

Captain's Log

Guiding Your Financial Journey



Hank Persia, CFP®
Financial Advisor & Branch Manager
Raymond James Financial Services, Inc.
Starboard Wealth Advisors, Inc.
5574-B Garden Village Way
Suite 1
Greensboro, NC 27410
336-763-4190
336-763-4152
hank.persia@raymondjames.com
www.starboardwealthadvisors.com



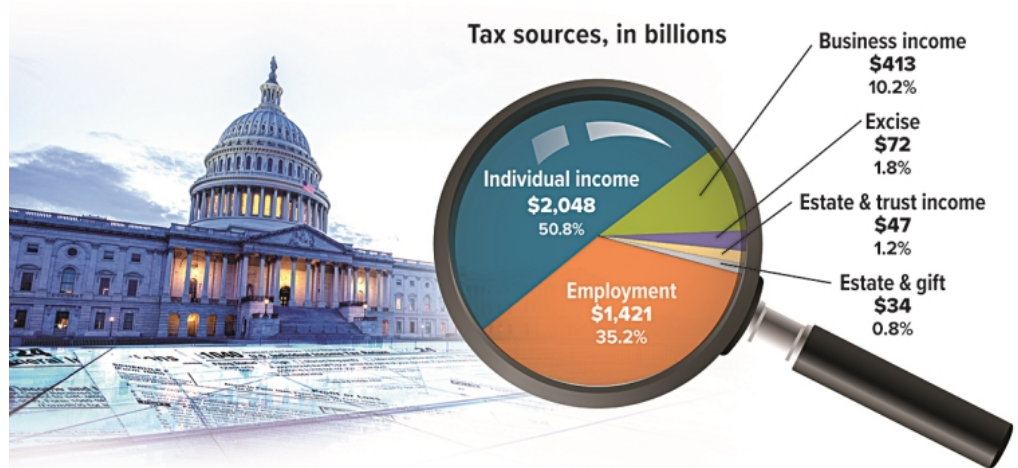
\$3,138

Average refund on individual income tax returns in the 2024 filing season. About 64% of individual filers received refunds.

Source: Internal Revenue Service, January 3, 2025

Funding the Federal Government

The IRS collected a little more than \$4 trillion in net taxes (after refunds) in fiscal year 2023. About half was individual income taxes, and around 35% was employment (payroll) taxes, including Social Security, Medicare, unemployment insurance, and railroad retirement. Business income taxes made up a little over 10% of the total, with relatively small contributions from excise, estate and trust income, and estate and gift taxes.



Source: Internal Revenue Service, April 2024

ETFs Are Closing the Gap with Mutual Funds

Investor demand for exchange-traded funds (ETFs) has increased rapidly over the last decade due to attractive features that set them apart from mutual funds. At the end of 2024, over \$10 trillion was invested in more than 3,600 ETFs. This was equivalent to 36% of the assets invested in mutual funds, up from 21% in 2019 and just 12% in 2014.¹

Fund meets stock

Like a mutual fund, an ETF is a portfolio of securities assembled by an investment company. Mutual fund shares are typically purchased from and sold back to the investment company and priced at the end of the trading day, with the price determined by the net asset value (NAV) of the underlying securities. By contrast, ETF shares can be traded throughout the day on stock exchanges, like individual stocks, and the price may be higher or lower than the NAV because of supply and demand. In volatile markets, ETF prices might quickly reflect changes in market sentiment, while NAVs — adjusted once a day — take longer to react, resulting in ETFs trading at a premium or a discount.

Indexes and diversification

Like mutual funds, ETFs may be *passively managed*, meaning they track an index of securities, or *actively managed*, guided by managers who assemble investments chosen to meet the fund's objectives. Whereas active management is common among mutual funds, most ETFs are passively managed, which helps reduce administrative fees.

Investors can choose from a wide variety of indexes, ranging from broad-based stock or bond indexes to specific market sectors or indexes that emphasize certain factors. This makes ETFs a helpful tool to gain exposure to various market segments, investing styles, or strategies, potentially at a lower cost. Diversification is a method used to help manage investment risk; it does not guarantee a profit or protect against investment loss.

Tax efficiency

Investors who own mutual fund shares actually own shares in the underlying investments, so when investments are sold within the fund, there may be capital gains taxes if the fund is held outside of a tax-advantaged account. By contrast, an investor who owns ETF shares does not own the underlying investments and generally will be liable for capital gains taxes only when selling the ETF shares.

