Pontera

The retirement confidence crisis

What savers and advisors are facing in 2025

What's ahead

Today's realities and opportunities for retirement savers in the US

Planning for retirement should feel empowering. For many consumers in 2025, it feels anything but.

Inflation is squeezing household budgets, and ongoing economic shifts are leaving many savers feeling less secure. A complicated landscape of retirement accounts and investment options make it hard to feel confident, while the rising cost of living is the top concern across all generations. People aren't just asking how much to save — they want to know their choices today will protect their financial wellbeing later in life.

Many feel they lack control over their investment decisions and feel uncertain about their retirement future. That's where advisors can make a decisive difference. By offering clear guidance and strategic support, advisors can give their clients the confidence to make decisions that maximize retirement outcomes.

There's a growing demand for advice that reduces confusion and builds confidence in retirement planning. And those relying on advisor advice and actively managing their portfolios are seeing their savings accounts grow, even amid the changing economy.

Our research, combining a sample of Pontera's first-party platform data with a nationwide survey of 1,000 savers and 400 advisors, reveals the realities shaping retirement planning and highlights opportunities for advisors to expand their practices while delivering a higher level of client impact.

At Pontera, our mission is to empower millions of retirement-savers to build a better future, by ensuring that they can work with the advisor they trust and enjoy the same level of service and care regardless of where their assets sit. Consumers want clarity, control, and confidence, yet retirement savings are often spread across multiple accounts (such as 401(k)s, IRAs, and former employer plans). Without clear visibility or holistic management, many struggle to feel confident that all their assets are working together toward their goals. Pontera gives advisors the tools to provide a complete view, deliver proactive guidance, and keep savers moving forward.

In uncertain times, the value of the advisor has never been greater.

Key findings

The rising cost of living and inflation are the #1 concerns across all generations.

Combined with economic uncertainty and market volatility, these pressures are shaping how savers act and how confident they feel.

Advisor relationships drive better outcomes.

Savers with an advisor are more than 2x as likely to have over $250,000 in retirement savings than those without an advisor.

Over three-quarters of savers are frustrated with held-away retirement and college savings accounts.

76% of advisors report hearing these concerns frequently in the past year, creating moments to provide support and clarity.

Only about 1 in 3 consumers feels in control when making portfolio decisions.

Those who do feel in control are more likely to have significantly higher balances.

Plan complexity is fueling saver frustration.

Financial advisors say that the complexity of rules and restrictions surrounding plans is the biggest challenge their clients face.

Savers want help in managing their held-away accounts*.

91% of financial advisors say that offering services for held-away accounts has increased demand for their services.

**Held-away accounts include workplace retirement plans like 401(k)s and 403(b)s that an advisor typically cannot manage without direct custody.*

US savers are navigating an uncertain retirement future

Inflation, the rising cost of living, and market volatility are pressing consumers to make critical decisions under uncertainty. Many Americans are unsure whether their current strategies will keep them on track with their retirement goals, leaving their confidence fragile.

Rising costs and inflation dominate concerns. The #1 worry for US consumers about retirement saving in 2025 is how the rising cost of living and inflation are impacting their savings.

For savers today, retirement saving can feel unnecessarily complex. Shifting markets, multiple fund options, and scattered accounts add to client confusion, leaving them unsure whether they're making the right decisions. That's where financial advisors can help.

A full-portfolio approach can guide savers in uncertain markets

What may look straightforward to an advisor can feel overwhelming to a client. Advisors may view fund options as simple and straightforward, where savers may feel they're confusing, restrictive, or difficult to navigate — creating critical moments where professional guidance is needed most.

Advisors also report growing complexity in their work, with their biggest challenge being how to deliver comprehensive guidance when client accounts are spread across multiple platforms. With investments scattered across multiple accounts and markets constantly in flux, retirement planning can no longer focus on individual accounts alone. Every decision needs to reflect the client's full portfolio.

Advisors who consider held-away assets (401(k), 401(a), 403(b), 457, Thrift Savings Plan, 529, and IRA accounts) alongside other investments can guide clients with a complete view of their portfolio, allowing them to confidently provide more comprehensive advice and improve savings outcomes across all accounts.

There's a confidence gap in retirement planning

For consumers, retirement planning is about more than putting money aside; it's about feeling in control and confident of their financial future. A strong sense of control is key to better retirement outcomes, yet most respondents don't feel they have it: Only about one-third feel truly in charge of their investment decisions.

How advisors influence savers' sense of control

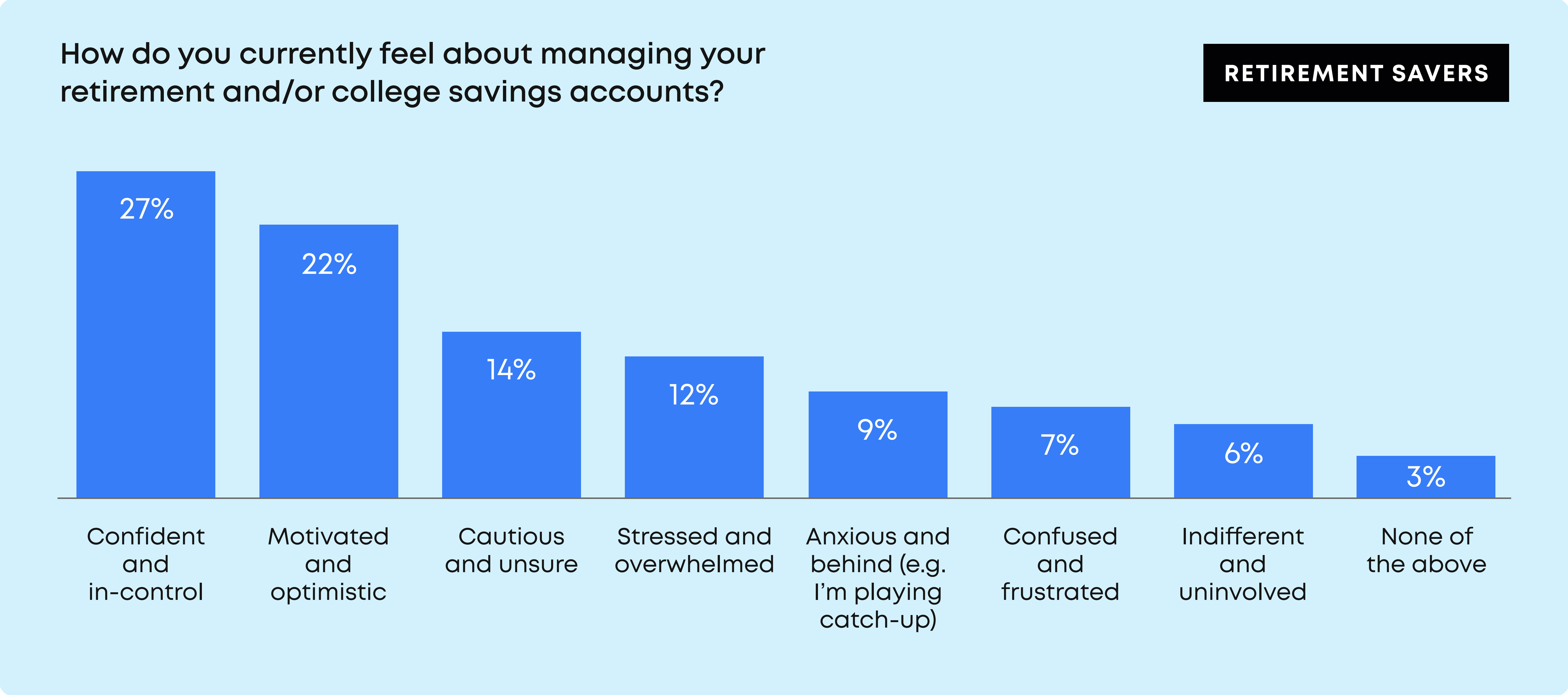
Most savers feel some level of control over their investment decisions, but those working with an advisor are more likely to experience a strong sense of control: **83% report having some or a great deal of control**.

The confidence paradox

Confidence doesn't always mean control. While more than half of investors describe themselves as confident, **42% still report feeling cautious, stressed, anxious, or confused**.

Savers who actively manage investments are 9x more likely to feel confident than those who take a "set it and forget it" approach.

This gap between confidence and control matters because it drives investor behavior. Investors who feel cautious, stressed, anxious, or confused may delay action, stick with defaults too long, or make reactive choices during market volatility.



Closing the confidence gap

A large proportion of retirement savers don't feel fully in control of their accounts, uncovering the need for professional guidance to navigate plan complexity, confusing rules, and market volatility. Real control requires more than just choices: it depends on visibility across accounts, access to information, and ongoing guidance.

The retirement system is too complex for most consumers to navigate alone. Advisors can help clients integrate held-away assets into their broader portfolio, providing clarity, actionable guidance, and a path toward genuine control and confidence.

Key insights for advisors

Active management improves saver confidence

9x

Those who actively manage accounts are 9x more likely to feel confident than those who take a "set it and forget it" approach.

This is a powerful case for advisors who offer hands-on portfolio management. Confidence isn't only about having money saved; it's about clients feeling actively involved in the process, which is where professional guidance is the most meaningful.

Nearly half of savers feel overwhelmed by retirement/college savings accounts

42%

of consumers report feeling cautious, stressed, anxious, or confused about their retirement/college savings accounts. These investors may not want to take financial risks or make adjustments during uncertain economic times.

Advisors can offer guidance and education to provide peace of mind and confidence for clients to take action on their accounts that result in better long-term outcomes.

Consumers who work with advisors see better savings outcomes

There's a clear divide in balances between those with advisors and those without. Those who work with advisors see better savings outcomes, with the largest impact for women, helping narrow gender gaps and support higher savings outcomes.

Savers with an advisor are more than 2x as likely to have over $250,000 in retirement savings than those without an advisor. Data from Pontera on accounts managed by advisors on our platform shows the broader impact of professional guidance:

Median balance

$180,579

representing what a typical saver achieves with guidance.

Average balance

$341,704

showing that many advised clients reach substantially higher balances and underscoring the value of professional guidance.

Advisors don't just provide guidance. They help clients — including women and other underrepresented groups — take full advantage of available options and make the most of their retirement savings.

Many savers rely on default options or manage only a single account, which can limit growth. But advisors coordinate multiple accounts, stay calm in the face of market volatility, balance risk across investments, and guide clients toward funds that align with their broader portfolio strategy for improved savings outcomes.

The reality of retirement and college savings distributions

Pontera's proprietary data showcases the central role of employer-sponsored plans in retirement saving: 71.2% of Pontera client accounts are tied to a current employer, while **21.8% come from former employers**, creating an opportunity for advisors to manage defined contributions plans that are no longer active **without initiating a rollover**.

+47%

Survey data showed that consumers who work with an advisor are **47% more likely** to hold IRAs, indicating that they are following common guidance from their advisor to roll over their account.

What advisors and clients are missing when they roll an account over to an IRA: The tax advantages, higher contribution limits, employer matching, and other benefits provided by a defined contribution plan. Advisors who can manage these held-away accounts and provide oversight and guidance across them can meet this growing client need.

