

Accelerating Science to Change Criminal Justice Outcomes

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Tallahassee, FL – In a heart-wrenching letter, Carrie Pettus-Davis, Associate Professor and Founding Executive Director of Florida State University’s Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD), describes how the existence of a 17-year gap between scientific innovation and actual changes to policy and practice directly affects her family. This 17-year gap means that the therapists currently working with her son – nicknamed ‘Baby Awesome’ at birth by his older sister and diagnosed with autism at age two – only have access to the innovations of approximately 17 years ago. By the time the best practices for early intervention among children with autism of today – of 2019 – are in the hands of practitioners, ‘Baby Awesome’ will be a 22-year-old man.

The focus of the [third quarterly report](#) from the 5-Key Model for Reentry study being conducted by researchers at IJRD details the steps Pettus-Davis and her team are taking to reduce that 17-year gap and accelerate the scientific process. The 5-Key Model is designed to help participants develop well-being, cultivating healthy thinking patterns, meaningful work trajectories, effective coping strategies, positive social engagement, and positive interpersonal relationships. The model is different from many current reentry approaches which focus on individual deficits – the 5-Key Model instead helps individuals to live the life they want to live.

The report details the implementation of a Research-to-Practice Feedback Loop and how this Feedback Loop has been used to overcome challenges and adapt both the 5-Key Model intervention and how the intervention is delivered to individuals as they release from prison. The Feedback Loop provides space for practitioners, study participants, and researchers to identify areas for improvement and formalizes a process to ensure that any changes made are consistent with the original model, acceptable to all parties, and implemented fairly across all study sites.

For example, based on the psychological toll of the incarceration experience for many study participants, they desired to engage with practitioners via texts, web messages, and phone calls – rather than meeting face-to-face. Through these frequent, low-pressure communications, participants built trust and rapport with practitioners, which helped them to feel more comfortable engaging in face-to-face sessions. Applying the Feedback Loop identified best practices and exemplar uses of technology to foster connection while setting appropriate boundaries on how the 5-Key Model content would be delivered to study participants.

Additionally, participants’ logistical barriers like lack of transportation or internet access meant that practitioners quickly shifted from providing services in brick-and-mortar office space into a mobile reentry model – meeting participants wherever and whenever possible. One practitioner noted, “Either we go to them, or they’re gone.” Practitioners were already overcoming these challenges using innovative methods, including meeting with participants before work for 6am coffee or connecting with them on the job site during their lunch break. The Feedback Loop helped to identify strengths and challenges to mobile reentry, helping team members expand on effective approaches and quickly abandon ineffective approaches.

“Deviation from the protocol is not inherently bad,” explains Pettus-Davis. “Sometimes the protocol simply should not be maintained. Using the Feedback Loop, we are able to identify what’s not working more quickly, so that we can get to what will work.”

Extensive data describing the lives of study participants approximately four months after their release from incarceration are provided. On average, 78% of study participants are employed across the four states. Of note, however, although half of the participants receive the 5-Key Model after release from incarceration, those participants in the comparison group receive whatever services already exist in their local communities. In three of the four study states, more than 80% of study participants in the comparison group reported that they have not received any reentry services after their release from incarceration.

Researchers at IJRD released their [first quarterly report in late 2018](#) and the [second in March of 2019](#). Those findings showed formerly incarcerated individuals are eager to succeed after prison — and are making huge efforts to do so – despite facing a variety of barriers and struggling to cope with the often disorienting and destabilizing process of leaving incarceration and returning to their communities. “As scientists, we need to move more quickly to accelerate the scientific process to get at ‘what works’ much, much faster,” concludes Pettus-Davis. “We do not have time to waste on approaches that are not workable and are not working.”

The next quarterly report will be released in August 2019.