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## Mich. St. student wins prize for research on SupCt

By: BEATA MOSTAFAVI | 09/19/11 8:58 AM  
The Flint Journal

She's just 21, but lawyer hopeful Sydney Hawthorne already has done research to unlock the mysteries behind how cases reach the U.S. Supreme Court.

After a year of sifting through hundreds of documents, she discovered bad news for people who are poor: Their cases are less likely to get heard.

Hawthorne of Genesee County's Grand Blanc Township recently took home the grand prize at an undergraduate research forum at Michigan State University for her study on how the U.S. Supreme Court sets its agenda.

Among Hawthorne's findings: Paupers — low-income people who may include prisoners — are 30 percent less likely to have their cases reviewed.

"It was interesting to see the effect of (economic status) in deciding Supreme Court decisions," said the political science major, who plans to attend law school after she graduates from MSU this year.

"It's important for us to understand this process since Supreme Court decisions affect every aspect of our lives."

Paupers often can't afford legal services, such as filing petitions, which could be a major factor in their disadvantage, she said.

Supreme Court already is a narrow one with just 100 of the 10,000 cases seeking review, Black said. Hawthorne's adviser.

WARNING: This is controversial, and may offend some audiences.

How the gatekeepers decide which cases get through the crack is largely secretive, he said.

"Agenda-setting is something studied pretty frequently, but there aren't really any studies that look at the impact pauper status has on individual (Supreme Court justice) voting behavior," Black said.

Several years ago as a graduate student, Black visited the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and took a quarter of a million digital photos from the files of Justice Harry Blackmun.

Hawthorne used the photos to evaluate documents from 1992 for cases, including criminal, civil and tax-related.

The research specifically studied cases that had been weeded out of "junk" or "frivolous" categories and that passed the initial screening process. One in five of such cases that make it to

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discussion are heard, Black said.

"If both cases are identical but one is submitted by a pauper and one is not, the pauper will be less likely to get granted review," Black said.

He said the findings open up possibilities for future research, such as exploring reasons behind the difference. Legal representation — or lack of it — is an obvious factor, but politics among courts also could influence votes.

"It's pretty uncommon to see an undergraduate student with that level of initiative to seek out faculty and get involved in research," Black said. "It just shows she's a top student and driven to work hard."

Hawthorne, a 2008 Grand Blanc High School graduate, won a \$500 prize after beating more than 500 entries at the spring MSU forum, where she gave short presentations on her research.

"The cases that are heard can ultimately affect everyday life for Americans," Hawthorne said. "Understanding the process is a critical aspect in studying Supreme Court decisions and law in general."

Information from: The Flint Journal, <http://www.mlive.com/flint>

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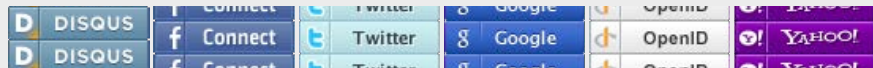
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