

## Venturing into the Heartlands: Comparing Trauma-Informed Spaces in Urban and Rural Jurisdictions through Field Observations

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores trauma-informed practices within courtroom settings in a Midwestern state, comparing urban and rural judicial districts through in-depth field observations. Using a semi-structured observational approach, we examined courtroom dynamics, environmental factors, and community influences to assess how trauma-informed design principles are applied. Our findings reveal notable contrasts: rural courtrooms grappled with resource limitations and conservative cultural influences, while urban settings displayed a fast-paced, often impersonal atmosphere. Socio-political factors, such as community values and political symbolism, emerged as significant influences on courtroom practices, shaping the receptiveness and implementation of trauma-informed approaches. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, we identified themes including resource constraints, courtroom decorum, community socio-political influences, and privacy considerations. The study highlights the need for adaptive trauma-informed policies and judicial training that account for socio-cultural differences, advocating for increased support to rural jurisdictions to enhance the implementation of trauma-informed judicial practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** trauma-informed, courtroom, rural and urban, field observations

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Our research aimed to investigate trauma-informed spaces, focusing on design layout, interactions, and community factors within a rural and urban jurisdiction in a Midwestern state. Trauma-informed design, as emphasized by Garcia (2020), prioritizes safety, dignity, and empowerment for all participants through considerations such as spatial layout, furniture arrangement, visual and aural elements, lighting, art, and biophilic design (Garcia, 2020). In judicial contexts, where individuals are often navigating high-stress environments, trauma-informed design has the potential to promote dignity and reduce anxiety for both justice-involved individuals and victims of crime. Despite its promise, there remains a scarcity of research addressing trauma-informed practices in courtroom and legal settings, leaving a gap in understanding how these environments impact individuals' psychological and physical well-being.

To enhance the breadth of our current research, we incorporated the measurements outlined in Garcia's study (2020) alongside a broader socio-environmental analysis of the judicial district (JD), including cultural and political factors. Understanding the overarching sociopolitical environment is crucial, as it significantly shapes the lives and experiences of residents and the practices of the community's legal system. Additionally, we consider variables such as room

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temperature, verbal and non-verbal communication cues, and contextual details within courtroom settings (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2013). Recognizing the scarcity of literature in this area, our research sought to understand the impact of trauma-informed practices on justice-involved populations and crime victims within a broader social, spatial, and political context.

Field notes are a widely adopted approach in qualitative and mixed methods research (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Field notes enhance the quality and rigor of qualitative research and extend data analysis beyond a mere focus on language-related aspects (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Including these field notes and observations in our research served the dual purpose of offering insights into trauma-informed practices and illustrating the unique challenges and opportunities of conducting research in rural communities. It is crucial to note that the researchers involved in this study are affiliated with a rural, teaching-focused institution where institutional financial support and teaching load reduction for research endeavors are relatively limited. This context adds a layer of complexity to our research journey. The two researchers dedicated their summer break and weekends to observe 40 hours of courtroom procedures as well as an additional 40 hours of travel, highlighting a unique perspective on how rural researchers navigate and succeed in their research pursuits, especially when compared to institutions with more extensive research support.

## The Current Study

The current methods and findings are part of a larger-scale study, where we began our project by selecting one rural and one urban JD in a rural Midwestern state. By selecting the two pilot JDs, we aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of trauma-informed practices between a rural and urban jurisdiction. In the current study, our primary focus was on trauma-informed spaces by utilizing contextual information outlined in the materials section. Key variables included documenting the behavior and interactions of participants, noting non-verbal cues and verbal interactions, alongside contextual observations of the research area, all while maintaining objectivity through self-reflection and thorough review and organization of data.

The process of designing the research had become an exploratory adventure for us as well. Initially, we reached out to professional listservs seeking literature and observational measurements to guide our research. However, we found limited specific guidance relevant to our research agenda. As a result, we ventured into uncharted territories with a novel approach to our design. We conducted a review of literature across various disciplines, including criminal justice, juvenile justice, social work, legal studies, and psychology. Additionally, we analyzed organizational assessments, company morale surveys, and evaluations to design tools that would allow for consistent documentation and reporting of the observations. Then, we synthesized these findings and delineated four discrete categories of observational assessment tools: in-person, virtual, adult court, and juvenile court. It was fascinating to recall our initial conversations, where we found ourselves delving into topics with a depth reminiscent of writing dissertations.

It was during the summer months, when we had a three-month break, that we humorously remarked, "It's finally time to do the work." It is important to note that while we spent a substantial amount of time in court documenting interactions and dynamics (approximately 40 hours), we also dedicated a sizable portion of our time to being on the road (approximately 40 hours of driving). During our road trips, we engaged in discussions about how to document our observations and routinely conversed about our senses, feelings, reactions, and surprising responses throughout the process, whether inside or outside of the courtroom setting. We believe we must share not just the mechanics of our research, including design, data collection, and findings, but also our firsthand

experiences in carrying out the research and the collaborative effort that brought everything together.

