

Where ‘Returning Citizens’ Find Housing After Prison

STATELINE
ARTICLE

April 23, 2019

By: [Teresa Wiltz](#)

Topics: [Business of Government](#), [Demographics](#), [Justice & Safety Net](#)

Read time: 6 min



A person walks into a shelter in Atlanta. Cities and counties including Atlanta are experimenting with creative ways to prevent homelessness among people who have been in jail or prison.

Robert Ray/The Associated Press

[Read more Stateline coverage on affordable housing.](#)

For those who've been locked up in prison for years, finding a home on the outside can be rough. Parole restrictions may limit where former inmates can live. Public housing and housing vouchers may be off-limits, and many landlords are reluctant to rent to former offenders.

The result, criminal justice experts say, is a housing crisis among the formerly incarcerated, particularly among those recently released from prison. The lack of affordable housing in

many cities, and the resulting spike in overall homelessness, are exacerbating the problem.

Former prison inmates are almost 10 times more likely to become homeless than the general population, according to an August [report](#) by the Prison Policy Initiative, a nonprofit based in Northampton, Massachusetts.

In New York City, for example, more than 54% of people released from prison moved straight into the [city's shelter system](#) in 2017, according to a 2018 report by the Coalition for the Homeless.

“If people don't have stable housing when they get out, they're much more likely to go back,” said Steve Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a research and advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. “Housing is the key to understanding the recidivism puzzle.”

A handful of states, cities and counties are experimenting with ways to house former inmates while protecting the public.

Prisoner advocates in Alameda County, California, launched a program in August that takes the Airbnb approach, pairing recently released offenders with homeowners willing to rent to them.

In December, Delaware Gov. John Carney, a Democrat, created a commission to make it easier for state inmates to find housing and employment.

In Washington state, the Tacoma Housing Authority provides rental assistance to formerly incarcerated college students at risk of homelessness.

The Housing Authority of New Orleans is updating its screening process to make it easier for ex-offenders to get housing, while Seattle and Washington, D.C., have barred landlords from asking about felony convictions on rental applications.

The Georgia Department of Corrections may be taking the most innovative approach. In August, it opened the Metro Reentry Facility in Atlanta, believed to be the first transitional state prison for offenders slated for release within 18 months. “Returning citizens” receive intensive counseling, vocational training and housing support so they will leave with two things: a job and a home.

“One of our goals is: Nobody is released to homelessness,” said Jay Sanders, assistant commissioner of inmate services at the Georgia agency.

Before, many former inmates became homeless as soon as they walked out of prison, said Doug Ammar, executive director of the Georgia Justice Project. The group is providing free legal services for those enrolled in the Metro Reentry Facility program.

“They didn’t have anywhere to go,” Ammar said. “And the state system was like, ‘Good luck, we don’t have anything to do with it.’”

Now government officials are increasingly aware of the problem, Ammar said, and willing to take steps to ameliorate it. The shift comes amid a bipartisan push to change the criminal justice system and reduce recidivism rates by, among other things, updating sentencing guidelines, decriminalizing some minor offenses and raising the age of criminal responsibility.

In the long term, those changes will lead to fewer people going to prison. In the short term, however, they are causing a flood of recently released inmates that is straining homeless assistance programs, according to Stephen Eide, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank in New York City.

Cities faced a surge of homelessness when people with mental illnesses were moved out of institutions in the 1970s and '80s. Now they are facing a similar situation as more people are released from prison.

“They’ve been in prison, and now they fall into the shelter system,” Eide said. “And shelters are very expensive.”

For their part, landlords say they are faced with a difficult choice.

“There’s a lot of fear when people hear there are criminal records,” said Alexandra Alvarado, director of marketing and education for the American Apartment Owners Association, a membership organization of professional property managers based in Calabasas, California. “They’re afraid they’re going to have a violent offender who’s a safety risk.”

