National Retraction Brief:
Widespread and systematic factual errors in Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)

Part 1 of 2, August 2026

Summary: A large majority of publicly distributed information from 2015-2026 regarding the LEAD[1] program's evidence base contains significant factual and statistical errors. Large in both number and size, the inaccuracies have permeated LEAD adoption and funding across more than twenty states and have been codified into congressional appropriations, government grants, private donations, municipal budgets, and state-and-local legislation. Cumulatively, the errors incorrectly depict LEAD as significantly reducing recidivism and felony offenses while increasing employment. In a separate finding, LEAD's foundational research demonstrates significant design limitations that appear to contradict both the way it has been used and some of its conclusions. This includes lost statistical control, artificial influences, and mid-stream methodological changes. LEAD's "benefit", as portrayed in most public sources, is not supported by causal evidence.

1 LEAD is a registered trademark of the Public Defender Association

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I. Scale and Significance of Incorrect LEAD Claims

The LEAD program seeks to reduce arrests, prosecutions, and jailing for individuals involved in drug crimes. In July 2026, significant factual and statistical errors were identified in the research translation promoted by LEAD advocates. The net effect of these errors is to credit LEAD with significant benefits, such as reducing crime and increasing employment among participants—claims which appear to confuse terms and magnitudes, and which the underlying evidence does not demonstrate. A review of public citations of LEAD's claimed evidence from 2015 to 2026 finds almost exclusive reliance on inaccurate and unsupported descriptions. Given LEAD's national and international expansion, its incorporation into state and local laws, and the hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private funding the LEAD approach has received, the persistence of serious and uncorrected misrepresentations over more than a decade appears to set a precedent for loss of public oversight in programs of this kind.

In concrete terms, the LEAD program's research demonstrates an uncertain instead of a clear reduction in recidivism—the tendency of a person to reoffend—among its participants. Inaccurate or misleading claims across the entirety of LEAD literature span recidivism, felony rates, employment, and cost savings. These claims typically more than double LEAD's possible effectiveness. In extreme cases, the claims treat null or negative findings as successes by removing the context. For example, compared to the small number estimated as gaining jobs during the study, three times as many LEAD participants died.

II. Inaccuracy of LEAD claims

Since 2015, promoters of LEAD have publicly communicated several versions of claims about how LEAD's original research describes arrest and felony rates, and individual outcomes. These claims have been regularly repeated from 2015-2026, and recently appeared in a Seattle City Council agenda packet in support of a LEAD expansion ordinance. Common incorrect versions include:

- **"LEAD reduced recidivism for all crimes by 58% [and] reduced felony charges by 39%[1]"**
- **"LEAD participants 58% less likely to be arrested for any crime in any jurisdiction compared to a similarly situated control group[2]"**
- **"[People who] participate in LEAD were 58% less likely to commit a new crime[3]"**
- **"Odds of being on employment continuum increased 46%[4]"**

These formulations regularly confuse concepts like odds, probability, and absolute versus relative change. They also substantially overstate the study's findings. The original research shows little or no clear positive intervention effect in these measures. The study is also separately impacted by what appears to be an early loss of statistical control, a high incidence of methodological artifacts, and significant design limitations which prevent it from establishing causality.

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1 https://seattle.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=15415213&GUID=36EC41B0-0EB0-40FE-9E74-9676BE88BEF1

2 https://leadkingcounty.org/harrt-peer-reviewed-evaluation-2017-seattles-law-enforcement-assisted-diversion-lead-program-within-subjects-changes-on-housing-employment-and-income-benefits-outcomes-and-associ/

3 https://youtu.be/6gaHYfZM-Ks?si=2vKcmLr5A9qDirtL&t=91

4 https://seattle.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=15415213&GUID=36EC41B0-0EB0-40FE-9E74-9676BE88BEF1

III. Correcting Inaccurate LEAD Claims

Study authors attempt to adjust for significant pre-entry differences between the LEAD and control groups by using propensity scoring. Though a challenging and uncertain method for small incoherent groups, this produced "odds ratios" as statistical outputs. From the study's first press release, promoters mistranslated these ratios into primary claims of large percentage reductions. To provide scale and context we cite unadjusted figures which illustrate absolute differences, though these are similarly affected by lack of a common baseline.

