

Justice System Involvement, Employment, and Homelessness in Rural Areas

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Abstract

Individuals who have been involved with the criminal justice system face many re-entry obstacles in their communities, including homelessness and unemployment, which increase their likelihood of recidivism. These challenges are often multiplied for justice-involved individuals in rural communities where access to employment opportunities and suitable housing are limited. This article provides an overview of specific challenges to obtaining and maintaining suitable housing and employment for those with previous involvement in the criminal justice system in the United States. Recommendations for using an evidence-based multi-agency collaborative approach to service provision to reduce recidivism and improve housing stability among this population are discussed and encouraged.

Keywords: rural homelessness; justice system involvement; employment; reentry; recidivism

Introduction

Homelessness as a construct is a complex issue that presents individuals experiencing this condition with a variety of challenges which are often exacerbated in rural areas, particularly among those with prior justice system involvement. While the impact and experience of homelessness in the United States has been studied vigorously across multiple disciplines (Meanwell, 2012), the specific experiences of justice-involved homeless persons in rural areas has received considerably less attention. One of the difficulties in studying homelessness in the United States stems from a lack of a consistent definition. The United States Code 42 generally describes the term homeless as “an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence”, but also includes conditions where an individual or family has a primary nighttime residence not designed for regular sleeping accommodation (e.g., a car or campground), reside in a temporary living situation such as a shelter, and those exiting temporary living situations (e.g., leaving a shelter or institution) (The Public Health and Welfare, 2018). Adding the condition of rurality to homelessness further confuses the issue because both the concepts of rurality and rural homelessness similarly lack consistent definitions.

Defining rurality in the United States is challenging for many reasons (Yousey & Samudra, 2018), among those being that it is necessary to create distinct geographical boundaries of where it begins and ends (Johnson, 2017). The Census Bureau, for example, defines rural by land-use, where it includes all population, housing, and territory not included in an urban area (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2018). Rural areas are often characterized by small populations and population densities, poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and uninsured or underinsured residents (Curtin & Cohn, 2015). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (Dobis et al., 2021), about one in five Americans – or about 60 million people – live in rural areas. The Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) for 2022 shows that approximately 19 percent of the unsheltered homeless population in the United States were located in rural areas (de Sousa et al., 2022). Resources, attention, and funding aimed at overcoming the conditions of homelessness often target urban homelessness where the condition is more “visible” to the eye (Edwards et al., 2009; Fitchen, 1992; White, 2015). However, the geographical isolation for those experiencing rural homelessness presents unique challenges including a limited number of shelter beds, lack of affordable housing, larger service areas, individual reluctance to seek government assistance, and a lack of public transportation (Fitchen, 1992; National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2013; Waegemaker et al., 2016). These challenges are further exacerbated for those with prior justice system involvement.

The results of a recent meta-analysis summarized contributors to homelessness over the past 40 years including issues related to family instability, unemployment and poverty, mental illness, substance use, unstable living arrangements, child maltreatment, lack of social support, and crime and violence (Giano et al., 2020). While these results indicate that the factors contributing to homelessness have received considerable empirical attention, the focus of this article centers on the relationship between justice involvement, employment, and rural

homelessness. Hamilton and colleagues (2011), for example, suggest that these factors are interrelated and can produce trauma that prevents individuals from gaining and maintaining stable housing (Hamilton et al., 2011) or obtaining employment, and may increase their chances of facing arrest or incarceration (Burke et al., 2013; Herbert et al., 2015; Nooe & Patterson, 2010).

Homelessness and the justice system are intricately connected with some estimates suggesting that just over 50 percent of people receiving homeless services have been previously incarcerated (Metraux et al., 2007). Estimates continue to suggest that of the roughly 700,000 inmates who are released from prison each year (Lutze et al., 2014), nearly 10 percent have limited to no housing options and approximately 50,000 will enter a homeless shelter immediately upon release (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2016). Further, after release, most individuals will be required to find and maintain housing and employment, as well as meet other conditions including regularly reporting to a probation or parole office or other local government official (Wiggins et al., 2021). These requirements can be difficult to accomplish due to a variety of unaddressed needs in housing, familial support, long-term substance use histories, and a lack of job skills (Listwan et al., 2018), which can lead to recidivism (e.g., commission of a new crime) (Bailey, 2006). Additionally, a recent study of homeless probationers in San Francisco found they were 52 percent more likely to recidivate than probationers with stable housing (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020).

