

IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATIONAL CROSS-SITE EVALUATION OF JUVENILE DRUG COURTS AND RECLAIMING FUTURES ON FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTICE: UNDERSTANDING THE *WHY*, *WHO*, AND *HOW* OF A JUVENILE DRUG COURT APPROACH

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This commentary explores the implementation factors analyzed under the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures and how those factors can guide the future of federal, state, and local efforts to respond to and treat youth with substance use and addiction issues in the juvenile court system. This commentary discusses three central questions that the articles raise: (1) Why may a specialized court approach to substance abuse by youth be important? (2) Who should juvenile drug courts serve? and (3) How should court and treatment systems operate to best serve the needs of youth?

AMONG ITS MANY ACTIVITIES, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)¹ oversees programs, training and technical assistance, and research related to juvenile drug courts. These initiatives have focused on the framework established in *Juvenile Drug Courts: Strategies in Practice* (National Drug Court Institute & National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2003). The *Strategies in Practice* monograph reflects a national effort by a federal agency and its grantees to identify important principles

¹ The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. For more information, see www.ojjdp.gov.

and implementation concepts for juvenile drug courts derived from research, practice observations, and extensive expertise. What *Strategies in Practice* does not fully reflect (and could not have reflected) is the more recent body of research on implementation—the science around conceptualization and systematic documentation of program designs, fidelity of implementation and systematic adaptation in real-world settings, quality improvement and continuous feedback loops, and successful scaling of national initiatives. Consequently, when recent syntheses of research on juvenile drug courts indicate a lack of evidence on whether the courts consistently achieve their goals (Mitchell, Wilson, Eggers, & MacKenzie, 2012) it raises questions about the study, quality of, and variation in the implementation of these juvenile drug court models.

THE *WHY*, *WHO*, AND *HOW* OF THE NATIONAL CROSS-SITE EVALUATION OF JUVENILE DRUG COURTS AND RECLAIMING FUTURES

Three implementation questions to which the current study and articles about the combined Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF) model sought answers can help guide the future of federal, state, and local efforts to better respond to and treat youth with substance use and addiction issues in the juvenile justice court system: (1) *Why* may a specialized court approach to youth substance abuse and use be important? (2) *Who* should juvenile drug courts serve? (3) *How* should court and treatment systems operate to best serve the needs of youth?

Overall, the findings of the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF National Evaluation) highlight that youth who participated in courts that implemented the JDC/RF approach appeared to have positive outcomes related to substance use and offending behaviors. The findings also show promise in the decreased reoffending and substance use frequency of the high-offending and high-substance use subgroups. Although the study cannot conclusively attribute positive behavioral outcomes for the entire target population to the JDC/RF approach, findings indicate that a

number of the program characteristics integral to that approach were associated with the success of youth involved in juvenile drug court.

Even though the study may not be conclusive about the effectiveness of the JDC/RF approach compared to the other approaches studied, the articles in this special issue offer a roadmap of practice that will point toward a better understanding of effective treatment tailored to the unique and complex needs of substance-using youth who come into contact with juvenile courts. A better understanding of implementation and practice research points to a future in which all juvenile drug courts have the potential to meet evidence-based practice and treatment standards. It is a future where OJJDP's Guidelines for Juvenile Drug Treatment Courts could provide practice guidance that is grounded in research and focused on the actionable.² The *why*, *who*, and *how* that the JDC/RF National Evaluation explores leads toward that future by furthering understanding about whether the JDC/RF approach worked and, more important, the relevant implementation factors.

Why May a Specialized Court Approach to Juvenile Substance Abuse and Use Be Important?

The Conceptual Framework and Logic Model

In "The Concurrent Evolution and Intertwined Nature of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures Approaches to Juvenile Justice Reform," Dennis, Baumer, and Stevens present the historical context for the development of the JDC/RF approach. The article points to the underlying theoretical basis for juvenile drug courts: (1) Youth are developmentally different than adults. (2) Substance-using youth present unique challenges to juvenile courts. The article highlights how these core concepts are centrally important today, when an estimated one of every seven young people age 12 to 18 has a diagnosable substance use problem, and treatment-oriented reforms in juvenile justice are happening across the country. The authors also point to instances

² OJJDP has an initiative to develop juvenile drug treatment court guidelines. For more information, see www.ojjdp.gov/Juvenile-Drug-Treatment-Court-Guidelines.

of rigorously evaluated juvenile drug courts that have demonstrated positive effects across a number of key outcomes, and research on how Reclaiming Futures' systemic change approach helped juvenile drug courts systematically turn conceptual principles based in science and literature into practice steps.

