

Homelessness among ex-prisoners

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Abstract

Ex-prisoners face the same obstacles as the greater population with regard to finding appropriate housing. However, their struggle is intensified by the additional barriers of mental illness, substance abuse, employment limitations, and available housing assistance programs. According to the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance 6% of new arrivals at homeless shelters in 2002 were former prisoners. There appears to be some confusion as to what entity is responsible for providing housing assistance to ex-prisoners and which institution should be forming these policies. For example, should this lie within the criminal justice system, housing services, or homeless services? This is not a new obstacle for this population since probation officers have been struggling with problems of housing and employment for newly released prisoners since the United States enacted the first parole program for Massachusetts parolees in 1837. Subsequently, many organizations have responded to the pleading cries for help to this population and all those impacted. Hence, institutes and associations have created numerous housing interventions to avoid homelessness and encourage autonomy and self-sufficiency among those re-entering.

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Introduction

According to the Massachusetts Department of Correction (2008), 3,140 prison inmates were released in 2007. Of these inmates, 82% were released to the street, rather than being released to another authority. Often, these prisoners who are released to the street do not have a permanent residence to go to, leading to high rates of homelessness for former prisoners. Research has shown that more than ten percent of prisoners will become homeless after being released from prison (Anderson, 2008). According to the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MSHA), 6% of people new arrivals at homeless shelters in 2002 were former prisoners (Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance, 2009). Nearly 1,000 prisoners in the United States released each year utilize an emergency shelter directly after their release. Research has found that homelessness and the use of homeless shelters increases the risk of recidivism. These individuals are on the streets and unemployed, making it more likely that they will commit crimes in order to get what they need (Kushel, Hahn, Evans, Bangsberg & Moss, 2005). Also, both the prison and homeless populations are disproportionately young, male, and black (Metraux & Culhane, 2004).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2005), each year more than 650,000 people leave state and federal prisons and 9 million are released from local jails. Furthermore, one out of every five people who are released from prison becomes homeless within a short time frame, if not instantaneously. Hence, the recidivism rate for this population increases gravely. Of the 3,140 inmates who were released in Massachusetts in 2007, 42% were released without supervision (Massachusetts Department of Correction, 2008). Offenders who are released without supervision pose a threat to public safety because they do not have access to

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services. It is difficult to monitor released prisoners who are homeless, and requires a great deal of time and resources to locate them (Council of State Governments, 2005).

Many aspects of homeless life are often “criminalized” because access to public services and community interactions decrease, so homeless people may resort to committing crimes in order to survive. A study conducted by Metraux & Culhane (2004) examined almost 50,000 released prisoners in New York between 1995 and 1998. Of these individuals, 11% entered a homeless shelter, and over half did so within one month of their release. Because so many released prisoners utilize homeless shelters in the first month, it is important to focus on the transition of these prisoners before they are sent back into the community.

Another downfall for using homeless shelters as default housing for released prisoners is the high cost for the criminal justice and other public systems. It is important for policymakers to establish policies that decrease the number of prisoners who utilize homeless shelters and to assist them in finding more appropriate housing (Council of State Governments, 2005).

However, because the responsibility of providing housing assistance to ex-prisoners does not seem to lie with the criminal justice system, housing services, or homeless services, there is confusion about which institution should be forming these policies (Rodriguez & Brown, 2003).

Often, individuals who are released from prison have few resources because they have been away from their families for a period of time. Also, because of their convicted felon status, the United States laws and policies encumber their eligibility to many services such as access to food stamps, welfare services, education, and employment opportunities (Roman, 2004; Evans, 2006). Along with this, the struggle for former prisoners to find affordable housing is overwhelming. There is a limited supply of affordable housing in the general population, and

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former prisoners are unlikely to be a priority to access that housing (Council of State Governments, 2005).

This paper will focus on the history of oppression that many homeless prisoners face. Also, barriers for these individuals will be addressed, including mental illness, substance abuse problems, and limited employment and housing opportunities. Lastly, this paper will examine current programs and initiatives in place for prisoners reentering the community, and develop a plan of action based on the programs already in place.

History and Oppression

Probation officers have been struggling with problems of housing and employment for newly released prisoners since the United States enacted the first parole program for Massachusetts parolees in 1837 (EOPSS, 2009). In the 19th century, it was deemed important for released prisoners to return to their homes in the community, and that they not be attacked and their money stolen while on their way home (DOJ, 2009). Today, *finding a home* is one of the largest problems facing the parolee population while transitioning into the community after being released from state and local prisons (Burkin, 2009; Heeringa, 2007, and Petersilia, 2003).

