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Paul R. Smokowski and Martica Bacallao

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A Group Randomized Trial of School-Based Teen Courts to Address the School to Prison Pipeline, Reduce Aggression and Violence, and Enhance School Safety in Middle and High School Students

Q1 Paul R. Smokowski^a, Caroline B.R. Evans^b, Roderick Rose^{cc}, and Martica Bacallao^d

Q2 ^aSchool of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA; ^bRhode Island College, Providence, Rhode Island, USA; ^cSchool of Social Work, University of Maryland; ^dNorth Carolina Youth Violence Prevention Center

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the efficacy of School-Based Teen Courts (SBTCs) using a rigorous experimental trial with 24 middle- and high-schools randomly selected to receive SBTCs ($n = 12$) or to business-as-usual without any SBTC program ($n = 12$). Analyses examined school-level longitudinal growth models and individual-level pretest-posttest comparisons on school climate, student problems, and suspension rates. Longitudinal growth models revealed that SBTCs were significantly associated with positive changes in school satisfaction and reductions in delinquent friends for high school students, but showed no significant changes on other outcomes. Short-term suspensions decreased more than twice as much in SBTC schools versus comparison schools. There was a 47% reduction in bullying victimization in SBTC schools relative to a 22% reduction in comparison schools. These findings suggest that SBTCs have the potential to positively impact youth development.

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The School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) refers to the school policies and practices (e.g., zero tolerance policies) that funnel students from schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). The STPP often leads youth to juvenile court, resulting in a myriad of negative outcomes. Youth adjudicated as delinquents receive a juvenile court record and face a host of long-term negative consequences such as an increased likelihood of adult criminal and penal involvement, decreased access to education, difficulties obtaining later employment, enhanced sentencing for future convictions, and increased delinquency (McConnell, 2012; Petrosino et al., 2010). Further, juvenile justice system involvement can result in detainment in a juvenile facility which is connected to increased delinquency, poor mental health, self-harm, and suicide (Gallagher & Dobrin, 2006); in fact, detained youth are almost three times more likely to commit suicide compared to non-detained youth (Gallagher & Dobrin, 2006). These consequences weaken youths' connection and engagement in society, increasing the likelihood of reoffending. Indeed, 56% of juveniles who have been referred to juvenile court reoffend prior to turning 18 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). One promising way to interrupt the STPP and avoid these negative outcomes is to replace school disciplinary practices that marginalize youth with diversion programs such as School-Based Teen Court. The National Institute of Justice (n.d.) clearinghouse, Crimesolutions.gov, considers juvenile justice diversion programs "promising" based on prior research.

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Q6 Background on school-based teen courts (SBTCs)

Teen Court is a diversion program that diverts first-time offenders from the traditional juvenile justice system and holds them accountable for their transgressions through prosocial sanctions (e.g., positive

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sanctions such as community service; Stickle et al., 2008). Rather than focusing on punishment, Teen Court emphasizes adolescent offenders taking responsibility for their transgressions by repairing the harm they have caused to victims and/or the community (National Institute of Justice, 2007). The goal of Teen Court is to reintegrate offenders back into the community or school (depending upon where the court is held), rather than further ostracizing them with excessive punishment. Although the majority of Teen Courts (64%) are community based (i.e., operated through juvenile justice programs or nonprofits), Teen Court is a viable option for use within schools to address disciplinary issues. Indeed, 36% of Teen Courts operate in schools (National Association of Teen Courts, n.d.).

School-Based Teen Courts (SBTC's) commonly handle school disciplinary cases, however, some programs also accept referrals for delinquency and status offenses from juvenile court or law enforcement (Vickers, 2004). Schools often use SBTC's as an alternative to routine disciplinary actions, decreasing the number of students who are removed from school and risk entering the STPP. Suspensions often cause more harm than good; suspended youth are often left unsupervised (Iselin, 2010), giving them time to engage in anti-social behavior. Suspended youth are at risk for getting behind in academic work, which could lead to academic and school disengagement and dropping out of school (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). Using SBTCs to reduce suspensions is a potential means of keeping youth out of trouble by keeping them engaged in school.

