

Guest Editor's Introduction

Reentry and Housing

Calvin C. Johnson

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official positions or policies of the Office of Policy Development and Research, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or the U.S. Government.

In 2021, HUD Secretary Marcia L. Fudge stated the President's and her position on reentry and housing: "The President and I believe that everyone deserves a second chance and a stable home from which to rebuild their lives. No person should exit a prison or jail only to wind up on the streets." She went on to clarify to HUD-assisted housing providers and Continuums of Care that returning citizens at risk of homelessness were among the eligible population for the recently awarded 77,000 new emergency housing vouchers. She continued by stating—

HUD is committed to taking a comprehensive approach to addressing the housing needs of returning citizens and people with criminal records, and by doing so, increasing public safety within our communities. Addressing reentry housing needs also furthers the Biden Administration's commitment to advancing equity and reversing systemic racism, given the racial disparities evident in the criminal justice system.

The following year (April 2022), Secretary Fudge charged the Department's leadership with conducting a comprehensive review of regulations and guidance to identify ways to reduce barriers to HUD programs for people with criminal records. She acknowledged that—

Individuals with criminal histories too often face daunting and unnecessary barriers to obtaining and maintaining housing, including public housing, HUD-assisted housing, and HUD-insured housing, which are often the only types of housing they can afford ... Too often, criminal histories are used to screen out or evict individuals who pose no actual threat to the health and safety of their neighbors. And this makes our communities less safe because providing returning citizens with housing helps them reintegrate and makes them less likely to reoffend.

Within that context, *PD&R Edge* (HUD-PD&R's online magazine) published a series of messages from PD&R's leadership on these topics (in [April 2022](#), [May 2022](#), and [August 2022](#)), and the planning for this *Cityscape* symposium on reentry and housing emerged.

The research articles in this symposium are intended to support evidence-building and policy-development activities on both issues identified by HUD's Secretary: (1) housing supports for returning citizens and (2) the enduring barrier to housing presented by a criminal record. Furthermore, these papers are written with a recognition that housing is an important tool for increasing public safety and connecting individuals to services associated with successful reentry (e.g., employment, health and wellness, and other social services), especially in the days immediately following release from correctional institutions.

Introduction

Despite having the lowest incarceration rate on record since 1995, the United States continues to incarcerate more people per capita than any other country for which data are available—810 inmates for every 100,000 adult residents (Gramlich, 2021). That proportion amounts to nearly 2.1 million incarcerated individuals, with the majority (69 percent) confined to state or federal prisons, where they typically serve a period of incarceration of more than 1 year, and the remaining 31 percent confined to local jails, where they typically serve 1 year or less (Carson and Kluckow, 2023). An additional 4.4 million individuals were being supervised in the community on probation (3.5 million) or on parole (900,000). The impact of those corrections practices disproportionately affects low-income communities and communities of color. No matter the form of correctional supervision, the facts remain the same: nearly all of them will go home. And when they go home—that is, return to their communities—they will have been labeled for their criminal justice involvement and, as a result, will face extremely challenging circumstances navigating life outside jail and prison walls.

The literature can be no clearer. Individuals with a criminal record confront barriers to accessing the most basic needs of food and shelter and an array of needed support services (e.g., employment, behavioral health, and physical and mental health care) to facilitate successful transitions from jails and prisons and reduce the risk of rearrest, relapse, or any negative behavioral outcomes that might land them back in a correctional institution (Reentry Coordination Council, 2022). With stable housing or a viable housing plan, these individuals establish meaningful connections to family and community-based services that support their reentry journey and slow the rate of future criminal offending (Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Roman et al., 2012; La Vigne et al., 2009; Visher et al., 2010). Without such stable housing or a viable housing plan, these individuals are likely to lose their connections to meaningful social networks and support services that mitigate the risk posed by social and economic deficits known to contribute directly and indirectly to criminal behavior (Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Denver et al., 2012).

