Texas Municipal Courts Education Center
(TMCEC)

Summary of Texas *CourTools*
Measure 1: Access and Fairness
Public Survey

July-August 2017

State Justice Institute

National Center for State Courts

Project Overview

The Texas Municipal Courts Education Center (TMCEC) was awarded a State Justice Institute (SJI) grant to focus its 2018 Training Plan on improving the perception of fairness for the public who appear in Municipal Courts in Texas. The Task Plan consists of developing a survey of municipal judges and court personnel on what they perceive to be the key issues that need to be addressed to improve the treatment of the public; surveys of the public on access, fairness and legal financial obligations; focus groups with judges and court administrators; and recommendations to address the results of the surveys, focus groups, and other findings to inform the training plan.

Report Overview

To gain a deeper perspective on the training needs of the Texas municipal courts from the perspective of the public, TMCEC asked a sample of courts to administer a public survey using the National Center for State Courts' (NCSC) *CourTools* Measure 1: Access and Fairness.

As stated in NCSC's *CourTools* publication, the purpose of Measure 1 is [to] "determine the court users' perceptions of how they are treated in court, and whether the court's process of making decisions seems fair."

Twenty-three (23) municipal courts administered the survey, including five (5) high-volume courts (over 100,000 population), eleven (11) mid-volume courts (between 10,000-99,999 population), and seven (7) low-volume courts (under 99,999 population), all listed below:

High-Volume Courts	Mid-Volume Courts	Low-Volume Courts
Austin	Beeville	Bastrop
College Station	Brenham	Crandall
Denton	Friendswood	Freer
Midland	Glenn Heights	Llano
San Antonio	Huntsville	Southside Place
	Hurst	Spearman
	Royse City	Spring Valley Village
	Seguin	
	Temple	
	Texas City	
	Victoria	

Members of the public were asked to fill out the survey at the courthouse, and 570 court visitors responded to the survey. This report summarizes the responses to the standard set of questions outlined in NCSC's *CourTools* Measure 1: Access and Fairness, as seen in Appendix A.

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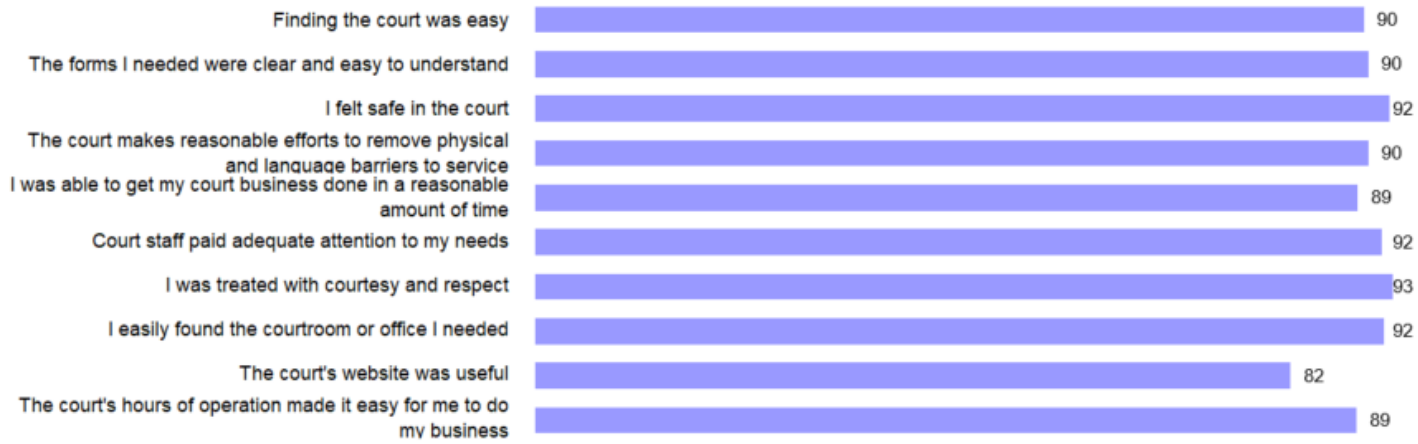
Overall Results

Overall, answers to *CourTools Measure 1: Access and Fairness, Section 1: Access to the Court* showed that members of the public were well satisfied (overall score=90/100) with their ability to find the court, courtroom, and information needed, the amount of time court business required, and the amount of respect shown by court staff.

