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Housing Instability and the Prevention of Recidivism in Travis County

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Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Austin, Travis County, Texas, incarceration, prison, jail, homeless, unhoused, recidivism, housing instability, reentry.

Housing Instability and the Prevention of Recidivism in Travis County

Goal Statement: To reduce and prevent homelessness for those individuals being released from incarceration to aid recidivism prevention, through the expansion and maximization of re-entry programs prior to release.

Significant Findings: Both homelessness and recidivism are significant problems in the Travis County area. Data showed over 6,000 individuals were unhoused per day in 2024 (ECHO, n.d.), with recidivism costing the state of Texas almost \$370 million per year. There is also a strong association between having been incarcerated, being unhoused, and subsequent recidivism, with a 10 times higher likelihood of being homeless (Couloute, 2018). In addition, this demographic faces many risks and barriers to success, including mental health problems (Nilsson et al, 2023), low socioeconomic status and inability to access employment and resources (Gray et al, 2019), and stigma and discrimination (Keene et al, 2018). Despite this, there are positive actions that can be taken to advocate for this population, with prevention programs that focus on protective factors, addressing stigma, and structured reentry encompassing wraparound services, training, employment, and housing, helping to improve outcomes for this demographic.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: To address the issue of homelessness and recidivism following incarceration, prevention should focus on: (1) reentry programs and necessary resources being planned from the start of incarceration through to release, with follow up continuing up to 12 months; (2) addressing stigma and affordability for housing options with

formerly incarcerated individuals, expanding options and availability for quicker access upon release; (3) implementing training and increased funding for jail and prison staff and programs to support reentry initiatives; (4) tailored skills and employment training for those in incarceration, to increase the chances of stability and success upon release; (5) individualized and holistic approaches to this demographic, ensuring consideration of race, ethnicity, age, gender, and family and community involvement; and (6) case management and peer support during and after jail custody time specifically, due to the possible short stay and need for immediate follow through on resource provision.

INTRODUCTION

Housing Instability and the Prevention of Recidivism in Travis County

Housing instability and criminal recidivism are an ongoing cyclical association issue in the state of Texas (Gray et al, 2019). Factors such as substance use, mental health issues, and access to care, housing affordability and unemployment, and prejudice and discrimination further fuel the problem (Salem et al, 2021), with those being released from jail or prison struggling to find housing. Statewide, Texas releases approximately 80,000 people from its state and federal prisons annually, with the highest percentage of incarceration compared to any other state or democratic country worldwide (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). In addition are the arrests and releases from local jails, with over 30,000 bookings into Travis County jails in 2024, a number that has continued to grow post-pandemic (Travis County, n.d.). With an increasing rate of homelessness in Travis County (ECHO, n.d.), and a higher risk of homelessness in those previously incarcerated (Couloute, 2018), it stands to reason that this is an issue affecting this demographic and will contribute towards the risk of recidivism. Implementing strategies to

reduce homelessness and initiate housing stability prior to release will help to reduce recidivism for formerly incarcerated individuals residing in Travis County. These issues and recommended options, and their impacts, will be discussed in this portfolio.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Housing Instability and the Prevention of Recidivism in Travis County

Homelessness, or being unhoused, is a global issue, affecting almost 600,000 individuals on one given night in 2022, a 0.34% increase from 2 years prior (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, n.d.). The United States Census Bureau found in 2022 that nearly 327,000 people were living in emergency or transitional shelters (Glassman, 2024). The city of Austin, Texas, and its division of Travis County is a growing area, fueled by expanding industry, popularity, and relocation (Southside Bank, 2025). As the population has increased, alongside the demand for housing, so too has the increase in socio-economic division and the rate of homelessness (City of Austin, n.d.). Current data suggests a minimum of 6,235 people being unhoused in May 2024. This rate has continued to grow each year, with impacts on the need for support and resource strain (ECHO, n.d.).

