Tracking the Trends of the Self-Represented Litigant Phenomenon:

Data from the National Self-Represented Litigants Project, 2023-2025

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Introduction

What is the National Self-Represented Litigants Project?

Since 2011, the National Self-Represented Litigants Project (NSRLP) has consistently collected and analyzed data on the experiences of self-represented litigants (SRLs) navigating the Canadian justice system. What began with a focus on three provinces—Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta—has expanded to include data from all provinces and territories. Via our permanent Intake Survey SRLs continually share their experiences, providing valuable insights that inform our access to justice work and advocacy.

The NSRLP is dedicated to raising awareness of the challenges and difficult decisions faced by the many Canadians who navigate the justice system without counsel. We foster dialogue and collaboration among those impacted by the SRL phenomenon, we regularly publish resources designed specifically for SRLs, and we produce research reports that explore the broader implications of self-representation for the justice system.

Our data

In 2013 the NSRLP research team developed an SRL Intake Form survey tool (using SurveyMonkey) to collect ongoing information from SRLs across Canada (the current iteration of the survey can be found here). The survey tracks SRLs' demographic data, using variables such as income, education level, and legal party status. It also includes questions about the litigant's overall experience with the legal system, such as prior use of legal services, participation in mediation, and whether they have brought a support person to court. Over the past decade of data collection, we have periodically updated certain questions in the survey to better reflect emerging issues and evolving trends in self-representation. Overall, the survey seeks to provide a window into the lived experiences of SRLs. Every 1-2 years we publish a report on the data collected since the last report – previous reports are available via the following links:

1. Original SRL Study (published 2013)
2. Intake Report 2014-2015 (published 2015)

3. Intake Report 2015-2016 (published 2017)

4. Intake Report 2017 (published 2018)

5. Intake Report 2018-2019 (published 2020)

6. Intake Report 2019-2021 (published 2021)

7. Intake Report 2021-2023 (published 2024)

   The data collected via the Intake Survey also provides us with evidence of arising issues and avenues for further research, understanding of what new resources would be most beneficial, and material for use in our systemic advocacy efforts.

Part I: Who are SRLs?

The data analysed in this report comes from 354 survey submissions, completed between July 1ˢᵗ, 2023, and August 30ᵗʰ, 2025. Late in this intake cycle period, (June of 2025), three new demographic questions were added to the survey: whether the respondent is a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, whether they identify as being neurodivergent, and whether they are a newcomer to Canada. We have reported on the data collected from these questions below, but it should be noted that these questions were only present during the final two months of this intake cycle. Therefore the numbers reported here are small and cannot be equally compared to the rest of the data collected during this two-year period. However, we note that the number of responses to these questions continues to grow, and while there are some interesting early findings, we look forward to a fuller picture of these demographics in our next intake report.

Gender and age breakdown

Of 354 respondents, 341 provided their gender identity:

- Female**:** 59.53% (n = 203)
- Male**:** 38.71% (n = 132)
- Two-Spirit: 1.76% (n = 6)

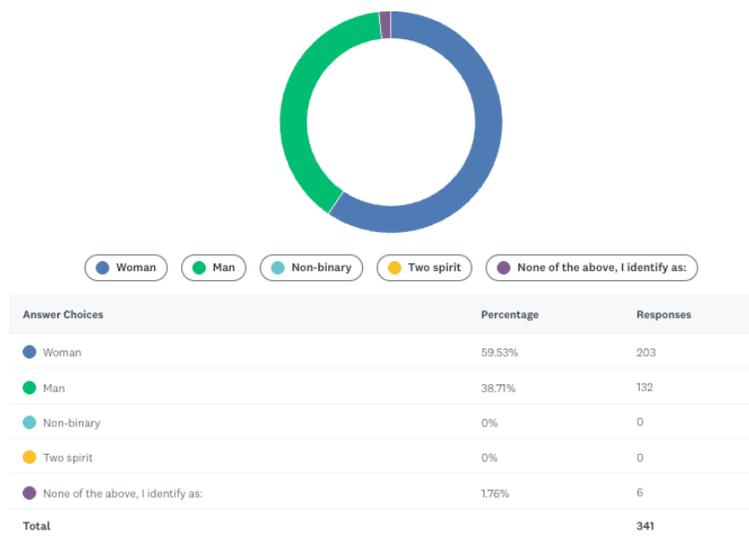| Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Woman	59.53%	203
Man	38.71%	132
Non-binary	0%	0
Two spirit	0%	0
None of the above, I identify as:	1.76%	6
Total		341

Table 1 – What is your gender?

Data from this intake cycle indicates that while male participation has remained consistent, there has been a notable increase in women engaging with the survey. In previous intake cycles the male-to-female ratio was nearly equal, while in the current period respondents identifying as female increased by 10%:

Intake Report	Female (%)	Female (n)	Male (%)	Male (n)
2023–2025	59.5%	203	38.7%	132
2021–2023	48.9%	127	46.9%	122
2019–2021	49.2%	126	48.8%	125
2018–2019	50%	84	48%	81
2017	53%	35	42%	38
2015–2016	49%	36	51%	37
2014–2015	47%	32	53%	37
2013	52%	–	48%	–

Table 2 – Gender Representation in Past Reports Compared to the Present

It will be interesting to follow this data point over the next several years, to see whether a trend develops, or whether this intake cycle is an outlier.

