

New York Recidivism Outcome Checkup System (NY.ROCS)

Concept Paper and Proposal

November 2024

John Jay College's Research and Evaluation Center ([JohnJayREC](#)) developed a program of confidential client recidivism checkups for community-based justice service providers in New York City (and perhaps eventually throughout New York State). Working in partnership with the State's Division of Criminal Justice Services ([DCJS](#)), researchers can create recidivism reports that local service providers may use to assess client outcomes confidentially — without the outside (and often misplaced) scrutiny accompanying contractual reporting requirements and external evaluations. Researchers tested the approach in a [pilot project](#) with several agencies in New York City and now propose to expand the project to provide ongoing recidivism checkups for more service providers.

The Challenge

State and local governments rely on community-based agencies to deliver many interventions for people involved with family courts and the criminal justice system. Services include probation supervision, behavioral therapy, drug treatment, mentoring, and many more. These diverse programs share the common goal of reducing recidivism, or lowering the odds that a former participant will be charged with a new offense and become involved again in the justice system. Lawmakers use recidivism data to gauge the effectiveness of interventions by analyzing the proportion of clients arrested, prosecuted, or incarcerated following intervention. Recidivism is assumed to reflect the effectiveness of justice services, but it is [not a perfect measure](#).

Recidivism is not a valid measure of individual well-being and behavior. It results from a sequence of events beginning with legal violations, of course, but often including the outcomes of citizen crime reports, police investigations, arrests, pretrial processing, and the complex series of bureaucratic actions involved in court hearings and judicial findings. Simple comparisons of recidivism can be highly misleading. An agency with a "recidivism rate" of 20 percent is not necessarily more effective than an agency with a rate of 40 percent. They may serve different client populations at different stages of justice involvement with dissimilar chances of justice-system contact and processing.

Using recidivism to assess agency performance can foster an anti-measurement culture. Service providers resist efforts to track recidivism among former clients. Instead of recidivism, they may prefer workflow measures, such as the number of clients served or the percentage completing services. Such measures may help to justify an agency's costs, but they do not generate information about intervention outcomes. Recidivism is important, but problematic. Accurate measures of effectiveness need to account for context and client characteristics that vary between providers and over time. The most appropriate response to any claim about recidivism data should be, "compared to what, when, and whom?" As a first step, however, agencies should be able to review their outcomes confidentially.

The Solution

In New York, DCJS data systems maintain detailed information about every arrest in the state involving relatively serious (i.e., “fingerprintable”) legal violations. Each data record includes demographic information about the individual involved, the location and date of the alleged crime, and legal disposition of the matter. The procedures required to obtain these records, however, are complex. State officials guard the privacy of arrest records very closely — as they should. Providers may want to track measures of client recidivism, but few agencies can do it themselves. They lack the necessary resources (e.g., time, funding, and staff).

What if community-based agencies were assisted by an independent research team that could review each agency’s recidivism outcomes — not as part of a high-stakes evaluation or legislative audit, but as a routine and confidential element of program management and quality assurance?

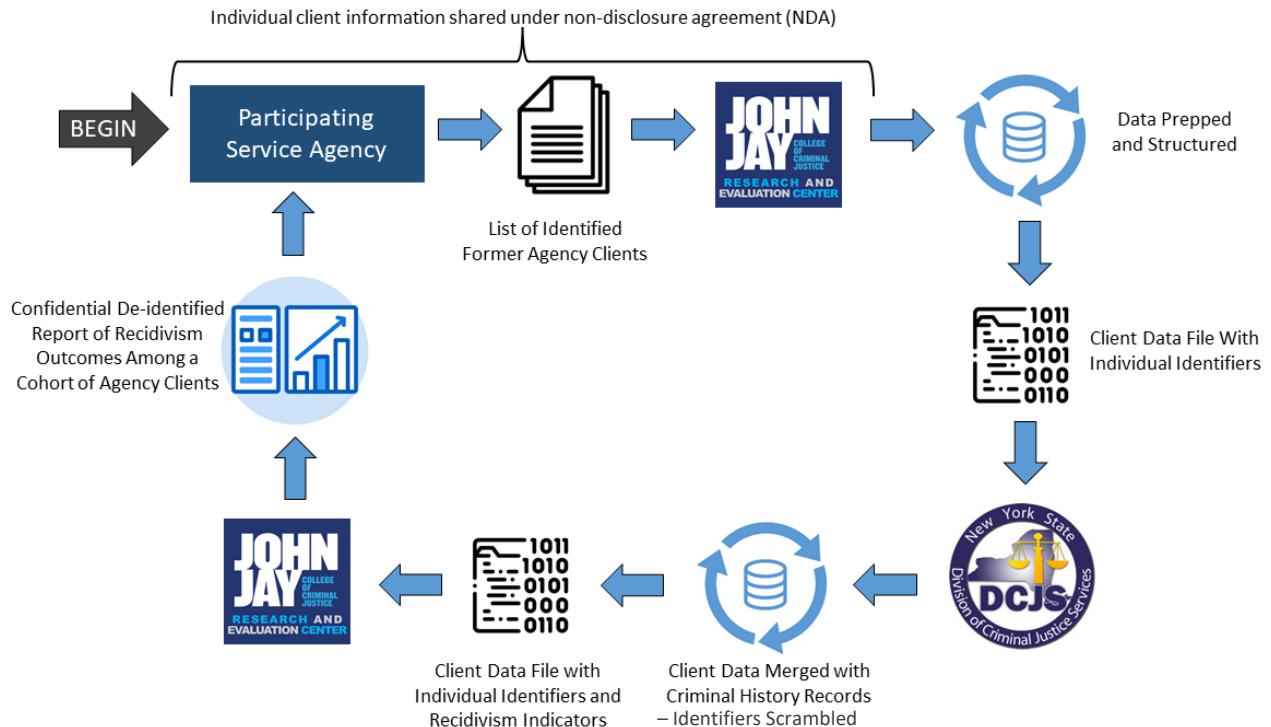
In partnership with DCJS, researchers at JohnJayREC developed a strategy to analyze recidivism outcomes confidentially. Results of each analysis are seen only by program staff who can use the results to fine-tune programs and gauge the impact of their services without the risk and expense of outside evaluations or contractual reviews. The NY.ROCS process begins when researchers at JohnJayREC obtain a list of former clients from a local service provider (e.g., all clients completing a program 12 months ago). Each list is provided to John Jay along with a signed, legal agreement ensuring individual privacy, confidentiality, and data security. These legally binding non-disclosure agreements (NDA) are executed before any data are shared by State officials.

