Franc

Wealth Index Report

Better money habits drive financial wellbeing in South Africa

2026

Foreword

Anyone can achieve financial security and prosperity with the right habits, guidance and support.

Fewer than 1 in 10 South Africans have access to independent financial advice, leaving the vast majority to navigate financial decisions alone. This is the gap Franc was built to close. As a digital wealth coach, our mission is simple: to help the 90% of South Africans without access to advice to grow their wealth and financial confidence.

Before founding Franc, my time at Discovery exposed me to a powerful idea: when you make the intangible tangible, behaviour changes. One of the most compelling examples of this is Vitality Age – a simple, intuitive measure that translates complex health data into a single, understandable number. It gives people a clear sense of where they stand and, more importantly, what to do next. That idea has stayed with me.

> Financial wellbeing is often invisible until it becomes a problem. And, like health, people feel the symptoms without knowing the underlying cause. The Wealth Index measures financial behaviours that build financial security, wealth and confidence – providing a holistic view of financial wellbeing.

The Wealth Index aims to capture all the complexity of financial wellbeing that is shaped by daily habits, long-term decisions and deeply human emotions, providing clarity on one's financial position today and illuminating a path toward improvement tomorrow.

Franc was built on a core belief that financial freedom is not reserved for high earners, but is accessible to all, regardless of income, gender and education. We exist to serve as a digital wealth coach for the millions of South Africans navigating their financial journeys alone. By simplifying complexity, building confidence and encouraging consistent action, Franc aims to help South Africans move beyond survival and begin to build financial security and, ultimately, financial freedom.

This inaugural Franc Wealth Index Report represents more than just a dataset. It is a first step toward building a shared language for financial wellbeing in South Africa. One that individuals, employers, policymakers and institutions can use to better understand the challenges people face and the opportunities that lie ahead. By making financial wellbeing measurable, we believe it will also become more manageable. Ultimately, our hope is to drive awareness and empower South Africans to take control of their financial futures.

Dr Thomas Brennan
Co-Founder & CEO at Franc

The authors

Dr Thomas Brennan is a South African entrepreneur, writer and fintech leader, best known as the co-founder and CEO of Franc, a digital wealth coach platform aimed at boosting financial wellbeing. He is a self-described generalist who combines technical, commercial and storytelling skills ranging from coding and product development to fundraising and strategic leadership. Thomas studied at the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar where he got his D.Phil. in Engineering Science, an experience that helped shape his global perspective and interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving. Alongside his executive role, he is an active commentator on entrepreneurship, venture capital and financial inclusion, regularly publishing essays on leadership and the realities of building startups. His work reflects a focus on democratising access to financial markets while navigating the challenges of scaling a technology-driven business in emerging markets.

Cassidy Nydahl is a growth and marketing professional with a strong background in digital strategy, product development and media. She currently serves as Head of Growth at Franc, where she focuses on expanding access to investment products and driving user acquisition in the fintech space. With a career spanning content, strategy and product, Nydahl has held several senior roles at Engage Video Group, including Head of Strategy and Product Strategy Lead, where she helped develop innovative digital offerings and led social media initiatives. Earlier in her career, she worked in digital editing and copywriting, building a foundation in storytelling and audience engagement. In addition to her corporate work, she is a director at SheSays Cape Town, contributing to initiatives that support and advance women in creative industries. Nydahl holds an honours degree in Media Theory & Practice from the University of Cape Town.

Siobhan Cassidy is an experienced journalist, writer and communications professional with a career spanning more than two decades across international media and corporate environments. Based in Cape Town, she has contributed to a wide range of leading publications, including the Financial Times, Daily Mail and Business Report, covering business, finance, investing, and lifestyle topics such as food, wine and the arts. She has held senior editorial roles, notably serving as a launch business news editor at a pan-African news agency, and brings more than six years of experience in corporate communications. Her work is characterised by a strong understanding of financial markets and an ability to translate complex economic issues into accessible, engaging content for diverse audiences. Cassidy's multidisciplinary background reflects a blend of rigorous journalism and strategic communication, positioning her as a versatile voice in both media and corporate storytelling.

Executive summary

Key behaviours are far more impactful than income or formal education in driving financial wellbeing.

With 3 952 respondents, this is one of South Africa's largest financial wellbeing surveys. The inaugural Franc Wealth Index draws a detailed picture of how South Africans are really doing financially – not just what they earn, but how they plan and save, and how they feel about their finances.

45/100

South Africa's Wealth Index for 2026

Resilience

49/100

Financial foundations: savings, debt, insurance

Growth

48/100

Long-term habits: investing, planning, retirement

Mindset

40/100

Knowledge, confidence and relationship with money

The highest-scoring individual behaviour was Managing Debt at 6.6/10, followed by Financial Planning and Investment Behaviour, specifically whether regular, diversified and automated, at 5.1/10.

Although the Investment Knowledge score is reasonably strong (5.0/10) this knowledge does not necessarily translate into good outcomes. Emergency Savings scores an alarming 2.7/10, Financial Confidence scores 3.3/10 and Retirement Preparedness scores 4.3/10, giving the impression that inaction drives anxiety.

87% of respondents don't have enough emergency savings (less than three months' income set aside).

1 in 4 are unable to save anything at all each month.

70% are inadequately prepared for retirement. Of those, 38% have little or no plan in place.

78% have financial goals, but more than half have no concrete plan to reach them.

34% are carrying high debt burdens, with debt consuming more than 35% of their income.

The gap between knowing and doing is one of the most consistent themes running through this data. South Africans are not financially illiterate – 64% rate their investment knowledge as intermediate or above. They are also not indifferent – most have goals and track their budgets at least monthly.

What is missing is the structural foundation that turns good intentions into compounding progress towards financial stability and wealth.

What you do with your money is a more powerful predictor of financial health than your age, education, or income.

This is perhaps the most important finding in the entire report. When we modelled the factors that predict a high Wealth Index, certain behaviours – investing regularly, budgeting consistently, setting and reviewing financial goals – consistently outperformed such demographic factors as age, income and education. The odds of a high score are two to three times higher for someone with strong financial habits than for someone simply earning more money.

Two behaviours, in particular, act as hindrances to financial stability and wealth creation. Carrying high debt doesn't just drag down your debt score — it significantly worsens saving and investment behaviour, financial anxiety and emergency preparedness. Similarly, having no emergency savings doesn't just leave one exposed to shocks, it makes you measurably less likely to invest, as well as adding to feelings of anxiety about money. These are not isolated problems. They are the fault lines through which financial wellbeing fractures.

Managing debt effectively

53 / 100

Median Wealth Index

Over-indebted

31 / 100

Median Wealth Index

With adequate emergency savings

45 / 100

Median Wealth Index

Without emergency savings

42 / 100

Median Wealth Index

Together, these findings suggest that even where financial knowledge and goal-setting are relatively widespread, the biggest constraints to improved financial wellbeing lie in building resilience, specifically reducing debt burdens and establishing emergency savings. Turning the tide on these two factors would unlock better outcomes across the broader financial ecosystem.

Context & purpose

Financial wellbeing in South Africa

A country caught between awareness and action.

South Africa's financial reality is defined not only by inequality of income, but by inequality of financial confidence and knowledge. These gaps are not evenly distributed, with women, lower-income households and those with less formal education remaining disproportionately at a disadvantage. While recent macroeconomic improvements, including easing inflation and interest rate cuts, have provided some relief to household balance sheets, they have little-to-no effect on long-term financial outcomes.

Many South Africans remain stuck in a cycle of short-term coping rather than proactive, long-term wealth building.

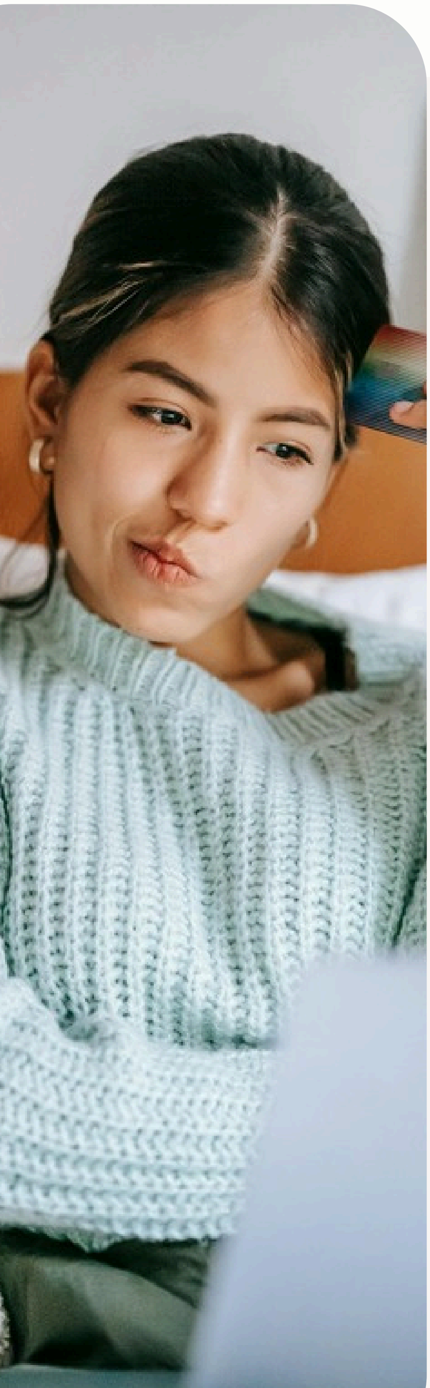
According to Nedbank's 2025 NedFinHealth Monitor Report that surveyed 1502 South Africans, financial wellbeing in South Africa is gradually improving, rising from 53.1 in 2023 to 56.4 in 2025, driven by better spending discipline and debt management. The report looks at 8 financial health indicators grouped into 4 key dimensions: Spend, Save, Borrow, and Plan. In the 2025 report, high earners (R10 000 or more) had a highest Borrow (69), Plan (74) and Save (67) Score, whilst women and Gen Z (born 1997 to 2012) had the highest Spend Score (61).

