

From the Facilitated Group Discussions: Housing

Housing is [the] number-one priority in stability. You want to go home. You don't want to sleep on the bench, you don't want to be at the park, you don't want to pay your last couple of dollars for a room for a couple hours and be woke up. I mean, number one is to make sure that when we come home, we have a safe place and a suitable place to go. Just letting us out is going to let us come back in.

We invited those participating in the group discussions to tell us about their living situation at the time of their release, and whether they faced homelessness while trying to establish stable housing. Participants explained what factors made it possible for them to establish stable and safe housing situations. At the same time, we asked them to describe any experiences when they were denied housing of any kind due to their criminal conviction status. Here we present a series of themes that emerged from the participants' collective responses. Each theme (a bulleted statement in boldface) is supported by direct quotes from the participants.

Living Situation When First Released

- **The initial living situation after leaving incarceration often was with family, although this was not always a long-term solution.** The living situations varied greatly after release. Participants commonly lived with family members or went to a program that provided housing. Unfortunately, many participants faced the threat of experiencing homelessness, often related to their previous felony conviction or type of offense. It was common to hear, "Well, the first thing I did was go to stay with my parent." Yet, as one participant explained:

I didn't have a housing experience where I couldn't get housing, but two days out of being released from prison, I had my family try to use the police to put me out of the house with temporary protection orders, even though I did nothing wrong.

Another participant described personal reasons for finding an alternative arrangement: "I had to go home to good old mom's, and she likes to partake in 'extracurricular activities,' and that was just hard for me to be around. So that's when I got out and I went to [a recovery program]."

- **Transitional living facilities were a common destination for men and women after their release from incarceration.** For some participants, the services they began receiving prior to release were linked so that they could experience "continued transitional programs with housing availability." There were many benefits to transitional housing programs. For one example, a participant explained, "I had to get into transitional housing. It was faith based,

so they were really helpful. They had a lot of support, a lot of programs that I could take advantage of.” Others described a network of connected services so that housing was provided. One female participant described as follows: “I got out of jail, went to treatment, and then came to where I live now, which is a transitional women’s living facility for homeless women.”

- **At the time of their release, the risk of homelessness is greater when individuals have limited options or if their criminal history is particularly serious.** The participants did not always have stable options for housing at release. As one participant explained, “I’m going through a process of returning to housing and, almost, if someone didn’t help me, being in the streets, third day from incarceration.” And even if they did not struggle with homelessness themselves, many of the participants knew of others who were less fortunate. As one participant noted, “And it’s still that reality for some people . . . depending on the severeness of your nature of your crime, that sexual nature, you still cannot live in certain places. So, you still rendered homeless.” Another participant put it this way, “I know some people that came home, that just went homeless, or that’s living from place to place because it’s hard for them to get a place because of a felony or their background.”

Safe and Stable Housing Factors

- **Transitional housing programs that offered comprehensive services were instrumental in setting individuals up for success.** Many participants reported going straight into a treatment program. Transitional housing programs, sober living, long-term recovery housing—all provided housing and support after leaving custody. Some facilities went above and beyond to provide for their participants. One participant described:

I got into a place that has an 18-month work readiness program for people just reentering society. And so, about a year and a half in the transitional housing, with all the support and help they gave me, I have just recently moved into my own place.

Another participant shared that:

For me, I just feel super lucky because I was placed in a sober living house. I was completely transient, and I was running around on the streets with nothing better to do than to get in trouble. Just the fact that we have a place that’s rent free and we’re able to get back on our feet is really the best option for me.

Not everyone was successful in avoiding gaps in housing once it was time to move on from the transitional housing program. As one participant indicated:

I was able to get into what they call a Faith-Based Independent Living Program. And I was in there for over two years. But right now, I’m homeless because you only can

be there for a year and a half. And I got over two years of treatment, and so now I'm working on getting my own place right now, I just don't have nothing with my name on it . . . I'm house to house . . . which renders me homeless.

- **Family support was still key for many people who could not find or qualify for transitional housing services.** As one female participant shared, she needed a short-term option when she was first released, and family came through:

I had family support when I got out from my grandpa. I was able to live with him. My boyfriend was deployed out of the country and now he is home. So, I moved back into our condo that we live in together. If I wouldn't have had family support, my options would've been extremely limited.

Another participant summed it up: "Well, I was in a good position when I got out because I had really strong family support and background, which is key to success when people get out."

Barriers to Safe and Supportive Housing

- **Although designed for emergency situations, shelters often had strict requirements that excluded many individuals.** As noted by the participants, a key obstacle was that many shelters would not admit people who were using drugs. This meant some participants had nowhere to go and be safe while using drugs. One participant noted:

You can't stay at the city mission here if you're using. They don't have anywhere that you can say that's safe as long as you're using. So, I guess you make a choice. If you're going to use drugs, you're not going to have anywhere safe to say.

