

January 2017

# Consumer Experiences with Debt Collection

Findings from the CFPB's Survey of Consumer Views on Debt

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# 1. Introduction

This report presents the results of the Survey of Consumer Views on Debt (“survey”) which was conducted by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (“Bureau”) between December 2014 and March 2015. The survey results substantially expand the understanding of debt collection in the United States by providing the first comprehensive and nationally representative data on consumers’ experiences and preferences related to debt collection.<sup>1</sup>

A debt collector generally contacts a consumer when the collector believes that the consumer owes an unpaid debt. Debts for which a collection may be attempted can include both loans, such as a car loan or student loan, and past-due bills, such as a doctor’s bill or a phone bill. The collector may be the original creditor or another entity that is trying to collect the debt on behalf of the creditor, on behalf of a third party that has purchased the debt from the creditor, or on its own account as a purchaser of the debt obligation (collectively, debt collectors).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Bureau released some preliminary findings from this survey in July 2016. See Appendix B of CFPB, “Small Business Review Panel for Debt Collector and Debt Buyer Rulemaking” (July 28, 2016), available at [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/20160727\\_cfpb\\_Outline\\_of\\_proposals.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/20160727_cfpb_Outline_of_proposals.pdf). This report provides more detailed results.

<sup>2</sup> This report refers to third parties attempting to collect a debt as “debt collectors” and uses the term “creditor” to refer to first-party collectors, including lenders or billers to whom the consumer has an outstanding debt, regardless of whether that debt is a loan or a bill. This shorthand aligns with the wording of the survey, which defined a debt collector as “a person or company other than the creditor that tries to collect on a debt, such as an attorney, a debt

The survey provides a more comprehensive picture of consumers' experiences with debt collection than has been available from other data sources. Consumer complaint data, for example, reflect only the experiences of those consumers who contacted the Bureau or other governmental agencies and therefore may not be representative of consumers' experiences generally. Administrative data from specific debt collection firms can provide detail that is helpful for understanding collection processes and practices of particular entities, including some of the larger firms engaged in debt collection. Information from firms, however, generally cannot provide a market-wide perspective or capture the consumer's perspective, and it may not be representative of collections by firms of different sizes or debt types. In contrast, as described in Section 2, the Bureau's survey sample was selected from credit records maintained by one of the top three nationwide credit repositories, and the survey data were adjusted for differences in response rates for different types of consumers. As a result, estimates from the survey are representative of U.S. consumers with a credit report.<sup>3</sup>

The survey asked consumers about their experiences, if any, with debt collectors over the past year.<sup>4</sup> For consumers who had such an experience, the survey captured detail on the debt for which they were most recently contacted. In addition, the survey collected data on disputes and lawsuits, preferences for communications with a creditor or collector, and each consumer's demographic characteristics, general financial situation, and credit-market experiences. As with any survey data, the results reflect the self-reported responses of survey participants and should be considered as such throughout this report. In contrast, results based on other sources of data,

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collection firm, or other third party" and defined "creditor" to include both lenders and those seeking payment on a past-due bill.

<sup>3</sup> This report uses the term "consumer" for brevity, but because the sample was drawn from a random sample of consumer credit records from one nationwide credit repository, the sample and population are, more precisely, consumers with a credit record from that firm. Prior Bureau research indicates that one in ten adult Americans do not have a credit record.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the survey asked about consumers' experiences with debt collection in the period since January 2014, roughly one year before the survey was conducted.

notably administrative data linked to the surveys, are noted in the text. The survey questionnaire is appended to this report.

The following is a summary of the key findings:

- About one-in-three consumers with a credit record (32 percent) indicated that they had been contacted by at least one creditor or collector trying to collect one or more debts during the year prior to the survey. Most of these consumers (72 percent) reported that they had been contacted about two or more debts.
- Past-due medical bills, credit cards, and student loans were among the most frequently cited debts consumers were contacted about. The prevalence of contacts about credit cards and student loans in collection differed across demographic and credit-score groups. In contrast, the shares of consumers who were contacted about past-due medical bills were more comparable across income levels, credit scores, and ages.
- More than half of consumers (53 percent) who were contacted about a debt in collection in the past year indicated that the debt was not theirs, was owed by a family member, or was for the wrong amount. Roughly one-quarter (27 percent) of consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection reported having disputed a debt with their creditor or collector in the past year.
- About one-in-seven consumers (15 percent) who were contacted about a debt in collection reported having been sued by a creditor or debt collector in the preceding year. Twenty-six percent of consumers who were sued reported that they attended the court hearing.
- More than one-third of consumers (37 percent) contacted about a debt in collection indicated that the creditor or debt collector that had contacted them most recently usually tried to reach the consumer at least four times per week and 17 percent reported that the creditor or collector usually tried to reach them at least eight times per week. Close to two-thirds of consumers (63 percent) contacted by a creditor or debt collector said they were contacted too often.
- Forty-two percent of consumers with collection experience in the past year said they had asked at least one creditor or collector to stop contacting them. One-in-four consumers who made this request reported that the contact stopped.

- Consumers most commonly indicated that they would prefer to be contacted about a debt in collection by letter or phone. Consumers most commonly identified in-person contacts as the way they would least like to be contacted.
- Consumers feel it is important that others not overhear a message about their debt from a creditor or debt collector. At the same time, most consumers also want the creditor or debt collector to include, for example, their name and the purpose of the call (debt collection) on a voicemail or answering machine.
- Consumers tend to take a more favorable view of creditors seeking to collect a debt than of debt collectors. Consumers were more likely to report that debt collectors contacted them too frequently compared with consumers contacted with the same frequency by a creditor. Consumers contacted by debt collectors were more likely than those contacted by creditors to report negative experiences such as being treated impolitely or threatened.

The rest of this report is organized as follows. Section 2 details the methodology and the types of questions asked in the survey. Section 3 discusses the prevalence of debt collections, as well as the extent to which consumers dispute debts and the extent to which creditors or collectors pursue the collection of debt through lawsuits. In many cases, these results are broken out based on selected consumer characteristics. Sections 4 and 5 detail survey responses related to how the creditor or collector communicated with consumers for their most recent debt collection and how the consumer would prefer to communicate regarding a debt collection. The final section of the report compares the responses for consumers based on whether the consumer's most recent collections-related contact was from the original creditor or from a debt collector.

## 2. Sample and survey design, response rates, and weights

### 2.1 Sample design

The sample for the survey was selected from the Bureau's Consumer Credit Panel (CCP), a 1-in-48 random and deidentified sample of credit records maintained by one of the top three nationwide credit repositories.<sup>5</sup> The credit repository associated the survey responses to CCP information through a process that preserved the confidentiality of consumers in the survey sample, survey responses, and credit record information.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The CCP excludes any information that might reveal consumers' identities, such as names, addresses, and Social Security numbers. For more information on the privacy protections associated with this survey, see the Consumer Experience Research Privacy Impact Assessment, available at [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201406\\_cfpb\\_consumer-experience-research\\_pia.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201406_cfpb_consumer-experience-research_pia.pdf) and System of Records Notice CFPB.022, Market and Consumer Research Records, available at <http://www.consumerfinance.gov/privacy/system-records-notices/market-and-consumer-research-records-2/>.

<sup>6</sup> The Bureau selected the survey sample and informed the credit repository which credit records were selected. The credit repository (which, unlike the Bureau, has name and address information associated with each record) mailed the survey to the consumer associated with each sampled credit record. Survey responses were collected by the credit repository's subcontractor, who removed any direct personally identifying information and other potentially identifying information that respondents may have inadvertently included. The subcontractor converted the



This approach has several advantages. In a simple random sample, most consumers would not have had a recent debt collection. To ensure that the survey included a sufficient number of responses from consumers who had experienced debt collection, credit records with a recent 60-day delinquency on a loan, a reported collection, or both as of September 2014 were sampled at a higher rate than other records. By disproportionately sampling records with 60-day delinquencies, the survey captured not only consumers with a collection tradeline, but also those who might be delinquent with a creditor and thus may experience collection efforts even though they do not have a collection tradeline on their credit record. The survey weights account for the different sampling rates (see below), so the survey results presented here are representative of all consumers with a credit record.

Associating the survey responses to CCP information such as credit score, age, and recent delinquencies strengthens the survey in two additional ways. First, this information is captured for consumers who did not respond to the survey as well as for those who responded. Statistical bias in estimates due to nonresponse is a concern for almost all surveys. The information contained in credit records provides a stronger basis to examine and to adjust for potential nonresponse bias than is generally available in most surveys, which typically do not have similarly extensive information for both respondents and non-respondents. The results reported here are weighted to adjust for nonresponse bias (see below). Second, in some cases, information from credit records can be brought to bear in reviewing, editing, and statistical processing of incomplete or ambiguous survey responses.

## 2.2 Survey questionnaire and topics

The survey questionnaire comprised 67 questions covering seven topic areas. The final questionnaire reflected public comments on a proposed questionnaire which was published as

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responses into an electronic format, and transmitted the data to the credit repository which provided the response data to the Bureau along with the CCP-specific encrypted record identifier.

part of the process of obtaining approval to conduct the survey under the Paperwork Reduction Act and also findings from cognitive testing of the proposed survey questionnaire. All consumers were asked to complete sections A, F, and G. Section A asked about consumers' general financial situation and credit-market experiences. Section F assessed preferences for ways that creditors or collectors could contact the consumer (for example, home phone, cell phone, letter, or email). Finally, Section G collected data on demographic characteristics, annual household income, and demographic or economic events that the household had experienced in the prior year.

Questions in sections B through E pertained only to consumers who indicated that a creditor or debt collector had contacted them in the prior year about a debt in collection.<sup>7</sup> Section B asked about all such collection attempts in the past year, including the types of debt in collection, whether the consumer paid a debt after being contacted, and whether the consumer felt any of the collection attempts were in error.

The questions in Section C focused on details of the most recent collection attempt, including the ways in which the consumer was contacted, the frequency of contacts, and whether the creditor or a debt collector was pursuing payment. Section C also solicited consumers' views on, for example, whether the creditor or debt collector had been polite, provided accurate information, or had contacted the consumer too often.

Section D focused on disputed debts.<sup>8</sup> The section examined, for example, how and why consumers disputed debts as well as the creditor's or collector's response to the dispute.

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<sup>7</sup> The questions in these sections and elsewhere about consumers' experiences asked, specifically, about the period since January 2014, roughly one year before the survey was conducted.

<sup>8</sup> The survey said that "People may dispute a debt by telling the creditor or debt collector, for example, that the debt is not theirs, that the amount is wrong, or that something else about the debt is incorrect." The consumers' perspectives on whether they had disputed a debt may differ from the definition of dispute used by a given creditor or collector, or what may constitute disputes pursuant to the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) or Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA).

Section E collected information on the prevalence of collections-related lawsuits and whether consumers who were sued attended the court hearing.

## 2.3 Data collection protocol

The survey proceeded in two phases and was sent to a total of 10,876 consumers. First, to gauge the potential success of the survey, the Bureau conducted a pilot survey of 997 consumers in December 2014. Responses from the pilot indicated that consumers could follow the question sequences and were willing to complete the survey. With the success of the pilot, the main survey of 9,879 consumers began in mid-January 2015, and data collection continued into March 2015. For both the pilot and main surveys, the invitation and reminder letters were in both English and Spanish, and consumers were given the option to complete the survey in English, either on paper or online. The main survey additionally included an online Spanish option.

