

Unequal and Unjust: Public Perceptions of the Legal System

from Equal Justice Works

Summary Report

April 14, 2026

Introduction:

Equal justice is a foundational American ideal, but for many people, whether that promise holds depends on what they know, what they can afford and how systems respond to them. As an organization committed to closing the justice gap, Equal Justice Works undertook this research to better understand how people experience the civil legal system in practice — not just how it is intended to function. By examining perceptions of fairness, awareness of rights and the barriers that shape whether individuals seek help, this research reflects the realities people face when navigating legal challenges. These insights are critical to informing solutions that expand access to legal support and build a system people can trust when it matters most.

Methodology:

On behalf of EJW, Pinkston conducted an online survey of a nationally representative sample of **1,613 Americans**. The survey captures public attitudes and lived experiences around access to due process and explores disparities in access to legal resources and representation. The survey was conducted from January 14-22, 2026 with a margin of error of 2% at the 95% confidence level.

Subgroups:

This report highlights the experiences of certain subgroups who perceive gaps in access to due process and a fair justice system.

- Those with lower incomes or less education, racial minorities (particularly Black Americans), and those who identify as LGBTQ+ often report gaps in knowledge or access.
- A “non-U.S. citizen” is anyone who did not self-select “U.S. citizen,” and is assumed to be an immigrant.
- Someone with “vulnerable physical needs” is economically disadvantaged, as indicated by elevated concern about housing, food, safety or basic needs.
- “Disability” refers to anyone who identifies as having a disability that requires accommodation.

Half (50%) of Americans have two or more structural obstacles to fair justice (defined as: identifying as a racial or ethnic minority; having a disability; having a household income below \$50K; holding a high school degree or less; having vulnerable physical needs; or identifying as LGBTQ+). Another 28% have only one of these obstacles, and 22% have none.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The Overwhelming Majority Do Not See the System as Fair or Accessible

While people believe in equal justice, many do not perceive the system as delivering it consistently or equitably.

- **61% of Americans** perceive that income affects whether courts provide fair justice
- **49%** perceive that race affects fairness in the legal system
- **Only 32%** perceive the system as fair to people without legal representation
- **Just 50%** feel confident they would receive fair treatment themselves

Across all of the justice system perceptions examined, **79% perceive injustice** in at least one of these statements.

These perceptions are more pronounced among people with lower incomes, people with disabilities, and others who already face structural barriers. Together, they point to a gap between the ideal of equal justice and how the system is experienced in practice.

Q1: For each of the following statements, please answer whether or not you agree.

Net 'Agree' (Somewhat + Strongly) for Key Groups								
	Total	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Disability	Vulnerable Physical Needs	Hispanic	Black	LGBTQ
I trust the legal system to provide justice for all.	45%	44%	41%	43%	42%	43%	43%	45%
I believe that the legal system is fair to those without legal representation.	32%	29%	30%	29%	28%	30%	40%	39%
I am confident that I would receive fair treatment from the justice system and the courts.	50%	43%	47%	44%	43%	49%	46%	47%

Net 'Agree' (Somewhat + Strongly) for Key Groups								
	Total	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Disability	Vulnerable Physical Needs	Hispanic	Black	LGBTQ
I am confident that the courts focus on justice.	50%	46%	49%	46%	46%	55%	47%	46%
I believe that race affects whether or not the courts provide fair justice.	49%	47%	46%	54%	51%	46%	66%	68%
I believe that income affects whether or not the courts provide fair justice.	62%	57%	62%	67%	65%	63%	68%	77%

Perceptions of Injustice, by Key Groups

If a respondent answered at least one of the statements below in the following ways, they were marked as “perceiving injustice.” If a respondent did not answer any of the statements below in the following way, they were marked as not perceiving justice.

1. Disagree with “I trust the legal system to provide justice for all.”
2. Disagree with “I believe that the legal system is fair to those without legal representation.”
3. Disagree with “I am confident that I would receive fair treatment from the justice system and the courts.”
4. Disagree with “I am confident that the courts focus on justice.”
5. Agree with “I believe that race affects whether or not the courts provide fair justice.”
6. Agree with “I believe that income affects whether or not the courts provide fair justice.”

