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Reentry in Kentucky

Progress, Gaps, and Recommendations for the Road Ahead

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Reentry in Kentucky: Progress, Gaps, and Recommendations for the Road Ahead

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Executive Summary

For nearly two decades, Kentucky's policymakers have asked their criminal justice system to do more than punish people who have criminal convictions. State leaders, corrections professionals, business owners, community partners and the public have carefully reshaped the expectations of "corrections" to include preparing people for safe, successful transitions to the community and preventing future justice system involvement.

This approach to public safety earned Kentucky national recognition as an early adopter of smart, research-driven corrections strategies.[1] Yet, being at the "forefront" of evidence-based justice reform in the 2000s and early 2010s still meant catching up to the realities created by an era of mass incarceration: high volumes of people returning to communities with limited preparation or reintegration support.

Like most states, Kentucky's corrections system was not originally designed to prepare tens of thousands of people to reenter the workforce, support their families, and contribute to their communities. Efforts to update laws, restructure state agencies, and invest in treatment and programming have been necessary to guide the system toward a recidivism-reduction trajectory. In 2026, Kentucky's reentry landscape is unrecognizable compared to what it was in the 2000s. However, the state continues to play catch-up in many key areas that impact how people leaving prison find stability and success.

To reinforce and guide reentry improvements in Kentucky, this paper highlights reentry as a public safety strategy, outlines the governance of reentry services in the state, and offers recommendations based on the following findings about how reentry is functioning:

1. Structural features of Kentucky's reentry system complicate statewide coordination of reentry services.
2. Kentucky has many codified reporting requirements, but some of the reentry-related metrics are inconsistently available or difficult for the public to locate.
3. A missing feedback loop between DOC and community organizations limits Kentucky's abilities to address reentry barriers and emerging needs.
4. Information gaps hinder the ability to identify, diagnose, and resolve barriers to obtaining identification cards for people leaving custody.
5. People continue to be incarcerated or remain incarcerated for violations that do not involve new criminal conduct.
6. Standard supervision conditions restrict critical peer support for reentry success.
7. Trauma stemming from incarceration in Kentucky requires further evaluation to better support returning citizens.
8. Reentry services have expanded in prisons but remain limited in jails.

The next stage of reform in Kentucky must focus on addressing persistent barriers that people face during reentry, while also getting ahead of emerging challenges. For a state that has spent years developing substantial policy infrastructure, Kentuckians deserve to know if their system operates in alignment with its structure, and most importantly, supports the needs of the people it's intended to serve.



Figure 1. Reentry in Kentucky at a Glance

Sources: Kentucky Department of Corrections, 2025 Annual Report; EBP Annual Report FY25; Recidivism Trend Report.

Project Approach: This paper discusses reentry at the point where people serving sentences in state-operated prisons are preparing for release to the community. This stage aligns with Intercept 4 of the Sequential Intercept Model (SIM), which many states have used to map how people move through criminal justice systems.[2] Although reentry can occur after any interaction with the system, narrowing the focus to release from incarceration allows for more focused analyses and recommendations.

The scope of this effort was further limited to reentry in the context of state-operated correctional facilities and did not include evaluations of local jails. Jails play a critical role in Kentucky's reentry ecosystem, as a significant portion of state-sentenced individuals are housed in local facilities. This effort touched on some general jail-related reentry needs; however, developing more specific recommendations in this area would require a comprehensive assessment of jails and local reentry practices and policies across the state, which was outside the parameters of this project.

The analysis that follows draws on a review of Kentucky statutes, administrative regulations, annual state agency reports, legislative history, and an array of policy papers and academic literature on reentry. Additional qualitative insights were gathered through interviews with stakeholders involved in reentry, a focus group meeting with individuals who were previously incarcerated in Kentucky prisons, and a tour of a DOC adult correctional facility. In total, 13 meetings were held with more than 20 participants, including cabinet officials, community-

based organizations, correctional professionals, business leaders, and people with lived experience in the justice system. Approximately half of these meetings took place in person during July of 2026, and the other half happened virtually and over the phone from June–August 2026.

About the Author: Celeste Gander is a criminal justice policy consultant with experience researching and writing about reentry initiatives across the United States. Previously, she served as a Senior Policy Specialist at the Crime and Justice Institute, where she provided technical assistance to support justice system improvement efforts in states including North Dakota, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Louisiana. Her work has included drafting statewide policy recommendations, facilitating state task force initiatives, and convening roundtables with criminal justice practitioners and community partners. Celeste is currently pursuing her J.D. at Suffolk University Law School and holds a B.A. in Human Rights Studies from Trinity College.

