

NSW court user experience survey: Results from two metropolitan courthouses

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Aim: To examine the experience of court users of two metropolitan courthouses in New South Wales.

Method: 311 court users were surveyed regarding their awareness, understanding, contacts, and satisfaction with services at court. The sample included defendants (33.1%), victims (10.6%), witnesses (8.0%) and supporters (48.2%). Court professionals were not sampled.

Results: Nearly all (90.6%) court users had previously attended court. Court users who reported contacts with court staff (64.1%) typically found these contacts very helpful. Court users who were well informed about support options at court (31.9%) were much more likely to rate other measures of court experience positively. Court experiences varied somewhat with user role; notably, victims, witnesses and their supporters were much more likely to receive proactive assistance than defendants and their supporters (37.0% vs. 20.7%, $p < .01$). Court users' suggestions for improving their experience included clearer and more prominent signage and more frequent information about the timing of hearings.

Conclusion: In line with previous research, this sample of court users primarily reported positive experiences. Opportunities for increased awareness about support were apparent across court user roles. A number of court users' concerns were practical and thus might be resolved through increased communication before and at court.

Keywords: Court users; court support; satisfaction survey.

Introduction

In 2015, the New South Wales (NSW) Local Court dealt with over 285,000 criminal matters (over 90% of those in the State), around 30,000 domestic and violence orders, and over 92,000 civil actions (Local Court of NSW, 2016). Factoring in victims, witnesses, and persons at court to support participants in court matters (referred to hereafter as supporters), the volume of people served by these Courts may be even higher. Court involvement can be demanding and traumatic for court users who are often disadvantaged, in crisis, and have complex legal and non-legal needs (Coumarelos, Wei, & Zhou, 2006; Henning, 2016; Parker, 1998). Data on court users and their experiences are critical to governments and other agencies tasked with improving and appropriately allocating court services (International Consortium for Court Excellence, 2013; Parker, 1998); however, local data are scarce.¹ This Brief provides the first detailed court experience data from the NSW Local Court.

Previous research

Court user research is highly varied in its methodologies and settings, making it difficult to generalise across jurisdictions. The current study defines court users as persons attending court to serve as a victim, witness, defendant or their non-professional supporters (e.g. friends and family). Some research has included other users (e.g. court staff, police). Most research has focused on victims, or particular user subgroups (e.g. Indigenous court users). Information on supporters is scarce, despite the fact that friends and family are regular users of court services (Court Network, 2016) and important to persons with legal problems (Coumarelos et al., 2012). Apart from one unpublished study (Attorney General's Department of NSW, 2007), we found no court user survey data for NSW Local Courts.

Survey data from other jurisdictions indicate that court users' experiences are typically positive. In a large (N=1,859) state-wide survey of Queensland court registry users, predominantly

in the summary jurisdiction, at least 88 per cent of court users felt safe, found the courthouse easy to navigate, and were satisfied with the information provided (Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 2012). Among 256 Victorian higher court users (County Court of Victoria, 2012) similarly high proportions (at least 82%) felt safe, easily found where they needed to go, understood proceedings in the courtroom, and found the court registry staff helpful. Fewer users in the Victorian study (approximately 64%) were aware of available court support services, although very few (approximately 8%) indicated a need for support services. In both of these studies, however, most court users were professionals or members of the public and participant-specific results were not reported. Surveys undertaken by the Family Court of Australia (2015) have primarily sampled court participants and found similar results regarding safety, navigation, and staff service. Areas for improvement identified in the above-mentioned included managing information and expectations regarding court timings and durations, managing queues during busy sessions, and promotion of support services.

Legal problems often have an adverse impact on peoples' lives, in more serious cases leading to increased financial strain, stress and illness (e.g. Coumarelos et al., 2006, 2012). Court involvement can also be traumatic and confusing due to its complex procedures, power imbalances, specialised language, and unfamiliar rules (Henning, 2016). Interestingly, Parker's (1998) rich qualitative interviews with court-room professionals (e.g. court workers, lawyers, police, and support staff, rather than participants) found that even this group of experienced users face unnecessary problems at court with (for example) navigating the courthouse, understanding signage, and identifying the current stage of proceedings.