	Total	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Disability	Vulnerable Physical Needs	Hispanic	Black	LGBTQ
Perceives Injustice	79%	74%	81%	81%	82%	85%	80%	92%
Does not Perceive Injustice	21%	26%	19%	19%	18%	15%	20%	8%

Q2: If you experienced [CIRCUMSTANCE BELOW] and needed help getting insurance or government assistance, *where would you go for help or information?*
(asked of all except immigration question)

% of respondents who would seek out this resource:	Free Legal Services	Hire A Lawyer	Bar Association Referral Service	Would Not Know Where to Get Help
Disaster (hurricane, tornado, fire, or flood)	26%	14%	5%	8%
Denied government benefits (military, disability, social security)	40%	37%	10%	8%
Job Discrimination	40%	51%	13%	6%
Denial of Access to Education	40%	36%	11%	9%
Not Allowed to Vote at Polling Place	38%	32%	13%	12%
Denial of Access to Public Housing	46%	28%	12%	10%
Landlord Dispute	47%	41%	13%	6%
Home Foreclosure	39%	41%	12%	9%
Denial of Health Care	39%	34%	11%	11%
Immigration Hearing or Possible Removal <i>(Base: those who were not a confirmed U.S. Citizen)</i>	33%	43%	15%	4%
Revocation of Driver's License	36%	35%	11%	8%

Q3: Why wouldn't you contact a lawyer if you were experiencing...

"A Lawyer Would Be Too Expensive"							
	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Hispanic	LGBTQ
Disaster (hurricane, tornado, fire, or flood)	31%	26%	30%	32%	35%	26%	30%
Denied government benefits (military, disability, social security)	33%	20%	32%	32%	38%	28%	41%
Job Discrimination	33%	23%	28%	37%	40%	28%	36%
Denial of Access to Education	31%	22%	30%	32%	32%	31%	45%
Not Allowed to Vote at Polling Place	28%	16%	24%	27%	30%	22%	32%
Denial of Access to Public Housing	33%	26%	31%	34%	38%	29%	34%
Landlord Dispute	32%	22%	29%	39%	34%	26%	42%
Home Foreclosure	36%	27%	32%	34%	41%	32%	36%
Denial of Health Care	35%	26%	33%	34%	39%	31%	43%
Immigration Hearing or Possible Removal (<i>Base: those who were not a confirmed U.S. Citizen</i>)	35%	35%	44%	70%	19%	50%	41%
Revocation of Driver's License	31%	16%	27%	30%	36%	33%	38%

Cost remains a major barrier to legal help. But our research shows that people perceive other obstacles that are just as significant. For many, the challenge is knowing where to start: up to 13% say they would not seek legal help because they do not know where to find a lawyer. For others, the barrier is concern about what seeking help might bring: between 6% and 10% say they would avoid hiring a lawyer because they worry about drawing attention to themselves or their situation.

Q3: Why wouldn't you contact a lawyer if you were experiencing...

"Don't Know Where to Find A Lawyer"							
	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Hispanic	LGBTQ
Disaster (hurricane, tornado, fire, or flood)	10%	16%	11%	12%	10%	8%	16%
Denied government benefits (military, disability, social security)	11%	16%	12%	13%	11%	6%	16%
Job Discrimination	10%	13%	11%	8%	12%	6%	16%
Denial of Access to Education	11%	13%	17%	13%	11%	12%	20%
Not Allowed to Vote at Polling Place	9%	12%	11%	11%	9%	7%	13%
Denial of Access to Public Housing	33%	26%	31%	34%	38%	29%	34%
Landlord Dispute	10%	14%	12%	11%	11%	7%	12%
Home Foreclosure	12%	18%	16%	12%	12%	13%	17%
Denial of Health Care	13%	22%	14%	12%	13%	11%	21%
Immigration Hearing or Possible Removal (<i>Base: those who were not a confirmed U.S. Citizen</i>)	12%	0%	9%	11%	26%	0%	12%
Revocation of Driver's License	10%	15%	11%	9%	7%	11%	11%

Q3: Why wouldn't you contact a lawyer if you were experiencing...

