Legal Action of Wisconsin
Survey of the
Civil Legal Problems and Needs
of
Low-Income People in Southern Wisconsin

Conducted
by
Sales & Marketing Communications Associates, Inc.

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In an effort to better understand the current civil legal needs of low-income people, Legal Action of Wisconsin, Inc. (Legal Action) hired Sales & Marketing Communications Associates, Inc. (SMC Associates, Inc.) to survey low-income people in the 39 southern Wisconsin counties served by Legal Action. Those 39 counties include:

**Milwaukee Region**
- Milwaukee
- Waukesha

**La Crosse Region**
- La Crosse
- Buffalo
- Trempealeau
- Jackson
- Monroe
- Vernon
- Juneau
- Crawford
- Richland
- Grant

**Oshkosh Region**
- Adams
- Waushara
- Marquette
- Green Lake
- Winnebago
- Fond du Lac
- Sheboygan
- Washington
- Ozaukee

**Madison Region**
- Dane
- Sauk
- Columbia
- Dodge
- Jefferson
- Rock
- Green
- Lafayette
- Iowa

**Green Bay Region**
- Brown
- Door
- Kewaunee
- Manitowoc
- Calumet
- Outagamie

**Racine Region**
- Racine
- Kenosha
- Walworth

METHODOLOGY

SMC Associates used person-to-person interviews of low-income persons on-site at organizations that serve large numbers of poor people. Trained interviewers conducted the surveys. The interviews were not limited only to persons with telephones or who were home during the day.
DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Gender
224 (33.8%) of the low-income people that we surveyed were male and 437 (66%) were female. Four (4) (.6%) were not identified by gender.

Income
All survey respondents were low-income or very low-income, based on federal poverty guidelines.
The top three areas of civil legal problems, based on responses by household are:

1. Family\(^1\) – 24\% of households had a family law problem in the past year.
2. Public Benefits\(^2\) – 24\% of households had a public benefits problem in the past year.
3. Housing – 14\% of households had a housing problem in the past year.

417 or 62.4\% of households surveyed experienced a legal problem in one of these three areas – family, public benefits, and housing – in the past year.

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\(^1\) The responses to the domestic violence question are included in the “Family” category.

\(^2\) The responses for the health and Social Security questions are included in the “Public Benefits” category.

\(^3\) There were no dominant individual responses in the “other” category. Therefore there is no statistically significant information contained in this “other” category.
The 665 survey respondents reported **a total of 1,461 separate civil legal problems** in the past year or **2.2 legal problems per household**.

The top areas of need\(^4\), based on separate occurrences of legal problems, were:

1. **Family** law problems were 22.38% of the total reported civil legal problems.
2. **Public Benefit** problems were 22.24% of the total reported civil legal problems.
3. **Housing** law problems were 17% of the total reported civil legal problems.
4. **Employment Barriers** were 7.8% of the total reported civil legal problems.
5. **Consumer** law problems were 7.46% of the total reported civil legal problems.

\(^4\) These areas of need, when expressed as a percentage, would represent more than 100% of the households surveyed because, when asked what they needed help with in the past year, some respondents selected more than one specific issue. For example, under the heading of housing needs, one person may have indicated she needed help with eviction, rent assistance and housing discrimination in the past year.
FAMILY PROBLEMS

- 22.38% of the total civil legal problems reported were family law problems.
- Respondents reported 327 separate family law problems.
- 161 of 665 households, or 24.2%, reported one or more family law problems.

Of the 327 separate occurrences of family law problems, divorce/separation, domestic violence, child custody/visitation/ and child support were the most common problems.
PUBLIC BENEFITS PROBLEMS

- 22.24% of the total civil legal problems reported were related to obtaining or maintaining public benefits.
- Respondents reported 325 separate public benefits problems.
- 161 of 665 households, or 24.2%, reported one or more problems in obtaining or maintaining a public benefit.

Of these 325 separate problems, obtaining and maintaining SSI, Social Security Disability, food stamps and W-2 were the most common.
HOUSING PROBLEMS

- 17% of the total civil legal problems reported were housing problems.
- Respondents reported 249 separate housing problems.
- 95 of 665 households, or 14.3%, reported one or more housing problems.

Of the 249 reports of housing problems, eviction was the most common, followed by lack of repairs (for unsafe housing), homelessness, and housing discrimination.
EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

- 7.8% of the total civil legal problems reported were barriers to employment.
- Respondents reported 115 separate job problems.
- 50 of 665 households, or 7.5%, reported one or more employment barriers.

Of the 115 reports of employment barriers, suspension or revocation of a drivers’ license, unpaid fines, and incomplete or incorrect criminal record were the most common.
CONSUMER PROBLEMS

- 7.4% of the total civil legal problems reported were consumer problems.
- Respondents reported 109 separate consumer problems.
- 45 of 665 households, or 6.8%, reported one or more consumer problems.

Of the 109 reports of consumer problems, bankruptcy and foreclosure were the most common.
### UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION
- 3.7% of the total civil legal problems reported were unemployment compensation problems.
- Respondents reported 25 problems involving unemployment compensation issues.

### FUEL AND/OR UTILITY
- 3.4% of the total civil legal problems reported were fuel and/or utility problem.
- Respondents reported 43 separate fuel/utility related problems.
- 19 of 665 households, or 2.9%, reported one or more fuel/utility problems.

### CHILDREN AND/OR SCHOOL
- 3% of the total civil legal problems reported involved children and/or school matters.
- Respondents reported 44 separate children/school related problems.
- 21 of 665 households, or 3.2%, reported one or more children/school legal problems.

### SENIOR CITIZENS AND/OR ELDER CARE
- 2.2% of the total legal problems reported were related to senior citizens and the elderly.
- Respondents reported 15 separate elder care problems.
- 7 of 665 households, or 1.1%, reported one or more elder care problems.

### OTHER
- 31.3% of the total legal problems reported were in areas other than the areas set forth above.
- Respondents reported 209 separate job problems.
- 84 of 665 households, or 12.6%, reported other problems. The most common “other” problems were criminal incarcerations, assault/battery, auto accident claim, and traffic violations. Other issues included: immigration issues (5), public urination (1), falsifying information (1), sexual assault (1), obstructing an officer (1), trespassing (1), destruction of property (1), third party bad check (1), wrongful debt (1), commitment of sister to an AODA facility (1), protective custody for child (1), collection regarding a car accident (1), car repossession (1), probate (1), property taxes (1), civil lawsuit (1), restraining order (1), work injury (1).