



## An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

# Best Practices for Developing a Final Report for a Reentry Program Evaluation

## Introduction

Several products can be used to document the findings from reentry program evaluations to reach various audiences effectively, including infographics, conference presentations, peer-reviewed journal articles, brief reports, and technical reports. One of the most important evaluation products is a final research report, which typically serves as formal, comprehensive documentation of a program and the participant outcomes and/or systems changes that were achieved (based on the full set of evaluation data collected). The final report clearly and effectively conveys detailed information about a program or initiative and its evaluation findings to an array of audiences, including those who are unfamiliar with the project. It can help establish the scientific credibility of an evaluation for research audiences (by providing technical documentation of the methodology), support replication or expansion of the program for practitioner audiences (who may need very specific detail about the program components that were delivered and implementation challenges that were encountered), and provide accountability for external funding providers (agencies may be interested in documentation regarding client enrollment, client characteristics, and achieved outcomes). Most funding agencies require awardees to produce and deliver a final report near the end of a project's period of performance.

A comprehensive technical final report can and should be accompanied by shorter, more user-friendly products that are intended for practitioner, policy, and other audience types. Such products might focus on specific aspects of program implementation or outcomes and use attention-grabbing strategies to reach specific audiences. These products can include links to the comprehensive final report (if publicly available) so that readers who are interested in additional detail can access it easily.

Importantly, narrative and visual storytelling can be an effective way to demonstrate program impact. For more information, please see the following resource brief:

<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/storytellingConveyImpactBrief.pdf> 



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Sometimes, the funding agency sets the requirements for the content that must be included in a final research report. However, when funders do not provide this information, it can be difficult to determine what details to include or what structure to use in a final report. This resource brief presents recommendations for an organizational structure, key sections, and specific content to include in a high-quality final research report.

To jump to specific sections of this resource brief, click on their titles in the sidebar.

Not all of the report sections covered in this resource brief will be relevant to every evaluation. Also, not every evaluation will include the three following evaluation components, which are discussed in this resource brief:




- **Process (or implementation) evaluation.** A process evaluation assesses the implementation of a program (e.g., populations served, services delivered, program fidelity, other implementation aspects) or systems change initiative (e.g., validating a risk assessment tool, changing system intake procedures, reducing racial inequities, mapping a network of information and resource sharing among relevant stakeholders).
- **Outcome evaluation.** An outcome evaluation is an empirical assessment of the program's effects (typically conducted by comparing recidivism and other participant outcomes targeted by the program to those of a comparison group receiving standard reentry programming) or system changes (e.g., building capacity to serve people, improving technological barriers to implementing programming, or leveraging information management systems to better track participant outcomes).
- **Cost study.** A cost study may include a cost analysis (which documents program costs), a cost-effectiveness analysis (which assesses the trade-off between program costs and outcomes), a cost-benefit analysis (which assesses the degree to which program benefits outweigh costs), or any combination of these.

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## How to Position a Program for a More Comprehensive Evaluation in the Future

A reentry program evaluation can answer basic questions about a program, such as how the program was implemented, how it might be improved, whether it improved outcomes for program participants, and whether it was cost effective. Including different evaluation components will increase the utility of an evaluation. For guidance on how to position a program for a more comprehensive evaluation in the future, see the following resources produced by the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance project:

Improving evaluation readiness:

- Resource brief:  
<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/evalReadinessBrief.pdf> 
- Planning guide:  
<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/resources/program-evaluation-readiness-planning-guide> 
- Animated video:  
<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/multimedia/video-evaluation-readiness-reentry-programs> 

Why does rigorous evaluation matter?

- Infographic:  
<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/multimedia/infographic-why-conduct-rigorous-evaluation> 
- Animated video:  
<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/multimedia/video-why-conduct-rigorous-evaluation> 

Some evaluations may focus only on one component (e.g., process evaluation). For example, this design is appropriate for pilot programs or for programs undergoing rapid change, where evaluations focus on providing formative feedback on program processes or documenting program fidelity. In contrast, evaluations for more established programs might focus more on assessing participant outcomes or determining the program's cost-effectiveness. Some evaluations may examine the organizational or interorganizational arrangements of agencies that serve people who are reentering their communities and assess whether the program created a positive systems change to either the institutional structures (e.g., policies, laws, and regulations; funding flows and resource allocations; culture, norms, and standard operating procedures; and knowledge bases) or the pathways (i.e., a set of programs and services designed to move clients through a progression of steps, supporting them to achieve positive outcomes).

