

Making Youth Court as Effective as Possible

by Deborah Williamson and James Wells

This bulletin is designed to share what we've learned in Kentucky over the last dozen years about youth courts and what makes them work. Youth courts in Kentucky go back to 1992. In that year, the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) introduced youth court as an option for formal courts. Youth courts permit great flexibility in handling cases, including a wide range of outcomes for defendants.

What Is Youth Court?

“Youth Court is a program in which juvenile offenders are questioned, defended, and sentenced by their peers. Youth Courts are the fastest growing crime intervention programs in the nation. They offer ways to engage the community in a partnership with the juvenile justice system to respond to juvenile crimes by increasing the awareness of delinquency issues at the local level and by mobilizing community members and youth to take an active role in addressing the problem.” (*American Youth Policy Forum*, 2001)

Several district judges asked us to begin the project. They were searching for effective options to use with low-level offenders appearing in juvenile court, and they also saw youth court as a means of educating young people and community

Deborah Williamson, Ph.D., is the former General Manager of Juvenile Services (1998–2003) for the AOC. She was responsible for administration of the Teen Court Program from 1992 to 2003. James Wells, Ph.D., is director of faculty at Eastern Kentucky University's Center for Criminal Justice Education and Research. Dr. Wells began evaluation efforts of Kentucky's Teen Court Program in 1995. Rachel Bingham is a professional service supervisor with the Administrative Office of the Courts.

leaders about the complexity of the juvenile justice system.¹ AOC staff researched the youth court sites existing at that time and decided to model the Kentucky initiative after the program based in Odessa, Texas (Rothstein, 1985; Rothstein, 1987; Lyles and Knepper 1997).² The initial Kentucky youth court program was successfully piloted in northern Kentucky. Since that time the program has expanded considerably and now serves 30 of the judicial system's 60 districts throughout the Commonwealth (Williamson, Chalk, and Knepper, 1993; Minor et al., 1999).

Benefits of Youth Court

- Youth court is not an expensive program. It will eventually save local governments money by reducing recidivism.
- Youth court provides a viable response to juvenile crime and permits local governments to show the community that they are serious about dealing with this problem.
- As an alternative approach, youth court enables judges in formal court to decrease their caseload and thereby allows more serious cases to be handled more effectively.
- Because of staff limitations, youth court offers a stronger system of monitoring sentence compliance than formal court.
- Youth court provides a way for the community to get involved in helping troubled young people. Community agencies can be involved in community placements for youth court defendants, and jury members and their parents get involved by teaching youth court defendants about responsibility.

From the *Kentucky Teen Court Coordinators' Handbook*.

Since the program's inception, we've focused on evaluation to refine and improve what we're doing (Knepper, 1994a; Knepper 1994b; Knepper, 1995; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 1998; Minor et al., 1999; Wells, Minor, and Fox, 2000). Drawing on 12 years of observation and external research in Kentucky, this bulletin summarizes the on-going research efforts and discusses a few key recommendations that are often overlooked in the literature. For veterans to the youth court movement, some of the recommendations presented here will appear self-evident. Yet the Kentucky experience suggests that these recommendations are worthy of on-going reconsideration to make the most of the youth court experience for all involved. We begin with a discussion of on-going research efforts in Kentucky.

Kentucky Youth Court Research

Since 1995, the Center for Criminal Justice Education and Research (CCJER) at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) has been evaluating youth courts that are administered by the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts. Evaluations have been comprehensive and in-depth. They have collected and analyzed data from youth court student volunteers and parents, youth court defendants and parents, site coordinators, and judges. These evaluations have also gathered and analyzed data on

- the characteristics of youth court sites and subjects,

- types of sentences received, and
- sentence completion and recidivism.

Evaluators have published evaluation results in six technical reports and two articles, including one article in a refereed journal. They have also presented results in professional papers, interviews, and speeches.