We aspire to offer these research notes and methodologies as useful resources for fellow researchers pursuing similar studies, especially those facing limitations in terms of resources, whether from their institutions or their personal lives. Our primary focus was to explore and contrast the spatial and environmental contexts, as well as community factors, between urban and rural settings, while we have other publications that delve more specifically into our survey and interview data. We seek to introduce readers to the nuances of conducting research in rural settings and to provide insights into the distinctive approaches of courtroom work in rural contexts.

## **Methodology**

Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, we employed a thematic analysis methodology that provided a structured, step-by-step approach for data coding, theme identification, and interpretative analysis. This framework allowed us to summarize coded segments into coherent themes, such as resource constraints, community socio-political influences, courtroom environment, personnel approaches to trauma-informed practices, procedural decorum, and privacy considerations. These emergent themes were defined and contextualized through iterative discussions within the research team. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process—from familiarization with the data to generating and refining themes—offered both structure and flexibility, which was essential for producing insights into trauma-informed practices within distinct urban and rural courtroom settings.

When working through these data, we agreed on the importance of documenting encounters, observations, and the courtroom environment, particularly regarding trauma-informed practices. For the physical environment, the documentation covered aspects such as seating arrangements, courtroom layout, lighting quality, decor elements, security practices, and any unique features impacting the proceedings. All observations and field notes were then transcribed. This process included noting essential verbal and non-verbal behaviors, such as documenting instances of the judges' demeanors towards defendants and attorneys' presentations and their interactions with their clients and/or families, the techniques used in questioning witnesses, and statements made by various participants.

## **Materials**

We employed a semi-structured methodology (Mulhall, 2003) to document various aspects of our courtroom observations alongside our field notes. Traditional field notes were taken to document observations made outside of the traditional courtroom, such as observations made along the drive. This allowed us to look beyond disparities in courtroom procedures to encompass the broader community context, including socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. We were able to capture and describe the manifold experiences associated with traveling to research sites and the observations made within these environments. We documented sights and unique landmarks that distinguish and stand out in both rural and urban terrain.

Table 1 offers our semi-structured approach to engaging in courtroom observations with field note documentation. After determining the appropriate observational approach(es) (Step 1), we then compiled courtroom environment notes (Step 2), including documenting the physical courtroom environment (e.g., seating arrangements), and finally, we documented sights and responses by categorizing the note-taking process into non-verbal and verbal cues, contextual observations, and self-reflection (Step 3).

**Table 1**  
*Courtroom Observation Methodology*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1. Observational Approach(es)</b>	Choose an appropriate observational approach and define the scope and objectives of the observation.
<b>2. Courtroom Environment Notes</b>	Document details about the physical courtroom environment, including seating arrangements, lighting, decor, and any unique features.
<b>3. Documenting Sights and Responses</b>	<p>Focus on observing and documenting the behavior, reactions, and interactions of participants, including judges, attorneys, witnesses, and jurors.</p> <p><b>Non-verbal Cues</b> Record significant non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures. Pay attention to their potential impact on the proceedings.</p> <p><b>Contextual Observations</b> Documenting the scenery, sights, and community environment where the research takes place is integral to the field documentation process. This provides readers with a vivid portrayal of what it looks like to conduct research in the area.</p> <p><b>Verbal Interactions</b> Note important verbal interactions, including objections, questioning, and statements made by participants. Document any emotionally charged moments.</p> <p><b>Self-Reflection</b> Capture reactions and impressions as an observer. Maintain objectivity and avoid making assumptions or judgments.</p> <p><b>Review and Organization</b> Regularly review and organize notes to ensure accuracy and completeness. This step is crucial for later analysis and reporting.</p>

In our qualitative research, achieving saturation through frequent discussion and comparison of our note-taking process was crucial. According to Guest et al. (2020), saturation in qualitative research can be measured using the base size, run length, and new information threshold methods. Base size refers to the total number of cases or participants in the study, while run length indicates the duration or number of observations. The new information threshold is the point at which additional data no longer provides significant new insights. Through the courtroom observations, particularly during the latter half of the day, the cases started to feel repetitive and monotonous. This repetition signaled to us that we had likely reached saturation, as we were not encountering substantially new information or themes.

