

**Evaluation of the Second Judicial District Court County Juvenile Drug Court:
Quasi-Experimental Outcome Study Using Historical Information**

prepared for:

**The Second Judicial District Court, the Children Youth and Families Department
and the Administrative Office of the Court**

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December 2001

Introduction

The goal in conducting this preliminary outcome study is to better understand the effectiveness of drug courts in terms of whether they “work” in reducing the incidence of crime as measured by new referrals of participants after they leave the program when compared to a matched comparison group. In the future we would like to conduct another study after more clients have entered and left the drug court program. This would have two benefits. First, a larger study group would allow us to conduct more sophisticated analyses and second, would allow a longer exposure time to measure recidivism. Additionally, we would like to include additional measures of success. Additional measures of success would concentrate on changes in substance use and increases in measures of social stability (i.e. school improvement, family, employment). We were not able to include these types of outcome measures in this study. We are also interested in conducting a cost study.

Outcome studies are useful for a number of reasons. First, knowledge involving client success and a program can be used in an interactive manner to create a self-correcting system and to improve programs. Second, both funding sources and service providers have a vested interest in utilizing scarce resources in the most effective manner. Programs that are effective in reducing future contact with the criminal justice system should be replicated. Third, outcome evaluation findings, if valid and reliable, can be used to make programs more useful to the target population.

The methodology used in conducting this study follows guidelines suggested by the federal Drug Court Program Office (DCPO) in their publication “Drug Court Monitoring, Evaluation, and Management Information Systems” (June 1998) as well as generally accepted guidelines for impact/outcome evaluations. The design focuses on using a matched historical comparison group. Comparison group members were primarily matched on sex, race/ethnicity, age, type of referring offense, the presence of a substance abuse history, and drug court eligibility criteria (i.e. no violent felony convictions and the current offense is not a violent felony). Comparison group members were also matched in time. This means comparison group members were taken from the same time period as the drug court group so that we could control for what might be occurring in the larger community (e.g. a new District Attorney or change in laws) and we could control for exposure time for recidivism. Successful drug court graduates and those who did not successfully graduate were part of this study. This meant the study included any individual who had officially been accepted into the drug court program and did not take into account length of stay. The size of both groups was approximately the same and was dependent on the number of participants who had left the drug court program based on certain time parameters. Information collected in the drug court client management database was used for the drug court treatment group. Information collected in the drug court client management database includes referral information, demographic data, substance abuse history data, current offense data, school information, all services received, and exit information. Official chronological offense histories were collected in order to report referrals and petitions before entry into the drug court program, while in either in the drug court program or probation, and post drug court program and post probation.

The comparison group was comprised of drug court eligible individuals who for various reasons (e.g. were never referred) did not become drug court clients. These individuals were under the supervision of the local probation department. Information collected for the comparison group was, to the extent possible, comparable. This consisted of demographic data, substance abuse history data, chronological offense history data, current offense data, and exit status from probation information. Information for both the drug court group and comparison group was composed of information that was available from official records and does not consist of any self-report information.

Using historical information only allowed us to collect official information that was available for the drug court and comparison group. It is our experience that historical information for the comparison group is much more limited than what is available for the drug court group. This primarily occurs because each New Mexico drug court uses an Institute for Social Research designed client management database that routinely collects the information necessary to complete this type of study, while information for the comparison group is typically maintained in hard copy files which contain less information and often in different formats. The lack of available comparison group information limited the amount of data available for this study.

Outcome evaluation is typically the comparison of actual program outcomes with desired outcomes (goals). For criminal justice programs outcome evaluation measures typically focus on recidivism rates. Other types of outcomes that can be measured include changes in substance abuse and improvements in social indicators (e.g. employment, family relationships and living arrangements). Studies using historical information are limited to those measures that can be obtained through official sources, which is typically limited to official measures of recidivism. This is a weakness of this type of study. A strength of this type of study is it is relatively inexpensive to complete and requires much less time than other types of studies. We have chosen to focus on a number of different outcomes. These include:

- recidivism - defined as official new referrals and petitions (in-program and post-program) for any offense.
- time to recidivism - in-program and post-program

Our primary goal is to help answer the broad question, which is not yet answerable, is do drug courts work? Perhaps as importantly, another question is: For which type of clients does drug court work best? Or, put another way: What is it about drug courts that work? This second question cannot be answered by this type of study.

