

Implementing School Based Youth Courts in a Rural Context: The Impact on Students' Perceptions of School Climate, Individual Functioning, and Interpersonal Relationships

Paul R. Smokowski^{1,2} · Caroline B. R. Evans² · Heather Wing³ · Meredith Bower² · Martica Bacallao^{2,4} · James Barbee²

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Abstract The Youth Court in Schools Project was implemented in two low-income, violent, racially/ethnically diverse rural counties. This study examined if the presence of Youth Court impacted students' perceptions of school danger, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships. Data were gathered from 3454 youth; following multiple imputation, data were analyzed using paired samples *t* tests. Results indicated that perceptions of school danger increased significantly and self-esteem decreased significantly in the control schools pretest to posttest. Violent behavior, anxiety, friend rejection, and bullying victimization decreased significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools pretest to posttest, but did not change significantly

in the control schools. Findings provide preliminary evidence that Youth Court is an effective way of improving school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships.

Keywords School based Youth Court · School to prison pipeline · Adolescence · Rural

Introduction

The School-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is a serious problem plaguing schools across the United States. STPP refers to the school policies and practices that push students, especially at risk youth, from public schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). A variety of factors impact the STPP such as inadequate public school resources (e.g., overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers, limited funding), increased police presence in schools (e.g., schools rely on the police, rather than teachers, to handle disciplinary issues, resulting in an increased number of school arrests), 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). One way to interrupt the STPP is by augmenting school disciplinary practices with restorative justice programs such as school based Youth Court.

Although the majority of Youth Courts (64%) are community based (i.e., operated through juvenile justice system based programs or non-profit organizations; National Association of Youth Courts, n.d.), Youth Court is a viable option for use within schools to address disciplinary

✉ Paul R. Smokowski
smokowski@ku.edu

Caroline B. R. Evans
careyrobertson@gmail.com

Heather Wing
ghwing@columbus.k12.nc.us

Meredith Bower
meredith.bower@co.robeson.nc.us

Martica Bacallao
marticabacallao@gmail.com

James Barbee
jbarbee1967@gmail.com

¹ University of Kansas, 4104 Blackjack Oak Drive, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA

² North Carolina Youth Violence Prevention Center, 800 N. Walnut St., Lumberton, NC 28358, USA

³ Public Schools of Columbus County, 817 Washington St., Whiteville, NC 28472, USA

⁴ University of North Carolina at Pembroke, 1 University Dr., Pembroke, NC 28372, USA

issues. Indeed, 36% of Youth Courts operate in schools (National Association of Youth Courts, n.d.), however, there are very few empirical studies of school based Youth Courts, leaving a large gap in the literature. School based Youth Courts have the potential to improve the behavior of individual participants, but also to positively impact the entire school climate. The current preliminary study used data from the Youth Court in Schools Project (YCSP) and compared student's perceptions of the school climate (i.e., school danger), individual functioning (i.e., violent behavior, self-esteem, anxiety), and interpersonal relationships (i.e., bullying victimization, friend rejection) in 12 schools randomly selected to implement Youth Court with the perceptions of students from 12 schools without Youth Court. These three groups of variables were selected because they capture important aspects of adolescent development and are potential points of intervention to improve adolescent functioning. First, assessing perceptions of school climate will help determine if Youth Court is a potential means of improving school climate. Youth in schools with positive climates benefit from a number of positive outcomes including decreased victimization and bullying (Gregory et al., 2010), depression (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008), and alcohol use (Kasen, Johnson, & Cohen, 1990). Thus, it is important to find new and innovative ways of improving school climate such as implementing Youth Court. Second, individual functioning can often be compromised in adolescence resulting in a risk of suffering from anxiety (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003) and low self-esteem (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Deilman, 1997), and engaging in violence and aggression (Smokowski, Guo, Cotter, Evans, & Rose, 2015). Youth Court might be a potential mechanism to bolster adolescent functioning and decrease anxiety and violence and increase self-esteem. Finally, social relationships are central to adolescence and the current study will help determine if Youth Court could function to improve the quality of adolescent social relationships. Data were gathered in the Spring prior to the implementation of Youth Court, and again the following Spring, after Youth Court operated for about 6 months in the 12 intervention schools. Evaluating the potential utility of Youth Courts in schools is pertinent given the presence of zero tolerance discipline policies that contribute to the STTP.