## **Findings**

### **Rural Jurisdiction Community Observations**

The rural pilot site was situated in the eastern corner of a predominantly rural Midwestern state and became an important stop in our research journey. Our mission was straightforward: understand the legal system and examine if trauma-informed components were employed or neglected in courtrooms. Amidst the conservative landscape of this Midwestern state, where political Republican affiliations run deep, the sparse population, opioid crisis, and the lack of

services underscore the challenges faced by its communities. This is a region where the influence of political figures like Donald Trump looms large and where the values of self-reliance and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” are deeply ingrained in the community’s fabric. Traveling to this location required a ten-hour round trip. The drive took us through various terrains, and upon entering the county, we encountered a series of detours due to road construction. Along the route, we occasionally passed prominent billboards promoting various causes, including pro-life, pro-Trump, and pro-gun campaigns, reflecting the region’s political sentiments. Additionally, local commercials drew our attention, boldly advertising “Adult” content. We noticed abandoned farmhouses dotting the countryside, isolated towns nestled in between, and haybales sprayed with “TRUMP 2024.” Some residential buildings were observed having neglected front yards, abandoned cars, and towns featuring just a solitary gas station and a diner, and always multiple Christian-based churches alongside large billboards along the highway with a Renaissance-style portrait of Jesus. Some residential houses along the highway also displayed flags bearing the phrase “Let’s go, Brandon,”<sup>2</sup> with various political symbols and slogans. Signs such as “NO TRESPASSING,” “Keep out,” and “Watch out for dogs” were overly present. These observations offer a glimpse into the livelihoods and characters of this area, encapsulating the essence of “lawlessness” in the wild Western ethos.

Within this rural community, lodging proved to be a challenge. Our rural location lacked a chain-brand hotel, where we were familiar with the lodging establishment, their safety protocols, and amenities. Due to these unknown concerns, particularly for two women researchers, we found ourselves compelled to lodge approximately 20 miles away from the rural courthouse. Additionally, sourcing meal options presented its own set of logistical challenges, with the nearest viable lunch venue situated a distance of eight miles away in a neighboring town. On subsequent visits, we frequented a diner situated across the courthouse. This experience provided insight into the diner’s ambiance reminiscent of 1970s aesthetics, offering traditional American breakfast and brunch-style fare. During our visit at noon, the diner attracted a diverse clientele resemblance of local construction workers, farmers, oil field workers, and retired residents. It had a welcoming communal atmosphere for casual conversation and interaction.

### **Urban Jurisdiction Community Observations**

The urban site was located in the south-central region of the same Midwestern state and served as one of the state's largest urban centers, having a population of approximately 400,000. While the urban JD may not compete with major national metropolises, it stands as a significant urban hub within the state, offering a diverse array of amenities and attractions. Within the city, one can find thriving shopping centers, well-established healthcare institutions, and many dining options. The adult courthouse in this JD was positioned within the downtown area, which presented a unique urban landscape. Our observations highlighted a striking contrast between this urban environment compared to our rural location. On one side of the street, the downtown business district was vibrant, characterized by commercial activity, a variety of restaurants, and court facilities. Conversely, on the opposite side of the street, a distinct scenario unfolded, marked by homeless shelters and individuals queuing for assistance—a vivid illustration of the challenges faced by urban communities. The juvenile courthouse was located in a separate part of this city. This courthouse was nestled within a residential neighborhood characterized by varying states of

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<sup>2</sup> “Let’s go, Brandon” is a phrase that gained popularity in some U.S. Conservative circles as a euphemism for a derogatory statement about the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Joe Biden. The slogan has since become a symbol of Conservative and anti-establishment sentiment in certain communities.

housing disrepair, winding roads, occasional roadblocks, and scattered litter. Within a mere 200 feet of this setting, garage sales were underway, where the immediate surroundings of a courthouse can sharply contrast with neighboring residential areas. The courthouses in this urban setting exhibited a more dynamic atmosphere, distinct from the quiet ambiance of the rural JD's courthouse.

In contrast to our experiences navigating lodging and dining options in the rural areas, our accommodations in the urban JD were more straightforward. We secured lodging in a mainstream chain-brand hotel conveniently situated near the courthouse, with easy access to dining options within the hotel premises. Additionally, we were able to find an array of culinary choices nearby, including daily changes in food trucks. Unlike the local options within the rural location, the urban hotel offered hotel security, concierge service, and covered parking.

## **Courtroom Observations**

### ***Courtroom Physical Environment***

One challenge we noted was the discomfort associated with the room temperature; specifically, the temperature was exceptionally cold, which was observed in all courtrooms. This discomfort was exacerbated by a noticeable contrast in attire between the courtroom working groups, often dressed in suits, ties, and regalia, while those attending for their own hearing were not in formal clothing. The rigid room temperature created an unwelcoming environment for individuals who might already be feeling vulnerable, potentially hindering their ability to fully engage in legal proceedings.

