

Evaluating California's Youth Courts

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Judicial Council of California

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Disclaimer

This report has been prepared for the **Center for Families, Children, and the Courts at the Judicial Council of California, San Francisco, California**. The author conducted this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Public Policy at Mills College. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Mills College Public Policy Program, the sponsoring organization, or any other agency.

Executive Summary

Project Purpose

This report summarizes the results of a statewide youth court survey in California, prepared for the Center for Family, Children and the Courts at the Judicial Council of California. This project adds to the body of knowledge about youth courts by providing system-wide data collection and analysis rather than narrowly focusing on the operations and outcomes of individual youth courts, which vary considerably from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Background

Youth courts are intervention programs that process low-level juvenile cases. Operating outside of the judiciary, often in partnership with law enforcement, probation, schools, and other public agencies, youth courts are unique because they use a peer model to determine sanctions. The most replicated intervention program in juvenile justice, youth courts have proliferated across the country and within California. Approximately 63 youth courts operate in California today. Despite many similarities, youth courts operate very differently from program to another. This variance likely limits the total impact youth courts could have in the state that remains the leading incarcerator of children in the country.

Key Findings

Sixty percent of California's youth courts responded to a survey in March of 2016. Among other notable findings discussed in the report, the survey revealed:

- 53 percent of survey respondents were receiving funding, while 24 percent reported never receiving funding and 18 percent lost funding.
- Adult Judge models are used by 53 percent of survey respondents. 31 percent operate the Peer Jury Model, which reflects national survey findings. 13 percent reported Adult Judge/Peer Jury blended models.
- Multiple cases from the same respondent are allowed, under certain circumstances, by 52 percent of youth courts that responded to the survey.

Recommendations

Survey results combined with quantitative analysis and review of recent literature led to a set of recommendations about strengthening the impacts of California's youth courts on participants and their communities:

- **Bring California's youth courts into greater alignment** around a core set of evidence-based practices, including standardized case screening and data collection.
- **Build the base of evidence** for youth courts by conducting a pilot project in jurisdictions with similar program structures.
- **Target youth most likely to be overrepresented** in the juvenile justice system for participation, and prioritize youth court implementation in jurisdictions lacking similar programs.
- In the wake of resource shortages, continue to **expand multiagency collaborations** and resource sharing to keep youth courts sustainable and resilient.

Geography of Youth Courts in California

