

SYSTEMS STATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

Compelling Reasons to Study the Long-Term Impacts of Drug Courts in North Carolina

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"I count myself among those who believe that, faced with these statistics, the criminal justice system has an obligation to use its supervisory powers to reduce drug use within the offender population. As I mentioned before, this perspective argues for expanded use of drug courts – for more offenders, for offenders facing more serious charges and offenders with more serious prior records."

— Former Director of the National Institute of Justice Jeremy Travis commenting on the expanded use of drug courts during his address to the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission on Dec. 7, 2000

This document is written with the intent to provide a brief overview on recent trends in the state's prison population in addition to suggesting research focused on the long-term impacts of one promising alternative to prison – drug treatment courts. An examination of rising costs, increasing admissions and stable crime rates lends support to the notion that our state has perhaps begun to reach a point of diminishing returns in regards to incarceration's effect on crime reduction. With the incarceration rate expected to grow, now is a critical point in time to examine how well alternative sentencing options can reduce both

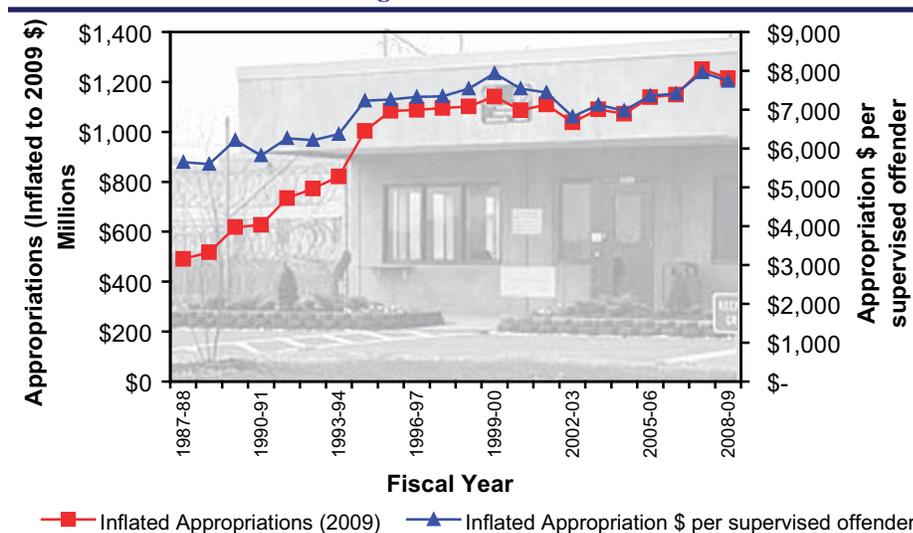
recidivism and crime while saving taxpayer dollars. Currently, drug treatment courts are one of the most worthy alternatives to rigorously examine in North Carolina because of the high rate of drug prison admissions coupled with an existing familiarity of a program that has already been implemented throughout a large portion of the state.

The increasing costs of weakened social control

On average, taxpayers foot the bill of almost \$28,000 per prisoner annually. Today the North Carolina Department of Correction supervises

over 40,000 prisoners with almost one in six being housed on a drug-related offense. Research suggests that once the imprisonment rate reaches a certain level, the criminal justice system starts to weaken its informal social control (Clear, Rose, Waring & Scully, 2003). The enormous increase in the use of incarceration over the last three decades has not only begun to weaken informal control, but has caused enormous growth in correctional budgets across the nation. Figure 1 provides an overview of North Carolina's

Figure 1: N.C. Department of Correction Certified Budget Appropriations, FY 1987-1988 Through FY 2008-2009



Note: Supervised offenders include prisoners, probationers and parolees under DOC supervision.

Source: N.C. Office of State Budget and Management

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correctional budget appropriations over the last 20 fiscal years.

Accounting for inflation, total appropriations for the Department of Correction have increased nearly two and a half times since the late 1980s and appropriation dollars per supervised offender¹ have increased 37 percent. If recent trends continue, future appropriations for other government services, such as education, healthcare and transportation, will be negatively affected in a rapidly growing state.

