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**REDUCING RECIDIVISM RATES:  
TEEN COURT SOLUTION IN KANKAKEE COUNTY**

By

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B.S., Calumet College of St. Joseph, 2014

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Public Administration

Governors State University  
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT.....	3
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	4
Background of the Problem.....	4
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Definition of Key Terms.....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Limitations.....	8
Delimitations.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	9
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	18
Research Method.....	18
Strategy of Inquiry.....	18
Sample Population.....	19
Instrumentation.....	20
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	24
Summary of Results.....	38
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	39
REFERENCES.....	42

**ABSTRACT**

The topic selected for this research is Teen Court, also referred to as Peer Court or Youth Court. The researcher attempts to determine the effects teen diversion programs, such as Teen Court, have on reducing the rate of recidivism during one's adolescent years. This approach uses a peer court system to hold them accountable for their actions. Teen court works, because it has peers influencing peers, versus another adult telling youths what they should do" (Garrett, 2009, p. 50). With a focus on past Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel in Kankakee County, Illinois, the results from this study may help others to understand why this alternative to traditional juvenile court services has shown to be more successful in preventing future criminal activities. In addition to drastically reducing the recidivism rates for juveniles, Teen Court is an extremely cost-effective method. The results from this concurrent mixed-methods study revealed the reasons why Teen Court is successful in reducing juvenile recidivism rates: youth avoid a criminal record, peer sanctioning is perceived as fair, and the program is more cost-effective. This study took place in Kankakee County, Illinois in the participant's residences or at the Kankakee County Courthouse.

*Keywords:* diversion, juvenile, juvenile delinquency, recidivism, Teen Court

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This concurrent mixed method study focuses on Teen Court participants in the Kankakee County area to determine whether the rate of recidivism among adolescents completing the program is significantly different compared to those subjects that were sent to the traditional Juvenile Court System. The participants who were surveyed and interviewed were all over the age of 18 years old, and voluntarily participated in the Teen Court program. Teen Court personnel were also asked to participate in this study, as this group has direct insight into the effectiveness of how a juvenile diversion program such as Teen Court impacts future delinquent behavior. The literature on this topic indicated: “The Teen Court program was considered by most people to have officially been established in Odessa, Texas in 1983” (Godwin, Steinhart, & Fulton, 1996, p. 26); therefore, this study will also discuss the program’s 36 year history.

### **Background of the Problem**

In many instances, juveniles make a poor mistake in judgement and commit first-time offenses, which can leave them with a criminal record as a result of their actions. Punishing first-time, non-violent offenders in a traditional juvenile court system increases the probability that they will not only reoffend, but also engage in a more serious offense. Furthermore, the juvenile’s chances of rehabilitation are drastically reduced since the mark on their criminal record will follow them to their next job interview or affect their likelihood of attending a local college or university. The main problem with traditional court process rehabilitation is that it frequently leads to a career criminal as the juvenile defendant experiences a feeling of worthlessness, and the juvenile justice system is overcrowded with these types of cases.

**Problem Statement**

Youth who commit offenses in Kankakee County are referred to a diversion program called Teen Court. These youth are admitting their guilt before being sentenced by a jury of their peers. These teens must successfully complete all the sanctions imposed upon them within the allotted time frame to avoid having their crimes forwarded to the juvenile justice system; thus, avoiding a criminal record. According to the Kankakee Daily Journal (2014), “This approach has helped the re-offender rate among teen offenders in the county to drop well below the state rate. According to Teen Court Board President, Deanna Carlson-Webb, of the 520 teens who have come through the court in the past 10 years, only 15 have become re-offenders.” (Blanchette, 2014, p. 2)

**Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this concurrent mixed-methods study was to collect both qualitative and quantitative information from former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel to illustrate the differences between the Teen Court process and the traditional juvenile justice system to decide which approach is the most efficient and effective in reducing juvenile recidivism rates. A concurrent mixed methods design allows the researcher to analyze data separately, and then merge the findings. In this study, quantitative data were used to test the theory of deterrence. This theory is used to explain when delinquent youth are sanctioned by their peers; youth are more likely to comply with the punishment; thus, reducing the rate of recidivism. The open-ended interview responses supported the questionnaire data. Therefore, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is used to bolster perspectives on Teen Court and why this approach is gaining momentum.

This study was designed to determine whether Teen Court is more effective and efficient than the traditional juvenile justice system. There were six questions that focused on the research topic: peer sanctioning, recidivism rates, criteria to participate in Teen Court, and program expansion. Participants' responses from open-ended interviews and questionnaire responses were used to answer the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

In order to determine if Teen Court is successful in lowering the rate of youth reoffending, the former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel were asked to give their opinions based on their actual experiences.

For the purpose of this study, the following questions were addressed:

1. How does Teen Court reduce the recidivism rate among adolescent offenders in comparison to traditional Juvenile Justice System methods?
2. What are the contributing factors that make Teen Court so successful in reducing the chances for teen defendants to re-offend?
3. What are the requirements in order for an adolescent to be considered to have successfully completed or graduated from Teen Court?
4. Why do the majority of Teen Court participants complete the requirements imposed onto them by the court?
5. What initiatives are being implemented to motivate juvenile offenders and their parents to choose Teen Court over the traditional Juvenile Justice System?
6. What is the cost-effectiveness of deferring juveniles to Teen Court versus the traditional Juvenile Justice System?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

Teen Court is a unique program offered to juveniles who have committed a minor offense, such as a retail theft or possession of drug paraphernalia, several key terms were used during the survey and interview processes. As comprehension is crucial for participants answering questions accurately, essential terms were defined.

*Diversion* -- “is an attempt to divert, or channel out, youthful offenders from the juvenile justice system.” (Bynum & Thompson, 1996, p. 1)

*Recidivism* -- “In juvenile corrections, recidivism—the commission of repeat offenses.” (Harris, Lockwood, Mengers, & Stoodley, 2011, p. 1)

*Teen Court* -- “Teen Courts (also known as youth courts or peer courts) are specialized diversion programs for young offenders that use court-like proceedings in courtroom settings.” (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002, p. 18)

*Juvenile* -- “A "juvenile" is a person who has not attained his eighteenth birthday, and "juvenile delinquency" is the violation of a law of the United States committed by a person prior to his eighteenth birthday which would have been a crime if committed by an adult.” (The United States Department of Justice, "Juvenile Defined," n.d., para. 1)

### **Theoretical Framework**

Teen Court is an example of the deterrence theory as applied in a legal setting. The deterrence theory focuses on discouraging individuals from committing future criminal acts based on the severity, swiftness, and certainty of the punishment. Teen Court elaborates on this original theory by providing juvenile offenders with a punishment that is decided upon and delivered by a peer system (those similar in age and gone through this same process), with sanctions imposed that have a limited timeline, while delivering the message that there are

consequences for your actions and decisions. Teen Court is used to prevent juveniles that complete the program from re-offending again. “In accordance with deterrence theory, diversion programs in the juvenile justice system could be structured to ensure that sanctions are imposed more swiftly and with greater certainty” (Feld & Bishop, 2012, p. 613). When related to criminal offending, deterrence theory is the idea that the threat of punishment will deter people from committing criminal acts and lower the likelihood of offending again. Teen Court follows this deterrence theory because it is a diversion program for youthful, first-time offenders that imposes sanctions delivered by a jury of peers in a swift and timely fashion.

