



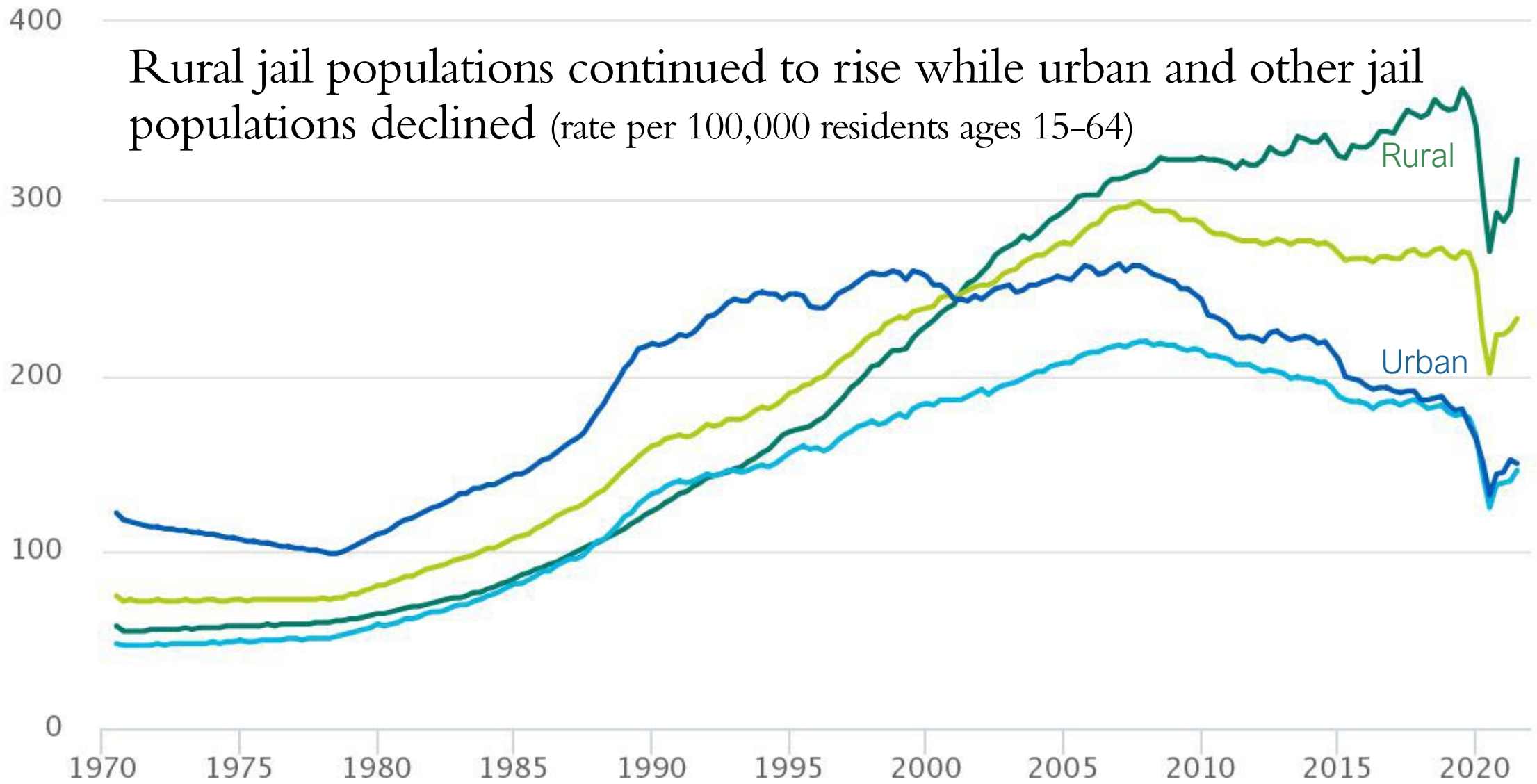
Rethinking Rural Recidivism: System Navigation Problems and the Myth of the Revolving Door

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Rural jail populations continued to rise while urban and other jail populations declined (rate per 100,000 residents ages 15-64)



— Rural counties
— Suburban counties

— Small/midsize metro areas
— Urban counties

Rural Eastern and Central Washington



The “Revolving Door”

“I’m sure most everybody... here would agree that the, the influx of drugs and the change in the inmates’ behavior since had a huge impact on our ability to do our job... It's just a never-ending cycle and a revolving door and it's... they just, they get lost, and keep coming back over and over and over again.”

