9

The Supply and Demand of Legal Help on the Internet

Margaret Hagan

Millions of Americans have civil justice problems every month, and most of these go unmet. A recent survey of low-income Americans found that over 70 percent of households had at least one civil legal problem in a year, including around health care, housing, disability benefits, veterans' issues, and domestic violence.[1] But of these needs, 86 percent of the problems received inadequate or no legal help.[2] Without legal assistance, a person may lose their home to an eviction or foreclosure, suffer physical abuse without protection, go into debt or bankruptcy, lose custody of their children, or be denied medical care.[3]

Why is there such a large justice gap between the high volume of justice problems and the small percentage that receive legal assistance? This may be due to the increasing costs of providing legal services, with lawyers having to follow burdensome procedures and licensing requirements that make it difficult to sustain a business model serving low- or moderate-income households.[4] Or another commonly cited reason is the undersupply of public interest lawyers to assist people with civil justice problems. The underfunding results from decades of congressional restrictions on legal aid funding, which both limits the supply of free lawyers and restricts whom these free lawyers can serve.[5] Without widely available free or

---

[1] LEGAL SERVS. CORP., THE JUSTICE GAP: MEASURING THE UNMET CIVIL LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AMERICANS (2017), https://www.lsc.gov/justicegap2017.

[2] *Id.*

[3] See more individual stories of experiences with and without legal assistance for their civil justice problems at the All Rise for Civil Justice platform. *Stories from the Civil Justice Crisis*, ALL RISE FOR CIV. J., https://allriseforciviljustice.org/stories/.

[4] Gillian Hadfield, *Legal Markets*, 60 J. ECON. LIT. (forthcoming 2022).

[5] *See* Rebekah Diller & Emily Savner, *Restoring Legal Aid for the Poor: A Call to End Draconian and Wasteful Restrictions*, 36 FORDHAM URB. L. J. 687 (2009). For a more recent news report on the underfunding see Adiel Kaplan, *More People Than Ever Need Legal Aid Services, but the Pandemic Has Hit Legal Aid Funding Hard*, NBC NEWS (Apr. 25, 2021), https://www.nbcnews.com/business/personal-finance/more-people-ever-need-legal-aid-services-pandemic-has-hit-n1264989.

affordable legal services, millions of people are turned away when they seek assistance.[6]

But what about those people that never seek legal aid assistance in the first place? This is the problem of awareness and capability. As Sandefur's research has highlighted, many Americans do not conceive of justice problems as ones that are "legal" or that legal assistance could help with.[7] Instead, they often attribute them to happenstance, bad luck, or other reasons – all of which make it more likely that they do not seek out legal or social services to have their rights protected and experts assist them. Here the problem is not a limited supply of affordable or free legal services. Instead, the problem is people's lack of consciousness of their legal rights and how legal professionals can help them,[8] and a lack of confidence, capability, or trust that they want to engage with legal assistance to deal with their problems.[9]

Recent decades have seen a variety of interventions aimed at closing the justice gap by increasing legal awareness among those with civil justice problems and their capability to use available assistance. In the early 1970s, consumer-facing legal clinics arose in storefronts with transparently priced menus of legal services, making legal help more approachable, demystifying the process of engaging a lawyer, and advertising how and why people should make use of legal services.[10] At the end of the 1970s, bans on attorney advertising were invalidated, and legal groups began to release audio, video, and print outreach to the public to drive up people's awareness about when and how they could use a lawyer to help them.[11] By the 1990s, however,

---

[6] Rebecca Buckwalter-Poza, *Making Justice Equal*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Dec. 8, 2016), https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal-justice/reports/2016/12/08/294479/making-justice-equal/.

[7] REBECCA L. SANDEFUR, ACCESSING JUSTICE IN THE CONTEMPORARY USA: FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY NEEDS AND SERVICES STUDY (2014), https://www.americanbarfoundation.org/uploads/cms/documents/sandefur_accessing_justice_in_the_contemporary_usa._aug._2014.pdf.

[8] For more about social-legal studies of legal consciousness and for more exploration of how people think about and interact with the legal system, *see* Susan Sibley, *Legal Consciousness*, *in* NEW OXFORD COMPANION TO LAW (2008).

[9] There is a growing literature framed around "legal capability" and "legal empowerment" that focuses on why people do not take action on justice problems, based on lack of knowledge, skills, or trust in the system. See NIGEL J. BALMER ET AL., KNOWLEDGE, CAPABILITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF RIGHTS PROBLEMS (2010), https://lawforlife.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/knowledge-capability-and-the-experience-of-rights-problems-lsrc-may-2010-255.pdf; Hugh M. McDonald & Julie People, *Legal Capability and Inaction for Legal Problems: Knowledge, Stress, and Cost*, UPDATING J., June 2014; LISA WINTERSTEIGER, LAW FOR LIFE: LEGAL NEEDS, LEGAL CAPABILITY AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION (2015); KRISTINA BROUSALIS, CLEO CONNECT, BUILDING AN UNDERSTANDING OF LEGAL CAPABILITY: AN ONLINE SCAN OF LEGAL CAPABILITY RESEARCH (2016), https://cleoconnect.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/online-scan-legal-capability.September-2016.final_.pdf; Margaret Hagan & Kursat Ozenc, A Design Space for Legal and Systems Capability: Interfaces for Self-Help in Complex Systems, *Design Issues*, Summer 2020, at 61.

[10] Nora Freeman Engstrom, *Attorney Advertising and the Contingency Fee Cost Paradox*, 65 STAN. L. REV. 633, 649 (2013).

[11] *Id*. at 653–54.

the use of lawyer advertising had shifted to focus primarily on personal injury needs rather than routine legal services (like divorces, debt, and estate planning). By the mid-1990s, the storefront legal clinic movement was extinct.[12]

More recently, awareness and capability efforts have centered on use of technology. Websites like LegalZoom and Rocket Lawyer emerged to serve the needs that storefront legal clinics had decades earlier, and these sites began to spend heavily in traditional and online advertising to build people's legal awareness.[13] More public interest organizations also began to build websites and apps, to make it easier for people to find and use legal help.[14] These sites have features intended to improve people's capability to engage with legal services, like referral engines to make it easier to engage a lawyer, self-help guides to understand the law, chat functions to get basic questions answered, and dispute resolution tools to generate agreements with the other party.[15] In recent years, new awareness-focused applications have begun to use artificial intelligence to automatically spot justice problems in their online posts, to diagnose what legal issue they might have.[16]

While justice problem-solving on the Internet remains a work in progress, all signs are that improving internet-based tools will be a central component of any successful effort to close the justice gap. This chapter presents a new approach to evaluating legal help websites as one of these internet-based tools. It posits that the mere existence of court and legal aid websites is not enough to close the justice gap. Rather, there must be accountability and research as to whether people are able to find and use these sites to build legal capability. This chapter presents one method to assess the impact of legal help websites: measuring the supply of sites, the demand for them, and the factors that may be impeding better matching of people with online resources.

