

Experience With State Courts Highlights Areas for Improvement

National poll shows 1 in 3 adults are in households with court experience, which affects their opinions of the judicial system

The Pew Charitable Trusts

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Acknowledgments

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Overview

Throughout the country, people rely on state and local courts to resolve a wide variety of issues, from traffic tickets and divorces to debt cases and shoplifting charges.¹ These interactions can affect their lives, their communities, and their opinions of the legal system.

To learn more about how people in the U.S. interact with and view courts, The Pew Charitable Trusts conducted a national poll of 2,016 adults in August and September 2024. The poll, administered by public opinion polling firm SSRS, asked individuals about their general perceptions of the state and local courts in their communities, their interactions with these institutions, and their priorities for improving the courts.² (All data in this chartbook is from the survey unless otherwise noted. See the methodological appendix for more information.)

Across dozens of questions, several key trends emerged. The poll found that 1 in 3 U.S. adults live in households that had been involved in a court case at some point, meaning that either the survey respondent or someone living with them had had a civil or criminal case before a state or local court, by either initiating or defending a case.

Many respondents said that this court experience had taken a toll on their mental and financial well-being. Households with court experience graded courts as “D” or “F” twice as often as those without. Contrary to what people might expect, defendants or those who lose their cases are not the only court users to hold critical views of the courts—the poll found that plaintiffs and winners often do too. For example, almost 1 in 5 people who won their cases nevertheless emerged with less confidence in the courts than when they started, and nearly 3 in 10 said their financial security was harmed. Still, many saw ways that courts could improve: About half of respondents said that state courts should prioritize their resources for the most serious matters before them, such as those that might break up a family or land someone in prison. And people from all walks of life, both

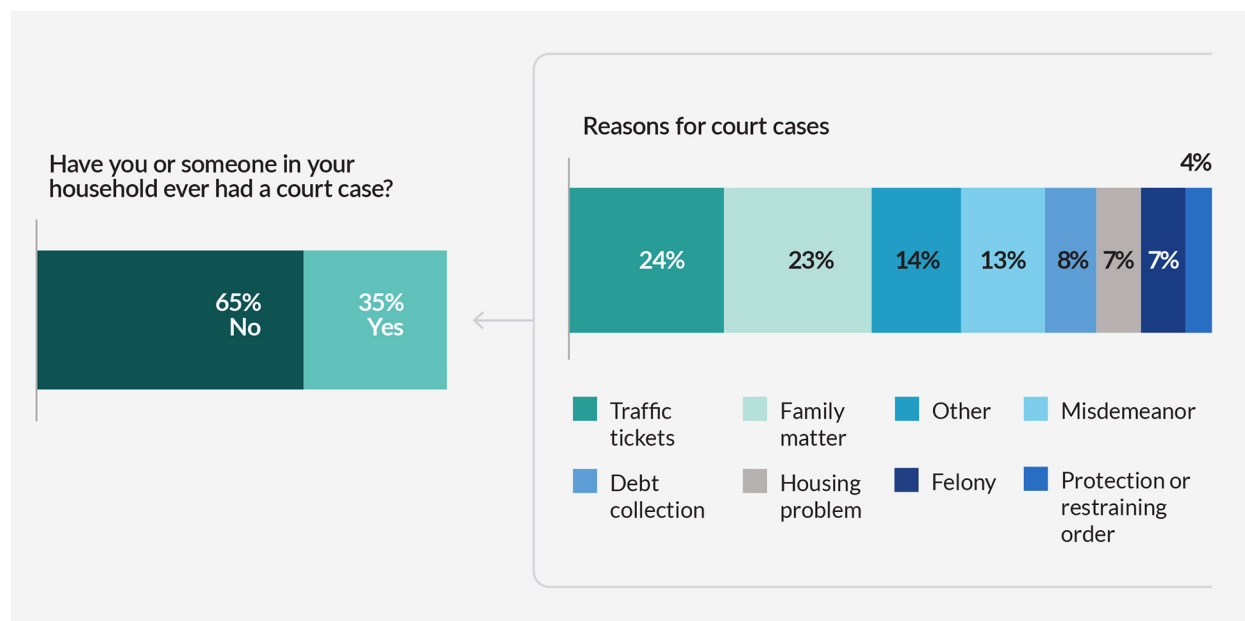
with and without court experience, said that state courts should prioritize their resources for the most serious matters before them, including public safety cases.

The poll revealed some of the challenges courts face in effectively interacting with the people they serve and highlighted opportunities for meaningful change. Courts and court stakeholders, including policy experts and community advocates, can use the insights from the poll to guide examinations of state and local courts and identify reforms that can make courts work better for individuals and communities.

Figure 1

1 in 3 Households in the U.S. Have Had a Case in Court

Most went to court for traffic and family matters



Note: Respondents were asked: “Have you or someone in your household ever had a court case for a civil, family, traffic, or criminal matter, that was not part of your work or jury duty?” and “Which of the following best describes the reason for having to attend court?”

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In the U.S., 1 in 3 adults—equivalent to 91 million people—reported that a member of their household has had a case in their local court. The most common reasons for having a court case were traffic tickets (24%) and family matters (23%), including child custody matters or divorce, followed by misdemeanors (13%) and debt collection (8%).