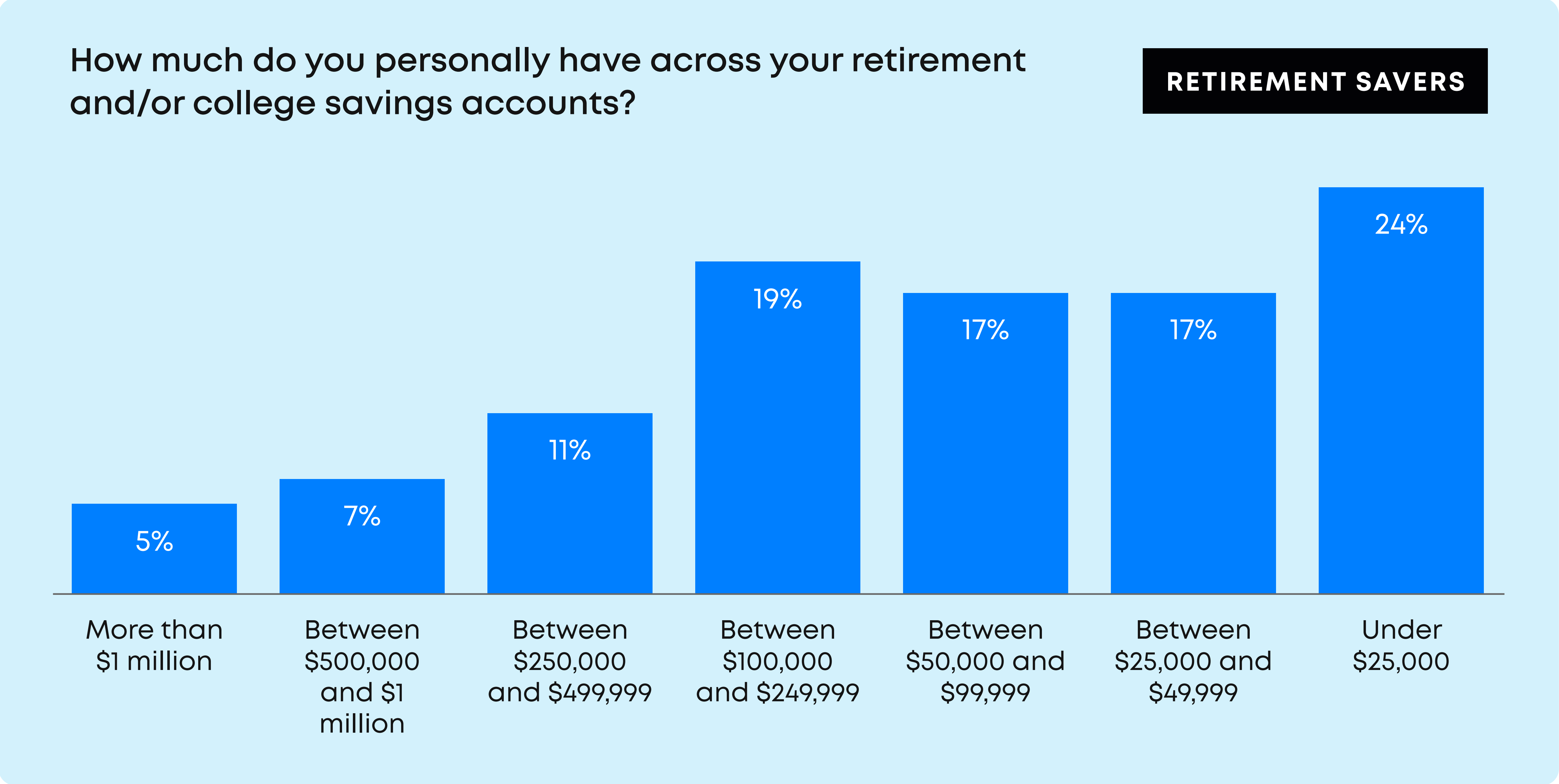
Where there are gaps in retirement savings

Retirement savings are not evenly distributed. These divides — across income, generation, and access to guidance — reveal where savers need the most support and where advisors can have the greatest impact.

1 in 4

Nearly 1 in 4 retirement savers have less than $25,000 across retirement and college savings accounts, while 42% have $100,000+.

This split shows the uneven landscape of retirement preparedness — and it's in this gap that professional guidance can have an outsized influence.



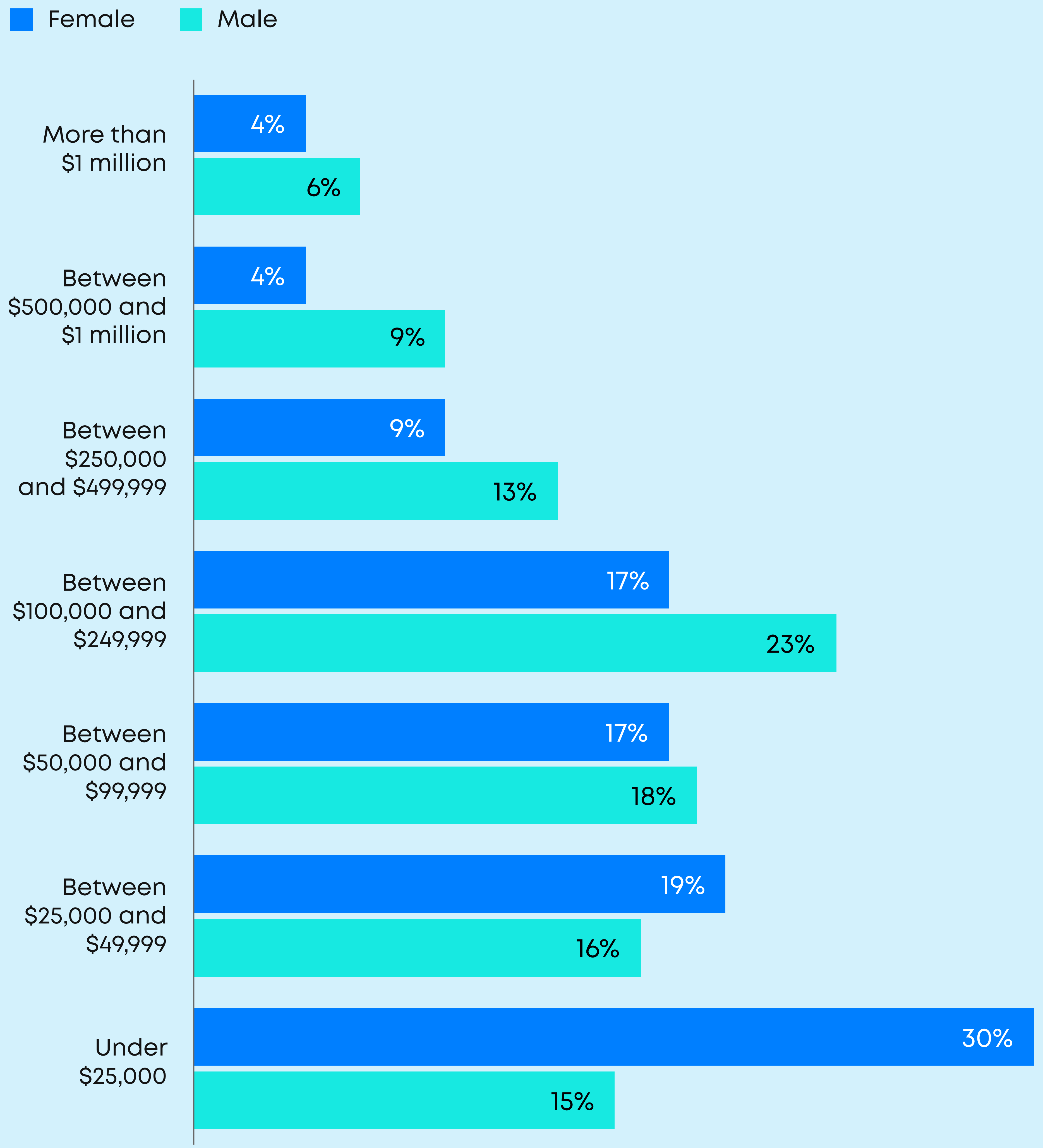
The gender divide in retirement savings

Persistent gaps in retirement and college savings remain between men and women. Men are 50% more likely than women to have $100,000 or more in retirement/college savings. Similarly, 30% of women have less than $25,000 in these accounts compared with just 15% of men.

Women are also 27% more likely than men to rely on default investment options, while men are more likely to actively manage their accounts, with 31% reporting a clear, self-directed investment plan. This highlights the opportunity for guidance to improve outcomes.

How much do you personally have across your retirement and/or college savings accounts?

RETIREMENT SAVERS

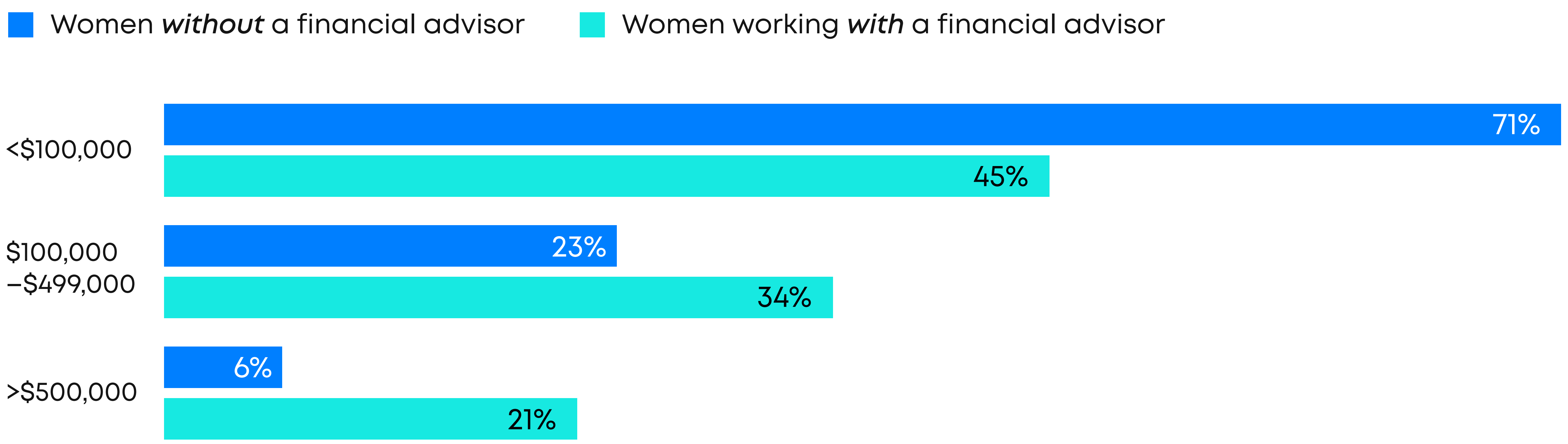


Advisors benefit all savers, especially women

Interestingly, women are 33% more likely than men to work with a financial advisor to manage their retirement/college savings accounts. Women who work with financial advisors generally have higher savings, reflecting a combination of income, access, and guidance. The table below shows that women with advisors are less likely to hold low balances and more likely to have $500,000 or more.

Retirement and college savings among women with and without financial advisors

RETIREMENT SAVERS



While women fall behind men in retirement savings, working with an advisor can significantly boost balances and reduce disparities. In fact, more than half of women with advisors (55%) report at least $100,000 saved — nearly double the share of women without advisors (29%)

This difference highlights a key dimension of the gender gap: many women can benefit from tailored advisor guidance to move beyond defaults and take fuller control of their retirement savings.

Key insights for advisors

The gender gap narrows significantly with advisor involvement

Women working with advisors have dramatically different outcomes than those who manage their retirement independently.

3x

Women with advisors are over 3x more likely to have over $500K across their retirement/college savings accounts than those without.