Sanlam's 2024 Financial Confidence Index (FCI), surveying 1512 South Africans, paints a similar picture with FCI holding steady at 47/100 over the last two years, with the financial wellbeing index (29) lagging well behind the financial self-determination index (56) and financial resilience (50). In terms of demographics, Sanlam also found that high earners (R20 000 or more) had higher FCI than people earning less than R8 000 (69 vs 48).

The credit picture adds further concerns to the state of South Africa's financial wellbeing. According to the Credit Stress Report released by Eighty20 and Xpert Decision Systems for the fourth quarter of 2025, 26 million South Africans carried a combined loan balance of R2.7 trillion. Overdue debt sat at R224 billion – up 6% quarter on quarter – with one in three loans in arrears. On average, 29% of net income went toward debt repayments.

Financial literacy in South Africa remains a significant structural challenge, despite years of intervention from government and financial institutions. According to the 2020 Financial Literacy Survey, conducted by the Financial Services Conduct Authority (FSCA) in collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), of 3 500 South Africans older than 16, the median financial literacy score was 51/100 (down from 55 in 2015), a metric that indicates only moderate understanding of basic financial concepts.

This gap translates into the reality that many individuals struggle with the most basic budgeting, saving and debt management, which locks them out of any real chance of achieving long-term financial stability, never mind building wealth.

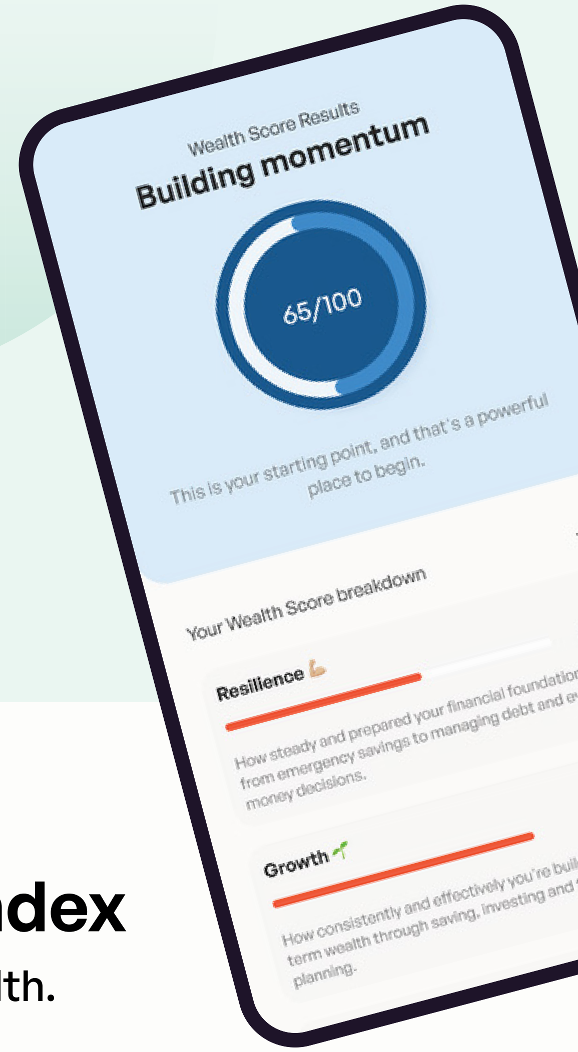


According to the FSCA study, 71% of South Africans had no emergency savings. Furthermore, they found that 44% had not been able to save anything in the past year.

Financial literacy is strongly influenced by demographic and socioeconomic factors such as age, gender, education level and, of course, income. The FSCA study found that women (48 v 54) and black South Africans (49 v 59) have disproportionately lower levels of financial knowledge. Broader structural issues, such as unemployment, inequality and limited access to quality education, compound the problem and make it difficult for many South Africans to apply financial knowledge even when they have it.

Still, South Africa faces a substantial gap between knowledge and behaviour. Improving financial literacy is not just an educational challenge, but a broader socioeconomic one requiring better education and improved economic conditions to meaningfully shift financial outcomes at scale. In short, financial literacy remains a critical challenge, but not following through with behaviours that can boost financial resilience and security is a bigger problem. It is against this backdrop that the Franc Wealth Index was designed.

franc.app/tools/wealth-score



Why we built the Wealth Index

The case for a new measure of financial health.

Financial wellbeing is not simply about access to products or information. It is about the ability to translate knowledge into consistent, confident habits over time. For the majority of South Africans, particularly the estimated 90% who do not have access to independent financial advice, this remains the greatest barrier. The challenge many face is feeling overwhelmed by complexity. They are uncertain about where to start and lack the confidence to make the "right" decisions. In this context, inaction is the default.

The Franc Wealth Index is designed to address this gap. By introducing a simple, intuitive measure of financial wellbeing, it seeks to make the intangible tangible with behaviours that can be understood, tracked and improved.

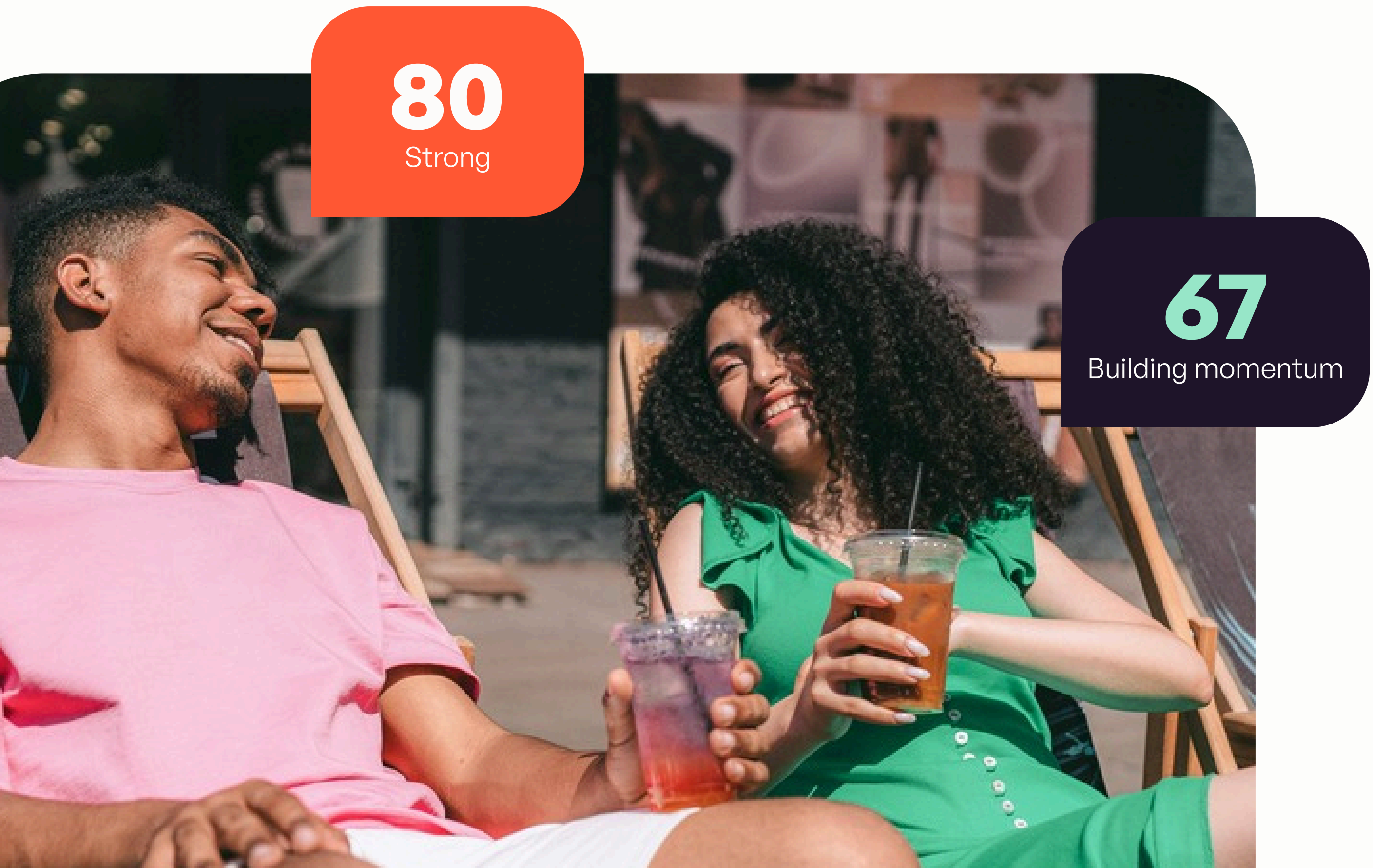
The Franc Wealth Index evaluates an individual's financial position across three core pillars: Resilience, Growth and Mindset.

By combining these dimensions into a single index that is simple to calculate, the index provides more than insight – it identifies a starting point. It enables individuals to understand where they stand, identify areas for improvement, and begin taking meaningful steps forward. It promises a broader contribution to society: a clear, data-driven view of financial wellbeing in South Africa, highlighting both systemic gaps and opportunities for intervention.

