

To: Interested Parties
From: HarrisX Research
Date: December 2025
Re: Findings from a Nationwide Survey of Low-Wage Workers

In a time of rapid technological transformation, Merit America, a national nonprofit that prepares workers in low-wage roles for family-sustaining careers, commissioned HarrisX to conduct unique research into how low-wage workers across America feel about the economy, the rise of Artificial Intelligence, and whether the American Dream is achievable today.

This research consisted of a nationally representative survey¹ of n=1,000 low-wage workers in the U.S. from October 28th – November 11th, 2025, with lower-wage workers defined as adults with a bachelor's degree or less who are currently employed or actively seeking employment and earn under \$50,000 per year. The study also included oversamples in key regions, outlined in the footer.

This study underscores the challenges American workers are navigating amidst economic pressure, technological change, and their own long-term aspirations – and what they believe is needed to create real, achievable pathways to upward mobility today.

Key Findings

1. **Workers no longer believe hard work alone guarantees a good life and the American Dream feels increasingly out of reach.** Rising costs have created a crisis that many workers believe is too hard to overcome, no matter how hard they work. Many workers do not feel “on track” to achieve the American Dream themselves, and this shapes how they see their futures, their families, and their ability to achieve long-term stability.
2. **The rise of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) economy adds another layer of uncertainty, heightening the demand for training that will protect against job loss.** Workers are anxious about AI's impact but recognize that upskilling can help them adapt.
3. **Job training – not traditional higher education – is the pathway workers believe will allow them to improve their lives.** Workers want practical, affordable ways to gain skills and improve their economic prospects. Traditional higher education no longer provides the return on investment that workers think will help them thrive.
4. **Despite a willingness to reskill and upskill through training programs to transition to an AI economy, the nation's affordability crisis often prevents workers from doing so.** Rising costs – especially housing, groceries, transportation, and debt – are an obstacle to low-wage Americans preparing for the future through job training.

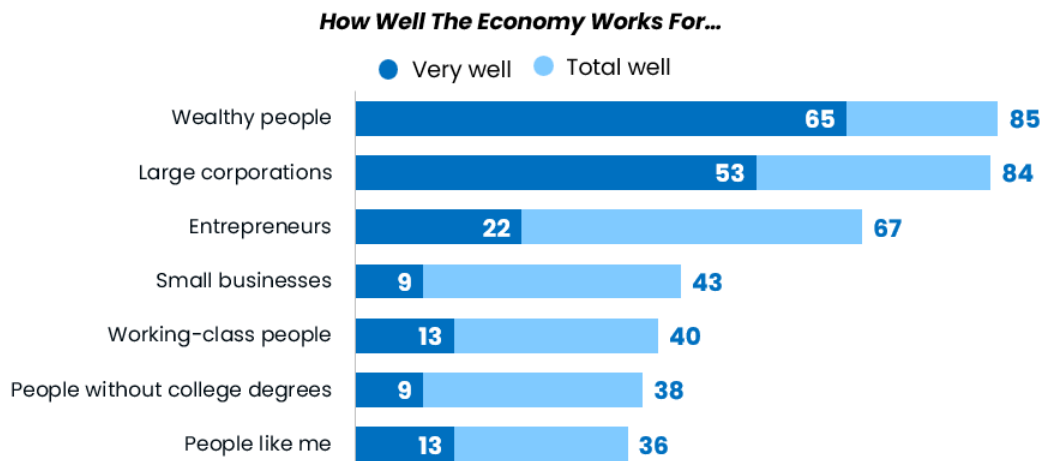
The State of the Economy: A Feeling of Decline

- **Low-wage workers today are in a place of deep economic anxiety.** Half (51%) of low-wage workers nationwide feel the state of the U.S. economy is currently poor – only 18% rate it as

¹ The survey was conducted via online panel, and included a base sample of n=1,000 lower-wage workers nationwide and oversamples of at least n=200 lower-wage workers in key states (Colorado, Florida, Texas, Utah, and Washington) and metro areas (Atlanta, The Bay Area, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City) weighted down into the base to create a total sample of 3,048 lower-wage workers. Survey results were weighted for age, gender, race, and region to U.S. Census data to align with proportions within the population. The sampling margin of error in this poll at the national level is +/- 3.1%. Margin of error is larger among subgroups.

“good” or “excellent.” Almost two thirds (64%) of low-wage workers nationwide believe the national economy has gotten worse compared to one year ago, and 46% believe it will continue to decline in the next year. Less than a quarter (24%) have hope the economy will improve in the next year, and 30% feel it will stay the same.