Professional guidance particularly benefits women in overcoming barriers to financial planning. This represents both a business opportunity for advisors, and a chance to make a meaningful impact with an underserved demographic group.

Advisor guidance shapes account choices, often leading clients toward IRAs.

47%

Consumers working with advisors are 47% more likely to have IRAs, indicating that they are following common guidance from their advisor to roll over their account. This highlights the pivotal role advisors play in helping clients navigate account types and structure their savings strategies.

For advisors, rollovers into IRAs may seem simpler, but they can cause clients to miss out on workplace plan benefits like tax advantages, higher limits, and employer matching. Many don't realize these held-away accounts can also be managed — creating an opportunity to deliver greater value without sacrificing plan benefits.

Complexity is a barrier to saver confidence

Plan complexity and account restrictions can make it challenging for savers to navigate their options. Advisors play a key role in helping clients understand the choices available and make confident, informed decisions.

Frustration is the norm, not the exception.

76% of advisors say clients have experienced frustration navigating retirement and college accounts, creating opportunities to step in with clarity and support.

Rules and restrictions create the biggest hurdle.

The complexity of rules and restrictions surrounding plans is the single biggest challenge advisors say their clients face.

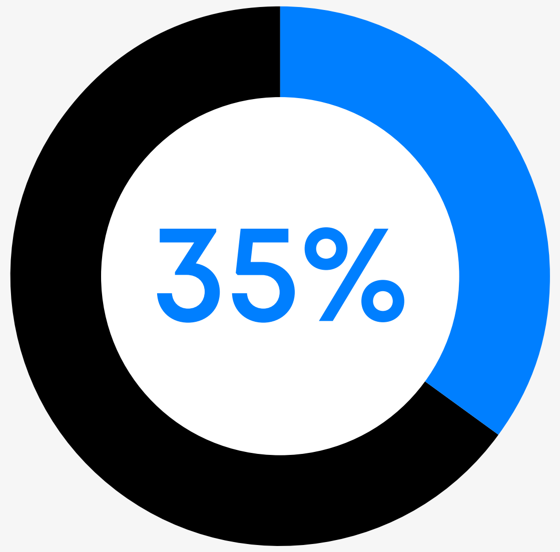
Investment choices can be overwhelming.

1 in 5 savers say their biggest challenge is navigating their available investment options within employer-sponsored plans.

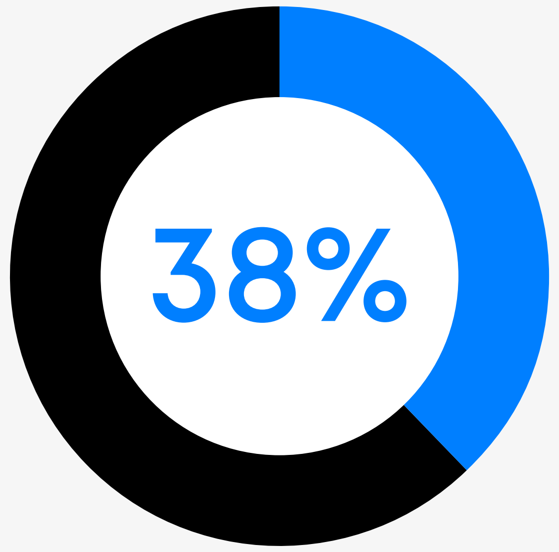
Plan complexity hurts confidence

Making retirement and college savings decisions continues to be challenging for most savers. Fewer than 1 in 5 feel highly knowledgeable and confident about managing their accounts. Pontera's 2024 Literacy Survey underscores just how steep the learning curve is: only 15% of 401(k) participants who took Pontera's literacy quiz scored an A.

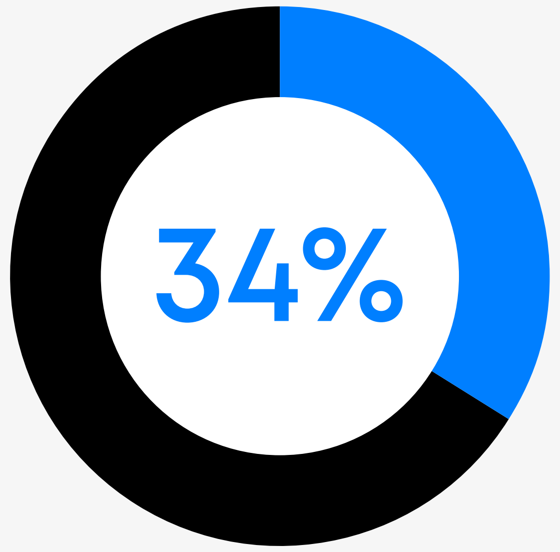
The quiz identified significant gaps in key areas:



of respondents had difficulty evaluating tax implications



had difficulty determining risk tolerance



struggled with asset allocation decisions

When the basics feel overwhelming, many rely on pre-set investment options: 25% of survey respondents reported using the default investments provided at enrollment, and only 12% of that group feel a great deal of control over their accounts.

What would make savers feel more confident?

Savers know exactly what would help them feel more confident: access to trusted advisors and guidance during uncertainty. When asked what would increase confidence, here's how they rank their priorities:

1. Access to a financial advisor to help manage their accounts
2. Clear guidance on adjusting investments during market changes
3. Better education on investment options and how they work

Generational differences also emerge: Gen Zers (28%), Millennials (20%), and Gen Xers (15%) are most likely to say tools to help them understand if they're on track, while baby Boomers are most likely to say access to a financial advisor to manage their accounts (14%). For advisors, this provides the chance to establish trust with younger clients now, by providing the clarity and resources they're actively seeking.

Advisors are the biggest professional influence on retirement decisions

Financial advisors are the most influential professional voice in the retirement space:

19% **of consumers are most influenced by advisors when making retirement or college savings decisions.**

This underscores that advisors are already highly trusted and uniquely positioned to be their clients' primary source for retirement guidance — they just need to initiate the conversation.

With 42% of respondents feeling cautious, stressed, anxious, or confused about managing their accounts, personalized advisor guidance can be the factor that turns indecision into action. When complexity leaves savers stuck, advisors are the difference between hesitation and confidence, between uncertainty and clarity.

When it comes to your retirement and/or college saving approach, which of the following has the biggest influence on your decision-making? (Professional sources only)

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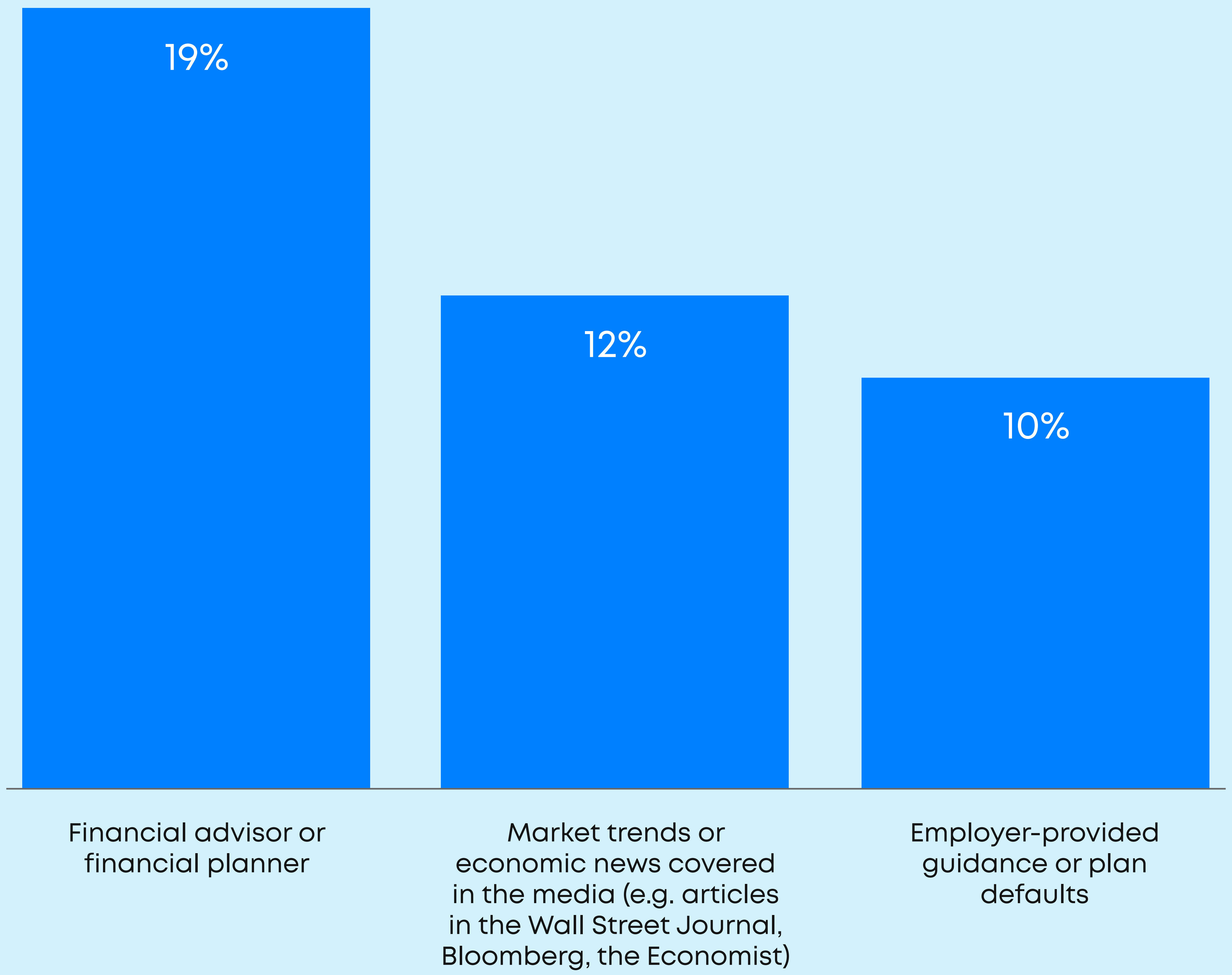


Key insights for advisors

Plan complexity creates opportunities for financial advisors

75%+

More than three-quarters of financial advisors report hearing client frustrations with navigating retirement and college savings accounts, with the complexity of rules and restrictions being the biggest challenge clients face. And, only 15% of 401(k) participants scored an ‘A’ on Pontera’s retirement literacy quiz.

There are major gaps in knowledge, validating that complexity is a measurable barrier creating demand for professional financial guidance.

Advisors are the most influential professional voice in retirement planning

Financial advisors are the biggest professional influence on retirement decisions.

1 in 5

Nearly 1 in 5 consumers rely on financial advisors for retirement and college savings planning.

Advisors can uniquely position themselves as an unbiased third-party, separate from other professional or peer influences.

Savers want access to advisors and guidance

When asked what would increase consumer confidence in their retirement planning, access to a financial advisor tops the list, followed by clear guidance on market changes.

#2

Access to a financial advisor is the 2nd biggest factor that would impact saver confidence.

Savers understand the value of professional guidance and are actively seeking out financial expertise.

Savers and advisors benefit from holistic planning

Consumers often manage accounts across multiple platforms. In fact, the biggest challenge savers have in managing retirement/college savings across different tech platforms/tools is that it's hard to get a full picture of all accounts in one place.