Employment, similarly, plays an important role in addressing and reducing homelessness among justice system-involved persons. Work has multiple individual and community-based impacts (Labonté et al., 2015), seemingly contributing to one's self-identity, as well as creating fulfillment for critical personal needs (e.g. food, housing, etc.). Literature has shown that having a job is important not only for career development and social connection (e.g., general integration with society, leisure, and social support), but also for maintaining health and happiness, improving a sense of overall well-being, and enhancing self-esteem and self-determination (Strauser, 2014). Gainful competitive employment refers to a regular, community-based job that pays a comparable wage in a setting where the opportunity to grow and develop abound. Evidence suggests that the unemployment rate among people experiencing homelessness is around 80-90 percent (Acuna & Erlenbusch, 2009; Aubry et al., 2012; Pickett-Schenk et al., 2002, Poremski et al., 2014), and while there are no specific current estimates for unemployment rates among those experiencing rural homelessness, these national estimates are likely similar. Housing and employment are of significant need for rural homeless individuals with justice system involvement (Zajac, et al., 2013).

This article examines the interconnectedness between rural homelessness and the unique challenges produced by justice system involvement and unemployment, as well as their collective impact on overcoming barriers to long-term stable housing for those experiencing homelessness in rural communities. First, we present a review of the concepts of justice system involvement and unemployment in relation to the experience of homelessness.

Specifically, we examine barriers to overcoming homelessness as a result of justice system involvement including housing instability, residential restrictions, and other support services. Then we review issues associated with topics regarding employment in connection with rural homelessness including work history and nontraditional work patterns (e.g., seasonal/part-time work history and scheduling issues), transportation, stigma, and discrimination. Finally, the article addresses the relationship between justice system involvement, unemployment, and rural homelessness by offering examples and policy recommendations for responding to these issues.

Housing and Employment Problems Among Justice-Involved Persons in Rural Contexts

Research suggests that homelessness (Clark, 2016; Harding et al., 2016; Lutze et al., 2014; Steiner et al., 2015) and unemployment (Lockwood, et al., 2012, 2015; Nally, et al., 2012, 2014(a), 2014(b)) are both common, and related to recidivism among justice-involved individuals. Incarceration places individuals at increased risk for homelessness immediately upon release, at a time when meeting basic survival needs already presents a challenge, and when familial support or pre-planned residency may be lacking (Bradley et al., 2001; Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Metraux et al., 2007; Rodriguez & Brown 2003; Taxman et al., 2002). For those returning to rural communities, challenges related to limited service availability, geographic dispersion, transportation, and stigma are particularly relevant (Staton et al., 2019). Adult probationers in the state of Rhode Island, for example, report that the inability to secure employment, as well as food and housing insecurity, made completing the conditions of their probation more difficult (Dong et al., 2018a, 2018b). Rural homeless justice-involved individuals often find themselves living in the woods, in tents or in campers, sleeping on a friend's couch, or living in a shack with no heat, electricity or running water (Wiltz, 2015). The criminalization of behaviors associated with homelessness, such as survival crimes (e.g. theft) or nuisance crimes (e.g. quality of life) (Mayer & Reichert, 2018) makes securing stable housing even more complicated for those with a criminal record (Dong et al., 2018a; Evans 2019; Fontaine, 2013; Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Herbert et al., 2015; Keene et al., 2018; Petersilia, 2003; Rankin, 2019; Roman & Travis, 2006).

Legal restrictions and discrimination represent one barrier for rural homeless justice-involved individuals to obtaining permanent housing, or employment, thereby increasing the likelihood for recidivism (Schneider, 2018). Federal law bars applicants from federally subsidized housing programs for specific offenses, such as the manufacture or production of methamphetamine, having been convicted of a sex offense requiring registration, as well as periodic bans for certain drug offenses, evictions for tenants who engage in criminal activity on or near the premises, or if the landlord believes an individual is using drugs. These laws also give administrators of federal housing programs broad discretion in handling cases for homeless individuals with justice involvement (Bauman et al., 2014; Cammett, 2015; Carey, 2005; Crowell, 2016; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Legal Action Center, 2016; Levenson, 2018; Lundgren et al., 2010; Silva, 2015; Van Olphen et al., 2009).

