Why do low-income families use tax preparers?

Q. Why do low-income families use tax preparers?

A. Many low-income families owe no income tax but still must file a tax return to receive refundable tax credits, including the earned income tax credit. Those who do file often seek help, which nearly always comes from a paid preparer. The cost of that help erodes the net value of refundable credits. That cost might be worth bearing if preparers helped their clients claim tax benefits that otherwise might be missed, but many don't.

TAX PREPARATION FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Most people fill out their tax returns with assistance from paid preparers. In 2010, 56.8 percent of all returns were completed this way. That proportion is slightly lower for lower-income families: 54.5 percent for returns with adjusted gross incomes below $30,000 (table 1). A very small proportion of low-income families reported using Volunteer Income Tax Assistance clinics.

TABLE 1

Tax Preparation Method

By adjusted gross income, 2010

AGI (thousands of dollars)	Tax returns (millions)	Tax Preparation Method				
		No identified preparer	Paid preparer	IRS prepared	Volunteer income tax assistance	Tax counseling for the elderly
Under 30	65.7	41.8%	54.5%	0.2%	1.7%	1.7%
30–50	25.6	42.3%	55.7%	0.1%	0.9%	1.0%
50–100	30.7	40.9%	58.2%	0.0%	0.4%	0.5%
Over 100	18.2	36.6%	63.2%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%
Total	142.8	40.9%	56.8%	0.1%	1.0%	1.1%

Source: Tax Policy Center tabulations of 2010 Statistics of Income Public Use File.

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DO PAID PREPARERS FILL OUT MORE ACCURATE RETURNS?

Except in a handful of states, paid preparers are not regulated. The Government Accountability Office found that returns completed by preparers were not more accurate than self-prepared returns and included errors in calculating a tax filer's earned income tax credit (EITC)—a problem specific to low- and moderate-income families.

In a small sampling performed by the Government Accountability Office, only 2 of 19 returns showed the correct refund amount. On 13 tax returns in the sample, preparers overestimated the total refund by $100 or more (McTigue 2014). A larger-scale study of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data showed that paid preparers had a higher estimated error rate—60 percent—than returns prepared by taxpayers themselves. Some of these errors are made by the preparer; some are the result of the taxpayer providing incorrect or incomplete information (McTigue 2014).

When it comes to returns with the EITC, a recent study showed that unenrolled return preparers were more likely to make errors than other paid preparers. An unenrolled return preparer is someone other than an attorney, a CPA, or an enrolled agent—agents licensed by the IRS. Unenrolled preparers completed 43 percent of the EITC returns made by paid preparers, while national tax preparation firms completed 35 percent of these returns (IRS 2014).

One clear benefit of paid preparation: an earlier study showed that if low-income workers already know about the EITC, they are more likely to receive it if they use a paid preparer than if they fill out their returns themselves (Maag 2005). Moreover, some preparers not only inform their low-income clients of their EITC eligibility, but further help them by identifying other forms of assistance for which they might qualify. Some even assist in the application process.

USE OF REFUND ANTICIPATION LOANS AND REFUND ANTICIPATION CHECKS

Before 2012, low-income tax filers who used paid preparers could get their tax refunds faster with a refund anticipation loan (RAL). RALs were high-cost immediate cash loans from private lenders, backed by the tax refunds the borrowers claimed on their prepared returns (Theodos et al. 2011). RALs proliferated after 1999 when the IRS reinstituted the debt indicator program, which disclosed whether a tax refund would be redirected by the IRS to pay debts.

The IRS has since discontinued use of the debt indicator, essentially eliminating the RAL market. However, most consumers who formerly received a RAL now appear to be using a similar product, the refund anticipation check (RAC). The RAC appears to cost less than the RAL but it can still be quite expensive. RACs are temporary bank accounts opened by paid preparers, where tax filers direct their refunds. Tax filers are allowed to pay fees out of their RACs. When the IRS deposits the refund, the paid preparer subtracts fees from the account, and then the tax filer can access the remainder.

In 2014, the National Consumer Law Center reported that more than 21 million consumers obtained RACs. Unlike RALs, RACs do not allow consumers faster access to anticipated refunds (Wu 2015). The vast majority of RAC consumers—about 83 percent—have low incomes. In fact, about half are EITC recipients (Wu 2015).

Beginning in 2017, a second generation of RALs became available, advertised as having no fees or risks to borrowers. The National Consumer Law Center reports that, as of 2020, interest bearing RALs have returned and put risk back on the consumer. Moreover, fees associated remain opaque, and potentially quite costly for consumers.

TAXES AND THE POOR

Why do low-income families use tax preparers?

Updated May 2020

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