There is a strong link between having been incarcerated, being unhoused, and subsequent recidivism. Those who have been incarcerated are 10 times more likely to be unhoused than the general population (Couloute, 2018), with associated factors being lack of income, affordability, and discrimination (Salem et al, 2021). The relationship between being homeless, criminal activity, and further arrests is cyclical, with those released into a homeless environment more likely to reoffend and have contact with the legal system (McCarthy & Hagan, 2024). The full scope of this problem in Travis County is unknown, although it could be suggested that, given

the issues surrounding affordability and homelessness in general, this is a significant issue. Data does remain scarce and though the state of Texas may have a low recidivism rate of 20% compared to nationally (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2022), it is acknowledged that this is likely to be underreported. Those in need upon leaving jail or prison far outweigh the resources available (Gray et al, 2019). Recidivism alone was estimated to cost the state of Texas \$369 million through reincarceration costs in 2022 (Council for State Governments, 2023). Anecdotally, this author has noted that those leaving jail are provided with resources and information, but waiting lists are long and programs full. Individuals often re-enter the system without follow up and before the situation has been resolved.

The issue of being unhoused comes with its consequences. Homelessness is associated with negative factors such as substance use, being a victim of crime or undertaking criminal activity oneself, mental health disorders, poor physical health and mortality, and being able to access stabilizing needs such as benefits, employment, and healthcare (Mitchell et al, 2023b). These factors can also be associated with criminal activity and arrests and indeed lend into the cyclical problem we see between homelessness and incarceration.

A study by Mitchell et al (2023a) found 98% of offenders had at least one mental health diagnosis, and that 75% of all offenders studied reoffended on average 10 times and became part of the judicial process again. Indeed, the authors found that most of these offenses occurred within 2 years of release, many often much sooner, resulting in high costs to the legal system. This is further compounded by high rates of arrests related to crimes associated with homelessness, such as trespassing and loitering, which can be associated with targeted discrimination (Diamond et al, 2022) and will accentuate the cycle of recidivism, as well as direct links to parole violations (Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2021). The two combined instability issues

of incarceration and homelessness further exacerbate the ability to enact change through employment, resources and support, and avoid precipitating events such as a return to substance use (Salem et al, 2021). Additional consideration should also be given to the proposal to formally criminalize homelessness itself (The White House, 2025), and the further impact this may have on the issue.

Although it is acknowledged that Travis County has initiated some strategies to tackle homelessness through housing projects, grants, and targeted programs (ECHO, 2021), this remains a prevalent local issue. The goal of this project, therefore, is to reduce and prevent homelessness for those individuals being released from incarceration to aid recidivism prevention, through the expansion and maximization of re-entry programs prior to release.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Housing Instability and the Prevention of Recidivism in Travis County

The socio-ecological model, developed by Bronfenbrenner, centers on the premise that we as individuals do not exist in isolation. Our growth and development are influenced by many factors, including our own individual characteristics, close and familial relationships, our peers and the community we live in, and society as a whole (EBSCO, n.d.). Addressing the risks and influencing factors that may be affecting our well-being across these multiple levels has a greater chance of enacting lasting change (Centers for Disease Control, n.d.). From a prevention perspective, this can help to identify specific risk factors that can subsequently be targeted in a preemptive approach, as we see when applied to suicide prevention (Cerulli et al, 2019). The socio-ecological model has also been used to great effect with the incarcerated population to address risks related to suicide (Carlisle & Lowder, 2025) and substance use (Russell et al, 2022). As the association between incarceration, homelessness, and recidivism is strong

(McCarthy & Hagan, 2024), this model will be utilized to examine the risks and protective factors for this population, with a view to identifying focus areas.

Individual

At an individual level, substance use, and mental health diagnoses are both independently associated with a higher risk of homelessness for those released from incarceration (Nilsson et al, 2023). Studies have also found increased incidence among Black and Hispanic minorities, and women (Remster, 2021), a statistic reflected in the state of Texas itself (Gray et al, 2019). There is both a higher probability of homelessness for those who are younger when first incarcerated (Cox et al, 2021), as well as an increasing risk as one gets older upon release (Couloute, 2018). It should also be noted that previously being incarcerated or homeless are risk factors for the individual (Augustine & Kushel, 2022), highlighting the cyclical process that can often be difficult to break.

