

MARKET RESEARCH

COVID-19 IMPACT FOR EX-OFFENDERS

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IMPACT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EX-OFFENDERS AND THE HOUSING CRISIS

To begin with, ex-offenders already face a myriad of challenges in their path towards societal reintegration. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these hurdles, imposing additional pressures that make their transition even more difficult.

The first challenge is employment. The pandemic-induced recession has led to widespread job loss, causing an escalation in the competition for available jobs. This scenario is particularly disadvantageous for ex-offenders who are commonly marginalized by potential employers due to their criminal records. As more people join the job-seeking pool, the labor market becomes increasingly saturated, thereby reducing the employment prospects for ex-offenders. The inability to secure stable employment exacerbates their financial insecurities, further hindering their reintegration process.

Secondly, housing, a fundamental requirement for stability and integration, has become an increasingly scarce resource during the pandemic. The already scarce affordable housing options available to ex-offenders have been further diminished by the ongoing housing crisis, escalated by the pandemic. They frequently face housing discrimination due to their past, making their search for a home exceptionally challenging. The pandemic, leading to an overall surge in housing prices and decreased availability, has magnified this issue.

The pandemic has also aggravated the mental health issues prevalent amongst ex-offenders. The isolation, fear, and general anxiety associated with the virus can trigger or intensify existing mental health conditions. Given that many ex-offenders often grapple with such issues, the pandemic poses a serious threat to their mental wellbeing.

In terms of community reintegration, COVID-19 has thrown another spanner in the works. Social distancing measures and closures have hindered access to crucial in-person services, such as counseling, community meetings, and other support services. These support systems

play a vital role in guiding ex-offenders through their reintegration journey, but the pandemic has significantly reduced their accessibility.

Turning our focus to the housing crisis, COVID-19 has poured gasoline onto an already blazing fire. The economic hardship induced by the pandemic has led to a sharp rise in evictions and homelessness, as individuals and families struggle to keep a roof over their heads. The affordability of housing has become an even greater issue during these trying times. The economic downturn has pushed many to downgrade their living conditions, move into unstable housing, or, in the worst cases, face homelessness.

The rental market has also felt the sting of the pandemic. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19, some governments have implemented eviction moratoriums. However, these have placed financial strains on landlords, particularly those operating on a smaller scale. As these moratoriums come to an end, there is a looming threat of mass evictions, which could escalate the housing crisis even further.

Lastly, for those already without homes, the pandemic poses a significant health risk. The necessity for social distancing is a luxury that the homeless cannot afford. This has piled pressure onto governments and social organizations to provide safe shelter options, further highlighting the pressing nature of the housing crisis.¹²³

LONG TERM SOLUTIONS

Developing Affordable Housing specifically for Ex-Offenders

One promising solution is the development of affordable housing explicitly designed for ex-offenders. Recognizing the unique needs and challenges faced by this population, the Department of Justice has initiated efforts to establish guidelines for housing providers. By creating transitional and long-term housing options tailored to ex-felons, this approach aims to ensure affordable, safe, and supportive environments that facilitate successful reentry into society.

¹ (Targeted Release in the COVID-19 Correctional Crisis: Using the RNR Model to Save Lives, n.d.)

² (Covid-19 Has Made Reentry and Life After Prison Even Harder, n.d.)

³ (Housing the Decarcerated: Covid-19, Abolition, and the Right to Housing, n.d.)

Providing Financial Support

Financial support programs play a crucial role in assisting ex-offenders with securing housing. Rental assistance programs can help alleviate the financial burden by providing subsidies to cover a portion of the rent. Similarly, offering security deposit assistance can address one of the significant barriers for ex-offenders, as many struggle to gather the necessary funds to secure housing. These financial support initiatives not only increase housing affordability but also promote stability and reduce the risk of homelessness.

Providing Temporary Housing

Temporary housing options, such as halfway houses or recovery residences, serve as vital stepping stones for ex-offenders transitioning into permanent housing. These facilities provide a safe and structured environment where individuals can receive support, access resources, and develop essential life skills. Temporary housing not only bridges the gap between incarceration and independent living but also fosters a sense of community and social support crucial for successful reintegration.

Addressing Discrimination

Discrimination faced by ex-offenders from public housing authorities and private property owners remains a significant obstacle to accessing stable housing. Combating this discrimination requires a multi-faceted approach. Firstly, public awareness campaigns can educate the general public and housing providers about the importance of fair housing practices and dispel misconceptions surrounding individuals with criminal records. Secondly, policy reforms can be implemented to ensure that housing applications are evaluated on an individualized basis, focusing on factors beyond criminal history. By addressing discrimination and promoting inclusivity, ex-offenders can have equal opportunities to secure affordable housing.

