



Assessing the Impact of North Carolina Teen Court on Recidivism

Research Report

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In Partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Division of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention

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Background

Teen courts are a diversion program serving as an alternative to processing youth through the traditional justice system. Teen courts divert youth from the route of formal criminal processing and are mostly targeted to first time or low-level offenders. Rather than traditional processing, teen courts instead utilize informal processing and sanctions in order to prevent future offending (Stickle et al., 2008).

Whether or not they are facing confinement, youth going through formal criminal processing are more likely to face a range of negative consequences. Formal juvenile justice systems tend to remove problem youth from their families and communities and thereby interrupt developmental processes and heighten the likelihood of further system involvement (Gase et al., 2015). Teen courts are aimed at providing the opportunity for reform and prevent the stigma of adult adjudications, allowing youth to move past their encounter with the juvenile justice system (Nellis, 2011). Teen courts are thought to help reduce recidivism by connecting the youth more directly to their crime. Specifically, the teen court process is seen as beneficial, because the offender is given the opportunity to observe directly how their behavior impacted the victim both through victim impact statements and at the conclusion of the hearing when the judge addresses the offender (Stickle et al., 2008). Most teen court sanctions are designed to go beyond simply punishing the offender, encouraging youth to restore part of the damages their behavior caused to the community (Butts et al., 2002).

In North Carolina, the juvenile court counselor plays a pivotal role in managing juvenile complaints through intake services, as outlined in § 7B-1700 of the North Carolina General Statutes. These services are designed to determine the validity and seriousness of complaints against youth, deciding whether court action is necessary or if community resources can be utilized instead. The counselor does not engage in field investigations but may refer complainants to law enforcement for further evidence. When a complaint is received, the counselor conducts a preliminary inquiry to establish jurisdiction and assess if the offense is non-divertible, as specified in § 7B-1701. For youth aged 10 and older, the counselor evaluates whether the complaint should be diverted or proceed as a petition. Diversion is not permitted for serious offenses like murder, rape, arson, or felonies involving serious bodily injury or deadly weapons. The evaluation process includes interviews with the complainant, the juvenile, their guardians, and other relevant parties, following departmental guidelines.

A key diversion strategy in North Carolina is the Teen Court Program, defined in § 7B-1501. Teen court serves as an alternative for youth who have allegedly committed certain offenses, allowing their cases to be heard by a jury of their peers. This program assigns rehabilitative measures such as counseling, restitution, curfews, and community service. The goal of Teen Court is to address the youth's behavior through peer-driven consequences and support, without involving the juvenile justice system. By focusing on restorative justice and peer accountability, Teen Court helps youth understand the impact of their actions and encourages positive behavioral changes.

Under § 7B-1706, the juvenile court counselor can develop a diversion plan or contract involving various resources such as community service, counseling, restitution,

mediation/conflict resolution, or participation in teen court programs. The plan must be agreed upon by the youth and their guardians and outline specific actions and conditions to be followed. The counselor monitors compliance and may file a complaint as a petition if the terms are not met. Teen court programs are used for minor infractions or misdemeanors, excluding severe offenses like DWI or controlled substance violations. The counselor reviews compliance within 60 days and may extend monitoring for up to six months. This process underscores North Carolina's emphasis on rehabilitation and community involvement over punitive measures, aiming to provide constructive consequences that help youth positively reform their behavior.

Overview of Research Strategy and Results

In this analysis, we are interested in examining the effect of teen court programs in North Carolina on recidivism. Given the nature of teen courts, specifically their unique ability to connect offending youth to their crime and the comprehensive nature of including the youth's parents, peers, and community in the sentencing process, we believe that this is a unique diversion source that will have reductionary effects on an at-risk youth's propensity to enter and a court involved youth's propensity to re-enter the system.

In this analysis, we focused the scope of research on the juvenile justice system in North Carolina, specifically examining the effects of the teen court program on recidivism. Within North Carolina, there are 68 counties that are served by teen court and 32 that are not. Within these 68 counties, in 2022 there were 3,400 youth served by teen court and 14,000 youth that went through the traditional justice processing and 4,300 youth that were processed via diversion plans or contracts.

Among the youth in North Carolina, there is variance in how or whether they are referred to teen court. Youth may be referred by a juvenile court counselor when an official offense is filed with juvenile justice, or they may be directly referred to a teen court program by a school resource officer or school administrator, or by local law enforcement among others. Among youth going through teen court in North Carolina, about 70% were referred from other referral sources and 30% were referred from juvenile justice.

Across the referral sources each involved actor has discretion on whether youth will be referred to a teen court program. Beyond targeting first time or low-level offenders, referring parties assess youth's risk to the community and individual needs to determine referral to court versus another diversion option. For example, upon a finding of legal sufficiency a juvenile court counselor may divert the youth to a diversion plan, taking the form of any of the following resources: an appropriate public or private resource; restitution; community service; victim-offender mediation; regimented physical training; counseling; or, a teen court program (G.S. 7B-1706). North Carolina teen courts exclude the following infractions: driving while impaired or any other motor vehicle violation; a class A1 misdemeanor; an assault in which a weapon is used; or a controlled substance offense (G.S. 7B-1706).

Though we are interested in assessing the effect of teen court on recidivism, we recognize that there will be some challenges measuring the effects of the treatment (teen court) since there is no comprehensive standard for how and why youth are referred to teen court. We will address our approach for confronting this complexity in the next section and the possibility that youth that are referred to teen court may be systematically different than those that are not.

In addition to the quantitative information described above, we also gathered descriptive information that helped us learn more about the structure of teen courts in North Carolina. In addition to conducting a handful of site visits, observations and interviews, we also sent a survey out to each of the 68 teen courts in North Carolina. This allowed us to gather information on the type of teen court model that is used (i.e, adult judge model, youth judge model, mixed models, peer jury model, youth tribunal, etc.) and types of sentencing that are typically handed out. We also sent a survey to the 32 counties that do not use teen court as an option to learn more information about their best practices with regard to options for diverting youth from the traditional justice system.

This study has two primary research goals 1) gain a more nuanced understanding about the structure of teen court across North Carolina; and 2) estimate the effectiveness of teen court on juvenile recidivism in North Carolina as compared to other processing alternatives. We aimed to accomplish these goals through three strategies-- surveys, site visits, and empirical analysis.

Part One: Survey Analysis

Purpose

For this project we created a survey using Alchemer survey software (Alchemer, n.d.). The goal of the survey was to deepen our analysis of teen courts in North Carolina. Surveys were sent to all 100 counties in North Carolina. This included 68 counties with teen courts and 32 without. With this, our objective was to further our analysis of the effectiveness, impact, and feedback on the existence, models, and management of teen court programs. We also set out to explore what alternative diversion programs are employed in regions without teen courts.

Overview of Survey

The survey consisted of 45 questions. All recipients received the same initial three questions:

1. Which county'(s) does your agency provide services in?
2. What is your title? (Please DO NOT list your name)
3. Does your agency provide teen court in any of the county's you selected in question #1?

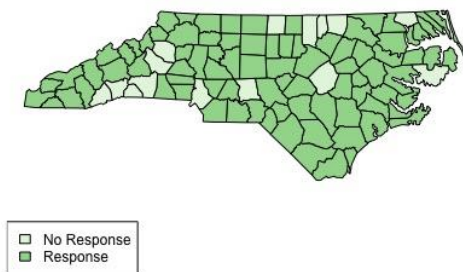
In an effort to distinguish respondents that have and do not have teen courts, question three asked recipients if their agency provided teen court in any of the counties they selected in question

one.¹ This question had built in logic that would route respondents to a different set of questions depending on their answer, either yes or no.² If respondents answered “no” to question three, they were routed to an additional eight questions, for a total of 11. If respondents answered “yes” to question three, they were routed to an additional 34 questions, for a total of 37. Question types included multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended. There were 26 open-ended questions, 16 multiple choice, and 3 Likert scale. The high proportion of open-ended questions was to pursue richer and more detailed insights into not only the teen court system but also alternative diversion programs throughout North Carolina.