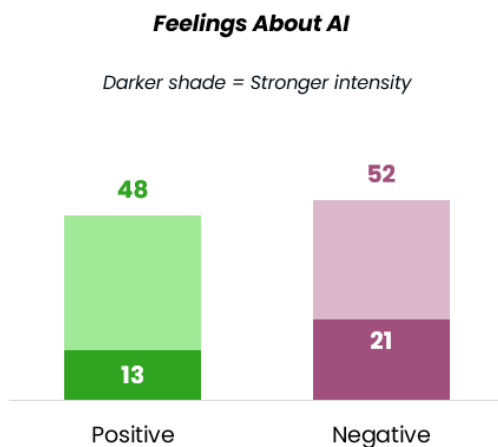
- **Workers do not believe the economy is working for people like them.** Just 36% of low-wage workers feel the economy is working even somewhat well for people like them, and only 13% feel it is working very well for people like them – compared to 85% of workers who feel the economy works well for wealthy people (65% very well) and 84% who feel it is working well for large corporations (53% very well) and 84% who feel it is working well for large corporations (53% very well).



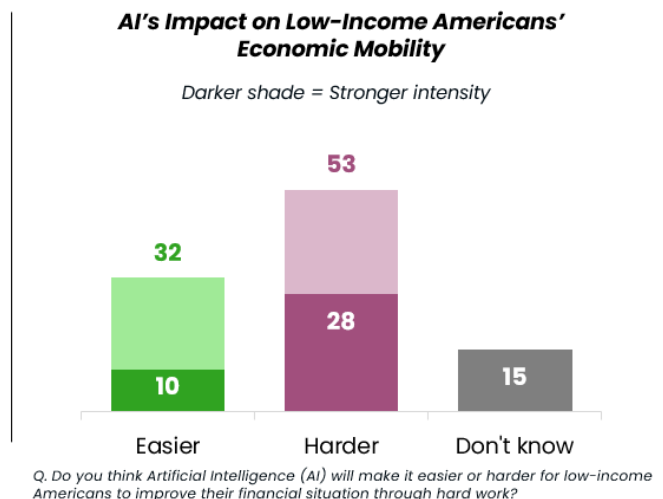
Q. How well does the economy work for each of the following?

Navigating the Future and Uncertainty With AI

- **AI represents a major source of uncertainty, and many low-wage workers are unsure what it will mean for their future.** Workers are divided: 48% feel positively towards AI and 52% feel negatively. Almost a third (32%) believe AI could create opportunities and make it easier for low-income Americans to improve their financial situation through hard work, but 53% worry it will make upward mobility harder. Many – especially older workers (20% of low-wage workers 45 years and older) – simply do not know what to expect, underscoring how unfamiliar and fast-moving the technology feels.



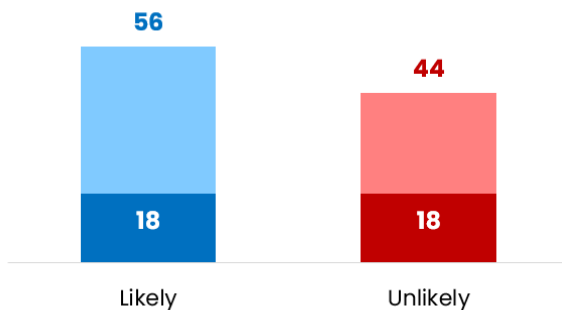
Q. How do you feel about AI?



- **This uncertainty is tied directly to concerns about job security and feeling prepared for a changing world of work.** A majority (56%) believe they may have to change careers because of AI, and about half (49%) think they could lose their job in the future. Moreover, 70% would stop the development of AI that might eliminate jobs – even among those who believe their own role is unlikely to be affected.
- **There are also major doubts about the government’s ability to adapt in a time of technological transformation.** A majority of low-wage Americans (56%) do not believe government or economic institutions are prepared to manage AI’s impact, reinforcing their broader doubts about whether the system can support workers in a changing economy.

