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Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

Tiffanie Robinson

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Burlington, Alamance County, North Carolina, Formerly Incarcerated, Homeless Prevention of Homelessness for Formely Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

Goal Statement: The goal of this project is to reduce homelessness and marginalized housing for formerly incarcerated individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina, by implementing strategic re-entry programming.

Significant Findings: Thousands of offenders are released back into Alamance County, North Carolina each year from both county detention centers and state prison facilities (Lyons, 2024). One in six of these individuals are released into homelessness, with many more finding themselves without secure housing within the first two years of release (Lyons, 2024). While the statistics are alarming, there is hope for reduction in homelessness by implementing holistic re-entry programming and increasing awareness through advocacy.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: To reduce the risk of homelessness amongst formerly incarcerated individuals, steps should be taken prior to incarceration, during incarceration and following incarceration. Implementing community programs, such as the Big Brother Big Sister program, which target children and teenagers help to reduce the risk of generational incarceration (Dubois, 2022). Increasing job skills training provided within the prison walls for HVAC, electrical and automechanics would increase the likelihood of obtaining lucrative employment upon release (Herbert et al., 2015). Home plans are established for every offender incarcerated in North Carolina by their case managers (P. Watson, personal

communication, January 27, 2025). However, those without family support, or established housing have a plan that consists of them being dropped off at a shelter or the courthouse steps of their original county of conviction (P.Watson, personal communication, January 27, 2025). Establishing a solid home plan, with feasible and eligible options for those without secure housing options, prior to release will substantially lower the risk for homelessness recidivism alike. Other interventions to reduce homelessness include implementation of affordable housing and transitional housing units, integration of wrap around services to existing re-entry programs, and addition of community support programs to assist recently released mothers and fathers.

INTRODUCTION

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

In 2020 just over six thousand offenders were released from the Alamance County Detention Center (Alamance County Sheriff's Office, 2020). In 2023, roughly 18,000 individuals were released throughout North Carolina from state prison facilities (Lyons, 2024). Statewide last year, over three thousand (or one in six) formerly incarcerated individuals were released into homelessness (Lyons, 2024). Formerly incarcerated individuals living in the United States are ten times more likely to be homeless than the general public (Couloute, 2018). Marginalized housing, or housing insecurity affects three times as many formerly incarcerated individuals (Couloute, 2018). The implementation of strategies to reduce homelessness and transient living for formerly incarcerated individuals in Alamance County will help reduce recidivism.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

While obtaining statistical data for homelessness is difficult, it was estimated that 11% of the population of Alamance County, North Carolina in 2012 were homeless (Allied Churches of Alamance County, 2020). In 2018, a point-in-time count found 66 homeless individuals living in Alamance County (NC Balance of State Continuum of Care, n.d.). Nationwide, the statistics are just as alarming with the number of homeless individuals in 2023 rising around 12% from the previous year to over 653,000 people (Soucy et al., 2023). This is the largest number of homeless individuals the nation has ever experienced, and with housing prices continuing to rise, the current outlook is bleak (Soucy et al., 2023).

Formerly incarcerated individuals are at risk for homelessness merely because of their involvement in the criminal justice system (Soucy et al., 2023). They experience housing discrimination in both the public and private sectors, and struggle to find employment post release, making it difficult to earn adequate income (Soucy et al., 2023). Formerly incarcerated individuals also receive decreased wages, have damaged social ties and networks, and tend to have worse physical and mental health than the regular population, all of which increase the risk for homelessness (Remster, 2021). This problem is so significant that North Carolina has joined Reentry 2030, that aims to create more successful re-entry programs (North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections [NC DAC], n.d.).

Consequences

In November, thirty-seven individuals were released from state prison back into Alamance County (NC DAC, n.d.). North Carolina has a recidivism rate of 33% according to the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Commission (Crumpler, 2024). Lack of housing contributes

greatly to recidivism (Remster, 2021). Gainful employment and access to medical care often hinge on stable housing. Government benefits and even a valid form of state identification require an address, as well (Remster, 2021). This means formerly incarcerated people in need of medical and mental health care, fall through the cracks (Salem et al., 2021). Not to mention formerly incarcerated parents who must have stable housing to reunite with their children (Salem et al., 2021). Lack of stable housing also contributes to use of illicit substances by formerly incarcerated individuals, who either return to substance abuse or begin using substances for the first time (Chavira & Jason, 2017). Another important consequence to note of homelessness in this population is their return to criminal activities, which in turn results in recidivism (Augustine & Kushel, 2022).

