

Best Practices in Serving Female Drug Court Participants: Five Years of Research (2017-2022) To Promote Motherhood, Trauma Recovery, and Gender-Specific Treatment

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Presentation Objectives

- ◎ Objective 1: Synthesize the history of gender inequality in criminal justice and the role of treatment courts in providing trauma-informed care to support women in achieving substance use and mental health disorder recovery.
- ◎ Objective 2: Compare and contrast women's experiences in drug court to assess the factors that may contribute to gender disparities in graduation rates, such as women having higher rates of trauma as compared to their male counterparts.
- ◎ Objective 3: Assess how findings from five years (2017-2022) of research guides criminal justice reform by ensuring women are receiving evidence-based treatments to support trauma recovery.

Defining Drug Courts: The Key Components

(National Association of Drug Court Professionals, 2004)

Key Component #8

Monitoring and evaluation
measure the achievement of
program goals and gauge
effectiveness

Justification for Qualitative Research

- ⊙ Women who participate in drug court have important needs. For instance, compared to their male counterparts, female drug court participants have less income and less education and are more likely to be homeless, be unemployed, experience mental health symptoms, and be survivors of abuse (D'Angelo & Wolf, 2002; Gallagher et al., 2022).
- ⊙ Drug court literature consists predominately of program evaluations using quantitative methods to predict graduation and criminal recidivism outcomes. Studies using qualitative methods to evaluate drug courts are less common. Therefore, this presentation provides an in-depth, behind-the-scenes perspective of drug court programming from the experiences and voices of female participants, with a particular focus on the aspects of drug court that support women in graduating and the how the program can be improved.

Women and Substance Use Disorders: Conveying Compassion and Empathy

- ⦿ I love that we have a female judge who is in recovery herself. She really understands addiction and the stuff we go through in addiction and recovery as women. When I entered this program, I felt like a horrible mother and person, but I saw the judge each week for a while and she always told me I could do this, I could overcome addiction and get my life back on track. I saw myself as nothing but a junkie when I came to drug court, but now I know I am a strong, beautiful woman and the judge helped me see that by just treating me nicely.

Women and Substance Use Disorders: Conveying Compassion and Empathy

- ⊙ The people in the program, the people that help us, that's what helps me graduate and do well in drug court. [Name of probation officer] is the best. She will help me and give me advice, and when I go to court and have to talk to the judge, even if I did something wrong, she will stand next to me and help me. It can be intimidating when you have to talk to the judge because she can put you in jail, but [name of probation officer] helps with that. I think her and the judge really understand the things we go through trying to get into recovery, that's really helpful. Like, the judge is in recovery so she doesn't judge us.

Women and Trauma: The Missing Piece in Treatment

- ⦿ I told my counselor when he met with me for the first time that I was in an abusive relationship. I have been in it for many years and my counselor said we will talk about it in counseling but we haven't yet and I've been seeing him for 2 months. All we talk about is not using drugs anymore. I stopped getting high but I swear the abuse has gotten worse since I stopped, he hits me and spits on me and even kicks my cat. It may sound weird to you, but it makes sense to me, but I think the abuse was less when I was getting high. I don't know, that just makes sense to me. I don't think I will ever maintain my recovery until my counselor helps me get through this abuse.
- ⦿ Must be prepared to treat addiction/substance use disorder through a harm reduction lens early in treatment court (reducing drug use, using less lethal drugs, providing naloxone to participants)

Women and Trauma: The Missing Piece in Treatment

- ⊙ I used to smoke meth just to cope with the pain. He [her ex-boyfriend] wouldn't hit me all the time, but every day he would call me a bitch and threaten to hurt our children and get in my face and tell me how I was a horrible mom. I went to bed every night fearful. I cried all the time. I am lucky to have family that helped me get out of the relationship and other relationships I had in the past that were abusive, but right now, I have so much pain and we don't discuss it at [name of treatment program], all we do is talk about the 12 steps and recovery and stuff like that. I think drug court could help me by sending us to treatment that teaches me how to avoid unhealthy relationships and get rid of this pain I feel. I know other women in the program and many of them have also experienced what I have experienced.
- ⊙ *Mandating 12-step meetings can lead to re-traumatization (intimacy, disempowering, powerless, not best practice, COVID lockdowns)*

Women and Trauma: The Missing Piece in Treatment

- ◎ The counseling helps me stay sober, treat my addiction, and do what drug court wants me to do, but the limitation is that it doesn't cover the whole picture of what's going on in my life. I have PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] and anxiety because of abuse when I was younger. I don't like talking about that with my case manager or judge or even at IOP [intensive outpatient program]. It's a private matter, and I wish I could see my counselor more too just help me do better, feel better about myself.
- ◎ *Do not require all treatment court participants to complete IOP or group therapy (this is the opposite of individualized, evidence-based treatment)*

Being a Single Mother: The Need for Individualized Interventions

- ⦿ We have to go to these AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] and NA [Narcotics Anonymous] support groups, like recovery support groups. They should have a support group for single moms in drug court. I have been doing this program for over a year, and I can tell you that the biggest challenge is not staying away from drugs and alcohol or doing all the court ordered stuff, it's trying to figure out how to take care of your children, especially when you don't have much support at home, and doing everything you need to do to complete this program. I have a hard time with childcare. I'm trying to keep my job, but drug court makes me leave work several times a week to go see the judge or my PO [probation officer] or do drops [urine drug screens], and it's overwhelming because the whole time I'm also trying to figure out who's going to watch my son when I do all this stuff. Like I said, they need to have a support group for us [single mothers] and give us some flexibility in doing the program because of the challenges we face. I can still do everything they want me to do; I may just need some flexibility in getting it all done.

