EPOP:2026 – A New Longitudinal Resource for Entrepreneurial Research

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OVERVIEW

As the final annual survey in the Entrepreneurship in the Population (EPOP) study, EPOP:2026 introduces a new sample design with a longitudinal component. This design intentionally selects individuals who participated in EPOP:2024 or EPOP:2025 to enable analyses of change over time, supporting a broad range of research applications. This brief first describes the key features of the EPOP:2026 survey and important design changes relative to previous waves of the EPOP survey. It then provides a high-level overview of changes in entrepreneurial activities from EPOP:2024 or 2025 to EPOP:2026, highlights research opportunities enabled by this unique data resource, and provides guidance on using the data files.



1 KEY CHANGES TO EPOP:2026

While the overall structure of the EPOP survey stayed the same, EPOP:2026 included multiple changes to enable new longitudinal analyses.

Sample Design

EPOP:2026 introduced a longitudinal sample component that selects respondents who previously participated in EPOP:2024 or EPOP:2025. Eligibility for the longitudinal sample was based solely on prior survey participation and was independent of a respondent's previously reported entrepreneurial status. Of 12,961 eligible respondents, 10,107 sample members were selected for inclusion in the longitudinal

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component, which comprises nearly 60% of the full EPOP:2026 sample. An additional 6,814 panelists were selected to form a cross-sectional supplement, allowing EPOP:2026 to support both longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses.

Questionnaire Changes

The EPOP:2026 questionnaire went through multiple changes to take advantage of the longitudinal sample design for Year 5. Returning sample members were asked new screener questions that confirmed the entrepreneurial experience they previously reported in either EPOP:2024 or EPOP:2025, whichever was more recent. Additionally, many existing EPOP survey items (e.g., startup capital, challenges encountered while pursuing entrepreneurship and steps taken) were not re-asked of sample members who reported the same job, business, or other entrepreneurial activity as they had when they last participated in EPOP.

The most significant additions to the EPOP:2026 questionnaire were questions explicitly asking about changes in respondents' entrepreneurial activities since their previous interview. These items asked respondents if their current entrepreneurial activity was the same business or idea they reported in the previous round and, if not, whether the current activity used similar suppliers, had a similar customer base, or had employees similar to those associated with the previously reported activity.

2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH USING EPOP:2026

EPOP:2026 provides a unique opportunity to examine changes in entrepreneurial activities over time. To illustrate how the longitudinal data can be used, this brief first summarizes the types of activity changes captured in the file and then presents a specific example focused on nascent entrepreneurs.

Changes in Entrepreneurial Activities Over Time

Entrepreneurial activity is rarely static. Table 1 shows just how much movement occurred over a one- to two-year period by comparing the primary entrepreneurial activities of the 7,410 respondents in the longitudinal sample in the base period (EPOP:2024 or EPOP:2025) with their activities in EPOP:2026.[1]

Among respondents classified as current business owners in the base period, nearly two-thirds (64.3%) remained business owners in EPOP:2026, while roughly one-third transitioned out of ownership. Of these original business owners, 17.1% moved into freelancing and 3.0% were planning an entrepreneurial venture. Base period freelancers showed even more movement across entrepreneurial categories: just over half (54.0%) remained freelancers at follow-up, while 15.7% transitioned to business ownership, and 6.1% started planning their business (i.e., nascent entrepreneurs). Another 6.8% became former business owners, and 17.4% were no longer engaged in business ownership, freelancing, or entrepreneurial planning at all.

Meaningful transitions occurred even among respondents who were not actively engaged in entrepreneurship in the base period, including former business owners, former freelancers, withdrawn entrepreneurs, and those with no entrepreneurial history. Among former business owners, for example, 5.2% became current business owners, 6.3% became current freelancers, and 3.5% were classified as

[1] Because individuals may engage in multiple entrepreneurial activities simultaneously, respondents are assigned to a single primary entrepreneurial activity category using a predetermined prioritization scheme (Brummet and Johnson, 2022). While the survey identifies all entrepreneurial activities in which a respondent is involved, detailed follow-up questions are asked only about the primary activity. As a result, the categories shown in Table 1 reflect respondents' primary entrepreneurial activity and do not capture all entrepreneurial activities reported. Sample sizes for respondents engaged in each entrepreneurial activity, regardless of whether it was classified as their primary activity, are provided in Appendix A.

