



Forging Paths of Compassion: Congregational Advocacy Groups' Influence on Expanding Civil Citation Programs Across Florida Counties

Anaum Virani

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Dr. Jodi Lane, Department of Sociology and Criminology

Abstract

In the United States, Florida leads the nation in prosecuting minors, from direct file to reinforcing systems like the school-to-prison pipeline. While the Department of Juvenile Justice has made an active effort to move away from the punitive avenues to address juvenile delinquency, the local implementation framework outlined in Florida Statute 985 results in variability in utilization across jurisdictions, influencing the treatment and consequences faced by justice-involved youth. The study unveils the influence of congregation-based community organizations, particularly within the Direct Action Research Training network (DART), in advocating for the expansion of civil citation programs. Through comparative analysis and qualitative interviews, it demonstrates the effectiveness of congregational advocacy in shaping juvenile justice policies. The findings underscore the necessity of statewide standards to ensure consistency and address local challenges in implementation. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of further research into the impact of socio-demographic and contextual factors on program effectiveness and youth outcomes, providing valuable insights for policy development.

Keywords: Florida, Juvenile Justice, Civil Citation, Juvenile Delinquency, Diversion, Local Implementation Method, Local Activism, Florida Statute, S. 985.12.

Introduction

Florida has long grappled with the challenge of juvenile justice, often finding itself at the forefront of debates regarding the appropriate treatment of minors the justice system. As the largest state lacking a minimum age for juvenile court jurisdiction (Abrams et al., 2020a), Florida's absence of state-level guidelines necessitates that local law enforcement agencies and officers rely on administrative policies and discretion to determine whether a child should be arrested and/or referred to the juvenile justice system (Abrams et al., 2020b). In response to decades of criminal justice policies prioritizing increased incarceration for enhancing public safety, many states, including Florida, have shifted their approaches in recent years (Pew Center on States, 2012).

Juvenile courts initially favored rehabilitation over punishment (Meng et al., 2013). However, the tough-on-crime approach surged due to rising crime rates, particularly violent offenses, from the 1970s to the 1990s, as the criminal justice system and public discourse increasingly labeled youths as "juvenile super-predators" (Lipsey, 2010). Despite this, juvenile crime rates have significantly declined in the past two decades, prompting a shift in public policy towards recognizing the unique psychological and neurological needs of juveniles (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2018; Lipsey, 2010).

Consequently, diversion programs like civil citation have gained traction in many states. A 2017 study found that while other Florida diversion programs had a 9% recidivism rate, civil citation programs boasted only a 4% recidivism rate (Caruthers, 2017). However, despite this success, many counties have not substantially implemented their civil citation programs (Nadel et al., 2018), resulting in continued underutilization across the state, with citations issued in only about half of eligible cases (Caruthers, 2017). Moreover, since officers have discretion in choosing between arrest or citation, utilization varies significantly across cases. Congregation-based community organizations have emerged as a leading voice in the cause to challenge the underutilization of civil citation programs. Driven by tenets of forgiveness and mercy, coalitions within the DART (Direct Action Research Training Center), a nationwide network of congregation-based community organizations, have been instrumental in advocating for juvenile justice reforms.

This study aims to explore the role of congregational advocacy groups in the expansion of civil citation programs, particularly in diverting youth offenders from punitive measures. While many counties have seen organic growth in civil citation usage (Caruthers, 2018), the research seeks to determine whether these advocacy groups serve as crucial catalysts for progress or if state law should be prioritized over local activism. Through comparative analysis between counties with and without such activism, the study aims to examine the necessity and effectiveness of non-governmental actors in influencing juvenile justice policies. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to discussions on whether state law should complement or override local activism in advocating for reformatory rather than punitive approaches to juvenile justice.

