‘Fine Words Butter No Parsnips’:

An Ethnographic Exploration of Courtwatching and the Practice of Open Justice in London’s Magistrates’ Courts

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Abstract

This research examines how public observers experience and interpret open justice in London's magistrates' courts. Open justice, understood as the principle that courts should be accessible to all, is often framed in procedural terms, omitting the caveats, complexities, and tensions that arise in practice. This study argues that open justice can only be fully and meaningfully realised when the lived experiences of public observers are taken into account. Using ethnographic and phenomenological methods, it explores the affective and embodied dimensions of open justice. Findings reveal that public observation can both reinforce power imbalances *and* offer moments of support for defendants. Consequently, diverse and representative audiences are crucial in shaping how observation is interpreted. Emotional proximity – the perceived closeness or distance between observer and defendant – significantly influences how courtroom events are absorbed and understood. Awareness of these dynamics provides valuable insight into the experience of open justice. False consensus bias among observers is widespread and strongly shapes perceptions of fairness. Engaging in reflexive dialogue can help mitigate this effect and foster a more nuanced understanding of the criminal justice system. By bridging theory and practice, this research shows that open justice can only become an accessible reality when the lived experiences of the public it intends to serve are intentionally considered. These insights serve to inform the Transparency and Open Justice Board's ongoing reform programme, highlighting key considerations and potential challenges to the meaningful implementation of open justice.

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1. Prologue

When Worlds Collide: Navigating the Realities of Open Justice

> I feel like I should not be here. Like the reason I have – to observe – is not good enough. I am worried that people in the courtroom will think I am here taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. I feel uncomfortable – dirty, almost. The courtroom is small. The magistrates and the defendant have a clear view of me. I feel exposed. I get a piercing look from the defendant. I look away quickly and tell myself that I am here to help. I want him to realise that I am on his side. Is that wrong? Why does this all feel so wrong?
>
> – *Fieldnotes, Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court, London, February 2025.*

This research is born from the internal tension I first felt in courtroom seven of Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court one clear, mid-February morning. The conflict arose from an unexpected clash between the theory and the practice of open justice, compelling me to critically examine one of the foundational principles of the British legal system.[1] Open justice famously holds that "that justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done" (*R v Sussex Justices, ex parte McCarthy*, 1924: 259). This means that courts in England and Wales have a legal requirement to allow anyone who wishes to witness their proceedings the opportunity to

[1] The United Kingdom has a devolved justice system, with separate jurisdictions for England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. This paper focuses on England and Wales.

do so (Jaconelli, 2002: 1).[2] In its fullest sense, open justice also requires courts to facilitate public understanding by providing access to relevant documents (Jaconelli, 2002: 2-3; Ministry of Justice, 2025a). Lord Justice Toulson, in *R (On the application of Guardian News and Media Ltd) v City of Westminster Magistrates' Court* (2012: 2) offered a clear and compelling expression of its value:

> Open justice. The words express a principle at the heart of our system of justice and vital to the rule of law. The rule of law is a fine concept but fine words butter no parsnips. How is the rule of law itself to be policed? It is an age old question. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes* – who will guard the guards themselves? In a democracy, where power depends on the consent of the people governed, the answer must lie in the transparency of the legal process. Open justice lets in the light and allows the public to scrutinise the workings of the law, for better or for worse.

It was the promise of transparency, accountability, and fairness embedded in the values of open justice that initially enchanted me. The spell lifted, however, the day I observed my first hearing and was faced with the reality of what open justice entailed in practice. I had joined CourtWatch London – a mass court observation project run by criminal justice charity Transform Justice – as a volunteer 'courtwatcher', a person who observes and records court proceedings to shed light on the workings of the justice system and build a case for change (Transform Justice, 2025). 'Courtwatching', hailed

[2] Exceptions apply: Proceedings in youth courts, some family cases, or hearings involving national security or vulnerable witnesses may be private or restricted.

as a powerful way of making “our courts fairer, more open and more just” (Ratcliffe, 2024: 1), provided a vehicle for me to experience open justice firsthand while also contributing to community oversight of my local magistrates’ court (Transform Justice, 2025). However, as I sat in the public gallery on my first day as a courtwatcher and looked at the defendant standing in the dock, my perception of courtwatching shifted, morphing from a manifestation of open justice into a form of callous voyeurism. I felt conflicted. More often than not, courtwatching is a practice that is carried out individually, so I sat alone with my thoughts, trying to understand how something so venerated could feel so wrong. Was I the only one who felt this way? This tension between what I *thought* to be fundamental to justice – that courts be open to the public – and my jarring introduction to the *practice* of open justice through courtwatching, motivated me to look deeper into what it means for a person not involved with, or connected to, an ongoing case in any way, to walk into a courtroom and observe justice being (un)done. This paper is a result of that exploration.

2. Introduction

Embodying Open Justice: Context, Research, and Relevance

The principle of open justice has a history dating back to before the Magna Carta, and is often considered the crowning virtue of the English justice system (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). As clarified by the Judiciary of England and Wales (2025a: 2), “open justice is the default position, established by the common law and recognised in Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights.” The long-standing tradition of open justice, however, has meant that it is commonly regarded as a “self-executing” (Nicklin,

2025: 2) and “self-evident good” (2025: 3), often escaping critical scrutiny regarding how it is experienced or enacted in practice. If open justice is fundamental to the rule of law (Bentham, 1843: 316), a comprehensive understanding of its practical realisation is not only warranted, but necessary. While a few key reports illustrate how the public can hold the justice system to account (Ferguson and Paul, 2017; Ratcliffe and Gibbs, 2024a; Rowe et al., 2019), there is limited analytical engagement with what it means to embody open justice in the courtroom. To shed light on this experience, this research engages with courtwatchers. These public volunteers typically attend courtrooms more frequently than unaffiliated individuals, and therefore are well positioned to provide valuable insights into the lived experience of open justice. Programmes like CourtWatch London offer an accessible group of such observers. The judiciary has recently emphasised the crucial role of such ‘open justice consumers’ in guiding efforts to deliver open justice that is “fit for purpose” (Nicklin, 2025: 11). By exploring the lived experiences of courtwatchers in London’s magistrates’ courts, this research seeks to illuminate the real-world complexities of open justice. It also aims to provide a grounded perspective that can inform policymakers and the judiciary as they work to “foster a culture in Courts and Tribunals that sees openness and transparency as a core part of the administration of justice, not an adjunct to it” (Transparency and Open Justice Board, 2025: 3).

