

## Addressing the Needs of Juvenile Offenders: A Study of the Greene County Missouri Teen Court Model

Cheryl Puzach<sup>1</sup> & Aida Hass<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Missouri State University, USA

Correspondence: Aida Hass, Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Missouri State University, USA

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### Abstract

Over the past several years, the teen court concept has been gaining popularity as a cost-effective alternative to traditional juvenile court proceedings for youth offenders. Relying on informal mechanisms of social control, Teen Courts are seen as a beneficial alternative to formal criminal justice intervention that have more positive consequences in terms of positively impacting the lives of juveniles. To date, the empirical data pertaining to how teen courts operate and their effect on changing the behaviors of young offenders is relatively limited in the research literature. This study provides a meta-analysis of some of the major evaluation studies of Teen Court, as well as examines data gathered on the Greene County Missouri Teen Court Model.

**Key Words:** Teen Court, Juvenile Justice, Diversion, Restorative Justice, Social Learning Theory

### 1. Introduction

Over the years, Teen Courts have risen in prominence and popularity as a way to effectively divert youth from the juvenile court and reduce recidivism on the part of juvenile offenders. Throughout the years, the Teen Court model has been given a variety of different names, including Teen Court, Youth Court, Peer Court, and Student Court (Schneider, 2008). While different models of Teen Court may have unique qualities, they all encompass the same basic goal: giving youth the opportunity to deal with their offenses informally without having to go through the formal court process.

Rooted in social learning theories, the basic premise of Teen Court is to teach young offenders pro-social attitudes and behaviors, change their negative feelings toward the judicial system, and improve their overall behavior by learning new skills and increasing accountability in order to keep from offending in the future.

To accomplish these goals, Teen Courts have a variety of different models that are utilized. Some Teen Courts use the adult model, which utilizes teen volunteers for the attorneys, bailiffs, and jurors but utilizes an adult volunteer for the role of the judge. The youth judge model employs teen volunteers for all of the different roles in the courtroom, including the judge. The peer jury model consists of teen jurors who, instead of playing the role of prosecutor or defense attorney, question the defendant directly and determine a sentence for the defendant. A fourth model, the tribunal model uses a panel of teen judges to decide what type of sentence is appropriate for the defendant. In this model, there is no jury, but the teen attorneys still argue their cases to the teen judges (Garrison, 2001). While there are four distinct models for Teen Court, some juvenile court systems employ a combination of these models.

From a theoretical standpoint, the efficacy of Teen Court can best be explained by Edwin Sutherland's theory of Differential Association. In short, Sutherland's theory asserts that behavior is learned through group interactions and associations, and that criminal behavior emerges when an individual learns to favor criminal patterns, activities, and attitudes above others (Sutherland & Cressey, 1970). This theory can be applied in juvenile justice through the formation of programs, like Teen Court, that serve to expose youth to pro-social and law-abiding attitudes, as well as place them in a peer group that both models and reinforces anti-criminal patterns and behaviors. By allowing offending youth to form their own court, as well as actively participate in the operation of the court and its sentencing outcomes, they experience a unique exercise in social learning that, ideally, facilitates a transformation in their attitudes and actions from that of violating laws and norms to being part of a process and a group that celebrates and enforces law-abiding and constructive behavior.

## 2. An Overview of the Literature on Teen Court

Since the inception of Teen Court and programs like it, several studies have been conducted evaluating the outcomes of Teen Courts and their overall effects on recidivism. Previous studies have focused on a variety of different aspects of Teen Court, including the compilation of descriptive data such as participant demographics, sentencing decisions and outcomes, and recidivism rates, as well as evaluative and exploratory data concerning participant satisfaction, limitations and shortcomings of Teen Court, and the overall success rate of Teen Court.

In a study analyzing Teen Courts in Cumberland County, the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC) (1995) used a comparison group of 97 cases heard between 1993 and 1994 that were similar in demographics and offenses to cases that were heard in Teen Court once the program was up and running. The experimental group consisted of youth who went through the Teen Court program. An analysis of recidivism rates found no statistically significant differences in the rates of recidivism between the control and experimental group. However, there were several limitations in this study. Most importantly, the study only analyzed recidivism rates for seven months after the date of the original offense (NCAOC, 1995). A longer follow-up period might have produced different recidivism rates for both groups. Moreover, the study took place when Teen Court in Cumberland County, North Carolina was still extremely new. While other models of Teen Court were in existence across the country, it is possible that this particular Teen Court was still learning how to operate effectively. Finally, recidivism data alone do not inform whether or not the needs of offenders were adequately addressed through the program.

