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The Evidence for Washington State Drug Courts

Updated 2024

Executive Summary

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) classifies Drug Courts as an evidence-based program. This classification is based on the findings from a meta-analysis that reviewed rigorous studies for approximately 30,000 drug court participants and shows statistically significant crime reductions beyond what could reasonably occur by chance. WSIPP's meta-analysis shows that drug courts have a larger effect on recidivism than most other criminal legal interventions studied.

88% of drug court participants in the State of Washington have <u>no new felonies</u> at 36-month follow-up and 77% have no new crimes at any level including misdemeanors per Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) data. This recidivism statistic is based on all Washington drug court participants, not just graduates, and is even more significant when considering that 79% had prior felonies and 94% had prior convictions at some level including misdemeanors (an average of 5 prior felonies and 9 prior misdemeanors) at drug court entry. iv

As an evidence-based intervention, drug courts are able to provide the support, resources, accountability, and structure needed for drug court participants to break the cycle of substance use and crime. What is not captured in the data are the powerful personal stories of drug court participants and their families and children whose lives have been transformed by their drug court participation. Many drug court participants are parents of minor children. In this context, drug courts have an upstream impact, helping to break what is often a generational cycle of substance use and criminal legal involvement. When parents successfully graduate from drug courts and other therapeutic courts, the results are life-changing for both them and their children. Drug courts prevent countless adverse childhood experiences associated with parental substance use, parental incarceration, and foster care. Washington drug court participants and their family members are some of the most outspoken advocates in explaining the importance and value of drug courts. Here are just a few of their stories.

May 2024 has been proclaimed National Treatment Court Month and Governor Inslee followed suit, declaring Therapeutic Court Month here in Washington.

In spite of the well-established evidence for drug courts, Washington drug courts are still sometimes the subject of inaccurate reporting and misrepresentations regarding the strength of the evidence supporting drug courts. During this May 2024 Therapeutic Court Month, the Washington Association of Drug Courts (WADC) and its sister organization, the Washington State Association of Drug Court Professionals (WSADCP) would like to take the opportunity to outline the evidence supporting Washington drug courts and the important role they play in creating safer, healthier communities.

History

The first Adult Felony Drug Court program was established in the State of Washington in 1994 with an additional twelve counties implementing drug court programs by the end of the decade. In 2002, in a grand bipartisan agreement, the legislature created the Criminal Justice Treatment Account (CJTA)^v in conjunction

with a revision of the drug offense sentencing grid. With the support of CJTA funds, drug courts have been able to treat the underlying substance use disorder and stop the revolving door of crime and incarceration, saving both lives and dollars. Today, 27 Washington counties operate drug courts by superior courts and another 3 at district and municipal courts. In addition, many counties operate therapeutic courts modeled on the success of drug courts (such as family treatment courts, mental health courts, veterans courts, and DUI courts).

Recidivism

As part of a legislative mandate to create an inventory of evidence-based programs for adult corrections in 2018, WSIPP conducted a meta-analysis of drug courts with all available literature as of August 2016. WSIPP systematically reviewed 56 high quality studies of drug courts and concluded that **drug courts have a statistically significant effect in reducing recidivism and produce a return on investment 100% of the time.** Vi WSIPP recognizes drug courts as an evidence-based intervention. Vii In reviewing outcomes for 38 separate criminal legal programs, WSIPP shows drug courts are among the most effective programs in reducing crime. Viii Within the State of Washington, drug courts are primarily delivered as pre-adjudication programs (meaning participants are not convicted or sentenced as a condition of participation and when they successfully complete drug court, their felony charges are dismissed). WSIPP's analysis shows drug courts as having a greater effect on reducing crime than any other community-based, pre-arrest or pre-adjudication program reviewed. Washington drug courts are able to reduce crime while diverting participants from incarceration and the impact of a felony conviction, both on the individuals involved and on the criminal legal and other public systems that would bear the additional costs.

