

Article 29: Legal Issues and Legal Support Programs

Legal support programs serve as critical foundations for justice by providing representation for millions of Americans facing civil **legal issues** without the financial means to hire a lawyer (Engler & Gold, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024; OPPAGA, 2025). These initiatives deliver expert pro bono services that prevent constraints like unfair evictions and domestic disputes from escalating into life-altering financial or personal crises (Legal Services Corporation, 2022; Rusyn et al., 2025; Sandefur & Burnett, 2025). By offering free or low-cost guidance, they ensure vulnerable individuals can successfully navigate a court system that is often prohibitively expensive and complex. Hence, these programs remain the primary mechanism for securing equal protection and upholding the fundamental legal rights of low-income families nationwide.

Causes and Scope of Legal Issues in the United States

People across the United States face persistent legal challenges throughout their lives, driven by economic instability and a complex court system that often requires expensive counsel. From childhood custody disputes to senior housing and healthcare crises, millions encounter a recurring cycle of litigation without adequate representation. Data from recent years shows that most low-income households struggle with at least one significant legal problem annually, often leading to financial ruin or homelessness. These unresolved legal burdens create deep-seated vulnerabilities that undermine personal stability and health from youth through older adulthood (Legal Services Corporation, 2022; Rusyn et al., 2025; Sandefur & Burnett, 2025).

On that note, an interdisciplinary study titled *Law and the 100-Year Life* explored how increasing lifespans in the United States create complex legal challenges that unfold across the entire lifespan, from youth through older adulthood. The authors drew on existing legal, demographic, and policy research to examine how longer lives interact with laws governing education, work, family relationships, health care, housing, and retirement. The study highlighted that many legal systems were designed around shorter life expectancies and are often poorly suited to the realities of longer lives. As a result, individuals may face growing legal vulnerabilities at multiple life stages, including employment transitions, caregiving responsibilities, access to health care, and income security later in life. The authors emphasized that legal issues are not confined to old age but accumulate and evolve over time, shaping people's opportunities and risks throughout adulthood. Longer lifespans may widen social and economic inequalities if legal protections do not adapt to support extended working lives and prolonged periods of dependency or care. The study underscored the importance of rethinking legal frameworks to better align with demographic change. It concluded that adapting laws and policies is essential to ensure fairness, stability, and access to rights for individuals navigating longer lives in the United States (Rusyn et al., 2025).

Following that lead, a report from the American Bar Foundation states how civil legal issues—such as problems related to housing, income, family, health, and employment—emerge, cluster, and affect individuals across the lifespan in the United States. Hence, the authors synthesized findings from decades of U.S. civil legal needs surveys that asked people directly about their lived experiences with legal problems. Data were collected through large, population-based interviews and questionnaires designed to capture everyday justice issues rather than court involvement alone. The findings show that civil legal problems are widespread and often interconnected, with one issue frequently triggering

additional legal and social difficulties. Certain groups—including low-income individuals, parents, and those with health challenges—face a higher burden of unresolved legal problems. The report also finds that many people do not recognize their problems as legal in nature and therefore rarely seek help from lawyers or formal institutions. Instead, individuals often rely on informal strategies that leave issues unresolved. The authors conclude that understanding the scope and causes of civil legal needs is essential for improving access to justice and designing systems that better support people throughout their lives in the United States (Sandefur & Burnett, 2025).

Similarly, a report from LSC documented the prevalence of civil legal problems in the United States and the extent to which individuals receive legal assistance for those issues. Following that lead, researchers relied on the 2021 Justice Gap Measurement Survey, which collected data from more than 5,000 American adults using a nationally representative sample. Observations were also supplemented with administrative records from LSC-funded legal aid organizations. Survey participants reported civil legal problems experienced in the previous year, including issues related to housing, family matters, health, income, and public benefits. Furthermore, respondents indicated whether they sought or received legal help. The findings showed that most people facing civil legal problems—especially low-income Americans—did not receive the legal assistance they needed, leaving many issues unresolved. The report identified populations with particularly high levels of unmet legal needs, including older adults, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing housing instability. It also showed that legal problems often cluster, meaning that one issue can trigger additional challenges over time. Many respondents attempted to handle legal issues on their own because they did not recognize them as legal problems, did not know where to seek help, or could not afford services. Although LSC-funded legal aid organizations assist millions of people each year, demand far exceeds available resources. The authors concluded that civil legal needs are widespread across the lifespan in the United States and that closing the gap will require expanded access to legal services, improved outreach, and sustained policy investment (Legal Services Corporation, 2022).

