



Demystifying DeFi

A national study on familiarity and usage of traditional, centralized, and decentralized finance using qualitative and quantitative research



About the National Survey

The DeFi Education Fund is a nonpartisan research and advocacy group working to explain the benefits of Decentralized Finance, achieve regulatory clarity for the future of the global digital economy, and help realize the transformative potential of DeFi for everyone.



Field Period

August 18-21, 2025



Sample & Mode

The survey was conducted online, leveraging sample from Ipsos KnowledgePanel.



Target Audience

Sample of n=1,321 interviews among U.S. adults aged 18 and older

The study was conducted in English. The data were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race and ethnicity, census region, metropolitan status, education, household income, political party identification, and 2024 presidential vote. The demographic benchmarks came from the 2024 March supplement of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). The Party ID benchmarks are from the 2024 NPORS annual survey.

The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, for results based on the entire sample of adults. The margin of sampling error takes into account the design effect, which was 1.08. The margin of sampling error is higher and varies for results based on sub-samples. In our reporting of the findings, percentage points are rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a given table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total substantially more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent.



About the In-Depth Interviews

Ipsos conducted 10, 60-minute in-depth interviews with underbanked consumers residing in the Bronx, or Queens, New York City from August 25-27, 2025

Key Recruitment Criteria

- All respondents were the primary or joint decision-maker in family financial matters
- Adults 18+ who use a variety of banking or money servicing options
- May have a bank account or savings account with a traditional bank, credit union, or use online non-traditional banks for their primary bank
- Regularly use non-bank financial services such as money orders, check cashing, Western Union (MoneyGram) on a regular basis (in the past 3 months), must use one at least 1-2x per month
- Must be at least aware of cryptocurrency as a payment/money transfer option, none are rejectors of cryptocurrency
- Must be using non-bank financial services/alternative financial services for legitimate reasons
- Recruit those who are employed part-time or full-time
- Mix of ethnicities, races, household income, and education



Key Takeaways

Key Takeaways



Trust in large financial institutions, such as banks, is lukewarm, with fewer than half saying they trust them completely or a lot.



While familiarity is low for both crypto and DeFi, there may be an opportunity as half of the sample say that “I feel like I should have a way to digitally send money to people without any third party involved.”



Fees seem to be the biggest point of friction with current financial products and the most likely problem where DeFi could help.



Roughly one-quarter of 30–44-year-olds have used or owned crypto in the last 12 months, distinct from their younger and older counterparts. They are going to be a prime audience for DeFi.



This age cohort is also to be the most likely to try out DeFi if it were available for them. And they would likely use it for daily activities, including buying things online, paying bills, sending money domestically, and saving money.



The idea of “control over my money at all times” as well as having “full personal control over the security” of their data seem to be the most important features of DeFi, followed by seeing full financial history.



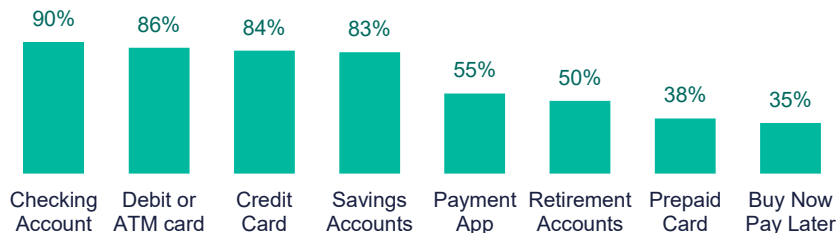
Findings

Hackers or other criminals getting access to personal and financial information held by financial institutions



Familiarity and Use of Financial Assets

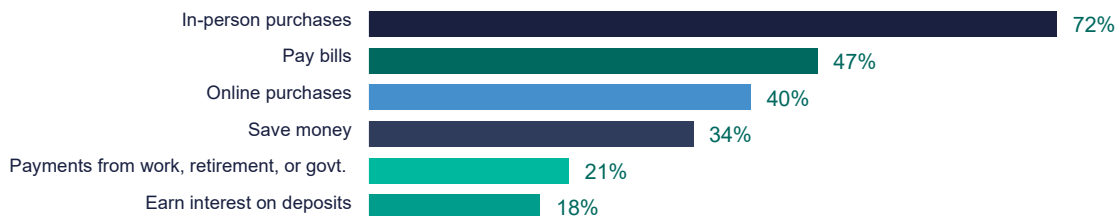
% of Respondents Extremely/Very Familiar With Financial Asset



Majority of respondents (**90%**) are familiar with checking accounts and debit cards (**86%**), but fewer than **1 in 5** use financial tools to grow their money.