Within the rural courtroom, the structure was formal and resembled the courtroom one would find in a traditional textbook depicting grandiose ceiling heights, oversized wooden structures evoking a cathedral-like atmosphere, along with oil portraits of former judges, and spaces filled with granite and marble. Safety plexiglass partitions were installed between judges and lawyers, as well as between all personnel and clients. While beautiful in appearance, these oversized courtrooms can be intimidating for those within the legal system, as their size and formality, as well as wide-open space, can make a person feel lost and small. To add to the courtroom's reminiscent of historical judicial spaces, was a judge who ordered individuals to adhere to the traditional courtroom decorum. For example, the rural judge told numerous individuals presenting for hearings to be "respectful" and to "wear long pants" to their future court dates. One individual responded by saying that he was in his work outfit as he had to leave work to attend court. The judge replied, "Okay, but you need to dress appropriately next time."

Within the urban courtroom was another significant observation regarding the resolution court, which was established to address the backlog of arraignments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As we entered the courtroom, the air was charged with a sense of urgency. Once a cafeteria in the courthouse, we were immediately struck by its makeshift arrangement, a departure from the conventional legal setting. The floors remained that of linoleum; the lights were poorly placed and offered ill-lit lighting in some spaces; and all those participating in the courtroom process used office-style roller chairs with the exception of nicer, cushioned chairs offered to the attorneys and judge. It became apparent that the environment lacked the essential amenities necessary to address the emotional needs of participants in the legal proceedings. For example, the atmosphere within the courtroom seemed detached, as if the space itself failed to acknowledge the gravity of the matters discussed. The one small clock on the wall had expired batteries, providing those in the courtroom, no accurate sense of time.

The courtroom proceedings moved with a strict, almost mechanical adherence to protocol, leaving little space for individualized attention or empathy. In our field notes, the judge was described as sitting upright and rarely making eye contact with those addressing the court. Their tone remained consistently formal and brisk, and they maintained a physical and emotional distance from court participants, often looking down at documents or a computer screen rather than at the individuals speaking. When addressing participants, their responses were concise and impersonal, giving an impression of detachment. This demeanor, coupled with the rapid pace of case processing, created an environment that felt rigid and unyielding, perhaps reflecting the urgency to manage the heavy caseload efficiently. Positioned on an elevated platform, the former cafeteria's stage introduced a layer of irony to the judges' informal seating arrangement, lending some absurdity and cynicism to the scene. Lawyers had approximately 15 minutes to confer with their clients prior to the arraignment due to the pressure to navigate through the backlog swiftly. In this environment, the resolution court represented a double-edged sword. While it aimed to expedite the arraignment process and address the backlog efficiently, the strict procedural framework risked sacrificing individualized attention and due process. As one example, one public defender showed us a table that laid out all the paperwork given to defendants in a conveyor belt style. This attorney said this practice was used to speed up the process of meeting with clients while helping them with “CYA—you know, to cover your own ass.”

### *Rural Courtroom Observations*

Among the numerous observations, we have elected to showcase one example to demonstrate our field note methodology. In both researchers' notes, documentation highlighted a clear hierarchical differentiation between judges and court-involved persons during hearings. As observers, we noted evident signs of employing legal jargon and complex terminology when addressing individuals in court proceedings. As evidenced by court records and contextual conversations, we noted many court-involved persons had minimal educational backgrounds. Although it is important to acknowledge that many observed behaviors might not be intentional, the consequences for those in the courtroom, especially those with limited educational backgrounds, can be significant. In our field notes, we documented exchanges where judges routinely recited scripts without considering the individuals' educational levels or the complexity of legal terminology (e.g., PSI, meaning Pre-sentence Investigation). In one specific case, the defendant had completed only an 8th-grade education despite being an adult. The rural judge acknowledged this; however, the judge then persisted in utilizing scripted language with legal jargon (e.g., “Aren't you deemed by the court to be indigent?”). This tendency overlooked the unique circumstances of persons with limited education and could inadvertently retraumatize individuals who may have already experienced marginalization or disadvantages within the criminal legal system.

Amidst the legal proceedings observed in the rural JD, there were instances where the judge exemplified a trauma-informed approach. For example, in one case, the judge emphasized the necessity of securing employment for a young individual nearing 18 years-of-age. Recognizing the potential challenges of this transition, the judge stated, “I'm sure you're aware of the diagnosis, and the diagnosis may explain some behaviors but doesn't excuse the behavior. That's the harsh reality.” This acknowledgment of underlying factors and the need for support aligns with trauma-informed principles. Additionally, we noticed that the rural judge exhibited a strong sense of personal connection with her fellow courtroom personnel, fostering a warm and friendly working environment. Unlike some of her urban counterparts, who maintained a more formal demeanor, the rural judge interacted with her colleagues in an approachable and congenial manner.

