

LAKE FOREST PARK MUNICIPAL COURT
ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND FAIRNESS

Survey Results

October 25, 2008



National Center for State Courts
Trial Court Performance Measures

Prepared by Kelley R Gradwohl

Senior Court Clerk/Program Lead

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Lake Forest Park Municipal Court was established on December 26, 1961. It currently consists of a part time presiding judge, a full time court administrator, one full time senior court clerk and one part time compliance clerk. The court also employs a part time probation officer or judicial assistant. The court serves a jurisdiction of 12,700 residents and consists of three square miles geographically. The municipal court files approximately 1780 cases annually and operates on an annual budget of \$341,000. Court is in session two days each week with the exception of jury week which is held once each month.

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 the court experience are shaped more by the court users’ perceptions of how they are treated in court, and whether the court’s process of making decisions seems fair.

This survey, or measure, of access to justice and fairness developed by the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), provides a tool for surveying all court users about their experience in the courthouse. Comparison of results can inform and improve court management practices. The self directed opinion survey was distributed to a proportional sample of the number of people appearing at the courthouse on Monday, October 20, and Wednesday, October 22, 2008. It is assumed that because the chosen dates are typical of most days at the courthouse that the responses will be received from a broad cross-section of those using the court.

Respondents were asked to rate, from 1 to 5, their level of agreement on fifteen concise questions pertaining to their sense of the court's accessibility and fairness. In addition, multiple choice questions determined user's point(s) of contact, intended tasks and basic demographic information. Finally, an open ended question soliciting comments and suggestions was offered. Once completed, surveys were collected in a sealed drop box to ensure anonymity. Completed surveys from 50 respondents were collected. A sample of the standard opinion survey is included in this report.

In the private sector, the principal measure of successful performance is profitability. For the courts, success can be more abstract; concepts such as equality and fairness are difficult to measure. Success is often viewed from the distinct perspectives of various court constituents such as the general public or other governmental bodies.

The CourTools project initiated by the NCSC are a balanced set of court performance measures which provides the judiciary with the tools to demonstrate effective stewardship of public resources. Being responsive and accountable is critical to maintaining the independence courts need to deliver fair and equal justice to the public.

If you don't measure results, you can't tell success from failure

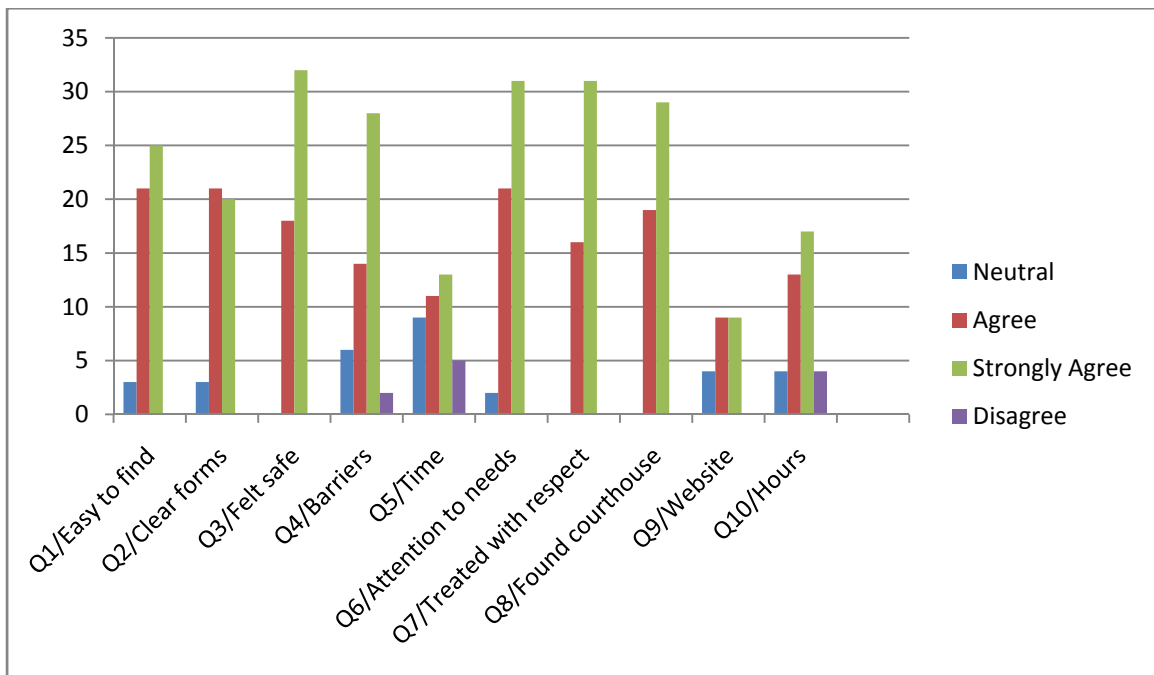
If you can't see success, you can't reward it