Ratcliffe and Gibbs (2024b: 2) initiated this line of inquiry, drawing on the experiences of volunteer members of the public who observed proceedings in London’s magistrates’ courts. Their insightful report, based on survey data, addresses issues of accessibility, outlining courtwatchers’ experiences of attempting to observe hearings and the barriers encountered. However, the affective dimensions of inhabiting the

courtroom are not examined in depth in their analysis. Building on their work, this study seeks to uncover the subjective particulars of this experience. By adopting an ethnographic and phenomenological approach that includes independent courtwatching, courtwatching alongside volunteers, and in-depth interviews, this research aims to illuminate the complexities and nuances of open justice beyond procedural accessibility. While there is an engaging body of literature exploring the politics of publicness, embodiment, and space in the courtroom (Anwar and Aardse, 2024; Bögelein et al., 2022; Faria et al., 2020; Flower and Klosterkamp, 2023; Gill and Hynes, 2020; Schliehe and Jeffrey, 2023), the lived experience of open justice has yet to take center stage. Furthermore, the literature on courtwatching remains limited in scope, primarily focusing on observations of domestic violence cases in the United States (Lessem, 2018; McCoy and Jahic, 2006). While volunteer experience is referenced, these studies have a different focus: McCoy and Jahic (2006) analyse how courtwatching shapes attitudes toward judicial legitimacy, and Lessem (2018) examines its role in enhancing court safety for victims. In contrast, this research places the experience of open justice at its core, examining how it manifests in practice within London's magistrates' courts. Although ethnographic research in English courts is well established (Campbell, 2020a; Johnstone et al., 2024; Read, 1996; Robinson, 2019; Welsh, 2022), the perspectives of lay observers remain largely absent. By foregrounding courtwatchers' experiences, this study extends the literature on inhabiting magistrates' courts to include how members of the public experience and interpret open justice in practice.

Renewed attention to the implementation of open justice from judicial and governmental bodies reinforces the relevance of this research. Recent evidence that

court users “still find the legal process impenetrable and secretive” (Nicklin, 2025: 2) has spurred initiatives aimed at making open justice “more than a slogan” (2025: 2). The establishment of a Transparency and Open Justice Board (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2024), as well as reports and public consultations on the subject (Ministry of Justice, 2025a; UK Parliament, 2022), signal that open justice is a key issue at the forefront of institutional agendas. The number of responses to the government’s enquiries from diverse actors also highlight that open justice is a key point of public concern (Ministry of Justice, 2025b: 3). Moving beyond blind assertions of its importance, the judiciary has declared an imperative to clarify the purpose of open justice and facilitate its everyday practice (Nicklin, 2025: 2). This study seeks to advance that effort by examining the lived experience of open justice. While the realisation of open justice depends on the execution of many elements, this research focuses specifically on the commitment to ensure effective public access to hearings.[3] By examining this critical component in depth, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the practice of open justice. My purpose, however, is not to argue for or against the principle itself (see Jaconelli, 2002, for a comprehensive critique). Rather, I aim to explore how it is experienced by members of the public. Where critical observations arise, drawn from my own courtwatching and my interpretation of other courtwatchers’ reflections, they do so to provide a full and honest account that can inform future practice and understanding. Building on existing research and aligning with the judiciary’s renewed focus on meaningful public engagement, this study takes the position that open justice can only be meaningfully realised when the lived experiences of public observers are taken into account. With this in mind, this research

[3] See Key Objective 2.3(a) (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2025a: 2).

is guided by the following questions: How do courtwatchers experience and interpret the practice of open justice in London's magistrates' courts? In what ways do they perceive power dynamics in the courtroom, particularly in relation to defendants? And how do their emotional experiences and reflective processes shape both their engagement with, and understanding of, open justice?

This paper now turns to a three-part methodology section. First, I explain how I connected with courtwatchers and invited them to participate in this research. I then outline the philosophical and academic framework that guided my study and present my ethnographic approach, which included courtwatching independently and with other volunteers, as well as in-depth interviews. I close the methodology section by outlining my approach to data analysis and write-up, which combines thematic and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with reflexive narration to produce an account that is both attentive to the nuances of the material and insightful in its interpretation. The findings section follows, presenting key insights into the lived experience of open justice in four parts. The first foregrounds the complexity of open justice and illustrates how reflexive dialogue reveals layers to both its principle and practice. The second examines how public presence in the courtroom can both amplify problematic power dynamics *and* offer moments of solace and solidarity to defendants. The third explores the role of psychological space in shaping the experience of open justice. Finally, I consider how false consensus bias can distort public perceptions of the courts and advocate for observers to continuously engage in reflexive dialogue. I conclude the paper by highlighting the implications of these findings for ongoing judicial reform, emphasising

the importance of ensuring that policy is informed by the realities of those whom open justice is intended to serve: the public.

3. Methodology

Open Justice in Practice: Design and Approach

To undertake this research, I adopted an ethnographic approach that enabled me to engage with courtwatching on multiple levels – attending not only to what was said about being in the courtroom, but also building understanding through shared experiences with courtwatchers. While my research was exploratory, as I entered the field without a predefined hypothesis, I was intentional and deliberate in my approach. This section is structured in three parts: first, I outline how I connected with courtwatchers, noting key decisions and trade-offs; next, I explain the research ethos guiding the study; and finally, I discuss my approach to data analysis and write-up.

3.1. Connecting with Courtwatchers: Preliminary Steps

I was particularly interested in exploring a topic that could inform and support Transform Justice, whose mission to make the justice system fairer had first motivated me to volunteer with them. This was their second year running a court observation programme – inspired by programmes operating across the United States (Ratcliffe, 2023), they piloted CourtWatch London in 2023 with more than 80 volunteers reporting on the operation of three magistrates' courts over a six month period. Data collected by courtwatchers informed three seminal reports examining the openness of the courts and the treatment of defendants (Ratcliffe, 2024: 9). The 2025 operation saw CourtWatch

London expand to cover every magistrates' court in the city, with almost 200 volunteers actively observing proceedings and collecting data (CourtWatch London, 2025). As a result of this growth, the charity's directors were eager to learn more about their volunteers. I was drawn to engaging with courtwatchers for my research, both to leverage my insights as a volunteer and to complement my ethnographic fieldwork with in-person interviews, thereby producing a richer, more nuanced dataset (Kapiszewski et al., 2015: 204; Paxson, 2017: 93). However, it was only when I confronted the stark contrast between my admiration for open justice and the deep discomfort I felt in the public gallery on my first day as a courtwatcher that my research path became clear. That moment catalysed the central line of inquiry in this study: an ethnographic exploration of courtwatching and the practice of open justice in London's magistrates' courts.

