



## Legal needs of single parents in New South Wales

**Abstract:** *The Legal Australia-Wide (LAW) Survey identified single parents as having increased prevalence of legal problems according to a number of measures. The survey findings in New South Wales (NSW) highlighted the increased vulnerability of single parents to legal problems overall, substantial legal problems and multiple legal problems. Single parents also had increased vulnerability to a number of different types of legal problems.*

### Source

This paper is a simplified excerpt from the report, **Legal Australia-Wide Survey: Legal need in New South Wales** by Christine Coumarelos, Deborah Macourt, Julie People, Hugh M. McDonald, Zhigang Wei, Reiny Iriana and Stephanie Ramsey (Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, 2012).

### About the LAW Survey

The LAW Survey provides a comprehensive assessment of a broad range of legal needs on a representative sample of the population. It covered 129 different types of civil, criminal and family law problems. It examined the nature of legal problems, the pathways to their resolution and the demographic groups that struggle with the weight of their legal problems.

With 20,716 respondents across Australia, including over 2000 in each state/territory, the LAW Survey allows for in-depth analysis at both the state/territory and national level. The major findings were published in a series of nine reports, with a report on Australia as a whole and each state/territory. Some key findings were:

- legal problems are widespread and often have adverse impacts on many life circumstances
- disadvantaged people are particularly vulnerable to legal problems
- many people do nothing to resolve their legal problems and achieve poor outcomes
- most people resolve their legal problems without using lawyers or the formal justice system.

The nine LAW Survey reports are available at:

[www.lawfoundation.net.au](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au)

**Past surveys have found single parents** to be among the demographic groups most vulnerable to legal problems, and meeting their legal needs has been identified as a priority (Buck et al. 2004; Currie 2007; Dignan 2006; Moorhead et al. 2004). Pleasence (2006) argued that the changes in personal circumstances that result from family breakdown, such as changes in family, economic and housing circumstances, can leave lone parents particularly vulnerable to a range of further problems that constitute elements of social exclusion.

### Measuring legal need in NSW

Respondents to the LAW Survey were asked about legal problems they had experienced in a 12-month period. Regressions were conducted to examine the demographic characteristics that are significantly related to prevalence. Respondents were asked about their experience of a total of 129 specific types of legal problems. These types of legal problems were categorised into 12 broad problem groups: accidents, consumer, credit/debt, crime, employment, family, government, health, housing, money, personal injury and rights.

For the purpose of the analyses, 'single parents' were defined as people who, at the time of the survey, were not living with a partner and had one or more children under 18 years, regardless of whether these children were living with them.

### Predicting the prevalence of legal problems

A series of regression analyses were conducted using NSW LAW Survey data to examine the demographic groups that had increased likelihood of experiencing:

- legal problems overall – that is, increased likelihood of experiencing a legal problem of any type
- substantial legal problems – that is, increased likelihood of experiencing a legal problem that had a 'moderate' or 'severe' impact on everyday life

- multiple legal problems – that is, increased likelihood of experiencing a greater number of legal problems
- problems from each of the 12 legal problem groups.

The regression results using NSW LAW Survey data replicated past findings that vulnerability to legal problems is not random but varies according to problem type and demographic characteristics. In particular, like past surveys, the LAW Survey showed that several disadvantaged or socially excluded groups had increased vulnerability, and the increased vulnerability of single parents was one of the strongest effects. Further details are provided below.

### Prevalence of legal problems

In NSW, the LAW Survey identified single parents as having increased prevalence of legal problems overall. The odds of experiencing legal problems were 2.3 times as high for single parents as for other respondents, with 72 per cent of single parents experiencing legal problems compared to 48 per cent of other respondents.

### Prevalence of substantial legal problems

When compared to their counterparts, single parents in NSW had significantly higher odds of experiencing substantial legal problems. In fact, single parents were twice as likely to experience substantial legal problems as were other respondents.

### Prevalence of multiple legal problems

Single parents in NSW were significantly more likely than other respondents to experience multiple legal problems.

### Prevalence of different types of legal problems

The regressions on the prevalence of each problem group revealed that single parents in NSW had increased odds of problems from six of the 12 problem groups: credit/debt, crime, employment, government, rights and family problems. More specifically, single parents were:

- 1.9 times as likely to experience credit/debt problems compared to other respondents, with 15 per cent of single parents experiencing credit/debt problems compared to only 6 per cent of other respondents
- 2.2 times as likely to experience crime problems (27% versus 13%)
- 2.1 times as likely to experience employment problems (13% versus 6%)
- 1.6 times as likely to experience government problems (19% versus 10%)
- 2.5 times as likely to experience rights problems (17% versus 5%)
- 13.3 times as likely to experience family problems (31% versus 2%).

### Severity of family problems

The high proportion of family problems experienced by single parents is not surprising, given that this group have the defining circumstances necessary for the experience of both relationship breakdown problems and problems related to children. It is noteworthy however, that family problems were seen as the most severe type of legal problem.

Family problems had the highest proportion of problems reportedly causing income loss or financial strain (57% of family problems) and the highest proportion of problems reportedly causing stress-related illness (46% of family problems). Physical ill health was relatively common for family problems (36%) and one-third of family problems resulted in the respondent moving home. The high proportion of family problems causing relationship breakdown (51%) largely reflects the capture of the problems of divorce and separation.

### Conclusion

The LAW Survey replicates previous findings that single parents are one of the sections of the community that are most vulnerable to legal problems and often struggle with the weight of the multiple legal problems they experience. Single parents are not only more likely to experience large numbers of legal problems, but they are also more likely to experience a wide range of often substantial legal problems. Given their multiple legal and non-legal needs, single parents are likely to benefit from a more holistic or client-focused approach, such as a coordinated response from both legal services and other human services.

### References

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