

Teen Court Fact Sheet

This model program is often referred to as peer, teen, or youth court. It operates like a traditional criminal court, with attorneys, judges, and juries, though peers fill the roles traditionally filled by adults. The peers also decide the outcome of the case. Many communities vary in how they practice the youth court model; some include adults in a decision-making capacity. In such courts, young people are held accountable by their peers through often innovative and creative sentencing options.

Typical ways in which youth are held accountable include paying restitution, performing community service, writing formal apologies, or serving on a subsequent teen court jury. Teen courts may also require juvenile offenders to attend classes designed to improve their decision-making skills, develop victim awareness, or deter them from participating in future criminal behavior.¹

Goals

The goals of teen courts are to

- Determine a fair and appropriate disposition for a youth who has already admitted to the charge;
- Address the needs of the victim and community;
- Base each judgment on the principles of restorative justice; and
- Promote positive youth development.

Implementation

Teen, youth, or peer courts have been implemented in schools, as diversionary programs. Either volunteers or paid employees can serve as facilitators. Four models are popular with teen courts: Adult Judge, Youth Judge, Tribunal, and Peer Jury.² The Adult Judge model has youth participating as attorneys, jurors, clerks, and bailiffs, while an adult serves as the judge and rules over courtroom procedure. The Youth Judge model is similar to the Adult Judge model, but with a youth filling the role of judge. In the Tribunal model, youth attorneys present the case to three youth judges who determine how the offender will be held accountable and make efforts toward repairing the harm. The Peer Jury model uses either an adult or a youth to present the case to a youth jury; the youth jury may question the defendant and then determines the appropriate disposition. Some teen courts are implemented within a single agency, while others are developed collaboratively among several agencies.

Lessons Learned

The most recent evaluation of teen courts (Butts, Buck, Coggshall, 2002) suggested that teen courts are a promising alternative for the juvenile justice system. Using a quasi experimental design, the study examined four teen court sites, each of which reported relatively low recidivism rates. Two of the sites demonstrated that youth who participated in teen courts were significantly less likely to be referred again to the juvenile justice system for a new offense within six months of the original offense. The other two sites had no statistically significant difference. Additional evidence suggests that teen courts may provide further benefits for offending youth. Participation

¹ J. Butts and J. Buck, *Teen Courts: A Focus on Research* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2005).

² T. Godwin, *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998).

in teen courts may provide a general satisfaction with the experience (McLeod, 1999; Swink, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998), improved attitudes toward authority (LoGalbo, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998), and greater knowledge of the legal system (LoGalbo, 1998; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998).³

For More Information

- J. Butts, J. Buck, and M. Coggeshal, *The Impact of Teen Court on Young Offenders* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2002).
- The Urban Institute
2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037
www.urban.org
- OJJDP Model Programs Guide
www.dsgonline.com/mpg_non_flash/teen_court.htm
- The National Youth Court Center, operated by the American Probation and Parole Association, has developed "Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Youth Courts." To order this publication (free of charge), contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736 or download the publication at www.youthcourt.net/publications/peer_justice.htm.

³ OJJDP Model Programs Guide (www.dsgonline.com/mpg_non_flash/teen_court.htm).