



National Youth Court Center POLICY BRIEF

SEPTEMBER 2004

Policymakers Support Youth Court Growth

Voices and Recommendations from the Field

By Sarah S. Pearson

Policymakers across the nation are looking for new and innovative ways to deal with juvenile crime. The time for serious consideration of this topic is at hand, as evidenced by a series of reports, studies, articles, and surveys recently released. For example: a nonprofit group, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids *Illinois*, a chapter of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, released a report in September 2002 called, "When the school bell rings . . . juvenile crime or constructive time?"¹ The report was endorsed by the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police. The report revealed that in Chicago, 15% of violent crimes by youth are committed after school, 43% of all juvenile offenses occur between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on school days, the crimes ranging from aggravated assault to drug possession. In April 2003, the same group collected the opinions of uniformed officers in Chicago through a survey, asking them what will work to cut juvenile crime. Seventy percent of the

officers said, "If America does not make greater investments in after-school and educational child care programs to help children and youth now, we will pay far more later in crime, welfare, and other costs."² A *Christian Science Monitor* article on teenage joyriding in Montana reported that young people today are more likely to take risks and be mobile than young people of previous generations. The article states that, nationally, the number of 16-year-old drivers will grow over the next decade.³ In 2003, the National Crime Prevention Council released findings from a survey conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide that cites bullying as the threat that most frightens teenagers and interferes with their education: "More than half of the teens polled said they could identify a student at school who they feel could cause harm to another student, a 15% increase over last year's response to the same question."⁴

A youth population boom is on the way. In the U.S., the number of people

under 18 grew by 8.5 million between 1990 and 2000, representing a respective 26% of citizens in American households in 2000.⁵ Many of these youth are teens now or soon will be.

Policymakers alerted to the rise in the number of youth, including those involved in juvenile crimes, should be seeking preventative, long-term solutions that address youth development. Expanding prison space is expensive,

¹ Fight Crime: Invest in Kids home page is www.fightcrime.org and the report press release may be found at <http://www.fightcrime.org/releases.php?id=38>.

² A press release for this survey may be found at <http://www.fightcrime.org/releases.php?id=54>.

³ Wilkinson, T. (April 24, 2001). Among states, a bid to curb teen joyriding. *Christian Science Monitor*.

⁴ January 14, 2003. "Bullying, Not Terrorist Attack, Biggest Threat Seen By U.S. Teens." Washington, D.C.: National Crime Prevention Council. Available at <http://www.ncpc.org/ncpc/ncpc/?pg=5878-5886-6652>.

⁵ Lugaila, T. and Overturf, J. (2004, February). Children and the households they live in: 2000. *Census 2000 Special Report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce.

and this solution seldom improves the quality of the community or the lives of youth. However, education in democracy and responsibility has promise, and some policymakers have chosen to incorporate this as they think of solutions to preserve the safety of their community and invest in tomorrow's citizenry. Youth court is their recommendation.

What is Youth Court?

Youth court (also called teen, peer, and student court) is a program that combines youth development with juvenile justice, involving young people in the community decision-making process for sanctioning their peers who have violated the rule of law or engaged in problem behavior. The program is a youth-driven, voluntary alternative to traditional juvenile court and school disciplinary proceedings. Youth court is sometimes confused with mock court—an exercise that allows youth to relive a previously tried case through role playing. Youth court, however, has an innovative feature—youth sentencing their peers in bona fide cases. Youth courts can be operated in schools (during school hours or after school), police departments, probation departments, juvenile and family courts, and community agencies. Cases commonly involve delinquent and status offenses such as larceny, criminal mischief, vandalism, minor assault, possession of alcohol, and minor drug offenses, as well as violations of school rules. The program receives referrals from school officials, local law enforcement departments, juvenile services offices, district attorneys offices, juvenile and district court judges, probation officers, and other local youth-focused programs.

