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**Document Title:** A Group Randomized Trial of Restorative Justice Programming to Address the School to Prison Pipeline, Reduce Aggression and Violence, and Enhance School Safety in Middle and High School Students

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**Document Number:** 254580

**Date Received:** March 2020

**Award Number:** 2014-CK-BX-0104

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A Group Randomized Trial of Restorative Justice Programming  
to Address the School to Prison Pipeline, Reduce Aggression and Violence,  
and Enhance School Safety in Middle and High School Students

Final Report in Response to:

NIJ-2014-3878 - Developing Knowledge About What Works to Make Schools Safe

September 2019

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This project was supported by Award No. 2014-CK-BX-0104, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

## Executive Summary

This study evaluated the efficacy of School-Based Teen Courts (SBTCs) that emphasized restorative justice and replaced punitive administrative disciplinary practices with community service sanctions determined by a peer jury. The goal of the SBTCs was to keep students with disciplinary problems engaged in school and out of the juvenile justice system by connecting them to community service and remedial services rather than marginalize them with suspensions/expulsions and juvenile justice referrals.

A rigorous experimental trial was conducted with 24 middle- and high-schools randomly selected to receive SBTCs ( $n=12$ ) or to business-as-usual without any SBTC program ( $n=12$ ). Analyses examined school-level longitudinal growth models ( $N=24$  schools, 3 assessment points) and individual-level ( $N < 1,000$  students tracked for 3 years) pretest-posttest comparisons on outcomes measures for school climate (i.e., school danger, hassles, and satisfaction), student problems (i.e., anxiety, violent behavior, delinquent friends, and bullying victimization), and suspension rates. SBTC offenders were also assessed at the beginning and end of their program participation.

Two hundred forty-nine students were seen in SBTCs rather than receiving traditional disciplinary actions. All of these offenders successfully completed community/school sanctions; no one dropped out of the program. Longitudinal growth models revealed that SBTCs were significantly associated with positive changes in school satisfaction and reductions in delinquent friends for high school students. Pretest-posttest analyses (Paired Sample T-tests) also showed significant decreases in student-reported violent behavior in SBTC schools while there was no significant change in this outcome in comparison schools. School hassles, bullying victimization, and use of suspensions for discipline all decreased in schools with a SBTC; however, these outcomes also decreased in comparison schools, making the changes not statistically significant. Short-term suspensions decreased more than twice as much in SBTC schools versus in comparison schools. There was a 47% reduction in bullying victimization in SBTC schools relative to a 22% reduction in comparison schools. Finally, SBTC participants reported decreasing friend support and increasing peer pressure and peer rejection.

These findings suggest that SBTCs have the potential to positively impact youth development by diverting youth with behavior issues to restorative justice Teen Courts instead of continuing to use traditional discipline practices that feed the school to prison pipeline. While initial results are encouraging, more research is needed with larger samples of schools to confirm initial findings and future implementation models should integrate SBTCs with other restorative practices in a comprehensive package to fully impact school climate and student problems.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) refers to the school policies and practices (e.g., zero tolerance policies) that funnel students from schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). STPP is impacted by a variety of factors such as inadequate public school resources (e.g., limited funding, overcrowded classrooms), increased police presence in schools, the use of alternative schools and juvenile detention facilities as a form of punishment, and zero tolerance discipline policies (e.g., the indiscriminate imposition of punitive disciplinary practices regardless of the infraction; American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). The STPP often leads youth to juvenile court, resulting in a myriad of negative outcomes.

Youth adjudicated as delinquents receive a juvenile court record and face a host of long term negative consequences such as limited educational and employment opportunities, eviction from public housing, suspension of driver's license, deportation, and an inability to serve in the military (Juvenile Law Center, 2011). Involvement in the juvenile justice system has also been connected to increased delinquency (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Guckenbug 2010). Further, juvenile justice system involvement can result in detainment in a juvenile facility which is connected to increased delinquency, poor mental health, self-harm, and suicide (Gallagher & Dobrin, 2006; Holman & Ziedenberg, 2006); in fact, detained youth are almost three times more likely to commit suicide compared to non-detained youth (Gallagher & Dobrin, 2006). These consequences weaken youths' connection and engagement in society, increasing the likelihood of reoffending. Indeed, 56% of juveniles who have been referred to juvenile court reoffend and return to court prior to turning 18 (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). A high proportion of U.S. adolescents are at risk of these negative outcomes as the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of youth under 18 in the world; 336.0 per 100,000, which is over five times higher than the rate of the next highest nation (South Africa, 69.0 per 100,000; Hazel, 2008). Thus, finding ways to

prevent youth from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system and potentially facing detention is a priority. One promising way to interrupt the STPP and avoid these negative outcomes is by replacing school disciplinary practices that marginalize youth with restorative justice programs such as School-Based Teen Court. The evidence-based National Institute of Justice (n.d.) clearinghouse, [Crimesolutions.gov](http://Crimesolutions.gov), has recently deemed restorative justice and juvenile justice diversion programs “promising” based on prior research.

### **Background on School-Based Teen Courts (SBTCs)**

Teen Court (also referred to as Peer Court or Youth Court) is a diversion program with elements of restorative justice that diverts first-time offenders from the traditional juvenile justice system and holds them accountable for their transgressions through prosocial sanctions (Stickle, Connell, Wilson, & Gottredson, 2008). Rather than focusing on punishment, the restorative justice framework emphasizes adolescent offenders taking responsibility for their transgressions by repairing the harm they have caused to victims and/or the community (National Institute of Justice, 2007). In this regard, the goal of Teen Court is to reintegrate offenders back into the community or school community (depending upon where the court is held), rather than further ostracizing them with excessive punishment. Although the majority of Teen Courts (64%) are community based (i.e., operated through juvenile justice system based programs or non-profit organizations; National Association of Teen Courts, n.d.), Teen Court is a viable option for use within schools to address disciplinary issues. Indeed, 36% of Teen Courts operate in schools (National Association of Teen Courts, n.d.).