Reentry as a Public Safety Strategy – National Context

The concept of prison reentry as a public safety strategy gained national traction in the early 2000s, following a multi-decade period of strict sentencing policies and limited release mechanisms that contributed to rising incarceration rates, expanding prison populations, and substantial correctional costs.[i] As more people completed prison sentences and returned home, policymakers, researchers and the public began to recognize the limitations of relying on confinement to meet public safety goals. Attention shifted toward studying reintegration and understanding its impacts on public safety over time.[3]

As a strategy, reentry required a fundamentally different approach than the prior era of criminal justice policy. Instead of centering punishment, confinement, and time served in prison, reentry places the individual at the core of the system and considers the range of factors, services, and systems at play in the reintegration process. Focusing on the individual prompted research on how factors like healthcare, housing, employment, and family connection impact reentry success,[4] and expanded the conversation of "safety" beyond the walls of corrections institutions.

Federal policy reinforced reentry as a promising public safety strategy. In 2008, Congress incentivized reentry improvements by authorizing $165 million in federal grants for state and local governments and nonprofits for the purpose of reducing recidivism, increasing public safety, and reducing corrections costs.[5] These Second Chance Act funds helped implement reentry programs and services in communities across the country related to workforce development, education, housing, family support, and more for the purpose of improving the transition from prison to the community.[6]

National momentum around reentry likely paved an easier path forward for reentry reform in Kentucky, but the state was already looking inward at justice improvements. Before federal resources were available during the Second Chance era, Kentuckians were examining their corrections system, investing in efforts to identify reintegration barriers and propose solutions, and considering modernizations to their public safety approach.

[i] The "tough on crime" era is often characterized as the period from 1970-1990s where mandatory minimum sentences, "truth-in-sentencing" models, sentencing enhancements known as "three strikes" laws, and restrictions on parole release were popularized as techniques to respond to or control crime in the United States.



Figure 2. Why Reentry Matters

Sources: CSG Justice Center, 50 States, 1 Goal (2024); Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2022; KRS 196.111; KRS 439.3103.

Kentucky's Evolution Toward a Reentry-Centered Justice System

Kentucky's shift towards reentry was shaped by the consequences of the mass-incarceration era. Kentucky's prison population growth in the 2000s[ii] outpaced the rest of the nation, and state leaders faced mounting pressure to reassess the effectiveness and sustainability of the corrections system.[7] Rising prison populations, increasing corrections costs, and growing numbers of individuals returning to the community made clear that a strategy focused solely on incarceration could not meet Kentucky's public safety needs. Reentry and reintegration emerged as necessary components of a broader effort to improve outcomes and reduce recidivism.

Kentucky began examining reentry challenges earlier than many states. As the Second Chance Act was being enacted in 2008, the General Assembly's research staff was completing a statewide review of reintegration processes for people with felony convictions, assessing the barriers they faced when leaving prison, and considering improvements to in-prison programming and correctional data collection and reporting.[8] In the years that followed, state correctional leaders were exploring a new "reentry philosophy,"[9] and business-sector advocates were calling attention to the state's "skyrocketing" corrections costs at the expense of other critical investments.[10]

Appetite for justice reform was growing and laid the groundwork for the 2011 Public Safety and Offender Accountability Act (HB 463), which was regarded at the time as the most significant criminal justice reform effort in Kentucky in more than three decades.[11] HB 463 is

[ii] Kentucky's prison population rose 45% over the decade ending in 2009, compared to 13% growth for all states. Pew Center on the States, "Kentucky Reforms Cut Recidivism" (2011).

often associated with sentencing reforms; however, the legislation also established a foundation for reentry-focused policy by expanding the use of risk and needs assessments across the system, defining and encouraging evidence-based programming in prison, and promoting information tracking and reporting to help the state understand the effectiveness of programming on recidivism reduction.[12]

In the decade following HB 463, Kentucky advanced multiple reentry-related policies aimed at reducing barriers in the community and standardizing in-prison programming. Successful legislation updated expungement processes,[13] and reduced certain criminal legal financial obligations.[14] The increased focus on reentry preparation inside prison sparked the creation of the Reentry Services Division to oversee and enhance reentry coordination for people in state custody (including those on probation and parole),[15] and legislative efforts helped clarify reentry program definitions (i.e., "life skills programs" and "promising practices"), and develop completion credits to incentivize participation in programs boosting reentry success.[16]

Since 2021, at least ten reentry-related policy initiatives have either passed the General Assembly or advanced through executive order. These include requirements ranging from DOC providing specific forms of documentation at the time of release[17] to supporting individuals with resume development.[18] Additional legislation expanded reentry-related reporting requirements,[19] supported workforce development by enabling people to complete barber licensure tests in prison,[20] and established processes for individuals to determine upfront if their convictions will disqualify them from an occupation.[21] Other efforts addressed the impacts incarceration has on families and promoted responses to crime that preserve family stability,[22] and invested in the development of a reentry campus to support education and skill development for people in DOC custody.[23]

Executive branch actions complemented legislative reforms by formalizing councils and creating structures to promote collaboration among the many partners involved in reentry work. Gov. Andy Beshear signed legislation creating the Advisory Council for Recovery Ready Communities,[24] formed the Council of Second Chance Employers,[25] and established the Office of Reentry Services within the Governor's Office to help coordinate reentry services across state agencies.[26]

As Kentucky has adjusted its public safety focus over time, many pressure points that stressed its justice system twenty years ago have eased, but system-level data still point to numerous opportunities for improvement.

