



Reentry Program Process Evaluation Strategies

Considerations When Conducting a Reentry Program Process Evaluation

Process evaluations *systematically* collect data from multiple stakeholders through various methods to better understand a program and its implementation. Evaluators can use results from this systematic investigation to help interpret outcome evaluation findings. Likewise, program staff can use the results to improve programming (see sidebar), and program leaders can also use the results to inform sustainability and funding decisions.

This brief explores essential considerations for designing and implementing a process evaluation of a reentry program. It describes how to develop a foundational understanding of the reentry program and then how to assess the program as it was implemented, focusing on reach, dosage, and fidelity. Finally, it describes how to use a process evaluation to examine barriers and facilitators to reentry program implementation.

Developing a Foundational Understanding of Your Reentry Program Model

Before reentry program evaluators can design a process (or outcome) evaluation, they first need to understand the program model. The program model describes whom the program plans to serve, program activities, and expected changes to participants that might result from program participation. It provides

Using Process Evaluation Findings to Inform Program Improvement

During program startup or ongoing implementation, process evaluation data can be used in real time in a formative manner to inform and improve ongoing performance. When an evaluation is complete, process evaluation results can help change, improve, expand, or replicate the program. For more on how to directly use process evaluation findings to inform reentry program improvements, see a related resource brief produced by the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance team: [Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs](#).

What Is a Program Model?

A program model specifies resources used to implement the program, the program’s target population, specific activities to be implemented (including activities to be provided to reentry program participants before and after release as well as staff trainings or systems-level interventions), expected outputs from the activities, and intended outcomes from each activity or set of activities.

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a roadmap for assessing how the program is implemented—the underlying goal of a process evaluation. A clear understanding of the program model is foundational to designing data collection tools to capture the information most relevant to the program.

A program model may have already been developed for some programs, often in a program logic model format that graphically illustrates key program components and the expected relationship between them. For other programs, a program model may not exist or be insufficient or outdated. Therefore, evaluators may need to engage in the foundational work of refining an existing program model or assisting program staff in developing such a model. This step may require reviewing existing materials (e.g., program descriptions, websites, recruitment materials) or engaging in conversations with program staff about the planned program components. Some programs, particularly newer programs that have never undergone an evaluation, might benefit from additional steps to improve their evaluation readiness (see [Improving Evaluation Readiness Planning Guide](#) developed by the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance [ES TTA] team). Table 1 lists potential data sources and action steps to develop a foundational understanding of a reentry program’s model.

Table 1. Data Sources and Action Steps for Documenting Program Model

Data Source	Action Step
Program documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Request any existing logic models and other program materials such as training manuals, curricula, program flyers, enrollment materials (e.g., intake forms), and organizational charts.• Use these materials to describe the program model.
Staff interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct staff interviews to understand the program model. Interviews can be formal, semistructured interviews or informal discussions with program staff that continue until evaluators fully understand the program model.• Ask questions such as the following:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– What resources do you have to run the program?– What activities does your program intend to offer to participants?– Does your program engage in activities beyond direct client work (e.g., staff training, systems-level changes)?– What outcomes are the program components intended to affect?
Draft model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepare a draft program model based on documents and interviews.• Share the model with program staff for feedback and revise it as needed.

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Based on the information gathered, a final model specifying how the program is to be implemented and intended outcomes should be developed. Appendix A includes a logic model template developed by the ES TTA project that evaluators may use for this purpose.

