



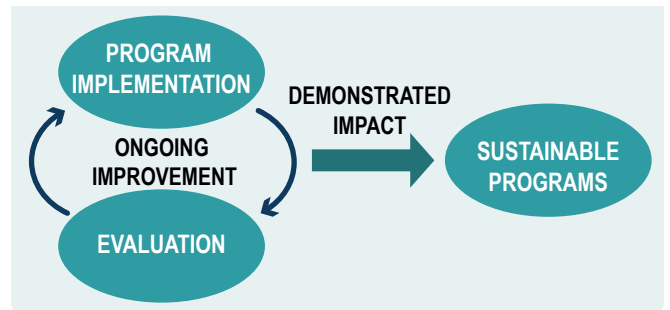
An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

Why Evaluation Matters for Program Improvement

The ultimate purpose of program evaluation is to improve and sustain programs. Evaluation results can identify needed improvements to your program, guide program planning, demonstrate the effectiveness of your program, and justify funding. For reentry programs in particular, evaluation results can help ensure that programs are able to deliver their services effectively (both pre- and post-release) and to support positive reentry outcomes for clients. Some studies have shown that programs that used results from an initial evaluation to make changes were able to achieve improved outcomes through serving their clients better or implementing greater fidelity to evidence-based practices (Gill & Wilson, 2017; Hassoun Ayoub, 2020).

Some evaluation results highlight the need for improvement. For example, an outcome study may find that significant improvement in recidivism was not evident among program participants, or a process study may find that a key program component was not implemented as intended. Such results should not necessarily be considered a failure of the program or lead to the conclusion that a program “doesn’t work”; rather, they provide an opportunity to develop a stronger program, improve existing efforts, and set the stage for additional evaluation of a program under ideal conditions. Evaluation results can be used by program staff and their evaluation partners to develop an action plan to identify and implement program improvements. Many forms of improvement are possible based on the unique configuration of different reentry programs—their resources, activities, and outputs¹ can all be changed. Programs should feel confident in embracing evaluation results



Key Definitions

Formative evaluation: The research and evaluation activities that occur when a program is starting up, in early implementation, or implementing new adaptations or modifications to an existing program.

Process evaluation: An assessment of the implementation of a program (e.g., the population served, the services that were delivered).

Outcome evaluation: An empirical assessment of the extent to which a program achieved its desired outcomes.

¹ Resources, activities, and outputs are often illustrated in a program logic model. Completing a logic model for your reentry program is a best practice for program planning and implementation. A logic model is a roadmap for documenting key aspects of the program and how it is intended to affect outcomes. When viewed alongside evaluation findings, the model can also be used to identify areas for improvement.

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

and not worry about criticism, as this type of feedback is often the most informative for understanding both the strengths and weaknesses of a program.

This brief highlights two primary strategies for using data and evaluation results to improve program and service delivery. When an evaluation accompanies program startup or ongoing implementation, formative and process evaluation data can be used in real time to inform and improve ongoing implementation. When an evaluation is complete, both process and outcome evaluation results can help change, improve, expand, or replicate the program.

Notably, various data collection methods (e.g., focus groups, surveys, program data) can be used for more than one type of evaluation (Table 1). The remainder of this brief provides considerations for each type of strategy.

STRATEGY

1 **Ongoing Improvement Through Formative & Process Evaluation**





- Process evaluation data inform *ongoing* implementation
- Both quantitative and qualitative information is used
- Feedback is provided in real time

STRATEGY

2 **Program Improvement Through Evaluation End Results**

- Process & outcome evaluation results are used to change or improve a program *after* the evaluation is complete
- Both quantitative and qualitative information is used
- Feedback is provided not in real time, but only at the end of the evaluation

Table 1: Data Sources, Types, and Use in Evaluation

Data Source	Type of Data	Collected From or About	Use in Evaluation
 Focus groups and interviews	Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients • Staff • Program partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative • Process • Outcome
 Surveys	Quantitative and qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients • Staff • Program partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative • Process • Outcome
 Program data (maintained by the program)	Quantitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative • Process • Outcome
 Official records (obtained from local agencies on program participants)	Quantitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

Strategy #1: Ongoing Improvement Through Formative and Process Evaluation

Formative evaluation refers to the research and evaluation activities that occur when a program is starting up, in early implementation, or implementing new adaptations or modifications to an existing program. It is specifically designed to provide real-time feedback to program staff to inform program development. **Process evaluation** is an assessment of

the *implementation* of a program (e.g., the population served, the services that were delivered). If key process evaluation metrics are shared in real time or continually throughout program implementation, they can be used to assess whether the program is being implemented as intended and to inform real-time improvement (as a formative evaluation).

