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Washington State's Drug Courts for Adult Defendants: Outcome Evaluation and Cost-Benefit Analysis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2002, the Washington Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate adult drug courts in Washington. Developed during the 1990s, drug courts use frequent courtroom activity and drug treatment resources in an attempt to modify the criminal behavior of certain drug-involved defendants. The questions for this evaluation are whether drug courts—when compared with regular criminal courts—reduce recidivism and produce more benefits than costs.

We began the study by reviewing previous drug court evaluations undertaken in the United States. We identified 30 evaluations with reasonably strong research designs and found that drug courts, on average, have been shown to reduce recidivism rates by 13.3 percent, a statistically significant reduction.

We then evaluated six adult drug courts in Washington operating during 1998 and 1999 to test whether Washington's drug courts reduce recidivism rates. We found that five of these drug courts reduce recidivism by a statistically significant 13 percent, a reduction almost identical to the national average. This favorable finding, however, must be tempered: one of the courts failed to reduce recidivism significantly.

We conducted a cost-benefit analysis. We estimate that these five drug courts cost \$3,891 more per participant than regular criminal court. These extra costs cover more frequent use of court resources and drug treatment.

The economic question is whether the benefits of reduced recidivism outweigh these extra costs. We found that the five adult drug courts generate \$1.74 in benefits for each dollar of costs. Thus, adult drug courts appear to be cost-effective additions to Washington's criminal justice system.