Of 354 respondents, 341 provided their age range:

- 70+ years: 2.93% (n = 10)
- 60–69 years: 13.2% (n = 45)
- 50–59 years: 28.45% (n = 97)
- 40–49 years: 24.05% (n = 82)
- 30–39 years: 21.7% (n = 74)
- 20–29 years: 9.09 (n = 31)
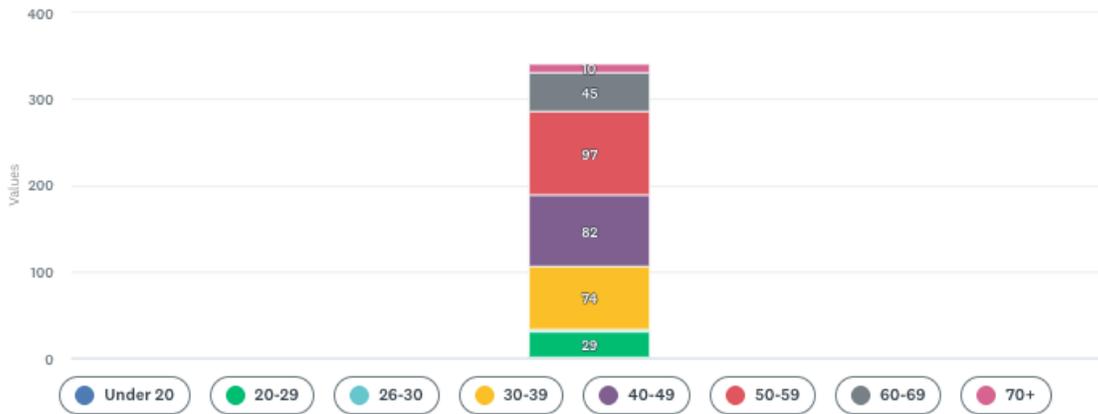- Under 20 years: 0.59% (n = 2)

Table 3 – What is your age?

Most participants in this intake cycle were in middle life. The largest groups were those aged 40–49 (24.05%, n = 82), and 50–59 (28.45%, n = 97), together accounting for over half the population. Younger adults, aged 20–39, made up 30.8% of the population, while there were very few respondents under 20 (0.59%, n = 2). People aged 60 and above represent 16.13% of the population, a smaller but notable proportion. Overall, respondents skewed toward middle age, with relatively low representation of both younger and older adults. This represents something of a shift from previous intake reports, where the largest group was those 50 and over, as shown in the table below:

Intake Report	Under 20 (%)	20–25 (%)	25–30 (%)	30–40 (%)	40–50 (%)	Over 50 (%)	Notes / n
2021–2023	0.39% (1)	0%	2% (5)	20.6% (53)	32.7% (84)	44.4% (114)	First respondent under 20 in NSRLP history
2019–2021	0%	0.8% (2)	3.4%	15%	29.2%	51.5%	First SRLs under 25
2018–2019	0%	0%	3%	12%	21%	63%	–
2017	0%	0%	3%	16%	25%	55%	Older demographic consistent with prior reports

Intake Report	Under 20 (%)	20–25 (%)	25–30 (%)	30–40 (%)	40–50 (%)	Over 50 (%)	Notes / n
2015–2016	–	–	<10%	21%	–	42%	Smallest group under 30; increase in 30–40 group
2014–2015	–	–	–	–	–	56%	Majority 50+
2013	–	–	3%	14%	32%	45%	Largest group 50+, consistent with other studies

Table 4 – Age in Previous Intake Reports

Identification as a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community

Since June 2025 the survey has included a question asking whether respondents identify as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Nine (9) respondents answered this question in this intake cycle:

- Gay: 11.1% (n = 1)
- Bisexual: 11.1% (n = 1)
- Transgender: 11.1% (n = 1)
- Queer: 11.1% (n = 1)
- Other: 55.6% (n = 5) *[Note: all "Other" responses indicated that the survey taker was heterosexual, or not a part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.]*

No one selected "Lesbian," "Intersex," "Asexual," or "Two-Spirit." Despite the small number of respondents engaging with this question to-date, it remains an important area for further investigation in future. We anticipate more responses to this question over time, and in order to deepen our understanding we aim to build stronger relationships with organizations and legal professionals serving these communities, with the goal of learning more about their experiences and specific needs.

Identification as a person with a disability

Of 354 respondents, 338 answered whether they identify as a person with a disability; 45.68% of respondents answered "yes" (54.73%, n = 185, answered "no"), with the following breakdown of types of disability:

- Cognitive Disability (i.e. memory, processing, learning challenges): 13.31% (n = 45)
- Physical Disability (i.e. mobility or sensory challenges, chronic health conditions): 11.24% (n = 38)
- Both Cognitive & Physical Disability: 5.33% (n = 18)
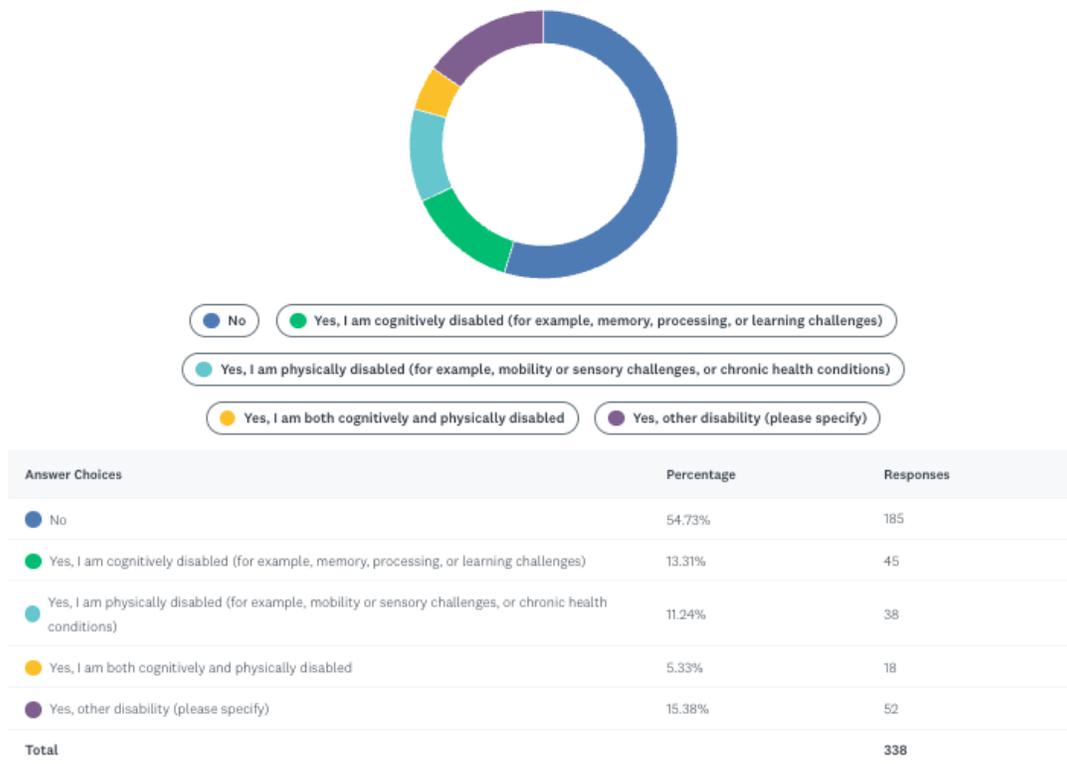- Other: 15.38% (n = 52)

Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
No	54.73%	185
Yes, I am cognitively disabled (for example, memory, processing, or learning challenges)	13.31%	45
Yes, I am physically disabled (for example, mobility or sensory challenges, or chronic health conditions)	11.24%	38
Yes, I am both cognitively and physically disabled	5.33%	18
Yes, other disability (please specify)	15.38%	52
Total		338

Table 6 – Do you identify as a person with a disability?

The "Other" option allows respondents to write their own answers, and many took the opportunity to elaborate on their intersecting disabilities, including how trauma exacerbates conditions such as auditory processing disorder, for example. A few responses also described aspects of neurodiversity, highlighting the need for a specific question on neurodivergence (see below). These written responses illustrate the impact of such

challenges on respondents' ability to self-represent, referencing various barriers. The proportion of "Other" responses (15.38%, n = 52) is consistent with previous intake reports, and aligns with additional data suggesting that disabled SRLs continue to face challenges in seeking accommodations from the courts.[1] The NSRLP provides some guidance on navigating the justice system for litigants with disabilities,[2] though we strongly feel that there is much more work to be done around this issue.

Identification as a person with neurodivergence

In June 2025 a separate question was added to the survey, asking whether participants identify as neurodivergent, and allowing them to select multiple intersecting neurodivergent identities (ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Dyscalculia, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, OCD, Tourette Syndrome, and/or "other"). (We introduced this change after gaining insight from an SRL with neurodiversity – we're grateful to them for reaching out, and for their help in designing this question.) The question enables us to clearly distinguish between respondents who identify as a person with a disability, those who identify as neurodivergent, and those who identify as both. In this intake cycle since the introduction of the question, 22 respondents identified as being a neurodivergent person, and specified their type(s) of neurodivergence. The breakdown is as follows:

- ADHD: 70.59% (n = 12)
- OCD: 11.76% (n=2)
- Autism: 5.88% (n = 1)
- Dyslexia: 5.88% (n = 1)
- Other: 35.3% (n = 6)

The "Other" option allowed respondents to write in their own answers; many took the opportunity to briefly mention their intersecting diagnoses.

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[1] Shannon Meikle, Silvia Battaglia, and Julie Macfarlane, "Struggling for accommodation: Barriers to Accessibility faced by Cognitively Disabled Self-Represented Litigants" National Self-Represented Litigants Project < https://representingyourselfcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PWCD-Report-FINAL.pdf > [2021 report]

[2] National Self-Represented Litigants Project, "A Guide for SRLs with Disabilities" < https://representingyourselfcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PWD-Primer-March-2021.pdf >

The data generated by this new question provides NSRLP with preliminary insight into the experiences of neurodivergent SRLs; as this data set grows over time, it will help inform the development of more inclusive research and advocacy efforts.

Ethnic identity

336 out of 354 respondents identified their ethnicity. On trend with prior Intake Reports, 57.14% of respondents identified as being Caucasian. The breakdown is as follows:

- Caucasian: 57.14% (n = 192)

- Asian or East Asian: 9.52% (n = 32)

- First Nations: 8.33% (n = 28)

- South Asian: 5.65% (n = 19)

- Black: 3.87% (n = 13)

- Métis: 2.68% (n = 9)

- Latino: 2.68% (n = 9)

- Middle Eastern or Arab: 1.79% (n = 6)

- Inuit: 0.6% (n = 2)

- Other: 7.74% (n = 26)

A number of the "Other" write-in responses were from respondents wishing to indicate a mix of ethnic identities; however the largest proportion of write-in answers were responses using words like "white," or "European." Three responses were simply, "Canadian."

The purpose of this survey question is to draw attention to the presence of racialized SRLs, and to understand and raise awareness of the distinct challenges they may encounter. The NSRLP acknowledges that systemic racism within the legal system creates additional barriers for racialized individuals and marginalized communities navigating the process without legal representation. We hope to continue to increase our reach within a broad range of ethnic groups, with the goal of improving our understanding of SRL

experiences and challenges, and creating programming and resources that respond to a greater variety of needs.

We are excited to note that the proportion of respondents indicating First Nations ethnicity has risen significantly since previous intake periods. In the last report, 1.98% of respondents reported being a member of a First Nation, while in this intake period 8.33% of respondents did so, making First Nations the third largest demographic. We speculate that this may be at least partially an outcome of NSRLP's recent work with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC), and we are grateful to OFIFC staff for promoting awareness of our work among their communities. We are hopeful that our continued and expanded work and connection with the OFIFC and other Indigenous groups and organizations will lead to further data, a better understanding of the particular experiences of Indigenous SRLs, and the generation of resources specific to their needs.