Many free services have been established in Australia to ameliorate this stress and facilitate court users' participation in the court process. Henning (2016) notes that court users' access to major services (victim/witness support programs, and Legal Aid/community legal centres) is impeded by the restrictive eligibility criteria and fragmented (rather than holistic) delivery of these services. Court registries are an important source of information, but public awareness of the services provided by registries (e.g. providing advice on court processes) is low (Coumarelos et al., 2012). High workloads and wide daily fluctuations in the volume of court matters may mean that the availability of these services is inconsistent. 'On-demand' information is available to NSW court users through government websites, the Victims Access Line (VAL), mobile applications (NSW Department of Justice, 2014) and LawAccess NSW which receives consistently high satisfaction ratings from users (e.g. NSW Department of Police and Justice, 2014). However, most people are unaware of the services provided by LawAccess and some groups may benefit more from face-to-face advice (Coumarelos et al., 2012).

In NSW, most court support services are directed at domestic violence victims (Standing Council on Law and Justice, 2012), such as the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service and safe rooms (private waiting areas). Other specialist court

services are also available (e.g. the Aboriginal Client Service Specialists Program; NSW Department of Justice, 2016). Non-government services providing non-legal support exist in many courts but are neither centralised nor standardised in NSW, and their expertise, target group, hours, location, and philosophy (e.g. advocacy vs. welfare) all vary.

Parker (1998) considered court support workers/volunteers in Australia to be a valuable resource but patchy in coverage and in need of appropriate resourcing and coordination. In their review of court services, Coumarelos et al. (2012) expressed a similar view. The Court Network (a statewide service in Victoria, also operating in Queensland) provides emotional support and referrals to other services using trained and easily identifiable court volunteers (Court Network, 2016). The Court Network has been commended for its comprehensive training, strong relationships with court and agency staff, clear referral pathways, and their provision of practical support and court companionship (Court Network, 2015). Unpublished evaluations of victims and unrepresented court defendants have found that the Court Network reduced victims' confusion and increased their feelings of safety, and reduced defendants' stress and difficulty navigating the court process (Court Network, 2016). Large studies from the US and UK (Bradford, 2011; Brickman, 2002) suggest that most victims are not reached by victim support agencies, that victims rely heavily on their informal support networks, and that proactive contact by victim support agencies may be more effective than reactive contact.

Disadvantage and high levels of psychosocial need including low income, poor education, and communication difficulties are common among court involved populations (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015; Jones & Crawford, 2007). These factors often co-occur, as do multiple legal and non-legal problems, which may complicate service access and delivery (Coumarelos et al., 2012; Henning, 2016; Hook, Murray & Seymour, 2005; Walsh & Muscat, 2012). These problems are more common in households in disadvantaged areas and are linked with inaction on legal problems, low awareness of legal services and high use of health/welfare services (Coumarelos et al., 2012; McDonald & Wei, 2016).

Aims

Given the paucity of court user experience data from NSW and its value in informing court interventions, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) undertook brief survey interviews with a large sample of court users in two metropolitan Local Courts in NSW. The research specifically aimed to:

1. Describe the demographics and role of court users attending these Local Courts
2. Identify court users' contacts with, awareness of and understanding of court services
3. Assess court users' ratings of various measures of their court experience
4. Examine variations in the above by court user role

Method

Recruitment

Participants were recruited into this study at Campbelltown and Penrith Local Courts over a three-week period between November 2015 and February 2016. Recruitment was conducted only during the morning court sessions because the vast majority of court users attended during this period. These two courthouses were selected based on the following characteristics: large case volumes, low proportions of court users from non-English speaking backgrounds (because translators were not available for this study), and physical and operational similarities (including their number of courtrooms and co-located District Courts). Volunteer services differing in coverage and service mix were operating in both courthouses during this time.