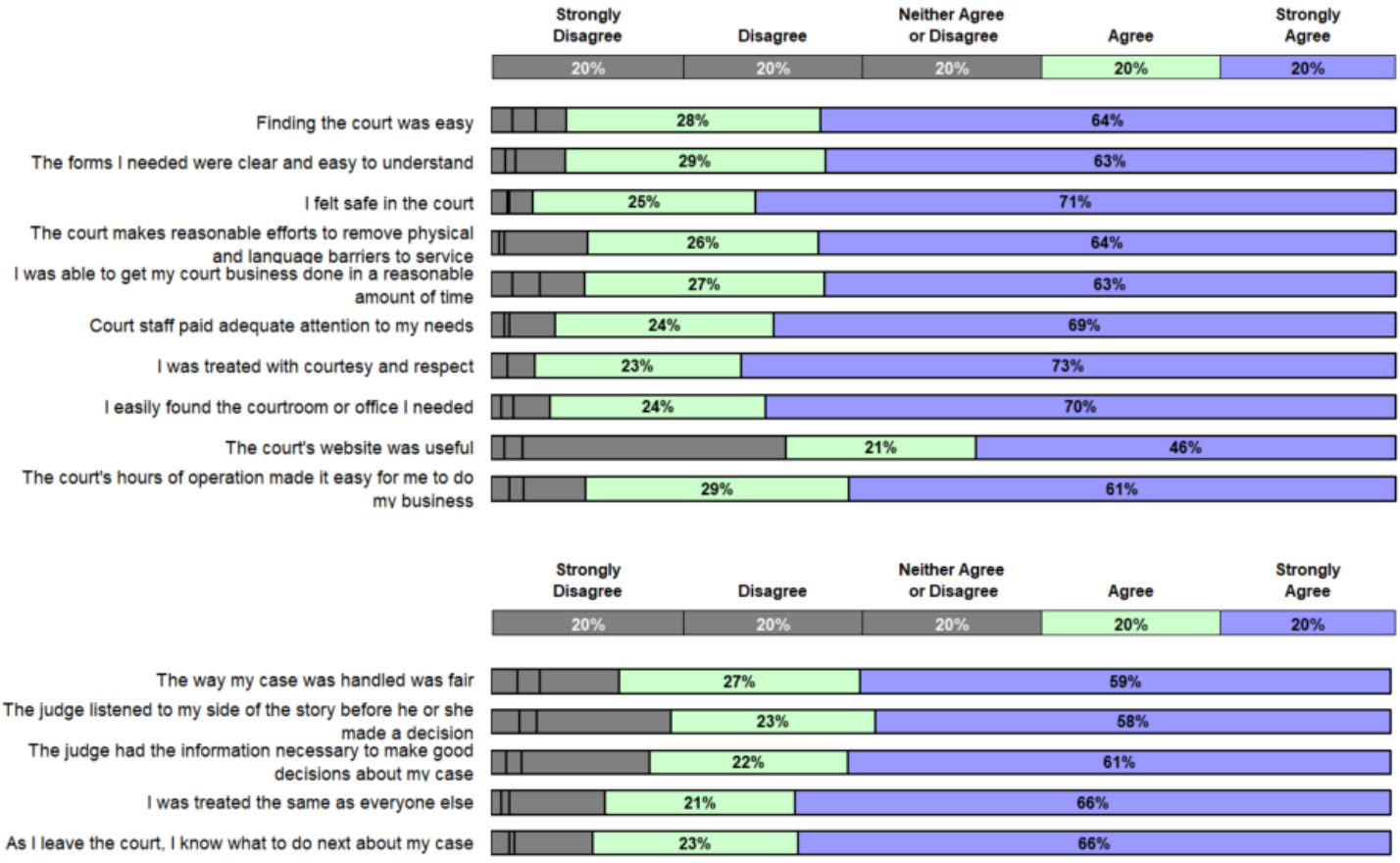
With regard to *Section II: Fairness*, members of the public were well satisfied (overall score=88/100) with the way their case was handled, the provision of next steps in the case, and the treatment of the respondent as being equal to others in court (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Overall Access Score = 90
N=570
(100 equals the highest level of satisfaction)



Overall Fairness Score = 88
N=372

Figure 2: Percentage of Responses by Category

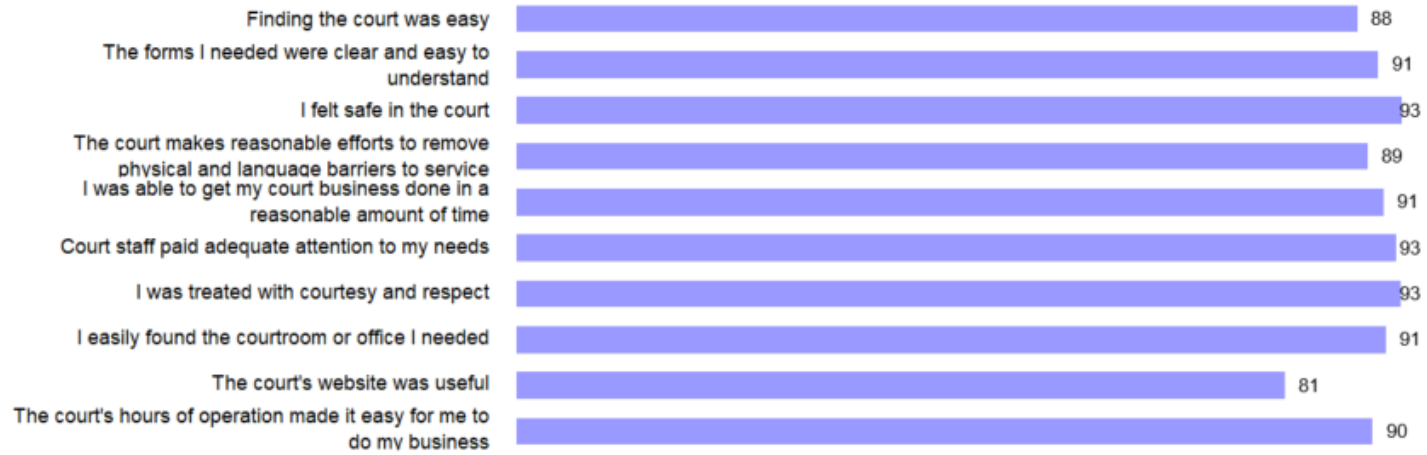


Results by Court Size: High-Volume Courts

Answers to *CourTools Measure 1: Access and Fairness, Section 1: Access to the Court* showed that members of the public visiting high-volume courts (over 100,000 population) were well satisfied (high-volume court score=90/100) with their ability to find the court, courtroom, and information needed, the amount of time court business required, and the amount of respect shown by Court staff.