The Washington State DSHS Research and Analysis Division reports annually on recidivism and other key outcome measures specifically for Washington drug courts. The most recent DSHS report shows 88% of Washington drug court participants have no new felonies at 36-month follow-up and 77% have no new crimes at any level including misdemeanor. This low recidivism rate is especially significant when taking into account the criminal history of the population that Washington drug courts serve. DSHS reports that 79% of Washington drug court participants had prior felonies and 94% had prior convictions at some level including misdemeanors (an average of 5 prior felonies and 9 prior misdemeanors per participant at drug court entry). So, the absence of new convictions at a three-year follow-up represents a significant interruption of their previous pattern of criminal history. It is important to note the recidivism rate includes all participants who started treatment in drug court whether they decided to opt into the program or take their case to the mainstream legal system. In other words, Washington drug courts have a beneficial impact on recidivism for all participants, even those who do not graduate. If the DSHS sample included only drug court graduates, the impact on recidivism would undoubtedly be even greater.

Cost Savings

WSIPP developed an economic model to consistently evaluate the financial costs and benefits of each program included in their inventory of adult criminal legal programs. Their analysis of drug courts (based on 56 high quality studies from across the nation) concluded that drug courts are effective, cost beneficial 100% of the time, and provide a net benefit of \$10,567 per program participant or a \$2.82 return on every dollar invested. xiii

In 2013, DSHS studied Washington drug courts specifically and found a net benefit for taxpayers of \$22,000 per Washington drug court participant or a \$4 return on every \$1 invested. The savings occurs as a result of crime reductions. xiv

Employment & Earnings

According to DSHS data, most individuals are unemployed when they enter Washington drug courts. However, 18-months following treatment initiation, DSHS found a 231% sustained increase in employment for

Washington drug court participants and a 191% increase in earnings among those who were employed.^{XV} These numbers include all participants who started treatment in drug court whether they decided to opt in or take their case to the mainstream legal system. If the rates included only graduates, the increase in employment and earnings would undoubtedly be even higher.

Assisting participants who are able to work in gaining the skills they need to find and maintain a job is an important focus of most drug court programs. Employment supports recovery by providing a focus and structure to daily life, offering meaningful social connections and a source of pride. Employment earnings are a key to helping participants to support themselves and their families without engaging in crime. Employment and sobriety are often interrelated; without the sobriety achieved in drug court, participants are likely to be unable to maintain employment.

Other Benefits

Homelessness: WSIPP has not yet developed a formula able to monetize and calculate every beneficial outcome that programs such as drug courts produce. While statewide data is not available in this regard, stories of Washington drug court participants suggest that reducing homelessness is an important benefit of drug court participation. CJTA funds critical recovery support services such as transitional housing that provide the safety and stability needed for participants to engage in treatment, break away from negative peer influences, maintain employment, and achieve long-term recovery. The ability to maintain housing and sobriety are frequently interrelated – when participants are using substances such as fentanyl and methamphetamine, their behaviors often cause them to lose their jobs and their housing. Drug courts are an important tool in addressing homelessness because they assist participants in achieving the sobriety needed to maintain housing and employment.

Public Safety: It is well known that drug and alcohol use contribute to domestic violence, suicide, assaults and other violent crime, accidental deaths and injuries, driving related incidents, child abuse and neglect, and property crimes. Even beyond the significant crime reductions that both WSIPP and DSHS report for Washington drug court participants, xvi xvii there are additional benefits for public safety when individuals are able to stop using through the support and accountability of a well-run drug court.

Giving Back: There are countless ways in which drug court participants give back to their communities that are not captured within the existing data. Many drug court participants become substance use disorder counselors, peer specialists, or other service-oriented professionals. Others give back in more personal ways such as volunteering in their children's schools, helping neighbors, becoming a sponsor, and giving support and encouragement to others seeking recovery.

How Do Drug Courts Work?

The majority of Washington drug courts are pre-adjudication Superior Court drug courts. This means that when participants successfully complete drug court, the felony charge(s) that brought them into the program are dismissed and prison/jail sentences are avoided.