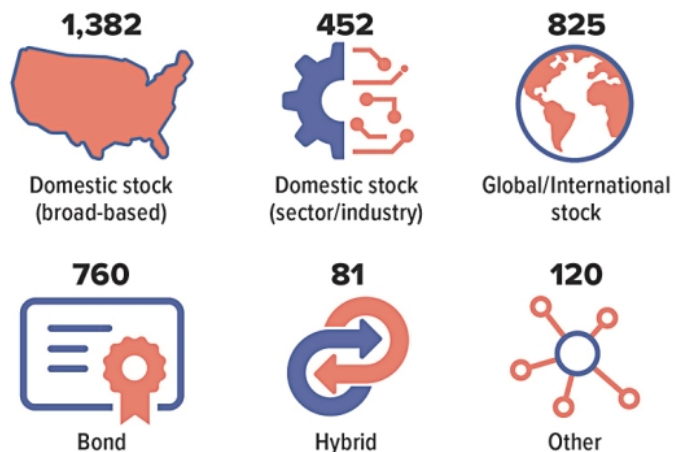
Trading, expenses, and risks

ETFs typically have lower expense ratios than mutual funds — a large part of their appeal. However, you may pay a brokerage commission when you buy or sell shares, so your overall costs could be higher, especially if you trade frequently. Whereas mutual fund assets can usually be exchanged within a fund

family at the end of the trading day at no cost, moving assets between ETFs requires selling and buying assets separately, which may be subject to brokerage fees and market shifts between transactions.

Plenty of Choices

Number of ETFs by type of underlying investment



Source: Investment Company Institute, 2025 (data for December 2024). Bond funds are subject to the same inflation, interest rate, and credit risks as their underlying bonds. As interest rates rise, bond prices typically fall, which can adversely affect a bond fund's performance. A portfolio invested only in companies in a particular industry or market sector may not be sufficiently diversified and could be subject to higher volatility and risk. Investing internationally carries additional risks, such as financial reporting differences, currency exchange risk, and economic and political risk unique to the specific country. This may result in greater share price volatility.

Mutual funds typically have minimum investment amounts, but you can generally invest any dollar amount after the initial purchase, buying partial shares as necessary. By contrast, you can purchase a single share of an ETF if you wish, but you can typically only purchase whole shares.

The trading flexibility of ETFs may add to their appeal, but it could lead some investors to trade more often than might be appropriate for their situations. The principal value of ETFs and mutual funds fluctuates with market conditions. Shares, when sold, may be worth more or less than their original cost. The performance of an unmanaged index is not indicative of the performance of any specific security. Individuals cannot invest directly in any index.

Exchange-traded funds and mutual funds are sold by prospectus. Please consider the investment objectives, risks, charges, and expenses carefully before investing. The prospectus, which contains this and other information about the investment company, can be obtained from your financial professional. Be sure to read the prospectus carefully before deciding whether to invest.

1) Investment Company Institute, 2025

Debt After Death: What Happens to Debt When Someone Dies?

Losing a loved one is never easy. In addition to the emotional challenges you may face, you might also be worried about what will happen to their debts once they are gone.

Generally, with limited exceptions, when a loved one dies you will not be liable for their unpaid debts. Instead, their debts are typically addressed through the settling of their estate.

How are debts settled when someone dies?

The process of settling a deceased person's estate is called probate. During the probate process, a personal representative (known as an executor in some states) or administrator if there is no will, is appointed to manage the estate and is responsible for paying off the decedent's debts before any remaining estate assets can be distributed to the beneficiaries or heirs. Paying off a deceased individual's debts can significantly lower the value of an estate and may even involve the selling of estate assets, such as real estate or personal property.

Debts are usually paid in a specific order, with secured debts (such as a mortgage or car loan), funeral expenses, taxes, and medical bills generally having priority over unsecured debts, such as credit cards or personal loans. If the estate cannot pay the debt and no other individual shares legal responsibility for the debt (e.g., there is no cosigner or joint account holder), then the estate will be deemed insolvent and the debt will most likely go unpaid.

Estate and probate laws vary, depending on the state, so it's important to discuss your specific situation with an attorney who specializes in estate planning and probate.

What about cosigned loans and jointly held accounts?

A cosigned loan is a type of loan where the cosigner agrees to be legally responsible for the loan payments if the primary borrower fails to make them. If a decedent has an outstanding loan that was cosigned, such as a mortgage or auto loan, the surviving cosigner will be responsible for the remaining debt.

