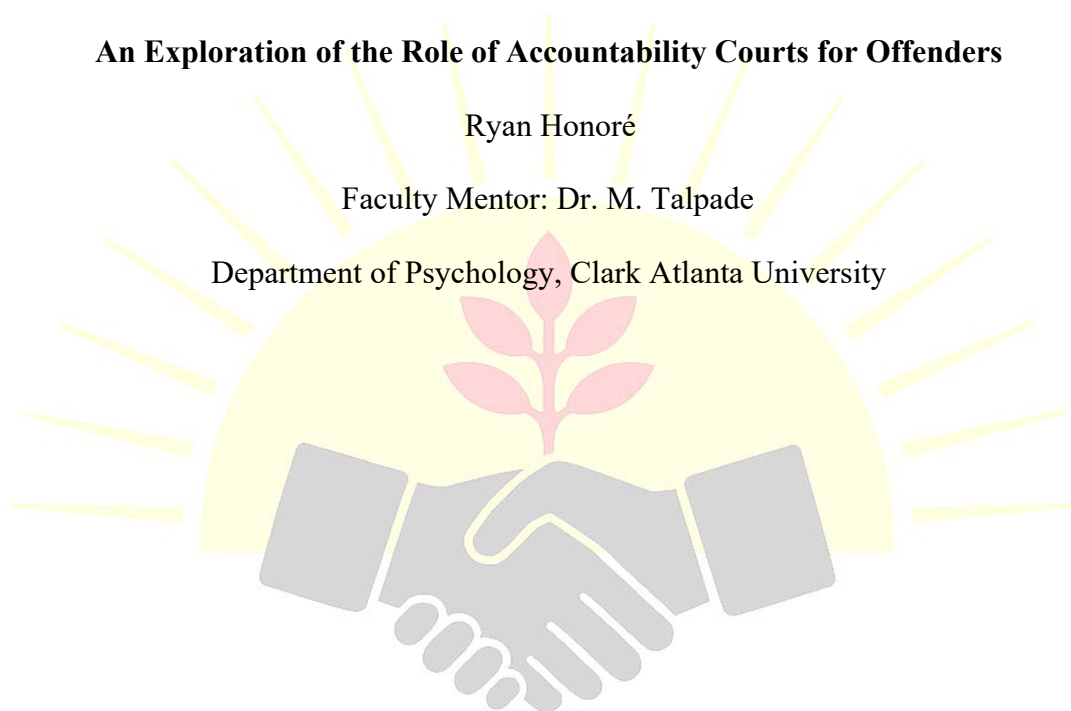


**An Exploration of the Role of Accountability Courts for Offenders**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the perceptions of the role of accountability court coordinators in Georgia. Past research has focused on different rehabilitation programs impact of recidivism. This study is unique because it explores the role of accountability courts specifically. This study answered the following research questions: “What are the perceptions of coordinators of accountability courts in Georgia? What do coordinators of accountability courts in Georgia discover about the challenges participants face in completing the program? How do coordinators of accountability courts in Georgia describe their experiences with addressing recidivism?” The qualitative strategy used in this study was phenomenology. The sampling strategy to recruit participants was snowball sampling. Participants were 3 key informants who were coordinators of different accountability courts across the state of Georgia. The data collection method included interviews. Validation strategies included peer review and rich thick descriptions. Results were coded into the following themes: Support systems, building relationships, and efficacy. The findings indicated that coordinators view these themes as crucial to the success of accountability courts and their participants. Implications of the results for future studies include examining the perspective of participants in accountability court programs. The results of this study can contribute to the field of forensic psychology and help initiate positive change for accountability courts and rehabilitation.

