

# Assessing the Impact of Leon and Alachua County Teen Courts

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## Background and Significance

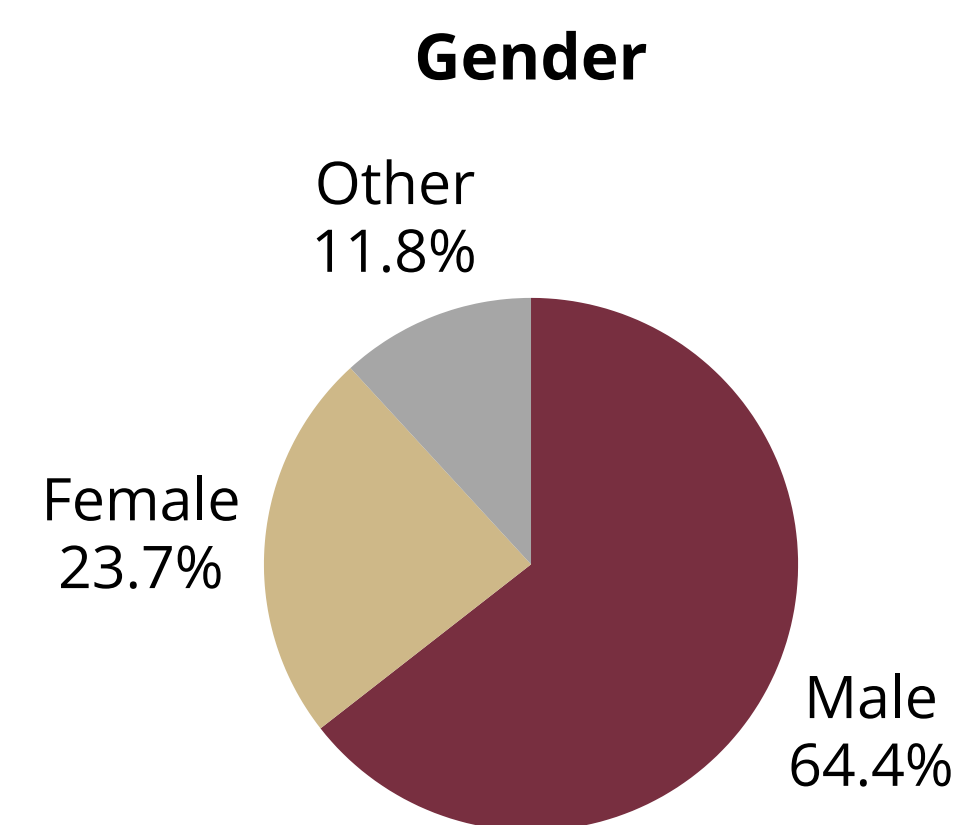
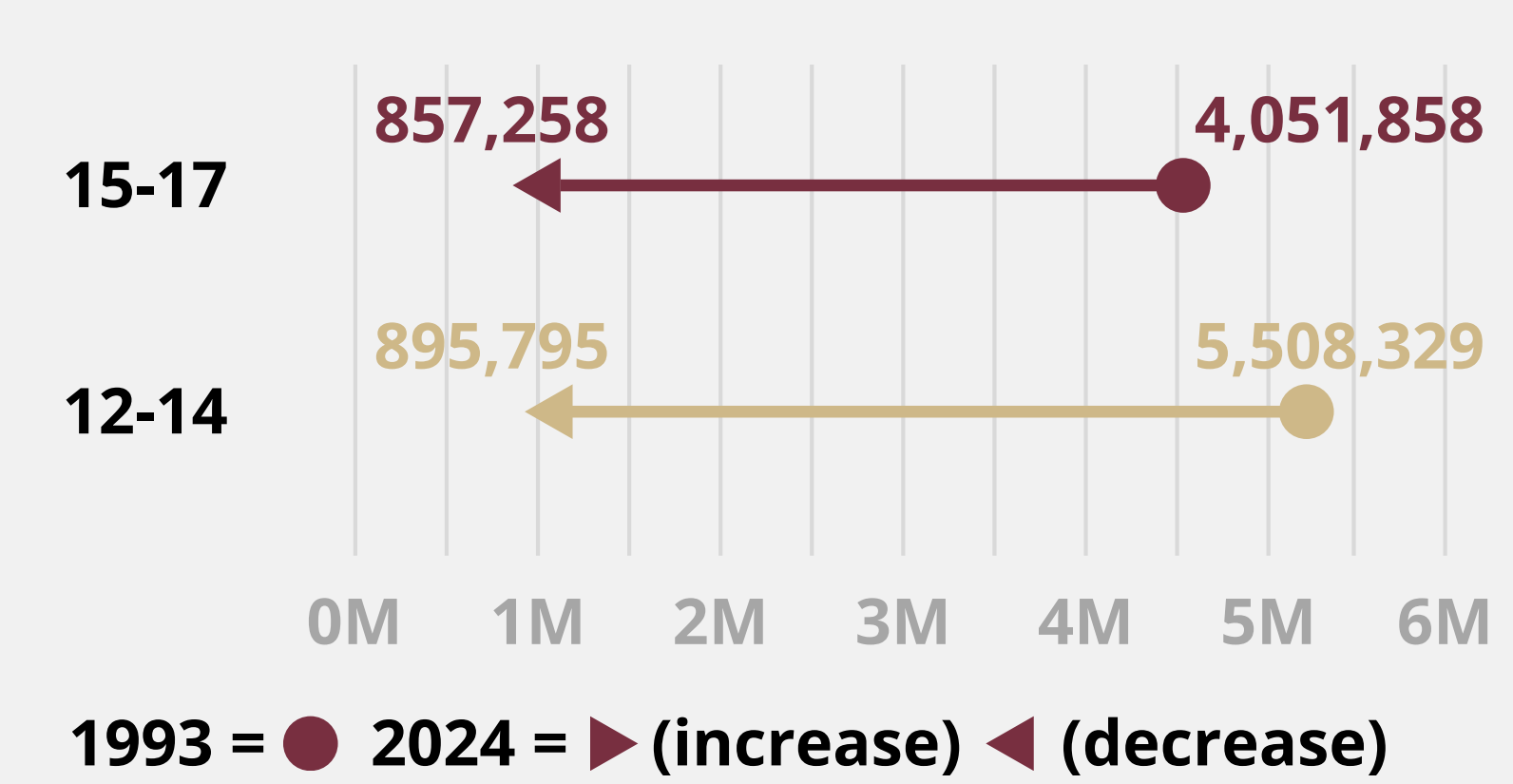
**Research Question:** How do differences in structure, youth participation, and restorative practices between Florida teen courts relate to county-level juvenile delinquency trends?