Criminal Justice System Trends Contextualizing Reentry

Kentucky's reentry policy developments have unfolded alongside measurable shifts in the size and composition of its justice system. This section reviews recent trends in three areas that shape reentry need and success: the population under correctional control; recidivism; and post-release housing, employment, and education outcomes. Together, these indicators show where Kentucky has made progress and where gaps remain.

Population under Correctional Control

The population under Kentucky's correctional control has decreased over time. Although it has fluctuated over the past decade, the state custody population is lower overall in 2025 compared to 2016. In 2025, the average daily population (ADP) of people in state custody, including those held in county jails, was about 19,100, which is about 16% lower than it was in 2016, and 21% lower than when it peaked in 2018.[iii] Community supervision populations have also declined. In 2025, the active supervision population fell for the second consecutive year, with about 46,400 people on active supervision. Of that group, over three quarters (79%) were on probation, about 21% were on parole, and an additional 39 were enrolled in a medical release program for pregnant women with addiction.[27] The active supervision population in 2025 was about 8% lower than when it reached its peak in 2019.[28] In 2025, county jails housed an average of about 19,900 people per month, roughly 4,900 fewer than the 2019 average of 24,820.[29] Just over one-third (about 36%) of the average jail population was serving state sentences. This has decreased over the past decade – in 2016, about half (49%) of the jail population was serving state sentences.[30]

Despite these declines, the number of people under correctional control in Kentucky remains high. In 2026, Kentucky ranked 10th in the nation for "mass punishment rate," a measure combining incarceration and community supervision rates in each state.[31] The level of correctional control is an important consideration in the discussion of reentry as people under supervision or nearing release from detention require resources, preparation, and support to prevent future returns to custody.

[iii] According to DOC's EBP annual reports, the DOC ADP was 19,098 in 2025, 24,235 in 2018, and 22,658 in 2016.

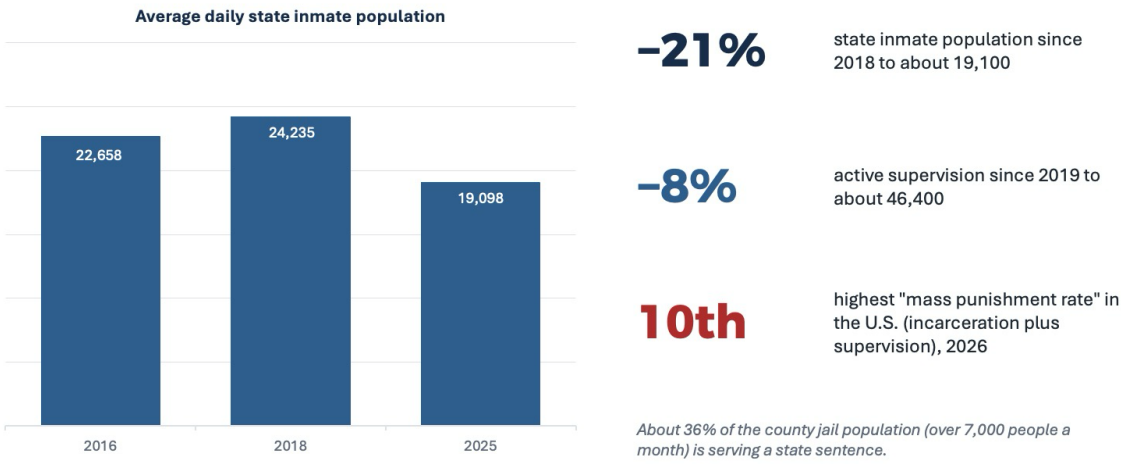


Figure 3. Kentucky's Correctional Population

Sources: Kentucky Department of Corrections, EBP Annual Reports (FY16, FY18, FY25) and 2025 Annual Report; Prison Policy Initiative, Punishment Beyond Prisons 2026.

Recidivism

Kentucky's 24-month recidivism rate in 2025 was approximately 30%, meaning that 70% of people released from state custody in 2023 did not return to custody within two years of release.[32] This represents a substantial improvement compared to the peak in 2017, when about 45% of people released in 2015 returned to custody within two years.[33] Notably, as total recidivism has fallen, the share of recidivism driven by technical violations has also decreased. Technical violations accounted for roughly 77% of total recidivism for the cohort released in 2015,[iv34] compared to about 60% for individuals released in 2023.[v] Overall, recidivism has trended down over the past decade and is considerably lower in recent years compared to its peak in 2017. But people in Kentucky continue to be incarcerated for conduct that does not involve new criminal behavior, which remains a challenge for Kentucky's reentry system to address.

