



Rural Reentry Housing

Research and discussion on prisoner reentry tend to focus on people returning to urban communities. In 2000, only 21 percent of U.S. population lived in rural areas,^{1,2} while the urban share of the national population has increased steadily since 1900.³ Furthermore, crime rates in rural areas are lower than those in urban communities for both violent and property crimes.⁴

However, rural areas are also grappling with reentry challenges. In recent years, 60 percent of new prisons have been located in rural counties.⁵ Integrating transition services with existing resources in rural communities can provide in-reach opportunities and bring a new funding stream to these communities. Some states (such as Washington) have “fair-share” legislation or policy, mandating that released prisoners return to supervision in their county of first commitment, whether or not transition services already exist there, or the inmate is welcomed by family, friends, or local community-based organizations.⁶

Challenges of Providing Housing in Rural Areas

Rural areas have unique housing and homelessness challenges. Approximately nine percent of the nation’s homeless people live in rural areas.⁷ Obtaining accurate counts is a challenge, as rural homeless people are more likely to inhabit abandoned farmhouses or other structures unfit for human habitation.⁸ In part because of the lack of emergency and transitional shelters in rural areas, homelessness tends to be more episodic, with people moving between overcrowded, cost-burdened, or substandard living situations. While these people do not have a stable, permanent home, they may have difficulty meeting definitions of homelessness to be eligible for government programs.

A higher rate of owner-occupied housing in rural areas tends to mean less availability of the rental housing that is most accessible to returning prisoners. Thus, many returning inmates are forced to share housing with family or friends, or become homeless at release. However, manufactured or mobile homes (which tend to be more affordable ownership options) are also much more prevalent in rural areas.⁹

The resources available to create affordable rural housing have declined substantially in recent years. For example, the USDA Section 515 Rural Rental Housing program provides low-interest loans to developers for the construction or rehabilitation of affordable rural multi-family rental housing. The program funded 11,542 units of affordable rental housing in FY 1994, but only 486 units in FY 2006, a decrease of 96 percent.¹⁰ The program continues to face budget cuts and even proposals to eliminate the program.

In rural areas, there is often the perception that problems like homelessness do not exist. This lack of awareness hinders efforts to address the problem. Rural communities also tend to stigmatize certain populations or behaviors, and may oppose programs in their communities.¹¹

Service Needs in Rural Areas

Rural areas usually offer fewer needed services to their residents than do more densely populated urban areas. Affordable housing resources and reentry programming tend to be scarce or absent, and mental health, substance use, or medical programs are limited.¹² Transportation is a major barrier for low-income rural residents, as the few available service providers must serve large areas. In some areas, people living with HIV/AIDS must travel 200 miles to visit a health care provider.

While rural homeless persons are as likely as other homeless persons to report a mental health or substance use problem, they are six times as likely to report an alcohol-only problem in the past year.¹³ Methamphetamine use is also especially high in rural areas.¹⁴ The rural homeless are less likely to receive government assistance and are more likely to rely on friends and family for cash assistance, as well as a temporary place to stay.

Rural communities also present unique employment challenges. Rural economies are often dominated by one or two industries, unlike more diversified urban economies.¹⁵ Rural employers are more likely to be small businesses,¹⁶ which research shows are frequently less willing to hire ex-prisoners.¹⁷

Strategies for Rural Reentry Housing Programs

Establish reentry case managers to provide referrals and bring together limited resources in an effective way. Rural service programs are dispersed across large areas and can be difficult for ex-prisoners to navigate. In some areas, especially in times of crisis, community corrections officers may be a critical source of support for ex-prisoners.¹⁸

MODEL PROGRAM:

MAINE REENTRY NETWORK

The **Maine Reentry Network** targets prisoners ages 16 to 30 that are considered “High Risk” in six counties across Maine, including several that are very rural. Six months prior to an inmate’s release, reentry teams—which can include staff from MaineHousing (Maine State Housing Authority), the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and the Social Security Administration—begin working with him or her to prepare for reentry. The program also uses video-conferencing to introduce prisoners to community staff and parole officers before release, and to connect with program mentors and the individual’s natural supports.

Program participants receive Rental Assistance Coupon housing vouchers that provide up to 24 months of rental support. MaineHousing provides most of the vouchers through HOME funding, while Corrections funds ten vouchers to house ex-prisoners who are ineligible for HOME programs. Participants pay 30 percent of their income toward housing, or at least \$50 per month, and must develop a self-sufficiency plan.