Another participant described the experience of going to a local shelter. "I knocked on their door desperate because I, too, was probably on drugs, and I wanted to get out of the situation I was in. I was scared. And this was during COVID, and they told me they couldn't help me." Other shelters were selective about admitting persons with certain criminal histories. Among those responding to the poll questions, only 24% of the participants said they were denied access to a shelter because of a conviction. One participant described being rejected with their conviction record:

So, I know that this question was not about an emergency shelter; it is probably more designed to be about a housing shelter, but I was told during a hurricane that I could not shelter at the emergency shelter, and that I needed to go home and pray.

- **Obtaining a lease in your name when you have a felony conviction record does not appear possible in most locations.** Even among participants who have experienced many years of reentry success, most explained that they are unable to get a lease in their own name. This

was true even when they qualified for housing assistance. Among those responding to the poll questions, 50% of the participants were told they could not reside or reenter housing because of their conviction. For example, one participant reported, “When the housing voucher does come through, good luck finding somebody who is going to rent to you if you have a felony record.” Another participant explained, “Whether you have Section 8 or not, and guaranteed paid rent, my criminal record a number of times has disqualified me for rents through a private landlord.” Still another participant described that “I was denied moving into these apartments that I thought was the perfect location. It fit my budget. But you . . . had to be off probation for a certain amount of years before you could even live there.” As one participant summed it up:

We’re not going to get housing, so we don’t even attempt to go get housing because we know ain’t anybody going to give us housing because we got felonies. So, we essentially try to go stay somewhere with somebody because that’s the really only option left for us.

- **Individuals perceived the requirement for nonrefundable application fees as unfair given the almost certain outcome (denial) because of their felony conviction record.** Such a requirement is a particularly inflexible aspect of trying to rent an apartment or house from a management company. As one participant noted:

So, it’s a struggle for sure because you’re denied over and over and over again, and they don’t care about taking the application fees and the background search fees. They’re like, ‘Yep. We know that we’re going to deny you, but we’ll take money anyway,’ and you don’t get it back.

For many, the issue is their criminal record. One participant reported that “I think I’ve racked up almost \$400 in application fees, and I’m denied every time because of my conviction.” For others, they believe the issue may be about their credit history. As another participant explained:

And they’re not always going to say, “Well we don’t want you here because you’re a felon.” They’re going to say, “Well, you don’t have established credit.” Where I live now, they want you to make four times your rent on a paycheck in a month. Who’s going to make that? And we don’t need that. But those are the hurdles. But credit, I think, is the number one thing. They just say, you don’t have any credit.

Trying to apply for multiple options at the same time so there is a backup if they get rejected is often not feasible given the cost. As one participant described:

A lot of these places want you to float them 300 bucks or something. 50 of it is for the background check, and then the rest goes somewhere else, and when they deny you, it’s usually a two-week lag time on that. It’s hard to be floating money all over

the place, and they ask you the question on the application if you've been convicted of a felony.

Renting directly from owners, rather than management companies, may lead to success, but as one participant noted, "I found it was much easier to go to private-owned houses, but then they can charge whatever astronomical amount of rent that they want to charge."

- **Those with a felony conviction record often are prohibited from living with other felons, which, for some, may include family members.** As one participant explained:

So, at first, I was going to go to my dad's . . . but because his wife has a felony on her record from maybe 5 or 10 years ago, I wasn't able to go there on home confinement. So, I had to live with my stepmom, with my dad's ex-wife.

Not everyone has options within their own families that meet the requirements. One participant described their parole requirements, "They don't want you to live with felons. Well, mostly all of my family has been in trouble." There are real consequences for not abiding by these restrictions. One participant shared, "When I was on parole, I ended up with 90 more days because I wasn't supposed to have contact with another felon. And no matter what, family or not." Family can provide a support system or place to live, so restricting access to family members can make it difficult for those returning to the community after incarceration.

- **Barriers to housing often mean that individuals who were formerly incarcerated will live in dangerous areas.** In finding options for housing that they may qualify for and can afford, many individuals are living in neighborhoods where they do not feel safe. As one participant noted:

Where I was living was not safe. I literally lived in an apartment complex in [the city] where I could hear them selling drugs and shooting right outside the window where I was sleeping on the couch, but I only had to stay there for three months after I got out of the halfway house.

Yet another participant described, "Here, at least in [this state], you really can't get an apartment anywhere—except for really, really, really bad neighborhoods—if you're a felon."

