



## **Rethinking Money: Why a New Financial Playbook Is Emerging for Young Americans**

Financial Literacy Month Survey Findings Summary

See the press release [here](#).

A new survey of 2,000 Gen Z and Millennial adults reveals young Americans are grappling with a fundamental reality: the financial system is stacked against them, pushing long-term goals further out of reach and forcing many into survival mode. The joint survey, in partnership between [Beyond Finance](#) and [Operation HOPE](#), was fielded March 16-18, 2026, with a nationally representative sample split evenly between Millennials (born 1981 to 1996, currently ages 30 to 45) and Gen Z adults (born 1997 to 2008, currently 18 to 29).

The results reveal a widening gap between traditional financial guidance and the economic realities younger generations face, with 7 in 10 indicating wealth is out of reach as survival spending becomes the norm. This points not only to the importance of financial education, but the need to meet these younger adults where they are, creating new—and realistic—pathways to achieve the American Dream.

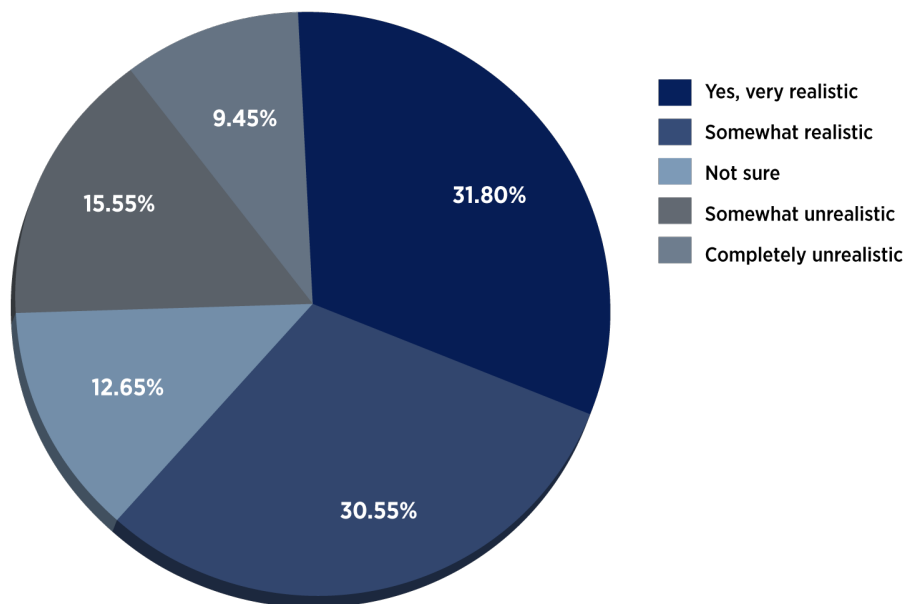
### **The American Dream Is Still Alive, Just Harder to Reach**

A growing share of Gen Z adults and Millennials feel the financial system is working against them, not for them. Over half say their generation was set up for financial failure (57%) and believe their generation has been financially set back compared to previous generations (68%). Zooming out, they point toward financial literacy conversations overlooking the bigger economic picture, placing too much responsibility on the individual who didn't have a path toward upward mobility in the first place (65%).

This results in the traditional American Dream feeling farther out of reach than ever before:

- Only 32% say the traditional American Dream feels very realistic
  - Gen Z is slightly more optimistic than Millennials, at 34% versus 29%
- A quarter say the American Dream is unrealistic

Do you believe the traditional "American Dream" (career, homeownership, family) is realistic for your generation?



However, the cornerstone of the dream itself hasn't changed: homeownership is still seen as the top factor for achieving "financial success" with almost half ranking it #1 (45%). The option of "being able to travel as much as I want" fell to the bottom, suggesting a desire for financial stability over a carefree lifestyle.

The breakdown comes from the outdated "playbook" to wealth, and the rules that came with it. A system that once provided retirement access is crumbling along with the security for what will happen when these generations get older.

- 71% say wealth-building opportunities are becoming less achievable
- 59% say spending on meaningful experiences today feels more practical than saving for long-term goals that seem increasingly out of reach
- 65% feel uncertain about whether traditional retirement planning will provide long-term security, weighted toward Millennials with almost a ten-point difference (70% versus 61%)