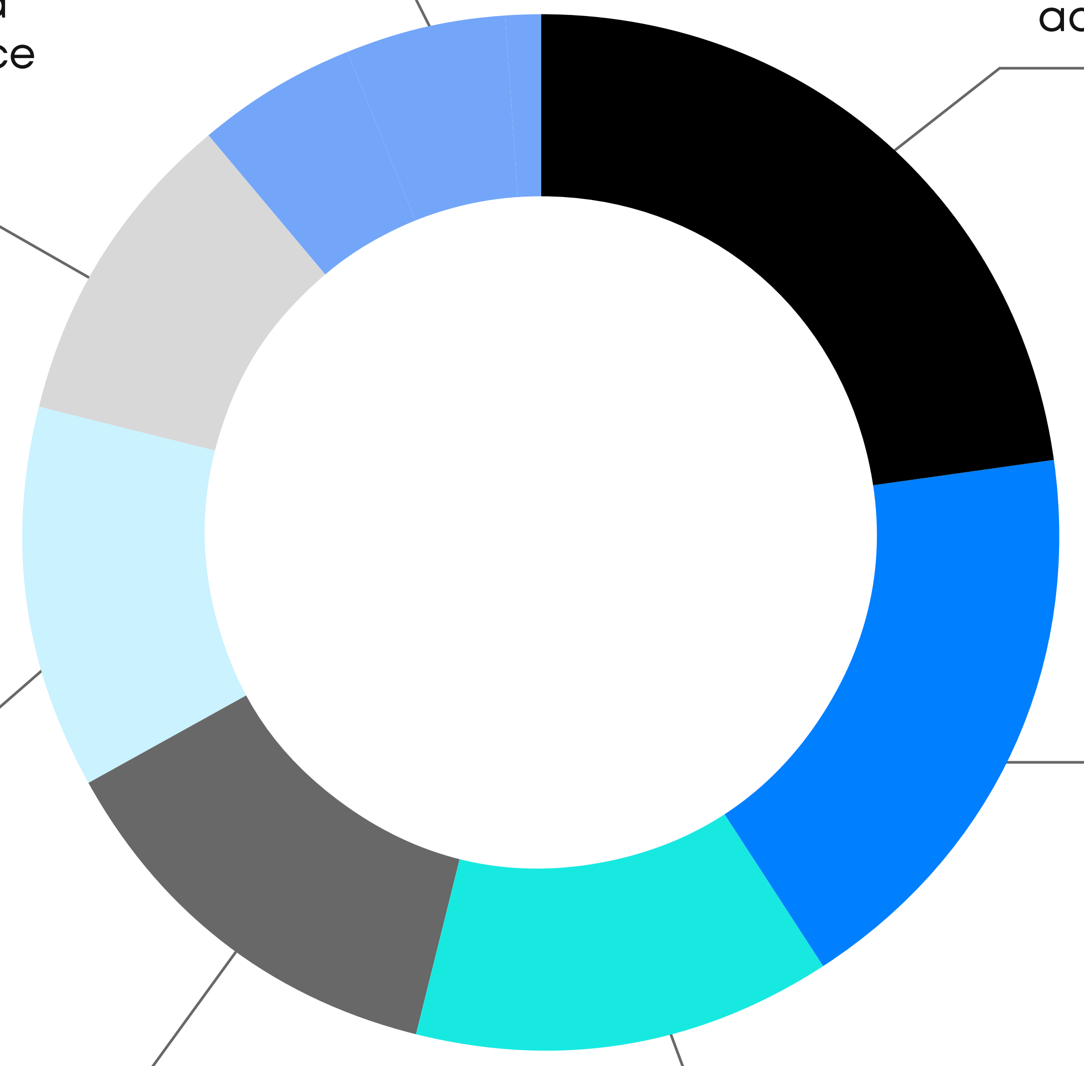
This also makes it challenging for advisors to see how each account fits into their broader retirement strategy.

When advisors have a complete picture of a saver's accounts, they can provide guidance that considers every part of the portfolio. This holistic approach to management and planning helps savers make informed decisions about contributions, asset allocation, and rebalancing, reducing unnecessary risk and uncovering opportunities for growth.

Seeing this "full picture" allows for smarter, more strategic retirement planning — something fragmented account management can't achieve.

What is your biggest challenge in managing your retirement and/or college savings accounts across different technology platforms or tools?

RETIREMENT SAVERS



The business upside for holistic account management

91% **of financial advisors report that offering services for held-away retirement and/or college saving accounts has increased demand for their services.**

Comprehensive account management is good for business. Today, advisors use [wealth management technology] to gain a full view of client accounts, allowing them to provide more personalized and effective guidance.

As more savers become aware that advisors can manage all of their accounts — not just those held at their primary custodian — the appetite for this type of support is set to grow.

In your experience, has offering services for held-away retirement and/or college saving accounts increased the demand for your services as a financial advisor?

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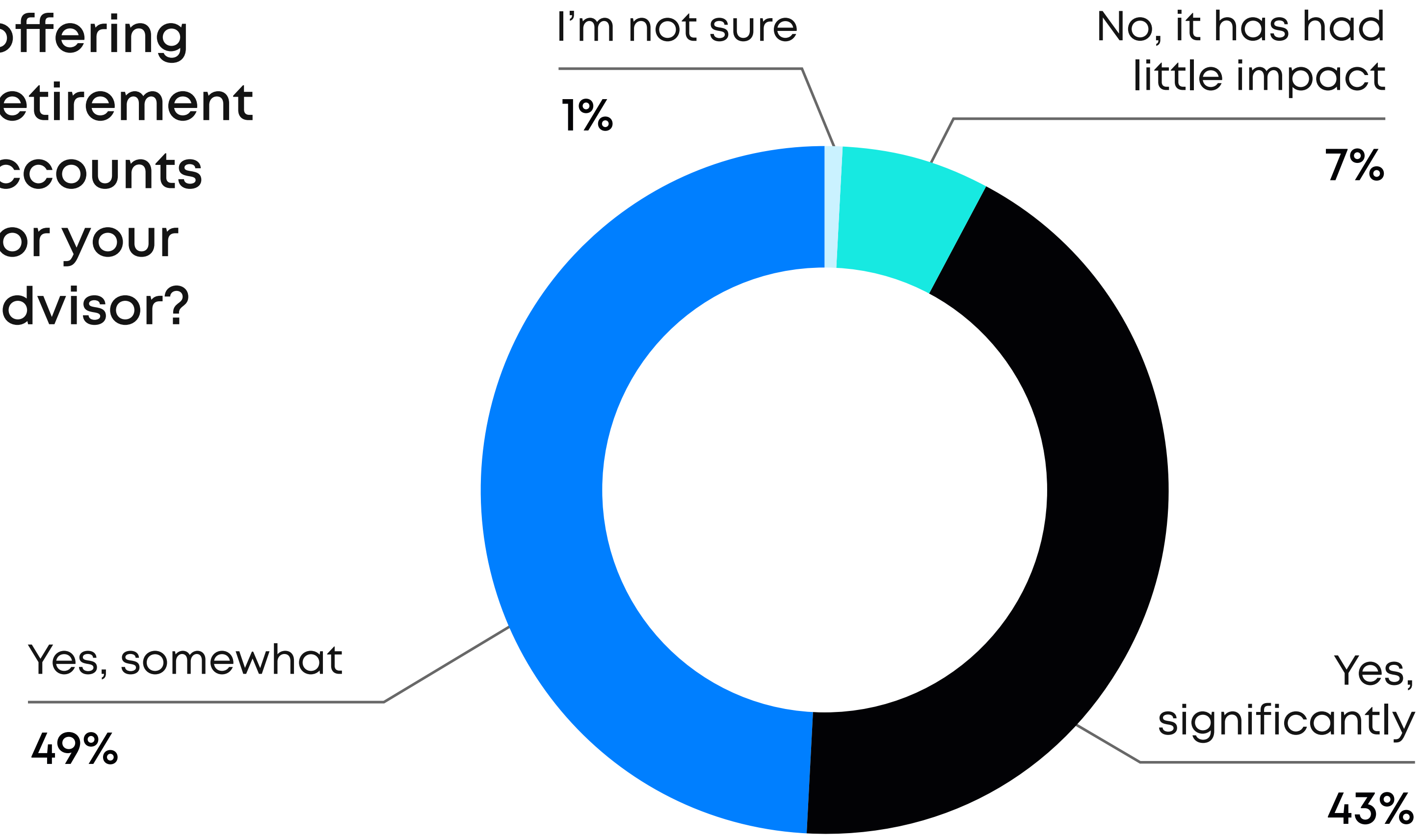

Key insights for advisors

Fragmented accounts represent the biggest management challenge for consumers

The biggest challenge for consumers in managing their accounts across different platforms and tools is that it's hard for them to get the "full picture" of their accounts in one place. Without this comprehensive view, they are making decisions based on pieces of information.

For advisors, there's a clear value proposition — providing the consolidated view savers struggle to gain on their own.

Holistic account management drives business growth for advisors

91%

of financial advisors report that offering services for held-away retirement and college saving accounts has increased demand for their services.

Held-away account services offer a business differentiator for those who can provide a complete picture of clients' portfolios across all platforms.

Consumers say they don’t make emotionally charged moves: Data tells a different story

During periods of economic uncertainty, intentions and actions don’t always align. Many consumers delay or avoid making changes to their retirement plans, even when market conditions suggest adjustments might be beneficial.

Others make big choices and pull their money out of accounts to protect themselves in the short-term. Income and access to guidance can play a role in shaping these decisions.

1/3

One-third of savers report taking no action — choosing to “stay the course.”

24%

24% of savers have either reduced or paused contributions or stopped checking these accounts to avoid stress.

50%+

Over 50% of savers say they have made changes to their retirement investments in the past year due to market uncertainty.

Advisors prevent reactive decision making: Savers without guidance often act against their intentions

Many investors report feeling confident in managing their accounts during market turbulence, while others say they tend to avoid making changes.

Yet when the stock market dropped sharply in April 2025 and then recovered, actual behavior told a different story: Many individuals panicked, sold stocks, and shifted their savings into cash or bonds, only to miss out on the recovery and suffer losses. In fact, more than half of US savers have made changes to their retirement investments over the past year in response to market uncertainty.

Accounts managed by advisors on Pontera, however, were more likely to hold steady. Rebalancing orders rose slightly, suggesting strategic rebalancing rather than fear-driven selling. If advisors had sold equities early, account balances would have ended lower; instead, advisor-managed accounts stayed aligned with market performance, preserving positioning and capturing the recovery.

This data proves that **while investors *say* they feel confident about making decisions when markets are uncertain, consumer behavior indicates a tendency to panic**. Advisor guidance prevents knee-jerk reactions and emotional decision-making and keeps investors aligned with their long-term goals — even during market shocks.

Key insights for advisors

Accounts managed by advisors are more likely to recover from market volatility

Accounts managed by advisors on Pontera saw only modest rebalancing, reflecting strategic adjustments rather than the panic-driven sell-off seen with consumers. By maintaining positioning through the market drop, these accounts preserved value and captured the recovery.

There is a tangible benefit of professional guidance in volatile markets.

Client intentions don't always match actions during market stress

While investors say they feel confident about making decisions when markets are uncertain, consumer behavior indicates a tendency to panic.

Advisors can provide value through investment selection and future planning to keep clients aligned with long-term goals, even during emotional market moments.

Economic uncertainty can lead to panic-moves that advisors can mitigate

Individual investors are more likely to make hasty decisions when faced with market stress, but those with advisors are more likely to stay steady and not pull out investments.

Advisors can position their services as behavioral coaching to prevent knee-jerk reactions that can impact long-term returns.