Throughout the decades there have been many changes in legislation, policies and popular beliefs regarding the release of prisoners and their re-integration into society. Perhaps the largest and most consistent problem to plague communities has been homelessness amongst ex-prisoners and the affects that ripple through the streets where housing is needed, yet scarce (Petersilia, 2003). It is in these neighborhoods that former inmates face oppression when trying to find housing and jobs, and they are often marginalized as they attempt to reenter society as ex-convicts (Petersilia, 2003).

The inmate process of re-entry into the community has received attention from national and state levels for many years, with legislation and programs reflective of the commitment of

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the government towards understanding the complexity of re-entry and the effects on the communities that accommodate the former prisoners as well as their families (NJC, 2009).

Legislation and programs are also reflective of public sentiment.

Since the 1990's and the rising of the no-frills policies in prisons, many opportunities for reform have been taken away, including the opportunity for inmates to receive paid tuition for college courses in many states (Petersilia, 2003). This allows money to be redirected elsewhere, but does little to increase the capabilities of those individuals who will one day be out on the streets. According to Petersilia (2001), the decrease in programs for prisoners coupled with the lack of services for parolees creates an environment where individuals attempting reentry are likely to fail.

Over the past several decades, the popular belief that victims must be protected has resulted in the growing trend of excluding former prisoners from many neighborhoods within communities. The addition of monitoring devices has created a further barrier between the victims, other community dwellers and former prisoners (EOPSS, 2009).

Additionally, legislation placing restrictions on the availability of housing can limit opportunities for former convicts to acquire suitable space for living (RPC, 2009). The Reentry Policy Council is a national project that was implemented by The Justice Center in 2001 to help policymakers deal with issues concerning reintegrating prisoners and to provide aid to reentry programs and initiatives (RPC, 2009). They found that legal issues are extensive when it comes to former prisoners finding housing (RPC, 2009). The Justice Center website provides an informational chart displaying the options and barriers that a former inmate might encounter when searching for appropriate housing: <http://tools.reentrypolicy.org/housing>.

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The ability to get loans, moreover, the opportunities to get jobs so that first and last month rent requirements and monthly rent money is available can be a tremendous hurdle for new parolees (Petersilia, 2001). Also, the increased use of criminal background checks combined with rental owners' disinclination to rent to former prisoners lowers the availability of rental units (RPC, 2009). With low-income public housing and scarcity of affordable housing, and legal barriers eliminating other housing opportunities, it is more challenging than ever for an ex-prisoner to secure a safe place to live for himself and his family (RPC, 2009).

Currently, public sentiment is focused on the effects of parolee homelessness, its association with recidivism how the community is affected (EOPSS, 2009; Petersilia, 2003, and RPC, 2009). There have been many studies done that show an association between homelessness and incarceration, as suggested by Petersilia (2001; 2003) and other researchers (Brooks, L.E., et al., 2008; Metraux, S., and Culhane, D.P., 2006; and Solomon, P. and Draine, J., 1999) which may be at least partially why public focus has shifted to recidivism and public safety (EOPSS, 2009; and RPC, 2009). Homeless former inmates are marginalized socially as well as economically when citizens, landlords, business owners engage in defensive behaviors that might be elicited from fear related concerns (Petersilia, 2003).

However, without employment, and/or housing, the risk of recidivism increases along with concerns for public safety (EOPSS, 2009) and the cycle continues to cost communities excess amounts of money, has negative effects on citizen well-being and denies former inmates and their families the opportunity to develop a safe and productive life after release from prison (RPC, 2009).

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Barriers to Reentry

Homelessness among ex-prisoners warrants careful consideration of the barriers facing these individuals in their search for living accommodations and the impact that their homelessness has on their parole requirements. For instance, the risk of recidivism among ex-prisoners increases when faced with homelessness upon release (Kushel, Hahn, Evans, Bangsberg & Moss, 2004; Re-entry Policy Council, 2005; Roman & Travis, 2004). It appears that many ex-prisoners enter into a cycle of homelessness and incarceration. Ex-offenders encounter the same social and economic obstacles as the larger population however they must overcome the additional setbacks associated with being an ex-convict (Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). These setbacks include the high percentage of ex-prisoners also suffering from mental illness or substance abuse problems, and limited employment opportunities and housing assistance as a result of having a criminal record (Anderson, 2008; Metraux & Cuhane, 2004; Roman & Travis, 2004).

