

**NEW JERSEY JUDICIARY**

**SUPREME COURT TASK FORCE  
ON  
MINORITY CONCERN**



**DIFFERENTIAL USE OF COURTS BY  
MINORITY AND NON-MINORITY POPULATIONS  
IN NEW JERSEY**

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149226



November 1993

This document was developed under a grant from the State Justice Institute. Additional funding was supplied by the Administrative Office of the Courts of New Jersey, Wellesley College, and Clark University. The points of view expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the State Justice Institute, the Administrative Office of the Courts, Wellesley College, or Clark University. We very much appreciate the valuable assistance provided by Sylvia Breau, Jon Blazer, and Nelson Kofie.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1985, Chief Justice Wilentz of the New Jersey Supreme Court established the Task Force on Minority Concerns to address directly the goal of equal justice under law within the New Jersey court system. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to identify problems faced by minorities that are within the scope of the Judiciary, to undertake a critical examination of the concerns of minorities in their treatment in and by the courts, and to propose solutions to the identified problems that the Judiciary could implement. Under the guidance of the Task Force, a study was developed to test the hypothesis that minorities utilize the courts differently from the majority. This report describes the results of the study of "differential court usage."

- This research asked citizens about the kinds of problems they experience and what they did about them, and about their legal experiences more generally.
- The final complete survey provided 403 useable/codeable surveys with a sample population approximating well the demographic characteristics of New Jersey.
- The average number of problems reported (any one of which could theoretically become the subject of some form of legal intervention) was fourteen, and that number did not vary significantly by race/ethnicity. While there is no significant variation in the number of problems, there is variation in the frequency with which different racial/ethnic groups reported having experienced certain problem situations.
- The data show that approximately 14% of the time people turn to the law (initiate action with a lawyer, court, or other govern-

ment official) to remedy or resolve their problems. We found no evidence of any significant variation by race/ethnicity in the degree to which people use law as a response to particular problematic situations.

- Approximately 80% of the sample reported that they had been in a United States court. White and African-American respondents were more likely to have been in court than Hispanic and Other respondents.

- Use of attorneys varied by race and ethnicity; non-white respondents were less likely to have consulted a lawyer.

- Victimization by crime did not vary but the willingness to call the police after being a victim did vary significantly by race/ethnicity with Black respondents significantly less willing to call the police.

- Respondents generally rated the legal system highest in terms of its effectiveness to resolve problems. Respondents' evaluations of the accessibility of courts and their ability to deal fairly with cases were lower, although still relatively positive. African-American respondents rated the legal system more negatively with regard to its effectiveness and its ability to deal fairly with litigants.

- Despite these variations among racial/ethnic groups, however, the ratings overall were relatively positive. Although the law is perceived to be sometimes unjust and unresponsive, it is still perceived to operate as an effective instrument for resolving problems.

- Black and Hispanic respondents reported themselves as preferring to use formal institutions rather than informal means to

handle their problems. Overall, and according to a variety of measures, non-white respondents were consistently more likely to describe themselves as being more willing than white respondents to use the courts in New Jersey.

- Comparing attitudinal responses with actual experience, we found that experience within a court does not have a simple or unidirectional effect on attitudes toward courts: in regard to some matters, experience enhances assessments, in regard to others, it lowers assessments. Citizens do not experience the courts as remote, nor as needlessly complicated; at the same time, the courts may not be particularly accommodating to an individual's desire to tell his/her story or provide extensive information.

- It appears that legal experience in general, not simply court experience, affects legal attitudes by eroding citizens' faith in the fairness as well as responsiveness of courts and court personnel. It does not, however, erode their view of courts as useful or effective problem-solving institutions.

- Throughout this analysis, it was often the case that there was as much variation among minority groups as there was between whites and "non-whites." In regard to some issues, Black respondents were indistinguishable from white respondents while Hispanics constituted a separate category, often distinctive by virtue of their willingness to use the law despite their relative legal inexperience.

- This research reveals a picture of a population willing and able to mobilize the courts but somewhat cynical about some of the claims to fairness and justness, in short, of a legally active but critical citizenry.

CHAPTER 1

THE DIFFERENTIAL USE OF COURTS:

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

a. **Introduction.** The fundamental premise of our legal system is that all citizens be governed by the same laws in the same way. In a nation committed to "equal justice for all," discriminatory practices and unequal access pose serious threats to government's integrity and legitimacy. Although the courts have been the primary vehicle through which barriers to equal access and treatment have been challenged, few believe that all the obstacles to complete equality have been removed, or that the courts are as accessible as they should be.

In 1985, Chief Justice Wilentz of the New Jersey Supreme Court established the Task Force on Minority Concerns to address directly the goal of equal justice under law within the New Jersey court system. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to identify problems faced by minorities that are within the scope of the Judiciary, to undertake a critical examination of the concerns of minorities in their treatment in and by the courts, and to propose solutions to the identified problems that the Judiciary could implement. By 1989, the Task Force had completed a survey of New Jersey judges and court managers (Chambliss and Taylor, 1989), organized study groups, and conducted public hearings (Interim Report, 1989:5-6, 23-24, 33-34, 115-116; Final Report, 1992:5-6, 40, 70, 146, 278). A considerable body of information was collected and areas of concern isolated. Although definitive conclusions on the status of discrimination in the New Jersey

courts remain open, important questions were raised by this research.

The literature describing practices in other legal settings offers ambiguous and conflicting results. Some evidence indicates considerable discrimination at different points in the court system, although other evidence challenges claims of discrimination. For example, in his study of criminal sentencing, Blumstein et al. argue that although the minorities are disproportionately sentenced to prison (the national ratio of minorities to whites in prison is seven to one), this ratio is no greater than the proportion of minorities involved in crime (Blumstein, Cohen and Nagin, 1978). These findings are questionable, however, because they do not differentiate involvement in crime from involvement in the criminal justice system, which may disproportionately select some populations and criminal behaviors for control. Furthermore, other research on this topic finds that discrimination occurs unevenly in the criminal justice system, at different stages of the criminal justice process, among different types of crimes, and in different locales. For example, Bridges and Crutchfield (1988) reported significant discrimination in some counties in Washington state but not in others.

The Task Force concluded from its preliminary research that it would be able to determine whether there is discrimination, and if there is, how it takes place and is distributed in the court system, only after a thorough and detailed study that examines the entire legal system from the initiation of legal process to the termination of a case. This study of "differential court usage" is a piece of that larger project.

b. Organization of Report. Chapter 2 describes the scholarly context for contemporary studies of the differential use of law and courts by minority and non-minority populations. Major survey projects have reported low level of legal use and need for minority populations, while small scale intensive ethnographic studies have described forms of cultural resistance to the resort to law among some population groups. For the most part, the studies have been flawed by conceptual and methodological problems.

Chapter 3 describes the design of this research, data collection instruments, and the characteristics of the resulting survey sample. This research collects data through a lengthy survey that self-consciously attempts to avoid the biases and oversights of earlier surveys. In addition to asking citizens about the kinds of problems they experience and what they did about them, respondents were asked about their legal experience more generally, whether they had ever been a juror, or observer in court, for instance. Additional questions were designed to measure legal knowledge, and to assess citizens' attitudes toward courts and legal services generally.

Chapter 3 also describes the demographic profile of the resulting sample of respondents and compares the sample to the New Jersey population in 1980 and 1990. The final complete survey provided 403 useable/codeable surveys with a sample population approximating well the demographic characteristics of New Jersey.

Chapter 4, "Legal Need," describes the legal needs of our respondents as measured by their responses to an extended inventory of problems, any one of which could theoretically become the subject of some form of legal intervention. The average number of

problems reported was fourteen, and that number did not vary significantly by race/ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, an important finding because, by showing the number of problems to be the same, it confirms our original assumption and working hypothesis that previous research has systematically underestimated the legal needs of minority populations. While there is no significant variation in the number of problems, there is variation in the frequency with which different racial/ethnic groups reported having experienced certain problem situations.

Chapter 5, "Turning to Law," describes the responses of our respondents to the situations they identified as problems. The data show that approximately 14% of the time people turn to the law to remedy or resolve their problems. Because we are interested in describing differential use of the legal system, we define "the law" broadly so as to capture the variety of responses and actions taken by citizens. To this end, we operationalized legal action as any effort to consult or mobilize any legal agent or agency, including, but not limited to, the courts. For instance, calling the police, consulting an attorney, or contacting a regulatory agency all constitute a form of legal action according to this definition. Whenever we are discussing or describing the use of a particular legal body, such as the courts, this is specifically noted. While it is clear that the law is by no means the most common response to daily situations and problems, at the same time it constitutes an important part of people's repertoire of actions.

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<sup>1</sup>For this report, "race/ethnicity" refers to the distribution of persons among the following groups: whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Other (Native Americans and Asians combined). See page 33, infra, for details.

We found no evidence of any significant variation by race/ethnicity in the degree to which people use law as a response to particular problematic situations.

We found that approximately 80% of the sample reported that they had been in a court in the United States; this measure of legal use did, however, vary by race and ethnicity. Use of attorneys also varied by race and ethnicity. Victimization of crime did not vary by race or ethnicity but the willingness to call the police after being a victim did vary significantly by race with Black respondents being significantly less willing to call the police.

If, as we have shown in Chapters 4 and 5, recourse to law is not a product of differential need, citizens' mobilization of law may reflect their attitude toward and expectations about the legal system and legal actors which is the subject of Chapter 6, "Perceptions of Law and Courts." Respondents were asked to rate the legal system in terms of its effectiveness, accessibility, and fairness. Respondents generally rated the legal system the most positively in terms of its effectiveness to resolve problems. Respondents' evaluations of the accessibility of the legal system, including courts, and its ability to deal fairly with cases were lower, although still relatively positive. Here we found some racial/ethnic variation. African-American respondents rated the legal system more negatively with regard to its effectiveness and its ability to deal fairly with litigants. They are less likely than other racial/ethnic groups to see the law operating in a fair and unbiased way. Despite these variations among racial/ethnic groups, however, the ratings overall were relatively positive.

This leads us to conclude that despite the fact that the law is perceived to be sometimes unjust and unresponsive, it is still largely perceived to operate as an effective instrument for resolving problems.

In addition, Black and Hispanic respondents indicated a preference for using formal institutions such as police and courts rather than informal means to handle their problems. Overall, non-white respondents were more likely to describe themselves as being more willing than white respondents to use the courts in New Jersey. Using a variety of measures of willingness, we consistently found that non-white respondents reported themselves more willing to use law and courts. Comparing these attitudinal responses with actual experience, we found that experience within a court does not have a simple or unidirectional effect on attitudes: in regard to some matters, experience enhances assessments, in regard to others, it lowers assessments. Citizens seem to learn that while the law may be neither remote nor needlessly complicated, they may still not be particularly accommodating to individuals' desires to tell their story or provide extensive information. When we look at more than court experience, the picture sharpens. It appears that legal experience in general, not simply court experience, affects legal attitudes by eroding citizens' faith in the fairness as well as responsiveness of legal institutions and actors. It does not, however, erode their view of the law and legal bodies as useful or effective problem-solving instruments.

Throughout this analysis when we found differences in the use of the law by race/ethnicity, it was often the case that there was

as much variation among minority groups as there was between whites and "non-whites." In regard to some issues, for instance, Black respondents were indistinguishable from white respondents while Hispanics constituted a distinctive category, differentiated by their willingness to use the law despite their relative legal inexperience. The variation that exists among Blacks, Hispanics, and Other racial/ethnic groups makes problematic the unreflective use of labels such as "minorities" or "non-whites" insofar as these labels obscure this variation. Throughout this text, we have remained attentive to this variation in our analysis and language, referring to each racial/ethnic group separately wherever differences exist.

This research reveals a picture of a population willing and able to mobilize the legal system but somewhat cynical about some of its claims to fairness and justness, in short, of a legally active but critical citizenry.

## CHAPTER 2

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON USE OF LAW AND COURTS

This research is part of a larger body of research on the differential use of courts and other legal agencies. That literature begins with the assumption that the law is a powerful, and potentially empowering, resource for citizens. As such, the law has historically provided an arena in which persons voice grievances, stake claims, assert rights, and seek protection. This particular project contributes to this growing body of research on the use of law and courts by asking how citizens use courts, why they use them, and why they may not turn to law or courts in situations of trouble, grievance, or dispute.

a. **Survey Studies of Legal Use.** The most prominent picture that emerges from the previous research on legal usage has been that the poor, and racial and ethnic minority citizens, use courts and law less often than do middle-class or white citizens, and thus have been correspondingly disempowered (Carlin, Howard and Messinger, 1966; Mayhew and Reiss, 1969; Galanter, 1974, 1975; Silberman, 1985; Miller and Sarat, 1980-1981; Goodman and Sanborne, 1986). The most common explanation for this difference has been that these citizens have fewer legal needs than wealthier citizens.

This "observed" differential use of legal resources has often been explained by what is essentially an economic or social structural model. Citizens with greater resources of education, income, or familiarity, which is often a consequence of education or income, are more likely to use law as a means of dispute resolution (Carlin, Howard and Messinger, 1966; Mayhew and Reiss,

1969; Galanter, 1974, 1975; Silberman, 1985). Because minority populations deploy disproportionately fewer social resources of education, income, status, and power, they are less likely to turn to the law or the courts with their troubles. Thus race and income interact to explain differential use of law and courts.

Indeed, prior survey research in New Jersey produced results consistent with this consensus in the literature. The survey of judges and court personnel supports the hypothesis that racial, ethnic (Hispanic) and linguistic minorities are less likely to use the courts than are whites (Chambliss and Taylor, 1989; New Jersey Task Force, 1989). Moreover, in a survey of a smaller subset of professionals in the court system, respondents suggested that the relative degree of inclination to use the courts would also vary, with whites being most inclined, Blacks second, Hispanics (who speak English) third, and linguistic minorities last (Bey and Lee, 1988). Asian Americans were thought to be differentially inclined depending upon the type of case.

Other research suggests, however, that the question is somewhat more complicated than a simple correlation among socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, and court usage. Although research continually documents the fact that poor people make less use of lawyers, and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be poor and thus also less likely to use lawyers or turn to the courts, it is not poverty per se, or the interaction between poverty and race/ethnicity alone, that creates barriers to use of the law. Since the 1960s, and since the institution of public legal services, research has repeatedly confirmed the observation that it is the kind of problems people have rather than their income,

education, race, or ethnicity that influences their recourse to law (Mayhew and Reiss, 1969; Miller and Sarat, 1980-81; Engel, 1984; Silberman, 1985). In one of the most extensive examinations of disputing behavior in the United States, conducted at the University of Wisconsin under the title "The Civil Litigation Project,"<sup>1</sup> researchers again reported that the willingness to use law and courts for dispute resolution was more dependent upon the nature of the problem than upon income or ethnicity. Miller and Sarat (1980-81:550) report that, with the exception of a limited number of problems including discrimination, the standard descriptive variables (age, income, education, ethnicity) "were poor predictors of rates of grievance experience, perception, or acknowledgement" of grievance.<sup>2</sup>

Although demographic variables do not seem to have much impact on grievances in general, they do have consequences for some classes of grievances. It appears that racial minorities are less likely to assert claims in consumer and tort areas than whites, but are significantly more likely to assert discrimination claims (Miller and Sarat, 1980-81:552). Nonetheless, researchers argue that, with the exception of torts and discrimination issues, the

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<sup>1</sup>The Civil Litigation Project was a multi-million dollar research effort coordinated at the University of Wisconsin, Institute for Legal Studies, to study patterns of disputing and litigation in five federal court districts. Its work is described in Joel Grossman, ed., Law and Society Review, Volume 15, No.3-4 (1980-81); "Litigation in America", UCLA Law Review, Volume 31, October 1983, No. 1; Trubek, Felstiner, Grossman, Kritzer and Sarat, Civil Litigation Research Project: Final Report (March 1983), University of Wisconsin Law School.

<sup>2</sup>Grievances are understood as the beginnings of disputes; a grievance is an individual's belief that he or she (or a group or organization) is entitled to a resource which someone else may grant or deny (Ladinsky and Susmilch, 1980:5).

probability of making claims and asserting rights is more dependent upon "problem-specific factors than on claimants' capacities" or characteristics (Miller and Sarat, 1980-81:555).

The Civil Litigation Project reported that over all problem areas "rates of claiming and disputing are substantial. Over 70 percent of those who experience problems make claims for redress, and almost two-thirds of these claims lead to disputes," that is, denials or challenges to these claims (Miller and Sarat, 1980-81:561). Studies of consumer complaining report similar figures with a range from 70% to 81% of citizens filing complaints when they are dissatisfied with a product or service (McGuire and Edelhertz, 1980; Ladinsky and Susmilch, 1981; Silbey, 1984: 429ff.). In sum then, if the literature describes differential use of law depending primarily upon the nature of the problem, it nonetheless describes a generally active and assertive citizenry, and a widespread willingness to turn to third parties, law, and courts when citizens perceive problems and grievances.

Studies in New Jersey, however, challenged this picture of an active and litigious citizenry. Local research by legal aid agencies had suggested that problems ripe for grievance, claims, and intervention exist across all social categories, although the perception of problems and the response differ by a variety of social factors, including income and race or ethnicity. In a 1986 study of "The Legal Needs of the Poor in New Jersey," Goodman and Sanborne (1986) reported that although 68% of the families surveyed reported circumstances that constituted, by professional assessment of those circumstances, grounds for legal action, only 26% of those problems were acted upon, or taken to a third party. Of those

taken to a third party, 51% sought governmental or private legal help. Thus, in a universe of potential legal claims, only 13.25% of the sample surveyed turned to law or the courts for remedy, while national cross-class surveys had usually found a response rate of at least 70%. These reported disparities seemed to demand further research.

b. Problems in Earlier Research. Many studies have been unable to capture the differential use of law and courts by racial and ethnic minorities, or resolve discrepancies in the data, because they have inadequately conceptualized the problem. First, the role of law, and government, in the life of minority and poorer citizens may also be substantially different from its role in the life of the majority of citizens. While many middle class citizens develop careers working in and administering the law, the poor develop careers maneuvering within and among legal agencies and legal bureaucracies. For the former, a career is a means of forging a professional identity, being a member of community, and earning a relatively secure living; for the latter, the time and expertise required to negotiate through bureaucratic offices also constitutes a career, but offers no socially acceptable identity, no community membership, no independence or comfort; it is, instead, often a means of physical survival (Goodman and Sanborne, 1986:2). If many poor citizens, and minority citizens, develop careers in law, it is not as disputants but as supplicants.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Almond and Verba (1965:138, 168-169) describe administrative or subject competence as distinguished as an ability to appeal to government responsiveness on the basis of existing policy; they contrast this with political competence which they define as the ability to demand participation in the making of governmental rules. Cf. Carlin, Howard, and Messinger, 1966:69.

Second, the legal needs of racial and ethnic minorities, and the poor who are disproportionately minorities, may be "fundamentally different in character and in quantity from the legal needs of other classes" (Goodman and Sanborne, 1986:1), and may have been inadequately identified in many of the studies of disputing and use of law.

Poor people's legal problems arise mainly in the context of interactions with institutional elements of the community. In these interactions and exchanges, the poor, almost by definition, are both needy and disadvantaged. These are not the circumstances that typically attend the emergence of legal problems of the middle classes. Therefore, from a middle class point of view, it may be difficult to see that the legal problems of the poor extend far beyond the familiar and conventional matters of estate planning, divorce, commercial contracts, incorporation, real property, and inheritance. It may also be difficult to understand the issues that arise from dependence on officialdom and on markets that specialize in low-income trade (Goodman and Sanborne, 1986:2).

