

Fighting the Addiction: The Effectiveness of the La Crosse County Drug Court Program

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research project is to determine the effectiveness of the La Crosse County Drug Court on participant's sobriety upon completion of the program. Questionnaires were distributed to 25 graduates and data was analyzed to determine AOSA treatment effectiveness of the program. Although much research has been done to determine the effectiveness of drug courts on recidivism rates of program participants, little to no research has specifically focused on drug use and sobriety of program participants. Research has mainly been concerned with whether or not a program participant has committed anymore drug-related crimes, but not if the participant continues drug use without committing a drug-related crime. Acquiring information about continued drug use is just as important as acquiring information about committing drug-related crimes. Drug treatment courts are used in place of prisons and other correctional facilities in order to rehabilitate criminals and keep them from committing crimes in the future as well as living a sober life. The growth of effective drug court programs will not only help the problem of overcrowded correctional facilities, but the crime and drug use in communities across America could expect to see a significant decline.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, the use of crack cocaine became a major issue in the United States. The extensive use of the drug also caused an exponential increase in the amount of drug-related crime, propelling drug-related crime to be the most common type of crime in America. Initially, these criminals, who were for the most part nonviolent, were put into jails with violent inmates and felons. Instead of building separate jails for drug-related criminals, a new judicial procedure was created (Egbert, Church, & Byrnes, 2006).

In an attempt to reduce drug use and drug-related crime, drug courts were developed, beginning in Miami, Florida in 1989. Addiction to drugs is a "longstanding, debilitating and insidious condition" (La Crosse County Drug Court Program, 2004) in which extensive treatment must be provided to patients. At the time of initial arrest and incarceration, "addicts are most vulnerable to successful intervention" (La Crosse County Drug Court Program, 2004), which is why drug court programs are available for rehabilitation and re-admittance into society.

The goals of the La Crosse County Drug Court are as follows: 1. Reduce drug related crimes, 2. Reduce offender contacts with the criminal justice system, 3. Reduce costs associated with criminal case processing and re-arrest, 4. Introduce offenders to an ongoing process of recovery designed to achieve total abstinence from illicit/illegal drugs, 5. Promote self-sufficiency and empower substance abusers to become productive and responsible members of the community (La Crosse County Drug Court Program, 2004).

The La Crosse County Drug Court Program uses a four-phase program with participants. The first three phases of the program are highly structured and assist the participant in creating personal goals such as an employment plan and a budget. The phases also include support meetings, social activities, appearances before the Drug Court Judge, and community service work, among other things. Before moving on to the next phase of the program, the participants must maintain consecutive days of total abstinence from the use of all drugs, chemicals and alcohol, for the designated time period. The fourth phase of the program is a one year incentive program. This phase of the program is used to help the participant maintain sobriety and use the skills acquired to live a drug-free life. During phase four, the participant is encouraged, but not required, to return to any drug court sessions (La Crosse Co Drug Court Program, 2004).

Because there is a great variety in problems and personal history of each participant, often other factors besides the criminal offense and drug use need to be taken into consideration. While everyone that comes into the drug court enters into the four-phase program, the drug court team also has to consider co-existing problems of the participants, which may include mental illness, medical problems, unemployment, homelessness, and physical or sexual abuse (Key Components, P.7).

The ultimate goal of a drug court is abstinence from drug or alcohol use (sobriety) and public safety (low recidivism rates). According to the U.S Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, there is typically a pattern of decreasing frequency in drug use before a sustained abstinence from a drug or alcohol is obtained. During the first few months of drug court, many participants report positive urine tests. Since complete abstinence from drugs and alcohol is difficult to obtain immediately after entering the program, participants are judged on their other behaviors, such as willingness to show up for scheduled court appearances, participating in treatment sessions, and cooperating with the drug court team (Key Components, P.13).

