JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA
OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMS DIVISION
CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN & THE COURTS

UCLA Health

Research Update

January 2020

STAR Court Study: Initial Results

The Judicial Council's Center for Families, Children & the Courts has partnered with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), to conduct a comprehensive study of the Succeeding Through Achievement and Resilience (STAR) Court, a juvenile collaborative court program focused on providing services to commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) or youth at risk of exploitation.[1] This research update provides descriptive data about STAR Court participants.

What is the STAR Court?

The STAR Court is designed to serve youth who have been or are at risk of being commercially sexually exploited. It combines court supervision with social, educational, and specialized trauma-informed treatment services in a supportive and caring environment rather than the traditional juvenile delinquency system.

The goal of STAR Court is to hold youth accountable for their actions while building on their strengths and reconnecting them to healthy relationships and behaviors.

Participants work with a nonadversarial collaborative team trained to work with victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Successful completion of the court program results in the youth's delinquency record being expunged.

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore characteristics of STAR Court participants and to examine the STAR Court's impact. Researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with the court's multidisciplinary team—including the judge, prosecutor, defense attorneys, probation officers, treatment providers, and education advocates—and with a sample of transitional age youth who successfully completed the STAR Court program. The researchers also conducted an exhaustive review of case files for the 364 youth who began the court program between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2016. The case files included histories of arrests, detentions, child welfare involvement, health, mental health, and substance use. The study procedures were approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board and the Superior Court of Los Angeles County, juvenile division.

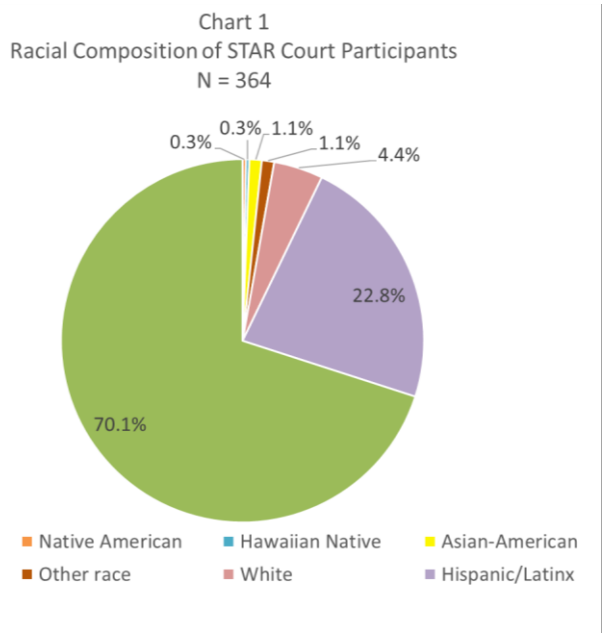
STAR Court participants were mostly female (99%), identified as black (70%), and had extensive histories of child maltreatment and behavioral health issues. About three-quarters (74%) had a history of child welfare referrals, and 76% had at least one placement in a foster home or group home. Of those, 69% had at least one "absent without leave/permission" (AWOL) from placement. About two-thirds of participants (64%) entered the STAR Court with reported mental health issues, and one third (33.6%) had at least one new mental health diagnosis while participating. Most participants (89%) reported using at least one substance. Early results showed improved outcomes from the STAR Court, such as a significant reduction in the number of citations participants received between entering and exiting the court.

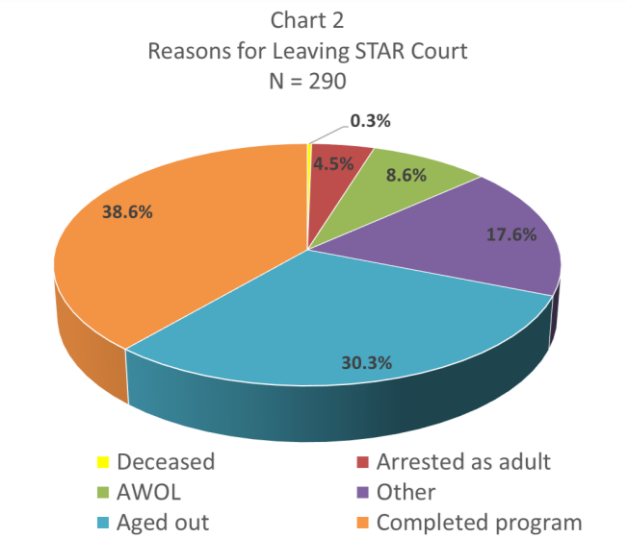
[1] For information on girls' courts and CSEC courts, see www.courts.ca.gov/documents/JCJC_Models_Girls_and_CSEC_courts.pdf.

