



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 (Boylorn, 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.

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What is participatory research?

Participatory research—sometimes referred to as community-based participatory research—is an orientation to research that focuses on the “collaborative participation of trained researchers as well as local communities in producing knowledge directly relevant to the stakeholder community” (Pant, 2014, p. 583). Those most affected by an issue or condition that is being studied or evaluated are involved in the different stages of the research process (see Figure 1), from determining what to study and how best to study it, to collecting and analyzing data, to determining and writing up major findings and recommendations.

Figure 1: Research Process



For example, when evaluating a reentry program, participants who have recently completed the program, people who were formerly incarcerated, or their family members could lead some of the data collection strategies. If the research involves surveys, interviews, or focus groups with program participants and staff—for example, to learn what people like about the program, what additional supports are desired, or why people are dropping out or staff members are leaving—participatory researchers could take the lead on collecting those data. Their intimate knowledge of the program or field may help the evaluation team collect richer data because they may ask more relevant follow-up questions or because research participants may be more open and honest in their responses, knowing that the person administering the survey or facilitating the focus group is a “credible messenger” and can relate to their experience.

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Participatory researchers can also be engaged in disseminating the findings to various audiences. They can present to funders, speak to the media, or share evaluation results with the community where the reentry program is located. Involving participatory researchers may help the different stakeholders understand the findings in new ways or may help the evaluation team reach new audiences.

Many reentry evaluations ask participants to be part of an interview or focus group so that evaluators can better understand their experience in the program. This is an important component of an evaluation.

However, participatory research is different. It instead focuses on **involving impacted people as researchers, not just research subjects**. They are meaningfully involved in conducting the research. So those interviews or focus groups you're doing? They could be running them!

How does a participatory approach add value?

Benefits to the participatory researchers

Moving beyond the rhetoric of empowerment, participatory evaluation creates real power for those affected by the research. Participatory evaluation of reentry programs offers numerous benefits to the participatory researchers:

- Provides concrete and meaningful jobs for people who were formerly incarcerated—something that is often a significant challenge for people who have criminal records
- Builds social capital as participatory researchers form trusting relationships with people (e.g., academic researchers, program staff) they may not have met otherwise and gain access to traditional sources of power they previously may have been excluded from accessing (e.g., funders, local politicians, policymakers)
- Promotes the growth of leadership from within a community, expanding community capacity
- Increases the power of people who have been affected by the criminal legal system to actively participate in research that affects their lives
- Teaches analytic skills that help people make sense of the systems and structures that influence their lives
- Offers opportunities for additional skill development such as writing, public speaking, and interviewing
- Trains participatory researchers who can then turn their skills to other community issues

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Benefits to the research

A participatory approach to research and evaluation also benefits the research itself. In addition to transforming unequal power dynamics—the “expert” researcher and the “researched” community member (see sidebar on “What power do evaluators have?”)—participatory research ensures that the research is asking questions that matter most to the affected community. At each stage of the research process, the evaluation is strengthened—which in turn makes for stronger reentry programs.

- Different research questions may be developed to guide the research, providing a perspective on the program and its implementation and impact that is more relevant and grounded in firsthand experience.
- Data collection strategies developed to answer these new questions will be informed by the lived experience of the participatory researchers. As a result, surveys, interview instruments, and focus group protocols may be more culturally responsive, use language and framing that are more accessible to the research participants, ask questions that would not have been asked otherwise, challenge implicit biases and assumptions of the more traditional researchers, and include more reliable measures.
- The research team may be able to gain access to populations that they previously could not access, as participants see themselves reflected in the research team and become more trusting of participating in the study. Higher participation rates from all populations of focus increase the generalizability of study findings.
- Research participants may be more forthcoming and provide more honest responses when being interviewed by someone whom they know has had similar experiences (resulting in more “real” responses instead of socially desirable ones). Thus, higher-quality, more-valid data are generated.
- The analysis of the data may be informed by new perspectives and knowledge. This could result in discernment of causal pathways, identification of key predictors or moderators, and a richer interpretation of findings.

What power do evaluators have?