Locating housing in the private market (Evans & Porter, 2015) is also difficult because landlords have the ability to ban potential tenants with criminal records, and often rural homeless justice-involved individuals are unable to meet basic prerequisites for housing applications such as reference letters from previous landlords, deposit funds to secure the housing, or work stability (Clark, 2016; Evans et al., 2020; Nagin & Waldfogel, 1998; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005; Travis et al., 2001). Additionally, rural communities are often defined by a shared culture, values, and belief system that is unfavorable to these individuals (Ethridge et al., 2014). In these areas, the stigma associated with justice system involvement can permeate a community and, because social networks are smaller, people are more likely to know each other and be familiar with an individual's criminal past (Kling, 2006; Staton et al., 2019). This seems to be true regardless of offense type, amount of time served, the length of time since an offense occurred, or the likelihood of recidivism, where simply having a criminal record prevents people from obtaining suitable housing (Schneider, 2018).

Research has shown that a criminal record is a significant barrier to employment for those with a criminal history (Agan & Starr, 2018; Pager et al. 2009b; Poremski et al., 2014), and homeless justice-involved persons in rural areas often struggle to find and maintain employment (Kachnowski, 2005; La Vigne et al., 2004; Visher et al., 2008). Particularly, a criminal record is likely to exert the most impact on those who are African Americans (Decker et al., 2015) or from other minority groups (Holzer et al., 2004; Pager & Quillian, 2005; Pager et al., 2009a). This stigma, prejudice, and discrimination impact rural homeless justice-involved individuals' ability to obtain employment (Decker et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2016; Poremski et al., 2014). For example, employers are often hesitant to hire these individuals because of their criminal history (Giguere & Dundes, 2002; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; Lukies et al., 2011), and there is a perception that they will have lost general and specific job skills and/or lack the education to meet the demands of certain jobs (Hampson & Jacob, 2020; Lockwood et al., 2016; Stangl et al., 2019). Around half of the adults experiencing homelessness in the United States are unemployed (Meyer et al., 2021), and the negative effects of poor work history may reduce opportunities and disrupt achieving gainful competitive employment (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2017). Further, employers and line managers typically play an important role in making hiring decisions but express concerns during the hiring process, such as fear of this population or fear of additional burdens resulting from hiring these individuals. These concerns contribute to stigmatizing attitudes that decrease the possibility of obtaining and maintaining employment (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2014; Hampson & Jacob, 2020; Stangl et al., 2019).

Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that many justice-involved individuals struggled in the labor market prior to their convictions (Western, 2002), and many were unemployed or underemployed prior to their arrest (James, 2004). Thus, it is possible that these individuals would continue to have difficulty finding and keeping employment even without a criminal conviction (Western, 2002). Incomes in rural areas tend to be lower than in urban areas even among those who are employed (Bradley et al. 2001; Bunting et al., 2019). Most available jobs are considered low-skill and low-paying but can be difficult to obtain even for individuals with no criminal history (Family Justice, 2009).

While gainful employment can be a step toward securing housing for individuals experiencing homelessness, not every employed person is able to obtain permanent housing. Inconsistent pay, for example, is a barrier to exiting homelessness and research has shown that typical employment for a person experiencing homelessness will be part-time, temporary or seasonal, pay minimum wage, and lack supportive benefits (Burke et al., 2013). A fixed address and the ability to receive mail or phone calls from potential employers is crucial for job seekers and the lack of these needs could pose difficulties for people experiencing homelessness (Pickett-Schenk et al., 2002). Job applications that include questions pertaining to residency to establish employment eligibility can contribute to this stigmatization.

Lack of transportation can be devastating for rural homeless justice-involved individuals looking for housing and employment options. Access to public transportation is vital to obtaining and maintaining employment because this population might not possess a personal vehicle or valid driver's license. Beyond access to employment itself, a lack of access to public transportation poses challenges to using support services for obtaining employment. Public transportation might not be a significant issue in urban areas where public transportation is more accessible, but for homeless justice-involved persons in rural areas, a lack of public transit can hamper access to jobs, housing, treatment, or meeting with probation or parole officers (Zajac et al., 2013). Even for those who live in areas with some public transit options, the reliability and cost of the transportation system may be prohibitive for someone who is unemployed and create barriers to obtaining employment.