Language

Of 354 respondents, 340 identified their first language:

- English: 77.35% (n = 263)
- French: 4.12% (n = 14)
- Spanish: 2.06% (n = 7)
- Tagalog: 2.06% (n = 7)
- Mandarin: 1.18% (n = 4)
- Punjabi: 1.18% (n = 4)
- Gujarati: 0.59% (n = 2)
- Portuguese: 0.59% (n = 2)
- Cantonese: 0.29% (n = 1)
- Korean: 0.29% (n = 1)
- Other (please specify): 10.29% (n = 35)

10.29% of respondents selected "Other" and reported the following languages: Farsi, Afrikaans, Greek, Vietnamese, Amharic, American Sign Language, Bengali, and Cantonese.

We also ask respondents whether they speak or read French fluently: 23.74% of respondents answered "Yes," while 76.26% answered "No." This highlights the predominance of English among SRLs who engage with the survey, and the need for the NSRLP to continue efforts to reach Francophone Canadians.

It should be noted that the survey is currently only available in English, and therefore the data underrepresents the full spectrum of languages spoken by SRLs, particularly among those who rely on translators or other language supports.

Newcomer identification

In June 2025 we added a question to the survey asking whether respondents are newcomers to Canada (within the last 6 years). Thirty-eight (38) respondents answered the question, with the majority, 92.11% (n = 35), indicating "No," while 7.89% (n = 3) reported that they had come to Canada within the past 1–6 years. No respondents reported arriving within the last year. The NSRLP hopes to generate more data from this question over time and will make efforts to reach more newcomers. Increased participation from newcomers will enable a deeper understanding of their unique experiences within the legal system and help identify the supports that would best assist them.

Legal party status

Of 354 respondents, 320 identified their position in their legal dispute: 69.38% (n = 222) identified as plaintiff, petitioner, or applicant, while 30.63% (n = 98) identified as defendant or respondent. This distribution is consistent with the 2021–23 report, and earlier reports.

Was the other side represented?

320 respondents indicated whether or not the opposing side in their dispute had legal representation: 89.38% (n = 286) responded "Yes," while 10.63% (n = 34) responded "No." These results are very similar to those of previous reports, particularly the 2021–23 report, in which 89.3% reported that the other side was represented.

Education level

341 respondents provided details about their highest level of education. Consistent with previous intake reports, a significant percentage of respondents have achieved a college diploma or university degree:

- University/professional qualification: 41.06% (n=140)

- College: 31.96% (n = 109)

- High School Diploma: 15.84% (n = 54)

- Other: 6.45% (n = 22)

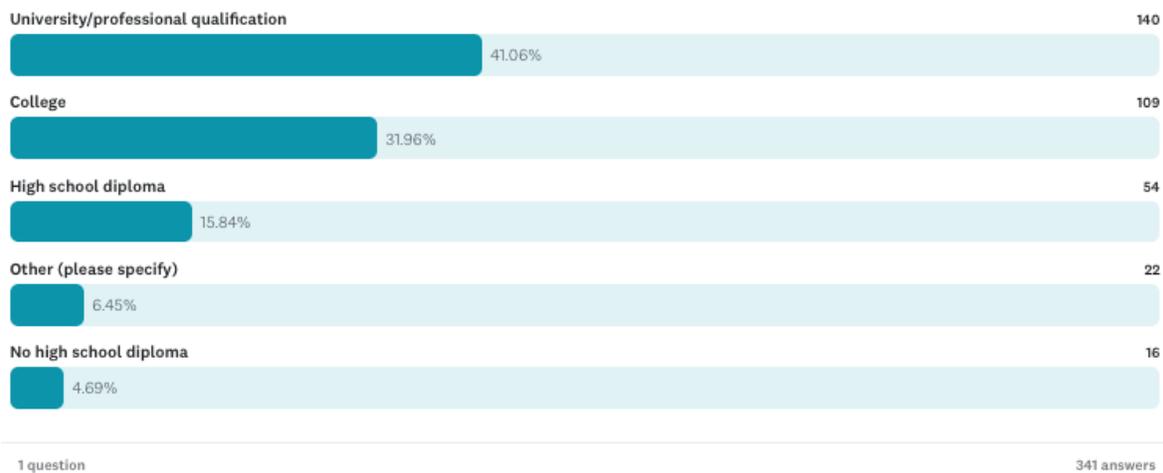- No high school diploma: 4.69% (n = 16)

University/professional qualification	140
41.06%	
College	109
31.96%	
High school diploma	54
15.84%	
Other (please specify)	22
6.45%	
No high school diploma	16
4.69%	
1 question	341 answers

Table 7 – What is your highest level of education?

Approximately six percent (6.45%) of respondents to this question marked "Other," with write-in responses naming professional/trade schools, or that they began a university or college program but did not complete their degree or diploma.

Annual income levels

341 respondents provided details about their annual income. The majority reported annual incomes under $50,000:

- Under $30, 000: 38.02% (n = 127)

- $30, 000 – $50, 000: 23.65% (n = 79)

- $50, 000 – $75, 000: 17.37% (n = 58)

