

Is justice happening here ?

By Emily LaGratta

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For many, the word *justice* has been rightfully ousted from the description of the criminal legal system. Of all the varied perspectives and theories that fuel individual and community-level notions of justice, a reckoning is underway to acknowledge that it's not happening sufficiently under any of these definitions. But gaining some consensus—as professionals, as community members, as human beings—as to what justice looks like and feels like is central to advancing it. To what extent is it already happening in certain contexts? And who or what is the authority on that assessment?

This piece wrestles with the question: *Is justice happening here?*

I explore this question through the theoretical frameworks of legitimacy and procedural justice, which I have spent the past 15 years trying to advance in courtrooms and prosecutor offices and prisons. We know from extensive research that people feel that they experience fairness and justice based largely on their experience of the process, not just the outcome.

Beyond the research literature, I am compelled by this framework's reliance on the perspectives of those experiencing “justice” (or not). “Justice” is inherently subjective and can't be captured in administrative data alone. I believe strongly that meaningful advancements will not happen without routine and sustained efforts to hear and learn from the voices of those most impacted.

In 2020 and 2021, my small consulting firm partnered with nearly 20 courts around the U.S. and the State Justice Institute to test new ways to capture this lived experience in modest but scalable ways. We did something novel: we asked people in these courts a few basic questions about justice. Leveraging the procedural justice framework, leadership at all of these courts asked at least one question about perceived fairness, such as, “Did the court treat you fairly today?” or “Did the judge treat you with respect?”

Different from a traditional survey, we prioritized quantity over quality and asked for a few minutes of people's time. Participation

was self-directed on an iPad in the courthouse or a clickable link in an email, on a court website, or within a virtual court context.

This was a notable first for most of these courts, few of which had ever requested feedback from the public. Some courts worried no one would respond. Others feared the iPads would be stolen. Others yet wondered whether the feedback would be valuable. In just a few months with each court, thousands of court users participated, most of whom had likely never been asked to contribute to justice improvement conversations. None of the iPads were stolen or damaged.

The courts were primarily municipal courts, hearing low-level infractions and misdemeanors, but also included district and county courts hearing a range of civil and criminal cases. Represented jurisdictions were small, large, and in between, and spanned the continental U.S.

Consistent with traditional studies asking questions about perceived fairness, the responses were mostly positive. In 2022, a national poll of registered voters put public confidence in local courts at 60 percent, a declining but still-positive percentage.

But numbers only tell a partial story, of course.

Presented here is a subset of the write-in responses received across these courts in response to the final, open-ended question: “How could the court improve its service?” The responses have been minimally edited for clarity. During the active pilot projects, local findings were shared with each participating court to guide policy and practice improvements and court accountability measures. Here, the responses are presented as a collective to spark conversation and movement on a broader scale.

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How could the court improve its service?

These voices can help answer that.

Add information on how long it will take to receive the email of the transcript of the conversation. Other than that it was great!

Allow 1st amendment activity.

Allow in person trials or video-conference like other municipalities.

Accept credit card payments like the rest of modern civilization.

Amazing, just be a bit quicker.

Answer my question clearly.

Be more considerate of handicapped.

Be more fair against cases where cops are just abusing their power.

Be more helpful, thoughtful, more support, and understanding.

Be respectful.

Because of COVID-19 the amount of wait time is understandable.

Better coordination.

Better customer service.

Better notifications.

Better public defenders working truly for the (innocent) people of the state and not for the courts just doing what they are asked by the prosecutors etc ...

Chop chop

Clerk was soooooo pushy trying to hurry me, not listening to what I was asking. Sent me to wrong place. Other clerk in courtroom mad they sent me to her.

Clerks rude was slow.

Confused with where to go after the front person talks to me.

Continue to reinvent the wheels of justice.

Continue with video court sessions.

Correct information on summons, better communication by code enforcement officer.

Deputy was rude.

Do a follow up email regarding court date and zoom credentials.

Do better with your clients.

Do more virtual and less in-person.

Don't like judge running late. Been here early.

Don't take all day.

