Navigating Economic Insecurity

Low-Income New Yorkers' Financial Strategies and Experiences

Community Service Society

SEPTEMBER 16, 2026

Today's Agenda

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Rachel Swaner, CSS VP of Policy Research and Advocacy

DISCUSSION: PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

Nichole Davis, Deputy Commissioner, Office of Financial Empowerment, NYC Department of Consumer and Worker Protection

Carolina Rodriguez, Senior Director, CSS's Education Debt Consumer Assistance Program (EDCAP)

Moderated by **Rachel Swaner**

CSS Community Service Society



The Community Service Society of New York (CSS) has worked with and for New Yorkers since 1843 to promote economic opportunity and champion a more equitable city and state. Join us at **cssny.org.**

Powering a more equitable New York

Navigating Economic Insecurity:

Low-income New Yorkers' Financial Strategies and Experiences

Rachel Swaner, CSS VP of Policy Research and Advocacy

CSS Community Service Society

For many low-income New Yorkers, there is no financial margin

60%

Cannot make ends meet or are barely managing to get by



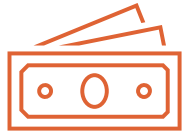
53%

Have no emergency savings at all



52%

Couldn't or probably couldn't cover a $400 unexpected expense



41%

Of those not currently retired are NOT saving for retirement



Data from CSS Annual Survey of Housing and Economic Security, Fall 2025

What we wanted to understand: for low-income New Yorkers, what are their…

- Strategies to manage money
- Experiences with and perceptions of financial institutions
- Barriers to achieving financial stability
- Trusted resources and supports
- Suggestions for policy and programs that would help improve financial well-being



4 in-person focus groups
- Lower Manhattan
- Crown Heights, BK
- Jamaica, Queens
- South Bronx



2 online focus groups



41 participants

Money Management Strategies

Community Service Society

Participants used highly intentional strategies to stretch limited resources

Budgeting and expense tracking

"I use my **Notes app** […]. I just **break each month of the year into two** mid sections, because I get paid biweekly, and just like **block off a chunk of money for essentials**. […] If there's like a lot of holidays or events, just block off like a chunk of money for those things."

"It is actually convenient because **[budget apps] do track everything for you and if you forgot you had a subscription, it will remind you. You can set your little budget** – so let's say I only want to spend $50 a week on GrubHub or something. If you go over, you adjust things and you can tell it to automatically pull money into different places."

Purposely choosing card or cash for expenses

"I'm **trying to build my credit**. So like I see it as […] I'm putting in the money, but it's coming back, maybe in points or building my credit. So I try to use my credit card first."

"I have a bank card, but **I find it difficult, keeping track of online purchases and things like that.** So what I'll do is, **I'll just like take half of the money off and I'll keep the money on the card simply because I know we live in a time when you need an actual debit card, but most of the time if I'm making purchases and things like that, I'm using cash**. **Because I can like…see the money**, it's easier for me to be like, OK, this is 20 and I can see the 20 going to this place, whereas with a card you will buy something for $20, but they may not take that $20 until three days after."

Setting money aside to build savings

"I try to **hide it somewhere** and then, like, surprise!"

"If it's $2.50, I spend $3. If I spend $4.50, I spend like $6, and that's how I cap it up. **Because all that extra change […] adds up**."

"[Acorn] kind of **rounds up purchases and […] they actually invest the money for you**. It's like an investment thing, but the idea of being able to round up and have this sort of like **secret hidden away money**, I thought was kind of a great idea."

Needs vs. wants

"I would go to each store and I would look at the 12-pack of toilet tissue and see what each one was charging. So it was also like a lot of leg work too, because I would have to walk around the vicinity of, I would say, 10 to 15 blocks in a radius to just you know, see what was the best price because at the end of the day, knowing that I didn't have a job right now and it was taking longer than expected to find a new one, […] even like saving $3 to $5 meant a lot, because then I could apply that to food or to an electric bill."

1. Identifying necessary expenses and paying those bills first



2. Eliminating optional expenses



3. Reducing necessary spending
   - Buying cheaper foods
   - Buying in bulk
   - Comparison shopping
   - Limiting subway use

Banks and Alternative Financial Institutions

Community Service Society

Participants felt banks were necessary…

Essential for:

- Work-related payment (e.g., direct deposit)
- Saving for specific goals
- Emergency loans
- Applying for certain programs

Useful for:

- Accessible ATMs
- Transfers and bill payment
- Debit card lock features (to help curb spending)
- In-person services (to speak to a “non-robotic person”)

…but did not trust them

Untrustworthy

"I don't like banks, I don't like debit cards. […] **I just take my money out and send off the bills**. Like my daddy used to do. Of course, he ain't never trusted a banker a day in his life and he taught all nine of us the same doggone way so it's instilled in us: **don't trust a bank**."