School-Based Teen Courts (SBTC's) operate within a school setting and most commonly handle school disciplinary cases, however some programs also accept referrals for delinquency and status offences from juvenile court or law enforcement (Vickers, 2004). Schools often use

SBTC's as an alternative to routine disciplinary actions (e.g., detention, suspension), thus decreasing the number of students who are removed from school and risk entering the STPP. Suspensions often cause more harm than good; suspended youth are often left unsupervised (See Iselin, 2010 for a review), giving them ample time to engage in anti-social behavior. Compared to youth in school, those out of school (e.g., suspended youth) are significantly more likely to report past 30-day weapon carrying, fighting in the past year, having sexual intercourse, and having used substances (e.g., cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994). Further, suspended youth are at risk for getting behind in academic work, which could lead to academic and school disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school (see Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012 for a review; see Skiba & Peterson, 1999 for a review). Thus, using SBTCs to reduce suspensions is a potential means of keeping youth out of trouble by keeping them engaged in school. There are two basic structures for SBTCs: Classroom Based Teen Court or Club Based Teen Court (Vickers, 2004).

A Classroom Based Teen Court program becomes part of the schools' curriculum and operates out of an existing class (e.g., social studies, government, English) or an elective class (e.g., civics, Teen Court class) and the teacher for that class serves as the Teen Court coordinator. Hearings are held as needed, and usually occur on school grounds as opposed to a courtroom or public building. These Teen Courts usually accept school disciplinary cases (e.g., disruptive behavior, truancy) and delinquent offenses that occur on school grounds or school sponsored events (e.g., simple assault, substance use, vandalism), depending upon the discretion of school resource officers and school administrators (Vickers, 2004). Club Based Teen Court programs are considered an extracurricular school activity and are therefore not considered part of the school curriculum. While most hearings are held at the school, they occur after school

hours and some hearings are actually held in a courtroom or other public space. The coordinator is a teacher, school resource officer, or interested community volunteer. Club Based Teen Court programs accept both school disciplinary cases and delinquency cases from outside referrals (Vickers, 2004). The current study exclusively looked at Classroom-Based Teen Courts.

In general, the Principal or Assistant Principal refers adolescents to the SBTC. A teacher or school administrator fills the role of judge and adolescents fill the roles of prosecution, defense counsel, bailiff, and jurors. The prosecution represents the school community, while the defense counsel represents the student on trial. Each attorney gives a brief opening statement; the prosecution focuses on how the school community was harmed by the transgression and stresses the need for stringent sanctions, while the defense counsel highlights positive aspects of the student on trial (e.g., first time offender, receives good grades). No witnesses are put on the stand and the jurors question the student on trial in order to gather additional information; jurors are often provided with an established set of questions. Each attorney gives a brief closing statement and the jury deliberates and decides on appropriate sanctions. The overall purpose is not to establish guilt or innocence, but rather to formulate a set of restorative sanctions for the offender to complete. In most Teen Courts, youth have to admit guilt during the intake process. If the youth does not admit guilt, the principal or assistant principal is alerted to investigate the case and it is withdrawn from Teen Court.

SBTC sanctions often include community service (e.g., a project that improves the school environment), an essay, and/or a letter of apology. Other sanctions depend upon what services and programs are available at each school. For example, if there is a weekly group focused on improving self-esteem for girls, a female defendant could be sanctioned to attend the group for a set period of time. The focus of the sanctions is on having the defendant repair the harm he/she

has caused; the sanctions are meant to be restorative rather than punitive. One of the goals of implementing a SBTC is to have the entire school community adopt the restorative justice framework and focus on repairing the harm that negative actions have caused. In this regard, Teen Court aims to alter the entire climate of a school by becoming part of the school's culture, however, there are very few empirical studies of SBTCs, leaving a large gap in the literature.

One small (N = 14) qualitative study of SBTC volunteers found that volunteers reported increased citizenship and civic skills such as learning about the law and legal proceedings, decision-making, and the importance of voting. Volunteers also noted increased confidence, leadership skills, and communication skills (Hirschinger-Blank et al., 2009). Although the sample size was small, these findings suggest that Teen Court has the potential to benefit all adolescents who participate in the process. Teen Court could serve to create a group of confident, prosocial leaders, which would benefit the entire school community.

In one of the only quantitative studies of SBTCs to date, students reported an increase in feeling safe in the hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, and outside the school building following the implementation of Teen Court; although the increase did not reach statistical significance, findings indicate that the presence of Teen Court has the potential to increase school safety, perhaps by decreasing aggressive, violent, and disruptive behaviors. It is important to note that this study lacked a control group and the sample size was small (N = 109; Jensen, 2015), highlighting the need for additional research. In the largest study of SBTCs to date, Smokowski and colleagues (2018) reported that violent behavior, anxiety, friend rejection, and bullying victimization decreased significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools Year 1 pretest to Year 2 posttest, but did not change significantly in the control schools. The current study extends that initial research with a third wave of assessment (Year 3) after two years of intervention.



Community-Based Teen Courts (CBTCs) that collaborate with the juvenile justice system have a slightly more advanced research base relative to SBTCs and have shown signs of effectiveness. Participation in CBTCs provided satisfaction with the experience, improved attitudes toward authority, and greater knowledge of the legal system (LoGalbo, 1998; McLeod, 1999). Logalbo and Callahan (2009) found that only 12.6% of juvenile offenders reoffended within five months of CBTC involvement. Improved attitudes toward authority and self were associated with a lower incidence of recidivism (see also Bright, Young, Bessaha, & Falls, 2015). After analyzing data from 110 CBTC defendants, Smokowski and colleagues found that the youth who successfully completed all CBTC sanctions reported a significant decrease in school hassles, peer pressure, parent-child conflict, anxiety, depression, aggression, and violent behavior and significant increases in future optimism (Evans, Smokowski, Barbee, Bower, & Barefoot, 2016; Smokowski, Rose, Evans, Barbee, Cotter, Bower, 2017; Smokowski, Cotter, Guo, & Evans, 2017). CBTC effects have never been compared to SBTC effects.