In "The Process of Integrating Practices: The Juvenile Drug Court and Reclaiming Futures Logic Model," Greene, Ostlie, Kagan, and Davis discuss the need for and process of developing an integrated JDC/RF logic model. The documentation of this iterative process to develop the integrated logic model establishes the theory of change for the specific JDC/RF programmatic implementation, which is important for potential replication of the JDC/RF approach. Moreover, the article's analysis of the process of establishing the logic model, in a more general sense, has even broader applicability in the implementation science literature by documenting a systematic process for adapting established interventions in real-world settings.

Together, these two articles present a detailed framework that establishes a sound conceptual basis for the specialized court treatment of youth who continue to experience substance misuse and addiction and the specific, integrated JDC/RF systemic court change approach. This research provides an understandable, replicable, and actionable model to change processes and meet the needs of youth.

Who Should Juvenile Drug Courts Serve?

Defining and Enrolling the Appropriate Target Population

In "Who Is Served and Who Is Missed by Juvenile Drug Courts Implementing Evidence-Based Treatment," Baumer, Korchmaros, and Valdez analyze the enrolled population, revealing that the JDC/RF clients in the study were disproportionately male and nonwhite. The sample also had mixed indications of substance use, in that the JDC/RF clients had lower rates of weekly substance use and dependence but had higher rates of substance abuse and reported using substances at an earlier age compared to the general population of youth who meet the enrollment criteria for juvenile drug courts. These findings of racial and gender disparities of the individuals enrolled in

the program, combined with inconsistent levels of risk in that population, underscore a significant challenge that all juvenile courts, including juvenile drug courts, face: to ensure that the most suitable youth are targeted and targeted equitably.

In “Critical Components of Adolescent Substance Use Treatment Programs—The Impact of Juvenile Drug Court: Strategies in Practice and Elements of Reclaiming Futures,” Korchmaros, Baumer, and Valdez further showed that all the approaches examined (JDC/RF, JDC-only, and intensive outpatient substance use treatment program [IOP]) are most likely to have an impact with youth who have heavy substance use and offending patterns. This suggests that youth with significant substance use and addiction problems are an ideal target population for specialized court and treatment programs.

The JDC/RF model outlines deliberate goals and criteria for enrollment of the high-need/high-substance-abusing youth; however, ensuring those criteria are consistently implemented—both generally and across racial and ethnic lines—proves more difficult. This is a difficulty juvenile drug courts must continue to address.

How Should Court and Treatment Systems Operate to Best Serve the Needs Of Youth?

Components and Community

The continued discussion by Korchmaros and colleagues presents the common components of the implementation sites in the JDC/RF approach. The article documents that all of the sites had incorporated most of the juvenile drug court strategies. This important finding demonstrates how national juvenile drug court recommendations are understood and incorporated at the local level in a variety of youth-serving programs. In addition, the article highlights the importance of having a defined target population, using sanctions to modify noncompliance in coordination with the school system, carrying out random and observed drug testing, having cultural- and gender-appropriate interventions and training, and employing a nonadversarial/therapeutic approach for reducing future substance use and offending by heavy substance users and individuals with high rates of offending.

In “Community Engagement: Perspectives on an Essential Element of Juvenile Drug Courts Implementing Reclaiming Futures,” Greene, Thompson-Dyck, Wright, Davis, and Haverly present the perceived benefits of community engagement. The benefits include expanding community partnerships, enhancing the knowledge base, furthering the court’s capacity for specialized services, and increasing the potential for sustainability. Barriers identified include the acceptance of substance use as normative, stigmas associated with court-involved youth, indifference to youth welfare, and resource and economic limitations. The study also presents findings related to participant recommendations for how to maximize these benefits and address the barriers. Clear documentation of the benefits, barriers, and recommendations provide a potential implementation path to achieve successful community engagement.

Together the articles add to the evidence base about the conditions under which a juvenile drug court approach is likely to work and provide insights on how to replicate those conditions at a national level.

CONCLUSION

While the overall findings favor the JDC/RF approach, no conclusive evidence exists to suggest that it is definitively the only approach for improving outcomes for youth with substance use and addiction who come into contact with the juvenile court system. However, the findings provide compelling evidence for understanding the need for and underlying conceptual framework behind the juvenile drug court approach; analyzing the specific JDC/RF systemic change logic model; targeting the highest need youth and addressing the disparities within that population; and establishing the community and core component conditions that are likely to create a successful juvenile drug court. Understanding the *why*, *who*, and *how* explored in the JDC/RF National Evaluation will improve the ability to identify the circumstances under which a juvenile drug court should and could be implemented and help drive the future of juvenile drug court practice. It is a future that many federal, tribal, state, and local partners continue to work toward and one in which comprehensive, evidence-

based guidance for juvenile drug courts is available to promote improved outcomes for justice-involved youth who have substance use and addiction issues.

Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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