The Maine Reentry Network provides limited funds for emergency housing for ex-prisoners before they begin receiving a Rental Assistance Coupon. The program has also worked with landlords to overcome resistance to housing ex-prisoners, particularly sex offenders.

Source: Becky Hayes Boober, Executive Director, Maine Reentry Network, personal interview, October 26, 2007.

Begin reentry planning well before release and use technology to facilitate coordination. With enough planning prior to release, reentry programs can ensure that eligible rural residents receive Medicaid, SSI/SSDI, food stamps, and other mainstream government services. Video-conferencing can be a powerful tool to overcome the challenges of service coordination in rural areas. Reentry programs can use video-conferencing to connect prisoners and corrections staff to staff at community programs and family supports, and to facilitate smoother transitions from corrections facilities to rural communities.

Invest in family reunification services for offenders who may eventually be able to live with family members. For example, transitional housing for offenders may be needed for the critical period directly following release, while offenders take steps to reconcile issues with family members, receive treatment, and seek employment. Another approach is to allow families to be compensated for housing returning prisoners, when that housing solution is appropriate.

Consider supporting homeownership opportunities for ex-prisoners where rental housing is scarce. Lower housing prices in rural rather than urban areas may make homeownership a viable option, but offenders typically need help addressing credit and criminal histories in order to purchase a home. Implementing matching funds and employment programs significantly prior to release may allow prisoners to save money towards a down payment.

Reentry programs may also need to consider new housing development or rehabilitation options. Developing new affordable housing in rural areas can be particularly challenging because of the limited funding and developer capacity available in most regions. However, aging housing stock may provide more affordable opportunities for rehabilitation than in urban areas, and such investments can meet long-term need in rural communities.

MODEL PROGRAM:

OREGON STATEWIDE SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY RE-ENTRY (OSSCR)

In 2006, HUD awarded funding for a competitive Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) Special Project of National Significance (SPNS) project focused on formerly incarcerated people living with HIV/AIDS. **The Oregon Statewide Supportive Community Re-entry (OSSCR)** project is a statewide initiative that is administered in the balance of state—outside the five county Portland metropolitan area—by the Oregon Housing and Opportunities in Partnership (OHOP) program. OHOP also administers the HOPWA formula grant in the balance of state.

OSSCR serves up to 35 post-incarcerated people living with HIV/AIDS per year with tenant-based rental assistance, housing information, and support services. Clients are referred by the Oregon Department of Corrections and local criminal justice agencies, and work closely with OHOP Housing Coordinators and Ryan White HIV Case Managers to develop housing plans that are integrated with other supportive service and community corrections plans. The 31 counties in the balance of state are served by four Housing Coordinators and 42 HIV Case Managers, located in 17 local county public health departments and three community-based organizations.

Source: Ryan Deibert, Program Coordinator, Oregon Housing Opportunities in Partnership (OHOP) program, personal interview, October 17, 2007. For more information, see Oregon Department of Human Services, Program Design and Evaluation Services. Oregon Housing Opportunities in Partnership: Summary of Project Evaluation Design and Findings (2006). Available online:

<http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/hiv/services/housing.shtml>

Resources

The following organizations and web sites provide excellent resources for information on housing, homelessness, poverty, and reentry issues in rural communities.

Housing Assistance Council (HAC):

<http://ruralhome.org>

HAC helps local organizations build affordable housing in rural America, through loans, technical assistance and trainings, and research. In January 2008, HAC will launch a new Rural Homelessness Capacity Building program. The three-year initiative will provide grants, training, and technical assistance to faith-based and community organizations serving homeless populations in rural areas.

HUD Rural Housing and Economic Development (RHED) Program:

<http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/economicdevelopment/programs/rhed>

The RHED Program provides for capacity building at the state and local level for rural housing and economic development and to support innovative housing and economic development activities in rural areas. Funds made available under this program are awarded competitively on an annual basis. In Fiscal Year 2005, HUD awarded a total of \$23.7 million across 103 grantees.

USDA Rural Development:

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rhs>

The USDA provides homeownership opportunities, home renovation and repair programs, and rental assistance programs to rural households. USDA also works with public and nonprofit organizations to provide housing developers with loans and grants to construct and renovate rural multi-family housing complexes.

National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH):

www.naeh.org

NAEH works collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help homeless individuals and families make positive changes in their lives. They have recently been granted a compassion capital award to help end homelessness in rural areas.

