

Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable  
2025

# Preliminary Cross-Agency Access to Justice Learning Agenda



# The Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable

This preliminary learning agenda is a product of the [Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable's](#) (LAIR's) Data and Research Committee. Led and staffed by the Department of Justice's [Office for Access to Justice](#) (ATJ), LAIR is a collaboration of 28 federal agencies and offices with a mission to:

- Increase the availability of meaningful access to justice for individuals and families, regardless of wealth or status;
- Improve coordination among federal programs;
- Develop policy recommendations that improve access to justice; and
- Advance evidence-based research, data collection, and analysis of civil legal aid and indigent defense.

In 2024, LAIR created its Data and Research Committee to advance an evidence-based and people-centered approach to data use, collection, analysis, and sharing across federal agencies. The Committee, made up of representatives from LAIR member agencies, leads LAIR efforts to “advance evidence-based research, data collection, and analysis of civil legal aid and indigent defense” and to develop innovative ways to generate and utilize data related to the public’s interactions with federal agencies to resolve justice problems, emphasizing the importance of informed, evidence-based decision-making. The Data and Research Committee proposed the creation of a cross-agency access to justice learning agenda to assist federal agencies, external researchers, and other stakeholders to build access to justice priorities into agency data collection and research efforts in alignment with agency missions. This document provides a preliminary LAIR access to justice learning agenda, developed under the Data and Research Committee’s leadership, and by LAIR agency representatives. This learning agenda, by its nature, is designed to be consistently reviewed and updated going forward.

# Why Create an Access to Justice Learning Agenda?

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018<sup>1</sup> (The “Evidence Act”) requires federal agencies to develop an evidence-building plan, also referred to as a learning agenda, and “urges the Federal Government to make decisions using the best available evidence.”<sup>2</sup>

Over 20 agencies have developed learning agendas since 2018. Three cross-government learning agendas have also been developed to help “[p]rioritize key questions,” “[s]pur coordinated research,” and “[e]nsure results inform decisions” across the government.<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish these same goals and strengthen the access to justice evidence base, LAIR has developed this preliminary Access to Justice Learning Agenda. The development of this agenda was led by the LAIR Data and Research Committee and incorporates input from the broader LAIR membership and learnings from a public listening session in June 2024.

Every day, millions of people in the United States face problems that affect their basic needs and rights, including those related to healthcare, housing, public benefits, education, employment, family stability, and safety.<sup>4</sup> These problems often implicate the law in some way—including, for example, getting evicted, struggling to negotiate child custody, falling victim to an online scam, or facing workplace discrimination or sexual harassment.<sup>5</sup>

Federal agencies hold many types of data that can illuminate our understanding of various justice problems. Such data is useful in developing, implementing, evaluating, and improving federal programs that help resolve or prevent justice problems both on individual and societal levels. A **people-centered approach** to thinking about these data involves examining how federal agencies, and others, can **collect and use data relating to various aspects of people’s experiences with justice problems**.

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<sup>1</sup> Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (2019). The Evidence Act defines a “learning agenda” as “a systematic plan for identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency.”

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies from Shalanda D. Young, Acting Director, Office of Management & Budget, M-21-27, Evidence-Based Policymaking: Learning Agendas and Annual Evaluation Plans (June 30, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Learning Agenda in Support of the President’s Management Agenda 4 (2022).

