

Report: Self-Represented Litigants in New York City: Characteristics, Needs, Services in Family and Housing Court (New York 2005)

In 2005, the [New York State Unified Court System's Office of the Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiatives](#) (DCAJ-JI) released this report that surveyed 3,303 litigants appearing without a lawyer ("self-represented litigants") in the New York City Family Court and New York City Housing Court in 2003. Most litigants in these courts appear without a lawyer for critical types of cases: evictions; domestic violence; child custody; guardianship; visitation; support; and paternity. The report may be found at http://courts.state.ny.us/reports/AJJI_SelfRep06.pdf.

The survey revealed that the majority of self-represented litigants:

- have low incomes;
- feel they cannot afford a lawyer for their case;
- do not consult with a lawyer; and
- have relatively low levels of formal education

Other significant survey results included the following:

- 83% of the survey respondents reported themselves as either African-American, Asian, or Hispanic.
- Survey respondents had less education and lower income than New York City residents as a whole.
- Respondents who completed the survey in Spanish reported lower income and education levels than those who completed it in English.

- The percentage of self-represented litigants who felt they could not afford an attorney (approximately 60%) was similar throughout the entire range of reported annual incomes (under \$15,000 to more than \$45,000).
- Family Court and Housing Court staff received high ratings for the quality of the services they provide.
- Relatively few self-represented litigants are aware that the courts have public-access law libraries that can be used for research; even fewer reported using a library to do research.
- Most self-represented litigants want written materials to be available in courthouses and court staff to be available to explain procedures.
- Approximately one-third of self-represented litigants would like courthouse and case information, including court forms, available on the Internet.

From these findings, a series of recommendations emerge for new and existing programs aimed at ensuring the maximum practical degree of equal access to justice for self-represented litigants in these and similar courts. See Recommendations, *infra*.

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