

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/two-societies/contemporary-models-of-equal-access-to-housing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A key area of focus of the Kerner Commission was equal and high quality access to housing.

The authors of the Kerner Report saw clearly how the huge shift in American culture from city dwelling to suburban homeownership left behind many Americans—mostly people of color—and contributed to profound economic and social segregation. The resulting civil disobedience was a call for affordable housing. Unfortunately, the commissions recommendations related to increasing access to affordable housing were not heeded, and 50 years later, equal access to affordable housing is still an issue. At Vera, we understand how housing stability is intimately connected to why so many individuals have landed in jail and prison and how this contact with the justice system leads to further housing instability.

The Kerner Commission strongly advocated for expanding the countrys affordable housing, as well as public housing and programs that support integration of residents. The authors of the report understood that systemic changes needed to take place. They questioned an underfunded federal housing program that could not adequately address the root of racial segregation. Instead, they called for creating federal housing programs that promoted low and middle-income housing outside of the inner cities. For example, an ownership supplement program in which low-income families could purchase homes with subsidized mortgages from the federal government to make homeownership accessible for lower-income residents. Similarly, Veras [Opening Doors](#) initiative creates system-level reforms to increase housing access and family reunification for formerly-incarcerated individuals.

During the 1970s and 1980s, with shifts towards punitive approaches and increases in the use of the criminal justice system, public housing was also targeted. In New York City, individuals convicted of misdemeanors can be barred from public housing for three to four years, and individuals with felony convictions can be barred for five to six years. Opening Doors mirrors the spirit of the Kerner Commissions efforts to better ensure equal housing access. In New York City, we partnered with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and many other community and government partners to plan, implement, and evaluate a pilot program that enabled men and women returning from incarceration to live with their family members in public housing.

Given the significant barriers to reentry for formerly incarcerated people—which leads to high personal and economic instability and a risk of recidivism—Vera and its partners in the NYCHA pilot program understood how vital it is for a person to connect with family or a support system in order to successfully reenter their community. The [Family Reentry Pilot Program](#) proved to be successful and in December 2016, it became a permanent program. The program aims to link access to housing with reentry services in an 18-month model where a formerly incarcerated individual can temporarily live with their family members. Upon completion of the program, the person can then join their familys lease. Each individual is screened for housing assistance and provided case management services from reentry service providers. John Bae, former program associate at Vera who worked closely on the project, reported that since its inception 127 people have successfully united with their families in public housing, and only four people have been convicted of a new offense.

As Vera continues to guide and work with NYCHA on this program, possibilities for expansion have surfaced. New York State launched its own, similar program, in attempts to reunite formerly incarcerated individuals with their families upstate. With greater care towards adequate housing for individuals who have been historically targeted by punitive policies, the possibilities for equal access to housing are a reality as Vera and other organizations continue to push for policies the Kerner Commission once introduced 50 years ago.

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