



Teen Courts: Executive Summary

Knowledge & Information Services

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Teen courts, also known as youth or peer courts, are gaining popularity as an alternative approach to juvenile justice. In teen court, youths charged with an offense can forgo the formal hearing and sentencing procedures of juvenile courts and participate in a sentencing forum made up of a jury of their peers. These courts offer youth the opportunity to learn valuable life lessons and coping skills while promoting positive peer influence for the youth defendants and volunteers, who play a variety of roles in teen court.

Teen courts serve a dual function. Defendants in teen court learn about responsibility and accountability. Teen courts also foster competency development in youth by promoting self-esteem and self-improvement, as well as creating a health attitude toward rules and authority, thus increasing the likelihood that youth will develop into responsible, mature citizens. Although the size, scope, structure, and operation of these courts vary, the fundamental principles of teen court are basically the same. Youth charged with status and misdemeanor offenses are held accountable for their behavior and are provided avenues for positive development.

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The Process

Teen courts focus primarily on first-time offenders charged with misdemeanors, including alcohol or drug possession, substance abuse, and traffic offenses. Teen courts are not adversarial proceedings; they do not determine guilt or innocence, but serve a sentencing function only.

Teen court cases may be referred from court, law enforcement, juvenile probation, prosecutor's office, or schools. School referrals are typically offenses that occurred on school property for which the school seeks an alternative to filing criminal charges. After arrest, the youth offender must have plead guilty to the charge in juvenile court, and with the juvenile court's permission, the youth agrees to be sentenced and abide by the decision of the teen court.

Teen court participants are usually between the ages of 13 and 18, although in some jurisdictions the minimum age that a juvenile may take part in the programs is 10. In most programs, the juvenile and his or her parent/guardian must sign consent forms, and the parent must agree to be present at all stages of the process.

The general sequence of events in teen courts is as follows: a first-time offender who has admitted guilt to an offense appears for a sentencing hearing before a jury of his or her peers, usually with an adult judge presiding. The jury is presented with evidence relevant to sentencing, deliberates, and passes a sentence. Sentences, which focus on rehabilitation, typically include community service,

counseling, restitution, educational seminars, and essay writing. Other sentencing options may involve peer discussion groups, tutoring, counseling, curfews, home restrictions, chores, public apologies, jail tours, attendance at an adult criminal proceeding, presentation to a small group, or other such sanctions.

An important prerequisite of the program is that in conjunction with the punitive sentence, the offender must agree to serve as a juror in future teen court cases. Upon completion of the teen court sentencing, the case against the juvenile will be dismissed pursuant to the deferred judgment agreement. School cases will be reported back to the referring school and would not be filed as criminal offenses. However, if the offender misses a court date or does not carry out the sentence, the case is automatically turned over the courts for prosecution. In this way, teen court allows juvenile defendants who successfully complete a sentence to keep their records clear and avoid court costs.

Teen court volunteers serve in a variety of roles; including jurors, defense or prosecuting attorneys, court clerks, and bailiffs, and in a few jurisdictions teens also serve as judges. School principals and teachers may nominate teens for participation in the court, though in some areas teens may nominate themselves. The teens receive formal training in the process and may be assigned an adult mentor to assist them in trial participation. The teen court director or coordinator, usually an adult serving as a paid staff member or as a volunteer, sets the defendant's schedule, monitors the youth's work performance, and makes sure that the sentence requirements are fulfilled.

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History of Teen Courts

Although teen courts are hardly a new idea —some have been in existence for over ten years—the number of teen court programs is increasing rapidly as people begin to realize the benefits associated with these programs and the wide range of youth they can influence. One of the earliest recorded teen court programs is the Grand Prairie Teen Court Program, which is reputed to have begun operation in 1976. However, the Odessa Teen Court program in Odessa, Texas appears to be the most widely known teen court and is regarded as a national model by many advocates.

Teen court programs are operated by juvenile courts, juvenile probation departments, law enforcement agencies, private nonprofit organizations, and schools all across the country. At last count, over 270 teen courts were operating in 30 states. Most funded by a combination of grants and local funds from civic groups, or through school district and municipal court budgets.

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Statistical Information

Juvenile Justice systems report a decrease in the amount of crimes committed locally. According to recent U.S. Department of Justice figures, juvenile crime fell last year for the first time in a decade, suggesting that community-based youth initiatives might be part of the reason. Nationally, juvenile offender recidivism rates range from 55 percent to 75 percent. However, several jurisdictions report the following recidivism rates: In Odessa, Texas, the recidivism rate is 0 percent for drug and alcohol offenders, 1 percent for misdemeanor offenses, and 10 to 15 percent for traffic offenses. In Gila County, Arizona, the reported recidivism rate is 12.5 percent, with the approximate state average between 40 and 45 percent. In addition, an evaluation report by SRA Associates of Sebastopol notes that for the period of January 1995 to 1996, the recidivism rate for repeat offenders who have

participated in teen court was 9.2 percent.

Although these figures appear promising, comprehensive statistics are difficult to collect, partly because of confidentiality laws involving minors and the newness of some of these programs. However, advocates in general feel that teenagers are less likely to become repeat offenders and that juvenile crime is falling in communities using teen courts.

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Conclusion

In sum, teen courts can be an effective intervention against juvenile crime in many jurisdictions where enforcement of misdemeanor charges is sometimes given low priority because of heavy caseloads and the need to focus on more serious offenders. Advocates cite the following benefits of teen court programs in the U.S.:

- Engenders respect for the judicial system
- Educates youth about the judicial process
- May reduce the juvenile crime rate
- Fosters the ability of teens to learn from their mistakes because of early intervention
- Provides a cost-efficient alternative to adult court
- Allows parents and guardians to be involved in the process
- Allows young people to get involved in the community
- Provides confidential handling of cases
- Provides a program that is totally voluntary
- Helps youth develop a healthy attitude toward authority
- Allows first-time offenders to keep their juvenile court record clean

For more information about teen courts, please refer to related documents in this database:

Teen Court Resource Guide

[Truancy Mediation](#)

[Juvenile Justice FAQ](#)

[Juvenile Justice State](#)

Contact the **Knowledge & Information Service Office** with inquiries
or requests for copies of any resources regarding

Teen Courts

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