

January 29, 2026

Santander US Paths to Prosperity

Financial Prosperity in America:

Consumer resiliency withstands price pressures, while AI seen as supporting financial prosperity.

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Paths to Financial Prosperity

At Santander, we strive to help consumers achieve prosperity. We commissioned this study to continue our efforts to better understand middle-income Americans' current financial state and future aspirations, so we can best support them on their journey. This research series explores the barriers and challenges facing consumers as they work toward achieving financial prosperity, and the tools and support that middle-income households need to get there, including vehicle access, housing, and banking solutions.

Building upon eleven quarters of research, this installment captures how middle-income households are navigating today's economic conditions and their impact on spending, saving, and overall financial outlooks. This twelfth edition also provides a first look at how middle-income households are thinking about artificial intelligence (AI) as it relates to their own financial journeys.

Key Findings

- 1 Middle-income Americans remain confident in achieving financial prosperity, with most saying they are on the right track and feeling better positioned to manage higher prices.
- 2 Most see the potential of AI to support their financial prosperity by learning new skills, budgeting more effectively, and/or making more informed investment decisions.
- 3 Car buying activity remains elevated as households prioritize vehicle access. Used-car interest is gaining hold, with four-in-five prospective car buyers considering one.
- 4 Half of car buyers who shopped online used AI to research vehicles and finance options. 80% of prospective buyers would be comfortable exploring financing options with AI.
- 5 After three years, half of middle-income consumers have now taken action to benefit from higher yields available on savings, but many more could still benefit.
- 6 Renters increasingly view their living situation as the more affordable choice. For many, homeownership is not required for financial prosperity.

Middle-income Americans continue to show resilience and see potential for AI to help support financial prosperity.



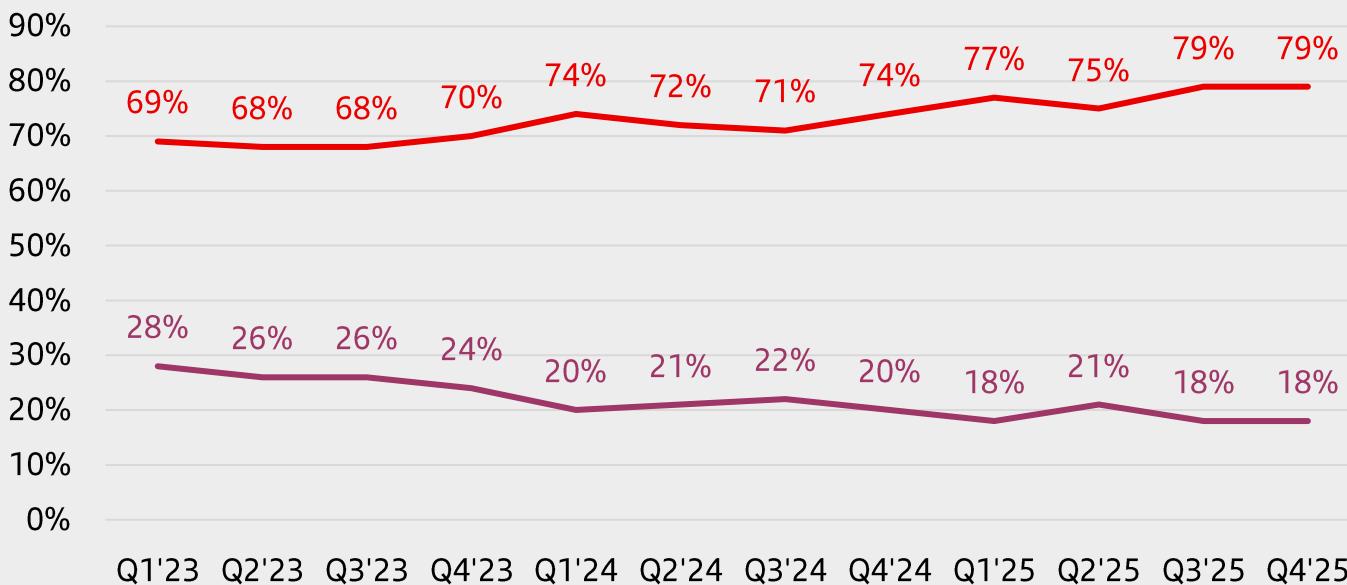
Middle-income Americans remain confident in achieving financial prosperity

Confidence remains at a survey high with 8 in 10 saying they are on the right financial track.

Financial confidence remains elevated

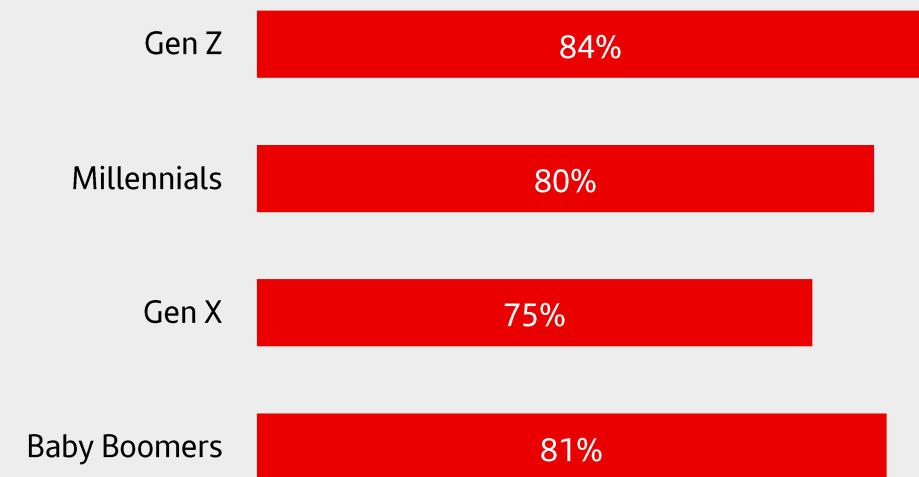
— Believe they are on the right track toward financial prosperity

— Feel financially insecure



Gen Z is leading the way in financial optimism

Percent who believe they are on the right track:



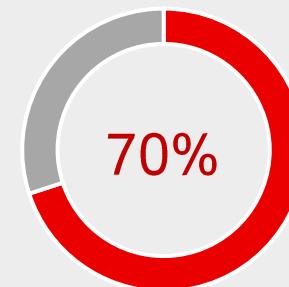
Middle-income consumers prioritize stability and flexibility in their finances

Most are current on their bills, feel confident in their job security, and have enough saved to cover small emergencies.

