LOCKED UP.
LOCKED OUT.

THE REVOLVING DOOR OF HOMELESSNESS AND ONTARIO'S JUSTICE SYSTEM

canadian
observatory on
homelessness

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ABOUT US

JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

For more than 90 years, The John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) has been dedicated to creating safer communities by fostering more effective, just and humane responses to crime. Our 19 local offices deliver programs and services that build key life skills, support families and allow people leaving incarceration to achieve a more productive future. The Centre of Research & Policy specializes in bridging the gap between analysis and front-line service delivery. By collaborating closely with local offices, the Centre's team of analysts and researchers develops policy positions that truly reflect the needs of each community, advances those positions to governments and other organizations, educates the public on the critical issues, and evaluates program efficacy to guide future work. Through it all, they're committed to ensuring that innovative ideas can translate into real action.

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION CORPORATION

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a non-partisan research and policy partnership between academics, policy and decision makers, service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness. Led by Stephen Gaetz, President & CEO, the COH works in collaboration with partners to conduct and mobilize research designed to have an impact on solutions to homelessness. The COH evolved out of a 2008 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded project called the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and is housed at York University.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SYSTEMIC ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When recognizing the systemic challenges within the Canadian criminal justice system, it is important to acknowledge the historical and present-day impacts of colonialism and systemic discrimination which includes but is not limited to the over-representation of Black People and Indigenous Peoples throughout the criminal justice system.

Black and Indigenous populations face higher levels of policing, incarceration, and biased treatment within the criminal justice system, with Black People being overrepresented by more than 3 times that of the general population, and Indigenous Peoples by more than 5 times.

This overrepresentation exacerbates pre-existing structural barriers rooted in systemic racism and colonialism. The intersection of racial disparities and justice system involvement creates distinct challenges for Black and Indigenous populations in many areas including access to housing. Compounding the stigma of a criminal record, Indigenous and Black populations face discrimination from landlords limiting their housing options, increasing their risk of homelessness. Despite a growing understanding of how racial identity influences individuals with criminal records in Canada, discrimination persists at both individual and systemic levels.

It is our hope that this acknowledgement contextualizes the research found in our report and serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to engage in open dialogue, challenge biases, and work collaboratively towards dismantling the systems of oppression that result in persisting inequities in our criminal justice system.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'cycle' is a common – if not overused – concept when speaking of the justice system and how it interacts with various other issues such as race, poverty, and employment. However, when it comes to the impact that housing and homelessness has on those involved in the justice system – and vice versa – it is hard to find a more apt term. Those who are unfortunate enough to enter this cycle alternate between being *locked up* in jail and *locked out* of safe and affordable housing. It is the opposite of a virtuous cycle, and it entraps far too many Ontarians.

"

"I'm homeless all the time. I come from jail, I start from scratch, I'm released with the clothes on my back, that's it. I start from scratch. Finding housing takes forever, man. I've never ever come out and been able to find a place just like that. Not even a room."

– Study participant with lived experience

Ontario is in an affordability crisis, and nowhere is this clearer than in the housing market. Safe, stable, long-term housing is a necessity that has become a luxury – completely out of reach for a growing percentage of Ontarians. The pandemic exacerbated this trend and was in many ways cataclysmic for people already on the economic margins. Ontarians previously eking out a living were pushed from housing precarity into homelessness. Municipalities across the province that have never seriously grappled with visible homelessness are struggling to respond to what is now a crisis in their communities.

Homelessness Defined

The **Canadian Observatory on Homelessness** defines homelessness as "*the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.*" Homelessness is a complex experience, with individuals encountering it in various ways. They may be completely unsheltered, often called "absolute homelessness." This term refers to individuals who are sleeping on the street or other public areas, and who are without a permanent or temporary shelter. Others may be living in emergency or temporary shelters. Many are accommodated in institutions, such as individuals who are incarcerated or hospitalized; these individuals may have no permanent shelter of their own but are not unhoused. Others may be staying with family or friends; this experience is often referred to as "hidden homelessness."[1] Hidden homelessness is often difficult to measure and may be missed by many methods designed to track homelessness.

Homelessness overlaps with a number of social determinants of health, and it places people at a greater risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. For precariously housed individuals, conflict with the law can be catastrophic: being charged and/or incarcerated leads to loss of wages or social assistance benefits, housing, employment, and personal belongings. It worsens mental health issues and disrupts any established treatment for both mental and physical health conditions. Jobs, housing, and any other form of stability lost due to contact with the justice system are not easily replaced. Systemic barriers are erected once a person has a criminal record. Justice involvement, and jail in particular, deepens dislocation and disadvantage, setting people up for an ongoing cycle of release, homelessness, re-arrest and jail, on repeat.

Justice-involvement Defined:

Justice-involvement refers to a person's or a group's interaction with the criminal justice system[2], which includes law enforcement, courts, and corrections. It encompasses various aspects of engagement with the legal system, such as being accused of a crime, being arrested, going through the legal process, serving a sentence if found guilty and having a criminal record. Justice involvement can range from being stopped, carded or arrested by the police, to navigating court and bail systems, to conviction and incarceration.

By the numbers:

235,000
people nationally experience homelessness in some form every year.

8,000 to 16,000
people are estimated to be experiencing homelessness in Ontario on any given night.

3.8 million
Canadians with a criminal record, including an estimated over 1 million Ontarians

170,000
adults charged in Ontario in 2022.

84,000
community and custodial admissions to Ontario's adult correctional system in 2022.

79%
of individuals in provincial correctional system are on remand awaiting trial and have not yet been convicted, they are presumed innocent.
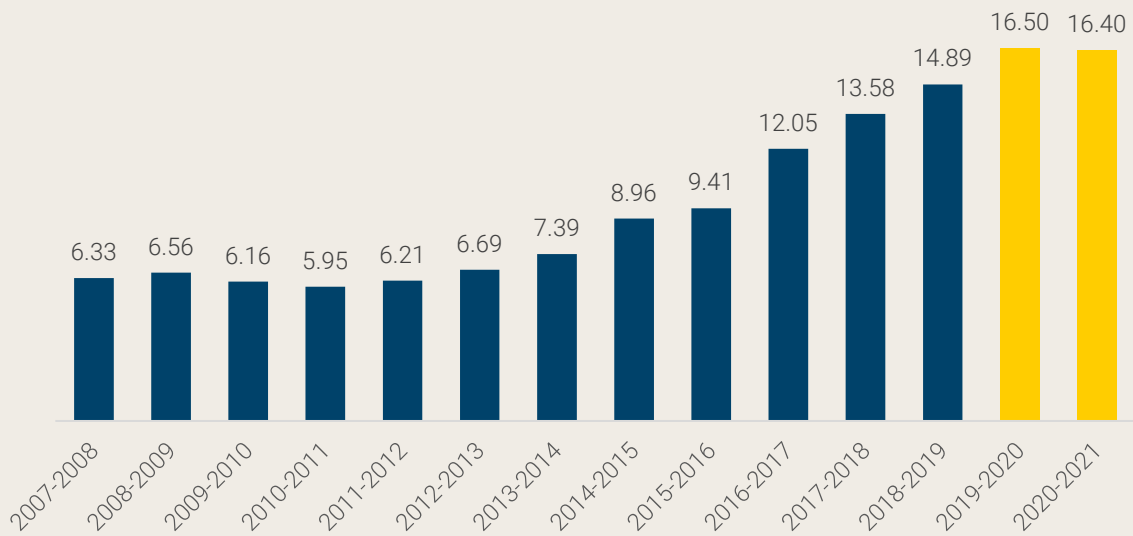
47,963
releases from correctional facilities in Ontario in 2022.