A) Charges filed (No statistically significant differences)

LEAD's research demonstrates no difference in total charges among LEAD participants and the control group. Collins et al. (2017) describes "...no statistically significant differences between the LEAD and control groups on total charges...", across a 6-month evaluation period, with a similar longer-term observation.

B) Arrests (Unclear differences)

- Incorrect Claim: "LEAD reduced recidivism for all crimes by 58%"
- Unadjusted Figure: The post-entry LEAD and control groups showed an arrest-rate difference of 22 percentage points
- Context: The LEAD group appears to benefit from reduction in warrant arrests due to a higher rate of dropped and reduced charges, while the control group does not. The LEAD and control groups were also subject to different recruitment practices, different patterns of law enforcement, different timelines, and different geographic areas. These differences were likely favorable to LEAD and unfavorable to the control group. No clear difference in arrests rates can be reliably claimed, but also cannot be altogether ruled-out.

C) Felony Rates (Unclear differences)

- Incorrect Claim: "LEAD reduced felony charges by 39%"
- Unadjusted Figure: The post-entry LEAD and control groups showed a felony rate difference of 11 percentage points
- Context: Study authors acknowledge the LEAD and control groups were subject to different interactions with the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (KCPAO), with the Trial Unit Chief being an "unblinded operational partner". The KCPAO was therefore able to "take into account LEAD participation and progress in the program when deciding whether and when to file felony charges." Because these differences cannot be cleanly separated from any LEAD treatment effect, the observed differences cannot be treated as reliable evidence of a causal program effect.

D) Employment (No statistically significant differences)

- Incorrect Claim: "odds of being on employment continuum increased 46%"
- From the research: "46% more likely to be on the employment continuum"
- Context: Neither of these claims describes a clear real-world result. Of 176 LEAD participants, an estimated 13 participants (7.43%) had employment when entering the study and an estimated average of 16 (9.03%) had employment in a given month of the 18-month follow-up period. With a 3-person difference, statistical significance cannot be established. 91% of the LEAD participants remained unemployed on average during the 18-month follow-up period. The study's authors also improvise a study-specific "employment continuum" definition to include vocational training,

and retirement. This prototype does not demonstrate clear validity, but nevertheless appears to count an additional 3 LEAD participants who engage in activity the authors interpret as being adjacent to employment. It does not describe a significant LEAD treatment effect on employment for LEAD participants overall. The lack of a control group for this phase also means that this element of LEAD's research cannot demonstrate a difference between LEAD and non-LEAD groups overall.

- Reference Comparison: In 2019, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) tracked employment rates for men after release from 6 months or more of incarceration. By week one, 33.9% of men were employed. By week ten, 50.3% of men were employed. LEAD's cohort is very different and plausibly includes a far higher rate of untreated behavioral health disorders, but the magnitude difference with incarceration is striking. With a cohort death rate three times higher than its estimated employment rate, the relative absence of a LEAD treatment effect for employment suggests insufficient depth or inadequate design for positive behavioral change outcomes.

E) Housing (Unclear differences, minor absolute changes)

- Incorrect Claim: "Participants' odds of being housed increased 89%"
- From the research: "Participants were 89% more likely to obtain permanent housing during the follow-up"
- Context: Both of these claims are misleading. Of 146 participants unhoused upon enrollment in LEAD, an estimated average of 19 appeared to be housed

in a given month over an 18-month follow-up period. This is equivalent to a 13% success rate in securing permanent housing for the LEAD participants who lacked such housing upon enrollment. For shelter usage, LEAD participants saw moderately higher success with an estimated average of 31 appearing to be sheltered in a given month. However, in combination with permanent housing placement, the LEAD program had just a 35% success rate in connecting unhoused participants with either shelter or housing. Because this October 2011 to January 2014 arm of the study did not use a control group, we assess HUD data to discern the rate change in sheltered homelessness in King County between January 2012 and January 2014. The county's rate of sheltered homelessness declined from 70.5% in 2012 to 69.4% in 2014. Aside from reduced justice contact, the relatively modest increase in shelter and housing rates for participants is plausibly LEAD's primary treatment effect and may allow LEAD to be most accurately described as a point-of-arrest intake method for "Housing First" programs. The context is relevant that half as many participants died as the number estimated entering permanent housing during the study period.

