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Navigating Limited and Uncertain Access to Subsidized Housing After Prison

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Abstract

An emerging literature has documented the challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face in securing stable housing. Given the increasingly unaffordable rental market, rental subsidies represent an important and understudied source of stable housing for this population. The existing literature has described substantial discretion and a varied policy landscape that determine former prisoners' access to housing subsidies, or subsidized housing spaces that are leased to members of their social and family networks. Less is known about how former prisoners themselves interpret and navigate this limited and uncertain access to subsidized housing. Drawing on data from repeated qualitative interviews with 44 former prisoners, we describe the creative and often labor-intensive strategies that participants employed to navigate discretion and better position themselves for subsidized housing that was in high demand, but also largely out of reach. Our findings also illustrate the potential costs associated with these strategies for both participants and members of their social and family networks.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Keywords

Reentry; subsidized housing; affordability

As a result of dramatic increases in incarceration rates in the United States, more than 700,000 prisoners are released each year, a greater than 10-fold increase since 1980 (West, Sabol, & Greenman, 2010). This rise in incarceration is disproportionately experienced by economically marginalized and predominantly minority urban communities, and by individuals who faced economic challenges prior to their incarceration (Wacquant, 2010). An emerging literature has documented the numerous challenges that these former prisoners face after their release, including barriers to employment, social service receipt, and housing access (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014; Solomon, Dedel Johnson, Travis, & McBride, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2011). This literature points to housing as both a particular challenge and also an important determinant of well-being after prison (Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, & Slayter, 2001; Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Harding, Morenoff, & Herbert, 2013; Metraux & Culhane, 2004).

One significant housing challenge that former prisoners face is access to subsidies that can offset the often unaffordable cost of rental housing (Brown, Kealey, Lindstrom, & Weiss, 2015; Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, McAuliffe, & Owczarzak, 2014). Rental subsidies funded by federal, state, and local programs are increasingly in short supply. Between 2007 and 2011, the portion of eligible households receiving federal housing subsidies declined from 27% to 23% (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2013). Although availability varies by area, wait lists for rental subsidies are often more than a decade long, and in many cities, these lists are closed to new applicants (Brown et al., 2015). Beyond the general scarcity of subsidized housing, eligibility restrictions associated with criminal justice histories can limit former prisoners' access to this resource (Curtis, Garlington, & Schottenfeld, 2013; Lundgren, Curtis, & Oettinger, 2010).

Although eligibility restrictions associated with criminal justice involvement may create barriers to subsidized housing access, in most cases a criminal record does not represent an automatic ban from subsidized housing (Roman & Travis, 2006). Eligibility policies vary considerably across housing authorities (Curtis et al., 2013). Furthermore, these local policies often include considerable discretion, and eligibility is often defined and negotiated on a case-by-case basis (Dickson-Gomez, Convey, Hilario, Corbett, & Weeks, 2007). This landscape of varied eligibility requirements and discretion may create additional barriers to subsidy access for former prisoners. Some literature suggests that misconceptions about eligibility may discourage former prisoners from seeking subsidized housing (Bradley et al., 2001). However, even when restrictions are correctly interpreted, the landscape of discretion may create an inherent uncertainty of access that is challenging to navigate. Furthermore, discretion may disadvantage those who may be considered less worthy of scarce housing subsidies on account of their criminal records (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007; Quinn et al., 2014).

Given that housing subsidies are a potentially valuable source of housing for former prisoners, and that housing may have a significant impact on reentry outcomes, research is

needed to better understand how this population seeks access to this resource. In this article, we examine how former prisoners interpret and navigate their uncertain and limited access to both housing subsidies and subsidized housing spaces that are leased to members of their social and family networks. We draw on 197 in-depth interviews, collected over 3 years, with 44 former prisoners who were convicted for nonviolent drug offenses. Although much of the literature on postincarceration housing has focused on the period immediately after prison (reentry), there is reason to believe that housing challenges extend well beyond this period. Furthermore, subsidized housing may be particularly significant for former prisoners after the immediate reentry period, when they no longer qualify for temporary postincarceration housing. For these reasons, we follow recently released prisoners ($n = 37$) and those released more than 1 year prior to baseline ($n = 7$) over a 3-year period. Our interviews provide an opportunity to examine the often creative and labor-intensive navigation strategies that participants employed in their attempts to access subsidized housing spaces. Our analysis also provides insight into the potential implications of these strategies for housing access and well-being among participants and members of their social and family networks.

Background and Prior Research

The challenges that former prisoners face in obtaining access to stable housing are well documented (Geller & Curtis, 2011; Petersilia, 2003; Roman & Travis, 2006). Existing studies of reentry find rates of postrelease homelessness ranging from 10% to as high as 50% (Metraux & Culhane, 2004; Roman & Travis, 2006), as well as high rates of residential instability more broadly (Geller & Curtis, 2011; Herbert, Morenoff, & Harding, 2015; Visher & Travis, 2011). Additionally, substantial research links these housing challenges to reentry outcomes including greater risk of recidivism (Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014; Metraux & Culhane, 2004), emergency room use (Wang, 2013), and lower likelihood of employment (Bradley et al., 2001).