The Florida Context

Recent policy shifts in Florida juvenile justice have focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment (Benekos & Merlo, 2016). Against this backdrop, diversion programs have emerged as promising alternatives, offering minors a route away from formal adjudication while providing opportunities for rehabilitation and societal reintegration. Amongst these practices are civil citation programs, in which a law enforcement officer has the authority to issue a civil citation to a person who commits an eligible misdemeanor offense, meets other eligibility requirements, and agrees to participate in a diversion program. These programs are designed to address the behavior of the individual instead of the crime itself and divert the individual from incarceration. Statewide, civil citation produces the lowest recidivism rates (4%) of any program type monitored by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FDJJ), an indicator of remarkable program success (Caruthers, 2018). Caruthers' report underscores the benefits of civil citations, indicating significant taxpayer savings and reduced strain on law enforcement resources. From July 2013 to December 2016, Florida saved between \$56 million to \$176 million by redirecting juveniles from incarceration to civil citation programs. Additionally, each avoided youth arrest and translates to taxpayer savings estimated between \$1,468 and \$4,614 per instance (Caruthers, 2017).

Introduced in 1990, Florida's Juvenile Civil Citation program offered an alternative to arrest for juvenile delinquency. The program gained significant momentum in 2011 when an amendment to Florida statute 985 mandated statewide diversion programs across all judicial circuits. Although the program has been established in 60 out of Florida's 67 counties (Nadel et al., 2018), it is locally implemented. The statute designates that the program "shall be established at the local level with the concurrence of the chief judge of the circuit, state attorney, public defender, and the head of each local law enforcement agency involved" (Florida Statute, S. 985.12).

State Statute 985's local implementation method has resulted in varying civil citation utilization rates across Florida. Since the statute operates on the premise of decentralized governance, it is facilitated by Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) among prosecutors, schools, court officials, community service providers, and participating law enforcement agencies (Caruthers, 2017). Though there were legislative attempts in 2017 to establish a statewide standard for civil citation referrals for a set number of misdemeanors (H.B. 2015, H.B. 213, S.B. 196), these efforts faltered due to concerns that such a law would infringe upon

officers’ discretionary powers (Capitol News Service, 2017). The local implementation mechanism is responsible for the substantial difference in civil citation utilization rates between top-performing counties like Pinellas (95%) in comparison to low-performing counties like Osceola (16%) (FLDOJJ, 2021). Despite a steady increase in citation utilization since 2011 (Caruthers, 2018), persistently low rates of utilization in certain counties translate to thousands of minors being impacted by permanent arrest records for common misbehaviors.

In Florida, pre-arrest principles for juveniles are set by the county sheriff, police chief(s), and judicial circuit state attorney (Florida Statute, S. 985.12). Each official has distinct strategies for delinquency, and responses therefore vary. Yet, as elected officials, they are ultimately accountable to the public, shaping their approach based on public sentiment.

Congregation-based community organizing has since risen to become one of the largest non-governmental entities influencing juvenile justice policy. DART, a national network of congregation-based community organizations, currently has its largest presence in the state of Florida. The goals of DART’s criminal justice collaborative, which was established in 2014, are described as “expanding access to the state’s civil citation program” (The DART center, 2023). Its 13 chapters include (Dart Center, 2023):

Table 1. Florida DART Chapters	County	Organization Name
	Broward	Ft. Lauderdale BOLD (Broward Organized Leaders Doing) Justice
	Brevard	Brevard Justice Ministry, Inc.
	Volusia	FAITH (Fighting Against Injustice Toward Harmony)
	Pinellas	FAST (Faith and Action for Strength Together)
	Hillsborough	HOPE (Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality)
	Escambia	J.U.S.T. Pensacola (Justice United Seeking Transformation in Pensacola)
	Lee	LIFE (Lee Interfaith For Empowerment)
	Manatee	STREAM (Stronger Together Reaching Equality Across Manatee)
	Miami-Dade	PACT (People Acting for Community Together)
	Palm Beach	PEACE (People Engaged in Active Community Efforts)

Polk	PEACE (Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment)
Sarasota	SURE (Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity)
Leon	CAJM (Capital Area Justice Ministry)

Counties of Interest

Many of these organizations have succeeded in their stated goals of throwing a “DART” at injustice. In particular, the focus of this study and literature review will be on examining the impact trajectories of advocacy efforts in Manatee, Escambia, and Hillsborough counties. Further rationale for this selection will be provided in the methodology section.

