



2011  
6<sup>th</sup> Edition

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# Access & Fairness Survey

THE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESS &  
FAIRNESS IN THE TIPPECANOE COUNTY  
COURTHOUSE

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **PURPOSE**

The Tippecanoe County Courthouse is a well-known landmark in the city of Lafayette. When driving through downtown, it is nearly impossible to miss the beautiful architecture of the Courthouse facade. However, the importance of the building rests not in its outside, but rather in what occurs inside. The public's experience at the Courthouse can directly affect its perception of the court system as a whole. If the experience is positive, then the public is more likely to see value in what occurs inside the building. This in turn will lead to a greater trust in the legal system as a whole. A negative experience by the public may translate into a poor opinion of the court system, leading to mistrust and disuse.

Not only can a single experience affect the opinion of the individual, but that individual's opinion can disperse into the community. People are typically willing to share their opinions, and therefore this survey is an important step in creating a positive experience for the public and courts alike. By isolating the elements that are more apt to be ranked as negative, it is possible to improve the public's experience at, as well as the general opinion of, the Tippecanoe County Courthouse as a whole. By finding the negative aspects of the public's experience, it is possible to make improvements that will better the individual experience and the system as a whole.

This survey assigned a numerical value to the opinions of the individuals conducting business in the courthouse. Through this survey, it is possible to quantify the opinions, both positive and negative, that are held regarding the Tippecanoe County Courthouse and the public's experience in it. The quantification can show patterns based upon characteristics such as race, gender, and educational background. Because this survey/study has been conducted in previous years, the courts are able to see how the public's experience in the courthouse has varied.

The purpose of this project is to gather quantifiable data to enable the courts to more easily understand and compare the public's opinion of the courts and the services provided in the Courthouse. As this survey has been done five times in previous years, a comparison of this data allows for the identification of patterns, as well as consistently low points of public opinion. This data can be used to help point those working in the Courthouse to make smart, effective improvements. The survey also makes it possible to calculate how the past improvements have positively affected the public opinion, and which areas still need improvement.

### **PROCEDURE**

In order to collect the most representative sample, the survey was conducted during the days July 13-17, 2011. Allowing each day of the to be included in the sample, it was possible to include people from all areas of the courthouse. The survey was conducted during the business hours of the courthouse, from: 8 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Monday through Friday except Tuesday the 14<sup>th</sup> when hours extended to 6:30 P.M.

All non-incarcerated individuals leaving the courthouse, through the only available public exit, were invited to fill out the short opinion survey. The survey was given in two versions, English and Spanish. There were a total of 321 valid respondents. A similar format to the 2010 report was used for the 2011 report, with some changes made for clarity purposes.

Section I, the first ten inquiries given as statements, asked respondents to rank the access to the court. Section II, the next six numbered 11-16, dealt with fairness in the court. All fifteen of the

statements gave a scale of 1-5. A “1” indicated that the respondent strongly disagreed, and a “5” indicated that the respondent strongly agreed with the statement. Section III asked individuals that were in one of the courts to give their opinion of the way their case was handled, treatment by the court, and to mark their representation either pro se or by an attorney. If the respondent was represented by an attorney, they either marked whether their representation was appointed or hired. If their response indicated that they had no representation, they were then asked to mark whether or not this was due to financial restrictions.

The final section inquired about the respondents’ background information. The questions asked about which court was visited, the intended task(s), and the frequency of visits, as well as the race, gender, and educational level of the respondent. This data allowed for a comparison based upon different characteristics. The survey also left space for comments and suggestions for improvements.

The survey used is included on the following two pages.

**Section I: Access to the Court**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Finding the courthouse 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 courthouse.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The court makes reasonable efforts to remove physical and language barriers.	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 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 Web site 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

**Section II: Fairness in the Court** (Answer only if you appeared before a judicial officer today)

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/she made a decision.	1	2	3	4	5
13. The judge had the information 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. I know what to do about my next case.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I am represented by an attorney.	If Yes: My attorney was appointed by the Court. Yes/ No				

If No: I am not represented by an attorney because of financial reasons. Yes/ No

**Section III: Background Information**

17. Which court or office did you visit today? (Circle all that apply)

CASA	Circuit Court	Clerk's Office	Elections & Registration	Magistrate
Probation	Prosecutor	Public Defender	Superior Court One	Superior Court Two
Superior Court Three	Superior Court Four	Superior Court Five	Superior Court Six	Office of Child Support
Other: _____				

18. What did you do at the court today? (Circle all that apply)

Search court records/ get 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
Other: _____		

19. How do you identify yourself?

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

20. What is your gender? Male/ Female



## **SUMMARY**

This report highlights the sixth phase of findings and compares them to findings from the previous five years. It also makes recommendations to improve access and fairness in the Tippecanoe County Courthouse.