There are a number of theories that support the utility of Teen Court in positively impacting adolescent behavior. For example, labeling theory posits that labeling youth as "delinquent" or "offender" could increase deviant behavior by causing youth to behave in accordance with these labels (Knutsson, 1977). Teen Court avoids such labeling which is expected to help youth form a positive self-view and could perhaps help them avoid engaging with delinquent peers or committing further delinquent acts. The concept of peer justice highlights the power of prosocial peer influence from the jury members, who could serve as positive role models for Teen Court participants, encouraging them to avoid further delinquent behavior. Taking responsibility for peer justice empowers the student body and changes school climate by investing in shared decision-making concerning discipline (Cotter & Evans, 2017). Finally, according to social control theory, weak or absent social bonds result in deviant behavior (Hirschi, 1969). Teen Court strengthens social bonds through inclusive community service, supportive connections between Teen Court staff and participants, and role modeling by prosocial peer jurors.

There are two basic structures for SBTCs: Classroom-Based Teen Court or Club-Based Teen Court (Vickers, 2004). A Classroom-Based Teen Court program becomes part of the schools' curriculum and operates out of an existing class (e.g., social studies, government) or an elective class (e.g., civics) and the teacher serves as the Teen Court coordinator. Club-Based Teen Court programs are considered an extracurricular activity, occur after school hours, and are not considered part of the school curriculum. The current study exclusively looked at Classroom-Based Teen Courts.

The Principal or Assistant Principal refers adolescents to the SBTC. A teacher or school administrator fills the role of judge and adolescents fill the roles of prosecution, defense counsel, bailiff, and jurors. The prosecution represents the school community, while the defense counsel represents the student on trial. Each attorney gives a brief opening statement; the prosecution focuses on how the school community was harmed by the transgression, while the defense counsel highlights positive aspects of the student on trial (e.g., first time offender). Jurors question the student on trial in order to gather additional information. Each attorney gives a brief closing statement and the jury deliberates and decides on appropriate sanctions. The overall purpose is to formulate a set of sanctions for the offender to complete. Youth have to admit guilt during the intake process.

Teen Court aims to alter the entire climate of a school by becoming part of the school's culture (e.g., student empowerment, shared decision-making around discipline), however, there are very few empirical studies of SBTCs, leaving a large gap in the literature. Rather than ostracizing students for their misbehavior, SBTCs provide these students with a way of remaining part of the school

community, which may increase students' feelings of safety and security by reducing alienation and marginalization.

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In one of the only quantitative studies of SBTCs to date, Hirschinger-Blank and colleagues (2009) asked about students' perceptions of school climate, safety, and disciplinary measures. Student's reported an increase in feeling safe in the hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, and outside the school building following the implementation of Teen Court; although the increase did not reach statistical significance. It is important to note that this study lacked a control group and the sample size was small (N = 109; Jensen, 2015), highlighting the need for additional research. In the largest study of SBTCs to date, P. R. Smokowski et al. (2018) reported that violent behavior, anxiety, friend rejection, and bullying victimization decreased significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools Year 1 pretest to Year 2 posttest, but did not change significantly in the control schools. The current study extends that initial research with a third wave of assessment (Year 3) after two years of intervention. Based on the minimal research directly examining the impact of SBTCs, additional research is needed and the current study aimed to begin to fill that research gap.

Current study

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate School-Based Teen Courts with a randomized controlled trial to assess if and how Teen Court: 1) enhances school climate (i.e., higher student satisfaction, less school danger, fewer school hassles); 2) reduces student problems (i.e., violent behavior, anxiety, delinquent friendships, bullying victimization); and 3) lowers use of punitive discipline in the form of short-term suspensions for middle- and high school students. Twenty-four middle- and high schools were randomly assigned to receive School-Based Teen Court (SBTC; $n = 12$) or the usual school curriculum (without Teen Court, no-SBTC; $n = 12$). Data were collected from a random sample of youth in repeated measures surveys across the 24 schools to examine if and how the presence of SBTCs impacted student perceptions of the school climate and student problems. The randomly selected students filled out the School Success Profile Plus (SSP+) in the Spring of the school year for 3 years. Aggregating student surveys into overall mean scores for each school provided measures of how schools changed over the course of the study. We call this school-level data because the aggregate student surveys provide measures of school climate change with mean scores for each of the 24 schools. These SSP+ surveys were also collected from the students who participated in the SBTC program (e.g., offenders) to assess how participation in the program impacted individual participant behavior from pretest to posttest.

Measures

The School Success Profile Plus (SSP+; Bowen & Richman, 2008) is a frequently used youth self-report that assesses perceptions about school, friends, family, neighborhood, self, health, and well-being. Previous analyses found the scales on the SSP+ to have internal consistency reliabilities exceeding 0.70 (e.g., Evans et al., 2016, 2016). Assessments were filled out in school computer labs with close supervision from staff in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality. The SSP+ outcome measures from student surveys for analyses were: student reported school climate (i.e., school hassles [13 items], school danger [11 items], school satisfaction [7 items]) and student reported problems scales (i.e., anxiety [3 items], violent behavior [10 items], bullying victimization [1 item], delinquent friendships [9 items]; P. R. Smokowski et al., 2018). Suspension rates were collected for each school from North Carolina administrative records. Administrative data on school characteristics (e.g., free/reduced price lunch and school size) were used to control for differences between schools.