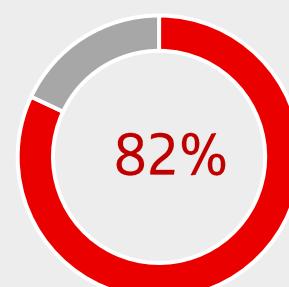
Top five factors middle-income Americans associate with financial prosperity:

- 1 Able to pay bills and expenses
- 2 Job security
- 3 Sufficient emergency savings
- 4 Debt-free
- 5 Able to retire

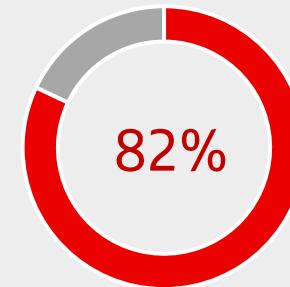
Key indicators of financial prosperity remain strong



are current on their bills.



feel secure in their jobs.



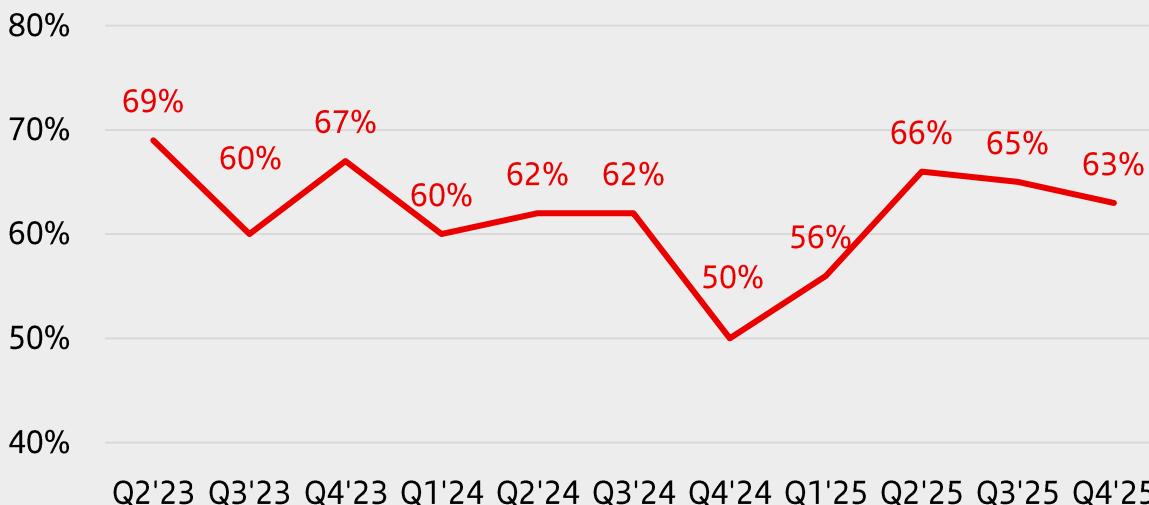
have enough saved to cover a small emergency.

While personal confidence is high, broader economic concerns linger

Inflation remains the greatest obstacle to financial prosperity.

Recession expectations tracked higher in 2025

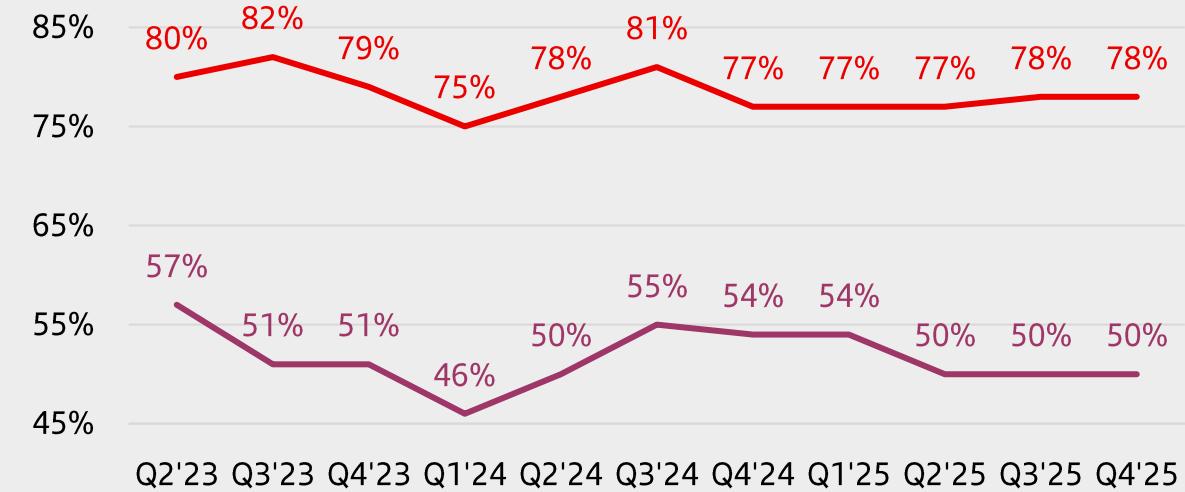
— Believe the U.S. will enter a recession in next 12 months



