

LOCKED UP.

LOCKED OUT.

IN-DEPTH RESEARCH FINDINGS REPORT



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observatory on
homelessness

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About Us

JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

For more than 90 years, The John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) has been dedicated to creating safer communities by fostering more effective, just and humane responses to crime. Our 19 local offices deliver programs and services that build key life skills, support families and allow people leaving incarceration to achieve a more productive future. The Centre of Research & Policy specializes in bridging the gap between analysis and front-line service delivery. By collaborating closely with local offices, the Centre's team of analysts and researchers develops policy positions that truly reflect the needs of each community, advances those positions to governments and other organizations, educates the public on the critical issues, and evaluates program efficacy to guide future work. Through it all, they're committed to ensuring that innovative ideas can translate into real action.

SOCIAL RESEACH AND DEMONSTRATION CORPORATION

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a nonpartisan research and policy partnership between academics, policy and decision makers, service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness. Led by Stephen Gaetz, President & CEO, the COH works in collaboration with partners to conduct and mobilize research designed to have an impact on solutions to homelessness. The COH evolved out of a 2008 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded project called the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and is housed at York University.

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Systemic Acknowledgement

When recognizing the systemic challenges within the Canadian criminal justice system, it is important to acknowledge the historical and present-day impacts of colonialism and systemic discrimination which includes but is not limited to the overrepresentation of Black People and Indigenous Peoples throughout the criminal justice system.

Black and Indigenous populations face higher levels of policing, incarceration, and biased treatment within the criminal justice system, with Black People being overrepresented by more than 3 times that of the general population, and Indigenous Peoples by more than 5 times.

This overrepresentation exacerbates pre-existing structural barriers rooted in systemic racism and colonialism. The intersection of racial disparities and the presence of a criminal record creates distinct challenges for Black and Indigenous populations in many areas including access to housing. Compounding the stigma of a criminal record, Indigenous and Black populations face discrimination from landlords limiting their housing options, increasing their risk of homelessness. Despite the growing understanding of how racial identity influences individuals with criminal records in Canada, discrimination persists at both individual and systemic levels.

It is our hope that this acknowledgement contextualizes the research found in our report and serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to engage in open dialogue, challenge biases, and work collaboratively towards dismantling the systems of oppression that result in persisting inequities in our criminal justice system.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the province of Ontario is experiencing a housing affordability crisis. Escalating housing and rental prices have outpaced wage growth for years, leading to a substantial shortage of safe and affordable housing options. For low-income Ontarians, this crisis is not about home ownership being out of reach – for many, this has not even been a remote prospect for years. Rather, the current crisis translates into not having any roof over their heads at all. The experience of homelessness places people at a greater risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. For individuals who are precariously housed who come into conflict with the criminal justice system, the results can be catastrophic – both for the individual, and the province more broadly. Conversely, justice involvement often pushes individuals into homelessness, which negatively impacts individuals' future health and economic prospects. There exists a reciprocal relationship between homelessness and justice involvement, where the challenges of one can exacerbate the other – a problem which impacts a significant number of Ontarians. Many individuals who experience this situation fall through the cracks of Ontario's social service landscape and remain there for years, if not decades. In this report, some of these individuals will have the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words.

Over the past decade, the number of people admitted into Ontario's correctional institutions with "no fixed address" (NFA) at the time of admission has been on a troubling incline.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, as many previously stable individuals faced job and subsequent housing loss. In addition, shelters and correctional facilities attempted to temporarily limit admissions to prevent spreading the virus. During this period, there was an increased prevalence of mental health challenges, which consequently exacerbated the issue of visible homelessness.^{2,3,4} While incarceration rates have unfortunately returned to previously overcrowded levels,⁵ the urgency of the homelessness crisis has not abated. Individuals caught in this cycle face repeated short-term incarceration stays. Each subsequent incarceration will cause them to again lose jobs, social assistance, housing, and personal belongings that they had managed to secure during the previous period in community. Upon release from jail, they are confronted with the Herculean task of rebuilding their lives – often while simultaneously grappling with untreated mental health and substance use issues. Finding a stable income that provides a livable wage through employment is difficult given the presence of a criminal record. This leaves many to rely on social assistance, such as the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or Ontario Works (OW). However, the income derived from social assistance places individuals below the poverty line in most Canadian regions; it is not a livable wage.⁶ In a province grappling with an affordable housing crisis, securing housing after incarceration becomes a near impossible task when you combine the stigma of a criminal record with very limited monthly income (if there is income at all). Consequently, many individuals slip into a state of chronic housing insecurity, which only heightens the risk of re-incarceration. This cycle of homelessness and incarceration is the grim reality faced by countless people in

Ontario, with the effects of incarceration lingering long after they've served their sentences.

In addition to being a known criminogenic risk factor, homelessness in and of itself is often policed, giving rise to justice involvement and subsequent incarceration. Many communities have enacted laws targeting individuals experiencing homelessness, such as prohibiting loitering or soliciting - actions that are incredibly challenging to avoid for those without a place to call home.⁷ Inevitably, these laws are violated, bringing homeless individuals into contact with law enforcement. Penalties often take the form of fines, which are unlikely to be paid by individuals trapped in the poverty that accompanies homelessness.⁸ More serious offences may result in incarceration, further exacerbating the challenges of securing stable housing and escaping homelessness.

This report is the second in a series of two reports funded by **the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation** on the housing challenges faced by justice-involved people in Ontario. The current report's primary goal is to offer qualitative insights into the experiences of people with lived and living experience (PWLE) of justice involvement and homelessness in Ontario. Drawing from over 50 interviews and 120 surveys conducted with PWLE, it sheds light on the systemic barriers faced by individuals navigating the criminal justice system, while attempting to access housing and other essential supports. The report identifies five key findings arising from an analysis of these surveys and interviews. These Key Findings raise awareness about the systemic barriers faced by individuals who are involved in the justice system and experiencing homelessness. This report outlines the challenges imposed by incarceration and the lack of supports available in correctional settings and the community immediately upon release. It highlights the barriers to accessing necessary social services and programs required to secure housing, and to successfully reintegrate into society. Finally, this report outlines programs that PWLE identified as helpful and what additional services are needed. This report also summarizes the perspectives of service providers who work with justice-involved individuals, using both surveys and interviews. The report concludes with a series of policy recommendations that emanate from the findings of this two-part research study, which aim to ultimately interrupt and break the costly and inhumane cycle of justice involvement and homelessness.

Homelessness Defined

The **Canadian Observatory on Homelessness** defines homelessness as “the situation of an individual, family or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it.”⁹ Homelessness is a complex experience, and there are many ways that an individual can experience homelessness. They may be completely unsheltered, often called “absolute homelessness.” This term refers to individuals who are sleeping on the street or other public areas, and who are without a permanent or temporary shelter. Others may be living in emergency or temporary shelters. Many are accommodated in

institutions, such as individuals who are incarcerated or hospitalized; these individuals may have no permanent shelter of their own but are not unhoused. Others may be staying with family or friends on a permanent or temporary basis; this experience is often referred to as “hidden homelessness.”¹⁰ Hidden homelessness is often difficult to measure and may be missed by many methods designed to track homelessness.

Homelessness may be experienced in temporary or chronic periods. Some individuals experience long-term homelessness. They may also experience repeated, short-term bouts of homelessness over a long period of time. This absence of a stable housing situation can last for months or years and is often considered to be “chronic homelessness.” Some individuals may face “temporary homelessness,” encountering a sudden loss of housing, but with the expectation that it will only be for a short period.¹¹

The Indigenous experience of homelessness has been recognized as distinct from settler definitions of homelessness. This distinction exists to capture the unique challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples because of the ongoing colonial legacy of Canada. The experience of Indigenous homelessness has been defined as “...something that isn’t about being without a structure of habitation or brick and mortar home...rather, is about something much deeper: existing in the world without a meaningful sense of home or identity.”¹²

Homelessness in Ontario

Homelessness can be very difficult to quantify. Nationally, it has been estimated that an average of 235,000 people experience homelessness in some form every year.¹³ In Ontario, estimates suggest that, on any given night, the number of people experiencing homelessness can range from 8,000¹⁴ to 16,000.¹⁵ There are many pathways to homelessness, but systemic causes play a strong role. These systemic pressures can include economic factors such as housing prices and other aspects of the economy, laws and policies that affect people experiencing homelessness, as well as engagement with institutions such as the justice system.¹⁶

In addition, Ontario has faced a reduction in social support programs designed to mitigate these economic factors.¹⁷ Overall, social assistance incomes have become inadequate across Canada. Individuals on social assistance in Ontario, such as Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), receive an income that places them below the poverty line.¹⁸ Cost of living increases have also placed economic pressure on people in Ontario; food bank use has increased substantially in Ontario between 2019 and 2022, illustrating that the affordability crisis has impacted people’s ability to afford basic needs.¹⁹ The Canadian economic context places many people at risk of homelessness. As housing and other necessities become more difficult to afford, individuals will end up paying an increasing proportion of their incomes on such necessities. They can be vulnerable to a loss of housing if they face an interruption of their earnings, or other financial setbacks.

Justice Involvement Defined

Justice involvement refers to a person's or a group's interaction with the criminal justice system, which includes law enforcement, courts, and corrections. It encompasses various aspects of engagement with the legal system, such as being accused of a crime, being arrested, going through the legal process, serving a sentence if found guilty, and having a criminal record. Justice involvement can range from being stopped, carded, or arrested by the police, to navigating court and bail systems, to conviction and incarceration.

Ontario's Justice System

Many Ontarians come into contact with, and remain entrenched in, the justice system each year. Currently, there are over 3.8 million Canadians with a criminal record, including an estimated over one million Ontarians.^{20,21} In 2022, there were over 170,000 adults charged in Ontario²² and nearly 84,000 community (28,218) and custodial (55,672) admissions to Ontario's adult correctional system.²³ In the same year there were 47,963 releases from correctional facilities in Ontario.²⁴

The vast majority (79%) of individuals in provincial correctional system are on remand.²⁵ People on remand (also known as pre-trial custody) are individuals who have not yet been tried but were denied bail or are awaiting a bail decision or trial. As they have not yet been convicted, they are presumed innocent. Without bail, individuals must await their court dates in custody. Research has demonstrated that the high proportion of remanded individuals can be partly attributed to a culture of adjournments and risk aversion in courts.^{26,27} Even when released on bail, many individuals are given numerous conditions that must be met as a part of a bail agreement. As courts become more risk averse, these conditions become more numerous and are often very restrictive, such as curfews or geographic restrictions; a violation of any of these conditions is a criminal offence. Many people, and particularly those who are marginalized, are incarcerated for violations of bail conditions, even if this is unrelated to their original charge.

The current bail and remand system exacerbates social marginalization and systemic inequities. Black individuals in Ontario spend longer in custody than white people, and Indigenous People are denied bail more frequently than other accused people.²⁸ Pre-trial custody disrupts employment, can result in loss of housing, and compels accused people to plead guilty.