First, many of those released from prison are also battling mental health or substance abuse problems (Anderson, 2008). A study conducted by Metraux and Cuhane (2004) found that many of these people cycle in and out of homelessness and prison, and are not receiving the care that they really need. Researchers believe that being homeless may actually worsen mental illness and substance abuse problems (Re-entry Policy Council, 2005). Evans (2006) states that it is easy to remain sober while incarcerated because the temptation has been eliminated, however once out in mainstream society, drugs and alcohol are more accessible and the temptation becomes difficult to ignore. It is possible that these individuals are unable to find and maintain housing, employment, or health care, and, as a result, continually find themselves shuffling between shelters and prison.

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Even those not suffering from mental illness or substance abuse issues may experience shock or other conflicting emotions upon reentry. It is common for ex-prisoners to be greeted with resentment, anger, and abandonment from their families (Evans, 2006). While ex-offenders were detained their families needed to support each other emotionally and financially, and have had to endure the stigma attached to having a family member in prison. These feelings are not easily overcome, and while the ex-prisoners are awaiting their forgiveness, they are lacking the support needed to create new, healthier lifestyles.

Having a criminal record also limits the number of work positions ex-prisoners are eligible for, thus creating another barrier to housing (Evans, 2006; Metraux & Cuhane, 2004; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). Finding stable housing directly from prison is difficult without money and becomes even more complicated when these individuals either cannot find a job or are only eligible for low paying positions. Metraux and Cuhane (2004) found that serving time in prison reduced the number of job opportunities for ex-offenders, making it harder to find housing, which in turn makes it even more difficult to find employment.

Two additional obstacles that ex-offenders must tackle are the reactions of family and friends to their incarceration and release, and the structure of present housing policies. Some ex-prisoners are fortunate enough to be able to return home and live with their families or friends. Others, however, are not as lucky. Some ex-prisoners cannot live with relatives or friends due to past conflicts or current legal restrictions (Roman & Travis, 2004). Families may still feel resentment, anger or fear towards ex-prisoners and refuse to let them come home (Evans, 2006; Roman & Travis, 2004). Still others may not have any immediate family in the area or make a personal decision not to revert back to a negative lifestyle involving people from their past

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(Roman & Travis, 2004). Finally, parole or subsidized housing requirements may prohibit a person with a criminal record from entering the family home (Roman & Travis, 2004).

If, for one reason or another, an ex-prisoner cannot live with family or friends, he or she must seek an alternative living arrangement, inevitably turning towards what is offered by the state. What the state offers, however, often includes additional obstacles for ex-prisoners. First, many of the housing options available to ex-offenders are located in poor neighborhoods where there is a lack of employment opportunity (Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). Without sufficient employment prospects, it is often difficult to find and maintain affordable housing (Rodriguez & Brown, 2003).

Second, many of the state-run programs exclude persons with criminal records (Anderson, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). For example, Section 8 housing requirements state that persons with criminal records are ineligible for services and anyone currently receiving the voucher may not house anyone with a criminal past (Anderson, 2008; Evans, 2006; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003). Likewise, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) enforces a restriction on food stamps and Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for anyone with a drug conviction (Evans, 2006; Roman & Travis, 2004). The McKinney-Vento program, on the other hand, will provide assistance to ex-offenders, however those being released from prison do not meet the criteria for being homeless and to receive benefits they must first spend time in a homeless shelter (Anderson, 2008). These are wonderful programs helping people obtain their basic needs, but they exclude this large portion of the homeless population.

One possible explanation for this is that the responsibility for aiding ex-prisoners in finding safe and affordable housing is unassigned. Metraux and Cuhane (2004) postulate that the

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number of imprisoned persons has been steadily increasing, which in turn has escalated the number of inmates released into society. These researchers then go on to state that there have not been any successful attempts at balancing the increase of released inmates and the number of resources available to them.

Reasons to Act

The Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS) has the enormous task and challenge of reintegrating prisoners from its state correctional facilities. As previously noted, prisoners are dealing with a plethora of issues ranging from substance abuse, medical and mental health illness, and the lack of basic skills necessary to become productive citizens in society. As a society we are compelled to take action given that each and every one of us will be affected by this grave issue. We may know someone who has been released who is struggling to find employment, or are friendly with a family member who cannot allow a sexual offender in the home, or amazed that it costs \$43,000 per year to house an inmate (Department of Corrections, 2008). Regardless, of the circumstances we are affected by this ever growing travesty.

Current Programs

Many organizations have created numerous housing interventions to avoid homelessness and encourage autonomy and self-sufficiency among those re-entering. Some of the programs in Massachusetts that have indicated success include Dismas House, which is a supportive residential community that serves former prisoners, and Home Start, which assisted more than 3,200 homeless people move to their own homes. In 2002, the Urban Institute highlighted Dismas House as a cost effective manner to reduce recidivism and reverse the damage occurring through poorly managed prison release. According to a report by the Massachusetts Parole

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Board, The Almost Home Program had a 95% success rate for reintegrating ex-criminals into society between October 2006 and July 2007.