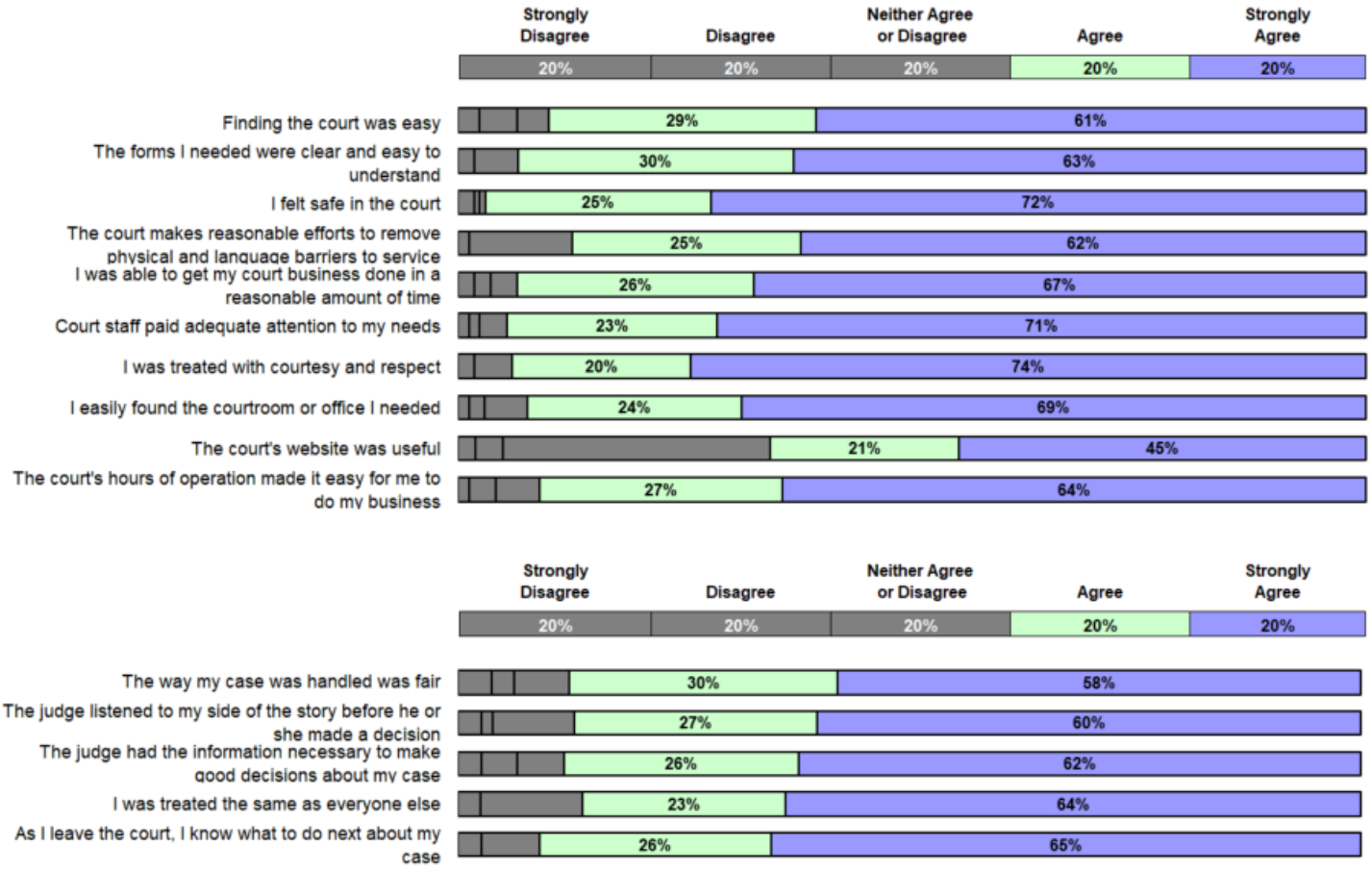
With regard to *Section II: Fairness*, members of the public were well satisfied (high-volume court score=89/100) with the way their case was handled, the provision of next steps in the case, and the treatment of the respondent as being equal to others in court (Figures 1a and 2a).

Figure 1a: High Volume Courts, Overall Access Score = 90
N=170
(100 equals the highest level of satisfaction)



