

What Social Science Tells Us about Youth Who Commit Status Offenses: Practical Advice for Attorneys

Understand what social science research says about the causes of status offense behaviors.

- Learn about antisocial behavior in youth, adolescent development, and peer influences to provide a context to understand the causes of status offense behavior.
- Use research to focus system interventions on identifying and resolving the cause of the behavior rather than only focusing on the behavior itself.

Build a strong relationship with your client.

- Understand that some adolescents may have trouble conceptualizing future consequences of their behavior. Discuss what is important to the youth now, and focus on the immediate effects of her actions.
- Assess whether the youth's behavior is influenced by peers.
- Build trust by demonstrating that you are actively working for the youth.
- Keep conversations short and focused.
- Look for signs of abusive situations at or away from home and link your client with appropriate services or legal assistance, if appropriate.

Engage the youth in setting a realistic case plan.

- Choose concrete, achievable goals and make sure the client understands the consequences of noncompliance.
- Consider resolutions that end the proceeding quickly over rulings that prolong adjudication.

- Seek evaluations or treatments where needed to better address mental health, substance abuse, or domestic abuse issues.
- Suggest family mediation or counseling, or a family assessment to address problems in the family dynamic.

Use social science research to support in-court advocacy.

- Use existing literature to bolster arguments against secure detention, certain service types, or dispositional approaches.
- Cite research that puts your client's behavior in the larger context of adolescent development to decrease culpability.
- Demonstrate that punitive measures may be less effective than community-based alternatives.
- Advocate for age-appropriate programs that offer positive peer influences.
- Emphasize the importance of treatments and services that address underlying causes of behavior.