Zero-Tolerance Discipline Policies and Suspension

Zero-tolerance discipline policies mandate that predetermined punishments are applied to school infractions regardless of the severity of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (American Psychological Association, 2008). Under zero-tolerance policies, students are expelled or suspended for any sort of infraction of

rules, such as bringing nail clippers to school. These policies are ineffective at improving school safety and are associated with decreased academic performance and increased rates of dropping out of school, academic disengagement, and subsequent disciplinary exclusions (see Iselin, 2010 for a review).

Suspension is a common form of school discipline and is not necessarily indicative of a zero-tolerance policy. However, regardless of how and why suspension is mandated, it can be an ineffective disciplinary strategy, sometimes resulting in more harm than good. For example, suspended youth are often left at home unsupervised (see Iselin, 2010 for a review), giving them the time and opportunity to engage in anti-social activities that might lead to involvement in crime and delinquency and further disengagement from school. Indeed, compared to youth in school, those out of school are significantly more likely to report having carried a weapon in the past 30 days, having gotten into a fight in the past 12 months, having sexual intercourse, and having used cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, or cocaine (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994). Further, for some students, being suspended simply results in subsequent suspensions (Tobin, 1996). Not being allowed to attend school might be seen as a reward for poor behavior by struggling students. Thus, rather than serving to improve students' behavior, being suspended simply fuels problematic behavior, resulting in further suspensions. Finally, suspended youth miss class and get behind in academic work, potentially resulting in academic and school disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school (see Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012 for a review); indeed, there is a strong relationship between being suspended and dropping out of school (see Skiba & Peterson 1999 for a review).

Both zero tolerance policies and suspension disproportionately affect students of color and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014), which further illustrates the need for alternative school discipline practices, such as Youth Court, that are non-discriminatory. For example, African American students are suspended three times as often as White students (16 vs. 5% respectively; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). And students with a disability are more than twice as likely to be suspended compared to students without a disability (13 vs. 6%; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Perhaps the use of Youth Court in schools would reduce discriminatory school disciplinary practices.

Taken together, research suggests that zero-tolerance policies and suspension can be ineffective and potentially harmful ways of handling rule breaking behavior in schools. It follows that students and schools would benefit from new and innovative forms of addressing behavioral

issues. School based Youth Court is one alternative that has the potential to discipline students for transgressions, while allowing them to remain connected to and engaged in school.

Youth Court

Youth Court (also referred to as Teen 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 Youth Court is to reintegrate offenders back into the community, rather than further ostracize them with excessive punishment. While the juvenile justice system focuses on establishing guilt or innocence, Youth Court requires participants to admit their guilt, and then peer jurors assign them a variety of prosocial sanctions aimed at reintegrating them into the community (Butts & Buck, 2000). Youth Courts operate either in the community or in the school setting.

Community Based Youth Court

Typically, in community based Youth Court, an adult judge oversees the process by explaining ground rules and highlighting the need for confidentiality. Adolescents fill the roles of defense counsel, prosecution, bailiff, and jurors. The trial begins with the defense counsel presenting an opening statement and highlighting why the defendant deserves a minimal sentence (e.g., extenuating circumstances that led to the transgression, defendant was bullied or gets good grades). The prosecution then makes an opening statement and highlights why the defendant should be given maximum sanctions. Both attorneys call witnesses to the stand who are questioned by the attorneys and the jurors. Following closing arguments, the jurors are dismissed to deliberate, where they agree upon a set of sanctions. Community service is the most common sanction and is used in 99% of Youth Court trials (Fischer, 2007). Other sanctions include paying restitution, writing an essay, writing a formal apology letter, serving on subsequent Youth Court juries, attending an educational workshop (e.g., anger management, self-esteem), or attending counseling.

School Based Youth Court

School based Youth Courts function in a similar manner as community based Youth Courts, but are implemented in the school setting rather than in the community. However, there is not an established set of implementation guidelines for school based Youth Courts, thus, structure and process varies by school. In some instances, Youth Court sanctions replace the original school punishment (e.g., suspension) and in other cases students receive a reduced school punishment (e.g., a 5-day suspension for fighting as opposed to a 10-day suspension) if they successfully complete the Youth Court sanctions. Upon completion of sanctions, the offense can be expunged from the student's record so that it does not become a barrier to getting a job or acceptance to college.