It is important not to judge financial wellbeing through a single lens, because someone may understand financial concepts but still struggle with debt, lack emergency savings or feel overwhelmed by financial stress. Equally, a person may save regularly, but have no long-term investment plan, or inadequate protection against unexpected setbacks.

The Franc Wealth Index recognises this complexity and sets out to assess the foundations of financial stability, the behaviours that build long-term wealth, and the often-overlooked emotional and psychological side of money. Together, these provide a more complete and accurate picture of overall financial wellbeing.

Franc is a digital wealth coach that helps people grow financial confidence and lasting wealth one small step at a time.



Methodology

Introducing the Wealth Index

Establishing a shared language for financial wellbeing in South Africa.

The Franc Wealth Index is a derived from a 10-question self-assessment. Each question carries a maximum of 10 points, giving a total score out of 100. Unanswered questions score zero.

Resilience (4 questions) focuses on the foundational elements of financial stability, including emergency savings, debt management, insurance and expense tracking.

- Do you have an emergency fund that can cover at least 3-6 months of expenses?
- Roughly how much of your income is being used to pay off debt?
- What best describes your current insurance coverage? (funeral, life, health and disability)
- How often do you track your expenses?

Resilience

Growth (3 questions) measures the habits that build long-term wealth: financial goal-setting and planning, monthly savings rate and retirement preparedness.

- What percentage of your monthly income do you save?
- How do you currently save or invest?
- How would you describe your retirement savings?

Growth

Mindset (3 questions) captures the often-overlooked dimension of financial wellbeing, including knowledge, financial stress and anxiety, and confidence in managing money.

- How would you rate your knowledge of investing?
- How do you feel about your finances right now?
- What is your current approach to financial planning?

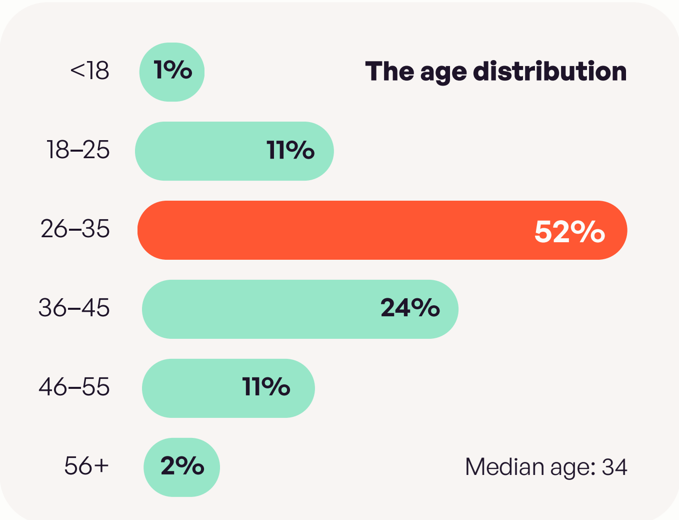
Mindset

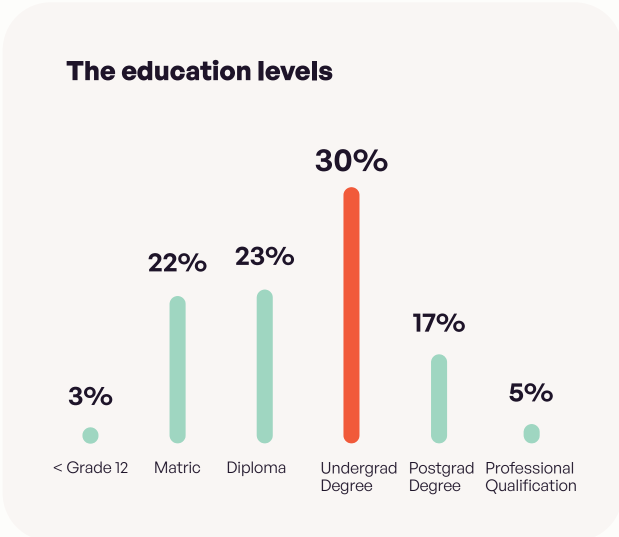
About the respondents

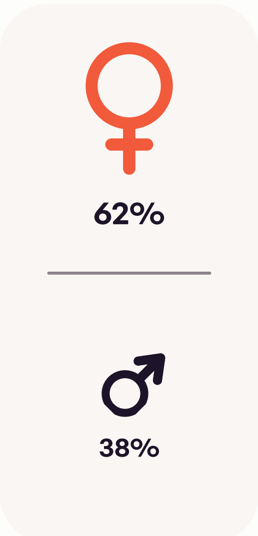
Financially active South Africans, spanning a wide range of income levels and life stages.

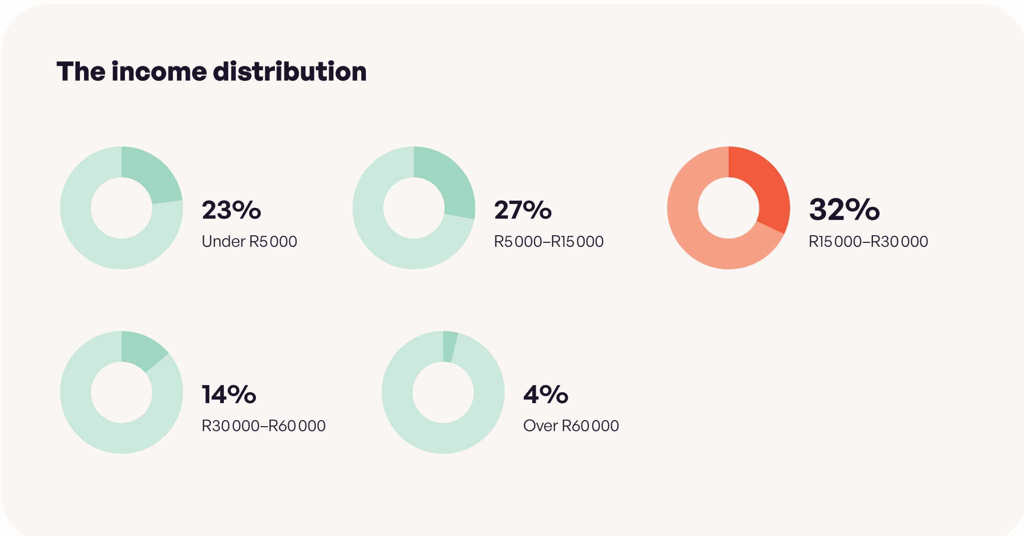
At 3 952 financially active South Africans, this is one of the largest financial wellbeing studies conducted in the country. The sample skews toward traditional working and wealth-building years, with nearly 7 in 10 respondents aged between 26 and 45 and a median age of 34. Women make up 62% of respondents, consistent with the predominantly female investor base at Franc.

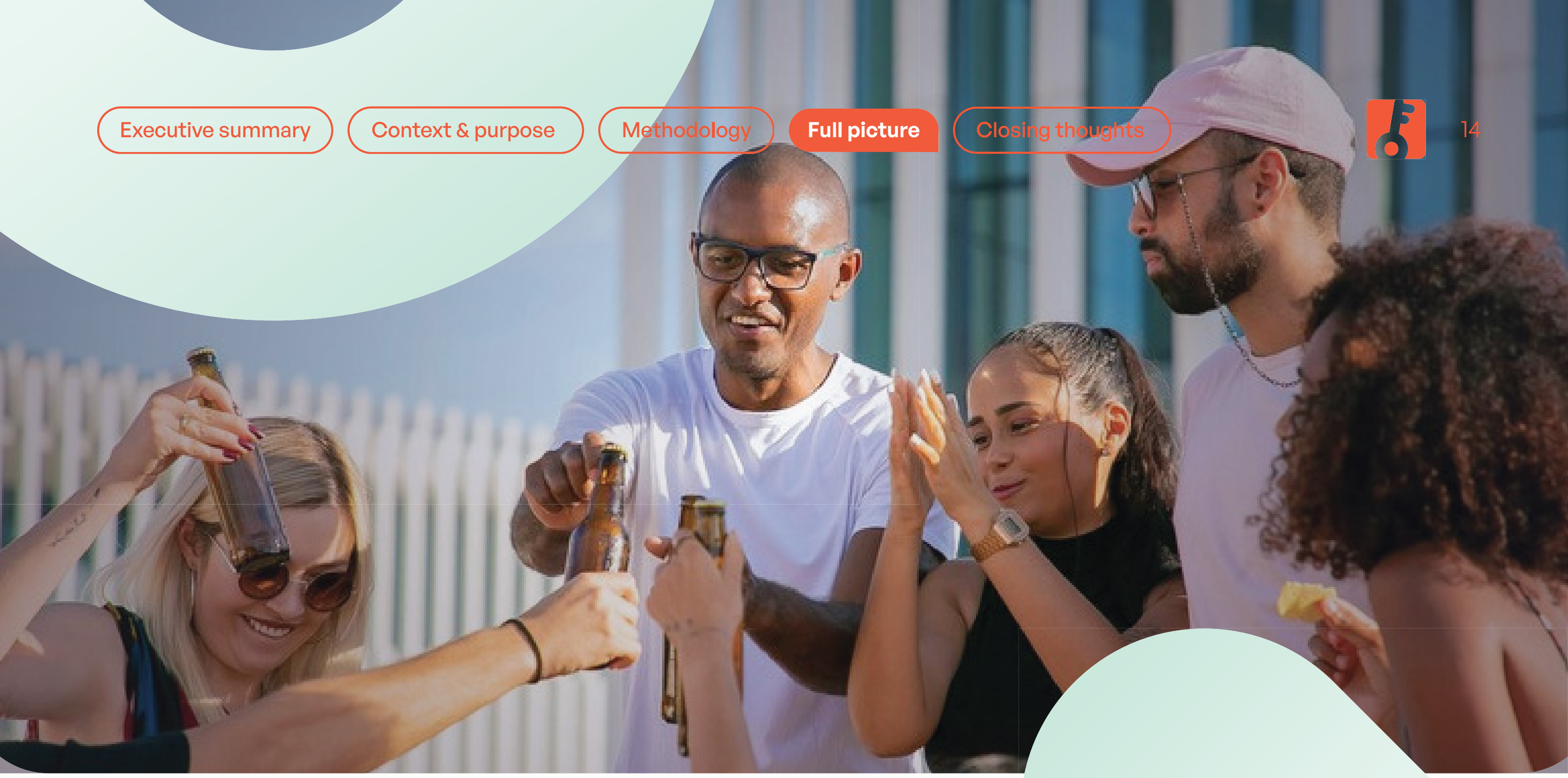
In terms of income, 82% of respondents earn under R30 000 per month – a profile that broadly mirrors working adults in South Africa. Education levels are relatively strong, with more than half of respondents holding a tertiary qualification, which makes gaps in financial behaviour all the more significant.











