

# Completing Research in Veterans' Treatment Courts: A Review of Outcomes and Research Challenges

**Loretta A. Coonan, LCSW**

Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator, Michael E. DeBakey VA  
Medical Center

**Andrea Stolar, MD**

Forensic Psychiatrist, Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center

# Overview

- What is a Veterans' Court
- History of Veterans' Court Development
- Harris County Veterans Court
- How to Evaluate the Success of Veterans' Court Programs
- Evolution of Research on Veterans' Court in Houston
- Review of Micro-level study
- Review of Macro-level study
- Refinement of Research
- Future Directions

# What is a Veterans' Court?

- Hybrid of traditional Drug Court and Mental Health Court
- Community Collaboration
- Comprehensive Treatment through VA
- Non-Adversarial
- Utilization of Peer-Mentorship
- LOS = 15 to 24 months
- Goal-driven phase progression
- Typically successful completion results in legal benefit to Veteran

# Brief History of Veterans Court Programs

- First Veterans Court Program was developed in 2004 in Anchorage, Alaska (Still in existence)
- Surge of Veterans Court Development across Continental US began with Buffalo Veterans Court - Judge Robert Russell (Ret) in 2008
- Presently over 300 specialized treatment court programs or dockets for Veterans across the US
- Parallel development of the Veterans Justice Outreach Program (At least one VJO specialist at each VA facility)

# Harris County Veterans' Court

- Brief History of Harris County Veterans Court
- Developed in 2009
- First Veterans' Court in Texas
- Felony –only with violent offenses
- ~ census is 45-50 and now have over 200 graduates
- Honorable Marc Carter – 228<sup>th</sup> District Court

# Harris County Veterans' Court

## Diverse Population

- 38% African American
- 2% Asian
- 37% Caucasian
- 21% Hispanic
- 0.5% Native American

## Diverse Charges

- 32% Assault
- 22% DUI/DWI
- 3% Evading
- 26% PCS
- Other: theft, robbery, endangering a child, criminal mischief, retaliation, burglary

# How to Evaluate Success of Veterans' Courts

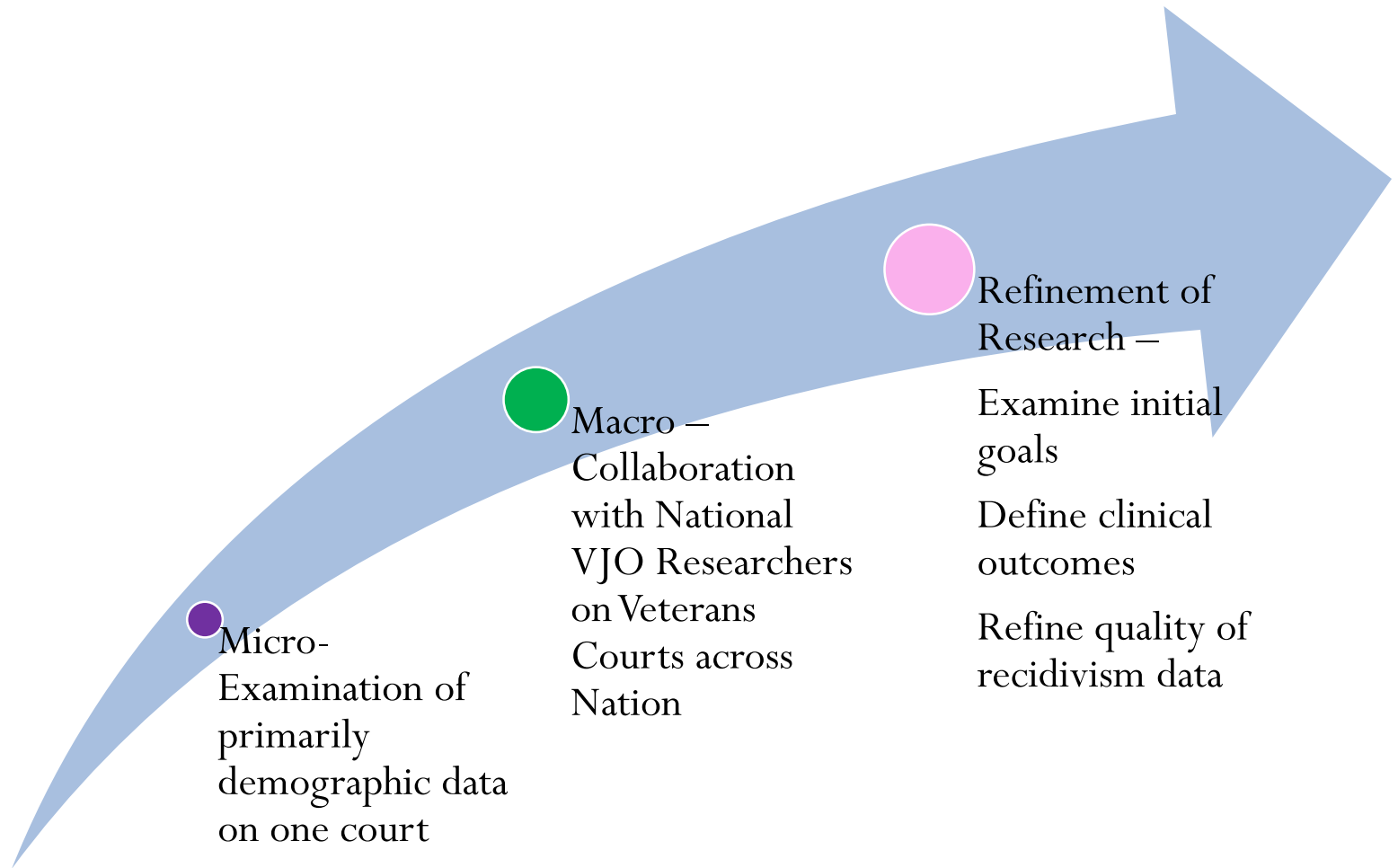
## What are Desired Outcomes?