This personal connection was evident in the way the judge engaged with court staff, attorneys, and others present in the courtroom. This judge took the time to inquire about their well-being, shared light-hearted moments, and exchanged friendly banter, which is crucial in creating a relaxed and inclusive environment. Below is an example excerpt of what the researchers documented:

The courtroom in the rural jurisdiction served as the sole judicial hub for the regional area, overseen by the presiding judge who handled a wide array of cases ranging from Child in Need of Care (CINC), juvenile, and criminal dockets. Unlike urban counterparts with specialized dockets for each judge, this rural setting housed all case types within a single room. Despite less traffic in the courthouse compared to the urban jurisdiction, this judge required additional cleaning (e.g., a staff person cleaned all spaces between all hearings) and separation of individuals (e.g., use of plexiglass) to reduce the transmission of germs. The presence of security personnel at the rural courthouse was also noticeably far fewer than in the urban courtrooms, especially when compared to urban courtrooms handling similar dockets. The rural judge facilitated clear audio and visual access in all proceedings, acknowledging the potential impact of exclusion or isolation of individuals. These intentional acts demonstrated a compassionate demeanor, whereby the judge engaged with parents, family members, and children, fostering a relaxed atmosphere by incorporating humor into interactions. Of particular note, was the judge's consideration for the well-being of children involved in the proceedings. Genuine conversations were initiated, allowing the judge to connect with the children on a personal level, discussing their interests and hobbies (e.g., Where is that beautiful jacket you always wear to court?).

### *Urban Courtroom Observations*

The example in this section pertains to observational notes taken during the researchers' visit to the different court dockets (e.g., criminal court and family court), with a specific focus on individuals seeking protection from Abuse and Protection from Stalking (PFA/PFS) orders. Contrary to our assumption that these cases would be highly sensitive and private, the environment given to the parties was rather casual, chaotic, and lacked privacy. Because it was almost a complete 180-degree contrast to what the researchers originally imagined, we decided to document the observations in a flowing, narrative format, or storytelling, to be as descriptive as possible and allow readers to "see" what happened to demonstrate the lack of trauma-informed care in the courtroom. Below is an example excerpt of what the researchers documented:

The morning session unfolded within the confines of Old Jury Room 1 at the Sweeley<sup>3</sup> County Courthouse. This space, resembling more of a dining hall than a traditional courtroom, served as the backdrop for individuals seeking protection through Protection from Abuse and Protection from Stalking (PFA/PFS) cases. These cases, though deemed lower risk and conflict-oriented by the court, held significant emotional weight for those involved. Individuals were herded in a cattle-like manner, on the hour, each hour. As the day's proceedings commenced, it became evident that these

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym is used to protect the confidentiality of the location.



cases were far from trivial matters—allegations of stalking and the pursuit of legal protection created tension within the room. The lack of privacy within the courtroom was striking, with only a thin divider strap, similar to those found at airport security checkpoints, separating the plaintiffs, often victims, from the defendants, the alleged abusers. Attorneys approached their clients in one giant room, having intimate conversations around all others. The courtroom itself buzzed with activity reminiscent of a New York stock market floor. Bailiffs, security personnel, court service officers, attorneys, advocates, and various legal professionals hurried about, creating an atmosphere of chaos that seemed at odds with the gravity of the cases being heard. In addition to the chaotic scene, plaintiffs and respondents found themselves seated uncomfortably close to each other (often inches away), amplifying the emotional tension. When it was finally their time to be heard by the judge, they sat next to one another in chairs located at one of two judge’s desks located on a shared stage.

During our observation of the PFA/PFS dockets, we noted the presence of trauma-informed components despite the described chaotic atmosphere. For example, this court differed from others we observed in that it had legal representatives and victim advocates from local agencies present throughout the day. The legal representatives were equipped to represent victims during proceedings and handle court orders with their clients. Meanwhile, the victim advocates occupied visible positions in the room, making everyone aware of their presence and availability. We spoke to several victim advocates and many expressed concerns about the lack of privacy in the courtroom setting and emphasized the importance of ensuring the safety of their clients, who are often alleged victims in the cases. During a conversation, a legal representative mentioned, "The security here is usually pretty observant and can make sure no one is going to be threatening to each other." While we recognize the necessity of security measures, we also pondered whether additional steps could be taken to make the courtroom environment less stressful and more victim-centered.

Additionally, we were mindful of documenting observable behavior, reactions, and interactions of all participants in the courtroom proceedings. For instance, during one observation in the urban JD, the arraignment of a woman for her third DUI (Driving Under the Influence) provided a strong example of poor trauma-informed practices. The public defender’s words, such as “You can’t screw up” and “If you fail a UA (Urine Analysis), you’re in a lot of trouble,” were rather harsh, disrespectful, and lacked professionalism. As the defendant cried, the attorney’s focus remained rigidly on the negative, demanding apologies and emphasizing the repercussions of her actions. When the defendant asked about her medication while she would be in jail, her concerns were dismissed with a curt “I don’t know.” Throughout the interaction, the attorney’s dismissive attitude persisted, evident in phrases like, “Don’t make excuses, like my dog ate my homework.” This stark lack of empathy emphasizes the necessity for legal professionals to adopt a trauma-informed approach, one that prioritizes understanding and support for individuals navigating the justice system.