A final report will include only the evaluation components that are relevant based on a project's evaluation design; therefore, not all subsections within each evaluation component discussed in this resource brief will be relevant to every evaluation (e.g., the Comparison Group Strategy subsection of the Outcomes Evaluation chapter would not be relevant for an evaluation that does not include a comparison group). Following these guidelines will assist research teams in producing a clear, structured, and sufficiently detailed report for most audiences.

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## What to Include in the Front Matter

The first few pages of a final research report include basic bibliographic details about the report. Recommendations for specific content to include in this section are as follows:

- **Title page.** List the report title, grant or federal award number (if applicable), month and year of submission, organization or funder for which the report was prepared (if applicable), and the authors and their contact information. It can also be helpful to include a suggested citation so that readers can easily cite a project team's work in the correct format.
- **Acknowledgements.** Include a brief narrative listing anyone the team would like to thank for their contribution to the research (e.g., members of the research team not listed as authors, study participants, program staff, partnering organizations).
- **Required disclaimers.** Include any disclaimers required by the project team's organization or funder. Disclaimers typically include the funding source for the study (if applicable) and a notation that the points of view presented in the report are those of the authors and not of the agency.
- **Table of contents.** Include headers for chapters/sections and appendices. The table of contents may also include a list of tables and list of exhibits (e.g., figures, graphics), if applicable. The table of contents can be formatted with hyperlinks to automate navigation to specific report sections for readers so they can easily access the content of interest.



## What to Include in the Executive Summary

The executive summary is one of the most important sections of a final report. It should be a stand-alone, concise summary of the report for readers who may not read the entire report. Consider including the following details in the executive summary:

- **Report highlights.** Include in this section a one- to two-page summary of the program that was evaluated, the evaluation components, the key findings, and the high-level implications of the findings.
- **Section-specific summaries.** After the report highlights, briefly summarize (in less than one page each) the contents of each section of the report (e.g., introduction, methodology, process evaluation findings, outcome evaluation findings, cost study findings, conclusions and implications). Align the findings in the report with the components in the evaluation.



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## What to Include in the Introduction

The introduction informs readers about the project, including the program and the evaluation, and its importance. It provides the context for why the program was designed in a particular manner and why the evaluation was conducted. The introduction should include the following topics:



- **Background/statement of the problem.** In this section, establish the need for the particular reentry program that was delivered. This section might describe the context in the community in which the reentry program was delivered (e.g., high recidivism rates, other unmet needs) and specify reentry populations with needs or challenges that historically have not been addressed through “treatment as usual” in the jurisdiction, including the unique programming needs of this population. In this section, if available, cite statistics or findings from literature (e.g., historical recidivism rates, unmet needs among the target population) to quantify the magnitude of the problem.
- **Program (or initiative) overview.** This section will summarize the reentry program that was implemented in response to the background/statement of the problem. Key programmatic details to include are as follows:
  - ♦ **Program or initiative origins.** State how the program or initiative was developed (including the receipt of any grant funding, the lead agency, and the key partnerships involved in program or collaborative development) and describe when it was implemented.
  - ♦ **Program or initiative goals and objectives.** List the goals and objectives of the program or initiative.
  - ♦ **Overview of the target population.** Describe the population that the program intended to serve, including eligibility criteria. (Note that if an evaluation included a process evaluation, authors would include more detailed information on the population served in a section on program implementation findings, as described below).
  - ♦ **Overview of the treatment or services provided.** In this section, provide a high-level overview of the program model that was delivered, including pre- and post-release services and components (if applicable).
  - ♦ **Program or initiative logic model.** Include a simplified program logic model describing the program resources and inputs, activities, and the intended outcomes and outputs. This visual aid shows readers the connection between the program design, the activities and services that were delivered, and the intended outputs and outcomes.