In another study, Lockart, Pericak, & Peterson (1996) discuss the rationale behind implementing a Youth Court in Colonie, New York. They argue that an early intervention program such as this one can teach youth accountability and promote positive behaviors through commitment and attachment. Furthermore, the authors contend that youth who participate in community service will exhibit a positive change in their behaviors and attitudes. In the model examined, high school students who have completed a ten-week training program fill the roles of the judge, clerk, bailiff, prosecutor, defense attorney, and jury foreperson.

The study revealed that out of 152 total cases adjudicated between 1994 and 1996, 134 defendants completed their sentences successfully, with seventeen defendants still in the process of completing their sentences. While data from this study suggest that the Colonie Youth Court model experienced extremely high successful completion rates, the lack of follow-up evaluation serves to limit the implications for its positive impact on meeting the needs of the youth and indicating a permanent change in their behavior patterns.

The El Dorado County Superior Court (EDCSC) (1999) in California conducted a study focusing on recidivism rates for Teen Court participants between 1994 and 1999. This study examined 460 Teen Court cases and utilized a comparison group of offenders who were referred to juvenile probation instead of going through Teen Court, even though they were eligible for it. Researchers found that 17% of Teen Court participants and 27% of youth in the comparison group recidivated by the end of the year in which they were referred. Additionally, the recidivism rate of the comparison group was higher than that of Teen Court participants every year during the five year follow-up period (EDCSC, 1999). These initial findings suggest that Teen Court was more successful in reducing recidivism rates than the traditional, formal intervention of juvenile probation.

There were also several limitations in this study, including the fact that a selection bias may have existed for the comparison group, since cases in the comparison group were the cases that were not chosen for Teen Court for a variety of different reasons. Furthermore, even though the recidivism rates were higher for participants in the comparison group, it was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the actual needs of the youth in this study were met.

Garrison (2001) assessed the Kent County Teen Court Program in Delaware in order to determine if grant money should continue to fund the program. The goal of the study was to find out if the program kept 100 youth from entering the family court system, if the program provided sentences for 100 youth, and if the program trained 80 youth to serve as jurors and other volunteer functions during 1999 and 2000. Garrison found that all three of these goals were met and exceeded; 106 youth participated in the program and received sentences, while 105 youth were trained to be volunteers throughout the two years.

When examining recidivism rates, Garrison (2001) found that 15.5% of youth who successfully completed the Teen Court program were arrested after their successful completion of the program. Moreover, of the youth who successfully completed the program, recidivism rates were analyzed after a three, six, nine, and twelve month period. At three months, 11.1% of youth who successfully completed the program were rearrested. This total percentage increased to 15.6% after a six month period and remained at this percentage throughout the twelve month period. Thus, 84.4% of youth who successfully completed the Teen Court program were not arrested during the twelve month follow up period. This yields a recidivism rate of only 15.6% (Garrison, 2001).

One limitation of this study to remember is that it only examined the re-arrest rate for participants who *successfully* completed the program instead of all the youth who were adjudicated. Thus, if unsuccessful youth were included in this analysis, the recidivism rate could have been much higher. Additionally, youth were only followed for twelve months, so any re-arrest that occurred after twelve months was not documented. One last limitation of this study is the fact that a control group was not utilized to compare the outcomes of Teen Court participants and juvenile offenders who did not participate in Teen Court, making it difficult to determine if Teen Court is more effective than other programs and processes. However, given the low recidivism rates, it appears as if the Kent County Teen Court Program was successful in meeting the needs of the Teen Court participants.

In 2001, Harrison, Maupin, & Mays conducted a study examining the outcomes of Dona Ana County Teen Court (DACTC) participants from Las Cruces, New Mexico between 1994 and 1998. For this study, 478 participants were randomly selected to be analyzed by the researchers. Harrison, Maupin, & Mays (2001) found that this Teen Court had a recidivism rate of 25% from its creation in 1994 until 1998. At the time this analysis was conducted, the researchers contend that this recidivism rate was “still lower than that of any other JPPO-administered diversion program in the country,” (pp. 252). This particular Teen Court accepted participants between the ages of ten and seventeen. With this in mind, Harrison, Maupin, & Mays (2001) found that high school students were less likely to complete the program. Additionally, the authors discovered that the majority (73%) of participants who recidivated were male.