Lack of affordable housing represents a significant barrier to housing access among former prisoners, who often have low incomes and limited employment prospects after prison (Pager, 2003; Wacquant, 2010). Former prisoners also face an increasingly expensive rental housing market where 75% of households earning less than 30% of their area median income are extremely rent burdened, spending over 50% of their income on housing (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015). These rent burdens reflect a growing mismatch between the available housing stock and what low-income families can afford (Pattillo, 2013). Nationally, there are only 46 available and affordable units for every 100 very low-income individuals (those earning no more than 30% of their area's median income), and even fewer in many urban areas (McDonald & Poethig, 2014).

Rental subsidies, designed to make housing affordable, are understudied in the larger literature on housing and postprison experiences (Roman & Travis, 2006). Federal rental subsidies, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through block grants to local public housing authorities (PHA), set a tenant's rent at 30% of their income. These subsidies are provided in two predominant forms: project-based housing and housing vouchers. Project-based housing consists primarily of public housing projects

that are owned and operated by local housing authorities and funded through federal block grants. Project-based housing also includes privately owned affordable units subsidized through grants to their owners. Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), often referred to as Section 8 vouchers, are issued to tenants and subsidize private market rent. These rental subsidies are highly sought after among low-income households, but are also in short supply (Pattillo, 2013). Currently, only about one fourth of eligible households receive a subsidy, and most housing authorities measure their wait lists in years (Sard & Fischer, 2013).

Although rental subsidies would be a valuable resource for former prisoners, research suggests that they are rarely obtained. For example, an Illinois-based study of former prisoners found that only 10.4% of participants lived in public housing between 1 and 2 years after release (LaVigne & Parthasarathy, 2005). This low utilization of subsidies likely reflects both a significant scarcity of this resource and specific eligibility restrictions associated with a criminal record (Curtis et al., 2013). It may also reflect the perception that former prisoners are not eligible for subsidized housing (Bradley et al., 2001), or the actions of housing officials who employ discretion in a way that disadvantages this population (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007).

In recent decades, new legislation has both tightened subsidized housing eligibility restrictions for those with criminal records and also granted greater discretion to local housing authorities and their employees to determine this eligibility (Curtis et al., 2013; Lundgren et al., 2010; McCarty, 2012). The National Affordable Housing Act, passed in 1990, imposed a mandatory 3-year ban from public housing on tenants who are evicted for drug or criminal involvement (Curtis et al., 2013). New legislation also expanded the authority of local PHA to set their own eligibility restrictions, often resulting in more stringent criteria than those imposed by HUD (Curtis et al., 2013). For example, PHA have extended the mandatory 3-year ban. They have also created additional categories of exclusion such as violent criminal activity, neighbor disturbance, disorderly house, or eviction from public or private housing (Curtis et al., 2013; Lundgren et al., 2010). In their review of Admission and Continued Occupancy Policies from 32 PHA, Curtis and colleagues (2010) find that two include bans of unspecified length for any incarceration and six include bans for an arrest.

In addition to creating barriers for individuals seeking to obtain a rental subsidy after prison release, new restrictions may prevent former prisoners from living with friends and family in subsidized housing (Curtis et al., 2013). In particular, restrictions that hold residents more accountable for the behaviors of those who live or stay with them may make existing tenants reluctant to take in a former prisoner, or former prisoners reluctant to jeopardize a family member or partner's tenancy. Furthermore, HUD's occupancy restrictions, which require that all adults living in federally subsidized rental housing appear on the lease, can prevent former prisoners from living with or paroling to family or friends who reside in subsidized housing. Adults who seek to move into an existing subsidized unit must go through an official application process. This may pose barriers to former prisoners who face eligibility restrictions as described above. Beyond these HUD regulations, some departments of correction prohibit individuals who live in subsidized housing from sponsoring reentrants for parole (Connecticut Department of Correction, 2013).

Whereas eligibility and occupancy restrictions may create barriers to subsidized housing access among former prisoners, in most cases a criminal record does not represent an automatic ban from subsidized housing (Roman & Travis, 2006). Instead, eligibility is often defined and negotiated on a case-by-case basis (Roman & Travis, 2006). Laws relating to subsidized housing access are interpreted and implemented by PHA as organizations, as well as by leadership and staff within PHA (Curtis et al., 2013). Lawyers who may represent applicants, caseworkers who work with reentry populations, and probation and parole officers also participate in interpretation of eligibility policies, and in determining subsidized housing access for former prisoners (Curtis et al., 2013). Additionally, discretion and criminal background checks on the part of private landlords may prevent someone who receives a voucher-based subsidy from utilizing it (Quinn et al., 2014).

Some existing research suggests that the discretion associated with benefit eligibility may create additional barriers to subsidy access among stigmatized individuals such as former prisoners (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007; Dohan, Schmidt, & Henderson, 2005). In particular, a study conducted among housing caseworkers and current drug users, many of whom had criminal records, found that in rationing scarce housing resources, caseworkers prioritized clients who they expected to be successful, a practice that disadvantaged drug users. The study also found that caseworkers sometimes blamed drug-using clients for their homelessness, and considered them less deserving of assistance (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007).

