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Consumers in Los Angeles manage their money better than their peers in other big U.S. cities, a study by CreditCards.com found, while Baltimore residents fared the worst.

The study compared average credit scores in the 25 most populous metropolitan areas, adjusted for differences in age, income, education and strength of the local economy.

but owed $14,000 a month in minimum credit card payments. "Maybe people with more money feel like it's always going to be coming in and they can just charge up," she said.

Los Angeles tops the list

Los Angeles, the top city in our analysis, suffers from low household income, relatively high unemployment and the lowest education level of the group. Its population is also on the younger side, which makes it harder to achieve a long track record of steady bill payment.

And the national economic recovery has been less than generous.

Since the recession, "Some of the industries that have been growing are lower-wage industries," said Juan Millan, labor market consultant for the state Employment Development Department. "There is a shift in types of jobs that are available."

Yet, against those headwinds, LA generates an average credit score of 664. That's just 4 points above subprime territory, but about 16 points better than its economy and demographics predict.

"I'm not shocked by that," said Natalie Lohrenz, counseling director at Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Orange County, which works with people across the metro region and the state. She said many locals are status-conscious, and one of the things they strive for is good credit.

"They're obsessed with their credit score," she said.

Scores as status symbols

The three-digit number has become another symbol of achievement, discipline or sheer one-upmanship, she said. On a more practical level, it can help you get a loan, a credit card, an apartment – or even a date.

Keeping up financial appearances could help explain why residents' balances on

twice about splitting up, Lohrenz said. "The high cost of living may be keeping families together," she said.

No. 2 city takes different route to success
No. 2 city Minneapolis-St. Paul almost tied LA in money management skills. Unlike LA, the Twin Cities have many advantages, including high education levels and a strong economy, with the second-best jobless rate during the study period. Its average credit score is high, too – No. 1 in the group.

Minneapolis makes the most of its advantages. Its 704 average credit score is No. 1 by a wide margin. It's the only city above 700, 9 points ahead of next-place Boston and a full 34 points above average.

"People here in the Midwest, when things get tough, they stop spending," said RayeAnn Hoffman, credit counselor at Consumer Credit of Minnesota in St. Louis Park, outside Minneapolis. That's what residents did in the recession, and they're only starting to open their wallets now, she said. Consequently, it is a slow time for credit counselors.

"We're finding most people aren't needing our services at the moment – they're able to pay down their debt," Hoffman said. These days she counsels people who call for advice on how to improve their credit scores. "They're not necessarily struggling," she said.

Twin Cities residents seem to have a good grasp of credit basics. Their $4,815 average balance on bankcards is above average, according to credit report data, but that's still just 26 percent of their available credit. The credit utilization rate ties with San Francisco for the lowest use of revolving credit in the group.

a result, most of the 25 cities cluster around the midrange of financial ability. The cities at the extreme ends of the money management spectrum raise the question of what their residents are doing differently.

DC, Baltimore trail
So what about it, Baltimore? With the fourth-highest household income and a better-than-average unemployment rate, Baltimore's predicted credit score is 683, which would be fifth highest of the group. But the actual score is 667, almost 17 points below what the economy and demographic factors predict, and just 7 points above subprime territory. That earns it a last-place finish for money management.

The Washington metro area, which adjoins the Baltimore area, is in the same boat. It ranks No. 24 in money management despite the highest household income among the group and enviable education levels – including the most professional and graduate degrees.

"In Maryland, we have a lot of people with very high income," said Nina Heck, former counseling director at Guidewell Financial Solutions credit counseling in Baltimore, now its advocacy director and assistant to the CEO. "We counsel a lot of people with low to moderate incomes, but we also counsel people with six-digit incomes."

Years of working as a credit counselor showed her that high incomes don't necessarily insulate people from financial problems. "I counsel people it's not about the dollars – the figures may be higher, but they're still in trouble."

But how does the Baltimore-Washington corridor manage its robust paychecks less well than other areas?

One answer comes from credit report data. Average balances on bank cards are an

programs designed to make payments affordable.

"Modified mortgages are only a Band-Aid for people who never should have been in the home to begin with," she said. As a result, homeowners' finances are crimped for years by an overpriced home and commensurately high mortgage payments. Baltimore's median home value was eighth-highest of the group, while Washington was fifth.

Knowledge is financial power

There's one attribute that financially troubled consumers share, credit counselors in different cities agreed: a poor grasp of financial basics. Whatever the family income, adhering to a budget and setting savings aside for emergencies are within consumers' control.

"Most of the people we counsel don't have good money management skills," Heck said. "There's always options in anyone's budget." One of the toughest obstacles to cutting spending is getting the whole family on board an austerity plan, she added.

Even in creditworthy Minnesota, consumers who Hoffman sees can be financially reckless, "The majority of people have no clue what they're paying in interest on credit cards," she said. "They have to look it up."

Creditcards.com used a multiple regression model to examine differences in cities' credit scores, adjusted for differences in population median household income, median age, unemployment rate of the labor force, and educational achievement, as measured by the population with a high school diploma or better. VantageScore credit scores were obtained from the Experian State of Credit 2015 report. The income and demographic data comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2014 estimates.

The bureau's population figures also determined the list of cities examined, which

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