



ICI RESEARCH

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# Ten Important Facts About 401(k) Plans



# Ten Important Facts About 401(k) Plans

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### 401(k) Plans

In 1981, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) proposed regulations for 401(k) plans that allowed pretax contributions to be made from employees' ordinary wages and salary. Over four decades later, 401(k) plans have grown to become the most common type of employer-sponsored defined contribution (DC) retirement plan in the United States.

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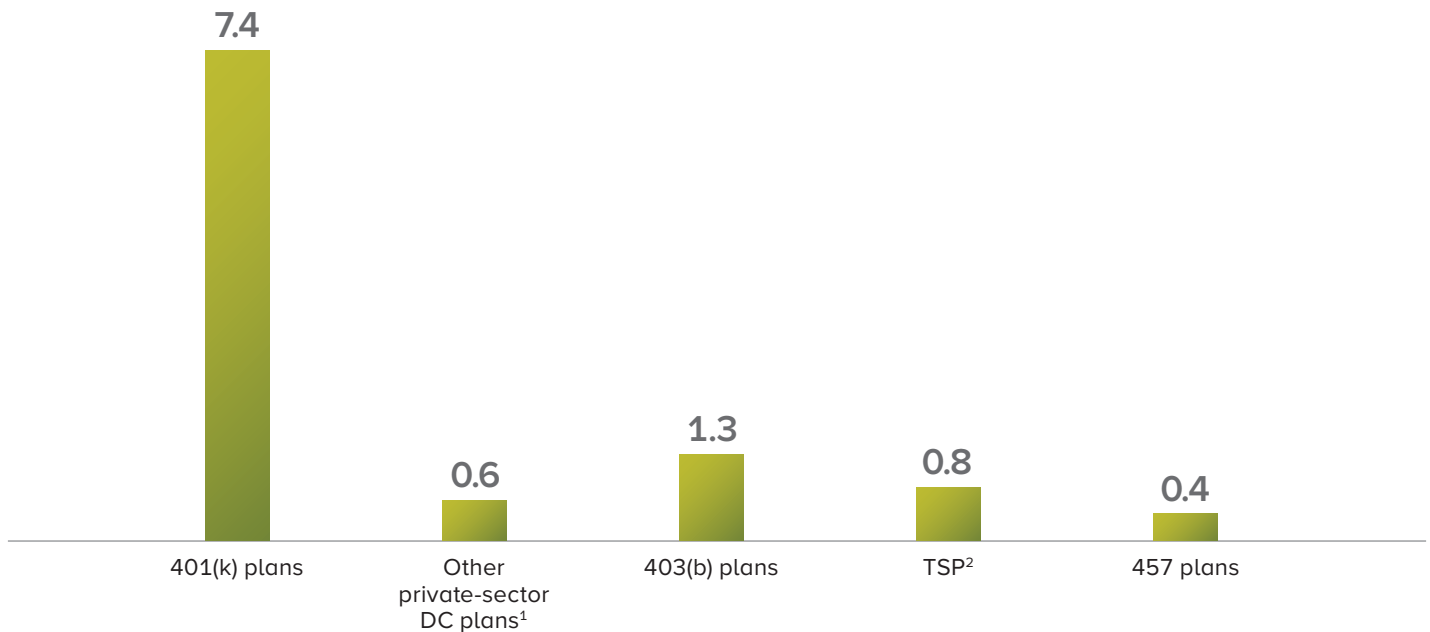
# FACT 1

## 401(k) plans represent the largest share of DC plan assets.

Americans held \$10.6 trillion in DC plans at year-end 2023, accounting for 28 percent of the \$38.3 trillion in retirement assets and about 9 percent of household financial assets. Seventy percent of DC plan assets, or \$7.4 trillion, were held in 401(k) plans, accounting for 19 percent of all US retirement assets.

### 401(k) Plans Represent the Largest Share of DC Plan Assets

Trillions of dollars, fourth quarter 2023



<sup>1</sup> This category includes Keoghs and DC plans (profit-sharing, thrift-savings, stock bonus, and money purchase) without 401(k) features.

<sup>2</sup> This category is the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) as reported by the Federal Reserve Board.

Sources: Investment Company Institute and Federal Reserve Board; see Table 6 in “The US Retirement Market, First Quarter 2024” (June 2024), [www.ici.org/research/stats/retirement](https://www.ici.org/research/stats/retirement)

# FACT 2

## Adults of all ages participate in 401(k) plans.

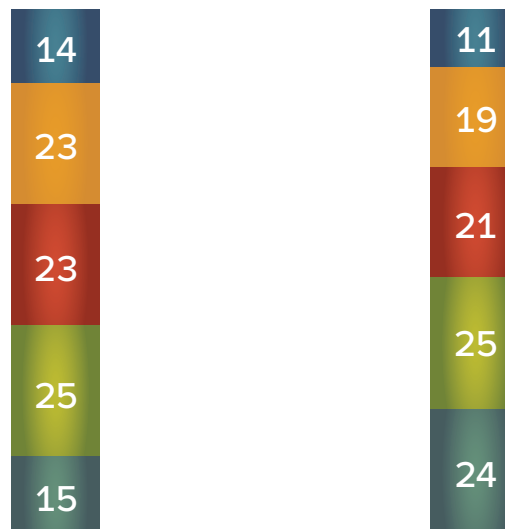
At year-end 2022, 40 percent of 401(k) participants were in their twenties or thirties, 23 percent were in their forties, 23 percent were in their fifties, and 14 percent were in their sixties. Reflecting the life cycle of retirement saving, 401(k) participants tend to be in their peak earning and saving years and are slightly older than the broad population of private-sector workers.

