

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

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GAO Review Finds Adult Drug Courts Can Be Effective

Drug court programs allow eligible defendants to be diverted from traditional sentencing and participate in a program that involves intense judicial supervision, substance abuse treatment, and sanctions for drug use. As of September 2004 there were approximately 1,040 adult drug court programs operating or being planned nationwide. The federal Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently conducted a review of empirical evaluations of adult drug court programs.* Following are highlights from the review.

- **Drug courts reduce recidivism.** Drug court program participants were less likely than nonparticipants to be rearrested or reconvicted. However, the effects of drug court components (e.g. the judge's behavior, the amount of treatment received, sanctions) on recidivism was infrequently evaluated.
- **Evidence of reductions in substance use is promising but limited.** Only eight drug court programs included in this review were evaluated for their effectiveness in reducing substance use. Drug test results generally showed significant reductions in use.
- **Drug courts are cost effective.** While drug court programs are typically more expensive than conventional case processing, the reduced costs of crime associated with recidivism yielded net monetary benefits. Additionally, these benefits may underestimate drug court programs' true benefits because the evaluations did not include indirect benefits, such as reduced medical costs of treated participants.

The report concludes that "[P]ositive findings from relatively rigorous evaluations . . . indicate that drug court programs can be an effective means to deal with some offenders. These programs appear to provide an opportunity for some individuals to take advantage of a structured program to help them reduce their criminal involvement and their substance abuse problems, as well as potentially provide a benefit to society in general" (p. 7).

*The GAO reviewed the results of 27 evaluations of 39 different adult drug court programs published between May 1997 and January 2004 that reported recidivism, substance use relapse, or program completion outcomes and met additional criteria for methodological soundness.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from U. S. Government Accountability Office, *Adult Drug Courts: Evidence Indicates Recidivism Reductions and Mixed Results for Other Outcomes*, February 2005. Available online at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05219.pdf>.

National Drug Court Month—May 2005

National Drug Court Month, sponsored by The National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) and the Congress of State Drug Court Associations (CSDCA), provides drug court practitioners an opportunity to increase awareness of drug courts and their mission at the federal, state, and local levels. Information about the May 2005 National Drug Court Month, is available online at www.nadcp.org.