[iv] DOC reports that the total 2-year recidivism for people released in 2015 was 44.56%. Of that, 10.08% was due to new commitment, while 34.48% was due to technical violations.

[v] The total 2-year recidivism for people released in 2023 was 30.32%, with 12.07% due to new commitments and 18.25% due to technical violations.

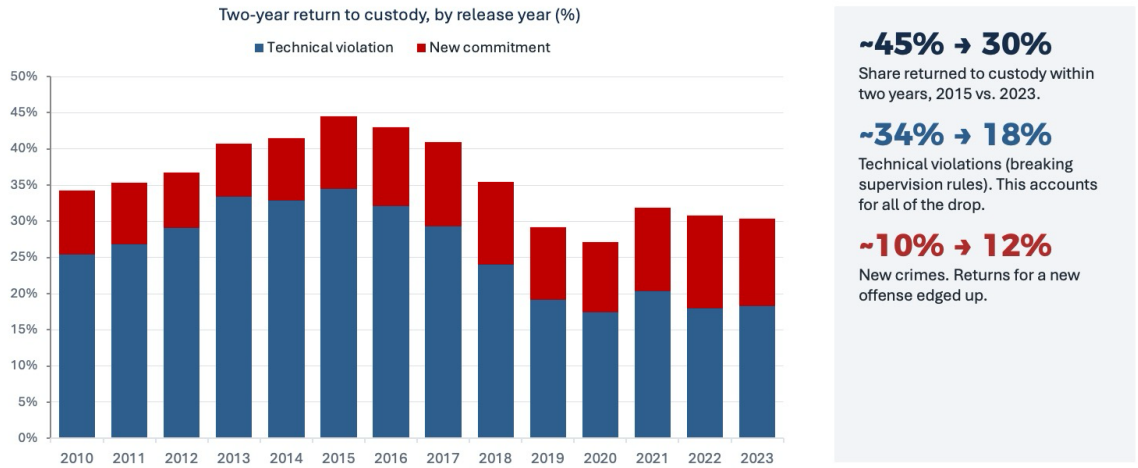


Figure 4. Two-Year Return to Custody by Release Year, 2010–2023

Source: Kentucky Department of Corrections, Recidivism Trend Report.

Housing, Employment, Education

Unlike other reports from DOC that are available through 2025, statewide metrics on housing, employment, and education outcomes for people released from incarceration are only published online for 2023.[35] According to the 2023 report, 72% of the people on post-release supervision maintained the same residence for at least six months.[36]

Across all post-release supervision types included in the report, about 17% were employed or in school within 30 days of the start of their supervision, another 33% between 30 days and six months, and another 8% between six months and one year (meaning roughly 57% were employed or in school within a year). About 36% were unemployed.[37] These metrics are valuable to track, and it's likely that the data on these points are being collected by the state, but the absence of more recent public information limits the ability to assess whether post-release housing, employment, and education outcomes are improving over time. These trends underscore the importance of evaluating not only outcomes, but the infrastructure that produces them.

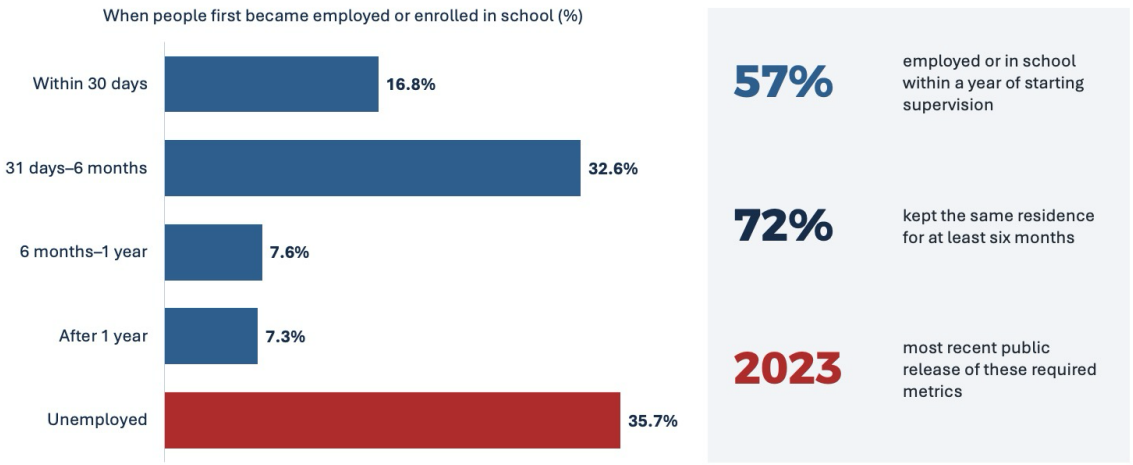


Figure 5. Employment and Housing After Release

Source: Kentucky Department of Corrections, 2023 KRS 196.031 Annual Report (data as of June 2023).