This report contains several sections including the research design, the data analysis and discussion, and a conclusion. This report will be useful for the program in assessing its effectiveness and improving its operations and at the state and national level for further discovering if drug courts work and what it is about drug courts that are most effective.

Research Design

This study was completed as part of a contract with the New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department. As part of this contract, for drug court programs where it is possible, we are obligated to complete a historical outcome study using a comparison group of individuals who did not participate in the juvenile drug court program. Originally we had hoped to conduct an outcome study using a contemporary comparison group of individuals who did not participate in the juvenile drug court program. Because of the small size of most juvenile drug courts regarding the number of clients who enter, are served and subsequently leave the programs it was not feasible to conduct this type of study within the time of the contract. This is further complicated by the difficulty in collecting a matched comparison group from probation files. This study includes all drug court clients between October 1998 and December 2000 who were clients for any period of time.

Drug Court clients who became part of the study entered and exited the program between October 1998 and December 2000. During this time, 34 clients entered and exited the program as indicated by the client management information database. These clients who had been accepted and received services became part of the treatment group.

Based on available data, we attempted to match the drug court graduates to a similar group of probation clients. In principle, we wanted a sample of probation clients who were similar in terms of chronological offense history, ethnicity and gender who also exited probation similarly (i.e. terminated and successfully completed probation). In other words, we wanted a comparison group of people who were otherwise eligible for drug court but for whatever reason did not participate in the program.

The comparison group originated from closed New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department (CYFD) Juvenile Justice Division (JJD) probation files. Closed files are files of juveniles who are no longer currently on probation and whose files are being stored. In this jurisdiction all the files were located at the local office in Albuquerque. We were granted access to these files by the local probation office and JJD.

After receiving permission to access closed files of clients we visited the office several times to become acquainted with the filing system. Next, we began reviewing individual probation files to determine eligibility for the comparison group. This was accomplished using an ISR designed eligibility criteria form (Appendix A). If an individual met all the criteria they were included in the comparison group and their file was coded using the ISR designed comparison group data collection codebook (Appendix B).

The following criteria were followed in the selection of the comparison group. A number of independent factors could exclude an offender from being included in the comparison group.

All comparison group members:

- Were matched to the Second Judicial District Court Drug Court clients who entered and exited between October 1998 and December 2000.

- Were matched to the Second Judicial District Court Drug Court clients by gender, ethnicity, and referring offense.
- Did not have prior violent felony convictions, referring offense was not a first degree felony, and had no prior convictions for a sex crime.
- Had never participated in the Second Judicial District Court Drug Court program.
- We attempted to match to the Second Judicial District Court Drug Court clients on status at discharge.
- We attempted to match to the Second Judicial District Court Drug Court clients on primary drug of choice

We excluded any potential comparison group member who had an indicated history of mental health problems or medical problems. We were not able to match participants on employment at intake into probation or years of education. We were also not able to completely match on length of stay because the average length of stay in drug court and probation vary.

When possible, we attempted to include as similar a client as possible, although this was not always possible. This process of matching clients greatly improved the reliability of the data and hence the findings.