### 401(k) Participants Represent a Range of Ages

Percentage of individuals aged 20 to 69 by age, 2022

#### AGE GROUP

- Sixties
- Fifties
- Forties
- Thirties
- Twenties



Active 401(k)  
plan participants

Private-sector wage  
and salary workers

**MEDIAN: 44 YEARS**

**MEDIAN: 40 YEARS**

Sources: Investment Company Institute tabulations of Current Population Survey data and tabulations from EBRI/ICI Participant-Directed Retirement Plan Data Collection Project; see Figure 1 in "401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2022," *ICI Research Perspective* (Apr 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf)

# FACT 3

## Households from all income groups own DC plan accounts.

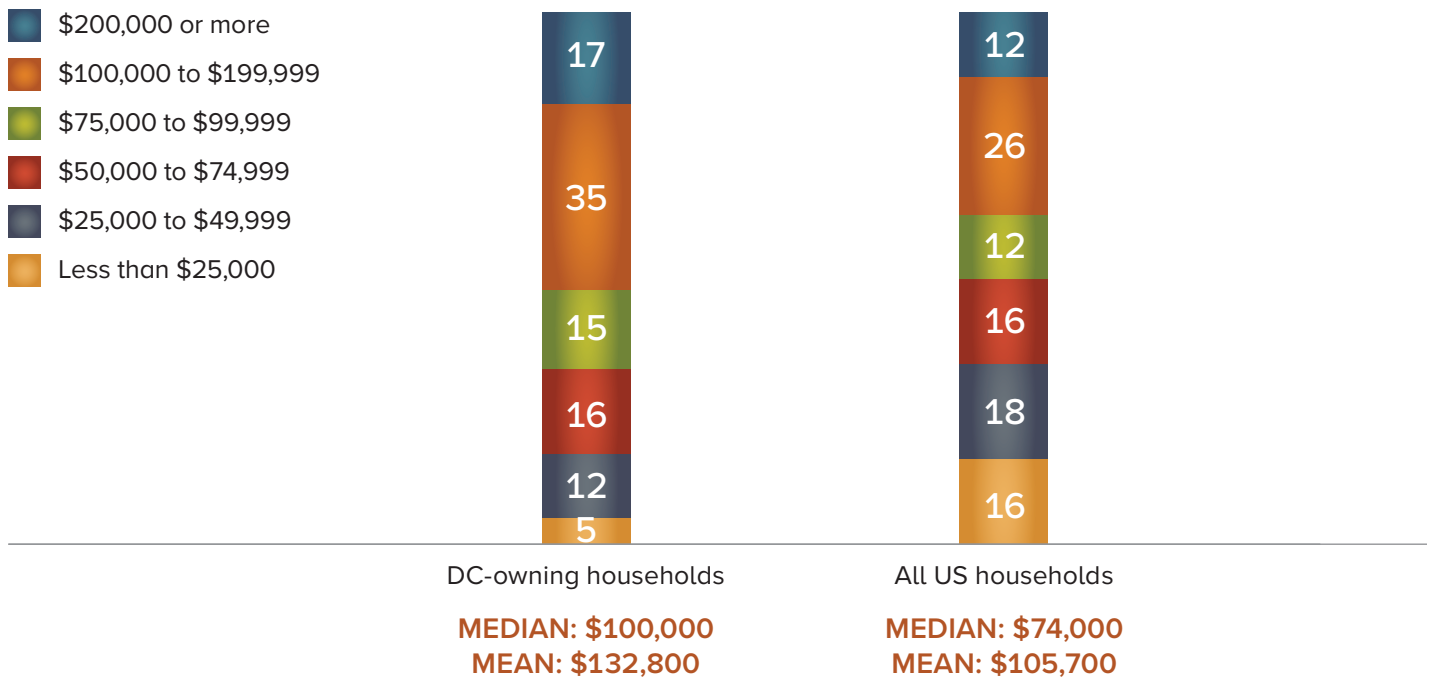
More than four in 10 US households with DC retirement plan accounts had moderate incomes. Forty-three percent of households owning DC accounts in 2023 had annual incomes between \$25,000 and \$99,999. Fifty-two percent of households with DC assets reported incomes of \$100,000 or more and 5 percent had incomes less than \$25,000.

### Households with DC Plan Accounts Cover All Income Groups

Percentage of US households with DC accounts and all US households by household income, 2023

#### HOUSEHOLD INCOME

- \$200,000 or more
- \$100,000 to \$199,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- Less than \$25,000



Note: Total reported is household income before taxes in 2022.