Overall Fairness Score = 89
N=81

Figure 2a: High Volume Courts, Percentage of Responses by Category

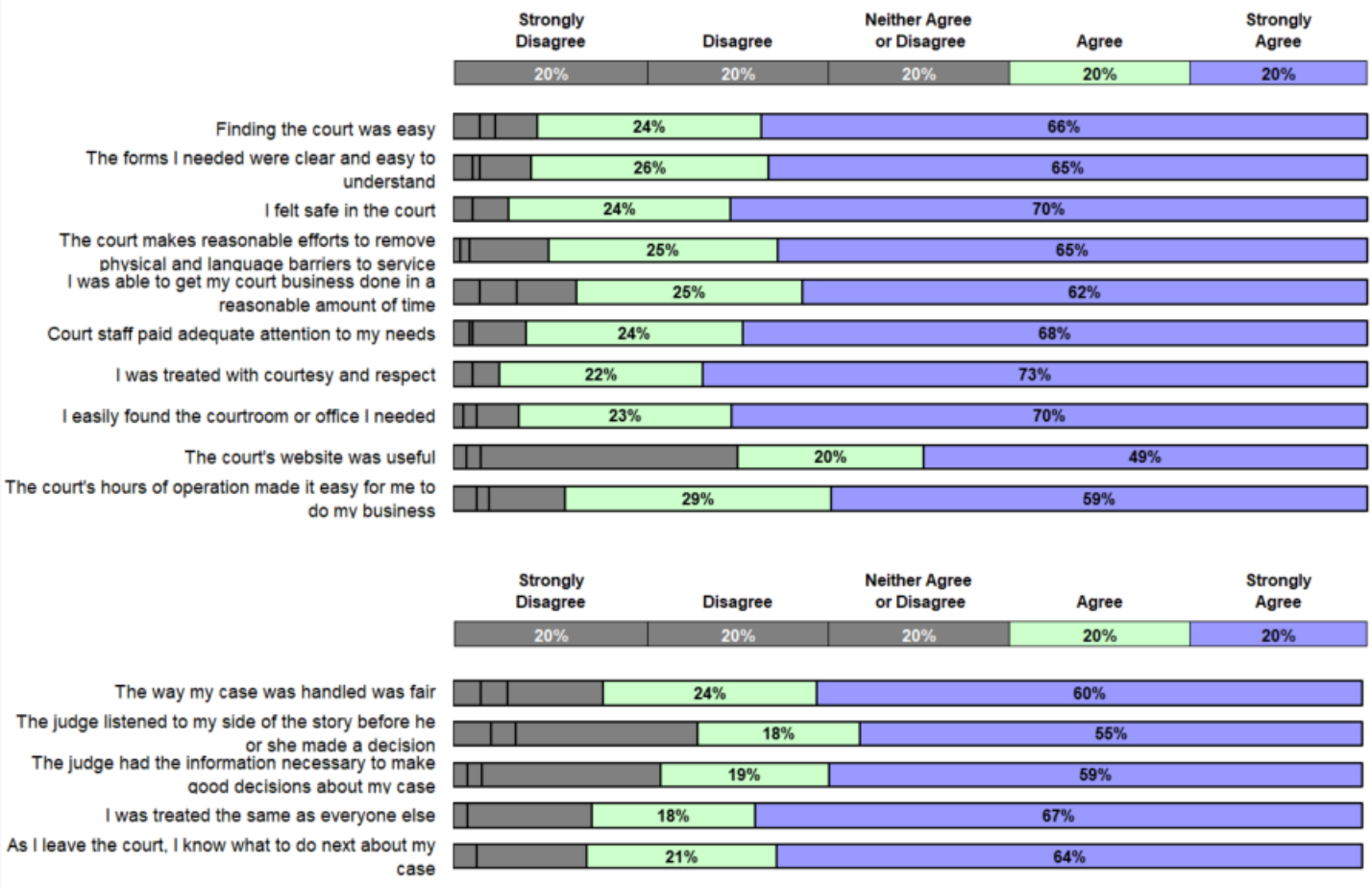


Results by Court Size: Mid-Volume Courts

Answers to *CourTools Measure 1: Access and Fairness, Section 1: Access to the Court* showed that members of the public visiting mid-volume courts (between 10,000-99,999 population) were well satisfied (mid-volume court score=90/100) with their ability to find the court, courtroom, and information needed, the amount of time court business required, and the amount of respect shown by Court staff.

With regard to *Section II: Fairness*, members of the public were well satisfied (mid-volume court score=87/100) with the way their case was handled, the provision of next steps in the case, and the treatment of the respondent as being equal to others in court (Figures 1b and 2b).

Figure 2b: Mid Volume Courts, Percentage of Responses by Category



Results by Court Size: Low-Volume Courts

Answers to *CourTools Measure 1: Access and Fairness, Section 1: Access to the Court* showed that members of the public visiting low-volume courts (under 9,999 population) were well satisfied (low-volume court score=90/100) with their ability to find the court, courtroom, and information needed, the amount of time court business required, and the amount of respect shown by Court staff.

With regard to *Section II: Fairness*, members of the public were well satisfied (low-volume court score=90/100) with the way their case was handled, the provision of next steps in the case, and the treatment of the respondent as being equal to others in court (Figures 1c and 2c).

