

Bridging the Map

The Geography of Legal Need and Aid in Arkansas

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ARKANSAS POLICY PROGRAM
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This project was carried out under the direction of Dr. Jay Barth, Bill and Connie Bowen Odyssey Professor, in collaboration with Arkansas Access to Justice.

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Executive Summary

Hundreds of thousands of Arkansans are being underserved by the state's civil justice system as the result, in significant part, of a set of serious geographic imbalances in the distribution of legal aid and need in Arkansas. This report uses a variety of statistical data to conduct an analysis of the geography of civil legal aid and need in the state.

Rural Arkansans suffer the most from this imbalance. While a significant portion of Arkansas's population lives in rural areas, only a small fraction of Arkansas's attorneys practice there. This, combined with the fact that Arkansas has the lowest per capita number of attorneys in the country, means that rural Arkansans have few places to turn when faced with legal problems. Indeed, for a majority of Arkansas's counties, there is less than one attorney per thousand residents.

Were it true that rural Arkansans had fewer legal problems than their urban counterparts, this imbalance might not be a crisis. However, the available data suggests that many areas in rural Arkansas, particularly the mid-to-south Delta, have a significantly greater degree of per capita legal need than the rest of the state. Phillips County, for example, has twice the normalized case filing rate for domestic relations, juvenile and civil cases than the statewide median county.

For low-income rural Arkansans, this problem is doubly serious. Most low-income Arkansans cannot afford to hire an attorney when faced with a civil legal problem, and are forced to turn to one of

Arkansas's two civil legal aid providers. However, those providers are seriously underfunded, and as a result, are only able to meet the needs of a small fraction of those eligible for aid. Furthermore, the data suggests that there are also geographic imbalances in the availability of civil legal aid, as northeastern Arkansas receives a substantially greater degree of legal aid service than the rest of the state. For example, in the past year, Sharp County had six times the normalized number of closed legal aid cases than the statewide median county.¹

Fixing these geographic disparities will require a sustained commitment to expanding the availability of legal help in underserved parts of the state. While this report is primarily concerned with evaluating the scope of these geographic disparities, not with proposing policies to fix them, there are policy options that policymakers can choose to pursue to bridge the map and connect Arkansans in underserved areas to the legal help they need.

Section 1-Mapping Legal Need Across Arkansas

The American system of justice is complex. In many circumstances the ordinary person cannot effectively navigate it without help. Theoretically, that help is supposed to take the form of a lawyer, a skilled licensed professional with years of training who represents their client in the court system. However, a variety of obstacles frequently block ordinary people, both across America and Arkansas, from being able to get the legal help they need to get justice. This section of the report will chart, in broad terms, the obstacles that prevent many Arkansans from getting the help they need, and that, as a result, create a need for expanded legal help.

Perhaps the simplest obstacle blocking Arkansans from getting legal help is the fact that in much of the state, there are remarkably few lawyers. A recent nationwide study of the number of attorneys per capita in each state by the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Civility estimated that Arkansas has some 2.01 licensed attorneys per thousand people—the lowest per capita number of attorneys of any state in the country. Yet that estimate actually significantly overstates the availability of civil legal services in Arkansas. IOLTA data suggests that only half of the attorneys currently actively licensed to practice law actually work in private practice.² Furthermore, as Figures 1 and 2 show, the distribution of attorneys in private practice across the state is far from balanced, even when normalized by population. Fifty-six percent of the attorneys in private practice in Arkansas live in Pulaski, Washington and Benton Counties. In a majority of Arkansas counties, there is less than one attorney in private practice per thousand residents. What those statistics mean is that rural Arkansans have few places to turn when faced with problems that require legal assistance, like abuse, discrimination or financial struggle.

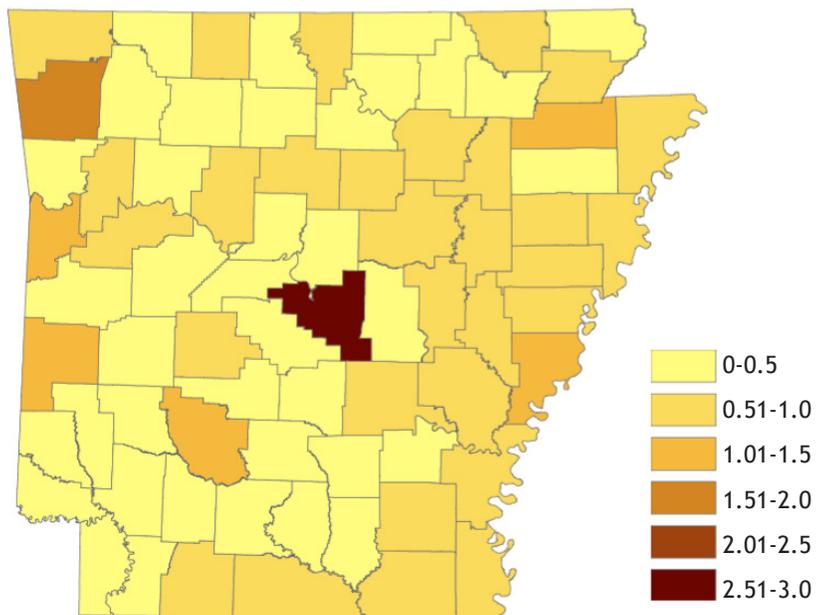
¹ This report uses the phrase *normalized filing rate* to refer to the number of cases filed in 2014 in a given county divided by that county's population. The phrase *normalized case closure rate* has the same meaning, except the numerator in that ratio is closed legal aid cases in 2014. This measure is designed to account for population differences between counties.

² The data for this section of the report was provided by Arkansas Access to Justice, and consolidated into a usable format as part of Professor Lisa Pruitt's research (cited elsewhere in this report) regarding attorney undersupply in rural Arkansas.

Figure 1: Dot Density Map of Attorneys in Private Practice in 2013



Figure 2: Attorneys in Private Practice per 1,000 County Residents



The relative absence of attorneys in rural Arkansas may exacerbate some of the unique challenges faced by people in rural areas seeking justice. Research suggests that one of the distinctive elements of rural life, the fact that most community members know most other members of the community, may also deter people in rural areas from seeking help from the courts, particularly for issues like abuse (Pruitt and Showman 2014). Similarly, research suggests that the interconnectedness and small size of rural communities may make it difficult for attorneys in rural areas to avoid representing, or litigating against, people to whom they are personally connected (Pruitt and Showman 2014). Attorneys in rural areas often face a significant backlash when they agree to represent clients in suits against established community institutions (Pruitt and Showman 2014). Furthermore, studies from across the country have established that rural areas are more likely to have incidents of serious domestic violence, labor violations, and housing issues related to home foreclosure (California Commission on Access to Justice 2010). Taken together, these facts are likely to make it difficult for rural Arkansans seeking legal help, and particularly for the kinds of cases in which they need it the most.