Source: 2023 ICI Annual Mutual Fund Shareholder Tracking Survey

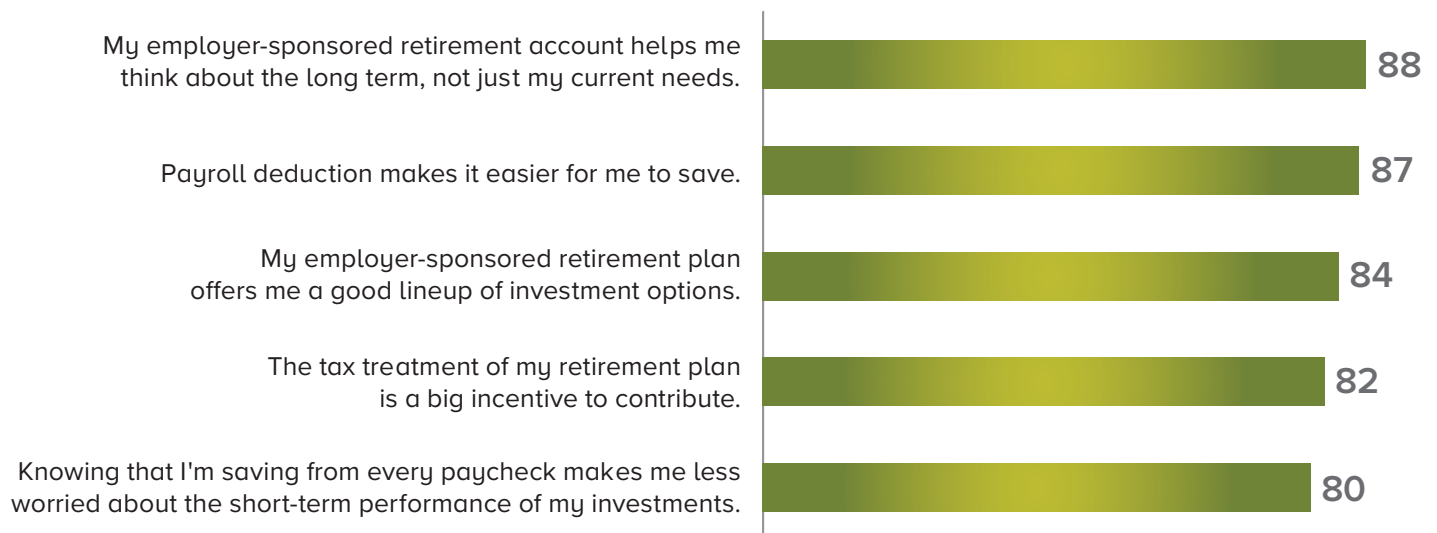
# FACT 4

## Individuals appreciate the tax treatment and investment features of their DC plans.

Most DC account owners agreed that employer-sponsored retirement accounts helped them “think about the long term, not just my current needs” (88 percent) and that “payroll deduction makes it easier for me to save” (87 percent). Saving in employer-sponsored retirement plans has certain tax advantages. Typically, neither the initial contribution nor investment returns are included in taxable income. Instead, taxes are deferred until the individual withdraws money from the account. Overall, 82 percent of individuals with DC plan accounts agreed that the “tax treatment of my retirement plan is a big incentive to contribute.” In addition, 84 percent agreed that their plans offer “a good lineup of investment options,” while 80 percent agreed that “knowing that I’m saving from every paycheck makes me less worried about the short-term performance of my investments.”

### Individuals Who Own DC Plan Accounts Have Favorable Views on Plan Features

Percentage of DC-owning individuals agreeing with each statement, fall 2023



Note: The figure reports the percentage of DC-owning individuals who “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” with the statement. The remaining individuals “somewhat disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

Source: Investment Company Institute tabulations of NORC AmeriSpeak® panel survey data (fall 2023); see Figure 2 in “American Views on Defined Contribution Plan Saving, 2023,” *ICI Research Report* (February 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/24-ppr-dc-plan-saving.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/24-ppr-dc-plan-saving.pdf)

