

Access, Safety,
and Regional Context

A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF BC COURT LOCATIONS



Rise 
WOMEN'S LEGAL CENTRE

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A Comprehensive Assessment
of BC Court Locations

March 2026

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This document does not contain legal advice.
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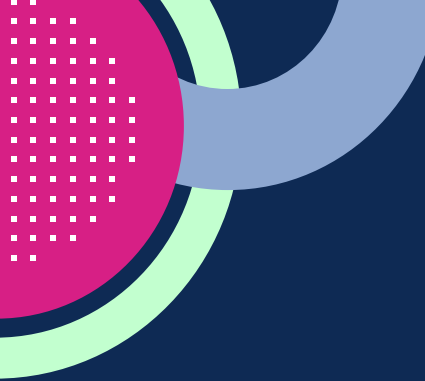
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Executive Summary

Because navigating family law can be one of the most challenging aspects of a survivor's life, it is essential to consider the impacts of court buildings on a survivor's physical, emotional, and psychological safety. BC court locations are expected to be places of justice and safety, but they are often unsafe or inaccessible for survivors of gender-based violence. Many features of court locations in BC may risk the safety of survivors as they navigate the physical buildings. These stressors are exacerbated when survivors must wait most of the day before their matter is called to be heard in the courtroom.

With this project, our primary goal was to assess as many BC court locations as possible to capture their strengths and shortcomings across the province. The results will be used to inform recommendations for improvement related to court-user safety.

BC court locations are expected to be places of justice and safety, but they are often unsafe or inaccessible for survivors of gender-based violence.

Methodology

This research project takes a mostly quantitative approach in assessing Supreme and Provincial Court locations in BC. We assessed each location ($N = 73$) using a list of safety metrics based on the 25 recommendations proposed in our 2022 report titled *Creating Safety in BC Courts: Key Challenges and Recommendations*. These safety metrics were represented by 22 closed-ended questions involving safety and accessibility, which were broken down into three categories: (1) building design, (2) interior space, and (3) resources for court users. The checklist for safety metrics included space for comments to capture additional observations.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

SAFETY AND WAYFINDING

It is difficult to avoid an abusive opposing party in most court locations.

A building's layout impacts a survivor's safety when attending court because crossing paths with an abusive opposing party can be both physically unsafe and emotionally disturbing. Court users may not be able to fully participate in their matter if they are triggered by unexpectedly seeing an opposing party they were trying to avoid. We identified several issues with the design of many court locations, including that 49% of locations did not have clear signage for navigating the building. We found that 67% of the assessed locations did not have multiple entrances and exits and 94% of locations did not have multiple ways in and out of the courtroom itself. We also found that 99% of locations did not have multiple pickup windows for court documents.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Court locations can be confusing and unsafe to navigate alone.

Given that the number of self-represented litigants attending court is increasing, it is vital to have supports in place to make navigating court locations safe and straightforward. It is especially important for survivors of violence to feel safe and informed about what to expect in a court location. We found that in 20% of locations there was not someone readily available to answer questions and in 42% of locations, sheriffs were hard to find. Almost all locations (96%) lacked information about being able to bring a support person to court and about half were missing adequate printed legal information. We also found that child care was not available at any court locations, which adds to the barriers for parents attending court.

WAITING AREAS AND LIBRARIES

Many locations lack appropriate waiting areas and amenities.

When court users must wait for their matters to be called, not having access to a private and safe space compromises their ability to engage in their appearance when it is time. We found that 46% of locations did not have a private or appropriate space for court users to wait. We also found that 40% of locations did not have effective paging systems, which limited where a court user could wait for fear of missing their hearing. Courthouse libraries generally make very good waiting spaces but only 50% of the libraries were easy to find. Unfortunately, not all court locations have a courthouse library. Another aspect of waiting is being able to find water and

food, to allow court users to feel well enough to participate when their matter is called. We found that 50% of locations did not have cold drinking water available for waiting court users but that only 18% of locations lacked some kind of food option close to the courthouse.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS FOR COURT USERS

Physical accessibility is not being met in many court locations.

While many locations had some elements of accessibility, we found that very few fully met accessibility requirements. We found that 42% of locations did not allow enough space for a wheelchair or someone on crutches and 78% of washrooms were not accessible using the BC Building Code as a reference. Generally, we found community-based spaces and court locations colocated with Service BC tended to be more physically accessible than traditional courthouses.

ENVIRONMENT AND LIGHTING

Court spaces can be intimidating and unwelcoming.

Court users often feel intimidated by the complexity of the proceedings, and this feeling can be exacerbated by the building environment itself. We found that only 13% of court locations had artwork or plants to help soften the interior spaces. Although most locations had comfortable temperatures and lighting, we found that some locations experienced extreme temperature or lighting issues. In 20% of the locations, the temperature was found to be uncomfortable often due to the cold that required people to wear their jackets indoors. In 21% of the locations, there were lighting issues mostly due to dark hallways and flickering lights.

NEXT STEPS

Our hope going into this research project was that we would be able to assess a large number of court locations to better understand the ways in which court users' safety could be improved. We are pleased to have results from 87% of the places where court is held in BC. We expected to discover a wide variety of building conditions and amenities across the province, and while this expectation was confirmed, we also observed the benefits of local adaptations made for local court users and court workers. We plan to explore these differences and creative adaptations further in a second phase of the research.