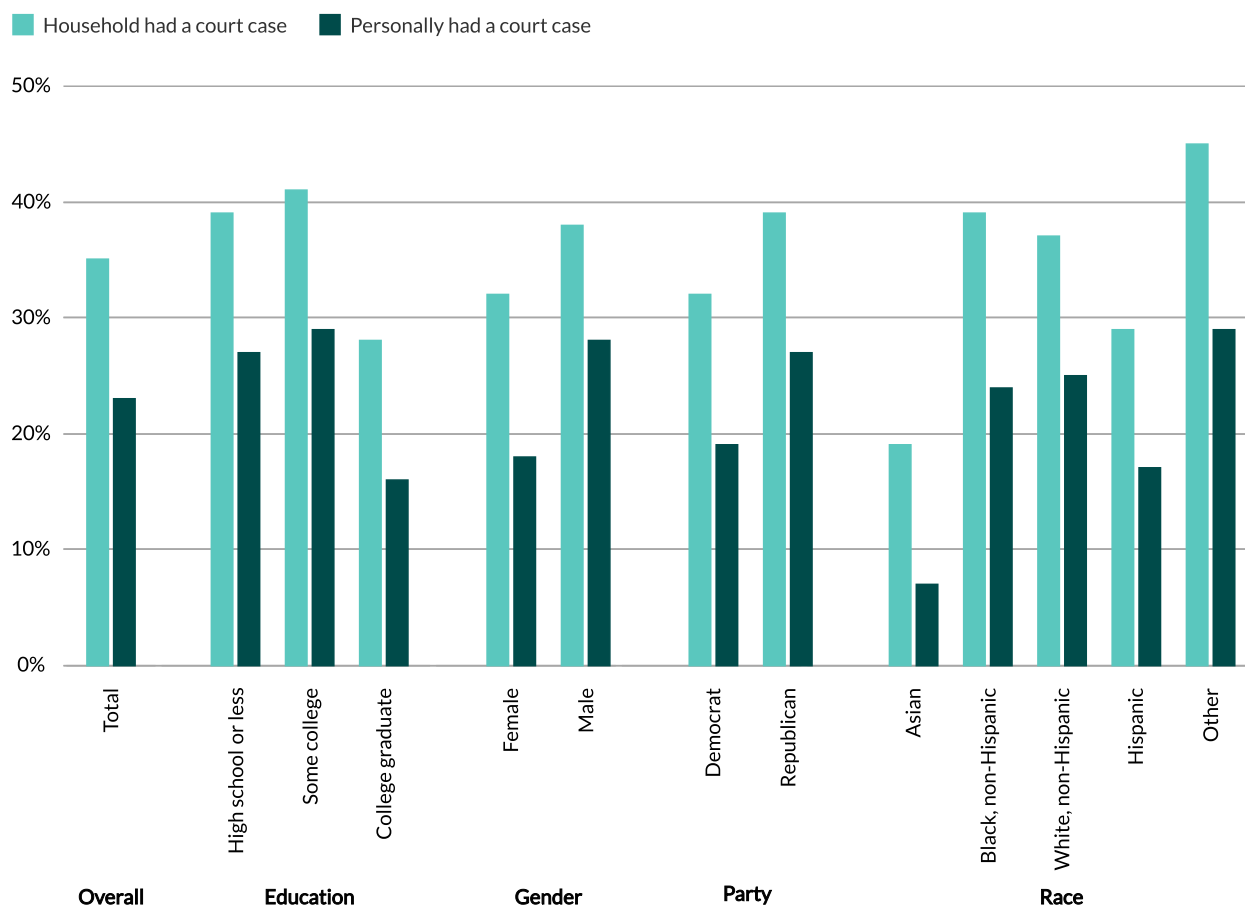
Family matters make up only a small share of the cases filed in state and local courts, but because more individuals may be connected to a single case (e.g., grandparents, siblings) and cases may take longer to be resolved, these cases are a common way that people throughout the U.S. interact with courts.

Consumer debt cases and housing disputes such as evictions—civil cases that typically involve relatively small dollar amounts but carry serious financial implications for U.S. adults—were cited as reasons for court involvement by 15% of respondents.³

Figure 2

Court Experience Varies by Demographics

Men, Republicans, and those without a college degree are more likely to report having had a court case



Among U.S. adults, 23% have personally had a case in court for a civil, family, traffic, or criminal matter. Men reported having had a court case at a higher rate than women (28% versus 18%), and adults without college degrees had a higher rate than those with degrees (about 28% versus 16%). There were also differences based on political affiliation, with Republicans reporting higher rates of having had a court case than Democrats.

Court experience, in which the respondent or a member of their household had a court case, also varied across demographic groups. Among White respondents, 37% had court experience versus 40% of Black respondents, 29% of Hispanic or Latino respondents, and 19% of Asian respondents. Across all demographic groups, most respondents who reported court involvement said that they (or their household member) had been a defendant (66%) rather than a plaintiff (25%).