Client lists are cleaned and standardized by JohnJayREC and then forwarded to DCJS data staff absent any information about the contributing service provider. The file submitted to DCJS includes individual client identifiers, such as their New York State ID number (if available), date of birth, Social Security number, and recent home address. Staff at DCJS match this information with the state’s criminal history database to create a combined file with complete criminal history records organized at the level of individuals.

The combined data file is then returned to JohnJayREC **but only after** all identifying data elements are either scrambled or anonymized. For example, an individual’s actual New York State ID number would be removed and replaced by a scrambled ID that still allows analysts to link individual records across time, but without knowing a person’s actual identity. Demographic indicators such as age would be grouped (age 18-20) while actual dates of birth or individual years of age are deleted.

Researchers at JohnJayREC would analyze these data to prepare a customized recidivism outcomes report for each participating agency. Only JohnJayREC staff would: 1) see the data file obtained from the state, and 2) know which provider agency supplied the original list of clients. Participating service providers would receive an analysis of their client outcomes but without seeing the actual DCJS records. Agencies would be able to review their own recidivism patterns by client characteristics and levels of service participation, but each report would refer to the agency using only an alias or pseudonym, such as “Uptown Services” or “Agency A.” Unless an agency elected to disclose its identity, all results would remain confidential and available only to the service provider.

NY.ROCS Data Processing and Workflow



This approach would be used with all participating service providers. If enough agencies were eventually involved, the project could also take on additional tasks. For example, multiple reports could be analyzed to track citywide (and eventually statewide) changes in recidivism among clients of differing ages and criminal backgrounds. Researchers could create an annual summary of recidivism results across all agencies without identifying the clients of any one agency. A master database could be developed for use as a reservoir of **matched comparison cases** for other evaluation projects.

When fully operational, the NY.ROCS project would: 1) provide individual service agencies with reliable and valid indicators of recidivism outcomes among their own clients, and 2) allow officials to monitor the effectiveness of justice operations using accurate and detailed recidivism outcomes without waiting for results from the intermittent and costly evaluations typically conducted by academics and outside research organizations.

The Research Team

The [Research and Evaluation Center](#) of John Jay College of Criminal Justice is part of the City University of New York, the nation's leading institution of higher education focused on justice-related matters. Established in 1976, the Research and Evaluation Center provides members of the John Jay community with opportunities to respond to the data and evidence needs of communities and justice practitioners collaborating to improve public safety. Since 2010, the Center has developed and managed research projects with combined budgets of \$48 Million (\$59M adjusted for inflation).

Dr. Jeffrey Butts, Director of the Research and Evaluation Center, will serve as the principal investigator. He is a well-known researcher who the U.S. Attorney General appointed to serve as a member of the Department of Justice's Science Advisory Board in 2015. Dr. Butts has more than 30 years of experience managing research projects. He graduated from the University of Oregon (Phi Beta Kappa) and earned the Ph.D. in sociology and social welfare from the University of Michigan.

Other staff, including CUNY graduate fellows and the JohnJayREC data analytics team, will administer the project under the supervision of the Center Director and two Deputy Directors: Sheyla Delgado and Kathleen Tomberg. Rebecca Balletto, Senior Research Administrator, will be the primary contact person for agencies interested in participating. JohnJayREC will also establish a working group of agency partners and evaluators, meeting regularly to discuss the project and the best uses of the data.