The questions on the survey were altered only slightly from the previous surveys. Following suggestions from the “Ex Post” on the previous year’s survey, the questions regarding education level and whether the respondent was represented by an attorney, were reworded to make the questions more clear to participants. An option to fill in a court or office, task(s), and racial identity under “Other” was added based on the previous year suggestions. The Office of Child Support was added as an option to the list of courts or offices visited, and a “comments” section was also added. These small changes improved the survey without losing the ability to gain a meaningful comparison with the results from the previous surveys.

For the purpose of this report the “Access Index” is derived from Questions 1 through 10, which asked participants about customer service and consumer disposition. The “Fairness Index” is derived from Questions 11 through 16, which asked about the public’s perceptions of procedures and outcomes. The individual question indices are the percent of respondents who answered “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to that question. The Access and Fairness Indices are the average of the individual question indices. The composite index scores are useful because they rely less on the wording of any single question and because they reflect the fundamental components of macro level concepts.

## **SECTION 1: ACCESS**

*What is the “Access Index?”*

The Access Index is used to measure the perceived ease of use of the Courthouse and the various courts and offices. The overall response pertaining to Access averaged an index of 81.7%. This is a decrease of about 0.3% from 2010, still lower than 2007, which had an index of 84.8%.

Our team received good feedback on the accessibility of the Courthouse. The vast majority of our sample population found it easy to locate the Courthouse. However, some respondents had difficulties finding the specific court they needed to attend.

*Question by question analysis:*

Question one shows that consumer satisfaction in locating the courthouse has raised 3%.

Question two saw a slight decrease in the satisfaction with the forms provided, with a decrease of 3%.

Unlike previous years, question three saw a decrease in the public’s perception of safety in the courthouse. Rather than steadily increasing as in 2009 and 2010, this year’s survey saw a 4% decrease.

This year, in regards to question four, more people felt that the courts have taken reasonable steps to remove physical and language barriers than in 2010. The index increased by 3%.

Question five saw a slight increase over 2010 of 1%. The courts are perceived as being quick and more efficient than in the previous two years.

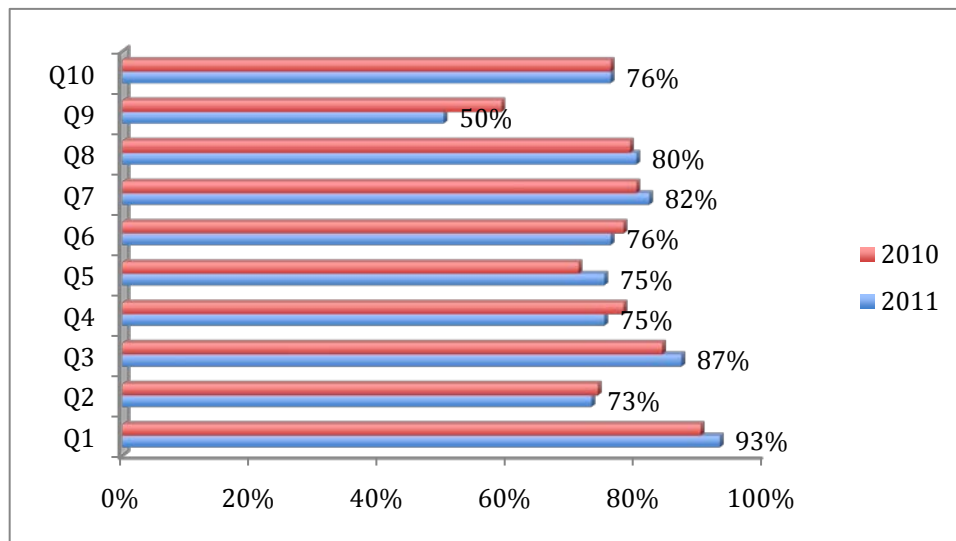
Question six gave a 6% increase over 2010 showing that the public is somewhat more satisfied with they way they are treated by the courthouse staff.