Homelessness of children and adolescents result in inability to attend school and focus on learning (CASA, 2022). This can also be carried over to adults, as they may have incomplete education and/or the inability to further their education. Because homelessness can affect individuals' ability to seek medical treatment, there is an increased incidence of spreading communicable diseases (CASA, 2022). One city in North Carolina, Charlotte, reported the cost of homelessness to be around 36,000 dollars per person, which included costs for things such as emergency room visits, and legal involvement (The Lotus Campaign, 2022). In addition to these numbers, formerly incarcerated individuals who return to prison cost an average of 27,000 dollars a year per person (NC DAC, n.d).

Goal Statement

The goal of this project is to reduce homelessness and marginalized housing for formerly incarcerated individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina, by implementing strategic re-entry programming.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

The social-ecological model is beneficial to social change because it looks four different factors and how they relate to health behaviors and prevention (Ventura, 2021). These factors are individual, interpersonal, community and societal. The individual tier of the social-ecological model considers individual knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. The next tier of this model, the interpersonal tier covers immediate and extended family, peers and social networks. The last two tiers of the social-ecological model focus on the broader picture: neighborhood, place of work, community as a whole, and local, state, and federal laws (Ventura, 2021). This model will be used to assess risk factors and protective factors related to the prevention of formerly incarcerated individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina.

Risk Factors

In general, risk factors for homelessness include substance abuse, mental illness, and prior homelessness (Herbert et al., 2015). These are magnified in those individuals who have a history of incarceration (Herbert et al., 2015). Risk factors can be broken down into individual-level, community or societal level, relational level and systemic level factors.

Individual-Level

Formerly incarcerated individuals are already at a higher risk for homelessness just by being who they are (Herbert et al., 2015). Previously incarcerated individuals are twice as likely to be homeless in the first two years following release than the general population (Cox et al., 2021). Incarceration for many black men is a cyclic, familial process that they have been a part

of since birth (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020). This alters their perception of the world (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020). Research also suggests the younger the age at first incarceration, the higher the risk for homelessness (Cox et al., 2021).

Community/Societal Level

Most individuals are released from prison with little to no money (Cox et al., 2021). Finding employment is incredibly difficult for formerly incarcerated individuals, as prejudice and discrimination exists for those labeled as felons (Herbert et al., 2015). In addition, formerly incarcerated individuals face obstacles finding and maintaining housing because of their criminal record. Legal requirements associated with release also play a big role in inability to find housing, as parole requirements often involve frequent visitation and require offenders to live within a certain jurisdiction (Herbert et al., 2015). For African American men, their return environment plays a huge role in their success or failure (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020).

Relational Level

Severed family relationships and friendships lead to lack of social support upon release from prison (Herbert et al., 2015). Formerly incarcerated individuals who used illicit substances prior to incarceration or used while in prison, are more likely to return to that lifestyle and former peer associates (P. Watson, personal communication, January 27, 2025). Previous involvement in gang activity can also play a huge role in risk for homelessness, especially if the offender went through the program to renounce his gang (Herbert et al., 2015).

Systemic Level

Systemic risk factors include criminalization for offenses such as public urination, sleeping in public spaces, etc. (Herbert et al., 2015). Homeless individuals are also at higher risk of engaging in criminal activities such as stealing or using illicit substances (Herbert et al.,

2015). Other systemic risk factors include being of African American or Hispanic ethnicity (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2018). Statistically African American women, who were formerly incarcerated, are at highest risk for becoming homeless (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2018).

Rehabilitative programming has long been considered to be the most effective re-entry strategy; however, rates of recidivism, especially those of black men, demonstrate otherwise (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020). Services traditionally offered by reentry programs, such as family reunification, employment, mental health, substance use, housing, and education/training, fail to consider the socio-ecological aspects of re-entry (Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020).

Protective Factors

While the risk factors for homelessness amongst formerly incarcerated individuals are vast, there are also many protective factors to consider. In preventing homelessness amongst this population, leaning into the protective factors and helping to strengthen them is vital.

Individual Level

Formerly incarcerated individuals who are able to secure employment post-release were least likely to become homeless (Herbert et al., 2015). This demonstrates the importance of post-release job skill programming such as HVAC certification or automechanics training. Studies have also shown that education is a protective factor (Cox et al., 2021). Formerly incarcerated individuals with higher education levels spend less time in homelessness. An individual with only a high school diploma averages 496 days longer in homelessness than those with college degrees. Prosocial behavior and leadership skills are also seen as protective factors within this group (Cox et al., 2021).