Research on school-based restorative justice practices in general has indicated that these programs are promising. Two large scale studies in the United Kingdom implemented restorative justice disciplinary practices in schools (e.g., conferences with an adult overseeing a conversation and resolution between the victim and aggressor) and found that learning was enhanced, the overall school environment was improved (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004), and there was improvement in relationships in the school (McCluskey et al., 2008). In three schools in Pennsylvania, following the adoption of restorative justice programming, schools reported decreased inappropriate behavior, disrespect to teachers, classroom disruption, disciplinary referrals, fighting, and detention (Mirsky, 2007). These studies suggest that restorative justice programs have the potential to positively impact student behavior

and the school climate. Based on the lack of research directly examining the impact of restorative justice programming in the form of SBTCs, additional research is needed and the current study aimed to begin to fill that research gap.

### **Current Study**

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate School-Based Teen Courts with a randomized controlled trial to assess if and how this restorative justice program: 1) enhances school climate (i.e., higher student satisfaction, less school danger, fewer school hassles); 2) reduces student problems (i.e., violent behavior, anxiety, delinquent friendships, bullying victimization); and 3) lowers use of punitive discipline in the form of short-term suspensions for middle- and high school students. Twenty-four middle- and high-schools were randomly assigned to receive School Based Teen Court (SBTC;  $n=12$ ) or the usual school curriculum (without Teen Court, no-SBTC;  $n=12$ ). Data were collected from a random sample of youth in repeated measures surveys across the 24 schools to examine if and how the presence of SBTCs impacted student perceptions of the school climate and student problems. The randomly selected students filled out the School Success Profile Plus (SSP+; Bowen & Richman, 2008) in the Spring of the school year for 3 years. Aggregating student surveys into overall mean scores for each school provided measures of how schools changed over the course of the study. We will call this school-level data because the aggregate student surveys provide measures of school climate change with mean scores for each of the 24 schools. These SSP+ surveys were also collected from the students who participated in the SBTC program (e.g., offenders) to assess how participation in the program impacted individual participant behavior from pretest to posttest.

### **Measures**

The School Success Profile Plus (SSP+; Bowen & Richman, 2008) is a frequently used youth self-report that assesses perceptions about school, friends, family, neighborhood, self, health, and well-being. The SSP has been administered to tens of thousands of students since its creation in 1993, resulting in well-documented reliability and validity (Bowen, Rose, & Bowen, 2005). Using a modified version of the SSP, the School Success Profile Plus (SSP+), previous analyses found the scales on the SSP+ to have internal consistency reliabilities exceeding 0.70 (e.g., Evans, Smokowski, Barbee, Bower, & Barefoot, 2016; Evans, Smokowski, & Cotter, 2014; Smokowski, Guo, Cotter, Evans, & Rose, 2015; Smokowski et al., 2016; Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013). Assessments were filled out in school computer labs with close supervision from staff in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Although we collected the entire SSP+ survey from students, only scales theoretically connected to the SBTC principles were used as outcome measures (see Smokowski, Evans, Wing, Bower, Bacallao & Barbee, 2018) for how outcome measures were previously used). The SSP+ outcome measures from student surveys for analyses were: school climate (i.e., school hassles, school danger, school satisfaction) and student problems scales (i.e., anxiety, violent behavior, bullying victimization, delinquent friendships). Suspension rates were collected for each school from North Carolina administrative records. Administrative data on school characteristics (e.g., free/reduced price lunch and school size) were used to control for differences between schools.

### **Participating Counties**

**Robeson.** Robeson County, NC, one of the two rural counties that participated in the current project, has one of the highest rates of youth violence in the state of North Carolina. For example, in 2014, Robeson County had a crime rate of 6,844 per 100,000, the highest in the state (North Carolina Department of Justice, 2015). The 2010 juvenile arrest rate in Robeson County

was 7,549 per 100,000, the fifth highest in the state, behind four major metropolitan areas (North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations, 2015). In addition, Robeson County is one of the most racially/ethnically diverse rural counties in the United States. In 2015, 40% of residents identified as American Indian, 32% as Caucasian, 24% as African American, and 8% as Hispanic/Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2016a). Between 2010 and 2014, 33% of Robeson County residents lived below poverty, a rate more than double the national rate of 14% (United States Census Bureau, 2016a). From 2010 until 2016, Robeson County schools have consistently reported the highest rates of corporal punishment use in the state (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2011-2016), highlighting the need for alternative discipline options.

**Columbus.** Columbus County, NC, located near Robeson, is a rural county with similar risk factors, although a lower rate of juvenile crime. The juvenile arrest rate was 7.1 per 100,000 in Columbus County (North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations, 2015) and the Youth death rate per 100,00 was 82.6. Columbus County is also less diverse than Robeson and 63.6% of the population identified as Caucasian, 30.5% as African American, 3.5% as American Indian, and 5.0% as Hispanic Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2016b). However, Columbus County reports high rates of poverty with 24.3% of the population living below poverty and a 12.6% unemployment rate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). See Table 1 for a comparison of Robeson County, Columbus County, North Carolina, and the United States.

### **School-Level Randomization**

Twenty-four schools were recruited to participate in the randomized controlled trial of SBTCs. Within each county, Robeson or Columbus, there were 12 participating schools; 8 middle schools and 4 high schools in Robeson and the same numbers in Columbus. Within each county, the participating schools were separated into matched pairs based on similarity in

suspension rates and free/reduced lunch student population. Officials from the superintendent's office in each county randomly assigned one of the matched schools to SBTC intervention and the other to comparison (no-SBTC) by flipping a coin. The treatment and comparison schools all completed SSP+ needs assessments to measure change in student reports. This process resulted in the randomized matched pairs consisting of: Robeson County – 4 middle schools with new SBTCs, 4 middle schools no-SBTC, 2 high schools with new SBTCs, 2 high schools no-SBTC; and Columbus County – 4 middle schools with new SBTCs, 4 middle schools no-SBTC, 2 high schools with new SBTCs, 2 high schools no-SBTC.

