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Illness and Injury as Contributors to Bankruptcy

David U. Himmelstein, M.D.

Elizabeth Warren, J.D.

Deborah Thorne, Ph.D.

Steffie Woolhandler, M.D., M.P.H.

Correspondence to: David U. Himmelstein, M.D., Harvard Medical School, 1493 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02139. Telephone: (617) 665-1032. Email: Dhimmelstein@challiance.org

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Brief Biographies of the Authors

David U. Himmelstein received his M.D. degree from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He completed an internal medicine residency at Highland Hospital in Oakland, California and a Fellowship in General Internal Medicine at Harvard Medical School. He joined the faculty at Harvard in 1984, and is currently an Associate Professor of Medicine and a primary care physician at Cambridge Hospital. He has published widely in the clinical and health policy literature, and is a well-known advocate for national health insurance. (Address: Cambridge Hospital/Harvard Medical School, 1493 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02139. Phone: (617) 665-1032. Fax: (617) 665-1671. Email: dhimmelstein@challiance.org).

Elizabeth Warren received her J.D. from Rutgers and currently serves as the Leo Gottlieb Professor of Law at Harvard Law School. She was Chief Adviser to the National Bankruptcy Review Commission. Professor Warren has served as Vice-President of the American Law Institute, and she currently serves on the Executive Boards of the Council of the ALI and the National Bankruptcy Conference. The National Law Journal named Professor Warren as one of the Fifty Most Influential Women Attorneys in America. She is the co-author of two leading case books in bankruptcy and commercial law, and she has written extensively about families in financial trouble. (Address: Harvard Law School, Cambridge, MA 02138. Phone: (617) 495-3101. Fax: (617) 496-6118. email: ewarren@law.harvard.edu)

Deborah Thorne earned her Ph.D. in sociology from Washington State University. During a post-doctoral assignment at Harvard University, she worked as Project Director on the Consumer Bankruptcy Project. Currently, she is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Ohio University, where she continues to study the issues associated with personal bankruptcy. (Address: Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701. Phone: (740) 593-1367. Fax: (740) 593-1365. Email: thorned@ohio.edu).

Steffie Woolhandler received her M.D. degree from Louisiana State University, New Orleans, and an M.P.H. from the University of California, Berkeley. She completed an internal medicine residency at Cambridge Hospital and a Fellowship in General Internal Medicine at Harvard Medical School. In 1990-91 she was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Fellow at the Institute of Medicine, and served on the staffs of Sen. Paul Wellstone and Rep. Bernard Sanders. She is currently an Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard, where she co-directs the General Medicine Faculty Development Fellowship Program. She practices primary care internal medicine at Cambridge Hospital and publishes widely in the clinical and health policy literature. Together with David Himmelstein, she co-founded Physicians for a National Health Program. (Address: Cambridge Hospital/Harvard Medical School, 1493 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02139. Phone: (617) 665-1032. Fax: (617) 665-1671. Email: swoolhandler@challiance.org)

Abstract

In 2001, 1.458 million American families filed for bankruptcy. To investigate medical contributors to bankruptcy we surveyed 1771 personal bankruptcy filers in five Federal courts, and subsequently completed in-depth interviews with 931 of them. About half of debtors cited medical causes, indicating that between 1.850 and 2.227 million Americans (filers plus dependents) experienced medical bankruptcy. Among individuals whose illness led to bankruptcy, out-of-pocket costs averaged \$11,854 since the start of illness; 75.7% had insurance at the onset of illness. Medical debtors were 42% more likely than other debtors to experience lapses in coverage. Even middle class, insured families often fall prey to financial catastrophe when sick.

