

Evaluation of Peer Court, Inc.: 1993-2001 Statistics and Recidivism

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Executive Summary

This study involved the analysis of Peer Court records covering the period from 1993 to 2001. Presented are summary statistics on the demographic make-up of Peer Court offenders (e.g., percent male and female), the types of offenses dealt with in Peer Court, the number of sanctions sentenced by the peer jury, and rates of re-offending after Peer Court (recidivism). Also included is some discussion of how Peer Court recidivism measures up to recidivism from other juvenile populations (including other teen court youth).

Summary statistics show that Peer Court services a variety of youth who have committed low-level offenses. Age, gender, race, residence, offense, and referral source indicate that the “typical” Peer Court youth can be described as being a White male from Danville between the ages of 13 and 16, referred by the police for committing a misdemeanor. While this describes many youth, most youth do not fit this exact description, and considerable variety is reflected in the numbers and percentages relevant to the various categories. For instance, while half the youth were residents of Danville, over a quarter were from elsewhere in Vermilion County (the residence of 23% was unknown). Peer Court has served offenders as young as 6 and as old as 18, covering a wide range of developmental stages, and has addressed many types of low-level offenses, from curfew violations to assaults and drug possession.

The sanctions handed down by Peer Court have been considerable over the years. Between 1993 and 2001 Peer Court juries sentenced youth offenders to over four years of community service, over 1,200 jury duty assignments, and over 1,200 writing assignments (essays and apologies). While not directly measured in this report, this is likely to have affected not only the youth completing their sentences, but the well being of the county as a whole. Providing valuable service to the county and local agencies (\$53,000 worth at minimum wage) and supplementing academic writing curricula should not be overlooked when judging Peer Court’s importance to the local community. In addition, almost 400 classes or counseling sessions have been assigned to offenders, providing them with educational and personal support resources.

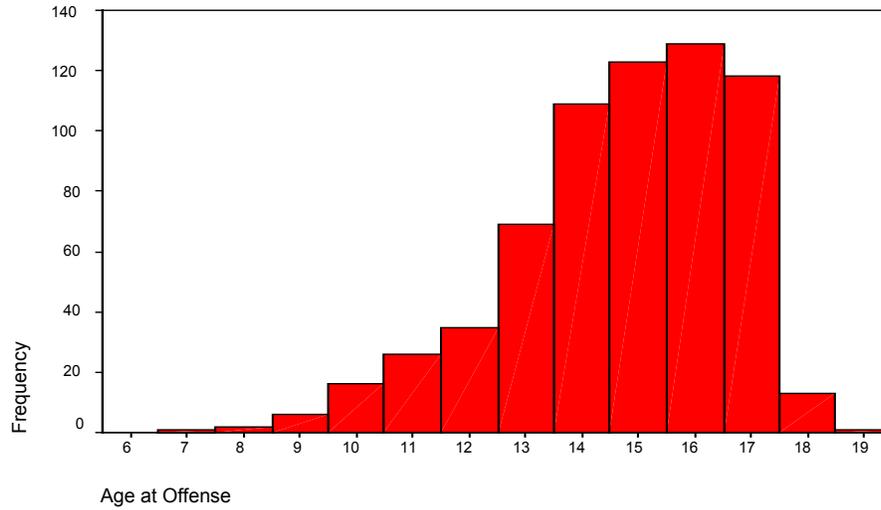
To measure re-offending after Peer Court, only records from 1993-2001 were used. This was done to ensure that any difficulties encountered during the initial stages of the program would not skew the results for the program after staff had established a routine. For youth who committed misdemeanors and felonies after Peer Court, the recidivism rate is about .10 a year after completing Peer Court; in other words, about 10% of youth can be expected to commit a misdemeanor or felony a year after completing their sentence. Adding ordinance violations raises the rate to .11; or about 11% of youth can be expected to commit an ordinance violation, misdemeanor or felony a year after completing their sentence. For later rates (i.e., two years after, three, etc.), see the section on recidivism (pp. 9-11). Youth who re-offended were more likely to be male, to have written more apologies as part of their sentences, and taken longer to complete their sentence.

Although it was the original intention of the author to measure Peer Court recidivism to a comparison group of youth who did not participate in Peer Court, it became quickly apparent that there were no youth in Vermilion County who were like Peer Court offenders but not actually in Peer Court. Given that, judging what these

recidivism rates mean is a difficult task. Comparing these rates to rates from other populations of low-level offenders (e.g., status offenders) and other teen courts around the country, it seems that Peer Court measures favorably; Peer Court recidivism rates are lower than most rates cited in research literature and lower than the rates from other (comparable) teen courts. However, without comparing Peer Court rates to those of other youth who living in Vermilion County, any conclusion is open to considerable skepticism.