The results of these evaluations have provided valuable descriptive information, including:

- Youth court student volunteers have showed statistically significant pre- to post-test gains on the knowledge test about Kentucky's juvenile court system;
- Defendants have shown statistically significant pre- to post-test gains on positive attitudes toward youth court; and
- Youth court student volunteers, volunteers' parents, defendants, and defendants' parents have all generally described the youth court program in positive terms when completing exit evaluations. For example:
 - Most volunteers have indicated that they would serve again, and many commented favorably about the learning experience (particularly pertaining to the legal system);
 - Volunteer's parents have also been favorably impressed with the educational aspects of youth court. Most parents of student volunteers have rated the Kentucky program as excellent or good, believing that the program benefited both defendants and student volunteers. Most have indicated that they would recommend the program to other parents;
 - Similarly, many parents of defendants have been favorably impressed with the educational experience of youth court for defendants. Defendants themselves have often commented favorably that youth court gives them "another chance." Both defendants and their parents generally felt that teen attorneys represented defendants well. Both generally felt that defendants were treated with courtesy. Most indicated that they understood their sentences. Over 87 percent of the defendants have rated their sentences as fair.



Chair, Standing Committee on Public Education: Alan Kopit
Director, Division for Public Education: Mabel C. McKinney-Browning
Editor: Charles White

© 2004 American Bar Association
PC # 497-0119 ISSN: 1-59031-460-3

This is one in a series of technical assistance bulletins on law-related education published by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education, 321 N. Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60610-4714; (312) 988-5735, FAX (312) 988-5494.
www.abanet.org/publiced E-mail: abapubed@abanet.org

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Prepared under Grant #2003-MU-FX-K015 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice; we are grateful for its support.

The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and have not been approved by the House of Delegates or the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association and, accordingly, should not be construed as representing the policy of the American Bar Association, the Fund for Justice and Education, or the Division for Public Education.

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Office of Juvenile Justice and
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We've also conducted a detailed study of Kentucky juveniles referred to youth court for disposition by their peers, focusing on sentence completion and recidivism. This study revealed that over 70 percent of the referred young people completed their sentences, and just under a third committed new offenses (were recidivists) over a one-year follow-up period. In multivariate models, or models used to study the relationships among several interrelated variables, sentence completion was significantly less likely among persons sentenced to community service. Recidivism was significantly higher among juveniles with prior records or those sentenced to curfew.

Despite this valuable descriptive information about youth courts, the true effectiveness of youth courts in Kentucky (as well as elsewhere) remains unknown. This is because to date no youth court evaluation has controlled for the influence of other possible factors on outcomes of interest, such as lower recidivism. When these other possible factors (also known as extraneous variables) are not controlled, they exert a confounding influence on a study of the effects of youth court. Examples of factors that should be controlled for include age, gender, prior offense history, and education. Again, no studies conducted to date have permitted valid inferences to be made about the impact of youth court.

Experiments and Control Groups

“If you are conducting a study to evaluate a new experimental method or treatment, make sure you include a group that does not receive the treatment. This control group will provide you with measurements to which the results of the new treatment can be compared. If you are evaluating a new program, for example, the appropriate control treatment may be the standard program.”
(Norusis, 1990:16)

An experiment is a research method that allows valid causal inferences to be made about the impact of a program. Experiments control for the influence of other possible factors through a type of design that provides equal comparison groups. If the groups are equal at the start of an experiment, then we can say with confidence that the differences observed at the end of the study are not due to some type of difference between subjects that existed before the experiment began.

A few years ago, the CCJER and the AOC decided to conduct an extensive study controlling for confounding factors. Evaluation activities primarily include input from AOC administrative staff, as well as youth court coordinators, juvenile court judges, and juvenile court clerks from experimental design sites in Louisville, Jeffersontown, Campbell County, and Hardin County. Coordinators have collected data on defendants who went through youth court during the

1999–2000, 2000–2001, and 2001–2002 school years. There were a total of 156 cases in these sites over the course of these years.