In general, adolescents are referred to Youth Court by the principal. The role of judge is filled by a teacher or school administrator 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.

School based Youth Court 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 school based Youth Court, 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, Youth Court aims to alter the entire climate of a school by becoming part of the school's culture.

The Youth Court process exposes troubled youth to positive peer and adult role models and prosocial behavior at multiple junctures. Youth Court participants view their prosocial peers serving as jurors and witness the time, care, and energy these positive peers exert in coming up with

constructive sentences. The adult teachers and administrators who volunteer their time to engage in the Youth Court process often provide mentorship and serve as positive role models for Youth Court participants. Finally, Youth Court participants engage in prosocial sanctions, such as community service, that helps improve the school environment and assists participants in becoming reintegrated into the school community. Participating in community service has multiple benefits for youth including increased self-esteem, confidence, competence, and prosocial behavior and decreased deviant school behavior and disciplinary problems (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackear, 2007; see Yates & Youniss, 1996, for a review). Further, workshops and essay writing help participants reflect on the harm their behavior caused.

Past Research on Community and School Based Youth Courts

There is limited research on Youth Court in general, and the majority of this research has focused on community based Youth Courts to the exclusion of school based Youth Courts (Fishman & Hack, 2012). The research on community based Youth Courts has concentrated on recidivism rates with mixed results, partially due to weak methodological designs that lack a control or comparison group and/or random assignment. In general, 1-year recidivism rates range from 9.8 to 31.8% (Bright, Young, Bessaha, & Falls, 2015; Garrison, 2001; Minor, Wells, Soderstrom, Bingham, & Williamson, 1999; Rasmussen, 2004; Weisz, Lott, & Nghi, 2002). However, recidivism is often defined and measured differently across studies and by state agencies, making cross study comparisons difficult.

Some researchers have begun to examine the impact of community based Youth Court on factors other than recidivism. For example, Youth Court participants reported satisfaction with their experiences, improved attitudes towards authority, and increased legal system knowledge (LoGalbo, 1998; McLeod, 1999; Wells, Minor, & Fox, 1998). In one study, adolescents who participated in a rural community based Youth Court reported significant decreases in internalizing symptoms and parent-child conflict compared to youth in two comparison groups (one comparison group from a neighboring rural county that experienced no interventions and one comparison group from the same county as the Youth Court program where many adolescents engaged in the Positive Action program; Smokowski et al., 2017). Further, Youth Court participants reported significant increases in school satisfaction and self-esteem and significant decreases in delinquent friends, aggression, and violent behavior relative to the non-intervention control group (Smokowski et al., 2017). These studies provide preliminary evidence that community based Youth Courts

positively impact adolescent functioning above and beyond decreased recidivism rates, by bolstering mental health, social relationships, and school engagement. It follows that implementing Youth Court in the school setting could have a similar effect on individual functioning.

In general, the limited research on school based Youth Court is either qualitative in nature (Hirschinger-Blank et al., 2009) or provides an overview of the Youth Court process and discusses implementation obstacles, but provides no analysis of school based Youth Court data (Cole & Heilig, 2011; Vickers, 2004). One small ($N=14$) qualitative study of school based Youth Court 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 highlight the fact that Youth Court has the potential to benefit all adolescents who participate in the process. Youth Court could serve to create a group of strong, prosocial leaders, which would benefit the entire school community.

The authors are aware of one study of school based Youth Court that analyzed quantitative data. Two high schools in New York implemented Youth Court and researchers examined pre-test (administered prior to the implementation of Youth Court) and post-test (administered 4 months after Youth Court was in operation) scores of students' perceptions of school climate, safety, and discipline as well as self-reported delinquency. While some of the changes were in the expected direction, others were not, and none of the findings were statistically significant. For example, in school A, perceptions of school safety increased modestly from pretest to posttest as evidenced by an increased percentage of students who reported feeling safe in the hallways, bathroom, and locker rooms (77% pretest, 82% posttest) and outside the school building (70% pretest to 80% posttest). However, there was a decrease in the percentage of students who felt safe inside and outside of the school building in School B (87% pretest to 75% posttest inside school building; 70% pretest to 54% posttest outside of school building). There were no significant changes in perceptions of school discipline and other findings were not noted (Jensen, 2015). Due to the lack of control schools and small sample size (109 pretests and 48 posttests in School A; 70 pretests and 47 posttests in School B), results are inconclusive. Given the lack of empirical data on school base Youth Courts, additional research is warranted.

