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Building Capacity for Data Collection

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A Toolkit for Programs Funded by the
Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act



Introduction to the Toolkit

The Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) aims to provide a stable source of funding for local community programs that have proven effectiveness in curbing crime among at-promise youth¹ and youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system. Administered by the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC), funds are provided to counties to invest in local programs. Every year, each county's Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC), which comprises representatives of local agencies, youth-serving organizations, and advocacy groups, selects programs to receive funding pending approval of the local board of supervisors and BSCC. In Los Angeles County, JJCPA funds are administered by the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

In Los Angeles County, there has been an emphasis on the importance of funding programs that have demonstrated effectiveness at reducing juvenile crime and delinquency, as required by the state (California Law Section 30061(b)(4)(C)(iv), 2019). Moreover, provision of evidence-based services is consistent with best practices for juvenile justice systems, as highlighted by a recent gap analysis focused on Los Angeles County (Whitaker, Smucker, and Brooks Holliday, 2022). However, many programs still encounter challenges related to the collection of data that can be used for program evaluation, as evidenced by discussions between the current JJCPA evaluator (the RAND Corporation) and funded programs, as well as discussions occurring in JJCC meetings over the past two years (JJCC, 2022). To continue to fund effective programs, JJCC members need to know how well current programs are addressing factors related to at-promise youth, Probation-involved youth, and their families. This need highlights the importance of providing guidance to funded programs to help build their capacity for the collection of data that can be used for evaluation. This toolkit aims to address this need.

This toolkit is intended to provide JJCPA-funded programs with assistance to effectively collect data that can be used to evaluate the programs' implementation and effectiveness. Programs that receive funding are generally required by the Probation Department to submit data about youth served and program outcomes. Though the specific requirements related to data collection have changed over time and are likely to continue evolving, there are some foundational evaluation principles that can be used as the basis for recommendations related to data collection. Moreover, even if some of the data collection practices covered in this toolkit are not required for submission to the Probation Department or to fulfill reporting requirements under California Government Code Section 30061, these data could be used by programs to evaluate themselves or by external evaluators with whom programs partner.

Before presenting the toolkit, we begin by discussing the reasons why collection of evaluation data is important.

Why Is Data Collection Necessary?

Data collection is necessary for the JJCC to assess whether currently funded programs are as effective in impacting outcomes for at-promise and Probation-involved youth. Frequent evaluation will ensure that state funding is spent on programs that help keep youth out of the juvenile justice system and reduce recidivism. Data collection is also important for each program because it can serve as a self-evaluation tool to see whether the program is

Abbreviations

BSCC	Board of State and Community Corrections
JJCC	Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council
JJCPA	Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act
MST	Multisystemic Therapy
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound
SUD	substance use disorder

effective in achieving its goal and what factors may be related to the program's success. This may help program leaders identify what changes could be made to further improve program outcomes. Although anecdotal evidence about program effectiveness can be useful, it means that information about perceived effectiveness may be coming only from a small sample that is not representative of everyone the program serves (e.g., leaders might be getting information only from highly satisfied or dissatisfied participants). Systematically collecting data can help program staff determine whether their program is actually meeting its goals for the majority of participants.

Without collecting data on program participation and outcome measures, program staff may not know whether their programs are achieving their goals and are unable to make data-driven decisions to improve programs. Moreover, evidence of program effectiveness can be valuable information to share with stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, funders, community members) and when applying for funding. In addition, collecting data on implementation or participation (e.g., number of sessions or length of enrollment) can help program staff understand results related to program effectiveness. For example, if a program is found not to be achieving its desired outcome, participation data can help program staff know why this may be. It may be the case that results are actually driven by factors unrelated to the effectiveness of the program, such as the program not being implemented as planned (e.g., services are provided once every two weeks rather than once a week) or a lack of consistent participant attendance. This information can then be used to improve the policies and practices of the program itself.

What Types of Data Should Be Collected?

There are many types of data that can be used for program evaluation, including both quantitative data and qualitative data. Qualitative data are often collected through such mechanisms as interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions asked as part of a larger questionnaire. Qualitative data are an important part of evaluation because they provide an in-depth understanding of a program. Programs may choose to institute these data collection practices or work with an external evaluator (including the JJCPA evaluator) for these data collection procedures.

However, this toolkit is focused on the collection of quantitative data related to the youth who were served by a program and their outcomes. It is more feasible to collect quantitative data on the full population of youth served by a given a program, and this is consistent with guidance provided by a state-level auditor in 2019 (Auditor of the State of California, 2020). For this reason, this toolkit specifically covers the collection of quantitative evaluation data.

How Does This Toolkit Relate to Data Requirements Established by the Probation Department?

The Los Angeles County Probation Department's requirements for data collection have been undergoing changes over the past several years. Rather than specifically describe the department's current data collection requirements, which may become outdated, this toolkit focuses on providing guidance that is independent of the Probation Department's requirements. This toolkit has its foundation in the program evaluation literature, and, consistent with program evaluation methods, good evaluation includes data on implementation and program outcomes. Therefore, we focus on helping programs to understand how they can capture these types of data internally. Though we may talk about the collection of identifiers, this is just to provide a resource in the event that identifiable data are required; we do not presume that this is a current requirement.

We also do not presume a specific format for the submission of data or frequency for submission of data. Instead, we provide some general guidance as to how programs may build data collection and compilation into the flow of their programs at regular intervals.



Navigating the Toolkit

This toolkit has two key components.

Summary of Survey Findings

Part 1 presents the findings of a survey conducted with JJCPA-funded programs to better understand current data collection expectations, processes, and challenges. We have learned of many of the data collection barriers that programs experience through discussions with the Probation Department, discussions with funded programs, efforts to provide technical assistance, and attendance at JJCC meetings. However, we wanted to supplement our preliminary understanding of these challenges with a more systematic data collection effort. Our goal with the survey was to understand the resources that programs currently have for the collection of evaluation-related data and identify common challenges.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Data Collection

Part 2 of this toolkit presents practical guidance on the steps that programs can take to develop and implement a data collection plan. Our goal was to break down each stage of the data collection process, provide existing resources that programs can draw on when developing evaluation plans, and address the common challenges that were identified through the survey.

Part 1



Part 1

Summary of Survey Findings

We surveyed JJCPA-funded programs in July and August 2023. In this section, we present a brief summary of the survey findings to describe the state of data collection efforts as of August 2023. For details on the survey methods, please refer to Appendix A.

Programs were queried about their current data collection efforts, resources for data collection, and main challenges to data collection (see Table 1). In terms of resources for data collection, the majority of programs reported having an established plan for data collection (71 percent), designated program staff who are knowledgeable about (57 percent) and responsible for (57 percent) data collection, and an established plan for submitting data to the Probation Department (57 percent). Less than half of programs reported having survey instruments to collect data from youth, databases to extract data to be used for evaluation (43 percent), and designated areas for the program to collect and secure the collected data (43 percent). Few programs reported using survey instruments to collect data (14 percent).

Programs were also asked to rate and rank potential challenges to data collection in two ways in the survey. First, they were asked to rate the extent to which each statement represented a challenge to data collection and submission on a scale of 0 (“not a challenge”) to 4 (“very great challenge”). The statements provided were based on informal discussions between RAND researchers and funded programs. Second, programs were given the same list of statements and asked to identify and rank the top three challenges to data collection for their program. Results of the ranking item are summarized in Figure 1, and results of the rating question are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Availability of Resources to Support Evaluation-Related Data Collection

Resources	Percentage
An established plan/workflow for data collection	71%
Designated program staff who are responsible for data collection	57%
Program staff who are knowledgeable regarding data collection	57%
An established plan for submitting data to Probation	57%
Existing program databases or files that can be used to extract data to be used for evaluation	43%
Designated areas within the program to collect and secure collected data	43%
Survey instruments used to collect data from youth	14%

When comparing the results of the ranking with the rating questions, the top four challenges to data collection remained the same, although the order differed between the two methods. Responses to the ranking question are depicted in Figure 1. The top four challenges were

- youth unwillingness to share information
- parents/caregiver unwillingness to share information
- concerns that Probation will use identifiable information
- concerns about evaluators being provided with identifiable data for research purposes.

For both methods, challenges related to developing and implementing a data collection plan were acknowledged as midlevel challenges. There were some differences in which challenges were selected as the lowest barrier to data collection via the two methods. However, based on both the rating and ranking items, it seems that programs do not experience significant challenges related to having sufficient funding to collect data or uncertainty around how to submit data to the Probation Department.