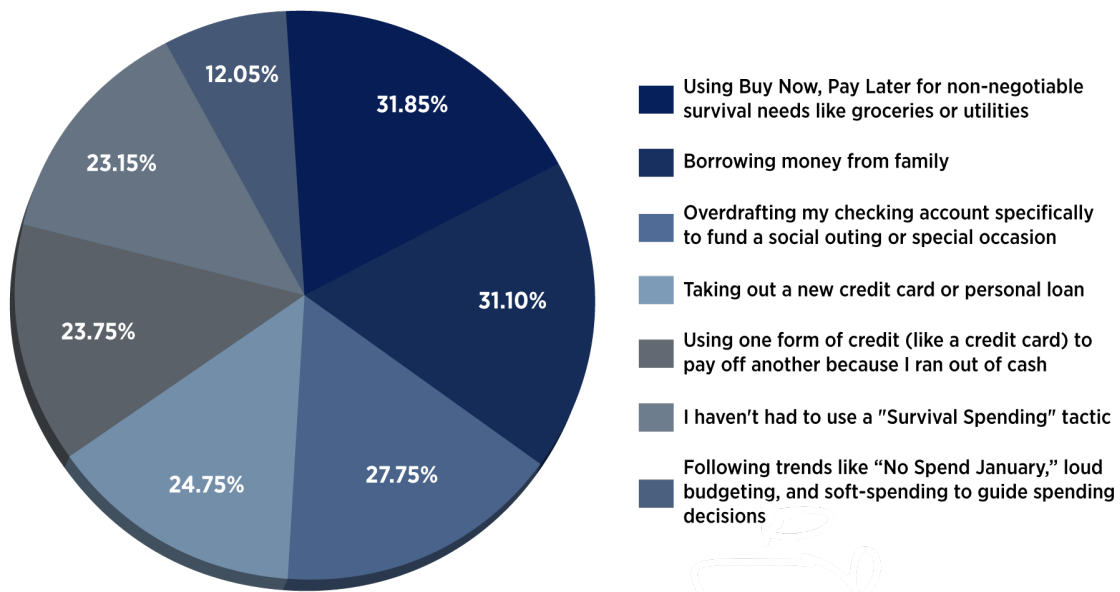
Connecting the broken system to homeownership, 75% say financial knowledge alone won't make homeownership attainable. Millennials are more likely to have this sentiment, at 81% versus Gen Z's 70%. We have seen this demonstrated already with over half of Millennials having stayed at or moved back into their parent's/guardian's home as an adult because of financial reasons (54%, versus only 37% of Gen Z adults).

## Young Adults are in Survival Mode to Keep up with Today's Economy

Rising economic pressures are shifting financial behavior from long-term planning to daily decision-making focused on immediate needs. Nearly one in three describe themselves as “barely surviving” financially (31%), which is felt more heavily by Millennials than Gen Z (35% versus 28%). To keep up in today's economy, most say a side hustle or additional income is required (71%).

Two-thirds report using “survival spending” tactics (77%). These include “Buy Now Pay Later” (BNPL) services for essentials like groceries and utilities (32%), borrowing money from family (31%), or intentionally overdrafting their checking account (28%). There is a large generational difference for overdrafting, with 34% of Gen Z adults having done it versus only 22% of Millennials.

Which of these “Survival Spending” tactics have you used in the last 12 months?



Further exemplifying the need to focus on the short term, 26% would use a financial windfall to cover basic living expenses first and 19% would pay down credit card debt first. Only 14% would be able to invest it, and only 4% feel stable enough to use it for a vacation.

As a result of the economic climate of the past year, over half say their ability to save money has worsened overall (53%), with a quarter saying it worsened significantly (26%).

- 45% say their ability to pay monthly bills has worsened
- 40% say their ability to pay down debt has worsened
- Almost half say their mental health related to money AND their confidence in their financial future has worsened (46% for each)

These money habits demonstrate the need for a new playbook that accounts for survival tactics, alternate pathways to saving, and coping strategies for mental wellbeing.

## **Their Parents' Playbook Didn't Prepare Them for This**

One-third of Millennials and Gen Z adults say their parent's or guardian's financial strategies informed their current money attitudes "a lot" and 77% say there was at least a little influence. Almost half of Gen Z feels like they handle their finances better than their parents/guardians (49%) whereas Millennials are split (43% say they do and 43% say they don't).

Each generation says their approach to money habits has been influenced by the financial attitudes of the generation that came before them:

- 81% of Gen Z adults say they have been influenced by Millennials
- 70% of Millennials say they have been influenced by Gen X (born in 1965 to 1980, currently 46 to 61 years old)

Almost one-third of each cohort says the generation before them experienced a better time that no longer exists today (30% for each). Additionally, they feel like other generations don't understand their financial challenges (43%).

Looking inward to their own generation, over two-thirds say their cohort talks about getting rich more than practicing good habits (68%), skewing more toward Millennials at 71% versus 65% of Gen Z adults.