Escambia County’s J.U.S.T. Pensacola (Justice United Seeking Transformation in Pensacola) is a coalition of 17 congregations from 12 different faith traditions in Pensacola and other surrounding areas of Escambia County. Formed in 2019, the group actively works to mobilize its community to combat Escambia County’s reputation as one of the most aggressive counties when it came to prosecuting juveniles in Florida. Data show that in 2015-2016 the County ranked third in the state for both the number and the percentage of children transferred to adult court (FLDOJJ, 2016). In 2021, J.U.S.T. Pensacola managed to get State Attorney Ginger Bowden Madden, Sheriff Chip Simmons, and Mayor Grover Robinson to sign onto a MOU expanding the number of misdemeanors and ordinance violations eligible for citation (Kennedy, 2021).

Manatee County’s STREAM (Stronger Together Reaching Equality Across Manatee) represents a nonpartisan, grassroots organizing endeavor that unites various faith communities in addressing societal injustices and resolving critical community issues. Consisting of 15 member congregations with diverse religious, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic compositions, the coalition is a collaborative effort focused on effecting positive change on issues such as criminal justice and housing. Members of STREAM have actively engaged in advocacy efforts, including lobbying the Manatee County Sheriff’s Office for new approaches to handling first-time juvenile offenders. Their advocacy is rooted in an aspiration to shift the paradigm of criminal justice, driven by the recognition of adverse repercussions related to arrest. As articulated by Glen Gracyzk, director of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Palmetto, STREAM’s overarching objective

is to “prevent the enduring stigmatization associated with criminal records, thereby mitigating the perpetuation of cycles of poverty-induced criminalization” (Callihan, 2023). However, these efforts have not come without challenge as Director Gracyzk also noted, “Letters and calls to Sherriff Rick Wells for a meeting have gone unanswered” (Gholar, 2022).

In the realm of juvenile justice, Hillsborough County, alongside Miami-Dade County, stood out for transferring a significant number of children to adult court, with Hillsborough transferring 178 juveniles to adult court in 2015-2016, placing it among the top Florida counties for adult transfer (FDOJJ, 2016). HOPE, or Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality, has since emerged with a membership of 26 congregations and community organizations to promote justice, fairness, and the dignity of people. HOPE's achievements include significant contributions to the establishment and expansion of the Hillsborough Civil Citation Program, which facilitated the adoption of a permanent Hillsborough Youth Civil Citation policy. This policy mandates civil citations for first-time misdemeanor offenses, reducing juvenile arrests and protecting their future prospects. HOPE also contributed to expanding Florida's Civil Citation law, allowing juveniles under 18 to receive civil citations for up to three misdemeanors, promoting diversion, and preventing unnecessary arrests (Jones, 2023).

Methodology

The study conducted both a descriptive analysis of publicly available data and interviews with people involved in congregations focused on improving the use of civil citation programs. The primary objective of this descriptive analysis of public data was to examine the evolution of civil citation program utilization rates across counties with (test groups) and without congregational advocacy groups (control groups). To ensure robust comparisons, counties were matched based on their most recent sociodemographics and youth arrest rates in proportion to population. All information was found on the FDOJJ juvenile delinquency profile data dashboard from 2021, the latest fiscal year (FY) with comprehensive public data.

Comparative groups were meticulously matched to ensure statistical similarity, with a margin difference of 5% or less in all descriptive statistics, such as youth arrest rates and population demographics. These counties were selected because they had comparable youth arrest rates and population demographics. This matching aimed to help control for confounding variables,

enhancing the study's ability to attribute differences in civil citation program utilization rates to the presence of congregational activism. However, due to the inability to control for these other possible confounding variables, this analysis remains descriptive.