Familiarity with and usage of traditional financial products **remain high** across the general population. Traditional uses of financial products/assets dominates, with most doing in-person purchases.

How People Use Their Financial Services





Recent crypto owners/users are from a diverse demographic base

Ownership/usage align with other probability-based sample surveys

% Owned or used crypto



Among crypto owners or users over the past 12 months

Generations

Gen Z	13%
Millennials	22% !
Gen X	12%
Boomers	7%

Household Income

White, Non-Hispanic	12%
Black, Non-Hispanic	20% !
Other, Non-Hispanic	18% !
Hispanic	10%

Gender

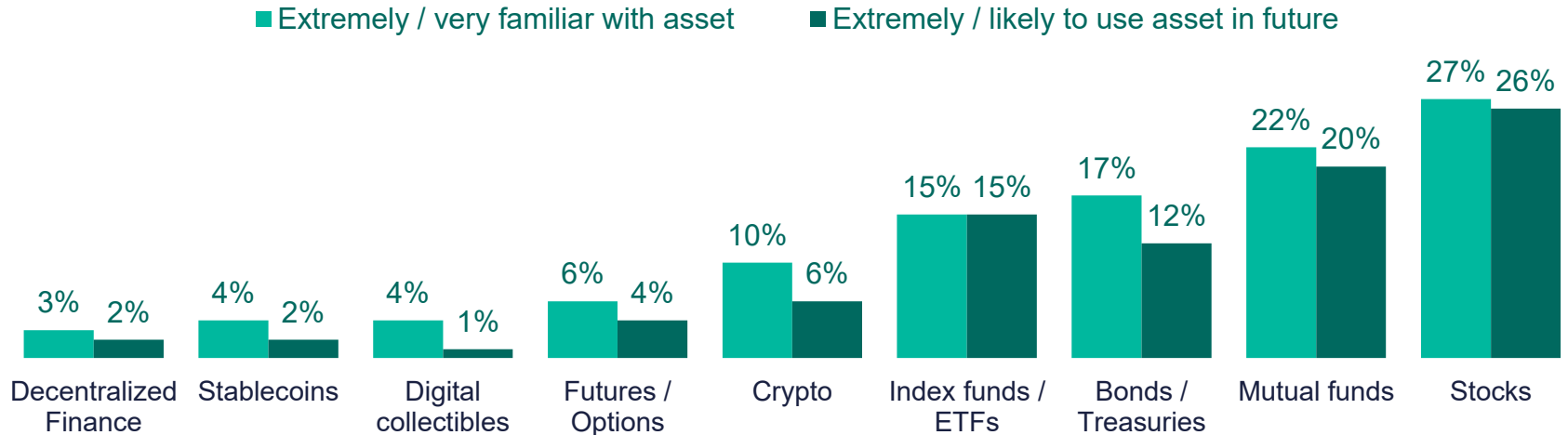
Male	20% !
Female	7%

Education

High school	10%
Some college	15% !
Bachelor's or higher	16% !

! Denotes Significant Difference

Familiarity with a digital asset largely corresponds with future use likelihood, similar trends found among demographic groups



Trend between familiarity and future use likelihood found within gender, racial/ethnic, and generational groups; Directional nature of trend requires further investigation