In rural areas, job seekers may rely more heavily on car transportation if public transit is not established or accessible. For those who have access to a car (or live in their car) costs for fuel, insurance, maintenance, and repairs may create barriers to using their car as reliable transportation. The feasibility of using someone else's car, whether through a rideshare service or getting a ride from a friend, may be lower in rural areas. While several rideshare companies have begun to reach into rural communities, they still do not have the same level of access to these services as urban areas (Joseph, 2018). Lyft is one example of a rideshare service working to close the gap in transportation access by offering free or discounted rides to job interviews and the first three weeks of employment (Vera, 2019). However, this offer is only available in select major cities in the United States (United Way, 2019). Fewer options for transportation are available in rural areas, and existing options come with other barriers relating to the cost or distance.

The relationship between homelessness, justice system involvement, and unemployment is similar to a revolving door where each condition affects each of the other conditions. For communities where chronically homeless individuals cycle in and out of jails, shelters, and hospitals, the costs can be exorbitant (Kertesz & Weiner, 2009). Despite this, traditional approaches to address housing among this population have shown little effect in reducing homelessness (Fallis, 2010). The following discussion addresses some possible solutions for overcoming these challenges among rural homeless justice-involved persons.

Relevant Solutions

The following section discusses both broad recommendations as well as specific solutions for overcoming homelessness and unemployment among rural homeless justice-involved persons. Improving efforts to provide swift and immediate access to housing for justice-involved persons, particularly upon release from incarceration or quickly after becoming homeless, should be a primary focus on reducing future interaction with the criminal justice system and paving the way to employment (Blowers & Blevins, 2015). Quickly connecting homeless individuals to housing and individualized services provides consistency for daily activities (Lutze, et al., 2014) and reduces recidivism (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020).

Halfway houses show promise in reducing recidivism among medium and high-risk individuals (Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2002). Utilized as transitional housing between incarceration and independent living in the community, individuals placed in halfway houses have immediate access to housing, supervision, and services that will assist them in successful orientation into the community. While less effective for low-risk individuals, halfway houses can significantly impact the chance of recidivating for individuals with the greatest number of risk factors (Fontaine, 2013; Lowenkamp & Latessa, 2002). In rural communities, reconnecting homeless justice-involved individuals with family or other support systems may lead to short-term housing options (Family Justice, 2009). Further, educating public housing officials and landlords on the importance of stable housing to promote community safety, or working with developers or nonprofit housing providers to create housing options for justice-involved persons could change the narrative in rural communities where stigma and discrimination are prevalent (Family Justice, 2009). Some evidence suggests that up-front disclosure of criminal history on housing applications might be an effective method for improving private housing outcomes (Leasure et al., 2022). Additionally, efforts to promote recognition and protection of the human rights of all people experiencing homelessness (Aykanian, & Lee, 2016), including those with criminal records, could contribute to a reduction in the occurrence of offenses related to being homeless.

A holistic approach to addressing needs of rural homeless justice-involved individuals can be challenging given fewer services, however, is imperative in reducing homelessness among this population. Miller and Ngugi's (2009) meta-analysis, for example, found that providing housing to former inmates was not sufficient in and of itself to reduce recidivism, as justice-involved persons often have complex needs (e.g., such as substance use and mental health concerns) which must be addressed as well (Fontaine et al., 2012; Hickert & Taylor, 2011; Russolillo et al., 2014; Rog, 2004). Ensuring that special populations and certain types of justice-involved individuals with significant housing restrictions as a result of their criminal history receive appropriate individualized services from a variety of programs can contribute to reductions in recidivism by providing them with prosocial alternatives to crime. Recognizing that homelessness is a risk for anyone increases service providers' ability to connect individuals to relevant services. Service providers can identify specific needs and educate their clients on how to enroll in various programs, assist in completing paperwork,

direct them toward educational and employment training and opportunities, and ensure access to mental health, substance use, and medical treatment care (Rapid Re-Housing, n.d.). Improving incentives and working conditions for service providers in these areas may facilitate this process by increasing the number of providers in rural communities.

