

Housing for Returning Offenders in the United States

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In the United States, individuals returning home from prison face serious obstacles securing affordable, stable housing. Without appropriate housing, applying for jobs, obtaining needed social services, and successfully reintegrating to their communities becomes nearly impossible. Furthermore, a lack of stable housing is a predictor for recidivism and homelessness, which places pressure on municipal budgets. Because no one agency or level of government sees housing for returning offenders as its responsibility, there has been little action on or attention to this problem. In this article, I first review the literature describing the barriers returning offenders face in securing housing, including legal prohibitions, limited family support, and fragmented social service delivery. Then, I examine policy models to address these problems in Washington State, New York City, and Ohio. Based on the results of these programs, I conclude with policy recommendations, including removing barriers to public housing based on past offending, search assistance programs for returning offenders, improving coordination across the criminal justice system and post-release service providers, and revitalizing neighborhoods that support high levels of returning offenders.

Over 650,000 people are released from prison in the United States every year, often to underserved neighborhoods with few resources to support reentry.¹ For these newly released offenders, securing housing is one of the most important requirements for successful reentry, but it is also one of the most difficult to meet. If adequate, affordable housing cannot be found, people returning to their communities may end up homeless, recidivating (committing a new crime), and/or utilizing cost-intensive crisis services (shelters). These outcomes are detrimental to the individual, communities they are returning to, and government budgets; therefore, policies are needed to support reentry housing. In this article, I will begin with a literature review that establishes the difficulties returning offenders face in finding housing. I will then examine promising models to ensure housing for returning offenders from Washington State, New York City, and Ohio. Based on the outcomes of these model programs, I will make policy recommendations for local, state, and the federal government.

Obstacles to Securing Housing

There is extensive literature on the challenges facing formerly incarcerated individuals when returning to their communities, and housing is chief among them. Housing also plays a role in

either mitigating or exacerbating difficulties in other areas—treating mental illness and substance abuse, securing employment and reliable transportation, reintegrating in communities, and accessing social services are all more difficult in the absence of stable housing.

Family members are a primary source of housing support for individuals upon release, but this is not a long-term solution and may not be available to many individuals.² Family members may be unable or unwilling to house offenders upon their release, or offenders may not have family in the community they return to. Probation restrictions also often prohibit returning offenders from living with a family member if that family member has their own criminal history.³

If family is unavailable, returning offenders may then turn to public housing as a safety net. However, returning offenders may be barred, temporarily or permanently, from utilizing public housing. Despite former U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Shaun Donovan encouraging public housing authorities (PHAs) to remove bans based on criminal history, many local PHAs still use these blanket bans.⁴ Even if policies do change, those with a criminal background may not be aware and thus may not reapply.

Without family or friend support, or public housing, returning offenders have few other options. Upon release, returning offenders have little to no income to find private housing. Those with criminal convictions face the same challenges in securing affordable housing faced by many people across the country, but with additional barriers due to their criminal backgrounds. Many cities have increasingly tight rental markets, with even fewer units available for low-income housing, and when landlords can be selective, they are less likely to choose someone with a criminal background.⁵ Although recent (April 2016) guidance from HUD stated that landlords who refuse to rent to someone based on a criminal conviction violate the Fair Housing Act,⁶ it is unlikely that discrimination in the housing market has disappeared without strong enforcement.

Difficulty in finding housing puts returning offenders at risk of homelessness, and homelessness in turn increases the risk of reincarceration.⁷ In a 2004 study of over 45,000 released prisoners in New York State (released to New York City), 11.4 percent utilized a homeless shelter post-release, and 32.8 percent experienced another term in prison. This proportion was even higher for black offenders at 12.9 percent and 34.6 percent respectively.⁸ Both previous shelter stays and periods of incarceration were associated with a higher likelihood of subsequent shelter or prison time. Interestingly, the study found that the risk for homelessness decreases after the initial two-months post release, suggesting that housing services are most needed immediately upon release.

