

X4007: Pew Courts and Communities

Final Topline Results

September 2024

This study was conducted for the Courts and Communities Survey for The Pew Charitable Trusts by SSRS, an independent research company. More information about SSRS can be obtained by visiting www.ssrs.com.

Interviews were conducted online from August 22, 2024, to September 13, 2024, among a nationally representative sample of 2,016 respondents age 18 and older. Online interviews were conducted via the SSRS Opinion Panel.¹ Phone interviews were conducted with SSRS panelists who prefer to take surveys over the phone. The margin of error for total respondents is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The survey's margin of error is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample — the one around 50%. This means that in 95 out of every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 2.8 percentage points away from their true values in the population. For estimates smaller or larger than 50%, the margin of sampling error will be smaller. Margins of error for subgroups will be larger.

General Notes:

Percentages may not add to 100%, or to subtotals indicated, due to rounding.

The “No answer” category includes refusals and those who volunteered “Don’t know” responses. The “Don’t know” category is shown in tables only when it was an explicit response option (i.e., shown on web or read via telephone) for survey respondents.

¹ SSRS Opinion Panel members are recruited randomly based on nationally representative ABS (address-based sample) design (including Hawaii and Alaska). Additionally, we recruit hard-to-reach demographic groups via our Omnibus survey platform. For more information: <https://ssrs.com/opinion-panel/>.

Respondent Characteristics

1. **[Disability]** Do you identify as a person with a disability or other chronic condition? This could include, but is not limited to, attention deficit, autism, blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, health-related disability, learning disability, mental health condition, mobility-related disability, or speech-related disability?

	Total (n=2,016)
Yes	29
No	70
No answer (VOL.)	1

2. **[Court Involved]** Have you or someone in your household ever had a court case for a civil, family, traffic or criminal matter, that was not a part of your work or jury duty? *Please select all that apply.*

	Total (n=2,016)
Yes (NET)	35
Yes, someone in the household	15
Yes, I have	23
No	65
No answer (VOL.)	<1

(Asked of those who have interacted with courts)

3. **[Court Involved]** When did the most recent interaction occur?

	Total (n=766)
In or after January 2023	18
In 2020 – 2022	18
Prior to 2020	63
No answer (VOL.)	0

Perceptions of Court

4. **[Performance]** On a grading system of A to F, with A being excellent and F being poor, what grade would you give courts on overall performance?

	Total (n=2,016)
A	7
B	27
C	38
D	11
F	6
Unsure	11
No answer (VOL.)	<1

5. **[Fairness/Equity]** Could you tell us how confident you are that:

- a. If I had to interact with the court today, I am confident I would be treated fairly.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	68
Very confident	16
Moderately confident	52
Slightly/Not all (NET)	32
Slightly unconfident	21
Not confident at all	10
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- b. In my community, the court treats people fairly even if they do not have a lawyer.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	45
Very confident	9
Moderately confident	35
Slightly/Not all (NET)	55
Slightly unconfident	34
Not confident at all	21
No answer (VOL.)	<1

c. In my community, the court treats people fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	57
Very confident	16
Moderately confident	41
Slightly/Not all (NET)	43
Slightly unconfident	26
Not confident at all	17
No answer (VOL.)	<1

d. In my community, the court treats people fairly regardless of their gender.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	70
Very confident	22
Moderately confident	48
Slightly/Not all (NET)	30
Slightly unconfident	20
Not confident at all	10
No answer (VOL.)	0

e. In my community, the court treats people fairly no matter what language they use.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	57
Very confident	15
Moderately confident	42
Slightly/Not all (NET)	43
Slightly unconfident	30
Not confident at all	13
No answer (VOL.)	0

f. In my community, the court treats people fairly no matter how much money they have.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	46
Very confident	12
Moderately confident	34
Slightly/Not all (NET)	54
Slightly unconfident	30
Not confident at all	23
No answer (VOL.)	<1

g. In my community, the court treats people fairly regardless of whether they have a disability.