Depending on the youth court program model (there are four primary models),⁶ proceedings involve a youth respondent—the defendant—and youth volunteers who may serve as jurors, judge, prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, clerk, and bailiff. Most youth courts serve only in the

capacity of a disposition hearing and require youth to admit guilt or agree not to contest the charges before participating. Through the youth court process, respondents do more than make up for their misdeeds; they have a chance to learn deeper lessons about their role in the community as they engage in constructive sentences handed out by their peers, which may include written apologies, repair of harm caused, community service, youth court jury duty, and educational workshops.⁷

One of the most attractive qualities of the program is that youth courts rely greatly on adult and youth volunteer assistance and pose little burden on taxpayers as they inform and educate youth about their roles as active citizens and the rule of law in our democracy.

State and Local Policymaker Recommendations

In less than a decade, youth and teen courts have increased in number from 78 sites in 1994 to more than 950 sites today, which are located in 48 states and the District of Columbia.⁸ This growth coincides with modest federal funding to assist youth courts, as well as with supportive legislation at the state and local level, the development of national guidelines, and professional development and technical support provided by the National Youth Court Center.⁹ Policymakers interviewed for this brief offered thoughtful advice to their peers considering legislation or other types of support for youth court programs.

City Voices

City of Anchorage, Alaska

Youth court was brought to Anchorage in response to an explosive crime wave in 1994. At that time, Mark Begich, now the Mayor of Anchorage, sat on the city council. He first heard about the program from staff at the Anchorage Youth Court: “We were trying to think long-term to stem the tide of crime by dealing

with first-time offenders,” says Begich. With the mayor's involvement, the program grew from processing 20 to 400 cases annually.

Mayor Begich feels the program is cost effective: “We spend on an average, from start to finish, an estimated \$600 per person, 67 to 68 days from offense to the completion of community service. This is reasonable if you compare it to the traditional court system case that costs taxpayers \$30,000 to \$40,000 for the city per year.”

The city funds the youth court program through a grant it provides to Anchorage Youth Court and Volunteers of America, which oversees the sentencing and community service part of the program. Working in conjunction with the state, the city funds two probation officers who provide the first point of contact for those who have been arrested and choose to transition to the program.

Marketing is about 40% of the work needed to expand the program and educate the press, policymakers, community leaders, and others. To help the program grow, the mayor hired an intern to assist him with oversight of the youth court. “We worked through the bureaucratic roadblocks that can keep the program from working. You can't just say you support youth court. You have to get out and work it through the system,” says Begich.

⁶ The four primary youth court program models are the Adult Judge Model, Youth Judge Model, Youth Tribunal Model, and Peer Jury Model [Godwin, T.M., Fulton, B.A., & Steinhart, D.J., (1998). *Peer justice and youth empowerment: An implementation guide for teen court programs*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.] A thorough description of these models also can be found on the National Youth Court Center's website at www.youthcourt.net.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

⁹ The National Youth Court Center is an organization created through a public/private partnership among the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Transportation, and the American Probation and Parole Association.

The mayor offered recommendations to other local policymakers thinking of bringing youth court to their city:

- When establishing and operating a youth court program, put youth in positions of leadership within the program.
- Work with and be a champion for the program, but don't just create legislation and then walk away. "A jurisdiction needs a political champion who can step out there and describe why youth court works. Go to work for them and do more than just show up to meetings," says Begich.
- Set the program up so that it is not dependent on your political career for its success. Policymakers must be willing to understand that youth should get a piece of the credit for making things happen. "The key in all of what I do is not to make the program dependent on my political identity for its survival. Policymakers should use their political clout to get it started, but not make the program dependent on their career," says Begich.