The impacts of policies such as subsidized housing restrictions are determined both by the actions of frontline workers who implement them, and through experiences, interpretations, and behaviors of policy targets themselves (Burris et al., 2004). In the case of subsidized housing, discretion is an important component of existing policies that often allow for case-by-case determination of eligibility (Curtis et al., 2013). Prior research suggests that allocating housing according to this discretion is not a random process, but rather follows unwritten rules derived from shared values commonly held by frontline workers (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007; Morgen, 2001). Research is needed to understand how former prisoners themselves interpret and navigate these unwritten rules. Former prisoners' interpretations of this resource allocation process, and their strategic responses to it, are likely important determinants of their housing access, and may also have implications for their well-being.

Research Setting

This study takes place in New Haven, Connecticut, a city with approximately 130,000 residents. Although small, New Haven experiences many of the challenges that larger cities face, including vast socioeconomic inequality, high rates of poverty and high rates of incarceration (Rawlings, 2013). The city receives approximately 1,200 reentrants each year (Connecticut Department of Correction, 2012). Connecticut also has high rates of recidivism; a recent Department of Corrections study found that 50% of released prisoners returned to prison with a new sentence within 5 years (Connecticut Department of Correction, 2012).

Connecticut also has the eighth highest housing wage in the country (the wage that a household must earn to rent a two-bedroom apartment without paying more than 30% of

their income), and New Haven County is the third most expensive area within this state (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2015). In 2012, there were zero unsubsidized affordable and available units for New Haven County households earning less than 30% of the area median income, indicating the central role of rental subsidies in providing affordable housing in this area (McDonald & Poethig, 2014). In 2013, rent-assisted households in New Haven County spent an average of 23 months on the public housing wait lists and 25 months on wait lists for vouchers, up from 15 months in 2009 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013). Furthermore, because wait lists are not always open to new applicants, these numbers likely underestimate the actual wait time for a subsidy. In Connecticut, rental subsidies are also funded through the state's Rental Assistance Program (RAP), a program that follows HUD's eligibility criteria. RAP waiting lists are also long and often closed. Similar to other states, Connecticut's eligibility policies related to prior incarceration and criminal records include considerable discretion (Dickson-Gomez et al., 2007).

Connecticut, and New Haven in particular, has some housing assistance designated specifically for reentrants. Although not universally available, the city provides temporary housing to reentrants in the form of halfway houses, sober houses (designated for those in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction), and the Re-Entry Assisted Community Housing (REACH) program, a 16-bed program for reentrants with a maximum stay of 180 days. Furthermore, recognizing the barriers that those with criminal records face in accessing housing subsidies, the New Haven Housing Authority has allocated public housing units specifically for reentrants immediately after release from prison (Ricks, 2017).

Methods

Data for this analysis comes from a larger mixed-method study titled Structures, Health and Risk among Re-entrants, Probationers and Partners (SHARRPP) which was approved by the Institutional Review Board at both American University and Yale University. The SHARRPP study examined movement between the criminal justice system and the community, with a focus on sexual risk and Black/White disparities associated with reentry, parole, and probation. The study involved a longitudinal survey, as well as longitudinal qualitative interviews conducted with a subset of participants. Although this was not its central focus, the study collected some data on housing circumstances. Our analysis draws on data from the qualitative interviews, which provide an opportunity to examine experiences with housing subsidies from the perspective of former prisoners.

Data Collection

Eligibility for the study was restricted to individuals who were over 18 years old and released from prison or placed on probation within 1 year of screening (conducted from July 2010 through February 2011) for a nonviolent drug-related charge. Participants were recruited through signs posted at probation and parole offices, the courthouse, offices of local social service providers, the needle exchange and community healthcare vans, halfway houses, drug treatment programs, community healthcare centers, Craigslist, and other public spaces. Of the 1,043 individuals screened, 368 qualified as eligible for the study and 302

completed a computer-based structured survey, which was repeated at 6-month intervals for 2 years.

A subset of 45 survey participants was selected through stratified purposive sampling to complete in-depth interviews. Given our focus on former prisoners, we omit the one participant who was recruited while on probation and had never been to prison or jail, for a final sample size of 44. These interviews sought to obtain a more thorough and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences during reentry or after being placed on probation. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed investigators to probe on main domains of interest, but also provided an opportunity to move beyond preconceived categories by allowing participants to narrate their own stories. The primary focus of this study was on sexual risk associated with reentry, probation, and parole. In accordance with this focus, the interviews contained three primary sections on Criminal Justice experience, social relationships, and HIV risk behaviors. The interview also contained a section on *current situation*, where participants were asked: "Tell me about where you have been living since [either last Criminal Justice event or last interview]." Although this was the only interview question that explicitly examined housing, it often led to longer discussions, encouraged by interviewer probing. Furthermore, housing issues emerged organically in responses to other questions throughout the interviews. The fact that housing, and specifically housing subsidies, emerged prominently despite only minimal questioning on these topics suggests that these were salient issues for participants.

Participants were interviewed six times at 6-month intervals. Retention was approximately 65% across waves, with the number of participants at each follow-up wave ranging from 29 to 36. All but one participant contributed more than one wave of data, and 17 participants completed all six interviews. The 44 participants completed a total of 197 interviews across the six waves.

Interview Sample Characteristics

The interview sample (see Table 1) was primarily male ($n = 36$) and African American ($n = 23$) but included women ($n = 8$), Whites ($n = 13$), Latinos ($n = 5$), and people of mixed racial/ethnic identity ($n = 3$). Two women in the study self-identified as lesbian; the remainder of the participants identified as heterosexual. The average age of the sample was 40.3 years old. Thirty-five participants had children. Only one participant was a college graduate, although eight participants had some college education. Most (43) had employment experience, but 36 had had no employment since their last criminal justice event. The majority (34) of participants had felony charges.