Likelihood to Change Careers Because of AI

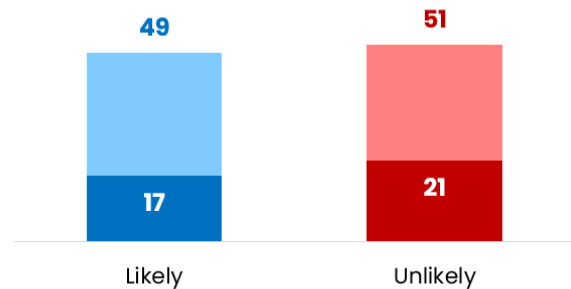
Darker shade = stronger intensity



Q. How likely do you think it is that you will need to change careers in the future because of AI?

Likelihood to Lose Job Because of AI

Darker shade = stronger intensity



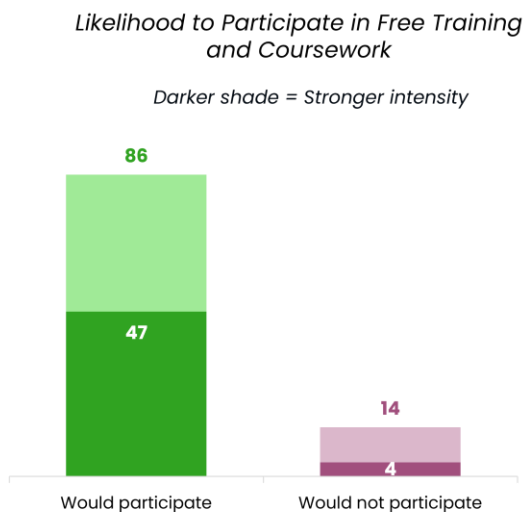
Q. How likely do you think it is that you will lose your job in the future because of AI?

- **How workers feel about AI shapes their broader economic outlook.** Those who feel positively toward AI are much more likely to say the American Dream is achievable (48% vs. 30%, +18), believe hard work leads to a good life (61% vs. 40%, +21), and think the economy will improve in the next year (31% vs. 18%, +13) than those who feel negatively toward AI. Workers who already believe the American Dream is achievable are more optimistic about AI – 59% feel positively toward it. For these workers, AI is something they expect to navigate – not an inevitable threat.
- **Notably, Americans want to work.** Even if provided a guaranteed income that would allow them not to work, 77% of low-wage workers report they would continue to find meaningful work.

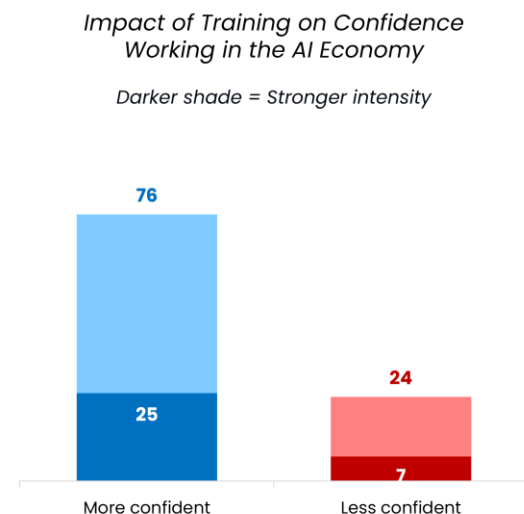
Solutions for Low-Wage Americans: Job Training is Seen as the Most Credible Pathway Forward

- **Workers increasingly believe America’s education system is not preparing people for success, and this skepticism shapes how they think about preparing for their futures.** 63% of low-wage workers say the U.S. higher education system leaves people less prepared to achieve the American Dream, including 67% of workers with a four-year degree. This skepticism is tied directly to pessimism about the future: 78% of workers who believe higher education does not provide a good return on investment say the American Dream is unrealistic for the average American, compared to 66% overall (+12).

- **Despite their economic anxiety, workers remain open to adaptation and upskilling. Job training and reskilling programs stand out as the most credible route to upward mobility.** Nearly three in four (73%) low-wage workers say job training is the best way to achieve the American Dream rather than higher education (27%), and 62% do not believe the higher education system provides a good return on investment. Skills-based pathways offer a more direct, practical, and realistic route to stability, and two thirds (67%) of low-wage workers have participated in or considered participating in job training or certificate programs before. Even among the 38% of low-wage workers who believe higher education does provide a good return on investment, 55% still identify job training as a more effective pathway to achieving the American Dream.
- **Workers gravitate toward training that leads to concrete outcomes and show strong interest in skilled and technical roles.** Programs that include on-the-job training (46%), job-specific skills (39%), leadership skills (30%), and professional certifications (29%) are the most appealing. Skilled trades and technical roles are also attractive to low-wage workers – 60% are interested in pursuing one of these jobs, and workers see these pathways as respected in society (77%).
- **Despite skepticism towards AI, workers remain open to adaptation and upskilling.** A significant majority (86%) say they would participate in free training if it was offered to them, and 76% believe it would make them more confident in their ability to work in the AI economy. Their willingness underscores a clear need for accessible, affordable training that helps workers prepare for jobs shaped by emerging technologies.