*For sources, please see Endnote # 2.

The current report is the second in a two-part series of research projects exploring the effects of justice involvement on homelessness in Ontario. The first report, **No Fixed Address: The Intersections of Justice Involvement and Homelessness** was released in 2022. The report analyzed over 10 years of data on admissions to Ontario correctional facilities of individuals who had *no fixed address* - no stable, permanent address - at the time of admission to a correctional institution. Findings from the report highlighted that Ontario's provincial correctional facilities are incarcerating a proportionally larger number of people experiencing homelessness now than at any other point in the last 15 years. As an illustration, in 2007/2008, about 6% of all admissions to Ontario correctional facilities were of people experiencing homelessness (i.e., had no "fixed address") at the time of admission. By 2020/2021, this number had jumped to over 16%.

Figure 1: Percentage of Admissions to Ontario Correctional Institutions Who Had No Fixed Address

Year	Percentage
2007-2008	6.33
2008-2009	6.56
2009-2010	6.16
2010-2011	5.95
2011-2012	6.21
2012-2013	6.69
2013-2014	7.39
2014-2015	8.96
2015-2016	9.41
2016-2017	12.05
2017-2018	13.58
2018-2019	14.89
2019-2020	16.50
2020-2021	16.40

FINDINGS

This current report seeks to capture the lived experiences of people who have had a history of justice involvement and homelessness. Drawing from a sample of **123** surveys and **52** interviews, this study sought to ground the provincial admissions data in the qualitative lived experiences of people who have endured homelessness and justice involvement, to understand the unique issues they face in navigating the current housing market and identify solutions that could serve to improve outcomes. Individuals were eligible for the study if they were currently experiencing homelessness, or if they had experienced homelessness in the past. The surveys and the interviews collected quantitative and rich qualitative data, including demographic information, information about experiences with homelessness and with the justice sector and circumstances surrounding an individual's housing loss, and their experiences accessing services. Individuals were also eligible if they had direct involvement with the justice system. In addition, the research team surveyed **62** service providers who worked in the justice and housing sectors asking their perspectives on the housing barriers faced by the clients they serve.
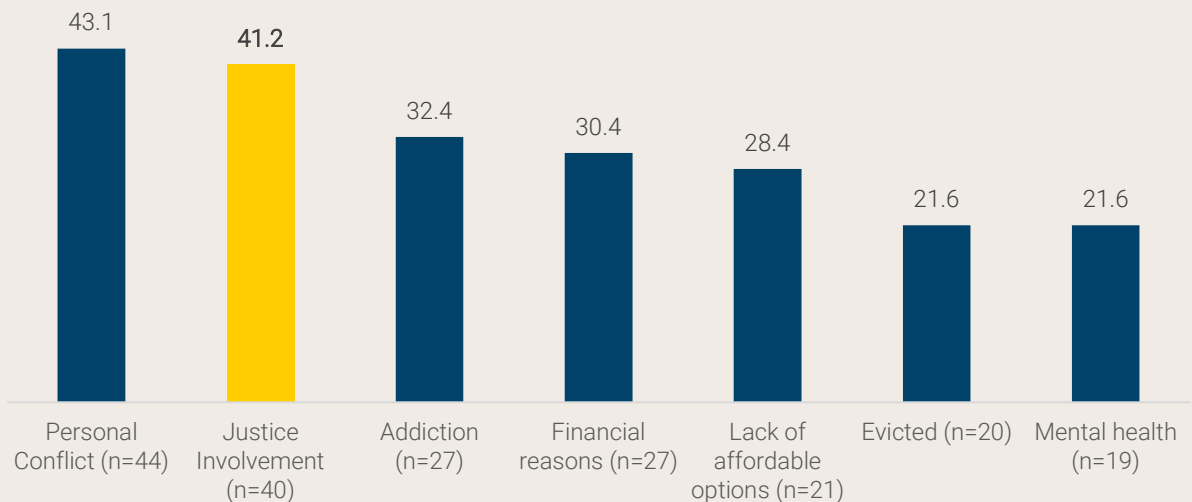
Table 1: Participant Demographics[3]			
Demographic		**Survey (n=123)**	**Interview (n=52)**
Gender	Man	58%	83%
	Woman	42%	17%
Age	19-25	6%	14%
	26-35	33%	14%
	36-45	28%	35%
	46-55	19%	19%
	56+	14%	19%
Ethnicity	White	51%	65%
	Indigenous	31%	17%
	Black	4%	12%
	Another Ethnicity/ Prefer Not to Answer	14%	6%
Income Situation	Income Support	55%	-
	Unemployed/No Income	27%	-
	Employed (Formal or Informal)	19%	-
Health	Diagnosed Mental Health Condition	68%	-
	Undiagnosed Mental Health Condition	87%	-
	Substance Use Condition	89%	-
	Chronic Illness and/or Disability	88%	-
Current Housing Situation	Sheltered	35%	-
	Own Place	22%	-
	Hidden	17%	-
	Other	13%	-
	Unsheltered	11%	-
	Transitional	2%	-
Justice Involvement	Involvement	83%	100%
	Incarceration	71%	-

Five major themes emerged from the analyses of the surveys and interviews of the people with lived experience (PWLE). These Key Findings represent the most common response patterns in the interviews with PWLE and the most endorsed items on the survey measures. Each Key Finding will explore part of the experience of justice involvement and homelessness, the barriers to finding housing, and what programs, services, and interventions are needed to help address them.

1. Justice system involvement is a leading cause of housing loss.

Justice involvement can impose barriers to employment and housing, even if it does not result in incarceration. More than 40% of survey participants indicated that their most recent experience of housing loss had been caused by justice involvement, while other commonly cited reasons included personal conflict (43%), addiction (32%), financial reasons (30%), lack of affordable options (28%), eviction (22%) and mental health (22%).