In addition to analyzing recidivism rates, Harrison, Maupin, & Mays (2001) also examined qualitative data of the participants that was collected through surveys. The researchers found that *all* of the respondents who filled out a survey felt as though the jury was consistent and reasonable in their sentencing. Additionally, *all* respondents indicated that Teen Court helped improve their attitudes. Furthermore, *all* participants stated that they learned their lessons throughout the Teen Court experience and would not reoffend in the future. While recidivism rates clearly illustrate that some participants still reoffended, it is worthwhile to note that none of the participants indicated they intended to reoffend in the future. The low recidivism rate and the above answers to the survey questions suggest that the participants of DACTC felt as though their needs were being met with the services they were offered through Teen Court.

Rasmussen (2002) analyzed the records of Peer Court in Vermillion County, Illinois from 1993-2001 to discover information about defendant demographics, court sanctions, and recidivism rates. Rasmussen (2002) found that “10% of youth can be expected to commit a misdemeanor or felony 1 year after completing their sentence,” (pp. 3). Even though this percentage rises to 11% when ordinance violations are included in reoffending, this is still an extremely low recidivism rate. The study also found that 16% of youth are likely to commit a misdemeanor or felony offense, two years after completing their sentence, with this percentage rising to 21% when ordinance violations are included in the analysis of reoffending.

While this study reports promising recidivism rates, it did not include a control group to compare the needs and outcomes of different youth offenders. So, once again, it is difficult to determine if this Peer Court is more effective in reducing recidivism and meeting the needs of teens, than a formal juvenile court.

Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall (2002) issued the first report of findings from the Evaluation of Teen Courts “ETC” Project, which included research on Teen Courts in Alaska, Arizona, Maryland, and Missouri. More specifically, the Anchorage Youth Court in Anchorage, Alaska, Teen Courts in Maricopa County, Arizona, the Montgomery County Teen Court in Rockville, Maryland, and the Independence Youth Court in Independence, Missouri were studied. This study focused on the attitudes of defendants before court, as well as the recidivism rates for Teen Court participants. Unlike the Kent County, Delaware study and the Vermillion County, Illinois study, the ETC Project included a comparison group to analyze recidivism rates for youth offenders who went through the formal juvenile justice system. In exploring recidivism rates, researchers found that recidivism rates for youth who went through the Teen Court program were lower than those who went through the formal juvenile justice system. Specifically, after six months of completing Teen Court, recidivism rates for the four states were as follows: 6% for Alaska, 9% for Arizona, 8% for Maryland, and 9% for Missouri. When analyzing the recidivism rates after six months for the comparison courts, they were as follows: 23% for Alaska, 15% for Arizona, 4% for Maryland, and 28% for Missouri (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002). Thus, with the exception of Maryland, initial findings indicate the Teen Court programs in Alaska, Arizona, and Missouri were more effective than the formal court system for juvenile offenders.

This study also collected qualitative data from parents and youth regarding their overall satisfaction of the Teen Court process. According to Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall (2002), the majority of parents and youth in all four states thought that “the teen court process was fair, that youth appearing before the court had ample opportunity to express themselves, and that the volunteers and staff...treated them with respect and cared about their legal rights,” (pp. 31). When analyzing

various factors that youth who recidivated had in common, the researchers discovered that youth who reported more pro-social attitudes before they went through Teen Court were less likely to recidivate in the future.

Limitations of this study include the fact that the four different sites varied greatly in demographics, population, and the number of cases they handled each year. Because of these differences, the study was unable to control for variables which could have affected the outcome of recidivism rates.

A study by Doroski (2007) analyzed the outcomes of Teen Court participants in San Diego, California over a two-year period. From January 2004 to May 2006, Doroski (2007) examined participant demographics, sentence outcomes, and the effects of these sentence outcomes on recidivism rates and overall knowledge of Teen Court participants. A total of 53 participants were examined. Findings indicate that 94% of participants had not recidivated 1 year after completing the program. An examination of qualitative data found that 97% of participants believed the Teen Court program had a positive impact on them, with 89% of participants reporting they believed their sentence was fair. Additionally, 30% of participants valued the support of their peers, 35% stated they learned the consequences of their actions, and 20% believed the Teen Court program was helpful (Doroski, 2007, pp. 5).

