



# NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING MEANINGFUL RESEARCH IN LOCAL JAILS



## Why Is Jail-Based Research Needed?

Jails have operated as a fundamental component of the local criminal justice system in this country since its establishment. Although they are a major portal of community reentry for criminal justice-involved populations, little is known about how they operate and what works in these settings. This presents researchers with the opportunity to fill the void and provide useful information and insight to jail practitioners.

## What Are Some Specific Elements That Researchers Should Address When Proposing Studies?

The following items detail key elements of successful strategies in proposing and conducting jail-based research:

- **Include the pretrial population.** Ensure the study includes a representative sample of jail inmates, including pretrial detainees, to produce meaningful analysis and insight.

- **Consider volunteering at the facility before developing a proposal.** Gain first-hand understanding of the jail before proposing research. This expedites the process of initiating and completing project tasks once the project commences.
- **Establish memorandums of understanding with data sources well in advance.** Allow at least a year to reach data extraction, matching, and sharing protocols with each agency or organization from which research-related information will be requested.
- **Establish researcher and practitioner partnerships.** Practitioner partnerships help ensure that baseline data for the study population and the jail population as a whole are defined, collected, and available to researchers when the study commences.
- **Engage in discussions with jail administrators and staff.** This will help create a sound logic model.
- **Seek guidance from the jail executive office<sup>1</sup> and general counsel.** Ensure the proposed logic model and protocols satisfy administrative, regulatory, and legal requirements.

<sup>1</sup> Typically, the sheriff's office or director's office (if a local department of corrections with a director is involved).

## ■ Address potential impacts on safety, security, and order before finalizing the logic model.

- *Include men and women as well as inmates with non-English primary languages.* Inclusiveness will improve the usefulness of information and analysis.
- *Develop and use a robust informed-consent form.* This prevents delays in collecting study data that include personally protected information.
- *Use informational material that is easily understood.* Potential participants' ability to read and comprehend may vary widely; information about the study should be easily understood.
- *Use prescreening to reduce potential recruits.* Prior to obtaining informed consent, use publicly available variables to prescreen for participation eligibility.
- *Determine eligibility with few criteria and readily available data.* This can prevent delays in eligibility determination as a result of using information derived from multiple information systems or agencies.
- *Maximize value of inmate contact time.* Complete the maximum possible study tasks with each contact visit to ensure maximum retention.
- *Design a study for minimal operational impact and risk.* Protocols requiring fewer visits, designed with safety in mind, and minimal staff time are more favorably received by practitioners and jail administrators.
- *Avoid denial-of-services comparison groups.* This will ensure compliance with federal regulations.
- *Vary service levels only slightly between groups.* Lower levels of variation in service levels between study groups will reduce differential attrition and reduce contamination bias.

■ **Consider noncontemporaneous comparison groups.** Differences in receptivity and other population characteristics between study groups selected within five population turnover cycles are likely to be minimal.

■ **Consider a modular program design.** Enable participants to pick up where they left off — whether transitioning from jail, to jail, or to the community — to improve retention.

■ **Design the study for inmates with very short jail stays.** This will maximize potential participants, completion of study tasks, and the value of derived insights.

■ **Design the study to minimize effects of selection bias, contamination, individual effects, limited sample sizes, and power limitations.** Use sound quasi-experimental study design principles to minimize the impact of widely known limitations that can be addressed through astute application of research methods.

■ **Include assurances that data will be de-identified and/or aggregated prior to public release.** Support privacy protection while producing meaningful analysis by ensuring potential participants and entities that provide data that the information provided will be de-identified and/or aggregated prior to public release. This will facilitate approval by the institutional review board.

■ **Focus on possibility.** Tremendous opportunities exist to systematically and methodically research jail processes and systems for those with the skill, perseverance, desire, and courage to do this necessary and challenging work.

## About the Author

Reena Chakraborty, Ph.D., has served as Chief of Strategic Planning and Analysis for the DC Department of Corrections since 2012. She is dedicated to applying systems and process analysis to understand, improve, and transform real-world systems that serve the public.

Dr. Chakraborty also serves as a Practitioner in Residence at the National Institute of Justice. She hopes this work will result in renewed interest in jails-based research that will meaningfully impact practice.