In Ontario, individuals facing incarceration may lose their jobs, income from social assistance, and as a result, their housing. The effects of justice involvement can persist long after the fact; in many cases, the stigma surrounding involvement with the justice system can have serious consequences for a person's ability to retain employment and housing. In addition, many systemic barriers imposed by justice system involvement can prevent people from recovering lost jobs and housing, leading to future homelessness and housing insecurity. These barriers include factors such as criminal records resulting from justice involvement as well as a lack of

assistance with reintegration after a period of incarceration. In this way, the justice system often serves to place people in poverty and to keep people in poverty.

Individuals who are in contact with the justice system, even those who don't receive a conviction, often face serious economic consequences.²⁹ Those who are convicted and/or become incarcerated are likely to lose their employment, income support and housing because of their contact with the justice system. Those who lost housing during their period of incarceration may have nowhere to go upon release. Some will stay with family or friends, some may find temporary accommodation such as shelters, but many will be released directly into homelessness.

Furthermore, justice involvement imposes many barriers that prevent people from finding housing, such as criminal records.³⁰ In many instances, people who break the law face incarceration. Incarceration causes housing loss and prevents an individual from finding stable housing upon release.³¹ People living in homelessness can find it very difficult to exit without help. Finding stable, affordable housing becomes even more difficult for people if they are involved in the justice system. These two factors — homelessness and justice involvement — form a causal cycle: they both cause and are caused by one another.³² Broad systemic factors can then conspire to keep people in this cycle.

Effective discharge planning can help interrupt this cycle and ensure that individuals who are released are placed in contact with needed programs, such as healthcare and employment programs, upon release.³³ It can also help to prevent homelessness by helping individuals secure some form of housing before release. However, many individuals in provincial correctional facilities do not receive effective discharge planning.^{34,35} Subsequent sections of this report will describe, in the words of PWLE, how inadequate discharge planning and scarce housing options can create significant barriers in the lives of individuals involved in the justice system. This is a missed opportunity to connect people with needed resources upon release, and to help reduce the costly pattern of recidivism and homelessness.

First Report Summary

As noted in the introduction, this report is the second in a series of reports covering the topic of homelessness through the lens of justice involvement. The first report, which can be found [here](#), presented an in-depth, high-level exploration of the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. It also highlighted the specific challenges faced by many groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, Black Canadians, women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, individuals with mental health and substance use challenges.

In addition, the report provided a summary of analyses of data on admissions to Ontario correctional facilities of individuals who had *no fixed address* (NFA) at the time of admission. This means that they have no stable, permanent address at the time that they were admitted to a correctional institution.

The goal of the first report was to examine the following trends of incarcerations over the years 2007-2021:

- (1) How many admissions of individuals with homelessness were being admitted to provincial correctional institutions during this time?
- (2) Did the trends suggest that there were more admissions of people experiencing homelessness in later years compared to earlier years?
- (3) What was the proportion of individuals experiencing homelessness being admitted?
- (4) Did the trends vary based on demographic characteristics, such as gender or Indigenous identity?
- (5) Were there regional disparities in these trends?

The results of the first report indicated an increase in the number of admissions of people experiencing homelessness to Ontario correctional facilities over the last 15 years. In the same period, the total number of admissions to provincial correctional facilities declined steadily. Thus, these admissions of people experiencing homelessness represented an increasing proportion of all admissions to provincial correctional facilities. In 2007/2008, about 6% of all admissions to Ontario correctional facilities were of people experiencing homelessness at the time of admission. In 2020/2021, the most recent year that data was available, this number had increased to 16%. This suggests that Ontario's provincial correctional facilities are incarcerating a proportionally larger number of people experiencing homelessness now than at any other point in the last 15 years. Ontario is incarcerating more people living in poverty, and this imprisonment serves to maintain and exacerbate this poverty.

The same report found that the growth in incarceration rates of people experiencing homelessness was higher for some groups than it was for the general population. Specifically, the incarceration rates of Indigenous peoples experiencing homelessness was higher than that of non-Indigenous people; this higher rate of incarceration amongst Indigenous Peoples speaks to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic discrimination experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Ontario. In addition, there were regional differences in the observed trends. Specifically, there were fewer admissions of people experiencing homelessness to institutions in the Central region of Ontario (containing the Greater Toronto Area) over time. Conversely, there were more incarcerations to correctional facilities in the Eastern, Northern, and Western regions of the province. The Northern region in particular saw a great deal of growth. In 2007, Northern correctional facilities represented 9% of all NFA admissions to provincial correctional facilities. In 2021, this number had risen to 15%.

In sum, the first report highlighted a concerning upward trend in the rates of incarceration of people with no fixed address in Ontario. While this trend was increasing for all observed groups and across all regions, the trend was even higher for Indigenous Peoples, as well as across all areas of the province, except for the Central region. The data summarized by this report also had important limitations. Its' definitions of homelessness – individuals who had no fixed address at the time of

admission – likely did not capture the full spectrum of the experience of homelessness. Homelessness can take many forms, such as sleeping on the streets, couch surfing with family and friends, living in transitional housing, etc. It also does not account for people who are precariously housed: those who have a fixed address at the time of admission but are living in a housing situation that is unaffordable or in housing of lower quality. In addition, this broad, population-level data provided little information on the individual people described. Data was separated due to broad demographic categories, such as gender, age, and Indigenous identity. However, each of these categories was presented individually: it described individuals from a particular age or a particular gender, not a particular age and a particular gender. When information is presented in this way, it is impossible to assess how intersecting identities might affect the experience of incarceration and homelessness.

In addition, broad data can only provide limited insight into the actual experiences of the individuals involved. These experiences can provide valuable context and insight into the challenges faced by justice-involved individuals who are experiencing homelessness. To address this gap, a more targeted research methodology is required. This would allow researchers to directly assess the complex relationship between justice involvement and homelessness, and its' effects on the lives of Ontarians.

The Current Report

The first report in this series established important trends regarding the incarceration of people experiencing homelessness in Ontario. This second report will delve more deeply into the direct experiences of people with a history of both homelessness and justice involvement. It will provide important context to the province-wide numbers presented in the first report. To provide this perspective, the research team sought input from two main groups. One group was service providers from organizations who work with people with experiences of justice involvement and homelessness. The other group were people with lived experiences. These groups were selected to provide a holistic perspective on the topic, from the people delivering services and the people receiving them.

Methods Used in this Research

This research used survey and interview data to explore the experiences of individuals with a history of both justice system involvement and homelessness in Ontario. Individuals were eligible if they were currently experiencing homelessness, or if they had experienced homelessness in the past and/or had direct involvement with the justice system. Justice system involvement involves a range of activities, such as being stopped or detained by police, held in a jail on remand or sentenced. The data collection tools were developed by the Research Team with the support of a knowledge sharing group. This knowledge sharing group was comprised of researchers and service providers with experience in the homelessness and justice sectors. The Research Team also employed the services of people with lived and living experience of both justice involvement and homelessness as research consultants. These PWLE consultants helped to create the research tools, contextualize research findings, and to produce research reports.

The PWLE survey contained demographic questions asking about topics such as the person's gender, ethnicity, and educational background. It also contained questions about their past experiences with homelessness and with the justice sector. Additionally, this survey contained questions regarding the circumstances surrounding their housing loss, their experiences accessing services, and what services would be helpful to access.

The PWLE interview contained questions about their past and current housing situations and their past and current involvement with the justice system. Other interview questions asked participants to describe the barriers they experienced when trying to find housing after their justice involvement and/or incarceration. Furthermore, they were asked about what services they accessed, what gaps there were in existing services, and any services they accessed that proved helpful to them.

The service provider survey contained questions about the service provider's organization, what type of services were provided, and what clients were served by the organization. It also asked to assess the barriers, challenges, and supports that

justice-involved people face from the perspective of service providers who work with these clients.

Individuals with lived experience of both justice involvement and homelessness were recruited through contact with John Howard Society (JHS) offices located throughout Ontario, as well as via emergency shelters. PWLE were paid an honorarium for completing a survey and/or an interview. Most interviews were completed over the phone, with some clients instead opting to complete interviews via Microsoft Teams.

People With Lived Experience Study Sample Characteristics

In all, surveys were collected from 123 participants. In addition, 52 interviews were conducted with people from across Ontario as a part of this study.

Table 1: People With Lived Experience Survey Demographics (n=123)			
Demographic		Number	Percentage
Gender* (n=115)	Man	67	58.3%
	Woman	48	41.7%
Age** (n=120)	19-25	7	5.8%
	26-35	39	32.5%
	36-45	34	28.3%
	46-55	23	19.2%
	56+	17	14.2%
Ethnicity*** (n=120)	White	61	50.8%
	Indigenous	37	30.8%
	Black	5	4.2%
	Another Ethnicity/ Prefer Not to Answer	17	14.1%
Education (n=121)	High School or Less	78	64.5%
	Post-Secondary Education	43	35.5%
Income Situation (n=108)	Income Support	59	54.6%
	Unemployed/No Income	29	26.9%
	Employed (Formal or Informal)	20	18.6%
Health	Diagnosed Mental Health Condition	90	68.2%
	Undiagnosed Mental Health Condition	115	87.1%
	Substance Use Condition	117	88.6%
	Chronic Illness and/or Disability	116	87.9%
Current Housing Situation****	Sheltered	57	35.2%
	Own Place	36	22.2%
	Hidden	28	17.3%
	Other	21	13.0%
	Unsheltered	17	10.5%
	Transitional	3	1.9%
	Involvement*****	102	82.9%

Justice Involvement	Incarceration	87	70.7%
<p>* Gender was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their gender identity in their own words. Responses were then coded by the research team. All participants in the current sample responded with either “man/male” or “woman/female.”</p> <p>** Age was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their own age numerically. The ages were divided to create a youth (25 or under) group, and the other categories were created based on the frequency of responses.</p> <p>*** Ethnicity was assessed using a checklist of ethnic backgrounds; participants could select any that applied to them.</p> <p>**** “Sheltered”: living in an emergency/transitional shelter, or a temporary space such as hostel, hotel, or motel “Own Place”: a place the participant owns or rents “Hidden”: living with friends/family or couch surfing, with no permanent place of their own “Unsheltered”: living outside, “sleeping rough” “Transitional”: a hospital or treatment center “Other”: any other living situation</p> <p>***** “Involvement” includes being detained, stopped, or carded by police, arrested, charged, and/or convicted, and incarcerated of a criminal offence.</p>			

Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the PWLE survey responses. This table indicates that there was a great deal of diversity in respondents with regards to gender, ethnicity, age, educational status, and source of income. In addition, most respondents had a mental health or substance use concern, and/or had a chronic illness or disability.