AOC staff has helped the CCJER gather youth court defendant data on factors such as:

- Case number (assigned by the coordinator and used to track cases through the youth court process)
- Court ID (extracted from court records and also used by coordinators in the tracking process)
- Race (recorded by the coordinator at the time of the hearing)
- Gender (also recorded by the coordinator at the time of the hearing)
- Date of birth (extracted from formal court records)
- County of original jurisdiction (an identification of the county indicated by the coordinator at the time of the hearing. This was deemed necessary because some judicial districts are multicounty jurisdictions.)
- Home location (recorded by the coordinator at the time of the hearing; this provides a cross-check on rural vs. urban home setting).
- Prior offenses (yes or no statement by the coordinator using the court record)
- Date of hearing (recorded by the coordinator)

Other variables to be used by the research team in analyzing the impact of the youth court experience include the following:

- Disposition
- Frequency and type of prior offenses
- Court appearances for new offenses/arrests following disposition (recidivism data will be analyzed at 6, 12, and 18 months)
- Completion of disposition
- Indicators of success

After we collected data on these variables of youth court defendants, we analyzed it so that we could develop a profile of the experimental group. Currently, the AOC is attempting to gather juvenile court records that will allow us to obtain a comparison group (control group) that has a profile (characteristics such as age, race, gender, priors, current offense, time period, etc.) similar to the characteristics of youth court defendants.

Once we've identified a comparison group, we will track for 12 to 18 months the recidivism rates of this control group and the youth court defendant group (experimental group). The results of this study will allow for more valid inferences to be made about the effectiveness of youth court, making the Kentucky evaluation the first of its type in the nation.

The final phase of the study design will be to compare recidivism between the experiment and control groups at 6-, 12-, and 18-month intervals.

Another objective of the study will be to use, where possible, qualitative data obtained from the sites. This data is derived from interviews with youth court judges from each of the sites.

We have interviewed each of the judges from the research sites and collected data on

- the goal or objective of their youth court,
- when and why they chose to participate in youth court,
- the types of cases they regard to be appropriate for youth court,
- their assessment of youth court support staff such as coordinators and the state administration,
- the philosophy behind their courtroom demeanor,
- the strengths and weaknesses of their youth court,
- their recommendations for improving their youth court.

We're analyzing data from these interviews via a qualitative data analysis program. We'll report on differences and similarities between the research sites. Where possible, we'll use data obtained from the interviews as part of the recidivism analyses.

We hope that the findings produced as a result of our on-going evaluation efforts, particularly the pending experimental design, will help youth court practitioners refine and improve components of their programs and ultimately improve the overall effectiveness of youth court. In the interim, and as a direct result of 12 years of intensive observation and descriptive analyses of youth court proceedings, we would like to

draw attention to a few key practices that seem to strengthen youth court proceedings and outcomes. These recommendations are rarely discussed in the literature, and, to reiterate, we believe they merit serious consideration by youth court administrators.

The Critical Relationship Between Graduated Sanctions and Youth Court

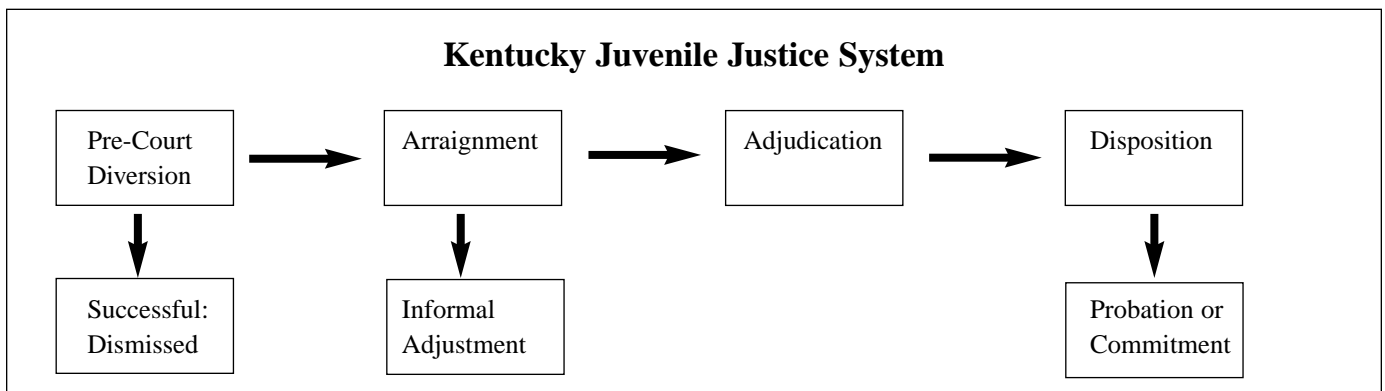
Wilson and Howell (1995) indicate that an effective juvenile justice system is one that combines accountability and sanctions with increasingly intensive treatment and rehabilitation services. They note, "Graduated sanctions should consist of sublevels, or gradations, that together with appropriate services constitute an integrated approach. At each level, offenders must be aware that, should they continue to violate the law, they will be subject to more severe sanctions....." (Wilson and Howell, 1995:43).