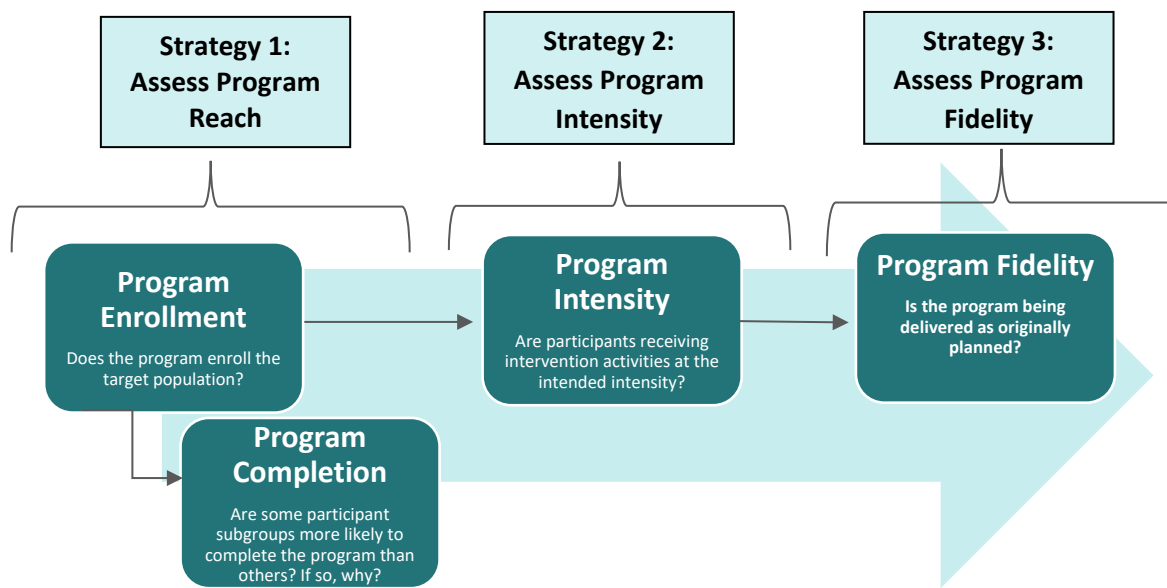
Assessing How the Program Is Implemented

Evaluators can design and document process evaluation activities once the program model is understood. Process evaluations often cover three aspects of program implementation: reach, dosage, and fidelity.

- **Reach:** Is the program reaching its intended target population?
- **Dosage:** How often is each program activity described in the program model offered, and how much do participants receive?
- **Fidelity:** How do program activities match what is in the program model? What adjustments were made, and why?

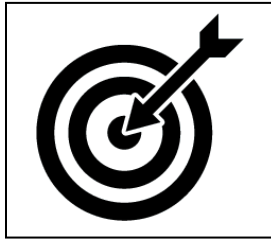
Collectively, these three areas can offer valuable information on how the program is being implemented and provide insight into areas where program adjustments can be made. Additional guidance on steps to undertake with each strategy is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Core Process Evaluation Strategies



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Strategy 1: *Assess Program Reach*: Is the Program *Reaching* the Target Population?



This strategy includes assessing whether the target population is served (i.e., whether those eligible for the program are identified for and enrolled in the program) and at a level consistent with the enrollment targets (e.g., whether the program meets numerical targets). Depending on the program’s logic model, this may apply to specific program components, or it may only apply to the overall program.

Why Is It Important to Assess Program Reach?

Assessing program reach can help determine whether programs are achieving enrollment targets and serving the intended population. Potential bias in program enrollment can also be detected (e.g., if all eligible clients are being recruited and enrolled) and implementation gaps based on the logic model identified (e.g., a service offering that clients do not appear to be receiving). Failure to understand whom the program enrolls can result in erroneous claims about a program’s performance. For example, a training program may have a high employment placement rate—a positive outcome. However, the program did not necessarily meet its goals if they were achieved by overenrolling people with extensive employment histories (underenrolling the intended target population of those with limited work histories). Therefore, the results of reach analyses can identify areas needing improvement and help create data-based plans for modifications.

As described below, specific steps to assessing reach include an examination of program enrollment and an examination of program completion. Both steps rely heavily on high-quality administrative data, such as data entered in a case management system (e.g., Credible, Apricot, Salesforce) and maintained by the program on its participants. Evaluators may need to work with program staff to get a data tracking system in place and complete necessary data sharing agreements allowing access to these data. Other data sources include interviews with program participants and staff, or observations.