### **Limitations**

Research on Kankakee County Teen Court expresses a vast reduction in future criminal acts by those who successfully complete the program. As stated by a local newspaper reporter (Blanchette), “Of the 520 teens who have come through the court in the past 10 years, Carlson said only 15 have become re-offenders” (Blanchette, 2014, para. 7). However, due to there not being an adequate amount of data collected (such as the type and severity of the offense committed, and the date committed), it is difficult to measure the reduction in recidivism rates for those juveniles that have completed the program.

### **Delimitations**

The researcher did not examine crimes juveniles committed before becoming a candidate for Teen Court; furthermore, the focus is on the results obtained from any offense submitted when teens successfully complete the program. Since many law enforcement agencies have varying criteria on what type of offense qualifies for a diversion program, such as Teen Court, it would have been helpful to have this information readily available to determine if there were any large discrepancies that would affect the research.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to reduce the amount of resources spent on the juvenile judicial system. Alternatively, sending juvenile offenders to Teen Court is more likely to save thousands of dollars per defendant and allow the courts to prosecute more severe cases. A good example of this cost saving effect was summarized by Stone, “when a teenager goes through the traditional juvenile justice system, he or she is sentenced to probation. It costs about \$4,800 to supervise a minor on probation, while it costs only about \$500 to send a kid to Teen Court” (Stone, 2011, para. 15).

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Diversion programs such as Teen Court, help to divert offenders from the legal Justice System by means of early intervention. Some juvenile offenders do not need to be introduced to the Juvenile Justice System, as they may be first-time offenders, may have committed a misdemeanor, or other minor infraction of the law. Teen Court is a good solution in these particular cases as the teenagers will not have a criminal record upon successful completion of the program. "When agreeing to be diverted to teen court and complying with the imposed sanctions, usually given by a jury of youth peers, a juvenile offender can avoid establishing a criminal record" (Vose & Vannan, n.d., p. 97). The impact this can have on a young person's future is often immeasurable.

### **History of Teen Courts/Youth Courts/ Peer Courts in America**

The concept of any type of juvenile diversion programs such as Teen Court, Youth Court, or Peer Court has been in existence for more than 70 years.

In the late 1940s, Mansfield, Ohio had a youth-operated "Hi-Y" bicycle court that met on Saturday mornings to hear cases of minor traffic violations by juveniles on bicycles.

Using the facilities of the municipal courthouse in Mansfield, teen defendants were arraigned on infractions such as violating the stop sign ordinance or riding at night without reflectors. Teen judges imposed sanctions in each case and often required young defendants to write 300-word essays about the importance of traffic laws" ("Sentences - Metted Out," 1949, p. 14).

The same types of attributes, such as writing an essay as part of the court sanctions, still exists in current Teen Court systems today.

Teen Courts date back to the 1970s and since then have grown exponentially over the last four decades, based mainly on their popularity within the community. One of the most commonly referred to Teen Courts was developed in Odessa, Texas, in 1983, and it quite possibly was the model for those Teen Court programs that followed. "Natalie Rothstein, who founded the Odessa Teen Court, was a strong advocate of holding youth accountable for their actions before they develop a pattern of law-breaking behavior" (Godwin et al., 1996, p. 26).

On a more regional scale, Teen Courts have been around and in practice for quite some time. In fact, they were formally recognized through Illinois legislation over 20 years ago.

Teen courts have existed throughout the country for several decades, in Illinois, they were formally authorized in 1997 by Illinois Senate Bill 171, according to Julie Pawl, director of special projects at the Northern Illinois Council on Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, or NICASA (Munder, 2016, p. 1).

### **Teen Court Roles, Functions, and Models**

One of the many benefits to a teen diversion program such as Teen Court is that these juvenile offenders are still exposed to what it would equivocally feel to be part of the Juvenile Justice System without having to actually bear the burden of becoming entangled in the juvenile system. "Teen courts can be designed to address a variety of problem behaviors, including underage drinking and related offenses" ("An Overview of The Teen Court Concept," n.d., Chapter 1, p. 2). Teenaged offenders would still be involved in a "mock" trial by their peers and must experience the 'eye-opening' experience of what a criminal trial entails from the prosecution to the defense, to sentencing. The sanctions imposed on these teen court participants usually range from community service, writing an apology letter and/or a research paper on the crime that they committed, to visiting the local county jail or similar detention facility and

speaking to staff and inmates on the importance of making good choices and how they impact your future. “Essentially, these youth are given the opportunity for a second chance, where they can learn from their mistakes and move forward without having an official record” (Stickle, Connell, Wilson, & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 139).

The basic principle behind the Juvenile Justice System is to rehabilitate these youths so that they do not become repeat offenders or career criminals. Having an alternative to the traditional juvenile process of arresting and sending teens to Juvenile Court, is a very strong deterrent to committing these or any other crimes in the future. “Teen courts operate from multiple theories of change, with relevant theoretical tenets derived from social learning and social control theory, as well as restorative justice principles” (Bright, Young, Beesaha, & Falls, 2015, p. 135).

Although Teen Court systems can vary in structure, all programs function in the same manner - juvenile peers occupy the majority of the roles in the judicial system. "The attorneys, jurors, and bailiffs are youth who work under the supervision of adult volunteer attorneys" (Vose & Vannan, n.d., p. 97). Typically, there is also an adult Teen Court Coordinator who oversees the entire program. The Teen Court Coordinator usually obtains waivers signed by parents and juvenile offenders, schedules the court trials, is present during the trial process, and updates the referring Law Enforcement agencies of the results of these cases.

There are many models of Teen Courts in existence today. They all operate under different formats; however, they all generate similar outcomes.

Godwin's (1996) study showed the following examples of Teen Court systems:

Trial Model A has youth volunteers serving in the roles of defense attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, and jurors. Trial Model B differs from Model A in that youth also serve in the

role of the judge. With Trial Model C, the primary difference is there is no peer jury; the youth judge (s) determine the appropriate sentence. Peer Jury Models differ from Trial Model systems in that peer model teen court programs do not use teen defense and prosecuting attorneys. Instead, they employ a panel of teen jurors who question the defendant directly (p. 11).

As demonstrated in this research, styles of various Teen Court systems exist; nonetheless, the end result is comparable as it holds these teen offenders accountable after they have admitted their guilt and their peers have administered their sanctions.