9.1 THE NEED FOR RESEARCH ON LEGAL HELP ON THE INTERNET

As more service providers attempt to use the Internet to close the justice gap by increasing legal awareness and capability of people, more people are going onto the

---

[12] *Id.* at 657–59.
[13] Debra Cassens Weiss, *This Law Firm Will Spend More Than $25M in Legal Advertising This Year, Report Says*, A.B.A. J. (Oct. 28, 2015), https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/this_law_firm_will_spend_more_than_25m_in_legal_advertising_this_year_repor; Sarah Knapp, *Can LegalZoom be the Answer to the Justice Gap?* 26 Geo. J. Legal Ethics 821 (2013).
[14] See case studies of many such efforts in the special volume of Colloquium, *Using Technology to Enhance Access to Justice*, 26 Harv. J. L. Tech. 243 (2012).
[15] See an inventory of technology tools for civil justice problems at Rebecca Love Kourlis & Riyaz Samnani, Institute for Advancement Am. Legal Sys., Court Compass: Mapping the Future of User Access through Technology (2017), https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/court_compass_mapping_the_future.pdf.
[16] Bob Ambrogi, *Stanford and Suffolk Create Game to Help Drive Access to Justice*, LawSites (Oct. 16, 2018), https://www.lawsitesblog.com/2018/10/stanford-suffolk-create-game-help-drive-access-justice.html.

Internet to find help for all kinds of problems (legal or not) that happen to them.[17] Many of these "life problems" that people search about (for example, getting calls from a debt collector, wondering if a past criminal record could be masked, dealing with a landlord threatening eviction, worrying about medical bills, or trying to get school services for a child with learning difficulties) are "justice problems."[18] In the past, people might have turned first to family, neighbors, librarians, or professionals to seek assistance for such life problems. People still might reach out through social connections, but increasingly the Internet figures prominently in this search for help.[19]

Yet little is known about the role of the Internet in people's problem-solving around legal life events. Do online sites and tools increase people's awareness and capabilities around their legal rights? Do they empower people to take action to resolve their justice problems? A handful of studies have surveyed people about whether and how they see legal assistance online.[20] This preliminary research, most of it done as small surveys and lab experiments, has established some useful insights and metrics as to how various internet intermediaries and resources may better serve individuals seeking out help on their problems. Among the insights are what kinds of search results, websites, and apps best improve people's understanding of the law, and which may best encourage people to take action on resolving their problem. Even so, we still lack knowledge about how many people are seeking help for justice problems on the Internet and how they behave when they do seek help online.

The limits of existing studies on justice problem-solving on the Internet stand in stark contrast with the medical field. Public health researchers and medical practitioners have developed data-driven techniques to understand people's health assistance–seeking behavior online, and what this means for how to better deliver services, predict needs, and communicate with the public.[21] Researchers gather data on what people are searching for, what kinds of websites they are visiting, what stories they are sharing about their health, and what actions they take in response to what they find online. This

---

[17] *Information Searches That Solve Problems*, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Dec. 30, 2007), https://www .pewresearch.org/internet/2007/12/30/information-searches-that-solve-problems/.

[18] Sandefur, Accessing Justice in the Contemporary USA. There is a distinction between the "justice problem" (sometimes called the "justiciable problem") and legal need. A justice problem may cross over into being a legal need if the legal system is the best way

[19] Erica Turner & Lee Rainie, *Most Rely on Their Own Research in Making Big Life Decisions, and It's Often Online*, Pew Rsch. Ctr. (Mar. 5, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/ 2020/03/05/most-americans-rely-on-their-own-research-to-make-big-decisions-and-that-often- means-online-searches/.

[20] Margaret Hagan, *The User Experience of the Internet as a Legal Help Service: Defining Standards for the Next Generation of User-Friendly Online Legal Services*, 20 Va. J.L. Tech. 395 (2016); Catrina Denvir, *Online and in the Know? Public Legal Education, Young People and the Internet*, 92–93 Computs. & Educ. 204 (2016); Ginnifer L. Mastarone & Susan Feinberg, *Access to Legal Services: Organizing Better Self-Help Systems*, 2007 Inst. Elec. & Elecs. Engineers Int'l Pro. Commc'n Conf. 1.

[21] Gunther Eysenbach, *Infodemiology and Infoveillance: Tracking Online Health Information and Cyberbehavior for Public Health*, 40 Am. J. Preventive Med. 154 (2011).

research helps public health officials improve outreach and education, predict new outbreaks of disease, and develop better services to engage people.

The justice sector can leverage what the health sector has already developed: research protocols, data exchanges, and artificial intelligence aimed at improving people's access to the legal system via the Internet. The public health work on digital epidemiology and infoveillance can guide those working on access to justice to new knowledge on the volume and type of legal needs, people's preferences and needs for services, and opportunities for innovative technology that can improve people's knowledge that they can use the justice system to resolve their life problems, and that can improve their capabilities to participate meaningfully in it.

To develop this research and practice around the Internet for legal help, there is a need for dedicated, ongoing work on an ordinary person's online legal help landscape. This overarching work can spotlight where new directions for justice system outreach, services, and reform could be targeted.

1. What is the demand and supply for justice problem-solving on the Internet?[22]
2. Who are the key intermediaries that are receiving people's help requests and matching them with resources?
3. And what are the datasets and research protocols that we can use to make sense of internet activity, for use in access to justice services and policy making?

The remainder of this chapter tackles one part of this needed research – namely, the first question, on the supply and demand of legal help in the US on the Internet as of 2021. It does so, first, by canvassing past research on how people use the Internet to deal with legal problems. Then it lays out three understudied research questions about the supply-and-demand theme: What is the quantity of the supply and the demand, what is the quality of the supply, and what harms do people experience because of low quantity or low quality? Finally, it offers preliminary answers to these questions by surveying hundreds of commercial and public interest websites that aim to serve people with civil justice problems, calculating initial estimates of how many people are visiting them, and then comparing these visit estimates with the estimates of people's justice problems, based on legal needs surveys.

By way of preview, this analysis shows that that millions of people each month are coming to websites to seek out help for their problems, with many more visitors going to commercial sites than public interest ones. The ecosystem of public interest online resources is scattered among the states, rather than concentrated on national

---

[22] See an earlier survey of the supply and demand of legal help for ordinary citizens at Gillian K. Hadfield, *Higher Demand, Lower Supply? A Comparative Assessment of the Legal Resource Landscape for Ordinary Americans*, 1 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 129 (2010). Hadfield's work was not focused solely on internet-based help, but her work on assessing the legal market is useful for this research.

hubs. Some states' public interest legal help portals are attracting a much higher relative number of visitors than others, indicating that there are substantial opportunities to improve how they offer help to the millions of people coming online for legal help each month.

This, of course, is only a start. Ideally, more researchers and practitioners will tackle the larger research agenda laid out above to build our store of knowledge about how courts, government agencies, legal aid groups, and justice technologists can engage with the public to improve their access and capabilities. In particular, there are many more data sources from internet intermediaries like search engines and social media that can provide insights about where people are going to seek help, whom they trust to help them, and what kinds of behavior they engage in to deal with their problems. Legal policy makers, service providers, and researchers can benefit from greater knowledge of what people are doing on the Internet, and how to increase people's access to the justice system online.

9.2 PRIOR RESEARCH ON LEGAL HELP ON THE INTERNET

Many legal practitioners and scholars in the 2000s highlighted the potential for new websites and internet-based tools to increase access to justice.[23] These proposals detailed how websites could increase the number of people who could find assistance, lower the burdens of time and cost to access help, and improve people's legal capabilities.[24] That "techno-optimism" about whether internet-based technology can increase most people's access to the civil justice system has been challenged in recent years, as website and application development have hit hurdles in accomplishing their goals around user engagement and outcomes.[25]

A small number of researchers have begun investigating if and how the Internet is improving access to justice. This research, primarily by Sandefur, Denvir, and Hagan, examines how people seek out legal assistance on the Internet and what kinds of tools are available for them to use.