There are some limitations to our survey methods. For example, the average rating of each challenge was fairly low, with all ratings less than 2, or a “moderate challenge.” However, based on our informal technical assistance discussions with programs and discussions in JJCC meetings, some of these challenges can be quite salient for programs. It may be that the staff members who completed the surveys are not completely familiar with the full range of challenges experienced by their programs, especially because the survey link was distributed to program or agency leadership (though we did request that the individual completing the survey consult with other staff members). In addition, even if only a single program is struggling with one aspect of data collection, we

FIGURE 1

Ranking of Top Three Challenges to Data Collection and Submission

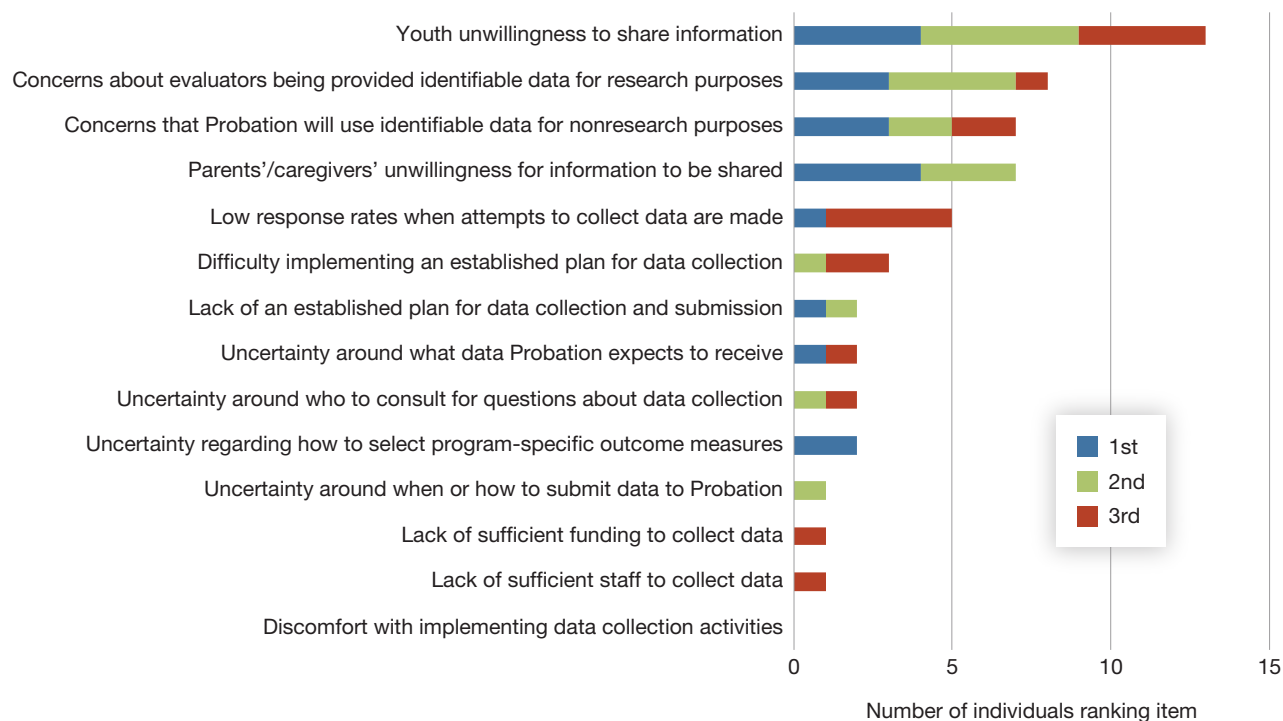


TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Rated Challenges to Data Collection and Submission

Challenges	Mean	Standard Deviation
Parents'/caregivers' unwillingness for information to be shared	1.44	1.30
Concerns that Probation will use identifiable data for nonresearch purposes	1.40	1.52
Youth unwillingness to share information	1.36	1.32
Concerns about evaluators being provided identifiable data for research purposes	1.32	1.41
Low response rates when attempts to collect data are made	1.00	1.22
Uncertainty regarding how to select program-specific outcome measures	0.96	1.34
Difficulty implementing an established plan for data collection	0.88	1.11
Lack of sufficient staff to collect data	0.79	1.15
Discomfort with implementing data collection activities	0.71	1.02
Uncertainty around who to consult for questions about data collection	0.67	1.07
Uncertainty around what data Probation expects to receive	0.54	0.96
Lack of sufficient funding to collect data	0.43	0.77
Lack of an established plan for data collection and submission	0.40	0.89
Uncertainty around when or how to submit data to Probation	0.29	0.73

believe that it is worth addressing that concern, to ensure that all programs have an equal opportunity to build their capacity. Therefore, when we developed this toolkit, we especially focused on areas that emerged as more prevalent concerns based on survey responses, but we still provide a start-to-finish guide to collecting evaluation data that addresses the full range of issues that programs experience.

We acknowledge that this toolkit is unable to address two of the top concerns regarding evaluators' and the Probation Department's access to and potential use of identifiable data. At the time of the writing of this toolkit (fall 2023), no formal decision had been made regarding the submission of identifiable data to the Probation Department, such as whether submission would be required of all programs and what specific identifiers were needed. That said, regardless of the decision and potential changes to data collection requirements in the future, we anticipate that this toolkit will still be a useful resource and will help prepare and empower programs to collect data to assess for effectiveness and improve the services they provide for youth.

Part 2



A Step-by-Step Guide to Data Collection

This section will provide step-by-step instructions regarding how your program can collect meaningful data efficiently and effectively. We present this guidance using a conversational tone, assuming that we are speaking directly to program staff when providing this guidance. Based on the survey results, we include step-by-step instructions to help programs identify program participation and outcome measures and make decisions on how to collect data on these measures. We provide information and resources for developing and implementing data collection plans that are more likely to lead to higher response rates. Lastly, we address concerns regarding youth and caregiver unwillingness with some guidance from existing literature. Each program's data collection steps will likely look different from other programs because of differences in the overall goals and desired outcomes of the programs. Following these instructions may help programs tailor data collection strategies for their staff and participants to improve the likelihood of responses and the sustainment of data collection efforts.

In this section of the toolkit, we cover the following steps:

1. Decide what data to measure and collect.

- Identify the program activities.
- Identify the desired program participation and outcome measures for each activity.
- Apply specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) principles to participation and outcome measures.

Info Box: Where can I find additional guidance on identifying participation and outcome measures?

2. Decide how you will collect data for the program participation and outcome measures you have identified.

Info Box: How can I select an existing validated scale or other preexisting questionnaire that is relevant to my program?

Info Box: How can I develop my own questionnaire items?

3. Develop a plan for data collection.

- Create a walkthrough of program activities to determine how to build in data collection.
- When** will data be collected from participants?
- How** will data be collected?
- Who** will be responsible for collecting the data and organizing the data for submission?

4. Prepare materials to inform participants about data collection.

Info Box: What are the basic elements of informed consent?

5. Document the data collection plan and train staff members.

6. Collect data using the plan and prepare to modify the data collection plan.

Info Box: What if youth or their caregivers are unwilling to provide data?

7. Prepare the data for analysis.

- Create a database to organize the data.
- Develop a data dictionary.

8. Share results with staff and make programmatic changes.

A checklist for all steps, including tables and worksheets, is provided in Appendix B.

Step 1

Decide What Data to Measure and Collect

The purpose of JJCPA funds is to support programs that have the potential to reduce rates of juvenile crime and delinquency. Therefore, reducing juvenile justice contact is a relevant long-term outcome across most or all JJCPA-funded programs. However, programs have various approaches that they use to reduce the risk of juvenile justice contact. For example, some programs provide mental health treatment, some address substance misuse, some address academic achievement, and others provide youth a safe place to go after school where they can learn new skills. And while some programs may be expected to have a fairly direct impact on juvenile justice contact, such as those programs directly serving youth in juvenile halls, others have a more indirect effect on that outcome. Therefore, this section focuses on identifying the best ways to measure participation in your program and the short-term outcomes you expect the program to achieve. In this section, we will review the process of identifying these **participation measures** (i.e., the ways to measure participation in the program) and **outcome measures** (i.e., ways to measure whether your program is having the intended effects).

Step 1a: Identify the Program Activities

The first step is to outline the specific activities that make up your program. For example, a program providing afterschool educational support to youth may support several activities, such as one-on-one tutoring services, monthly college preparation workshops, and occasional arts-related programming. As another example, a program that offers outpatient substance use treatment may provide weekly group therapy, individual motivational interviewing therapy, and care coordination services.

Step 1b: Identify the Desired Program Participation and Outcome Measures for Each Activity

The next step is to identify several participation and program measures that your program hopes to see after youth participate in each activity.

Participation measures can be used to directly measure the program activities and identify the people being served by the activities. They include such measures as the number of people attending, characteristics of youth and families who attended the activity, fidelity of the services provided, and duration of attendance. These measures should capture information about what the ideal participation in your program might look like. Collecting information on participation measures may be helpful in answering such questions as the following:

- Who is our program serving?
- How many youth and families used each activity that we provided?
- How often did youth and families use these services or activities?
- How long did participants stick with the activity?
- Were participants satisfied with the activity?

Even if you are not interested in such questions, we still recommend collecting data related to participation: It can provide useful context to understanding whether youth had adequate contact with your program and how that might affect youth outcomes.

Outcome measures assess the degree to which your program made the difference it intended to make for your participants. As an example, for programs providing educational support, outcome measures may include improved grades, improved school attendance, and, as a result, reduced juvenile justice system contact. Outcome measures for programs that offer substance use treatment services may be reduced substance use, as well as improved mood and other mental health symptoms.

Figure 2 illustrates how program activities, participation measures, and outcome measures are related but conceptually different from one another. Table 3 provides several examples of these factors.