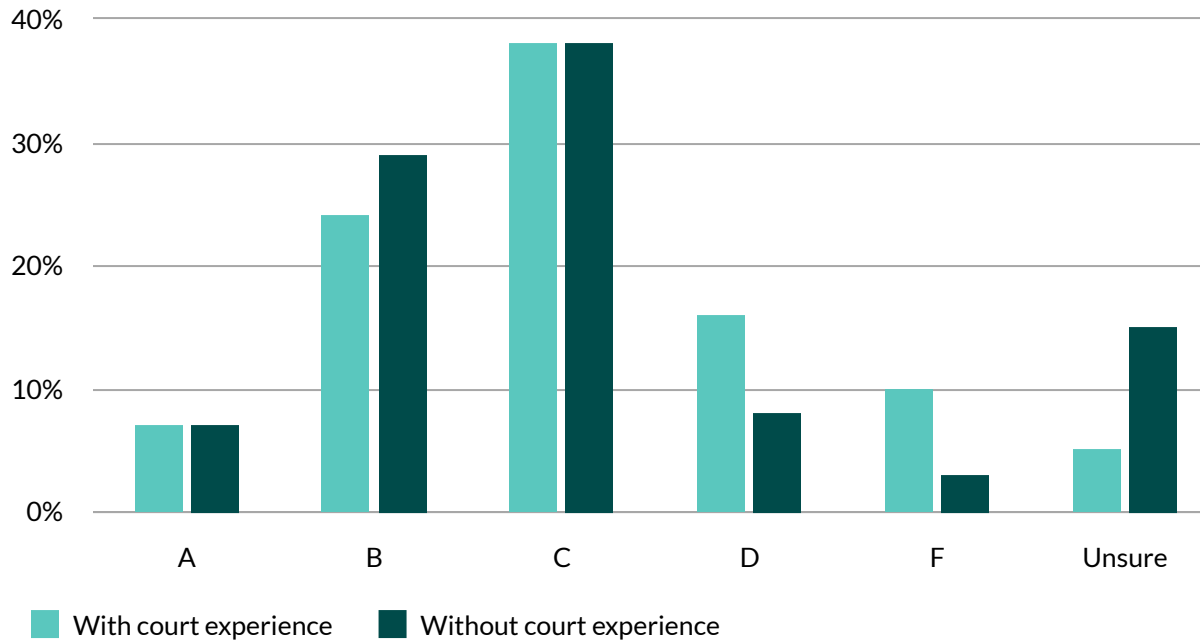
Note: Respondents were asked: "Have you or someone in your household ever had a court case for a civil, family, traffic, or criminal matter that was not part of your work or jury duty?"

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Figure 3

Most U.S. Adults Grade Courts as “C,” or Average

People with court experience are more likely to give marks of “D” or “F”



Note: Respondents were asked: “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?”

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More U.S. adults (38%) rate courts as average (“C”) than any other grade. Marks of “A” or “B” were given by about one-third of respondents.

U.S. adults with court experience—meaning that they or a household member have had a court case—were more likely to give a “D” or “F” (26%) grade than those who had no court experience (11%).

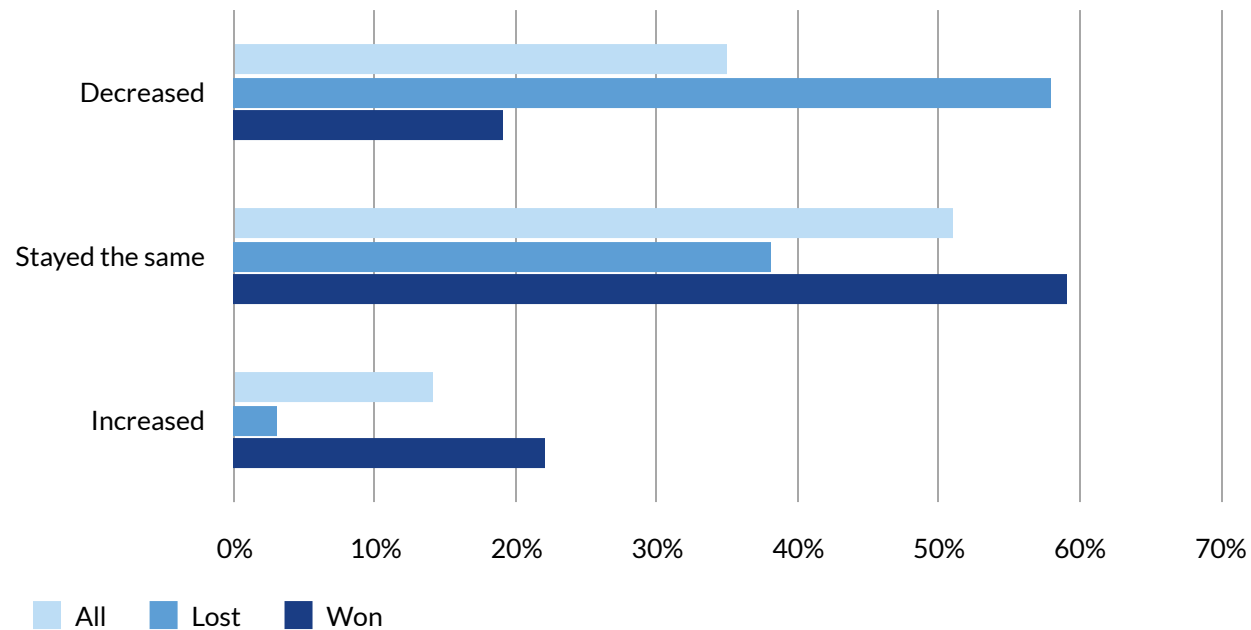
Of those who gave “D” or “F” grades, 45% said that they trusted court staff “not at all” and 42% said that the experience was “very unfair.”

Experiences were slightly more favorable for court navigation and respect. Thirty-seven percent of those who gave courts a “D” or “F” said that they did not receive any respect, and 32% said that navigating court was very hard.

Figure 4

Court Experience Can Strain Confidence in the Legal System

One-third said their confidence in courts dropped after their court experience



Note: Respondents were asked: After your household's most recent experience with the court, did your confidence in courts increase, decrease, or stay the same?