Response Rate

The survey received responses from 85 out of the 100 counties in North Carolina. In total, there were a total of 62 survey responses covering these 85 counties.³ See Appendix A for a complete list of counties that responded. Some respondents covered multiple counties.⁴ Recipients were from programs that were either: 1) a Juvenile Crime Prevention Council (JCPC) funded teen court program; or 2) For those counties without a JCPC funded teen court program, the survey link was sent to the restitution/community service program in that county, which is also restorative justice and most provide a diversionary option for their community. A response rate this high speaks to both the representativeness and reliability of the data collected. The higher proportion of responses allows for more reliable results. This response rate also captures a more accurate picture of the entire population thereby increasing the generalizability of results. Figure 1 displays the geographic distribution of counties that responded to the survey.

Figure 1: Map of Survey Respondents



¹ Recipients were provided a list of all 100 counties in North Carolina.

² The following full answer choices were given to survey respondents for question three: Yes: Traditional Teen Court model with cases tried by a jury of peers is available, and/or other Restorative Justice programming (i.e., Sentencing Circles/Peer Accountability Circles, Restorative Circles). Or: No: None of the above options is provided.

³ The survey originally had 78 responses. A data quality review was conducted by Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention staff. The results of the review found responses that were: (1) the same program with more than 1 response, or (2) A program that should not have responded. An example is a Restitution program in the same county as the Teen Court. It was requested that only the Teen Court program be solicited. One respondent responded twice because they “missed a couple questions” so those responses were concatenated. In total, 15 responses were not included and two responses were combined. This brought the total number of responses to 62.

⁴ The following counties received two responses: Ashe, Cabarrus, Gaston, Iredell, Onslow, Stokes, Wilson

Methodology

Survey Design

Survey questions were developed through a collaborative process that involved the Montreat College research team as well as stakeholders from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety's Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The grant's objectives were reviewed to ensure questions aligned with the focus and desired outcomes of the survey. Our main objective in this project is to analyze teen court data provided by the Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to review its impacts on recidivism. Questions devised in the survey were designed to further our analysis of the effectiveness, impact, and feedback on the existence, models, and management of teen court programs across North Carolina.

Data Collection Methods

The survey was distributed online using Alchemer survey software to all 100 counties in North Carolina. Counties with a Teen Court Program were solicited for a response. For counties without a Teen Court Program, other restorative justice programs, such as restitution and community service programs received the survey for feedback.

Survey Results

The set of questions counties received varied based on whether they had a traditional teen court system.⁵ For the purposes of summarizing the results, survey questions are organized into six overarching categories.⁶ Respondent feedback is discussed below. Within these categories, twenty one questions (and responses) were determined as key topics of analysis, providing insight into various aspects of teen court programs, including their structure, effectiveness, challenges, and community impact.

Teen Court Models and Operations

This category addresses the overall structure and functioning of the teen court including questions related to the types of teen court models utilized, key elements of the program, and how court sessions are conducted. All questions in this category are from respondents that express they do have a traditional teen court system.⁷

⁵ There were a total of 62 respondents; 56 with traditional teen court or other restorative justice programming and 6 respondents that do not offer this type of programming. It is important to note that although it does not occur often, some respondents skip certain questions. As such, there may not be responses from these counties.

⁶ Questions are not numbered in the same manner recipients received them on the actual survey.

⁷ Responses from the following five questions are discussed in this section: (1) What type of teen court does your agency adhere to? Check all that apply. (2) Please describe the key elements of your teen court program and how it operates and when applicable, including where teen court sessions are held (i.e., in a courtroom, other meeting space, etc.). (3) How long has your teen court been in operation? (If your area covers more than one county, please answer this with regard to the longest running program). (4) How do you handle a referral when your agency

The majority of respondents adhere to the traditional teen court model, making it the most widely utilized model by respondents throughout North Carolina, based on the choices offered in this survey.⁸ 89% use the traditional teen court model, 9% utilize sentencing circles, and 2% operate restorative circles.⁹ This suggests a strong preference for the traditional peer jury approach in handling youth cases and limited use of alternative models. This may also reflect community needs and preference toward the teen court model.

Respondents reported that the majority of teen court sessions are held in traditional courtroom settings. For example, the Alamance Civil Courthouse facilitates Teen Court sessions while, similarly, the Camden County Courthouse makes use of historic courtrooms. However, not all respondents make use of traditional courtrooms, for example the Boys and Girls Club in Carteret County converts their “education room” into a courtroom setting for traditional hearings or it will arrange desks in a circle for restorative justice hearings.

The use of these facilities are indicative of local partnerships that teen courts have established for several reasons such as resource sharing, judicial support and endorsement, educational opportunities, as well as visibility and accessibility. By sharing a physical space, there is a reduced cost for teen court programs as well as a show of support from the local justice system to assist with communal initiatives like teen courts. This backing and endorsement raises the legitimacy for all parties involved in teen courts because they are provided an actual judicial environment. With this, youth are able to learn about the legal process, civic duties, and consequences of breaking the law. With the ability to hold teen court programming in a central and well-known public venue such as the local courthouse, there is also an increased level of visibility that aids in public outreach, engagement, and accessibility.

There are times in which a juvenile is not eligible to participate in the teen court program. For example, the severity of the offense can disqualify an offender. When an ineligible youth is mistakenly referred to a teen court, many respondents indicate they contact the referring source to educate them on the reason the youth is disqualified. Officials will also suggest alternative resources or services for the youth. For example, one respondent indicates, "A Notice of Ineligibility is sent to the referral source informing them of the reason that they cannot be accepted into the program". Another source states, "We contact the referral source and recommend more appropriate services, especially if there are mental health issues discovered during intake". These results demonstrate that when a youth is deemed ineligible for teen court, agencies prioritize communication, education, and the provision of alternative solutions. This approach allows the youth to still receive guidance and support, even if Teen Court is not an option.

determines a youth is not eligible for teen court? (5) What is the most common reason why a youth DOES NOT complete their teen court sanctions?

⁸ Actual numbers: Traditional Teen Court Model (tried by a jury of peers) (50), Sentencing Circle (Peer Accountability Circles) (5), Restorative Circles (1)

⁹ Percentages are based on the number of respondents for the respective question and not total respondents in the survey.

It is also important to understand why youth do not complete their court sanctions. Accountability and assuming responsibility are important properties of the teen court program. While there are a variety of responses in this area of the survey, the most common reasons are a lack of parental support, reoffending or committing another offense, and higher level of care needs that go beyond what teen court programs can provide. Other logistical issues are items such as moving out of the district, lack of transportation, and non-compliance because of personal or family dynamics. These responses indicate the importance of family involvement and support, supervision, as well as the multitude of youth needs that must be accounted for to ensure success in the teen court program.

Volunteer Roles and Training

This segment of the survey included questions that cover topics related to the teen court participants such as how volunteers are assigned roles, the types of roles they fulfill, as well as the training and support provided to both youth and adult volunteers. It highlights the importance of volunteer involvement and preparation. Responses from two survey questions are analyzed in this section.¹⁰

Teen Court sessions require numerous volunteers to fill necessary roles and operate properly. The majority of respondents indicate that both adult and youth volunteer roles are employed in teen court programs. Respondents indicate that youth volunteers generally serve as jurors, clerks, bailiffs, or attorneys. These roles are generally chosen based on either volunteer interest, maturity, and training completion. Adult volunteers typically serve as judges, mentors, or coordinators. Oftentimes, adult volunteers are law-students, retired judges, or current attorneys in the region. In these roles, adults are able to provide supervision, mentorship, and support to youth volunteers.

The volume of volunteers in these programs can be considerable to ensure the comprehensiveness of each session. During a session, an offender's case is heard and adjudicated. It includes aspects such as case deliberation, testimony, and sentencing. In total, one session may need to fill the following roles with youth and adult volunteers: (1) full jury, (2) a clerk, (3) a bailiff, (4) defense and prosecuting attorneys, as well as (5) a judge. Larger programs will utilize a high volume of volunteers and include a greater number of sessions. Youth volunteers can often rotate positions to provide a greater amount of experience as well as preventing potential burnout. These volunteers will often begin in a less challenging role such as a juror, and progress (if desired) to a more challenging role such as an attorney. The assignment of youth volunteers is often based on factors such as training completed, interest, and program needs.

¹⁰ Questions are as follows: (1) How are roles assigned to volunteers within your program? (2) What training or support is provided to teen court volunteers and who provides the training?

Most respondents mention that adult and youth volunteers receive some form of training. Much of this training is reported as being catered to youth that are participating in the Teen Court Program. The majority of volunteers submit an application as well as participate in an initial training. Youth training can consist of a multitude of elements, such as an introduction to restorative processes, the agency, circle process, roles and expectations, confidentiality, and program goals. According to participants, these training sessions are normally led by either agency staff, attorneys, judges, and/or more experienced volunteers.