### **Teen Courts: Cost and Benefits of this Alternative**

One of the main benefits of sending juvenile offenders to Teen Courts versus the traditional justice system is the huge cost savings. An alarming number of teenagers are being arrested on a daily basis across the country and then charged with misdemeanor offenses such as retail thefts, criminal damage to property, or disorderly conduct. "During a single year, an estimated 2.1 million youth under the age of 18 are arrested in the United States." ("Youth Involved with Justice System," n.d., para. 1). Furthermore, many juvenile courts do not charge these first-time offenders as the juvenile justice system is overwhelmed with more serious offenses, including robbery, sexual assaults, and even homicides from repeat offenders. "Seventy percent of these youth are held in state-funded, post-adjudication, residential facilities, at an average cost of \$240.99 per day per youth" ("The Costs of Confinement," 2009, p. 1).

Conversely, the cost of sending a teenager through Teen Court is a mere fraction in comparison. "It costs about \$500 to send a kid to teen court compared to the roughly \$5,500 cost per child of appearing in juvenile court, said Jack Levine, program director of the National Association of Youth Courts" (Baker, 2015, para. 15). Another contributing factor that makes

Teen Court so cost-effective is that a vast majority of the court participants are volunteers - from previous juvenile defendants completing their sentencing requirements to the volunteer judges giving up their free time to make a difference in the lives of these influential young teens.

With so many state budgets already exceeding their projected maximum levels, the state's legislators are faced with decisions on what programs and/or services to eliminate. "States spend about \$5.7 billion each year imprisoning youth, even though the majority are held for nonviolent offenses and could be managed safely in the community" ("The Costs of Confinement," 2009, p. 1). As a result, a significant amount of resources is diverted from local governments; thus, forcing communities to be innovative when implementing juvenile justice reforms. "With budgets and staffing levels shrinking, the ability to provide a multitude of programming options (Campbell & Fiske, 1959), attitude, and any mitigating circumstances that jurors should consider when they debate possible sentences (Zehner, 1997, p. 1).

The current Juvenile Justice System is overwhelmingly crowded with cases, many of these are first-time offenders who have committed their first minor offense. With so many budget cuts at the state and federal levels, there needs to be an alternative solution to this problem.

If youth courts divert 9% of the arrests that may end up in the juvenile court system, while achieving high completion rates, reducing backlog at the juvenile courts without increasing recidivism may be the greatest impact of youth courts for the juvenile justice system (Pearson & Jurich, 2005, p. 16).

As teenager's minds are not fully developed and occasionally incapable of rationalization, youth find themselves making foolish decisions that lead to their arrests for minor offenses. "Most teen court sanctions are designed to do more than simply punish the

offender. They encourage young offenders to restore at least a part of the damages their behavior caused to the community or to specific victims" (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002, p. 2). This type of cause-and-effect relationship has been shown to be a very effective deterrent to any future criminal activities of the teen defendant. Since the primary goal of the juvenile justice system is to try and rehabilitate the teen offender, Teen Court has increased these odds by imposing stricter sanctions on the offender.

In Butts et al. research (2002), they observed the following about Teen Court defendants:

Many are required to do community service and pay restitution for any damages they may have caused. They may be ordered to write apology letters to their parent(s) and the victim of their offense and perhaps an essay about the effects of crime on the community. Often, they must return to teen court to serve on juries for other cases (Butts et al., 2002, p. 1).

This type of accountability rationalization produces more positive results and fewer teenagers reoffending after fully completing their Teen Court requirements.

The other factor in the success of reducing the recidivism rate in Teen Court participants is that the teenager can avoid having any type of blemish on their criminal record. "In many programs, all records related to closed cases are eventually destroyed, although some record of the youth's referral to teen court may be retained" (Butts et al., 2002, p. 6). Many parents stress the importance of good grades, strong decision-making skills, and having no criminal record has on potential college admissions, prospective employment screenings, or acceptance into one of the branches of the armed forces for their adolescent children. Since teenagers are not the best in making decisions, especially under peer pressure, they find themselves making a poor choice that

may lead to an arrest. If these juvenile offenders are fortunate enough to be referred to Teen Court, their chances of maintaining or abstaining from acquiring a criminal record, upon successful completion of the program.

As teenagers' decisions are largely impacted by what their friends, classmates, or other social circles persuaded into youth are more likely to be making poor decisions that put them face-to-face with law enforcement for the first time in their young lives. "Teen courts are believed to reduce recidivism by tapping the power of positive peer influence" (Butts & Ortiz, 2011, p. 20). As the foundation of the Teen Courts is to be "judged by your peers," this type of deterrence has a huge impact on teenaged offenders who often do not respond well to adults in stressful situations. "Advocates also believe teens can get through to other teens in a way out-of-touch adult cannot. Some jury members are former "respondents" who went through the teen court system themselves" (Baker, 2015, para. 10).

When confronting adolescent behaviors, one must consider what approach is most beneficial in making an impact on their future decision making. Teen Court's approach to diversion appears to be better suited to address this issue with that same unique approach.

The combination of not only diversion and restorative justice principals, but also the use of peer pressure (through the use of a peer jury) and reintegrative shaming might be just what is needed to change the paths and decision-making skills of this vulnerable group of youth (Povitsky, 2005, p. 33).

Positive, peer pressure sounds so simplistic, yet holds such an impressive impact on the future of Teen Court participants. Often, these young, first-time offenders are being persuaded by others to commit crimes they would normally never do on their own. Having peers imposing the sentencing through group deliberations is highly successful.

Teen peers serving on the Teen Court are sending the message that "crime and disobedience is not cool" and are empowered to pursue the virtues of the public good, a moral, social and cultural order above private interest or immediate gratification and well-being. Harsher sanctions are applied consistently when defendants do not have satisfactory answers, or their attitudes don't reflect the civic mindedness of the group (Landry, 2000, p. 17).

### **Summary**

"Rooted in social learning theories, the basic premise of Teen Court is to teach young offenders pro-social attitudes and behaviors, change their negative feelings towards the judicial system, and improve their overall behavior by learning new skills and increasing accountability in order to keep from offending in the future" (Puzach & Hass, 2014, p. 113). The researcher showed how Teen Court programs are successful in drastically reducing the rates of recidivism in juvenile offenders based on the many factors comprising the Teen Court dynamics. The main reason being that teens are far more receptive to being judged by their peers and actually have a higher rate of completing their sentencing as imposed upon them by their adolescent peers.

In the teen court hearing itself, however, young people are responsible for much of the process, from calling the case, to reviewing the charges and presenting the facts, to choosing the proper sentence. Teenagers may serve as court clerks, bailiffs, attorneys, jurors, and in some cases, even the judges that hear each matter brought before the court (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002, p. 1).

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Method**

To fully grasp why Teen Court has gained momentum in Kankakee County, a concurrent mixed-methods research design was used. This research design allowed the researcher to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. An advantage associated with concurrent mixed-methods design is the collection of different perspectives based on how the data was retrieved from the target sample population. Although the data was collected through questionnaires and open-ended interviews, the results should be comparable. This research design was founded on the historic concept of the multimethod, multi-trait idea from Campbell and Fisk (1959).

