An Introduction to Court-Based Program Data

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This overview was prepared by the Data Analytics and Applied Research (DAAR) department at the Center for Justice Innovation (the Center). The Center is a community justice organization that seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing programs, performing original research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to launch new strategies. DAAR is a team of more than 30 seasoned researchers, data analysts and former practitioners, who work to identify metrics, facilitate the effective collection of data, and ultimately use data to enhance programming both within the Center's programs and as part of national technical assistance.

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For More Information

To learn more or request assistance, please visit us at innovatingjustice.org/about/expert-assistance.

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Overview

Accurate data collection is vital for court-involved programs to effectively address participant needs and enhance community outcomes. This document outlines best practices for tailoring data collection to align with program goals and participant requirements. It covers key data domains—such as demographics, criminal legal information, program progression, and outcomes—and discusses Case Management Systems for efficient data management. Additionally, it provides practical tips for fostering a data-driven culture to boost program effectiveness and community impact.

Tailoring Data Collection

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to data; the data you collect and how you collect it must be tailored to your program's specific goals and requirements. For example, the data needed for an alternative-to-incarceration restorative justice program should differ from the data utilized in probation; the data should reflect the program it describes.

To know where to start with data collection, you first need to thoroughly understand the program at hand—at a minimum consider questions like:

- What does this program do? Who does it serve?
- What issue or gap does this program seek to address?
- What impact should this program have on participants? On the wider community?
- What defines success for this program in terms of longer-term outcomes and short-term milestones?
- What data points do I need for grant reporting or sharing with stakeholders?

Formally, this process is known as constructing a theory of change or a logic model, depending on whether your program is in the planning or implementation stage[i]. These critical exercises will clarify the relevant data points needed for your program. Essentially, you should collect data that helps you answer these questions and effectively communicates your insights to a broader audience.

i. For an overview of logic models and theories of change we recommend Chapter 2 from the Community Tool Box hosted by the University of Kansas.

Domains

While it's best to begin with a detailed examination of your specific program, the following data domains and suggested data points commonly found in court-based diversion programs. While these lists are not exhaustive or universally applicable, they can serve as a helpful starting point for identifying relevant information for your needs.

DOMAIN AND DESCRIPTION	DATA POINTS AND INFORMATION
Demographics/ Participant Info Whenever possible, demographic information should be self-reported; to preserve the relationship between the participant and the program, it is best practice to include the option to refuse to answer these questions. Questions like race and ethnicity should be multi-select where possible. At a minimum, answer choices should include an option for "other" (with a write-in) to be as descriptive and exhaustive as possible.	Examples of Relevant Demographics ● Date of birth ● Race/Ethnicity ● Gender/Gender identity ● Address/Zip code ● Primary language Additional Participant Info ● Contact information
Criminal Legal Information Criminal legal information should come from the most official sources possible.	Examples of Relevant Criminal Legal Information ● Relevant state ID ● Arrest number ● Arrest charges ● Case/docket number ● First court date ● Subsequent court dates ● Attendance at court dates ● Outcomes at court dates ● Court mandates ● Top arraignment charges ● Criminal legal history (i.e., prior arrests and court cases)

<table>
<tr><th>DOMAIN AND DESCRIPTION</th><th>DATA POINTS AND INFORMATION</th></tr>
<tr><td>Program Progression Dates
Often, a benefit of alternative court-based programs is in accelerating the traditional court process. Recording relevant dates is an important way to note any timesaving for participants and stakeholders. These dates can also be used to identify important trends around program progress or exit points (e.g., who is being referred but never accepts programming).</td><td>Example Dates
Date first referred
Date first assessed
Date participant accepted/began programming
Dates of any major programmatic milestones
Dates of any program noncompliance
Date programming ended/Graduation Date</td></tr>
<tr><td>Programming
Understanding the programming is important both to ensure that the provisions laid forth by the court are met and to assess fidelity to the program in an evaluation.</td><td>Examples of Relevant Programming Information
Charge at entry of program
Details from the treatment plan
Type of programming
Intensity of programming (i.e., frequency and duration)
Compliance information
Sanctions or Incentives
Voluntary Referrals/Connections</td></tr>
<tr><td>Needs
To ensure that you are both serving the intended population and effectively connecting individuals to appropriate services, it is important to document the needs presented by each participant. This is often done using a needs assessment tool.