Two Steps to Examine Program Reach

Examine
Program
Enrollment

Examine
Program
Completion

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Step 1: Examine program enrollment. To assess program enrollment, evaluators can review participant data, such as the program’s screening and intake data that contain demographic information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) and other information (e.g., risk level), to determine how demographic and other characteristics align with the eligibility criteria described in the original program model. In this case, a review of the program data can allow evaluators to determine if certain eligible groups are not being recruited or enrolled.

Evaluators should examine whether the characteristics of individuals screened for and enrolled in the program align with the eligibility criteria and to what *extent*. As evaluators review a program’s enrollment data, they can split the data into subgroups based on key demographic and other characteristics of interest (e.g., primary language spoken, gender, race/ethnicity, risk score). This arrangement can help to determine if some participant subgroups (that are eligible for the program) are under- or overrepresented. For example, for job training activities, data can be split according to participants’ primary spoken language. It may be found that non-English speakers are underrepresented (relative to their proportion in the target population). Further consultation with program staff may reveal that the activity no longer has a bilingual outreach worker and intake specialist and, thus, can inform hiring needs. A critical review of recruitment materials and procedures, particularly reliance on “word of mouth” or “passive” recruitment strategies, can also shed light on unmet enrollment targets or underrepresentation from some members of the target population.

Step 2: Examine program completion. Many reentry programs operationalize successful program completion in some manner (e.g., attendance at a certain number of postrelease case management sessions, completion of a particular curriculum) and track participants’ disposition accordingly (with unsuccessful completion including dropouts or terminations). Examining program completion rates and enrollment can offer a full understanding of how the program is (or is not) reaching the target population. One should not assume that a program is reaching its intended population simply because the population is enrolled—some participants may experience barriers that inhibit their continued program participation. Evaluators should review a program’s administrative data to compare the demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, primary language) of participants who complete the program to those who do not.

Consider These Questions When Examining Program Reach

- How much of the target population is served?
- Is the program filled to its specified capacity?
- Are all program participants members of the target population?
- Are certain subgroups over- or underrepresented?
- Why have people declined participation or dropped out?

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While program data can shed light on *who* does not complete the program, it does not necessarily explain *why* some people drop out. Some data sources, such as satisfaction surveys or interviews with staff and participants, are more suitable for answering such questions. Evaluators can work closely with program staff to develop a satisfaction survey to assess participant perceptions of the programs. The survey can be used retrospectively to understand early “risk factors” for dropping out. For example, evaluators can administer a brief satisfaction survey to program participants at 2 and 6 weeks into participation; assuming some participants drop out, evaluators can then analyze the first wave of data to identify characteristics associated with subsequent dropping out. The survey could include items that target domains such as program accessibility (e.g., “The training is scheduled at a time that is convenient”) and cultural competency (e.g., “The facilitator is not respectful of my cultural background”). It can also include open-ended questions (e.g., “What do you like least about this training?”). Divergent responses to these questions between participants who remain and those who leave the program may offer insight into *why* some participants leave the program. Table 2 summarizes data sources and possible action steps when assessing program reach.

Table 2. Assessing Program Reach

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
Program Enrollment	Program data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review program screening and enrollment data to assess how the characteristics of enrolled participants align with the program eligibility criteria.
	Staff interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask program staff about hard-to-reach populations, recruitment methods, and barriers to service. Interviewing frontline staff, outreach workers, and intake specialists can be helpful.
Program Completion	Program data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review program data and compare the demographic characteristics (or other characteristics) of participants who complete the program to those who drop out.
	Satisfaction survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administer periodic satisfaction surveys and then compare program satisfaction responses of participants who complete and who do not complete the program. Design satisfaction surveys to include open-ended questions to assess perceptions and program quality (e.g., what did you like least?).

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Table 2. Assessing Program Reach (continued)

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
	Staff interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask program staff about participant groups that have difficulty completing the program and why.
	Participant interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask participants about barriers to participation, perceptions concerning services, and program satisfaction.