METHODS

The purpose of the research project was to determine the effectiveness of the La Crosse County Drug Court Program. To obtain data on the effectiveness of the La Crosse County Drug Court Program, a survey research method was used. A questionnaire was drafted asking graduates questions regarding illegal drug use prior to the drug court program and current illegal drug use, as well as legal drug use before and after. Questions regarding reasons for using and stopping using drugs were also asked, along with other questions such as length since graduation and number of relapses. A cover letter was also created. The questionnaire along with a cover letter was examined by members of the La Crosse County Drug Court team. With the help of the drug court team, a final copy of both were created and approved. Using information supplied by the La Crosse County Drug Court, a list of current addresses of all 25 drug court graduates was provided. Graduates were sent a cover letter which guaranteed complete confidentiality and protection from the law, as well as the survey, a \$5 incentive, due to the small sample size, and a self addressed stamped envelope. Working with the drug court team, we were able locate nearly all 25 participants. One letter was returned with a “deceased” stamp on it. Overall, 14 (out of 24 currently living graduates) surveys were returned, giving a 58% response rate. The data were collected and entered into SPSS. The variables were dichotomized and crosstabs were run. The following section discusses results found when they data were analyzed.

RESULTS

Out of the 14 participants that responded, only one participant has returned to drug use since graduating from the drug court program, a 93% sobriety rate among participants. Of the 14 participants, 10 have been graduated for the program for over a year which shows that the drug court is not just a temporary remedy, but that the effects of the program and participants’ sobriety are long-lasting.

The following contingency tables (Tables 1-8) look at participants’ age and sex as they vary with reasons for using drugs prior to participation in and completion of the La Crosse County Drug Court Program.

Table 1. Addiction by Participant Age

	Participant Age		Total
	20-45	46+	
Not Addicted	1	1	2
Addicted	6	6	12
Total	7	7	14

Table 1 looks at the participants’ age and whether or not they were addicted to drugs prior to the program. As can be seen from the table, age is not a factor in addiction for the drug court participants. Only two graduates reported not being addicted to drugs. Addiction can, therefore, happen at any point in a person’s life, and one’s age does not affect his or her ability to be come addicted.

Table 2. Addiction by Sex

	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
Not Addicted	0	2	2
Addicted	4	8	12
Total	4	10	14

Table 2 looks at using drugs due to addiction and sex. The table shows that sex is a not a factor in determining whether a participant is addicted to drugs prior to entering drug court. Table 1 and Table 2 show that not only are most people addicted to drugs upon entering drug court, but that anyone can be addicted to drugs and enter the drug court program regardless of age or sex.

Table 3. Recreational use by Participant Age

	Participant Age		Total
	20-45	46+	
q8 Not for recreational use	2	5	7
For recreational use	5	2	7
Total	7	7	14

Table 3 looks at the relationship between the participants’ age and their use of drugs for recreation. As the chart shows, younger people aged 20-45 are much more likely than people age 46+ to use drugs for recreational use. Some people have suggested that there are stages in the addiction process. Perhaps later stages involve more isolated drug use than earlier stages, which could explain why younger participants use drugs use more recreationally than older participants.

Table 4. Recreational Use by Sex

	Sex		Total
	Female	Male	
q8 Not for recreational use	4	3	7
For recreational use	0	7	7
Total	4	10	14

Table 4 looks at drug use for recreation by sex. There is a significant difference found between men and women in use of drugs for recreation. While no women reported using drugs for recreation, 70% of men reported using drugs for recreational use. Looking back at Table 3, we determine that the majority of people in drug court who use drugs for recreation are men ages 20-45.

Table 5. Use With friends by Participant Age

	Participant Age		Total
	20-45	46+	
q9 Didn't use with friends	2	4	6
Used with friends	5	3	8
Total	7	7	14

Table 5 looks at drug use with friends and the participant’s age. Younger graduates reported using with friends more than the older graduates. When looked at in combination with drug use for recreation in Table 3, the younger graduates are more likely to use drugs with friends, which coincide with their higher percentage of recreational drug use.