With my focus defined, the first step was to connect with volunteers who might participate in the research project. I had met a few at volunteer training sessions and during initial court visits, but I wanted to ensure that individuals could opt-in freely, without any sense of obligation towards me or the organisation. I therefore asked the charity's directors if they would be willing to leverage their digital communication platforms to invite volunteers to sign-up. They were very supportive, sharing information and a sign-up form through their weekly volunteer newsletter (see Appendix 1 for the newsletter call-out received by all courtwatchers, and Appendix 2 for the volunteer sign-up form). To maximise visibility, I planned to implement a tiered communication strategy, with a follow-up message to be sent one week after the initial announcement, and a final reminder sent out the day before the two week recruitment phase would

end.[4] This approach aimed to attract sufficient volunteers to meet sample size requirements. Determining the appropriate sample size is a recurring challenge in qualitative research (Bekele and Ago, 2022: 43). My objective, following Morse's (2000: 5) recommendation, was to attract between 20 to 30 courtwatchers who would be interested in speaking to me about their experience. Initially, my intention was to conduct two to three unstructured interviews with each courtwatcher (as per Morse, 2000: 5), so that I could follow how their experience evolved in real time. However, in my conversations with the charity's directors, it became clear that asking courtwatchers to commit to more than one interview would be a potential barrier to entry. We agreed that asking for one 45-minute interview would serve to maximise volunteer participation. Twenty-seven volunteers signed up within the first 48 hours, with a further four joining over the next 12 days, bringing the total to 31 in response to the first newsletter.

The positive reception was encouraging – it signalled the possibility that courtwatching had brought up conflicting emotions in others, too, and that there was a desire to unpack those in dialogue. On the other hand, I worried that I would not have the capacity to see everyone if more volunteers signed up. I considered sending the follow-up messages as planned to recruit as many volunteers as possible, then selecting 20 to 30 based on their demographic information to ensure a diverse range of voices in the sample. However, by limiting recruitment to the first newsletter and focusing on those already signed up, I could begin reaching out and scheduling meetings immediately. Given time constraints, I chose the latter approach, deciding not to send the follow-up messages. I also chose not to continue recruiting in order to preserve time for courtwatching – both independently and alongside the volunteers I

[4] Two weeks were allocated to fit in with the time limitations for this research.

planned to interview. Furthermore, even accounting for cancellations, I anticipated reaching my target of 20 to 30 volunteers.

I reached out to volunteers by email, introducing myself, restating the research objectives, and inquiring about availability to meet in person. I clarified that I would travel to where they were and meet at a location of their choice. As researchers, we hold power over individuals "simply by introducing them into conversation" (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, 2016: 1013). I therefore wanted to give courtwatchers the opportunity to dictate the terms of our meeting – location, timing, date – as a way of offsetting, even minimally, the inherent power dynamics that come when any researcher enters the field (Pachirat, 2021: 144). Of the 31 people who signed up, I was able to meet 22 in person.[5] Nine of the volunteers who completed the sign-up form did not respond to my introduction email, and I made the decision to not send a follow-up message: I wanted to ensure that courtwatchers did not feel pressured in any way to participate. I also had to navigate time constraints. Since I was meeting volunteers across Greater London, travel could take up to four hours round-trip. Additionally, I needed sufficient time after each meeting to type detailed field notes and reflections, which typically took two to six hours. Consequently, I planned to schedule only one interview per day. However, on three occasions, I deemed it feasible to meet with two volunteers in one day. These instances involved minimal travel, enabling me to see one person in the morning and another in the afternoon, while still devoting sufficient time to each interview and detailed field notes.

[5] Consent forms were reviewed before and during each meeting.

3.2. Engaging with Courtwatchers: Approach and Ethos

My priority and wish throughout this research was to cultivate a sense of connection with my fellow volunteers. While I hoped that doing so would reveal insights about the experience of open justice, I framed this objective as secondary. Martin Buber's (1937) philosophy of '*I – Thou*' dialogue offered a powerful lens for viewing my interviews as relational spaces of becoming. This approach challenges the impulse to prioritise control, categorisation, or detachment, and instead foregrounds presence, trust, and dialogue. The driver of my interactions was curiosity about each volunteer as a whole person. While the writing process inevitably fragments identities and compartmentalises experiences (Krystalli, 2020: 39), I sought to offset this as much as possible by giving volunteers room to express what is meaningful to them (Pearlman, 2017: 1). Lee Ann Fujii's (2018) work was instrumental in helping me navigate the tension between my academic mandate and the Buberian-style connection I sought to establish with volunteers. Her 'relational interviewing' framework provided a scaffold for upholding and honouring the interpretivist nature of my research, enabling a collaborative uncovering of meaning and reflexive exploration of meaning-making (2018: 3).

Relational interviewing is built on reflexivity and respect, valuing interaction and dialogue over interrogation and extraction (Fujii, 2018: 8). Its foundation of active listening and interviewing as a learning process provided an important buffer between my inherent assumptions and biases and my interlocutor's narratives and stories. Fujii's relational approach emphasises the need for continual critical examination of a researcher's engagement with others, meaning my positionality was starkly spotlighted

throughout. In practice, this meant that all my field notes – observations, interview notes, reflections, anecdotes – were interwoven with paragraphs examining why and how I was making meaning. Roxani Krystalli's (2020) work was also pivotal in shaping my research approach, particularly in addressing the fundamental dilemma that arises from qualitative research: the task of ensuring "fieldwork is taken seriously without dehumanizing it and the process of its generation" (2020: 39). Guided by Fujii (2018) and Krystalli (2020), I sought to sidestep academia's fetish for data extraction and sterilisation and create spaces of relational encounter where the full spectrum of our humanity can unfold. I embraced the revelatory "meta-data" (Fujii, 2010: 321) that emerge in every face-to-face interaction – embellishments, evasions, half-truths, untruths, stock answers and silences (Fujii, 2018: 4) – as a way of preserving the texture and three-dimensionality of the research. While limitations of scope required selectivity, a commitment to dignity – treating individuals as ends in themselves, not as a means to something else (Fujii, 2018: 6) – and transparency – recognising the inherent power dynamics that shape each interaction (Krystalli, 2020: 39) – enabled me to safeguard the spirit and sincerity of each encounter.