"Worried About Drawing Attention to Myself"							
	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Hispanic	LGBTQ
Disaster (hurricane, tornado, fire, or flood)	6%	9%	9%	8%	4%	8%	9%
Denied government benefits (military, disability, social security)	8%	13%	12%	10%	8%	7%	11%
Job Discrimination	10%	15%	14%	9%	10%	15%	17%
Denial of Access to Education	6%	11%	9%	5%	7%	6%	7%
Not Allowed to Vote at Polling Place	9%	16%	14%	11%	11%	15%	7%
Denial of Access to Public Housing	8%	16%	11%	9%	6%	10%	11%
Landlord Dispute	8%	13%	12%	7%	9%	8%	7%
Home Foreclosure	7%	11%	12%	6%	7%	10%	11%
Denial of Health Care	7%	11%	9%	7%	6%	6%	8%
Immigration Hearing or Possible Removal <i>(Base: those who were not a confirmed U.S. Citizen)</i>	7%	12%	5%	12%	0%	0%	0%
Revocation of Driver's License	7%	11%	10%	5%	7%	6%	10%

Q4: Which of these do you think is a legal issue? Select all that apply.

	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Hispanic	LGBTQ
Disaster (hurricane, tornado, fire, or flood)	30%	28%	27%	24%	32%	26%	28%
Denied government benefits (military, disability, social security)	60%	46%	53%	49%	63%	56%	57%
Job Discrimination	70%	56%	64%	64%	74%	63%	71%
Denial of Access to Education	51%	47%	48%	41%	53%	49%	49%
Not Allowed to Vote at Polling Place	57%	43%	51%	44%	60%	45%	52%
Denial of Access to Public Housing	50%	38%	37%	44%	50%	43%	47%
Landlord Dispute	50%	35%	45%	44%	55%	47%	40%
Home Foreclosure	48%	33%	40%	43%	48%	39%	43%
Denial of Health Care	53%	50%	48%	42%	52%	59%	51%
Immigration Hearing or Possible Removal <i>(Base: those who were not a confirmed U.S. Citizen)</i>	2%	36%	37%	35%	26%	44%	33%
Revocation of Driver's License	46%	35%	41%	39%	49%	38%	44%

There is a widespread gap in understanding how the civil legal system works. Many Americans perceive that courts will provide attorneys in situations where that is not the case:

- 41% believe an attorney would be provided in a discrimination case
- 40% in a child custody case
- 35% in traffic court
- 30% in a divorce

In reality, court-appointed counsel is generally limited to criminal cases. (next page)

Q5a: In which of the following cases do you believe the court would provide you a lawyer?
Select all that apply.

Q5b: In which of these cases do you think an attorney should be provided? Base: among those who do not believe a lawyer would be provided in each case.

	Believe the court would provide a lawyer	Believe an attorney <i>should be</i> provided <i>(Base: among those who do not believe a lawyer would be provided)</i>
If you were charged with a crime	71%	40%
Discrimination case	41%	46%
Child custody case	40%	39%
Traffic court case	35%	25%
Work injury	34%	43%
Unfair termination from work	32%	44%
Divorce	30%	31%
If you were denied access to public housing	27%	33%
Eviction from home or apartment	26%	35%
If you were denied healthcare	26%	36%
Bankruptcy	25%	28%
If you were denied access to education	25%	32%
Dispute with your landlord over housing conditions	23%	31%
Foreclosure on your home	20%	31%
None of these	9%	21%

Q6: *Are you aware of free legal services options? Select all that apply.*

	Total
I have heard of free legal services options	64%
I have heard of free legal services and I know someone who has used them	17%
I have heard of free legal services but I know there are none in my area	10%
I have contacted free legal services for help before	12%
I do not think I would be eligible for free legal services	16%
I have never heard of free legal services	11%