This geographic maldistribution of attorneys is getting worse. As Pruitt, McKinney and Calhoun discuss in a forthcoming article, the number of attorneys in private practice in Arkansas's most rural counties decreased by 25% between 2010 and 2014 (Pruitt, McKinney, and Calhoun 2016). The same study estimated that 26% of the attorneys in private practice in Arkansas's most rural counties are over the age of 65 (Pruitt, McKinney, and Calhoun 2016). These statistics suggest that the relative absence of attorneys in rural areas, already at near-crisis levels, will grow substantially worse in the near future.

The cost of hiring a lawyer is also a significant obstacle that prevents many Arkansans from getting the legal help they need. Legal needs studies have consistently shown that the vast majority of low-income Americans faced with legal problems are unable to get help from a lawyer, and that one of the primary factors preventing low-income Americans from getting the help they need is the cost, or the perceived cost, of legal services (Legal Services Corporation 2009). The cost of retaining an attorney for even a relatively simple case can easily stretch into many thousands of dollars, which is simply beyond the means of low-income Arkansans, and indeed, most middle-class Arkansans. Such challenges make it enormously difficult for the one-in-four Arkansans who live below 125% of the federal poverty line, the cutoff for eligibility for legal aid services, to obtain a lawyer and, by extension, to get fair treatment in the courts without help from legal aid.

In Arkansas, this income obstacle intersects with the challenges associated with rural access to justice. As Figure 3 shows, many of the poorest areas in the state are also rural. This creates a profound legal need challenge without an easy solution.

For those Arkansans who do not speak English, the challenge of finding legal help is even greater. Over the past few decades, Arkansas's immigrant population has grown dramatically, not only in urban areas like Fayetteville and Little Rock, but also in rural counties in the west like Hempstead and Sevier (Capps et al. 2013). As Arkansas's immigrant population has grown, so too has the population of people who have only limited English proficiency (LEP status). At present, Census data suggests that there are roughly 70,000 LEP status Spanish-speaking Arkansans, as well as several thousand LEP status Arkansans who speak some other language, including Marshallese (Census Bureau 2013). Though there is currently not available data regarding the poverty population of LEP Arkansans, research by the

Figure 3: Percentage of Population below 125% of Poverty

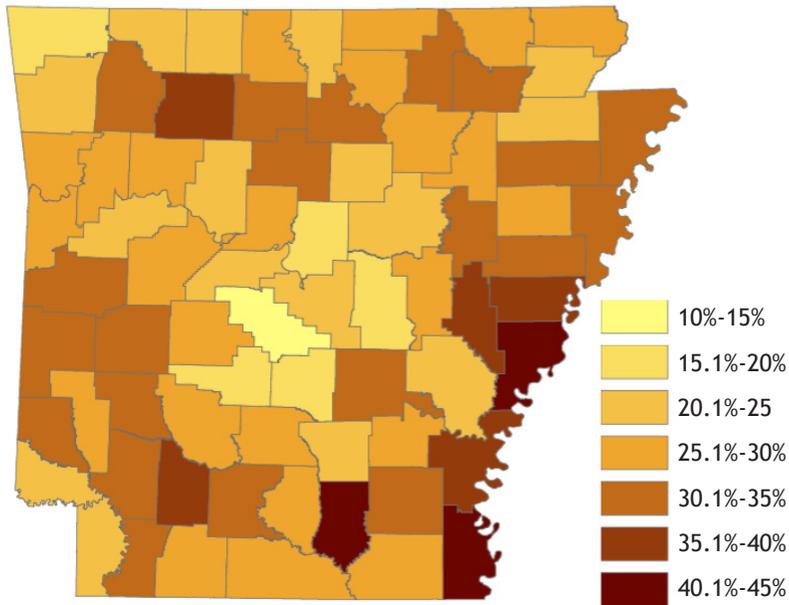
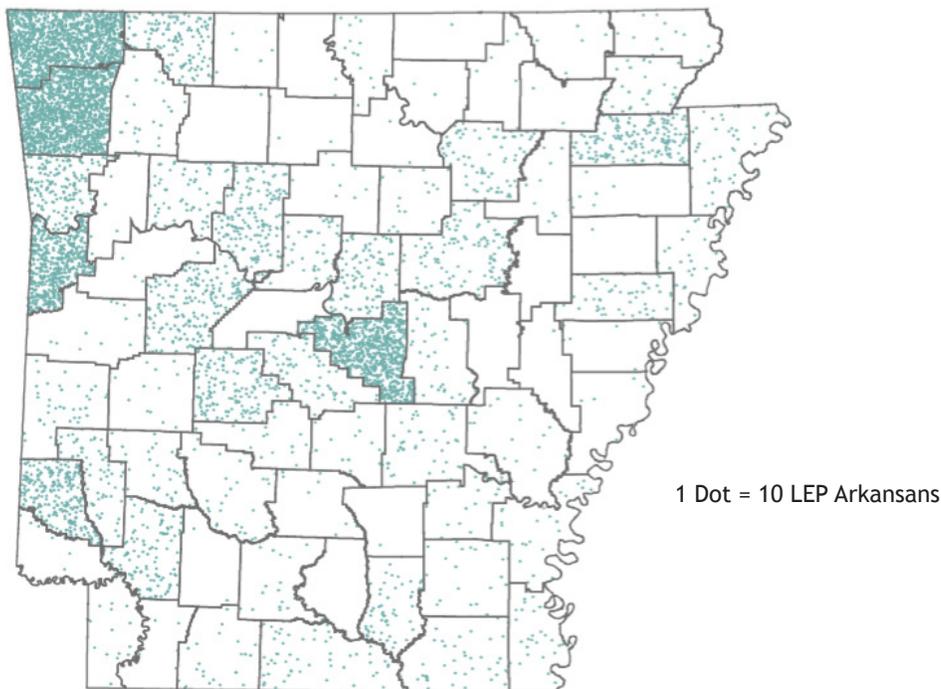