These challenges are exacerbated by a fragmented service delivery system for the formerly incarcerated, in which no one agency views the provision of long-term housing for returning offenders, or additional services

required by special needs populations (illiteracy, mental illness, substance abuse, etc.) among released prisoners, as part of its mission.⁹ This results in returning offenders falling through the social service “cracks,” and an increase in use of crisis services such as homeless shelters.

Policy Models for Housing Returning Offenders

Recognizing the issues described in the previous section, many state and local governments have taken the lead on designing policies to address the challenges returning offenders face in securing housing, staying in their housing, and remaining out of the criminal justice system. However, there is little quantitative evidence on the outcomes of these programs, as many are still quite new. In the following sections, I will examine what evaluations do exist for reentry housing vouchers and reentry supportive housing in Washington State, and Frequent Users Systems Engagement in New York City and Ohio, as three promising programs to address returning offenders’ needs.

Vouchers and Reentry Housing in Washington State

Washington State has experimented with two different models for providing housing to returning offenders—a reentry housing voucher program through the Department of Corrections, and a supportive housing program called the Reentry Housing Pilot Program.

Department of Corrections Housing Voucher Program (HVP)

Before 2009, inmates who were about to be released but could not establish adequate housing arrangements were held in prison past their earned release date (ERD, early release for good

behavior) until such arrangements could be made. To address this problem, the Washington State Legislature and Department of Corrections implemented the Earned Release Date Housing Voucher Program (ERD HVP). Under the program, which began in 2009, prisoners who could not find post-release housing could request housing vouchers, which pay up to \$500 per month towards rent in private housing for up to three months.¹⁰ The payments are made directly to landlords, ensuring the assistance is spent only on rent. In 2012, only 12 percent of releases (about 1,000 vouchers every year) received a voucher, due to the limited eligibility of the program.¹¹ This program had the benefit of securing housing before the offender was released, therefore ensuring they were housed during the highest-risk period for homelessness.

Because only returning prisoners who have earned early release—and are subject to community supervision post-release—are required to have an approved release plan (with housing being an essential factor), they are the only prisoners eligible for the HVP. It was expected that this program would save the State money in holding prisoners beyond their ERD, and would also result in better outcomes for prisoners returning home.¹² Because the program released prisoners to private, individual housing, participants in the HVP were subject to additional community supervision requirements to make up for the lack of resources and support present in transitional housing or living with their family.

The Washington Department of Corrections (WADOC) began accepting applications in July 2009. In 2013, Hamilton, Kigerl, and Hays conducted a study that compared HVP participants to a matched control group.¹³ Because the HVP provided vouchers to nearly all applicants, a comparison group could not

be constructed with offenders released at the same time as HVP participants. Instead, the researchers used a historical comparison group of inmates who had ERDs in the 18 months before HVP's implementation and were held past their ERDs due to lack of housing. The comparison group was statistically identical to the HVP participants group on key characteristics (a “quasi-experimental” design). The researchers tested both the impact of HVP on recidivism and community supervision violations, as well as the cost savings realized.

The study found that there were no significant differences between HVP participants and the control group in recidivism rates. Because the study compared HVP participants to the status-quo alternative of staying in prison past their ERD, it would not be possible for HVP participants to have lower recidivism rates than the comparison group of individuals still in prison (therefore unable to recidivate). Therefore, the researchers considered a finding of no significant differences between the groups to be a sign of success. Providing vouchers to reentering individuals, instead of additional time in prison, did not increase risks to public safety. Hamilton et al. also found that HVP was less expensive (in terms of average costs per offender) than holding prisoners past ERD—every dollar invested in the HVP program saved WADOC over \$7. Because the purpose of the study was to determine cost-effectiveness, not impact on housing outcomes, the broader impact that stable, independent housing has on the returning offender in terms of housing success or reintegration was not measured.