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

51 of the 73 locations
were traditional
courthouses



22 locations were not traditional courthouses, including:



9 in a community centre
or municipal hall



5 in a Service
BC building



4 in First
Nations spaces

It is difficult to avoid an abusive opposing party in most court locations



67% did not have
multiple entrances
and exits



94% did not have
multiple ways in and out
of the courtroom itself



99% did not have
multiple pickup windows
for court documents



49% did not have clear
signage for navigating
the building

Court locations can be confusing and unsafe to navigate alone



20% did not have
someone readily available
to answer questions



51% were missing adequate
printed legal information
(posters and pamphlets)



96% lacked information
about the right to have
a support person



In 42% of locations,
the sheriffs were
hard to find



100% did not
have child care
available

Many locations lack appropriate waiting areas and amenities



46% did not have
a private space for
court users to wait



50% of the places with
a Courthouse Libraries
BC location had
easy-to-find libraries



40% did not
have effective
paging systems



50% did not have cold
drinking water for
waiting court users



18% lacked some
kind of food
option nearby

Physical accessibility is not being met in many court locations



42% did not include enough
space for a wheelchair or
someone on crutches



78% of washrooms were
not accessible using the BC
Building Code as a reference



Only 13% of court locations
had artwork or plants to help
soften the interior spaces



21% had
lighting
issues



20% had
temperature
issues

Court spaces can be intimidating and unwelcoming



Introduction

Because navigating family law can be one of the most challenging aspects of a survivor's life, it is essential to consider the impacts of court buildings on a survivor's physical, emotional, and psychological safety. BC court locations are expected to be places of justice and safety, but they are often unsafe or inaccessible for survivors of gender-based violence.

Many features of court locations in BC may risk the safety of survivors as they navigate the physical buildings. Sometimes survivors will not have a safe place to wait for their matter to be called. They may lack access to drinking water or a physically accessible washroom. In some locations, survivors may have a hard time finding the sheriffs, the registry, or anyone to ask for help. No court locations currently offer a child care service, so many survivors struggle to find affordable, short-term child care while they attend court. All of these stressors only get worse when survivors must wait most of the day before they even get into the courtroom for their matter to be heard.

In 2022, Rise Women's Legal Centre released a report titled *Creating Safety in BC Courts: Key Challenges and Recommendations*.¹ The report outlined 25 recommendations for improving courthouse safety in BC, including for the government to audit all court locations for safety and accessibility. In 2023, the Ministry of Attorney General provided funding to Rise to support initiatives identified in the *Creating Safety* report. This current research project builds on the previous work from 2022, starting with our comprehensive assessment, the first of its kind in the province. The assessment represents an important step in examining the challenges and successes across BC in order to improve safety for court users.

With this project, our primary goal was to assess as many BC court locations as possible to capture their strengths and shortcomings across the province. The results will be used to inform recommendations for improvement related to court-user safety. A secondary goal was to assess for accessibility to understand how all court users might navigate court locations with dignity. The assessments focused on the public spaces of court locations and did not include the courtroom interiors.

1 Haley Hrymak, *Creating Safety in BC Courts: Key Challenges and Recommendations* (Rise Women's Legal Centre, 2022), womenslegalcentre.ca/publications/report-creating-safety-in-bc-courts [*Creating Safety*].

51 of the 73 locations
were traditional
courthouses



22 locations were not traditional courthouses, including:



9 in a community centre
or municipal hall



5 in a Service
BC building



4 in First
Nations spaces

Three locations used strip malls, and one used a hotel for court.

This current research project will combine results from the first assessment phase with select recommendations outlined in the *Creating Safety* report to formulate interventions that we will test in a second phase of research. The second phase of the project will take place in three different court locations to allow us to test the effectiveness of the interventions in different contexts. After the second phase of this research is complete, Rise will publish an additional report to recommend solutions for improving the accessibility and safety of court locations.

This report summarizes our findings from the assessment phase of the research, involving 73 of the 84 court locations in BC.² Because court is held in a wide variety of buildings, we use the term “court location” to reference these places.³ We refer to “traditional courthouses” as buildings that were purpose-built to host court. Although 51 of the 73 locations we assessed were traditional courthouses, 22 were not. These included nine locations that used a community centre or municipal hall to hold court. Five locations were housed within a Service BC building, and four used a First Nations space, such as a band office or Indigenous community gathering hall. Three locations used strip malls, and one location used a hotel for court. For a full list of BC’s 84 court locations, please see Appendix 2.

2 For the purposes of this research, we counted a total of 84 buildings where court appearances are held. This number differs from the 82 locations listed by the BC Provincial Court because we counted separate court *buildings*, whereas the BC Provincial Court sometimes considers two buildings to be one *location*. The Court Services Branch counts 90 court locations, because it includes six communities where there is no designated building for court. CSB also counts separate buildings for two locations in Vancouver, as we did.

3 This usage is consistent with terminology used by the Supreme Court of BC and the Provincial Court of BC. See bccourts.ca/supreme_court/ and provinciacourt.bc.ca/.

Many of the concerns we have highlighted in both the past and current research are not new issues, and many people within the provincial government told us they were aware of the challenges at court locations across the province. This report is meant to present a comprehensive assessment of the physical court spaces and the resources available to help with moving beyond the challenges to building solutions. We focus especially on survivors of violence to inform these solutions and hope that any future improvements will benefit a much wider group of court users and those who work within BC's court locations. We appreciate this opportunity to work collaboratively towards a shared goal of increased safety for court users across BC.

Methodology

This research project takes a mostly quantitative approach in assessing Supreme and Provincial Court locations in BC. In designing this project, we aimed to collect objective data that would capture a wide range of court location features impacting safety for survivors. We wanted to be able to identify where there was a specific need for improvement as well as highlight the wide range of buildings where court is held across BC.

