



The Psychological Toll of Reentry

RESEARCH REPORT



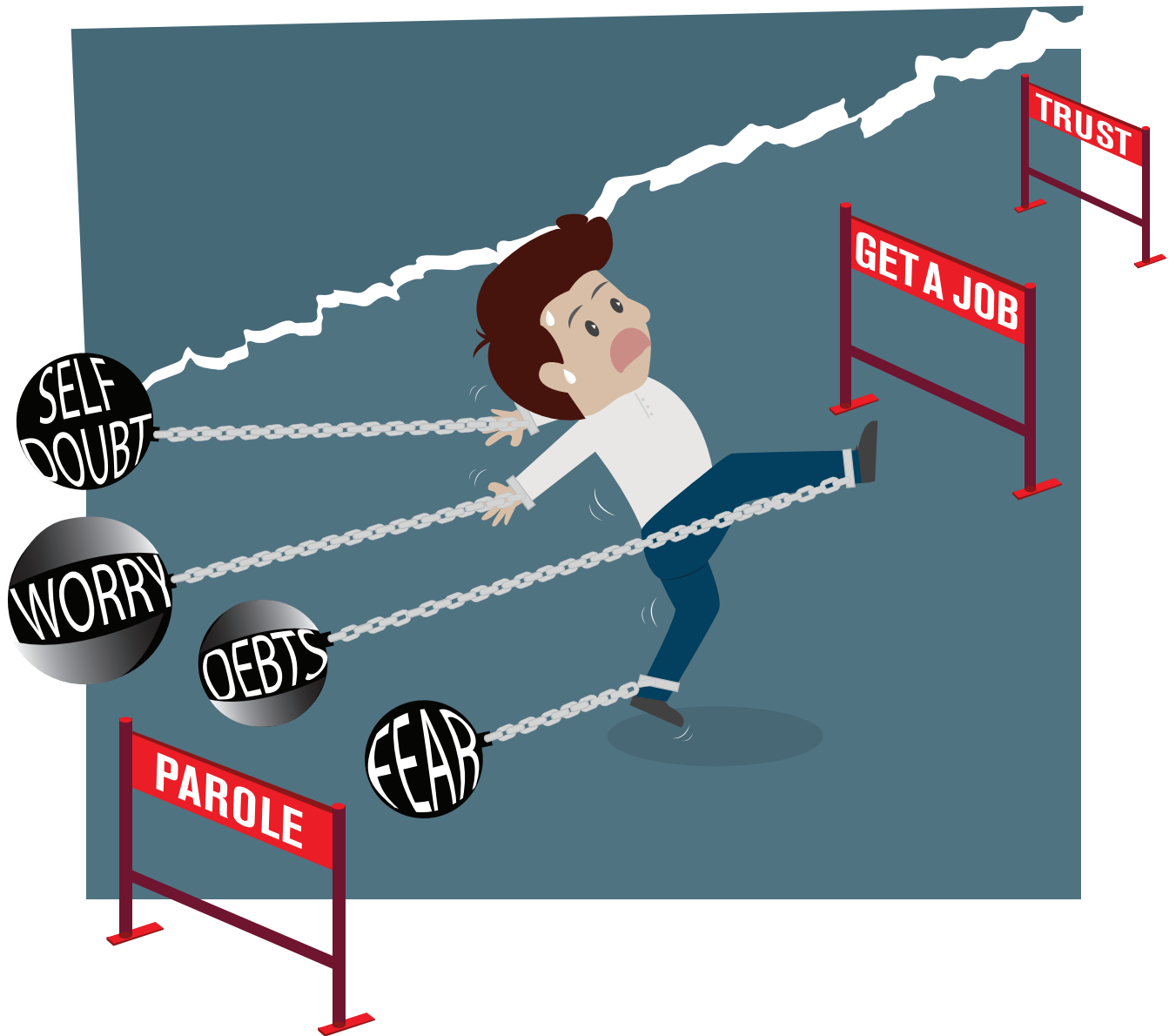
WEI’s work originated at major academic institutions, including Washington University in St Louis and Florida State University. We continue to build on these academic and data-driven approaches, with a strengthened emphasis on the translation and delivery of scientific findings to the people doing the day-to-day hard work – including practitioners, advocates, policymakers, businesses, government and nongovernment institutions.

We want our historical work to be as accessible as our work going forward. These compendiums are a resource to the work our team has done in the past and have maintained their origin affiliations as reference with appropriate crediting of where the work began.