City of Fort Worth, TX

In 1987, the Fort Worth Teen Court was established as a nonprofit agency by the Junior League of Fort Worth, TX. The Fort Worth Teen Court handles 2,300 cases for the city each year, says Director Susan Wolf. By taking on such a substantial amount of cases, the teen court diverts less serious cases from the traditional juvenile justice system, freeing the juvenile court to manage serious juvenile crime cases in a timely manner. To oversee the teen court, the League created a board of directors consisting of business and community leaders, including a lawyer, a teacher, a banker, a junior league member, and the Chief Judge for the City of Fort Worth. Today, the Fort Worth Teen Court is a public/private partnership between the Junior League and the City of Fort Worth. According to Director Wolf, "The

Junior League saw teen court as a better way to handle juvenile justice cases because it includes youth development components."

Program funding currently supports two full-time salaried positions, office space, and computers. The teen court uses donated funds for a part-time staff person, volunteer appreciation activities, and limited professional development for staff, including reimbursement for travel. "The importance of funding these types of activities," says Wolf, "is that it helps to keep the daily activities of processing so many cases per year running smoothly."

State Voices

Florida

Katie Self, Executive Director of the Sarasota Teen Court, Inc. and co-founder of the Florida Association of Teen Courts, Inc. (FATC) asserts, "There is no question that teen court is cost-effective for the state of Florida." Currently, 25,000 cases are being handled by youth court programs statewide, with the cost for processing a youth through the program at \$400 per youth, which is thousands of dollars less than youth adjudicated through the circuit courts.

Teen court started in Florida in Sarasota County in 1988. By 1992, Self and other teen court advocates had begun to seek statewide legislative support for the unique program. Several legislators advised that the legislature would not look at statewide funding for programs that were localized in just a few districts across the state. Between 1992 and 1994, "We [teen court advocates] worked to expand the program across the state to demonstrate that the program was getting a foothold in other districts. We worked on the language for a bill for about two years, having approximately 25 programs across the state by the time former Senator John McKay started working on a bill," Self reports. Also, by 1997, teen courts across the state had joined together

and formed the Florida Association of Teen Courts, Inc. (FATC).

Efforts to increase networking and support for teen court paid off. According to Self, in 1997 Governor Lawton Chiles signed a bill into law, F.S.S. 938.19, to provide local county governments the authority to adopt an ordinance for a \$3 fee on approved court cases and traffic tickets. The fees were expressly intended for funding the operation and administration of teen courts at the county level. That same year, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, through FATC, provided \$1.5 million, for three years, to assist with the implementation of teen courts among participating counties across the state. This funding was distributed through a grant process in which FATC reviewed and distributed the grants for funding and development of teen courts, also providing educational and training materials. Under the state funded grants, Florida's teen court programs expanded.

According to Self, the state funding through the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice was terminated in 2000. However, by that time, most programs were able to adopt a local ordinance to continue their programs. However, some smaller, rural counties—where sufficient ordinance revenues were not generated—were faced with closing their programs.

Although most of Florida's teen courts are not operated as a court function, they were swept into the court reorganization process. The legislative funding source supporting teen courts was terminated due to Article V, Revision 7, a constitutional amendment on the ballot approved by voters in 1997. The constitutional revision was to take effect July 2004, shifting the funding for the court system in Florida from county to state. All teen court funding was to be eliminated, resulting in the potential closure of many teen court programs. The delay in implementation of the revision was due to the sheer size and impact of the policy on the state.

With 57 active teen courts in Florida and the threat of elimination of vital diversion resources, it became critical that FATC rally greater support in the legislature. State Senator Rod Smith, Senator Mike Bennett, and Representative Aaron Bean served as the leading champions of new teen court legislation during the 2004 legislative session. Senator Smith, former chairman of the Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice, was in charge of finding funding for the program. He believes that if youth are given more responsibility, they will rise to the occasion. "We used teen court as a diversion program for minor offenses and got our monies' worth. The program seemed like the best solution for youth. I went to several teen court proceedings, watched the judge, listened to advice given to offenders, and I felt that it had an impact," says Smith. Smith feels the new language adopted in 2004 provides potential for greater funding for teen court programs across the state. The Article V "Glitch Bill" will allow counties the ability to collect a \$65 fee for any criminal or traffic court case in the state, be it felony or misdemeanor. Twenty-five percent of the fee must be used for juvenile prevention programs, including teen court. The new legislation, guided by Senator Smith, sailed through the House and Senate with overwhelming support. According to Self, the program administrators are "cautiously optimistic" that the same level of funding programs received under the previous legislation will be available for teen courts through the new legislation.