Participants were asked to select their current living situation from a list of possible housing situations. These living situations were categorized based on the living situations used in previous research.³⁶ Relatively few participants were staying in a place they either owned or rented — this option was selected by 22% of the sample. An additional 17% of the sample were experiencing “hidden homelessness:” staying with family or friends, either in a long-term arrangement, or in short-term stays with different family members and friends (e.g., couch surfing). Participants were most commonly sheltered in temporary accommodations, with 35% of participants selecting one of these options. These temporary accommodations were most commonly emergency shelters and could also include hotels/motels or hostels. A further 10.5% of the sample was unsheltered; these individuals were fully unhoused and were living outside. The lack of stable, permanent housing is indicative of the housing history of survey respondents; 92.5% indicated that they had experienced homelessness in the past in some form or another. Furthermore, 82.9% of participants reported some involvement with the justice system, ranging from being stopped or detained by police, to incarceration.

Table 2: People With Lived Experience Interview Demographics (n=52)			
Demographic		Number	Percentage
Gender*	Man	43	82.7
	Woman	9	17.3
Age**	19-25	7	13.5
	26-35	7	13.5
	36-45	18	34.6
	46-55	10	19.2
	56+	10	19.2
Ethnicity***	White	34	65.4
	Indigenous	9	17.3
	Black	6	11.5
	Another Ethnicity/ Prefer Not to Answer	3	5.8
Education (n=46)	High School or Less	32	69.6
	Post-Secondary Education	14	30.4
Employment	Past Employment	14	26.9
	Current Employment	31	59.6
Past or Present Mental Health/ Substance Use Concern	Mental Health Concern	35	67.3
	Substance Use Concern	33	63.5
Justice Involvement	Any Form****	52	100
<p>* Gender was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their gender identity in their own words. Responses were then coded by the research team. All participants in the current sample responded with either "man/male" or "woman/female."</p> <p>** Age was assessed using an open-ended question asking participants to indicate their own age numerically. The ages were divided to create a youth (25 or under) group, and the other categories were created based on the frequency of responses.</p> <p>*** Ethnicity was assessed using a checklist of ethnic backgrounds; participants could select any that applied to them.</p> <p>**** "Involvement" includes being detained, stopped, or carded by police, arrested, charged, and/or convicted, and incarcerated of a criminal offense</p>			

Table 2 above shows the demographic breakdown of the interview participants. Compared to the survey participants, interview participants were more likely to be men, older, white, and have a high school education. Overall, interview participants showed less diversity than survey participants. They were also less likely to report mental health and/or substance use challenges when compared to the survey sample.

In all, participants in the current sample tended to have complex economic and healthcare needs. Participants tended to have mental health and substance use challenges. They had a history of both justice involvement and homelessness. Many were unemployed or reliant on social assistance for income. Furthermore, most of the participants were in temporary living situations, living with family/friends, or experiencing homelessness, with only a small proportion in a place that they either owned or were renting. Participants experiencing these housing circumstances are often missed by researchers seeking to understand their experiences in detail. This report seeks to address that gap. The subsequent section will allow participants to describe, often in their own words, the experiences that they have with the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

Research Findings Part 1: People with Lived Experience Findings

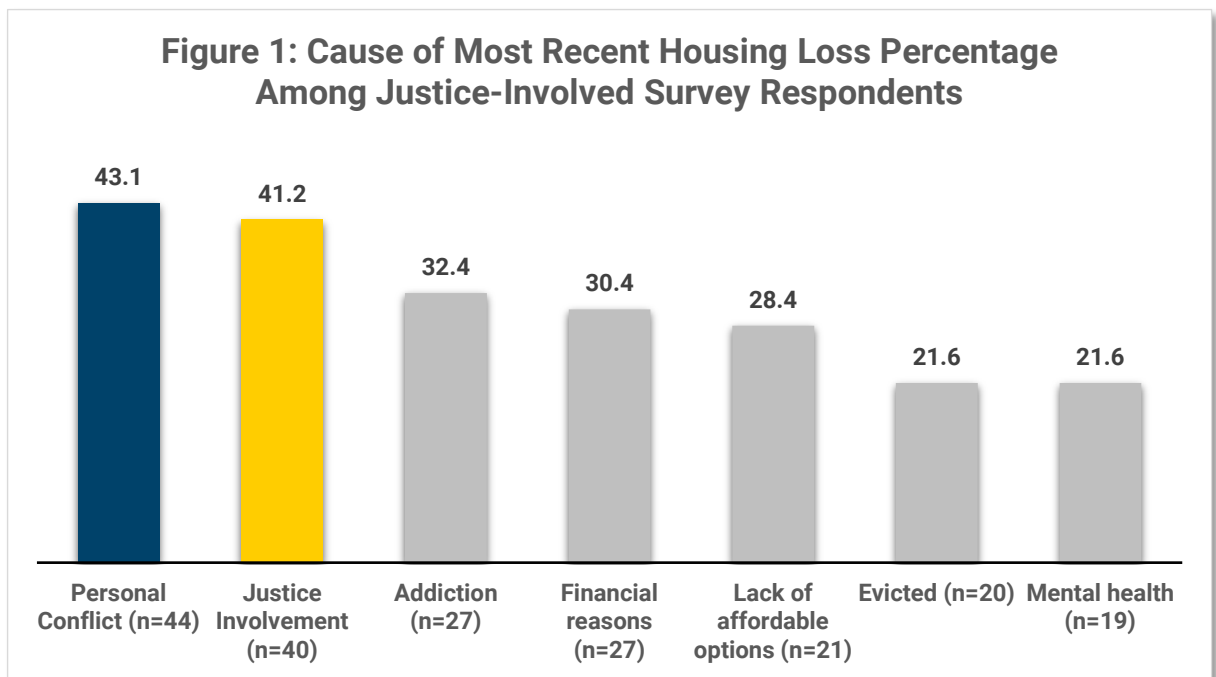
The next sections summarize the findings of the interviews and surveys conducted with PWLE. The results are organized in terms of Key Findings. These Key Findings represent the most common response patterns in the interviews with PWLE and the most endorsed items on the survey measures. Each Key Finding will explore part of the experience of justice involvement and homelessness, the barriers to finding housing, and what programs, services, and interventions are needed to help address them.

Key Finding 1: Justice system involvement is a leading cause of housing loss.

One of the primary themes identified by the first report was the vicious cycle created by homelessness and justice involvement. The goal of this current report was to provide more context regarding this cycle from the perspectives of individuals who have experienced it firsthand. Justice involvement can impose barriers to employment and housing, even if it does not result in incarceration. Not all participants in this sample had experienced incarceration in the past. However, most participants were involved with the justice system in some form. As previously indicated, over 75% of survey respondents reported some involvement with the justice system, ranging from being detained by police to incarceration. In addition, all interview respondents had been charged, even if they did not spend time in a correctional facility. Many participants in the current research reported that their homelessness and justice involvement were related. They noted that justice involvement can make it even more difficult for people experiencing homelessness to find stable housing. Involvement with the justice system produces unique housing barriers that are not experienced by the general population. These barriers often prevent people from making a recovery from the economic and social shock of justice involvement and make reintegrating back into the community difficult. One of the Key Findings from this research concerned the unique barriers that justice involvement imposes from the perspectives of the PWLE. This section will outline some of those barriers that prevent people from finding affordable, suitable, and stable housing after contact with the justice system.

Survey Findings

The 82.9% of PWLE survey respondents who had past contact with the justice system were asked to indicate the cause of their most recent housing loss. Personal conflict was the most cited reason for housing loss, with 43% of participants indicating that they had lost their housing for this reason. Personal conflict could comprise a variety of different types of relationships; it could describe conflicts with roommates, family, neighbours, or landlords. It could also refer to domestic violence situations and other toxic living environments. Justice involvement was identified as a very common reason for housing loss in the sample, with 41% reporting that they had lost their housing due to involvement in the justice system. Other common factors that were reported included addiction, financial distress and a lack of affordable housing, eviction, and mental health.



Note: Data for Figure 2 is derived from two separate questions. As a result, the total number of respondents are different based on each response.

Overall, survey participants listed diverse reasons for housing loss. However, justice involvement was one of the most common causes of housing loss for survey participants. Justice involvement does not necessarily mean incarceration; it could refer to being detained by police, or being charged with an offence, even if incarceration does not follow. While incarceration leads to the loss of housing for many individuals, any contact with the justice system can jeopardize housing. The following sections will explore the link between justice involvement and housing loss from the perspectives of the interviewed respondents.

Interview Findings

Of the 52 PWLE interviewed, about 79% made some reference to how their justice involvement led to homelessness, or how their homelessness led to further involvement with the justice system.

"I was homeless from that time... couch surfing at a friend's house, but that was too much because they always wanted fent[anyl] and I had to supply since I was living there... It was horrible. It's just difficult to live like that. Kinda had no choice. It was either that or sleep on the street and I don't wanna sleep on the street. Especially having a criminal-minded, criminal background. I was afraid I was going to end up doing crimes just to survive... I wasn't thinking that 'I should get a job right now' because I wasn't stable. Without housing, I wasn't stable enough to go onto anything else."

Once participants lost housing, it was often difficult to regain possession. Participants reported various, often insurmountable systemic barriers to housing acquisition. Many of these barriers were a product of their previous involvement with the justice system. One major barrier was a lack of affordable housing options. In the PWLE interviews, 56% of people cited affordability as a major barrier to housing acquisition after a period of incarceration. However, many also found that justice involvement and homelessness had created unique barriers. Specifically, 38% cited justice involvement, and criminal records in particular, as a substantial barrier to finding housing. In addition, 43% of participants cited the stigma associated with justice involvement, homelessness, and social assistance as a barrier to housing acquisition.

Criminal record checks have long been a barrier imposed by past justice system involvement on people seeking employment.³⁷ In recent years, it has become increasingly common for landlords to also perform criminal record checks on prospective tenants. Some participants cited this as a very difficult barrier to overcome.

"It seems now it's very common; if you want an apartment, they're going to do a background check. Whereas back then, it wasn't common to do it... With a landlord, you could explain things and let them decide. But there was a lot of times where as soon as I could put on the application 'Yes, I have a record', I would never get a call back, or I would be told 'Sorry, you're not the right fit. We need somebody without a record.'"

In a highly competitive housing market, barriers such as these could determine whether a person finds stable housing or must rely on the temporary housing system. Employment was also difficult to acquire because of their criminal record. As previously indicated, nearly 4 million Canadians currently possess a criminal record,^{38,39} including over one million individuals from Ontario. Some participants

described how criminal records serve as a barrier to employment, even when they were employed by temporary job firms.

*"I've been to a staffing program in [city]... They worked pretty decent for me. **Once they found out I had a criminal record,...** I stopped getting the opportunities I was getting every day. When they found out I had a criminal record, the job I was doing the day before, I was scheduled to do for the whole two weeks. The next day, they didn't want me there. They put me on something else."*

Many interviewees were on social assistance (e.g., OW, ODSP), due to disability and were thus unable to work. Others needed social assistance due to an inability to find employment, often due to the barrier of a criminal record. Many found that being on such social assistance led to even more stigmatization. One participant described the difficulty in finding housing when dealing with the triple stigma of being homeless, having past justice involvement, and being on social assistance.