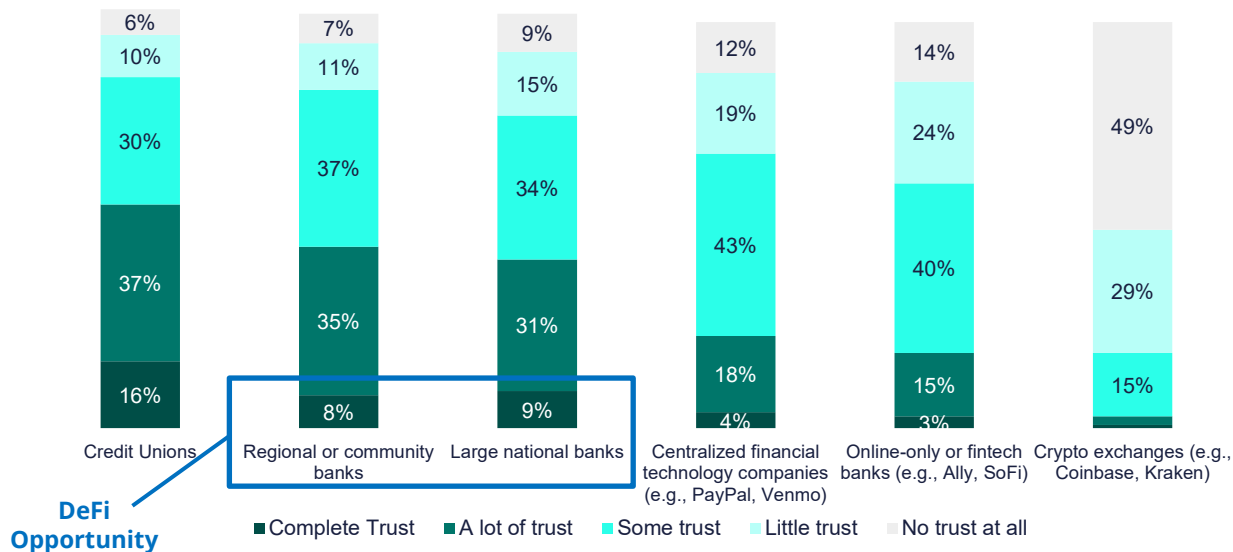
Crypto	% familiar	% likely to use
Gen Z	15%	7%
Millennials	13%	10%



A Detailed Look at Consumer Confidence in Financial Institutions

While some institutions retain high levels of trust, the data reveals significant variations and areas of skepticism across the financial landscape. Complete trust in traditional finance, however, is low across the board.

Consumer Trust Levels in Financial Institutions



- **High Trust in Traditional Banking:** Credit Unions (53% trust) and Regional Banks (43%) hold the strongest positive trust balance.
- **The Tipping Point:** Centralized Fintech is the first category where distrust (32%) overtakes trust (22%).
- **Trust Deficit:** The gap widens dramatically for crypto, with Crypto Exchanges facing a 78% distrust rating, nearly 20 times higher than their 4% trust rating.

Involvement of third parties when sending money digitally is a key friction point among this population as well as fees charged by financial institutions



Statement	% Strongly agree / agree
I feel like financial institutions are responsible for ensuring my financial data is secure	74%
I feel like I have a say in how my finances are managed or invested	69%
I feel like I have personal control over my financial assets	67%
I feel like the government should not have a say in which products I am able to invest in	61%
I feel like traditional financial institutions should not have a say in which products I am able to invest in	53%
I feel like I should have a way to digitally send money to people without any third party involved	51%
Traditional forms of finance need an overhaul	29%
The traditional financial system is designed to advantage of ordinary people	25%
Banks and other financial institutions charge reasonable fees for their services	23%
I am interested in learning more about nontraditional forms of finance, such as blockchain, crypto, or decentralized finance	22%

DeFi
Opportunity

While Americans express confidence in current financial system, majorities agree that changes are needed, especially security and control



Statement	% Strongly agree / agree
The current financial system needs to be upgraded to combat new threats, like cyber crime or AI	74%
Changes to the current financial system are needed to give people more control over their personal data	56%
The current financial system needs to be upgraded to be more affordable	54%
I am concerned the current financial system does not adequately protect my personal information	54%
The current financial system needs to be upgraded to be more user-friendly	50%
The current financial system in the United States meets my financial needs	49%
Changes to the current financial system are needed to give people more control over their financial future	48%
The current financial system needs to be upgraded to enable financial transactions outside of market hours (weekdays, 9:30am - 4:30pm)	48%
Changes to the current financial system are needed to give more people control over their own money or assets	47%
I believe the financial system works well for people like me	44%
The current financial system in the United States is secure	29%

DeFi
Opportunity

Findings from in-depth interviews highlight four key challenges and frustrations with the financial system



The system is frustratingly slow and inefficient	A dominant sentiment is that the financial system operates on an “archaic” timetable that is out of sync with modern, digital life. This creates friction and anxiety.
Fees feel excessive, unfair, and lack transparency	There is a strong and emotional belief that the fee structure of the financial system is predatory and inequitable. Consumers feel they are being “nickel and dimed.”
A lack of control and autonomy	There is a sense that the system's rules, not the consumer's own will, dictate what is possible. Consumers feel they are operating within a system with arbitrary restrictions.
Deep privacy and security anxieties	There is a common feeling that personal and financial data is not safe and that financial privacy is an illusion.