Concerns about inflation remain steady

— Inflation is a major concern as I pursue financial prosperity

— Inflation = biggest obstacle to financial prosperity*



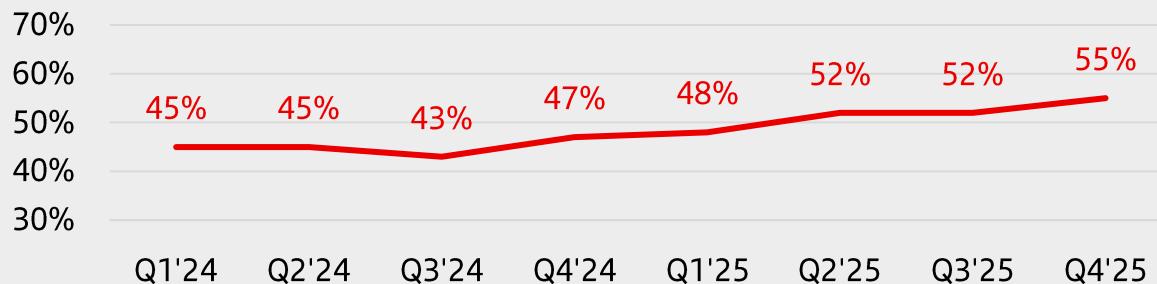
*50% indicated inflation is their biggest obstacle to financial prosperity, the highest of seven response options, including state of the job market/job security (12%) and slow wage growth (11%).

Consumers remain resilient amid ongoing price pressures

Middle-income Americans are taking more steps to cope with high prices.

Middle-income Americans are better managing higher prices.

— Managing higher prices better than a year ago



More than 8 in 10 (86%) took some action in response to inflation in Q4:

Top actions taken due to inflation over past three months:*

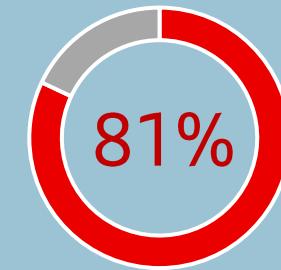


Consumers are planning for future price uncertainty and feel prepared to handle it.



2pts QoQ

believe they can adapt if costs go up.



took some action in Q4 in anticipation of potential price increases.

*Respondents could select all that apply; only top actions shown.

Generational differences shape inflation management

Younger generations report stronger adaptation, but all cohorts remain confident they can adjust.

Younger generations report that they are managing price increases more effectively.

Percent who say they are managing higher prices better than a year ago:



All generations are confident in ability to adapt to price increases.

Percent who believe they can adapt if costs go up:



Middle-income households see AI as supporting financial prosperity

9 in 10 see the potential of AI to help achieve prosperity, with 60% saying it will help them over the next year.

The majority of middle-income Americans see AI as supporting financial prosperity.



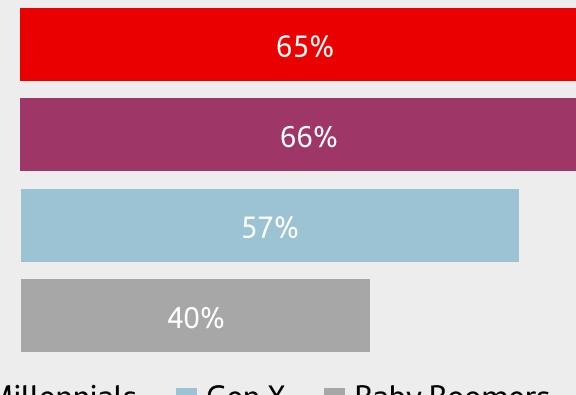
AI will help financial prosperity in the next 12 months



AI will help financial prosperity in the next 10 years

Younger generations are more optimistic than older generations in AI's ability to support financial prosperity.

AI seen as helping financial prosperity in next 12 months



■ Gen Z ■ Millennials ■ Gen X ■ Baby Boomers

Top three potential benefits of AI to help financial prosperity:

1 Help learn new skills

2 Budget/manage money more effectively

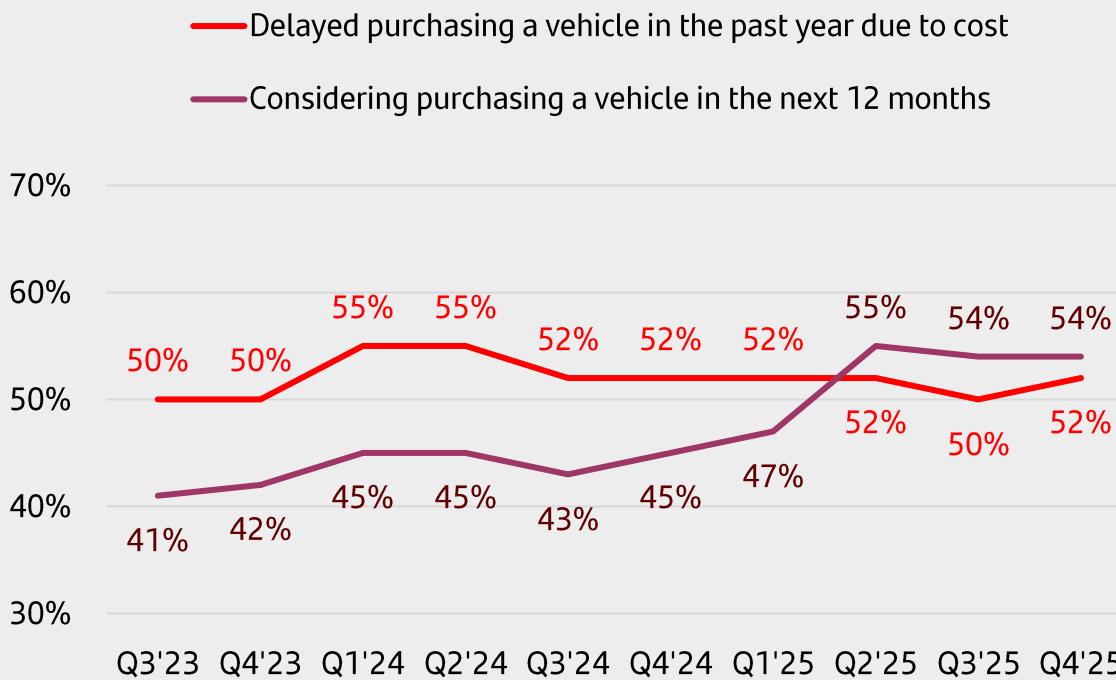
3 More informed investment decisions

Vehicle demand remains elevated as auto buying activity accelerates; used cars gaining appeal among cost-conscious consumers.

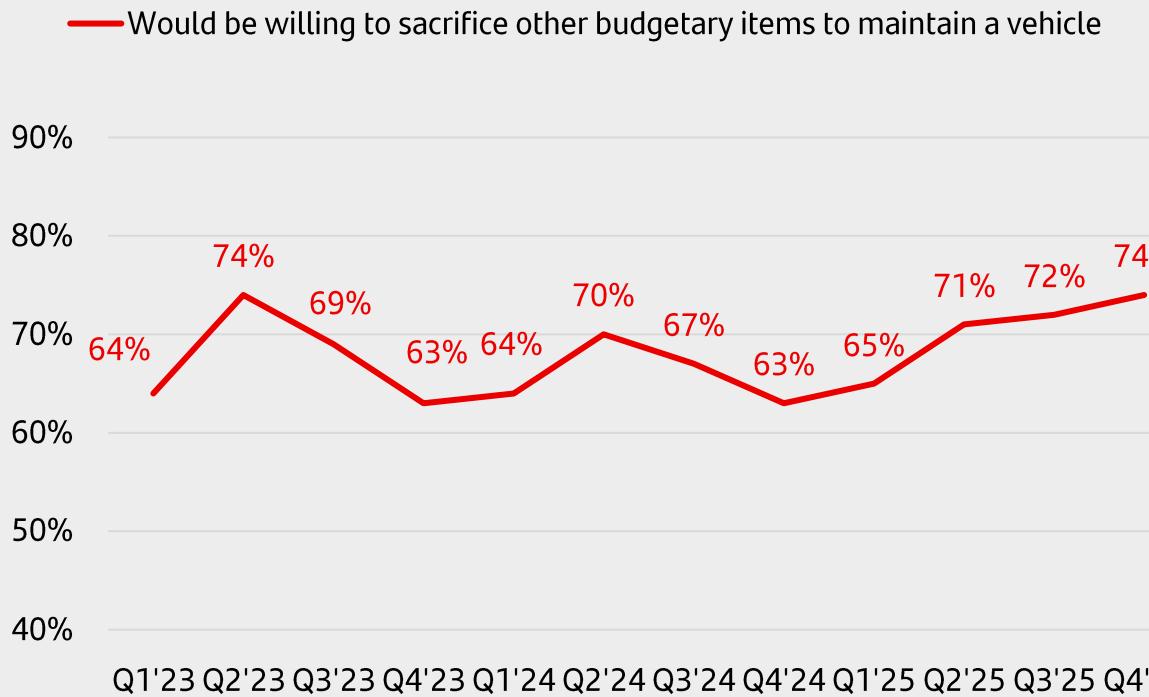
Auto demand remains elevated

Vehicle purchase consideration surged in 2025 and continues to outpace those delaying purchases.