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- **Evaluation overview.** In this section, conclude the introduction by setting the stage for the evaluation. Briefly explain what the purpose of the evaluation was, which organization conducted the evaluation (e.g., external research partner), and when it was conducted. If any previous evaluations of the program have been conducted, briefly summarize their findings and compare and contrast the goals of the previous and current evaluations. This section provides context for the importance of the evaluation, whereas the methodology section provides much more detail on the evaluation goals and objectives.

## What to Include in the Methodology Section

The methodology section of a final evaluation report provides detailed information about the specific goals and objectives of the evaluation and the methods used. This section is critical for establishing the scientific credibility of the evaluation. It documents the evaluation components, data sources, and statistical methods that were used to evaluate the program. The following topics are typically covered in a methodology section, but not every topic will be applicable to every evaluation:



- **Evaluation goals and objectives.** List the specific goals and objectives of the evaluation and key research questions that the evaluation intended to address.
- **Evaluation components and purpose.** Next, describe the specific evaluation components that were included, such as a process evaluation, outcome evaluation, and cost study. Also describe the purpose of each component.
- **Evaluation framework or evaluation-focused logic model.** It is important to show how the evaluation components (and key research questions or outcomes examined) connect to the program or initiative logic model. An evaluation framework or evaluation-focused logic model often includes a graphical overview of the program (e.g., resources or inputs, program activities, and outcomes and outputs) that demonstrates the rationale for including the components in the evaluation, as well as the specific outcomes measured by the evaluation. For an example of an evaluation-focused logic model, see Appendix A.
- **Detailed description of each evaluation component.** For each evaluation component (e.g., process evaluation, outcome evaluation), include the following methodological details:
  - ♦ **A description of the study sample.** Describe the sample for each data collection activity (e.g., focus group, web-based survey of program staff, program cohort for which administrative data were obtained). For each sample, describe (if applicable) the methods used to select and recruit study participants, the

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response rate, the final sample size (e.g., number of participants who completed the data collection activity), and the demographic composition of the sample. This information will help inform readers of the representativeness of the sample and inform other jurisdictions of its potential generalizability.

- **For outcome evaluations**, consider starting with a description of the study design that was used to assess the impact of the program (e.g., experimental design, matched comparison group design, nonexperimental design). This will lead into a discussion of how the treatment and comparison groups were each selected (as well as of other details, such as the final sample size and the demographic composition of each group). If the project team used either an experimental or matched comparison group design in the evaluation, include details such as how individuals were randomized to conditions or what matching procedures were employed to select the comparison group. If the evaluation included any weighting procedures or validity checks to establish the comparability of the treatment and comparison groups (e.g., “balance checks”<sup>1</sup> after implementing propensity score modeling), include these details.
- ♦ **Data sources and data collection methods.** For each evaluation component, describe the data sources that were used. For a process evaluation, this might include focus groups, web-based surveys of staff, or review of program administrative data. For an outcome evaluation, this might include the acquisition of administrative recidivism data or longitudinal interviews with treatment and comparison group members. For each data source, describe how the data were collected or acquired (e.g., informed consent procedures, instrument development procedures, content or data elements).
- ♦ **Key constructs or outcomes.** For each evaluation component and data source, list the key constructs or outcomes of focus and how they were operationalized. A process evaluation might include constructs such as a client satisfaction scale or program completion rates. An outcome evaluation might include outcomes such as 12-month rearrest rates or employment status 6 months post release.
- ♦ **Analyses that were conducted.** For each evaluation component, describe the analyses that were conducted to address the research questions. Some analyses might use a single data source (e.g., synthesis of focus group findings), whereas other analyses might integrate various data sources (e.g., an analysis of whether the receipt of certain program services was associated with better recidivism outcomes). For both quantitative and qualitative data, provide details on how the data were cleaned and what validation checks, if any, were run. For quantitative data, detail the descriptive statistics that were collected and the outcome models that were run (control variables, independent variables, statistical techniques, etc.). For qualitative data, describe the procedures for coding or identifying themes and synthesizing findings across respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> “Balance” is determined by assessing the average difference in pre-treatment characteristics between the members of the treatment group and those in the control or comparison group.