Reentry Governance in Kentucky

Kentucky's reentry governance rests on a strong statutory foundation and substantial operational development within the Department of Corrections (DOC), but responsibility is distributed across multiple agencies and partners, producing fragmentation and uneven coordination. The result is a system rich with activity but challenging to navigate for the people who rely on it.

Justice and Public Safety Cabinet

At the highest level, the Justice and Public Safety Cabinet ("the Justice Cabinet") provides oversight of the justice system, monitoring five departments including the Kentucky State Police, DOC, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Department of Criminal Justice Training, and the Department of Public Advocacy.[38] Statute assigns the Justice Cabinet's Office of the Secretary the responsibility for advising the direction of "long-range planning regarding all elements of the criminal justice system," disseminating information on justice system trends, and offering technical assistance to criminal justice agencies.[39]

The Justice Cabinet is also required to report key justice system metrics annually to the Governor, the Legislative Research Commission, and the Kentucky State Corrections Commission. These reports include information relevant to reentry, such as the percentage of people on supervision who obtain employment, education, or housing, as well as recidivism metrics disaggregated by participation in reentry programs.[40] Although some of the Justice Cabinet's duties intersect with reentry, its role is primarily supervisory. Direct statutory responsibility for reentry lies within DOC.

Department of Corrections

State law assigns DOC the objective to "maintain public safety and hold offenders accountable while reducing recidivism and criminal behavior and improving outcomes for offenders."[41] Because individuals under state custody may be housed in jails or prisons or supervised in the community, this responsibility extends to DOC's 14 adult facilities, 55 probation and parole field offices in the state,[42] and 77 county and regional jails.[vi] As previously noted, the ADP of people in state custody was over 19,000 in FY 25, including an average of over 7,000 people serving state sentences in county jails each month, and more than 46,000 people were on active supervision,[43] illustrating the scale of reentry preparation needed for people serving state sentences.

Lawmakers have codified many requirements for DOC to follow when it comes to reentry. These include developing and implementing policies to reduce recidivism,[44] studying the causes of criminal behaviors in its population,[45] preparing people in custody for reintegration by issuing documentation at release (i.e., criminal and institutional history, program completions, education, and work records),[46] encouraging employment as part of rehabilitation,[47] assisting with résumé development,[48] and supporting eligible individuals with the civil rights restoration process.[49]

DOC must also evaluate the effectiveness of its own programs,[50] eliminate programs that do not reduce recidivism[vii] and report to the state on evidence-based practices and recidivism-reduction efforts.[51] Together, these requirements position DOC as both a provider of reentry preparation and a steward of program quality and accountability, record accuracy, and system transparency.[52]

Reentry Services within DOC

The Division of Reentry Services serves as DOC's operational arm for reentry.[viii] Created in 2018 with a very small team, the Division has since expanded to more than 100 employees working in prisons, jails, and the community.[53] Its mission is to "improve involvement within the criminal justice system by creating individualized reentry plans, empowering individuals

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[vi] Kentucky has 77 jails statewide, but only 74 of them appear in DOC's jail population reporting. People serving state prison sentences may be housed in one of the state's four regional jails or in any of the 70 "full-service" jails that meet DOC's operational standards. The remaining three facilities are classified as "life safety jails," which are not authorized to house state inmates and therefore are excluded from DOC's jail population reports.

[vii] KRS 196.111 required DOC to eliminate supervision policies, procedures, programs, and practices that did not reduce recidivism as intended by fiscal year 2016-2017.

[viii] The Division of Reentry Services is housed within the Office of Community Services and Facilities, one of the five organizational units that make up DOC. Other units include the Division of Compliance, Division of Public Affairs, Office of Adult Institutions, and the Office of Support Services. See KRS § 196.026.

with resources, support and programming, to promote successful reintegration into the community."[54]

The Division manages all reentry programs offered in state prisons.[ix] DOC policy requires programs to undergo a screening process to ensure programs are evidence-based and designed to reduce recidivism, and the agency audits its own facilities to monitor fidelity and terminate ineffective programs.[55x] In FY 25, DOC offered 77 programs and courses, 40 of which were evidence-based.[56] In its FY 25 Evidence-Based Practices report, DOC documented 38,719 total program completions[57] – more than five times the number recorded in 2017.[58] More than 85% of those program completions were evidence-based programs. In total, DOC estimates spending approximately $31.5 million on evidence-based programming, most of it ($28.1 million) coming from the state's general fund.[59]

Beyond program facilitation, the Division oversees the reentry services offered in the 18 months leading up to release. These include meeting with individuals at the reentry centers in every state prison, completing reentry checklists,[xi] offering workshop topics that are helpful for release preparation (e.g., community supervision, employment, life skills, etc.) and hosting expungement sessions and job fairs.[60] The Division also conducts reentry simulations for DOC staff and community organizations to increase awareness of the experiences people have when returning to the community.[61]

Although DOC has regulatory oversight of local jails that house state-sentenced individuals,[62] the Division does not have reentry staff in most local facilities and therefore cannot operate reentry services or offer programs to all individuals serving state sentences.[63]

Despite DOC's extensive statutory authority and operational infrastructure, many critical elements of reentry fall outside its control. This makes reentry governance inherently cross-system and requires coordination across many state entities.

