



O ★ H ★ I ★ O
DRUG COURT
EVALUATION



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For questions regarding the Ohio Drug Court Evaluation,
please contact the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services.

OHIO DRUG COURT EVALUATION

In late 2000, the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services designed a drug court evaluation strategy to study distinct aspects of the courts through very different methodologies.

Taken as a whole, these three studies comprise a comprehensive and unique assessment of Ohio's drug courts. The following is intended to provide a brief summary of the major findings of this multiple drug court evaluation.

University of Cincinnati

Dr. Edward Latessa and colleagues at the Center for Criminal Justice Research, University of Cincinnati (UC) conducted a quantitative assessment of drug court impact on recidivism and other outcomes such as program retention.

The Ohio State University

Dr. Joseph Donnermeyer at The Ohio State University (OSU) developed indicators of drug court effectiveness using input from drug court professional focus groups.

Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services

Robert Swisher of the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS) conducted a case study of the impact of drug courts on court operations and systems.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Drugs Courts Enhance Treatment.

Drug courts and judicial involvement increase treatment effectiveness. Data shows beneficial outcomes from drug courts. Qualitative assessment shows judicial involvement is a critical component of the beneficial outcomes. And treatment professionals support the benefits of judicial involvement.

Drug Courts Increase System Collaboration.

Drug courts increase collaboration between the court and treatment providers. They also increase collaboration between court probation and law enforcement.

Drug Courts Support Related Services.

Innovative approaches to reducing and preventing crime can result from the presence of a drug court. DUI and Reentry courts, progressive probation software and community policing/court probation projects are a few of the initiatives arising from Ohio drug courts.

Drug Courts are not Soft on Crime.

Accountability and responsibility are the primary themes of drug court intervention, with offenders being held accountable through drug testing, intensive supervision, treatment and graduated sanctions. These necessary program standards are reflected in the success drug court participants experience through reduced recidivism rates post-graduation.

Drug Courts are Cost-Effective.

Court and treatment professionals believe that drug courts are cost-effective. They believe this because drug courts break the cycle of drug use and crime that are so costly to Ohio communities.

WHAT IS A DRUG COURT?

Drug courts specialize in the adjudication and treatment of offenders who use drugs. Judges who created drug courts found that they were repeatedly seeing the same drug-involved offenders in their courts and determined that traditional court processes were not working. Through drug courts, judges, court personnel and treatment providers partner to help end the cycle of crime and drug use of offenders.

Offenders eligible for drug courts have been charged with low-level, nonviolent offenses. Drug court participants agree to comply with strict supervision and treatment requirements. Most offenders seen in drug courts have many issues in addition to drug abuse, such as employment, education or mental health problems.

Treatment and related services to address these complex problems are structured in three or four phases, with offenders progressing based on their response and compliance with requirements. The typical length of time for offenders to complete drug court is eighteen months.

Ohio drug courts operate as specialized units within existing courts, including Common Pleas, Municipal, Juvenile and Family. While drug courts take place in a courtroom setting, the sessions operate very differently. Offenders who meet expectations are rewarded with incentives ranging from a small token such as a theater ticket, to increased freedom in the program. Those offenders failing to meet drug court requirements often receive community service. A graduation ceremony is held for participants who successfully complete all the drug court phases.

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THE STUDIES

University of Cincinnati

Drug Courts & Recidivism

The UC study used a quasi-experimental matched comparison group design to quantitatively evaluate the impact of drug courts on future criminal involvement. To achieve a sufficient outcome follow-up period, the majority of this study's offenders were from ten of the longer established Ohio drug courts. The study team analyzed data from each of three types of courts.¹ Courts and experimental and comparison group cases represented in the study involved: 1) Common Pleas: 4 courts; 788 drug court participants; 429 comparison group members; 2) Municipal: 3 courts; 556 drug court participants; 228 comparison group members, and 3) Juvenile: 3 courts; 310 participants; 134 comparison group members.