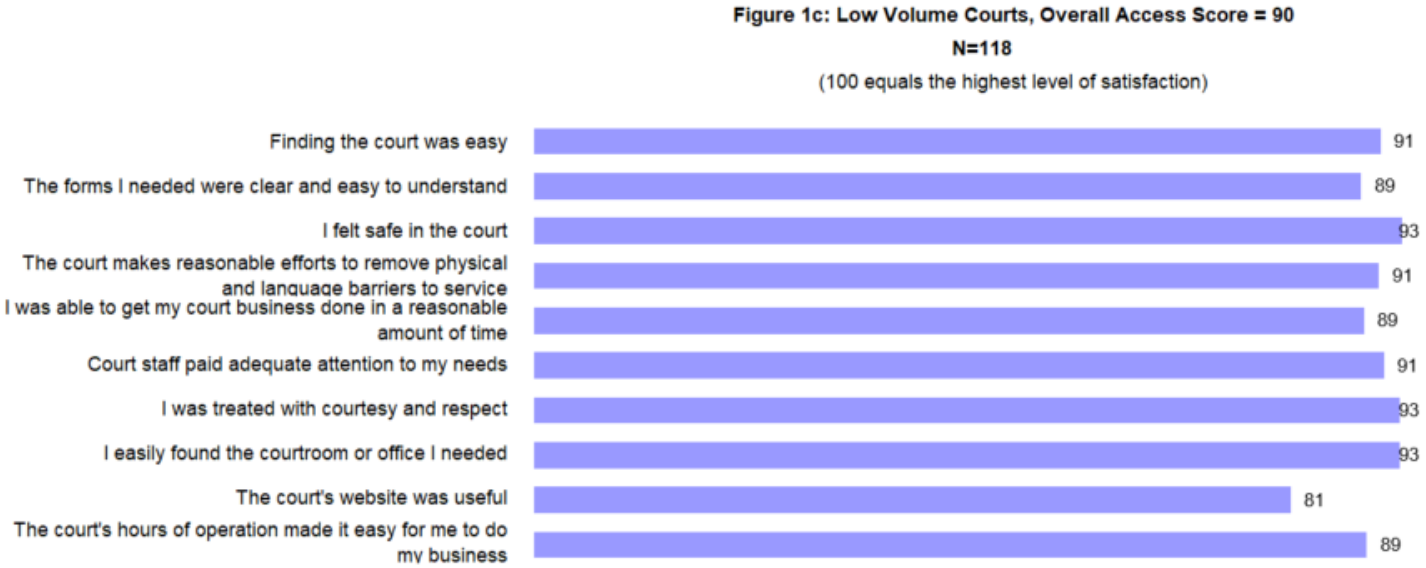
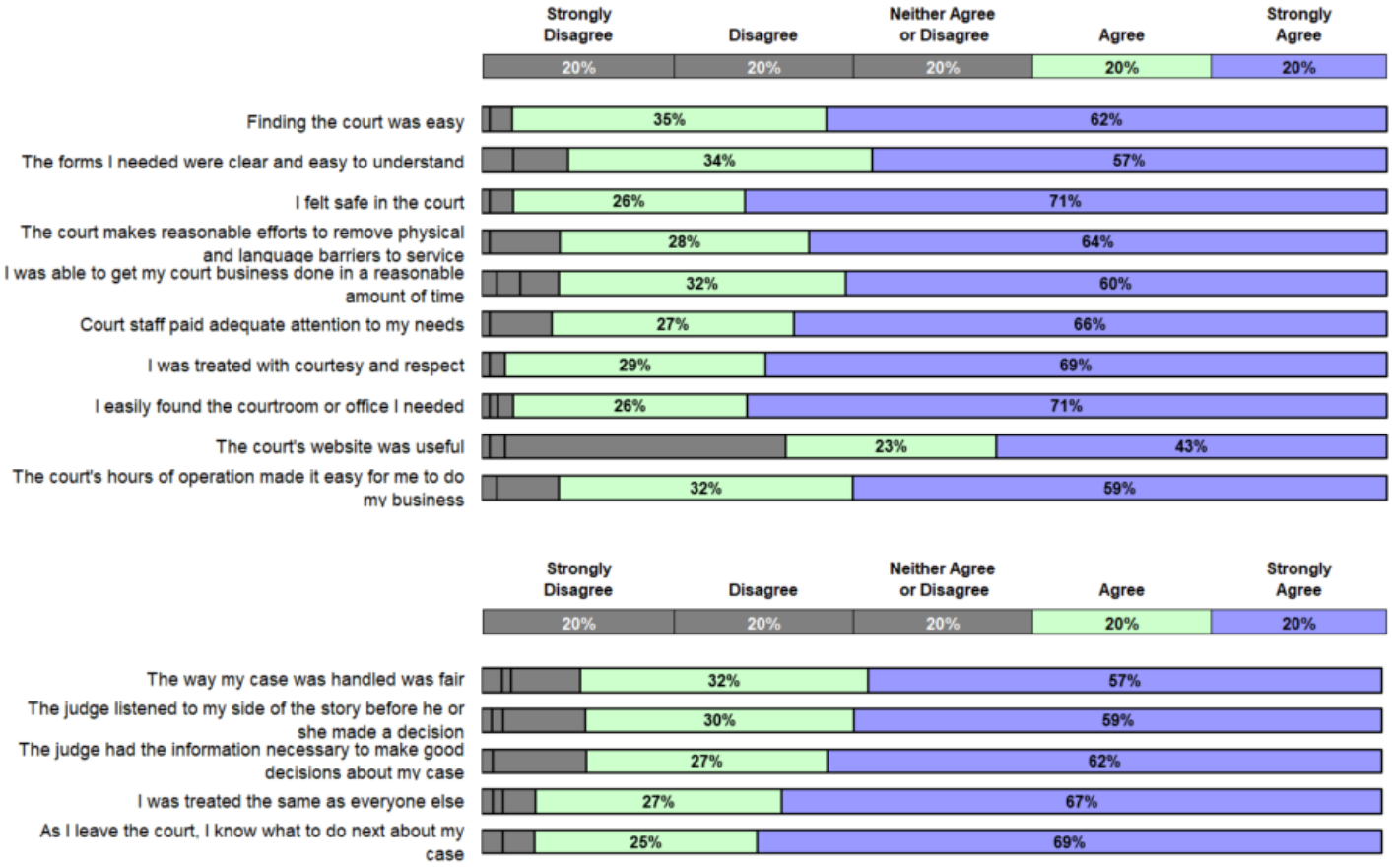
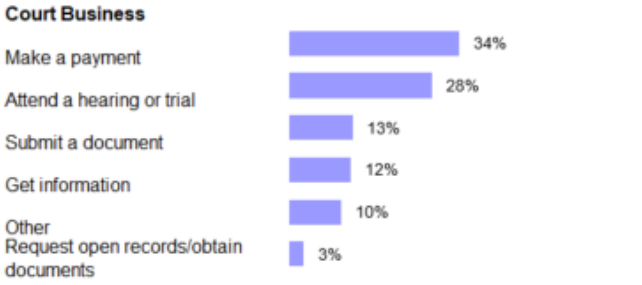


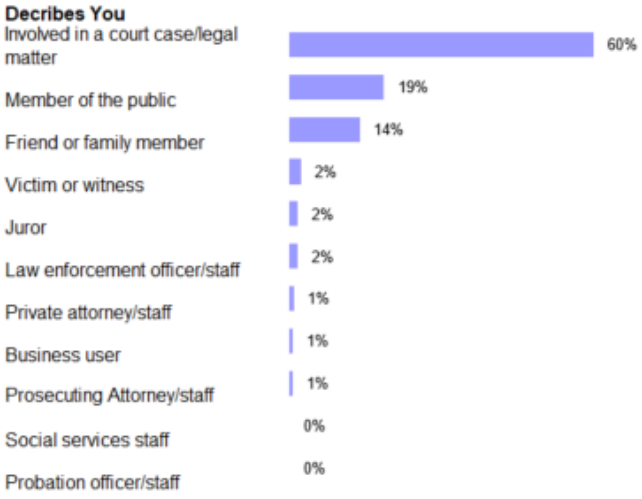
Figure 2c: Low Volume Courts, Percentage of Responses by Category

