

7 Key Decisions to Measuring Recidivism

Recidivism is one of the most commonly sought after – and most commonly misunderstood – performance measures in juvenile justice. Before you embark on recidivism research, be sure there is agreement on these seven key decisions.

Decision 1 – Who will you measure?

Most recidivism research is on youth exiting juvenile corrections, but cohorts can include youth on supervision, referrals to court, or youth completing a diversion program. It may depend on who is doing the study or what data are available.

Decision 2 – How long will you track them?

The longer the follow-up period, the higher the recidivism rate. Best practices call for a maximum follow-up period of 2 years, with attention paid to the length of time between when the “clock” starts and the next offense.

Decision 3 – What counts as recidivism?

Whether you choose re-arrest, re-referral, re-petition, re-adjudication, or re-commitment, there are limitations and direct implications to the resulting rate.

Decision 4 – In what other systems will you look?

Many youth will age out of the juvenile system or move during timeframe of recidivism research. Data sharing agreements with the law enforcement, criminal system actors, and neighboring jurisdictions can help improve accuracy.

Decision 5 – What offenses will you count?

Offense type and severity provide useful details on the juveniles who recidivate and patterns of re-offending behavior. Capture technical violations and status offenses in addition to delinquent offenses as long as they can be distinguished.

Decision 6 – Will you count cases or kids?

It's often easier to talk about re-offending behavior of youth rather than cases, however, the purpose of the research may call for analysis of the percentage of cases in which the offender re-offends.

Decision 7 – What measure(s) interest you?

Additional measures, such as re-offending behavior by risk level or severity of initial offense versus subsequent offense can help the research be applied to practice.