STAR Court Participants

The following data show demographic characteristics of participants, as well as information about their time in STAR Court. Complete information on their exiting STAR Court was available for 326 cases. Among the 364 cases, 290 were closed at the time of data collection.

- In all, 99% of participants were female, two were male, and two were transgender female.
- The average age of entry into STAR Court was 16, with a range of 12 to 19. The average age at court exit was 18.
- The majority of participants identified as black (70.1%) or Latinx (23.8%) (see Chart 1).
- Fewer than a third (31.3%) had prior gang affiliation.
- The majority of participants (78.7%) were involved in the program for at least six months, with 52.6% staying involved for at least 12 consecutive months. Participants stayed in the STAR Court program for an average of 15 months, with a range of 0 to 66.
- More than a third of the 290 participants with closed cases (38.6%) successfully completed the STAR Court program, 30% aged out, about 9% were considered AWOL, and 4% were arrested as an adult. Approximately 18% of cases were closed for an unspecified reason, or categorized as "other." Nearly all in the "other" category had their cases either dismissed, moved, or transferred to another jurisdiction (see Chart 2).





Education

Educational attainment was calculated at the points of entry and exit of Star Court supervision from those for whom that information was available. Researchers determined found a positive correlation between having an educational advocate and remaining in school.

Before STAR Court

- The average last grade completed on entry to STAR Court was grade 9, with a range of 7th grade to college course.

- At entry, only 8.7% of participants had an educational advocate (N = 359) and 21.4% had received an individualized education plan (IEP; N = 359).

On Exit From STAR Court

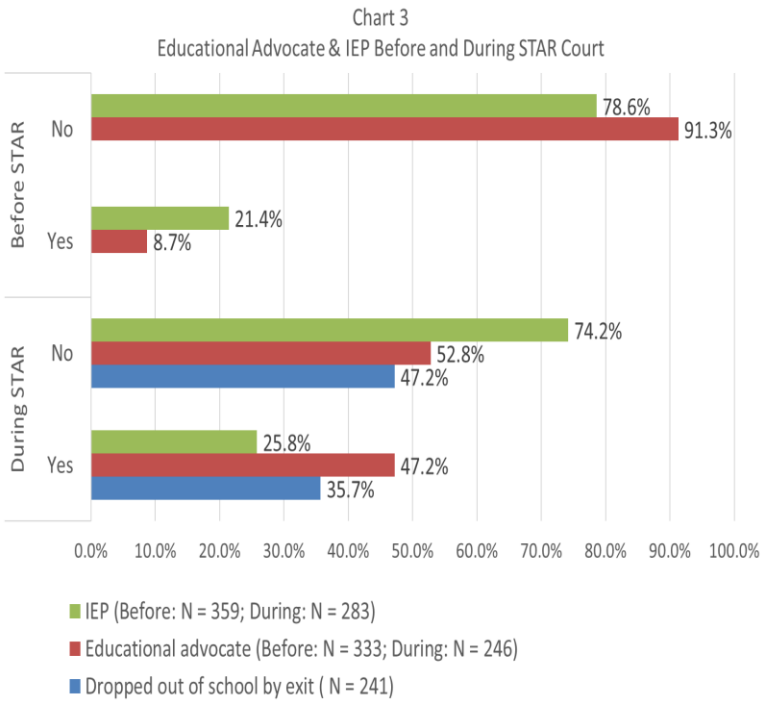
- Of the 281 participants for whom this information was available, the average last grade completed was grade 10, with a range of 7th grade to college course.

- Of the 287 participants for whom information was recorded, 16.7% had received their high school diploma and 40.4% were still enrolled in school.

- More than a third of the 241 participants for whom information was available (35.7%) had dropped out of school.

- At exit, nearly half had an educational advocate (N = 292) and 25.8% had received an IEP (N = 283) (see Chart 3).