Thirty-seven participants had been released from prison in the year prior to their enrollment in the study. The other seven were recruited into the study while on probation, but had prior prison experiences. Three of these seven participants, and 21 interview participants in total, were reincarcerated during our study. Several were subsequently released from prison, thus contributing multiple experiences of reentry to the data. Interview participants had been incarcerated an average of 5 times; thus, for many, reentry was not a one-time event, but rather a process of cycling in and out of prison. Although much of the literature on postincarceration housing has focused on the period immediately after prison (reentry),

housing challenges are likely to extend well beyond this period. Furthermore, subsidized housing may be particularly salient for former prisoners after the immediate reentry period, when they no longer qualify for temporary postincarceration housing. Our inclusion of former prisoners beyond the immediate release period, and our longitudinal study design, provide opportunities to examine these longer term challenges.

Housing questions from the survey data provide some context for our qualitative analysis. Consistent with existing literature, interview participants experienced homelessness and instability: during the 2 years of survey data collection, 12 of the 44 interview participants had spent a night in a homeless shelter, or in a place not designated for sleeping, because they did not have a place to stay. Additionally, at baseline, nine participants reported that their criminal records had interfered with their ability to obtain subsidized housing, and 10 said that their record had prevented them from staying with friends and family in subsidized housing. The survey does not provide information about receipt of long-term housing subsidies because the questions combined all forms of housing assistance, including transitional housing. However, review of the interview transcripts suggests that only one interview participant obtained a lease for a HUD-subsidized unit over the course of the study, and few were able to move into subsidized units that were leased by family members.

Qualitative Analysis

To examine the quest for subsidized housing from the perspective of former prisoners, we rely on an inductive analytic approach borrowed from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Specifically, we used a multistaged coding process. Given the large amount of data associated with the 197 total interviews, we first employed broad codes to extract data related to housing and housing subsidies, using NVivo software. The first author read these data excerpts and utilized an open coding process to denote important subthemes related to housing. The list of open codes was then discussed and further refined by the research team at a series of meetings. The refined list included categories such as *eligibility restrictions* as well as more thematic codes such as *lived versus stayed* to denote one strategy that participants used to navigate occupancy rules. The refined list of subcodes was applied to all housing data from all 197 interviews by a team of research assistants using Dedoose software. Throughout this final round of coding, the research assistants and first author met frequently to discuss interpretation of codes and to ensure their consistent application.

A subset of participants discussed housing subsidies in depth across the interviews, and we found that the coding was not sufficient to allow us to fully understand these longitudinal patterns. To better understand how housing circumstances changed across the 3-year study, and to help us organize our coded data, the first author and a research assistant worked collaboratively to create housing matrices for each of these 10 participants. These matrices were one-page charts containing brief summaries of the following topics: context, description of current housing situation, evaluation of current housing situation, and goals. We used these matrices to supplement the coded data from all 44 interview participants. In presenting our findings below, we use pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity.

Results

The sections below describe how participants actively interpreted and navigated limited and uncertain access to housing subsidies and subsidized housing spaces. The first section describes participants' attempts to obtain housing subsidies, and the second section describes participants' attempts to access subsidized housing spaces that were leased to members of their social and family networks. Both sections describe participants' strategic navigation of eligibility restrictions and enforcement discretion that had uncertain probabilities of success.

Navigating Uncertain Access to Housing Subsidies

The challenge of finding housing after prison was a predominant theme in these interviews. Given the significant cost barriers to market-rate housing, several participants described subsidized rental housing as a highly sought-after although scarce resource. Given opaque eligibility restrictions and enforcement discretion, participants also described uncertainty about the extent to which their criminal records affected their access to rental subsidies. In navigating this discretion, they worked to construct themselves as deserving and in need of housing, and to distinguish themselves from other former prisoners.

Several participants were on long housing authority wait lists in New Haven and in surrounding areas. Deb (African American, age 40) had reached position number 54 on the list, before being reincarcerated and losing her spot. Jeff (White, 54), remained on the wait list across all six interviews and noted that "It can take years." Similarly, Travis (African American, 53) remained on the wait list throughout the study and was unsure when he would reach the top. He explained, "It could be next month, or it could be a year and a half."

In addition to the general scarcity of rental subsidies, participants described concerns about the extent to which their criminal records restricted their access to this resource. For example, Gary (African American, 54), who had multiple felony convictions, explained that he had heard that individuals who have felonies cannot live in public housing. He explained, "Anybody with felonies. Misdemeanors probably can move in there, but not people with felonies." As a result of this perceived ineligibility, Gary did not apply for a HUD rental subsidy. In contrast, Paul (White, 47), who also had a felony conviction, explained that he didn't expect his criminal record to interfere with his Section 8 eligibility, stating, "It shouldn't be [a problem] because I'm not a—no violent crime, no sexual crime, no pedophilia". Both Gary and Paul provide interpretations of eligibility restrictions that may reflect the way these policies are commonly implemented by local caseworkers.