Question seven addresses the welfare and treatment of consumers and visitors to the courthouse. Patrons of the courthouse felt slightly more respected than in 2010 with an increase of 1%.

Question eight shows that consumers were able to find courtrooms or offices at the same percentage as 2010.

Question nine pertaining to the Court’s website to has been getting persistently bad reviews in the past few years, with only 50% of respondents finding the site useful. This is a significant decrease from 2010 which saw an index of 61%.

Question ten addresses the Court’s hours of operation. Seventy-six percent of respondents found the hours of operation satisfactory. This is an increase of 5% over 2010. The problem with the hours of operation is likely due to working hours of respondents. A large number of people declined to take the survey because they needed to get back to work, or had taken time off from work to do their business. It is likely that the increase from 2010 is due to the evening hours provided every Tuesday. Respondents during that evening of the survey week seemed pleased to be able to do their business outside working hours.



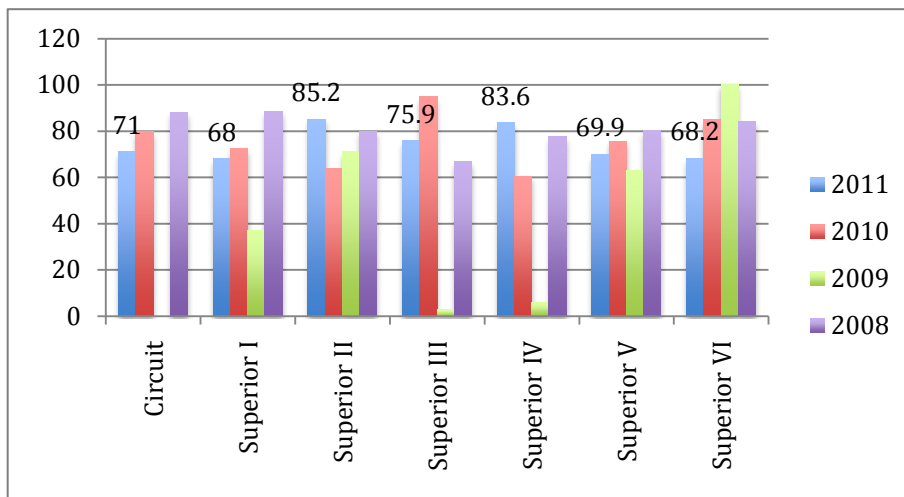
## SECTION 2: FAIRNESS

*What is the "Fairness Index?"*

The Fairness Index measures whether how the public views the procedures of the courts and its outcomes. The six questions were answered only by participants who appeared before a judicial officer. The overall Fairness Index was 74.97%, which is 1.03% lower than the previous year's index and still higher than in 2009.

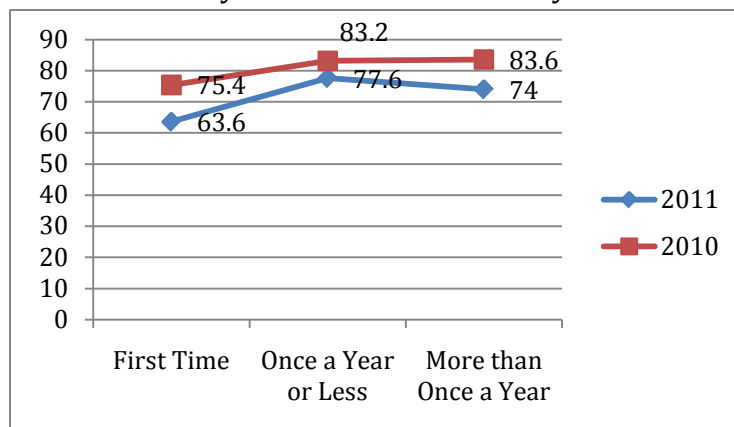
*How does the Fairness Index break down by individual court?*

This year's breakdown of the Fairness Index by individual court produced results which were similar to those found in the previous year. In 2010, many of the courts appeared to have moderate to high levels of fairness. This year the lowest perceived level of fairness by individual court was 68%, similar to the finding of 60.4% in 2010. There are many courts which followed the trend of the 2010 report. However, Superior Court II, Superior Court III, Superior Court IV, and Superior Court VI had the greatest differences when compared to the previous year with a 21.6 increase, 18.9 decrease, 23.3 increase and 18.6 decrease respectfully.