The absence of a mental health or substance use disorder diagnosis will, in contrast, function as a protective factor for homelessness following release from prison or jail (Nilsson et al, 2023). Being able to communicate well and confidently with others can further enhance this level of protection (Cox et al, 2021). The authors also found a positive link with a higher education level, with Herbert et al (2015) specifying that having employment post-incarceration results in a reduced likelihood of homelessness. For the individual, therefore, this would suggest that being cognizant of or addressing factors of minority groups and demographics, personal skills, and resources could influence the possibility of being homeless.

Family and Relationships

The next level of the socio-ecological model concerns immediate relationships such as family. Put simply, those with individuals without supportive families that can provide assistance

and shelter upon release are more likely to become homeless, as well as be at risk for other negative associated impacts such as further criminal activity and substance use (Moschion & Johnson, 2019). Family relationship strain, conflict, and issues such as returning to a family environment that views the incarceration negatively can cause added difficulties (Herbert et al, 2015) and may therefore lead to future instability. Furthermore, low socioeconomic status is a risk factor for homelessness after incarceration and can be related to both the individual themselves and the family unit (Gray et al, 2019).

Having an emotionally supportive and involved family has been found to be a protective factor towards further instability and incarceration, through facilitating a more successful reentry into society, including housing (Mowen et al, 2018). In addition, supportive families throughout an individual's incarceration have a positive impact on family values, communication, and mental health, leading to more positive outcomes on release (Williams et al, 2019).

Peers and Community

An individual's peer group can have both a negative and positive influence on the risk of incarceration and subsequent homelessness. Supportive peers can provide resources such as short- or long-term accommodation, role modeling and positive direction, and motivation (Herbert et al, 2015). This can also include more formal peer support, where help given around community connections and housing applications can facilitate a more stable reentry, reducing both homelessness and recidivism (Hyde et al, 2022).

It is acknowledged that many individuals leaving the prison system or jail may have contact with peer groups that foster a more adverse impact. This can include association with gangs and crime, an unemployed subculture (Herbert et al, 2015), and even just the person's predominant peer group being those who are unhoused. All of these factors increase instability

and the likelihood of becoming or remaining homeless. In addition, individuals released into or experiencing homelessness are more likely to be around peers who use illegal substances, strengthening the probability of substance use and recidivism for the individual, and perpetuating the problem of homelessness (Zhao et al, 2018). It is also worth noting that there is a suggestion that peer groups can be more influential than family (Johnson et al, 2008, as cited in Christensen, n.d.), therefore escalating the risk even further.

Society

Being incarcerated is in itself a risk factor for homelessness (Coulette, 2018). From a community and societal perspective, there exists a stigma or prejudice towards those who have been incarcerated. This can lead to discrimination by not only wider society but by housing authorities and rental agencies, hindering the ability to find somewhere to live and break the cycle (Keene et al, 2018). There also exist barriers to employment and subsequent financial stability for this population (Augustine & Kushel, 2022). This in turn will increase the possibility of being unhoused or, at a minimum, reduce options. As previously discussed, in Austin, the availability of affordable housing is an issue alongside this socioeconomic divide, which will only worsen the problem locally.

Overwhelmingly, programs that support reentry can provide a positive buffer to prevent homelessness and recidivism. This includes opportunities to help individuals gain aptitude in job training, living skills, learning and development (Herbert et al, 2015), and rehabilitation, such as substance use (Salem et al, 2021). All of this can increase the likelihood of employment, stability, and housing on release. Providing affordable housing opportunities that meet the individuals' needs is also a priority. As barriers to this can exist among providers, focusing on ways to promote the positive benefits of working with this population can help to reduce stigma.