Some programs also hold observational training in which new volunteers are required to observe teen court sessions prior to officially participating. This experience aids in the understanding of court proceedings as well as the different roles within sessions. Current participants, made up of program staff and attorneys, are present during this training to provide guidance to new volunteers. There is also role-specific training. For example, youth interested in volunteering as an attorney normally receive additional training from adult volunteers who are attorneys or judges. Training sessions are held periodically; generally, before the school year or prior to the first court session. Programs may also conduct mock trials for recruitment and training purposes. These trials aid in youth volunteers' ability to understand court procedures and gain additional experience.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Community Engagement

Question responses discussed here address cross-sector collaboration between teen courts and other juvenile justice stakeholders such as schools, law enforcement, and social services, as well as community and school support for the program. Responses to these questions reflect the partnerships and external support critical to the success of the teen court program.¹¹

Local partnerships are viewed as important to the success of teen court programs and are highlighted as an important component of teen court by many respondents. For example, some programs report having weekly or monthly meetings with several juvenile justice stakeholders including, school social workers, school resource officers (SROs), juvenile court counselors and school administrators. Teen court programs will often receive referrals for their program from schools, law enforcement, and juvenile court counselors. Juvenile court counselors are updated monthly on youth referred from court services. This could include progress reports as well as termination paperwork depending on whether the youth completes teen court programming. Ongoing communication and collaboration among stakeholders allows for increased productivity in their relationships. This collaboration has the potential to allow for more comprehensive support and resources for youth offenders.

¹¹ Questions are as follows: (1) How does your teen court collaborate with other juvenile justice stakeholders, such as juvenile court counselors, district court, law enforcement officers, schools (SRO's), and/or social services? (2) Our local schools and/or community organizations actively support the teen court program. (3) Counties Without Teen Court - Does your agency offer specific educational or preventive programming for at-risk youth in your county who may benefit from early intervention strategies?

Teen court programs generally perceive local schools and community organizations as supportive of the teen court program. Almost half of respondents strongly agree that there is active support, while 39% agree. A smaller portion (11%) are neutral, and only about 4% of respondents strongly disagree.¹² Given the amount that teen courts work with schools and the community, and the high number of referrals from schools, it is vital to have support from each of these entities. It appears the majority of programs receive this support and only a small percentage of respondents could strengthen local ties to ensure uniform support.

Counties Without Teen Court

Counties that do not offer teen courts were asked whether their agency offers specific educational or preventive programming for at-risk youth in their county who may benefit from early intervention strategies. Half of respondents indicate, yes, their agency does offer specific educational or preventive programming.¹³ Of these programs, they specifically mention services such as school and community-based programs, individualized integrated case management, and substance use prevention.¹⁴ The other half mention they do not offer programming for at-risk youth. Given this disparity, it may be beneficial to seek out programming options for youth in counties that do not offer it.

Program Effectiveness and Challenges

The responses highlighted below provide insight into areas for improvement within the program.¹⁵ Survey questions included pertain to topics such as the effectiveness of the teen court program, metrics used to measure success, and challenges faced by the programs.

Potential Improvements

While teen court programs throughout the state provide a benefit to youth as well as the community more broadly, it is important to consistently make note of improvements that can be made. Those surveyed note further development needs in areas such as education, communication, and alignment with juvenile justice processes. There is also an emphasis on better coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders, including schools, law enforcement, and community organizations. For example, participants expressed a need for increased education and communication with referral sources to highlight the benefits of

¹² Actual number of responses: Strongly agree (25), Agree (21), Neutral (6), Strongly disagree (2)

¹³ There were a total of six responses for this question. Three answered yes and three answered no. None of the respondents that answered “no” provided further explanation for their response.

¹⁴ Other programs mentioned include: school-wide supports, restitution/community service, interpersonal skill-building, parent/family skill-building, psychological assessments, juvenile structured day, and mentoring.

¹⁵ Questions are as follows: (1) What strategies or changes do you believe could enhance the effectiveness of your teen court program? (2) Are there specific areas of the teen court program that you believe need improvement or additional resources? (3) In addition to the measurable objectives in your program agreement, are there other metrics used to measure the success or effectiveness of your teen court?

Counties Without Teen Court: (1) What challenges or limitations have you encountered while working with the youth population?

diversion programs, aligning timelines between juvenile justice case management and circle processes, as well as providing teen court experiences during the summer to maintain volunteer interest.

Funding and Resources

Contributors also emphasize the necessity for increased funding and resources to support staff, expand services, and develop the teen court program further. They suggest the removal of funding restrictions in order to sustain and further develop teen court programs. It is suggested that increased funding would further strengthen outside resources like attorney mentors and local support services to bolster the program's offerings. Similarly, there is a desire for additional training and seminars for students and volunteers. Addressing transportation needs for clients and volunteers is also a key priority. For example, one response mentioned that it can be difficult for offenders who want to complete their sanction but do not have the means of travel needed physically report to their assigned session. Transportation was also noted as one of the major reasons that youth do not complete court sanctions. In addition, many contributors indicate a need for increased staffing and volunteers (adult and youth). They state that it is difficult to meet high case volume with low staffing levels. One response mentions the need to serve food at their sessions, acknowledging that it is a major expense but also a necessity.¹⁶

Community and Parental Involvement

Respondents also call for enhanced parental involvement and overall program awareness. For example, it is mentioned that mandatory parenting services should be integrated into the program to provide a more holistic approach to rehabilitation. Multiple respondents pointed out the need for community outreach to boost program awareness. More specifically, increasing school administrators' awareness of the program is seen as vital. Since school administrators are also referral sources to the teen court program, it is crucial they are informed of teen court services to ensure students are provided resources that would support them. Similarly, individuals note the need of increased community support and involvement in providing work sites for community service and increasing the perception and promotion of teen court programs.

Counties Without Teen Court

Parental involvement is also an area of concern for counties without a teen court program. Multiple contributors indicate difficulties related to parental and caregiver involvement. Within this vein, some mention a lack of cooperation among parents to enforce desired behaviors in children. Others discussed the lack of commitment from parents and caregivers that can impact overall program effectiveness. Noncompliance was also reported as a difficulty with youth. Based on information from respondents with and without teen courts, it appears that parental involvement is considered a key component of success in juvenile justice.

¹⁶ During the course of the site visits, it was noted that food was also served at two of ten teen court sessions.

Metrics for Success

Various metrics are used by programs to gauge their success and effectiveness. One important area is surveys and feedback. Several programs administer surveys to parents and offenders. These often include pre and post-tests to measure any changes in behavior and/or attitudes. Programs also make use of satisfaction surveys from these individuals to provide feedback about program effectiveness. Client evaluations are used to provide a greater understanding of client experiences as well as any areas for improvement.

Many programs also monitor recidivism rates by checking if participants re-offend within specific timeframes such as 6, 12, or 18 months post-program. This often results in collaboration with other juvenile justice stakeholders to track recidivism and receive reports from juvenile court counselors. Behavioral and academic performance are also tracked through items such as attendance to measure improvements in behavior and commitment to education. Along with this, respondents also review improved behavior and timely completion of sanctions.

Interactive journaling and cognitive-behavioral assessments are also seen as key. Tools such as the Forward Thinking Journal Series helps administrators determine changes in participant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.¹⁷ Results in this area help programs in identifying strengths and weaknesses based on participant outcomes. Some individuals also shared that a high number of referrals is viewed as a positive indicator of program effectiveness and stakeholder confidence.

Program Reach and Longevity

Responses discussed here covers the duration of program operations and the volume of referrals handled annually. It reflects the program's stability, growth, and potential to serve the youth in the community.¹⁸

Most respondents (approximately 56%) indicate their teen court has been operating for more than 10 years. As such, most of the programs are well-established, have a potential for more experienced staff, as well as proven and reliable methods and protocols. This also speaks to the

¹⁷ This series is published by The Change Companies (n.d.). According to its website, "This cognitive-behavioral series uses evidence-based strategies to assist youth involved in the criminal justice system in making positive changes to their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Applying the information presented in the Interactive Journals to their own lives helps participants achieve their goals of responsible living".

¹⁸ Questions are as follows: (1) How long has your teen court been in operation? (If your area covers more than one county, please answer this with regard to the longest running program). (2) Does your teen court place limits on the number of times a youth can be admitted for services? (3) Question 11: Approximately how many referrals does your teen court handle annually?