The survey protocol was approved by the Office of Management and Budget as required under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995.<sup>9</sup> The protocol for the main survey started with a mailed cover letter, paper questionnaire, and respondent incentive. The letter and questionnaire contained an option to take the survey online. A reminder letter was sent in week two. In week five, another letter, replacement questionnaire, and incentive were sent to those who had not yet responded. A final reminder was sent in week seven. The pilot survey used a slightly abbreviated protocol, but the questionnaires for the pilot and main surveys were identical, so the results presented in this report combine responses from both.

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<sup>9</sup> The survey was assigned OMB Control Number 3170-0047.

## 2.4 Response rates

About 20 percent of consumers invited to complete the survey did so, yielding a sample of 2,132 survey responses. About ten percent of responses (from 226 consumers) were received online, and the rest were returned by mail. The response rate varied by several key variables available in the CCP. For example, the response rate for consumers whose credit record contained a new 60-day past-due loan or a newly reported collection in the prior year was about 15 percent. By comparison, 30 percent of sampled consumers whose credit record did not include a new delinquency or collection responded to the survey. This difference in response rates might be expected because potentially negative financial information—including debt and debt collection, in particular—is a sensitive topic to many consumers. Finally, the response rate for consumers who appear to have moved from one census tract to another between September 2014 and March 2015 was 13 percent, which was about eight percentage points lower than the response rate for other consumers.

## 2.5 Statistical adjustments and considerations

As described, different segments were sampled from the CCP at different rates, and survey response rates varied by characteristics of credit records. The survey data are, therefore, weighted to account for both the differential sampling and the differential nonresponse. A variety of variables which are available in the CCP can be used to facilitate weighting to account for differential nonresponse. The weights used in all of the analyses combine selection weights (to account for the fact that certain segments were sampled at higher rates than others) and nonresponse adjustment weights (to account for differences in response rates). These combined weights ensure that the weighted distributions for the sample of respondents align with the CCP for key variables. Such weighting procedures reduce the risk of significant bias in generalizing from the sample of respondents to the broader population of consumers with credit records.

A key aim of the survey was to gain a basis for examining how consumers' experiences with debt collection processes vary. The report illustrates this variation by presenting estimates for several groups of consumers defined by demographic or credit characteristics. These results are intended to be descriptive and to highlight patterns that may be of policy interest as they add to the Bureau's and other researchers' understanding of consumers' experiences with the debt

collection process. Differences across groups may reflect a variety of factors that may be correlated with demographic or credit characteristics. This report does not attempt to disentangle the underlying sources of these differences. In addition, although the analysis sought to ensure reasonable sample size in calculations, the report does not present standard errors or statements about the statistical significance of the differences.

The Bureau intends to report additional technical documentation of the survey methodology and expects that the survey will form the basis for both further descriptive studies as well as in-depth analyses of consumer finances and financial decisionmaking. As noted in the original material presented to the OMB, the Bureau intends to release a public version of the data if it can do so while protecting the confidentiality of survey respondents.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The estimates in future reports or in a public release file may differ slightly from those reported here as the Bureau's researchers may revise the weighting, editing, or statistical processing of the survey responses as they continue to work with the data. The Bureau does not expect that any such changes would substantively alter the estimates.

# 3. Collections-related contacts, disputes, and lawsuits

## 3.1 Consumers with collections experience

Almost one-third of consumers (32 percent) reported being contacted over the past year by a creditor or debt collector about a debt (Table 1). Most of these consumers said they were contacted about between two and four debts, although 27 percent said they were contacted about a single debt. A small but notable share, about 16 percent, said they were contacted about five or more debts.

**TABLE 1:** DISTRIBUTION OF NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT IN THE PRIOR YEAR (PERCENT)

Number of debts in collection contacted about	All consumers	Consumers contacted about a debt in collection
None	68	—
One	9	27
Two to four	18	57
Five or more	5	16

Prior researchers have sought to quantify the percentage of consumers experiencing debt collection by estimating the percentage of consumers with a debt collection reported on their credit record. The quantification presented here is based on the percentage of consumers who reported that they had been contacted about a debt in collection. These are two distinct definitions of consumers with debt in collection and, therefore, could yield different conclusions about the number and types of consumers with debt in collection.

The differences between these sets of consumers can, in fact, shed light on some aspects of debt collection practices. For example, creditors engaged in debt collection generally do not report

collection tradelines; rather, they either report the status of the underlying loan (where applicable) or do not report at all. Debt collectors may also refrain from reporting their collections activity—especially if there is an underlying loan that is being reported by the creditor—or, they may not report collection tradelines with respect to debts that have been paid. On the other hand, debt collectors may report collection tradelines even though the collectors are not actively attempting to collect.<sup>11</sup>

The combined survey-CCP data suggest that, in fact, many collections may not be reported to the nationwide credit repositories as collection tradelines since, for example, nearly 80 percent of consumers who reported having been contacted about a single debt in collection in the past year did not have a new collection tradeline reported between January 2014 and March 2015 (Table 2). About half of consumers who indicated they had been contacted about more than one debt in collection in the past year had no new collection tradeline that appeared on their credit records in the prior fifteen months.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, it is noteworthy that ninety-six percent of consumers who indicated they had not been contacted by a creditor or collector in the prior year did not have any new collection tradelines in the prior year (Table 2). The fact that the vast majority of consumers who were not contacted about a debt in collection in the past year did not have a new collection tradeline provides confidence in the accuracy of the survey responses and illustrates the ability to effectively sample types of consumers of particular interest when using credit record data as a sampling frame for surveys related to debt and consumer finances.

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<sup>11</sup> The Bureau previously has reported on the practice known as “passive collections” that involves reporting a debt in collections to one or more credit repositories and simply waiting for the consumer to discover the collection tradeline (rather than actively seeking to collect from the consumer). See CFPB, “Consumer Credit Reports: A Study of Medical and Non-Medical Collections,” available at [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201412\\_cfpb\\_reports\\_consumer-credit-medical-and-non-medical-collections.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201412_cfpb_reports_consumer-credit-medical-and-non-medical-collections.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Some of these consumers may have been contacted about older debts with collection tradelines that were reported earlier than January 2014.

**TABLE 2:** NUMBER OF NEW COLLECTION TRADELINES IN CREDIT RECORDS BY NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS REPORTED BEING CONTACTED ABOUT (PERCENT)

<b>New collection tradelines in credit record, January 2014– March 2015 (CCP)</b>	<b>None (survey)</b>	<b>One debt (survey)</b>	<b>Two or more debts (survey)</b>
None	96	79	52
One collection tradeline	2	10	23
Two or more collection tradelines	2	11	25

### 3.1.1 Differences in collections experiences by consumer characteristics

Consumers with relatively low incomes were more likely to report having experienced debt collection efforts in the prior year. About half of consumers (52 percent) with (self-reported) annual household income less than \$20,000 reported that they had been contacted about repaying a debt in collection; this share falls to just 16 percent for those with income of \$70,000 or more (Table 3).

**TABLE 3:** DISTRIBUTION OF THE NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME (PERCENT)

<b>Annual household income</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>One debt</b>	<b>Two or more debts</b>
Less than \$20,000	48	14	38
\$20,000-\$39,999	58	8	33
\$40,000-\$69,999	70	10	20
\$70,000 or more	84	5	11

In contrast to the differences in the share of consumers contacted about a debt in collection, the shares of consumers who reported having been contacted about multiple debts are generally similar by income. Among consumers who said they had been contacted about a debt in collection, the fraction of consumers contacted about multiple debts ranged between 67 percent and 80 percent across the four groups.



For purposes of comparing consumers with different credit characteristics in this report, consumers are classified into two groups—non-prime and prime—based on a commercially available credit score as of September 2014.<sup>13</sup> About two-thirds (66 percent) of consumers with non-prime credit scores said they had been contacted about a debt in collection during the past year (Table 4). By comparison, about 12 percent of consumers with prime credit scores reported having been contacted. The greater fraction of consumers with non-prime credit scores who had been contacted about a debt in collection likely reflects the fact that credit scoring models generally assign lower scores to consumers with a recent collection tradeline or major delinquency.<sup>14</sup>

**TABLE 4:** DISTRIBUTION OF NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT BY CREDIT SCORE (PERCENT)

Credit score	None	One debt	Two or more debts
Non-prime	34	13	53
Prime	88	6	7

Consumers between the ages of 35 and 49 were most likely to say they were contacted about a debt in collection (Table 5).<sup>15</sup> By comparison, it was less common for consumers age 62 or older to report having been contacted about a debt collection, although even within this age segment 19 percent reported having been contacted about a debt in collection. The pattern by age may

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<sup>13</sup> About 37 percent of consumers are classified as “non-prime.”

<sup>14</sup> Recently-developed credit scoring models have begun to exclude collections that are for relatively small amounts or have been paid in full.

<sup>15</sup> The age ranges shown in Table 5 and subsequently in this report use the age as recorded in the CCP.

reflect, in part, the fact that debt holdings similarly peak among households with a head in their mid-30s to mid-40s.<sup>16</sup>

**TABLE 5:** DISTRIBUTION OF THE NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT BY AGE (PERCENT)

Age	None	One debt	Two or more debts
Less than 35	66	8	26
35–49	58	9	33
50–61	65	11	24
62 or older	81	7	12

Table 6 reports findings by consumers’ self-reported race and ethnicity. Consumers are categorized as either white or non-white for race and, separately, are categorized as Hispanic or non-Hispanic for ethnicity.<sup>17</sup>

More than 40 percent of non-white consumers reported having been contacted about a debt in collection, compared with 29 percent of white consumers. Hispanic consumers were more likely than non-Hispanic consumers to report having been contacted about a collection (39 percent and 31 percent, respectively). As noted above, these and other differences across groups may

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<sup>16</sup> According to the 2013 Survey of Consumer Finances, the share of families with any debt is greatest for families with a head between the ages of 35 and 44, and these families have the second-highest median amount of debt (conditional on having any). See [http://www.federalreserve.gov/econresdata/scf/files/scf2013\\_tables\\_internal\\_real.xls](http://www.federalreserve.gov/econresdata/scf/files/scf2013_tables_internal_real.xls).

<sup>17</sup> The non-white category includes individuals who self-identified alone or in combination as: Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The white category comprises those who self-identified as white alone.

stem from factors that are correlated with demographic characteristics, and disentangling these potential factors is beyond the scope of this report.<sup>18</sup>

**TABLE 6:** DISTRIBUTION OF THE NUMBER OF DEBTS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT BY RACE AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)

Consumer characteristic	None	One debt	Two or more debts
<b>Race</b>			
White	71	7	21
Non-white	56	13	31
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	61	9	30
Non-Hispanic	69	9	23

## 3.2 Types of debt in collection

The survey asked what types of obligations were the subject of the debt collections reported by consumers. This section of the report separately presents findings for loans (such as student loans and credit cards) and for past-due bills (such as medical debts). The survey distinguished between loans and past-due bills primarily to emphasize to respondents that, when thinking about debts and debt collection, they should include past-due bills as debts. The distinction between loans and past-due bills in collection may also be of interest to the extent the amount, age, type of consumer, and credit-reporting status of these debts differ.

