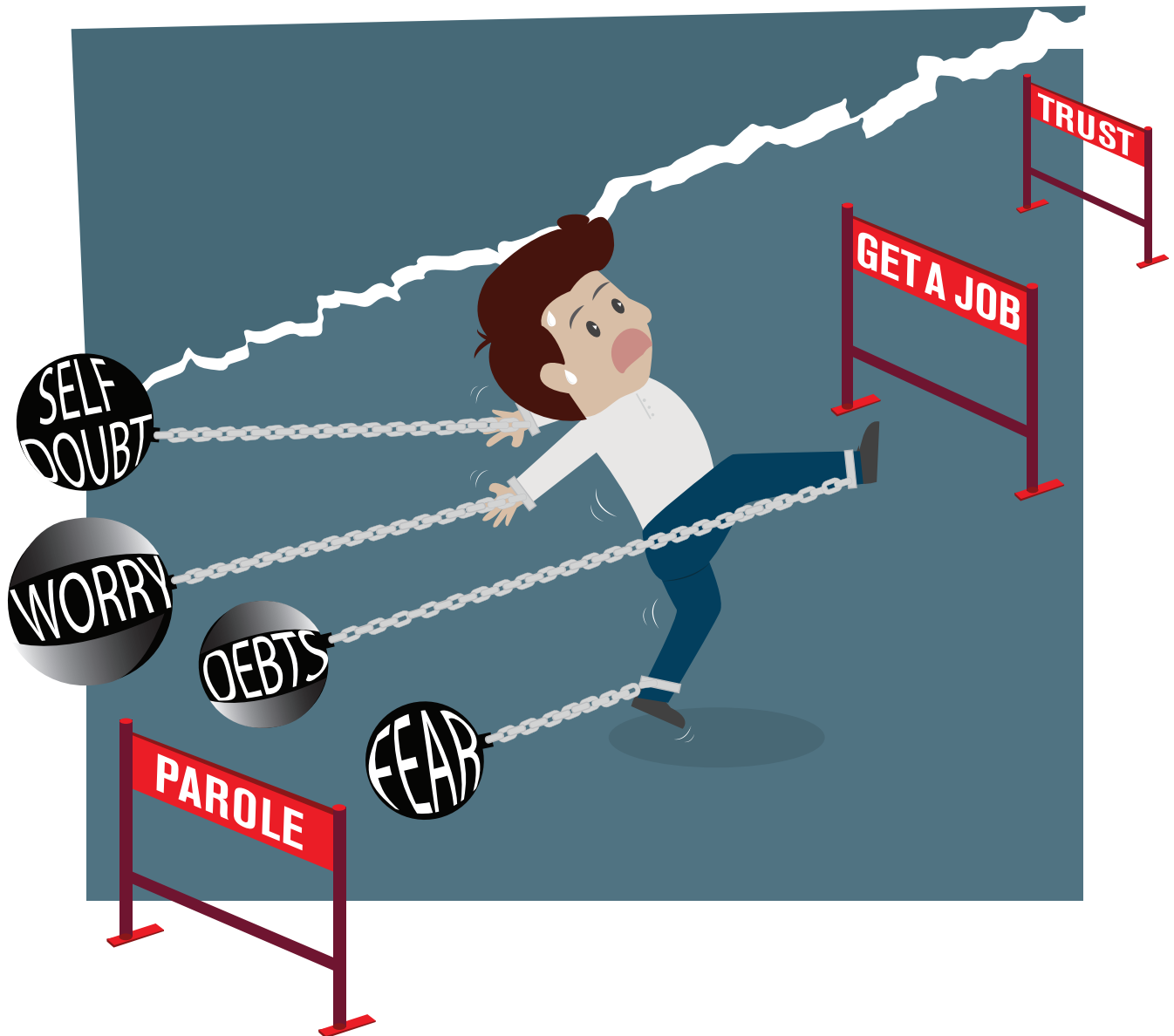


# The Psychological Toll of Reentry: EARLY FINDINGS FROM A MULTI-STATE TRIAL

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INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE  
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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## Introduction

The incarceration experience is highly destabilizing for most individuals. For individuals who have never directly experienced incarceration, it is easy to understand the power of this physical disruption when it is framed in concrete terms: the distance between the prison and an incarcerated person's home and family, the number of birthdays an incarcerated parent misses, the loss of a job, the foreclosure of a home, or the repossession of a car.

However, incarceration also creates a cognitive and emotional disruption for many men and women who must grapple with the fact that not only has the world changed dramatically during their incarceration, but they have also been forever changed by the incarceration experience.

For many, leaving incarceration initiates a phase of psychological turmoil. Men and women returning home must quickly adapt to the changes they see all around them – in the world, in their families, and in their communities – and they yearn to rapidly move toward independence and self-sufficiency. For those individuals with strong support systems, this transition may be relatively smooth – at least initially.

However, the vast majority of individuals who release from incarceration find themselves in survival mode, acutely aware of how they no longer quite fit into the life they led prior to incarceration. These men and women struggle to meet multiple demands. Some of these demands are imposed by the state – attending drug treatment, abiding by the rules of a halfway house, or wearing an ankle monitor. Other demands are self-imposed – finding employment to make up for lost wages and provide for one's family, staying in recovery from a substance use disorder, or healing broken family bonds.

When these men and women describe their lives during reentry, the stories they tell are permeated by worry. They worry about having been away and they worry about being back home. They worry about finances and feeding their children and they worry that work takes them away from the children they are so desperate to spend time with. They worry about what it means for them to need help from a service provider and some worry that they will not survive unless they beg for that help.

Unfortunately, leaving incarceration is an incredibly common experience as more than 10,000 individuals leave prisons each week across the United States. They return to families who also experience the burden of incarceration and the reentry of their loved ones. Therefore, the psychological turmoil inherent to the reentry experience is created for huge segments of the American public every single year.

This report is the second in a series of public reports on a multistate, multisite study of a reentry services model referred to as the 5-Key Model for Reentry, or the 5-Key Model for short. In the first report, we described the internal and external barriers that 5-Key Model participants faced in the early days and weeks of incarceration. In this report, we describe whether and how our participants are accessing services and the landscape of reentry that exist in the absence of the 5-Key Model intervention. We do this by reporting on the experiences of those study participants who were randomly assigned to receive whatever reentry supports currently exist in both the correctional systems with which they are involved and in their communities.

We then describe our commitment to rapid translation of research findings into real world policies and practices and the feedback loop that we are using to increase the impact of research as we learn. We end by describing what we expect to see next in the study and with our participants, and pose questions we hope our communities will grapple with when thinking about what it means for all of us when those who have been incarcerated succeed.

## About the Authors

The report was prepared by Dr. Carrie Pettus-Davis, Associate Professor and Founding Director of the Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD) and Principal Researcher of the 5-Key Model trial; and Dr. Stephanie Kennedy, the Director of Research Dissemination at IJRD.

**Institute for Justice Research and Development.** IJRD is a research center housed within the College of Social Work at the Florida State University. Our mission is to advance science, practice, and policy to improve the well-being of individuals, families, and communities impacted by criminal justice system involvement. IJRD specializes in conducting rigorous real-world research using randomized controlled trials.

IJRD [team members](#) reside in communities across the nation and are currently implementing the 5-Key Model for Reentry research, as well as research on other pressing issues relevant to criminal justice reform.

Learn more about our work at [ijrd.csw.fsu.edu](http://ijrd.csw.fsu.edu)

## The Purpose of this Report

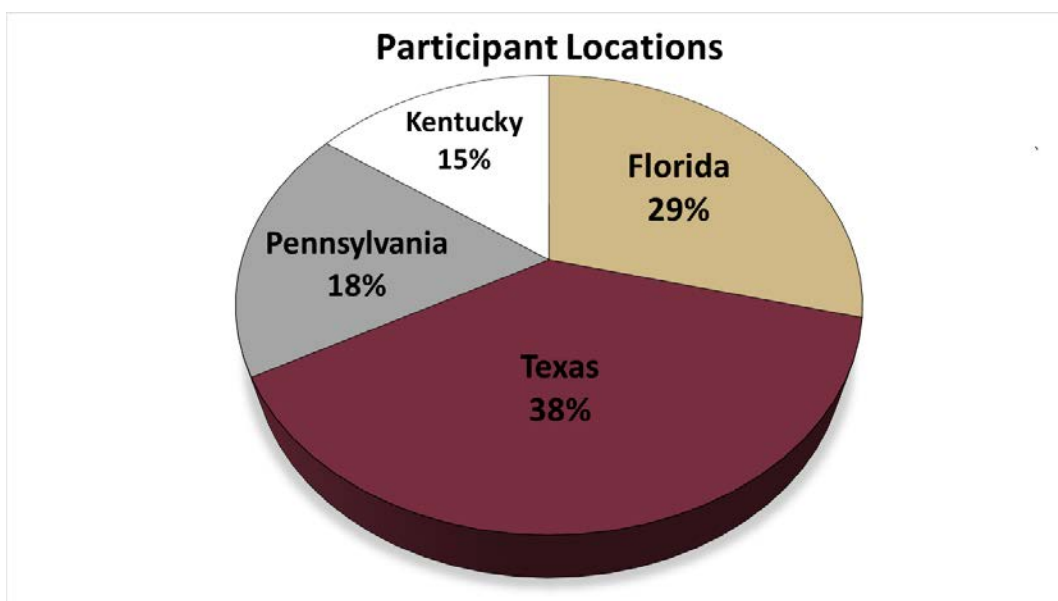
The purpose of this report is to catalyze the rapid translation of research findings into policy and practice, bridging the 17-year implementation gap between scientific discovery and actual changes to laws, policies, and services which affect individuals leaving incarceration. Quarterly research reports released to stakeholders and the public are one facet of this innovative and accessible approach to conducting and disseminating research. We are releasing our findings in real-time, rather than waiting for the end of the project to report results. This represents a departure from most research on programs and interventions, where results are released only after the conclusion of the study and are frequently shared only with academic audiences.

This is the second quarterly report which describes the inner workings and early discoveries of participants and researchers in a groundbreaking longitudinal study officially titled *A Multisite Randomized Controlled Trial of the 5-Key Model for Reentry*. The study is currently being implemented in 12 urban and rural counties across four states: Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas.

Since May 2018, our team has approached 2,216 incarcerated individuals in one of 50 state prisons in our four study states. Just over 17% of these individuals ( $n=383$ ) were not eligible to join the study because they were not releasing during our study window, they were releasing to a county outside of our catchment area, they did not speak English, or they were not cognitively able to understand what being a research participant entailed and provide informed consent. An additional 12% of participants ( $n=271$ ) declined to join the study.

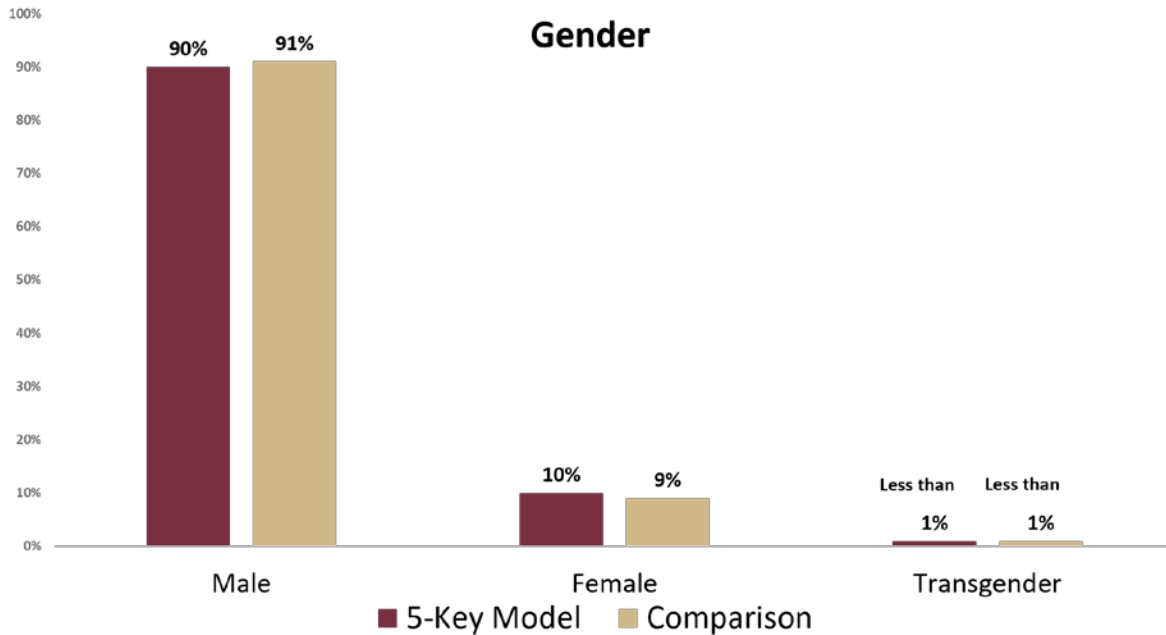
Our final study sample is comprised of 1,561 individuals. Just over half (51%;  $n=801$ ) have been randomly assigned to receive the 5-Key Model for Reentry and 49% ( $n=759$ ) have been randomly assigned to the comparison group.