Participating counties

Robeson

Robeson County, NC, one of the two rural counties that participated in the current project, has one of the highest rates of youth violence in North Carolina. Robeson County is one of the most racially/ethnically diverse rural counties in the United States. As of 2019, 41.7% of RC residents identified as American Indian, 30.9% as Caucasian, 23.8% as African American, 9.0% as Hispanic/Latinx, and 2.7% as mixed race/other. In 2019, 24.5% of Robeson County residents lived below poverty, a rate more than double the national rate of 12.3% (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). 140

Columbus

Columbus County, NC, located near Robeson, is a rural county with similar risk factors, although a lower rate of juvenile crime. Columbus County is less diverse than Robeson and 63.2% of the population identified as Caucasian, 30.5% as African American, 3.7% as American Indian, and 5.5% as Hispanic/Latinx (United States Census Bureau, 2019b). However, Columbus County reports high rates of poverty with 24.3% of the population living below poverty and a 12.6% unemployment rate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). 145 150

School-level randomization

Twenty-four schools were recruited to participate in the randomized controlled trial of SBTCs. Within each county, Robeson or Columbus, there were 12 participating schools; 8 middle schools, and 4 high schools in Robeson and the same numbers in Columbus. Within each county, the participating schools were separated into matched pairs based on similarity in suspension rates and free/reduced lunch student population. The researchers and Superintendent of Schools in each county randomly assigned one of the matched schools to SBTC intervention and the other to comparison (no-SBTC) by flipping a coin. The treatment and comparison schools all completed SSP+ needs assessments to measure change in student reports. This process resulted in the randomized matched pairs consisting of: Robeson County – 4 middle schools with new SBTCs, 4 middle schools no-SBTC, 2 high schools with new SBTCs, 2 high schools no-SBTC; and Columbus County – 4 middle schools with new SBTCs, 4 middle schools no-SBTC, 2 high schools with new SBTCs, 2 high schools no-SBTC. 155 160

Teen court implementation procedure

Each of the 12 schools implementing SBTCs selected a class that served as the Teen Court for the school. This class received 8 to 10 hours of Teen Court training before the start of the school year in Year 1. All students were trained as jurors and learned how to question the defendant and decide on sanctions; mock hearings were used to teach these skills. Each SBTC coordinator received 6 to 8 hours of training in Year 1 and ongoing training throughout the year. Each school held at least two hearings per month during the school year. 165

A total of 249 adolescents who committed a transgression at school participated in the Teen Court program as “participants.” There were two criteria for participation in SBTC: youth committed an infraction of school rules and were willing to admit guilt. The Principal referred youth who engaged in a transgression at school (e.g., disruptive behavior, fighting, being out of area) to the Teen Court program instead of using traditional discipline. Participation in Teen Court was used as an alternative to normal school punishment (e.g., Teen Court replaced a suspension). Considering that half of the tested SBTCs were in middle schools, not all of the infraction referrals would have led to juvenile court involvement. However, with the growing presence of School Resource Officers and zero-tolerance policies, many lower-level discipline problems are commonly referred to juvenile court counselors, even in lower grades (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020; Nelson & Lind, 2015). The SBTCs are set 170 175

up to handle any type of school-based infraction, from swearing at a teacher to physical assault; however, the nature of referrals has to be left to the discretion of the school's leadership team. 180

SBTCs are not meant to determine guilt or innocence. If a student will not admit guilt, he or she progresses through the regular course of school discipline and possible referral to juvenile justice counselors. This was uncommon in our SBTC schools because students preferred going through the Teen Court process rather than receiving traditional discipline. All 249 referred students with infractions agreed to participate in the program; students preferred SBTC participation over traditional discipline. 185

All SBTC participants assented to fill out the SSP+ prior to Teen Court and again six months after their sanctions were completed. Parents/caregivers also gave consent for participation. Each school had an SBTC coordinator who was responsible for administering the SSP+ and overseeing the SBTC process. Students were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to decline at any time or skip any question without negative consequences. 190

