Systematic Review of Mental Health Court Efficacy in Reducing Recidivism and Improving Treatment Outcomes

Mara Law

INTRODUCTION
The current proportion of inmates with a serious mental illness is higher than the proportion of persons with a serious mental illness in the general United States population. In the past two decades, mental health courts have emerged in an effort to direct people with a serious mental illness in the criminal justice system towards the resources they need for recovery rather than simply and only punish them. Operating under the principal of therapeutic jurisprudence, these courts take special consideration for the emotional and psychological well-being of the offender.

AIM
This systematic literature review evaluates the effect mental health courts have on criminal recidivism and treatment outcomes of persons with mental illness who participate in them and discusses the characteristics of mental health courts which have the greatest effect.

Who can participate in mental health court?
Similar to a drug court, mental health courts operate under the principal of therapeutic jurisprudence. As a special treatment court, each mental health court establishes its own eligibility requirements. Some MHCs only hear cases of defendants charged with misdemeanor, non-violent crimes while others process defendants charged with felony violent crimes, or drug related offenses.

METHODS:
- Over 7 databases in the OSU library searched
- Sources separated by type of effect measured: recidivism or treatment
- Studies evaluated for internal validity
- Final analysis included:
  - 6 studies of mental health court efficacy in improving treatment outcomes
  - 9 studies of mental health court efficacy in reducing criminal recidivism

RESULTS
Mental health court efficacy in improving treatment and clinical outcomes can be measured in a variety of ways, including the frequency or amount of mental health treatment received, change in psychosocial functioning, and time to access treatment. Two of the six studies of mental health court effect on treatment outcome included in this review are outlined in the table to the right. Overall, the literature included in this review showed that mental health court participation increased the amount of mental health treatment participants received.

Three of the nine studies included in the analysis of mental health court efficacy in reducing criminal recidivism are outlined below. All studies included in the review measured the results in percentage of participants who recidivated by the end of the study period. Some studies measured recidivism rates for participants who chose not to have their case heard in a mental health court or participants whose case was not completed in the mental health court, as well as measuring recidivism rates for completers of an MHC program. All studies showed a decrease in recidivism for mental health court participants, but not all differences measured were significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental Health Court Efficacy: Recidivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length/type of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measured in % recidivated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Characteristics of an Effective Mental Health Court
Effective Mental Health Courts are voluntary and require the consent of defendants to have their case heard in the MHC rather than in traditional court. Effective MHCs, such as the Broward County Mental Health Court, include judges who discuss treatment needs with defendants during regular status hearings and take into account the psychosocial functioning and mental health needs of a defendant.

CONCLUSIONS
Participation in mental health court is associated with reductions in recidivism and violence, and completion of mental health court is associated with higher reductions and maintenance of these reductions. Although participation in mental health court is also associated with increased mental health treatment usage, there is no evidence to suggest that participation is associated with a positive change in psychosocial functioning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Special thanks to the College of Social Work for their support, as well as Dr. Gerald Bean, undergraduate advisor for this project and thesis.