Figure 2: Cause of Most Recent Housing Loss Percentage Among Justice-Involved Survey Respondents

| Personal Conflict (n=44) | Justice Involvement (n=40) | Addiction (n=27) | Financial reasons (n=27) | Lack of affordable options (n=21) | Evicted (n=20) | Mental health (n=19) |
| 43.1 | 41.2 | 32.4 | 30.4 | 28.4 | 21.6 | 21.6 |

Note: Data for Figure 2 is derived from two separate questions. As a result, the total number of respondents are different based on each response.

Survey participants were asked if they had ever been discriminated against, stigmatized, or otherwise harassed by landlords or employers due to their past justice involvement. Approximately 40% of respondents reported discrimination or stigmatization by a landlord or housing provider and almost 37% reported discrimination or stigmatization by an employer.

"

"Yeah, and also the stereotype of they have to leave John Howard as the call-back place, they have to check their email there, because they don't have a computer. And I think for a lot of people, that scares them, they think 'If they're homeless, they must be addicts, I'm not gonna get my rent. If they're on disability, I'm not gonna get my rent."

– Study participant with Lived Experience

Of the 52 interviewed PWLE, about 79% made some reference to how their justice involvement led to homelessness, or how their homelessness led to further enmeshment with the justice system.

Once lost, housing was difficult to re-acquire due to systemic barriers such as criminal records and the accompanying stigmatization by employers and landlords. Specifically, 38% of PWLE participants cited justice involvement, and criminal records in particular, as a substantial barrier to finding housing. In addition, 43% of participants cited the triple stigma associated with justice involvement, homelessness, and being on social assistance as a significant barrier to housing acquisition. Criminal record checks by employers were a key barrier to employment imposed by justice involvement. Without proper employment, housing was typically not affordable, and what housing could be found was often not of high quality. In addition, criminal records created direct barriers to finding housing. An increasing number of landlords in Ontario are utilizing criminal record checks as a part of the rental screening processes and are less likely to rent to individuals with a history of justice involvement.

"

"It seems now it's very common, if you want an apartment, they're going to do a background check. Whereas back then, it wasn't common to do it back then. With a landlord, you could explain things and let them decide. But there was a lot of times where as soon as I could put on the application 'Yes, I have a record', I would never get a call back, or I would be told 'Sorry, you're not the right fit. We need somebody without a record.'"

– Study participant with Lived Experience

2.   Incarceration causes and perpetuates homelessness.

Incarceration is the most disruptive consequence of justice involvement. The effects of incarceration persist long after a person is released from an institution. Loss of housing can often be a direct result of that incarceration. A large proportion of survey participants, 40%, indicated that they were living in their own private residence before their most recent incarceration. In contrast, the number of participants who were living in their own residence dropped significantly to 21% immediately after being discharged. People who became homeless due to incarceration were often still homeless 6 months after their release.

Figure 3: Housing Situation of Participants Who Had Experienced Incarceration Percentage
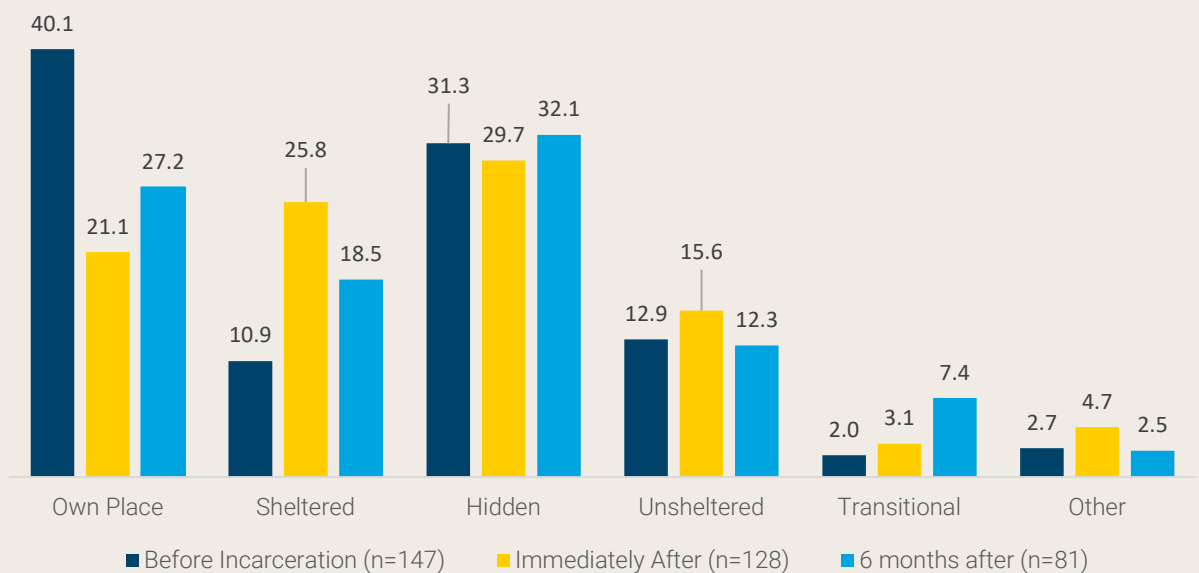
Incarceration represented an economic disaster for many individuals. Interview participants reported that they frequently lost their housing when they became incarcerated. In addition to the housing loss, participants often stated that they lost all of their possessions when incarcerated. With limited social networks, such as family and friends, to draw from to receive support many relied on community organizations. When these community resources are lacking, particularly resources after release from incarceration, participants are often trapped in the cycle. This lack of supports immediately upon release was cited by some participants as a primary cause of their entry into the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

"

"I lost my apartment once I got arrested. I had to start over, new stuff, every single time….. Yeah, I didn't have friends to save my stuff, or keep my stuff for me. I'd think they would because I've helped them in the past, but they won't."

– Study participant with Lived Experience

People released from a correctional facility were often released into shelters or transitional homes, stayed with family or friends, or had nowhere to go upon release and were thus released to live on the streets. Once homeless, many were at increased risk of contact with the police and re-incarceration. Participants often spoke of being caught in a cycle of homelessness and incarceration, where they would be incarcerated because they were homeless, and released from incarceration directly into homelessness.

"

There's a lot of people … They offer help and don't do nothing. So, when you get out, it's not like you have the cheque sitting there waiting for you… or you have a bed at a shelter, or like a motel. Something. They just throw you right back onto the street, and say 'You know what? Fend for yourself.' And I know a lot of people who are in there… who don't have nobody to fall back on when you get out. Either some people who don't get along with their family or this or that, so they just get out there with nobody….They'll just go right back to their old habits because that's what they're used to."

– Study participant with Lived Experience

3. Pre-release planning from correctional facilities was often insufficient to meet the needs of participants, making housing very difficult to find post-release.