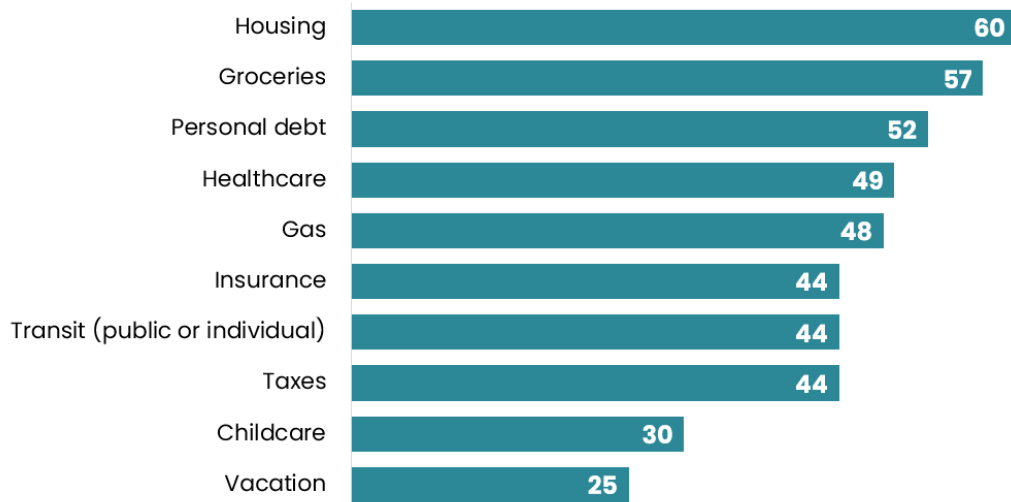
Q. If you knew that training and coursework would be provided to you at no cost, how likely would you be to participate in future training?



Q. With access to ongoing training, would you feel more or less confident in your ability to work in the AI economy?

- **Yet, the nation's affordability crisis is directly intersecting with the ability of low-wage Americans to transition to an AI economy. Cost and the general affordability crisis are the biggest barrier to pursuing advancement – even when interest is high.** Many say their everyday expenses have prevented them from pursuing these opportunities as well. The top factor preventing workers from investing in their education is the cost of housing (60%), followed by the cost of groceries (57%). These financial pressures make it difficult to commit to coursework or training, reinforcing the sense that traditional education pathways are out of reach for many workers. Half (50%) say the tuition costs of career education or training programs are the biggest factor holding them back.

Factors That Have Prevented Pursuit of Education/Training

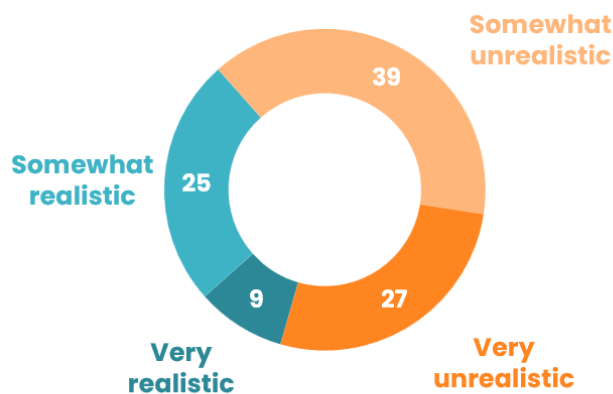


Q. Have you ever chosen not to pursue training/education that would help you grow in your career because of the cost of any of the following things?

The American Dream Feels Out of Reach

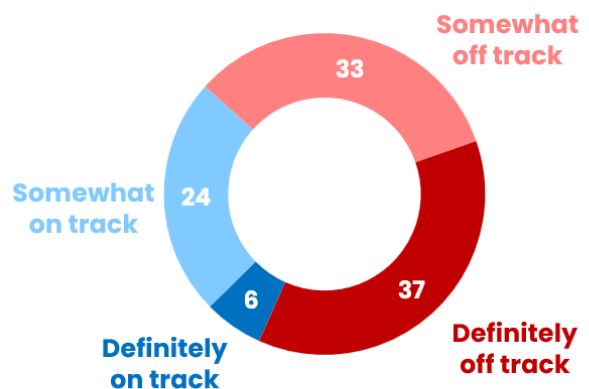
- Most low-wage workers no longer believe the American Dream is attainable, despite being raised to believe hard work would lead to a good life.** While 89% agree they were taught that working hard was all you needed to be able to afford a good life, 50% say they no longer believe this is true. Majorities reject the idea that the American Dream is achievable for most people (61%) or that it is easier to achieve than it was for their parents (62%). Two thirds (66%) say it is unrealistic for the average household to earn enough to reach the Dream today, and 70% say their own household is not on track.

