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# Stability Over Status: How Americans Are Redefining Financial Success

KeyBank's 2026 Financial Mobility Survey

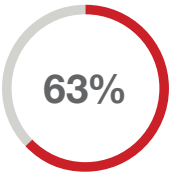
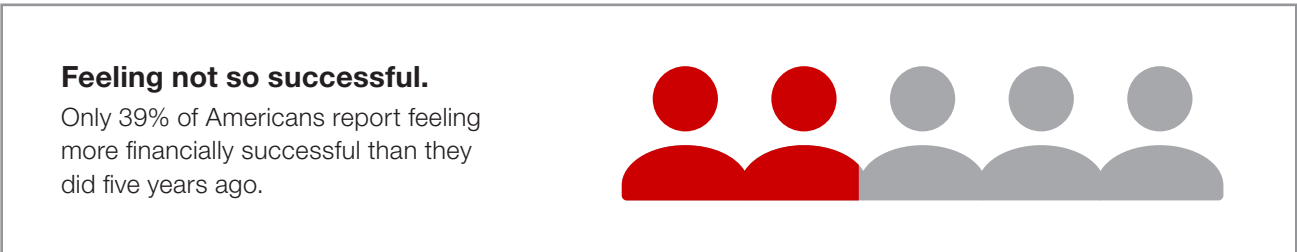
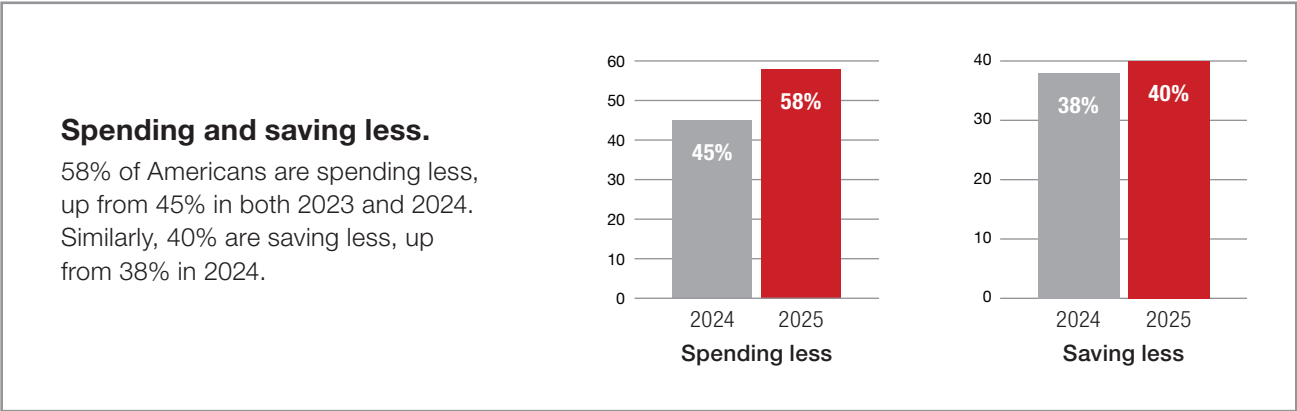


**The KeyBank 2026 Financial Mobility Survey** captures a pivotal moment in American financial behavior. Beyond the headlines of economic stress, Americans reveal they aren't just reacting emotionally: they're strategically recalibrating their entire approach to money. The findings show that stability is Americans' top priority, with three in four agreeing that debt-free living is the most important milestone to their financial success.



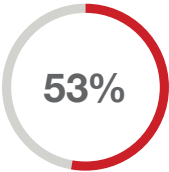
# How Americans learned to value resilience.

The old definition of “making it” is fading and Americans are adopting a rewritten definition of financial success built on resilience, manageable debt, and the ability to handle the next curveball that might come their way. While 68% of Americans feel financial stress, many are turning that pressure into purpose by making intentional trade-offs, focusing on what they can control, and building resilience for the long term. Kitchen table conversations nationwide have shifted from chasing milestones to creating a steadier path forward, proving that adaptability can be its own kind of strength in an uncertain economy.



**Stability remains a front runner.**

63% agree that thriving in America means having financial stability — consistent with sentiments over the last three years.



