Housing for Female Ex-prisoners and Their Children

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Purpose and Significance of the Project

This research explores the experiences and opinions of women released from prison regarding housing and employment. The project includes 40 in-depth interviews and a survey of 140 ex-prisoners. It focuses on housing histories, housing at community reentry, and future aspirations, especially those related to their children.

The affordable housing dilemmas prevalent throughout society, especially structural barriers to gaining and maintaining affordable housing, are magnified for women who are ex-prisoners. For the vast majority, “housing and home” are major goals and symbols of successful return to society. Housing is envisioned primarily in terms of human relationships. When asked, “What is the best housing situation you can imagine?”, the women focus on the pivotal role that stable, affordable housing plays in their ability to repair, reestablish, or – for some – build for the first time successful relationships with their children and families.

Initial Findings

There is a considerable range in housing histories and post-release experiences. On one extreme, a modest proportion of the women owned homes prior to imprisonment and, due to ongoing family support, their housing situations remain relatively unchanged when they are released. Other women who were previously home owners lost their homes while imprisoned – to pay legal fees or due to statutes that permit forfeiture and sale of property linked with illegal activities.

On the other extreme for a small proportion of imprisoned women, prison is among the best housing they have ever had, at least physically. Previously they lived in a series of makeshift arrangements, including homelessness and living on the streets. The majority of released women lie in between these two extremes; their histories are characterized by relatively stable to unstable housing, linked with their gender, race/ethnicity, and their families' social standing and economic means.

Housing and employment are the primary issues faced upon release from prison. Because the overwhelming majority has few resources, a major factor is whether someone will offer ex-prisoners temporary housing that is approved by prison personnel. Particularly salient is the experience of exclusion from much housing designated as “crime-free.” This adds to the complex matrix that confounds the women’s efforts to “make it on the outside”: ex-felon status, financial instability and need, and lack of documented recent work history.

A major anxiety for most is obtaining employment and housing that are essential to demonstrating stability in order to have custody of their children. Among those who view themselves as most fortunate are those who can live with their immediate families, most frequently mothers and sisters, who have been caring for their children.

Although women’s experiences vary, there is widespread acknowledgment of a day-to-day struggle with the lack of access to safe, affordable housing and the palpable lack of entitlement to affordable housing that many ex-prisoners view as part of the “perpetual punishment
package” for them and their children. Some of the women discuss this issue with a stoic realism, resignation, sarcasm or humor, combined with determination:

I want the white picket fence! No, I’m just kidding. I just want my sobriety, I just want my family together and to work and finish school. [I want to get] as much education as I can get. Get a career, have a lot of money put away in the bank. Doing the right thing.

Others express resignation or despair at their denigrated status and their belief that many within society view them as unworthy of being neighbors and ineligible for full community participation. This perception, coupled with perseverance, was a common theme in the advice ex-prisoners offered to those just coming out:

Know that there will be people who want to shut you down, who want to bring you down, but you have to stay true to what you believe in and want to accomplish. No matter how hard it gets, you have to focus on what you intended to accomplish, no matter what.

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