Self provided the following recommendations for organizing teen courts on a statewide level:

- Have a state team develop a strategic plan for communication with legislators. Planning should occur statewide to garner buy-in from all stakeholders. "It is critical that leaders unify within an organization to establish the goals and mission of what they want to provide with their teen court program," says Self.

- Develop a set of state standards.¹⁰
- Develop a common message that will provide a more unified front to present to legislators.

New York

Michael J. Elmendorf, II, Chairman of the State Advisory Office for Governor George E. Pataki's office, was first exposed to youth court while serving as the vice chairman of the state's Youth Bureau. He saw the program during a site visit to a youth court in Odessa, TX: "I was pretty skeptical ... placing kids out of the traditional justice system into a court with other kids? But, it doesn't take much time to see that the traditional juvenile justice system does not have the resources to focus on first-time offenders. Youth court, if done right, can serve a key role in teens' fundamental development as citizens in the community." The Governor's administration asked the state division of criminal justice to partner with communities to create youth court programs across the state. The Town of Colonie, New York became the model for the rest of the state. Today, New York leads the nation in the number of youth court programs with 102 sites out of over 950-plus nationwide.

To make the program work in other states, Elmendorf recommends that state and local policymakers, the probation department, the schools, the court system, and community partners become involved. If thoughtfully implemented, youth court will quickly become an accepted and useful component in a state's juvenile justice system.

North Carolina

In comments prepared for this article, Joanne McDaniel, chief of staff, Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, state of North Carolina, wrote, "The teen court program had not been exhaustively researched before it was adopted in the state, but state policymakers felt there was enough evidence that the program yielded favorable out-

comes. Qualitative studies reveal that parents, teachers, and juvenile justice professionals all indicated high levels of satisfaction and benefits to youth offenders." Case studies of successful teen courts provided lessons learned and examples of best practices, but the state was mostly influenced by evaluation conducted in 1991 by Rod Hissong, reporting the effectiveness of a teen court program in Arlington, Texas.¹¹ Legislative support for teen court programs began during the 1993 session of the North Carolina General Assembly.

As suggested by McDaniel, the identification of a number of benefits played an important role in the decision to adopt and implement teen court. "An important benefit that convinced juvenile justice and community stakeholders to go with the program was that teen court was a cost-effective alternative to traditional juvenile court for some youth offenders," writes McDaniel. Other benefits included the opportunity for juveniles to be held accountable for their illegal behavior, even if their offenses were relatively minor. This also aided in promoting an understanding of the legal system for youth. Teen court saved time in moving young offenders from arrest to sanctions within a matter of days rather than the months that may pass with traditional juvenile courts, and is effective in reducing recidivism. "Although only a handful of evaluations have measured recidivism, many indicate the potential of teen court with careful planning can indeed have a positive effect on youth offender recidivism," writes McDaniel. Currently, there are 43 teen court programs across the state of North Carolina.

¹⁰ Contact the National Youth Court Center for examples of other states' standards and for information on national youth court guidelines.

¹¹ From a sample of 392 teenagers over a period of 24 months, the research found that only 25 percent of the individuals who participated in teen court had recidivated by the end of the study, while 36 percent of the teens not involved in teen court had recidivated.