The incarceration rate continues to grow

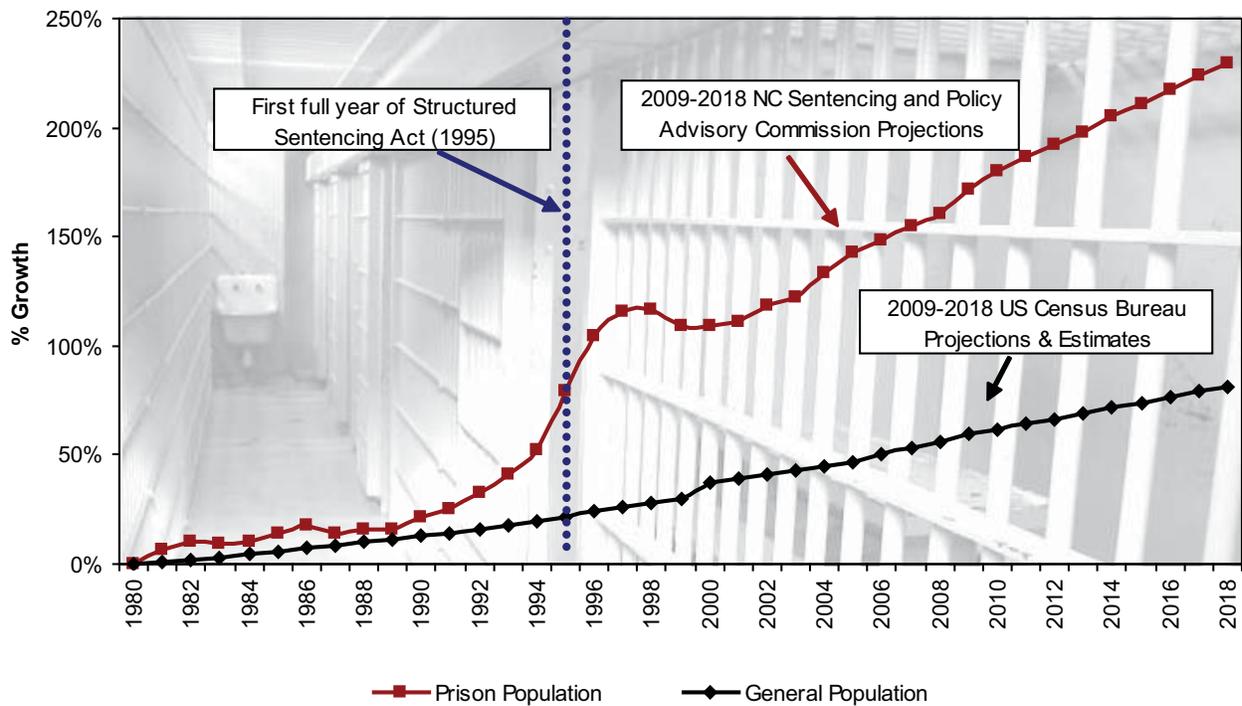
As budgets have substantially grown over the past three decades, many states have become increasingly focused on stabilizing prison population growth. North Carolina is no different. While the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that North Carolina's incarceration rate fares well in comparison with other states, it omits offenders sentenced to prison

¹ Supervised offender includes all prison inmates, probationers and parolees.

for less than a year. With this exclusion, many low-level offenders, such as non-trafficking drug offenders, would not fall within the parameters of their incarceration rate. Undoubtedly, an accurate state comparison would require additional state-level data. Nonetheless, since 1980 the state has seen its prison population increase threefold in comparison to the general population. This growth differential began to increase dramatically at the beginning of the 1990s and exploded, as anticipated, around the enactment of the Structured Sentencing Act. Based on projections, Figure 2 shows that prison populations are expected to continue growing at a faster pace than the general population, yielding a higher imprisonment rate that will indeed fuel the growth of correctional costs even more so.