Adequate assessment of individuals' risk and needs is necessary before and/or immediately after individuals exit incarceration as it is an important step towards reducing recidivism (Leclair et al., 2019) and improving employment outcomes, particularly in rural areas where affordable housing and employment opportunities are already in limited supply. The impact of the opioid crisis in rural communities exemplifies this need. In recent years, the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services have partnered to create recovery housing in rural communities. Specifically, USDA-owned real estate and single-family housing properties are being sold at a discount to non-profits providing housing, treatment, job training, and other key services for individuals in substance treatment and recovery (SAMSHA, 2019). As substance users often interact with the criminal justice system, ensuring access to these resources may decrease housing instability as well as future justice system involvement for this population. State and local governments, law enforcement officers, and other agencies can provide referrals to local service providers where individuals can obtain temporary housing and other service assistance. Taken together, continuing these initiatives can reduce the likelihood of future criminal justice system involvement.

Vocational rehabilitation programs can help justice-involved individuals in rural areas be prepared for employment that will ultimately aid in their attainment of stable housing. There are various resources that can be helpful in promoting work participation for people experiencing homelessness. The State-federal vocational rehabilitation program, enacted in 1918, currently provides services for over one million individuals with disabilities per year (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Focused specifically on vocational outcomes for individuals with disabilities, including mental illnesses, the effectiveness of state-federal vocational rehabilitation programs has been highly supported by scientific studies (e.g., Bolton et al., 2000; Chan et al., 2006; Dutta et al., 2008; Gamble & Moore, 2003; O'Neill et al., 2015). The introduction of these evidenced-based practices in the vocational rehabilitation system can promote positive outcomes for justice-involved individuals who are also experiencing homelessness in rural communities.

Supported employment is particularly relevant to rural homeless justice-involved persons. Supported employment, legislated by the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, focuses primarily on the provision of vocational intervention at the point of placement through use of an employment specialist or a job coach (Wehman et al., 1989). Key features involved in supported employment include: (a) job placement for competitive work; (b) paid work; (c) integrated work settings; (d) job site training; (e) ongoing assessment; (f) ongoing support throughout the client's employment; (g) zero-exclusion; and (h) individualized services.

While traditional employment services place emphasis on prevocational training, assuming that people require a period of preparation before entering competitive employment (Chalamat et al., 2005), supported employment emphasizes the presence of an on-site employment specialist or a job coach to provide training and advocacy support. Therefore, individuals who receive supported employment services do not necessarily have to be “job ready”. Supported employment services are also able to help individuals overcome barriers to employment, such as poor work history, functional disability, transportation, and employer misconception by providing individualized employment services. Scientific evidence has shown the effectiveness of supported employment among individuals with mental illness (e.g., Bond et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2011; Metcalfe et al., 2018), and researchers also advocate supported employment as an intervention strategy to help homeless people with mental illness return to work (Brown et al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2018; Poremski et al., 2015; Poremski et al., 2017).

In practice, private employers are not prohibited from asking a job candidate's criminal history on their job applications. However, private employers are prohibited from discriminating against a job candidate when they use information of criminal history in decision-making (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, if an employer's decision not to hire a job candidate is due to the candidate's criminal history, the candidate's criminal history must be associated with the job, meaning the criminal history indicates that the candidate could be a liability in that position. Using criminal history that is not related to the job for making hiring decisions may violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended. Title VII prohibits employers from utilizing practices or policies that screen job candidates based on criminal records if they do not help the employer accurately decide whether the candidate is likely to be a reliable, responsible, or safe employee (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.).

‘Banning the box’ initiatives are a promising alternative to limiting the impact of a justice-involved individuals' past criminal behavior from impacting their ability to obtain future employment. These initiatives promote delaying asking about a job applicant's unlawful background in order to prevent employers from relying on an applicant's criminal history as grounds for disqualification from employment at the inception, particularly in cases where the individual's past has no rational relationship to the job sought (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2016). Evidence suggests that these policies can be effective at improving employment outcomes for justice-involved individuals (D'alessio et al., 2015).

In an effort to regain entry into the workforce, a number of individuals with criminal backgrounds have had to carefully navigate how to disclose their past misconduct. Impression management is one of a number of techniques for protecting and promoting the self-image. In this practice, skills are taught on how to influence how they are perceived by others, such as potential employers (Wayne & Liden, 1995). This exercise is particularly useful for job applicants with non-visible disabilities (e.g., mental illness) or job applicants who are justice-involved individuals (Ali et al., 2017) when they need to disclose a criminal history during a job interview. Several skills such as *assertive* impression management (i.e., actively

constructing an image of oneself with a cohesive set of beliefs, opinions, characteristics, or experiences) and *defensive* impression management (i.e., responding to a perceived or actual threat to one's image) (Sung, Lin, Connor, & Chan, 2017) may be helpful. Scientific evidence has shown the positive effect of impression management techniques on hiring managers' perceptions of applicants' fit with applied positions, which in turn promotes more positive hiring decisions (Higgins & Judge, 2004).