In addition to being one of the most important basic needs, housing is a key predictor of successful community reentry (Burrowes, 2019). Returning citizens for whom safe and affordable housing is inaccessible often experience a downward spiral immediately following release from incarceration that increases the risk of returning to jail or prison. Without housing, accessing much-needed

social services and health services is extremely challenging. Safe and affordable housing serves as a protective factor by removing the search for housing as a primary need and therefore facilitating access to other needed services (Criminal Justice Policy Group, 2019; Johnson, 2022). Therefore, housing should qualify as a prescription for public safety that supports access to other protective factors known to reduce the rate of return to jail or prison.

Returning Citizens (formerly incarcerated individuals) and Barriers to Reentry

Each year, between 600,000 and 650,000 individuals return to the community following a period of confinement in state or federal prisons (Carson, 2015), and another 4.9 million individuals return to the community following a period of confinement in local jails (Sawyer and Wagner, 2023). Upon return to the community, they experience the same set of social, economic, and health conditions that contributed to their incarceration. A significant share of these individuals return to a relatively small number of communities across the country (La Vigne et al., 2003; Olson and Anderson, 2020; Travis, Solomon, and Waul, 2001; University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2020). Those communities have an ever-shrinking supply of quality affordable housing and limited access to employment opportunities and healthcare services (including physical, mental, and behavioral health). Based on surveys of returning citizens in The Returning Home Study, more than one-half returned to neighborhoods that have major drug problems (Visher, La Vigne, and Travis, 2004; Visher, Yahner, and La Vigne, 2010). Despite every effort by families, community nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, local government service providers, and community corrections officers committed to supporting successful transitions from correctional institutions to the community, the structural conditions within those communities (e.g., inadequate affordable housing stock, high poverty, and high unemployment) are significant contributors to crime and its correlates and, as such, present program and policy challenges for reentry.

Nearly all individuals confined to a period of incarceration in either jails or prisons will go home and return to the community, so where do they live upon their return? Housing arrangements for citizens returning from prison or jail are fragile; they were fragile before incarceration and are even more fragile upon return to the community. Upon release from jail or prison, returning citizens might stay with family, stay in emergency housing shelters, or find themselves experiencing a variety of unsheltered sleeping arrangements. For those fortunate enough to have housing arrangements with family, those arrangements often are temporary. Families who rent their homes and invite a person returning from incarceration to stay with them often do so in violation of their lease agreements. Moreover, families who receive federally assisted rental housing often are restricted from adding individuals who have a criminal record to the lease, even if the individual was listed as a tenant on the lease before incarceration. Those temporary and unstable housing arrangements and lease restrictions further exacerbate the housing challenges faced by the more than 600,000 individuals released from state and federal prisons and the nearly 5 million individuals released from local jails each year.

The literature consistently indicates that returning citizens are more likely to transition successfully to the community when housing and support services are in place, connections to healthcare

resources are established (including physical, behavioral, and mental health), and employment or vocational skill development plans are in place (Travis et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2019). Further, the interconnectedness of health, employment, and housing as part of the reentry process (Link, Ward, and Stansfield, 2019) requires intentionality with respect to prerelease planning (Nelson, Deess, and Allen, 2011) and policy and program development. When people returning from incarceration are housed and connected to services that address their healthcare needs and other service delivery needs, such as employment or vocational programs, they are more likely to remain in the community without being reincarcerated for a new offense (Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), 2022; Fontaine, Gilchrist-Scott, Roman et al., 2012; La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus, 2009; Bae, diZerega, Kang-Brown et al., 2016).

When returning citizens have access to safe and affordable housing, they can reunify with family members willing to support the implementation of a reentry plan, engage in employment services or maintain their employment, participate in behavioral health services, and better manage their physical and mental well-being (BJA, 2022). A growing body of evidence highlights the importance of well-structured and coordinated housing interventions plus support services in increasing the likelihood of successful reentry. A few such programs are listed below.