#### **Strategy of Inquiry**

The quantitative survey strategy of inquiry and the qualitative case study were both employed simultaneously to collect data on the advantages and disadvantages related to the Kankakee County Teen Court Juvenile Justice system of sanctioning youth. Survey research allowed the researcher to administer closed-ended questionnaires to former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel who work in Teen Court. The survey design concentrated on defining the relationship between two variables, predictive relationships, and the gathering of current opinions, positions, and perceptions. Survey research was used to gather data from a sample population to infer the general population's perspective, low cost to administer, and the responses from the study subjects provided the researcher with data that could be statistically analyzed. The disadvantage was not being able to follow-up with the participant to discover why a particular response to the survey instrument was selected. The survey research design

shortcoming often required the researcher to apply a qualitative strategy of inquiry to support the quantitative findings. Therefore, the case study strategy of inquiry was also utilized.

The qualitative case study strategy of inquiry offered the researcher the ability to conduct an in-depth analysis. The information collected was very detailed and was used to explain why the phenomenon is, has, or will occur. The most significant disadvantage associated with the case study approach was the researcher had limited control over the study environment. Collecting data in the study participants' natural setting had an impact on internal and external validity.

Although both survey and case study strategies of inquiry had limitations, using both of these research designs simultaneously enriched the study findings. Therefore, the researcher was more likely to establish an acceptable truth versus only using one strategy of inquiry. To determine the "truth" being sought, two sample populations were identified in this study as being able to offer the most accurate data on the advantages and disadvantages associated with the Kankakee County Teen Court Juvenile Justice system of sanctioning youth.

### **Sample Population**

The population selected to participate in the study on the Kankakee County Teen Court Juvenile Justice system of sanctioning youth were former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel. The court personnel participants encompassed juvenile and family court judges, juvenile probation workers, Olivet Nazarene University students, and current members of the State's Attorney Office. The survey population consisted of thirty-six (36) participants between the ages of 18-72 years old. The purposeful sampling method was selected. There were many advantages and disadvantages associated with the sampling method.

One advantage of using purposeful sampling is that it provided the researcher with the reasoning to make a generalization from the sample pool selected. Another advantage was that the researcher was given the fortuity to develop as much understanding as possible to decide on the topic from the data collected from an array of demographical participants.

A considerable disadvantage to purposeful sampling was that this method is highly susceptible to researcher bias since the interpretation of the data was based on the researcher's judgment. Another drawback was that those participating in the research project may have manipulated the information because they had a bias of their own and wanted to make it public.

The first group selected was Kankakee County Teen Court personnel. This group had personal insight from their experience with this type of diversion program. The second group was former Teen Court graduates, who were chosen because they could provide an understanding of how being judged by your peers and accepting the sanctions imposed were more acceptable than being sentenced by a traditional juvenile justice system process.

### **Instrumentation**

A twenty-two (22) question quantitative survey instrument was administered. The questionnaire examined three main areas:

- 1) Teen Court as a valuable solution to reducing the recidivism rate in juvenile offenders.
- 2) Teen Court participants' program completion.
- 3) Teen Court is a cost-effective alternative to the traditional Juvenile Justice System approach.

The demographic information in the survey instrument provided an understanding of potential trends and emerging concepts associated with age, gender, and educational status. The quantitative survey instrument included a scaled response ranging from least agreement to strongest agreement with a concept or questions, along with a "yes" / "no" / "no position"

responses and questions related from 1 to 10 for the opinion of the severity. The basic underlying assumption focused on the belief that a diversion program, specifically Teen Court, helped to reduce the recidivism rates of juvenile offenders than using a traditional juvenile justice system approach. The motivating factor of what caused this to occur was that juveniles are influenced more when they are judged by their peers versus by out-of-touch adults; thus, Teen Court participants were more likely not to repeat criminal acts.

The qualitative instrument consisted of five (5) open-ended questions that were presented during the interview process to determine a broader understanding of how Teen Court influences the decision-making process of teenagers. The main areas of focus were:

- 1) Being judged by your peers had an overwhelmingly positive effect on a successful outcome
- 2) Sanctions imposed by others who have gone through a similar event already are accepted more willingly and completed on time
- 3) Volunteers contribute to the cost-effectiveness of Teen Court over the traditional justice system

### **Data Collection**

Former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel were contacted by phone or by email and agreed to volunteer their time to conduct the research. Participants were told that the objective of the study was to gather information about whether they thought Teen Court was an effective deterrent to preventing youthful offenders from committing future crimes. Specific demographics were collected from each participant, such as gender, age, and level of education.

Participants were administered either a twenty-two (22) question quantitative survey instrument or interviewed about five (5) open-ended questions to determine a broader

understanding of how Teen Court influenced the decision-making process of teenagers. Before participating in either the survey or interview process, participants were read aloud a statement that advised them of their rights to refuse to take part without any negative consequences. All participants were advised their personal information would be kept confidential and locked in a secure, predetermined location at Governor's State University for a period of three years. Participants were advised in lieu of using their names, a unique code number would be assigned to the data collected from them.

### **Data Analysis - Quantitative Phase**

The data collected during the quantitative phase from former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel was analyzed using a cross-tabulation technique. Cross-tabulation analyzed different demographics between the participant's surveyed, such as age, gender, or educational levels. This data was then analyzed to see if there was any difference between the groups in response to a specific question. For instance, whether a high-school graduate felt being judged by your peers was more important than what a college student felt. The advantage to cross-tabulation was one can compare differences between different groups, then compare those results to assist in explaining those differences. A disadvantage to cross-tabulation is that the data could be difficult to determine if beneficial to the study based on a smaller sample size.

### **Data Analysis - Qualitative Phase**

The data collected during the quantitative phase from former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel focused on thematic coding. According to Gibbs (2007):

Thematic coding is a form of qualitative analysis which involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea allowing you to

index the text into categories and therefore establish a “framework of thematic ideas about it.” (Thematic Coding," n.d., para. 1).

The interviewee’s responses to the five predetermined questions, were compared, and similar attributes were picked out and these interviewees were grouped together, and any unique demographical information was noted in the research.

Both phases of this research occurred after the participant signed a waiver and agreed to voluntarily answer the predetermined questions about Teen Court. The interviews and questionnaire were distributed and conducted in a public place, or within the homes of the participants.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This study aimed to determine how successful Teen Court is in reducing juvenile recidivism compared to traditional justice systems designed to modify adolescent delinquent behavior. Two groups were formed consisting of both former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel. One group participated in the quantitative phase; this group completed the questionnaire. The second group took part in interviews. The responses from both groups were merged to develop a more in-depth understanding of the teen court process.

### Quantitative Research

The first sub problem focused on what the methods Teen Court uses compared to traditional juvenile justice system research to ensure juveniles will not continue committing criminal acts. Items, 9, 11, and 18 on the questionnaire highlighted program effectiveness. The responses from both Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel are illustrated in the participant's responses.

