

Reentry is characterized by psychological turmoil - for individuals and their families

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Tallahassee, FL – In the few months after release from prison, formerly incarcerated individuals face significant stress and anxiety that could affect their ability to successfully reenter society, new data shows. In a [second quarterly report](#) from a multistate study published by Florida State University's Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD), researchers provide additional information on the internal and external barriers faced by people recently released from prison. The new data also show the anxiety and stress is shared by family members, and can last for months after incarceration has ended.

“The psychological turmoil experienced by many individuals recently from prison comes from multiple sources,” explained Dr. Carrie Pettus-Davis, Associate Professor and Founding Executive Director of IJRD. “There’s the stress of adaptation to home-life and to a world and family that may have changed radically. Second is the fear of failure. The individuals not only want to stay out of prison, they want to succeed and worry about every small step on their journey. Finally, the individuals we spoke with obviously are frustrated with how slow the stabilization process is. They want to feel ‘normal’ and ‘free’ but that feeling is elusive.”

Regarding the stress of adaptation, for example, many of the individuals in the study used the language of struggling to adapt and adjust to describe their initial experiences of life since their release from prison. The causes of stress may be relatively small. One individual said his biggest challenge was adjusting to “little things like layering clothing and sleeping in a bed.”

Employment also is a huge source of anxiety. Over and over, study participants who were looking for employment beyond low-wage physical labor type-jobs detailed their struggles. One individual said, “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.”

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.

This second quarterly report is part of a unique pilot study of the 5-Key Model for Reentry launched in May 2018 in Florida, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas. To date, researchers have approached more than 2,200 individuals across 50 correctional facilities. The new data compares individuals engaged in the 5-Key Model with those who are not and considered the experiences of 1,561 individuals, 457 in Florida, 230 in Kentucky, 280 in Pennsylvania, and 594 in Texas. Ninety percent of interviewees were male and 10 percent were female.

In addition to identifying the psychological barriers to reentry, the new data indicates men and women experience reentry differently.

Male study participants typically said they did not want to need help or accept any help, especially from service providers. For some, their choice was driven by the desire to avoid any person or situation that reminded them of their time in prison.

“The men we interviewed put a premium on stepping up and the need to ‘be a grown man’ and figure it out themselves,” explained Dr. Stephanie Kennedy, Director of Research Dissemination at IJRD. “While they are making significant strides to provide for their family and support themselves, men are less likely to seek aid in their efforts. The men in this study need a lot of help, but they resist it and when they do give in and seek help, they have found the services to be scattered and inconsistent, or wholly unavailable.”

Outside of a willingness to access services, researchers identified another problem. Community 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.

Participation in the study also confirmed that the vast majority of incarcerated individuals are open to sharing their experiences. Only 12 percent of those who were approached about the study declined participation.

The second quarterly report also focuses on how families are affected by reentry.

Families are a huge part of the reentry process. Fully 60 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. (Fewer than 20 percent had a home they either owned or leased on their own.)

Although very few participants reported being married (10 percent), those who were married expressed more stability in their reentry experience than those who were not married. Those participants noted how their spouses kept the family running during their incarceration, allowing them to leave incarceration and resume their lives in a smoother fashion than those without spouses.

Some individuals, however, came home to find that the home they knew had been forever changed. One participant described, “I had a home plan, expected to go home. ... 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.”

“Clearly the complexities presented by reentry are not only felt by the individual,” said Kennedy. “Family members also experience a major transition and because recently incarcerated individuals are highly dependent on family members for so much – from food to money to emotional support – the return home generates a significant financial, time, and emotional burden that can sometimes cause resentment on the part of the individual and his or her family. Community support is essential to navigating and overcoming this strain.”

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. The model shifts away from using brick-and-mortar office space to engage with and help formerly incarcerated individuals; researchers instead integrate more deeply into communities, meeting participants at the public library, job site, or at their home. They also use technology to reach those who would otherwise be unreachable, conducting meetings using streaming video and texting throughout the day. The goal is to re-think how programming is delivered to help formerly incarcerated individuals.

“Overall the study participants, just months out of incarceration, are still in survival mode,” concludes Pettus-Davis. “They are suffering and their families are suffering. In the United States, 10,000 people are released from prison each week. All of the themes we’ve seen with our study participants are predictable yet nearly 300 years into having prisons in this country, communities have not rallied to generate opportunities for those who have been incarcerated. Rather, individuals and their families remain isolated, excluded, and struggling to make their way. That must change.”

Researchers at IJRD released their first quarterly report in late 2018. Those findings showed formerly incarcerated individuals are eager to succeed after prison — and are making huge efforts to do so. Read more about that data [here](#).

The next quarterly report will be released in May 2019.