Introduction

"If the debtor be insolvent to serve creditors, let his body be cut in pieces on the third market day. It may be cut into more or fewer pieces with impunity. Or, if his creditors consent to it, let him be sold to foreigners beyond the Tiber."¹

Our bankruptcy system works differently from ancient Rome's; creditors carve up the debtor's assets, not the debtor. Even so bankruptcy leaves painful problems in its wake. It remains on credit reports for a decade, making everything from car insurance to house payments more expensive². Debtors' names are often published in the newspaper, and the fact of their bankruptcy may show up whenever someone tries to find them via the internet. Potential employers who run routine credit checks (a common screening practice) will discover the bankruptcy, which can lead to embarrassment or, worse, the lost chance for a much-needed job.³

Personal bankruptcy is common. Nearly 1.5 million couples or individuals filed bankruptcy petitions in 2001, a 360% increase since 1980.⁴ Fragmentary data from the legal literature suggests that illness and medical bills contribute to bankruptcy. Most previous studies of medical bankruptcy, however, have relied on court records - where medical debts may be subsumed under credit card or mortgage debt - or on responses to a single survey question⁵. None has collected detailed information on medical expenses, diagnoses, access to care, work loss, or insurance coverage. Research has been impeded both by the absence of a national repository for bankruptcy filings, and by debtors' reticence to discuss their bankruptcy; in population-based surveys only half of those who have undergone bankruptcy admit to it⁶.

The health policy literature is virtually silent on bankruptcy, though a few studies have looked at impoverishment due to illness. In his 1972 book, Senator Edward Kennedy gave an impressionistic account of "sickness and bankruptcy."⁷ The likelihood of incurring high out-of-pocket costs was incorporated into older estimates of the number of under-insured Americans - 29 million in 1987.⁸ Currently, about 16% of families spend more than one-twentieth of their income on health care⁹. Among terminally ill patients (most of them insured) 39% reported that health care costs caused moderate or severe financial problems.¹⁰ Medical debt is common among the poor, even those with insurance, and interferes with access to care¹¹. At least 8%, and perhaps as many as 21% of American families are contacted by collection agencies about medical bills annually¹².

Our study provides the first extensive data on the medical concomitants of bankruptcy, based on a survey of debtors in bankruptcy courts. We address the following questions: (1) Who files for bankruptcy? (2) How frequently do illness and medical bills contribute to bankruptcy? (3) When medical bills contribute to bankruptcy, how large are they and for what services? (4) Does inadequate health insurance play a role in bankruptcy? (5) Does bankruptcy compromise access to care?

A Very Brief Primer on Personal Bankruptcy in the U.S.

Broke is not synonymous with bankrupt. "Bankrupt" means filing a petition in a Federal Court asking for protection from creditors via the bankruptcy laws. A single petition may cover an individual or married couple. The instant a debtor files for bankruptcy, the court assumes legal control of the debtor's assets and halts all collection efforts against the debtor.

Shortly after the filing, a court-appointed trustee convenes a meeting to inventory the debtor's assets and debts and to determine which assets are exempt from seizure. States may regulate these exemptions, which often include work tools, clothes, bibles, and some equity in a home.

About 70% of all consumer debtors file under Chapter 7 of the Bankruptcy Code; most others file under Chapter 13. In Chapter 7, the trustee liquidates all non-exempt assets - although 96% of debtors have so little unencumbered property that there is nothing left to liquidate. At the conclusion of the bankruptcy the debtor is freed from many debts. In Chapter 13, the debtor proposes a repayment plan, which extends for up to five years. Chapter 13 debtors may retain their property so long as they stay current with their repayments.

Under both chapters, taxes, student loans, alimony, and child support remain payable in full and debtors must make payments on all secured loans (e.g., home mortgages and car loans) or forfeit the collateral.

Methods

This study is based on a cohort of 1771 bankruptcy filings in 2001. For each filing a debtor completed a written questionnaire at the mandatory meeting with the trustee, and we abstracted financial data from public court records. In addition, we conducted follow-up telephone interviews with about half (931) of these debtors.

Sampling Strategy

We used cluster sampling to assemble a cohort of households filing for personal bankruptcy in 5 (of the 77 total) federal judicial districts.¹³

We collected 250 questionnaires in each district, representative of the proportion of Chapter 7 and 13 filings in that district. These 1250 cases constitute our "core sample."

For planned studies on housing, we collected identical data from an additional 521 homeowners filing for bankruptcy. We based our analyses on all 1771 bankruptcies: the 1250 in the core sample plus the 521 additional home-owners, with responses weighted to maintain the representativeness of the sample.¹⁴

Data Collection

With the cooperation of the judges in each district we contacted the trustees who officiate at meetings with debtors. The trustees agreed to distribute, or to allow a research assistant to distribute, a self-administered questionnaire to debtors appearing at the bankruptcy meeting. Questionnaires (which were available in English and Spanish) included a cover letter explaining the research project and human subjects protections and encouraging debtors to consult their attorneys (who were almost always present) before participating.