The state has backed up legislation with a financial investment in the program. According to McDaniel, during FY 2002-03 teen court programs had a total operating budget of \$2,256,681. The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, going through local Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils (JCPC), provided \$1,421,421. In addition to this funding, McDaniel reports that there was a total of \$228,890 in local support, \$341,589 in in-kind support and \$264,781 in other funding sources. "The local JCPC allocates funding to the teen court program based on conditions outlined in their program agreements and approved program budget," writes McDaniel.

Communities within the state receive thousands of hours of community service from youth and adult volunteers, and as an added benefit, hundreds of young citizens are staying out of trouble. According to McDaniel, participants in the teen court program performed over 33,000 hours of community service, which contributes to the community as a whole. "Over 3,300 youth and 500 adults were volunteers and involved in the implementation of services during the past fiscal year. This is instrumental in the overall success and continued expansion of teen court in our state," writes McDaniel.

Before moving forward with legislation and funding for a teen or youth court, McDaniel suggests that state leaders:

- Conduct a thorough needs assessment of the state and community juvenile justice systems;
- Organize the community to identify key stakeholders and partners;
- Develop state or local program purpose, goals, and objectives;
- Determine a target population and design a referral process;
- Design program services;
- Recruit, utilize, and train volunteers;
- Examine human and financial resource issues; and
- Evaluate program effectiveness.

Tennessee

Cindy Perry, executive director for the Select Committee on Children and Youth for Tennessee's General Assembly, was introduced to the youth court concept by the chairman of the Committee, who learned about it through a conference.

Perry and her staff spearheaded a state program model and allowed the state's juvenile courts to integrate the program into their system. "It started at the state level to enable the juvenile courts to have an option to run a youth court. It was not difficult to pass the legislation," says Perry. Legislation for youth court was passed when the state was heading into dire budget issues. "It has not been a popular idea to put an add-on tax to fund programs. As a result, the state made it optional to do the program but provided no funding, but we do fund the statewide coordinator position for the youth court program, who for the past two years has worked to get the program recognized in various pockets within the state," says Perry. This is the coordinator's first year on federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funds. Before that time, the position was paid for by Byrne federal grant funds.¹² Perry believes that there may be a time in the near future when the state will be ready to try an add-on tax to support the program, but until then, she and colleagues will continue to identify grant funding and other funding streams for the program.

Perry recommends that other youth court program organizers, staff, and supportive policymakers:

- Expand programs on a statewide basis by obtaining grant funding to support a state coordinator who can educate the courts and law enforcement agencies about the benefits of the program.
- Give presentations and attend youth- and justice-related conferences across the state to promote the program. The National Youth Court Center was mentioned as a useful resource for information on

youth court guidelines, funding and programming ideas, publications, and training and technical assistance.

- Look for and educate champions of the youth court concept within their local or state legislature and encourage them to introduce enabling legislation. She also suggests program organizers find juvenile courts in the state that are interested in piloting the program.
- Investigate non-traditional funding through youth services funding streams, local school system budgets, and Department of Safety or Highway Safety dollars. Local school systems, Perry feels, are a natural fit for the program because it provides a positive setting for the introduction of law enforcement officers who can take the lead for the program.

Texas

Texas boasts some of the longest running teen court programs in the nation, dating back to the early 1970s. The State of Texas has written provisions for teen court into two sections of state policy, Code of Criminal Procedure (used by municipalities), *Article 45.052*: "Dismissal of misdemeanor charge on completion of teen court program;" and Family Code (used by county and district courts), Section 54.032: "Deferral of adjudication and dismissal of certain cases on completion of teen court program." Both pieces of legislation are identical in most sections, including the section with language that describes a fee, not to exceed \$10 per child, which is designed to help offset some of the costs associated with operating the program. One particular point on which the two Texas laws

¹² The Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Grant Program (Byrne Formula Grant Program) is a partnership among federal, state, and local governments to create safer communities. These federal grants are for use by states and local governments to improve the operation of their criminal justice system. For more information, visit <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/byrne.html>.

vary slightly relates to the ability of a youth to participate in the program as a respondent more than once. The Family Code allows the judge to permit youth who have previously completed teen court to go through the program again, if needed, as long as their offense is not against the same ordinance that brought them to the teen court program earlier. The Code of Criminal Procedure does not allow for that provision. Currently, the state legislature is working to bring these two pieces of legislation into alignment.