*"The stereotype of they have to leave John Howard as the call-back place; they have to check their email there because they don't have a computer. And I think for a lot of people, that scares them, they think 'if they're homeless, they must be addicts, I'm not gonna get my rent. **If they're on disability, I'm not gonna get my rent.**'"*

Survey participants were asked if they had ever been discriminated against, stigmatized, or otherwise harassed by landlords or employers due to their past justice involvement. Of the 85 participants who responded:

- 34 (40%) had reported discrimination or stigmatization by a landlord or housing provider
- 31 (36.5%) had reported discrimination or stigmatization by an employer

Involvement with the justice system imposed a variety of barriers upon participants. Some were systemic, such as criminal records that prevent an individual from acquiring employment and housing, while others were social, such as the stigmatization that came with justice system involvement. These systemic and social barriers interacted with each other: individuals that could not find employment were forced to utilize other sources of income, such as OW and ODSP. These sources of income made people vulnerable to yet more stigmatization, with landlords reluctant to rent to prospective tenants with these sources of income. These barriers are pervasive and persistent, and for many people will be very difficult to overcome without assistance. Those unable to overcome these barriers will find stable, long-term housing difficult to find and retain.

Key Finding 2: Incarceration causes and perpetuates homelessness.

Incarceration is the most disruptive consequence of justice involvement. The effects of incarceration persist long after a person is released from an institution. It can directly result in homelessness, as was outlined in the previous Key Finding. Incarceration was assessed by asking survey participants if they had ever spent time in a correctional facility. About 71% of survey participants reported previous experiences of incarceration. In many cases, participants described a pattern of short-term incarceration, as well as short-term homelessness. Of those PWLE reporting incarceration, 60% indicated that their longest period of incarceration was a year or less. Similarly, many participants were homeless for relatively short periods of time; 60% of respondents indicated that their longest period of homelessness was a year or less. These findings match a pattern of people enduring brief periods of incarceration, experiencing homelessness upon release, and then being reincarcerated shortly thereafter. As one participant described:

“I was homeless for almost 12 years. In and out of the system, you know? I was going to jail, the longest I was out was 3 months at a time. I would go to jail, get out. I’d be out for maybe 3 months if I was lucky, then I’d be right back in. This is the longest that I’ve been out of jail in my life.”

Survey Findings

In the survey, PWLE were asked multiple questions about how their living situation was affected by incarceration. They were asked to select where they were living a) before incarceration, b) immediately after incarceration, and c) 6 months after their incarceration. Participants could select multiple categories that applied to their situation.

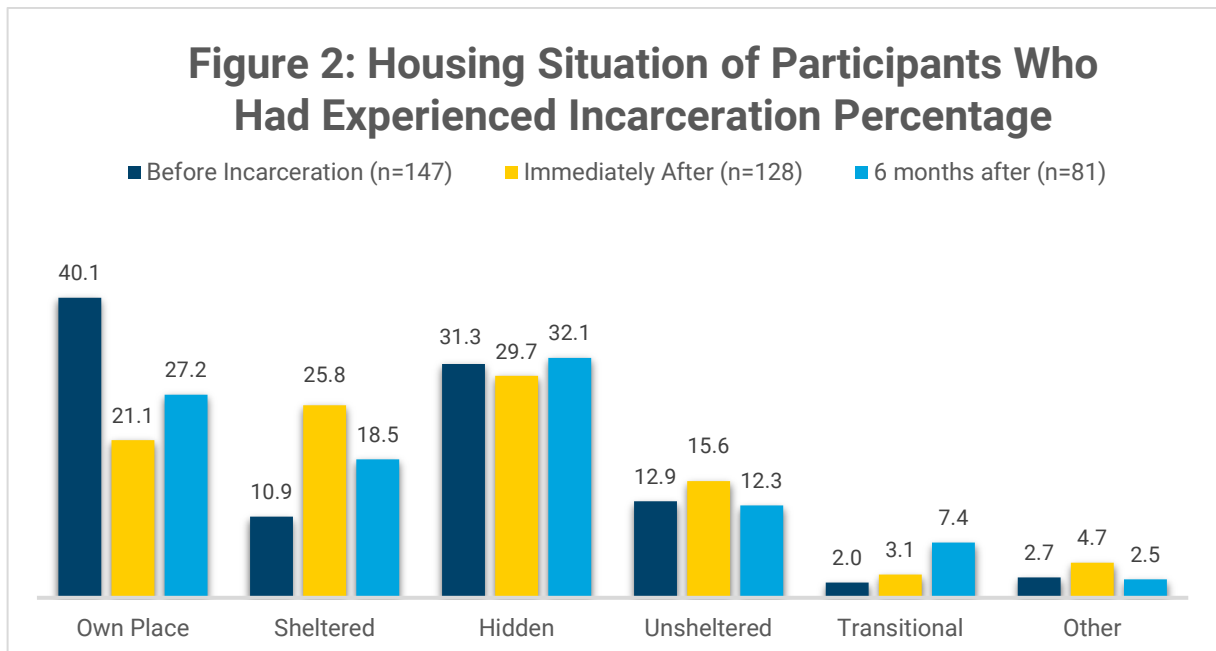


Figure 2 above lists the percentage of respondents who selected the relevant housing options. The major differences of note are the proportion of respondents who lived in their own place that they rented or owned, and those who were *sheltered*: those staying in a temporary or shelter space. A large proportion of participants, 40%, indicated that they were living in their own private residence before their incarceration. In contrast, the number of participants who were living in their own residence dropped precipitously to 21% immediately after incarceration. Six months after incarceration, that number improved slightly, but still with only 27% of respondents indicating that they were living in their own private residence. Instead, people who were released from incarceration tended to live in shelters, transitional houses, and other temporary accommodations. Before incarceration, 11% of people lived in such temporary spaces. Immediately after incarceration, this number had increased to 26%. Six months after incarceration, that number had remained steady, at 19%. These numbers suggest that many PWLE survey participants suffered a housing loss after a period of incarceration. They moved from a private residence to other accommodations, typically temporary ones such as shelters, transitional houses, and other short-term housing solutions. However, six months after their period of incarceration, only a very small proportion had returned to the private housing market. An increasing number were staying in temporary accommodation.

Interview Findings

Incarceration represented an economic disaster for many individuals. Interview participants reported that they frequently lost their housing when they became incarcerated. In addition to the housing loss, participants often stated that they lost all their possessions when incarcerated, as in many instances they could not find somebody trustworthy to secure their belongings, as a stay in correctional institution could last months or years.

"I lost my apartment once I got arrested. I had to start over, new stuff, every single time... I didn't have friends to save my stuff or keep my stuff for me. I'd think they would because I've helped them in the past, but they won't."

Often, individuals could only escape the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement with outside assistance. This could be assistance from family and friends who provide housing and support after incarceration. However, many participants may lack a social network to draw from to receive such supports. This means that they may rely on community organizations to help them break out of the cycle. When these community resources are lacking, particularly resources after release from incarceration, participants are often trapped in the cycle. This lack of supports immediately upon release was cited by some participants as a primary cause of their entry into the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

"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."

Statements like this describe a pattern by which individuals are released from correctional institutions with few resources, and nowhere to go upon release. They are also likely to be released into an overburdened shelter system and a housing market that can be challenging for people without significant financial resources and facing systemic barriers such as criminal records, loss of income and social security.

Some participants talked about their reasons for reincarceration while homeless. A few talked about how the lack of post-release resources makes them feel that they had to commit crimes in order to survive. As one participant described:

"Say I got busted say for stealing food from a grocery store, right? So, when I get released, what am I gonna do? I need to eat, right? So, guess what? I'm gonna go back to the grocery store and most likely steal myself something to eat or steal something to sell to get money, you know what I mean?"

"There's a lot of people ... They offer help and don't do nothing. So, when you get out, it's not like you have the cheque sitting there waiting for you... or you have a bed at a shelter, or like a motel. Something. They just throw you right back onto the street, and say 'You know what? Fend for yourself.' And I know a lot of people who are in there... who don't have nobody to fall back on when you get out. Either some people who don't get along with their family or this or that, so they just get out there with nobody... They'll just go right back to their old habits because that's what they're used to."

This statement describes, in a poignant way, what the pressures are like for participants trapped in the cycle. Released directly into homelessness with few supports, many engage in criminal activities to secure basic survival needs. This leads to a higher risk of reincarceration. Once incarcerated, people lose any housing, income assistance, employment, or possessions. With no financial and possibly few social resources to fall back on, many people have great difficulty rebuilding their lives after a period of incarceration.

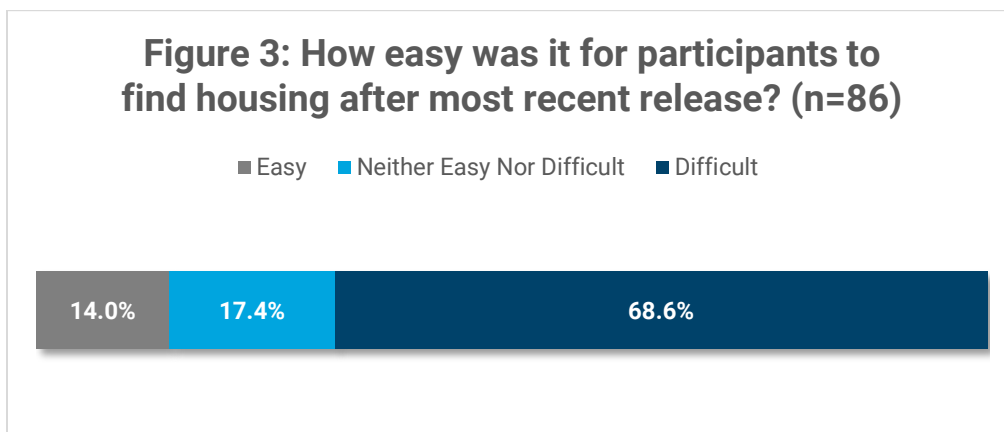
The long-term effects of incarceration on housing represent a serious problem. As previously reported, there were 47,963 releases from correctional facilities in Ontario⁴⁰ in 2021/2022. Each of these individuals faces the challenges imposed upon them by criminal justice involvement and incarceration. Many of these individuals will face difficulties in accessing housing - described above - due to their involvement with the justice system. Some will be able to meet these challenges, but many will fall into the cycle of homelessness and reincarceration.

Key Finding 3: Pre-release planning from correctional facilities was often insufficient to meet the needs of participants, making housing very difficult to find post-release.

The barriers that keep people enmeshed in the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement are such that many people would benefit from targeted support. The next Key Finding will explore two settings in which participants can access supports: those supports accessed in a correctional facility and supports accessed in the community. Both settings can provide different sorts of assistance to individuals in need. However, both settings also have barriers that can often prevent people from taking full advantage of these services. These barriers represent missed opportunities to prevent people from falling into homelessness after a period of incarceration and can have a lifelong effect on people involved in the justice system.