We also encountered instances reflecting a concerning lack of clarity and empathy. For instance, in one case, the attorney advised the client, “Never tell the police shit. They aren’t your

friends,” despite the client's admission of theft. Additionally, when a paralegal mispronounced the defendant's name, the client's correction was met with laughter from court personnel, lacking the professionalism and sensitivity warranted in such situations. We found ourselves questioning whether the courtroom personnel had become desensitized and seemingly incapable of displaying empathetic reactions. The lack of sensitivity extended into the documentation of facial expressions, voice, and tone, as displayed below:

The emotional rawness in the PFA/PFS Pro Se<sup>4</sup> cases lacked privacy for all involved parties—contributing to an environment that we described as emotionally charged. The judges presiding over these cases, both of whom had retired from their judicial roles some 20 years prior, brought an extra layer of complexity to the situation as they lacked details surrounding the cases. Both judges reported a lack of experience dealing with these types of cases, and to us, it felt like two judges hearing disputes they perceived as trivial.

In one particularly distressing instance, a victim had to express their fear openly, stating, "I am afraid because he (the respondent) said the next time he saw my son he would be hanging in the garage." Such revelations, made in a public and crowded setting, added vulnerability and discomfort to an already emotionally charged situation. One attorney said this docket resembled the ‘Wild West’ and her family court colleagues refused to hear cases here. In another case, the victim made a clear and distressing statement about security camera footage capturing the respondent breaking in her home to steal his lent out laptop, and also climbing a ladder to knock on her window to then demand she give this exact laptop back to him. However, the judge appeared to focus on a different aspect of the case, specifically the business-related conflict between the two parties.

As the day progressed, the ambiance in Old Jury Room 1 shifted from the morning's low-key atmosphere to a more somber tone. Unlike the morning session, many of these cases had legal counsel. The tension in the room during the afternoon session was palpable, as these cases delved into allegations of abuse and violence within intimate relationships. Yet, many defendants seemed to play the role of the innocent party, displaying indifference or even anger through their facial expressions. It was as though their facial expressions were a mask for their emotional reactions.

While we believe we observed to the point of saturation, we were forced to consider the limitations of our presence. This included our awareness of the observer effect, wherein courtroom personnel might have altered their behavior because of our presence. However, based on our observations, we found that, for the most part, courtroom personnel continued with their usual routines and activities, many times not engaged in trauma-informed practices when they knew this was what we were there to observe. To mitigate the observer effect, we made a conscious effort to minimize direct interactions with courtroom personnel unless necessary for our research objectives.

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<sup>4</sup> Pro Se is a Latin term meaning “for oneself.” In a legal context, it refers to individuals who represent themselves in court proceedings without the assistance of an attorney.

## Limitations

As with all research, we must acknowledge the limitations related to our project. First, the limited time and opportunity we had for courtroom observations may have resulted in missing certain incidents or courtroom dynamics even though we reached a point of saturation. For example, we were unable to observe the drug court in the urban JD as the day of our travel coincided with their drug court graduation ceremony (although we did attend the ceremony). Additionally, we were hoping to observe the new Veteran's Court, also located within the urban JD, but the opening of this specialty court was postponed to a date after all our travel had commenced. Another challenge we encountered was the lack of diversity in cases in the rural JD. Upon comparing our field notes, it became evident that we had documented more observations in the urban JD, both in terms of physical presence and courtroom activities, with a wider range of case types, judges, and proceedings, compared to the rural JD, despite spending a similar amount of time in both JDs. However, due to limited research funding and our heavy teaching workload, we found it challenging to accommodate additional trips to the rural JD.

Recognizing the limitation of solely examining one rural community is important for placing the findings in a broader rural context. While the current study offered important insights into trauma-informed practices within a specific rural jurisdiction, it is also important to acknowledge the significant variability among rural communities in terms of demographics, socio-economic factors, and cultural dynamics. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this single rural community may not fully encompass the diversity of experiences and practices across all rural areas.