To provide a broader representation of Ohio's drug courts, the researchers combined cases from these ten courts with additional, randomly selected cases from three other Courts of Common Pleas (339 adults) and three other Juvenile courts (148 juveniles). The experimental and comparison groups were well matched. The two groups were similar on all social demographic, offense and criminal history dimensions except that the drug court participants tended to have completed more years of schooling and had more prior arrests.

It is not surprising that the great majority of drug court participants in all the courts were referred to substance abuse treatment; however, UC found interesting differences in referrals for other types of services. While Common Pleas drug courts tended to refer participants to other types of services, topped by family services (80.5% of participants) and employment services (70.0%), Municipal and Juvenile courts referred a much smaller percentage to similar services.

The study tracked participant progress through drug courts and found: 1) A high percent complete the first phase of treatment (78% in Common Pleas and Juvenile, 64% in Municipal); 2) Completion of a drug court is very hard work, contributing to technical violation rates (62% Common Pleas, 64% Juvenile, and 13% Municipal), and 3) Drug court program standards affect graduation rates (31% Common Pleas, 44% Municipal, and 34% Juvenile).² It is important to note that Courts of Common Pleas, most rigorous in technical violation rates, also produced the greatest impact on recidivism.

The University of Cincinnati found all three types of drug courts are lowering recidivism rates at statistically significant levels, and that drug court participation is a

¹ Although four family drug courts were also in existence at the time of this study, none had been operating long enough for an outcome follow-up period of graduates.

² The 'not graduated' percentage includes current participants in the drug court program.

significant factor in producing those lower rates. Controlling for differences between the experimental and control groups, it was found: 1) Common Pleas: Probability of rearrest lowered by 19%; 2) Municipal: Probability of rearrest lowered by 9%, and 3) Juvenile: Probability of rearrest lowered by 16%.

The Ohio State University

Drug Courts & Measures of Success

Although much of the attention in national drug court evaluations has involved drug court impact on recidivism rates, there is a great deal of variation in the specific court processes followed in drug courts—and even greater variation in treatment and referral services available to participants. What court processes and treatment delivery dimensions create more successful drug courts? This was the issue addressed by Dr. Donnermeyer, OSU, in his study of Ohio drug courts.

Dr. Donnermeyer utilized two focus groups comprised of criminal justice and social service professionals who work directly with Ohio’s drug courts. A qualitative methodology was chosen based on the exploratory nature of the study. The focus groups operated largely independently from each other,³ to serve as a comparison on the established dimensions. Each group met three times with a total of 25 participants in the two groups.

Court processes emphasized by focus group participants included: the necessity of random drug testing with the threat of jail as a sanction for infractions; the role of the judge in reinforcing the drug court philosophy and mission, and the importance of follow-up after graduation, as six and twelve month post-graduation intervals are critical times for offender relapse. Commitment of time—more time per case than in typical court processes—was emphasized by focus group participants. They also noted how the drug court problem solving model has positively translated to other criminal justice agencies.

Participants placed great emphasis on the need to coordinate and collaborate with service providers. A recommended minimum standard was that, before the start-up of a drug court, a series of meetings occur with local service providers to explain the drug court philosophy and its operational components. Drug court services should include not only drug treatment but also a range of other services, especially family, educational and employment. Participants strongly argued for family participation in the treatment process. The focus groups noted two major goals for Ohio’s drug courts: 1) To identify appropriate treatment and social services, and 2) To maintain momentum and expansion of drug courts across the state.

³ Three focus group participants switched groups due to scheduling conflicts.

Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services

Drug Courts & Impact on Court Systems

The third drug court study came from an observation by an Ohio judge that his colleagues were hesitant to implement a drug court, not because of cost or effectiveness issues, but because of the potential impact of the court on their overall dockets and court systems. OCJS conducted its case study in one of the more established Ohio drug courts, Richland County, to capture how the court addressed operational challenges posed by the drug court over time.