### 3.2.1 Loans

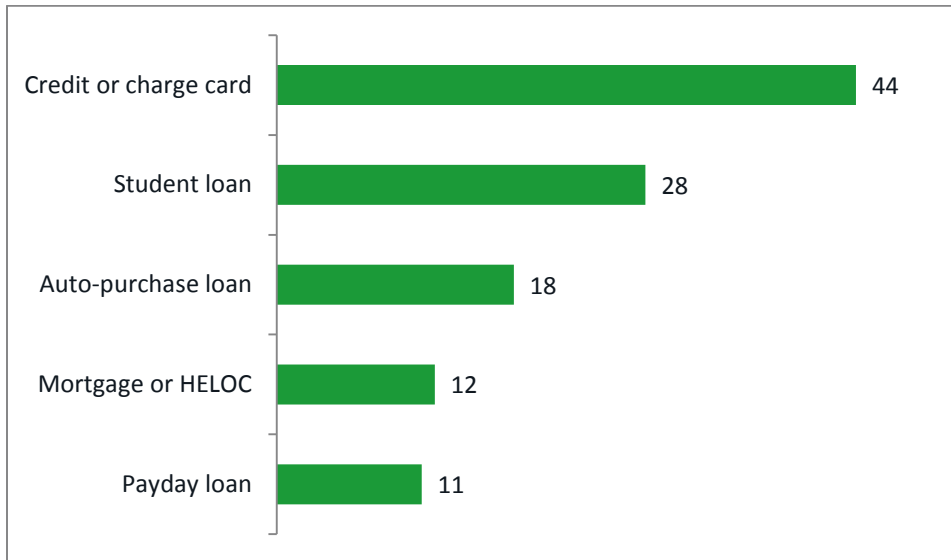
Among consumers who were contacted about a collection, credit cards and student loans were the most common debts that consumers reported having been contacted about, with 44 percent

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the estimated difference for whites compared with non-whites narrows by roughly one-quarter when comparing consumers with similar incomes in a regression framework.

and 28 percent of consumers citing these debts, respectively. Auto loans were cited by 18 percent of consumers contacted about a debt in collection, and mortgages and home equity lines of credit (HELOCs) were cited by 12 percent of consumers.<sup>19</sup> Eleven percent of consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection reported attempts to collect on a payday loan.<sup>20</sup>

**FIGURE 1:** TYPES OF LOANS FOR WHICH CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED (PERCENT)



Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection. The percentages sum to more than 100 percent because respondents could report contacts about multiple types of debts.

<sup>19</sup> Contacts about these debts could include not only attempts to collect past-due loan amounts but also potentially deficiency balances following a foreclosure or repossession.

<sup>20</sup> The survey asked separately about auto loans and auto title loans. Results for auto title loans are not shown, however, because of potential confusion from some respondents between this loan product and auto-purchase loans which leads us to believe that the share of consumers with auto title loans may be biased upward. According the survey, about eight percent of consumers currently have an auto title loan. In contrast, 1.3 percent of consumers reported taking out an auto title loan in the past year according to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation's 2015 National Survey of Unbanked and Underbanked Households (<https://www.fdic.gov/householdsurvey/2015/2015report.pdf>, p. 34). The Pew Charitable Trusts similarly estimated, based on state regulatory reports and industry filings, that about one percent of adults use auto title loans each year (<http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/03/autotitleloansreport.pdf?la=en>, endnote 1).

Table 7 considers differences in the characteristics of consumers who reported having been contacted about the three most common types of loans: collections for a credit card, student loan, or auto loan. Among all consumers contacted about at least one debt, consumers with non-prime credit scores and Hispanic consumers were relatively more likely to report having been contacted about credit card debt.

**TABLE 7:** DISTRIBUTION OF THE TYPES OF LOANS CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED ABOUT, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, CREDIT SCORE, AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)

Consumer characteristic	Credit card	Auto	Student
<b>Annual household income</b>			
Less than \$20,000	41	18	33
\$20,000-\$39,999	44	19	28
\$40,000-\$69,999	47	17	24
\$70,000 or more	46	17	25
<b>Credit score</b>			
Non-prime	47	21	34
Prime	34	8	12
<b>Age</b>			
Less than 35	38	18	47
35–49	45	15	28
50–61	45	20	22
62 or older	52	19	8
<b>Race</b>			
White	44	16	24
Non-white	44	20	37
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	54	16	27
Non-Hispanic	42	18	29

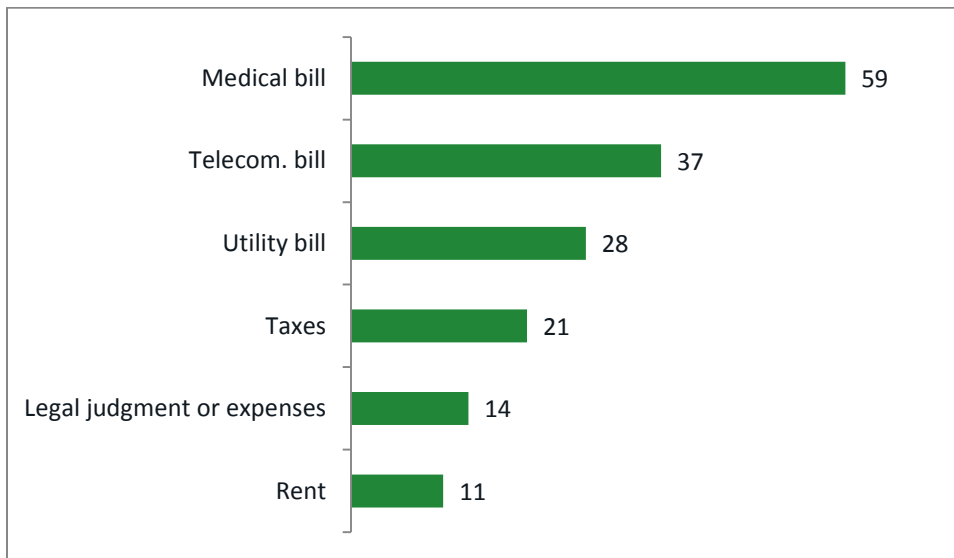
Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection. Sums across columns may exceed 100 percent because consumers could report having been contacted about multiple types of debts.

Contacts related to an auto loan debt collection were more prevalent among those with non-prime credit scores. Finally, consumers under age 35, non-whites, and those with non-prime credit scores were more likely to report having been contacted about student loan debt.

### 3.2.2 Past-due bills, payments and other debts

Medical debt is the most common type of past-due bill or payment for which consumers reported being contacted. More than half of consumers who said they were contacted about a debt in collection noted that it was related to medical debt; this was followed by past-due bills for telecommunications<sup>21</sup> and utilities (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2:** TYPES OF PAST-DUE BILLS, PAYMENTS AND OTHER DEBTS FOR WHICH CONSUMERS WERE CONTACTED REGARDING A COLLECTION (PERCENT)



Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection. The percentages sum to more than 100 percent because respondents could report multiple types of debt.

Between 52 and 62 percent of consumers in each of the demographic and credit-score groups in Table 8 reported having been contacted about medical debt. The prevalence of past-due medical

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<sup>21</sup> The survey asked specifically about past-due phone, cable, internet, or other telecommunications bills.

debt regardless of consumer characteristics makes this type of debt collection unique among those types examined in the survey.<sup>22</sup> Collection contacts for past-due telecommunications bills were most frequently cited by consumers with lower incomes and non-prime credit scores, as well as younger and non-white consumers. Past-due utility bills were more often cited by consumers with non-prime credit scores.

**TABLE 8:** DISTRIBUTION OF THE TYPES OF PAST-DUE BILLS IN COLLECTIONS, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, CREDIT SCORE, AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)

Consumer characteristic	Medical	Telecom.	Utilities
<b>Annual household income</b>			
Less than \$20,000	61	42	35
\$20,000-\$39,999	62	42	26
\$40,000-\$69,999	58	26	24
\$70,000 or more	54	26	24
<b>Credit score</b>			
Non-prime	62	42	34
Prime	52	20	11
<b>Age</b>			
Less than 35	59	44	23
35–49	61	40	34
50–61	57	32	30
62 or older	59	27	21

Table continues on next page

<sup>22</sup> The Bureau previously reported that 22 percent of consumers with collection tradelines have only medical collection tradelines and that approximately 50 percent of these consumers have otherwise “clean” credit reports with no indication of serious past delinquencies. CFPB, “Consumer credit reports: A study of medical and non-medical collections,” (December 2014), available at [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201412\\_cfpb\\_reports\\_consumer-credit-medical-and-non-medical-collections.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201412_cfpb_reports_consumer-credit-medical-and-non-medical-collections.pdf).

**TABLE 8 (CONT.):** DISTRIBUTION OF THE TYPES OF PAST-DUE BILLS IN COLLECTIONS, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, CREDIT SCORE, AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)

Consumer characteristic	Medical	Telecom.	Utilities
<b>Race</b>			
White	61	33	28
Non-white	57	45	29
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	54	40	29
Non-Hispanic	61	36	28

Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection. Sums across columns may exceed 100 percent because consumers could report having been contacted about multiple types of past-due bills.

### 3.3 Contacts about debts a consumer believed were in error and disputes

Consumers who are contacted about a debt in collection may disagree with the creditor or debt collector about whether the obligation is theirs or about the specifics of the obligation. The survey asked about whether any of the debts a consumer had in collection over the past year were a debt that: (1) the consumer did not believe he or she owed; (2) was owed by a family member and that the consumer had not co-signed; or (3) the consumer owed but for which the



amount sought was incorrect.<sup>23</sup> The survey included a second set of questions about whether the consumer had disputed a debt and, if so, the details of the dispute.<sup>24</sup>

Considering the first set of questions, 28 percent of consumers who said they had been contacted about one or more debts in collection reported that the contacts included attempts to collect at least one debt the consumer believed he or she did not owe. One-third of consumers who had been contacted about one or more debts in collection said the amount the creditor or collector was trying to collect was wrong in the case of at least one of these debts, and 16 percent said the contacts included one related to a debt instead owed by a family member (Table 9). Taken together, more than half of consumers (53 percent) who said they had been contacted about one or more debts in collection said that these contacts included at least one debt the consumer felt was in error.

**TABLE 9:** CONSUMERS CITING AN ISSUE WITH DEBT IN COLLECTION, BY ISSUE CITED (PERCENT)

Issues cited	Consumers contacted about a debt in collection
Do not owe debt	28
Incorrect amount owed	33
Debt owed by family member	16
Any of these three issues	53

<sup>23</sup> The estimates for a debt owed by a family member combine responses to separate survey questions about “[a] debt owed by a family member that you did not co-sign” and “[a] debt owed by a deceased family member.” The survey also asked if one or more of the debts they were contacted about was “[a] debt for which you were a co-signer?” Consumers are generally liable for co-signed debts. Eleven percent of consumers reported that they were a co-signer on at least one debt that they had been contacted about.

<sup>24</sup> The survey did not specifically define disputes and instead noted that “[p]eople may dispute a debt by telling the creditor or debt collector, for example, that the debt is not theirs, that the amount is wrong, or that something else about the debt is incorrect.” Given this, consumers’ perspectives on whether they had disputed a debt may differ from the definition of dispute used by a given creditor or collector or what may constitute disputes pursuant to the FCRA and FDCPA.

More than one-quarter (27 percent) of consumers who said that they had been contacted about a debt in collection reported that they had disputed at least one debt (Table 10). This is about half the share of consumers who reported some issue with a debt about which they had been contacted. As might be expected, the share who reported that they had disputed a debt is greater for those who cited an issue with a debt in collection about which they had been contacted than those who did not (42 percent and 11 percent, respectively; not shown).