As previously noted, in Kentucky, youth court is a program

Youth Courts and Repeat Offenders

"Non-serious repeat offenders must be targeted for system intervention based on their probability of becoming more serious or chronic in their delinquent activities. Such programs are small and open, located in or near the juvenile's home, and maintain community participation in planning, operation, and evaluation. The use of peer juries is an appropriate program." Wilson and Howell, 1993:20-21

available through the juvenile division of district court. The youth court program is positioned as an option to be used after pre-court diversion and prior to commitment to the state. That means that youth court is an option when a case is informally adjusted by the district court judge or when the judge gives the defendant probation.³ In terms of graduated sanctions, the dispositions in youth court should be more severe than those applied in diversion and less severe than those applied in later stages.



Because of this, Kentucky youth court program coordinators must work diligently to fully understand the range of sanctions and services used in the pre-court diversion process, informal adjustment, probation, and commitment. It is important that the range of dispositions available to youth jurors is in keeping with the range of sanctions available in formal court.

If peer jurors are too lenient after a case has passed through diversion in the Kentucky system and offer a lesser sentence, it sends a mixed message about accountability. For example, let's say a juvenile defendant has been through diversion and was assigned 30 hours of community service for a first time shoplifting offense. The juvenile comes to district court on a second shoplifting charge, is referred to youth court, and the peer jury assigns 15 hours. What is the message being sent?

If peer jurors are overly strict, on the other hand, the juvenile may be discouraged and the chance for recidivism increases. This might well be a significant problem—court coordinators around the country have indicated that the majority of youth juries, particularly juries that have just been assembled for the first time, are extremely tough on peers. In addition, if jurors are overly punitive at the front end of the system, they leave the juvenile court with little option should the juvenile continue to offend. For example, a defendant makes an appearance for a first-time alcohol offense and is ordered to 80 hours of community service, a severe sentence a juvenile court judge is not likely to order in a first-time appearance. Now if the defendant commits another offense, the judge's alternatives are limited.

So understanding the entire system (again, even what transpires in community and school-based youth courts) is critical to the overall health of the juvenile justice system and stands to impact recidivism. It demands consistent communication among all agency representatives, but is worth the effort.

Once the coordinators have assessed the range of options employed by judges in a given district, they must articulate this knowledge to youth court student volunteers, preferably in writing at the time of the initial training. They should conduct periodic reviews with student volunteers to ensure fidelity to the graduated sanctions process. Our observations and research suggests that student volunteers, particularly those who are new to the youth court process, tend to be overly punitive with peer defendants. In many instances, we have observed new peer juries rendering dispositions far more demanding than those issued in traditional juvenile court, so much so that the adult judges were forced to amend the dispositions. Allowing peer juries to be overly punitive with low-level offenders, many appearing before court for the first time, may result in low compliance with youth court dispositions.

As noted by Wilson and Howell (1993), there are many benefits from incorporating graduated sanctions in the juvenile justice system, including

- increased collaboration with various system components, i.e., police, probation, and community-based programs,
- increased compliance from juvenile offenders (and decreased likelihood that they will commit new offenses), and
- decreased cost to the overall system as least restrictive alternatives are thoroughly exhausted prior to more severe sanctions such as detention and commitment.