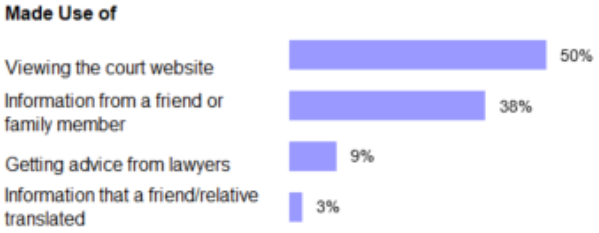


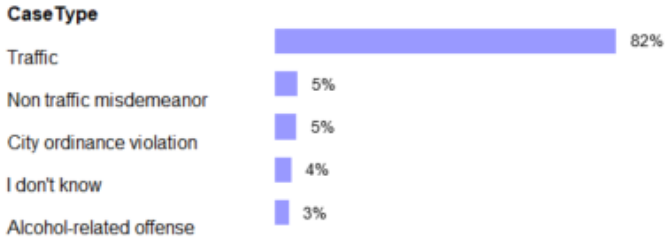
Survey Respondent Demographics

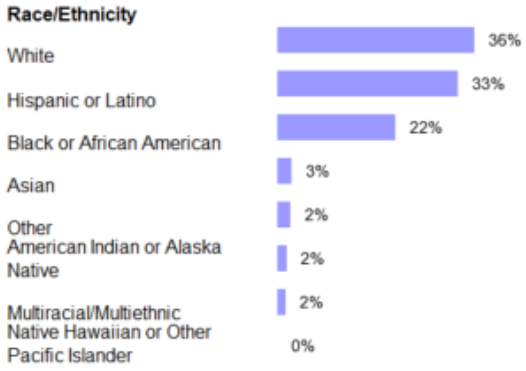
Overall, demographic answers to *CourTools Measure 1: Access and Fairness* showed that respondents were primarily attending court to make a payment or attend a hearing or trial, overwhelmingly related to a traffic case. Most of the respondents were in their respective courthouses for the first time, and half were able to make use of the court website.

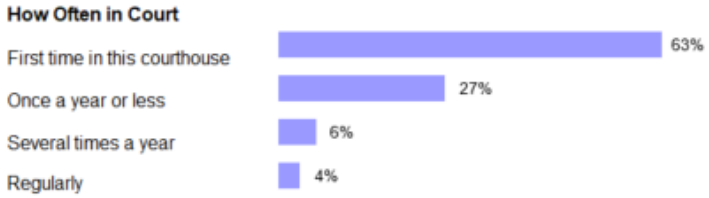












Appendix A: NCSC's *CourTools* Measure 1: Access and Fairness

CourTools | *Trial Court Performance Measures*

National Center for State Courts

Access and Fairness — Measure 1

Definition: Ratings of court users on the court's accessibility and its treatment of customers in terms of fairness, equality, and respect.

Purpose: Many assume that "winning" or "losing" is what matters most to citizens when dealing with the courts. However, research consistently shows that positive perceptions of court experience are shaped more by court users' perceptions of how they are treated in court, and whether the court's process of making decisions seems fair. This measure provides a tool for surveying all court users about their experience in the courthouse. Comparison of results by location, division, type of customer, and across courts can inform and improve court management practices.

Method: Everyone in the court on a "typical" day is asked to fill out a brief self-administered survey as he or she exits the courthouse. People are asked to rate their level of agreement with each item, using a 1-5 scale. The survey should be conducted on a periodic basis, for example, annually. The individuals surveyed would include litigants and their families and friends, victims and witnesses, attorneys, law enforcement officers, representatives of social service agencies, and individuals doing record searches or having other business at the clerk's office, among others. Because the survey is designed to assess the views of the court's customers, judges and court staff are excluded.

Step 1: Prepare Survey

The survey asks questions on access and fairness, along with background information about the respondent. The survey questions are concise and clear statements that get right to the point, producing *actionable* data. They require only seconds to understand and rate, so the survey may be completed in 5 minutes or less. The goal is to provide the court with the information needed to make informed decisions, and do so in the shortest amount of time possible.

An open-ended question or two may prove beneficial for some courts, to give customers the opportunity to address their own particular concerns. The data can be used to verify findings and improve future surveys.

Recommendations

- Use the questions as worded in this survey.
- Adopt a standard survey to make reliable comparisons across locations, divisions, and courts.
- Limit demographic questions to those that will actually be of use.
- Keep the survey short and focused.

Step 2: Choose a "Typical" Day

The questionnaire is given to *all* the individuals who use the court (i.e., are physically in the courthouse) on a typical day. If the day is typical of most days at the courthouse then it can be assumed that responses will be received from a broad cross-section of those using the court. Common survey problems related to adequacy of response rate and representativeness of the sample are avoided with this method.

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Step 3: Gather Needed Materials

The size of the team to hand out surveys and facilitate completion and return will vary according to the maximum number of individuals exiting the courthouse during any hour of the day. Tables and chairs should be placed around the exits of the courthouse to accommodate the maximum number of survey respondents filling out questionnaires at the peak of courthouse use. Signs posted conspicuously around the entrances to the facility announcing the survey (e.g., "Your Opinion Counts: Tell Us How We Are Doing") and similar preparations do much to increase survey participation.

When there are multiple court sites for a jurisdiction, a court may wish to include each site in the survey. The sites need not all be surveyed on the same day, as long as the days chosen are typical for each site.

Step 4: Assemble and Train Survey Team

Survey success depends to a large degree on the skills and demeanor of the staff members assembled to administer the survey and on the care taken with preparations. Criteria for staff selection might include friendliness, bilingual skills, and poise. An orientation session and walk-through of arrangements should precede the data collection. Arrangements should be made to rotate staff through the assignment in staggered intervals to avoid fatigue while maintaining continuity.

Step 5: Administer Survey

The survey should be administered to enhance participation by the greatest number of potential respondents. Factors that may inhibit response rates include fears about anonymity and confidentiality, apathy, and skepticism that the court will follow through on improvements. A well-trained survey team and appropriate survey procedures (e.g., to ensure anonymity, respondents place completed questionnaires in a sealed drop box) help increase participation. Remember, given the focus on court customers, no surveys should be given to court employees or judges.

Which Questions Should Respondents Answer?

No information is requested that allows the court to identify the respondent (e.g., name, case number, etc.); thus, responses cannot influence the outcome of a respondent's legal matter and confidentiality is preserved.