Survey Findings

As indicated above, most PWLE relied on some form of income support for their needs, such as OW or ODSP. Securing a source of income, whether via employment or income support, takes time. Individuals who do not have access to employment programs while incarcerated will likely find challenges in securing timely employment upon release. People in need of income assistance will find those payments delayed if they do not have the opportunity to begin the application process before release. Those who do not have any income secured upon release are at high risk of homelessness and are unlikely to find stable housing in the private housing market. More can – and should – be done to help to ensure that individuals released from correctional institutions will be able to acquire a stable income as soon as possible upon re-entry into the community.



Difficulty securing an income upon release is accompanied by difficulties securing housing. The figure above shows the percentage of survey participants who had difficulty finding housing after incarceration. The results indicate that a large majority of participants, 68.6%, found it “Difficult” to find housing after release. These numbers point to the barriers that many people with previous justice system involvement face when trying to find housing. Insufficient housing supply, affordability issues, and discrimination and stigma all play substantive roles in this difficulty. This Key Finding also speaks to the

lack of resources available to help individuals overcome these barriers. Participants spoke about the lack of resources available in correctional facilities to help begin the process of securing housing and income before release. Without access to fundamental necessities such as housing, income, and healthcare, participants are not being put in a position to successfully reintegrate. More dedicated resources, including effective discharge planning, and support in follow through of discharge plans, can help to mitigate these barriers and improve access to needed services.

Interview Findings

The participant interviews helped provide context for the above findings by allowing participants to describe the difficulties they faced securing needed resources before release. For interviewed participants, the experience of accessing programs while incarcerated varied greatly. Many participants indicated that there were many more, and effective, supports in the federal system compared to the provincial system. In the federal system, individuals were able to access more programs dealing with varied topics. In addition, these programs were thought to be of higher intensity and generally more effective. In contrast, many participants felt that there was a lack of programming in the provincial system. This included programs designed to assist with needs like employment and housing. Many people in the current sample had been incarcerated for a year or less, meaning they were held in a provincial facility. These individuals, then, reported very little access to programs, support, or services while incarcerated. For these individuals, this represents a missed opportunity to provide support that could help them avoid falling into homelessness and future reincarceration upon release.

For the interviewed participants, 50% reported some sort of barrier in accessing services in a correctional facility. As previously mentioned, many participants stated that services they needed were simply not available in an institution. Others mentioned that services could sometimes be accessed but were inadequate to meet their needs. This could be because of a lack of resources. According to one participant:

“There are social workers, but they’re seeing so many people, they can’t do it all. They try, and they say they can do it all, but they just can’t. There’s getting to be more help now with like programs and stuff, but that’s just starting now.”

Others mentioned that the lack of resources made program delivery challenging for those who were on very short sentences. Programs and resources could take very long to access, and by the time a person was able to access a service, they were either due to be released soon, or the program was being delivered too late to be helpful.

“That’s another thing too. Correctional facilities, it takes a minute for paperwork and processing, and all that stuff to get going. And who knows? You could be just about to see an appointment, and boom, you get in trouble, you get shipped out, and you’ve gotta start that process all over again. And who knows, just when it’s about to happen, you could get shipped out, let out, get bail, get released. Anything. So, it’s a big challenge, right?”

A pervasive and frequently cited problem was a lack of release planning. In ideal situations, release planning is supposed to place individuals in contact with needed services upon release from a correctional facility, so that individuals can experience little interruption in services, as well as in healthcare. In about 52% of the interviews, participants reported that release planning was inadequate. One frequently cited problem was that release planning often occurred too late in a sentence to be of value. As one participant described:

“A week before you would be released you would get somebody to just figure out your situation – why you’re there, stuff like that, and then they would see if there was... let’s see if a sober living house would be good for you. But when you first go in and you see the counselor, the drug counselor, the addictions counselor – if you’re interested in rehab at all – they need to get you on the list for treatment right away, because there’s always quite a wait.

“Let’s say you’re coming up to your release date, or you’re only there for a few weeks, and there’s somebody who’s trying to get you into treatment from the jail. Then they would try to put you into a sober living, or get you into a shelter, or something like that. But it was really only that one hour you had with them a week before your release. And if you don’t get it figured out then, you’re on your own pretty much. So, there was no times where they, and they pay for your taxi when you leave, so whatever city you were arrested in, that’s the city they would bring you back to. So, if I didn’t have anything lined up for when I was getting released, a lot of the times they would just, I would get a taxi back to [city] and they would leave you at the bus stop. (Interviewer: And that’s it then.) Yeah. And then... you have nothing, except whatever you had when you got arrested.”

This lack of release planning can have serious consequences for the well-being of individuals released from correctional facilities. Some participants also cited a disruption in their treatment for physical or mental health issues. While incarcerated, they had access to the medical care that they needed. However, once they left incarceration, they were left without a primary healthcare or mental healthcare practitioner. They may have had a small supply of needed prescriptions that they now had no way to refill. One participant described the experience of being released and needing to find a way to access medication:

*“Not in a timely manner, no. I had to **go some time without medication before I got it.** Back in the day, when you got out of jail, you could go to welfare and get a mercy check right then and there. You can’t do that anymore. Last time I got out of jail, it **took me almost three weeks** to get on welfare. Seriously. Those three weeks with no money, not knowing what to do, and meds I’m supposed to get. You can’t pay for them, **you’ve got no money...** On my own. Totally on my own.”*

Individuals who are released with no discharge planning represent a missed opportunity. Effective discharge planning is a way to connect these individuals to needed support and services. Discharge planning in provincial facilities is often difficult. Most people being held in such places have been remanded into custody while awaiting bail or a trial. They could be released on very short notice and are typically incarcerated for relatively short periods of time. However, even individuals who have been sentenced reported a lack of meaningful discharge planning. They frequently reported that their meeting with a discharge planner took place with weeks, or even days, left in their sentence.

*“I believe it was... **two days or three days.** Because you’re supposed to see the discharge planner, I think it was when you have **something like 25% or 50% of your sentence done.** So, that would give you enough time to work on things with them to help you out to get it. But, I’m pretty sure I seen the discharge planner like, probably **tops, two to three days before I got out.** Right? And that **leaves no time to do anything.**”*

In this instance, the release date of these individuals is known, and should not act as a barrier to effective discharge planning. The problem likely has more to do with other factors, such as a lack of available resources. An individual who sees a discharge planner with so little time left in their sentence is unlikely to see much benefit from the service. Access to many community services can take time, certainly longer than the days described by the participant above. Thus, while this participant may technically have received discharge planning, it was too late to be an effective transition to needed community services. This participant’s experience was not unique; other interviewed clients also suggested that discharge planning was too late to be of any real use.

Key Finding 4: Participants reported many barriers to accessing essential services in the community.

Many individuals released from incarceration have many pressing needs. They often have acute financial needs, need to secure housing, and many have mental or physical health needs to address. They will require the support of community-based agencies to meet many of these needs. If individuals are to avoid future homelessness and justice involvement, they must be able to access these services in a timely manner. However, many people experience barriers when attempting to

access these services. Sometimes they lack the services required to meet their needs. In other instances, they are unaware of available services. In other cases, there might be practical barriers that prevent an individual from accessing a service, such as complex application procedures. This section will outline PWLE’s perspectives on the experience of accessing community services. It will focus on the difficulties that individuals faced when attempting to utilize these services to meet their needs after a period of incarceration.

Survey Findings

In the survey, participants who had been previously incarcerated were asked to indicate what barriers they experienced from a list of 24 possible barriers when they attempted to access community services.

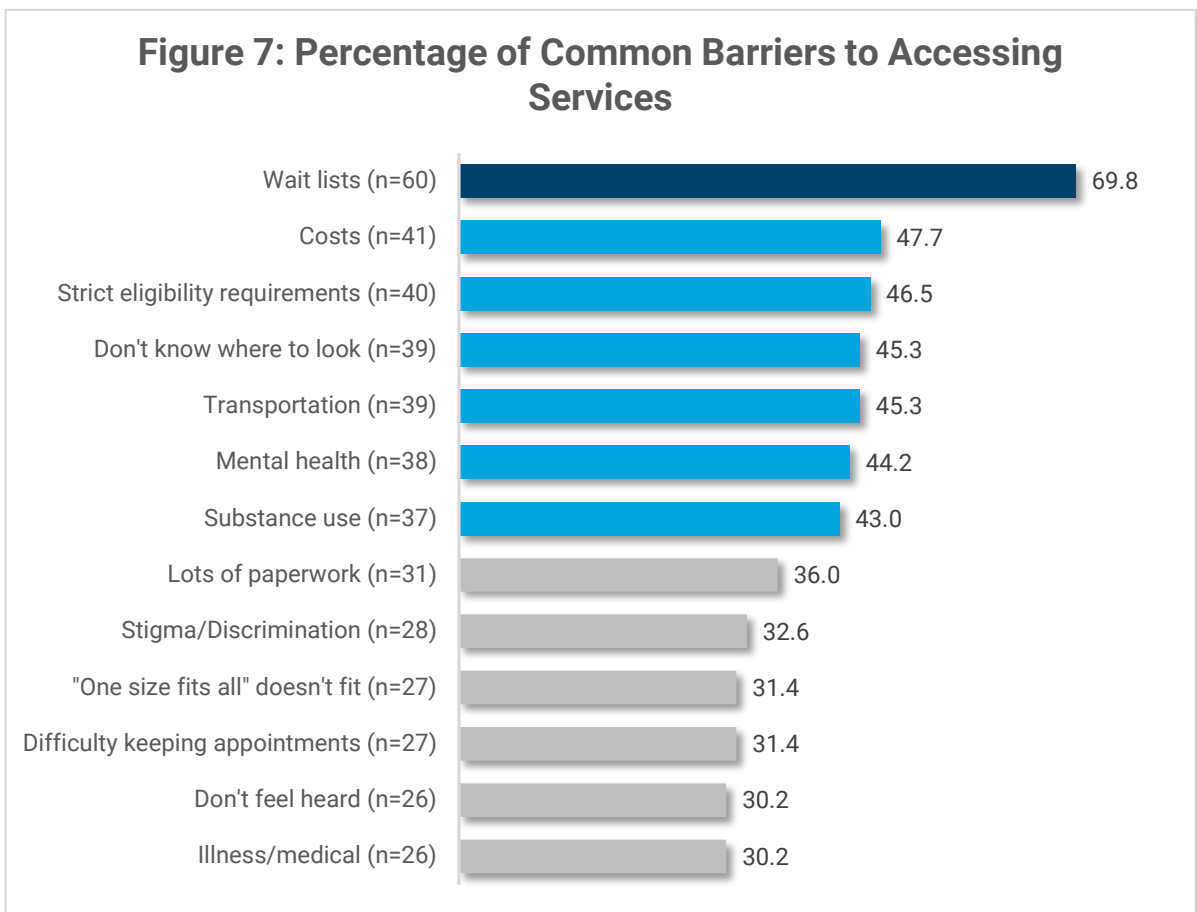
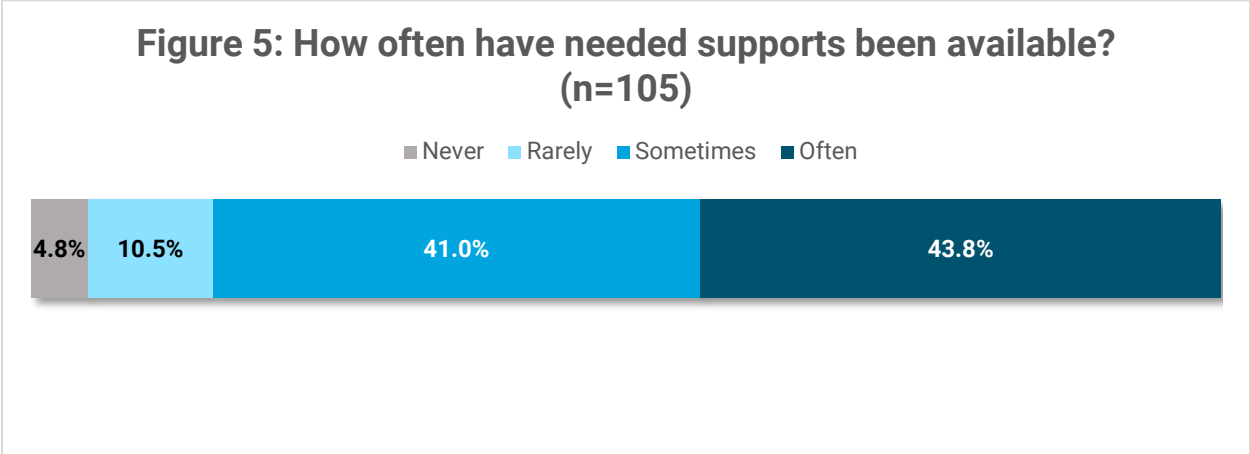