Data Sources for Formative and Process Evaluation

Process and formative evaluations may use multiple methods to collect and analyze data on program startup and implementation. Data may be collected from clients, staff, and other key stakeholders (e.g., representatives from partner organizations), typically through surveys, interviews, or focus groups. Process evaluation may also include monitoring and reviewing quantitative program data—such as descriptive statistics on the program client population or the services delivered or received—and reviewing program documents such as logic models, intake forms, and assessments. It may also include fidelity assessment to determine the extent to which the program was implemented as intended. Numerous types of data sources are used. Similar strategies (e.g., interviews) can be used with different study populations (e.g., clients or program staff), providing complementary information that can be used for program improvement.

- **Feedback from clients**

- o Focus groups or in-depth interviews can help develop an understanding of client experiences with the program, perceptions of how it has helped them, and suggestions for improvement.
- o Surveys can be used to assess program satisfaction or perceived program impact in a standardized, quantitative way. Surveys can be brief and collected at multiple time points (e.g., every 6 months).

- **Feedback from staff and partners**

- o Focus groups or interviews with program staff and staff from partnering agencies can help determine how implementation is going, identify challenges or barriers, document informal or formal adaptations and deviations from the program model, identify possible improvements, and assess perceived program impact.
- o Surveys may be used with program staff and partners to assess collaboration, communication, challenges and possible improvements, and perceived program impact. Again, surveys can provide a standardized, quantitative manner to assess the same constructs among different respondents. When readministered at multiple time points, they can be used to detect change over time.

- **Quantitative program data analysis and monitoring**

- o Quantitative analysis of data collected and maintained by the program (typically in a case management system) can provide real-time snapshots of how the program is doing in terms of enrollment, program activities (e.g., number of groups offered), and outputs (number of clients served since the start or year; number of graduates).

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

- o These data can help programs assess whether they are hitting their targets and serving the intended population (e.g., high-risk clients). This analysis can also detect potential bias in program enrollment (e.g., if all eligible clients are being recruited and enrolled) and identify implementation gaps based on the logic model (e.g., a service offering that clients do not appear to be receiving). The results of such analyses can then help create plans to improve.
- o If a program is engaged in an outcome study with a comparison or control group, ongoing review and analysis of participant characteristics (and the comparison group) will help assess whether the two groups are comparable (and, if not, whether adjustments to the comparison group identification procedures need to be made).

Using Evaluation Data to Improve Program Implementation

Process and formative evaluation data may highlight needed areas for improvement that could better ensure successful implementation or client and program outcomes. Using the results from formative or process evaluation before the end of a study or grant period (i.e., while the program is still under way) can help programs

- **eliminate** services or activities that have insurmountable barriers to implementation or that may not be well connected to achieving client outcomes;
- **add, develop, or modify** services and activities so that they are better designed to achieve outcomes;
- **acquire** more resources to support program services and activities; and
- **refine** the participants who are eligible to receive program services (e.g., expand eligibility criteria) because of lower-than-expected enrollment based on the original eligibility criteria.

What if we don't track program data or need to improve our data systems?


Some reentry programs struggle with maintaining accurate data on program participants, including who was served and what services were provided. The difficulty is often due to reliance on paper records, old or outdated systems, or inefficient data entry and management processes. This common challenge makes it difficult for federally funded grantees to comply with performance measures reporting and to engage in evaluation. Therefore, it is highly advisable to invest in improvements to program data systems to facilitate these critical functions. Tracking program data can be an asset for internal reasons as well, allowing program staff to examine clients more systematically, understand common characteristics and trends, and ensure that consistent information is collected for each client. Some commonly used case management software solutions for tracking program data include Credible, Apricot, and Salesforce. Alternatively, some programs may choose to store collected program data in purchased survey software packages, including REDCap, SurveyMonkey, or Qualtrics. More information and links are available in the Additional Reading and Resources section.

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

Table 2 provides an overview of potential lessons that can be learned from formative and process evaluations, examples, and changes that could be made to address them.

