

# Zero Returns to Homelessness

## A Collaborative Vision for Corrections, Housing Leaders, and Their Partners

### The Problem: The Cycle of Homelessness and Justice Involvement

Each year, as millions of people return home from prison and jail, accessing safe, affordable housing is one of their most difficult challenges.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they are 10 times more likely than the general public to experience homelessness.<sup>2</sup> Recent state-level data suggests that over 30 percent of people returning home from incarceration may experience homelessness,<sup>3</sup> with local data suggesting that up to 20 percent of people experience homelessness when released to community supervision.<sup>4</sup>

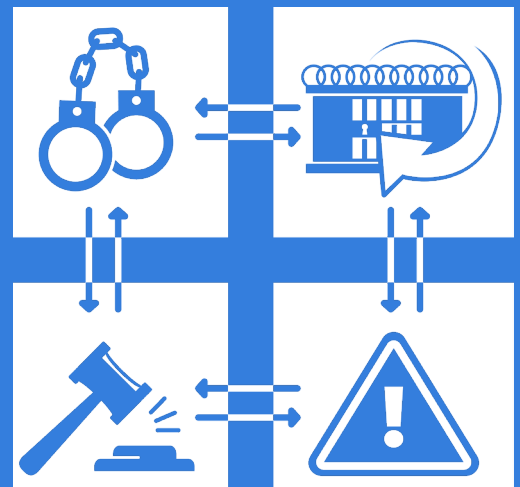
This challenge to obtain housing persists for many reasons, some of which include well-known barriers to reentry such as securing employment and accessing treatment for behavioral health needs.<sup>5</sup> However, housing market challenges also play a significant role in the lack of housing access for people in reentry, most notably widespread stigma, discrimination, and policy barriers imposed by housing providers.<sup>6</sup> These challenges disproportionately impact Black, American Indian, and Hispanic individuals, who experience homelessness and incarceration at higher rates than White people in the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, every year, at least 50,000 people experience homelessness following incarceration.<sup>8</sup> Once homeless, people face increased vulnerability of contact with the justice system, as **people experiencing homelessness are 11 times more likely to face arrest.**<sup>8</sup> This creates a costly cycle of contact with law enforcement, courts, and incarceration<sup>9</sup> that strains systems meant to respond to emergencies. It also comes at substantial financial, societal, and human cost.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1:  
**The Cycle of Incarceration and Homelessness**

Local policies and ordinances contribute to arrests for behaviors associated with homelessness.

Lack of stable housing upon exit from jail contributes to supervision failure & increased risk of recidivism.



Lack of stable housing viewed as a risk factor and reduces courts willingness to divert people from jail or prison.

Criminal record history acts as barrier to obtaining housing.

<sup>1</sup> In 2022, state departments of correction and the Federal Bureau of Prisons reported releasing a total of 448,400 people. However, in 2022, across all states, 7,300,000 people cycled through local jails, far exceeding releases from prison. See E. Ann Carson, Ph.D., *Prisoners in 2022 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2023); Zhen Zeng, Ph.D., *Jail Inmates in 2022 – Statistical Tables* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023); Joy Moses, *Demographic Data Project: Race, Ethnicity, and Homelessness* (Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Alexi Jones, *New Data: The Revolving Door Between Homeless Shelters and Prisons in Connecticut* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Applied Survey Research (ASR), *2023 County of Santa Cruz Homeless Count and Survey Comprehensive Report* (Watsonville, CA: ASR, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> <https://housingforhealthpartnership.org/Portals/29/HAP/Providers/Data/2023PITFullReport.pdf>; ASR, *Santa Clara County Homeless Census & Survey 2017 Comprehensive Report* (Watsonville, CA: ASR, 2020), <https://osh.sccgov.org/sites/g/files/exjpc671/files/2017%20Santa%20Clara%20County%20Homeless%20Census%20and%20Survey%20Report.pdf>; ASR, *County of Sonoma 2022 Point-in-Time Count Results* (Watsonville, CA: ASR, 2022), <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Main%20County%20Site/Health%20and%20Human%20Services/Health%20Services/Documents/Homelessness%20Services/Homeless%20Data/County%20of%20Sonoma%202022%20Point-in-Time%20Count%20Results.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, *Successful Reentry/Transition from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation: Identification of Barriers + Solutions to Address Them* (Sacramento, CA: The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Francis, Joey Hayashi, and Alexandria Hawkins, *Building Connections to Housing During Reentry: Results from a Questionnaire on DOC Housing Policies, Programs, and Needs* (New York: CSG Justice Center, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Olivet et al., "Racial Inequity and Homelessness: Findings from the SPARC Study" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 693, no.1 (2021): 82-100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216221991040>; Brenna Klein et al., "COVID-19 Amplified Racial Disparities in the US Criminal Legal System" *Nature* 617 no. 7960 (2023): 344-350, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10172107/>.

<sup>9</sup> Office of Planning and Development, *The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress: Part 2: Estimates of Homelessness in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018), <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-2.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Alexi Jones, *New Data: The Revolving Door Between Homeless Shelters and Prisons in Connecticut*.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan McBain et al., *Pima County Housing First Initiative: Final Evaluation Report Fall 2021* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA236-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA236-1.html).