Strategy 2: Assess Program Intensity

Examining program intensity includes an assessment of program dosage, which relates to how much of a program is offered and received by participants. “Dosage” comes from the medical field—how much of a medication, or dosage, does someone need to recover from their illness? Concerning social programs, dosage refers to how much of a program’s activities a participant needs to achieve the intended outcomes. Therefore, dosage typically quantifies program activities to determine how much a participant received. In the context of reentry programs, quantifying the duration of overall program or postrelease participation (when many participants often discontinue receiving services) is also an essential component of dosage. In general, a higher dosage or a greater duration of participation is not necessarily “better,” as participant service needs and responsivity are key components. For example, Risk-Needs-Responsivity tools assess program participants as they are enrolled to inform intensity and type of services given risk of reoffending. In such instances, linking participants to a limited number of services that are critically needed (e.g., referrals to entitlement supports, housing) may be the most appropriate. Some research shows that exposing low-risk offenders to services meant for high-risk offenders can be harmful (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2004).

Two Steps to Examine Program Intensity

Examine
Program
Dosage

Examine
Participant
Engagement

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Step 1: Examine program dosage. Frequency (e.g., the amount of a specific activity that is delivered) and duration (e.g., the length of the program in weeks) are common measures of program dosage. Program attendance and the amount of time people participate in a program activity can provide information about program dosage. These metrics can be obtained through program administrative data when case management systems are in place to track them. Programs may already have a data tracking system that can monitor participant attendance, but if not, evaluators may need to work closely with program staff to develop such a system.

Evaluators can then review possible indicators, such as attendance, to assess how much of the program participants received. Descriptive statistics (e.g., the average number of days in which participants attended the program) can help to determine if dosage aligns with the program's expected attendance (for participants with the identified area of need and risk) as articulated in the program model. When analyzing the data, dosage can be assessed across program activities and for specific program components.

Within the context of an outcome evaluation, evaluators can link participant dosage data to outcome data, which can offer insight into the level of dosage associated with better outcomes. Key questions that should be answered when examining the relationship between dosage and program outcomes include what amount of a program activity or service is associated with better results for participants.

Additionally, analyzing program data can help to determine the threshold at which service receipt influences outcomes or shows a diminished return—such that the benefits of receiving more services from a reentry program begin to level off and no longer influence the outcomes of interest. Evaluators should also review the relevant research literature to determine recommended best practices concerning the dosage for the whole program or for a specific component. For example, a 1-hour training may not be sufficient to have a meaningful impact on program outcomes. Thus, program dosage can provide valuable information concerning optimal levels of service receipt for reentry program participants.

Step 2: Examine participant engagement. Although participants may receive a certain dosage of activities, this does not necessarily capture engagement with the program. For example, participants may attend trainings but may be uninterested in the topics. Unengaged participants may not fully benefit from

Consider These Questions When Assessing Program Dosage

- Among participants identified as needing each activity, how many instances or sessions are they receiving?
- How does the amount of the intervention participants receive compare with the prescribed amount (based on their level of need)?
- If outcome data are available, what dosage is associated with more positive outcomes for participants?

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program services despite attending program activities. Therefore, additional assessments of participant satisfaction, such as surveys documenting participants' perceptions of the program and examining if participants enjoyed the topics, can accompany assessments of program dosage. Program activities can be observed to assess participants' level of engagement. For example, evaluators can be present during training to observe whether participants are listening, engaging in discussion, and asking questions. Potential data sources and action steps for assessing program intensity and engagement are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Assessing Program Intensity and Engagement

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
Program Dosage	Program administrative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Review program data (e.g., program attendance) entered by staff into the program's data tracking system to assess how much of the program (including specific activities recommended from needs assessments) participants receive.
Participant Engagement	Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conduct observations of program activities as they are delivered to assess participant engagement (e.g., engaging in discussions, listening).
	Satisfaction surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Periodically administer satisfaction surveys to assess participant engagement.

Strategy 3: Assess Program Fidelity

For mature programs delivered under a prescribed model (to guide replication, test evidence-based practices, or for other purposes), it may be desirable for the process evaluation to include a fidelity assessment. A fidelity assessment assesses the extent to which the program is delivered as planned (in the program model or grant proposal). It typically includes examining program adherence and whether activities different than the ones intended initially are delivered.