Table 2 Sample Lessons From Ongoing Formative or Process Evaluation

Lesson	Examples	Possible Changes or Considerations
Systemic or structural challenges to program implementation need to be overcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jail reform in your jurisdiction has led to very few eligible individuals available for the program Specialized caseloads for reentry-focused supervision officers have been eliminated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore options for expanding your program into other correctional facilities or expanding eligibility criteria to serve more participants Work with supervision agency to train (and provide refresher trainings) to all supervision officers on best practices in reentry
Operational barriers to effective implementation or to high-quality data collection need to be addressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients are being asked to complete multiple assessments and forms, leading to inefficiencies and low-quality data A facility is not providing any classes because no programming space is available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamline client intake process (including forms) and explore technology solutions (e.g., electronic forms, existing administrative data) Work with facility staff to explore alternative solutions (e.g., tablet-based programming, after-hours classes) or remove operational barriers
Cultural responsiveness can contribute to improved outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clients cannot meet on Fridays because of religious obligations Group curriculum feels outdated or out-of-touch to younger clients Program does not build on client cultural strengths and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule client meetings on days and times that are respectful of cultural and individual needs Update curricula and program materials to ensure they are relatable to clients Assess client cultures and cultural strengths as a starting point for intervention*
Client-focused challenges suggest the need to include additional reentry services or address needs that are currently unmet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of transportation prevents clients from attending appointments on time Clients who are parents struggle to find affordable childcare necessary to facilitate employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage organizational partnerships to find transportation solutions for clients Obtain additional funding to support transportation or childcare for clients

*For more tips on cultural responsiveness, see [Assessing and Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Reentry Programs Through Research and Evaluation](#) 

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

Careful planning and active engagement of the evaluators in the program planning phase can help maximize the utility of formative and process evaluation for ongoing improvement. Program staff and leadership should work with evaluators to identify the key data points that will be regularly collected and reviewed by the team (and determine the frequency of reviewing these data points). This ongoing review will allow the team to identify and implement changes that move the program toward greater fidelity to the intended model.

In addition, regular meetings between evaluators and program staff to discuss the program's status can help ensure that both parties are aware of any new and important information, that the evaluation is responsive to any significant program changes, and that the changes are well-documented in an updated program logic model. Furthermore, evaluators can shed light on areas of improvement, working with program staff to identify top priorities, particularly those that emerge from multiple data sources.

Strategy #2: Program Improvement Through Evaluation End Results

The second approach to using evaluation results to improve the program is a comprehensive examination of how the program was ultimately implemented and what impact the program had on the outcomes it intended to affect. This strategy uses the full set of process and outcome evaluation findings to document final implementation lessons learned and to assess participant outcomes. These findings can then guide decisions about program sustainability and the types of outcomes that can be expected for participants.

Using Final Process Evaluation Findings

At the *end of the evaluation*, process evaluation findings are often used to identify final lessons learned on program implementation from all stakeholders' perspectives and to assist in the interpretation of outcome findings produced from the evaluation. At this stage, the findings can provide an important opportunity for program improvement, informing discussions about improving an ongoing program or supporting decisions about sustainability, replication, and expansion of the program.

This use of the process evaluation data is more reflective and comprehensive than in the formative strategy, in that it leverages the full set of data collected throughout the entire period of program implementation and

considers any modifications to program implementation from one data collection period to the next. Some examples follow.

- **Feedback from clients**

- o Focus groups or in-depth interviews can help develop an understanding of whether "midcourse" modifications to the program appeared to improve program implementation (or resolve the particular barrier or issue that was uncovered during the formative stage).
- o Analysis of quantitative survey data, with an eye for differences in perceptions of the program by participant subgroups (e.g., by gender, race/ethnicity, age) or cohorts could identify whether any further adaptations to the program might be needed when expanding the program to particular populations.

- **Feedback from staff and partners**

- o Focus groups or interviews with program staff and staff from partner agencies can be used to identify final implementation lessons learned and considerations for other jurisdictions seeking to implement a similar program.
- o In addition, the evaluation team should share outcome evaluation findings with staff and get their perspective on interpreting unexpected or nuanced patterns in the outcome data.

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

- o Staff or partner survey data could be analyzed to identify particular partnerships that could be strengthened or that would require additional attention when replicating or expanding the program.
- **Quantitative program data analysis and monitoring**
 - o Quantitative analysis of data collected and maintained by the program can provide a final, detailed picture of who was served, the program activities that were delivered, and the key outputs that were seen. This analysis could assist the program in understanding whether the intended population was ultimately served, identify predictors of successful or unsuccessful completion, and identify program activities that did not appear to ever be fully operational.

Using Outcome Evaluation Findings

An **outcome evaluation** is an empirical assessment of the extent to which a program achieved its desired outcomes. For reentry programs, this typically means comparing outcomes (e.g., recidivism, employment, housing) for program participants with those of a comparable group of individuals who received standard reentry services (not the “enhanced” program being evaluated). It answers questions such as, “Did participants who participated in the program (treatment group) have better outcomes than similar individuals who did not receive the program (comparison group)?”

