

Mental health courts improve relationships, help people manage health care

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Mental health courts provide a voluntary option for criminal offenders. These courts incorporate mental health assessments, treatment plans and ongoing monitoring to address the health needs of offenders in an effort to keep them out of jail, while also ensuring public safety. Proponents point to reductions in recidivism, or relapse into criminal behavior, as evidence to the effectiveness of mental health courts. Now, new research from the University of Missouri has found additional mental, social and health benefits for mental health court participants as an alternative to serving time in jail or prison.

"When interviewed, participants of [mental health](#) court programs consistently noted positive changes in their relationships with friends and family while participating in a mental health court program," said Kelli Canada, assistant professor in the MU School of Social Work.

"Participants discussed improvements in psychiatric stability thanks to corrections in medication and counseling. They also reported longer periods of sobriety since entering treatment."

Canada and Bradley Ray, assistant professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, analyzed interviews with participants from mental health courts to identify common themes about the program. Participants self-reported reduced drug and alcohol use, improved relationships with family, mood stability and increased patience.

"Past research on mental health courts has focused on whether the

programs are increasing public safety by reducing criminal activity in the community," Canada said. "This research, which includes documented participant experiences and first-hand stories, provides a more complete picture of how programs help people with mental illness become healthy and stay out of trouble."

Canada notes that an important factor in creating changes in the criminal justice system is treatment. Participants in the study had received many different services including therapy, medication management and access to group networks such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Not all mental health courts provided the same levels of treatment, Canada said.

Canada's study, "Mental health court [participants'](#) perspectives of success: what key outcomes are missing?" recently was published in the *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*. Funding for the study was provided by the National Institute of Mental Health (MH085981). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funding agency.

More information: Kelli E. Canada et al. Mental Health Court Participants' Perspectives of Success: What Key Outcomes Are We Missing?, *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/14999013.2016.1230155](https://doi.org/10.1080/14999013.2016.1230155)

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