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Attitudinal Change Among Teen Court Participants

by

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National Center for Justice Information Service (NCJRS)
Box 5700
Rockville, MD 20849-5000

* Prepared for the Kentucky Court of Justice, Administrative
Office of the Courts, Frankfort, Kentucky, July 7, 1994. COJ
Account Number 374-T-0-03-0000-3311.

Introduction

Teen court provides first-time juvenile offenders charged with minor offenses an opportunity to participate in a less formal court process. A process in which only the judge is an adult. In teen court, young persons who perform duties of attorneys, bailiffs, clerks, and jurors, conduct a trial session not unlike the sentencing process in adult court.

Teen court is based on the premise that the same force that leads youth into lawbreaking behavior--peer pressure--can be redirected to become a force leading youth into law-abiding behavior. While there are some variations among teen courts across the country, Kentucky's teen court functions as a dispositional alternative. Youth who complete the constructive sentence assigned to them by the teenage jury do not receive a formal court record.

From its inception in Odessa, Texas, in 1983, by Natalie Rothstein, a social worker, teen courts have sprouted up across the nation. Teen courts now operate in 60 cities within 15 states; more than 30 teen courts operate in Texas alone (ABA/YEFC 1993). Despite this marked growth, few published evaluations of their impact on youth have appeared. To date, published reports have been limited to basic follow-up data; that is, the percentage of defendants who failed to complete the program (Collins 1992; Rothstein 1985; Rothstein 1987; Williamson, Chalk and Knepper 1993).

This paper describe the results of an evaluation of two Kentucky teen courts. Primarily focused on attitudinal change among participants, the evaluation provides evidence that completion of the teen court training process is associated with more favorable feelings toward authority figures in general, and authority figures within the legal system in particular. The findings suggest that teen court has a positive impact on participants' attitude toward legal authority.

Kentucky's Teen Court Program

Kentucky's teen court program grew out of the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) Law Related Education initiative. Law Related Education (LRE) is founded on the premise that young people who understand the nation's laws are less likely to violate them (Stephens 1987).

In November 1990, Robert F. Stephens, Chief Justice of the Kentucky Supreme Court, formed a 26-member roundtable to direct LRE activities in schools, communities, and juvenile justice settings across the state. Roundtable members encountered the

teen court concept in February 1992, and decided to explore model teen courts at Odessa, Texas, and Globe, Arizona. Initially, the AOC piloted teen courts in four areas: northern Kentucky (Campbell, Kenton, and Boone Counties), Nelson County, Fayette County, and Montgomery County. Teen courts in Franklin and Scott Counties began in 1993 and 1994 (Williamson et al. 1993).

Teen court officially became an LRE option in March 1992. As a part of the LRE initiative, goals for the teen court program overlap with the state's other LRE programs. Specifically, these are: (1) to demystify law and legal proceedings; (2) to expand knowledge and understanding of the law; (3) to provide a balanced view of the law; (4) to develop critical thinking abilities; (5) to prevent delinquent behavior; (6) to increase interaction with members of the legal community; (7) to enhance positive interaction among peer groups; and (8) to teach youth their rights and responsibilities under the law (Williamson and Young 1992).

Multiple goals mean the program is intended to benefit defendants and participants. Teen court participants receive a valuable lesson in citizenship; defendants receive a dispositional alternative that stresses both accountability and diversion.

Program Description

In the fall of 1993, the AOC contracted with Northern Kentucky University for evaluation of teen courts in Jefferson and Franklin Counties. When it became clear that the Jefferson site would not begin in the Spring of 1994 as anticipated, the Scott county site was added.

Both programs were initiated and coordinated by Jeanie Lyles with the support of the Director of Law Related Education Program and other AOC staff. The programs feature a 12-hour training program based on the LRE model.

Franklin County

Franklin County, located near the heart of the Bluegrass, is what represents Kentucky in most people's minds. Tobacco, apple, thoroughbred, and beef cattle farms cover nearly three-fourths of the gentle rolling hills. About 45,000 people live in the county, eight out of ten of whom were born in Kentucky. Although predominantly rural, Franklin County's largest city, Frankfort, is the state's capital.

