why consumers don’t pay

**loss of income (48%)**
- Unemployment (24%)
- Illness (16%)
- Other (divorce, death) (8%)

**overextension (25%)**
- Poor money management
- Emergencies
- Materialism
- Need for instant gratification

**defective goods and services (20%)**

**fraudulent use of credit (4%)**

**other (3%)**
warning signs of trouble

- You don't know how much you owe.
- You often pay bills late.
- You get a new loan to pay old loans.
- You pay only the minimum balance due each month.
- You spend more than 20% of your net income (after paying rent or mortgage) on debt maintenance.
- You would have an immediate financial problem if you lost your job.
- You're spending more than you earn, using your savings to pay for day-to-day expenses.
first steps to take if you can’t pay your bills

**take another (close) look at your budget**

- Trim your expenses.
- Be realistic about what you can afford.

**contact your creditors**

- Tell them why you can't pay, that you intend to pay, and when/how much you will be able to pay.
- You may be able to work out a new payment schedule.
- If possible, continue to make the minimum payments.
### income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job #1</td>
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<td>Job #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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### fixed expenses

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<td>Rent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Car payment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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### flexible expenses

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<td>Personal items</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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### total expenses

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### total income

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national foundation for consumer credit (NFCC)

- Program that offers information on financial and consumer topics. All cities with populations of 50,000, and 1,500 locations nationwide.
- Reviews your income.
- Helps you set up a realistic personal budget.
- May contact your creditors and make arrangements for reduced payments on your bills.
- Helps you plan for future expenses.
- Services, depending on location, may be available for no charge or reasonable fee.
- Listed in yellow pages under “credit counseling” or call (800) 388-2227 for a location nearest you. Or you can visit NFCC online at nfcc.org.
consolidating your debts

loan consolidation

- You make only one payment, usually lower than the total amount of your monthly debt payments.
- Best to use only when combined with credit counseling.
- If you own a home, consider your spending habits carefully before you take out a home equity loan. You could end up with a loan and large credit card bills if you don't change your spending habits.

watch out for “credit repair” companies

- Offer for-profit counseling.
- Offer debt consolidation loans.
- Offer debt counseling.
- Some advertise they can erase a poor credit history (no one can do this).
a debt collector must
- Inform you, in writing, of the amount of your debt, the name of the creditor, and an explanation of your right to dispute the debt.
- If you dispute the debt, the debt collector must give you written proof of the debt.

a debt collector may not
- Contact you at unusual times or places.
- Disclose what you owe to anyone but your attorney.
- Harass or threaten you.
- Use false statements.
- Give false information about you to anyone.
- Misrepresent the legal status of the debt.
- Engage in any kind of unfair practice, such as trying to collect an amount greater than you owe.
what is garnishment?
- A legal procedure that withholds a portion of your earnings for the payment of debt.

the limits of garnishment
- The lesser of 25% of your disposable income or 30 times the federal hourly minimum wage.
- You may be able to get a “Claim of Exemption.”

claim of exemption (only if you meet all of the following conditions)
- Your family is living in the state.
- All the money you earn is needed to provide necessities.
- Debt was for a necessity (food, housing, medical care).
- Garnishment has already been started.

what protection you have
- You cannot be fired for any one garnishment.

how the law is enforced
- Enforced by the Secretary of Labor through the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor.
wage assignment and wage attachment

assignment
- Does not have legal force from a court, as does wage garnishment.
- It is a legal agreement between a lender and a debtor.
- Permits lender to collect part of debtor’s wages from an employer if debtor fails to make regular payments.
- Employer is not legally compelled to honor a wage assignment arrangement.

attachment
- If you don’t have a job, a lender can get a court order to “attach” or seize some of your property to pay off the debt.
**car repossession**

**rights of creditor**
- Can seize car as soon as you default.
- Can't commit a breach of the peace, i.e., use physical force or threats of force.
- Can keep car or resell it.
- May not keep or sell any personal property in car (not including improvements such as a stereo or luggage rack).

**your rights**
- Can buy back car by paying the full amount owed on it plus repossession expenses.

**your responsibilities**
- Must still pay the “deficiency balance”—the amount of debt remaining even after your creditor has sold your car.
wage-earner bankruptcy

how it works

- You petition bankruptcy court to approve a plan to pay off your debts.
- Court accepts plan if you can pay off, in three years, at least as much as your creditors would receive if you filed straight bankruptcy.
- Interest on all your loans stops.
- Creditors must contact the court, instead of you.
- If paid as agreed, at the end of three years your debts are considered paid in full.
- Your costs range between 15% and 25% of amount owed.

benefits

- Can sometimes salvage your credit.
- You can avoid being harassed by your creditors.
- By being required to draw up a budget and determine exactly how much you can actually afford to pay, you are forced into being realistic about your budget.

disadvantages

- Some lenders don't react favorably when they see wage-earner bankruptcy on a credit report because some people use it to protect their property and pay less of their debt.
**straight bankruptcy**

**duration on your credit record**
- Up to 10 years

**what you may still owe**
- Taxes
- Child support
- Alimony
- College loans
- Fines
- Illegal debts
- Co-signer obligations

**what you no longer owe**
- Retail store charges
- Bank credit card charges
- Unsecured loans
- Unpaid hospital or physician bills