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

The Purpose of this Report

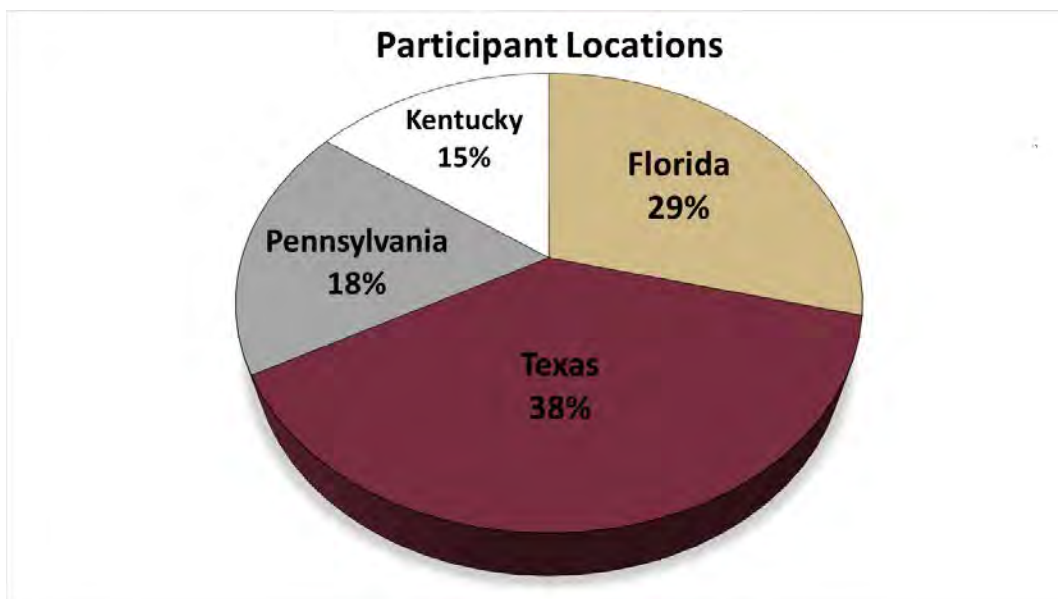
The purpose of this report is to catalyze the rapid translation of research findings into policy and practice, bridging the 17-year implementation gap between scientific discovery and actual changes to laws, policies, and services which affect individuals leaving incarceration. Quarterly research reports 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.

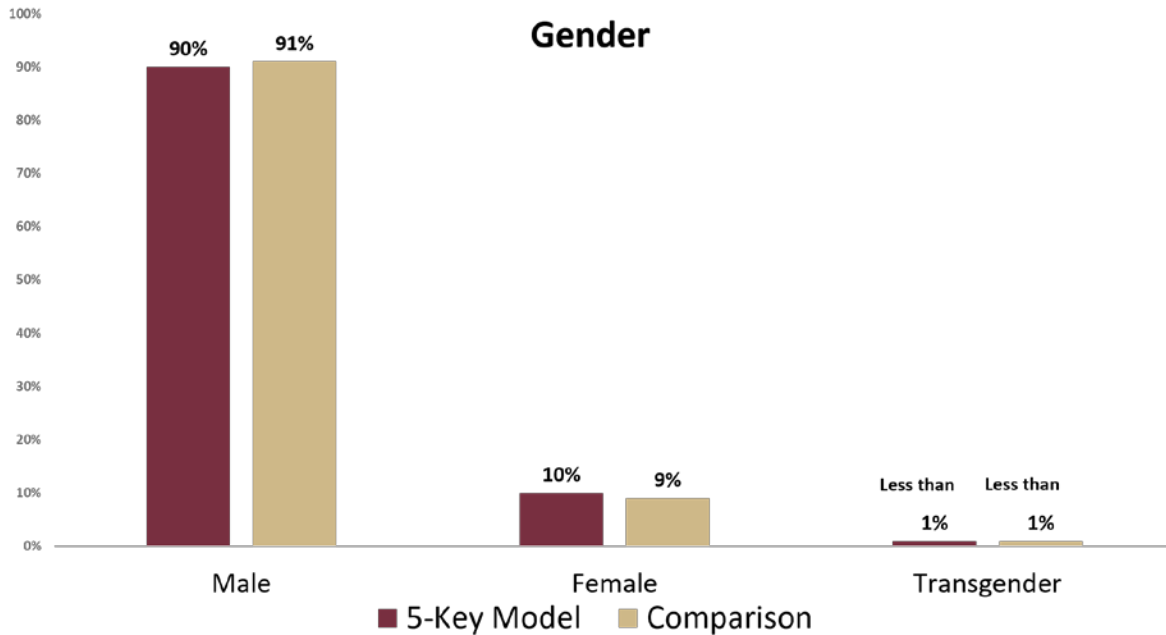
Our final study sample is comprised of 1,561 individuals. Just over half (51%; $n=801$) have been randomly assigned to receive the 5-Key Model for Reentry and 49% ($n=759$) have been randomly assigned to the comparison group.