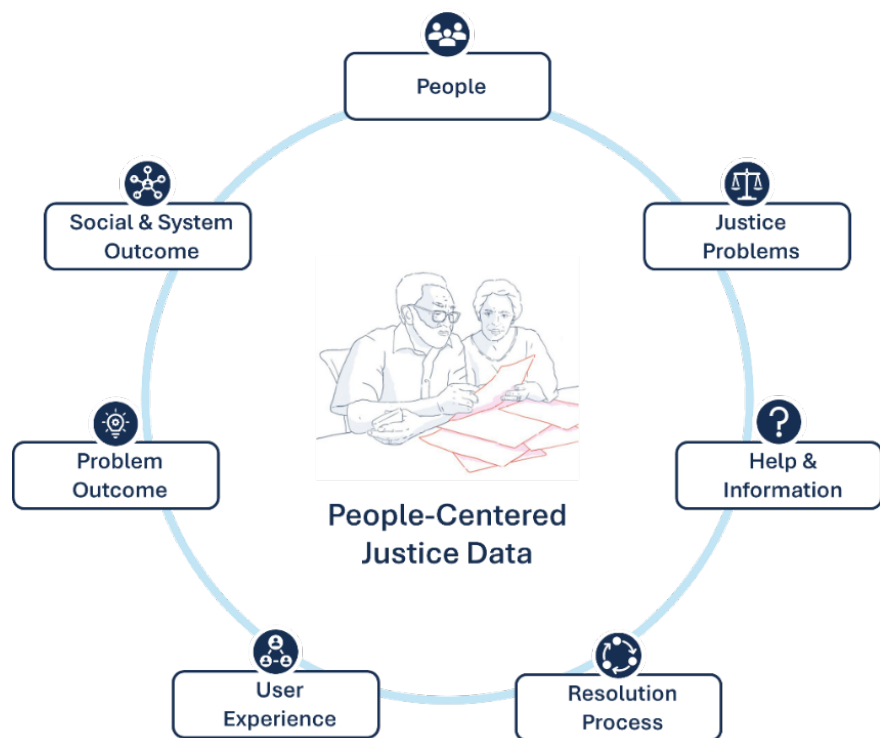
<sup>4</sup> One large-scale study found that 66% of the U.S. population experienced at least one legal issue in the preceding four years, but only 49% of those problems were completely resolved. See *Justice Needs and Satisfaction in the United States of America*, Inst. for the Advancement of the Am. Legal Sys. (2021), <https://iaals.du.edu/publications/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-united-states-america>. A 2022 study by the Legal Services Corporation found that low-income Americans do not get any or enough legal help for 92% of their substantial civil legal problems. When people do not have what they need to resolve their justice problems, they face a justice gap. See *The Justice Gap: The Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*, Legal Servs. Corp. (2022), <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/the-report/>.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Rebecca L. Sandefur & James Teufel, *Assessing America’s Access to Civil Justice Crisis*, 11 U.C. Irvine L. Rev. 753, 757 (2021).

The preliminary Learning Agenda embraces the people-centered approach described in LAIR’s 2024 report, *Access to Justice through Data and Research: A People-Centered Approach to Evidence-Based Policymaking by the Federal Government*. To support federal agencies and others in taking a people-centered approach to understanding justice data, LAIR developed the below framework, which includes seven key aspects of people’s experiences with justice problems and a series of questions to help agencies identify the data necessary to understand these experiences at various stages in the justice process. Appendix A, attached, includes associated questions that should be asked for each stage. We encourage agencies to consider these questions for each priority identified in this Access to Justice Learning Agenda. As different programs impact access to justice in different ways, not every priority or research question will apply to every agency or program. In incorporating this Preliminary Learning Agenda into their evidence-building activities, agencies must consider the unique circumstances of the programs they administer.

**Figure 1:  
People-centered  
justice data**

This figure shows seven key aspects of people’s experiences with justice problems. This content was adapted from USAID’s “Infographic: Data Along the Justice Journey.”<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Infographic: Data Along the Justice Journey, U.S. Agency for Int’l Dev., <https://www.usaid.gov/democracy/document/infographic-data-along-justice-journey> (last visited Aug. 21, 2024).

