National Institute on Retirement Security
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Retirement Insecurity 2026:

Americans' Views of Retirement

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About the Authors

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Kelly Kenneally has provided communications counsel to the National Institute on Retirement Security since its founding in February 2007. She implements communications programs that provide accurate data and information on retirement policy issues and has authored the NIRS biennial public opinion research studies. Kenneally has more than 25 years of public affairs experience with corporations, government, and non-profit organizations. Previously, she served in the White House as associate director of the President's Commission on White House Fellowships. She has held communications positions at Micron Electronics and MCI WorldCom, and she began her career at the Maryland General Assembly. She holds a B.A. in government and politics from the University of Maryland.

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Executive Summary

Retirement security has become one of the defining economic challenges facing American workers. In February 2026, the National Institute on Retirement Security (NIRS) released *Retirement in America: An Analysis of Retirement Preparedness Among Working-Age Americans.* The report examined the retirement preparedness of Americans aged 21 and older, assessing retirement savings, access to workplace retirement plans, and the financial challenges affecting workers' ability to prepare for retirement.

The analysis found that working Americans are struggling to prepare for retirement. Workers often lack access to employer-sponsored retirement plans, have minimal savings, and face growing tradeoffs between saving for retirement and meeting basic financial needs such as housing and debt. Notably, the report found that the median American has just $955 saved in a retirement account, highlighting the depth of the retirement savings gap facing today's workforce.[1]

The nation's primary retirement safety net also faces growing financial pressure. The latest Social Security Trustees Report moved the projected depletion date for the retirement trust fund to late 2032. Absent congressional action, Social Security would be able to pay about 78 percent of scheduled retirement benefits, resulting in across-the-board benefit reductions for current and future retirees.[2]

Compounding these challenges, traditional defined benefit pensions that provide guaranteed lifetime retirement income have become increasingly rare in the private sector. In 1980, 38 percent of private-sector workers participated in a defined benefit pension plan. By 2023, only 15 percent had access to one. As a result, workers today bear far greater responsibility—and greater investment risk—for financing their retirement.[3]

Against this backdrop of growing financial pressures and structural changes in the retirement system, NIRS conducted a national public opinion survey of Americans to better understand how they view retirement security and the challenges they face preparing for retirement.

Taken together, the findings paint a picture of a retirement system under increasing strain. Americans are facing growing financial pressures, taking on greater responsibility for funding their own retirement, and looking for solutions that provide greater financial security and predictability.

The report's key findings are as follows:

1. **Americans increasingly view retirement insecurity as a national crisis.** Eight in ten Americans say the nation faces a retirement crisis, up from 67 percent in 2020. More than six in ten (61 percent) are concerned they will not achieve financial security in retirement, up from 55 percent in 2020. Americans cite inflation, affordability, market volatility, possible cuts to Social Security, and the decline of traditional pensions among the leading reasons for their retirement concerns.

2. **Americans say preparing for retirement is becoming harder and expect policymakers to do more.** Sixty-eight percent of Americans say preparing for retirement is becoming harder, up from 58 percent in 2020. The vast majority (84 percent) agree that leaders in Washington do not understand the retirement savings challenges facing Americans. Eighty-five percent believe policymakers should make retirement security a higher national priority, up from 76 percent in 2020.

3. **Americans are embracing AI but remain cautious about using it for financial and retirement decisions.** Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) report having used an AI tool. However, most have not used AI to answer questions

about their finances, investments, or retirement (61 percent), and 45 percent say they are uncomfortable with AI playing a role in delivering financial advice. As expected, Gen Zers are more comfortable than Boomers with using AI for financial and retirement decisions.

4. **Americans are guarded about cryptocurrency and alternative investments in retirement plans.** Most Americans have either never heard of or are not very familiar with private equity, cryptocurrency, and real estate investment trusts (REITs). More than half (53 percent) oppose employers offering cryptocurrency as an investment option in workplace retirement savings plans, while more than three-fourths (77 percent) believe allowing cryptocurrency in workplace retirement plans is risky.

5. **Americans lack a clear understanding of what it takes to be financially prepared for retirement.** More than half report waiting until age 30 or later to begin saving for retirement, placing themselves at a significant disadvantage in building long-term retirement wealth. Low-income households are more likely than high-income households to delay saving for retirement. The survey also found that many Americans substantially overestimate how much retirement income their savings can generate. Only nine percent selected a range consistent with a commonly used withdrawal guideline, under which a $100,000 retirement nest egg would likely generate about $4,000 in annual retirement income.

6. **Debt continues to limit Americans' ability to save for retirement.** Nearly three-quarters of Americans (74 percent) say debt is a problem for them, up from 71 percent in 2023. More than three-quarters (77 percent) say debt is preventing them from saving adequately for retirement, essentially unchanged from 2023.

7. **Retirement benefits are becoming increasingly important, and Americans continue to value pension benefits.** Forty-one percent of workers say retirement benefits have become more important to them over the past year. Nearly seven in ten Americans (69 percent) believe pensions do more than retirement savings plans, such as 401(k)s, to help workers achieve a secure retirement, up from 65 percent in 2020.

I. Americans Increasingly View Retirement Insecurity as a National Crisis

America's retirement system is under growing strain. Independent research from organizations across the retirement policy community points to the same conclusion: millions of Americans are not financially prepared for retirement. The Employee Benefit Research Institute's 2026 Retirement Confidence Survey found retirement confidence has fallen to its lowest level since 2017, driven by inflation, housing costs, debt, and concerns about Social Security and Medicare.[4] Meanwhile, researchers at Boston College's Center for Retirement Research estimate that nearly four in ten households are at risk of being unable to maintain their pre-retirement standard of living in retirement, even after a temporary improvement driven largely by rising home values. The researchers caution that retirement readiness remains a major challenge for many of today's workers.[5]

These concerns reflect significant structural changes in the nation's retirement system. NIRS's *Retirement in America* report found that nearly half of Americans have no retirement savings and that the typical worker has only $955 saved for retirement.[6] Traditional pensions have largely disappeared from the private sector,[7] while Social Security—the foundation of retirement income for most Americans—faces projected benefit reductions absent congressional action.[8]

At the same time, affordability has become one of the defining economic challenges facing American households. While inflation has slowed from its historic highs, the rising cost of housing, food, transportation, health care, and other necessities continues to stretch family budgets.[9] Meanwhile, workers increasingly rely on 401(k) plans and other individual retirement accounts whose balances are directly affected by market performance, making market volatility an important factor in retirement security.[10]

Amid these challenges, NIRS asked Americans their views about retirement. We learned that retirement anxiety is growing. Eight in ten Americans say the nation faces a retirement crisis, up from 67 percent in 2020 (**Figure 1**). More than six in ten (61 percent) are concerned they will not achieve financial security in retirement, up from 55 percent in 2020 (**Figure 2**). Not surprisingly, concern is especially high among low-income Americans: 72 percent are somewhat or very concerned, including 39 percent who are very concerned. Even among high-income Americans, however, concern remains widespread: 53 percent are somewhat or very concerned, including 15 percent who are very concerned.

Figure 1: 80% say U.S. faces retirement crisis, up from 67% in 2020.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that America is facing a retirement crisis?

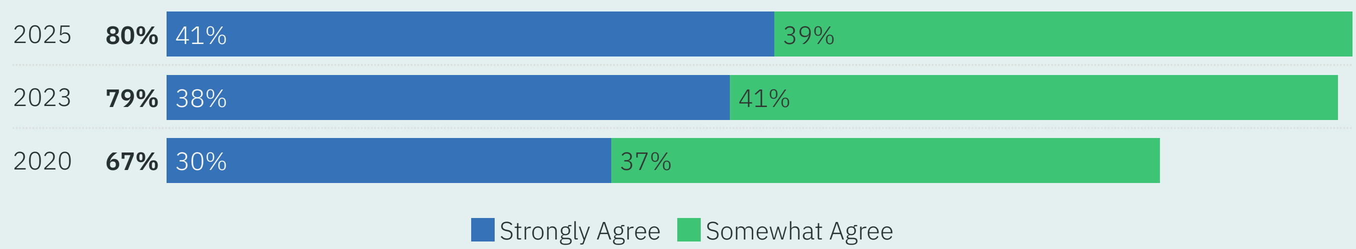


Figure 2: Retirement security concerns are widespread especially among low-income Americans.

How concerned are you that you won't be able to achieve a financially secure retirement?

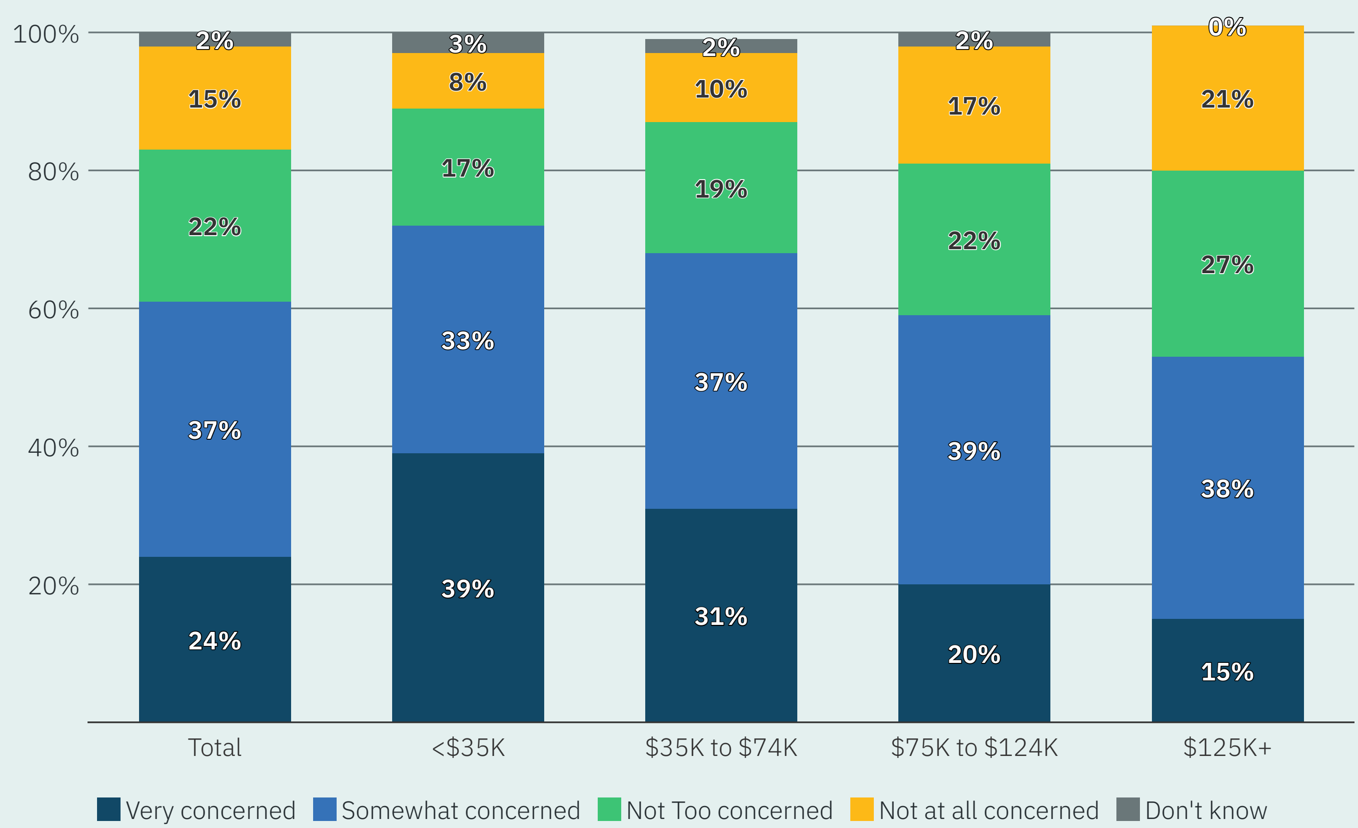
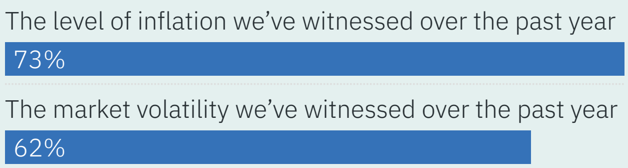


Figure 3: Inflation and market volatility remain key contributing factors to retirement worries.

