

Mass**INC** Policy Center

Middle Class Household Shares Data and Methods

2026

1. Key Concepts and Definitions

This analysis combines American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data with the project's middle-class budget model to estimate:

- the distribution of household types across states and over time;
- the share of benchmark households whose income meets or exceeds the middle-class standard of living; and
- how these patterns vary by household structure, age of householder, race and ethnicity, geography, and time.

The analysis centers on a set of benchmark households that correspond to the family structures used in the middle-class budget model. These benchmark households are intended to reflect common household forms: a single adult maintaining an independent household, a couple living independently, or a family raising children without relying on additional adult household members outside the immediate household unit.

The benchmark household types are:

- **1 adult:** one adult, no children
- **2 adults:** two adults living as spouses or unmarried partners, with no children
- **1 adult with 2 children:** one adult and two children under age 26
- **2 adults with 2 children (1 earner):** two adults living as spouses or partners, only one working, and two children under age 26
- **2 adults with 2 children (2 earners):** two adults living as spouses or partners, both working, and two children under age 26

The budget model also distinguishes among five life stages based on the age of the ACS householder (the person listed first on the lease, deed, or mortgage): ages 26–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65 or older. Households headed by adults under age 26 are excluded from the benchmark framework because the budget model begins at age 26. In addition, households with children are only benchmarked for householders under age 55, consistent with the life-stage structure used in the middle-class budget model.

For the race and ethnicity analysis, each household was assigned to a broad mutually exclusive race/ethnicity category based on the ACS householder: Hispanic/Latino, White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Asian non-Hispanic, and Other non-Hispanic. The “Other non-Hispanic” category combines American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Some Other Race, and Two or More Races.

2. Sources and Methods

The primary data source is the American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), produced by the US Census Bureau. Four ACS 5-year samples were used:

- 2005–2009
- 2010–2014
- 2015–2019
- 2020–2024

The ACS PUMS provides household- and person-level microdata, including household income, household composition, age, employment status, race and ethnicity, and survey weights. Each 5-year sample is designed to represent the household population when weighted appropriately.

The income thresholds required to sustain a middle-class standard of living were estimated separately using the project’s middle-class budget model. These thresholds vary by state, year, household structure, and age of householder.

For each state and ACS sample year, household- and person-level PUMS files were linked using the ACS household identifier to construct household-level measures of family composition, earnings, and selected characteristics of the ACS householder.

Household income was measured using ACS household income measure “Total income”—the sum of the amounts reported separately for wage or salary income; net self-employment income; interest, dividends, or net rental or royalty income or income from estates and trusts; Social Security or Railroad Retirement income; Supplemental Security Income (SSI); public assistance or welfare payments; retirement, survivor, or disability pensions; and all other income. Receipts from the following sources are not included as income: capital gains, money received from the sale of property (unless the recipient was engaged in the business of selling such property); the value of income “in kind” from food stamps, public housing subsidies, medical care, employer contributions for individuals, etc.; withdrawal of bank deposits; money borrowed; tax refunds; exchange of money between relatives living in the same household; gifts and lump-sum inheritances, insurance payments, and other types of lump-sum receipts.

Linking households to middle-class thresholds

The middle-class budget model estimates the income required to sustain a middle-class standard of living for each combination of:

- state,
- year,
- household structure, and
- age of householder.

These thresholds incorporate the costs of major components of household budgets, including housing, childcare, health care, transportation, taxes, retirement saving, and other core expenses.

Each benchmark household in the ACS data was matched to the appropriate threshold using its state, sample year, benchmark family type, and age-of-householder category. A household was classified as meeting the middle-class standard if its adjusted household income was greater than or equal to the required income threshold for its benchmark type.

Because the budget model is defined only for the benchmark household structures, the affordability analysis is limited to those households.

Population-representative estimation

The ACS is a sample survey rather than a full census of households. Each household observation therefore represents multiple households in the population.

All estimates were calculated using the ACS household weight (WGTP), so that state and national results reflect the household population rather than the unweighted sample. For example, the share of benchmark households meeting the middle-class threshold was estimated as the weighted proportion of benchmark households whose adjusted income met or exceeded the relevant threshold.

State-level estimates were calculated directly from each state's ACS microdata. Margins of error were calculated using the ACS replicate-weight method and analyzed to ensure that state comparisons were precise enough across each household type.

Race and ethnicity subgroup estimates

To examine disparities in access to a middle-class standard of living, the analysis also produced estimates by the broad race/ethnicity category of the ACS householder/reference person.

Household-composition estimates by race and ethnicity were calculated using the same weighted ACS framework described above. For each year and race/ethnicity group, the analysis estimated the distribution of household types and benchmark family types. Margins of error were calculated using the ACS replicate-weight method and analyzed to ensure that comparisons were precise enough across racial and ethnic groups.

For middle-class affordability estimates by race and ethnicity, each benchmark household was first matched to the appropriate middle-class income threshold using its state, year, family type, and age-of-householder category, just as in the main affordability analysis. After this matching step, the age categories were collapsed when estimating subgroup shares by race and family type. Each household was therefore evaluated against the age-appropriate threshold for its own life stage, but the resulting subgroup estimates pooled households across age groups within each race/ethnicity-by-family-type cell.

This approach was used because fully disaggregating the estimates by race/ethnicity, family type, and age produced margins of error that were often too large to support stable interpretation. Collapsing across age after the threshold-matching step preserves the logic of the budget model while producing more reliable subgroup estimates.