9.2.1 *A Growing Supply of Online Help, but Not Always User-Centered*

Sandefur recently surveyed what digital legal help tools exist, and what forms of assistance they offer to users trying to use technology for self-help.[26] Her survey found 322 digital legal tools specifically for nonlawyer users. This included legal

[23] Ronald W. Staudt, *All the Wild Possibilities: Technology That Attacks Barriers to Access to Justice*, 42 LOY. L.A. L. REV. 1117 (2008).

[24] ENGINE ROOM, https://theengineroom.org.

[25] Tanina Rostain, *Techno-Optimism & Access to the Legal System*, 148 DAEDALUS 93 (2019).

[26] REBECCA L. SANDEFUR, LEGAL TECH FOR NON-LAWYERS: REPORT OF THE SURVEY OF US LEGAL TECHNOLOGIES (2019), http://www.americanbarfoundation.org/uploads/cms/documents/report_us_digital_legal_tech_for_nonlawyers.pdf.

help websites with guides and forms, legal dictionaries to clarify jargon, lawyer referral service platforms, and then tools that provide almost end-to-end support for a specific problem (including diagnosis of an issue, evidence gathering, process guides, form assembly, filing, and follow-up). Sandefur observed a mismatch between what the tools offer and the apparent justice needs desired by the public, as well as the issue areas served.[27] Many of the digital legal tools were focused on providing information rather than facilitating user action. They also did not necessarily match the most common user needs reported by people: household finances, health and insurance, consumer problems, family problems, housing, and immigration. This study points to the need for more evaluation of the supply of online legal help, and the development of measures that can encourage more supply that matches the demands and preferences of people in need.

9.2.2 *People Finding Inappropriate Resources on the Internet*

Catrina Denvir has researched how different demographic groups, including young adults and senior citizens in the UK, attempt to use online search to deal with life and legal problems. Her research includes both simulation labs to analyze how people search for help and website assessments to measure the quality of the help people receive.[28] Denvir's work found some common patterns in people's behavior online. Many start with a search engine, type in short questions, and try to find pages that could help them. She observed that young people tended to find and use information with little regard to the importance of jurisdiction. Even as digital natives, they often were unable to use the Internet to get correct information on their problem. In some cases, the young people got distracted by irrelevant information, trying to apply it to their situation, even if it was not legally correct to do so. These lab studies confirm that more people are trying to use the Internet to find help but raise concerns about people (including digital natives) finding "help" that in fact has incorrect, out-of-jurisdiction, or anecdotal information that may lead them astray.

9.2.3 *Preferences for Clear, Authoritative, Open Access, Comprehensive Resources*

My own earlier research performed lab simulations, in which US adults were asked how they might respond to a legal problem using the Internet.[29] This study found that respondents, as in Denvir's studies, preferred to start with a search engine like

---

[27] *Id.* at 10–11.
[28] *See* Catrina Denvir, What Is the Net Worth? Young People, Civil Justice and the Internet 245–90 (May 2014) (PhD dissertation, University College London), https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b584/c82bbc1baebd435a36ac1aa25001930344fa.pdf (providing website assessment tools).
[29] Hagan, *The User Experience of the Internet.*

Google to find help for their civil justice problem. And as with Denvir's respondents, they often ignored the importance of jurisdiction, and they sought out peer-to-peer anecdotes on forums. The study also had respondents evaluate different commercial and public interest legal help websites and express their reasons and preferences for the ideal online assistance. Most all respondents wanted a tool that met the following criteria:[30]

- *Authoritative*, if not directly from the government, then closely affiliated with it;
- *Open Access*, without paywalls, advertisements, or upselling – ideally being offered by a public interest actor rather than a commercial one;
- *Modern Design and Technical Capabilities*, that offer mobile-friendly, intuitive, and interactive resources, and that are accessible to people with disabilities;
- *Comprehensive*, with resources not just for initial understanding of a problem area, but also for taking action to respond to a problem.

These preferences echo Sandefur's concerns that current digital tools are not comprehensive enough (providing only information rather than tools to take action). The user preferences also suggest categories for a standard evaluation metric, which researchers could use to measure if sites are sufficiently meeting people's needs for usability, accessibility, and trustworthiness.

9.2.4 *Open Questions for Further Research*

Research studies so far on the Internet's role in access to justice have been relatively small, with surveys, simulation tasks, and user interviews of small groups of people. What is missing is a broader examination of how people use the Internet to seek help for justice problems. The early research has laid the groundwork: More people are going online to seek help, and there are more sites, tools, and apps being built to serve them. But what do we actually know about the supply and demand of legal help online?

Public health data-driven research can provide legal researchers with models for evaluating the Internet's use for access to a public good. The rise of digital epidemiology, infoveillance, and infodemiology[31] in the public health field offers lessons for legal researchers exploring how people are seeking and finding help for justice problems, on a population level. Digital epidemiology and infoveillance involve drawing upon digital sources of data where people share information about

---

[30] Denvir, *What Is the Net Worth?*
[31] These three terms are used by various research groups, but often connote the same essential type of research: harnessing digital datasets, internet behavior, and other online resources to track diseases, spot health assistance-seeking, and identifying other trends of interest to public health practitioners.

themselves, like on search engines, social media sites, and other platforms. This data can then be analyzed through techniques like natural language processing to identify patterns, intents, and possible problems. Digital epidemiology has been used to analyze internet datasets to identify possible influenza outbreaks based on patterns of user searches, mental health risks based on online forum posts, and risk of being infected with HIV based on tweets.[32] These techniques have identified patterns of people's medical needs, their preferences for assistance, and the coming outbreak of a crisis – though they may be problematic if relied upon as the sole evidence for where to deploy resources or make policy.[33]

Legal researchers might employ techniques akin to digital epidemiology in order to establish broader, population-level understandings of access to justice on the Internet. Returning to the core research questions introduced previously, but with a richer sense of the state of the field, new research might ask:

1. *What is the quantity of demand and supply for legal help on the Internet?* What is the volume of assistance being sought out? Does the supply match the demand? Are there "online legal help deserts," with minimal resources for certain issue areas? These can help make better agendas of where resources should be spent in creating more online help.

2. *What is the quality of the supply of legal help, and the matching of people to this help?* Are the websites and tools online providing resources that people want to use, are able to use, and that get them to good outcomes? And are intermediary platforms directing people to higher-quality help, or to lower-quality help? Research around quality of supply and quality of intermediary's matching can help set better policy about what kinds of online tools should be funded, and what internet platforms like search engines and social media ought to prioritize in their algorithms.

3. *Are there harms occurring when people seek help on the Internet?* Are people finding malicious or unintentional misinformation about their legal options, processes, and outcomes online? This may be because of their own misunderstanding of jurisdiction, their reliance on anecdotal advice, frauds and scams, or intentional misinformation campaigns. As with public health concerns over misinformation and over harms of

---

[32] *See, e.g.*, Han Chin Shing et al., *Expert, Crowdsourced, and Machine Assessment of Suicide Risk via Online Postings*, 5 Proc. Workshop on Computational Linguistics & Clinical Psych.: From Keyboard to Clinic 25 (2018).

[33] Google Trends data indices on common searches was trumpeted as an effective way to identify flu outbreaks; in 2013 studies revealed that its ability to track the flu did not correspond to the official public health agency's (the CDC) data – in part because of news reports about the flu leading the search engine to overestimate people actually experiencing symptoms. See Declan Butler, *When Google Got Flu Wrong*, 494 Nature 155 (2013). Researchers acknowledge that internet-based surveillance techniques (based on Google Search query data, Twitter posts, or self-reporting on crowd intelligence sites) had substantial limits and should not be the main source of policy making around services or resources for health.

medical advice being given over the Internet, legal practitioners and policy makers could benefit from more research on whether and how people are finding misinformation about their justice problems online, and what harms these may cause. This could lead to more intentional strategies by service providers, policy makers, and internet platforms to address misinformation and support quality sources of assistance.