Providing Longer-Term Support

To sustain stable housing for ex-offenders, it is crucial to offer comprehensive support services. Job training and placement programs can equip individuals with marketable skills, increasing their chances of finding stable employment. Access to mental health and substance abuse treatment is vital, as many ex-offenders face these challenges upon

reentry. Additionally, offering supportive services such as counseling, case management, and educational programs helps individuals navigate the complexities of independent living, enhancing their long-term stability.

Conclusion

The affordable housing crisis for ex-offenders requires a holistic and multi-dimensional approach to facilitate successful reintegration. By developing affordable housing specifically for this population, providing financial support, offering temporary housing options, addressing discrimination, and providing longer-term support services, we can create a path towards stable and affordable housing. These solutions not only contribute to reducing recidivism rates but also foster a more inclusive society that values second chances and supports the successful reintegration of ex-offenders. Through collective efforts and collaboration between housing providers, policymakers, and community organizations, we can work towards a society where affordable housing is accessible to all, including those with criminal records.⁴⁵⁶

FINANCIAL BARRIERS THAT EX-OFFENDERS FACE WHEN TRYING TO SECURE HOUSING

Lack of Affordable Housing Options

Ex-offenders are confronted with a general scarcity of affordable housing, similar to what many low-income individuals encounter. The limited availability of affordable housing exacerbates the competition for resources among ex-offenders and non-offenders alike. With a higher demand than supply, ex-offenders often face challenges finding suitable and affordable housing options, leading to housing instability and potential homelessness.

Limited Access to Public Housing

Ex-offenders may encounter restricted access to public housing due to their criminal records. Public housing authorities may implement policies that disqualify individuals with certain criminal histories, making it harder for ex-offenders to secure stable and affordable housing. The limited availability of

⁴ (Affordable Housing for Ex-Offenders, n.d.)

⁵ (Securing housing after incarceration, n.d.)

⁶ (Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people, n.d.)

public housing exacerbates the difficulties faced by ex-offenders in finding appropriate accommodation upon release.

Poor Credit History

A criminal record can have adverse effects on an individual's credit history. Time spent in prison may result in financial hardships, unpaid debts, or a lack of credit activity, leading to a poor credit score. Landlords often rely on credit checks as part of their screening process, making it more challenging for ex-offenders with poor credit history to secure housing. The perceived risk associated with a low credit score may discourage landlords from renting to ex-offenders, further limiting their housing options.

Lack of Financial Resources

Ex-offenders frequently lack the financial resources necessary to secure housing. Insufficient funds for security deposits, first month's rent, or ongoing rental payments can be significant barriers. Additionally, limited or unstable income due to a lack of employment opportunities can hinder ex-offenders' ability to meet their housing expenses. The absence of a stable financial foundation makes it difficult for ex-offenders to establish a stable living situation and can contribute to housing instability and homelessness.

Stigma

The stigma surrounding individuals with criminal records poses a considerable obstacle when seeking housing. Landlords may hold biased perceptions about ex-offenders, associating them with increased risk or potential disruptions in their properties. The resulting reluctance to rent to individuals with criminal records contributes to a cycle of housing instability and limited housing options for ex-offenders.

Conclusion

Ex-offenders face significant financial barriers when attempting to secure housing, including a lack of affordable housing options, limited access to public housing, poor credit history, lack of financial resources, and stigma. Addressing these barriers is vital to support the successful reintegration of ex-offenders into society, reduce recidivism rates, and prevent homelessness. Implementing targeted policies and interventions such as increasing the availability of affordable housing, revisiting public housing

eligibility criteria, offering credit counseling and rehabilitation programs, providing financial assistance for rental costs, and promoting education and awareness to combat stigma can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive housing system. By removing these financial barriers, we can foster an environment that supports ex-offenders in accessing stable and affordable housing, facilitating their reintegration and enabling them to lead productive, fulfilling lives within their communities.⁷⁸

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES IN COMBATING EX-OFFENDER HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY

Combating ex-offender homelessness and housing instability requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the unique challenges faced by this population. Several successful strategies have emerged, aimed at providing support, resources, and opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to secure and maintain stable housing.

One crucial strategy is the development of more efficient interagency systems. States can collaborate with public housing authorities, non-profit organizations, and various stakeholders to streamline the process of finding homes for ex-offenders. By improving coordination and communication among these entities, the availability of affordable housing options can be increased, ensuring that individuals reentering society have a place to call home.