- Denver Social Impact Bond Initiative
 - *Program Description:* Offers permanent housing and supportive services to “front end” or frequent users of criminal justice and emergency medical services.
 - *Partners:* Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, Colorado Division of Housing, Denver Continuum of Care, Denver Housing Authority, and Mental Health Center of Denver.
 - *Outcome (experimental design):* Compared with a control group, the treatment group experienced a 34-percent reduction in police contact and a 40-percent reduction in arrests.
- New York City Frequent Users Service Enhancement (FUSE)
 - *Program Description:* Individuals experiencing homelessness who had experienced four jail stays and four shelter stays in the past 5 years were offered permanent supportive housing.
 - *Partners:* Corporation for Supportive Housing, Department of Corrections, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Department of Homeless Services, Housing Preservation and Development, New York City Housing Authority, and nonprofit housing and service providers.
 - *Outcome (quasi-experimental design):* Compared with a comparison group, FUSE participants experienced a larger reduction in jail days, lower rates of hard drug and alcohol use, and higher levels of family and social supports.
- Returning Home—Ohio (RHO)

- *Program Description:* A component of the Corporation for Supportive Housing's Returning Home Initiative, in which citizens returning from incarceration with unmet medical needs and at risk of being homeless are offered permanent housing and supportive services.
- *Partners:* Corporation for Supportive Housing, Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, Ohio Department of Mental Health, and Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections.
- *Outcome (quasi-experimental design):* Compared with a comparison group, RHO participants were less likely to be rearrested and to return to prison within 1 year of release.

In the absence of stable housing or a viable housing plan upon release from jail or prison, returning citizens are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public (Couloute, 2018). The rates are significantly higher among those released from incarceration within the past 2 years. Using HUD Point-in-Time estimates and the National Former Prisoner Survey, Couloute estimates that the sheltered homeless rate is 98 per 10,000 for formerly incarcerated individuals, compared with 13 per 10,000 for the general public. The unsheltered homeless rate is 105 per 10,000 for formerly incarcerated individuals compared with 8 per 10,000 for the general public. An additional 367 per 10,000 formerly incarcerated individuals have marginal housing insecurities, living in rooming housings, hotels, or motels.

The Enduring Effect of a Criminal Record

Nearly 1 in 3 adults (or 85.1 million adults) in the United States are estimated to have a criminal arrest record. No matter the length of time since their arrest, their criminal record has an enduring effect, causing barriers to housing, employment, and a range of social services. Landlords conduct criminal background checks and deny housing because of the presence of a criminal record—even when the applicant is financially qualified.

Criminal history data (the compilation of crime records) typically are used in risk assessment and screening tools across criminal and juvenile justice settings, but little empirical evidence supports their use to predict successful tenancy (Malone, 2009). Instead, housing providers and their management agents routinely conduct criminal background checks as part of their tenant screening processes, believing that criminal history is an accurate predictor of future criminal behavior that could pose harm to other tenants or disturb their peaceful enjoyment of the property. Housing providers and their management agents rely on findings from recidivism studies that take an event-based approach using an arrest in the past to predict future arrests or other behavioral outcomes. In so doing, housing providers and their management agents fail to acknowledge that the greater the distance in time since the criminal activity, the more indistinguishable the risk of arrest is for a person with a criminal record compared with a person with no prior arrest (Bushway et al., 2022; Kurlychek, Brame, and Bushway, 2006, 2007).

Given disproportionate patterns of arrest in low-income communities and communities of color, the use of criminal records to determine eligibility for housing is a disadvantage for renters who are people of color. Even when criminal records are assessed for all potential renters, this practice

has a disparate impact on low-income people and people of color who are adversely affected by discriminatory policing and sentencing practices.

The articles in this symposium address the challenges of reentry and housing and provide more details about the challenges faced by citizens returning from incarceration and individuals with a criminal record as they attempt to obtain housing—one of the most important basic needs.