Options to facilitate acceptance and mitigate the issue of homelessness include partnership working, state agency support, voucher schemes, shared accommodation and low-income housing, and halfway houses (McKernan, 2017). Research would also suggest that when reentry or release program support ends, then the likelihood of homelessness increases (Moschion & Johnson, 2019), therefore ongoing community and organizational support is pivotal in maintaining this safety net. There are such initiatives locally in the Travis County area, such as reentry centers, housing assistance, and restorative justice, which aim to increase available options and facilitate wider community acceptance and involvement (Gray et al, 2019).

Homelessness is a multifactorial problem, and so too are the wide breadth of risk and protective factors related to being unhoused, incarceration, and recidivism. Being aware of these issues, and subsequently what intervention or support can be initiated, could help to address this challenge and provide insight into targeted actions for the overall well-being of individuals and the community.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

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Theories of prevention for health promotion are used as a structural guide through which we can view and assess the various factors influencing an issue, anticipate any possible barriers, and help to plan evidence-based, holistic strategies. Any theory used should fit the needs of the population and problem being addressed (National Cancer Institute, 2005). In this portfolio, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Community Organization will be discussed in reference to the problem of homelessness and recidivism with incarcerated individuals, in addition to evidence-based prevention programs that have been used in similar areas of social change.

Theories of Prevention

SCT focuses on the ever-evolving interactions between a person, their environment, and individuals' behavior, and how these interactions shape and change each other. Three main factors are in play in terms of whether an individual's health behavior will alter, those being self-efficacy or belief, goals, and our experience and acceptance of the outcome. (National Cancer Institute, 2005). The authors also posit this approach as an interpersonal level theory, meaning it encompasses not one element solely in isolation, but rather how all can contribute to behavior, and subsequently how our learning and development can be shaped. Given the multiple risk factors discussed surrounding homelessness and recidivism, this theory appears to fit with the needs of the population.

Those individuals who experience incarceration may lack self-confidence, belief in themselves, optimism for change, and have experienced struggles previously themselves or known through peers (Herbert et al, 2015). An SCT approach could therefore aim to increase positivity and control, and through the influence of beneficial role models. This is seen in a study by Slesnick et al (2018), who found that working with at-risk youths on their skills, personal resources, self-actualization, and motivation through growth and development, can reduce the risk of housing instability. In addition, the use of peer support can instill those positive role models, providing observed experiences to assist formerly incarcerated individuals to make positive behavior changes. These changes can impact both the risk of homelessness and recidivism (Bellamy et al, 2019).

Considering the nature and extent of wider community influences on the risk of homelessness and recidivism, the theory of Community Organization is an appropriate theory to apply to this demographic. Here, the process of addressing problems is done at the community

level, through identifying what matters to the community, partnership working, empowerment and local involvement, and ownership. This is also identified as a model that fits well with SCT, due to the integrated structure of people within their community (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

To address the problem of homelessness and risk of recidivism for individuals released from incarceration, community interventions could focus on ideas such as housing subsidies and affordable housing, employment and training support (McKernan, 2017), and working with the individuals themselves to strengthen connection and reduce stigma (Kjellstrand et al, 2022). The strength of the Community Organization approach will be to ensure the community is involved in recognizing the issue, the benefit of working together to solve, and how addressing systemic inequalities and discrimination can benefit the society as a whole.

Evidence Based Prevention Programs

The Critical Time Intervention Program (Social Programs That Work, 2017) is a 9-month case management intervention that focuses on the prevention of cyclical homelessness in high-risk individuals with mental illness leaving institutions, such as incarceration facilities. This program found that providing support around transition back into the community, as well as individualized and practical resources, resulting in a 60% reduction in the possibility of homelessness. One fundamental feature to note is that the case manager followed the individuals through their transition, seeing them before and after release or discharge. From anecdotal experience, this is likely to reduce the risk of individuals falling through the net between incarceration, release, and connection with services.

An independent study by Lutze et al (2014) found a reduced risk and rate of recidivism for those individuals accessing a re-entry housing program and holistic support, when compared

to traditional management. This is supported by a similar program in the state of Ohio, where individuals released from incarceration into affordable, supportive housing had over 60% less risk of further arrest and imprisonment (Fontaine et al, 2012). These studies indicate therefore that providing immediate shelter and housing, alongside tailored resources to support permanent stability, can have a positive impact on the likelihood of becoming permanently housed and avoiding further criminal activity, arrests, and subsequent incarceration.