Paul Lewis, Jail Superintendent, rural Washington State*

*All names are pseudonyms.

System Navigation Problems (SNP): Revolving Doors & Downward Spirals

→ Many initial and subsequent jail stays were due to System Navigation Problems (SNP), that manifested in:

- Missed court dates (failure to appear)
- Failures to comply, Failures to pay fines
- Driving while license suspended

→ Financial and *logistical* struggles criminalized rural poverty and created negative feedback loops

Criminalizing Poverty: Financial and Non-Financial Mechanisms

Criminalization of Poverty and Mass Incarceration

- “Net-widening” (Garland 2001) → “high fines and misdemeanors” (Kohler-Hausmann 2018; Edelman 2017)
 - Legal financial obligations and cash bail system (Harris 2016; Page & Soss 2021)
- “Procedural Hassle” and Non-Financial Burdens of Legal Process (Feeley 1979)
- Maze of obligations within and across courts, bureaucracies (Paik 2021)
 - Opaque and complex legal process without counsel (Huebner & Giuffre 2022)

Spatial Inequalities and Rural Lacks

Rural Disadvantages:

- Lack of support services in criminal-legal systems (Weisheit et al. 1995)
- Lack of legal counsel, pretrial programs, and diversion services (Kang-Brown & Subramanian 2017; Pruitt et al. 2018)
- Lack of affordable housing (Sherman 2023), public transportation (Eason et al. 2017; Henning-Smith et al. 2017), health and mental health services (Snell-Rood et al. 2016; Waity 2019); reliable internet (Townsend et al. 2013; Turner-Lee 2018)

Pretrial Jail Admissions

Quantitative Jail
Booking &
Release Data:
2015 – 2019

37 in-depth phone interviews of those with rural jail experience(s)

Qualitative
Data: Collected
between
July 2019 -
Dec 2021

Uncovering
SNP: Insights
from Multi-
Methods
Research

Uncovering large-scale patterns
and *how* they occurred.