Order of Articles and Summaries

- In their article, Elizabeth Beck and her research partners from Georgia State University share research from their evaluation of Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in three communities. The research team interviewed local SCA program providers in each site and 31 program participants across the sites. Program participants' list of housing challenges included housing affordability, barriers in the private and public housing market caused by a criminal record, and the importance of family in providing a housing safety net. Program providers relied on a variety of efforts to support connection to housing for their program participants, including referrals to housing partners and providers that also offer case management support and collaboration with local housing authorities to promote the use of vouchers for returning citizens.
- David Kirk's article presents findings from pilot randomized evaluations of a "fresh start" with free housing—the Maryland Opportunities through Vouchers Experiment (MOVE). Kirk notes that a large share of citizens released from incarceration return to the community or areas close to the community where they were arrested. Essentially, they return to the places familiar to them—places where they have social networks that facilitate their criminal involvement—and do so facing housing challenges. Although resources limited the design of the pilot evaluation, Kirk designed two pilots testing (1) the effect of moving to a new jurisdiction with free housing and (2) the effect of moving to a new jurisdiction with free housing compared with the usual reentry housing search process. These pilots provide promising signals for followup research offering returning citizens a "fresh start" in jurisdictions that are less familiar and where they have no existing social networks that might facilitate criminal involvement.
- The article by Sarah Hunter and Stephanie Mercier presents findings from Los Angeles County's first Pay For Success (PFS) initiative—Just in Reach (JIR). In general, PFS allows the private sector to invest in public initiatives and receive their initial investment plus interest if outcomes are achieved. JIR PFS is modeled after Los Angeles County's Housing for Health program and is administered by the Office of Diversion and Reentry. The program model includes prerelease screening for potential eligibility, assignment to intensive case management services with mental health services as needed, and assignment to transitional housing (up to 9 months) followed by permanent supportive housing. Using a quasi-experimental design, the authors report positive program effects for jail days, housing and homeless services, and healthcare services and related costs.
- The article by Niloufer Taber and her research partners highlights the significant barrier to obtaining housing presented by a conviction history. Further, the research team identifies

“1,300 documented local and state barriers to housing for people with conviction histories and 26 federal barriers.” Using policies across public housing authorities in Michigan and Oklahoma regarding housing eligibility for persons with a criminal history and criminal conviction data in both states, the researchers estimate the number of individuals potentially excluded from housing in the 116 housing authorities in Michigan and the 101 housing authorities in Oklahoma if the lookback period¹ was changed. The numbers are large and speak to the deleterious effect of the lookback period.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to the authors for their submissions to this symposium. Their research contributes to evidence-building and policy development at the intersection of reentry and housing.

Guest Editor

Calvin C. Johnson, PhD, is the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Monitoring at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

References

Bae, John, Margaret diZerega, Jacob Kang-Brown, Ryan Shanahan, and Ram Subramanian. 2016. *Coming Home: An Evaluation of the New York City Housing Authority's Family Reentry Pilot Program*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice. https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/NYCHA_report-032917.pdf.

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). 2022. *Opening Doors, Returning Home: How Public Housing Authorities Across the Country Are Expanding Access for People with Conviction Histories*. <https://bja.ojp.gov/doc/opening-doors-returning-home.pdf>.

Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). 2014. *Survey of State Criminal History Information Systems, 2012: A Criminal Justice Information Policy Report*. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/bjs/grants/244563.pdf>.

Burrowes, Kimberly. 2019. “Can Housing Interventions Reduce Incarceration and Recidivism?” *Housing Matters*, February 27. <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/can-housing-interventions-reduce-incarceration-and-recidivism>.

Bushway, Shawn D., Brian G. Vegetabile, Nidhi Kalra, Lee Remi, and Greg Baumann. 2022. *Resetting Recidivism Risk Prediction*. Rand Corporation Research Brief. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA1360-1.html.

¹ The lookback period is how far back a landlord “looks back” when conducting a criminal background check of a housing applicant.

Carson, E. Ann. 2015. "Prisoners in 2014," *Bulletin*, September: 1–33. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/p14.pdf>.

Carson, E. Ann, and Rich Kluckow. 2023. *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2021—Statistical Tables*. Bureau of Justice Statistics: Statistical Tables. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xycyuh236/files/media/document/cpus21stB.pdf>.

Couloute, Lucius. 2018. *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People*. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.

Criminal Justice Policy Group. 2019. *Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis*. The Harvard University Institute of Politics. https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/sources/program/IOP_Policy_Program_2019_Reentry_Policy.pdf.

Fontaine, Jocelyn, Douglas Gilchrist-Scott, Megan Denver, and Shelli B. Rossman. 2012. *Families and Reentry: Unpacking How Social Support Matters*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/24921/1001630-Families-and-Reentry-Unpacking-How-Social-Support-Matters.PDF>.