We assessed the locations ($N = 73$) using a list of safety metrics based on the 25 recommendations proposed in the *Creating Safety* report. These safety metrics were represented by 22 closed-ended questions involving safety and accessibility, which were broken down into three categories: (1) building design, (2) interior space, and (3) resources for court users. For aggregate results based on the 22 questions, please see Appendix 1.

Each court location was assessed against the same safety metrics to highlight strengths, shortcomings, and the differences between locations. All 73 assessments were done in person between June 2024 and May 2025. The two lead researchers, Samantha Davis and Stephanie Melnyk, assessed 36 of the court locations. Nine staff members at Rise assisted with data collection at 17 of the locations. The remaining 20 court locations were assessed by 18 trusted community partners from various organizations across BC. The trusted community partners signed confidentiality agreements and consent forms before participating in the research and followed a standardized procedure for completing the assessments to ensure data was collected consistently.

The checklist of safety metrics was designed to be printed and filled out manually by the data collector while observing each court location. The survey consists of 22 questions that could be answered with “yes,” “no,” “not applicable,” or “unverified.” Each question had detailed descriptions to help with consistency in the data collection. Not all questions were answered for every location. The data collector could provide additional observations in the comment sections if applicable. The qualitative data collected was coded using the data analysis software NVivo 14 and analyzed for themes and standout findings.

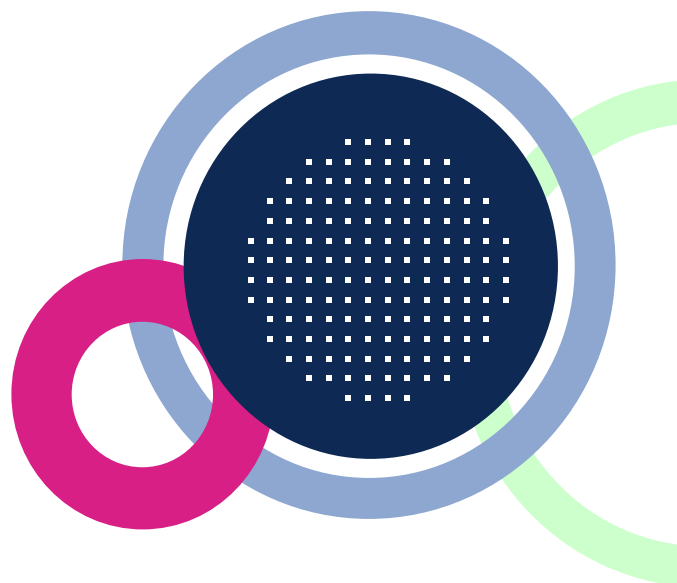
Research Limitations

We were not able to assess 11 court locations due to the cost of travelling to remote communities.⁴ One other location was not available for assessment as court appearances were no longer being scheduled.⁵ We recognize that not assessing a location because it was too remote (and, by extension, too costly to visit) may have led to missing considerations not experienced in the assessed locations. It was a priority in this research to ensure we included locations that reflected the experiences of court users in rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous communities, since these locations are often under-resourced and underserved. While we were able to capture results for some isolated and rural court locations, we regret that we did not have the opportunity to assess the 11 remaining locations. We strongly recommend that the government evaluate the needs of these 11 locations.

Our results were impacted by how busy the court location was on the specific day we visited. Our findings are a snapshot in time only.

While we did not assess for all-gender washrooms, we believe adding all-gender washrooms to court locations would increase safety for some survivors.

The number of locations that were assessed for remote appearances, opaque screens, and availability of CCTV was low because we could not verify this information by observation alone. However, the lack of results for these metrics had very little impact on our overall findings, since the courts are already moving towards new technology for virtual and hybrid options in appearances.



4 The 11 locations not visited were Ahousaht, Atlin, Chetwynd, Dease Lake, Fort Nelson, Good Hope Lake, Kwadacha, Lower Post, Sparwood, Stewart, and Tsay Keh Dene.

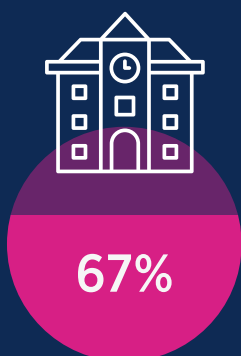
5 The McBride location is no longer scheduling matters as of April 4, 2025. Court for this community will be scheduled in Valemount instead.

Safety and Wayfinding

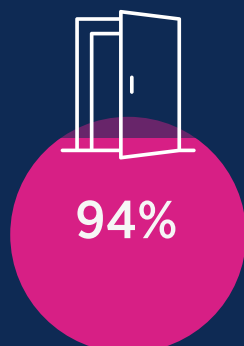
FINDING: It is difficult to avoid an abusive opposing party in most court locations.

A building's layout impacts a survivor's safety when attending court because crossing paths with an abusive opposing party can be both physically unsafe and emotionally disturbing. Court users may not be able to fully participate in their matter if they are triggered by unexpectedly seeing an opposing party they were trying to avoid. Typically, in court locations there are three points where a survivor is forced into close contact with their abuser: entering and exiting the courthouse building, entering and exiting the courtroom, and picking up or filing court documents.

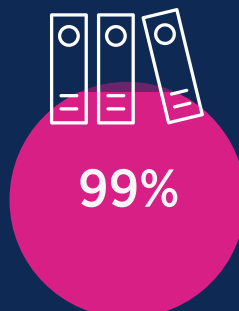
The results from our assessments showed that most court locations (67%) had only one way in or out of the building. In some locations, this was for safety and allowed sheriffs to conduct security checks but, unfortunately, a single access point could result in survivors encountering an abusive party when entering the building. Similarly, it would also risk both parties leaving the building at the same place and time. If a survivor must walk to transit or their vehicle, this could pose a serious safety risk, especially if they are alone.