### **Teen Court Implementation Procedure**

Each of the 12 schools implementing SBTCs selected a class that served as the Teen Court for the school (e.g., eleventh grade social studies). This class received 8 to 10 hours of Teen Court training before the start of the school year in Year 1. The training introduced and explained the purpose of Teen Court, the student's role, and the benefits of Teen Court, as well as providing information about school violations, the effects of crime on victims, and the restorative justice framework. All students were then trained as jurors and learned how to question the defendant and decide on sanctions; mock hearings were used to teach these skills. Throughout the year, ongoing trainings were provided to help students maintain their skills. Each school coordinator (e.g., member of the school staff responsible for running the Teen Court) received about 6 to 8 hours of training in Year 1 and ongoing training throughout the year. These trainings explained the structure and goals of the Teen Court process and taught the coordinators how to run a Teen Court hearing and how to administer the SSP+. Each school administered at least two hearings per month throughout the course of the school year.

A total of 249 adolescents who committed a transgression at school participated in the Teen Court program as “participants.” There were two criteria for participation in SBTC: youth committed an infraction of school rules and were willing to admit guilt. The Principal referred youth who engaged in a transgression at school (e.g., disruptive behavior, fighting, being out of area) to the Teen Court program instead of using traditional discipline. In most cases, participation in Teen Court replaced a punishment from the school and was used as an alternative to the normal school punishment (e.g., Teen Court replaced a suspension). In other cases, participating in Teen Court reduced the punishment from the school (e.g., a five-day suspension for fighting and no referral to juvenile probation instead of a 10-day suspension and a referral to juvenile probation). Considering that half of the tested SBTCs were in middle schools, not all of the infraction referrals would have led to juvenile court involvement. However, with the growing presence of School Resource Officers and zero-tolerance policies, many lower-level discipline problems are commonly referred to juvenile court counselors, even in lower grades. North Carolina schools have had fifth graders referred to juvenile court, prompting concerns about the school-to-prison-pipeline. The SBTCs are set up to handle any type of school-based infraction, from swearing at a teacher to physical assault; however, the nature of referrals has to be left to the discretion of the school’s leadership team.

In order to participate in Teen Court, the referred students admitted their guilt. SBTCs are not meant to determine guilt or innocence. If a student commits an infraction and will not admit guilt, he or she progresses through the regular course of school discipline and possible referral to juvenile justice counselors. This was uncommon in our SBTC schools because students preferred going through the Teen Court process rather than traditional discipline. All 249 referred students

with infractions agreed to participate in the program; refusals to participate were not a problem because the SBTC process was less aversive compared to traditional discipline.

After program orientation and admitting guilt, all SBTC participants assented to fill out the SSP+ prior to Teen Court and again six months after their sanctions were completed. Parents/caregivers also gave consent for participation. Each school had a Teen Court coordinator who was responsible for administering the SSP+ and overseeing the Teen Court process. Prior to filling out assessments, students were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to decline at any time or skip any question without negative consequences. Students assented to participate by reading and electronically signing an assent screen. All participants had a unique identification number in order to maintain confidentiality and no identifying information was collected. All intervention and control schools received a \$2,000 stipend, which was used to reward the entire student body for participating in the project.

Over half (66%) of the 249 Teen Court participants were middle school students and the rest were high school students; the average participant age was 14 years old ( $SD = 2.25$ ). The majority of the sample (59%) were male and received free/reduced price lunch (66%). The racial/ethnic diversity mirrored the surrounding community and 40% identified as African American, 23% as American Indian, 17% as Caucasian, 10% as Latino, and 10% as mixed race/other.

**Offenses.** The offenses that participants committed included; physical fighting, disrespectful behaviors (i.e., shouting, cursing, throwing objects) towards teachers, excessive tardiness, misbehavior on school buses, and other school infractions of rules.

**Sanctions.** All SBTC sanctions are based on restorative justice principles of addressing the harm caused by the infraction and engaging with the school community through service.

Sanctions are meant to provide prosocial relationships with others and not marginalize the participant, prompting further inappropriate behavior. As examples of sanctions, participants were required to write apology letters and read them to the victim, work with coaches to assist with team practices, assist the school custodian, create lists of alternative behaviors to slow down anger, and serve on SBTC juries. Sanctions can also include mandating participation in services, such as academic tutoring, anger management groups, seeing the school social worker, or other programs that may help the participant. Sanction completion was closely tracked and monitored. If the participant failed to complete the required sanctions, s/he was referred back to the traditional school discipline process. All 249 of the SBTC participants completed their sanctions.

### **The Impact of Teen Court at the School Level**

There were 2,749 students included in the analytic sample; these were youth randomly selected from the 24 participating schools who had data for all three years of the project. There were 1,388 youth enrolled in Teen Court schools and 1,361 youth enrolled in the control schools.

Two separate analyses were conducted at the school level. Both analyses examined changes from Year 1 to Year 3 in a random sample of youth from the 24 participating schools. The statistical power of this group randomized research design is contingent upon the highest level of clustering (i.e., 24 middle and high schools) regardless of the hundreds of students clustered within each school. First, to supplement the limited statistical power of the sophisticated school-level longitudinal growth models, we ran simple paired sample T-tests on Year 1 to Year 3 student outcomes with a Bonferroni adjustment of p-values to 0.01. This less rigorous, but commonly used analyses extended our previous research from baseline to Year 2 (Smokowski, et al., 2018). The outcomes tested include: school climate - school danger, hassles,



satisfaction; and student problems – anxiety, delinquent friends, violent behavior, and bullying victimization.