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nascent entrepreneurs at follow-up. Even respondents with no prior entrepreneurial activity in the base period were not entirely static. By EPOP:2026, 3.0% who had never engaged in entrepreneurial activity had become business owners, 5.1% had become freelancers, and 2.3% were engaged in entrepreneurial planning. Together, these findings underscore how dynamic the entrepreneurial process can be and how much change can occur in a relatively short window of time.

TABLE 1. Longitudinal Changes in Primary Entrepreneurial Activity Classification

Base Period Classification (*n* = 7,410; *N* = 258,902,800)	EPOP:2026 Follow-Up Classification						
	Current Business Owner	Current Freelancer	Nascent Entrepreneur	Former Business Owner	Former Freelancer	Withdrawn Entrepreneur	No Entrepreneur Activities
Current Business Owner (*n* = 926; *N* = 32,524,500)	64.3	17.1	3.0	15.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Current Freelancer (*n* = 1,100; *N* = 37,423,200)	15.7	54.0	6.1	6.8	17.4	0.0	0.0
Nascent Entrepreneur (*n* = 379; *N* = 14,488,300)	14.6	13.3	19.5	11.5	13.0	23.4	4.6
Former Business Owner (*n* = 708; *N* = 22,368,000)	5.2	6.3	3.5	84.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Former Freelancer (*n* = 720; *N* = 21,937,100)	4.7	8.0	3.1	11.6	72.4	0.2	0.0
Withdrawn Entrepreneur (*n* = 763; *N* = 25,488,000)	5.2	7.5	6.7	1.8	9.9	68.2	0.6
No Entrepreneur Activities (*n* = 2,814; *N* = 104,673,800)	3.0	5.1	2.3	2.1	5.4	10.2	71.8

Notes: Sample is restricted to the longitudinal component of EPOP:2026 (N = 7,410). Base period refers to the respondent's prior year of participation in EPOP (either 2024 or 2025). Entries are weighted row percentages using the EPOP:2026 longitudinal weight, and unweighted sample sizes and weighted population estimates (rounded to the nearest 100) are shown in row labels. Rows may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. Categories reflect respondents' primary entrepreneurial activity based on the EPOP entrepreneurial activity screener. Because respondents may engage in multiple entrepreneurial activities simultaneously, classifications shown here represent a prioritized summary measure rather than all reported activities.

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Outcomes of Nascent Entrepreneurs

As a specific example of how the EPOP:2026 longitudinal data can be used, consider the outcomes of nascent business entrepreneurs who reported attempting to start a business in the base period. As shown in Table 2, nearly 5% of the EPOP sample were classified as nascent entrepreneurs when they were surveyed in 2024 or 2025. In the 2026 follow-up, 16% of these nascent entrepreneurs were current business owners, meaning in one to two years, their primary entrepreneurial activity shifted from considering and planning their business concept to actually running a business. While many of these nascent entrepreneurs were likely considering multiple business concepts, around a third of these individuals who moved from pursuing to owning a business maintained a consistent business concept over a 1- to 2-year period.

TABLE 2. First-Time Nascent Entrepreneur Pathways from Base Period to EPOP:2026 Follow-Up

% Who are First-Time Nascent Entrepreneurs in base period[a]		First-Time Nascent Entrepreneurs in base period… % Who are Current Business Owners in 2026		First-Time Nascent Entrepreneurs in base period… Who are Current Business Owners in 2026… % Who have a consistent business concept	
Yes	4.5%	**Current business owner**	16.0%	**Consistent business concept**	37.4%
				Different business concept	62.6%
		Not a business owner	84.0%	Not applicable	
No	95.5%	Not applicable		Not applicable	

Notes: All statistics are weighted using EPOP:2026 longitudinal weights. NA = not applicable. Base period refers to the respondent's prior year of participation in EPOP (either 2024 or 2025). "First-time" nascent entrepreneurs are the subset of nascent entrepreneurs in Table 1 who have no prior business ownership experience.