Considering the limited research on school based Youth Courts, it is necessary to examine if restorative justice practices in general impact school outcomes. 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 Youth Court, additional research is needed and the current study fills this research gap.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that perceptions of school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships would improve significantly in the 12 Youth Court schools relative to the 12 no Youth Court control schools. More specifically, it was hypothesized that: (1) the mean score of school danger (perception of school climate) would decrease significantly pretest to posttest in the 12 Youth Court intervention schools relative to the 12 no Youth Court control schools; (2) the mean scores of violent behavior and anxiety (individual functioning) would decrease significantly pretest to posttest in the 12 Youth Court intervention schools relative to the 12 no Youth Court control schools; (3) the mean scores of friend rejection and bullying victimization (interpersonal relationships) would decrease significantly pretest to posttest in the 12 Youth Court intervention schools relative to the 12 no Youth Court control schools; and (4) self-esteem (individual functioning) would increase significantly from pretest to posttest in the 12 Youth Court intervention schools relative to the 12 no Youth Court control schools.

Method

Current Study

The current 3-year study was funded through the National Institute of Justice (NIJ); the study is currently in year 3 of implementation. Prior to year 1, school districts in two rural counties in North Carolina agreed to participate. In each county, four high schools and eight middle schools elected to participate, resulting in 24 schools total (i.e., eight high schools and 16 middle schools). The four high schools in

each county were randomly assigned to the Youth Court treatment condition or the no Youth Court control condition; thus, in each county, two high schools were randomly assigned to Youth Court and two high schools were randomly assigned to be control schools resulting in four total Youth Court treatment high schools (two from each county) and four total control high schools (two from each county). A similar procedure was used for the middle schools resulting in eight Youth Court middle schools (four from each county) and eight control middle schools (four from each county). A random sample of 4000 students (2000 from across the 12 schools in each county) was selected to participate in the data collection; additional data were collected from the students who were sanctioned to Youth Court. The current study analyzed the pretest and posttest data from the random sample of 4000 students.

Participants

The racial/ethnic composition of the current sample ($N=3454$) closely matched the surrounding community and 32.69% identified as Caucasian, 26.49% as African American, 18.21% as American Indian, 11.56% as Mixed Race/Other, and 11.06% as Latino/Hispanic. About half of the sample ($n=49.51%$) were female and almost half ($n=45.05%$) received free or reduced price lunch. The sample ranged in age from 11 to 16, with a mean age of 12.07 years ($SD=.89$) and over half resided with two parents ($n=59.58%$) while the remainder lived in another type of family situation.

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 195 items grouped into 22 scales and 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). The Youth Court in Schools Project (YCSP) used a modified version of the SSP, the School Success Profile Plus (SSP+), which included 17 of the original SSP scales plus 13 additional scales and 26 single items. The SSP+ was used extensively during the North Carolina Youth Violence Prevention Centers (NC-YVPC) Rural Adaptation Project (RAP). This 5-year longitudinal panel study was conducted in the same rural school districts as the YCSP and multiple analysis found the scales on the SSP+ to have an internal consistency of over .70 (e.g., Evans, Smokowski, Barbee, Bower, & Barefoot, 2016; Evans, Smokowski, & Cotter, 2014; Smokowski et al., 2015, 2016; Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013).

The current study analyzed data from five scales (three that were added to the SSP+ and two from the original SSP) and one single item added to the SSP+.

School Danger

The 11-item school danger scale (Bowen & Richman, 2008) was used to assess student's perceptions of dangerous behavior (e.g., fights, substance use, weapon carrying) in their school; this scale provided insight into student's view of the school climate. Following the prompt "How often does each of the following happen in your school?" students were provided 11 examples of dangerous behavior such as: "Fights among students" and "students physically abusing teachers (hitting, pushing)." Items were rated on a 3-point Likert scale (scale range 1–3; *Does Not Happen, Happens Sometimes, Happens a Lot*). Cronbach's Alpha was .90 at pretest and .92 at posttest in the current sample. The mean score at pretest was 1.77 ($SD = .49$) and was 1.79 ($SD = .52$) at posttest for the entire sample.

