



POLICY ISSUES

Specialized Teen Court

Teen courts, also called peer or youth courts, use a process similar to a juvenile court, but peers serve as judges, attorneys, jurors, and other members of the courtroom work group. Most teen courts hear cases for first-time, low-risk offenders typically engaged in minor offenses: vandalism, disorderly conduct, and petty theft. The majority of the courts require the defendant to admit to the charges in order to participate, although according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, some courts hold trials to determine guilt or innocence. Parents are required to be present for the trial. Defendants may be sentenced to community service, counseling, or restitution and/or may be required to make an apology to the victim.

Proponents believe teen courts reduce future wrongdoing and increase respect for the law. Also, the process educates volunteers and defendants about

the judicial system. Opponents argue these courts create an additional sanction, which may pull more offenders into the system unnecessarily. Additionally, evaluation research is needed to determine whether the courts are effective.

Think About It

1. Are teen courts an effective method for reducing recidivism?
2. Why or why not?
3. How can the use of peer volunteers add bias to the system?
4. When defendants fail to comply with the peer sentence, what are the possible consequences?
5. What other types of diversion programs may be more effective than teen court?