Have any of the following impacted your concern, if at all, that you won't be able to achieve a financially secure retirement?



Both inflation (73 percent) and market volatility (62 percent) concerns are contributing to Americans' sentiment that they won't be able to achieve a financially secure retirement (**Figure 3**). Worries about Social Security also are contributing to retirement anxiety. More than three-fourths of Americans (76 percent) report they are worried about the possibility of a 20 percent cut in payments if Congress fails to take action (**Figure 4**).

The vast majority of Americans (79 percent) also feel that they just cannot save enough for retirement on their own (**Figure 5**). Obstacles that prevent Americans from saving more on their own include paying down debt (41 percent), high housing costs (39 percent), emergency expenses (30 percent), healthcare/medical expenses (25 percent),

Figure 4: Most Americans are worried about Social Security cuts.

As things stand, the Social Security trust fund is projected to run short of money by 2032. If no action is taken, it will only be able to pay about 80% of the benefits it has promised, resulting in about a 20% cut in payments to retirees and disabled workers.

How worried are you about this possibility?

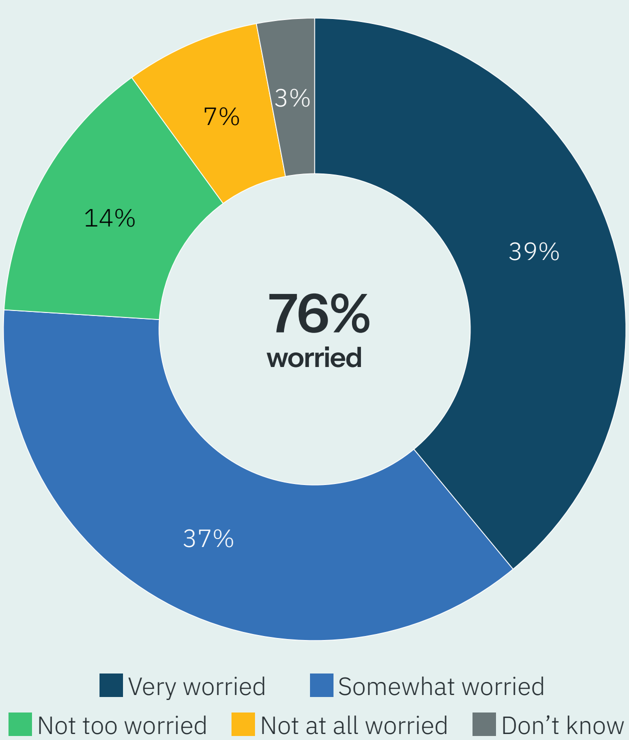
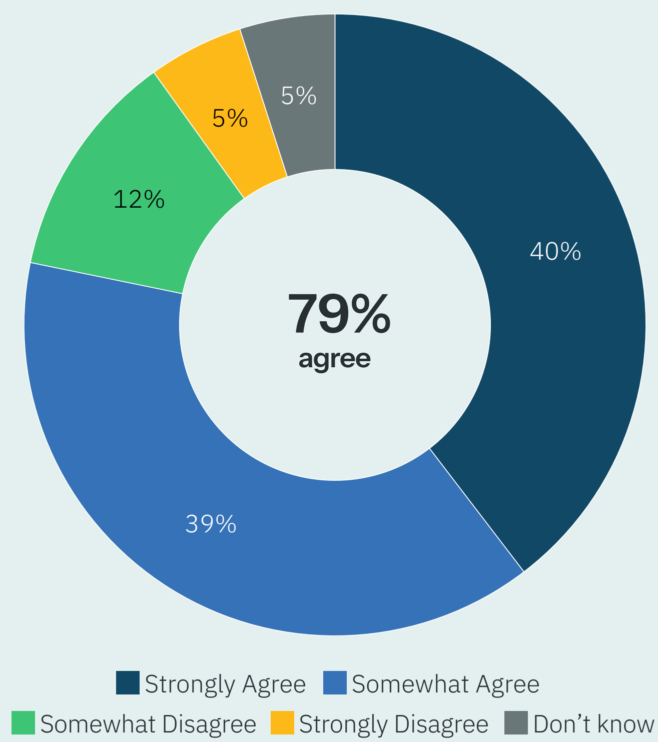


Figure 5: More than three-fourths of Americans say the average worker can't save enough on their own for secure retirement.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the average worker cannot save enough on their own to guarantee a secure retirement.



lack of a workplace retirement plan (13 percent), and childcare costs (12 percent) (**Figure 6**).

The shift away from pensions is also contributing to Americans' growing pessimism about their long-term financial security. Seventy-six percent of Americans say that the disappearance of traditional pensions has made it harder for workers to achieve the American Dream (**Figure 7**). Moreover, most say that those with traditional pensions are more likely than those without pensions to have a secure retirement (**Figure 8**).

Figure 6: Multiple factors are preventing Americans from saving more for retirement.

Are any of the following preventing you from saving more for retirement? Please select all that apply. [Among those not retired]

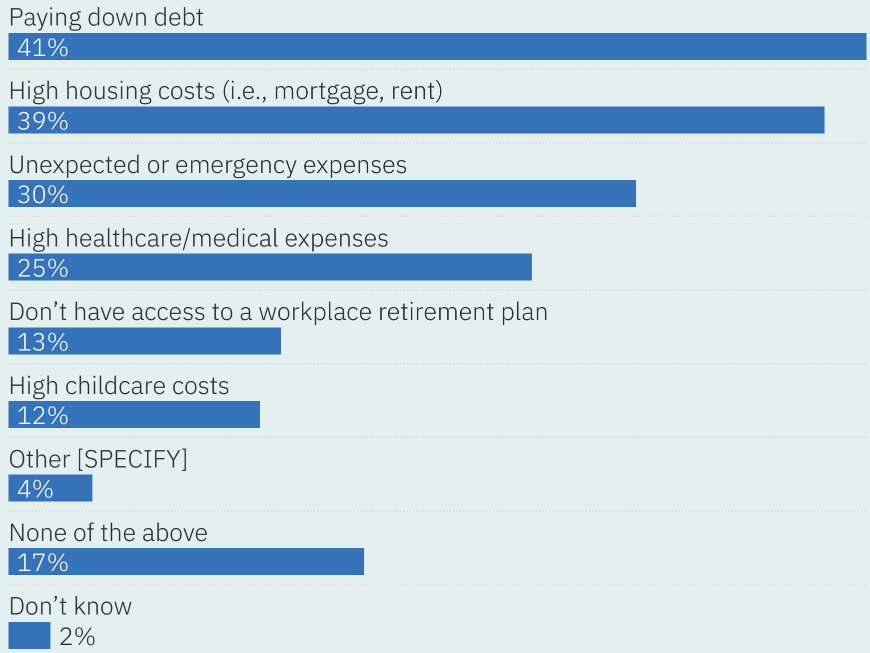


Figure 7: Americans continue to say that the decline in pensions makes it harder to achieve the American Dream.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the disappearance of traditional pensions has made it harder for workers to achieve the American Dream?

