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To: Jim Greiner
From: Hasaan Munim
RE: Denise C. Gottfredson et al., *How Drug Treatment Courts Work: An Analysis of Mediators*, 44 Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency 3 (2007).
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Title: How Drug Treatment Courts Work: An Analysis of Mediators
Authors: Denise C. Gottfredson, Brook W. Kearley, Stacy S. Najaka, Carlos M. Rocha
Location: Baltimore, MD
Sample: N = 157
Timeline: February 1997 to August 1998
Target group: Individuals with substance use disorders
Intervention type: Drug court
Research papers: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427806291271>
Partners: Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services

Abstract

Drug treatment courts were a widely used and believed to be effective, but researchers needed to evaluate their specific mechanisms. Researchers sought to understand the specific elements of what makes drug treatment courts effective in ameliorating reoffending and substance use among individuals with substance use disorders. Randomizing Baltimore City defendants into the drug court docket, researchers found that days of drug testing, days of drug treatment, and number of judicial hearings significantly reduced drug use and crime among participants.

I. Policy Issue

Recognizing the important role of drug treatment in addressing drug-related crimes, states and counties implemented Drug Treatment Courts, which instituted alternative sentencing for individuals with substance abuse disorders. There was evidence that DTCs reduced reoffending and substance use. However, past research has not identified the specific factors, structural and theoretical, that underpinned outcomes for DTCs' clients. Previous qualitative evaluations of program elements identified drug treatment, graduated sanctions, and status hearings as key to determining outcomes. Factors thought to mediate

outcomes in theory, such as perceptions of procedural justice and increased social controls, needed testing. What specific elements made drug courts effective?

II. Context of Evaluation

A 1990 Bar Association of Baltimore City report estimated that drug addiction drove nearly 85 percent of all crimes. In 1994, Baltimore City established a DTC for individuals convicted of addiction-related, non-violent crimes. The two-year Baltimore City DTC program involved regular supervision, drug testing, and drug treatment. During bi-weekly status hearings, judges reviewed probation officers' reports on participant progress and could institute graduated sanctions that increased the frequency of supervision and drug testing. After two years of compliance with the program, DTC clients become eligible for graduation upon approval of the court, the State Attorney's Office, and the Office of the Public Defender.

III. Details

Researchers randomly assigned 235 participants immediately prior to their hearing with a DTC judge in a two-to-one ratio to either the treatment condition ($n = 139$), the DTC docket, or the control condition ($n = 96$), standard adjudication. Three years after randomization, researchers contacted participants by mail to ascertain participant outcomes by interview. Researchers employed additional strategies for contacting non-responders, including phone calls, home visits, and visiting community treatment centers. The interview measured participant outcomes and the proposed mechanisms, structural and theoretical, through which DTCs are effective.

The study used a structural equations model to estimate the effects of exogenous factors, the program elements, and theoretical elements. The final sample for the model included 145 cases. The interview protocol asked participants to self-report both the independent variables (structural and theoretical program elements) and dependent variables (participant outcomes). The five DTC program elements were days of drug treatment, days of drug testing, days of probation, number of status hearings attended, and days of suspended sentence. Furthermore, the interview measured theoretical mediators studied by asking participants an inventory of questions on social control factors and their perceptions of procedural justice. The three outcomes studied were measures of crime variety, drug variety, and frequency of multiple-drug use.

IV. Results and Policy Lessons

Ultimately, drug court participation, days of drug testing, judicial hearings attended, and days of drug treatment significantly reduced drug use and crime. Drug court participation generally reduced crime variety ($p < 0.05$). Hearings attended reduced the variety of drugs used ($p < 0.01$), while drug treatment and drug testing reduced the frequency of multiple-drug use ($p < 0.05$). The two other program elements studied, days of probation and days of suspended status, did not directly affect drug or crime outcomes.

However, days of probation increased the perception of procedural justice ($p < 0.05$) and days of suspended status was weakly correlated with improved social control ($p < 0.10$).

Reports of increased perception of procedural justice reduced crime variety ($p < 0.05$), while an increased perception of social control prevented multiple drug use ($p < 0.01$).

The study's authors suggested that practitioners ought to strengthen increase the frequency of drug tests, the number of judicial hearings, and days of drug treatment. In particular, length of drug treatment was not strongly correlated with participation in the DTC. The authors recommended that DTC operators closely monitor disparities in services received by participants in some courts.

V. Quality of the Study

The authors described the randomization procedure well and included a discussion of missing data and noncompliance. However, because drug treatment courts exist across the country in many different forms, it is not possible to assume that every drug treatment court could produce the same results as found in this study. Drug treatment courts, even if they share many elements, may differ in how consistently treatments are applied, how long the court has been established, and the eligibility criteria for offenders admitted. Additionally, the small sample size of the study results in relatively low statistical power.