CLOSING

Savers seek control over their financial future in light of economic uncertainty

Retirement readiness is about more than balances; true preparedness comes from both financial resources and the confidence to navigate uncertainty. Being financially prepared also means understanding that the decisions they make today will support their future retirement goals.

1/3+

Over a third (34%) of those who work with a financial advisor feel more prepared, while only 24% of people who rely on default options do, demonstrating how professional guidance makes a tangible difference in planning, decision-making, and long-term outcomes.

Consumers with advisors were more likely to hold steady with their investments through market volatility. In uncertain times, advisors help keep clients aligned with long-term goals.

With clarity and control, consumers can save with confidence

Advisors report clients are increasingly focused on consolidating or rolling over held-away accounts to gain more control: 18% report this as the top concern. Many individuals assume that leaving a job means their only choices are to roll over accounts or leave them behind. This common misconception drives a focus on consolidation and rollovers, even when doing so can add complexity and reduce control.

Advisors who can directly manage held-away accounts from both current and former employer plans allow savers to maintain oversight, preserve plan benefits like low fees, and make informed decisions about where their money stays.

> **By offering clarity and control without unnecessary rollovers, advisors help clients act with confidence and support long-term retirement readiness.**

Which of the following are clients raising as their biggest concern during this period of market uncertainty, specifically related to their retirement savings?

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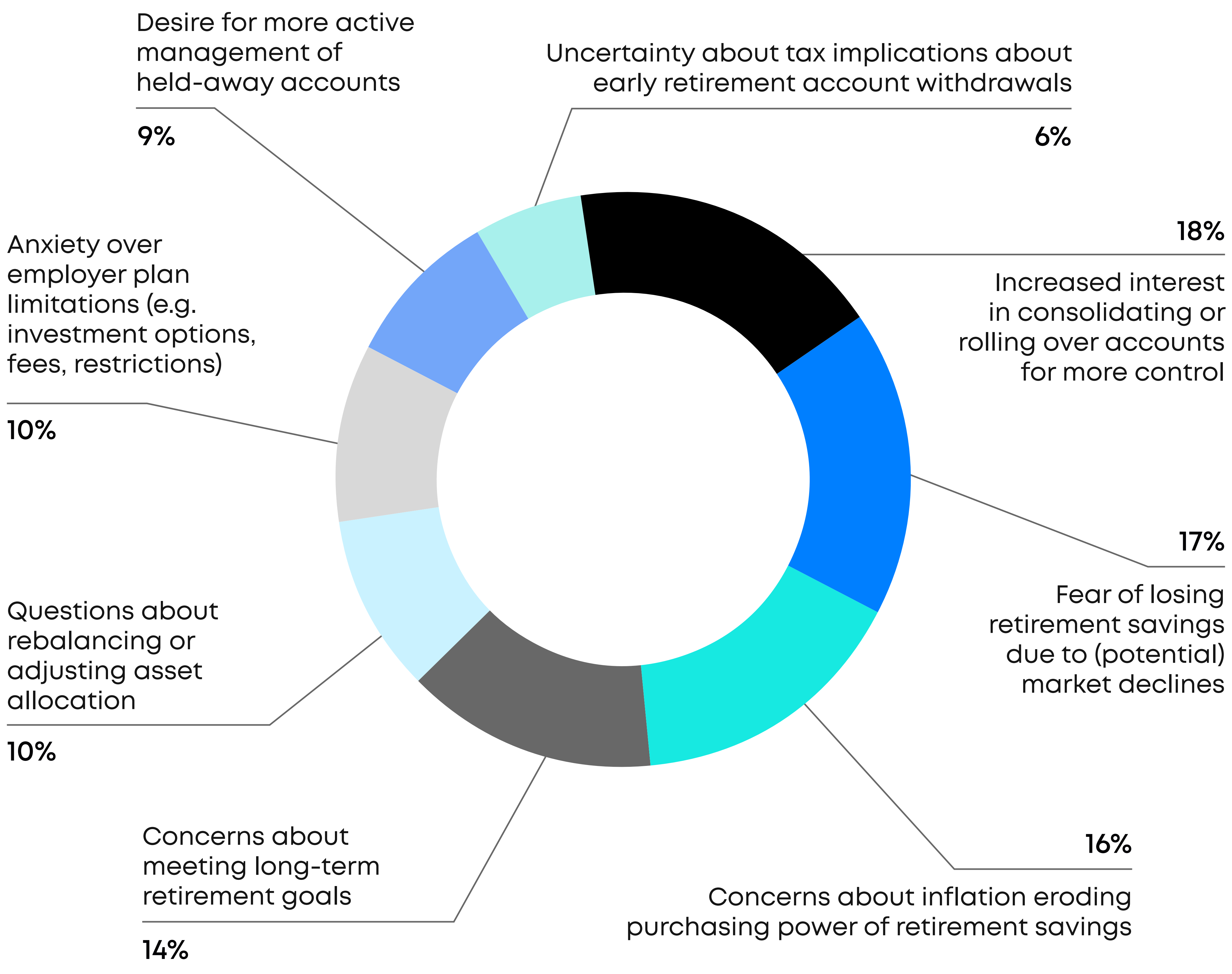
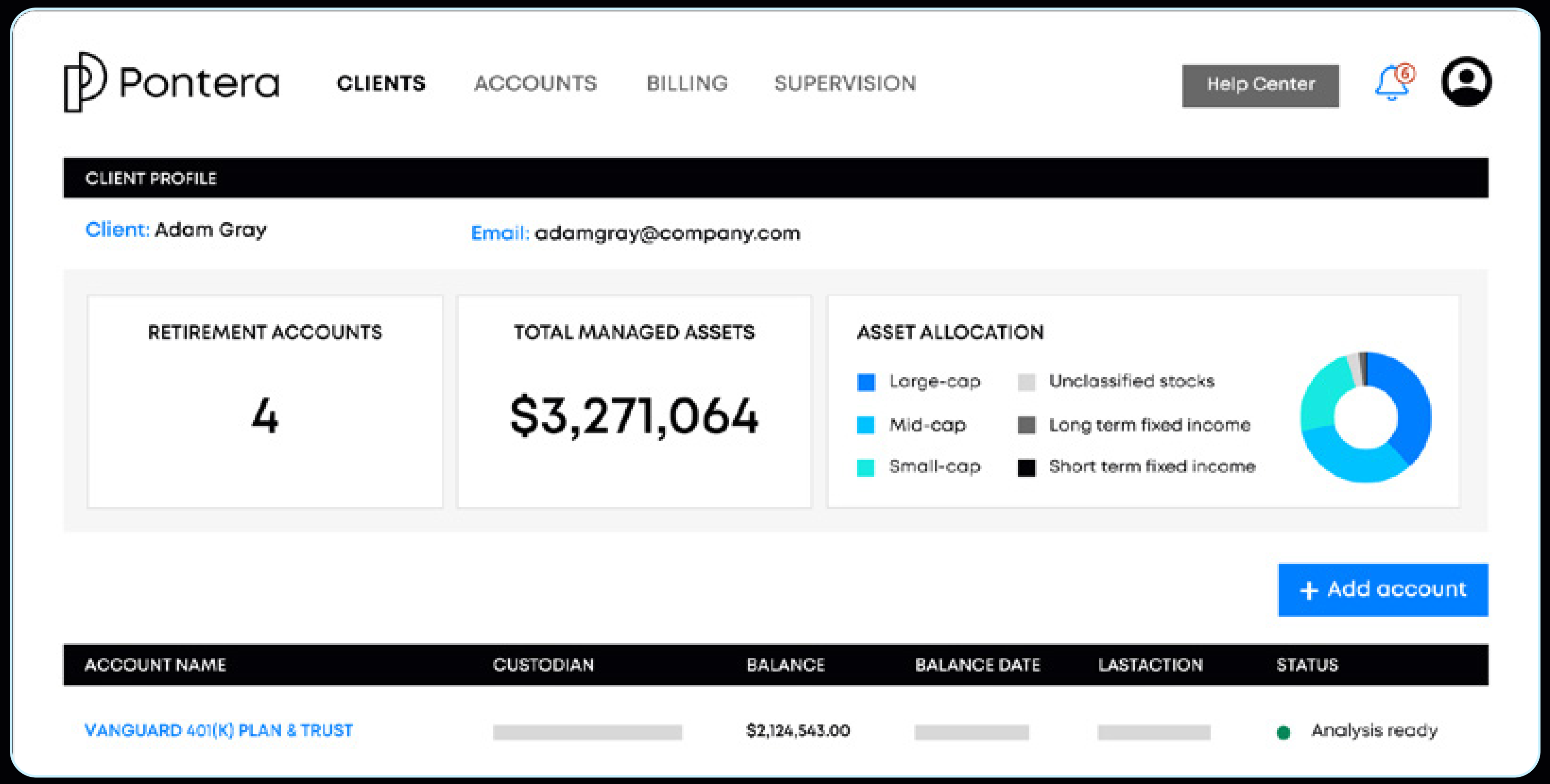


Pontera

Manage client retirement savings smarter with Pontera

Improve retirement outcomes for your clients with cohesive rebalancing and tax strategies across their 401(k)s, 403(b)s, and more.



Offer informed advice and management

Pontera provides a secure, compliant, and seamless way for financial advisors to manage 401(k)s and other employer-sponsored retirement accounts, without taking custody. Monitor accounts, compare fund options and fees, set target allocations, and track performance — all in one platform.

Strengthen client relationships

Give your clients the comfort of knowing that their trusted advisor is handling these vital accounts in real time as the markets and their priorities change. By incorporating retirement accounts into ongoing planning, advisors help clients feel confident that their long-term goals are on track.

Offer holistic wealth management

Ensure clients receive an investment strategy that accounts for all of their assets. Advisors can compare fund options, fees, and allocations in a standard view, regardless of the custodian, and integrate with portfolio performance reporting and billing solutions.

Stay compliant and protect clients

Protect your clients, particularly in the realms of account custody, supervision, and level-fee billing, and safeguard client data. Pontera is purpose-built to allow advisors to manage held-away accounts securely without taking custody, reducing operational risk

Make retirement planning more impactful for your clients

Get a demo

Methodology

To gain the datapoints and insights for this report, Pontera administered a 20-question survey to 1,000 retirement savers in the United States from July 23–August 1, 2025 via SurveyMonkey, and a 19-question survey to 400 financial advisors in the United States from July 21–August 1, 2025 via Centiment, both in collaboration with Datalily.