Violent Behavior

Self-reported violent behavior was measured with 13 items (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005). Following the prompt "How often have you done the following things during the past 12 months, either in school or anywhere outside of school?" students were provided 13 items assessing violent behavior including: "I beat somebody up" and "I damaged or destroyed things that belonged to someone else." Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (scale range 1–4; *Never, Once, Sometimes, Often*). Cronbach's alpha was .91 at pretest and posttest for the current sample. The mean score at pretest was 1.23 ($SD = .44$) and was 1.22 ($SD = .43$) at posttest for the entire sample.

Anxiety

Symptoms of anxiety over the past 6 months were assessed with three items from the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Example items included: "I often feel fearful or anxious" and "I often feel nervous or tense." Each item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale (scale range 1–3; *Not Like Me, A Little Like Me, A Lot Like Me*). The Cronbach's alpha was .84 at pretest and posttest in the current sample. The mean pretest score was 1.44 ($SD = .59$) and the mean posttest score was 1.41 ($SD = .58$) for the entire sample.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was assessed using a five-item adapted version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).

Example items included, "I feel good about myself" and "I am able to do things as well as most other people." Each item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale (scale range 1–3; *Not Like Me, A Little Like Me, A Lot Like Me*). The Cronbach's alpha was .96 at pretest and .97 at posttest in the current sample. The mean pretest score was 2.60 ($SD = .55$) and the mean posttest score was 2.58 ($SD = .58$) for the entire sample.

Friend Rejection

The degree to which participants felt rejected by their friends through teasing, being picked on, and being treated disrespectfully was measured with the three-item friend rejection scale (Bowen & Richman, 2008). Example items included: "I am made fun of by my friends" and "I wish my friends would show me more respect." Each item was rated on a 3-point Likert scale (scale range 1–3; *Not Like Me, A Little Like Me, A Lot Like Me*). The Cronbach's alpha was .79 at pretest and .80 at posttest in the current sample. The mean pretest score was 1.23 ($SD = .44$) and the mean posttest score was 1.22 ($SD = .44$) for the entire sample.

Bullying Victimization

In line with the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YBRS; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), one item was used to assess bullying victimization. "During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?" The response options were *Yes* or *No* (coded as 1 and 0).

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board from a major research university in the Southeastern United States, nearly identical data collection procedures were used in both Robeson and Columbus counties in North Carolina. Following school district policies, both Counties adopted the Youth Court in Schools Project as part of their normal school procedures. There were two data collection components: (1) 4000 students across the 24 schools were randomly selected to fill out the SSP+ each Spring in order to ascertain if and how individual perceptions of school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships were impacted by the presence of Youth Court and (2) each Youth Court participant filled out the SSP+ prior to engaging in Youth Court and 6 months after completion of sanctions in order to assess how participating in school based Youth Court impacted participants. The current study analyzed the data from the 4000 students across the 24 schools.

For the large data collection of 4000 students, SSP+ assessments were filled out in the Spring of 2015 (pretest). Youth Court began operation in the Fall of 2015, and participants filled out the SSP+ again in the Spring of 2016, after Youth Court had been implemented in the 12 intervention schools for about 6 months (posttest). Assessments were filled out in school computer labs with close supervision from YCSP staff in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality. 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 \$2000 stipend, which was used to reward the entire student body for participating in the project.

The data collection procedure was slightly different for Youth Court participants. Students who engaged in a transgression at school (e.g., disruptive behavior, profanity, fighting, being out of area) were referred to the Youth Court program by the principal. In some cases, participation in Youth Court replaced a punishment from the school and was used as an alternative to the normal school punishment (e.g., Youth Court replaced a suspension). In other cases, participating in Youth Court reduced the punishment from the school (e.g., a 5-day suspension for fighting instead of a 10-day suspension and no referral to juvenile probation).