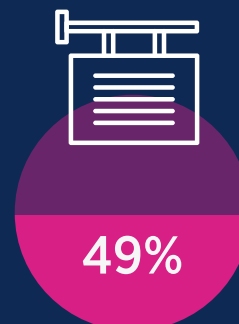
67% did not have multiple entrances and exits ($n = 73$)



94% did not have multiple ways in and out of the courtroom itself ($n = 70$)



99% did not have multiple pickup windows for court documents ($n = 67$)



49% did not have clear signage for navigating the building ($n = 72$)

Similarly, most court locations (94%) did not have more than one way in or out of the courtroom itself. The locations that did have multiple pathways in or out were non-traditional courthouses, such as community centres. With multiple doors, there would be a decreased chance of a survivor crossing paths with an abusive party. For context, traditional courtrooms are purposefully designed with one door for court users, allowing sheriffs to keep the courtroom secure. Although adding doors could address the safety concerns of a survivor encountering an abusive party, multiple doors could pose a security risk and may not be a practical solution.⁶

Almost every court location (99%) had only one registry window where someone would pick up court documents. If a survivor needed to file or pick up documents, they might have to wait in line with their abuser to do so, which could be distressing.

Besides unsafe entry and exit, inadequate signage was a significant finding. In almost half (49%) of the court locations assessed, courtrooms were not clearly marked, especially in non-traditional court locations. Both courthouse libraries and washrooms within the courthouses were hard to find. Other signage issues observed at some court locations included

- unclear direction to the elevator
- a lack of accommodation for visually impaired court users
- most signs being only in English
- a lack of clear exit signs
- out-of-date operational hours being posted for duty counsel

In one location, Service BC staff were routinely asked for directions to the courtrooms due to unclear signage. In another location, a digital wayfinding station forced court users to congregate in the same area when figuring out where they were going. Some locations were using temporary signs, which demonstrated that court staff were aware of the need to improve wayfinding. Having multiple pathways with good signage is key to safety, since survivors need to easily find clear routes into, through, and out of a court location.

While we did not specifically assess for the layout of hallways, corners, or stairwells, we identified several issues with the design of many court locations that we think are worth noting. We found some buildings to be very small, which meant an abusive party could walk in and see everyone who was there right away. Other buildings had very tight hallways and blind corners, which made it more likely for a survivor to run into their abuser unexpectedly. In some locations, we found there were large open spaces with long sightlines that would allow an abusive party to visually track the survivor while in the court location. While long sightlines can be helpful for survivors to see places to wait, to find washrooms, or to locate exits, they can also make it difficult for survivors to avoid an abusive party.

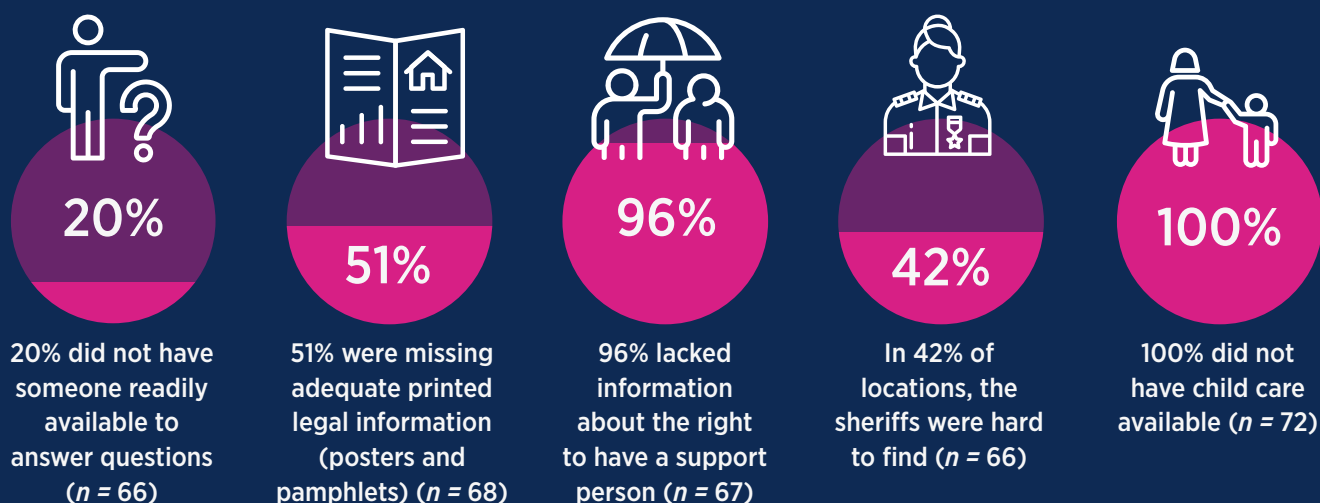
6 Any proposed solutions in the later stages of this research will not recommend the addition of doorways in and out of courtrooms or in and out of buildings. Instead, the focus will be on interventions that compensate for any structural features that impact court-user safety.

Information and Resources

FINDING: Court locations can be confusing and unsafe to navigate alone.

Given the high number of self-represented litigants attending court, it is vital to have supports in place to make navigating court locations safe and straightforward. Safe access is especially important for those attending court for the first time.