This commitment to relational interviewing informed two key decisions that underpin this study: first, the decision to travel and meet all volunteers interested in collaboratively shaping the research in person; and second, the decision to forgo audio recording during our meetings. Both meant that the time, energy, and expense required to do the research justice increased exponentially. However, I felt that the lack of direct eye contact, bodily abstraction, and self-image distraction inherent in video calls would undermine the intimacy and openness I sought to cultivate. Moreover, studies show that

in-person interviews not only encourage interviewees to be the dominant speaker (remote interviews generate more 'floor-holding' by the researcher), but they can also generate greater depth of discussion (Irvine, 2011: 209; Krouwel et al., 2019: 3). In terms of whether to use a recording device, research cites that the "data quality between audio-recorded transcripts and interview scripts written directly after the interview were comparable in the detail captured" (Rutakumwa et al., 2019: 567). Furthermore, although seemingly unobtrusive, recording devices are "not mute or innocent entities" (Nordstrom, 2015: 389) – they are "highly political" (Rutakumwa et al, 2019: 579). Another consideration is that the transcripts produced from audio recordings threaten to "elevate the mental over the corporeal" (Sandelowski, 2002; 108), suppressing the 'meta-data' that Fujii (2010: 321) has shown to be so revealing. I concluded that, for this type of phenomenological research, I stood to gain more from the absence of a recorder than from its presence.

I also engaged in courtwatching independently and alongside other volunteers. Such participant-observation has been shown to yield unanticipated insights, uncover implicit meaning and generate new questions (Bayard de Volo, 2021: 220), and I found this to be the case. In particular, courtwatching alongside individuals I later interviewed proved especially illuminating, and my own participation provided a form of insider knowledge that shaped how I understood and analysed these experiences. As Wedeen (2021: 89) notes, "the ethnographer can produce rigorous knowledge *because* she participates" [emphasis in original]. Throughout the process, I kept a field journal using a comprehensive, temporally organised note-taking method to capture detailed observations (Wolfinger, 2002: 91). I also kept a separate journal to document my

subjective experiences, reflect on how the process affected me, and record how my perceptions shifted over time. Comparing my field notes and personal journal with interview data provided deeper insights into the lived experience of open justice (Paxson, 2017: 95). Additionally, this combined research approach allowed for data triangulation and cross-checking of findings, reducing the risk of any single perspective dominating the analysis (Campbell, 2020b: 59). By the end of my data collection phase, I had conducted 22 in-person interviews across Greater London, and observed 35 hearings across six courtwatching sessions in two magistrates' courts. During this time, I also courtwatched alongside four of the volunteers I interviewed.

3.3. Understanding Courtwatcher Experience: Reflexive Analysis

My interviews with volunteers, together with my own courtwatching experience, yielded a wealth of information. The dataset, however, is limited in time, space and scope: it draws on a sample of 23 people (including myself) living in Greater London and volunteering for a single courtwatch programme. This limitation paradoxically enabled more meaningful interactions, enhancing both the depth and volume of the data. Still, with over 300 pages of material and a strict word limit, much was inevitably "left on the cutting room floor" (Enloe, 2004: 22). In approaching data analysis, I experimented with several methods before settling on an approach that felt both attentive to the nuances of the material and insightful in its interpretation. I drew on elements of thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006: 78) six-phase process to interpret patterns across the dataset. At the same time, I incorporated aspects of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to deepen my understanding

of how volunteers perceive and interpret their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022: 1). Names and other strongly identifying details have been withheld or altered, and gendered pronouns have been replaced with they/them. Following Fujii's (2012: 721) recommendations, I include general characteristics where relevant to the discussion. For example, in one account, a courtwatcher's racial identity is referenced. I considered this information crucial to share, as it not only highlights a key point in the discussion, but also brings my own positionality into stark relief. This approach aims to faithfully convey the essence of each courtwatcher's experience, without "obscuring the power dynamics of the interactions that gave rise to research insights in the first place" (Krystalli, 2020: 39). It is worth noting that I actively eschew the term 'participant' throughout, as it can reinforce a Buberian '*I – It*' perspective, framing individuals as objects of study rather than relational beings with whom knowledge is co-constructed (Buber, 1937: 23).

Krystalli (2019: 184) offers an eloquent account of the pitfalls inherent in the research process, particularly during data analysis and writing. She acknowledges the consequences of curation and invites researchers to engage in "reflexive narration" (2019: 185) as a way of mitigating the effects of our fragmentation and recognising the power dynamics inherent in our "hierarchy creation" (2019: 184). I practiced this reflexivity by adopting several writing styles – from first-person narrative to third-person narration, crafted dialogue to composite storytelling – to present specific anecdotes or statements from volunteers. I then selected the style that best captured each person's experience, amplifying their voice while minimising mine. For this reason, the following analysis presents information in multiple forms, forgoing homogeneity in favour of

honoring humanity. It focuses on themes or key insights that stood out, either for capturing broader trends or for their distinctiveness. These are grouped into four sections, each addressing particular dimensions of the lived experience of open justice: the role of reflexive dialogue; the reality of unchecked power; the significance of psychological space; and the pitfalls of personal truths. These are examined in the following section.

4. Findings

Emergent Insights into the Lived Experience of Open Justice

Every courtwatcher I spoke to believed that courts should not be kept closed.[6] However, in the process of unpacking what this means in practice, we uncovered caveats, complexities, and tensions that challenged the apparent simplicity of the belief and revealed unresolved issues lying at the heart of open justice. This section proceeds as follows: First, to foreground the complexity of open justice, I open with an anecdote that illustrates how reflexive dialogue reveals layers to both its principle and practice. Second, I examine how public presence in the courtroom can both amplify problematic power dynamics *and* offer moments of solace and solidarity to defendants. Third, I explore the role of inner and external space, and analyse how their flux shapes the experience of open justice. Finally, I consider how false consensus bias can distort public perceptions of the courts and advocate that observers continuously engage in reflexive dialogue before drawing conclusions. I argue that failure to do so can perpetuate narrow views of the criminal justice system.

[6] Unless subjected to previously specified restrictions.

4.1. The Role of Reflexive Dialogue

The disconnect between the theory and the practice of open justice was brought sharply into view during one particular conversation with a courtwatcher.[7] This exchange stood out because of my interlocutor's legal background and their resulting shift in perspective. They entered the conversation with strongly held views and logical arguments to justify why courtrooms should be open to the public, yet as we worked through what this meant in practice, they revised their position in a way that surprised us both. The following reconstruction, drawn from my field notes, conveys the essence of our interaction rather than a verbatim record. My contributions appear in bold for clarity:

> **Do you think courts should be open?**
>
> Absolutely!
>
> **Why?**
>
> Because I think that the public should be aware of what goes on in court.
>
> **Do you feel comfortable being there?**
>
> Yes. I am a naturally confident person, so I have no issue being there. Also, I think because I know that I want to practice law as a job, I don't have an issue with it.
>
> **When I walked into the courtroom, I felt that, morally, I didn't have a right to be there, that I was witnessing the most intimate aspects of someone's life, and that just felt wrong.**

[7] Interview 21.

Oh, you're right… I hadn't thought about it that way. I think it's because I know that I have a right to be there, because I'm a student and I'm learning.

