

Drug Court Evaluations: Looking at the Trend Line

Early outcome evaluations of drug courts often produced very positive results, but many were methodologically flawed. More recent studies, incorporating more sophisticated methodological designs, however, are continuing to show positive results.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently released its [latest report](#) on drug court evaluations. The GAO reviewed 117 evaluation studies conducted between May of 1997 and January of 2004. Less than a quarter of these studies met the GAO's criteria for methodological rigor, but those that did indicated that drug courts remain a promising intervention for some individuals who come in contact with the justice system. The GAO's review of 27 evaluations of 23 different drug court programs indicated:

- Less recidivism for both new arrests and new convictions among drug court participants than among individuals in an appropriate comparison group (these differences were significant for 10 of 13 programs that examined rearrest rates and 10 of 12 programs that examined reconviction rates—see list following text)
- Reduced recidivism for a period of time following drug court completion (according to most of the evaluations)

These findings echo recent conclusions by other scholars in the field. For example, Dr. Douglas Marlowe and his colleagues at the Treatment Research Institute at the University of Pennsylvania determined that “the best available research evidence suggests that drug courts can reduce drug use and criminal recidivism on an order of magnitude of two to three times greater than almost any other initiative that has been attempted with this intransigent population” (Marlowe, DeMatteo, & Festinger, 2003, p. 153).

The reports are careful to point out that the findings do not mean that all drug courts are effective; rather they indicate that drug courts *can* be effective.¹ The reports also highlight that there is still much to learn regarding what practices and treatment dosages contribute to effective drug court outcomes for different groups of drug court participants.

References

- Government Accountability Office. [Adult Drug Courts: Evidence Indicates Recidivism Reductions and Mixed Results for Other Outcomes \(GAO-05-219\)](#). Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2005.
- Marlowe, D. B. "[Commentary: Drug Court Efficacy vs. Effectiveness](#)." JoinTogether.org (September 2004).
- Marlowe, D. B., D. S. DeMatteo, and D. S. Festinger. "A Sober Assessment of Drug Courts." *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 16 (2003):153-157.
- Roman, J. "[Commentary: Accreditation Key to Creating the Next Generation of Drug Courts](#)." JoinTogether.org (September 2004).

¹ See Marlowe (2004) for a discussion on drug court efficacy versus effectiveness.

The U. S. Government Accountability Office identified the following studies as meeting the criteria for sound methodological designs.

Results for recidivism defined as rearrest rates

Studies using a random experimental design:

- q Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry and up to 2 years after entry)
- q D. C. Superior Court Drug Intervention Program (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry for sanctions docket; no significant difference for treatment docket up to 1 year after entry)
- q Maricopa County First Time Drug Offender Program (no significant difference up to 1 year after entry; significant positive difference up to 3 years after entry)

Studies using a quasi-experimental design:

- q Breaking the Cycle Program, Birmingham (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Breaking the Cycle Program, Jacksonville (no significant difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Breaking the Cycle Program, Tacoma (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Douglas County Drug Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Escambia County Drug Court (no significant difference up to 2 years after entry)
- q Jackson County Drug Court (significant positive difference up to 2 years after entry)
- q Kentucky Drug Court Programs (significant positive difference up to 1 year and up to 2 years after entry)
- q Los Angeles County Drug Court Program (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Orange County Drug Court Program (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)

Results for recidivism defined as reconviction rates

Studies using a random experimental design:

- q Baltimore City Drug Treatment Court (no significant difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Maricopa County First Time Drug Offender Program (no significant difference up to 1 year after entry; significant positive difference 3 years after entry)

Studies using a quasi-experimental design:

- q Bronx Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Brooklyn Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Douglas County Drug Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year after entry)
- q Kentucky Drug Court Programs (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Queens Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Rochester Drug Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Suffolk County Drug Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 3 years after entry)
- q Syracuse Community Treatment Court (significant positive difference up to 1 year and 2 years after entry)
- q Washington State Drug Court Program (significant positive difference 2 to 3 years after entry for five counties combined; no significant difference for King County 2 to 3 years after entry)