

"I was blessed in my reentry experience, I had a family to lean on — though I was technically homeless and denied housing due to my criminal record. It took my full exoneration to open an appropriate housing window. Working directly in the reentry space affords me the opportunity to hear similar stories and allows me to further understand the average experience has been and will continue to be challenged in the realms of housing, employment, mental health and everything in between."

- Troy Burner

INTRODUCTION

Like many other returning citizens, Troy lacked stable housing upon his release from prison. Besides adequate housing, a series of other factors also impact the success of an individual's reentry experience, including steady employment, educational attainment, access to treatment services, and familial relationships. As Troy states, these factors remain intertwined as a lack of housing stability often impacts access to employment or educational opportunities and vice versa. Thus, stable housing, employment, and education affect one another, which in turn impacts recidivism.

In 2021, US prisons released nearly 450,000 individuals, yet approximately two-thirds of them will likely be rearrested within three years. While housing issues are not the sole cause of recidivism, stable housing can provide the foundation to succeed. Returning citizens are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public.¹

In two focus groups conducted by the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, DC, housing was a core issue for returning citizens. JPI partnered with George Washington University's Trachtenberg School of Public Policy & Public Administration and released *Returning Citizens:*

¹ Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Promising Practices and Recommendations for the District of Columbia to understand housing's impact on reentry outcomes better.

While many returning citizens are not homeless, their options are limited to short-term transitional housing or relying on family. It is imperative to understand that an individual does not need to be 'sleeping in the streets' to feel the impact of homelessness. Instead, many returning citizens face housing insecurity.

WHAT IS HOUSING INSECURITY?

Housing insecurity encompasses a range of housing experiences, including sheltered and unsheltered opportunities, and those living in marginal housing, such as rooming houses, hotels, and motels.² Housing insecurity can also include individuals returning home to stay with relatives. In a focus group with returning citizens, many expressed concerns over the fragility of their housing situation. They relied on others to provide housing, such as their family, which is tenuous and could come to an end at any point. Returning citizens would then have to rely on the limited resources provided by the public and private sectors, which can impact transportation and access to educational and employment opportunities. Regardless of where someone lands on the housing spectrum, they face several challenges that impact their reentry experience.

HOUSING ISSUES IMPACT REENTRY

Housing challenges, correctional supervision, and incarceration negatively impact one another to create a vicious circle, as housing issues increase the likelihood of violating the terms of supervision. Vulnerable individuals are more susceptible to engaging in criminal activity to survive and are likely to experience barriers to receiving basic forms of support.³

Rather than assisting returning citizens, the current system is set up to punish them. As the legal system criminalizes homelessness, returning citizens are particularly susceptible to arrest for their fragile housing situation.⁴ In Washington, DC, policy, and funding decisions hamper the success of those struggling to acquire stable housing. The District has the nation's highest homeless rate of 103.1 per 10,000.

² Lucius Couloute, 2018).

³ F. Lutze, J. Rosky, & Z. Hamilton, *Homelessness and Reentry: A multisite outcome evolution of Washington State's reentry housing program for high-risk offenders* (Criminal Justice and Behavior, Vol. 41, Issue 4, 2013).

⁴ Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

For returning citizens who fall under the traditional definition of homelessness, enforcement sweeps of homeless encampments come with few alternatives. The alternatives that do exist in the District, such as public housing, include a waiting list exceeding 70,000 applicants. Systemic barriers exist for those returning citizens hoping to transition to stable housing.⁵ A recent study indicated that the Washington DC Metropolitan area needs 75,000 more homes to meet the need of the District's growing population. And unfortunately, simple funding allocations cannot fully overcome this deficit. In each of the last four years, the District spent \$100 million a year to build affordable housing.⁶ However, a large portion of the housing is for those earning a percent of the *area median income (AMI)*. For example, in Washington D.C., the AMI for a family of four is \$129,000. There is a mandatory inclusionary zoning programs in the District that requires builders to include units available for families earning 80 percent of the AMI. So a family of four earning \$103,200 is eligible for a 'low-income' unit.⁷ While important to offer opportunities across the spectrum of income, it becomes problematic. HUD identifies families of four earning \$38,700, or 30 percent of the AMI, as 'extremely low-income household', which potentially include returning citizens. However, since the AMI is a calculation of the region, including Maryland and Virginia, it leaves virtually no housing opportunities within the extremely-low income bracket.

Stable, safe housing is a prerequisite for a successful return to the community. Without it, returning citizens are susceptible to returning to prison. To ensure a smooth reentry process, it is imperative to support long-term transitional housing initiatives or permanent housing solutions for returning citizens from day one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Guidance on Housing Inclusion to Life Barriers and Create Stability

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development issued guidance that housing admission policies resulting in discrimination, including discrimination against those with a criminal history, violate the Fair Housing Act. However, that direction is still not a formal policy. Thus, landlords are not legally bound to make the necessary changes against discriminatory housing practices.

⁵ Martin Auster Muhle, "'Absurd' and 'Dehumanizing': D.C. Advocates respond to white house proposals to fight homelessness", *WAMU* 88.5, September 23, 2019. <https://wamu.org/story/19/09/23/absurd-disingenuous-and-dehumanizing-d-c-advocates-respond-to-white-house-proposals-to-fight-homelessness/>

⁶ Martin Auster Muhle, September 23, 2019.

⁷ Brian McCabe, "The Area Median Income (AMI), explained", *The Greater Greater Washington*, September 1, 2016. <https://gqwash.org/view/42671/the-area-median-income-ami-explained>; See also, "Government of the District of Columbia, Inclusionary Zoning Program, 2021 Maximum Income, Rent and Purchase price Schedule", June 25, 2021. <https://dhcd.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dhcd/publication/attachments/2021-6-25%20IZ%20ADU%20price%20schedule.pdf>

Build Capacity to Provide Opportunity

A successful reentry program must support housing with a holistic approach. This includes establishing adequate housing options for returning citizens that address other underlying problems. A program should focus on behavioral health, substance abuse counseling, financial literacy, job training opportunities, and education. Notably, an effective program should avoid dehumanizing returning citizens as it can affect their already sensitive state. Housing programs must strike a balance between the excessive monitoring of returning citizens and a hands-off approach.