“When I’m transferring money from my bank accounts to my crypto account, the Robinhood... I get frustrated... I have an opportunity to buy an investment...you transfer the funds, right that second, and then, you got to wait, a few days, in some cases. And that’s kind of frustrating that it doesn’t happen in that same second because that opportunity might disappear. That happened to me a couple of times.” – Queens

“I would take away fees because the bank gets our money and they invested it, so they make money on it already. So, all the fees they charge us... to take our money, use it, make money, and then charge us fees. Not very fun” – Queens

“I needed to get money moved from one account to the other because I needed a certified check from the bank... I remember going in person to my bank because I was not able to move the amount that I needed... I was extremely upset about the situation because it was my money... I didn’t understand why I was given a hard time.” – Bronx

“Everything is being tracked, what you’re doing... let’s say you shop, your bank can be like, hey, we see suspicious activity... you don’t always have the freedom... because you’re being tracked. Yeah. Somebody’s always watching.” – Bronx



Messages around control and privacy test well with this audience

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is tension in this attribute. Most want to eliminate fees and have greater privacy. They feel if it's their money, they should not have to pay a third party to move it, nor should a third party be tracking their personal transactions.• But there is a counterpoint raised by some, who view third parties like PayPal as a necessary layer of security, which provides a sense of safety and recourse if something goes wrong.	<p><i>"I feel like I should have a way to digitally send money to people without any third party involved."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respondents feel a sense of ownership and believe that this ownership should grant them unrestricted control. Yet most feel it is not reality, and point to barriers like sending limits, bank holds, etc.• The ultimate benefit of having full control is feeling at ease and freedom from financial anxiety. It means knowing what you have and being able to use it how you see fit, without external restrictions.	<p><i>"I want to have full personal control over my money at all times."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respondents see the protection of their financial data as a fundamental right and a prerequisite for trusting any financial system.• But many question if it is realistic. They cite the constant news of data breaches and the feeling that their data is already exposed and out of their hands.	<p><i>"It is important to ensure that I have full personal control over the security of my personal and financial data."</i></p>

"Control" over their own money remains a point of friction with the traditional finance system



The Convoluted Self-Transfer	When a Queens resident needed to move a large sum of money between her own two bank accounts for an emergency trip, she found it was impossible to do so directly. She was forced to devise a complicated and stressful workaround: sending the money to her brother, who then had to use Apple Pay to send it back to her. This multi-step process, which relied on the trust and availability of a third person, highlights a breakdown in the system's ability to allow a consumer to simply and easily manage her own funds across her own accounts.
The Untrustworthy Primary Bank	A Bronx resident shared a story of feeling angry and frustrated when her own primary bank, where most of her money was deposited, gave her a "hard time" and refused to issue a certified check she needed to purchase a car. To complete the purchase, she had to digitally transfer the entire sum to a secondary bank, which processed the request for the same certified check without any questions or delays. This experience demonstrates how a consumer's own trusted financial institution can become an obstacle, treating them with suspicion and forcing them to find their own solutions just to use their legitimate funds.
The Money Black Hole	When a Queens resident's sister tried to send him money from another country via a bank wire, the funds disappeared for several days into a "black hole" with no tracking number or status updates available. When he called the bank, they admitted they had no way of knowing where the money was, leaving him to feel he had no control and to worry that the funds could be lost forever.

In addition to control, privacy/security and fees are challenges. Some consumer stories emerge on how the financial system creates these challenges



The Security That
Wasn't

Privacy & Security

A Bronx resident expressed that she feels her financial information is "not safe at all," which is why she diligently locks her bank cards as a security precaution. However, she was shocked to discover that a charge was still processed on one of her locked cards, with the bank explaining it was due to a pre-authorization loophole she was unaware of. This experience demonstrates that even when consumers proactively use the security tools provided to them, the system has hidden flaws that undermine their sense of protection.

The Loss of
Privacy

A Queens resident, who has had his identity stolen twice, feels that the financial system offers no real privacy. He is frustrated that he cannot make a large transaction, like buying a car, without feeling like he is being watched or will have to explain his actions. This sentiment captures the deep-seated concern that the digital financial system has eroded personal privacy, leaving consumers feeling monitored and without the freedom to manage their own money privately.