**Table I**

*Perceptions of Teen Court Effectiveness Compared to the Traditional Juvenile Justice System*

<i>Question 9</i>	<i>Former Teen Court Participants</i>	<i>Teen Court Personnel</i>
<i>Teens Taking Ownership For Their Actions</i>	Strongly Agree	67% (n=10)
	Agree	50% (n=11)
	Disagree	33% (n=5)
	Strongly Disagree	36% (n=8)
		14% (n=3)
<i>Totals</i>		100% (n=15)
		100% (n=22)

Note: The data presented in Table I are based on both participants' groups' responses to the following questionnaire: Teenagers judged by their peers are more likely to take ownership of their actions.

The majority of former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel agree, persuading the youth who has committed a criminal offense to take responsibility for their deviant actions has led to those adolescences into making better decisions. According to the American Probation and Parole Association (n.d.), teen court initiatives “teach youth about the effect their actions have on themselves, victims, and the community” (“An overview of the teen court concept,” n.d., p. 7). Although the majority of literature on Teen Court is positive, opposition exists. In 2011, Weidner’s presentation indicated, “Teen Court punishments are not harsh enough, and teens may not take being judged by their peers as seriously compared to traditional juvenile court sentencing” (Weidner, 2011, Slide 14). The harshness of the punishment may be the reason why 14% of the Teen Court personnel do not perceive youth are taking responsibility for their actions.

According to BuzzFeed 2015, “Imprisoning young offenders actually increases their odds of committing more serious crimes and returning to prison while also making them less likely to graduate from high school” (Baker, 2015, p. 4). One of the most encouraging reasons why parents choose Teen Court is its effectiveness in rehabilitating juvenile offenders. A major component of this achievement is that those who complete Teen Court avoids having any derogatory marks on their criminal history. When teenagers transition into adulthood, college admissions, military recruiters, and future job prospects often perform background checks before accepting a candidate. Those who complete Teen Court, do not have a criminal record; therefore, future endeavors will not be jeopardized due to a wrong decision that occurred as a youth.

**Table II***Teen Court Influence on Future Criminal Offenses*

<i>Question 11</i>		<i>Former Teen Court Participant</i>	<i>Teen Court Personnel</i>
<i>Avoids Criminal History</i>	Strongly Agree	60% (n=9)	86% (n=19)
	Agree	40% (n=6)	14% (n=3)
	Disagree		
<i>Totals</i>	Strongly Disagree		
		100% (n=15)	100% (n=22)

Note: The data presented in Table II are based on both participants' groups' responses to the following questionnaire: Parents and Teens are more likely to choose Teen Court over the traditional Justice System, as it avoids any derogatory marks on their criminal record.

The majority of former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel strongly agreed that the decision to choose Teen Court over a traditional justice system was largely swayed by there not being a negative mark on their criminal records. According to Stone (2011), "With the successful completion of a sentence, the minor avoids having any offense placed on his or her record" (Stone, 2011, para. 20). A startling 60% of former Teen Court participants and 86% of past Teen Court personnel strongly agreed that a diversion program such as Teen Court is far more favorable than using traditional juvenile court methods.

As advocated by Butts and Buck, "Sanctions encourage young offenders to repair at least part of the damage they have caused to the community or to specific victims" (Butts & Buck, 2000, p. 4). One major reason why administering sanctions to a teenage offender is so effective, is that they understand there are consequences for their actions and poor decision-making. These sanctions can range from performing mandatory community service to writing an essay to the

victim. Many times, a combination of these may be administered to youth offenders, including ordering restitution to be paid to the victim.

Why do the sanctions placed on Teen Court participants tend to be completed on time and without reservation? One explanation is that the penalties given to juvenile offenders are fair and just based on the offense committed. The teenager who committed the crime accepts the punishment more openly because those deciding his or her fate have also exhibited poor judgments that caused them to face a jury of their peers as well. Since the teenaged offender has to admit to their wrongdoings, a sense of ownership is established; thus, accountability for one's actions understood.

### Table III

*Teen Court Participants Successfully Complete Sanctions as Required*

<i>Question 4</i>		<i>Former Teen Court Participant</i>	<i>Teen Court Personnel</i>
<i>Completes Teen Court Requirements</i>	Strongly Agree	7% (n=1)	18% (n=4)
	Agree	53% (n=8)	36% (n=8)
	Disagree	40% (n=6)	41% (n=9)
	Strongly Disagree		5% (n=1)
<i>Totals</i>		100% (n=15)	100% (n=22)

Note: The data presented in Table III are based on both participants' groups' responses to the following questionnaire: Teen Court participants complete sanctions imposed upon them as required due to their peers judging them, and court-ordered services leave a meaningful impact on the juvenile defendant.

The question posed in item four (4) on the questionnaire to former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel asked the following: "Why do the majority of Teen Court participants complete the requirements imposed onto them by the court?" The benefits associated with Teen Court are being judged by one's peers and not acquiring a criminal record. Youth are

more compelled to comply with the sanctions imposed through Teen Court because they are aware of the consequences a criminal record will have on their future ventures. Since every Teen Court participant has at least one or more sanctions to complete after admitting their guilt, the consequences for their actions are more heartfelt. As noted by Butts and Buck (2000), “Sanctions encourage young offenders to repair at least part of the damage they have caused to the community or to specific victims” (Butts & Buck, 2000, para. 19).

According to an article on the website, *youth.gov* (n.d.), “Early intervention prevents the onset of delinquent behavior and supports the development of a youth’s assets and resilience” (“Prevention & Early Intervention,” n.d., para. 3). Research has shown that the sooner any type of intervention occurs, the quicker negative behavior or poor judgment is corrected. This benefits not only the individual, but society as a whole, as juvenile criminal behavior is deterred; thus, offering the opportunity for teens to be more successful in future ventures.

#### **Table IV**

##### *Early Intervention into Juvenile Delinquency Deters Future Criminal Activity*

<i>Question 21</i>		<i>Former Teen Court Participant</i>	<i>Teen Court Personnel</i>
<i>Early Intervention Deters Criminal Activities</i>	Strongly Agree	7% (n=1)	18% (n=4)
	Agree	53% (n=8)	36% (n=8)
	Disagree	40% (n=6)	41% (n=9)
	Strongly Disagree		5% (n=1)
<i>Totals</i>		100% (n=15)	100% (n=22)

Note: The data presented in Table IV are based on both participants’ groups’ responses to the following questionnaire: Parents and Teens alike agree that early intervention of juvenile delinquent behaviors poses a strong deterrent to future criminal activities.

Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel were asked the following: “Does an early intervention into juvenile delinquency deter future criminal acts from being committed?” The responses from both groups, former Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel, reaffirmed that they believe an early intervention into juvenile’s illegal activities has a higher chance of any further wrongdoings occurring. Numerous studies have shown that when young offenders are arrested and convicted in the juvenile court system, they are at a higher risk of reoffending. According to an MST Services study (2018), “... juveniles were far more likely than adults to re-offend after release across all states” (“Do We Know the Full Extent of Juvenile Recidivism?” 2018, para. 3). Conversely, with diversion programs, such as Teen Court, the recidivism rate drops to less than 10-percent nationwide. One of the main contributing factors of this success is teens pay very close attention to and accept punishments more when judged by their peers. In March of 2010, the National Association of Youth Courts reported, “According to the *Urban Institute’s Evaluation of Teen Courts Project*, which was based on four teen court programs studied in four different states (Alaska, Maryland, Arizona, and Missouri), the six-month recidivism figures among the programs ranged from 6% to 9%” (“Youth Courts: Facts & Stats,” 2010, para. 8).

### **Qualitative Research**

Although the quantitative portion provided the data needed to partially assess the Teen Court Juvenile System in Kankakee County, survey data does not allow the researcher to ask participants why specific responses were selected. Therefore, a qualitative phase was introduced. The qualitative case study strategy of inquiry was used. Five interview questions were posed to two groups who are the most influential with the Kankakee County Teen Court program – former Teen Court participants and those persons who served as Teen Court personnel.

As stated previously in the quantitative phase of the study, the primary objective of conducting this research was to determine if a diversion program, such as Teen Court, has an impact on reducing the recidivism rate among juveniles who committed a non-violent crime eligible for Teen Court review. One condition of finishing Teen Court is that after admitting guilt and being judged by their peers, the offender must serve on at least one jury for another youthful offender. In doing so, this ensures there is a fair rationality to the sanctions imposed on the teenaged wrongdoer.

A vast majority of the interview statements from the study participants during the qualitative phase were repetitive; therefore, responses are grouped based on themes that emerged after the interview answers were analyzed. The ideas that resonated the most are the following: (1) reducing recidivism in juvenile offenders, (2) the harshness of punishment given by peers, (3) cost-effectiveness and efficiency of the program, and (4) peer-to-peer sanctioning.

Eight (8) former Teen Court participants shared their views and experiences. Those who participated in the interview consisted of three males, aged 18, 19, and 27. Two males self-reported completing high school, and one is pursuing their post-graduate degree. Five females participated in the interview process, and their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years old. All of the female participants completed high school, one is pursuing a post-secondary degree, and one has completed a graduate degree. Ten (10) Teen Court Personnel who voluntarily participated in the interview phase of the study were comprised of five males and five females. Their ages ranged from 17 to 28, one male is completing high school, and the remaining participants are high school graduates. Eight are currently pursuing their post-secondary education, and one has earned their undergraduate degree.

In order to assess the effectiveness of being judged by your peers, the first open-ended question asked to both groups, Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel, was what their perspective is on peer judgement: “How do you feel being judged by your peers, versus by an adult (such as a judge in the Juvenile Court), effects the teenage offender’s willingness to accept court-ordered sanctions?”

The overall responses revealed teens perceive other peers as being able to relate to their problems due to similar environments and age. Former Teen Court participant (Interviewee #1), a female aged 26, who is pursuing a post-secondary degree stated:

“ I feel like having people my age versus an adult would be easier or not has hard to accept as they would be more understanding as their perspective would be similar versus an adult.”

Interviewee #4, a nineteen-year-old male Teen Court participant who has graduated from high school, indicated the following:

“I feel judged by peers better than people older than you. Give you better decisions as can relate to you. Older persons give you punishment that can get you in trouble for life.“

Interviewee #5, another recent male high school graduate who is 18 years of age shared,

“ I feel that it's better because our peers have been through what we have and can relate more than adults.”

The Teen Court personnel interviewees' responses emphasized Teen Court participants respect their peers and are more accepting of the sanctions rendered through Teen Court. Teen Court personnel responses to the same question yielded answers similar to the Teen Court participants. Teen Court personnel highlighted the teens are more likely to adhere to the

sanctions and view the process as being fair. Interviewee #10, who was a 28-year old female post-secondary undergraduate stated:

“I think the teenage offender is more willing to participate in the process and adhere to his/her sentencing when they are judged by peers instead of an adult. They can relate more to people of their similar age. The Teen Court process can remove some of the fear associated with the proceedings/judgment.”

Another female undergraduate student (Interviewee #15) who was 25 years of age at the time of her interview said:

“When being judged by one’s peers, there is an ingrained sense that they understand and respect one another, given the similar background/age/etc. that makes them peers. I feel that this understanding and respect allows a much greater degree of acceptance towards court-ordered sanctions.”

The second question asked Teen Court participants and Teen Court personnel to give their point of view on the following question: “What are your opinions on permitting first-time, teenage offenders the opportunity to participate in a diversion program, such as Teen Court, versus being sent directly to Teen Court?”

After collectively reviewing these Teen Court participant’s answers, the overwhelming response from Teen Court participants was that holding first-time, teenage offenders accountable by referring them to Teen Court instead of the traditional Juvenile Court gained more compliance, and it allowed teens the time to reflect on their actions. One of the female participants (Interviewee #1), a 26-year-old student attending undergrad school, reflected on this question by stating:

“I think it gives teens more of an opportunity to think of their actions versus (when) being sent to a Juvenile Court system, they wouldn’t think of their actions first. Teen Court allows teens to ease back and reflect on what they did.”

Interviewee #12, one of the 27-year old male contributors who is also enrolled in a post-secondary institution, added:

“When you’re young, you tend to make stupid mistakes you cringe at when you’re older. It’s nice to have this program, so you don’t have a record.”

The retorts of actual Teen Court personnel echoed those of the Teen Court participants. The majority of Teen Court personnel felt that Teen Court allowed teens the time to reset their actions without any long-term consequences, such as a juvenile criminal record. In addition, Teen Court provided a positive atmosphere for juvenile offenders to be rehabilitated while allowing them to work through their issues and emotions safely. As stated by Interview #15, who was a 25-year old scholar enrolled in her Bachelor’s Degree program:

“First-time offenders frequently benefit more from diversion programs, in my opinion, primarily because these programs allow them to grasp the gravity and the consequences of their actions without the long-term labels and fall-out that a juvenile record creates and allows them the opportunity to do better.”

Another participant was a seventeen-year-old male in high school (Interviewee #16) that summed this question up by saying:

“With the offenses often being minor, this system is great for saving young teens who made a mistake from the permanent record that would hold them back.”

Interview question number four (4) pondered this query:

“Since teenage offenders are required to serve on the peer jury for another Teen Court as part of their sentencing, how do you feel this benefits them?”

The Teen Court participants believed being required to serve as a juror on Teen Court as one of their sanctions, provided them with more compassion towards juvenile defendants, since Teen Court personnel have also experienced similar situations themselves. They also felt that they listened more to both sides of the story (prosecutor and defense) because a juror sees how actions affects others. Interviewee #1, a 26-year old female who is attending college shared her perspective:

“I thought it was fun to be on the other side – very interesting listening to cases. I felt more compassion since I went through similar things.”

The male undergraduate student who was 27 years of age (Interviewee #12) explained:

“They get to see both sides of the judicial system – as a juror, they also hear how actions affect others.”