We had differential recruitment goals by state, based on a variety of factors including the size of the incarcerated population. Therefore, our participants are not equally distributed across the four study sites. There are 457 participants in Florida, Kentucky has 230, Pennsylvania has 280, and Texas has the most study participants at 594.

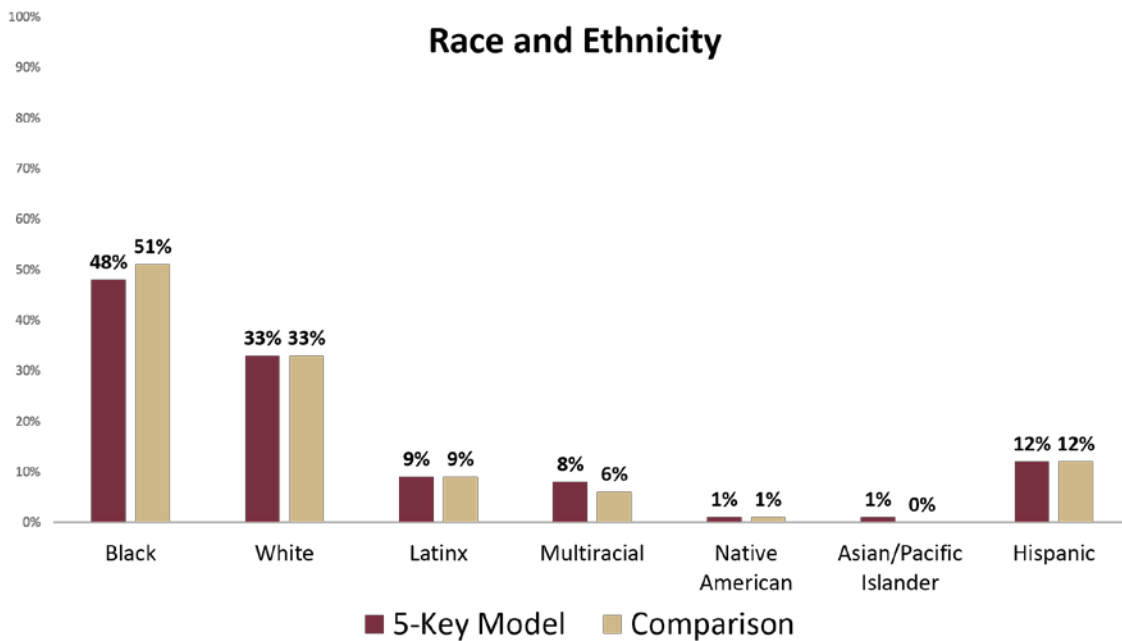


Below, we describe the demographic characteristics of all of our participants and identify any demographic differences between the two groups: those who have been randomly assigned to receive the 5-Key Model and those randomly assigned to the comparison group.

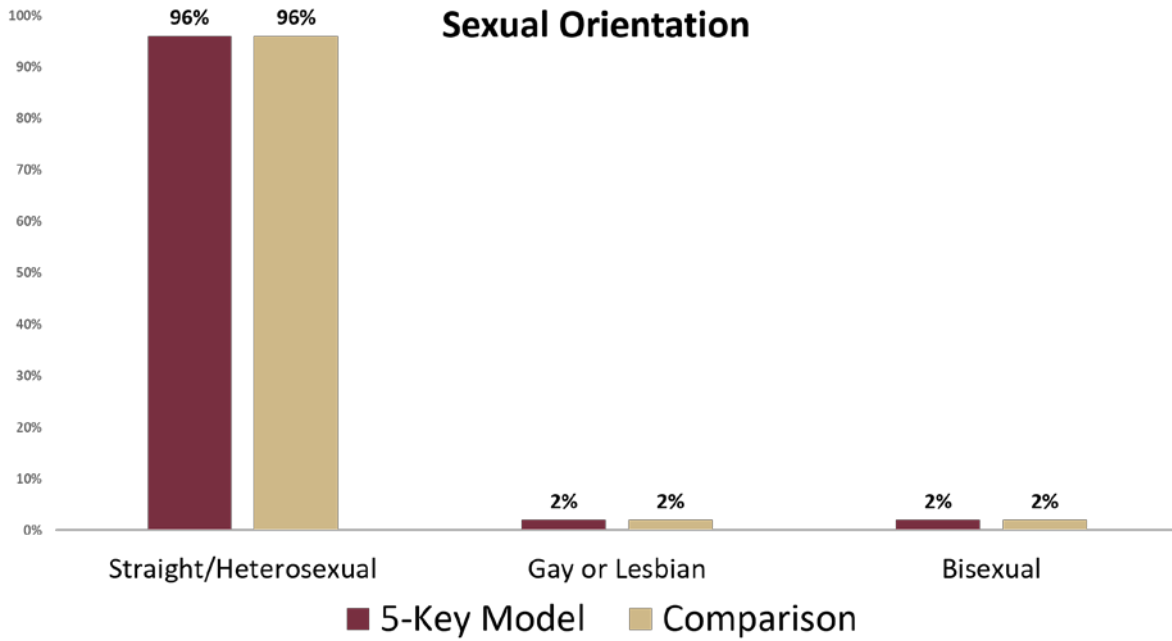
On average, our study participants overwhelmingly identify as male. This reflects national averages; approximately 93% of incarcerated individuals identify as male nationally.



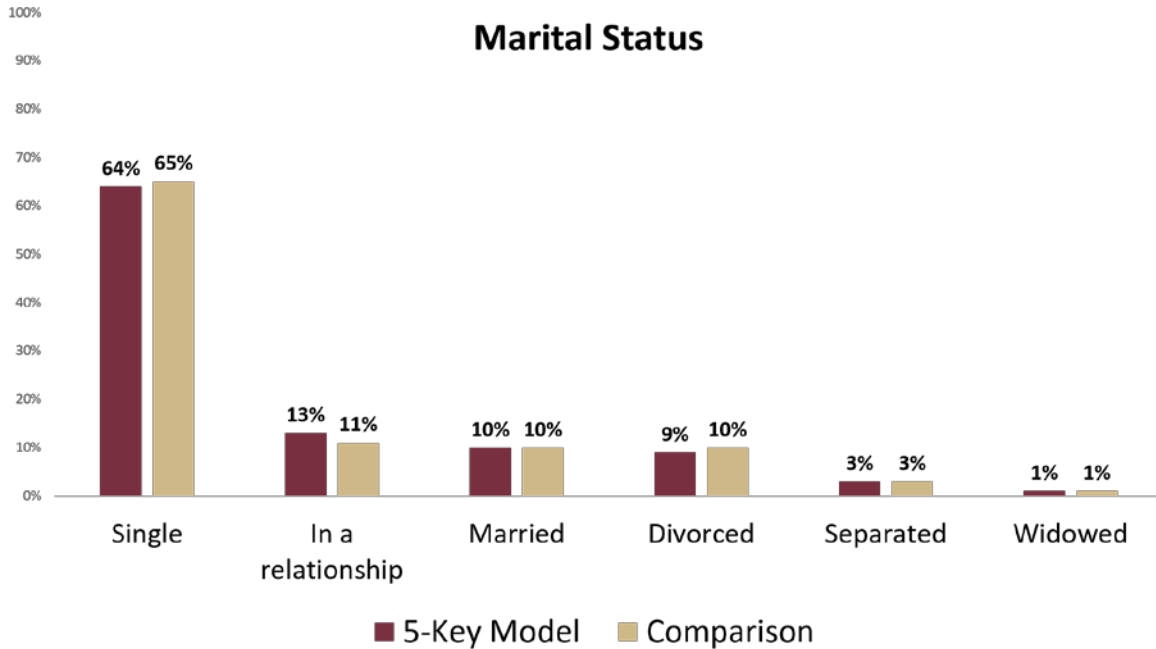
Approximately half of our study participants identify as Black, a third identify as White, and fewer than 10% identify as either Latino or Latina (referred to as Latinx). Additionally, 12% of participants identified with the Hispanic ethnicity in addition to their racial identity.



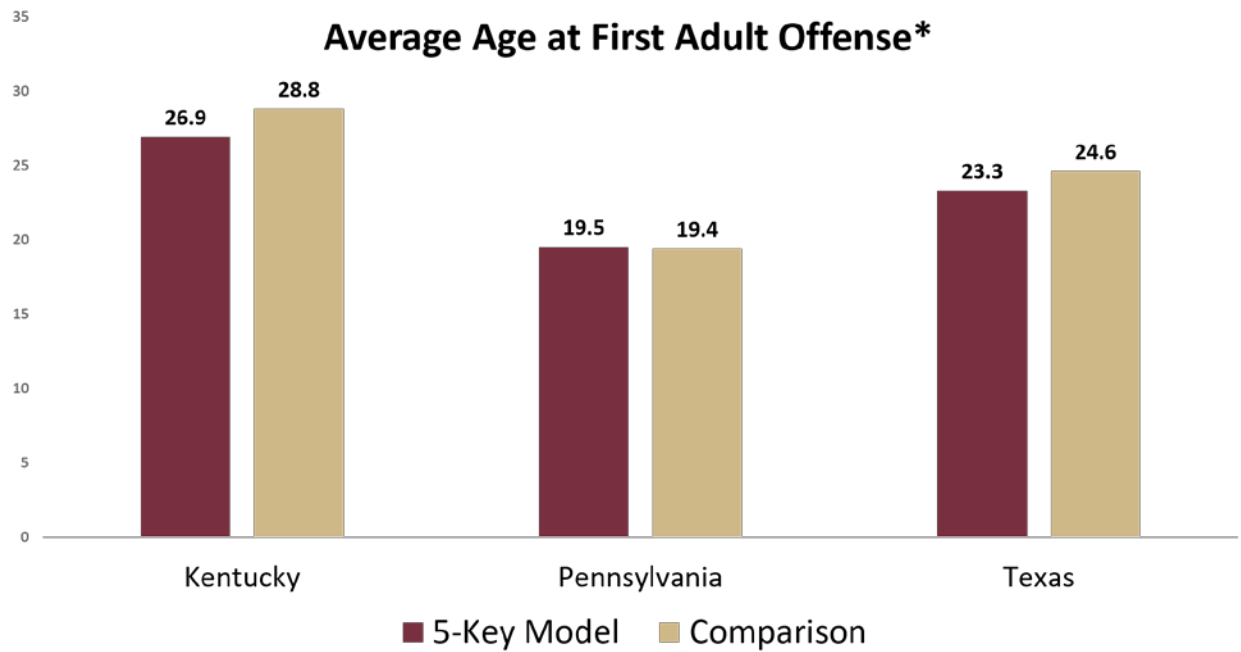
The overwhelming majority of our participants identify as Heterosexual, with approximately 4% identifying as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual.



Our participants are unlikely to be married or in a relationship at the time of their release from incarceration. Nearly two-thirds of our participants identified as single.

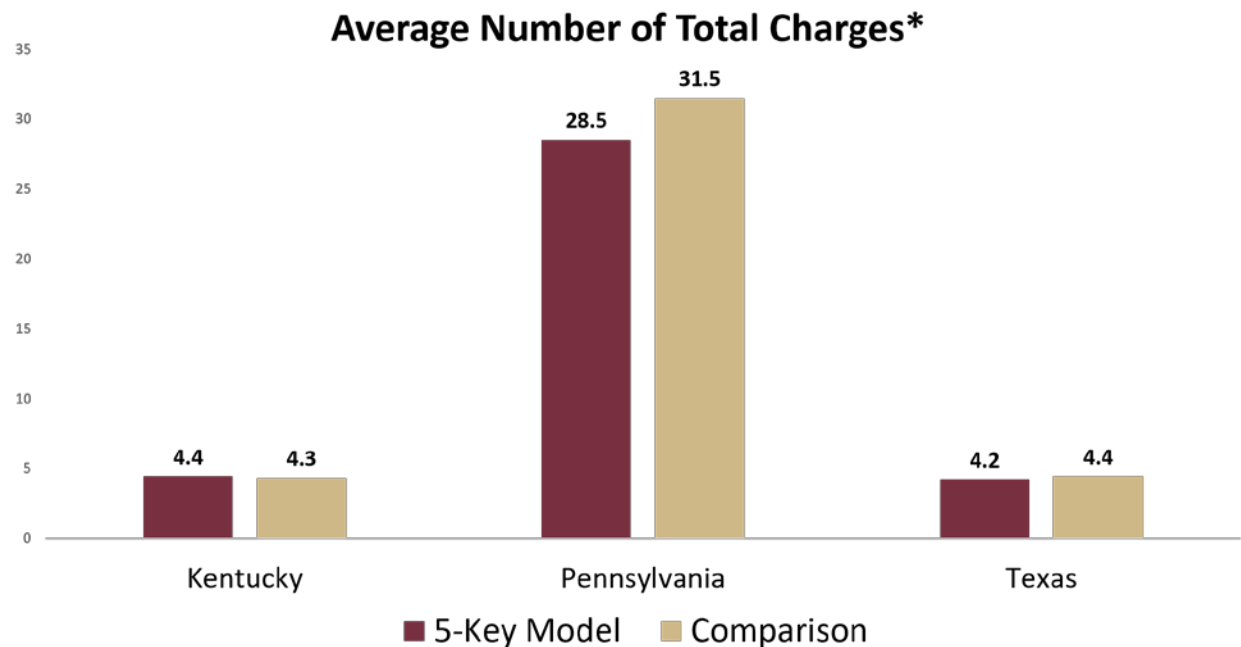


Participants' average age when they were first charged with an adult criminal offense varied between states. Participants in Pennsylvania were, on average, the youngest; those in Kentucky were the oldest.



