

# When every dollar counts: Inside the economic struggles of workers who earn low to moderate incomes

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“The American dream is just that, a dream. It’s not even reachable anymore to have the house and the white picket fence.”

—Participant with household income less than \$50k annually



## Worker Perspectives Key Themes

**Stuck in survival mode:** Participants in this research noted financial instability due to recent rising cost pressures and wages falling short of household budgets. They shared how already strained budgets were adjusted through changes in their consumer behavior, credit extension, and reliance on formal and informal social safety nets to make ends meet.

**(Not so) upward mobility:** Most participants were focused on economic survival, which slowed or halted their ability to pursue avenues for economic mobility like education and skill-building due to constrained income, limited capital, and the rising cost of living. Among participants who were employed, most noted they were thankful for their income and job, even if that job did not meet their needs. Those in unstable jobs or experiencing unemployment shared significant concerns for their future employment opportunities and financial stability.

**Searching for jobs and job quality:** Almost all participants noted an active or passive job search but struggled to connect with new job opportunities. They encountered new barriers to job matching with the prevalence of artificial intelligence in job screening, and they reported experiencing job scams. Workers reported they still prioritize

flexibility, work-life balance, and upward career mobility, but that adequate compensation is the most critical component of a quality job from their perspectives. Discussions of job quality characteristics were framed as something aspirational or nice to have in their employment journey, as opposed to an expectation that would affect their employment choices and behavior in the job market.

**Perseverance in the face of challenges:** Almost all participants expressed low overall confidence in the macroeconomy and labor market, which they deemed to be forces outside of their control. At the same time, their confidence in their own ability to find employment was high, even if that employment fell short of their needs. These sentiments conveyed how participants sought to persevere in times of difficulty, and some shared how “positive thinking” was foundational to their ability to tackle difficult economic conditions.



So thankfully I’m comfortable, but let’s just say on thin ice, there’s definitely like one or two paychecks away from not being, you know, in the right place...

—Participant with household income between \$60k–\$75k annually

