

Incarceration and Homelessness: A Vicious Cycle

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Known to some as the “jail to homelessness pipeline,” formerly incarcerated individuals continue to struggle to secure housing after their release. In addition, felons are also more likely to be homeless prior to being incarcerated, often because of petty crimes associated with homelessness like loitering. This can lead to a vicious circle, in which homeless people are incarcerated, leading to even more difficulties in securing housing and employment, compounding their homelessness and likelihood of being incarcerated yet again.

This idea is well-supported by the statistics on formerly incarcerated individuals. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, felons are 10 times more likely than non-felons to experience homelessness at some point in their lives, whether before or after their incarceration. More than 10% of those entering or leaving prison, furthermore, are homeless immediately prior and following their time in prison. These statistics do not include the further population of felons who are marginally housed – people living in temporary situations such as boarding houses and motels – who are also more likely than the general public to experience homelessness in the near future.

The reasons for this are manifold. Felons struggle to secure housing – including public housing – and employment, factors which increase their chances of homelessness. In fact, individuals who have been incarcerated are likely to be denied affordable public housing because of their criminal record, putting them out on the street in many cases. Policy makers prefer non-felons to have access to public housing rather than felons, and with limited availability that means that many felons are given few opportunities to get back on their feet. This contributes to continuing the cycle of crime and homelessness.

Some homeless individuals, seeing little hope for their prospects of securing housing and employment, turn to committing minor crimes in order to receive free meals and beds in jail. The Guardian has reported that more than one-fifth of homeless people have committed a minor crime to spend a night in jail in their desperation. This is but one piece of the multifaceted connection between homelessness and incarceration, showing how systemic reform is needed if this problem is to be solved. The cooperation of the justice system – by, for example, finding alternative means of dealing with petty crimes than prosecution – and homeless shelters, public housing, and employers is necessary to tackle this issue. Any attempt at reform which singles out any one of these issues is likely to do some good, but only by looking at the entire issue can genuine solutions be found.

Many people have little sympathy for people who were formerly incarcerated and now find themselves homeless. But we need to remember why we imprison people in the first place: reform and reintegration. Prison (and alternative methods of punishment, such as community service) is meant to reform the people who experience them, and to allow them to pay their dues to a society which they have wronged. They are then supposed to be reintegrated into society, now that they have served their punishment and hopefully changed. The prison to homeless pipeline denies people that chance and continues to punish them after they have paid their dues. If we want to uphold our ideals of giving people a second chance, we need to find a way to break the cycle.

The Guardian, “A Fifth of All Homeless People Have Committed a Crime To Get Off the Streets”: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/dec/23/homeless-committing-crimes-for-shelter>

CityLab, “The Homeless Problem We Don’t Talk About”:
<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/08/the-homelessness-problem-we-dont-talk-about/567481/>