Washington drug courts are data driven and are continuously evolving as more information and resources become available. Three decades of research addressing the elements that comprise an effective drug court are articulated by All Rise (formerly NADCP, the National Association of Drug Court Professionals) and All Rise's Treatment Court Institute through the publication of the <u>Adult Treatment Court Best Practice Standards</u>. XVIII

Washington drug courts receive ongoing education and technical support from All Rise and the national Treatment Court Institute.

The statute that authorizes therapeutic courts in Washington, RCW 2.30, expresses how the Legislature recognizes, "the effectiveness and credibility of any therapeutic court will be enhanced when the court implements evidence-based practices, research-based practices, emerging best practices, or promising practices that have been identified and accepted at the state and national levels." xix

WSADCP hosts an <u>annual Washington State Therapeutic Court Conference</u> with support from the Washington Healthcare Authority (HCA) and Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), to ensure that drug courts and other Washington therapeutic courts have the information and support they need to operate high quality programs.

Drug courts provide a daily structure and expectations that support recovery. In addition to substance use disorder (SUD) treatment and frequent urinalysis drug testing, drug courts provide case management services to help participants achieve milestones that support long-term success – stable housing, employment, college enrollment or GED completion, reunification with children/family, driver's license reinstatement, primary healthcare services, and meaningful connections with support in the broader community.

Drug courts utilize a multidisciplinary team approach. Participants earn privileges and incentives to encourage positive progress and are held accountable to program requirements through court sanctions. (This is an evidence-based practice known as Contingency Management that supports long-term behavior change. The court and case managers provide supervision and monitoring to ensure participants stay on track. Participants receive support and resources to help them succeed – typically inpatient or outpatient treatment, medications, housing, transportation, childcare, peer support, vocational support, and more.

Significant research addresses which individuals are best served by drug courts. **Xi* According to national research, individuals who are "high risk" to re-offend (including those with multiple prior felony convictions, those with antisocial personality traits, and those who have previously failed in less intensive interventions) will "typically perform poorly on low intensity dispositions, such as pre-trial diversion or standard probation, and apparently require the additional structure and accountability offered by drug courts in order to succeed." **Xxii* For drug court practitioners, this is something participants have demonstrated and endorsed again and again — the importance of expectations and consequences in supporting their ability to stop using and achieve their goals.

Who Do Drug Courts Serve?

Washington drug courts are voluntary programs for individuals charged with eligible felony property crimes and other drug-related offenses. Individuals who do not wish to participate in drug court have the opportunity to take their case(s) to the mainstream criminal legal system.

Many crimes are driven by addiction. Even prior to the Washington State Supreme Court's Blake decision that removed simple drug possession cases from the jurisdiction of Superior Courts, most Washington drug courts already served individuals charged with other drug-related crimes such as felony level property offenses, drug delivery, possession with intent to deliver, and specific domestic violence and assault charges. Many Washington drug courts have since expanded their eligibility criteria, making additional charges eligible or reducing exclusionary criteria (often related to criminal history) that might have previously prevented drug court enrollment. These expansions align with national research and recommendations regarding who can be effectively served by a drug court. XXIII XXIV

Washington drug courts are governed by a statute authorizing Therapeutic Courts, <u>RCW 2.30</u>, which contains guidance on determining eligibility for drug courts and other therapeutic courts. The CJTA statute <u>RCW</u>

71.24.580 that provides critical funding for drug courts requires an individual have a substance use disorder or the likelihood that, if untreated, they will develop one.***

Critics of drug courts sometimes suggest that drug courts cater to those who are least likely to be imprisoned or that drug court participants often do not have a clinically significant substance use disorder. This is simply not accurate in the State of Washington. DSHS reports that 79% of Washington drug court participants have prior felonies (an average of 5 prior felonies per participant). XXVI

Washington drug courts support success for individuals with the most significant challenges including severe substance use disorder and frequently, co-occurring mental health disorders, homelessness, unemployment, and significant criminal histories.