The questionnaire asked about demographics, employment, housing and specific reasons for filing for bankruptcy; whether the debtor had medical debts >\$1000, had lost two or more weeks of work-related income due to illness, had health insurance coverage for themselves and all dependents at the time of filing, and whether there had been a one month or greater gap in that coverage over the past two years. In joint filings, we collected demographic information for each spouse.

During the spring and summer of 2001, we collected questionnaires from consecutive debtors in each district until the target number was reached.¹⁵

Follow-up Telephone Interviews

The written questionnaire distributed at the time of bankruptcy filing invited debtors to participate in future telephone interviews, for which they would receive \$50; 70% agreed to such interviews. We ultimately completed follow-up telephone interviews with 931 of the 1,771 debtor families, a response rate of 53%.¹⁶

The telephone interviews, conducted between June 2001 and February 2002 using a structured, computer-assisted protocol, explored financial, housing and medical issues. Many debtors also provided a narrative description of their bankruptcy experience.

Detailed Medical Questions

Each of the 931 interviewees was asked if any of the following had been a significant cause of their bankruptcy: an illness or injury; the death of a family member; or the addition of a family member through birth, adoption, custody or fostering. Those who answered yes to this screening question were queried about diagnoses, health insurance during the illness, and medical utilization and expenses. Interviewers collected information about each household member with medical problems.

In total, we collected in-depth medical information on 391 individuals with health problems in 332 debtor households.

Data Analysis

We used data from the self-administered questionnaires (and court records) obtained from all 1771 filers to analyze demographics, health coverage at the time of filing and gaps in coverage in the two years before filing.

The questionnaire was also used to estimate how frequently illness and medical bills contributed to bankruptcy. We developed two summary measures of medical bankruptcy. Under the rubric "Major Medical Bankruptcy" we included debtors who: cited illness or injury as a specific reason for bankruptcy; OR reported uncovered medical bills in the past 2 years >\$1000; OR lost •2 weeks of workrelated income due to illness/injury; OR mortgaged a home to pay medical bills.

Our more inclusive category "Any Medical Bankruptcy" includes debtors who cited any of the above, OR addiction, OR uncontrolled gambling, OR birth, OR the death of a family member¹⁷.

Data from the 931 follow-up telephone interviews were used to analyze hardships experienced by debtors in the peri-bankruptcy period, including problems in access to medical care.

The in-depth medical interviews regarding 391 individuals with medical problems are the basis for our analyses of which household members were ill, diagnoses, health insurance at onset of illness, and out-of-pocket expenditures. Two physicians (DUH and SJW) coded the diagnoses given by debtors into categories.

SAS and SUDAAN were used for statistical analyses, adjusting for complex sample design. To extrapolate our findings nationally, we assumed that our core sample was representative of the 1,457,572 households filing bankruptcy during 2001.

Human subject committees at Harvard Law School and The Cambridge Hospital approved the project.

Who Files for Bankruptcy?

Exhibit 1 displays the demographic characteristics of our weighted sample of 1771 bankruptcy filers. The average debtor was a 41 year old woman with children, and at least some college education. Most debtors owned homes; their occupational prestige scores place them predominantly in the middle or working classes.

On average, each bankruptcy involved 1.32 debtors (reflecting some joint filings by married couples) and 1.33 dependents. Extrapolating from our data, the 1.458 million personal bankruptcy filings nationally in 2001 involved 3.867 million people: 1.924 million debtors, 1.209 million children under 18, and .734 million other dependents.

Medical Causes of Bankruptcy

Exhibit 2 shows the proportion of debtors (n=1771) citing various medical contributors to their bankruptcy, and the estimated number of debtors and dependents nationally affected by each cause. More than one quarter cited illness or injury as a specific reason for bankruptcy; a similar number reported uncovered medical bills >\$1000. Some debtors cited more than one medical contributor. 46.2% (95% CI=43.5% to 48.9%) of debtors met at least one of our criteria for "major medical bankruptcy." 54.5% (95% CI=51.8% to 57.2%) met criteria for "any medical bankruptcy."