The barriers that keep people enmeshed in the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement are such that many people would benefit from targeted support. As discussed earlier, incarceration often leads to loss of critical supports that can help prevent homelessness. People entering incarceration often lose their employment, income, social supports, medications and identification. More robust discharge planning could help mitigate this difficulty. Participants reflecting on their experiences often reported that discharge planning was insufficient to meet their needs or came too late in their sentences (where applicable) to be helpful.

"

"There are social workers, but they're seeing so many people, they can't do it all. They try, and they say they can do it all, but they just can't. There's getting to be more help now with like programs and stuff, but that's just starting now."

– Study participant with Lived Experience

Participants felt that there was a particular lack of programming in the provincial correctional system. Approximately half of the interview participants reported some sort of barrier in accessing services in a jail or correctional facility. In addition, in about 52% of the interviews, participants reported that release planning was inadequate. Many participants stated that the services they needed were simply not available in an institution. Others mentioned that services could sometimes be accessed but were inadequate to meet their needs. Programs and resources could take very long to access, and by the time a person was able to access a service, they were either due to be released soon, or the program was being delivered too late to be helpful.

"

"And that's another thing too. Correctional facilities, it takes a minute for paperwork and processing, and all that stuff to get going. And who knows? You could be just about to see an appointment, and boom, you get in trouble, you get shipped out, and you've gotta start that process all over again. And who knows, just when it's about to happen, you could get shipped out, let out, get bail, get released. Anything. So, it's a big challenge, right?"

– Study participant with Lived Experience

Lack of effective discharge or pre-release planning often led to delays in accessing employment, income supports and social assistance upon release, therefore exacerbating the difficulties of securing housing. The figure below shows the percentage of survey participants who had difficulty finding housing after incarceration. The results indicate that a large majority of participants, 68.6%, found it "Difficult" to find housing after release.

Figure 4: How easy was it for participants to find housing after most recent release? (n=86)

| 14.0% | 17.4% | 68.6% |

■ Easy   ■ Neither Easy Nor Difficult   ■ Difficult

"
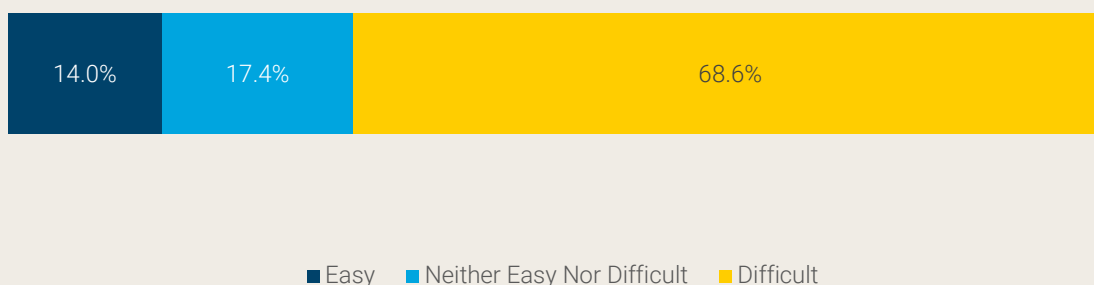
"It's… well, I believe it was… two days or three days. Because you're supposed to see the discharge planner, I think it was when you have something like 25% or 50% of your sentence done. So, that would give you enough time to work on things with them to help you out to get it. But, I'm pretty sure I seen the discharge planner like, probably tops, two to three days before I got out. Right? And that leaves no time to do anything."
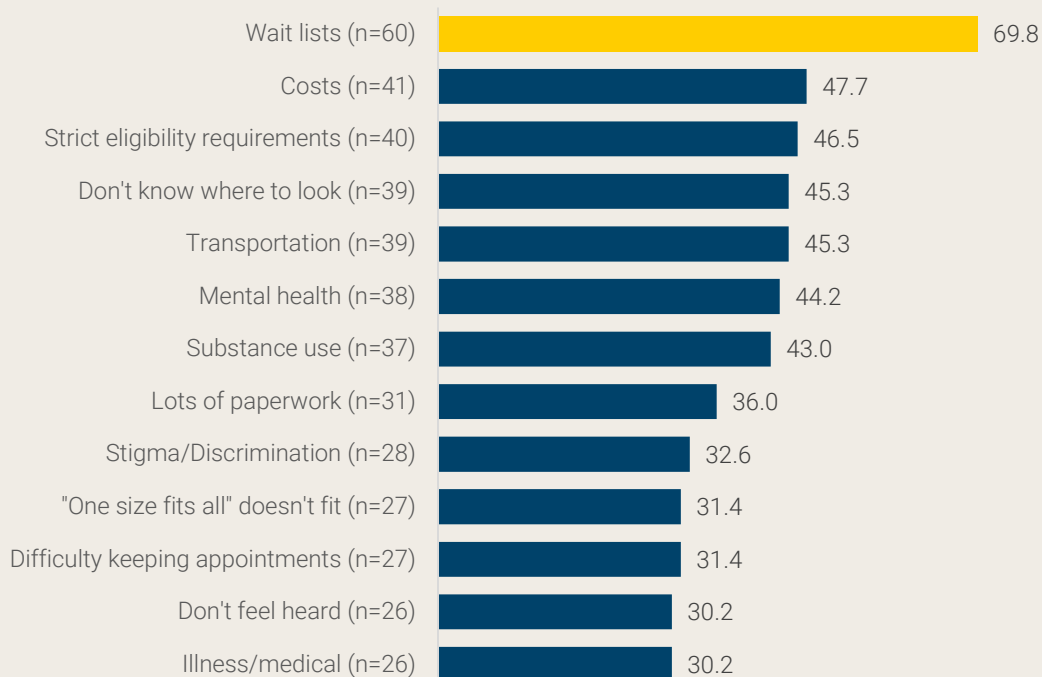
– Study participant with Lived Experience

4. **Participants reported many barriers to accessing essential services in the community**.

Individuals released from correctional institutions have many pressing needs. They often have acute financial needs, need to secure housing, and many have mental or physical health needs to address. They will require the support of community-based agencies to meet many of these needs. If individuals are to avoid future homelessness and justice involvement, they must be able to access these services in a timely manner. However, many people experience barriers when attempting to access these services. Sometimes there is a lack of services required to meet their particular needs. In other instances, they are unaware of available services or there might be practical barriers that prevent an individual from accessing services.

Participants highlighted a range of challenges in accessing supports in the community. Among survey respondents, 70% indicated that waitlists were a major barrier to accessing needed services. Some additional commonly cited barriers included costs, eligibility requirements, transportation and service availability, mental health and/or substance use challenges, administrative barriers such as paperwork, and stigmatization.

