



Drug courts: a positive verdict

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review: Authors with Mitchell O, Wilson D, Eggers A, MacKenzie D. Drug courts' effects on criminal offending for juveniles and adults. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2012:4. DOI:10.4073

The drug court model involves drug treatment mandated by the authority and aims to break the cycle of an offender's drug use and drug related crime. This Campbell systematic review concludes that adult drug courts have a substantial effect on reoffending, but that drug courts for juveniles show a much smaller effect. With respect to drug courts for offenders convicted of driving under the influence (DWI) the jury's still out.

1.1 BREAKING THE CYCLE OF REOFFENDING WITH DRUG COURTS

Two decades ago, there was a single drug court in one Florida County; now there is an international movement comprising thousands of drug courts. A typical drug court runs in the following way: after arrest, offenders with drug addictions are eligible for and offered entry into the drug court, with an agreement that the charges against them will be reduced or dismissed if they complete a treatment program. Arrestees who sign up for treatment become drug court "clients." Clients can have their cases handled in one of two ways. During the "pre-plea" period, clients enter drug court from the "standard" court system without a trial. In the "post-plea" period, clients enter drug court after conviction but before sentencing. In order to pass into the drug court program the client must agree to follow the court's orders. This includes regular drug testing, treatment sessions, and status hearings before the court. If he or she completes the program, the client receives a sentence of "time served" or probation.

1.2 SUCCESS RATES DEPEND ON TYPES OF OFFENDERS

This review examined the effects of drug courts versus "standard" criminal justice processing. On average, a client who has been processed by a drug court is less likely to re-offend than someone who has gone through the normal justice system process. This applies to both drug-related and not drug-related crimes. The effect persists for at least three years after entering the drug court.

For DWI drug courts, the evidence is promising. DWI drug court studies show an overall effect similar to that of adult drug courts. Some of the best evaluations, however, showed mixed results, and even no effect of the court in some instances. Therefore, more research is needed on DWI courts to clarify the effects.

The effects of juvenile drug courts are smaller than for adult drug courts. One possible explanation is that juvenile drug courts often target quite high-risk offenders while adult drug courts typically exclude high-risk offenders. Moreover, juvenile drug courts appear to be less

demanding than adult drug courts: clients are drug tested less often, they are called to fewer status hearings and the program is shorter than for adult drug courts.

Overall, the effects of drug court participation are highly variable. The review explores the sources of this variability and finds that programs with less high-risk offenders are more effective in reducing reoffending rates than other programs. This supports the view that the smaller effects from juvenile courts reflect a greater incidence of exactly high-risk offenders. Variation in intensity of programs, however, was not found to be important and courts that required more than the standard number of phases or drug tests were no more effective than other courts.

1.3 FACTS ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

This review includes 154 experimental and quasi-experimental studies, including eight randomized experiments. Included studies measure outcomes related to criminal or drug-use behavior and examine comparison groups that went through the standard criminal justice system. Of the 154 studies, 92 assess adult drug courts, 34 examine juvenile drug courts and 28 look at DWI drug courts. All but eight studies look at U.S. drug courts; the remaining studies come from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Guam. The majority of the studies look at male non-violent offenders. Studies on adult drug courts include offenders with minor criminal histories whereas participants in the juvenile and DWI drug courts are mostly first-time offenders.

The review assesses the drug court's effects on three outcomes: general re-arrest for any offense, drug related re-arrest, and drug use (either self-reported or urine test) for each type of court. While results are generally in favor of drug courts for the first two outcomes, only nine evaluations assesses the effect of drug courts on drug use.

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