FIGURE 2

Relationship Between Program Activities, Participation Measures, and Outcome Measures

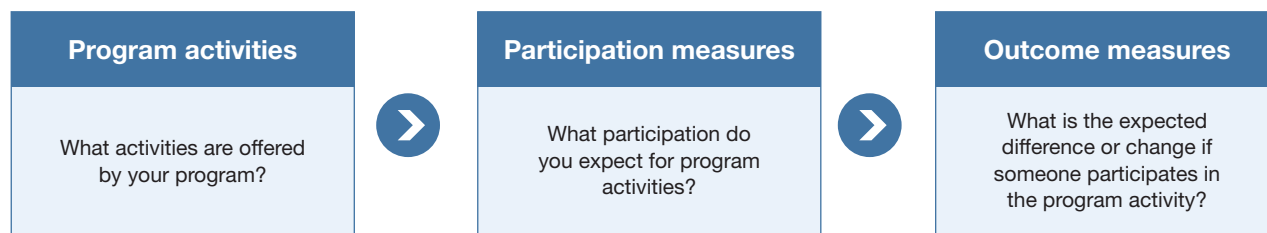


TABLE 3

Examples of Program Activities, Participation Measures, and Outcome Measures

Program Activities	Participation Measures	Outcome Measures
Specific actions that make up the program	Direct and measurable products of the program activities	The intended effects of the program
Afterschool educational program for youth	• Increase the number of youth who attend the program in the next year. • Increase the frequency of youth attendance from once per week to twice per week in the next six months. • Increase the length of time youth attend the program in the next year.	• Increased youth school engagement in the next six months • Improved academic scores in the next year
Multisystemic Therapy (MST) for youth and families	• Increase the number of youth and families served in the next year. • Improve provider fidelity to MST in the next year. • Increase family members' knowledge about MST principles in the next year.	• Continued knowledge of MST principles in next year • Improved mental health outcomes in the next six months • Reduced recidivism in the next year

When you are ready to begin identifying the participation and outcome measures of your program, we find it can be helpful to go through an activity we call “If, then.”

“If, then” statements are commonly used to predict what might happen. These statements have two parts: (1) a hypothesis and (2) a conclusion (Figure 3).

Each JJCPA-funded program will have likely thought through a variation of the statement “If **our program provides this activity to youth**, then *eventually youth rates of juvenile justice contact will decrease*.” However, there might be more-immediate outcomes that you expect to occur before you get to the point of reduced juvenile justice contact. If you need help figuring out what those outcomes might be, it is helpful to do a series of “if, then” statements. Going through this activity can help you identify participation and program outcomes that are important to your program. For example, consider the following “if,

FIGURE 3

Illustration of Hypothesis and Conclusion

If **this happens**, then *that will happen*.

hypothesis
conclusion

then” statements for a program that provides a weekly skills training class for Probation youth to gain skills related to future employment:

If our program provides this activity to youth, then *youth will attend the program every week when it is offered.*

If youth attend this activity every week, then *they will learn skills related to future employment.*

If youth learn skills related to future employment, then *they will be more motivated and successful in obtaining jobs.*

If youth are more motivated and successful at obtaining jobs, then *they will have a stable income and structure.*

If youth have a source of income and structure, then *they will be less likely to recidivate.*

These **red** and **blue** statements will inform which participation and program outcomes are important to achieving the eventual goal of your program. Once you have created a list of “if, then” statements for your program, consider what information might tell you whether the **red** and **blue** statements were true. This will help you decide how to measure your outcomes. For example, for the statement “If our program provides this activity to youth, then *youth will attend the program every week when it is offered,*” we would need to collect information about youth attendance to help us know whether this statement is true.

We have provided an example (Table 4) and a template (Table 5) to guide you through writing your “If, then” statements, as well as what information may tell you that the “If, then” statement occurred. Now, it is your turn! At this point, you do not need to consider specific methods to collect that information (e.g., questionnaires, attendance taken by program staff) because we will cover that in **Step 2: Decide how you will collect data for the program participation and outcome measures you have identified.** However, we have included methods in the Table 4 example in case that is helpful, and you might decide to revisit this table after reviewing Step 2.

TABLE 4

Example of “If, Then” Statements Template

If . . .	Then . . .	What Will Your Measure Be?
<u>our program provides this activity to youth</u>	<i>youth will attend the program every week when it is offered.</i>	Participation: Weekly youth attendance
<u>youth attend this activity every week</u>	<i>youth will learn skills related to future employment.</i>	Outcome: Employment skills
<u>youth learn skills related to future employment</u>	<i>they will be more motivated and successful in obtaining jobs.</i>	Outcome: Youth efforts to apply for jobs; youth rates of obtaining jobs
<u>youth are more motivated and successful at obtaining jobs</u>	<i>they will have a stable income.</i>	Outcome: Youth income level
<u>youth have stable income</u>	<i>they will be less likely to recidivate.</i>	Outcome: Youth arrests

Table 5 provides a blank template that you can use to write out these statements for your program. You can also find this same template in Appendix B (Table B.1).

Once you have completed this activity, we recommend that you review the participation and outcome measures you identified to consider which of these measures are absolutely necessary to know whether your “If, then” statements are true. As we described in **Part 1: Summary of Survey Findings**, youth and caregiver hesitancy and unwillingness to provide data is a barrier to data collection. Therefore, we suggest being mindful of this population and refraining from collecting data that are not essential for evaluating your program, even if certain questions may be interesting. Overall, we do not recommend collecting information that is (1) unrelated to your program’s goals or (2) unlikely to be used by your program for purposes of providing services or evaluation. As will be described further in **Step 4: Prepare materials to inform participants about data collection**, we also recommend sharing with your participants that you are collecting data for the purpose of program evaluation and only intend to collect information that is necessary for the evaluation to alleviate concerns about data collection.

Step 1c: Apply SMART Principles to Participation and Outcome Measures

Once you have identified participation and outcome measures for your program, we recommend that you apply SMART principles (University of California, undated) to each measure. SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Applying SMART principles to your measures will help you to refine your measures, give them clearer definitions, and increase the chances that data collection for these measures is feasible. In the following section, we outline what these principles mean for your measures:

TABLE 5

Blank If, Then Statements Template for Organizations to Use

If . . .	Then . . .	What Will Your Measure Be?

- **Specific:** The measure should describe exactly what is expected to change and for whom, as well as how this will be accomplished.
- **Measurable:** There should be a way to assess progress toward your program's measure.
- **Achievable:** The desired participation or outcome must be feasible for your target population, and your program must have the resources to support these changes.
- **Relevant:** The measure should be related to the program's purpose.
- **Time-bound:** The time frame in which the participation or outcome is expected to occur is specified.

We can examine two examples of measures to demonstrate these principles. Table 6 compares two sample measures identified by a hypothetical program that offers an educational session about substance use disorder (SUD) treatment with the goal of getting youth connected to formal SUD treatment. In this table, we apply the SMART principles to determine which is the better measure.

This section provides a basic overview of the ways you might go about identifying participation and outcome measures. Once you have completed identifying your program's activities, participation, and outcome measures, you may document them in Table B.2 in Appendix B. If you are interested in more guidance or additional tool-kits, please see the Info Box on the next page for recommended resources.

TABLE 6

SMART Principles Applied to Two Sample Measures for SUD Treatment Program

SMART Principles	Sample Measure 1: Improve Initiation of SUD Treatment	Sample Measure 2: 50% of Youth Who Participate in a SUD Educational Session Will Initiate Treatment Two Months After the Session
Specific	NO. This measure could be made more specific by including information about what "improve" means.	YES. This measure clearly indicates that the goal is to increase the number of youth who start SUD treatment, which is more specific than just looking for improvement. It also more clearly identifies the target population (i.e., youth).
Measurable	NO. While we know what will be measured, it is not clear when or via whom we will measure initiation.	YES. This measure focuses on the number of individuals who initiate in SUD treatment after receiving the session and sets a specific target goal, which is easy to measure.
Achievable	UNCLEAR. This outcome may be realistic, but it is difficult to tell because it is not very specific or measurable.	YES. This outcome appears to be realistic.
Relevant	YES. This measure is relevant to the program's desired outcome of increasing treatment initiation among youth with SUDs.	YES. This measure is relevant to the program's desired outcome of increasing treatment initiation among youth with SUDs.
Time-bound	NO. A specific time frame is not identified, so we do not know when initiation is expected to occur.	YES. This outcome is time-bound because it is tied to a specific time frame of two months following the completion of the educational session.

Info Box

Where Can I Find Additional Guidance on Identifying Participation and Outcome Measures?

In this toolkit, we've presented a simplified version of the process of identifying participation and outcome measures. If you'd like to learn more about this process, you might find program evaluation toolkits and guides to be useful. These toolkits and guides often walk through the process of developing a logic model, which is a visual way to depict the key components of your program and how they work together. They also walk through the process of using a logic model to identify participation measures (typically referred to as *process measures*) and outcome measures. This is just a sample of relevant guides, but there are many more great resources available online if you search for terms like "program evaluation toolkit."

- Joie D. Acosta, Rajeev Ramchand, Amariah Becker, Alexandria Felton, and Aaron Kofner, *RAND Suicide Prevention Program Evaluation Toolkit*, RAND Corporation, TL-111-OSD, 2013: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL111.html>
- Brian Lawton, Paul R. Brandon, Louis Cicchinelli, and Wendy Kekahio, *Logic Models: A Tool for Designing and Monitoring Program Evaluations*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, and Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, REL 2014–007, 2014: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/pdf/rel_2014007.pdf
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Logic Model Development Guide*, January 2004: https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Programs/Public-Health-Infrastructure/KelloggLogicModelGuide_161122_162808.pdf
- Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, eds., *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, 3rd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Step 2

Decide How You Will Collect Data for the Program Participation and Outcome Measures You Have Identified

Once you have decided on the participation and outcome measures that are relevant to your program, you must determine how you collect these data. There are several types of methods you could use for data collection. In this section, we discuss three methods that are useful for collecting quantitative data.