In order to participate in Youth Court, the referred students admitted their guilt, agreed to participate in the program, and assented to fill out the SSP+ prior to Youth Court and again 6 months after their sanctions were completed. Parents/caregivers also gave consent for participation. Each school had a Youth Court coordinator who was responsible for administering the SSP+ and overseeing the Youth Court process. In year 1 (2015–2016), the coordinators provided Youth Court participants with paper and pencil SSP+ surveys that were filled out prior to the Youth Court hearing and again 6 months following sanction completion. In year 2 (2016–2017), Youth Court participants took the SSP+ online.

Each of the 12 schools implementing Youth Court selected a class that served as the Youth Court for the school (e.g., eleventh grade social studies). This class received 8–10 hours of Youth Court training before the start of the school year in year 1. The training introduced and explained the purpose of Youth Court, the student's role, and the benefits of Youth 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 Youth Court) received about 6–8 hours of training in year 1 and ongoing training throughout the year. These trainings explained the structure and goals of the Youth Court process and taught the coordinators how to run a Youth Court hearing and how to administer the SSP+. Each school administered at least two hearings per month throughout the course of the school year.

Although the students and school coordinators were well trained in how to implement and run a school based Youth Court, field coordinators from the YCSP monitored progress throughout the school year. These field coordinators supported the school coordinators and offered ongoing training if needed. For example, if the field coordinators saw that jurors in a particular school were struggling with questioning the defendant, a training on questioning would occur. These ongoing trainings and the supervision from the field coordinators ensured that the Youth Court programs were implemented with fidelity across the 12 schools.

Statistical Analysis

Multiple imputation was used to decrease the impact of missing data due to student non-response or attrition from pretest to posttest. In line with recommendations from Rubin (1987), ten imputed data sets were created. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, following multiple imputation, paired samples t-tests were run; results were combined across imputations using Rubin's rule (1987). McNemar's test was used for the dichotomous variable of bullying victimization; this test is a Chi square test for paired observations (Glass & Hopkins, 1996) and was appropriate given that bullying victimization was a dichotomous variable and that the samples from year 1 and 2 had some of the same participants and were thus considered paired. McNemar's test was run using one of the imputed data files.

Results

Our hypotheses were partially supported.

Hypothesis 1 In terms of school danger (perceptions of school), there was no significant change in the Youth Court intervention schools pretest to posttest $t(1792) = -0.642$, $p = .529$, $d = -0.018$, 95% CI $[-0.051, -0.026]$; however, perceptions of school danger increased significantly in

the control schools pretest to posttest $t(1660)=-2.404$, $p=.027$, $d=-.070$, 95% CI [-0.081, -0.007]. Although effect sizes of 0.2 and below are considered small (Cohen, 1988), the current finding of significance is noteworthy given that this is a preliminary study.

Hypothesis 2 In support of Hypothesis 2, the mean score of violent behavior decreased significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools pretest to posttest $t(1792)=1.967$, $p=.053$, $d=.053$, 95% CI [-0.00006, 0.053]; there was not a significant corresponding decrease in the comparison schools $t(1660)=0.893$, $p=.375$, $d=.025$, 95% CI [-0.014, 0.037]. Also in support of Hypothesis 2, the mean anxiety score decreased significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools pretest to posttest $t(1792)=2.209$, $p=.030$, $d=.061$, 95% CI [0.004, 0.071]; the mean anxiety score did not decrease significantly in the control schools $t(1660)=1.440$, $p=.164$, $d=.043$, 95% CI [-0.012, 0.074].

Hypothesis 3 In support of Hypothesis 3, friend rejection decreased significantly pretest to posttest in the Youth Court intervention schools $t(1792)=2.859$, $p=.005$, $d=.081$, 95% CI [0.012, 0.062], but did not change in the control schools $t(1660)=.836$, $p=.407$, $d=.026$, 95% CI [-0.017, 0.042]. Also in support of our hypothesis, McNemar's test illustrated that bullying victimization decreased significantly in the intervention schools pretest to posttest; 23.4% of the Youth Court sample was bullied at pre-test and this percentage decreased significantly to 20.30% at post-test [$\chi^2(1, 1793)=7.69$, $p<.01$]. In the no Youth Court Schools bullying victimization decreased from 23.4% at pre-test to 21.1% at post-test, but this difference did not reach significance [$\chi^2(1, 1661)=3.76$, $p=.53$].