Recent literature suggests that the association between increased incarceration and lower crime rates shrinks in size as levels of imprisonment ascend. Furthermore, it has been suggested that once a state's prison population exceeds the "inflection point", increases in incarceration rates actually become

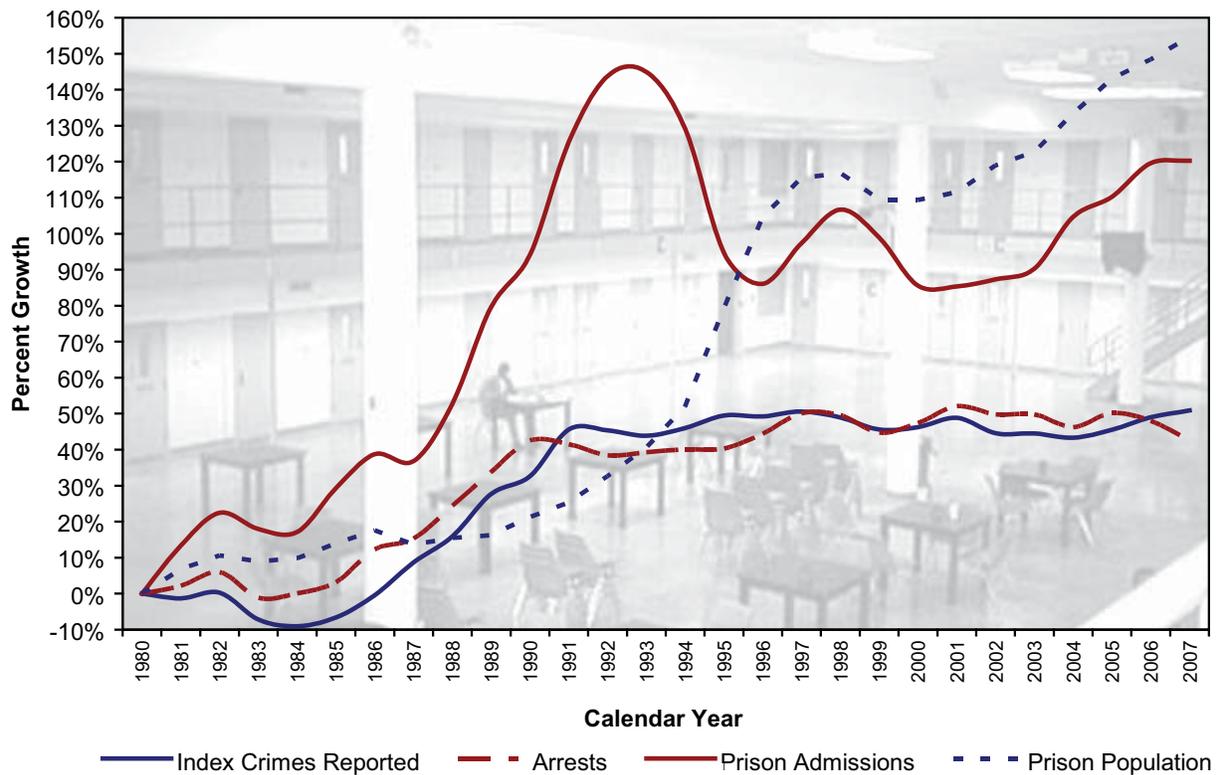
Figure 2: Cumulative Growth Since 1980 for North Carolina's Prison and General Populations



Note: Population counts reflect July 1st of each year.

Source: N.C. Department of Correction and U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 3: Cumulative Growth Since 1980 for Prison Admissions, Population, Index Crimes and Arrests



Source: N.C. Department of Correction and the State Bureau of Investigation

associated with higher crime rates. That “inflection point” is believed by researchers to fall somewhere in between 325 and 492 inmates per 100,000 people (Stemen, 2007). Although, the state’s incarceration rate did not reach the lower end of the inflection rate until 1994 ($r = 325$), the current rate is roughly 425 and is forecasted to reach a rate of 462 per 100,000 people by 2017. This projected increase in state prison population over the next 10 years is a result of the stacking effect caused by longer, mandatory active sentences for violent offenders.