Pent up vehicle demand converting to auto buying considerations

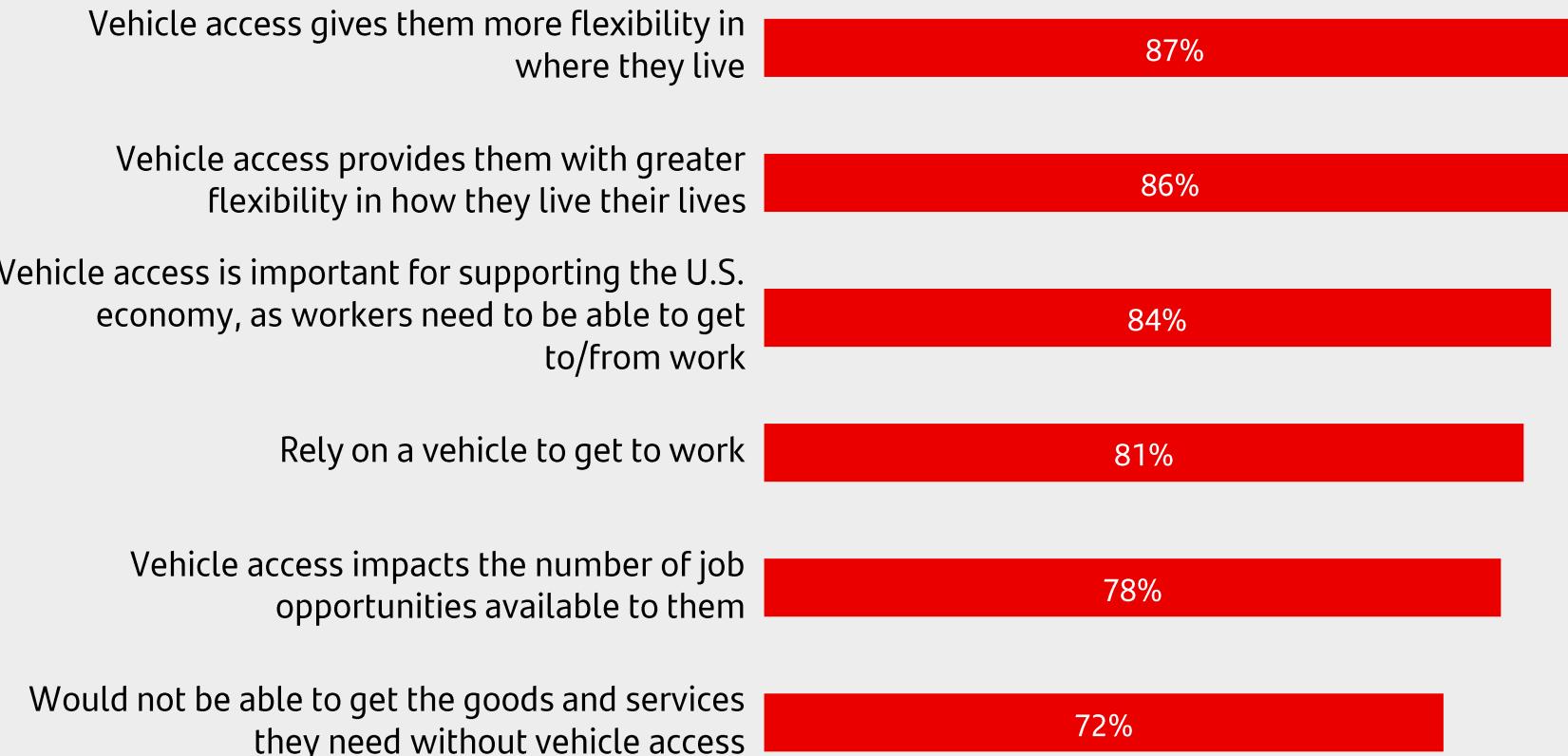


Consumers remain committed to maintaining vehicle access



Vehicles access unlocks work, mobility, and opportunity

Four-in-five middle-income Americans rely on a vehicle to get to work.

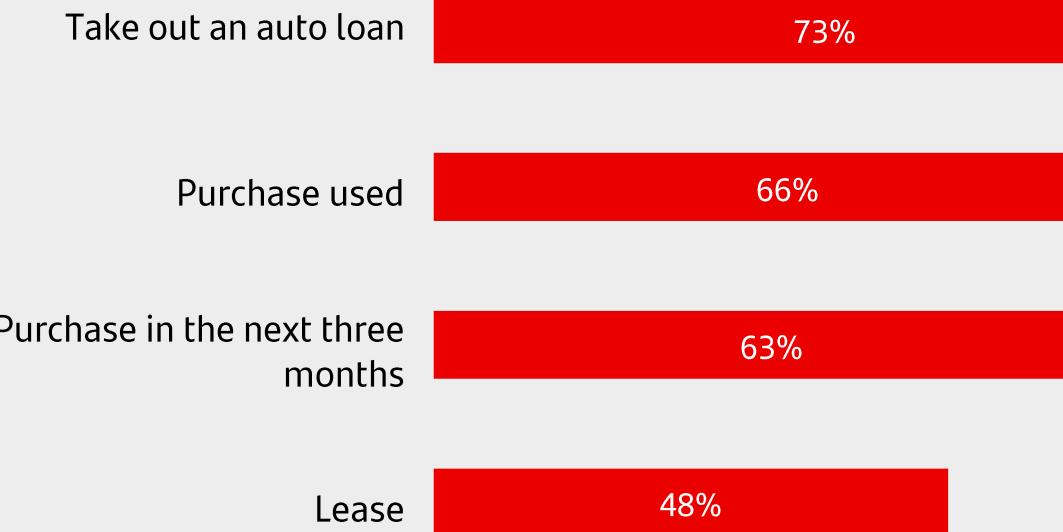


Vehicle purchase considerations are translating into action

Prospective buyers are increasingly taking concrete steps toward purchasing, signaling growing purchase readiness.

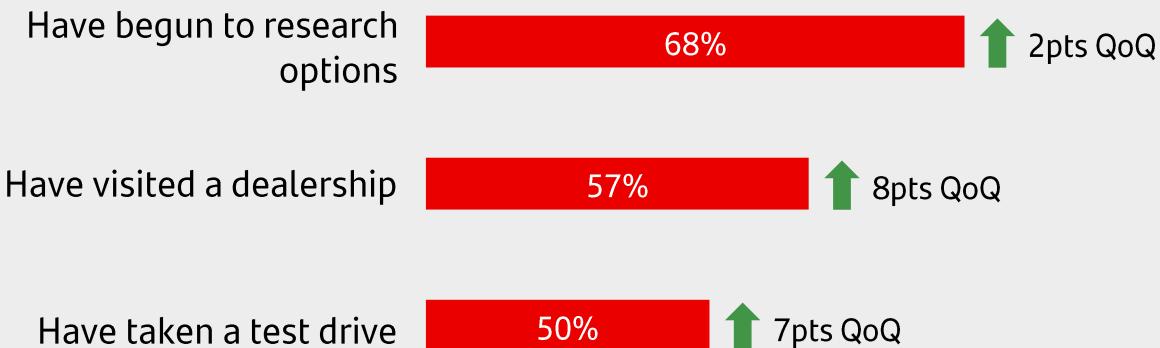
Near-term purchase intent and financing plans are clear

Percent who are *likely* to do the following:*



*Among those considering a vehicle purchase in the next 12 months.

Those considering a vehicle purchase are taking greater steps toward buying*



*Among those considering a vehicle purchase in the next 12 months.



are comfortable using AI to help understand auto financing options

*Among those considering a vehicle purchase in the next 12 months.

Used vehicle interest is taking hold among car shoppers

84% of recent car buyers and 81% of prospective buyers considered or are considering a used car. Two-thirds of prospective buyers are likely to purchase a used car.