**Traditional milestones take a back seat — for now.**

53% said that paying for experiences or a certain lifestyle was less of a priority and 39% said both buying a home and getting married were less of a priority than one year ago. Still, more than half (55%) consider homeownership a “very important” part of their definition of success.

## With a sharp eye on inflation, Americans are making deliberate trade-offs to prioritize saving over spending.

The rising cost of living and increased price of everyday items are putting a strain on wallets across households in America.



Americans are most concerned about day-to-day expenses like groceries (55%), housing costs (35%), and credit card debt (26%).



They also agreed that the top three expenses that have increased the most due to the rising cost of living are: food and groceries (76%), utilities (44%), and housing (35%).



49% of consumers have switched to less expensive brands or services due to the rising cost of living and 41% have reduced subscriptions or memberships.

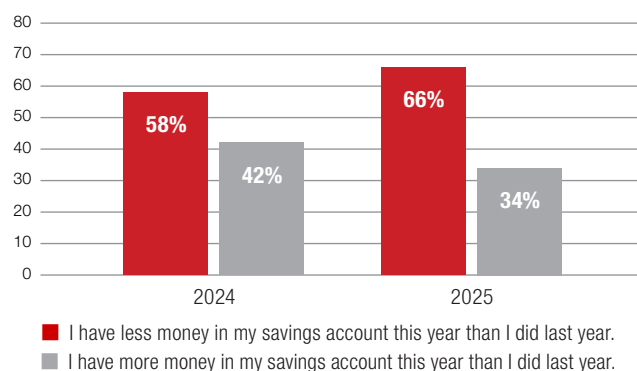


14% of Americans haven't changed their spending behavior because they either haven't felt a significant impact from rising costs (22%) or they just weren't sure what changes they should make (17%).

