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Navigating Economic Insecurity

Low-Income New Yorkers' Financial Strategies and Experiences

ELISE WHITE AND RACHEL SWANER

Community Service Society

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Elise White and Rachel Swaner

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ELISE WHITE is is the Executive Director of Community Insight Collaborative, a collective focused on centering community voices and experiences in community safety research and policy. Her work explores community justice, violence prevention, and community-driven approaches to public safety. Previously, she spent nearly 20 years at the Center for Justice Innovation, where she held leadership roles across research, court operations, and youth justice, including leading the organization's research department and participatory research initiatives. She has a PhD from the University of Maryland.

RACHEL SWANER is the Vice President of Policy, Research, and Advocacy at the Community Service Society of New York. Her research focuses on the structures of power that shape people's lives, and on how people understand, navigate, and challenge those structures. She has a PhD from the CUNY Graduate Center and an MPA from NYU. She teaches courses in research methods and participatory policymaking at New York University and Columbia University.

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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 an equitable city and state. We power change through a strategic combination of research, services, and advocacy to make New York more livable for people facing economic insecurity. By expanding access to health care, affordable housing, employment, opportunities for individuals with conviction histories, debt assistance, and more, we make a tangible difference in the lives of millions. Join us at www.cssny.org.

 Report Design: Opal Lynch, Alia Wimters

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Community Service Society's (CSS) 2025 Annual Survey of Housing and Economic Security, 60 percent of low-income New Yorkers report that they cannot make ends meet or are barely managing to get by. More than half (53 percent) have no emergency savings and 52 percent also could not or probably could not cover a $400 emergency expense. Three-quarters are not saving for retirement.

With savings at such low levels and the cost of living remaining stubbornly high, many households struggle to cover routine expenses and absorb unexpected financial shocks. To make ends meet, people often rely on a combination of financial tools, public and private resources, and personal strategies to stretch limited incomes, manage debt, and navigate persistent financial instability.

Designing effective policies and programs to improve financial security requires understanding not only whether people experience financial insecurity, but how they navigate it, the barriers they encounter, and the supports they find most valuable.

GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

National surveys conducted by the FDIC, Federal Reserve, and U.S. Census Bureau provide valuable information about Americans' financial well-being, including rates of savings, debt, and banking access. However, these surveys are designed to measure prevalence rather than explain how people manage financial insecurity in their daily lives. They tell us what people are experiencing but offer less insight into the strategies people use, the tradeoffs they face, the resources they trust, and how they make financial decisions within the constraints of their everyday lives.

While the New York State Department of Financial Services has begun examining financial access through analysis of publicly available data and interviews with stakeholders such as advocates, academics, industry participants, and state agency personnel, relatively few studies systematically engage directly with individuals experiencing financial insecurity. In particular, there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring how people manage limited financial resources, experience financial institutions, and respond to the structural challenges that shape their financial well-being. Just as importantly, few studies ask participants themselves what policymakers and practitioners need to understand about managing on a limited income or what changes they believe would most improve financial security. Without these insights, it is more difficult to design policies and programs that effectively meet people's needs.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

To address these gaps, CSS conducted an exploratory qualitative study to better understand how low-income New Yorkers navigate financial insecurity. The study explored the following research questions:

1. What strategies do low-income New Yorkers use to manage financial insecurity?
2. How do low-income New Yorkers perceive and experience financial institutions, including banks, nonbanks, and fintech tools?
3. What barriers to achieving financial stability do low-income New Yorkers face, and how do they navigate those challenges?
4. What resources and supports contribute to financial resilience among low-income New Yorkers?
5. What policy or program changes do low-income New Yorkers believe would improve their financial well-being?

To answer these questions, researchers conducted six focus groups in June 2025 with 41 participants recruited through community-based partner organizations in The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Approximately half of participants were recruited through a workplace training program for low-income women, while the remainder were recruited through a community-based legal services program with storefront offices in low-income neighborhoods that provides assistance with housing, public benefits, employment, immigration, and other civil legal matters. Focus groups were conducted both in person and online and lasted approximately 75 minutes. Participants received a stipend for their time. This study was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Focus group participants were predominantly women (90%) and represented a range of ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and income levels (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participants ranged in age and race/ethnicity but were mostly women

			N=41
Mean Age (n=37)	**39.3 years**	**Race/Ethnicity**	
18-24 years old	19%	Black	34%
25-34 years old	27%	Latino	12%
35-44 years old	22%	Asian	10%
45-59 years old	24%	White	7%
60+ years old	8%	North African/Middle Eastern	5%
		More than one race/ethnicity	15%
Income (n=30)		Prefer not to say	17%
Under $15,000	50%		
$15,000 - $24,999	20%	**% Women**	**90%**
$25,000 - $34,999	7%		
$35,000+	23%		

Focus groups were recorded (with participants' permission) and transcribed. Analysis followed a grounded thematic approach, beginning with the domains in the discussion guide and then inductively identifying themes across participants' responses.

This report summarizes the themes that emerged across the focus groups, illustrating how participants navigate financial insecurity, identifying the barriers to "getting ahead," presenting participants' recommendations for change, and concluding with broader policy and practice implications drawn from the findings.

MONEY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Focus groups opened with a series of questions related to how participants managed their money on a daily basis. Strategies were wide-ranging but broadly fell into three categories: budgeting and expense tracking, methods of handling regular expenses, and methods of limiting spending.

BUDGETING AND EXPENSE TRACKING

Many participants reported using budgets to make sure they were living within their means. The actual methods of creating budgets differed among participants and included such tools as Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets, pen and paper, planners, and cell phones. One participant explained, "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."

In addition to laying out anticipated expenses, many participants also identified the importance of expense tracking to their money management strategies. Some used the above methods, while others described phone-based apps (e.g., RocketMoney).

> It is actually convenient because they 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.

Several participants specifically appreciated these apps' use of visuals to help them understand where they were spending, and how much money they had remaining within a given pay period.

> I have a financial tracking app, [... that] lets me see it in [...] more like [a] pie chart. I see how much I spent on expenses, so that I can actually see what are my miscellaneous that I could squeeze out to do something to treat myself. But I'm a visual person, so I think I use all those to be able to separate and then see it all in one.