Second, longitudinal growth models were run after multiple imputation was used to address missing data and 10 data sets were imputed. Because entire schools were assigned, it was important to use methods appropriate for multilevel data such that standard errors for school-level variables were estimated correctly and could handle complex relationships among predictors including cross-level interactions. In addition, with three waves of data, longitudinal growth models can address reliability concerns and improve standard error estimation. Combined, the structure of the data consisted of three levels: multiple measurements on each student, with students nested within schools.

There are different ways in which time can be parameterized when there are three time points. Linear and non-parametric models are possible; higher-order terms such as quadratic or cubic terms are not. In every variation, we tested both a linear variation and a non-parametric version with dummy variables for waves 2 and 3 (with wave 1 as the reference for both). The model with the linear version is:

$$(1L) \quad Y_{tij} = \beta_{0ij} + \beta_{Wij}W_t + e_{tij}$$

$W = \{0, 1, 2\}$ , corresponding to the first, second, and third waves. The coefficient for  $W$  measures the average change in the outcome over each wave of data collection. Alternatively, the model with the dummy variables is:

$$(1D) \quad Y_{tij} = \beta_{0ij} + \beta_{1ij}W_1 + \beta_{2ij}W_2 + e_{tij}$$

$W_1$  corresponds to  $W = 1$  and  $W_2$  to  $W = 2$  ( $W = 0$  is the reference.) The coefficient for  $W_1$  measures the difference between wave 1 and wave 2 outcomes; and the coefficient for  $W_2$  the

difference between wave 1 and wave 3 outcomes. Using 1L, we then regress  $\beta_{0ij}$  and  $\beta_{Wij}$  on models for the student:

$$(2) \quad \beta_{0ij} = \gamma_{0j} + X_{ij}\gamma_{Xj} + u_{0ij}$$

$$(2W) \quad \beta_{Wij} = \gamma_{Wj}$$

For 1D, models for  $\beta_{1ij}$  and  $\beta_{2ij}$  have a form similar to 2W.  $X_{ij}$  is a set of student characteristics or covariates. Model 2W indicates that each student's change over time in the outcome is assumed to be equal to that of the school of which he or she is a member. Finally, the coefficients from the student level were regressed on school level models:

$$(3) \quad \gamma_{0j} = \pi_0 + Z_j\pi_Z + \pi_{TC}TC_j + r_{0j}$$

$$(3X) \quad \gamma_{Xj} = \pi_X$$

$$(3W) \quad \gamma_{Wj} = \pi_W + \pi_{TCW}TC_j$$

A school-level variable for Teen Court assignment was included in model 3, capturing the difference between Teen Court and control schools at the first wave, and in model 3W, capturing the effect of Teen Court on the linear change over time in each outcome. School level characteristics or covariates are represented by  $Z_j$ . Combined and rearranged, we estimated the following model:

$$(4) \quad Y_{tij} = \pi_0 + \pi_W W_t + \pi_{TC}TC_j + \pi_{TCW}TC_j W_t + X_{ij}\pi_X + Z_j\pi_Z + e_{tij} + u_{0ij} + r_{0j}$$

The treatment effect of Teen Court relative to the control condition, was given by  $\pi_{TCW}$ , the coefficient on the cross-level interaction between Teen Court assignment (TC) and wave (W). It captures the additional change over time for youth in the treatment condition relative to the change over time in the control condition (which is given by  $\pi_W$ ). All of the error terms (e, u, and r) are assumed to be normally distributed with means zero and variances of  $\sigma^2$ ,  $\tau$ , and  $\eta$ , respectively. In models with dummy variables for time, there would be two treatment effects,

$\pi_{TCW1}$  for the second wave, and  $\pi_{TCW2}$  for the third, each relative to the first. All student-level covariates were centered at the school mean.

The indicator of school level is usually entered as a time-varying variable at level 1, because it changes over time for many students as they advance from middle to high school. A standard approach to handling school membership in studies in which students advance to the next level (or simply change schools from year to year) is to define a school of record for each student. In this study, the school of record is the wave 1 school.

**SBTC effects on school suspensions from Year 1 to Year 3.** We examined if there were significant differences in the number of short-term suspensions per 100 students between the Teen Court and no Teen Court comparison schools. Short-term suspension rates were gathered for all three years of the study and then the change scores between year 1 and year 3 were calculated for each school. Although the number of short-term suspensions decreased by an average change score of 12.56 for the Teen Court schools and only 5.32 for the no Teen Court schools, this difference did not reach statistical significance. This means that all schools were trying to decrease their use of short-term suspensions for discipline. The decrease in the number of short-term suspensions in SBTC schools was 2.36 times greater than the decrease in the number of short-term suspensions at no-SBTC schools.

**SBTC effects on student problems and school climate.** 1) Student problems: Table 2 showing the paired sample T-Tests indicates that there were significant decreases in the SBTC schools from Year 1 to Year 3 on student-reported violent behavior and delinquent friendships. Bullying victimization decreased from 23% in SBTC schools at baseline to 13% in Year 3 after 2 years of intervention. In non-SBTC comparison schools, bullying victimization displayed a smaller decrease from 23% to 18%. The differences in bullying victimization between SBTC and non-SBTC schools was not

statistically significant, most likely due to the small sample size of 24 schools. Student reports of anxiety also did not significantly change.

The longitudinal growth models uncovered the following nuances in results.

- Delinquent friends: High school youth in SBTC had a statistically significant reduction in delinquent friends (-0.04,  $p < 0.05$ ) relative to high school youth in the control group, and in fact were the only group (relative to middle school in SBTC or control and high school in control) predicted to decline.

2) School climate: Reports of school danger did not significantly change in SBTC or comparison schools. Student reports of school hassles significantly decreased in both SBTC and comparison schools. However, these changes did not rise to levels of statistical significance in complex longitudinal growth models.

The longitudinal growth models uncovered the following nuances in results.