Once the two comparison groups were chosen, we requested a chronological offense history report on every study group member from the New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department (CYFD) Juvenile Justice Division (JJD) local probation office. These reports contain information pertaining to each referral to the JJD including incident date and charges, referral date to the local probation office, whether the incident was handled formally or informally and disposition information. In our review of the reports we discovered they were very difficult to read and interpret. In order to better understand the reports a meeting was scheduled with one of the supervising JPO's from the Thirteenth Judicial District to help us. As a result of this meeting we decided to keep our interpretation of the reports as simple as possible to reduce errors. We decided to include in our data collection the incident date of each referral, each charge associated with the incident and whether or not a petition was filed for a given referral. If we were not able to interpret a referral it was omitted from the data analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This study considers drug court clients who entered and exited the program between October 1998 and December 2000, a twenty-seven month period. During this time period, as noted earlier, 34 individuals entered and exited the program and are included in the study. We matched 33 comparison group individuals to the 34 drug court program study group members. All of these individuals were matched to a chronological offense report for a total of 67 cases. This small number of cases limits the analyses that can be performed and the significance of the findings. The findings, while limited, are useful for documenting the on-going development of this particular program and serve as a starting point in reporting client level outcomes as they relate to recidivism.

This sample size does not allow us to conduct more sophisticated analyses than what are presented below. This has potential ramifications because we cannot with statistical confidence profile the differences between the two groups. While this is true we can say the drug court group and comparison group vary regarding their recidivism patterns. It would be very beneficial to replicate this study in the next 1-2 years when a larger number of drug court clients have exited the program and more time has elapsed to measure recidivism. For this study we are able to document new referrals and petitions through October 2001. The following tables are an analysis of the 67 matched individuals in the study group.

Referring Offense	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Drug Possession	3	10.3	4	12.1
Other Drug Related Offenses	3	10.3	4	12.1
DWI	1	3.4	1	3.0
Property Crimes	5	17.2	6	18.2
Probation Violations	15	51.7	11	33.3
All Other Offenses	2	6.9	7	21.2

Table 1 documents the referring offense for the drug court and comparison group. As this table indicates the majority of individuals in the drug court group were in the program for a probation violation (51.7%), followed by property crimes, drug possession, and other drug related offenses. We were not able to match as well as we would have liked comparison group members with drug court members. Because we could not locate a sufficient number of probation violations we chose other offenses.

Disposition at Exit	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Graduate	20	58.8	13	39.4
Absconded/Terminated	14	41.2	20	60.6

p=.112, df=1

A larger percentage of the drug court group graduated when compared to the comparison group. The difference was not statistically significant, which indicates disposition at exit for both groups was similar.

Table 3 – Length of Stay		
	Drug Court	Comparison
Mean Length of Stay In Months	8.0	7.5

The mean length of stay for both groups was similar with drug court individuals staying on average 0.5 months longer. This average takes into account all clients whether or not they completed the program. The program is designed to last 36 weeks for clients who successfully complete.

Table 4 - Prior Referrals and Petitions		
	Drug Court	Comparison
Average Number of Referrals Prior to Entering Program	5.9	6.5
Average Number of Petitions Prior to Entering Program	0.3	1.7

When average prior referrals were compared we found the drug court group and comparison group were similar in the average number of referrals prior to entry in either group. When comparing petitions filed the comparison group had a higher average number of petitions filed. Surprisingly, five drug court group members had no referrals recorded on their chronological offense histories prior to entry into the drug court program.

Table 5 – Primary Substance of Abuse at Entry				
Primary Substance	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Alcohol	3	12.0	10	30.3
Marijuana	21	84.0	21	63.6
Other	1	4.0	2	6.0

missing =9, p=.291, df=2

A large majority (84%) of the drug court group’s primary substance of abuse at entry was marijuana, followed by alcohol and one individual who used cocaine. The majority (63.6%) of the probation comparison group used marijuana as their primary substance of abuse as indicated by their probation files followed by alcohol (30.3%) and one cocaine and opiate user. These differences were not average. It was our observation when collecting this data that many of drug court and probation clients either self-reported or had indicated in their files that they used multiple substances. Multiple substances primarily consisted of alcohol being used in conjunction with marijuana. When reviewing probation files it was more difficult to find information related to substance

abuse than in the drug court client management database. While the drug court client management database is designed to routinely and consistently collect this information in a systematic way this is not true of probation hard copy files. When coding the probation clients we coded the primary substance based upon what substance appeared to be indicated as the primary problem.