METHODS OF HANDLING REGULAR EXPENSES

Participants described many different strategies as part of their systems for paying for their living and everyday expenses.

Debit and Credit Cards. Most participants (85%) had bank accounts of some kind. Many had credit cards as well and described using their debit and/or credit cards to pay for bills and goods they bought regularly (e.g., food, toiletries), sometimes toggling between different cards for different bills.

> I use my credit card and debit card for bills and non-essential purchases. Because for example, my phone bill, it's not… it doesn't accept my credit card as, like, an authorized payment, so I have to use my debit card. But Google or Apple? It does accept my credit card, and since I would like to keep that account open, I'll just use that to pay for it monthly. So I just flip flop whatever system accepts whichever payment.

Some participants appreciated autopay options so they did not miss due dates and incur extra fees. Several described prioritizing paying bills with credit cards to maximize benefits. "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."

Some participants used Apple Pay/Wallet, while others avoided it over concerns about fraud. "I watch the news and I've seen where someone could just, you know, hold their phone over your phone and […] have it just pop up there and saving it."

Cash. Many participants used cash on a regular basis. Several identified using cash primarily as a way to avoid fraud in poorer neighborhoods. As one participant explained:

> I dislike that I have to say it in this manner, but mostly I use cash in my area. With the exception [of] Target or […] a supermarket or something. But if I go to the little mom and pop stores, they're not as updated in electronics. I know we have tapping now, but I still don't fully trust it only because of my experience in the past with fraud. And so I use cash mostly in this area. However, if I go to the city, I'm tapping the card.

While computer-based and virtual payment systems worked for some participants, many felt that exclusive reliance on cards and apps left them unclear about where their funds were going and how much money they had available at a given time.

> 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.

This cash-based system helped many participants physically see what money they had available and avoid overspending. Several participants also described a savings strategy related to cash left unspent at the end of a pay-period: "when I get like paid, […] I spend money on my bills first and then whatever money that's still leftover, I take it out and I put it somewhere safe, like the cash, so I won't see it on my card."

Setting Money Aside. Some participants described putting money aside to build savings. For some, this involved hiding cash in different bags, coats, or pieces of furniture. As one participant explained, "I try to hide it somewhere and then, like, surprise!" For others, this was a budgeting strategy where in their own accounting (e.g., an Excel spreadsheet), they regularly rounded up purchases to create a financial cushion. "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." Other participants reported similar strategies using apps. As one participant explained, the app 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."

METHODS OF LIMITING SPENDING

Many participants were unemployed at the time of the focus groups, with even more reporting having experienced unemployment within the last five years. "Even if I have an OK situation where I'm not going to be hungry, just the uncertainty of being unemployed at the moment, [...] it really heavily weighs mentally on me." At the outset of each focus group, participants were asked to identify a word or phrase that they most associated with managing their money. Of all responses (see Figure 1), the most frequent were related to stress, confusion, and anxiety.

Figure 1: Word Participants Most Associated with Managing their Money

To help manage the stress and uncertainty, participants described employing a number of strategies to decrease their expenditures.

Identifying Necessary Expenses. Foremost among these was the importance of identifying their fixed expenses, and either immediately paying those first or setting aside money in special accounts (e.g., a dedicated checking account) to make sure they could be covered. Participants cited such costs as rent; phone, electricity, and heating bills; and pet and child-related expenses. These participants detailed paying these expenses immediately upon getting paid and then seeing how much money they had left (in their bank accounts or in cash) before making optional spending decisions (e.g., clothing, entertainment subscription services, savings). A few participants described the inverse, depositing half in a savings account initially, and then using the remainder to cover living expenses. Others, however, were in life circumstances that necessitated tapping into savings just to cover "needs": "Back when the Big C [covid] happened, I mean, that was like an eye opener. [...] I try to save the most that I can [...], but when you have to dip into your savings and you see the numbers dwindling, that changed my whole mind frame too on necessity versus wants."

Eliminating Optional Spending. Once the "needs and wants" had been identified, participants described cutting "wants" such as cable, new clothes, Amazon impulse buys, alcohol, social outings with family or friends, more expensive foods like steak or salmon, and subscription services like Netflix and Hulu. Some participants called out "lifestyle creep" as particularly pernicious, leading them to want things beyond their means. "I like to live nice and bougie," said one participant, but that meant he often did not have money available for savings or other financial goals.

Reducing Necessary Spending. Participants then described turning to the "needs" and trying to ascertain where costs could be cut while still meeting them. "I make it like a game," one participant explained, to see how many meals she can make out of limited amounts of food. Other participants described prioritizing cheaper foods like beans or chicken, buying in bulk (e.g., from Costco), or comparison shopping to find the lowest prices.

> 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.

Others suggested they were similarly intentional about using the subway only when necessary to save on travel costs. "I like to sit there and think about, like, OK, if I'm taking the subway, am I wasting $3? How many times am I taking the subway? It's too expensive now to just be like, 'swipey swipey'."

BANKS: ENGAGEMENT AND PERCEPTIONS

While participants developed a wide range of personal strategies to manage limited resources, they also described how financial institutions either supported or complicated those efforts.

BANKING PRACTICES

As mentioned above, most participants reported having at least one bank account. Common engagement with banks included checking accounts, savings accounts, and use of small business and personal loans.

Reasons for Having Accounts. Participants saw the need to have bank accounts for things like job-required direct deposit and applying for housing. One participant saw first-hand how essential a bank account was when she and a friend both applied to an affordable housing program. “I was going to the interview and they told us to bring documentations like bank statements, credit score [...]. My friend did not have a bank account. I had a bank account. She had Cash App. She had a very difficult time. Unfortunately for her, her application didn’t go further.”

Many participants reported having no issues or concerns with their checking accounts, though a few described using them reluctantly, withdrawing pay as soon as it arrived. Some also used savings accounts for specific goals. “[W]henever I have like vacations [to] Florida, I like to create little mini joint accounts with my friends to keep us accountable of money we have for vacation.”