Moreover, the participants were given the same survey before their Teen Court experience and after it to assess any changes in their attitudes and behaviors. The results of this survey showed that participants were more likely to complete chores at home, turn down opportunities to use drugs or alcohol, and participate in more school activities after they completed Teen Court. Parents also reported that participants improved in school, communication, impulse control, volunteering, and choosing their friends after they went through Teen Court (Doroski, 2007, pp.5).

The type of qualitative data reported in this study serve to better inform our understanding of the teen court model in meeting the specific needs of the youth who participated in the San Diego Teen Court program, as both participants and parents reported overall high levels of satisfaction with the program.

In an attempt to discover how jurors arrive at their sentencing decisions in a Colorado Teen Court, Greene & Weber (2008) observed thirty-two Teen Court trials and jury deliberations and questioned 98 teen jurors about their sentencing decisions in Colorado. Researchers distributed a questionnaire to the teen jurors and utilized coding forms during the actual trial to determine if information the questionnaires asked was presented during the trial itself. Results showed that jurors generally aimed to teach the offenders to take responsibility for their actions when they determined what the offenders' sentences would be. Jurors also expressed that they hoped the defendants could learn from their Teen Court experience and not re-offend in the future (Greene & Weber, 2008). In this study, there were some jurors who went through the Teen Court experience themselves. These jurors were questioned about their perceptions of Teen Court. The majority of these jurors answered that they felt as though they were treated fairly during their court experience, and most of them wished to extend this fairness to other defendants (Greene & Weber, 2008).

This study is unique in its evaluation of sentencing decisions. Greene & Weber (2008) explore a territory that is not often scrutinized. The results of the survey in this study indicate that prior defendants felt like they were treated fairly, which could be interpreted to mean that they felt as though their needs were met during their trials. This could be especially true for this group of prior defendants since they came back on their own to volunteer as jurors. One potential limitation to this study, however, is the fact that the sample size was somewhat small, as there were only 98 participants.

In September of 2007, youth court coordinators from over 1,255 different courts in forty-nine states and Washington, D.C., received the National Youth Court Data Collection Survey by mail. This survey analyzed how the various youth courts operated and the outcomes of the different Teen Court programs. Only 278 coordinators returned a completed survey and met the criteria for the study. Schneider (2008) analyzed these surveys and discovered that the majority (68.3%) of Teen Courts across the nation have been in existence for six to fifteen years. Additionally, many courts had extremely low operating budgets, with 30.67% having a budget under \$10,000 and 15.67% having a budget between \$10,000 and \$20,000 (pp. 17). The majority of youth defendants (97,600) completed their sentences within one year of their court date.

As indicated by Schneider (2008), there were several limitations of this study. First off, the response rate was extremely low. Next, the research did not include a sample but rather tried to reach the whole population. Using a sample would have been less time consuming and less costly, and the response rate would not have been as much of an issue. Lastly, additional questions could have been asked on the survey that focused more on recidivism rates and different Teen Court policies among the states. Since recidivism rates were not considered in this study, it is impossible to measure whether or not Teen Court participants felt as though their needs were met through their Teen Court sentences. However, Schneider (2008) was able to ascertain that youth courts across the nation are continuing to be utilized as an alternative to the formal court system.

The McDowell Group (2010) evaluated and assessed the outcomes of Alaska Youth Courts from January 2010 to July 2010. Alaska Youth Courts are unique because they actually determine guilt and innocence in their courts while most Teen Courts require defendants to admit guilt before coming to court. For this particular study, the McDowell Group (2010) analyzed the ten different Youth Courts that are located in Alaska. The average successful completion rate of these ten courts was 79%. The researchers discovered promising recidivism rates; after six months of completing Youth Court, only 3% of participants re-offended. Throughout the ten different court systems, recidivism rates after twelve months of completing Youth Court ranged from 0% in Sitka to 13% in Juneau. Furthermore, only 19% of participants reoffended before their eighteenth birthdays (McDowell Group, 2010, pp. 1-2). Compared to studies conducted in the past, these recidivism rates are quite low.

