

Many U.S. Families Faced Civil Legal Issues in 2018

Survey highlights need for alternative approaches to help people navigate the courts

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About 1 in 3 U.S. households faced housing, family, or debt issues that could result in an interaction with the civil legal system in 2018, according to a survey commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

The pervasive nature of such civil legal issues suggests that Americans would benefit from having more options for handling these cases and a broader range of assistance programs that extend beyond what private or legal aid attorneys can effectively provide.

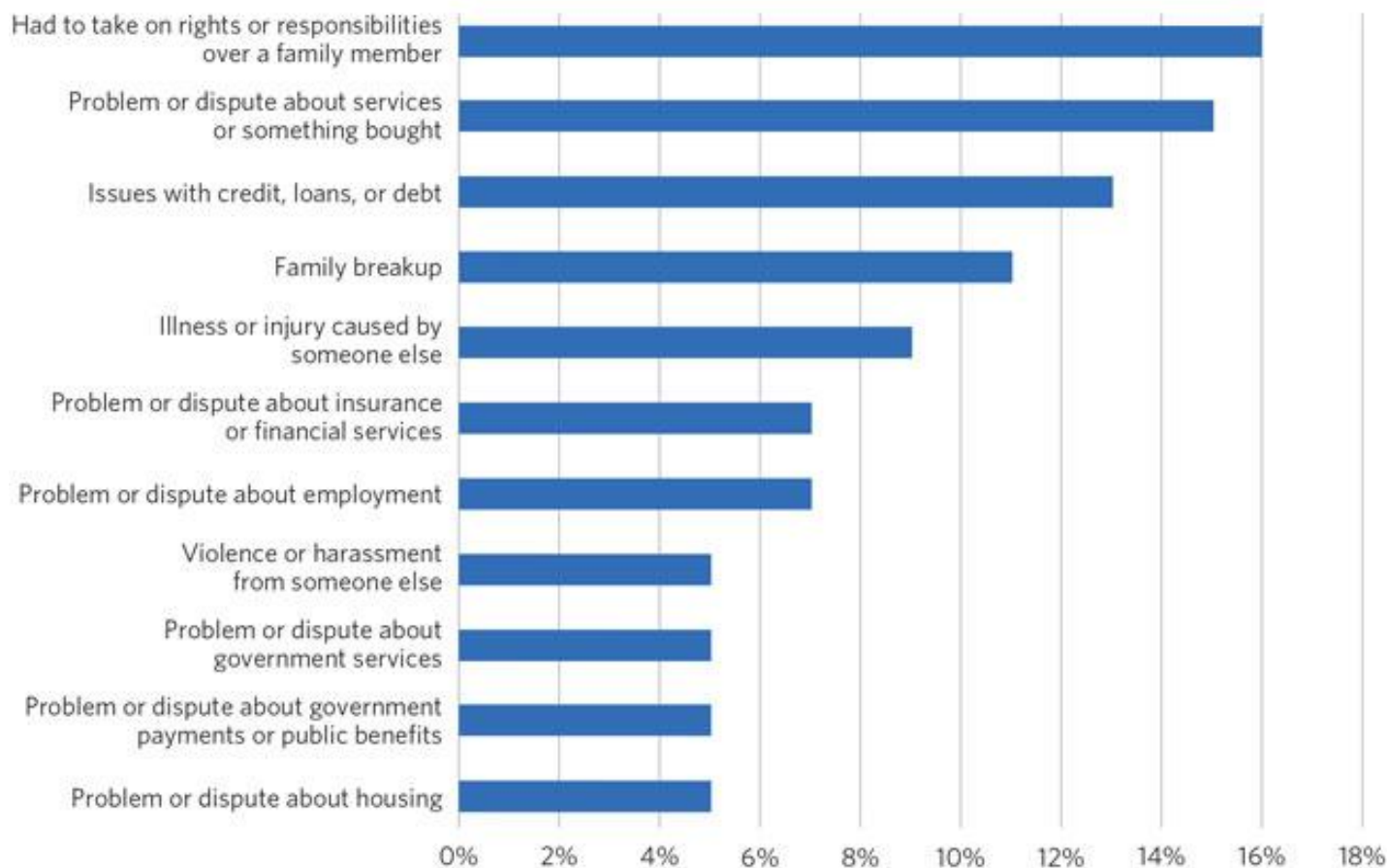
In the survey, 47 percent of households reported that they had dealt with at least one civil legal problem over the previous 12 months, not including traffic tickets. Including traffic citations—which may be civil or criminal, depending on the state—the number increased to 56 percent. A significant number of respondents—25 percent—said they had experienced at least two civil legal problems during the year.

Aside from traffic tickets, the top civil issues faced by families involved responsibility for a family member, for example child custody (16 percent); disputes related to goods or services (15 percent); and issues with credit, loans, or debt (13 percent). (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Variety of Civil Legal Problems Affect U.S. Households

Share of respondents reporting specific issues in survey



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 18-23, 2018, by SSRS for The Pew Charitable Trusts

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Pew commissioned the research firm SSRS to conduct the first representative survey of the American public in decades to capture the prevalence of civil legal problems in the United States across all income levels. Previous polling on this issue had focused on segments of the population, targeting specific locations or income levels. Last December, SSRS surveyed 1,002 people on cellphones or landlines in English or Spanish, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.68 percentage points.

The survey included 12 questions about issues related to housing, family, debt, employment, traffic violations, government benefits, and disputes about utilities and services. The questions referred to the issues generally and not specifically as civil or legal concerns. Because these do not represent a comprehensive list of potential civil legal problems, the actual incidence rate is likely higher.

Among the key findings:

- Renters were significantly more likely than homeowners to experience a civil legal problem—61 percent versus 53 percent.
- People who said they had experienced an illness or injury caused by someone else were more likely to also report problems related to credit, loans, or debt.

The broad impact of civil legal problems confirmed by the SSRS survey suggests that the nation needs new solutions to the problems frequently encountered by U.S. households. This could include, but not be limited to, improving the availability and quality of legal information from courts to help individuals resolve legal issues and pursue remedies with or without a lawyer.

The survey did not explore the severity of the issues reported. It also did not delve into respondents' perceptions of whether the problems were legal in nature or the steps they took to address them. These topics warrant future in-depth research.

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