Carefully targeted use of sanctions and quality community-based services are a key to an effective youth court. They also enhance the overall functioning of the juvenile justice system. We strongly urge youth court coordinators in other states to incorporate a graduated sanctions approach in court proceedings, as well as to become familiar with sanctions used in school and community-based youth courts.

Focus on Formality

During the 1998–99 evaluation of Kentucky youth court, exit data were collected from 132 parents of defendants. As previously discussed, most (96.2 percent) thought that their children had been well represented by teen attorneys. In addition, the vast majority thought that their children had been treated courteously by all youth court student volunteers. However, defendants' parents were also asked to describe positive and negative features of the program. Out of 203 responses provided, 37 (or 18 percent) negative responses were categorized. Nearly 55 percent of these responses faulted some aspect of the youth court process, e.g., disorganization, lack of participation and seriousness, unprofessionalism, and the need for more time (see Wells, Minor, and Fox, 2000).

During field observations throughout 1998–99, the external evaluation team noted that in 89 percent of the youth court observations, court proceedings were described as solemn and formalized; in 7 percent of the cases the atmosphere was rated as casual (the remaining cases were not categorized). Of course, we don't necessarily know that the informal courts were the sources of the complaints, but given the dissatisfaction we found, it seems prudent to suggest that youth court hearings incorporate a high level of formality, characterized by good procedural organization; youth court volunteers who are fully engaged, professional, and exude positive attitudes; and courts that allow ample time for cases to be heard and deliberated.

Young people learn social skills and responsibilities through interactions with role models at home and in school and the community. Research suggests that “atmosphere” is associated with various measures of achievement and skills (see Redd, Brooks, and McGarvey, 2002). The literature also suggests that programs that are well implemented and highly structured reduce at-risk behaviors among adolescents (see Hatcher and Scarpa, 2001; Hair, Jager, and Garrett, 2002). Ensuring that adolescents are fully vested in a program requires on-going work and positive modeling on the part of program administration. Youth court coordinators and other program leaders are strongly encouraged to adopt a high degree of formality in youth court proceedings to maximize benefits for all involved and reduce the likelihood that defendants and their families will perceive the experience negatively.

Student Volunteer Awareness of Community Program Options

In the Kentucky program, student volunteers undergo six weeks of formal training prior to being officially sworn to serve the court. Incorporating awareness sessions in formal training alerts youth court volunteers to available social services and community-based programming. This is critical to the overall success of the program and fidelity to graduated sanctions (see Knepper, 1993; Godwin, 2000; Redding, 2000). Young people serving the court must have solid knowledge of the range of social services and community-based programs available to render dispositions that meet the needs of defendants or “respondents” (as they are often called in youth court). It’s particularly important that youth volunteers understand that community service can be—and often should be—more than basic hard labor. Service learning has shown itself very promising as a way for students to understand and appreciate responsibility and their contributions to society. It could provide the same benefits for youth court defendants, enabling them to exercise their skills and gain new knowledge. This type of service is particularly important in youth courts that have a commitment to restorative justice. Coordinators trained in social work and umbrella organizations with social service bents are especially well suited to finding meaningful community service options for defendants.

Range of Alternatives Needed

“Besides community service, only three other dispositions (i.e., written apologies, future youth court jury duty, and counseling workshops) were imposed with regularity. This constitutes a rather restricted range of disposition options. Youth court programmatic efforts should expand this range to broaden jurors’ choices and increase the chances of achieving meaningful matches between offense circumstances and sentence components.” Minor, et al., *1998–99 Kentucky Youth Court Evaluation*

Our observations suggest that all too often program coordinators attempt to become intimately familiar with local programs, but fail to adequately share the breadth and depth of knowledge with student volunteers. While some young people will undoubtedly have general knowledge of local programs, they may not know of specific program offerings that can meet the diverse needs of peer defendants. Youth court program coordinators must incorporate information about available community-based program options as part of both the initial and refresher training for young volunteers. Representatives from these agencies make effective session leaders during youth court volunteer training and follow-up functions, since they’re best positioned to describe their individual program offerings. At the Kentucky Annual Teen Court Conference, sessions devoted to program options, led by community-based agency staff, invariably receive the highest rankings from student participants.