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Access and Fairness Survey

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Applicable
Section I: Access to the Court	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**n/a**
Circle the Number.						
1. Finding the courthouse was easy.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
2. The forms I needed were clear and easy to understand.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
3. I felt safe in the courthouse.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
4. The court makes reasonable efforts to remove physical and language barriers to service.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
5. I was able to get my court business done in a reasonable amount of time.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
6. Court staff paid attention to my needs.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
7. I was treated with courtesy and respect.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
8. I easily found the courtroom or office I needed.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
9. The court's Web site was useful.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
10. The court's hours of operation made it easy for me to do my business.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a

If you are a party to a legal matter and appeared before a judicial officer today, complete questions 11-15:

Section II: Fairness

11. The way my case was handled was fair.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
12. The judge listened to my side of the story before he or she made a decision.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
13. The judge had the information necessary to make good decisions about my case.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
14. I was treated the same as everyone else.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a
15. As I leave the court, I know what to do next about my case.	1	2	3	4	5	n/a

Section III: Background Information

What did you do at the court today?
(Check all that apply)

___ Search court records/obtain documents
___ File papers
___ Make a payment
___ Get information
___ Appear as a witness
___ Attorney representing a client
___ Jury duty
___ Attend a hearing or trial
___ Law enforcement/probation/social services staff
___ Party to a legal matter

What type of case brought you to the courthouse today?

___ Traffic
___ Criminal
___ Civil matter
___ Divorce, child custody or support
___ Juvenile matter
___ Probate
___ Small Claims
___ Other:_____

How do you identify yourself?

___ American Indian or Alaska Native
___ Asian
___ Black or African American
___ Hispanic or Latino
___ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
___ White
___ Mixed Race
___ Other:_____

How often are you typically in this courthouse?
(Choose the closest estimate)

___ First time in this courthouse
___ Once a year or less
___ Several times a year
___ Regularly

What is your gender?

___ Male
___ Female

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Access and Fairness

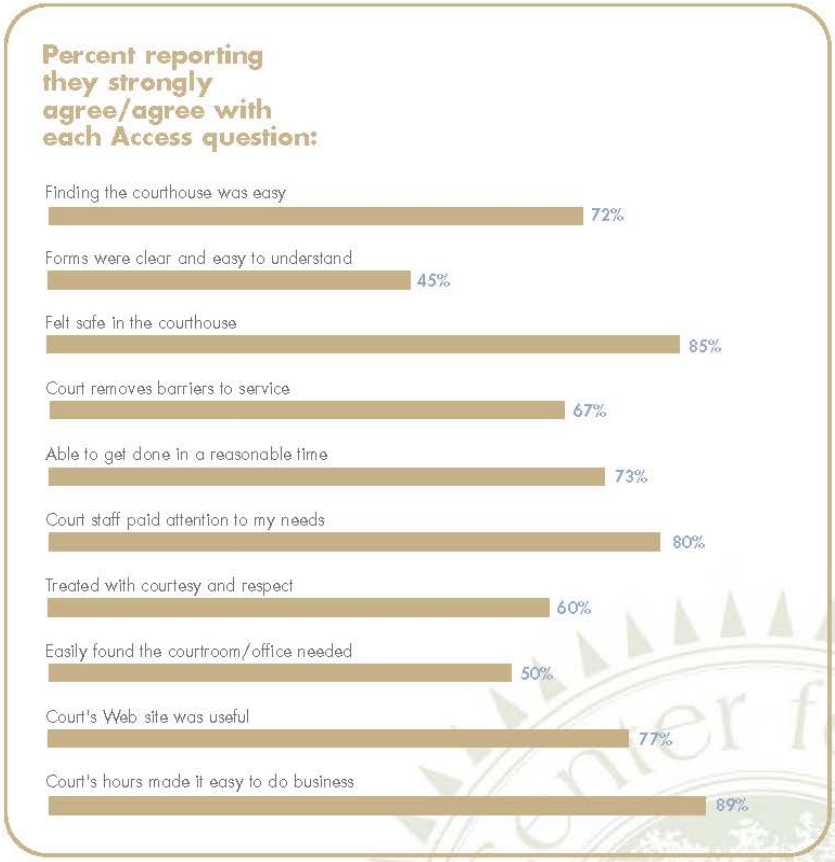
Measure

Analysis and Interpretation

Compile the survey data to summarize:

- 10 items that capture respondents' opinions about access to court services
- 5 questions related to procedural fairness, completed by parties to a legal proceeding
- 5 items that capture background information about the respondent

Overall attitudes about access and fairness are the first level of analysis. Court managers may decide that a rating of at least 4 or better means that the court is meeting its performance goal. In this case, responses would be grouped together for those who "Strongly Agree" and those who "Agree" into an "Agree" grouping. The total number of these responses can be converted into a percentage of all valid responses. The results for all questions can be shown in a single graph. As the graph below shows, court users were especially positive about safety and hours of operation; conversely, they were least satisfied with finding courtrooms and forms.



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Enter the responses from each respondent into a spreadsheet or database to record and summarize the results. The figure shows a sample summary spreadsheet for the five fairness questions. Note that the court surveyed 100 respondents, but that the number of valid responses for each question is not necessarily 100. If people did not answer the question, or answered "Not Applicable" on a question, their answers are not counted for that question.

Computing the Average Fairness Scores

Respondent Number	Q11 Case handled fairly	Q12 Judge listened	Q13 Judge had information	Q14 I was treated the same	Q15 I know what to do next
10001	3	5	–	3	2
10002	–	2	2	2	1
10003	–	4	3	1	1
10004	1	0	5	3	–
10005	2	4	2	3	1
⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄
⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄
⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄	⌄
10100	3	4	3	3	2
Total Score	363	337	307	240	168
Total Respondents	100	100	100	100	100
Total Valid Reponses	98	99	99	100	99
Average	3.7	3.4	3.1	2.4	1.7

363 ÷ 98 = 3.7

Creating an Index Score

A court may also wish to construct an overall rating of access and an overall rating of fairness. By summing the average scores for each question, an index is created. However, the index scores for each section are easier to interpret and compare when placed on a 100-point scale. Because the number of questions between the access and fairness sections varies, this step involves a different multiplier for each section. There are 5 questions in the fairness section, with a maximum score of 5 points each, for a total maximum score of 25. Multiplying the summed averages by 4 gives a score on a 100-point scale. For the 10 access questions, the total maximum score is 50, so the multiplier is 2.