This chapter, as already noted, tackles the first of these questions, about the quantity of supply and demand for legal help online. It provides initial data sources, techniques, and findings that can offer some insight into how the Internet is functioning in people's access to justice.

9.3 WHAT IS THE QUANTITY OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR LEGAL HELP ONLINE?

How many people are coming to the Internet to find help for their justice problems? And how many resources are there to assist them with these problems? There is no perfect source of data on the demand or the supply for legal help on the Internet. But there are surveys and proxy data sources that can help us to estimate what is happening online. This section presents the data sources and methods to quantify the supply and demand of legal help online: the sites that are supplying help (either as intermediaries or as providers of legal help) and the numbers of people that are seeking help.

The Internet has billions of websites.[34] How many of these count as "supplying" legal help for people seeking help for justice problems? First, we must distinguish between two types of help websites: intermediaries and providers. Intermediary sites let people express their problem or story, and then discover links, people, or answers to their problem. Some of the primary legal help intermediary platforms in the US are search engines, social media platforms, and forums. Providers' sites, on the other hand, provide content for a person to deal with their justice problem (rather than just referrals to other sites).

9.3.1 Intermediary Platforms Used for Justice Problem-Solving

The main intermediaries for justice problems are likely to be the same as general problem-solving intermediaries: search engines, voice assistants, and social media platforms.

Search engines are platforms in which people present words, phrases, or sentences for the intermediary to then interpret and respond with sites (or direct

---

[34] Martin Armstrong, *How Many Websites Are There?* STATISTA (Aug. 6, 2021), www-statista-com .stanford.idm.oclc.org/chart/19058/number-of-websites-online/.

answers). Google Search is by far the most widely used search engine. For search engines from US desktop computers in 2021, Google received 86.64 percent of search queries, Microsoft's Bing search engine had 6.79 percent, and Yahoo, 2.75.[35] For mobile searches, the companies are in a similar order – but with Google with an even higher share. Of mobile searches in the US in 2021, Google has 93.4 percent market share, Yahoo has 2.02, Bing has 1.87, and DuckDuckGo has 2.3.[36]

Voice assistants, in the form of mobile phone–smart device assistant or voice-enabled speakers, are another rising type of intermediary. Voice assistants are increasingly used, in particular on one's smartphone, car, tablet, television, or computer. Over 63 percent of Americans used a voice assistant as of 2020, and 51 percent use a voice assistant on their smartphone.[37] In 2020, an estimated 128 million US residents used a voice assistant at least once a month.[38] Searching the Internet is the most frequent use cases for voice assistants.[39] For voice assistants specifically in home speakers, Amazon's Alexa brand (as of 2021, relying primarily on the Bing search engine) is the leading voice-enabled speaker with 69.7 percent of US market share in 2020, with Google's Home devices (using Google Search) at 31.7 percent, and others at 18.4 percent.[40]

Social media platforms are another key intermediary. The most popular platforms among US adults as of 2021 were YouTube (81 percent use it), Facebook (69 percent), Instagram (40 percent), Pinterest (31 percent), LinkedIn (28 percent), Snapchat (25 percent), Twitter (23 percent), WhatsApp (23 percent), TikTok (21 percent), Reddit (18 percent), and Nextdoor (13 percent).[41]

---

[35] Joseph Johnson, *Worldwide Desktop Market Share of Leading Search Engines from January 2010 to September 2021*, STATISTA (Mar. 1, 2022), https://www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/statistics/216573/worldwide-market-share-of-search-engines/.

[36] Joseph Johnson, *U.S. Mobile Search Share 2021*, STATISTA (Mar. 1, 2022), https://www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/statistics/511358/market-share-mobile-search-usa/.

[37] Lionel Sujay Vailshery, *Share of Voice Assistant Users in the U.S. 2020 by Device*, STATISTA (Mar. 15, 2022), https://www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/statistics/1171363/share-of-voice-assistant-users-in-the-us-by-device/; NAT'L PUB. MEDIA, THE SMART AUDIO REPORT (2020), https://www.nationalpublicmedia.com/insights/reports/smart-audio-report/#download.

[38] Shanhong Liu, *Number of Voice Assistant Users in the United States, 2017–2022*, STATISTA (Mar. 18, 2022), www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/statistics/1029573/us-voice-assistant-users/.

[39] Alexander Kunst, *Usage of Google Assistant's Functions in the U.S. 2019*, STATISTA (Nov. 26, 2019), www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/forecasts/1038131/usage-of-google-assistant-s-functions-in-the-us; Nicolas Loose, *Virtual Assistants in the U.S., 2019*, STATISTA (Feb. 2019), https://www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/study/60113/virtual-assistants-in-the-us/.

[40] Federica Laricchia, *Voice-Enabled Speaker User Share by Brand in the United States, 2017–2021*, STATISTA (Feb. 14, 2022), https://www-statista-com.stanford.idm.oclc.org/statistics/720066/us-voice-enabled-speaker-user-share/.

[41] Brooke Auxier & Monica Anderson, *Social Media Use in 2021*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Apr. 7, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/.

We can assume that the general popularity of these search engines, voice assistants, and social media sites carries over to justice problem help-seeking. These intermediaries provide opportunities for research on internet problem solving. Just like in public health research, we can use them to observe what people are searching for, how they frame their problems, what they click on, and how they behave. That said, research using these intermediaries is difficult, because they do not make their data about users' searches, clicks, and other behavior open to researchers.

9.3.2 *Provider Websites That Offer Legal Help*

Apart from these intermediaries of online legal help, there are the provider websites, which offer assistance to people seeking help on a justice problem. Within the provider group, there is another division, between commercial providers and public interest providers. Commercial providers have a for-profit business model and are giving help, information, and tools in order to either upsell the user to other services or to get advertisement or referral fees from them. Public interest providers have a nonprofit business model and are trying to get assistance to the user in order to improve their outcomes. Some may aim to generate revenue through paid services, but most public interest sites are funded through grants or government funds.

9.3.3 *Commercial Legal Help Supply*

I surveyed the Internet for commercial websites that offered legal assistance for civil justice problems and identified over seventy sites that have over approximately 5,000 visitors per month. Some of the most prominent general commercial legal help websites are Nolo.com, Avvo.com, Findlaw.com, Legalmatch.com, AllLaw.com, and LawShelf.com. These sites offer resources for a wide variety of legal issue areas.

There is another layer down of commercial legal help suppliers: those that focus on particular areas of legal needs. Some focus on creating legal documents for estate planning, businesses, and contracts.[42] Other providers aim exclusively at business formation legal needs.[43] Another cluster of commercial providers focuses on family law needs, like divorce and child custody.[44] There is another cluster around bankruptcy, debt, and credit repair problems,[45] another around disability benefits

---

[42] See examples of these sites at the full list of commercial legal help websites compiled at Stanford Legal Design Lab, *Commercial Legal Help Websites*, Legal Help Dashboard, https://legalhelpdashboard.org/websites/commercial-legal-help-websites/.

[43] *Id.* (such as ZenBusiness and Northwest Registered Agent within the business category).

[44] *Id.* (such as Its Over Easy or Custody Xchange in the family category).