**TABLE 10: CONSUMERS CITING AN ISSUE AND WHO DISPUTED A DEBT IN COLLECTION, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, CREDIT SCORE, AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)**

<b>Consumer characteristic</b>	<b>Consumers who cited an issue with a debt in collection</b>	<b>Consumers who disputed a debt in collection</b>
All consumers contacted about a debt in collection	53	27
<b>Annual household income</b>		
Less than \$20,000	56	22
\$20,000-\$39,999	52	29
\$40,000-\$69,999	49	26
\$70,000 or more	53	36
<b>Credit score</b>		
Non-prime	52	24
Prime	55	37
<b>Age</b>		
Less than 35	46	18
35–49	58	29
50–61	49	27
62 or older	59	40
<b>Race</b>		
White	52	28
Non-white	55	25
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic	48	23
Non-Hispanic	54	28

Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

Consumers with annual household incomes of \$70,000 or greater were nearly twice as likely to say they disputed a debt as consumers with incomes below \$20,000. Consumers aged 62 or

older and those with prime credit scores also had higher rates of reported disputes. The shares of consumers who reported that they had disputed a debt vary more substantially across groups than do the shares who cited an issue with a debt in collection. This suggests that, for example, the greater fraction of prime consumers contacted about a debt in collection who had disputed a debt compared with non-prime consumers is not driven entirely by differences in the likelihood in having experienced collection efforts the consumer felt were in error.

Consumers who said they disputed a debt were asked to provide a reason for doing so (Table 11). Consistent with the responses to the earlier questions, among those who said they disputed a debt, large shares disputed whether a debt was actually theirs or whether the amount owed was correct.<sup>25</sup> In addition, 40 percent of consumers reported that they had already paid the debt and 47 percent of consumers questioned whether the creditor or collector had the right to collect the debt in question.<sup>26</sup>

**TABLE 11:** DISTRIBUTION OF REASONS FOR DISPUTING DEBT FOR ALL CONSUMERS WHO DISPUTED A DEBT AND FOR CONSUMERS WHO CITED ONE REASON FOR DISPUTE (PERCENT)

<b>Disputed whether ...</b>	<b>it was your debt</b>	<b>the amount was right</b>	<b>it had already been paid</b>	<b>the creditor or collector had the right to collect</b>
All consumers who disputed a debt	47	71	40	47
Consumers who reported a single reason for dispute	27	50	10	13

Note: Estimates are for consumers who disputed a debt in collection. Sum in the first row exceeds 100 percent because consumers could dispute more than one aspect of the collection.

<sup>25</sup> The survey asked about the most recent debt a consumer disputed if he or she disputed multiple debts in the prior year.

<sup>26</sup> Since consumers may have multiple debts in collection and therefore may have more than one dispute, a consumer may provide more than one reason for disputing debts.

These reasons are not mutually exclusive: a consumer who believed the debt was not his or hers may also have reported that, therefore, the creditor or collector did not have a right to collect the debt. Restricting attention to just those consumers who reported a single reason for disputing a debt, 27 percent said they disputed whether the debt was theirs, and half said they disputed the amount. Much smaller shares of consumers who cited a single reason for the dispute questioned whether it had already been paid or the creditor’s or collector’s right to collect.

### 3.4 Lawsuits

One in seven consumers (15 percent) with a debt collection experience reported that they were sued by a creditor or debt collector during the preceding year (Table 12). This share is greater for consumers who said they had been contacted about multiple debts, increasing from six percent for those who were contacted about a single debt to 35 percent for consumers who were contacted about five or more debts. Most consumers who said they were sued did not attend their court hearing; about one-quarter of these consumers (26 percent, not shown) reported doing so.

**TABLE 12:** CONSUMERS SUED, BY NUMBER OF DEBTS CONTACTED ABOUT (PERCENT)

Number of debts in collection	Consumers who were sued
One	6
Two to four	14
Five or more	35
All consumers contacted about a debt in collection	15

Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

Of those consumers who had been contacted about a debt, consumers with incomes less than \$40,000 were more likely to say they were sued than consumers with higher incomes. Suits regarding a debt in collection were more prevalent among older consumers and among consumers with non-prime credit scores (Table 13).

**TABLE 13: CONSUMERS SUED, BY ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME, CREDIT SCORE, AGE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY (PERCENT)**

<b>Consumer characteristic</b>	<b>Consumers who were sued</b>
<b>Annual household income</b>	
Less than \$20,000	20
\$20,000 to \$39,999	16
\$40,000 to \$69,999	8
\$70,000 or more	12
<b>Credit score</b>	
Non-prime	17
Prime	9
<b>Age</b>	
Less than 35	12
35–49	12
50–61	20
62 or older	20
<b>Race</b>	
White	16
Non-white	14
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic	15
Non-Hispanic	15

Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

## 4. Contacts by creditors and collectors

Debt collection generally requires the creditor or collector that is trying to obtain payment on a debt to contact the consumer. The method, frequency, and nature of these contacts or attempts to contact may affect a consumer's experiences with the collections process, the amount of time a debt is subject to collection efforts, and whether the consumer pays a debt.

### 4.1 How consumers were contacted

Consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection were asked, with respect to the debt which was the subject of the most recent collection activity, about all the ways in which the creditor or debt collector had reached or tried to reach them (Table 14). The most common forms of contact reported were phone (85 percent) and letter (71 percent). Fifty-seven percent of these consumers reported contact by voicemail or answering machine message. Much smaller shares of consumers reported contact in person, by email, or by other methods, including text message or social media.

Consumers who were not contacted by phone were generally said they were contacted by letter only. Combining contacts either by phone or by an answering machine or voicemail message, 88 percent of consumers reported contact or attempted contact by phone. Of the remaining 12 percent of consumers, more than four fifths—10 percent of all consumers—were contacted by letter only.

**TABLE 14: METHODS OF CONTACT BY A CREDITOR OR DEBT COLLECTOR (PERCENT)**

<b>Method of contact</b>	<b>Consumers contacted about a debt in collection</b>
In person	4
By phone	85
By voicemail or answering machine message	57
By letter	71
By email	12
Other	3
By phone incl. voicemail or answering machine message	88
By letter only	10

Note: Estimates do not sum to 100 percent because respondents could provide multiple responses.

## 4.2 How often consumers were contacted

The survey asked about the frequency of contacts or attempted contacts by the creditor or collector that had most recently contacted the consumer. The survey asked both how often the creditor or debt collector usually tried to reach consumers each week and whether consumers felt the creditor or debt collector had contacted them too often. The reported frequency of contacts, including both successful and attempted contacts of which the consumer was aware, varies considerably. In particular, 33 percent of consumers who were contacted about a collection in the prior year reported that they were usually contacted by that creditor or collector less than once per week, whereas 37 percent said they were usually contacted by that creditor or collector four or more times per week with almost half of those (17 percent of all consumers who were contacted) reporting that they were usually contacted eight or more times per week (Table 15).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Consumers' estimates of the frequency of contacts may be subject to uncertainty, particularly for attempted phone contacts before a creditor or debt collector had initially reached a consumer, when a consumer may not have known

**TABLE 15: DISTRIBUTION OF CONTACT FREQUENCY FOR CONSUMERS CONTACTED ABOUT A DEBT IN COLLECTION (PERCENT)**

<b>Contact frequency</b>	<b>Consumers contacted about a debt in collection</b>
Less than once per week	33
One to three times per week	30
Four to seven times per week	20
Eight or more times per week	17

Overall, 63 percent of consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection felt that they were contacted too often with respect to the debt they had been contacted about most recently (Table 16). About one-fifth of consumers who reported having been contacted less than once per week indicated they were contacted too often. This fraction rises to 74 percent of consumers contacted between one and three times per week and to about 90 percent for consumers who said they were contacted more than three times per week.

**TABLE 16: CONSUMERS INDICATING THEY HAD BEEN CONTACTED TOO OFTEN, BY CONTACT FREQUENCY (PERCENT)**

<b>Contact frequency</b>	<b>Consumers who said they were contacted too often</b>
Less than once per week	22
One to three times per week	74
Four to seven times per week	88
Eight or more times per week	91
All consumers contacted about a debt in collection	63

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who was attempting to contact them. Once a creditor or collector had reached a consumer, however, consumers may be reporting on attempted, as well as successful, contacts if they identified the caller. The survey does not purport to distinguish between these varying scenarios in its questions or analysis.

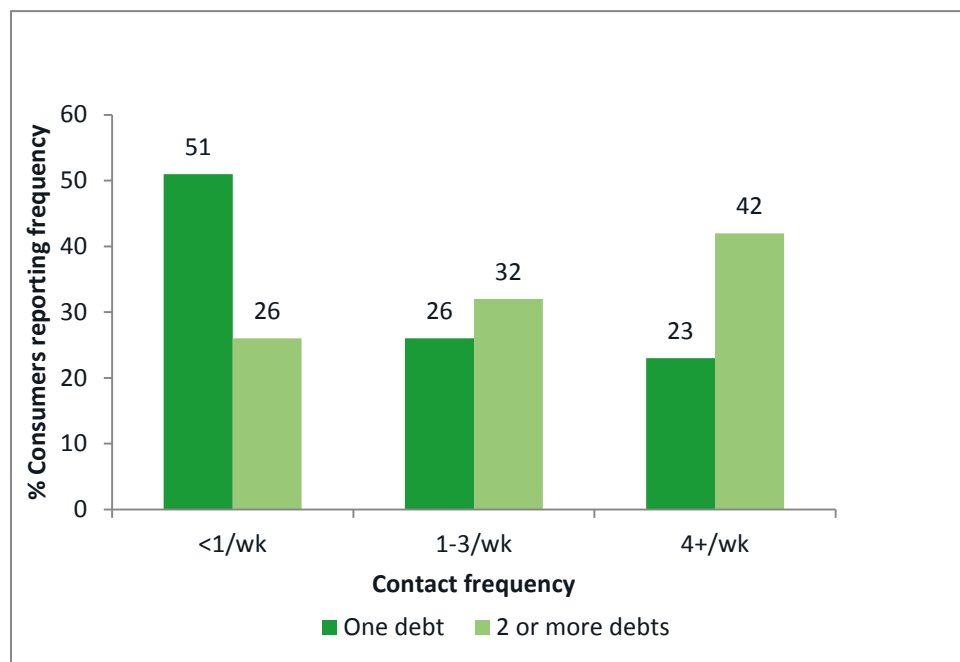


## 4.3 Contact frequency by number of debts

Overall, the greater the number of debts consumers said they had been contacted about, the more likely they were to report that they were contacted too often by the last creditor or collector that contacted them. Among consumers who reported having been contacted about one debt in collection, 40 percent reported being contacted too often, compared with 71 percent of consumers with two or more debts in collection (not shown).

Figures 3 and 4 suggest that the differences in the shares of consumers that said they were contacted too often reflect both greater contact frequency and different perceptions of contacts. Consumers with more debts in collection over the past year reported greater contact frequency by the creditor or collector who most recently contacted the consumer (Figure 3). For example, 23 percent of consumers with one debt in collection reported four or more contacts per week (including unsuccessful attempts) by the creditor or collector who had most recently contacted the consumer on a collection matter. By comparison, 42 percent of consumers with two or more debts in collection indicated they had been contacted at least four times per week (again including unsuccessful attempts) by the most recent creditor or collector.