Relational Level

Familial support is also a protective factor, as former offenders who are released into a support system are less likely to be housing insecure, or re-offend (Herbert et al., 2015). Support of a spouse or partner is shown to reduce relapse in those with alcohol abuse histories (Williams et al., 2019). Visitation during incarceration also leads to more favorable outcomes. Research has shown that incarcerated individuals who receive no visitation while incarcerated violate parole, within a year, at a rate of 6x's higher than those who received visitation. Incarcerated fathers who maintained contact with their children during incarceration maintained a level of attachment. Fathers with strong attachment and involvement in their children's lives tend to maintain employment successfully, have better mental health and avoid criminal activity leading to recidivism (Williams et al., 2019).

Community Level

The implementation of wrap-around services and an effective home plan, prior to release are also important protective factors for former offenders (Herbert et al., 2015). Such wrap around services include programming to gain life skills, legal assistance, job training, education, mental and physical health support, and communication skills training (Herbert et al., 2015). Communities with affordable housing in desirable neighborhoods offer a level of protection from homelessness, as higher rental rates correlate with higher percentages of homelessness (Horowitz et al., 2022). Shared housing options are also a protective factor. These housing units, with private bedrooms and shared bathrooms, living rooms and kitchen space, allow multiple individuals to combine their income (Horowitz et al., 2022).

Societal/Systemic Level

Programs and interventions implemented by governments, such as the Re-Entry 2030 implemented by the North Carolina government, serve as protective factors (Reentry 2030, n.d.). Federal programs such as Medicaid expansion also help assist with homelessness prevention.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

Theories and models of prevention have existed for many years, and are used to guide intervention plans and decisions by providing a meaningful lens by which to view a problem (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The Health Belief Model

Developed in the 1950s, the Health Belief Model was constructed to help explain why people refuse to participate in preventative care (National Cancer Institute, 2005). This theory suggests that individuals will only engage in preventative care measures if they believe the following: susceptibility, severity, benefits outweigh consequences, the call to action, and their own self-efficacy. Health motivation is the central idea to this theory, and as such it is useful for prevention of problem behaviors (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

The Health Belief Model can be applied to the prevention of homelessness amongst formerly incarcerated people, by analyzing their motivation for re-entry and recidivism

avoidance. This model will work best with formerly incarcerated individuals who have some sort of home plan prior to release, as opposed to those that lack any sort of home plan or supports.

Social Cognitive Theory

This theory observes how human behavior, personal factors and environmental factors intersect and influence one another (National Cancer Institute, 2005). This theory suggests that three main factors influence whether a health behavior change will occur: self-efficacy, goals and outcome expectancies. Followers of this theory assert that “*Behavior is not simply a product of the environment and the person, and environment is not simply a product of the person and behavior*” (National Cancer Institute, 2005, p. 20).

The most interesting, and applicable, part of this theory is the idea that learning occurs not only from one’s own experiences, but from observing others, as well (National Cancer Institute, 2005). Formerly incarcerated individuals are well aware of the experiences of other formerly incarcerated individuals. They see the struggles that ensue once their friends, family members or acquaintances are released from prison. Chronic homelessness, defined as at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years, totaling at least 12 months, increased by 20% in 2021 (Invisible People, 2024). Risk factors for repeated or chronic homelessness include, having a mental health disorder, having a criminal record, and lacking a decent paying job (Invisible People, 2024).

Evidence Based Programs

Critical Time Intervention is one evidence-based program that assists with homelessness prevention (Social Programs That Work, 2017). This 9 month program is a case management program for people with severe mental illness leaving institutions. It consists of three phases

with varying levels of support from a dedicated case worker. Randomized trials have shown effectiveness with a 60% reduction in risk of homelessness (Social Programs That Work, 2017).

Another evidence based prevention program specific to formerly incarcerated individuals, is the Transitions Clinic Model (Fox et al., 2014). A transitions clinic provides a medical and case management home for formerly incarcerated individuals. This means needs such as employment and housing are also addressed. The transitions clinic is especially crucial for those recently released, as statistics show a 12% increase in risk of death during the first two weeks of reentry (Fox et al., 2014).

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

African Americans make up roughly 48% of jail population and 52% of prison population (Vera Institute of Justice & Arnold Ventures, 2019). African Americans are incarcerated at 3.8 times the rate of Caucasian Americans. Some statistics even suggest that for every five African American men born in 2001, at least one will be incarcerated at some point during their life (Vera Institute of Justice & Arnold Ventures, 2019). Research has demonstrated a risk factor for recidivism is being a black male (Crime and Justice Research Alliance, 2018). One particular study looked at the incarceration and recidivism rates of both white and black men in North Carolina. An alarming 58% of black men were reincarcerated within 8 years of

their release, compared to less than 50% of white men (Crime and Justice Research Alliance, 2018).