Counties Without Teen Court: (1) Are there particular reasons why your county has not implemented a teen court model (tried by a jury of peers)? (2) In the absence of a teen court program, what alternative diversion programs are available for youth in your county?

program's effectiveness as well as community support in these counties. The second most common response (approximately 28%) was 1-5 years, with a fair number of teen courts that are new. While these programs may still be in the process of refinement with their processes and procedures, this also means that there appears to be a growing interest in teen courts potentially due to their apparent benefits for youth and the community more broadly. The third most common response (approximately 15%) was 5-10 years. These programs are more established but may be in a transition phase of growth while also having established practices. Only one response indicated the program had been operating for less than one year.¹⁹ While this number is small, it does indicate recent growth. It may be beneficial for newer programs like this and those in operation from 1-5 years to seek feedback and support from programs that have been established for a longer period.

Due to statutory changes in 2019, youth are now allowed to be referred to teen court multiple times as opposed to the previous rule of only one referral. This legislation prompted teen court programs to generate their own rules regarding admittance (Greene, 2019).²⁰ The majority of survey participants (67%) indicate they do place limits on the number of times a youth can be admitted for services. Respondents mention varying reasons for this that include: different offenses, time gaps between offenses, or based on past experience and severity of cases. For example, some programs will allow up to three admissions but not for the same offense, with at least six months to one year between referrals. Another program specifies that youth can be referred twice but they must have 18 months between referrals. One program specifies that admission is generally only once but that a second admission may be considered after a large time gap. Given these responses, the amount of time between offenses is an important consideration as to whether an individual will be referred again.

Although a smaller number, many programs (33%) do not place limits on the number of times a youth can be admitted for teen court services.²¹ Instead, these programs focus on the appropriateness of the referral and potential benefits to the youth. For example, one response states that "youth can be referred as needed until improvement is seen or they refuse to participate". Another bases their decision on legal standards: "State statutes or local policies allow multiple admissions, and the decision is often case-by-case". This mixture of policies and procedures reflects the varying approaches to balancing accountability, rehabilitation, and support for youth within the North Carolina Teen Court system.

A significant number of teen court programs handle a high volume of referrals annually, with the majority managing 50 or more cases (53%). There is also a notable distribution among programs dealing with fewer cases, indicating variability in the scale and capacity of different teen court programs. For example, there are approximately 17% of programs that handle 25-49

¹⁹ Actual numbers: Less than 1 year (1), 1-5 years (15), 5-10 years (8), More than 10 years (30). Hertford County was the only county with less than one year.

²⁰ N.C. Gen. Stat. § 7B-1706

²¹ Actual numbers: Yes: 36, No: 18

referrals annually, 18% that process 13-24, and 13% that oversee between 1-12 referrals.²² This variation could be due to factors such as program resources, community size, and referral processes. Program resources might also vary due to the rural landscape of North Carolina, small Juvenile Crime Prevention Council (JCPC) allocations that are distributed based on a formula that is generated from low numbers of youth that reside within those counties, thus effectively funding the model to serve low expected numbers.

Counties Without Teen Court

The majority of responses suggest that teen courts have not been implemented due to the lack of a responsible agency to oversee the program. This suggests that without a dedicated agency or organization to manage and implement the program, it will most-likely remain unestablished. Other challenges included a lack of funding and resource management, as well as a lack of information pertaining to teen courts. Many participants have some type of diversion programs, while others are limited in their options. Common programs include community service, restitution, family advocacy, and skill-building programs. Others suggest a need for more availability and variety of diversion programs. For example, one county mentioned they have very few diversion programs available. Providing additional programs in these counties, such as teen court, would aid in ensuring youth have more (and equal) access to diversion programs throughout North Carolina.

Impact and Perception

This segment of the survey addressed subjects such as the perceived impact of teen court programs on youth offenders and the level of support from local schools and community organizations. The responses highlight the overall effectiveness of these programs in positively influencing youth behavior and the importance of community and educational partnerships in sustaining and enhancing the program's reach and success.²³

The majority of respondents (69%), "Strongly Agree" that the teen court program has positively impacted youth offenders, indicating a highly favorable perception of the program's effectiveness. The next highest response (24%) was "Agree," further supporting the positive impact of the program. Only a small minority, (5%) respondents, "Strongly Disagree," and 2% of respondents remain "Neutral," suggesting very few dissenting opinions.²⁴ Overall, the data shows strong support for the positive effects of the teen court program among the majority of respondents.

²² Actual numbers: 1-12 referrals (7), 13-24 referrals (10), 25-49 referrals (9), 50 or more referrals (29)

²³ Questions are as follows: (1) The teen court program in our county has positively impacted youth offenders. (2) Our local schools and/or community organizations actively support the teen court program.

²⁴ Actual number of responses: Strongly agree (38), Agree (13), Neutral (1), Strong disagree (3).

Likewise, participants generally perceive local schools and community organizations as supportive of the teen court program. Almost half of respondents strongly agree that there is active support, while 39% agree. A smaller portion, 11% are neutral, and only about 4% of respondents strongly disagree.²⁵ Given the amount that teen courts work with schools and the community, and the high number of referrals from schools, it is vital to have support from each of these entities.

Conclusion

The survey results provide valuable insight into the current state as well as the effectiveness of teen court programs (as well as other juvenile restorative justice programs) across North Carolina. Survey responses from 85 of the 100 counties throughout the state allows for a diverse range of regions, and allows for a high level of representativeness, generalizability, and reliability of data collected. These responses also indicate the high level of engagement of stakeholders in the state and the importance of teen court in the field of juvenile justice. These findings signify a prevalent use of the traditional teen court model, reflecting community preference and the perceived benefits of peer-led judicial processes.

We also find support for the positive benefits of teen court programs on youth offenders, with a majority of respondents being in agreement that teen courts effectively address juvenile delinquency. Responses also indicate a high level of community support from schools and organizations, which is important for the success and sustainability of teen court programs. To continue this success, respondents highlighted the importance of continuous improvements and funding allocation. Suggestions in this area include increased funding, improved training for volunteers, and increased community awareness and involvement.

The survey results also provided insight into counties that do not provide teen court programs for youth. Some key obstacles include a lack of responsible or organizing agency, funding constraints, and insufficient information. Addressing these barriers through more dedicated funding, improved communication, and identifying a leading organization could increase the number of teen court programs in the state. Overall, the survey findings highlight the critical role of teen court programs in improving rehabilitations efforts, reducing recidivism, and promoting communal support for at-risk youth.

Part Two: Site Visit Observations

In an effort to make qualitative observations about North Carolina Teen Court, members of the research team visited different Teen Courts throughout the state and conducted observations. Our team conducted ten site visits. Three of the observation visits were in the western area (Buncombe, Gaston, McDowell), one was in the eastern area (Pitt), and six were in

²⁵ Actual number of responses: Strongly agree (25), Agree (21), Neutral (6), Strongly disagree (2)

the piedmont area (Rowan, Stanly, Iredell, Cabarrus, Randolph, Guilford). A list of the selected programs and dates observed are listed in Table 1: Site Visit Locations.

Table 1: Site Visit Locations

Date	Site Visited	Area
November 14	Gaston County	Western
November 20	Iredell County	Piedmont
November 27	Cabarrus County	Piedmont
November 28	Guilford County	Piedmont
November 30	Randolph County	Piedmont
December 5	Rowan County	Piedmont
December 11	McDowell County	Western
January 22	Buncombe County	Western
February 20	Pitt County	Eastern
February 27	Stanly County	Piedmont

Unique Experiences

There were several experiences across site visits that demonstrated unique and innovative strategies for connecting with the youth and volunteers that we think are worth highlighting. More than summarizing general differences across courts, the following anecdotes detail creative policies and procedures taking place across the teen court site visits.

Two teen court sites served dinner before the session, which was enthusiastically received by the participants observed. Some counties included a reading of parent impact letters as part of the hearing. The parent impact letter is a letter written by the Teen defendant’s parent explaining how the Teen’s actions had impacted the family. While prepared by the parent, it is read by the Teen defendant from the witness stand.

Other sites required that the jurors who were serving jury duty as a Teen Court sanction were required to ask the defendant or the defendant’s parent/guardian a question for their jury service to count as a completed sanction. If the juror failed to ask a question during the case, that juror would not get credit for being there.