If you can't recognize failure, you can't correct it

Osborne & Gaebler (1992) Reinventing Government

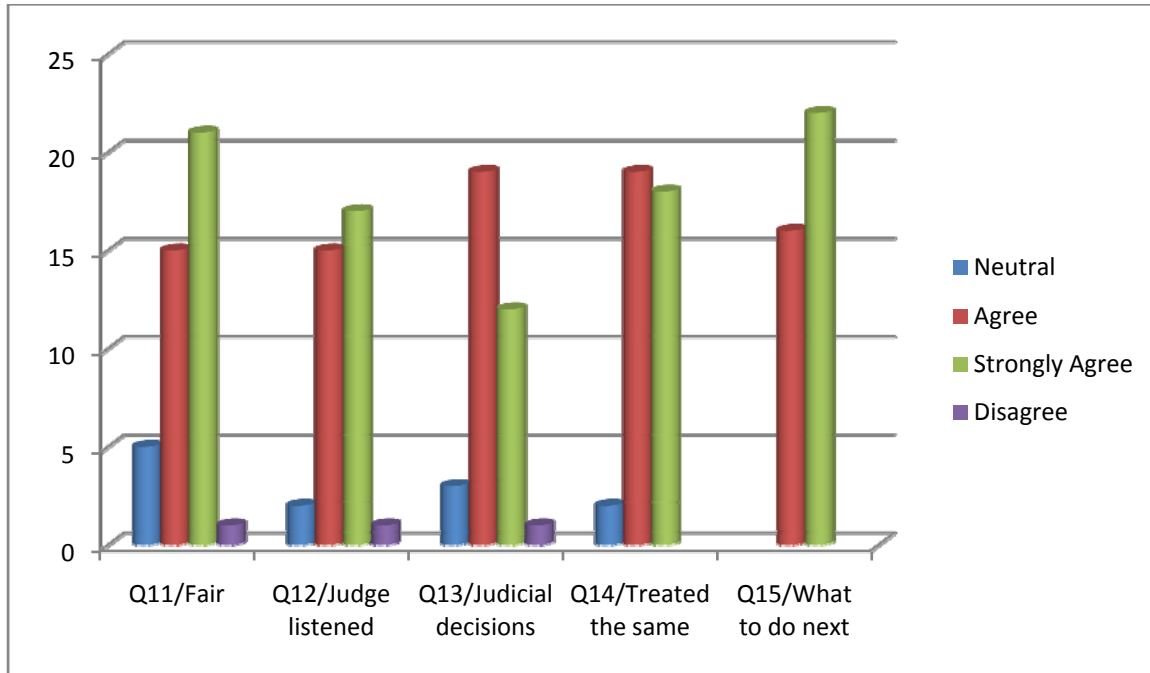
SECTION I: Access to the Court

The “access” measure is a gauge of the court’s ease of use. The public rated their level of agreement on ten aspects of access. For purposes of this report, customer service pertains to user’s perceived treatment by the court staff; including being treated respectfully, feeling safe in the courthouse and being able to complete their business in a timely manner. The graph below clearly indicates that user’s perceived they were being treated with courtesy and felt safe. In contrast, 10% of user’s felt conducting court business was not time efficient.