Similarly, the National Institute of Justice (2016) rated a Pennsylvania re-entry program as effective in the reduction of re-arrest risk and recidivism, through the provision of pre- and post-release ongoing case management support, employment training and support, housing, and addressing substance use issues. These factors were all previously identified risks for homelessness and recidivism, so it stands to reason that a robust program to address these problems would prove successful. Again, the time commitment through long-term intervention of up to 12 months, ensuring continuation of services, could be a pivotal element. All these programs also focus on starting support and resources immediately upon release.

Whilst not directly related to homelessness and recidivism, important approaches could be learned from the Big Brothers and Sisters mentorship program for at risk youth, ages 6 to 18, from low socio-economic backgrounds (Social Programs That Work, 2023). These two randomized controlled trials found promising results with this approach and level of support in terms of reduced substance use and criminal behavior, both linked risk factors for the population of this social change project. Therefore, adopting a similar strategy of peer support and mentorship, including positive activities and coping skills, could be a valuable addition to work with those previously incarcerated on preventing the risk factors associated with recidivism, and subsequent unstable housing.

It could be suggested that all these interventions have their roots in prevention theory, with indications of SBT through individualized focuses and peer support, and Community Organization in employment and housing assistance. The use of theories to guide and implement effective, evidence-based, coordinated approaches can be instrumental in working towards prevention and social change. The most effective programs in this area have key features, those being immediate and continual intervention until stability is achieved, individualized support, and collaboration between agencies and the community. These factors should be considered when considering the goal of improving housing stability and preventing recidivism.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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To ensure the effectiveness of prevention programs, consideration must be given to multicultural factors and disparities that may influence the effectiveness and uptake of such initiatives (SAMHSA, n.d.). One factor with respect to incarcerated individuals is race, specifically the Black minority group. This population will be discussed when compared to other racial groups in the Travis County area, as well as how prevention programs could be tailored to meet the needs of this group, whilst ensuring ethical compliance.

Population Needs

Overall, non-White individuals are more likely to have contact with the jail or prison system, with around 7 out of 10 people from these minority groups in prison (The Sentencing Project, 2024). In a report of 2020 U.S. data, Black prisoners made up a much larger percentage of imprisoned individuals, at a rate of 1,234 per 100,000 U.S. adults, compared to 223 for White prisoners (Carson, 2021). This figure has only increased, with an 1,890 versus 377 rate in 2022

(Statistica, n.d.). Indeed, it is estimated that 1 in 5 Black men born in 2021 will be imprisoned at some point in their lifetime (Robey et al, 2023). Although jail incarceration rates have declined over the last 10 years, in particular in non-White racial groups, the rate of Black jail incarceration compared to White is still higher, at 528 and 157 per 100,00 people respectively (Ghandnoosh, 2023).

In the state of Texas, similar disparities exist. 2021 data shows that Black individuals had over a 3 times greater representation in prison rates when compared to White and Hispanic groups, with similar figures of over double the rate from 2019 jail statistics (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Current Travis County figures suggest that, although the total number of Black versus White incarcerated population may be lower, the rate per demographic population is still higher (Travis County, n.d.), with a report by Wolfe (2020) highlighting this disproportionality with regard to drug offenses. As those of Black racial origin also make up the largest number of homeless individuals in Travis County, with a high socio-economic divide (Fuetter, 2023), it is easy to connect these dots.

This minority population can therefore face greater challenges when it comes to risk of incarceration, homelessness, and recidivism. A study by Williams et al (2019) found Black men reported high levels of stigma and discrimination when it came to finding stability on release from incarceration, such as through employment and housing. Overall, racial bias and profiling can result in higher arrest and imprisonment rates (Fridell & Marier, 2025), worsening the social and economic divide between minority and privileged races (Price, 2022), as well as both individual and community rates of unemployment (Thomas, 2022). With respect to the previously discussed risk factors for homelessness and recidivism, this sub-group population faces both a higher threat and a need for further consideration of preventative measures.