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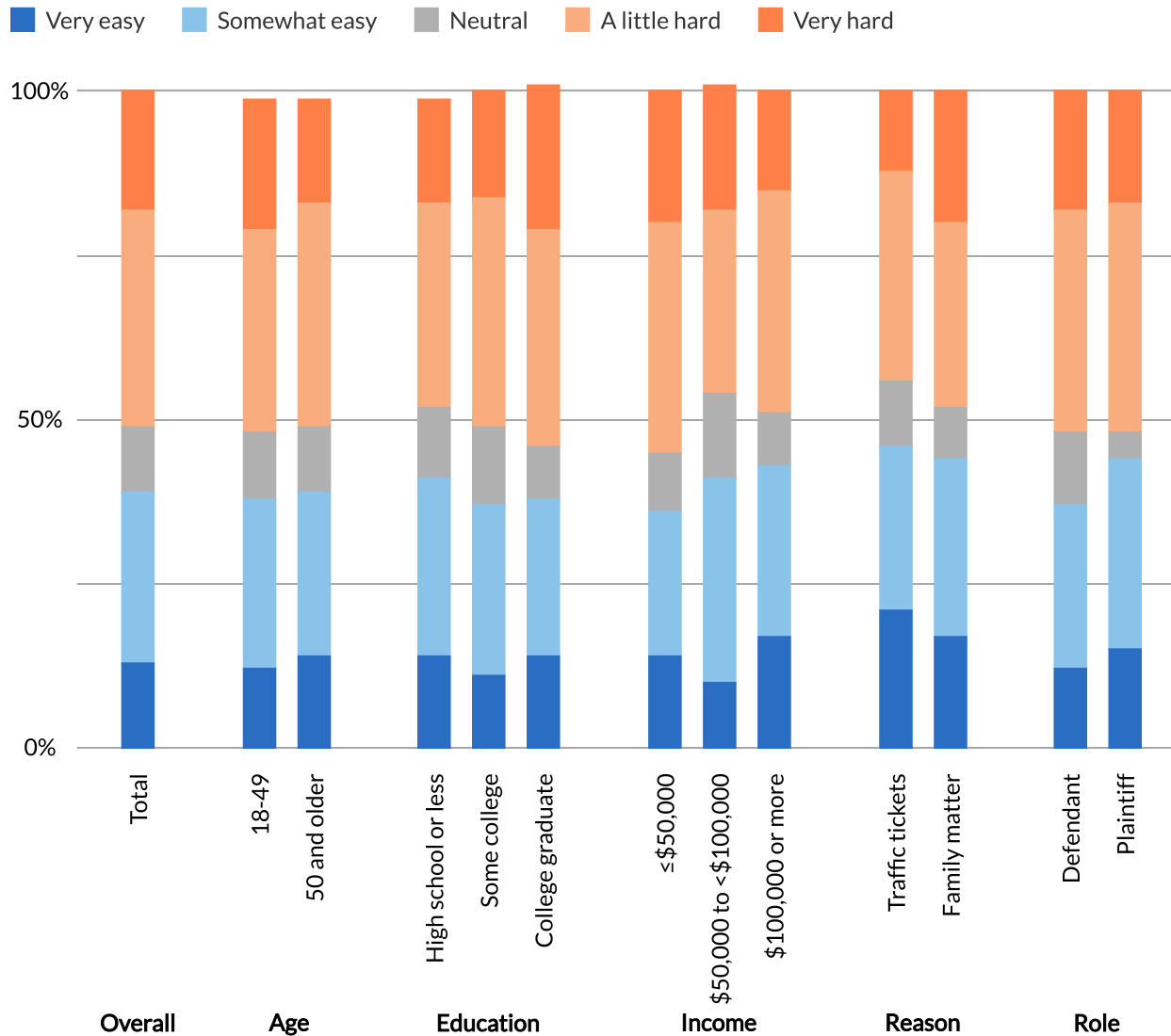
Having a matter in court (involving either themselves or a member of their household) affected some people's faith in the institution. About 50% of respondents said that their confidence in the courts changed after their most recent interaction: 14% said their confidence increased, 35% said it decreased. Half of the respondents (51%) said that their confidence in the courts stayed about the same.

Unsurprisingly, people who lost their cases were more likely than other respondents to report diminished confidence. However, people who won their cases were almost as likely to have lost confidence in the courts (19%) as to have gained confidence (22%), suggesting that the process (not just the outcome) may affect an individual's confidence.

Figure 5

People Find It Challenging to Navigate Courts

Court navigability by age, income, education, role, case type



Note: Respondents were asked: “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?”

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People had trouble navigating court across demographic groups: Slightly more than half of respondents with court experience, meaning that they or a household member had a court case, said that it was “a little hard” or “very hard” to understand the steps of the case and court forms.

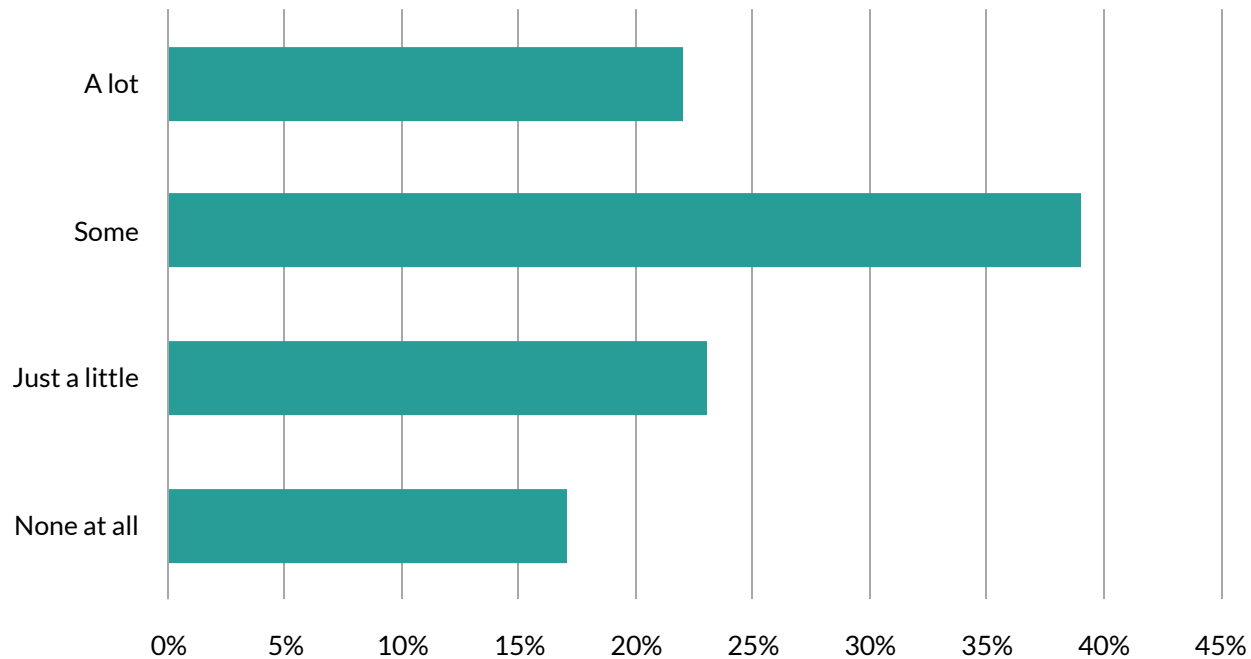
Defendants and plaintiffs responded similarly, with 52% of both groups citing navigability as “a little” to “very” hard. A slightly higher share of college graduates reported that processes were “very hard” compared with high school graduates, and people from low-income households reported slightly more difficulty than those with higher household incomes.