The full picture

Where South Africa stands

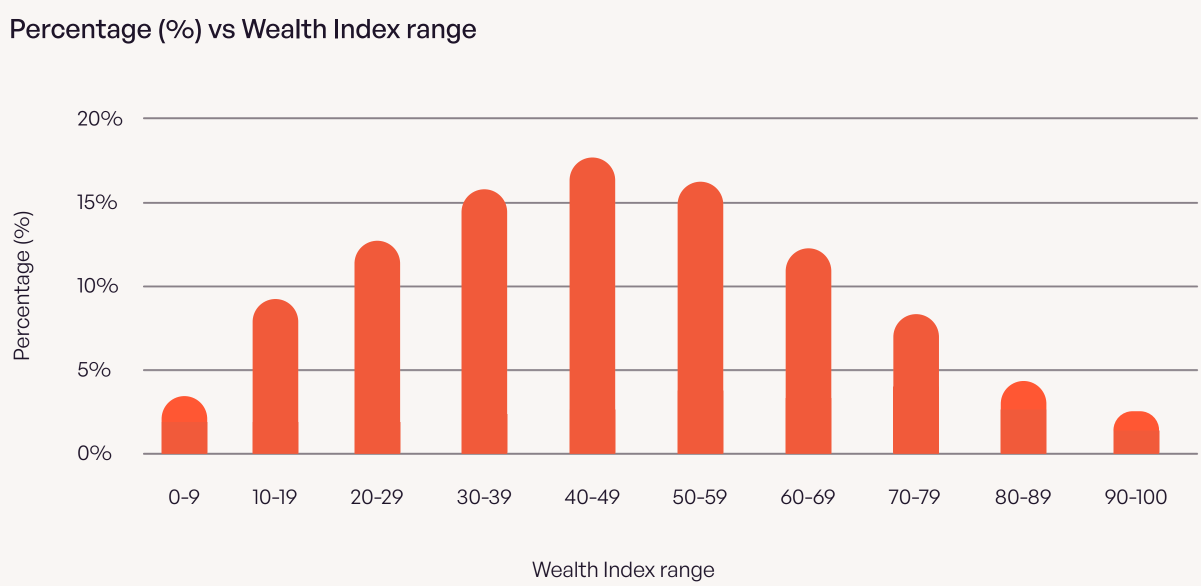
Across all respondents the median Wealth Index was 45 – neither failing nor flourishing, but with specific gaps that the data illuminates.

If we break down the Wealth Index, Resilience scored highest (48.5/100), marginally higher than Growth (48.2/100) with Mindset trailing at 40/100. In terms of behaviours, debt management had the highest score (6.6/10), with both financial planning and investment behaviour relatively strong (5.1/10). Emergency Savings had the lowest score (2.7/10) with financial stress and anxiety also low (3.3/10).

The majority are below the midpoint: Nearly 58% of respondents scored below 50, suggesting that for most people, such foundational financial habits as budgeting, preparedness for an emergency or saving consistently are not yet in place.

A small group is excelling: 5.7% of respondents scored above 80. This group serves as the benchmark for financial wellbeing in this dataset, typically combining low anxiety with high savings and manageable debt.

A significant number of people are close: Roughly 22% of respondents scored between 50 and 65. They are just one or two behavioural shifts, such as better debt management or more structured retirement planning, away from stronger financial health and less anxiety.



In terms of **Resilience**, the majority of respondents (87%) have insufficient emergency savings (less than 3 months income). While almost 1 in 4 have no debt, 34% report a high debt-to-income ratio (over 35%). Having insurance cover is a common financial behaviour, with the majority (74%) having some form of insurance cover in place. Monthly expense tracking is practised by 45% of respondents.

In terms of **Growth**, nearly 1 in 4 of the respondents are unable to save any money on a monthly basis. The majority of respondents (70%) said they are inadequately prepared for retirement, with 38% reporting that they have little or no retirement planning in place. A small majority (56%) have no financial plan in place.

In terms of **Mindset**, it was surprising to see that the majority of respondents (64%) rate their investment knowledge as intermediate or above. Although 1 in 4 say they use automated investment processes with diversified strategies, another 1 in 4 say they do not have an investing practice at all. Financial stress is a significant factor, with more than 35% of respondents reporting they are often worried or stressed about their finances.

Debt management is the highest-scoring individual behaviour (6.6/10) – but looking beneath that headline reveals a more troubling picture. While 66% report manageable debt levels, the 34% who are over-indebted (carrying a debt-to-income ratio above 35%) show dramatically worse outcomes across almost every financial dimension. Their median Wealth Index is 31, compared to 53 for those managing debt effectively. That 22-point gap represents the difference between financial fragility and financial health.

Question category	Over-indebted	Managing debt
Monthly savings*°	2.71	5.43
Financial anxiety*	2.02	3.93
Emergency fund*	1.46	3.34
Investment behaviour*	3.63	5.89
Financial goals*	4.25	5.56
Investment knowledge*	3.81	4.99
Budget tracking*	4.31	5.07
Retirement preparedness	4.13	4.37
Insurance coverage	5.35	4.68

* Statistical significance ($p<0.001$) ° Large effect (Cohen's d > 0.8)

Saving for emergencies is the lowest scoring financial behaviour. The vast majority of respondents (87%) are inadequately prepared for emergencies (less than 3 months' income). For this subset, the median Wealth Index is 42 (compared to an overall median of 45). The table below looks at the difference across all behaviours between those who are adequately prepared for emergencies and those who are not.

Question category	Inadequately prepared	Adequately prepared
Monthly savings*°	3.98	7.44
Financial anxiety*°	2.88	5.65
Investment behaviour*	4.72	7.65
Debt to income*	6.30	8.68
Financial goals*	4.84	6.65
Retirement preparedness*	3.97	6.21
Investment knowledge*	4.35	5.99
Budget tracking*	4.66	5.65
Insurance coverage*	4.71	5.71

* Statistical significance ($p<0.001$) ° Large effect (Cohen's d > 0.8)

Key findings

Most people lack strong financial foundations. Nearly 58% of respondents scored below 50, suggesting that the majority lack core habits such as budgeting, saving consistently, and being financially prepared.

Emergency savings is the biggest weakness. Emergency savings was the lowest-scoring behaviour (2.7/10), with 87% of respondents having less than three months' income in reserve and financial stress levels that are twice as high.

Debt is a major dividing line. While debt management was the highest-scoring behaviour overall (6.6/10), 34% are over-indebted. This group has a median Wealth Index of 31, versus 53 for those with manageable debt, showing how damaging debt can be.

There is clear potential for improvement. Although only 5.7% are thriving (scores above 80), around 22% scored between 50 and 65, meaning many people need only make one or two behavioural changes, such as better debt control, retirement planning, or regular saving, to meaningfully improve their financial wellbeing.

Financial wellbeing doesn't automatically improve with age and income

Income and education help, but neither guarantees better financial outcomes.

Age

The average Wealth Index is relatively consistent across age groups, with a slight decline from the 20s (53) and 30s (52) to the 40s (50), before stabilising again in the 50+ group (52). This suggests that financial wellbeing does not automatically improve with age, and that many individuals are not materially strengthening their financial position over time. It may also be indicative of how the conversation around money is changing, with Gen Z wanting to take more ownership and control of their personal finances. The absence of a strong upward trend points to missed opportunities for long-term planning and compounding.

Age bracket	Average Wealth Index
20s	53
30s	52
40s	50
50s +	52

Income

Regarding the impact of income on one's overall Wealth Index, scores rise steadily with income from 43 in the lowest income bracket (under R5 000) to a peak of 64 in the R60 000 to R150 000 range. However, the decline among the highest earners (61) suggests that higher income alone does not guarantee better financial outcomes. Behavioural factors and financial discipline still play a critical role, particularly at higher income levels.

Income bracket	Average Wealth Index
Under R5 000	43
R5 000 – R15 000	47
R15 000 – R30 000	55
R30 000 – R60 000	62
R60 000 – R150 000	64
Over R150 000	61

Education

Financial wellbeing generally improves with higher levels of education, particularly for those with professional qualifications (60) and tertiary degrees (57). However, the relatively low score for diploma holders (44) indicates that not all forms of education translate equally into financial capability. This suggests that both the type and quality of education, as well as financial literacy exposure, may influence outcomes.