In Alamance County, specifically, in 2020 the population with the highest incarceration rate was Black Americans (Cape Fear Initiative, 2020). African American men are sentenced to longer periods of incarceration than their white counterparts (Williams et al., 2019). Compare this with the statistics surrounding unhoused individuals and it's easy to see the disparities. In 2023, African Americans made up 37 percent of all homeless individuals in North Carolina (Patterson, 2024).

What makes a difference? Peer Support, family connections and employment post release are three key factors in both reducing recidivism and reducing homelessness (Williams et al., 2019). Support of a spouse or partner is shown to reduce relapse in those with alcohol abuse histories (Williams et al., 2019). Visitation during incarceration also leads to more favorable outcomes. Research has shown that incarcerated individuals who receive no visitation while incarcerated violate parole, within a year, at a rate of 6x's higher than those who received visitation. Incarcerated fathers who maintained contact with their children during incarceration maintained a level of attachment. Fathers with strong attachment and involvement in their children's lives tend to maintain employment successfully, have better mental health and avoid criminal activity leading to recidivism (Williams et al., 2019). Implementing programs that foster relationships and employment opportunity benefits this population greatly.

Ethical Considerations

When it comes to diversity, the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics provides an ample amount of guidance (American Counseling Association, 2014). According to this guidance, as noted in Standard A.4.b, counselors are to be aware of their own cultural bias

and work to become more culturally aware (American Counseling Association, 2014, p.5). As always, addressing confidentiality and any limits to confidentiality is paramount. This is especially true when working with this population, as confidentiality may look different for justice-involved individuals than clients who have no criminal background, as addressed in Standard A.2.E (American Counseling Association, 2014, p.4). As noted in Section A.6 and the subsequent standards, it is also important to maintain professional boundaries (American Counseling Association, 2014, p.5).

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Prevention of Homelessness for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals in Alamance County, North Carolina

Although advocacy has always been at the core of what counselors do, it wasn't until the early 2000s that the American Counseling Association acknowledged its importance enough to create advocacy competences (Toporek, et al., 2009). This importance is noted in the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics in section A.7 (American Counseling Association, 2014, p. 5). Advocacy is important because it has the ability to foster client independence and cultivate multi-level changes (Toporek et al., 2009).

Of course, advocacy comes with barriers. One of the most apparent barriers formerly incarcerated individuals face is stigma (Herbet et al., 2015). This stigma spans all levels of society. In fact, Alamance County has been known for years as "No chance Alamance" because of their views surrounding formerly incarcerated individuals.

Institutional Level

This level of advocacy seeks to discover what ways social institutions effect certain populations (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). This includes schools, churches, nonprofit organizations, etc. Whether social institutions create barriers or create empowerment can be viewed through several lenses. For example, some social institutions focus prevention efforts on early ages. Research has shown the Big Brothers Big Sisters of American programs reduce a youth's risk of being arrested significantly (Dubois, 2022). These programs help prevent incarceration before it begins, and thus prevent the risk of homelessness for previously incarcerated individuals. This is especially important in Alamance County which had the 24th highest juvenile detention rate in the state (Kupperman, 2024).

Hospitals, clinics, and mental health care facilities can also be thought of as social institutions. Healthcare providers have the unique opportunity to reach diverse populations and connect them with valuable resources. This is why interventions like provision of wrap around services and transitional clinics are important (Fox et al., 2014).

Community Level

This level of focus encompasses the norms, values, and regulations of the community and its surrounding society (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). Community factors may either be oppressive or empowering. For formerly incarcerated individuals, their community is vital to their success post incarceration (Herbert et al., 2015). Formerly incarcerated individuals who are released back into their old gang neighborhoods or places of high drug use, quickly become at risk for homelessness and recidivism (Herbert et al., 2015). This is especially true if they lack support systems.

Public Policy Level

This sector of advocacy focuses on laws and regulations from local governments to the federal government (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). To be effective at advocacy of this level, counselors must learn how public policies affect their populations of interest. For example in January 2024, Governor Cooper issued an executive order requiring state departments to collaborate to improve re-entry efforts (North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2024). This order also announced the state's commitment to joining Reentry 2030 and aligning with their goals (North Carolina Office of the Governor, 2024). These goals, if brought to fruition, would change the experience of newly released offenders immensely.

Implementing changes to housing policies would markedly reduce the risk of homelessness and decrease the discrimination faced by those with misdemeanors and/or felonies. Current legislation prevents a large percentage of felons from receiving public benefits like Section 8 and food stamps (Young, 2024). Anyone with drug-related, class A to G, felonies is bared in North Carolina from receiving food benefits for their entire lifetime. The only exception to this is during times of disaster (Young, 2024). Modifications to this would help those with low income afford necessities to help prevent homelessness.

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