



Teen Courts

Resources:

- **American Bar Association**, 740 15th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-1022; <http://abanet.org>
- **American Probation and Parole Association, Teen Courts Project**, (technical assistance and training), PO Box 11910; Lexington, KY 40578-1910; 606-244-8203; fax 606-244-8001; <http://www.appa-net.org/>
- **National Crime Prevention Council**, 1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor, Washington, DC 20006-3817; <http://www.ncpc.org/>; <http://www.mcgruff.org>; <http://www.weprevent.org>
- **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, US Department of Transportation**, 400 7th St. SW, Washington, DC 20590; <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>
- **National Teen Courts of America & Teen Clubs of America, Inc.**, P. O. Box 17513, San Antonio, TX 78217, (210) 432-8416; ntca@earthalliance.com; <http://firms.findlaw.com/teencourt/index.htm>; <http://www.angelfire.com/biz/nationalteencourts/>
- **National Youth Court Center**, C/o American Probation and Parole Association, PO Box 11910, Lexington, KY 40578-1910; 606-244-8215; 606-244-8001; <http://www.youthcourt.net/default.htm>
- **Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice**; Evaluation of Teen Courts; <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/grants/disckit/eval97.htm>
- **The Urban Institute**, 2100 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20037; www.urban.org
- Godwin, T.M. (1998.) *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association. Available from the Juvenile Justice, Clearinghouse, OJJDP, 800-638-8736, <http://www.appa-net.org/>

Various agencies and schools have recognized the potential value of having children and youth involved in decision making and planning. When youth get in trouble, there may be a two-fold benefit of having youth be involved in the determining the consequences for the problem behavior. The youth involved in the problem behavior may be more likely to accept and learn from a consequence delivered by his or her peers. Also, the youth making the decisions may be learning about social issues, civic responsibility, and justice.

What are Teen Courts?

Teen Courts, also known as “Youth” or “Peer Courts,” are structured programs where teens serve in the roles associated with adult courts to provide intervention for youthful offenders. Teen courts are generally community-based programs that may be housed within or closely affiliated with the local juvenile courts, although they are also sometimes housed in schools. These courts administer justice for selected juvenile offender cases, often for drug and alcohol abuse and related offenses (Godwin, 1998). Very similar programs have been run in secondary schools to serve as a school discipline enforcement vehicle. Most teen courts do not determine the guilt or innocence of the youth. Rather, the youth must admit to the charges against them in order to qualify for teen court, and the court serves as diversion alternative for the offending youth, determining the nature of the sanctions (Butts, Hoffman, & Buck, 1999).

Teen courts are a relatively new concept, with an estimated 50 or so programs in existence in 1991, but with almost 675 such programs by 2000 (Butts & Buck, 2000). The first programs grew out of efforts by the American Bar Association and other national and community organizations to hold youth accountable for their actions before they develop a pattern of law-breaking behavior. Teen court programs offer chances to increase youth knowledge of the justice system, to capitalize on peer influence, to facilitate the development of competencies in youth, such as listening, problem solving, communication and conflict resolution; and to empower and involve youth in addressing community youth crime. These programs offer benefits both for the youth volunteers and the youth offenders going before the court (Nessel, 1998).

Most teen courts are administered and sponsored by juvenile courts, or probation or law enforcement agencies, though schools sometimes also do so. Costs are typically covered by the sponsoring public agencies, though the youth participants are all volunteers. A variety of procedures have been developed for these teen courts, and the teens serving the various roles volunteer and undergo training before participating in the program. Some teen courts employ an adult judge, with youth serving as attorneys, jurors, clerks, and bailiffs. Others use youth judges, or panels of three youth judges, with youth also serving in the other roles.

Teen courts typically serve first-time offenders charged with offenses such as theft, misdemeanor assault, disorderly conduct, and possession of alcohol (Butts, et al., 1999). Some teen courts have specialized in minor drug and alcohol offenses, while others have focused on traffic offenses or more general issues. While these courts rarely are set up to determine the guilt or innocence of an offender, they almost always determine the sanction or disposition for the offending youth.

The youth offender typically volunteers for the teen court determination of disposition, as an alternative to the other ways to arrive at the disposition. Teen court is therefore considered a court diversion option. The most frequent disposition of teen courts was “community service” with victim apology (in person, or via letter or essay), drug/alcohol classes, or monetary restitution. (Butts & Buck, 2000; Godwin, 1998). In no case would teen courts have authority to administer incarceration.

Although not nearly as common, some schools have begun to use teen courts to administer school disciplinary actions. In these programs, the teen court determines the disciplinary consequences for violations of the school disciplinary codes.

What Do We Know About Teen Courts?

In the first major national evaluation of teen courts, the Urban Institute is currently studying the process and impact of four teen court programs. In addition to studying the nature and extent of these programs, the evaluation will also measure the intended outcomes of teen courts, including reduced recidivism, increased pro-social attitudes, and improved perceptions of justice.

State evaluations of these programs have been reported in Texas, Indiana, and North Carolina. While the methodologies of these reports do not permit definitive conclusions, all of the studies found outcomes at least as positive as other diversionary alternatives and some were clearly superior to other alternatives (Godwin, 1998). A study in Kentucky reported improved youth attitudes of volunteers towards authority figures (Godwin, 1998) after involvement in the program. No evaluations of or specific procedures for school-based teen courts were found, although a variety of schools have implanted versions of teen courts.

Making It Work

A detailed manual on the implementation of teen court programs has been developed, addressing issues ranging from organizing the community, to legal issues, to developing a program model and procedures, to designing a referral and case monitoring process (Godwin, 1998). Also included are chapters on recruiting and training volunteers, human and financial resource issues, program evaluation, and a wide array of sample brochures, forms, and protocols in the appendix.

Successful teen court programs in the justice system require a full or part time staff person to provide

coordination for the program, and to monitor referrals, and provide case management. Programs in other settings, such as schools, would also require such coordination, with at least some staff time assigned. Access to training at various locations, related training materials, and an annual conference are accessible through the National Youth Court Center (see Resources).

The teen court can be adapted by schools to be used for at least some categories of disciplinary infractions.

Conclusion

Teen courts represent a very promising approach to developing youth involvement in diminishing juvenile delinquency and substance abuse, and as such, represent a useful approach to crime and violence prevention. As with conflict resolution education and peer mediation programs, the potential benefit of teen courts is two-fold. First, it has the possibility of diminishing youth crime and recidivism directly through the diversionary programs and sanctions imposed; Secondly, it may affect a wider group of teens through the skills, training and experiences of the youth volunteers. Based on the evaluation data to date, the teen court program appears to be a promising alternative for youth justice, and may also be a useful tool for school discipline, though more research on the impact of these programs is necessary.

- Reece L. Peterson, Revised May 2003

References

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- Butts, J., Hoffman, D., & Buck, J. (October, 1999). *Teen Courts in the United States: A Profile of Current Program*, OJJDDP Fact Sheet, #118, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Godwin, T. M. (1998.) *Peer justice and youth empowerment: An implementation guide for teen court programs*. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association. Available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, OJJDP, 800-638-8736.
- Nessel, P. A. (1998). *Teen court: A national movement*. Technical Assistance Bulletin Number 17, Chicago, IL: American Bar Association, Division for Public Education.

About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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