[ix] In DOC Policy (CPP 30.3), "reentry programming" is defined as "any program overseen by the Department of Corrections Division of Reentry Services for the express purpose of attempting to reduce recidivism by targeting criminogenic needs as identified through the administration of an approved risk and needs assessment." This means that to be considered a "program," it must be overseen by DOC. See: Kentucky DOC Policy CPP 30.3 (effective Feb. 4, 2025).

[x] After litigation over inconsistent programming and unequal good-time accruals, DOC centralized and standardized programming statewide, discontinuing many partner-run programs but improving quality control.

[xi] DOC's Reentry Checklist allows individuals to document various pre-release needs (i.e. home placement, identification card, education, clothing, etc.) and work with a DOC Division of Reentry Services staff member to identify which needs can be met in the months leading up to release and which will require support in the community. Information from the checklists is digitized and shared with DOC staff who are stationed in the community.

Reentry Outside of the Justice Cabinet

Several other state agencies outside of the Justice Cabinet play essential roles in reentry and reintegration.

- Transportation Cabinet: Issues operator's licenses and personal identification cards, making it a critical partner for DOC in ensuring people have documentation prior to release.
- Cabinet for Health and Family Services: Manages Medicaid coverage activation for people in DOC custody, and oversees behavioral health and substance use treatment programs.
- Education & Labor Cabinet (ELC): The Reentry and Employment Services (RES) branch focuses on workforce development for people on reentry pathways, including those in pretrial settings, jail, and post-release.[64]
- Administrative Office of the Courts: Plays a critical role in the expungement process for people who have served their time and are eligible to have convictions removed from their records to support their hiring, renting, and other reentry endeavors.

To coordinate the growing volume of reentry-related efforts at the state level, the Beshear Administration established the Office of Reentry Services in 2025, to "help leverage, maximize, concentrate, and better coordinate services and resources" in Kentucky.[65] This Office is a melding of reentry across government entities – pulling leaders from the Justice Cabinet and the ELC to oversee the coordination of reentry-related services offered across the Justice Cabinet, the ELC, the Personnel Cabinet, the Cabinet for Economic Development, the Department of Corrections, and the Department of Medicaid Services. Although not grounded in statute and staffed by only two employees, the Office represents an administrative effort to fill a gap in statewide coordination of reentry services.[xii]

Report Findings and Recommendations for the Road Ahead

Kentucky's governance structure reflects both progress and growing pains. Reentry has expanded, but the system responsible for coordinating it has not yet fully matured, and this impacts the experience of reentry for the people moving from incarceration to community. When coordination is uneven, even strong policy reforms or individual agency efforts struggle to resolve persistent challenges.

[xii] At the time that information was collected for this paper, public record of this Office and its efforts were limited to the Executive order press release and power point presentation titled "Department of Corrections Reentry Services" that was authored in part by the Team Kentucky Office of Reentry Services but not posted on any state website.

Finding 1: Structural features of Kentucky's reentry system complicate statewide coordination of reentry services. Housing the operational arm of reentry within DOC limits its ability to drive system-wide strategy and constrains coordination with the many agencies whose participation is essential for successful reentry. Other states have taken a different approach, embedding reentry and rehabilitation at the top level of the agency rather than within a division. North Dakota's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation not only signals this priority in its name but also sets agency values such as "we firmly believe in second chances and that people can change," helping to shape a culture where reentry is a department-wide philosophy.[66]

Outside of DOC, Kentucky has taken a meaningful step to enhance reentry coordination through the creation of the Office of Reentry Services. As established, however, this office is leanly staffed and has a lot of system ground to cover. Most individuals interviewed for this research effort described persistent silos among state agencies involved in reentry and noted that cross-agency collaboration and relationship-building remain significant opportunities for improvement. Strengthening Kentucky's reentry governance model, both within DOC and across the Justice Cabinet, is essential to improving coordination, accountability, and system performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 **Define reentry as a statutory priority** of the Justice Cabinet.
1.2 **Create a Deputy Commissioner for Reentry Services** within DOC to elevate the critical role reentry programs and strategies should play within Corrections.
1.3 **Codify, operationalize and strengthen the structure of the Governor's Office of Reentry Services**, centralizing information, consolidating resources, and clarifying coordinating authority.