*Keywords:* recidivism, accountability courts, rehabilitation, forensic, psychology

## **An Exploration of the Role of Accountability Courts for Offenders**

Studying accountability courts is critical in the effort to lower recidivism and provide individuals with the necessary resources to successfully reintegrate into society. These courts serve as an alternative to traditional incarceration by addressing underlying issues such as substance use disorders and mental health disorders. Without sufficient research into the effectiveness of accountability courts, the criminal justice system may continue to rely on measures that fail to rehabilitate offenders, leading to the continued cycle of incarceration. Current research focuses on general recidivism trends but does not address intervention programs such as accountability courts. In Georgia, felony reconviction rates have remained consistently above 25% across various facilities in recent years. However, accountability courts have demonstrated notable success. In fiscal year 2024, these programs achieved a 92% negative drug test rate and graduated over 1,800 participants. A lack of understanding and evaluation of these programs could result in missed opportunities for improvements that better support rehabilitation and public safety.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Recidivism Rates and Reentry Challenges**

A nationwide study conducted in Sweden, analyzed recidivism rates among 37,891 formerly incarcerated individuals (Yu et al., 2022). Their study found that 53.3% of participants reoffended at least once, regardless of prison security levels. These findings highlight the limited impact of incarceration alone on reducing recidivism and suggest that intervention programs may be more effective in reducing recidivism. This is supported by the Noland et al. (2022) study, which further examined recidivism among mentally disordered offenders

in Sweden. Their study found that 86.3% of individuals did not reoffend, but among those who did, violent crimes were common. These findings indicate that specialized forensic psychiatric care may be effective in reducing recidivism among certain populations, but additional measures may be needed to prevent violent reoffending. Substance use has been identified as a significant contributing factor of recidivism. Individuals with substance use disorders and antisocial personality disorders were significantly more likely to reoffend (Morgan & Del Fabbro, 2018). These findings align with those of Seid et al. (2022), who reported a 30.6% prevalence of antisocial personality disorder among incarcerated individuals in Ethiopia. Taken together, these studies emphasize the need for targeted interventions addressing both substance use and personality disorders as part of rehabilitation efforts.

Research has consistently shown a strong correlation between mental health disorders and recidivism rates. A retrospective cohort study examined 413 women who completed a voluntary prison health program in Australia. The study found that women with prior substance use issues and mental health conditions were more likely to return to custody (Edwards et al., 2024). Another study explored the impact of solitary confinement on individuals with mental illness. Their findings indicated that extended periods of isolation worsened mental health conditions, resulting in an increasing need for mental health services and in turn raising the likelihood of reoffending (Silverthorn & Zgoba, 2024). These findings highlight the need for mental health services in both correctional facilities and post-release programs to enhance outcomes.

Social environment also plays a crucial role in considering recidivism risk. A study conducted by McCuish and Lussier (2025) investigated the relationship between youth psychopathy traits and continued offending in adulthood. This supports the cumulative disadvantage theory, which suggests that social disadvantages increase the likelihood of reoffending. Another study explored the impact of childhood trauma and attributional styles on recidivism in South Korea (Jung and Lee 2021). Their findings revealed that childhood trauma significantly increased the likelihood of reoffending. These results highlight the direct impact of adverse childhood experiences on recidivism, emphasizing the importance of trauma-focused interventions.

### **Research Question/s**

What are the perceptions of supervisors of accountability courts in Georgia?

#### **Subquestions:**

1. What do supervisors of accountability courts in Georgia discover about the challenges participants face in completing the program?
2. How do supervisors of accountability courts in Georgia describe their experiences with addressing recidivism?

### **Qualitative Research Orientation**

A qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it focuses on understanding the experiences of accountability court coordinators. Specifically, a phenomenological approach, which is appropriate because it allows for an understanding of the coordinators lived experience.

## **Research Design**

### **Role of Researcher**

My philosophical assumptions are grounded in an advocacy ontology, which recognizes multiple realities and emphasizes the importance of amplifying the voices of those working within systems of social change. This study specifically focuses on the lived experiences of accountability court coordinators in both adult and juvenile programs, aiming to understand their roles, challenges, and contributions to reducing recidivism. My personal interest in recidivism to this work, as well as prior experience as an intern with a mental health court, informs my understanding. I acknowledge that my perspective and background may influence the research process and will aim to mitigate potential biases. To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, I used validation strategies such as peer review and rich, thick descriptions to accurately capture the experience of the participants.

### **Sample Size**

For this study, I interviewed three accountability court coordinators who work in the state of Georgia.

### **Sample and Context**

The sample for this study included three accountability court coordinators working in different cities across the state of Georgia. Participants were in their 30s and 40s, and the group consisted of two women and one man. All participants held master's degrees and had professional experience relevant to their roles.