Increasing Cultural Relevance

To increase the cultural relevance of prevention programs for this subgroup of the target population, specific mechanisms or approaches can be considered. Firstly, in a qualitative study with Black men following release from prison, a loss of masculinity and lack of identity related to their family and children was identified as a culturally significant deficiency on reentry (Williams et al, 2019). Prevention programs that focus on family involvement, working with the court system regarding any parental role stipulations, and supporting employment that can facilitate this would enhance motivation, relevance, and potential success from prevention programs.

A second area to contemplate would be employment opportunities. As previously discussed, lack of employment opportunities is a factor following release from incarceration, which is subsequently also linked to financial instability and risk of homelessness and recidivism. Participants in the Williams et al (2019) study identified this as particularly relevant to their demographic, feeling that racial profiling and greater barriers to employment were present. This is corroborated in a similar study by Couloute (2024), where Black men also stated that barriers to employment were a big concern for them on release, finding less access due to their race, and less availability of work that was relevant to them and their community. An opportunity here, therefore, could be to work with the demographic and local communities to identify gaps and needs in employment that would benefit society in general, and provide an opportunity to earn and increase stability for Black individuals upon release. In short, not assuming that one size fits all when it comes to training, job needs, and abilities.

In addition, one permeating trend throughout literature is the presence of stigma towards Black individuals when it comes to release and reentry, access to housing and jobs, and criminal

activity. Prejudice towards the possibility of being rearrested and an overall lack of understanding of their experiences was a common theme discussed (Couloute, 2024). There is some suggestion that prejudice may exist between law enforcement and racial minorities, whether intentional or unintentional (Smith, 2024). Ways to address this could therefore include peer support from other Black individuals with the same lived experience, and partnership working with law enforcement to improve relationships and reduce stigma, as evidenced by ongoing work within Travis County (Hughes, 2025). We have seen that peer support programs can help to increase stability and access to fundamental resources that reduce homelessness and recidivism. Making this meaningful and relevant to the Black demographic could enhance compliance, and the additional component of addressing prejudice and collaboration could allow them to feel more understood and promote community buy-in.

Ethical Considerations

There are some key ethical aspects of care in the American Counseling Association (2014) Code of Ethics that are relevant to our target population when thinking of prevention programming. Standards state that any intervention requires informed consent about the process or program (§A.2.a) and should also be appropriate for the multicultural comprehension of the individual or group (§A.2.c). The incarcerated population still requires the same standards to be met to ensure transparency, autonomy, and choice. For example, they still have the right to refuse any preventive interventions or programs, even if their decisions and choices are considered unwise, and may result in a lack of housing stability and further arrests. In addition, consideration should be given to any mandated clients or interventions, and how full information on the consent process and consequences of not engaging with any prevention programs as dictated by the legal system (§A.2.e). As collaboration may be involved with other professionals,

it is also imperative that consent include the sharing of information (§A.3) to ensure that partnership working is both seamless and effective. This can increase the likelihood of a positive outcome and ensure the client is aware of and agreeable to the process.

As discussed, the incarcerated population may often invoke negative or stigmatizing behaviors and thoughts in others. For counselors working with the client group, it is important that we do not impose any of our own bias or prejudice on this population (American Counseling Association, 2014, §A.4.b). Checking and challenging our own biases allows us to be more effective and culturally sensitive practitioners, as well as recognizing potential societal or community discrimination that we can then more effectively aim to manage. This is potentially something to be cognizant of with regard to preventive programs, given the community and stakeholder involvement.

Considering the advocacy role, this is another key element that the American Counseling Association (2014) raises. Within the counseling role, we can advocate and lobby for change (§A.7.a). In this scenario, this could include reducing barriers to re-entry programs, affordable housing, and working with employers or housing associations to challenge prejudice. As this advocacy is often on an individual's behalf, it is essential that consent for this is also obtained beforehand (§A.7.b), given the potential confidential nature involved.

