

Research in Brief

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Reentry Courts

KEY POINTS

- A reentry court uses a problem solving court model to facilitate a smoother transition from incarceration into the community by providing supervision and connecting people to treatment and services.
- Currently, there is mixed evidence on the use of reentry courts to reduce recidivism.
- Reentry courts should look to other research on reentry program effectiveness to incorporate these methods into the reentry court model and evaluate their ability to reduce recidivism.

Policy and Purpose

Reentry courts serve individuals conditionally released from jail or prison (i.e., parole supervision), and reduce recidivism by addressing social service needs and focusing on successful reintegration into the community. Many individuals released from institutions face a variety of barriers upon reentering the community, such as connecting to treatment services, locating stable housing, finding steady employment, etc. **A reentry court uses a problem solving court model, similar to a drug court,ⁱ to facilitate a smoother transition from incarceration into the community by providing supervision and connecting people to treatment and services.** A reentry court offers a less adversarial approach than traditional court case processing, incorporates judicial authority to monitor treatment and supervision, enforces compliance with sanctions and incentives, and uses a collaborative approach to connect participants with resources to address reentry needs.

ⁱ Please see Research in Brief “Operating Drug Courts to Reduce Recidivism” for more information about drug courts. ■

Summary of Research

There is less research on reentry courts as a problem solving court model since it is a fairly new form.¹ **Evidence is mixed for the use of reentry courts to reduce recidivism based on high and medium quality studies.** A meta-analysis that explored the impact of all types of reentry programs on reducing recidivism scrutinized the effectiveness of reentry court models as a program delivery method (i.e., moderator in the analysis) and found that reentry courts did not have a significant effect on reducing recidivism.² Stated differently, delivering reentry services and programs in a reentry court setting did not improve or negatively impact recidivism outcomes. However, this could have been due to the small sample of reentry courts included in the meta-analysis.

Since the meta-analysis was conducted, a few more studies have emerged on this topic. A more recent evaluation of the Second Chance Act Adult Reentry Courts, which included eight courts, found mixed results.³ The results ranged from one reentry court demonstrating positive outcomes on different measures of recidivism to two courts demonstrating negative outcomes on recidivism, with the other courts having some form of mixed findings at their sites. The conflicting findings from all eight reentry courts could be due to the different types of target populations and programs delivered across the sites. The one site with positive outcomes targeted participants that were moderate or higher risk to reoffend and who had a substance abuse disorder. The site provided intensive supervision and substance abuse treatment, matched treatment with wraparound services for multiple needs (i.e., needs that included more than substance abuse, including criminal thinking, mental health, housing), and applied increased use of praise from the judge along with other sanctions and incentives. However, other sites appeared less likely to operate in adherence with risk, need, and responsivity principlesⁱⁱ and did not offer intensive services matched for higher risk people. In addition, some sites served both high and low risk individuals. Besides this multi-site study, there is research from an experimental evaluation of the Harlem Parole Reentry Court. This evaluation used random assignment and found that participants (213 individuals) did not have significantly different rates of rearrest or reconviction at 18 months out from the comparison group (291 individuals), but they did have significantly lower rates of revocation.⁴ The study explored the effects by risk level and did not find that the results varied by risk level, however, the sample size was too small to draw more definitive conclusions on this com-

ponent of the evaluation. These recent findings continue to provide mixed evidence on the ability of reentry courts to reduce recidivism, though some of the promising results indicate that there are potentially certain components which should be in place for reentry courts to be effective at reducing recidivism.

Reentry courts may be a more challenging model of problem solving courts because they are tasked with addressing a greater range of needs than a traditional problem solving court. These needs include those often associated with people exiting incarceration and returning to the community, which include the types of needs associated with recidivism (criminogenic needs like antisocial cognitions, antisocial friends, substance use, employment), in addition to reentry specific needs such as housing assistance, transportation, health, etc.⁵ Unlike drug courts, no core componentsⁱⁱⁱ have yet been identified as essential to a reentry court model. As demonstrated by the positive site in the Second Chance Act evaluation, it is likely that reentry courts are most effective for higher risk people who require intensive supervision and services to assist them in transitioning from incarceration into the community. Due to the considerable resources required to operate reentry courts relative to other types of programs, more research should be done to evaluate how reentry courts can improve the delivery of services and examine the “black box” (i.e., what happens inside a reentry court program) of what happens to improve their effectiveness. **Reentry courts should look to research on reentry program effectiveness⁶ to incorporate these methods into the reentry court model and evaluate their ability to reduce recidivism.**

ⁱⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on the research supporting core components of drug courts to reduce recidivism, please see Research in Brief, “Operating Drug Courts to Reduce Recidivism.” ■

Endnotes

- ¹ Vance, S. E. (2011). Federal reentry court programs: A summary of recent evaluations. *Federal Probation*, 75, 64-73.
- ² Ndrecka M. (2014). *The Impact of Reentry Programs on Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis*. (Electronic Thesis or Dissertation). Downloaded from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.
- ³ Carey, S. M., Rempel, M., Lindquist, C., Cissner, A., Ayoub, L. H., Kralstein, D., & Malsch, A. (2017). *Reentry Court Research: Overview of Findings from the National Institute of Justice's Evaluation of Second Chance Act Adult Reentry Courts*. Prepared for the National Institute of Justice. Downloaded from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251496.pdf>.
- ⁴ Ayoub, L. H. (2020, online). The impact of reentry court on recidivism: a randomized controlled trial in Harlem, New York. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*.
- ⁵ Vance, 2011.
- ⁶ Ndrecka M., Listwan S. J., Latessa E. J. (2017). "What works in reentry and how to improve outcomes. In: Stojkovic S. (Eds.) *Prisoner Reentry*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York; Visher, C. A., Travis, J. (2011). The characteristics of prisoners returning home and effective reentry programs and policies. In Petersilia, J., Reitz, K. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sentencing and Corrections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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.