- School satisfaction: Notably, on school satisfaction, high school youth in SBTC were significantly worse off at assignment than middle school youth (-0.165,  $p < 0.01$ ), and a statistically significant and positive change was observed for high school youth in SBTC relative to high school youth in the control group (0.043,  $p < 0.05$ ). This effect for high school youth was significantly different from that for middle school youth. Relative to high school youth in SBTC, middle school youth in SBTC started out 0.145 ( $p < 0.001$ ) higher on school satisfaction; changed by 0.071 less ( $p < 0.01$ ); and experienced no overall benefit from SBTC on school satisfaction.

To summarize, longitudinal growth models revealed that SBTC was significantly associated with positive changes in school satisfaction and reductions in delinquent friends for high school students. Basic Year 1 to Year 3 Paired Sample T-Tests showed significant declines

in student reported violent behavior and delinquent friendships in SBTC schools, but not in comparison schools. Short-term suspensions decreased by more than twice as much in SBTC schools versus in non-SBTC schools; however, this difference was not statistically significant. There was a 47% reduction in bullying victimization in SBTC schools relative to a 22% reduction in non-SBTC schools, also not statistically significant.

### **The Impact of Teen Court for SBTC Participants**

A final set of analyses examined if there were changes in the behavioral and mental health of youth who participated in the SBTC program. Mean scores from pre-test were compared to mean scores at 6-month-post-test for 249 adolescents who participated in SBTC after committing a school infraction. There was a consistent pattern across multilevel, multilevel log transformation, and Ordinary Least Squares log transformation models in which SBTC participation was a statistically significant predictor of decreasing friend support and a statistically significant predictor of increasing peer pressure. In some model variations, SBTC participation was also a significant predictor of increasing peer rejection.

### **Discussion**

This is the first randomized controlled trial of Teen Courts in schools. The results were mixed, with some positive indicators of efficacy while other measures fell short of statistically significant thresholds for change. Our analyses provide some preliminary evidence of the efficacy of SBTCs on 1) suspensions, 2) student problems, and 3) school climate (i.e., perceptions of school danger, hassles, and satisfaction). We will also discuss implications of SBTC participant changes from the beginning to the end of the program and compare SBTC effects to CBTC effects.

**Suspensions.** As a foundation, 249 students with offenses received Teen Court rather than traditional school discipline and all of these students successfully completed their sanctions.

We believe this is an important sign of proof of concept. The traditional school discipline response would likely have been a suspension or, in some cases, a referral to juvenile justice counselors. Considering the documented negative effects of suspensions and juvenile justice adjudication noted in the introduction, completion of community service sanctions while remaining in school is a successful sign. The decrease in the number of short-term suspensions in SBTC schools was 2.36 times greater than the decrease in the number of short-term suspensions for no-SBTC schools. Although not statistically significant (possibly due to low power:  $N=24$ ), this suggests that SBTCs can decrease the use of suspensions faster than not having a SBTC.

We did not track juvenile justice diversion explicitly because the purview of SBTCs is broader, handling a wide range of infractions internal to each school. This three-year study also could not track participants to see if they offended again. Despite these limitations, decreased suspension rates are a positive sign of movement away from marginalizing discipline. Future efforts should include more schools for additional statistical power and enhance the implementation of SBTCs, perhaps by augmenting them with additional restorative practices (i.e., mediation, restorative circles), so that changes are more dramatic and detectable.

**Student problems.** The Year 1 to Year 3 basic analysis summarized in Table 2 showed there were significant decreases in the SBTC schools on violent behavior and delinquent friendships. Indeed, student reports of violent behavior significantly decreased in SBTC schools, while there was no significant change in non-SBTC schools. Delinquent friendships significantly decreased in SBTC schools while these friendships significantly increased in non-SBTC schools. The highly rigorous longitudinal growth models confirmed that high school youth in SBTC schools reported a statistically significant reduction in delinquent friends ( $-0.04$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) relative to high school youth in the control group.

Although the violent behavior change for SBTC schools did not rise to levels of statistical significance in complex longitudinal growth models, likely due to the small sample size of 24 schools, we believe this trend is important. Past research on Community-Based Teen Courts has demonstrated reductions in aggressive and violent behavior (Evans et al., 2016; Smokowski et al., 2017; Smokowski, Cotter, Guo, & Evans, 2017). It is plausible that violent behavior was reduced in SBTC schools, but our longitudinal growth models did not have sufficient power to detect it. Implementation supervisors in SBTC schools reported that students said they were changing their behavior in order to avoid the embarrassment of going in front of a peer jury in court. Student offenders reported increased peer pressure. These indicators suggest that the atmosphere in SBTC schools might have shifted to discourage violent behavior. These trends need to be further investigated in future studies.

The documented decreases in delinquent friends are also well-grounded in theoretical models for Teen Courts as prosocial relationships, positive peer pressure, and engagement and service within the community are emphasized from the SBTC experience. Delinquent friends significantly decreased in SBTC schools while increasing in comparison schools. Longitudinal growth models confirmed that high school students in SBTC schools experienced the strongest decrease in delinquent friendships. This is an important pattern of effects because delinquency in late adolescence becomes increasingly more serious, heightening the risk for juvenile justice involvement. Delinquent friendships are a gateway to increasing antisocial behavior. Evidence of decreasing delinquent friendships is encouraging and should be followed up in replication studies as the field begins to examine mediation mechanisms that make SBTCs effective.

**Bullying.** From Year 1 to Year 2, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of youth reporting bullying victimization in the SBTC schools (23.4% to 20.30%), but there was

not a corresponding significant decrease in the control schools (Smokowski et al., 2018). Bullying victimization continued to decrease from 23% in SBTC schools at baseline to 13% in Year 3 after 2 years of intervention. This is encouraging because bullying is very common, potentially traumatic, and bullying prevention programs have shown limited success (Smokowski & Evans, 2019). However, comparison schools also decreased bullying from 23% in Year 1 to 18% in Year 3, making the overall comparisons between SBTC and non-SBTC schools in longitudinal growth models not statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance for the Year 1 to Year 3 reduction suggests that the SBTC model either needs to be strengthened to display larger effects or a larger sample of schools is needed to raise statistical power. SBTCs focus on offenders and it may be necessary to include victim-focused programs, such as mediation or restorative circles, in a comprehensive package to fully address bullying.