Prior to on-site interviews, two surveys were conducted; the first asked Ohio drug court judges how their courts had addressed administrative issues such as hiring new staff and changes to court hours. The second survey asked a sample of Ohio judges from non-drug court jurisdictions how they anticipated drug courts might affect court operations, and used questions similar to those for the first survey. Results from the two surveys were then used to construct the case study protocol and questionnaires.

Time, due to the increased number of hearings and intensity of offender services, is the major issue of drug court impact on court operations. Richland County addressed these time demands through a combination of highly motivated staff; shifts in staff responsibilities; the addition of a few positions, and the addition of one late court session every two weeks. This case study did not find resistance by court staff to role specialization; instead, those interviewed expressed support for it. Respondents believed that consistent drug court client assessments streamline the case handling process. They also thought standardized probation conditions are increasing court efficiency. Ultimately, specialization was viewed as not only allowing the court to more effectively meet the demands of the drug court operation, but also of generating beneficial impacts on other court functions.

Most interviewees commented on the strong community corrections orientation in Richland County that preceded the existence of the drug court. Building on that orientation, the drug court has served to anchor a number of subsequent new and innovative programs and practices within the county. In fact, the more impressive organizational impact of the Richland County Drug Court has been in the many and varied secondary effects it has helped produce. A DUI court, two Reentry courts, a new probation information system and closer collaboration between the court and treatment providers are all attributable—in whole or in part—to the Richland County Drug Court.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Offenders

Drug court participants often have multiple problems in addition to their drug abuse. Both the UC and the OSU studies found that compared to the general public, drug court participants tend to have low educational attainment and marginal employment. The UC offender comparison group had even lower educational and employment histories than the drug court participants. Over half of drug court participants reported trying both drugs and alcohol before the age of seventeen.

OSU focus group participants noted use of alcohol, a sense of worthlessness, and a belief that drugs are not a problem as characteristic of drug court participants. Drug court participants in counties like Hamilton began using alcohol between the ages of ten and seventeen.

Decreased Recidivism

Drug courts lower recidivism rates. The UC, OSU and OCJS studies all found that drug courts lower recidivism rates. Further, the UC study identified that offenders who successfully complete the drug court program are considerably more likely to remain crime free than offenders who did not successfully complete the program. Both the UC and OCJS studies found that drug courts tend to have higher rates of completion the longer the court is in existence. Common Pleas Drug Courts in Erie and Hamilton counties reported lower rearrest rates for participants.

Other Outcomes

Drug treatment is more effective when other offender needs are also addressed. All three studies noted that substance abuse treatment is more effective if other offender needs are also treated. All studies focused on similar treatment needs: families, employment, and education. Miami County Common Pleas Drug Court requires participants to gain employment, and the Common Pleas Drug Court in Stark County provides educational services to participants wanting to obtain their GED.

Maintaining program integrity and securing treatment funding are vital to the continued effectiveness of Ohio's drug courts.

Judges & Court Staff

Drug court “Best Practices” begin with a commitment to the drug court philosophy. The OSU and OCJS studies

found it necessary for drug court judges and staff to be committed to the drug court philosophy and spend the time required for implementation of the program. Both studies also found leadership by the drug court judge essential for drug court success. Another effective practice that OSU focus group participants see in Ohio drug courts is retaining staff with a willingness to learn, and a background in substance abuse treatment or law enforcement. Judicial involvement in counties like Mahoning and Richland has provided leadership for establishing and operating a drug court.

Maintaining program integrity and securing treatment funding are vital to the continued effectiveness of Ohio’s drug courts.

Drug Court Interventions

Assessment, drug testing and follow-up are necessary components of success. The UC study emphasized the role of appropriate assessment in treatment success. Through their own experiences, court and treatment professionals in the OSU and OCJS studies found essential elements of drug court success to involve monitoring and supervision; drug testing; sanctions for violations; graduation ceremonies, and follow-up. The OSU study found that the six to twelve months following graduation is an especially critical period for follow-up of drug court graduates. Mahoning Common Pleas Drug Court has an extensive assessment process for screening applicants, and Delaware County Family Court conducts drug testing for all participants.