Forms and Questionnaires

This method of data collection involves having your participants provide information directly via a form or questionnaire. For purposes of this toolkit, a *questionnaire* refers to a set of questions (e.g., a survey, a scale, a symptom inventory), and a *form* broadly refers to other types of self-report data collection materials, such as a sign-in sheet or an event registration form. These are effective methods for collecting self-report data on each participant (e.g., attendance, demographic information, individual opinions about the program). Program participation can typically be measured through a brief form, whereas program outcomes will likely need to be measured by a questionnaire.

If you choose to use a questionnaire, your program may want to use existing questionnaires to collect data for the outcomes you are interested in—for example, using validated mental health scales, which were developed to measure an outcome, such as depression or well-being, and have been formally tested by researchers to make sure that they accurately capture the outcome. Alternatively, your program can easily create a list of questions based on the outcomes of interest—for example, if you have a training program that aims to increase knowledge related to some specific domains, you might develop some questions to assess the knowledge covered by the training program. We recommend asking questions that require a numerical response (e.g., “How many times have you experienced X?” or “Write the number of days this happened to you in the past week”) or provide multiple choice responses (e.g., “How much do you agree with the following statements on a scale of 0–4, where 0 = not at all and 4 = strongly agree?”). Using these types of questions will limit participant burden and will help you easily analyze the data, if you will be using the data for internal purposes.

When using this method, it is best to keep the forms and questionnaires brief (no more than five minutes): If a questionnaire is too long, participants may decide not to complete it at all. The Info Boxes on the following pages summarize some additional resources you may find helpful for developing or selecting a questionnaire.

Direct Observation

For purposes of this toolkit, observational data involves having an observer—generally a staff member of the program—observe program activities and clients for the purposes of systematically recording information about the program. For example, a staff member might attend an event and count the number of attendees. At times, this method may be a more efficient and accurate method of collecting information than asking each participant to provide data themselves via a form or questionnaire. For example, if a program’s short-term goal was to know how many youth attended a weekly skills training group, it may be easier for the staff member conducting the group to observe the number of youth who attend and record this information rather than having each youth complete a sign-up sheet. Types of information that might be best captured by this method are attendance, number of individuals present, and amount of time spent in an activity. We do not recommend using this method to capture demographic or identity-related information, such as gender, age, or race and/or ethnicity, because one’s identity may not be visible or observable.

Documents and Records

This method of data collection relies on existing sources of information. Your program may have already been collecting data relevant to your outcomes over the past few years. For example, a mental health program may already have been measuring client symptoms as part of care, or a school-based program may already have access to clients’ grades and academic performance. Previous records of event registration or attendance are also applicable here. If this is the case, you might find that you do not need to implement new data collection activities specifically for the purposes of evaluation; instead, you can leverage those data you were already collecting as part of your program to determine if it is meeting its expected outcomes.

Info Box

How Can I Select an Existing Validated Scale or Other Preexisting Questionnaire That Is Relevant to My Program?

Your outcome of interest may have been measured by other programs in the past using a validated scale or questionnaire. Researchers who developed validated scales for a particular outcome often publish the set of questions for others to use, as well as information about how the scale was developed and how to score the responses. There may also be programs that are similar to yours that have developed questionnaires to give to their participants; even if they haven't been formally evaluated in the literature, you may decide that you would rather select a preexisting questionnaire so that you do not need to develop your own. So how do you go about picking a validated scale or other questionnaire?

How to find an existing scale or other questionnaire: As a first step, there are some sources you can use to look for existing measures like this. Some free resources that may be of use include the following:

- Emily M. Becker-Haimes, Alexandra R. Tabachnick, Briana S. Last, Rebecca E. Stewart, Anisa Hasan-Granier, and Rinad S. Beidas, "Evidence Base Update for Brief, Free, and Accessible Youth Mental Health Measures," *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 1, January–February 2020 (refer to Supplementary Tables 1–10 for the measures):
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6962529/>
- YouthPower, "Positive Youth Development Measurement Toolkit," webpage, undated:
<https://www.youthpower.org/positive-youth-development-toolkit>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Evaluating Youth Programs and Outcomes," webpage, undated:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/youth/outcomes/>
- Matthew H. Morton, Megan Blondin, Alison Chrisler, Josephine Pufpaff, Melissa A. Kull, Shannon Kugley, and Kendan Elliott, *Measuring Up: Youth-Level Outcomes and Measures for System Responses to Youth Homelessness*, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, May 2019:
<https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Measuring-Up-Youth-Outcomes-Project-Youth-Collaboratory-Chapin-Hall-Final-v8.pdf>

You might also consider reaching out to other programs similar to yours to see what types of questionnaires they use and ask if you can use them too.

How to assess the degree of fit between your program and an existing scale or other questionnaire:

When you are considering using an existing scale or other questionnaire, it is important to get a sense of whether it is a good fit for your program. Here are a few questions you might consider:

- **Is it measuring the right thing?**
 - One aspect of fit is making sure there is a match between the content of the scale or other questionnaire and the outcome you are trying to measure. If you want to measure changes in depression symptoms, it's important to make sure you select a measure that specifically measures depression and not general mental health. If you select a scale that measures general mental health, you might not see the effects of your program—and this result might not be because your program is ineffective, but just because the scale is not a good fit.
- **Was it intended for use with your population?**
 - Another aspect of fit is determining whether the scale or other questionnaire has been used with populations that are similar to the population served by your program. For example, imagine that you have a scale that was developed with elementary school students, but your program serves middle and high school students. You would probably expect different types of responses from elementary school students than high school students, and you would probably word the questions differently too. So that might not be a good fit. Some aspects of the population you want to consider are (a) at-risk or juvenile justice involvement, (b) age, (c) gender, and (d) race and ethnicity. Typically, you want there to be a close match between the types of youth you serve and the population for whom the scale or other questionnaire was designed.

- **What if you can't find an existing scale or other questionnaire that has been used with a similar population before?**
 - It can be challenging to find a scale or other questionnaire that has been used with a similar population—or maybe you just can't find enough background information about it to make that determination. In this case, it is okay to use the scale or other questionnaire if it seems like a good fit for your program. But you should keep this mismatch in mind when you interpret the results. For example, imagine that you select a depression measure, and, typically, a score of 8 would be the cutoff for determining whether someone has serious levels of depression. If the population you serve is very different from the population used to develop that measure, a score of 8 could mean something different.
- **Do responses to the questions have the potential to change over time?**
 - If you intend to use this measure at multiple timepoints (see Step 3b for more information about this), you will need to consider whether the questions will still be relevant and appropriate at each timepoint. For example, imagine that you are trying to reduce levels of marijuana use in youth. When a youth enters the program, maybe you ask a question such as “Have you ever used marijuana?” If you ask that question the same way when they exit the program, it would be really difficult to tell if your program has been effective, because it asks about historical marijuana use: A young person who says they have used it when they enroll in the program will still give the same response when they exit, because you are asking if they ever used marijuana. It would be better to ask a question that can show the effects of the program—for example, asking if they have used marijuana in the past 30 days.
- **Can I make changes to the questions on an existing scale or other questionnaire?**
 - The short answer is yes—you can make changes to the questions. Sometimes this can be important—for example, maybe you find a scale, but you know the reading level is too high for the youth that you serve, or you know that some of the terms that are used are outdated. You might decide to make some updates to the wording. You just have to keep in mind that it does change the scale from the way it was initially developed, so you cannot necessarily make a direct comparison to other programs that have used the same measure.

Consider using a resource like this to help you decide whether existing measures fit with your program's participation or outcome measures: Youth Development Executives of King County, “Choosing a Survey Tool Worksheet,” undated-a: <https://ydekc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Choosing-a-Survey-Tool-Worksheet.pdf>

Info Box

How Can I Develop My Own Questionnaire Items?

If you are planning to develop new questions or items for a questionnaire to measure your program outcomes, here are some additional resources that you may find useful. They cover such topics as guidance and tips for writing questions, sample question and response options, and additional resources. Please keep in mind that these resources are not specific to developing items for at-risk or juvenile justice-involved youth, and your program should consider the sensitivity of the items you are developing to make sure that they are appropriate for the population of youth and families that you serve.

- Youth Development Executives of King County, “Survey Selection and Design Guiding Questions,” undated-b: <https://ydekc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Survey-Selection-and-Design-Guiding-Questions.pdf>
- Chase Harrison, “Tip Sheet on Question Wording,” Harvard University Program on Survey Research, updated November 17, 2007: https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/sites/projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/psr/files/PSRQuestionnaireTipSheet_0.pdf
- Sarah Fisher, “Great Survey Questions: How to Write Them & Avoid Common Mistakes,” *Qualtrics* blog, April 1, 2023: <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/writing-survey-questions/>
- Pew Research Center, “Writing Survey Questions,” webpage, undated: <https://www.pewresearch.org/our-methods/u-s-surveys/writing-survey-questions/>

Step 3

Develop a Plan for Data Collection

Once you have determined how you will collect data, the next step is to create a plan for data collection. This includes examining existing program processes and deciding when data will be collected, how the data will be collected and stored, and who will be responsible for this process.

