

Executive Summary

“Improving Housing Outcomes for the Justice-Involved with Behavioral Health Challenges”

This [report](#) provides an analysis and evaluation of the housing and homeless crisis in California impacting vulnerable populations through looking at the current landscape, identifying key findings, examining data and trends, linking the association between behavioral health, criminal justice and homelessness, emphasizing the vast and complex housing needs of individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges and justice involvement, outlining strategies for improving outcomes, and suggested recommendations for action, short and long term on a the local and state level.

Background and Overview

California has the nation’s largest homeless population and it is the leading political and humanitarian issue. The 2019 Point-In-Time (PIT)¹ count report released by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) indicated there were 151,278 homeless individuals in California, which is nearly a 15% increase since 2017.ⁱ A statewide survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), reported in September 2019, that Californians named homelessness, jobs, and the economy (both at 15%) as the most important issues facing the state today; followed by housing costs and availability (11%).ⁱⁱ Although the data confirms how bad the epidemic is the trends call attention to the different subpopulations that flow into the housing and homeless population.

The [“Improving Housing Outcomes for the Justice-Involved with Behavioral Health Challenges”](#) report identifies a number of key findings that pertain to unsheltered adults that have an association with mental illness and incarceration, and five broad strategies accompanied with detail recommendations for state and local action. Key findings from PIT counts of 2017 and 2018 and other surveys from the three most populous counties in the state - Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego, were reported by the California Health Policy Strategies (CalHPS) in a brief that estimated the statewide number of unsheltered homeless individuals, who report histories of mental health issues or illness and justice involvement, were higher than anticipated. The findings include the following results for unsheltered adults:

- 26% increase in the number of unsheltered homeless individuals in the 5 years from 2013 to 2017,
- 70% report a history of incarceration,

¹ The Point-in-Time count is a count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons on a single night in January. HUD requires that Continuums of Care conduct an annual count of homeless persons who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night.

- 28% report a recent release from jail or prison,
- 13% report being presently under community supervision, probation or parole,
- 32% report both having “mental health issues” and being formerly incarcerated, and
- 15% report both a “serious mental illness” and being formerly incarcerated.

On a national level, data shows that the number of Americans caught in a revolving door between the streets, shelters, and jails may reach the tens of thousands, and anywhere from 25 to 50% of people experiencing homelessness have a history of incarceration. According to the USICH, “homelessness may be both a cause and consequence of incarceration. At the local level, the link between housing instability and criminal involvement is a cyclical relationship, clearly depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Source: *The Council on State Governments Justice Center*

This diagram shows the series of events that contribute to the cycle of homelessness for justice-involved individuals with behavioral health needs: Law enforcement policies and practices criminalize behaviors associated with homelessness.

1. Law enforcement policies and practices criminalize behaviors associated with homelessness,
2. Lack of stable housing is a known risk factor and has reduced courts’ willingness to divert individuals from jail or prison,
3. Criminal history serves as a barrier to housing, contributing to housing instability, and
4. Lack of stable housing upon exit from jail contributes to supervision failure and increases the risk of recidivism.

With the input of over 100 experts in the field, CCJBH developed five strategies to address the unique housing needs of individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges and justice involvement. These strategies and policy recommendations were developed with the consideration of the “drivers” of homelessness. As specified in the report, “drivers” are risk factors that lead to a higher prevalence of unfavorable outcomes or life experiences. The drivers of homelessness listed below are significantly and disproportionately experienced by individuals in the intersection of behavioral health and the justice systems.

Known “drivers” of homelessness:

- Poverty
- Lack of Education and Employment Opportunities
- Disability/ Poor Health (Behavioral Health)
- Marginalization
- Disenfranchisement
- Discrimination (Racism)
- Trauma

Strategies and Recommendations

The strategies and policy recommendations listed below are short and wide range approaches to solving the problem aimed at addressing the needs of individuals.

- **Strategy One:** Support the Expansion of Housing and Housing Assistance Options
 - **Recommendation One:** Support the expansion of housing and housing assistance options with an “all hands on deck” approach.
 - Prevent the most vulnerable individuals from homelessness by calling for emergency, short, medium and long-term solutions that are inclusive of the unique needs of individuals with justice involvement and behavioral health challenges.
- **Strategy Two:** Support Housing Best Practices for the Justice-Involved with Behavioral Health Challenges
 - **Recommendation Two:** Increase understanding and adoption of *Housing First* principles that help an individual to be successful while under supervision, court-ordered treatment, or other forms of alternative custody. Explore and examine various models that can obtain similar results, but are sensitive to the unique needs and wishes of individuals returning after long periods of incarceration and/or who wish to achieve a substance-free lifestyle.
 - Address housing needs through the association of public safety and better health outcomes to affordable housing by adopting *Housing First* principles, which is a best practice approach to “quickly and successfully connect individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation requirements.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Strategy Three:** Commit to Addressing Underlining Poverty
 - **Recommendation Three:** Commit to addressing underlining poverty as an essential strategy to solve and prevent future homelessness among individuals experiencing behavioral health challenges who are justice-involved. For those with disabling mental illness, consider ways to fill the gaps between the cost of living and what benefits cover. Invest in employment, education, and training grounded in best practices, as well as aid in achieving a livable wage that provides equal opportunities for everyone to participate in society.
 - Income and employment is critical to sustaining housing or preventing homelessness. Individuals experiencing significant behavioral health challenges and

justice-involvement, are more likely to experience extreme poverty, in addition to stigma and discrimination due to not making a livable wage or gaining adequate financial assistance.

- **Strategy Four:** Create Equitable Housing Assistance Opportunities and Combat Housing Discrimination
 - **Recommendation Four:** Invest in uniform quality data collection, analysis and report efforts to understand the needs and gaps in services and to inform on the impact of strategies and investments on target populations. Data analysis can track progress on benchmarks to achieve equitable housing assistance opportunities for people who are justice-involved and experiencing behavioral health challenges. The reports will provide information on comprehensive statewide strategies to combat housing discrimination.
 - Available and accurate data regarding who is experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness among individuals, who are currently or formerly justice-involved with behavioral health challenges is necessary to address their needs.
- **Strategy Five:** Link the Criminal Justice System to the Homeless Crisis Response System and Facilitate Coordination, Collaboration, and Commitment among System and Service Partners
 - Link the criminal justice system to the homeless crisis response system to facilitate coordination, collaboration, and commitment among systems and service partners at the state level, the local level, and between the state and local levels.
 - Address the need to link the criminal justice system to the homeless crisis response system to facilitate coordination, collaboration, and commitment between the multi levels of governance.

This [report](#) provides several concrete recommendations for actions among criminal justice, behavioral health and housing providers at both state and local levels to bridge gaps through solutions that include resource sharing and leveraging expertise. Addressing the diverse needs of individuals can be complex. The complex issue of improving housing outcomes for justice-involved populations with significant behavioral health challenges requires methods to address multifaceted needs that include coordination, collaboration, and sustained commitment across multiple systems. It also requires eliminating barriers and abolishing drivers of homelessness.

ⁱ US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2019 Point In Time Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S. Retrieved from: <https://www.hud.gov/2019-point-in-time-estimates-of-homelessness-in-US>

ⁱⁱ Baldassare, M., Bonner, D., Dykman, A., & Lawler, R. (2019, September). Californians and Their Government. Retrieved from the Public Policy Institute of California: <https://www.ppic.org/publication/ppic-statewide-survey-californians-and-their-government-september-2019/>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2014). Implementing Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing. Retrieved at: https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Implementing_Housing_First_in_Permanent_Supportive_Housing.pdf