**FIGURE 3:** DISTRIBUTION OF CONTACT FREQUENCY, BY NUMBER OF DEBTS IN COLLECTION (PERCENT)

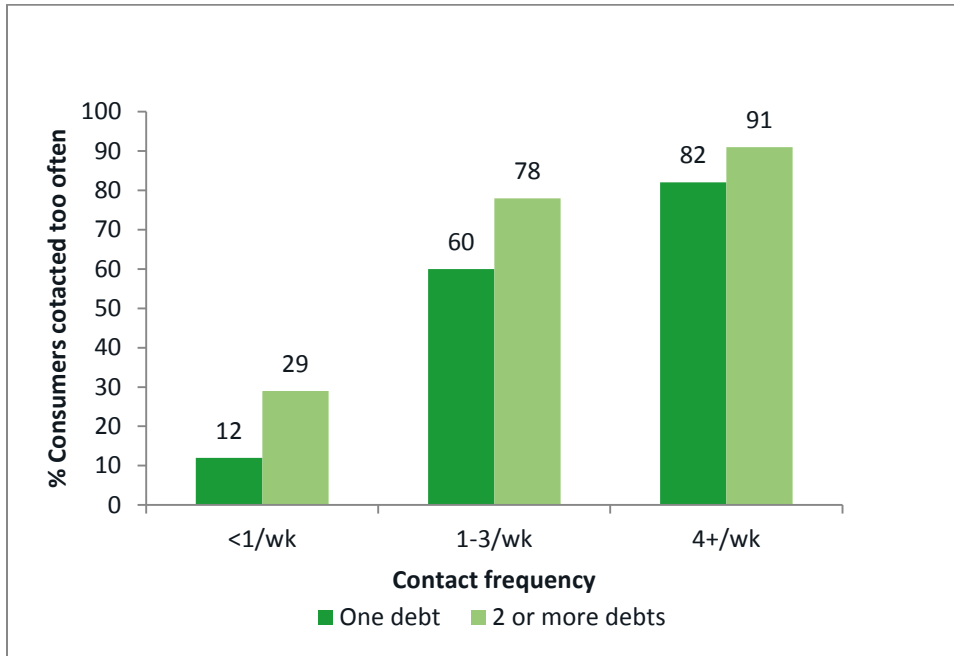


Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

Given the structure of the survey, it is not surprising that consumers with more debts in collection report greater contact frequency. The survey questions focused on the debt collector or creditor that contacted them most recently. For a consumer who is being contacted by multiple debt collectors, the collector that contacted the respondent most recently is more likely to be one that attempts contact more frequently – for example, if one collector contacts the consumer once per week, and another contacts the consumer twice per week, then at any given time the second collector is more likely to be the one that made the most recent contact.

Consumers with more debts in collection over the past year were generally more likely to say that they were contacted too often by the creditor or collector who had most recently contacted them, even holding constant the number of contacts they received each week (Figure 4). This was especially true for lower rates of contact frequency. For consumers with one debt in collection, 12 percent of consumers contacted less than once per week said they were contacted too often by the most recent creditor or collector, whereas this share increased to 29 percent for consumers with two or more debts. This pattern suggests that a consumer’s perception of one collector’s call frequency may depend in part on the total number of collection contacts the consumer receives. A consumer who is contacted about multiple debts is likely to experience a higher overall frequency of calls, and this may make the consumer more likely to perceive any number of calls from any one collector as “too often.” Nonetheless, these responses reflect a perception of “too frequent” contact for many consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection.

**FIGURE 4:** DISTRIBUTION OF CONSUMERS WHO SAID THEY WERE CONTACTED TOO OFTEN, BY CONTACT FREQUENCY AND NUMBER OF DEBTS IN COLLECTION (PERCENT)



Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

## 4.4 Requesting not to be contacted

The survey asked consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection whether in the past year they had requested that a creditor or debt collector stop contacting them. Forty-two percent of consumers who reported having been contacted about a debt in collection said they had done so at least once. Consumers were asked how they had made the request the most recent time they asked a creditor or collector to stop contact. Eighty-seven percent said they made the request by phone or in person only, and 13 percent said they made the request by

other means (letter, fax, email, etc.), or by multiple means.<sup>28</sup> Twenty-five percent of consumers said that the creditor or debt collector stopped attempting to contact them after being asked to.

Consumers with more debts in collection were more likely to say they requested that a creditor or debt collector stop contact (Table 17). Twenty-nine percent of consumers with one debt in collection said they requested that the creditor or debt collector no longer contact them. This fraction is higher (47 percent) among consumers with two or more debts in collection. If consumers take this action when faced with unwanted collection practices, it could be that consumers with more debts in collection are more likely to have faced problematic collection practices from at least one collector. Alternatively, consumers may make this request when they feel they are being contacted too often, which, as reported above, is more likely for consumers with more debts in collection.

**TABLE 17: CONSUMERS WHO REQUESTED CONTACT STOP, BY NUMBER OF DEBTS IN COLLECTION (PERCENT)**

<b>Number of debts in collection</b>	<b>Consumers who requested contact stop</b>
One	29
Two or more	47
All consumers contacted about a debt in collection	42

Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

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<sup>28</sup> Under the FDCPA, collectors are generally required to cease most communications upon receiving a written request from the consumer.

# 5. Communication methods

## 5.1 Preferences for contacts about a debt in collection

The survey collected information from all consumers—including those who did not report any collections in the past year—about the ways consumers say they *could* be reached and the ways they would *prefer* to be reached by a creditor or debt collector.

The survey questions about each of the ways that the consumer could be reached, by design, did not refer to being reached by a creditor or collector. This question was intended to provide context for interpreting the subsequent question about preferences for collections-related contacts by determining which means of contact were relevant. Nevertheless, many respondents appear to have interpreted the questions to be about ways they would like to be reached by a creditor or collector. For example, 30 percent of consumers said they could be contacted in person, and nearly 90 percent said they could be reached by mail, though presumably nearly all consumers could be reached by either of these means. This interpretation could reflect the survey's general focus on collections or the fact that the subsequent questions about contact preferences specifically referred to contacts by creditors and debt collectors.

Almost half of consumers said they would most *prefer* to be reached by letter (Table 18). The second most common preference for contact was through some kind of phone other than work: 14 percent preferred a cell phone, 11 percent a home phone, and one percent indicated a generic preference for “phone” without further specification. Less than one percent of consumers indicated work phone as their preferred method of contact. Consumers who were contacted about debt in collection were more likely than consumers overall to list a cell phone as their most preferred method of contact, and they were slightly less likely to prefer contact by letter or email.

Consumers' responses regarding their least-preferred methods of being contacted by a creditor or debt collector were more mixed. "In-person" was the most common response and was listed by about 20 percent of all consumers and 18 percent of those with recent collections experience. Many consumers gave some type of phone as their least-preferred way a creditor or collector could reach them.

**TABLE 18:** MOST AND LEAST PREFERRED METHODS OF CONTACT, AMONG ALL CONSUMERS AND FOR CONSUMERS CONTACTED ABOUT A DEBT IN COLLECTION (PERCENT)

Method of contact	Most preferred: All consumers	Most preferred: Consumers contacted about a debt in collection	Least preferred: All consumers	Least preferred: Consumers contacted about a debt in collection
In-person	2	<1	20	18
Home phone	11	9	8	7
Cell phone	14	21	16	18
Work phone	<1	1	9	10
Phone (unspecified)	1	2	7	11
Voicemail or ans. machine	2	3	4	5
Letter	46	42	7	7
Email	15	11	8	6
Text Message	2	1	5	3
Social Media	<1	<1	9	6

Note: Totals do not sum to 100 because uncoded multiple, ambiguous, and uninformative responses are not shown.

Taking responses to the most- and least-preferred methods of contact together, consumers appear ambivalent about cell phone contacts, since it was among the most common response for both questions. Preferences about phone contacts clearly differ by the type of phone, as more than a third of the consumers who listed work phone as their least preferred method of contact listed either cell phone or home phone as their most preferred method. There also seem to be strong preferences against in-person contacts.

## 5.2 Preferences about messages from a creditor or collector

Responses to the survey questions about messages from creditors or debt collectors illustrate how consumers weigh potentially competing considerations of privacy regarding financial matters and the need to understand who is calling and for what purpose. A voicemail that

discusses a debt collection could be overheard by others, revealing information that the consumer would prefer to remain private. At the same time, a voicemail from a collector that does not reference a debt collection would leave the consumer in the dark as to the identity of the caller and the purpose of the call.

Fewer than five percent of consumers listed voicemail or answering machine as their least-preferred method of contact by a creditor or collector, and even fewer chose it as their most-preferred method (Table 18). This relative indifference notwithstanding, consumers had clear preferences regarding the content of messages from a creditor or debt collector. Nearly two-thirds of consumers indicated it is very important that others do not hear or see a message from a creditor or debt collector (Table 19). In all, 87 percent of consumers said it was somewhat or very important that others not see or hear a message from a creditor or debt collector. The responses from consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection are quite similar. These preferences do not vary much across consumers of different ages, incomes, credit scores, race or ethnicity (not shown).

**TABLE 19:** PREFERENCES REGARDING OTHERS SEEING OR HEARING COLLECTOR MESSAGE (PERCENT)

<b>Importance of others not seeing or hearing a message</b>	<b>All consumers</b>	<b>Consumers contacted about a debt in collection</b>
Very important	64	65
Somewhat important	23	24
Not at all important	14	10

These responses suggest that consumers consider debt collection to be a sensitive topic and value privacy with respect to messages. Nevertheless, almost 90 percent of consumers indicated that if they received a voicemail or answering machine message from a creditor or collector, they would prefer that the message include the name of the creditor or debt collector, and about two-thirds of consumers say they would want the creditor or debt collector to state in the message that they are attempting to collect a debt (Table 20). Nearly the same fraction reported they

would prefer to have the voicemail or answering machine message state that the communication was an attempt to collect a debt and any information obtained will be used for that purpose (the so-called “mini-Miranda” disclosure).<sup>29</sup> The shares of consumers that indicated they would prefer each piece of information be included in a message are similar for consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection (not shown).

Consumers’ preferences regarding the level of information in a message left by a creditor or collector differ to some extent based on the stated importance that others not hear a message. On the one hand, 89 percent of consumers, regardless of the importance they placed on not having a message heard by someone else, said they would want the creditor’s or debt collector’s name included in a message. On the other hand, consumers who believed it was important for others not to hear the message were less likely than other consumers to want the creditor or debt collector to disclose that they are trying to collect a debt. However, even among this group, a clear majority wanted to know the purpose of the call and receive a mini-Miranda disclosure.

**TABLE 20:** COMPARISON OF PREFERENCES FOR MESSAGE CONTENT BY PREFERENCE THAT OTHERS NOT HEAR OR SEE A MESSAGE (PERCENT)

<b>Importance that others not see or hear message</b>	<b>Prefer collector name included</b>	<b>Prefer purpose of call included</b>	<b>Prefer “Mini Miranda” disclosure included</b>
Very important	87	63	62
Somewhat important	94	77	74
Not at all important	89	82	80
All consumers	89	69	67

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<sup>29</sup> The FDCPA requires such a disclosure in the initial communication from a collector and requires that subsequent communications inform the consumer that the communication is from a debt collector.