F) Cost Savings (Unclear differences, limited numerators)

- From the research: LEAD participants were estimated to have fewer jail bookings, fewer days in jail, a lower odds of prison, and an estimated $8,061 difference in legal costs compared to the control group.
- Context: The study describes cost savings resulting from decreased

utilization of the criminal justice system. In relationship to jail bookings, days in jail, and odds of prison, it is difficult to assign these benefits to the LEAD intervention. Criminal justice exposure between the LEAD and control groups was non-comparable due to the study's limitations. Because differences between the LEAD and control groups for justice system utilization also appears mostly driven by large increases in the control group, the LEAD group's comparatively modest changes fall short of demonstrating a beneficial LEAD effect. Because the study's modeling of cost savings depends on utilization of sunk costs, and involves the use of informal and improvised measurements to estimate a partial list of costs which appears to favor the LEAD group more than the control group, the study does not demonstrate any cost savings to government as a result of the LEAD intervention.

IV. Origin and Nature of Incorrect LEAD Claims

The 2015-2026 pattern of errors appears to trace to the initial promotion of LEAD's research in 2015, occurring in the first press releases from Seattle Police Department and the University of Washington (pg. 10). The original confusion was made between a loosely defined "58% reduced odds of arrest", probability, and absolute percentage point changes. Confusion of this type is regularly a layperson's error in statistics, and can make small changes appear large. As an illustration, research from Monash University suggests an analogy through driving speed: When driving in a 35-mph zone, increasing a vehicle's driving speed to 39 mph corresponds roughly to a 58% increase in the odds of a crash. However, a crash will not occur 58% of the time or even 58% more often, and the risk change is low.

V. Consequences and Reach of Inaccurate LEAD Claims

Incorrect LEAD research translation has been broadly consequential within Seattle, King County, Washington State, and nationally.

- Incorrectly labeling the LEAD approach as "evidence-based" projects credibility which exceeds the level of evidence presented in the research.
- Among jurisdictions which deliberated LEAD adoption, the difference between a 58% reduction in arrests or a 39% reduction in felony charges, and much lower numbers, plausibly affected vote outcomes and budgeting.
- For grant-making entities, the difference was likely material to funding decisions in competitive RFPs where higher performance claims can correspond to a higher win rate.

- For congressional appropriations and grants regulated by federal law, the difference is material for the outcome of appropriations, applications, and program reporting.
- For service organizations and law enforcement agencies, an accurate understanding of evidence is necessary for designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating service and justice models. These models have life-and-death significance.
- For national research, the difference is material to the questions and agenda of future research.

Confusion surrounding LEAD claims are documented across a wide range of academic, government, industry, and journalism sources. A sample includes:

Most commonly: 'People in LEAD were 58% less likely to be arrested.'

1. **Seattle Police Department (2015):** https://spdblotter.seattle.gov/2015/04/08/study-innovative-seattleking-county-diversion-program-shows-success/
2. **University of Washington (2015):** https://depts.washington.edu/harrtlab/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-04-08-LEAD-Press-Release-and-Evaluation-Summary.pdf
3. **LEAD Seattle King County (2017):** https://leadkingcounty.org/seattles-law-enforcement-assisted-diversion-lead-program-effects-on-recidivism-outcomes/
4. **LEAD Bureau (2017):** https://leadbureau.org/toolkit/resources/seattles-law-enforcement-assisted-diversionlead-program-effects-on-recidivism-outcomes-2017/
5. **KIRO 7 News (2018):** https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/more-drug-users-prostitutes-to-get-treatment-instead-of-jail-in-king-county/830887952/
6. **American Journal of Public Health (2019):** https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6366485/
7. **Duke Law School (2021):** https://wcsj.law.duke.edu/news/lead-program-allows-police-officers-to-divert-individuals-to-resources-instead-of-arrest/
8. **King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (2021):** https://kcprosecutor.medium.com/insights-from-the-law-enforcement-assisted-diversion-lead-program-cd6f6f764ad1
9. **Michigan State Police (2019):** https://www.michigan.gov/msp/-/media/Project/Websites/msp/gcsd/2023-files/LEAD-Bureau-Fact-Sheet-2020-COSSAP.pdf?rev=cece2393057340baba301cf340548f84&hash=50742424F5AA7F0F44E80C5B667B0347
10. **New Mexico State Legislature (2015):** https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/LHHS%20101915%20Item%206%20Law%20Enforcement%20Assisted%20Diversion%20(LEAD).pdf
11. **National Association of Counties (2024):** https://www.naco.org/resource/pre-arrest
12. **Arizona State University (2020):** https://academyforjustice.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/a4j_non-prosecution_drug_policies.pdf