A Closer Look at the Data

Critics of drug courts sometimes suggest the evidence for the effectiveness of drug courts is weak or inconclusive or that studies that have found drug courts to be effective are methodologically flawed. This is simply not accurate. At this point, the data supporting the effectiveness of drug courts has been well-established.

While there are poor quality studies of drug courts, there are also many high-quality studies. Importantly, the WSIPP meta-analysis that classifies drug courts as evidence-based is methodologically sound, systematically reviewing all available research and only including studies that meet rigorous standards of quality (e.g. employing statistically equivalent comparison groups and intent-to-treat approaches). WSIPP does not "cherry pick". WSIPP excludes studies that do not meet these minimum standards from their analysis. WSIPP's rigorous analysis concluded that drug courts significantly reduce recidivism and can be expected to produce a return on investment 100% of the time. **XXVIII** Likewise, a 2013 DSHS study of Washington drug courts is methodologically sound, also employing a statistically equivalent comparison group and an intent-to-treat analytic approach. DSHS found crime reductions created a \$4 return on every \$1 invested in Washington drug courts. **XXVIII**

Critics often cite decades-old studies focusing on drug courts in other states that have program models and populations which are quite different than our contemporary Washington state drug courts. Clearly, these are apples-to-oranges comparisons and cannot realistically be seen as relevant to current Washington drug courts.

Critics of drug courts also sometimes compare drug courts to other WSIPP-reviewed interventions such as treatment in the community, case management, and pre-arrest diversion and represent these non-drug court interventions as being more effective and/or more cost beneficial than drug courts. This is either a misunderstanding of the WSIPP analyses or a significant omission in terms of accurately describing the full picture of what they show. WSIPP's 2018 Inventory of Programs for Adult Corrections show these comparative crime reduction and cost benefit outcomes: xxix

- Drug Courts: Classified as evidence-based. There is a 100% chance the program will produce benefits greater than the costs. Effect size is -0.255. This is a statistically significant effect size. This is based on 29,452 individuals in the treatment group across 72 independent analyses contained within 56 separate studies. One study included in the review is the 2013 DSHS evaluation of Washington drug courts. Benefit minus cost per participant is \$10,567. **xxx
- Outpatient or non-intensive drug treatment in the community: Classified as evidence-based. There is a 100% chance the program will produce benefits greater than the costs. Effect size is -0.122. This effect size is smaller than the effect of a drug court but is still statistically significant. This is based on 42,338 individuals in the treatment group across 3 independent analyses contained within 3 separate studies. Benefit minus cost per participant is \$11,259. Note outcomes are based on individuals who attend outpatient for 2-18 months as part of their criminal legal involvement, including a study in which

the individuals attend outpatient as part of their probation. This is <u>not</u> a study of participants in outpatient treatment without the additional monitoring, consequences, and incentives that come from legal involvement. **xxi*

- Case management (not "swift, certain, and fair") for drug-involved persons: Classified as evidence-based. There is a 58% chance the program will produce benefits greater than the costs. Effect size is -0.047, which is smaller than the effect of a drug court. This is based on 3,624 individuals in the treatment group across 19 independent analyses contained within 14 separate studies. Benefit minus cost per participant is \$6,943. (Note there was a separate meta-analysis for case management that uses a "swift, certain and fair" approach to community supervision where participants receive an immediate sanction when they violate the conditions of supervision. There was a greater effect size and cost benefit for the "swift, certain, and fair" approach but that program differs from traditional case management in the community, appearing more similar to a probation model.)**
- Police diversion for low-severity offenses (pre-arrest): Classified as "null effects". There is an 86% chance the program will produce benefits greater than the costs. Effect size is -0.093, smaller than the effect of a drug court but still demonstrating desired results. This is based on 247 individuals in the treatment group across 2 independent analyses contained within 2 separate studies. One study included in the review is the 2015 Washington LEAD program evaluation. Benefit minus cost per participant is \$5,261. **XXXIIII*