Outcome evaluation of a grant-funded program is often conducted at the end of the grant period. Because most reentry programs intend to continue operating even after the grant ends, evaluation is critical beyond just offering accountability for the grant-funded activities. It can help attract new funding (by demonstrating that the program is effective at affecting desired outcomes) and directly inform changes and improvements to the program that can help ensure better service delivery in the future.

In reentry program evaluations, outcome data sources typically include

- **administrative data** (official records) on recidivism (e.g., rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, compliance with supervision), obtained for both treatment and comparison group members; and
- **self-reported survey data**,² obtained from both treatment and comparison group members, on outcomes that are typically not available in administrative data, such as employment, substance use, housing independence, and family reintegration.

Outcome analyses use various statistical techniques to determine whether the treatment group was more successful than the comparison group. Sometimes the groups are compared on intermediate outcomes (e.g., obtaining a job) and long-term outcomes (e.g., any reincarceration for a new offense within 24 months of release). In addition to comparing outcomes between the treatment and comparison groups, some outcome analyses attempt to assess program impact for specific subgroups (e.g., assessing whether the program was equally effective for participants of various risk levels or by gender, by age groups, and by racial/ethnic groups). Some outcome evaluations may conduct supplemental analyses just on the treatment group to examine whether specific program components appeared to be associated with more positive outcomes (e.g., whether treatment group members who received a particular service had better outcomes than those who did not).

The results of these outcome analyses can be examined in conjunction with the process evaluation findings to identify areas for program improvement. Specific examples are described below.

Assessing impact on specific outcomes and time periods. One use of outcome analyses is to determine whether the program achieved positive impacts for

² Program staff may maintain this information in the program administrative database for program participants, but it is rarely available for the comparison group. Thus, strong evaluations collect the same data in a uniform manner from both treatment and comparison groups.

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

each key outcome targeted by the program (e.g., recidivism, employment, housing) and for each time period examined. When examining these outcome findings, program staff and research partners often use the information learned from the process evaluation to understand and interpret the outcome findings.

If some outcomes were not achieved—particularly those that the program should plausibly have been expected to affect (e.g., if a program delivers an intensive employment component, yet program participants were no more likely to get jobs within 12 months of release than comparison group members)—program staff can use these outcome findings with the process evaluation findings to reevaluate the service offerings intended to affect this outcome. Specifically, the team can assess whether the related services were actually received by participants, were of high quality and appropriate dosage, had sufficient continuity pre- and post-release, and were timed appropriately (e.g., relative to release). Evaluators can also investigate whether comparison group members may also have received similar services (which might explain the lack of a “treatment effect”).

This assessment can lead the program to determine whether improvements to certain services need to be made to achieve the desired effects on outcomes.

Examining program impact at specific time periods can also be useful. If outcomes are measured at various time points (e.g., employment at 6 and 12 months post-release) and positive effects are achieved only in the short term, the team can use these outcome findings and the information learned from the process evaluation to assess how long program participants were engaged with the program, whether program participants continue to receive core program offerings for a sufficient period of time (particularly post-release), and whether participants continued to have a case manager or service coordinator for a sufficient period of time (particularly post-release).

It is not uncommon for reentry programs to achieve positive impacts for reentry outcomes such as employment and housing independence, yet not have an impact on recidivism or to have only very modest effects on recidivism. In understanding recidivism findings, particularly those that reflect supervision compliance (e.g., technical violations, revocations), be sure to document the level of supervision intensity for the treatment and comparison groups and rule out any “supervision effects” resulting from one group’s having more intensive supervision. Also, assess whether the program included service offerings that directly targeted criminal thinking or criminogenic risk factors; used practices that have been empirically documented to impact recidivism, such as cognitive behavioral programming; or both.

Reentry programs operated by corrections agencies often excel at providing pre-release services but do not have a strong mechanism to ensure post-release service delivery. The reverse is often true for reentry programs run by community-based organizations or agencies. And in both types of service delivery models, keeping participants engaged for an extended period of time after release is extremely difficult. Outcome analyses could point to the need for incentives or alternative approaches to promote long-term client engagement.

Assessing what worked for whom. In addition to learning whether the program affected various outcomes at specific time periods, some reentry programs may want to know for whom the program worked (i.e., whether it was equally effective for all

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

demographic subgroups and risk levels) and whether receiving certain program offerings appeared to be associated with greater impact.

The most rigorous way to assess the “for whom” question is to compare results for treatment group members in the subgroup of interest with those for comparison group members in the same subgroup of interest—see the sidebar for examples of faulty and better comparisons.