Some participants expressed uncertainty about the extent to which criminal histories affected their eligibility. For example, Rosa (Hispanic, 49) cited a lack of clarity about the length of time that she must wait to be eligible. She explained,

I was looking for some kind of help with my housing, and you have to have, um, three years without any, um—I don't know if this is probation or any cases or something and then two years another way or five.... Then you have to have so many years without a conviction or something like that.

Jeff was unsure whether he would be eligible when he reached the top of the wait list. In particular, he was unsure about the difference between Section 8 (HCV) and public housing eligibility, noting,

I put in for housing. I don't know if I can get Section 8 because I have felonies. Now I don't know if that's just for hard felonies, hardcore, or for any felony. For any felony, I won't be able to get Section 8, but I can get housing.

Rosa and Jeff's questioning of eligibility rules may reflect a system of discretion where access is determined on a case-by-case basis. In Rosa's case, the lengths of bans are variable and subject to appeal (Curtis et al., 2013). Jeff's uncertainty about Section 8 may stem from landlord discretion and the common use of criminal background checks that may make it difficult for former prisoners to find someone who will rent to them, even after they have obtained a voucher (Quinn et al., 2014).

The discretion associated with subsidy eligibility contributed to participants' uncertainty, but also gave them hope that access was negotiable. For example, Rene (African American, 36) lost her HCV housing when she was convicted on drug charges and incarcerated. Although this eviction, according to HUD rules, bars her from living in federally subsidized housing for 3 years, she was unsure whether this restriction was universally enforced. She questioned, "I don't know because it's a lot of people that I know who have been in trouble with housing before and got housing".

In light of this discretion, Rene, who engaged in a persistent quest for subsidized housing across all six interviews, preemptively enlisted support from a case manager with the hopes of reducing her 3-year ban. She explained,

She's helping me with like with housing just in case, you know some places try to deny me because of my background. She'll help me try to get—what they call that? [Interviewer: An appeal?]. . . Yeah, like an appeal on it. Yeah. Cause she helped a couple of girls who got denied. She helped them get in there. And she put a recommendation in that she think *I should get my last year taken off*.

Similarly, Natalie (African American, 41) who had been denied state housing assistance (RAP) as a result of her felonies, explained that discretion, and in particular the ability to appeal a denial of eligibility, offered an opportunity to negotiate subsidy access. She explained,

I have a felony on my record, but I'm not gonna let that stop me because I'm waiting to find out that I can do appeal. I have a case manager saying that I'm doing what I have to do and they're gonna write a letter saying that I've been there such-and-such time and I haven't had a dirty urine since I came home.

In referencing her lack of dirty urine, Natalie appealed to both her eligibility and her deservingness of a subsidy. Additionally, she emphasized rehabilitation that created distance between her and the felonies that could render her underserving. She explained, "Yes, I got two felonies. . . . But I'm not that person I used to be. I changed 100 percent."

In appealing to the discretion of caseworkers, Rene also emphasized rehabilitation. She explained, in a follow-up interview,

If they deny because of my record, which was in 2010. It's about to be four years ago. That I have a couple people, even a lady from City Hall, that all them said they would write letters for me and you know, right, because like I said, even when I went through probation and parole and all of that, I've never given a dirty urine, I've never got in trouble. From then to now I've been doing good.

In emphasizing their rehabilitation, and their unique deservingness, both Natalie and Rene sought to distance themselves from their criminal histories, and perhaps also from others who have not followed the same path of reform. They sought to be exceptions in a system that is designed to reward the exceptional case.

Participants also participated in programs that would certify their rehabilitation, and perhaps their deservingness of housing. In describing her attempts to access subsidized housing, Natalie explained, "I just show all the hard work that I'm doing.... I just completed a two-year outpatient I just completed last week after two years there." Similarly, Rosa described program participation as a potential strategy to obtain housing. She explained, "The state would wanna see that, you know, you've been in programs.... [I am going to] see what kind of programs I can get into."

Gary explained that he was considering a drug treatment program that could provide access to subsidized housing. He explained,

I think you go to some [Narcotics Anonymous] meetings and be involved with that program. [Interviewer: To get housing?] Yeah. I don't mind doing it, you know? An hour a day or an hour a week or something. It aint gonna hurt me.

For Gary, participation in drug treatment was a way to certify his commitment to rehabilitation, and thus render him deserving of a subsidy. It was also one of the few recognized official routes to scarce subsidized housing access.

Like Gary, other participants identified programs that were thought to provide a direct route to housing subsidies. For example, Nick (African American, 41) moved from his girlfriend's house to temporary parole housing in hopes that this would help him obtain a long-term rental subsidy. He explained,

Well, yeah I moved. I moved into a REACH bed. That's only temporarily. But I did that for the wrong reasons. Thought it was gonna help get assistance far as getting low-income housing. But I went into the wrong program.

Rene also moved out of a shared housing arrangement in an attempt to access a subsidized unit. She was living with her sister, which made her ineligible for programs that help homeless women access permanent housing. In an early interview, she described a plan to move out of her sister's apartment into a homeless shelter as a strategy to obtain housing, explaining,

And what's crazy is I was even trying to go into a shelter because you know you go into a shelter or emergency, like emergency housing, it'll help you quicker to get

[subsidized] housing. It's hard to even get in there [the shelter]. I been trying to get in there for like three months.