Court users were eligible to participate in the study providing they spoke English, were at least 18 years of age and at court in the role of victim (or plaintiff or applicant), witness, defendant (or offender or respondent) or a supporter. Professionals (e.g. court staff) were excluded. Recruitment took place in the public waiting areas and safe rooms of the courthouse, thus, defendants who were in custody were excluded. No distinction was made between users at court for criminal or civil matters, or Local Court or District Court hearings. Most court users were with least one other person when invited to participate in the research. Where multiple persons were attending court together, recruitment was limited to one of each user role (e.g. one victim, one supporter). Participation was encouraged by offering court users the opportunity to give confidential feedback on their experience, and by offering a supermarket gift card which was issued on completion of the survey.

Survey administration and content

In total 789 court users were invited to participate in the research; 507 provided consent and 311 surveys were completed (148 from Penrith, 163 from Campbelltown). The overall response rate was 39.4 per cent, which compares favourably with direct contact surveys.² Some non-consenting court users provided reasons for non-response, including stress and concerns relating to their imminent court hearing, and (among supporters) a perception that the survey content was irrelevant. With two face-to-face exceptions, surveys were completed by phone at a time of participants' choosing. Surveys took around 10 minutes to administer and were obtained within three weeks of recruitment (mostly within one). At least three attempts were made to complete the survey with consenting court users. Surveys collected self-report data on participants' demographics and experience at court on the day of recruitment (or most recent day at the same court in the same role), through a mix of fixed-choice, Likert-type, and open-ended questions. Key measures are presented below.

Binary measures

Response options were 0 'no' or 1 'yes' for:

Court history: 'Have you ever been to [this court, another court] before today?'

Court hearing occurred: 'Was there a court hearing for your matter today?'

Present for hearing: 'Were you in the courtroom or on video-link for your matter?'

Understanding of hearing: 'Was the court hearing hard to understand?'

Understanding of roles: 'Did you understand the role of the [e.g. magistrate]?'

Proactive assistance: 'Did anyone approach you to ask if you needed assistance?'

Staff contacts: 'Did you interact with the... [e.g. registry staff]?'

Likert-type measures

Response options were 1 (not at all), 2 (slightly), 3 (moderately), 4 (very) or 5 (extremely) for:

Helpfulness of staff: 'How helpful were the... [e.g. registry staff]?'

Helpfulness of signs: 'How helpful were the signs in the courthouse?'

Ease of navigation: 'How easy was it to find your way around the courthouse?'

Feeling of safety: 'How safe did you feel inside the courthouse?'

Role information: 'How well informed did you feel about what was required of you at court?'

Support information: 'How well informed did you feel about where to find support at court?'

Confusion: 'How confusing did you find your day at court?'

Stress: 'How stressful did you find your day at court?'

Analysis and missing data

Firstly, descriptive statistics are provided for the full sample. We then examine differences between victims, witnesses and supporters (VWS) and defendants and their supporters (DS) using Pearson's Chi-square or Fisher's Exact tests. Further variation in court users' characteristics and experience was examined using Spearman pairwise correlation coefficients with a family-wise Bonferroni error rate for each characteristic. Data were at least 92 per cent complete for all items. Some participants' comments are reported to provide qualitative insights, but these may not be representative of the sample.

Results

Court usage and demographics

Table 1 presents a breakdown of participants by their role, type of matter, prior and subsequent attendance at court. Court users were typically at court in the role of defendant (33.1%) or

defendant supporter (40.5%). Half were in court for a violent offence (52.5%); compared with DS, VWS were significantly more likely to be at court for a violent offence (70.7%; DS 45.3%, $p < .01$) and significantly less likely to be at court for a traffic offence (7.3%; DS 27.4%, $p < .01$). Most (75.2%) court users had already attended the same court and eight per cent had returned to court between the recruitment and survey dates.³

Table 1. Category of court user interviewed and court attendance information

	N	%
Role	311	
Victim		10.6
Witness		8.0
Victim/witness support		7.7
Defendant		33.1
Defendant support		40.5
Crime type ^a	305	
Violent		52.1
Traffic		22.0
Other		25.9
Prior court attendance	310	
None		9.4
Same court		75.2
Different court only		15.5
Subsequent court attendance	311	
No		92.0
Yes		8.0

^a Apprehended Violence Orders and violent charges were aggregated. The 'other' category may include some persons with concurrent traffic charges.