Figure 4: Dot Density Map of Spanish Speaking LEP Arkansans



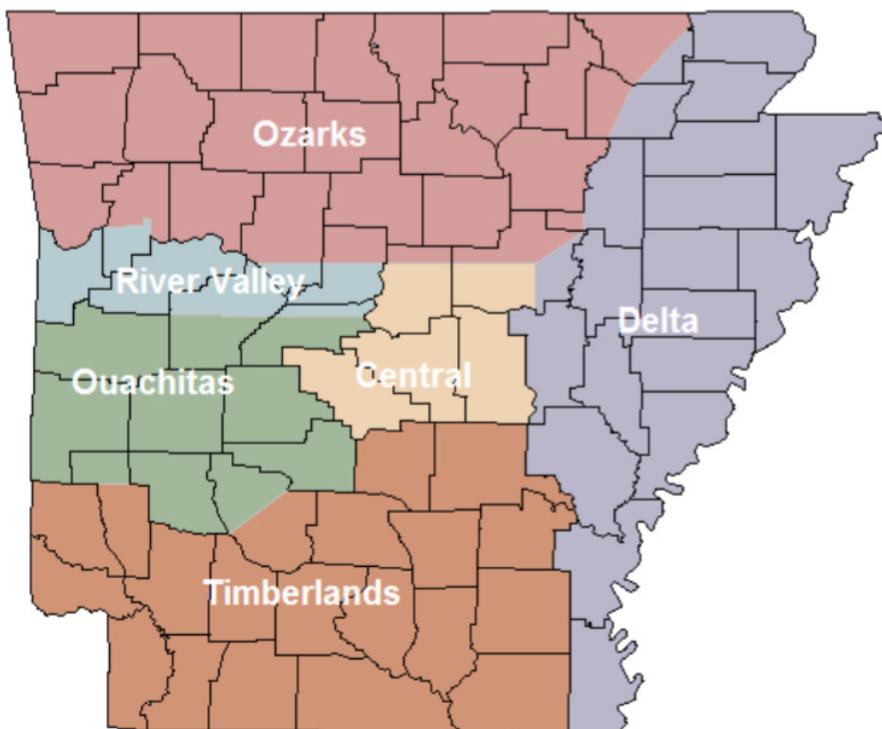
Rockefeller Foundation has shown that many, but not all, LEP Arkansans are employed in positions that pay wages below 125% of the federal poverty line (Capps et al. 2013). As Figure 4 shows, LEP Arkansans, like Arkansas's immigrant population in general, live both in urban and rural areas in the west.

This substantial population of LEP Arkansans presents a significant challenge for the court system. A 2012 report by the Administrative Office of the Courts revealed through a survey of court personnel that a quarter of all district courts did not use state-provided professional court interpreter services to translate for LEP Arkansans before the court (Administrative Office of the Courts 2012). The survey further found that 68% of district courts and 19% of circuit courts had used the bilingual family and friends of LEP Arkansans before the court to translate proceedings, a practice that the report described as “worrisome” (Administrative Office of the Courts 2012). The survey also expressed concern about the fact that the vast majority of Arkansas clerk’s offices did not have translated forms available for LEP Arkansans, nor bilingual staff, nor pamphlets or posters describing services available for LEP Arkansans (Administrative Office of the Courts 2012). These various limitations on the available language assistance in the court system suggest that LEP Arkansans face a set of unique obstacles in obtaining access to justice and, as a result, are in special need of legal help.

Section 2- Mapping Regional Legal Needs

The geography of Arkansas’s legal needs is more complex than just those considerations though. Arkansas has a complex geography (depicted in Figure 5) that means that certain parts of the state have unique legal needs driven by the unique characteristics of that region. In order to understand this regional legal needs geography, this report uses court filing data taken from the 2014 Annual Statistical Supplement to the Report of the Arkansas Judiciary regarding all categories of circuit court cases, excluding criminal cases, to discuss those with distinctive regional legal needs.³

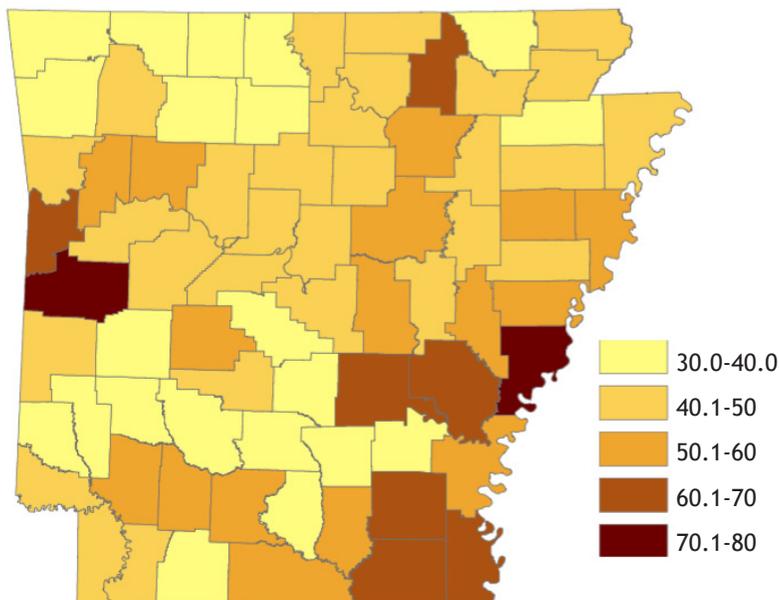
Figure 5: Regional Map of Arkansas⁴



Before discussing the findings of this analysis of court filing data, it is important to note that this method of analysis carries with it significant limitations. As court filing data reflects only those people who were able to file a case, it will not reflect those people who, despite having genuine legal problems, lacked the resources or understanding to be able to successfully file a case. Similarly, court filing data will not reflect those people whose cases were settled, either with or without the assistance of an attorney, before they needed to file suit. As a result, court filing data may understate the extent of one county’s legal needs relative to another county, and it may overstate the same. Furthermore, case filing data also cannot show the relative complexity or importance of one filed case versus another. However, despite the limitations inherent in such data, this report uses normalized court filing data as a proxy for legal need because such data, while flawed, provides at least some insight into the region by region legal needs of Arkansans.

The primary takeaway from this analysis is that certain regions of Arkansas have, proportionate to their populations, a greater need for legal help than other regions in the state. As Figure 6 below shows, court filing data for domestic relations cases, juvenile cases, and civil cases indicates that two groups of counties—counties in the River Valley stretching into the northern Ouachita Mountains and counties in the middle and south Delta stretching into the eastern Timberlands—have a substantially higher filing rate normalized by population than most of the rest of the state. For example, Phillips County has a normalized filing rate for all three types of cases that is approximately twice the statewide median normalized filing rate.