**Purpose:** Teen courts are built to reduce recidivism, promote peer accountability, and support mental and emotional development. National trends demonstrate the increasing adoption across U.S. states to supplement traditional juvenile justice systems.

**Teen Courts:** Juvenile diversion programs for first-time or eligible offenders.

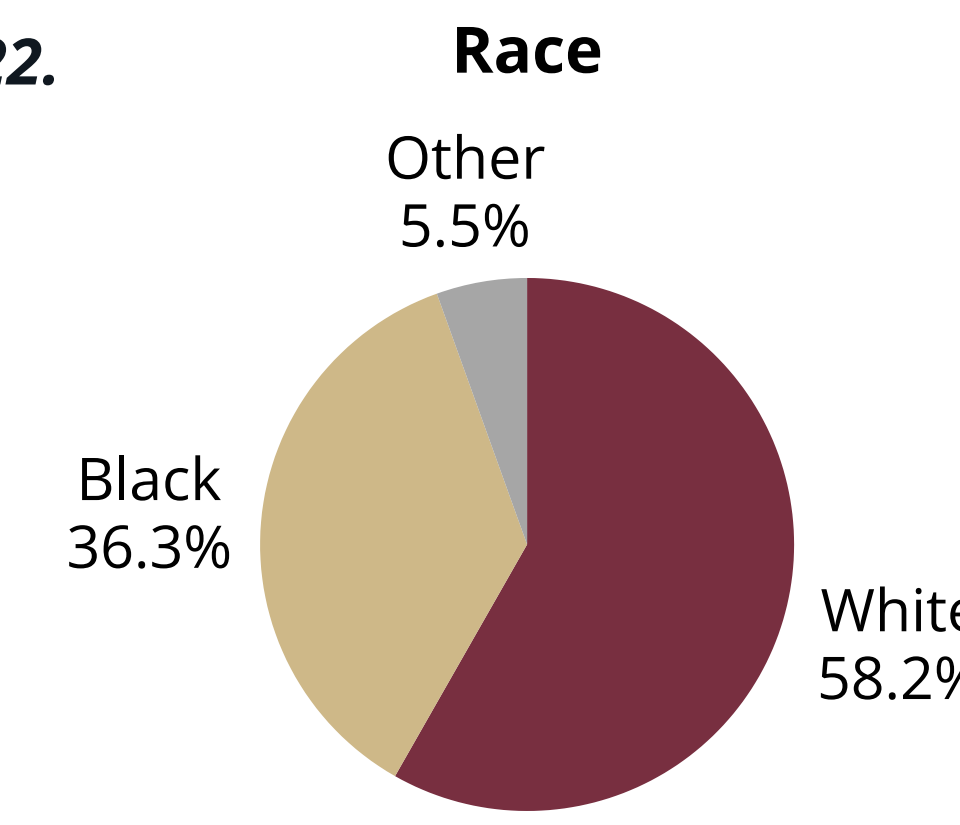
- Focus on accountability, restorative justice, rehabilitation, and community service.