- More than $100, 000: 11.08% (n = 37)
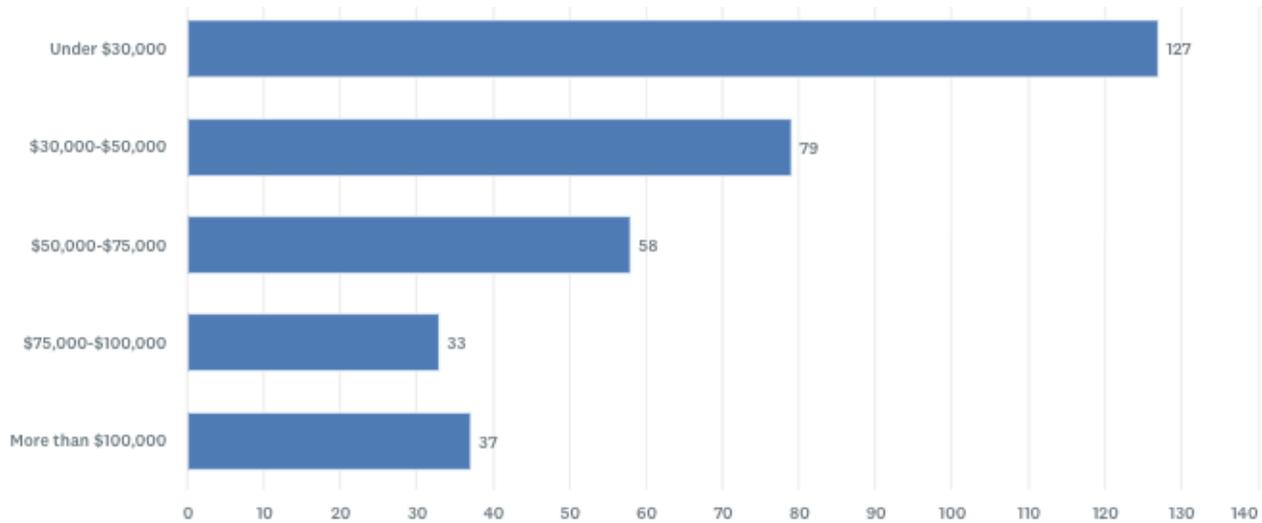
- $75, 000 – $100, 000: 9.88% (n = 33)

Table 8 – What is your annual income?

38.02% of respondents reported earning under $30,000 and a further 23.65% reported earning between $30,000 and $50,000. Given this context, it is interesting to note that the threshold annual income to qualify for Legal Aid in Ontario is $18,000 to $50,000 depending on the number of family members.[3]

As in previous intake reports, the data shows that even people with higher annual incomes self-represent: 17.37% of respondents reported an annual income of $75,000 or more. This suggests that individuals with medium to high incomes can struggle to afford legal services, or to maintain them over the course of a long dispute – this may be unsurprising given the high cost of legal services.

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[3] https://www.legalaid.on.ca/will-legal-aid-pay-for-my-lawyer/

Part II: Where do SRLs file their claims?

Types of cases SRLs are involved in

      333 out of 354 respondents provided details around the type of case they were involved in. In the current intake cycle 38.14% of respondents reported being involved in a family law matter, while 26.73% reported involvement in a civil matter. Smaller proportions of respondents were involved in:

- Criminal/Provincial offence cases: 4.5% (n = 15)
- Disability benefits: 3.3% (n = 11)
- Human rights/discrimination: 3% (n = 10)
- Housing: 2.4% (n = 8)
- Personal property disputes: 2.4% (n = 8)
- Employment: 2.1% (n = 7)
- Sale of goods or services: 1.8% (n = 6)
- Debt: 1.5% (n = 5)
- Other: 12.61% (n = 42)

      The "Other" option allows respondents to provide more detailed answers, and some took the opportunity to describe the intersectionality of their cases, noting involvement in multiple types of legal matters simultaneously:

> "Civil, human rights, employment, infringement of Charter rights and freedom, barriers to self-represented litigants etc."

      As prior reports have suggested, while family law cases always constitute a substantial proportion of SRL cases, civil matters remain prominent and may be increasing in proportion relative to previous reports.

Province/Territory SRLs file their cases

321 respondents indicated the province or territory in which their case was filed. Ontario accounts for nearly half of all cases reported (49.53%), followed by Alberta (17.76%) and British Columbia (12.77%). The remaining provinces and territories are represented in much smaller proportions, with Nunavut showing no reported cases in this intake data set:

- Ontario: 49.53% (n = 159)
- Alberta: 17.76% (n = 57)
- British Columbia: 12.77% (n = 41)
- Newfoundland and Labrador: 4.36% (n = 14)
- New Brunswick: 3.43% (n = 11)
- Manitoba: 2.8% (n = 9)
- Nova Scotia: 2.8% (n = 9)
- Quebec: 2.49% (n = 8)
- Saskatchewan: 2.49% (n = 8)
- Prince Edward Island: 0.62% (n = 2)
- Yukon: 0.62% (n = 2)
- Northwest Territories: 0.31% (n = 1)
- Nunavut: 0% (n = 0)

Court Level

297 survey respondents specified the court or tribunal that their case was filed in. Given that the majority filed their claims in Ontario, it is not surprising that the greatest number of legal claims were filed in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. The breakdown is as follows:

- Ontario Superior Court of Justice: 23.91% (n = 71)
- Ontario Court of Justice: 17.85% (n = 53)
- Various tribunals: 9.4% (n = 28)
- Alberta Court of Justice: 8% (n = 24)
- Alberta Court of King's Bench: 8% (n = 24)

- British Columbia Provincial Court: 6.73% (n = 20)

- British Columbia Supreme Court: 6% (n = 18)

- Federal Court: 2.69% (n = 8)

- British Columbia Court of Appeal: 2.36% (n = 7)

- Alberta Court of Appeal: 2% (n = 6)

- Ontario Court of Appeal: 2% (n = 6)

- Newfoundland and Labrador Court of Appeal: 1.68% (n = 5)

- Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Court: 1.68% (n = 5)

- Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court: 1.68% (n = 5)

- Probate Court: 1.68% (n = 5)

- Manitoba Provincial Court: 1.35% (n = 4)

- Small Claims Court: 1.35% (n = 4)

- Supreme Court of Canada: 1.35% (n = 4)

- Tax Court of Canada: 1.35% (n = 4)

- New Brunswick Court of King's Bench: 1% (n = 3)

- Nova Scotia Supreme Court: 1% (n = 3)

- Saskatchewan Provincial Court: 1% (n = 3)

- New Brunswick Provincial Court: 0.67% (n = 2)

- Nova Scotia Court of Appeal: 0.67% (n = 2)

- Prince Edward Island Supreme Court: 0.67% (n = 2)