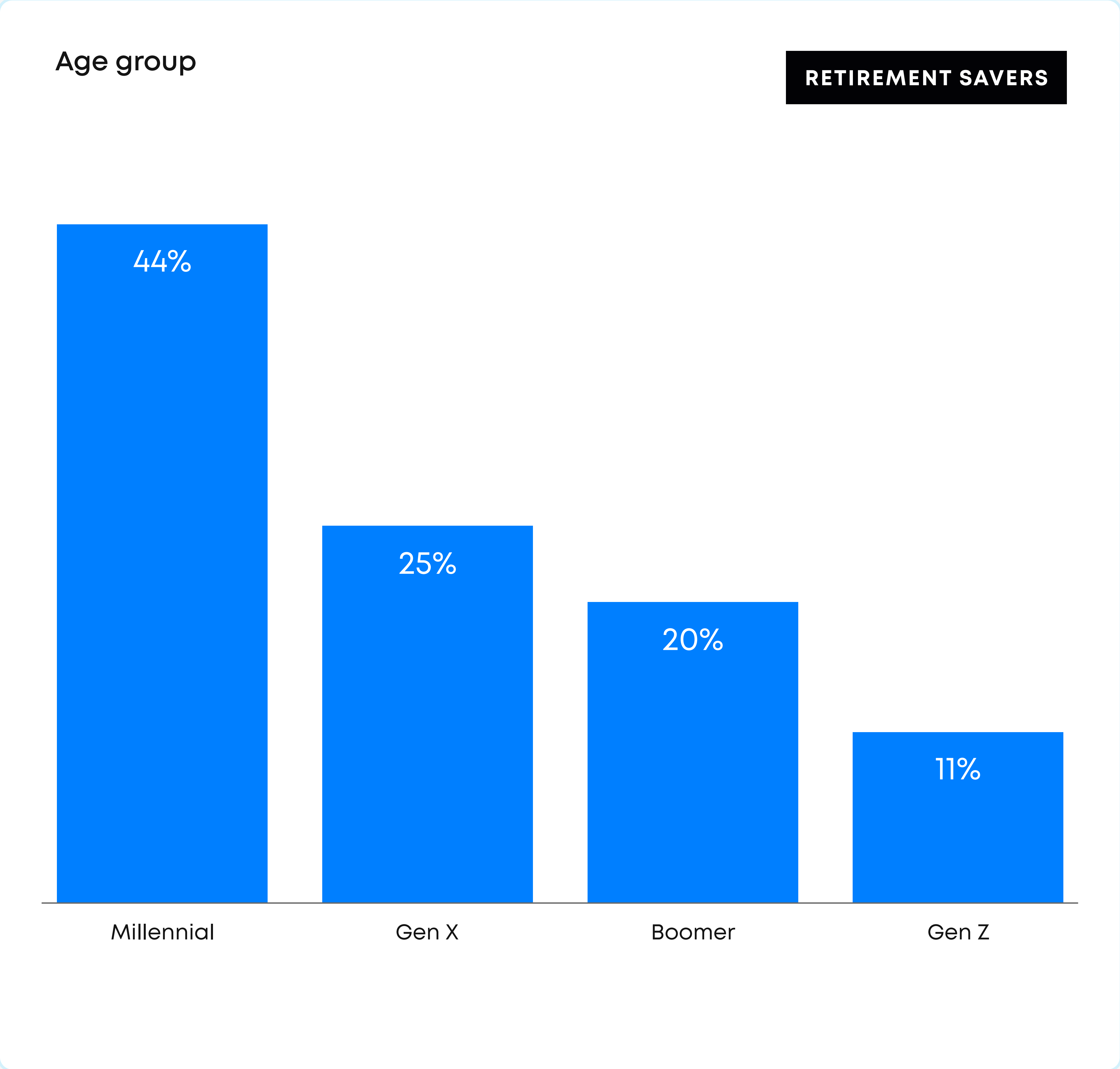
The retirement saver audience was made up of consumer savers in the United States that have one or more of the following account types: 401(k), 401(a), 403(b), 457, Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), 529, and/or IRAs.

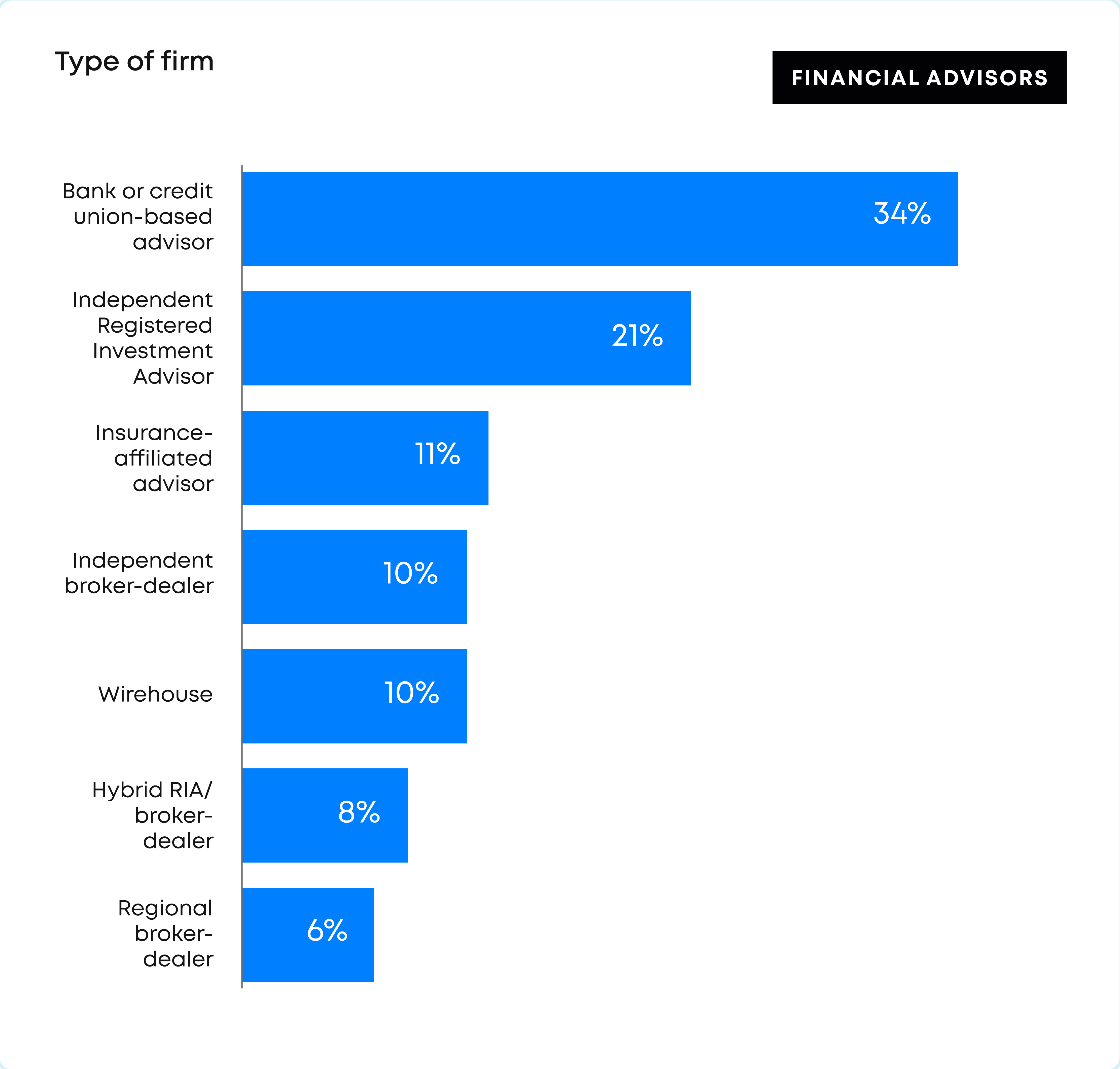
The financial advisor audience was made up of licensed financial advisors in the US who provide advice on and/or manage one or more of the following account types: 401(k), 401(a), 403(b), 457, Thrift Savings Plan (TSP), and/or 529.

Throughout the report, we also referenced anonymized, proprietary data from Pontera.

Pontera

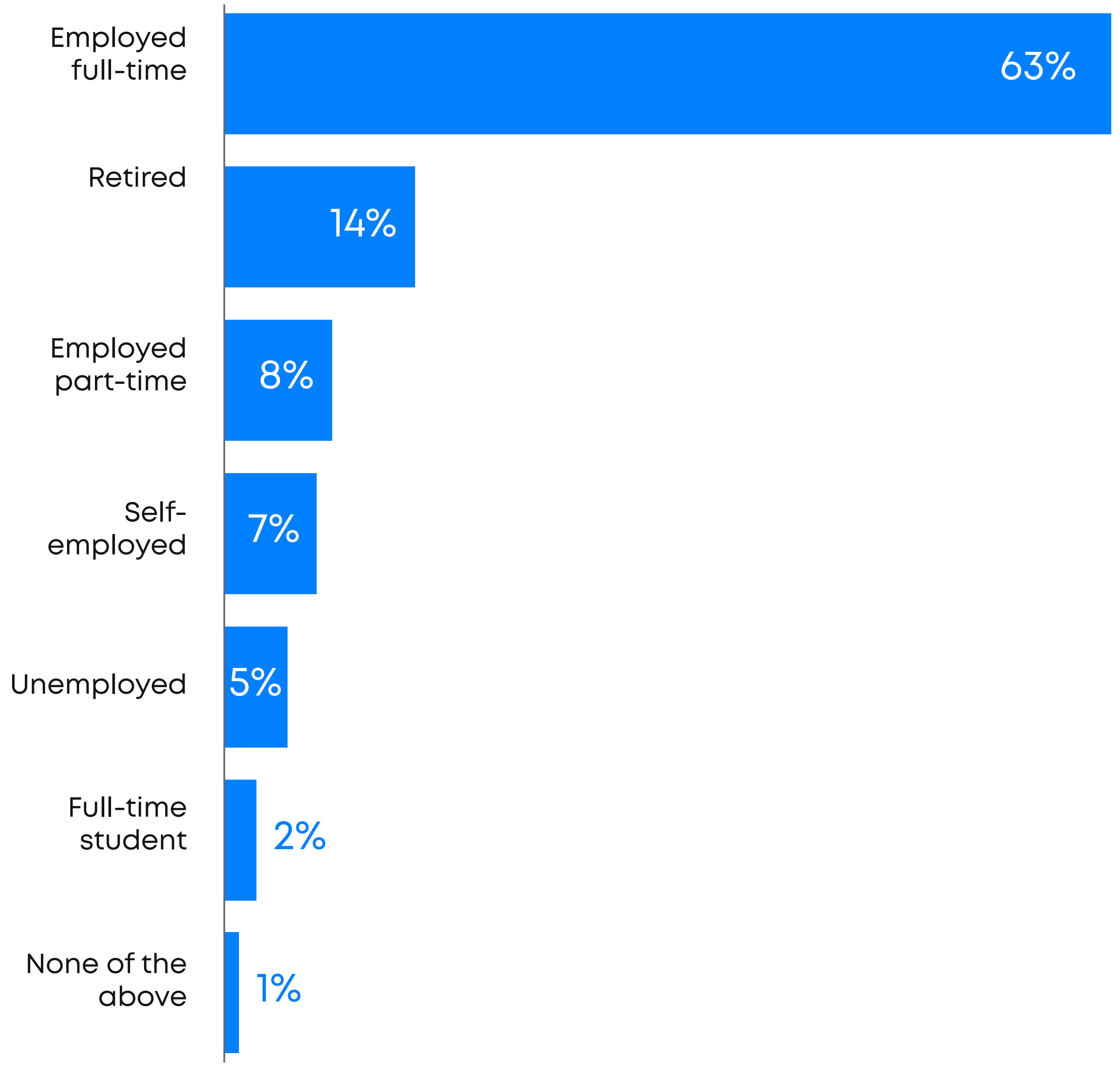
Additional demographic data on the survey audiences





