



Successful Practices & Strategies

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Fresno Police Department

Fresno, California

www.fresno.gov/police

Community policing element

Community partnerships, problem solving, and organizational transformation

Problem/issue

Diverting youth from criminal justice

Problem description

Seeking to have long term impacts on crime, the Fresno Police Department and its community partners sought to find ways to divert juvenile offenders from criminal justice and into restorative justice programs.

Community policing strategies implemented

Student and neighborhood resource officers (SNRO) are focused on intervention strategies on their campuses that will divert student offenders from the criminal justice system to restorative justice programs. One of those programs is the youth court. Youth court systems have proven to be an effective restorative justice program with an incredibly low recidivism rate that provides consequences for low-level, misdemeanor offenses. The SNROs and their partners (Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), Fresno County Probation Department, and Fresno County Superior Court) agreed to expand youth court to the FUSD middle schools, beginning with a pilot program for the final months of the 2016–2017 school year. The pilot program included four middle schools. Since the start of the 2017–2018 school year, the program has been expanded to include all Fresno Unified middle schools where an SNRO is assigned.

Youth court sessions are held once per month (September through May) at each of FUSD's high school campuses. Each school has an assigned Fresno County Superior Court judge and a trained student jury. When SNROs identify students who have committed qualifying misdemeanor offenses, they can request the case be sent to the youth court. In order to qualify for youth court, the offender must be a first-time offender, not be a gang member, and agree not to challenge the charges. The offender and a parent first meet with a juvenile probation officer to sign a participation contract consenting to the youth court process.



The proceedings begin with the judge swearing in the jury and the involved parties. The judge or a law enforcement officer summarizes the report of the incident for the jury. The offender then describes the crime in his or her own words. During the proceedings, the judge and the peer jurors ask questions of the offender to determine the motivations for their actions and mitigating factors. They also ask questions that can help them decide appropriate sentencing punishments. After hearing testimony and questioning the involved parties, the student jurors determine the youth offender's sentence, which usually includes community service, essays, letters of apology, and occasionally mediation with the victim.

All offenders who complete their sentence must also serve as a juror on at least one youth court proceeding. Making the offender a part of the jury ensures that the offender does not view the jury as adversaries and reduces the likelihood of retaliation. When the offender successfully completes their sentence, the judge immediately orders their record sealed for that offense.

The youth court process is just one of the tools that SNROs use to address criminality without placing students into the juvenile justice system. In 2017 there were 91 students identified as suspects in crimes that occurred on the campus of schools where an SNRO is assigned. Of the 91 offenders, 51 (55.43%) were diverted from the juvenile justice system into the youth court or restorative practices or were reprimanded and released. This does not even include the dozens of incidents where SNROs prevented criminal activity, conducted interventions and counseling sessions to address anticipated criminal activity (fights, etc.), or worked with students to correct noncriminal misbehavior.

Of the offenders not diverted at the school level, even more are referred to the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) by the juvenile courts. The nine-week program brings the victim and the offender together in a mediation to discuss what happened and how to correct it, including paying restitution. This program has been very successful and has only a 6% recidivism rate within two years.

The Fresno Police Department and our partner agencies use many programs and methods to allow our youth to positively learn from poor decisions and criminal behavior. Our goal is to have long-term impacts on crime by changing current behaviors. We are hopeful that expanding youth court into the middle schools will ultimately prove to be another effective way to steer our youth away from the path of criminality and toward a path of success.

Change and/or impact as a result of these community policing efforts

The youth court program has only recently been implemented in the middle schools, and as a result the sample size is still small and of less than one year's duration. The long term benefits of such early intervention cannot yet be extrapolated with any reasonable certainty.



Anecdotally, some officers at middle schools with the most interaction with the youth court report real world benefits of the program. One officer reported that the students he has referred to the youth court have developed relationships with him. The students feel that he gave them a break by not referring them to the traditional court process, and they appreciate the second chance. He stated that not only are they friendly toward him but they also seek him out for advice and to bring him information about problems occurring on campus that he may not be aware of. We are hopeful that in time, this anecdotal evidence will be reflected in the empirical data.

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