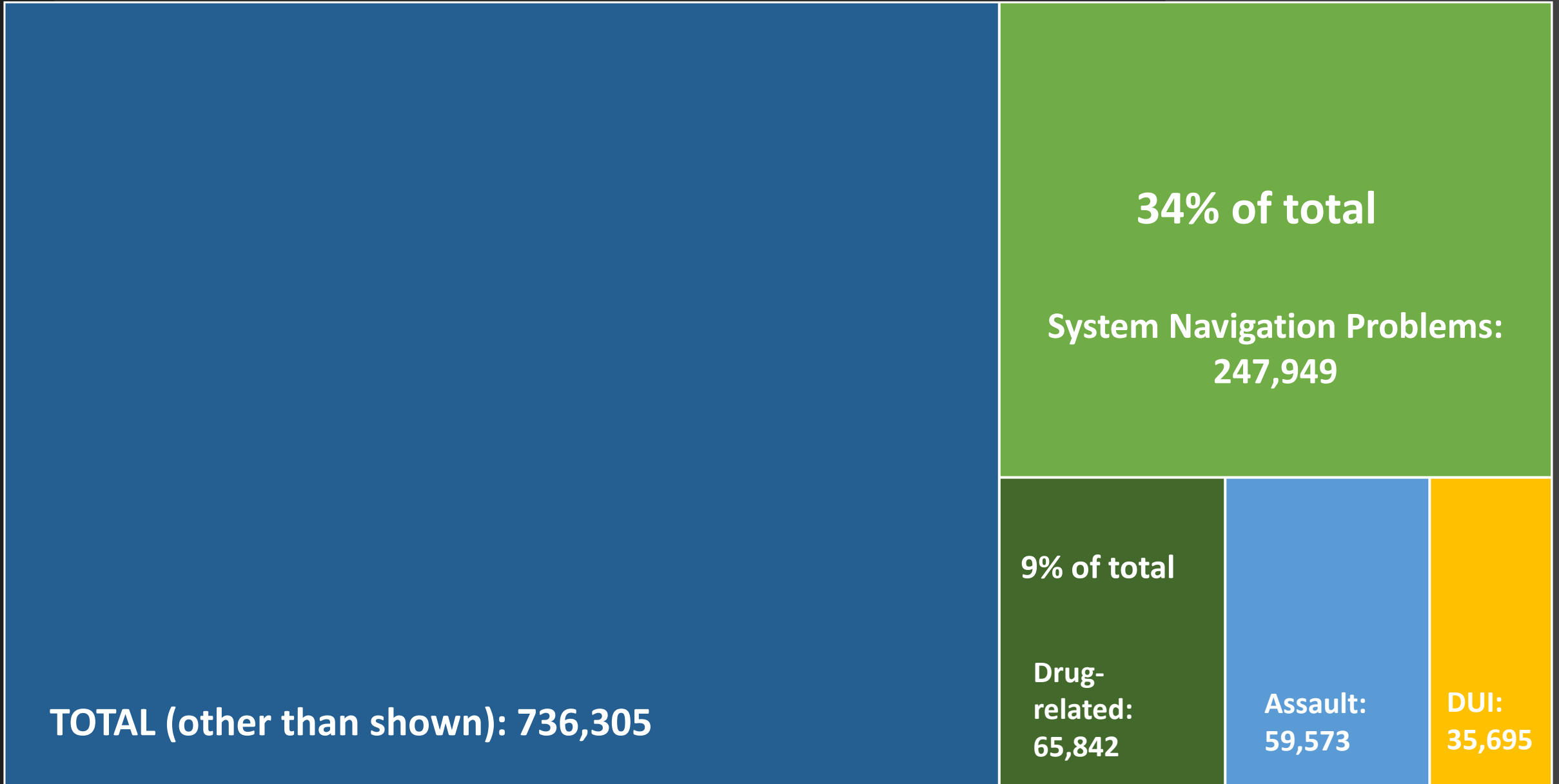
System Navigation Problems (SNPs)

Types of System Navigation Problems	% of SNPs
Court non-appearance (Failure to Appear)	55% (9,164)
Warrant arrest	18% (2,983)
Driving while license suspended (DWLS)	18% (2,983)
Failure to comply (FTC)	7% (1,100)
Other “Failure” charges (e.g., pay, register, obey)	2% (598)