Participants worked within diverse communities and were from different accountability court programs.

### **Sampling Procedure/Ethical Considerations**

This study used snowball and criterion sampling to recruit participants. To be included, individuals had to be accountability court coordinators working in Georgia. An initial participant was identified and help refer additional coordinators for the study. Interviews (see Appendix A) were conducted to gather insights into their experiences. All participants received a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, their rights, and how their information would be kept confidential. Participation was voluntary and ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process.

**Data validation.** To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study used peer review and rich, thick description. Peer review involved discussing findings with colleagues to reduce bias and strengthen the analysis. Rich, thick description provided direct quotes from coordinators, helping readers understand the context.

### **Results**

This study aimed to understand the perspectives of accountability court coordinators regarding the key factors that support recovery and long-term success, Data collected during indepth interviews was analyzed and coded using ATLAS.ti software to identify themes. Three major themes emerged from the analysis, highlighting the ways in which support, relationships, and structure contribute to participant growth and success in accountability court programs.

## **Themes**

### ***Support System***

The support system theme highlights the importance of both guidance and accountability in helping accountability court participants succeed. This theme includes the codes: structured support and accountability. Staff provide consistent care, meeting participants where they are and offering encouragement. One participant said, “Acceptance of who they [participant] are and meeting them where they are, that’s huge.” Accountability measures such as drug tests and curfew checks add structure and help participants stay on track. As one participant explained, “curfew checks just to make sure they’re not involved in any criminal activity.” Together support and accountability create a stable environment where change is possible.

### ***Building Relationships***

Building relationships focuses on the strong personal connections formed between staff and accountability court participants. This theme includes the codes: connection, emotional, and impact. These relationships often feel like family as one participant stated, “there were some of them I saw as my own kids.” Even participants who do not complete the program value the bond created. One participant explained that recently they have had previous accountability court participants call “just wanting to talk or say thank you even if they didn’t complete the program.” The impact code captures how meaningful those relationships can be. One coordinator stated they recently received a call from a previous participant who had been diagnosed with cancer, and he wanted to say

“goodbye” to her. These personal relationships help participants feel supported and understood, which can be just as important as the program structure itself.

### ***Efficacy***

The efficacy theme focuses on how accountability courts promote meaningful growth and lasting results. It includes the codes: cognitive, progress, and efficiency. A turning point for many participants comes when they start to believe in their potential. One coordinator reflected on when participants realize “they don’t have to be what they’re growing up to be...that finally sinks in with them,” showing a key cognitive shift. In terms of progress, accountability courts celebrate achievements, one coordinator stated, “if this kid finished school and when we took them in they were failing...that’s a success for me.” Finally, the focus on efficiency is evident in how data is used to improve results, “we submit data to the state and data is everything,” one coordinator stated. These combined elements show that accountability courts can support individual transformation and deliver trackable outcomes.

### **Discussion**

This study found that accountability court coordinators view support, structure, and relationships as essential in participant success. Coordinators emphasized the importance of meeting participant where they are, maintaining consistent accountability, and building longterm connections. These elements are seen as crucial for encouraging recovery and behavior change. The findings align with previous research showing that supportive staff and structured environments improve outcomes in rehabilitation programs (Yu et al., 2022; Noland et al.,

2022). Future research could triangulate participant perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to the success in accountability courts. The findings of this study are useful for the field of forensic psychology and can use the perspectives for optimal outcomes for the participants of accountability courts.

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## Appendix A

### Ice Breakers:

- How are you doing today?
- Where would you be at this time if you had a choice?

### Screening Questions:

- What is your job title?
- Could you tell me a bit about your background and how you became involved in accountability courts?

### Interview Questions:

- In your experience what tends to be the most satisfying part of serving in an Accountability Court?
- How well do you know the participants of this Accountability Court?
- What is the key to being successful in completing an Accountability Court Program?
- What factors do you think contribute to the success or failure of participants in an accountability court program?
- How do supervisors measure the success of accountability courts?
- How effectively do you think accountability courts address the underlying causes of recidivism?
- What recommendations do you have for ensuring the success of accountability courts and reducing recidivism (repeat offending)?