**School climate.** The analyses examined three indicators of school climate (i.e., perceptions of school danger, hassles, and satisfaction). There were no significant changes in student reports of school danger from Year 1 to Year 3 (see Table 2). This null finding contradicts Jensen's (2015) previous data showing students reported an increase in feeling safe in the hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, and outside the school building following the implementation of Teen Court. The school danger scale used in this study was coded from 0 ("does not happen") to 3 ("happens a lot") and the average item rating was 1.82 in Year 1 and 1.81 in Year 3. This symbolizes a student report between "does not happen" and "happens sometimes." It is plausible that this coding was not sensitive enough to subtle changes (i.e., a measurement issue) or alternately the SBTCs may not be pervasive and powerful enough to counter all problems captured in this expansive measure of danger (e.g., includes picking on other students, disagreements, weapon carrying, alcohol and other substance use, fighting, gang



activity, verbal and physical abuse of teachers, and other items). Although this is disappointing to have SBTCs fall short in this domain, we believe that changing school climate requires more, multi-component interventions that would have complementary effects. Several of the intervention schools implemented Teen Court in one classroom and did not embrace whole-school restorative justice efforts. It is likely that more investment is needed to impact climate for the entire school, especially in large schools. Indeed, in this post-Columbine era when school shootings happen regularly and without warning, it may be particularly difficult to dramatically decrease student feelings of school danger.

School hassles (i.e., a construct measured by students' perceptions of being disrespected, ignored, excluded, discouraged, hassled, insulted, and threatened) significantly decreased in SBTC schools, but also significantly decreased in comparison schools. It is difficult to interpret this without a full accounting of policies and programs in comparison schools. This was a longitudinal study, tracking students over three years. It is possible that students moving from middle schools where bullying and victimization is known to be pervasive to high schools where the school environment is more diffuse and diverse underpinned a general trend in decreasing school hassles. Alternately, school hassles may be reduced by SBTCs, but are also reduced by other programs and policies that went unidentified in comparison schools. Indeed, methodologists for randomized controlled trials are often wary of the threat to validity called compensatory rivalry. School principals in these two rural districts may have had district meetings where comparison school (non-SBTC) principals heard about the intervention activities in SBTC schools, generating competitive rivalry. The comparison schools did not start SBTCs, however, they might have changed their programs or policies to impact school climate, decreasing the comparative effect of the SBTC changes.

One school climate effect was clear and consistent: High school youth in SBTC schools reported higher school satisfaction compared to high school students in schools without SBTCs or all middle school youth. This finding surfaced in the most rigorous longitudinal growth models. Observing higher school satisfaction for high school students with SBTCs is consistent with previous reports of the positive effects of restorative justice practices on school environment (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004), relationships in school (McCluskey et al., 2008), and on decreased inappropriate behavior, disrespect to teachers, classroom disruption, disciplinary referrals, fighting, and detention (Mirsky, 2007).

High school students reported stronger effects from SBTCs compared to middle school students. There are several possibilities that explain this disparity. High school students are more likely to commit offenses that are serious, warranting either juvenile court involvement or the diversion to Teen Court. The power of getting a second chance, and being offered an alternative to suspension, for high school students may be more profound and these students may realize that the stakes are much higher for their actions. In comparison, middle school students may go to Teen Court because of swearing at a teacher, truancy, or similar lower level offenses with less powerful consequences. Further, the climate in high schools with SBTCs may show more student satisfaction because high school students are developmentally more mature than middle school students, contributing to an increased ability to run the court with full knowledge of its empowerment and importance as an alternative disciplinary mechanism to assist high-risk students. Middle school students may not fully grasp the profound shift that it takes for a Principal to give up much of his or her power of traditional discipline to invest in a student-run alternative. Based on the stronger effects for high school students, we recommend future studies

of SBTCs either focus on high school implementation or combine Teen Courts with other restorative practices to enhance middle school efficacy.

**Changes for Teen Court offenders.** From the beginning to the end of the program, SBTC participants reported decreasing friend support and increasing peer pressure and peer rejection. These relationship variables may be mediators that drive the effects of SBTCs. Youth who commit school infractions commonly have friends who support or instigate their antisocial behavior. Consequently, decreasing friend support is not necessarily bad for the adolescent's development if the friends are antisocial and enhance the adolescent's chances of continuing problematic behavior. Increasing peer pressure is also a potentially healthy part of the process if the heightened pressure is coming from prosocial peers on the jury who pressure the SBTC participant to change his or her offensive behavior. Similarly, feeling increasing peer rejection, if taken in small doses rather than high rejection levels that marginalize the youth, may press the participant to change behaviors and adopt responses that are more socially acceptable.

Although the general restorative justice hypothesis is that people are more cooperative and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them, not to them (Porter, 2007), these negative feelings participants reported after their SBTC experience (i.e., less friend support, more peer pressure and rejection) may be adverse but productive social processes that motivate behavior change. One theory is that, in court, youth will respond better to prosocial peers than to adult authority figures. This peer justice approach assumes that, similar to the way in which an association with delinquent peers is highly correlated with the onset of delinquent behavior (Loeber & Dishion, 1987), peer pressure from prosocial peers may push youth toward prosocial behavior (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002). The fact that participants reported less support from prior, possibly antisocial, friends,

more peer pressure likely coming from prosocial peers and more peer rejection of problematic behavior may indicate that the theoretical underpinnings for SBTC effectiveness are actually working.

Increasing prosocial bonds may form through a process in which participants have to feel less connection to their prior antisocial friends and renewed pressure to rejoin prosocial peer groups. Adverse and conflicted feelings may arise in this transitional process. Practitioners should be aware that this shifting of peer relationships from antisocial to prosocial peers might be a difficult process for SBTC participants. If these deleterious effects are confirmed in future studies, additional implementation components to buttress positive social support during the SBTC process would be warranted.