Hypothesis 4 Hypothesis 4 was partially supported. Although the mean self-esteem score did not change significantly in the Youth Court intervention schools pretest to posttest $t(1792)=1.176$, $p=.245$, $d=.030$, 95% CI [-0.013, 0.052], the mean self-esteem score decreased

significantly in the control schools pretest to posttest $t(1660)=3.197$, $p=.001$, $d=.084$, 95% CI [0.019, 0.078]. See Table 1.

Discussion

The current study of Youth Court in schools provides preliminary evidence that restorative justice programming in the form of peer run Youth Courts, is a potentially effective means of improving certain aspects of student's perceptions of school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships. It was hypothesized that perceptions of school climate (e.g., school danger), individual functioning (e.g., violence, anxiety, self-esteem), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., friend rejection, bullying victimization) would improve significantly in the 12 Youth Court schools relative to the 12 control schools. These hypotheses were partially supported, indicating that Youth Courts can potentially improve the school atmosphere and individual functioning. Perhaps the fact that Youth Courts allow students to take justice into their own hands empowers the student body, increases their confidence, and fuels their investment in maintaining a peaceful school environment, resulting in decreased antisocial and increased prosocial behavior.

In terms of specific findings, our hypotheses were partially supported. While there were no significant changes in school danger in the intervention schools, school danger increased significantly in the control schools. Although the effect size of this increase was small ($d=-.07$), this finding indicates that over the school year, students in control schools perceived an increase in the prevalence of dangerous and delinquent behaviors (e.g., fighting, property destruction, gangs, verbal and physical abuse of teachers), suggesting that their peers engaged in increased levels of these negative behaviors at posttest relative to pretest. This finding is in line with past research indicating that delinquency increases from late childhood through adolescence (National Institute of Justice, 2014), thus, as students aged

Table 1 Pretest and posttest means for Youth Court intervention and control schools

	Youth Court intervention schools ($N=1793$)				No Youth Court control schools ($N=1661$)			
	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	p Value	Cohen's d	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	p Value	Cohen's d
School danger ^a	1.805	1.817	0.529	-0.018	1.727	1.772	0.027	-0.070
Violent behavior ^b	1.254	1.227	0.053	0.053	1.218	1.207	0.375	0.025
Anxiety ^a	1.442	1.405	0.030	0.061	1.426	1.395	0.164	0.043
Friend rejection ^a	1.242	1.205	0.005	0.081	1.226	1.214	0.407	0.026
Self-esteem ^a	2.595	2.576	0.245	0.030	2.603	2.556	0.001	0.084

^aScale range 1-3

^bScale range 1-4

over the school year, they increasingly engaged in delinquent and deviant behavior. Current findings tentatively indicate that the presence of Youth Court could function to prevent this natural increase in anti-social behavior; the 12 schools with Youth Court did not report an increase in school danger from pretest to posttest. The school danger scale assessed adolescent's perceptions of violent behavior in their classmates; thus, Youth Court potentially alters the entire school climate by encouraging positive behavior across the school milieu and not just in Youth Court participants.

In further support of this assertion, there was a significant ($p = .05$) decrease in self-reported violent behavior in the Youth Court intervention schools. Although the effect size was small ($d = .053$), this finding suggests that the presence of Youth Court could serve to quell students' inclinations to commit violent acts. However, given the small effect size this conclusion must be made cautiously, and further research is needed. There was not a corresponding increase in self-reported violent behavior in the control schools; it is interesting and somewhat enigmatic that school danger increased, but violent behavior did not change. Perhaps these different results have to do with the fact that the school danger scale asked participants to reflect on the behavior of their peers, while the violent behavior scale was a self-report. It is possible that adolescents in the control school were hesitant to report that their own violent behavior increased or were not self-reflective enough to realize that their behavior changed, resulting in no change in the violent behavior score pretest to posttest in the control schools. Or, it might have been easier to recognize increased violence in others, hence the increased school danger score at posttest. In the intervention schools, Youth Court likely played a role in decreasing self-reported violent behavior. Youth Court sanctions focus on strengthening the school community by having defendants engage in community service projects. Further, the Youth Court philosophy focuses on acceptance, forgiveness, and learning from past mistakes. It is possible that this philosophy began to gradually permeate the school, positively impacting student behavior and decreasing violence. Youth Court sanctions come from peers, heightening the pressure for positive behavior from adolescent social networks, rather than receiving discipline from a principal who may or may not garner respect. This peer influence on the school climate can be a powerful deterrent for future violent behavior.

