

North Carolina Teen Court and Recidivism: The Team Process



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Introduction and Background

Teen Court programs are diversion programs that serve as an alternative to processing juveniles through the traditional justice system. They are implemented around the country in hopes of reducing recidivism rates for juveniles. Juveniles can be referred to the Teen Court program through a juvenile court counselor, school administrators, law enforcement, or other members of the local community. This research examines whether the teen court in North Carolina reduces juvenile recidivism and provides descriptive information about the teen court policies and procedures across counties.

- In North Carolina, 68 counties have Teen Court programs while 32 counties do not.
- This project is enabled by the North Carolina Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships.
- This project examines the Teen Court process through three different methods: surveys, site visits, and statistical analysis.

This research was enabled through teamwork and collaboration across the research team and a team of state workers in the North Carolina justice system and each member of the team worked together to achieve a better understanding of the research question.

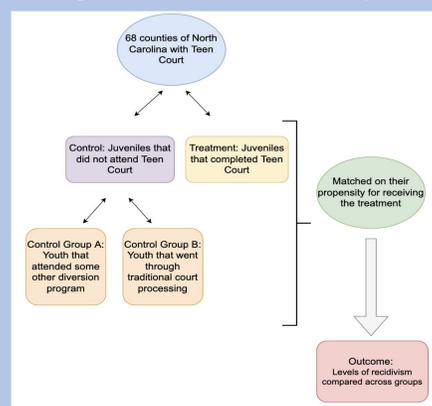
Methods

1. Data was collected on all juvenile offenders in North Carolina for 2019-2020. The data is tracking the juveniles for delinquent and criminal behavior for a two-year period which will help develop the dependent variable. To create the propensity scores, a table of variables was made (Table 1). These variables include their characteristics and their data source.
2. The qualitative data that was collected increases the understanding of the organization of North Carolina teen courts. As site visits, observations, and interviews of each county are being completed, a survey is being sent out to every county in North Carolina. The survey will provide information on:
 - Type of teen court model that is used (i.e. adult judge model, youth judge model, mixed models, peer jury model, youth tribunal, etc.)
 - How teen court volunteers are selected
 - Types of sentencing that are typically handed out
 - Their level of success with teen court programs
3. There will also be a survey sent to the 32 counties that do not use teen court programs to understand their best practices concerning options for diverting youth from the traditional justice system.

Table 1: Matching Criteria for Statistical Analysis

| Variable | Definition | Data Source |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Sex | | NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN |
| Age | | NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN |
| Race | | NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN |
| Type of Offense | Type of misdemeanor | NC-JOIN |
| NCAR Score | A scale of 9 risk indicators including legal history, runaways, alcohol use, school behavior problems, peer relationships, parental supervision. | NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN |
| Measure of disconnected youth | The share of the 16-24 population out of the labor force and school | North Carolina Department of Public Instruction |
| Poverty rate | % children living in poverty in each county | Kidcount |

Figure 1: Treatment and Control Groups



Preliminary Results

This research, conducted by three groups, focused on empirical data, site visits, and surveys. There was a focus on the literature review to prepare for creating the survey analysis for the North Carolina counties.

The literature review highlighted Teen Court programs' lower recidivism rates compared to other diversionary programs, as evidenced by studies in Washington and Los Angeles. Forgays (2008) found significant benefits for Teen Court participants in Washington, while Gase et al. (2016) showed Teen Court's superiority over school-based programs in Los Angeles.

Led by Dr. Alexandra Cockerham, the empirical data demonstrated Teen Courts' efficacy in reducing recidivism. Dr. James Cockerham administered surveys to counties, awaiting results. Site visits by Dr. Rob Roth and Dr. I-Eesha Patterson provided valuable insights. Together, the team has made significant progress, aiming for completion by June 2024.