- Quebec Court of Quebec: 0.67% (n = 2)

- Yukon Territorial Court: 0.67% (n = 2)

- Manitoba Court of King's Bench: 0.34% (n = 1)

- Northwest Territories Supreme Court: 0.34% (n = 1)

- Quebec Superior Court: 0.34% (n = 1)

- Saskatchewan Court of Appeal: 0.34% (n = 1)

- Saskatchewan Court of King's Bench: 0.34% (n = 1)

Write-in responses naming various tribunals made up the third highest proportion of responses to this question, at 9.4% (n = 28). "LTB" or "Landlord Tennant Board" and "HRT"

or "Human Rights Tribunal" were the most commonly cited tribunals (tied at 3.7%, n = 11, each), while 1% (n = 3) cited "LRB" or "Labour Relations Board," and 0.67% (n = 2) cited "CRT" or "Civil Resolution Tribunal." Other tribunals referred to included "WCAT," "IRB," and "SAT." Because these are write-in responses, it is not always clear which specific jurisdiction respondents may be referring to. While ideally we would include every tribunal in a list of options in the survey, as we do with the courts, in order to get more accurate and specific data, there are simply too many tribunals across Canada to make this feasible. However, given the proportion of SRLs who engage with tribunals, NSRLP hopes at some point to embark on more specific research studies into their experiences.

It is notable that several appellate and territorial courts (Manitoba Court of Appeal, New Brunswick Court of Appeal, Nunavut Court of Justice and Court of Appeal, Prince Edward Island Provincial Court and Court of Appeal, and Yukon Supreme Court and Court of Appeal) were not represented in this intake period. This may suggest limited SRL activity at these higher court levels, or that SRLs in these jurisdictions are underrepresented among our respondents or unfamiliar with our organization, or a combination of these considerations. Monitoring these "zero" responses in future intakes will help determine whether this is a persistent trend to be investigated, or a reflection of the specific sample in this reporting period.

Part III: What help do SRLs seek?

Why are you representing yourself?

In the past, NSRLP has generally assumed anyone filling out the intake form was self-representing out of financial necessity. However we are now seeking additional detail through an explicit question about why the respondent is self-representing, added in March 2025. It allows respondents to select multiple motivations for self-representation, and add individualized comments. 73 respondents answered the question during this intake period. This early sampling of data provides valuable insight into the multiple and intersecting factors influencing people's decisions to self-litigate (we reiterate that respondents can select as many options as they wish):

- I cannot afford to hire a lawyer: 72.6% (n = 53)
- I do not qualify for legal aid: 36.99% (n = 27)
- I had a lawyer, but ran out of money: 35.62% (n = 26)
- I had a bad experience with a lawyer: 26.03% (n = 19)
- I do not trust lawyers generally: 12.33% (n = 9)
- I prefer to represent myself: 10.96% (n = 8)
- I had legal aid support, but it ran out: 5.48% (n = 4)
- Other (please specify): 36.99% (n = 27)

Respondents selecting "Other" took the opportunity to further explain how intersectional factors influenced their decision to self-litigate. From these answers, we can identify recurring themes around the causes and impacts of self-representation. For example, as seen above in the "Annual income levels" section, it would appear that many individuals do not qualify for legal aid and simultaneously cannot afford to hire a lawyer. Some respondents reported facing procedural difficulties and feeling trapped by legal technicalities when trying to secure adequate representation. Many noted that they could not find lawyers willing to take their case.

Assistance from lawyers

Out of 354 respondents, 308 answered the question, *"Have you worked with a lawyer to represent you at any stage in this case?"* The majority indicated that they had previously worked with a lawyer (73.38%, n = 226), while 26.62% (n = 82) said no. This suggests that many SRLs initially secure legal representation but are subsequently obliged to proceed alone – we believe as a result of financial constraints.

Respondents who worked with a lawyer were asked whether they retained one privately, received legal aid, or were assisted *pro bono*. Of 222 respondents, 66.95% (n = 156) worked with a private lawyer, 26.18% (n = 61) received legal aid, and 6.87% (n = 16) were assisted *pro bono*. These percentages are similar to those reported in 2021–23.

Regarding their satisfaction level with past legal assistance, 247 respondents answered:

- Poor: 45.75% (n = 113)
- Moderate/OK: 31.98% (n = 79)
- Well satisfied: 14.57% (n = 36)
- Not applicable: 7.69% (n = 19)

Overall, the data indicates that while many SRLs initially access legal support – primarily through private lawyers – costs and other challenges often force them to continue without representation, and satisfaction with available legal services remains moderate to low.

Unbundled legal services

Unbundled, or limited-scope legal services are a la carte services provided for specific elements of a client's case, as opposed to traditional full-scope retainers in which the lawyer assumes responsibility for the totality of the client's case. Unbundling offers a more affordable option for those unable to pay for full representation. Limited scope retainers can be particularly helpful for people who are primarily self-represented, but who wish to consult a lawyer on issues and procedures with which they struggle.

221 respondents answered a question on whether they had used unbundled services, with 57.92% **(**n = 128**)** answering 'No,' while 42.08% (n = 93) answered 'Yes.' Out of the 'Yes' responses, 118 provided further insight regarding their level of satisfaction with the unbundled legal services they received:

- Moderate/OK: 44.07% (n = 52)

- Poor: 38.98% (n = 46)

- Well satisfied: 16.95% (n = 20)

As reflected in previous Intake Reports, there has been a continued increase in SRLs accessing unbundled legal services:

Intake Report	% Offered Unbundled Legal Services	% Not Offered Unbundled Legal Services	% Sought Unbundled Legal Services But was Unsuccessful	Poor	Moderate/OK	Well Satisfied
2023–2025	57.93%	42.08%	56.72%	38.98%	44.07%	16.95%
2021–2023	34.1%	65.9%	52.6%	48%	32%	20%
2019–2021	27.2%	72.8%	50.5%	53.6%	28.6%	17.9%
2018–2019	29%	—	47%	50%	25%	25%
2017	25%	75%	—	43%	57%	0%

Table 9 – Previous Intake Reports on Unbundled Legal Services

Nonetheless, the data indicates that despite ongoing efforts to enhance affordability and accessibility, a significant proportion of users remain dissatisfied with these services.