	Total (n=2,016)
Confident (NET)	70
Very confident	22
Moderately confident	48
Slightly/Not all (NET)	30
Slightly unconfident	22
Not confident at all	8
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Summary Tables

	Total (n=2,016)
Felt confident in at least one situation	86
Felt slightly unconfident or not at all confident in all or most situations	14

	Total (n=2,016)
Felt slightly unconfident or not at all confident in at least one situation	72
Felt confident in all or most situations	28

6. **[Technology]** How would you rate courts' ability to adopt and use new technologies—for example, using digital communication like text and email instead of sending mail, or allowing people to complete some tasks associated with their case online?

	Total (n=2,016)
Excellent/Good (NET)	48
Excellent	8
Good	40
Fair/Poor (NET)	52
Fair	42
Poor	10
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Court Practices and Consequences

Q7a. Which comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?

	Total (n=2,016)
Courts should allow people to choose to appear in court virtually (such as Zoom) for most types of cases.	60
Courts should only allow people to attend court in person.	40
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Q7b. Which comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?

	Total (n=2,016)
Courts should allow people to receive a notice that they are being sued over email, in addition to a paper copy.	68
Courts should only allow people to receive a paper copy delivered to them of a notice that they are being sued.	32
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Q7c. Which comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?

	Total (n=2,016)
When a person is sued, the court should only schedule a date to hear the case after the person files a formal written response with the court acknowledging the lawsuit and defending themselves.	70
When a person is sued, the court should automatically schedule a date to hear the case without first requiring the person to file a formal written response with the court acknowledging the lawsuit and defending themselves.	30
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Q7d. Which comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?

	Total (n=2,016)
People with a court case should be allowed to reschedule a court hearing if they have a legitimate reason.	92
Courts should not allow people with a court case to reschedule a court hearing, even if they have a legitimate reason.	8
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Q9. [Court revenue] Courts rely on various sources of funding to support their operations, including fees and fines. Fees are payments people make to reimburse the court for its services (like issuing a marriage license), whereas fines are charges people must pay as penalty for committing an offense (such as a traffic violation or drug possession). For each of the following statements, please indicate how much you agree or disagree.

- a. Court services should be funded solely by public tax dollars and not rely on revenue from court fees and fines.

	Total (n=2,016)
Agree (NET)	51
Strongly agree	20
Somewhat agree	31
Disagree (NET)	49
Somewhat disagree	32
Strongly disagree	18
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- b. Courts should account for how much a person can afford to pay when determining how much they must pay for a fee.

	Total (n=2,016)
Agree (NET)	65
Strongly agree	32
Somewhat agree	34
Disagree (NET)	35
Somewhat disagree	21
Strongly disagree	14
No answer (VOL.)	0

- c. Courts should account for how much a person can afford to pay when determining how much they must pay for a fine.

	Total (n=2,016)
Agree (NET)	65
Strongly agree	31
Somewhat agree	34
Disagree (NET)	35
Somewhat disagree	18
Strongly disagree	17
No answer (VOL.)	0

Summary Tables:

	Total (n=2,016)
Agrees with at least one situation	83
Disagrees with all situations	17

	Total (n=2,016)
Disagrees with at least one situation	65
Agrees with all situations	35

10. **[Efficiency/Time]** Judges are responsible for overseeing cases that move through their docket. Depending on the case, a judge might review evidence, motions or requests from lawyers, and oversee hearings in court. In most cases, judges decide whether the defendant is guilty or responsible.

In your opinion, from start to finish, how long do you think a judge **typically** spends on each of the following types of cases.

- a. A business suing an individual for \$4,000 of debt.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	60
30 minutes or less	18
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	17
About one hour	24
Several hours	17
One workday or more (NET)	23
One workday	9
More than a day, but less than a work week	9
One work week or more	4
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- b. A traffic violation, like speeding or driving without a license.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	91
30 minutes or less	65
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	15
About one hour	11
Several hours	4
One workday or more (NET)	5
One workday	3
More than a day, but less than a work week	1
One work week or more	1
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- c. A landlord trying to evict a tenant.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	64
30 minutes or less	23
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	18
About one hour	23
Several hours	16
One workday or more (NET)	20
One workday	8
More than a day, but less than a work week	7
One work week or more	5
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- d. Determining which parent or family member should have custody over a child.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	28
30 minutes or less	8
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	7
About one hour	13
Several hours	24
One workday or more (NET)	48
One workday	10
More than a day, but less than a work week	21

One work week or more	17
No answer (VOL.)	<1

e. A crime for which someone could be sentenced to jail for up to 5 years.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	23
30 minutes or less	6
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	5
About one hour	12
Several hours	22
One workday or more (NET)	55
One workday	13
More than a day, but less than a work week	24
One work week or more	18
No answer (VOL.)	<1

f. A homicide.