Respondents said that court matters were challenging to parse even for relatively minor cases such as traffic tickets (44%), and 1 in 5 people dealing with family matters said that it was “very hard” to navigate their case.

Figure 6

Most People Report Being Treated With Respect by Court Staff

Just 17% of U.S. adults report receiving no respect from staff



Note: Respondents were asked: "In your opinion, how much respect, if at all, did you receive from judges and other court staff throughout the process?"

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Although court users cited challenges, most respondents said that court staff treated them with respect, suggesting that challenges are more related to processes than to problems with individual court staff.

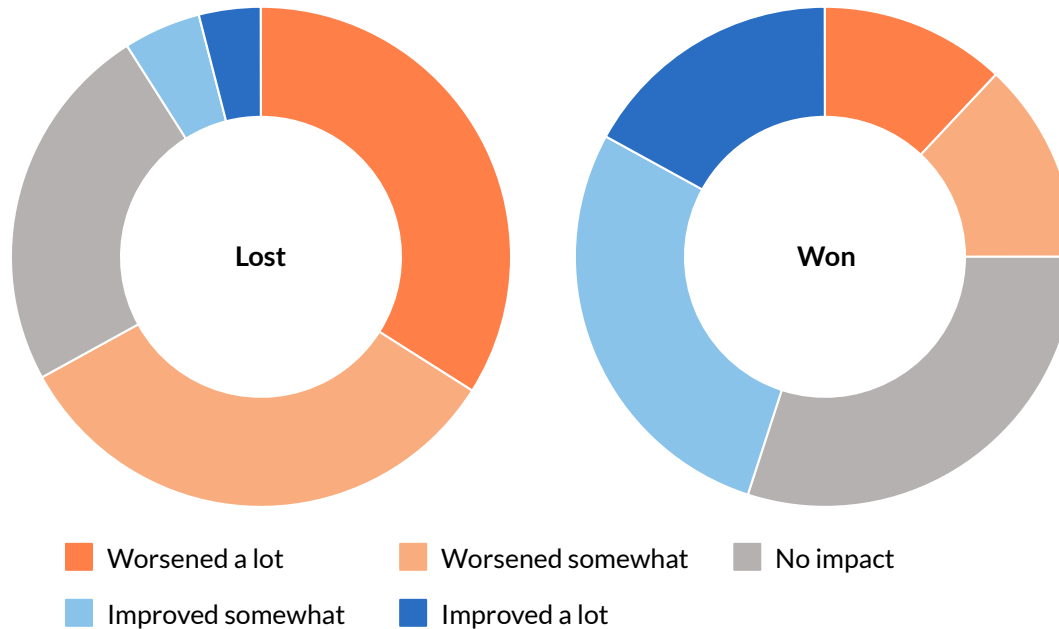
Most respondents who reported having had court experience, meaning that they or a household member have had a court case, said that they had received some respect from judges and other court staff (39%); 22% said that they received "a lot," 23% "a little," and 17% said that they received "none at all."

U.S. adults with only some secondary education reported slightly higher levels of respectful treatment than those with high school diplomas. Respondents also were more likely to report receiving "a lot" of respect if they won their case (34%).

Figure 7

U.S. Adults Say Going to Court Affects Emotional Health, Regardless of Outcome

1 in 4 people with households that won their case reported a negative effect



Regardless of a case's outcome, poll responses suggested that having a matter before the court—for an individual or a member of their household—affects people's emotional health. Of respondents whose household lost their case, 34% said that their emotional and mental health worsened a lot as a result; 33% said they worsened somewhat. Of those whose household won their case, less than half (45%) said that their emotional and mental health improved as a result, and a quarter (25%) said that they worsened.