But if you put aside the 'student' part of your brain, would you still feel comfortable with the courts being open to the public?

Then, no. It's a hard no. *[Laughs]* I'm surprising myself, but thinking of it from a different perspective, I wouldn't want somebody without a legal background witnessing my trial. If they are going to be there, I would want to have prior knowledge of it. My lawyers would have to let me know beforehand and I would have to consent.

So, if members of the public can't enter the courtroom, what's the alternative?

I want someone there witnessing my hearing, but they would have to be an official courtwatcher, someone with some amount of training. Just like magistrates get a certain amount of training, if you are interested in going to court, then you can do the training and be the official person that sits there to observe.

So 'no' to members of the public just walking in?

Now that I think of it from this perspective – no, absolutely not.

OK. How are people to learn about what goes on in courts and in their local community?

From the reports.

They can read the reports put together by official courtwatch programmes, and if they are interested, they can do the training to become a courtwatcher, and that's the only way they can get into court?

Yes.

OK.

Our dialogue had led us to an unexpected destination. The realisation that, were they ever to find themselves in the dock, an open court would mean that there may be one or more unidentified individuals with unstated motives sitting in the public gallery, watching them, made this courtwatcher drastically revise their position. They went from stating that courts should "absolutely" be open to the public, to declaring that it was a "hard no" – the public should not be allowed in. Their description of this shift as "surprising" highlights the value of reflective dialogue in achieving a more nuanced understanding of the practice of open justice. I foreground this encounter to show that the conversations informing this research were rarely clear-cut, continuously moving across diverse perspectives and underscoring the extent to which open justice is shaped by both perception and experience. I now turn to the courtroom itself to illustrate how these dynamics unfold in practice.

4.2. The Reality of Unchecked Power

My courtwatching experience revealed the often-overlooked complexities of what open justice entails in practice. The following account, reconstructed from my field notes and reflective journal, illustrates the power dynamics evoked by the public dimension of the court gallery:

> I am courtwatching alongside another volunteer. The defendant in this case is a young Muslim woman. Her alleged crime is racial harassment. It is her first time in the courtroom, and she looks terrified. Her vulnerable expression and awkward posture reveal a desperate desire to disappear. But there is nowhere to hide. Here, she is in the spotlight – her transgressions laid bare for anyone who wishes to stumble into this courtroom in central London at quarter to four on a Thursday afternoon.
>
> She is found guilty and charged with a fine, with installments timed to align with her benefit payment schedule. I sense that this is a moment filled with shame for her, one she is unlikely to share with many people. Yet I am here. I see her, and she sees me. Just moments before, she sat besides me in the public gallery. I did not know that she was a defendant until she was called to the dock. I know that she feels my presence.
>
> *A week later, I see the young woman again. She walks right past me on the street.*

> I recognise her instantly. The moment catches me off guard, and I come to a halt. I do not look back for fear that she will see me looking at her. A deep sense of shame engulfs me. I feel as if I have been caught in the act – as if I am the guilty one. It is the feeling of having witnessed something intimate and realising that you now have the power to cause harm with that knowledge.
>
> The likelihood that our paths will cross again is very low. And yet… I know her address and phone number. I know her date of birth. I know when she receives her benefit payments. I know her medical history and I know her employment status. I know where she goes out with her friends on a Friday night. Should I wish to find her, I am sure that I could. Should I wish to take advantage of the fact that I know a lot about her, I am sure that I could.

After this experience, I came to understand that my discomfort with court galleries being open to anyone and everyone stemmed from the sense of unchecked power one person could hold over another. While not every defendant warrants such sympathy, the majority of those I observed in court appeared subjected to a level of exposure I considered disproportionate to the severity of their offence.[8] One courtwatcher echoed my concern about the indiscriminate disclosure of sensitive information, albeit with less emotional impetus:[9]

[8] All adult criminal cases begin in magistrates' courts. The most serious offences, such as murder, rape, and robbery, are then referred to Crown Court for trial, while most less serious offences are handled entirely in magistrates' courts (Sentencing Council, 2025).
[9] Interview 16; quote reconstructed from field notes.

> I didn't feel morally uncomfortable being there like you did, but there have been situations where you learn very intimate things about a person's life. You have their name, date of birth, address, criminal record. You can argue that that's fine if they are found guilty, but what if they are found innocent and released? In a social media-driven world where privacy is becoming so valued, this seems really problematic. I now understand why family courts are kept private.

The guilty–innocent axis is particularly important to consider, as this courtwatcher noted. The public nature of open justice has also historically served to shame offenders and deter crime (Jaconelli, 2002: 46). Criminality is meant to carry a cost – but what are the implications for those who are found innocent? One courtwatcher described observing a case in which a defendant was ultimately found innocent, but only after his entire mental health history had been laid out before the court.[10] The courtwatcher who witnessed this form of personal dissection said that they would feel uncomfortable should they ever bump into him on the street. "I know too much," they lamented. However, while this courtwatcher and I both felt disturbed about having access to such detailed information about a defendant – a person yet to be proven guilty of committing the crime for which they are being tried – other volunteers shared that their discomfort stemmed from different sources. One volunteer felt conflicted about becoming privy to the lives of those in the public gallery.[11] They described one instance of courtwatching where the medical details of a woman sitting beside them – a relative of the defendant –

[10] Interview 13.
[11] Interview 11.

were disclosed, revealing to the court that she had been diagnosed with cancer. What struck the courtwatcher was the dissonance of the situation: knowing nothing about this woman's life, yet being informed of something as intimate as her cancer diagnosis. Another volunteer, however, shared that they felt no discomfort in gaining access to a defendant's personal information, yet noted that they might feel differently should there be witnesses or claimants present.[12] A different volunteer described one occasion in the public gallery when a defendant's family member was unabashedly staring at them.[13] "I felt really uncomfortable, like I had to apologise for being there," they shared. Another courtwatcher echoed this feeling of discomfort, particularly in courtrooms where no clear boundary separates the public gallery from the rest of the room.[14] They described being seated so close to the court staff that they felt less like an observer and more like part of the proceedings – an unsettling blurring of boundaries that made them feel they were overstepping their mark.

In certain circumstances, however, the open nature of the public gallery can offer a sense of empowerment – for the defendant, the complainant, or both. One courtwatcher spoke of attending court to support friends facing charges related to their environmental activism.[15] In this case, the watchers were advocating for the defendants. Another courtwatcher recounted observing a case in which a member of a civil society group involved in efforts to combat Islamophobic hate sat in the public gallery to monitor the trial of a defendant accused of attacking a mosque.[16]

[12] Interview 22.
[13] Interview 1.
[14] Interview 13.
[15] Interview 9.
[16] Interview 12.