- **Differences in the options for temporary housing for women and men often create more unsafe circumstances for women.** Participants described an apparent unfairness in practices toward men and women. As one participant described:

[I] have to have some place that I can say I'm going home. When I was in that reentry program, they housed men with Section 8. They sent the women to the shelter. And I don't think that was fair because we are out here; we're at risk. We could be beat, raped, and killed at any time. And they housed the men, but they didn't house us.

Because they often are housed with their children, there are more stringent requirements for women than for men. In one example, we heard that “the men are allowed to stumble in drunk. They’re allowed to use and go in. They don’t treat them the same because there’s not children on their side [of the shelter].”

- **Section 8 housing can be a solution, but those with felony conviction records face restrictions.** Section 8 is an essential voucher program that provides housing to low-income families and individuals. Many who were formerly incarcerated were denied Section 8 housing and had to find alternative forms of housing. Even when families received Section 8 vouchers, they were still being discriminated against and even denied housing. One participant explained, “before we were incarcerated, we had Section 8 housing. As a result of our convictions, we were banned from the Section 8 waiting list for . . . five years.” This same participant noted that once approved to have the benefits restored, “Section 8 housing has made all of the difference in the world for me.” Yet many others reported that the loss of benefits was permanent. Another participant described:

I had applied for Section 8 a couple of times, and for whatever reason, all these years later, my name never came up. You know, I was never contacted. I think once I got a letter saying that I didn’t qualify but with no explanation.

Still another participant related that “I had Section 8 before I was incarcerated and lost it due to my arrest and, because it’s a felony, I got kicked off of my subsidy housing and was never able to apply again.”

Recommendations

In their descriptions about how reentry works or how to improve conditions so that reentry success is possible, individuals in the group discussions provided numerous recommendations related to housing.

During the Transition from Incarceration to the Community

- The transition from a very controlled setting to an unstructured environment can be disorienting, stressful, and even overwhelming. Ideally, everyone would have holistic support so that they have a place to live.
- It is usually not a surprise when a person will be released from incarceration, so there should be a lot more integrated planning to make the transition from incarceration to the community potentially seamless. For instance, is it possible to apply for subsidized housing early enough so that arrangements are already in place to allow a person to leave prison and move in that same day?

Establishing Stable and Safe Living Arrangements

- There is a need for more short-term housing options for women in reentry. The limited availability and/or the restrictions that exclude women if they are using drugs mean that many women fail to find safe housing.
- Similarly, women should not have to choose between supportive housing and reunification with their children. They also should not have to choose between treatment programs and living with their children. Rehabilitation for women with minor children should feature strategies to build their capacity as mothers and strengthen the relationships with their children.
- There is insufficient support in most places to provide safe and stable housing for persons convicted of sex offenses. It is unfair that no matter how much effort these individuals brought to their treatment programs while incarcerated, and how hard they worked to become better people, their status as a convicted sex offender is a major barrier to successful reentry.

Other

Reentry should be about authentic second chances:

- There is a lot of interest in emerging policies in some jurisdictions that after a certain length of time, a person's criminal history would no longer be held against them. Knowing that they would have a clean slate after some period of time (even as long as 7–10 years) after their conviction gives these individuals hope, something to look forward to, and something to work toward.
- Coupled with policies on a clean slate and expungement, it is vitally important to offer sufficient options for housing while a person's criminal record is still a limiting factor.
- Some suggested extending "ban the box" campaigns to include applications for rental housing and treatment programs.
- There should be protection against practices that unfairly affect those who are previously incarcerated, such as the following: "You have to make triple times the amount to get a house in your name."

Implications for Stakeholders

Based on what we heard from participants, we present potential implications of our takeaways for reentry providers, policymakers, and funders.

Reentry Providers

Based on what we learned from these group discussions, there are several takeaways for reentry providers. Most importantly, comprehensive initiatives are vital. Those in reentry need support in multiple ways:

- A continuum of housing options to offer the best fit for everyone in that jurisdiction returning to the community from incarceration, including short-term shelter options, Section 8 housing, and sufficient housing options for sex offenders.
- Equity of access for all gender, racial, and ethnic subgroups for all services.
- The development or expansion of systems to support the individuals on their day of release and ensure that everyone has a safe place to stay at the time of their release.

Policymakers

The themes and recommendations from this project also point to ways that legislators and policymakers might improve the reentry experiences for those who were previously incarcerated. Further consideration of ban the box initiatives for housing might have an important impact. New legislation might provide ways to protect individuals from unfair exploitation practices related to housing.

Funders

Based on the conversations with men and women who were previously incarcerated, funders interested in building the capacity for effective reentry might consider investments for transitional living facilities, especially those that allow mothers to reunite with their children while staying in a supported living program.

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