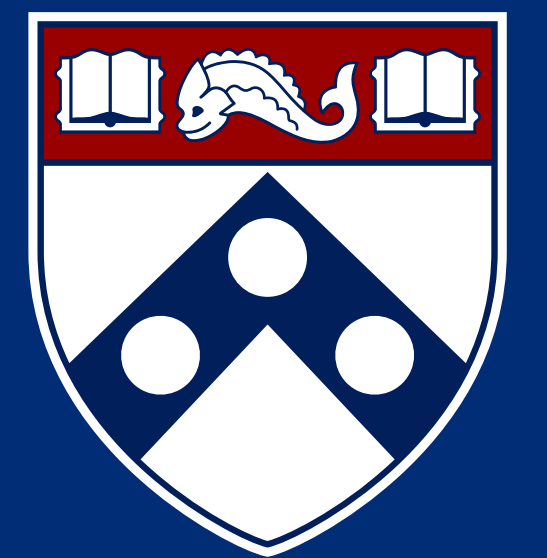


Local Courts - Appeals, Wealth, and Density

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Abstract

My research aims to shed light on the practices, procedures, and outcomes of Pennsylvania's Magisterial District Courts (MDJ) system. The work presented in this poster focuses on my initial question: **Are case appeal rates in the MDJ system affected by income level, population density, or any other factors?** While learning about appeal rates, factors that influence the MDJ system, and MDJ procedure, I interviewed judges and judicial officials and analyzed requested and public data. Although it was quickly clear that the data suggests that there is no correlation between rates of appeals, income level, and population density, **my exploration of the MDJ system raised more questions than it answered.** My work has shown me how complicated judicial systems can be, how inaccessible crucial data can be, and the impact one court appearance can have on a life.

The goal of this poster is to introduce the reader to the lower court system in Pennsylvania, display relevant data, and encourage further questions about an often misunderstood system.

This research is important because, as the gateway to the judicial system, the minor courts hugely influence how our society dispenses justice. Most people will never directly interact with a higher court.

Introduction

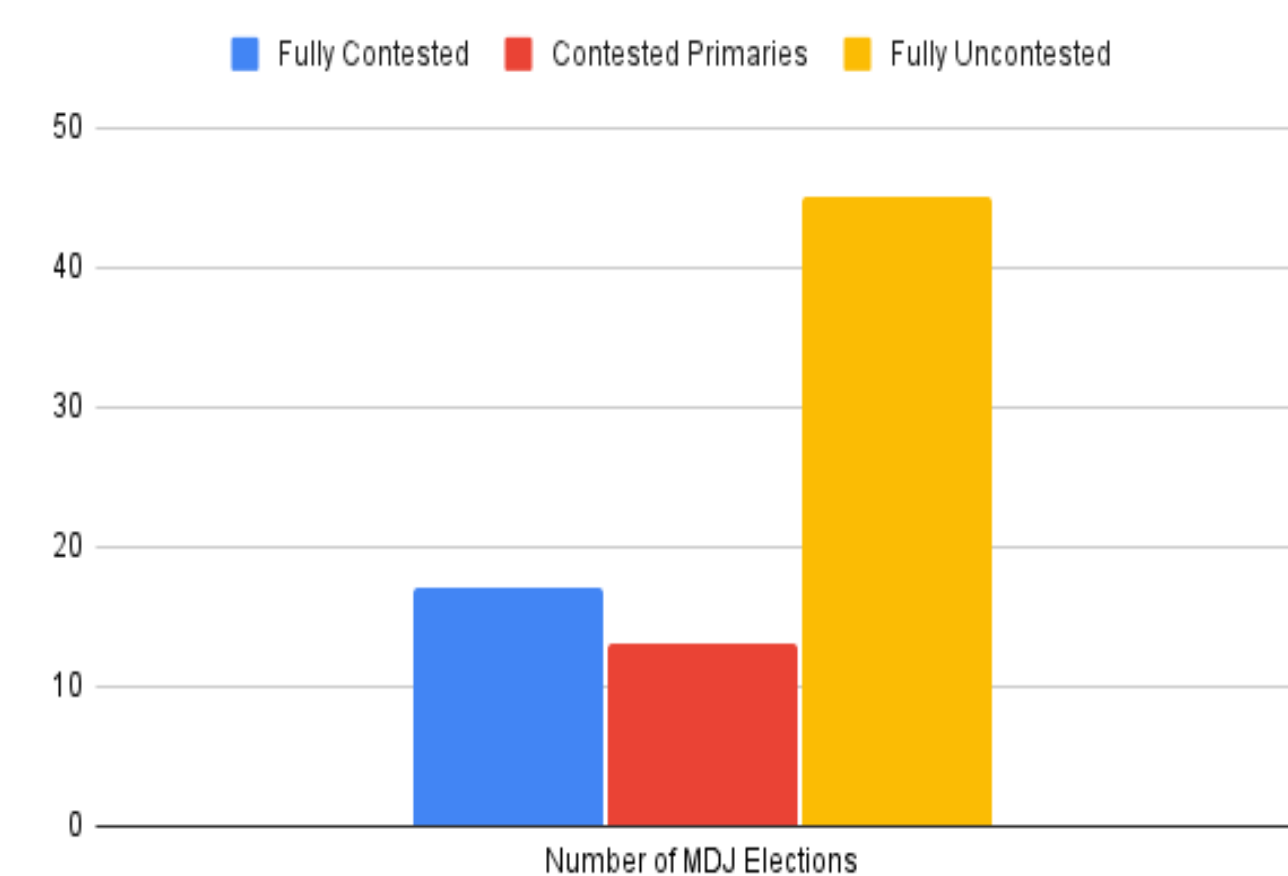
The Magisterial District Judicial (MDJ) courts have often been described as the **"courts of first appearance."** Nearly all criminal and civil litigations begin before a Magisterial District Judge (MDJ). MDJ courts:

- **are lightweight and fast** and often handle minor offenses
- **are not "Courts of Records"** meaning their proceedings can be appealed and overruled in their entirety
- **work around the clock** - they handle arrest warrants, search warrants, and Emergency Protections from Abuse (EPAs) orders, sometimes in the middle of the night.

Magisterial District Courts are run by a Magisterial District Judge. MDJs:

- **are locally elected** although in practice they often secure their positions unopposed.
- **are mostly (~66%) non-lawyers.** Non-lawyer MDJs must pass an 18-day state-run training course. I requested the information several times, but was not able to learn the pass rate of the course. It is currently unpublished.

Contest Status of 75 MDJ Elections in Delaware County, 2009-2021



Methodology

"I do not want my name to be associated"

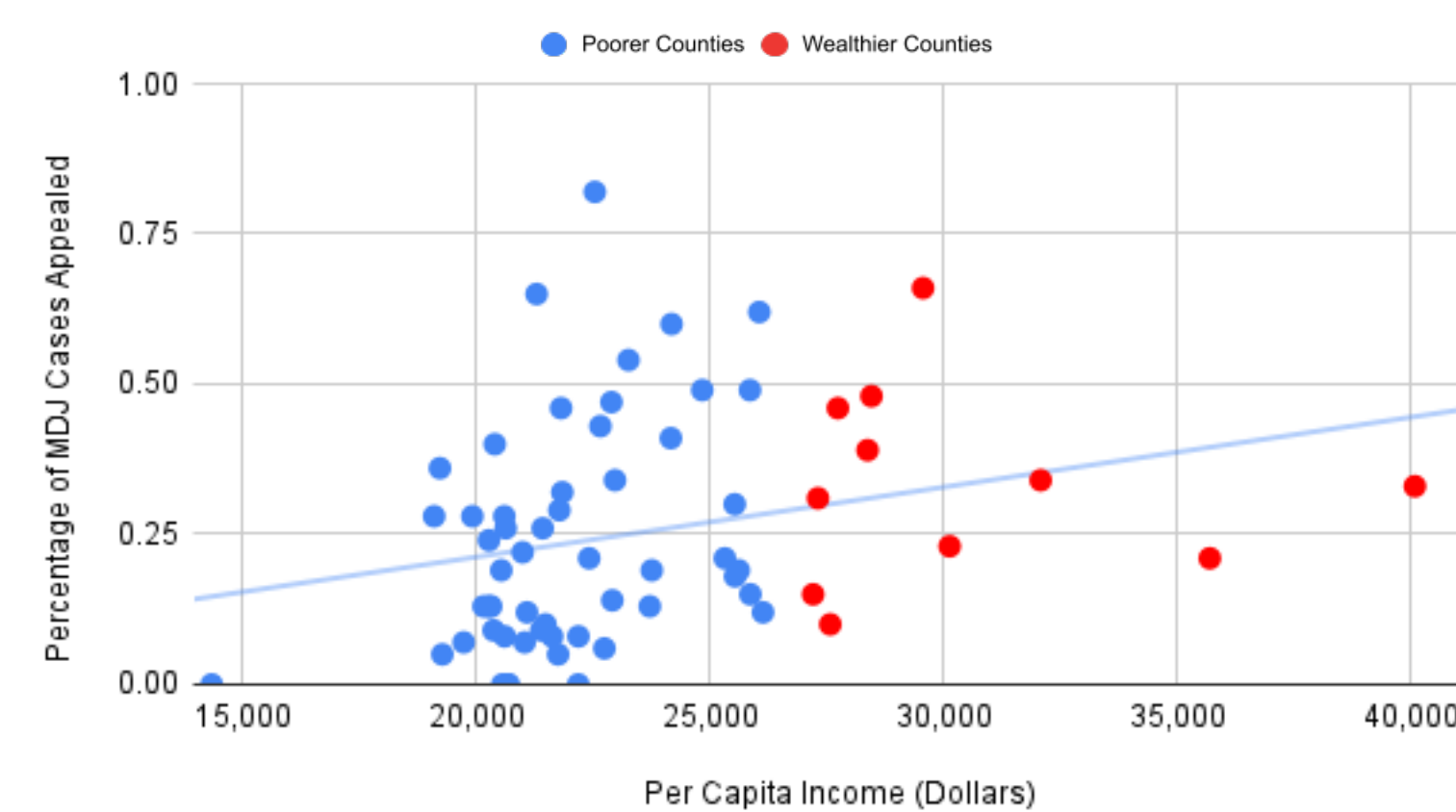
The direction of this project changed multiple times throughout its course and thus numerous methods for gathering qualitative and quantitative data were employed. Among them were:

- **Interviewing** local judges and judicial officials, including county and state statisticians, judicial systems administrators, pretrial services coordinators, and wardens. I heard the quote at the top of this box several times from elected officials who were on the fence about being interviewed. As electorate-conscious officials who have been occasionally the target of hit pieces, MDJs are often wary of speaking with reporters or researchers.
- **Formally requesting** non-public or otherwise non-published information
- **Collecting and analyzing** data from public sites and databases
- **Studying** state statutes with a focus on judicial structure law (Title 42) and bail law (Rules 523-529)
- **Attending** local government meetings including prison board meetings

Income's Impact on Appeal Rates

I hypothesized that in counties with a larger per capita income there would exist a larger rate of appeals. I initially suspected wealthier counties would hold a greater percentage of defendants who hired private legal defense for their MDJ appearance.

Percentage of MDJ Cases Appealed vs. Per Capita Income in 66 PA Counties, 2021



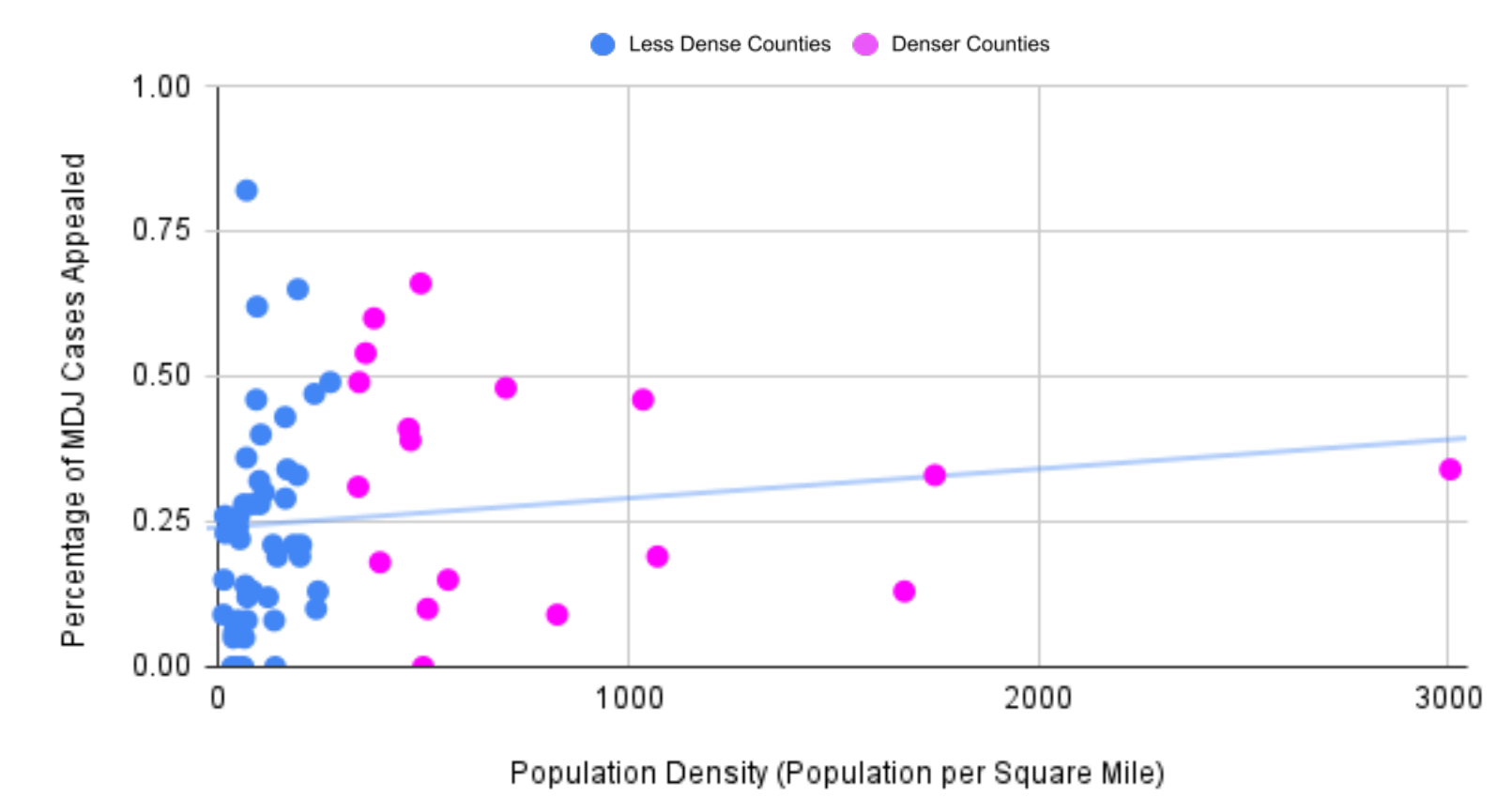
The data suggests that there is no correlation between rate of appeals and level of income. Please note:

- **The R² value of .083** fell below the pre-chosen benchmark value of .7
- The red dots represent counties with a per capita income above the PA state average. **Wealthier counties averaged a .333% appeal rate as compared to less wealthy counties at .238%.**
- The dataset's mean x-value of .255% and median x-value of .215% illustrate how infrequently MDJ decisions are appealed - **about 1 in 500 cases.**
- Appeal rates were scattered with a standard deviation of .187 percent; this suggested that appeal rates are relatively tightly clustered.
- Plotted above are 66 of PA's 67 counties, Philadelphia was not included as it does not have MDJ courts.

