Credit Score in the United States

Summary sheet: FICO, factors, 12-month plan, disputes, and FDCPA/FCRA rights

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What is a U.S. credit score?

A credit score is a number (often 300 to 850 for FICO) that summarizes how reliably you repay debt. It is calculated from your credit report, fed by banks, card issuers, and lenders. In the U.S. it affects loans, rentals, insurance, some jobs, and phone plans. Newcomers often start with no history (a thin file).

FICO scale and tiers (300-850)

Poor: 300-579. Fair: 580-669. Good: 670-739. Very Good: 740-799. Excellent: 800-850. Cutoffs vary by lender.

Factors that drive the score

On-time payments (~35%), credit utilization (~30%), length of history (~15%), credit mix (~10%), new applications (~10%). Paying on time and keeping utilization low are the strongest levers.

Low score: real-world consequences

Denied loans or higher rates, low card limits, larger rental deposits, utility deposits, higher auto insurance premiums, employer checks, denied phone plans, collections, and a costly cycle of subprime products.

Build and improve your score

Open a tracked account (secured card), always pay on time (autopay), keep utilization under 30% (ideally under 10%), space out applications, dispute errors, monitor through AnnualCreditReport.com.

12-month roadmap

M1-M3: free reports, error list, secured card, autopay. M4-M6: disputes, utilization under 30%, no new applications. M7-M9: debt validation, zero lates, file prep. M10-M12: review, new free reports, adjust strategy.

Monitor your report for free

Go to AnnualCreditReport.com (the authorized site for free annual reports). Request one report per bureau per year. Compare all three. The CFPB notes the FICO score may not be included, but the full report is.

Dispute an error

Gather proof, contact Equifax/Experian/TransUnion online or by mail. The bureau must investigate within 30 days (45 in some cases). If that fails, file a CFPB complaint at consumerfinance.gov/complaint.

Debt collection: FDCPA and FCRA rights

Request written debt validation within 30 days. Demand that contact stop in writing (except lawsuits). Dispute inaccurate report entries. Never admit a questionable debt without documentation.

FICO vs VantageScore comparison

Criterion	FICO	VantageScore
Creator	Fair Isaac Corporation	Equifax, Experian, TransUnion
Scale	300-850 (common models)	300-850 (3.0/4.0)
Usage	Mortgage and auto lenders	Free apps, education
Payments	~35%	Highly weighted

Criterion	FICO	VantageScore
Utilization	~30%	Highly weighted
Age of credit	~15%	Influential
Mix / inquiries	~10% each	Varies by version
Updates	When creditors report (often monthly)	Same

12-month checklist (excerpt)

☐ Pull all three free reports (M1-M3)
☐ Dispute errors in writing
☐ Utilization under 30% then 10%
☐ Zero late payments for 12 months
☐ Annual review and new free reports

Official U.S. links: forms and steps

Free reports : https://www.annualcreditreport.com/
CFPB, reports and scores : https://www.consumerfinance.gov/consumer-tools/credit-reports-and-scores/
CFPB, dispute an error :
https://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb/how-do-i-dispute-an-error-on-my-credit-report-en-314/
CFPB, file a complaint : https://www.consumerfinance.gov/complaint/
CFPB, debt collection : https://www.consumerfinance.gov/consumer-tools/debt-collection/
FTC, free credit reports : https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/free-credit-reports
FCRA (FTC) : https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/statutes/fair-credit-reporting-act
FDCPA (FTC) : https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/statutes/fair-debt-collection-practices-act
Equifax dispute : https://www.equifax.com/personal/credit-report-services/credit-dispute/
Experian disputes : https://www.experian.com/disputes/
TransUnion dispute : https://www.transunion.com/credit-dispute