Consider These Questions When Assessing Program Fidelity

- Are program activities being implemented as intended?
- If program activities have changed or been adapted, how have they changed and why?

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Two Steps to Examine Program Fidelity

Examine
Program
Adherence

Document
Adaptations

Step 1: Examine program adherence. Program adherence examines the extent to which program components (or the entire program) are delivered as originally intended (i.e., as specified in the program logic model). For example, a 14-week curriculum-based substance use psychoeducational program may consist of 12 modules. A process evaluation can examine the number of modules delivered within these 14 weeks—a program that only delivers six modules would show less adherence to the curriculum.

To track program adherence, evaluators often ask program staff to document delivered activities, such as which curriculum modules are delivered weekly. This information can be entered into the program’s existing data tracking system, or staff can use alternative platforms such as SurveyMonkey or Google Forms. At the end of the 14-week program, evaluators can review and develop a summary of the completed modules. Such summaries can be beneficial when programs operate on an ongoing and rolling basis or across sites, as the data can shed light on variations in program adherence.

Step 2: Document adaptations. Sometimes a reentry program may provide activities that are not in the original program model or deliver them in a manner that diverges from the program model. It can be helpful for fidelity assessments to document and examine what activities the program provides. For example, a process evaluation may uncover that the above-mentioned 14-week substance use program is unable to deliver the curriculum because participants spend most of the time on sobriety “check-ins.” During these check-ins, participants may discuss how they maintained their sobriety over the past week as well as discuss stressors concerning basic needs (e.g., unstable housing, unemployment). In this case the substance use groups also function as a space where participants provide one another with emotional and informational support on how to access needed services. As a result, program directors can use this information to guide program enhancements such as the possible creation of a support group or extending the sessions by 15 minutes.

Thus, program adaptations are not necessarily bad—sometimes programs must adapt because of participant needs, external circumstances (e.g., a shift to online programming because of a pandemic) or to be culturally or gender responsive. But adaptations need to be documented in the process evaluation

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because it is essential to understand the program delivered. Such documentation is critical for interpreting outcomes and attributing certain findings to specific program activities.

Qualitative data sources, such as observations and interviews with program staff, can provide rich information about how program activities are delivered. Conducting observations and interviews can be resource intensive (e.g., time, staffing) for evaluators and program staff. For example, observations and interviews require substantial coordination, and evaluators should remember that program staff often have high caseloads and busy schedules. However, they are often worth undertaking when a program is being delivered to a new target population (different from the population with whom the approach was developed); when program delivery relies heavily on staff judgment or group dynamics, and thus involves more potential for variation; and when changes to a program have recently been made or are being considered.

Evaluators often observe program activities to determine if the rhetoric of the program—how staff talk about it—matches the reality, for example, how it looks in practice. When conducting observations, evaluators can annotate detailed notes of the activities delivered or refer to a checklist of predetermined topic areas that would be marked if observed during the program activity. Another option is to collect this information by conducting semistructured interviews with program staff who deliver the activities. Regardless of the data source used, evaluators would analyze the data for inconsistencies between the topic areas expected to be delivered and what is delivered. These discrepancies can then serve as the focus for ongoing discussions with program staff about why staff adapted the program (e.g., logistical challenges, tailoring services to the target population). This information could then be used to decide if the program adaptations should be sustained. A summary of data sources and potential action steps for assessing program fidelity is included in Table 4.

Table 4. Assessing Program Fidelity

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
Program Adherence	Program data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Review program data to assess the extent to which the program is delivered (e.g., number of sessions).
	Staff interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ask program staff about any program services that were part of the original model that are or are not being delivered and why.

(continued)

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Table 4. Assessing Program Fidelity (continued)

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
Documentation of Adaptations	Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct systematic observations of program activities as they are delivered.
	Staff interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct interviews with staff who are responsible for delivering program activities. Ask staff about adaptations or deviations that were not part of the original program model.

