

Teen courts

Diverting young people from the formal court system.

First published

17 November 2020

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Mixed findings	 Very strong	 Low	 Moderate	No information	No information

Focus of the intervention

Teen courts – also known as peer courts – are a specialised intervention that divert young people from the formal court system.

Teen courts tend to be used for first time, less serious, non-violent offenders who are viewed as having a low risk of reoffending.

Participation is voluntary, meaning that a young person can withdraw at any time but will then be diverted back to the traditional justice system.

A defining feature of a teen court is that other young people serve as some of the court personnel, such as the lawyer, judge or jury. The roles filled by young people will vary according to the model of teen court used.

Most teen courts require the young person to admit guilt in order to participate. So, unlike the

formal system, court proceedings are not focused on establishing guilt or innocence but rather on assigning constructive sentences that encourage them to accept responsibility for their actions while repairing harm to the community.

Sentences typically include community service, apology letters to victims or educational workshops. They may also include a requirement to serve on a jury of a future teen court or a referral to a community-based resource such as tutoring or mentoring.

When a young person successfully completes the programme, the offence for which they are referred is erased from their criminal record.

Note that teen courts are different to youth courts, which are a specialist type of magistrates' court routinely used in the UK to deal with criminal cases against children.

The narrative is based on one meta-analytic review covering 14 studies and focuses on the effect of teen courts on reoffending. All the primary studies in the meta-analysis were carried out in the USA.

See also [Trying youths as adults](#) and [Police-led diversion models for young offenders](#).

Effect – how effective is it?

There is some evidence to suggest that teen courts have increased or reduced reoffending, but overall they have not had a statistically significant effect on reoffending.

The review was based on 14 studies contributing 18 effect sizes. These were divided into two separate meta-analysis – one that compared young people who completed teen court to those who were formally processed (11 studies) and another that compared them with those who were processed through other types of diversion programmes, for example, community service (seven studies).

In both cases, teen court was found to be no more effective at reducing reoffending than the alternative mechanism.

The review examined potential effect size moderators. It found that length of follow-up was an important moderator – short follow-up periods of less than 12 months were related to strong and

positive effects, while longer follow-up periods of 12 months or more were related to negative effects.

This suggests that while teen courts may be effective at reducing reoffending in the short term, these effects do not appear to last more than a year.

The review also reported that studies published in 2004 or earlier were related to stronger positive effects than those published in 2005 or after, indicating that older programs demonstrate significantly stronger effects than those published more recently.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the conclusions can be ruled out.

The evidence is taken from a meta-analytic review which demonstrated a high quality design in terms of having a transparent and well-designed search strategy, valid statistical analysis, sufficient assessment of publication bias and consideration of the risk of bias in the analysis and the influence of statistical outliers.

Mechanism – how does it work?

While the mechanisms for how teen courts work were not empirically tested, the authors noted that they are assumed to reduce reoffending by the following mechanisms.

- Positive peer pressure – a sentence mandated by pro-social peers rather than an adult is more likely to be perceived as a form of peer disapproval, which may lead to greater respect of the terms set and an increased motivation to comply
- Restorative justice – a focus on repairing harm and taking responsibility for one's actions is thought to be more effective in reducing reoffending than eliciting retribution and distributing tough sentences.
- Labelling – as the teen court diverts young offenders away from the formal justice system, it could reduce the social consequences and stigmatisation of negative labelling.

However, the review authors note that the findings do not support the expectation that teen courts are a more effective alternative to reducing reoffending and consider the following reasons.

- Target population – participants were selected specifically because they were identified as being at low risk of reoffending, so reoffending rates alone may not be the most appropriate mechanism to determine success and efficacy.
- Peer justice – the process of being judged and sentenced by a jury of peers, who in adolescence may be more influential than adults, may mean participants are more likely to internalise a negative or criminal self-perception than if they were judged by an adult figure of authority.
- Sanctions – by admitting guilt and agreeing to participate in teen court, young people may actually face more formal, lengthy and onerous proceedings than those who are formally processed.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review examined the effect of participant-level characteristics, such as gender or ethnicity, and found that they were not significantly associated with more positive (or negative) effects.

However, it did note that four of the five primary studies that demonstrated statistically significant reductions in reoffending were those that included at least some repeat offenders.

While not conclusive, these findings suggest that teen courts might be more effective at reducing reoffending among low-risk repeat offenders and that targeting first-time offenders may be ineffective, as one would not reasonably expect these young people to reoffend in the first place.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review gave no account of how the intervention was implemented, nor of any implementation challenges encountered by the primary studies.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not detail the costs of teen courts and no formal economic analysis was provided. The authors did note however that as teen courts are primarily run by volunteers, the operating costs of the intervention are low when compared to the formal court system.

General considerations

- The review was based on two separate meta-analyses of 18 effect sizes rather than a single analysis of the 14 studies. The sub-analysis groups were determined by the type of intervention in the comparison group – formal processing or another diversion programme.
- All of the primary studies were conducted in the USA. Teen courts are known to exist in various countries but published evaluations of non-US interventions could not be located. It is possible that these findings are not representative of other geographical contexts.
- A lack of detailed programme descriptions limited the number of variables that could be examined in the moderator analysis – for example, risk level of participants, age, socioeconomic status and substance abuse, which are all known risk factors for reoffending.

Summary

Overall, the review found that teen courts are no more effective at reducing reoffending among young people than formal processing or other diversion programmes. However it was also found to be no worse.

Teen courts are expected to reduce reoffending by diverting young people at low risk of reoffending from the formal court process, avoiding the potential for negative labelling and focusing instead on reparation and the positive influence of their pro-social peers.

There was some evidence to suggest that teen courts might be more effective for certain types of offenders, for example, repeat offenders.

Further studies are needed to determine if teen courts are more effective for populations with certain individual or crime-prone characteristics, or whether they can demonstrate other non-crime benefits.

These could include high levels of satisfaction among parents and young people, improvement in participants' social and psychological behaviours, and cost effectiveness, to fully consider whether they may be a justifiable and worthy diversion programme for young people.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Bouchard, J., and Wong, J. (2017), [A Jury of their peers: A meta-analysis of the effects of teen court on criminal recidivism](#). Journal of Youth and Adolescence. April 2017

Summary prepared by

This narrative was written by the College of Policing. ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)
- [Criminal justice](#)