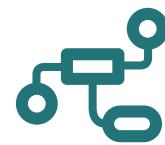


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Authors may want to include supplemental methodological materials in appendices. Materials such as data collection instruments, recruitment materials, and other technical details (e.g., tables) may be of interest to some readers and are important to document in the report.

## What to Include in the Process Evaluation Findings Section

A good organizational strategy for presenting evaluation findings in the final report is to dedicate one chapter or major section to present the findings from each of the evaluation components. The process evaluation findings section typically documents who was served, what services they received, and what the evaluation found regarding how the program was implemented and how the program implementation was perceived by clients and staff.



The specific findings to include will depend on what the project team measured in the process evaluation. However, some recommendations are as follows:

- **Basic performance metrics on whom the program or initiative served.** This section may include a quantitative summary of how many individuals were actually enrolled in the program or initiative and what their characteristics were. If applicable, authors may also include metrics on how many individuals were referred, screened, classified as eligible, and declined the program. Client characteristics, such as demographics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, criminal history, risk level), are also important to report. Because this section follows the introduction and the program logic model, the reader will be familiar with the target population and eligibility criteria, but this summary will indicate whether the program was successful at enrolling the intended population and whether the evaluation found any kind of selection bias in recruitment and enrollment. Selection bias occurs when the group receiving the treatment systematically differs from the comparison group in ways that are related to the outcome.
- **Documentation of services participants received.** This may include a quantitative summary of the number and percentage of enrolled clients who were referred to, and who received, each service or program component, leveraging any data maintained by the program on service receipt (e.g., number and duration of sessions). This information establishes the “dosage” of the program and presents the uptake of core and ancillary services that the program intended to provide.
- **Fidelity assessment results.** If the process evaluation included a fidelity assessment of a particular evidence-based practice, include the findings of the assessment in this section.
- **Metrics on program completion rates.** This may include a quantitative summary of participants’ program enrollment status in terms of successful completion, unsuccessful termination, and dropout rates, for example. Where possible, report this information for various participant subgroups, such as by program cohort, gender, age, and race/ethnicity.



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- **Findings on participants' perceptions of the program or initiative.** Include any quantitative and qualitative findings from the process evaluation regarding how the program was perceived by clients, including level of satisfaction, perceptions of unmet needs, and perceptions of cultural responsiveness. Where possible, report satisfaction data for various participant subgroups, such as by program cohort, gender, age, and race/ethnicity.
- **Findings on staff members' perceptions of the program or initiative.** Include in this section any findings from the process evaluation regarding how the program was perceived by staff, including satisfaction metrics and perceptions of interagency collaboration and communication. This section may also include staff or partner perceptions of barriers to program implementation (e.g., startup challenges, ongoing implementation barriers), solutions employed to ameliorate barriers, and big-picture lessons learned regarding program implementation or replication.

## What to Include in the Outcome Evaluation Findings Section

This section of the final report typically includes findings on what impact the program had on client outcomes (e.g., recidivism, employment). Specific findings are based on the outcomes measured and the study design used, which will help determine whether the outcomes for the reentry program clients were significantly better than treatment as usual. Alternatively, some outcome evaluation findings provide information on whether an initiative effort led to a positive systems change (which in turn may lead to improved individual outcomes). Recommendations for what to include in this section/chapter are as follows:



- **Outcome evaluation findings on recidivism.** In this section, summarize key findings regarding the extent to which the program was associated with reductions in the recidivism outcomes measured in the evaluation. Include tables, figures, and charts showing the findings and the results of statistical tests conducted to assess the significance of the recidivism findings. Depending on the outcome evaluation design, this may include a comparison between the recidivism outcomes for those enrolled in the reentry program and either a baseline recidivism level or the recidivism outcomes of a comparison or control group. If the outcome evaluation examined recidivism outcomes for participant subgroups, include those findings. If recidivism outcomes were examined for multiple periods (e.g., 3, 6, and 12 months post release), include the findings for all periods. In supporting tables, it is helpful to include sample sizes, key estimates (e.g., mean number of new arrests, proportion of sample members with a new arrest), standard errors, and p values for significance tests. Figures and charts can be used to simplify key findings for readers.