Prison admissions and populations have significantly outpaced reported crimes and arrests

The relationship between crime and incarceration is oftentimes hard to explain. One might anticipate that if crime rates increase, prison populations will increase with a lag of a couple years between arrest and conviction. Others who subscribe to crime control theory feel that increased prison populations will reduce crime rates through both deterrence and incapacitation (Blumstein, 1998). Either way you

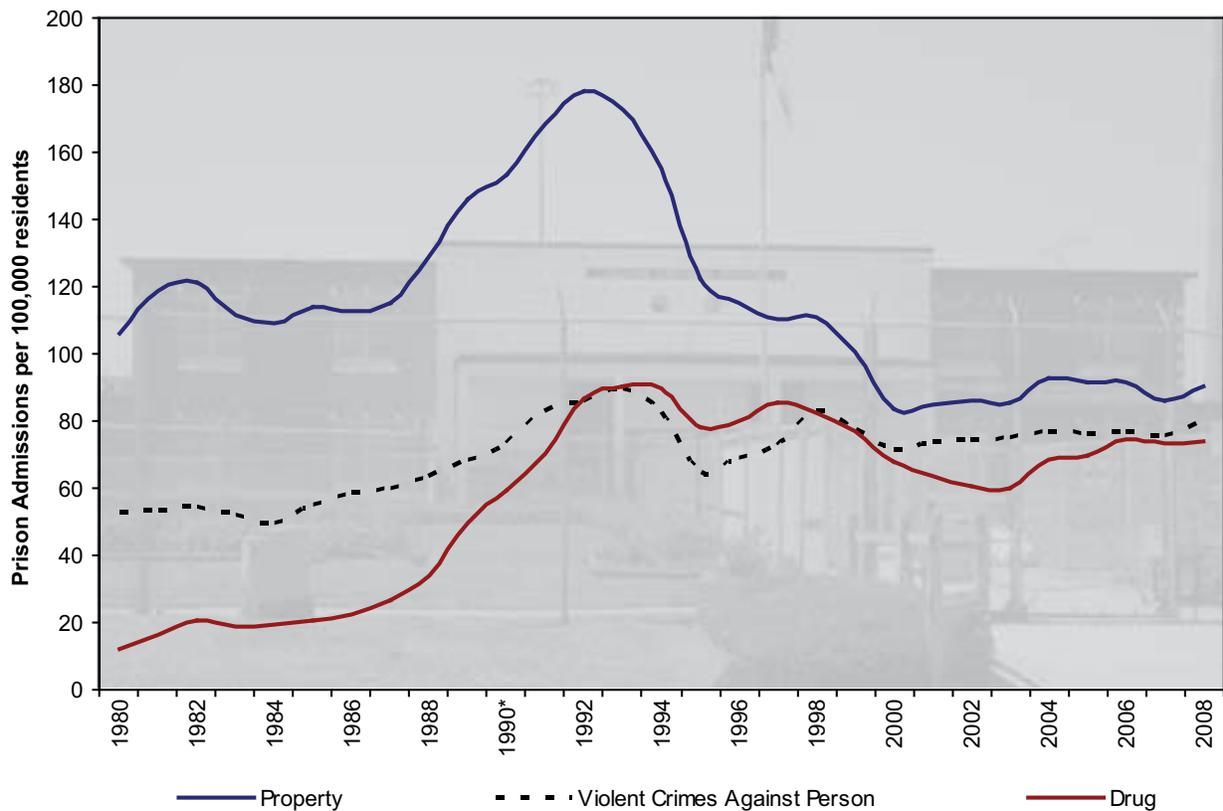
view this cause and effect relationship, annual counts of index crimes and arrests in North Carolina have changed little since 1990, yet prison admissions and populations have fluctuated considerably as reflected above in Figure 3.

