



NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

TORONTO DRUG TREATMENT COURT PROJECT

The Toronto Drug Treatment Court, the first of its kind in Canada, has been in operation since 1998. The Toronto Drug Treatment Court (TDTC) was designed specifically to address the unique needs of non-violent offenders who abused cocaine or opiates. Clients were accepted into the project based on a clinically-assessed addiction to either cocaine or heroin. They were also identified as having been actively involved in criminal activities, such as prostitution, possession and trafficking of heroin or cocaine. The initiative involved a number of government departments and agencies in the fields of criminal justice, addiction, mental health and community-based service agencies.



TDTC clients were required to attend court as stipulated by a judge and addiction treatment was provided through the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). Court and treatment services worked together as a team to supervise clients and provide them with the resources required to successfully complete the treatment program. By providing project participants with treatment instead of punishment, it was hoped that the cycle of repeat offending would be averted and that it would lead to a decrease in substance abuse problems and the costs associated with the prosecution and incarceration of drug-dependent offenders.

Project assessment

Evaluation of the project consisted of a process, outcome and cost-comparison analyses.

The process evaluation focused on several elements including:

- characteristics of the TDTC project and its clients
- client-related, short-term outcomes
- clients' status at discharge
- characteristics of the TDTC treatment services
- community partnership involvement
- review of committee structures and policies

The outcome evaluation focused on post-project substance abuse, criminal activity and the physical and psychological health and social stability of TDTC clients compared to a judicial comparison group. The cost analysis examined the direct costs associated with the TDTC project compared to those of traditional judicial adjudication.

The outcome evaluation used a quasi-experimental design involving an experimental group and two comparison groups. Comparisons were also made using sub-groups within the experimental group, both graduates and others. Overall, 593 clients were admitted to the TDTC project and were included in the data analysis

Key Findings

The process evaluation findings indicated that:

- TDTC clients had more serious problems with substance abuse and criminal behaviour than was originally expected leading to low retention rates. Only 57 clients (15.6%) graduated from the court.
- Clients in the experimental group said that the TDTC project helped them reduce their dependence on drugs and criminal activity and find assistance for treatment. It was less helpful when it came to areas such as finding employment, assistance with housing, and financial and vocational counseling.

- TDTC participants stated that the project helped them gain a better self-image and improved their quality of life.
- Clients who did not reach the maintenance phase of the treatment program were found to have more difficulties with project requirements and, once out of jail, were more likely to return to their previous life-styles and behaviours.
- Clients in the experimental group expressed the view that being held accountable for their behaviour was the greatest strength of the TDTC. In particular they stated that verbal commendations from the court and acknowledgement of their progress were the most effective rewards.
- The introduction of a 30-day probationary period for new client applications appeared to be an important addition to the program as it kept people who were not serious about participating from using valuable court and treatment resources.

The outcome evaluation findings showed that:

- Graduate clients were found to be in breach of approximately 25% of their court appearances compared to between 50% and 90% of participants who left the program or were expelled from it.
- All graduates said that the project helped them reduce their drug dependency, compared to 84.4% of the expelled-engaged clients and 60% of expelled non-engaged clients.
- Of the graduates, 96% said the program helped them reduce their involvement in criminal activity.
- All groups had fewer convictions at the time of the first post-project follow-up and again at the end of the first, second and third year post-project, than they did at the time of their assessment. The longer clients spent in the TDTC, the less likely they were to be reconvicted.
- Less than 15% of graduate clients re-offended post-project compared to 90% of comparison clients. Rates of reoffending for members of the experimental group who did not graduate from the program were in between these two figures.
- For each year post-project follow-up, graduates were less likely to be re-convicted than any of the other client groups. However, post-project follow-up results indicate that reconviction was similar among the experimental group and the comparison group.
- The small number of participants left in the program meant that the results cannot be generalized to other situations.

Lessons learned

A number of lessons were learned in the project, including the following:

- Substance-abuse treatment for offenders requires collaborative partnerships between the court, treatment staff and community-based organizations.

- Encouragement from the judge and treatment staff is important along with the use of rewards and incentives rather than sanctions. Limited use of severe sanctions, such as incarceration, are recommended.
- It is important to hold clients responsible for their own behaviour.
- A significant number of women and young people under the age of 25 failed to return to the project after their initial assessment or dropped out early in the project. More attention should be given to this client population during program planning. As well, the use of monitoring techniques to assess and address their needs is recommended.
- Regular feedback from the evaluation team is helpful in continually assessing and adapting the TDTC project to meet client needs.
- Drug-dependent criminal offenders are a challenging population to locate for follow-up interviews. A more carefully planned follow-up strategy including detailed consent forms may help to locate clients for interviews.

Conclusion

The reduction in substance abuse and criminal activity among drug dependent offenders of the Toronto Drug Treatment Court can be characterized as promising, given the limitations of the evaluation, such as the small number of graduates, different response rates among groups, and the decrease in program's participation over time.

The evaluation of the TDTC adds to the growing body of research on specialized courts, and in particular, on collaborative justice and community responses to substance abuse by offenders in the criminal justice system.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre at 1-877-302-6272 or visit our website at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca/ncpc

You can also visit the web site of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at: <http://www.camh.net>