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- **Outcome evaluation findings for other reentry outcomes.** If the outcome evaluation examined other outcomes (e.g., employment, housing, criminal thinking, financial independence), present those findings following the same recommendations as noted for recidivism outcomes.
- **Any other outcome evaluation findings.** Include other outcome evaluation findings, such as analyses of whether receipt of specific services or program components was associated with better outcomes, analyses examining mechanisms of change (e.g., whether reductions in criminal thinking were associated with long-term impacts on recidivism), or analyses of systems-level outcomes (e.g., community arrest rates, incarceration rates). As with the other outcome findings, provide sufficient technical detail to convey the findings.

## What to Include in the Cost Study Findings Section

If the evaluation included a cost study or economic evaluation, include a section or chapter summarizing those findings. Recommendations include the following:

- **Findings on program costs.** These findings might include the total amount spent on the program, the amount spent per spending category (e.g., type of service), the average program costs per enrolled participant, the average costs for the treatment-as-usual or comparison group, and any other program cost estimates that were derived from the cost study, such as the costs of specific services or program components.
- **Cost-benefit findings.** If the cost study included a cost-benefit analysis, report on the monetized outcomes or benefits achieved (based on the outcomes evaluation findings described in the previous section), the net benefits (i.e., difference between monetized benefits and program or comparison group costs), and the incremental net benefits (i.e., difference between monetized net benefits for program group and comparison group). Other cost-benefit results such as cost-benefit ratios and return of investment can also be summarized here. Include the results of any sensitivity analyses conducted around the base case. The sensitivity analysis technique is useful for determining the impact of potential changes in resources invested in the program on the outcome of the cost study.
- **Other cost findings.** If the cost study included a cost-effectiveness analysis or any other components, report on those findings in this section.




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## What to Include in the Conclusions and Implications Section

The last section in a final report will summarize and interpret key findings for various audiences and provide recommendations or implications for program, collaborative, or initiative improvement and policy. Specific content to include in this section is as follows:



- **Summary of the key findings from each evaluation component (process, outcome, cost).**
- **Discussion of the limitations of the evaluation and other considerations.**  
Acknowledge the methodological limitations of the evaluation (e.g., small sample size, low response rates) and how these limitations may have affected the findings (e.g., limited statistical power, caused selection bias). Note any other considerations that readers should keep in mind when interpreting evaluation findings (e.g., program modifications made due to the coronavirus 2019 pandemic, limited dosage of core program services, high participant dropout rates).
- **Interpretation of findings.** In addition to the discussion of the methodological limitations and other considerations, include a discussion of plausible explanations for the findings that were observed. Integrate findings across all data sources to identify the main themes. If both process and outcome studies were included, it would be very useful to use the process evaluation findings to help explain and interpret outcome study findings. For more guidance on integrating process and outcome findings, see [https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/usingEvalResultsImproveServiceDelivery\\_0.pdf](https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/usingEvalResultsImproveServiceDelivery_0.pdf) 
- **Recommendations or implications for program improvement, expansion, or replication.** Highlight needed adaptations or areas for program improvement suggested from the findings, drawing from both process and outcome findings (if relevant). This may include specific recommendations for pre- or post-release program implementation or for community-based service providers, community supervision agencies, or other partners. If relevant, discuss lessons learned regarding program implementation for other jurisdictions that might consider implementing a similar program (e.g., startup challenges to prepare for and ways to mitigate these challenges). If relevant, discuss recommendations for adapting the program to other populations or other service delivery settings.
- **Recommendations or implications for policy.** Discuss the implications of the findings for state or local policy (e.g., jail or prison policy, community supervision policy, law enforcement policy, funding decisions, legislative appropriations). If applicable, incorporate findings from the cost study to discuss potential cost savings associated with sustaining or expanding the program.
- **Next steps.** Describe whether and how the program or initiative will continue beyond the evaluation period and what further evaluation activities will be conducted, if any.

