

Highlights of [GAO-05-219](#), a report to congressional committees

# ADULT DRUG COURTS

## Evidence Indicates Recidivism Reductions and Mixed Results for Other Outcomes

### Why GAO Did This Study

Drug court programs, which were established in the late 1980s as a local response to increasing numbers of drug-related cases and expanding jail and prison populations, have become popular nationwide in the criminal justice system. These programs are designed to reduce defendants' repeated crime (that is, recidivism), and substance abuse behavior by engaging them in a judicially monitored substance abuse treatment. However, determining whether drug court programs are effective at reducing recidivism and substance use has been challenging because of a large amount of weak empirical evidence.

The 21st Century Department of Justice Appropriations Authorization Act requires that GAO assess drug court program effectiveness. To meet this mandate, GAO conducted a systematic review of drug court program research, from which it selected 27 evaluations of 39 adult drug court programs that met its criteria for, among other things, methodological soundness. This report describes the results of that review of published evaluations of adult drug court programs, particularly relating to (1) recidivism outcomes, (2) substance use relapse, (3) program completion, and (4) the costs and benefits of drug court programs.

DOJ reviewed a draft of this report and had no comments. Office of National Drug Control Policy reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with the findings. [www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-219](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-219).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie E. Ekstrand at (202) 512-8777 or [ekstrandl@gao.gov](mailto:ekstrandl@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

Most of the adult drug court programs assessed in the evaluations GAO reviewed led to recidivism reductions during periods of time that generally corresponded to the length of the drug court program. GAO's analysis of evaluations reporting these data for 23 programs showed the following:

- Lower percentages of drug court program participants than comparison group members were rearrested or reconvicted.
- Program participants had fewer recidivism events than comparison group members.
- Recidivism reductions occurred for participants who had committed different types of offenses.
- There was inconclusive evidence that specific drug court components, such as the behavior of the judge or the amount of treatment received, affected participants' recidivism while in the program.

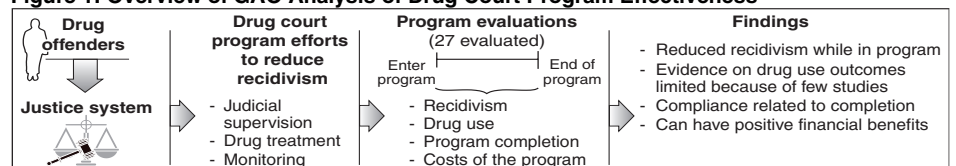
Recidivism reductions also occurred for some period of time after participants completed the drug court program in most of the programs reporting these data.

Evidence about the effectiveness of adult drug court programs in reducing participants' substance use relapse is limited to data available from eight drug court programs. Evaluations of these eight drug court programs reported mixed results on substance use relapse. For example, drug test results generally showed significant reductions in use during participation in the program, while self-reported results generally showed no significant reductions in use.

Completion rates, which refer to the percentage of individuals who successfully completed a program, in selected adult drug court programs ranged from 27 to 66 percent. Other than participants' compliance with drug court program procedures, no other program factor (such as the severity of the sanction that would be invoked if participants failed to complete the program) consistently predicted participants' program completion.

A limited number of evaluations—four evaluations of seven adult drug court programs—provided sufficient cost and benefit data to estimate their net benefits. Although the cost of six of these programs was greater than the costs to provide criminal justice services to the comparison group, all seven programs yielded positive net benefits, primarily from reductions in recidivism affecting judicial system costs and avoided costs to potential victims. Financial cost savings for the criminal justice system (taking into account recidivism reductions) were found in two of the seven programs.

**Figure 1: Overview of GAO Analysis of Drug Court Program Effectiveness**



Source: GAO review of drug court program evaluations.