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

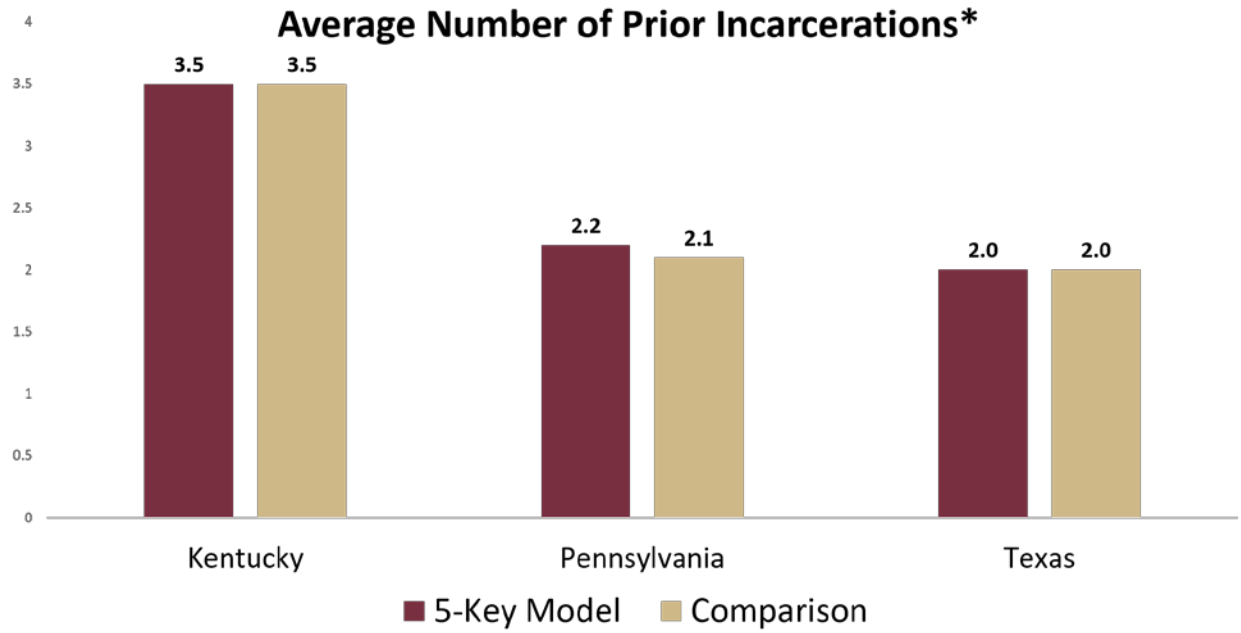
In Kentucky and Texas, participants had 4-5 prior charges. In Pennsylvania, however, participants had nearly 30 prior charges. We will be able to report more about state-level differences on these data in a future report.



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

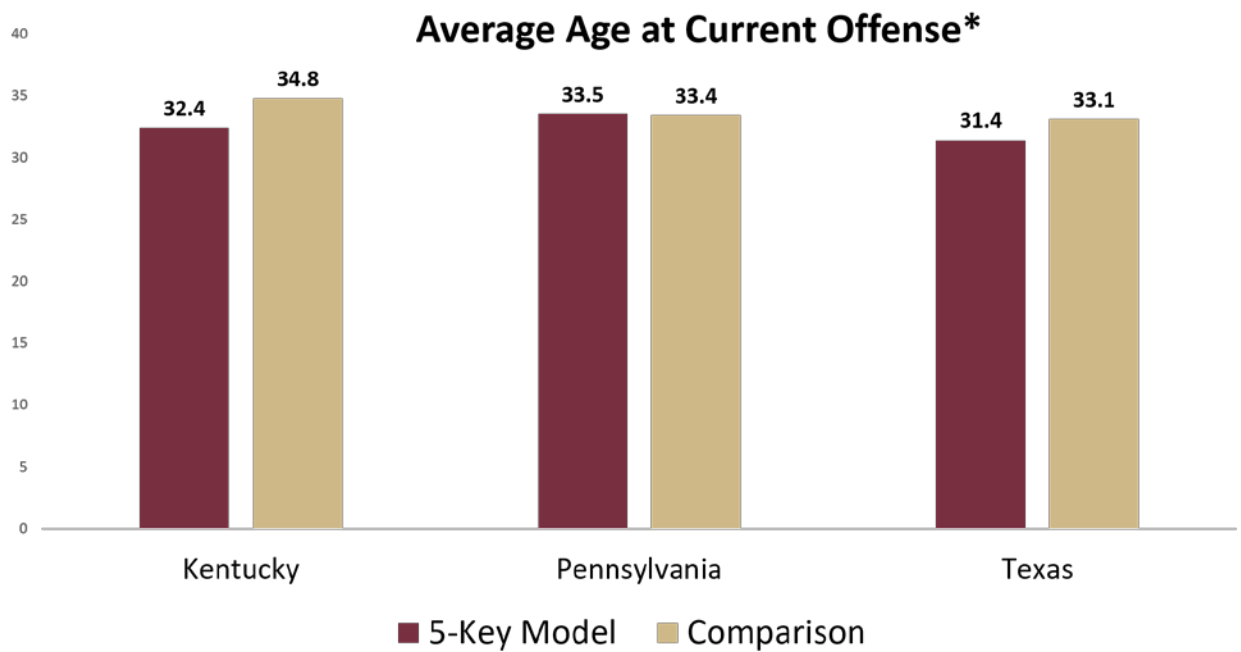


On average, our participants have been incarcerated in prison between 2-4 times before their current incarceration.



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

Across study sites, participants were between 31 and 35 years old when they were convicted of their current criminal offense.

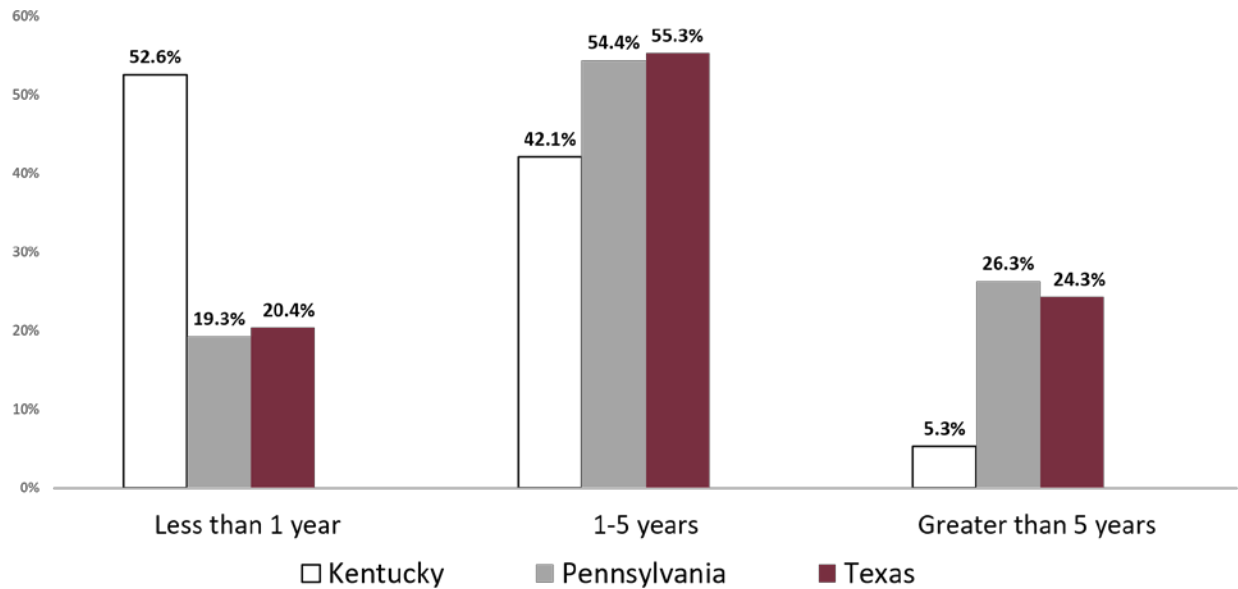


\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

We present the average length of the current sentence in two charts below, broken down by study group.

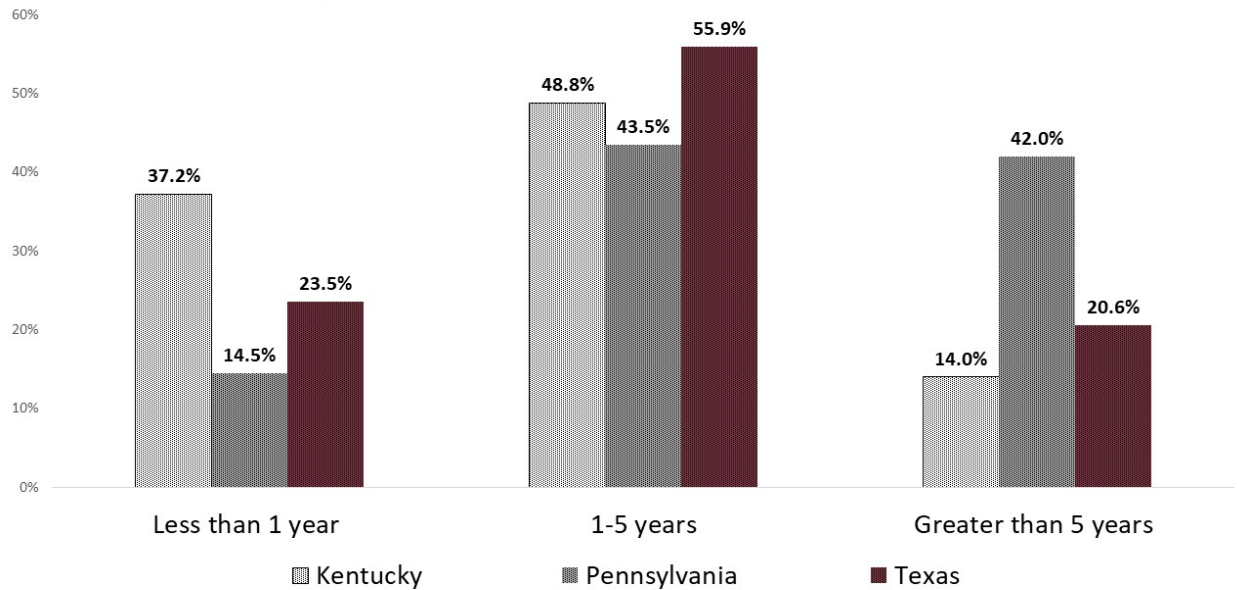
Our participants were most commonly serving a sentence longer than one year but shorter than five years, although variation by state exists.

### Average Length of Current Sentence: 5-Key Model Participants\*



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

### Average Length of Current Sentence: Comparison Group Participants\*



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

In our first report, *Researching and Responding to Barriers to Prisoner Reentry: Early Findings From a Multistate Trial* we discussed the internal and external barriers to reentry that our participants faced as they transitioned from prison to our communities. We categorized these internal barriers as: experiences with employment, experiences of trauma, the impact of mental health and substance use disorders, and having limited opportunities for social connection. These internal barriers affected how our participants moved through their world and interacted with the 5-Key Model.

We also described our data that showed that despite many participants' deep commitments to succeed after prison and contribute positively to society, they faced seemingly insurmountable external barriers as well. These external barriers included: lack of transportation, lack of telephone or Internet access, housing instability, and limited employment opportunities that provided livable wages.