Rene eventually did move into a shelter; however, she was ultimately disappointed, noting, "Yeah. I mean, it's kind of... like before, they used to help people with housing, like they'll give you, like, Section 8 or something, but they don't do that as much no more".

The examples above illustrate the ingenuity of participants' strategic attempts to obtain subsidized housing. Although these strategies were largely ineffective, they were not necessarily misinformed. Participants drew on circulating knowledge about routes to housing in order to better position themselves for a resource that was needed greatly, but largely out of reach.

Navigating Occupancy Restrictions After Prison

In addition to the challenges associated with obtaining housing subsidies, participants described the ways that perceived occupancy restrictions prevented them from living with or paroling to friends and family members in subsidized units. Participants faced general restrictions associated with HUD leases, as well as restrictions specific to their criminal records. As in the above section, they described these restrictions as opaque and subject to discretion. They navigated their uncertain access to these spaces by negotiating the boundaries of occupancy (living in one place, but staying in another). In some cases, they risked detection by staying *on the low* in subsidized spaces, and in others, they cautiously avoided these spaces, not wanting to jeopardize the tenancy of their loved ones.

Some participants who were recently released discussed general HUD rules that restrict residence to individuals who are on the lease, and thus prohibit the fluidity of household members that is inherent to movement between prison and the community. For example, in describing his girlfriend's HCV-supported apartment Jeff (White, age 54) explained, "The state's paying for her, not for me being there." Others noted that their criminal records specifically prohibited them from living in subsidized housing. In particular, participants described HUD and Department of Correction restrictions that prohibit parole sponsors from living in subsidized housing. For example, Rodney (African American, 36) noted that he couldn't move to his mother's house, "cause she's under Section 8," and instead found shared housing with a codefender. Similarly, Craig (African American, 34) was unable to move to his fiancée's public housing unit. He explained, "I couldn't go to that place because it was housing. They don't want parolees in the housing, so I had to do something."

Participants also described uncertainty about the extent to which their criminal justice histories barred them from subsidized housing spaces. In contrast to those participants who viewed discretion as a way to negotiate eligibility, Tony (White, 50) expressed fear that discretion could cause his wife to lose her subsidy, even after he was given explicit permission by his probation officer to live with her. He explained:

Respondent Probation told me I could go live with them, but she's on Section 8 and I don't wanna jeopardize their living for nothing, so...

Interviewer So even though you're allowed, you're...

Respondent Yeah, but I'm not on the lease and god forbid something happens with neighbors. You know how people are these days. I try not to do nothing wrong, so the lease—I'm not on the lease.

Tony's concern that a neighbor might say something that could affect his wife's subsidy speaks to the contingent nature of his permission to live there. His cautionary approach also speaks to the perceived value of rental subsidies as a critical resource that he does not want to jeopardize. Ultimately, Tony was able to find a creative way to live with his wife. His brother bought a two-unit home and allowed Tony to live in one of the units, whereas Tony's family used their HCV voucher to rent the other. However, this creative solution depended on family resources that many participants did not have access to.

Like Tony, several participants in the study employed creative strategies to access subsidized housing spaces that were rented by their spouses or romantic partners, without officially living in them. For example, Doug (African American, 42) and other participants described the practice of maintaining two separate addresses. Upon release from prison, Doug had paroled to his sister's house where he lived with his wife and their children. However, when his wife obtained a public housing unit and his sister moved out of state, he was no longer able to live with his family. Doug celebrated his wife's new public-housing unit as a long-awaited opportunity after years on the wait list. He explained,

I felt so happy for her. You know. Just to be able to have her own kitchen and living room set up the way she wanted to and just have her own company and cook her own food on the kitchen. It just felt so good.

But he also described the challenge this imposed, stating, "Anything the government owns you can't parole to." Ultimately, Doug obtained a bed in a sober house that he used only for the address, and stayed with his wife and her daughter in the subsidized unit. He explained, "Long story short, we worked it out where I can be there, but I'm not there. So in other words, I was staying with my wife, but my room was there [the sober house], my address was there." However, this solution had its drawbacks. For example, Doug described the financial burden of paying for the room that he was officially living in, while also contributing to the household where he was staying. Ultimately, two years into the study, Doug was able to obtain permission to live with his wife in her subsidized unit.

Jeff also paid for a room in a friend's apartment that he used only as an official address. He spent most of his time in his girlfriend's subsidized unit. He explained,

Yeah. Section 8—you can't have nobody else there. So I can stay there, and then I stay at my friend's on Grand Avenue. All I do is sleep on the couch. I don't even shower or nothin' there. Because I get—everything I do at my girl's house. That's where I got all my clothes.

Other participants stayed with partners in subsidized housing *on the low*, perhaps reflecting an assumption that rules were not universally enforced. For example, Darrell (African American, 29) stayed in his girlfriend's subsidized apartment, although his name was not on the lease. Similarly, when asked if living in his girlfriend's subsidized unit was problematic, Jason (African American, 45) replied, "Nah, I am not even on the lease...I just live here."