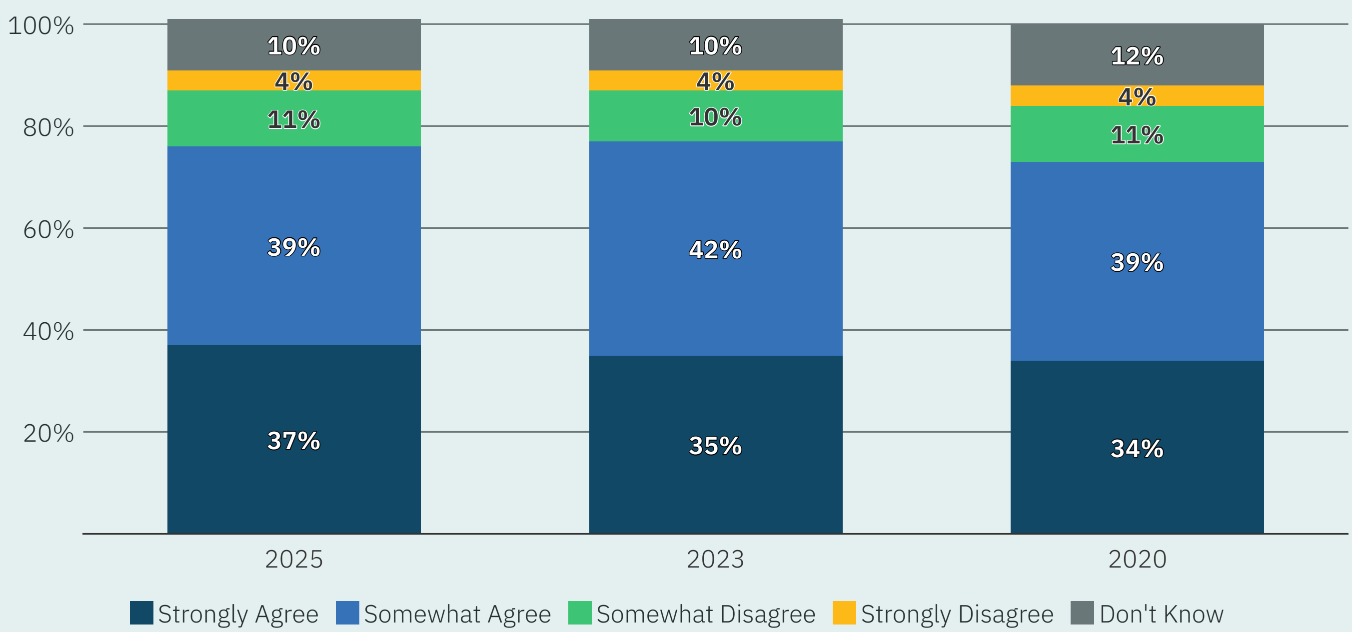
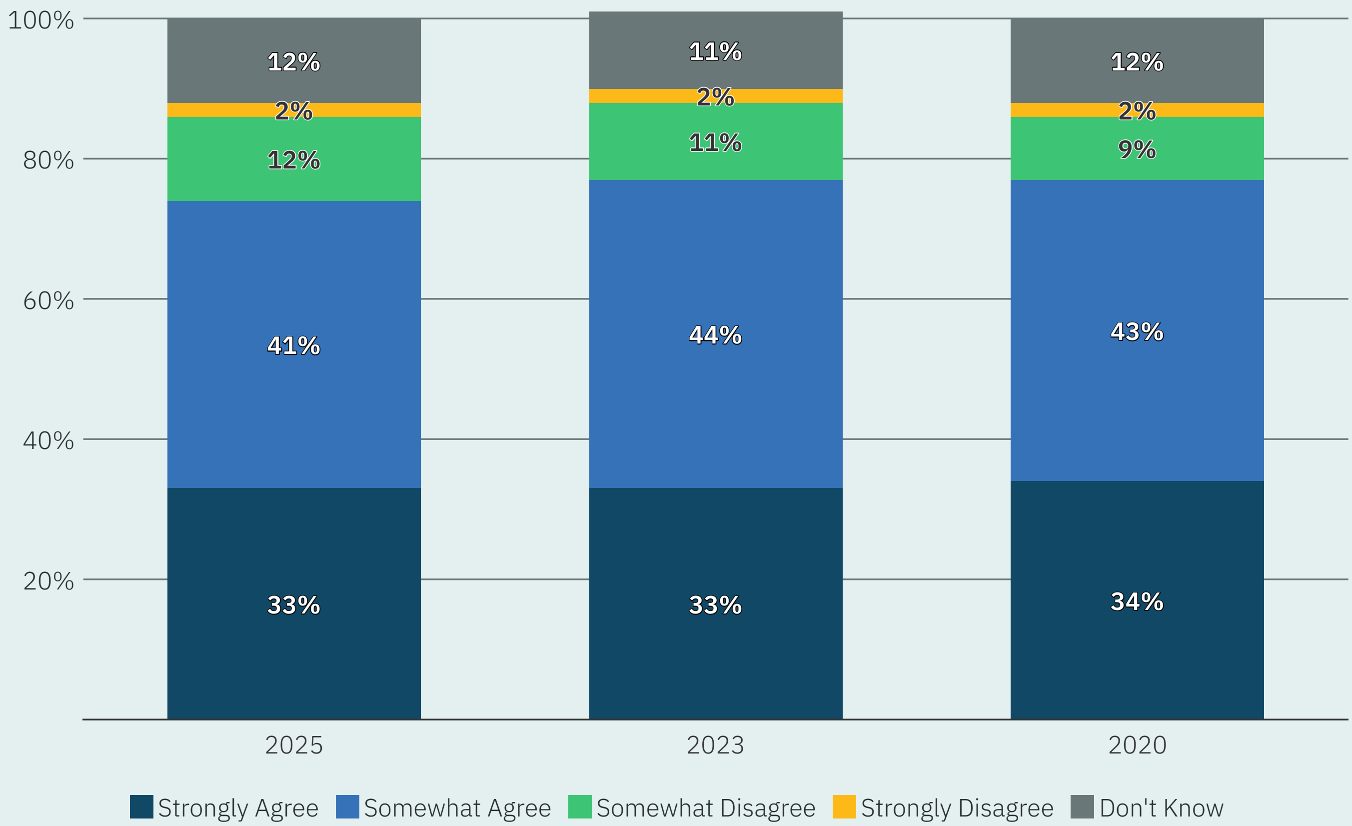


Figure 8: Americans continue to say those with pensions are more likely to have a secure retirement.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Americans with traditional pensions are more likely than those without pensions to have a secure retirement.



II. Americans Say Preparing for Retirement is Becoming Harder and Expect Policymakers to Do More

For many Americans, preparing for retirement has become increasingly difficult. Rising costs, longer life expectancies, declining access to traditional pensions, uncertainty surrounding Social Security, and greater reliance on individually managed retirement accounts have fundamentally changed the retirement landscape. Workers today face greater financial responsibility—and greater financial risk—than previous generations, even as many struggle to balance retirement saving with the demands of everyday life.

Against this backdrop, Americans increasingly feel that preparing for retirement is difficult. Sixty-eight percent of Americans say preparing for retirement is becoming harder, up from 58 percent in 2020. Moreover, nearly half (45 percent) say it will be *much* harder, up from 31 percent in 2020 (**Figure 9**). They point to a wide range of interconnected challenges, including the rising cost of health care in retirement (91 percent), inflation (91 percent), long-term care costs (89 percent), wages that are not keeping pace with expenses (88 percent), increasing debt (87 percent), the decline of traditional pensions (86 percent), longer life expectancies (83 percent), and the expectation that workers must largely fund and manage their own retirement savings (82 percent) (**Table 1**).

As retirement challenges mount, Americans also express frustration that policymakers are not keeping pace with these realities. Eighty-four percent agree that leaders in Washington do not understand the retirement saving challenges facing Americans (**Figure 10**). At the same time, 85 percent believe policymakers

Figure 9: A growing share of Americans expect preparing for retirement to be much harder in the future.

Do you feel that – compared to today – it will be easier or harder for Americans to prepare for retirement in the future, or will there be no difference?

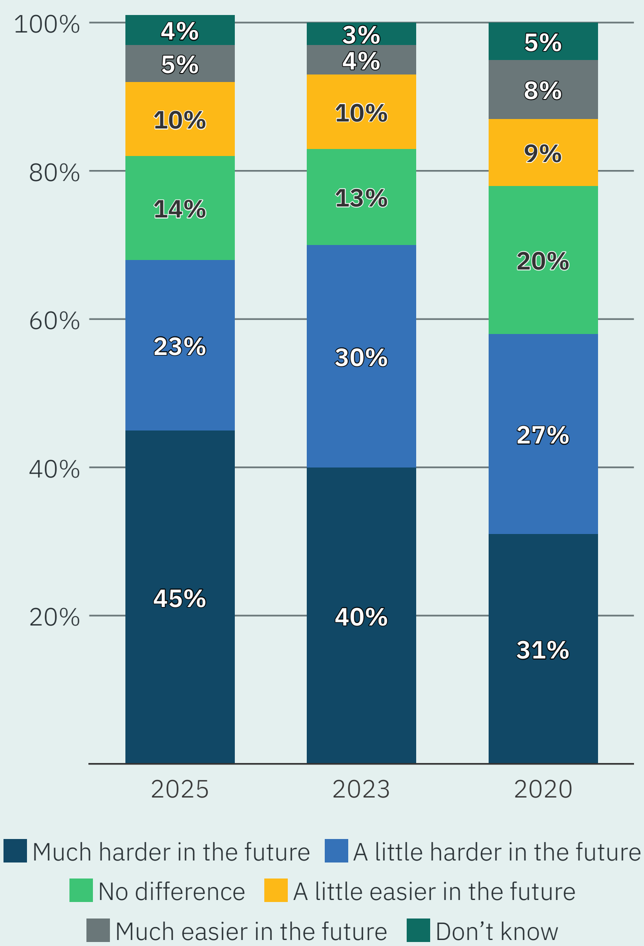


Figure 10: Vast majority say Washington leaders don't understand how hard it is to save enough for retirement.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that leaders in Washington do not understand how hard it is for workers to save enough for retirement.

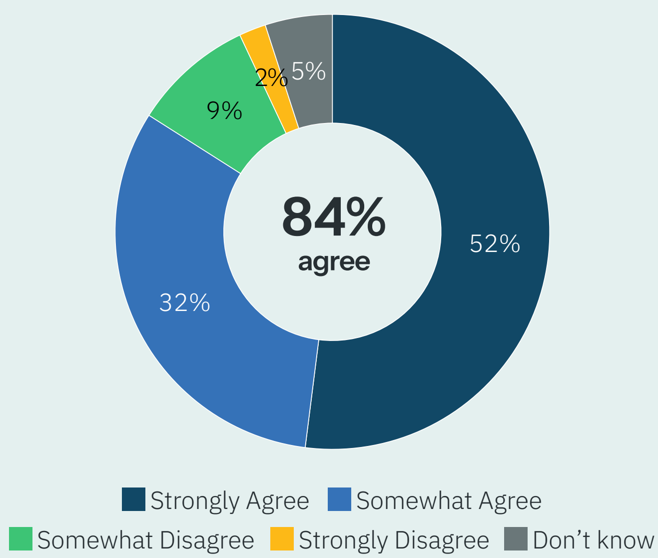


Table 1: A multitude of issues are making it harder to prepare for retirement.

To what extent do you feel each of the following issues are a factor in making it harder for Americans to prepare for retirement?

	Major Factor	Minor Factor	Not a Factor	Don't know
The stock market is more volatile				
2025	37	38	15	9
2023	42	37	13	9
2020	33	39	15	14
People are living longer				
2025	47	36	11	5
2023	46	39	11	4
2020	53	30	10	7
Fewer people have pension benefits through their employers				
2025	57	29	7	7
2023	56	31	7	6
2020	51	30	9	10
Middle class workers' salaries are not increasing				
2025	62	26	7	5
2023	59	30	7	4
2020	51	30	9	10
Workers typically now must fund and manage their retirement savings themselves				
2025	52	30	10	8
2023	47	38	8	6
2020	45	34	10	10
The rising cost of long-term care				
2025	65	24	7	4
2023	67	24	5	4
2020	56	28	7	9
The rising cost of healthcare in retirement				
2025	70	21	5	4
2023	73	21	4	2
2020	59	25	8	8
Increasing debt such as student loans, housing or credit cards				
2025	57	30	8	5
2023	56	31	9	5
2020	47	33	11	9
High inflation				
2025	69	22	6	4
2023	74	20	4	1

should make retirement security a higher national priority, up from 76 percent in 2020 (**Figure 11**). That desire for action extends to workplace retirement benefits. More than eight in ten Americans (82 percent) agree that government should make it easier for employers to offer traditional pensions to workers, up from 77 percent in 2020 (**Figure 12**). This finding suggests that many Americans view pensions not simply as a legacy benefit, but as part of the solution to the nation's broader retirement security challenge.

Figure 11: Strong agreement is growing that retirement should be a higher priority with Washington leaders.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that leaders in Washington need to give a higher priority to ensuring more Americans can have a secure retirement?