Initial program development for the Franklin County Teen Court began in September 1993. Jeanie Lyles of the Kentucky

Administrative Office of the Courts recruited 45 students from three local high schools to participate.

Ms. Lyles conducted five two-hour training sessions during October 1993. Local attorneys and the Court Designated Workers assisted with the training along with Susan Clary, Chief Council for the Supreme Court, Grant Winston of the Attorney General's Office, and District Court Judges Reed Rhorer and Guy Hart. The training began with an overview of juvenile justice since the Gault decision in 1964. The training concluded with a mock teen court session followed by an official swearing in ceremony.

Beginning with the first session November 18, 1993, sessions were held on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at the Franklin County Courthouse. A total of six sessions were conducted before the program was suspended for the summer due to summer recess. The session for 1993-94 was held May 12, 1994.

Scott County

Scott County, like Franklin County, lies near the heart of the Bluegrass region. Tobacco, beef cow, and other farms occupy more than 90 percent of the land area. About 23,000 people live in the county; eight of ten are Kentucky natives. The largest city, Georgetown, is the home of Georgetown College.

Initial development began in March 1994 after consultation with District Court Judge Lindsey Stewart. Ms. Lyles held an initial meeting at Scott County High School, then held training sessions during the month of April. Judge Stewart, the Court Designated Worker, and several local attorneys assisted with the training sessions.

In Scott County, as in Franklin County, the training was divided into five two-hour sessions. The first session covered juvenile rights and the concept of diversion. The next two sessions dealt with instruction for prosecuting and defense attorneys, and with formulating appropriate questions. The fourth session covered the jury deliberation and sentencing. The last training session combined a mock trial and swearing-in ceremony.

The first teen court trial session was to be held on May 5, 1994, at the Justice Center in Georgetown.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation made use of a attitude survey administered in a pre-test/post-test fashion. Additional sources of information, including interview and observation, were collected in order to

secure "multiple sources of information" (Posavac and Carey 1985: 56-57).

Data Collection

Attitudinal change among the participants in the teen court training sessions were assessed by means of a "feeling thermometer." Adapted from the National Election Study, the feeling thermometer measured feelings toward nine authority figures. Specifically, these included "Police Officer," "Teacher," "Court Designated Worker," "Parent," "Judge," "Principal," "Mother," "Lawyer," and "Father". The last item on the instrument, "Yourself," was included as a measure of self-esteem.

Students were asked to indicate their feelings toward each item by marking a line on a picture of a thermometer. The instructions informed them that ratings between 50 and 100 indicated they felt "favorable and warm" toward the person, and that ratings between 0 and 50 meant that they "didn't feel too favorable toward the person." Instructions directed the respondents to mark 50 if they felt neutral toward the figure, or if they did not recognize the title of the position. (Attachment 1)

The instrument yields interval data suitable for rigorous data analysis. At the same time, the minimal reading involved mitigates the affect of variation in students' reading ability on the outcome. The feeling thermometer information was supplemented by observation (Attachment 2) and exit interviews (Attachment 3).

Methods

The evaluation utilized a pre-test/post-test or before-and-after design (Langbein 1980: 107). In this design, the same population receives the measure before the intervention.

Participants were given the feeling thermometer at the first and the last training sessions. They were asked to read the instructions carefully, and reminded about filling out demographic information on the last page. Several participants asked whether they should respond to various items with a specific individual in mind, or the category of individuals in general. They were told to rate their feeling based on whatever image the word brought to mind.

Conclusion

The teen courts in Franklin and Scott Counties appear to have a positive impact on the participants. The substantial increase in favorable ratings indicates significant attitudinal change among teen court participants. After completing the training, teen court participants seem to possess a more positive attitude toward those in positions of authority within the legal system, and towards authority figures in general.

If the programs in Franklin and Scott Counties are comparable to programs elsewhere in the state, then it can be said that Kentucky's teen court program has a positive impact. Participating youth report favorable feelings toward authority, an essential law related education lesson.