Step 3a: Create a Walkthrough of Program Activities to Determine How to Build in Data Collection

Before making these decisions, you may find it useful to think about the process of implementing the program, from start to finish, and then identifying opportunities to build data collection into the existing processes and flow. Capitalizing on existing organizational processes will help you more seamlessly integrate data collection into things that are already happening and reduce burden on staff because it can be difficult to sustain data collection if it is burdensome for staff.

We suggest that you begin by “walking through” your program activities step by step to determine the order in which things happen and who is involved. Figure 4 includes some of the questions you might ask yourself. Worksheet B.1 in Appendix B also includes the same questions and space for you to write responses. Figure 5, later in this section, will show you how to complete the worksheet.

Once you have completed the walkthrough and outlined the resources, staff, and steps of your program’s activities, you can use this information to start making decisions about the **when**, **how**, and **who** of your program’s data collection process. You may choose to document these decisions in Table B.3 in Appendix B. An example of how to complete this table is shown in the example at the end of Step 3 (Table 10). You can also refer to Step 5 to see how this can be used as a visual representation of your data collection plan.

FIGURE 4

Questions to Assess the Flow of Your Program

How frequently is your program offered?
Regularly (e.g., once a week) OR as a specially scheduled activity (e.g., a few times a year)? If regularly, how long are participants enrolled (e.g., 12 weeks? Six months? Varies?)?
▼
Where is your program activity held?
Is it indoors or outdoors? Is it held in the same location each time or different locations? Is there a natural entry point for the activity, such as a door or gate that people pass through?
▼
Who helps run your program activities?
Who is on site when the activity is offered?
▼
What supplies or resources are used for the program activities?
Are there office supplies, such as paper and pencils? Do the youth have access to computers?
▼
Are there times that you are already collecting information from participants?
Do youth sign up in advance of the session, and, if yes, how do they do so? If not, do they sign in or out at the event?

As stated earlier, the goal is to seamlessly integrate data collection into existing program processes as much as possible to reduce the burden on program staff. Please note that these decisions do not have to be made in the order in which we present them—for example, you can decide on the **how** prior to the **who**. In addition, we highly encourage collaboratively creating the data collection plan with the staff members who will be implementing the plan. Staff members who are leading program activities are the most knowledgeable about when and how to make data collection feasible. Also, providing staff members with opportunities to provide feedback about data collection processes will likely increase staff investment and ownership of the data collection process, which will lead to greater probability of implementation success and sustainment of the data collection plan.

Step 3b: When Will Data Be Collected from Participants?

Timing is a relevant factor for data collection. When considering timing, there are two things that you will need to consider.

1. If your program activity occurs regularly, at what timepoints will you collect data from participants?
2. When will data be collected from participants during the program activity?

Participation measures and outcome measures will likely need to be collected at different timepoints. Participation measures are simplest to collect every single time the participant engages in the program activity (e.g., collecting attendance for each day a youth comes to the afterschool activity).

Outcome measures may not follow that same pattern. Some outcome measures are collected at the start of the program and then at additional timepoints (e.g., monthly during participation, at the conclusion of the program). Others are collected at a single timepoint, such as a post-program questionnaire.

If you do decide to measure outcomes at multiple times during the program, your SMART measures and schedule of program activities will help guide when would be the best frequency to collect data. For example, one potential outcome measure for a six-session life skills training program is a brief questionnaire about participants' knowledge about the skills. If the SMART measure was "increased participant knowledge of life skills by the end of the program," it is not necessary to collect data on participant knowledge throughout the program, even though it might be interesting to know. To address this SMART measure, pre-post data collection (i.e., data collected at the beginning and end of a program or intervention) is entirely sufficient.

A benefit of measuring outcomes at multiple timepoints is that you can assess change over time after participating in the program. For example, if someone reports high levels of depression at the beginning of the program and then lower levels of depression at the end of the program, you will be able to detect that. Note that in this instance, you should be careful in interpreting whether that change is entirely due to the program—there can be a lot of factors that influence changing scores over time. However, having multiple measurements is helpful because you can see that depression decreased. If you had only measured depression at the end of the activity, you would not have a point of comparison for that score. Routine data collection may also be useful in addressing program specific data collection issues. For example, if youth frequently drop out of your program, routine data collection may help ensure that some outcomes are still collected despite lack of program completion. Additionally, if your program does rolling admission (i.e., not all youth start the program at the same time), it may be more efficient and simple for your staff to incorporate routine data collection into their processes rather than having to remember to collect pre-post data for youth with different start and end dates.

Remember, less frequent data collection is better than having **no** data, so if you think that it might be excessive to ask participants to provide data weekly, consider whether collecting data from participants once every two weeks or once per month will still help collect enough information for your program's participation and outcomes measures. Tables 7 and 8 provide two examples of timepoints for the same 12-week substance use treatment program:

There might also be situations, such as a one-time event, in which a single assessment is the most realistic option. For example, there could be an activity hosted at a park that doesn't have a formal start and end time—perhaps it is a three-hour activity, and youth can drop in and then leave when they are done. In this case, it could be logistically challenging to give a pre-activity *and* post-activity questionnaire, and you may decide that a post-activity questionnaire is the best option. If you are considering using questionnaires as your “post only” data collection method, you might want to be sure that the phrasing of your question orients your respondents to the time frame of interest. For example, you may want to begin questions with “As a result of this program” or “Compared to the start of the program” to assess for change that occurred as a result of the program.

TABLE 7

Potential Routine Data Collection Timepoints for a 12-Week Substance Use Treatment Intervention for Youth with Substance Use

Option 1: Routine Data Collection

Measures	Timing (weeks)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Participation: Collect youth weekly session attendance (measured by therapist)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Outcome: Collect youth self-reported substance use and symptoms related to substance use (measured by a brief paper questionnaire given at the beginning of the session)	x		x			x			x			x

TABLE 8

Potential Pre-Post Data Collection Timepoints for a 12-Week Substance Use Treatment Intervention for Youth with Substance Use

Option 2: Pre-Post Data Collection

Measures	Timing (weeks)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Participation: Collect youth weekly session attendance (measured by therapist)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Outcome: Collect youth self-reported substance use and symptoms related to substance use (measured by a brief paper questionnaire given at the beginning of the session)	x											x

In Table 9, we outline some of the considerations that might shape your decision regarding the frequency of data collection. It is possible that your program outcomes can be measured using more than one method, so we recommend considering which method may be the best for measuring your desired outcomes as well as feasibility for your staff.

When Will Data Be Collected from Participants During the Program Activity?

Once you have decided at which timepoints data will be collected, you must consider when would be the best time *during* the program activity to collect data. To maximize responses from participants, we recommend collecting data from participants toward the beginning of the program activity, especially for activities that occur regularly (e.g., weekly or monthly). If your program activity happens irregularly or only a few times a year, consider connecting data collection to an “exit” activity that the program already has, such as a sign-out sheet or some sort of incentive (e.g., providing a goodie bag or snack after data have been collected). You may need to consider the **how** and **who** of data collection in conjunction with the timing in order to develop an effective data collection plan.

Step 3c: How Will Data Be Collected?

The **how** involves thinking about where your program takes place (e.g., inside an agency room, outside in the park or at the beach, in youth homes) and what resources your program already has available in that location (e.g., paper, pencils, tablets, computers). If the program takes place inside and participants will already be using a computer or tablet for program activities, you may consider collecting data using a free online survey platform, such as Google Forms or SurveyMonkey. Using this option may be helpful for data collection and submission because all of the data will be collected and stored in one place. However, these online methods may not be the best way to collect sensitive data because of limitations to data security. This information about data security should be disclosed to participations prior to data collection (refer to Step 4).

TABLE 9
Considerations for Different Frequencies of Data Collection

Type of Data Collection	Considerations	How to Address Considerations
Routine or pre-post	• Able to directly assess program effectiveness • Able to examine intermediate change (e.g., can see if outcome occurs at specific time during the intervention) • Frequent data collection might be burdensome for participants and staff	• Consider collecting data at the beginning of program activities to improve likelihood of receiving a response • Consider whether you will collect data routinely or only pre-post depending on your outcome measures
Post only	• Less participant and staff burden for data collection • Need to assume and trust participant self-report regarding post-program changes • Unable to directly examine effects of program because there are no data from participants prior to program participation	• May need to modify questionnaire items to orient participants to the program – for example, “<i>As a result of this program</i>, I am doing better in school” • May use a comparison group (could be an anonymous group that did not receive the activity) to examine effects of program

If the activity occurs outside or your program activity does not involve using electronics, it may be best to collect information via direct observation from staff members or paper forms. If you are offering an activity that takes place in a recreational room at a park that has a single entrance or exit, and youth will be participating in an art-making event, it might make sense to have a paper-and-pencil version of a questionnaire as people walk into the room, setting the expectation that they will pick up the questionnaire, complete it sometime during the activity, and then return it to the same place as they leave. Alternatively, if you are offering an outdoor activity at a park where people can easily come and go and there is not a single unifying space, you might consider placing paper-and-pencil questionnaires and writing implements throughout the park and having a locked box where people can submit their questionnaire when they are done. You could also consider programming a brief online questionnaire and then posting a QR code that participants can use to access the questionnaire throughout the park.

Now that you are considering location and feasibility, you may need to go back to Step 2 and choose a more appropriate method based on your review of program resources and schedule.

Step 3d: Who Will Be Responsible for Collecting the Data and Organizing the Data for Submission?