**Comparing SBTC to CBTC efficacy.** The research team conducting the current study has an emerging capacity to compare and contrast SBTC and CBTC effects. We have implemented Teen Courts in both schools and community settings in the same rural counties and have used the same measures to evaluate program effects. CBTCs have shown a broader and stronger pattern of effects (i.e., low recidivism and significant decreases in perceived school hassles, peer pressure, parent-child conflict, anxiety, depression, aggression, and violent behavior and statistically significant increases in future optimism; Evans, Smokowski et al., 2016; Smokowski, Rose et al., 2017; Smokowski, Cotter, Guo, & Evans, 2017). The current study's SBTC effects showing decreased violent behavior and delinquent friendships and increased school satisfaction for high school students are noteworthy, especially for schools that do not have access to a CBTC. SBTC effects might be diluted by middle schools that send students to court for minor infractions. However, if communities can only support one Teen Court model, we would recommend community-based courts because these programs can handle more serious

cases from both School Resource Officers and juvenile justice counselors. Overall, we recommend the continued evolution of research on both models of TC implementation.

### **Limitations**

This project had important limitations to consider. As a school-level randomized trial in two expansive rural school districts, the project was very large and implementation supervision was intense. Even so, the school sample size of 12 treatment and 12 comparison schools provided low levels of statistical power for finding SBTC effects. This might explain why some changes in the intervention schools were in the hypothesized direction, but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. To complement the sophisticated school-level longitudinal growth models, we provided a simpler pretest-posttest Paired T-test analyses that had ample statistical power from more than 1,000 students tracked within the 24 participating schools. Discussing the results from both of these analyses shows a pattern of SBTC effects that should be further investigated in future studies. Considering the dearth of research on SBTCs, our data provides a considerable contribution to extant knowledge; however, more research is needed with larger numbers of schools.

Second, while there were useful signs of SBTC efficacy, we believe that to impact school climate SBTCs should be integrated within a full package of restorative practices, including restorative circles, mediation meetings, and classroom management strategies. Comprehensive programming is likely to have a more profound impact if the entire school buys into a new restorative culture change. Support for victims should not be overshadowed by the SBTC focus on keeping offenders engaged with prosocial relationships. Also, SBTCs should not be isolated in one class and should probably be under the purview of student government leaders in order to maximize empowerment and student ownership.

## Conclusion

Rigorous longitudinal growth models showed that high school students in schools with a SBTC reported higher school satisfaction and fewer delinquent friendships compared to schools without a SBTC. Basic pretest-posttest analyses also showed significant decreases in student-reported violent behavior in SBTC schools while there was no significant change in this outcome in comparison group schools. School hassles, bullying victimization, and use of suspensions for discipline all decreased in schools with a SBTC; however, these outcomes also decreased in comparison schools. Finally, SBTC participants reported decreasing friend support and increasing peer pressure and peer rejection. These are potential mediation mechanisms indicating stress within the process of going through SBTCs as an offender and should be further examined in future studies.

Restorative justice approaches assist offenders in establishing positive connections with the school community by giving them a voice, which might help them acknowledge their transgressions and improve their behavior. SBTCs are also based on elements of restorative justice, including a concentration on the harm done to the victim or the community, a focus on repairing the harm, and an emphasis on having an open dialog rather than on procedure and evidence (Fischer, 2007). Based on Braithwaite's Re-Integrative Shaming Theory (1989) and Sherman's Defiance Theory (1993), SBTC programs seek to provide an atmosphere in which youths can be re-integrated into the community, instead of being stigmatized for their transgressions (Stickle et al., 2008). SBTCs have the potential to interrupt the School to Prison Pipeline by providing an alternative to marginalizing discipline, such as suspensions from school. Our data shows that SBTCs exert some positive effects on school climate (i.e., student satisfaction) and student problems (i.e., delinquent friendships, violent behavior) while diverting

offenders to community/school service as a restorative justice alternative to traditional discipline. Based on encouraging results from this initial randomized trial, we recommend replication studies with a larger number of schools and the integration of Teen Courts with other restorative practices to form a comprehensive package of programs to impact school climate.

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Table 1.

*A comparison of Robeson County, Columbus County, North Carolina, and the United States*

	<b>Robeson County</b>	<b>Columbus County</b>	<b>North Carolina</b>	<b>United States</b>
Population: 2015	134,197	56,694	10,042,802	321mil
African American: 2015	24.4%	30.5%	22.1%	13.3%
American Indian: 2015	39.9%	3.5%	1.6%	1.2%
Caucasian: 2015	32.2%	63.6%	71.2%	77.1%
Hispanic/Latino: 2015	8.3%	5.0%	9.1%	17.6%
Residents Living Below Poverty: 2010-14	33.1%	24.3%	16.4%	13.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher age 25+: 2015	12.4%	12.7%	27.8%	29.3%
Homicide Rate Per 100,000: 2013	23.9	7.1	4.7	4.5
Juvenile Arrest Rate per 100,000: 2014	7,045	1,980	3,226	1,385

Table 2: Mean Scores on School Climate and Student Problems Scales from Year 1 to Year 3 for a Random Sample of Youth in Teen Court Intervention and Control Schools

	Teen Court Intervention Schools (n= 1,388 students)			No Teen Court Control Schools (n=1,361 students)		
	Year 1 Mean	Year 3 Mean	P- Value Within Group	Year 1 Mean	Year 3 Mean	P- Value Within Group
School Danger	1.82	1.81	NS	1.68	1.70	NS
School Hassles	1.34	1.25	< .000	1.36	1.27	< .000
School Satisfaction	2.30	2.21	< .000	2.38	2.27	< .000
Violent Behavior	1.25	1.18	< .000	1.21	1.18	NS
Delinquent Friends	1.36	1.32	< .01	1.29	1.34	< .01
Anxiety	1.42	1.40	NS	1.43	1.38	NS
Bullying Victimization	23.22%	13.34%	< .001	23.15%	18.02%	< .001