Additionally, any needs that you foresee the program helping to meet should be collected at intake and updated at either discharge or when needs are met. For example, if a program can connect individuals with health insurance, the participant’s health insurance status should be asked at program intake.</td><td>Examples of Needs Flagged at Intake/Assessment
Mental health concerns
Substance use issues
Physical health concerns
Housing instability
Education needs
Employment needs
Needs/risk related to IPV
Examples of Needs-Related Information:
Insurance Status
Detailed information on housing status
Forms of identification/identification needs</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><th>DOMAIN AND DESCRIPTION</th><th>DATA POINTS AND INFORMATION</th></tr>
<tr><td>Outcomes
Measuring success or failure in the program is crucial; however, it is also important to consider the broader outcomes that may result from its implementation. For individuals, an outcome could be a better disposition or avoiding jail time. Other outcomes might include how this program changes things outside of the court context, like the participant’s mental health. Ultimately, many funders are interested in recidivism and other costs to the criminal legal system, though how a program impacts a community should also be considered. Your logic model or theory of change is also an indispensable guide for selecting outcome data to collect.</td><td>Program/Court Outcomes
Discharge date and reason
Length of time in program
Final disposition/sentence
Final disposition date/Sentence date
Time to final disposition/Sentence
Individual Level Outcomes
Recidivism (e.g., new court case on similar charges; any new court case beyond a technical violation)
Participant perceptions (obtained via an anonymous feedback surveys)
Need flags at discharge
Number of referrals addressing needs
Specific milestones that align with program goals (e.g., obtained employment for an employment services-focused diversion program).
Community Level Outcomes
Community perceptions of fairness
Community perceptions of safety
Community involvement in program
Crime rates</td></tr>
</table>

Making Data Work for You

Ultimately, data is a powerful tool that can help you gain valuable insights into your program. These insights can help you allocate resources more strategically, grow your program effectively and efficiently, and enhance your program's responsiveness to the participants you serve. From basic metrics like volume and growth to deeper analyses of impact, data empowers you to drive your program's success.

The data points above can help provide some immediate insights to the following questions:

- Is this program serving who it is intended to serve?
- Is this program serving everyone equally? Are some groups (by race, gender, age, etc.) more likely to be referred to and/or complete the program than others?
- Is this program connecting participants with services that help support their needs?

Making data a part of your program's culture by including routine data reports, dashboards, or just informal discussion of trends, will help to solidify the key role that data plays operationally, and can inspire meaningful conversations. Data is also pivotal when it comes to funding; grants often require a basic level of data reporting, and programs that can demonstrate their impact have an incredible advantage over their competition. Even if impact cannot be quantified right away, building up and investing in your program's data infrastructure will allow you to have the available data tools needed to measure impact effectively in the future.

Doing Data: Case Management Systems and Other Considerations

While it is possible to track data using spreadsheets, it is much more efficient and beneficial to invest in a Case Management System (CMS). CMSs are digital systems specifically designed to track and store information related to complex processes (such as those involved in running a diversion program!). They operate as a shared tool, allowing multiple users to work together to update records as cases progress.

There are many CMS providers and platforms available, and while the task of finding a CMS that's right for your program can be daunting, it is worth it. During this process, be sure to think back to your logic model/theory of change and ask the vendor how their system can help you track specific scenarios. Try to talk to other programs that have adopted that specific case management system. You'll want to consider questions around system implementation, workflow of data collection, and data security.

Some other important data-related questions to ask before adopting a CMS include:

- Are there ways to represent the data being collected in real time? For example, are there dashboards or other reports that non-data/technical staff can have immediate access to?
- What are the ways in which data can be extracted from the CMS? Do you need special software or technical know-how to do so?
- When the data is extracted, how is it formatted? And what is the ease in which data can be reported or analyzed?
- What is the process for adding or amending data collection fields? Can this be done easily and efficiently?

Additional Tips

Effective data management requires an upfront investment and a sustained commitment to best practices throughout program planning, implementation, operations, and evaluation.

A few additional tips to help you on your program's data journey include:

- Have clear expectations around obtaining and inputting data—when it should be entered, by whom—and reevaluate as needed. If you need data from a partner organization, make sure to have those conversations early.
- Get everyone involved in the data at all points in time, including sharing the insights from the data with program staff. Staff will be more invested in data entry both if they are included in the setup of the data collections and when they see their efforts pay off.
- Write-in options and text boxes can be tempting, but keep in mind that it is difficult and sometimes impossible to do the types of analysis on open text that you can on closed-ended questions. You can always add notes fields for the nuance, but make sure the important data fields are discrete and standardized.
- There's a saying, "garbage in, garbage out," meaning that your analysis and insights are only as good as the data that is entered. Make sure that data is routinely audited for completeness and accuracy.

Finally, if possible, invest in data-specific roles in your agency/organization or on your program team. Make it someone's job to:

- Support program staff and leadership in setting up data collection tools;
- Train and create user manuals on data entry protocols;
- Carry out data audits;
- Develop reporting for funders;
- Perform analyses to inform practice and policy

This not only brings dedicated expertise to your program's data culture, but also allows direct service staff to focus more on their essential work with participants and less time on data-related tasks.

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