A lapse in health coverage during the two years before filing was a strong predictor of a medical cause of bankruptcy (Exhibit 3). 38.4% of debtors who had a "major medical bankruptcy" had experienced a lapse, vs. 27.1% of debtors with no medical cause (p<.0001). Surprisingly, medical debtors were no less likely than other debtors to have coverage at the time of filing. (More detailed coverage and cost data for the subsample we interviewed appears below.)

Medical debtors resembled other debtors in most other respects (Exhibit 1). However, the "major medical bankruptcy" group was 16% (p<.03) less likely than other debtors to cite trouble managing money as a cause of their bankruptcy (data not shown).

Privations in the Peri-Bankruptcy Period

In our follow-up telephone interviews with 931 debtors, they reported substantial privations. During the two years before filing, 40.3% had lost telephone service; 19.4% had gone without food; 53.6% went without needed doctor or dentist visits because of the cost; and 43.0% had failed to fill a prescription, also because of the cost. Medical debtors experienced more problems in access to care than other debtors; three-fifths went without a needed doctor or dentist visit, and nearly half failed to fill a prescription (Exhibit 4).

Medical debt was also associated with mortgage problems. Among the total sample of 1771 debtors, those with > \$1000 in medical bills were more likely than others to have taken out a mortgage to pay medical bills (5.0% vs. 0.8%). 15.1% of all homeowners who had taken out a second or third mortgage cited medical expenses as a reason. Follow-up phone interviews revealed that among homeowners with high-cost mortgages (interest rate >12%, or points plus fees of at least 8%) 13.8% cited a medical reason for taking out the loan.

Following their bankruptcy filings, about one-third of debtors continued to have problems paying their bills. Medical debtors reported particular problems paying mortgages/rent and utilities (Exhibit 4). Although our interviews occurred soon after the bankruptcy filings (7 months, on average) many debtors had already been turned down for jobs (3.1% of debtors), mortgages (5.8%), apartment rentals (4.9%) or car loans (9.3%) because of the bankruptcy on their credit reports.

Medical Diagnoses, Expenditures and Type of Coverage

Our interviews yielded detailed data on diagnoses, health insurance and medical bills for 391 debtors or family members whose medical problems contributed to bankruptcy. In three-quarters of cases the person experiencing the illness/injury was the debtor or spouse; in 13.3% a child; and in 8.2% an elderly relative.

Illness begot financial problems both directly - due to medical costs - and through lost income. 59.9% of families bankrupted by medical problems indicated that medical bills (i.e. from medical providers) contributed to bankruptcy; 47.6% cited drug costs; 35.3% had curtailed employment due to illness - often (52.8%) to care for someone else. Many families had problems with both medical bills and income loss.

Families bankrupted by medical problems cited varied, and sometimes multiple, diagnoses. Cardiovascular disorders were reported by 26.6%; trauma/orthopedic/back problems by nearly one-third; and cancer, diabetes, pulmonary or mental disorders, and childbirth-related and congenital disorders by about 10% each. 51.7% of the medical problems involved ongoing chronic illnesses.

Our in-depth interviews with medical debtors confirmed that gaps in coverage were a common problem. 75.7% of these debtors were insured at onset of the bankrupting illness. 60.1% initially had private coverage, but one third of them lost coverage during the course of their illness. 5.7% had Medicare, 8.4% Medicaid and 1.6% veterans/military coverage. Those covered under government program were less likely to have experienced coverage interruptions.

Few medical debtors had elected to go without coverage. Only 2.9% of those who were uninsured or suffered a gap in coverage said they had not thought they needed insurance. 55.9% said premiums were unaffordable; 7.1% were unable to obtain coverage because of pre-existing medical conditions; and most others cited employment issues, e.g., job loss or ineligibility for employer-sponsored coverage.

Debtors' out-of-pocket medical costs were often below levels that are commonly labeled catastrophic. In the year prior to bankruptcy, out-of-pocket costs (excluding insurance premiums) averaged \$3,686 (95% CI; \$2,693 to \$4,679) (Exhibit 5). Presumably, such costs were often ruinous because of concomitant income loss, or because the need for costly care persisted over several years. Out-of-pocket costs since the onset of illness/injury averaged \$11,854 (95% CI; \$8,532 to \$15,175). Those with continuous insurance coverage paid \$734 annually in premiums on average, over and above the expenditures detailed above.