A retrospective cross-analysis was conducted on civil citation utilization rates from FY 2016 to FY 2021, comparing counties with and without congregational advocacy groups. This approach illustrated through line graphs, offers insights into the influence of advocacy groups on program adoption and expansion. Each graph compares county rates to the statewide average, providing context within broader state-level trends. All data are from the FDOJJ.

The methodology also includes a qualitative component, involving interviews with congregational advocacy group members to gain insights into their strategies and experiences influencing the adoption and expansion of civil citation programs in their respective jurisdictions. I contacted 12 participants via email and phone, and 9 agreed to participate (75% response rate). I conducted interviews via Zoom from February 21st to March 15th, 2024, and they lasted between 30 to 60 minutes each. I conducted a thematic content analysis to identify patterns in the interview data, aiming to capture the motivations, values, beliefs, and obstacles underlying the efforts and influence of congregational group juvenile justice activism. To code the themes, the interview transcripts were first reviewed to identify recurring concepts and ideas. Initial codes were generated based on these patterns. For instance, motivations included themes such as the desire to align with biblically inspired justice, while obstacles covered issues such as lobbying challenges and bureaucratic hurdles. Participant comfort and discretion were prioritized by focusing on overarching themes and avoiding singling out individuals or organizations.

Results

County-Comparisons

According to the methodology established statistical criterion of a 5% marginal difference in descriptive statistics, the comparative analysis delineated three pairs: Group 1 (comprising Manatee and Alachua County), Group 2 (comprising Escambia and Marion County), and Group 3 (comprising Hillsborough and Orange County) (see Tables 2-4). Notably, Manatee, Escambia,

and Hillsborough County demonstrated the presence of congregational activism (STREAM, J.U.S.T Pensacola, HOPE), whereas Alachua, Marion, and Orange County did not.

Table 2. FC 2020-21 Delinquency profile descriptive statistics for Group 1

Variable	Manatee County	Alachua County
Youth Population	34753	21618
Youth Arrest Rate*	.03%	.03%
Youth Female Population	21%	20%
Youth Male Population	79%	80%
Youth White Population	50%	54%
Youth Non-White* Population	50%	46%

Youth Arrest Rate denotes the proportion or percentage of intake arrests, which involve the screening and assessment of a youth alleged to have violated the law or a court order, in relation to the total population of youths aged 10 to 17. Values are rounded to the nearest hundredth. **Non White*** denotes (Black/Hispanic/Other)*

Table 3. FC 2020-21 Delinquency profile descriptive statistics for Group 2

Variable	Escambia County	Marion County
Youth Population	30901	30141
Youth Arrest Rate*	.03%	.03%
Youth Female Population	32%	27%
Youth Male Population	68%	73%
Youth White Population	54%	54%
Youth Non-White* Population	46%	46%

Table 4. FC 2020-21 Delinquency profile descriptive statistics for Group 3

Variable	Hillsborough County	Orange County
Youth Population	152349	147675
Youth Arrest Rate*	.02%	.02%
Youth Female Population	23%	20%
Youth Male Population	77%	80%
Youth White Population	37%	32%
Youth Non-White* Population	63%	68%

Figure 2 shows that Manatee County had a significantly higher civil citation issuance rate (CC%) of 91% compared to Alachua County's 41% in 2020-2021, despite similar youth arrest rates and sociodemographic factors (Figure 2). Manatee's civil citation rate has steadily increased since 2016, surpassing the state average each fiscal year, while Alachua underperforms by 20% compared to Florida. This discrepancy suggests that congregational advocacy groups, such as STREAM in Manatee County, may have effectively influenced civil citation program adoption.

Despite efforts by J.U.S.T Pensacola to expand the scope of misdemeanors and ordinance violations eligible for citation by gaining support from the state attorney, police chief, and sheriff, Escambia County still underperforms compared to the statewide CC% (Figure 3). However, there was a notable 13% increase in CC% from fiscal year 2019-20 to fiscal year 2020-21, aligning with the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in 2021 (Kennedy, 2021). In contrast, Marion County meets the statewide average in 2021 and does not lag in CC% as significantly as Escambia County from fiscal year 2017 to 2020 (Figure 4).