Rural Assistance Center (RAC):

http://www.raconline.org/info_guides/housing

Created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Rural Initiative, RAC serves as a rural health and human services "information portal." RAC helps rural communities access the full range of available programs, funding, and research that can enable them to provide quality health and human services to rural residents.

Rural Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC):

<http://www.ruralisc.org>

LISC is a nonprofit intermediary that provides grants, loans and equity investments to community development corporations (CDCs). The mission of Rural LISC is to build the capacity of rural CDCs, increase their production and impact, and make the resource and policy environment more supportive of rural CDCs and their work.

Recommended Reading

Belden, Joseph N. and Robert J. Wiener, eds. *Housing in Rural America*. Sage Publications, 1999.

Hecht, Frank. "Reentry Programs and Rural Jails." 2006. Available online:

http://www.urban.org/projects/reentry-roundtable/upload/hecht_paper.pdf.

Kusmin, Lorin, ed. "Rural America at a Glance." 2007. Available online:

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB31/>.

La Vigne, Nancy G., Cynthia A. Mamalian, Gillian Thomson, and Jamie Watson. "Prisoner Reentry in Idaho." 2004. Available online:

http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411171_Prisoner_Reentry_ID.pdf.

Wodahl, Eric. "The Challenges of Prisoner Reentry from a Rural Perspective," in *Western Criminology Review*, 2006. Available online:

<http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v07n2/32-wodahl/wodahl.pdf>.

Sources

- ¹ For information on the U.S. Census definitions and uses for the similar yet distinct terms “rural” and “nonmetropolitan,” see the Census 2000 explanation. Available online: http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html.
- ² U.S. Census 2000. Available online: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-box_head_nbr=GCT-P1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-format=US-1.
- ³ U.S. Census. Available online: <http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urpopoo9o.txt>.
- ⁴ “Crime in the United States 2000,” Federal Bureau of Investigation. Available online: <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>.
- ⁵ Prison Policy Initiative. Available online: <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2003/07/28/rural-areas/>.
- ⁶ Washington State Senate Bill 6157. A summary of the bill is available online: <http://www.leg.wa.gov/pub/billinfo/2007-08/Pdf/Bill%20Reports/Senate/6157.SBR.pdf>.
- ⁷ Martha R. Burt, Laudan Y. Aron, Toby Douglas, Jesse Valente, Edgar Lee, and Britta Iwen, “Homelessness: Programs and the People They Serve: Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients,” 1999. Available online: <http://www.urban.org/publications/310291.html>.
- ⁸ Eric Wodahl, “The Challenges of Prisoner Reentry from a Rural Perspective,” *Western Criminology Review*, 2006. Available online: <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v07n2/32-wodahl/wodahl.pdf>.
- ⁹ Housing Assistance Council Data Portal. Available online: <http://www.ruralhome.org/dataportal/>.
- ¹⁰ National Low Income Housing Coalition. Section 515 Rural Rental Housing, 2007.
- ¹¹ “Rural Homelessness,” Housing Assistance Council, 2006. Available online: <http://www.ruralhome.org/manager/uploads/HomelessnessInfoSheet.pdf>.
- ¹² Eric Wodahl, “The Challenges of Prisoner Reentry from a Rural Perspective,” *Western Criminology Review*, 2006. Available online: <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v07n2/32-wodahl/wodahl.pdf>.
- ¹³ “Rural Homelessness,” Housing Assistance Council. 2006. Available online: <http://www.ruralhome.org/manager/uploads/HomelessnessInfoSheet.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ “Methamphetamine Information Guide,” Rural Assistance Center. Available online: http://www.raonline.org/info_guides/meth/.
- ¹⁵ Richard Reeder, “Designing an Effective Rural Development Strategy,” USDA Amber Waves, November 2006. Available online: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/November06/Findings/Designing.htm>.
- ¹⁶ Harry J. Holzer, Steven Raphael, and Michael A. Stoll, “Will Employers Hire Ex-Offenders? Employer Checks, Background Checks, and Their Determinants,” 2002. Available online: <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp124302.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Robert Gibbs, Lorin Kusmin, and John Cromartie, “Low-Skill Jobs: A Shrinking Share of the Rural Economy,” USDA Amber Waves, November 2004. Available online: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/November04/Features/lowskilljobs.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Eric Wodahl, “The Challenges of Prisoner Reentry from a Rural Perspective,” *Western Criminology Review*, 2006. Available online: <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v07n2/32-wodahl/wodahl.pdf>.