Because the problems and grievances, and thus potential disputes, of poor and minority populations are fundamentally different from both minority and non-minority middle and upper classes, it is not surprising that in many of the studies those problems have been ill-conceived and therefore unlikely to be recorded and measured.

Almost without exception, legal need was assessed in these studies by presenting respondents with a list of problems or situations, any of which could potentially lead to some legal action, and asking which, if any, of these situations a person might have experienced. The point of this inventory was not to determine the soundness of a person's legal case—not to assess the facts of the case—but simply to determine whether a respondent had experienced the type of situation, or dispute, that could poten-

tially or theoretically become the subject of legal services. Those legal services included a range of actions such as calling the police, contacting a lawyer, or actually suing another party.

Using this methodology, most studies had found that poor citizens are less likely to experience the type of problems that are potentially courtworthy or that would require legal services. In addition, these studies concluded that minority citizens, because of disproportionate poverty, were less likely to use the law than were white citizens. In drawing this conclusion, much of the research has relied on a relatively narrow definition of legal need. In almost all of these studies, the list or inventory of problem situations was constructed by including only those kinds of problems that upper courts routinely handled, more serious legal issues. The result was a list of problems biased toward the conventional, middle class matters involving property. Not surprisingly, using such an inventory, poorer citizens were found to have fewer legal needs when it was, in fact arguable that the level of reported legal need reflected more about the biases of the measurement device than the actual experiences, life situations, or perceptions of poorer and minority citizens.

Third, the research on citizen participation in the legal system has, for the most part, "derived from a model of disputing as a form of rational optimizing behavior most prominently, but not exclusively, associated with economic transactions" (Merry and Silbey, 1984:155), and most often associated with middle and upper-class values and less often with working and lower classes, or racial and ethnic minorities (Baumgartner, 1984; Merry and Silbey, 1984; Sennett and Cobb, 1973). In the large scale surveys,

disputants are perceived as making rational decisions between alternative courses of action on the basis of the stakes, costs and anticipated outcomes. To some extent, the focus on economic reasoning is dictated by the nature of the cases being studied ... the result [however] is a characterization of dispute and a model of disputing in terms of instrumental, optimizing decision strategies. (Merry and Silbey, 1984:157)

Thus, researchers describe the "opportunity costs" associated with going to court (Steadman and Rosenstein, 1973; Moulton, 1969; Yngvesson and Hennessey, 1975), and litigation is described as an investment of time, money, and skill.<sup>4</sup> This model underestimates, as it devalues, the role of cultural norms in the dispute process. It fails to incorporate those circumstances and values which more adequately capture the common life experiences of racial and ethnic minorities by defining economic transactions and rational calculation as the modal category of dispute behavior.

Fourth, the conventional studies of disputing often use methods of analysis which disaggregate social action into component variables which are measured independently and then re-aggregated through complex statistical procedures (e.g., see Miller and Sarat, 1980-81). These approaches are unable to access the complex meanings of events which vary by race and ethnicity as well as by social class. In other words, the most common research methods and measures systematically exclude just those phenomena which distinguish and define race and ethnicity, i.e., variations in meaning systems and values.

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<sup>4</sup>Although little research has attempted to measure the consequences of variations in investments of time for disputing or legal transactions, socioeconomic status has been used as a surrogate measure for describing citizens' variable investment of money and skill, as well as knowledge and experience and the effects on disputing behavior.

As a result, there is a need for research which can compare and distinguish the use of courts and law by poor, minority, and middle class populations. This research would need to: (1) distinguish the problems and situations of poor and minority populations which might call for legal action from those of the middle class; (2) conceive of social action and use of law as more than a product of rational cost-benefit analyses; (3) use a range of methodologies able to access and describe the cultural norms, values, and habits of action that promote or inhibit use of courts in a variety of social groups; and, (4) establish the relationship between legal organization and the culture of a variety of population groups.

c. Ethnographic Studies of the Social Meanings and Uses of Law. In response to this bias problem, the next wave of research expanded the operational definition of legal needs, and looked at a wider, and less slanted, array of issues and events that might prompt people to turn to law, not just estates and wills, or property sales, but issues such as neighborhood conflicts, rental disputes, evictions, or problems with local schools or governmental officials, to name just a few. This next wave of research demonstrated that the legal needs of the poor are different, but not necessarily, fewer than the needs of middle class citizens.

This work uses ethnographic and qualitative methods of analysis, intensive interviewing, and observation, to study disputes and dispute behavior. It seeks out the aspect of "party capability" or "legal competence" that has been overlooked in many studies of differential use of law: litigant dispositions, values, and inclinations. "Whether and how people participate and use

legal processes results, in large measure, from the way law is represented in and through cultural systems in which citizens are embedded" (Sarat, 1986:539).

The "legally competent person", that is, a person, according to Carlin, Howard and Messinger (1966:71) who is both aware and assertive, "has a sense of himself as a possessor of rights and he sees the legal system as a resource for validation of these rights." This sense of the self, and these sets of dispositions and perceptions are cultural products learned, shaped, and framed by interactions in specific social locations. Although these perceptions may be understood as matters of skill associated with social class, they have an important and independent normative dimension. The legally competent subject

will see assertion of his interests through legal channels as desirable and appropriate. This is not to say the he will view law as omni-relevant, as a sort of all-purpose tool. He will be aware of the limits of law. But it is important to stress that he will not be hostile to the extension of the rule of law. When he believes it proper, he will make an effort to bring his interests under the aegis of authoritative rules. This will call for a 'creative act of influence' that will affect the content of official decisions. It is implicit in what we have said that the competent subject will have a sense of himself as a possessor of rights, and in seeking to validate and implement rights through law he will be concerned with holding authorities accountable to law. (Carlin, Howard, and Messinger, 1966:70)<sup>5</sup>

In other words, legal competence, or the willingness to use law and courts, includes "an ideological or normative dimension, which may

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<sup>5</sup>"As we see him, the competent subject will see law as a resource for developing, furthering, and protecting his interests. This is partly a matter of knowledge. The competent subject will be aware of the relation between the realization of his interests and the machinery of law making and administration. He will know how to use this machinery and when to use it" (Carlin, Howard, and Messinger, 1966:70).

operate to inhibit participation for those otherwise seemingly capable of participating" (Sarat, 1986:539).

Ethnographic studies have been able to capture, in ways inaccessible to large surveys of disputing, the variable meaning of events, grievances, disputes, and law, in the lives of citizens, neighborhoods, and communities. This research paints a very different picture of citizens' responses to grievances and perceptions of law. The studies confirm the fact that all social groups experience grievances that could become claims and disputes. They also demonstrate that citizens perceive these events differently and respond to them in culturally specific and variable ways; moreover, they argue that these differences cannot be adequately described by an economic, cost-benefit, or rational calculus that has characterized most of the studies of disputing (Merry and Silbey, 1984).

Disputes are cultural events, evolving within a framework of rules about what is the normal or moral way to act, what kinds of wrongs warrant action, and what kinds of remedies are acceptable and appropriate.

Ideas about how to respond to grievances are linked with socially constructed definitions of normal behavior, respectability, responsibility and the good person ... Rules about how to fight or whether to fight, how to respond to insults and grievances, how to live with one's neighbors are parts of elaborate and complex belief systems which may vary between social groups.... In other words, dispute behavior reflects community evaluations, moral codes, and cultural notions, learned but not entirely chosen, of the way people of virtue and integrity live. (Merry and Silbey, 1985:157, 176)

Research on the cultural conditions of disputing indicates that American citizens prefer to handle problems by themselves, by talking with the other party, or by avoiding the situation or the

person. In some cases, this reluctance derives from a fear of "making trouble" (Merry and Silbey, 1984), or being perceived as litigious and greedy (Engel, 1984) by turning to third parties. In other communities, the resistance to law derives from deeply held religious principles (Greenhouse, 1986). For these people, invoking the law or litigating requires a submission to civil, as opposed to, religious authority. Conflict and authority are perceived as sinful evidence of a fall from God's grace. According to Bumiller (1987), victims of discrimination often also refuse to turn to law. This group avoids litigation because they believe that courts rob them of being in control of their lives and isolate them from their communities at a time when they are most in need of support. Bumiller's respondents resisted what she described as a "double victimization"; first in becoming an "object" of discrimination, and second, in becoming "a case" in law.

Typically, only when problems seemed intractable, unavoidable, and intolerable do litigants seek help. In these cases, it requires an extraordinary effort to overcome the routine reluctance, and necessitates the development of principled arguments to justify the action. Only when differences and disputes have reached the point where they are interpreted as conflicts of principle do citizens feel comfortable turning to law (Merry and Silbey, 1984).<sup>6</sup> When surveyed, these communities and groups registered an abnormally low court usage. The courts and the law are avoided not because the citizens do not know how to use the courts; nor do they always lack the financial resources to invoke

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<sup>6</sup>See Galanter (1983) for a significant challenge to the notion of a litigation crises and the pervasiveness of a culture of litigiousness.

its agency. By rejecting the courts' purposes and authority, nonetheless, these citizens appear to lack what we have been referring to as legal competence.

While these studies describe forms of avoiding law that might explain the low rate of complaining observed among the poor in New Jersey, none of these pictures is flat or simple, and few suggest that they can be reliably generalized outside of the limitations of the communities and situations studied. This body of research depicts variability influenced by local situations, norms, and customary ways of doing things. Cumulatively, these works suggest a complex picture of citizens' differential use of law. These uses can be described strategically, but the tactics and uses are framed not solely by economic, informational or instrumental concerns, but by moral and normative systems of meaning as well. Moreover, these meanings vary by geographic locations, as well as by racial, ethnic and class distinctions. By recognizing the fit, or lack thereof, between legal organization and both the norms and interests of particular groups or classes, this body of research suggests ideological and cultural explanations for the display of avoidance or pragmatic and skeptical involvement in law by subordinate social groups (cf. Doo, 1973; Merry, 1979, 1985).

The problem with the data generated by this recent research, however, is that the results have, for the most part, been based on small, non-random samples. Consequently, the results—while suggestive of a larger level and different character of need—could not be extended to minority or poor populations generally.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND SURVEY SAMPLE

It was with this body of research in mind that we designed the current study. Our explicit research goals were first, to describe the number and kinds of potentially legal problems people experienced; second, to identify what people did about these situations, specifically to determine the role of the law in citizens' repertoire of responses to these problematic events; and third, to see if there were differences by race/ethnicity in either the number and kinds of problems people experienced, or their use of legal services.

We constructed a lengthy survey that self-consciously avoided the biases and oversights of earlier surveys. In addition to asking citizens about the kinds of problems they experienced and what they did about them, we asked about their legal experience more generally, whether they had ever been a juror, or observer in court, for instance. We included questions that were designed to measure legal knowledge, and questions to assess citizens' attitudes toward courts and legal services generally.

a. Data Collection. The study design used in-depth, face-to-face, interviews with 150 persons in each of four New Jersey counties (total N=600). The counties were selected for variation in racial/ethnic composition, population density, and socioeconomic status. Using the U.S. Census data for 1980, four counties in New Jersey were identified: Bergen, Camden, Essex, and Hudson. Bergen and Essex are the largest and most densely populated New Jersey counties with approximately 850,000 persons in each county. They

vary significantly, however, by the percentage of the population which is non-white or Hispanic. Bergen has less than 4% African American and less than 4% Hispanic; Essex county has over 37% African-American population and 9% Hispanic, as well as communities with the highest and lowest median incomes. Hudson and Camden counties are moderate sized (with approximately 500,000 persons) but with varied minority populations and local cultures. Camden county is in the southern part of the state, removed from the culture of metropolitan New York, with a mix of both urban and rural communities. Hudson county has the largest Hispanic population in the state in both proportion and number.

The data set was created using multi-stage cluster sampling. Within each county, census blocks, stratified by race and ethnicity were randomly selected. From these clusters of census blocks, households were randomly selected for interviewing.

Interviews were conducted in person, usually in the respondent's home, by an ethnically and racially diverse team of male and female field-workers. The interview instrument was translated into Spanish by an accredited translator, pretested in Spanish, and administered upon request to twelve respondents who requested it in Spanish. The field-workers were selected after personal interviews, extensive training, and trials in the field. Interviewers were instructed about the theoretical background of the project, the relationship to earlier research, and the specific design of the interview schedule. Training time was devoted to practice interviewing and probing techniques. Because each interview was both written and tape recorded, interviewers were instructed in listening and note-taking techniques, how to ask questions, how to

recognize openings in the conversation, and how to ask for more information without projecting "right" or "interesting" responses. Instruction was provided on how to offer encouraging, yet non-evaluative responses, and thus how to develop a repertoire of probes and nondirective feedback.

We created additional quality control checks. Interviewers were closely monitored and supervised. First, each completed interview schedule was read by a research assistant who was trained for this task. This person's entire, full-time occupation was oversight of the logistics of data collection. Second, the first two to three interviews conducted by each interviewer were listened to in their entirety. In addition, at least one other interview by each interviewer was transcribed and read by the principal investigators. We provided both written and oral responses to interviewers on the quality of the interviews. Third, interviews were coded to include not only demographic information about the respondent but information about the interviewer as well. Data were analyzed to determine if there were systematic responses by interviewer, race, or gender. There were none. Finally, we collected samples of handwriting for a standard paragraph so that coders would have less difficulty interpreting individual handwriting.

**b. Interview Format and Content.** The interview schedule was developed to examine the relationship between race and ethnicity to court use. To what degree are minorities less likely to use the courts and what accounts for this variation? How much is a product of skill, information, or socioeconomic resources (opportunity costs/legal capability)? How much is a product of cultural

perceptions, norms, and values (dispositions/legal competence)? How much of the variation is a product of previous experience with courts? And, how much of this variation is group specific or individual?

The interview schedule was designed by synthesizing both the methods and substantive foci of previous studies of legal mobilization, attitudes, and consciousness. It specifically replicated portions of the instruments used by the Civil Litigation Project, Tyler (1990), Lind and Tyler (1988), Merry and Silbey (1984), Bumiller (1987), Sarat (1986), Mayhew and Reiss (1969), Goodman and Sanborne (1986), and Yankelovich et al. (1978). Respondents were asked about ordinary, daily events and transactions, what they perceived as disruptions in those exchanges, and how they responded. We inquired about a range of situations and relationships including consumer purchases and sales, housing, neighborhood and community matters, medical services, relations with educational and public institutions, work and employment, as well as family and emotional connections. Questions included standardized indexes used to measure knowledge of law, experience, and familiarity with courts and legal institutions, perceptions of legal authorities and legal procedures, mastery of English, and basic demographic data.

Open-ended questions were placed throughout the interview, beginning with inquiries about respondents' attachments to their local community. We asked respondents to indicate ways in which they are the same or different from their neighbors and to name what they like or dislike about the community in which they live. Here, respondents were able to place themselves within a set of values and life styles, and to approve and disapprove of different

ways of doing things. These questions were followed by a series of probes about ordinary events (e.g., neighborhood problems, membership in clubs or local organizations, rental of housing, consumer purchases, interactions with educational and medical institutions), whether the respondent has been troubled by any of these or any like those named, how often and when they happen, what the respondent did or did not do, the relationships between the parties, the circumstances, and the outcomes. When respondents asked what we meant by "trouble" or "bother," interviewers were instructed to reply, "Anything that was not as you would have liked it to be, or thought it should be." In each instance, respondents were asked to account for their actions and to interpret the situation and their own and others' responses. This part of the interview is followed by a more in-depth conversation about one particular incident. Respondents were also asked to describe in detail their experiences and reactions to any encounters with legal actors or other third party counselors or interveners. The interviewers asked respondents to describe events, to assess responsibility, to suggest motives, to identify grievances, to interpret their own and others' actions, and to make judgments about typicality and variance. Importantly, we used non-analytic, colloquial terms throughout.

The resulting survey was extensive and comprehensive; the interview booklet ended up being over eighty pages and the interview itself took an average of two hours to complete.

c. The Survey Sample. In defining and selecting a sample, care was taken to ensure that the results of the research would approximate the demographic composition of the state. Because the

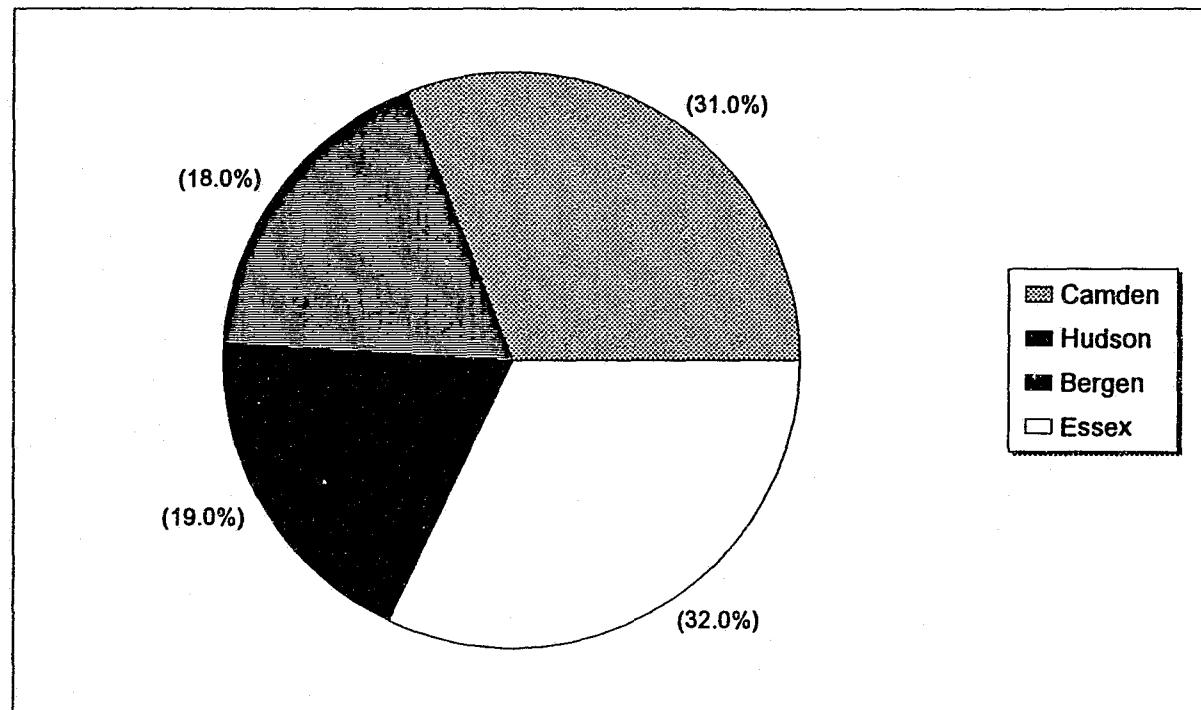
Task Force was specifically interested in how race and class operated to affect legal usage, the sample had to include sufficient numbers of racial and ethnic minority citizens to be able to make racial and ethnic comparisons. With these goals in mind, the 1980 census was used to create a multi-stage, stratified cluster sample.

The final complete survey sample provided 403 useable/codeable surveys. The population surveyed approximates well the demographic characteristics of New Jersey.