However, securing housing is just the first step. To ensure long-term stability, it is vital to provide extended support to ex-offenders. This support may include comprehensive services such as job training and placement programs, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and other essential resources. By addressing the underlying factors that contribute to housing instability, individuals are better equipped to maintain their housing and successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Housing must be prioritized within the context of reentry programs. Adopting a "Housing First" approach recognizes that safe, stable, and

⁷ (For Ex-Offenders, Housing is a Bigger Hurdle Than Employment, n.d.)

⁸ (HOMELESSNESS AND PRISONER RE-ENTRY, n.d.)

affordable housing is a fundamental requirement for successful reintegration. If formerly incarcerated individuals are excluded from accessing such housing due to legal or financial barriers, their chances of rebuilding their lives and avoiding homelessness diminish significantly. Therefore, it is crucial for state and local reentry organizations to make housing a priority and offer ongoing services to support individuals after they secure housing.

Financial assistance plays a significant role in helping ex-offenders overcome the financial challenges associated with housing. Rental assistance programs, security deposit assistance, and other forms of financial support can alleviate the burden of housing costs and help individuals maintain their homes. By removing the financial barriers, formerly incarcerated individuals have a better chance of securing and retaining housing, reducing their risk of homelessness.

Additionally, the development of creative alternative housing options is essential. This involves the establishment of transitional and long-term housing specifically designed for ex-felons, as well as the creation of halfway houses or recovery residences. These alternative housing options provide temporary accommodation and supportive environments where individuals can receive additional services and guidance as they transition back into society. By offering safe and structured housing choices, the public safety and public health concerns often associated with homelessness among ex-offenders can be mitigated.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Increased awareness: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the challenges faced by ex-offenders and the housing crisis they often encounter upon release. This heightened awareness can lead to increased support and initiatives to address these issues.</p> <p>Remote support systems: The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote support systems, such as virtual counseling and online job training programs. These platforms provide opportunities for ex-offenders to access essential services and support, even during periods of lockdown or limited mobility.</p>	<p>Limited employment opportunities: The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has significantly impacted job availability, making it harder for ex-offenders to find employment upon release. This can increase the risk of recidivism and exacerbate the housing crisis, as steady income is vital for securing housing.</p> <p>Housing instability: The housing crisis, combined with the financial hardships resulting from the pandemic, can create housing instability for both ex-offenders and the general population. Limited affordable housing options, eviction moratoriums, and increased competition for housing resources can make it difficult for ex-offenders to secure stable accommodation.</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>Policy reform: The pandemic has highlighted the need for comprehensive policy reform to address the challenges faced by ex-offenders and the housing crisis. This presents an opportunity for governments and policymakers to enact changes that prioritize affordable housing options and create supportive reentry programs.</p> <p>Collaboration between stakeholders: The current situation encourages collaboration between various stakeholders, such as government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community groups. By working together, these entities can develop innovative solutions and leverage resources to support ex-offenders in securing stable housing and successful reintegration.</p>	<p>Stigma and discrimination: Ex-offenders already face social stigma and discrimination when seeking housing and employment. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its focus on public health and safety, may further contribute to these negative perceptions, making it even more challenging for ex-offenders to find suitable housing.</p> <p>Limited resources: The economic impact of the pandemic has strained resources across various sectors, including those that support ex-offenders and address the housing crisis. Funding cuts, reduced staffing, and increased demand for services can limit the capacity to provide adequate support to ex-offenders in need of housing assistance.</p>

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN BALTIMORE

Baltimore, like many other cities, faces the challenge of providing affordable housing options for individuals who may have difficulty passing a traditional background check. This issue is particularly pertinent for returning citizens, individuals who have been incarcerated and are reintegrating into society. In order to address this issue, several organizations operating in the housing space in Baltimore can potentially serve as partners to provide affordable housing opportunities for returning citizens.

One such organization is the Baltimore County Housing Stability Services. This organization plays a crucial role in providing grant funding to nonprofit and government organizations serving Baltimore County citizens. Their focus is on delivering housing stability services, which encompass various aspects such as housing navigation, case management, housing retention, and credit repair. By partnering with this organization, housing providers can access the necessary financial resources and support to offer affordable housing options tailored to the needs of returning citizens.

Another notable organization in Baltimore is Mother Rescuers from Poverty. This organization traces its roots back to U-JOIN, a group of women on welfare who advocated for improved treatment and living conditions. Their efforts included organizing rent strikes against private landlords, which eventually led to the formation of Tenants for Justice in Housing. This group fought for better housing conditions in Baltimore. Mother Rescuers from Poverty can serve as a valuable partner for housing providers seeking to address the housing needs of returning citizens. Their experience and advocacy can contribute to creating housing options that are not only affordable but also provide safe and decent living conditions.