A final unique experience included where the teen court session was run by the county’s Public Safety class from the local high school. The Public Safety teacher ran the court session and the Public Safety students served as volunteers as the clerk, the attorneys, and the jurors. While the other site visits typically had 4 to 8 jurors, this site had a minimum of 10 jurors that were mostly student volunteers.

Part Three: Statistical Analysis

Without the ability to perform a randomized controlled trial, randomly assigning teen court to youth offenders, we recognize the need for a quasi-experimental research design that

will allow us to compare those youth that went to teen court to those that did not. We compared youth offenders that completed teen court with those that did not participate in the teen court program across the same time period among youth that live in the 68 counties where teen court is offered as a diversion alternative. By limiting our sample to these counties, we minimize any other county-level latent elements that make counties that offer teen court systematically different from those that do not, thereby making comparison more difficult.

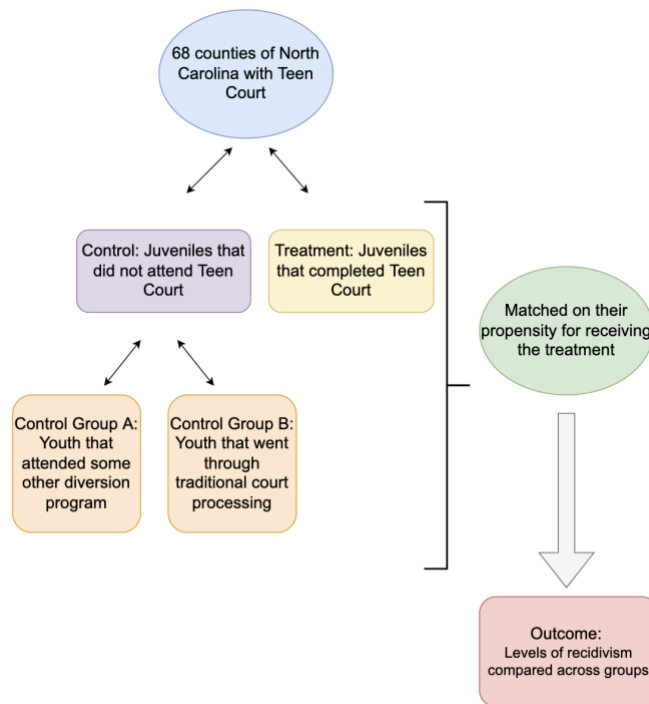
Properly estimating the effect of the *Teen Court* diversionary program on *Recidivism* requires that we contrast outcomes for two groups of people 1) juveniles going through teen court; and 2) an equivalent group of juveniles not receiving this treatment. However, we also recognize that among the second category, in the state of North Carolina, juveniles have other diversionary options or the option to go through the traditional justice system.

We ran this analysis with two different comparison groups. First, we compared at risk and court involved youth that successfully completed teen court with those that were diverted to some other program besides teen court. We then examined youth who successfully completed teen court to those that received no diversion plan and went through juvenile court.

We constructed our comparison group by using the electronic records of juvenile offenders who were similar to youth in the teen court sample (matched on demographic characteristics, risk factors, and offense), but who had not gone through teen court across the jurisdictions of interest. The comparison groups included first time offending juveniles that have been charged with an offense that could have qualified them for teen court but for whatever reason were not diverted to teen court. Figure 2 displays our research design visually.²⁶

²⁶ In terms of the data that we have available for North Carolina, Control Group A includes youth who have an at-risk legal status and completed a non-teen court program such as experiential skill building, interpersonal skill building or mediation/conflict resolution. Control Group B includes juveniles with low to moderate risk profiles, who were charged with non-assault misdemeanors (i.e., Class 1-3), that were approved for court and went through traditional juvenile court processing.

Figure 2: Treatment and Control Groups



Matching Plan

To create an equivalent group of comparison, we conducted matching analysis that allowed us to account for a host of independent variables that we believe affect the likelihood that an individual would receive the treatment. We recognize that all youth are not randomly selected to receive the treatment and that there are some predictor variables that would make a youth more likely to be chosen for *Teen Court*. To address this selection bias, we used propensity score matching. Propensity score matching allows us to use these covariates to estimate the propensity of each youth in our sample of receiving the teen court treatment and then match individuals in our sample based on this estimate. In this way, we were able to compare youth who did and did not attend teen court but that were theoretically equally likely to receive this treatment, with the goal of imperfectly simulating a random treatment assignment using observational data. This is an effort to make the comparison groups comparable to the youth who participated in the teen court program.

Once we pre-processed the sample we conducted a difference of means test to examine the differential recidivism outcomes across the groups. This determined whether there were any

statistically significant differences in recidivism among those youth that participated in teen court versus those that did not. We utilized a logit model to estimate the effect of *Teen Court* on *Recidivism*, and the use of this model allowed us to control for other relevant covariates that are likely to effect whether a juvenile recidivates.

Data Sources

Once we received the data from DJJDP of all juveniles in NC that had justice system involvement for fiscal year 2019/2020, we created two data sets for this analysis. In the first, we compared our treatment sample (teen court) to juveniles that went through juvenile court. In the second, we compared juveniles that went through teen court with those that participated in alternative diversion programs. In these data sets, our unit of analysis is the juvenile and our independent variable of interest is whether they went through *Teen Court* or one of the other comparison options.

After acquiring the data on all juvenile offenders in North Carolina for fiscal year 2019/2020 we tracked these juveniles for delinquent and criminal behavior over a two-year period and this comprises the construction of our dependent variable, *Recidivism*.

Table 2 displays the variables that we used to construct our propensity scores. When applicable we indicated the defining characteristics of those variables and the data source.

Table 2: Matching Criteria

Variable	Definition	Data Source
Sex		NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN
Age		NC ALLIES, NC-JOIN
Race		NC ALLIES, 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	Kidscount

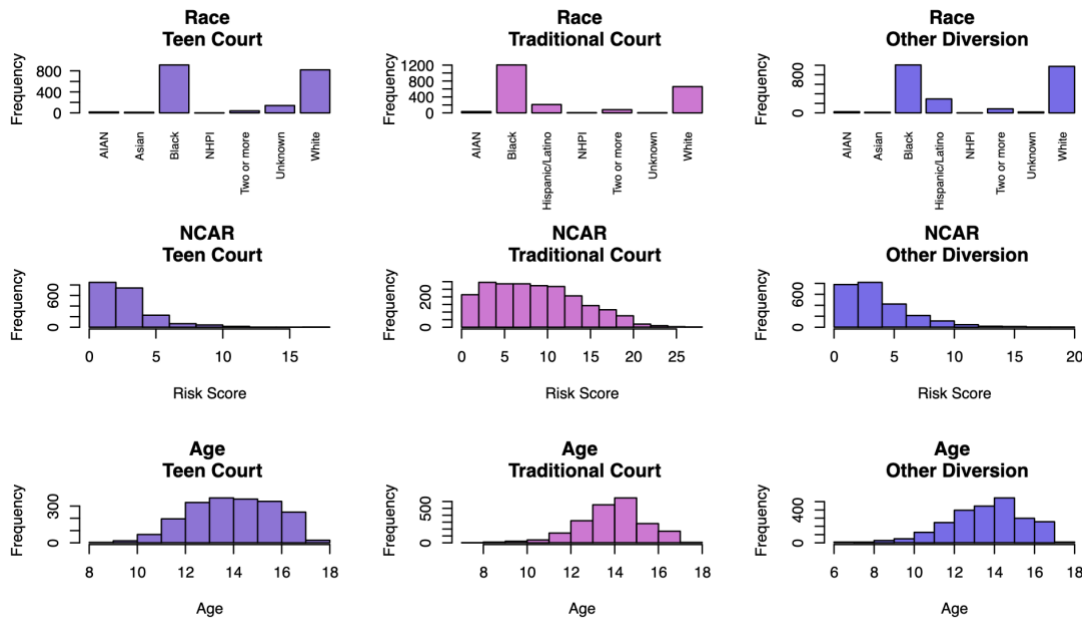
Descriptive Data

There are 6,554 youth in the sample, of which 2,194 were approved for juvenile court, 2,416 were diverted to programs other than a teen court program, and 1,944 were referred to teen

court. Across all treatment groups, the total percentage of observations that recidivated was 17%.²⁷

Figure 3 displays the distribution of the youth level control variables. The bar plots indicate the distribution of these youth characteristics across treatment status. These plots feature the distribution of the data before matching.