Education level	Average Wealth Index
Less than Grade 12	42
Grade 12 / Matric	49
Diploma	44
Undergraduate Degree	57
Postgraduate Degree	57
Professional Qualification	60

Gender

Female respondents slightly outperform males, with an average Wealth Score of 52 compared to 50. While the difference is modest, it challenges common assumptions about financial confidence and capability, and may reflect stronger financial behaviours or discipline among women.

Gender	Average Wealth Index
Female	52
Male	50

28

Median Wealth Index

The lowest-performing segment

Women in their 40s, holding a diploma-level qualification and earning between R5 000-R15 000 per month, achieve a median Wealth Index of 28, which is 17 points below the national median. This group likely faces what the data describes as a double squeeze: income that doesn't match their level of education combined with increased child-rearing and household expenses.

76

Median Wealth Index

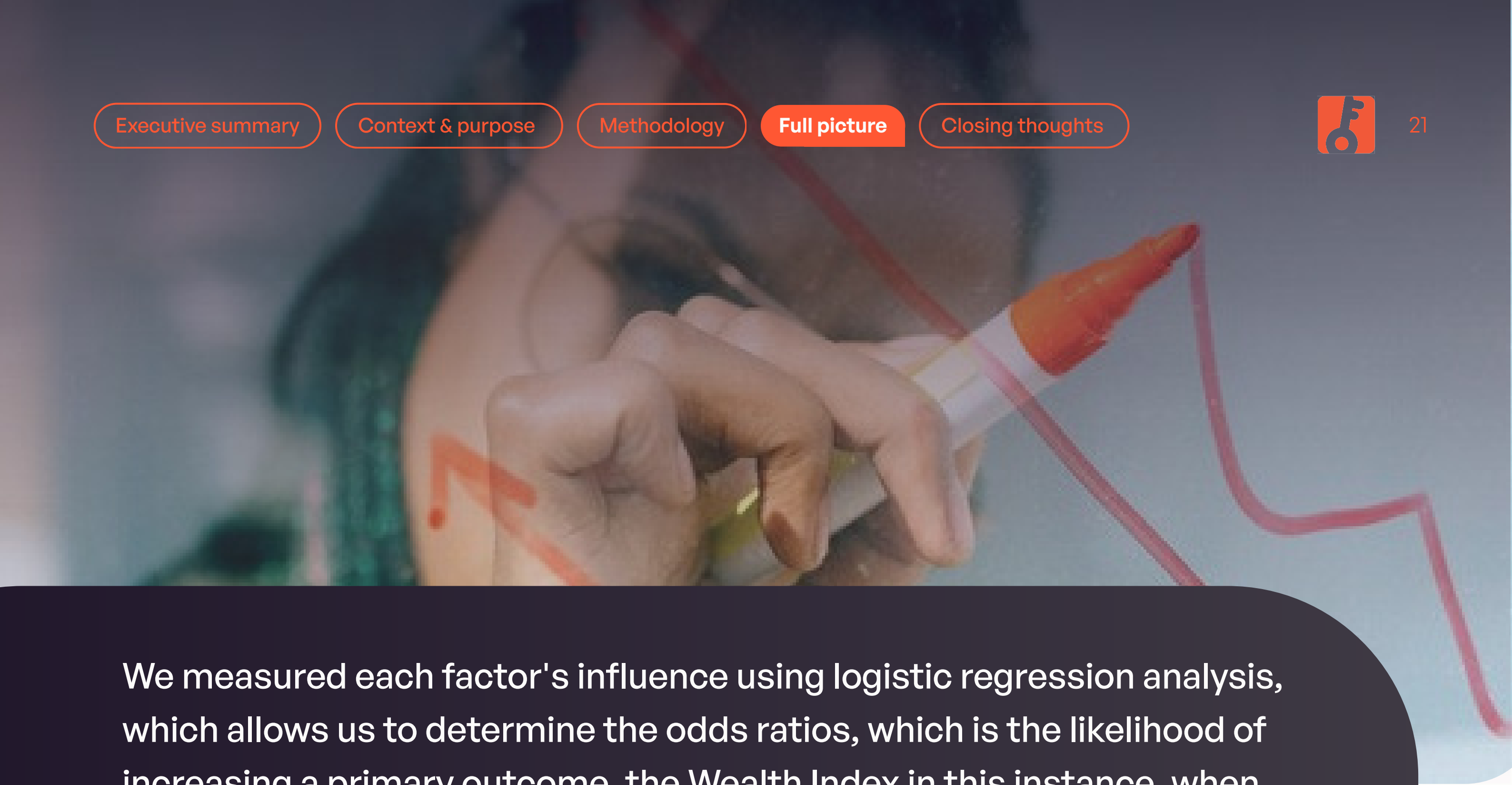
The highest-performing segment

Professional women in their 30s, earning between R30 000-R60 000 per month, achieve a median Wealth Index of 76, which is 31 points above the national median. The combination of professional expertise, stable middle-class income and, as the data suggests, stronger financial discipline among women in this bracket produces the strongest financial outcomes in the dataset.

What you do with money matters more than how much you earn

Behaviour is a stronger predictor of financial health than age, income or education.

The central question this report set out to answer is a deceptively simple one: Does financial wellbeing depend more on how much you earn, or on what you do with it? To find out, we modelled the relationship between demographic factors – age, gender, income and education – and the Wealth Index.



We measured each factor's influence using logistic regression analysis, which allows us to determine the odds ratios, which is the likelihood of increasing a primary outcome, the Wealth Index in this instance, when controlling for all other factors. So an odds ratio of 3.0, for example, means it is three times more likely that the score will be higher.

Demographics: odds ratios of 1.03 to 1.85

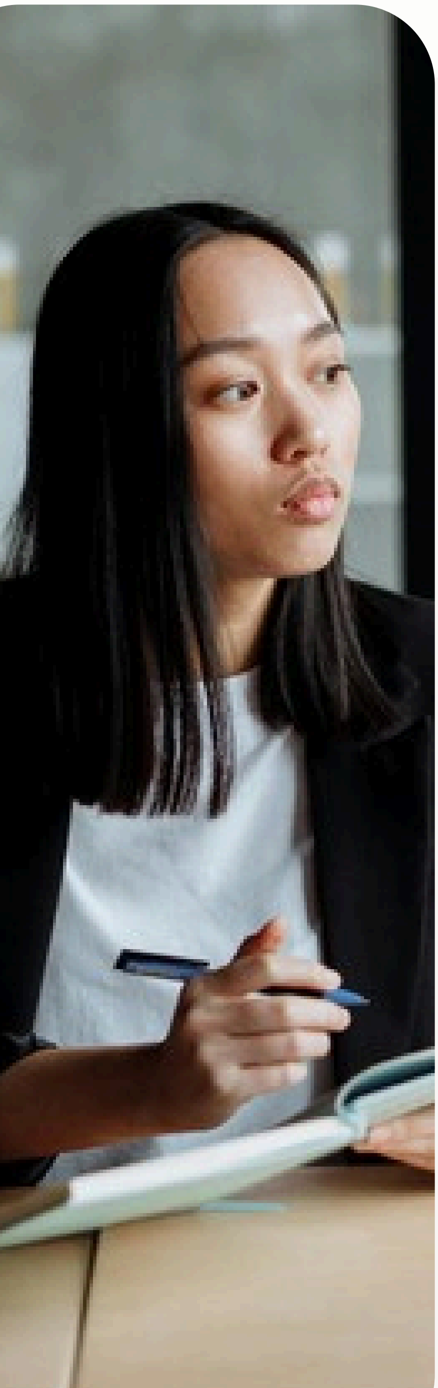
Feature	Odds ratio (OR)	Interpretation
Education level	1.60	An increase in education level increases the odds of improving the Wealth Index by 60%.
Age	1.03	For every additional year of age, the odds of an improvement in the Wealth Index increases by 3%.
Gender	2.22	Women have 122% higher odds of having a higher Wealth Index than men.
Income level	1.85	Higher income increases the odds of improving the Wealth Index by 85%.

Behaviours: odds ratios of 2.25 to 3.31

Behaviour	Odds ratio (OR)	Impact rank
Investment behaviour	3.31	Improving your saving and investment behaviour triples your odds of a high overall score.
Budget tracking	3.17	Consistent tracking (daily/weekly) is the second strongest predictor of success.
Retirement preparedness	3.12	Being on track for retirement is 3 times more likely to result in a high score.
Debt to income	2.83	Manageable debt levels are a critical pillar of a high Wealth Index.
Financial goals	2.63	Having a clear, regularly reviewed plan makes you almost three times more likely to score higher.
Monthly savings	2.47	Consistent saving of more than 10% of income increases your chances of a higher Wealth Index.
Emergency savings	2.46	Having 3+ months of income as a buffer means you're almost 2.5 times more likely to score higher.
Insurance coverage	2.25	Having the "about right" amount of protection increases your financial wellbeing.

What you do with your money is a far stronger predictor of financial wellbeing than who you are, how much you earn and your level of education

Financial behaviours are almost twice as influential as demographic factors on financial wellbeing. Behaviours – investing, budgeting, goal-setting – carry odds ratios of 3.31 to 2.25, compared to 1.85 to 1.03 for demographic factors.



Key findings

How you save and invest offers the highest return on effort. Of all the behaviours measured, improving investment behaviour increases the odds of stronger financial outcomes across every other dimension.

Women are more than twice as likely as men to be high performers. Even when controlling for age and education, women in this dataset have 2.22 times the odds of achieving a higher Wealth Index relative to men.

Education creates a foundation, but behaviour builds on it. Education is the strongest demographic predictor of financial wellbeing, but it is only a starting point. The behaviour data makes it clear that what people do with their educational advantage matters as much as having it.

franc.app/tools/wealth-score

The financial habits with the biggest impact

Financial habits such as planning and monthly saving don't just improve one area, they shift the entire financial profile.