It is generally important to consider that many programs in WSIPP's inventory do not serve the same population at the same time and therefore it is difficult to meaningfully compare. However, since drug courts are so often the subject of misrepresentations and comparisons to other approaches, it is important to clarify that drug courts, in fact, compare quite favorably to these other approaches. WSIPP's analyses show that drug courts have a greater effect on reducing crime than outpatient in the community, case management, or prearrest diversion programs. XXXIV And, drug courts produce a greater cost benefit per participant than case management for drug-involved persons or pre-arrest police diversion for low level offenses. XXXV (These other interventions are still beneficial and typically serve different populations than drug courts so they are still an important part of an effective and multi-pronged community response to SUD.) WADC/WSADCP does not believe in a one size fits all approach to addressing substance use disorder and crime and strongly supports having a robust continuum of services available in the community.

Some drug court critics cite the cost benefit per drug court participant as being slightly less than the cost benefit per outpatient participant. However, this omits some important context:

- Drug courts are more expensive than outpatient treatment so produce a slightly lower cost benefit per participant (\$10,567 benefit per drug court participant versus \$11,259 benefit per outpatient participant). However, drug courts are more effective in reducing crime (with an effect size of -0.255 for drug courts versus -0.122 for outpatient). So, the crime reduction outcomes are greater for every dollar spent on a drug court. xxxvi When evaluating programs, it is important to consider both effectiveness in outcomes as well as cost benefit per participant.
- WSIPP's outpatient data is based on 3 studies, all of which evaluate outpatient within the specific context of a criminal legal requirement to attend outpatient (e.g. probation or alternative sentencing).
 This is not a study of individuals who self-refer to outpatient treatment or who have no monitoring and expectations regarding their outpatient attendance.
- Many drug court participants are in fact enrolled in an outpatient level of care in the community.
 WSIPP classifies both drug courts and outpatient as evidence based and 100% cost beneficial.

drug courts and outpatient treatment should be part of a community response to substance use disorders and associated crime.

Drug courts are sometimes asked to provide a general Washington felony recidivism figure for comparison to the 25% felony recidivism figure for drug court participants reported by DSHS. XXXIX To this end, WADC/WSADCP consulted with WSIPP staff and learned that a general Washington recidivism rate is difficult to determine for a variety of reasons, especially if trying to make a meaningful comparison within a specific population and timeframe. A 2019 WSIPP report outlines Washington recidivism trends from 1995-2014 (defining recidivism as both felony and misdemeanor recidivism) but does not identify an overall recidivism rate. XI

A State of Washington Sentencing Guidelines Commission report "Recidivism of Adult Felons" published in April 2008 provides the most recent overall Washington recidivism rate known to WADC/WSADCP. The general recidivism rate outlined in this report is 65.9% for men and 53.6% for women. **Ii This rate includes both felony and misdemeanor recidivism. Although it is likely an apples-to-oranges comparison, if including misdemeanor recidivism, DSHS shows a 23% recidivism rate for Washington drug court participants at 36-month follow-up, with men comprising 72% of the Washington drug court population. **Iii Xliii In analyzing recidivism rates by offense type, the Sentencing Guidelines Commission report concludes that individuals charged with property crimes (currently the most common charges in Washington drug courts) have a recidivism rate of 66.4%, one of the highest rates of recidivism. Individuals charged with drug crimes have recidivism rate of 62.7%. **Xliv** When including both gender and offense type in the analysis, the Sentencing Guidelines Commission found that "property offenses were the most likely to have been committed by repeat offenders among men, with recidivism at 72%." **This speaks to the importance of drug courts. In addition to drug offenses, substance use disorders are driving many property crimes. By providing effective treatment, supervision, and resources to address the underlying SUD, drug courts are able to effectively interrupt the cycle of crime and incarceration.

The Big Picture

Drug Courts are just one piece of an effective community response to substance use disorder.

In order to effectively address SUD, it is critical to fund and support a robust continuum of resources and interventions in our communities, including drug courts and other therapeutic courts. For pre-arrest and prefiling diversions to be effective, there must be evidence-based, culturally responsive, plentiful, and accessible services to which to divert individuals in every zip code. This includes treatment on-demand, interim and longer-term affordable housing options, and outreach and case management support in the community. These interventions serve "lower risk" individuals at an earlier <u>intercept</u> on the continuum of community responses to SUD but work towards most of the same goals as drug courts - decreased incarceration and recidivism, healthy and happy individuals and families, and safer communities.