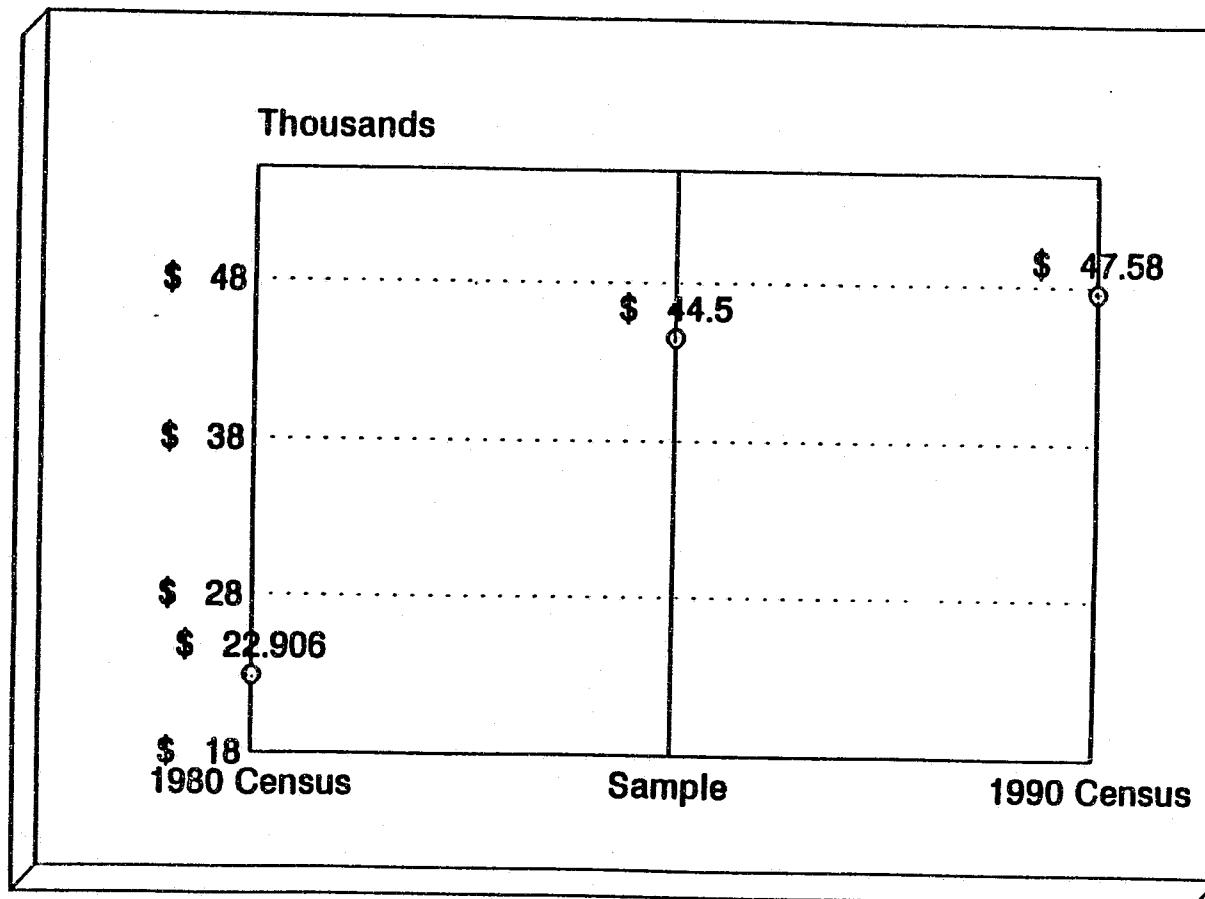
The completed sample is represented on Figure 1, Percentage Breakdown of Respondents, which shows the percentage breakdown within the sample by residence in the four New Jersey counties. Due to higher response rates, Camden and Essex Counties are disproportionately represented. Sixty-three percent of the respondents come from the two more heterogeneous counties (Camden and Essex), with the remaining thirty seven percent divided between the more homogeneous counties (Bergen and Hudson). Since these particular four counties were selected, in part, to insure a racially and ethnically diverse sample, and since the final sample composition reproduced well the racial/ethnic composition of the state as a whole, the underrepresentation of Bergen and Hudson is less problematic than it might otherwise be.

Figure 2, Median Family Income in New Jersey, displays the income composition of the sample. This figure shows that there is a good correspondence between the survey population and the New Jersey population in terms of median income, with the population surveyed falling somewhere between the median incomes reported in the 1980, 1990 censuses. Figure 3, Family Income: 1980 Census,

**FIGURE 1**  
**PERCENTAGE BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS**



**FIGURE 2**  
**MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME IN NEW JERSEY**



\*Sample median represents midpoint of the income category

1990 Census, Sample, lists the actual population numbers for the sample and the 1980 and 1990 censuses.

FIGURE 3

FAMILY INCOME: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
1980*	\$22,906	\$27,517	\$20,998	\$19,931	\$17,659
1990	\$47,589	\$57,640	\$41,961	\$42,150	\$32,250
Sample**	\$40,000- 49,999	\$60,000- 74,499	\$40,000- 49,999	\$50,000- 59,000	\$35,000- 39,000

\* Census data based on median income

\*\* In the survey, respondents were not asked to indicate the exact dollar amount of their income but, instead, to indicate the category within which their income fell. Therefore, the sample data are based on these categorical ranges. For the state, for instance, the median income fell within the category of \$40,000 to \$49,999.

Figures 4-6 describe the gender, occupation, and educational attainment profiles of the respondents and compare the sample to the New Jersey population in 1980 and 1990. Although the population we were sampling may be better described by the 1990 census, we relied on information from the 1980 census when constructing the survey because the 1990 census was not yet available to us in 1989.

Figure 7, New Jersey State Population by Race, specifically compares the sample with the population in terms of race. We can see from this graph that our sample also conforms by race to the New Jersey population. In fact, our sample contains a slightly higher proportion of non-white respondents than are represented in

the state population. Figure 8, Race: 1980 Census, 1990 Census, Sample, provides the numbers that were more boldly displayed on the bar chart.

FIGURE 4

GENDER: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
Women					
1980	--	52.0	52.3	53.4	52.7
1990	52.7	52.0	51.9	52.7	51.5
Sample	47.4	51.9	46.3	49.6	40.5
Men					
1980	--	48.0	47.7	46.6	47.3
1990	48.3	48.0	48.1	47.3	48.5
Sample	52.6	48.1	53.7	50.4	59.5

FIGURE 5  
OCCUPATIONS: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
Profes- sional					
1980	25.8	30.9	25.6	24.7	17.5
1990	32.7	35.7	28.9	28.2	24.1
Sample	37.7	44.2	34.1	36.7	39.2
Non-Pro- fessional					
1980	74.2	69.1	74.4	75.3	82.5
1990	67.3	64.3	71.1	71.8	75.9
Sample	62.0	55.8	65.9	63.3	60.8

FIGURE 6

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

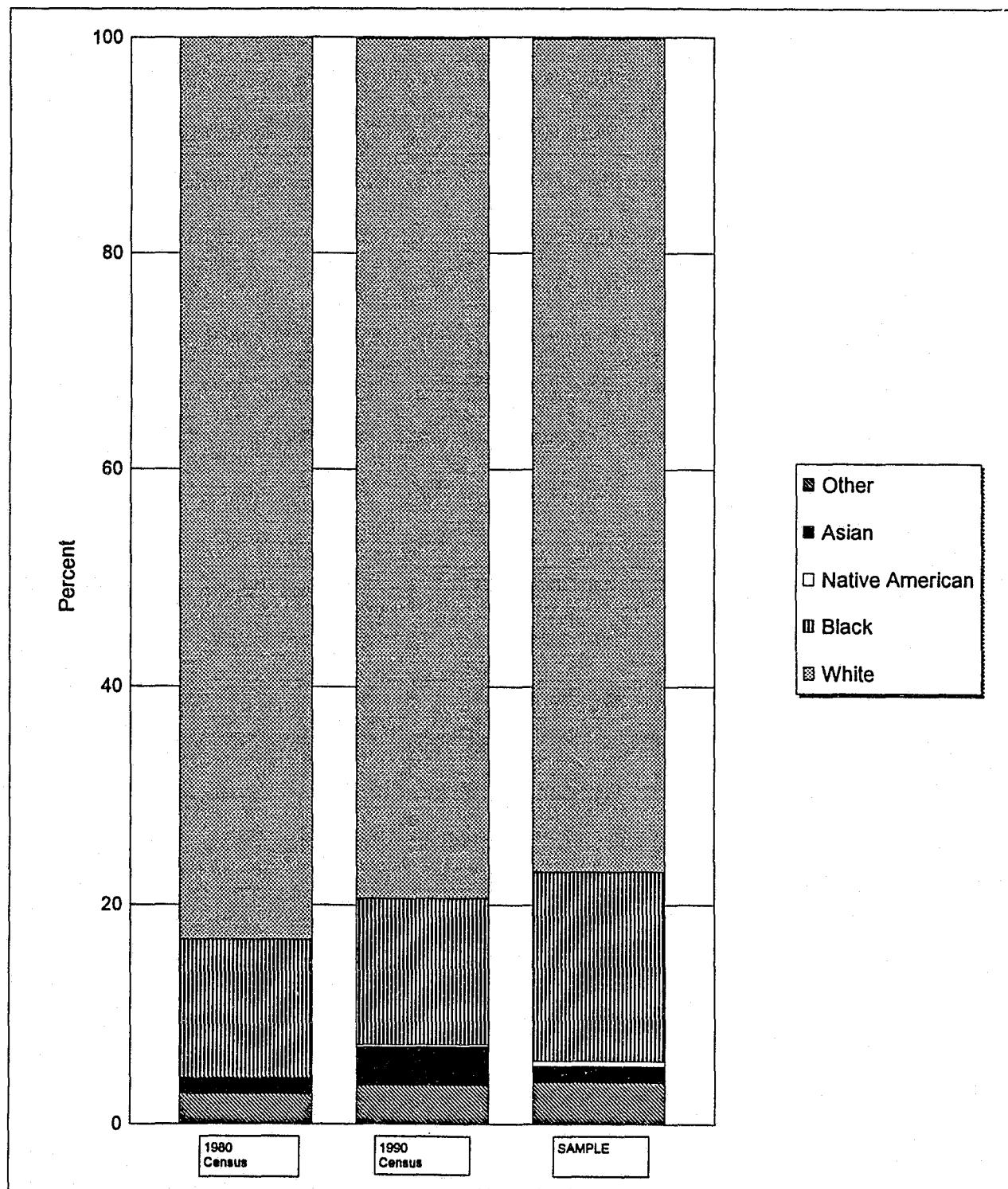
CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
<b>EDUCATION 0-8 YEARS</b>					
1980*	17.7	14.4	16.9	21.0	29.9
1990**	8.5	7.2	7.7	11.0	15.5
Sample***	5.0	3.9	5.7	4.0	6.9
<b>SOME HIGH SCHOOL</b>					
1980	14.9	11.9	17.6	16.2	18.5
1990	14.5	10.7	17.0	18.5	19.3
Sample	5.8	0.0	6.5	6.3	9.7
<b>HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA</b>					
1980	35.9	35.3	36.8	32.4	31.5
1990	31.4	29.4	34.0	28.3	28.8
Sample	19.6	16.9	24.4	23.0	8.3
<b>SOME COLLEGE</b>					
1980	13.2	14.6	12.5	12.5	9.0
1990	22.6	22.8	21.9	20.8	17.6
Sample	18.6	16.9	23.6	15.9	16.7
<b>COLLEGE DE- GREE OR MORE</b>					
1980	18.3	23.8	16.2	18.0	11.2
1990	23.1	30.0	19.4	22.0	18.7
Sample	51.0	62.3	39.8	50.8	58.3

\* 1980 data reports educational attainment of persons 25 years and older

\*\* 1990 data reports educational attainment of persons 18 years and older

\*\*\* Sample data reports educational attainment of persons 18 years and older

**FIGURE 7**  
**NEW JERSEY STATE POPULATION**  
**BY RACE ACCORDING TO**  
**1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, AND SAMPLE**



For this report, race/ethnicity is reported in a single measure that combines the two characteristics. In the interview schedule, that is in collecting data, Hispanic was not counted among the racial categories. People were asked to check the racial group with whom they identified. They were also asked, in a separate question, to check whether they had Spanish or Hispanic background or origin. The questions were asked and coded separately. Figure 9, Hispanic Origin: 1980 Census, 1990 Census, Sample, displays the percentage of Hispanic respondents in the sample and compares that to the census reports for 1980 and 1990. The sample is slightly lower than the population reported in the census.

For purposes of data analysis, however, we constructed a racial/ethnic variable that included Hispanic as a value in addition to white, and Black. This recoding was prompted by two considerations. First, of the thirty respondents who identified themselves as Hispanic, twenty-one also identified themselves as white in terms of race. Had the Hispanic and racial variables not been combined, these twenty-one persons would have been counted as white. Subsequent analysis shows that this would have buried and obscured important differences between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanic whites. Thus, it seemed more descriptively accurate to separate out Hispanic as a distinct population group.

Second, this recoding of Hispanic into a separate racial/ethnic category seemed culturally appropriate. Although "Hispanic" is not technically a racial category, in American society, it often functions as a racial category in the extent to

FIGURE 8  
RACE: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
RACE WHITE					
1980	83.2	92.8	81.3	56.7	76.4
1990	79.3	87.0	76.6	51.1	68.8
Sample	76.9	93.5	82.1	63.6	70.3
BLACK					
1980	12.6	3.9	14.3	37.2	12.6
1990	13.4	4.9	16.2	40.6	14.4
Sample	17.3	0.0	15.4	29.5	16.2
NATIVE AMER- ICAN					
1980	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
1990	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3
Sample	0.5	1.3	0.8	0.0	0.0
ASIAN					
1980	1.4	2.3	1.1	1.3	2.7
1990	3.5	6.6	2.3	2.7	6.6
Sample	1.5	2.6	0.8	0.8	2.7
OTHER					
1980	2.7	0.5	3.3	4.8	8.2
1990	3.5	1.4	4.6	5.3	9.8
Sample	3.7	2.6	0.8	3.9	9.5

FIGURE 9

## HISPANIC ORIGIN: 1980 CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS, SAMPLE

CENSUS YEAR/ SAMPLE	STATE	COUNTY			
		BERGEN	CAMDEN	ESSEX	HUDSON
1980	6.7	3.4	4.4	9.0	26.1
1990	9.6	6.0	7.2	12.6	33.2
Sample	7.4	2.6	3.3	7.0	20.3

which it reflects differences in power, resources, and status. These differences and their significance in understanding legal usage seemed to warrant separate accounting in this research which would have been obscured by lumping Hispanic respondents into the global categories of white and non-white, or minority and non-minority. **Figure 10, Racial and Spanish/Hispanic Origin Composition of Sample**, displays the racial and ethnic variation of the sample as the data were collected in response to the separate questions about racial identification and Hispanic origins. **Figure 11, Racial/Ethnic Composition of Sample after Recoding**, displays the racial/ethnic variation of the sample after recoding, and the percentages used throughout the remainder of this report. With the creation of new racial/ethnic variable, 71% of the sample is white, 17% African American, 7% Hispanic, and 5% were categorized as Other. In this breakdown, Other includes six Asian Americans and two Native Americans.

FIGURE 10

RACIAL AND SPANISH/HISPANIC ORIGIN COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE  
(N=403)

RACIAL/SPANISH-HISPANIC ORIGIN	NUMBER	PERCENT
<b>RACE</b>		
White	307	76.2
Black	69	17.1
Asian	6	1.5
Native American	2	0.5
Other	15	3.7
No Answer	4	1.0
<b>SPANISH-HISPANIC ORIGIN</b>		
Mexican-American	2	0.5
Puerto Rican	8	2.0
Cuban	6	1.5
Other Spanish/Hispanic	14	3.5
Not Spanish/Hispanic	337	83.6
No answer	36	8.9

FIGURE 11

RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE AFTER RECODING  
(N=403)

RACE/ETHNICITY	NUMBER	PERCENT
White	286	71.0
Black	67	16.6
Hispanic	30	7.4
Other	18	4.5
No answer	2	0.5

## CHAPTER 4

### LEGAL NEED

One of the principal goals of this research was to generate an estimate of the legal needs of citizens that would be free of both racial/ethnic and class bias. Since legal need must be conceptualized and measured independently from legal experience, need is typically assessed by presenting respondents with a list of events, experiences, or problems that theoretically could become the subject of some form of legal intervention or remedy. This measure seeks to establish legal need by determining the number of potential legal problems a respondent had experienced within a given time frame (in this research, the last five years), regardless of whether the respondent defined the situation as legal, ever sought any sort of legal remedy, or the case would have been successfully litigated had he or she pursued it. Assessing need in this way allows for an examination of the relationship between legal need and how people define and respond to situations.

As was mentioned earlier, previous research that had reported differential legal need among racial/ethnic and class groups was often based on an inventory of problem situations that overrepresented the experiences of middle class citizens. The resulting inventories, then, tended to consistently underestimate the legal needs of lower and working class citizens. Recognizing this problem, in developing the inventory of problem situations for this study, we included a far-ranging list of problems and situations that was intended to be as reflective of the lives and experiences of lower and working class citizens as it was of middle

and upper class citizens. The resulting list of over 100 situations ranged from noisy neighbors to family violence and fell into eight general categories, including neighborhood, consumer transactions, housing, employment, medical, public organization and government programs, discrimination, and family. See Figure 12, Discrete Problems, for a complete list of situations about which we inquired.

a. Number of Problems. Of the 100 issues or situations we asked about, people reported that they had experienced an average of fourteen problems, with the number ranging from zero to sixty-two (Figure 13-1, Frequencies of Problems Reported).

The average number of problems reported by our respondents did not vary significantly<sup>1</sup> by race/ethnicity. Whites and Blacks each reported an average of fifteen problems, Hispanics reported thirteen problems and racial/ethnic groups categorized under the Other category reported twelve problems. Figure 13-2, Frequencies of Problems Reported by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Family Income, displays the average number of problems by family income and shows,

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<sup>1</sup>Statistical significance indicates the probability that a relationship between two variables (such as in this case Race/ethnicity and the Number of Problems) would be observed in the data where, in fact, no relationship existed. A significance level of .05, for instance, indicates that in five out of 100 hypothetical samples we might expect to observe such a relationship where none actually existed. Since this is a relatively low probability, it indicates that the two variables are probably related. A significance level equal to or less than .05 is conventionally interpreted as a statistically significant relationship, something unlikely to occur unless the variables are in fact related. The smaller the number, the more confident we are in concluding that two or more variables are connected. Significance levels that are statistically significant are indicated by the notation "p <" (probability as less than). N.S. indicates that a relationship is not statistically significant.

**FIGURE 12**  
**DISCRETE PROBLEMS**

**I. Neighborhood Problems**

Have you ever been bothered by:

- Noise from neighbors?
- Kids playing or fighting?
- Problems with other people's dogs or pets?
- Adults who bother your children, scold or harass them?
- Problems about cars or parking?
- Vandalism to your house, car, hallways, graffiti, breaking things?
- Problems with fences?
- Things you loaned to neighbors that have not been returned?
- Disputes in your church, club, or neighborhood association?
- Neighbor's garbage or trash?
- Are there any other problems you have experienced in this neighborhood?

**II. Consumer Problems**

Have any of the following things ever happened to you?

- Someone who sold you an appliance or car and refused to make repairs promised by the warranty?
- You bought something because of an advertisement that turned out to be false?
- You went to buy an advertised product and were told it was sold out and that only a more expensive item was available?
- You bought something by mail that never arrived, or was not the same as was advertised?
- You bought something from a door-to-door salesperson that was not delivered or was not what you expected?
- You tried to return something but the seller would not take it back?
- You have been charged for something on credit that you either returned or never purchased in the first place?
- You were charged by a repair or service person more than you had originally agreed?
- You had insurance problems during the last five years?
- You were denied credit for what you consider unfair reasons?
- You had problems with creditors?
- You had difficulty cashing checks?