Confidentiality is an area that needs overall consideration. When working with clients, the need for and limitations of confidentiality should be explained (American Counseling Association, 2014, §B.1.c., & B.1.d). As this arena of work is likely to involve planning and working with stakeholders and other partners, the concept of minimal disclosure is important, ensuring only essential information is shared (American Counseling Association, 2014, §B.2.e). For example, this could include only what is necessary for the delivery of preventive services,

and not any information that could cause harm or break trust, such as legal proceedings and charges.

Being mindful of these ethical and multicultural dynamics can allow us to more effectively recognize and meet the needs of our population and clients. Through this lens, we can subsequently develop more tailored, culturally sensitive, and diverse preventative interventions to begin to tackle the issue of homelessness and recidivism in this often marginalized and underserved population.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

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Advocacy is one of the essential building blocks of counseling practice, an important strategy that impacts both positive changes in society and also for our clients (Toperek et al, 2009). The importance of these advocacy activities is highlighted in their inclusion in the American Counseling Association (2014) code of ethics. In line with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) institutional, community, and public policy levels of intervention, this portfolio will now consider the barriers to advocacy for the population of incarcerated individuals, and the mitigating steps that can be taken to reduce them.

Institutional

Stigma and discrimination may exist in the jail or prison facilities themselves, where inmates may experience negative preconceptions and prejudice from staff (Erdem et al, 2024). Just the fact of being incarcerated can elicit a heavier focus on punishment, leading to lower self-esteem and self-worth among inmates, and less preparatory work around reentry (Williams et al, 2019). This can subsequently lead to a higher chance of instability on release. The incarceration

facilities may also have their own procedural barriers. Underfunding and de-prioritization of reentry programs leads to a lack of access (Kaiser et al, 2022), with training and preparing for employment for inmates often not seen as essential (Baron et al, 2013). This would therefore lead to an additional lack of resources when released, and a higher risk of homelessness and recidivism. In addition, the temporary and often fast turnaround time in jail or custody, rather than formal prison time, can result in individuals often not receiving the necessary contact or resources to begin to address the problem of homelessness (Gray et al, 2019).

Educational institutions may also inadvertently impose barriers. Access to training, educational courses, and financial aid can be hindered due to affordability and availability for this demographic (Donaldson & Viera, 2021), and a lack of necessary resources such as transportation and technology (Colbert, 2025). Again, this could have an impact on the future prospects of former inmates, leading to a higher risk of unemployment, a lower income and socioeconomic status, and therefore further escalating the risk of homelessness after incarceration.

To address these barriers, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) propose advocacy actions that will allow for the appropriate and equitable support and well-being of the target demographic. Appropriate actions would include training and education for staff, with the aim of reducing prejudice and changing the mindset towards a more positive focus on the benefits staff can have towards this population. From a counselor perspective, advocacy may include either promoting or directly providing this training, targeting common misconceptions and the benefits of rehabilitative and reentry programs, all of which have been found to have a positive impact on attitudes, understanding, and support (Moak et al, 2020), including for those prisoners with mental illness (Compton et al, 2023). Reentry programs have

been found to help with skill development and resources (Herbert et al, 2015), as well as the ability to access further training and education (Colbert, 2025). Counselor advocacy should therefore extend to promoting the benefits of wider access to these programs to stakeholders, including those involved with policy and funding for jails, prisons, and educational establishments.

Community

Barriers exist for this population in the community through difficulty and inability to access housing, often precipitated by stigma and discrimination. Many housing providers show this prejudice through putting up obstacles to applications and providing inequitable and unaffordable options (Tharshani et al, 2018). Many renters express just a general unwillingness to work with former inmates (Keene et al, 2018), presenting multiple impediments for individuals trying to find stability on release. Employers may also display similar prejudice, unwilling to give former inmates jobs, resulting in blocks for individuals upon release to be able to find employment (Baron et al, 2013). When considered in conjunction with the previously discussed lack of training opportunities, this leads to a higher risk of unemployment, limited access to only low-pay or entry-level jobs, and therefore a greater risk of homelessness.