You can learn more about that report and the overall study methodology [here](#), how the 5-Key Model was developed [here](#), and the broader work of IJRD [here](#).

## Overview of the Report

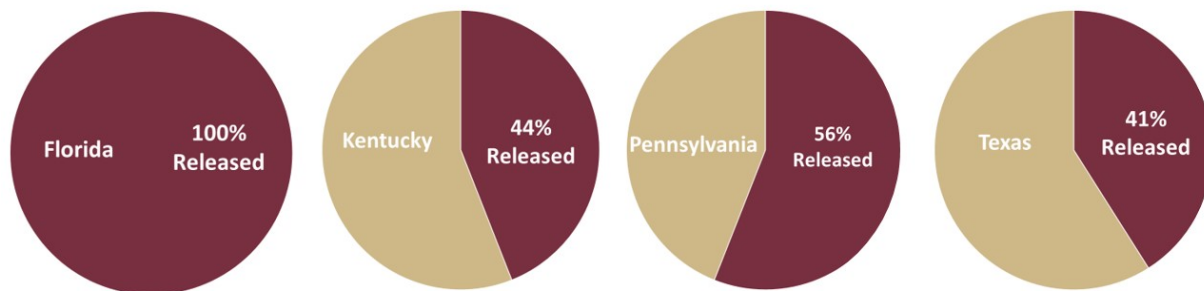
In the first report we focused on, and learned a lot about, the experiences of participants who had been randomly assigned to the 5-Key Model intervention. In this second quarterly report, we want to learn more about reentry as it currently exists – in the absence of the 5-Key Model intervention.

Therefore, the participants featured in this report are those who have been randomly assigned to the comparison group where they receive “services as usual,” or whatever reentry services are already available in their communities.

They do not meet with the 5-Key Model practitioners but, like all participants enrolled into the study, they meet with members of our research team for five interviews throughout the study. They are first interviewed during their incarceration, then immediately upon release, and again at 4, 8, and 15 months post-release.

Currently, nearly 40% of our study participants across all four states are still incarcerated. Below, we show the breakdown by group.

However, there is variation in how many participants are still incarcerated by state. Below we detail this variation. Although all of our participants in Florida have been released at the time of this report, fewer than half have been released in both Kentucky and Texas.



Those participants who have released from incarceration have been back in their communities for fewer than four months. Therefore, we are not able to conduct statistical analyses to assess the type of impact that the 5-Key Model is having in the lives of our participants at this point in the study, or to make statistical comparisons between participants receiving the 5-Key Model and participants receiving services as usual.

We are, however, able to closely examine the reentry experience and the landscape of reentry services in the absence of the 5-Key Model for our participants who have been randomly assigned to the comparison group. In this report, we hone in on these particular participants – those not receiving the 5-Key Model – because they best help us to understand the existing landscape of reentry in the absence of our intervention.

The data in the current report were drawn from the first post-release interview, which was conducted between 48 hours and 6 weeks after leaving incarceration and in some cases and the second post-release interview conducted 4 months after release from incarceration. We complement these participants' experiences with data collected from our research team to gain a fuller sense of how our researchers perceive how these individuals are doing and what they are struggling with as they leave incarceration and come home.

First, we describe the psychological toll that reentry takes on many study participants. Participants described their struggles to adapt to life after incarceration, to adjust to the slow pace of post-release stabilization, and to manage their worries and anxieties about their lives during the reentry period.

Second, we explore how leaving incarceration affects not just study participants, but their families. These families – many of whom are already struggling themselves - receive no support as they work to help their loved ones come home and restart their lives.

Third, we begin to examine whether and how study participants in the comparison group are accessing reentry services and how men, in particular, struggle with the reality that they need help while wanting desperately to remain independent.

At the end of the report we will introduce the feedback loop we are using to learn from our study participants' experiences and adapt how we think about, intervene on, and research reentry policy and services. We end by inviting readers and stakeholders to join us in grappling with four intractable realities of the reentry experience.

# The Psychological Toll of Reentry

In this section, we describe the psychological toll that reentry takes on study participants. The participants featured represent a cross-section of participants assigned to the comparison group in each of the four study states.

## Adaptation: Coping with life after incarceration

In most cases, life during the reentry period is exceedingly difficult for individuals leaving incarceration. Many of the individuals in our study used the language of struggling to *adapt* and *adjust* to describe their initial experiences of life since their release from prison. They told us how they struggled to adapt to living beyond the prison walls and to adjust to the changes they saw all around them.

Similarly, our researchers described how study participants reported in interviews that they are “happy to be home even though they don’t feel ‘home’ yet” because of the difficulties adapting. One team member detailed how some study participants attempted to cope with the lasting effects of the incarceration experience. They said,

Some really struggle with the effects of institutionalization. I’ve heard very poignant descriptions of how hard it is to no longer be in a structured environment, how they are still always watching their backs, not trusting people. Participants describe the difficulty of adjusting to a comfortable bed, of making food for themselves, of how strange it is to be in stores where people walk in all different directions with no sense of order.

For example, one participant noted that his biggest challenge since leaving incarceration was “Readjusting to life outside of prison – little things like layering clothing and sleeping in a bed.”

Our researchers indicated that study participants report getting far too little sleep in the days and weeks immediately after release from incarceration. Although this may seem counterintuitive to those who have not been incarcerated, prisons are filled with noise at all hours – there are keys clanging, the footsteps of staff making rounds, and the sounds of many other individuals sleeping and living in close proximity. Individuals leaving incarceration must adapt to the relative calm and quiet of a bedroom. Many reported that their loved ones simply did not understand how the incarceration experience had affected them. One participant suggested,

I do not know why, but I have not been able to get a good night's sleep. I wake up multiple times in the night. I guess I still need to re-adjust to 'the quiet' and to being with my wife after being away so long. It’s been hard to even find an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where people might understand what I’ve been through.

Notably, for a few study participants, the adjustment back home was defined by moments of pleasure and enjoyment. These participants described how they savored the simple comforts of life after incarceration. For some, being able to shower and eat whatever and whenever they pleased was a palpable reminder of being home.

One participant said, "Taking a bath -- I just don't want to get out of the tub, I will be in there for 4 hours. Feels so good!" while another highlighted the intersection of comfort and freedom. They said, **"Simple comforts: Freedom to eat what I want, warm showers, deodorant, dryer sheets."**

However, reveling in the joy of freedom and the pleasure of simple comforts was far from a universal experience. Almost unimaginable to those who have never experienced incarceration, often individuals leaving incarceration find everyday activities to be deeply unsettling as they are no longer accustomed to living outside of a structured environment where individuals wear identical clothing and walk in orderly lines, performing the same rituals every day.

Underscoring the dramatic impact confinement can have on the human experience, our study participants often spoke about how hard it was to adapt to life beyond the prison walls. One participant said that the most challenging part of reentry was "Adjusting back to society -- with all the changes. **I am used to a scheduled life.** Life is totally different. Just getting on the bus is an adjustment." Another participant echoed this sentiment, **"It's a challenge just to be able to come and go freely. I am not used to it."** A third said,

I am used to certain structures in prison. I am not comfortable being out -- am confused and lost, don't know what I'm supposed to do because there is not structure. Everything has changed since I went in. I don't have the necessities -- it is like I got out of prison naked, been walking around that way. Will feel more clothed and human as things fall into place. **It is like I am still in prison, just out here.**

Another participant described how he had been changed by incarceration,

I did secure this job. I had to steel myself up to say you can do this. **Sitting in a cell can rob you of self-confidence. You don't know if you can do anything but sit in a cell.** I had to tell myself, 'No, you can work, you can support yourself.' Had to talk to myself and practice positive attitude.

One of our researchers described a conversation they had with an individual a few months post-release. They wrote,

One participant told me that things with his anxiety are slowly getting better. We were sitting in a booth at a fast-food restaurant for the interview. He said, "Like, I look out that window and see that woman walking to her car, and my initial reaction is still to be stressed. Why is that woman walking, what is going on, what is she doing? But now I can tell myself, she is just walking to her car. It is okay." He doesn't like to sit facing a wall, he wants his back to the wall so he can see everything.

Study participants indicated that the challenges inherent to adapting to leaving a structured environment and "living free" were amplified by the changes they were trying to make in their lives post-release. For some, these changes were tangible – they moved to a new community, changed their living situation, or severed problematic interpersonal relationships with partners, family members, or friends – in an attempt to avoid past mistakes. One participant described how living this new life was unnerving, even though he had intentionally planned to make these changes prior to his release.

He said,

What I did the past two times put me back in jail, so **I'm doing it different this time**. But this adapting to a new environment, adapting to life, adapting to the city life -- I am from a small town -- I lived in the woods. I am adjusting to seeing how a town works. Everything is just so different, nothing is the same.

For others, the changes they had begun to implement were mental, emotional, and cognitive. Participants spoke of anxiety and fear, of actively addressing their own insecurities and striving to “do it different.” Another participant said, “My challenge is changing thinking patterns. Challenging pre-conceptions, fears, and insecurities I have. It's a daily struggle.”

Several participants answered the question “What has been your greatest challenge during reentry” with “Myself.” They spoke of wanting to think more positively and to “do the right thing.” One study participant said, “I've learned not to always trust what I think and feel. I watch for fear and dishonesty and selfishness within myself and when I notice it, I pray to God, I talk to others. I try to relax and just focus on what is right in front of me.”

Even participants who had been incarcerated for a relatively short amount of time – for say, two years as opposed to several decades – described the disorientation after release and the daily self-talk they used to stay positive. One participant told us,

First day out, after two years away, I was a little messed up -- didn't know how to catch the bus. Trying to get right to work... **Same things have occurred that tried to discourage me before. I have to learn to react differently, not get discouraged.**

## A transition fraught with anxiety

Understandably, leaving incarceration and building or re-building a life during the reentry period was stressful and unsettling for study participants. We asked study participants to reflect on their expectations of reentry and how those expectations had matched to the reality of reentry.

The study participants in the comparison group expressed deep worry and anxiety when they spoke about their reentry transition. They worried about the impact of their absence from their families emotionally and financially – anxious about not being able to “catch up” financially or support their families. They worried about where they were living and whether their living situation would fall apart.

Participants, especially those who were not releasing for the first time, expressed determination to not go back to prison. These participants told our researchers that they **“were done with that”** and described how their perspective had changed. For those in recovery, they worried about their sobriety and how they saw drug use everywhere they turned. Participants under post-release supervision were very anxious that one misstep or one miscommunication with their parole officer would land them back in prison.



One of our researchers also noted how study participants in the comparison group seemed “particularly vulnerable” when speaking of their struggles post-release. Some of these participants were unlikely to have discussed these struggles with any other person, either during their incarceration or after their release. Because participants in the comparison group often had no one asking about their experiences, the staff member described how these participants were more likely to say thank you at the end of the interview or to express gratitude that someone had listened to them talk about their experiences when compared to participants who were regularly meeting with a 5-Key Model practitioner.

Although some study participants told us that reentry had been relatively easy because they had extensive support systems that had remained intact throughout their incarceration, these stories stood in contrast to those told by many, many individuals who described the depth and breadth of the challenges they had experienced since leaving incarceration. For example, one participant said he, “Expected to have a steady place to live, a job. Definitely different. I am homeless, don't have a job, nowhere to live.”

### The slow pace of reentry

Patience is essential during the reentry period as rebuilding a life takes time; our study participants were acutely aware of how slowly the process moved. Wait lists for housing programs, entering treatment, and completing job readiness courses added layers of frustration for individuals eager to immediately begin working and contributing to their lives and families. Although the theme of waiting and needing patience intersected with a range of facets of our participants' lives after release from incarceration, it came up most frequently in the context of employment.

Many participants discussed how a host of restrictions complicated their ability to find a job. For some, their rural community offered few opportunities and transportation to the city was unreliable and expensive. Others detailed how they needed to wait to complete education or job training programs prior to even beginning to apply for jobs, and they described how frustrating it was to wait. And others described the frustration of not having a phone or internet access, which hampered their ability to apply for jobs and track down job leads. Older participants described how difficult it was to find potential employers or part-time work that allowed them to access their retirement or SSI benefits.

Unfortunately, with no financial resources, patience is likely to devolve into desperation to survive and get basic human needs of food and shelter met.

### The collateral consequences of incarceration

However, the most common challenge and source of both frustration and worry for our participants were the collateral consequences of incarceration. Many, if not most, of our participants in the comparison group who were searching for jobs described how frustrating it was to want to work, to apply for jobs, to have interviews, and to never get a call back.

Felony job restrictions limited participants' job search and sapped much of their initial excitement about finding quality work after release. One participant noted, “Finding a job is the most hard. I can't get hired when they hear I'm a felon.”