Debtors with private insurance at the onset of their illness had even higher out-of-pocket costs than those with no insurance (Exhibit 5). This paradox is explained by the very high costs - \$18,005 - incurred by patients who initially had private insurance but lost it.

Among families with medical expenses, hospital bills were the biggest medical expense for 42.5%, prescription medications for 21.0% and doctors' bills for 20.0%. Virtually all of those with Medicare coverage, and most patients with psychiatric disorders, said prescription drugs were their biggest expense.

The Human Face of Bankruptcy

Debtors' narratives painted a picture of families arriving at the bankruptcy courthouse emotionally and financially exhausted, hoping to stop the collection calls, save their homes, and stabilize their economic circumstances.

Many of the debtors detailed ongoing problems in access to care. Some expressed fear that their medical providers would refuse to continue their care, and a few recounted actual experiences of this kind. Several had used credit cards to charge medical bills they had no hope of paying.

The co-occurrence of medical and job problems was a common theme. For instance one debtor underwent lung surgery and suffered a heart attack. Both hospitalizations were covered by his employer-paid insurance, but he was unable to return to his physically-demanding job. He found new employment, but was denied coverage due to his pre-existing conditions which required costly ongoing care. Similarly, a school-teacher who suffered a heart attack was unable to return to work for many months, and hence her coverage lapsed. A hospital wrote off her \$20,000 debt, but she was nonetheless bankrupted by doctor bills and the cost of medications.

A second common theme was sounded by parents of premature infants or chronically ill children; many took time off from work or incurred large bills for home-care while they were at their jobs.

Finally, many of the insured debtors blamed high co-payments and deductibles for their financial ruin. For example, a man insured through his employer (a large national firm) suffered a broken leg and torn knee ligaments. He incurred \$13,000 in out-of-pocket costs for co-payments, deductibles and uncovered services - much of it for physical therapy.

Discussion

Bankruptcy is common in the U.S., involving nearly four million debtors and dependents in 2001; medical problems contribute to about half of all bankruptcies.

Medical debtors, like other bankruptcy filers, were primarily middle-class (by education and occupation). The chronically poor are less likely to build up debt, have fewer assets (such as a home) to protect, and have less access to the legal resources needed to navigate a complex financial rehabilitation.

The medical debtors we surveyed were demographically typical Americans who got sick. They differed from others filing for bankruptcy in one important respect: they were more likely to have experienced a lapse in health insurance coverage. Many had coverage at the onset of their illness, but lost it. In other cases, even continuous coverage left families with ruinous medical bills.

Limitations of the Study

Our study's strengths are the use of multiple overlapping data sources; large sample size; geographic diversity; and in-depth data collection. While our sample may not be fully representative of all personal bankruptcies, the Chapter 7 filers we studied resemble Chapter 7 filers nationally (the only group for whom demographic data has been compiled nationally from court records).¹⁸ Several indicators suggest that response bias did not greatly distort our findings.¹⁹

As in all surveys, we relied on the truthfulness of respondents. Might some debtors blame their predicament on socially acceptable medical problems rather than admitting to irresponsible spending?

Several factors suggest that our respondents were candid. First, just prior to answering our questionnaire, debtors had filed extensive financial information with the court under penalty of perjury - information that was available to us in the court records, and which virtually never contradicted the questionnaire data. They were about to be sworn in by a trustee (who often administered our questionnaire) and examined under oath. At few other points in life are full disclosure and honesty so aggressively emphasized.

Second, the details called for in our telephone interview - questions about out-of-pocket medical expenses, who was ill, diagnoses etc. - would make a generic claim that "we had medical problems" difficult to sustain.

Third, one of us (DT) interviewed (for other studies) many debtors in their homes. Almost all specifically denied spendthrift habits, and observation of their homes supported these claims. Most reflected the lifestyle of people under economic constraint, with modest furnishings and few luxuries. Finally, our findings receive indirect corroboration from recent surveys of the general public that have found high levels of medical debt, which often result in calls from collection agencies²⁰.