3 HOW TO USE EPOP:2026

Longitudinal data from EPOP:2026 are available exclusively through the EPOP Restricted Use File (RUF). Access to the RUF requires completion of a brief training covering disclosure protection and publication requirements, as well as execution of a data use agreement. Additional information about the RUF application process, including access requirements and application materials, is available at: https://epop.norc.org/researchers/restricted-use-files.html.

As in prior years, cross-sectional EPOP:2026 data are available through the annual Public Use File (PUF): https://epop.norc.org/researchers/public-use-files.html.

For any questions or further information, please contact EPOPResearch@norc.org.

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ABOUT THE EPOP SURVEY PROJECT

EPOP Survey Project Overview

The EPOP Survey aims to fully understand entrepreneurship in the U.S. economy across the varied pathways people take towards business ownership. Thus, the EPOP Survey considers the experiences not only of current business owners but also individuals in the process of starting a business, as well as those who are no longer business owners. The project conducts an annual survey of individuals to represent the non-institutionalized adult population in the U.S. by state and major metropolitan area. This report is based on the 2026 survey. Of those who are or who have engaged in entrepreneurial activity, the EPOP Survey asks about business formation steps and support, challenges and obstacles, and capital investments.

Survey Design and Methodology (2026)

A complete methodology report is available on the EPOP Survey website.

Target Population. All non-institutionalized adults 18 years or older in the United States.

Sample Design and Frame. The study sample is selected from NORC's AmeriSpeak® Panel, with samples selected with explicit stratification and known sample selection probabilities.

Data Collection. EPOP:2026 started on February 20, 2026 and ended on March 11, 2026. Data were primarily collected via an online survey; computer-assisted telephone interviewing was a secondary mode and available upon request. The survey was available in both English and Spanish. All participants were compensated for their participation.

Data Processing. The raw data file was reviewed and compared to the programmed survey specifications to identify data irregularities and develop any necessary code to transform raw data for consistency. Complete and partial survey records were all reviewed for data integrity (e.g., to identify respondents who completed the survey too quickly to have read question text and respondents who straight-lined responses) and those that were in violation were discarded. For a small number of cases where the data could not be repaired, the case was discarded. Similarly, cases were evaluated for item nonresponse. Those with high item nonresponse or missing critical pathway information were dropped from the final data set.

Weighting. EPOP:2026 provides separate weights for cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. Cross-sectional weights are available for all respondents and available in both the PUF and RUF. Longitudinal weights are available only for respondents included in the longitudinal component and are only available in the RUF.

About NORC

The EPOP Survey Project is designed and conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. NORC is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions. NORC conducts objective, non-partisan research to help inform people in government, nonprofits, and businesses making decisions on key issues of the day. Our research addresses important issues like employment, education, and health care. Since 1941, NORC has conducted groundbreaking studies, created and applied innovative methods and tools, and advanced principles of scientific integrity and collaboration. Today, government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world partner with NORC to transform increasingly complex information into useful knowledge.

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About the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

The EPOP Survey Project is both guided and funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, a private, nonpartisan foundation based in Kansas City, Mo., which seeks to build inclusive prosperity through a prepared workforce and entrepreneur-focused economic development. The Foundation uses its $3 billion in assets to change conditions, address root causes, and break down systemic barriers so that all people – regardless of race, gender, or geography – have the opportunity to achieve economic stability, mobility, and prosperity. For more information, visit kauffman.org and connect with us at instagram.com/kauffmanfdn and facebook.com/kauffmanfdn.

REFERENCES

Brummet, Quentin and Katie Johnson. 2022. "Understanding the American Entrepreneurship Landscape: A New Resource." NORC at the University of Chicago. https://epop.norc.org/content/dam/epop/media/publications/pdf/epop2022-brief_american_entrepreneurship.pdf.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX TABLE A1. Entrepreneurial Activity in Base Period for Longitudinal EPOP:2026 Sample

Entrepreneurial Activity in EPOP:2024 or 2025	Percent of Population	Sample (N = 7,410)
Current Business Owner	12.6	929
Current Freelancer	20.7	1,550
Nascent	15.1	1,008
Former Business Owner	14.6	1,143
Former Freelancer	21.0	1,700
Withdrawn	30.9	2,328
None	44.0	2,814

Notes: Percentages are weighted using EPOP:2026 longitudinal weights. Base period refers to the respondent's prior year of participation in EPOP (either 2024 or 2025).

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