MENTAL HEALTH, GENDER, AND DRUG COURT COMPLETION†

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ABSTRACT: Drug-involved offenders report high rates of mental health problems that can negatively impact criminal justice outcomes. Yet, relatively little attention has been given to the mental health issues of drug court offenders. Therefore, this study examined 449 participants in a Delaware drug court and investigated relationships between mental health, gender, and program completion. Bivariate results indicated that gender was related to both mental health status and completion status. Multivariate findings revealed that two indicators of mental health, depression and being prescribed drugs for a psychological or emotional problem, were significant predictors of drug court completion. Policy implications include assessing the mental health status of all drug court participants at program entry so that services can be provided which aim to improve offender health and increase the likelihood of successful program outcomes. Drug courts must better meet the needs of participants with co-occurring disorders if they are to remain an effective and viable criminal justice intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence continues to develop in support of the overall success of the drug court movement (Belenko, 2001; Gottfredson, Kearley, Najaka, & Rocha, 2005). Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are now looking beyond whether drugs courts “work” by examining ways in which drug courts can be most effective. We know that drug courts can produce positive results including high retention rates for participants and significant post-program reductions in relapse and recidivism (Bavon, 2001; Butzin, Saum, &Scarpitti, 2002). Yet, these findings are not consistent across the increasingly diverse population of drug court offenders. Prior research has found drug court outcomes vary according to gender (Johnson-Listwan, Koetzle Shaffer, Latessa,

† This research was supported by grant RO1 DA12424 “Drug Court Offenders in Outpatient Treatment,” by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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Drug-involved offenders report high rates of mental health problems (Compton, Cottler, Jacobs, Ben-Abdallah, & Spitznagel, 2003; Jainchill, DeLeon, & Pinkham, 1986), and these mental health problems can negatively impact criminal justice outcomes (Gossweiller & Martin, 1996). However, relatively little attention has been given to the mental health issues of drug court offenders. Mental health has been addressed in the drug court literature only peripherally, often in reference to substance-abusing offenders who are assessed to have mental health needs (i.e. have co-occurring disorders) and require treatment beyond that available in typical drug courts (Belenko, 2001; Cooper, 1997; Hagedorn & Willenbring, 2003).

Most of the drug court literature that discusses mental health has focused solely on women participants (D'Angelo & Wolf, 2002; Dannerbeck, Sundet & Lloyd, 2002; Harrell, Roman & Sack, 2001). This is largely due to the assessed need for mental health services for women. For example, national prevalence rates for certain mental health disorders are higher for women, and women overall are more likely to report and seek treatment for mental health problems (Langan & Pelissier, 2001; SAMHSA, 2002). In addition, it has been demonstrated that women in drug court programs have a higher rate of reported mental health problems than men do (D'Angelo & Wolf, 2002; Dannerback, Sundet, & Lloyd, 2002). Yet, because men are much more likely to be under the control of the criminal justice system than women are, there are proportionally more male offenders available to participate in drug courts. Thus, there is a relatively large population of men in drug court programs who may be affected by mental illness. As such, there is a need for a more in depth understanding of how mental health may impact drug court outcomes for both men and women, or for the drug court population as a whole. This study focuses on the mental health status of male and female drug court participants and the role of mental health problems in predicting drug court completion. More specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the mental health status of drug court offenders in this sample?
2. Do mental health status and drug court completion vary according to gender?
3. Do mental health problems at admission predict drug court completion?