*Do the Fairness Indices vary between first time court users and those who appear regularly?*

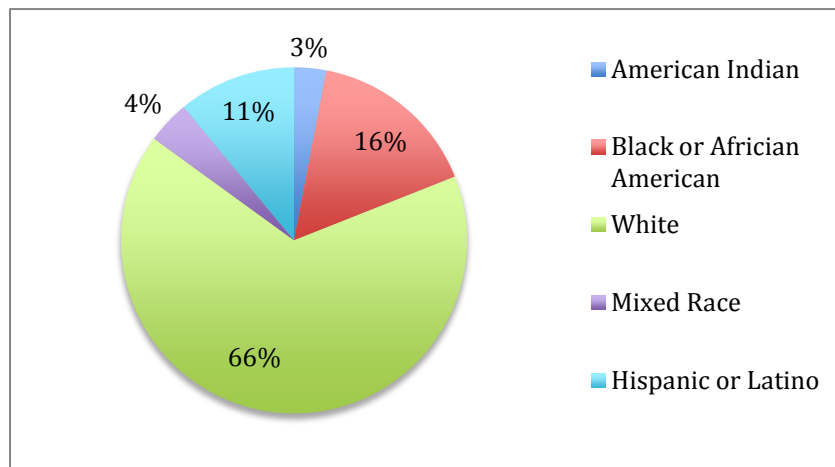
Our results show a slight, overall decrease in perceived fairness when comparing 2010 and 2011 by types of court users. The 2011 results show users perceiving the court as most fair when they only visit once a year or less; otherwise, there is a slight 3.6% percent decrease when the user visits more than once a year. Those who visit the Courthouse once a year or less or more than once a year viewed it most fairly.



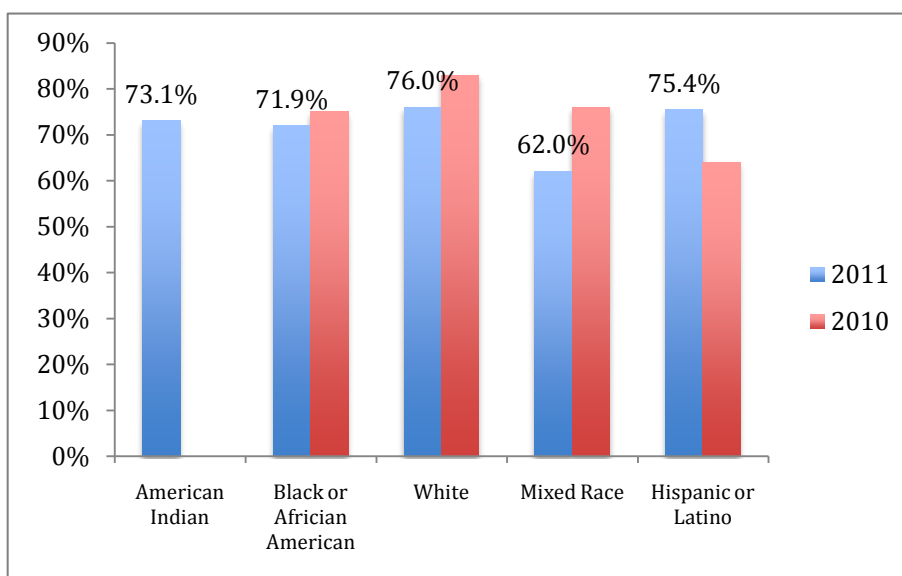


*What about Fairness Index in relation to demographic data?*

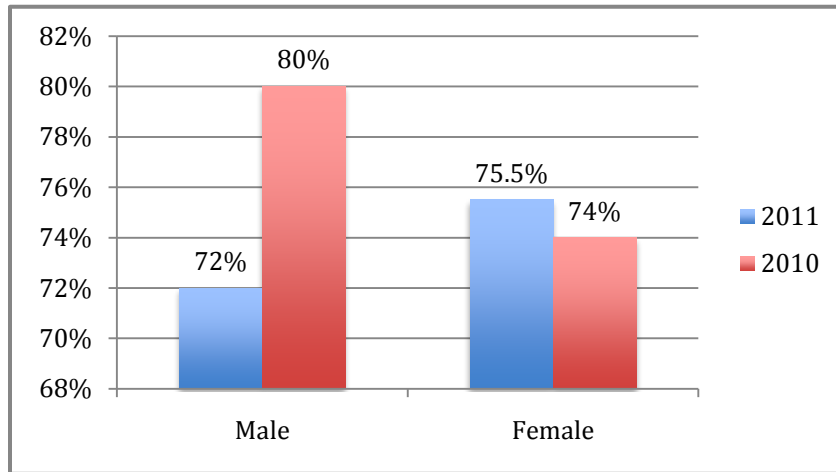
The respondent demographic data shows that, like previous years, the majority of respondents to this survey were white. There was a decrease in African American respondents from 29% in 2010 to 16% in 2011, which are back to similar levels in 2009.