"I **don't trust the banks because I truly believe that they are not for the people. Their top priority is literally the money**. […] For me, cash is king and that's also kind of how I was raised up. Like my dad is a big believer of, like, no one is ever going to turn down cash."

[About hidden fees] "When you're living on a little bit of money, those 5-10 bucks really add up."

Unhelpful

"They're not going to say, 'hey, we have also this available.' Like, **you have to find things out for yourself**."

"At one time I was like, 'Hey, I'm making really good money now. I have a shit ton saved up. Can y'all help me invest in it?' […] I tried to be responsible, and **I met with like three people, but nothing happened**."

"I had *so* many questions because I had no idea what was going on because […] when you have that first meeting, **they don't actually tell you** […] 'OK, with this credit card, you have a spending limit.' […] I feel like **there isn't any education** for that."

Lasting consequences of easy credit

"I had a positive experience with banks **when I first started working** like 12 years ago and it was like really easy, like I was building like a lot of credit. My credit score was rising pretty quickly, like I was gaining a lot of credit from **banks that were just approving me for credit left and right**, [...] And then I had like a little menty b and, uh, bye bye credit! […] **my credit score's completely screwed, I'm like, I don't know how to get back there**. […] I'm kind of in a hole now. And it's like, how do I get back… Like **that was like ten years ago, and I still haven't been able to fix my credit score**."

Credit unions offered a more trusted alternative

"I think that the **lawmakers should figure out a way for everybody to be able to join a credit union** because they **don't charge these fees** and stuff. Like, they **don't charge you for maintaining a certain amount** in your account."

"I wish they had **more locations**."

"**Have a credit union in the school for the students**. Like they can have their own banking and credit union throughout the year. They can save their money and they can see interest and investment. […] At the end of the year, they can withdraw or they can carry it over into the next year, or something like that."

Participants used fintech products for different reasons…

Covering everyday expenses

"[The reason] I like **Chime** is because if you got **a bill or medications** you need to pay for and you got **SpotMe**, you can use that money and get what you need."

"I just used **Klarna** to buy **contact lenses**. Stuff like that. Not frivolous stuff, honestly."

Saving

"I started a **savings for this trip** that we have coming up through **Cash App**. I put like $5 here, and that was about two years ago. […] When I get ready to travel tomorrow, that's going to be my spending money. […] I think a little bit over a $100 from when I started."

Building credit

"I put [my paycheck] into my bank account and then I transfer it from my bank account to **Experian** and then whatever bills I have to pay, I use Experian. [It] **helps with my credit score**."

"I **built up my credit score using [Chime's Credit Builder].** It's using your own money, basically, but they […] register it as a credit card."

...but questioned their costs and risks

Easy to overextend

"I think that was like the worst mistake of my life, […] **because I spent the money and then when I needed it for something else […] it was already gone** because I, the [earned wage access service] gave me the option to take it. Which is a bad option."

"It's **easy to mismanage** that and forget that you have payments."

"Buy now, pay never."

Hard to reach

"When there are issues, **there isn't a direct person you can speak to**. I think with all the banks is that like… when there's an issue, you can go to the teller and be like, 'what do you see on your end?' Versus where **Cash App is just like […] an entity that just has your money**."

Untrustworthy

"[Cash App is] **made by scammers** for scammers."

"[I paid] **90 dollars more than what the actual order was**."

"Something about it feels like it's just **going too much over into my business**."

Challenges to Financial Security

Community Service Society

Participants cited structural barriers as the biggest obstacles

Individual choices matter

- Overreliance on credit, especially when young
- “Lifestyle creep”
- Spending on non-essential items
- Difficulty saying no to family and friends

But most barriers were beyond their control

- Low wages and unemployment
- Rising housing and food costs
- Healthcare expenses
- Inconsistent public benefits
- Intergenerational poverty

“**You have to make good decisions**. Some of us do, some of us don’t. That is part of it. And then sometimes things can spiral out of control. **What can you do if you lose a job or if you get sick?**”

“If you’re telling me that **you can make all the right decisions and still not exit that cycle** [of poverty], then clearly it can’t just be all on the individual.”

Low wages + rising costs = no financial margin

Income

"I've noticed that for job **salaries are so low**, and they're like from 20 years ago. I feel like, as a single woman, that makes it very, **very difficult to survive**, **let alone save** for my future."

"In New York, **you can't pay somebody $18 an hour and expect them to sustain themselves**. You have to get back and forth to work, that's $6, right? You have to feed yourself. You have to buy clothing for yourself. Even if you have a uniform, you're going to need more than one of those uniforms. And then you have to wash them. You know what you need to wash your clothes? You need money to wash your clothes. […] So at something like $18 an hour, you're just taking care of your **bare minimum** for yourself."