Figure 5: Common Barriers to Accessing Services Percentage

Barrier	Percentage
Wait lists (n=60)	69.8
Costs (n=41)	47.7
Strict eligibility requirements (n=40)	46.5
Don't know where to look (n=39)	45.3
Transportation (n=39)	45.3
Mental health (n=38)	44.2
Substance use (n=37)	43.0
Lots of paperwork (n=31)	36.0
Stigma/Discrimination (n=28)	32.6
"One size fits all" doesn't fit (n=27)	31.4
Difficulty keeping appointments (n=27)	31.4
Don't feel heard (n=26)	30.2
Illness/medical (n=26)	30.2

Practical barriers, such as a lack of access to a phone or email, made waitlists particularly hard to navigate.

> *"I'm on a list for food, I'm on a list for housing, I'm on a list for clothing, I'm on a list for counseling, I'm on a list for addiction counseling, I'm on a list for everything. And I'm desperate right now. I'm starving out there right now."*
>
> — Study participant with Lived Experience

Individuals experiencing homelessness can have difficulty keeping appointments, especially when services are in physically different locations that may be quite far from one another. In addition, many participants spoke of a lack of coordination between correctional facilities and community service organizations that caused service delays and often led to a lack of awareness of what services were available, and how these services might be accessed. Almost half of the respondents cited a lack of systems navigation and outreach as a barrier to accessing community services.

> *"One [thing I needed] was… guidance and directions, where the best resources are, and directions for me where to start. You know what I mean? I have a learning disability, something like that, so I need to be told and shown what to do…And a lot of the times they just give you a bunch of words on a piece of paper, they don't explain nothing to do, and they expect you to do that. I can read, but I'm still illiterate. They make it hard."*
>
> — Study participant with Lived Experience

Some participants indicated that having a case manager who is able to talk to a landlord on their behalf was crucial in helping them to secure housing. Some cited the need for a case worker or other individuals who are knowledgeable about the social systems to provide practical support and advocacy on their behalf.
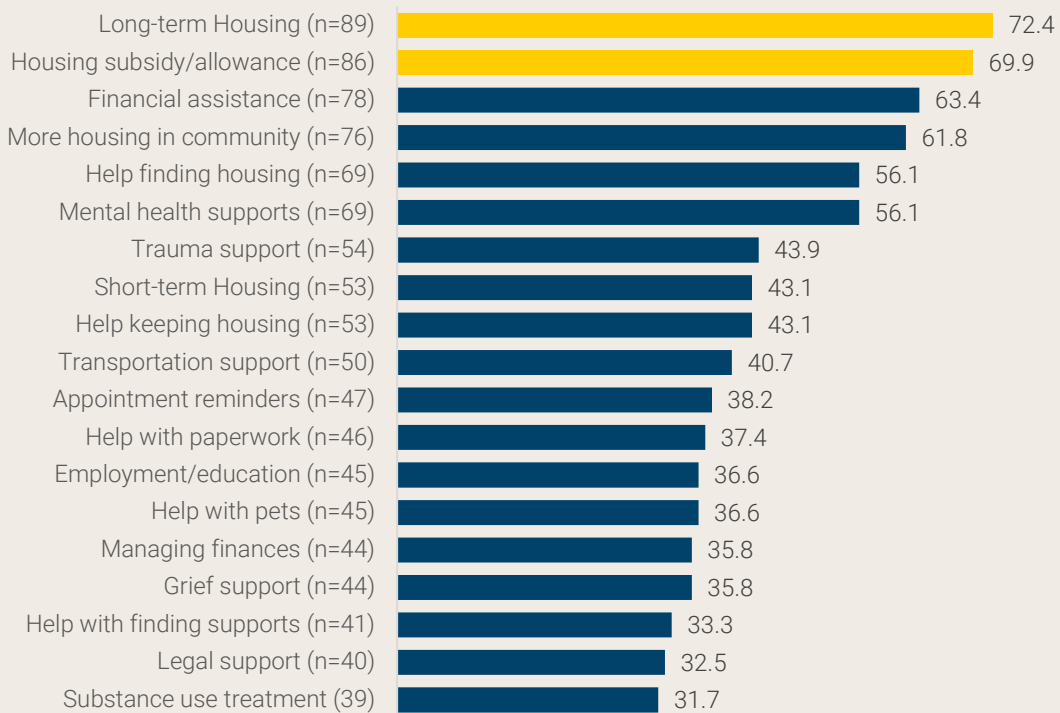
Figure 6: How Often Have Needed Supports Been Unavailable? (n=105)

- Often 44%
- Sometimes 41%
- Rarely 10%
- Never 5%
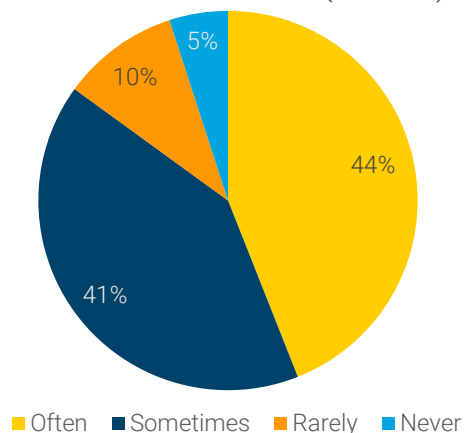
5. There are significant resource and service gaps for individuals caught in the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