Banking Services Used. Others turned to personal bank loan services to cover family emergencies. As one participant described:

> I had a problem with my mother at her place and I needed a loan [...]. And I was shocked they give it to me [...] I was like, “What?! You guys give me $40,000? I could go and invest!” But it was an emergency that I had to take care of. So they said, “OK, you have to pay this amount $700 every month for five years.” I was like, “OK.”

Shortly before this participant was able to finish paying off this loan, she was fired from her job. She ultimately cashed in on her 401(k) to clear the debt, eliminating one financial problem but creating another one down the road. “At the time, I was stressed. And with that, I say, just give me my money, I have bills to pay. Give me my money because I am already stressed out. I’m not getting unemployment. I need my money. So this is where the money come. I paid off all my bills, I’m debt free.”

Participants particularly appreciated accessible ATMs, banking apps for transfers and bill payment, debit card lock/unlock features to curb their own spending, and in-person services. As one explained, “banks have their flaws, but if you speak to [...] a non-robotic person, [...] most of the time it works out good.” Nearly all who had used in-person banking preferred it for account-related fraud, withdrawing money, or getting direct answers.

BARRIERS TO BANKING

Despite recognizing the value of these services, participants also described several barriers that complicated their relationships with banks. Some found branch closures and reduced bank hours a major impediment to using—and trusting—their banks. "I see a lot more ATMs than actually tellers," said one, while another noted traveling nearly an hour to reach a branch as worth the trip because of its lack of fees and strong savings rates.

Unexpected Bank Requirements. Many also expressed frustration with bank fees. "When you're living on a little bit of money, those 5-10 bucks really add up." This extended to confusion around their accounts terms—minimum balances, annual fees, interest rates, and required monthly transactions. One recent college student opening a checking account and credit card in the same visit, only to realize afterward how little she'd understood: "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."

Several participants reported accounts closed for failing to maintain minimum balances or accruing fees and interest. Student credit cards were named as a particular risk, issued with limited explanation and outsized potential for significant debt early in life with lasting consequences. A few participants also indicated their immigration status as a barrier to opening bank accounts at all.

PERCEPTIONS OF BANKS

Untrustworthy. While the majority of participants had bank accounts, many had negative associations with them as well. Some felt that banks were simply "untrustworthy," or just focused on making money—sentiments passed down through family. As one participant explained: "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." Another participant echoed this sentiment, particularly stressing her perception of the banks' corporate greed. "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."

Beneath this skepticism was a belief that banks profited by withholding information or access—through fees, fraud, or simply not proactively offering better options ("they're not going to say, 'hey, we have also this available.' Like, you have to find things out for yourself"). Delays in ACH deposits reinforced this: several participants felt banks were sitting on their money rather than releasing it promptly, a suspicion that stung most when bills were due. "If you do direct deposit, [...] they don't put it in fast enough, you got to wait a couple of hours or another day when you have bills and this and that. [...] You need your money when you need it." Branch closures and decreases in human assistance only fed this narrative, as did the experience of one participant who asked her bank for investment help and got nowhere:

> 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 just ended up being like, I guess I'll just keep it as savings because it doesn't sound like this is really going to help me that much, or, like, grow anything.

Helpful Tellers. Still, participants pointed to positive moments, all of which involved a human teller: fees waived when life circumstances warranted it (e.g., having a job that does not do direct deposit), and fraud resolved quickly through a real person rather than an automated system. One recalled a bank teller helping to restore stolen funds "right then and there" once she verified her identity.

Predatory Credit Offers. Finally, participants described a fraught relationship between banks and credit. Several had been issued credit cards in young adulthood and struggled with the debt that followed. As one participant described:

> 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[1] 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.

While not inherently predatory, offering credit cards to young adults without ensuring they understand the long-term risk creates a financial precarity that other life circumstances can easily tip into crisis.

1 Slang for "mental breakdown."

ALTERNATIVE FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

To avoid the perceived downsides of traditional banking, in addition to using cash, participants turned to alternative financial institutions. These included credit unions and "fintech"—online apps and other digital tools offering financial services.

CREDIT UNIONS

Credit unions were a common alternative that some participants used and advocated for, appreciating the absence of fees and balance minimum alongside personal attention and financial education. "I'm a great believer in credit unions," one participant explained. "They don't charge you the fees that other banks do [...] and sometimes you don't even have to maintain a certain amount of money in there either." Another described an easy loan process and regular financial literacy workshops that the credit union proactively invited them to. She added, "I wish they had more locations," which was the only downside participants identified, since the limited branches made credit unions less geographically convenient than banks.

FINANCIAL TECHNOLOGY

Participants described using financial technology applications, or "fintech," for several distinct purposes: sending and receiving money, alternatives to traditional banks, cash advances, credit building, and buy-now-pay-later purchases.

Money Transfers. Many participants used apps like Zelle, Cash App, Venmo, and PayPal to send money to family and friends. Zelle was seen as "safer" for its affiliation with banks and lack of fees. Cash App was more polarizing; some liked its lack of fees, while others said it was "made by scammers for scammers," and felt its use was more likely to result in money loss. Beyond peer-to-peer transfers, participants also used these apps to automate things like a child's weekly allowance, or to hold grocery money and small savings outside their main bank accounts.

Alternatives to Bank Accounts. Apps like Cash App, Chime, Green Dot, and Brinks All Access served as mobile banking or prepaid card options. Some participants used these as a full replacement for a bank account, including for direct deposit. Others used them as complements—for example, as a place to stash savings toward a specific goal, as one participant described: "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."

Cash Advances. With many participants living "paycheck to paycheck," use of cash advance features were common. The most frequently mentioned was Chime's SpotMe, a no-fee overdraft that lets clients with direct deposit overdraw their accounts by a preset limit (up to $200) without a fee. Many participants described using SpotMe to cover expenses when funds were low, as an alternative to a more traditional cash advance service or payday loan (illegal in New York State). "I find it very helpful because […] it's your own money. So it's like you're taking money from your check, even though you didn't get it yet. […] You're going to pay that back when you get paid automatically. […] So I don't have to worry about being in the negative." Explained another participant, "[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."