Table 7 – Gender				
Gender	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Male	31	91.2	28	84.8
Female	3	8.8	5	15.2

p=.425, df=1

The vast majority of individuals in both groups were male.

Table 8 – Race/Ethnicity				
Race/Ethnicity	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Anglo	8	27.6	6	18.2
Hispanic	21	72.4	24	72.7
Other			3	9.1

missing =5, p=.356, df=3

The majority of individuals served in both groups self-identified as Hispanics. Anglos were the next largest group of individuals served in both programs.

Table 9 – Average Age		
	Drug Court	Comparison
Average Age	15.8	15.1

The drug court group had a average age of 15.8 years old (range 14-19, std. dev. 1.5) while the comparison groups average age was 15.1 (range 14-18, std. dev. 1.3). The average difference between the groups was 0.7 years.

Table 12 – Enrolled in School				
Education	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Full-Time/Part-Time	19	55.9	26	78.8
Obtained GED	1	2.9	1	3.0
Not in School	14	41.2	6	18.2

p=.118, df=2

This table documents school enrollment at the time of entry into either the drug court program or probation. The large majority (78.8%) of the comparison group individuals were either in school full-time or part-time while only 55.9% of the drug court individuals were in school full-time or part-time. Of importance is the large percentage of drug court program individuals (41.2%) who were not in school when compared to the probation individuals (18.2%).

Table 13 – Employment Status				
Employment Status	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Employed	8	23.5	7	21.2
Unemployed	26	76.5	26	78.8

p=.220, df=1

An almost identical percentage of individuals were employed in the comparison group when compared with the drug court group.

Table 14 – Living Arrangements				
Living Arrangements	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Living with Parent(s)	24	92.3	28	84.8
Not Living with Parent(s) (i.e. alone, other family, boy/girl friend)	2	7.7	5	15.2

missing= 8, p=.379, df=1

This table reports the living arrangements of both groups. Almost 93% of the drug court group lived with one or both of their parents at intake into the drug court program. A smaller percentage (84.8%) of the comparison group comprised of probationers lived with one or both of their parents. Findings from this table indicate a large majority of drug court and probation group individuals lived with one or both parents.

Using the information presented in the above tables a useful profile of the drug court group can be developed and compared to the probation comparison group. This is necessary in order to better understand how comparable the two groups are and to place the recidivism findings in context to both groups.

A majority of individuals in the drug court group were in the program for a probation violation (51.7%), followed by property crimes, drug possession, and other drug related offenses. We were not able to match as well as we would have liked comparison group members with drug court members on the referring offense of probation violations. Because we could not locate a sufficient number of probation violations we chose other offenses. Additionally, a larger percentage of the drug court group graduated when

compared to the comparison group. The average length of stay for both groups was similar. When average prior referrals were compared we found the drug court group and comparison group were similar in the average number of referrals prior to entry in either group. When comparing petitions filed the comparison group had a higher average number of petitions filed.

A large majority (84%) of the drug court group's primary substance of abuse at entry was marijuana, followed by alcohol and one individual who used cocaine. The majority (63.6%) of the probation comparison group used marijuana as their primary substance of abuse as indicated by their probation files followed by alcohol (30.3%).

The vast majority of individuals in both groups were male and self-identified as Hispanics. Anglos were the next largest group of individuals served in both programs. The average age was very similar between both groups. A large majority of the comparison group individuals (78.8%) were either in school full-time or part-time while only 55.9% of the drug court individuals were in school full-time or part-time. Of importance is the large percentage of drug court program individuals (41.2%) who were not in school when compared to the probation individuals (18.2%). While this difference is not average it is a large difference. An almost identical percentage of individuals were employed in the comparison group when compared with the drug court group. A large majority of drug court and probation group individuals lived with one or both parents.

The above tables and discussion point to a similar drug court group when compared to the probation comparison group. While there were some differences between groups in referring offense, disposition at exit from either program, primary substance of abuse and school enrollment none of these differences were average. On the variables of average length of stay in program, average prior referrals, gender, race/ethnicity, employment at intake, and disposition at exit the groups were similar.