Figure 3: Youth Descriptive Data Across Treatment Status



While the distribution of race and age are relatively similar across treatment status, the North Carolina Assessment of Risk (NCAR) score (ranging from zero to thirty) is more variable across treatment status. Many juveniles approved for juvenile court have higher NCAR scores than those that did not. Among those that went to juvenile court, the average NCAR score was 9.05, among those that went to teen court, the average NCAR score was 3.09 and among those that were diverted to other programs, the average NCAR score was 4.02. As displayed in the above Figure 3, the distribution of NCAR score is also different across treatment status. While this variability in NCAR score across groups is expected, it further necessitates matching analysis.

The NCAR score is of particular importance given its relation to the treatment and recidivism. It has been well documented that this score is significantly correlated with rearrest and has high inter-rater reliability (Schwalbe et. al, 2004). This score is given to each youth that enters the justice system in North Carolina based on a standardized questionnaire consisting of

²⁷ Within the two year window of our recidivism measure, some juveniles became adults and their recidivism value was pulled from a different data set. It is not straightforward to disaggregate the rate of recidivism across juveniles and adults because all of the juveniles that aged out of the system and became adults are coded as zero, even if they did eventually recidivate so this variable is not an accurate measure of juvenile recidivism rate.

items relating to prior adjudications, prior assault, runaway status, known use of drugs or alcohol, peer relationships and parental supervision.

The distribution of age is relatively similar across treatment status. Among the youth referred to teen court, the average age was 14.445, among those approved for juvenile court average age is 14.394, for those referred to other diversion options their average age was 14.095. The average age out of all 6,554 observations is 14.297.

Across all treatment groups, the distribution of race is also similar with black and white being the largest categories, however the disparity between the two groups was largest among the juvenile court sample. Among the juveniles approved for juvenile court in our dataset, 55% (1201) were black, and 30% (660) were white. Among the youth referred to teen court, 47% (912) were black and 42% (820) were white. Among those that were diverted to other programs, 42% (1005) were black and 40% (976) were white.

Descriptive Data for Teen Court Juveniles

Among the youth referred to teen court, their referral sources came from different sources, the most common referral source was from school resources officers. Of the 1,944 teen court youth, 24% had complaints prior to admission. Among the youth that had complaints prior to admission, 79% were first time offenders. Among these youth, 42 had felonies, 407 had misdemeanors and 18 were status. There were 93 different offenses coded but the highest two categories were simple assault (77) and simple affray (49). Also, among those that had prior complaints, 72% had school based offenses.

Descriptive Data for Juvenile Court

Among the juveniles that were processed through juvenile court, there are many different types of offenses represented. Although variable “charged type” only takes on four values there are many different offenses that fall under each category.

Among the juveniles that were sent to juvenile court, prior to court approval, the offense type distribution is as follows, 325 coded as class A1, 926 coded as class 1, 811 coded as class 2, 132 coded as class 3.

There are 107 different charged offenses but the top two were simple assault (405) and larceny (215). 39% had a school-based offense prior to court approval.

The juvenile outcome varied across juveniles with 1044 dismissed (48%), 70 disposition none (3%), 1065 disposed (49%), 6 adjudicated not disposed (0.2%), 2 transferred (0.1%), and 7 had incomplete information.

Descriptive Data for Other Diverted Juveniles

Of the juveniles sent through other diversion, 277 (11%) were felony, 1841 (76%) misdemeanor, 296 (12%) status and 2 coded as infraction ((0.1%). There were 175 different charged offenses but the top two were simple assault (324) and simple affray (137) closely followed by disorderly conduct at school (125). Among the juveniles that went to other diversion programs, 56% had a school-based offense.

There were many different diversion programs represented in the data. Among the NC ALLIES data, 95 went to interpersonal skill building, 26 went to mediation/conflict resolution and 296 went to restitution/community service. Among the NC-JOIN Program Assignment data the top three diversion programs are as follows: 161 went to restitution/community service, 124 went to accountability and delinquency prevention and 74 went to counseling services.

Matching Results

After constructing the two data sets for comparison, we matched our data based on the propensity of receiving the treatment. Since we believe there are several key confounding variables this allowed us to construct a scaled conditional probability of receiving treatment. This technique allowed us to create a quasi-experimental comparison between youth in “treatment” and “control” groups but who display similar likelihoods of experiencing the treatment based on observed characteristics. We estimated the propensity of receiving treatment based on sex, age, race, NCAR score, measure of disconnected youth across counties, and county poverty rate.

Our results from the matching are below. We used six independent variables to model a youth’s propensity of receiving the teen court treatment. These variables were selected based on theory and empirical research to identify background characteristics that increase a youth’s propensity to go through teen court.

We used a logit model to predict the propensity score of each youth in our samples. Following the advice of Caliendo and Kopeinig (2008), we only used variables that influence simultaneously the participation decision (*Teen Court*) and the outcome variable (*Recidivism*). All of these variables included in the model are unaffected by participation in *Teen Court* (no endogeneity in the matching model).

After calculating the propensity score, we then opted to use nearest neighbor matching where the individual from the comparison group was chosen as a matching partner for a treated individual that was closest in terms of propensity score (Caliendo and Kopeinig 2008).²⁸

²⁸ We ran the matching analysis with and without replacement and the treatment was statistically significant at the 0.01 level both ways.

Across both data sets, there were 1944 youth who received the treatment (*Teen Court*). These were matched from a larger pool of control cases. In fiscal year 2019/2020, 2194 juveniles were approved for juvenile court and 2416 were referred to other diversionary programs. Our matching analysis selected 1944 juveniles from the comparison groups that best matched the propensity scores of the treatment group.

The table below displays the standardized mean differences (SMD) across all covariates between the treatment and control groups after matching for both sets of control groups (other diversion programs and juvenile court). Standardized differences have been demonstrated to be one of the best performing balance measures for matching analysis (Ali et al., 2014). SMD's close to zero indicate a good balance across treatment and control groups. As shown in Table 3, in the matched samples, none of the standardized means rise above 0.1, which is consistent with recommendations in the literature (Stuart, Lee, and Leacy, 2013). In addition, for both data sets, pre-processing the data through propensity score matching reduced the imbalance between predictors, substantially so for particular covariates (sex and NCAR score).²⁹

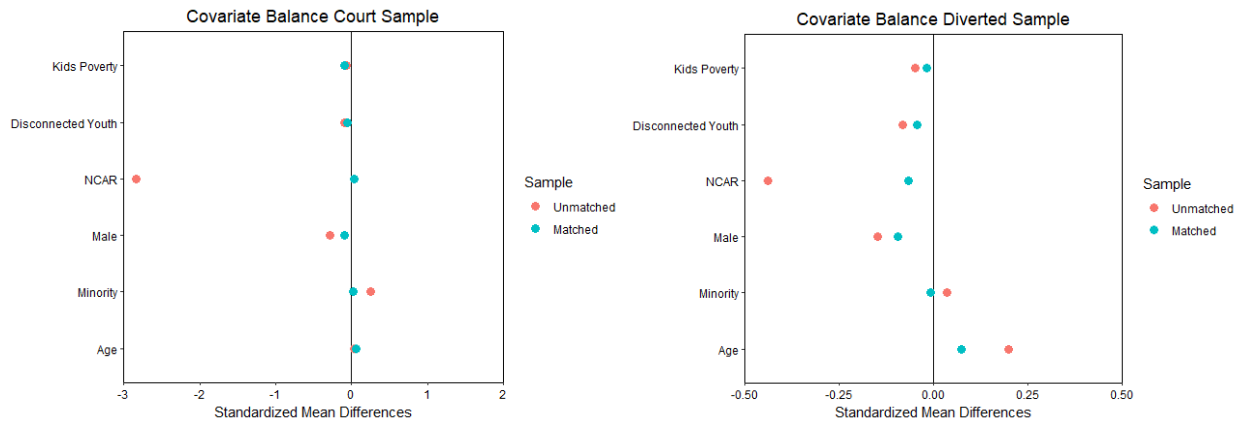
Table 3: Standardized Mean Difference in Covariates Across Samples

Covariate	Before Matching Other Diversion	After Matching Other Diversion	Before Matching Traditional Court	After Matching Traditional Court
Kids Poverty Rate	-0.048	-0.018	-0.071	-0.095
Disconnected Youth	-0.083	-0.045	-0.089	-0.059
NCAR Score	-0.440	-0.066	-2.835	0.031
Male	-0.148	-0.096	-0.281	-0.092
Minority	0.036	-0.007	0.245	0.025
Age	0.200	0.073	0.029	0.055

Figure 4 below displays the standardized mean difference across all covariates before and after matching.