Others echoed this sentiment, noting how they were “declined by four jobs due to felony convictions and poor work history,” or how “having a felony on your record, a lot of employers don’t want to hire you.” Yet another said, “I’m struggling to get a job. Think my felony conviction plays a part -- I have been qualified for jobs, but I never get a call.”

Over and over, study participants who were looking for employment beyond low-wage physical labor type-jobs detailed their struggles. One participant told us,

The biggest challenge is getting a job with a felony conviction -- interviewed for four jobs, didn't get them. **This felony charge seems to be the reason I am not getting work.**

These challenges played out in unique ways for those who released after long sentences. Long gaps in the work history, paired with felony restrictions and sometimes physical impairments, constrained and confined the job search for these participants. Those who served long sentences often had a lot of anxiety about reentry and worried about whether or not they would be able to “stay free” after release without any income.

Some study participants learned to rely on referrals and tips from family and friends to help them identify employers willing to consider applicants with a felony conviction. One participant stated,

My biggest challenge is employment. I've gotten a lot of rejections because of my background. I feel stuck because you don't know who to ask for help, so I depend a lot of word of mouth through close friends and family.

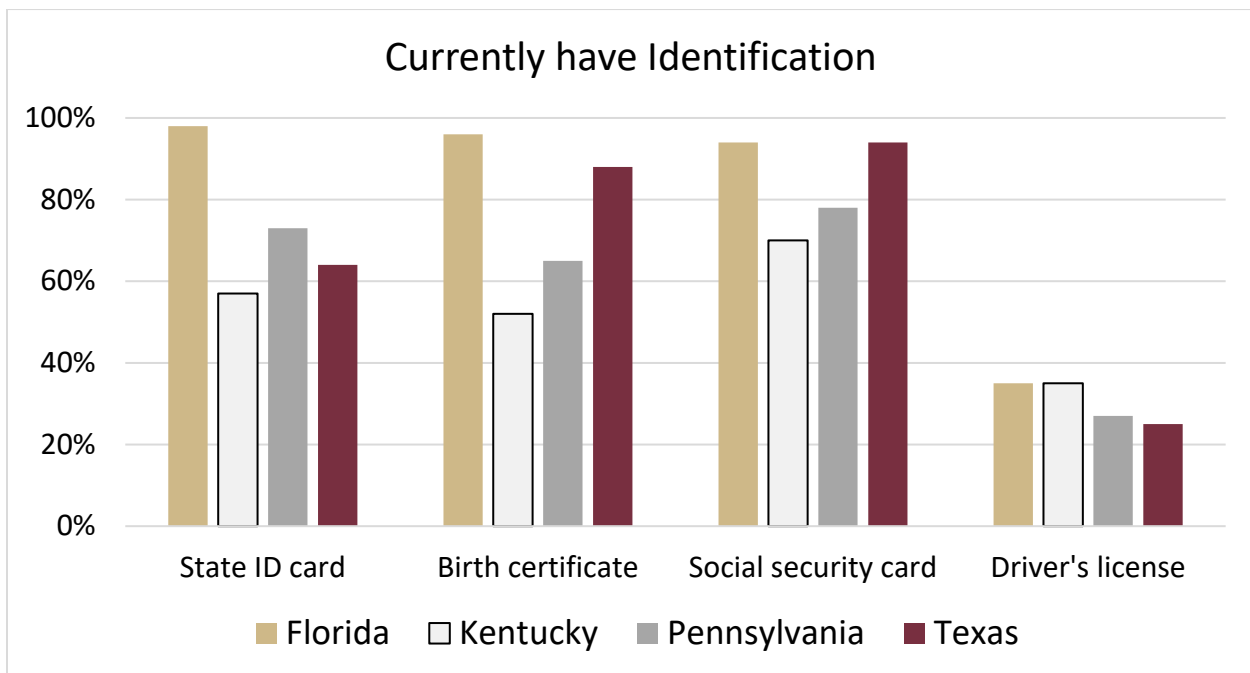
The advice and direction of friends who had also released from incarceration helped them to target their job search strategies. One participant described how “Having friends that know companies that are hiring and will hire felons” was the only strategy that helped him to find work.

However, a few participants took advocating for change into their own hands and told us how they planned to open a dialogue with potential employers about their felony restriction policies and perhaps helping these employers to examine the logic and usefulness of policies that eliminate a substantial portion of American workers from consideration. One participant told us that he had begun to schedule appointments with potential employers to discuss their policies around criminal charges. He said, “My challenge is finding a job. But, I have an interview at 1:45 today. **I plan to talk to the employer about their no felony policy.**”

## Challenges of state identification

Beyond felony restrictions, participants struggled to find employment based on a host of other barriers, which included securing the forms of state identification documents needed to begin working. Although many correctional agencies strive to ensure that all individuals release from incarceration with current, unexpired identification cards, some of our participants discussed how not having a state identification card, birth certificate, social security card, or a driver's license kept them from starting work.

Below, we show how many of our participants had current forms of identification, broken down by state.



One participant noted, **“It is so hard trying to get a job without a social security card or birth certificate.”** Further, many participants identified their greatest challenge as simply “Getting a driver’s license” or “Getting my ID.” Another participant noted, “My barrier is getting my state ID renewed. My ID expired 20 days after I was released.” Another said, “I don’t have a job and I need my birth certificate and ID to start working.”

Further compounding barriers to employment, not having a valid driver’s license limited individuals’ mobility and intersected with the common barrier of lack of access to transportation. Many of our participants spoke about their challenges finding transportation, getting rides, having (and losing) personal vehicles, and being unable to access public transportation for a variety of reasons including not having the income to do so.

Some of our participants told us that jobs involving driving often paid more than other jobs in their area and sometimes offered overtime pay. Therefore, a few of our participants hinted that they drove for their jobs, even though they had lost their driver’s license.

Not having a driver's license also took a psychological toll on individuals who told us that not being able to drive made them feel "less than" or like "a drain" on their loved ones and communities, especially for those in rural communities. One participant identified transportation as his second largest challenge (behind re-building his relationship with his teenage child). The participant said, "I need to start driving because taking the bus and bumming rides isn't the way I want to live."

## Maintaining sobriety during reentry: Struggling to 'do it different'

Making dramatic changes to one's life and routines is incredibly difficult for most people, but it is especially challenging for individuals who release from incarceration. Many study participants with substance use disorders were trying to remain in recovery from their addiction after their release.

Before release, these individuals were frequently told to simply cut ties with their old friends and to remove themselves from situations which could trigger a relapse or future criminal activity. However, our participants explained how few resources they had and how their housing choices were limited based on where they were allowed to, or could afford to live. Due to these constraints, they noted how being around drug use was pervasive and unavoidable for them.

Participants who released from incarceration to a halfway house often described how they were constantly surrounded by drug use, even though halfway houses were designed to provide additional structure and oversight for individuals at risk for relapse. One participant said, "One challenge is being here around all the drug use. It's not like I didn't expect it but it's hard. I'm on papers [under parole supervision] so it makes me nervous to be around that. **I don't want anything to jeopardize what I got going on.**"

Being surrounded by drug use – especially when it occurred in their own families -- provoked fear and worry, as some participants noted how they "thought there would be fewer temptations and staying clean would be easier."

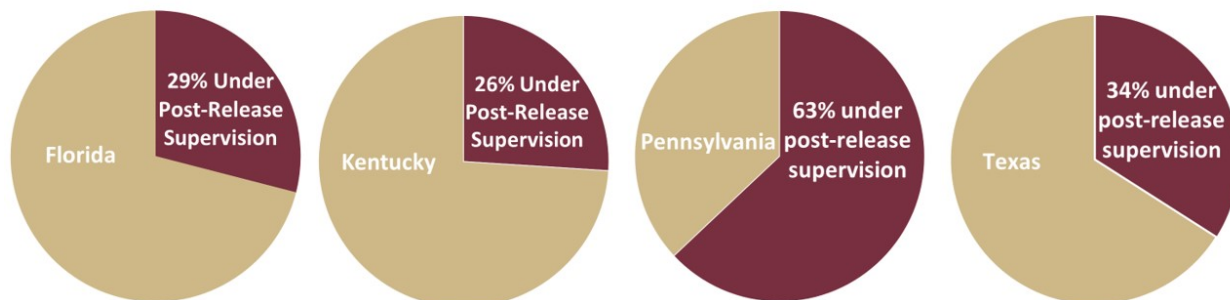
One study participant said, "Staying off the streets is hard. I know everybody so it's hard to avoid bad influences." Another told us that his challenge was "Not going back to the old environment. **People expect me to go back but I will not.**"

Wanting connection and to "feel normal" again, study participants described how difficult it was to "not go around people you known before." One participant stated, "It's a challenge staying away from negative peers, people who I'm still close with but I know I probably shouldn't be talking to."

Some chose to isolate themselves at home to avoid the temptation of going back to their old lives. One study participant told us he stayed at home to stay safe, "It's hard adjusting to going out in public, I feel more comfortable staying home. I don't wanna run into people I used to know because that will just lead to bad places and bad things."

## Being on 'papers': The anxiety of post-release supervision

The sense of anxiety and worry, however, was highest among those study participants who released from incarceration to some form of post-release supervision like probation or parole. These participants told us how being under supervision affected nearly every facet of their lives.



Above, we show how many of our study participants are under post-release supervision of any kind. We present these data by state, as some variation exists across our four study states.

Our researchers noted that although participants are generally hopeful after leaving incarceration, many of those on post-release supervision often expressed an expectation that something small would happen and they would be “violated” (or, found to be in violation of the terms of their release) and sent back to prison. One participant described,

It's hard dealing with parole. I'm on the intensive supervision program. Concerned that if I screw up, that I could go right back. For example, **I'm worried that a miscommunication might happen that might send me back.**

Our researchers indicated that “many, if not most” participants on parole become overwhelmed during those first few weeks after release from incarceration. They talked about how stressful and difficult it was to “keep it all together.”

Participants reported being overwhelmed by restrictive schedules and curfews combined with the demands of meeting the terms of parole, while also being submerged in the chaos of “freedom” outside the prison walls. These participants must regularly report to the parole office, attend mandatory meetings and check-ins, complete required classes, attend drug treatment, or submit regular drug screens.

For many, they must achieve all of these parole expectations in addition to conducting a job search or working full-time hours (and those who found jobs were often working more than 40 hours per week) with little or no transportation access. When added to the stress of adapting – back to freedom, to society, and to their families – participants suggested that they constantly

felt like they were unable to get ahead. Comments from participants described a perception that “the parole system is setting me up to fail, rather than wanting to help me succeed.” Another participant felt,

There is no room for negotiations. They don't even try to make it convenient for me. My parole officer still makes visits unannounced or schedules visits for times when I'm at work. And I can't even get a bus ticket from my parole officer. **I work 7 days a week and my parole officer doesn't even try to work around my schedule.**

Those participants assigned to higher-intensity levels of parole were often scheduled for full-time parole activities during the week. One participant noted that he struggled to find work while being on parole as “80% of my time is spent doing required activities.”

Another participant said, “The curfew does not allow me enough time to do other things apart from meetings and mandatory classes. I haven't even had a chance to look for a job or enroll in school because by the time I'm done with these meetings, I have to be back home.”

In general, participants described post-release supervision as an experience of feeling “trapped” or that they were “one foot in” or that “I feel free but they're [parole] still involved.”

One participant succinctly noted, **“I expected to feel more free.”**

## Reentry: A Family Affair

Most incarcerated individuals are deeply connected to their families. Although we often think and talk about them as individuals, they are also sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, fathers, and mothers. What gets lost in this focus on the individual is the profound effect of reentry on an individual's entire family.

Our study participants are highly dependent on family members for just about everything – food, clothing, shelter, transportation, emotional support, guidance, and financial support. Although a great many family members have been waiting for the day that their loved one is released from incarceration, the return home generates significant financial, time, and emotional burden on the family.

### The support provided by families

The majority of our study participants are highly dependent upon their families in the early months after release from incarceration. Parents, siblings, extended family, partners/spouses, and children were all identified as a strong source of help since our participants had left incarceration.

Participants commonly reported that whatever supports they had gotten from their family were the only post-release supports they had received. Study participants described how their family members provided a range of practical supports to them including a place to stay, clothing, money, transportation, a telephone, help with technology – like how to use a smartphone or the Internet – and they helped participants learn basic life skills like cooking and shopping.

Beyond practical supports, family members provided emotional support and moral guidance; they “looked after” participants and inspired study participants to succeed and stay out of prison. When asked what had been most helpful during reentry, participants often talked about family by saying things like, “Support of family who believe in me and want to see me do better.” And,

**The support of my family, they have been there for me no matter what.**

Study participants frequently identified their parents and siblings as important sources of support. When asked sources of support, one study participant replied, “My mother -- like my backbone -- anything I need, to talk, she is there.”