The **who** is often easy to decide once you have determined the exact timing of data collection during the program activity and the method you'll use to collect data. This is because you will already know which program staff members are available to collect data and the resources to which they will have access. For example, if one staff member already manages the sign-in sheet at the beginning of the activity, this individual might be the best fit to administer other self-report data collection forms at the same time as the sign-in. You will also want to consider who will be responsible for organizing the data and preparing the data for submission. Is the same individual who is responsible for collecting the data also responsible for entering the data into a database (see Step 7), or will this task be assigned to different staff members? Clearly assigning staff to specific data collection and submission tasks and timelines will help provide clarity regarding steps and responsibilities and increase the likelihood of data being collected and organized correctly.

Once you have decided the **when**, **how**, and **who**, we recommend testing the data collection decisions with your staff. This test will not include actual data collection with participants, but it should go through the operations of the data collection plan and include all necessary materials for staff to practice with. Be prepared to make modifications based on your test runs, so that you can develop a more efficient data collection plan alongside your staff.

Example of Completing Step 3 to Determine a Program's Data Collection Plan

Consider the example in Figure 5 for a 12-week substance use treatment program. The figure demonstrates how this program might answer the questions suggested during the program walkthrough activity in Step 3a. Table 10 depicts how the responses for the walkthrough activity may contribute to decisions made for the data collection plan.

FIGURE 5

Example of a Program Walkthrough (from Step 3a) Being Used to Inform the Data Collection Plan

How frequently is your program offered? Regularly (e.g., once a week) OR as a specially scheduled activity (e.g., a few times a year)? If regularly, how long are participants enrolled (e.g., 12 weeks? Six months? Varies?)?	Regularly, once a week for 12 weeks. Youth are enrolled for the full 12 weeks.
	
Where is your program activity held? Is it indoors or outdoors? Is it held in the same location each time or different locations? Is there a natural entry point for the activity, such as a door or gate that people pass through?	Program is held indoors at center each week. The exact room may vary depending on availability. Youth enter the center through the same entrance each time.
	
Who helps run your program activities? Who is on site when the activity is offered?	Five program staff administer weekly program activities with individual youth. Administrative (front office) staff are on site but do not interact with youth other than alerting program staff that youth have arrived.
	
What supplies or resources are used for the program activities? Are there office supplies, such as paper and pencils? Do the youth have access to computers?	All activities are done with pens, pencils, and paper. Youth do not have access to computers during program activities.
	
Are there times that you are already collecting information from participants? Do youth sign up in advance of the session, and, if yes, how do they do so? If not, do they sign in or out at the event?	Youth and caregivers schedule sessions with front office staff in person or via phone or email. Program staff collect information about youth symptoms every week via paper forms.

TABLE 10

Example of Decisions Made for Data Collection Plan Based on Figure 5

Measures	Method	Frequency	Who Is Responsible for Collecting Data?	Who Is Responsible for Organizing Data for Submission?
Participation: Consistent weekly youth attendance	Direct observation: Front office staff will document youth attendance in existing check-in forms when youth arrive for each session.	Each session (weekly)	Lisa and Keenan (whoever oversees the front office that day)	Lisa (front office staff) will compile youth attendance data from existing check-in forms once every four weeks and send to Brian (program staff).
Outcome: Youth self-reported substance use and symptoms related to substance use	Questionnaire: Brief paper questionnaire is given at the beginning of sessions. The session does not begin until questionnaire is complete.	Pre-program, every two weeks, end of program	Individual program staff working with youth (e.g., Brian, Kayla, Jessica, Juan, Tyler) collect data and enter data into online form at the same time that they complete session notes.	Brian (program staff) will compile all data from Lisa and program staff into a spreadsheet to send to Probation every month.

Step 4

Prepare Materials to Inform Participants About Data Collection

After deciding on a data collection plan, you can start to prepare materials that will be used to communicate with your program participants—and their caregivers—about data collection. To do this, there are a few factors you should consider.

First, be aware of any requirements and policies that your agency and regulatory environment has regarding collecting data from individuals. This may include requirements regarding how to document consent with youth, how to receive permission to collect data from caregivers, how data will be stored in a protected physical location (e.g., locked room and cabinet) or system (e.g., electronic system that uses passwords), or limits to your ability to share data with outside entities, such as an external evaluator (e.g., because of protections such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act [FERPA]).

Second, be aware of the principles of informed consent. Even if you are only using the data for internal evaluation purposes, being clear with participants about the use of their data might alleviate concerns that they have about your use of the data. In research settings, *informed consent* is a structured process in which participants must be provided with information on several key topics to make sure that their decision to participate in the research is based on a complete understanding of the research, participation's risks and benefits, and the ways their data will be used. Even if you are not collecting data under a formal research study, you can look to the principles of informed consent to think through the types of details you might want to share with participants (see the Info Box on the next page for more detail).

Once you have considered these factors, you can prepare the appropriate materials to share this information with your participants. If you are collecting information via an online survey or an electronic form, you may consider including these materials at the beginning of the questionnaire or form. If you need to collect signatures from individuals in person, you may consider preparing a paper consent form including this information, as well as a script for your staff to describe the contents of the consent form to the individuals. We have found that careful and thoughtful in-person explanation of the purpose of data collection can be helpful in increasing participation in data collection efforts. Lastly, it is important to use plain-language statements when explaining data collection processes and describing how data will be used. Participants need to be able to understand these processes to provide consent, so you may need to consider youth or family reading level and language fluency when preparing your materials.

Info Box

What Are the Basic Elements of Informed Consent?

In formal research studies, there are certain elements that researchers are supposed to discuss with participants before obtaining their consent to participate (Office for Human Research Protections, 2016). This ensures that participants understand the nature of the research and its risks and benefits, and they can make a fully informed decision. The commonly required elements of informed consent include:

- a statement with the purpose of data collection, the expected duration of participant's involvement, and a description of the procedures. For example, "We are collecting data to evaluate this program. We will be asking you to complete a questionnaire when you enroll in the program and when you complete the program, and it will take about 3 minutes each time."
- a description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the participant. This includes risk related to confidentiality. For example, "We will not be asking you to put your name on the questionnaire, but, because this is a small program, there is a chance we will be able to determine who completed the questionnaire."
- a description of any benefits to the participant. For example, in research studies, participants sometimes receive an incentive (e.g., a gift card) to participate in the study.
- a statement describing the extent to which confidentiality of records identifying the participant will be maintained. For example, "We will be collecting your name along with your answers to these questions. However, the file will be password protected and stored on a secure site, and only members of our team will have access to your responses. When we report on the results, we will only summarize them—for example, 70 percent of people said they were satisfied with this program."
- an explanation of whom to contact for answers to questions about the research, participants' rights, and how to report that a participant has had an injury
- a statement to indicate whether participation is voluntary and whether there are limits to what participants have available to them if they refuse to participate.

When collecting data from participants in your program, you may decide to use a similar process to inform them about the purpose of data collection. When you are collecting data from your participants as part of your regular program operations (as opposed to an external evaluation or research study), you do not necessarily need to cover all these topics with them. However, when their information will be shared with an outside entity, such as an evaluator, it can be important to make sure that they know how their data will be used, and you may find that you want to share some of these details with participants before they begin.

Step 5

Document the Data Collection Plan and Train Staff Members

Once you have decided which data will be collected and the staff members responsible for collecting the data, the next step is to document the procedures using written and visual materials and train staff members to implement the plan. Step-by-step procedures are necessary to ensure that useful data are collected accurately and to ensure continuity in the event of staff turnover. The procedures should be written in simple language and define key terms or acronyms that are related to data collection. We recommend including information about:

1. chronological order of data collection events
2. who is responsible for each action
3. the amount of time each event is expected to take (both within activity and timepoints)
4. materials needed for data collection
5. instructions for organizing and storing data prior to data submission (this is described in detail in Step 7)
6. who to contact with any questions about data collection.

In addition to written procedures, it may be helpful to create a visual workflow to guide and remind staff of the data collection plan. You may wish to use the template provided in Table 11 to help create a timeline and track data collection and submission efforts. This is the same template that was used in the example in Step 4.

TABLE 11
Template for Documenting Data Collection Plan

Measures	Method	Frequency	Who Is Responsible for Collecting Data?	Who Is Responsible for Organizing Data for Submission?
Participation:				
Outcome:				

Another option you can use to organize your efforts is a *Gantt chart*, a horizontal bar chart that shows timelines. When using a Gantt chart, place the timeline for data collection at the top of the chart and each data collection step in the left-hand column. You then place an “X” or shade the box to indicate when each data collection activity will take place. A sample Gantt Chart (Table 12) is provided using the same data collection tasks described in Step 3 and Table 10. Tables 7 and 8 in Step 3 are also examples of simplified Gantt charts. Free Gantt chart templates that you can use and modify are available for Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets.² Note that, due to the format of the Gantt chart, it is often difficult to provide in-depth instructions about the data collection tasks in the chart itself, so you may find that some supplemental documentation is needed even if you create a Gantt chart. An empty data collection plan template (Table B.3) and an empty Gantt chart (Table B.4) are provided in Appendix B. Regardless of which written or visual documentation you choose to use, these documents should be reviewed for clarity and feasibility by program staff who will be implementing the data collection plan, so that necessary changes can be made prior to training efforts.