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.

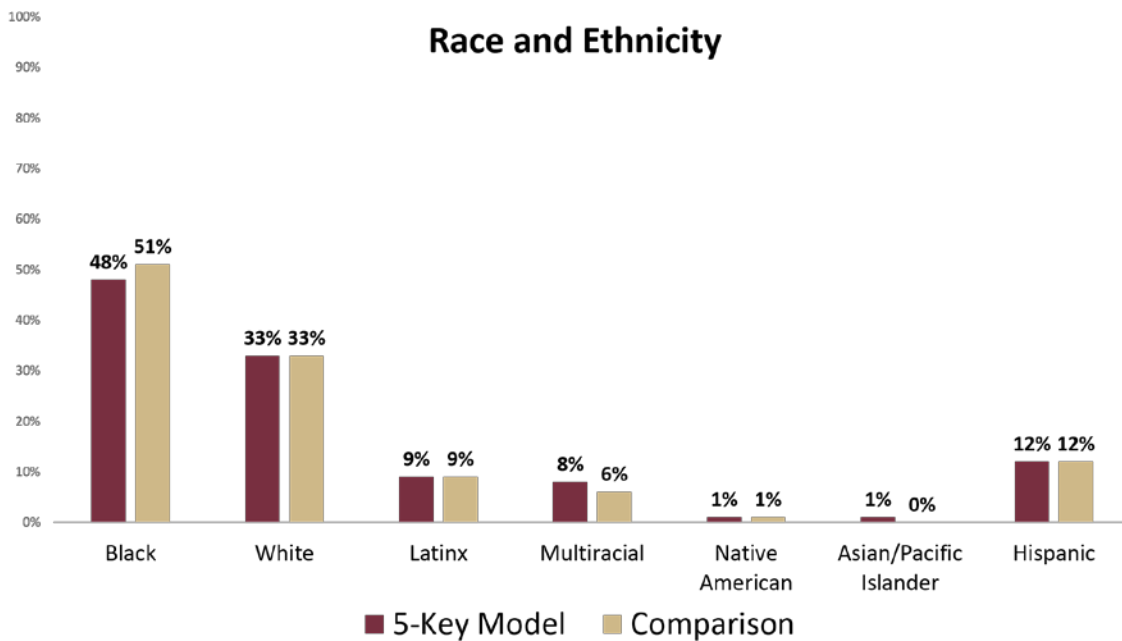


Below, we describe the demographic characteristics of all of our participants and identify any demographic differences between the two groups: those who have been randomly assigned to receive the 5-Key Model and those randomly assigned to the comparison group.