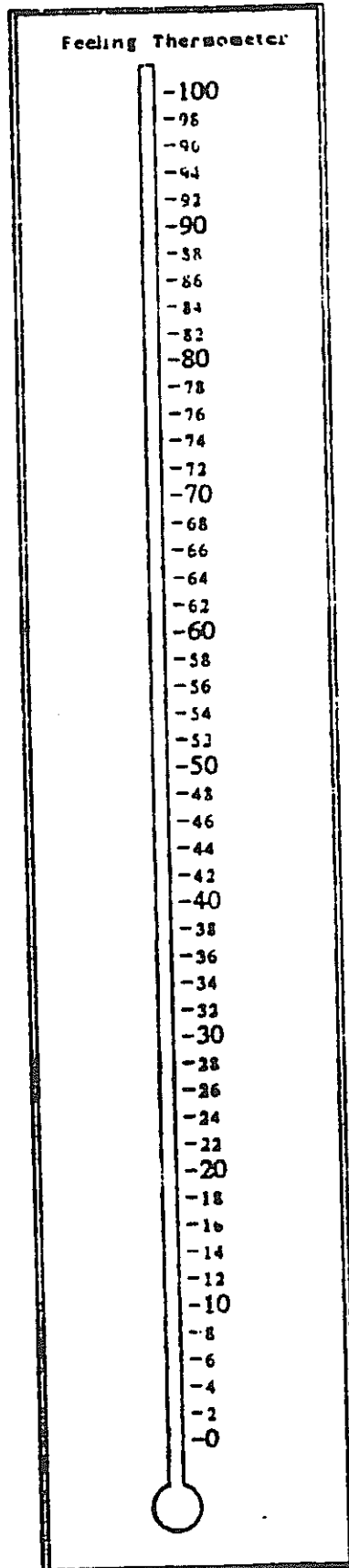
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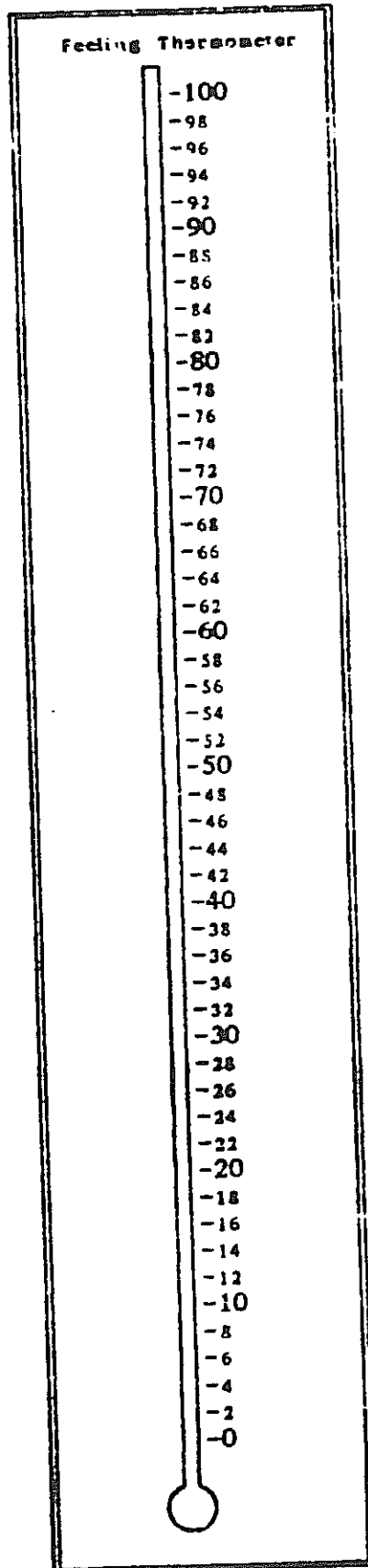
Attachment 1
Feeling Thermometer

■Instructions: I'd like to get your feelings toward some people in the community. For each person at the top of the page, rate this person using the feeling thermometer below. You may indicate any number between 1 and 100 by marking a line on the thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 and 50 mean that you don't feel too favorable toward the person. If you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person, you would rate that person at the 50 degree mark.