	Total (n=2,016)
One hour or less (NET)	9
30 minutes or less	2
More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour	4
About one hour	3
Several hours	11
One workday or more (NET)	79
One workday	7
More than a day, but less than a work week	22
One work week or more	50
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Need For Reform

11. **[Priorities]** Imagine that you're responsible for improving the courts in your community. Below is a list of potential changes you could have the courts make. Select up to **two changes** you would pick for improvement.

	Total (n=2,016)
Make it easier for people to represent themselves in court without a lawyer.	33
Invest in better technology, such as virtual hearings and online self-help resources.	27
Focus time and resources on the cases with the most serious consequences, like those that might land someone in prison or might break up a family.	57
Give more options to resolve certain cases or legal issues outside of court, such as referring people in an eviction case to a rental assistance program.	52
Collect and use data to measure how court operations and policies impact communities.	18
No answer (VOL.)	<1

12. **[Significance]** Which of the following statements comes closest to your view regarding the role state and local courts should play, in ensuring justice, even if none of these fit your views perfectly?

	Total (n=2,016)
Courts have the most important role in ensuring justice in my community.	27
Courts are equally important as other parts of state and local government in ensuring justice in my community.	66
Courts are not as important as other parts of state and local government in ensuring justice in my community.	5
Courts are not an important part of ensuring justice in my community.	2
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Policy Specific Questions

13. **[Debt]** To what extent, if at all, do you worry that yourself or a member of your household might be sued for an outstanding debt?

	Total (n=2,016)
Not at all	65
Somewhat	27
A lot	7
No answer (VOL.)	<1

14. **[Debt]** If a business sues you for a debt that you owe, what's the maximum amount of your paycheck you could afford to pay on a regular basis until the debt is paid without impacting your ability to meet your basic needs?

	Total (n=2,016)
5%	51
10%	23
15% or more (NET)	26
15%	9
20%	7
25%	4
More than 25%	6
No answer (VOL.)	1

Court appearance

(Asked of those who have interacted with courts)

15. **[Miss Court]** Have you or a household member ever missed a court hearing?

	Total (n=766)
Yes	19
No	75
Unsure	6
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who have missed a court hearing)

16. **[Barriers]** What was the reason you or the household member missed the most recent court hearing? If there was more than one reason that contributed, please select the most significant one.

	Total (n=164)
Forgot about the hearing.	37
Couldn't get off work or had other obligations.	18
Didn't receive notice/updates.	8
Couldn't get a ride to court.	8
Afraid of going to jail.	8
The information received was confusing.	5
Something else	9
Don't remember.	7
No answer (VOL.)	<1

17. **[Reminders]** Just like businesses, some courts send text message or email notifications reminding people about their upcoming court date. How would you feel about the courts in your community providing that service?

	Total (n=2,016)
Positively (NET)	71
Very positively	49
Somewhat positively	22
Neutral	21
Negatively (NET)	8
Somewhat negatively	4
Very negatively	4
No answer (VOL.)	0

18. **[Warrants]** If someone misses a court hearing, regardless of the reason, judges in most states can issue a warrant for their arrest. These warrants can land someone in jail even if the underlying offense is not punishable with jail time.

In which circumstances, if any, do you think a warrant should be issued if someone missed court for the following types of cases?

- a. Lowest level of drug possession.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	27
In some circumstances	46
Rarely or never	27
No answer (VOL.)	<1

- b. Violation of a restraining order.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	73
In some circumstances	23
Rarely or never	3
No answer (VOL.)	0

- c. Dangerous driving, such as driving under the influence (DUI) or reckless driving.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	75
In some circumstances	22
Rarely or never	3
No answer (VOL.)	0

- d. Other traffic offenses that are not for dangerous driving, such as driving with an expired license or improper registration.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	14
In some circumstances	42
Rarely or never	44
No answer (VOL.)	0

e. Unpaid debt, fines, or fees.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	15
In some circumstances	46
Rarely or never	39
No answer (VOL.)	0

f. Any offense, regardless of its severity.