### Number of victimizations by age, 1993 vs. 2024



Total Delinquency went down by 53% between 1985 and 2022.

- **Rehabilitation over Punishment:** Teen courts emphasize reflection, apologies, and restorative actions rather than punitive measures.
- **Educational Implications:** Judges often mentor student participants, teaching courtroom procedure and law skills.
- **Nationwide Benefits:** Understanding best practices can guide statewide and future nationwide teen court frameworks to improve consistency and effectiveness.



## Methods

### Study Design

Qualitative comparative case study incorporating:

- Systematic literature review of juvenile rehabilitation programs, restorative justice models, and teen court recidivism research, including the quantitative examination of trends in youth offense patterns over the past four decades as well as specific crimes by Florida county and circuit
- Qualitative site observations of two Florida teen courts (Leon and Alachua County)

Data collection occurred through in-person court observations conducted in the Spring 2026 semester. Structured field reports were completed during the sessions and included precise timestamps (arrival, security, call to order, deliberation, adjournment, etc.), courtroom layout descriptions, sanction documentation, and behavioral observations.

### Participants Observed:

- Presiding judges
- Administrators and greeters
- Student bailiffs and clerks
- Student prosecutors and defense attorneys (Leon County)
- Student jurors
- Juvenile defendants (ages 12–15)
- Parents/guardians
- Law enforcement
- Six court sessions (N=10 cases total)

### Observation Sites

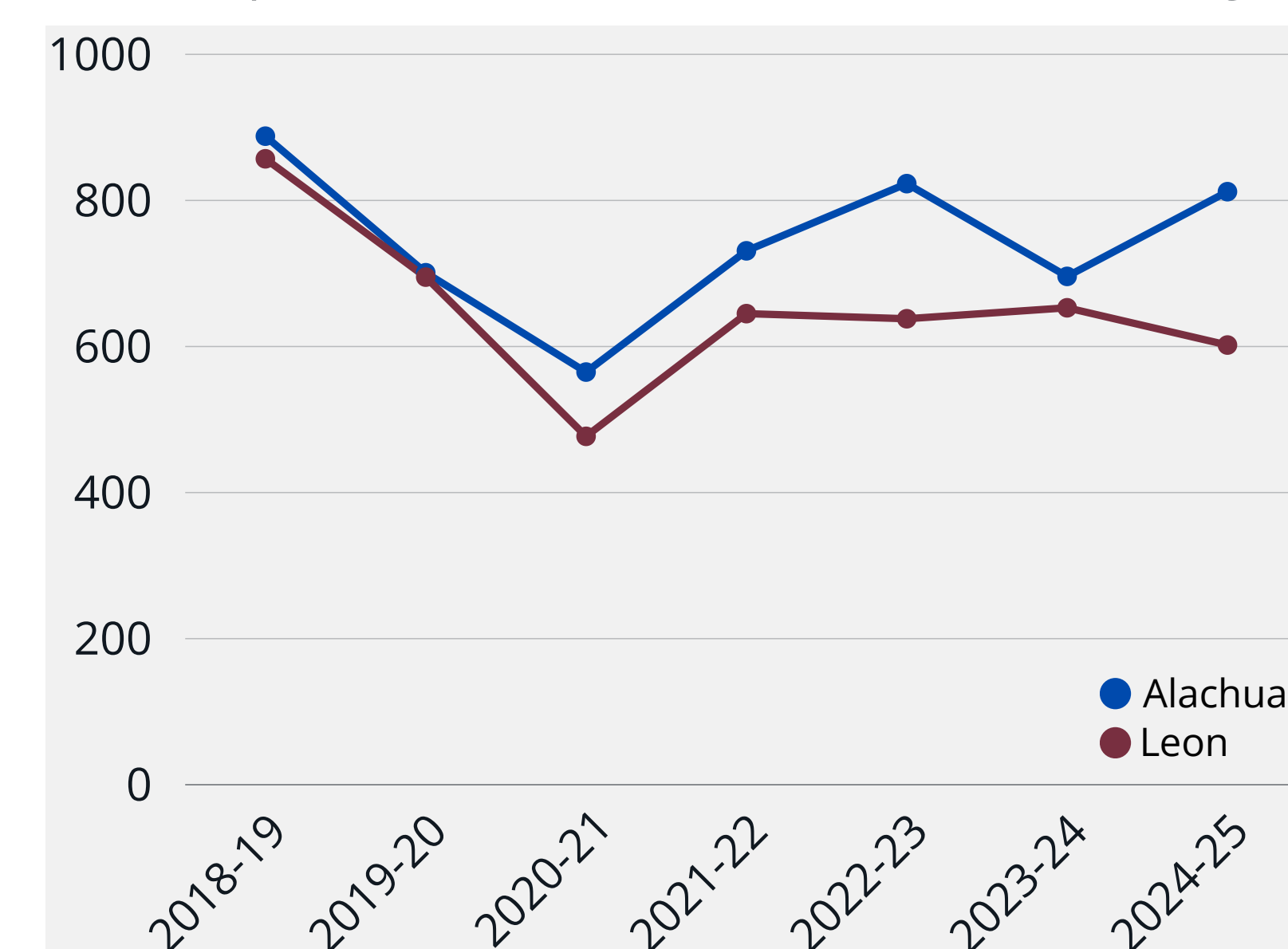
- **Teen Court:** Leon County Teen Court
- **Location:** Leon County Courthouse Annex
- **Judicial Circuit:** The Second Judicial Circuit of Florida
- **Teen Court:** Alachua County Teen Court
- **Location:** Judge Stephan P. Mickle, Sr. Criminal Courthouse
- **Judicial Circuit:** The Eighth Judicial Circuit of Florida