Andrea (African American, 46) also stayed in her boyfriend's subsidized housing, which he had obtained through the Veterans Affairs, a rare reversal of a gendered pattern in the data where subsidies were held primarily by women. However, she noted that this arrangement was a source of stress for her and her partner, explaining, "I don't want him to lose, you know, his section eight or whatever." She considered marriage as one strategy that would allow her to legally live with her partner, but ultimately rejected this option because she "wasn't ready to get married". Similarly, Tony occasionally stayed with his wife in her subsidized apartment (prior to working out the arrangement with his brother described above), and noted the stress associated with these instances. He explained, "She gets nervous, 'cause what if they see my shoes or my clothes?...She could lose it. Like I said, I gotta get a job and get away from all of that hiding and—it's terrible."

By getting a job, Tony hoped to be able to find an unsubsidized unit where he could live with his wife legally, and avoid the occupancy restrictions associated with his criminal history. However, this strategy of forgoing subsidies altogether may be difficult to achieve given the high costs of unsubsidized housing.

Discussion

In summary, participants described barriers to subsidized housing access caused by both universal supply issues and specific eligibility restrictions that were associated with their criminal justice histories. One challenge to navigating these eligibility restrictions was the well-documented discretion associated with the enforcement of these policies (Curtis et al., 2013). In a context where eligibility was often determined on a case-by-case basis, participants were uncertain about the boundaries of their eligibility to either obtain subsidized housing or reside in subsidized housing spaces that were leased to family and friends.

Some participants seeking housing subsidies viewed this discretion as an opportunity, employing creative and often labor-intensive strategies to better position themselves for housing. By proving themselves worthy through appeals, program participation, and narratives of rehabilitation, they sought to distance themselves from the criminal records that could create barriers to housing and thus to become the exceptional cases. Those seeking to live in subsidized units leased to family members also navigated a landscape of uncertain access to these spaces. Some participants renegotiated the definition of occupancy, living in one place and officially staying in another. Others gambled that rules would not be enforced, and stayed with family members *on the low*. In contrast, one participant was afraid that discretion could jeopardize his wife's subsidy if he were to stay with her, despite having explicit permission to live there.

Indeed, it is possible that discretion could be used to restrict, rather than provide, assistance to former prisoners seeking subsidized housing. In particular, some research suggests that in the context of a shrinking social safety net, discretion is used to reserve limited resources for those who are considered most deserving of them (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). Well-documented stigma associated with criminal records may disadvantage former

prisoners in their competitive quests for housing, placing them last in line despite their need (Pager, 2003; Wacquant, 2010).

Prior research has described how the impact of policies operates through both the implementation practices of frontline workers and the responses and reactions of policy targets (Burris et al., 2004). The narratives presented above provide insight into the latter, illustrating how the strategies that participants employed to navigate discretion can have implications for their housing access, their well-being, and the well-being of their families and partners. For those seeking housing subsidies, strategic efforts employed to prove themselves deserving likely represent an added burden on their already full plates after prison. Likewise, the strategies participants employed to access subsidized housing spaces of their friends and family members sometimes resulted in unnecessary expenses—for example, rent payments for official addresses where they did not actually reside. For some, these strategies also resulted in stress associated with fears of detection.

Despite their strategic quest for housing, only one participant received a HUD subsidy over the course of the study, and only a few accessed subsidized housing spaces leased to partners or relatives. Participants faced restricted access to subsidies on account of both short supply and eligibility restrictions. The latter represent one of the many barriers to full citizenship that former prisoners experience, not only during reentry but years after their release (Kennington, 2013; Travis, 2002; Western, Braga, Davis, & Sirois, 2015).

Participants' limited access to subsidized housing spaces may also have significant implications for their well-being, and for a successful transition to community life after prison. First, because subsidized housing units typically provide more housing per dollar than unsubsidized units do, these restrictions may push former prisoners toward less-resourced neighborhoods or places where crime is more common. Research finds that residence in such higher crime and less-resourced neighborhoods is associated with recidivism (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Mears, Wang, Hay, & Bales, 2008; Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Second, lack of subsidy access is likely to result in higher rent burdens, which have been associated with poor mental and physical health (Pollack, Griffin, & Lynch, 2010). Third, occupancy restrictions often prevented reentrants from living with partners and family members who represent the primary source of postrelease housing for most former prisoners (Roman & Travis, 2006; Visher & Travis, 2011). Occupancy restrictions may separate couples and family members, prevent the pooling of resources under one roof, or add additional stress to social relationships that are already strained by incarceration. Furthermore, existing research suggests that reentrants are less likely to recidivate when they are living with their families (Herbert et al., 2015).

Although occupancy restrictions may keep romantic partners and family members apart, a lack of independent subsidized housing options for former prisoners may impose a burden on those who house them. Additionally, existing occupancy requirements mean that romantic partners and family members may risk losing their own housing subsidies when they take in a former prisoner who has nowhere else to go. Prior studies have noted that the burden of housing former prisoners falls largely on women, who are more likely to have access to subsidized or otherwise stable housing (Goffman, 2009; Harding et al., 2014). Our

interviews also display this gendered pattern, with male participants frequently finding post-release housing with wives, girlfriends, mothers, and aunts.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides a unique opportunity to examine former prisoners' housing challenges, both by offering an in-depth look at their experiences and by examining these experiences across six waves of data. Despite these strengths, the study has some limitations. First, the data do not provide insight into the experiences of individuals who may not have mentioned subsidies at all because they did not need them, because they did not consider themselves to be eligible for them, or because they were not explicitly asked about subsidies in the interviews. The topic of subsidies was not an initial focus of this research, and thus specific questions around application experiences or intentions were not systematically probed. Future research that explicitly examines former prisoners' experiences with rental subsidy applications will be an important addition to the literature. Furthermore, because only one interview participant received a long-term rental subsidy, the data provide little information about this experience or its implications. Future research that compares former prisoners who have and have not received subsidized housing would provide important insights into the potential impact of subsidies on reentry outcomes. Additionally, this analysis relies solely on the perspective of housing seekers. Future research that examines the perspective of housing authority employees and other frontline workers will be an important addition to the literature. Their perspective is essential to gain a fuller assessment of the challenges and solutions to housing former prisoners in the context of limited public resources.