A male, 19-year old recent high school graduate (Interviewee #4) reflected on the above question by answering:

“When you go back after being in Teen Court yourself, you already know what they’re going through and can help them out by listening more and giving (a) punishment similar to yours.”

The Teen Court personnel used their experience of serving “on the other side” as a juror and related the following benefits to serving as a jury of their peers: (1) experience and knowledge to guide first-time offenders through the court process, (2) jurors take the entire court process more seriously as they are now “wearing the shoes that previously judged them”, (3) the

judgment of the juvenile offender was fairer since they paid attention to the details and gave more thought to sanctions imposed.

Interviewee #11 was a male, twenty years of age and attending a post-secondary school. The reflection he shared about his experience as a Teen Court juror was:

“By making all participants of the Teen Court program come back to serve as a jury member, it allows them to put themselves in the shoes of the people who sentenced them for their actions; and, therefore, are more likely to take it seriously.”

A twenty-eight-year-old male undergraduate (Interviewee #17), who also served as a former Teen Court juror, responded to his experience by stating:

“Being required to serve on the Teen Court jury is a benefit to offenders who go through the system. It helps them to see that they aren’t the only person who makes mistakes and makes bad decisions. Seeing other offenders in the same position they have been in, makes them easy to relate to, and, also, puts the responsibility on them to formulate a sentence to help the new offender successfully complete the program. Also, I have seen those who have been sentenced to serve on the Teen Court jury choose to stay and become part of the (Teen Court) program. It can help build friendships or even raise an interest in the justice system. What starts out as a requirement for punishment, can become a regular program that they are interested in and look forward to attending.”

As Interviewee #16 stated:

“It gives them relatability to the peers that viewed their own case and helps them better appreciate their situation.” (a 17-year-old high school male student)

The fifth, and final question presented to the Teen Court participants asked, “The Teen Court program focuses mainly on volunteers to operate. Why do you think it is more cost-effective than sending juvenile offenders through the court system?”

All eight (8) Interviewees, former Teen Court participants, unanimously agreed that by using a diversion program, such as Teen Court, versus sending juvenile offenders to a traditional juvenile court system saves time and money. The main consensus was that money is conserved using Teen Court as the court personnel consists mainly of volunteers; thus, avoiding the higher costs usually paid out to those persons involved in the trial process. Families are also avoiding having to hire personal attorneys or take time off from work for court appearances. A 26-year-old, female post-secondary student (Interviewee #1) indicated:

“Because its volunteer-based, the participants appearances aren’t compensated, there’s a minimal exchange of money versus the judicial system where you have to pay lawyers, judges, clerks, etc.”

Another valid argument presented by Interviewee #12, a male enrolled in undergraduate school that was 27 years of age, was:

“It saves the County money by lowering the caseload for employees – and it saves the families money on court costs and fines.”

After interviewing ten (10) Teen Court personnel, it was clear that Teen Court saves money throughout the entire process – from trial preparation, the trial itself, and following up to ensure the court-ordered sanctions were completed. One 25-year-old female court volunteer who was enrolled in an undergraduate program (Interviewee #15), flawlessly summarized the cost savings that Teen Court has over the traditional Juvenile Court system by declaring:

“Focusing primarily on volunteer support allows the court system to cut down on a tremendous number of costs from attorney and clerk fees/salaries to postage for jury summons and security personnel expenses.”

Another 24-year old in her post-secondary education journey (Interviewee #9) indicated:

“Teen Court is functional because previous attendees give their time and knowledge, and because it not only provides a service to the offenders but brings enjoyment and knowledge to the volunteers. They continue to come back. Its’s more cost-effective because it is using a peer structured environment to staff and run.”

One more added benefit to saving money by using Teen Court was noted by at least two of the Teen Court personnel. The advantage was most juvenile offenders that completed Teen Court were less likely to commit additional criminal acts again; therefore, reducing repeated prosecutions within the system. A female aged 28 that recently completed her undergraduate degree (Interviewee #10) noted:

“I think the legal fees would far outweigh the cost of pop and pizza for the volunteers. The offenders may be less likely to (be) repeat offenders too.”

Echoing this sentiment was Interviewee #12 (a 19-year-old female in undergraduate classes), who gave her opinion of how Teen Court is more cost-effective than sending juveniles through the court system when stating:

“The juvenile court system is costly for both the state and the defendant, whereas Teen Court is far less costly and time-consuming yet produces a community-based, meaningful impact on teens that leads to decreased recidivism rates.”

**Summary of Results**

By analyzing the results of this concurrent mixed-methods study, there were many notable advantages of using a diversion program, Teen Court specifically, for juvenile offenders that commit minor criminal acts. Teens are more receptive and accepting to being judged by their peers versus adults that would be issuing their sentencing in a conventional Juvenile Court. Another advantage was that teenaged offenders have a higher rate of not reoffending as they learn more by actually being mandated to participate as a juror themselves after admitting guilt in their case and completing the sanctions imposed upon them in the allotted time. The cost savings of the entire Teen Court process overshadow the traditional Juvenile Justice system approach. The enormous cost-savings are attributed to the fact that Teen Court is operated by volunteers; therefore, less money is spent on court personnel salaries and support services, especially case filings, which is mandated by the juvenile courts.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

The study results from the concurrent mixed-methods study revealed youth who are eligible to participate in Teen Court sanctioning are less likely to commit another offense. The data from the quantitative survey instrument and the qualitative case study revealed the most significant influence on whether a youth continues committing criminal acts is the peer-to-peer sanctioning process. Responses from participants who completed the questionnaire and those who participated in the interviews consistently indicated being judged and sanctioned by one's peers is more acceptable, and the juvenile offender perceives they were treated fairly. The "fairness" concept is what has the most influence on the juvenile's future behavior. For instance, if a parent tells their child to clean their room, the scolding is viewed as an unfair demand; however, if a peer states the room needs cleaning, the youth views their peer's response as a suggestion and complies without a lengthy discussion.

From *Teen Courts: A Focus on Research* (Butts & Buck, 2000, p. 15), "Many jurisdictions report that teen court increases young offenders' respect for the justice system and reduces recidivism by holding delinquent youth accountable for what is often their first offense." When their peers judge teens as in a Teen Court setting, rather than by adults in a traditional juvenile justice system, they are more likely to complete sanctions imposed upon them. One reason teens favor peer's judgment over parents or other adults is that the development of the teenage brain, specifically the frontal lobe that controls reasoning and function, does not fully develop until in the later teen years of young adulthood. As a result, most adolescent offenders are drawn towards what their fellow teens have to say about their illegal behavior than what adults would impose upon them as punishment.

Early intervention inhibits the onset of delinquent behavior and encourages the development of a youth's abilities and resilience. According to Agnew (1990):

The consistent finding that peers exert an important influence on adolescent behavior and that peer delinquency is a major risk factor for serious antisocial behavior suggests that shifting peer group norms in a direction that creates positive peer pressure should decrease antisocial behavior and violence (Agnew, 1990, p. 540).