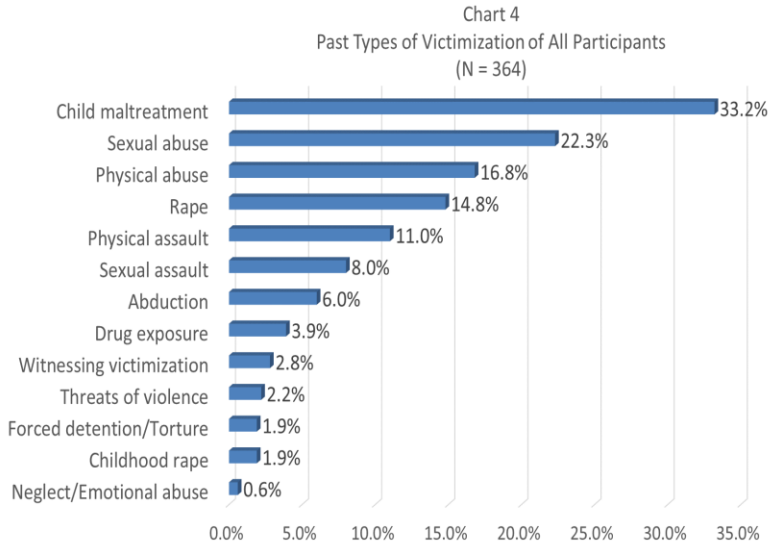
- A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine any relationship between having an educational advocate and dropping out of school. The relationship between these variables was significant: X^2 (1, N = 202) = 5.94, p < .05. Having an educational advocate decreased the likelihood of a participant's dropping out of school.

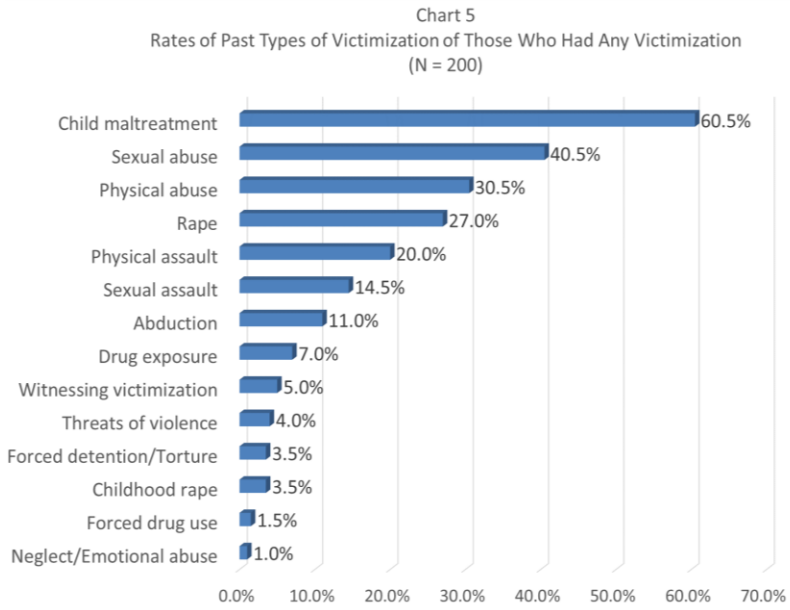


Past Victimization

Slightly more than half of participants had a reported history of victimization. A third of participants had a reported history of child maltreatment and almost a quarter had a reported history of sexual abuse.

- The most common forms of victimization among all participants were maltreatment (33.2%), sexual abuse (22.3%), and physical abuse (16.8%) (see Chart 4).
- Of those with a reported history of any victimization (N = 200, 54.9%), the average number of times participants had been victimized before entering STAR Court was one, with a range of one to four.
- Of those with prior victimization, most (85.5%) had been victims of past sexual victimization, including sexual abuse, rape, and sexual assault (see Chart 5).
- The most common perpetrators of child maltreatment were a parent or caregiver or a relative.
- The most common perpetrator of sexual victimization was a stranger.
- The most common perpetrators of physical abuse were a parent or caregiver or a relative.





Child Welfare Background

Consistent with prior research,[2] the current findings showed a high prevalence of participants intersecting with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Of the 364 participants in the study period, 270 had child welfare referrals—257 of which were recorded in detail—at some point before entering STAR Court. Referral information was unknown in 13 cases.

Before STAR Court

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) had at least one referral to the child welfare system before entering STAR Court.
- Participants had an average of 10 referrals, with a range of 1 to 42.
- Nearly two-thirds of all participants (62%) had at least one substantiated child welfare case. Most of those cases were for general neglect or having a caretaker absent (see Chart 6).
- The average number of substantiated cases was four, with a range of 1 to 16.
- Among participants with substantiated child welfare cases, 93.3% had cases for abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal) and 77.9% had cases for general or severe neglect (see Chart 7).
- About three-quarters of all participants (76%) had at least one child welfare placement in a foster home or group home at some point before entering STAR Court.

On Exit From STAR Court

- Of those for whom information was available (N = 278), 5% had a new substantiated child welfare case.
- Most new cases (64%) involved exploitation. More than a third of new cases (35.7%) were for neglect and more than a quarter (28.6%) were for sexual abuse.