These results, while promising, have several important limitations. First, the HVP is offered only to a small subset of returning offenders. It is impossible to estimate the program's effectiveness if expanded to include all those

leaving prison without appropriate housing, but this kind of analysis is important to conduct before implementation in other locations. Second, because this was not the study's focus, we do not know the housing outcomes for HVP participants in the long term. When designing a program to meet the needs of returning offenders, it is critical to ensure that the program does not leave them in a similar, or worse, position than they would have been otherwise. WADOC asserts that HVP prevents participants from becoming homeless (because it provides housing immediately upon release), but the evaluation conducted by Hamilton et al. does not study that outcome, and there is no data to suggest the success rate of these housing placements. More research is needed to determine if the three months of vouchers was enough for participants to get back on their feet. Third, it is likely a voucher program such as this would be less effective in a tighter housing market. In a tight housing market, in which landlords can more easily reject applicants, participants will have to deal with the double stigma of a criminal history and a voucher. WADOC attempted to correct for this by paying the voucher amount directly to the landlord, thereby eliminating the possible concern that the participant will use the subsidy irresponsibly. Again, this was not a focus of the Hamilton et al. study, so we do not know any difficulties participants faced in securing affordable housing. This is another aspect of the program that will need to be examined more closely before implementation elsewhere.

Reentry Housing Pilot Program (RHPP)

Recognizing that “stable, habitable, and supportive housing is a critical factor that increases a previously incarcerated individual’s access to treatment and services as well as the likelihood of success in the community,” the Washington State Legislature created the Reentry Housing Pilot Program (RHPP) in

2007.¹⁴ The program was targeted to high-risk, high-need individuals about to be released from prison without stable housing to return to. It provided up to a year of housing support for returning individuals who were willing to undergo counseling (for drug abuse, mental health, etc.) and who were willing to find stable employment and work toward independence. Failure to meet expectations in these areas resulted in termination from the program. Pilot programs were established in three counties (Clark [Vancouver], King [Seattle], and Spokane), and were operated by the counties’ existing Community Justice Centers (CJCs). The CJCs already served as a “one-stop shop” for both post-release supervision and reentry services, and therefore were able to utilize well-established relationships between corrections, law enforcement, and treatment providers to facilitate service delivery.

In the housing realm, each county identified housing units, offered renters rights courses, and coordinated safety plans to address potential issues with landlords and the community due to ex-offender behavior.¹⁵ While RHPP’s implementation differed slightly across counties based on the conditions and resources available in each location, these differences had no significant effects on program delivery. Lutze, Rosky, and Hamilton conducted an evaluation of RHPP to estimate RHPP’s impact on participants compared to a sample of community corrections (traditional parole) participants matched on key factors as a control group.¹⁶

The researchers found that participation in RHPP was associated with fewer recidivism events, and participants were less likely to experience one or more periods of homelessness (see Figure 1). The RHPP group also experienced lower rates of revocation and readmission, but those outcomes were not statistically significant. Furthermore, their results also add to the existing

evidence that housing instability and periods of homelessness increase the chances of recidivism, and that the RHPP program was shown to reduce the effect a homelessness event had on recidivism risk. Despite these promising results, the program was cut before its cost effectiveness was evaluated due to budget constraints caused by the Great Recession. Additionally, 41 percent of program participants were terminated from the program, due mostly to noncompliance with the RHPP rules. These participants' outcomes were still incorporated in the RHPP treatment group outcome measures, which demonstrates that the program was successful even with many participants eventually terminated. Nevertheless, this high termination rate is problematic, and if other locations choose to implement a similar program in the future, how to increase compliance with the program will need to be further explored.

Additionally, certain aspects of the RHPP program make it difficult to generalize the results to other locations and populations. First, it was conducted only in the three most populous counties in Washington. The resources available in these cities (financial, political, and structural) are likely higher than in rural areas; therefore, it is questionable if these wraparound services can be provided similarly in less densely populated areas. Similarly, because an already well-established “one-stop shop” for reentry services conducted the program, it was likely implemented more seamlessly than in a city that would have to establish relationships between several agencies and nonprofit service providers. Because the program lasted only one year, long-term outcomes were not observed.