	Total (n=2,016)
In most circumstances	18
In some circumstances	68
Rarely or never	14
No answer (VOL.)	0

Message testing

19. **[Time-focused vs. People-focused]** Which statement comes closest to your views, even if neither of them is perfect.

	Total (n=2,016)
Courts need to better use their resources so judges can process cases as quickly as possible. As institutions funded in part by tax dollars, courts should focus on minimizing costs.	31
Courts need to better use their resources to make it easier for people to navigate the system and resolve legal issues. As institutions funded in part by tax dollars, they should focus on the needs of community members.	69
No answer (VOL.)	<1

20. **[Intention vs. Impartiality]** Which statement comes closest to your views about court responsibility, even if neither statement is perfect?

	Total (n=2,016)
Helping community members understand court processes, like explaining the steps of a case or how to fill out a form, doesn't compromise the court's impartiality, it upholds it.	80
If the court helped people understand court processes, like explaining the steps of a case or how to fill out a form, it's no longer a neutral and unbiased venue.	20
No answer (VOL.)	<1

Interaction and Impact of Court

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

21. **[Role]** What was the reason you or your household member had to go to court?

	Total (n=766)
As a defendant—a person, business, or government agency (like law enforcement or child welfare services) brought a case against me (and/or a household member).	57
As a plaintiff— I (or my household member) brought a case against another person or business.	22
Other.	21
No answer (VOL.)	0

Q21 v2 (Back-coded Other)

	Total (n=766)
As a defendant—a person, business, or government agency (like law enforcement or child welfare services) brought a case against me (and/or a household member).	66
As a plaintiff— I or my household member brought a case against another person or business.	25
Other.	9
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts as a defendant)

22_1. **[Reason]** Which of the following **best** describes the reason for having to attend court?

	Total (n=421)
Traffic tickets (such as a speeding ticket, a parking ticket)	30
Misdemeanor (such as drug possession, trespassing, shoplifting, or criminal traffic violation)	20
Family matter (such as divorce, child custody, or guardianship)	18
Felony (such as a violent crime or burglary)	9
Debt collection	7
Housing problem (such as eviction or another problem with a tenant, landlord, or real estate agent)	7
Protection or restraining order	3
Other	5
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts as a plaintiff)

22_2. [Reason] Which of the following **best** describes the reason for having to attend court?

	Total (n=174)
Family matter (such as divorce, child custody, or guardianship)	28
Housing problem (such as eviction or another problem with a tenant, landlord, or real estate agent)	13
Debt collection	12
Protection or restraining order	9
Other	38
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts as something other than a court or plaintiff)

22_3. [Reason] Which of the following **best** describes the reason for having to attend court?

	Total (n=171)
Traffic tickets (such as a speeding ticket, a parking ticket)	31
Family matter (such as divorce, child custody, or guardianship)	31
Felony (such as a violent crime or burglary)	8
Misdemeanor (such as drug possession, trespassing, shoplifting, or criminal traffic violation)	7
Debt collection	5
Housing problem (such as eviction or another problem with a tenant, landlord, or real estate agent)	3
Protection or restraining order	3
Other	12
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

22. **[Outcome 1]** Even though the outcomes of a court case can be complicated, overall would you say you **won** or **lost** the case?

	Total (n=766)
Won	47
Lost	30
Not sure	14
The outcome hasn't been decided	8
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

23. **[Outcome 2]** In your own words, can you tell us about the case you had in court and what impact it had on your life?

Please include what the case was for, what it was like navigating your case, the outcome of the case, and the way it affected your life.

***Percentages not shown**

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

24. **[Emotional health]** To what extent, if at all, did the outcome of the court case affect your emotional and mental health?

	Total (n=766)
Improved (NET)	28
It improved a lot.	10
It improved somewhat.	17
Worsened (NET)	43
It worsened somewhat.	23
It worsened a lot.	21
No impact.	29
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

25. **[Financial]** To what extent, if at all, did the outcome of the court case affect your financial security?