## Even with daily and weekly trade-offs, more Americans are watching their savings shrink year over year.

**32%** of Americans are making weekly trade-offs to spend less so that they can save more for the future.

**25%** are making daily trade-offs.



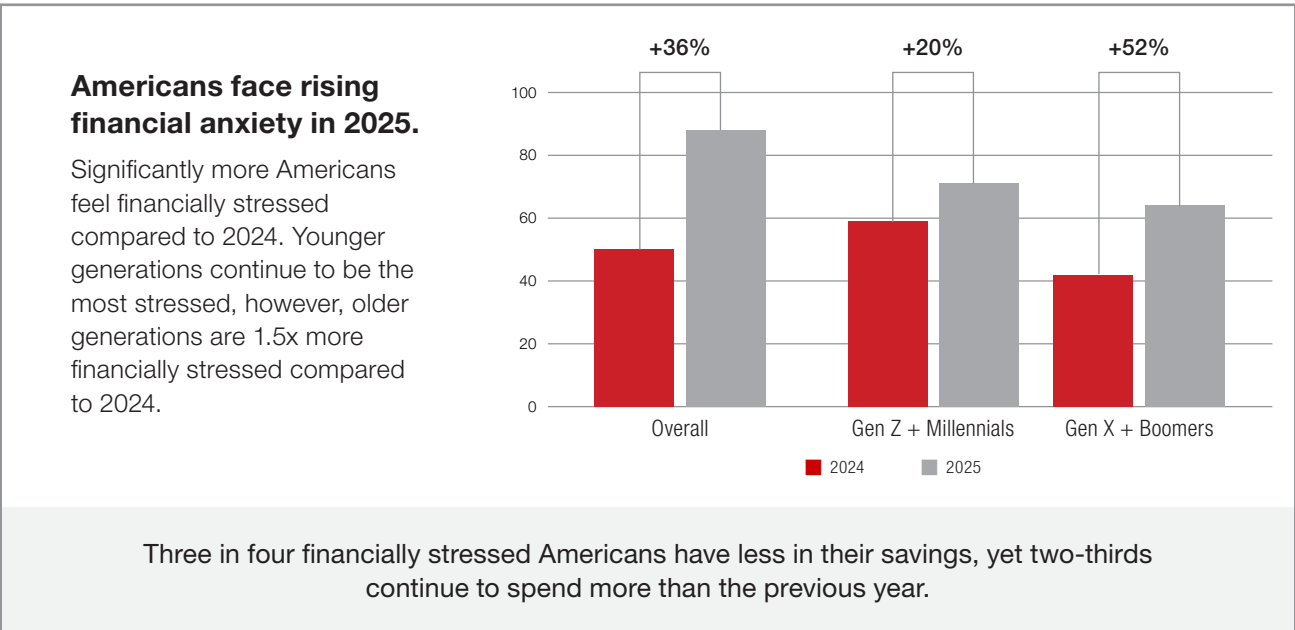
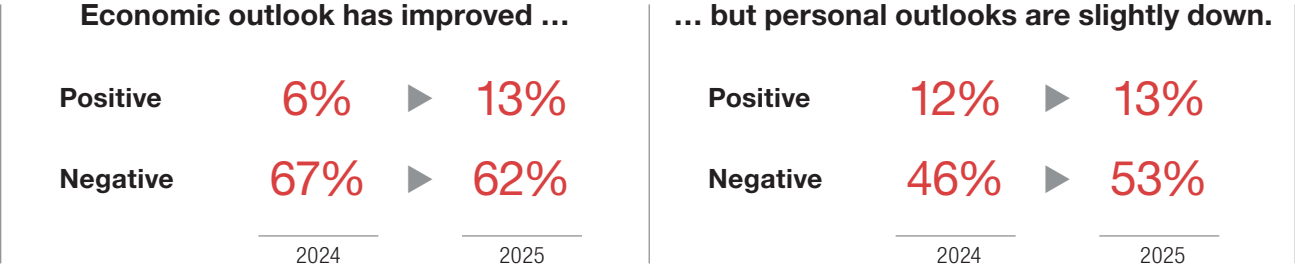
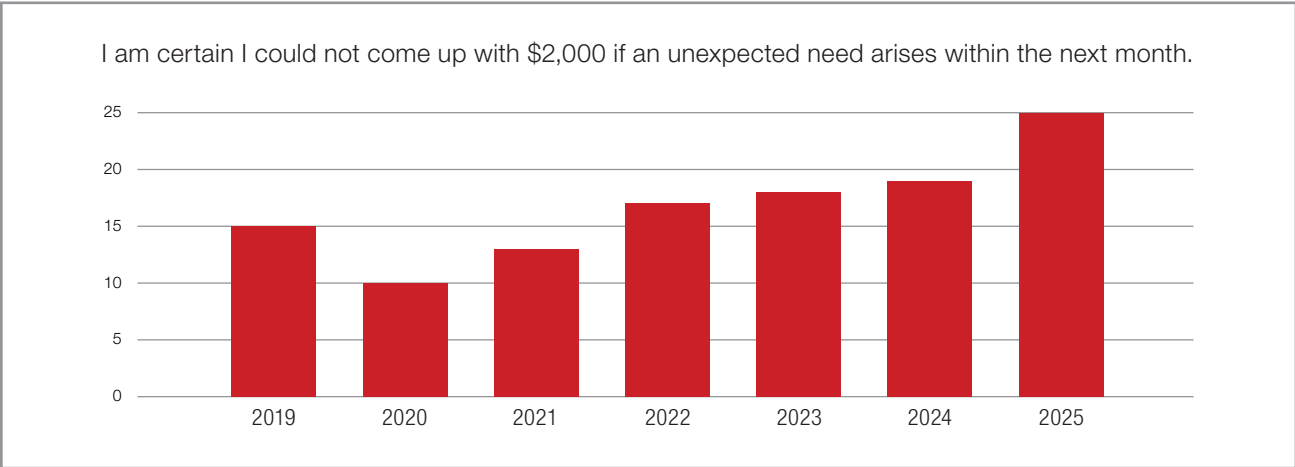
### The splurge diet: Everything in moderation

Americans agree (36%) that they spend money on things they don't need to boost their mood, even if it means they're neglecting their financial responsibilities.

However, 40% of Americans cut back on either everyday spending or big purchases when they hear news about a possible recession.

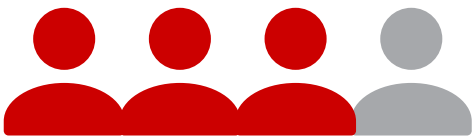
# Americans' emergency readiness drops as costs climb.

Over the past six years, day-to-day price increases and financial stress have eroded Americans' confidence in their ability to cover an unexpected \$2,000 expense. Today, one in four (25%) Americans are certain they cannot come up with the money if an unexpected need arises.