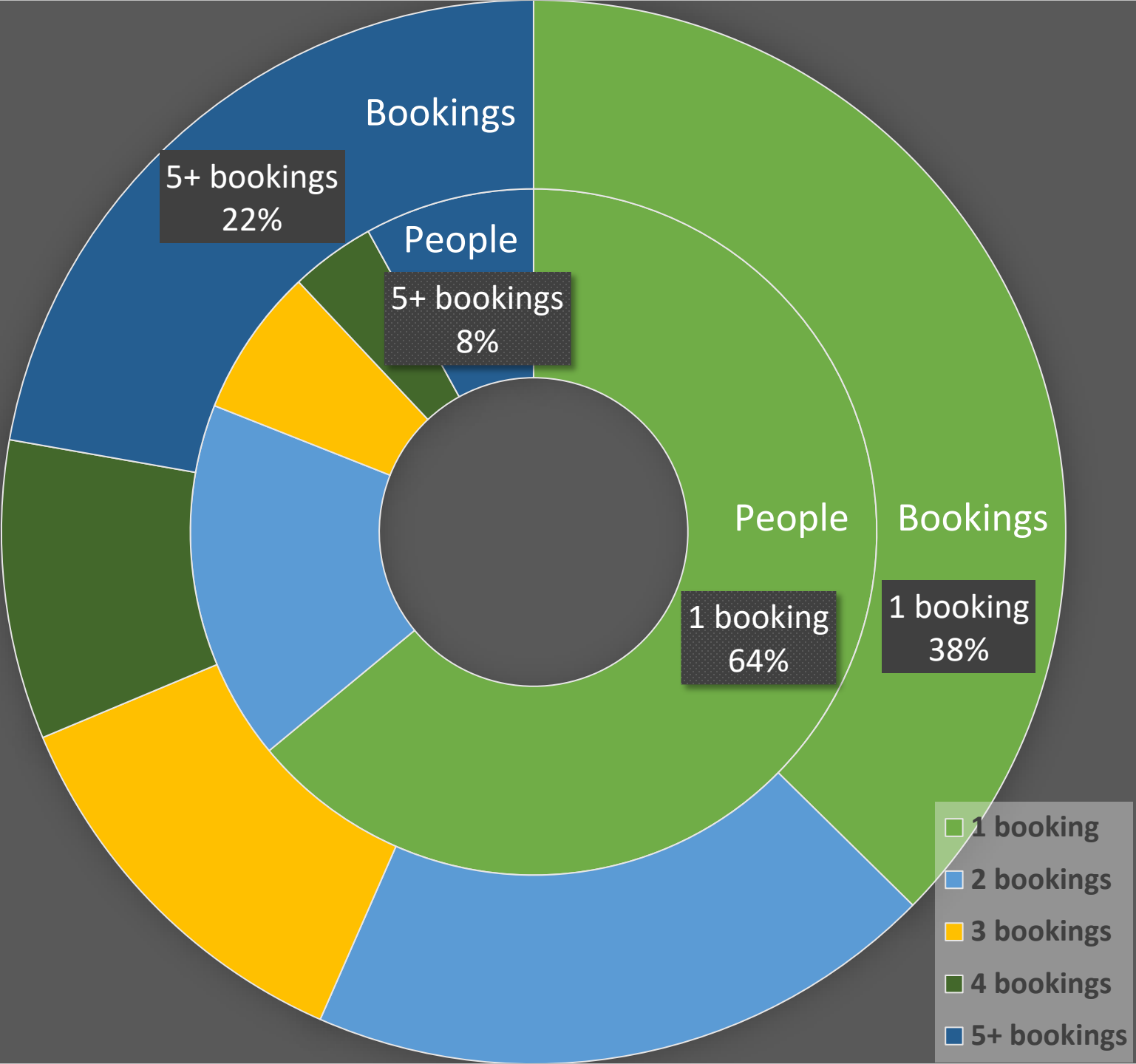
Why are rural people going to jail?