Through the legislation, the state has given jurisdictions permission to charge a \$10 fee to help offset the cost of running the teen court, but, according to Susan Wolf, director of the Fort Worth Teen Court, this does not cover other costs such as volunteer appreciation banquets, professional development, and other miscellaneous expenses frequently found in running a nonprofit of this nature.

The premier champion for teen court in Texas is State Senator Royce West, who attributes his commitment to the program to his personal introduction to it when he was asked to serve as a guest teen court judge for a local program. "I thought it was such a novel idea, and I became a fan. I didn't have any problems passing legislation for it. My colleagues are fans for the same reason. It allows young people to participate in the [justice] system. It gives someone who is of the similar age an idea of what a real court setting is about and how their peers feel about their actions. It's great all the way around," says West.

Senator West offered a piece of advice to other policymakers considering youth court legislation. "It's important that policymakers share the program concept by inviting as many persons on the committee as possible, that would hear a particular bill, to visit the program, so they may see it first-hand and get a true sense of what youth court is and what it has to offer their young people. It is important to see young people participat-

ing in the process. It can be a positive influence in their lives."

Federal Voices

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) funded the first national teen court initiative in 1994. The funds NHTSA provided to the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) in 1994 were given to develop an implementation guide to assist communities in establishing teen courts called, *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*. Along with the *National Youth Court Guidelines*, this

guide is one of the key publications sought out by communities wanting to start a program. After the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) at the Department of Justice took over management of the program several years later, NHTSA continued to provide supportive funds to the initiative through an interagency agreement with OJJDP.

According to Susan Ryan, Office Director, Office of Safety Programs, NHTSA's interest in teen and youth courts focuses on underage drinking and the problems that surround it. She and her colleagues see the youth court program as a positive influence on youth. "We're very much an advocate for youth court. It provides a great opportunity to listen to youth

The author would like to thank the following individuals for contributing their time and for providing insights and recommendations for this article.

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and for problem-solving among peers,” says Ryan. With this belief in mind, the agency has given funding to help build an infrastructure for youth courts across the nation by supporting the establishment of program implementation guidelines which are available from the National Youth Court Center. “We provide public information for the program through National Youth Court Month in September and assist with marketing at the state and local levels. We work with state safety offices. Our constituencies at the state and local levels work through our regional offices,” says Ryan.

Ryan recommends that other federal agencies with programs involving youth consider joining NHTSA, OJJDP and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in a united interagency effort to support youth court. There are natural partnerships for those willing to make the effort in the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Her general recommendations to individuals to promote and grow youth court are: 1) market the program within your community, and 2) get buy-in from community leaders.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Harry Wilson, associate commissioner, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services first heard about youth court when he worked in the nonprofit world in Michigan and read about it in *Youth Today*, a national newspaper on youth issues. “I think that anytime you engage youth in finding their own solutions, they are less likely to become part of the problem,” says Wilson. Research and evaluation played a role in Wilson’s decision to include youth court as part of the national youth summit sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The session that features youth court is called

“Youth as Advisors to School Boards, City Councils, and Youth Committees.”

Helping kids become civically engaged has benefits for them and others. “We know that kids who are civically engaged do good things when they become adults. When they don’t have a reason to give back to the community, you get what is called “brain drain,” says Wilson. He believes that youth court is one of the best deterrents to brain drain because it champions civic engagement and is an entry point into other civic duties such as sitting on a city committee or planning commission. “It’s a great strategy at the local level, because you’re making the community safer, so if you have a budget for crime prevention, then this is one strategy that makes a difference,” says Wilson. Youth court should also be considered a prevention program for youth crime. It’s a positive entity within the community.