Even when data are reliable, making causal inferences from a cross sectional study such as ours is perilous. Many debtors described a complex web of problems involving illness, work, and family. Dissecting medical from other causes of bankruptcy is difficult. We cannot presume that eliminating the medical antecedents of bankruptcy would have prevented all of the filings we

classified as "medical bankruptcies." Conversely, many people financially ruined by illness are undoubtedly too ill, too destitute or too demoralized to pursue formal bankruptcy. In sum, bankruptcy is an imperfect proxy for financial ruin.

Trends in Medical Bankruptcy

Although methodologic inconsistencies between studies preclude precise quantitation of time trends, medical bankruptcies are clearly increasing. In 1981 the best evidence available suggests that about 25,000 families filed for bankruptcy in the aftermath of a serious medical problem (8% of the 312,000 bankruptcy filings that year).²¹ Our findings suggest that the number of medical bankruptcies had increased 23-fold by 2001. Since the number of bankruptcy filings rose 11% in the 18 months after the completion of our data collection, the absolute number of medical bankruptcies almost surely continues to increase²².

Policy Implications

Our data highlight four deficiencies in the financial safety net for American families confronting illness.

First, even brief lapses in insurance coverage may be ruinous and should not be viewed as benign. While 45 million Americans are uninsured at any point in time, many more experience spells without coverage. We found little evidence that such gaps were voluntary. Only a handful of medical debtors with a gap in coverage had chosen to forego insurance because they had not perceived a need for it; the overwhelming majority had found coverage unaffordable or effectively unavailable. The privations suffered by many debtors - going without food, telephone service, electricity and health care - lend credence to claims that coverage was unaffordable and belie the common perception that bankruptcy is an "easy way out".

Second, many health insurance policies prove too skimpy in the face of serious illness. We doubt that such underinsurance reflects families' preference for risk; few Americans have more than one or two health insurance options. Many insured families are bankrupted by medical expenses well below the "catastrophic" thresholds of high-deductible plans that are increasingly popular with employers. Indeed, even the most comprehensive plan available to us through Harvard University leaves faculty at risk for out-of-pocket expenses as large as those reported by our medical debtors.

Third, even good employment-based coverage sometimes fails to protect families because illness may lead to job loss and the consequent loss of coverage. Lost jobs, of course, also leave families without health coverage when they are at their financially most vulnerable.

Finally, illness often leads to financial catastrophe through loss of income, as well as high medical bills. Hence, disability insurance and paid sick leave are also critical to financial survival of a serious illness.

Only broad reforms can address these problems. Even universal coverage could leave many Americans vulnerable to bankruptcy unless such coverage was much more comprehensive than many current policies. As in Canada and most of Western Europe, health insurance should be divorced from employment to avoid coverage disruptions at the time of illness. Insurance policies should incorporate comprehensive stop-loss provisions, closing coverage loopholes that

expose insured families to unaffordable out-of-pocket costs. Additionally, improved programs are needed to replace breadwinners' incomes when they are disabled or must care for a loved one. The low rate of medical bankruptcy in Canada suggests that better medical and social insurance could substantially ameliorate this problem in the U.S.²³

In 1591 Pope Gregory XIV fell gravely ill. His doctors prescribed pulverized gold and gems. According to legend, the resulting depletion of the Papal treasury is reflected in his unadorned plaster sarcophagus in St. Peter's²⁴. Four centuries later, solidly middle class Americans still face impoverishment following a serious illness.