Others who used explicit paycheck advance services were more wary, generally using these only once: "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, they gave me the option to take it. Which is a bad option." The few participants who had used traditional payday loans regretted it. "That was a mistake," one participant shared, "because you had to pay […] the fees and stuff. But I was stuck. […] Slowly but surely, I did the minimum, whatever they asked for. I paid it off and I was like, 'I'm never doing this again.'"

Credit Building. Participants also used credit-building products like Chime's Credit Builder, Credit Karma, Experian, and Self Credit Builder, believing these services helped them build their credit records and improve their credit scores. One participant shared, "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." Explained another, about Chime's Credit Builder, "I built up my credit score using that. It's using your own money, basically, but they […] register it as a credit card." Participants particularly appreciated that the money they were using to build their credit was their own, rather than borrowed money they would have to repay. "Whatever money, when I had a job, I would use it for the direct deposit and I would use the credit builder card and every month my credit would go up."

While these services were considered by many to be beneficial, like the double-edged sword of credit card use, these services also had a downside some participants felt was inadequately explained at the outset. One described Credit Karma repeatedly encouraging her to apply for cards she then maxed out—with one card's debt reported to collections while another was not, muddying her sense of her own risk. Another described steadily building her credit score with Self Credit Builder, only to watch it fall the moment she stopped contributing: "yeah, drastic change."

Peer-to-Peer Lending. Some participants reported considerable credit card debt from when they were younger and turned to peer-to-peer lending platforms like Lending Club to consolidate debt and streamline repayment.

> Because I was 18, I was applying for everything and I was a sucker. They got me because I have no credit, […] I took the opportunity of me having no

> [credit] record to just to apply for everything. And I got approved, [...] so here I come with like three different credit cards. Fifteen, $17,000 worth of debt. [I]n my 20s, [...] I went online [to Lending Club] and to a group of investors. You put your information, how much you need, and they give you up to three years to pay. And then for these three years, it'll tell you how much [...] they're gonna charge you on a monthly basis with interest. [...] That's another way for consolidating your credit cards. I had three different credit cards. I used one loan to pay off all three. Instead of me having three different bills, I have one loan that's coming out of my month, my account every month with X amount of dollars for the next three years. I also noticed that when I did that my credit score did jump up. It jumped up because I paid off my credit card but little did they know I have one loan that equals the same amount of credit card, so I'm still in debt. [...] But it was a little bit [...] easier paying back one account, one time a month than having three different due dates.

Buy Now, Pay Later. Referred to as "Buy now, pay never" by some participants, companies like Afterpay and Klarna let them make purchases they could not otherwise afford. "I just used Klarna to buy contact lenses," explained one participant. "Stuff like that. Not frivolous stuff, honestly." Another used Afterpay to buy a $500 prom dress for her niece because she did not have all the money upfront. But she offered a caution: "Other than that I haven't used it in a long time because it's hard. It's [easy] to mismanage that and forget that you have payments." Other participants saw similar dangers, especially since you receive the purchase (or, in one case, take a vacation) before paying it off in full, and warned that "Afterpay and Klarna has its good but that's only if you have good management, money management skills."

Participants also flagged the hidden fees as lessening the appeal of installment plans, with one paying "90 dollars more than what the actual order was." Another participant identified as problematic perceptions of differential pricing among potential borrowers. "I've noticed with those like buy now pay later, there's a lot of oversight like. So I like to mask my VPN because they... everyone charge Americans like literally three times the amount for certain things. So I'll like change my VPN and I'll put like a Scandinavian nation and then it's cheaper."

PERCEPTIONS OF FINTECH SERVICES

As with banks, many participants were wary of these apps' trustworthiness, appetite for personal data, and lack of accountability. Several were unsettled that services like Cash App operate outside the regulatory protections of traditional banks: "They're not banks, you know. […] If you read the fine text, they're not responsible [for your money]. There's a disclaimer." The lack of a clear point of contact made account lockouts especially frustrating. As one participant noted, "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."

This same inaccessibility made some participants uneasy about how much personal data these apps required, particularly ones that scan phone contacts to enable transfers: "something about it feels like it's just going too much over into my business." Finally, participants were frustrated—as with banks—by hidden fees. Some of these fintech companies have "their own ATMs that you could go to. […] But they charge you a little more extra, plus your additional fees you get from your bank. So like taking out $20 is really $30."

CHALLENGES TO FINANCIAL SECURITY

Participants' relationships with banks and fintech services shaped how they managed money day to day, but these tools could only go so far. Focus groups also explored the broader challenges to achieving and maintaining financial security. Some of the challenges participants reported were rooted in individual decisions, but the vast majority were structural—forces operating well outside any individual's control.

INDIVIDUAL DECISION-MAKING

Participants were clear that there were some things that they do or had done that contributed to their lack of financial security. These included overreliance on credit cards, difficulty saying no to family and friends, eating out and going to bars or clubs, "lifestyle creep," and a desire for new clothes or goods beyond their means. Explained one participant of her decision to cut back on eating out, "I feel like when I go outside too much, sometimes with my friends I do be spending too much money." The proclivity to overspend was shared among some participants, and often associated with youth. "The materialistic minds is crazy. That's what's always going to keep you in debt [...]. But when you get to a certain age, it ain't that life no more. You just trying to make ends meet because everything is too damn expensive." While participants did acknowledge the role of individual decision-making in personal financial stability, some were careful to identify that, even then, there were often contributors to instability beyond individuals' control. "You have to make good decisions," shared one participant. "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?"

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Structural barriers took many forms, from stagnant wages and rising costs to unreliable public benefits and the compounding weight of intergenerational poverty. Together, they left participants managing not just tight budgets, but conditions largely outside their control.

Wage Stagnation, Unemployment, and Poor Job Growth. Many participants identified low minimum wage rates and wage stagnation as major hurdles to financial security. "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." As previously mentioned, many participants had recently been or were unemployed. Those who previously held positions with higher incomes reported no or dramatically reduced incomes and limited prospects of returning to that salary level. "I've been on unemployment for two years now and my husband's been unemployed for a year [...] But, I had some savings so we're living off that right now." Many experienced minimum wage as too low to live on.