Survey and interview participants were also asked to provide feedback on services and supports available in the community. These services included assistance with affordable long-term housing, mental health, substance use, trauma support, help finding and keeping housing, and administrative assistance, among others.
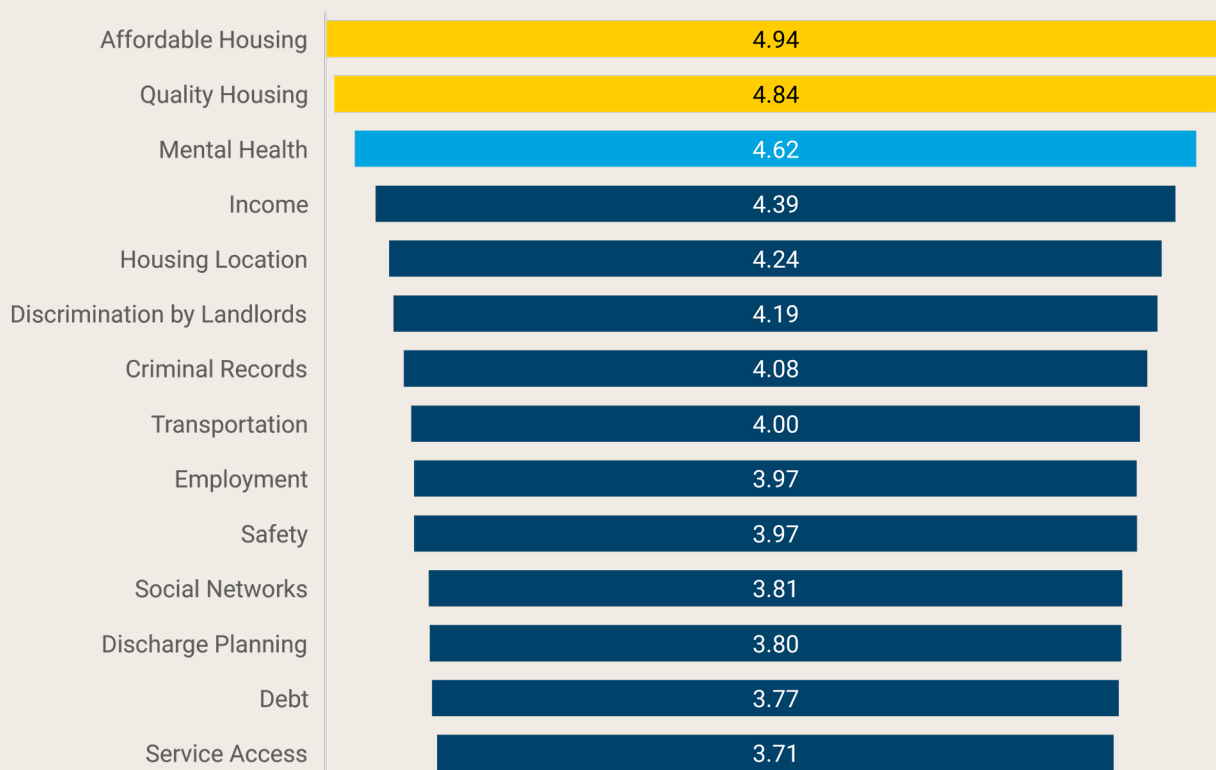
Figure 7: Helpful Services Percentage

Service	Percentage
Long-term Housing (n=89)	72.4
Housing subsidy/allowance (n=86)	69.9
Financial assistance (n=78)	63.4
More housing in community (n=76)	61.8
Help finding housing (n=69)	56.1
Mental health supports (n=69)	56.1
Trauma support (n=54)	43.9
Short-term Housing (n=53)	43.1
Help keeping housing (n=53)	43.1
Transportation support (n=50)	40.7
Appointment reminders (n=47)	38.2
Help with paperwork (n=46)	37.4
Employment/education (n=45)	36.6
Help with pets (n=45)	36.6
Managing finances (n=44)	35.8
Grief support (n=44)	35.8
Help with finding supports (n=41)	33.3
Legal support (n=40)	32.5
Substance use treatment (39)	31.7

Overall, for community service organizations, participants often cited factors such as outreach, assistance with systems navigation, and intensive case management as helpful. These factors tended to be mentioned in interviews most often.

Of the 62 service providers who participated in the study, a majority (82%) indicated that at least a "Moderate" number of their clients (40% or more) were experiencing homelessness. About 56% of service providers indicated that at least a "Moderate" number of their clients (40% or more) had past involvement with the justice system. Service providers who were asked about the needs of their clients agreed that the number one pressing need in communities was quality, affordable housing options.

Figure 8: Biggest Challenges Faced by Clients (n=62)

Challenge	Score
Affordable Housing	4.94
Quality Housing	4.84
Mental Health	4.62
Income	4.39
Housing Location	4.24
Discrimination by Landlords	4.19
Criminal Records	4.08
Transportation	4.00
Employment	3.97
Safety	3.97
Social Networks	3.81
Discharge Planning	3.80
Debt	3.77
Service Access	3.71

The challenges outlined by service providers echo many of the challenges described by PWLE. These challenges tended to arise due to broad, systemic factors, such as a lack of affordable housing, high costs of living, and stigmatization.

The overall findings of this research study underscore the importance of dedicated affordable housing tailored to meet the unique needs of justice-involved individuals. The findings also speak to the need for enhancements to discharge planning pre-release, and coordination of re-entry supports post-release, but for these improvements to be effective, adequate (and appropriate), housing supply must be made available in communities across the province. The report concludes with a series of policy recommendations which aim to ultimately interrupt and break the costly and inhumane cycle of justice involvement and homelessness.
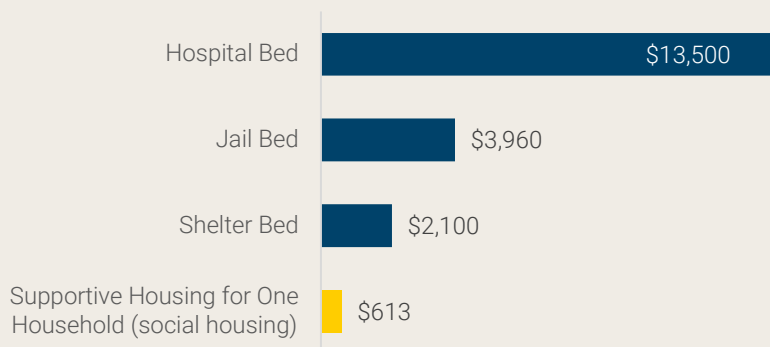
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Dedicated Housing Options for Justice-Involved Populations*

As outlined in the Key Findings above, incarceration can result in unique and significant barriers for people trying to secure housing post-release. Yet, housing is a crucial part of successful reintegration.

Affordable housing targeted to justice-involved populations should be a key policy goal. Justice-involved populations have unique challenges and barriers, necessitating a tailored response. Investments into a variety of housing options specifically focused on individuals with past justice involvement would fill a critical gap, help the province reach homelessness reduction targets and contribute to decreased recidivism rates by helping individuals meet a vital need. Supportive housing options that connect people with services are particularly useful as many individuals with justice involvement also have complex needs. Long-term housing is crucial and for some, transitional housing can help bridge the gap to longer term solutions and prevent periods of homelessness. Community-based supportive housing also makes economic sense, as it is much less costly than emergency services and correctional stays. Supportive housing (social housing) for one household costs about $613 a month, contrasted with the cost of a shelter bed at $2,100 a month, a jail bed that costs an average of $3,960 per month or a hospital bed at $13,500 per month.[4]

Supportive housing combines affordable housing with individualized, flexible services for people with high needs. Effective, long term supportive housing should be low barrier and services should be culturally safe, particularly for Black and Indigenous populations, who are overrepresented in corrections and often face compounding issues upon release into the community. Resources should be dedicated to Indigenous and Black-led culturally appropriate housing and supportive services to improve outcomes.

Transitional supportive housing refers to a temporary type of accommodation meant to bridge the gap between incarceration, or chronic homelessness, and permanent housing. For some individuals recently released from correctional institutions, dedicated transitional housing options would help with stabilization and fill a critical need. After a period in transitional housing, some individuals may naturally transition into the private rental market or other housing options. Others may require longer term supportive housing.