Table 6. Use with friends by Sex

		Sex		Total
		Female	Male	
q9	Didn't use with friends	3	3	6
	Used with friends	1	7	8
Total		4	10	14

Table 6 looks at drug use with friends by sex. The table shows that women are using drugs with friends significantly less than men. Combining all the information, we see that young men are the most likely to be using drugs recreationally and with friends, while women and older men are significantly less likely. From the above results, it appears that recreational use is related to using drugs with friends. The people who are not doing drugs with friends, who are women and older participants, are also not using drugs for recreational use. Those using drugs with friends, who are mainly young men, are also using drugs for recreational use.

Table 7. Use for Stress by Participant Age

Count

		Participant Age		Total
		20-45	46+	
q10	Not to cope with stress	3	2	5
	To cope with stress	4	5	9
Total		7	7	14

Table 7 looks at using drugs to cope with stress and age. The results show that age is not a factor in using drugs to cope with stress. Both the younger and older graduates reported a similar usage of drugs for stress.

Table 8. Use for Stress by Sex

Count

		Sex		Total
		Female	Male	
q10	Not to cope with stress	3	2	5
	To cope with stress	1	8	9
Total		4	10	14

Table 8 looks at using drugs to cope with stress by sex. Unlike age in Table 7, sex has a significant affect on use drugs to cope with stress. While only one woman reported using drugs to cope with stress (25%), 80% of men reported using drugs to cope with stress. Men, either young or old, entering drug court, are more likely to be suffering from stress and using drugs as a way to try to relieve their stress, whereas women do not attribute their drug use to stress. A possible reason for this is that women are typically more open and willing to share their feelings and talk about their problems, whereas men may keep their emotions bottled up inside, finding drug use as the only solution to coping with stress.

The following contingency tables (Tables 9-14) look at participants' sex, age and reasons for using drugs as they related to the number of times a participant relapsed while in the La Crosse County Drug Court Program.

Table 9. Number of relapses by Participant Age

		Participant Age		Total
		20-45	46+	
number of relapses	none	5	4	9
	some	2	3	5
Total		7	7	14

Table 9 looks at the number of relapses before graduating from the drug court program and the participant's age. The participants' age was not found to be a factor in determining whether or not he or she will relapse while in the program. Overall, there was a 36% relapse rate within the program.

Table 10. Number of relapses by Sex

		Sex		Total
		Female	Male	
number of relapses	none	2	7	9
	some	2	3	5
Total		4	10	14

Table 10 looks at the number of relapses before graduating from the drug court program by sex. While Table 9 shows that age has no effect on number of relapses, sex does have an effect on if a participant will relapse in the program. Fifty percent of women reported relapsing at least once while in the program while only 30% of males relapsed. Seventy percent of men were able to complete the program without relapsing. This indicates that the drug court needs to pay particular attention to the women and help to aid them in staying sober throughout the program.

Table 11. Number of relapses by Addiction

		Not Addicted	Addicted	Total
		number of relapses	2	
	some	0	5	5
Total		2	12	14

Table 11 looks at number of times a person relapses during the drug court program and addiction to drugs. Those people who are addicted to drugs are more likely to relapse than those who are not. If a person was not truly addicted to drugs in the first place, it would be much easier for that person to stop using while in the program. This coincides with the information in Table 2 which shows that 100% of women were addicted to drugs when entering the drug court and in Table 10 that women have a higher relapse rate than men.

Table 12. Number of relapses by recreational use

		q8		Total
		Not for recreational use	For recreational use	
number of relapses	none	4	5	9
	some	3	2	5
Total		7	7	14

Table 12 looks at the number of times a person relapses during drug court and drug use for recreational use. Those who use drugs for recreational use are less likely than those who do not use for recreational use to relapse in the program. Looking back, females reported never using drugs for recreational use, and they relapsed 20% more than men, who did use drugs for recreational use. Although older people are less likely to use drugs for recreation, there is no relationship between age and number of relapses, so recreational use is not a factor in determining relapses for older graduates. This relationship can be explained by the fact that it is easier for people who are using drugs for a recreational purpose to quit than those who are using drugs for other reasons. If a person is using drugs for recreation, his or her drug use can be replaced by some other form of recreation. If a person is using drugs for some other problem or more frequently, however, it will not be as easier to replace their drug use with some other form of nourishment. Since men use drugs more recreationally than women, men have an easier time quitting using drugs than women and relapse less often while in the drug court program.