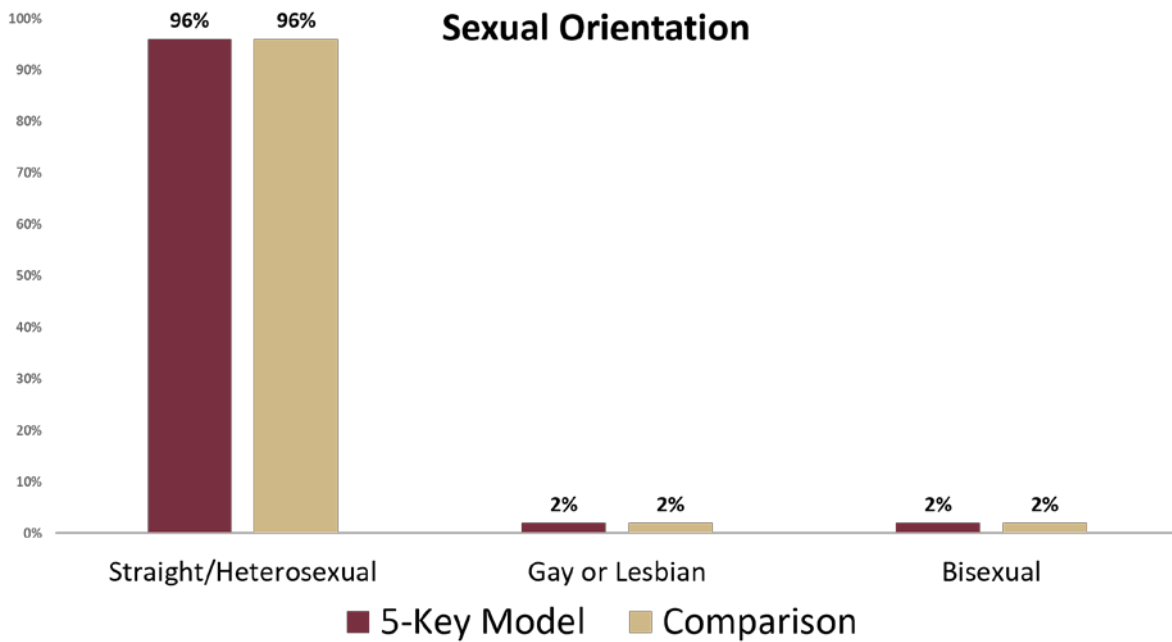
On average, our study participants overwhelmingly identify as male. This reflects national averages; approximately 93% of incarcerated individuals identify as male nationally.



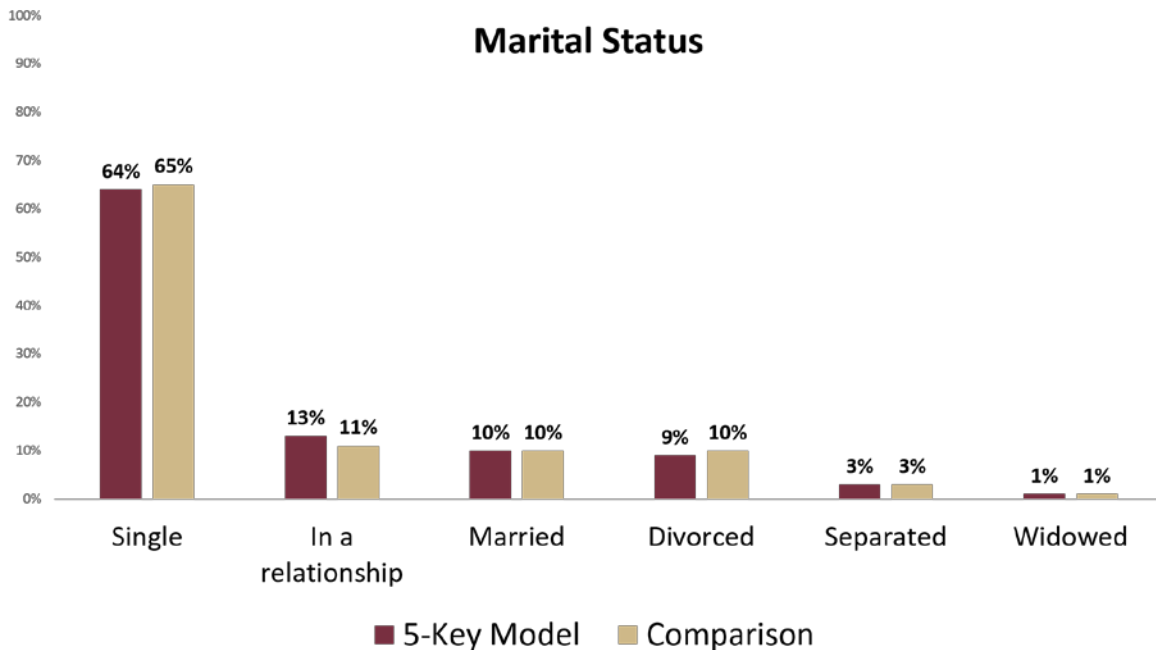
Approximately half of our study participants identify as Black, a third identify as White, and fewer than 10% identify as either Latino or Latina (referred to as Latinx). Additionally, 12% of participants identified with the Hispanic ethnicity in addition to their racial identity.