Chart 6
Child Welfare Substantiated Cases of All Participants Upon Entry to STAR Court
N = 364

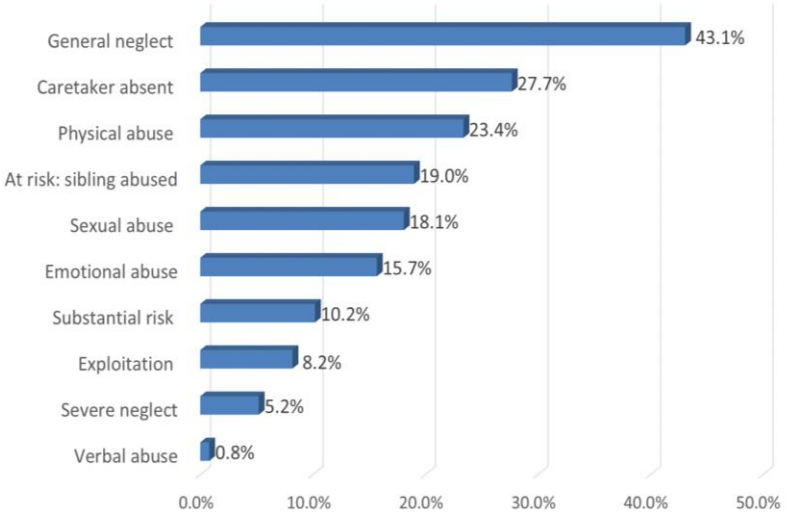
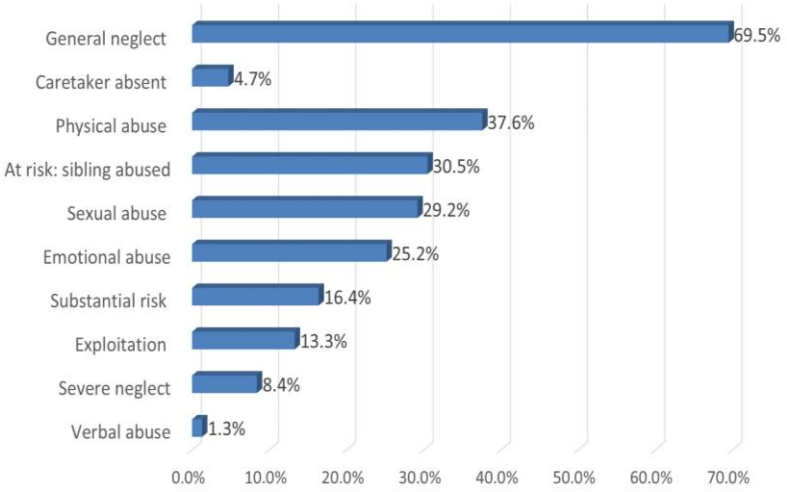


Chart 7
Child Welfare Substantiated Cases of Those Who Had Any Cases Upon Entry to STAR Court
N = 226



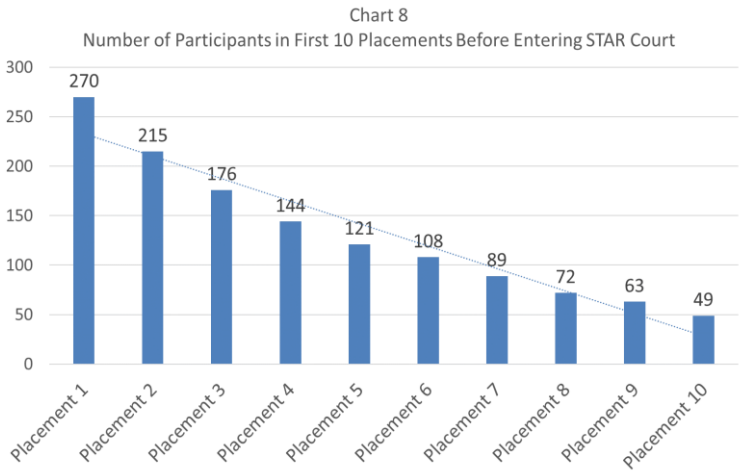
[2] See Judy Havlicek, Shannon Huston, Seth Boughton & Saijun Zhang, "Human trafficking of Children in Illinois: Prevalence and characteristics" (2016) 69 *Children and Youth Services Review*, 127–135; Cal. Child Welfare Council, *Ending the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Call for Multi-System Collaboration in California* (2013), *www.chhs.ca.gov/Child%20Welfare/ Ending%20CSEC%20-%20A%20Call%20for%20Multi-System%20Collaboration%20in%20CA%20-% 20February%202013.pdf*.

