

Juvenile Community Programs Section – Teen Court Evaluation Research Brief

A key diversion strategy in North Carolina is Teen Court Programs, 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 design 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 beyond satisfying diversion requirements. By focusing on restorative justice and peer accountability, Teen Court helps youth understand the impact of their actions and encourages positive behavioral changes.

The Department of Public Safety, Juvenile Community Programs Section, received grant funding from the NC Office of State Budget and Management, Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSBM-OSP) to engage in an evaluation study of North Carolina's traditional Teen Court programs. The last evaluation of North Carolina's Teen Court programs was conducted in the 1990's. The recent evaluation design focused on the effectiveness of teen court programs by examining the programmatic delivery of the model and its effects on preventing youth from returning to the justice system (recidivism). In North Carolina there are restorative justice models in all 100 counties, this evaluation focused upon the 68 counties that fund a traditional teen court model to estimate the effectiveness of teen court on juvenile recidivism as compared to other processing alternatives.

The evaluation had 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. This was accomplished by the Montreat College researchers through three strategies of 1) provider surveys, 2) program site visits, and 3) statistical analysis. This research prepares the section to move toward evaluating the benefit-cost of the traditional teen court diversion program model, an exercise planned to be completed in partnership with the NC Office of State Budget and Management.

Provider Surveys and Program Visits

Surveys were sent out to each of the 68 traditional teen court model programs in North Carolina. Information received regarded 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 sentences that are typically handed out. A survey was also sent to the 32 counties that do not fund a traditional teen court model program to learn more information about their best practices about options for diverting youth from the juvenile justice system. In addition, the research team visited 10 teen court programs and observed operations. Similarities across the traditional teen court model programs are listed below.

Similarities Across Teen Court Programs – 68 Counties utilizing the Traditional Teen Court Model

- Programs adhere to the traditional teen court model, making it the most widely utilized model throughout North Carolina.
- Teen court sessions are held in traditional courtroom settings while others are held in other county buildings and educational settings.
- Youth and adult volunteers are utilized for the success of programming. All volunteers must receive training prior to program participation.



- Cross-sector collaboration with other juvenile justice stakeholders such as juvenile court, schools, law enforcement, and social services, as well as community and school support are critical for the success of the program.
- Increased funding and resources are needed to support staff, expand services, and further develop the teen court program (i.e., transportation for youth to complete teen court sanctions, hire more staff to assist with high referral volumes).
- The need of increased community support and involvement in providing work sites for community service options and increasing the perception and promotion of teen court programs.
- Various metrics are used by programs to gauge their success and effectiveness. 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 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.

Statistical Analysis

Sample Groups – Teen Court, Diverted, Juvenile Court

There were 6,554 youth in the sample, of which 2,194 were approved for **juvenile court**, 2,416 were **diverted** to a plan/contract and may have received programs other than a teen court program, and 1,944 completed **teen court**. Across all treatment groups, the total percentage of observations that recidivated was 17%. Below, **Table 1: Comparison Groups – Teen Court, Diversion, Juvenile Court** illustrates the three sample groups analyzed in the evaluation.

Table 1: Comparison Groups – Teen Court, Diversion, Juvenile Court

Sample Group	Sample Size
Treatment – Teen Court <i>(successfully completed Teen Court)</i>	1,944
Comparison Group 1 – Diversion <i>(diverted youth who received other diversion programs)</i>	2,416
Comparison Group 2 – Juvenile Court <i>(non-assault misdemeanor approved for juvenile court (i.e., Class 1-3))</i>	2,194

Descriptive Data for Teen Court Youth

- Among the youth **served in teen court**, their referral sources came from different sources, the most common referral source was from School Resources Officers (SROs).
- Of the 1,944 **teen court youth**, 24% had complaints received prior to admission.
 - Among the youth that had complaints received prior to admission, 79% were first time offenders.

Descriptive Data for Other Diverted Youth

- Of the juveniles sent through other **diversion**, their offense proportions were 76% misdemeanor, 12% status, 11% were felony, and 0.1% coded as infraction. The top two offenses diverted were simple assault and simple affray closely followed by disorderly conduct at school. 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. The most common programs received were restitution/community service, other accountability and delinquency prevention, interpersonal skill building, counseling services and mediation/conflict resolution.