## Comparisons

FEATURE	LEON	ALACHUA	POTENTIAL IMPACT
Oath of Confidentiality	Oath administered to all present	No confidentiality oath administered	Confidentiality encourages honesty, supporting deeper self-reflection and accountability
Parent Involvement	Seated separately, limited interaction	Close proximity; judge involves parent comments	High parental involvement in the process cultivates at-home support for juveniles
Severity of Punishment	Student jurors more deliberate	Student jurors more punitive	Balanced, restorative sanctions are more likely to support behavioral change
Deliberation Structure	Educational emphasis	Secrecy not ensured, informal	Informality diminishes the gravity of consequences and accountability
Juror Engagement	Considered restorative aspects	Dominant jurors, laughter observed	Peer engagement promotes prosocial influence; joking deliberation reduces deterrence
Mentorship Present	Students in key roles, judge leads	Students in roles, but less guidance	Mentorship reinforces responsibility, trial understanding, and learning
Courtroom Features	Small, low ceiling, dim lighting in well, carpet floors	Large, bright, higher ceiling, marble floors	Official settings create more formal environments that carry more significance
Student Participation	High; all student roles active	Medium; jury roles student-filled	Visible peer engagement models civic responsibility and can strengthen social learning

## Analysis

To assess program effectiveness, quantitative juvenile delinquency rates were analyzed alongside structured courtroom observations. This comparative approach allows for examination of whether procedural/environmental differences align with broader county-level juvenile trends.



- Leon County consistently reports lower juvenile delinquency rates than Alachua County.
- Leon's teen court featured greater youth involvement across multiple courtroom roles along with structured deliberation, confidentiality safeguards, and restorative integration.
- Alachua relied primarily on a teen jury with lower rates of structured procedural engagement and a comparatively more punitive tone.

## Conclusion and Results

While causation cannot be determined, the alignment between lower juvenile rates and a more comprehensive, peer-driven, and restorative framework suggests that broader teen engagement and structured accountability may contribute to stronger rehabilitative outcomes.