> 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.

Cost of Living. Compounding stagnant wages and unemployment, participants also pointed to the rising cost of everyday living. Among living expenses, participants most frequently cited feeling strapped by food and housing 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." Echoed another participant, "We live in an expensive city, and now groceries are expensive. Like, you buy five things and you're spending like $70. I need to eat. There's no room for putting money aside for a rainy day or for an emergency." Several also pointed to a systemic dimension to these costs: similar food was both more expensive and spoiled faster (necessitating more frequent purchases) in low-income neighborhoods than in wealthier ones.

> My community is one of the lowest income-based districts in New York City and I've noticed that [...] the mom and pops charge twice as much, and so do the supermarkets. So, like a Food Bazaar here, if I go to 125th or I go to the one in Brooklyn by around East New York, I've noticed price differences in certain items. And so, that, again, could be a little bit challenging to make sure [...] the food is lasting. So there's no place here to get like fresh fruits or vegetables unless you go to the supermarket and they charge twice as much.

Participants also discussed the paucity of affordable housing, noting that "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. A big chunk of our income goes towards housing in New York." One participant felt that "the only reason we're surviving is because we live in a rent-controlled apartment." Public housing, Section 8, and rent control were all named as helpful, though a few participants questioned whether affordable housing programs were even within reach for them.

> I go on like Housing Connect—the lottery—to see, you know, low-income apartments and some of them start….you have the few that you get like maybe for $900 or $800, [...] and that's a studio, [but] with the family, you're looking for maybe a two bedroom and low income, the income they're looking at is like $75, $80,000 annually, right? And that's considered like a low-income apartment to qualify. So I'm just wondering, yeah, the developers have to make back money and all of that, [...] how is that low income? And then you are forced to stay in situations or a neighborhood that is affected by violence and crime is heavy there and so on because of financial situations.

Living Without a Margin. Unsurprisingly, the majority of participants named the reality that when wages are low and cost of living is high, they simply do not have enough income to cover their living expenses and build a savings cushion: "the less money you have, it's like you literally, you have nothing to hold on to. You literally can't get on top of it." Several participants referenced having had "good paying" jobs in the recent past that allowed them to accrue savings, only to have to draw that savings down to live off while searching (in all cases in vain) for new employment.

> I kept digging into my savings account. [...] I'm putting money away and then it's like, next day, OK, something happens. [...] So I kept grabbing from my savings, grabbing from my savings. They're sending me emails like, hey, [...] you keep digging into your savings account [...]. So I ended up closing it because I kept going into it.

Here, the participant explains how she ultimately was unable to maintain her bank account due to having to "grab a little bit" regularly to cover expenses. Other participants reported having never had a savings account, describing the psychological toll of constantly deferring long-term goals in favor of short-term survival:

> I'm always on the short-term spending because that's all that I have [...] There's more things that I need to buy long term but it's like, uggghh, I'm not crossing out any of these long-term purchases that I'm supposed to... so it's like, kind of makes me feel bad a little bit because [...] I am budgeting and saving but it's like, that's also a little bit depressing, honestly. You're like, "Oh my God. I'm never going to be able to buy this thing that I know I need."

Without that margin, unanticipated costs, or "curveballs" as one participant put it, become real challenges. These included things like health emergencies, car or appliance breakdowns, and children's needs. "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." While traditional budgeting advice holds that there should be money set aside for such emergencies, when people are living with a limited margin, such a budget line is not practical. "I had made up my mind that I was going to budget and we were going to stay on budget," explained one participant. "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."

That same lack of margin made it hard to escape debt once it accumulated. A number of participants described feeling burdened by student loans they had no ability to pay down. "It does weigh a lot on my psyche. [...] It makes you have to do things you don't want to do because you because you need to survive. [...] the student loan debt is just really hard to deal with, especially when your salary not that high. It's pretty low."

Healthcare Costs. Participants named healthcare expenses—glasses and contacts, braces, co-pays, monthly medications—as particularly stressful given their often high cost. "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."

Unreliability of Public Benefits. Participants were conflicted about public benefits. All who received them deeply appreciated them and saw them as an invaluable resource without which they would not be able to make ends meet. However, many also felt they were overly restrictive in eligibility and difficult to obtain.

> When I had my daughter I was a substitute teacher and then I didn't qualify for benefits, so I called HRA. I'm like, "I have a newborn, I have a baby." "Oh, but you still have that income." Because of that income, they denied me. So I had to wait, and I don't remember how many X amount of months and then I tried again. They almost denied me. I asked for a supervisor. I was just persistent, persistent. I finally got my benefits with a one-year-old.

Participants felt that exclusion criteria related to income (however tenuous or low, as above), housing, or partners was unfair and not reflective of their true financial position.

> I got laid off in January. And I went in to [HRA] to see if I can get any type of benefits [...]. During the interview they say, "I don't even know why you're applying. You're not going to get granted, you're not going to go to get approved." 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. Even to now. So, if for me it was, if I didn't have my partner, if I didn't live with that other person, I would have been in the streets, I would have been, in other words, screwed.

Other participants pointed out that some of the funding formulas perversely disincentivize improving financial position. "I had somebody I worked with it, she lived in the projects, and she refused the raise or the bonus because she said they look at her taxes and they'd raise the rent and she wouldn't be able to afford it."

Alongside concerns over New York City's administration of benefits, participants were widely unsettled by cuts to federal benefits programs including SNAP, WIC, and Medicaid. "People are losing their benefits, their Medicaid," reported one participant. “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.”

Intergenerational Poverty. Ultimately, participants were grappling with the insurmountability of poverty and the lack of a safety net to support their movement into improved financial conditions. Some participants were facing this reality alone as single mothers. One participant described her transition to head of household following divorce: “I was married and so I had a support system team. Now I’m not [...]. I’ve been laid off before, like 10 years ago. And it was a much easier time because I had somebody to fall back on. [...] So being by myself alone on my own devices and my family is not here, it’s especially hard and anxiety inducing.”