Figure 4 above lists the most common responses to this question, which were addressed by at least 30% of respondents. It is apparent that there are many barriers that were commonly cited; 13 different barriers were endorsed by 30% or more of the sample of previously incarcerated people. These barriers comprised a range of administrative, practical, and personal barriers. Waitlists were cited as the most common barrier, with 70% of respondents indicating that this was a barrier to accessing services. These waitlists indicate a lack of resources to meet the

community's needs. Individuals who are attempting to access needed supports such as housing, healthcare, mental health, and financial supports frequently experience such waitlists. The lists can be very long; individuals can spend years on waitlists for affordable housing.



In **Figure 5** above, participants were asked to report the frequency with which needed services were unavailable to them. A substantial minority of participants, 43.5%, indicated that this was “Often” the case, with a further 41% reporting that necessary services were “Often” unavailable. Only a small minority of respondents reported that this was “Never” the case. Participants’ perceptions of the availability of services could be influenced by a variety of factors described in this section. Services may not have been available in their region. There could have been too many barriers to service access to overcome. Participants may not have been aware of the services that were available to them. Whatever the reason, many of the sample reported that the services they needed were often not available for them to access.

While many participants reported that needed services were unavailable, they also often reported that these services assisted them in meeting those needs when they could be accessed.

Figure 6: Assessments of Community Services

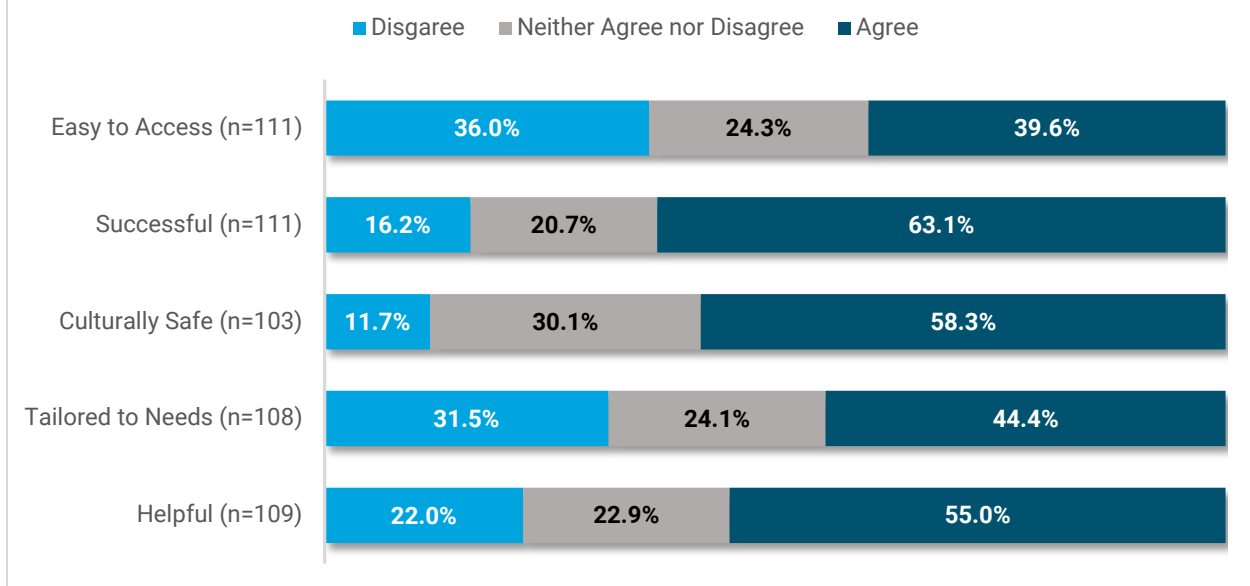


Figure 6 outlines responses from the survey evaluating the utility of support available to them. Most participants evaluated these supports in a positive manner, with 63.1% indicating that these supports were successful in helping them meet their needs, and 55% indicating they found the supports helpful overall. Supports were also thought to be culturally safe. However, relatively fewer participants found that these supports were tailored to their individual needs, with only 44.4% indicating agreement to this item. In all, only 39.6% felt that these supports were easily accessed. These findings suggest that survey respondents felt that community services could be an important tool in helping them to address their needs. If supports were easier to access, it could result in a substantive improvement in the lives of PWLE.

Interview Findings

Participants were often frustrated and demoralized when attempting to overcome the barriers outlined above. In the interviews, they spoke about how these barriers prevented them from accessing the resources they needed. For participants with complex mental health needs, these difficulties, such as wait times, represented a real barrier to treatment and stabilization. One interview participant summarized their experience:

“I’m on a list for food, I’m on a list for housing, I’m on a list for clothing, I’m on a list for counseling, I’m on a list for addiction counseling, I’m on a list for everything. And I’m desperate right now. I’m starving out there right now.”

The issue of waitlists compounds other challenges faced by PWLE. Individuals experiencing homelessness can have difficulty keeping appointments, especially when services are in physically different locations that may be quite far from one another. They can sometimes have challenges contacting service agencies, as they often lack phones and access to technology such as email. If they cannot access services immediately and are put on a waiting list, they will need to frequently check back in with the organization or risk losing their place on the list, as it is difficult for them to be contacted. This takes up much of PWLE's time, and leads to other practical issues, such as transportation as a barrier.

*"You know, if I wanted to be put on a treatment waitlist, I would **have to have an email, a way to check an email, or somewhere for someone to call me back, and I didn't have those things because I was homeless.**"*

Another often-cited barrier was a lack of awareness of what services were available, and how these services might be accessed. In the interview responses, 46.2% of respondents cited a lack of systems navigation and outreach as a barrier to accessing community services. In many instances, PWLE interview participants remarked that they simply did not know where to look for assistance. They receive their information from peers and from referrals from other service organizations. For many individuals, this source of information will prove inadequate. Some mentioned that community service organizations often do not know about other services that could be helpful to PWLE. Even if they are aware of services, the act of accessing them can be difficult. Many individuals need assistance with tasks such as filling out forms and navigating bureaucratic procedures.

*"One [thing I needed] was... **guidance and directions; where the best resources are, and directions for me where to start... I have a learning disability... so I need to be told and shown what to do. I can't just be told to do something. I need to be shown what to do on paper. I can't pick it out of the air and do it. So, help me – I can't. I try to explain that to them, like 'I understand what you want me to do, but I need to see it so that I can do it.'** And a lot of the times they just give you a bunch of words on a piece of paper, they don't explain nothing to do, and they expect you to do that. I can read, but I'm still illiterate. **They make it hard.**"*

A similar sentiment was echoed by other participants: that they needed somebody to provide them with in-depth assistance and, in many cases, advocate on their behalf with other service organizations and with the community. Some participants have indicated that having a case manager who is able to talk to a landlord on their behalf was crucial in helping them to secure housing. Some PWLE cited the need for a case worker or other individuals who are knowledgeable about the social systems to provide practical support and advocacy on their behalf.

*“[Someone] who will help you do everything from helping you to get your ID, stuff like that. Or maybe even advocate for them with landlords, instead of just ‘You can come into the office and use my computer to call these places.’ Sure, that is a huge help for a lot of people, but also for a lot of people that doesn’t really help them. They **need somebody who will actually help advocate for them.**”*

Key Finding 5: There are significant resource and service gaps for individuals caught in the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

Many PWLE involved in this research were currently receiving services from community organizations or had received services in a correctional setting. Many participants reported that these were helpful resources in assisting participants with their needs. This Key Finding details PWLE perspectives on service delivery models, areas, and practices that they believed were helpful, or that would be helpful in addressing their current needs.

Survey Findings

In the survey, PWLE were asked to select from a list of services what would be most helpful to them right now from a list of 34 possible options.