# Definitions

**Administrative burden:** The learning, compliance, and psychological costs associated with navigating federal administrative processes.<sup>7</sup>

**Access to justice data (also referred to as “people-centered justice data”):** Any information held by federal agencies, no matter its form or source, that is potentially useful in understanding how people experience justice problems and interact with federal programs relating to justice problems.<sup>8</sup>

**Federal programs:** Those activities that federal agencies engage in to help resolve justice problems such as:

- Providing critical benefits and services;
- Funding state, local, territorial, Tribal, and privately run programs that help people resolve justice problems, including through the provision of legal aid;
- Investigating complaints and enforcing laws against entities that violate people’s rights and basic needs;
- Disseminating information about or funding programs that enable people to know their rights, act to solve justice problems, have assistance in solving justice problems when they need it, or reach a just outcome; and
- Undertaking and funding the collection of access to justice data and research on the prevalence of justice problems, the availability of legal aid, the functioning of legal systems, or the effectiveness of federal programs.

**Justice problems:** Those problems that have legal aspects, raise legal issues, and have consequences that can be shaped by law.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Admin. Conf. of the U.S., *Administrative Conference Recommendation 2023-6: Identifying and Reducing Burdens on the Public in Administrative Processes* (2023), <https://www.acus.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Identifying-and-Reducing-Burdens-on-the-Public-in-Administrative-Processes-Post-Plenary-Adopted-Recommendation-2023.12.22.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, *Access to Justice Through Data and Research: A People-Centered Approach to Evidence-Based Policymaking by the Federal Government* (2024), <https://www.justice.gov/atj/media/1379491/dl>, at 10.

<sup>9</sup> See *id.*

# Research Priorities

Building on previous LAIR reports and the experiences of its members, the Data and Research Committee identified five proposed high-level, cross-government research priorities:

1. Access to information and legal empowerment
2. People-centered processes
3. Access to assistance
4. Just outcomes
5. Collaborative evidence-building and learning

## Priority 1:

# Access to Information and Legal Empowerment

To resolve a justice problem, people must first be aware that they are facing a justice problem, in particular where the solution might require an understanding of the law or certain legal or administrative processes in order to address it. Federal agencies play an important role in providing information about people's rights, available benefits and services, and processes for addressing justice problems.

This research priority assesses:

1. The extent to which people know about their rights, available benefits and services, and processes for addressing justice problems.
2. The nature, extent, and effectiveness of federal government efforts to inform people about their rights, available benefits and services, and processes for addressing justice problems.

Several agencies included related questions in their learning agendas. Examples include:

**Department of Homeland Security.** To what extent is FEMA's training and education enterprise providing equitable delivery of curricula to state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTTs) constituents?

**Social Security Administration.** Does redesigning the Social Security Statement and providing supplemental fact sheets with customized information on Social Security's programs improve people's knowledge of the program and increase the use of internet services?

### Priority Research Question 1:

How can the federal government communicate clearly and effectively so that people are aware of their rights, available benefits and services, and federal programs that can help them resolve or prevent their justice problems?

### Sample Sub-Questions:

- When people face justice problems, to what extent are they aware of federal programs that might help resolve them?
- How effective are federal informational and outreach efforts at raising awareness of relevant federal programs?
- What factors prevent people from gaining awareness of federal programs that might help resolve justice problems?
- If people may face negative consequences for noncompliance with certain laws or policies, to what extent are they aware of those laws or policies?

**Priority Research Question 2:**

How can the federal government communicate clearly and effectively so that people know how to access federal programs that can help them resolve or prevent justice problems and navigate related government processes?

**Sample Sub-Questions:**

- When people need to submit applications to access a federal program, how easily can they find relevant forms and instructions for submitting those applications?
- When people need to provide records or other documentation, how easily can they find relevant forms and instructions for submitting that documentation?
- When people have questions about accessing federal programs, how easily can they obtain answers? What information are they seeking that they cannot easily obtain?
- How accessible and useful are agency informational materials? What barriers do people face in locating and using information?



## Priority 2:

# People-Centered Processes

To resolve a justice problem, people must be able to navigate the process(es) for resolving it. Unfortunately, too many people face procedural obstacles and other barriers (collectively known as administrative burden) that prevent them from achieving a just outcome.

This research priority assesses:

1. The nature and prevalence of administrative burden in accessing federal programs.
2. The effectiveness of federal government efforts to reduce administrative burden in accessing federal programs.