Table 2 details the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 2. Sample demographics

	N	%
Gender	311	
Male		33.8
Female		66.2
Indigenous status	311	
Non-Indigenous		86.5
Indigenous		13.5
Language background	311	
English		94.9
Other		5.1
Age	310	
18 - 24		19.7
25 - 54		65.8
55 plus		14.8
Completed schooling	308	
Less than Year 10		15.3
Year 10, 11 or Diploma ^a		57.5
Year 12 or above		27.3

^a Some persons with diplomas ($n = 41$) may also have obtained a Year 12 qualification.

Table 2 shows that most court users were female (66.2%), non-Indigenous (86.5%), from English speaking backgrounds (94.9%), and had not completed Year 12 (72.7%). Ages varied widely (mean = 39.6, range = 18 to 81 years) and victims and defendants tended to be younger (respective means of 34.6 and 35.8). The gender balance differed widely by role: most defendants (62.1%), relatively few supporters (18.7%), and less than 1 in 10 victims (9.1%) were male. Significantly more VWS than DS had completed Year 12 (VWS 38.3%; DS 23.4%, $p < .05$).

Court hearing and contact with staff

Three in four (73.6%) court users said that a magistrate dealt with their matter on their day at court.⁴ Most court users who said that a magistrate dealt with their matter were present for their hearing (82.5%; 189/229) although this was significantly less likely for VWS (59.1%) than for DS (92.0%, $p < .01$). Among court users who were present at their hearing and who provided a response, half (52.5%; 114/217) were very or extremely satisfied with the magistrate's ruling or directions. Most court users who were present at their hearing said they understood the jobs of the magistrate, prosecutors and defence lawyers (82.0%; 150/184) and found the hearing itself easy to understand (71.9%; 134/189). Among court users who commented on problems with understanding, the most common complaints related to terminology or difficulty hearing due to courtroom noise or poor amplification.

Table 3 presents information on court users' contacts with staff at court. Two thirds (64.1%) of participants reported at least one of the contacts listed in the table. One in four court users (25.0%) received proactive assistance (i.e. were approached by someone offering assistance). The first person who made this approach was typically a support worker or volunteer (46.8%; 36/77) rather than court staff, police or security staff (26.0%; 20/77), although other court users were unsure who had made the approach (26.0%; 20/77). Court users tended to rate this approach as very helpful (58.3%; 56/72). VWS were more likely to have been approached than DS (37.0%; DS 20.7%, $p < .01$).

The next section of the table reports on contacts more broadly (i.e. including approaches made by staff and approaches made by court users). VWS were more likely than DS to report contacts with support workers, mental health workers or volunteer staff in aggregate, VWS 23.1%; DS 3.6%). Conversely, the registration desk and court registry were accessed by a higher proportion of DS (28.0% and 35.8% respectively) than VWS (7.4% and 19.5% respectively).⁵ Across different court user roles, most court users reported that they understood the roles of staff with whom they had contact. Most court users who rated these contacts rated them as very or extremely helpful (e.g. 60.6% for the registration desk; 90.9% for DV support workers).