One effective way to support court users is through helpful staff who can give directions and answer questions. In our assessments, we observed that helpful staff included security guards, victim services workers, sheriffs, courthouse librarians, registry staff, duty counsel, Service BC workers, probation officers, and other support workers employed by local non-profit organizations. Ideally, staff of any organization could assist court users to find safe places to wait, washrooms, and drinking water. In community-based court locations, like community centres, there were naturally more staff around to help guide court users. We found that 20% of the 66 court locations we assessed for this metric did not have someone readily available to answer questions.



In addition to helpful staff, it is equally important to provide printed resources for court users to access reliable information about court that they can take with them. While some locations did have pamphlets, 51% of the locations had out-of-date or incomplete printed resources. Specifically, 96% of locations lacked information about the right to have a support person attend court. We also found that several locations lacked family law resources. On a positive note, it was common for courthouse libraries to be well stocked with print materials that were provided in multiple languages.

The BC Sheriff Service is mandated to help with court-user safety, but in 42% of locations, the offices of the sheriffs were hard to find. In many court locations, either the sheriffs' office or the sheriffs themselves were visible upon entering, which was very helpful. However, in other locations, sheriffs were less visible because their offices were located in the basement, at the end of a long hallway, or tucked away behind the registry office. We counted seven court locations with no sheriffs' office at all, which would make it hard for a survivor to find a sheriff for safety planning or safe walk help. In smaller locations, sheriffs were required in the courtroom, which meant they were not available to assist court users in waiting areas.

Child care is not a service that is offered in the BC courts, but the costs and availability of reliable child care have been identified as barriers for people attending court.⁷ During our assessment, we observed two court locations held in community centres that also housed child care programs. While the child care was not designated for court users, it is an interesting example of how court users may be able to access some form of child care close to court, especially if it takes place in a non-traditional courthouse like a community centre. Two other locations we visited had made efforts to help families by providing toys and play spaces for children.⁸

It is especially important for survivors of violence to feel safe and informed about what to expect in a court location. Having someone who can answer questions, having sheriffs who can help with safety, and making print resources available are some of the key ways to make navigating the courts less confusing.

Having someone who can answer questions, having sheriffs who can help with safety, and making print resources available are some of the key ways to make navigating the courts less confusing.

7 *Creating Safety*, *supra* note 1 at 40.

8 One example was a Justice Access Centre that provided toys and the other example was a play area set up in a waiting space just outside the main courtroom. We appreciated how these accommodations might make attending a court location more pleasant for the parent and child while waiting, but we note that a play area is not a substitute for child care during the actual court appearance.

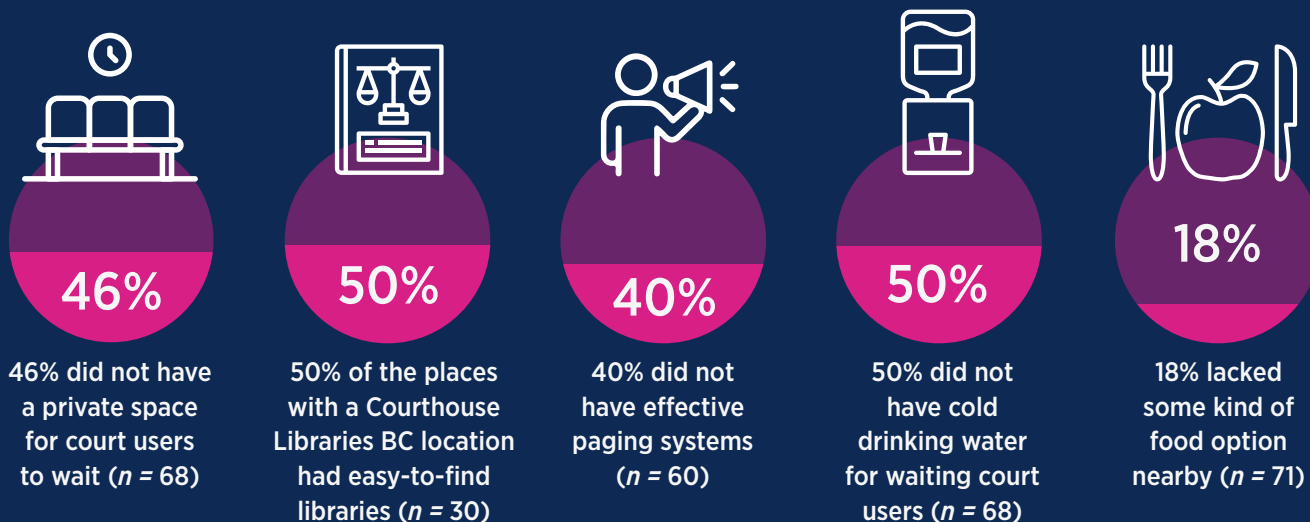
Waiting Areas and Libraries

FINDING: Many locations lack appropriate waiting areas and amenities.

Having a private waiting space is important for someone to be in a good headspace to attend court. It can be very distressing for a survivor to be in proximity to their abuser while they wait to enter the courtroom, especially if they are triggered by their abuser or experience physical intimidation.

Being able to wait in a separate space would allow survivors to feel safer, calmer, and more secure, especially if they have a long wait. A separate waiting space would also allow survivors some privacy for legal advice from their lawyer or emotional support from their support worker or support person. However, 46% of the 68 locations we assessed did not have a private waiting space for court users.