Due to the unforeseen circumstances of the death of one son, the illness of the other son and my own recovery from spinal surgery, I ask forgiveness from my parking ticket.

Each court has different routines, procedures, etc. We have struggled to learn how to proceed.

Easier way to pay and get information back for older people.

Educate on laws.

Everyone was rude.

Everything was great!

Excelente todo! Muchas gracias.

Exempt ticket fines for proper appearances.

Expedite the time online business can be completed.

Explain the charges and plea better for first-time offenders.

Find prosecutors who are sympathetic and don't laugh and make fun when you have to appear in court on your birthday.

Fridays are workdays for tons of people.

Front clerks when you walk in rushing me. Not even let me talk, confused.

Get me off probation.

Get rid of it.

Give me some sort of advice on how to handle this matter.

God blessed me today. Nice judge.

Good but clerk talks too fast not sure what she was saying.

Great set up but front clerk too busy pushing everyone out, not really listening to us in line.

Have a better phone service to where I can actually talk to someone maybe.

Have a number to call.

Have all the paperwork ready and the right times.

Have more lawyers to help those low advantage.

Have more people answer the phones.

Have more people here to help.

Have the wait time be a little less.

Help me find out why I have a ticket still.

Help more with payments over phone and options for classes for driving infractions.

Help not come back, lol.

Here on time but no judge.

Horrible attitude.

How about a simple one-on-one and really settle these transactions accordingly.

I didn't get any emails yet of my new court date.

I don't have all day.

I don't understand how somebody is found guilty without the judge looking at a video for evidence ... The system is rigged for citizens to fail and be found guilty no matter what.

I feel like the whole process down here is crazy unacceptable and nasty. Single mom having hard time in life get treated like a piece of black crap.

I had to stop working because I thought I had court, but later on I haven't received anything about court. I also called the courthouse number.

I have been attempting to get a court date to plead not guilty to a ticket, and after showing up on my date, I found out no one was prepared to handle my case. I was told to call back. After calling back the court was still not ready, and after not receiving any notifications, I got an email stating I missed my date. Later, I called back and they informed me that they are still not ready to handle my case. It has been months now and I'm extremely confused and still waiting to plead not guilty to my ticket.

I just felt a little rushed.

I received a parking violation ticket ... Now I'm being told that the officer has two years to file it. I don't believe I should have received it. Now I have to wait for up to two years. Crazy.

I think the judge was not compassionate by any means. The phone representative made an offer then spoke to the judge and she rejected it and made me pay for both. I think due to Covid she's trying to just get all the people's money.

I took off work and showed up for a court appearance in-person only to be told it was going to be held via Zoom. Prior notification would have been beneficial as I wouldn't have had to lose time at work.

I was served well by the court today. It could be even better, however, if I were able to pay my citation the day after receiving it.

I was so happy and grateful that my email was responded to so professionally and with respect to me. Thank you so much.

I was told by the officer that the request for deferred disposition could be handled totally online through the website, but that was not the case. It only describes deferred disposition. I had to call to find out I could email the court for the request. That was time consuming. The website should either state the message that you email the court and provide the email address or you should be able to request it online.

If I could pay by debit card it would make it easier for me because I had to move away. I have no transportation.

I'm old fashioned. I prefer face to face.

I've been rescheduled twice that wasn't my fault.

It took way too long for my name to be called and no one was even here.

It was great, much faster than expected.

It was great, even went in order of whoever logged in first.

It was much quicker and easier than I expected. Thank you!

It went well for my first time but I thought this was my official court proceeding but it wasn't... So it was reset again until after January. I was hoping to resolve it by now.

It's fine.

It's hot in here.

Just quicker I guess.

Keep people who care.

Later times.

Less court cost.

Let more people come to court at the same time.

Let one person in with the defendant.

Let people make bond when they have money on them.

Limit the people.

Listen to my complaints against my accomplices.

Listen to my question.

Listen without judging.

Maybe have more phone operators.

Maybe work on learning how to send us back to the waiting room then to talk to someone then back to the waiting room. What I'm trying to say maybe a little more training how to use zoom when it comes to sending the clients to different rooms without sending to the wrong rooms.