Future research should also consider how racial marginalization may intersect with subsidized housing access for former prisoners, given vast racial disparities in incarceration (Wacquant, 2010). Most participants discussed in this article were African American, reflecting our sample demographics, but perhaps also reflecting racial differences in subsidy demand. White participants generally had more family support to draw on, which may make subsidies less necessary for them. White participants also generally had more severe drug issues that may have rendered them ineligible for subsidies. Additionally, in a landscape of discretion, negative racial stereotypes may intersect with criminal justice stigma to disadvantage African American subsidy seekers. Although our participants did not discuss this intersection, future research with a more racially diverse sample, and a specific focus on structures of racial inequality, may be able to better speak to this issue.

Additionally, the participants in this study were all convicted of nonviolent drug-related crimes, and their experiences seeking housing subsidies may not be transferable to those with other types of criminal records. However, several participants had multiple convictions, and many of these included charges that were not for drug-related offenses. Finally, although this study had relatively high retention rates (65% across six waves), loss to follow-up may affect the data. Reincarceration was a significant cause of missed interviews, and lack of housing is a risk factor for reincarceration (Fontaine & Biess, 2012). This may mean that the most disadvantaged individuals with respect to housing are less prevalent in the data. However, because our qualitative analysis seeks to present a range of individual experiences,

rather than aggregate figures, this loss to follow-up does not limit the trustworthiness of the experiences that we are able to observe.

Policy Implications

The staggering numbers of individuals being released from prisons each year as a result of high incarceration rates, and also a growing emphasis on early release, necessitate particular policy attention to the challenge of where these individuals will live when they return to the community. Addressing this challenge may also be an important path to reducing future rates of incarceration, given the relationship between homelessness, unstable housing, and recidivism (Lutze et al., 2014). Additionally, given the profound unaffordability of private-market housing, postincarceration challenges are likely to persist beyond the period that immediately follows release. Whereas the existing literature on housing and reentry has focused on the period directly following prison (Roman & Travis, 2006), our data suggest that this search for home can be an ongoing issue that extends beyond this period. Housing challenges emerged as salient themes across our interviews, and few participants obtained stable housing over the course of the 3-year study.

Given the growing shortage of unsubsidized affordable housing units in the United States, long-term rental subsidies represent an important resource for former prisoners. Our data suggest that existing discretion in subsidized housing policy may create opportunities for former prisoners to access this resource, but also imposes burdens in the form of sometimes-costly navigation strategies. Discretion provides an opportunity for some participants to be the exception. However, a system that rewards the exceptional case is potentially problematic given that subsidized housing would be valuable to the large number of former prisoners who face homelessness and housing instability after prison (Roman & Travis, 2006). Given the growing recognition of these issues, some housing authorities are beginning to pay specific attention to the needs of former prisoners. For example, the New Haven Housing Authority recently developed a partnership with the city's reentry initiative and the Department of Correction in order to expand housing access for former prisoners (Ricks, 2017). Other housing authorities are reforming eligibility restrictions for former prisoners (Williams, 2016). HUD has also begun to take steps in this direction, advising PHAs against using arrest records to deny admission or terminate access to subsidized housing (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, 2015). Although promising, these initiatives are unlikely to fully address the shortage of housing subsidies that former prisoners and other low-income households confront in an increasingly unaffordable housing market. Our findings and others (Bradley et al., 2001; Roman & Travis, 2006) suggest that this larger affordable housing crisis is central among the challenges that former prisoners face.

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Table 1

Baseline characteristics of survey and interview samples.

Characteristic	Interview sample (<i>n</i> = 44)	
	<i>N</i>	(%) ^a
Race/ethnicity		
African American	23	(52.3)
White	13	(29.5)
Latino	5	(11.4)
other	3	(6.8)
Age (years), mean ± SD	40.3 ± 9.8	
Sex		
Male	36	(81.8)
Female	8	(18.0)
Have children		
Yes	35	(79.5)
No	9	(20.5)
Educational history		
Some high school	13	(29.5)
High school graduate	13	(29.5)
High school Equivalent (GED)	10	(22.7)
Some college	7	(15.9)
College graduate	1	(2.3)
Employment since last criminal justice event	43 (97.8)	
Yes	8	(18.1)
No	36	(81.8)
Number of incarcerations, mean ± SD	5.3 ± 4.3	
Years of most recent incarceration, mean ± SD	2.3 ± 3.52	
Released from prison during last year	34	(75.6)
Homeless since release	12	(26.7)
Housing challenge caused by criminal record		
Unable to access subsidized housing	9	(20.5)
Unable to stay with family/friends in subsidized housing	10	(22.3)

^aMay not total 100 because of rounding.