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Evaluation of a Federal Mental Health Court: Do They Work?

Kimberly Houser

Rowan University, houser@rowan.edu

Christine A. Saum

Rowan University, saum@rowan.edu

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The STRIDES Federal Mental Health Court

Process and Outcome Evaluation Findings

Dr. Kimberly Houser, Law and Justice Studies

Dr. Christine Saum, Law and Justice Studies

Dr. Matthew Hiller, Criminal Justice, Temple University

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The Mentally Ill Offender Population

- Offenders have extremely high rates of mental illness (MI):
 - 56% of state and 45% of federal inmates report a recent history/symptoms of a mental health disorder
 - 14% of state and 8% of federal inmates have experienced serious psychological distress; a rate 3x general population estimates
 - By gender, 69% of state and 51% of federal females report mental health disorders
- The MI are one of the most difficult populations to manage both in prison and in the community:
 - They have high rates of institutional misconduct which is a factor associated with longer periods of incarceration and recidivism
 - Few receive treatment while in prison and have little-to-no aftercare planning for the reentry process
 - With little support on release, many MI offenders stop taking needed medications and clinically deteriorate, resume drug and alcohol use, and experience homelessness, quickly returning to the criminal justice system
- There are few community programs available for this population; Mental Health Courts(MHCs) are a relatively new intervention which began in 1997; as of 2020, there are 450 state MHCs, and 3 federal MHCs.

Mental Health Courts and the STRIDES Program

- The STRIDES (Strategies That Result In Developing Emotional Stability) Federal Court was established to assist MI offenders during community supervision to improve their reentry success by providing them with treatment for MI and substance abuse and help with housing, employment, medical needs and other ancillary services (e.g., legal, financial counseling)
- Mental Health Courts - A type of problem-solving court for the MI based on the drug court model
 - Non-adversarial approach, “therapeutic jurisprudence,” focusing on healing and reintegrating offenders
 - A judge, along with a team (prosecutor, defense attorney, probation/pretrial officers, court administrators, treatment providers) are actively involved in monitoring the participants’ treatment plan, providing support and rewards for positive behavior and sanctions for non-compliance
- In the 21st Century Cures Act, the U.S. Congress mandated that a federal MHC be evaluated, and STRIDES was designated by the U.S. Deputy Attorney General to serve as the pilot program in response to this Act
 - We completed a 2-year study of the court which included observations of hearings and meetings, interviews and a focus group with the team, review of court documents, and assessment of participant data
 - The process evaluation examined program implementation; the outcome evaluation examined whether- or not participants completed the MHC and their likelihood of recidivism. A comparison group of non-participants was utilized

STRIDES RESULTS

• Evaluation Findings:

- 60% of STRIDES participants successfully completed the program, complied with all treatment and supervision conditions and were living a law-abiding lifestyle
- Women participants and those with depressive disorders were less likely to complete the program
- Criminal history and offender risk levels were not related to program completion
- Cannabis users were more likely to have shorter stays in the program and about half didn't complete
- Participants saw a significant decrease in the proportion who reported drug use caused them social/interpersonal problems; a finding not reported with the comparison group
- Fewer participants were re-arrested (24%) than were the comparison group (38%); The arrest rate between 12 and 18 months doubled for the comparison group; whereas the arrest rate grew by only 17% for the STRIDES group

• Discussion:

- Results point to a positive impact of the MHC. These findings may be related to:
 - Comprehensive help with participants' myriad immediate, short-term and long-term needs
 - Positive reinforcement from the judge/ team was given in at least 80% of the court sessions; average time spent per participant was over 7 minutes (the average for problem-solving courts is 3 minutes)
 - The MHC appears to be effectively responding to the complex needs of those with both MIs and SUDs