Making student volunteers aware of options for use at disposition has many benefits. It enhances the overall quality and duration of jury deliberations, bolsters confidence in the dispositions rendered, increases meaningful connections with key community leaders, refocuses the overall process on the needs of the defendants, and, perhaps most importantly, reduces recidivism.

Debriefing Sessions

Our observations suggest that the successful youth court programs in Kentucky incorporate debriefing sessions at the conclusion of each court proceeding.

Talking It Over

“During field observations, data were also gathered on whether judges reviewed the session with the teens, either while the jury was engaged in deliberations or after the hearing. The reviews include things such as discussing performance of attorneys, making suggestions for improvements, and going over the sentence with the jury. Reviews were conducted in roughly two-thirds of the cases observed.” Wells, Minor, and Fox, 2000:73

Sessions are often co-facilitated by the sitting judge, the attorney coaches, and the program coordinator. As defined by Stahl (1994), debriefing, also known as post group reflection, is time set aside for systematic reflection upon completing an activity. Students discuss how well they achieved their goals as a group, how they supported one another in comprehending task procedures, how they modeled appropriate and positive behaviors, and what needs to happen during the next activity to ensure continued success (see Moore and Zaff, 2002). Routine debriefing sessions with youth court volunteers yields many benefits, including: underscoring the fact that the court is keenly interested in providing support to volunteer decision making and the ultimate impact of decisions on juvenile defendants; improving volunteer performance during the hearings and jury deliberations; refocusing participants’ attention on the serious nature of their responsibility to both the court and their peers; and increasing peer-to-peer and court-to-peer bonding.

Routine Use of Evaluation Findings

Each year, we prepare a comprehensive written report that provides evaluation findings to the statewide program administrator, district coordinators, and judges. In addition, we ask one member of the evaluation team to present highlights at the annual Youth Court Conference. Drawing on evaluation findings, we modify the program manual and training sessions for coordinators to rectify problems. If issues are specific to a local jurisdiction, the state administrator will meet with court officials and the local coordinator to help develop modifications. We strongly encourage judges and local coordinators to review evaluation findings with student volunteers during debriefing sessions. From our vantage point, rigorous, on-going evaluation of all processes associated with youth court is critical to the program’s continued growth and success.

Conclusion

We are guided by the principles noted in the Kentucky Revised Statutes: “the Unified Juvenile Code shall be interpreted to promote the best interests of the child through providing treatment and sanctions to reduce recidivism and assist in making the child a productive citizen by advancing the principles of personal responsibility, accountability and reformation” (KRS 600.010 (2e)). Referral to youth court is a viable option for district court judges, an option that advances responsibility, accountability, and reformation among juvenile defendants.

Since 1992 youth court program administrators have routinely evaluated efforts in an attempt to make youth courts as effective as possible. While evaluation efforts are still in progress, and the recommendations from a rigorous experimental design are forthcoming, we believe that sharing our preliminary findings, observations, and recommendations with colleagues is vital to improving proceedings in courts throughout the nation. As a result of our 12-year endeavor, we recommend

- on-going external evaluation,
- use of graduated sanctions and services,
- incorporating a high degree of formality in youth court proceedings,
- increasing youth court student volunteer awareness of community placement options,
- routine use of debriefing sessions at the close of each court proceeding, and
- thorough review and dissemination of evaluation findings with all involved.

Resources

For more information on youth courts, contact:

National Youth Court Center
c/o American Probation and Parole Association
P.O. Box 11910
Lexington, KY 40578
Phone: 859-244-8193
Fax: 859-244-8001
Email: nycc@csg.org
Main Website: www.youthcourt.net
Youth Volunteer Website: www.ycyouth.net

Federal agency contact persons:

Scott B. Peterson
Program Manager
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
810 7th St., NW
Washington, DC 20531
Phone: 202-616-2368
Email: Scott.Peterson2@usdoj.gov

Brian Chodrow
Policy Analyst
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Enforcement and Justice Services Division
400 7th Street, SW, Room 5130
Washington, DC 20590
Phone: 202-366-9765
Email: Brian.Chodrow@nhtsa.dot.gov

