

# Riverside County Sheriff's Department - Youth Court

## Background

Youth Court is a voluntary alternative to the criminal justice system for youthful, first-time offenders. It is a diversion program allowed under the Welfare and Institutions Code Section 626. The goal of Youth Court is to intervene in early antisocial, delinquent, criminal behavior to reduce the incidence and prevent the escalation of such behavior. It allows offenders the opportunity to complete community service and write essays in lieu of criminal prosecution. This innovative program is designed to make a positive impression on the youthful offender.

Youth Court is a participatory approach for students to learn about our legal system, to understand how our system applies to each individual, and to develop an awareness of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. It offers high school students the opportunity to become exposed to the justice system and be active as advocates. Attorneys are student volunteers from the area middle or high schools. The jury pool is made up of prior juvenile offenders. The judge is often a local volunteer attorney. Other positions include a bailiff, court clerk and jury monitor who are normally trained by the acting judge as to courtroom procedure, law and protocol.

The Sheriff has made Youth Court a top priority to prevent the onset of a criminal lifestyle at the level of the youngest offenders. This is a joint effort of the schools, the Sheriff's Department through its School Resource Officer (SRO), or Youth Court Officer (YCO), various nonprofit agencies and is sanctioned by the District Attorney's Office.

Typically, an arresting officer forwards a case to a SRO or a YCO in jurisdictions that participate in Youth Court. To be eligible for this program, the youth must be a first-time offender, under seventeen years of age, who has committed a minor offense such as shoplifting, theft, vandalism, minor assaults or low grade drug or alcohol-related crimes. The youth must admit guilt to the offense and appear with one or both parents for a sentencing hearing before a jury of his or her peers. Offenders are usually sentenced to write an essay on the negative aspects of the offense of at least 150 words to a maximum of 950 words, a letter of apology, community service of ten hours to seventy hours, attendance at two self-esteem classes, and serve as a juror for two to four sessions. Restitution may be ordered, and if needed, drug/alcohol counseling. Completion of the sentence within the time allotted removes the charges from the juvenile's record.

## **Findings**

1. Not all Youth Courts are conducted in a courtroom setting. This atmosphere lessens the effect of the trial, demeans the proceedings and detracts from the dignity of the judge's office.
2. There are only three Youth Courts in the county.

## **Recommendations**

To the Sheriff's Department:

1. Conduct Youth Court in a regular courtroom.
2. Establish Youth Courts in as many areas as possible, and apply for grant money to promote the program.