Across role types, the majority of court users did not express a need to use the courthouse safe room. Fifteen court users including nine victims used the safe room; 11 victims were unaware of the safe room. Eight court users reported problems with accessing or using the safe room, including the room being locked, overcrowded, accessible only to DV victims, or difficulty receiving information about the progress of their matter whilst

Table 3. Staff with whom respondents made contact at court

	N	%
Proactive approach with offer of assistance	308	25
Contacts (multiple responses possible)		
with support, mental health or volunteer staff	301	16.6 ^a
with security, police, or legal staff	304	16.1 ^b
with registration desk staff	311	31.5
with court registry staff	310	22.6
with unknown staff	301	8.0
Used safe room	309	4.9
Victims only	33	27.3
Had a support worker at court	308	8.8
Victims only	32	40.6
Any of the above	298	64.1

^a Support/mental health workers (8.6%) and volunteers (10.0%) were aggregated because some support workers were volunteers (and vice versa) and participants expressed some difficulty distinguishing these roles.

^b Court users were not asked specifically whether they had interacted with these staff.

in the safe room. Fewer than half of all victims (40.6%; 13/32) and very few other court users had a support worker at court on the day. Court users typically indicated that the support they received from their worker was substantive (e.g. extensive procedural, logistical or emotional support). Most court users had not met with their support worker before their day at court. Court users were not asked about their use of support outside of the courthouse.

Ratings of court experience

Court users' ratings of seven measures of their court experience are presented in Table 4. In this table, the five-point Likert-type scales have been dichotomised to show the proportion of court users that strongly endorsed each item (e.g. rated the signs in the courthouse as 'very helpful' or 'extremely helpful'). Ratings are presented in full in Figure 1. Court users were invited to explain their ratings, and while their comments and themes emerging from these responses are discussed, these are not quantifiable or representative of the sample.⁶

Signage and navigation

Three in four (76.4%) court users considered it very or extremely easy to find their way around the courthouse. Among the minority of court users who offered additional explanations for their ratings, common themes involved relying on prior knowledge of the courthouse or finding the signage or court layout helpful. Only one third (33.9%) of the sample rated the signage as very or extremely helpful. While the most common explanations for rating involved not noticing or considering the signage, the placement, content and physical features of signage were also relevant, for example: 'Signs inside courtroom could be more prominent'; 'Signs on [open] doors hard to see'; 'Colours don't stand out'. Several court users noted problems locating the court lists. One user made the comment that 'There are a lot of words in the court system that people don't understand. It would be useful for these to be up on a sign and explained'.

Role and support information

Half of the sample (49.2%) rated themselves very or extremely well informed about what was required of them at court, although 17.8 per cent felt not at all well informed. The most frequent explanations for higher levels of being informed pertained to advice from legal professionals; advice from police, court staff, and support workers was also acknowledged. Explanations for lower ratings of being informed included not having been informed prior to coming to court, not knowing who to approach at court and unsuccessfully seeking information at court. Court users generally felt less well informed about where to find support at court. One third (31.9%) felt very or extremely well informed whereas 39.0 per cent felt not at all well informed. Ratings were slightly better for VWS (e.g. 40.2% very or extremely well informed). Explanations for higher ratings highlighted the value of signage and information received from staff at court, and to a lesser extent, court users' pre-existing knowledge. While most court users giving lower ratings were unaware of support options, their need for support was unclear. Some, however, had sought support information unsuccessfully at court and others assumed that support was unavailable.

Safety, confusion and stress

Most court users (74.8%) felt very or extremely safe at court and found their day at court no more than moderately confusing (67.0%). Among persons providing explanations, higher safety ratings tended to relate to security screening procedures or the presence of police or security staff. Explanations offered for lower ratings of safety tended to reference concerns with other court users or with police and security being too few in number or sources of conflict. Court users who explained their ratings of confusion tended to attribute low levels of confusion to their prior knowledge or experience, and some acknowledged helpful interventions by court staff, for example 'Lady near lists told us where to be'; and '[The court registrar] explained everything thoroughly'. Explanations for higher levels of confusion were diverse and included difficulty understanding legal terminology and processes, and uncertainty about the timing of their matter and whether they were required to wait.