[45] *Id.* (such as Debt.org, Debt.com, or Consolidatedcredit.org).

claims and navigating resources for people with special needs,[46] and another around personal injuries and torts.[47]

In addition to sites whose mission is exclusively around providing legal help, there are also commercial sites in other, nonlegal domains that try to attract users with justice problems. In this parallel commercial group, there are sites that offer financial literacy and other professional services, such as Nerdwallet.com, Credit.com, Creditcards.com, Consumerhelpcentral.com, Studentloanhero.com, or Angieslist. com. These sites' resources often overlap with legal help resources, especially for life problems that have both legal and financial dimensions, like debt collection, home-ownership, and landlord-tenant scenarios. The other parallel commercial group are news outlets. Sites like Usnews.com, Wusa9.com, WashingtonPost.com, and Cnbc. org offer articles that provide basic overviews of legal situations, with short articles aimed at giving general discussions of various life, legal, and financial problems.

I compiled a list of the most popular commercial legal websites, using search engine optimization (SEO) tools Ahrefs and Similarweb, which list the most popular websites for common keywords. By searching for sites that appear frequently for keywords around law, legal help, legal aid, legal answers, and related issues, I identified approximately seventy commercial legal help sites. This research focused on civil justice problems (so excluding criminal and immigration law keywords). Also excluded were commercial provider websites that appear to have fewer than 5,000 visits per month.

9.3.4 *Public Interest Legal Help Websites*

Apart from the commercial providers, there is a robust ecosystem of public interest legal help websites. They provide similar kinds of content as the commercial ones do articles, step-by-step guides, frequently asked questions, and form-filling tools. They also tend to have contact information for legal aid attorneys, free chat with law librarians, and other on-ramps to free services.

Unlike the commercial provider sites, public interest legal help websites are almost all at the state or local region level. It is notable that there is not a single national legal aid or public interest legal help portal that gives national guidance on civil justice problems. Rather, it has been state or local actors that have created legal help portals for their region, giving guides and contacts for people looking to address their justice problems.[48]

There are some national public interest websites around specific issue areas or demographic groups. For example, there are national public interest sites for sexual

---

[46] *Id.* (such as Disabilitysecrets.com or Specialneedsanswers.com).

[47] *Id.* (such as Forthepeople.com, Injuryclaimcoach.com, or EnJuris.com).

[48] For a full list of these statewide legal help portals, see LAW HELP INTERACTIVE, https://lawhelpinteractive.org/.

assault and domestic violence,[49] women's law issues,[50] landlord-tenant issues,[51] immigration issues,[52] and bankruptcy and debt issues.[53] There are also some national legal help websites that provide specific tools or resources, like a legal dictionaries and reference materials.[54]

I identified approximately 340 civil help websites that provided free information and tools to people in the fifty states, as well as DC and Puerto Rico. I did not include local bar associations, law library, or county court websites, because the majority of them do not have substantial self-help material (though this may change in the future, and these sites might be added into future research).

Most public interest legal websites operate at the state or regional level. Within each state, frequently there is a local ecosystem of four kinds of public interest legal help websites:

1. A *statewide legal help portal*, which provides an overview of civil justice guides, contacts, FAQs, and tools.
2. A *legal aid organizational website (or sites)*, which provides contact information, hotline numbers, clinic details, and a limited number of articles or guides on legal issues. (Some states have many regional legal aid groups, each with its own website, while others have a single main legal aid group serving the entire state.)
3. A *court self-help website*, which offers court-focused guides, tools, forms, and service hours to self-represented litigants who have an issue in civil, family, or traffic court. (Some local county courts may have their own self-help, but typically this is run by the statewide judicial council or administrative office of the courts.)
4. A *free online brief advice clinic* for low-income people, run through the ABA Free Legal Answers project. Not every state has a Free Legal Answers clinic, but more than thirty do.[55]

Some states, like California, Florida, and New Jersey, have many legal aid organizations and so have a large number of public interest websites. Other states, like Wyoming, North Dakota, Georgia, Wisconsin, or New Hampshire, do not have

---

[49] See examples like Rainn.org and TheHotlineorg at the master list of public interest legal help websites, Stanford Legal Design Lab, *Public Interest Legal Help Websites*, Legal Help Dashboard, https://legalhelpdashboard.org/websites/public-sites/.

[50] *Id.* (providing examples such as the National Women's Law Center and the Women's Law Project).

[51] *Id.* (providing examples such as Legal Help FAQ).

[52] *Id.* (providing examples such as Immigration Law Help and Immi).

[53] *Id.* (providing examples such as Upsolve.org, Incharge.org, and ConsumerFinance.gov's national resources).

[54] *Id.* (providing examples such as Cornell's Legal Information Institute and LegalDictionary).

[55] See the full list at American Bar Association Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service, *ABA Free Legal Answers*, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/probono_public_ser vice/projects_awards/free-legal-answers/.

statewide legal help portals and may only have one or two public interest legal help sites.

9.4 WHAT IS THE DEMAND FOR LEGAL HELP ONLINE?

There is no public data source that represents exactly how many people are searching for justice problems. Google and other search engines do not release their data on exact numbers of search volumes for different queries. But there are other proxies that make possible some estimates of how many people are seeking legal help online.

9.4.1 *Estimates of Demand from Legal Needs Surveys*

One way to estimate how many people might be coming online to find help is to look at estimations of how many people experience justice problems in the US. Legal needs surveys ask adults about how often they have experienced justice problems, like situations of wage theft, eviction, debt collection, bankruptcy, domestic violence, foreclosure, access to medical treatment, and the care and custody of children and dependent adults.[56] Sandefur's study of a representative sample of US adults in 2013 found that two-thirds of them experienced at least one civil justice problem in the past eighteen months, with the average number of justice problems being 2.1 problems in eighteen months. Of the two-thirds of adults who reported having a problem, they averaged 3.3 needs in eighteen months.[57]

These rates of justice problems allow us to estimate how much demand there might be for legal help. By using this estimated rate of each adult experiencing 2.1 problems in eighteen months, we can use states' adult populations to estimate how many people are experiencing justice problems in a month. This estimation is likely to overestimate the number of people coming to the Internet to seek help for a justice problem. Surveys have found that 16 percent of US adults take no action (including reaching out for assistance or searching for help) when they experience a justice problem.[58] Accordingly, we can assume that a significant proportion of adults with a justice problem, akin to this 16 percent figure, may not come online to find help. There are not yet surveys that document the rate at which people experiencing a justice problem go onto the Internet to seek help.

[56] Rebecca L. Sandefur, *Access to What?* 148 DAEDALUS 49 (2019).
[57] SANDEFUR, ACCESSING JUSTICE IN THE CONTEMPORARY USA.
[58] See the discussion about inaction after experiencing a justice problem at Rebecca L. Sandefur, *What We Know and Need to Know about the Legal Needs of the Public*, 67 S.C. LAW REV. 443, 448 (2016). Studies of torts and claim-making further explore why so few people are able to "name" their situation as legal, or why they decide against making a claim. DAVID M. ENGEL, THE MYTH OF THE LITIGIOUS SOCIETY (1st ed. 2016); Nora Freeman Engstrom, *ISO the Missing Plaintiff*, TORTS JOTWELL (Apr. 12, 2017), https://torts.jotwell.com/iso-the-missing-plaintiff/.

I calculated each state's expected number of justice problems per month, and the expected number of problems for which people seek help.[59] For example, we might assume that each month in California there are around 3,572,000 justice problems, and that people might take action on approximately 3 million of them. Or in Alabama, there may be around 445,000 problems per month, and people will seek help for around 374,000 problems. In total, we can assume that the whole US population has around 25 million acted-upon justice problems per month (with acted-upon meaning that the adult takes action to try to address it). These estimates provide a rough expectation of how many adults might be seeking help online.