Employment status

RETIREMENT SAVERS



Home office

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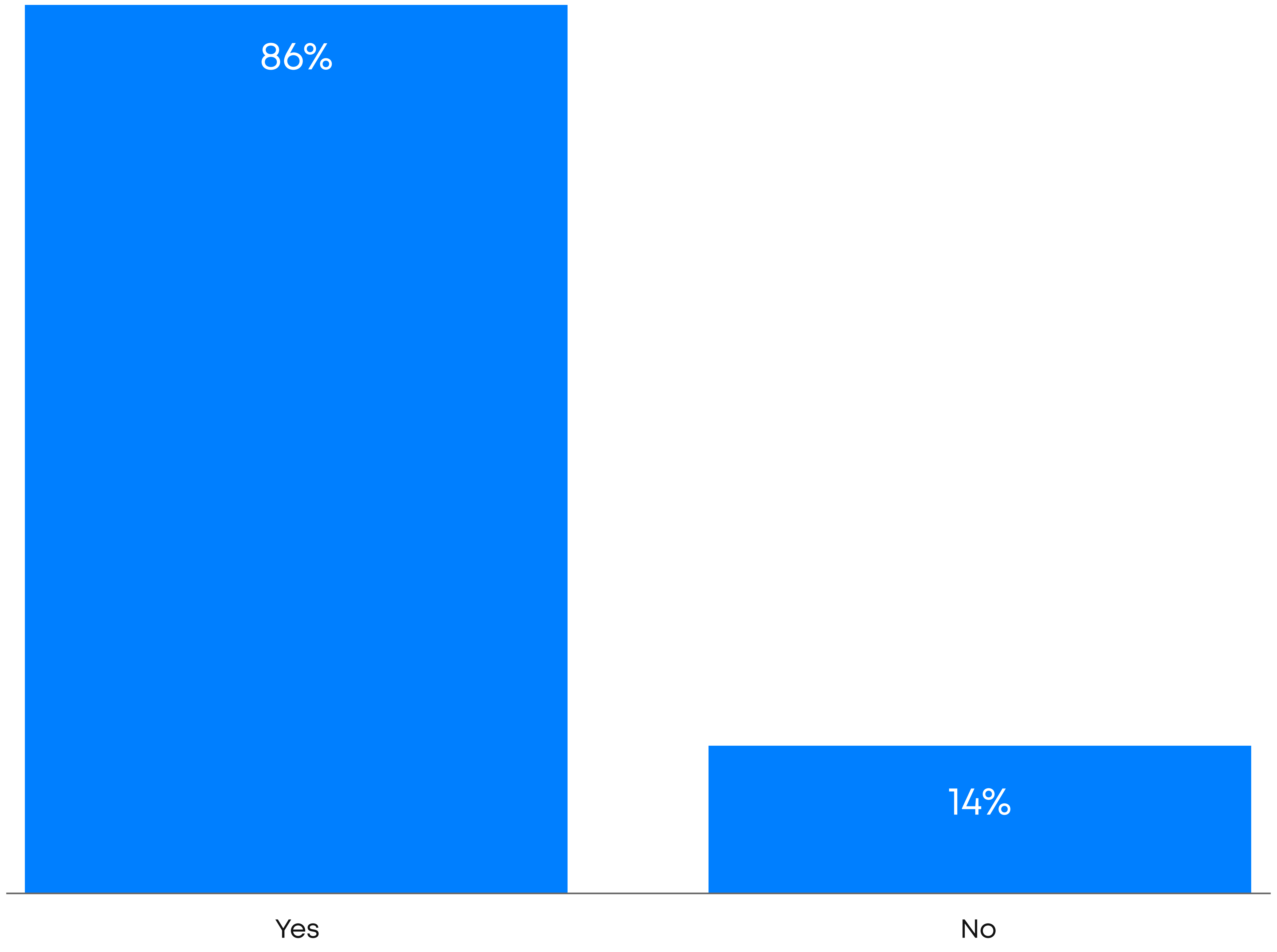
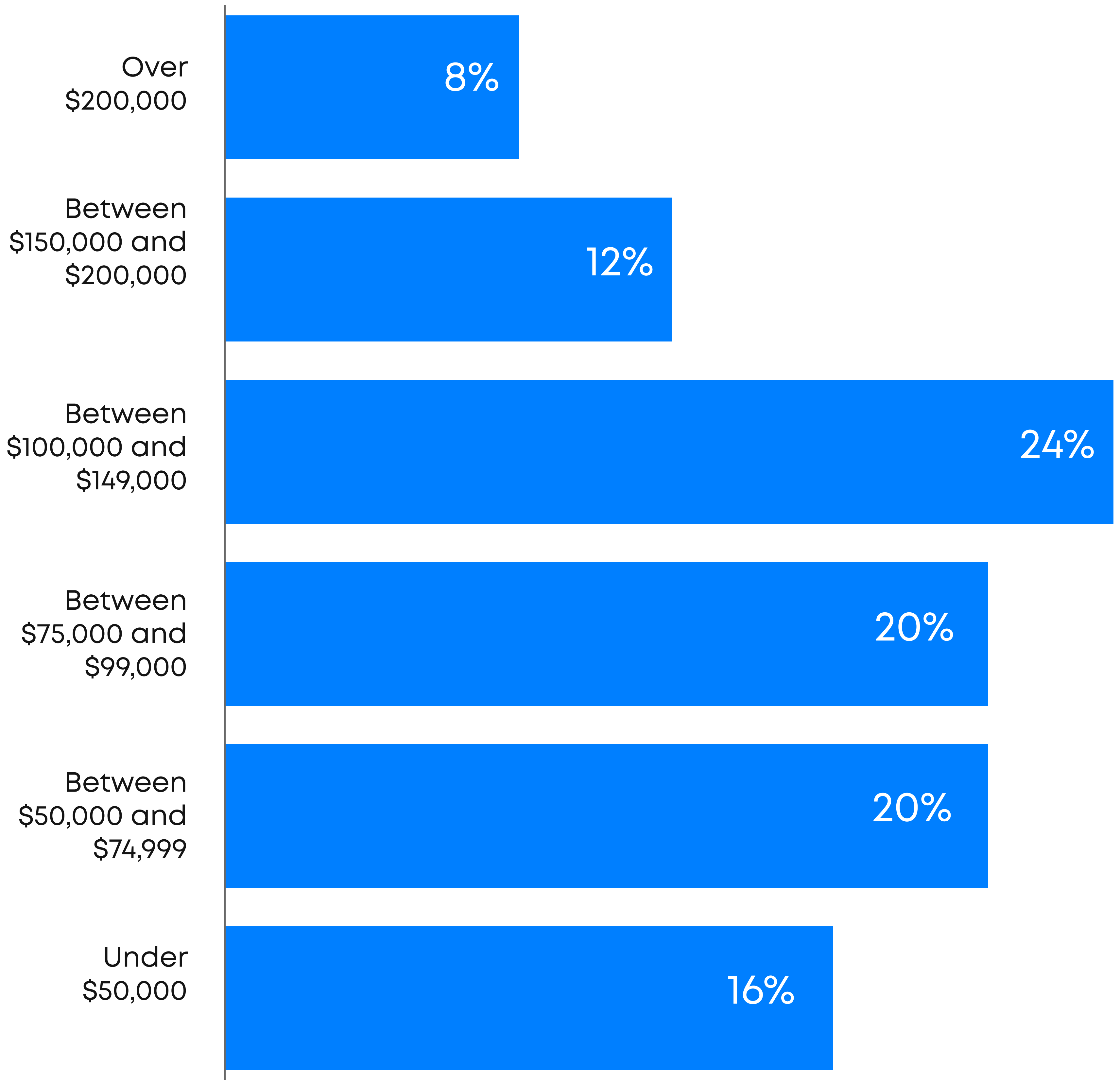


Annual household income

RETIREMENT SAVERS



Total assets under management (AUM) for existing clients

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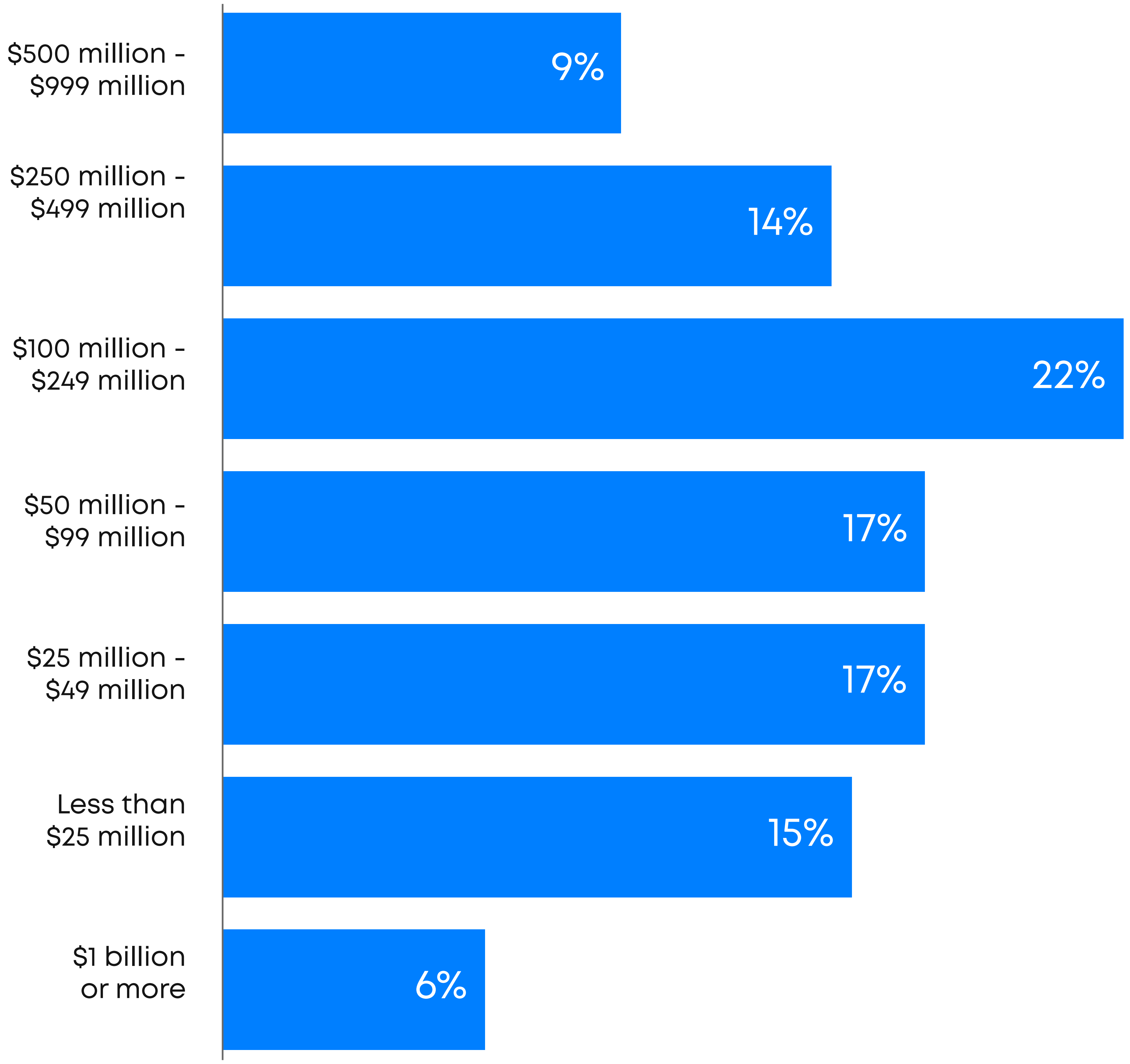
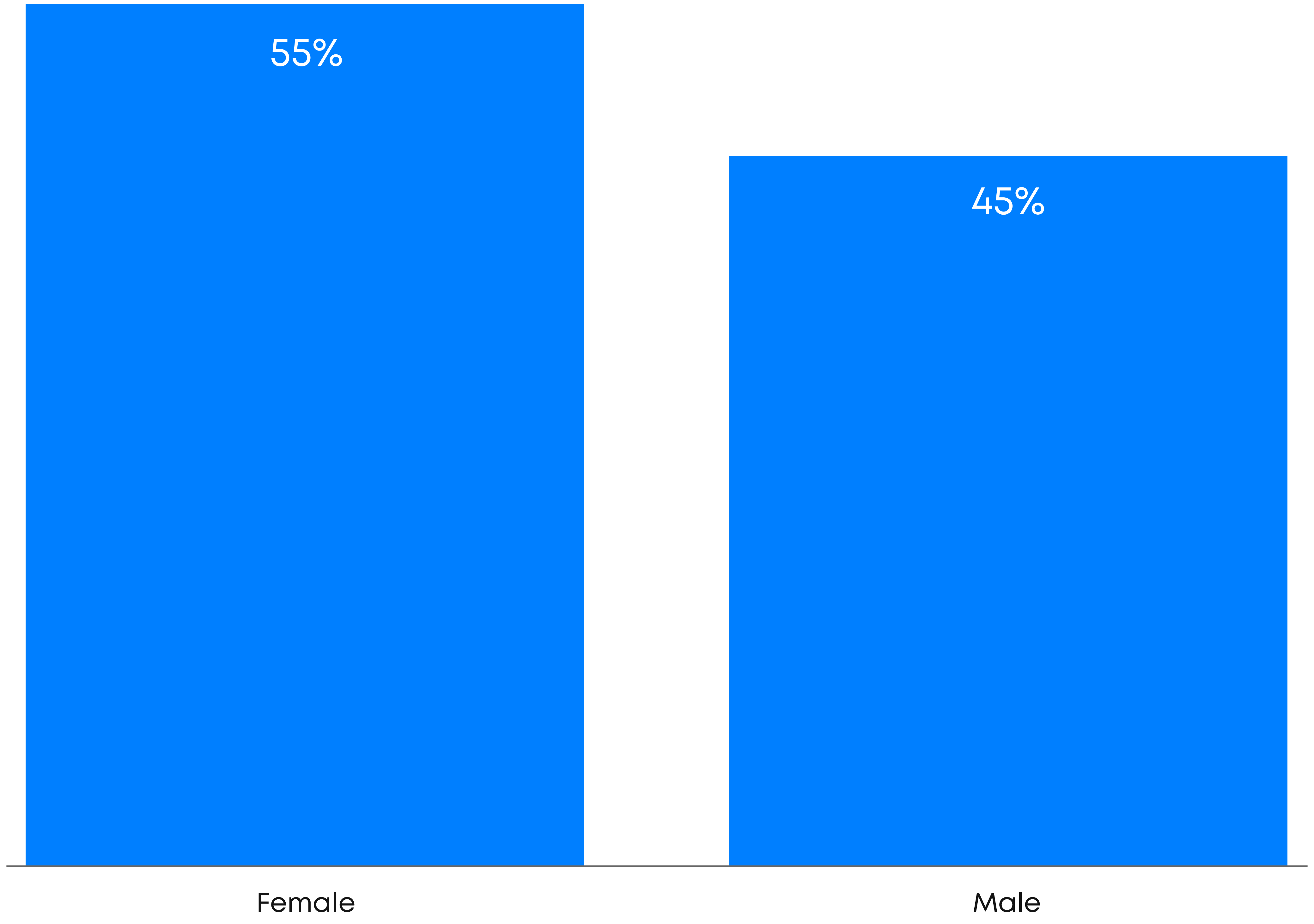