In traditional program evaluation, evaluators—often from research institutes or universities—hold a lot of power. They determine whether a program works or not, what the program has achieved and for whom, and what next steps could be. Evaluators are thus in the position of concluding whether programs are successful in meeting outcomes, suggesting what adaptations should be made, and recommending whether programs should be expanded or cut—all for a program that usually does not directly affect their own lives.

But who decided on what outcomes were most important to measure to begin with? Who decided on how they would be measured? Who decided on implications and recommendations for the program? If it was only those with traditional research expertise, then important knowledge—from affected communities, from program participants—may have been missed. Had other measures been chosen through a participatory approach, the evaluation may have produced deeper insights about the program’s impact.

Participatory research—the involvement as co-researchers of those most affected—fundamentally shifts the traditional power dynamic found in many evaluations and makes the research more accountable to the affected communities. A participatory research study is informed by and responds to the experiences and needs of people often excluded from the knowledge creation process, increasing the chances that the findings and recommendations of a study are more relevant to and more likely to meet the needs of the communities those individuals come from.

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- Recommendations will be informed by community knowledge of acceptability and feasibility, making them more likely to be received and accepted and to meet community needs.
- Data and findings may be democratized through new forms of dissemination and distribution to new audiences who differ from those of more traditional publications.

Why is participatory research important when thinking about reentry program evaluation?

The impact of incarceration on individuals has been well documented, including likelihood of further entanglement in the criminal legal system, reduced employment possibilities, lower income, poor mental health, stigma, and strained family relationships (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Kirk & Wakefield, 2018; Tobin Tyler & Brockman, 2017; Turanovic et al., 2012; Turney, 2017). Returning home to a community after being in jail or prison can be a challenge for individuals who were formerly incarcerated and for their families.

Reentry programs help individuals to overcome many of these challenges by providing essential educational and vocational services, substance use disorder treatment, mental and physical health care, and family supports. The sustainability of these programs may be dependent on funding that is informed by evaluation results. Therefore, evaluators must be extremely thoughtful and careful when thinking about their research questions, design, sample, and measures. While more traditional stakeholders—program managers, funders, government, criminal legal system agencies—might focus on outcomes related to recidivism, program participants and their families and support networks may have other goals that are being achieved through the program that will help participants with long-term success and stability. Reentry program evaluators who focus only on more traditional outcome measures might miss the chance to learn additional ways the program is or is not meeting the needs of participants. Evaluators might also draw conclusions about program success that are not completely dependent on participant behavior but may also reflect larger system issues such as the over-policing of certain communities.

More traditional evaluations may also focus on process-related information such as fidelity to a program model or challenges to implementation, whereas the involvement of those with lived experience on the evaluation team may result in different questions—for example, what factors increase participants' trust and willingness to engage in program activities? What larger structural issues (e.g., discrimination, the mark of a criminal record) make it difficult for participants to succeed even when fully engaged?

As evaluators consider their power in determining the fate of reentry programs—and, indirectly, the fate of their participants—they must think about how those affected by the program could be included in the research process to create a more robust, relevant, and ethical evaluation.

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When? Who? What? How?

Given the benefits, evaluators considering making their research more participatory should think through questions of when, who, what, and how.

When is a participatory approach appropriate?

Participatory research works best when there are *time and resources to properly train and acclimate participatory researchers*. People who have recently returned home from jail or prison, especially, may take time to adjust to a more traditional work environment and to learn about research—what it is and how to do it. The labor costs of training participatory researchers properly should be factored in, along with the time required for other members of the research team to provide ongoing support.

A participatory approach is also appropriate when the *research and analysis rely on intimate knowledge of the community being studied* and there is a need for an understanding of the culture around a given issue from the perspective of people who have experienced it.

Finally, participatory approaches are suitable when there is *concern that the affected community does not support the research* or has a distrust of the institutions conducting the research or programming. This is common for communities affected by the criminal legal system. Having participatory researchers may help give the research the credibility with, and access to, the target population.

Who should be involved?