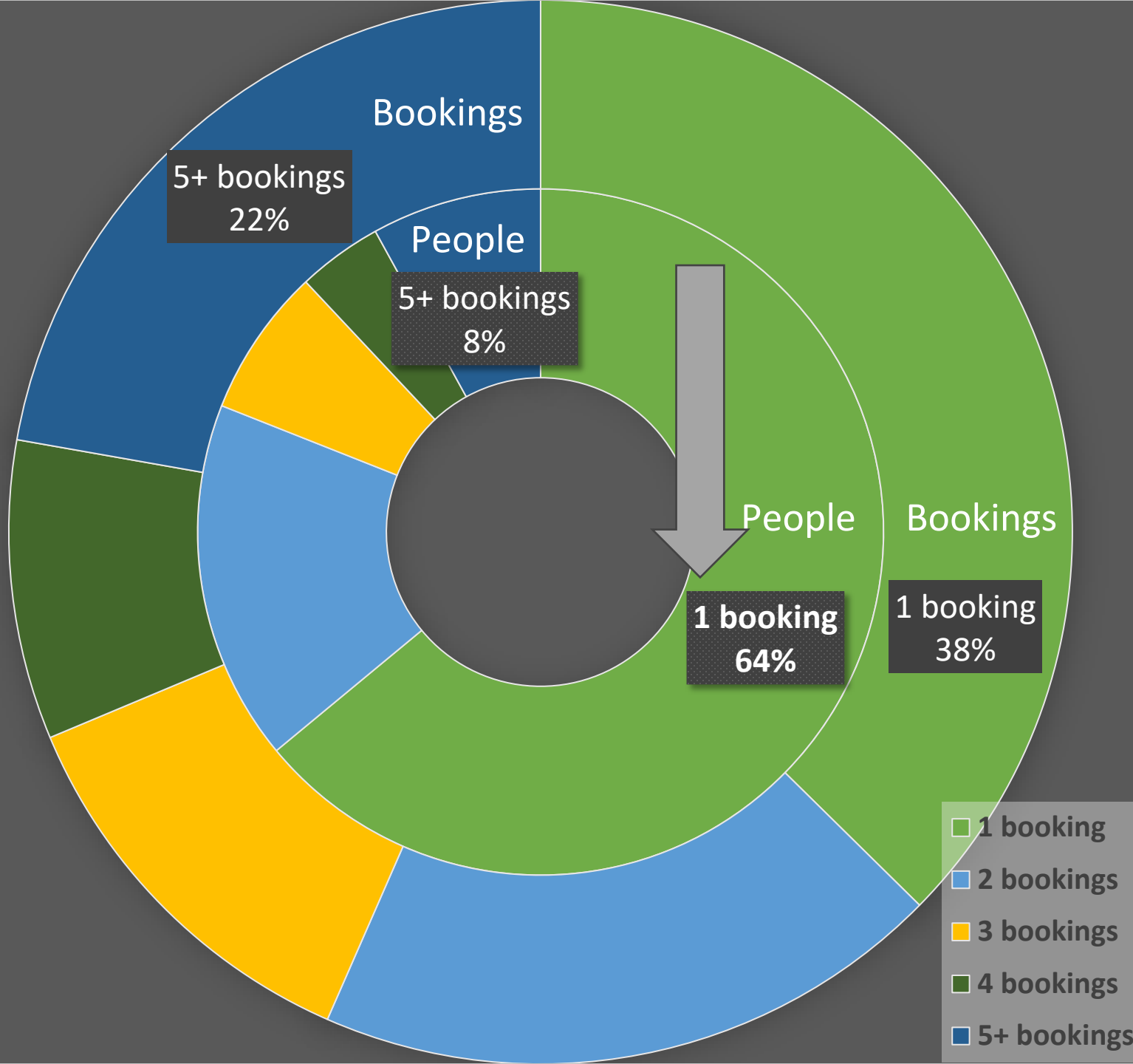
Pretrial Booking Incidents, Top Charge, 2015-2019	% of total
System Navigation Problem (e.g., FTA, DWLS)	41% (16,862)
Assault (mainly Domestic Violence)	10% (4,147)
DUI	7% (3,986)
Drugs (paraphernalia, possession, sales)	7% (2,943)