Here, the watchers wanted to ensure the defendant was adequately sentenced as a way of providing justice for the victims. In both these instances, where support is directed toward a victim or a defendant, the practice of open justice arguably *feels* more ethically defensible than when an observer enters the courtroom with no personal connection or clearly defined purpose. However, one particular anecdote from a courtwatcher directly challenged the narrative I had been developing in relation to how public presence in the courtroom exacerbates problematic power dynamics for vulnerable individuals.[17] Crucially, their experience sharply revealed the edges of my embodied positionality, forcing me to "acknowledge [my] own power, privilege, and biases just as [I was] denouncing the power structures that surround [my] subjects" (Madison, 2020: 7). This courtwatcher described observing a case where the defendant was a young male. What happened after the hearing stood out to them for its particularity. The description below is reconstructed from field notes taken shortly after the conversation (my contributions appear in bold, while striking non-verbal observations appear in italics). They shared the following:

> I saw one case where the boy was silly, it was so silly! He was asked by a couple of guys to carry a package from here to there for £20. I mean, you don't do that, you just don't do that!

[17] Interview 17.

Their emphatic tone and facial expressions suggest utter disbelief that anyone could be lured by such a promise without fully grasping the consequences of their actions.

After he was released, he came up to me and started shaking my hand, saying, ‘Thank you, thank you so much for being there, thank you!’

They clasp their hands together and shake them up and down as they speak, mimicking an energetic handshake. Their eyes widen, imitating the defendant’s heartfelt expression of gratitude.

I looked around and was like, ‘Why? I didn’t do anything’, but he repeated, ‘Thank you, thank you for being there!’ It was weird, it was really weird.

Why do you think he came to thank you?

Probably because I was the only other person of colour in the room.

Do you think he felt that you were there supporting him, in solidarity?

I don’t know, but that was when it struck me. The imbalance. People in the dock must think, ‘There is no-one who looks like me in this room.’

From my position as a woman perceived as white, I had been experiencing courtwatching as a kind of voyeuristic intrusion on individuals in positions of vulnerability. Unable to speak directly with the majority of defendants, many of whom I perceived as young men of colour, I was left to construct imagined narratives about their experiences – narratives inevitably shaped by my own positionality. I had not considered that, for some defendants, the presence of an unfamiliar courtwatcher might offer solace or a sense of support. During the hearings I observed, I perceived over 60% of the defendants as people of color. Among the courtwatchers I spoke with, about one-third could themselves be perceived by defendants as people of color. Awareness of this interplay of perceived identities – not only regarding race, but also gender, religion, and ability – can provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how public presence shapes courtroom dynamics. Such emotional connection, however, is complex and carries significant implications for the experience of open justice, as examined in the following section.

4.3. The Significance of Psychological Space

Space is a powerful player in the courtroom, and much has been written on the politics of physical space and positioning (Anwar and Aardse, 2024; McKimmie et al., 2016; Staehler and Kozin, 2015). However, my experience of courtwatching and conversations with other courtwatchers brought to light a particular type of space: the expanding and contracting distance between a defendant and an individual who sits in the gallery, observing. This space is both external and internal, physical and

psychological. External space between a defendant and a courtwatcher shifts because a defendant may sit in the public gallery prior to entering the dock. In these situations, they are physically close to other observers. Often, as happened to me on several occasions, they will talk to you, asking who you are or what you are doing. On the other hand, when they enter the dock, they are physically separated from the shared space of the courtroom. These shifts are visible and explicit. Internal and psychological space moves in very different ways, invisible by its very nature, yet arguably more impactful and worthy of attention. Nir and Musial (2020: 548) give an insightful account into the "circulatory nature of emotions" and the "affective economy" experienced by public observers – in this case, college students in the United States – in courtroom settings. They highlight that, "how [we] interpret affect – what [we] see and personally feel – is informed by [our] emotional archive. This can lead to distancing from, projection onto, relating with, or humanizing of an Other" (2020: 548). Drawing on my own experiences and the accounts of fellow courtwatchers, I contend that the perceived affective distance between an observer and the defendant is the lynchpin for understanding the practice of open justice.

One particular anecdote vividly illustrates the impact of affective proximity, revealing how the emotional closeness or distance an observer feels toward a defendant profoundly shapes how they absorb and process what they see. A courtwatcher described two hearings that left a particular impression on them.[18] The following is reconstructed from my field notes written immediately after our conversation:

[18] Interview 1.

> What struck them most about the two cases was how it made them confront prejudices. With the weed case, the defendant was someone they would have felt nervous about meeting on the street. He sat next to them in the public gallery before his hearing and they felt uncomfortable. They were surprised to learn later on that he was just guilty of having weed on him.
>
> But the defendant found with tens of thousands of files containing child sexual abuse material was someone they felt they could know, someone who “looked normal” – yet he was the one who had committed the most heinous of crimes, the details of which were some of the most disturbing they have ever heard. What struck them most about the defendant was that he was wearing a [green jacket] just like theirs. The same [green jacket] that they are wearing today, as they speak to me.

For my fellow courtwatcher, the defendant’s appearance, particularly the relatability of their green jacket, shrunk the emotional distance between them. The situation became internalised, personal. The impact of this perceived closeness cannot be foreseen, and its ripple effects may persist well beyond the courtroom. This courtwatcher described how they went home that night and cried. They were still visibly moved as they recounted the experience.

This clash of expectation between appearance and (alleged) crime deeply resonated with me. On my second day courtwatching, I observed a hearing where the

defendant was being accused of raping a young woman at knife point. The public gallery, where I sat, was incorporated into the main room, with no glass separation. I could see and be seen. At one point during the hearing, the defendant looked me directly in the eyes. I could not read his expression, could not ascertain whether it was one of accusation, curiosity, or detachment – but he saw me looking at him, witnessing the moment he was being accused. This hearing had a significant psychological impact on me, and my journal notes reflect my attempt to make sense of the experience:

> I keep thinking about the way he looked at me. It has been a couple of weeks since the hearing and he keeps coming to mind. I keep thinking about the fact that he is a young student who looks like he could be one of my university peers. It makes me feel a certain kind of proximity with him that I don't feel with other defendants. I can imagine him sitting next to me in class, looking at me… thinking about me.

