

# Participatory Research: What it is and how it can strengthen your reentry program

Second Chance Month

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# Presenters

- Rachel Swaner, Center for Court Innovation
- Monica Sheppard, RTI International
- Michael Cannon, Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership
- Elizabeth Johnston, Family Services of Montgomery County



# Overview of Today's Webinar

- What is participatory research?
- Benefits to participatory researchers
- Benefits to reentry program evaluation
- Thinking through when, who, and challenges
- Incorporating participatory approaches into existing evaluations
- Real-world application



# What Is Participatory Research?

- Who is an expert? People who have...
  - Knowledge through study in an academic setting
  - Knowledge through cultural practices and community history
  - Knowledge through personal experience
- Participatory research is an ***approach to knowledge creation that recognizes multiple forms of expertise*** from research professionals, communities, and people with lived experience
- ***Involving as researchers*** people with these different types of knowledge as it relates to the topic being studied
- For reentry programs: former participants, people who have been in jail or prison, family members who help loved ones return home



# The Research Process



- Determining which outcomes are most important to measure to determine reentry program success
- Conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups with current and former reentry participants
- Presenting evaluation results to funders, program staff, and community members

# Importance for Reentry Program Evaluation

- The power of evaluators
- Well-known impact of incarceration on
  - Employment and income
  - Health and mental health
  - Family relationships
  - Stigma
- Sustainability of funding may depend on evaluation results
- What matters most to the affected community?



# Benefits to Participatory Researchers



- Provides meaningful jobs for people with lived experience
- Builds social capital
- Increases power for those affected by the criminal legal system
- Teaches analytic skills
- Offers opportunities for additional skill development
- Promotes the growth of leadership
- Trains participatory researchers

# Benefits to the Research

- Transforming unequal power dynamics
- Asking different research questions
- Creating more culturally responsive data collection materials
- Improving reliability of measures
- Gaining access to previously hard-to-reach populations → more generalizable findings
- Eliciting more honest responses from research participants → higher quality and more valid data
- Increasing the richness and nuance of interpretation of findings
- Making recommendations more likely to meet community needs
- Democratizing data
- Disseminating to new audiences

# Identifying Outcomes That Matter to Communities

Sobriety

Trauma  
symptoms

Self-esteem

Self-efficacy

Family  
reunification

Support  
system

Housing  
stability

Quality of life

Life skills



# When? Who?

When is participatory research a good fit?

- Time and resources available to properly train and acclimate participatory researchers
- Research and analysis relies on intimate knowledge of the community being studied
- Concern that the affected community would not otherwise participate in research activities

Who should be involved?

- Program participants
- People who have experienced incarceration
- Family members
- Those who interact with reentry population (faith-based leaders, service providers)
- Academics interested in reentry

# Always Easy? No!

- Differing positions of power
- Token inclusion
- Who owns the data and findings?
- More time because of the need for:
  - Trust-building
  - Training
  - Joint decision-making
- Data collection in correctional facilities



# What If My Evaluation Is Already Under Way?

- It's not too late!
- Smaller project to answer new or refine old research questions
- Sample project expansions could include primary data collection with participants or family members to understand...
  - Why participants have dropped out
  - What larger structural issues make it challenging to succeed even when fully engaged
  - What factors increase trust between participants and staff
  - Why there has been staff turnover
  - What family members think of the program
  - What additional services are desired

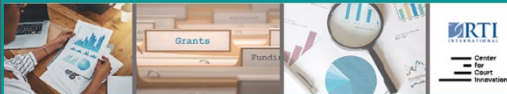


# Application to Reentry Programs

- Some reentry programs have already hired people with lived experience as program staff
- Experiences from Chicago Workforce Partnership and Family Services of Montgomery County:
  - Background and role
  - How lived experience has benefited their reentry program
  - How working at a reentry program has benefited them
  - Challenges incorporating someone with lived experience
  - How lived experience could benefit the evaluation
    - New outcomes not captured in existing research
    - Benefits of credible messenger conducting interviews and surveys
    - Different types of dissemination



# Participatory Research & Racial Equity Research Briefs



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

## Participatory Research: What Is It and How Can It Strengthen Your Reentry Program Evaluation?

### Introduction

When you think of a researcher, what image comes to mind? Where is the person located? What credentials do they have? What makes them an expert?