Penalized For
Trying To Save

Fees

A Bronx resident described how her bank charges what she called "insane" maintenance fees on her savings account if the balance drops below a certain threshold. This creates a "bad cycle" where the very tool meant to help her build financial security actually penalizes her when she is vulnerable. For consumers with low or fluctuating incomes, this type of fee structure works directly against their efforts to save, making it significantly harder to get ahead.

The Unfair Fee

A Queens resident expressed her frustration with constantly having to pay fees to convert currency when sending money to her family in Canada, a process she knows is fully automated. She feels these fees are unjustified because there is no manual work being done by the bank or service to warrant the extra charge. This highlights how consumers feel exploited by fees that seem arbitrary and disconnected from any real service provided, making them feel like a "money grab".

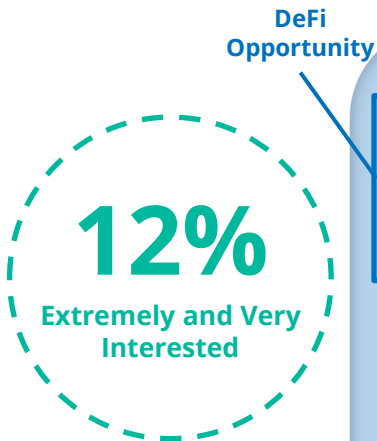
Who is Interested in DeFi and What Do They Value?



Respondents show a 12% interest in learning about the technology, with a strong preference for features related to personal control over their finances and data.



The data reveals a clear pattern: while **overall interest** in learning about DeFi sits at 12%, the features that resonate most strongly are those related to personal empowerment and security. Over **half of respondents prioritize having full control over their money** (56%), their data (54%), and their financial history (53%). These themes of **control and transparency** are rated higher than the transactional benefits, such as relying less on banks (26%) or lower-cost international transfers (20%).



Which DeFi Features Matter Most to Potential Users?



In-depth interviews reveal an interest in DeFi coupled with concerns



The idea sparks interest:

- Negligible fees: One can keep more of their hard-earned money. A primary driver of interest.
- Instant movement anytime: Addresses frustrations with slow speed in the current system. A key upgrade.
- Control of one's money at all times: No longer stymied by imposed limits or restricted access. Highly aspirational.
- Privacy of one's data: A valued benefit.

However, the idea is confusing and lacks protections

- The language (e.g., cryptography, consensus) is unclear and intimidating. This leads to skepticism and a lack of trust.
- "Public" is the antithesis of private and secure. Transactions running on a public ledger sparks immediate privacy and security concerns.
- While there is a desire for freedom from middlemen, consumers seem unwilling to give up protections provided by those middlemen. It raises questions of "what if something goes wrong?" "Who do I call for help?"
- For DeFi to become a viable alternative, respondents would need to be assured of some protections and a system of accountability.

"It would help us all out as a community. And having that as a priority for a community should always be number one for the simple fact that less money would be taken out for taxes to then implement on maybe less fortunate communities, and we can all have a little bit more money." – Bronx

"This scares me because it doesn't seem like it's regulated or protected... I don't think that there's enough protection on it... I would have to have government involvement, I think. Involvement where the government has protections. You can sue. There's checks and balances." – Queens

"The way to get to everybody's heart, of course, is by giving them a bonus... but... if you get hacked or somebody, steals your money out of this account, are you going to get it back. Tell me you're covered. You're insured. Whatever. Hey. I'm fine with it. But, if I don't have any guarantees, I don't keep any money in it." – Queens

"I would just reinforce that I would be more financially well off. If that was the case, I would keep more of my paycheck in my pocket. I wouldn't have to rely on any of the financial institutions, on paying them fees." – Queens

"I'd want them to know it's time for the people to take control of themselves and be able to have our money and have value to our money." – Queens