Costs

"I feel like every day **the prices for living—housing, eating, everything—is just going up**. So if prices are going up and minimum wage is not going up, **how can we be financially stable**? **Even if you're doing everything that you need to do**."

"Unless you have a family situation, or a couple of roommates situation, it's hard because **housing takes so much of your money, so it's hard to save** and, you know, have a roof over your head."

"I had to go to the eye doctor like 2-3 months ago. That was like hundreds of dollars because I needed an exam, new glasses, all that. […] **when it comes to health, and, like those annual and semiannual visits, it kind of takes a big chunk out of what I usually spend**. So it like **sets me back**."

Without a financial margin, a "curveball" can undo careful planning

"**You're living paycheck to paycheck** […]. So **when something unexpected comes up—an emergency, the kid needs this, this bill is more than it usually is—now you're like, OK, well, you got to figure that out**. And that, that for me is like the biggest challenge."

"I had made up my mind that **I was going to budget** and we were going to stay on budget. **But then, when something break down and you have to buy it, it throws off your budget**, you know what I mean? Because we're not making that much money anyway."

Public benefits were essential, but could be difficult to access or rely on

"I got laid off in January. And I went in to [HRA] to see if I can get any type of benefits […]. They asked if I lived with somebody. I said yes and because I lived with that person, I wasn't qualified. But we're not married. **We're both on the lease for… Safety wise, I can't kick him out. He can't kick me out.** They made me go through the whole speech and submit this, submit that. Why would I submit another person's information when *I'm* applying? *We* are not applying, *I'm* applying. I did not get any type of help. They denied me any type of assistance."

"**People are losing their benefits**, their Medicaid. Things that pay for everyday items that people need. You can't do that. **I don't see how people can really pull themselves out of stuff. Like with things getting, like, slashed and burned**."

Trusted Resources

Community Service Society

Participants relied on a mix of personal and public safety nets

Family and partners

- Emergency help
- Shared household costs
- Someone to fall back on

"I'm **lucky enough to have family that I know I can go to and ask for a loan** if I need it. I know a lot of people don't have that."

Public benefits

- SNAP
- Housing programs
- Medicaid
- SSI

"I didn't have SNAP for a few months and that was very stressful. […] so I feel like **SNAP has just been a godsend** for me."

Community-based resources provided practical help

- Library tax prep
- Food pantries
- Financial education
- Buy Nothing Facebook groups

"A financial advisor for life at the Neighborhood Trust Bank. […] they taught me the difference between a commercial bank and a community bank, and **how I could build my credit**."

"I actually applied for my programs through […] Fifth Avenue Committee, and they just make **applying for assistance with compassion and empathy** and humanity."

Key Takeaways and Policy Implications

Community Service Society

Financial security requires more than good individual decisions

Participants are already resourceful

- Budgeting
- Cutting costs
- Thoughtfully using financial tools
- Seeking help from trusted organizations with human assistance

Structural barriers are high

- Low wages
- Unemployment
- High costs
- Opaque systems
- Limited safety nets

Persistent insecurity makes it hard to build for the future

- Weather financial shocks
- Save
- Accumulate assets
- Break cycles of intergenerational poverty

Improve systems people use

Make financial systems fairer

- More transparent banks and fintech products
- Lower fees and interest rates
- Fee waivers in times of crisis (e.g., medical emergency, job loss)
- Proactive, individualized guidance
- Stronger oversight and consumer protections

Invest in trusted community and public supports

- Holistic community support
- Advocacy and systems navigation
- Warm handoffs between programs
- Modernized financial education focused on consumer rights and holding systems accountable
- Improve public benefits access and eligibility rules

Address the economic conditions making stability so hard

Create pathways to stable, living-wage income

- Raise wages
- Invest in public and infrastructure jobs for low-income New Yorkers
- Connect job training to actual jobs

"Job training and job placements—real job placement—is so needed right now. I really, I mean, I'm kind of noticing that […] there are places that you can get training […], but the jobs just aren't, the connection with the jobs aren't out there."

Reduce costs and help families build assets

- Affordable housing and healthcare
- Rental assistance
- Strengthened rent stabilization
- Lower food costs
- Asset-building opportunities

"It's hard because housing takes so much of your money, so it's hard to save and have a roof over your head."

"The only reason we're surviving is because we live in a rent-controlled apartment."

Resources

- Education Debt Consumer Assistance Program (EDCAP)
- The ACES Project
- Financial Coaching Corps (FCC)
- Community Health Advocates (CHA)
- NYC DCWP Office of Financial Empowerment
- Basic Banking in New York
- Filing a complaint at NYC DCWP

Questions?

Rachel Swaner
rswaner@cssny.org