While this study indicates that recidivism rates for the Youth Courts in Alaska are low, researchers also emphasize the importance of analyzing qualitative data when evaluating the effectiveness of Youth Courts. Thus, interviews were conducted with juvenile probation officers, judges, magistrates, Youth Court board members, and youth volunteers to gain qualitative data about their over perceptions of the implementation of Youth Court. Respondents indicated that they believed Youth Court was effective at reducing juvenile crime and recidivism. About 90% of Youth Court volunteers believed that Youth Court was effective in preventing juvenile crimes. Moreover, Youth Court board members collectively specified that they served on the board because they believed there was great value in diverting juvenile offenders from the formal court system (McDowell Group, 2008).

While quite informative, this analysis also contained many limitations. One limitation comes from the fact that there are significant differences between the courts examined with regard to the ages of offenders they accept, the methods they use to record recidivism rates, the data they record regarding the defendants, and the amount of missing data there is for defendants across the state (McDowell Group, 2010). Moreover, the actual participants were not specifically asked about their perceptions of Youth Court, which does not give a complete understanding of the extent to which the Alaska Youth Courts are effective in meeting the needs of juvenile offenders.

The Hillside Children's Center – Community Service Livingston Youth Court (LCYC) program and the Community Service Only (CSO) program were evaluated by the School of Social Work in the State University of New York at Buffalo during 2008 through 2010 (Nochajski, 2011). Researchers also analyzed comparison groups from other states and equated them against the LCYC and CSO groups when analyzing recidivism rates. Nochajski (2011) discovered that teens who went through LCYC displayed a recidivism rate of 3.6% after six months of receiving their sentences, and CSO participants displayed a recidivism rate of 6.2%. Both of these rates are significantly lower than the comparison group recidivism rate of 18% after six months of receiving their sentences. Nochajski (2011) also found that re-offense rates increased steadily as time went by, a consistent finding in the research literature.

Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with participants. Through these interviews, Nochajski (2011) found that participants learned how important it is to be responsible, learned that their actions have consequences, obtained new skills and a better work ethic, felt remorse for their actions, and stated that their experiences in LCYC and CSO would keep them from getting into trouble in the future.

One weakness of this study is that researchers were unable to utilize a comparable control group, which is why they analyzed comparison groups from other states. Additionally, there was a low number of participants in the study and some recidivism rates were only analyzed for ten or eleven months after sentencing, instead of the full twelve months (Nochajski, 2011). The results of the interviews, combined with the low recidivism rates, would indicate, however, that LCYC and CSO are both effective programs in meeting the needs of the youth.

A final study we present is that of Flowers (2011). Through self-administered surveys and interviews, Flowers (2011) evaluated the Time Dollar Youth Court (TDYC) in the District of Columbia in 2010. This assessment did not use recidivism rates when evaluating the court's overall effectiveness. Instead, Flowers (2011) analyzed participants' responses to interview questions, in order to determine the type of impact the Youth Court had on juveniles. While one of the goals of TDYC is to reduce recidivism, this court also aims to positively change the attitudes and behaviors of Youth Court participants. Flowers (2011) notes that many participants of TDYC willingly returned as volunteers after completing all of their sentencing requirements. Additionally, participants reported higher levels of life skills, better problem-solving techniques, more involvement in the community, and better communication skills after they went through the court process (Flowers, 2011). All of these findings indicate that several positive changes in behaviors might be attributed to the Youth Court experience, which suggests that the needs of the youth court participants were met.

### **3. Greene County Teen Court Missouri Model**

The Greene County Teen Court Model was instituted in 1996 in Springfield, MO in order to provide low-risk juvenile offenders with a chance to learn from their mistakes and accept responsibility for their actions through a diversion program. This model has the goal of creating a constructive approach to sentencing that avoids formal sanctions and allows the offender to repair the harm their crime has caused to the victim and the community.

Greene County utilizes a Teen Court model in which teens serve as attorneys, bailiffs, clerks, and jurors. The defense and prosecuting attorneys are volunteers from local high schools, while the jury is made up of prior Teen Court defendants. Attorneys are required to attend training and also have to shadow current attorneys before they are able to have their own cases. The clerk and bailiff positions are also held by high school student volunteers. Volunteer participants in Teen Court receive community service hours for high school credit. While all defendants are sentenced to participate on a certain minimum number of juries, prior Teen Court defendants can choose to participate in additional jury duties to earn community action points (CAPs).

