



“I’m homeless all the time. I come from jail, I start from scratch, I’m released with the clothes on my back, that’s it. I start from scratch. Finding housing takes forever, man. I’ve never ever come out and been able to find a place just like that. Not even a room.”

– Study participant with lived experience

To learn more and read the full report click [here](#).

Executive Summary

Safe, stable, long-term housing is a basic necessity that has become a luxury – completely out of reach for a growing percentage of Ontarians. The pandemic exacerbated this trend and was in many ways cataclysmic for people already on the economic margins. Ontarians previously eking out a living were pushed from housing precarity into homelessness. Municipalities across the province that have never seriously grappled with visible homelessness are struggling to respond to what is now a crisis in their communities.

Homelessness overlaps with a number of social determinants of health, and it places people at a greater risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. And for precariously housed individuals, conflict with the law can be catastrophic: being charged and/or incarcerated leads to loss of wages or social assistance benefits, housing, employment, and personal belongings. It worsens mental health issues, and disrupts any established treatment for both mental and physical health conditions. Jobs, housing, and any other form of stability lost due to contact with the justice system are not easily replaced. Systemic barriers are erected once a person has a criminal record. Justice involvement, and jail in particular, deepens dislocation and disadvantage, setting people up for an ongoing cycle of release, homelessness, re-arrest and jail, on repeat.

This study examines the lived experiences of people who have had a history of justice involvement and homelessness. Drawing from a sample of 123 surveys and 52 interviews, this study sought to ground previous [JHSO research on provincial corrections admissions data](#) in the qualitative lived experiences of people who have experienced homelessness and justice involvement, to understand the unique issues they face and identify solutions that could serve to improve outcomes. The research team also surveyed 62 service providers who work in the justice and housing sectors to understand their views of the housing barriers faced by the clients they serve.

Five major themes emerged from the analyses of the surveys and interviews of the people with lived experience (PWLE).

- 1** → **Justice system involvement is a leading cause of housing loss.**

41% of survey participants indicated that their most recent experience of housing loss had been caused by justice involvement. Criminal records act as a hard barrier to employment, and without employment income, decent housing was typically not affordable. In addition, an increasing number of landlords in Ontario are using criminal record checks as a part of the rental screening process, and are less likely to rent to individuals with criminal records. 38% of PWLE participants cited justice involvement, and criminal records in particular, as a substantial barrier to finding housing. In addition, 43% of participants cited the triple stigma associated with justice involvement, homelessness, and social assistance as a significant barrier to housing acquisition.
- 2** → **Incarceration causes and perpetuates homelessness.**

Individuals who were incarcerated often lost their housing as a direct result of that incarceration. A large proportion of participants, 40%, indicated that they were living in their own private residence before their most recent incarceration. In contrast, the number of participants who were living in their own residence dropped significantly to 21% immediately after being discharged. Participants who became homeless due to incarceration were often still homeless 6 months after their release. Individuals released from a correctional facility were often released into shelters or transitional homes, stayed with family or friends, or had nowhere to go upon release and were thus released to live on the streets.
- 3** → **Pre-release planning from correctional facilities was often insufficient to meet the needs of participants, making housing very difficult to find post-release.**

More robust discharge planning could help mitigate this difficulty. Participants reflecting on their experiences often reported that discharge planning was insufficient to meet their needs or came too late in their sentences to be helpful.
- 4** → **Participants reported many barriers to accessing essential services in the community.**

Among survey respondents, 70% indicated that wait lists were a major barrier to accessing needed services. Practical barriers, such as a lack of access to a phone or email, made wait lists particularly hard to navigate.
- 5** → **There are significant resource and service gaps for individuals caught in the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.**

These services included assistance with affordable long-term housing, mental health, substance use, and trauma support, help finding and keeping housing, administrative assistance, among others. Effective services identified by PWLE tended to involve community outreach and tailored, one-on-one support.

Service providers who were surveyed about the needs of their clients agreed that the **number one pressing need in communities was quality, affordable housing options**. They also echoed that the stigma associated with justice involvement acted as a significant barrier to securing stable housing for their clients.

The overall findings of this research study underscore the urgent need for dedicated affordable housing tailored to the unique needs of justice-involved individuals, and investment in the requisite community-based infrastructure to make this possible.

The report concludes with a series of policy recommendations which include:

- ✓ **A call for dedicated housing options for justice-involved populations across Ontario**, including short-term transitional housing and long-term supportive housing options.
- ✓ **Enhancing social assistance rates and processes to prevent housing loss**. The current income assistance available to Ontarians is not sufficient for even basic costs of living. Additionally, relatively minor regulatory changes to how benefit payments are issued or suspended could prevent needless housing loss for social assistance recipients who have short jail stays.
- ✓ **Increasing access to targeted and culturally safe services** to respond to the needs of Black and Indigenous communities, women and gender diverse individuals, as well as those from rural, remote and Northern communities.
- ✓ **Building on the Ministry of Solicitor General's Community Reintegration Strategy to strengthen release planning**. Increased resourcing to smooth the transition from jail to the community, including ensuring individuals have adequate identification, maintain healthcare continuity, and secure housing supports pre-release.
- ✓ **Investing in community-based reintegration and system navigation services**. More sustainable funding is needed for community-based organizations providing reintegration supports, including expanding effective systems navigation programming to facilitate successful re-entry and secure long-term housing.
- ✓ **Better data collection for transparency and accountability to measure and track homelessness in Ontario**.