Density's Impact on Appeal Rates

I hypothesized that more population-dense counties would have a larger rate of appeals. I supposed denser counties would be more likely to maintain in-person proceedings due to shorter average travel distances, which would encourage appeals.

Percentage of MDJ Cases Appealed vs. Population Density in 66 PA Counties, 2021



The data suggests that there is no correlation between rate of appeals and level of income. Please note:

- **The R² value of .017** fell below the pre-chosen benchmark value of .7
- The pink dots represent counties with a population density above the PA state average. **Denser counties averaged a .362% appeal rate as compared to less dense counties at .215%.**

Takeaways and Notes

Magisterial District Courts are lightweight and fast, oftentimes with non-lawyer, non-elected judges. As seen, **county income rates and population density do not seem to have a measurable effect on Magisterial District Judicial appeal rates.**

Further, I want to note, having done several iterations of this poster, this project has inspired many more questions about the MDJ system. I am particularly interested in preliminary arraignment procedure, pre-trial incarceration rates, and partisan influence in MDJ races. **Unfortunately, certain data on these topics could not be procured prior to this poster's due date.** Stay tuned for further research.

Acknowledgments

I received help on this project from more people than I can name as well as people who asked not to be named. I am indebted to a huge amount of people whose names I do not know - including the wonderful secretaries, data assistants, and security guards who helped me navigate the judicial system. Special thanks to Joel Mankoski, Rebecca Stuhr, Fayyaz Vellani, Elizabeth Scheyder, and Dr. Frank Solga.

I received funding to pursue this project through the **College House Research Fellowship** - a CURF Fellowship