Security and cost top the list of DeFi's perceived impact areas

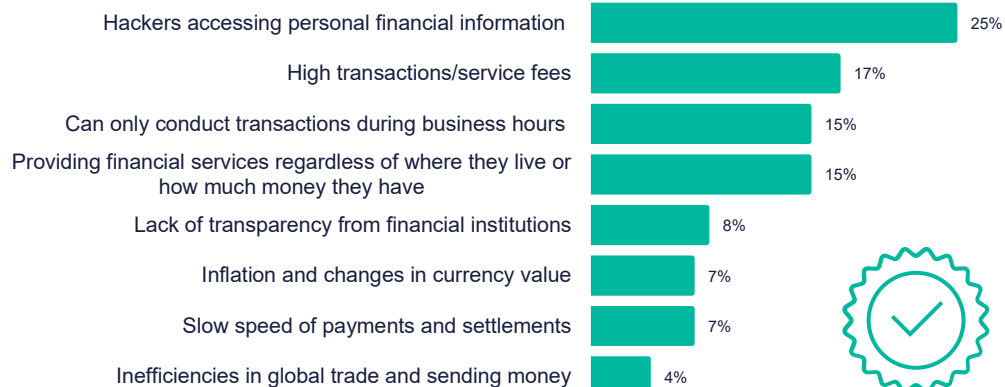


DeFi is seen as most impactful in **strengthening security** (25%), but cost and access remain equally critical areas for transformation. Concerns around **cost and security dominate**, with nearly 4 in 10 citing high fees (39%) and one-third pointing to cybersecurity risks (33%) as the problems DeFi is best positioned to solve.

DeFi Opportunity

Problems DeFi can most impact	% of respondents
High transactions/service fees	39%
Hackers accessing personal financial information	33%
Providing financial services regardless of where they live or how much money they have	31%
Can only conduct transactions during business hours	31%
Slow speed of payments	22%
Lack of transparency from financial institutions	21%
Inflation and changes in currency value	15%
Inefficiencies in global trade and sending money	12%

Ranking Problems In Traditional Finance DeFi Could Help Solve



Unlocking the Next Wave of DeFi Adopters



10% of respondents are extremely, or very likely to try out DeFi...and here is how they would use it

10%

Extremely or
Very Likely

Across the board, intended uses for DeFi are grounded in **everyday financial tasks**. High-ranking activities include **commerce (online purchases at 84%)**, **money management (bill pay at 78%, saving at 77%)**, and peer-to-peer payments (**sending money in the US at 73%**). This pattern suggests that potential users view DeFi through a lens of practical, daily utility.





Annex

Gender Disparities in Crypto Usage Reflect Broader Financial System Sentiments



Men Lead in Crypto Familiarity, But Educational Opportunities Present Among Women

Crypto Usage (Past 12 Months)	Men (20%) are twice as likely as women (7%) to have owned or used crypto. This trend underscores a significant gender divide in crypto familiarity and adoption.
Familiarity & Adoption	Men show higher levels of familiarity, adoption, and interest; however, women's lower starting familiarity could mean they may represent a larger opportunity for awareness-building and education
Need for Change	A majority of men and women agree that changes to the financial system are necessary to enhance personal data control (52% of men, 43% of women).
Security Concerns	Fewer men and women agree on the security of the U.S. financial system; 33% of men and only 25% of women.

Consumers Demand Greater Control and Accessibility, Highlighting Flaws in Traditional Banking



The Convoluted Self-Transfer

When a Queens resident needed to move a large sum of money between her own two bank accounts for an emergency trip, she found it was impossible to do so directly. She was forced to devise a complicated and stressful workaround: sending the money to her brother, who then had to use Apple Pay to send it back to her. This multi-step process, which relied on the trust and availability of a third person, highlights a breakdown in the system's ability to allow a consumer to simply and easily manage her own funds across her own accounts.

- 47% say changes are needed to give more people control over their money/assets
- 48% say the system needs upgrades to allow transactions outside market hours
- 51% feel they should have a way to digitally send money without any third party

The Untrustworthy Primary Bank

A Bronx resident shared a story of feeling angry and frustrated when her own primary bank, where most of her money was deposited, gave her a "hard time" and refused to issue a certified check she needed to purchase a car. To complete the purchase, she had to digitally transfer the entire sum to a secondary bank, which processed the request for the same certified check without any questions or delays. This experience demonstrates how a consumer's own trusted financial institution can become an obstacle, treating them with suspicion and forcing them to find their own solutions just to use their legitimate funds.

- 50% agree the system must be more user-friendly
- 54% say it should be more affordable
- 53% say traditional financial institutions should not have a say in which products they are able to invest in

The Money Black Hole

When a Queens resident's sister tried to send him money from another country via a bank wire, the funds disappeared for several days into a "black hole" with no tracking number or status updates available. When he called the bank, they admitted they had no way of knowing where the money was, leaving him to feel he had no control and to worry that the funds could be lost forever.