Examine Program Implementation Challenges and Facilitators

A final use of process evaluation in reentry programs is to document overall program challenges (and strategies used to overcome these challenges or barriers) and identify facilitators of successful implementation. The information can be used to glean lessons learned that are important for sustainability, expansion, or replication of the program into other jurisdictions. Typically, this assessment involves capturing broad perspectives of the program from all stakeholders, including participants, program staff, and organizational partners. This assessment should also examine the perspectives of subgroups. For example, perceptions of program challenges may vary depending on whether program staff members serve in an administrator role or work as direct service providers. When designing interview instruments or protocols, evaluators should ask about barriers to implementation using open-ended questions (e.g., What has made it difficult to run the program? What have been some challenges to implementing this program?). They can then probe, as necessary, for common barriers to implementation such as resources (e.g., staff, funding), skills and training, policies, leadership support, and organizational culture (e.g., staff buy-in, norms, staff morale). However, questions should not be limited to the program or the organization. Sometimes factors external to the program can impact how a program is delivered. Such external factors could include political changes (e.g., newly elected officials who do not support the program), legislation, or unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Documenting this information can help evaluators to understand why a program did or did not achieve its intended outcomes. Table 5 lists potential data sources and action steps when examining implementation challenges and facilitators.

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Table 5. Examining Implementation Challenges and Facilitators

Area to Assess	Data Source	Action Step
Barriers and Facilitators to Implementation	Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conduct interviews with program stakeholders (e.g., directors, case managers, staff who deliver curricula, and program participants) to learn about factors that hinder or facilitate program delivery.
Barriers and Facilitators to Implementation	Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conduct focus groups with program stakeholders to learn about factors that hinder or facilitate program delivery.

Conclusion: Putting It All Together

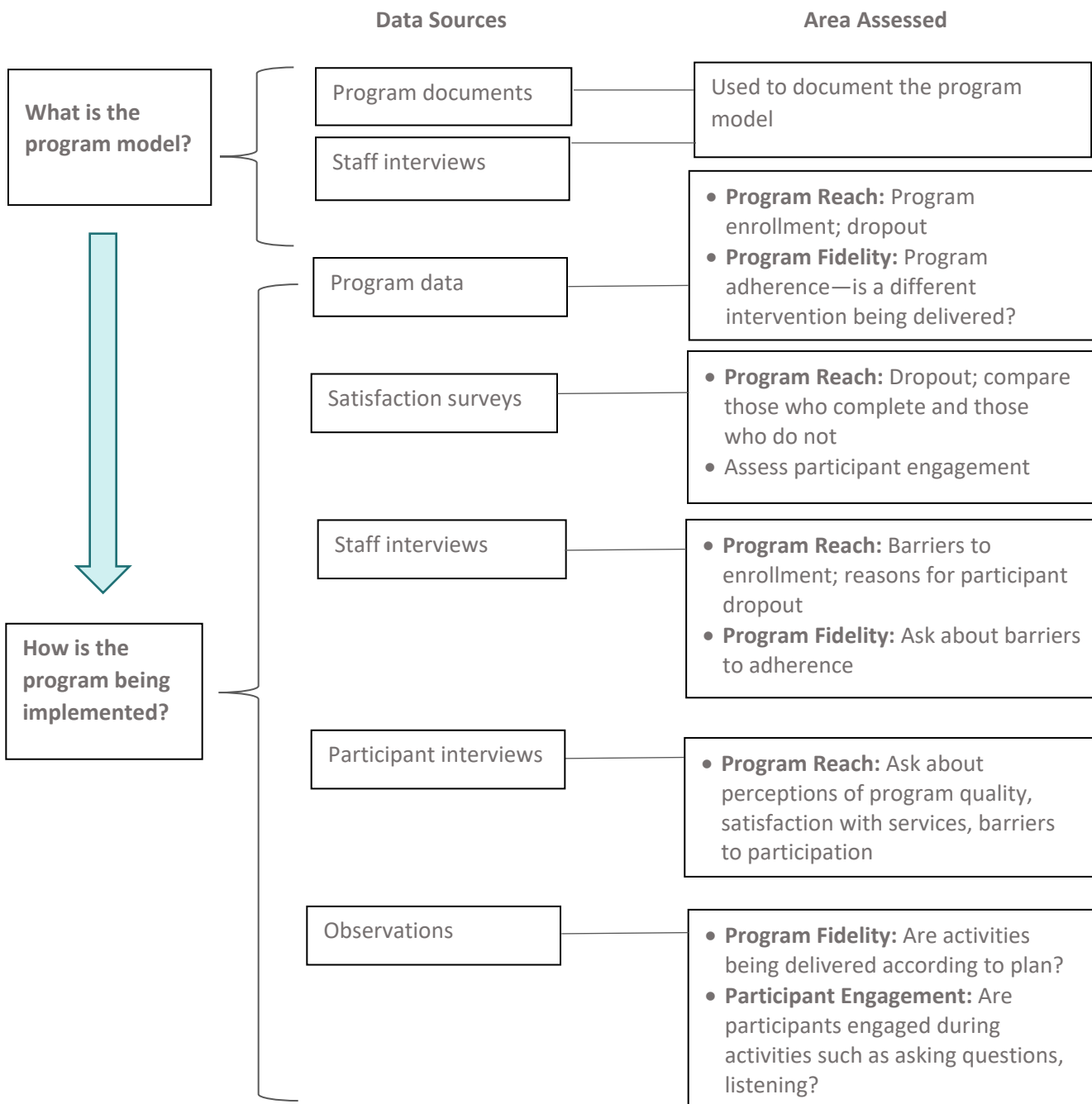
Process evaluations can generate useful information about how a program is being implemented relative to the intended program model. Three critical areas of program implementation often assessed in process evaluations are program reach, intensity (e.g., dosage), and fidelity. To evaluate these respective areas, evaluators can leverage a range of quantitative and qualitative data sources and the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Collectively, such findings can provide valuable information about how the program is operating and necessary improvements. Finally, evaluators should also examine barriers and facilitators to implementation to help inform how the program is implemented and identify potential areas for programmatic enhancements or adaptations.

