

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/homeward-bound-increasing-access-to-public-housing-in-new-york-for-formerly-incarcerated-people>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A bus with gated windows pulls over to the side of a dark, empty street on the outskirts of town. A man steps down to the curb with little beyond the faded clothes he is wearing and the five-dollar fare card in his pocket. Good luck, the bus driver says, and drives off, leaving the man alone at the street corner, wondering where he will stay the night.

For thousands of men and women returning home from incarceration each year, this scene is frighteningly familiar. The question of where to live presents an immediate, and at times desperate, concern made more difficult by local public housing authorities that deny admission based on past convictions and, in some cases, a persons arrest record, including arrests that did not lead to a conviction. Formerly incarcerated people seeking shelter are effectively barred from what could otherwise be their best resource: public housing.

In cities like New York, New Orleans, Oakland, and Burlington Vermont, however, coalitions of administrators, advocates, and researchers are testing strategies to broaden access to public housing for those returning from incarceration. The first of a three-part blog series on reentry and public housing, this installment will provide an overview of the field and profile an [initiative in New York](#) run in partnership between the Vera Institute of Justice, the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), the Corporation for Supportive Housing, and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). The project aims to reunite families and to carefully test the hypothesis that formerly incarcerated people can thrive when supported in subsidized housing units.

Housing, family support, and prisoner reentry are deeply intertwined. In separate studies, researchers at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and the [Urban Institute](#) found that stable housing and family support may contribute to lower rates of recidivism, homelessness, drug use, and parole and probation violations, and that housing stability is a key to securing and retaining employment. Moreover, studies demonstrate that most formerly incarcerated people plan to rely on their families for housing upon release.

Incarceration rates, however, are greatest in neighborhoods that tend to have high concentrations of public housing, preventing formerly incarcerated individuals from living with family members who reside in publically-subsidized apartments.

The NYCHA Family Reentry Pilot program is attempting to test one response to this issue. Launched in September 2013, the pilot will permit 150 carefully screened individuals who are over 16 and have been released from incarceration within the past 18 months to live with a family member in public housing for two years. Individuals must refrain from reoffending, stay drug-free, and participate in at least six months of case management with one of nine reentry service providers across the city. Significantly, the participants addition to the household will not increase rent, and once the participant finishes the two-year program, he or she can be added to the lease.

The program which is [managed by Vera](#) aims to keep formerly incarcerated people off the streets. Through funding from the Tiger Foundation and DHS, 100 of the 150 participants will be referred from shelters, transitional housing, or the citys HomeBase homelessness prevention program. Lifetime-registered sex offenders and those convicted of producing methamphetamine in public housing are ineligible for the pilot due to federally-mandated bans.

Vera is tracking pilot participants for the duration of the program as part of a unique study to determine if formerly incarcerated people can achieve stability, remain safely in the community, and follow all the conditions of being public housing residents once they are reunited with family. The findings of this research potentially demonstrating the successes of the participants may for the first time shed light on previously untested rules restricting individuals with criminal records and may lead to the removal of one of the harshest collateral consequences of incarceration in America.

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