

IMPACT OF COVID ON COURTS

ASHLEY KURIAN,^{1,3} HONORABLE JUDGE J. CHRISTIAN BECERRA²

DULLES HIGH SCHOOL, SUGAR LAND, TX¹
434TH DISTRICT COURT, RICHMOND, TX²

GIFTED AND TALENTED MENTORSHIP PROGRAM, FORT BEND ISD, TX³



INTRODUCTION

For many American citizens, the process of resolving disputes through **the court system is tedious, stressful, and long**. According to a study done by the National Center for State Courts), **the average time to a trial** in the US is **256 days** (~8.5 months) **for a felony case**. The **pandemic** has also taken its toll, with Reuters finding “the median criminal. . .case moved through the federal **courts 44%. . .slower. .** than compared to. . .pre-pandemic years.” Fort Bend County holds 6 district level courts, which resolve larger civil cases and all criminal cases, 4 county courts at law, which resolve minor civil cases, and 1 county court.

METHODOLOGY

To **measure the effects of COVID on caseloads in Fort Bend County**, the researcher utilized both data available to the public on the Fort Bend County website² and data given by Fort Bend County District Judges.

Only the **five district level courts handling felony charges** were analyzed, and data was collected on the **total number of cases in the system over six years (2017-2022)** from **January 1st to June 30th**. Further data, specific to each court, was taken from the months January 2021, May 2022, and April 2023. Fort Bend County District Judges were also **interviewed** to understand what practices were utilized to speed up cases and explain differences in numbers over the past six years.

OBJECTIVE:

The researcher seeks to understand the effects of the pandemic on caseloads in Fort Bend County and identify possible factors that help courts dispose of cases faster.

RESULTS

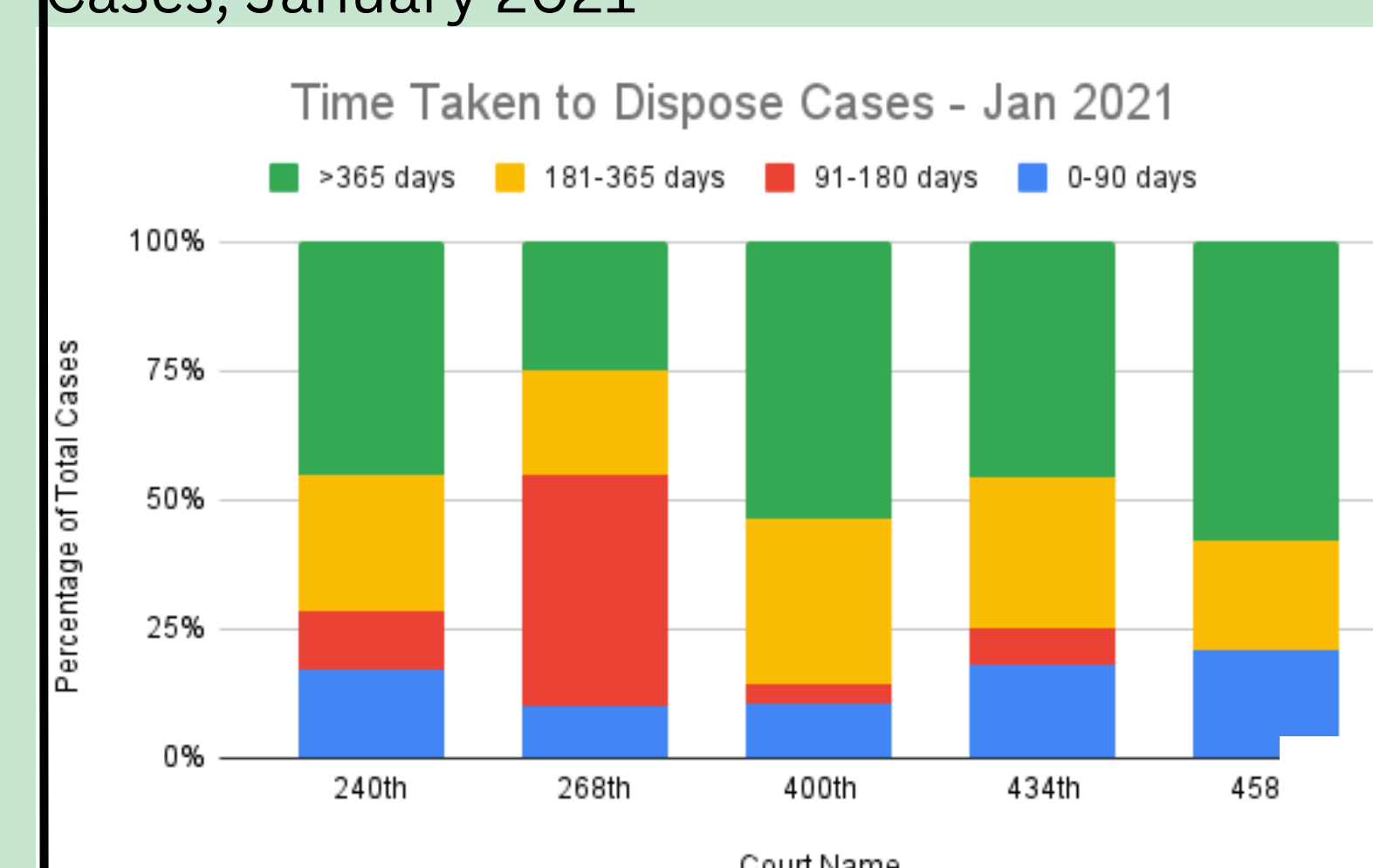
Figure 1: Monthly Court Data
from the . . .