Several agencies included related questions in their learning agendas. Examples include:

**Department of Labor.** What are the barriers different populations of workers face in accessing [unemployment insurance] benefits and what are potential interventions that community groups, employers, states, and the federal government could deploy to reduce those barriers?

**Department of Treasury.** How can the IRS and TTB (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau) simplify interactions for taxpayers, such as providing more self-service options, improving processes for filing, responding to audit notices or examinations, correcting returns, and remitting payments?

### Priority Research Question:

How can the federal government reduce unnecessary administrative burden in government processes so that people can fairly and effectively resolve justice problems involving federal programs?

### Sample Sub-Questions:

- What costs and challenges do people face in accessing federal programs and navigating government processes?
- What procedural factors prevent people from accessing federal benefits and services for which they are eligible?
- What government processes place disproportionate or undue administrative burden on people as they seek to resolve justice problems?
- Given available resources, what steps can agencies take to simplify government processes to reduce administrative burden and improve decisional quality and fairness?
- How can agencies leverage technology to reduce administrative burdens in accessing federal programs and navigating government processes?
- How can agencies seek input from people who are eligible for federal benefits and services to avoid future potential administrative burden at the design phase?

## Priority 3:

# Access to Assistance

To resolve a justice problem, people often seek assistance from a variety of sources to learn about their rights and available benefits and services; learn about ways to resolve justice problems; and get help navigating federal programs and other processes (e.g., state and local programs).<sup>10</sup> Whether the assistance is sought from legal aid providers or other sources, resource gaps and other barriers prevent too many people from obtaining the help they need.

This priority assesses:

1. The extent to which people are able to access the assistance they need to resolve justice problems and navigate related processes within federal programs or use federally funded assistance.
2. Barriers people face in accessing the assistance they need to resolve justice problems.
3. Reasons why people are unable to access the assistance they need.
4. The effectiveness of federal government efforts to expand the public's access to assistance and increase the availability of assistance.

Several agencies included related questions in their learning agendas. Examples include:

**Department of Justice.** What individuals are not currently receiving [civil rights-related] legal assistance/orientation services and referrals for representation, and why? How can the Department most effectively assess and address any access barriers identified?

**Department of Veterans Affairs.** To what extent is VA's Transition Assistance Program supporting the transition needs of newly separated Veterans?

### Priority Question:

How can the federal government ensure that people have the assistance they need to resolve justice problems?

### Sample Sub-Questions:

- What assistance is available to help people resolve justice problems?
- When and why do people seek assistance in resolving justice problems? Why do people not seek assistance?
- How often are people successful in accessing the assistance they seek, and what barriers do they face when they seek assistance?
- Are people with assistance more successful in resolving justice problems and obtaining just outcomes than those who do not have or cannot access such assistance?
- How can the federal government increase the public's access to or the availability of assistance?

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<sup>10</sup> See Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, *Access to Justice in Federal Administrative Proceedings: Nonlawyer Assistance and Other Strategies* (2023), <https://www.justice.gov/atj/media/1327481/dl?inline>, which discusses the critical role of assistance from lawyers, nonlawyers, and ombuds offices to ensure people access and obtain fair outcomes in certain federal administrative proceedings.

## Priority 4:

# Just Outcomes

In seeking to resolve a justice problem, many people are unable to achieve the outcomes to which they are entitled or that are intended by federal agencies. There are many reasons why people might not achieve just outcomes. There may be limitations with the administration of a federal program, or the design of a program may not be tailored to meet access to justice policy objectives. This priority assesses:

1. The extent to which federal programs help people resolve their justice problems in a fair, accurate, efficient, and timely manner.
2. Legal, administrative, and other barriers that prevent federal programs from helping people to resolve their justice problems in a fair, accurate, efficient, and timely manner.

Several agencies included related questions in their learning agendas. Examples include:

**Department of Agriculture.** How effective are Food and Nutrition Service programs in improving nutrition security through access to nutritious foods?