Rearrest rate white \neq Rearrest rate Black

Do not compare them

Instead, compare:

Rearrest rate white clients — Rearrest rate white comparison group

with

Rearrest rate Black clients — Rearrest rate Black comparison group

This approach allows for a more rigorous assessment of the *relative* impact of program participation on a particular outcome, given that some outcomes may be influenced by inequities across the different subgroups of interest. If positive outcomes are achieved for some subgroups but not others, the team can use these outcome findings and the information learned from the process evaluation to assess whether the program offerings are culturally responsive³ and whether the observed subgroup outcome differences are related to differences in program retention or engagement.

Typically, assessments of “what worked” are limited to treatment group members only (given that the comparison group members would not have received the specific services). These analyses incorporate individual-level quantitative data on service receipt (typically maintained in a program’s case management system) and the outcome data to assess whether participants who received a particular service (e.g., an employment readiness class) had better outcomes than participants who did not receive the service. Because some services may be offered only on the basis of an identified need, such analyses should be limited to participants who were actually offered the service. This approach would isolate the impact of the service itself. If results indicate that some services did not appear to be associated with the desired outcomes, program staff can use these findings along with process evaluation data to determine whether the service was of sufficient quality and dosage to make a difference.

³ For more on this topic, see [Assessing and Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Reentry Programs Through Research and Evaluation](#).

Using Evaluation Results to Improve Service Delivery in Reentry Programs

Conclusions

The strategies discussed in this brief can assist reentry programs in using evaluation data in both a formative manner, to guide ongoing, continuous program improvement, and a reflective manner, to gain deep insights at the conclusion of the program and inform decisions about program sustainability, replication, and expansion.

As demonstrated in the specific examples provided in this brief, two factors are particularly important to a reentry program's ability to use evaluation findings to guide program improvement. The first is ensuring that the evaluation is designed to document both program implementation (through a process evaluation) and impact (through an outcome evaluation). If a process evaluation is conducted without an outcome evaluation to objectively assess whether the program indeed influenced desired outcomes, program staff may assume that a program that appears to be implemented effectively (based on positive stakeholder perceptions) is achieving the intended outcomes, when that might not be the case. If an outcome evaluation is conducted without an accompanying process evaluation, the

mechanism by which particular outcomes were affected (or not) will not be understood and the team will be left uncertain about how to interpret outcome study findings. Therefore, comprehensively documenting both how a program was implemented (through a rigorous process evaluation that includes all stakeholders' perspectives) and what outcomes were achieved is critical to effectively using evaluation findings.

The second factor that facilitates the use of evaluation findings to inform program improvement is careful planning and strong coordination between program delivery and evaluation staff. A strong partnership and mechanism for an early and ongoing feedback loop between program and evaluation staff is necessary to ensure the real-world application of evaluation data. Evaluation findings should be reported and reviewed with the entire program team (e.g., agency leadership, relevant justice system and community partners, advisory board, and frontline staff) so that the findings can be fully interpreted and applied.

Additional Reading and Resources

From the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance 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](#)
- Assessing and enhancing cultural responsiveness in reentry programs through research and evaluation: [resource brief](#), [animated graphic video](#), and [archived webinar](#)

Commonly used program data software solutions

- Behavioral health electronic health records: [Credible](https://credibleinc.com)
- Social Solutions: Apricot + Products: socialsolutions.com
- Public-sector resources from Salesforce
- REDCap: project-redcap.org
- Free online survey software and questionnaire tool: [SurveyMonkey](https://www.surveymonkey.com)
- Experience management software: [Qualtrics XM](https://www.qualtrics.com)
- Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/excel>

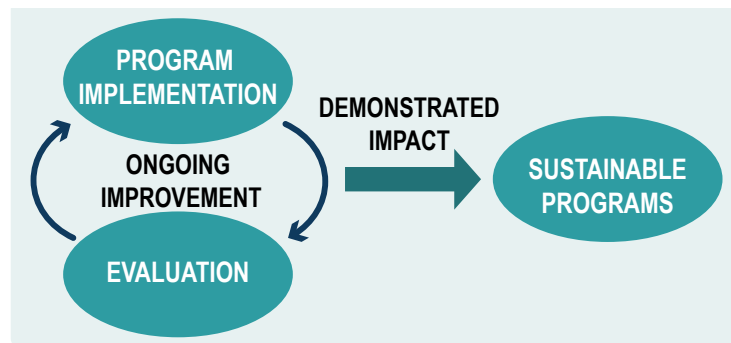
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The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

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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