In addition to assertive and defensive impression management techniques, reparative impression management techniques, such as *apology* and *justification*, are also found helpful for job candidates who are justice-involved individuals. Apology refers to a verbal acknowledgment of remorse while justification refers to the case in which an individual takes responsibility for the behavior (e.g., offense) but denies the inappropriateness of the behavior or provides an external explanation for the behavior (Ali et al., 2017). Research has also shown that the use of apology or justification tactics in the context of explaining a previous criminal offense is positively associated with hiring evaluations (Ali et al., 2017). In brief, impression management would be helpful for those experiencing homelessness when they need to disclose or reveal personal limitations.

Example Programs

There is considerable research suggesting that homelessness and residential instability are among the greatest challenges facing justice system-involved individuals and their chances to achieve successful reintegration (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; Lutze et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003; Roman & Travis, 2006). Further, there is a consensus that barriers faced by rural individuals involved in the justice system are often times more challenging requiring distinct policy interventions (Belloti et al., 2008; Kleinedler, 2010) including coordination between local government agencies and existing community organizations (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007; Wodahl, 2006). To overcome some of these challenges, policymakers have sought to increase coordinated responses that support inmates recently released from prison (Lutze et al., 2014), including social services (e.g. housing, food, and clothing), treatment (e.g. substance use and mental health), and community support (Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). The following program descriptions illustrate these points and provide examples of effective programs for use and consideration in rural areas.

The Justice Bridge Housing Program (JBHP) was developed in response to the critical need for justice-involved individuals to have stable housing at re-entry and the urgency for housing for those returning to rural areas (Bowman & Ely, 2020). Specifically, the experiences of rural jail inmates reentering appear to be uniquely different from their urban counterparts as they are less likely to receive services prior to release and more likely to experience both structural and economic barriers to stable housing (Bowman & Ely, 2020). Bowman and Ely (2020) studied the experiences of 17 jail inmates who were released to a supportive housing program in rural Pennsylvania. The program was administered by the local public housing authority which oversaw a housing voucher program. Participants were referred to the program by county probation services and probation officers were actively

involved in supervising and monitoring participants. Program participants reported their experiences as representative of a relationship between homelessness, housing instability or unsafe housing conditions, and their criminal behavior. Specifically, they recounted committing crime for “survival” including situations where they lacked food and/or shelter as well as in response to feeling concerned for their own safety or that of their dependent children. In addition to housing vouchers, the program also provided integrated support services that provided direct forms of emotional support, care, and other material necessities (Walker et al., 2014). These networks allowed participants to develop social capital and build trusting relationships with community members who may not understand their circumstances or criminal past. Participants reported feeling less anxious or fearful over time and the security of stable housing made it easier to focus on reuniting with their families, rehabilitating, and meeting conditions of their parole (e.g., seeking or maintaining employment). Stable housing and the development of social networks makes securing and continuing employment easier as individuals have an address to provide to employers and develop references and support systems for obtaining employment.

JBHP participants also indicated that securing housing served as a triggering event that changed the way they thought about themselves and helped in accepting their new identity. Specifically, participants reported initially struggling with the internalization of their criminal past as well as the stigma associated with being a justice-involved individual. Over time, they began to develop new social identities where fear and uncertainty were replaced with comfort, a sense of independence, and self-worth. The safe and secure housing provided by the program laid the groundwork for the internal change participants needed to begin to focus on their other needs such as overcoming addiction, becoming financially independent, being productive and responsible, and having a positive influence on the community. One participant reported the desire to be “a productive member of society... actually for once doing what I should have been doing for a long time...” (Bowman & Ely, 2020, p. 439).

Through coordinated efforts by the local housing authority and the community, the JBHP was able to address the most basic of needs among those being released from jail. While the focus of this study was on the experience of the participants in the JBHP as opposed to a specific measure of recidivism, the responses suggest that participants underwent an internal transformation as a result of securing stable housing post-release that would discourage future offending. Participants were able to focus on other needs, including criminogenic needs and meeting their conditions of parole, after their need for housing had been met. The program specifically targeted justice-involved individuals in a rural setting where the housing challenges are particularly difficult to overcome.