- 47% want more control over money/assets
- 50% say the system needs to be more user-friendly

Consumer Voices Highlight the Need for Reform and Innovation in Financial Systems



Penalized For Trying To Save

A Bronx resident described how her bank charges what she called "insane" maintenance fees on her savings account if the balance drops below a certain threshold. This creates a "bad cycle" where the very tool meant to help her build financial security actually penalizes her when she is vulnerable. For consumers with low or fluctuating incomes, this type of fee structure works directly against their efforts to save, making it significantly harder to get ahead.

- 54% want the system upgraded to be more affordable
- Only 44% say the system works well for "people like me"

The Security That Wasn't

A Bronx resident expressed that she feels her financial information is "not safe at all," which is why she diligently locks her bank cards as a security precaution. However, she was shocked to discover that a charge was still processed on one of her locked cards, with the bank explaining it was due to a pre-authorization loophole she was unaware of. This experience demonstrates that even when consumers proactively use the security tools provided to them, the system has hidden flaws that undermine their sense of protection.

- 50% agree the system must be more user-friendly
- 54% say it should be more affordable
- 53% say traditional financial institutions should not have a say in which products they are able to invest in

Consumer Voices Highlight the Need for Reform and Innovation in Financial Systems



The Loss of Privacy

A Queens resident, who has had his identity stolen twice, feels that the financial system offers no real privacy. He is frustrated that he cannot make a large transaction, like buying a car, without feeling like he is being watched or will have to explain his actions. This sentiment captures the deep-seated concern that the digital financial system has eroded personal privacy, leaving consumers feeling monitored and without the freedom to manage their own money privately.

- 47% want more control over money/assets
- 50% say the system needs to be more user-friendly

The Unfair Fee

A Queens resident expressed her frustration with constantly having to pay fees to convert currency when sending money to her family in Canada, a process she knows is fully automated. She feels these fees are unjustified because there is no manual work being done by the bank or service to warrant the extra charge. This highlights how consumers feel exploited by fees that seem arbitrary and disconnected from any real service provided, making them feel like a "money grab".

- 54% want the system more affordable; younger/lower-income groups less likely to feel the system "works for them"
- Only 23% believe that banks and other financial institutions charge reasonable fees for their services



Additional Findings on Trust and Security

Trust in national and regional banks provide an opportunity for DeFi:

- “Complete trust” in large national banks is low; male (11%) and foreign born (17%) respondents are more likely to hold complete trust than their counterparts.
- A similar level of trust is held in regional or community banks; those with a bachelor’s degree (10%) and male (10%) respondents hold slightly higher levels of trust.

Freedom from banks and intermediaries:

- Respondents under the age of 60 years are more likely to agree with the statement “I feel like I should have a way to digitally send money to people without any third party involved” (55%).
- Foreign born (66%) respondents are also more likely to agree versus their US born counterparts.

Security concerns of the current financial system are high

Significant numbers of respondents hold concerns about the financial system, including upgrading it to combat threats and changes needed to give more personal control.

- Almost three-quarters of respondents agree that “the current financial system needs to be upgraded to combat new threats, like cyber crime or AI.” This is elevated among a few subgroups, including men (77% agree), Gen X (76% agree), and Boomers (85% agree).
- Just over half agree that “changes to the current financial system are needed to give people more control over their personal data.” This is more pronounced among male (62%) versus female respondents (51%).
- Few respondents agree that “the current financial system in the United States is secure.” This is significantly lower among women (25%), US born (28%) and Millennials (23%).

Additional Findings on DeFi Concept



Mild interest in learning more, especially among a few key subgroups

While interest levels are somewhat low (12% say they are “extremely” or “very interested”) in Decentralized Finance Technology, there are some subgroups that show higher levels of interest.

Male respondents (15%) and Millennials (15%) are significantly more likely to say they are interested in learning more about DeFi and could be a good opportunity.

Key features of DeFi center around control and security:

- More than half of respondents feel that the top features of DeFi are: (1) To have full personal control over my money at all times; (2) Being able to see my full financial history at all times; and (3) To ensure that I have full personal control over the security of my personal and financial data.
- This is elevated among foreign born respondents, where nearly two-thirds say these features are important.