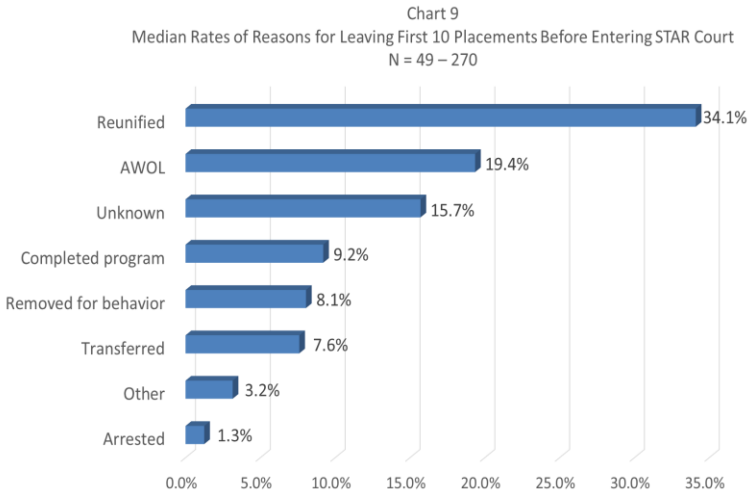
Housing and Placement History

At the time participants entered STAR Court, two-thirds lived with a biological or adoptive parent or other family member. Almost 7% were AWOL or homeless at the time of the arrest leading to STAR Court. About 5% were in foster care placement and 19% were in a group home placement, for a total of 24% in a child welfare placement at the time of entry to STAR Court. However, about three-quarters (277 participants) had at least one child welfare placement before entering STAR Court.

Before STAR Court

- The average age of first placement was 11, with a range from birth to 18.
- Those with a placement history had an average of five placements, with a range from 1 to 20. Nearly half (47%) had fewer than three placements. Chart 8 shows how the number of participants in placements decreases as the number of placements increases.
- More than two-thirds (69%) had at least one AWOL from a placement. About 14% had more than one AWOL.
- Participants spent an average of 212 days in placements, with a range of 1 to 5,451.[3]
- The most common known reasons for leaving the first five placements before entering STAR Court were going AWOL, being reunified with family, and being transferred to another facility. Additional common reasons, categorized as "other," were being placed with a relative, a request by the placement, and higher level of care needed. About 16% of reasons were unknown (see chart 9).





On Exit From STAR Court

- Participants had an average of one placement, with a range of one to two.
- After entering the STAR Court, participants spent an average of 78 days in placements, with a range of 1 to 1,100—a significant reduction in time.
- The most common known reason for leaving a placement during STAR Court was going AWOL (61.1%) or reunifying with family (12.3%).

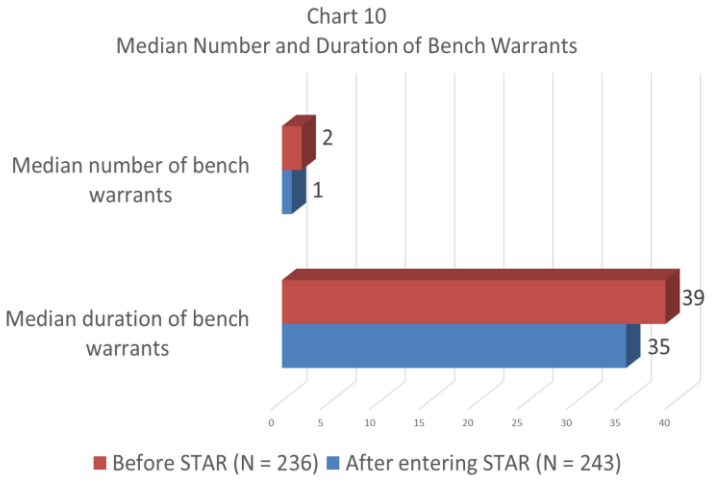
[3] The time data for one of the placements were skewed and were not included in the calculation.

AWOLs and Bench Warrants

Approximately 75% of participants (N = 274) had been in a placement at some point before starting STAR Court. During all participants' time in STAR Court, 54.3% had at least one absence in the courtroom.