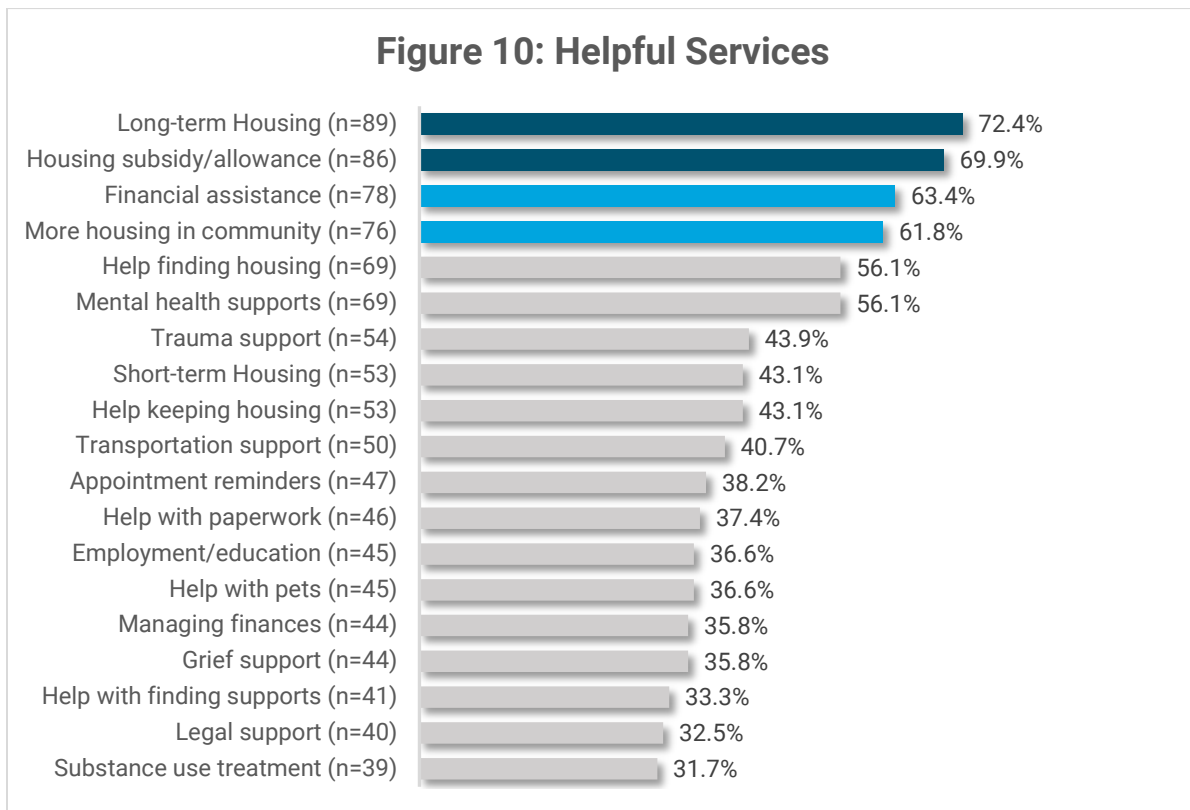


Figure 10 above shows the items from the list that were endorsed by 30% or more of participants. These services represent interventions that PWLE consider important and are not necessarily services that they are currently able to access. However, this

list provides some insight into the areas of need that services address, as well as how those programs can be structured for greater effect. The most selected items are those that concern housing and financial stability. Participants cited the need for programs that can provide affordable, long-term housing options and general cost of living assistance. Participants also frequently endorsed the need for mental health and trauma support. Many participants indicated the need for logistical support in accessing programs. This included the need for assistance with paperwork, transportation, appointment reminders, and systems navigation to help understand what programs are available.

Interview Findings

Many interviewed participants reported that they had accessed helpful services. In the interviews with PWLE, 57.7% reported having accessed an effective community-based service in the past, and 32.7% mentioned an effective program or service they had received in a correctional setting. Some had found housing, either in transitional housing or shelter situations, or in their own apartments via subsidized rent programs.

There were different pathways to effective housing programs. Some participants had been involved in a rental subsidy program, that allowed them to supplement their social assistance income to engage in the private rental market. They had case workers who were able to act as an advocate with their landlords. In this way, some participants were able to acquire stable, long-term housing.

"I'm on disability, so I get about \$500 for rent, which makes it impossible to find anything. I've been looking for forever. But the Salvation Army is kicking in like \$800 or more, which puts me in a range to afford something."

Other housing strategies focused on ensuring that individuals had a place to stay immediately upon release from a correctional institution. Several individuals who had been released from federal incarceration cited transitional housing, such as halfway houses, as an effective model of housing for them. This model was usually suitable for their needs, was arranged for them, and could link them with other programs to support their transition from a correctional facility to the community.

Some participants spoke of the need for outreach. In many interviews, PWLE mentioned that help was often available if an individual knew where to look and took the initiative to find that help. If somebody did not do so, or was unaware of what support was available, they could slip through the cracks and go without help. When discussing helpful services, some PWLE cited the effectiveness of outreach efforts, where service providers attempted to recruit PWLE to programs, either from the community, or from correctional institutions. This could be a valuable tool to connect individuals to community service organizations.

*“This last experience... when I was incarcerated, I did 4 months, and I was offered a spot here at [organization name]. They approached me regarding the situation because I did... it was almost like a survey, then doing that survey I was able to get I guess the attention of [organization name] here in [location] so they came to me asking if I would like to stay. It wasn’t the bail or the other programs they offer here, it was a brand new one that they called reintegration. I had no curfew. Of course, I had to abide by my probation order, but I have no curfew per se like other people have in the building. It’s **more sustainable housing or stable housing right now** till I can find my own place eventually.”*

Many respondents had some difficulty with the logistics of finding assistance. This could mean that they had difficulty in filling out forms for social assistance or other forms of community services. Others needed practical help in navigating the job or housing application processes, which could include tips on how to make their applications more competitive. Some PWLE interview respondents pointed to examples of how intensive case management was helpful in overcoming some of these logistical barriers, as well as some of the other practical barriers to housing or employment applications.

*“Today I have an appointment to see my employment counsellor at [organization name]. I’m working with an employment counselor through [program name]. [They] made up my resume, well actually, [they] **helped me make my resume**, and [they] helped me do my cover letter, and [they] look for places I can apply for. Because you know, I’m trying to look for places that **aren’t going to ask for a criminal record check**, because I’ve been in trouble with the law since I was a kid.”*

(Interviewer: And did [they] find the first three places that you applied to?)

*“Yup. [They] found them for me, and I sent out my resume, and **one company called me back** out of three companies.”*

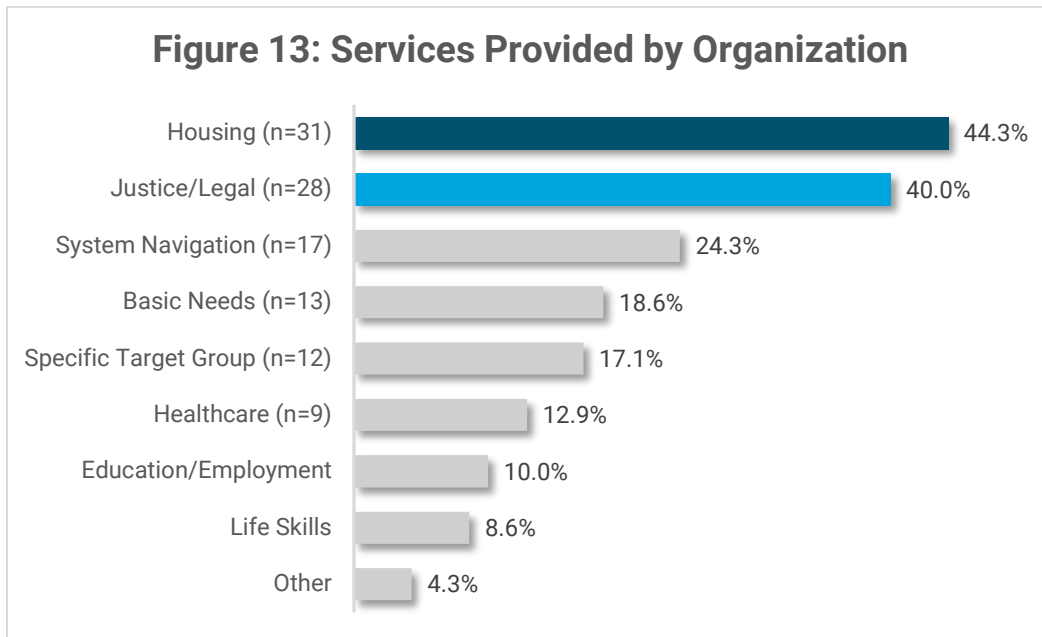
Most of the mentions of effective service delivery occurred when discussing services in a community context. There were relatively fewer discussions about services that were delivered in a correctional setting. Previous sections of this report have already discussed how many PWLE felt that there were not enough services being offered in correctional institutions, particularly in the domain of release planning and transition from an institution to the community. However, some interviewed participants outlined how they were able to be put into contact with supports while incarcerated.

“And so, the last of the first few times that I went to, and I would go to [correctional institution] each time. Actually, the first few times I was there, it was almost a relief when I would go, especially in the winter, because I knew I would be warm and safe, and fed, and showered. And then I could talk to people there too. I could talk to the counselor, I could talk to the addictions counselor, and that’s how I ended up getting into treatment, was through the addictions counselor.”

In general, for community service organizations, participants often cited these factors such as outreach, assistance with systems navigation, and intensive case management as helpful. Of course, participants had very diverse needs, and required diverse solutions to those needs; there was no “one size fits all” approach to service delivery. However, these factors tended to be mentioned in interviews most often. A substantial minority of participants did mention effective services that they received in correctional institutions, usually in federal institutions. While correctional services tended to be more inconsistently mentioned (and were often mentioned as being insufficient), it was clear that some participants did benefit from programming received while incarcerated. This could be an opportunity for growth in service coverage for individuals in the justice system who have a history of homelessness.

Research Findings Part 2: Service Provider Findings

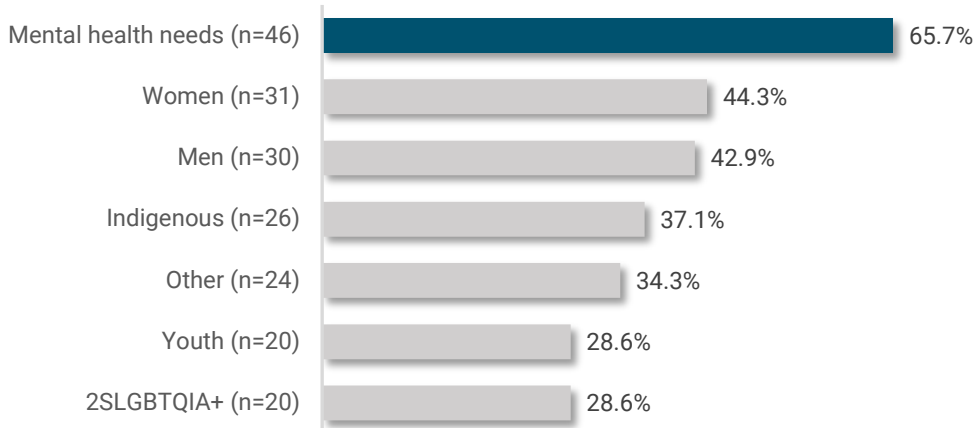
To provide a holistic perspective on the challenges facing PWLE in Ontario, service provider perspectives were also assessed using both interviews and surveys. Surveys were distributed to service providers through the professional networks of members of the research team, as well as through mailing lists of organizations that provided services to people with homelessness and who work with justice-involved populations. In all, 62 service providers responded to surveys.



Service providers were asked to indicate the range of services that their organization provided using an open-ended item asking respondents to write in each service. The research team then coded these open-ended responses according to the most frequently observed categories. It should be noted that this list of services is unlikely to be exhaustive. It may also represent an underestimate of the range and frequency of the services provided, as respondents may have focused on a few provided services.

