combined with weekday consistency, positions open-air centers as reliable errand hubs embedded in community life.

Open-Air Shopping Centers Serve as Weekday Errand Hubs for Wealthy Families

Visitation Patterns, 2025



Download data

*Based on [Spatial.ai: PersonaLive](#) combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas.



Outlet Malls at a Crossroads

Outlet malls, for their part, have historically differentiated themselves by offering something shoppers couldn't find elsewhere: an experiential treasure hunt featuring brand-name merchandise at compelling prices. But the decline in long visits shown above suggests that this positioning may be coming under pressure – likely from the rise of off-price and discount chains as well as other low-cost, convenient treasure-hunt alternatives like thrift stores. When shoppers can score attractive deals online or browse for bargains at a nearby T.J. Maxx or Ollie's Bargain Outlet, the incentive to dedicate time and travel to an outlet trip may no longer feel as compelling – especially for outlet malls' core audience, which includes meaningful contingents of middle and lower-income consumers with families.

Outlets Draw Visits From Larger, Less Affluent Households Seeking to Save

Outlet Mall Captured Market Profile*



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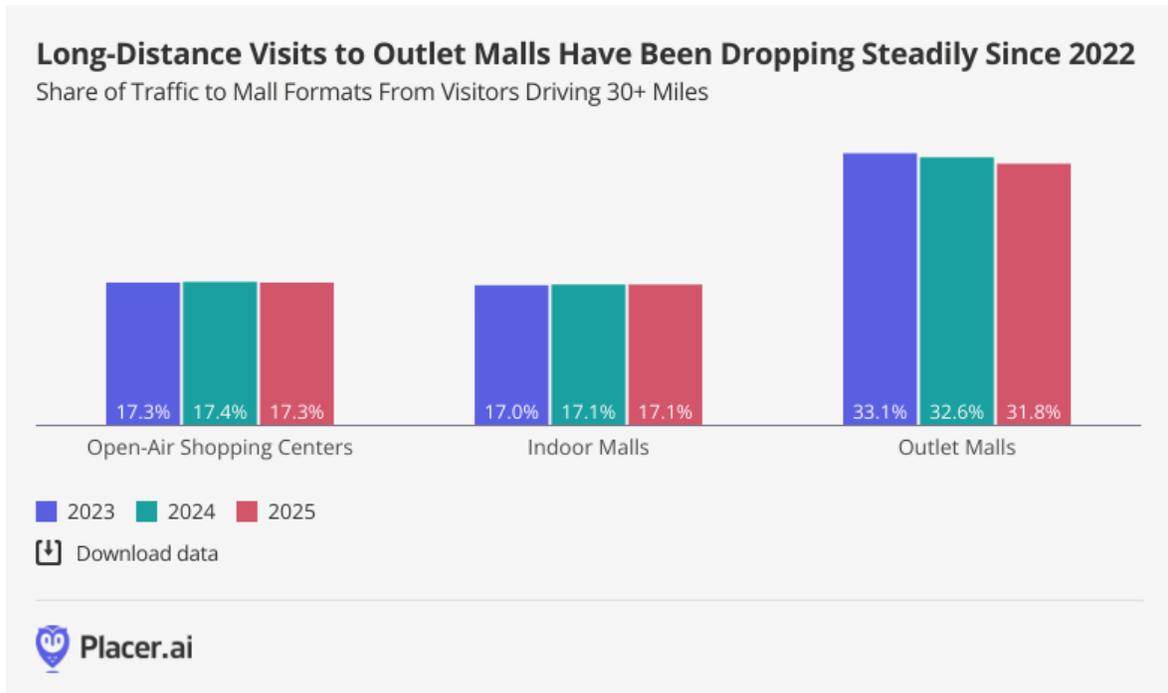
*Based on data from [STI:PopStats](#) combined with Placer.ai data for captured trade areas.



Going the Distance?

And data points to a subtle but steady erosion in the share of visitors willing to go the extra mile to visit outlet malls. Since 2023, the share of outlet visits from consumers traveling more than 30 miles has slipped from 33.1% to 31.8%, even as long-distance visits to other mall formats have remained relatively stable. This softening of

destination demand may be contributing to outlets' recent traffic lags.



Still, despite these lags in foot traffic, major outlet companies continue to see YoY [increases](#) in same-center tenant sales per square foot. The format's strong visit start to 2026 also suggests that outlets still have significant draw – and that with the right strategy, they could reinvigorate their traffic trends.

One option is for outlet malls to lean further into their immediate trade areas: Nearly 20% of visits to outlets already originate within five miles – a share that edged up from 19.4% in 2023 to 19.9% in 2025. These closer shoppers may be largely responsible for the segment's rise in short visits, pointing to an opportunity to further augment BOPIS offerings and select essential-use tenants.

Another option is to strengthen outlets' destination appeal with distinctive retail, dining, and experiential offerings that resonate with value-oriented, larger-household shoppers. But whether they focus on convenience or on justifying the journey – or attempt to balance both – success will depend on identifying who their shoppers are and which missions they are best positioned to own.

Strategic Clarity for the Win

As in other areas of retail, shopping center success increasingly depends on strategic clarity. The malls that thrive will be those that clearly define their role in their customers' lives and execute against it with intention – whether by decisively optimizing for efficiency, fully investing in experience, or thoughtfully integrating both.