Once the procedures have been documented and reviewed, you will need to train staff members who will be directly responsible for data collection efforts and any other staff members who will be providing support to data collection efforts. These trainings can be provided in person or virtually and may need to be provided over several sessions. In addition to training staff on what data collection procedures to follow, the training should aim to educate anyone who plays a part in data collection efforts on **why** data are relevant to their work and why this data collection is a high priority for the program. This will signal organizational priority for data collection and provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions about the task and its importance. Given their knowledge about day-to-day details of the program, staff may also suggest important modifications to improve the efficiency of the workflow and data collection. It will be important to acknowledge their suggestions and be open to making modifications to the plan. In addition, it may be helpful to briefly share the data collection plan with all staff members in the program, so that other staff members are knowledgeable about these efforts and can provide assistance when needed.

TABLE 12
Example of Gantt Chart

Task	Timeline (weeks)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Collect weekly participation data	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Collect youth symptom data	x	x		x		x		x		x		x
Program staff enter youth data into electronic database	x	x		x		x		x		x		x
Lisa sends participation data to Brian				x				x				x
Brian compiles data and sends to Probation				x				x				x

Step 6

Collect Data Using the Plan and Prepare to Modify the Data Collection Plan

After training staff, you are ready to implement the data collection plan. We recommend scheduling staff meetings after the first few times your staff attempt data collection to seek feedback on the processes. Despite having done several practice runs, there may be additional modifications that may need to be made to the data collection plan to make it as efficient as possible. It is best to make these changes as early as possible, so that staff members can see that their feedback is being considered as they implement new work activities. This will encourage staff to continue to suggest helpful ways to improve the plan and increase investment in data collection efforts.

The results of our survey with JJCPA-funded programs suggest that one factor to be attuned to is the willingness of youth or their caregivers to provide data to your program. Youth and caregivers may have valid concerns regarding the provision of their data. For this reason, it is important not to dismiss those concerns but instead to find ways to address the concerns to the extent possible. Many of the suggestions made in this toolkit may help to address the concerns of youth and caregivers. For example, in Step 1, we talked about the importance of limiting data collection to information that your program actually needs and plans to use for evaluation, and in Step 4, we provided some initial detail about how you can communicate with program participants about data collection. In the next Info Box, we provide additional suggestions of ways that you might address hesitancy or concerns on the part of youth and caregivers.

Info Box

What If Youth or Their Caregivers Are Unwilling to Provide Data?

Many JJCPA-funded programs indicated that youth and caregivers may be unwilling to participate in data collection (see results in **Part 1: Summary of Survey Findings**). In this box, we list several ways to address this unwillingness and encourage participation, rooted in the literature related to client engagement.

- **Explain the data collection process (Youth Development Executives of King County, undated-c):**

Consider explaining data collection processes to youth and families in the same manner you would explain your program's activities and intended goals. It may be best to include this information in the same conversation or informational email to demonstrate that data collection is an important part of program activities. Here are some additional things to consider when describing data collection:

- **Transparently frame the benefits and risks:** One benefit of providing data is that they can help the program to know whether it is actually achieving the outcomes that it expects to. If the program is not achieving the expected effects, data collection gives programs the chance to identify this issue and then to try to investigate ways to improve the effectiveness of the program. In addition, if your program is willing to share information back with youth and families, another potential benefit is that youth may be able to directly observe changes as a result of participating in the program. For example, if a ten-week program collects data on youth mental health symptoms every week, showing youth their progress when they are halfway through the program may motivate them to continue to work toward their goals or contribute to discussions on how to improve treatment to meet their goals by the end of the program. Finally, collecting data can help programs demonstrate their effectiveness to funders and help them to secure future funding. Regarding risks, the specific risks will depend on the ways that data are shared with outside entities. For example, any time data with identifiers are shared, there is the potential for a breach of confidentiality. Therefore, you should also share efforts to protect the identity of youth and ensure that data do not fall into the wrong hands.
- **Address concerns directly:** Justice-involved youth and their families may have had negative experiences with or general distrust of the justice system (Elkington et al., 2020). This may contribute to their concerns about how data will be collected and used. We encourage staff to be open to listen to their concerns and express understanding. While some of the concerns may be valid, others may be addressed by providing additional information about the data collection process and plans to protect data. Expressing that the program is also aligned with the family's interest of helping (and not harming) youth may also be helpful in developing a collaborative, empathic relationship among staff, youth, and their caregivers.
- **Express support and respect regarding youth and caregiver points of view:** Service providers are in positions of authority with at-risk and justice-involved youth and their families as gatekeepers of services (Toros, DiNitto, and Tiko, 2018). Expressing support and respect for their points of view and ultimate decisions regarding data collection may increase trust in program staff, which, regardless of participants' decisions about data, may positively influence program outcomes. We want to empower youth and families to make decisions that they believe are best and safe.

- **Reduce barriers and provide incentives associated with completing data collection (Wong et al., 2021):**

Even once youth have agreed to provide data, staff may encounter difficulty with participation. The following are some ways to make data collection as burdenless and acceptable as possible for youth and their families. These strategies are not intended to coerce participants to provide data but rather to give positive reinforcement for participating in a desired behavior. Considering sharing these methods with youth and their families to demonstrate that your program's plan is not an added burden.

- Use shorter questionnaires.
- Use direct observation when possible.
- Administer questionnaires prior to starting program activities.
- Reduce social burden by allowing participants to answer questions through electronic or paper means, rather than verbally or visibly to staff members.
- Express messages of appreciation or gratitude for completing measures.
- Tie the completion of measures to a material reward (e.g., youth receive a small snack or school supply after completing the questionnaire). These material rewards (which should not be expensive) may already be things that your program intended to provide to participants as part of the program.

Step 7

Prepare the Data for Analysis

Once you have figured out the process of collecting evaluation data, you have cleared some of the biggest hurdles. However, it's also important to think about how the data will be used to support evaluation.

There are many ways that these data might be used for evaluation. If you have staff members who are knowledgeable about evaluation, you may use the data for internal evaluation purposes. Alternatively, the data might be used by an external evaluator, which could include the JJCPA evaluator. Because the data submission requirements for JJCPA-funded programs have shifted over time, in this section, we do not talk about specific requirements imposed by the Probation Department. Rather, we focus on how to prepare the data for analysis, regardless of who may be performing that analysis.

Step 7a: Create a Database to Organize the Data

Often, it can be easy to collect data from youth, perhaps using sign-in sheets or a questionnaire, but then the raw data might be set aside and not incorporated right away. However, we advocate for creating a database that you can update in real time as you get new data from youth. Though the term *database* may seem intimidating for programs that have limited capacity to collect and organize data, this can be as simple as developing a spreadsheet with all the key information. For example, you might create a spreadsheet that has one row per youth. Each column could then reflect a key piece of information about the youth—for example, you might have a set of columns for youth demographics (e.g., age, gender, race and ethnicity), a set of columns to reflect participation measures (e.g., number of sessions attended), and a set of columns to reflect outcomes (e.g., scores on a validated well-being scale, quantitative responses to a form). Table 13 shows a basic example of what this spreadsheet might look like, based on a notional program that tracks participation in sessions on a quarterly basis and administers a well-being measure to youth at enrollment and exit.

It will likely be easiest for your program to use participant names within your database. This way, you'll be able to easily link data from different timepoints—for example, if you have one youth who attends several sessions of a program, you'll be able to tell whether their name is already in the database. This also means that you'll be set up to provide the identifiable data, if that's required. If it is not required, you can prepare the data to share with external evaluators by assigning a unique ID to each youth participant and using that ID in the data rather than the youth names.

TABLE 13
Sample Program Data Spreadsheet

Youth ID	First Name	Last Name	Enrollment Date	Exit Date	Age	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	# Sessions Attended Q1 2023	# Sessions Attended Q2 2023	# Sessions Attended Q3 2023	# Sessions Attended Q4 2023	Wellbeing Score_ Enrollment	Wellbeing Score_ Exit
1														
2														
3														
4														

Step 7b: Develop a Data Dictionary

Another best practice is to develop a data dictionary. A *data dictionary* is a guide that explains what each data element in your database means and what the possible options for those data elements are. This type of documentation is important for multiple reasons. First, if there is turnover among the staff members who collect data, this ensures that the new staff member will collect and define data in the same way as the original staff member. Second, if the person analyzing the data is different from the person who collected the data, the data dictionary ensures that the person doing the analysis understands what data are in the database. Having a data dictionary is essential even for items that might seem obvious, such as gender or age. We give an example of this in Table 14.

Data dictionaries are most useful when they are detailed. If you are administering a questionnaire to youth, you can include the specific wording of each item in the data dictionary, as well as the response options and what each response option means. If you make any changes to the data compared with how they are collected on a questionnaire, you will also want to record that information. For example, you might have a questionnaire item with response options of “yes” and “no.” In the database, you might record these responses so that a “no” is entered as a 0 and a “yes” is entered as a 1. If this is the case, you should include this detail in the data dictionary too. Make sure all numbers have units attached, too—for example, if you have an item that is “Length of enrollment,” make you specify whether the number recorded refers to the number of sessions, hours, days, or weeks.