At the same time, Alvarado said, landlords are reluctant to run background checks for fear of being sued for housing discrimination. She said her organization advises property owners to consider the type of crime the former offender committed and its relevance to renting a home.

Precariously Housed

“There’s really no reason to expect that someone leaving prison would be able to find housing on their own,” said Wanda Bertram, spokeswoman for the Prison Policy Initiative.

It should be incumbent on cities, counties and states to find housing for people who've been incarcerated, Bertram said, particularly when some local ordinances can make it all but impossible for former inmates to find housing.

For example, in August, the Clayton (California) City Council banned homes for two or more people on probation or parole in all but two locations in the city.

"I don't want parolee housing landing anywhere in Clayton," Councilwoman [Julie Pierce](#) said at the Aug. 21 board meeting, according to the *East Bay Times*. "I want to make it as ugly a process as it can possibly be, so they go anywhere but Clayton."

Federal law only prohibits two types of former offenders from living in public housing: people convicted of manufacturing methamphetamines and those who must register as sex offenders. But individual authorities have broad discretion to bar other kinds of offenders.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued [guidelines](#) advising public housing authorities and private landlords that refusing to rent to someone with a criminal history could violate the Fair Housing Act because "racial and ethnic minorities face disproportionately high rates of arrest and incarceration."

But critics argue the HUD guidelines are vague and rarely enforced.

"It's so loosey-goosey out there," Ammar said. "It leaves a lot of room for people not to get housing."

Reestablishing Connections

Being in prison cuts people off from friends, family and other sources of support. And sometimes parole conditions bar former inmates from moving back home if other family members also have criminal records — a common situation in poor neighborhoods.

The reentry facility in Atlanta was created because so many state prisoners were from the area but were locked up in facilities far from home, according to Sanders from the Georgia Department of Corrections. Most of the prisons are in rural Georgia, Sanders said, which made it difficult for Atlanta-area inmates to reconnect with family and local services.

So far, 350 inmates, all men, have been enrolled in the program. Plans are in the works that would build additional dorms for men who are about to be released and who have jobs outside the prison.

Prison officials work with the soon-to-be released inmates to help them reconnect with family members, find housing, get a driver's license and open a bank account.

The goal is to introduce a strange new world to people who may have been incarcerated for decades.

“They have so much they have to catch up on,” from technology advancements to resume-building to getting a driver’s license, said Terah Lawyer, project coordinator for the Homecoming Project at Impact Justice, a California-based nonprofit.

Lawyer has experienced that struggle herself: In 2017, she was released from prison after serving 15 years of a lifetime sentence. (She doesn’t want to say what her crime was, out of respect for her victim.)

“My criminal record could definitely lead to me [living] in my car,” Lawyer said.

Now, she matches people recently released from prison with homeowners who are willing to give them a place to live and coach them on living life on the outside.

The homeowners are paid a \$25 daily subsidy. So far, 10 people have enrolled in the two-year pilot program, which is believed to be the first of its kind.

Five former inmates have successfully completed the program. Two have moved on to their own apartments and three have opted to become permanent roommates with their benefactors. She hopes to expand the program with state and county funding.

“Once they’re not worried where they’re going to lay their head, they’re able to focus on the things that matter,” Lawyer said.

AUTHORS



[Teresa Wiltz](#)
Staff Writer
Stateline




RELATED

Topics [Business of Government](#), [Demographics](#), [Justice](#), [Safety Net](#)

Places [California](#), [New York](#), [Washington DC](#)

EXPLORE MORE FROM STATELINE

explore by place 

explore by topic 

About Stateline

Stateline provides daily reporting and analysis on trends in state policy.

[About Stateline](#) →

Media Contact

Jeremy Ratner
Director,
Communications
[202.540.6507](tel:202.540.6507)



SIGN UP

**Sign up for our daily update—
original reporting on state policy,
plus the day's five top reads from
around the Web.**

Email address	SUBMIT
---------------	--------