## 6. Comparing collections for creditors and collectors

Creditors and debt collectors might be expected to take different approaches to collecting unpaid debts for several reasons. First, a creditor has an existing relationship with a consumer that it may want to maintain, whereas collectors are not seeking to retain the consumer's business. Second, creditors may have more complete or up-to-date information about the consumer including address and contact information, which may make creditors more likely than collectors to readily reach a consumer and to accurately state the amount owed. Third, collectors are more likely to be engaged after the creditor has been unsuccessful in collecting the debt, which may lead them to take a different strategy for getting a payment.

### 6.1 Method and frequency of contact by creditors and debt collectors

Among consumers who reported having been contacted about a debt in the prior year, 23 percent said they were last contacted about the debt by a creditor, and 63 percent by a debt

collector (not shown).<sup>30</sup> This survey question was one of a few that included “don’t know” as a response option, to measure how well consumers can discern whom they are interacting with in the context of collections. About 15 percent of consumers contacted about a collection in the prior year indicated they were uncertain whether the most recent contact was from a creditor or debt collector.

With respect to the debt about which consumers were most recently contacted, more than one-in-three consumers (36 percent) said they had been contacted for more than a year about the debt by the creditor or any collector (Table 21). About one-quarter of consumers (26 percent) had been contacted for fewer than three months about the debt that was the subject of the most recent collections effort. The reported duration of contacts tends to be shorter for consumers contacted most recently by a creditor rather than a collector. Among consumers who reported that their most recent collections-related contact was from a creditor, 37 percent had been contacted for less than three months, and 23 percent were contacted for more than one year. These shares are roughly reversed for consumers most recently contacted by a debt collector.

**TABLE 21:** MONTHS THAT ANY CREDITOR OR COLLECTOR HAD CONTACTED THE CONSUMER (PERCENT)

	<b>All consumers contacted about a debt in collection</b>	<b>Consumers contacted by creditors</b>	<b>Consumers contacted by debt collectors</b>
Less than three months	26	37	21
Four to six months	21	29	20
Seven to 12 months	16	11	19
More than 12 months	36	23	40

Note: Estimates for all consumers contacted about a debt in collection include those who indicated they did not know whether the most recent contact was from a creditor or debt collector.

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<sup>30</sup> The survey contained a definition of debt collector as follows: “A debt collector is a person or company other than the creditor that tries to collect on a debt, such as an attorney, a debt collection firm, or other third party.”

As shown in Section 4, a large majority of consumers contacted about a debt were contacted by phone. This finding holds when distinguishing consumers contacted by creditors from those contacted by a debt collector (Table 22). Eighty-eight percent of consumers who said they were most recently contacted by a creditor reported they had been contacted by phone. The share was comparable for consumers who indicated they were most recently contacted by a debt collector.<sup>31</sup>

**TABLE 22: METHODS OF CONTACT BY A CREDITOR OR DEBT COLLECTOR (PERCENT)**

<b>Method of contact</b>	<b>Consumers contacted most recently by creditors</b>	<b>Consumers contacted most recently by debt collectors</b>
In person	5	3
By phone	88	86
By voicemail or ans. machine message	56	57
By letter	62	74
By email	19	8
Other	3	2
By phone including voicemail or ans. machine message	89	88
By letter only	5	12
Contacted someone other than spouse, co-signer or attorney	20	27

Note: Numbers do not sum to 100 percent because respondents could provide multiple responses.

Contact via letter was quite common for both sets of consumers, but the share of consumers who reported having received a letter was 12 percentage points higher among consumers most recently contacted by a debt collector compared with those most recently contacted by a creditor

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<sup>31</sup> Note that the survey did not ask about the most recent contact but about the ways in which the creditor or collector who most recently contacted the consumer had attempted to contact the consumer in the course of the collection effort.

(74 percent compared with 62 percent). This difference may be due, in part, to requirements that most debt collectors (but not most creditors) provide certain disclosures to consumers within five days of the initial communication with the consumer, unless those disclosures were made in the initial communication. These disclosures are commonly mailed.<sup>32</sup>

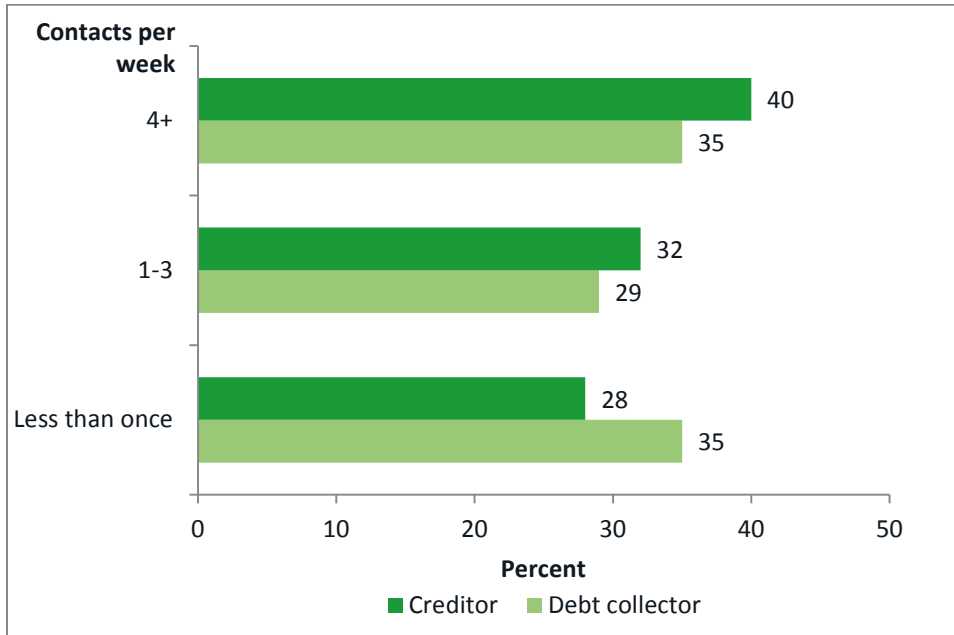
Consumers were much more likely to report email contact if they had been contacted by a creditor rather than a debt collector, with 19 percent of those who were most recently contacted by a creditor reporting email contact, compared with eight percent of consumers most recently contacted by a debt collector. The greater prevalence of reported email contact by creditors may reflect among other things differences in the availability of valid email addresses for consumers, consent obtained to communicate by email, and concerns on collectors' part that using e-mail may lead to litigation. Finally, 20 percent of consumers who were most recently contacted by a creditor reported that the creditor had contacted someone other than a spouse, co-signer, or attorney in the course of collection efforts. The corresponding share for consumers most recently contacted by a collector was 27 percent.

Figure 5 compares the reported frequency of contact or (known) attempted contact for creditors and debt collectors. The distributions of contact frequency are broadly similar for the two sets of consumers as the shares ranged between 28 percent and 40 percent for each category.

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<sup>32</sup> It may also be that consumers do not perceive regular billing statements sent by creditors as collection efforts even if the statement includes a delinquent balance.

**FIGURE 5:** DISTRIBUTION OF CONTACT FREQUENCY FOR CONSUMERS CONTACTED BY A CREDITOR OR A DEBT COLLECTOR (PERCENT)



Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

## 6.2 Consumer characterizations of creditor and debt collector contacts

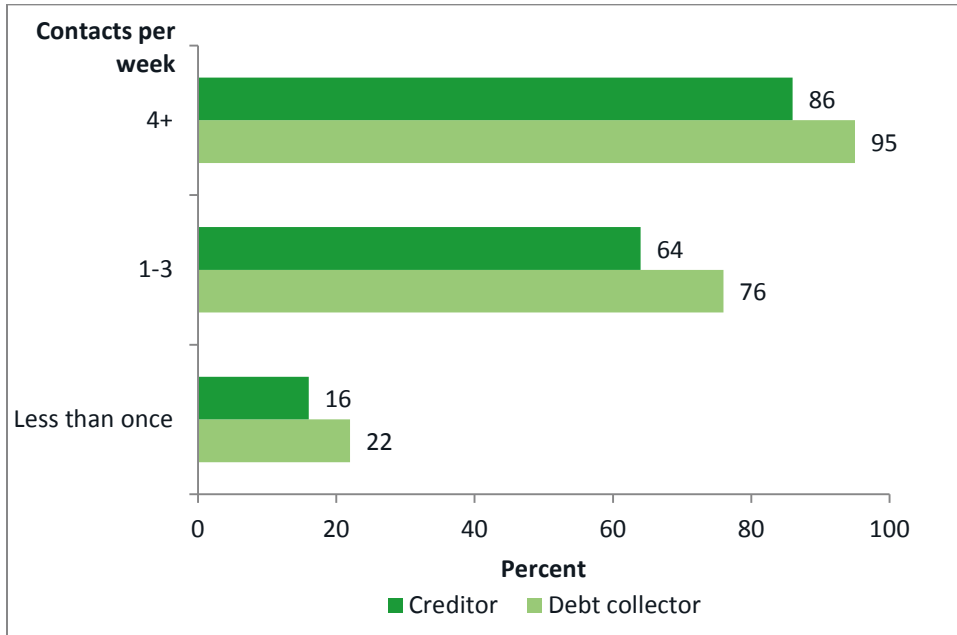
The survey asked consumers to characterize their interactions with the creditor or debt collector that contacted them most recently.<sup>33</sup> The shares who said they were contacted too often were similar for consumers who reported they had most recently been contacted by a creditor and

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<sup>33</sup> It seems likely that consumers' responses to questions about interactions with the creditor or debt collector are based largely on successful contacts. In contrast, the question about the usual frequency of contacts, for example, explicitly asked consumers to consider both successful and attempted contacts, such as calls that a consumer did not answer but identified based on caller ID.

those who said they had most recently been contacted by a debt collector (not shown). Accounting for differences in contact frequency, consumers who said they were most recently contacted by a debt collector were more likely to say they had been contacted too often than were consumers contacted with the same frequency by a creditor (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6:** CONSUMERS CONTACTED “TOO OFTEN” BY CREDITOR OR A DEBT COLLECTOR AND CONTACT FREQUENCY (PERCENT)



Note: Estimates are for consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection.

Nearly nine out of ten consumers reported that the creditor or debt collector was clear that the purpose of the contact was to collect a debt (Table 23). About half of consumers, however, reported that they received accurate information about the debt (55 percent), were treated politely (54 percent), or received clear and accurate answers to questions (49 percent). Smaller

but still notable fractions of consumers indicated that the creditor or collector had threatened them or had called between 9:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m.<sup>34</sup>

**TABLE 23:** CONSUMERS' CHARACTERIZATIONS OF CONTACTS WITH CREDITORS AND COLLECTORS (PERCENT)

	<b>All consumers contacted about a debt in collection</b>	<b>Consumers contacted by creditors</b>	<b>Consumers contacted by debt collectors</b>
Provided accurate information	55	77	49
Provided options to pay the debt	53	60	49
Communicated in preferred language	79	81	79
Stated reason for contact was collection	86	88	87
Addressed questions clearly and accurately	49	66	44
Treated you politely	54	66	50
Contacted too often	63	59	64
Called before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m.	36	34	34
Threatened	27	16	28

Note: Estimates for all consumers contacted about a debt in collection include those who indicated they did not know whether the most recent contact was from a creditor or debt collector.