Figure 3 focuses on the more densely populated counties and shows a closely aligned trend in CC% between the county and the statewide average. Despite Hillsborough County showing a gradual increase compared to Orange County's relatively stagnant trajectory, both counties have consistently fallen behind the statewide average issuance from fiscal year 2016 to 2021 (Figure

4). Over the past five years, Hillsborough has maintained an average CC% of 52%, slightly higher than Orange County's 47%.

Figure 2: Group 1 Civil Citation Utilization Rate (CC%) Cross-Analysis

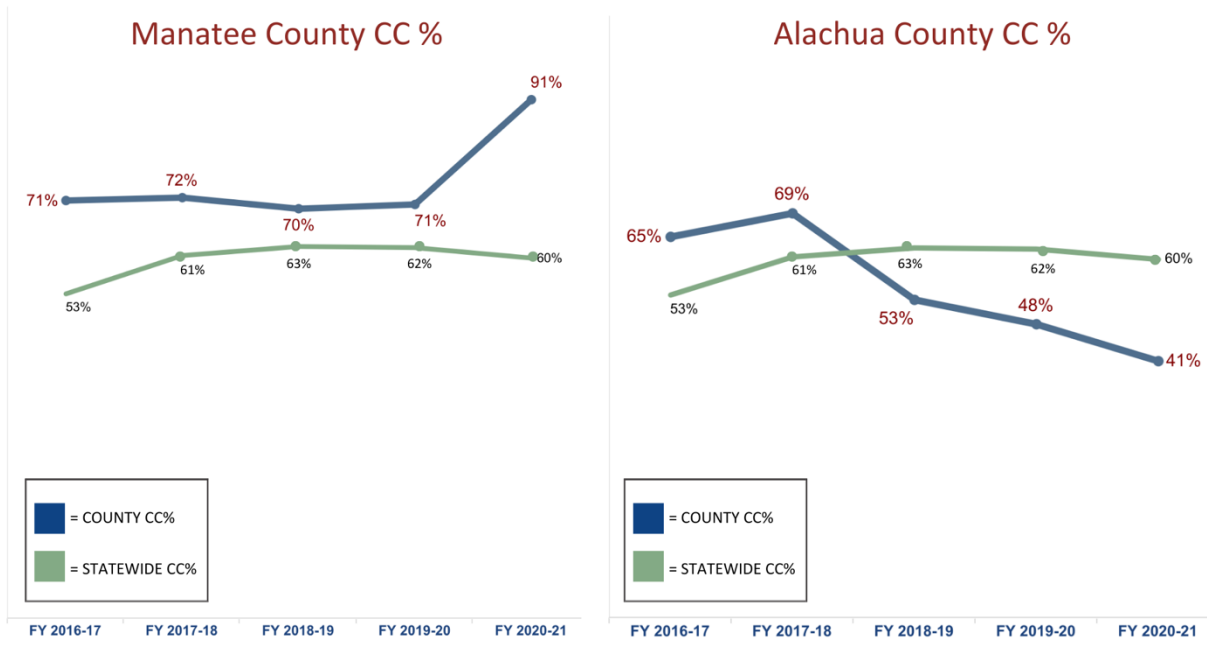


Figure 3: Group 2 Civil Citation Utilization Rate (CC%) Cross-Analysis

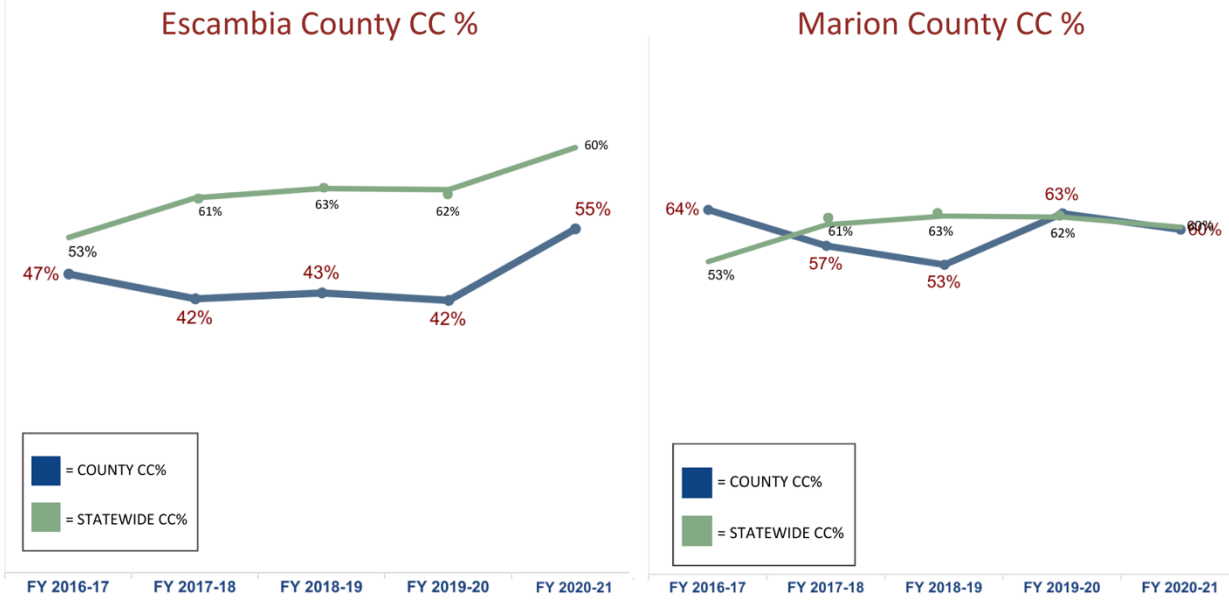
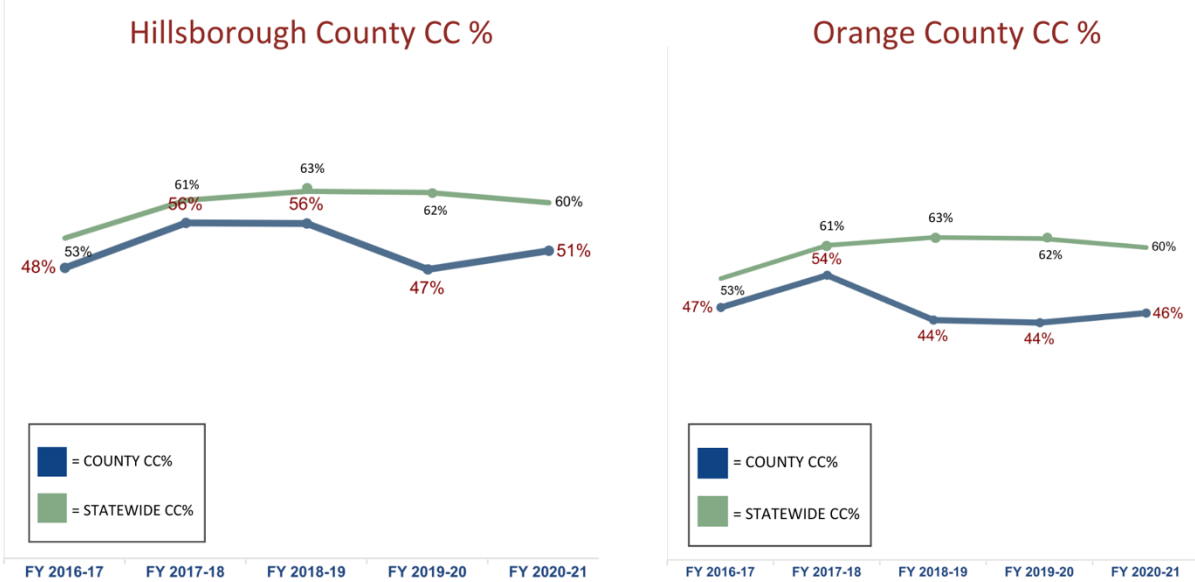


