Financial Fragility in America

With medical resources under stress; many schools, restaurants and stores closed; a majority of employees asked to work from home; unemployment claims at record high; and the stock market on a spiral, we are up against an unprecedented challenge. The major economic impact of this pandemic lays bare the deeply-rooted financial insecurity that many Americans face on a daily basis.

OUR MEASURE OF FINANCIAL FRAGILITY

Financial fragility is the inability to cope with a mid-size shock in a short period of time. It is a self-assessed measure of capacity to deal with financial shocks, regardless of whether the source of funds is the respondent’s own assets, capacity to borrow, a network of family and friends, or something else. In 2019, about one-in-four Americans were financially fragile.

THE MOST FINANCIALLY FRAGILE PEOPLE

The most vulnerable groups are women, minorities, those with low education or those with low income. However, financial fragility is also prevalent among a broad cross-section of the American population.

29% of women are financially fragile, compared to 22% of men.

African-Americans are more likely to be financially fragile than are whites.
The percentage of financially fragile households in America has not changed much over the past three years, hinting that this issue is deeply rooted. Financial fragility remains high even when the economy is doing well.

On average, 46% of those without a high school degree are financially fragile, compared to only 13% of those who have at least a bachelor’s degree.

While financial fragility is highest among those with low income, around 30% of middle-income households are financially fragile.

The percentage of financially fragile households increases with the number of children younger than 18.

Not only are many Americans unable to face a shock, but our research finds that individuals who are financially fragile are likely to be financially vulnerable in the long term. Among financially fragile individuals who are not retired, only 21% have tried to determine how much they need to save for retirement. In contrast, 44% of non-retirees who are not financially fragile have planned for retirement. This suggests financial fragility can have severe short- and long-term implications for households’ financial security.

More than ever before, it is important to step up the effort to improve financial resilience among Americans.

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