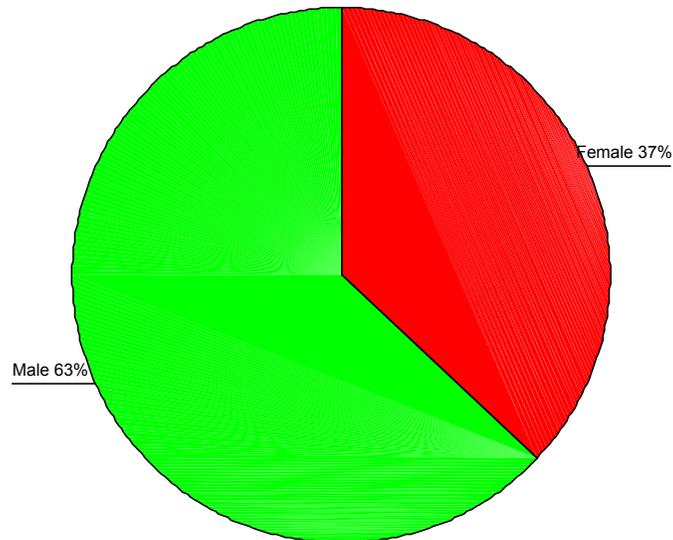
Demographics, 1993-2001

Age of offenders



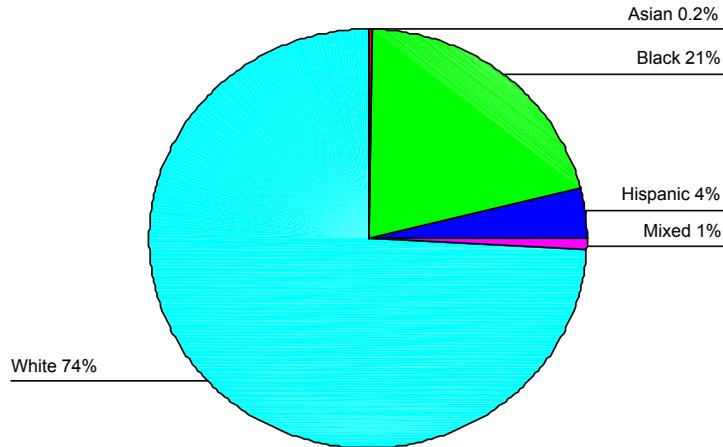
The average age of Peer Court youth was 14. The most frequent age was 16. Most (2/3rds) were in the range 12 and 16 (standard deviation = 1.99).

Gender



Boys made up 409 Peer Court offenders (or 63%), and girls 239 (37%). This is notable in that usually girls' rates are much lower. It is likely that the ratio of girls to boys is higher than in most juvenile justice samples because Peer Court deals primarily with low-level, first-time offenses.

Race/Ethnicity



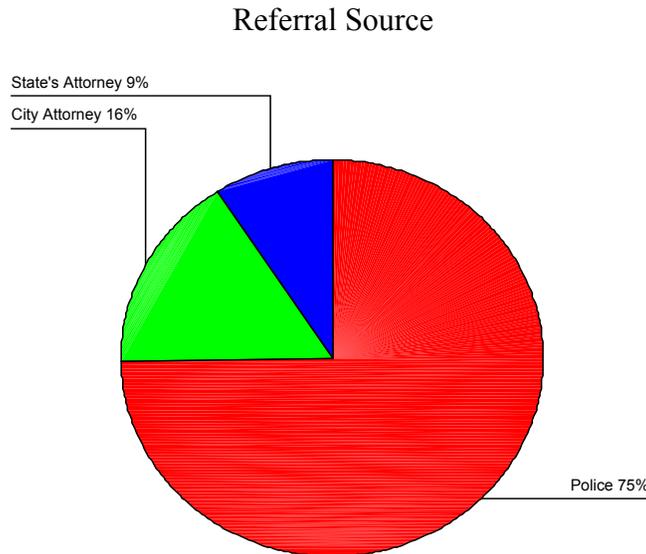
Given 2000 US Census figures for Vermillion County (the census reports percentages for Blacks as 12% and for Whites as 85%), it appears that Blacks are over-represented and Whites are under-represented among Peer Court youth. These disproportional rates are tempered somewhat, however, when residence is accounted for (below), and it is noted that at least half of all Peer Court youth are from Danville: racial/ethnic percentages for all Peer Court youth mirror closely percentages reported for the city of Danville. Still, disproportionate processing exists in Peer Court, as it does throughout the juvenile justice system.

