The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans

The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago to help measure the justice gap among low-income Americans in 2017. LSC defines the justice gap as the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and the resources available to meet those needs. NORC conducted a survey of approximately 2,000 adults living in households at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) using its nationally representative, probability-based AmeriSpeak® Panel. This report presents findings based on this survey and additional data LSC collected from the legal aid organizations it funds.

86% of the civil legal problems reported by low-income Americans in the past year received inadequate or no legal help.

In the past year, 71% of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem, including problems with domestic violence, veterans’ benefits, disability access, housing conditions, and health care.

In 2017, low-income Americans will approach LSC-funded legal aid organizations for support with an estimated 1.7 million problems. They will receive only limited or no legal help for more than half of these problems because of a lack of resources.

More than 60 million Americans have family incomes at or below 125% of FPL, including:

- About 6.4 million seniors
- More than 11.1 million persons with disabilities
- More than 1.7 million veterans
- About 10 million rural residents

Data Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2015 1-year estimates
Key Findings: Experience with Civil Legal Problems
Data Source: 2017 Justice Gap Measurement Survey

71% of low-income households have experienced a civil legal problem in the past year. The rate is even higher for some: households with survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault (97%), with parents/guardians of kids under 18 (80%), and with disabled persons (80%).

1 in 4 low-income households has experienced 6+ civil legal problems in the past year, including 67% of households with survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault.

7 in 10 low-income Americans with recent personal experience of a civil legal problem say a problem has significantly affected their lives.

71% of households with veterans or other military personnel have experienced a civil legal problem in the past year. They face the same types of problems as others, but 13% also report problems specific to veterans.

Common Civil Legal Problem Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Consumer &amp; Finance</th>
<th>Rental Housing</th>
<th>Children &amp; Custody</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Income Maintenance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Percent of households experiencing at least one issue-related problem in the past year. Base sizes vary.

Key Findings: Seeking Legal Help
Data Source: 2017 Justice Gap Measurement Survey

Low-income Americans seek professional legal help for only 20% of the civil legal problems they face.

Top reasons for not seeking professional legal help are:

• Deciding to deal with a problem on one’s own
• Not knowing where to look for help or what resources might exist
• Not being sure whether their problem is “legal”

Low-income Americans are most likely to seek professional legal help on problems that are more obviously “legal,” like custody issues and wills/estates.
Key Findings: Reports from the Field
Data Source: LSC 2017 Intake Census and LSC 2016 Grantee Activity Reports

The 133 LSC-funded legal aid organizations across the United States, Puerto Rico, and territories will serve an estimated 1 million low-income Americans in 2017, but will be able to fully address the civil legal needs of only about half of them.

Among the low-income Americans receiving help from LSC-funded legal aid organizations, the top three types of civil legal problems relate to family, housing, and income maintenance.

In 2017, low-income Americans will receive limited or no legal help for an estimated 1.1 million eligible problems after seeking help from LSC-funded legal aid organizations.

A lack of available resources accounts for the vast majority (85% - 97%) of civil legal problems that LSC-funded organizations do not fully address.

Special Focus
The Special Focus section of this report presents key findings for several groups of interest.

Seniors
56% of seniors’ households had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year.

Rural Residents
75% of households in rural areas had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year.

Veterans
71% of households with veterans or other military personnel had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year.

Persons with Disabilities
80% of households with persons with disabilities had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year.

Parents of Children under 18
80% of households with parents or guardians of minor children had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year.

Survivors of Domestic Violence or Sexual Assault
97% of households with survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault had at least 1 civil legal problem in past year in addition to domestic violence or sexual assault.
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