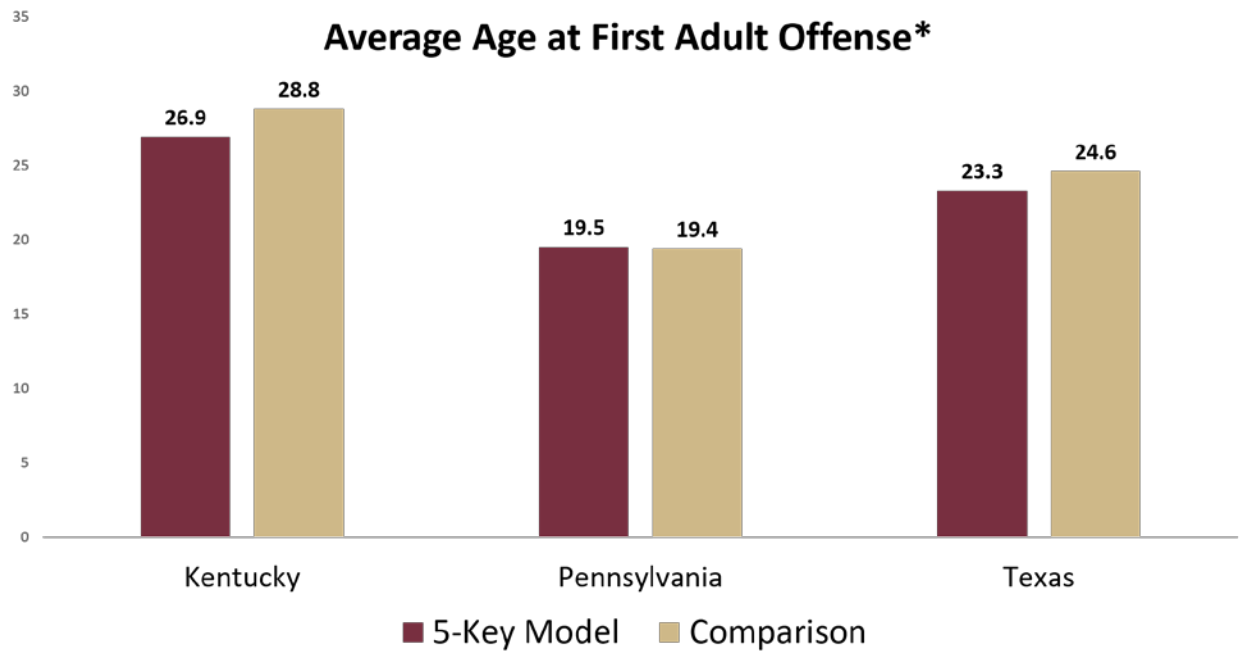
The overwhelming majority of our participants identify as Heterosexual, with approximately 4% identifying as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual.



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.