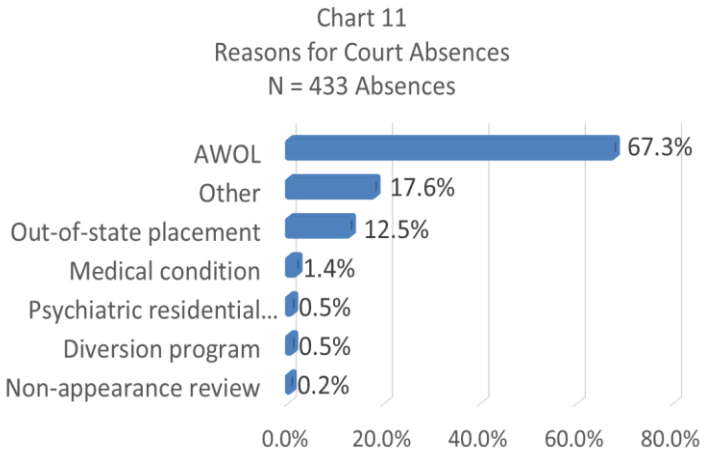
Before STAR Court

- Of the 274 participants with histories of child welfare placements, details were available for 192 participants. Of those, 70.1% had at least one AWOL from placement.
- More than two-thirds (65.1%) had at least one bench warrant.
- On average, participants had two bench warrants, with a range of one to six. More than two-thirds (68.8%) had between one and two bench warrants.
- The average duration of all bench warrants recorded was 74 days, with a range of 1 to 776. The median number of days was 39.[4]



On Exit From STAR Court

- Of the 364 participants, 259 (71.2%) had at least one placement during STAR Court. Of those, 72.2% had at least one AWOL from placement.
- The majority (70.5%, N = 353) had at least one bench warrant. Almost half (43.6%) had more than one bench warrant.
- On average, participants had two bench warrants, with a range of one to nine.
- The average duration of all bench warrants recorded was 80 days, with a range of 1 to 985 days. The median number of days was 35 (see chart 10).
- Of those with courtroom absences (N = 196), more than half (54.3%) had more than one absence.
- More than two-thirds of all absences from court (67.3%) were the result of being AWOL (see chart 11).



[4] Data for one participant were skewed and omitted from the analysis.

Arrest History

All the STAR Court participants (100%) had prior arrests before entering the program. Fewer than half (41.8%) had new charges while involved in STAR Court.

Before STAR Court

- Participants were most frequently arrested for prostitution (53.1%), assault and battery (39.6%), and theft (31.1%).
- The most recurring arrests were for resisting arrest and presenting a false identification to an officer.
- The average number of violations of probation (VOP) before starting STAR Court was two, with a range of one to five.[5]

On Exit From STAR Court

- The majority of new citations were for VOP (21.2%), prostitution (12.1%), theft (9.3%), and assault and battery (8.5%) (see chart 12).
- The average number of VOPs during STAR Court was one, with a range of one to two.
- On average, almost all of those who had a VOP (90%) were detained.
- Three-quarters of those who had a VOP (76.6%) had only one violation, whereas fewer than a quarter (20.8%) had two or three.
- A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the citations received before starting and after leaving the STAR Court. Arrest rates were significantly less after STAR Court (M = .62, SD = .49) than before entering STAR Court (M = 3.07, SD = 1.81); t(244) = -21.11, p = .000. This suggests that the STAR Court effectively reduces recidivism.
- Wilcoxon tests showed that all citation types except resisting arrest had a significant reduction between entering and exiting the program (see table 1).