Consumers reported more favorable experiences with creditors than debt collectors along many of the dimensions surveyed. About three-quarters (77 percent) of consumers who reported being contacted by a creditor, for example, said that the creditor provided accurate information compared with 49 percent of consumers contacted by a debt collector. Consumers contacted by creditors similarly were more likely to say that the creditor provided options to pay the debt,

<sup>34</sup> Most consumers who had been contacted about a debt in collection also indicated that the creditor or collector communicated in the consumer's preferred language, but this proportion, 79 percent, is lower than expected. Analysis of responses to this question suggests that the question may have been interpreted by some consumers as referring to the tone and tenor of the communications, rather than a consumer's preference for a language other than English.

addressed their questions, and was polite. Finally, those contacted by creditors were less likely than those contacted by debt collectors to agree with less-favorable characterization of interactions such as reporting that the creditor threatened them.



## 7. Conclusion

This report draws on nationally representative data from the Bureau's Survey of Consumer Views on Debt to sketch, from consumers' perspectives, the broad experience of debt collection in the United States. As the report notes, this experience is shared by many consumers: roughly one-third said they were contacted by a creditor or collector in the last year. Most consumers who were contacted about a debt in collection were contacted about multiple debts; and, for consumers of all ages, income, and credit scores who experienced collection efforts, these efforts often included attempts to collect on past-due medical bills. A large percentage of consumers stated that they were contacted too often. And, just over half of consumers who said they had been contacted about at least one debt in collection said they had been contacted about a debt that was not theirs, was owed by a family member, or was for the wrong amount.

These broad patterns are not uniform, however. Lower-income consumers and consumers between the ages of 35 and 49, for example, were more likely than others to report having been contacted about a debt in collection. As might be expected because credit-scoring models generally assign lower scores to consumers with collections, consumers with non-prime credit scores were more likely to have had collections experience. The survey results further suggest that consumers may view their experiences with creditors more favorably than they do experiences with debt collectors.

Beyond the results in this report, a more complete picture of debt collection in the U.S. will emerge from both filling in additional details and understanding how this picture fits with the perspective provided by other data. To this end, the Bureau intends to draw on the survey data to provide further descriptive results as well as to do more in-depth research on consumer finances and decisionmaking. Moreover, the Bureau hopes that this report prompts others to consider how the survey's findings from consumers' perspectives may be reconciled with the findings offered by, for example, administrative data from collectors and creditors or by complaints data, each of which can add to our understanding of debt collection in the United States.

## 8. Appendix: Survey instrument



An official U.S. Government agency

# A Survey of Consumer Views on Debt

## **QUESTIONS?**

For more information about this survey, please call 1-855-246-9457

or go to [www.consumerfinance.gov/debtsurvey.html](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/debtsurvey.html)

For more information about the CFPB, visit [www.consumerfinance.gov](http://www.consumerfinance.gov)

Esta encuesta está disponible en español en Internet.  
Ver la parte posterior del cuestionario para obtener instrucciones.

## Consumer Views on Debt

### What is the CFPB?

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) is a Federal agency created in 2010 to make mortgage, credit card, automobile, and other consumer loans work better and ensure that these markets are fair, transparent, and competitive and that the costs and risks are clear.

### Who should complete this survey?

It is important that this survey is only completed by the person named on the enclosed letter.

### What is the Survey of Consumer Views on Debt?

Most people have credit or debt at one time or another. This survey is about your experiences with credit and debt and the process of paying debts. This information will help shape federal policies to ensure that consumers are treated fairly and respectfully when creditors seek to collect money they are owed.

### Who will see my responses, and how will my responses be used?

Your responses will be used by researchers at the CFPB and elsewhere to understand consumers' experiences with debt and debt collection. Your responses will be kept confidential. Participation in the survey will not affect your credit.

### How was I selected for this survey?

Survey recipients were selected at random from across the United States. The survey results will give a better picture of consumers' experiences with debt collection. People's experiences can vary widely, so it is important that the study reflects the perspectives of all types of consumers.

### How long will it take?

We expect the survey will take about 10–20 minutes, but it may vary based on your experiences.

**Privacy Act Statement:** This collection of information is authorized by Pub. L. No. 111-203, Title X, Sections 1013 and 1022, codified at 12 U.S.C. §§ 5493 and 5512. Participation in this study is voluntary and there are no penalties for refusing to answer any question. However, your participation is extremely important to ensure the accuracy of the statistical results.

The information you provide will be used to help the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau ("CFPB") understand consumers' experiences with debt and debt collection. You were randomly selected for this survey as part of a sample that is representative of consumers. Your responses will be combined with other data that we have collected to understand conditions in consumer credit markets in a way that you cannot be identified.

Routine uses which may be made of the collected information can be found in the CFPB's System of Records Notice, CFPB.022 –Market and Consumer Research Records, 77 FR 67802. The CFPB may make an anonymous version of the survey data publicly available in accordance with applicable federal law.

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The OMB control number for this collection is 3170-0047. It expires on 05/31/2015. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average approximately 20 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing any instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. The obligation to respond to this collection of information is voluntary. Comments regarding this collection of information, including the estimated response time, suggestions for improving the usefulness of the information, or suggestions for reducing the burden to respond to this collection should be submitted to the Bureau at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (Attention: PRA Office), 1700 G Street NW, Washington, DC 20552, or by email to [PRA@cfpb.gov](mailto:PRA@cfpb.gov).

## A. Your General Financial Situation and Experiences

1. Would you say that you are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?

- Better now
- About the same
- Worse

2. Now looking ahead—do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, or worse off, or just about the same as now?

- Will be better off
- About the same
- Will be worse off

3. Have you applied for any type of credit or loan in the past five years?

- Yes
- No

→ 3a. In the past five years, have you been either turned down for credit or not given as much credit as you applied for?

- Yes
- No → *If No, please skip to Question 4*

3b. Thinking about the most recent time this happened, were you later able to get a loan or obtain the full amount you requested from that lender or somewhere else?

- Yes
- No
- Did not reapply

↓  
4. At any time in the past five years, did you think of applying for credit or a loan but changed your mind because you thought you might be turned down?

- Yes
- No



For the purposes of this survey, a **debt** is any money you owe. A debt could be a bank loan, student loan, financing from a store or dealer, amounts remaining on credit cards after your last payment, or bills or payments that are past due.

Do not include business loans or loans from a family member or from a friend.

**5. Do you currently have each of these kinds of debt?**

Loans	Yes	No
A charge card or credit card balance remaining after your last payment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mortgage or home equity loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Home equity line of credit (HELOC) that you owe money on	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A loan for an automobile or other type of vehicle (such as a motorcycle or boat)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Payday loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Automobile title loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other consumer or personal loan or line of credit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>		

Past-due Bills, Payments, or Other Debt	Yes	No
Past-due taxes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due medical bill(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due rent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due phone, cable, internet, or other telecommunications bill(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due utility bill(s) (gas, electric, water, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Legal judgment or legal expenses (child support, attorneys' fees, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other type of debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>		



## B. Your Debt Collection Experiences in the Past Year

In this section, we are interested in any instances in the past year that a creditor or debt collector tried to collect a debt from you—whether or not you owed this debt.

- **Debt collection** occurs when a creditor or debt collector contacts you to seek payment for a debt that is past due. This does not include contact in the course of making on-time payments.
- A **creditor** is the original person or company that lent you money (for example, a bank or credit card company) or that sold you something on credit (for example, a store, hospital, or landlord). Creditors may collect debts through their internal collections departments.
- A **debt collector** is a person or company other than the creditor that tries to collect on a debt, such as an attorney, a debt collection firm, or other third party.

6. **In the past year, since January 2014, have you been contacted by a creditor or debt collector trying to collect a past-due debt from you?** Include instances when you were contacted about debts that you believed you did not owe or someone else's debt. Do not include instances when a creditor or debt collector contacted you by mistake and had the wrong phone number or address.

Yes

No **—————>** *If No, please skip to Section F*

7. **In the past year, since January 2014, how many different debts have creditors or debt collectors tried to collect from you?**

1 debt

2–4 debts

5–9 debts

10 or more debts

8. **Were any of these debts that you have been contacted about since January 2014...**

	Yes	No
A debt that you did not owe?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A debt you owed but the amount the collector was seeking was wrong?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A debt for which you were a co-signer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A debt owed by a family member that you did not co-sign?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A debt owed by a deceased family member?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



**9. Thinking about all of the debts that you have been contacted about since January 2014, were you contacted about any of the following types of debt?**

Loans	Yes	No
A charge card or credit card balance remaining after your last payment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mortgage or home equity loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Home equity line of credit (HELOC) that you owed money on	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A loan for an automobile or other type of vehicle (such as a motorcycle or boat)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Payday loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Automobile title loan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other consumer or personal loan or line of credit	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>		

Past-due Bills, Payments, or Other Debt	Yes	No
Past-due taxes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due medical bill(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due rent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due phone, cable, internet, or other telecommunications bill(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Past-due utility bill(s) (gas, electric, water, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Legal judgment or legal expenses (child support, attorneys' fees, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other type of debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>		

**10. Since January 2014, have you ever paid part or all of a debt after being contacted by a creditor or debt collector about that debt?**

- Yes  
 No

**10a. Thinking about the most recent debt you paid after being contacted, which is the single most important reason why you paid this debt? Please mark one reason.**

- I thought it would improve my credit score or credit rating
- I wanted the creditor or debt collector to stop contacting me
- I wanted the creditor or debt collector to stop contacting friends, co-workers, or others
- I had forgotten or not known about the debt and collection efforts led me to pay
- I thought I might be sued if I did not pay
- I thought it might affect my job or I could lose my job if I did not pay
- My financial situation changed and I was able to pay the debt
- I paid it because it was the right thing to do
- I paid it because it was a small amount
- I needed to pay it off to qualify for a new loan
- Other reason:

**10b. People may pay a debt that they are unsure is theirs. Which of the following best describes how sure you were about whether this debt was yours?**

- I was reasonably sure the debt was mine
- I was reasonably sure the debt was not mine
- I was unsure whether the debt was mine

Skip to  
Question 11





11. Since January 2014, have you ever not paid a debt even after being contacted by a creditor or debt collector about the debt?

- Yes  
 No

11a. Thinking of the most recent instance when you did not pay a debt despite being contacted by a creditor or debt collector, which is the single most important reason why you did not pay the debt? Please mark one reason.

- I was not sure the debt was mine or was legitimate
- The amount of the debt was wrong
- I had already paid the debt
- I did not know who to pay
- I did not have enough money
- I thought nothing bad would happen
- I was (or am) planning to file for bankruptcy
- I did not want to pay
- I plan to pay but have not yet done so
- Other reason:

12. In the past year, since January 2014, have you ever asked a creditor or debt collector to stop contacting you?

- Yes  
 No

12a. Thinking about the most recent time you requested that a creditor or debt collector stop contacting you, how did you make your request? Please mark one response.

- Over the phone or in person
- By letter or fax
- By email, text, or internet

12b. Did the creditor or debt collector stop contacting you after this request?

- Yes
- No

13. Think about the last time you were contacted by a creditor or debt collector about a debt. How helpful would the following information have been in figuring out whether you owed the debt?

	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not at all helpful
Original account number	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name of the original creditor (at the time the debt was taken out)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Itemization of the amount owed (such as principal, interest, and fees)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Security Number of the person who owes the debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Type of debt (credit cards, medical bills, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name and address of the person who owes the debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name and address of joint borrowers (if any)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Date and amount of the last payment made	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copy of the last billing statement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copy of the contract or original invoice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## C. Your Most Recent Debt Collection

This section asks about the most recent debt that a creditor or debt collector contacted you about—even if you believe that this debt is not yours, the amount is wrong, or you already paid this debt.

