

"I believe in the program! Sometimes kids do stupid stuff and are at the wrong place at the wrong time and this is a good opportunity for them to turn their lives around. These are life lessons and Teen Court makes you look back and stop before committing a bigger offense in the future."

Jessica, Teen Court student volunteer/high school student

Let's face it – as Jessica says, teenagers can do stupid things. Sometimes they even break the law. When this happens, teenagers often have to go to court for criminal **trial**. If the teens are found guilty, they can get criminal records and may even end up in jail. Students with a criminal record can have a hard time finding jobs, going to college, or getting loans.

In Miami, Florida, people have created a program called Teen Court that helps students who break the law avoid a criminal record. Teen Court is made up mostly of student volunteers from local high schools. The punishments that teenagers get from their peers are often less severe in Teen Court than in adult courts. Students also do not get a criminal record if they stay out of trouble in the future. Many people in Miami argue that Teen Court is a great way for students to stay out of serious trouble, stay in school, and get back on the right track.

A Jury of Your Peers...and Almost Everyone Else in Court is a Teen, Too!

In Teen Court, the **process** is mostly the same as adult court except high school volunteers play almost all of the parts. Teens are the lawyers, the bailiffs, and the clerks. They also act as the jurors who make decisions about each case. The only adult is the judge. The judge knows the law well and helps to make sure that the **trial** is **fair**.

Only some teens can go to Teen Court when they break the law. For example, it must be the first time that the teen has broken the law. This is to **control** against students who might break the law over and over, thinking they can just go to Teen Court to get off easy. Also, the crime cannot be a dangerous or violent crime. Crimes in Teen Court **vary** from trespassing to stealing.

Teen lawyers argue the different sides of the case. Then the teen jury decides on a punishment. The jury usually gives a less severe punishment than adult court would give. Punishments **vary** depending on the crime. Some examples of punishments are community service or a written apology to the victims of the crime. Most important, the teens do not get a criminal record if they agree to the punishment and stay out of trouble in the future.

Supporters of Miami's Teen Court argue that students other than the ones who break the law benefit from Teen Court, too. Students who volunteer to be lawyers, jurors, and other court members learn a lot about the law. They often plan to study law in college and to become lawyers or police officers. Also, students practice public speaking and leadership skills during the court **process**. Finally, student volunteers can count their time at Teen Court as community service hours. Many high schools require this.

A lot of people think that having separate courts for teens is a good idea for these reasons. What do you think? Is teen court a good idea? Can students be **objective** when one of their peers is on **trial**? Would we be safer if adults who know the law **controlled** the **process** and punished teens who broke the law? Or is teen court the most **fair** way for teens to have their day in court?