Being a Single Mother: The Need for Individualized Interventions

- ⦿ I was on methadone a few years ago and the [name of housing agency] told me I had to stop taking methadone or leave. This is the type of stuff we face as women. We try to take care of our kids, do right by taking our medicine as prescribed by the clinic, and these other places try to bring us down. The drug court is good with this and the judge allows us to take methadone when given by the doctor. My kids were with me at the [name of housing agency] so, of course, I stopped taking methadone so I had a roof over my head and I needed to keep my kids safe. I had really bad withdrawal, it was awful, and eventually relapsed and got arrested. I can't believe, but none of us are surprised, that these places that want to help you won't let you take methadone even with a doctor's note.

African American Women's Experiences

- ◎ Judge as an Advocate of Motherhood: The judge is helpful because she knows that I am a mother of two kids, and my priority is being a mom. Drug court helps me be a better mom now because I am no longer getting high or doing some of the other things I did to get in trouble with the law. I have more energy to play with my kids and help them with their schoolwork. Drug court and the judge have helped me with that because she [drug court judge] tells me I am a good person, good mom, and my kids deserve to have me in their lives. My kids will be healthier and grow up with less issues and problems if I stay away from drugs and complete the program.

African American Women's Experiences

- ◎ Judge as an Advocate of Motherhood: I'm not sure if I will graduate, but if I don't, it's not because the people didn't care or try to help me. The judge really wants to see all of us do well and change our lives for the better. My biggest challenge is being a single mom while also doing all the stuff for drug court. I have counseling, have to meet with my P.O. [probation officer], and other stuff, like pay fines and come to court all the time, and it's hard, but they [drug court] try to work with my schedule. I hope I do graduate because I know the judge will be proud. My son will be proud, too.

African American Women's Experiences

- ◎ Gender-Responsive Interventions: The drug court could support me better by giving me more options for counseling. Ideally, I would like to go to A.A. [Alcoholics Anonymous] and N.A. [Narcotics Anonymous] meetings that are just women and maybe see a female counselor one-on-one to discuss my past. I had some pretty horrible things happen to me when I was younger and I will never discuss them in front of men. I think the drug court does the best they can, but they need to understand that men and women are different when it comes to talking about our problems and the past.

African American Women's Experiences

- ◎ Gender-Responsive Interventions: I am not sure if the [drug] court knows this, but it is me and only one other woman in our group therapy classes. I like the guys in group, but they dominate the group and I do not really get a chance to talk. There is not much I would say anyways because I am not telling a bunch of guys my personal business. Maybe the [drug] court could help us better by letting us choose group therapy, individual therapy, or support groups.

Limitations

- ⦿ Social desirability bias.
- ⦿ Findings are not generalizable beyond the research sample.
- ⦿ The majority of women were white; therefore, the experiences and voices of female drug court participants from other races and ethnicities is not fully understood.
- ⦿ It is recommended that future qualitative research collect data from minority women. A comparative and contrastive analysis, for example, of African American, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and white women's experiences in drug court may offer insight into the factors that contribute to racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in drug court outcomes (ex. access to the program, graduation rates, criminal recidivism rates).

Drug Court Practice

- ◎ It is recommended that drug courts refer their participants to treatment providers who are trained in treating dual disorders, such as substance use disorders and mental health symptoms. Women in this presentation reported having PTSD and a substance use disorder, and research has consistently demonstrated that treating these disorders concurrently and in a trauma-informed setting is the most effective approach to promote recovery (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2005, 2014).
- ◎ Part of the drug court model is to provide incentives to reinforce positive behaviors, and common incentives given are gift cards to restaurants, verbal praise from the judge in court, and even shortening one's time in the program. Perhaps incentives can be tailored to respect the time of single mothers and to promote motherhood, such as giving gift cards that support family activities.

Drug Court Practice

- ⦿ Consistent with the findings from this study, drug court research is beginning to suggest that treatment providers may not always be providing evidence-based interventions or trained to treat the complexities of addiction, such as dual diagnoses (Bouffard & Taxman, 2004; Gallagher, 2012; Gallagher, 2013; Taxman & Bouffard, 2005).
- ⦿ It is recommended that key stakeholders in drug court carefully select the providers that offer treatment to their participants. Drug court stakeholders, for example, should only contract with treatment providers who employ counselors who are licensed and trained in the use of evidence-based interventions in treating trauma and other disorders, such as EMDR and cognitive processing therapy (Barlow, 2014).

Thank you!

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