The fact that the defendant and I were both students provided a shared lens through which I perceived my experience. Nir and Musial (2020: 554) explain how this relatability triggered the move from externalising the observation (e.g. this is happening to someone else) to personalising it (e.g. this could happen in my university), and ultimately, awakened a sense of responsibility for what I was witnessing. This hearing brought the textured nature of open justice into violent focus. Engaging with the principle purely through text had compressed its layered complexity to the point of lifeless abstraction. Only by being in a courtroom myself was the full extent of its

multidimensionality revealed. What struck me about that particular hearing, in which the defendant stood accused of aggravated rape, was the feeling that *I* was somehow in the wrong, suddenly guilty of possessing fragments of a story that did not belong to me. This points back to the source of discomfort described by several courtwatchers in the previous section (4.2): the unearned access to deeply personal information. However, the knowledge that they were acting in service of a greater purpose offered many a sense of relief and reassurance in the face of it. One courtwatcher captured this feeling clearly:[19]

> Yes, I have defendants that look at me and must be wondering why I am there. Yes, it is uncomfortable, but if it's something that I can do to help down the line, to reform the system… It's uncomfortable, but the idea is that you have to do uncomfortable things in order to do good.

This tension – the discomfort of witnessing intensely personal moments while recognising the broader purpose of courtwatching – highlights the ethical and emotional complexity inherent in the practice of open justice. At the same time, courtroom observation carries subjective dimensions that can be both valid *and* misleading, a duality explored in the following section.

4.4. The Pitfalls of Personal Truths

My own courtwatching experience, along with insights from interviews with other volunteers, revealed that members of the public often find it difficult to fully grasp what is

[19] Interview 11; quote reconstructed from field notes.

happening in the courtroom. This is commonly due to the prevalence of legal jargon, the ever-changing dynamic of courtroom proceedings, the lack of context afforded to anyone not connected to the HMCTS Common Platform, and difficulties in hearing anyone other than the Presiding Justice (Ratcliffe and Gibbs, 2024b: 2).[20] As a result, courtwatchers can easily misinterpret what is going on. I was only able to realise the extent of my misinterpretations on the occasions that I courtwatched alongside other volunteers and we had the opportunity to talk through our experiences. It then struck me how two people, sitting in the same courtroom and witnessing the same hearing, could interpret a situation so differently. While there were often discrepancies in our understanding of factual details – such as the defendant's date of birth or the alleged offence – the most striking gap emerged in our perceptions of fairness. Most troubling of all was realising that I, like nearly everyone else I spoke to, assumed our interpretations would align far more closely than they actually did.

One courtwatcher's account was especially revealing in this regard.[21] They recounted that, on one occasion, another volunteer happened to be observing in the same courtroom as them. When the proceedings came to an end, the two shared their thoughts on what they had witnessed. My interlocutor had found one hearing to be among the most unfair they had ever observed. They were stunned to learn, however, that the other volunteer considered it relatively fair. What made this anecdote especially powerful was the courtwatcher's strong emotional reaction as they recounted the experience. I could clearly see the shock on their face as they recalled the moment – seemingly horrified that someone could perceive the scene they had witnessed as

[20] HMCTS Common Platform allows the police, judiciary, solicitors, barristers and criminal justice agencies to access and edit case information.
[21] Interview 11.

anything other than a blatant injustice. This conversation revealed a tendency I had observed since my earliest courtwatching experiences, a pattern that emerged as I spoke with more volunteers: the assumption that others think and feel the same way we do. Social psychologists refer to this phenomenon as false consensus bias – the tendency to overestimate how typical and appropriate our own choices and judgments are, while viewing alternative responses as rare or inappropriate (Ross et al., 1977: 280). This can create pitfalls of personal truths – where deeply felt, genuine experiences are mistakenly seen as universal, overlooking the diversity of other perspectives, and promoting “error in the interpretation of social phenomena” (1977: 300).

I found false consensus bias to be strikingly prevalent in courtwatching – both in my own reflections and among the volunteers I interviewed. However, it only becomes apparent when courtwatchers engage in dialogue with one another. In my privileged position as a researcher, I had the opportunity to speak to a diverse group of volunteers, and as a result, I was able to identify instances where I had inadvertently generalised my experiences – that is, assumed everyone felt the same way I did about certain courtroom dynamics. The overwhelming majority of volunteers I spoke with, however, had not met or spoken to any other courtwatchers beyond their initial training sessions. This lack of contact served to perpetuate the false consensus effect, leading many courtwatchers to unwittingly shape their attitudes toward the justice system from an egocentric perspective. Such attitudes can carry significant societal implications, potentially influencing behaviors ranging from the willingness to pursue legal resolution to compliance with court decisions. Negative perceptions of the justice system may even drive individuals to bypass the system altogether (Benesh and Howell, 2001: 200).

Cast in a more positive light, “an informed public is a powerful ally of the rule of law” (Nicklin, 2025: 7). Given that public confidence in the justice system is crucial for the stability of democracy (Bühlmann and Kunz, 2011: 333), facilitating the formation of comprehensive and critically reflective attitudes is of paramount importance.

While I understood that most courtwatchers were not conscious of succumbing to false consensus bias, some I spoke to nevertheless demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity and awareness of other forms of bias – such as those related to class, race, and neurodivergence – particularly in terms of their positionality toward the defendant. One courtwatcher described how they sat in the public gallery and imagined experiencing the proceedings from the standpoint of everyone in the room.[22] They tried to see each hearing through the eyes of the magistrates, the prosecution, the solicitor, and – most importantly – the defendant. They carried those multiple perspectives with them as they wrote their notes and formed their conclusions. Aware that the courtroom spotlights a particular moment, effectively isolating it from a lifetime of experiences, this courtwatcher consistently asked themselves: “What are we not seeing?” This degree of reflexivity was particularly striking. While many courtwatchers saw the proceedings through a specific lens that resonated with their interests – racial inequality, socio-economic bias, gender inequality, mental health – few appeared to be as attuned to the convergence of multiple perspectives.

Several volunteers expressed feeling that something was missing from the practice of courtwatching. I had felt this myself – the sense that the experience needs to be contained or framed in some way. The terms ‘observing’ or ‘watching’ that are associated with members of the public in a courtroom gallery can encourage passivity,

[22] Interview 10.

which may in turn perpetuate partial perceptions of fairness and an incomplete understanding of the justice system. My conversations with courtwatchers underscored the importance of having points of contact with whom to discuss experiences. While this is most effective when observers have attended the same hearings, even comparing the experience of different courtrooms or courthouses proves to be extremely valuable. This research highlights that courtwatching should be seen as an active, ongoing process rather than one that ends when a person leaves the public gallery. Whether recording information for an organisation or seeking to learn about the system individually, it is important for observers to intentionally engage with others and reflect on their experience. Doing so helps clarify observations, identify potential biases, and encourages continued involvement. Many courtwatchers I spoke to were drawn to volunteering as a way of seeking connection and community. However, the act of courtwatching itself can be very isolating. Having someone with whom to engage in reflexive dialogue not only deepens understanding of the criminal justice system as a whole, but also fosters connection and supports continuity.