Concerning utilities:

- Has your electricity, gas, heat or telephone ever been shut off?
- Have you had errors in your bills?
- Have you had any other problems with utilities, gas, electricity, heat or telephone service?

### III. Renter and Home Owner Issues

Have any of these problems happened to you while renting?

The owner did not make repairs or provide services?  
The owner has not kept what you would consider undesirable people out of the building?  
The owner claimed that you damaged the property?  
The owner claimed that you owed him/her property?  
The owner claimed that you owed him/her money?  
Have you ever had problems with your lease being canceled, or rent raised unfairly?  
Did the owner ever try to have you evicted?  
Did you ever have to move because the place you lived was taken over for some other use?  
Did an owner ever withhold a security deposit?  
Have you ever found yourself without a place to live?  
Are there any other problems that you may have had with your housing?

Have you had any of these problems while owning a house or apartment in the last five years?

Have you ever had problems with your assessments?  
Have you ever had problems with tax bills?  
Had problems with violations of zoning ordinances?  
Had problems with the housing code?  
Did a bank or loan company ever give notice that your mortgage was in default or going to be canceled?  
Has an insurance company ever canceled your insurance?  
Have you ever had any other problems associated with housing that we may not have mentioned?

### IV. Employment Issues

Have you ever had any problems getting your benefits, such as sick leave, health insurance, vacations?  
Have you ever been paid less than other workers who did the same job and worked there about the same length of time?  
Has your employer ever owed you back pay or overtime that was not paid?  
Have you ever been threatened because you belong to or tried to join a union?  
Have you ever filed a grievance against your employer?  
Were you ever laid off or fired for what you thought were unfair reasons?  
Have you ever been injured on the job?  
Were you ever sexually harassed by other workers?  
Were you ever sexually harassed by your superiors at work or at school?

### V. Medical Problems

Have you or anyone in your household:

Ever been charged by a doctor or hospital for services you did not receive?  
Ever been refused treatment by a hospital or a doctor?  
Ever been given medical treatment (an operation or drugs or hospitalization) you did not think you needed?  
Had any problems with doctors, dentists, hospitals, health insurance?

#### VI. Education

Have you or someone in your household:

- Ever been denied access to a child's school record when you asked to see it?
- Found problems or inaccuracies in your child's record?
- Applied for a placement or class for your child or had it denied?
- Any child in your household suspended or expelled from school?
- Have you had any problems with the availability of bilingual education?
- Do you have a child who is handicapped and has been denied special services, or for whom the services provided were inadequate?
- Has a child been put in a class or program that was below his/her natural ability?
- Have you had problems because the school system did not acknowledge and teach about your culture?
- Have you ever had any other problems with the public school system that we have not mentioned (such as school teachers or disciplining)?

#### VII. Public Organization and Government Programs

Have you had any problems in dealing with federal, state, or local government agencies?

- Have you ever had a problem getting benefits you deserve like pensions, medical care, home loans, educational benefits, psychiatric care, etc., or anything else of that sort?
- Have you ever failed to receive a check from some public agency to which you are entitled, such as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children - welfare), Social Security, Veterans' Benefits, or general assistance or Medicare?
- Have you ever been cut off or had your benefits changed without notice?
- Have you had troubles with social workers, welfare officials or veteran administrators?
- Have you ever had a problem with the government over your income tax return?
- What about problems because the city ignored your complaints or call for services, such as street cleaning or repair, or garbage collection?
- Have you ever had problems about the quality and level of police protection in your neighborhood?
- Have you ever had problems with police harassment?
- Have you ever had problems with the division of motor vehicles or traffic court?
- Have you ever had any other problems with local, state or federal government officials that we have not mentioned?

#### VIII. Discrimination

Since living in New Jersey, have you been treated unfairly because of your age, sex, race, religion or nationality?

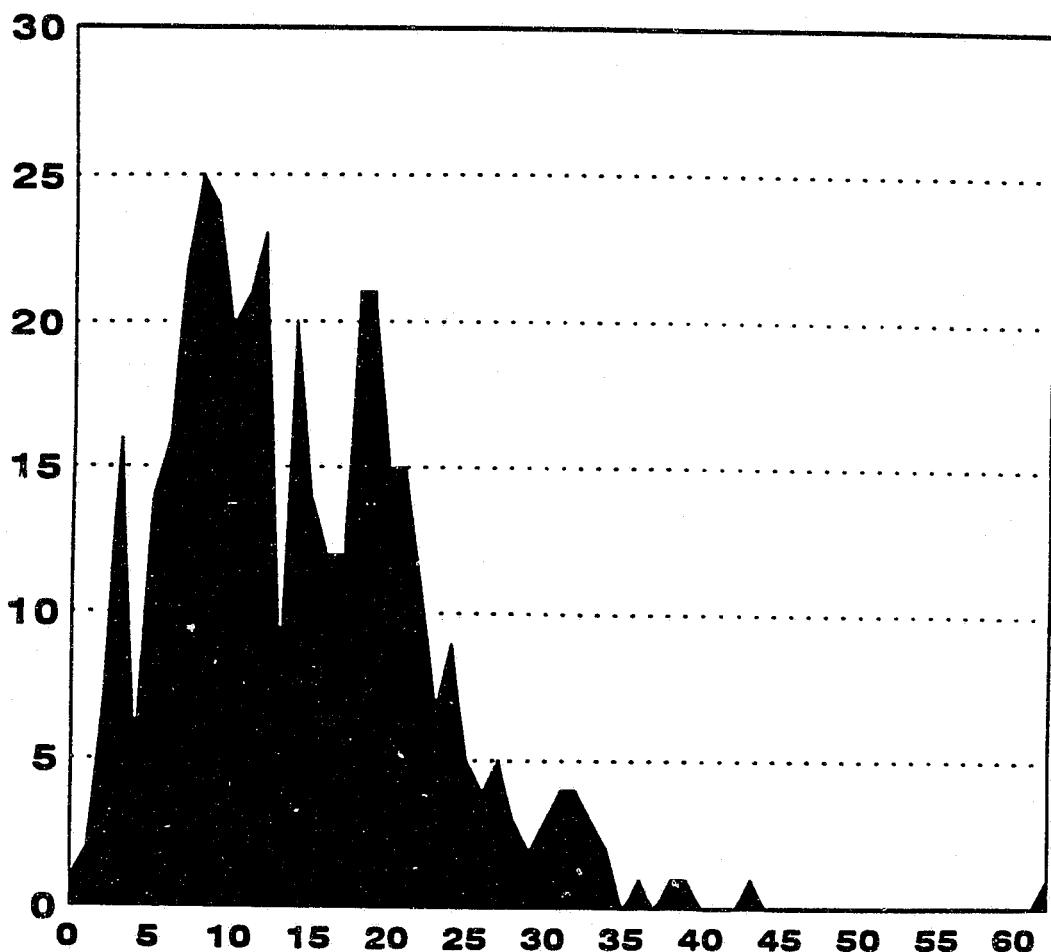
- In getting a job or being promoted on a job?
- Joining a club or organization?
- Buying a house?
- Renting an apartment?
- Getting service in a restaurant or hotel?
- Participating in some social or community activities?
- Is there any other way you have been treated unfairly because of your age, sex, race, religion, or nationality?

#### **IX. Family Issues**

Within your household or family, do you now, or have you ever had, a problem with:

- Taking care of and disciplining children?
- Drinking?
- Hitting or physical abuse of a spouse, child, or elderly person?
- Responsibility for household chores?
- Money and how to spend it?
- Disputes within the family about who your children play with?
- Because someone in the household is unemployed?
- Someone wants to work but the other thinks he/she shouldn't?
- Someone in the household working too much or too many hours?
- Time spent away from the home?
- Problems in the immediate family because of in-laws and relatives?
- Extra-marital sexual affairs?
- Has anyone tried to take your child from you, adopt your child, or place your child in another's care?
- Have you ever had a problem with juvenile court, child protection services or some agency for children?
- Have you ever had trouble getting support of alimony payments?
- Have you tried to get anyone else's visitation right limited?
- Have you had any child custody problems?
- Have you had any problems with alcohol or drugs?

**FIGURE 13-1**  
**FREQUENCIES OF PROBLEMS REPORTED**  
**(N=403)**



**Mean Number of Problems Reported = 14**

White	= 15
Black	= 15
Hispanic	= 13
Other	= 12

Not Significant

**FIGURE 13-2**  
**FREQUENCIES OF PROBLEMS REPORTED**  
**BY RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER, AND FAMILY INCOME**  
**(N=403)**

GROUP	MEAN NUMBER OF PROBLEMS REPORTED	STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE
RACE/ETHNICITY		
White	14.6	N.S.*
Black	14.5	
Hispanic	12.9	
Other	12.0	
GENDER		
Male	13.0	p < .001
Female	15.8	
FAMILY INCOME		
\$0.00-\$29,900	14.0	N.S.
\$30,000-59,900	15.2	
\$60,000 or more	14.0	

\* N.S.=The results were not statistically significant.

as with race/ethnicity, no significant relationship. The lack of a relationship between race/ethnicity or income and legal need confirmed our original assumption and working hypothesis that previous research had systematically underestimated the legal needs of poor or minority populations. More importantly, it demonstrated that whatever differences might be found to exist in legal use could not be attributed to differences in need.

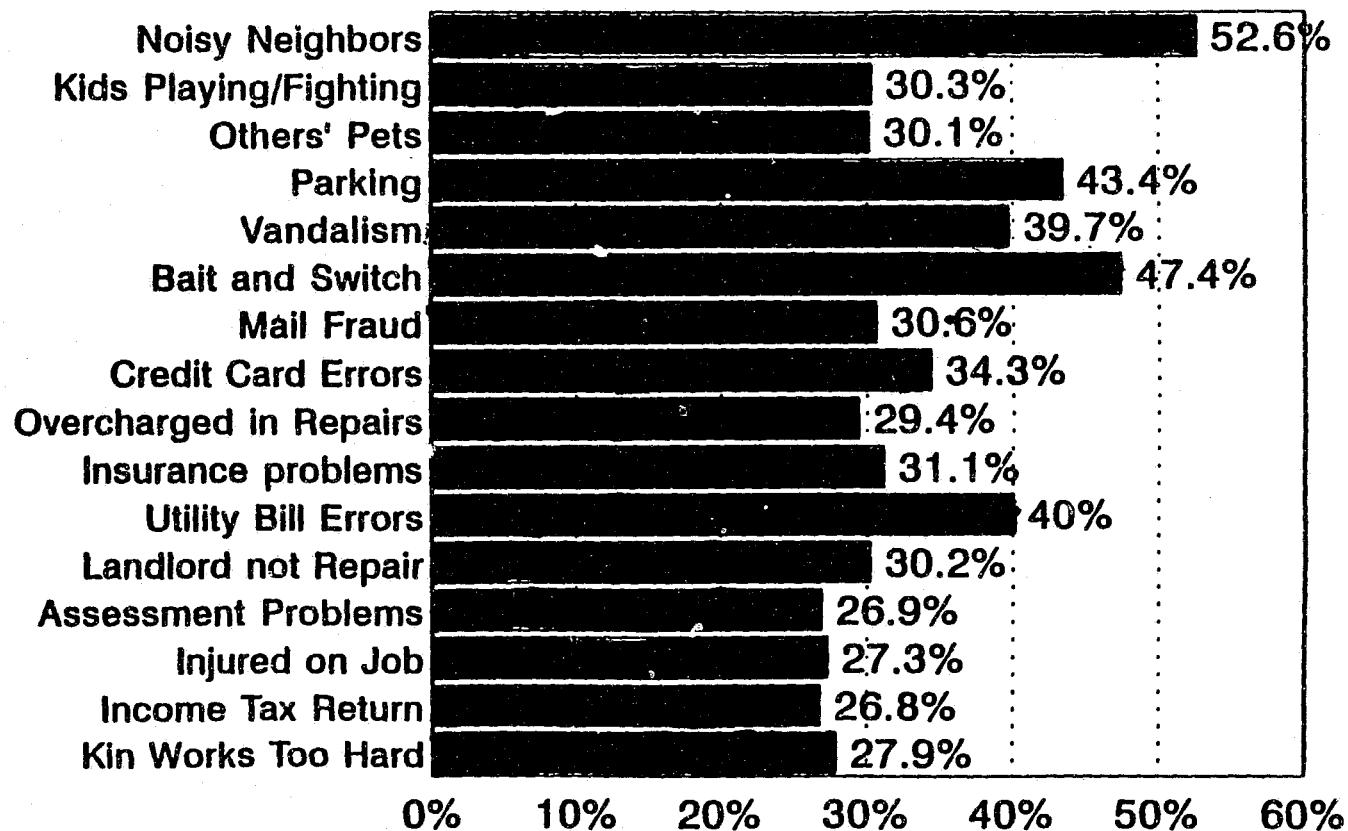
The only variable that was shown to be significantly related to legal need, measured in terms of the number of problems

reported, was gender. Females reported on average sixteen problems, while males reported only thirteen problems. This difference in number of problems is also reflected in differences in the types of problems reported by men and women and will be discussed below.

b. The Character of Legal Need: Type of Problems Reported. The overall number of problems reported by our respondents can be used as a global measure of legal need. However, relying on this single measure may obscure important information regarding the character of that need. The specific type of problems and situations that people experience and report, not simply the total number of problems, is particularly relevant in assessing the responsiveness of legal institutions to the needs of citizens. With this in mind, Figure 14, Most Frequently Identified Problems, displays the most frequently reported problems for the entire sample.

The sixteen problems shown in Figure 14 represent all of those situations that at least 25% of our sample reported having experienced. The resulting list of problem situations confirms the importance of expanding the inventory of types of situations about which we inquired. With a few notable exceptions, the most frequently reported situations concern the recurring, mundane interactions and disputes that punctuate daily life. In other words, conspicuously absent from the list are the kinds of problems that are likely to involve large sums of money or property, and, therefore, are likely to end up in general jurisdiction courts. In fact, the single most frequently reported problem involved noisy neighbors, with over half of our sample relating some experience

**FIGURE 14**  
**MOST FREQUENTLY IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS**  
**(N=403)**



with this problem. The second most frequently reported problem involved consumer bait and switch practices where a business "baits" the consumer with advertised bargains which are not available when the consumer reaches the store; the consumer interest is then "switched" to another product usually at a higher price than the advertised "bait." Clearly, the list is comprised of those sorts of problems that reflect the dailiness of ordinary citizens' lives.

It is important to point out, however, that while it is true that these problems may not involve large amounts of money or property, we cannot dismiss them as not court-worthy or not potentially the subject of legal action; nor can we dismiss these problems as trivial from the point of view of citizens seeking relief or remedy from these situations. Lower courts, small claims courts, arbitration boards, and various other legal services exist for the purpose of processing precisely these kinds of disputes and problems. They are the kind of problems about which Roscoe Pound wrote, at the turn of the century, when he first articulated the fear that accumulating and unremedied little injustices erode citizens' faith in law and the legal system (Pound, 1906). Any regular participant or observer in the nations' more than 18,000 limited jurisdiction courts can attest to the fact that neighborhood, consumer and family troubles are often the sources of persistent feuding, as well as aggressive and violent exchanges, that form the bulk of the non-traffic cases in these courts.

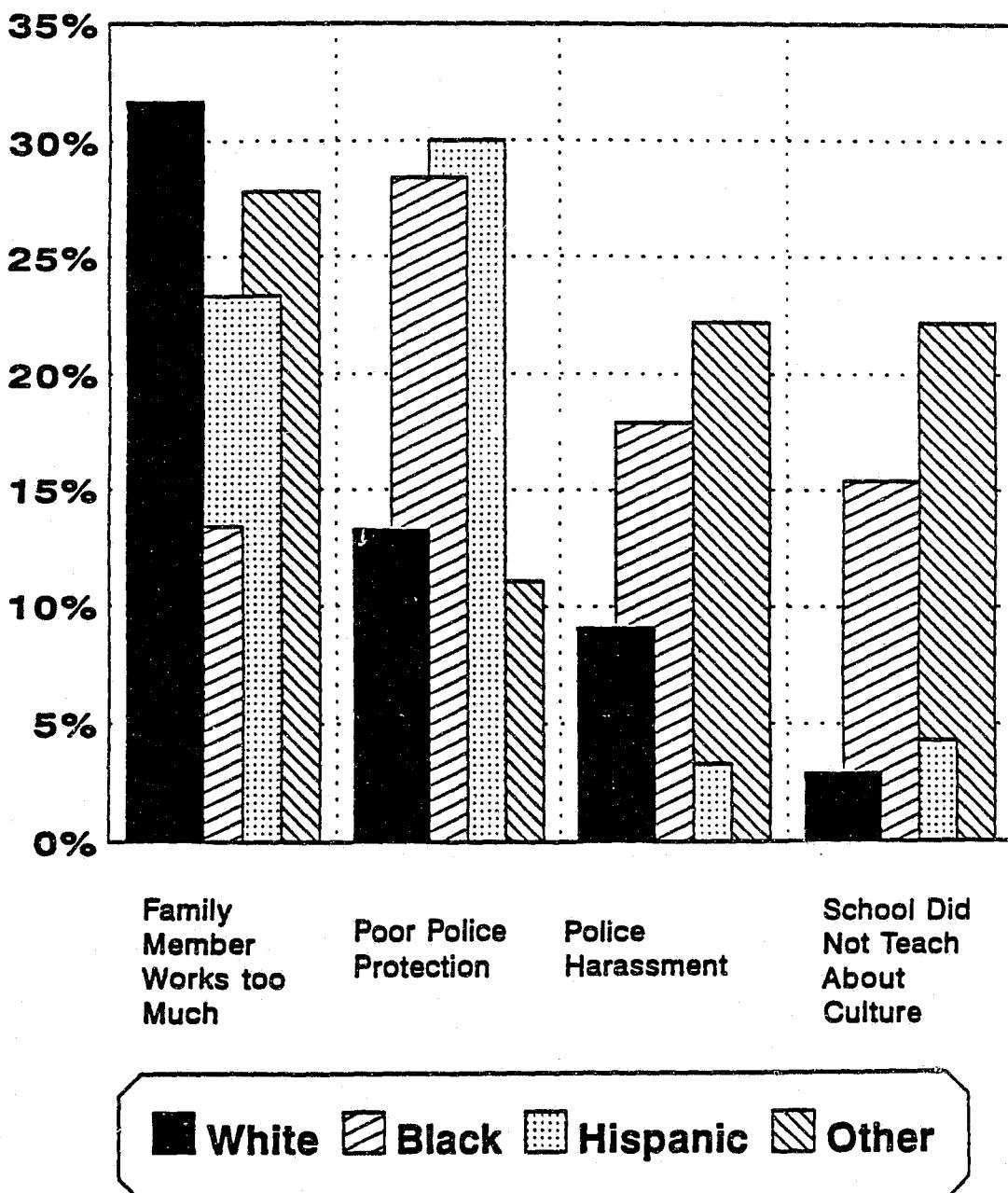
Interestingly, and in keeping with our hypothesis, while there is no significant variation in the number of problems among different racial/ethnic groups, there is variation in the frequency

with which different racial/ethnic groups reported having experienced specific problem situations. What the data show is that for most problem situations, there was no significant variation in the frequency with which the problems were reported. However, for twenty out of the 100 problems significant racial/ethnic variation did exist. Figure 15, Reported Problems Significant by Race/Ethnicity, displays those problem situations whose occurrence was reported differently by racial and ethnic groups.