Using these estimates of acted-upon justice problems per state, we can approximate if supply is matching demand. Are people in a state visiting legal aid, court, and public interest websites at the rate we may expect them to? Are there 3 million visits to California legal help websites each month – or is the number substantially higher or lower? How well is the supply of public interest websites matching the demand for legal help?

9.4.2 *Tracking Demand through Analytics and SEO Traffic Estimators*

Aside from estimates based on surveys, another strategy to measure demand is to count the visitors to legal help websites. There is a clear gap in this strategy: Not all people searching for help with a justice problem online will in fact find their way to a legal help website. Website visit counts will not capture demand from people who might have framed their online queries in terms that may have led them to other sites – or who looked at search results and decided not to click anything. Still, the visitor counts can help us see if the expected demand matches the actual demand, and if that matches the number of people using public interest sites.

Site analytics. Sites that have an analytics tool installed can track the numbers of people who come to visit, what search terms or other sites have referred them to this site, and what pages on the site they visit. These analytics numbers are useful because they are closest to being exact counts of visitors. They are not completely accurate. Often they will undercount visitors, because of the use of ad blockers, cookie blockers, and JavaScript disablers by visitors. When a person has these blockers in place on their browser, they can prevent Google Analytics from tracking their behavior – and thus stop the site from registering their visit. Researchers can use Analytics, from websites' administrators that have given them access or reports to their sites. These numbers will likely underestimate actual visits.

SEO platforms have developed tools to estimate the traffic to websites, even without access to websites' administrative backends. These SEO research platforms do not offer exact numbers of how many visitors come to a specific website in a

---

[59] Stanford Legal Design Lab, *Justice Problem Estimates per State*, Legal Help Dashboard, https://legalhelpdashboard.org/rank/#need.

month. But they provide useful estimations of how many visitors are coming from search engines to a site.[60]

SEO traffic estimator by search keywords. One type of SEO traffic estimation tool, like that from provider Ahrefs, makes these estimates by tracking billions of keywords that people tend to search for, and then seeing how many people are searching for them each month, which sites appear for them, and which sites people click on.[61] This permits estimates of the average monthly visitors coming from search engines to a given site. The SEO traffic estimation tools will most often underestimate actual visitors to a website because of several inbuilt constraints. First, some SEO tools (like Ahrefs) track only visitors who are coming from search engines, and not from other pathways (like those directly typing in the website URL or coming from another non-search website). Second, they do not track every single keyword (or search query) that a person might type into a search engine. Though a tool like Ahrefs Traffic Estimator follows over 6.1 billion keywords, visitors might use "long-tail" searches (like, "show me a legal aid group that can help me with an eviction notice please Google") that it does not track.

SEO traffic estimator by behavior tracking. Another SEO estimation tool, Similarweb, takes a different approach. It gathers data about users' online activities from internet service providers, a panel of monitored devices, and shared web analytics accounts.[62] They use their behavioral tracking data, analytics access, and other public data sources to estimate how many people are visiting a given website. Other SEO tools have found Similarweb to provide the most accurate estimates of total visitors to a site, though they tend to overestimate visitors.[63]

To assess which estimation tool might be useful, I used a website that I maintain with my team at Stanford Legal Design Lab. In May 2020, our team launched a national non-profit website for housing law information, Legal Help FAQ. We have Google Analytics tracking visitors to the website and keeping counts of users and visits. According to Google Analytics, in the month of January 2021, the site had 13,520 users and 30,623 page views. Similarweb estimated that the site had 18,126 users and 31,877 visits. They overestimated visitors by 34 percent (4,606 users), and visits by 4 percent (1,254 visits). Ahref estimated total traffic from Google Search to LegalHelpFAQ to be 42 visitors in January 2021. Google Analytics indicated that we had 4,385 visitors from Google Search in January 2021. This was a substantial

---

[60] See an overview of these SEO research tools for website traffic estimation at Tyler Horvath, *8 Most Accurate Website Traffic Estimators*, Ninja Reps., https://www.ninjareports.com/website-traffic-estimators/.

[61] See a full explanation of how Ahrefs' search traffic estimation works at *What Is Organic Traffic in Ahrefs and How Do We Calculate It?* Ahrefs Help Ctr., https://help.ahrefs.com/en/articles/1863206-what-is-organic-traffic-in-ahrefs-and-how-do-we-calculate-it.

[62] See Similarweb's data strategy for estimating web traffic at *How We Measure the Digital World*, SimilarWeb, https://www.Similarweb.com/corp/ourdata/.

[63] Joshua Hardwick, *Find Out How Much Traffic a Website Gets: 3 Ways Compared*, Ahrefs Blog (Aug. 16, 2018), https://ahrefs.com/blog/website-traffic/.

TABLE 9.1 *Comparison of different estimations of visitors to legal help websites*

Site	Google Analytics reported visitors per month (likely to underestimate)	Similarweb estimation of visits per month (likely to overestimate)	Difference between site Analytics and Similarweb's estimate
Legalhelpfaq. org	13,520	18,126	34 percent over, by 4,606
Wisconsin State Law Library	30,100	36,461	21 percent over, by 6,361
Michigan Legal Help	180,049	166,689	7 percent under, by 13,360
Texas Law Help	318,232	378,050	18 percent over by 59,818

underestimation of search traffic to our site, with a difference of 4,343 visitors. I then proceeded to measure Similarweb's estimates against other sites, whose administrators shared their Google Analytics reports with me (see Table 9.1).

Google Analytics tends to underestimate the number of visitors, though it is not clear by how much. Similarweb seems to overestimate the number of users visiting the site, differing from the Analytics by as much as 34 percent. Similarweb's numbers are substantially closer to the Analytics' numbers than the Ahrefs tool.

With those caveats on the tools' limitations to produce exact numbers, Similarweb does provide us with rough estimates of most legal help websites' traffic. Its ballpark estimates should not be relied upon for exact measures, but they can be approximate counts to help service providers and policy makers compare how different kinds of sites are performing and how they change over time.

9.4.3 *Legal Help Site Visits as Proxy for Demand*

By looking at rough estimates of visits to various types of legal help websites, we can see what kinds of justice problem-solving behavior is happening online. These numbers are estimates from Similarweb, so they may overestimate actual visitors. They are also for a single month, January 2021, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so may be different than a typical month (without a public health emergency) (see Table 9.2).

These monthly estimates of visits to commercial legal help websites indicate that tens of millions of people come online to seek assistance and information about the law each month. Compared to our earlier estimate from legal need surveys that the US adult population has approximately 25 million justice problems per month, the visits to commercial websites almost double this estimate. This high number of visits may include "multiple visit" scenarios, in which a person with a single justice

TABLE 9.2 *Estimated visitors to commercial legal help websites in a month*

Type of commercial legal help website	Estimated monthly number of visits to this site in Jan. 2021, from Similarweb
All types of commercial legal help sites	50,909,394
General legal help websites	31,539,004
Legal forms sites	7,702,137
Immigration	3,312,554
Public benefits sites	2,050,050
Family law websites	1,857,023
Small business sites	1,765,107
Debt, credit, and bankruptcy sites	1,439,497
Personal injury sites	1,244,022

problem visits more than one website in order to find assistance. These website visits may also include visits from people outside the US, who found the resource online. Some visits may also come from legal professionals or researchers, using these websites in their own work. We cannot take each visit to a website as indication of a unique justice problem; these numbers of website visits are not direct proxies for legal need counts.

These caveats aside, this estimated traffic of over 50 million visits to US commercial legal help sites in one month strongly suggests that there is a substantial demand for legal information and assistance online. This survey also shows that there are active ecosystems of websites supplying assistance for certain legal issue areas, including immigration, public benefits and disabilities, family law, small business, bankruptcy, and personal injury.