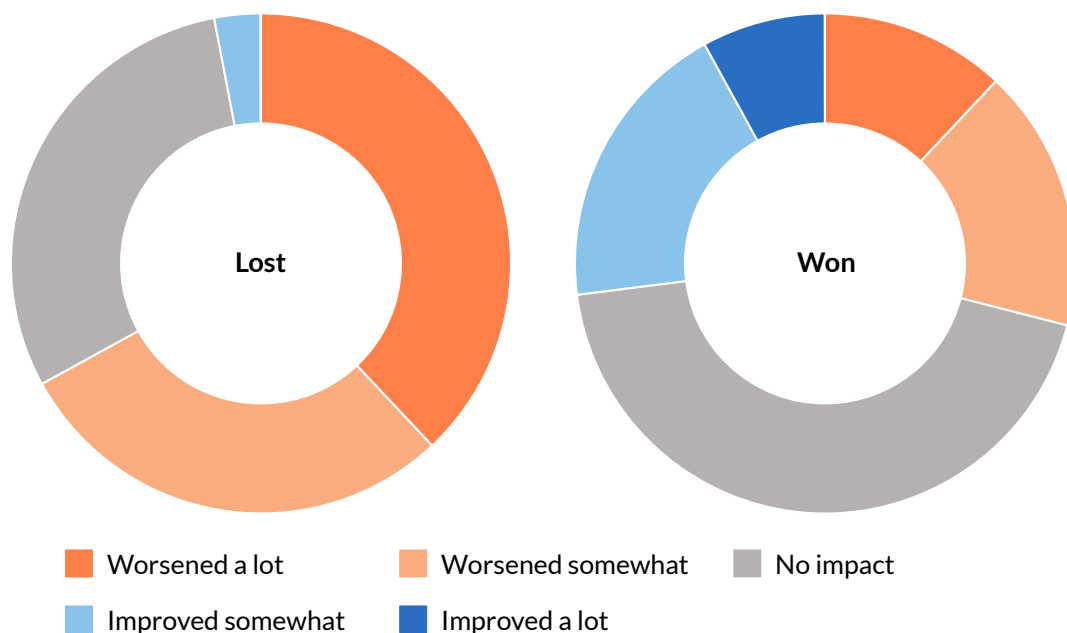
Note: Respondents were asked: "To what extent, if at all, did the outcome of the court case affect your emotional and mental health?"

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Figure 8

Court Cases Can Reduce Financial Security

Two-thirds of people whose household lost their case reported a negative effect on their financial security



Note: Respondents were asked, “To what extent, if at all, did the outcome of the court case affect your financial security?”

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Respondents also reported that having a court experience affected their household’s financial security, regardless of the case’s outcome.

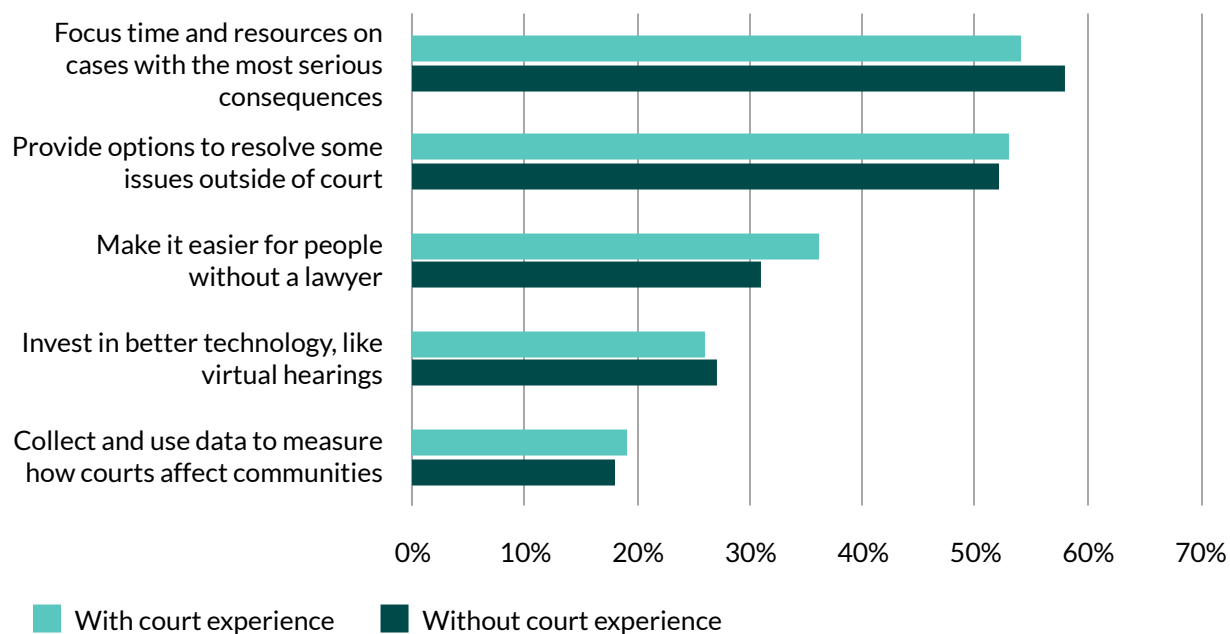
Overall, 67% of respondents whose household lost their case said that it threatened their financial security: 38% of people who lost their case said that their financial security worsened a lot as a result, and 29% said that it worsened somewhat. Among people whose household won, just 27% said that their financial security improved; 44% said that there was no effect; and 29% said that it worsened.

These findings underscore that win or lose, court cases can be expensive for all parties involved. Courts often charge fees for filing or responding to a case. Hiring a lawyer can be a significant expense. And taking time off work to attend hearings can result in lost wages. For some people, these expenses might outweigh the financial benefits that come with winning their case.

Figure 9

People Want Courts to Better Serve Community Needs

Respondents with and without court experience want courts to prioritize serious cases and create more options outside court



Note: Respondents were told: “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.”

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Respondents’ top priorities for improving the court system are to direct resources toward cases with the most serious consequences and to give people more ways to resolve certain cases or legal issues outside court.