Total Person-Days Over 5 Years Spent in Jail Pretrial, by Most Serious Charge



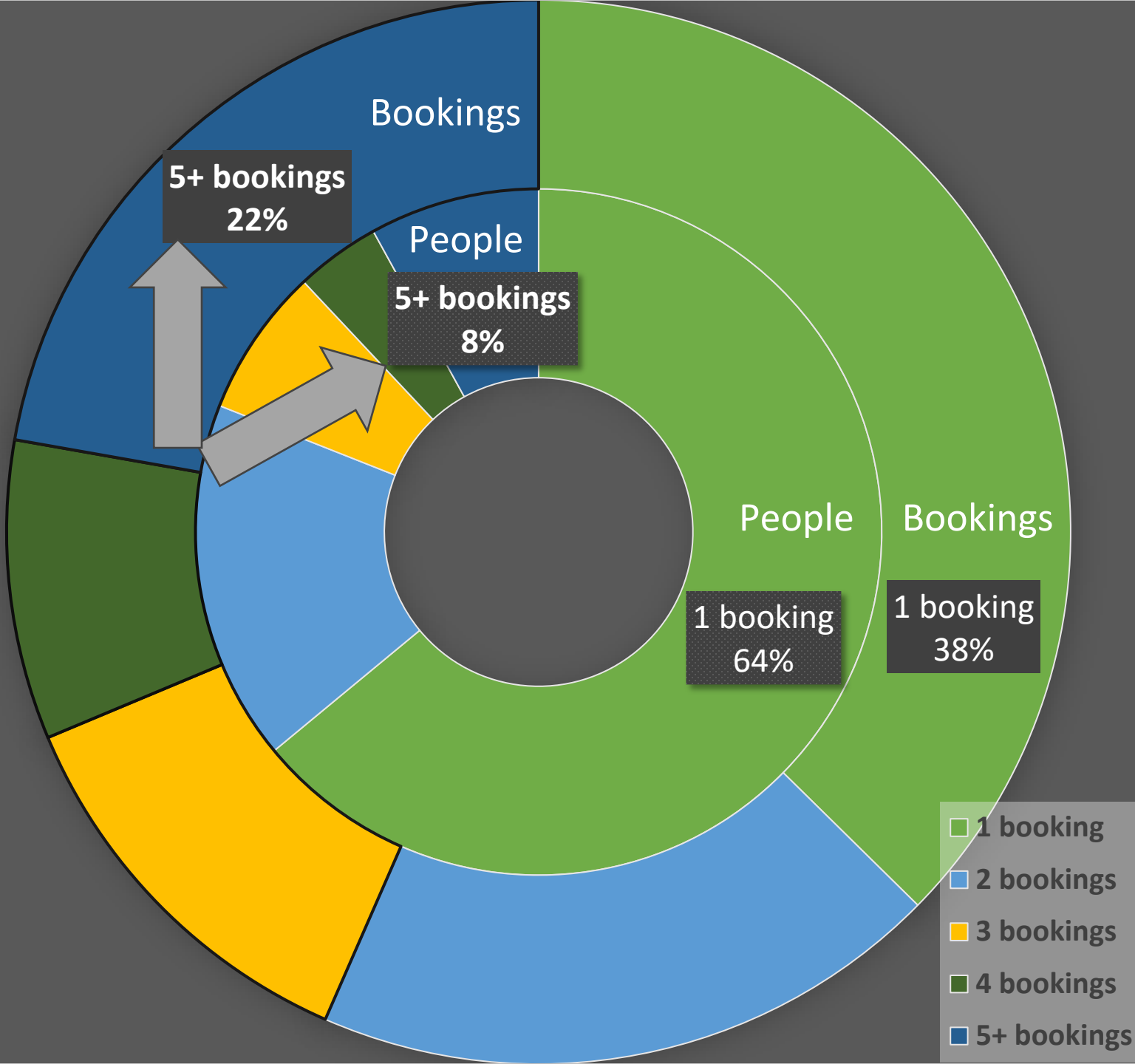
Repeated Jail Entries





Repeated Jail Entries

Most people – 64 percent – were jailed (pretrial) once over five years



Repeated Jail Entries

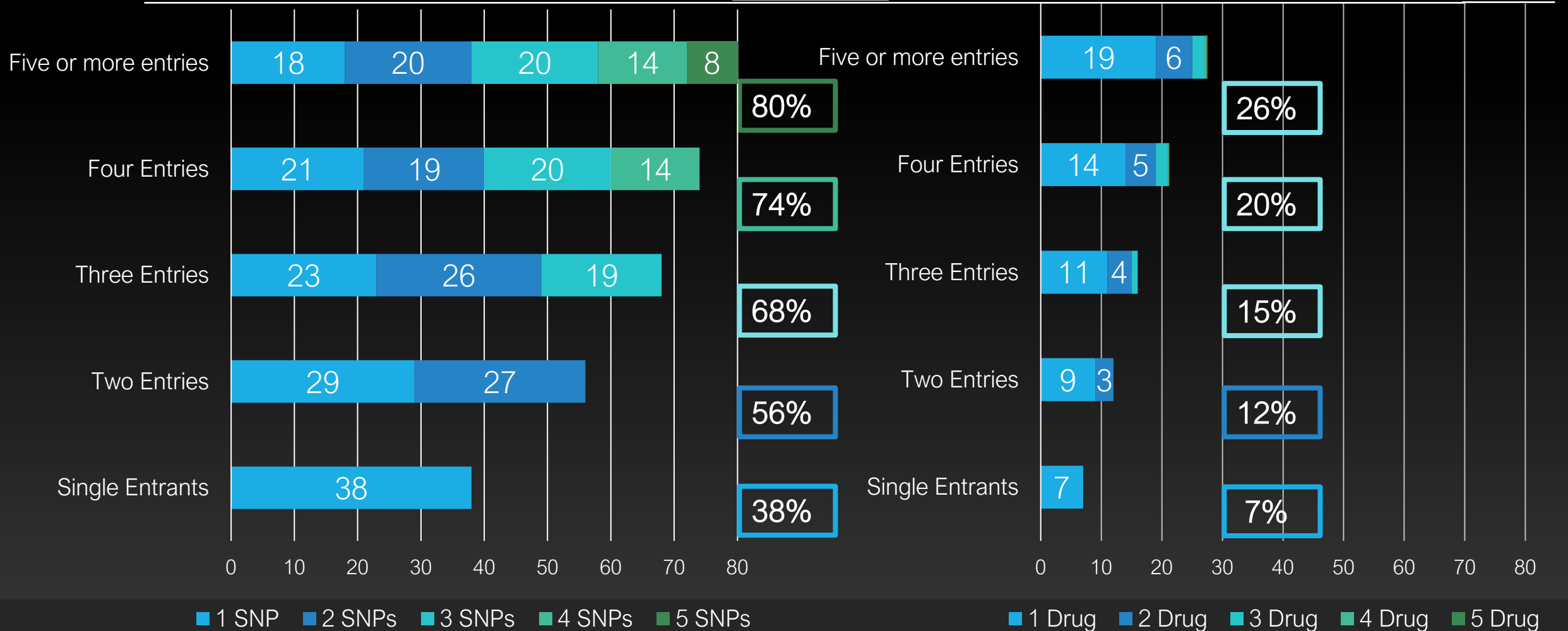
8 percent of people who were jailed five (or more) times accounted for 22 percent of pretrial bookings

Percent with one or more SNP / Drug Charge(s) for Those with Multiple or Single Pretrial Jail Entries, 2015-2019

System Navigation Problem as Reason for Jail Re-Entry

% at least once

Drugs as Reason for Jail Re-Entry



Staff Understandings of Recidivism

“You know there's bad people on the street and there's bad people in the hills and there's bad people that need to come to jail.” (Tim Campbell, Jail Lieutenant)

“[Our inmates are mostly] frequent fliers. You look in there and go back in their history and they have been in numerous times for the same stuff.” (Roger Brooks, Jail Commander)

Staff Understandings of SNP Charges

“Let's say Inmate A, you know he comes to jail the first time, for whatever reason, his license gets suspended and in a small area, you know the police officers and the local precincts know who this offender is and they continually ride him while he's trying to get to probation meetings, court hearings, family events, work, and so the fees just continue to add up. And then you put this guy in jail... or what it may be more court time, more court, it's just a revolving door... They're so far in the hole, it's just impossible for them to get out.” (Tim Campbell, Jail Lieutenant)

System-Involved Experiences of SNP

“I got myself in trouble by drinking and driving one night.... I was released. But then because of a failure to appear back in court, that issues a warrant. And then I got picked up at my house for the warrant. Then I spent another -- and this kind of perpetuated itself, like back and forth, back and forth for about two or three years just because I didn't have the money to pay it then. I didn't -- you know, I was struggling in between trying to get housing and doing everything else.” (Michelle Turner, 56, white)

System-Involved Experiences of SNP

“I was trying to get into a house or apartment or whatever. Housing in [this] county is very difficult. There is not a lot of it, at all. I didn't have a vehicle. I shouldn't be driving. So I needed something close and on transportation. So we were living at Motel 6. There goes your money right there.” (Michelle Turner, 56, white)