Nearly half of the sample (46.7%) said they found their day at court very or extremely stressful. VWS were significantly less likely to say their day was very or extremely stressful (33.3%; DS 52.2%, $p < .01$). Explanations of higher stress ratings included concerns about the outcome of proceedings, uncertainty about responsibilities at court, and anxiety due to lengthy, unanticipated or unexplained delays in proceedings. Few explanations were offered for lower stress ratings.

Variations in court experience

Table 5 presents Spearman coefficients for pairwise correlations between eight user characteristics and eight measures of court experience. Correlations with p -values above 0.2 are excluded to facilitate ease of reading. Double-starred (**) correlations had p -values below the Bonferroni family-wise error value, and are therefore more likely to reflect true variation than chance

Table 4. Percentage of respondents strongly endorsing each measure of court experience

	N	%
Signage (signs in the courthouse were very/extremely helpful)	292	33.9
Navigation (very/extremely easy to find your way around the courthouse)	309	76.4
Role (very/extremely well informed about what was required at court)	293	49.2
Support (very/extremely well informed about where to find support at court)	285	31.9
Safety (Felt very/extremely safe inside the courthouse)	306	74.8
Confusion (found day at court very/extremely confusing)	309	15.5
Stress (found day at court very/extremely stressful)	307	46.7

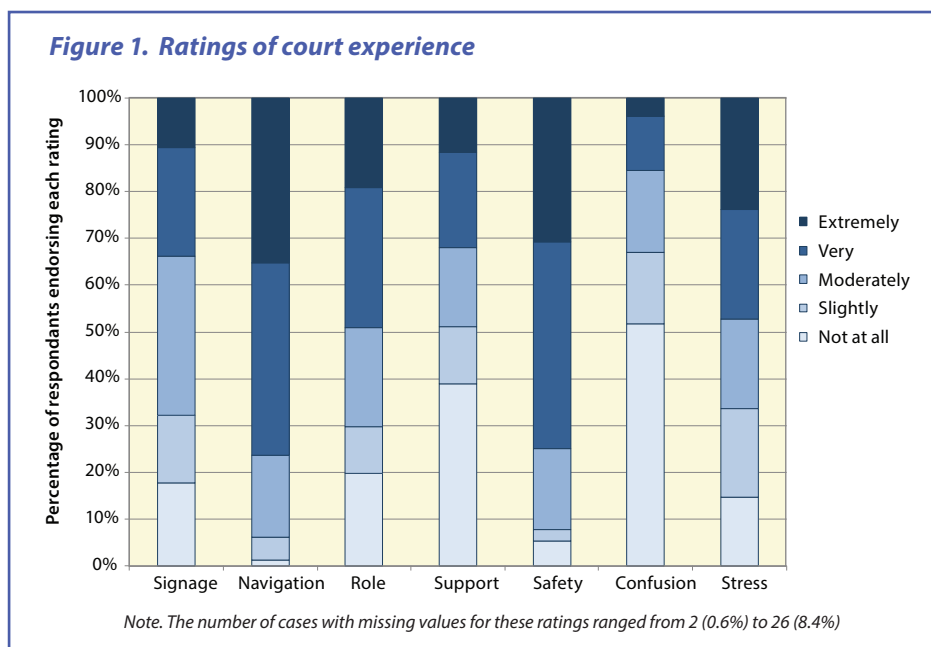
nonetheless felt very or extremely well informed about where to find support at court, while 1 in 4 (26.3%) who were approached were not at all well informed about where to find support.

Discussion

This brief has reported the results of a survey of 311 court users recruited at the Campbelltown and Penrith courthouses. The study sought to provide a profile of court users, to describe their experiences, awareness and understanding of court services, and to consider variation between users in different roles.

The results showed that, overall, most court users, regardless of their role at court provided broadly positive responses regarding their level of understanding and their experience of courthouse staff. At the same time, some areas for improvement were apparent and these were not limited to particular user characteristics. The sample was diverse in terms of gender, age and Indigenous status. Court users typically had prior court experience and less than 12 years' schooling. Further social disadvantage is likely to have been present for many participants, given the relatively disadvantaged geographic setting for the study (Coumarelos et al., 2006, 2012).