In general, minorities were significantly more likely than whites to experience poor police protection, police harassment, housing problems, problems involving children, as well as problems with insurance, utilities and creditors. Not surprisingly, minorities were also more likely than whites to report problems with schools failing to teach about their culture. Finally, as Chart 5 of Figure 15 shows, minorities are more likely to experience and report discrimination in hotels, restaurants, renting apartments, buying homes, and getting jobs. Notably, the two problems that were reported more frequently by white respondents (assessment problems and credit card errors) involved property transactions of some sort.

Women (see Figure 16, Reported Problems Significant by Gender) were more likely to report problems about noise in the neighborhood, fights among children, inability to obtain access to a child's school record and having a child expelled from school, as well as differences with spouses about child rearing practices, alimony, being hit by a spouse, and drug use in the family. Women also reported significantly more consumer problems such as not being able to return purchases, having problems with mail order

**FIGURE 15**  
**REPORTED PROBLEMS SIGNIFICANT**  
**BY RACE/ETHNICITY**



Family Member Works too Much      Poor Police Protection      Police Harassment      School Did Not Teach About Culture

■ White   ■ Black   ■ Hispanic   ■ Other

**FIGURE 15, p. 2**

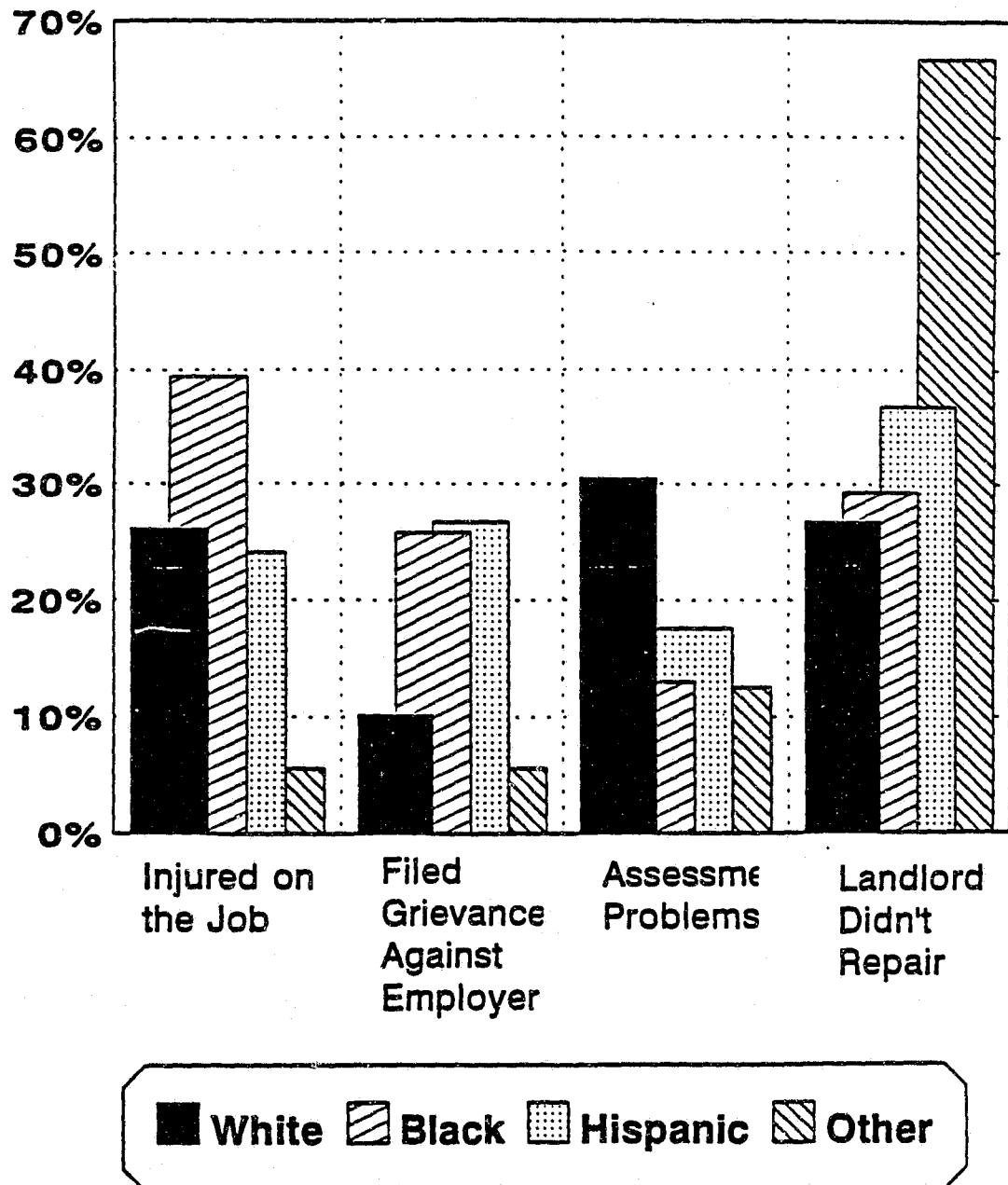
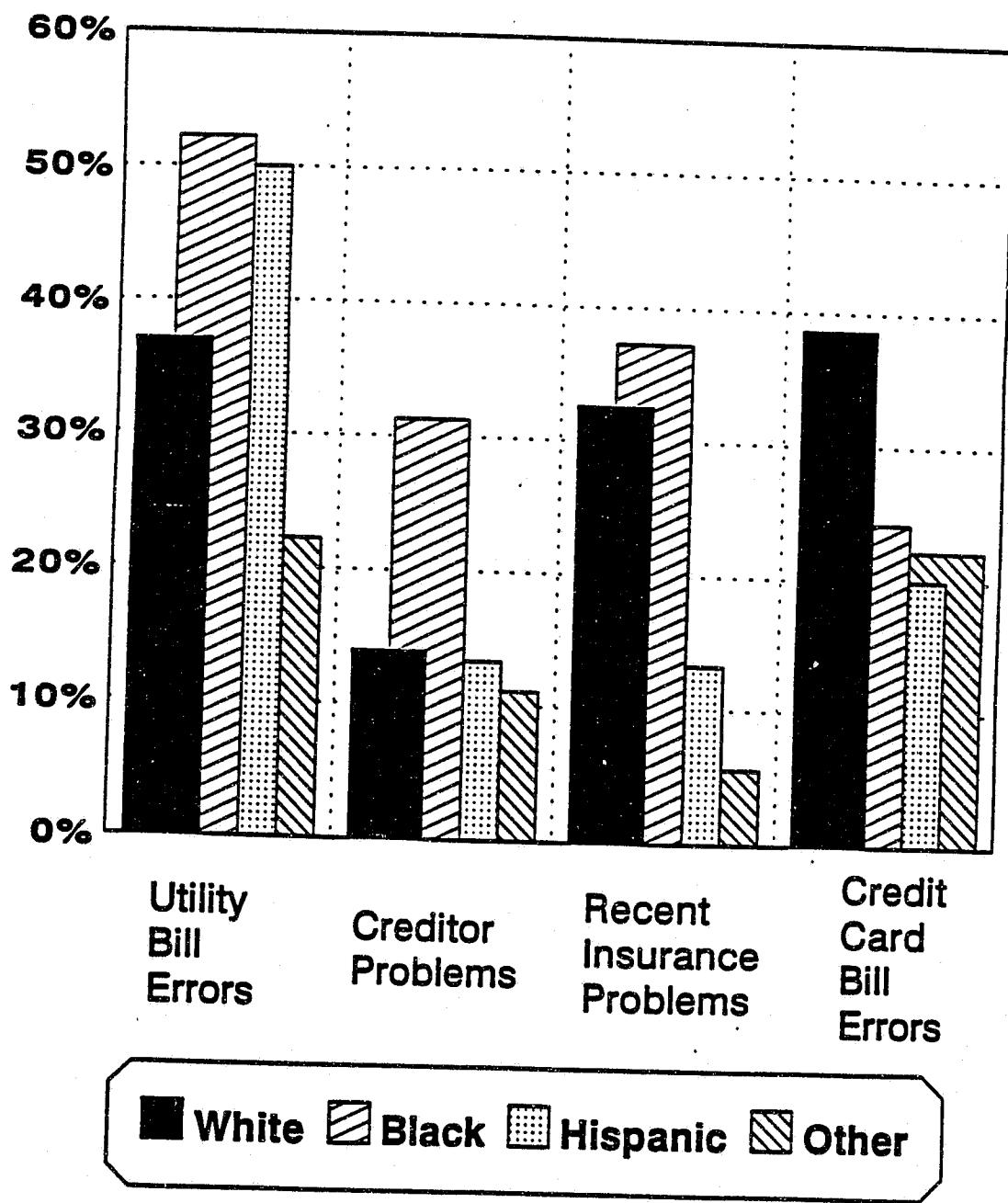


FIGURE 15, p. 3



**FIGURE 15, p. 4**

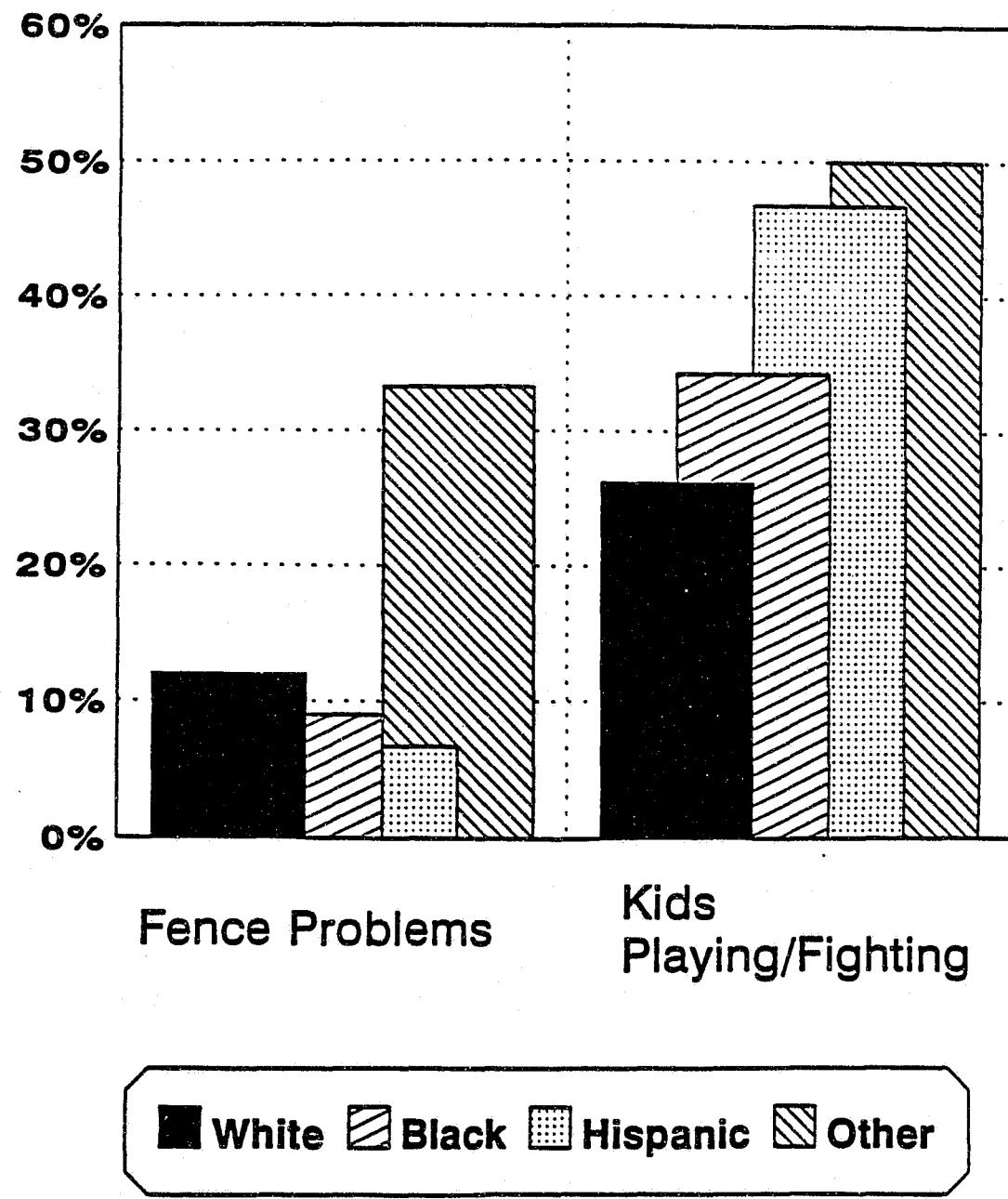
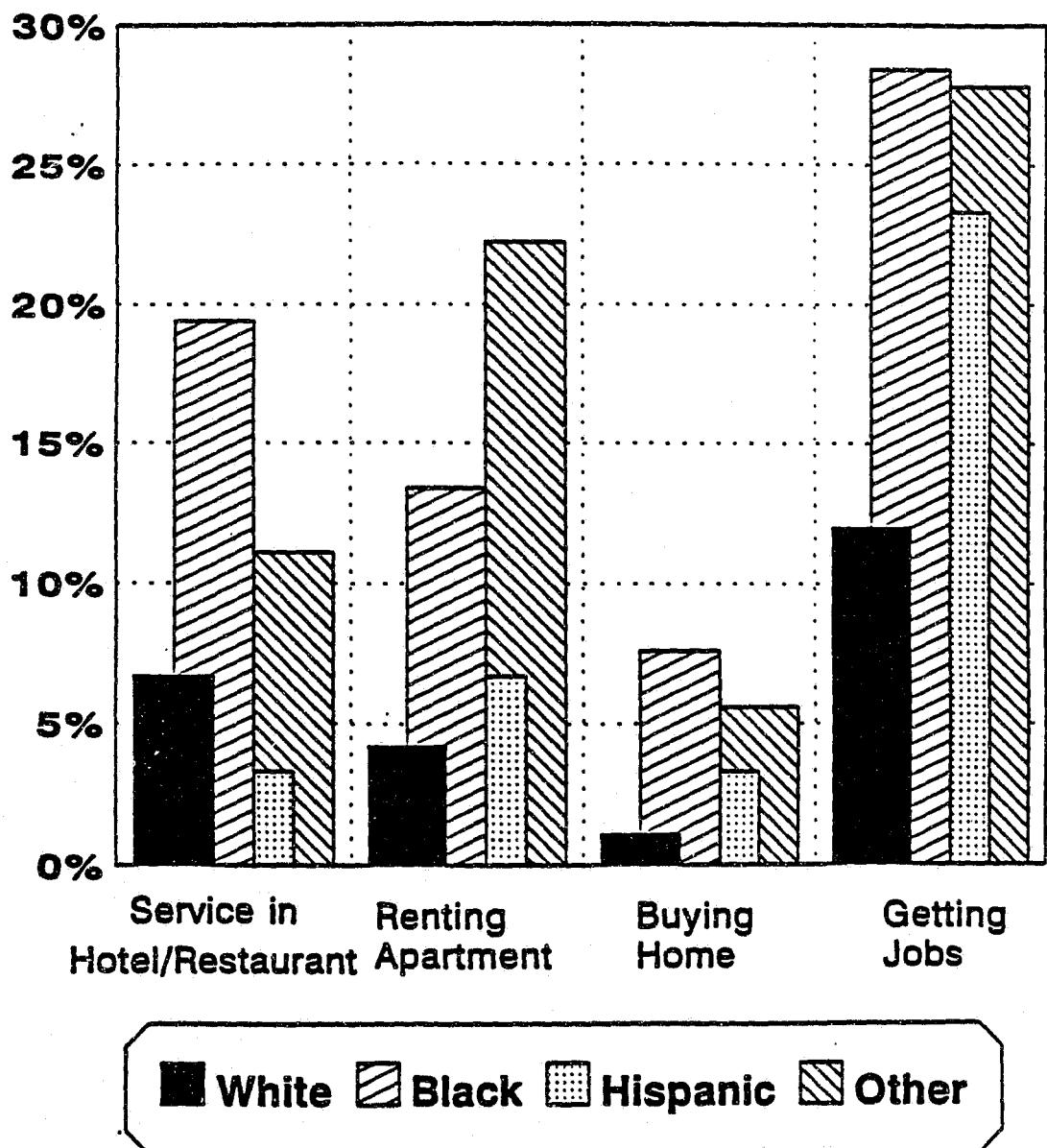


FIGURE 15, p. 5

## Discrimination noted in...



purchases, door-to-door salespersons, credit cards and creditors, mortgages, and repairs of appliances. In addition, women reported larger numbers of problems having to do with sexual harassment on the job by colleagues and bosses, as well as discrimination in pay. The only problem that men reported disproportionately, in comparison to women, was being injured on the job. Figure 17, **Reported Problems Significant by Socioeconomic Status**, displays the problems that varied significantly by socioeconomic status.

It seems apparent that the distinctive kinds of legal problems experienced by gender and race/ethnicity reflect the social practices and relative power and resources of subjects. Notice that women are more likely to report problems involving family (violence, rearing children), consumer problems (purchases, credit, and repairs), and job related discrimination (sexual harassment, paid less for the same job).

c. Summary. There appears to be a similar degree of legal need across racial/ethnic and class categories as measured in terms of the number of problem situations reported. However, there are notable differences in the kind of problems experienced by different racial/ethnic groups. These differences, no doubt, reflect differences in the shape of daily life, as well as the resources available to different groups. These differences in the kind of problems notwithstanding, we conclude that there is no reason to assume that minority citizens have less need than do white citizens for law or courts.

FIGURE 16  
REPORTED PROBLEMS SIGNIFICANT BY GENDER

REPORTED PROBLEM	MALE	FEMALE
Noisy neighbors* (N=403)	47.6%	58.1%
Kids playing/fighting*** (N=403)	24.1%	37.2%
Mail order purchases**** (N=402)	22.7%	39.3%
Cannot return merchandise** (N=402)	15.2%	25.7%
Credit card error* (N=400)	29.5%	39.5%
Creditor problems* (N=402)	13.2%	20.5%
Landlord not repair* (N=222)	24.1%	36.8%
Mortgage in default* (N=312)	3.6%	9.7%
Received less pay than others* (N=399)	14.8%	24.3%
Employer owes back pay* (N=398)	14.8%	8.5%
Injured on job*** (N=399)	33.3%	20.6%
Sexually harassed by coworker**** (N=396)	1.9%	9.5%
Sexually harassed by boss**** (N=394)	1.0%	11.6%
Denied access to school record* (N=291)	1.3%	7.1%
Child expelled or suspended* (N=292)	10.0%	19.7%
Registry of Motor Vehicle problems* (N=400)	25.8%	17.3%
Childrearing problems* (N=397)	9.7%	18.4%
Drinking problems* (N=400)	9.1%	16.2%
Spouse or child abuse* (N=399)	4.8%	10.5%
Alimony/child support problems**** (N=389)	0.5%	8.5%
Drug problems* (N=397)	7.2%	13.3%

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .005

\*\*\*\* p < .001

FIGURE 17  
REPORTED PROBLEMS SIGNIFICANT BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

REPORTED PROBLEM	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
	LOW	MIDDLE	UPPER
Noisy neighbors* (N=333)	55.8%	59.8%	42.6%
Kids playing/fighting*** (N=333)	43.4%	25.9%	22.2%
Credit card error** (N=330)	25.9%	33.6%	46.3%
Creditor problems* (N=332)	25.0%	11.6%	14.8%
Threatened for joining union* (N=330)	4.5%	11.7%	3.7%
Fired or laid off* (N=330)	19.8%	23.2%	10.3%
Injured on job**** (N=330)	40.5%	23.2%	17.8%
Sexually harassed by boss* (N=327)	7.3%	0.9%	10.3%
Benefits cut off/changed** (N=332)	3.5%	8.0%	0.0%
Drinking problems* (N=331)	16.8%	12.6%	5.6%
Kin works too hard* (N=331)	21.2%	34.2%	36.4%
Kin spends too much time away** (N=332)	11.5%	12.5%	26.2%

\* p < .05      \*\* p < .01      \*\*\* p < .005      \*\*\*\* p < .001

## CHAPTER 5

### TURNING TO THE LAW

In addition to asking our respondents whether they had ever experienced any of the potential legal problems included in the inventory, and thus establishing a base line of comparable legal need among different racial/ethnic and class groups, we also asked a series of follow-up questions. Most importantly, we asked what the respondent did in response to the situation reported as a problem. In asking this question we were attempting to describe the range of responses to these situations and to measure the degree to which people turn to law to resolve or remedy their problems.