<sup>12</sup> "Five Charts That Explain the Homelessness-Jail Cycle—and How to Break It." Urban Institute, accessed June 23, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/features/five-charts-explain-homelessness-jail-cycle-and-how-break-it>.



# The Solution: Building Connections with Safe, Affordable Housing

## Housing works. The research is clear:

- Housing reduces returns to both prison and jail.<sup>11</sup>
- Housing reduces costs to corrections<sup>12</sup> and other public systems,<sup>13</sup> and can save taxpayer dollars as well.<sup>14</sup>
- Housing improves outcomes for families<sup>15</sup> and bonds between returning parents and their children while also improving prosocial outcomes for kids.
- Housing increases connections to stabilizing community-based services.<sup>16</sup>
- Housing reduces rates of crime victimization.<sup>17</sup>
- Housing leads to these and other positive outcomes<sup>18</sup> across all types of communities.<sup>19</sup>

## The Vision: Zero Returns to Homelessness

Just as the “functional zero”<sup>20</sup> concept is used to measure if a community has sustainably ended homelessness for a population, the concept of Zero Returns to Homelessness challenges states and communities to drive toward an ambitious goal: **a future where all people have a safe, permanent place to call home upon reentering the community after incarceration.** This critical goal can help break the cycle between homelessness and incarceration and “move the needle” on one of the most challenging issues in reentry. While episodes of homelessness will still occur at times, the Zero Returns to Homelessness vision seeks to make these episodes rare, brief, and non-recurring.

At its foundation, Zero Returns to Homelessness necessitates elected officials, providers, and community leaders working together across systems and sectors—sometimes in new ways—to ensure there are sufficient housing and support service resources to make this goal a reality. It also requires the involvement of a wide range of people, from the decision makers who allocate resources to the program managers who make meaningful coordination happen, and especially the people with lived experience in homelessness and the criminal justice system to lead and inform all aspects of the work.

Achieving zero releases from prison and jail into homelessness is ambitious. However, people also once thought it was too difficult to end veteran or chronic homelessness. Yet now, in 2024, we see strides forward as 83 communities and 3 states have all but ended veteran homelessness, and 5 communities in the U.S. have ended chronic homelessness.<sup>22</sup> By getting the right people to the table, setting ambitious but achievable system-wide goals, and aligning resources to support these goals, these places have done what once seemed impossible.

Across the country, communities are also making significant progress toward increasing housing options for people reentering the community from prison and jail, and starting to show that the Zero Returns to Homelessness vision can become a reality. Interested in learning more? Contact us at [ZeroReturns@csg.org](mailto:ZeroReturns@csg.org).

**“Homelessness is a cross-systems problem in need of cross-systems solutions. . . [That] means working closely with the criminal justice system to make sure that no one ever leaves jail or prison only to end up in a shelter or an encampment.”**

— United States Interagency Council on Homelessness Executive Director, Jeff Olivet<sup>21</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Jocelyn Fontaine et al., *Supportive Housing for Returning Prisoners: Outcomes and Impacts of the Returning Home-Ohio Pilot Project* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute - Justice Policy Center, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Ryan K. McBain et al., *Pima County Housing First Initiative: Final Evaluation Report Fall 2021* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Verughese Jacob et al., “Permanent Supportive Housing with Housing First: Findings from A Community Guide Systematic Economic Review,” *Guide to Community Preventive Services* 62, no. 3 (2022): E188-E201, [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(21\)00482-7/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(21)00482-7/fulltext).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Western and Natalie Smith, *Formerly Incarcerated Parents and Their Children* (Bethesda, MD: National Library of Medicine, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Anirban Basu et al., “Comparative Cost Analysis of Housing and Case Management Program for Chronically Ill Homeless Adults Compared to Usual Care,” *Health Services Research*, no. 47 (2012): 523–543, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3393008/>.

<sup>17</sup> Molly Meibresse et al., “Exploring the Experiences of Violence Among Individuals Who Are Homeless Using a Consumer-Led Approach” *Violence and Victims*, 29:1, (2014) 122–136, [https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/vv-29-1\\_ptr\\_a8\\_122-136.pdf](https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/vv-29-1_ptr_a8_122-136.pdf); Janey Rountree, Nathan Hess, and Austin Lyke, *Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the U.S.* (Los Angeles: California Policy Lab, 2019); Michelle Tong et al., “Persistent Homelessness and Violent Victimization Among Older Adults in the HOPE HOME Study,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36: 17–18 (2021), 8519–8537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519850532>.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Ventures, *Southwest Minnesota - Rural Communities Working Together to End Homelessness* (Houston, TX: Arnold Ventures, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Tim Aubry et al., *At Home/Chez Soi Project: Moncton Site Final Report* (Calgary, AB: Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> “Functional Zero: A Definition for Ending Homelessness for a Population,” Community Solutions, accessed April 31, 2023, <https://community.solutions/built-for-zero/functional-zero/>.

<sup>21</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “We All Have a Role to Play”: Jeff Olivet’s Full Remarks at NAEH Conference on Ending Homelessness,” news release July 26, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> “VA Homeless Programs,” U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, accessed January 8, 2024, <https://www.va.gov/homeless/endingvetshomelessness.asp>; “Functional Zero: A Definition for Ending Homelessness for a Population,” Community Solutions.