Over half (66%) of the 249 SBTC participants were middle school students and the rest were high school students; the average participant age was 14 years old ($SD = 2.25$). The majority of the sample (59%) were male and received free/reduced price lunch (66%). The racial/ethnic diversity mirrored the surrounding community and 40% identified as African American, 23% as American Indian, 17% as Caucasian, 10% as Hispanic/Latinx, and 10% as mixed race/other. 195

Offenses

The offenses that participants committed included: physical fighting, disrespectful behaviors (i.e., shouting, cursing, throwing objects) toward teachers, excessive tardiness, misbehavior on school buses, and other school infractions of rules. 200

Sanctions

All SBTC sanctions addressed the harm caused by the infraction and engaged the participant with the school community through service. Sanctions are meant to provide prosocial relationships with others and not marginalize the participant. For example, participants were required to write apology letters and read them to the victim, work with coaches to assist with team practices, and serve on SBTC juries. Sanctions can also include mandating participation in services, such as academic tutoring or anger management groups. Sanction completion was closely tracked and monitored. If the participant failed to complete the required sanctions, s/he was referred back to the traditional school discipline process. All 249 of the SBTC participants completed their sanctions. 210

The impact of teen court at the school level

There were 2,749 students included in the analytic sample; these were youth randomly selected from the 24 participating schools who had data for all three years of the project. There were 1,388 youth enrolled in Teen Court schools and 1,361 youth enrolled in the control schools.

Two separate analyses were conducted at the school level. Both analyses examined changes from Year 1 to Year 3 in a random sample of youth from the 24 participating schools. The statistical power of this group randomized research design is contingent upon the highest level of clustering (i.e., 24 middle and high schools) regardless of the hundreds of students clustered within each school. First, to supplement the limited statistical power of the sophisticated school-level longitudinal growth models, we ran simple paired sample T-tests on Year 1 to Year 3 student outcomes with a Bonferroni adjustment of p -values to 0.01. This less rigorous, but commonly used analyses extended our previous research from baseline to Year 2 (P. R. Smokowski et al., 2018). The outcomes tested include: school climate – school danger, hassles, satisfaction; and student problems – anxiety, delinquent friends, violent behavior, and bullying victimization. 220

Second, longitudinal growth models were run after multiple imputation was used to address missing data and 10 data sets were imputed. These models included a three-way interaction between treatment condition, school level, and time:

$$Y_{tj} = \pi_0 + \pi_W W_t + \pi_{MS} MS_i + \pi_{TC} TC_j + \pi_{WMS} W_t MS_i + \pi_{TCMS} TC_j MS_i + \pi_{TCW} TC_j W_t + \pi_{TCWMS} TC_j W_t MS_i + X_{ij} \pi_X + Z_j \pi_Z + e_{tij} + u_{0ij} + r_{0j}$$

The treatment effect was estimated by π_{TCW} for youth in high school, capturing the additional change over time for a high school youth in the treatment condition relative to the change over time in the control condition (TC = assignment; W = wave; MS = middle school; X_{ij} = covariates). The coefficient for the three-way interaction, π_{TCWMS} , measures the difference in this effect between MS and HS youth. A version of the model was run with MS as the reference condition to test the impact in this group. All error terms (e, u, and r) are assumed distributed $N(0, v)$.

Because entire schools were assigned, it was important to use methods appropriate for multilevel data such that standard errors for school-level variables were estimated correctly and could handle complex relationships among predictors including cross-level interactions. In addition, with three waves of data, longitudinal growth models can address reliability concerns and improve standard error estimation. Combined, the structure of the data consisted of three levels: multiple measurements on each student, with students nested within schools. Analytic details are available from the authors upon request and are archived at the University of Michigan’s ICPSR (<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/ICPSR/index.html>).

SBTC effects on school suspensions from year 1 to year 3

We examined if there were significant differences in the number of short-term suspensions per 100 students between the Teen Court and no Teen Court comparison schools. Short-term suspension rates were gathered for all three years of the study and then the change scores between year 1 and year 3 were calculated for each school. Although the number of short-term suspensions decreased by an average change score of 12.56 for the SBTC schools and only 5.32 for the no-SBTC schools, this difference did not reach statistical significance. This means that all schools were trying to decrease their use of short-term suspensions for discipline. The decrease in the number of short-term suspensions in SBTC schools was 2.36 times greater than the decrease in the number of short-term suspensions at no-SBTC schools.

SBTC effects on student problems and school climate

1) Student problems: Table 1 shows the paired sample T-Tests indicates that there were significant decreases in the SBTC schools from Year 1 to Year 3 on student-reported violent behavior and delinquent friendships. Bullying victimization decreased from 23% in SBTC schools at baseline to

Table 1. Mean scores on school climate and student problems scales from year 1 to year 3 for a random sample of youth in teen court intervention and control schools.