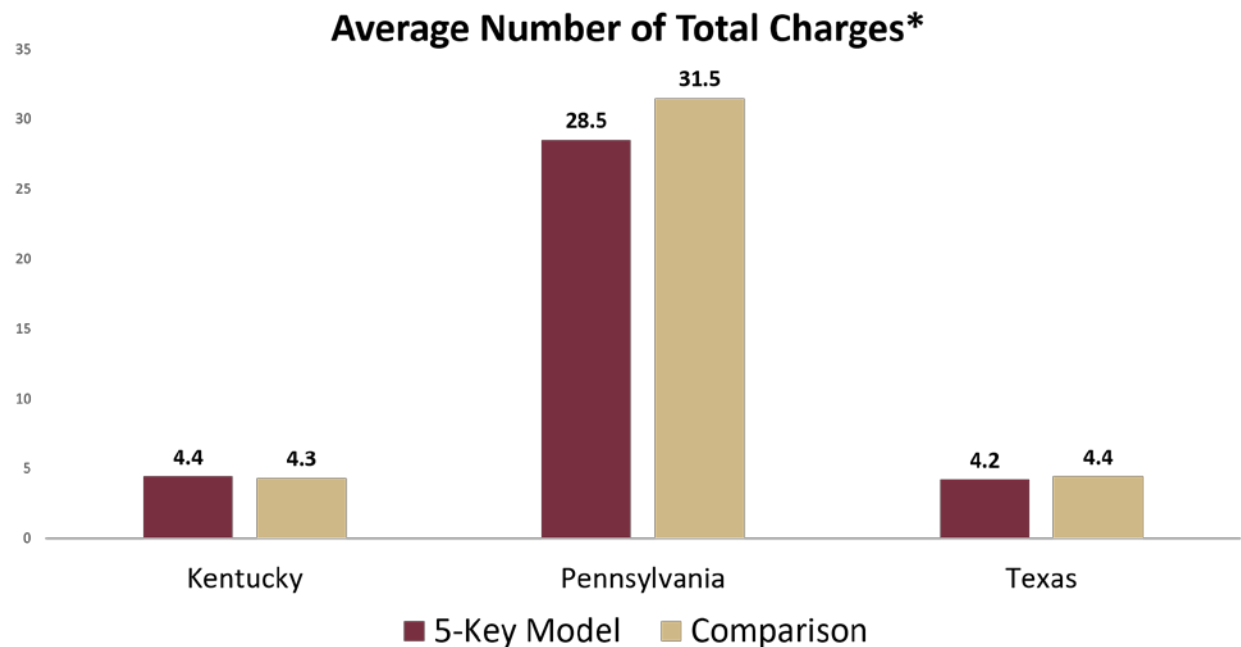


Participants' average age when they were first charged with an adult criminal offense varied between states. Participants in Pennsylvania were, on average, the youngest; those in Kentucky were the oldest.



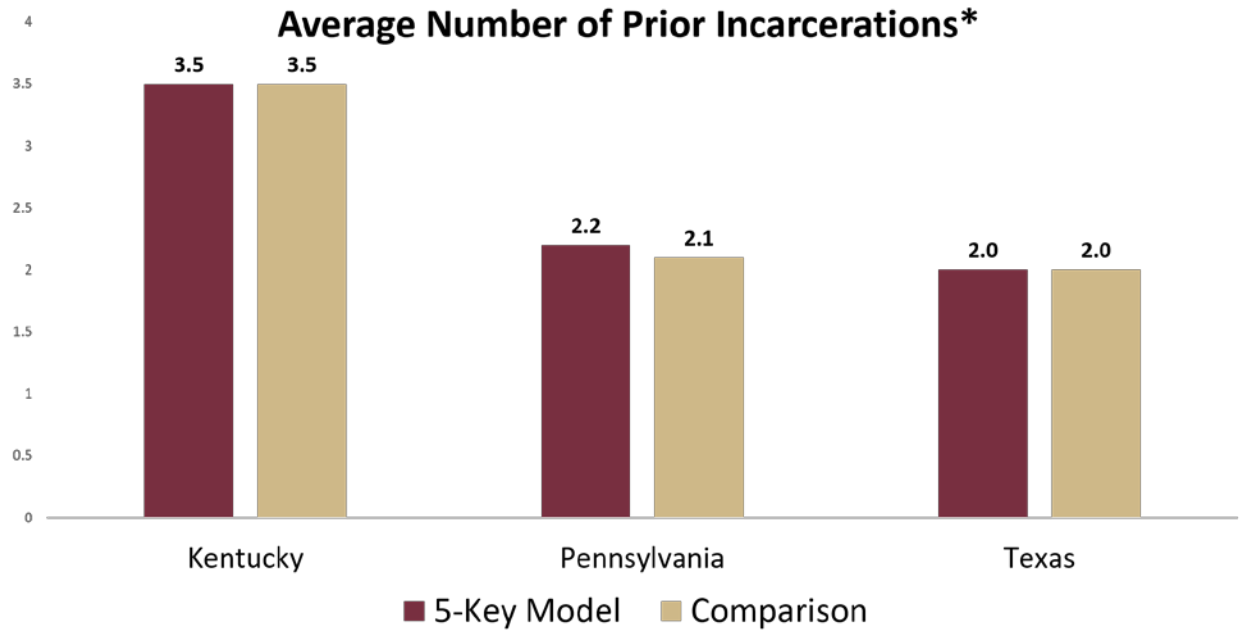
*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

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.