Q7: *If you needed legal help and a lawyer was not provided for you, how confident are you that... (Respondents answered on a 0-10 scale, with 0 being 'no confidence' and 10 being 'highest confidence')*

	High Confidence (8-10)	Moderate Confidence (4-7)	Low Confidence (0-3)
You could find a good lawyer	32%	49%	19%
You could afford a good lawyer	23%	39%	38%

Key Groups Expressing Low Confidence						
	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Non-U.S. Citizen
You could find a good lawyer	19%	21%	20%	28%	20%	12%
You could afford a good lawyer	38%	35%	35%	49%	46%	14%

Q8: *If a lawyer were not available, would you trust any of these to provide legal assistance?*

	Total	Age 18-29	Age 30-41	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K	Hispanic	LGBTQ
A paralegal	52%	44%	53%	51%	58%	49%	54%
A trained advocate who is not a lawyer	38%	36%	38%	28%	31%	31%	36%
A community justice worker	30%	36%	31%	35%	37%	34%	40%
Law school clinic staff	28%	24%	23%	23%	24%	27%	30%
None of these	22%	21%	20%	27%	19%	21%	15%

Q10: *Who would you consult, or where would you go for help, if you or a loved one were in immigration detention, facing an immigration hearing or at risk of removal? Select all that apply.*

	Total
A lawyer	55%
Free legal services	36%
Online search	22%
Immediate family member(s)	13%
Bar Association referral service	12%
Friend(s)	12%
Community center	11%
A law school	8%
Library	5%
Would not know where to get help	14%
Prefer not to say	5%

Q11: Thinking about immigration processes in general, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The process used to decide immigration cases in the United States is fair .	16%	20%	30%	15%	19%
The process used to decide immigration cases is easy to understand .	12%	17%	29%	22%	20%
Immigration laws are enforced consistently regardless of a person's race, income level or country of origin.	19%	21%	26%	16%	18%

Net "Agree" (Somewhat + Strongly) Among Less Educated					
	Total	Some High School	High School Degree	Associate's Degree	Some College
The process used to decide immigration cases in the United States is fair .	36%	28%	35%	29%	28%
The process used to decide immigration cases is easy to understand .	29%	24%	31%	22%	22%
Immigration laws are enforced consistently regardless of a person's race, income level or country of origin.	40%	28%	43%	36%	34%

Net "Agree" (Somewhat + Strongly) for Lower Income			
	Total	Less than \$30K	\$30K-\$75K
The process used to decide immigration cases in the United States is fair .	36%	28%	31%
The process used to decide immigration cases is easy to understand .	29%	23%	24%
Immigration laws are enforced consistently regardless of a person's race, income level or country of origin.	40%	34%	38%

Respondent Profile:

Age Groups: 18-29 (16%), 30-41 (23%), 42-53 (19%), 54-65 (24%), Older than 65 (18%)

Gender: 51% Female, 48% Male

Race/Ethnicity: 70% White, 16% Hispanic/Latino(a), 15% African-American, 7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3% Native American

Education: 4% Some high school, 26% High school diploma / GED, 12% Associate's or technical degree, 20% Some college, 24% Bachelor's degree, 14% Post-graduate degree

Household Size: 1 (20%), 2 (35%), 3 (18%), 4 (15%), 5+ (12%)

Household Income: Less than \$30K (23%), \$30K-\$49,999K (15%), \$50K-\$99,999K (31%), \$100K-\$199,999K (24%), \$200K+ (5%)

Community: 47% Suburban, 30% Urban, 23% Rural

Regions: 23% Southeast, 22% West, 21% Midwest, 18% Northeast, 17% Central South

Current Work Status: 46% Full-time, 9% Part-Time, 11% Unemployed, 4% Student full-time, 5% Caregiver or homemaker, 21% Retired, 7% on Disability

Current Role for Full-Time and Part-Time Workers: 13% Entry level staff, 28% Mid-Level or experienced staff, 31% Manager / supervisor, 9% Director or regional manager level, 7% Vice President or executive level, 6% Independent contractor, 5% Other