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Endnotes

- ¹ In 1986 the Kentucky General Assembly legislated the Unified Juvenile Code, which called for a statewide diversion program for first- and second-time minor juvenile offenders. As a result of this well-researched legislation, excellent front-end options exist for young people eligible for diversion from formal court. However, judges sought—continue to seek—options that they could use for young people not meeting the standardized criteria for diversion. This is an important distinction, as most youth courts are essentially designed to function as pre-court diversion programs (see Butts and Buck, 2000).
- ² At the time of Kentucky's initial exploration, the Odessa program employed the adult judge courtroom model (see classification developed by the National Youth Court Center, 2000).
- ³ The Kentucky Revised Statutes Chapter 600 defines pre-court **diversion** as an agreement entered into by the child to provide redress for offenses without a formal court hearing. An **informal adjustment** is a court-approved agreement reached among defense, prosecution, and the victim of the crime, after a petition has been filed in formal court, that the best interest of the child (defendant) would be served without formal adjudication and disposition. **Commitment** is defined as an order of the court that places the child (defendant) under the custodial control or supervision of a state agency until the child attains the age of eighteen.

Technical Assistance Bulletin Series

Technical Assistance Bulletins (TABs) are developed and published by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education. Other publications in this series provide concise information on specific topics of interest to law-related educators, school administrators, teachers, law enforcement, and delinquency prevention professionals. Each bulletin may be downloaded from the ABA Web site as a .pdf. (www.abanet.org/publiced/tabs.html).

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Youth for Justice

To learn more about Youth for Justice, the national coordinated law-related education program, its efforts to incorporate effective delinquency prevention strategies in LRE programs, and its work with law enforcement personnel as resource persons, contact the individual consortium member listed below or visit www.youthforjustice.org.

American Bar Association

Division for Public Education
Mabel C. McKinney-Browning, Director
Michelle Parrini, Program Manager
Katie Fraser, Program Manager
321 N. Clark Street
Chicago, IL 60610-4714
Tel: 312-988-5735
Fax: 312-988-5494
E-mail: abapubed@abanet.org
Web: www.abanet.org/publiced/

Center for Civic Education

Roy Erickson, Director of Justice
Education Programs
5145 Douglas Fir Road
Calabasas, CA 91302
Tel: 800-350-4223
Fax: 818-591-9330
E-mail: cacoord49@aol.com
Web: www.civiced.org

Norma Wright, Senior Consultant
101 Shell Road, #25
Watsonville, CA 95076-9665
Tel: 831-724-5241
Fax: 831-761-9160
E-mail: normaw3253@aol.com
Barbara Miller
Center for Education in Law and Democracy
300 High Street
PO Box 18490
Denver, CO 80218-4022
Tel: 303-778-7441
Fax: 303-733-4791
E-mail: miller@lawanddemocracy.org

Constitutional Rights Foundation

Todd Clark, Executive Director
601 S. Kingsley Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90005
Tel: 213-487-5590
Fax: 213-386-0459
E-mail: todd@crf-usa.org
Web: www.crf-usa.org

Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago

Carolyn Pereira, Executive Director
E-mail: pereira@crfc.org
Nisan Chavkin, Associate Director
E-mail: chavkin@crfc.org
Margie Chan, Office Administrator
E-mail: chan@crfc.org
407 S. Dearborn, Suite 1700
Chicago, IL 60605
Tel: 312-663-9057
Fax: 312-663-4321
Web: www.crfc.org

Phi Alpha Delta Public Service Center

Carole Collins, Coordinator
345 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
Tel: 410-347-3118
Fax: 410-347-3119
E-mail: psc@pad.org
Web: www.pad.org

Street Law, Inc.

Lee Arbetman, Director of U.S. Programs
1010 Wayne Avenue
Suite 870
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Tel: 301-589-1130
Fax: 301-589-1131
E-mail: larbetman@streetlaw.org
Web: www.streetlaw.org



AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

321 N. Clark Street
Chicago, IL 60610-4714
<http://www.abanet.org/publiced>
(312) 988-5735
E-mail: abapubed@abanet.org