



WSU News

- WSU Calendar
- WSU Announcements

- WSU News Home
- Events & Exhibits
- Research
- Employee News
- Alumni Features
- WSU in the Media
- Student News
- Government Relations
- WSU Pullman News
- WSU Spokane News
- WSU Tri-Cities News
- WSU Vancouver News
- WSU Global Campus
- WSU Extension
- Sustainability
- Social Media Directory
- Press Releases
- Obituaries
- WSU Grad List
- All Posts
- Subscribe to Enewsletter
- News Release Styles
- Hometown News Form
- About Us
- Submit Item
- Contact Us

Study: Legal problems of poor triple in past decade

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PULLMAN, Wash. – A statewide survey of more than 1,600 low-income Washingtonians found that seven of 10 face at least one significant civil legal problem each year and the average number of problems per low-income household has tripled over the last decade.

The majority of low-income Washingtonians do not receive the legal help they need to solve these problems: More than three-quarters of those with civil legal problems struggle without a lawyer or any type of legal help.

The survey was commissioned by the Washington State Supreme Court and conducted by Washington State University's Social and Economic Sciences Research Center.

"We now have greater clarity than ever that we're witnessing the erosion of the proud American principle of Justice for All," said former U.S. Attorney John McKay in a news release from the Equal Justice Coalition, which advocates for legal services for low-income Washingtonians. "We're standing at a point in our history with the information to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable. This report allows us not just to see the problem, but act for a solution."

The results indicate nearly a half million Washington residents who live in poverty are unable to find help with their civil legal problems such as access to healthcare, consumer finance and debt collection, and employment related issues.

Low-income persons of color, victims of domestic violence or sexual assault, persons with disabilities and youth experience substantially higher rates of legal problems than the general low-income population.

"We must recognize the consequences of a system of justice in our state that denies a significant portion of our population the ability to assert and defend their core legal rights," said Supreme Court Justice Charles K. Wiggins, chair of the Civil Legal Needs Study Update Committee. "We can and we must do better."

Washington has one state-funded legal aid attorney for every 11,628 eligible residents, which is less than half the nationally recognized minimal level of service of one legal aid attorney for every 5,000 eligible low-income residents.

The 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update follows a similar study published by a state Supreme Court task force in 2003. In response to the 2003 study, the Legislature devoted more resources to address the civil legal problems of low-income Washingtonians and established an agency to administer and oversee the state investment in civil legal aid.

Find the 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update at http://ocla.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CivilLegalNeedsStudy_October2015_V21_Final10_14_15.pdf. Find the state Office of Civil Legal Aid at <http://ocla.wa.gov>.

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