



Research Summary



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“WHAT WORKS” IN DRUG TREATMENT COURTS

Question: How do the principles of effective correctional intervention apply in drug treatment courts?

Background: Drug treatment courts were created as an alternative sanction in response to the rising rates of drug-related offenses in the 1980s. The purpose of this specialty court system is to divert non-violent offenders from institutions to judicially supervised treatment in the community, with the goal of reducing re-offending by means of substance abuse treatment. Drug treatment courts have since become a popular alternative to incarceration. Today there are over 3,000 drug treatment courts in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, with more in the planning stages in various countries around the world.

Despite the increasing popularity of the drug treatment court model, the research on their effectiveness at reducing recidivism has been equivocal, in large part due to the poor study quality of the individual evaluations (see Research Summary Vol. 15, No. 2). Three reviews of the drug court literature yielded moderate benefits of these courts at reducing recidivism (e.g., reductions ranging from 7.5 to 12.5%).

The past 30 years of research in the field of criminal justice psychology has yielded a considerable wealth of information regarding “what works” in offender

treatment. In particular, there has been a recent shift towards examining what works with offenders who are being supervised in the community.

The service model that has shown to be the most effective at producing consistent reductions in re-offending is the Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) model of offender intervention (see Research Summary Vol. 12, No. 6). The RNR principles state that an offender’s risk level, criminogenic characteristics (i.e., need factors related to criminal behaviour), and personal characteristics should dictate the type and intensity of services. This model of intervention has been shown to be effective across a wide variety of offender types (e.g., sex offenders, substance abusing offenders, violent offenders, etc.).

Method: A comprehensive review of the drug treatment court literature was conducted using individual evaluations. These studies were vetted based on their study quality and assessed for their adherence to each of the principles of Risk, Need and Responsivity.

Answer: A total of 96 drug treatment court evaluations were included in the review, only 25 of which were rated as methodologically “acceptable”. The 71 studies deemed unacceptable were not used to estimate the overall effectiveness of drug courts. The review found that drug courts

reduced recidivism by approximately 8%; however, this dropped to 4% when studies assessed as “weak” were eliminated.

An examination of the RNR principles within the drug treatment court process revealed that only 14 studies demonstrated adherence to at least one or more the RNR principles. Of these studies, 13 adhered to one of the RNR principles and only one study adhered to two principles.

Consistent with the larger offender treatment literature, the results of the review also found that increases in the adherence to the principles of RNR were associated with increases in the effectiveness of the drug courts. In terms of reductions in re-offending, adherence to none, one, or two of the principles corresponded to 5%, 11%, and 31% reductions in recidivism, respectively. Unfortunately, none of the studies adhered to all three of the RNR principles and therefore the effect of adhering to all three could not be tested.

Policy Implications:

1. Adherence to the principles of Risk, Need and Responsivity was associated with increases in the effectiveness of drug treatment courts in reducing re-offending; therefore, these programs should make greater efforts to adhere to the RNR model.
2. Drug treatment courts should begin by making greater use of validated risk assessments to guide them in matching offenders to community services. Furthermore, using risk assessments will provide a variety of relevant treatment targets beyond simply focusing on substance abuse.
3. Given the overall low adherence to the RNR principles, further research is needed to better inform our understanding of how the RNR principles apply in a drug treatment court context.

Source: Gutierrez, L. & Bourgon, G. (2012). Drug treatment courts: A quantitative review of study and treatment quality. *Justice Research and Policy*, 14, 47-77.

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