Since 1980, admissions have grown almost two and a half times faster than reported index crimes while populations have outpaced index crimes and arrests by three times as much. Most likely caused by longer sentences being handed out to offenders, between 1992 and 1996, admissions declined sharply while populations increased rapidly. Since the beginning of the 21st century, both admissions and populations have begun to grow significantly while index crimes and arrests have remained stable.

Prison admission rates among drug offenders have swelled

While almost 50 percent of the prison population is comprised of violent offenders, lower-level offenders, such as non-trafficking drug offenders, represent a large volume of convictions, serve

Figure 4: N.C. Department of Correction Prison Admission Rates by Crime Category, 1980-2008



*Note: 1990 prison admissions reflect an estimated count based on the average of fiscal year data.

Source: N.C. Department of Correction and U.S. Census Bureau

shorter sentences and have a smaller effect on the overall prison population in comparison. However, these offenders have begun to represent a substantial portion of prison admissions. Figure 4 shows that rate of prison admission for drug offenders has become comparable to those of both property and violent offenders.

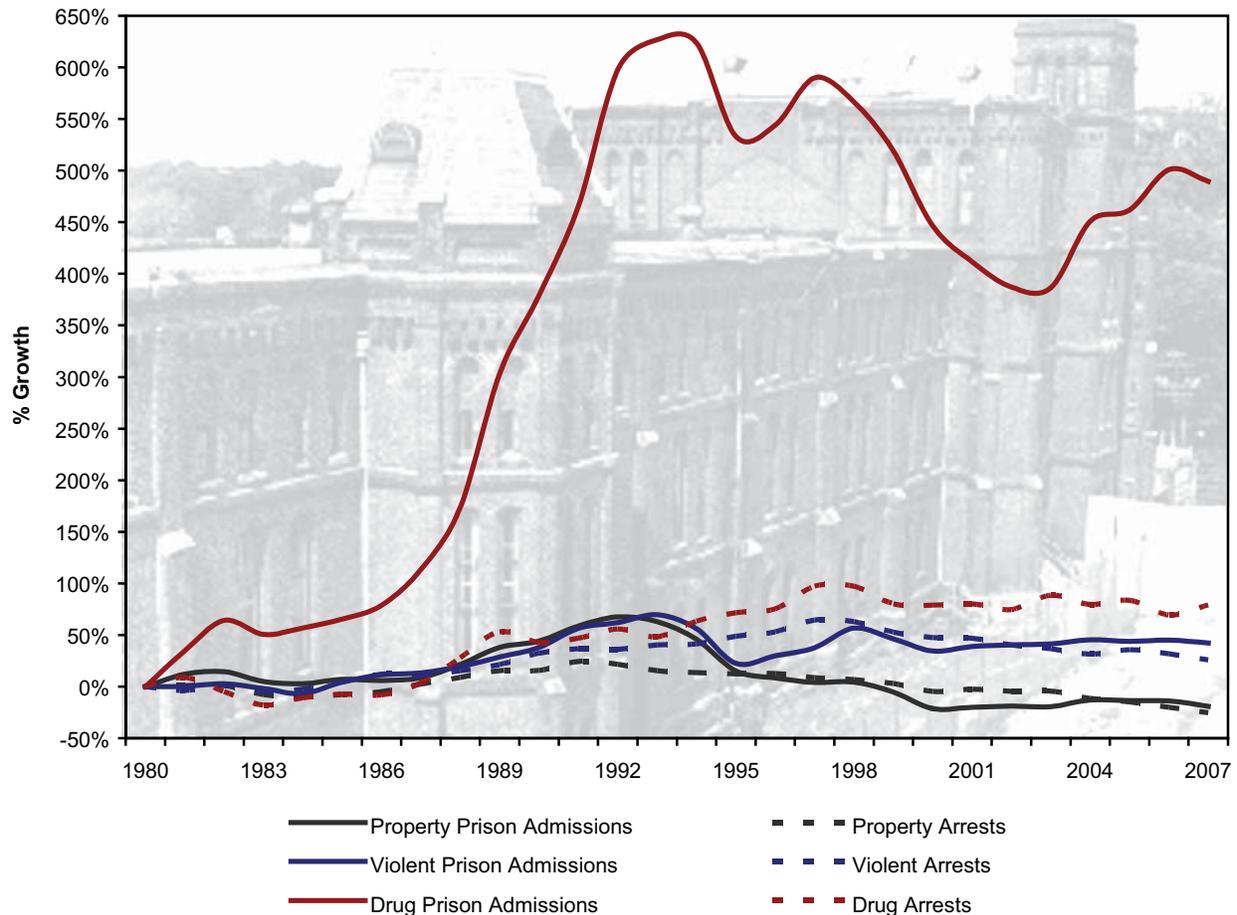
In 1993, the drug prison admission rate was seven and a half times that of 1980. Surprisingly, rates for drug offenders surpassed rates of those admitted on violent crimes against persons in 1994 and were roughly half of the rate regarding property offenders. From that point on, rates declined through 2003 before slowly rising again.