Most significantly, because the program offered wraparound services that went beyond housing, it is impossible to determine whether it was the housing itself that produced the positive

outcomes, or if it was the combination of services. This distinction may not matter to cities considering a program like RHPP, as long as it achieves its goals (reduced recidivism, etc.). But because the cost effectiveness of this program has not been studied, it may be that providing the services is more costly than the benefit they provide to society. In that case, it would be worth determining whether the housing without services could produce the same outcome as housing with services (or even service delivery alone), but with fewer costs.

Frequent Users Systems Engagement

The Center for Supportive Housing (CSH) developed the Frequent Users Systems Engagement (FUSE) model to break the cycle of homelessness, recidivism, and health challenges of “super utilizers.” Super utilizers are individuals that have repeated periods of homelessness and incarceration, and may also frequently use other crisis service systems such as the emergency room and inpatient mental health or substance abuse treatment facilities.¹⁷ The model was first implemented in New York City and has since been expanded to over 20 communities across the country. Under the FUSE model, communities identify and place super utilizers in permanent supportive housing, in which health care, substance abuse treatment, and other social services (mental health, job training, etc.) are provided either on site or through coordinated scattered sites. The goal is that this supportive housing will not only result in better outcomes for those served, but also reduce costs to the crisis service systems. In 2006, CSH began the “Returning Home” initiative to support communities using the FUSE model. Early evaluation results have shown both positive impacts for participants and cost savings to local governments. As of December 2014, Returning

Home has created 1,500 new re-entry supportive housing units across the country, and advocated for federal and state policy changes to better serve super utilizers.¹⁸ In the following sections, I will review the outcomes of two quantitative evaluations of FUSE programs, one at the local level (New York City) and one at the state level (Ohio).

FUSE II in New York City

In New York City, the FUSE program targeted individuals who had at least four jail and four shelter stays over five years, and had either received substance abuse treatment within the past 12 months, had no recent alcohol or drug use problem, or had serious mental health issues that had been treated in the past year. Participants received permanent supportive housing and paid no more than 30 percent of their income (or housing allowance) on rent.¹⁹

The program was evaluated to determine the effect on participants (retention in permanent housing, avoiding homelessness, and various health and mental health outcomes), as well as the program's cost-effectiveness, using a treatment group of 60 FUSE II participants and 70 comparison individuals. Both groups were tracked for two years following the treatment (placement in housing) using a combination of surveys and data from the New York City Departments of Corrections and Homeless Services.

Aidala et al. found that at both one year and two years post-treatment, FUSE II participants had statistically significant and more positive permanent housing outcomes than the comparison group.²⁰ After two years, 86 percent of FUSE participants were in permanent housing, compared to only 42 percent of the comparison group (the one-year

post-treatment results were 91 percent and 28 percent respectively). Furthermore, FUSE II participants spent 146.7 fewer days in homeless shelters, and the number of those with any time in a shelter over the two year study period was reduced by 70 percent on average. The study also found statistically significant and positive effects on recidivism rates, crisis care services use, and health outcomes (see Figure 1). Lastly, the researchers found that FUSE II resulted in significant cost savings to the corrections and homelessness systems, and that those costs offset over 60 percent of the public costs for the housing and services provided.

FUSE in Ohio

Unlike New York City's, Ohio's FUSE pilot program—called Returning Home Ohio (RHO)—targeted those who were about to be released from prison, had a disability (developmental, addiction, behavioral), and were homeless at the time of their incarceration or at risk of homelessness upon release. Participants in RHO received pre-release reentry planning, and upon release, were provided supportive housing (either single or scattered site) through one of nine providers in Dayton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, or Toledo. Because RHO was run at the state level, the implementation details such as target population, housing model (single versus scattered site), and exclusionary criteria varied by community, depending on the provider facilitating housing and service delivery.²¹