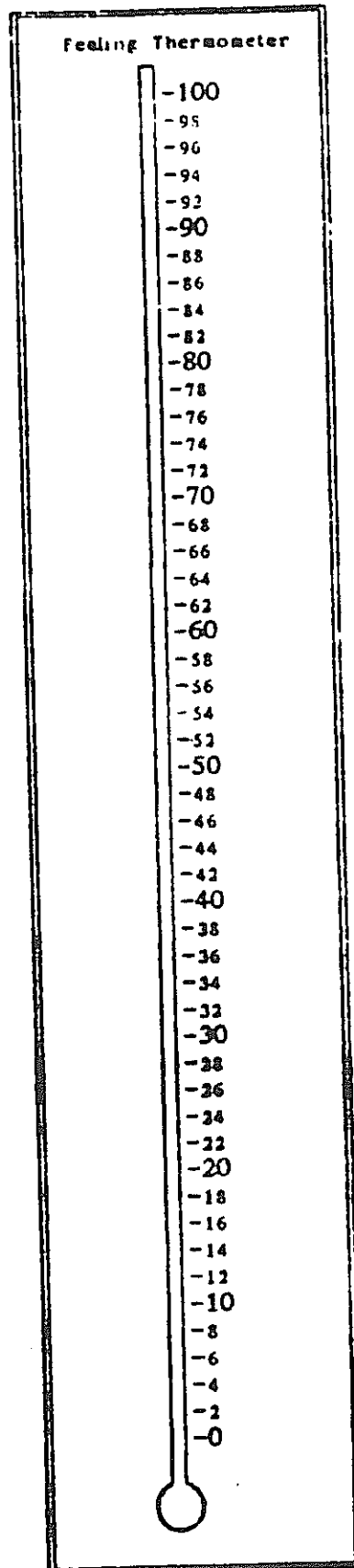
Police Officer



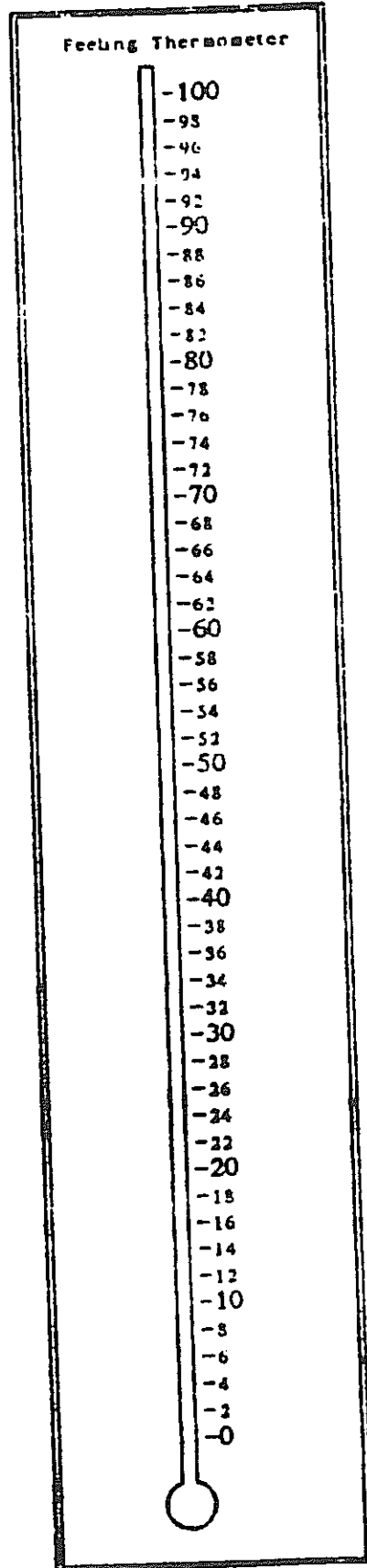
Teacher



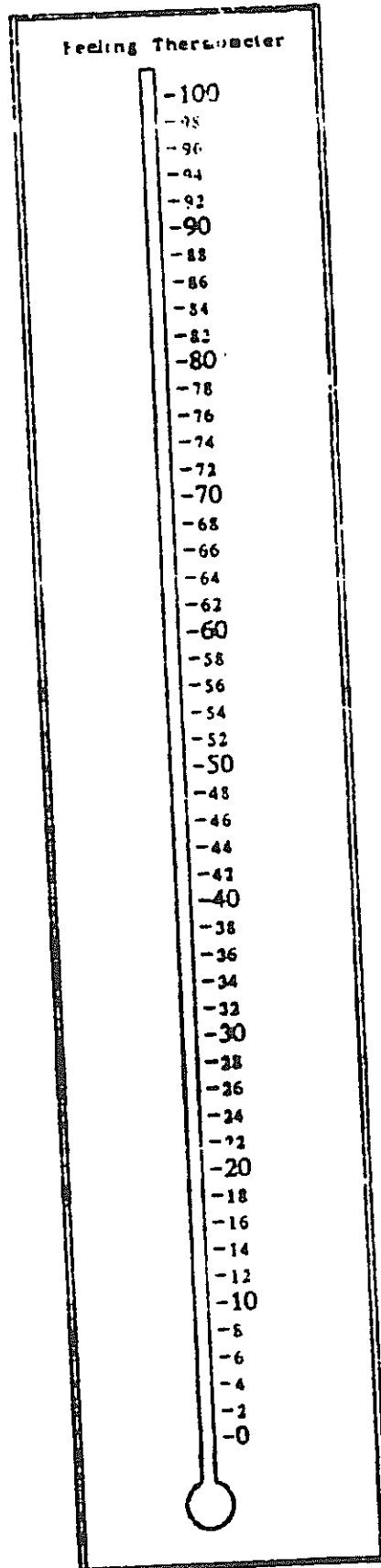
Court Designated Worker



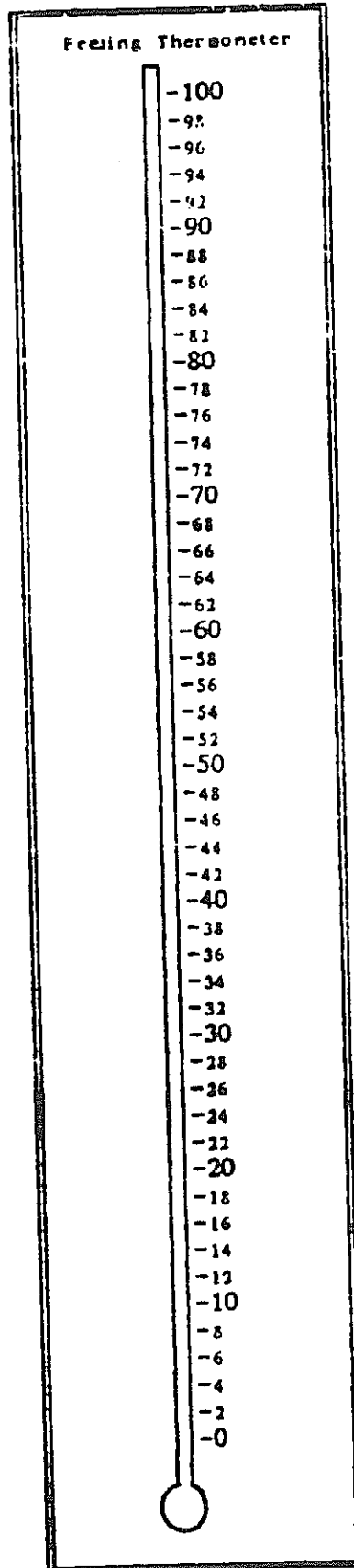
Parent



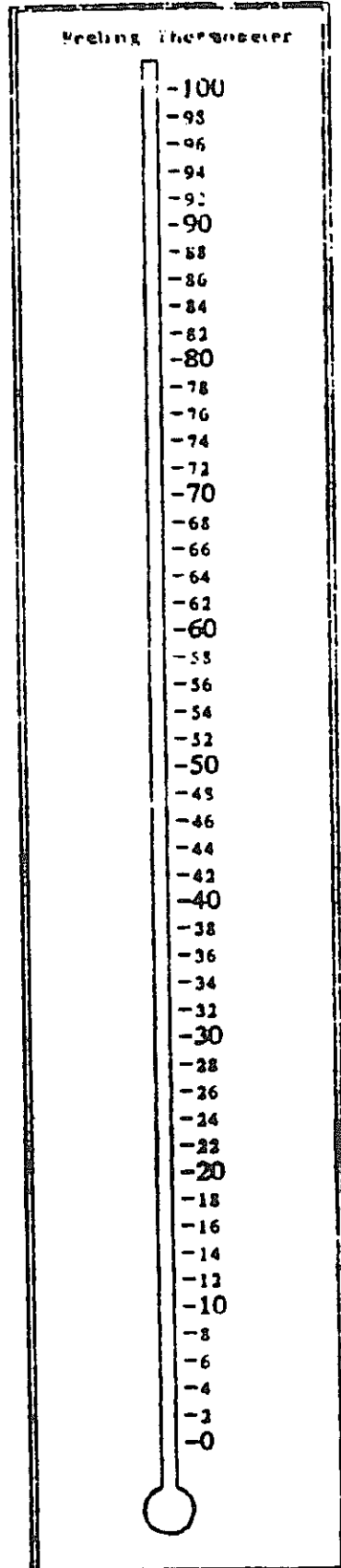
Judge



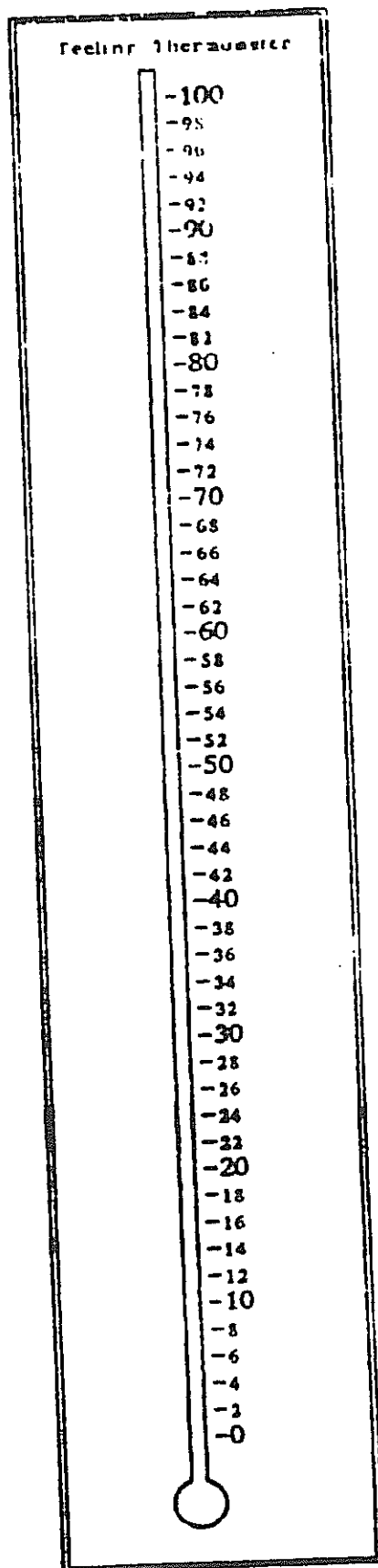
Principal



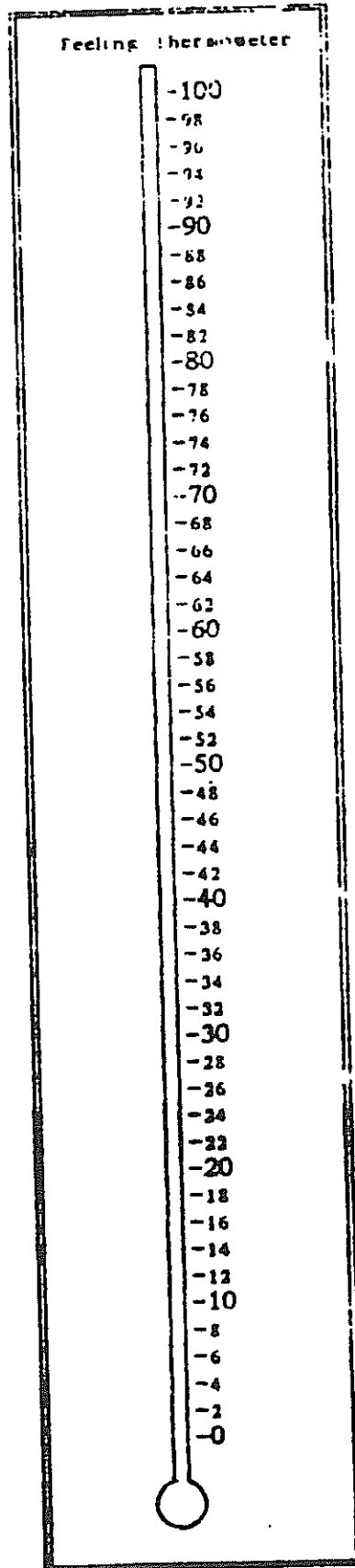
Mother