Experts are not always from formal institutions. People have expertise about their own lives and experiences, and communities have cultural practices and wisdom that are often passed down for generations. Very often, however, people leading research and evaluation studies do not include these experts on their team, defaulting to including only those with academic knowledge or a social science background. This omission can lead to missing out on essential information that could not only strengthen a research or evaluation project but also make the recommendations that come out of it more likely to meet community needs.

This brief provides an overview of **participatory research**, an approach to knowledge creation that recognizes multiple forms of expertise from research professionals, communities, and people with lived experience. It highlights different ways that reentry programs can strengthen the evaluations of their programs by involving—as members of the research team—people affected by the criminal legal system and incarceration, and it highlights the value that doing so will add to a program and evaluation. This brief is intended to be useful for reentry programs that are considering using participatory research and would like some guidance on getting started, as well as for programs that are already implementing this approach and would like to enhance their efforts. In addition, it can be used by reentry programs that currently involve individuals with lived experience in their program delivery and are interested in building on this role to include research and evaluation activities.

**What is “lived experience”?**

When we talk about including people with lived experience as researchers on an evaluation team, what do we mean? We are referring to hiring people who have the “personal and unique perspective” that comes with having been affected in some way by the issue being studied, and understanding that those experiences—and the knowledge gained from them—are shaped by characteristics such as race, class, and gender (Boydell, 2008, p. 518).

For reentry programs, this could mean hiring as co-researchers former program participants, people who have spent time in jail or prison, or family members who have helped their loved ones return home after incarceration. They will have expertise and insight that may be lacking in people who have not been affected by incarceration or participated in reentry programming.

## Participatory Research



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

## Assessing and Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Reentry Programs Through Research and Evaluation

### Why Does Cultural Responsiveness Matter for Reentry Programs?

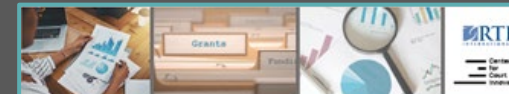
Given the diversity of justice-involved populations across different jurisdictions around the country, reentry programs cannot assume a one-size-fits-all approach regarding the appropriateness of the programming for the clients they serve. Effective programs must be culturally responsive to their clients, considering characteristics such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender identity, and other factors that may collectively shape clients' service needs and reentry experiences. Culturally responsive programs address the varied beliefs, practices, and cultures of client populations through respectful and inclusive approaches. In corrections and reentry programming, cultural responsiveness ties into the “responsivity” component of the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (Bonta & Andrews, 2007). The model emphasizes that social characteristics of the individual (including race and gender) should be incorporated when tailoring an intervention to maximize the individual's ability to learn and the likelihood of positive outcomes, including reduced recidivism.

Although more research is needed, some studies have found that culturally responsive programs are more effective than others in achieving reductions in recidivism, improvements in program engagement, and, potentially, influences on such intermediate outcomes as education, employment, family relationships, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. A recent meta-analysis of several studies showed that culturally responsive programming yielded lower recidivism for formerly incarcerated indigenous people (Sutherland et al., 2018), and a study by Shephard and colleagues (2018) provided evidence that cultural engagement in a correctional setting was a significant factor in reducing recidivism among indigenous people. A recent qualitative study of a culturally responsive education program for reentry-incarcerated young Black men indicated that programs that affirm participants' culture and social identities supported greater engagement in education, safe and supportive education environments, stronger relationships with instructors and staff, and potentially positive long-term outcomes (Jae et al., 2020) relative to programs that do not do so.