Another told us, “My mother -- financially, mentally, physically, spiritually.”

A third said, **“My sisters. They help me with stuff but also emotionally. They got my back.”**

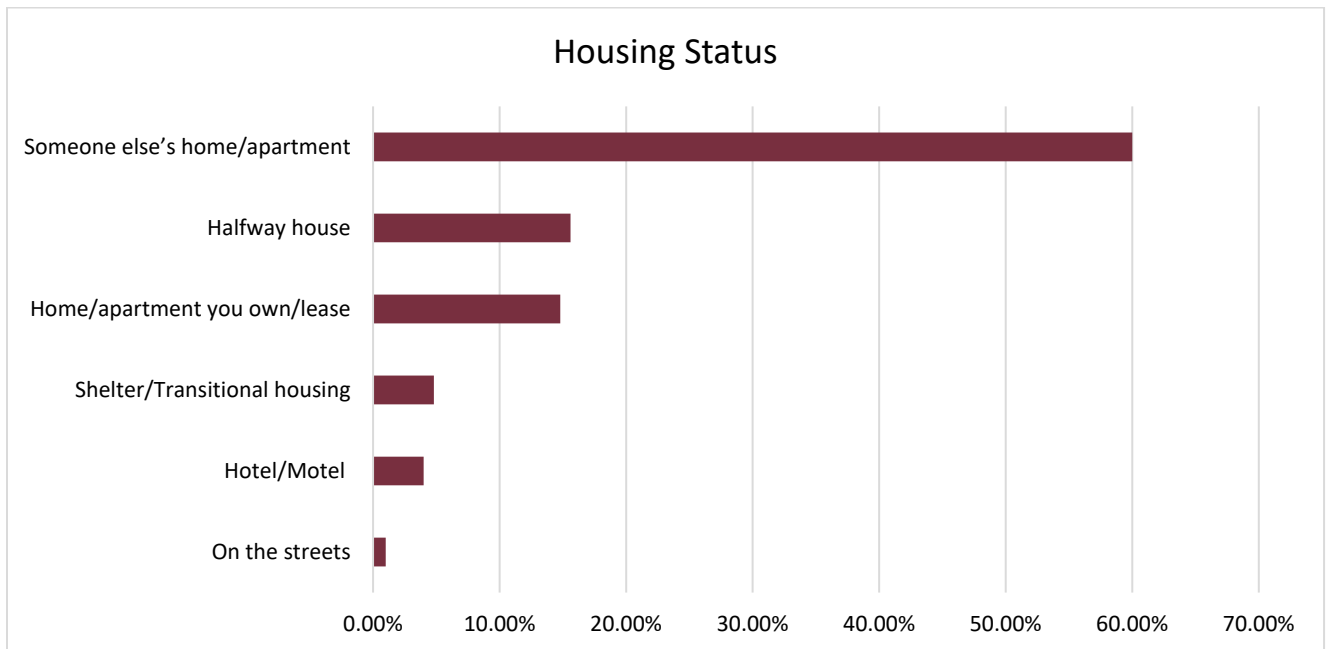
Participants who received a high degree of emotional and financial support from family experienced reentry differently than those participants whose families simply did not have the means to care for them.

One of our research team members wrote,

For the most part, participants who have a strong family support system describe a smoother post-release experience. They have families that offer them a place to stay, clothes, food, assistance with cash if needed. Having this support is invaluable to them because it allows them to dedicate time to other responsibilities such as finding a job or meeting with parole, without having to worry about where they are going to spend the night or whether or not they have enough money to pay for it.

Although participants spoke about a range of supports they received from family, the depth and breadth of this family support was clearly visible when participants spoke about their housing situation.

Sixty percent of study participants were living in someone else's home after their release, and for most, "someone else's home" meant the home of a family member.



Although very few participants reported being married (10%), those who were married expressed more stability in their reentry experience than those who were not married. A few of these participants noted how their spouses kept the family running during their incarceration, allowing them to leave incarceration and simply resume their lives.

One study participant said, "My life just picked back up. I have a wife and two kids. A house. A life. People stayed visiting me." Another participant noted how everything was "just waiting" for him after his release. He told us, "I had a job waiting for me – I don't even have my driver's license yet but my old boss brought me back on. We have a house and a car. My wife took care of everything."



In addition to tangible and emotional support, family members also provided a sense of order and structure and helped to keep participants motivated as they transitioned home. One participant described this in detail. She said,

Getting to see my daughter -- spending time with her, and knowing I might be able to get her back. And staying clean. **Mom is helping me stay clean -- she is my biggest support.** I know she will kick me out and I will not have a place to stay if I do not stay clean.

Another study participant echoed this sentiment. When asked what had helped him the most, he replied,

People I have in my life as support -- family, friends, people from Narcotics Anonymous. They are there for me. **When you know someone is still there for you, will give me another chance -- want to try to re-establish a relationship with me -- that motivates me.** Unexpected people are messaging me -- letting me know that once I stay well, they want to reestablish a relationship with me.

Study participants reported that just being with their children made them determined to succeed. And the emotional support they received from rebuilding and strengthening these relationships catalyzed their motivation and resolve.

One study participant succinctly noted, "My kids, they motivate me to do better." Another noted, "Spending time with my son. He helps me stay motivated and keep on track."

Some study participants found that because their families were welcoming and supportive. This support allowed these participants to let go of a lot of the anxiety, worry, and fear that they had developed during their incarceration. One study participant told us,

Expected it would be a lot harder to deal with society, family, children. I didn't know what to expect from them, hadn't seen them in 4 years. Is the opposite of what I thought -- they are very supporting, the love is amazing -- especially from the children, it is unconditional. **Didn't realize how much my kids loved me. I can see the appreciation of being in their lives. Gave me a better understanding of who I am and what I need to do to stay out.**

## Reconnecting with family: Change, loss, and grief

Participants returning from incarceration to their family often reported struggling to find where they "fit." Both men and women spoke at length about adapting to living in a family again even though for many the thoughts of coming home to family had sustained them during their incarceration.

For example, one participant described how the promise of leaving incarceration and living a perfect version of life provided her the hope and strength to make it through incarceration. However, her dream did not materialize. She explained,

When you are in, all you have to hold onto is how good things will be when you get out. **I thought the holidays would be like a Hallmark movie. Thought my kids' behavior would be great because I am home. They are not.**

Thought I would have more resources -- a vehicle, more money. Thought I would get custody of my kids, and I haven't yet.

The family context of reentry was typically described in terms of powerful emotions – both positive and negative. There was elation to be home and deep gratitude for the love and care participants received from their loved ones. And there was a palpable undercurrent of fear.

One participant told us,

I was scared to reconnect with my young children after so long away from them. **I mean, it was frightening -- do they remember me, will they care?**

The emotional strain that incarceration placed on these participants and families sometimes made connection difficult and heightened the sense of urgency that these participants felt to become financially self-sufficient and “pay back” their family for their time away. One study participant noted that his biggest challenge was “Providing financial support, keeping money to help with living expenses. **I live with my daughter and I can barely help her.**”

Study participants spoke of the complex web of employment, finances, and family responsibility. They understood the sacrifices their family had made during their incarceration and were eager to give back and participate in the family's financial success. Another participant said,

The hardest part right now is just getting out of the financial hole. I need to get my license but I owe a lot of money before I can do that. It makes me nervous to think I need to drive around without a license but I've got to make money. **My oldest daughter is disabled and my wife can't work, so there's a lot of pressure.**

And for others, there was no respite. The choices they made to survive incarceration were straining their family relationships and hampering their movement in the world after release.

One of our researchers described an interview conducted with a 20-year old who had been incarcerated for over 2 years. The participant was from a “bad neighborhood,” where people were very poor and drug use, gangs, and community violence were commonplace.

Early in his incarceration, his life was threatened. He joined a prison gang to gain some sense of protection and over the years, he got several gang-related tattoos, including one on his face. He released from prison to his parents' house in the neighborhood where he grew up. He talks about feeling pressure from all sides. His father pressures him to find a job, but no one will hire him with a felony record and a gang-related face tattoo. His family threatened to kick him out if he can't help pay the bills. His old friends want him to come back, to let things “be like they were before.” He says he feels lost. He tells me that he does not know what to do. He admits to having symptoms of depression but doesn't even know how to begin to get help.

This young man may be offered an opportunity in his community which will help him to find a path forward. However, if this young man's experience plays out like our prior research suggests it will, by the time we release our next quarterly report, he will not have employment and his family, frustrated by this, will have kicked him out of the house. Driven by a desire to seek out connection and to survive on the streets, he will find local members of his gang and re-join that life and a year from now, he will likely be back in prison.

One research team member noted that “Interpersonal relationships with partners, spouses, and children are a source of support and strength as well as a source of tension and challenges.” Some study participants struggled to accept and be accepted by their family as they were no longer the person they were when last they were home.

Another research team member described a 26-year old participant who released after 10 years. He had left his family a child and returned a man, and his homecoming was tinged with confusion and anger. He noted that communication with his family was his greatest difficulty – “They do not understand when I say I need space. Like do not understand.”

When he used the strategies he learned in prison to diffuse volatile situations with his family, they expressed more confusion and frustration with him – unclear why he felt the need to avoid talking or arguing with them. Our researcher recounted how he had said, “They keep coming at me. Wanting to talk and fight -- all ‘you do not walk away from your mother’ -- I am trying to keep it cool. But it is hard.”

But for others, they released from incarceration and became overwhelmed with grief. Far too often, participants recounted the family members and loved ones who had died during their incarceration. These deaths were especially devastating because of the inability to say goodbye, and the difficulty of processing or mourning deaths from a prison cell.

One participant told us about a tragic loss which occurred just before his release. He said,

Both my grandkids passed away in January -- right before I got out. Still dealing with that. I can't believe I didn't get to see them. I wish I had been there.

The participant was overcome with emotion during the interview and would not elaborate on what had happened. He took some deep breaths and said simply “Let's keep going. I have to be at work after this.”

Another participant spoke at length with one of our research team members about trying to re-connect with a child who was born during his incarceration. Recounting the participant's words, the researcher described the participant's experience,

I been trying to get to my daughter since I've been home. She was born while I was inside. She was staying with kin, but someone fed her bleach. Why would they do that? How could they do that? So, she went with child welfare to foster care. I'm her daddy but I don't even know her. I can't help her. I don't know my rights. I don't even know if I can have her back. It makes me so angry that they did that to her. How could they do that to a little baby -- my baby. And child welfare won't even talk to me. So I get so stressed. I been focusing on finding a job -- just tryna distract myself from this. From her.

Profound, unthinkable losses and lack of control applied extreme pressure on our study participants and influenced their ability to cope with the unpredictable nature of the reentry period and to adapt to the new version of the world, and their family, that confronted them every day.

## The deterioration of support

Several factors contribute to the deterioration of support after an individual releases from incarceration. There is often a mismatch of expectations between the formerly incarcerated individual and their loved ones. This mismatch is complicated by the inability to communicate their respective struggles during the reentry process. And, the family is often not considered to be an important piece of the reentry experience. Therefore the emotional and financial strain – the disruption to the family unit – go unspoken and unnoticed by correctional agents and service providers in the community.

Although we anticipate that much of the support families have provided to study participants in the early days and weeks since their release will wane as they reach the six months post-release mark, for some, their support was already beginning to disintegrate at the time of this report. For others, our participants' families fractured and changed during their incarceration and upon their release, whatever support they may have received during their incarceration had all but evaporated.

One participant replied, "My life turned upside down before getting out, I got divorced and lost housing. So I had needs I didn't anticipate."

Some individuals came home to find that the home they knew has been forever changed during their absence. One participant described, "I had a home plan, expected to go home. Didn't expect to go to a halfway house and start over from scratch. My mom lost the family house due to not paying taxes, and we lost everything in the house, as well. They didn't even tell me. I am in a bad spot."

One of our research team members recounted an interview they conducted with a participant who released from prison only to find that everything had disintegrated, including the support he had relied on during his incarceration and hoped would carry him through reentry. They wrote,

Another participant I interviewed lost everything. No one could keep up with his payments on his vehicle, so it was repossessed. They had to sell his house for money to pay the lawyers. His family has been very supportive by letting him stay at their home, but he feels uncomfortable being in someone else's space. His wife divorced him while he was in prison and he is estranged from his children. He recognizes he needs to speak to someone, wishes to speak to a counselor, but doesn't really know where to go.