Also communicated as: 'People in LEAD had 58% fewer arrests / recidivism / crime':

1. **MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Prize, video (2019)**: https://www.macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2019/lisa-daugaard
2. **American Journal of Criminal Justice (2021):** https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8254616/
3. **King County MIDD:** https://cdn.kingcounty.gov/-/media/king-county/depts/dchs/behavioral-health-recovery/midd/midd/middbriefingpapers/crisisdiversion/bp23lawenforcementassisteddiversionleadmaintenanceandexpansion.pdf?la=en&rev=afa992963a0d483fa45b3d4094d17540&hash=9F7DACF3AC047FF3494E17AB43A38823
4. **Salem Health Hospitals and Clinics:** https://www.salemhealth.org/you-matter/post/salem-health-grant-supports-innovative-diversion-program
5. **Maryland-DC Society of Addiction Medicine:** https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2021/jpr/4142_03162021_15643-672.pdf
6. **North Carolina Medical Journal (2018):** https://ncmedicaljournal.com/article/55022-meeting-opioid-users-where-they-are-a-service-referral-approach-to-law-enforcement.pdf
7. **New York State Department of Health:** https://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/aids/ending_the_epidemic/docs/drug_user_health_advisory_group.pdf
8. **Albany Police Department (2016):** https://katalcenter.org/2016/03/albany-becomes-1st-jurisdiction-on-east-coast-3rd-in-nation-to-launch-innovative-evidence-based-law-enforcement-assisted-diversion-lead-program/

Between 2015-2026, implementers of LEAD in Washington State do not appear to report individual outcomes to public funders. Such reporting is key for transparency and accountability in front-line public strategies. This includes:

- Mortality rate of participants
- Rate of progression to housing independence among participants
- Rate of employment among participants
- Metrics for arrests, felonies, criminal charges, jailing, and prison
- Measures of improved health outcomes

Highlighting the risks of insufficient local oversight, federal audit of one Seattle-area LEAD grant in 2024[1] identified a "Significant deficiency in internal controls over financial reporting", and a "Material weakness in internal control over compliance with procurement procedures." Such findings are not minor.

1 2024-12-GSAFAC-0000378681

VI. Policy Recommendations

1) **Jurisdictions where LEAD has been adopted**
   - **a.** Pause the expansion of such programs
   - **b.** Place programs into external audit by an independent program auditor
   - **c.** Evaluate the use of alternatives including baseline criminal justice, and compliance-dependent and residential-treatment diversion case-by-case
   - **d.** Plan for increased investment in rehabilitative jail programs and post-release support, including vocational, financial literacy, and life-skills training, and community-, peer-, and accountability-based support programs
   - **e.** Collaborate with legislative and judicial entities to develop, strengthen, or restore frameworks which increase the certainty of arrest, prosecution and jailing for drug crimes while offering compliance-based pathways for reduced sentences, early release, or intermittent confinement / weekend jailing
   - **f.** Where LEAD can be appropriately transitioned to frameworks described in 1c, 1d, and 1e, this transition should be undertaken

2) **Jurisdictions considering adoption** of LEAD should suspend this process pending rigorous LEAD evidence generation for real-world individual outcomes

3) **Published secondary scholarship** which inadvertently repeat inaccurate LEAD claims as citations of evidence should be annotated

4) **LEAD, LEAD-like, and diversion-focused public programs** should ensure the presence of robust design, monitoring, and evaluation practices which establish clear goals for participant outcomes and ensure progress towards those outcomes will be transparently and regularly reported to government and to the public.

5) **Reported LEAD outcomes should include** "Participant mortality rate", "Participant loss to follow-up", "Reduced frequency of drug-use", "Rate of abstinence from drug-use", "Employment rate", "Income growth", "Housing independence rate", and "Permanent Supportive Housing longevity".