Figure 6: Civil, Domestic Relations, and Juvenile Case Filings per 1,000 County Residents

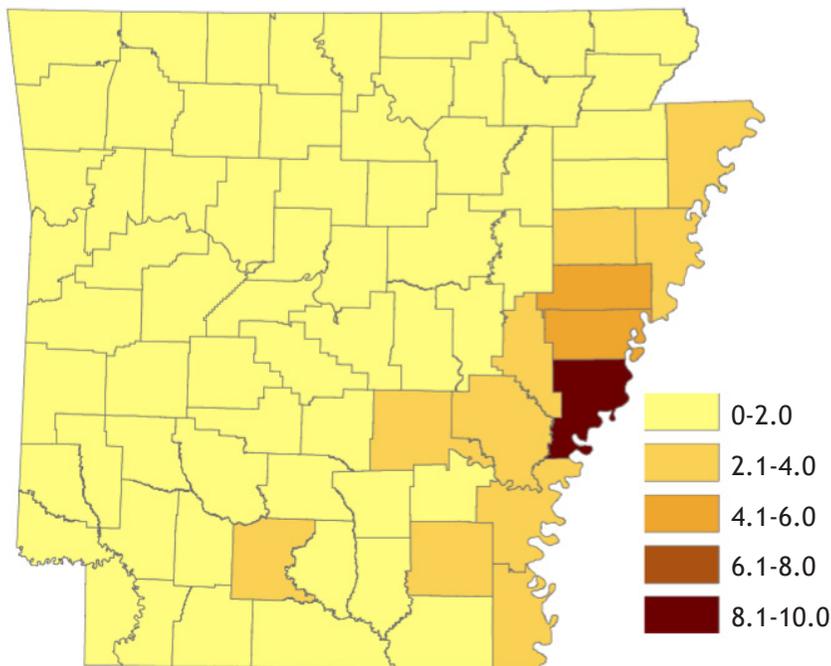


³ This report does not discuss criminal cases as the contours of the access to justice problem are significantly different for such cases. Indigent defendants in criminal felony cases are constitutionally guaranteed a right to state-provided legal assistance. As a general rule, no such guarantee exists for civil cases. There are exceptions to this rule however, including cases involving the termination of parental rights and civil commitment cases.

⁴ This image is based upon regional boundaries established by the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism. It is not the author’s original work. “Arkansas Regions Colored With Names” is available on Wikimedia Commons and is licensed by Brandon Rush under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

For domestic and civil cases in the mid-to-south Delta and eastern Timberlands, much of this difference is the result of higher normalized filing rates in three subcategories of cases: paternity support suits, child support cases, and debt open account cases.⁵ In these three categories, the difference in normalized filing rates between the middle and south Delta and the rest of the state is dramatic. In Phillips County, the normalized filing rate for paternity support suits is more than ten times the statewide median. In Drew County, the normalized filing rate for child support cases is more than four times the statewide median. In Woodruff County, the normalized filing rate for debt open account cases is two and a half times the statewide median.

Figure 7: Parental Support Cases per 1,000 County Residents



The increased normalized filing rates for paternity support suits, child support cases and debt open account cases in the eastern Timberlands and the middle and south Delta are likely a product of the deep poverty that persists in the region. This same poverty is also the likely driver of the sharply higher normalized filing rates in the eastern Timberlands and the south Delta (though curiously, not the middle Delta) for certain subcategories of juvenile cases, specifically juvenile delinquency cases, family in need of services cases and probation revocation cases.

⁵In addition, domestic contempt of court filings, which are associated with paternity support suits and child support cases, also represent a significant driver of higher normalized filing rates. It is worth noting that fourteen Arkansas counties did not report domestic contempt of court filings in 2014, and that this discrepancy would have affected their total number of cases filed. However, those counties are not clumped together in a way that would either significantly affect regional patterns, or cause the higher regional filing rates discussed in this section.

Figure 8: Child Support Cases per 1,000 County Residents

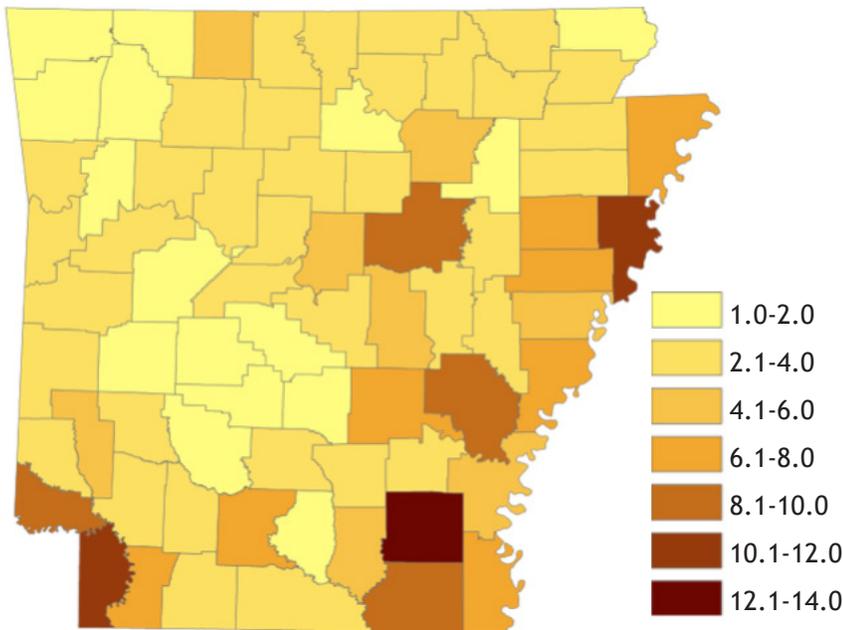
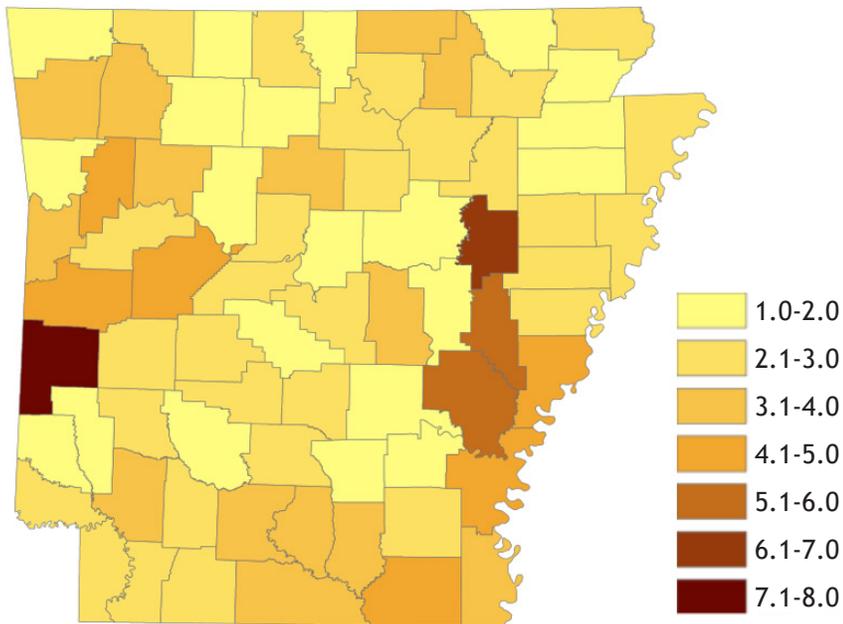


Figure 9: Debt Open Account Cases per 1,000 County Residents



The difference in normalized filing rates in these categories of juvenile cases is no less pronounced than the other normalized filing rate differences discussed earlier. Desha County has a normalized filing rate for juvenile delinquency cases three times higher than the statewide median, and a case filing rate for family in need of services rate of more than four times the statewide median.