TABLE 14
Sample Data Dictionary Entries

Variable	Definition	Response Options
Gender (Sample 1)	Youth self-identified gender. Youth select from the response options named in the next column. Youth must select a single option.	• Girl or woman • Boy or man • Transgender • Nonbinary • Other gender
Gender (Sample 2)	Youth self-identified gender. Youth select from the response options named in the next column. Youth may select multiple options.	• Girl or woman • Boy or man • Transgender • Nonbinary, genderfluid, or genderqueer • I am not sure • I prefer not to specify
Age (Sample 1)	Youth self-reported age at time of participation. Youth write in their age.	Continuous age scale (recorded in one or two digits depending on age of youth)
Age (Sample 2)	Youth self-reported age at time of participation. Youth select their age from the categories in the next column.	• Under 10 • 10 to 12 • 13 to 16 • 17 or 18 • Older than 18
Age (Sample 3)	Youth age at the time of referral, as recorded on the referral form received from Probation.	Continuous age scale (recorded in one or two digits depending on age of youth)

NOTE: The gender examples are not necessarily designed to reflect best practices in data collection, though we have built on the guidance provided by DeChants et al. (2021) for the collection of gender data from youth. Rather, these examples are designed to provide models of the many ways that data can be collected in real-world settings.

Step 8

Share Results with Staff and Make Programmatic Changes

Once you have received results about your program from an evaluator (whether that is the evaluator with Probation or an external evaluator) or once you have analyzed the data internally, we encourage you to share the results with program staff, especially those who were involved in data collection efforts. We recommend this to be shared during a staff meeting so that staff can discuss the results, but it may also be shared via an email or newsletter. Engaging in conversation with staff about the results, both positive and negative, can be an excellent way to show that the program values and is invested in data collection. Sharing successful results may promote increased feelings of efficacy in your staff, and positive effects of the program demonstrate the utility of data collection, increasing the likelihood that staff will continue to implement the data collection plan. On the other hand, discussing difficult results is also important in order to encourage staff engagement in problem-solving and improving the program.

We also recommend that you consider making programmatic changes informed by the results of the data collection. These results may indicate that the program did not have the impact that the program had hoped for, which suggests that some changes need to be made, either to the program activity itself or to participation in the program. For example, if a program did not achieve the desired outcomes, but you found that youth did not attend the program consistently, it is hard to know whether the lack of outcomes is due to an ineffective program or a lack of consistent youth attendance. Therefore, this program may want to invest in strategies to encourage consistent youth attendance. Even if results indicate that the program did achieve desired outcomes, there is always room for improvement. For instance, if results for a ten-week program that collected data routinely suggested that youth skills development only improve during weeks 1–5 and are stagnant during weeks 5–10, you might consider shortening the program to reduce costs but still achieve goals.

Conclusion

This toolkit was designed to help programs receiving JJPCA funds to bolster current data collection practices. Programs benefit from the collection of data that can be used to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the programs. Not only does it allow programs to fulfill any data collection requirements associated with the terms of JJCPA funding, but it also provides them with the opportunity to self-evaluate or partner with external evaluators to make sure that the programs are resulting in the intended outcomes.

Each program in the JJCPA portfolio is unique in key ways—the population served, the services provided, the staffing structure, and the intended outcomes. Our goal in developing this toolkit was to provide guidance that would be applicable to this diverse portfolio of programs. At the same time, there were certain themes that we were not able to discuss in as much depth. Therefore, we hope that programs with additional questions will consult the additional resources referenced throughout this toolkit and will continue to seek more-tailored technical assistance from the Probation Department and the JJCPA portfolio. Ultimately, ensuring that evaluation data are available will ensure that programs in the JJCPA portfolio maximize their potential for meeting the needs of at-risk and juvenile justice-involved youth.

Survey Methods

We developed a survey instrument to assess current practices, resources, and challenges related to collection of evaluation data. Survey items were developed specifically for this project and were informed by the evaluation team's past experience discussing evaluation data collection with the Probation Department and funded programs, as well as issues that have been raised at JJCC meetings. The survey had a total of ten questions and covered such themes as communication received from Probation about data collection requirements, current within-program data collection implementation processes and resources, and challenges to data collection and submission. The survey was disseminated to key contacts from 28 programs, administered by 20 agencies and organizations, to complete. We requested that a single survey be completed per program. However, we stated that the survey would be most easily completed by leaders and staff who are involved in data collection efforts and encouraged communication with program staff before completing the survey or while completing the survey, if needed. We fielded the survey from July 27, 2023, to August 31, 2023. We sent weekly reminders to programs that had not completed the survey, with some additional reminders for nonresponders. In total, surveys were completed for 25 programs (100 percent of prevention programs and 87 percent of intervention programs). All participants provided informed consent for participation. We conducted basic descriptive statistics to understand the pattern of responses, including calculating mean and standard deviation for items using continuous rating scales and frequencies for items using categorical response options.

Step-by-Step Checklist with Worksheets

In this appendix, we provide a checklist based on the steps we outlined in the toolkit. The checklist also incorporates tables and worksheets that were referenced throughout the toolkit.

Step 1

- ☐ **Decide what data to measure and collect.**
 - ☐ **Step 1a: Identify the program activities.**
 - ☐ **Step 1b: Identify the desired program participation and outcome measures for each activity.**
Complete the “If, then” activity using Table B.1 to identify participation and outcome measures for each program activity. If have already defined your measures, document them in Table B.2.
Once you have identified your participation and outcome measures, list them in Table B.2.
 - ☐ **Step 1c: Apply SMART principles to participation and outcome measures.**

Step 2

- ☐ **Decide how you will collect data for the program participation and outcome measures you have identified.**
You may use the data collection plan template (Table B.3, “Method” column) in Step 5 to document your decision.

Step 3

- ☐ **Develop a plan for data collection.**
 - ☐ **Step 3a: Create a walkthrough of program activities to determine how to build in data collection.**
Use Worksheet B.1 to complete the walkthrough activity.

TABLE B.1

If, Then Statements Template

If . . .	Then . . .	What Will Your Measure Be?

TABLE B.2

Program Activities, Participation Measures, and Outcome Measures

Program Activities	Participation Measures	Outcome Measures

WORKSHEET B.1

Template for Program Walkthrough Activity

How frequently is your program offered?	
Regularly (e.g., once a week) OR as a specially scheduled activity (e.g., a few times a year)? If regularly, how long are participants enrolled (e.g., 12 weeks? Six months? Varies?)?	



Where is your program activity held?	
Is it indoors or outdoors? Is it held in the same location each time or different locations? Is there a natural entry point for the activity, such as a door or gate that people pass through?	



Who helps run your program activities?	
Who is on site when the activity is offered?	



What supplies or resources are used for the program activities?	
Are there office supplies, such as paper and pencils? Do the youth have access to computers?	



Are there times that you are already collecting information from participants?	
Do youth sign up in advance of the session, and, if yes, how do they do so? If not, do they sign in or out at the event?	

☐ **Step 3b: When will data be collected from participants?**

You may use Table B.3 (in the “Frequency” column) in Step 5 to document your decision.

☐ **Step 3c: How will data be collected?**

You may use Table B.3 (in the “Method” column) in Step 5 to document your decision.

☐ **Step 3d: Who will be responsible for collecting the data and organizing the data for submission?**

You may use Table B.3 (in the “Who Is Responsible . . .” columns) in Step 5 to document your decision.

Step 4

☐ **Prepare materials to inform participants about data collection.**

Step 5

☐ **Document the data collection plan and train staff members.**

Document the steps of the data collection plan and consider including visual aids for your staff using either a table (like the template in Table B.3) or the Gantt chart template (Table B.4).

TABLE B.3

Template for Documenting Data Collection Plan

Measures	Method	Frequency	Who Is Responsible for Collecting Data?	Who Is Responsible for Organizing Data for Submission?
Participation:				
Outcome:				

TABLE B.4

Gantt Chart Template

Task	Timeline (weeks)											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

Step 6

- ☐ Collect data using the plan and prepare to modify the data collection plan.

Step 7

- ☐ Prepare the data for analysis.
- ☐ Step 7a: Create a database to organize the data.
 - ☐ Step 7b: Develop a data dictionary.

Step 8

- ☐ Share results with staff and make programmatic changes.

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Notes

¹ The State of California uses the term *at-promise* to describe youth who were previously referred to as *at-risk*, consistent with California Assembly Bill 413 (2019).

² A free Gantt chart template is available at Smartsheet, “Gantt Chart Template,” undated: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1JcX4sHAuBRGsbXlgtxj5n72sMyFQutQyqJ7R_xQCCU/edit#gid=0

About This Toolkit

The Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA), administered by the California Board of State and Community Corrections, provides funding to counties to support programs that have proven their effectiveness in curbing crime among at-risk (also known as “at-promise”) youth and youth involved in the juvenile justice system. In Los Angeles County, the Probation Department oversees the implementation of JJCPA-funded programs, which are approved by the County through the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (JJCC), which comprises stakeholders from county agencies, city agencies, and community-based organizations. In 2019, the Probation Department funded the RAND Corporation to provide evaluation and technical assistance services related to JJCPA-funded programs, including an annual gap analysis. Despite previous gap analyses highlighting the importance of data on program implementation and outcomes as a way to ensure that funded programs are effective (Whitaker, Smucker, and Brooks Holliday, 2022), many programs still encounter challenges to the collection of data that can be used for program evaluation. In order to continue funding effective programs, the JJCC needs to know how well current programs are doing to address factors related to at-promise youth, Probation-involved youth, and their families.

This toolkit was developed to provide JJCPA-funded programs with assistance to effectively collect and submit data requested by the Los Angeles County Probation Department. The development of this toolkit was informed by the results of a survey of JJCPA-funded programs to better understand current data collection expectations, processes, and challenges.

Justice Policy Program

Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of the RAND Corporation that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The Justice Policy Program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.

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