Changing family circumstances, the loss of housing or transportation, and the disintegration of the reentry plan were not uncommon experiences for our participants. One study participant described at length how his attempts to find stability and support continued to slip through his fingers. He said,

Finding a place to stay is my challenge. Once I was released, I did not know where to go. I have a grandmother in [a town nearby], but too many people already live with her. I stayed with my daughter for a while but I was gone 17 years and we did not have a relationship. **I also didn't like how she used drugs and neglected my grandkids. She kicked me out and now I'm homeless.** I know I use them as an excuse but I just can't get ahead now. I lost my documents and my ID and I don't even know how to get new ones without the old ones. All that's keeping me going is God and my survival skills, and some money my sister gave me.

## What happens when there is no family support?

Although this section of the report is about the supports given to our participants by their family members, we also need to consider the consequences of not having a supportive family as a safety net after release from incarceration. One participant explained, “I got out with absolutely nothing -- no money, no house, no family, no nothin’.”

Some study participants left prison utterly alone – they released after long sentences with no social connections. Their belongings were thrown away during their incarceration and there was no one to welcome them home.

Others had serious mental health issues or addiction issues, which complicated their relationships prior to incarceration, isolating them further after release.

One research team member recalled an interview with a young man in his 20’s who was living on the streets and staying at a local homeless shelter on cold nights, despite the fact that he had family in the area. The researcher noted that he seemed paranoid and anxious, uncomfortable talking about where he went during the day and how he spent his time. He said that his family “won’t talk to me.”

Those participants without strong family connections tended to be highly isolated and were frequently homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless.

Other participants framed their lack of support as a choice, referring to themselves as “loners.” However, this choice may be better understood as a consequence of incarceration, as many of these individuals indicated that they “don’t trust no one, I rely on myself.”

Similarly, some of our participants chose to stay away from family because of complicated or destructive interpersonal relationships. One researcher described how a participant had great difficulty in reconnecting with family after leaving incarceration. Although he wanted to heal these relationships, his attempts to connect were met with confrontation and anger. “He avoids his old friends, but he is afraid to make new friendships because of old habits that he does not want to repeat. He is stressed and anxious about where he fits in society.”

# Accessing Reentry Services

Fewer than half of our study participants in the comparison group had accessed any services since their release from incarceration. Of those participants who are accessing services, it appears much of those services are being offered through the Departments of Corrections or with Department of Corrections' contractors in their respective states. For example, in one of our study sites, reentry caseworkers were provided through parole offices; in other states, corrections-based services were offered through halfway houses, reentry centers, and court-mandated treatment.

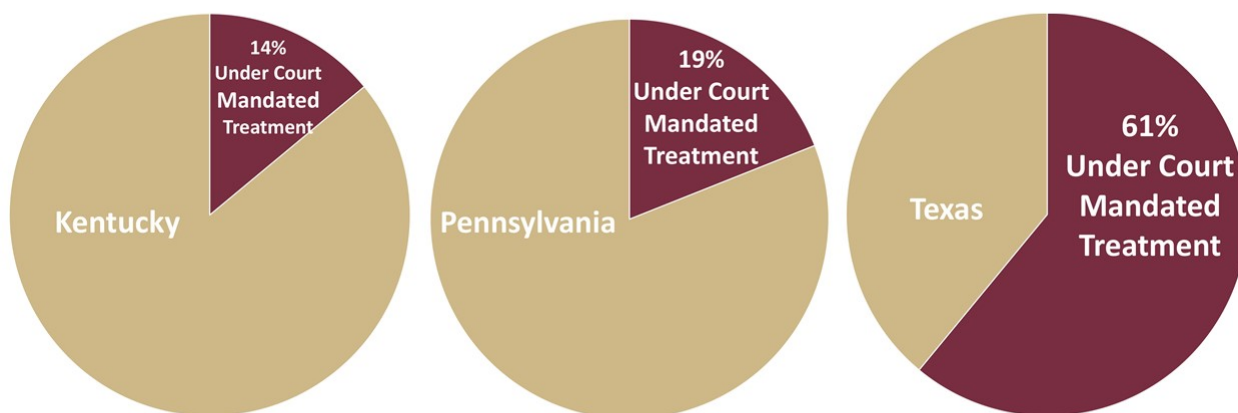
## The Reentry Services Landscape

In this section of the report, we explore what reentry services our study participants in the comparison group have accessed since their release from incarceration. We work with a range of community partners in each of our states who have been providing reentry services to those leaving incarceration for many years prior to the 5-Key Model study. In fact, we identified our community partners based on the quality of their work and their positive reputation. We provide study participants in the comparison group with the contact information for our community partners, but the research team does not directly refer the study participants to the community partner site. Thus, the content in this section is not a statement on the work of our community partners or their interactions with our study participants. Rather, we provide a birds-eye view of the reentry landscape across the 12 rural and urban communities in our four states as experienced by those participants who are not receiving the 5-Key Model. Once the study is over, we will train our community partners on the 5-Key Model, so that they can begin to deliver 5-Key Model services in the community should they choose.

As noted, many of the services our participants have accessed appear to be offered by the Department of Corrections or with a correctional contractor. Beyond these correctional-based services, our participants struggle to identify community-based organizations which provide support relevant to their reentry experience.

Given the short amount of time that participants have been in the community at the time of this report, we are unable to fully estimate which of the reentry services that our study participants discussed were hosted by departments of corrections, which were mandated, and which were voluntarily-community led services. We will be able to provide more data on these three types of services, and whether and how our participants are accessing them, in a later report.

We do, however, have some data on whether our participants have been mandated by the courts to receive treatment after their release from incarceration. In Texas, more than 60% of our participants are under court mandated treatment, compared to fewer than 20% in both Kentucky and Pennsylvania.



\*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

A common problem across our four study sites was the transitional nature of service agencies. Several of our researchers mentioned how agencies and programs opened and closed as funding allowed. A new agency might provide job readiness or job training services, but then close, or cease the service, 12 months later when a grant ended. Another might close at the end of the next legislative session when budget allocations changed. Our researchers and participants noted how non-for-profit halfway houses, three-quarter houses (or, sober-living programs), and a range of other programs specifically targeting individuals leaving incarceration were only able to provide inconsistent help.

Likewise, service availability varied greatly between agencies and programs. For example, some housing-based programs provided only housing (no other services) while others (particularly those contracted with corrections) were able to provide housing plus residential drug treatment, access to a caseworker who helped participants register for food stamps or Medicaid, and/or in-house job readiness services.

Based on feedback from study participants and researchers, supportive services for study participants are often scattered across the city and few, if any, services extend to residents of rural counties. Further complicating matters, very few of the “reentry services” study participants had accessed were designed for, or intended to be used exclusively by, individuals leaving incarceration. Instead, the services our participants described were often under the umbrella of some other service sector: services targeting individuals experiencing homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse; churches; job training; or charity organizations who offered clothing, vouchers, eyeglasses, or bus passes.

Agencies not designed exclusively for individuals leaving incarceration sometimes were unable to fully respond to the unique experience of having been removed from society, confined for a length of time in a highly structured environment, and then returned to the community. Further, some of these agencies purposely exclude individuals with a criminal record or restrict eligibility for their services to only first-time or non-violent offenders. Our participants are highly aware of these restrictions and told us,

I knew it was going to be difficult even though you always hear about all the help available. But I have a violent crime on my sheet and there are no resources in this county.

Approximately half of our state prisons are filled with individuals convicted of violent offenses – and the overwhelming majority of these individuals will eventually leave prison and return home. When service providers exclude people from services who have been convicted of a violent crime, they are effectively creating an environment where nearly half of those released from prison will not get the supports they need, which then increases the likelihood for future criminal behavior.

Service usage restrictions were amplified for our participants who had a prior incarceration. Several participants sought out services only to find that they were ineligible based on their criminal justice history. One participant said,

I expected to be able to work and be more self-sufficient. I knew it was going to be hard and I'm a reoffender so I can't go back to some re-entry services because they only let you use it once every few years.

However, what we are learning from study participants is that the participants' own deep desire to be independent and self-sufficient becomes a barrier in and of itself. Seeking help is difficult for most people under normal circumstances. However, our participants have been dependent on the prison for survival – sometimes for years – and now they are dependent on their families. And for the majority, they yearn for independence.

### I'm a grown man

This desire for independence is inextricably tied to what participants believe it means to “be a grown man” and their own perceptions of masculine norms. Many of our participants feel a strong sense of personal responsibility and value their independence and self-reliance above all else. Like most of us, study participants typically do not want to need help or accept any help, especially from service providers. Not surprisingly then, not accessing reentry services appeared to be an easy choice for those who released from incarceration with a job or who already had some level of financial security. One participant said, “No issue with service -- I just don't need any.” Another participant replied,

I don't know how or who to reach out to in reentry, but more than that, I haven't needed help either. I have supportive family and a steady income, so I don't need help. I would figure it out if I needed help though.



For others, their choice was driven by the desire to avoid any person or situation that reminded them of their time in prison. In such cases, not using reentry services is more an extension of the psychological toll of reentry rather than an indication of well-being or need.

When asked about their experiences during reentry and what they felt their service needs were, many of the men in our study indicated that they neither expected nor wanted help from anyone. One male participant said, “Had no expectations. **I just had to come out and get it done.**”

Several male participants expressed discomfort even with the help they received from family members, telling us that they felt uncomfortable staying in a family member’s home (versus their own independent home) or how they wished they had a personal vehicle.

Others were concerned about their reliance on their wives or family members after release. One participant said,

My issue is the electronics. Credit card stuff, swiping. I don't know what I'm doing when I go to a store -- I was away for 17 years. **I look like a fool.** My wife has to help -- swipe it, enter the pin.

For many of our male participants, needing help was equated with weakness and dependence, of not being “a grown man.” Another participant told us, “I didn't have a lot of expectations. **I knew I had to be a man and take care of my own business.**”

The idea of being independent – of “being a man” or “being a grown man” – came up again and again in participant interviews. Several expressed how needing or desiring help was at odds with their desire to be a grown man. One participant said, “I had savings and I had a plan. **I'm a grown man I take care of myself.**” Another told us,

**I don't need anything, I never expected anything. If I need something I'll get it myself. I'm a grown a\*\* man.**

When our research team member asked another participant about how he felt about not having received any reentry services, he replied, “I don't feel nothing about not receiving them. I didn't know they was out there, I didn't ask. Ain't nobody offered me nothing.”

Our researchers underscored how many of the men they interview were mistrustful of others and deeply uncomfortable asking for and accepting any type of emotional support. One research team member wrote,

Some guys will bring up right off the bat stressors they are dealing with, things that have happened recently – accidents, family struggles, how their girlfriends are controlling – but these situations are rarely reflected in their answers to the multiple-choice questions, or in the interview as a whole. There appears to be a discrepancy between the chaotic or stressful situations they describe to me 'off the record', and how they answer the interview questions.

Other men in our study detailed the situations they would have to be in to feel like services were necessary. One participant told us,

Don't need nothing. If I was homeless or something maybe I'd need help but I got lots of people here so I would just go somewhere else. Same with work. There are lots of jobs in [city].

Another replied, "If I was like homeless or on drugs. But I'm good. I am working steady, I see my kids and family. I'm good."

For some, accessing services was equated with hitting rock bottom, being homeless, and having nowhere else to turn. A third participant said,

I don't know. I'm a grown man. I got to step up for my family. I can't imagine being so low I got to get help but if my kids are hungry believe I will!

There is a sense that accessing services had a meaning larger than the services themselves. This meaning seemed to indicate that for some men, needing help and getting help from a service provider was a marker of failure – failure as an independent and strong man.

## Reaching out for services

Unfortunately, when an individual was "so low [they] got to get help," they reached out only to discover that services either did not exist or that they were inaccessible to them for the reasons described above. Additionally, the services that our participants could access had long wait-lists or were only able to conduct an intake assessment, and then told participants they would call to schedule the first appointment "in a few weeks."

Even those connected to services and living in a halfway house struggled to access what they needed to survive. One participant told us,

I thought there would be a lot more services available, but it is like pulling teeth to get help and services from [the halfway house]. I've never been in a place like this.

Supposed to be drug and alcohol services, mental health services, reentry services -- if they are here, I don't know about them.

Some of our participants knew prior to release that they would need services after they returned home. But, these participants found that securing the basics – housing, employment, clothing, food – was more difficult than they imagined after leaving incarceration. One participant described this in detail. He said,

I expected more help. Other than the IDs, I got nothing. They don't offer anything especially when you're out somewhere like [rural community]. If I can't drive, how am I supposed to get help?...I got food stamps for only two months. I thought I would be able to have them for longer. People here are really poor, if you make a couple hundred a week you're doing good. I could really use the food stamps but they say I don't qualify. And because it's so far away to get to the office I haven't been able to go up there and talk to anyone.

For others, the plan they developed during incarceration with correctional staff suddenly dematerialized when referrals were not made and because of this, participants' perceived that promises were broken. One participant noted,

They screwed up everything that was supposed to be when I got released. My probation officer did help me find a place eventually, but my dad got me some help where I need to be at.