When respondents were asked why the unbundled legal services received were unsatisfactory, many indicated that they had received minimal practical guidance, often confined to receiving assistance in completing forms or preparing documents, with little explanation of procedures or legal options. High costs and unexpected billing, including

charges for errors or incomplete work, were also common concerns. Poor communication and responsiveness, including delays, lack of updates, and inadequate explanations, were also reported. While some found unbundled or limited-scope services helpful, particularly in litigation, overall dissatisfaction with lawyers' competence, responsiveness, or approach led many to choose full self-representation.

Virtual court hearings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many court procedures migrated to video conference and teleconference formats. Therefore, NSRLP added a question to the survey in late 2020 inquiring whether respondents had engaged in virtual hearing procedures. Of 354 respondents, 303 answered the question in this data intake period. The majority, 65.68% (n = 199), reported having participated in a virtual court hearing, while 34.32% (n = 104) had not. Of those who had, 181 indicated the kind of virtual hearing they participated in:

- Motion or application: 26.52% (n = 48)
- Case conference: 20.99% (n = 38)
- Administrative or registrar hearing: 17.13% (n = 31)
- Unsure: 16.02% (n = 29)
- Settlement conference: 10.50% (n = 19)
- Trial: 5.52% (n = 10)
- Appeal hearing: 3.31% (n = 6)

When asked to share their thoughts on their experiences with virtual hearings, a total of 180 respondents provided write-in answers. While some explained they preferred virtual hearings because they allow participation from home (in more comfortable surroundings, with the ability to set up as they prefer), or a less intimidating atmosphere, many others described these hearings as difficult and stressful, citing last-minute changes from in-person to virtual without notice, distractions, and communication difficulties. Many faced challenges accessing documents during the hearing, while some found the experience emotionally overwhelming, particularly in complex personal cases involving domestic

issues or property disputes. Practical difficulties, such as preparing for court without physically attending, or managing technology while living in unstable conditions, also made participation challenging. Overall, virtual hearings were seen by many as less effective, stressful, and sometimes inequitable. For a deeper look at SRL experiences with virtual hearings, see NSRLP's 2024 research report, "Virtual Justice: A complex portrait of Canadian self-represented litigants' experiences with virtual hearings."

McKenzie Friends and support persons

A McKenzie Friend is a support person an SRL may bring into the courtroom with them. They can sit with the litigant, take notes, hand documents, and otherwise provide practical and emotional support. They cannot address the court, but instead act as a silent helper. Out of 163 respondents, 51.53% (n = 84) answered 'Yes,' to whether they had previously used a McKenzie Friend or support person, while 48.47% (n = 79) answered 'No.' Compared to the 2021-23 (32.4% said yes) and 2019-21 (42.3% said yes) reports, this intake cycle shows that a steadily increasing proportion of respondents report using a McKenzie Friend. The increase indicates greater awareness of this option among SRLs.

Usage of AI

In the midst of this reporting period (April 2024) NSRLP added questions to the survey on SRLs' use of artificial intelligence (AI). When asked whether they had used AI in preparing their case, out of a total of 237 respondents to this question, 43.46% (n = 103) answered 'Yes,' 52.74% (n = 125) answered 'No,' and 3.8% (n = 9) were 'Unsure.' When asked which AI tools they used, 103 respondents provided additional detail. ChatGPT was the most popular tool referenced, followed by Microsoft Copilot, with a few respondents mentioning Twitter Grok, Adobe AI, and DeepSeek. 106 respondents reported using AI tools for research, drafting, writing, formatting and organizing documents, and articulating arguments for both sides. Many noted that AI was helpful, but many also expressed disappointment with and uncertainty over the reliability of these tools:

> "As someone with no formal training in Canadian law and limited English proficiency, I rel[ied] heavily on AI as a thinking assistant and writing partner."

> "AI was not helpful with preparing my position and arguments. The strongest points of my case were not addressed within the AI information. AI was very helpful with writing letters and compiling my information."

> "AI can provide inspiration, but the results are occasionally not precise."

We note that the proportion of intake survey respondents who report using AI is steadily increasing over time, while responses to the question of their usefulness continue to be complex and thoughtful. NSRLP is committed to further understanding SRLs' use of AI, providing information and resources to help them use it wisely, and advocating for the equitable use of AI in the legal system broadly, to ensure it does not increase the justice gap such that lawyers have access to far more sophisticated resources than the public. As in every professional sphere, AI use in the justice system is a complex and evolving issue, with the potential to both increase access to justice, and exacerbate existing inequities or spawn new ones.

Part IV: SRL perspectives and stories

The final section of the intake survey provides an open space for SRLs to share personal testimonies about their experiences — both their personal journeys as SRLs, and their thoughts on the legal system more broadly. This section invites respondents to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of self-representation, and to offer insights or advice to others who may be considering self-representation or currently navigating the process. Given the many barriers within the legal system, these firsthand accounts help contextualize the challenges SRLs face, and provide guidance for others.

Negative experiences

SRLs frequently report a range of emotional and systemic challenges throughout their legal journeys. Many describe feelings of helplessness and isolation, coupled with a belief that justice is unattainable within the current system. A significant barrier they face is difficulty understanding procedural nuances, which further exacerbates their stress and contributes to a sense of overwhelm and the inability to participate effectively. The lack of clarity around legal processes often leaves SRLs struggling to navigate the system, deepening their frustration and reinforcing the perception that the system is not designed for them:

> "Justice, you have got to be kidding. After all this, the only thing left for me, is to create my own justice, isn't it?"

