



# OJJDP FACT SHEET

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## Teen Courts in the United States: A Profile of Current Programs

by Jeffrey Butts, Dean Hoffman, and Janeen Buck

Teen courts, also known as youth courts, have become a popular intervention for relatively young and usually first-time offenders. The number of teen courts nationwide grew from an estimated 50 programs in 1991 to between 400 and 500 programs in 1998 (Nessel, 1998). To document the characteristics and effectiveness of these courts, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funded an evaluation of teen courts in 1998. The Urban Institute of Washington, DC, is conducting the evaluation.

Based on information provided by OJJDP and the American Probation and Parole Association, Urban Institute researchers mailed questionnaires to every known teen court program in the country between October and December 1998. A total of 335 teen court programs responded—more than 70% of the programs contacted. This Fact Sheet summarizes the results of the survey.

### Program Characteristics

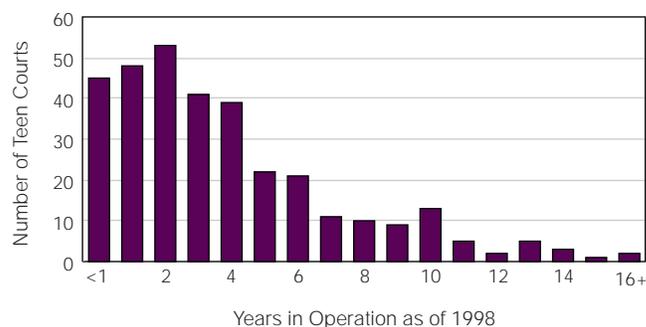
More than two-thirds of the teen court programs surveyed indicated that, at the time of the survey, they had existed for less than 5 years; of these, 20% had been operating for less than 1 year.

Most teen courts have relatively small caseloads. Forty-eight percent of the programs indicated that they received fewer than 100 referrals per year. Only 9% of the programs reported handling 300 or more referrals per year. Survey findings indicated that teen courts nationwide handled approximately 65,000 cases in 1998.

Godwin (1998) described the following case-processing models used by teen courts:

- ◆ **Adult Judge**—An adult serves as judge and rules on legal terminology and courtroom procedure. Youth serve as attorneys, jurors, clerks, bailiffs, etc.
- ◆ **Youth Judge**—This is similar to the adult judge model, but a youth serves as judge.
- ◆ **Tribunal**—Youth attorneys present the case to a panel of three youth judges, who decide the appropriate disposition for the defendant. A jury is not used.

**Most Teen Courts Are Less Than 5 Years Old**



**Source:** The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts (unpublished).

- ◆ **Peer Jury**—This model does not use youth attorneys; the case is presented to a youth jury by a youth or adult. The youth jury then questions the defendant directly.

Most teen courts reported using only one case-processing model for all cases. Forty-seven percent used the adult judge model, 12% used the peer jury model, 10% used the tribunal model, and 9% used the youth judge model. The remaining 22% used more than one case-processing model.

Most teen courts do not determine the guilt or innocence of youth. Rather, they serve as diversion alternatives and youth must admit to the charges against them in order to qualify for teen court. According to the survey, only 13% of teen courts were authorized to determine guilt; of these, 44% used the tribunal model and 36% used the youth judge model.

### Program Administration

Administrators of teen court programs most often include juvenile courts, probation agencies, law enforcement agencies, schools, and private youth agencies. In 1998, the most common

**The Most Popular Teen Court Model is an Adult Judge With Youth Attorneys**

Teen Court Model	Percent of U.S. Teen Courts Using Each Model		Total
	Used Exclusively	Used in Some Cases	
Adult Judge	47%	17%	64%
Youth Judge	9	5	14
Tribunal	10	2	12
Peer Jury	12	14	26

**Source:** The Urban Institute. 1998. National survey of youth courts and teen courts (unpublished).

administrators of teen court programs were local court or probation departments (36%), private agencies (24%), and law enforcement agencies (12%).

Most of the costs associated with teen court programs were covered by State or local governments. Only 33% of the programs responding to the survey received 10% or more of their annual funding from private sources.

**Case Characteristics**

Teen courts usually handle first-time offenders charged with offenses such as theft, misdemeanor assault, disorderly conduct, and possession of alcohol. The majority (87%) of teen courts reported that they “rarely” or “never” accepted youth with prior arrest records, and 98% reported that they “rarely” or “never” accepted youth with prior felony arrests. Respondents reported that, on average, 24% of their cases involved youth under age 14 and 66% involved youth under age 16.

Community service was the most common disposition used in teen court cases. Virtually all of the programs (99%) reported that they used community service “often” or “very often.” Other dispositions that were used “often” or “very often” included victim apology

letters (86%), apology essays (79%), teen court jury duty (75%), drug/alcohol classes (59%), and monetary restitution (34%).

**Process and Impact Evaluations**

In the next phase of the evaluation project, researchers will conduct process and impact evaluations at four teen courts. These evaluations will measure the intended outcomes of teen courts, including reduced recidivism, increased prosocial attitudes, and improved perceptions of justice. Results are expected to be available in 2001.

**For Further Information**

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**References**

Godwin, T.M. 1998. *Peer Justice and Youth Empowerment: An Implementation Guide for Teen Court Programs*. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association. (Available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800-638-8736.)

Nessel, P.A. 1998. *Teen Court: A National Movement*. Technical Assistance Bulletin Number 17. Chicago, IL: American Bar Association, Division for Public Education.

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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

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