

# Research analysis: 'adult drug courts'

[Health & Medicine](#), [Drugs](#)



The General Accountability Office (GAO) did the study on Adult Drug Courts. GAO is an agency, operating independently and without any partisan agenda, that works for the U. S. Congress. Its role is to investigate how the federal government appropriates public revenue to aid Congress in deciding over approval of the budget allocation of the federal government and ensure the accountability of the federal government for approved budget allocation.

The drug court programs that started in the latter part of the 1980s (GAO 1) comprise one area of budget allocation by the federal government. The purpose of the drug court programs is to prevent recidivism of inmates involved in drug-related crimes. This served as a solution to the exploding prison population and escalating costs to the criminal justice system.

The federal government commenced awards or grants to these programs in 1994 through the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.

By September of 2004, there were already 1, 200 programs established in the different states and 500 more programs are in the planning stage. (GAO 1) GAO conducted the study to determine the achievement of the purpose of the federal awards by considering the outcomes of drug court programs as mandated by the appropriations authorization law for the Department of Justice (GAO 2).

The independent and non-partisan character of GAO as well as conducting the evaluations based on a legal mandate contributed to the objectivity of the results.

**What was the Study About?**

The study is a systematic evaluation of previous researches done on drug court programs. GAO initially selected 117 studies assessing drug court programs conducted between May 1997 and January 2004 that made reports on recidivism, relapse of drug use, and outcomes of program completion (GAO 2). Of this number, GAO selected 27 studies that compared a group undergoing the drug court program and a group not part of any drug court program.

Five of the 27 studies were experiments with an experimental and control groups with members assigned at random. The 27 studies covered 39 drug court programs for adults. (GAO 9-10) The aim of the GAO evaluation was to obtain systematically information on drug court programs, specifically the components of drug court programs, the outcomes of these programs, and costs of these programs.

The evaluation also conducted a cost-benefit analysis of 8 studies providing information on costs and benefits. Four of the 8 studies even enabled the determination of net benefits. (GAO 9-10)

To augment the evaluation of studies on drug court programs, GAO also interviewed key respondents from three government agencies with direct involvement in the implementation of the drug court programs, including the Department of Justice, National Institute on Drug Abuse, and Office of National Drug Control Policy (GAO 3).

The combined evaluations and interviews supported conclusions based on multiple perspectives of the effectiveness of drug court programs to aid legislative decision-making.

**What is the Time-period of the Study?**

The evaluation commenced in October 2003 and concluded in February 2005 in compliance with auditing standards (GAO 3). Although the research process involved a period of 1 year and 4 months, the study is a cross-sectional study because the focus is results over a given period, specifically studies done between May 1997 and January 2004 and interviews over the operations of drug court programs during the same period.

The evaluation did not intend to trace developments in drug court programs or study specific individuals involved in drug court programs over an extended period. Doing cross-sectional study allows the comparative and collative evaluation of studies on drug court programs. However, this also creates the limitation of the results by not covering developmental issues or problems emerging from the programs.

**What is the Research Design of the Study (planning)?**

The research design employed in the evaluative study is the mixed methods research that integrates both quantitative and qualitative aspects to derive better results when compared to using only one aspect or the other. The mixed method research requires the derivation of both quantitative and qualitative data and integrative analysis of both types of data.

The study by GAO collected quantitative data by using statistical analysis of the data derived from the 27 studies. The presentation of results was through comparative and summative tables. It also derived qualitative data

<https://assignbuster.com/research-analysis-adult-drug-courts/>

based on the results of the 27 studies and interviews with three government agencies (GAO 3) directly involved in the implementation of the programs. The presentation of results was through tables and text discussions.

The planning of the evaluative study by GAO involved secondary research and interviews as data collection techniques. Secondary research is a three-stage process. First stage is searching for studies on drug court programs from research databases using key words such as drug court program and recidivism as well as drug court websites of research institutions or organizations that are likely to have made studies on drug court programs.

GAO also considered previous studies it made on drug court programs. It also requested for drug court studies from research agencies. Second stage is review of the studies found to determine those that qualify for its criteria of study coverage including recidivism, drug use, and program completion.

Third stage is in-depth review to determine the studies that employed group comparison methods such as those using experiment and control groups in experiment and quasi-experiments, which employed either historical comparison group or contemporaneous comparison group (GAO 17). The studies selected also employed a number of statistical methods to address individual differences and allow for comparison and collation as well as address selection bias (GAO 19).

Interviews with three agencies yielded background information on the drug court programs including the characteristics of the drug court programs and the participants of these programs. (GAO 9-10) The analytical techniques also combined statistical with document or text analysis.

The combination of data collection methods and use of multiple analyses addressed selection bias arising from differences in the methodological approaches of the studies evaluated and derivation of as much information as available to support generalizations.

### **What are the Results of the Study?**

The results of the study had strong and weak points. These showed reduction in recidivism during the course of the program, lower percentage of re-arrests or re-convictions for participants of the program relative to non-participants, there was also relatively lower re-arrests or re-conviction across program participants, recidivism reduction was uniform regardless of the severity of the drug-related offence.

However, there was no conclusive data to support the link between specific characteristics of the program to within-program recidivism. Recidivism rates within one-year after program completion were similar with recidivism during the program to indicate maintained low level of recidivism. (GAO 5-6) However, this only covers the immediate year following program completion.

Data on drug use during the program was inconclusive. Drug tests showed a decline but self-reported use indicated no change (GAO 6). This could be due to the limitation of drug testing as the means of determining drug use within the program. This could also be due to methodological issues such as insufficient data or lack of comparative measures.

Completion rates that depended on compliance with activities and responsibilities varied between 27 to 66 percent. Factors such as age and severity of offence are explanations of the variance in completion rates with

older participants more inclined to complete the program. (GAO 6) There were no definitive explanations for the variance in completion rates.

Cost benefit analysis showed a greater cost per individual program participant when compared to cost per individual non-participant of the program. Results of four studies covering seven drug court programs indicated net benefits because of the decline in recidivism that meant decline in costs to the judicial system and avoidance of costs to potential victims of recidivism.

Nevertheless, these did not consider indirect benefits. Only two drug court programs reported actual data on cost savings of the criminal justice system. (GAO 6-7) More data is necessary to support generalizations on the comparative costs and benefits of drug court programs.

### **What are Opinions of the Study?**

The study holds beneficial value but it also has limitations. Its beneficial value comes from providing an overview of the state of knowledge over the effectiveness of drug court programs. Decline in recidivism, at least during the program and one-year immediately following program completion, reflected the extent of effectiveness of drug court programs.

Some of the drug court programs also led to financial net benefits. This implies the contribution of the drug court programs in lowering drug-related recidivism. As such, Congress could decide to continue approving federal appropriations to drug court programs.

However, the study also has limitations as a preliminary study that requires follow-ups. The use of secondary research meant that data relied on the

results of existing studies, which is not sufficient to inform on the overall effectiveness of drug court programs.

The use of interviews provided characteristics of the drug court programs and the participants but was underutilized. The interviews could have yielded more data such as on implementation issues, best practice, areas for improvement, and other pertinent information to support the evaluation.

## **Work Cited**

1. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Adult Drug Courts: Evidence Indicates Recidivism
2. Reductions and Mixed Results for Other Outcomes. Washington, DC: GAO,