²⁹ In the pre-analysis plan, we anticipated the need to add the type of offense to the matching model. This is due to the fact that we anticipated the juveniles who were processed through juvenile court to have more variance on this predictor. However, for the data that was pulled from NC-JOIN, only youth that were eligible for teen court but not sent to teen court were pulled. To clarify, the youth who went to teen court are not being compared to the population of youth that went through juvenile court. Only the youth who were first time offenders with misdemeanor charges were included in the comparison group. In other words, youth were manually matched on type of crime before being added to the comparison group. We will rely on this manual matching because is also significant amounts of missing data on the charged offense for the teen court youth in our data set.

Figure 4: Love Plots



Statistical Results

Once we matched the data based on propensity of receiving the treatment, we undertook two different statistical strategies for estimating the effect of our treatment across both comparison groups.

Difference of means – Using the matched data, we used t-tests to measure the effect of *Teen Court* across both comparison groups. We compared *Recidivism* outcomes among youth that went to *Teen Court* and those that went to 1) other diversion programs and 2) approved for juvenile court.

The average rate of recidivism for those approved for juvenile court was 21.49% while the rate of recidivism for those referred to teen court was 4.73%, making a difference of means of about 16.757%. The average rate of recidivism for youth that went to other diversion programs was 9.36%, meaning that the difference of means between those referred to teen court and those referred to other diversion programs was 4.629%. Both of these differences of means are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, however the estimated difference in recidivism is larger among those approved for juvenile court compared to those referred to teen court. Table 4 Displays the Results of Both T-Tests.

Table 4: Difference of Means in Recidivism

	Juvenile Court	Other Diversion Programs
t statistic	16.76%	4.63%
p-value	< 0.01	<0.01

Logit Model – We used logit to estimate the average treatment effect of juvenile court. We chose logit since the dependent variable is *Recidivism* which takes the form of a binary variable. The covariates used are the same predictors that we used estimate a youth’s propensity

of receiving treatment since the variables that predict whether a youth will receive the treatment also predict recidivism outcomes. The results from this analysis are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Logit Estimation

Variables	Model 1: Court Comparison	Model 1 Odds Ratios	Model 2: Diversionary Comparison	Model 2 Odds Ratios
Teen Court	-1.507*** (0.150)	0.222	-0.717*** (0.134)	0.488
Poverty Rate	0.022 (0.016)	1.022	0.011 (0.013)	1.101
Disconnected Youth	-0.039 (0.029)	0.961	-0.029 (0.024)	0.971
NCAR Score	0.168*** (0.027)	1.183	0.199*** (0.026)	1.220
Male	0.448** (0.171)	1.565	0.596*** (0.150)	1.815
Minority	-0.231 (0.155)	0.793	-0.492*** (0.140)	0.611
Age	-0.059 (0.046)	0.943	0.292 (0.027)	1.030
Intercept	-1.414* (0.729)	0.243	-3.527*** (0.603)	0.029
AIC	1333.4		1866.7	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Across both comparison groups, *Teen Court* had a statistically significant reductionary effect on recidivism when compared to the other processing alternatives. On average, *Teen Courts* have a statistically significant negative effect on recidivism (i.e. decreased recidivism for the Teen Court treatment group) when compared to juvenile court ($p < 0.01$) and when compared with other diversion alternatives ($p < 0.01$). The substantive effects can be discerned using the odds ratios. Odds ratios that are greater than 1 indicate that the event is more likely to occur as the predictor increases whereas an odds ratio less than 1 indicate that recidivism is less likely to occur as the predictor increases. For youth referred to teen court, the odds of recidivating are 77.80% lower than those approved for juvenile court and the odds of recidivating are 51.20% lower than those referred to other diversion programs.

In the above models, several of the control variables are statistically significant. In the juvenile court model, the odds ratio for the NCAR score is 1.183, which means that the odds of recidivating are predicted to grow by 1.183 for each unit increase in the NCAR score. If two people differ by 10 points on the NCAR scale, the odds that the person with the higher NCAR score will recidivate are 5.234 times larger than those of the person with the lower NCAR score. Likewise, the odds ratio for male indicates that the odds a male will recidivate is 1.565 times higher than the odds of a female.

For the diversion model, three control variables were statistically significant. In this model, the odds that a male will recidivate are 1.815 higher than the odds of a female. The odds ratio for the NCAR score is also similar across both models. In both models, minority status also has a reductionary impact on the odds of recidivating but is only significant in the “Other Diversion” model.

Substantive Effects Estimation

Following the advice of King, Tomz, and Wittenberg (2000)—to measure the magnitude of this effect, we used these coefficients to generate more meaningful quantities of interest: the estimated effect of *Teen Court* on the probability that a youth will re-enter the system within two years when other independent variables are held at central values. These reported quantities of interest are first differences in the probability of recidivating across treatment group. Rather than being tied to the odds of recidivism, this calculation allowed us to determine the first difference in probability of recidivating. This is different than the odds ratio calculations which are exponentiated versions of the coefficients from the logit models and are still based on the odds. Both are tools to estimate the magnitude of the effect but this is slightly more versatile since it is in terms of probability of recidivating, rather than the odds which is not as intuitive.

Youth that successfully complete *Teen Court* are 49.03% less likely to recidivate than those that are diverted to another program. This first difference is statistically significant—with a 95% confidence interval that ranges from 48.67 to 49.37. The magnitude of this effect is similar across both comparison groups. Youth that successfully complete *Teen Court* are 46.85% less likely to recidivate than those that are approved for juvenile court [95% CI: 45.98, 47.50].³⁰

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This research conducts a multi-pronged analysis of the effectiveness of the North Carolina Teen Court system. The three methods utilized in analyzing this topic were (1) a survey of counties in North Carolina that involved both counties with and those without a traditional teen court model, (2) observational site visits to ten teen court sessions in North Carolina, and (3) a quantitative analysis to estimate the effect of the teen court diversionary program on recidivism. Findings from each of these facets allow for a deeper understanding of not only teen court programming but also the juvenile justice landscape throughout the state. These findings enable us to reach evidence-based conclusions as well as suggest policy options that have the

³⁰ These are first differences based on a simulation technique as laid out by Imai, King, and Lau (2008). The first difference is the probability that a juvenile will recidivate given the treatment minus the probability that a juvenile will recidivate given they are in the control group ($\Pr(Y=1|\text{treatment}) - \Pr(Y=1|\text{control})$). This difference is calculated 1,000 times utilizing a bootstrapping method and then confidence intervals are also estimated. Since these first differences are based on different models, they cannot be compared to each other. This is the estimated effect of teen court compared to juvenile court and the estimated effect of teen court compared to other diversionary programs.

potential to improve teen court services and in return, resources available to youth in North Carolina.

Survey

The survey provides insight into the differentiated approaches, hurdles, and successes of teen court programs and juvenile services across 85 counties. The majority of counties surveyed use the traditional teen court model. Respondents emphasize the importance of local partnerships such as schools, law enforcement, and social services. These partners are also often referral sources. In utilizing these partnerships, most teen court sessions take place at the local courthouse. As such, collaboration and communication with these entities is seen as vital for the relationship as well as success of teen court programs.

Challenges reported generally center on limited funding. Increased funding could allow for more optimal staffing levels, increased services available to youth, increased training, as well as provisions available to offenders and volunteers alike. For example, transportation to court sessions was viewed as a challenge for both offenders and volunteers. This creates a two-fold problem: (1) There is an added hardship for offenders that wish to meet their sanctions; and (2) lack of transportation creates a barrier for volunteers and offenders to participate in teen court. Teen court relies heavily on volunteers, especially youth volunteers and several respondents mention the difficulty of obtaining volunteers. Lack of transportation may also have a disparaging impact on lower socio-economic status individuals.

There is also a concern surrounding parental support in the program. For example, it is mentioned that mandatory parenting services should be integrated into the program to provide a more holistic approach to rehabilitation. Despite these struggles, most participants report that teen court has a positive impact on youth. They also view local schools and community organizations as supportive of their teen court program. The majority of county teen courts have been operating for ten years or more. Many also process a high volume of referrals (50 or more cases) on an annual basis. These results point to numerous program successes that have the potential for expansion if certain challenges are addressed.