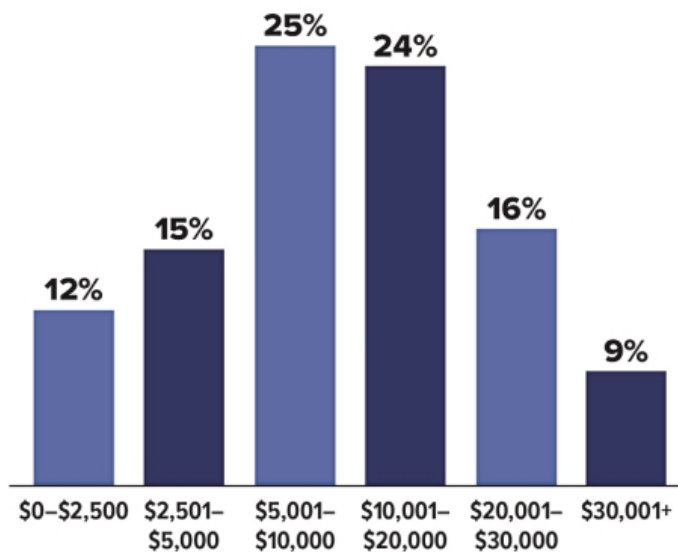
For cosigned private student loans, the surviving cosigner is usually responsible for the remaining loan balance, but this can vary depending on the lender and terms of the loan agreement.

If a decedent had credit cards or other accounts that were jointly held with another individual, the surviving account holder will be responsible for the remaining debt. Authorized users on credit card accounts will not be liable for any unpaid debt.

Are there special rules for community property states?

If the decedent was married and lived in a community property state, the surviving spouse is responsible for their spouse's debt as long as the debt was incurred during the marriage. The surviving spouse is responsible even if he or she was unaware that the deceased spouse incurred the debt.

How much debt Americans expect to leave behind when they die



Source: Debt.com Death and Debt Survey, 2024

What if you inherit a home with a mortgage?

Generally, when you inherit a home with a mortgage, you will become responsible for the mortgage payments. However, the specific rules will vary depending on your state's probate laws, the type of mortgage, and the terms set by the lender.

Can you be contacted by debt collectors?

If you are appointed the personal representative or administrator of your loved one's estate, a debt collector is allowed to contact you regarding outstanding debts. However, if you are not legally responsible for a debt it is illegal for a debt collector to use deceptive practices to suggest or imply that you are. Even if you are legally responsible for a debt, under the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA), debt collectors are not allowed to unduly harass you.

Finally, beware of scam artists who may pose as debt collectors and try to coerce or pressure you for payment of your loved one's unpaid bills.

Breaking Down the Numbers: The Soaring U.S. National Debt

The U.S. national debt is the total amount of money owed by the federal government. As of January 2025, it stands at \$36.16 trillion.¹

The difference between deficit and debt

When the federal government spends more money than it collects in taxes in any given fiscal year (the government's fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30), there is a deficit. The opposite of a deficit is a surplus.

To fund its operations when there is a deficit, the government borrows money by selling Treasury notes, bills, bonds, and other securities to investors, paying interest based on the interest rate environment at the time the security is issued. The interest owed to these investors adds to each year's spending deficit (if any) and further increases the national debt over time.

In the past 50 years, the U.S. has run a deficit 46 times. The last U.S. budget surplus was in 2001. In 2024, the deficit was \$1.83 trillion, the third-highest on record. The highest deficit was in 2020 during the pandemic, when it was \$3.13 trillion.²

Why is the national debt so high?

There are several reasons for the ballooning national debt. One reason is previous tax cuts and pandemic spending. Another major reason is the increasing cost of Social Security and Medicare, two popular programs that serve a growing demographic of older Americans and make up the two biggest slices of the federal

budget pie.³ Cutting spending on these programs is not politically popular, though in theory, future benefits could be trimmed. Military spending also consumes a significant portion of the federal budget.

A category of spending that can't be cut is the interest the federal government must pay to investors who have purchased Treasury securities, which is consuming an increasing share of the federal budget. This is sometimes referred to as "servicing the national debt." As of September 2024, \$1.13 trillion went toward maintaining the debt, which was 17% of total federal spending in fiscal year 2024.⁴

Comparing a country's total debt to its gross domestic product (GDP) is typically a better way to gauge a country's ability to pay down its debt than just looking at the raw debt number. For fiscal year 2024, the U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio was 124%. This was just under the record 126% in 2020.⁵ According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, based on current spending and revenue projections, the debt-to-GDP ratio is projected to reach 179% by 2054.⁶

Clearly, Congress has work ahead to better balance U.S. revenue and spending.

Projections are based on current conditions, subject to change, and may not come to pass.

1–5) fiscaldata.treasury.gov, 2025

6) Congressional Budget Office, 2025

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