Figure 4: Group 3 Civil Citation Utilization Rate (CC%) Cross-Analysis



Qualitative Interview Results

Table 5: Interview Thematic Analysis

Topics of Interview Question	Main Themes Identified in Response
Core Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biblically aligned notions of justice and forgiveness. - Focus on restorative justice as opposed to punitive. - Believe arresting kids has more long-term harm than good.
Advocacy Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constrained impact for newer advocacy groups. - Gained political traction and support with legislators and the local community. - Positive media coverage.
Obstacles in Advocacy Effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sherriff's tougher to lobby than state attorney and police chief. - Officer discretion continues to come up as a contentious issue. - The complexity of the legal system and bureaucratic hurdles involved in enacting policy changes.
Local vs State Oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legal and regulatory barriers and restrictive civil citation eligibility can impede advocacy for program expansion. - All interviewees indicated the need for a more standardized state policy on civil citation issuance.
Influence of Advocacy on Local Elections and Law Enforcement Appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coalition building has given significant visibility in local elections. - The general public is unaware of the severity of juvenile justice issues, which leads to limited impact for larger elections. - Public pressure has become more of an effectiveness mechanism with many elected legal officials and local leaders.
Future Advocacy Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue expansion and coalition building. - Lobby for adult diversion programs. - Advocate for statewide oversight of civil citation programs.

Qualitative interview results in Table 5 underscore a commitment to restorative justice rooted in biblical values, despite challenges in lobbying law enforcement, including resistance and concerns over discretion. Advocacy successes are attributed to coalition building and positive media coverage. However, bureaucratic complexities persist, necessitating standardized state policies for CC%. Interviewees express dedication to enhancing advocacy, prioritizing coalition networks, and also addressing adult diversion programs. There's also a call for statewide oversight mechanisms to ensure civil citation program effectiveness, signaling a collective push for systemic juvenile justice reform.

Conclusion

Florida's juvenile justice system and activism landscape provided an interesting case study in examining the impact of congregational advocacy groups on the adoption and expansion of civil citation programs in Florida counties. The descriptive study presents mixed results regarding the influence of congregational advocacy groups on the adoption and expansion of civil citation programs in Florida counties. While some counties with active advocacy groups, such as Manatee County, demonstrated significantly higher CC% rates compared to their counterparts without such groups, others, like Escambia County, still underperformed despite concerted efforts by advocacy groups like J.U.S.T Pensacola.

Congregational advocacy groups pursued a multifaceted approach, including coalition building, political lobbying, and media outreach, to advance civil citation programs' expansion. Despite these efforts aiming to promote civil citation initiatives across various jurisdictions, the outcomes showed significant variability, as indicated by Tables 2 through 4. Challenges in engaging with law enforcement, navigating legal procedures, and raising public awareness of juvenile justice issues, as illustrated in Table 5, contributed to this variability. This emphasizes the need for statewide standards in civil citation issuance to address these challenges and ensure consistency across jurisdictions.

In addition to presenting quantitative data on CC%, this study delved into the juvenile justice landscape and individual case studies to offer a comprehensive analysis of the influence of congregational advocacy groups. Specific instances of advocacy initiatives and their outcomes were examined, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics involved in the adoption and expansion of civil citation programs. Yet, there are limitations. Specifically, this study used publicly available data and a convenience sample of interview respondents. Future research endeavors could use a more systematic sampling strategy and examine a larger sample to determine whether these findings hold. Moreover, new studies should delve deeper into the implications of socioeconomic status, race, and urbanization on civil citation program implementation, as well as their broader impact on youth outcomes within the criminal justice system. These investigations hold promise for informing the development of more equitable and effective policies, not only in Florida but also in other jurisdictions, by offering insights into best practices for promoting diversionary measures for youth offenders.

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