In terms of individual functioning, anxiety decreased significantly in the intervention schools ($d = .061$), but did not change significantly in the control schools. Having zero tolerance or overly strict disciplinary policies that result in many suspensions might make students feel anxious and on edge, looking over their shoulders all the time, wondering if they will be suspended or get in

trouble. Perhaps the presence of Youth Court decreased this anxiety because students knew there was a fair and equitable process they could go through in the event of committing a transgression. The decrease in violent behavior may have also influenced feelings of anxiety in the school environment, alleviating the anticipation of adverse events.

Self-esteem did not change significantly in the intervention schools, however, there was a significant decrease in the control schools ($d = .084$). Self-esteem generally decreases throughout adolescence (see Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005 for a review), thus the decrease in self-esteem scores in the control schools was normative. It is possible that the presence of Youth Court protected adolescents in the intervention schools from experiencing this normative decrease in self-esteem. Based on qualitative research on volunteers from school based Youth Court (Hirschinger-Blank et al., 2009), volunteering for Youth Court seems to bolster confidence, which could stabilize self-esteem. Further, the adolescents who participated in Youth Court were not chastised for their transgression, but were given the opportunity to repair the harm they caused and join the school community in a productive and prosocial way through community service. Past research found that participation in community service was associated with increased self-esteem, self-worth, confidence, competence, academic performance, and prosocial behavior and decreased truancy, deviant school behavior, and disciplinary problems (Schmidt et al., 2007; see Yates & Youniss, 1996 for a review). Thus, participating in community service might have prevented decreases in self-esteem for youth in the intervention schools. If the philosophy of Youth Court permeated the school climate, students might have been positively impacted and their self-esteem bolstered so it did not decrease.

Finally, also in support of our hypothesis, friend rejection ($d = .081$) and bullying victimization ($d = .090$) decreased significantly in the intervention schools, but did not change significantly in the control schools. Restorative justice practices such as Youth Court focus on forgiveness and acceptance. Perhaps these philosophies encouraged adolescents to treat each other with respect, resulting in improved interpersonal relationships.

Many of our hypothesis were supported, demonstrating preliminary evidence that Youth Court improves aspects of the school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships. Although effect sizes were small, this was due in part to the fact that Youth Court only operated for 6 months in the intervention schools prior to posttest data collection. Future research will examine perceptions of school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships after Youth Court has been

implemented for a longer period of time and has become more a part of the fabric of the intervention schools.

Limitations

Although the current study makes important contributions to the restorative justice and school based Youth Court research base, findings must be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, this study was conducted in two rural, racially/ethnically diverse counties, thus findings should be generalized with caution. Second, student's filled out the SSP+ in computer labs with their classmates present and their answers might have been impacted by the presence of their peers. This is a limitation of any large scale data collection and project staff closely monitored the data collection process in order to maintain confidentiality. Third, this was a preliminary data analysis conducted after only 6 months of Youth Court implementation. It is possible that with a longer implementation period more profound results would emerge; future studies will analyze additional years of data after Youth Court has been implemented for a longer period of time. Fourth, as with the implementation of any new program, certain schools were slower than others in adopting Youth Court, which could have impacted results. Finally, although schools were trained in how to implement Youth Court, it is possible that Youth Court sessions were run slightly differently across the 12 schools. Although project staff closely monitored implementation, it is possible that differences across schools could have impacted the current results.

Conclusion

Given that this was a preliminary study and Youth Court was implemented for only about 6 months between pretest and posttest, findings must be interpreted cautiously. However, findings were in the expected direction and tentatively suggest that Youth Court is a viable disciplinary alternative for school based offenses. The current preliminary results suggest that implementing Youth Courts in schools improves students' view of the school climate, individual functioning, and interpersonal relationships. Future research is needed examining data after Youth Court has been implemented in schools for a longer period of time and has become more integrated into the school setting. Providing disciplinary alternatives such as Youth Court will improve school climate and student behavior, ultimately decreasing the school to prison pipeline.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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