Throughout this brief, a range of data sources were identified as being useful for various aspects of a process evaluation, with most data sources having multiple uses. Figure 2 offers a comprehensive summary of the wide range of data sources and the corresponding programmatic areas that these data sources can assess within a process evaluation.

A robust process evaluation can provide invaluable information to reentry program staff and leaders so they can fine-tune their program to best meet their participants' needs. It can help evaluators interpret future outcome evaluation results. And it can ultimately serve as a blueprint for other jurisdictions hoping to replicate existing reentry program models.

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Figure 2. Process Evaluation Data Sources and Areas to Assess



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Additional Reading and Resources

From the ES TTA Project

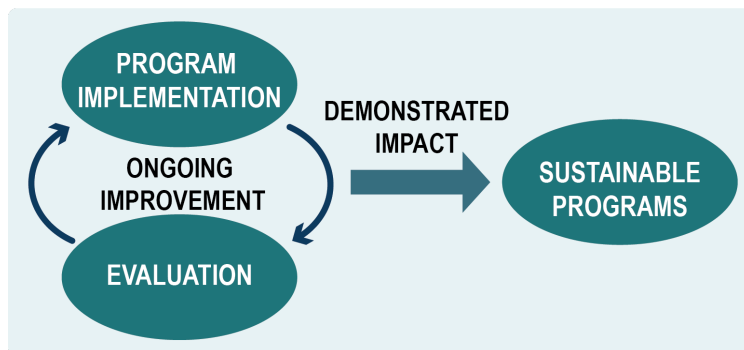
- *Why Conduct a Rigorous Evaluation?:* [infographic](#) and [animated graphic video](#)
- *Improving Evaluation Readiness in Reentry Programs:* [resource brief](#), [planning guide](#), and [animated graphic video](#)
- *Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs:* [resource brief](#).

References

Lowenkamp, C. T., & Latessa, E. J. (2004). Understanding the risk principle: How and why correctional interventions can harm low-risk offenders. *Topics in Community Corrections*, 3–8.

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.



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Appendix. Evaluation-Focused Logic Model Tool for Reentry Programs