	Teen Court Intervention Schools (n = 1,388 students)			No Teen Court Control Schools (n = 1,361 students)		
	Year 1 Mean	Year 3 Mean	P-Value Within Group	Year 1 Mean	Year 3 Mean	P-Value Within Group
School Danger	1.82	1.81	NS	1.68	1.70	NS
School Hassles	1.34	1.25	<.000	1.36	1.27	<.000
School Satisfaction	2.30	2.21	<.000	2.38	2.27	<.000
Violent Behavior	1.25	1.18	<.000	1.21	1.18	NS
Delinquent Friends	1.36	1.32	<.01	1.29	1.34	<.01
Anxiety	1.42	1.40	NS	1.43	1.38	NS
Bullying Victimization	23.22%	13.34%	<.001	23.15%	18.02%	<.001

13% in Year 3 after 2 years of intervention. In non-SBTC comparison schools, bullying victimization displayed a smaller decrease from 23% to 18%. The differences in bullying victimization between SBTC and non-SBTC schools was not statistically significant, most likely due to the small sample size of 24 schools. Student reports of anxiety also did not significantly change.

The longitudinal growth models uncovered the following nuances in results (see Table 2).

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- Delinquent friends: High school youth in SBTC had a statistically significant reduction in delinquent friends ($-0.04, p < .05$) relative to high school youth in the control group, and in fact were the only group (relative to middle school in SBTC or control and high school in control) predicted to decline.

2) School climate: Reports of school danger did not significantly change in SBTC or comparison schools. Student reports of school hassles significantly decreased in both SBTC and comparison schools. However, these changes did not rise to levels of statistical significance in complex longitudinal growth models.

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The longitudinal growth models uncovered the following nuances in results (see Table 2).

- School satisfaction: A statistically significant and positive change was observed for high school youth in SBTC relative to high school youth in the control group ($0.043, p < .05$). This effect for high school youth was significantly different from that for middle school youth who, on average, showed no overall benefit from SBTC on school satisfaction.

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To summarize, longitudinal growth models revealed that SBTC was significantly associated with positive changes in school satisfaction and reductions in delinquent friends for high school students.

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Table 2. Longitudinal growth curve models.

	Delinquent Friends				School Satisfaction			
	Estimate	95% CI			Estimate	95% CI		
		Lower	Upper			Lower	Upper	
HS as Reference Condition								
Intercept	1.28	1.22	1.34	2.47	2.38	2.57		
Wave	0.00	-0.02	0.03	-0.08	-0.10	-0.05	*	
Treatment Assignment	0.07	-0.01	0.14	-0.16	-0.27	-0.06	*	
Middle School	-0.01	-0.06	0.04	-0.09	-0.15	-0.04	*	
Treatment Assignment by Middle School	-0.08	-0.15	-0.01	*	0.14	0.07	0.22	*
Wave by Treatment Assignment	-0.04	-0.07	-0.01	*	0.04	0.01	0.08	*
Wave by Middle School	0.01	-0.03	0.04		0.04	0.01	0.08	*
Wave by Treatment by Middle School	0.05	0.00	0.09	*	-0.07	-0.12	-0.02	*
MS as Reference Condition								
Intercept	1.27	1.22	1.32	2.38	2.30	2.46	*	
Wave	0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.04	-0.06	-0.01	*	
Treatment Assignment	-0.01	-0.07	0.04	-0.02	-0.10	0.07		
High School	0.01	-0.04	0.06	0.09	0.04	0.15	*	
Treatment Assignment by High School	0.08	0.01	0.15	*	-0.14	-0.22	-0.07	*
Wave by Treatment Assignment	0.01	-0.03	0.04		-0.03	-0.07	0.01	
Wave by High School	-0.01	-0.04	0.03		-0.04	-0.08	-0.01	*
Wave by Treatment by High School	-0.05	-0.09	0.00	*	0.07	0.02	0.12	*
Covariates								
Age	0.03	0.01	0.05	*	-0.03	-0.05	0.00	*
FRL	-0.02	-0.07	0.04		-0.03	-0.09	0.03	
Gender	-0.06	-0.08	-0.03	*	0.00	-0.03	0.03	
Two Parent Home	-0.06	-0.09	-0.03	*	0.10	0.06	0.13	*
American Indian	-0.03	-0.08	0.01		0.02	-0.04	0.07	
Black	0.04	0.00	0.08	*	-0.08	-0.12	-0.03	*
Latinx	-0.01	-0.06	0.04		0.06	0.00	0.12	*
School Crime	-0.01	-0.04	0.02		0.03	-0.02	0.08	
Short Term Suspensions	0.00	0.00	0.00	*	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Long Term Suspensions	0.00	-0.02	0.02		0.02	-0.02	0.06	

