

FOREWORD

The National Drug Court Institute (NDCI) is pleased to publish this guest-edited special issue of the *Drug Court Review*, which reports recent findings from the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts and Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF National Evaluation). With funding from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, through an interagency agreement with the Library of Congress, the JDC/RF National Evaluation examined ways to improve outcomes in juvenile drug courts by enhancing collaboration between the juvenile justice, treatment, educational, and child welfare systems; increasing youth access to evidence-based substance use disorder and mental health treatment; improving the quality and cultural proficiency of the services delivered; and sustaining youth involvement in continuing care services following discharge from court supervision (Nissen & Pearce, 2011).

The findings come none too soon. A recent literature review conducted by NDCI raises questions about the average effectiveness of juvenile drug courts (Marlowe, Hardin, & Fox, 2016). Average impacts on recidivism have ranged from statistically nonsignificant to minimally beneficial (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Latimer, Morton-Bourgon, & Chrétien, 2006; Madell, Thom, & McKenna, 2013; Mitchell, Wilson, Eggers, & MacKenzie, 2012; Shaffer, 2006; Stein, Deberard, & Homan, 2015; Wilson, Mitchell, & MacKenzie, 2006). The disappointing results are largely attributable to the fact that many juvenile drug courts are unaware of or failing to apply key components of the drug court model (van Wormer, 2010), serving the wrong target population of low-risk or low-need teens (Idaho Administrative Office of the Courts, 2015; Long & Sullivan, 2016; Taylor, 2016), delivering non-evidence-based treatment and supervision services (Sullivan, Blair, Latessa, & Sullivan, 2014), or failing to monitor the quality and impact of the services they deliver (Yelderman, 2016). No program should be expected to succeed under such conditions.

Fortunately, against a backdrop of generally lackluster findings, some juvenile drug courts are producing exceptional outcomes in well-designed research studies, including in randomized controlled

experiments. Exemplary juvenile drug courts have reduced recidivism by 15% to 40%, which scientists characterize as a moderate to large effect (Carey, van Wormer, & Mackin, 2014; Marlowe, 2010). Evaluators are looking carefully at these effective JDCs to determine what elements or services are responsible for their successful outcomes.

In 2010, a special issue of the *Drug Court Review* (Henggeler & Marlowe, eds., 2010) and an NDCI practitioner fact sheet (Marlowe, 2010) reviewed the evaluation literature on juvenile drug courts and identified a range of practices associated with significantly better outcomes. In the ensuing six years, research has advanced considerably in identifying evidence-based (and contraindicated) practices for juvenile drug courts. The JDC/RF National Evaluation moves the field many steps closer to success by “unpacking the black box” of juvenile drug courts—that is, studying the appropriate target population for these programs, identifying best practices associated with better outcomes, and uncovering the mechanisms of action or processes by which these programs can improve results.

The JDC/RF National Evaluation findings are highly consistent with what has previously been learned in adult drug courts, DUI courts, mental health courts, and other court-based programs. For example, findings suggest juvenile drug courts should focus on serving high-risk and high-need teens, staff members should interact collaboratively as a multidisciplinary team, and the programs should hold frequent status hearings, monitor substance use and other behaviors closely, and deliver structured cognitive-behavioral and behavioral treatments documented in treatment manuals. In other words, diluting the drug court model for teens is not justified on the basis of current research findings. Practitioners and policy makers must heed the lessons of science and redouble their efforts to hold juvenile drug courts accountable for applying research-proven solutions rather than acting on the basis of personal beliefs or philosophies, no matter how well-intentioned these sentiments may be.

Although it is premature to conclude whether the Reclaiming Futures model is superior to other systems-integration approaches in the juvenile justice system, the results of the JDC/RF National Evaluation nevertheless point the way toward highly promising solutions for

reducing teen delinquency and associated psychosocial impairments. NDCI stands ready to assist juvenile drug courts to learn about and apply evidence-based practices, and in so doing improve the lives of thousands of justice-involved youths, their families, and society at large.

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