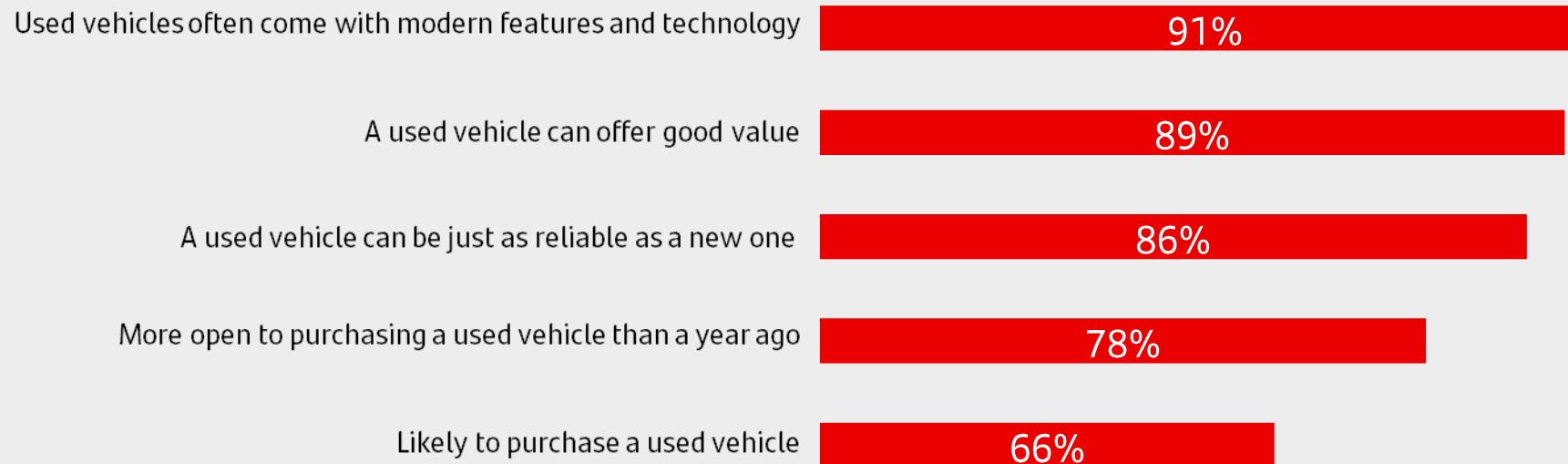


of 2025 car buyers looked at or considered a used vehicle



of potential 2026 car buyers are considering a used vehicle

Used vehicles are seen as good value and reliable among prospective buyers*

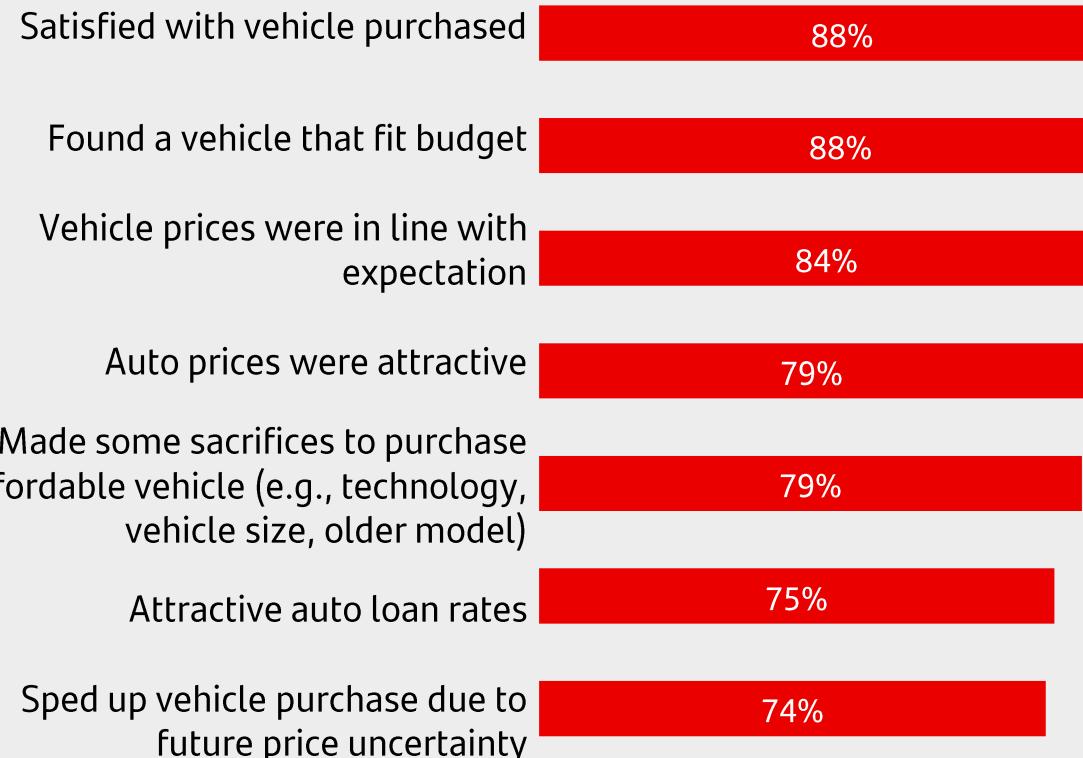


*Among those considering a vehicle purchase in the next 12 months.

Car buyers are satisfied, budget-conscious, and AI-enabled

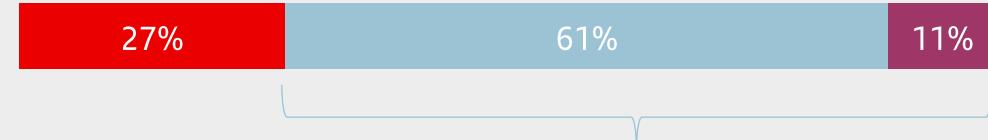
Half of middle-income Americans who are online car shoppers used AI to inform vehicle and financing options.