Wilson recommends that state and local policymakers:

- Look at the big picture and think long-term about the benefits of youth courts. Through a youth court program, young people are asked to work on ways to make their community a safer and better place, and they become skilled in being civically engaged. “Youth are empowered and engaged. It’s a youth development program where kids are learning meaningful consequences for their mischief,” says Wilson.
- Look at the budget and ask if you can afford to do prevention efforts. “I don’t think it would be money wasted,” says Wilson. One potential source of funds that Wilson recommends youth courts investigate is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars, because these funds are designed, in part, for programs that support crime prevention and youth development.

U. S. Department of Justice

According to J. Robert Flores, Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,

Office of Justice Programs, U. S. Department of Justice, in statements provided by Flores for the purposes of this article, through youth court, young people are able to learn about the rule of law in society and its application; they are educated on the impact their actions have on themselves and others; they are able to build competencies through law-related education and civic instruction; and they are provided a rare opportunity at an early stage in their development to experience making a difference for others, while enriching their own lives. Flores referred to youth court as a textbook example of service learning—a teaching methodology that links academic learning to service to the community. Service-learning is a growing trend in public and private education, especially in after-school programs. Youth court encourages youth to learn through active participation in organized service experiences that meet actual community needs.

The Office of Justice Programs (OJP) bases its belief that youth court has made a difference for youth on research and evaluation. An OJP three-year evaluation of youth court included a six-month follow-up to determine rates of recidivism. Recidivism rates of first-time offenders in youth or teen court were compared to that of nearly 500 first-time offenders with similar offenses that were processed through the traditional juvenile justice system. In April 2002, the results from the first National Youth Court Evaluation were released by the Urban Institute and by OJP. In the Alaska youth court program, youth offenders were re-referred to the juvenile justice system in only six percent of the cases, compared with 23 percent of those handled by the traditional juvenile justice system. In Arizona, the outcome was nine percent recidivism among youth court cases versus 15 percent in the comparison group. In Missouri, recidivism was at nine percent for the youth who went before a youth court

and 27 percent for the youth who went through the traditional juvenile justice system.¹³

The Office of Justice Programs believes that youth volunteerism has increased nationwide as a result of youth court. Through the program, young people become trained and volunteer as judges, jurors and attorneys, and a key component of the program is the engagement of the youthful offender in the peer jury process. By becoming civically engaged, youth switch from thinking about themselves to thinking about others. "Many youth find it so personally meaningful that they remain on the jury after their required number of hours have been completed and go on to be trained to serve in other youth court positions," writes Flores.

The federal government has a history of support for the national youth court movement, with the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and the U.S. Department of Transportation leading the way. In 1999, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, with support from NHTSA, created the National Youth Court Center (NYCC) which is managed by APPA and has provided more than \$3.1 million to support the NYCC's activities. These funds allow the NYCC to carry out its mission of serving as a clearinghouse for information, developing national resource materials, and providing training and technical assistance to jurisdictions on establishing and enhancing youth court programs. Other national organizations that have served as partners in OJP's national youth court initiative with the National Youth Court Center and the American Probation and Parole Association include the American Bar Association, Constitutional Rights Foundation/Chicago, and Street Law, Inc.

¹³ Butts, J. A., Buck, J., and Coggeshall, M. B. (April 2002). *The impact of teen court on young offenders*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, available at www.urban.org and www.youthcourt.net.

Flores asserts that there are clear indicators that youth courts are gaining greater levels of acceptance and are attracting increased support from all levels of government. Local, state,

and federal policymakers in more than 12 states are providing legislative appropriations directed for the development and operation of youth courts. As of November 2003, of the

Supplemental Resources

For more information on youth courts, contact:

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Email: nycc@csg.org
Main Website: www.youthcourt.net
Youth Volunteer Website: www.ycyouth.net

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Fisher, M. (2002). Youth courts: Young people delivering justice. *Roadmaps*. Chicago, IL: American Bar Association, Division for Public Education. Also available at <http://www.abanet.org/justice/youthcourtsroadmap.pdf>.