The Fairness Index by Race shows rather similar perceived levels of fairness amongst different races. The Fairness Index ranged from 62% among Mixed Races to 76% among the White race. Although 2010 reported Asians has having the lowest perceive level, no respondents identified as Asian in 2011. However, Whites perceived the courts with the highest level of fairness both years. All perceived levels of fairness dropped in 2011 except for Hispanics and Latino's levels which rose by 11.4%. Please note there is no data for American Indian's for 2010.

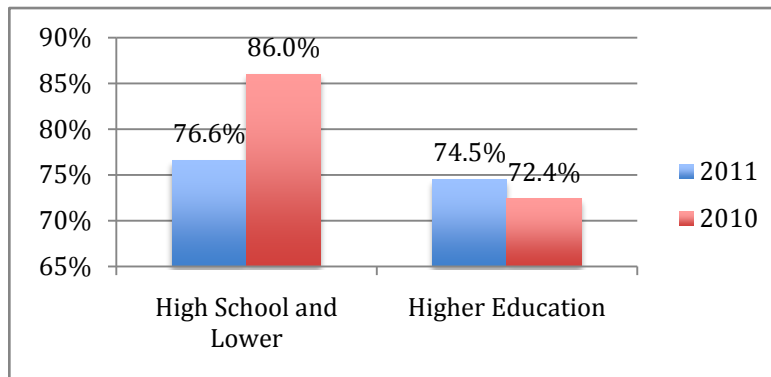


Our results show surveyed males had a perceived level of Fairness of 72%, down by 8% form 2010. Females had a perceived level of Fairness of 75.5%, up by 1.5%. Both genders were close to the overall Fairness Index found.



*What about Fairness in relation to education?*

Our results for 2011, show a slight variation of 2.1% in the Fairness Index between those with High School education and lower and those with Higher Education. This is quite different from the 2010 findings, which reported a gap of 13.6% with those having a High School or lower education with a higher Fairness Index.

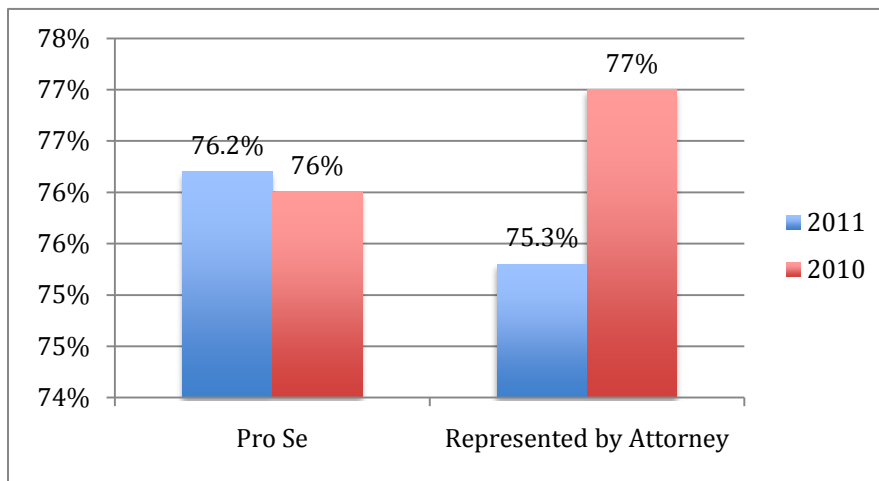


*General Trends in Fairness*

The general fairness trend from the Fairness Index shows a marked decrease in the perceived levels of fairness from last year to this one.