Constructing the Overall Fairness Index Score

	Average score
11. **The way my case was handled was fair.**	3.7
12. **The judge listened to my side of the story before he or she made a decision.**	3.4
13. **The judge had the information necessary to make good decisions about my case.**	3.1
14. **I was treated the same as everyone else.**	2.4
15. **As I leave the court, I know what to do next about my case.**	+ 1.7
	14.3
	x 4

Overall Fairness Index Score = 57.2

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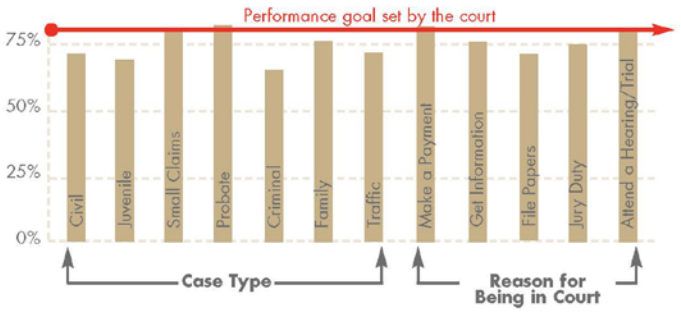
Assessments of access and fairness may vary by case type, reasons for being in the courthouse, frequency of courthouse use, and demographic characteristics that might be associated with differential treatment or ability to access court services. The graphs below indicate that court users' perceptions of staff vary by the type of case that brought them to the court and by reasons for being in the courthouse. Staff and management can seek the reasons behind these numbers as they strive to meet the goals they have set for themselves.

Percentage of those who agree they were treated with courtesy and respect by staff varies by...



The court should establish a baseline, set its own performance goals for access and fairness, and seek to improve over time. Comparisons of survey results over time and across the court can be a useful basis for identifying trends or successful improvement strategies.

Different locations or divisions might be compared, for example, on the percent of users who felt that they were treated with courtesy and respect. Follow-up queries can then be made that probe the comparisons. Why do one or more locations/divisions seem to be more successful than others? What are they doing that the other locations/divisions are not? Why are some locations/divisions more successful at communicating what litigants need to do next? Posing these simple questions to staff in both the most successful and least successful locations can help to identify effective customer service and communications practices.

Terms You Need to Know

Index: A single number used to summarize a set of data, providing an overview.

Judicial Officer: A judge, commissioner, referee, magistrate, or hearing officer.

Mean: The average value of a set of numbers, equal to the sum of all values divided by the number of values.

Party: A person making or responding to a claim in a court proceeding, e.g., plaintiff, defendant, petitioner, respondent, cross-complainant, but not a witness, juror, or attorney.

Valid Responses: Responses that should be counted for purposes of analysis. For example, missing, "not applicable," or nonsensical responses are not included.

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CourTools

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Appendix B: NCSC's *CourTools* Measure 1: Access and Fairness Modified for Texas Municipal Courts

Your opinion counts!

Court Name

Please take a few minutes to tell us what you think. Your views will help the court improve our services. We estimate it will take no more than 5 minutes to complete the survey. For each item below, please circle the number that best reflects your opinion, based on your experience with the Court. In addition, we ask a few questions about you to help us understand your views. We are not asking you for your name or any other identifying information. Your answers to this survey will not be connected to or influence any business you have with the court.

	Circle the number				
	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Neither Agree or Disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
1. Finding the court was easy	1	2	3	4	5
2. The forms I needed were clear and easy to understand	1	2	3	4	5
3. I felt safe in the court.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The court makes reasonable efforts to remove physical and language barriers to service	1	2	3	4	5
5. I was able to get my court business done in a reasonable amount of time	1	2	3	4	5
6. Court staff paid adequate attention to my needs	1	2	3	4	5
7. I was treated with courtesy and respect	1	2	3	4	5
8. I easily found the courtroom or office I needed	1	2	3	4	5
9. The court's website was useful	1	2	3	4	5
10. The court's hours of operation made it easy for me to do my business	1	2	3	4	5

If you are a defendant and appeared before a judge today, please complete questions 11-15 also. Your answers will have no effect on your case.

11. The way my case was handled was fair	1	2	3	4	5
12. The judge listened to my side of the story before he or she made a decision	1	2	3	4	5
13. The judge had the information necessary to make good decisions about my case	1	2	3	4	5
14. I was treated the same as everyone else	1	2	3	4	5
15. As I leave the court, I know what to do next about my case	1	2	3	4	5

How could we have served you better today? _____

_____

Please share any additional comments you would like to make: _____

_____

Please Turn Over and Continue

Court Name

Please answer the following:

What did you do in court today?
(check all that apply)
___ Request open records/obtain documents
___ Submit a document
___ Make a payment
___ Get information
___ Attend a hearing or trial
___ Other, please describe:
_____

What type of case brought you to court today?
___ Traffic (examples: speeding, running a stop sign, without insurance)
___ Non-traffic misdemeanor (examples: theft, assault)
___ City ordinance violation (example: excessive noise)
___ Alcohol-related offense
___ I don't know

How do you identify yourself?
(check all that apply)
___ American Indian or Alaska Native
___ Asian
___ Black or African American
___ Hispanic or Latino
___ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
___ White
___ Multiracial/Multiethnic
___ Other:_____

Please check one description below that best describes you:
___ Involved in a court case/legal matter
___ Friend or family member
___ Victim or witness
___ Juror
___ Member of the public
___ Business user (e.g., messenger, process server, etc.)
___ Private attorney/staff
___ Prosecuting Attorney/staff
___ Social services staff
___ Probation officer/staff
___ Law enforcement officer/staff

As part of my visit to the court, I made use of information from (check all that apply):
___ viewing the court website
___ getting advice from lawyers
___ information from a friend or family member
___ information that a friend/relative translated for me today (My native language is: _____)

How often are you typically in this court?
___ First time in this court
___ Once a year or less
___ Several times a year
___ Regularly

What is your gender?
___ Male
___ Female

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