Residence

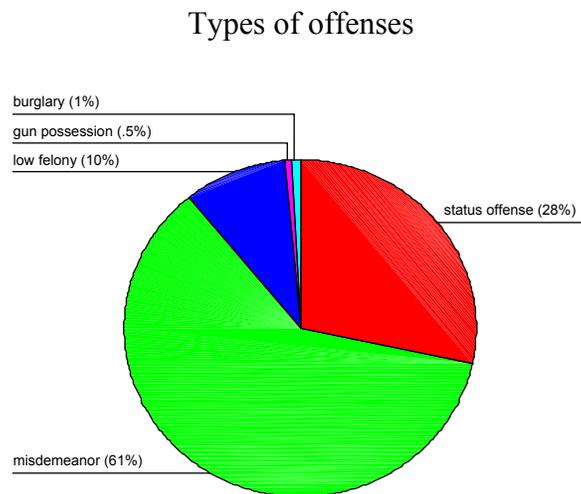
Town/City	Number of youth	Percentage of Peer Court
Danville	328	51
Georgetown	37	6
Westville	27	4
Ridge Farm	21	3
Hoopeston	10	2
Tilton	10	2
All others	60	9
Unknown	155	23

By far the most frequent residence of Peer Court offenders is Danville. It is likely that many of those for whom residence was unknown lived in Danville, making it likely that Danville residents make up three quarters of all Peer Court youth. These findings are not

particularly surprising given the location of Peer Court and the size of the county's most populated city.



Most referrals came from Police departments (Danville, Vermilion County Sheriff, other police departments). City Attorneys in Danville and Georgetown also referred cases. The State's Attorney's office referred the fewest cases between 1993 and 2001.



The vast majority of offenses processed in Peer Court have been misdemeanors and status offenses. Examples of these include retail theft, small amounts of damage to property, assault, curfew violations, and possession of alcohol, tobacco, and small amounts of cannabis. Low felonies include theft of more than \$300 worth of goods, possession of large amounts of cannabis, and more severe assaults. Very few higher-level felonies have been seen in Peer Court.

Peer Court Sanctions

Community Service

Between 1993 and 2001 Peer Court juries sentenced 648 offenders to 11,529 mandatory service hours. That can be seen as:

- 480 days
- 1440 8-hour work days
- About 4 years of community service work days

If each of those hours were to be paid for at minimum wage (\$6.35 an hour), the bill would come to almost \$53,000.

Other Sentencing Options

Peer juries also handed down:

- 1250 jury duty assignments
- 365 essays
- 855 apologies
- 391 class and counseling assignments

These represent considerable educational value for youth in Vermilion County. These figures do not include volunteer jurors' hours nor volunteer lawyers' training sessions.

NOTE: Information from this point to the end of the report was drawn from analyses of records covering 1995 to 2001. Records from 1993 and 1994 were dropped from analyses so as to account for any difficulties encountered during the first few years of the program.

Completion Rate

Ninety-three percent of Peer Court youth completed their sentence between 1995 and 2001 (or, 7% did not complete their Peer Court sentence). This high rate of completion was accompanied by a finding that a considerable number of youth were given extensions in order to complete their sentence (over 50%). Most completed their sentences between 60 and 185 days. The average number of days to completion was 121. Peer Court administrators explained that extensions were liberally given in part to "hold on" to youth in trouble so that they might have lengthy contact with positive influences. They also reported that they were not always sure that youth who did not complete would be held accountable for their offense by anyone else.