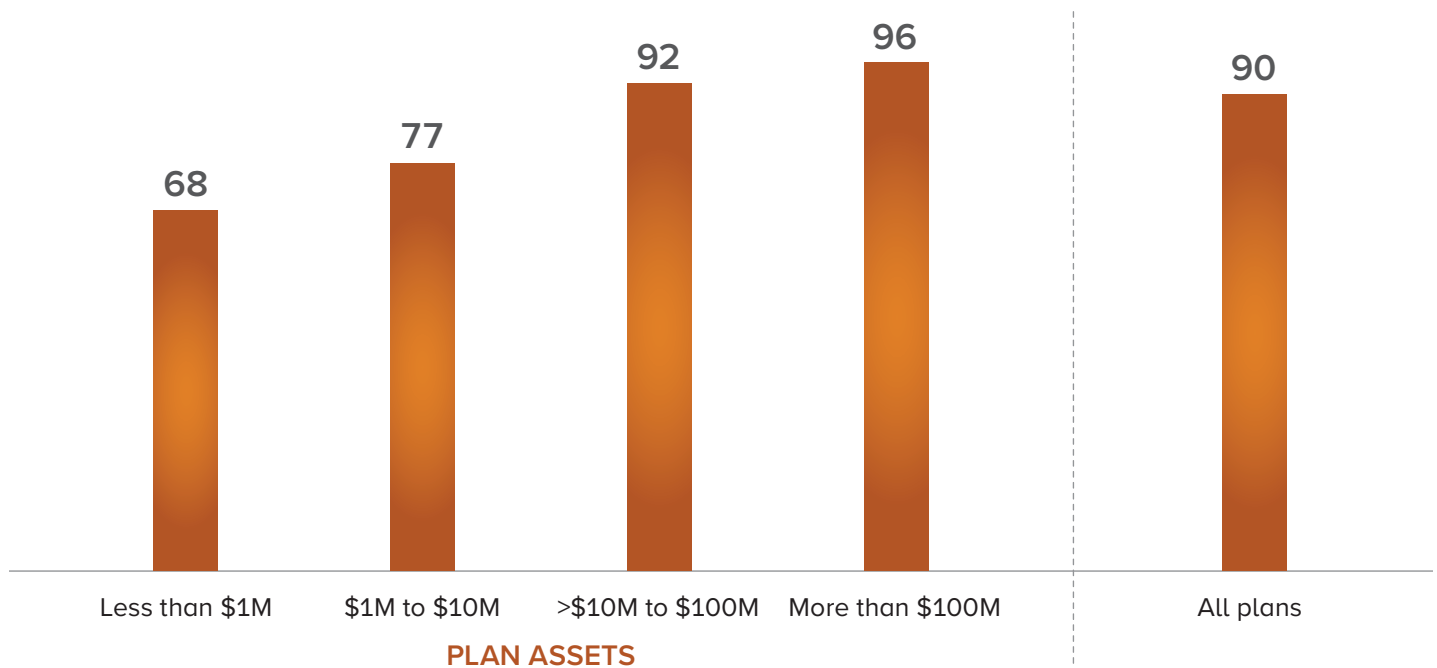
# FACT 5

## Most 401(k) plan participants receive plan contributions from their employers.

In 2021, 90 percent of 401(k) plan participants were in plans with employer contributions.

### Most 401(k) Participants Receive Employer Contributions

Percentage of participants in 401(k) plans with employer contributions by plan assets, 2021



Source: Investment Company Institute tabulations of US Department of Labor Form 5500 Research File

# FACT 6

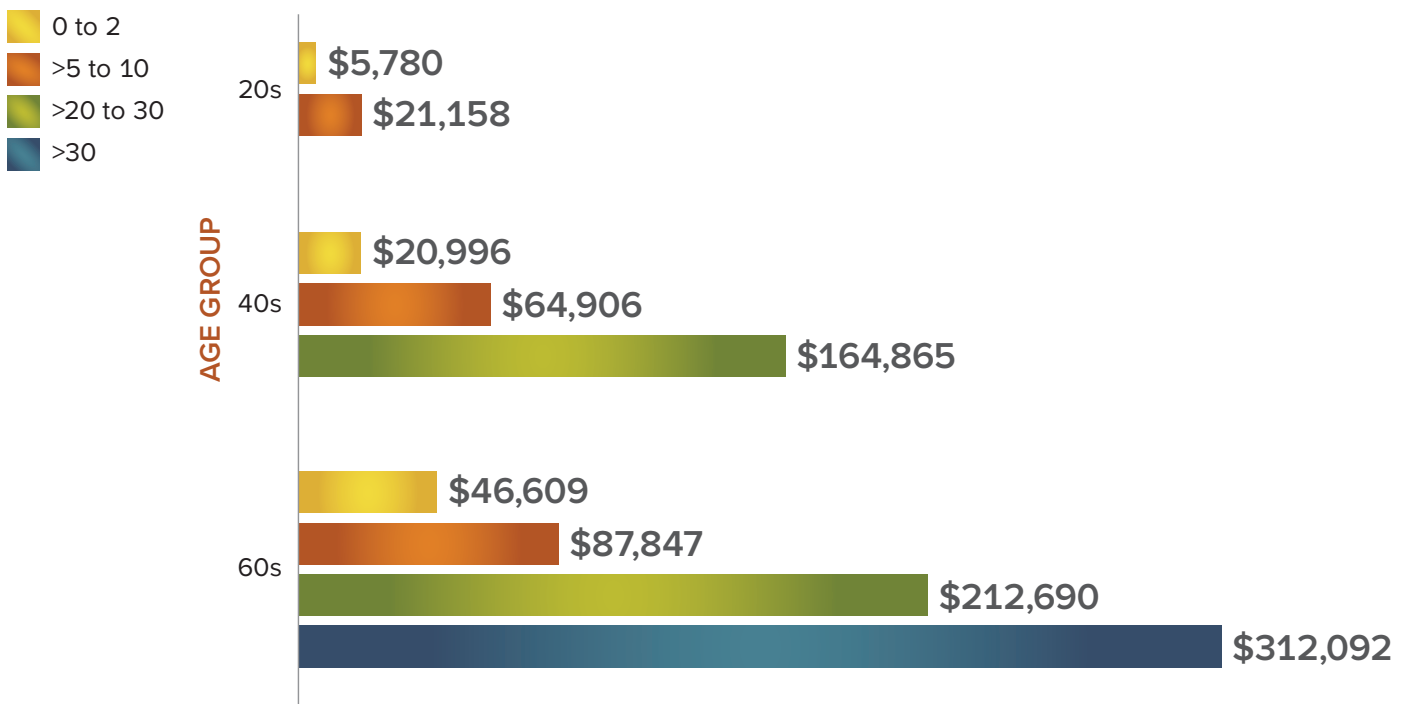
## 401(k) plan account balances rise with participant age and length of time on the job.