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Basic Year 1 to Year 3 Paired Sample T-Tests showed significant declines in student reported violent behavior and delinquent friendships in SBTC schools, but not in comparison schools. Short-term suspensions decreased by more than twice as much in SBTC schools versus in non-SBTC schools; however, this difference was not statistically significant. There was a 47% reduction in bullying victimization in SBTC schools relative to a 22% reduction in non-SBTC schools, also not statistically significant. 280

The impact of teen court for SBTC participants

A final set of analyses examined if there were changes in the behavioral and mental health of youth who participated in the SBTC program. Mean scores from pretest were compared to mean scores at 6-month-posttest for the 249 adolescents who participated in SBTC after committing a school infraction. There was a consistent pattern across multilevel, multilevel log transformation, and Ordinary Least Squares log transformation models in which SBTC participation was a statistically significant predictor of decreasing friend support and a statistically significant predictor of increasing peer pressure. In some model variations, SBTC participation was also a significant predictor of increasing peer rejection. 285
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Discussion

This is the first randomized controlled trial of Teen Courts in schools. Our analyses provide some preliminary evidence of the efficacy of SBTCs on (1) suspensions, (2) student problems, and (3) school climate (i.e., perceptions of school danger, hassles, and satisfaction).

Suspensions

As a foundation, 249 students with offenses received Teen Court rather than traditional school discipline and all of these students successfully completed their sanctions. We believe this is an important sign of proof of concept. The traditional school discipline response would likely have been a suspension or, in some cases, a referral to juvenile justice counselors. Completion of community service sanctions while remaining in school is a successful sign. The decrease in the number of short-term suspensions in SBTC schools was 2.36 times greater than the decrease in the number of short-term suspensions for no-SBTC schools. Although not statistically significant (possibly due to low power: $N = 24$), this finding suggests that SBTCs can decrease the use of suspensions faster than not having an SBTC. 295
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We did not track juvenile justice diversion explicitly because the purview of SBTCs is broader, handling a wide range of infractions internal to each school. This three-year study also could not track participants to see if they offended again. Despite these limitations, decreased suspension rates are a positive sign of movement away from marginalizing discipline. Future efforts should include more schools for additional statistical power and enhance the implementation of SBTCs, perhaps by augmenting them with restorative practices (i.e., mediation, restorative circles), so that changes are more dramatic and detectable. 305
310

Student problems

The Year 1 to Year 3 analysis, summarized in [Table 1](#), showed there were significant decreases in the SBTC schools on violent behavior and delinquent friendships. Indeed, student reports of violent behavior significantly decreased in SBTC schools, while there was no significant change in non-SBTC schools. Delinquent friendships significantly decreased in SBTC schools while these friendships significantly increased in non-SBTC schools. The highly rigorous longitudinal growth models 315

confirmed that high school youth in SBTC schools reported a statistically significant reduction in delinquent friends ($-0.04, p < .05$) relative to high school youth in the control group.

Although the violent behavior change for SBTC schools did not rise to levels of statistical significance in longitudinal growth models, likely due to the small sample size of 24 schools, we believe this trend is important. It is plausible that violent behavior was reduced in SBTC schools, but our longitudinal growth models did not have sufficient power to detect it. Implementation supervisors in SBTC schools reported that students said they were changing their behavior in order to avoid the embarrassment of going in front of a peer jury in court. Student offenders reported increased peer pressure. These indicators suggest that the atmosphere in SBTC schools might have shifted to discourage violent behavior.

The documented decreases in delinquent friends are also well grounded in theoretical models for Teen Courts as prosocial relationships, positive peer pressure, and engagement and service within the community are emphasized from the SBTC experience. Delinquent friends significantly decreased in SBTC schools while increasing in comparison schools. Longitudinal growth models confirmed that high school students in SBTC schools experienced the strongest decrease in delinquent friendships. This is an important pattern of effects because delinquency in late adolescence becomes increasingly serious, heightening the risk for juvenile justice involvement. Delinquent friendships are a gateway to increasing antisocial behavior. Evidence of decreasing delinquent friendships is encouraging and should be followed up in replication studies as the field begins to examine mediation mechanisms that make SBTCs effective.

