

# Individuals leaving incarceration face many barriers to success, few of them of their own making

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**Tallahassee, FL** – Individuals leaving incarceration have many obstacles to manage as they return home and begin the process of rebuilding their lives post-release, new data shows.

According to a [new report](#) published by Florida State University researchers at the Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD), individuals are highly motivated to find and maintain employment, reconnect with their loved ones, and stay out of prison. These findings are part of a unique pilot study of the 5-Key Model for Reentry. The researchers describe the model as a reentry services approach that departs from more typical reentry services that tend to serve only the most likely to succeed by removing the individual deficits of those individuals. Instead, the 5-Key Model is based on a psychological well-being development foundation that aims to build on the strengths and human potential of individuals and, in turn, promote community well-being and public safety.

A large pilot study of the new model launched in May 2018 in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The researchers aim to approach 2,200 individuals about study participation. To date, they have approached over 1,900 individuals across 50 correctional facilities and those individuals plan to release to one of 12 urban and rural counties across the four states. Just under 14% of those who were approached about the study declined participation, suggesting an openness among the incarcerated to receive post-release support and contribute to science that is trying to understand how to best help individuals after an incarceration experience.

“What is most exciting to me about this research is that we are analyzing our data as we go. This allows us to learn in real time about how to adjust the 5-Key Model based on the feedback we receive from study participants and the research team members implementing the new reentry approach during the course of the study. This strategy allows us to shrink the typical 17-year lag time between scientific discovery and the adoption of research findings into practice,” remarks Dr. Carrie Pettus-Davis, Associate Professor and Founding Executive Director of IJRD.

The research team released their first quarterly report from the study last month. Some findings suggest that those factors that many people think contribute to a person’s success after release from prison, may in fact not have as much impact as people think. “We measured motivation of incarcerated individuals before we approached them to participate in the study. Early analysis shows that those people who refused to participate in the study or who refused to engage in study reentry services, are no less motivated than those who agreed to participate and are involved in programming,” said Dr. Pettus-Davis.

The 5-Key Model is designed to help participants develop well-being and to cultivate healthy thinking patterns, meaningful work trajectories, effective coping strategies, positive social engagement, and positive interpersonal relationships. “What we are beginning to notice,” remarks Dr. Kennedy, Director of Research Dissemination at IJRD, “is that our participants are making huge efforts to succeed despite experiencing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This is

not about a lack of motivation or desire. There are real tangible roadblocks to their success that I don't think any of us could easily overcome."

Rather, the researchers have identified what they describe as internal and external forces or barriers to stabilizing after incarceration. Over 96% of the men and women in the study report traumatic life experiences including having loved ones murdered (60%) or witnessing deaths and serious injuries (70%). Not surprisingly, 25% of the study sample meet diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, which is significantly higher than rates among the general public. The untreated trauma symptoms prevalent among formerly incarcerated individuals lead to self-isolation and fear of seeking connection to others who can help to ensure their success.

For those who do feel stable and able to seek support, many are unable to get help because they have significant transportation barriers, are working 50-60 hours a week at multiple worksites, and are required to attend hours of mandated treatment and supervision meetings each week. Data in the current report underscore participants' intense motivation to find employment, often noting that employment is the primary or sole focus for many individuals. "However, many of their best efforts are met with frustration as they struggle to overcome a range of barriers while simultaneously attending required mental health and substance use treatment, working long hours doing physical labor, and participating in their family and community," says Dr. Kennedy. The study authors detail the research team members' efforts to anticipate and address these barriers, shifting away from brick-and-mortar office space and moving more deeply into communities, meeting participants at the public library, job site, or at their home. They also showcase using technology to reach those who would otherwise be unreachable, conducting meetings using streaming video and texting throughout the day.

As they learn from the study participants, the researchers say they are pondering if the field needs to re-think how programming is delivered to help formerly incarcerated individuals. "Our study interventionists have naturally innovated to connect with study participants in any way that they can. They drive to participant's worksite during lunch time and call and text throughout the day to deliver reentry supports in "bite size" amounts to fit into all of the competing demands these individuals are faced with. I am starting to wonder if we should move away from "brick and mortar" reentry services and more towards mobile reentry outreach," notes Dr. Pettus-Davis.

"The research team has committed to providing a window into the study through these quarterly reports" described Dr. Kennedy. "We hope that those individuals who work and study in the field of reentry will learn alongside us and offer their insights," said Dr. Pettus-Davis, "But more importantly, the 5-Key Model study was informed and designed in collaboration with formerly incarcerated individuals and now study participants are helping to guide us toward taking new approaches to identifying the right answers about what works for whom, how, and why as people navigate the transition from prisons back home." The next quarterly report will be released in February 2019.