Godwin, T.M., Fulton, B.A., and Steinhart, D. (1998). *Peer justice and youth empowerment: An implementation guide for teen court programs*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation. Available at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/publications/peerjustice.html>.

Godwin, T.M., Heward, M.E., and Spina, T. (2000). *National youth court guidelines*. Lexington, KY: National Youth Court Center, American Probation and Parole Association. Also available at <http://www.youthcourt.net/publications/guidelines.pdf>.

Godwin Mullins, T. (2003, Spring/Summer). A national overview of youth courts. *In Session*, Volume 3, Number 2. Lexington, KY: National Youth Court Center, American Probation and Parole Association.

Pearson, S.S. (2003, September). Youth court: A path to civic engagement. *National Youth Court Center Policy Brief*. Lexington, KY: National Youth Court Center, American Probation and Parole Association. Also available at http://www.youthcourt.net/Publications/Policy_brief_civic_engagement.pdf.

Pericak, W.C., Peterson, S.B., and Lockart, P. (1996, Fall). Youth court: The Colonie, New York experience. *Journal for Juvenile Justice and Detention*, National Juvenile Detention Association, Volume II, Number 2.

Peterson, S.B., and Colydas, V. (2001, Fall). In youth courts, teen holds teens accountable. *The Safety Zone*. Volume 3. Issue 3.

Peterson, S.B., and Elmendorf, II, M. (2001, December). Youth courts: A national movement. *Corrections Today*. American Correctional Association, Juvenile Corrections Annual Journal.

48 states that have youth court programs, 25 have enacted legislation that specifically addresses youth courts, in one form or another. Some state legislation is detailed and comprehensive in its guidelines, whereas other state legislation related to youth or teen courts tends to be broad and general. Local levels of government in Texas and Florida have initiated policy and legislation to support youth courts through revenues from traffic tickets. “Youth courts deliver results in a significant, cost-effective manner that gets the attention of both the lawmakers and the policymakers,” writes Flores. Mr. Flores encourages policymakers to view examples of state legislation on teen or youth court at www.youthcourt.net when considering the establishment of a program in their state, city, or district.

Conclusion

With state and local budgets tightening and juvenile crime still a real-

ity, legislators are seeking innovative and creative ways for dealing with teens who choose to engage in unlawful behavior. The savings and investment in youth and community are hard to ignore. Policymakers are aware that many of the youth who are sent through youth court choose to become more deeply involved in the program and eventually serve as youth volunteers. This adds value to the community and to a policymaker’s constituency. Adult and youth volunteer support for the operation of youth court make it one of the most cost-effective ways for communities to handle minor delinquent and status offenses *and* invest in youth, preserving our communities and protecting our most precious of resources—our young people. Finally, because of the combined qualities of youth development, service, and education—service-learning—and promising research results, policymakers find youth court to be an easy

sell to their peers and can address funding for the program creatively. Youth court is emerging as a promising program for youth and communities.

About the Author

Sarah S. Pearson is a senior program associate with the American Youth Policy Forum in Washington, DC where she coordinates speaker forums and field trips and organizes the summer policy salon series. She also is the author of “Finding Common Ground: Service-Learning and Education Reform;” “Leveling the Playing Field-Technology As an Equalizer in Education, Transition to Careers and Daily Lives;” and “Building an Effective Citizenry, Lessons Learned from Initiatives in Youth Engagement.”

National Youth Court Center

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) established the National Youth Court Center (NYCC) at the American Probation and Parole Association in Lexington, Kentucky. The NYCC serves as an information clearinghouse and provides training, technical assistance, and resource materials to assist jurisdictions in developing and operating effective youth court programs.

NYCC Staff:

Tracy Godwin Mullins, *Director*

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