

PEER PRESSURE from page 4

Youth Peer Court, they are first required to plead guilty to the offense they committed. They are also required to take steps designed to involve the youth with their family and community members who can help them get back on track. For instance, the youth are required to have their parent, guardian, or another adult with them in an interview prior to the court proceeding, or the actual proceeding itself.

During the proceeding, the youth is questioned in direct and cross-examinations by the defense and prosecuting attorneys. Once the case is heard, the jury deliberates and decides the sentence the offender gets. A typical sentence is a combination of community service, writing essays about the impact of their crimes, and serving on Peer Court's jury.

The minimum sentence a teen can receive is taking a class about the effects of crime and compulsory volunteering for two jury sessions. Community service time can't exceed 16 hours, and essays can't be longer than 1,000 words. Harvey-Trigoso says the juries rarely impose fines on defendants. "Of course, who would be paying that is the parent," she says.

The sentences are designed to be educational as much as they are punitive. In that regard, Peer Court acts as an educational experience for the youth.

"They tend to commit these offenses because they are compulsive," McKetchnie says. "They don't have the cognitive development of adults. They don't necessarily understand the consequences of their actions."

Finally, the attorney volunteering as the judge gives the youth a stern warning

regarding the seriousness of their crime, and how much jail time or fines they may have gotten had they gone through the juvenile justice system.

"It's important for them to realize how serious some of these things are," Keller says, pointing out that once kids turn 18 and become adults, they would go to jail or prison.

"A lot of times, we're getting kids that are 17, and almost turning 18," she says. "That birthday is the difference between a Peer Court case and possibly going to jail."

Once the youth finish their sentence obligations, they have the chance to expunge the offense from their record. Harvey-Trigoso and others regard that as one of the most important benefits of Peer Court. Having a criminal record that starts when someone is a teenager can affect what sorts of jobs and housing they can get, as well as eligibility for federal financial aid for college.

"Even if someone has their juvenile record closed, that history still comes into play as an adult," Keller says.

The court does not keep track of recidivism rates, but Harvey-Trigoso says around 80 percent of the teens follow through with completing their sentences.

A lot of it, she thinks, is related to the fact that the court is peer-driven, and the sentences are given by fellow peers. "Peer pressure is strong," Harvey-Trigoso says. "In the teenager years, you really care about what peers are saying to them. They're able to relate to each other better."

Kiriak says seeing peers sit on the jury and hand down sentences has the effect of humbling the offenders. "They expect to see a bunch of adults or strangers," she says. "And then it's like 'oh, I have math with you tomorrow.'"

Harvey-Trigoso says the program is still too new to see any trends in decreased crime, or teen behavior. But the court has started to see an uptick in harassment cases. Much of it doesn't involve physical contact, but can be harassment from cyber-bullying, harassing text, Facebook messages, or video.

Assault IV, which is the most common charge, is a "borderline" offense that is almost too severe to handle in Peer Court, Harvey-Trigoso says. As Peer Court continues, its sentences and methods of working with juveniles will evolve as the crimes they commit change.

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— KIM HARVEY-TRIGOSO
YOUTH PEER COURT COORDINATOR

The program is completely funded by federal grants, as well as in-kind support from the four towns participating in Peer Court. Currently, there is no Peer Court program in Portland. Harvey-Trigoso says the program would like to expand to Portland, but has not been able to find a way of funding the expansion — but she and others would like to see the program continue to grow.

"Anyway we can get in and intervene with kids, that's a great thing," Keller says. "And the less likely they are to end up in prison."



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