Gender

RETIREMENT SAVERS



Years of experience as a licensed financial advisor

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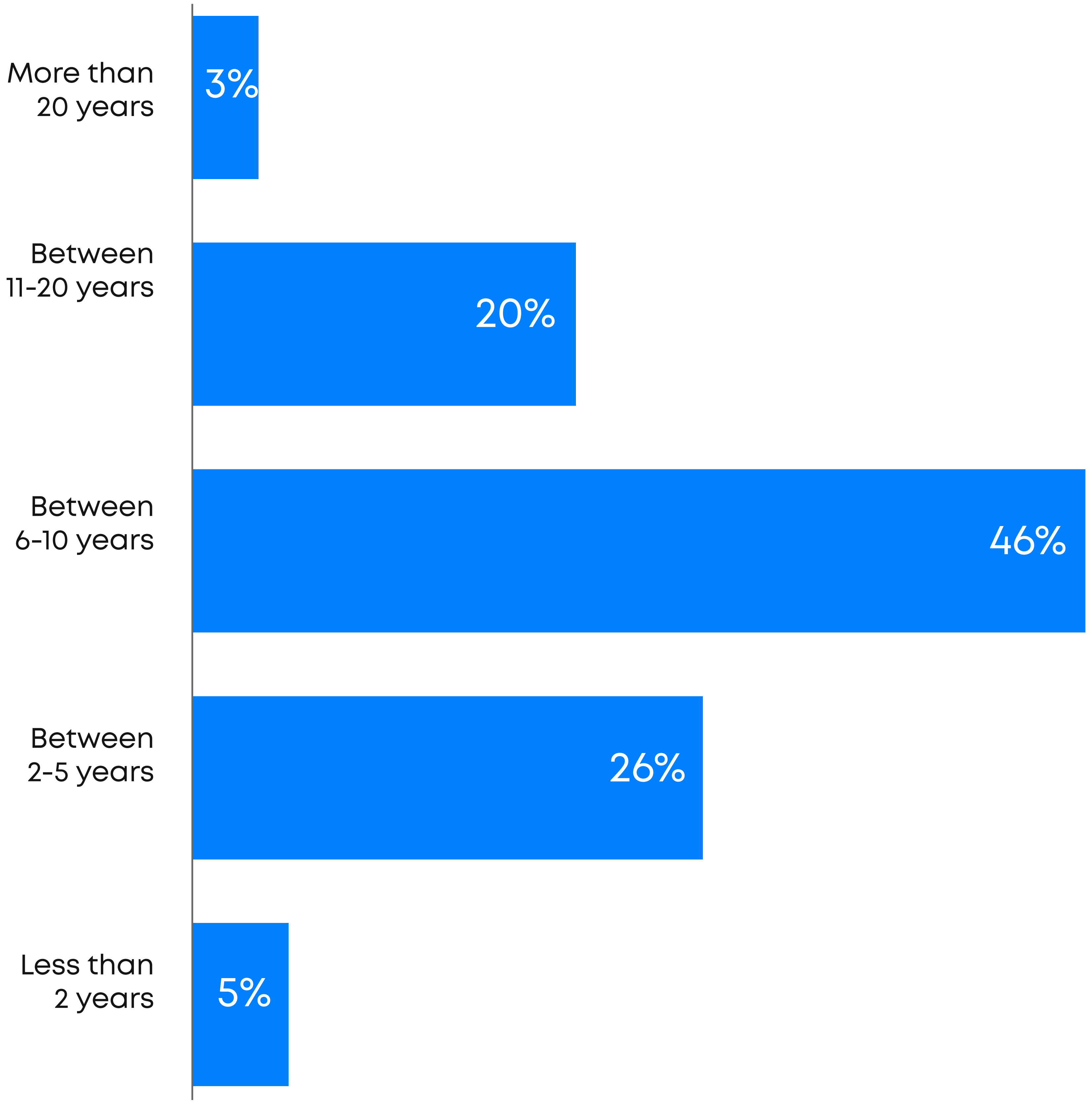

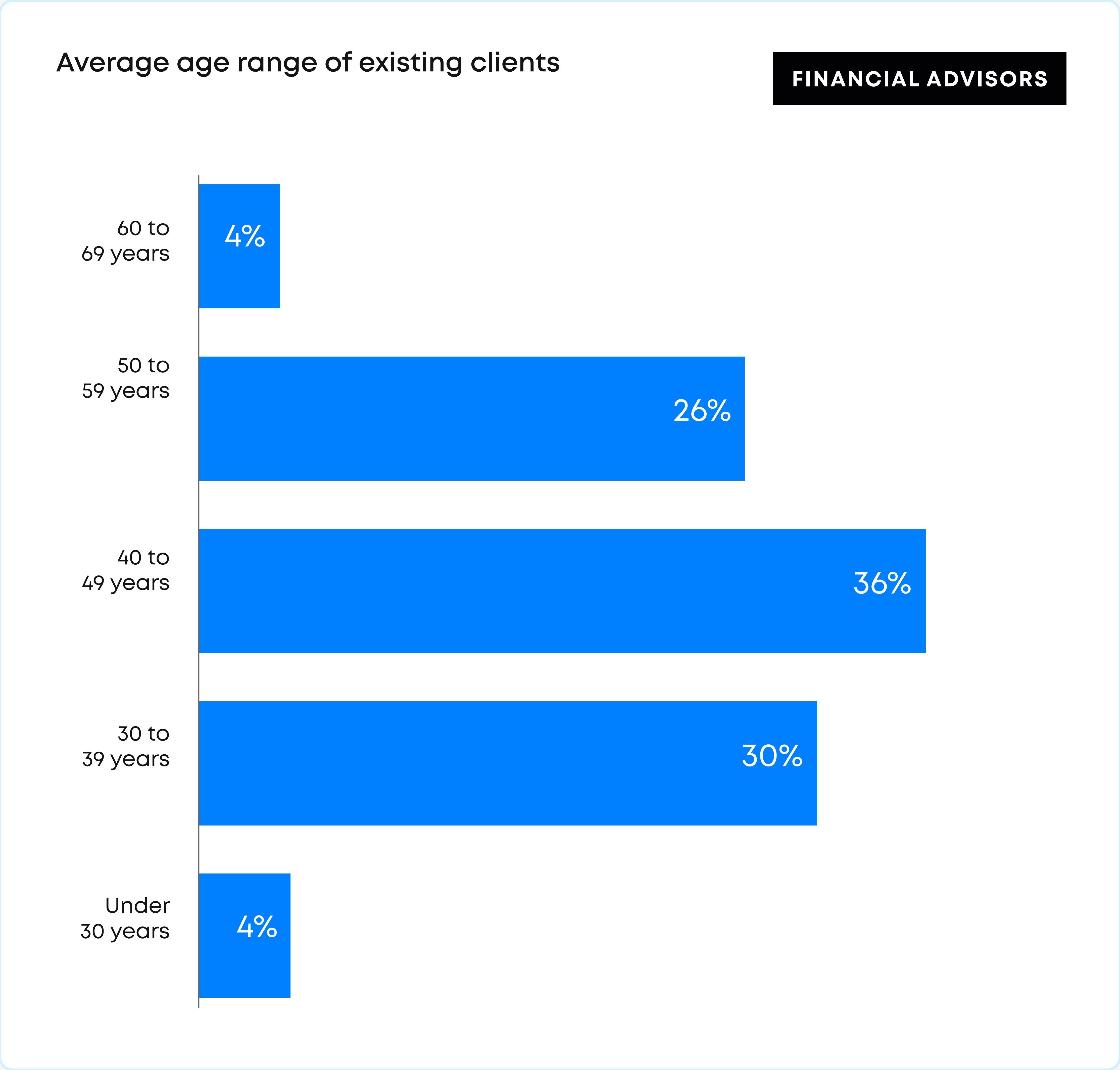
Average age range of existing clients
FINANCIAL ADVISORS
60 to 69 years
4%
50 to 59 years
26%
40 to 49 years
36%
30 to 39 years
30%
Under 30 years
4%