The Cost

JohnJayREC would require \$400,000 annually to organize and maintain project activities and infrastructure. Each annual agency report would likely cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000. The cost of reports could be offset eventually by asking participating agencies to pay for part of the work required to analyze their data. With enough funding, the project could eventually incorporate a dissemination and communications strategy with professionally designed written products, videos, and other web-based content to enhance the measurement of outcomes in the justice sector. Finally, the project could host an annual conference focused on research, evaluation, and the uses and limits of justice system data.

For More Information

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Key Partners Welcome the Idea of NY-ROCS (letters attached)

- **Jess Dannhauser, Commissioner, NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS)**
- **Dr. Ronald F. Day, Senior Vice President, The Fortune Society**
- **Michelle Portlock, Director of Impact & Evaluation, Osborne Association**
- **Jonathan McLean, Chief Executive Officer, CASES**



October 7, 2024

Jess Dannhauser
Commissioner

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Phone: 212-341-0903
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Dr. Jeffrey A. Butts
Research and Evaluation Center
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
524 W. 59th, BMW605
New York, NY 10019

Dear Dr. Butts,

On behalf of the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), I am providing this letter in support of your efforts to launch the New York Recidivism Outcomes Checkup System (NY.ROCS). We would be interested to explore the possibility of working with John Jay College and other partners to support this important initiative.

While ACS provides services for court-involved children and youth, policymakers and the public have an expectation that our efforts will reduce the chances that young people will continue to offend into adulthood. For this reason, criminal recidivism is pertinent as one outcome measure even for youth-serving agencies.

As you know, recidivism is not an appropriate measure of program effectiveness. It can be a helpful data point among many other outcome measures, but recidivism is often misused and misinterpreted. We would be pleased to see the NY.ROCS initiative provide service providers with routine, confidential measurements of recidivism that do not expose them to the misplaced scrutiny that often accompanies contractual audits and academic evaluations.

Please keep ACS informed of your progress in developing NY.ROCS and let us know if we can assist in your efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "JD", written over a horizontal line.

Jess Dannhauser
Commissioner



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August 12, 2024

Dr. Jeffrey A. Butts
Research and Evaluation Center
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York
524 West 59th Street
New York, NY 10019

Dear Professor Butts,

We are very interested in your idea for an independent research project that could provide us with measures of post-intervention recidivism among people who have received services and support from Fortune Society. Like other not-for-profit organizations in the justice sector, we are frequently asked about recidivism. Those asking the question, however, rarely understand the complications involved in measuring the effectiveness of justice interventions with metrics from the justice system itself.

The Recidivism Outcomes Checkup System (NY-ROCS) would be a wonderful way to improve our evidence orientation while accurately contextualizing the strengths and limitations of recidivism as an organizational metric. We expect the project would provide invaluable insights into the relationship between recidivism and other individual and neighborhood variables that are often overlooked. We look forward to learning more about this potentially important work and would be happy to consider partnering with you as soon as you are able to secure funding.

Thank you for reaching out.

Sincerely,

Ronald F. Day, Ph.D., MPA
Senior Vice President
The Fortune Society



Dr. Jeffrey A. Butts
Research and Evaluation Center
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
524 W. 59th, BMW605
New York, NY 10019

August 21, 2024

Dear Dr. Butts:

The Osborne Association would be pleased to participate in the John Jay Research and Evaluation Center's Recidivism Outcomes Checkup System (ROCS), once funding is secured for this important initiative.

As you know, John Jay REC has served as Osborne's partner on several evaluation initiatives, including a five-year evaluation of a federally-funded workforce and fatherhood program and a current evaluation of the Bronx Osborne Gun Accountability and Prevention (BOGAP) program. Both of these studies have included analyses of the recidivism of Osborne program participants. Though recidivism is not a singular measure of our program outcomes it is a helpful data point, especially when recidivism analyses are available to us on a regular basis, allowing for tracking of changes over time. This information is not currently accessible to Osborne or other similar service providers.

Osborne is fortunate to have REC as a partner and we look forward to continuing our collaboration through ROCS..

Sincerely,

Michelle Portlock

Director of Impact & Evaluation
mportlock@osbornenyny.org



August 11, 2024

Dear Professor Butts,

Chief Executive Officer/President

Jonathan McLean, LCSW

Chief Finance &

Administrative Officer

Rebecca Asbury

Chief Impact Officer

Ann-Marie Louison

Chief Program Officer

Jessica Klaver, PhD

Chief People & Culture Officer

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Joseph Williams, LCSW

Thank you for sharing your interest in partnering on an independent research project that would confidentially measure post intervention recidivism for not-for-profit organizations.

I think the Recidivism Outcomes Checkup System-NY-ROCS, is a wonderful idea. As you have correctly pointed out, CASES and other not-for-profits could benefit from this important research project. Recidivism, as you know, is a limited and often misused metric, but there is value in understanding its relationship to services interventions. A project like this could help accurately contextualize the strengths and limitations of recidivism as a metric. I also believe that this research project could potentially provide invaluable insights into the relationship between recidivism and other variables that may be overlooked.

I look forward to learning more and potentially partnering with you when you secure funding for this project.

Sincerely,

Jonathan McLean

Chief Executive Officer

CASES