This question, "What did you do about it?" was posed every time someone reported having experienced one of the situations included in the inventory. Respondents' verbatim answers were recorded, resulting in an amazing variety of responses and actions, ranging from doing nothing to suing one of the parties to the dispute. From these exact responses, we developed a coding scheme that categorized similar responses and, thus, allowed us to identify patterns in peoples' responses to problems.

We reduced over 100 identifiably different responses to eight possibilities:

- 1) Nothing
- 2) Exit: Leaving the problematic situation or interaction.  
Exiting would include, for instance, moving away from a neighborhood, divorcing a spouse, or quitting a job;

3) **Complying:** Resolving the situation by complying with the rules and procedures defined by the party with whom one is having the dispute, for example, filling out forms required by an insurance company or retail store;

4) **Confronting the second party:** This category includes complaining, demanding, threatening, or persuading the second party to the dispute. For purposes of this analysis the second party is defined as the person or organization with whom the problem or dispute occurred;

5) **Turning to a non-legal third party to resolve the situation:** Consulting, for advice or intervention, a person or organization that is neither a party to the dispute nor associated with the local, state or federal government. This category would include consulting a therapist, a member of the clergy, or a neighbor;

6) **Legal action:** Taking legal action is broadly defined as any effort to consult or mobilize any legal agent, such as calling the police, consulting an attorney, filing a complaint in court, or contacting a regulatory agency;

7) **Collective action:** Taking some action with other aggrieved parties, including circulating a petition, boycotting a merchant, or organizing protesters or witnesses at a town meeting;

8) **"Other":** This category contains those responses that were infrequent and non-categorizable in any other category.

a. **Citizen Responses to Problematic Situations.** Figure 18, *Actions Taken in Response to Problems*, shows the relative frequency with which these different types of actions were taken in response to problem situations included in the survey. Note that the unit

of analysis in this chart is the discrete action, not the person. In other words, the wedges of this pie chart represent the proportion of the total number of actions ( $N=4821$ ) reported by our respondents that fell into each category. This change in the unit of analysis is necessary due to the fact that each individual could, and typically did, report about more than one situation and, thus, described multiple and often diverse actions in response to each problem or situation. Since the mean number of problems reported was fourteen, with a few exceptions, the average number of actions per respondent was also fourteen.

As Figure 18 shows, the single most common response taken by the respondents was to confront the second party (31%), followed by doing nothing (20%). In approximately 14% of the situations, people turned to the law to remedy or resolve a problem. Thus, while it is clear that turning to the law is by no means the most common response to daily situations and problems, at the same time it constitutes a significant part of people's repertoire of actions.<sup>1</sup>

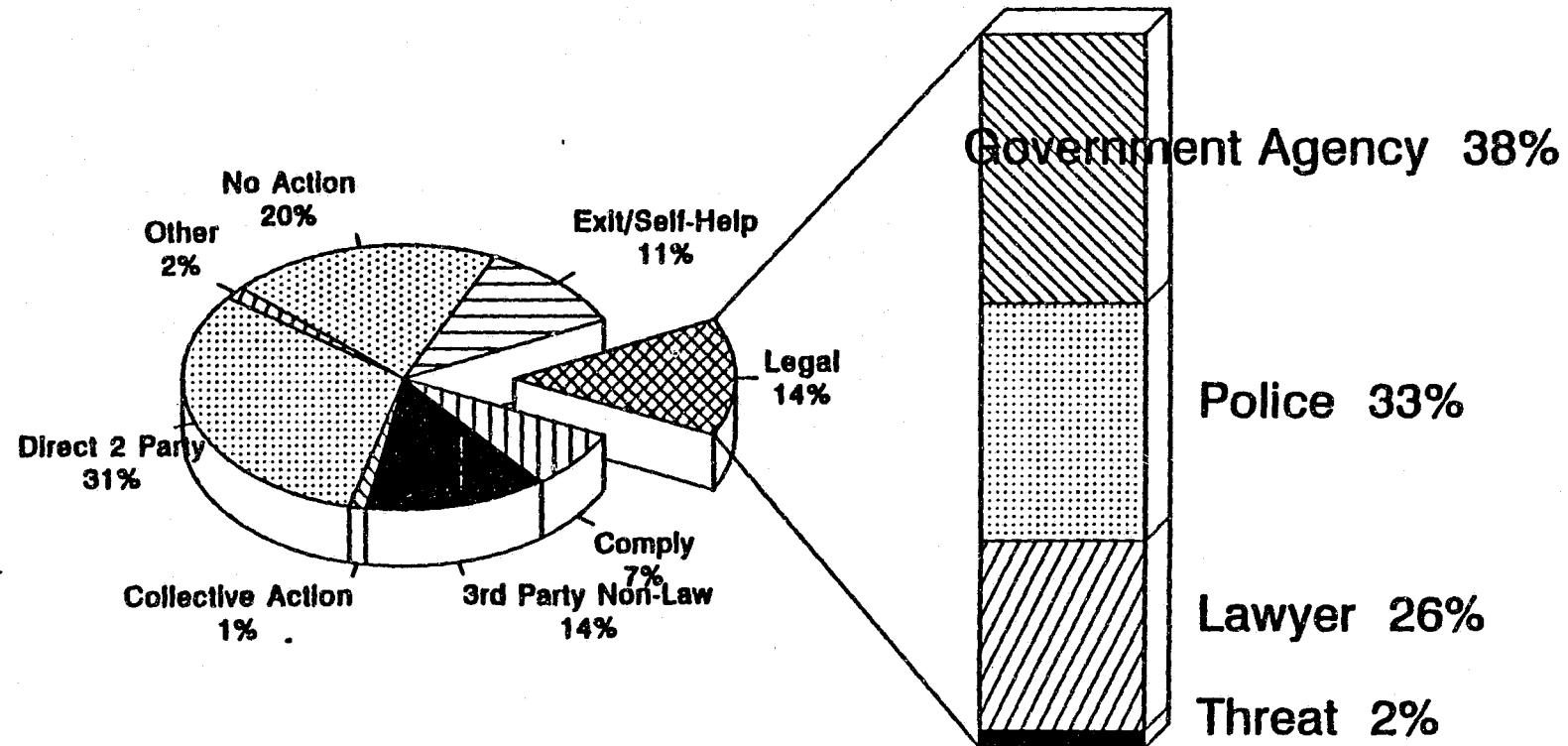
Figure 19, Percentage of Legal Actions Taken in Response to Discrete Problems, shows the percentage of legal actions taken for each of the 100 situations about which we queried respondents.

b. Differential Use of Law. When we examined the different responses to problems by race/ethnicity, we encountered the first surprise of our analysis. Contrary to previous research and our

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<sup>1</sup>The focus group study that was completed and reported in Legal Needs of the Poor in New Jersey found a similar rate of legal use, reported that 13% of actions were legal. Goodman and Sanborne (1986).

**FIGURE 18**  
**ACTIONS TAKEN IN RESPONSE TO PROBLEMS**  
**(N=4821)**



**FIGURE 19**  
**PERCENTAGE OF LEGAL ACTIONS TAKEN**  
**IN RESPONSE TO DISCRETE PROBLEMS**

I. NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN BOTHERED BY:	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Noise from neighbors?	19.6%
Kids playing or fighting?	19.7%
Problems with other people's dogs or pets?	11.4%
Adults who bother your children, scold or harass them?	11.8%
Problems about cars or parking?	27.1%
Vandalism to your house, car, hallways, graffiti, breaking things?	57.0%
Problems with fences?	27.0%
Things you loaned to neighbors that have not been returned?	0.0%
Disputes in your church, club, or neighborhood association?	9.3%
Neighbor's garbage or trash?	15.2%

FIGURE 19, p. 2

II. CONSUMER PROBLEMS. HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING THINGS EVER HAPPENED TO YOU?	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Someone who sold you an appliance or car and refused to make repairs promised by the warranty?	10.0%
You bought something because of an advertisement that turned out to be false?	5.5%
You went to buy an advertised product and were told it was sold out and that only a more expensive item was available?	0.0%
You bought something by mail that never arrived, or was not the same as was advertised?	0.9%
You bought something from a door-to-door salesperson that was not delivered or was not what you expected?	4.0%
You tried to return something but the seller would not take it back?	9.0%
You have been charged for something on credit that you either returned or never purchased in the first place?	2.4%
You were charged by a repair or service person more than you had originally agreed?	4.6%
You had insurance problems during the last five years?	11.8%
You were denied credit for what you consider unfair reasons?	12.3%
You had problems with creditors?	12.0%
You had difficulty cashing checks?	0.0%
Has your electricity, gas, heat or telephone ever been shut off?	2.9%
Have you had errors in your utility bills?	12.0%

FIGURE 19, p. 3

III. RENTER AND HOME OWNER ISSUES. HAVE ANY OF THESE PROBLEMS HAPPENED TO YOU WHILE RENTING?	% LEGAL ACTIONS
The owner did not make repairs or provide services?	8.3%
The owner has not kept what you would consider undesirable people out of the building?	12.5%
The owner claimed that you damaged the property?	22.3%
The owner claimed that you owed him/her money?	20.0%
Have you ever had problems with your lease being canceled, or rent raised unfairly?	30.0%
Did the owner ever try to have you evicted?	26.7%
Did you ever have to move because the place you lived was taken over for some other use?	26.6%
Did an owner ever withhold a security deposit?	10.6%
Have you ever found yourself without a place to live?	5.3%
HAVE YOU HAD ANY OF THESE PROBLEMS WHILE OWNING A HOUSE OR APARTMENT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?	
Have you ever had problems with your assessments?	21.6%
Have you ever had problems with tax bills?	19.3%
Had problems with violations of zoning ordinances?	26.8%
Had problems with the housing code?	29.4%
Did a bank or loan company ever give notice that your mortgage was in default or going to be canceled?	22.2%
Has an insurance company ever canceled your insurance?	8.7%

FIGURE 19, p. 4

IV. EMPLOYMENT ISSUES.	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Have you ever had any problems getting your benefits, such as sick leave, health insurance, vacations?	20.4%
Have you ever been paid less than other workers who did the same job and worked there about the same length of time?	7.4%
Has your employer ever owed you back pay or overtime that was not paid?	12.5%
Have you ever been threatened because you belong to or tried to join a union?	15.8%
Have you ever filed a grievance against your employer?	4.2%
Were you ever laid off or fired for what you thought were unfair reasons?	18.8%
Have you ever been injured on the job?	15.2%
Were you ever sexually harassed by other workers?	5.3%
Were you ever sexually harassed by your superiors at work or at school?	9.0%

V. MEDICAL PROBLEMS. HAVE YOU OR ANYONE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD:	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Ever been charged by a doctor or hospital for services you did not receive?	9.1%
Ever been refused treatment by a hospital or a doctor?	7.1%
Ever been given medical treatment (an operation or drugs or hospitalization) you did not think you needed?	7.1%

FIGURE 19, p. 5

VI. EDUCATION. HAVE YOU OR ANYONE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD:	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Ever been denied access to a child's school record when you asked to see it?	27.3%
Found problems or inaccuracies in your child's record?	17.7%
Applied for a placement or class for your child and had it denied?	3.7%
Any child in your household suspended or expelled from school?	5.4%
Have you had any problems with the availability of bilingual education?	0.0%
Do you have a child who is handicapped and has been denied special services, or for whom the services provided were inadequate?	0.0%
Has a child been put in a class or program that was below his/her natural ability?	3.7%
Have you had problems because the school system did not acknowledge and teach about your culture?	0.0%

FIGURE 19, p. 6

VII. PUBLIC ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS. HAVE YOU HAD ANY PROBLEMS IN DEALING WITH FEDERAL, STATE, OR LOCAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES?	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Have you ever had a problem getting benefits you deserve like pensions, medical care, home loans, educational benefits, psychiatric care, etc., or anything else of that sort?	41.7%
Have you ever failed to receive a check from some public agency to which you are entitled, such as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children - welfare), Social Security, Veterans' Benefits, or general assistance or Medicare?	7.7%
Have you ever been cut off or had your benefits changed without notice?	22.2%
Have you had troubles with social workers, welfare officials or veteran administrators?	36.9%
Have you ever had a problem with the government over your income tax return?	12.9%
What about problems because the city ignored your complaints or call for services, such as street cleaning or repair, or garbage collection?	14.6%
Have you ever had problems about the quality and level of police protection in your neighborhood?	28.8%
Have you ever had problems with police harassment?	20.6%
Have you ever had problems with the division of motor vehicles or traffic court?	25.8%

FIGURE 19, p. 7

VIII. FAMILY ISSUES. WITHIN YOUR HOUSEHOLD OR FAMILY, DO YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER HAD, A PROBLEM WITH:	% LEGAL ACTIONS
Taking care of and disciplining children?	17.1%
Drinking?	13.9%
Hitting or physical abuse of a spouse, child, or elderly person?	50.0%
Responsibility for household chores?	3.0%
Money and how to spend it?	0.0%
Disputes within the family about who your children play with?	0.0%
Because someone in the household is unemployed?	6.6%
Someone wants to work but the other thinks he/she shouldn't?	9.5%
Someone in the household working too much or too many hours?	2.4%
Time spent away from the home?	8.5%
Problems in the immediate family because of in-laws and relatives?	1.5%
Extra-marital sexual affairs?	26.7%
Has anyone tried to take your child from you, adopt your child, or place your child in another's care?	30.0%
Have you ever had a problem with juvenile court, child protection services or some agency for children?	47.7%
Have you ever had trouble getting support of alimony payments?	53.3%
Have you tried to get visitation rights?	100.0%
Have you tried to get anyone else's visitation right limited?	85.7%
Have you had any child custody problems?	62.5%
Have you had any problems with alcohol or drugs?	8.6%

own expectation that there would be significant variation by race/ethnicity (with whites being more likely to use the law), we found no evidence of any significant variation. Figure 20, Percent of All Actions Taken by Race/Ethnicity, shows the breakdown of actions by total sample and by each racial/ethnic group. Approximately 15% of all actions taken by whites involve the law, compared to approximately 14% of all actions taken by Blacks or Hispanics, an insignificant difference of only one percentage point. The Other category did appear to differ from the other groups with only 7% of their actions involving some legal service or agent. However, in light of the fact that this category is comprised of a variety of racial/ethnic groups (including Native American and Asian American), it is impossible to make any meaningful assertion about the lower use of law and race/ethnicity. Furthermore, a breakdown of the category Other into its constituent racial/ethnic categories yields subcategories that are so small as to make any statistical analysis misleading.

Because the lack of a relationship between race/ethnicity and use of the law was not hypothesized, we were initially skeptical of our measure. We considered whether the absence of any measurable racial/ethnic variation might be due to the way we had collapsed a variety of legal actions into a single category. In other words, by not differentiating among calling the police, hiring an attorney, or complaining to a government agency, we thought that we might be obscuring significant differences in the type of legal responses that different racial/ethnic groups were taking. In particular, we hypothesized that consulting an attorney, a form of legal remedy involving personal material resources, would be more

**FIGURE 20**  
**PERCENT OF ALL ACTIONS BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

ACTION	TOTAL (N=4821)*	RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP			
		WHITE (N=3487)	BLACK (N=790)	HISPANIC (N=339)	OTHER (N=175)
Nothing	19.9%	19.4%	19.9%	17.7%	32.0%
Exit/self-help	11.1%	11.3%	10.9%	9.7%	10.3%
Comply (complied, paperwork, exchange)	7.1%	7.1%	8.2%	6.8%	4.6%
Directly 2nd party (spoke or wrote to 2nd party)	31.4%	30.8%	31.0%	39.5%	28.6%
3rd party non-law (within organization, professional advice, family/friend advice)	13.5%	14.2%	12.9%	9.1%	12.0%
Legal	14.4%	14.8%	13.8%	13.8%	7.4%
-Threat	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.6%	0.0%
-Lawyer	3.8%	3.9%	2.9%	3.5%	3.4%
-Police	4.8%	5.0%	4.8%	4.4%	1.7%
-Government	5.4%	5.5%	5.8%	5.3%	2.3%
Collective action	1.2%	1.0%	2.2%	1.5%	0.6%
Other	1.5%	1.5%	1.1%	1.8%	4.6%

\* Ns represent number of actions, not number of persons.

FIGURE 21  
PERCENT OF ALL ACTIONS BY GENDER

ACTION	TOTAL (N=4821)*	GENDER	
		FEMALE (N=2497)	MALE (N=2324)
Nothing	19.9%	19.4%	20.4%
Exit/self-help	11.1%	11.5%	10.8%
Comply (complied, paperwork, exchange)	7.1%	6.2%	8.2%
Directly 2nd party (spoke or wrote to 2nd party)	31.4%	31.8%	31.0%
3rd party non-law (within organization, professional advice, family/friend advice)	13.5%	13.9%	13.1%
Legal	14.4%	14.7%	13.7%
-Threat	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
-Lawyer	3.8%	3.8%	3.8%
-Police	4.8%	4.5%	5.0%
-Government	5.4%	6.0%	4.6%
Collective action	1.2%	1.1%	1.3%
Other	1.5%	1.5%	1.6%

\* Ns represent number of actions, not number of persons.

likely among white respondents. Yet, when we broke down "legal action" and reanalyzed the data, we were still unable to find any significant racial/ethnic variation. Between 3 and 4% of all actions consisted of calling a lawyer, and this was true for each of the racial/ethnic categories. Figures 21, Percent of All Actions by Gender, and 22, Percent of All Actions by Socioeconomic Status, display the variation in the percentage of actions taken by gender and by socioeconomic status (SES).

FIGURE 22  
PERCENT OF ALL ACTIONS BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

ACTION	TOTAL (N=4821)*	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
		LOW (N=1372)	MIDDLE (N=1369)	HIGH (N=1314)
Nothing	19.9%	21.6%	18.4%	19.1%
Exit/self-help	11.1%	10.7%	11.1%	12.0%
Comply (complied, paperwork, exchange)	7.1%	7.4%	7.1%	6.5%
Directly 2nd party (spoke or wrote to 2nd party)	31.4%	29.1%	31.6%	33.3%
3rd party non-law (within organization, professional advice, family/friend advice)	13.5%	12.8%	14.7%	14.4%
Legal	14.4%	15.8%	13.9%	12.3%
-Threat	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.3%
-Lawyer	3.8%	4.1%	3.2%	3.8%
-Police	4.8%	4.7%	4.8%	4.2%
-Government	5.4%	6.6%	5.6%	4.0%
Collective action	1.2%	1.4%	1.0%	1.3%
Other	1.5%	1.1%	2.3%	1.1%

\* Ns represent number of actions, not number of persons.

c. Legal Competence and Legal Experience. It has long been hypothesized that it is not simply material resources that facilitate use of the law. What has been called legal competency, a familiarity with the law, the legal system and legal actors, also operates to increase use of the law. Among those who are legally competent, the law appears to be less remote, complex, and intimidating. When confronted with a situation in which turning to the law might be an option, these citizens are, it is argued, more likely to mobilize the legal system.

