

# From behind bars to ... the streets? Bay Area residents with records struggle to find housing



New programs, policies aim to help

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It's tough for anyone to find housing in the Bay Area, but something in Lee "Taqwaa" Bonner's past made his search even more difficult: a felony conviction.

Bonner had rent money — when he got out of prison in 2017, two separate nonprofits offered to pay for his housing for a few months. And he had a job driving a forklift lined up. But after getting rejected by multiple landlords because of his record, Bonner did what many parolees do — he moved into his car.

"It's supposed to be when you leave prison, your punishment stops. Unfortunately, the punishment begins," said 52-year-old Bonner, who served 30 years for second-degree murder — a crime he still thinks about, and regrets, constantly. In an attempt to atone for what he did, Bonner started a nonprofit outreach program for troubled kids while he was incarcerated. Today, he continues to mentor young people and also works as an advocate for the rights of formerly incarcerated people.

Housing struggles are a reality for many Bay Area residents, but they're even more acute for the estimated one in five Californians — or 8 million people — with a criminal conviction. Background checks are a standard part of applying for an apartment, and applicants with criminal records often are denied.

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“For many people, they remain homeless for years and years,” said Sonja Tonnesen, co-founder of Oakland-based Root & Rebound, which advocates for people who have been incarcerated.

But momentum to change that is building. Root & Rebound recently released a [housing “toolkit”](#) for formerly incarcerated renters — a lengthy document that explains their rights and how to protect them — and is holding training sessions for community members. Richmond and San Francisco have joined a handful of U.S. cities in banning some landlords from asking about criminal history during the initial application process. Oakland-based Impact Justice is helping people with records find housing by matching them, Airbnb-style, with altruistic local homeowners.

At the state level, California has some of the [strictest rules in the country](#) limiting when an employer can ask a job seeker about past criminal convictions. But a bill that would have placed similar limits on landlords screening potential tenants died earlier this year.

Criminal background checks are an important part of the tenant-screening process, according to Mike Nemeth, spokesman for the California Apartment Association. But the association doesn’t oppose legislation that “bans the box” applicants often are asked to check if they have a criminal conviction — as long as background checks are allowed later in the process.

“Such a policy offers a reasonable approach,” Nemeth wrote in an emailed statement. “Landlords can thoroughly screen their applicants, and tenants with a criminal record can still make a good first impression without the ‘box’ being a factor.”

When Bonner got out of prison, he applied for one apartment in San Leandro and another in Brentwood but said both rejected him because of his record. Disheartened by the rejections and by the news that none of the 20 other men in his network who were paroled around the same time had found housing either, Bonner started sleeping in the driver’s seat of his Toyota Camry. He couldn’t stay with his family either — his sister and daughter, both in Oakland, have housing through Section 8 vouchers that doesn’t allow residents with criminal convictions.

Bonner served three decades behind bars for two murders he committed when he was 19 while working as a lookout for a drug dealer. He says the murders were in retaliation for a beating he had endured and were the culmination of a childhood filled with early drug and alcohol use and negative influences.

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Last year, Bonner got married and moved into his wife's East Bay apartment.

"Outside of her," he said, "at this point, I would still be homeless."

People who have been incarcerated are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

Impact Justice is housing some of those people through its Homecoming Project, which launched last summer in Alameda County. The nonprofit works with parolees who are getting out of prison after serving long sentences and matches them with homeowners who have an extra bedroom. For six months, Impact Justice pays the homeowner about \$750 a month, said project coordinator Terah Lawyer. After that, the parolee can move on or the parolee and homeowner can work out their own lease terms.

The organization has housed 12 people. So far Impact Justice hasn't reported any problems between tenants and homeowners, Lawyer said.

Tamiko Panzella signed up to be a Homecoming Project host last year, offering up one bedroom in the two-bedroom condo she shares with her boyfriend in Oakland. As a volunteer at San Quentin State Prison, 32-year-old Panzella had spent time helping inmates find housing before they were released, and she knew first-hand how limited their options are.

Last fall, Panzella and her boyfriend welcomed a new roommate who had just gotten out of prison after serving 13 and a half years for a violent crime.

The three instantly hit it off.

"We didn't really know anyone else with his background," Panzella said. "But personality-wise, we just all got along really well."

To help smooth such transitions, the Richmond City Council in 2016 passed an ordinance that prohibits subsidized affordable housing providers from asking about an applicant's criminal history until after the landlord has vetted the prospective tenant in other ways and offered him or her a conditional lease. San Francisco has a similar ordinance.

But the Richmond ordinance doesn't have teeth, said Adam Poe, managing attorney with Bay Area Legal Aid. He represents a client who recently sued an apartment complex, claiming the landlord violated the ordinance by rejecting her based on her past conviction and denying her the right to appeal that rejection.

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