In 2008, Washington State implemented the Reentry Housing Pilot Program (RHPP) to reduce the likelihood of recidivism among justice-involved individuals who were released from incarceration, homeless, and therefore at a higher risk for returning to prison (Lutze et al., 2014). While this program did not specifically target individuals experiencing homelessness in rural areas, at least one of the three counties where the study took place is characterized as being rural. The purpose of the program was to provide housing assistance

and wraparound services for high-risk and high-need individuals leaving prison without a viable place to live (Lutze et al., 2014). Lutze and colleagues further described that the goal of the program was “to reduce recidivism by providing access to stable housing for up to one year and coordinating resources across agencies including the police, community corrections officers, social service providers, employers, and housing managers” (Lutze et al., 2014, p. 472). The program was part of Washington State Bill ESSB 6157 that “provided up to 12 months of housing support to qualified offenders who were willing to engage in treatment, secure employment, and work toward self-sustainability” (Lutze et al., 2014, p. 472). The program promoted interagency collaboration and information-sharing at the local level between multiple stakeholders including RHPP contractors, Community Justice Centers, the Department of Corrections, and other supporting agencies (e.g., social services, mental health services, treatment providers, and police) (Lutze et al., 2014).

In 2014, Lutze and colleagues conducted a multisite outcome-based evaluation in which they considered how 208 previously convicted individuals in the RHPP program who were provided with housing and wraparound services compared with 208 similar previously convicted individuals who were traditionally supervised after release who were also elevated risk of homelessness. Lutze and colleagues (2014) found that the RHPP program reduced participants’ propensity to recidivate in the form of new convictions, revocations of their conditions of release, and readmission to prison. The program effects were significant for both reducing new convictions and readmission to prison for new crimes. Further, their findings indicate that the program had no significant effect on revocations suggesting that the increased supervision associated with the involvement of more agencies and potentially enhanced supervision did not lead to more revocations. They suggested that housing-centered policy initiatives that include additional wraparound services are an important part of keeping previously convicted individuals from repeating involvement in the criminal justice system. Obtaining housing generally requires individual to place a down payment, pay the first and last month’s rent, or bring some type of financial stability to the table which presents significant challenges. As residential status was found to change over time, Lutze and colleagues (2014) further suggested that policymakers conceptualize residential status not as a fixed event, but as a fluid and volatile state for justice-involved individuals that can be an ongoing threat to successful re-entry. Instability in housing can lead to instability to other aspects of the re-entry process, including keeping a job. The provision of additional services throughout the length of the program ensured that participants were supported at each step along the way, and ultimately decreased their likelihood of returning to incarceration.

Conclusion

Employment, homelessness, and justice system involvement are intricately linked. The revolving door between justice system involvement and homelessness is exacerbated by lack of employment sufficient to meet the daily needs of individuals including food, and shelter. Securing traditional housing generally requires individuals to put forward a considerable amount of money which can be a considerable obstacle for justice-involved individuals. Further, the stigma they face as a result of their criminal history makes obtaining

housing and employment even more challenging, particularly in rural communities where social networks are extensive. Many employers and housing providers are hesitant to extend services to justice-involved individuals due to concerns related to public safety and other liabilities as well as their ability to pay for housing or show up for work. In addition, many individuals face further personal challenges that make securing employment difficult.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward a more collaborative interagency approach to improving housing and employment outcomes and decreasing future involvement with the criminal justice system. This becomes particularly important for justice-involved individuals in rural areas where services are more limited, more spread out, and more difficult to locate or reach. As agencies begin working together more frequently, they will be able to improve housing options for justice-involved individuals. Programs such as the JBHP and RHPP are two examples of interagency approaches to improving these outcomes among individuals with a criminal history in rural areas. These programs each identified the individual needs of the participants, provided housing services, and improved employment outcomes among participants. This holistic approach which includes criminal justice agencies, community support services, and specific individual needs is particularly important for residents of rural areas where housing and employment opportunities are already limited. While the previously discussed programs indicate success across a myriad of variables, future research should examine the correlates of successful employment and access to housing stability, as well as other risk factors, for those who have been previously involved in the criminal justice system experiencing chronic homelessness.

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