9.4.4 *Visits to Public Interest Legal Help Websites*

As mentioned earlier, most public interest sites are local rather than national. There are approximately twenty public interest national sites, most of which focus on particular legal issues or provide national coverage with legal dictionaries or sets of forms.[64] The total estimated number of visitors in January 2021 to only the national public interest websites was around 6,290,000 visitors.

This 6.2 million visitor count must be adjusted downward, though 4.49 million of those visitors were to Cornell's Legal Information Institute (LII), which provides a legal dictionary and open access to legislation and other laws. Many users of LII are

---

[64] See this the full list of US public interest legal help websites at Stanford Legal Design Lab, *Public Interest Legal Help Websites*, LEGAL HELP DASHBOARD, https://legalhelpdashboard.org/websites/#public.

TABLE 9.3 *Estimated visitors to national public interest legal help websites in a month*

Type of national public interest legal help website	Estimated monthly number of visits to this site in Jan. 2021, from Similarweb
All types of national public interest legal help sites	6,291,274 (or 1,798,274 without LII)
General legal help websites	4,800,403 (of which, 4,493,000 to LII)
Debt and bankruptcy	569,366
Domestic violence	444,591
Women's law	388,478
Immigration	56,559
Housing	31,877

legal professionals and students using its legal reference resources. It's impossible to discern how many of LII's 4.49 million visitors are legal professionals versus people seeking help on their justice problem. The monthly number of laypersons seeking help on the national public interest legal sites likely lies between 1.79 and 6.29 million (see Table 9.3).

The estimated traffic to national public interest sites is substantially lower than that to national commercial help sites, by at least 44 million visits per month. The coverage of issues is also quite different. National public interest websites focus more on debt, domestic violence, and women's law issues, and less so on family law, small business, immigration, public benefits, or housing. In some cases, such as family, benefits, and housing, the shortfall is likely because regional public interest sites are expected to serve this need. But the lack of a national public interest hub for these issues is noticeable, particularly given apparent high demand for these issues.

How do local public interest legal help websites (for instance, those of a local legal aid group or court self-help center) fare, in terms of estimated monthly traffic? Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure most courts' self-help sites, because of the nature of their websites. Most court help pages are located as a subpage of the main court website (like https://www.azcourts.gov/selfservicecenter or https://mdcourts.gov/legalhelp). This prevents estimation of their traffic, because the Similarweb estimation tool works on only the main domain and not the subpages. I was also unable to estimate many legal aid sites' visitors, because they apparently have fewer than 5,000 visits per month, and the Similarweb estimation tool could not reliably predict their visit count.

These limits result in a restricted measure of local public interest site visits. I ran visitor estimations for each state's statewide legal help portal. Not every state has a dedicated "Law Help" portal. In some cases, such as Delaware or Wisconsin, it is a legal aid group's site that functions as a de facto statewide resource. But most of the states do have something akin to Alaska Law Help, Law Help Hawaii, or

TABLE 9.4 *Estimated visitors to statewide legal help portals, including most highly visited sites*

Statewide legal help portal	Estimated monthly number of visits to this site in Jan. 2021, from Similarweb
All statewide legal help portals	3,453,921
Texas Law Help	578,563
Massachusetts Legal Help	424,324
Illinois Legal Aid Online	369,715
Connecticut Law Help	312,095
Michigan Legal Help	248,960
Washington Law Help	218,663
LSNJLaw	174,994
The People's Law Library of Maryland	152,816
Pennsylvania Law Help	100,665
Law Help New York	80,832
Legal Aid Oklahoma	77,806
Arizona Law Help	71,560

Massachusetts Legal Help. The estimated visitor counts to these statewide law-help portals is a first attempt to measure people's visits to local public interest sites.

The total estimated visitors to the statewide legal help portals were approximately 3,454,000 per month. Nine of the portals had over 100,000 estimated visitors per month, mostly from high-population states like Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois. But the numbers of visitors did not necessarily correspond to population numbers or projected levels of justice problems (see Table 9.4).

9.5 DISCUSSION OF ONLINE LEGAL HELP TRENDS

When we compare the expected number of justice problems in each state to the visits to the statewide legal help portal, some sites have visitor numbers that are a much higher proportion of the estimated demand than others. For example, Connecticut's portal visitor estimates reach almost 95 percent of the estimated justice problems occurring in its adult population. For Massachusetts, this percentage is around 65 percent, Illinois is around 32 percent, and Washington at 31 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, the statewide legal help portals of California, Florida, and North Carolina seem to be getting visits for only around 2 percent of estimated problems in the state (see Table 9.5).[65]

The high proportion of visits to portals in Connecticut and Massachusetts may not mean that nearly every person in these states who experiences a justice problem

[65] See the full list of portals' estimated traffic and percentages of expected problems to visits at Stanford Legal Design Lab, *Rankings of Legal Help Websites*, LEGAL HELP DASHBOARD, https://legalhelpdashboard.org/rank/.

TABLE 9.5 *Proportion of estimated acted-upon justice problems to statewide portal visits*

Jurisdiction	Expected number of acted-upon justice problems per month	Estimated visits on state legal help portal for this jurisdiction per month	Difference between estimated problems + web visits	Proportion of expected problems showing up as portal visits
Connecticut	331,082	312,095	−18,987	0.9426516694
Massachusetts	646,299	424,324	−221,975	0.6565444167
Illinois	1,149,627	369,715	−779,912	0.3215956132
Washington	694,380	218,663	−475,717	0.3149039431
Maryland	549,616	152,816	−396,800	0.2780413962
Michigan	915,008	248,960	−666,048	0.2720850528

is coming online and finding their statewide public interest resource. These portal websites may have content and technical strategies that attract visitors from outside their jurisdiction. Their relatively high number of visits does indicate that these states are effective at making public legal help accessible and discoverable online.

9.5.1 *State Portals as an Underdeveloped Resource*

For those states whose portals get relatively few visits, this may be because there is another public interest site in their jurisdiction that has a high-traffic site. For example, in California the statewide legal help portal gets far fewer visitors than the court's statewide Self-Help center website. In this state (unlike most others), the state court is the leader in online legal help.

Still, the estimates of monthly visitors to public interest legal help websites show that there is a broad section of the public that is not finding these free, non-profit resources when they are searching for their justice problems online. The estimated visitors to commercial websites indicate that there are tens of millions of people seeking information on legal topics on the Internet each month. A handful of public interest websites have been able to attract relatively high proportions of their potential audience. But most state portals seem to be getting visits from fewer than 20 percent of people in their state experiencing justice problems.

These findings indicate a gap that policy makers and service providers must prioritize. The supply of public interest legal help sites might be improved with more content, improved technical and design updates, and outreach strategies. The sites may be able to reach more of the people seeking legal help online if they improve their performance so that more people can find them, and more internet intermediaries are likely to place them high on search results.

How does a site improve its offerings and placement by intermediaries? One answer is investment in better content that matches what people are searching for

and websites that engage visitors so that they do not click away quickly. It also involves improving the technical and design performance of the sites, so that search engines favor them. More work needs to be done with public interest sites to master these SEO techniques and content development work that many of the commercial sites have done, in order to engage the millions of people coming onto the Internet in search of help.

9.5.2 *Technology Companies' Role in Directing People to Commercial or Public Interest Sites*

Another area of policy concern is the dominance of commercial legal help websites in visitor patterns over public interest websites. To be sure, commercial legal help websites are not inherently bad. For-profit entities have high-powered incentives to offer user-friendly designs, responsive technology, and content and services that match the needs of the public. Their business models, however, tend to steer people away from free legal assistance and give only basic beginning information about a legal issue rather than a full protocol of steps and process.