Benefit to Court Operations

Drug courts can restructure existing resources for successful program integration. The OCJS case study found that by expanding court hours; hiring a few new staff, and specialization of existing staff, the court successfully integrated drug court into court operations. The drug court resulted in increased specialization of court staff not assigned to drug court—a development considered by those interviewed as having a beneficial impact on overall court operations. Richland County found changing court practices made operations more effective.

IN OHIO...

- There are 50 drug courts in Ohio, up from zero just six years ago.
- The Greater Cleveland Municipal Drug Court conducted record checks up to two years after program completion to reveal only four new drug charges were incurred by its drug court graduates.
- Hamilton County's first group of 43 drug court graduates had 430 court contacts prior to drug court. In the sixteen subsequent months, there was an 87% decline in court involvement.
- State and county agencies have worked together in eight Ohio counties to create Family drug courts for clients who have children in protective care. The goal: to get appropriate treatment for parents and caregivers before children are permanently removed from the home.
- With a reported retention rate of 80% for all participants, 88% of Mahoning County Drug Court graduates improved their living arrangements as a result of their involvement in the program.
- Over 90% of Butler County Drug Court participants were employed during the program.
- Two of Ohio's drug courts, Mahoning and Richland, were chosen nationally as mentor courts—only one other court in the nation received this distinction.

Information from the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Education & Training

- Design and distribute a guidebook for judges and treatment professionals outlining the effective components of an Ohio drug court.
- Train judges and court personnel on substance abuse and treatment issues.
- Train judges on the philosophy and elements of a successful drug court.
- Train court personnel on system issues involving drug courts.
- Train treatment providers on laws and court processes relating to drug courts.
- Train corrections professionals on the drug court model.
- Organize professional job shares, with drug court judges and personnel mentoring new drug courts on procedural and system issues.

Communication

- Design and distribute monthly drug court updates to courts and local treatment boards, including current literature and trends.
- Establish a website for Ohio on drug court best practices and information sharing.
- Develop and distribute an educational brochure for citizens, explaining drug court operations, drug treatment options and how drug courts benefit offenders and communities.

Funding

- Provide start-up funding for counties without drug courts, and continued funding for existing programs.
- Set-aside funding for continued evaluation of drug courts and related issues.

Evaluation

- Evaluate drug courts for program integrity and standards compliance.
- Conduct a formal Cost-Benefit Analysis of Ohio drug courts, using results to streamline future funding and services.

AT A GLANCE

Issue	OSU	UC	OCJS
Type of Drug Court	Juvenile; Adult; Family	Common Pleas; Municipal; Juvenile	Common Pleas; Municipal; Juvenile; Family
Offender Characteristics	Education; Employment; Alcohol; Worthlessness; Believes drugs not a problem	Education; Race; Gender; Age; Employment; Marital Status; Prior Offenses; Instant Offense; Drug of Choice	
Offender Treatment Needs/Outcomes	Quality of life; Families stay intact and supportive; Employment; Drug free babies	Drugs; Alcohol; Employment; Family	
Program Retention	High rate	70% complete Phase 1 (intensive probation; drug testing; treatment services)	Graduation rates increase over time
Predictive Factors for Reduced Recidivism		Drug court participation and completion of high school are predictive for Municipal; Common Pleas, and Juvenile courts	
Reduction in Recidivism	Yes	19% Common Pleas; 9% Municipal; 16% Juvenile; Higher rates for drug court graduates	
Judicial & Court Staff Characteristics	Commitment; Time; Willingness to learn; Personal knowledge; Law enforcement background		Commitment; Motivation; Specialization
Ohio Drug Court Goals	Providing drug treatment and other services; Sustainability and expansion	Standardized risk/needs assessment; Quality assurance mechanisms program integrity	Providing drug treatment and related treatment services

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