Figure 9: Monthly Cost of Housing

Housing Type	Monthly Cost
Hospital Bed	$13,500
Jail Bed	$3,960
Shelter Bed	$2,100
Supportive Housing for One Household (social housing)	$613

Effective housing options must also include a variety of services including culturally relevant and safe programming for Black and Indigenous populations, who are overrepresented in corrections and often face compounding issues upon release into the community. Resources should be dedicated to Indigenous and Black-led culturally appropriate housing and supportive services to improve outcomes.

Bail beds are an example of transitional/supportive housing that could be enhanced and expanded to help address homelessness at the bail stage. Bail beds provide supervision and housing with supports to individuals on bail who might otherwise be released into homelessness or held in detention. This not only supports compliance with bail conditions but also ensures people are connected to services to reduce homelessness and address their needs longer term.

JHS Ottawa operates a bail residential program that provides supervision and case management to individuals on bail who might otherwise experience homelessness or prolonged pre-trial detention. The program involves a partnership with the local Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), so clients are able to access mental health supports without the waitlists experienced by people in the community. In addition to mental health and substance use services, clients have access to employment supports, upgrading and life skills, and social recreational services.

In early February 2024, the Ministry of the Solicitor General issued a call for proposals for up to 30 beds for people leaving corrections in Central region, which is a great signal that the Ministry is prioritizing the creation of housing for people leaving their care. This represents a good opportunity to pilot and ultimately scale this model to address the demand for justice housing in communities across Ontario.

Key Recommendations:

o   Justice and housing ministries should work collaboratively with community-based justice and mental health organizations to direct funds to a range of supportive housing facilities and rent supplements for individuals recently released from provincial corrections and/or currently under a bail or probation order. The supportive housing options should include both short-term transitional housing and long-term housing options.

o   The Ministry of Solicitor General pilot of dedicated justice beds in Central region for people leaving corrections should be expanded across the province.

2. *Continuity and enhancement of social assistance in Ontario*

Lack of income support was listed by service providers in the current study as one of the most pressing challenges affecting their clients. Incarcerated people cannot receive Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) while they are incarcerated, which means they may also lose their housing without the financial resources to continue payments. About 70% of people are in provincial custody for a month or less,[5] yet due to these interruptions to income assistance, it could mean a release into homelessness.

There are also challenges with reinstating OW and ODSP upon release. According to the Ontario Works policy directives, incarcerated people who are soon to be released from custody can initiate the process to reinstate OW by phone while in the correctional facility.[6] There is often uncertainty about release dates preventing many individuals from being able to call and start the process of reinstatement while they are incarcerated. Even with the changes in reinstatement rules, the current study revealed many people are left without any income supports after release. Without any income supports, many individuals are left homeless or sleeping rough.

Furthermore, the income assistance available to Ontarians places them well below the deep income poverty threshold, meaning their disposable income is less than 75% of the cost of a basket of goods and services that represent a basic standard of living.[7] In short, the income assistance available to Ontarians, whether they are single or families, is not sufficient for cost of living and entrenches them in deep poverty. The social assistance rates should be increased to reflect the growing cost of living.

Key Recommendations:

o Continue paying full benefits for short periods of incarceration. Many individuals are only incarcerated for short periods of time but the impacts of being cut off OW or ODSP are long lasting. Not only can it result in loss of housing but can also impact child support, and payment of ongoing debts, leading to further entrenchment in poverty. Recipients of OW or ODSP who are hospitalized continue to receive full income assistance in the first three full calendar months of hospitalization.[8] Similar policies should be in place for periods of incarceration.

o Extend the time for pre-release OW or ODSP applications to 30 days. It can be difficult to predict when an individual will be released from incarceration. Allowing pre-release applications within 30 days of release would ensure that more people have the income support they need when they are released from corrections and help prevent re-entry into homelessness.

o The province should increase income assistance rates to reflect the growing cost of living and in recognition that current rates keep recipients in deep poverty.

3. Strengthening Release Planning

Research participants found reintegration and housing supports for people leaving incarceration to be inadequate. The findings from this research particularly emphasized the importance of providing identification to avoid interruptions in care and services post-release, and comprehensive reintegration planning that ensures individuals are connected with a primary care provider and adequate supports.

Identification (ID) is required to reinstate social assistance, to see a doctor and get prescriptions, and for employment and housing. Many individuals lose their IDs when they are arrested, and it can often be challenging to get new ID upon release. In certain jurisdictions (like Thunder Bay), pilot projects are being explored to introduce ID clinics inside correctional institutions so individuals can leave with their ID, minimizing interruptions to accessing social services or health services in the community. This should be evaluated and expanded across the province.

Individuals in the study brought up challenges they experienced with continuing health services in the community upon their release. Particularly for individuals with mental health conditions or individuals struggling with substance use/addiction, accessing treatment is an essential part of being able to secure and retain housing. Interruptions in health services could be avoided if people without a primary doctor are connected with primary care upon release to access prescriptions and get referrals.

The Ministry of Solicitor General has made huge strides in making reintegration supports available to individuals in provincial institutions – both remanded and sentenced populations – through the **Community Reintegration Strategy**. As the strategy continues to roll out, future evaluations will provide a better picture of the impact of these programs on the outcomes of individuals released from corrections.

Key Recommendations:

o   The provincial government should introduce/expand initiatives to allow incarcerated individuals to obtain identification before their release so that they can connect to community-based care and services without interruption.

o   The provincial government should standardize a process for correctional institutions to coordinate with community-based health service providers to ensure individuals are being released into the care of primary care physicians upon release. We know there is a new unit at the Ministry of Solicitor General dedicated to health transformation. We hope that referrals to primary care providers are addressed in any initiatives to improve health outcomes and continuity of care for individuals reintegrating into community.

o   The Ministry of Solicitor General's Community Reintegration Strategy should be evaluated to determine its impacts and make any necessary changes to continue to support reintegrating Ontarians.

4.   *Shoring up Community-Based Reintegration Services*

There are community-based services that have long been supporting individuals as they transition from corrections into the community, yet these agencies are often chronically under-resourced and face growing demand for their services. As noted above, there are often long waitlists that leave people without supports for months or years. A robust system of community-based supports and services is crucially important for reintegration and preventing recidivism.

Community service agencies face increasing complexity of cases requiring more time, resources and supports to meet the needs of clients. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues like mental illness and substance use and shed light on underserved people in our communities. Now, years out from the start of the pandemic, community service organizations continue to face increasing complexity of client needs and circumstances and struggle to maintain programming due to resource constraints and increased service demands, such as the expectations to continue offering hybrid services.