We observed a variety of issues with waiting rooms, including many interview rooms that were locked or reserved for use by counsel or legal aid staff only. Some locations had interview rooms



that were available but just difficult to locate. We were told that in some locations, court users would wait outside the building or in their vehicle until a sheriff or victim services worker came to get them. In many locations, we found the seating in waiting areas to be not only limited but also very uncomfortable and sometimes falling apart. In several locations, court users were expected to sit on hard wooden chairs or metal benches, which could be difficult for long wait times. In some locations, there was not enough seating for everyone and many people had to stand.

Courthouse Libraries BC is a non-profit foundation with locations in 30 courts, and these libraries are a great resource for many court users. They provide comfortable places to sit, computers to use, and knowledgeable staff familiar with the law. We found that courthouse libraries in many locations appeared to be welcoming spaces for court users to wait, but very few were open during regular court hours. In addition, half of the libraries (50%) were difficult to find because they lacked clear signage or were located in underutilized areas of the building. Some libraries had locked doors and limited public hours.

Generally, a paging system will have an impact on a court user's experience because they can only wait in areas where they can hear their matter being called. If it were easier to be paged, survivors would be able to wait in interview rooms, washrooms, or other spaces in the building without worrying about missing their court matter. During the assessments, we found that 40% of locations did not have effective paging systems. Some paging systems were hard to hear due to echoing or fuzzy audio. Other paging systems could not be heard in all areas of a court location. There were a few examples of court staff not using the paging system by choice to protect court user privacy when calling parties for family matters. In these cases, the sheriffs would leave the courtroom to go find the parties wherever they were waiting. No matter the configuration of the court location, ineffective paging systems limit a court user's options about where they can wait.

Some positive observations included victim services offices that served as safe waiting spaces for survivors. One victim services office had tea, snacks, and water in their thoughtfully decorated space. In another location, the sheriffs had a staff room that was sometimes offered to survivors of violence as a waiting space. For court locations using a community centre or First Nations gathering space, the waiting areas tended to be more welcoming and offer food, art, plants, comfortable seating, familiar faces, and a sense of community.

Having access to water and food is important during a long wait, so court users feel well enough to participate when their matter is called. This is especially true when family court users must wait many hours, or even multiple days, for their matter to be heard in court. Although drinking water is routinely provided in the courtroom, we assessed for the availability of drinking water in the waiting areas of courthouses. This meant either functional water fountains or washroom sinks with cold drinking water and enough room for a cup or bottle to fit under the faucets. By this measure, half of the court locations we assessed (50%) did not have drinking water available, whereas 18% lacked nearby food options for court users.

Universal Access for Court Users

FINDING: Physical accessibility is not being met in many court locations.

While many locations had some elements of accessibility, we found that very few fully met accessibility requirements.⁹ Namely, 42% of locations did not allow enough space for a wheelchair or someone on crutches. A large number of the washrooms (78%) were not suitable for someone with a mobility aid, with a stroller, or with physical limitations. In some locations, the washrooms required a key for access, which provided another barrier if someone was looking for somewhere to quickly go. In some washrooms, we found that stall doors did not lock or close properly.

Some locations opted to prop washroom doors open, presumably to help where an automatic door was not available, but this further reduced the privacy in the washroom. The accessibility



42%

42% did not include enough space for a wheelchair or someone on crutches ($n = 69$)



78%

78% of washrooms were not accessible using the BC Building Code as a reference ($n = 68$)

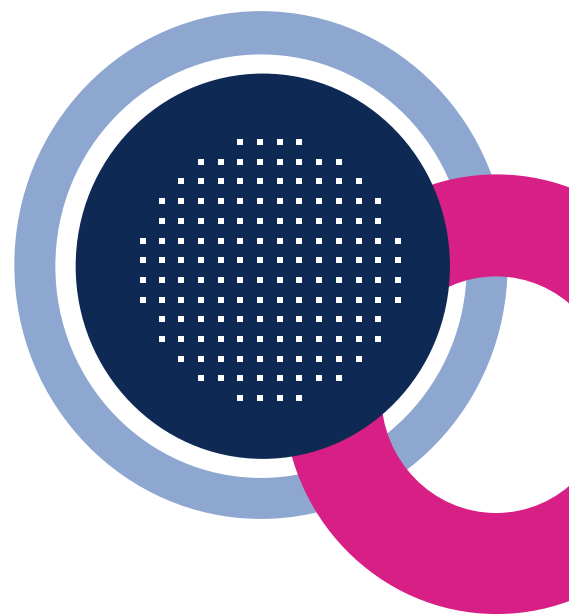
⁹ We refer to “Accessibility Requirements in the BC Building Code,” last updated June 10, 2025, gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/construction-industry/building-codes-standards/bc-codes/2024-bc-codes/accessibility.

of washrooms is important because they may also be used as a refuge, especially when other waiting spaces are not available.¹⁰

It was noted at some court locations that paved pathways from bus stops and parking lots did not have adequate snow removal or were icy. Some had broken pavement or no pathway at all. There were many locations with limited accessible parking spots.

Many court locations had courtrooms on the second floor, and one location was found to have no elevator at all to the second-floor courtrooms. It was explained that in the past, staff or local firefighters had needed to carry someone up the stairs to attend court. In one northern location, the elevator was unreliable and had broken down often. In two locations lacking accessible entrances, a court user who could not use stairs would be required to make their way uphill to an unmarked back door after arranging for someone to let them in. Having to wait outside a court location would put survivors of violence at risk, and making special arrangements to enter a building puts the onus on the court users who are already experiencing accessibility challenges.

Generally, community-based spaces and court locations housed with Service BC tended to be more physically accessible. These buildings featured ramps, elevators, electronic doors, wider hallways and doorways, accessible parking stalls, and even sidewalks. Being an accessible building is not just about providing ramps but going beyond, to accommodate people of all abilities.¹¹



¹⁰ *Creating Safety*, *supra* note 1 at 15.