Additionally, there are programs offered through the MA Parole Board who are taking a preventative path regarding the re-entry of inmates. For example, the Pathways Program focuses on inmates within six months of release. Inmates partake in vocational evaluation, life skills/career counseling and an assortment of training opportunities. After the instruction, inmates are assisted with job and training placement in the community. Another program is Project Assisting Women Achieve Reintegration and Employment (AWARE), which offers individualized discharge planning and is intended to coach inmates about the skills essential for reintegration (DOC, 2008). The philosophy behind this initiative is that education and well thought-out preparation for re-entry into the community denote a decrease in the recidivism rate.

As a means to link inmates to employment, including supportive employment and employment services, Massachusetts was awarded a Department of Justice grant for the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) in which the Department of Correction was the lead agency. Upon conclusion of the grant, the Department created an internal Career Center Workgroup to enhance the community connections required to help offenders find and sustain profitable employment.

The Reentry Workshop is a program offered to inmates within one year of their earliest possible release date, which is an initiative from the Department of Correction. This recently expanded ten day program is delivered by Spectrum Health Systems, Inc. and designed to assist inmates in developing a comprehensive reentry plan. Topic areas include housing/living arrangements, employment, social support, crisis planning, and financial budgeting. In October 2007, the Reentry Workshop curriculum was enhanced to include a comprehensive

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employability component addressing the process of seeking, securing, and maintaining employment by practicing with mock job applications, resume writing, and interviews.

The Reentry Housing Program funded by DOC and administered by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) provides individual assistance to eligible offenders with every step of the housing search process, including budgeting and credit repair, as well as identifying transitional, public and private housing options. This program has received national recognition by the U. S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2005) as a model that decreases the likelihood of offenders releasing to shelters by providing housing placement services, follow-up case management and referral to appropriate treatment, education, training and employment. As such, it is an essential component of successful offender reentry.

Action Plan

Thus, this leads to the question as to who should sit on the panel? As noted earlier, inmates have a large array of issues which impact their ability to obtain housing. Consequently, there would be a representative from the following areas: parole board, treatment providers for substance abuse, mental health, and physical health, the office of Medicaid, the Department of Labor and Training, the inmate, and anyone identified as a support for the inmate. It is imperative that the inmate attend all meetings and his or her voice be heard. As noted above, the first meeting should occur within six weeks of the scheduled release date, with a follow-up to take place within two weeks of the discharge date, and then a final meeting occurring within two weeks after the inmate has been released. The purpose of the final meeting would be to evaluate the initial plan, reassess services, and to devise a six month plan.

Therefore, when thinking of a social action plan one needs to consider programs that have had a positive impact on decreasing homelessness for this population and building on their

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strengths. The first task for this plan is to devise a lead agency that would be responsible for coordinating a discharge meeting with community providers to discuss options, services and concerns, and to develop a plan for an inmate's release. There would be a representative from the local providers at the meeting which would be scheduled on a weekly basis, on the same day and time. This would ideally alleviate confusion and foster consistent representation from the various agencies invited to sit on the panel. For an individual inmate, this meeting should occur within six weeks of the tentative release date. According to the Department of Correction (DOC) an integral aspect of successful reentry development is acquiring housing prior to an offender's release in order to avoid homelessness. This supports the need for an interagency collaboration that would not only benefit the individual inmate, but society at large. At this time the DOC has developed a Friends & Family Brochure to assist families and ex-prisoners to navigate the system in order to make their re-enter a positive experience and an accomplishment.

Discussion

When the authors of this paper discussed the vision for a plan to successfully reintegrate inmates back into society, they were unaware of the magnitude of programs already in existence. After conducting the research and realizing how many programs, forums, and initiatives have been devised to address this population and the problem of homelessness, they wondered what the challenges and barriers for success were. Financial constrains, manpower, lack of resources, and accountability are possible reasons for the lack of accomplishment in this area. It appears that various programs have been devised to approach one aspect of the re-entry process. However, there must be an identified lead agency and one forum in which the inmate goes to in order to get his or her needs addressed. Additionally, this needs to be a uniformed process across the state. The DOC has developed a flyer entitled "Friends & Family Brochure" which is a tool

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to inform and educate offenders and family members of various programs and services to facilitate the conversion between prison back into the community. This is a good first step towards successful reintegration.

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