An actual adult judge presides over each Teen Court proceeding. Judges involved in the Greene County Teen Court are usually from the Missouri Appellate Court, Greene County Circuit Court, and the Springfield Municipal Court. While the judge questions the defendants, the determination of guilt is not a part of the court proceedings. Under this model, defendants must admit guilt before going to Teen Court; jurors merely decide what sentence to give the defendants. After closing arguments and jury deliberations, the judge accepts the sentence the jury presents. If the judge feels as though the sentence is unfair, s/he will ask the jury to go back to deliberations and deliver a different sentence. Other volunteer roles held by adults include the verdict processor and jury consultants. The verdict processor goes over the sentence with the defendant and his or her parent/s, while jury consultants help guide deliberations and supervise the teen jury.

There are sentences which are required for all Teen Court defendants as well as some optional sentences. According to data compiled in 2011, all sentenced defendants received the following dispositions:

- 3-9 hours of community service
- 2-6 jury duty obligations
- Attending a Family Communication Workshop
- Obtaining 40-80 Community Action Points (CAPs)

In order to earn CAPs, teens have to participate in a variety of activities centered upon the themes of accountability, education, and community safety. Each activity is assigned a certain number of points and must be verified by an adult. Since there is a range associated with three of the sentencing dispositions, the assigned disposition will depend upon both the offense and jury deliberations.

In addition to the required sentences, there are also optional sentences the jury can assign defendants. These include apology letters, essays, posters, random drug or alcohol tests, life story assignment, life skills classes, anger management classes, drug and alcohol abuse classes, restitution, victim-offender mediation, a victim-impact panel program, interviews, and other creative sentencing options. Some examples of creative sentencing options include a rap about respect or a poem about the effects of drug abuse on the brain. Once a sentence is given and approved by the judge, the defendant will have ninety days to complete that sentence. Although the ninety days is sometimes extended due to special circumstances, most defendants who do not complete their obligations in the specified time fail Teen Court and are referred back to the Deputy Juvenile Officer for further disciplinary action. Successful completion of a sentence results in the case being dropped, and no formal charges are filed against the Teen Court defendant.

### **4. Sentencing Outcomes, Recidivism Rates and Participant Satisfaction**

In 2011, the Greene County Juvenile Justice Office in Springfield, MO, began compiling data on participants in Teen Court. The goal of this study is to examine this data in order to assess and discuss sentencing outcomes, recidivism rates, and participant satisfaction. This study represents the first attempt to assess the implementation of the Teen Court Model in Springfield, MO, and is an important development in the ongoing efforts of correctional agencies to develop and advance evidence based policies and practices.

Data collected on the sentence outcomes of the 85 defendants who participated in Teen Court in 2011 reveal that there were 353 total jury duties, 5,597 total CAPs, 516 total community service hours, 96 essays, 76 interviews, 171 apology letters, 35 posters, 51 life story assignments, 70 life skills classes, and 156 random drug and alcohol tests were assigned to defendants. Additionally, 29% of defendants had to attend a victim impact panel, 35% of defendants were assigned to drug and alcohol classes, and 8% of defendants had to attend anger management classes.

These statistics illustrate the wide variety of non-traditional, constructive sentence options that Greene County Teen Court defendants received in 2011. Moreover, they are indicative of an implementation design that encompasses the various programmatic elements characteristic of a holistic, restorative justice approach to juvenile justice intervention that builds upon the tradition of pro-social learning, positive role modeling and accountability as successful indicators of community reintegration. These are hallmark components of the Teen Court Model and Teen Court's mission to provide creative sentencing alternatives that are based on the juvenile's particular offense.

Moreover, of the 85 youth who went through Teen Court in various intervals during the year 2011, 64 youth were successful in completing Teen Court, yielding a 75% successful completion rate. In addition, an examination of recidivism data reveals that as of November 2012 (significantly more than 1 year for participants beginning the program in early 2011) eighteen youth had reoffended, yielding an overall recidivism rate of only 21%. While this rate appears to be somewhat high in comparison to other Teen Court models, it is important to note that not all recidivism (measured as an offender's return to the Juvenile Office) data reflects the same time interval between program completion and date of measurement. Moreover, as stated previously in the review of prior research studies on Teen Court, a comprehensive understanding of the overall success of program implementation must go beyond recidivism data. In order to determine the effectiveness of Teen Court as an alternative intervention in juvenile justice, qualitative data evaluating client satisfaction is imperative.