In order to test this hypothesis, we included in the survey instrument two different measures of legal competence. The first measured what we call Objective Legal Knowledge. It consists of sixteen questions regarding federal and state law. These questions were taken from previous research and, where necessary, adapted to reflect New Jersey law. The questions were then submitted to members of the Task Force on Minority Concerns who were asked to indicate the correct answer to each question. Unlike other survey questions, responses to these items were scored as correct or incorrect. Possible scores on the Objective Legal Knowledge Index, thus, range from zero to sixteen (Figure 23, Mean Scores on Objective Legal Knowledge Index for Entire Sample and by Race/Ethnicity).

In terms of Objective Legal Knowledge, the sample mean was eleven out of a possible sixteen. White respondents had the highest mean scores at twelve, followed by African Americans, Hispanics, and Other. These differences represent statistically significant racial/ethnic variation.

In addition to measuring objective legal knowledge, we also constructed an Index of Subjective Legal Knowledge. Since our interest was in predicting whether someone's sense of competency would inhibit or facilitate mobilizing the law, we reasoned that the level of knowledge that one believed oneself to have might be a better indicator of use of law than would objective knowledge. This measure consists of only three questions. Two of the questions indicate the respondent's self-reported ability to locate a good lawyer and their self-reported confidence in their understanding of the court system. To the statements, "I do not know

FIGURE 23  
 MEAN SCORES ON OBJECTIVE LEGAL KNOWLEDGE INDEX  
 FOR ENTIRE SAMPLE AND BY RACE/ETHNICITY

GROUP OF RESPONDENTS	MEAN SCORE
Sample	11.4 (70% correct)
White	11.8
African American	10.6
Hispanic	10.0
Other	9.5
N=401; p < .000	

how to get a good lawyer" and "I do not understand how to use the court system," respondents were asked to indicate whether these were a good, fair, or poor description of themselves. A third questionnaire item was included in the Subjective Legal Knowledge Index. This item asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they understand the talk of lawyers and judges. These three items were aggregated and collectively represent self-attributed knowledge of the legal system.

In terms of Subjective Legal Knowledge, Figure 24, Subjective Legal Knowledge for Sample and by Race/Ethnicity, shows that the sample mean (out of a possible high score of three) was 2.1. Although the number of test items is different and, thus, the mean scores for each of the two knowledge indices are different, the proportion of the sample means to the overall respective index totals is the same for Objective and Subjective Legal Knowledge. In both cases, respondents had a mean of approximately 70% of the

total. Unlike the Objective Legal Knowledge Index, however, a comparison of subjective knowledge among different racial/ethnic groups shows no significant differences.

FIGURE 24  
SUBJECTIVE LEGAL KNOWLEDGE  
FOR SAMPLE AND BY RACE/ETHNICITY

GROUP OF RESPONDENTS	MEAN SCORE
Sample	2.1 (70% correct)
White	2.2
African American	2.0
Hispanic	2.1
Other	1.8

N=401; The results were not statistically significant.

Contrary to our hypothesis, however, neither objective nor subjective knowledge of the legal system was significantly related to use of the law. People who had more correct knowledge about the law did not use the law more or less than people who scored lower on objective legal knowledge. Similarly, people who described themselves as knowing the law also did not report systematically more, or less, use of law and courts.

d. Reasons for Turning to Law. In addition to asking people what they did in response to problems they experienced, we also asked why respondents took that action. Specifically, we asked, "What were your reasons for that type of action?" Not unexpectedly, the answers were diverse. We recorded each answer verbatim.

Grouping similar answers produced forty-two distinct reasons. We were then able to review the distribution of these very discrete types of reasons and recode them into five categories:

1) Instrumental or consequential reasons: This category included statements describing the severity and importance of the problem in relation to the action. Statements indicating that doing something about the situation was "not worth money," "not worth the time," or that "the problem was minor, 'no big deal'" were categorized under instrumental/consequential reasons. This category also included assessments of the effort required and the likelihood of success, e.g., "This action was the easiest solution," "The best approach."

2) Relationships: This category included all reasons having to do with the perceived effect an action would have on social relationships of the respondent. Efforts to "keep it in the family," or refraining from some confrontation because the respondent cared for or liked the second party would fall into this category. This category also included respondents' concerns about the harm which might come to others if the respondent took action on the perceived problem.

3) Claims about self: Whenever a respondent explained their action with regard to their own character or personality (i.e., "I'm not that kind of person," "I'm easy going," "I don't like to make trouble") their reasons were put in this category.

4) Compliance in order to resolve the issue: This category includes explanations of actions in terms of some set of authoritative procedures, either organizational or governmental, such as "store policy." It often involved the respondent's supplying

documentation and paper records to resolve a problematic situation. "I wanted to get information"; "They told me to bring in some receipts."

5) **Assessments of morality or responsibility:** This category includes references to the culpability, responsibility of either of the parties, or of the "unfairness" of the situation were collapsed into this category. "It was her fault." "I thought the other person was not responsible." "I tried to do the right and fair thing to do."

6) **Futility of action:** The final category includes claims that any other action than that which was taken would be futile, or claims by the respondent that he or she had no choice. "It an inevitable part of life" "S... happens all the time." "I had no options." "Taking any action would be futile."

Figure 25, Reasons Given for Action, Entire Sample, illustrates the distribution of reasons given by the entire sample. As in the case of actions (Figures 20-22), the unit of analysis for this figure is not the individual, but the discrete reason given. The reason for using this unit is also the same: each individual could, and often did, give many different reasons, for different actions. Examining Figure 25 shows that the reasons categorized as cost assessment are the most frequently given for explaining an action, followed by those reasons based on an attribution of responsibility and culpability.

FIGURE 25  
REASONS GIVEN FOR ACTION,  
ENTIRE SAMPLE

REASON	NUMBER	PERCENT
Cost assessment	1,105	33%
Relationships	168	5%
Respondent's character	652	20%
Compliance	312	9%
Responsibility	902	27%
Futility	169	5%
Other	17	1%
TOTALS	3,325	100%

Figures 26-28 display the frequency distribution for the different reasons by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and gender respectively. In each of these figures, the general pattern prevails. Assessments of moral responsibility compete with instrumental cost concerns as the most common reasons given. It is clear, however, that respondents rely on a variety of criteria for explaining their actions.

There appears to be a relationship between the kinds of reasons people offer and the actions they take in response to specific problems. Claims about character and identity are most often invoked when respondents choose to do nothing, to exit a situation, or routinely comply with rules and regulations. Claims about moral responsibility and fairness are most likely associated with confrontation with second parties and with resort to legal action.

**FIGURE 26**  
**REASONS GIVEN FOR ACTION**  
**BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

REASON	RACE/ETHNICITY			
	WHITE (n=2465)	BLACK (n=535)	HISPANIC (n=200)	OTHER (n=112)
Cost assessment	32%	37%	39%	23%
Relationships	5%	4%	4%	8%
Respondent's character	20%	19%	16%	21%
Compliance	10%	9%	8%	7%
Responsibility	27%	25%	29%	33%
Futility	5%	6%	4%	7%
Other	0%	1%	2%	0%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>102%</b>	<b>99%</b>

**FIGURE 27**  
**REASONS GIVEN FOR ACTION**  
**BY SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS**

REASON	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS		
	LOW (n=934)	MIDDLE (n=913)	UPPER (n=991)
Cost assessment	32%	35%	34%
Relationships	5%	7%	4%
Respondent's character	21%	20%	17%
Compliance	9%	9%	10%
Responsibility	26%	25%	30%
Futility	6%	5%	4%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>101%</b>	<b>99%</b>

FIGURE 28  
REASONS GIVEN FOR ACTION  
BY GENDER

REASON	GENDER	
	MALE (n=1561)	FEMALE (n=1764 )
Cost assessment	36%	31%
Relationships	4%	6%
Respondent's character	18%	21%
Compliance	9%	10%
Responsibility	27%	28%
Futility	6%	5%
TOTALS	100%	101%

e. Other Court Experience. Although much of our information regarding legal experience was solicited in the context of the specific problem codes or situations, we also included in the survey a number of questions regarding court experience more generally defined. For instance, we asked all respondents whether they had ever been to court in the United States. A large majority, 80%, of our sample, reported such experience. Respondents were also asked about whether they had ever been in a New Jersey state court and 60% said that they had.

In terms of experience in a United States Court, there was variation on the basis of race/ethnicity. While Black and white respondents reported similar levels of experience in United States courts, Hispanic and other minorities were significantly less

likely to report such court experience. (See Figure 29, Legal Experience by Race/Ethnicity.)

Although almost half of our respondents reported being a party in some court action (ranging from traffic cases through divorces to major criminal prosecutions), only 6% of the respondents reported being a party in a major civil suit. Four percent of the respondents had been a party in a small claims action. This suggests that few of the respondents have used the civil courts (either as plaintiffs or defendants) for tort or contract actions. This pattern was consistent across all racial/ethnic groups.

We can attempt to gain further information about possible use of courts, or other legal actions, for injuries and torts by looking at the kinds of problems respondents reported experiencing and at what they did about them. Twenty-seven percent of our respondents reported being injured at work or on the job with Black respondents being significantly more likely to experience an injury. There also appeared to be variation by race/ethnicity in the action taken in response to being injured. Seventeen percent of Hispanic respondents and 11% of Black respondents consulted a lawyer or initiated a lawsuit; only 7.5% percent of the white respondents who had been injured took such legal action. It is probably important to note, however, that 26.9% of the white respondents injured on the job sought insurance compensation while only 16% of the Hispanic and 11% of the Black respondents sought insurance compensation.

f. Jury Duty. Ninety-four percent of the 403 respondents were eligible for jury duty, when eligibility is defined by being over seventeen and under seventy-five years of age and being able

to read and write English. Eligibility did vary by race/ethnicity. This definition may overestimate eligibility because it does not take into account exclusion from jury eligibility because of criminal convictions. While 95% of white respondents were eligible, only 90% of Hispanics and 87% of Blacks met these criteria. Of those who are eligible, 92% could appear on jury lists since they are registered voters, licensed New Jersey drivers, or both, which are the pools from which prospective jurors are drawn. Once again, however, this availability for the jury list (by voter or license registration) varied by race/ethnicity: 94% of the white respondents were eligible and could have appeared on jury lists, while only 82% of Black and 83% of Hispanic respondents met the criteria for eligibility and availability through registration and drivers' license lists. Despite these differences among racial/ethnic groups in eligibility or availability, there was no statistically significant difference reported in jury experience. Approximately twenty-four percent of our respondents reported service on a jury.

g. Other Legal Experience. Relying on other measures of legal experience, such as calling an attorney or calling the police, a similar pattern emerged. As was the case with court experience, Hispanic and Others are considerably less likely than African-American and white respondents to report legal experience.

We also asked respondents whether they had ever been a victim of a crime, and, if so, what they did about it. Here, we found a break from the pattern of similarity among White and African-American respondents and difference between those two groups and Hispanic and Other respondents. African-American respondents were

significantly less likely than Other racial/ethnic groups to call the police when they had been a victim of a crime. See Figures 30, Respondents Who Have Been the Victim of a Crime by Race/Ethnicity, and 31, Respondents' Responses to Victimization by Race/Ethnicity.

The expressed reluctance of African-American respondents to call the police needs, we think, to be interpreted in the context of the kinds of problems that were disproportionately reported by minority respondents. If you will recall, among the types of problems that were more likely to be reported by minority respondents were issues concerning the police, including police harassment and poor police protection. Clearly, these experiences may explain why they are less likely to call the police.

FIGURE 29  
LEGAL EXPERIENCE BY RACE/ETHNICITY

TYPE OF LEGAL EXPERIENCE	TOTAL (N=403)	RACE/ETHNICITY				STATISTICAL SIGNIFI-CANCE/N
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER	
Been in any court in United States	80.4	83.5	80.3	70.0	61.1	p < .05 (N=398)
Consulted attorney in lifetime	83.9	87.4	79.1	72.4	66.7	p < .05 (N=400)
Consulted attorney within 5 years	71.0	76.2	77.6	60.0	72.2	p < .05 (N=401)
Called police in lifetime	67.9	77.6	70.1	63.3	55.6	N.S.* (N=401)
Used mediation service	8.1	7.8	11.3	6.7	5.6	N.S. (N=392)
Dealt with probation officer	9.1	8.5	11.3	3.3	22.2	N.S. (N=394)
Dealt with DYFS	7.3	8.5	4.8	6.7	--	N.S. (N=393)

\* N.S.=The results were not statistically significant.

**FIGURE 30**  
**RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN THE VICTIM OF A CRIME**  
**BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

VICTIM	TOTAL (N=397)	RACE/ETHNICITY			
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER
Yes	52.9%	54.7%	54.7%	30.0%	55.6%
No	47.1%	45.3%	45.3%	70.0%	44.4%

The results were not statistically significant.

**FIGURE 31**  
**RESPONDENTS' RESPONSES TO VICTIMIZATION BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

RESPONSE	TOTAL (N=148)	RACE/ETHNICITY			
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER
Call police	77.0%	81.1%	64.0%	75.0%	55.6%
Nothing	14.9%	11.8%	32.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Other	8.1%	6.4%	4.0%	0.0%	44.4%

p < .001

## CHAPTER 6

### PERCEPTIONS OF LAW AND COURTS

Social class has been thought to affect citizens' legal experience in at least two ways. First, it has been asserted that class operates to shape the problems and life events of citizens resulting in less need for law and courts, especially civil law, among lower class persons. In Chapter Four we demonstrated that this presumed relationship between class and legal need was not born out by the data, as neither family income nor race/ethnicity were significantly related to need.

Apart from the question of legal need, social class has also been hypothesized to be relevant in shaping legal experience in terms of limiting citizens' access to legal services. Lacking adequate material resources to hire an attorney or institute a civil suit, it was assumed, lower and working class citizens would be less likely than middle class persons to use the law. As with legal need, however, our data show that having fewer material resources does not necessarily limit the voluntary or self-initiated use of law among poorer or non-white citizens. In fact, one of the two legal services that showed differential use by race/ethnicity was mobilization of the police, a type of legal use requiring no expenditure of resources on the part of citizens. This finding suggests that factors other than resources may explain the use of the law.

If recourse to law is not a product of differential need, citizens' mobilization of law may reflect their attitudes and expectations about the legal system and legal actors. Thus, in

addition to asking respondents about their actual legal experience, we also collected information regarding respondents' perceptions and expectations of courts and law generally.

Recognizing the variety and complexity of the legal system, we included a number of different measures of legal attitudes. First, respondents were asked to assess police, attorneys, and courts, as well as to evaluate the efficacy of law generally. In addition to asking respondents to evaluate particular legal settings and actors, they were also asked a series of questions regarding their own orientation toward and willingness to use the law. Finally, we posed a series of hypothetical problem situations asking respondents how they would respond to each of these situations. We will discuss each of these measures below.

a. Perceptions of Law and Courts. We presented respondents with a series of thirty-nine statements that solicited their perceptions regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of courts, the degree to which legal actors responded to racial/ethnic and gender differences among citizens, and the consideration citizens are likely to receive when interacting with legal officials. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement.

A Legal Attitude Index was then constructed by aggregating each respondent's answers to twenty-nine of the thirty-nine items; ten items were discarded because the responses were not assessments of the legal system. This aggregation yielded an overall assessment of the legal system that could range from one, indicating a extreme negative evaluation of the legal system, to five, indicating an extremely positive assessment. The scores given by the

respondents, in fact, ranged from 1.79 to 4.54, with a mean score of 3.2. Thus, our respondents assessed the legal system, on average, in a relatively positive way.

Since the twenty-nine items addressed identifiably different aspects or dimensions of the legal system, we disaggregated the twenty-nine-item index into three separate indices. The first index includes the subset of items having to do with the accessibility and responsiveness of the courts, including the degree to which the respondent believes the courts are slow, costly, show concern for citizens' rights, or treat citizens politely. We refer to this as the Procedural Justice index as these items collectively measure the degree to which respondents evaluate legal procedures favorably.

The second index, what we refer to as the Effectiveness Index, measures respondents' assessments of the ability of courts to solve problems and handle disputes. While the first index attempts to measure the openness and participatory nature of the courts, this second index very specifically goes beyond those "process" issues to the ability of courts to get results and remedy citizens' problems.

Finally, the third index measures respondents' evaluations of the degree to which legal actors (courts, police, and lawyers) accomplish their work in a fair and unbiased manner, or the degree to which the law is distributively just, i.e., blind to race, ethnicity, class, and gender in making decisions. We refer to this as the Distributive Justice Index.

Taken together, these indices measure the extent to which people believe the courts and legal institutions operate according

to the ideals of accessibility, effectiveness, and fairness. Figure 32, Indices of Respondents' Perceptions of Law and Courts, lists the items that were included in each index. For each of these indices, scores ranged from a low score of one, meaning a negative assessment, to a high of five, indicating a strong positive assessment. In other words, the higher a person's score, the more positive his or her assessment of the legal system in terms of the particular dimension being addressed.

As Figure 33, Perceptions of Law and Courts by Race/Ethnicity, shows, respondents rated the legal system highest in terms of its effectiveness in resolving problems. The average score given by the total sample for the Effectiveness Index was 3.7. By comparison, the mean scores given on the Procedural Justice Index and the Distributive Justice Index were considerably lower, at 3.0 and 2.9 respectively.

Figure 33 also displays the mean scores for the three indices broken down by race/ethnicity. In the case of the Distributive Justice Index, Black respondents rated the legal system considerably more negatively than any of the other racial/ethnic groups. Black respondents gave a mean rating of 2.3 compared to Whites with 3.0, and Hispanics with 2.9. This racial/ethnic variation suggests that African Americans are less likely than other racial or ethnic groups to see the law operating in a fair and unbiased way. This finding is robust and is sustained, even when we break down the Distributive Justice Index to separate police from courts. Here again, the Black respondents are responding even more negatively to the police, and still statistically significantly more negative in

FIGURE 32  
INDICES OF RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LAW AND COURTS

Procedural Justice Index:

"Courts are slow."  
"Courts are costly."  
"Judges make people feel uncomfortable."  
"When citizens present problems or cases to legal authorities (courts, police, lawyers) they have sufficient opportunity to present their story before decisions are made."  
"Legal authorities usually show concern for citizens' rights."  
"If you are treated unfairly by a legal agency, you can always find another to appeal to."  
"Citizens can influence the decisions made in their legal cases."  
"Legal authorities are generally polite."

Effectiveness Index:

"In the end, courts never solve problems."  
"The legal system needlessly complicates problems that people have with one another."  
"In general, the police do a good job in our community."  
"Legal authorities usually gather sufficient information to make good decisions."  
"The legal system is set up to deal with problems involving large sums of money and not with the kinds of problems the ordinary person has."

Distributive Justice Index:

Police Subindex:

"The police treat rich and poor alike."  
"The police treat different racial and ethnic groups the same."  
"The police treat men and women alike."