This stigma may not only be seen through housing organizations and employers, but also in the community in general. A lack of acceptance by family, friends, and society can lead to a lack of social support (Kjellstrand et al, 2023), where it becomes easier to fall back into bad habits, and high-risk peer associations and environments (Brehmer et al, 2024).

To promote advocacy and overcome barriers in the community the counselor could look to work with the public and society to address the negative connotations associated with being a former inmate. Providing education, media campaigns, and the sharing of personal stories in

groups (Overton et al, 2024) can all help to change views and could lead to more community integration and support. This fits with the broad suggestions offered by the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015), where both the individuals needs and community norms and values are considered. Another successful intervention example is The Frederick Douglas Project, who facilitate members of society visiting those in incarceration, resulting in greater empathy, self-worth, and a more positive view on reentry (Stand Together, n.d.[a]).

Targeting employers and housing associations would also be key. Education through promoting strategies such as linking individuals to employers for vocational training and job placement (Gorman et al, 2025), focusing on skilled jobs that are needed in the community (Baron et al, 2013), and working with housing organizations to help provide specific housing options for those formerly incarcerated (McKernan, 2017) can help to break down the barriers and increase the chance of success upon release. For success in community advocacy, it is critical to involve and work with all members of society, focusing on prevention and promotion through the community organization theory that can bring about change.

Public Policy

To some degree, barriers at the public policy level encompass elements of both institution and community involvement. The counselor's role is to act as a voice for these individuals, working with institutions, organizations, and state and federal organizations to promote rights and positive change. Within policy, these obstacles can take various forms. Many housing organizations have policies in place that prohibit them from renting to former inmates, although federal law only specifies two instances where this is mandated (Gray et al, 2019). Employers can require background checks as part of policy. Incarceration history often forms part of

applications or interviews and can be a mandated requirement to proceed (Baron et al, 2013). In Texas, certain criminal convictions can prevent an individual from being able to receive SNAP benefits (Texas Health and Human Services, n.d.), and educational aid and grants (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, n.d.). All these resources factor into stability. A lack of access, therefore, can also impact the risk of future homelessness and recidivism.

Furthermore, the focus of policy and its underpinning drivers often can lean more towards punishment of criminal behavior, rather than future prevention. The funding and prioritization of reentry programs can often be low (Kaiser et al, 2022). Subsequently, the ability to provide necessary training, education, and proactive release plans is impeded. The criminalization of homelessness results in high arrest and citation rates in Texas (Gray et al, 2019), so those released to an unhoused environment are at an immediate disadvantage as a result of the law.

These restrictions, laws, and policies are all-encompassing and system-wide, so advocacy must always include action at this higher level (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). Advocating with state and local leadership for fair and accessible housing opportunities, improved funding for reentry programs, and training and employment opportunities could sit within the counselor's role. Whilst legal restrictions may be difficult to address, advocacy could still involve the development of other shelter and food options to improve access to these resources. The literature provides some specific suggestions that could be brought to the attention of state or national officials, including removing non-mandated incarceration questions from job applications (Baron et al, 2013) and lowering the screening criteria for housing (Tharshini et al, 2018). Another prominent program example is through The Easy Expunctions service, which provides affordable access to remove criminal convictions from

their history, subsequently aiding in the ability to apply for housing and employment (Stand Together, n.d.[b]).

Individuals who are released from incarceration facilities and are navigating reentry into society face many barriers. As counselors, we can play a crucial role in advocating for this population, but it cannot occur in isolation. In order to address this matter of housing instability and recidivism among formerly incarcerated individuals, advocacy and prevention initiatives must address the issues of stigma, resource accessibility, and underfunding. Multi-level approaches that can prioritize individualized, collaborative, accessible, and holistic and ongoing services, may give us the opportunity to work towards the goal of ending the cycle of homelessness and recidivism.

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