Most buyers stayed within budget and felt satisfied with their purchase

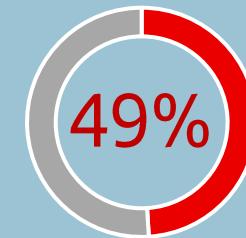


Where car buyers shopped for their vehicles in 2025:

■ In-person only ■ Mix of in-person and online ■ Online only



AI is influencing key phases of the vehicle purchasing decision*



of online car shoppers used AI to research vehicle and/or financing options

Top three AI uses when shopping for or financing a vehicle:**

- 1 Estimate automobile budget
- 2 Personalize vehicle recommendations
- 3 Calculate monthly loan costs

*Among online car shoppers.

**Respondents could select all that apply; only top actions shown.

Renters increasingly view their housing situation as the more affordable choice.

Middle-income renters are choosing flexibility and affordability over ownership

An increasing number of renters feel they do not need to own a home, with a growing share saying they could afford to buy but choose to rent instead.

Renters increasingly see their housing situation as a more affordable alternative to homeownership*

Current home prices make me feel owning a home isn't necessary when I can rent.



72%
2pts QoQ

Renting is more affordable than a mortgage.



68%
2pts QoQ

I would be comfortable renting forever.



56%
2pts QoQ

I could afford to buy a home, but I choose to rent instead.



51%
7pts QoQ

Renting is not just more affordable, it is also more flexible*

Provides more flexibility in where I live and work.



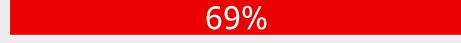
83%

Provides more financial flexibility.



74%

Offers more amenities and updated living spaces compared to owning a home.



69%

*Among those who rent their primary residence.

Renters would benefit from having more options*



believe building more multifamily homes will help maintain affordability.



say there are not enough rental options in their area.

*Among those who rent their primary residence.

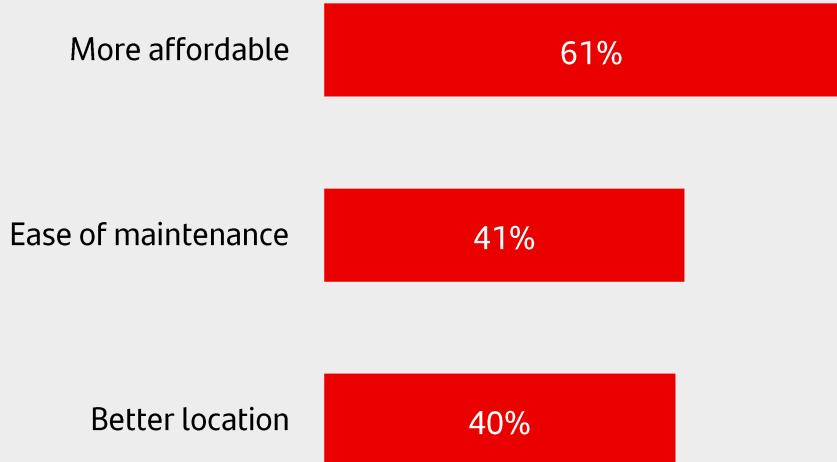
*Among those who rent their primary residence.

Multifamily housing delivers affordability and flexibility for renters

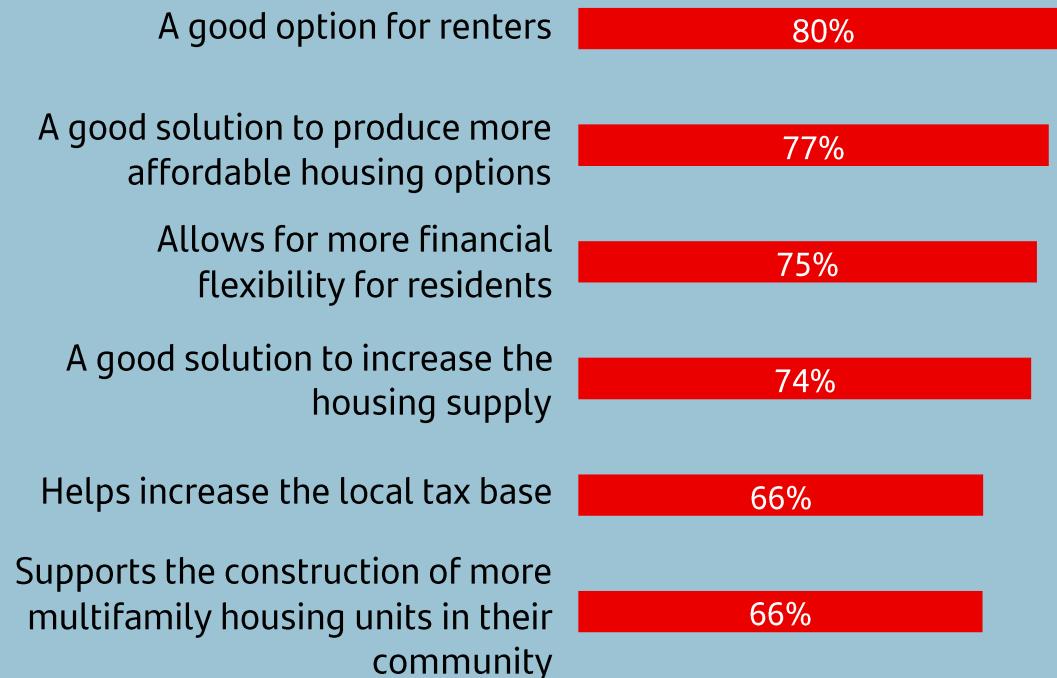
Most residents say multifamily homes offer meaningful advantages for both individuals and communities.