Figure 10: Juvenile Delinquency Cases per 1,000 County Residents

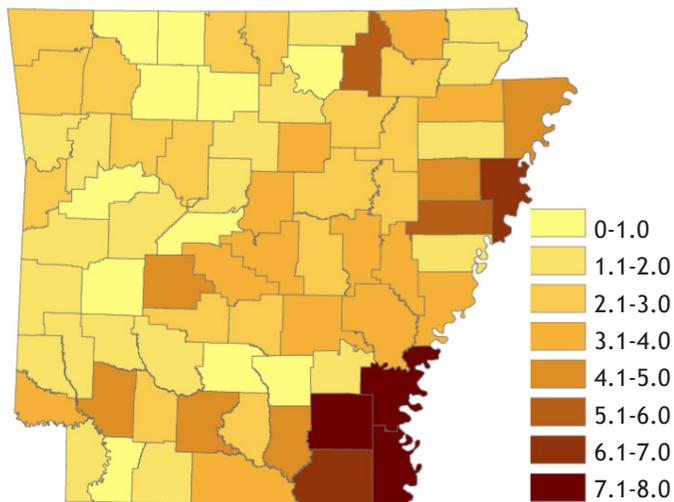


Figure 11: Family in Need of Services Cases per 1,000 County Residents

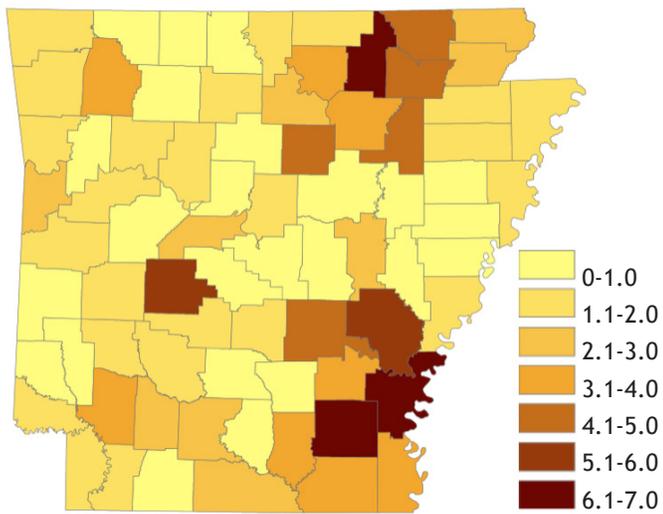
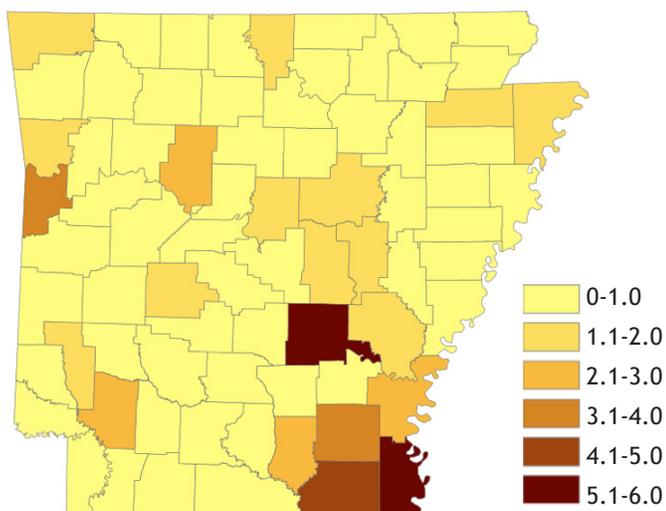


Figure 12: Juvenile Probation Revocation Cases per 1,000 County Residents



Taken together, these statistics demonstrate that the Delta and eastern Timberlands, particularly in the middle and south Delta, have a unique set of legal needs related to domestic relations and juvenile cases, particularly as related to providing support to children.

In contrast, the starkly higher overall filing rates in the River Valley and northern Ouachita Mountains appear to be a product of the region’s juvenile court system. Indeed, the River Valley and northern Ouachita Mountains have substantially higher rates of court filings regarding juvenile cases when compared to the rest of the state. These higher rates are primarily driven by review hearing case filings, termination of parental rights case filings, juvenile adoption case filings and, to a lesser extent, juvenile neglect case filings. In some cases, these higher filing rates are such that even when the data are not adjusted for population, the absolute number of these types of cases is higher than in far more populous counties like Pulaski County.

Indeed, the numbers associated with juvenile cases in the River Valley and northern Ouachita Mountains are remarkable. More than thirty percent of all review hearings in Arkansas are filed in Sebastian County, and the normalized filing rate for review hearings in Scott County is more than seven and a half times the statewide average. Thirty six percent of all juvenile adoptions in the state take place in Sebastian County, and the normalized filing rate for juvenile adoptions in Sebastian County is twenty times the statewide average. One in four termination of parental rights cases in the state takes place in Sebastian County, and the normalized filing rate for such cases is thirteen times the state average.

Taken together, these statistics suggest that the juvenile legal issues in the River Valley and northern Ouachita Mountains should be a significant source of concern.