**SECTION 3: PRO SE LITIGATION**

Results regarding the Fairness Index, broken down by representation types, show very similar responses to that of 2010. Both people who were pro se and those represented by an attorney found their experience to be equally fair. Those represented by an attorney had a Fairness Index of 75.3%, and those who were pro se have a Fairness Index of 76.2%.



#### **SECTION 4: INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES**

While the survey is based on quantitative data, some respondents included written comments regarding their experience at the Courthouse.

The comments ranged from requesting an information station in the courthouse to praise of court staff to a suggestion to put an ATM in the building. Below are some of the comments collected from the surveys.

##### ***Sample comments:***

- “The website could be significantly improved!”
- “It is hard to know what to do and where to go. An information station would help.”
- “I can see that the court is trying to make the process faster and that is good. Also the artwork and pictures around the courthouse make the atmosphere more pleasant.”
- “The courthouse staff are always kind and very helpful.”
- “Parking is difficult to find.”
- “Superior 4 is great from judges to those wonderful clerks and bailiffs”
- “Even though I don’t come here much intimidation would cause me not to go to a place, any place, that would threaten my security. We all have to live and let live to some degree. We all make mistakes because we’re only human, so we shouldn’t be so judgmental. Treat others the way you want to be treated. I hope you can dig this.”
- “The seats in the courthouse could use cushions.”
- “I don’t need the courthouse often, but when I do, I dread it. Today I wanted to file for small claims and after arriving went to the Clerk’s office only to be told I needed to go down the hall to another office. When I arrived there I was told to go back to the Clerk’s office to get my forms. I finally received those forms and completed them. Then I was told I have to go next door to make 3 copies, which I did and returned

again to the Clerk's office. The signage in the facility is inadequate. Both signs on 2 Clerk's offices said '1. Marriage license and child support' and the other said 'Traffic violations.' Neither pertained to my situation. It is confusing, and the people in the Clerk's office could be more helpful."

- "I came seeking information about custody and child support. I was shortly informed that the only way to do that is to file with a lawyer. There were no forms or anything available to point me in the right direction. No information about legal aid. There was no help or advice given about who to see next. There was just a simple, 'we can't help you.'"
- "The courthouse needs to either get a cash station machine or accept checks or credit cards. No one carries cash anymore."
- "I would like to see better directions on what floor each court is on, including which judge is presiding. I realize that there is a small plaque but it needs more information and to be larger. I come often and as many times as I come here, I get confused on who is who in what court on what floor. The courthouse needs better directions."

## **APPLICATIONS**

In future administrations of the survey and editions of this report, a few additions and alterations could improve the survey to ensure collection of more complete and usable data. Below is this survey team's top ten list.

1. Place "Strongly Disagree" – "Strongly Agree" right side up so that respondents do not have to turn the page around and can more easily understand how the numbering works.
2. We suggest exploring the possibility of having an option for respondents to mail the form back in.
3. Shorten the comments section (lessen the number of lines) and make it more clear that there are more questions continued on the back by placing more of the questions on the back side.
4. As a part of number 3, consider making the print larger for those who don't see well, and thus pushing more questions to the back of the page.
5. Take of race factor and add age? Or just add age factor.
6. Adding an "N/A" option because people wrote that in anyway.
7. Grade level—instead of putting level put "highest level" and possibly numbers and B.A./B.S options and G.E.D.
8. Procedure: Give on the way in an ask them to drop off on way out
9. Take out elections and registration and add translator.
10. Possibly making a sign to make clear that they can give opinions.

It is also important for survey administrators to obtain volunteers for the busiest day, which in this team's weeklong experience, was Monday. Having more volunteers during the busiest time ensures the greatest number of survey collections. During the rest of the week, two volunteers giving the survey appeared to be a sufficient number to catch possible participants going in and out of the Courthouse.

To continue the observation of public opinion on their Courthouse experiences and to seek improvements to those visits, continuity of this report is vital. The trends throughout the years of specific access and fairness concerns suggest that room for improvement still exists.

## **CONCLUSION**

This concludes the sixth report of the Access & Fairness study conducted in the Tippecanoe County Courthouse, Tippecanoe County, Indiana. Further questions, comments, concerns, or suggestions may be addressed to Ashley Federer at [ashleyfederer@gmail.com](mailto:ashleyfederer@gmail.com) and Hilary Hershberger at [hhershbe@purdue.edu](mailto:hhershbe@purdue.edu).

NOTE!! There were fewer people that filled out the “fairness” section while all filled out the “access”