For other participants, the absence of family wealth to fall back on left them no way to get ahead. “The only people I know who aren’t struggling with money have money from family,” reflected one participant. She continued:

> I don’t see a path out of not having money for people who don’t really have it at this point. [...] There’s nothing. Everything is getting worse. Just gonna keep getting worse and worse and worse. [...] And it’s not even, we’re not there yet. So, I feel like in New York City, at least, unless you get some type of like little financial jackpot, it’s always going to be like a struggle.

This recognition extended beyond participants’ own life circumstances to their families and communities: “Just listening to my aunties, my uncles, my cousin, my nieces, we all have the same problems. So it seems to be like a recurring theme.” As another participant reflected, “if you’re telling me that you can make all the right decisions and still not exit that cycle, then clearly it can’t just be all on the individual.”

RESOURCES FOR FINANCIAL SECURITY

Focus groups explored resources that participants felt supported them and assisted them in their efforts toward financial security. The most frequently-cited resources included families, public benefits, free public services/amenities, and community-based programming focused on financial well-being.

Families. Many participants cited the importance of a familial network—both blood family and partners—in creating a financial buffer. "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." Those participants who did not have this felt the absence acutely and identified increased anxiety as a result.

Public Benefits. Participants reported using benefits including SNAP, Cash Assistance, WIC, Section 8, public housing, Medicaid, Medicare, SSI, and Social Security. While participants were critical of the limitations of some of these public benefits, they were also well aware that for many, these benefits made the difference between economic survival and collapse. "I'm on SNAP and that helps a lot. That takes a big burden off of it. I also work, so they don't give you as much as they do, as if you were like unemployed, which is, you know, I understand. But it does help out a lot." The necessity of these benefits—particularly food and housing—was marked in their absence. Another participant shared, "I didn't have SNAP for a few months and that was very stressful. I actually relied on somebody in my Buy Nothing group who was giving me their food, their meal boxes. But that was very stressful, so I feel like SNAP has just been a godsend for me."

Free Public Services/Amenities. Participants appreciated free services offered by churches, libraries, food pantries, and other community institutions. One participant noted that she had been able to save funds after using free tax preparation services offered at her local library. She had previously used H&R Block, which charged for the services. "You know, they take the money out. I never really got anything back in taxes. So I was able to go to the library this year, where they do it for you for free. So all of my money is my money."

Many participants referenced the usefulness of food pantries. They especially appreciated those that were able to offer fresh produce, meat, and spices for cooking. "Your food choices are limited and you don't know, you have so many food insecurities. So, a food pantry is a godsend." Finally, a few participants found Buy Nothing groups helped them share skills and tools among neighbors and lower repair costs as a result. "I ask people I know, or I'm really active on Buy Nothing and people will let you borrow tools. I've learned how to install my sink faucets and all sorts of, and caulk things, so it's great."

Community-Based Classes/Programs. The final category of resources that participants spoke of most frequently was classes or programs offered by non-profits or schools, many explicitly related to financial literacy and money management. One participant described some of the topics she learned about:

> [A] money class just to learn more about taxes and how to budget and retirement, like all things revolving around money. I feel like that resource

> really helped, because now I can say that I do know these things. I do know how to talk to my tax person every year and like actually know what's going on, because I'm reading my pay stubs and stuff now.

As previously discussed, credit unions and community banks sometimes provide adjacent services, including connecting participants with "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 by secure credit card." Some of these were programs participants engaged with in recent years, but several also fondly recalled financial education from their youth or from high school finance classes. In addition to the education component, some programs also offered concrete assistance in the form of gift cards or vouchers participants could use to pay bills, for which participants expressed gratitude.

Participants also spoke favorably of programs designed to help them settle arrears. One participant described "a program that NYCHA offered that helped with rent arrears. [...] I applied and I just got the rent arrears of $795." Another participant described "two arrears" that "got paid back by voucher programs. That is grant money that you do not pay for."

Finally, given the number of benefits many participants were receiving and the challenges they identified at HRA and Medicare/Medicaid offices, a few participants also named community-based organizations that assisted with the benefits application process as extremely helpful. "I actually applied for my programs through [...] Fifth Avenue Committee, and they just make applying for assistance with compassion and empathy and humanity. And it's just such a better experience than going, because I've gone to the HRA office and it's very challenging."

PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Before turning to specific recommendations, participants voiced strong concerns that the people making policies, particularly politicians, were sorely out of touch with the realities of living at the edge of poverty. “Don’t pretend like you get the struggle of our communities. Like, please stop. It’s weird.” Participants urged policymakers to “walk a mile in our shoes” and understand that receiving public assistance was not the result of laziness.

> There are a lot of working people who are just struggling and it’s like they’re working, they’re not lazy. They’re working one job, they’re working two jobs. They still have families to feed and they’re just, it’s not their season. It’s not their time. There are people who had well-paying jobs and then something happened that the company went under. They got laid off. Like, I think they’re not taking the personal circumstance into consideration.

Participants were particularly critical about the lack of action on bringing the cost of living into alignment with wages. “I think they’re underestimating how the cost of living is increasing and the wage growth just hasn’t kept up with like, everything that’s been rising. […] I feel like they think personal budgeting is the main issue and that kind of is what frames poverty […] when I think it’s like a systemic unfairness that’s going on.”

With that context in mind, participants were asked what one change would make the biggest difference in improving financial stability for people in their communities. Their recommendations clustered into three themes: building financial literacy and openness around money, addressing the structural economic conditions participants face, and improving access to supports that already exist.

FINANCIAL LITERACY AND CULTURE

Participants viewed financial literacy as an ongoing process that should begin in childhood, continue throughout adulthood, and include opportunities for honest conversations about money and individualized support.

1. **Normalize conversations about money and finances.** Many participants described growing up in households where money simply was not discussed, leaving them to learn financial habits by trial and error as adults. They suggested schools, senior centers, and community organizations as natural places to encourage more open conversations.

   > “I learned a lot of my financial bads and dos and don’ts as an adult, not […] as a child. It was not OK to talk about money. It was frowned upon. To […] speak freely about money and how it does affect you [is important]. […] so having more open conversations and that can be in schools or senior places.”

