

JUDGE ROBIN L. ROSENBERG, CHAIR
U.S. District Court, Southern District of Florida

BEN AGUIÑAGA
Associate, Jones Day

JUDGE JENNIFER D. BAILEY
Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida

CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERT M. BRUTINEL
Arizona Supreme Court

JUSTICE REBECCA FRANK DALLET
Wisconsin Supreme Court

JUDGE BERNICE B. DONALD (RET.)
U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit

MATTHEW J. EIBLE
*Attorney-Adviser, Office of the Legal Adviser,
U.S. Department of State*

JUSTICE DOUGLAS M. FASCIALE
New Jersey Supreme Court

BRANDON L. GARRETT
*L. Neil Williams Jr. Professor of Law,
Duke Law School*

SARA STERNBERG GREENE
Professor of Law, Duke Law School

JACK KNIGHT
*Frederic Cleaveland Professor of Law and Political
Science, Duke Law School*

THOMAS LEIGHTON
*Vice President, Content Acquisitions
Thomson Reuters*

MARIN K. LEVY
*Melvin Shimm Distinguished Professor of Law,
Duke Law School*

JUDGE MICHAEL J. NEWMAN
U.S. District Court, Southern District of Ohio

JUDGE ANDREW J. PECK
*Senior Counsel, DLA Piper
(former U.S. Magistrate Judge, SDNY)*

JONATHAN PETKUN
Associate Professor of Law, Duke Law School

JUDGE JOHNNIE B. RAWLINSON
U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit

JUDGE SAMUEL A. THUMMA
Arizona Court of Appeals, Division One

JUDGE DON R. WILLET
U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit

AMY YEUNG
Executive in Residence, Progress Partners

Read and subscribe online at
JUDICATURE.DUKE.EDU

from **THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS**



Pew survey examines experiences with, perceptions of state courts

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

Across dozens of questions, several key trends emerged. The poll found that one in three 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 one in five people who won their cases nevertheless emerged with less confidence in the courts than when they started, and nearly three in 10 said their financial security was harmed.

ALMOST ONE IN FIVE PEOPLE WHO WON THEIR CASES NEVERTHELESS EMERGED WITH LESS CONFIDENCE IN THE COURTS THAN WHEN THEY STARTED.

Still, many saw ways that courts could improve: About half of respondents — across all demographics, both with and without court experience — 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.

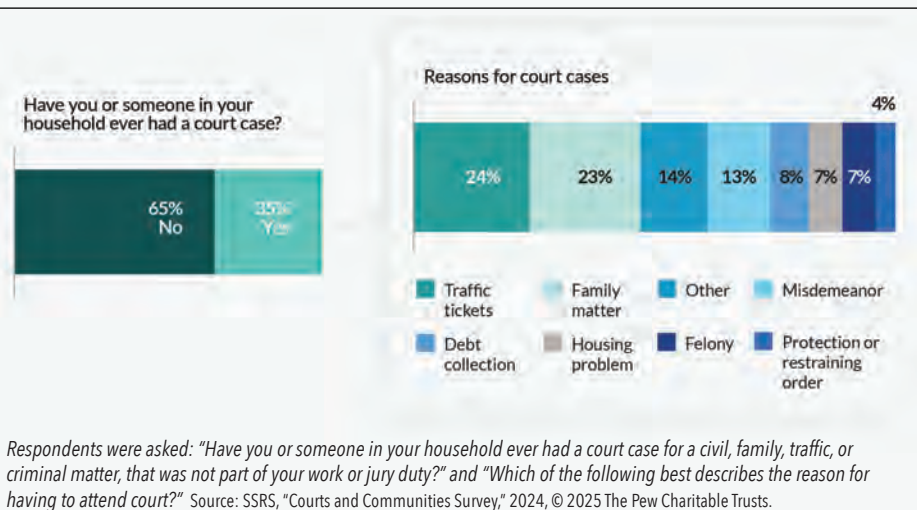
The poll revealed some of the challenges courts face in effectively interacting with the people they serve and highlighted opportunities for meaningful change. Courts and court stakeholders, including policy experts and community advocates, can use the insights from the poll to guide examinations of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

One in Three Respondents Said Their Household Has Had a Case in Court

In the U.S., one in three 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.

FIGURE 1. ONE IN THREE ADULTS REPORT EVER HAVING HAD A CASE IN COURT



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?" Source: SSRS, "Courts and Communities Survey," 2024, © 2025 The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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

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

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.

