



## An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

# 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., rearrest, 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 confate criminal justice system surveillance and decision-making (e.g., police activity, supervision efforts, prosecutor decisions about charging, sentencing policies) with individual behavior (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Skeem & Lowenkamp, 2016). Some policing practices, in particular, affect the racially disproportionate risk of criminal justice system contact (see sidebar), and bias is inherent in some crime control policies.

### 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

[evaluation](#)

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, at grant closeout, grantees must report e as a Core Outcome in Reentry Program Evaluations





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limitation of early-stage measures (e.g., arrest) is that they include incidents that did not result in a conviction. Also, evaluators should consider alternatives to binary indicators reflecting any legal action (e.g., any rearrest or reincarceration within 12 months of release). For example, focusing on offenses at a certain level of severity (e.g., felonies), exploring “time to failure,” or developing counts of new crimes could reduce bias and serve as more meaningful outcomes. In particular, focusing on a measure such as arrest for violent crime is preferable and reflects the most unbiased measure because such offenses are more likely to be reported to law enforcement and are less subject to justice system discretion than crimes like drug use or “public order” crimes (Skeem & Lowenkamp, 2016).

## Make careful comparisons.

Some reentry evaluation plans include an analysis of “what works for whom,” which entails examining program impact for subgroups of participants, such as racial or ethnic minorities, women, or younger participants. Such analyses may be important for understanding for whom the program (or specific services) seemed to work better; however, the analytic approach must be appropriate. Results for program participants in the subgroup of interest should be compared to those for *comparison group members* (a carefully selected group of individuals who meet program eligibility criteria but who are receiving standard services rather than the reentry programming being evaluated) *in the same subgroup of interest*. For example, rather than comparing the rearrest rate for white program participants to that of Black program participants to assess for whom the program seemed to work better, the reduction in rearrest achieved for

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the implications of any bias should also be spelled out for readers. For example, if a program was not found to have a positive effect for participants of color (based on a measure such as reincarceration), researchers cannot rule out the possibility that the finding was actually due to participants of color being subject to greater criminal justice system surveillance

or harsher sentencing, and they should state such an implication in the evaluation findings. Self-reported measures may be subject to other biases (e.g., individuals may be reluctant to disclose engaging in illegal behavior), and this should certainly be noted as well.

## References

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## The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ESTTA) 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).

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