Recidivism

Recidivism can be defined in numerous ways, including a referral for any new offense, a referral for a similar offense or the same offense (i.e. drug possession), a conviction, or a new petition. For this study we have chosen to define recidivism two ways. First, as an official referral, as indicated by chronological offense reports, for any offense following an individual's exit from the drug court program or comparison group of probationers. Second, we consider petitions filed in court following an individual's exit from either group. We also include a table that documents new referrals and petitions while in the drug court program or under probation supervision.

Exposure time for new referrals varied for the study group from between 359 days and 1101 days. This occurs because individuals from both groups exited from either the drug court program or probation comparison group on different dates between November 1998 and December 2000.

Table 15 – Average Exposure Time		
	Drug Court	Comparison
Average Days	683.1	684.8
Median Days	649.9	668

Table 15 measures average days for exposure and median days for exposure for each group. The average exposure days was less than 2 days different indicating the similarity between the two groups. Median days exposure measures the point in the distribution of the data below and above which half of the scores are located. The difference between the two groups in median days was 18.1 days, which again indicates the similarity in the two groups.

Table 16 – New Referrals				
New Referral	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	12	35.3	20	60.6
No	22	64.7	13	39.4

p=.038, df=1

Differences in new referrals following exit from the programs between the drug court and probation comparison group were average. A larger number and percentage of comparison group members had new referrals when compared to the drug court group. The average number of new referrals was 2 for the drug court group and 2.2 for the comparison group. Additionally, the average time in days to a new referral was 224.3 days for the drug court group and 120.2 days for the comparison group. This is a difference of 104.1 days.

Table 17 – New Petitions				
New Petition	Drug Court		Comparison	
	N	%	N	%
Yes	6	17.6	14	42.4
No	28	82.4	19	57.6

p=.048, df=1

The comparison group had a larger number and percentage of new petitions filed following exit from probation than the drug court group. This difference is statistically significant.

The average time in days to acquiring a new petition was greater for the drug court group (236.2) when compared to the comparison group (165.1). This is a difference of 71.1 days.

Table 18 – New Referrals and New Petitions While in Program		
	Drug Court	Comparison
Average Number of Referrals While in Program	0.0	0.0
Average Number of Petitions While in Program	0.3	0.8

This table documents the number of referrals and petitions while either in the drug court program or on probation. Neither group had any referrals or petitions filed while in their respective programs. Interestingly, both groups had petitions filed resulting in small averages. This is probably a result of petitions being filed on referrals that occurred prior to entry into the drug court program or probation. This could also be a result of data collection and data entry errors by JJD staff.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that drug court individuals and comparison group members composed of probationers were similar in their characteristics. This similarity provides credibility to the recidivism finding that the drug court program group picked up new referrals at a lower rate than comparison group members. While preliminary this finding begins answering the question regarding the success of this drug court program in particular and drug court programs in general. Despite the small sample size this study has established an important baseline for the Second Judicial District Court Juvenile Drug Court Program.

This preliminary outcome study also provides a starting point for further study regarding the effectiveness of drug courts. Further time and attention should focus on “what about drug courts work”, more detailed and complete analyses and a cost study.

More detailed studies and analyses would focus on collecting more complete data on both drug court clients and a comparable group of probationers. This could include treatment information and self-report information regarding drug use after exit from drug court and probation/prison as well as improvements in living arrangements, education, employment, medical health and mental health. It would also be worthwhile to look at longer post-program time periods than what was included this report. Benefits may increase with longer time periods. Additionally, a larger sample would allow more sophisticated analyses and increase the significance of the findings.

The findings in this report provide some interesting information on cost issues. While it is our opinion that short term in-program average costs per client for drug court are greater than comparable probation costs due to increased supervision and treatment some or all of this cost may be offset by higher recidivism rates, a shorter time period in days to acquiring new referrals and petitions, and a higher average number of new referrals.

Appendix A

Comparison Group Eligibility Criteria Form

Appendix B

Juvenile Historical Comparison Group Data Collection Codebook