System-Involved Experiences of SNP

“[My kids] were pissed. They were pissed. My oldest two especially. Especially my eldest... He was like, ‘what is your effin problem, Mom? You’ – I mean, oh, god, yeah. It wasn’t good. And he never let me live that down for three or four years.” (Michelle Turner, 56, white)

SNP Spirals

“I just wasn't able to make it through the program. I think it was supposed to last -- it was an outpatient treatment program that I think was supposed to last, like, three months but I didn't make it through that. And just, like, each time I had to go back I got a little more jaded by the experience because it didn't seem to be ... doing anything for me... [But] it was basically do that or go to jail. And I think each time I ended up in jail.”
(Aaron Johnson, 35, white)

“I had to walk super far in the middle of winter to get to it and I had a twisted ankle.” (Aaron Johnson)

SNP Spirals

“I have had several bench warrants issued because of a failure to appear. One or two times, I did not even know that I had a court date. Or it would be more accurate to say I did not remember... So I had a court date, didn't know about it, missed it for obvious reasons, and got arrested and thrown in jail... And then other times, because of my issues with anxiety and depression, I would wake up and, like, I could not make myself even get out of bed to go to court... I have had several bench warrants for that particular reason.” (Aaron Johnson, 35, white)

“I didn't get those [court] notices when I was homeless but when I was caught, I was usually ticketed there on the spot and they would say, okay, just show up at this court date.” (Aaron Johnson)

SNP and Rurality

“There are good things and there are bad things about the town. One of the bad things being, as I’m guessing is the case in many rural areas, the legal/criminal justice community.”

Q: What do you mean by that?

“I mean that, for example, um, public defenders are overworked. They are hard to come by. There is only, like, three judges here. I don’t even know if we have that many now... And, just, I don’t have a good, like, relationship with them for probably fairly obvious reasons.” (Aaron Johnson, 35, white)

SNP Spirals

“I don't really recall how many times I have been in the [County] Jail... maybe four or five times. And when I went in there, it was for nothing. There was only one time I went in there for something major. And the other times, it was in there for, you know, failure to appear or a court warrant, you know, out of town court warrant.” (Randy Sanchez, 48, Latinx and Native American)

SNP and Rurality

“So the cops know you. They know you by name. They know your vehicle. And they don't need a reason to pull you over. They are going to. If they see you driving, and they know that rig because it's a small town, they are going to pull you over with or without cause. It is illegal for them to do that. It's called profiling. But in a small town, they don't care. They are going to.” (Clay Nash, 32, white)

SNP Spirals

“Ninety percent of people that go to jail that I've met there aren't pieces of shit. They want to do better. They want to have a better life. But when you get in their system deep enough, you can't. You can't get a decent job. If you can't get a decent job, how do you pay to get your license back? If you can't get a license back, you can't get a decent job. It is this downward spiral effect that it is really hard to hit the brakes and it is really hard to stop.” (Clay Nash, 32, white)

Conclusion: SNP and “Recidivism”

- System navigation problems contributed to the rise in rural jail incarceration.
- SNP spirals negatively impacted jobs, housing, income, and relationship stability.
- Rural social and structural conditions exacerbated cycles and/or increased the likelihood of SNP.
- Low-income and vulnerable individuals were most likely to get entangled in SNP charges and faced the biggest struggles in ending cycles.

Conclusion: Addressing SNP

- SNP need to be addressed at multiple levels:
 - Local Services: improving access to housing; transportation; financial stability; and treatment for substance abuse, health, mental health, IPV/DV issues.
 - Criminal-Legal Systems: improving access to public defense/counsel; digital court reminders; relicensing programs; system navigation aid; and diversion services.
 - Structural Level: better integration of social with criminal-legal services; decriminalization of misdemeanors; broader recognition of *logistical* as well as financial means by which poverty is criminalized.

Thank you!

We appreciate the time and efforts of our county participants and those who spoke with us about their incarceration experiences.

Questions or comments?

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