Fontaine, Jocelyn, Douglas Gilchrist-Scott, John Roman, Samuel Taxy, and Caterina Roman. 2012. *Supportive Housing for Returning Prisoners: Outcomes and Impacts of the Returning Home-Ohio Pilot Project*. Urban Institute Research Report, August. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25716/412632-Supportive-Housing-for-Returning-Prisoners-Outcomes-and-Impacts-of-the-Returning-Home-Ohio-Pilot-Project.PDF>.

Gramlich, John. 2021. *America's Incarceration Rate Falls to Lowest Level Since 1995*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Johnson, Calvin. 2022. "Why Housing Matters for Successful Reentry and Public Safety," *PD&R Edge*, April 19. <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr-edge-frm-asst-sec-041922.html>.

Kurlychek, Megan C., Robert Brame, and Shawn D. Bushway. 2007. "Enduring Risk? Old Criminal Records and Predictions of Future Criminal Involvement," *Crime and Delinquency* 53 (1).

———. 2006. "Scarlet Letters and Recidivism: Does an Old Criminal Record Predict Future Offending?" *Criminology and Public Policy* 5 (3): 483–504.

La Vigne, Nancy G., Cynthia A. Mamalian, Jeremy Travis, and Christy Visser. 2003. *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois*. Urban Institute Research Report, April. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

La Vigne, Nancy G., Tracey L. Shollenberger, and Sara A. Debus. 2009. *One Year Out: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas*. Urban Institute Research Report, June. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/30436/411911-One-Year-Out-The-Experiences-of-Male-Returning-Prisoners-in-Houston-Texas.PDF>.

Link, Nathan W., Jeffrey T. Ward, and Richard Stansfield. 2019. "Consequences of Mental and Physical Health For Reentry and Recidivism: Toward a Health-Based Model of Desistance," *Criminology* 57 (3): 544–573. DOI: 10.1111/1745-9125.12213.

Malone, Daniel K. 2009. "Assessing Criminal History as a Predictor of Future Housing Success for Homeless Adults with Behavioral Health Disorders," *Psychiatric Services* 60 (2): 224–230.

Nelson, Marta, Perry Deess, and Charlotte Allen. 2011. "The First Month Out: Post-Incarceration Experiences in New York City," *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 24 (1): 72–75.

Olson, Steve, and Karen M. Anderson. 2020. *The Effects of Incarceration and Reentry on Community Health and Well-Being: Proceedings of a Workshop*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Reentry Coordination Council. 2022. *Coordination to Reduce Barriers to Reentry: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 and Beyond*. Report to Congress from the Reentry Coordination Council. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1497911/download>.

Sawyer, Wendy, and Peter Wagner. 2023. "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023." Press release. *Prison Policy Initiative*, March 14.

Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2001. *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty. 2020. *Connections Among Poverty, Incarceration, and Inequality*. Fast Focus Research/Policy Brief No. 48-2020. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/connections-among-poverty-incarceration-and-inequality/>.

Visher, Christy, Nancy La Vigne, and Jeremy Travis. 2004. *Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry. Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore*. Urban Institute Research Report, January. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/42841/410974-Returning-Home-Understanding-the-Challenges-of-Prisoner-Reentry.PDF>

Visher, Christy, Jennifer Yahner, and Nancy La Vigne. 2010. *Life After Prison: Tracking the Experiences of Male Prisoners Returning to Chicago, Cleveland, and Houston*. Urban Institute Research Brief, May. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28671/412100-Life-after-Prison-Tracking-the-Experiences-of-Male-Prisoners-Returning-to-Chicago-Cleveland-and-Houston.PDF>

Zhang, Ryan, Swathi Srinivasan, Amisha Kambath, Venus Nnadi, Adiah Price-Tucker, Amy Zhou, Andrew Charroux, Choetsow Tenzin, Emma Robertson, Hoda Abdalla, Jeffrey Gu, Jordan Barton, Maria Keselj, Owen Bernstein, Paul Alexis, Sethu Odayappan, and Tabitha Escalante. 2019. *Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis*. Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics Criminal Justice Policy Group. https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/sources/program/IOP_Policy_Program_2019_Reentry_Policy.pdf.