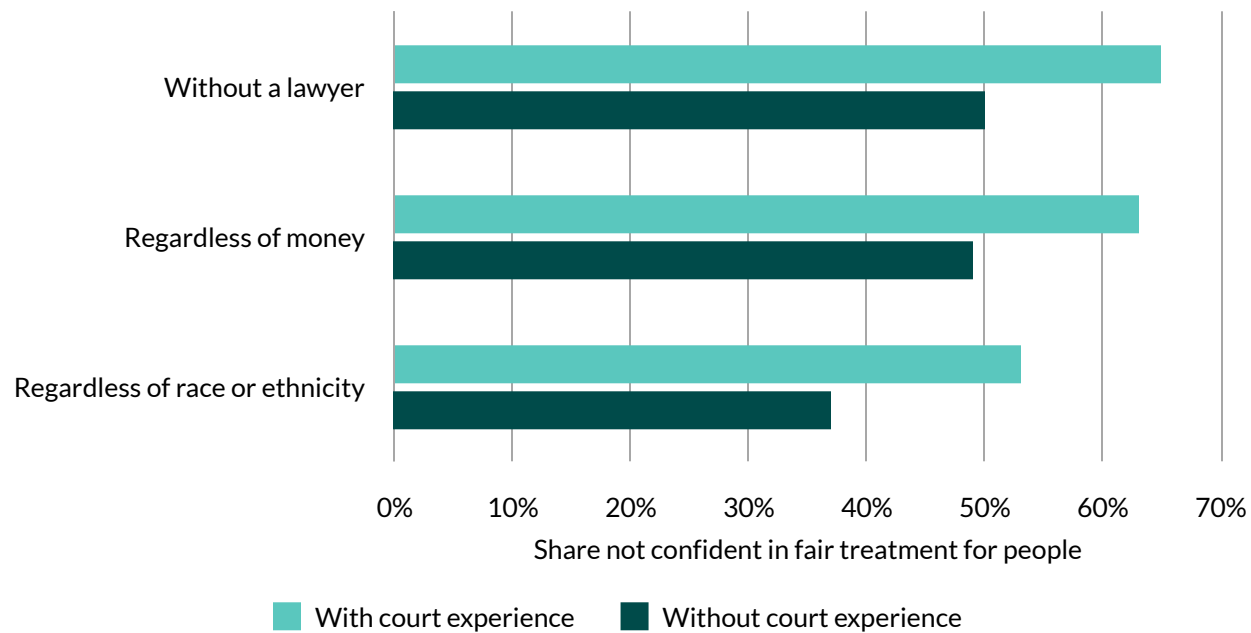
And when asked to choose two priorities for court improvement, about half of respondents, including those with or without court experience, selected those same two responses.

Additionally, making courts easier to navigate without an attorney was the third-highest priority, selected as an important area for improvement by one-third of respondents. Although people have a right to counsel in criminal cases, in roughly 3 of 4 civil cases, at least one side is not represented by a lawyer.⁴

Figure 10

People Want Courts to Work for All Users

Most respondents with court experience say that fair treatment is inconsistent



Respondents were asked how confident they are that courts treat people fairly based on factors such as race, financial means, and access to a lawyer. They were least confident that courts treat people without attorneys fairly (65% of people with court experience, and 50% of those without court experience).

Overall, people with court experience reported less confidence in fair treatment than those without court experience.

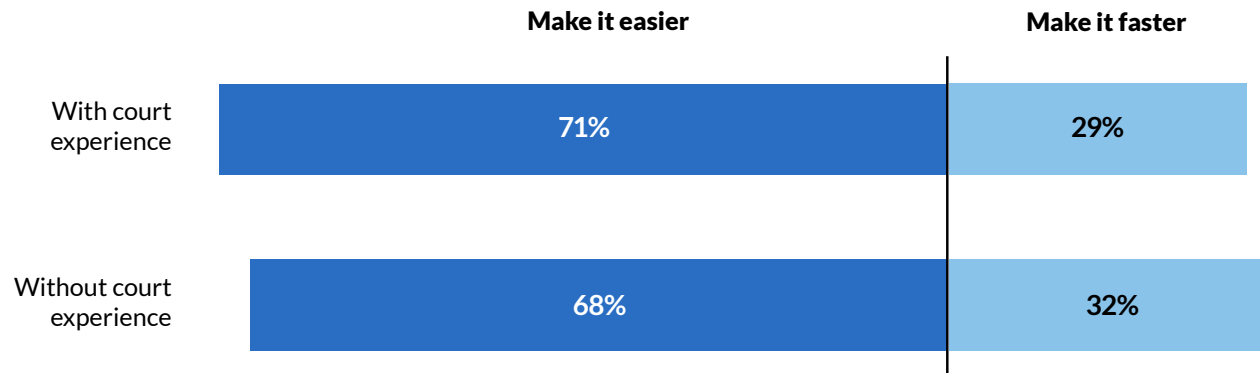
Note: Respondents were asked: "Could you tell us how confident you are that: 'In my community, the court treats people fairly even if they do not have a lawyer.' 'In my community, the court treats people fairly no matter how much money they have.' 'In my community, the court treats people fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity.'"

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Figure 11

People Would Rather Courts Be Easy to Navigate Than Fast

Respondents said that courts can do more to help litigants resolve legal issues



Most U.S. adults, with and without court experience, say that making courts easier for users to navigate is more important than improving speed and minimizing costs for courts. Speed and cost savings were the choice of roughly one-third of respondents, while about two-thirds viewed courts as needing to better use their resources to make court easier to navigate and do a better job addressing the needs of community members.