Keystone habits are those habits that when in place are associated with measurable improvements across all other dimensions. The analysis calculates the average uplift across all other behaviour scores between those with the top-tier habit score (+8/10) and everyone else.

Rank	Behaviour	Average uplift across other behaviours*	Biggest effect (average uplift)
1	Financial goals	+2.3	Investment behaviour (+3.1)
2	Investment behaviour	+2.2	Financial goals (+2.8)
3	Emergency savings	+2.1	Financial anxiety (+2.9)
4	Monthly savings	+2.1	Emergency savings (+2.9)
5	Investment knowledge	+1.7	Financial goals (+2.8)
6	Retirement planning	+1.7	Investment behaviour (+2.5)
7	Insurance coverage	+1.0	Financial anxiety (+2.0)
8	Debt to income	+0.9	Financial anxiety (+1.6)
9	Budget tracking	+0.9	Monthly savings (+2.2)

The most powerful keystone habit is having a clear, regularly reviewed financial plan with an average uplift of +2.3 across all other behaviours. Automated, diversified investing, an emergency fund (3 months or more income set aside) and saving more than 20% of your income can also positively shift your entire financial profile. Financial anxiety was excluded from the keystone analysis, given that it is more of a symptom than a habit.

When we look at which behaviours have the biggest impact when we unlock a keystone habit, some interesting trends emerge. It's clear that financial planning and investment behaviour go hand in hand, with good financial planning driving strong investment behaviour and vice versa.

Unsurprisingly, having adequate emergency savings, insurance coverage and good debt management see the biggest reduction of financial stress and anxiety, with associated uplifts of +2.9, +2.0 and +1.6 respectively.

This has a practical implication: the most effective place to start is not necessarily the area where you score lowest, but the habit most likely to unlock progress everywhere else or provide the biggest relief to your financial stress and anxiety levels.

Knowledge closes the gap, but doesn't eliminate it

Self-reported financial knowledge is higher than expected, but translating it into action is where most people get stuck.

At first glance, individuals who rate themselves financially knowledgeable (intermediate to expert) do meaningfully outperform the rest across all categories, with especially large differences in financial goals and investment behaviour. Investment knowledge is most strongly correlated with the Mindset pillar, followed by Resilience and then Growth.

Category	High knowledge Average Wealth Index	Average Wealth Index of everyone else	Difference
Mindset score	56.1	19.8	+36.3
Resilience score	53.1	35.4	+17.7
Growth score	51.5	33.4	+18.1

However, the absolute scores tell a more nuanced story. Even among the "knowledgeable" group, critical areas such as emergency savings (3.2/10), retirement preparedness (5.1/10), and monthly savings (5.3/10) remain relatively weak, implying there is some self-denial or disconnect between knowledge and action.

Interestingly, self-reported knowledge is only weakly correlated with a higher overall Wealth Index. What's more, the data suggests a significant shift in self-perception once a respondent reaches a university degree level. Respondents with a postgraduate degree are twice as likely to identify as "experts" (12.8%) compared with those with a Grade 12/Matric certificate (6.4%).

There is also a clear gap between perception and reality: while individuals may feel confident in their financial knowledge, it does not consistently translate into strong financial outcomes or resilience. In particular, foundational behaviours, such as building an emergency fund or maintaining consistent savings, remain underdeveloped. The data suggests that knowledge alone is insufficient; behavioural execution and structural factors (such as income constraints) continue to limit financial progress.

Question category	High knowledge Average Wealth Index	Average Wealth Index of everyone else
Financial goals*°	6.06	3.40
Investment behaviour*°	6.20	3.15
Financial anxiety*°	4.05	1.89
Monthly savings*	5.27	3.09
Retirement preparedness*	5.12	2.83
Emergency savings*	3.19	1.73
Budget tracking*	5.28	3.99
Insurance coverage*	5.39	4.05
Debt to income*	7.10	5.76

* Statistical significance ($p<0.001$) ° Large effect (Cohen's $d > 0.8$)

There is evidence that financial knowledge generally increases with age. Young adults (18-30) tend to have the lowest financial literacy due to limited experience with credit, investing, taxes and long-term planning. The middle-aged (30-55) show the highest levels due to peak exposure to mortgages, retirement planning education (and realities of their parents' situation etc) , insurance and investing. Older people (60+) tend to be more risk-averse and somewhat disconnected from new tech and opportunities.

Knowledge closes the gap between intention and action, but doesn't eliminate it. The largest differences between high and low knowledge groups are found in financial goal-setting and investment behaviour. As financial knowledge grows, people move from having no plan to having a structured, regularly reviewed one. But, even then, foundational gaps remain.

Financial literacy is one of the most powerful antidotes to financial anxiety. Those with higher investment knowledge score more than twice as high on the calm and confident scale. Understanding money doesn't just improve financial outcomes – it significantly reduces the stress that comes with managing it.

Knowledge has its greatest impact on future-oriented behaviours. High-knowledge respondents score significantly better on retirement preparedness and monthly savings, the behaviours most focused on long-term security. The gap narrows for present-day management, including debt and budgeting, but remains meaningful.

Those with the least knowledge are the most exposed. Beginners and novices score extremely low on emergency savings (1.7/10) and investment behaviour (3.2/10), leaving them not only unprepared for financial shocks, but missing out on the long-term growth that investing, even in small amounts, can provide.

South Africa's distinct financial personas

The data reveals four ways we relate to money – each with different challenges, and each requiring a different solution.

By analysing patterns across the full behavioural dataset, we identified four distinct segments within the population. These groups represent different "financial personas" – each with unique Wealth Score trends and behavioural gaps.

Segment	Proportion	Average Wealth Index	Key characteristics
Conscientious Optimisers	24%	73.0	High across all pillars, low debt, automated investing and low anxiety.
Disciplined Builders	26%	46.3	Strong savings habits and very low debt, but lacking in retirement planning and insurance.
Stalled Professionals	22%	46.2	High knowledge and good insurance cover alongside high debt and zero emergency savings.
Stressed Strugglers	28%	20.7	Low savings, high debt, high anxiety, minimal financial planning.

Conscientious Optimisers

Median Wealth Index:
Consistently high (73/100)

Behavioural Signature:
This group has mastered both the "offensive" (investing) and "defensive" (insurance & emergency fund) sides of finance. They score an average of 8.7/10 in Investment Behaviour and 8.7/10 in Debt-to-Income.

Insight:
They are the least anxious group (6.5/10 confidence), likely because their financial goals are clear, investing is automated and their debt management is strong.

Disciplined Builders

Median Wealth Index:
Moderate (46/100)

Behavioural Signature:
This is the youngest group (average age 31). They are doing the hard work of daily management, scoring high in Monthly Savings (6.0/10) and Debt Management (8.8/10).

Insight:
Despite their discipline, they score very low in Retirement Preparedness (1.6/10) and Insurance (2.3/10). They are effectively "building a house without a roof" – they have the bricks but no protection for the long term.

Stalled Professionals

Median Wealth Index:
Moderate (46/100)

Behavioural Signature:
This group is the oldest (average age 37) and has the highest income, but they are stuck. They have the Knowledge (4.8/10) and Insurance Coverage (8.1/10), but they are weighed down by high debt (4.2/10) and low Emergency Savings (1.4/10).

Insight:
They are the definition of "knowing but not doing". Their high income is likely being consumed by debt and lifestyle rather than being converted into wealth.

Stressed Strugglers

Median Wealth Index:
Critically low (21/100)

Behavioural Signature:
This group is characterised by survival mode. They score under 1.5/10 in Emergency Savings and Investment Behaviour. Unsurprisingly, they have the highest levels of Financial Anxiety (Score 0.9/10).

Insight:
For this group, the primary hurdle is not "investment knowledge" but "liquidity". They lack the cash-flow buffer to start any wealth-building activities.

Financial behaviour matters more than income. Disciplined Builders and Stalled Professionals carry almost identical Wealth Scores despite very different income levels and life stages. The determining factor is not what they earn; it is the specific behavioural patterns and structural gaps that define each group.

Doing one thing well is not enough. Discipline alone does not build wealth. Stalled Professionals have knowledge and the insurance cover. Disciplined Builders have savings habits and low debt. But both groups have critical blind spots that cap their financial progress. Wealth is built across multiple behaviours simultaneously – not by excelling at one.

Financial anxiety tends to be a liquidity problem more than an income problem. The Stressed Strugglers group demonstrates that chronic financial stress is most strongly associated with the absence of an emergency fund – not with low income per se. Without cash-flow resilience, financial wellbeing cannot take root, regardless of earnings.

Each persona requires a different intervention. Stressed Strugglers need liquidity and cash-flow stabilisation first. Stalled Professionals need debt reduction and behavioural activation. Disciplined Builders need long-term protection – retirement planning and insurance. Conscientious Optimisers need optimisation and scaling.

The data challenges the common assumption that financial progress is primarily about earning more. Instead, it shows that people fail (or succeed) for very different, highly specific behavioural reasons. The opportunity is not to educate everyone the same way – it is to diagnose and solve the right problem for each financial persona.

Bottom line

Who is doing the most with what they have

Within every income bracket, a gap of up to 50 points separates top performers from bottom performers.

To understand who is doing the most with what they have, we segmented the population by income and compared the top 25% to the bottom 25% within each bracket. The analysis reveals that the habits separating the "Wealthy" and the "Struggling" are not the same at every income level. As income increases, the "Keystone Habit" that drives success shifts from offensive moves (investing) to defensive stability (emergency funds and mindset). The "Wealth Index Gap" within a single income bracket is massive – often as high as 50 points.