Defendants outnumbered victims by 3 to 1. In addition to their sheer volume, they are important because evaluations of therapeutic jurisprudence programs



variation due to the high number of contrasts undertaken. Contrasts with user characteristics (Variables 1 to 8) reveal minimal variation other than between user roles. The fact that females were more likely than males to be at court for a violent offence reflects the strong association between gender and user role (with VWS being much more likely to be female than male).

Correlations were more extensive among measures of court experience (Variables 9 to 16). Most notably, being very or extremely well informed about support options at court was significantly correlated after Bonferroni-correction with being approached (receiving proactive assistance), being well informed about their role and feeling safe, and negatively correlated with feeling confused. Most correlations between measures of court experiences were moderate, indicating substantial variation between individual court users. For example, 1 in 4 court users (26.1%) who were not approached

show that for defendants a positive court experience can be 'transformative' (Meija-Canales, 2014). Supporters are another important yet sometimes overlooked group, comprising nearly half of this sample.⁷ Informal supporters are an important source of assistance to victims, and are often consulted by persons with serious legal problems more broadly (Coumarelos et al., 2012). They may be especially sought when formal assistance is unavailable (Brickman, 2002) and can provide continuity in support beyond the court appearance. Courts should consider supporters' court experiences and furnish them with information that may enhance self-care and the experience of court participants. Supporters are open to receiving support; they comprised 30 per cent of persons supported by the Court Network (2015).

The survey provides many positive findings. Court users generally found these courthouses easy to navigate, felt safe, understood their hearing and the role of staff at court. Most

Table 5. Matrix of pairwise correlations between court user characteristics and measures of court experience

Variable	1. VWS (role)	2. Male	3. Indigenous	4. Age <35 yrs	5. School <10 yrs	6. Prior court	7. Violent crime	8. Site	9. Approached	10. Signage ^a	11. Navigation ^a	12. Role ^a	13. Support ^a	14. Safety ^a	15. Confusion ^a	16. Stress ^a
1. VWS (role)	1															
2. Male	0.180**	1														
3. Indigenous	-0.087		1													
4. Age <35 yrs				1												
5. School <10 yrs	-0.110		0.100	0.082	1											
6. Prior court			0.114*			1										
7. Violent crime	0.226**	-0.197**	0.089	0.094			1									
8. Site					0.147*	0.080	1									
9. Approached	0.166**	-0.076	0.078			0.133*	-0.113*	1								
10. Signage ^a				0.127*				0.087	1							
11. Navigation ^a			0.096	0.137*				0.332**	1							
12. Role ^a				0.105				0.291**	0.256**	1						
13. Support ^a	0.109	0.086				0.096	0.083	0.212**	0.320**	0.161*	0.281**	1				
14. Safety ^a					-0.108			0.214**	0.130*		0.164**	1				
15. Confusion ^a							-0.077	-0.099	-0.103	-0.242**	-0.174**	-0.086	1			
16. Stress ^a	-0.167**		-0.142*	0.156*	0.096			-0.157**	0.105			-0.123*	0.203**	1		

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .00625$ (Bonferroni family-wise error value). Correlations with p -values $> .2$ are not shown. Coefficients $\geq |.2|$ are in bold; negative coefficients are in italic

^a Items 10 through 16 correspond to the strong endorsements reported in Table 4, e.g. signs in the courthouse were rated as very helpful or extremely helpful

interacted with a potential source of support and considered these contacts helpful, and few court users reported high levels of confusion. In these ways the results concord with court user surveys that were discussed in the introduction. There were some possible gaps in knowledge and areas for improvement. Nearly all court users had previously attended court and many drew on this prior experience on their day at court. Court was a stressful experience for many court users, and many did not feel well informed about their role or where to find support. Being well informed about support was weakly associated with receiving a proactive offer of assistance, but only 1 in 4 court users had received such an offer.