Finding 2: Kentucky has many codified reporting requirements, but some of the reentry-related metrics are inconsistently available or difficult for the public to locate. Despite strong statutory reporting requirements, not all reentry-related reports are easily accessible. For example, information annually required under KRS 196.031 appears to be publicly available only for 2019 and 2023, posted on the General Assembly's website within a "Department of Corrections" folder nested in a "Justice and Public Safety Cabinet" folder.[xiii][67]

[xiii] Both the 2019 and 2023 reports available on the General Assembly website are titled "06 Annual Report" with their corresponding years, however these documents are distinct from the "Annual Reports" published on DOC's website for those respective years ("2019 Annual Report- Final.pub" and "2023 Annual Report").

In contrast, other required annual documents, such as DOC's Annual Reports, KRS 439.3103 Evidence-Based Practices Annual Reports, Recidivism Report, and Cost to Incarcerate documents, are readily accessible on DOC's website.[68]

Also notable, the 2019 and 2023 reports on the General Assembly website do not contain the same metrics. While the 2023 report includes figures related to post-release employment and housing that have been required since the passage of HB 463 in 2011, these metrics are absent from the 2019 report, making it difficult to assess how such trends have changed over time.[69] One possible explanation for inconsistencies in the availability and completeness of reporting is that the requirement under KRS 196.031 is assigned to the Justice and Public Safety Cabinet, whereas other codified annual reporting requirements, such as those established in KRS 439.3103, are expressly assigned to DOC. Collectively, the inconsistencies in availability, completeness, and platform hinder transparency and make it difficult for the public to understand how the justice system is functioning and whether statutory reporting requirements are being met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 **Clarify in statute which agency** within the Justice Cabinet is responsible for producing the KRS 196.031 report.
2.2 **Publish previous years of KRS 196.031 reports** to restore continuity.
2.3 **Post all reentry-related reports** on the State Corrections Commission's website in accordance with all statutory deadlines.

Finding 3: A missing feedback loop between DOC and community organizations limits Kentucky's abilities to address reentry barriers and emerging needs. In prison, Reentry Checklists are used not only to help individuals in custody get organized for their release, but they are also a tool to inform DOC staff who work in the community (e.g., probation and parole officers, reentry coordinators, etc.) about the needs of the person who will be entering their district. However, there is no parallel process or systematic way for letting community partners know about the persisting needs and where communities may be able to meet those needs. Interviews conducted for this paper indicate disconnects between the services or opportunities pitched by community partners and the gaps that DOC staff are trying to fill. For example, one interview participant noted receiving calls from community partners offering housing options with eligibility restrictions that make them unusable for the population DOC is trying to house. Without updated information about the needs and gaps to fill inside of prisons, Kentucky's community partners are less prepared to provide support. Focus group participants described opportunities to close communication gaps in the reentry process by

encouraging DOC to seek input from formerly incarcerated people about reentry supports that are effective and improving "warm hand-offs" from DOC staff to community partners, for example by aiding in scheduling follow-up meetings in the community prior to release from prison.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 **Provide regular DOC updates to community partners** on persistent gaps (e.g., sex offender housing) and emerging gaps and needs. Consider using reentry checklist data (or other internal DOC data) to inform the information shared with community partners or presenting this information at reentry simulations that are already hosted by DOC for community partners.

3.2 **Convene an annual statewide reentry conference** to promote cross-agency communication, information-sharing, and collaboration opportunities with state agencies and community partners involved in reentry services.

3.3 **Establish warm hand-off practices** in each probation and parole office.

3.4 **Solicit feedback from formerly incarcerated individuals** about the types of programs, workshops, and other resources in prison that are most helpful to prepare for the transition back to the community.

Finding 4: Information gaps hinder the ability to identify, diagnose, and resolve barriers to obtaining identification cards for people leaving custody. In 2025, DOC's Division of Reentry Services processed 2,555 state ID applications across all 14 prisons and 19 county jails.[70] Although this information is not included in annual reports, DOC's Reentry Division internally tracks ID requests *submitted* by staff when individuals report needing an ID and seek assistance. Interviews with system practitioners suggest that the number of IDs processed is roughly comparable to the number of requests DOC receives.[xiv] Practitioners noted that DOC provides every person released from prison with a document called an "Offender ID letter," which includes information that the individual needs to obtain an ID once released. While the number of IDs processed in 2025 was higher than in any previous year, staff anticipate new challenges due to recent changes in the Transportation Cabinet's software used to process IDs.

[xiv] People in custody self-report their need for identification, which prompts DOC staff to submit requests for identification cards to the Transportation Cabinet. People are not required to leave prison with identification cards, and some cannot obtain cards due to circumstances outside of DOC control (i.e. if they are not a resident of Kentucky).

