



INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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COVID-19 Experiences Inside and Outside Prison Walls Captured By Researchers At Florida State University

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Prisons across the country have made headlines during COVID-19, but until now little has been empirically documented by researchers. [A first-of-its-kind study](#), released today by researchers at the Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD) of Florida State University, captured data on more than 200 individuals during and after incarceration, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was also collected on their COVID-19 related experiences and perspectives on strategies that prison officials used to communicate and contain the spread of COVID-19.

Lead researcher in the study, Carrie Pettus-Davis, Ph.D., associate professor of social work and founding director of IJRD, emphasized the importance of this research: “Prisons are not self-contained. Prison staff enter the prison community and return home to their residential community each day. That means COVID-19 can be brought into prison as easily as it can spread inside prison, and then be brought home from prison. Because of the significant public health consequences associated with containing COVID-19 in correctional facilities, we felt it was important to immediately research and empirically document what is occurring. This is the first of many studies we will conduct, including next learning from prison officials what they did and hope to do to contain the virus.”

Study participants expressed stress, anxiety and fear related to COVID-19 both before individuals left incarceration and throughout release and return to their home communities. Some felt resigned to being infected because social distancing was not possible in their cells. Some worried that they would die before release or that they would not be released as scheduled to prevent community spread. A vast majority, 89%, reported they would feel safer from COVID-19 in their home community than behind prison walls. As participants transitioned back home, some reported feeling socially isolated while others enjoyed being able to spend more time at home with their loved ones, perhaps making up for lost time.

Reentry related barriers appeared heightened because of COVID-19 restrictions including office closures and services shutting their doors entirely. Some participants described feeling that their lives were on hold and found it more difficult to move forward at a time when they are expected to rapidly reestablish roles in their home, family, the workforce and their greater communities.

“Many of us have experienced anxiety and stress during COVID-19 restrictions, but these feelings are amplified for those who have been waiting – sometimes for years – to leave prison and restart their lives at home. And when they come home, community resources are closed, they can’t get identification, and there is increased demand for many jobs,” said Stephanie Kennedy, director of research dissemination at IJRD.

ADVANCING SCIENCE, POLICY, AND PRACTICE TO IMPROVE THE WELL-BEING OF INDIVIDUALS,
FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES IMPACTED BY CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT.

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Members of IJRD's Community Advisory Board, comprised exclusively of individuals who have experienced incarceration, serve as expert consultants on IJRD's research projects. They emphasized the importance of making data-driven policy changes to help individuals leaving incarceration to thrive in the community.

The larger study in which the COVID-19 survey was embedded, focuses on a novel reentry program approach, The 5-Key Model for Reentry. It was designed to aid individuals who are incarcerated and reentering from incarceration to reach their full potential as contributing members of their communities after release in their communities. The 5-Key Model study is being tested across seven states. COVID-19 survey data were collected from phase two of the study included those who were both incarcerated and released from prison during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indiana, Ohio and South Carolina.

Access the one-page key takeaways from the full report [here](#). To review our prior study findings, please [visit our website](#).

ABOUT the [Institute for Justice Research and Development \(IJRD\)](#):

We prioritize rapid dissemination of research findings to the advocates, professionals, and policymakers who can adopt them rather than limiting the communication of our findings to academic audiences. The mission at IJRD is to advance science, policy, and practice to improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities impacted by criminal justice system involvement, in a first of its kind research and development center. The movement from mass incarceration toward smart decarceration has the potential to produce effective, sustainable, and equitable criminal justice reforms.

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