There are at least two reasons to increase proactive attempts to reach court users. Some factors that are prevalent among court users may inhibit action to seek help, including stress and low education. Being proactive also increases awareness, uptake and effectiveness of victim support services (Brickman, 2002). Court users' suggestions for improving signage, their limited use of support services, and the fact that not all court users recognised who they had interacted with might encourage efforts to increase the visibility of support services. Using a well-signed, central location, and standardised branding per the Court Network model described in the introduction, may achieve greater recognition and uptake, particularly on high volume days at court where a proactive approach may not be feasible.

Differences between victims, witnesses and their supporters (VWS) and defendants and their supporters (DS) were largely

contained to experiences of support. VWS were mostly female and at court for a violent offence. VWS were more likely than DS to receive proactive assistance, and their contacts tended to be with support workers or volunteers. However, most VWS were neither approached nor reported having contact with potential support staff. Victims were much more likely to have a support worker than other users. Contacts for DS tended to involve the registration desk or registry, although most did not interact with these services. Although these differences could reflect a greater prevalence of violence or victim-focused services, there is room for increasing service contacts across user types.

The study achieved a relatively good response rate (Brickman, 2002; Ralph, 2011) and provides unique, detailed court experience data from a diverse sample of court participants in NSW, but is not without limitations. The sample may not be widely representative of all court users attending NSW courthouses. Characteristics and experiences may differ for non-participants (including those who withheld consent), and for users of courthouses with marked differences in demographics, volumes, services, or layouts. Notwithstanding these caveats, the fact that many results aligned with studies conducted in other jurisdictions suggests that court experiences are not entirely parochial.

A future survey of court users in NSW would be well advised to consider international guidelines for assessing court performance (e.g. International Consortium for Court Excellence, 2013). Employing a standardised approach (European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice, 2016; USAID Fair Justice Project, 2015) would facilitate comparison

with other jurisdictions and comparisons over time which is important for benchmarking performance and monitoring changes.⁸ Additional questions that would facilitate a more holistic profile of court users could cover their expectations regarding wait times; their perception of whether they needed support; their use of lawyers, police, and external support agencies; and, their engagement with online/telephone services. A larger sample would facilitate greater disaggregation of court user roles, and the comments offered by many court users also suggest using qualitative research to enrich these survey data.

The results of this study suggest that there is room for increasing awareness and contacts between court users and sources of assistance at these courthouses. Court users have contact with many different services, but only a minority of court users interact with any one service. The Court Network offers an appealing model of a single point of contact for all court users that also provides support and referral to those who require it. Existing volunteer services could potentially be recruited to pursue this model in NSW. Other possibilities to improve court experiences raised by this research include increased communication about court delay/wait times and pre-court preparation. Mobile technology has been successfully used to disseminate such information (Wallace, 2013) and could augment face-to-face support, particularly during busy periods at court. The effectiveness of any interventions should be evaluated using a sound design, ideally a randomised trial.

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Notes

1. The International Framework for Court Excellence is a holistic management system designed to help courts improve their performance; Australian members include the Victorian Magistrates' Court.
2. Some court users who withheld consent would have been ineligible to participate. Among court users whose role at court was known, research staff observed no particular pattern of consent. However, only some non-consenting court users disclosed their role at court.
3. Court users were also asked what stage their matter had reached (e.g. sentencing) but most were unsure how to respond, so these data are not reported.

4. Court users who had returned to the same court since the day of recruitment were asked about their most recent day at that court.
5. Registry: office with a service counter from which the court provides services to the public. Registration desk: desk located near the courtrooms at which court participants can register their presence and seek advice about the time and location of their matter.
6. Explanations were not sought from all court users, in particular, those under time pressure.
7. Supporters were most likely underrepresented as only one supporter was drawn from large groups of court users, which tended to be predominantly comprised of supporters.
8. Gething's (2013) proposed leading practice framework for Australian Courts suggests that user satisfaction surveys be undertaken at least every 18 months.

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