Bullying

From Year 1 to Year 2, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of youth reporting bullying victimization in the SBTC schools (23.4% to 20.30%), but there was not a corresponding significant decrease in the control schools (P. R. Smokowski et al., 2018). Bullying victimization continued to decrease from 23% in SBTC schools at baseline to 13% in Year 3 after 2 years of intervention. This is encouraging because bullying is very common, potentially traumatic, and bullying prevention programs have shown limited success (Smokowski & Evans, 2019). Comparison schools also decreased bullying from 23% in Year 1 to 18% in Year 3, making the comparisons between SBTC and non-SBTC schools in longitudinal growth models not statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance for the Year 1 to Year 3 reduction suggests that the SBTC implementation model either needs to be strengthened to display larger effects or a larger sample of schools is needed to raise statistical power. SBTCs focus on offenders and it may be necessary to include victim-focused and bystander programs in a comprehensive package to fully address bullying.

School climate

The analyses examined three indicators of school climate (i.e., perceptions of school danger, hassles, and satisfaction). There were no significant changes in student reports of school danger from Year 1 to Year 3 (see Table 1). This null finding contradicts Jensen's (2015) previous data showing students reported an increase in feeling safe in the hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, and outside the school building following the implementation of Teen Court. The school danger scale used in this study was coded from 0 ("does not happen") to 3 ("happens a lot") and the average item rating was 1.82 in Year 1 and 1.81 in Year 3. This symbolizes a student report between "does not happen" and "happens sometimes." It is plausible that this coding was not sensitive enough to subtle changes (i.e., a measurement issue) or alternately the SBTCs may not be pervasive and powerful enough to counter all problems captured in this expansive measure of danger (e.g., includes picking on other students, disagreements, weapon carrying, alcohol, and other substance use, fighting, gang activity, abuse of teachers, and other items). Although this is disappointing to have SBTCs fall short in this domain, we believe that changing school climate requires more, multi-component interventions that would have

complementary effects. Several of the intervention schools implemented Teen Court in one classroom but did not make school-wide changes. It is likely that more investment is needed to impact climate for the entire school, especially in large schools. 365

School hassles (i.e., students' perceptions of being disrespected, ignored, excluded, discouraged, hassled, insulted, and threatened) significantly decreased in SBTC schools, but also significantly decreased in comparison schools. It is difficult to interpret this without a full accounting of policies and programs in comparison schools. This was a longitudinal study, tracking students over three years. It is possible that students moving from middle schools where bullying and victimization is known to be pervasive to high schools where the school environment is more diffuse and diverse underpinned a general trend in decreasing school hassles. Alternately, school hassles may be reduced by SBTCs, but are also reduced by other programs and policies that went unidentified in comparison schools. Methodologists are often wary of the threat to validity called compensatory rivalry. School principals in these two rural districts may have had district meetings where comparison school (non-SBTC) principals heard about the intervention activities in SBTC schools, generating competitive rivalry. The comparison schools did not start SBTCs, however, they might have changed their programs or policies to impact school climate, decreasing the comparative effect of the SBTC changes. 370 375 380

One school climate effect was clear and consistent: High school youth in SBTC schools reported higher school satisfaction compared to high school students in schools without SBTCs or all middle school youth. There are several possibilities that explain the stronger SBTC effects for high school students. High school students are more likely to commit offenses that are serious, warranting either juvenile court involvement or the diversion to Teen Court. The power of getting a second chance, and being offered an alternative to suspension, for high school students may be more profound. In comparison, middle school students may go to Teen Court because of swearing at a teacher, truancy, or similar lower-level offenses with less powerful consequences. Further, the climate in high schools with SBTCs may show more student satisfaction because high school students are developmentally more mature than middle school students, contributing to a heightened understanding of SBTC empowerment and its importance as an alternative disciplinary mechanism to assist high-risk students. Middle school students may not fully grasp the profound shift that it takes for a Principal to give up the power of traditional discipline to invest in a student-run alternative. Based on the stronger effects for high school students, we recommend future studies of SBTCs either focus on high school implementation or combine Teen Courts with complementary programs and practices to enhance middle school efficacy. 385 390 395

Changes for teen court offenders

From the beginning to the end of the program, SBTC participants reported decreasing friend support and increasing peer pressure and peer rejection. These relationship variables may be mediators that drive the effects of SBTCs. Youth who commit school infractions commonly have friends who support or instigate their antisocial behavior. Decreasing friend support is not necessarily bad for the adolescent's development if the friends are antisocial and enhance the adolescent's chances of continuing problematic behavior. Increasing peer pressure is also potentially healthy if the heightened pressure is coming from prosocial peers on the jury who pressure the SBTC participant to change his or her offensive behavior. Similarly, feeling increasing peer rejection may press the participant to change behaviors and adopt responses that are more socially acceptable. 400 405