Within Greene County Juvenile Justice, youth who participate in Teen Court have the opportunity to fill out a satisfaction survey (*Teen Court Evaluation Survey*) evaluating their overall Teen Court experience. An examination of all surveys filled out by youth who participated in Teen Court in 2011 reveals the following data: 100% of participants believed they were treated with respect, 100% of participants were glad they chose Teen Court instead of formal court processing, no participants rated their overall Teen Court experience as poor, and no participants believed their attorney represented them poorly. Additionally, as is shown in Table 1, a majority of the participants felt as though the drug and alcohol classes, life skills classes, and victim impact panel were worthwhile if they were a part of their sentence.

Table 1: Offender Perception of Sentencing Disposition Effectiveness

Disposition	Percentage Indicating Effective	Percentage Indicating Somewhat Effective	Percentage Indicating Not Effective
Drug/Alcohol Classes	64%	15%	21%
Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM)	50%	0%	50%
Victim Impact Panel (VIP)	80%	0%	20%
Life Skills Classes	73%	7%	20%
Inside/Out Girls Group	50%	0%	50%

With regard to learning from different sentencing dispositions (see Table 2), Teen Court participants who filled out the satisfaction survey indicated that they learned the most from Community Service, a finding that is consistent with the literature on Teen Court.

Table 2: Offenders Indicating What They Learned From the Most

Sentencing Disposition	Percentage of Teens Selecting Intervention
Community Service	26%
Interviews	8%
Classes	15%
Family Communication Workshop	7%
Essays	7%
Jury Duties	19%
VIP	11%
Drug/Alcohol Classes	7%

The Teen Court Evaluation Survey also gives youth the opportunity for comments and suggestions for Teen Court. The following statements represent some of these comments:

*"It really put things into perspective for me. Everyone was very respectful."*

*"Teen Court gave me a chance to redeem myself."*

*"They treated me without judging me, like I was a person not a criminal."*

*"It was an overall good learning experience and very informational."*

One limitation to these findings is the fact that clients were able to choose on a voluntary basis whether or not to fill out the Teen Court evaluation survey. Of the 2011 successful program completers, about half filled out this survey. Thus, those who took the time to do the survey and turn it in could very well be those who had the most positive experience in the program, yielding more positive results. Additionally, longer follow-up of participants is needed, since only about a year had passed since most participants began their sentences at the time this evaluation took place. Nevertheless, the results of the Teen Court Satisfaction Survey are a promising indication that the Greene County Teen Court Model is successful in implementing a sentencing model that addresses the needs of participants.

### **5. Benefits of Greene County Teen Court**

An examination of the Greene County Teen Court reveals an approach that delivers a constructive sentencing model that is a creative, “hands-on” opportunity for juvenile offenders and volunteer participants to not only learn about the legal system, but to provide positive role-modeling and positive peer pressure. Through this experience, juvenile offenders can benefit from becoming empowered by having an active role in life changing experiences. In doing this, teen offenders increase their chances of developing leadership qualities, negotiation skills, and positive self-worth, by helping each other, instead of feeling like they are misunderstood and themselves victimized. Moreover, upon successful completion, participants in Teen Court will learn to take responsibility for their actions and not endure the long term consequences of a having a criminal record. Researchers note that Teen Courts can encourage healthy attitudes toward authority figures and produce higher levels of self-esteem for participants (Colydas & Peterson, 2001).

At the heart of the Greene County Teen Court Model is the goal of providing offenders with positive learning experiences whether through serving as a juror, participating in an educational workshop, or serving the community. Through these opportunities, offenders learn the value of respect and accountability, obtaining a new perspective on crime and the criminal justice system, without becoming alienated or developing negative attitudes towards authority. Studies show that Teen Court participants often improve their attitudes toward authority and increase their knowledge of the criminal justice system as a whole. (Butts & Buck, 2000).

### **6. Recommendations for Future Evaluation**

A meta-analysis of different evaluations and assessments of Teen Courts throughout the nation as well as an examination of data from the Greene County Teen Court provides us with several suggestions for future studies of this model of correctional intervention. First and foremost, the implementation of a Teen Court model needs to account for a universal measurement of recidivism. Currently, with the thousands of different Teen Courts throughout the country, there are many different ways that “recidivism” is defined and counted. This can produce mixed results with regard to program evaluation. Additionally, some courts measure recidivism at three months, others measure it at six months, some measure it at twelve months, while even others measure it until the participant turns eighteen. All of these different methods of measuring re-offense rates make it difficult to determine accurate and consistent recidivism data, which could account for why some Teen Courts illustrate extremely low recidivism rates, such as 0% in Sitka, Alaska (McDowell Group, 2010), while others demonstrate higher recidivism rates, such as 24% in Arlington, Texas (Hissong, 1991).