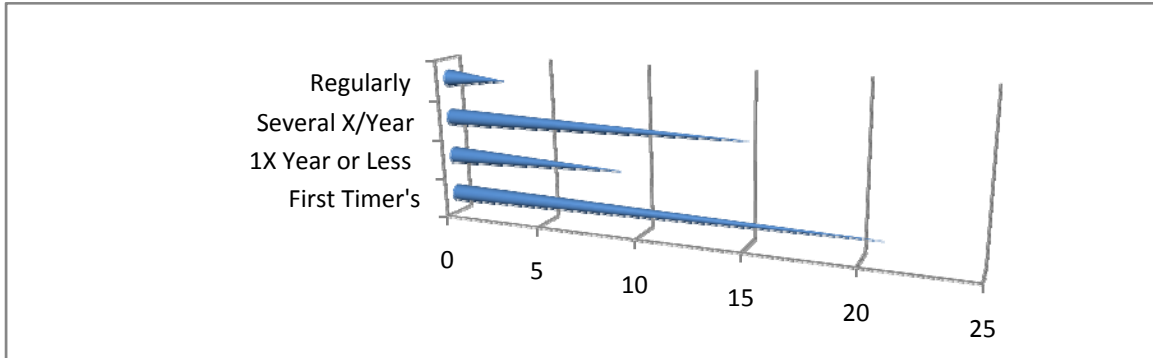
SECTION II: Fairness

The “fairness” measure is a gauge of the public’s perceptions of procedures and outcomes for respondent’s who appeared before the judge. Court user’s rated their level of agreement on five aspects of fairness.

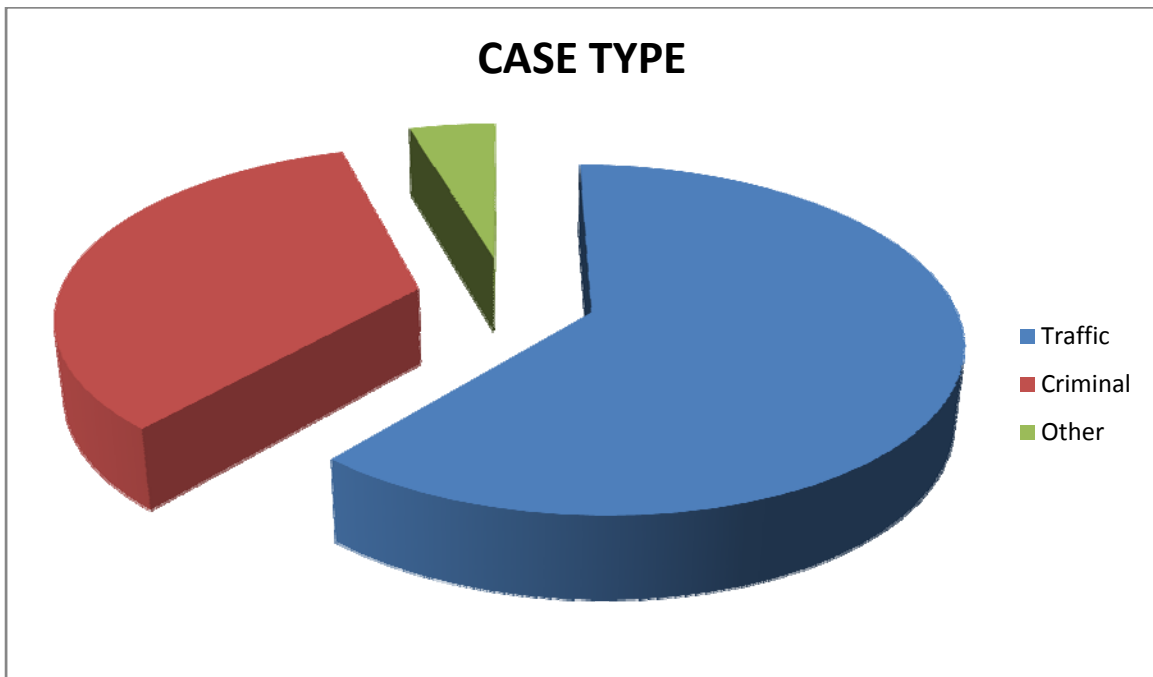


72% of respondents’ felt their case was handled fairly by a judge who listened and had the knowledge and information to make good decisions about their case. 76% of court user’s felt strongly that they knew what to do next about their individual cases.

The graph below shows frequency of visits to the court with 42% using the court for the first time in comparison to only 6% who use the court on a regular basis.