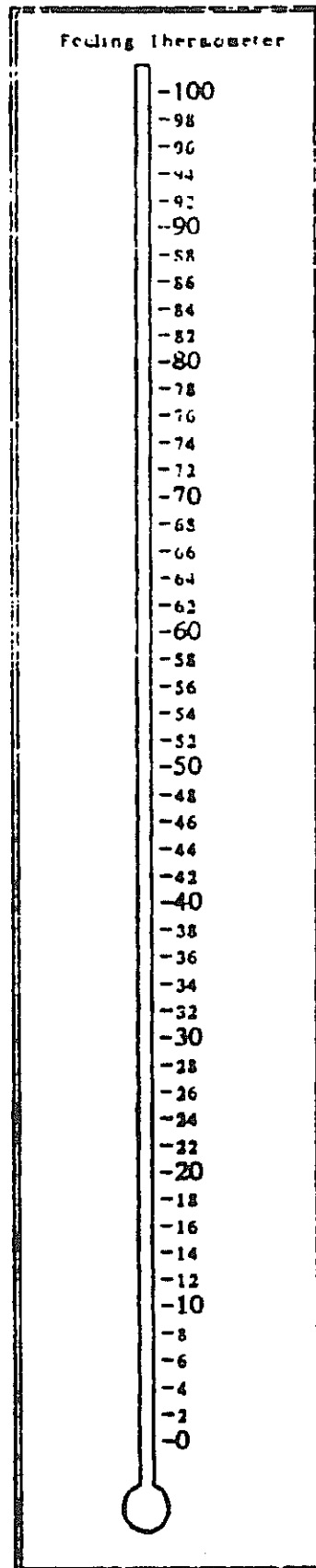
Lawyer



Father



Yourself



Instructions: Now I'd like to get some information about you. Please use a checkmark (✓) to indicate your answer to each of the following:

Gender:

Male _____ Female _____

Race/Ethnicity:

White _____ Black _____ American Indian _____ Asian _____

Hispanic _____ Other _____

Grade in School:

5th Grade _____ 6th Grade _____ 7th Grade _____ 8th Grade _____

9th Grade _____ 10th Grade _____ 11th Grade _____ 12th Grade _____

Please write in each of the following:

Your birthdate _____

Today's date _____

Attachment 2

Personal Observations

On February 24, 1994, I visited the Franklin County Teen Court Program and observed the evening's session. I also had the opportunity to talk with several teen court participants, defendants, and their parents.

Defendants sat with their parents and other teen court participants outside the court. Two teenage prosecuting attorneys chatted with a defendant they recognized from school; one wished him "good luck" when he entered the courtroom. A few studied, one made a phone call; others huddled together for a chat.