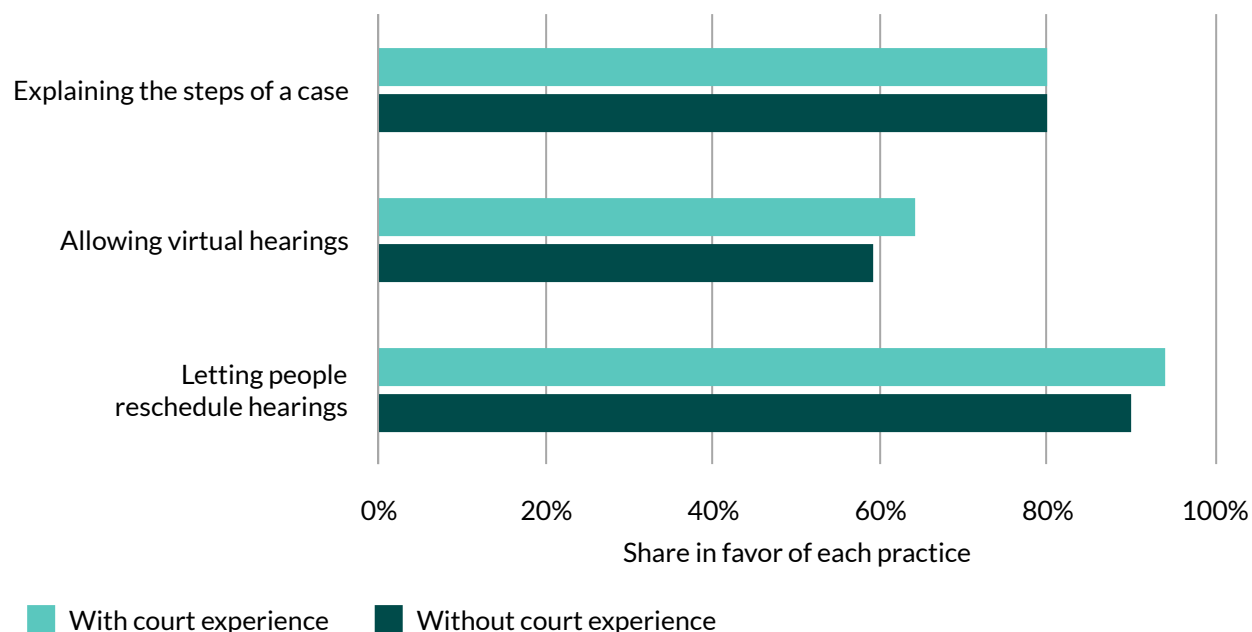
Note: Respondents were asked: Which statement comes closest to your views? As institutions funded in part by tax dollars, courts need to better use their resources to A. enable judges to process cases as quickly as possible and because courts should focus on minimizing costs, or B. make it easier for people to navigate the system and resolve legal issues and because courts should focus on the needs of community members.

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Figure 12

U.S. Adults Support Making Courts More User-Friendly

Respondents agree that helping users doesn't compromise impartiality



Note: Respondents were asked: Which option comes closest to your views? 1. Helping community members understand court processes, like explaining the steps of a case: A. doesn't compromise the court's impartiality, it upholds it, or B. makes the court no longer a neutral and unbiased venue. 2. Courts should allow people to choose to appear in court A. virtually (such as on Zoom) for most types of cases, or B. in person only. 3. People with a court case should A. be allowed to reschedule a court hearing if they have a legitimate reason, or B. not be allowed to reschedule, even if they have a legitimate reason.

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Poll participants ranked technology and court flexibility, both of which can improve court navigability and court experience, as important focus areas. Most respondents support making virtual hearings available, and an overwhelming majority think that people should be able to reschedule their hearing if they have a legitimate reason, just as one would with a doctor's visit.

Respondents also said that courts could better guide litigants about navigating processes and procedures while remaining neutral. Eighty percent of those with and without court experience agree with the statement, "Explaining the steps of a case or how to fill out a form doesn't compromise the court's impartiality, it upholds it," compared with the statement, "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."

Conclusion

Approximately one-third of adults in the U.S. live in households in which someone has defended or initiated a court case, whether it be civil, criminal, family, or traffic-related. Although each person's court experience is different, common themes emerged across respondent demographics from Pew's poll: U.S. adults with court experience frequently reported that their court case had a significant negative effect on their emotional and mental health and their financial security, regardless of whether they won or lost. Plaintiffs and defendants alike generally gave courts low marks for usability and ease of navigation.

All respondents, regardless of whether they had experience with the courts, had similar priorities for making courts more effective. Most want courts to be more user-friendly, especially for people without lawyers, and to prioritize their resources for cases with the most serious consequences.

In light of the significant influence that state and local courts hold over people's lives, court leaders can use these findings about public perception to strengthen public trust.

Data notes

Respondents with “court experience(s)” refers to U.S. adults who said that they or a member of their household have had a court case for a civil, family, traffic, or criminal matter that was not a part of their work or jury duty.

The estimated number of adults with court experience is derived from the total population ages 18 and older, as determined by the American Community Survey in 2022 and used by SSRS in conducting the poll.

Blank, refused, or unknown responses to a given question were excluded from the analysis for that question; these amounted to less than 1% of responses for each question.

Less than 2% of respondents did not select male or female, or Republican or Democrat; these responses are not included in analyses related to gender or political party.

About 15% of respondents said that they were not sure if they had won or lost, and 9% said the outcome had not been decided; those responses are not included in the analysis by outcome.

Endnotes

- 1 “State Courts Play a Key Role in American Life,” The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2024, <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2024/10/state-courts-play-a-key-role-in-american-life>.
- 2 SSRS, “Courts and Communities Survey” (survey, commissioned by The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2024).
- 3 The Pew Charitable Trusts, “How Debt Collectors Are Transforming the Business of State Courts,” 2020, <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/05/how-debt-collectors-are-transforming-the-business-of-state-courts>.
- 4 The Pew Charitable Trusts, “Why America’s Civil Courts Need Reform,” 2021, <https://www.pew.org/en/trust/archive/summer-2021/why-americas-civil-courts-need-reform>.

For more information, please visit: pew.org

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Project website: pew.org/en/projects/courts-and-communities

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