When individuals with SUD are not able to be successfully diverted or accrue more serious charges, drug courts play a critical role in addressing SUD at a later intercept, helping participants to make significant life changes and exit the pathway to prison. XIVI

In some instances, resources, treatment, and case management support alone are not enough to help an individual stop using and address related criminal activity. The structure and accountability provided by a drug court is often needed to provide individual participants with the best chance of success. Many drug court participants have had prior unsuccessful attempts at treatment – they have tried to stop using without the structure and supervision of a drug court and have not been able to do so. Research indicates that drug courts are able to provide the level of intervention that individuals with severe SUD and significant prior criminal histories and antisocial personality traits need in order to stop using, stop committing crimes associated with addiction, and achieve long-term success. XIVIII

Drug courts are also important because they are able to effectively address behaviors that are harming others in the community. Crimes such as vehicle theft, identity theft, theft from a person, residential burglary, and organized retail theft are crimes with victims and are examples of an individual's SUD progressing to the point where it is impacting the entire community. In these instances, drug courts provide the supervision and accountability needed to ensure public safety.

Drug courts provide an evidence-based off-ramp from the legal system and benefit the whole community in the form of crime reductions and economic savings.

Please join us in recognizing Therapeutic Court Month each May by celebrating the success of Washington drug court participants and other therapeutic court participants who have worked so hard to overcome obstacles, achieve recovery, reunite with family, and build a new life. You can find a few of their stories here.

ⁱ Wanner, P. (2018). Inventory of evidence-based, research-based, and promising programs for adult corrections (Document Number 18-02-1901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. p. 12

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^v RCW 71.24.580

vi Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2023 December). "Drug Courts: Adult Criminal Justice."

wii Wanner, P. (2018). Inventory of evidence-based, research-based, and promising programs for adult corrections (Document Number 18-02-1901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. p. 12

viii Ibid

^{ix} Ibid

x <u>DSHS Research and Data Analysis Division (2024 January). "Drug Court Participants: Recidivism and Key Outcome Measures".</u> p. 9 (Note: DSHS website has not yet been updated to reflect this most recent data presented at 4/12/24 CJTA Panel meeting.)

xi Ibid

xii Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP): Benefit-Cost Results. Updated December 2023.

xiii Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2023 December). "Drug Courts: Adult Criminal Justice."

xiv Mayfield, J., Estee, S., Black, C., Felver, B. (2013 July). Drug Court Outcomes: Outcomes of Adult Defendants
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xv <u>DSHS Research and Data Analysis Division (2024 January). "Drug Court Participants: Recidivism and Key Outcome Measures".</u> p. 13 (Note: DSHS website has not yet been updated to reflect this most recent data presented at 4/12/24 CJTA Panel meeting.)

xvi Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2023 December). "Drug Courts: Adult Criminal Justice."

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xxii Marlowe, Douglas B. (2011 February). "The Verdict on Drug Courts and Other Problem-Solving Courts". Chapman Journal of Criminal Justice. p. 69-70

xxiii National Association of Drug Court Professionals. Equivalent Access Assessment and Toolkit. Adult Drug Court Best Practice Standard II. "Equity & Inclusion Research Brief: Exclusionary Criteria and Their Impacts on the Likelihood to Reoffend, Racial Bias, and Outcomes in Treatment Court. p. 31-37.

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xxv RCW 71.24.580

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wanner, P. (2018). Inventory of evidence-based, research-based, and promising programs for adult corrections (Document Number 18-02-1901). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. p. 12

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xxxvii Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2023 December). "Outpatient or non-intensive drug treatment in the community."

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xlv Ibid. p. 3

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xli State of Washington Sentencing Guidelines Commission (2008, April). "Recidivism of Adult Felons 2007." p. 1

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