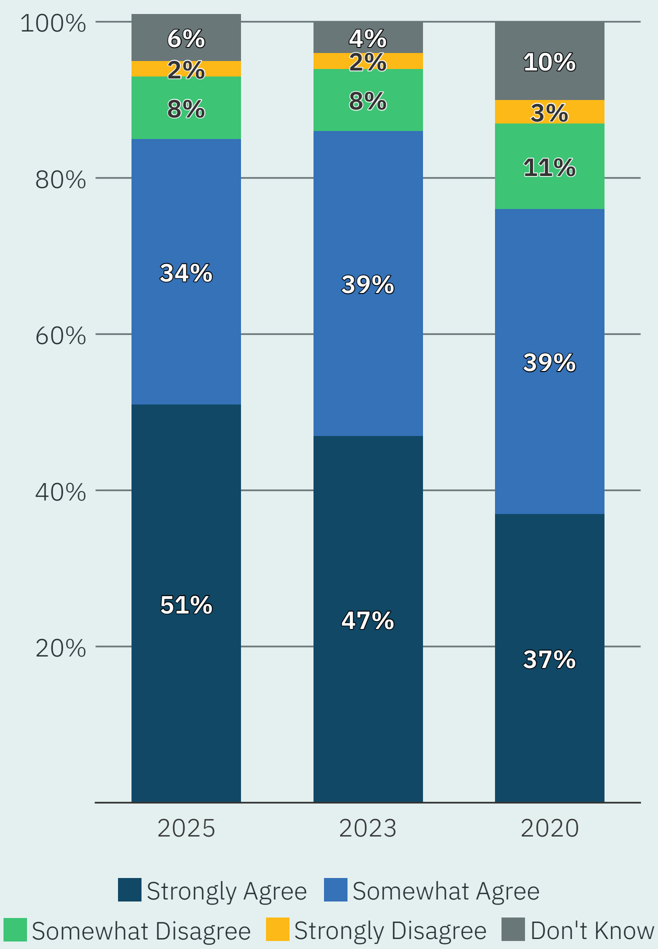
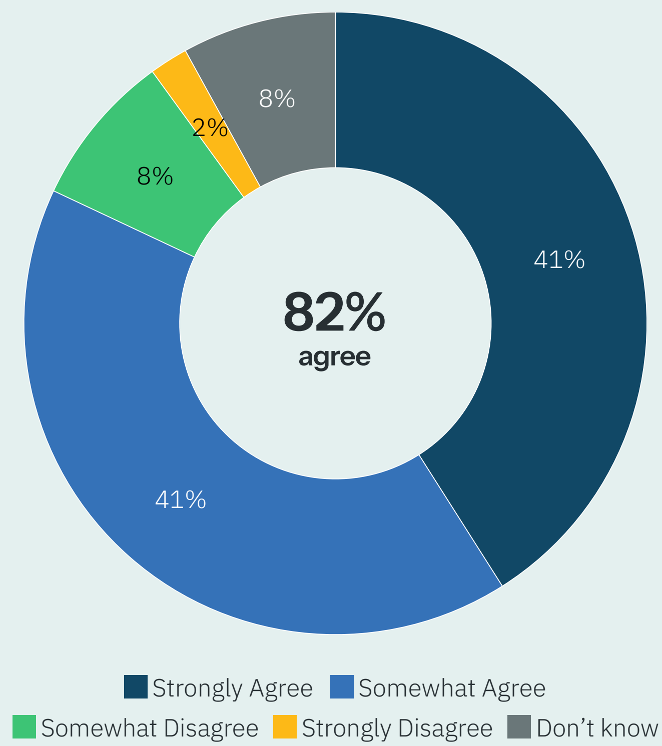


Figure 12: The majority of Americans want government to make it easier for employers to offer pensions.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the government should make it easier to offer pensions?



III. Americans Embracing AI But Cautious About Using It for Financial and Retirement Decisions

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming part of everyday life. AI-powered tools are now integrated into search engines, smartphones, workplace software, and personal digital assistants, while financial institutions are increasingly deploying AI to enhance customer service, detect fraud, automate routine tasks, and develop personalized financial planning tools.[11] As AI becomes increasingly common in financial services, understanding how consumers view the technology—and under what circumstances they are willing to trust it—will be essential.

Despite AI's growing presence, Americans appear to draw a distinction between using AI for everyday tasks and relying on it for major financial decisions. Retirement planning involves complex, long-term decisions that can have lasting financial consequences, and many consumers remain cautious about allowing AI to play a significant role in those decisions.

The survey finds that nearly two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) report having used an AI tool (**Figure 13**).

However, 61 percent say they have not used AI to answer questions about their finances, investments, or retirement (**Figure 14**). AI usage for financial questions varies widely across generations, with Gen Zers (50 percent) and Millennials (53 percent) most likely and Boomers (20 percent) least likely to report using it.

Figure 13: The majority of Americans have tried using AI.

Have you ever used an artificial intelligence (AI) tool (such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini)?

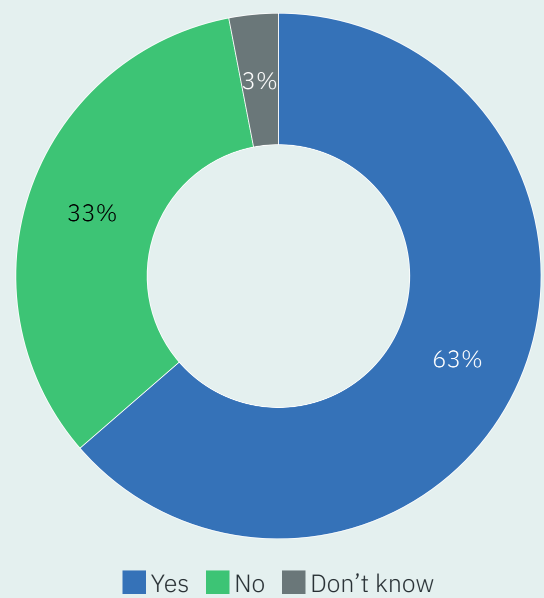
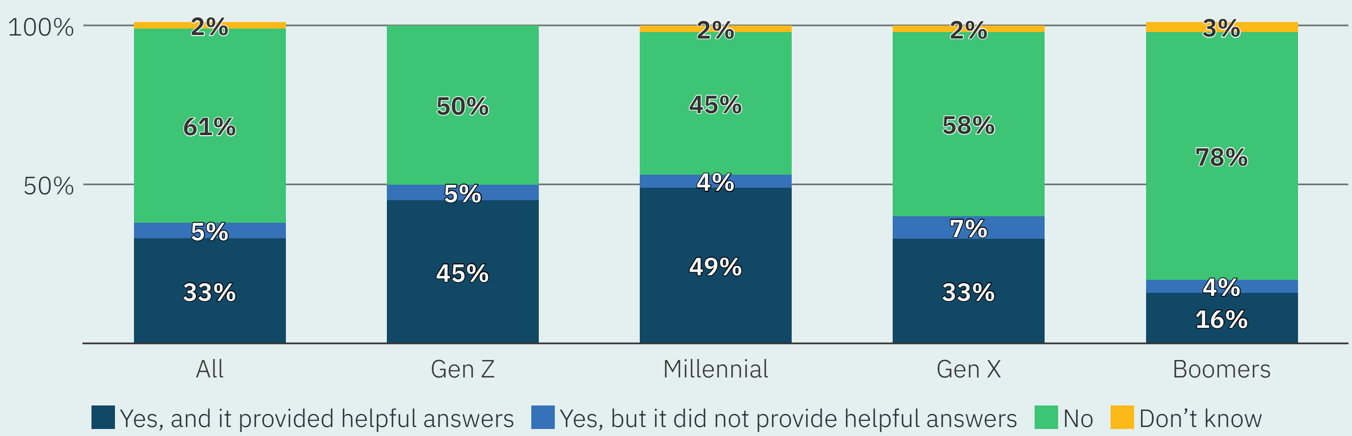


Figure 14: Most, Boomers especially, are not using AI for finances, investments, or retirement.

Have you ever tried asking an AI tool (such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini) a question about finances, investments, or retirement?



Nearly half (45 percent) of Americans say they are uncomfortable with AI playing a role in delivering financial advice, including 22 percent who say they are not at all comfortable with the idea. As expected, there is a large generational divide with only 7 percent of Gen Zers reporting they are not at all comfortable with AI playing a role in the delivery of financial advice compared with 33 percent of Boomers (**Figure 15**).

At the same time, Americans appear open to using AI as a resource on various financial topics. Respondents express interest in using AI to help with budgeting (38 percent), investing (34 percent), retirement planning (32 percent), paying down debt (30 percent), and tax planning (24 percent) (**Figure 16**). These findings suggest Americans see promise in AI as a tool for financial education and planning but may value human expertise for important financial decisions.

Figure 15: Americans are split on AI for financial advice, with large generational differences.

How comfortable are you with the idea of AI playing a role in the delivery of financial advice?

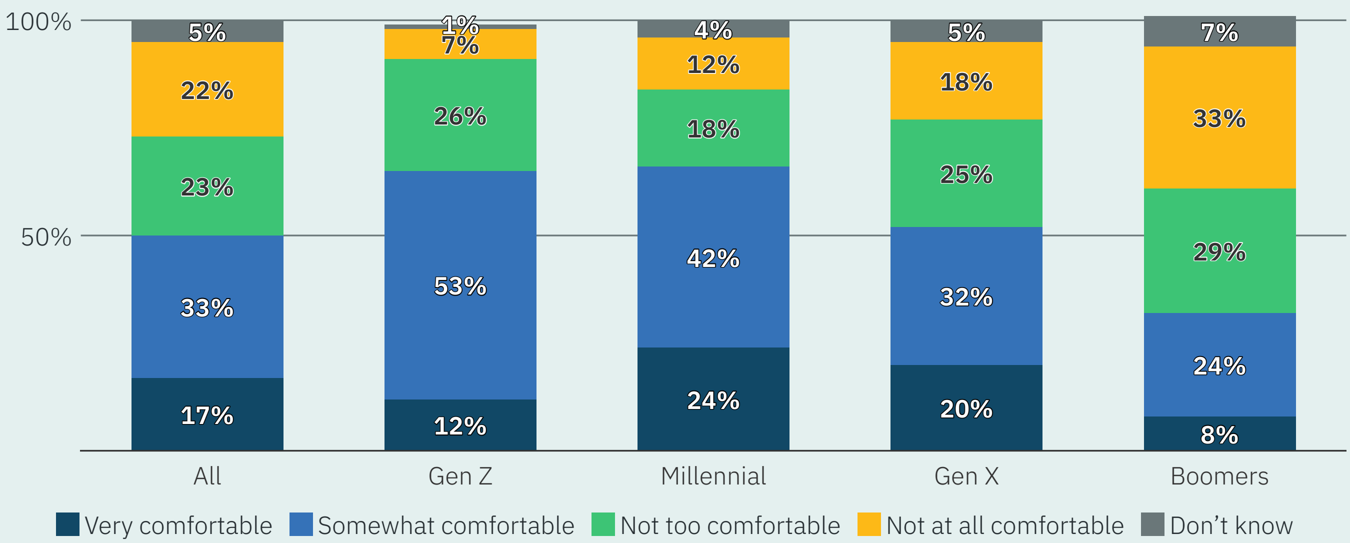
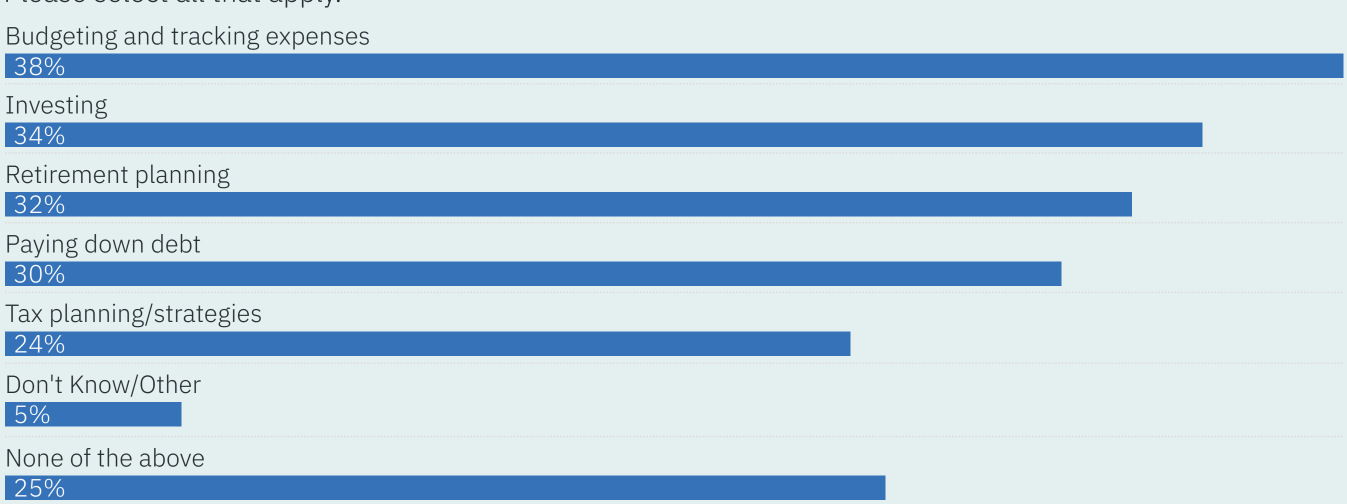


Figure 16: There is at least some interest in using AI for a variety of financial topics.