2. **Start financial education early, ideally integrating it into elementary school curricula.** Participants wanted financial education to begin in elementary school and continue throughout students' education. They emphasized practical topics such as the "value of a dollar," financial literacy, money management, saving and investing, and planning for college. They pointed to one of their trusted financial institutions—the credit union—as a potential source of hands-on financial education in schools.

> "I wish that financial literacy was one of the courses taught in elementary school, middle school, and high school."

> "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. [...] The government or banks can maybe match what the kids save in school, like they could adopt one of the schools or adopt a couple schools. They can match what the kid saves."

3. **Offer individualized financial coaching and case management.** While participants greatly valued group-level advisement and learning generalized best practices, many were in financial situations where they felt overwhelmed and underwater. Many expressed a need for tailored advice specific to their situations.

> "[We need] very in-depth detailed resources and not even just like resources, like as like an information booklet or something like. [A place] where people can just like come and ask their questions and get help. Like just understand what it is that they're doing and what needs to be done and have recommendations. [...] For a lot of people, the struggle is like they don't know necessarily where to start or what the next step is to take. So they just don't do anything."

COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Participants emphasized that many helpful resources already exist but are often difficult to access, poorly understood, or disconnected from stable employment opportunities.

4. **Increase access to credit unions.** Most participants recognized the importance of bank accounts to financial health and stability. However, due to their limited resources and what they believed to be private banks' intentional lack of transparency, they had both trouble and reservations about maintaining accounts as such locations over time. Credit unions were favored due to their lack of fees and account requirements, and participants suggested these be made more easily accessible.

> "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."

5. **Increase awareness of trusted community organizations that can provide material support and education around meeting basic needs.** Those participants who had engaged with non-profit organizations providing support for material needs and education about and connection to public benefits and resources were very appreciative. They wished there could be greater knowledge of and trust of such programs among people experiencing financial insecurity so there was increased uptake of those services.

> "One of the things that happens to our community is that they don't know that agencies like Community Justice Connect and CSS exist. And sometimes a person comes in and they go away so happy as they said, 'How come I didn't know this place has been here?' even though we have been there for two years. So education. I mean, we do outreach, we do all kinds of things to try to get people to know that we're there, but it's also to help people build trust to know that these agencies are there for them and to help them."

> " Some of [food pantries] are underutilized and sometimes they do have produce. But if you can find like a listing of those places and see what they have and on the dates they have it. And then maybe you could devise a strategy [...] where you go one day, somebody else goes the other day."

6. **Create more opportunities for job training and—particularly—job placement.** Many participants reported participating in job training programs and doing what they perceived to be their part in trying to secure employment. However, several voiced frustration over the lack of a viable pathway from these programs to long-term, secure employment.

> " 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. And I feel like there really needs to be more something like, I guess they had during the Depression, where the president made jobs happen and had, you know, infrastructure built and things like that."

STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC POLICY

Participants repeatedly returned to the view that individual financial strategies could not overcome broader economic conditions, particularly stagnant wages, burdensome debt, and rising housing costs.

7. **Bring wages and the cost of living into alignment.** In every focus group, participants voiced challenges related to the incommensurability between everyday living costs (e.g., rent, food, children's needs) and wages.

> "[Raise] minimum wage where it's, where actually, it's livable. We can actually do the things that we need to do."

> "Just like the basic living things more affordable."

> " I would probably balance out cost of living and wages that people make, because right now there's a huge gap."

8. **Implement universal basic income for low-income households.** As a solution to this problem, participants suggested implementing a universal basic income to ensure that low-income households had some amount of income to cover basic needs.

> “ Give the amount that’s supposed to be for everybody that’s under a certain income bracket. If you give them that amount of money that covers their bill and have extra money, so it will have a better flow of things. You know, because it’s just nothing.”

9. **Reduce burdensome debt, particularly student loan debt, and provide a savings cushion.** Recognizing that even this benefit might not be sufficient for those with extensive debt—particularly student loan and medical debt—participants recommended also making sure there were mechanisms for resolving crippling debt, with a few also suggesting an additional provision of universal savings.

> “ When you’re in debt […] it’s hard to kind of get out of it a lot of the times and it’s like, well, I’m just gonna stay in it […]. Cause mental and emotionally and financially, it’s like a burden. So I feel like replacing it with savings gives more of like a peace of mind, a breathing room for any emergencies or any other opportunities that would allow me to say yes and walk away from, like, the bad ones because I actually have the liquid and a strong foundation to build on.”

> “ Change the law that doesn’t allow student loan debt to be cleared through bankruptcy.”

10. **Freeze rents for a period of time.** Participants viewed housing costs as one of the greatest barriers to financial stability and nearly impossible to resolve without structural intervention. A few participants suggested freezing rent for a meaningful period of time (i.e., not just a year) to ensure people had the opportunity to pay down debt, increase savings, and improve their financial security.

> " Lock you in for five years, 10 years where you cannot get a rent increase. That would help people out a lot. That would be able to save some money if you get locked in at a certain... Because if not, they're just going to keep going and going and going and then, have people from overseas that are buying them, one, two, three houses. And they're not going to care about, you know, freezing no rent or anything like that. So that would help New Yorkers a lot, freezing rent, affordable housing."

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Participants demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in managing financial insecurity, often making thoughtful, adaptive financial decisions despite having extremely limited resources and navigating systems that were frequently opaque or difficult to understand. They described carefully budgeting, creating systems to control spending, pursuing financial support services, and making what little money they had "work for them." They drew on formal and informal support networks, pursued training and certification programs (even when these did not lead to employment opportunities), and continually adapted to changing financial circumstances. Yet these strategies were largely adaptive responses to structural barriers rather than substitutes for adequate income, affordable housing, affordable healthcare, or fair and transparent financial systems. As a result, despite their best efforts to save and build financial stability, many participants struggled to meet basic needs month to month, and most could not envision a realistic path toward building emergency savings, accumulating assets, and achieving long-term economic security that could change their family's financial trajectory.