Examining the interaction of both age and tenure with 401(k) plan account balances reveals that, for a given age group, average 401(k) plan account balances tend to increase significantly with tenure.

### 401(k) Plan Account Balances Increase with Participant Age and Tenure

Average 401(k) plan account balance by participant age and tenure, year-end 2022

#### YEARS OF TENURE



Note: At year-end 2022, the average account balance among all 12.3 million 401(k) plan participants was \$70,320; the median account balance was \$15,331. Account balances are participant account balances held in 401(k) plans at the participants' current employers and are net of plan loans. Retirement savings held in plans at previous employers or rolled over into individual retirement accounts (IRAs) are not included. The tenure variable is generally years working at current employer, and thus may overstate years of participation in the 401(k) plan.

Source: Tabulations from EBRI/ICI Participant-Directed Retirement Plan Data Collection Project; see Figure 5 in "401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2022," *ICI Research Perspective* (April 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf)



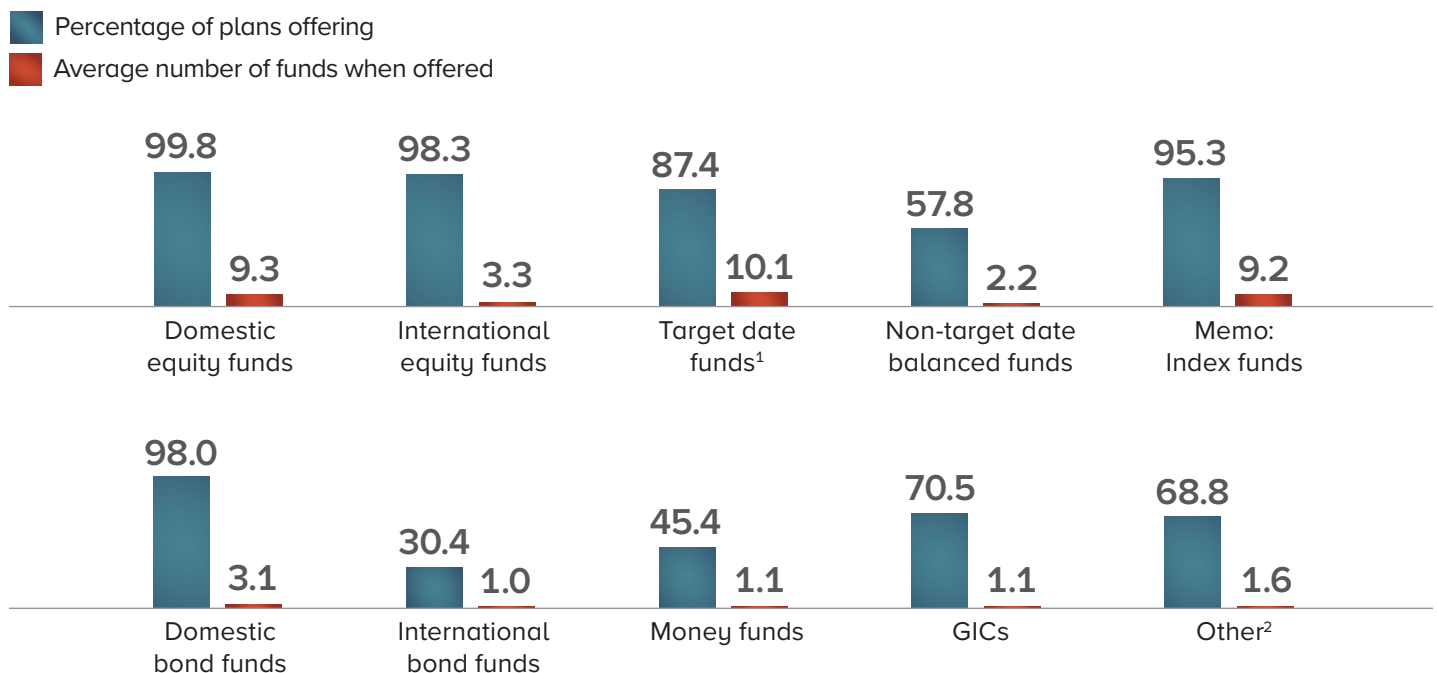
# FACT 7

## 401(k) plans offer participants a wide array of investment options.

Domestic equity funds, international equity funds, and domestic bond funds were the most likely investment options to be offered in 401(k) plans in 2020. Nearly all plans offered these types of funds, which can be mutual funds, collective investment trusts (CITs), or separate accounts. Equity funds were the most common investment option, with 401(k) plans offering about 13 funds on average, of which nine were domestic equity funds and three were international equity funds. Domestic bond funds were almost universally available, offering three funds on average. Target date funds were another common category in 401(k) investment lineups, representing roughly 10 fund options when offered in plans.

