

Offenders in Drug-Abuse Treatment Programs

Criminal justice clients do as well as or better than other clients in drug-abuse treatment programs, according to the results of a recent study in the United States.

The study examined whether referral to drug-abuse treatment through the criminal justice system benefits the client and society. The authors gathered data on clients in five cities who had entered publicly funded residential and out-patient, drug-free treatment programs from 1979 to 1981.

A number of mechanisms are used to identify drug abusers in the criminal justice system and refer them for treatment, but the major model employed in the United States is the Treatment Alternatives to Street Crime (TASC) program. Initiated nearly 18 years ago in recognition of the links between substance abuse and criminal behaviour, TASC projects currently operate in approximately 18 American states.

The TASC program attempts to identify drug abusers who come into contact with the criminal justice system, to refer those eligible for treatment, to monitor their progress in terms of abstinence, employment and improved social functioning, and to return violators to the criminal justice system. TASC offers community-based treatment to individuals who would otherwise become involved with the criminal justice system.

TASC programs operate in each of the five cities chosen for study. Intake data analyses compared offenders referred for treatment through TASC programs (n=502), those involved with the criminal justice system but not TASC at the time of treatment admission (n=855), and clients without any current involvement with the criminal justice system or TASC (n=1,078).

One of the major purposes of the study was to determine the key factors affecting treatment outcomes, including involvement with the criminal justice system. Data were drawn from four periods: the year before treatment, the first three months in treatment, the second three months in treatment, and the first year after treatment.

Approximately half of all criminal justice clients were on probation at the time of admission to drug-abuse treatment, except for TASC clients in out-patient, drug-free programs, about half of whom were on bail as a result of pretrial or presentencing diversions.

TASC and other criminal justice clients in both residential and outpatient, drug-free treatments were on average two years younger than their counterparts with no legal involvement (age 25 versus 27). No major differences in drug-use patterns were noted, and treatment histories appeared to be very similar for criminal justice clients and clients with no legal involvement.

The study also compared the types of services received by clients involved with the criminal justice system and those with no legal involvement. Out-patient, drug-free clients with no legal involvement were more likely than TASC referrals and other criminal justice clients to receive more types of services. Criminal justice involvement, however, did not seem to have an effect on the number of services delivered by the residential programs.

TASC clients were also less likely than other criminal justice clients to receive psychological services. The authors hypothesized that program directors and counsellors may have assumed that TASC clients needed fewer services because they had less extreme drug-use patterns. The authors question this assumption, however, as TASC clients entering out-patient, drug-free programs report a high incidence of drug-related problems.

The study concluded that a treatment duration of six or more months was needed to significantly reduce drug use. Criminal justice involvement of any kind, TASC referral or not, seemed to result in longer treatment. The authors speculate that clients entering treatment through the criminal justice system may remain longer because of the degree of coercion used to get them to enter and remain in treatment.

The analyses also indicate a significant relationship between the source of referral and the frequency of use of the primary problem drug. Criminal justice clients were less likely than their self-referred counterparts to use their primary problem drug weekly or more often. The source of referral did not, however, affect other drug use, depression, criminal behaviour, or employment.

The TASC and criminal justice involvement variables did not predict a significant reduction in the likelihood of illegal acts committed by individuals after treatment. The findings do illustrate, however, that criminal justice clients do as well as or better than other clients in drug-abuse treatment.

TASC programs appear to refer individuals with no history of treatment and many who are not yet heavily involved in drug use. This early intervention in criminal and drug-use careers may have long-term benefits in reducing clients' crime and drug use. The authors suggest that a new role for TASC may be the provision of aftercare services to reinforce behavioural changes established during treatment.

Hubbard, R.L., Collins, J.J., Rachal, J.V., & Cavanaugh, E.R. (1988). *The Criminal Justice Client in Drug Abuse Treatment*. National Institute on Drug Abuse Research Monograph Series 86, 57-79.