Figure 13 indicates the range of responses received from service providers. The respondents from this sample were drawn from organizations providing diverse services to clients. The most cited services were mental health/substance use treatment programs (52.9% of respondents), followed by housing (44.3%) and legal or justice services (40%). The range of services provided speaks to the diverse needs of the clients being served and echoes the need for more services and supports that PWLE reported above.

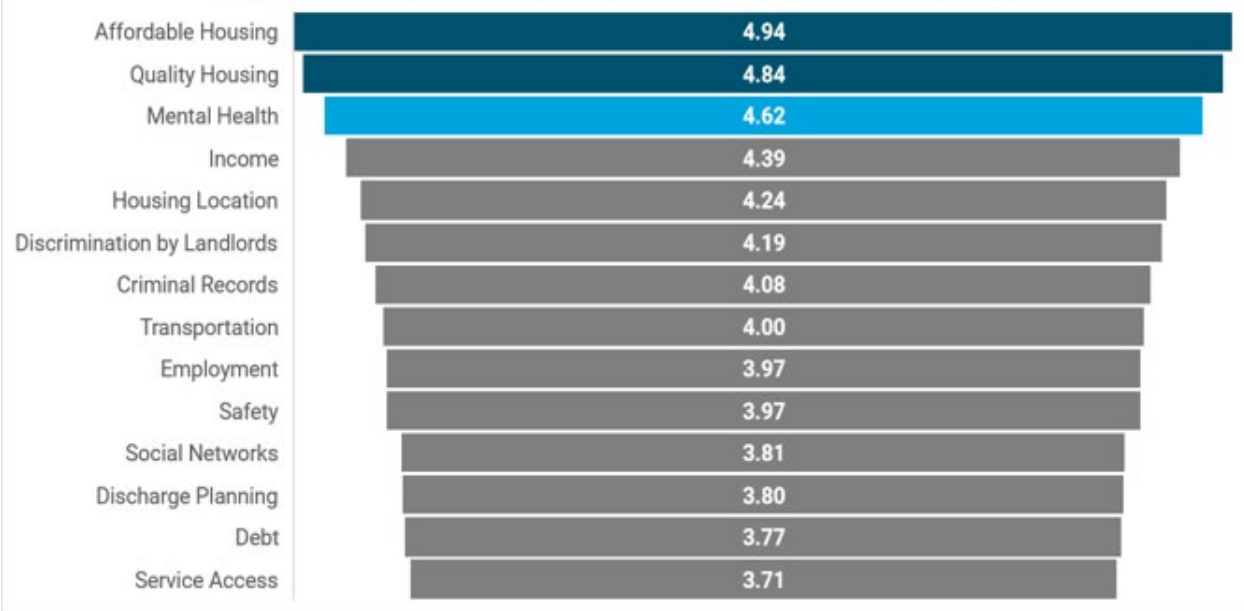
Figure 14: Groups Served by Service Provider Organizations



Service providers were asked if they had any programs that were specifically designed to meet the needs of specific groups in their communities. Figure 14 indicates the diverse programs targeting groups in the communities served by service providers. The most common programs targeted individuals with mental health challenges (served by 65.7% of service provider organizations). Many organizations reported such programs specifically designed for those with mental health needs, women, men, Indigenous Peoples, Black People, youth, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and newcomers to Canada.

In addition, service providers were asked to estimate the proportion of their clients who had a history of homelessness and justice involvement. A large majority of respondents, 81.5%, indicated that at least a “Moderate” number of their clients (40% or more) were experiencing homelessness. About 56.1% of service providers indicated that at least a “Moderate” number of their clients (40% or more) had past involvement with the justice system. In total, about half of the sample of service providers (49.5%) indicated that their organization worked with a “Moderate” (or more) number of clients with a history of both homelessness and justice involvement.

Figure 15: Biggest Challenges Faced by Clients (n=62)



Finally, service providers were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale ranging from *not challenging at all* to *extremely challenging*, the biggest challenges facing their clients. Figure 15 shows that service providers indicated a diverse array of challenges. The most prevalent challenges were the difficulties that clients had in accessing affordable, quality housing. Mental health was also a commonly cited challenge, as was a lack of income, housing location, and discrimination by landlords. In all, service providers cited challenges related to housing access and income support as the most pressing challenges faced by clients served by their organizations.

The challenges outlined by service providers echo many of the challenges described by PWLE. These challenges tended to arise due to broad, systemic factors, such as a lack of affordable housing, high costs of living, and stigmatization. Service providers reported that many of their programs focused on finding housing and providing programming for individuals with past justice system involvement. Many other services are reported with less frequency. Of specific interest are the 24% of service providers who reported that their programs provide systems navigation assistance to clients. This result, the third most provided service, suggests some recognition that many clients need assistance with building connections to other needed services in the community. However, the PWLE interviews suggest that more work needs to be done in this area.

Limitations

The current research represented a significant effort to reach people with lived experience of homelessness and justice involvement from across Ontario, as well as service providers. However, it is important to note that the data collection strategy in this study involved partnerships with service providers and shelters to recruit participants. This means that the study drew primarily from people experiencing homelessness who were actively engaged with either service providers, or who were currently provisionally sheltered. This is not the reality for many people experiencing homelessness; many are not engaging with services, and many are not sheltered. These individuals were not sampled by this research, and so the barriers, challenges, and required services outlined by this study may not generalize to other populations of people experiencing homelessness. A major cause of homelessness is broad structural factors, such as economic conditions. It can affect people from many different backgrounds and experiences. While this research provides important insight into the experiences of homelessness by individuals with justice involvement, it should not be taken as a representative assessment of all individuals experiencing homelessness, or all individuals who have prior justice involvement.

Summary of Research Findings

The [first report](#) in this series showed that there are more admissions of people experiencing homelessness in the last five years than there have been at any other point in the last 15 years. People who are experiencing homelessness when they enter a correctional facility are very likely to be released back into homelessness. People who are housed when they enter a correctional facility are likely to lose that housing while incarcerated. Finding housing upon release is often difficult. In this way, justice involvement, and especially incarceration, directly causes homelessness in Ontario. While homeless, people are much more likely to encounter police and law enforcement, and to face reincarceration. This cycle of homelessness and justice involvement is the reality for many people living in Ontario. This current report represents a concerted effort to understand that cycle from the perspectives of the people affected by the justice system.

People with lived experience were given both surveys and interviews. Participants were drawn from across Ontario; the sample from the current study was diverse with regards to gender, ethnicity, age, and education level. In addition, service providers working with the relevant clientele were also invited to participate in the form of surveys and interviews. Taking service provider perspectives into account helps to contextualize the findings of the people with lived experience in a holistic way.

- **Many participants lost housing due to their involvement with the justice system. Once lost, housing was difficult to re-acquire due to criminal records and the accompanying stigmatization by employers and landlords.**

The individuals in this study spoke about the barriers that they faced when attempting to break out of the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Many of these barriers were systemic in nature. These barriers included expensive housing, or housing that was of low quality. Many spoke of policies that served to prevent them from effectively reintegrating, such as criminal records that blocked attempts at finding housing or employment. Others spoke of factors such as stigma against people with justice involvement, those who were experiencing homelessness, and/or against people who were on social assistance that prevented them from acquiring housing.

- **People who became homeless due to incarceration were often still homeless 6 months after their release. People released from a correctional facility often were released into shelters or transitional homes, stayed with family or friends, or had nowhere to go upon release.**

In addition to the systemic barriers imposed by criminal records, and the stigma that made jobs and housing difficult to acquire, individuals who were incarcerated often lost their housing as a direct result of that incarceration. Once released, many were released to temporary shelter accommodations or transitional housing or lived with family or friends. Many, however, were unsheltered upon release. Interviewed participants often described the process of being released into homelessness, and the difficulties they faced in securing stable, affordable housing. In many instances, they reported that their involvement with the justice system, and incarceration in particular, was a direct cause of their housing loss.

- **Many participants reported that they had few resources in a correctional facility to help them to secure housing before release. This made housing very difficult to find. Effective discharge planning could help mitigate this difficulty, but participants often reported that discharge planning was insufficient to meet their needs or came too late in their sentence to be helpful.**

Many people had few resources with which to overcome these systemic barriers. Services in correctional facilities were often insufficient when they were present at all. Most are released with the possessions that they were admitted with. Their clothing might be inadequate for the current season. They might have no money, and no identification with which to access social assistance. The lack of identification might delay access to needed services such as income assistance at a time when many released individuals have many needs and very few resources to meet these needs. For these individuals, any delay in accessing services can result in a great deal of hardship.

- **Participants reported many barriers to accessing services in the community. Some commonly cited barriers included wait times, costs, strict eligibility requirements, transportation and service availability, mental health and/or substance use challenges, administrative barriers such as paperwork, and**

stigmatization. In addition, many participants did not know where to look for services.

Community services often had insufficient resources to address systemic housing shortages. Services could be difficult to access, and many individuals were not aware of what services were available to them. A key gap in services came when individuals were about to be released from correctional institutions. Many PWLE spoke of a lack of coordination between correctional facilities and community service organizations. Discharge planning, which is designed to put individuals in contact with needed services upon release, was either not present, or was inadequate. People were released from correctional facilities with nowhere to go and little idea where to go to get help.

- **Many participants who accessed services found them helpful. The PWLE sample outlined a number of services that they would find helpful. These services included assistance with affordable long-term housing, mental health, substance use, trauma support, help finding and keeping housing, and administrative assistance, among others.**

It should be noted that many participants were able to successfully break out of the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Community services were an important component that allowed this to occur for many. Participants in this study reported several promising practices that helped to mitigate some of the barriers that they faced. Housing services such as supportive housing and rent subsidies were effective for some of the individuals in this study. Effective services tended to involve community outreach and tailored, one-on-one support. Many individuals stated that services in correctional settings did not meet their needs. Some others also reported that services in correctional institutions helped them to address deficits in education and skills. However, many pointed out that these services were lacking at the provincial level. This is an unfortunate gap, as some PWLE in this study reported that effective services in correctional settings could be helpful to them.

- **Service providers agreed that quality, affordable housing was needed by the clients that they served. Other needs included mental health supports, service access, and transportation, among others. They also cited the stigmatization experienced by their clients because of both their homelessness and involvement with the justice system as barriers.**

The findings from service providers supported the findings from the PWLE measures. They indicated that affordable, quality housing that was close to needed services was the top need of their clients. They also suggested that more mental health and substance use services would be important to help meet the needs of the communities in which they operated. In addition, they noted clients face stigmatization because of their involvement with the justice system. They echoed the sentiments of PWLE that criminal records and stigmatization constituted a large barrier to finding housing and employment.

These are problems that can be fixed. To read our policy recommendations and investment priorities that could help mitigate some of the key barriers faced by PWLE read our public report with accompanying policy recommendations [here](#).

These recommendations outlined in our public report could help to ease the transition from a correctional facility to the community, and to reduce barriers to accessing services. Easing this transition could help keep vulnerable people from slipping through the cracks and connect them to the services that they need, thereby reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness entering and exiting its correctional institutions.

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