Which of the following financial topics would you be most interested in getting help with from AI tools? Please select all that apply.



IV. Americans Guarded About Cryptocurrency and Alternative Investments in Retirement Plans

Federal policymakers and the financial services industry are actively debating whether workers should have access to a broader range of investment options in workplace retirement plans, including cryptocurrency and other alternative assets such as private equity. In recent years, the White House and the U.S. Department of Labor have taken steps to reconsider previous federal guidance and explore ways to expand investment options available through defined contribution retirement plans.[12] This policy discussion continues to evolve.[13]

Meanwhile, the survey finds that most Americans are unfamiliar with many of these investments. A majority report they have either never heard of or are not very familiar with private equity, cryptocurrency, or real estate investment trusts (REITs) (**Figure 17**).

That limited familiarity appears to translate into caution about including cryptocurrency in retirement plans. More than half of Americans (53 percent) oppose employers offering cryptocurrency as an investment option in workplace retirement savings plans, including 33 percent *who strongly* oppose the idea (**Table 2**).

More than three-quarters (77 percent) believe allowing cryptocurrency as an investment option in a workplace retirement savings plan is risky, including 46 percent who consider it *very risky* (Table 2).

The findings suggest that while policymakers and the financial services industry continue to evaluate the role of alternative investments in retirement plans, many Americans remain cautious about their use as long-term retirement savings vehicles.

Figure 17: The majority of Americans are unfamiliar with alternative investments.

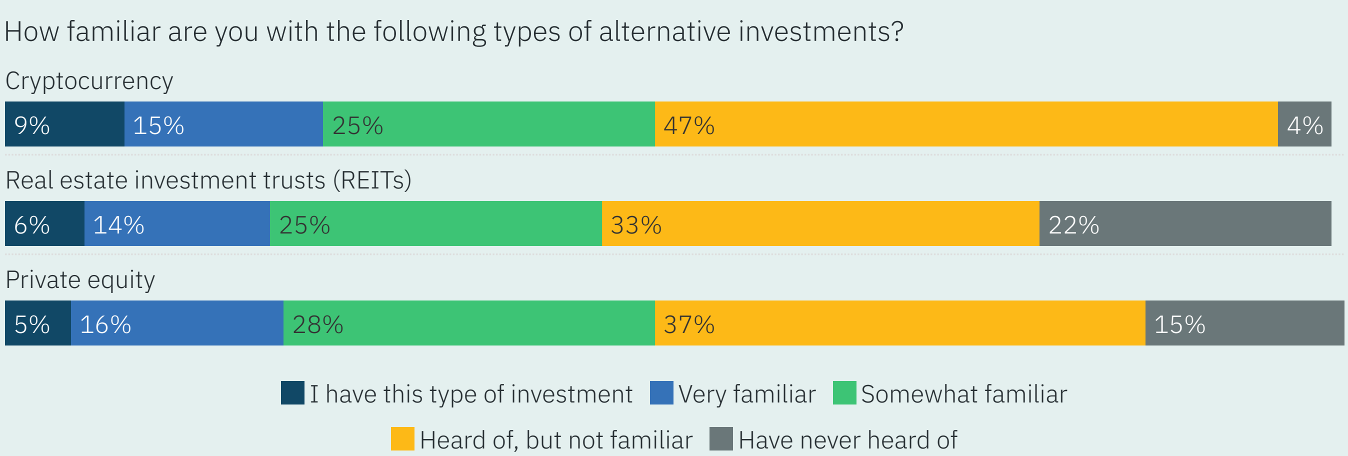


Table 2: Americans have mixed views on cryptocurrency in retirement plans; the majority view it as risky.

Do you favor or oppose employers offering cryptocurrency as an investment option in a workplace retirement savings plan?

Strongly favor	6%
Somewhat favor	20%
Somewhat oppose	20%
Strongly oppose	33%
Don't know	21%

How risky do you think it would be to allow cryptocurrency as an investment option in a workplace retirement savings plan?

Very risky	46%
Somewhat risky	31%
Not too risky	10%
Not at all risky	2%
Don't know	10%

V. Americans Lack a Clear Understanding of What It Takes to Be Financially Prepared for Retirement

Achieving financial security in retirement requires more than simply saving money. It also requires understanding how much to save, how early to begin, and how retirement savings generate income over what can be a decades-long retirement. Financial literacy plays a critical role in helping workers make informed decisions throughout their careers.[14] Yet the survey findings suggest many Americans face significant knowledge gaps that may make it more difficult to prepare adequately for retirement.

These knowledge gaps begin with retirement savings themselves. Most Americans report relatively modest retirement savings. When asked how much they have saved for retirement—or had saved at the time they retired—nearly half (47 percent) reported less than $100,000. This includes 18 percent who reported having no retirement savings. By comparison, only 9 percent reported having accumulated more than $1 million. Perhaps most concerning is that Gen Xers, who are nearing retirement, report retirement savings that are broadly similar to those of Americans overall (**Table 3**).

Yet Americans recognize that achieving retirement security requires substantial savings. More than a third (35 percent) of workers believe they will need at least $1 million by the time they retire to be financially secure (Table 3). The gap between current savings and perceived retirement needs highlights the significant financial challenge many workers face.

The survey also found that many Americans have unrealistic expectations about the amount of retirement income their savings can generate. While there is no single universally accepted retirement withdrawal strategy, financial professionals commonly reference the "four percent rule" as a general guideline for sustainable withdrawals over a 30-year retirement. Under that approach, a retiree with $100,000 in savings could initially withdraw approximately $4,000 during the first year of retirement, with subsequent annual withdrawals adjusted for inflation.[15]

To better understand what the public knows about retirement income planning, respondents were asked how much annual income a $100,000 retirement nest egg could reasonably generate. Only nine percent selected a range consistent with the four percent rule (four percent said $3,000-$3,999 and five percent said $4,000-$4,999). Many respondents substantially overestimated the income such savings could support. Nearly one in five (19 percent) believed a $100,000 nest egg could produce between $10,000 and $14,999 in annual retirement income, while another 19 percent estimated it would generate $25,000 or more annually (**Figure 18**). These findings suggest many Americans may underestimate how much savings will ultimately be needed to generate sufficient retirement income.

Table 3: Many Americans' retirement savings fall short of what they think they need.

Needs: If you were to guess, how much money do you think you need to save by the time you retire in order to have a financially secure retirement? [Among those not retired]

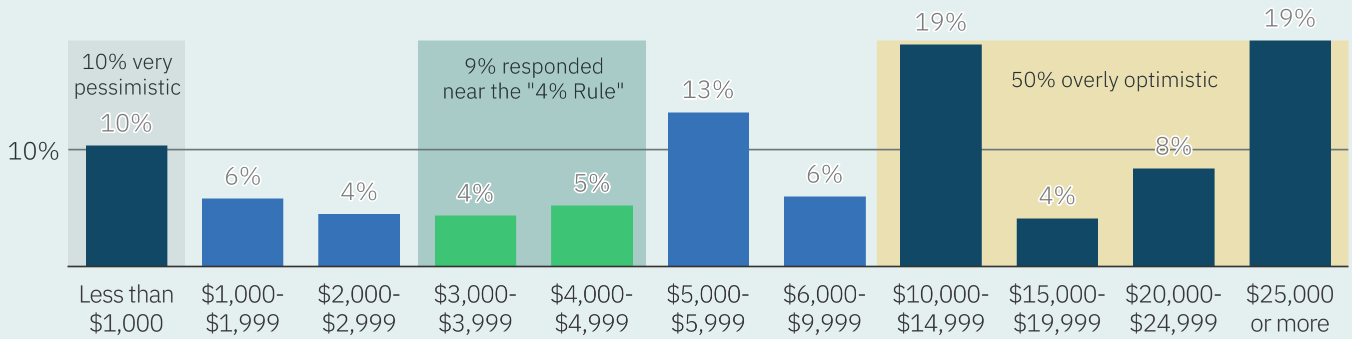
Savings: Approximately how much have you saved for retirement/did you have saved at retirement? [Among those not retired/Among those retired]

	How much do you need?	All: How much retirement savings do you have?	Gen X: How much retirement savings do you have?
Less than $100,000	9%	47%	42%
$100,000 to $249,999	6%	15%	15%
$250,000 to $499,999	16%	11%	14%
$500,000 to $749,999	12%	6%	9%
$750,000 to $999,999	11%	4%	3%
$1,000,000 to $1,999,999	21%	5%	8%
$2,000,000 or more	14%	4%	4%
Don't know	12%	8%	4%

The survey also highlights that many Americans do not start saving for retirement early enough in their career, which is critically important for accumulating sufficient retirement income. More than half (52 percent) of Americans report waiting until age 30 or later to begin saving for retirement (**Table 4**). Not surprisingly, among those with incomes of less than $35,000, 64 percent waited at least until their 30s and 25 percent waited until at least their 50s. Even among those with incomes of $125,000 or more, however, 53 percent did not begin saving until at least their 30s. Delaying retirement saving reduces the opportunity to benefit from decades of compound investment growth, making it substantially more difficult to accumulate adequate retirement assets over a working lifetime.[16]

Figure 18: Many Americans have overly optimistic retirement income expectations.

If you were to retire at age 67 with $100,000 in retirement savings, how much income do you think you would be able to draw annually from that savings throughout your retirement? [Among those under age 67 and not retired]



Additional context: 50% expect to be able to draw $10,000 or more per year throughout retirement from a $100,000 nest egg at age 67. With 6% post-retirement returns, $10,000 withdrawals would only last to age 82 (15 years). 77% of females and 68% of males, aged 67 and of average health, are expected to live past age 82. Annual withdrawals of $25,000 would not last until age 72.

Table 4: More than half of Americans, especially those with low incomes, waited until at least their 30s to save for retirement, putting them at a disadvantage.