Court Subindex:

"Generally, courts try to handle similar cases in similar ways."  
"Courts treat men and women alike."  
"Judges are generally honest and fair in deciding each case." "Judges and people who work in courts are influenced by the gender of the lawyer."  
"Minorities can expect to have a harder time in court."  
"Courts treat rich and poor alike."  
"Courts are unpredictable and arbitrary."  
"Minority lawyers are less likely to win cases in court than white lawyers."

FIGURE 33  
PERCEPTIONS OF LAW AND COURTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY

INDICES	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY				STATISTICAL SIGNIFI-CANCE/N
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER	
Procedural Justice Index	3.0	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.0	N.S.* (N=396)
Effectiveness Index	3.7	3.8	3.6	3.7	3.4	S.** (N=398)
Distributive Justice Index	2.9	3.0	2.3	2.9	2.9	S. (N=397)
Police Subindex	2.5	2.7	1.7	2.3	2.7	S. (N=398)
Courts Subindex	3.0	3.1	2.6	3.2	2.9	S. (N=397)

\* N.S.=Results were not statistically significant.

\*\* S.=Results were statistically significant.

Procedural Justice Index: Evaluation of courts in terms of accessibility and responsiveness of procedures.

Effectiveness Index: Evaluation of law as an effective problem-solving instrument.

Distributive Justice Index: Evaluation of law in terms of its fairness.

their assessment of the fairness of courts than are white or Hispanic respondents. While black respondents are significantly more negative for both police and courts, the degree of negativity is less for courts than for police.

Ratings on the Effectiveness Index, which measures the usefulness of law as an instrument for solving problems, also varied significantly by race/ethnicity. Once again, Black respondents gave the least favorable rating at 3.6, compared to White (3.8) and Hispanic respondents (3.7).

Despite these variations among racial/ethnic groups, it is perhaps worth noting that the scores on the Effectiveness Index, regardless of race/ethnicity, were relatively positive. This leads us to conclude that despite the fact that the law is perceived to be sometimes unjust and unresponsive, it is still perceived to operate as an effective instrument for resolving problems.

The fact that there is no difference by race/ethnicity in the scores of the Procedural Justice Index demonstrates that the relative negative assessment of the legal system by Blacks and Hispanics is neither general nor unfocused. The data in this table reflect a minority population that is more critical of the legal system than the white population. However, this criticism is directed at specific issues and problems, in particular issues regarding fairness and effectiveness; Black respondents do not voice a global rejection or general distrust of the law.

b. Self-descriptions in Relation to New Jersey Courts. In addition to asking respondents to evaluate the law and courts in general, we also asked a number of questions that attempted to measure how persons position themselves in relation to the New

Jersey courts. Rather than ask respondents to evaluate the legal institutions, here we were asking respondents to describe themselves in relation to the courts. Respondents were presented with a series of statements such as "I have never needed to use the New Jersey State Courts," "I could not afford the money to go to court," or "I would prefer to settle my problems informally than through legal action" and asked to indicate to what extent each statement described their situation. The respondents could answer that the statement was a "good" description of them, a "fair" description, or a "poor" description. A complete listing of these statements and the mean scores for the total sample and for each of the four racial/ethnic categories appear in Figure 34, Respondents' Self-Reported Relationship to the Law and Courts.<sup>1</sup>

The responses to only one of these items varied significantly by race/ethnicity: "I would prefer to settle my problems informally than through legal action." Black and Hispanic respondents were less likely to claim that they prefer to settle problems informally, and therefore more willing to use legal services. They prefer to use formal more than informal methods.

After examining these items separately, we then aggregated the twelve items into an index that represented the overall degree to which the respondent characterized themselves as willing and able to use the New Jersey Courts. A low score on this index indicates less willingness or ability to use the New Jersey Courts. Scores for the sample ranged from 1.5 to 3 for the entire sample, with a

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<sup>1</sup>Respondents were also explicitly asked whether they would use the New Jersey courts, if the need arose. Ninety-seven percent of the sample said they would.

FIGURE 34, p. 1

RESPONDENTS' SELF-REPORTED RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAW AND COURTS

SELF-REPORTED RELATIONSHIP	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY				STATISTICAL SIGNIFI- CANCE
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER	
I have never needed to use the New Jersey State Courts.	N=380 1.62	1.63	1.69	1.59	1.22	N.S.*
I could not afford the money to go to court.	N=341 2.43	2.42	2.32	2.77	2.47	N.S.
I could not take the time to go to court.	N=372 2.48	2.47	2.52	2.65	2.24	N.S.
I wouldn't receive fair treatment by the courts.	N=314 2.69	2.71	2.63	2.61	2.54	N.S.
I do not understand how to use the court system.	N=372 2.43	2.43	2.37	2.64	2.28	N.S.
I am reluctant to get involved with the courts.	N=276 2.00	1.97	2.19	2.00	2.00	N.S.
I would prefer to settle my problems informally than through legal action.	N=380 1.31	1.22	1.59	1.63	1.29	p > .001

\* N.S.=The results were not statistically significant.

**Scale:**

- 1 = Less willingness and ability to use courts
- 2 = Some willingness and ability to use courts
- 3 = More willingness and ability to use courts

FIGURE 34, p. 2  
RESPONDENTS' SELF-REPORTED RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAW AND COURTS

SELF-REPORTED RELATIONSHIP	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY				STATISTICAL SIGNIFI- CANCE
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPANIC	OTHER	
I am afraid of getting involved with the government.	N=376 2.46	2.45	2.49	2.60	2.28	N.S.*
I had a problem but didn't go to court because the other person didn't have any money that I could collect.	N=347 2.66	2.65	2.64	2.68	2.93	N.S.
I am afraid that court action would expose my personal affairs.	N=368 2.78	2.78	2.73	2.79	2.83	N.S.
I didn't go to court because I was afraid of the other person.	N=372 2.87	2.85	2.92	3.00	2.75	N.S.

\* N.S.=The results were not statistically significant.

Scale:

- 1 = Less willingness and ability to use courts
- 2 = Some willingness and ability to use courts
- 3 = More willingness and ability to use courts

FIGURE 35  
 RESPONDENTS' RATING OF THEIR OWN WILLINGNESS AND ABILITY  
 TO USE LAW AND COURTS

GROUP OF RESPONDENTS	MEAN SCORE
Sample	2.43
White	2.42
Black	2.47
Hispanic	2.59
Other	2.23
p > .05	

relatively positive sample mean of 2.4. Figure 35, Respondents' Rating of Their Own Willingness and Ability to Use Law and Courts, also shows that there is statistically significant racial/ethnic variation in terms of this index. Whites reported an average score of 2.4, Blacks 2.5, and Hispanics 2.6.

Further, it appears that the self-reported willingness to resort to law and courts is related to the more general perceptions of law and courts that we reported in section (a) above (see pages 87 ff.). The higher the scores on perception of law and courts (e.g., as effective, as procedurally accessible, and as distributively just), the greater the expressed willingness to use the court (see Figure 37, Relationship between Willingness to Use Law and Courts and Perceptions). We also find that willingness is most strongly related to perceptions that the courts are effective problem solvers.

c. Willingness to Use Law: Hypothetical Situations. Contrary to popular perception, we have thus far been able to show that minority and non-white citizens are not less willing than white respondents to use the law. In fact, despite more negative evaluations of the legal system, Black and Hispanic citizens report a greater willingness than white citizens to use legal remedies. This tendency was further confirmed by an analysis of respondents' reports of what they would do in response to a number of hypothetical problem situations. In two such scenarios, one involving a neighbor borrowing but not returning a valuable item, the other involving a car accident in which a child is thrown from a bicycle, but not injured, Blacks are significantly more likely than either Whites or Hispanics to indicate that they would take some legal action. See Figure 38, Respondents' Willingness to Take Legal Action in Response to Hypothetical Problems. Thus, overall non-white citizens were more likely to describe themselves as being both more willing and able than whites to use the courts in New Jersey. This index did not vary significantly by any other demographic measure, e.g., occupation, income, gender, education.

Out of the twelve items in this index, four items specifically addressed the respondents' willingness, as opposed to their ability, to turn to the courts. These included: "I am reluctant to get involved in the courts," "I would prefer to settle my problems informally," "I am afraid of getting involved with the government," and "I am afraid court action would expose my personal affairs." We analyzed these items separately, constructing a smaller index that we refer to as the Willingness Index. As Figure 36, Respondents' Self-Reported Willingness and Ability to Use Law

and Courts, shows, the sample mean for this index was 2.1. Once again, we find significant racial/ethnic variation with whites reporting less willingness to engage the law.

**FIGURE 36**  
**RESPONDENTS' SELF-REPORTED WILLINGNESS AND ABILITY**  
**TO USE LAW AND COURTS**

GROUP OF RESPONDENTS	MEAN SCORE
Sample	2.14
White	2.11
Black	2.26
Hispanic	2.32
Other	2.07
p > .000	

**FIGURE 37**  
**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WILLINGNESS TO USE LAW AND COURTS**  
**AND PERCEPTIONS**

INDICES	WILLINGNESS/N
Procedural Justice Index	p < .01 (N=333)
Effectiveness Index	p < .001 (N=335)
Distributive Justice Index	p < .01 (N=334)
Police Subindex	N.S.* (N=335)
Courts Subindex	N.S. (N=334)

\* N.S.=The results were not statistically significant.

FIGURE 38  
 RESPONDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO TAKE LEGAL ACTION  
 IN RESPONSE TO HYPOTHETICAL PROBLEMS

SCENARIO	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY			
		WHITE	BLACK	HISPAN-IC	OTHER
Unreturned household appliance or tool valued at \$100	N=381 p < .001 7.6%	5.1%	15.9%	7.1%	16.7%
Auto hits child on bicycle no permanent injury, minor bicycle damage and medical costs	N=375 p < .001 13.1%	9.7%	25.0%	11.1%	23.5%

These hypothetical situations are not behavioral measures of experience or actual use of law; instead, the responses to the hypothetical situations are another measure of respondents' attitudes and orientations. Importantly, these responses to hypothetical situations are consistent with the greater self-reported willingness by non-white respondents to use law and courts, although they do not conform to the pattern of actual legal actions taken by different racial/ethnic groups, where we found no differences by race/ethnicity in use of law or legal remedy. The difference in attitude and experience raises important questions which we pursue in the next section.

d. The Relationship between Perceptions of Law and Legal Experience. What is the relationship between people's attitudes and expressed willingness to use the law and the frequency with which a person has actually turned to legal institutions? We approached this question in a number of ways. First, we compared

the ratings given on the twenty-nine-item Legal Attitude Index by those respondents who reported having been to court with the ratings given by those who had no court experience. This comparison showed no significant difference in the assessment of the legal system, indicating that actually having been to court has no appreciable effect on people's overall evaluations of the legal system.

We then elaborated upon this line of analysis by replicating the comparison of experienced court users with those not experienced for each of the sub-indices: Procedural Justice Index, Effectiveness Index, and the Distributive Justice Index. The results of this analysis showed that while experience does not affect the overall assessment, it does seem to affect particular attitudes, although the direction is not uniform (see *Figure 39. Perceptions by Court Experience*).

Finally, we examined each of the items making up the Legal Attitude Index separately. The results of this analysis showed that while experience does not affect the valence of the overall assessment, it does seem to affect particular attitudes, although the direction of effect is not uniform (see *Figure 39*). For instance, those respondents having court experience were less likely to agree with the statement, "The legal system is set up to deal with problems involving large sums of money and not with the kinds of problems the ordinary citizen has." In other words, respondents with court experience offered more positive assessments and were more likely to see the legal system as responsive to the needs and problems of ordinary citizens. Similarly, experienced court users were less likely than the non-experienced to agree with

the following statement: "The legal system needlessly complicates problems that people have with one another." In relation to these two items, court experience resulted in a more positive orientation toward law.

FIGURE 39  
PERCEPTIONS BY COURT EXPERIENCE

PERCEPTION*	TOTAL	COURT EXPERIENCE			STATIS-TICAL SIGNIFI-CANCE/N
		WITHOUT COURT EXPERI-ENCE	WITH COURT EXPERI-ENCE		
Courts treat men and women alike.	3.0	2.7	3.1		p < .05 (N=397)
The legal system is set up to deal with problems involving large sums of money, not the kinds of problems ordinary people have.	2.1	2.4	2.0		p < .01 (N=396)
The legal system needlessly complicates problems that people have with one another.	3.0	3.3	2.9		p < .05 (N=396)
When citizens present problems to legal authorities, they have sufficient opportunity to present their story before decisions are made.	3.7	4.0	3.6		p < .05 (N=395)
Legal authorities gather sufficient information to make good decisions.	3.6	3.9	3.6		p < .01 (N=396)

\* The scores are based on a five-point scale where 1=less agreement and 5=more agreement.

However, experience had a negative effect in terms of other discrete indicators. Experienced respondents were more likely to agree with the statements "When citizens present problems or cases to legal authorities (courts, police, lawyers) they have sufficient opportunity to present their story before decisions are made." and "Legal authorities usually gather sufficient information to make good decisions."

It appears, then, that experience within a court does not have a simple or unidirectional effect on attitudes toward the law. The observations citizens make while in court and the conclusions they draw from their experience lead them to make multi-valent assessments of the legal system: in regard to certain matters, experience enhances their assessments, in others it lowers their assessments.

Interpreting the particular items that were affected by experience is also revealing. In demonstrating the relevance and applicability of law to everyday life, citizens' experience in court serves to demystify the legal system for citizens. In other words, experience makes the law seem less remote. It also seems to challenge the popular, Dickensian view of the law as injecting needless, endless complication to the problems it deals with. Consequently, the legal system is recognized by those with experience as both applicable and useful to their lives.

Nevertheless, the lessons learned from court experience are mixed. Citizens learn that while the law may be neither remote nor needlessly complicating, they also conclude that the procedures are not particularly accommodating to citizens' stories nor is there

sufficient time or care given to the collection of sufficient information needed for good decision-making.

In addition to comparing the evaluations of respondents with court experience with those without such experience, we also examined the relationship between attitudes toward the law and the frequency with which persons turn to law in dealing with specific problems. Here legal experience is defined more broadly to include anything from calling the police or participating in arbitration to initiating a civil suit.

This analysis revealed that legal experience, defined as the number of legal actions taken, is inversely related to a respondent's assessment of the legal system in terms of the Distributive Justice Index and the Procedural Justice Index. In other words, the more experience a person has with the legal system, or the more often a person has turned to law in the context of a specific problem, the less positive the respondent's evaluation. However, experience, measured by number of legal acts, is not significantly related to evaluations of legal effectiveness.

A final comment is in order: the direction of the relationship between legal experience and attitudes indicates that it is legal experience that shapes attitudes rather than the reverse. Given the inverse relationship, in other words, it would be illogical to argue that the more negatively a person views the legal system the more likely he/she is to turn to the law. Experience, then, seems to erode citizens' faith in the fairness, that is the color and gender blindness, of law, as well as the responsiveness of legal institutions. It does not, by contrast,

erode their view of law as a useful or effective problem-solving instrument.

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We began this report by noting that in a democratic society the law is a potentially empowering resource and one which should, therefore, be equally available to all of its citizens. Commitment to that ideal has underwritten this research. The purpose of this work was to describe current legal need and use among minority and non-minority populations in New Jersey. As importantly, it sought to identify institutional impediments and obstacles that might account for differential use of the law and courts among different racial and ethnic groups.

Based on this research, we found that respondents report a substantial need for the law, as measured by the number of potentially legal problems people experienced. Notably, the level of need among citizens does not vary by race/ethnicity or social class. While the level of need did not vary, however, the type of need, or the type of problems experienced, did vary by race/ethnicity and gender. This variation reflected, moreover, differences in material and social resources deployed by these different groups and the shape of their daily lives. For instance, the legal needs of racial/ethnic minorities concerned issues involved in discrimination, housing, police harassment, and poor police protection. Women were significantly more likely to experience problems related to their experiences in their gender roles of mothers, wives and consumers. Women also were more likely than men to report having experienced job-related problems such as sexual harassment and unequal wages. The general conclusion to be

drawn from these findings regarding legal need suggests that the legal system must be attentive and responsive to not only the level of need but to the variety of life experiences of its citizens and the variety in kinds of disputes and problems that emerges out of these experiences. Legal institutions that function to adjudicate and resolve disputes among its citizens must reflect the shape and form of that variation. Legal venues, resources, and processes should respond to varying types of legal need that exist among citizens.

Perhaps more surprising than the comparability of legal need among the respondents to this survey was the comparability of legal use. When individuals were asked how and why they responded as they did to the various situations they described, minority and non-minority respondents alike described a wide repertoire of actions, with law being only one. Respondents did not appear hesitant or unwilling to use the law or other governmental agencies when they identified a need. Of the 4821 actions described to us by the respondents, 675 were instances of citizens "turning to law": calling the police, consulting a lawyer, or contacting a government regulatory agency. Most significantly, the racial/ethnic differences that were hypothesized were not borne out by the data. There was little or no difference in the likelihood that minority and non-minority citizens would turn to law in responding to what they described as problematic situations.

This conclusion regarding use of law among different racial/ethnic groups was, at least, partially confirmed when we looked at different measures of legal use and legal experience. Here we did find some racial/ethnic differences in whether

respondents had been to court or called the police after having been a victim of a crime. However, in both cases, differences that emerged were as great among non-white groups as they were between white and non-white citizens. In the case of court experience, Hispanic respondents were significantly less likely than either whites or Blacks to report such experience. In the case of calling the police after having been victimized, we found that Blacks were significantly less likely than any of the other groups to mobilize the law.

Against this background of similar legal need and use, we did find significant racial/ethnic differences in perceptions of and attitudes toward the legal system. While minority respondents were no less likely to see the courts as effective in resolving problems and disputes than whites, they were significantly more negative than whites about the justness and fairness of the law. Minorities were, in other words, less likely to perceive the courts and the law as conforming to the ideal of equal justice under the law.

When we examine the effect of legal experience on citizen perceptions and attitudes, we again found a complex pattern emerging. Court experience has a mixed effect on citizen assessment of the law. In respect to issues concerning the everyday relevance and effectiveness of law, we found that experience enhanced citizen evaluations. At the same time, experience eroded citizen assessments of the responsiveness of law. These findings paralleled our previous results showing that citizens generally saw the law as an effective problem solver without necessarily seeing it as fair and responsive to citizen differences.

Despite their heightened criticism of the courts and some legal actors, minorities did not express any less willingness than whites to use the law and courts. As measured in terms of their responses to hypothetical situations and in terms of their self-characterized willingness to use the law, minorities came out, if anything, as more willing than non-minorities to turn to the law. In light of this expressed willingness to use law and courts, therefore, it is not surprising that we found no difference in the rate at which minorities and non-minorities turned to law in response to perceived problems.

Finally, we must note that throughout this analysis when we found differences by race, it was often the case that there was as much variation among minority groups as there was between whites and "non-whites." In regard to some issues, African-American respondents were indistinguishable from white respondents while Hispanics constituted a separate category, often distinctive by virtue of their willingness to use the law despite their relative legal inexperience. We conclude from this general observation that too often in social analyses the only important distinction that is drawn and to which policy-makers and scholars attend is the difference between white and non-white. We should be cautious about this tendency, however. In focusing our attention on that particular divide, we are in danger of overlooking critical and important differences in culture, history, experiences, and resources among racial groups.

In conclusion, then, this research reveals a picture of a population willing and able to mobilize the legal system but

somewhat cynical about some of its claims to fairness and justness,  
in short, of a legally active but critical citizenry.

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