Dealing with COVID-19 and Other Contextual Factors in your Reentry Program Evaluation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many reentry programs have not been able to engage in person with program participants. This has impacted recruitment, enrollment, and service delivery--both in correctional and community settings. Because of these programmatic changes, your evaluation may no longer reflect the "pre-COVID" version of the program it was designed for. Evaluations are challenged in other ways too. Plans for in-person interviews or focus groups may no longer be realistic. These types of disruptions can also happen with other major contextual events, like natural disasters, economic recession, or social upheaval.

Tips for Addressing Disruptions to the Way the Program is Operating

1 Update the logic model that documents program delivery to reflect what happened during the period of disruption (i.e., the adaptations that were made) and the time period of the adaptations. Ideally, three versions of the logic model are developed: 1) pre-disruption, 2) during disruption, and 3) post-disruption. For example:

INPUTS

What has changed in terms of the staffing, resources and other conditions your program is working with because of the disruption?

ACTIVITIES

How have your recruitment or service delivery activities changed (e.g., any adaptations, pauses)?

OUTPUTS

How do (or will) these changes affect outputs (e.g., how many participants are enrolled, how many sessions of core program activities are offered, number of completions, etc.)?

OUTCOMES

How might you expect your new program model to change your targeted outcomes (e.g., housing, employment)?

2 If major adaptations were made, consider collecting input from participants and staff about what they think of the adapted model. This could help the program make service delivery decisions going forward.

3 In your outcome data analysis, consider analyzing data separately for the "pre-disruption", "during disruption", and "post-disruption" cohorts of participants. If the cohort that received the "disruption" model received a much lower dose program or was much smaller in size, consider focusing on intermediate outcomes (e.g., finding housing) rather than long-term outcomes. Be sure to document any "COVID effects" when you interpret findings.

1 Consider alternative research methods that do not rely on in-person contact or put your participants at risk:

Tap available sources of administrative data that you may not already be using (e.g., data maintained by partner organizations)

Video- or phone-based interviews

Video-based focus groups

Online surveys using a free or low cost web-based survey platform

For more information, see our accompanying video on this topic and our fact sheet on web-survey platforms

2 For any adaptations under consideration, be sure to protect participants' confidentiality and data security. Make sure that informed consent procedures can be implemented with the new mode. If your study is overseen by an IRB, be sure your changes are approved.

3 For adaptations that require access to technology, consider ways to make sure **all** participants can be included. By unintentionally excluding vulnerable populations, you may end up deepening inequities during a time of crisis.

Additional Resources:

Adapting Evaluations in the Era of Social Distancing

Evaluation Implications of the Coronavirus Global Health Pandemic Emergency

Adapting Evaluation in the Time of COVID-19

The Evaluation Mindset: Evaluation in a Crisis

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