Even though drug-related prison admission rates were low to begin with in the early 1980s, admission rates have exploded with growth being about five times that of arrests over the past three decades, as

shown in Figure 5 at the top of the next page. Of note, annual admissions for drug-related charges nearly quadrupled from 1,695 offenders in 1987 to 6,333 in 1994, a span of only seven years. Unlike property and violent prison admissions, drug admissions have not tracked closely to arrests.

With this knowledge, one must wonder if the number of non-trafficking drug offender prison admissions on probation revocation has changed drastically over the last three decades in comparison to all other offenders. Unfortunately, specific analysis by crime type would not be accurate as probation revocation data pre-dating Structured Sentencing is not reliable due to antiquated collection systems of the past. Nevertheless, currently one-half of all prisoners and about two-thirds of non-trafficking drug offenders are admitted to prison as a result of probation revocation. A logical explanation for this occurrence is that non-trafficking drug offenders are most often sentenced to

Figure 5: Cumulative Growth Comparisons Since 1980 Between Prison Admission Rates and Arrest Rates by Crime Category



*Note: 1990 prison admissions reflect an estimated count based on the average of fiscal year data.

Source: N.C. Department of Correction, the State Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Census Bureau

community and intermediate probation and thus are more likely to enter prison on a revocation.

Can expansion of drug treatment courts reduce recidivism and crime while saving taxpayer dollars?

According to the most recent annual report on North Carolina’s drug treatment courts, there are 42 operational courts² across North Carolina (North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, 2009). These courts serve about one-third of appropriate intermediate-level offenders (Frescoln, 2009).

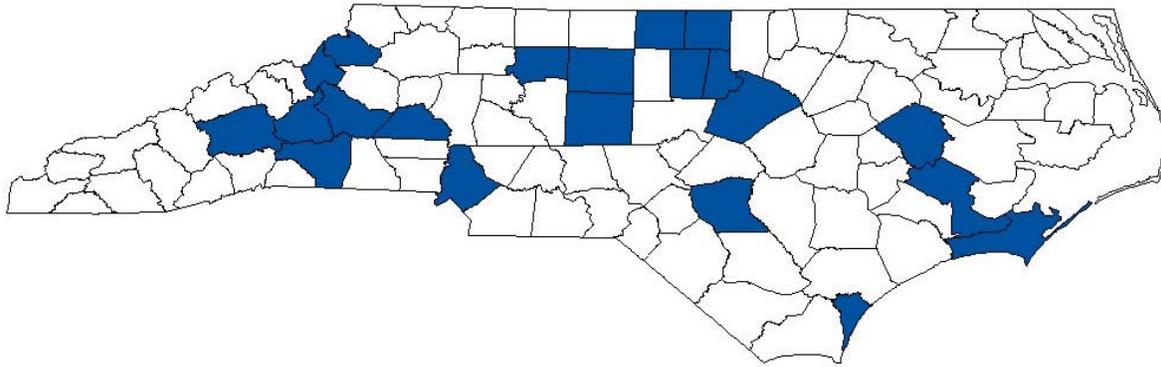
In July 2004, drug treatment courts became an intermediate punishment in an effort to actively intervene and end the cycle of addiction and crime (North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory

Commission, 2008). Support for drug treatment courts can be found in the Sentencing Commission’s 2008 report on recidivism:

Intermediate punishment, as expected, provides an effective alternative in the range of graduated sanctions between probation and incarceration... The more intense level of supervision in the community under SSA was designed to give them [offenders] a second chance – and the state a less expensive option – in lieu of incarceration. Findings of this and previous reports confirmed that, while the general profile of intermediate probationers more

² The 42 operational Drug Treatment Courts include 25 Adult Drug Treatment Courts, 12 Family Drug Treatment Courts and five Youth Drug Treatment Courts.

Figure 6: Counties with an Operational Adult Drug Treatment Court, FY 2007-2008



Avery	Craven	Mecklenburg	Rutherford
Buncombe	Cumberland	New Hanover	Wake
Burke	Durham	Orange	Watauga
Carteret	Forsyth	Person	
Caswell	Guilford	Pitt	
Catawba	McDowell	Randolph	

closely mimicked that of prisoners than of community probationers, their rearrest rates were considerably and consistently lower than those of prisoners. This finding lends continued support to the notion of intermediate sanctions (recently enhanced by the added sanction of Drug Treatment Courts) as an effort to combine greater offender control for public safety with more intensive programming for the offender in the community. Especially when the correctional response is intensive, well-targeted for an offender's needs, and is most concentrated in the first year of supervision, it seems to produce a correctional alternative that is less expensive and more successful in reducing future rearrests.

As expected, the Sentencing Commission is not unaccompanied in its support for the use of drug



courts. Recently the North Carolina Institute of Medicine issued a report recommending the addition of eight adult drug treatment courts over the next two fiscal years. The report calls for the General Assembly to increase total appropriations by almost \$2.7 million to fund eight new adult

drug treatment court coordinator positions, eight new probation officer positions, and treatment services to support the additional drug treatment courts (North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 2009).

Although the nation's first drug treatment court opened in Miami, Fla. 20 years ago, drug courts are still seen by many as an effective problem-solving strategy because of the swiftness and certainty of responses that are critical to effect lasting behavioral change. Drug courts provide increased judicial intervention along with intensive treatment. Jurisdictions across the country are beginning to realize the potential prison bed savings coupled with financial savings that drug courts can provide. According to a Washington State Institute for Public Policy report, a total of \$1.74 in benefits is gained for every dollar spent on drug treatment court in the state of Washington (Barnoski & Aos, 2003). Not only does literature show an estimated cost savings, but research has concluded that drug courts significantly reduce crime rates by an average of 7 percent to 14 percent (Huddleston et. al, 2008). Bringing it closer to home, in FY 2007-08, seven drug-free babies were born as a result of North Carolina's adult drug courts. Based on one study, the total lifetime costs for caring for each child prenatally exposed to drugs or alcohol is between \$750,000 and \$1.4 million (Kalotra, 2002). Using this assumption, last fiscal year North Carolina drug treatment courts may have saved taxpayers between \$5.25 million

and \$9.8 million by facilitating the birth of these seven babies.

The Sentencing Commission's latest recidivism study indicates that preexisting personal and criminal history characteristics predict the probability of recidivism, rather than punishment type. With substance abuse being one of the risk factors that predict recidivism, one would foresee that recidivism rates would be much higher among drug treatment court participants considering 93 percent of offenders admitted to an adult drug treatment court were screened as having a high probability of having a substance abuse disorder. The remaining 7 percent were found to be having a low probability of having a substance abuse disorder, but other information available indicates addiction. Surprisingly, however, recidivism of drug court participants has actually been fairly comparable to that of all intermediate punishments in terms of rearrest rates thus far and participants have had substantially lower incarceration/reincarceration rates than those of intermediate punishment as a whole. While the data are quite impressive, one must be cautious of the small number of offenders within the drug treatment court cohort studied (N=119).