In a participatory research project, the people most affected by the issue being studied or the program being evaluated are included as co-researchers. For reentry programs, this may include reentry program participants, individuals who were formerly incarcerated, and family members who have welcomed home and supported loved ones released from jail or prison. Additional stakeholders to be engaged are community members who may regularly interact with program participants (e.g., faith-based leaders, health and social service staff and volunteers) and academics with an interest in reentry and the criminal legal system.

What are the challenges?

All research projects face challenges—low response rates or sample sizes, external forces that change timelines, missing data, lack of resources, and more. Participatory research has its own unique set of challenges that are good to know in advance; that way they can be planned for. One example is in the sidebar on “A Reentry-Specific Challenge.”

A Reentry-Specific Challenge

Reentry program evaluations that require researchers to enter correctional facilities to collect data may present a challenge to a participatory researcher with a criminal record. Local policies may restrict the ability of a participatory researcher who has a prior conviction to enter a jail or prison, making it difficult for them to conduct necessary interviews. Multiple meetings with the local jail or department of correction may help build the trust needed to overcome this challenge.

If this challenge cannot be overcome, such that participatory researchers cannot be involved in data collection, their engagement in the design of the data collection instrument, analysis of the data, and interpretation of findings can still be of value.

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- Traditional researchers and participatory researchers are often not facing each other from the same positions of power, and issues of race, gender, class, and community trauma—and their intersection—may make collaborating on an “even playing field” difficult.
- These power dynamics may play out in who determines who will be asked to become involved as a participatory researcher in the first place. Traditional researchers must be mindful of really sharing power, not just falling into token inclusion of community members.
- When a research project is participatory, conflicts may arise over who owns the data and findings—is it the research institute or the community?
- Participatory research takes more time than a conventional evaluation because of the number of people who have never taken part in a research project before, the need for extensive training, and joint decision making.

Taking time to build trust and common understanding among the research team will help overcome some of these challenges. Consider including informal interactions such as gathering for meals and attending community events together, as well as designating time early on to discuss how the group will make decisions, resolve conflicts, celebrate successes, and hold each other accountable. Also, establish a shared understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities for each member of the research team.

As others engaged in participatory research have noted, given the challenges, it “can be tempting to opt for less inclusive research processes that prioritize efficiency over relevance,” (Local Initiatives Support Corporation, n.d.). However, the increased reliability, validity, and relevance of the research, and therefore the research’s ability to have long-term positive impact on reentry programming, are well worth the effort.

How can I incorporate a participatory approach if my evaluation is already under way?

Some reentry programs may be months or years into their evaluation. While the research questions, design, methods, and measures may have been determined long ago, there are still ways to incorporate participatory approaches. People with lived experience can be brought on at any point—especially if data collection is not yet complete. Wherever you are in the process, it is not too late to have them join the research team for the remainder of the cycle presented in Figure 1.

Additionally, research is an iterative process, and findings from an evaluation can shed light on additional gaps in knowledge, informing new research questions and starting the cycle over again. If budget and time allow, a smaller, discrete research project can be undertaken through participatory means to answer new questions or refine old ones, or to look at one specific aspect of a reentry program that is not fully captured in the existing evaluation. For example, if your evaluation does not capture what family members of participants think of the program, a

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participatory team may develop and implement research specifically to get at that. Or if your evaluation relies on administrative data (e.g., rearrest, service utilization) and does not speak directly to current or former participants, the evaluation team can expand the evaluation to include a new component that surveys or interviews participants, hiring a participatory team to lead that expansion.

Building on participatory engagement in reentry programs as a starting point

Although very few reentry programs have a well-developed participatory research component, many involve people with lived experience in various aspects of program operations. Such programs may be able to build on this foundation as they move toward participatory research and evaluation. The three examples below, which are developed from interviews conducted with people with lived experience who are actively involved in reentry program delivery (with the names changed to protect confidentiality), illustrate the mutually beneficial effects of a participatory engagement approach.