The research supports the theory that using a diversion program, such as Teen Court, drastically reduces the recidivism rate for juveniles to commit further criminal acts. Since the sanctions imposed on these teenage delinquents are delivered by their own peers, they are more likely to take ownership for their poor decision-making and complete these sanctions in a timely manner.

As noted in the qualitative interview responses, the cost-effectiveness of using Teen Court versus the traditional Juvenile Justice System, overwhelmingly reduces the burden on taxpayers. Less money is wasted on trial costs, case prep work, and monitoring services to first-time offenders convicted of minor crimes, since the majority of the Teen Court personnel are volunteers. Studies have shown the savings associated with Teen Court systems are anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of a difference per case. As Butts and Buck noted, "If managed properly, they (Teen Courts) may handle a substantial number of offenders at relatively little cost to the community" (Butts & Buck, 2000, p. 3).

The contention that allowing first-time youthful offenders the opportunity to participate in a diversion program, such as Teen Court, instead of being sent directly to the traditional juvenile court system, helps to free up time for more severe criminal cases is profoundly essential to diverting resources where they are most effective. With the majority of Teen Court

participants completing sanctions imposed on them in a shorter time period as opposed to traditional courts, there is an increased probability of less cases referred to juvenile courts.

The primary goal of this study was to determine if Teen Court is successful in lowering the rate of youth reoffending. As previously stated, due to the limitations of accurate recording data by the multitude of Teen Courts across the nation, it is difficult to declare wholeheartedly that Teen Courts drastically reduces recidivism rates in juvenile offenders. However, there are many documented cases where Teen Court has indeed reduced recidivism rates to as little as ten to twenty-four percent! (Butts et al., 2002, p. 27). When you take these numbers into consideration, there is a lot to be said about the effectiveness of Teen Courts as a strong deterrent to future criminal activities. Another added advantage to using Teen Court for first-time delinquents, is the effect it has on the mindset of youth. As recognized by Butts and Willison, “For both defendants and volunteers, Teen Court may impart an increased respect for the law and a greater understanding of the obligations of civil society” (Butts & Willison, 2002, para. 35). This undertaking alone illustrates the impact a diversion program administered by peers has on youthful offenders who have made a poor error in judgement and how the decisions they make has a profound impact on society.

If there was a federal mandate that the various Teen Court models throughout the nation were required to gather, collect, and report on the data relevant to how diversion programs reduce recidivism rates in juvenile offenders, there is a greater chance more funding would be diverted to these programs. Since there is a limitation on what types of data is currently being collected, and the lack of additional resources or funding to support this research, the true measure of Teen Court’s effectiveness is still to be determined.

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## Appendix A

### Robert Mason II Quantitative Study Questionnaire

**Purpose:** This questionnaire is part of a Master's Capstone project which is being conducted to determine if a diversion program, such as Teen Court, reduces the recidivism rate in juvenile offenders. A diversion program refers to when the Criminal Justice System gives a form of sentencing where the criminal offender must participate in some type of rehabilitation program to help remedy the criminal behavior that led to his or her arrest. This type of program allows the offender to avoid having a criminal record or a conviction of a crime on their record. Teen Court is one type of diversion program where the teen-aged offender is judged by a jury of their peers.

**Instructions:** Please complete the following questionnaire. All responses will remain anonymous and will be used solely for research purposes. Please do not include your name anywhere on this questionnaire. Thank you for your participation.

#### Demographics:

Gender: **Male** or Female (circle one)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ (in years)

Grade in School (check one please):

- Elementary** (1– 8)       **High School** (9–12)       **Post-Secondary** (12–21)  
 **GED**       **Dropped Out**

1. I am familiar with the Juvenile Justice System.  
 **Yes**       **No**
2. I feel the Juvenile Justice System is fair and unbiased to juvenile offenders.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
3. The Juvenile Justice system is overcrowded with cases.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
4. The Juvenile Justice system does not effectively address juvenile delinquency issues properly.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
5. I feel that teenagers arrested for minor crimes committed as their first offense should be sent directly to the Juvenile Justice System.  
 **Yes**       **No**
6. I am aware of what the Teen Court program is.  
 **Yes**       **No**
7. I am aware of what a juvenile diversion program is.  
 **Yes**       **No**

8. I believe that Teen Court is more effective than the traditional Juvenile Justice System for first-time offenders committing minor crimes.  
 **Yes**       **No**
9. Teenagers judged by their own peers are more likely to take ownership of their actions.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
10. I feel that the recidivism rate for teenagers that successfully complete Teen Court is drastically reduced.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
11. When given the opportunity, I feel that most parents and their teens would choose a diversion program like Teen Court over the traditional Juvenile Justice System in order to avoid a mark on their criminal record.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
12. Teen Court is usually more difficult and demanding on juvenile defendants versus the Juvenile Justice System.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
13. I feel that using mostly teenagers to operate Teen Court is less effective than using adults in the same roles (judge, prosecution, defense, jury members, etc.).  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
14. The best way to prevent teenagers from becoming habitual criminals is to use the “heavy-hand” philosophy and impose the strongest and strictest penalties when they commit criminal acts.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
15. Sanctions imposed upon the teenaged defendant are designed to do more than just punish the offender.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
16. I feel that Teen Court is a good example of the Deterrent Theory.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
17. Communities benefit from Teen Court since juvenile offenders usually perform some type of service activity as one of their sentencing conditions.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
18. Mandating Teen Court defendants to pay back victim's restitution and/or perform some type of community service is a strong deterrent to committing future crimes.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
19. Teenagers with anti-social friends and associates are more likely to be delinquent themselves.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**       **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**

20. Certain environmental influences, such as economic conditions, population density, levels of access to health care, and quality of education, effect the rate of recidivism.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**     **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
21. An early intervention into juvenile delinquency helps to deter future criminal activity.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**     **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**
22. Using a Teen Court approach within our school systems, when addressing some behavior issues, like truancy, cheating, or bullying would have a greater impact on a student's success versus traditional methods like out-of-school suspensions.  
 **Strongly agree**     **Agree**     **Disagree**     **Strongly disagree**

**Appendix B****Robert Mason II  
Qualitative Study Questionnaire****Interview Questions**

1. How do you feel being judged by your peers, versus by an adult (such as a judge in the Juvenile Court), effects the teenage offender's willingness to accept court ordered sanctions?
  
2. What are your opinions on permitting first-time teenage offenders the opportunity to participate in a diversion program, such as Teen Court, versus being sent directly to Juvenile Court?
  
3. Why do you think a diversion program like Teen Court may be more beneficial to a first-time teenage offender versus sending them directly to the traditional Juvenile Justice System?
  
4. Since teenage offenders, are required to serve on the peer jury for another Teen Court as part of their sentencing, how do you feel this benefits them?
  
5. The Teen Court program focuses mainly on volunteers to operate, why do you think it is more cost effective than sending juvenile offenders through the court system?

## Appendix C