## **They're Not Rejecting Advice — They're Rejecting Bad Advice**

When navigating a system that feels misaligned with reality, traditional advice often falls short. For example, almost a quarter reject the idea to "go to college no matter what it costs" the most among a list of commonly-held financial wisdom (22%). This is heavily weighted by Millennials, at an 8-percent difference (25% versus 17% of Gen Z), most likely reflecting the experiences their cohort have faced with college loan debt.

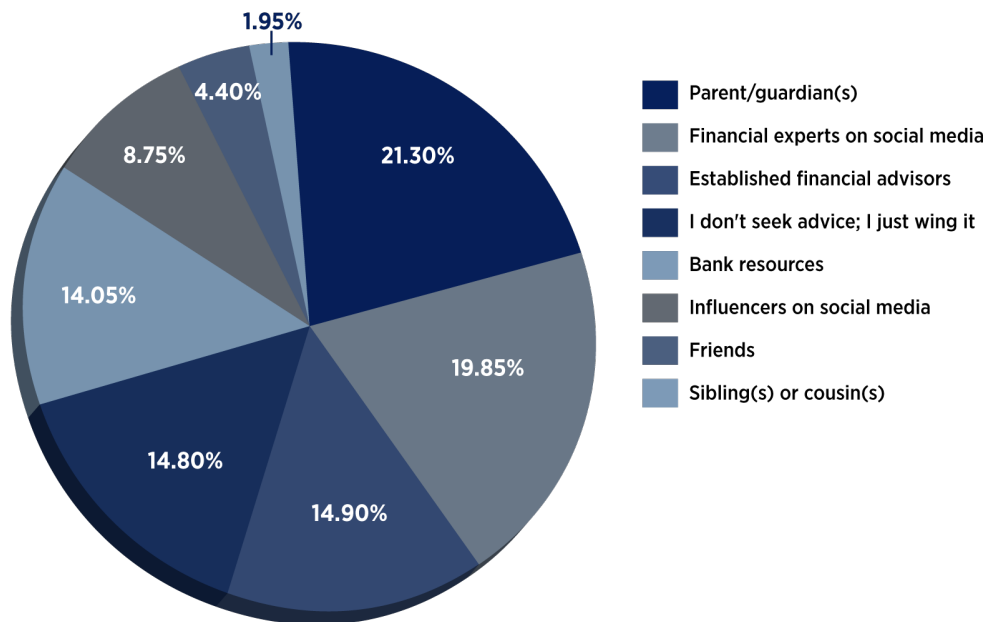
Barely a quarter say they feel fully prepared to make good financial decisions from their education (28%), skewed toward Gen Z adults at 34% versus only 22% of Millennials. Knowledge around credit cards and emergency savings rose to the top for desired topics they wish they had learned more about.

Financial literacy even affects dating, with almost three-quarters saying they would want to know their partner's exact financial situation (debt, credit score, and spending habits) before the third date versus waiting until they're already committed (73%).

When it comes to seeking financial advice, they consult their parents/guardians equally to watching financial experts on social media (21% and 20%, respectively).

- Gen Z is more likely to use advice from experts on social media (24% versus 16% of Millennials) as well as influencers (12% versus 5%)
- Millennials consult established financial advisors more than their younger counterparts (19% vs 10%) and are also more likely to "wing it" (19% vs 10%)

Where do you get the majority of your actionable financial advice?



Additionally, AI presents new opportunities to reach them where they are. Almost two in five are using an AI element for budgeting and/or to inform financial decisions (39%), including those who use AI to run “what if” scenarios (like buying a home) to later discuss with a human professional (27%).

- Gen Z skews more heavily toward AI use:
  - 31% use a “human + AI” hybrid for decision making versus only 24% of Millennials
  - 17% use AI to auto-pilot budgeting and savings, ten percent more than Millennials
- Each generation uses apps to gamify banking equally, at 16% each

### **They’re Not Giving Up. They’re Rewriting the Rules.**

Gen Z and Millennials aren’t rejecting financial success—they’re rewriting the rules for a system that no longer works the way it once did. This shift signals a broader change in financial identity, with success now defined by navigating an evolving and uncertain system rather than achieving traditional milestones.

Despite these challenges, Gen Z and Millennials remain engaged, adapting their expectations and redefining financial success for today’s environment.

The opportunity now is to redefine hope: to move beyond outdated assumptions and equip people with a new, more realistic set of financial rules—ones built for today’s economy, not yesterday’s expectations.

Beyond Finance and Operation HOPE are constantly working to meet each generation where they are. We are proud to have offerings that redefine the financial literacy space, addressing the new rules, new playbooks, and the constantly-shifting economic environment. To examine your money mindset further, explore [a free tips guide](#) from Beyond Finance and then take Operation HOPE's [quizzes, AI video training, and micro-courses](#).