

# Drug Courts: More Effective in Reducing Drug Use and Reoffending in Adults than Juveniles



*Drug courts appear to be effective in reducing recidivism for adults and drunk driving.*

## What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review assesses the effectiveness of drug courts in reducing criminal or drug-use behaviour (recidivism). The review summarises findings from 154 studies, all of which report evidence from adult drug courts, DWI drug courts, and juvenile courts. All but eight of the studies are of drug courts in the United States.

**Drug Courts monitor drug-involved offenders' abstinence from drug use through frequent drug testing and compliance with drug treatment programs. These courts are effective in reducing future offending and drug use (recidivism) for adults, but not for juveniles.**

## What did the review study?

Drug courts are an alternative to the traditional justice system. Drug-involved offenders are offered entry into drug court with an agreement that the charges against them will be reduced if they complete a treatment program. Participants' adherence to the program is monitored by the court. Various rewards (e.g., praise, tokens of achievement, movement to the next phase of the program) and sanctions (e.g., increased treatment attendance or urine testing, short jail stays) are used to compel compliance to program requirements.

This review examines the effectiveness of drug courts, including drug courts for juvenile and drunk driving (DWI) offenders, in reducing recidivism compared to the standard justice system. The review critically assesses these courts' effects on recidivism in the short and long term. It also assesses the methodological soundness of the existing evidence, as well as the relationship between drug court features and effectiveness.

## What studies are included?

Included studies are evaluations of drug courts that used an experimental and quasi-experimental comparison group design. Studies must also have had an outcome that examined criminal or drug-use behavior (recidivism).

A total of 154 studies were included in the review which, of which 92 focused on adult drug courts, 34 on juvenile drug courts, and 28 on drunk driving courts.



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#### How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published until August 2011. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in February 2012.

#### What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. We help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

#### About this summary

This summary was prepared by Ada Chukwudozie and Howard White (Campbell Collaboration) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2012:4 "Drug Courts' Effects on Criminal Offending for Juveniles and Adults" by Ojmarrh Mitchell, David B. Wilson, Amy Eggers, and Doris L. MacKenzie (DOI: 10.4073/csr.2012.4). The summary was designed, edited and produced by Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration). Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



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#### What are the main results in this review?

There is a large, significant mean average effect from both adult and DWI drug courts. Overall, recidivism rates were just over one third (38 per cent) for programme participants, compared to half (50 per cent) for comparable nonparticipants. This effect endures for at least three years.

### *Juvenile drug courts are less effective at reducing repeat offenses*

There is a smaller effect from juvenile drug courts. Program participation reduces recidivism from 50 per cent to 44 per cent.

The effects of drug court participation are highly variable. Programs with fewer high-risk offenders are more effective in reducing reoffending rates. This finding may help explain why juvenile courts are less effective, as they deal with a greater proportion of high-risk offenders.

Variation in intensity of programs is not related to effectiveness. Courts that required more than the standard number of phases or drug tests were no more effective than other courts.

The highest quality evidence from three experimental evaluations confirms the impact from adult courts on recidivism, though there was some inconsistency in durability of the effects over time. For DWI drug courts three of the four experimental evaluations produced similar results as the adult drug courts, but one high quality study found negative effects.

#### What do the findings in this review mean?

Drug courts appear to be effective in reducing recidivism for adults and drunk driving. There is a smaller effect for juveniles, which may be due to the fact that they deal with a greater proportion of high-risk offenders.

But further experimental research would be useful to confirm the effects of DWI courts, and to examine the variation in effects to identify what sort of drug courts and in which contexts.