# Debt-free is the new luxury, but most Americans still don't feel fully in control of their money.

Three in four Americans agree that debt-free living is the most important milestone in their definition of financial success.



## Debt is considered differently by positive and negative economic outlooks.



of those with a positive economic outlook believe debt is a necessary part of life.

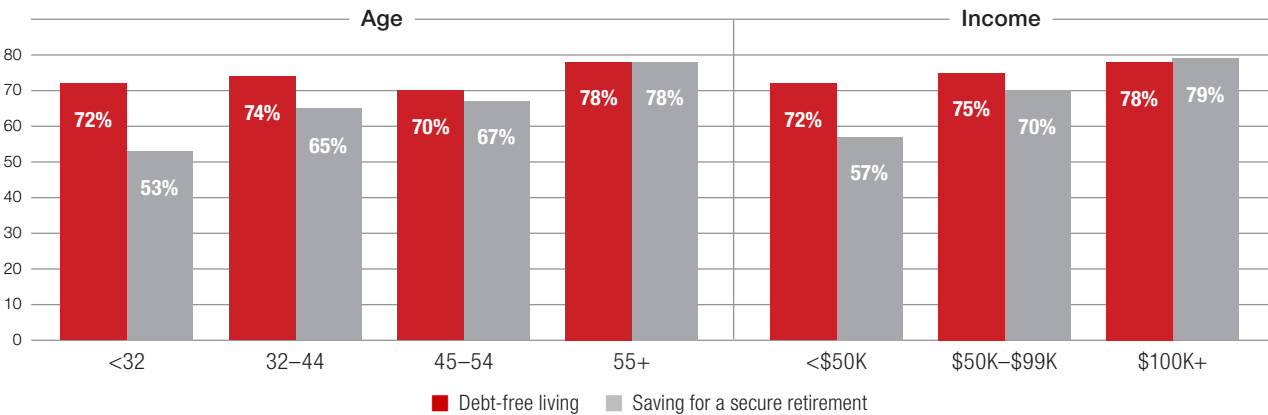


of those with a negative economic outlook avoid debt at all costs.



Despite stress and worsening economic conditions, one in three Americans feel in control or proud of how they manage their money.

Older generations and those with an income of over \$100k are placing equal emphasis on debt-free living and saving for a secure retirement.

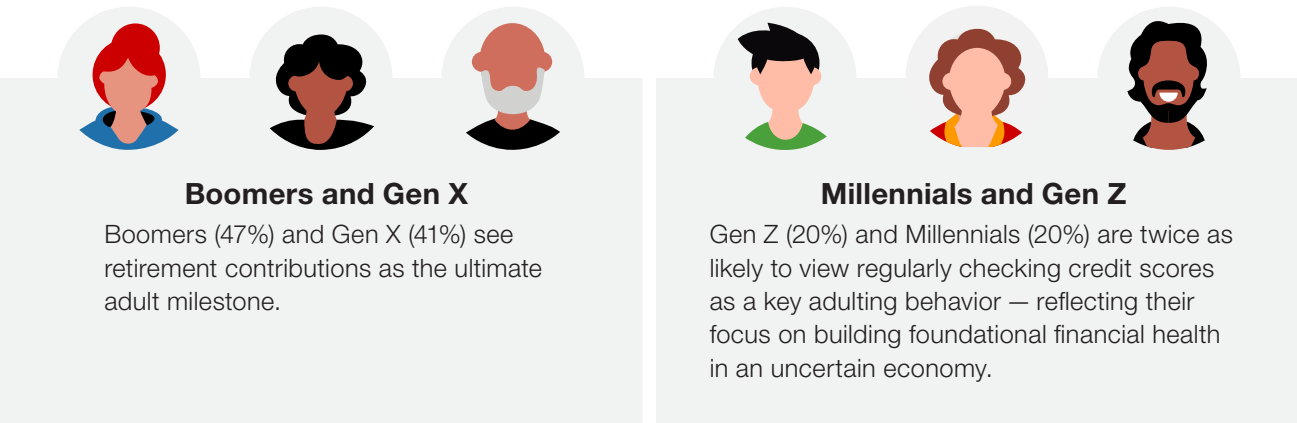


Two in five (39%) Americans said they feel more financially successful than they did five years ago.