Figure 13: Juvenile Case Filings per 1,000 County Residents

Figure 14: Review Hearing Case Filings per 1,000 County Residents

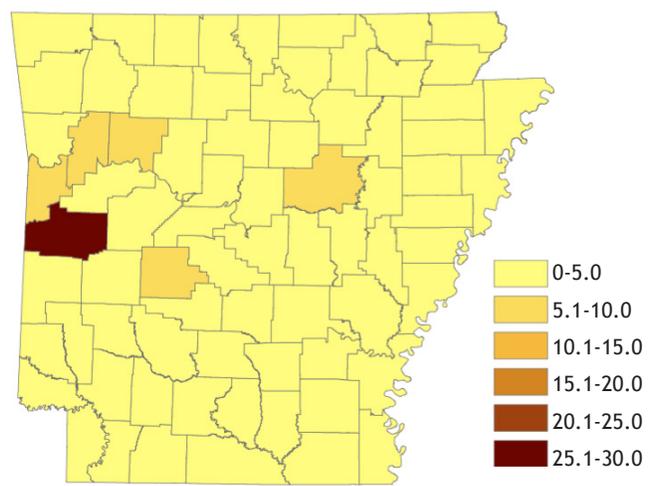
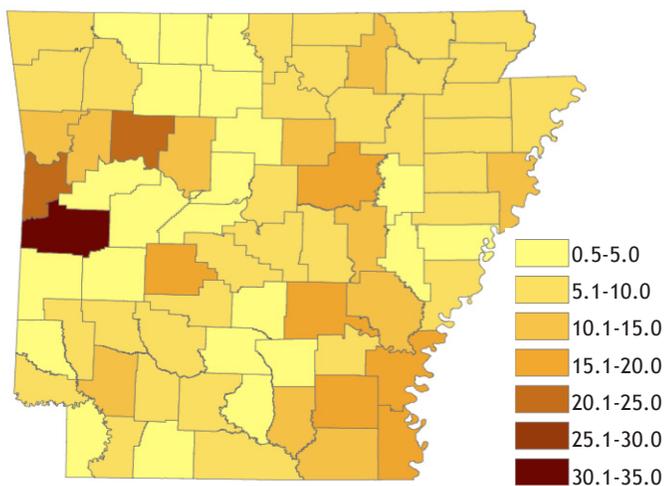


Figure 15: Percent of Review Hearings Statewide by County

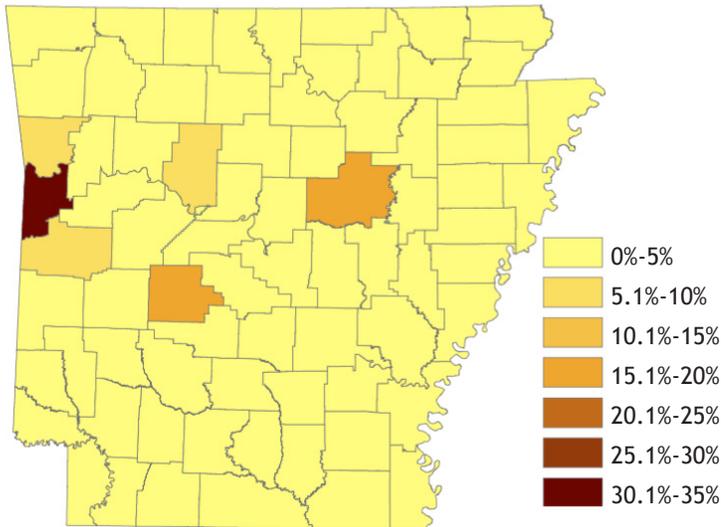


Figure 16: Juvenile Adoption Case Filing per 1,000 County Residents

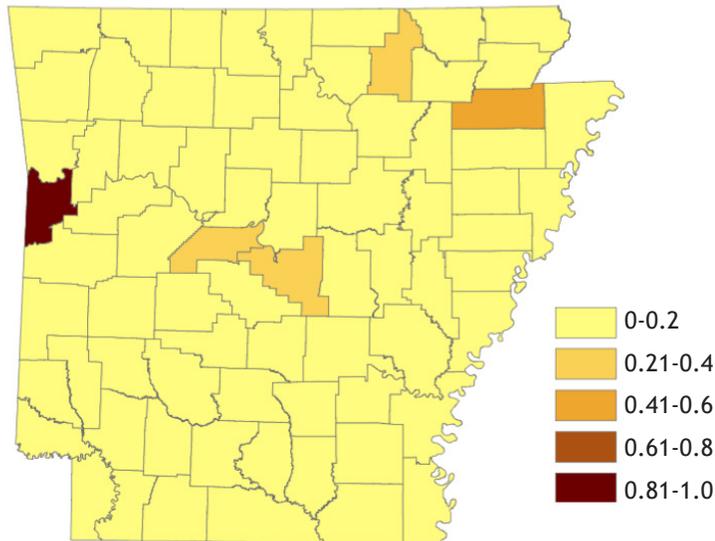
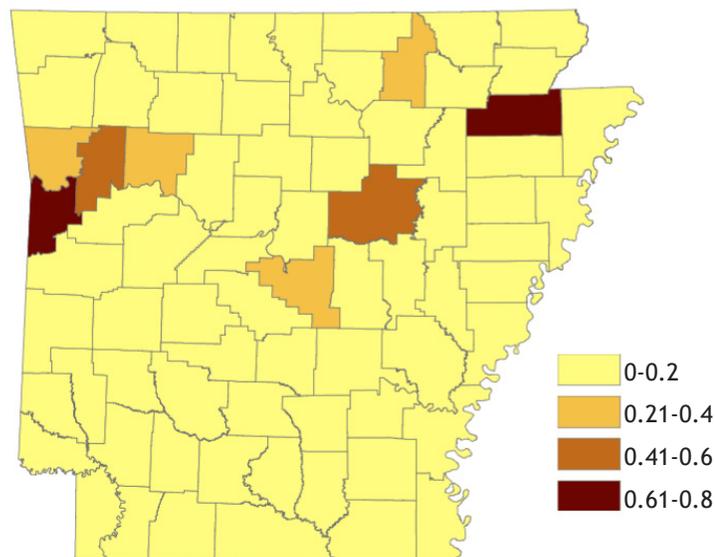


Figure 17: Termination of Parental Rights Case Filings per 1,000 County Residents



Although they are primary driver of higher filing rates in the River Valley and northern Ouachita Mountains, it is worth noting that juvenile cases are not the only drivers of these higher filing rates. Normalized court filing data indicates that several counties in the northern Ouachita Mountains have substantially higher normalized rates of debt open account case filing than most of the rest of the state, as indicated in Figure 8 above. Indeed, Polk County's rate exceeds even that of the highest filing counties in the Delta, and is more than three times the statewide median. The northern Ouachita Mountains also have substantially higher normalized foreclosure rates than is the statewide norm, and have somewhat higher normalized rates of domestic abuse case filings.

It is worth repeating, as noted earlier, that case filing data is a weak proxy for mapping legal need. However, to the extent that case filing data can be considered a proxy for legal need, the data suggests that two regions in the state—the mid-to-south Delta and the River Valley—have a need for legal services that is substantially greater than would be suggested by their population.