Site Visits

Site visits conducted at teen court sessions confirmed some of the information provided by survey respondents. For example, most operated in actual courtrooms with roles filled by both youth and adult volunteers such as judges, attorneys, and jurors. Some sessions also provided dinner for participants, which was mentioned in survey feedback. However, there was also a level of adaptability of programs to suit local needs and resources. For example, some counties incorporated elements such as impact letters and mandatory questioning by jurors, which has the potential to enhance the involvement and accountability of both the offenders and their families. Although this number of visits is not generalizable to North Carolina teen courts as a whole,

observations and interactions provided key insights into the actual happenings taking place during teen court sessions.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis conducted provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of North Carolina Teen Court in reducing recidivism rates among youth offenders. Through comparing youth who participated in teen court with both youth who went through juvenile court and youth who went through other diversion programs, the results demonstrate the teen court significantly lowers the likelihood of reoffending. The use of propensity score matching strengthens the reliability of the findings by controlling for various factors that influence both the selection into the teen court program and the likelihood of recidivism.

The results of this analysis suggest that teen court is not only a practicable alternative to traditional juvenile justice processes but also a more effective one in terms of its ability to reduce recidivism. The results demonstrate that youth who successfully complete the teen court process are significantly less likely to re-enter the justice system within two years compared to any other processing alternative.

These results highlight the importance of expanding the North Carolina Teen Court program to ensure that this opportunity is accessible to a broader population of at-risk youth across the state. Looking forward, the policy implications of these findings are significant. There is rationale for increasing support and funding for the teen court programs, as they offer an impactful way to reduce juvenile crime and recidivism.

Policy Options

Data collected through this research reveals that teen courts have a positive impact on the community, based on actual evidence collected. Two main goals of the juvenile justice system are rehabilitation and successful reintegration of youth into the community (Youth.gov, n.d.). Furthermore, recidivism rates are considered fundamental in measuring the success of juvenile justice interventions (Kamradt and Goldfarb, 2015). The quantitative analysis provides evidence of the success of North Carolina's Teen Court program and these results are bolstered by other aspects of our research that offer insights from numerous practitioners on the ground level that operate programs throughout the state. Consequently, this evidence and insight allows for policy options that can be translated to practical recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders. The following options are intended to continue to build on positive outcomes while also addressing potential shortcomings in the teen court program in hopes of making it more effective in serving offenders and the community more broadly.

Education and Advertisement

A common theme among respondents was the suggestion of increased funding for services. Common feedback focused on increasing staffing levels to better serve offenders and volunteers alike. Teen courts rely heavily on volunteers and survey responses indicate a need for

additional participants. For example, one county mentioned how they could benefit from even small increases in staffing: “[our teen court program consists of] 1 full-time staff person, and 2 part-time staff members. We serve between 250-300+ youth a year and are unable to provide a higher quality of service to clients and their families due to limited staff hours. To increase youth volunteer participation, a Youth Coordinator is needed, as well as a Case Manager to follow up with the families after they have completed the program.” In this county there is a large disparity between the number of youths served and the available staff. Other suggest additional personnel to monitor community service and recidivism efforts. Another indicates that if they were able to hire another person, they could give cases more attention that is needed. Based on the survey responses, it appears that that increasing full-time and/or part-time staff could assist the capability of programs. Increased staffing also has the potential to alleviate the urgent need for increasing volunteer numbers.

As founded in survey results, most surveyed indicate a high number of cases on an annual basis. Others, however, suggested an increase in the education and advertisement of teen court services and referrals sources to attract more clients and volunteers. Making the public and referral sources more aware of teen court services could achieve a couple goals. First, it could potentially increase the number of youths that are referred. If sources are not made aware of teen courts as an option for offenders, they may not be providing them services that would benefit them the most. In addition, given the voluntary basis of teen court actors, raising public awareness of not only volunteer opportunities but also the potential for youth to gain hands on experience in a legal setting, could yield additional volunteer prospects.

Parental involvement

Respondents also mentioned difficulties surrounding parent and caregiver engagement. Among other requirements, some counties mandate offenders to admit guilt and have parent involvement in proceedings in order to participate in teen court services (Beaufort County Schools, n.d.). On some occasions it may not be that parents do not wish to support youth but due to hardships, are unable to. In a study by the Council of State Governments it was found that two out of three parents reported missing work and pay while their child was involved in the juvenile justice system (n.d.). While our survey did not focus on this, several survey respondents mention parenting services, enforcement of parental involvement, and parental awareness as a need. It may be important to incentivize parent commitment in teen court proceedings. Increased parental involvement has the potential to enhance program impact since it can offer additional support to offenders throughout services as well as at home. Through our survey as well as site visits, we found that some programs offer a meal to all those that attend the teen court session. This was reported as a significant expense but also as an important aspect of services. Offering a meal may be a small gesture that gives parents a small incentive to increase participation.

Transportation

Transportation was discussed on several occasions in feedback from survey participants. Youth offenders and volunteers alike must travel, oftentimes to their local courthouse, to participate in teen court sessions. Based on survey input, it appears that teen court participants must make their own travel arrangements to participate, which can create a hardship for these

individuals. Since teen courts are a diversion program, they are designed to hold offenders accountable for their actions as well repair harm done (Dare County, n.d.). Volunteers also benefit from the training and experience provided at teen court. Given the demonstrated benefits of teen court in reducing recidivism, it seems vital to ensure all offenders as well as volunteers that wish to participate are not hindered due to a lack of transportation. One option would be for teen courts to provide transportation for youth participants to and from the session location. It may be beneficial to allow each teen court to decide the best option of transportation that serves their population most effectively. For example, one respondent specifically mention a van for transportation as an area of improvement. Other counties may determine there are more effective options to suit their needs.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the teen court model in North Carolina serves a restorative justice mechanism that reduces recidivism when compared to any other processing alternative. As evidenced by the site visits and survey conducted, the structure of teen court varies across counties within the state. However, despite some structural variations, teen court sites across the state consistently focus on therapeutic, restorative justice which guides their proceedings. Through research conducted, several successes were noted such as evidence that teen courts reduce recidivism in youth offenders as well as the majority of county survey respondents view teen court as positively impacting youth offenders. The policy options provided hope to further current successes while also addressing opportunities for improvement of the program more broadly.

Restorative and therapeutic justice is in contrast to the traditionally Western "retributive" lens of the justice system that focuses on the punishment of the offender according to the severity of the crime (Zehr, 1990). In a broad sense, restorative justice focuses on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships through a process that involves stakeholders, while emphasizing the community's role in problem solving (Godwin, 2001). Rather than viewing crime and justice as merely an act against the state, the traditional teen court model in North Carolina takes a more holistic view of crime in which it emphasizes it's impact on people and relationships. This is evidenced in the structure and process of each teen court site in North Carolina. We find that the teen court framework promotes positive change in the communities across the state, as evidenced in our analysis.

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Appendix A: List of Survey Participating Counties

Number	County	Number	County	Number	County
1	Alamance	31	Forsyth	61	Pender
2	Alexander	32	Franklin	62	Perquimans
3	Alleghany	33	Gaston	63	Person
4	Anson	34	Graham	64	Pitt
5	Ashe	35	Greene	65	Randolph
6	Avery	36	Guilford	66	Richmond
7	Beaufort	37	Halifax	67	Robeson
8	Bertie	38	Harnett	68	Rockingham
9	Bladen	39	Haywood	69	Rowan
10	Brunswick	40	Hertford	70	Sampson
11	Buncombe	41	Hoke	71	Scotland
12	Cabarrus	42	Iredell	72	Stanly
13	Camden	43	Jackson	73	Stokes
14	Carteret	44	Jones	74	Surry
15	Catawba	45	Lee	75	Swain
16	Chatham	46	Lenoir	76	Tyrrell
17	Cherokee	47	Lincoln	77	Union
18	Chowan	48	Macon	78	Wake
19	Clay	49	Madison	79	Washington
20	Cleveland	50	Martin	80	Watauga
21	Columbus	51	McDowell	81	Wayne
22	Craven	52	Mitchell	82	Wilkes
23	Cumberland	53	Moore	83	Wilson
24	Currituck	54	Nash	84	Yadkin
25	Dare	55	New Hanover	85	Yancey
26	Davidson	56	Northampton		
27	Davie	57	Onslow		
28	Duplin	58	Orange		
29	Durham	59	Pamlico		
30	Edgecombe	60	Pasquotank		