### 401(k) Plan Lineups Contain Many Investment Options

Percentage of plans offering and average number of investment options among plans offering the specified investment option, 2020



<sup>1</sup> A target date fund typically rebalances its portfolio to become less focused on growth and more focused on income as it approaches and passes the target date of the fund, which is usually included in the fund's name.

<sup>2</sup> Other includes commodity funds, real estate funds, and individual stocks (including company stock) and bonds, but each separate option is counted as a unique investment option.

Note: The sample is 59,981 plans with 59.1 million participants and \$5.9 trillion in assets. Participant loans are excluded. Funds include mutual funds, collective investment trusts, separate accounts, and other pooled investment products. BrightScope audited 401(k) filings generally include plans with 100 participants or more. Plans with fewer than four investment options or more than 100 investment options are excluded from BrightScope audited 401(k) filings for this analysis.

Source: BrightScope Defined Contribution Plan Database; see Exhibit 2.6 in *The BrightScope/ICI Defined Contribution Plan Profile: A Close Look at 401(k) Plans, 2020* (Sep 2023), [www.ici.org/files/2023/23-rpt-dcplan-profile-401k.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2023/23-rpt-dcplan-profile-401k.pdf)

# FACT 8

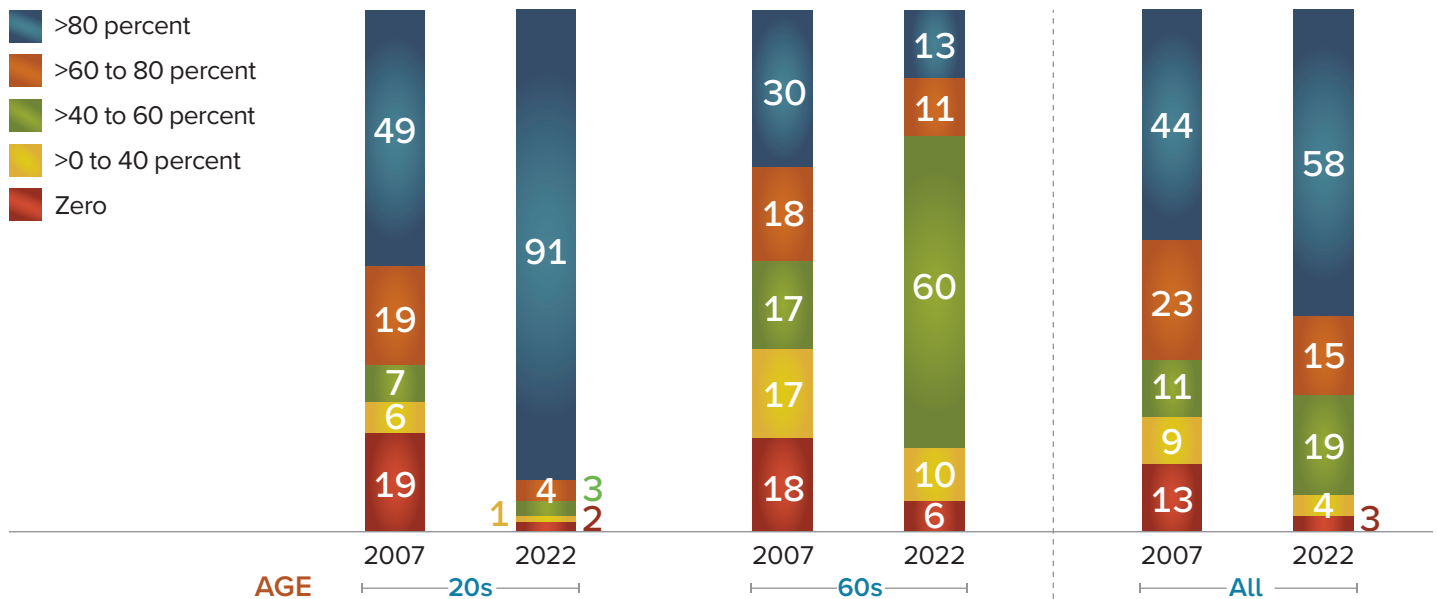
## Equities figure prominently in 401(k) plans, especially among younger 401(k) investors.

Data from the 2022 EBRI/ICI 401(k) database show that equity securities—equity funds, the equity portion of balanced funds, and company stock—represented 71 percent of the assets in 401(k) plan participants’ accounts. Equity funds represented 38 percent of 401(k) plan participants’ account balances. Another 38 percent of 401(k) assets were invested in target date funds, and 68 percent of all 401(k) plan participants had invested at least some of their accounts in target date funds. Additionally, more 401(k) plan participants held equities at year-end 2022 compared with year-end 2007, and many—particularly younger participants—had higher concentrations in equities. Younger 401(k) participants were much more likely to hold equities and high concentrations in equities at year-end 2022 compared with year-end 2007. Of these younger participants, the share holding no equities fell to 2 percent at year-end 2022 from 19 percent at year-end 2007.