Despite DOC's efforts, several interview participants not associated with DOC expressed concern that too many individuals in 2026 are still leaving custody, especially jails, without identification. One contributing factor may be that DOC does not oversee ID processing in most county jails. Ultimately, confusion about which agencies are responsible for ID access obscures where gaps truly lie. Without clear data distinguishing IDs requested from IDs processed, lawmakers lack the information needed to accurately diagnose the problem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 **Establish a statutory waiver option** allowing the Transportation Cabinet to process IDs for incarcerated individuals whose records were purged from the Transportation Cabinet's new system.

4.2 **Allow ID requests to be submitted earlier** than the current 90-day window before release.

4.3 **Clarify and publicly report ID-related data**, distinguishing between IDs requested and IDs processed, and identifying gaps in jails not served by DOC reentry staff.

Finding 5: People continue to be incarcerated or remain incarcerated for violations that do not involve new criminal conduct. As noted, Kentucky's recidivism has declined over the past decade, but it remains driven by technical violations of supervision. Technical violations accounted for roughly 60% of total recidivism for individuals released in 2023.[xv] While measures have been implemented to create graduated responses to non-criminal violations of supervision conditions, correctional resources are still being used to house people who may not be a risk to public safety. Additionally, system practitioners report that some people who complete their prison sentences remain incarcerated because they cannot secure approved housing. According to interview participants, there are cases where individuals who have completed their sentences but have not yet been released must proceed through formal revocation hearings because they do not have approved housing to release to. Even if this only impacts a few individuals, it can easily create a backlog within DOC for releases and undermine the purpose of reentry preparation.

[xv] The total 2-year recidivism for people released in 2023 was 30.32%, with 12.07% due to new commitments and 18.25% due to technical violations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 **Limit incarceration** as a response to technical violations.
5.2 **Report annually on how many people experience delayed release** due to housing barriers.
5.3 **Consider incentives for housing providers** willing to serve populations that have historically faced high barriers to placement.

Finding 6: Standard supervision conditions restrict critical peer support for reentry success. People on probation or parole in Kentucky must comply with 11 "regular" conditions, in addition to any special conditions ordered by the court or Parole Board.[71] One of the conditions requires supervised individuals to "avoid associating with any convicted felon" without permission granted by a supervising authority.[72] Several interview participants who spent time incarcerated in Kentucky noted that peer support, specifically from formerly incarcerated individuals, was the single most important factor in their successful transition home. Participants described how formerly incarcerated friends and family members picked them up from prison, drove them to supervision meetings, or connected them to other reentry resources. Without advance approval, this type of support is prohibited, and may even lead to a violation or revocation of supervision. Given that most people under correctional control in Kentucky are supervised in the community,[xvi] it is critical that supervision conditions do not inadvertently block critical reentry support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 **Remove the following condition from the "Regular Conditions" list:** "I understand that I shall avoid associating with any convicted felon and shall not visit residents of jails or prisons unless permission is obtained from my officer and institutional or jail authority." If necessary, the Court and Parole Board may order this condition as a special condition.
6.2 **Evaluate the remaining 10 "Regular Conditions"** for opportunities to optimize reentry success and reduce violations of supervision.

Finding 7: Trauma stemming from incarceration in Kentucky requires further evaluation to better support returning citizens. Participants interviewed described experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and "post-incarceration syndrome" (PICS) because of their

[xvi] In 2025, DOC reported over 46,000 people on active supervision. This is more than twice the size of DOC's average daily population in custody in FY 25.

time in custody in Kentucky. Trauma can exacerbate reentry challenges, making it harder to obtain employment and housing and to find stability in the community. Participants emphasized the long-term effects of trauma and acknowledged that healing from trauma needs to be a priority in the same way securing employment after release is. They also reported challenges accessing services specifically tailored to incarceration-related trauma, including difficulty finding mental health professionals who either have lived experience themselves or who are specifically trained to treat patients who have been incarcerated. These gaps underscore the need for further evaluation of trauma stemming from incarceration and stronger support for people returning home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 **Explore how trauma affects individuals in DOC custody** and develop or update institutional practices in response to findings.

Finding 8: Reentry services have expanded in prisons but remain limited in jails. Recommendations made in Kentucky to focus on programming and reintegration improvements in local jails nearly two decades ago remain relevant today. Several stakeholders interviewed during this process expressed that the greatest area of opportunity to enhance reentry is in Kentucky's jails. This effort did not dive deeply into the ecosystems of local jails, and to make intentional recommendations related to this part of the system, more jail-based practitioners need to be included in the evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 **Conduct a comprehensive statewide study of jail-based reentry needs** and consider structural reforms to integrate jails more fully into the reentry system.

Conclusion

The consequences of a swelling corrections system may have pushed Kentucky to embed reentry into the state's public safety strategy, but years of bipartisan work, state agency commitment, and the dedication of local partners and advocates have helped make the state's commitment to reentry deeper than a crisis-management response.

The challenge Kentuckians now face is deciding how to calibrate the system and ensure the structure they have codified, the services they have expanded, and the public safety goals they envision are all aligned.

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