**Disposed* refers to when the judgment is signed. This case has been gone through the full legal process (

***Discrepancies in net cases may be from inactive cases being reopened, cases being appealed-- these are not considered new cases and are not recorded in the chart*

Court	240th	268th	400th	434th	458th
March 2023					
Beginning of Month	1470	1251	1291	1026	1093
End of Month	1430	1214	1312	983	1086
New Cases	38	27	40	28	63
Disposed	88	67	28	79	76
Net Cases	40	37	-21	43	7
May 2022					
Beginning of Month	1447	1305	971	994	1310
End of Month	1439	1271	950	988	1289
New Cases	38	35	42	38	27
Disposed	49	70	67	51	54
	8	34	21	6	21
Jan 2021					
Beginning of Month	7112	1499	985	1400	1384
End of Month	7215	1527	983	1392	1416
New Cases	204	44	34	29	48
Disposed	129	20	40	44	19
	-103	-28	2	8	-32

Figure 2: Time Taken to Dispose Cases, January 2021



All mentions of the 240th, 268th, 400th, 434th, and 458th refer to the 240th District Court, 268th District Court, 400th District Court, 434th District Court, and 458th District Court..

Figure 3: Time Taken to Dispose Cases, May 2022

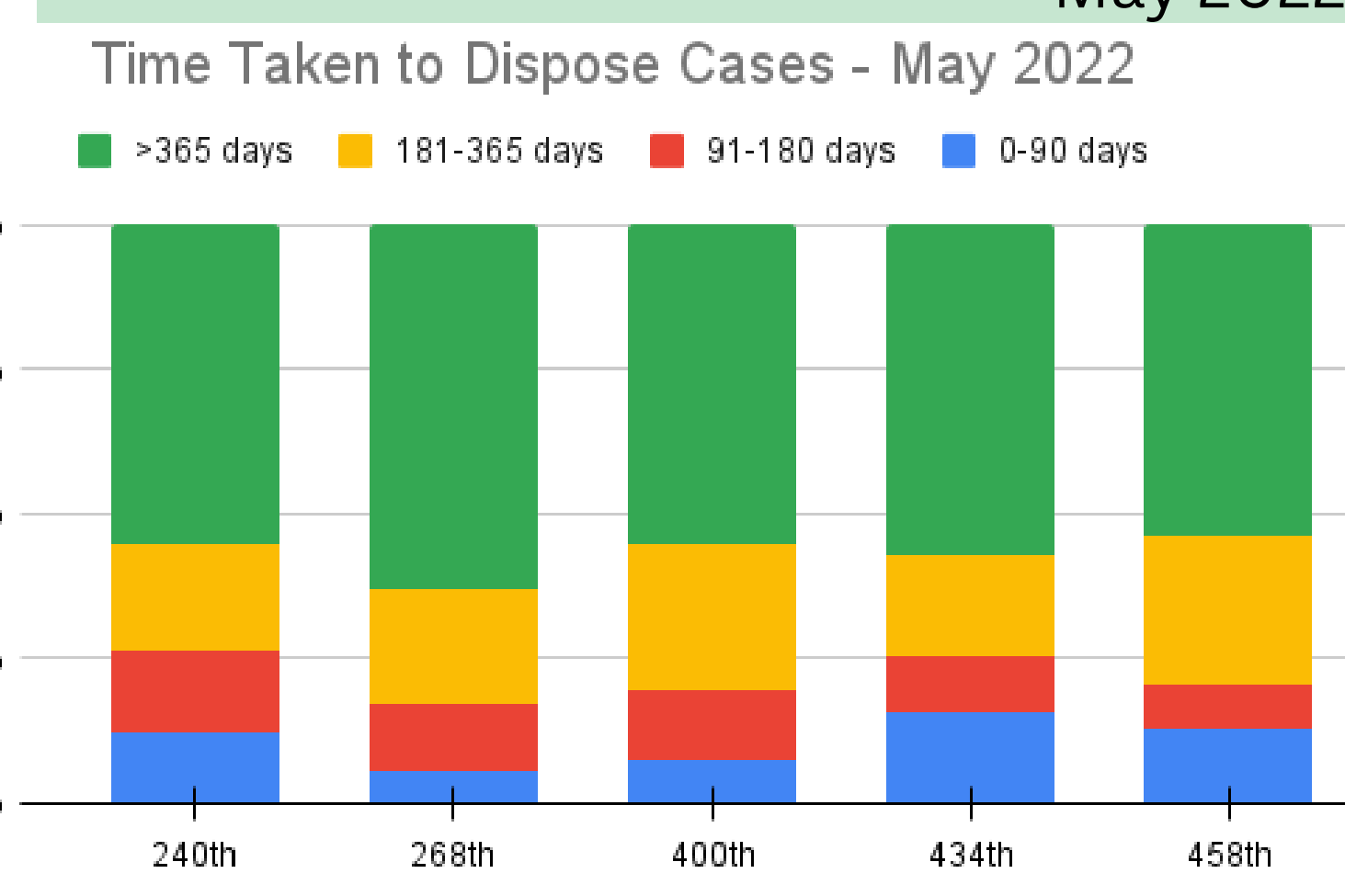
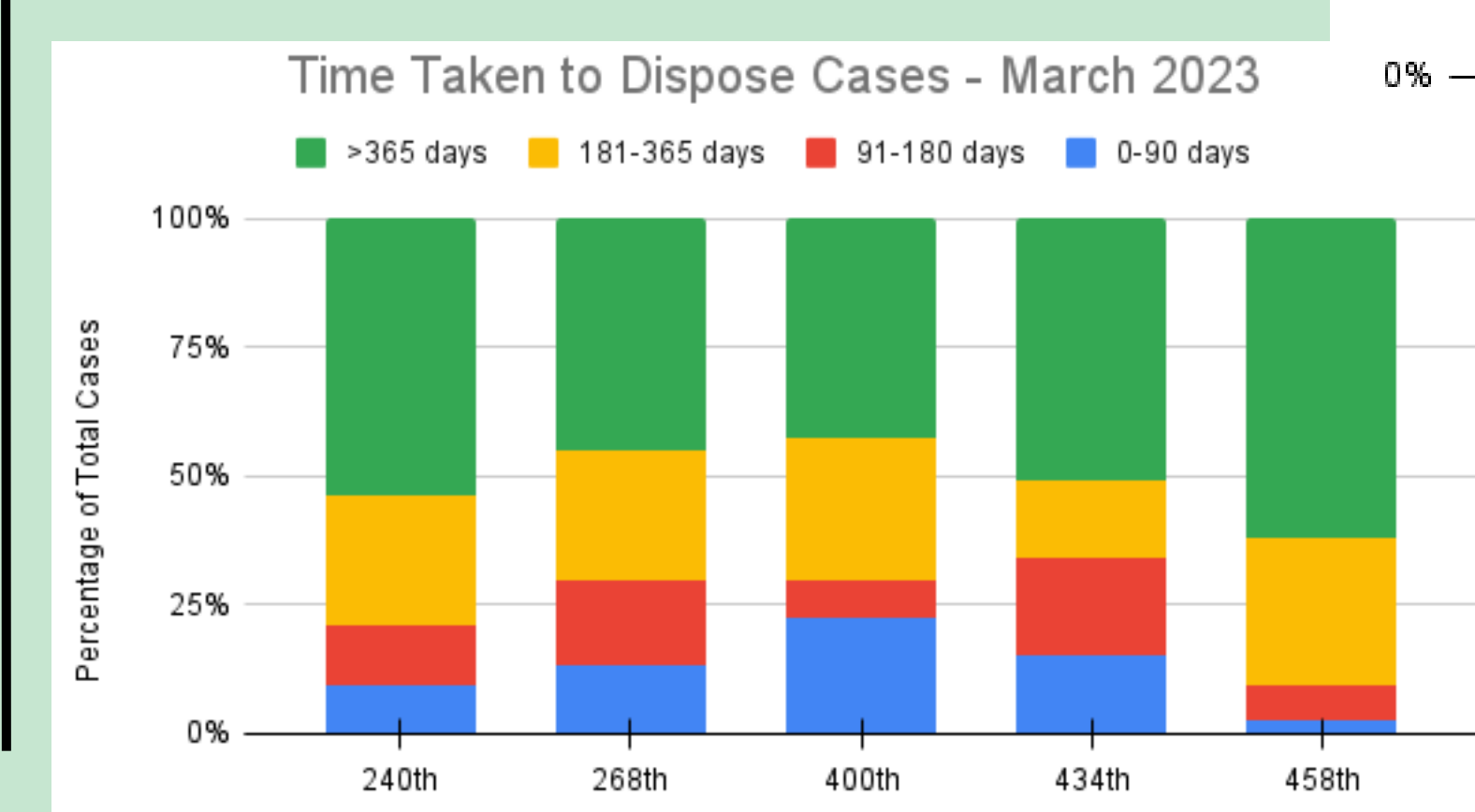