In addition, we acknowledge the limited interaction with the community beyond what was discussed in the research and deemed necessary for research activities. For instance, it is important to acknowledge the potential for selective bias in our observations, particularly concerning political signage and community support. Our field notes detailed prominent displays of Conservative political backing (e.g., Donald Trump signs) observed primarily along major highways and country roads. However, we cannot rule out the presence of other political perspectives within the community that may not have been as visible from our travel routes. Our awareness of and attention to certain types of signage may have influenced the perceived prevalence of Conservative symbols, possibly making them appear more dominant than they might to other observers. As a result, this might involve the potential for additional insights and perspectives that could have been gained through more extensive engagement. Moreover, focusing on courtroom observations and minimal interactions, such as dining in local establishments, may have resulted in overlooked opportunities to delve deeper into the community's social dynamics, cultural norms, and residents' perspectives on trauma-informed care. This limitation emphasized the importance of future research endeavors adopting a more participatory-orientated approach that includes community engagement strategies, such as interviews, focus groups, or participant observation, to gain an understanding of the contextual factors influencing trauma-informed practices in rural areas.

Despite these limitations, we attempted to compensate for the limited observation time by ensuring a diverse range of cases and court types. This included observing juvenile, adult, family, and criminal courts, as well as the resolution docket. These diverse experiences allowed us to gain a broader understanding of the judicial process and the interactions within different court settings. We recognize that observational research inherently has limitations, while we strive to capture as much relevant information as possible within the allotted time, there may still be gaps in our understanding. Therefore, we approach our findings with a degree of caution, acknowledging the potential limitations of our methods and the need for further research to validate our conclusions. Additionally, we must also remind readers that we selected only one rural and one urban judicial

district. We began this larger research project with the mutual understanding that we were engaged in a pilot project and that, eventually, we would like to observe these practices across our entire state. Yet, again, as scholars located at a teaching-focused university, in a rural location, resources were limited to the piloted approach.

## **Discussion and Implications**

This study reveals contrasting dynamics in trauma-informed practices between urban and rural courtroom settings within a Midwestern state. Our findings suggested that while urban courts often emphasize procedural efficiency to manage high caseloads, this focus can limit personalized engagement and empathy toward defendants and victims. In contrast, rural courtrooms, despite resource constraints, demonstrated greater flexibility and inclination toward empathetic interactions. These differences imply that the quality of trauma-informed care is not solely dictated by policy but is also rooted in the institutional culture and environmental context of each setting.

### **Implications for Policy**

The findings indicated a critical need for targeted resource allocation to support rural courtrooms in adopting trauma-informed practices. Policies should advocate for increased funding to provide rural courthouses with resources such as specialized trauma training, additional staff, and infrastructural support. This approach could reduce the burdens on judges and personnel, enabling a more supportive courtroom environment that aligns with trauma-informed principles. Additionally, the development of standardized trauma-informed training programs for judicial personnel across both urban and rural settings is essential. Such training should address gaps in practice, particularly in high-volume urban environments, and equip judicial personnel with strategies to balance efficiency with a courtroom environment attuned to the psychological needs of justice-involved individuals.

### ***Implications for Judicial Practice***

For judicial practice, the adaptation of courtroom protocols to enhance empathy and engagement is critical. In high-volume courtrooms, protocols could include brief but meaningful interactions with court participants. Integrating trauma-informed checklists and prompts supports more mindful, empathetic interactions while maintaining the flow of procedural requirements. Moreover, the physical environment of courtrooms significantly influences participants' experiences. Adjustments to seating comfort, temperature regulation, and designated meeting spaces for victim support could help create a more trauma-sensitive environment. Future courthouse planning and refurbishments should prioritize these trauma-informed design elements to support more inclusive and stress-reducing spaces.

### ***Implications for Individuals Navigating the Judicial System***

Justice-involved individuals would benefit from enhanced awareness of and accessibility to support resources that clarify courtroom protocols and outline available assistance, helping them better navigate the judicial process. Informational materials detailing trauma-informed practices could empower these individuals to advocate for their needs and request additional support when necessary. Additionally, community organizations, especially in rural areas, play an important role in supporting trauma-informed practices by providing pre-court guidance and education on

courtroom procedures. Partnerships between the judicial system and community-based organizations could offer preparatory support to justice-involved individuals, easing their transition into formal judicial proceedings and enhancing their experience within the judicial system.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings are an advancement in field research as we conducted a pilot study comparing two JDs within one rural Midwestern state. This study represents the first comprehensive comparison of trauma-informed spaces, courtroom settings, and community and sociopolitical factors between rural and urban judicial districts, drawing from extensive field observations, courtroom elements, and contextual environmental information. Our objective was to provide a nuanced understanding of the social and cultural dynamics shaping judicial proceedings, including understanding their local culture. Employing a semi-structured observational research framework, we enriched our findings with detailed field notes, presenting both a replication and an innovative experiment in qualitative research methodology.