### Asset Allocation to Equities Varied Widely Among 401(k) Plan Participants

Percentage of participants by age of participant, year-end

#### PERCENTAGE OF 401(k) PLAN ACCOUNT BALANCE INVESTED IN EQUITIES



Note: Equities include equity funds, company stock, and the equity portion of balanced funds. Funds include mutual funds, bank collective trusts, life insurance separate accounts, and any pooled investment product primarily invested in the security indicated. Components may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Tabulations from EBRI/ICI Participant-Directed Retirement Plan Data Collection Project; see Figure 8 in “401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2022,” *ICI Research Perspective* (Apr 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf)

# FACT 9

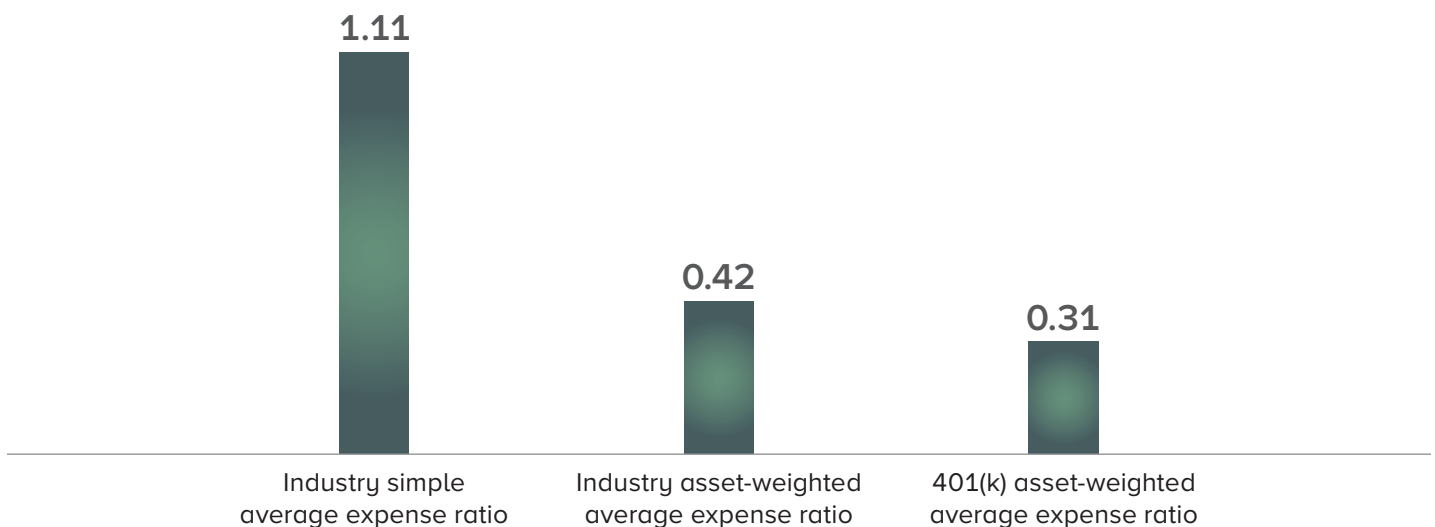
## 401(k) plan participants have concentrated their assets in lower-cost funds.

Employers offering 401(k) plans typically hire service providers to operate the plans, and these providers charge fees for their services. 401(k) plans have administrative services, participant-focused services, and regulatory and compliance services. Plan costs may be paid by the employer, the plan, or the plan participants, and may be assessed at a plan level or account level as a fixed charge or as a percentage of assets.

Sixty-five percent of 401(k) plan assets at year-end 2023 were invested in mutual funds—mainly equity mutual funds, representing about 59 percent of 401(k) mutual fund assets and about 38 percent of all 401(k) plan assets. 401(k) plan participants investing in mutual funds tend to invest in lower-cost funds. In 2023, the simple average expense ratio for equity mutual funds offered in the United States, including both index and actively managed strategies, was 1.11 percent. However, taking into account both the plan sponsors' selection of funds offered in 401(k) plans and the distribution of assets in those funds, 401(k) plan participants who invested in equity mutual funds paid 0.31 percent on average.

### 401(k) Mutual Fund Investors Tend to Pay Lower-Than-Average Expense Ratios

Total expense ratio for equity mutual funds, percent, 2023



Note: ICI uses asset-weighted average expense ratios to measure the expense ratios that mutual fund investors actually incur for investing in mutual funds. The simple average expense ratio, which measures the average expense ratio of all funds offered for sale, can overstate what investors actually paid because it fails to reflect the fact that investors tend to concentrate their holdings in lower-cost funds. The total expense ratio includes fund operating expenses and any 12b-1 fees. Data exclude mutual funds available as investment choices in variable annuities.