**Department of Education.** What policies, programs, services, and practices best support the design of learning environments and educational experiences that are effective in reducing gaps in student opportunity and achievement, including those that are responsive to the assets and needs of underserved students?

**Department of Health & Human Services.** How do HHS programs and policies expand equitable access to comprehensive, community-based, innovative, and culturally competent healthcare services while addressing social determinants of health?

### Priority Question:

How can federal agencies ensure that their programs meet their access to justice policy objectives?

### Sample Sub-Questions:

- To what extent are federal programs helping people to resolve their justice problems?
- Would changes to program design increase the availability of meaningful access to just outcomes?
- Are there legal, administrative, or other barriers that prevent policymakers from making changes to program designs that, if eliminated, would increase the availability of meaningful access to just outcomes?

## Priority 5:

# Collaborative Evidence-Building and Learning

Collaboration is essential to develop a high-quality evidence base for access to justice learning, to develop and implement strategies for addressing justice problems, and to assess the effectiveness of those strategies in achieving good outcomes.

This priority assesses:

1. The extent to which the administrators of federal programs collaborate with counterparts elsewhere in the federal government and with public- and private-sector entities outside the federal government.
2. The effectiveness of such collaborations.
3. Areas where further collaboration may be beneficial.

Several agencies included related questions in their learning agendas. Examples include:

**Department of the Interior.** How can Interior improve the public benefit of the Department's data, science, and information resources, especially among vulnerable communities?

**Social Security Administration.** What are the effects of improving collaboration and enhancing data sharing with external agencies on saving citizens time from reporting required information, reducing labor market barriers, improving program solvency projections, improving program administration, and reducing improper payments?

### Priority Question:

How can federal agencies collaborate with other governmental and nongovernmental partners, to improve the evidence base for assessing the performance of federal programs, support nongovernmental partner efforts to close access to justice gaps, and develop policies to increase meaningful access to justice?

### Sample Sub-Questions:

- What programs and practices best enable collaboration and continual learning on access to justice issues within and across federal agencies?
- What programs and practices best enable collaboration and continual learning between the federal government and people who rely on federal programs to access justice? At what points in the process of program design and evaluation is it best to consult with such individuals?
- What institutions and practices best enable collaboration and continual learning on access to justice issues between the federal government and state, local, Tribal, and territorial governments?

- What institutions and practices best enable collaboration and continual learning on access to justice issues between the federal government and nongovernmental entities that advocate on behalf of the public?
- What institutions and practices best enable collaboration and continual learning on access to justice issues between the federal government and external researchers?

# Appendix

Below are the questions included in LAIR's 2024 report, aimed at identifying people-centered justice data for each of the seven key aspects of people's experiences with justice problems.

## People

- How many people have justice problems? Who are they?
- What is their capability to understand relevant legal issues?
- What is their perception of and prior experience with the justice system/service providers?

## Justice Problems

- What are people's justice problems?
- How prevalent are different types of justice problems?
- What is the severity of these justice problems?
- Do the prevalence and severity of problems vary across different demographics?

## Help & Information

- Where and when do people turn for help? Why?
- Are people aware of available sources of information, advice, and representation?
- Is this information, advice, and representation accessible? Is it useful and effective?

## Resolution Process

- What formal and informal resolution mechanisms are available? Are they accessible and effective?
- What is their capacity to provide services (i.e., number of institutions/providers, level of funding, caseload, etc.)?
- How timely is service provision?

## User Experience

- Are resolution processes/services user-friendly (accessible, affordable, timely)?
- Can users easily understand the process? Is it perceived as fair?
- What is the emotional cost of the resolution process and its impact?

## Problem Outcome

- Are people's justice problems being solved? Are they likely to recur?
- Is the outcome perceived as fair by all parties? Are there disparities in outcomes for different groups?
- Are any decisions made by authorities (e.g., courts or agencies) complied with by people? Are they well understood?

## Social & System Outcomes

- What are the economic impacts of the justice problem?
- What are the social impacts of the justice problem?
- Have users' perceptions of justice systems, services, or providers changed?