5. Conclusion

Informing Reform Efforts Through Courtwatcher Insight

This research has highlighted the multidimensional nature of open justice. Framing the principle solely in procedural terms obscures the challenges, tensions, and emotional weight that accompany public observation of court proceedings. Such a narrow perspective risks overlooking the pitfalls inherent in bringing open justice to life, thereby undermining its full execution. By focusing on the lived experiences of

courtwatchers in London's magistrates' courts, this study reveals these real-world complexities, moving beyond accessibility to examine its affective, psychological, and social dimensions. Through ethnographic and phenomenological methods, it has demonstrated how internal and relational dynamics shape how open justice is perceived and enacted. Recognising these nuances helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping those responsible for implementation with the insight needed to make informed decisions.

The experiences of courtwatchers bring these complexities into sharp relief. Their observations reveal that public presence in the courtroom can amplify existing vulnerabilities *and* offer support for defendants. These dynamics underline the importance of ensuring that individuals attending court are as diverse and representative as possible. In practice, this requires raising awareness of the right to observe proceedings across different communities, and attending to how perceived identities – such as race, gender, religion, and ability – shape courtroom dynamics. The findings also underscore the role of psychological and affective space in conditioning how observers absorb and interpret proceedings. Recognising this is essential for supporting meaningful engagement with open justice and ensuring courtroom practices account for the emotional and psychological experiences of those observing. Additionally, reflexive dialogue emerges as crucial for countering false consensus bias and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the justice system. Public observers can easily assume that their personal experience reflects a general consensus, which may perpetuate narrow or oversimplified perceptions of fairness. Creating opportunities for reflexive dialogue allows observers to situate their own

experiences within a broader, collective context, deepening their understanding of courtroom dynamics. This responsibility also extends to the observers themselves: those who choose to enter courts must be willing to engage with the experience beyond the courtroom, actively reflecting on their own perspectives and integrating the views of others. Only then can a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the justice system be attained. By revealing how individual experiences, affective dynamics, and reflexive engagement shape public perceptions of justice, these findings offer a foundation for initiatives aimed at making open justice meaningful and accessible.

Recent finalisation of the Transparency and Open Justice Board's Key Objectives highlights the judiciary's ongoing efforts to clarify the role and purpose of open justice (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2025a). These objectives mark the first stage of a broader reform programme, with the next phase, scheduled for autumn 2025, set to evaluate the extent to which current practices and procedures align with the Board's transparency and accessibility standards (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2025b). This research provides a foundation for that phase by offering insight into the lived experience of open justice beyond procedural accessibility. In particular, the Board has asked Courts and Tribunals to engage in a "reflective exercise" (2025b) to identify obstacles limiting the practical realisation of open justice. The findings presented here underscore the importance of fully considering members of the public in this process and provide a starting point for this exercise. To support the full and effective realisation of open justice across the United Kingdom, future research is necessary. This would involve extending the study to include additional courts, engaging a broader and more diverse range of participants, and adopting longer observational periods. Such work

would deepen understanding of how open justice is experienced across different contexts over time and ensure that reforms are guided by the realities of those whom open justice is ultimately meant to serve.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

Newsletter Call-Out for Volunteers (my name and pronouns have been removed to maintain the anonymity of this dissertation).

COURTWATCH LONDON

Do you want to take part in research about courtwatching?

Has courtwatching shaped the way you think about fairness and trust in the criminal justice system? 💬⚖️👀

Fellow courtwatcher [redacted] is researching how courtwatching shapes people's perceptions of the criminal justice system — as well as how it impacts courtwatchers on a personal level. This research will form part of [redacted] master's dissertation in human rights at University College London and will also be used by Transform Justice to raise awareness about the importance of courtwatching.

Your story can provide invaluable insights into the role courtwatching plays in society.

Participation would involve:

- One informal interview with [redacted] (25-45 mins).
- Where possible, interviews will take place in person, at a location you are comfortable with, like a local coffee shop, park, or other space. Alternatively, [redacted] can arrange to speak over Zoom or on the phone.
- All personal information will be kept anonymous: your name will be changed, and any identifying details will be removed.

Interested? Sign up here 👉 https://forms.gle/vWALXxTibT4q1QmGA

Thanks

The CourtWatch London team

Appendix 2:

Google Sign-Up Form for Volunteers (my name has been removed to maintain the anonymity of this dissertation).

Share Your Courtwatching Story!

Hello! 👋

I'm [redacted] a fellow courtwatch volunteer with Transform Justice.

I'm researching how courtwatching shapes our perceptions of fairness and trust in the criminal justice system — as well as how it impacts us on a personal level.

This research will form part of my Master's dissertation in Human Rights at University College London and may also be used by Transform Justice to raise awareness about the value of courtwatching.

If you are a seasoned courtwatcher, or a newbie like me, I would love to hear about your experience!

Participation would involve:
- One informal interview with me (25-45 mins).
- Where possible, interviews will take place in person, at a location you are comfortable with, like a local coffee shop, park, or other space. Alternatively, we can arrange to speak over Zoom or on the phone.
- All personal information will be kept anonymous: your name will be changed, and any identifying details will be removed.

If you are willing to share your story, please fill out the form below and I'll be in touch soon with more information!

Thank you for considering being part of this project! 🙂

Name: *

Your answer

Email address: *

Your answer

If you prefer to be contacted by WhatsApp, please share your phone number:

Your answer

Gender: *

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Non-binary
- ◯ Prefer to self-describe
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Age range: *

- ◯ 18 - 24
- ◯ 25 - 34
- ◯ 35 - 44
- ◯ 45 - 54
- ◯ 55 - 64
- ◯ 65+
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Race and/or ethnicity: *

- ◯ Asian or Asian British
- ◯ Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
- ◯ Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- ◯ Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- ◯ White
- ◯ Other ethnic group
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Roughly how many times have you attended courtwatching sessions? *

- ◯ I haven't been yet, but I plan to go soon
- ◯ Just once
- ◯ A few times (2-5 times)
- ◯ I'm a regular courtwatcher

Where do you usually go courtwatching?
Please select all that apply:

- ☐ Barkingside
- ☐ Bexley
- ☐ Bromley
- ☐ Croydon
- ☐ Highbury Corner
- ☐ Hendon
- ☐ Lavender Hill
- ☐ Stratford
- ☐ Thames
- ☐ Westminster
- ☐ Willesden
- ☐ Wimbledon
- ☐ Other

Do you have any questions or concerns about potentially participating in this project?

Your answer

Submit

Clear form