¹¹ Disability Alliance BC, *Right to Be Safe: Creating Inclusive Services for Women with Disabilities Experiencing Violence* (Vancouver: Disability Alliance BC, 2016) at 15, <https://disabilityalliancebc.org/rbtsguideupdate/>.

Environment and Lighting

FINDING: Court spaces can be intimidating and unwelcoming.

Court users often feel intimidated by the complexity of the proceedings, and this feeling can be exacerbated by the building environment itself.¹² We found most court locations to feel sterile and intimidating. These feelings were based on a lack of colour, deteriorating furniture, and confusing building structure. Surveys completed by our community partners described many court locations as “bleak,” “rundown,” “old,” “sterile,” “commercial,” and “stark.”

When assessing for pleasant artwork or plants, we were looking for an environment that contributed to a welcoming feeling rather than an oppressive one. Where this safety metric was answered by “yes,” the decor included landscape prints, Indigenous artwork, or art by local



13%

Only 13% of court locations had artwork or plants to help soften the interior spaces ($n = 70$)



21%

21% have lighting issues ($n = 70$)



20%

20% have temperature issues ($n = 69$)

¹² *Creating Safety*, *supra* note 1 at 32.

students. Where this metric was answered by “no,” the artwork was limited to black-and-white photos of judges lined up on walls or one small piece of art on a wall, placed like an afterthought. Locations with plants that were either alive or artificial also scored well on this metric.

Although most locations had comfortable temperatures and lighting, we found that some locations experienced extreme issues in these areas. Where temperatures were a problem, court staff and court users needed to wear jackets in the winter because there was no heat. Some locations had inconsistent lighting, where main hallways were brightly lit and side hallways were underlit. One location had a dimly lit hallway to the sheriffs’ office, which made it feel like the public was not welcome. Another location had a long, unlit hallway to the washrooms at the far end of an underused mall that court users and lawyers alike said was a safety concern. Flickering lights were also a concern for being distracting and a challenge for people with sensory sensitivities.

At least two locations used some form of blue lighting in the washroom or hallway, which made it difficult to see or read. Blue lighting is sometimes used to deter the use of injection drugs.¹³ Although we did not have confirmation that deterrence was the intention in these two court locations, we thought it was likely the reason for the blue lights. This is a concern because besides making it difficult to see in a washroom, blue lighting makes it even more challenging for a court user who is using the washroom to get legal advice from a lawyer, review documents, or calm down — all of which are unintended but likely occurrences in court location washrooms. All forms of distracting, flickering, or blue lights made the washroom and public waiting areas unpleasant for all users.

Court location assessors made positive comments when natural light, colourful artwork, and plenty of greenery were part of the public court spaces. Community-based spaces used for court tended to be less intimidating and more pleasant, likely because they included many of these positive elements. A court location that contributes to a survivor’s sense of comfort during a stressful and potentially dangerous time of their life can ease the negative impact of attending court.

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13 Alexis Crabtree et al., “A Qualitative Study of the Perceived Effects of Blue Lights in Washrooms on People Who Use Injection Drugs” (2013) 10:22 Harm Reduct J 1, <https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1477-7517-10-22>.



Conclusion and Next Steps

[The court location] was overall uncomfortable and I would be terrified to have to appear here [facing] an abuser.

— Court support worker in a northern community

Our hope going into this research project was that we would be able to assess enough court locations to get a good picture of what was working and what might be lacking for court-user safety. We are pleased to have results from 87% of the places where court is held in BC. We expected to discover a wide variety of building conditions and amenities across the province, and while this expectation was confirmed, we also observed the benefits of local adaptations made for local court users and court workers. We plan to explore these differences and creative adaptations in a second phase of the research.

This comprehensive assessment was not a stand-alone goal, but rather a basis for developing solutions. The second phase of our research will take the form of a pilot to test solutions that address the biggest issues. Rebuilding courthouses is not a practical approach. Instead, we aim to test interventions that compensate for the issues we have identified. We propose seven safety interventions for the subsequent pilot phase:

Improved signage

- to help court users navigate the building and reduce the need to ask for directions
- to help survivors map out how to get where they are going within the court location

A court concierge

- to guide survivors to safe waiting spaces, resources, and amenities
- to mirror the success that support workers have in helping clients find what they need. This intervention seems useful because support workers who helped to complete assessments were more likely to mark “yes” for most of the metrics, likely due to their relationships and comfort in the courthouse environment. The court concierge would build on this successful model.

Provision of cold drinking water

- to enable court users to stay hydrated during long wait times

Provision of snacks where food is not available within the court location

- to allow court users to maintain their energy, especially during long waits

An alternative paging system

- to provide survivors with the option of waiting in a more comfortable space without fear of missing their matter when it is called

Improved print resources

- including pamphlets and posters that court users can take with them
- that ensure a variety of legal topics are covered

Private waiting areas

- to improve safety and comfort for survivors of violence
- including the expanded use of courthouse libraries where appropriate

In the pilot phase, we hope to spend multiple days at each of three different court locations. We are looking for a variety of contexts and will be including at least one traditional courthouse, at least one urban location, and at least one rural or northern location. The goal is to test these interventions under a variety of conditions to determine when, where, and how a specific intervention would be helpful.

The second phase of our research will take the form of a pilot to test solutions that address the biggest issues.