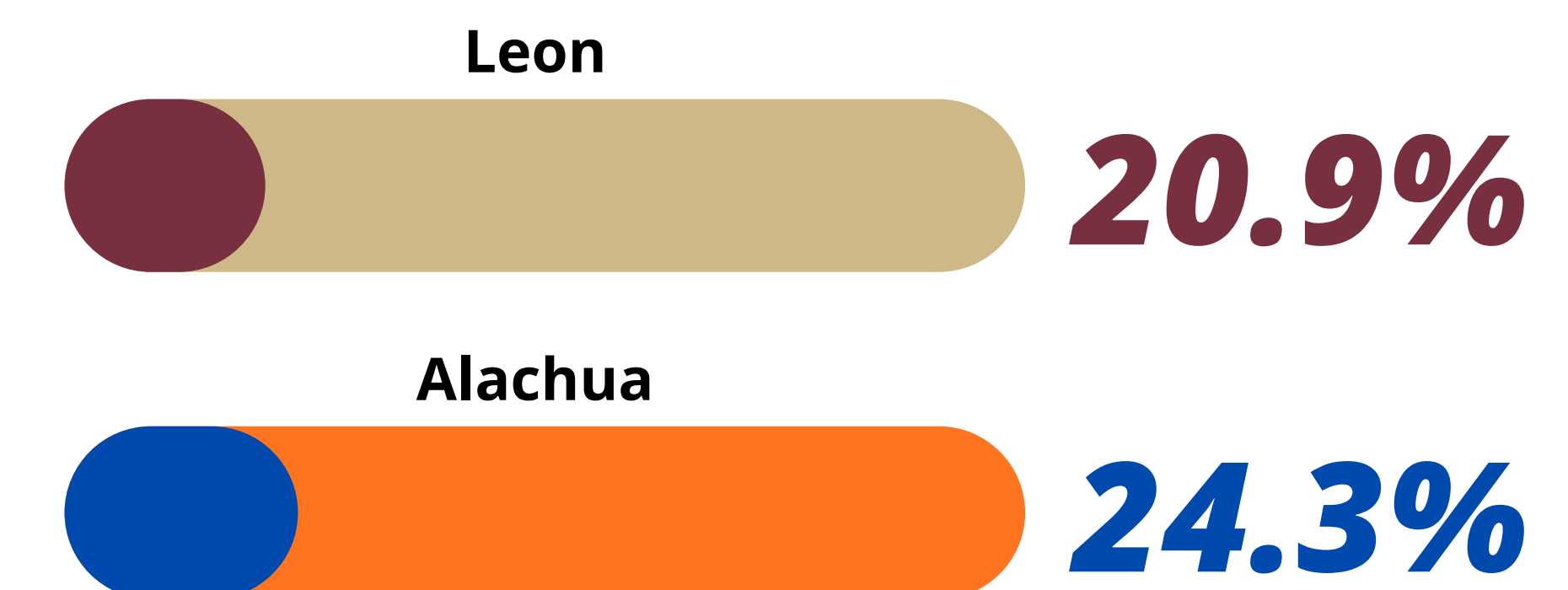
- Teen courts with higher levels of teen involvement will have lower recidivism rates
  - This can be seen through lower youth recidivism rates in Leon County vs. Alachua County
- Formal sessions that follow a specific program may provide a more impactful experience
  - Formality and session length observed through site visits (i.e., stricter dress codes, more programming, location)

This study also has a couple of limitations:

- **Small sample size:** The study focuses primarily on two teen courts, reducing the variety of observed sessions.
- **Limited number of case observations:** Given the distance between Tallahassee and Gainesville, fewer site reports were conducted at the Alachua County location, while more case visits were observed Alachua compared to Leon due to organizational differences.

## Chronic Offenders by County

Chronic offenders are defined having a history of 4 or more arrests in their lifetime, classifying them as chronic. The rate of Leon County chronic offenders based off of data from 2010-2018 is 20.9%, while Alachua County's is 24.3%.



## Implications and Further Research

### Establishing Procedures

A primary aim and accomplishment of this qualitative research on teen courts is to identify the most essential and successful aspects of currently established programs to implement within its structures to move these diverse programs into a more cohesive and success-backed form. In order to do this, conclusions from this study can be used to refine preexisting and shape new Teen Court as well as other diversion programs.

### Further Research

Due to the highly qualitative nature of this research, future research should aim to address the:

- effect of required jury duty that is a common required sanction in many programs
- variation of dynamics between teen volunteers and teen defendants
- purpose of expanding teen court programs to include currently ineligible offenders such as repeat or violent offenders.

## Acknowledgements and References

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As a general disclaimer, the qualitative results presented on this research poster are preliminary and should not be interpreted as definitive conclusions. Ongoing data collection is required to validate findings.