Utilizing insights derived from our field notes and observations, we offered case studies representing diverse contexts, which served as narratives of the complex intersections of trauma, justice, and legal proceedings. Furthermore, we sought to shed light on the experiences of researchers operating in rural areas, navigating the challenges of conducting field research with limited resources and time constraints. Through sharing our insights and experiences, we aimed to contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities inherent in conducting research in rural settings to raise awareness for fellow researchers facing similar challenges. Additionally, we employed a semi-structured observational methodology highlighting the role of observations and the field note process. This approach allowed us to dive into the complexities of courtroom proceedings and to examine potential disparities in trauma-informed practices between a rural and urban jurisdiction.

Our findings shed light on the challenges and opportunities present in both rural and urban legal systems and opportunities to engage in rural-specific research within these spaces. Central to our methodology was the documentation of participant behavior, reactions, and interactions during courtroom proceedings alongside our firsthand observations of community dynamics. Understanding the challenges faced by individuals navigating the criminal legal system or advocating for their safety as victims, we empathetically put ourselves in their shoes. We constantly asked ourselves, “What would a trauma-informed approach entail?” and evaluated how well personnel responded to this approach. This constant reflection helped us better gauge the degree of trauma-informed care present in the courtroom environment. Unfortunately, our combined field notes produced a glaring overall finding—there were few examples of effective trauma-informed practices occurring within either JD. When positive exchanges were observed, they were generally limited to a specific judge (e.g., one rural judge) or a specialty docket (e.g., juvenile). We suggest that cases involving due process and the rights of the accused are not necessarily a focal point of judges' training or day-to-day practice. In simpler terms, judges and other courtroom players tend to prioritize being attentive to the emotions and stress of individuals in court, mainly when it is directly related to upholding due process and safeguarding the rights of defendants. In cases where this connection was less clear, courtroom staff may not see the necessity or justification for such attentiveness.

We also want to highlight the unexpected observations and findings in our research. We noticed that the judges in the rural JD exhibited more examples of trauma-informed practices within the courtroom compared to the judges in the urban JD. It is important to recognize that biases, stereotypes, and beliefs surrounding rural communities—such as conservatism, resistance to

change, and lack of advanced training—can often be exaggerated as an overarching narrative. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are individuals within rural communities who are exceptionally compassionate, supportive, and aligned with trauma-informed care principles. Considering the rural judge's multifaceted responsibilities overseeing numerous cases, it becomes more evident that the trauma-informed approach can be applied more consistently and have a greater impact. Although rural JD demonstrated significant potential in implementing trauma-informed approaches, it was evident the judge and all personnel at the courthouse were stretched thin, with limited time, resources, and training opportunities compared to their counterparts in the urban JD. Therefore, we advocate for increased resources and funding support for rural JDs to improve access to services and rural-specific programs. This would enable the flourishing of trauma-informed services in these underserved communities.

While there is increasing recognition of the importance of trauma-informed approaches in certain specialized courts, it remains less prevalent in the broader judicial system, where courtroom personnel often navigate a complex balancing act between efficiency and empathy, depending on the nature of the cases before them. Furthermore, there is a sustained focus on ensuring that all courtroom personnel receive both basic and advanced training in trauma-informed practices. This emphasis acknowledges that no individual participant can fully embody the principles of trauma-informed care alone; rather, it requires collaborative efforts among all stakeholders.

While courtroom observations reveal important insights into trauma-informed practices, the broader socio-cultural and political context equally shapes the experience and accessibility of justice within these communities. In rural areas, the visible display of political conservatism and self-reliant values, as observed through community symbols and signage, suggests an environment that may affect community members' interactions with and perceptions of the justice system. This political landscape potentially impacts how trauma-informed practices are received, prioritized, or even viewed as necessary by judicial personnel and community stakeholders.

On the other hand, the more diverse and resource-rich urban setting reflects a different set of socio-cultural pressures, where a mix of political beliefs and a greater demand for efficiency create unique challenges for implementing individualized, trauma-informed approaches. These socio-political dynamics emphasized the need for culturally responsive strategies that respect and align with the values and expectations of each community. Therefore, it is important to recognize the relationship between local political climates and courtroom practices, so policymakers and judicial personnel can utilize trauma-informed initiatives to better meet the needs of justice-involved individuals within their specific socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, this understanding can help guide future training and resource allocation, ensuring that both rural and urban court systems are supported in ways that address the unique socio-political factors influencing each community.

Finally, we want to emphasize the significance of rural research within criminology. Scholars operating in rural settings often find themselves at the forefront, conducting investigations through fieldwork, observations, and interviews. Despite their invaluable contributions, their efforts often go underacknowledged, failing to receive the recognition proportional to their impact on the broader discourse of criminology. Thus, there is a pressing need to advocate for increased visibility, resource allocation, and institutional support aimed at addressing the intricate complexities inherent to rural communities. Recognizing the importance of rural research is pivotal, as it acts as a catalyst for shedding light on critical issues and facilitating positive transformations within these frequently overlooked areas.

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## Notes on Contributors

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