

For many rural participants, Drug Court can be a positive experience, but more treatment options and support are needed.



Drug Courts are an increasingly popular policy intervention which can divert those convicted of drug-related offenses to treatment services rather than prison. In new research, [Susan Witkin](#) and [Scott P. Hays](#) spoke to a number of rural-based Drug Court participants about their experiences. While many participants were generally positive about the impact of Drug Court on their lives, they also felt that judges needed to have more experience in dealing with addiction issues, and that better treatment options should be available.

Drug Court, an alternative sentencing program designed to divert those who are heading for prison for substance-abuse related infractions to appropriate treatment services, leaves nearly all participants with a story to tell:

If they wouldn't have given me the option of drug court, when I got out of prison, I probably would've got back into the same cycle. This was able to get me to sit down, get my head on straight, see what life is really about.

Or this participant:

In the beginning, the only reason why I did it was because I didn't want to go to prison. I wanted to be able to take care of my family. And in the beginning, I planned on just coming to the program, and if I wanted to drink I would go out of town and drink. That was my plan, but then I got involved in my recovery and things are working out really well. It's been an awesome experience.

Since their beginnings in the Miami court system in 1989, drug courts have become a significant nationwide criminal justice initiative. Operating through partnerships among treatment providers and the criminal justice system, drug courts address substance abuse as a root cause of criminal behaviors. Yet drug court success depends heavily on implementing the drug court model with fidelity and adhering to widely recognized best practices.

To investigate how five rural county drug courts are perceived by those that went through them, we spoke with fifteen of the 32 overall participants across these five programs. All of our 15 interviewees were convicted criminal offenders who had entered a guilty plea and whose offenses were related to their substance use disorder.

The drug court 'status hearing' is the (typically) weekly appearance of participants before the judge and the drug court team, held in a courtroom or other formal review setting. The team is comprised of the judge, the probation officer, prosecuting and defense attorneys and a treatment counselor working with the participant. The drug court team receives an update on the participant's weekly status and decisions are made about the need for rewards and punishments, including the possibility of being returned to jail. The status hearing could be a positive experience for participants who are achieving success on their path to recovery, yet even participants making good progress reported that they can still feel quite vulnerable and uncertain going into their drug court. In most cases the drug court team made them feel more positive and confident about themselves:

I felt nervous. Just because I have been in trouble so much and it is the courtroom, I always feel a little nervous. Even though I don't do anything wrong. But after court, I am usually happy.

I feel like I am on a game show.

It varies every time. I go in with butterflies and I come out feeling great. I don't know why. I guess because it is court and I never know the outcome.

A positive and respectful relationship with the judge can make participants feel more accountable for their actions and can lower the odds of subsequent substance abuse. Overall, participants reported a healthy relationship with drug court judges:

Yes, I more or less feel that the judge listens to us from watching everyone else who actually talks and has problems. I feel like if I ever asked the judge for anything, he would help me. I feel like he listens.

Yet many participants believed judges lacked experience dealing with addiction issues.

My judge is great, sincere, open-minded, respectful, and attentive – but personally how can the judge relate to drug use because I doubt the judge has ever did it.

I don't know if the judge really understands what's in our head, the judge just thinks we don't care. I'm not saying the judge is the only one that thinks that either. I'm sure a lot of people just don't understand addiction. So, it's like, 'Well he's just not ready to grow up, or he just doesn't care what happens to him', or something like that.

Participants felt that judges might benefit from increasing their knowledge of addiction or could visit local treatment centers and interact more with treatment professionals, including those on the drug court team. Getting participants into appropriate treatment services is critical to participant success. Yet there were many negative comments associated with treatment services, many arising from the limited treatment options available in the rural area where they were located.

We need better treatment, don't get me wrong I am all for treatment. I need and want treatment because that will help me break my addiction. But I am not receiving any services to help me change my life and break my addiction. I went through a group counseling once and it didn't work for me because half of the people in my group I already knew, I partied with. So when we all got together, that kind of drug me down. And to be honest, I left there wanting to get high.

Certainly drug court administrators are aware that promoting and providing improved treatment options in this rural area would be helpful. But it is extremely challenging.



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Participants noted the difficulty that recovering addicts can confront with keeping and holding a job, particularly given the demands of drug court. Transportation is a particular challenge in this five-county rural area, especially since drug court participants often have suspended driver's licenses or don't own a car. In this area, towns are small, public transportation is non-existent and distances between rural towns are often too far for walking or cycling. Asked about the biggest challenges, one participant reported:

Getting to all of my obligations when I don't have a car.

Overall, many participants reported the drug court time demands as their biggest personal challenge:

Coming in to do a drug screen three times a week is fine when I'm not working, but when I am working that is very tough. What employer wants you off three times a week for drug testing and then another chunk off for court? I have lost some jobs because of this. I know these are the rules and I follow them and I live with the consequences. But it would be nice if they understood how hard it is for us.

The hardest part is trying to be everywhere and work at the same time.

Despite some issues, drug court is an innovative approach that has demonstrated successful results. Participant comments shed additional light on the experience of the program from the inside but can also help to clarify and reinforce drug court's positive impacts. We close with two of these comments:

You get out of prison, you just run back to your old friends that are either on their way to prison or close to getting to prison. You are putting yourself right smack in the middle of the same mess you did when you went there. It's a cycle that can't stop. Drug court stopped it for me.

Drug court has been an opportunity for a good future. Just the people around the table that care about me enough to look into what I need as an individual. And it's great. I mean, I'm amazed by the program. I really am.

- This article is based on the paper '[Drug Court Through the Eyes of Participants](#)' in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*.

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