

The Creation of a Young Adult Court

Elizabeth Cauffman, PhD

Judge Maria Hernandez

Alex Brown, JD

Frank Davis, JD

Level

Intermediate

Room

Track

Juvenile/Legal/Clinical

CE

CPA/BBS/CJER/MCLE

Bio

Elizabeth Cauffman, PhD is a Professor in the Department of Psychological Science at the University of California, Irvine and holds courtesy appointments in the Department of Criminology, Law & Society, the School of Education, and the School of Law. Dr. Cauffman received her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Temple University and completed a post-doctoral fellowship at the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University. She has published over 150 articles, chapters, and books on a range of topics in the study of contemporary adolescence, including adolescent brain development, risk-taking and decision-making, parent-adolescent relationships, and juvenile justice. Findings from Dr. Cauffman's research were incorporated into the American Psychological Association's amicus briefs submitted to the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roper v. Simmons*, which abolished the juvenile death penalty, and in both *Graham v. Florida* and *Miller v. Alabama*, which placed limits on the use of life without parole as a sentence for juveniles. As part of her larger efforts to help research inform practice and policy, she served as a member of the MacArthur Foundation's [Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice](#) as well as the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Committee on the Neurobiological and Socio-behavioral Science of Adolescent Development and Its Applications. Dr. Cauffman currently directs the Center for Psychology & Law (<http://psychlaw.soceco.uci.edu/>) as well as the Masters in Legal & Forensic Psychology (<https://mlfp.soceco.uci.edu/>) at UCI.

Frank Davis, JD served as the Director of the Alternate Public Defender's Office in Orange County for over a decade until his retirement in 2024. His office represented indigent clients in criminal cases when the main Public Defender's Office had a conflict of interest. Frank supervised felony trials and helped to establish the Young Adult Court. He was a deputy public defender for over 26 years and an attorney supervisor for 14 years, continuing to litigate cases until his retirement. Frank handled several high-profile homicide cases, including one involving a custodial death that led to a grand jury investigation into jail policies and procedures. Currently, Frank lectures at the University of California, Irvine, where he teaches Criminal Law and Constitutional Law.

Alexander Brown, JD has worked as a Deputy District Attorney with the Orange County District Attorney's Office (OCDA) since 2016; working in a variety of areas ranging from Juvenile Justice, Driving under the Influence of Drugs (DUID) and Insurance Fraud. He currently works in the Mental Health/Recidivism Reduction Unit (MH/RRU). MH/RRU handles all matters related to competency to stand trial, post-conviction including Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity and Offenders with Mental Disorders, collaborative courts (Mental Health, Drug, DUI, Veterans' Treatment and Young Adult), Military and Developmentally Disabled Diversion. His focus and specialty is on Mental Health Diversion and Young Adult Court. Last, but not least, he serves as a board member of the OCDA Association for Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity (AIDE).

Judge Maria D. Hernandez was elected as the Orange County Superior Court Presiding Judge in 2023, overseeing the daily operations of the third largest court in the state of California and the fifth largest court in the country. Judge Hernandez currently serves as the chair of the State Trial Court Judges Advisory Committee and an Advisory member of the Judicial Council. She served as the court's Assistant Presiding Judge in 2021 as well as the court's COVID-19 liaison throughout the global pandemic. Judge Hernandez previously served as the Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court for Orange County until January 2018, when she returned to a criminal felony trial calendar. During her nine years as a juvenile court judge, she created and presided over the dedicated court addressing commercially sexually exploited children (GRACE—Generating Resources to Abolish Child Exploitation) and co-chaired the Orange County Committee relating to Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (CSEC). While overseeing all daily court operations for the juvenile branch, she convened the County's first Juvenile Justice Summit in 2016, which brought together over 400 of the county's leaders to address the special needs of the children and families of Orange County. Judge Hernandez also created and presided over an innovative collaborative court dedicated to boys in the child welfare system back in 2010, which continues to meet the needs of the highest-risk system-involved youth. In 2018, Judge Hernandez launched the Young Adult Court (YAC), an innovative program that addresses the special needs of emerging adults charged with felonies in the criminal justice system.

Narrative

This presentation will provide a broad overview of the Young Adult Court (YAC) and the corresponding research study, which is a randomized controlled trial. The YAC was designed for young men between the ages of 18 and 25 and is intended to reduce recidivism and promote positive life outcomes by providing developmentally appropriate support to participants of the program. Eligible young men are randomized into either the YAC treatment group or to a control group, which receives traditional court processing. Preliminary data suggest that participating in the YAC is indeed related to reduced recidivism and better mental health outcomes. This presentation will include a review of the developmental science that led to the creation of this court, the perspectives of the legal practitioners who are involved in the operations, and the preliminary results of the randomized control trial.

Learning Objectives

1. Explain three key principles of developmental science as they relate to decision-making, risk-taking, and impulse control in adolescents and young adults
2. Explain how brain maturation impacts behavior and legal culpability in emerging adults (ages 18-25).
3. Describe two goals and structure of Young Adult Court (YAC) and how it differs from traditional criminal court
4. Examine the role of individualized interventions in addressing the developmental needs of young adult offenders

5. Assess how research in developmental science informs policy decisions related to juvenile and young adult justice