Chart 12
Citations Pre-STAR Court & After STAR Court
N = 364

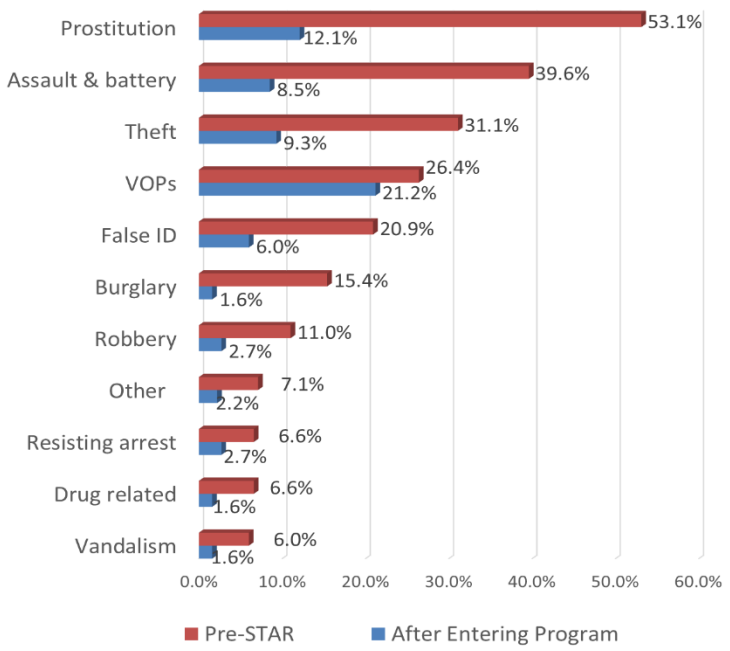


Table 1
Citations Before and After Entering STAR Court

Outcome	Before STAR *M*	Before STAR *SD*	Before STAR *Mean Rank*	After STAR *M*	After STAR *SD*	After STAR *Mean Rank*	*Z*	*p*
Vandalism	0.06	0.24	11.50	0.02	0.13	11.50	-3.41	.001*
Drug related	0.07	0.27	12.00	0.02	0.13	13.19	-3.41	.001*
Resisting arrest	0.07	0.29	16.00	0.03	0.16	18.13	-2.60	.009
Other	0.07	0.26	18.29	0.03	0.17	16.00	-2.87	.004*
Robbery	0.11	0.31	23.50	0.03	0.16	23.50	-4.42	.000*
Burglary	0.15	0.36	28.50	0.02	0.13	28.50	-6.68	.000*
False ID	0.21	0.41	43.50	0.06	0.26	43.50	-5.61	.000*
VOPs	0.26	0.44	68.96	0.28	0.63	57.00	-0.16	.000*
Theft	0.31	0.46	64.17	0.1	0.33	61.50	-6.77	.000*
Assault & battery	0.72	1.14	144.45	1.6	5.76	65.01	-3.52	.000*
Prostitution	0.97	1.19	173.44	1.83	5.55	80.70	-3.08	.002*

N = 364; * p < .05

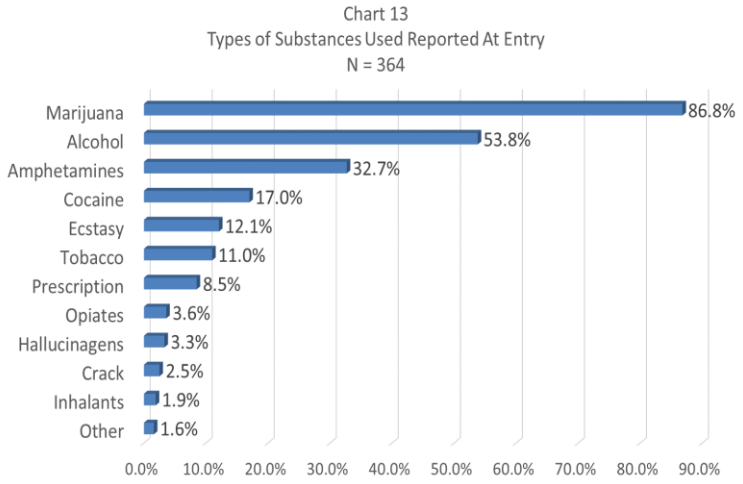
[5] One participant had 10 VOPs before starting STAR Court. That participant's VOP number was removed from the calculation. When including that participant, the mean remained 2 but the range was 10.

Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse

Almost two-thirds of participants (64%) reported having at least one mental health diagnosis on entering STAR Court. More than half (53.9%) reported having more than one diagnosis. The average number of diagnoses reported on entry was two, with a range of zero to nine. During their tenure at STAR Court, 34.4% of participants for whom information is available received at least one new mental health diagnosis.