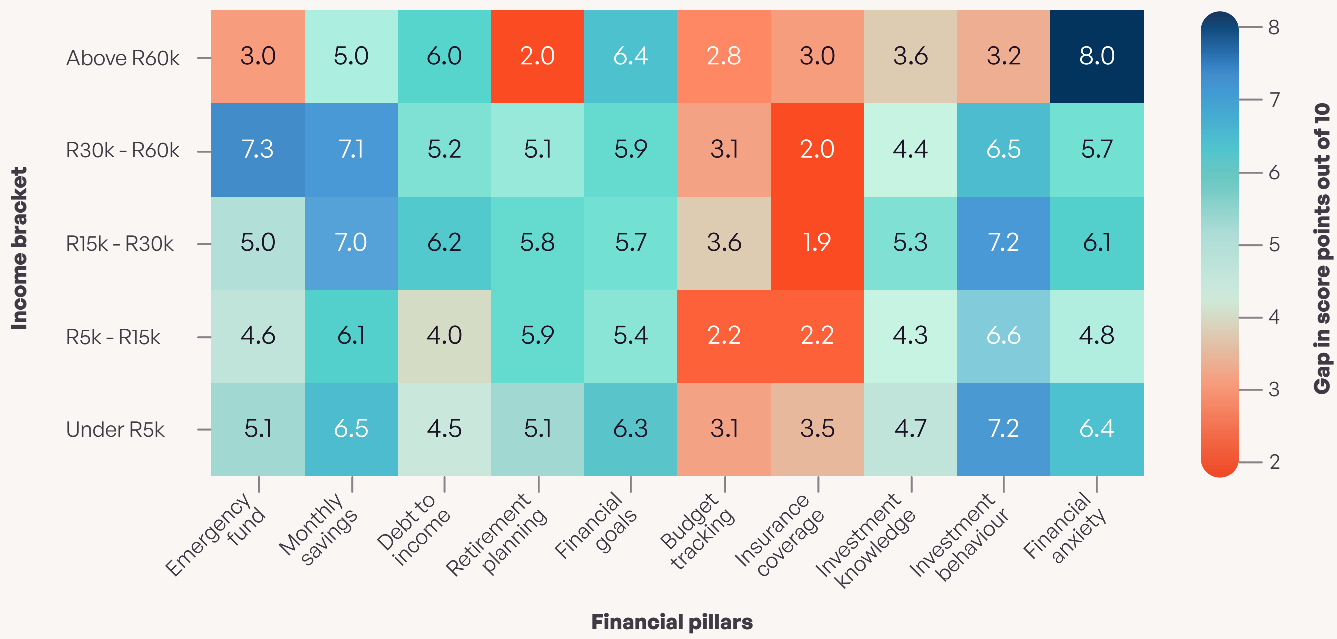
This proves that income is merely the *capacity* for wealth; behaviour is what converts it into reality.

● Bottom 25% (Wealth Index) ● Top 25% (Wealth Index) ← Gap → **Key differentiator**

Income bracket	Bottom 25% (Wealth Index)	Top 25% (Wealth Index)	Gap	#1 differentiator
Under R5 000	19.2	72.1	52.9 pts	**Investment behaviour** +7.2 uplift
R5k - R15k	23.2	69.1	45.9 pts	**Investment behaviour** +6.6 uplift
R15k - R30k Largest gap	26.9	80.5	53.6 pts	**Investment behaviour** +7.2 uplift
R30k - R60k	32.4	84.8	52.4 pts	**Emergency fund** +7.3 uplift
R60+	37.6	84.4	46.8 pts	**Financial anxiety** +8.0 uplift

The heatmap below illustrates the "Behavioural Gap" – the score difference between the top and bottom performers for each financial habit. The data suggests that starting a regular, automated investment habit early, regardless of income level, is what defines the top performers in these groups.

The Behavioural Gap: difference between top and bottom performers



At lower incomes, investing is the game-changer. In lower income bands, the biggest differentiator between those who score in the 70s vs the 20s is Investment Behaviour. High performers in these bands are often those who prioritise automated, diversified investing. They are punching above their weight by using time and compound interest to make up for lower cashflow.

In the middle-income tier, emergency savings is a clear dividing line. Once respondents reach the middle-income tier, the "investment" gap narrows, and the emergency savings becomes the primary differentiator. Top performers in this bracket have built a +3 month buffer, while lower performers often have zero savings despite earning a higher-than-average income.

At higher incomes, mindset is the differentiator. At the highest income levels, the differentiator is no longer "knowing how to save" or "how to invest" – it is Financial Anxiety and mindset. High-income under-performers often report extreme stress and low confidence, whereas top performers at this level are "Calm and Confident". This suggests that at high incomes, the struggle is often lifestyle inflation and the psychological pressure of managing larger sums.

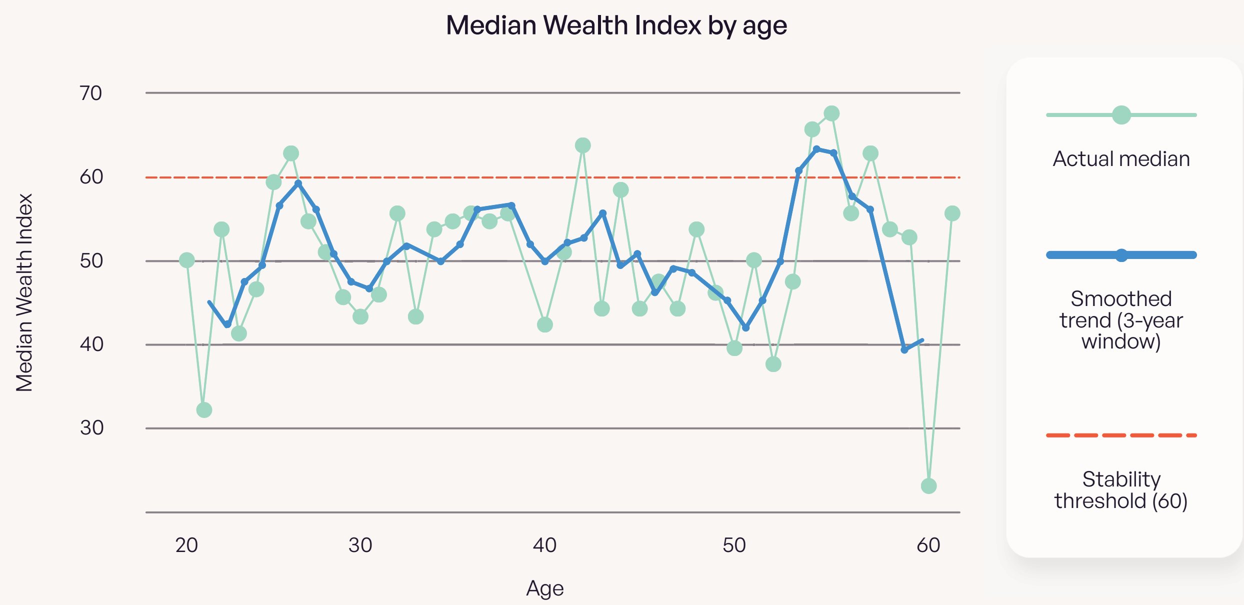
It's worth noting that Financial Goals show a consistently high gap across every income bracket, reinforcing its status as a foundational habit for anyone looking to do more with what they have.

If you are in a lower income bracket, your highest leverage move is to start investing (even small amounts) and budgeting. If you are in a higher income bracket, your success depends on securing your foundation (sufficient emergency savings) and managing your anxiety to avoid lifestyle traps.

Bottom line

The challenges that come with different life stages

Based on the available data, we explored the median Wealth Index across age brackets. The data shows that there isn't a single tipping point where people suddenly become stable. Instead, there are specific age windows where Wealth Index peaks.



The Early Peak (25-26): Interestingly, there is a peak in stability around age 25-26, where more than 50% of respondents score 60 or higher. This often represents young professionals with low debt and high savings rates before major life expenses, such as buying property and starting a family, begin to bite.

The Middle Slump (30-34): Stability rates often dip in the early 30s (dropping to roughly 29-36%), which may correlate with increased financial responsibilities (mortgages, young family).

The Second Rise (42): At age 42, the stability rate jumps significantly to above 60%. Perhaps this is where income has caught up with burgeoning expenses.

Late-Career Peak (54-57): The most consistently high levels of stability are seen between ages 54 and 57, where the majority of respondents in this sample reached the stable threshold.

While individual circumstances vary, the data suggests two "typical" windows of stability:

1. **Transitional Stability (Mid-20s):** A temporary peak before major life expenses accrue.
2. **Established Stability (Mid-50s):** This is the time where stability becomes the norm rather than the exception, likely due to peak career earnings, decreasing debt, and lower expenses as mortgages approach maturity and children leave home.

While the segments above represent groups of people, if we look at individual results:

Absolute Highest: A male in his 20s with a Post-Graduate Degree earning under R5 000 scored 85/100. This likely represents a student or researcher with high financial literacy and a currently low income.

Absolute Lowest: A male in his 30s with less than Grade 12 education earning between R15 000 and R30 000 scored an 8/100, indicating severe financial distress.

An emergency fund is the best route to peace of mind

The single biggest driver of lower financial anxiety is not income, it is having sufficient emergency savings.

To interrogate whether financial anxiety is justified, we mapped respondents' objective reality (income, debt-to-income ratio and savings) against their self-reported anxiety levels. The data reveals that financial anxiety is overwhelmingly justified by objective reality, but the primary cause of that worry is not what most people might expect.