Mom and I both say thanks.

More face-to-face... isn't that what the vaccine mandates are for?

Move faster.

Never having been in court. I was nervous. I found the process and the judge and everyone I interacted with to be very kind, helpful, and respectful.

No complaints.

No court appointed lawyer. Not fair.

No respect for my time or effort.

No suggestions.

Nobody at the desks on Friday. I took the day off to file this paperwork.

Not my job to advise y'all

Not sure how to improve.

Offer in person and online.

Once I paid for ticket. I was not allowed to upload documents.

Overall rude.

People be nuts up in here.

PO is racist.

Poor attitude.

Poor attitude and bad service.

Provide more info about the ways to resolve the issue, but the person who answer phone calls might not have that's responsibility and authority.

Provide water, mask.

Reduce fines.

Reminders on when the next court date is instead of warrants.

Rude.

Rude clerks when I walked in, officer sent me to check in. Lady was rude not letting me talk. Left her, had to ask another clerk cashier to help me.

Rude if you have time to be in court and the judge is not on time.

Sad day for the Justice System! Judge failed to deliver justice in the courtroom and lost touch with reality.

Send me the actual payment plans.

Service was fine.

Set court times at various part of the day. I was in court for 9:00 am but didn't see the judge until 2:00. I missed a whole day of work.

Single black mom no help waiting to go to two offices and I have to wait to be seen. I'm a victim of domestic violence, and I have to pick up my son from school. I'm trying to stay safe.

Stop charging people with random charges.

Stop giving out tickets for no license.

Stop pulling me over.

Takes toooo long

Takes too long because of parking

Terrible with people that have a job.

The appointed time said 8am, nothing started until after 9am.

The courts have been more than accommodating for a mother of four with a full-time job.

The judge was kind and very helpful. Everything was convenient and user friendly.

The officers at the entrance are barbaric with their actions and their vocabulary is provoking.

The online parking ticket payment portal does not tell you to leave off the ".01" after your ticket number... could not pay ticket. Had to contact the court to get proper method of payment.

The service was easy to navigate as an educated person. I worry for those less educated.

The staff exceeded my expectations. Everyone was professional and helpful.

The staff could be more helpful. I couldn't ask them a question without being made to feel as if I was bothering them.

There's no way all these people are vaccinated without their masks.

They did not get my information. They just talked to the offenders. I am handicapped and was taken advantage of and I just want justice.

This place smells like piss.

Throw out ticket. That is a speed trap.

Time should be shorter. Speak louder when calling people names.

Too long waiting.

Too slow.

Took long to get judge to hear case. Clerks sitting waiting for judge to arrive.

Very respectful staff.

Very shocked at how easy this was.

Waited in line too long just to make a payment.

Waiting on judge why if told to be here on time.

Was somewhat helpful. Hopefully my issues with the neighbor gets resolved!

We have to come here for things that can be done over the phone.

Website has bugs, some links need to be fixed.

Why are the clerks rude? Say they're waiting for the judge but they're eating tacos.

Why do I have to wait so long? I see the judge talking with his clerk.

Why does it take so long? Prosecutors don't believe you anyway.

You could lessen traffic by telling code enforcement officers not to write tickets during a pandemic for lawns that are visibly in the process of being cut.

You guys keep us waiting for hours. Start at 10.

Is justice happening here?

The surprising answer seems to be, yes, sometimes. Amidst the frustration and calls for improvement, there is shock—almost delight—when it isn't as bad as people fear.

Many comments are positive or neutral. Many focus on mundane and bureaucratic details. Few mention outcomes or the fairness of sentences or fines. Instead, most constructive feedback focuses on small to modest improvements that individual professionals or systems could make.

On one hand, the feedback and ideas offered here reflect a low bar for our legal

system. On the other hand, this feedback is realistic and actionable alongside deeper investments.

Overhauling a broken system may feel daunting but there's no excuse for not starting on these small adjustments. If these are too easy, prove it. If they're hard, let's be honest about why. In any case, perhaps more justice can happen here.

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