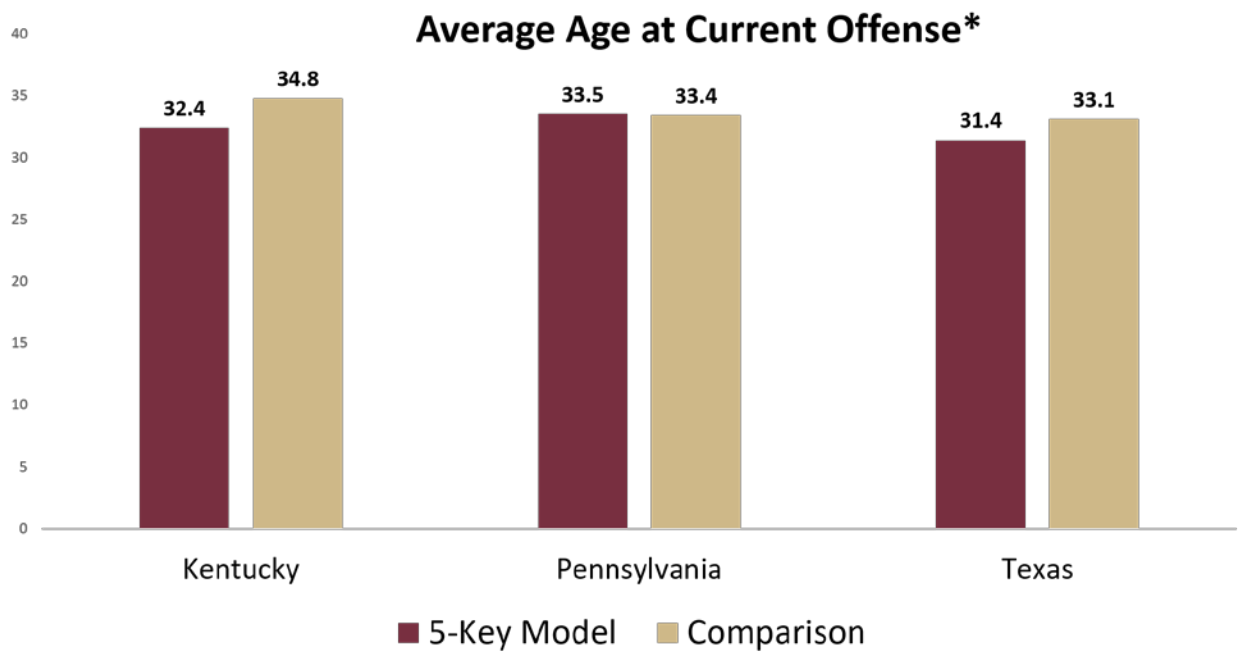
*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

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.