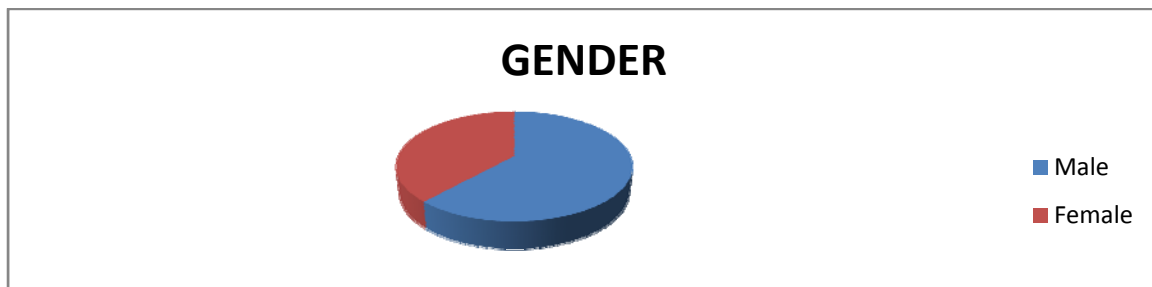
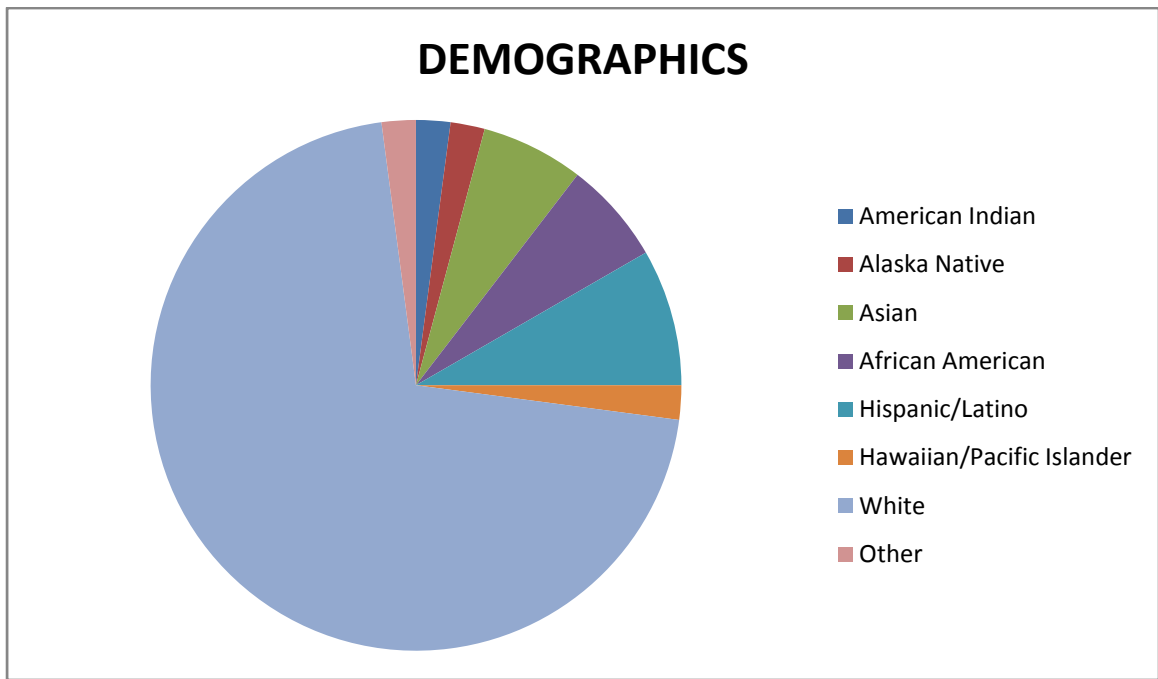


54% of respondent's used the court for a traffic case while 30% were present for a criminal matter. Other types of hearings made up the remaining 4%.



Section III: Background

The chart below indicates the demographic relationship between respondents. 68% users were White, 8% Hispanic/Latino and 6% Asian and African American. Unfortunately, a deficiency of the survey was that it was not made available in the Spanish language, suggesting a language barrier may have inhibited Hispanic representation.



58% of court user's were male and 36% were female.

CONCLUSION

Today's courts face numerous challenges. Public opinion surveys should be evaluated and considered with optimism but realism. Courts need not be passive with respect to the support they receive from the public but rather attempt to understand and respond to the changing expectations of its users while continuing to preserve the integrity and neutrality of the court system. The results of this survey indicate that the majority of court user's who responded feel that access and fairness are a priority and properly addressed in the Lake Forest Park Municipal Court.

"great judge"

"fair"

"nice clerks, court courteous"

"this City has a fabulous court staff and Judge"

"felt safe"

"satisfaction"

"it was enjoyable as possible, thank you"

"best clerks around"

REFERENCES

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