Recommendations and Closing Remarks

While drug courts appear promising and efforts are supported at the state level, little is known about the actual long-term effects of these problem-solving courts. North Carolina §7A-801 requires the Administrative Office of the Courts to conduct ongoing evaluations of drug treatment courts. Although AOC tracks intermediate outcomes, it does not have the capacity to conduct a scientific evaluation on long-term impacts. As a result, the state has yet to realize the outcomes of offenders who are no longer under supervision. The Craddock (2002) evaluation was essential in measuring the impact of pilot drug treatment courts in North Carolina, but the evaluation was completed over seven years ago with data approaching almost a decade in age. In addition, the evaluation pre-dated a statute defining drug treatment courts as an intermediate punishment. By including these courts as an intermediate punishment, the number of offenders characterized as high-need has increased significantly along with the total number of offenders participating. Increasing the use of drug courts is indeed a step in the right direction



towards providing the entire citizenry with equal access. Nevertheless, as promising as drug courts appear, they have been understudied.

Therefore, based on this analysis, the Criminal Justice Analysis Center recommends that the General Assembly consider studying North Carolina's drug treatment courts with an emphasis on adult drug courts. The study should consider including the following components at minimum:

- a) *An examination of whether drug treatment courts in North Carolina are truly diversionary programs and the selection process of participants* – In other words, would offenders who participate in drug treatment courts actually receive prison sentences otherwise if not enrolled? Drug court evaluations often do not attempt to answer this critical question (Fluellen and Trone, 2000). In fact, Craddock could not directly determine the proportion of participants who were at risk for receiving an active sentence due to compiled data not including the Structure Sentencing grid location at the time of evaluation in 2002. Additionally, the selection of participants for the drug treatment court program should be examined. If participants are handpicked, recidivism rates and intermediate outcomes will surely look impressive in comparison to other cohorts.

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- b) *A comparison of drug court participants' recidivism by type of drug addiction* – Determining which types of drug addicts, if any, recidivate less after participating would be beneficial. The most frequent drugs of choice reported by offenders admitted to adult drug treatment courts last fiscal year were crack cocaine (29 percent), alcohol (23 percent), marijuana (20 percent), powder cocaine (12 percent) and heroin (7 percent); however, recidivism data has not been compiled by type of drug addiction.
- c) *Tracking the continuation of treatment and sobriety of past participants who are still under supervision* – While recidivism is the only long-term outcome currently studied in regards to drug court participation, other long-term impacts such as continued drug use should also be studied. Tracking the continuation of treatment participation in support groups, along with drug test outcomes of offenders who are no longer participants but are still under supervision would provide beneficial data in terms of the efficacy of drug treatment courts in reducing substance abuse.
- d) *A comparison of drug court graduates and dropouts' personal characteristics* – Higher retention and graduation rates are surely important to the success of drug courts in general. Findings of any glaring differences in personal characteristics, such as gender, race or age, would certainly reveal weaknesses in treatment for certain populations. Rectifying these shortcomings will help improve the effectiveness of drug courts in North Carolina.
- e) *An estimation of cost-benefit ratios for each type of North Carolina drug treatment court program* – We need to evaluate the benefits gained, in terms of dollars, for every dollar spent on adult, youth and family drug treatment courts in North Carolina. Estimates for drug treatment courts operating in other states exist, but often those estimates vary tremendously. Specific cost-benefit figures could provide North Carolina policymakers with the information needed to make more informed decisions concerning these courts.
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All of the publications listed above can be found on the GCC website at www.ncgccd.org.

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A Publication of the
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