Section 3- Mapping Legal Aid

Just as legal needs can be understood geographically, so too can legal aid distribution. This section will use a quantitative and statistical analysis of legal aid closed case distribution to map the geography of legal aid in Arkansas. It is important to note that there are significant limitations in using a largely quantitative and statistical approach to analyzing case data like this. Closed cases can only give limited information about the difficulty or importance of given cases. As such, the recent landmark case decided in Pulaski Circuit Court striking down Arkansas's criminal eviction statute counts under this analysis as only one case, despite its significance to thousands of Arkansans (Brantley 2015). Given this, caution should be taken when interpreting quantitative case data, as it may not accurately reflect the real impact of legal aid's work.

Two organizations—the Center for Arkansas Legal Services (CALS) and Legal Aid of Arkansas (LAA)—are the only providers of civil legal aid in Arkansas. LAA serves 31 counties in the north of Arkansas and in the east of Arkansas, a service area stretching from Phillips County to Benton County. CALS serves the other 44 counties, from Crawford County to Chicot County. Of the two service areas, CALS's contains significantly more legal aid eligible Arkansans, with 59% of the state's eligible population living in CALS's service area compared to LAA's 41%. In addition, for four counties in the southwest—Hempstead County, Miller County, Lafayette County and Little River County—CALS relies on a contract with Lone Star Legal Aid, a Texas based legal aid organization to provide service. It is also worth noting that the boundaries between CALS's service area and LAA's service area are not absolute, and through a variety of activities, particularly medical-legal partnerships that cover broad areas of the state, both organizations help clients in the other's service area.

Each year, CALS and LAA receive vastly more requests for help from legal aid eligible Arkansans than they could possibly provide service for given the limited funding available for legal aid. Last year, fully half of all requests for help from eligible Arkansans were turned away due to resource limitations (Arkansas Access to Justice 2014). Of those clients helped, most received assistance that was less than traditional representation, either taking the form of counsel and advice regarding their legal problem, or limited action by a legal aid attorney, like drafting a demand letter on a client's behalf. A little more than three quarters of legal aid cases closed in 2014 were coded as being either counsel and advice or limited action cases.

With such limited resources, CALS and LAA are forced to prioritize certain types of cases over others. This prioritization generally means that legal aid prioritizes cases in which the absence of legal help could have devastating consequences for the potential client, as in many domestic violence-related cases. Based on closed case data, it appears that both organizations use similar criteria when deciding which cases to prioritize. Lone Star Legal Aid, the contractor providing services to several counties in the southwest, uses somewhat different criteria when deciding which cases to handle. Although Lone Star Legal Aid handles, like its Arkansas based counterparts, a high volume of family law cases, it also offers counsel and advice to many clients seeking help regarding income maintenance and government programs, particularly those clients seeking help with SNAP.

Legal aid case closure data suggests that northeastern Arkansas receives a much greater degree of service than the rest of the state, as reflected in Figure 18. This imbalance is much greater when focusing on closed cases in which legal aid provided representation beyond limited action. In a majority of Arkansas's counties, the ratio of cases in which legal aid provided representation beyond brief service to legal aid-eligible Arkansans is less than two for every thousand eligible Arkansans. This contrasts sharply with counties in the northeast like Sharp County, in which that ratio is more than twelve for every thousand eligible Arkansans, six times the median normalized closure rate.

It is important to note that this higher rate of service in the northeast should not be considered overservice. National legal needs assessments have established that low-income people have on average two significant legal problems a year, and the most recent legal needs assessments in Arkansas conducted by the Clinton School further established that Arkansas is no exception to this national rule (Lafont et al. 2013; Legal Services Corporation 2009). Furthermore, several of the areas in the northeast have regional legal needs that would drive a higher degree of per capita service. For example, Sharp County has a much higher than average filing rate for domestic abuse cases, a core legal aid priority. Likewise, the unique legal needs of the mid-Delta could also be a compelling justification for higher rates of service for those counties. Indeed, the higher rates of service in the northeast are less an indication of overservice than they are an indicator that other areas in the state are underserved.

It is also worth noting that this imbalance does, to a significant degree, correspond with the geographic boundaries separating the areas served by CALS and LAA. Case closure statistics support this interpretation. Despite the fact that CALS serves 59% of the state's eligible population, LAA handled more cases than CALS in 2014. Not one of the 44 counties served by CALS has four or more legal aid cases where representation was provided beyond limited action per thousand eligible Arkansans; a majority of counties served by LAA are above that threshold. This distinction does not entirely explain this imbalance though; much of the western Ozarks, contained within LAA's service area, are significantly less served than the northeast.

The pattern of greater service relative to population in the northeast reflected in the figures above exists in almost every category of cases handled by legal aid. In some categories, like housing cases and employment cases, the balance shifts somewhat towards Fayetteville and central Arkansas. However, even in those cases, the northeast received a significantly greater degree of service than much of the rest of the state outside of urban areas.

Figure 18: Legal Aid Cases per 1,000 Eligible County Residents

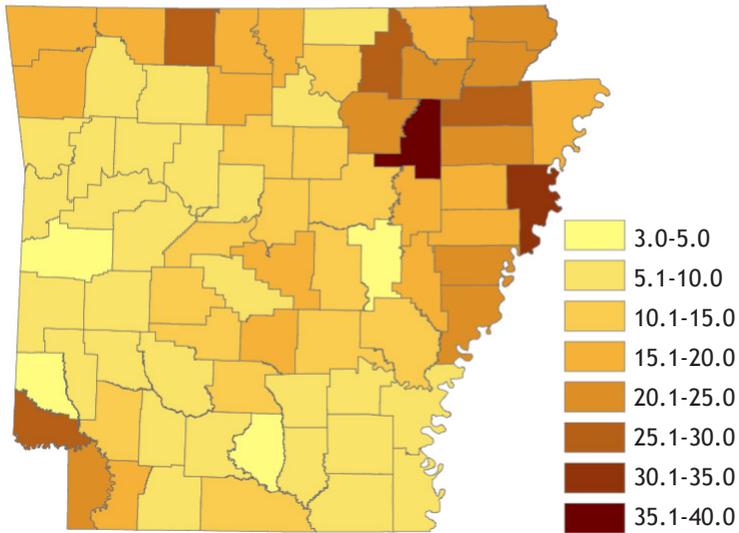


Figure 19: Legal Aid Cases Where Service Was Provided Beyond Limited Action per 1,000 Eligible County Residents