By comparing a Financial Reality Index (a combined score of income, debt and savings) to Financial Anxiety, we can categorise respondents into four distinct mental states:

State	% of Respondents	Justification
Rational stress	51%	**Justified.** Poor financial health (high debt/low savings) triggers high anxiety.
Rational calm	22%	**Justified.** Good financial health (high savings/low debt) results in high confidence.
Risk denial	20%	**Unjustified Calm.** Poor financial health but reporting no stress. This is a high-risk group that may be ignoring a looming crisis.
Irrational worry	7%	**Unjustified Stress.** High income and strong financial health but still reporting extreme anxiety.

To identify which factors most reliably predict financial calm or stress, we used a machine learning model that weighs multiple variables simultaneously and ranks them by influence. The result is one of the most counterintuitive findings in this report: **income is the weakest predictor of financial anxiety.**

The #1 driver of calm: emergency savings (43% weight)

Having a 3-6 month cash buffer is the single most effective antidote to anxiety in the dataset. Regardless of income, people with emergency savings are significantly calmer.

The #2 driver of calm: monthly savings (23% weight)

The simple act of saving every month – even small amounts – creates a sense of empowerment that lowers stress.

Earning more does not automatically make people less stressed. In fact, high-income earners with high debt scores (the "Stalled Professionals") often report anxiety levels similar to low-income earners.

If you have low income, high debt and poor savings, the data says your anxiety is the correct signal for your situation. You are in the 51% majority, where stress is a survival mechanism. However, the data offers a clear path to "justified calm":

1. **Don't wait for a higher income to feel better.**
   Income accounts for only 18% of the calm score.

2. **Build the buffer.**
   Moving from "no emergency savings" to "1-3 months" has a 3 times higher impact on reducing anxiety than getting a 20% salary increase.

3. **Check for "risk denial".**
   If you are in the 20% who are calm despite having high debt and no savings, your lack of anxiety may be a lack of awareness of your financial vulnerability.

Your anxiety is justified by your liquidity (access to money), not just your income. Stability is felt not in how much you make, but in how much money you can access in case of emergency.

The gender gap

After controlling for income and education, a gap remains between men and women, driven by financial confidence and risk aversion.

In South Africa, the wealth gap between the genders is often attributed to structural inequalities, such as income and education, and the ways in which society reinforces them. A deep dive into the Wealth Index data reveals a surprising paradox: the gap is strongly driven by lower financial confidence and risk aversion amongst women.

In this dataset, we see that despite women outperforming men when we control for income, age and education, specific behavioural gaps remain. Specifically, women score lower across key pillars due to differences in financial behaviour and confidence. The gender disparity is not uniform across all financial habits. It is most pronounced in Growth (investing) and Mindset (confidence and anxiety).

Mindset Confidence & anxiety	**Growth** Investing	**Resilience** Emergency savings & insurance
This is the single largest gap. Men consistently report higher confidence and lower financial anxiety, even when their objective financial reality (debt/savings) is identical to women's. This suggests that women are carrying a significantly higher "mental load" of financial worry.	Men show a +3.8 point behavioural advantage in the Growth pillar (after controlling for income). This points to a "confidence gap" in investing, with men more likely to engage with automated, diversified assets even at lower income levels.	This is the most "equal" pillar. The behavioural gap is negligible (+1.0 point), suggesting that both genders prioritise defensive financial health (savings and insurance) similarly when income allows.

The gender gap is a Mindset and Growth Gap. Closing it requires moving beyond income parity and focusing on financial confidence, risk-taking (investing) and the psychological burden of financial management.

Closing thoughts

The gap between knowledge and action is the defining challenge.

The inaugural Franc Wealth Index reveals a clear and compelling picture of financial wellbeing in South Africa: while awareness and intent are present, consistent financial resilience remains out of reach for many. With a median Wealth Index of 45, the data shows a population that is neither failing nor flourishing, but rather navigating a complex middle ground – making progress in some areas while remaining vulnerable in others.

Encouragingly, many South Africans demonstrate elements of strong financial behaviour. A majority report manageable debt levels, a growing proportion engage in budgeting practices, and self-reported investment knowledge is relatively high. These are important signals of engagement and intent. However, this intent is not consistently translating into tangible financial security. The most critical gaps – emergency savings, retirement preparedness and consistent saving habits – highlight a systemic fragility. Financial resilience, the foundation upon which all long-term wealth is built, remains the weakest pillar.

The Index also underscores the unequal distribution of financial wellbeing. Income and education are strongly correlated with better outcomes, yet even among higher-income or more financially knowledgeable individuals, significant gaps persist. Over-indebted individuals and those without adequate emergency savings are materially worse off across almost every dimension, reinforcing how quickly financial stability can erode without strong foundations. Perhaps most notably, the data reveals that knowledge alone is not enough – there is a persistent gap between what people know and what they do.

This is precisely where Franc's mission becomes most relevant. If the challenge were purely one of access to information, the solution would already exist. Instead, the data points to the need for guidance that is continuous, personalised and actionable. Individuals need help translating intention into behaviour over time. Financial wellbeing is not achieved through isolated decisions, but through consistent, compounding habits.

The Franc Wealth Index was designed to make financial wellbeing measurable, relatable and actionable. By simplifying complexity into a clear, trackable metric, we hope to have created a starting point for South Africans who have historically been excluded from meaningful financial advice. More importantly, it creates a pathway forward.

The Wealth Index presents an opportunity to not simply identify where South Africans are, but where they are going. With the core ambition of closing the gap between knowledge and action, to strengthen financial resilience at scale and, ultimately, to help more people build financial confidence and grow their wealth.

Curious to see where you are on your own wealth journey?

Take the quick 3-minute Wealth Score check

Check my Wealth Score

Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Do you have an emergency fund that can cover at least 3-6 months of expenses?
- I have no emergency savings
- Less than 1 month
- Yes, 1-3 months covered
- Yes, 3-6 months covered
- Yes, 6+ months covered

2. What percentage of your monthly income do you save?
- I don't save regularly
- Less than 5%
- 5-10%
- 10-20%
- 20% or more

3. Roughly how much of your income is being used to pay off debt?
- More than 50%
- 35-50%
- 20-35%
- I have no debt
- Less than 20%

4. How would you describe your retirement savings?
- I have little or no retirement savings
- I'm not sure if my savings are adequate
- I have some savings and contribute when I can
- I've started but contributions are inconsistent
- I contribute regularly and feel on track

5. What is your current approach to financial planning?
- I don't have a financial plan
- I'm not sure
- I have goals, but no clear plan
- I have a basic plan, but rarely review it
- I have a clear plan and review it regularly

6. How often do you track your expenses?
- Rarely or never
- Every 3 to 6 months
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily

7. What best describes your current insurance coverage? (funeral, life, health and disability)
- I don't currently have any insurance.
- I'm not sure what cover I have or what it includes.
- I only have basic cover (like funeral or hospital plan).
- I have more cover than I need (like multiple funeral policies).
- I have life, health and disability insurance and choose the amounts carefully.

8. How would you rate your knowledge of investing?
- Unsure - I'd like guidance on where to begin
- New - I'm just getting started
- Learning - I'm building my knowledge over time
- Comfortable - I understand the basics and continue learning
- Confident - I feel comfortable making decisions

9. How do you save or invest?
- I have little or no savings or investments
- I'm not sure how my savings are structured
- I save occasionally, mostly in one place (like a bank savings account)
- I invest regularly, but it's not fully automated or only in a few types of investments
- Money is invested automatically each month and spread across different types of investments

10. How do you feel about your finances right now?
- I feel stressed and often worry about money
- I'm not sure how I feel
- I sometimes worry about my finances
- I feel okay, but wish I was more confident
- I feel calm and confident about my financial situation

Appendix

Survey responses

Emergency Savings (Resilience):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
No	40.9%
Less than 1 month	27.3%
1 to 3 months	18.3%
3 to 6 months	7.1%
6+ months	6.4%

Debt to Income Ratio (Resilience):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Less than 20%	26.4%
No Debt	22.5%
More than 50%	20.3%
20% – 35%	16.8%
35% – 50%	14.1%

Budget Tracking (Resilience):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Monthly	45.1%
Rarely	19.2%
Weekly	18.3%
Daily	9.3%
Every 3–6 Months	8.1%

Insurance Coverage (Resilience):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Some, but not enough	34.4%
About Right	31.8%
None	25.7%
More than needed	4.9%
Not Sure	3.2%

Monthly Savings (Growth):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
None	24.2%
5% – 10%	22.2%
Less than 5%	20.3%
10% – 20%	17.5%
20%+	15.8%

Retirement Preparedness (Growth):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Little or None	37.8%
On Track & Structured	30.3%
Not Sure	13.2%
Some Savings (Inconsistent)	12.0%
Started but Inconsistent	6.7%

Financial Goals (Growth):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Goals, No Plan	34.2%
Clear Plan (Regular Review)	24.0%
Basic Plan (Rare Review)	19.9%
No Plan	14.7%
Not Sure	7.0%

Investment Knowledge (Mindset):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Intermediate	34.6%
Advanced	23.3%
Novice	18.4%
Beginner	17.2%
Expert	6.5%

Investment Behaviour (Mindset):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Automated & Diversified	26.9%
Little or None	26.3%
Regularly (Few Assets)	22.2%
Occasionally (One Place)	18.5%
Not Sure	6.1%

Financial Anxiety (Mindset):

Answer option	Percentage (%)
Stressed / Often Worry	35.6%
Okay, Wish for Confidence	25.9%
Sometimes Worry	25.3%
Calm & Confident	8.6%
Not Sure	4.6%

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