

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Matching Supervision to Clients' Risk Status

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Key Words: supervision, recidivism, Risk principle, assessments, drug court, status hearings

Drug Court and Risk Level

Summary/Conclusions

This article features the results of studies conducted by the Treatment Research Institute, in Philadelphia. The article begins with a review of prior studies, in which researchers examined the variables at play in the success or failure of drug court participants. The previous studies directed the researchers' current study, in that they could address some of the earlier limitations, as well as replicate the findings. The object of current study was the risk level of drug court clients. The risk levels were matched to differing frequencies of drug court status hearings, with outcomes supporting the use of the Risk Principle.

Limitations of Information

The current study is limited by small sample sizes in some of the participant groups. As noted in the article, the study could be criticized for things such as "limited sample representativeness, potential selection bias, or systematic attrition." Also limiting for purposes of generalizing the finding, most of their study cohorts were involved in misdemeanor drug court, and "all of the programs were pre-plea diversionary models."

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

This article revisits the results of a series of studies, beginning in 1999, conducted to determine "whether judicial status hearings are an essential ingredient of drug court programs." The researchers, informed by the Risk Principle, hypothesized that the most intensive interventions should be reserved for the highest risk offenders; whereas those same intensive interventions may be ineffective for lower risk offenders, at best, and harmful, at worst.

The current study was informed by the lessons learned from the earlier studies. The researchers matched the higher risk adult participants to bi-weekly status hearings, while the lower risk adult participants were assigned status hearings "as-needed." After a period of 14 weeks, these two groups were then compared to adult participants who were attending status hearings on a regular schedule (approx. every 4-6 weeks).

There were 187 participants in the sample from which outcomes were measured. The primary measure for performance was urine screens, while the study also looked at treatment attendance, self-reported drug and/or alcohol use and criminal activity.

Results were limited for the study. Analysis indicated that the high risk participants, who were assigned the standard number of hearings (4-6 weeks), provided the most positive urine tests and also averaged the fewest consecutive negative urine tests. Participants, who were high risk and attending the

most frequent, bi-weekly hearings, attended more treatment sessions than the other participants. Regarding the other outcome measures, data did not lend itself to meaningful interpretation. In all, "drug court clients who are high risk responded better to frequent court hearings, whereas clients who are low risk responded equivalently to various levels of judicial supervision."

Practical Applications

- √ When considering a referral to drug court, ensure the probationer is assessed as high risk in order to receive the maximum benefit from the combination of judicial involvement and treatment attendance.
- √ Completing quality assessments, prior to assigning supervision or interventions, is essential to improving outcomes. Following assessments, any intervention (ie: drug court, treatment, cognitive skill building classes) utilized should be appropriate for the assessed level and address an identified criminogenic need specific to that probationer.
- √ Matching high intensity interventions to high risk probationers provides the best outcomes. When high risk offenders do not receive appropriate services, outcomes are poor and public safety is at risk.
- √ Matching low risk probationers to high intensity interventions is not beneficial. Consider community treatment alternatives to drug court enrollment for the lower risk probationers.

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