These findings suggest that improving financial security for many New Yorkers requires more than helping individuals make better financial decisions. Participants were not asking for budgeting lessons alone; they were calling for public systems that are easier to navigate, financial institutions and products that are more transparent, stronger consumer protections, stronger community-based supports, and economic policies that better align wages and living costs. They also described how persistent financial insecurity limits opportunities to build wealth over time, making it difficult not only to weather emergencies but also to create greater economic security for future generations. Financial education and coaching remain important—particularly when they help people evaluate financial products, understand their rights, navigate complex systems, and make informed decisions within those systems. However, this study suggests that financial education should not be viewed as a substitute for stronger consumer protections or structural economic reforms, nor should responsibility for financial security rest primarily on individuals. No amount of individual financial skill can fully compensate for inadequate resources, lack of jobs, rising costs, and systems that too often make it difficult for people to get ahead.

The recommendations below reflect this broader perspective. Rather than focusing solely on improving individual financial decision-making, they seek to strengthen the systems, institutions, and policies that shape financial well-being while ensuring people have the tools to navigate them effectively.

ADDITIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve the accessibility, accountability, and transparency of financial institutions. Most participants recognized the value of bank accounts but described institutions that made it easy to accrue fees and hard to access better options. They also had better experiences when they could talk to someone rather than going through an automated system. Financial institutions should:

- Maintain neighborhood banks and in-person staff who can provide individualized guidance and build relationships with local customers;
- Cap or eliminate fees tied to low balances and other markers of financial hardship;
- Offer fee waivers and payment flexibility as standard practice for customers facing job loss, medical emergencies, or other sudden income disruption;
- Proactively inform customers about their eligibility for products and services such as high-yield savings accounts or opportunities to build credit; and
- Provide clearer, more accessible educational materials for new customers, recognizing that financial terminology can be difficult to understand.

Increase oversight and regulation of "fintech" companies. Participants described using a growing range of financial technology products to build credit, access financial services, pay for everyday and larger expenses, and manage their finances. However, many also expressed confusion about how these products worked and uncertainty about which could be trusted. As fintech products become an increasingly common part of how people manage their financial lives, policymakers should ensure they are subject to strong consumer protections, including:

- Clear disclosures of costs and terms;
- Limits on interest rates and fees;
- Robust consumer rights;
- Accessible dispute resolution processes; and
- Strong oversight to prevent deceptive and predatory practices.

Reduce the structural costs that make financial stability unattainable. Participants consistently described housing and healthcare costs as some of the largest barriers to financial security. Even careful budgeting and strong financial decision-making could not overcome rent burdens, medical expenses, and other essential costs that consumed much of their income. Policies such as expanding social housing, community land trusts, and other permanently affordable housing options; strengthening rental assistance programs; and ensuring access to affordable healthcare through programs such as Medicaid and the Essential Plan are fundamental to improving financial security.

Create jobs programs and wage growth. Participants consistently emphasized that financial stability requires stable jobs, and recommended raising wages and expanding job training and placement. These recommendations reflect two related but distinct problems: wages that do not cover the cost of living, and training that too often leads to a credential but not a job. Policymakers should invest in public and infrastructure jobs programs targeted at low-income households, including stronger implementation of existing requirements (e.g., Section 3 for HUD-funding projects). Additionally, they should raise wages broadly, and invest specifically in the low-wage industries that have lagged behind for years without help (e.g., home health care, childcare).

Reform public benefits eligibility rules. Participants encountered benefits eligibility rules—around income, cohabitation, and modest earnings gains—that often felt disconnected from their real circumstances. Rules that assume cohabitating partners share resources, for instance, can penalize arrangements that are really about housing stability, not shared support. Policymakers should smooth benefits cliffs so that modest income gains do not trigger a disproportionate loss of support, reconsider how cohabitation and partner income count toward eligibility, and streamline application and appeals processes.

Invest in community-based organizations that integrate financial guidance, systems navigation, and advocacy. While some participants described a need for skills-based financial education earlier in life, they more often emphasized the need for help navigating complex systems that made financial security difficult regardless of individual knowledge. This included accessing affordable housing, affordable health care, and public benefits. Participants particularly valued trusted community-based organizations that could help them navigate these systems, advocate on their behalf when problems arose, and provide practical financial guidance tailored to their circumstances. Policymakers and funders should invest in trusted community organizations with the capacity to provide holistic support by integrating financial guidance, systems navigation, advocacy, and warm handoffs across services—creating one trusted location where people can access the full range of support they need.

Modernize financial education to equip people with the knowledge and critical skills to understand their rights, navigate financial and public systems, and advocate for themselves. Many participants actively sought to improve their credit and make informed financial decisions, yet often found themselves navigating a confusing marketplace of financial products and apps. Rather than focusing primarily on budgeting or money management, financial education and coaching should help people understand how financial systems work, recognize potentially harmful products and practices, understand their consumer rights, and know where to seek help when problems arise. Financial education should equip people not only to make informed financial decisions, but also to understand, navigate, question, and hold accountable the systems that shape those decisions.

Build regular feedback loops between agencies and communities. Community-based organizations and financial coaching programs hear firsthand about emerging financial products, recurring consumer problems, barriers to accessing public benefits, and challenges navigating financial and government systems. Government agencies responsible for consumer protection, public benefits administration, and other economic security programs should establish regular forums with community organizations, financial coaches, and program participants to identify emerging trends, share information about common barriers, and use those insights to inform policy, service delivery, public education, and enforcement priorities. In turn, agencies should regularly share information about new scams, enforcement actions, policy changes, and program updates so that community organizations can better advise the people they serve. These partnerships should also be used to identify opportunities to simplify administrative processes, improve communication with program participants, and reduce unnecessary barriers.

Expand access to asset-building programs. Participants repeatedly described the impossibility of saving for the future despite making careful financial decisions. Programs such as baby bonds, children's savings accounts (e.g., NYC Kids RISE), and matched savings programs can help families accumulate assets that would otherwise remain out of reach for many low-income households. Pairing these programs with periodic financial guidance at key life stages could further help families make informed decisions about these resources.

For more information, contact
Rachel Swaner at rswaner@cssny.org

Community Service Society
633 THIRD AVE, 10TH FL,
NEW YORK, NY 10017
PH 212.254.8900
www.cssny.org