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## Other Items to Include in a Final Report

Final technical reports often contain supplemental materials to provide technical documentation of various tools or materials that were used in the study, along with details not appropriate to include in the body of the report. This content may include the following:



- **References.** Include full citations for all references cited in the report.
- **Program logic model.** Include this as an appendix if it is not included in the body of the report.
- **Data collection instruments.** If relevant, include interview guides, focus group protocols, and surveys.
- **Recruitment materials.** If relevant, consider including screening forms, recruitment brochures, or other materials in an appendix.
- **A glossary of technical terms or abbreviations.**
- **Detailed descriptions of study samples.** These descriptions could include tables summarizing background characteristics for participant and control group members.
- **Other supplemental data tables.** This could include the full statistical models run (with all control variables), the results of sensitivity analyses, and the results of balance checks (for weighting).

## For Further Reading: Sample Reports and Other Resources



### Sample reports

- This final report presents the findings from a cross-site evaluation of the Adult Offender Reentry Demonstration Projects (AORDP), which included process, outcome, and cost studies of SCA reentry programs in seven states: <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251703.pdf>
- This final report presents the findings from a mixed-methods and quasi-experimental evaluation of the Seattle Women's Reentry (SWR) initiative: [https://www.seattleu.edu/media/college-of-arts-and-sciences/departments/criminaljustice/crimeandjusticeresearchcenter/documents/SWR\\_FinalReport.pdf](https://www.seattleu.edu/media/college-of-arts-and-sciences/departments/criminaljustice/crimeandjusticeresearchcenter/documents/SWR_FinalReport.pdf)
- This final report presents the findings from process and outcome studies of a randomized controlled trial of the Harlem Parole Reentry Court: <https://www.courtinnovation.org/sites/default/files/documents/Harlem%20Final%20Report%20-%20June.pdf>



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## Additional Resources

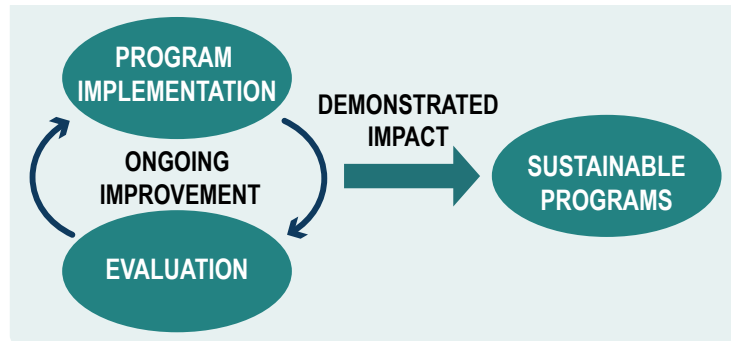
- *Developing an Effective Evaluation Report*, from the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, summarizes the general topics included in a final evaluation report by describing the “What,” “How,” and “Why it Matters” questions about the program. It also provides an overview of the specific sections included in a final report. Finally, it describes the steps involved in conducting participatory evaluation reporting: [https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/tobacco-control/pdfs/developing\\_evaluation\\_report.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/tobacco-control/pdfs/developing_evaluation_report.pdf)
- *Writing a Research Report*, from the University of Adelaide, provides a high-level description of the general sections to include in a research report, recommendations for content to include in each section, and steps for developing the report: <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/sites/default/files/docs/learningguide-writingaresearchreport.pdf> 
- *A Short Guide to Writing Your Final Year Project Report Or MSc (studylib.net)*, from Cardiff University, provides guidance on the general sections to include in a final report but also includes more specific advice, including examples of language to use when writing these sections and content to include in each section: <https://studylib.net/doc/18697071/a-short-guide-to-writing-your-final-year-project-report> 



# Best Practices for Developing a Final Report for a Reentry Program Evaluation

## The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project supports Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in conducting more rigorous evaluations that lead to data-driven program improvement and demonstrated impact and that support programs' long-term sustainability. For more information about the project, contact [ESTTA@rti.org](mailto:ESTTA@rti.org).



The ES TTA Project is conducted by RTI International and the Center for Court Innovation with funding from Grant No. 2019-MU-BX-K041 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



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## Appendix. Evaluation-Focused Logic Model Tool for Reentry Programs