	Total (n=766)
Improved (NET)	17
It improved a lot.	5
It improved somewhat.	12
Worsened (NET)	47
It worsened somewhat.	24
It worsened a lot.	23
No impact.	36
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

26. **[Relationships]** To what extent, if at all, did the outcome of the court case affect the strength of your relationships with family and people you're close with?

	Total (n=766)
Improved (NET)	24
It improved a lot.	10
It improved somewhat.	14
Worsened (NET)	28
It worsened somewhat.	17
It worsened a lot.	11
No impact.	49
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

27. **[Confidence]** After your household's most recent experience with the court, did your confidence in courts, (increase), (decrease), or stay the same?

	Total (n=766)
Increased (NET)	14
Greatly increased	4
Somewhat increased	10
Stayed the same	51
Decreased (NET)	35
Somewhat decreased	18
Greatly decreased	17
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

28. **[Fairness/Neutrality]** How would you rate the level of fairness or unfairness of your household's most recent experience with the court?

	Total (n=766)
Fair (NET)	47
Very fair	26
Somewhat fair	22
Unfair (NET)	41
Somewhat unfair	22
Very unfair	18
Neutral	12
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

29. **[Navigation]** How would you rate the ease or difficulty of navigating your household's most recent court matter, for example, understanding the steps of the case or understanding the court forms?

	Total (n=766)
Easy (NET)	39
Very easy	13

Somewhat easy	26
Hard (NET)	51
A little hard	33
Very hard	18
Neutral	10
No answer (VOL.)	0

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

30. **[Respect]** In your opinion, how much respect, if at all, did you receive from judges and other court staff throughout the process?

	Total (n=766)
A lot	22
Some/Just a little (NET)	61
Some	39
Just a little	23
None at all	17
No answer (VOL.)	<1

(Asked of those who had interacted with courts)

31. **[Trustworthiness]** In your opinion, to what extent do you trust that judges and court staff tried to do what was right for everyone involved in the court process?

	Total (n=766)
A lot	21
Some/Just a little (NET)	59
Some	36
Just a little	23
None at all	20
No answer (VOL.)	0

DEMOGRAPHICS

Z9. What is your total annual household income from all sources, and before taxes?

Z9a. Could you say if your total annual household income falls into one of these broader categories?

Z9b. Would that be....?

Income Combo Table

	Total (n=2,016)
Less than \$25K	20
\$25K to less than \$50K	23
\$50K to less than \$100K	31
\$100K to less than \$150K	13
\$150K or more	12
No answer (VOL.)	<1

EDUC. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

	Total (n=2,016)
High School or less	34
Less than high school graduate	9
High school diploma or GED or alternative credential	25
Some College	32
Some college credit, no degree	22
Associate's degree	9
College Graduate or higher	34
Bachelor's degree	20
Master's, Professional, or Doctorate degree	15
No answer (VOL.)	<1

(Asked of those who have only some college education)

SOMECOLL. How many semesters of college have you completed?

	Total (n=442)
Less than one semester	15
One or more semester	81
No answer (VOL.)	5

RACE. What is your race?

	Total (n=2,016)
White, non-Hispanic	60
Black, non-Hispanic	12
Hispanic	17
Asian	6

Other	4
No answer (VOL.)	<1

CO1. Were you born in the United States, in a United States territory, or in another country?

	Total (n=2,016)
United States	84
Puerto Rico	1
Other United States territory	<1
Another country	12
No answer (VOL.)	3

Z10. Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin or descent?

	Total (n=2,016)
Yes	17
No	82
No answer (VOL.)	1

QDISABLED2. Do you have any of the following health conditions?

	Yes	No
Are you deaf or do you have serious difficulty hearing?	4	96
Are you blind or have serious difficulty seeing, even when wearing glasses?	3	97
Do you have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs?	9	91
Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions?	7	93
Do you have difficulty dressing or bathing?	2	98
Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping?	5	95

POLPARTY. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as...?

POLLEAN. As of today, do you lean more to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?

	Total (n=2,016)
Republican/Lean Republican	49
Democrat/Lean Democrat	49
Independent/Something else/refused to lean	2
No answer (VOL.)	0