Please do not include instances when a creditor or debt collector contacted you by mistake.

**14. In the past year, since January 2014, how many different creditors or debt collectors have contacted you trying to collect a debt?**

One creditor or debt collector → Please skip to Question 15

Two or more }  
 Don't know } ↓

**14a. Which of the following best describes the type of debt that a creditor or debt collector most recently contacted you about? Please mark one type of debt.**

### Loans

- A charge card or credit card balance remaining after your last payment
- Mortgage or home equity loan
- Home equity line of credit (HELOC) that you owe money on
- A loan for an automobile or other type of vehicle (such as a motorcycle or boat)
- Student loan
- Payday loan
- Automobile title loan
- Other consumer or personal loan or line of credit:

### Past-due Bills, Payments, or Other Debt

- Past-due taxes
- Past-due medical bill(s)
- Past-due rent
- Past-due phone, cable, internet, or other telecommunications bill(s)
- Past-due utility bill(s) (gas, electric, water, etc.)
- Legal judgment or legal expenses (child support, attorneys' fees, etc.)
- Other type of past-due bill or payment:

**14b. When this creditor or debt collector first contacted you about this particular debt, did you believe that you owed some or all of the debt?**

- Yes
- No
- I was uncertain

**14c. When this creditor or debt collector first contacted you, did you believe that the amount being sought was correct?**

- Yes
- No
- I was uncertain



**15. When did a creditor or debt collector most recently contact you about this debt?**

- Less than a month ago
- 1 to 3 months ago
- 4 to 6 months ago
- 7 to 12 months ago

**16. How long has any creditor or debt collector been contacting you about this debt?**

- Less than 3 months
- 4 to 6 months
- 7 to 12 months
- More than 12 months

**17. Think about the person or company that contacted you most recently about this debt. Was this person or company the creditor or a debt collector? Please mark one response.**

- The creditor (for example, the original lender, store, hospital, or landlord)
- A debt collector (for example, a law firm, debt collection company, or other third party trying to collect the debt)
- Don't know

**18. How often did this creditor or debt collector usually try to reach you each week, including times they did not reach you?**

- Less than once per week
- 1 to 3 times per week
- 4 to 7 times per week
- 8 to 14 times per week
- 15 to 21 times per week
- More than 21 times per week

**19. How did this creditor or debt collector try to reach you (including times they were not able to reach you)? Did they try to reach you...**

	Yes	No
In person?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By phone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By voicemail or answering machine message?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By letter?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By email?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By text message?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
By social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
In some other way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please specify:



**20. Think about the creditor or debt collector that most recently contacted you about this debt. Did they...**

	Yes	No
Provide accurate information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact you too often?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide options to pay the debt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Call before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m.?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communicate with you in your preferred language?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State that the reason for contacting you was to collect a debt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Address your questions about this debt clearly and accurately?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Treat you politely?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Threaten you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**21. Did you contact each of the following about your experience with this creditor or debt collector?**

	Yes	No
An attorney or legal aid organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A Federal or state government agency (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Federal Trade Commission, state Attorney General, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A Better Business Bureau or other industry group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**22. To your knowledge, has this creditor or debt collector ever contacted someone other than your spouse, your attorney, or a co-signer (for example, contacted a friend, coworker, or family member)?**

- Yes
- No

**23. Did you pay off some or all of this debt after this creditor or debt collector contacted you?**

- Yes
- No



## D. Disputing a Debt in Collection in the Past Year

This section asks about debt you disputed in the past year. People may dispute a debt by telling the creditor or debt collector, for example, that the debt is not theirs, that the amount is wrong, or that something else about the debt is incorrect.

**24. In the past year, since January 2014, have you disputed a debt with a creditor or debt collector?**

- Yes  
 No  $\longrightarrow$  *If No, please skip to Section E*

**25. Is the debt that you most recently disputed the same one as the most recent debt you were contacted about (that you described in Section C)?**

- Yes  
 No

In questions 26–31, answer based on your most recent experience in which you disputed a debt.

**26. Did you dispute the following?**

	Yes	No
Whether it was your debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Whether the amount of the debt was correct	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Whether the debt had already been paid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Whether the creditor or debt collector had the right to collect the debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other <i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**27. Who did you dispute this debt with? Please mark one response.**

- The creditor (for example, the original lender, store, hospital, or landlord)  
 A debt collector (for example, a law firm, debt collection company, or other third party trying to collect the debt)  
 Don't know

**28. Was this the first time you had disputed this debt?**

- Yes, this was the first time I disputed the debt  
 No, I had previously disputed the debt with the creditor or with a different debt collector

**29. Thinking about the most recent dispute, how did you dispute the debt? Please mark one response.**

- Over the phone or in person  
 By letter or fax  
 By email, text, or internet

**30. In response to this dispute, did the creditor or debt collector...**

	Yes	No
Reduce the amount of debt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cease efforts to collect the debt?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make other payment arrangements?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ignore the dispute and continue to contact you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



**31. Did the creditor or debt collector provide additional information in response to your dispute?**

- Yes  
 No



*Skip to  
Section E*

**31a. Did the creditor or debt collector provide the following in response to your dispute?**

	Yes	No
Original account number	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name of the original creditor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Itemization of the amount owed (e.g., principal, interest, and fees)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Security Number of the person who owes the debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Type of debt (credit cards, medical bills, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name and address of the person who owes the debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Name and address of other borrowers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Date and amount of the last payment made	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copy of the last billing statement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Copy of the contract or original invoice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>If Other, please specify:</i> <input type="text"/>		

**31b. Did this information allow you to determine if you owed the amount that the creditor or debt collector was seeking?**

- Yes  
 No

## E. Lawsuits to Collect on Debts in the Past Year

**32. In the past year, since January 2014, have you been sued by someone trying to collect a debt (for example, you received or were served with a complaint)?**

- Yes  
 No



*Skip to  
Section F*

**32a. Did you attend the court hearing for the most recent lawsuit?**

- Yes **→** *If Yes, please skip to Section F*  
 No

**32b. People may want to attend a court hearing but then are unable to or do not. Which one of the following best describes the most important reason you did not attend the hearing? Mark one reason.**

- I owed the debt or had no defense  
 I did not owe the debt but thought it would not matter whether I appeared  
 I did not know that a lawsuit had been filed  
 I did not know when or where the hearing was held  
 I did not have an attorney  
 It was too difficult or expensive to attend  
 Other   
*If Other, please specify:*  
 The claim was settled or the suit was dropped



## F. Your Preferences for Communications about Debts

To understand how consumers interact with creditors and debt collectors, this section asks for your opinion about being contacted through various methods and the content of messages a creditor or debt collector might leave.

### 33. Please indicate ways that you can be reached.

	Yes	No
a. In-person	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Home phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Cell phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Work phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Voicemail or answering machine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Letter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Email	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Text message	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 34. Of the ways you said you can be reached, which one would you most prefer a creditor or debt collector to use to contact you about a debt? *Please provide one response.*

### 35. Of the ways you said you can be reached, which one would you least prefer a creditor or debt collector to use to contact you about a debt? *Please provide one response.*

### 36. How important is it to you that others do not hear or see a message from a creditor or debt collector?

- Very important  
 Somewhat important  
 Not at all important

### 37. If a creditor or debt collector left you a voicemail or answering machine message, would you want the information below included or not included?

	Included	Not included
The creditor's or debt collector's name	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
That the creditor or debt collector is attempting to collect a debt	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
That the communication is an attempt to collect a debt and any information obtained will be used for that purpose	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



## G. You and Your Household

**38. What is your sex?**

- Male  
 Female

**39. What is your age as of your last birthday?**

- Less than 25 years  
 25–34 years  
 35–44 years  
 45–54 years  
 55–64 years  
 65 years or older

**40. What is your highest level of education?**

- Less than a high school degree  
 High school degree  
 Some college (excluding technical or vocational schools)  
 College degree  
 Postgraduate degree (for example, MA, PhD, JD, MBA, MD)

**41. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**

- Yes  
 No

**42. What is your race? Mark all that apply.**

- White  
 Black or African American  
 American Indian or Alaska Native  
 Asian  
 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

**43. Is English your preferred language?**

- Yes  
 No

**44. Do you have a mobile phone?**

- Yes  
 No → Please skip to Question 46

**45. Would you be charged extra (on top of any regular monthly fees) to receive the following on your mobile phone?**

	Yes	No
A call	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A text message	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**46. Which of these ways do you use to access the Internet on a regular basis?**

	Yes	No
Your phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A computer at home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A computer at work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A tablet or similar portable device	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (for example, library or a relative's home)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**47. What is your current marital status?**

- Married  
 Living with a partner  
 Never married  
 Separated  
 Divorced  
 Widowed

Please answer the following questions for you and your spouse or partner, if you have one.

**48. Current work status: Mark all that apply.**

	You	Spouse/ Partner
Self-employed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Work full time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Work part time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Retired	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Temporarily laid off or on leave	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unemployed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not doing any work for pay (homemaker, student, disabled, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**49. Recent active duty military service and veteran status. Active duty includes service in U.S. Armed Forces as well as activation from the Reserves or National Guard.**

	You	Spouse/ Partner
On active duty at any time since January 2014	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Veteran but not on active duty since January 2014	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
No military service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





**50. Is your current residence owned, rented, or something else?**

- Owned or being bought by you, your spouse or partner, or someone else who lives there
- Rented
- Neither owned nor rented

**51. Approximately how much was your total annual household income in 2014 from all sources (*wages, salaries, tips, interest, child support, alimony, investment or rental income, retirement, Social Security, government benefits such as TANF*)?**

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$69,999
- \$70,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

**52. How did this total annual household income last year compare to what you would expect in a "normal" year?**

- Higher than normal
- Normal
- Lower than normal

**53. Have any of the following happened to you since January 2014?**

	Yes	No
Separation or divorce	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marriage or moving in with a new partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Death of a household member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Birth, adoption, or other addition to your household	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Person leaving your household	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Promotion or starting a new job for you or for your spouse or partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loss of significant income for you or for your spouse or partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Retirement for you or for your spouse or partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disability or serious illness of any one in your household	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identity theft of personal information belonging to you or your spouse or partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural disaster affecting your home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Move within the state where you currently live	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Move from a different state	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Move to the U.S. from another country	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



We have provided the space below if you wish to share additional comments or further explain any of your responses. Please do not put your name or address on the questionnaire.

## Thank you for completing our survey!

Please use the enclosed business reply envelope to return your completed questionnaire to:

**Consumer Financial Protection Bureau**

1600 Research Blvd., RC B16

Rockville MD 20850

If you would prefer to complete the survey online in English or Spanish, follow the instructions below. Web responses are processed more quickly, so taking the survey online makes it less likely that you will receive follow-up contacts.

## Web Survey Instructions

- 1** Go to the website **www.CFPBDebtSurvey.com**  
*Visite al sitio web **www.CFPBDebtSurvey.com***
- 2** **Log in** and enter your unique survey PIN number and 5-digit zip code found in the accompanying letter. *Inicie la sesión con su número PIN único de la encuesta y el código postal de 5 dígitos que se encuentra en la carta adjunta.*

### Questions?

If you have any technical difficulties, including problems with the website or any questions about the survey, please call 1-855-246-9457.

