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MEDIA RELEASE

NSW Drug Court evaluation: The final reports

Despite the high drop-out rate (about 40%) the NSW Drug Court program has proved more cost-effective than imprisonment in reducing the number of drug offences and equally cost-effective in delaying the onset of further offending.

This is the main finding to emerge from a comprehensive three year evaluation of the NSW Drug Court by the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) and the Centre for Health Economics Research and Evaluation at the University of Technology Sydney (CHERE).

The NSW Drug Court was set up on a trial basis to provide an alternative to incarceration for drug-dependent offenders.

To evaluate the cost-effectiveness of the Drug Court, BOCSAR tracked a group of more than 300 participants on the Drug Court program (the treatment group) and compared them with a group of nearly 200 offenders deemed eligible for the program who were unable to obtain a place on it (the control group).

After adjusting for any time spent in custody, the treatment group was found to take longer to their first court appearance for shop-stealing and their first drug offence. The treatment group also performed better than the control group in terms of the number of new court appearances for drug offences. There were no significant differences for any other offences.

Those who remained on the Drug Court program generally did better than either those rejected from the program or those in the control group in terms of time to the first offence and the number of new offences. These results held up even after controlling for any differences between the groups in terms of age, gender, prior imprisonment and prior criminal record.

Analysis of the cost of the Drug Court compared with conventional sanctions revealed that it is not an inexpensive sentencing option. The cost per day of placing some one on the Drug Court program is about \$144. The cost per day for an individual placed in the control group is about \$152.

The estimated cost of the Drug Court program for the 309 participants who formed part of the cost-effectiveness analysis was \$13,495,727. Health care treatment (\$3,352,341) and court attendances (\$2,846,362) were the most important contributors to this overall cost but the cost of sanctioning those placed on the program (\$1,417,677) was also significant.

The evaluation report highlighted several ways in which the cost-effectiveness of the Drug Court could be improved.

These include improving the Court's ability to identify offenders who will benefit from the program, earlier termination of those unsuited to the program, improving the match between offenders and treatment regimes and improving the level of coordination between agencies involved in the program.

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In separate reports also released today, BOCSAR detailed the results of interview studies with Drug Court participants and with those directly involved in managing or providing services to the Drug Court.

Interviews with participants revealed that those who remained on the Drug Court program showed clear and sustained evidence of improvement in their health and social functioning. Participants on the program were generally very satisfied with it.

Interviews with those directly involved in managing or providing services to the Drug Court also indicated general satisfaction with the program. However two areas highlighted for reform were the need for clarification of the legal provisions prohibiting violent offenders from entering the program and the need for improved services for women, Aboriginal offenders and those with a concurrent psychiatric problem.

Further enquiries:

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