

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/youth-court-redirecting-young-lives>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[The New York Times recent feature story](#) on New York City's youth courts cast a spotlight on a simple idea that has great potential for improving outcomes for youth in trouble with the law. In the criminal justice system, a jury of one's peers is a guaranteed right of criminal defendants, so why not provide the same to youth coming into contact with the juvenile justice system?

The idea of a youth court is not a new one; in fact, most states provide for this type of court in one form or another. A youth court provides young low-level offenders the opportunity to be tried by other youth who act as the judge, jurors, and advocates. Within this context of positive peer influence, rather than being formally processed and sentenced, these youth may instead learn the value of being accountable for their actions, making better decisions, and redirecting their paths.

In Staten Island, through the [Youth Justice Center](#), a program run by the [Center for Court Innovation](#), the goal is not to punish, but rather to provide an alternative option for those youth headed toward more serious and criminal activity. Sentences such as community service, life-skills workshops, and the identification of career goals aim to divert first-time offenders from deeper penetration into the juvenile justice system and it seems to be working. Eighty-five percent of youth complete their sentences and have their records sealed.

Diverting young people who have committed minor offenses from the formal system increases the juvenile courts ability to focus on youth who have been accused of more serious offenses. Furthermore, research on youth courts around the country has shown that specialized or problem-solving courts offer a transformative experience for the youth who participate, diminishing the likelihood that they will engage in future illegal activity.

The overarching goals of Staten Islands Youth Justice Center fit clearly within Vera's [Center on Youth Justice](#)'s mission and overall principles of preventing deeper penetration into the system, while focusing on providing positive opportunities for youth in their communities. Policymakers should give serious thought to expanding specialized courts in the criminal and the youth justice systems throughout New York City's five boroughs, given their benefits to the system, the youth, and the community as a whole.

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