Reality of the Average Household Achieving the American Dream



Q. How realistic do you think it is for the average household to make the amount of money necessary to achieve the American Dream?

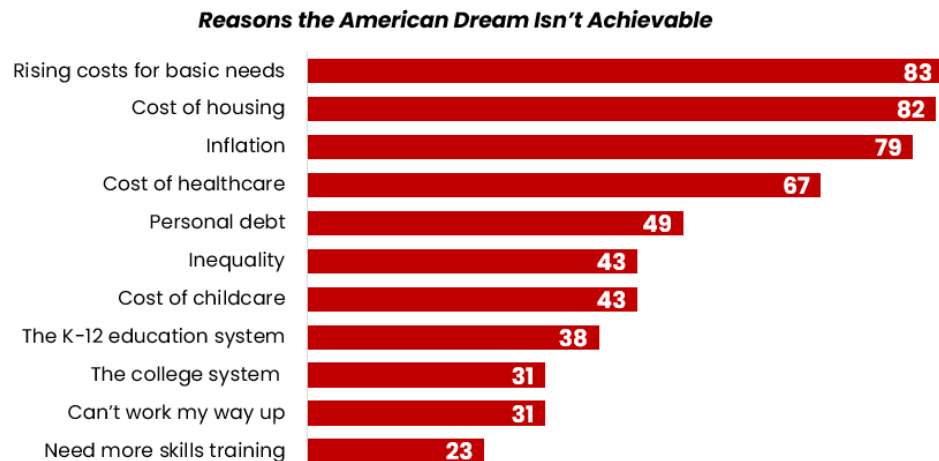
Feel Their Household is On Track to Achieve the American Dream



Q. Do you feel you and your household are currently on track to achieve the American Dream?

- Workers who do not believe the American Dream is achievable are much more negative on the state of the country.** 86% of low-wage workers feel less patriotic towards the United States when they also believe the American Dream is not achievable.
- Rising costs – especially housing – are the clearest barrier and shape day-to-day tradeoffs.** Workers say these pressures have forced them to consider delaying milestones

like buying a home (26%) or having children (20%), and 44% say they have considered taking on multiple jobs to keep up. These financial burdens also prevent workers from investing in their futures: 60% say housing costs have stopped them from pursuing education or training, along with 57% who cite groceries, 52% personal debt, 49% healthcare costs, and 48% gas.



Q. (IF DISAGREE THE AMERICAN DREAM IS ACHIEVABLE) Why do you believe that the American Dream isn't achievable for most Americans anymore? Select all that apply.

- **Whether low-wage workers feel “on track” fundamentally shapes how they see their lives and prospects.** Those who feel “on track” express far greater optimism: 79% say hard work is enough to make the money needed for a good life, and 70% believe the American Dream is achievable. Those who believe the American Dream is achievable also see more upward mobility around them—78% say friends or family have improved their circumstances through hard work (compared to 61% overall), and 54% believe they themselves are “on track” (compared to 30% overall).
- **Those who feel “off track” see the American Dream slipping away in multiple areas of their lives.** Workers who do not believe the American Dream is achievable are more likely to say they have considered putting off buying a home (34%), taking care of their health (26%), having children (23%), or even considered moving to another country (22%) because long-term opportunity feels out of reach. These experiences reinforce a broader belief that hard work alone is no longer enough, and that factors outside their control are shaping their futures.

About Merit America

Merit America is a national nonprofit preparing workers stuck in low-wage roles for family-sustaining careers at scale. Named by the New York Times as “the hybrid future of training programs for the disadvantaged,” Merit America offers fast and flexible training and job search programs that work for working adults, and are aligned to the most in-demand roles in the fastest-growing sectors of the U.S. economy. Founded in 2018, Merit America has served more than 18,000 learners across the country, and has driven more than an estimated \$1 billion in cumulative wage gains. For more information, visit: <https://meritamerica.org/about/>

About HarrisX

HarrisX, a Stagwell company, is a strategic research advisory firm that delivers clear, data-driven answers to our clients' most pressing questions. Powered by proprietary technology and a campaign-style approach, we move fast, cut through the noise, and surface insights that drive real-world impact. With offices in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, we advise Fortune 100 companies, public institutions, global leaders, NGOs, and philanthropic organizations. Named the most accurate pollster of the 2020 U.S. presidential election by The Washington Post and the American Research Group, HarrisX doesn't just deliver data — we deliver confident decisions.