Sources: Investment Company Institute, Lipper and Morningstar; see Figure 6 in “The Economics of Providing 401(k) Plans: Services, Fees, and Expenses, 2023,” *ICI Research Perspective* (July 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-06.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-06.pdf)

# FACT 10

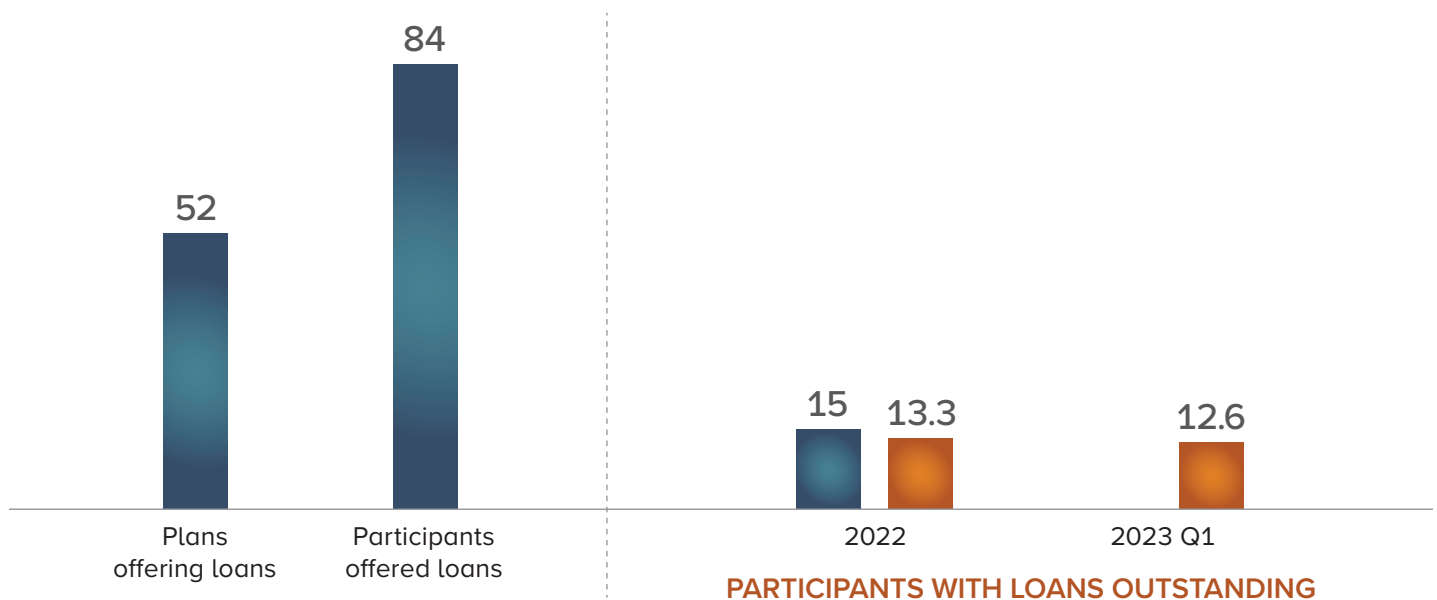
## Fewer than one in five 401(k) plan participants have loans outstanding.

Data from the 2022 EBRI/ICI 401(k) database indicate that 52 percent of 401(k) plans offered a plan loan provision to participants, and 84 percent of participants were in plans offering loans. However, relatively few participants made use of this borrowing privilege. Factoring in all 401(k) participants with and without loan access in the database, only 15 percent had loans outstanding at year-end 2022. More recent data from the ICI survey of DC plan recordkeepers similarly show that 12.6 percent of DC plan participants had loans outstanding at the end of March 2023.

### Fewer Than One in Five 401(k) Participants Have Loans Outstanding

Percentage of total, end of period

- EBRI/ICI 401(k) Plan Database
- ICI Survey of DC Plan Recordkeepers



Sources: Tabulations from EBRI/ICI Participant-Directed Retirement Plan Data Collection Project and the ICI Survey of DC Plan Recordkeepers; see “401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2022,” *ICI Research Report* (April 2024), [www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2024/per30-03.pdf), and “Defined Contribution Plan Participants’ Activities, First Quarter 2023,” *ICI Research Report* (July 2023), [www.ici.org/files/2023/23-rpt-recsurveyq1.pdf](http://www.ici.org/files/2023/23-rpt-recsurveyq1.pdf)

## Additional Reading

- » 401(k) Plan Asset Allocation, Account Balances, and Loan Activity in 2022  
[www.ici.org/research/retirement/ebri-ici-401k](http://www.ici.org/research/retirement/ebri-ici-401k)
- » The BrightScope/ICI Defined Contribution Plan Profile, 2020  
[www.ici.org/research/retirement/dc-plan-profile](http://www.ici.org/research/retirement/dc-plan-profile)
- » The US Retirement Market, First Quarter 2024  
[www.ici.org/research/stats/retirement](http://www.ici.org/research/stats/retirement)
- » The Economics of Providing 401(k) Plans: Services, Fees, and Expenses, 2023  
[www.ici.org/research/industry/fees](http://www.ici.org/research/industry/fees)
- » American Views on Defined Contribution Plan Saving, 2023  
[www.ici.org/research/retirement/us-views](http://www.ici.org/research/retirement/us-views)
- » Defined Contribution Plan Participants' Activities, First Quarter 2023  
[www.ici.org/research/retirement/dc-plan-activities](http://www.ici.org/research/retirement/dc-plan-activities)



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