- Reduction in Criminal Recidivism
- Successful Completion/Discharge
- Sustaining Treatment/Recovery Goals
- Resolution of Psychosocial Issues
- Are these the best measures?

## Challenges in Measuring Outcomes

- Initially, very little research available (no baseline)
- Drug Court Research (Apples to Oranges?)
- Great diversity across Veterans Courts
- How to measure recidivism?
- How to measure treatment goals?

# Evolution of Veterans' Court Research at MEDVAMC





**Micro:** An analysis of successful outcomes and associated contributing factors in veterans' court. Johnson RS, Stolar AG, Wu E, Coonan LA, Graham DP. Bull Menninger Clin. 2015 Spring;79(2):166-73. doi: 10.1521/bumc.2015.79.2.166.

- Background

- Based on first 100 participants in local Veterans' Court Program
- Aim – Examine relationship between post-program arrest and length of stay, type of discharge and number of judicial sanctions
- Hypothesis: Higher rates of recidivism would be associated with
  - Higher rates of judicial sanctions
  - Shorter lengths of stay within the court program
  - Unsuccessful discharge

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- Data Analysis

- Primary Analysis was Hierarchical linear regression
- Dependent Variable = number of criminal arrests after court discharge
- Step 1- controlled for : Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Education, TBI, Initial criminal offense
- Step 2- Entered Factor Score 1-manner of discharge, LOS, # of criminal arrests while in program and presence of Opioid misuse dx.

- Results

- No associations between recidivism and demographic factors, psychiatric diagnoses, medical diagnoses
- Association between recidivism and rearrests during program ( $p < .001$ )
- 50% with opioid misuse engaged in criminal recidivism after discharge (cocaine misuse trended toward significance  $p = .057$ )

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## Major Findings

- Criminal recidivism was inversely associated with LOS irrespective of number of sanctions (countered initial hypothesis)
- Association between Opioid misuse and criminal recidivism.
- TBI was not associated with criminal recidivism

## Limitations

- Very low number of Veterans in review (100)

**Macro:** US Veterans' Court Programs: An Inventory and Analysis of National Survey Data. Johnson RS, Stolar AG, McGuire JF, Clark S, Coonan LA, Hausknecht P, Graham DP. Community Ment Health J. 2016 Feb;52(2):180-6. doi: 10.1007/s10597-015-9972-3. Epub 2016 Jan 21.

- Background
  - Prolific Growth in Veterans' Court Programs in short period
  - Variation of programs nationally
  - Existing Survey of VJO personnel across county to collect descriptive information on court programming across the nation
- Aim
  - Better understand the efficacy of court programs with respect to successful completion of same.
- Hypothesis
  - Court programs that utilized gradually escalating sanctions would be associated with lower rates of Veteran termination

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- Methods

- Use of VJO National Phone Survey with VJO Staff (Social Workers)
- 60 min/107 questions (court structure,, eligibility criteria, admission/termination data, sanctions/rewards. 302 Courts

- Data Analysis

- Primary Outcome variable: Rate of Termination ( $RT = T / (T + SC)$ )
- Linear regression – forward stepwise method for all court descriptors

- Results

- 97 % work closely with VA, 77% accepted felony cases, most (96%) used verbal reprimand as most common sanction, jail holding cell during docket was least utilized sanction (35%)

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## Major Findings

- Higher rates of termination
  - Phase progression
  - Post-plea
  - Frequent testing for substances/alcohol
  - Outside jurisdictions
  - Level of sanction for immediate vs. longer term goals
  - Classification of court (VC vs. MH)

## Major Findings

- Lower rates of termination
  - Reserve/Guard participants
  - Later phases= less stringent testing
  - Behavioral contracts
  - Brief incarceration sanctions
  - Programs that work closely with VHA

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## Findings

- Brief incarcerations (91% of courts used as sanctions) were associated with lower termination rate.
- Use of behavioral contracts associated with lower termination rate
- More severe sanctions for immediate vs. long term goals associated with higher termination rate
- Most extensive court inventory to date

## Limitations

- Survey was based on self-report of the VJO specialists
- Data may not have been most up to date or accurate.
- Diversity of Court Programs

# Refinement of Research

## “Initial Goals” (*What were we thinking?*)

- Improving access to needed MH and SUD treatment for jailed Veterans
- Reducing criminal recidivism through successful treatment outcomes and community reintegration
- Improving long-term mental health recovery and community reintegration through structured, comprehensive treatment
- Reducing jail time and resolving felony charges related to mental health, TBI, and addiction
- Reducing costs associated with unnecessary incarcerations

## Challenges

- Which clinical scales to utilize
- Pinning down criminal recidivism rates (how you slice the pie/accessing data)
- Collaborations across agencies
- Feasibility of measurement



# Future Directions

- Deepen understanding of criminal recidivism data
- Gain better access to data owned by different agencies
- Examine and refine clinical outcome data
- Continue and expand research collaborations
- Incorporate evaluation and research questions at the beginning of court development

# Questions/Discussion

## Contact Information

Loretta A. Coonan, LCSW: 832-260-1361

Coonan.lorettaa@va.gov

Andrea G. Stolar, MD: 832-728-9626