Affordability, location, and ease drive multifamily appeal

*Top three reasons for living in a multifamily home:**



Multifamily homes are seen as a practical path to expand housing options and positively impact communities**



*Among those living in a multifamily home. Respondents could select all that apply; only top responses shown.

**Among those living in a multifamily home.

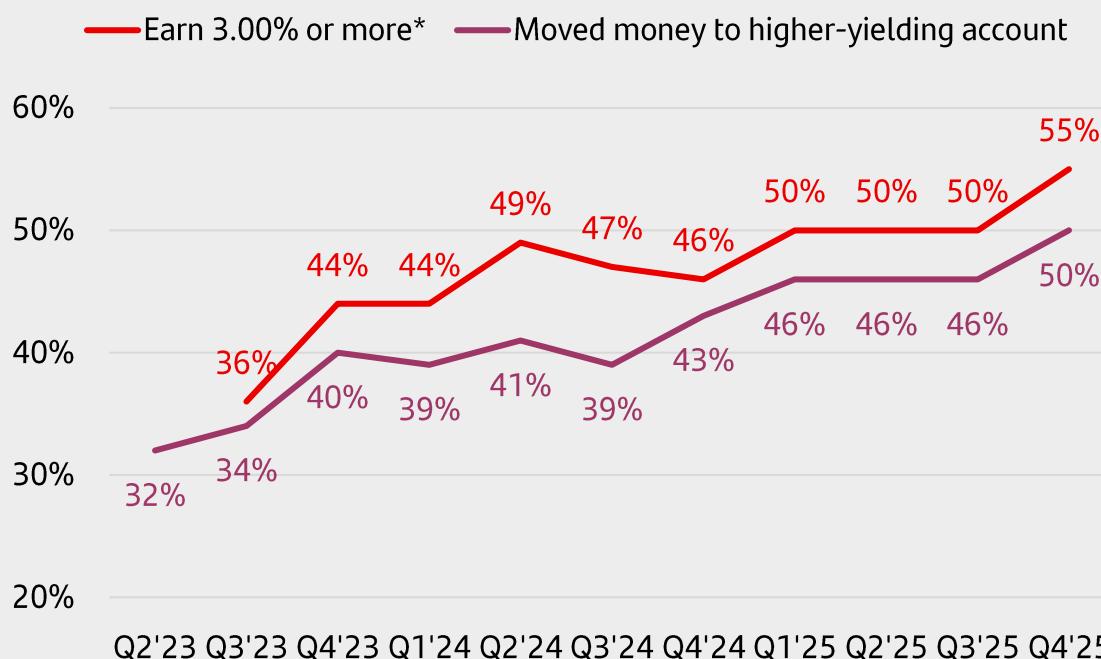
Middle-income Americans still have an opportunity to earn more interest on their savings.



Shifts to higher-yielding accounts hit a new high

After three years, half of middle-income households have taken action to benefit from higher yields available on savings.

Over half of middle-income Americans are now earning 3% or more in their high yield saving accounts



*Among those who know the interest rate on their primary savings account. 16% do not know the rate they earn on their savings.

Consumers rely on flexible digital banking options to stay on top of their finances



say it's important their bank offers 24/7 digital account access.



bank digitally at least half the time.

Middle-income consumers remain confident in their bank and the banking sector overall.

Confident deposits will be available when needed



Confident in the safety and stability of primary banking provider



Confident in the stability of the banking sector



Methodology

Methodology

This research on financial prosperity, conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of Santander US, surveyed 2,178 Americans who are bank and/or financial services customers, ages 18-76.

Survey participants are employed or looking for work, own/use at least one financial product, and are the primary or shared decision-maker on household finances with household income in the “middle-income” range of ~\$53,000 to \$161,000¹.

¹ Range based on median household income of ~\$80,500 (U.S. Census Bureau) and Pew Research Center definition of middle-income being two-thirds to double median household income.

This Q4 study was conducted from December 11-14, 2025. The interviews were conducted online, and the margin of error is +/- 2 percentage points for the total audience at a 95% confidence level. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

The data was weighted to target population proportions for a representative sample based on age, gender, ethnicity, region, and education.

The previous studies were conducted over the following time periods:

- Q3 2025: September 2025
- Q2 2025: June 2025
- Q1 2025: February 2025
- Q4 2024: December 2024
- Q3 2024: August 2024
- Q2 2024: May 2024
- Q1 2024: February 2024
- Q4 2023: December 2023
- Q3 2023: September 2023
- Q2 2023: May 2023
- Q1 2023: January 2023

Financial prosperity is defined as thriving financially. Achieving financial prosperity includes being able to cover living expenses, handle emergencies, and pursue life goals without significant tradeoffs.

Multifamily homes are generally housing properties with five or more residential units, such as an apartment building.

About Santander US

Santander Holdings USA, Inc. (SHUSA) is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Madrid-based Banco Santander, S.A. (NYSE: SAN) (Santander), recognized as one of the world's most admired companies by Fortune Magazine in 2025, with approximately 178 million customers in the U.S., Europe, and Latin America. As the intermediate holding company for Santander's U.S. businesses, SHUSA is the parent company of financial companies with more than 11,300 employees, 4.5 million customers, and assets of \$165 billion in the fiscal year ended 2024. These include Santander Bank, N.A., Santander Consumer USA Holdings Inc., Banco Santander International, Santander Securities LLC, Santander US Capital Markets LLC, and several other subsidiaries. Santander US is recognized as a top 10 auto lender as well as a top 10 multifamily bank lender and servicer, and has a growing wealth management business. For more information about Santander US, please visit www.santanderus.com.

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