Returning to Peer Court

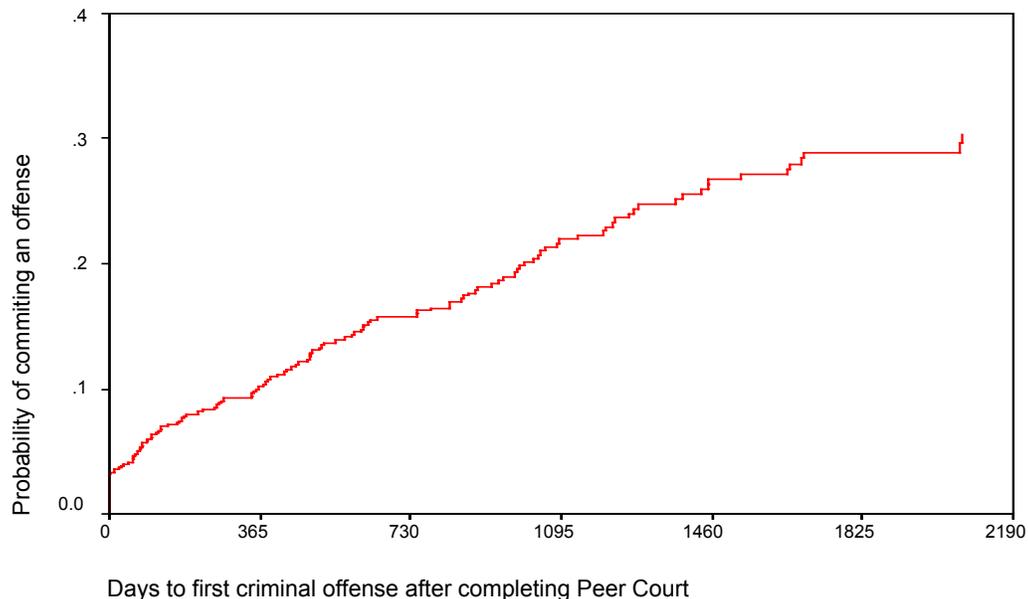
Only 3% of Peer Court offenders returned as offenders in Peer Court later. This is consistent with the general rule that Peer Court is a “one-shot” opportunity. In interviews Peer Court administrators explained that these exceptions were youth who had not offended in a long time.

Recidivism

Recidivism was measured in two ways: (1) committing a misdemeanor or felony after completing Peer Court sentence, and (2) committing an ordinance violation, misdemeanor or felony after completing Peer Court sentence (note that (2) includes (1)). The statistical method used to measure recidivism is called survival analysis (specifically Cox regression). Survival analysis is used to estimate the probability of an event over time from information on subjects (here the subjects were records from youth in Peer Court) with different lengths of follow-up time. It was necessary to use this method (as opposed to simply looking at the percentage of youth that had ever re-offended) because each youth completed Peer Court on different dates and their court records were checked on one date.

Recidivism Rates

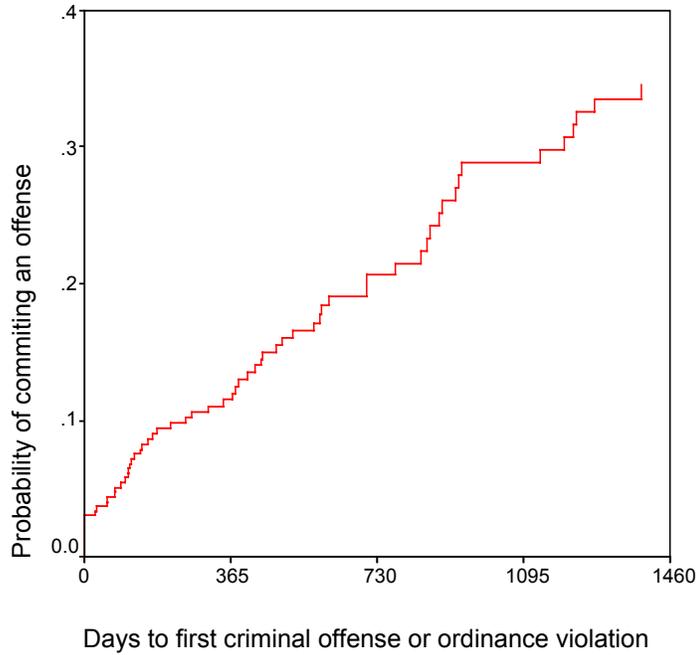
Committing a misdemeanor or felony



This graph represents the likelihood of re-offending up to six years after completing Peer Court. Along the horizontal axis are days (365 days = 1 year), and along the vertical axis is the probability of re-offending. One can interpret these probabilities as percentages. In other words, within 365 days, about 10% of youth are likely to commit a misdemeanor or

felony. Within 730 days (2 years), about 16% are likely to have committed such an offense.

Committing an ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony



This graph represents the likelihood of re-offending with an ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony after completing Peer Court. Only four years are shown here because ordinance violation data was collected for only four years (instead of six in the previous graph). Note that the line is steeper, indicating more offenses. Within 365 days, about 11% of youth are likely to commit an ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony. Within 730 days (2 years), about 21% are likely to have committed such an offense. Higher rates are to be expected for this group of offenses, as there are more types of offenses included.