- In Illinois, a reentry program has a reentry navigator, Dave, who served nearly 30 years in prison. While incarcerated, Dave established workforce development activities for his peers. He wanted to continue the work he was doing “on the inside” once he was released and was hired by a local reentry program as a navigator. In this role, Dave “walks with clients pre and post release,” facilitating their connections to services. His time spent incarcerated provided him the training and expertise that he needs to help program participants and to identify barriers to successful program completion that other staff might not see—things like lack of digital literacy and deep-rooted trauma. Dave’s insight helped the reentry staff strengthen their activities through more trauma-informed programming.
- A reentry program in Texas has hired a director of programs, Chris, who had previously been incarcerated. Chris oversees the mentoring and financial capability activities. Before being able to fully jump in, however, she had to overcome barriers because of her past criminal record—jail staff were hesitant to approve her coming into their facility. But she persevered, providing them with references from judges and law enforcement officials and disclosing her full criminal history. Her expertise from her lived experience has proved invaluable for programming. For example, when going into detention facilities to meet with participants for the first time, she makes sure to shake their hands, knowing how meaningful it might be for some. As one participant told her, “No one has shaken my hand in 20 years.” Chris has also helped shape larger agency-wide conversations around diversity and inclusion, ensuring that part of that diversity includes people who are on probation or parole, and identifying potential accommodations they might need from the agency to do their job and also meet their parole requirements.

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- In Pennsylvania, Robin was a student at a community college when her teacher, after learning of her recent incarceration experience, encouraged her to apply for a volunteer position with a local reentry program. Though hesitant at first because she had never had traditional employment and did not have a college degree, she reached out to the reentry program. Program staff immediately recognized that Robin's lived experience gave her expertise that would benefit the program. Robin was brought on as an intern, and shortly thereafter was offered a position as a reentry housing specialist. Having once been where her clients are now, Robin is able to make connections based on trust that might be more difficult for other staff members who have not experienced incarceration. Clients look up to her as someone who has successfully reentered the community and see her as an inspiration for what they too can achieve. Since beginning work at the reentry program, Robin has expanded her skills as well. With the support of her supervisor, she has received multiple professional certifications, attended free trainings offered by community partners, and plans to attend a 4-year college this fall.

Dave, Chris, and Robin clearly have expertise that could be leveraged to strengthen their programs' research and evaluation activities. They are able to identify what matters to participants—outcomes of program success that are often missed by evaluations that focus on traditional criminal justice outcomes like recidivism. These include sobriety, decreased trauma symptoms, self-efficacy and self-esteem, family reunification, the presence of a support system, housing stability, quality of life, and life skills. Their ability to form deep connections with program participants based on shared experiences would make them valuable members of a data collection team and facilitate open, honest answers about what participants think of the program and how it could be improved. In addition, they are deeply committed to growing their professional skills and influencing policy and program improvements.

Many other reentry programs are similarly positioned to build on existing program roles for people with lived reentry experience—or to create new roles—by elevating these individuals to influential positions in their programs' research and evaluation activities. The strategies and recommendations provided in this brief can help ensure that reentry programs successfully leverage the perspectives of people who are most affected by the research, which will not only benefit participatory researchers in many ways but also produce stronger evaluations and, ultimately, more effective and sustainable reentry programs.

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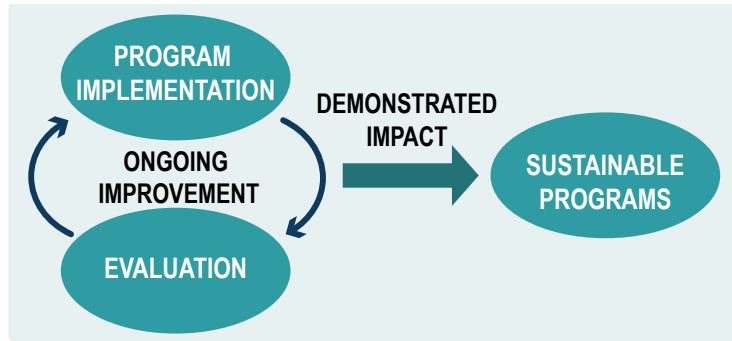
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The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

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.



The ES TTA Project is conducted by RTI

International and the Center for Court Innovation with funding from Grant No. 2019-MU-BX-K041 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



Suggested citation: Swaner, R., & Sheppard, M. (2022). Participatory Research: What Is It and How Can It Strengthen Your Reentry Program Evaluation? U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.