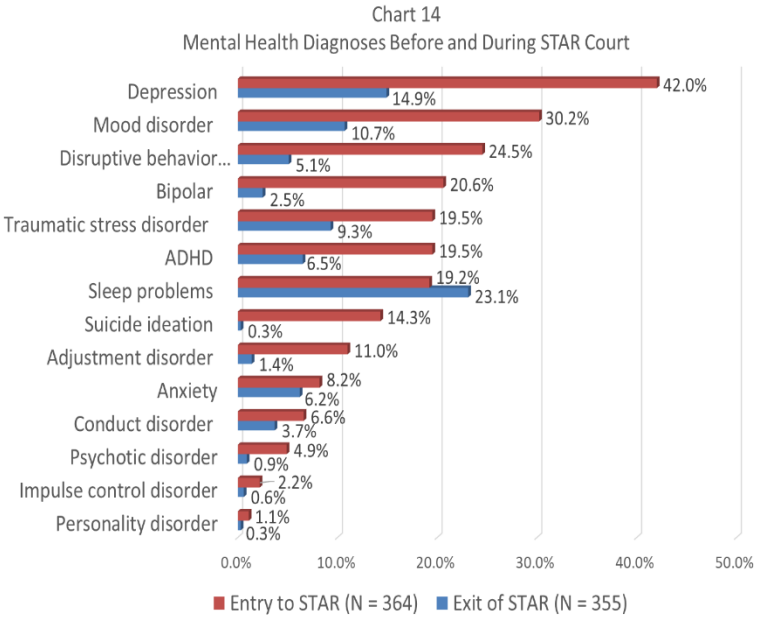
Before STAR Court

- The most common diagnoses at entry were depression (42%), mood disorder (30.2%), and disruptive behavior disorder (24.5%).
- Of the 244 participants for whom suicide information is available, nearly a quarter (22.5%) reported ever having attempted suicide.
- Nearly all (89.3%) reported using one or more substances on entry to STAR Court.[6]
- The most common substances used were marijuana (86.8%) and alcohol (53.8%) (see chart 13).
- Additionally, a large percentage of participants reported polysubstance use: 67.3% reported using between two and five substances.
- Participants were split almost evenly regarding substance abuse treatment before starting STAR Court, with 49.4% having received treatment and 50.6% having received none. Of the 173 participants for whom we have information about treatment facility, about half (49.7%) received treatment in a group home, about a quarter (26%) in the community, and 16.8% in detention or at a camp.



On Exit From STAR Court

- The most common diagnoses at exit were sleep disorders (23.1%) and depression (14.9%) (see chart 14).
- Of the 141 participants for whom suicide information is available, .3% reported having attempted suicide during STAR Court.



[6] Substance use data at exit were unavailable.

Conclusions

Consistent with prior literature,[7] these initial findings suggest that youth in the STAR Court program are primarily girls of color who have long histories of child welfare involvement, placement outside the home, and victimization. They also have substantial substance abuse and mental health needs, particularly related to cumulative trauma throughout their lives, as well as educational needs.

Limitations to this study should be noted. First, the Los Angeles County juvenile court system lacks a centralized database and data collection system that would allow for consistent information to be gathered at each court hearing and among all court participants. Thus, some case files had more information than others. Second, the reliance on administrative records may result in underreporting prevalence and severity, especially as it relates to behavioral health, because not all case files had behavioral health information recorded. Finally, biological boys and transgender youth were underrepresented in this study. Thus, results may not be generalized to those populations.

The findings provide a first look at commercially sexually exploited youth in the Los Angeles County STAR Court. Although this study provides insight into the youth in this particular CSEC court, exact results may not be generalizable to participants of other similar courts or to commercially sexually exploited youth at large.

As this study continues, the researchers will compare data from the STAR Court cohort (N = 364) to data from two comparison groups: a matched sample of youth in the general juvenile justice system in Los Angeles County and a group of self-disclosed victims of commercial sexual exploitation who are in the general juvenile justice system in Los Angeles County and not receiving specialized court programming and services. This comparison will allow for a more robust outcome evaluation of STAR Court. In addition, the researchers will expand the longitudinal analyses to compare the STAR Court participants' baseline data on entry into the court program to data two years after completing the program, including available data on recidivism into the adult criminal justice system. A full report of this evaluation will be published on completion.

[7] See Amy P. Goldberg, Jessica L. Moore, Christopher Houck, Dana M. Kaplan & Christine E. Barron, "Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Patients: A Retrospective Analysis of Medical Presentation" (2017) 30(1) *Journal of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology*, 109–115; Judy Havlicek, Shannon Huston, Seth Boughton & Saijun Zhang, "Human trafficking of children in Illinois: Prevalence and characteristics" (2016) 69 *Children and Youth Services Review*, 127–135; Jennifer. E. O'Brien, Kevin White & Cynthia Fraga Rizo, "Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Among Child Welfare–Involved Youth: An Exploratory Study of Correlates" (2017) 22(3) *Child Maltreatment*, 265–274; S. Varma, S. Gillespie, C. McCracken, & V. J. Greenbaum, "Characteristics of child commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking victims presenting for medical care in the United States" (2015) 44 *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 98–105; and D. S. Wolfe, J. K. P. Greeson, S. Wasch, & D. Treglia, *Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth: A Multi-City Study* (Jan. 2018), *https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/6230-R10-Field-Center-Full-Report-Web.pdf*.

Acknowledgments

The researchers are grateful for the time and effort of everyone involved with the STAR Court, including Judge Catherine J. Pratt; Michelle Guymon, director of the Child Trafficking Unit of the Los Angeles County Probation Department; the probation officers, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and treatment providers dedicated to this court; all the members of the multidisciplinary team; and the survivor graduates who participated in this study.

Study data were collected and managed using the REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture) electronic data capture tools hosted at UCLA. REDCap is a secure, web-based software platform designed to support data capture for research studies, providing (1) an intuitive interface for validated data capture; (2) audit trails for tracking data manipulation and export procedures; (3) automated export procedures for seamless data downloads to common statistical packages; and (4) procedures for data integration and interoperability with external sources.

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