The negative feelings participants reported after their SBTC experience (i.e., less friend support, more peer pressure and rejection) may be adverse but productive social processes that motivate behavior change. One theory is that, in court, youth will respond better to prosocial peers than to adult authority figures. This peer justice approach assumes that, similar to the way in which an association with delinquent peers is highly correlated with the onset of delinquent behavior, peer pressure from prosocial peers may push youth toward prosocial behavior (Butts et al., 2002). The fact that participants reported less support from prior, possibly antisocial, friends, more peer pressure 410

likely coming from prosocial peers and more peer rejection of problematic behavior may indicate that the theoretical underpinnings for SBTC effectiveness are actually working. More research is needed to confirm this conjecture. 415

Increasing prosocial bonds may form through a process in which participants have to feel less connection to their prior antisocial friends and renewed pressure to rejoin prosocial peer groups. Adverse and conflicted feelings may arise in this transitional process. Practitioners should be aware that this shifting of peer relationships from antisocial to prosocial peers might be a difficult process for SBTC participants. If these deleterious effects are confirmed in future studies, additional implementation components to buttress positive social support during the SBTC process would be warranted. 420

Limitations

As a school-level randomized trial in two expansive rural school districts, the project was very large and implementation supervision was intense. Even so, the school sample size of 12 treatment and 12 comparison schools provided low levels of statistical power for finding SBTC effects. This might explain why some changes in the intervention schools were in the hypothesized direction, but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. To complement the sophisticated school-level longitudinal growth models, we provided a simpler pretest-posttest Paired T-test analyses that had ample statistical power from more than 1,000 students tracked within the 24 participating schools. Discussing the results from both of these analyses shows a pattern of SBTC effects that should be further investigated in future studies. Considering the dearth of research on SBTCs, our data provides a considerable contribution to extant knowledge; however, more research is needed with larger numbers of schools. 425 430 435

Second, while there were useful signs of SBTC efficacy, we believe that to impact school climate SBTCs should be integrated within a full package of practices, including restorative circles, mediation meetings, and classroom management strategies. Comprehensive programming is likely to have a more profound impact if the entire school buys into a new culture change. Thus, in the current study, it is possible that SBTC's implemented in isolation without targeting the entire school climate do not have a large enough impact to create measurable change. Future studies of SBTCs need to ensure that the program is well integrated into the culture of the school. 435 440 445

Third, schools received support (e.g., trainings, supervision) for implementing Teen Court and these supports are not always available to other schools implementing this program. Findings might have been different without this support.

Finally, referrals for TC often came from the principal, which means that personal biases from the principal might have impacted the sample. 445

Conclusion

Rigorous longitudinal growth models showed that high school students in schools with an SBTC reported higher school satisfaction and fewer delinquent friendships compared to schools without an SBTC. Basic pretest-posttest analyses also showed significant decreases in student-reported violent behavior in SBTC schools while there was no significant change in this outcome in comparison group schools. School hassles, bullying victimization, and use of suspensions for discipline all decreased in schools with an SBTC; however, these outcomes also decreased in comparison schools. Finally, SBTC participants reported decreasing friend support and increasing peer pressure and peer rejection. These are potential mediation mechanisms indicating stress within the process of going through SBTCs as an offender and should be further examined in future studies. 450 455

Teen Court assists offenders in establishing positive connections with the school community by giving them a voice, which might help them acknowledge their transgressions and improve their behavior. SBTCs focus on repairing the harm done to the victim or community and emphasize having an open dialog rather than on procedure and evidence (Fischer, 2007). Based on Braithwaite's Re- 460

Integrative Shaming Theory (Braithwaite, 1989) and Sherman's Defiance Theory (Sherman, 1993), SBTC programs seek to provide an atmosphere in which youths can be re-integrated into the community, instead of being stigmatized for their transgressions (Stickle et al., 2008). SBTCs have the potential to interrupt the School to Prison Pipeline by providing an alternative to marginalizing discipline, such as suspensions from school. Our data shows that SBTCs exert some positive effects on school climate (i.e., student satisfaction) and student problems (i.e., delinquent friendships, violent behavior) while diverting offenders to community/school service as an alternative to traditional discipline. Based on encouraging results from this initial randomized trial, we recommend replication studies with a larger number of schools and the integration of Teen Courts with other practices to form a comprehensive package of programs to impact school climate.

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