At what age did you start saving for retirement? Your best guess is fine. [Among those who ever had retirement savings]

	Total	<$35K	$35K to $74K	$75K to $124K	$125K+
Under 25	20%	7%	19%	22%	23%
25-29	17%	11%	15%	19%	18%
30-34	18%	14%	13%	19%	21%
35-39	10%	6%	11%	9%	13%
40-44	8%	15%	10%	8%	6%
45-49	4%	4%	4%	3%	5%
50+	12%	25%	15%	10%	8%
Not sure	11%	18%	13%	10%	6%

VI. Debt Continues to Limit Americans' Ability to Save for Retirement

For many Americans, preparing for retirement requires balancing long-term financial goals against immediate financial obligations. Rising consumer debt, higher borrowing costs, and the increasing cost of everyday necessities have left many households with less income available to save for the future.[17] Financial experts have long recognized that carrying significant debt can delay or reduce retirement saving, making it more difficult to accumulate sufficient assets over a working lifetime.[18]

The survey findings suggest debt continues to be a significant barrier to retirement preparedness. Nearly half of Americans (46 percent) report carrying credit card debt, up from 41 percent in 2023. In addition, 32 percent report having a mortgage, 26 percent have an auto loan, 15 percent carry medical debt, and 14 percent have student loan debt (**Figure 19**).

The financial burden of debt is evident in Americans' perceptions of their own financial well-being. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) say debt is a problem for them, up from 71 percent in 2023 (**Figure 20**). More than three-quarters (77 percent) say debt is preventing them from saving adequately for retirement, essentially unchanged from 2023 (76 percent) (**Figure 21**).

The findings also suggest Americans recognize the importance of reducing debt before leaving the workforce. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) say it is essential or very important to enter retirement without mortgage debt (**Figure 22**).

Together, these findings underscore one of the central challenges facing American workers: paying for today's financial obligations often comes at the expense of preparing for tomorrow's retirement.

Figure 19: Nearly half of Americans hold credit card debt.

Which of the following types of debt do you have? Please select all that apply.

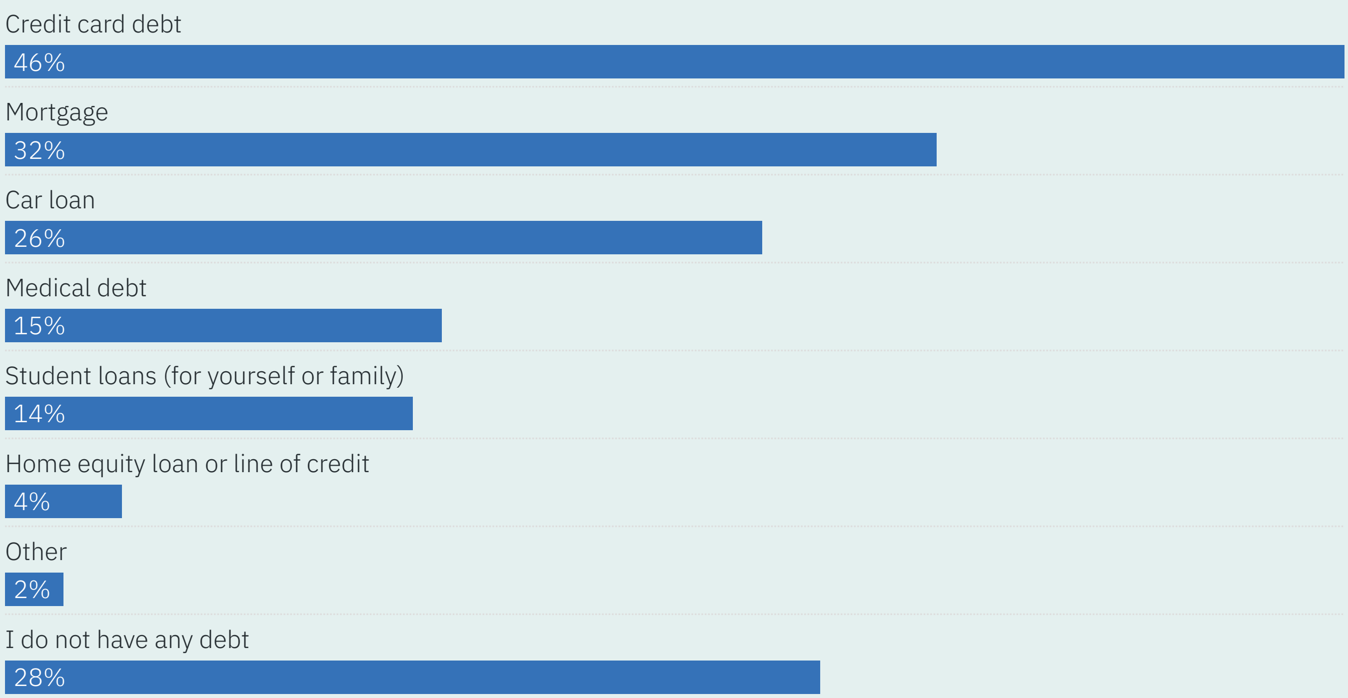


Figure 20: The majority of Americans say debt is a problem; only 25% say it's not problem.

How would you describe your level of debt? [Among those with debt]

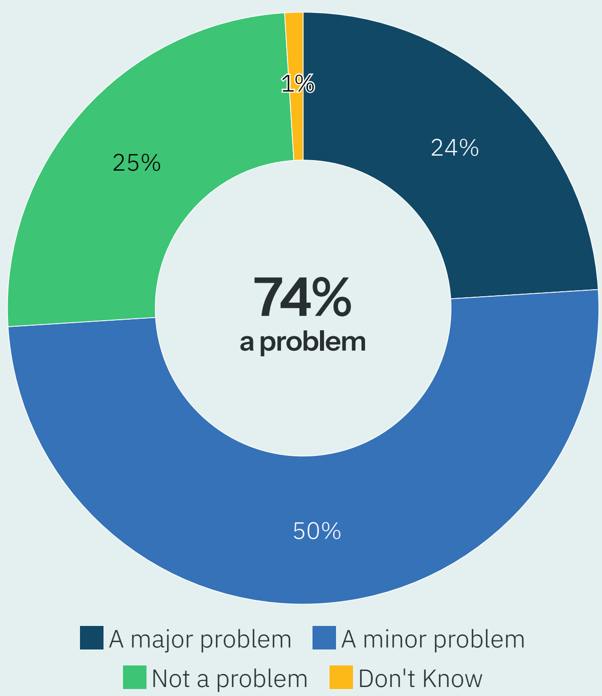


Figure 21: Debt is a barrier to retirement savings for more than three-fourths of working Americans.

To what degree does debt prevent you from saving as much as you believe you should be saving for retirement? [Among those with debt and not retired]

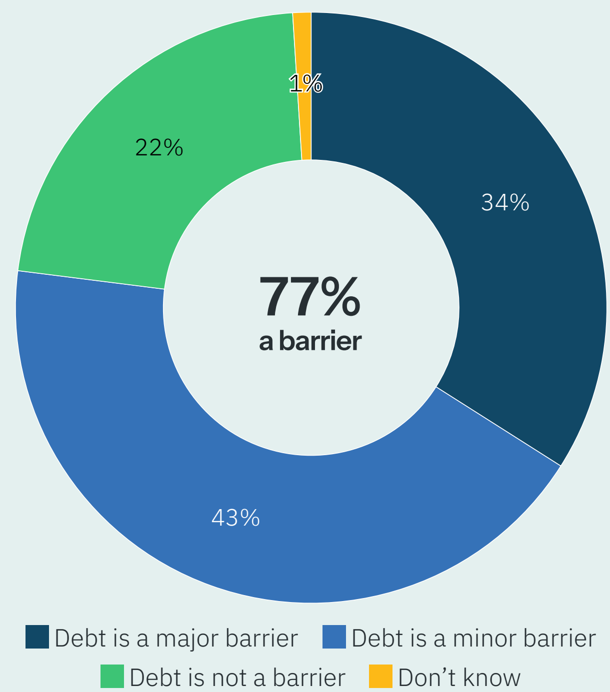
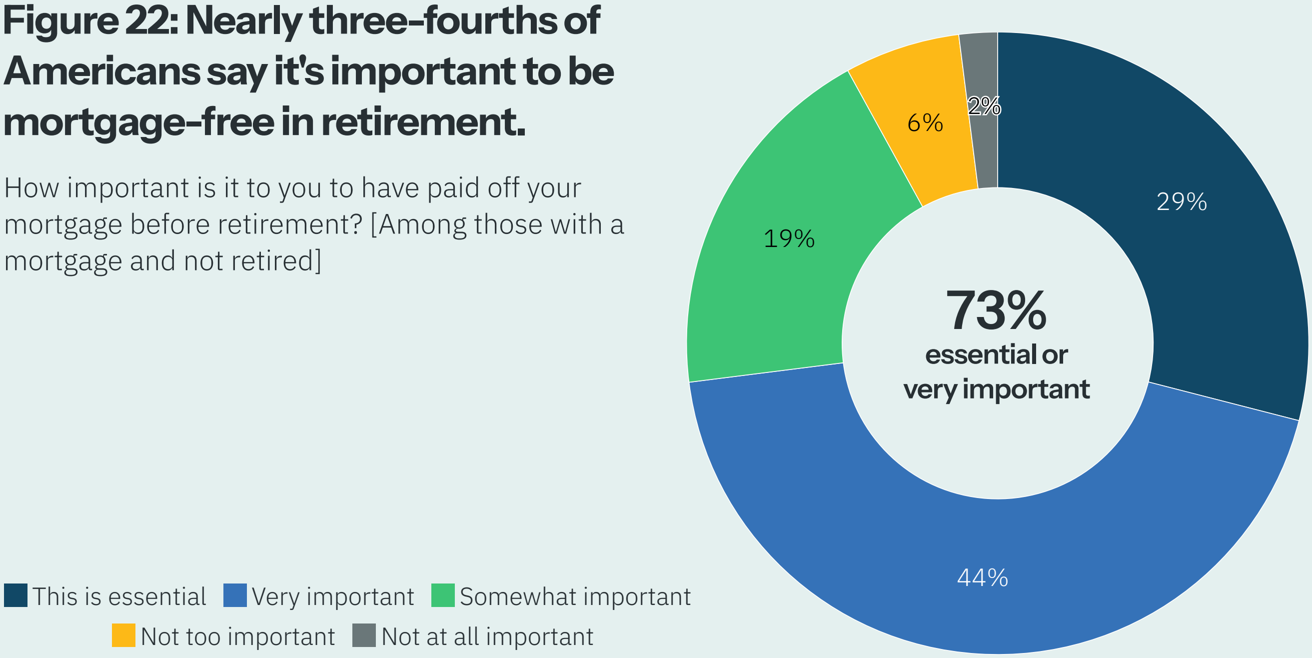


Figure 22: Nearly three-fourths of Americans say it's important to be mortgage-free in retirement.

How important is it to you to have paid off your mortgage before retirement? [Among those with a mortgage and not retired]



VII. Retirement Benefits Increasingly Important, and Americans Continue to Value Pension Benefits

As employers compete for talent in a tight labor market, retirement benefits are becoming an increasingly important component of the total compensation package. Research has consistently found that retirement benefits influence both employee recruitment and retention, particularly as workers place greater value on long-term financial security.[19] At the same time, the continued shift from traditional pensions to defined contribution plans has increased workers' responsibility for financing retirement, making the quality of workplace retirement benefits more important than ever.

