

Sample Court Watching Assignment

For this assignment, you are asked to replicate the “court watching” data from “Crook County.” You will be reporting on our Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas-Felony Trial Division.

Background and Basics:

State level trial courts of general jurisdiction (both civil and criminal) in PA are called Courts of Common Pleas and exist at the county level. Philadelphia City and County are co-extensive, so the local state court is the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas.

Criminal courtrooms are for the most part in the Criminal Justice Center which is catty-corner from City Hall (where there are also a lot of courtrooms) and accessible by Broad Street subway or bus.

Common Pleas is where jury trials, felony bench trials are conducted. Misdemeanors are tried in Philadelphia Municipal Court (courtrooms also in the Criminal Justice Center) - the other counties in Pa. (with the exception of Allegheny County which includes Pittsburgh) use District Justice courts (essentially justices of the peace) for low level misdemeanors. The focus of this research is on the felony division. Be sure to ask sheriff or staff to assist you to the proper courtrooms.

Before going to the courts, visit the following links for background information:

<http://courts.phila.gov/common-pleas/>

and

<http://www.courts.phila.gov/common-pleas/trial/>

For location of court:

1301 Filbert Street

Philadelphia, PA. 19107

Main Telephone Number

215 683-7000

For a map of the Criminal Justice Center see:

<http://www.courts.phila.gov/locations.asp>

Rules and Attire:

Students should dress in “every day,” casual attire (rather than business-professional attire). The goal is to blend with the general public and not alert that you are a student or “court watcher” this could bias your findings.

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Published by Stanford University Press

Also, students are required to follow all courthouse rules. Many courthouses do not allow computers, cell phones, food, drinks etc. Be sure to follow all court guidelines. A pen/pencil and your notepad/court forms are all you need.

Code of Conduct:

Chicago Appleseed outlined “code of conduct” that delineates parameters of behavior for the professionals at 26th and California, Criminal Courthouse. This Code is based upon the National Center for State Court’s Trial Court Performance Standards and Measurement and is outlined below.

Standard 1: Trust and Confidence in Public Proceedings

The trial court conducts its proceedings and other public business openly.

The court must ensure that its proceedings are accessible and audible to all participants, including litigants, attorneys, court personnel, as well as members of the public including victims, families, jurors and the general public.

Standard 2: Safety, Accessibility and Convenience

Trial court facilities are safe, accessible and convenient to use for all members of the public, as well as courtroom participants.

Court personnel should not engage in any intimidation or impropriety to visitors including victims, families, jurors and the general public regardless of their social background.

Standard 3: Effective Participation

The trial court gives all who appear before it the opportunity to participate effectively, without undue hardship or inconvenience.

The court must accommodate all participants in its proceedings—especially those who have language difficulties, mental impairments, or physical handicaps. This includes interpreters for the deaf, arrangements for the impaired, and translators for non-English speakers. Also, defendants should be able to ask their attorneys questions during proceedings without being reprimanded.

Standard 4: Courtesy, Responsiveness and Respect

Judges and other trial court personnel are courteous and responsive to the public, and accord respect to all with whom they come in contact.

The criminal court should be accommodating and less intimidating. No court employee should by words or conduct demonstrate bias or prejudice based a person’s social background to other employees of the court, as well as members of the public. Furthermore, victims and defendant’s families should be treated with appropriate tact and basic sensitivity, and their questions should not be criminalized or ignored.

QUESTIONS:

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- 1) Please provide an overall evaluation of your experience at Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas against the standards outlined in the “code of conduct.” Provide specific examples as evidence of your assessment. Use ethnographic details and “thick description” of all courtroom encounters and events.
- 2) Based on your training and observations, please provide a recommendation that would improve the access and quality of justice at the Court of Common Pleas. If you have a positive review of the courts, please provide evidence that the standards of access and quality of justice are upheld.

When you hand-in your assignment, staple all hand-written field notes and court watching forms.

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