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To: Jim Greiner
From: Hasaan Munim
RE: Elizabeth Piper Deschenes, et al., *Drug Court or Probation?: An Experimental Evaluation of Maricopa County's Drug Court*, 18 *The Justice System Journal* 55 (1995).
Date: August 15, 2018

Title: Drug Court or Probation? An Experimental Evaluation of Maricopa County's Drug Court
Authors: Elizabeth Piper Deschenes, Susan Turner, and Peter W. Greenwood
Location: New York, NY
Sample: N = 630
Timeline: March 1992 to April 1993
Target group: Drug Offenders
Intervention type: Drug Court
Research papers: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27976883>
Partners: RAND Criminal Justice Program, National Institute of Justice

Abstract

Drug courts aim to rehabilitate drug offenders and thereby reduce crime, but previous research designs were flawed. In a randomized control setting, researchers tested the efficacy of the Maricopa First Time Drug Offender Program, an enhanced probation program, over a period of twelve months in terms of future substance use and offender reintegration. The study found that the program did not significantly improve system burden nor participant substance use and reintegration outcomes.

1. Policy Issue

Drugs courts rehabilitated drug offenders by coercing them into treatment. Past drug court evaluations in Miami and Alameda County showed positive results, leading to a flurry of new jurisdictions designing their own programs before considering the feasibility of existing models. The limited amount of existing research on drug courts exhibited methodological flaws, partially due to the use of quasi-experimental designs. Difficulties in producing sufficiently comparable study groups for quasi-experimental research designs led to selection bias in past evaluations of drug courts.

Using an experimental design to evaluate drug courts would ameliorate the validity threats present in past studies.

II. Context of Evaluation

The Maricopa County First Time Drug Offender (FTDO) Program was a postadjudication program for felony drug offenders. FTDO combined a privately provided drug treatment program with court supervision of treatment progress. The unique component of FTDO was its use of graduated sanctions, a point system wherein successful completion of tasks such as drug education classes and urine drug testing reduced sanctions and failure increases sanctions.

This evaluation focused on first-time felony drug offenders and excluded offenders involved in drug sales or trafficking. The program lasted six to twelve months with monthly status hearings or progress reports. Divided into three, repeatable two-month phases, the program based graduation into less restrictive phases on count-determined point thresholds. Failure to graduate could lead to sanctions.

The program focused on the twelve-steps, group therapy, and educational trainings. Throughout all stages, clients had to submit to the terms of probation, such as random urine tests. Stage one focused on social skills training and drug education, stage two focused on relapse prevention, and stage three, the final stage, continued twelve-step meetings and group meetings.

III. Details

The FTDO experiment evaluated the effect of treatment and graduated sanctions on offender reintegration, substance use, and system overcrowding. The experiment compared four probation tracks: three standard probation tracks (n = 454) whose drug-testing schedule differed in intensity and one drug court track (n = 176). The drug court served as the experimental group and the remaining three as control groups. RAND designed a computer program that a clerk would use to randomly place drug offenders deemed eligible for probation and FTDO into one of the four tracks.

Researchers followed up with individuals for twelve months following random assignment, collecting data on individual characteristics and program implementation. Researchers collected individual history information through probation files and a computerized tracking system to obtain individuals' prior records. Program memos and reports provided data on program implementation, primarily the number and type of services received (e.g. phone contacts with clients and number of drug and alcohol checks). Researchers used probation files as the source of outcome data.

IV. Results and Policy Lessons

Substance use

The drug court program did not reduce drug use. Although positive urinalysis test results came up significantly less often* for drug court participants in some cases (Cocaine: 17

percent vs. 24 percent; Heroin: 15 percent vs. 16 percent), marijuana came up more often (28 percent vs. 20 percent). Despite this, probation officers sanctioned drug court participants significantly less for technical drug violations (9 percent vs. 22 percent).

Offender reintegration

Recidivism as measured by new arrests did not significantly decrease between experimental and control treatments. This led the authors to question the cost effectiveness of the program.

*All significant results significant at $p < 0.05$.

V. Quality of the Study

Overall, the randomization procedure was valid and provided valid comparison groups.

The authors did not discuss the study's limitations. The study's findings were not generalizable to other drug courts as some of the FTDO's elements were unique to the program. Designing a trial that increased the number of treatment groups to study specific program elements, such as court contact and drug tests, may have provided more insight into the effectiveness of drug courts.

Comparing broken down control groups, as opposed to pooling all three together, to the experimental group would have improved the completeness of the findings.