In addition to these grassroots organizations, the Baltimore City Department of Housing & Community Development plays a significant role in promoting affordable housing in the city. The department provides funding for the production of rental and for-sale housing opportunities, aiming to create decent, safe, and affordable housing for Baltimore City residents. They coordinate several programs that offer financial support to developers committed to providing affordable housing. By partnering with

this department, housing providers can tap into funding opportunities and benefit from their expertise in creating sustainable and affordable housing solutions.

Similarly, the Baltimore County Office of Housing is an important entity in the region. They administer the Housing Choice Voucher program and are responsible for outlining the policies in accordance with the requirements set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Their focus is on facilitating landlord participation in the Housing Choice Voucher Program, which can be an effective means of providing affordable housing options for returning citizens. Housing providers interested in participating in this program can engage with the Baltimore County Office of Housing through their Request for Information about Landlord Participation form.

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

In Baltimore, several non-profit organizations are dedicated to providing affordable housing options specifically for returning citizens. These organizations recognize the importance of supporting individuals as they transition back into society and strive to create a stable housing environment that facilitates successful reintegration. Here are a few notable organizations in Baltimore that focus on affordable housing for returning citizens:

Return Home Baltimore: This non-profit organization offers an educational program that equips returning citizens with the necessary skills and resources to navigate life outside of incarceration. The program includes job-readiness training, group sessions, individual assessments, and various support services. By addressing the unique challenges faced by returning citizens, Return Home Baltimore aims to facilitate their successful reentry into the community, including securing affordable housing.

Baltimore City Department of Housing & Community Development: The Department of Housing & Community Development in Baltimore City plays a crucial role in coordinating several programs that provide funding to developers committed to offering affordable housing options. Their goal is

to create decent, safe, and affordable housing for the citizens of Baltimore City. By partnering with this department, non-profit organizations and developers can access financial resources and support to develop affordable housing projects specifically tailored to the needs of returning citizens.

Affordable Housing Trust Fund: The Affordable Housing Trust Fund in Baltimore City is a program that offers funding to developers committed to providing affordable housing solutions. Within this program, the Department defines Community Land Trusts as entities that provide affordable housing opportunities to low-income and moderate-income families through an affordable homeownership model. This approach can be particularly beneficial for returning citizens who may seek stable housing options that align with their financial circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the housing situation of ex-offenders. As the pandemic led to an economic downturn and increased competition for affordable housing, it became increasingly difficult for ex-offenders to find housing options that were both affordable and suitable for their needs. This scarcity of affordable housing put individuals with criminal histories, as well as those with limited or no credit histories, at a significant disadvantage.

Finding stable employment has always been a challenge for individuals with a criminal record, and the pandemic has further exacerbated this issue. The economic consequences of the pandemic have resulted in job losses and a highly competitive job market, making it even harder for ex-offenders to secure employment. The stigma associated with having a criminal record, which already exists in the job and housing markets, has been amplified during the pandemic and recession. This added layer of stigma has made it even more challenging for ex-offenders to overcome the barriers they face when seeking employment and housing.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the U.S. correctional system, which has had a ripple effect on the housing situation of ex-

offenders. The spread of the virus within prisons and jails poses a serious threat to everyone involved, including personnel, attorneys, prisoners, and their families. The impact extends beyond the correctional facilities themselves and into the communities in which these facilities are located. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated systemic issues within the prison system, which were already known to facilitate the spread of infectious diseases. The policy responses to the crisis often created confusion among those responsible for implementing them. While the pandemic has highlighted the crisis within the U.S. correctional system, it has also provided an opportunity to question the effectiveness and necessity of mass incarceration.

Moreover, ex-offenders have faced challenges in accessing social support services, including housing, due to the pandemic. Many social support organizations had to close their doors or reduce their capacity, making it more difficult for ex-offenders to access the services they rely on for housing assistance. Additionally, programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) that provide food assistance have become harder to access, which can lead to increased hunger and homelessness among ex-offenders.

Recovery housing, an important housing option for ex-offenders, has also been impacted by the pandemic. Recovery housing often operates outside formal substance use treatment and relies on out-of-pocket payments from residents. These housing options cater to some of the most vulnerable individuals in recovery, who may have co-occurring health conditions that put them at higher risk for COVID-19. Additionally, many residents of recovery housing work in low-wage jobs, which makes them more susceptible to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the housing situation of ex-offenders. It has created obstacles in finding affordable housing, accessing social support services, and securing employment. Policymakers should prioritize increasing the availability of affordable housing options for ex-offenders and providing financial assistance to those struggling to pay rent or find suitable housing. By addressing the housing challenges faced by ex-offenders during the

pandemic, we can not only mitigate the spread of COVID-19 but also provide essential support to those who are most vulnerable.

THANK YOU!

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