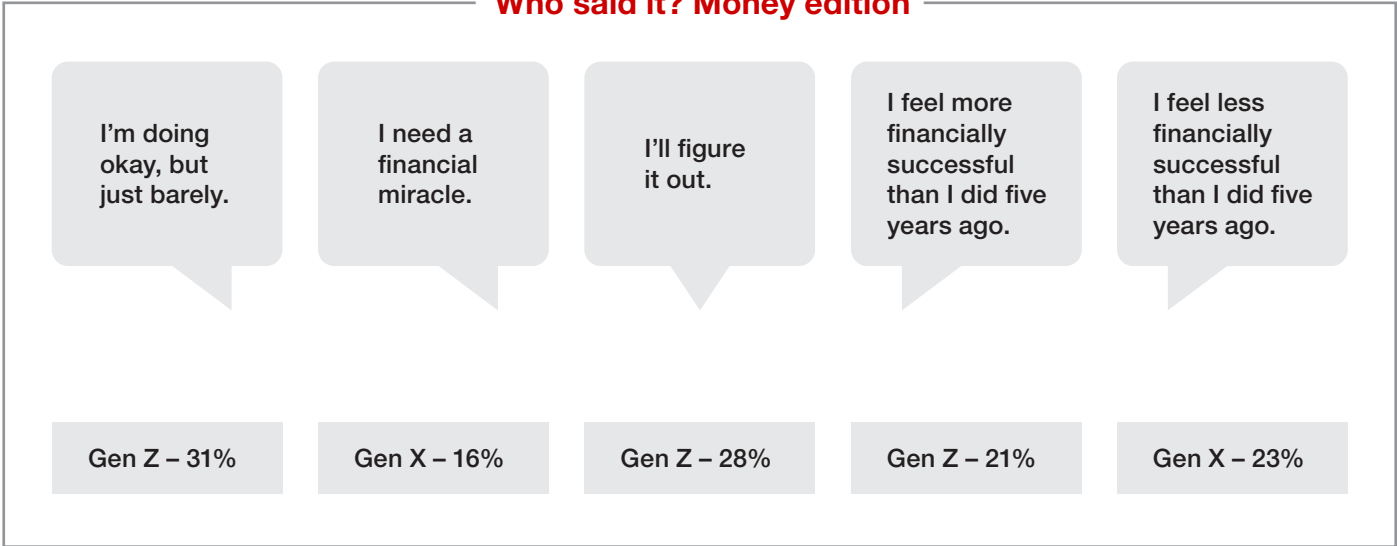
If they felt less successful (22%), it was mostly due to the rising cost of living and inflation (71%), economic uncertainty and recession fears (45%), and job changes or career burnout (26%).

# The kids are alright; the grandparents are not.

Gen Z is reshaping financial milestones, while Gen X feel more squeezed and in need of a financial miracle. Contributing to retirement funds (32%) and saying “no” to plans to save money (30%) are the top behaviors that feel most like financial “adulting,” but priorities vary significantly by generation.



## Who said it? Money edition



## Guilt and joy share the same table

After making a big purchase, Americans first feel excited (34%), then guilty (27%) — with Gen Z (30%) and women (30%) most likely to experience buyer’s guilt.

This emotional complexity extends to how generations celebrate financial wins: Americans are equally likely to skip celebrating a milestone (33%) as they are to set a new goal immediately (33%).

However, nearly half of Boomers (48%) skip celebrations entirely, while Gen Z (36%) and Millennials (34%) are most likely to treat themselves when they reach a financial goal.

# Everyday trade-offs say a lot about financial priorities.

In a world of rising costs, Americans prize staples and privacy over perks and popularity.

## Would you rather ...

Get free groceries for six months?

OR

Get free streaming services for a year?



The majority (86%) of Americans would rather get free groceries for six months than get free streaming services for a year (14%).

## Would you rather ...

Send your bank statement to your boss?

