

Data Collection in Criminal Justice Settings



Data collections involving criminal justice (CJ) agencies, personnel, and populations pose significant implementation challenges. Through decades of experience, RTI International's data collection experts have gained a thorough understanding of these challenges and effective methods for overcoming them.

Overview

With in-depth expertise in the design and conduct of CJ research, RTI anticipates and resolves potential implementation challenges, resulting in the collection of high-quality data. We provide refined techniques in frame remediation and enhancement to resolve consistency issues common to extant CJ frames. Our robust data collection protocols align with variation in data availability, storage, and retrievability within (and between) CJ jurisdictions. Our experts navigate the infrastructures of CJ agencies to reach and communicate effectively with decision makers and data providers. Our flexible multi-mode approaches to data collection minimize burden and increase ease of response.

Our study populations include the following types of agencies and individuals:

- Drug court participants, probationers, and parolees
- Judges
- Law enforcement agencies
- Police officers and school security officers
- Prison and jail inmates and their families
- Prisons and jails
- Probation offices and officers

Project Highlights

The following project highlights demonstrate RTI's experience in several areas.

RTI offers expertise in navigating agency infrastructure to engage decision makers and data providers.

Survey of Law Enforcement Officers'/Agencies' Attitudes Towards and Resources for Traffic Safety Enforcement

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration sponsors this project. The research seeks to identify, analyze, and understand the attitudes, resources, and restrictions regarding traffic safety enforcement and how these different aspects have changed over time, as well as expectations for future traffic safety enforcement programs.

Surveying law enforcement agency personnel is challenging because of agency infrastructure, staff members' schedule constraints and willingness to complete the surveys, and variations in how agencies define and retain data. Recognizing these challenges, RTI conducted a series of structured focus groups to ensure that survey instructions and questions would be understood consistently by staff members from participating agencies. RTI then conducted a pilot study to determine the challenges and obstacles of a large-scale implementation. Informed by the focus groups

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and pilot study, RTI's final design called for collaboration with an individual at each agency to design a customized approach that would encourage staff member participation, regardless of agency size.

RTI offers strategies to minimize burden and increase ease of response.

Annual Surveys of Probation and Parole (ASPP)

The ASPP has been part of the BJS core set of correctional statistics since 1980. Across the country, roughly 450 probation agencies and 50 parole agencies participate. Data are used to track outcomes of probation and parole populations, compare changes in populations across similar jurisdictions, and support state and local CJ budgets. There is no other ongoing, comprehensive, nationally representative survey of probation and parole populations. RTI has served as the ASPP data collection agent since 2015.

Mortality in Correctional Institutions (MCI)

Started in 2000, MCI (funded by BJS and formerly known as Deaths in Custody Reporting Program) is the only nationwide data collection program that enumerates and reports on the absence or occurrence of jail and prison inmate deaths. Data are collected from approximately 2,900 jails and 50 state departments of correction. RTI has served as the MCI data collection agent since 2009.

RTI's strategy to minimize burden and increase response on these studies includes

- Pre-notification protocols whereby the agency confirms or corrects contact information for the upcoming data collection cycle
- Ongoing quality review of the survey frame to identify missing, merged, and duplicate records
- Varied contact modes to ensure communications reach the desired recipient
- Multi-mode data collection that offers both web-based and paper-based surveys
- Data validation calls to remediate data discrepancies
- Nonresponse phone interviews to encourage participation.

RTI offers expertise in navigating the ethical and logistical complexities of interviewing prison and jail inmates.

National Inmate Study (NIS)

Sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), NIS reports have been submitted to Congress and findings have informed the development of the Prison Rape Elimination Act standards, which outline policies and procedures to prevent and address sexual victimization. Since the inception of NIS, RTI has collaborated with BJS to design the study and conducted three rounds of data collection and analysis. RTI has worked with federal and state corrections agencies and facilities to implement procedures that address each facility's unique schedule, space, and security parameters. Across the three NIS waves, RTI has completed over 240,000 interviews with inmates in more than 1,500 correctional facilities.

Collecting victimization data poses several challenges related to the protection of research participants. For example, protecting an inmate's privacy requires designing procedures to mask the identity of survey participants and maintain their data security. To accomplish this, we designed a methodology whereby two versions of the survey were used—one that included questions about victimization and one that substituted those questions with questions about alcohol and drug use. Data collection methods ensured that only the respondent knew which questionnaire had been presented. RTI also programmed the questionnaire such that victims and nonvictims spent the same time answering questions, thereby preventing identification of those who reported an assault based on interview length.

More Information

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