Court Experience Can Strain Confidence in the Legal System

Having a matter in court (involving either themselves or a member of their household) affected some people's faith in the institution. About half 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.

Most People Report Being Treated With Respect by Court Staff

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 respect from judges and other court staff. Thirty-nine percent said they had received “some” respect, 22% said that they received “a lot,” 23% “just a little,” and 17% said that they received “none at all.”

Opportunities to Improve

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.

See the full report at: <https://duke.is/statecourtexperience>.

– **ERIKA RICKARD** is director and **RUTH ROSENTHAL** is project director for the Courts & Communities project at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

¹ THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS, STATE COURTS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN AMERICAN LIFE, 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.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/05/how-debt-collectors-are-transforming-the-business-of-state-courts>.

FIGURE 2. MOST U.S. ADULTS GRADE COURTS AS ‘C,’ OR AVERAGE

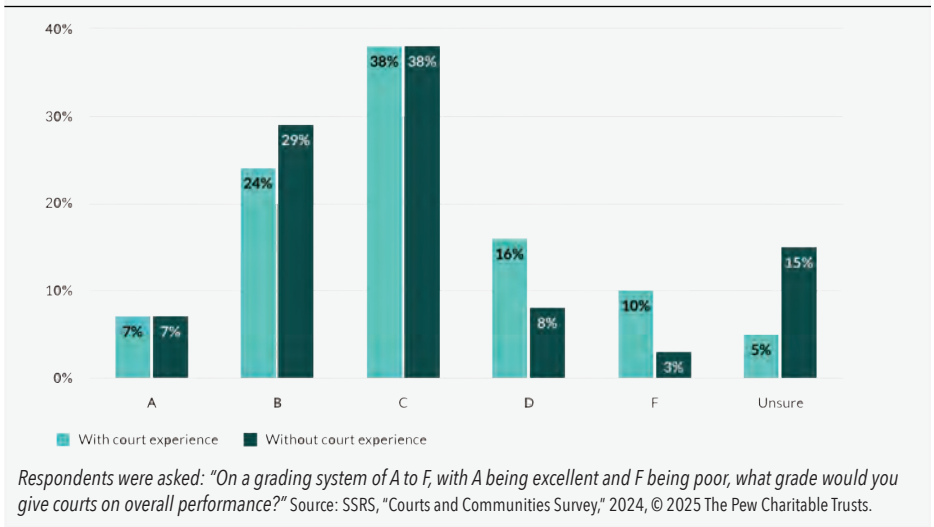


FIGURE 3. COURT EXPERIENCE CAN STRAIN CONFIDENCE IN COURTS

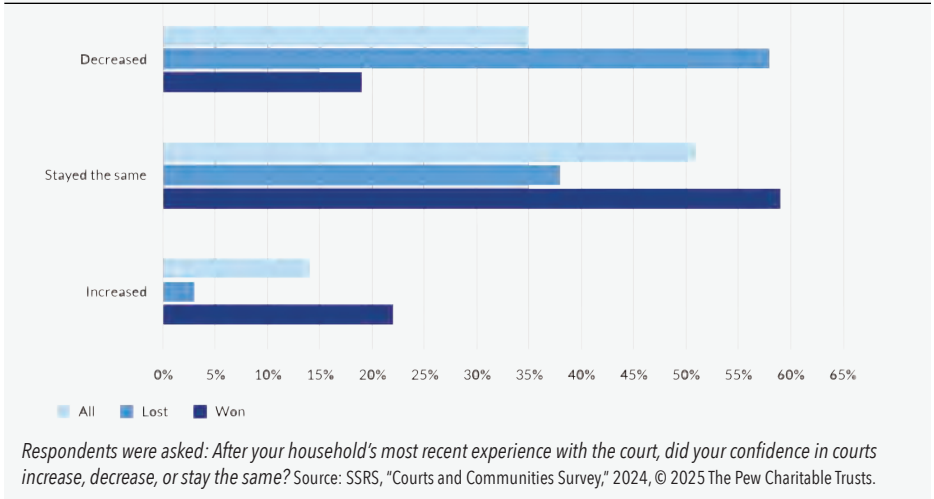


FIGURE 4. PEOPLE REPORT RESPECTFUL TREATMENT BY COURT STAFF