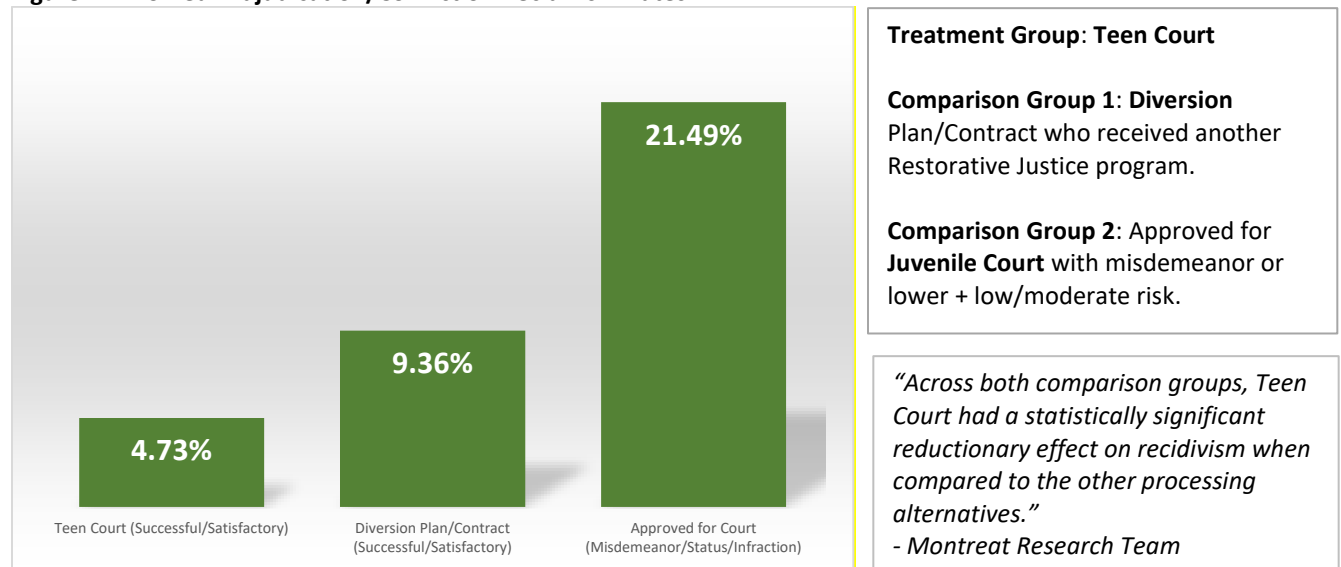
Descriptive Data for Juvenile Court Youth

- Among the juveniles that were **sent to juvenile court, prior to court approval**, the top two offenses were simple assault and larceny. Prior to juvenile court approval, 39% of the sample had a school-based offense.
- The juvenile outcome varied across juveniles with 49% disposed, 48% dismissed, 3% disposition none; less than 1% adjudicated not disposed, transferred to superior court (most likely for subsequent offenses), or had incomplete outcome information.

Recidivism - Teen Court, Diverted, Juvenile Court

Below, **Figure 1: Two-Year Adjudication/Conviction Recidivism Rates** illustrates recidivism for the three sample groups in the evaluation.

Figure 1: Two-Year Adjudication/Conviction Recidivism Rates



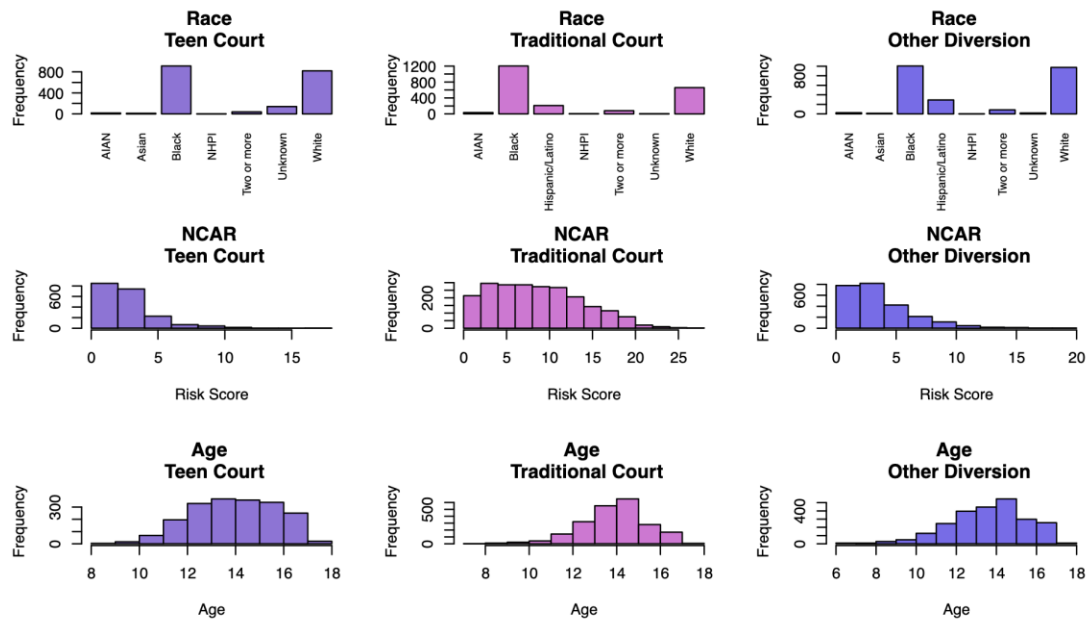
Similarities Across Sample Groups – Teen Court, Diversion, Juvenile Court

- **NCAR:** 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 **referred 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 following charts, 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.
- **Age:** 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.

- Race:** 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.

Below, **Figure 2: Similarities Across Sample Groups – Teen Court, Diversion, Juvenile Court** illustrates those similarities to youth NCAR scores, age of youth and race as it relates youth being referred to a teen court program, diverted to another programming option or approved for juvenile court.

Figure 2: Similarities Across Sample Groups – Teen Court, Diversion, Juvenile Court



Recidivism Summary

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.

Evaluation Summary and Next Step

The Department sought to partner with an academic institution to evaluate the effectiveness of the traditional teen court model objectively and rigorously in North Carolina. The first goal was to understand if the traditional teen court model programs were effective in reducing the likelihood of recidivism, and they are. The next goal the Department plans to accomplish is engage in a benefit-cost analysis to understand the realized economic savings for the citizens of North Carolina.