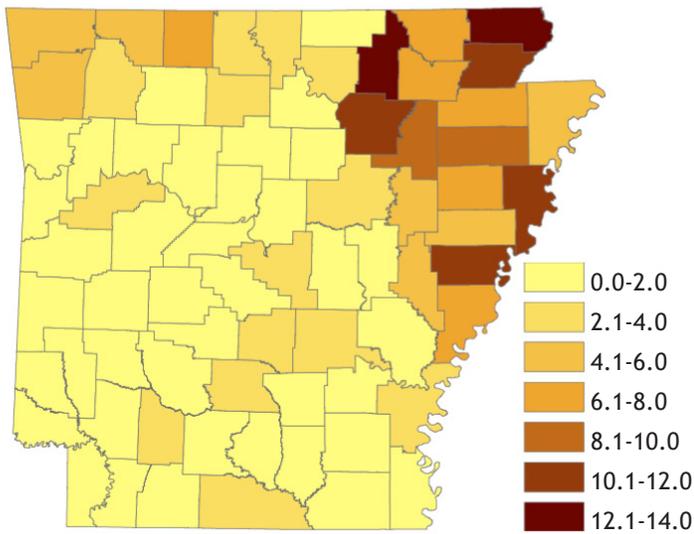
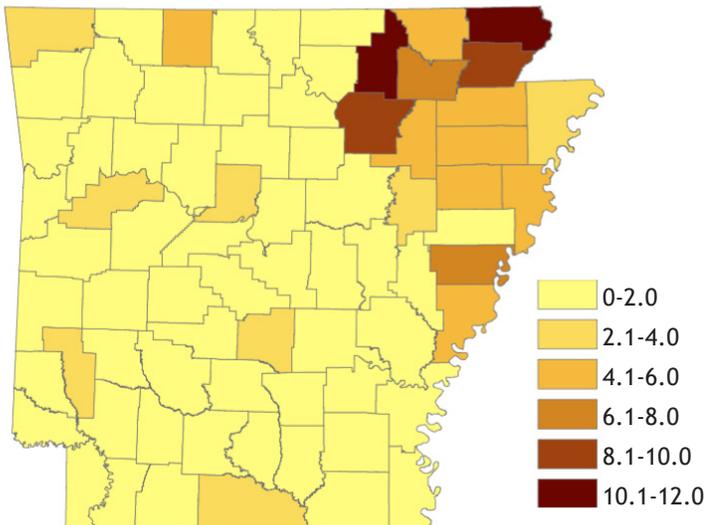


Figure 20: Legal Aid Domestic Violence Closed Cases per 1,000 Eligible County Residents



In addition, legal aid is currently struggling to reach LEP Spanish speaking Arkansans. In 2014, LAA and CALS together represented one hundred and seventy LEP Spanish speaking Arkansans. This means that the ratio of closed legal aid cases to thousand LEP speakers is roughly two and a half cases per thousand LEP Arkansans, a rate significantly lower than the fifteen cases per thousand eligible Arkansans that exists for the general legal aid population. It is worth noting that not all LEP Arkansans are eligible for legal aid based on their income. In addition, federal law prohibits legal aid providers that receive Legal Services Corporation funds—a category that includes both LAA and CALS— from assisting undocumented migrants, except in domestic violence and human trafficking cases. While there is not available data regarding how much of Arkansas’s LEP population this restriction affects, it is likely that a substantial portion of LEP Arkansans are ineligible for civil legal aid. This fact likely explains much of the discrepancy discussed above.

Conclusion - Bridging the Map

Taken together, the concentration of legal aid cases in the northeast of the state with the varied regional needs of Arkansans across the state suggests that right now, there is a large number of Arkansans who are not getting the legal help they need. Rural poverty, combined with the increasing concentration of Arkansas’s attorneys in urban areas, makes it increasingly challenging for hundreds of thousands of Arkansans to find the legal help they need. This problem is made all the more challenging by the fact that the various regions of this state have a set of unique and complex legal needs, which vary meaningfully from region to region. Yet at present those needs are not being met.

There is no easy solution to this problem. The core factors driving the geographic access to justice gap—the undersupply of attorneys in rural areas and deep rural poverty—are not easily fixable. However, there are policy options that may be able to lessen the effects of the access to justice crisis for ordinary Arkansans. As a result, although this report is not designed to primarily be a policy proposal, it is worthwhile to discuss those policy options briefly.

Perhaps the most direct way of solving the problem of the lack of attorneys in rural areas is to try and find a way of getting more attorneys to live and practice in rural areas. Pruitt, McKinney and Calhoun recently proposed a broad range of policy solutions aimed at encouraging precisely this, including state subsidies for repayment for law school student loans for lawyers who move to rural areas, a distance incubator program to give young lawyers the skills they need to practice in rural areas, and a legal aid fellowship program that could serve a similar role (Pruitt, McKinney, and Calhoun 2016). Using their analysis of attorney distribution in Arkansas’s rural areas, Pruitt McKinney and Calhoun make an effective case that each of these proposals could help increase the number of attorneys in the state’s most underserved communities.

It is worth noting that these proposals have some precedent in similar programs in healthcare policy that help ensure that rural areas have adequate access to primary care physicians. In addition, South Dakota, which also faces a serious problem with undersupply of attorneys in rural areas, has implemented a policy that uses state subsidies for repayment for law school student loans for lawyers who move to rural areas (Bronner 2013). As a result, while these proposals are a relatively new approach to dealing with access to justice issues, there is evidence that indicates that these sorts of methods would be an effective method of increasing attorney supply in rural areas.

Other states also face rural access to justice challenges, though generally not on the same scale as Arkansas's. In 2010, the California Commission on Access to Justice made a series of proposals suggesting policy options designed to ameliorate the rural access to justice problem, including greater funding for legal aid in rural areas, the development of a set of geographic minimum access guidelines for legal help, the creation of a statewide "Friends of Rural Legal Aid" committee to coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders, and the expanded use of technology like videoconferencing to connect attorneys in urban areas with rural clients (California Commission on Access to Justice 2010). While most of these proposals were put on hold following major budget cuts to California's judicial system in the following year, the ideas may offer a path forward on how to approach these issues. Indeed, two of the elements involved in the California proposal, specifically the use of technology to bridge the urban-rural divide, and a greater commitment to ensuring that legal aid funding is geographically equitable, seem particularly well suited to being implemented in Arkansas.

In the absence of policy action however, it seems unlikely that the geographic imbalances this report identifies will grow better. There are serious structural forces driving the geographic imbalances identified in this report, and solving this problem will require a sustained commitment by the state to ensuring that all Arkansans, regardless of where they live, can have meaningful access to justice. While that goal is achievable, it is not the current reality.

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