Effectiveness and Impact of Legal Support Programs

Legal support programs provide specialized pro bono representation that helps mitigate complex legal challenges across a person’s life, effectively resolving issues in housing, healthcare, and family law. These initiatives offer age-specific advocacy that prevents manageable disputes—like wrongful evictions or benefit denials—from escalating into life-altering financial crises. Furthermore, these programs offer legal expertise, effectively upholding fundamental legal rights and shielding vulnerable individuals from predatory exploitation. Ultimately, such services promote long-term stability by ensuring that justice is accessible regardless of an individual's income or life stage (Engler & Gold, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024; OPPAGA, 2025).

For instance, a report by OPPAGA examined multidisciplinary legal representation (MLR) programs for parents involved in child welfare dependency cases in Florida. The analysis relied on administrative and case-level data from four Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, combined with information from Florida’s child welfare database covering July 2021 through June 2025. The findings showed that children whose parents received MLR services were more likely to be reunified with their families and less likely to be adopted compared with similar cases without MLR support. The non-MLR cases often took longer to resolve, reflecting the added focus on addressing underlying legal and social challenges faced by families. The report also showed lower rates of repeat

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abuse or neglect after reunification when parents received MLR services. Parents served by these programs tended to have more complex needs, including mental health or domestic violence concerns, suggesting that MLR reached high-risk families. The researchers concluded that multidisciplinary legal representation improves family stability and child welfare outcomes while helping parents navigate the complex legal issues involved in dependency proceedings (OPPAGA, 2025).

Another study assessed the role of medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) in helping individuals address legal problems that negatively affect health and social stability in the United States. Therefore, the researchers conducted a review of existing studies on MLPs, focusing on programs that integrate legal services into health care and community settings to address patients' legal needs. In these models, health care providers screened patients for legal issues and referred them to legal professionals for support with challenges such as housing instability, access to public benefits, family law matters, and immigration concerns. MLPs provided a wide range of legal services to vulnerable populations, improving awareness of legal rights and access to assistance across the lifespan. The findings showed that individuals who participated in MLPs experienced improved access to services, fewer unmet legal needs, and better health-related outcomes. Legal and medical providers also reported stronger coordination of care and more comprehensive support for patients facing complex challenges. Some programs documented cost savings through reduced emergency care use and improved system efficiency. The study found that legal support was particularly beneficial for individuals facing multiple, overlapping challenges. The researchers concluded that MLPs offer an effective approach for mitigating legal issues that contribute to poor health outcomes. Overall, the study highlights the value of integrating legal support into health and community services to reduce legal burdens and promote long-term wellbeing (Johnson et al., 2024).

Lastly, a study examined whether access to civil legal aid improves housing stability for low-income individuals and families in the United States. The researchers used large-scale U.S. census data combined with administrative records from LSC-funded legal aid organizations, comparing households that were just eligible for legal aid with similar households that were not. Furthermore, the study assessed how legal support affected housing outcomes such as eviction and forced moves. The findings showed that access to civil legal aid significantly increased housing stability, helping many families and individuals remain in their homes who otherwise may have been displaced. These benefits were observed across a broad population and were especially meaningful for vulnerable groups, including older adults and people with lower education. The results aligned with evidence from smaller experimental studies, suggesting that legal aid remains effective at scale. The researchers concluded that legal support programs offer an effective approach to mitigating housing-related legal problems, reducing instability, and supporting long-term security for individuals across the lifespan (Engler & Gold, 2023).

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