OR

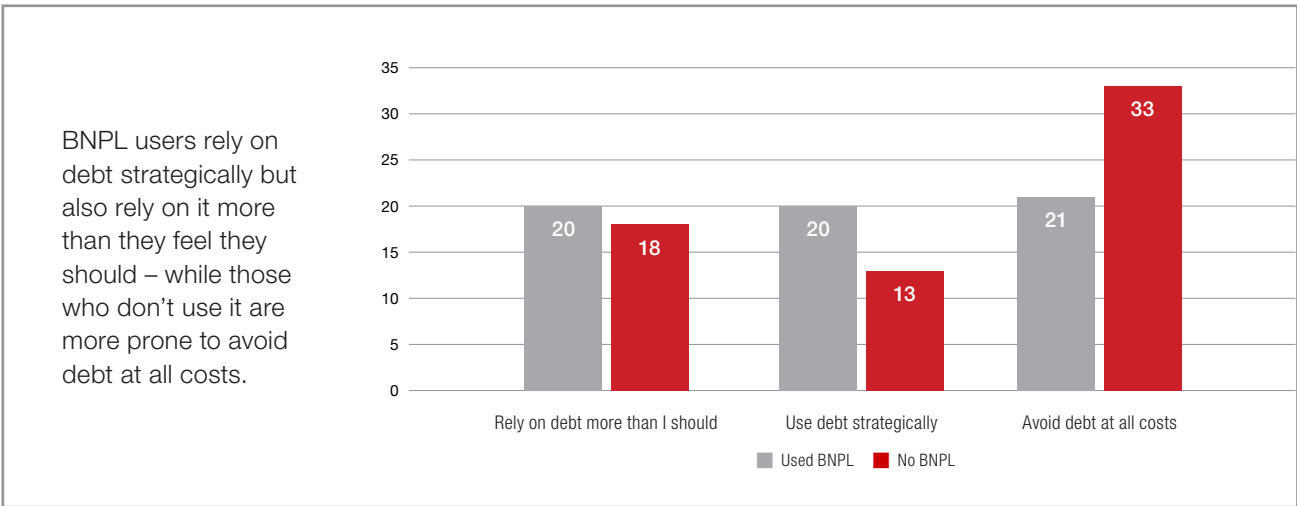
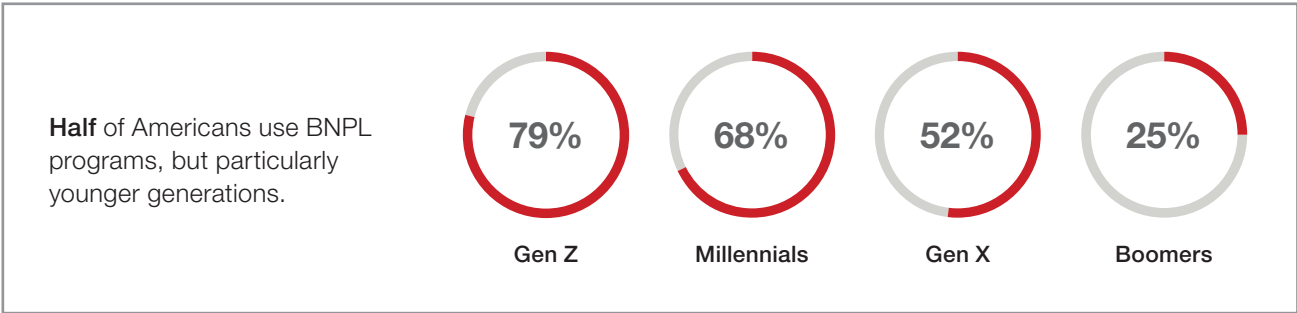
Have your monthly budget go viral on social media?

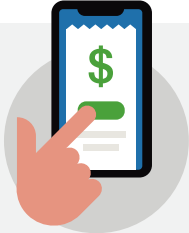


Americans are mostly split on sending their bank statements to their boss (53%) than having their monthly budgets go viral on social media (47%).

# Americans increasingly rely on financial floats, like Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL), that blur the line between control and strain.

This approach allows people to sustain their desired lifestyle in the face of rising expenses, and notably, those relying on BNPL report more positive financial outlooks than those who don't.





73% using BNPL feel financially stressed, however, they still have a less negative personal outlook than non-BNPL users.

Although BNPL users have higher stress, only 10% cite that BNPL payments are a top three financial concern.



### **Methodology: About the KeyBank 2026 Financial Mobility Survey**

This survey was conducted online by Schmidt Market Research in July 2025, polling 1,004 Americans ages 18–70. All respondents have sole or shared responsibility for household financial decisions and maintain a checking or savings account. The survey respondents' spending and savings habits, levels of financial confidence, stress and resiliency factors, economic sentiment, and debt impacts.



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