Measuring Harm Reduction due to Mental Health Court Participation

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Background to Mental Health Courts

- More than half of all prison and jail inmates in 2005 had a mental health problem and these inmates face many issues including homelessness, low rates of employment, past sexual and physical abuse, and high rates of substance use (Glaze & James, 2006).
- In order to help improve this situation, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) teamed up with Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to create the Mental Health Courts Program.
- Mental Health Courts typically involve judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and other court personnel who possess particular mental health expertise.
- The courts typically deal with nonviolent offenders who have been diagnosed with a mental illness or co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders.
- The goal is to improve clients’ social functioning and link them to employment, housing, treatment, and support services (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2007).
- Mental Health Court programs provide diversion from jail, but have sanctions such as time in jail, monitoring, homework, and reports to the courts. The support services provided include supervision, case management, counseling services, medication management, and education.
- The participants have to be diagnosed with a major mental illness or cognitive impairment. In order to qualify for the program, the participant's problematic behaviors must be directly connected to the mental illness or cognitive impairment.

Research Design

- Four main areas were examined:
  - mental health symptoms
  - alcohol and/or drug abuse
  - placement and income
  - legal factors
- The data collected via multiple sources were then utilized to create a detailed case study of each of the clients; these findings were then aggregated to determine the factors that contribute to an individual’s progression through the mental health court system.
  - The research team examined the case files of each client in order to gain an understanding of the client’s legal and social background prior to and while receiving services of the mental health court.
  - The research team interviewed the client to ask any additional questions regarding client perceptions of the program.
  - The research team interviewed the primary counselor provided to the client to learn more about the client.
- These three data sources were then triangulated to determine the harm reduction seen in the client’s overall situation as a result of the services received by the mental health court.
- As part of the research process, the research team developed a coding process in which qualitative data was transformed into quantitative data. This allowed for visualizing and calculating the change scores.

Results

- The number of criminal acts committed.
  - # of Criminal Acts Committed
  - Pre-MHC: 2.57
  - MHC: 0.29
- The number of times of alcohol/drug use per week.
  - # of Times of Alcohol/Drug Use Per Week
  - Frequency of Alcohol or Drug Use
  - Pre-MHC: 3.86
  - MHC: 0.86
- The mental health symptoms on a 1-10 scale.
  - Mental Health Symptoms on a 1-10 Scale
  - Pre-MHC: 7.0
  - MHC: 0.43
- The income of the clients.
  - Income
  - Job-Related Income
  - Government Benefits
  - Income Support from Family/Friends
  - Pre-MHC: 0.71
  - MHC: 0.14
- For the number of placements, the researchers looked at jail stays, hospital stays, treatment facilities, supported living arrangements, own home, familial home, non-familial home, and homelessness. Overall, the placement totals went up, but the quality of placements is what improved. Movements were to more stable placements, such as own homes or treatment facilities, rather than non-familial (which included friend’s houses and hotels) placements and homelessness.

Conclusions

- Most participants have not committed any illegal acts since entry to the mental health court.
- Prior to the mental health court, all participants except for one stated that they used alcohol or drugs five or more times per week. Since entering the mental health court system, the average use of alcohol and drugs is less than once a week for all participants.
- Prior to the mental health court, all participants rated their mental health symptoms as 7-10 (many symptoms). Since entry to the mental health court, all participants except for one rated their symptoms as 0-2 (consistently stable).
- Since entry to the mental health court, participants have more job-related income, rely less on income support from family and friends, and receive more help from government benefits.

Limitations

- Seven mental health court participants were involved in this research. Seeing as the sample size was small, these results should not be generalized to all mental health courts.

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