> "The hardest part is the reliance on a system which claims to support and protect SRLs but fails. Procedural nuances which [I am] not aware of have hindered me down."

A recurring theme is the perception of systemic failure at every stage, including the unrealistic expectation to perform 'like a lawyer' without adequate support. External life

factors such as family obligations and health issues often hinder full participation, leading to significant stress and, in some instances, exacerbation of existing health conditions:

> "The legal system assumes a level of procedural literacy that most SRLs do not have, and it often feels like you're being penalized not for your case, but for [not] knowing how to behave like a lawyer."

> "I ...could not continue as my health issues are life threatening and aggravated by stress."

The process of navigating the legal system is described as both physically and mentally exhausting, with confusion being a common experience. SRLs also report feeling intimidated by opposing counsel and, occasionally, encountering unprofessional conduct from legal professionals, further undermining their confidence in the system:

> "Counsel has sent me unsolicited "recommendations" to amend my pleadings or obtain legal advice, even after I expressly requested in writing that such unsolicited advice cease. . . [They have], on more than one occasion, introduced comments that placed doubt on my credibility and on the conduct of my spouse, despite such matters being unrelated to the issues before the Court."

Positive experiences

While many SRLs express anxiety and stress about their upcoming court cases or decisions, a few also share moments of optimism and hope:

> "I am super excited but somewhat stressed regarding my upcoming judicial review."

> "I have only [recently] decided to [self-represent] but so far I feel more empowered. I have hired a legal coach. I don't know that I would have felt confident enough to process without a lawyer without a legal coach. Tips: hire a legal coach. Don't wait to set trial."

> "I have learned a great deal. Presently, we are waiting for a judge's decision for a perjury hearing against my ex and his lawyer; I received leave for this. The opposing party tried to appeal the oral summary hearing as ordered by the judge. I am confident that I will be successful."

Notably, some SRLs conveyed sincere gratitude for the support and resources provided by the NSRLP:

> "I do appreciate the resources on [NSRLP's] website... pamphlets and videos."

> "I have been the victim of those who have power and resources, I believe NSRLP would be very helpful also useful for a self-representative plaintiff."

Advice to other SRLs

SRLs often emphasize the importance of preparation and emotional resilience. They recommend thoroughly understanding court rules — especially key provisions — and documenting everything, including communications with opposing parties and interactions with court staff. SRLs caution others to expect resistance even when legally correct. Some suggest using artificial intelligence tools to help synthesize information and improve clarity in legal documents. They also highlight the importance of documenting any prejudice or harm, and to actively pursue enforcement when necessary. SRLs caution against mistaking silence for neutrality, and encourage proactive legal action. Importantly, they stress knowing personal limits and choosing peace when the emotional toll becomes too great.

> "... Don't mistake silence for neutrality: Sometimes, courts will not intervene unless pushed. If someone isn't following the order, don't wait to apply for enforcement, file affidavits, and escalate appropriately....Know your limits and choose peace when you

> need to: It's okay to stop fighting for a hearing date or complaint when the emotional toll is too high. You're not giving up you're protecting your well-being. That is strength, not failure."

Rather than always trying to mimic the behaviour and language of lawyers, SRLs advise focusing on presenting the truth clearly, supported by evidence, and using plain-language resources and peer support. Finally, they recommend seeking legal assistance, when possible, through unbundled or *pro bono* services, and maintaining confidence through careful preparation and a strong case.

> "My tip for other SRLs is: don't try to imitate lawyers. Instead, focus on presenting the truth clearly, backing it up with evidence, and identifying the legal questions as best you can. If you can, use AI tools, plain language resources, and talk to others who've been through the process. You may be alone on paper, but you don't have to feel alone."

> "My tips – get legal support if you can. Call *pro bono* as often as you can. Take 1 step at [a] time and just have confidence in yourself and case. In my circumstance, it helps to have a strong case. I had preserved evidence, taken pictures, videos etc. I was very well prepared."

Final thoughts

The experiences shared with NSRLP by SRLs reveal a complex and often challenging journey through the Canadian legal system. A recurring theme is the difficulty associated with navigating complex procedural frameworks that require a nuanced understanding of the legal process, which intensifies the stress and confusion faced by those attempting to advocate for themselves. In navigating these barriers, SRLs express deep appreciation for the support and resources offered by reliable legal information sources, including the NSRLP, which provide guidance, empowerment, and a sense of community.

Founded in response to the voices of SRLs who participated in Dr. Julie Macfarlane's original study, the NSRLP has grown into a vital platform for advocacy, research, and resource development. Through our SRL Intake Form and ongoing engagement with SRLs across Canada, the NSRLP continues to shed light on the realities of self-representation, and fosters meaningful dialogue between litigants and justice system professionals. The insights shared by SRLs — ranging from the identification of barriers and stress points to practical strategies and emotional resilience — underscore the urgent need for accessible legal support and systemic reform.

The NSRLP's Intake Form survey tool and other resources and programs are dynamic and evolving, reflecting our commitment to adapting to changes in the legal landscape and emerging issues faced by SRLs. Questions and feedback regarding the data presented in this report are welcomed via email (representingyourself@gmail.com). The NSRLP deeply values the time and honesty of respondents who have shared their stories and offered guidance to others navigating similar paths. Through continued research, resource development, and advocacy, the NSRLP remains dedicated to supporting SRLs and contributing to solutions that address the access to justice crisis in Canada.

The NSRLP regularly hears from self-represented litigants through our public email address (representingyourself@gmail.com). We can also be found on our website, as well as on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn, and Bluesky, where SRLs, legal system professionals, and members of the public can leave comments and engage in discussion. These communications are indicative of the general desire among self-represented litigants to better understand the justice system and the processes relevant to their cases. Although the NSRLP is unable to provide legal advice or review submission materials for SRLs, NSRLP staff can direct self-represented litigants to our own and other resources, and give general legal information to provide assistance and support.