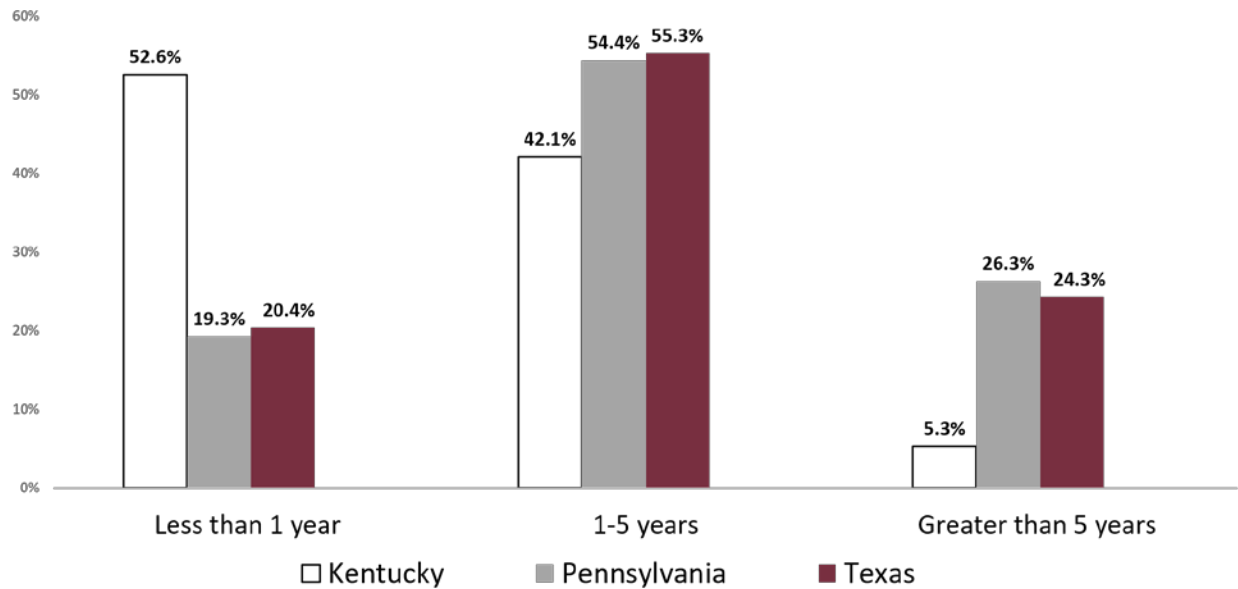


*Data were not yet available from Florida at the time of this report

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

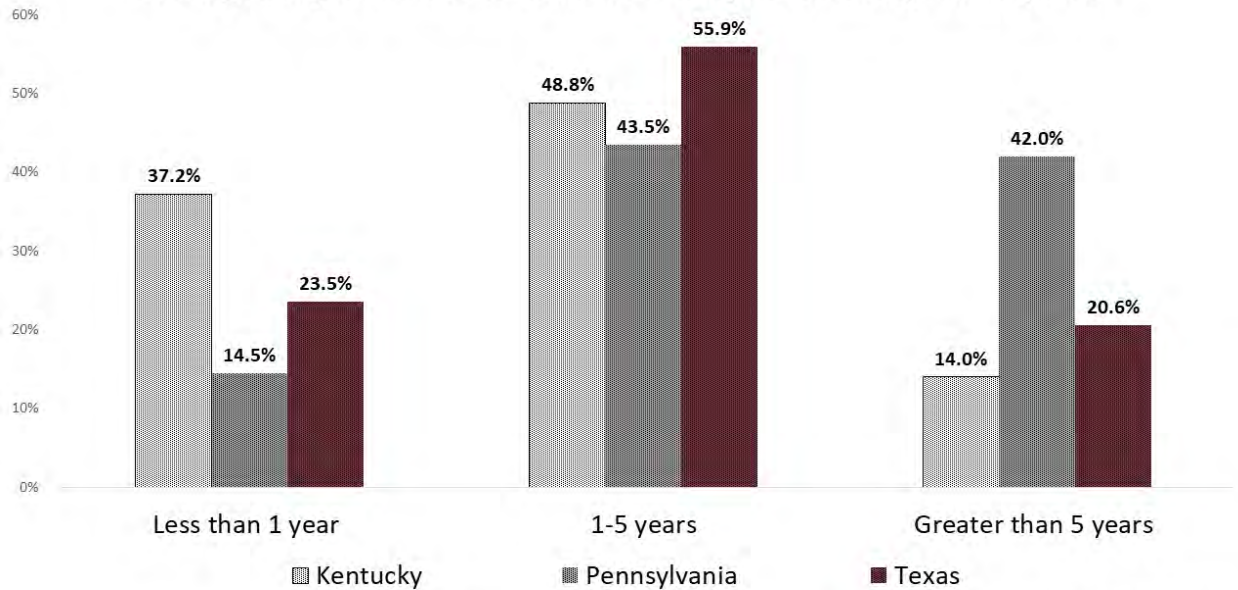
Our participants were most commonly serving a sentence longer than one year but shorter than five years, although variation by state exists.

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

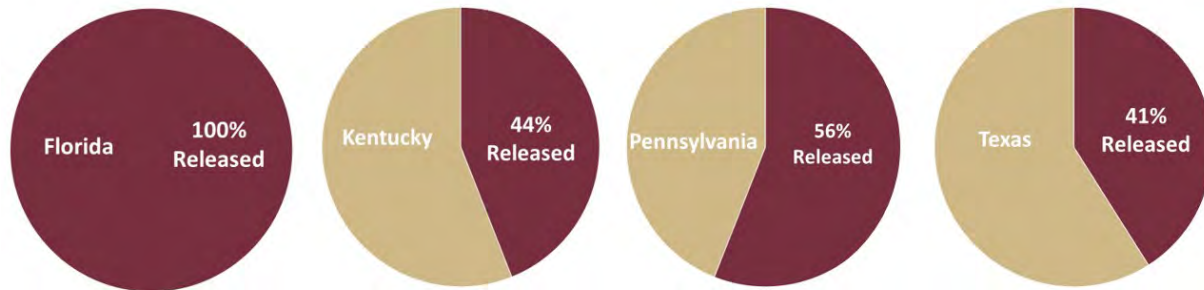
In the first report we focused on, and learned a lot about, the experiences of participants who had been randomly assigned to the 5-Key Model intervention. In this second quarterly report, we want to learn more about reentry as it currently exists – in the absence of the 5-Key Model intervention.

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.