Figure 2: Heat Map

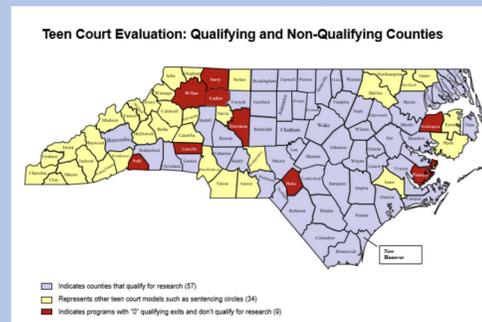
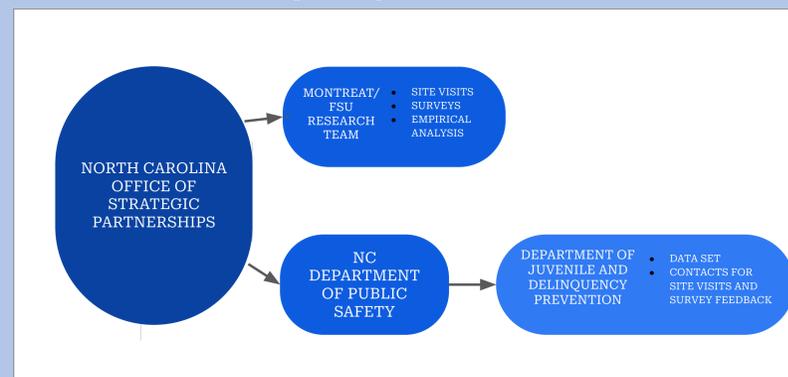


Table 2: Site Visits

| Date | Site Visited |
|-------------|----------------------------|
| November 14 | Gaston County Courthouse |
| November 20 | Iredell County Courthouse |
| November 27 | Cabarrus County Courthouse |
| November 28 | Guilford County Courthouse |
| November 30 | Randolph County Courthouse |
| December 5 | Rowan County Courthouse |
| December 11 | McDowell County Courthouse |
| January 22 | Buncombe County Courthouse |
| February 20 | Pitt County Courthouse |
| February 27 | Stanly County Courthouse |

Figure 3: Organization Flow Chart



Limitations

Due to the nature of this research, there were challenges with measuring the effects of teen court due to there not being a standard among all counties of how and why juveniles are referred to teen court. In order to address this limitation, a quasi-experimental design was used to limit elements that make differences between other counties's Teen Court programs less prominent.

Another challenge is that teen court programming is not randomly assigned as juveniles who are sent have different characteristics and aspects of their cases that affect this measure. Due to the fact that teen court is not randomly assigned, it is difficult to find a causal effect.

Discussion

Unfortunately, there are a lot of disparities found within the Criminal Justice system. Gase et al. (2016) explore the racial discrimination against minorities within the Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice System with a large predominance of Hispanic offenders. Researchers were able to control factors to identify that:

- African American juveniles had higher recidivism rates than Hispanic youth.
- African American youth were less likely to complete their Teen Court program or 654 Contract program compared to any other race.

Ray and Alarid (2004) picked 6 counties in Missouri that provided racial diversity for their study. It was found that in all 6 counties, juveniles who are Black were more likely to be referred and detained before adjudication. We can try our best to limit disparities but this is the reality of the Criminal Justice system.

Conclusion

Through analyzing many pieces of literature on juvenile justice and teen court, the effectiveness of Teen Court in reducing recidivism and in comparison to other diversion programs was discovered. Overall, Teen Court has proven to be the most effective way to keep juveniles accountable through appropriate consequences in comparison to other diversion programs.

With work still to be done, this project has shown what all can be accomplished in a short period of time with teamwork and leadership skills. The empirical data has shown a significant contribution Teen Court programs have on recidivism when compared to other diversionary programs and traditional court proceedings. The final results from the site visits and surveys are ongoing at this time. Effective communication and teamwork provided results to help improve the North Carolina Juvenile Justice systems and hopefully affect nationwide Juvenile Justice systems in the future.

References

- Forgays, Deborah K. "Three Years of Teen Court Offender Outcomes." *Adolescence*, vol. 43, no. 171, 2008, pp. 473-84. ProQuest
- Gase, Lauren N., et al. "The Impact of Two Los Angeles County Teen Courts on Youth Recidivism: Comparing Two Informal Probation Programs." *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2016, pp. 105-126. ProQuest
- Ray, Katherine E. Brown, and Alarid, Leanne Fiftal. "Examining Racial Disparity Of Male Property Offenders In The Missouri Juvenile Justice System." *Youth Violence And Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2004, Pp. 107-28