Table 13. Number of relapses by use with friends

		q9		Total
		Didn't use with friends	Used with friends	
number of relapses	none	5	4	9
	some	1	4	5
Total		6	8	14

Table 13 looks at the number of relapses during drug court and drug use with friends. Those who do not use drugs with friends are less likely to relapse than those who do use drugs with friends. Since the person can be around friends without using drugs, they can still spend time with friends and get support from friends and family while in the program without the temptation of using drugs. Those people who use drugs with friends are less likely to get support from their friends to help them quit smoking or will be unable to spend time in social situations with their friends without feeling the urge to go back to drug use. This creates a contradiction, however, with some previous findings from the study. Table 6 shows that women use drugs significantly less with friends than men do, however, women are 20% more likely to relapse while in drug court than men.

Table 14. Number of relapses by use for stress

		q10		Total
		Not to cope with stress	To cope with stress	
number of relapses	none	2	7	9
	some	3	2	5
Total		5	9	14

Table 14 looks at the number of relapses and drug use to cope with stress. Those who use drugs to deal with stress are less likely to relapse in the program than those who do not use drugs to cope with stress. This corresponds with previous findings in Table 8 that men are more likely than women to use drugs for stress while Table 10 shows that women are more likely to relapse. A possible reason for the finding is that the drug court program helps put the graduates' lives back on track, thus relieving the prior stressors in their lives. Without having these previous stressors, the participants do not have to use drugs as a way to cope with their stress while in drug court. Looking back at reasons for using drugs, men were much more likely than women to use drugs to cope with stress. Since those who use drugs for stress, mainly men, relapse less than those who do not cope with stress, it appears that the drug court may be helping men to express their emotions and deal with their stress in a more constructive way than their previous way of coping through drug use.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing data on graduates from the La Crosse County Drug Court Program, it is clearly evident that the drug court is truly an effective program for achieving sobriety among drug related criminal offenders. The 93% sobriety rate shows that the drug court is making a difference in the graduates' lives. Although the program is successful for graduates, the data provided useful information on ways to better work with participants during the drug court program in order to reduce their risk of relapse while in the program.

Since the research only looked at successful graduates of the La Crosse County Drug Court Program, the data obtained can also be used to better understand and predict the problems a person may encounter in the program in order to ensure a higher rate of graduation among all participants. Looking at the reasons for using drugs in relation to a person's age, sex, and number of relapses in the program provides useful information for the La Crosse County Drug Court Program. By realizing that the reasons for using drugs truly do have an effect on how well a person succeeds in the program. This should encourage the drug court to thoroughly examine a participant's reasons for using drugs upon admittance to program.

Women reported a significantly lower percentage of using drugs to cope with stress than men, yet they have a significantly higher relapse rate. This indicates that the drug court needs to focus not solely on the individual's drug habits, but the personal life of the individual that will affect his or her likelihood to succeed.

Although a lot of information gathered was found to be insignificant and not a factor in relapse or reasons for drug use, this information is also very important for the drug court to take into consideration. In many cases something such as number of relapses has no significance based on one's age. It is important that the drug court realizes this so they give equal chance and opportunity and effort towards helping each individual regardless of age. It may be easy for someone to think that an older individual is set in his or her ways and will not be able to change, whereas a younger person is still influential and susceptible to change. The research shows, however, that at the La Crosse County Drug Court, people of all ages share a similar relapse rate. Sex, however, as discussed previously, does have an effect on relapse rate, which is something that the drug court needs to take into very special consideration. Women have a much higher relapse rate, however they are not using drugs with friends, recreationally, or for stress. The drug court needs to determine what it is that is driving women to relapse more often than men in the drug court and what positive steps are being taken by or with men to reduce their likelihood of not relapsing in the program.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the small sample size gathered, the data collected and analyzed was unable to be generalized to all drug courts. The results found are specific only to the La Crosse County Drug Court.

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