Figure 4: Time Taken to Dispose Cases, March 2023



FINDINGS/CONCLUSIONS

The data indicates that Fort Bend has worked to **significantly decrease the number of active cases**. While January 2021 and May 2022 demonstrate increased felony caseloads, March 2023 shows **fewer new cases being introduced into the court system**. Furthermore, while January 2021 has more cases coming in than being disposed of, May 2022 and March 2023 **indicate that Fort Bend is working faster to get rid of cases than new ones are coming in**. (Figure 1).

The time taken to dispose of cases has somewhat decreased. In January 2021 and May 2022, most courts took longer than 365 days to dispose of the majority of their cases. However, the March 2023 graph demonstrates more cases taking 181 days or less. As national average for felony cases is 293 days (see introduction), these numbers are indicative of a steadily increasing pace in the Fort Bend court system.

DISCUSSION

These numbers mark the beginnings of a faster court system in Fort Bend. When speaking to 434th District Judge Christian Becerra, he often remarked on **the judge being the main reason courts move fast or slow**. According to him, the experience level of the judge, as well as their work ethic, determines the pace of the court. Because **there are relatively few regulations on the number of cases a judge must take and time they must be in office**, the judges' outlooks can vary widely. While **methods like Zoom** have allowed for parts of the court process to be held remotely, shortening the time it takes to get through a case, **much of the court process is still required to be done in person**.

If more studies were to be done on this topic, the researcher would recommend studying whether the manner in which cases are resolved is consistent, which aspects of the court process add the most time, and whether court structure plays a role in timeliness.