### Applying a Racial Equity Lens in Reentry Program Evaluation

This resource brief is part of a three-part series intended to assist reentry programs that are interested in applying a racial equity lens to their research and evaluation activities. The other briefs, which can be found on the National Reentry Resource Center website, focus on (1) **risk assessment and racial equity** and (2) **racial equity considerations when using recidivism as a core outcome in reentry program evaluation**.

## Cultural Responsiveness



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

## Racial Equity Considerations When Using Recidivism as a Core Outcome in Reentry Program Evaluations

### Recidivism Measurement Considerations and Limitations

Disrupting the cycle of recidivism, or a return to criminal activity after some type of intervention, is a central goal of most reentry initiatives. Such programs seek to address individuals' criminogenic needs and provide services that help participants successfully reintegrate into society and refrain from criminal activity. But measuring the outcome of recidivism in reentry program evaluations is not straightforward because no standard definition for recidivism exists. Most commonly, recidivism is operationalized as a return to the criminal justice system through arrest or reincarceration. In other words, rather than measuring criminal activity itself, researchers commonly measure criminal activity that has been detected by the criminal justice system.

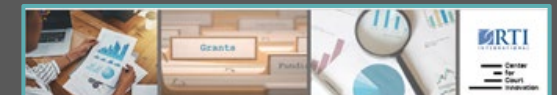
System-focused measures of recidivism (e.g., re-arrest, reincarceration) are certainly of importance to criminal justice system stakeholders, because whether or not individuals return to the system has major cost implications. Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees are required to report several system-focused recidivism outcomes for SCA program participants.<sup>1</sup> However, recidivism measures that focus on justice system involvement alone are limited and can reflect racial bias underlying the justice system. Because such metrics are not direct indicators of whether someone engages in criminal activity, they confound criminal justice system surveillance and decision-making (e.g., police activity, supervision efforts, prosecutor decisions about charging, sentencing policies) with individual behavior (Butts & Schwalbe, 2018; Stearn & Lowenkamp, 2016). Some policing practices, in particular, affect the racially disproportionate risk of criminal justice system contact (see Oberstar, and bias inherent in some crime control policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, grant grantees must report the number of program participants from among those at all participating, community colleges and universities completed who were arrested and/or on a new charge, were convicted of a new crime, had a re-arrest of the same offense to community corrections supervision, or were incarcerated after their release date.

## Racial Equity and Recidivism



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

## Risk Assessment and Racial Equity: Making Your Reentry Program Evaluation Part of the Conversation

### Calculated Risks: The Use of Standardized Tools for Risk Assessment

In every point in criminal justice system decision-making, system actors consider the likelihood of certain future events, such as criminal activity, acts of violence, re-arrest, and reincarceration. These considerations factor into decisions about pretrial release and bond amounts, sentencing, reentry planning, community supervision, and post-release services (Peters, Rempke, et al., 2017).

Historically, the assessment of such risks has relied on individual judgments—judgments that have been shown to be affected by the implicit biases of key decision-makers, particularly judges (Arnold et al., 2018). Beginning in the early twentieth century and with considerable momentum from the 1950s onward, many American jurisdictions have adopted standardized, mathematical models to guide judicial and parole decisions (Johnson et al., 2018).

Today, standardized risk assessment tools such as the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS) tool, the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R), and the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS) are often given before a person is released from jail or prison. Most Second Chance Act (SCA)-funded or other reentry programs rely on these scores to identify people who are eligible for participation in their pre- and post-release services, typically focusing on those who are assessed as being at a moderate to high risk of future arrest. Reentry programs may also use the results of risk assessments, when administered at intake and program completion, to assess whether a participant's risk of recidivism (based on dynamic criminogenic needs, rather than static factors) has decreased over their period of program participation.

Many important questions have been raised about how the use of standardized risk assessment tools might affect racial disparities in the criminal justice system, however. Reentry program evaluations may be well positioned to begin answering these questions.

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## Risk Assessment & Racial Bias

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