The survey findings reflect this growing importance. Among current workers, 75 percent say retirement benefits are a very or extremely important factor when evaluating job opportunities (**Table 5**).

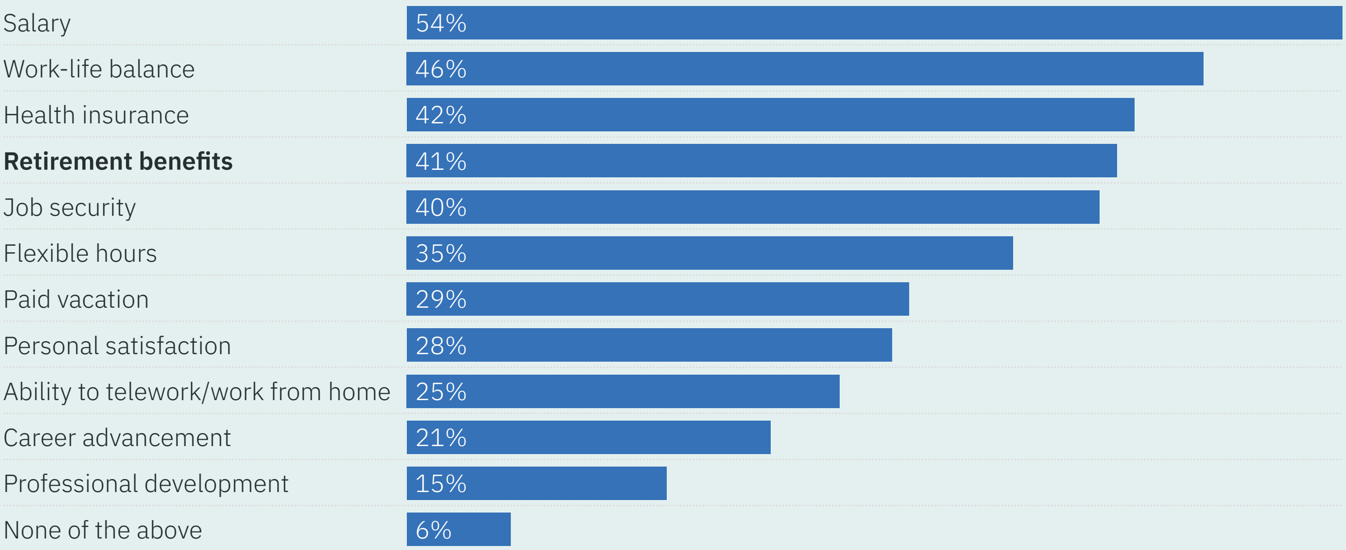
Table 5: Retirement benefits remain an important job feature for American workers.

When making job decisions, how important are the following job features to you? [Among those not retired]

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Too Important	Not at All Important	Don't know
Salary						
2025	50%	33%	12%	2%	2%	1%
2023	54%	32%	11%	2%	1%	1%
2020	42%	33%	16%	4%	2%	3%
Health insurance						
2025	44%	33%	13%	5%	4%	1%
2023	51%	31%	10%	4%	2%	1%
2020	43%	32%	16%	4%	3%	3%
Job security						
2025	43%	38%	14%	2%	1%	1%
2023	48%	35%	13%	2%	1%	1%
2020	47%	33%	14%	3%	1%	3%
Retirement benefits						
2025	40%	35%	18%	3%	2%	2%
2023	41%	37%	15%	4%	1%	1%
2020	38%	31%	20%	5%	2%	4%
Work-life balance						
2025	39%	39%	17%	2%	1%	2%
2023	47%	34%	15%	2%	1%	1%
2020	34%	34%	19%	7%	2%	4%
Personal satisfaction						
2025	34%	41%	17%	4%	2%	1%
2023	39%	39%	18%	3%	1%	*
2020	36%	32%	22%	5%	3%	3%
Paid vacation						
2025	31%	34%	24%	6%	4%	1%
2023	39%	32%	19%	6%	4%	1%
2020	28%	35%	23%	8%	3%	4%

Figure 23: Retirement benefits are among workers' top growing job priorities.

Which of the following job features, if any, have become more important to you personally over the past year? Please select all that apply. [Among those not retired]



Additionally, 41 percent say they have become more important to them over the past year (**Figure 23**). Yet only about half (54 percent) report being very or extremely satisfied with the retirement benefits provided by their employer (**Figure 24**).

Figure 24: Only about half of workers are satisfied with their retirement benefits.

How satisfied are you with the retirement benefits your employer provides? [Among full-time workers]

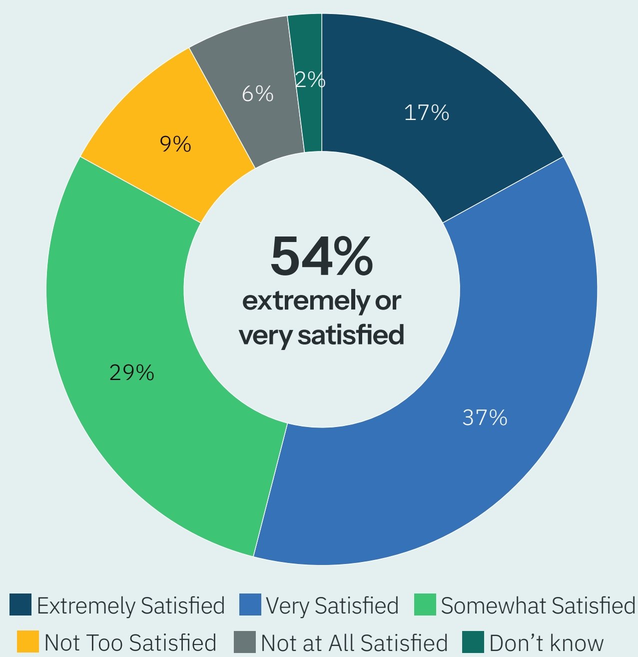
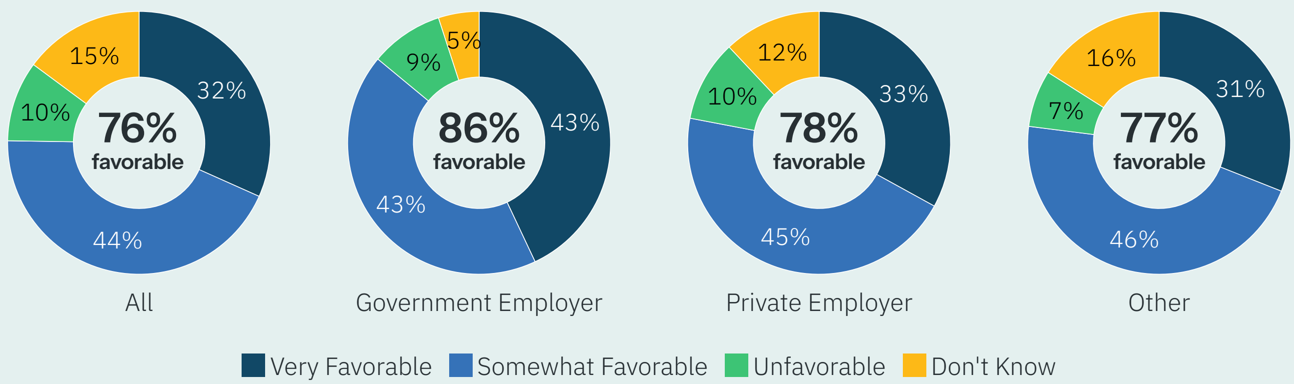


Figure 25. Most Americans, especially government workers, have a favorable view of pensions.

How would you describe your overall view of this type of pension?



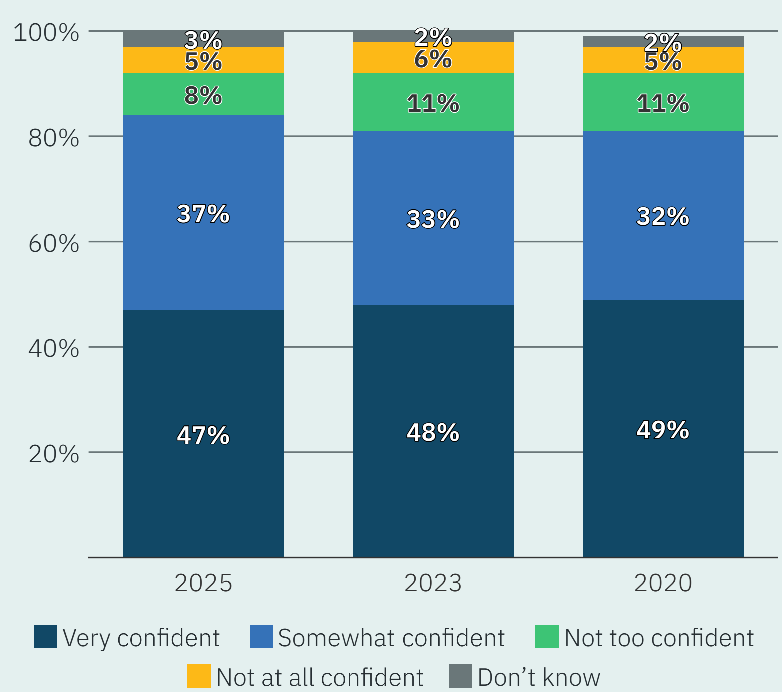
Americans continue to express strong support for traditional pensions. More than three-quarters (76 percent) have favorable views of pension benefits. Government workers view pensions more favorably than private-sector workers, with 86 percent expressing favorable views compared with 78 percent, and 43 percent expressing very favorable views compared with 33 percent (**Figure 25**).

Among workers and retirees who ever participated in a pension plan, confidence in those benefits remains high, with 84 percent expressing confidence their pension will be there when they retire—or, for current retirees, would have been there when they retired (**Figure 26**).

Figure 26. Confidence that pensions will be there at retirement remains high.

How confident are you that your pension will be there when it is time to retire? [Among those not retired who ever participated in a pension plan]

Before you retired, how confident were you that your pension would be there when it was time to retire? [Among those retired who ever participated in a pension plan]



When asked to compare retirement plan designs, Americans continue to favor pensions over defined contribution plans such as 401(k)s. Nearly seven in ten (69 percent) believe pensions do more to help workers achieve a secure retirement, up from 65 percent in 2020 (**Figure 27**).

The survey findings also demonstrate that retirement benefits influence employment decisions. When presented with two otherwise identical job opportunities—one offering a traditional pension and the other offering a 401(k)-style retirement savings plan—57 percent of workers said they would choose the job offering the pension (**Figure 28**).

Figure 27. 69% say pensions are better than 401(k)s for helping workers achieve retirement security.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Pensions do more to help workers achieve a secure retirement as compared to retirement savings plans such as 401(k)s.