The table below summarizes these results in numeric terms.

Years	Misdemeanor or felony	Ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony
1	.10	.11
2	.16	.21
3	.22	.29
4	.26	.35

Associations with re-offending

In addition to providing recidivism rates over time, the analysis used notes information in cases that is associated with re-offending. The following table summarizes these findings.

Misdemeanor or felony	Ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony
Boys were more likely to re-offend than girls. Youth who make fewer apologies were more likely to re-offend.	Boys were more likely to re-offend than girls. Those with more days between Peer Court intake and their hearing were more likely to re-offend.
Those with more days between hearing and completion were more likely to re-offend.	Those with more days between hearing and completion were more likely to re-offend.

It seems that boys are more likely to re-offend than girls, and that youth with quicker cases are less likely to re-offend. In addition, for more serious cases, making more apologies is associated with lower rates of re-offending. Note that none of these findings establishes causes of re-offending. For example, it may be that youth with more days between hearing and completion are less responsible than other youth, and therefore more likely to re-offend; or, it may be that the more time given between hearing and completion makes them think that they can “get away” with more and therefore is directly responsible for their re-offending.

For more detailed information on the survival analysis/Cox regression results, refer to Appendix A.

Interpreting Recidivism Rates

Interpreting these recidivism rates should involve some comparisons between Peer Court youth and other, similar youth. In interviews, law enforcement agents who referred youth to Peer Court described them with the following attributes:

- Police: first police contact, remorseful youth, cooperative parents, must have transportation available, mostly station adjustments
- City Attorney: first offense, parents are involved, youth who “really” admit guilt
- State’s Attorney: first misdemeanor, rare low level felony with mitigating circumstances, youth accepts responsibility

The problem for comparison purposes is that all youths like this in Vermilion County are already in Peer Court! Therefore, no comparisons using youth in Vermilion County can be made. Other comparisons must be sought.

One can compare recidivism rates from Peer Court to rates from other low-level offense youth. Recidivism after a status offense within a year has been reported as 33% (Benda, 1987). Recidivism after a first-time offense where a youth is sentenced to probation has also been reported as 33% (Severy & Whitaker, 1982). Using these comparisons, Peer Court appears to be reducing recidivism compared to other options. However, recidivism studies for these populations have never been done in Vermilion County, so the applicability of these figures to the local context is questionable.

Other teen courts have reported recidivism rates within a year of 15% (Hissong, 1991), 31% (Garrison, 2001), and within 6 months in the 8-9% range (Butts, Buck, & Coggeshall, 2002). While this might suggest that Peer Court, Inc. reduces the likelihood of recidivism more than other teen courts, it must be remembered that these rates come from different regions of the country with different overall crime rates, and therefore any comparison should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. Peer Court does, however, seem to be on the lower end of the range of recidivism rates after teen court.

References

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- Butts, J., Buck, J., & Coggeshall, M. B. (2002). *The impact of teen court on young offenders*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.
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- Severy, L. J. & Whitaker, J. M. (1982). Juvenile diversion: An experimental analysis of effectiveness. *Evaluation Review*, 6(6), 753-774.

Appendix A

Survival Analysis/Cox Regression Model Results

Committing a misdemeanor or felony after Peer Court

Model fit:

-2 log likelihood: 1520.993

Chi-Square: 42.20 (p<.01)

	Beta	SE	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(Beta)	95.0% CI for Exp(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender	-.859	.204	17.695	1	.00	.424	.284	.632
No apology	-.642	.263	5.935	1	.02	.526	.314	.882
1 apology	-.614	.285	4.630	1	.03	.541	.310	.947
2 apologies	-.270	.241	1.259	1	.26	.763	.477	1.223
3+ apologies	--	--	7.846	3	.05	--	--	--
Days between hearing and completion	.003	.001	6.930	1	.01	1.003	1.001	1.006
Completing sentence*	.907	.262	11.969	1	.00	2.478	1.482	4.143

*It is the judgment of the author that this association is an artifact of the high percentage of youth competing sentences

Committing an ordinance violation, misdemeanor, or felony after Peer Court

Model fit:

-2 log likelihood: 625.953

Chi-Square: 19.19 (p<.01)

	Beta	SE	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(Beta)	95.0% CI for Exp(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender	-.768	.281	7.455	1	.006	.464	.268	.805
Days between intake and hearing	.008	.004	3.584	1	.058	1.008	1.000	1.016
Days between hearing and completion	.005	.002	5.104	1	.024	1.005	1.001	1.009