

Research in Brief

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Domestic Violence Courts

KEY POINTS

- Domestic violence courts are similar to other types of problem solving courts because they offer an alternative approach to traditional case processing and use judicial monitoring, but they are also unique because of their services to victims.
- There is insufficient evidence to show that domestic violence courts reduce recidivism.
- Domestic violence courts may have the capacity to operate programs and services to reduce recidivism, but more research is needed to understand what components should be in place to do so.

Policy and Purpose

Domestic violence courts are a problem solving court model that serves individuals charged with domestic violence offenses, which can include cases related to intimate partner violence or violence between non-intimate family members.

Domestic violence courts are similar to other types of problem solving courts because they offer an alternative approach to traditional case processing and use judicial monitoring, but they are also unique because of their services to victims.¹ Many domestic violence courts assist victims by providing crisis intervention, shelter referrals, and other services² and domestic courts are often more likely to emphasize accountability over rehabilitation.³ Domestic violence courts usually incorporate efficient judicial monitoring, treatment or referrals for programming such as batterer intervention programs, accountability for individuals participating in the program (i.e., swift responses to noncompliance), in addition to supporting victims through coordinated services across the court and community.

Summary of Research

A meta-analysis by Gutierrez, Blais, and Bourgon reviewed 20 studies of domestic violence courts. They rated study quality and classified only three studies as good, none as strong, and the remaining as weak or rejected for poor methodological designs. There was a relationship between study quality and outcomes in the meta-analysis, where poorer quality studies were associated with better outcomes and better quality studies were associated with less promising results. The authors also accounted for treatment quality in the study as measured by adherence to risk, need, and responsivity (RNR) principles:¹ five domestic violence courts adhered to one principle, one adhered to two principles, and none adhered to all three (or did not include data to assess adherence to RNR). Adherence to RNR had a significant relationship with improved outcomes from the program in comparison to those courts that had no adherence to RNR.⁴ Unexpectedly, Gutierrez, Blais, and Bourgon found that domestic violence courts significantly lowered recidivism for participants who were classified as low risk to reoffend, however, they hypothesize that this was because moderate or higher risk participants did not receive treatment that was matched to their risk and needs levels. At first glance domestic violence courts demonstrate reductions in recidivism: a 5.56% reduction in general recidivism and 2.77% in domestic violence recidivism (both significant). Yet, when only those studies categorized as good study quality were reviewed, the authors did not find an improvement in recidivism through domestic violence courts. **Based on the results of the meta-analysis, there is insufficient evidence to show that domestic violence courts reduce recidivism.**

Similar to other problem solving court models, there is wide variation in the types of people served and types of services offered across domestic violence courts across the country.⁵ **Domestic violence courts may have the capacity to operate programs and services to reduce recidivism, but more research is needed to understand what components should be in place to do so.**

¹ Risk, need, and responsivity refers to 1) risk: assessing for risk to reoffend and varying services by risk, 2) need: targeting criminogenic needs (i.e., needs related to reoffending) in programs and services, and 3) responsivity: addressing the barriers or learning styles of individuals associated with treatment (such as personality or motivation) and providing interventions in a modality effective with most people involved in the justice system (i.e., cognitive-behavioral) (Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Hoge, R. D. (1990). Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 17*, 19-52).

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Endnotes

- ¹ Gutierrez, L., Blais, J., & Bourgon, G. (2017). Do domestic violence courts work? A meta-analytic review examining treatment and study quality. *Justice Research and Policy, 17*(2), 75-99; Moore, S. (2009). *Two decades of specialized domestic violence courts: A review of the literature*. The Center for Court Innovation. Downloaded from <https://www.courtinnovation.org/publications/two-decades-specialized-domestic-violence-courts-review-literature>.
- ² Moore, 2009.
- ³ Gutierrez et al., 2017.
- ⁴ Gutierrez et al., 2017.
- ⁵ Moore, 2009.

The strength of the evidence reviewed in this brief is assessed according to our Evidence of Assessment Criteria and Hierarchy of Study Design, which are posted online: robinainstitute.umn.edu/research-brief.