Norway Drug Treatment Court Evaluation Report

Norwegen Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research (SIRUS) is an independent research institute under the Ministry of Health and Care Services. SIRUS aims to carry out research, documentation and dissemination about drug issues, with particular emphasis on social issues. The Institute has national competency library vigilance and national contact point for the European drug monitoring center, the EMCDDA.

English summary

In 2006, the pilot project Drug Program with Court Control (Narkotikaprogram med domstolskontroll = ND) started in Oslo and Bergen. The ND model was imported from Drug Court in Ireland, Scotland and the USA with modifications. ND is an alternative criminal sanction for drug users who are recidivists in the criminal justice system. The District Court in the two cities can decide to give a conditional sentence as an alternative to unconditional imprisonment. The condition is to attend the drug program for a minimum two-year probationary period. The individuals avoid serving a prison term, but dropouts from the program are normally required to serve their prison sentence.

The purpose of the ND was to prevent new crimes and promote the convicted person’s rehabilitation. KRUS (Correctional Service of Norway Staff Academy) was to carry out process evaluation (Johnson & Svendsen, 2007), while SIRUS (Norwegian Institute for Drug and Alcohol Research) was given responsibility to conduct a result evaluation. The result evaluation looked at 115 of the first participants. They were interviewed after entry to the program (time one, T1), again after one year (T2) (106, or 92 %) and finally after two years (T3) (96, or 83 %). The interviews mapped substance abuse, crime, physical and mental health problems and social issues of importance to integration.

ND was both a separate program and a facilitator for treatment. The program could be varied to cater to individual plans. Those sentenced had different arrangements: everyone had plans for school, work and/or training. In addition, a quarter had institutional treatment part of the time and a third outpatient treatment.

The courts’ role was primarily to decide which sanction to impose, thereafter to determine changes in the program (everyone had to complete four phases before they were deemed to have completed the program); and finally at the end of the probation to decide whether the individual had completed the program satisfactorily or whether it had to be prolonged. The court also determined whether those who dropped out during the program had to serve all or part of the conditional sentence in prison. The judges have a less active role in the daily running of the program than in most other countries.

Fewer participants than expected were recruited to ND. Before it started in Bergen and Oslo, about 100 were expected to pass through it every year, but the result was approximately 25. The explanations are mainly found outside of the actual operation of the ND. They were partly due to restrictions on who could be sentenced to take part in the program, and whether the person accepted the option. The number of ND participants was too small to have a substantial impact on the number of people sentenced to prison for drug-related offenses. The low number also reduced our ability to draw statistically generalizable conclusions.
More than a third (34%) of those required to undertake the ND program completed the course. The result is satisfactory and corresponds to results from other treatment programs for heavy drug users. The average completion rate in treatment centers for heavy drug users is around 20–30%. Compared to similar measures in other countries (Drug Court) this shows that ND in Norway performs better in general in terms of percentage completed. Relative to the population size an approximately equal number was ordered to take part in the ND program and the Drug Court in other countries. Those who dropped out either in Norway or other countries tended have more serious and complex problems than those who completed.

ND provides an alternative to imprisonment. The recidivism rate to prison for repeat offenders of drug crimes is approximately 85%. This gives a signal about the importance of trying alternative reactions. The follow-up survey with self-reporting by the ND-participant over two years revealed: Over 80% of those who completed were outside a controlled environment (prison or institution) after two years, as against only about 40% of those who dropped out. Eight percent (3) of those who completed were in prison after two years, compared to half of those who dropped out.

All variables self-reported by the ND participant showed a positive trend (time in controlled environment, drug abuse, crime, psychiatric and somatic health, education, work and social relationships). Those who completed had better results compared to those who dropped out. Those who dropped out had a positive trend too, but weaker than those who completed the program.

Two unfortunate conditions limited the evaluation’s scope. As mentioned, ND had fewer participants than expected. Second, the research design was not optimal. For ethical and practical reasons it was decided not to include a control group of prisoners in the research design. The questionnaires were not adjusted or specially adapted to ND as criminal sanction.

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