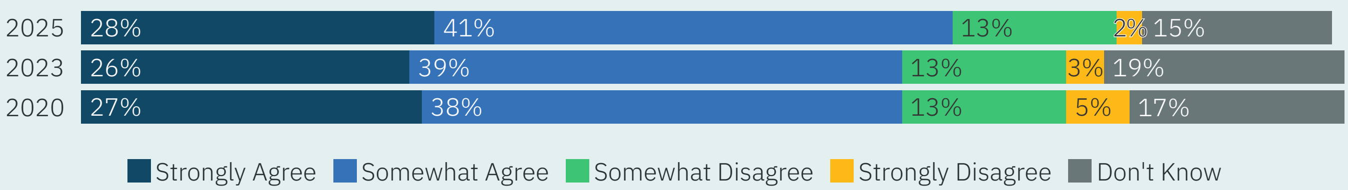
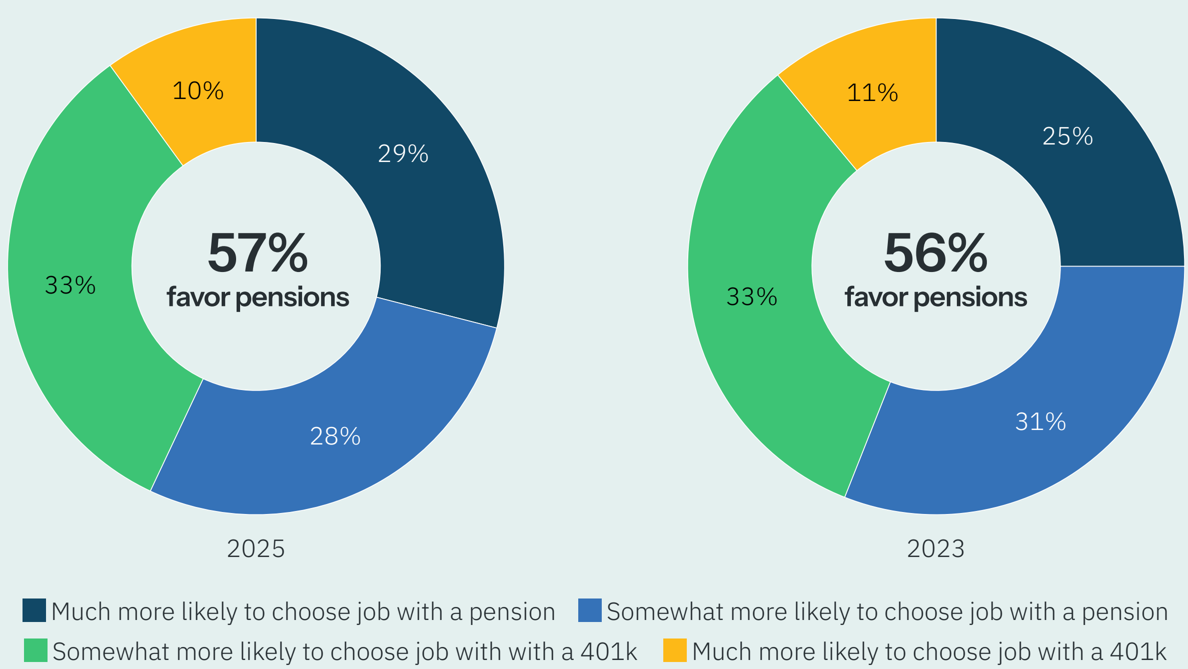


Figure 28. Workers continue to favor jobs with pensions over 401(k)s.

Imagine you are evaluating two new job opportunities. Both jobs are similar in all aspects (such as pay, type of work, etc.) except for one: **Job A** offers employees a traditional pension plan as part of the retirement benefits, while **Job B** offers a retirement savings plan (like a 401k). Which job would you be more likely to choose? [Among workers]



Pensions also appear to be a powerful retention tool. Among workers who currently have a pension, 78 percent say they would be much more or somewhat more likely to leave the company if it did not offer one (**Figure 29**). Likewise, 84 percent of workers who do not currently have a pension say they would be at least somewhat more likely to stay with the company if it offered one—up from 74 percent in 2023 (**Figure 30**).

Together, these findings suggest that retirement benefits—and traditional pensions in particular—continue to play an important role in attracting and retaining employees while supporting long-term retirement security.

Figure 29. A growing share of workers with pensions say they'd be much more likely to leave without them.

All other factors equal, if your current employer did not provide a traditional pension plan as part of the retirement benefits, would you be more inclined to leave the company if another job opportunity came up?
[Among full-time workers with pensions]

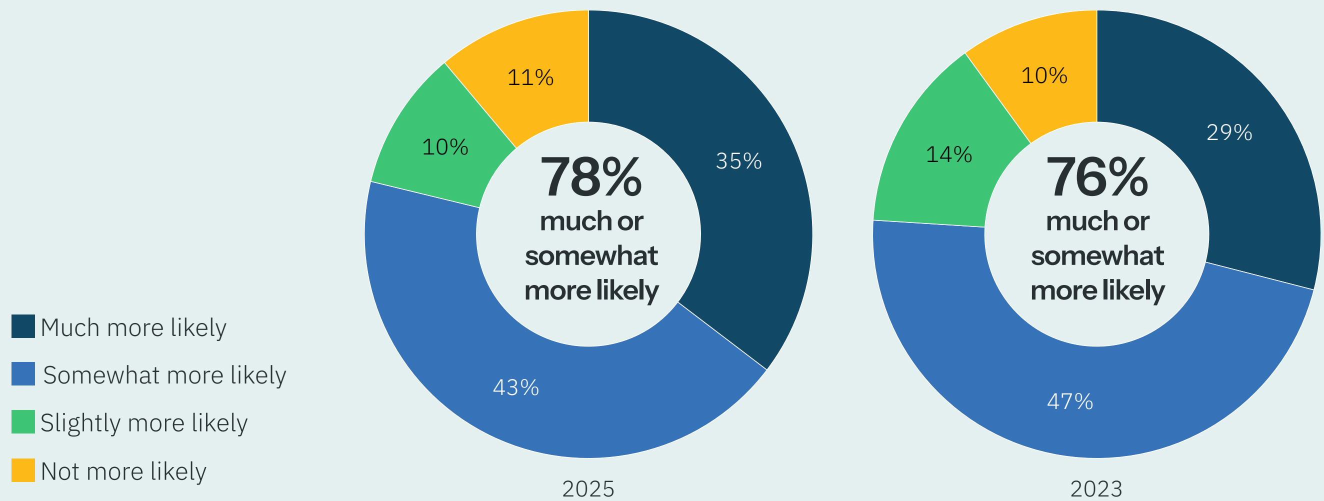
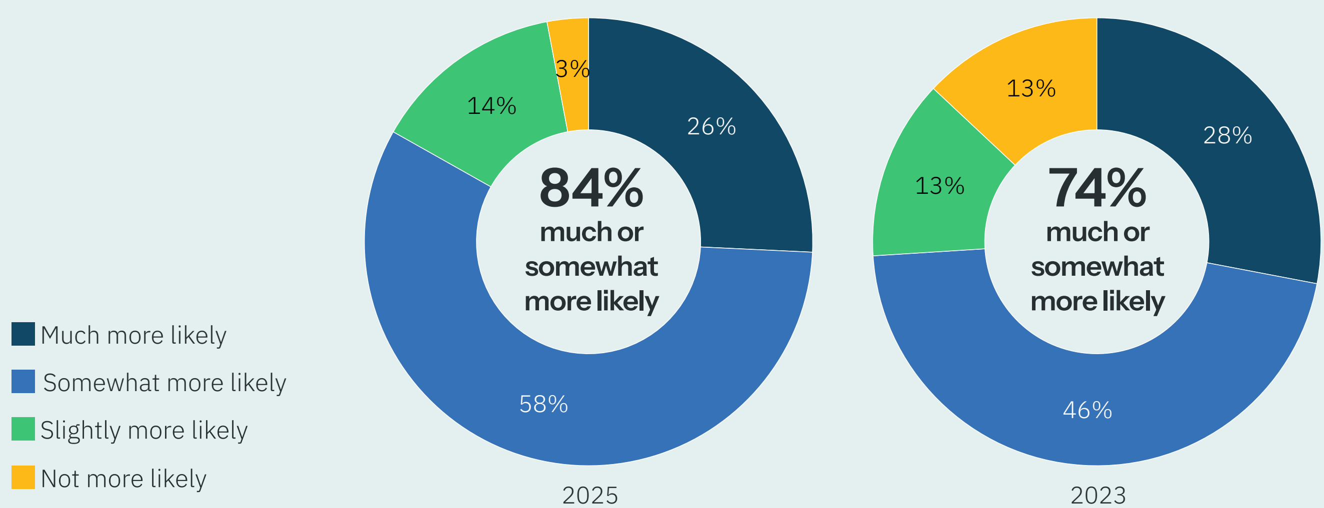


Figure 30. A growing share of workers without pensions say they'd be more likely to stay with them.

All other factors equal, if your current employer provided a traditional pension plan as part of the retirement benefits, would you be more likely to stay at the company longer even if another job opportunity came up?
[Among full-time workers without pensions]



Conclusion: Americans Are Looking for a More Secure Path to Retirement

The findings in this report make clear that retirement insecurity is no longer a concern confined to the future. It is a challenge millions of Americans are confronting today. Across nearly every measure, Americans report growing anxiety about their ability to achieve financial security in retirement. They face rising living costs, mounting debt, uncertainty surrounding Social Security, fewer traditional pensions, and greater responsibility for managing their own retirement savings. At the same time, many lack a clear understanding of how much they need to save or how those savings translate into sustainable retirement income.

The findings also reveal important gaps between the retirement system and the needs of today's workers. Americans are cautious about emerging financial technologies such as artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency in the retirement context, suggesting that trust and financial literacy remain essential as new tools and investment options become available. Meanwhile, workers increasingly view retirement benefits as an important factor in employment decisions and continue to express strong confidence in pensions as an effective way to achieve retirement security.

Importantly, Americans do not view these challenges as inevitable. The survey suggests broad agreement that the retirement system can and should better support workers' long-term financial security. Respondents consistently express support for expanding retirement opportunities, strengthening workplace retirement benefits, and increasing access to reliable sources of lifetime retirement income. Together, these findings underscore the importance of policies and workplace practices that help Americans save more effectively, improve financial literacy, and strengthen retirement security over the long term.

As policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders consider the future of retirement in America, the message from the public is clear: Americans want a retirement system that is easier to navigate, more dependable, and better aligned with the financial realities workers face throughout their careers.

Addressing these challenges will require attention not only to retirement policy itself, but also to the broader economic pressures that shape Americans' ability to prepare for the future. The findings in this report suggest that strengthening retirement security will require a comprehensive approach—one that expands access to retirement plans, encourages lifetime saving, improves financial literacy, and supports workers as they navigate an increasingly complex retirement landscape.

Methodology

Conducted by Greenwald Research, information for this study was collected from online interviews between October 24, 2025 and November 14, 2025. A total of 1,203 individuals aged 25 and older completed the survey. The final data were weighted by age, gender, and income to reflect the demographics of Americans aged 25 and older. The sample was selected using Dynata, an online sample provider. Percentages shown in figures and tables are rounded. As a result, percentages may not always sum to 100 percent. When categories are combined, percentages reported in the text are based on the displayed values and therefore may differ slightly from those computed using unrounded values.

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