Moreover, Teen Courts across the country need to establish surveys and questionnaires assessing participant satisfaction that are very similar and consistent with one another (McDowell Group, 2010). While different Teen Courts may want to analyze different aspects of the Teen Court program depending upon their individual characteristics, overall statistics cannot be compiled if every Teen Court in the United State uses a different survey. Following a consistent format can aide in evaluating the overall effectiveness of Teen Courts in our country. Similar surveys would also give assessors the ability to determine which Teen Courts need to improve their practices and which Teen Courts should be models for other courts.

The data explored in this study points to the need for additional research studies to be conducted on Teen Courts using *appropriate* control groups. According to Schneider (2008), only three published studies utilized control groups as of 2008. Of the thirteen studies reviewed in our meta-analysis, only four of them used comparison groups, and some of these comparison groups did not exactly match the characteristics of the experimental groups. Butts, Buck, and Coggeshall (2002) as well as Garrison (2001) concur that definitive outcome studies are lacking when it comes to evaluating Teen Court programs. Without proper control groups, it is almost impossible to adequately assess if Teen Court is actually more effective than the alternative of being referred to formal court. While there are ethical concerns in randomly assigning juvenile delinquents to a Teen Court group or “formal court” group, researchers can still analyze comparison groups of juveniles that have similar characteristics of those who participate in Teen Court, where this option is not recommended or even not available.

In addition, more studies need to be conducted examining youth satisfaction with the Teen Courts experience. As expressed by many different researchers (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002; Doroski, 2007; Flowers, 2011; Harrison,



Maupin, & Mays, 2001; Lockart, Pericak, & Peterson, 1996; McDowell Group, 2010; Nochajski, 2011; Peterson & Elmendorf, 2002), recidivism rates should not be the only tools we use to evaluate the effectiveness of Teen Court programs. The fact that a youth re-offends after participating in Teen Court does not mean that the youth did not learn valuable coping skills and gained knowledge of the criminal justice system that may help them in some future situation or decision. To leave out these positive effects of Teen Court would not give a comprehensive understanding of the value of Teen Court as an intervention.

Lastly, there needs to be more long term follow-up data on Teen Court participants. Some Teen Courts only measure recidivism rates for one year after program completion, while others keep statistics on participants until they turn eighteen. However, since some Teen Court participants are seventeen years old when they go through the Teen Court process, keeping statistics until they turn eighteen means they are only followed for a year after they complete the program. More longitudinal studies need to be conducted, with data on Teen Court participants kept for at least five years (McDowell Group, 2010). Currently, this task presents a great challenge to Juvenile Justice Offices, as many Teen Courts close cases if offenders successfully complete their sentences.

## 7. Conclusion

Teen Court is a promising alternative to formal sanctions for youth who have committed status or misdemeanor offenses. Consistent with social learning paradigms in Criminology, the Teen Court Model relies on a powerful learning mechanism in the life of an adolescent –peer pressure and the desire to obtain approval. The response to this type of pro-social intervention is widely regarded as a better approach than the traditional methods used by adult authority figures within the formal criminal justice system. Relying on volunteers from the court system, as well as the community, Teen Courts are not only a less costly alternative to formal sanctions but also allow members of the community to become more actively engaged in the response to teen crime.

While there are several different models of Teen Court across the country, they all allow young offenders a second chance at reintegration and avoiding the stigma of progressing further into the formal juvenile system, provided they successfully complete their sentences. The specific emphasis of this study focused on the relationship between services rendered to youth in Teen Courts across the nation and meeting the needs of youth participants in this type of sanction. A meta-analysis focusing on thirteen different evaluation studies as well as a more in-depth look at evaluation data from Greene County Teen Court concludes that Teen Court is a promising alternative sentence that adequately addresses and meets the needs of youth participants. While recidivism data are not conclusive, a survey of client satisfaction affirms the beneficent mediating variables of Teen Court's success in its intervention in the lives of youth offenders.

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