Appendix 1: Aggregate Results

Metric	n*	Yes	No	N/A	Unverified
1. Multiple entrances to court location?	73	24	49	0	11
2. Multiple entrances to courtroom?	70	4	66	0	14
3. More than one pickup spot for docs?	67	1	66	0	17
4. Bathrooms accessible?	68	15	53	0	16
5. Signage clear?	72	37	35	0	12
6. Private space to wait?	68	37	31	0	16
7. Paging heard everywhere?	60	36	24	0	24
8. Court location accessible?	69	40	29	0	15
9. Pleasant artwork or plants?	70	9	61	0	14
10. Lighting comfortable?	70	55	15	0	14
11. Temperature comfortable?	69	55	14	0	15
12. Cold drinking water available?	68	34	34	0	16
13. Food within five-minute radius?	71	58	13	0	13
14. Someone to answer questions?	66	53	13	0	18
15. Sheriffs available?	66	38	28	0	18
16. Posters and/or pamphlets?	68	33	35	0	16
17. Info about support person?	67	3	64	0	17
18. Child care available?	72	0	72	0	12
19. Library easy to find and access?**	30	15	15	54	-
20. Space for remote appearance?	55	29	26	0	29
21. Screen for appearances?	42	37	5	0	42
22. CCTV available?	44	19	25	0	40

* Sample size = number of court locations checked for the specific safety metric.

** Only select court locations have a library run by Courthouse Libraries BC.

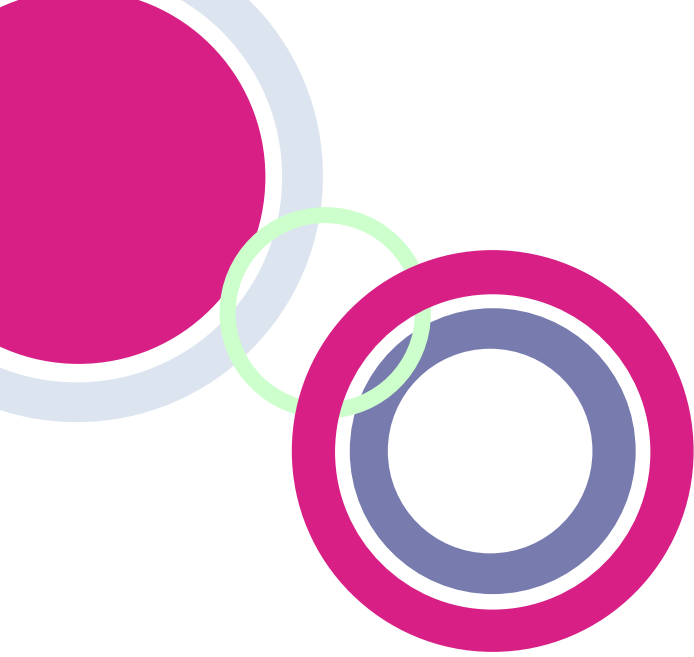
Appendix 2: Court Locations

Assessed Court Locations (N = 73)	
1. 100 Mile House	38. Nanaimo (main location)
2. Abbotsford	39. Nanaimo (annex location)
3. Anahim Lake	40. Nelson
4. Bella Bella	41. New Aiyansh
5. Bella Coola	42. New Westminster
6. Burns Lake	43. North Vancouver
7. Campbell River	44. Pemberton
8. Castlegar	45. Penticton
9. Chilliwack	46. Port Alberni
10. Clearwater	47. Port Coquitlam
11. Courtenay	48. Port Hardy
12. Cranbrook	49. Powell River
13. Creston	50. Prince George
14. Daajing Giids	51. Prince Rupert
15. Dawson Creek	52. Princeton
16. Downtown Community Court – 211 Gore Ave*	53. Quesnel
17. Duncan	54. Revelstoke
18. Fernie	55. Richmond
19. Fort St. James	56. Robson Square PC – 800 Hornby St*
20. Fort St. John	57. Rossland
21. Fraser Lake	58. Salmon Arm
22. Ganges	59. Sechelt
23. Gold River	60. Smithers
24. Golden	61. Surrey
25. Grand Forks	62. Terrace
26. Hazelton	63. Tofino**
27. Houston	64. Tumbler Ridge
28. Invermere	65. Ucluelet
29. Kamloops	66. Valemount
30. Kelowna	67. Vancouver Supreme Court – 800 Smithe St*
31. Kitimat	68. Vancouver Criminal Court – 222 Main St*
32. Klemtu	69. Vanderhoof
33. Lillooet	70. Vernon
34. Mackenzie	71. Victoria
35. Masset	72. Western Communities
36. Merritt	73. Williams Lake
37. Nakusp	

Unassessed Court Locations (<i>n</i> = 11)
Ahousaht Provincial Court
Atlin Provincial Court
Chetwynd Provincial Court
Dease Lake Provincial Court
Fort Nelson Law Courts
Good Hope Lake Provincial Court
Kwadacha Provincial Court
Lower Post Provincial Court
Sparwood Provincial Court
Stewart Provincial Court
Tsay Keh Dene Provincial Court

* Two separate buildings counted as one location by the courts.

** We assessed the Tofino Community Centre, which is no longer being used by the courts as they have moved to the Tin Wis Best Western instead. Please note that McBride was no longer a court location as of time of publication.



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We are grateful to Indigenous Peoples for their enduring stewardship over their lands since time immemorial. We recognize Indigenous communities for their resistance, resilience and resurgence and their enduring care of the land against colonial legal systems and practices. We acknowledge that as a predominantly settler organization, we share an obligation to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and that we have a responsibility to learn and implement decolonizing legal practices.