Fontaine et al. used a quasi-experimental design to determine the impact RHO had on reducing residential instability and recidivism among program participants. A treatment group of 121 participants was compared to a 118-person comparison group during a one-year follow-up period. Due to the few observed homeless incidents (measured by shelter use),

the researchers could not conduct a multivariate comparison of this outcome. Researchers did find that RHO participants were significantly less likely to have a recidivistic event or were less likely to be incarcerated. In the cost-benefit analysis, these outcomes resulted in a decrease in the average criminal justice cost per person. However, RHO participants had much higher mental health and other service costs. This resulted in a net increase in spending of \$9,500 per person per year on average. Fontaine et al. assert that these increased net costs are consistent with programs aimed at increasing human capital, as they are “by definition, more costly than business as usual, particularly in the short-term.”²² Additionally, this could have been due to the need to establish communication and collaboration between agencies and service providers that had not previously worked together, and could therefore decline in later years. Lastly, the benefits of RHO may have been understated due to inconsistency in program “benefit” (actual housing services) delivery across the different pilot locations—some locations struggled to integrate all services across providers for the participants. Therefore, the researchers posit that over a longer-term follow-up period, the net value of RHO may increase to a “break even” or cost-savings point.

Takeaways of the FUSE Program

Similar to Washington’s RHPP program, it is difficult to determine how the FUSE model could ameliorate the challenges faced by returning offenders generally. The comprehensive services provided in the FUSE model that make it so successful at addressing the needs of super utilizers (both for individuals’ housing and health level and for cost savings) also make it unlikely to be necessary or cost-effective for the average released offender. Not all returning offenders have the serious mental health, substance abuse, or homelessness problems that require such robust services. Moreover, the differential impact

of the housing by itself, without supportive services, cannot be determined. Furthermore, the coordination it requires between government agencies and nonprofit service providers may not be feasible in non-urban locations, and establishing this coordination may be costly in the short-term. However, the FUSE model’s success does demonstrate that housing for formerly incarcerated individuals reduces recidivism, which in turn generates cost savings for, at the very least, the criminal justice system. There will likely be greater cost savings in locations with an established collaboration between service providers and the criminal justice system. These cost savings may prove to be a politically feasible avenue for funding affordable housing and services for returning offenders.

Policy Recommendations

The programs in Washington, New York City, and Ohio give us several best practices for designing programs for improving housing services for returning offenders. Though these programs are narrowly targeted to specific populations, we know nearly all of those released from prison face similar difficulties in securing housing. Because the reentry population has such varied needs, from short-term housing immediately upon release, to long-term, supportive housing with wraparound services, a program aimed at housing provision for this population will require multiple components. Therefore, it will require coordination between all levels of government; criminal justice, housing, and social service agencies; and nonprofits.

To tailor a comprehensive reentry housing program to local housing market conditions, local governments will have to be responsible for the details of program design and implementation. The federal government delegates the distribution of housing funds, such as Section

8 and Community Development Block Grants, because of local officials' expertise on their communities' needs. One step local governments can take to make securing housing easier for returning offenders is to increase access to existing units. For instance, governments can partner with landlords to implement a search assistance program that connects returning offenders and landlords willing to work with them. Such a program would look similar to the RHPP program in Washington, with service providers serving as a liaison between returning offenders and landlords (providing safety plans, unit identification, etc.). This type of program would be most beneficial for returning offenders without significant underlying issues that require more intensive wraparound services. It would be particularly valuable in the private housing market where landlords are selective and do not have a mission to serve disadvantaged groups (as opposed to a nonprofit providing supportive housing). Working to establish relationships with landlords and returning offenders could improve the community's perception of returning offenders, thereby improving chances for successful reintegration. It may also be possible for cities to leverage these landlord partnerships to purposefully locate returning offenders in communities with more resources (jobs, transit, social services) and lower crime rates. It would be important that prisoners receive search assistance before release, to ensure that returning offenders are housed during the highest-risk post-release period for homelessness (immediately upon release to two months). For those that cannot secure private housing, but have relatively fewer needs for wraparound services, cities should remove barriers to entering public housing and obtaining housing vouchers.