Parents

The father of one defendant suggested that the penalties at the jury's disposal were not serious enough. The penalties were "too easy" and more stringent penalties needed to be formulated. "Three times jury duty could be accomplished in a single evening," this father explained, "they need to give them [defendants] something they'll remember. A judge would give them something they'd remember." The program drew both good and bad kids; some would learn a lesson and be influenced by what they observed. "The program's fine, but make it hard."

Another parent, the mother of a young man sentenced together with a young woman, thought the program was a good idea. She believed her son would comply with the sentence, despite the fact that she thought he had been sentenced rather harshly relative to his co-defendant. "She [the co-defendant] doesn't have to do anything."

Participants

Several teen attorneys expressed their desire for other participants to "do a professional job." While they waited for their case, they quizzed each other on legal procedure and chatted about school activities. They had volunteered because they had family members in the legal profession and anticipated careers for themselves in law. "It's a good way for people to improve their public speaking," one commented.

"Attorneys need more information" one young woman said, "they need to know more of the facts to represent the case. "They need to evaluate prosecutors before letting them have a case," another commented, eager for her own performance. Another suggested that all the attorneys need to be "presentable"--dress the part.

Following the case, all the participants agreed it "was fun" and

that they "enjoyed it." "I can't wait to do it again. That was awesome!"

Defendants

Two defendants spoke with broad grins, clearly satisfied with the outcome. Another, who had received 60 hours of community service, felt he didn't deserve the sentence and wanted to talk to the judge.

As he talked he expressed several reasons for his feelings. "Anybody put in my position would have done it. I know it was wrong, but they [the jury] went a bit overboard." Several attorneys had talked about school matters during the proceeding and this bothered him a great deal. "I know some of the jurors, they were not being themselves in there. They were not professional--talking about friends and stuff while the jury was deliberating." He was also dismayed because he had not received jury duty. "They just think I'm a bad guy," he sighed.

Attachment 3

Exit Interviews

Several themes emerged from exit interviews administered to teen court participants at the close of their service.

Franklin County

Most frequently, participants wrote that the program was an effective means of learning about the law and the legal system:

"I believe teen court...teaches everyone involved about the judicial system."

"It is a good idea to get our youth involved in the judicial process. I now understand it better than I ever did before."

"I really though it was a good experience which helped me understand our judicial system more. We learned about it in school, but nothing teaches you better than experience."

Other participants wrote that participants needed to take the process "more seriously":

"It worked well, but sometimes there was a lack of real courtroom seriousness."

"I believe it can work, but I believe the sentencing needs to be more strict, and the atmosphere more serious. The defendants think it's a joke."

"...Both the defendants and teen court members need to remember the program's purpose and take it more seriously."

Two other themes that emerged from the exit interviews were the need for attorneys to have more information pertinent to the case, and for the jury to possess increased sentencing authority.

"If success is proven there, and the teen court program continues, volunteers need to have a clear understanding of the defendant's rights (not have their name mentioned out of court, no discussion of past crimes, etc.). Also, volunteers should be notified of the court dates at least one week beforehand so they can plan ahead."

"...Attorneys had too little time to prepare and not much specific information to try to make a case on."

Attachment 4

Northern Kentucky's Teen Court program serves Campbell, Boone, and Kenton Counties. Kenton County, an urban area of 142,000, lies across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ohio, a metropolitan area of about 1.7 million. Covington, the area's principal city, is also the third largest Kentucky city.

The program, coordinated by Michelle Chalk and later, Ann Purdy, two students enrolled in Northern Kentucky University's Justice Studies program, held its first teen court session in September 1992. The program has received referrals from Campbell and Boone County District Courts.

Northern Kentucky Teen Court participants completed the feeling thermometer at the conclusion of the teen court training session on November 18, 1993.

Mean Feeling Thermometer Ratings of Northern Kentucky Teen Court Participants

	Post-test (N = 37)
Police Officer	71.5
Teacher	64.0
CDW*	72.8
Parent	74.3
Judge	64.2
Principal	74.8
Mother	78.9
Lawyer	76.2
Father	80.2
Yourself	90.0

*Court Designated Worker