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Notes

1. Twelve tables. Table III, 6 (c. 450B.C.).
2. J. Guest, High Rate Robbery, Consumer Reports 67, no 10 (2002):7.
3. Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, The Two-Income Trap (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
4. Statistical Abstract of the U.S. 1982-83 (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983).
Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Record Breaking Bankruptcy Filings Reported in Calendar Year 2001, http://www.uscourts.gov/Press_Releases/cy01bk.pdf (3 December, 2002).
5. See: Melissa B. Jacoby, Teresa A. Sullivan and Elizabeth Warren, Rethinking the Debates Over Health Care Financing: Evidence from the Bankruptcy Courts, *New York University Law Review* 76 (2001):375-418.
6. Scott Fay, Erik Hurst and Michelle J. White, The Household Bankruptcy Decision, *American Economic Review* 92, no. 3 (2002):706-11.
7. Edward M. Kennedy, In Critical Condition: The Crisis in America's Health Care, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).
8. Pamela Farley Short and Jessica S. Banthin, New Estimates of the Underinsured Younger than 65 Years, *JAMA* 274, no. 16 (1995):1302-6.
9. M. Merlis. Family out-of-pocket spending for health services. New York: Commonwealth Fund, June, 2002.
10. Ezekiel J. Emanuel et al., Understanding Economic and Other Burdens of Terminal Illness, *Annals of Internal Medicine* 132, no. 6 (2000):451-459.
11. The consequences of medical debt: evidence from three communities. February, 2003.
www.accessproject.org/feature.htm (24 October 2003).
12. National Survey on Health Care (chart pack). NPR/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, June, 2002, www.kff.org/content/2002/3238/NPR_Chart_Pack_FINAL2.pdf (5 December 2002). Jessica H. May and Peter J. Cunningham, Tough Trade-Offs: Medical Bills, Family Finances and Access to Care (Washington: Center for Studying Health System Change, June, 2004). Sara R. Collins, Michelle M. Doty, Karen Davis, et al., The Affordability Crisis in U.S. Health Care: Findings from the Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey, (New York: Commonwealth Fund, March, 2004).
13. The districts were: California (Central District); Illinois (Northern District); Pennsylvania (Eastern District); Tennessee (Middle District); and the Texas (Northern District). These were chosen to achieve geographic, social and legal diversity. Together, the five districts accounted for 13.8% of total U.S. bankruptcy filings in 2001.
14. The 521 extra homeowner cases make the full sample of 1771 less representative of filers nationally than our core sample of 1250. Therefore, we used weighting procedures to adjust for the oversampling of debtors in three districts, homeowners, and debtors filing under Chapter 13. The weighted and unweighted findings were little different.

15. Interviews with trustees indicate that response rates in the 5 districts varied from approximately 55% to nearly 100%.
16. It proved difficult to contact some debtors, presumably because they were experiencing major life disruptions and/or were afraid of calls from creditors. After 10 unsuccessful attempts to telephone the debtor, we attempted to reach them through contacts they had previously given us and via a letter.

Relative to the overall sample, the 931 interviewed debtors were slightly less likely to be male, to have lost a home, or to reside outside of Illinois, but did not differ in age, occupational prestige score, education, or home ownership. On occupational prestige scores see: NORC, Occupational Prestige/Summary, <http://cloud9.norc.uchicago.edu/faqs/prestige.htm> (20 December 2002).
17. Uncontrolled gambling is classified as a psychiatric disorder in the DSM-IV and contributed to about 1% of the bankruptcies.
18. Our Chapter 7 filers are similar to those nationally in income, home ownership, family size, age distribution and marital status (see: E. Flynn et al, Bankruptcy by the Numbers, ABI Journal December/January, 2002:28-9, April 2002:22,49, and October, 2001:20.)
19. We achieved high response rates to our initial questionnaire and rates of medical bankruptcy varied little between districts despite some variation in response rates. It seems plausible that more-stigmatized causes of bankruptcy (e.g. addiction, mental illness, or profligate spending) may be underreported.
20. 12% of households reported unpaid medical debts in 1997, with 691,000 households reporting outstanding medical debts greater than \$5000. (SMR Research Corporation, The New Bankruptcy Epidemic, (Hackettstown, NJ: SMR, 2001: 127)). A high incidence of collection agency calls was reported in: NPR/Kaiser et al., National Survey on Health Care. May et al., Tough Trade-Offs. and Collins et al., The Affordability Crisis in U.S. Health Care.
21. For the total number of bankruptcies see: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1986, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985). The estimate that 8% of these were medical is from: Teresa A. Sullivan, Elizabeth Warren, Jay L. Westbrook, The Fragile Middle Class: Americans in Debt, (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2000).
22. Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Bankruptcy Cases Continue to Break Federal Court Case Records: Total Bankruptcy Filings and Non-Business Filings Hit Highs, www.uscourts.gov/Press_Releases/603b.pdf (31 October, 2003).
23. Between 7.1% and 14.3% of Canadian bankruptcies are attributable to "health/misfortune" (Jacob S. Ziegel, A Canadian Perspective, Texas Law Review 79, no. 5 (2001):241-56).
24. Rome/Vatican City, (Clermont-Ferrand, France: Michelin Travel Publications, 2001).