Another simply explained dissatisfaction, **"I expected disappointment and they screwed up the plan after I released."**

For some, releasing to a county far from the city center meant there was no one to help navigate the plan after leaving incarceration. One participant said,

My main concern before release was being connected to resources. I found out they could not help me with getting my social security, driver's license, or birth certificate due to I was being released to [rural] county.

Regardless of their specific circumstances, many participants who sought out services needed for their survival came up empty handed.

# The Feedback Loop

## Accelerating the Adoption of Research Findings into Policy and Services

The use of research evidence to alleviate human suffering is a cornerstone of modern society. Yet, we have not effectively identified a way to speed the dissemination of scientific knowledge into real world adoption so that people benefit from evidence-driven interventions as scientists learn what is effective. One major aim of the 5-Key study is to rapidly translate knowledge – as we learn it – into policy and services (also referred to as practices). We aim for this translation to occur within the study – adapting and refining the 5-Key Model as we learn. External to the study, we aim to pose questions, highlight challenges, and suggest potential solutions to researchers, policymakers, corrections professionals, reentry service providers, and the general public. These quarterly reports are one mechanism for achieving these goals.

### The 17-year odyssey

One of the major barriers to use of research evidence in reentry services is the lengthy lag time between when research ideas are born and evidence-based practice guidelines are developed and then implemented in practice. Yet, subjecting reentry service approaches to rigorous testing is still necessary.

Referred to as the 17-year odyssey, the lag time between science and adoption of evidence-driven practice is a result of a configuration of current research methodologies as well as how research gets funded. Although researchers have limited control over funding priorities, what we can control is when and how we share our findings.

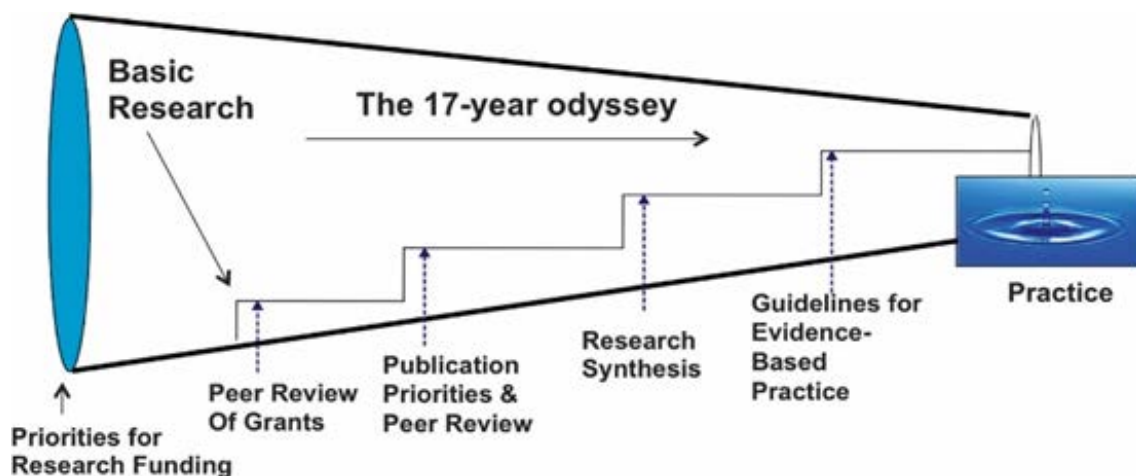


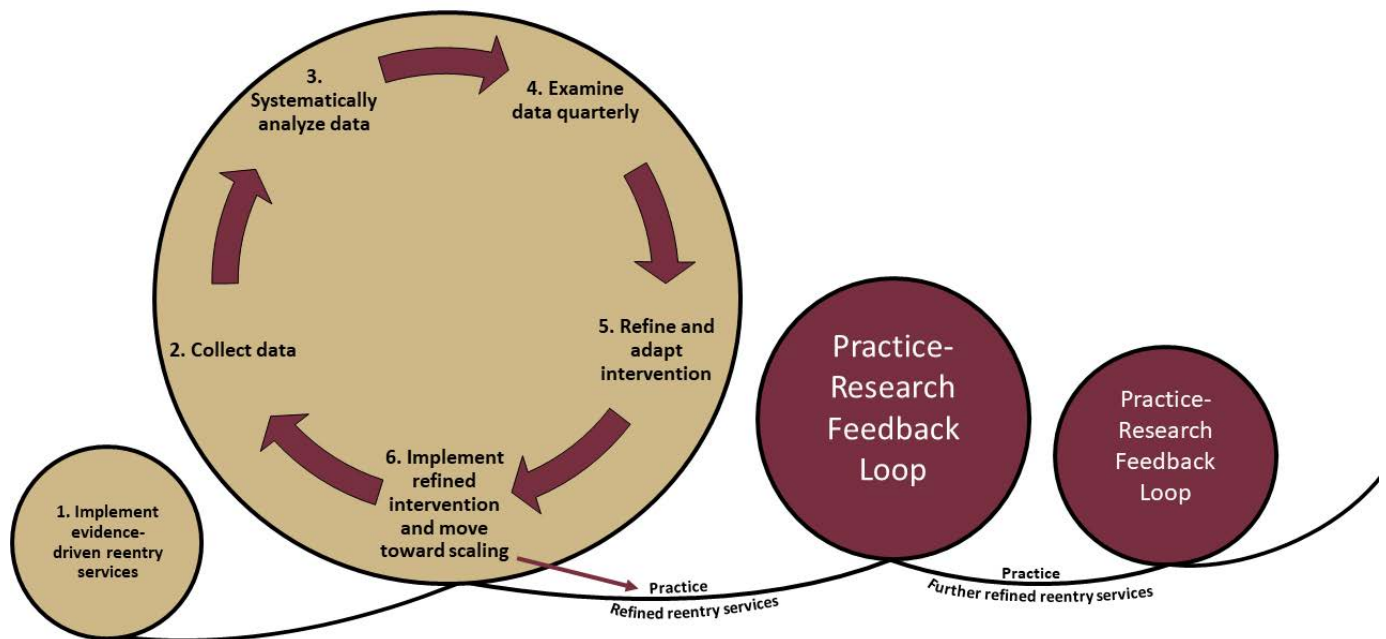
Image from [Olswang & Prelock, 2015](#)

## Closing the gap: Sharing research discoveries as we learn them

Building on the knowledge translation work conducted by the [Canadian Institutes for Health Research](#), we choose to integrate a feedback loop into the 5-Key study to calibrate the 5-Key Model as we learn from study participants, and the research and intervention staff. We provide a brief introduction to the feedback loop in this section and will dive more deeply into the feedback loop that we use in the next quarterly report to describe the changes that we have made to date.

We established, with the guidance of a scientific advisory board, pre-determined parameters of the circumstances under which to adapt and refine an intervention during the course of a randomized controlled trial. These parameters include: any adaptations to the 5-Key Model must be conceptually consistent with original model; needed adaptations must reflect commonalities identified across locations and reentry practitioners; if a needed refinement or adaptation of the model only applies to certain subgroups, an adaptation will not be made for the entire population. Major adaptations will not be done to the model during the course of a model. In order to statistically account for individuals receiving different adaptations of the 5-Key Model, the type and amount of program participation will be accounted for in statistical estimations of intervention effects.

You can see the graphic representation of the feedback loop below.



Ultimately, we anticipate that this feedback loop strategy will optimize time, resources, and impact. Instead of needing to wait until the trial has ended to discover whether 5-Key Model “worked,” we are able to refine and improve as we go. During the trial, the research team publishes and disseminates the conceptual models driving the intervention, practice tools developed for the intervention, and preliminary findings to other practice audiences – accelerating the transfer of knowledge to the field.

# Conclusions and Next Steps

## Conclusions

A unique feature of this multistate, multisite study is that the study sample represents a cross-section of incarcerated populations<sup>1</sup> across four states. We are able to observe themes and trends of individuals' reentry experiences across varied state prison systems and community contexts. One of the most powerful realities we have learned thus far is how consistently tough – even debilitating – the reentry experience is for most people who leave incarceration. This difficulty transcends differences in each states' regional practices and topographical constraints. The struggle of reentry is common across hundreds of study participants and the reentry experience has a wide range of ripple out consequences for individual, family, and community well-being, and it intersects with the potential for future criminal behavior and public safety.

When we step back and think about the early lessons of this study, a few themes have surfaced that we feel are worthy of discussion and debate.

1. Recidivism has been the default measure of reentry services success for decades, and thus, recidivism is treated primarily as a measure of individual behavior. Yet, what we are observing is that recidivism is a result of a confluence of events – it reflects systems-level (or structural) decision making, and sometimes even systems failures. Recidivism reflects the decisions of correctional agents – such as parole officers who have an influence on who is ultimately violated for failing the terms of their post-release supervision. Recidivism reflects the interaction between individual decision making and a host of structural barriers. Recidivism reflects whether or not reentry service supports are available in local communities to individuals leaving incarceration. What recidivism does not solely reflect, however, is individual criminal behavior. We need better measures to help us to distinguish the structural causes of recidivism from the structural-individual interactions that cause recidivism from individual criminal behavior.
2. Corrections cannot be the primary source of support for reentry; communities must play more of a role in prevention by helping to prevent people from going to prison in the first place and help them remain in the community after their release. Despite being two decades into the “reentry movement” in this country, communities are still largely void of adequate reentry supports. Yet, reentry is primarily experienced in communities – communities which are, by definition, beyond the scope of correctional responsibility. How can we catalyze communities to take on the challenge of welcoming those who are returning from prison back home? How can communities strive to do everything in their power to guide and support people toward being true community contributors and to living meaningful and positive lives?
3. Reentry experiences are simultaneously completely predictable – and not at all predictable. The themes, which are predictable, in our first two quarterly reports echo themes found in years of prior research, documentaries, books, and popular media. The challenges we detail of limited services, waitlists, resistance, and logistical barriers are known and expected. Less commonly described are the themes in this report – the psychological toll of the reentry

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of non-English speakers and those too cognitively impaired to participate.

experience, the detrimental impacts that reentry has on an individual's entire family, and the persistent lack of ownership and accountability of an individual's community. Often completely unpredictable are the actual release dates of many incarcerated individuals. In three of our four states, the sentencing structures for many are such that we cannot accurately predict exactly when a person will release from incarceration. For example, we expected 100% of our participants to have released from incarceration by January 2019. However, nearly 40% are still incarcerated. Although this unpredictability in release dates may be appropriate and necessary for correctional agents, it complicates and confounds any attempts to plan for reentry. How can individuals, families, and communities prepare for release from incarceration when the release date is not yet entirely known?

4. Incarceration and reentry are a family affair for most men and women across our nation. However, current criminal justice practices – arrest, sentencing, and reentry – are designed to respond solely to individual behavior. These practices do not take into account that individuals who engage in criminal behavior are, more often than not, highly connected to family – people who love them, people who will miss them, and people who will be hurt by their absence during incarceration – and, ironically, can also be hurt by their return home. Although policing and sentencing are well beyond the scope of this report, shifting our perspective to locate within the family is not. Almost all of the participants in this study are living with and relying on family after they leave incarceration. These families experience reentry as well – they struggle and suffer with their loved ones. Our research (in this study as well as in our prior work) has shown us that reentry approaches that fail to include the family will never achieve maximum impact. Families are the bridge to community and the cornerstone of preventing both further suffering and crime – but they are largely invisible in our national discourse on reentry. How can we include the voices and perspectives of family in reentry? How can we support families so that they can, in turn, support the 10,000 men and women who leave prisons every single week?

### What happens next?

Our next quarterly report will release at the end of May 2019. By that time, all study participants will have released from prison. We anticipate that most of our study participants who have been randomly assigned to receive the 5-Key Model will have had the opportunity to engage in post-release programming. At that time, we expect to have data related to how our participants are performing on the 5-Key indicators of well-being. We will also have more data on the circumstances of those individuals who may have returned to jail or prison since their release. We will dig further into the complex web of reentry, evidence, policies, and intervention.

In the next report we will highlight the feedback loop process in much more detail, showing how the feedback loop has been used in this study and how it has impacted the 5-Key Model. We will discuss the changes we have made to implementation and to the 5-Key Model itself and describe the how and why of those changes. As always, we will also explore whatever new themes have come to light as a result of examining our data in real time. We are excited to share our discoveries with you as we make them and to catalyze the national discussion on how to end the cycle of incarceration and help millions of incarcerated men and women and their families develop well-being.

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We extend our deepest gratitude to our research team and collaborators who work diligently every day to improve the lives of individuals and families impacted by criminal justice system involvement in order to promote the safety and well-being of our communities across our nation.

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