Many organizations are struggling to keep up with the demand for community programming. As noted in the previous section, the Community Reintegration Strategy being rolled out by the Ministry of Solicitor General is making sure more Ontarians are given referrals to community supports upon release, thereby likely increasing demand on already over-burdened service providers. Additional resources are required to ensure community infrastructure is equipped to support growing need for community resources.

Key Recommendation:

o   The province should issue a meaningful increase in funding to agencies providing reintegration services in the community to ensure they are able to meet current demands and growing needs of reintegrating Ontarians.

5.   *The Need for System Navigation Services*

Related to community reintegration supports, is the role of navigation services. As outlined in the research, services are often difficult to navigate and often individuals are unaware or unable to access available supports. Even the most robust, comprehensive institutional discharge planning does not translate into positive outcomes if individuals struggle to navigate systems and act upon referrals once they are released from custody. Navigation services fill this need by providing case management support in the transitional period post-release helping to ensure individuals access appropriate services.

One example of such a program is the Systems Navigator Program (SNP) that is currently funded by the Ministry of Solicitor General and available in select communities in Ontario. The SNP caseworkers get referrals from staff within the correctional institutions and provide intensive case management in the immediate period post-release, including assistance with paperwork, accompaniment to appointments and assistance in accessing referrals to meet their needs, so that reintegrating individuals have direct support executing their discharge plan.

Another example of a promising navigation program is the social navigator component of the Residential Reintegration Program (RRP), operated by John Howard Society of Thunder Bay. The Social Navigator coordinates and liaises with community services and provides case management including assistance with paperwork and applications to help individuals identify and secure long-term housing and community services.

Community-based organizations are uniquely suited to deliver navigation supports as they hold the trust of individuals reintegrating into community and provide many in-house services that provide crucial wraparound supports to address compounding needs.

Key Recommendation:

o   Expand community-based systems navigation services across the province to ensure individuals can implement their reintegration plans and access vital community-based services and supports to meet their needs.

6.   Improving Access to Services in Remote Communities

It was raised in the current study that in rural and suburban areas it can be very challenging to access services due to a lack of public, accessible transportation. Shelters and other housing options may be located very far away from other services and supports, making them inaccessible for an individual who relies on those services. The process of obtaining and retaining housing often relies on mobility and a lack of transportation can hinder the ability to access housing.

In order to address this issue, services and supports that cover a specific catchment area should ensure that they are truly accessible to everyone in that region. Mobile units that meet people where they are located can help increase the accessibility of services where there are transportation challenges. Bringing services to publicly accessible spaces like libraries or to places where people reside such as shelters can also help ensure people have access to supports.

Finally, policy makers should ensure public transportation is accessible and available across the province through building and expanding infrastructure. Transportation

services should be made accessible for low-income people and those experiencing poverty and homelessness so that they can access critical services and supports.

Key Recommendation:

o   Services should be accessible to everyone within a catchment area. Mobile units and pop ups in places like shelters and libraries can help with accessibility where there are transportation challenges.

7. *Data Collection for Transparency and Accountability*

One of the key challenges in defining the scope of the homelessness issue in Ontario is a lack of data. In this research, no fixed address was used as a proxy measure for homelessness among incarcerated people. As outlined in the report, that has significant limitations in that it doesn't capture individuals considered the "hidden homeless" and those who lost their housing during their time in custody. It also doesn't capture the extent to which homelessness impacts people who have not experienced incarceration but have past involvement with the justice system.

The development of effective and comprehensive strategies and interventions relies on fully understanding the scope of the issue. To this end, there should be efforts made on a federal, provincial, and local level to collect and publish data on homelessness. Data should include demographic information including race-based data and be broken down into jurisdictions/regions across the province to facilitate targeted and community-specific responses.

Key Recommendation:

o   Federal, provincial, and local governments should facilitate the collection and publication of data to effectively measure the scope of homelessness in Ontario.

CONCLUSION

Ontario is currently experiencing a housing crisis; many families are finding housing increasingly unaffordable. As housing prices increase, more economically marginalized people become at increasing risk of homelessness. Justice-involved individuals are among these economically marginalized groups.

The current report documented the perspectives of service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness and justice involvement. They spoke about the barriers they faced when attempting to obtain housing. The barriers ranged from unaffordability of housing to the stigma of criminal records that resulted in exclusion from housing providers. They also spoke about the lack of adequate resources to help individuals with their needs and difficulty navigating social service systems.

Many of the people interviewed in this study also showed considerable resilience in overcoming barriers. Many were now living in stable housing situations. They had successfully exited the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Many others could as well if they are put in contact with needed services, and if these services are given the resources required.

This points to the need for targeted policy responses to reduce homelessness among justice-involved populations. The path forward should involve investment in dedicated beds for individuals with justice involvement and those transitioning out of incarceration. Social assistance policies should allow for reasonable rates to allow people to provide for themselves and prevent interruptions during short periods of incarceration. Community-based service agencies should be resourced to support individuals transitioning out of corrections with case management and navigation supports to ensure institutional release plans can be executed. This project also points to the need for more data collection to measure the scope of homelessness in Ontario to develop and measure interventions.

Homelessness is a complex problem; there are many pathways to homelessness, and these different pathways require different solutions to ensure that everyone has a stable home. This research makes clear that the problem of homelessness cannot be solved without considering the unique needs of justice-involved people in Ontario. Over a million people in Ontario have criminal records,[9] and tens of thousands are incarcerated and released from provincial correctional institutions every year. Their needs must be considered if homelessness is to be ended. Without stable housing, many justice-involved people will not be able to effectively reintegrate into society. Providing accessible, adequate housing for justice-involved individuals will help to facilitate reintegration, and to prevent future incarceration by allowing people to break free from the vicious cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

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[3] Table Notes:
- *Gender was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their gender identity in their own words. Responses were then coded by the research team. All participants in the current sample responded with either "man/male" or "woman/female."*
- *Age was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their own age numerically. The ages were divided to create a youth (25 or under) group, and the other categories were created based on the frequency of responses.*
- *Ethnicity was assessed using a checklist of ethnic backgrounds; participants could select any that applied to them.*
- *Housing Situation Definitions*
  - *"Sheltered": living in an emergency/transitional shelter, or a temporary space such as hostel, hotel, or motel*
  - *"Own Place": a place the participant owns or rents*
  - *"Hidden": living with friends/family or couch surfing, with no permanent place of their own*
  - *"Unsheltered": living outside, "sleeping rough"*
  - *"Transitional": a hospital or treatment center*
  - *"Other": any other living situation*
- *Involvement" includes being detained, stopped, or carded by police, arrested, charged, and/or* convicted, and incarcerated of a criminal offence.

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5 Office of the Auditor General. (2019) Annual Report 2019: Reports on Correctional Services and Court Operations. Retrieved from https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/annualreports/arreports/en19/2019AR_v3_en_web.pdf

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