A standard approach is to offer short descriptive articles about a problem like eviction or debt collection, rather than a full step-by-step guide like those that might be found at public interest websites.[66] One type of commercial model relies on attracting people to click on the site, in order to show them advertisements. These sites present short, generic articles framed around FAQs like "How Do I Stop an Eviction?" which give people descriptions about the law and options of what they can do while showing multiple advertisements for nonlegal content. These generic articles do not provide information about jurisdiction, defenses, laws, or free services a person can use.[67] Another for-profit model provides short summaries of substantial, local legal information for free, but then with a paywall around actionable help. For example, on Nolo's website about non-payment of rent and eviction, the site provides a summary of local legal requirements and defenses. If a visitor wants to understand how to make use of these laws, the site advertises that they should buy the website's books, forms, and templates, or that they should hire a lawyer affiliated

---

[66] See for example the public interest court site on evictions in California, *The Eviction Process for Tenants*, CAL. CT. SELF-HELP GUIDE, https://www.courts.ca.gov/27798.htm, which provides all the details, forms, timelines, and rules for tenants to defend themselves, versus the commercial Nolo site, *How Evictions Work: What Renters Need to Know*, NOLO, https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/evictions-renters-tenants-rights-29824.html, which provides a short summary before recommending the purchase of a book or hiring of a lawyer through a referral service.

[67] For example, see the SFGate article "How to Catch Up on Rent So You're Not Evicted" that provides a five-step set of advice, but without mention of legal aid, mediators, emergency rent programs, or other laws or services that can help people. Jenna Marie, *How to Catch Up on Rent So You're Not Evicted*, SFGATE, https://homeguides.sfgate.com/catch-up-rent-not-evicted-42577.html.

with the site.[68] By contrast, public interest sites tend to give visitors a menu of free assistance, including do-it-yourself guides, form-filling tools, free legal navigators, legal aid representation, and holistic social services assistance.

Commercial websites may be getting so much traffic vis-à-vis public interest ones because they have deployed more search engine optimization strategies: producing more content that matches people's search keywords, creating sites that people stay on for longer amounts of times, having technically capable websites, and taking other actions that make it more likely for Google and other search engines to place them higher on search results pages. Public interest organizations may, as mentioned before, improve the content and technical performance of their sites to be more competitive.

Still another factor that shapes comparative use rates is the search engine companies' policies themselves. As with other sectors, the search engine companies could alter their ranking algorithm to prioritize court, legal aid, and other public interest legal help providers above commercial providers. Google, for example, has altered how it responds to its users' searches around health problems or voting and elections to provide information that is sourced from vetted public interest actors rather than commercial websites. In 2015, Google partnered with the Mayo Clinic and medical doctors hired by their company to curate medical knowledge panels to show in response to people's health searches.[69] In 2016, Google worked with a university and foundation-supported Voting Information Project to present knowledge panels on where to vote, requirements to vote, and who is on the ballot in local elections.[70] Could such an initiative be possible for users' queries around evictions, foreclosures, wage theft, divorce, custody, debt collections, and domestic violence protection? Technology companies play a substantial intermediary role, directing people to resources that can answer their questions and conferring authority to those that place high in their search results. Public interest organizations may partner with these search engine intermediaries to create knowledge panels and search rank algorithms that convey key local legal help information to people searching online that would appear before the normal search results from a mix of commercial and public interest providers.

More thinking remains to be done on how best to harness the capacities, resources, and profit-seeking motivation of the commercial sector alongside the

---

[68] An example is a California eviction help page from Nolo. Beth Dillman, *Eviction Notices for Nonpayment of Rent in California*, Nolo, https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/eviction-notices-nonpayment-rent-california.html.

[69] *See* Prem Ramaswami, *A Remedy for Your Health-Related Questions: Health Info in the Knowledge Graph*, Google: Keyword Blog (Feb. 10, 2015), https://blog.google/products/search/health-info-knowledge-graph/.

[70] *E.g., VIP Projects*, Voting Info. Project, https://www.votinginfoproject.org/projects; Shashi Thakur, *Google and YouTube Can Help Keep You Informed on Election Day*, Google: The Keyword Blog (Nov. 7, 2016), https://blog.google/products/search/google-and-youtube-can-help-keep-you-informed-election-day/.

public-interest orientation and ethical approach of non-profit and legal aid groups, whether public or private. The empirical analysis presented above aims to spur some of that thinking.

9.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter raises many questions for future research about the role of the Internet in access to justice. Is it an effective on-ramp into the justice system for people who come online to find help? Or is it confusing, misleading, or harmful – possibly directing people to incorrect or unhelpful resources, or overwhelming them so that they disengage, or offering them too-limited resources that don't empower them to take action to resolve a problem?

Future research can build off the initial data collection, methods, and analysis in this chapter. The documentation of the legal supply – the intermediaries, commercial providers, and non-profit providers – can be built upon, with greater evaluation of their traffic, their quality, and people's outcomes when using different kinds of online sites. The initial estimates of demand for online legal help might be refined in future work, with better information about the rates at which people go online for justice problems and the rate of different kinds of legal issues.

This chapter was not able to tackle many other important questions about the Internet's role in access to justice. In particular, *what is the quality of the supply of legal help online?* Are people able to discover the highest quality help, or are they being directed toward lower-quality or incorrect help by intermediaries? This type of quality evaluation can be done through a standardized scorecard of legal help sites, building off of earlier research on user preferences and effectiveness of legal technology. Building off of Sandefur, Hagan, and Denvir's earlier assessments of legal help tools' quality, some key measurements of quality are: (1) *content quality* (accuracy, relevancy, and actionability); (2) *human-centered design* (accessibility, amount of administrative burden, and engagement of user); (3) *technical performance* (speed, lack of bugs, responsiveness); and (4) *discoverability* (search engine placement, social media referrals, backlinks to trustworthy sources).

In addition, legal researchers can build from public health researchers' digital epidemiology and infoveillance techniques *to track legal needs through search engines and social media data sources.* Researchers could pool legal aid groups' Google Analytics, or use SEO traffic estimators, along with Google Trends and other intermediaries' APIs in order to track people's online expressions of justice problems and legal needs longitudinally. This research on legal needs can provide useful population-level knowledge about what kinds of justice problems people are experiencing, what seasonal patterns exist, and what outbreaks of needs may necessitate new emergency services or outreach.

The final priority area going forward should be *documenting and measuring harms* people may be experiencing when seeking assistance online. Are there

situations akin to antivaccine misinformation in law? How often are search engines directing people to legal help resources from the wrong jurisdiction, leading people to rely on incorrect law, file incorrect forms, or use a defense they don't actually have?

Finally, in addition to more research-focused work, policy makers and justice stakeholders should focus on online strategies to address the justice gap. There are two main avenues. First are efforts to increase the prominence of public interest legal help online. This work could aim to reform existing state help portals, legal aid websites, and free tools, to have content that better matches people's searches, design that is more user-friendly, and technology that is more responsive and fast-loading. All of these factors can increase public interest websites' prominence in search results and numbers of visitors. The second reform avenue is for court and legal aid leaders to engage technology companies to change how search algorithms treat people's searches for justice problems. There is the potential for a public-private partnership, to develop more reliable, quality content for Google, Siri, and other search engines to feature when someone goes online to search "help I'm being evicted" or "how do I get a restraining order?" The Internet holds great promise in developing people's awareness of their rights and their capability to take action on justice problems, but there is still substantial work to be done to deliver on this potential.