Local governments could also partner with nonprofits to increase the stock of housing units, specifically for the reentry population with high needs for social services, as in the FUSE model.

These units could be new or converted from existing units. This approach requires enlisting the nonprofit service providers to provide the wraparound services associated with the units. Establishing permanent supportive housing is cost intensive, and may therefore only be an option for well-resourced communities that have many services available within the immediate geographic area.

Another, broader approach cities could take is to focus on revitalizing the underserved neighborhoods (with a focus on affordable housing provision) many offenders return home to.²³ This has the benefit of impacting a larger group of people also in need of investment, and limiting the negative effect that stigmas around those with criminal histories can have on public support for the program. It would also go the furthest in addressing the root causes of criminal behavior, recidivism, and homelessness. However, these root causes are intractable problems cities have been grappling with for decades and will therefore require more complex policy solutions than some of the targeted interventions discussed here. And while returning offenders would likely be better off returning home to more well-resourced neighborhoods, without targeted, intensive services, many of the returning offenders with the most needs will continue to fall through the service delivery cracks. Furthermore, benefits from such development will take several years to materialize, and could accrue inequitably.

States and the federal government can act on returning offender housing in several ways. First, they can fund local governments' efforts in increasing the reentry housing stock and neighborhood revitalization, and create incentives for doing so. Without support from the state, it is likely that the costs associated with housing returning offenders will fall more heavily on communities with large populations

of returning offenders. This could result in services being unavailable in other parts of the state, which could then lead to concentrated populations of returning offenders in particular areas, or individuals falling through the cracks. Therefore, efforts should be made to engage service providers, landlords, and detention centers across the whole state. Second, states and the federal government could institute broad criminal justice reform that reduces the number of individuals sent to prison each year, which will reduce the reentry population in the future. Shifting to favoring community-based sanctions over jail or prison allows offenders to retain their current community connections such as their housing or job(s), and perhaps establish new or better ties after linking community corrections to service providers. Lastly, states and HUD should continue encouraging (and consider incentivizing) local public housing authorities to eliminate barriers preventing returning offenders from accessing public housing. Again, this is unlikely to make a large impact for returning offenders in communities with already long waitlists for public housing or vouchers, but could serve as a signal that returning offenders do not deserve to be excluded from public services.

Lastly, all of these levels of government must work collaboratively with each other and nonprofit service providers. Creating a shared data system and establishing formal and informal communication channels between the various actors is a critical component of facilitating collaboration. In the programs examined earlier, those that utilized existing partnerships between various agencies and nonprofits demonstrated better housing outcomes and cost effectiveness than those that were more fragmented. While coordination has obvious benefits, it can also be time consuming and challenging to build the interpersonal relationships and structural systems necessary to make these collaborations efficient and effective. It will therefore require patience

from stakeholders and continuous evaluation of the process to ensure goals are met.

Conclusion

Given President Trump's recent executive orders aimed at cracking down on crime²⁴ and campaign promises to restore "law and order,"²⁵ policymakers should prepare for an increase in incarceration and, consequently, an increase in offenders eventually returning home. Therefore, it is even more imperative to successfully reintegrate returning offenders to their communities, starting with stable housing. While the administration's actions may exacerbate the needs for reentry services, it is unlikely to prioritize their funding. Consequently, cities and states should take what action they can without financial or political support from the federal government. For example, steps such as partnering with landlords in a search assistance program and removing barriers to public housing can be done with limited resources.

Academic institutions should also take opportunities to conduct further research on additional reentry housing innovations to determine program impacts and cost-effectiveness. The existing research is promising, but far from comprehensive. This could further discourage some policymakers from taking action when the political environment is less friendly. Therefore, it is critical for researchers, planners, and policy experts to continue evaluating innovations to support returning offenders, and to disseminate best practices to local communities. ■

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