Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

HHS Public Access
Author manuscript
*Sociol Rev*. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2020 August 26.

Published in final edited form as:
*Sociol Rev*. 2018 July ; 66(4): 799–815. doi:10.1177/0038026118777447.

# Stigma, housing and identity after prison

**Danya E. Keene**,
Yale School of Public Health, USA

**Amy B. Smoyer**,
Southern Connecticut State University, USA

**Kim M. Blankenship**
American University, Washington, DC, USA

## Abstract

Existing research suggests that individuals who are released from prison face considerable challenges in obtaining access to safe, stable, and affordable places to live and call home. This article draws on repeated qualitative interviews (conducted every 6 months over a period of 3 years) with 44 formerly incarcerated individuals, to understand how these individuals experience the search for a home after their prison release. The interviews show that the quest for a home is central to participants' reintegration projects as they seek to establish themselves as 'decent' and economically self-sufficient citizens, and shed stigmatized identities associated with incarceration, poverty, homelessness, and place. Interviews also suggest that their quest for a home is an arduous one as they encounter numerous barriers to housing arising from both structural and interpersonal forms of incarceration stigma. Somewhat paradoxically, the challenges that they face in accessing housing seem to hinder their ability to shed the stigmatized identities associated with their incarceration. Ultimately, the narratives presented here show how stigma can restrict access to a valuable material and symbolic resource (housing), resulting in ongoing stigmatization, and contributing to the enduring and discrediting mark of incarceration. In this way, the study illustrates how stigma that is enacted by both individuals and the state, that is embodied in place, and that is internalized and managed by stigmatized individuals themselves, can work to reproduce power and serve as justification for inequality.

### Keywords

housing; incarceration; spatial stigma

## Introduction

More people are incarcerated in the United States than any other country in the world, with a vastly disproportionate impact on urban, poor, and minority populations (Wacquant, 2010a, 2010b; Western, 2006). An emerging literature has documented the numerous reintegration challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face upon leaving prison, including barriers

**Corresponding author:** Danya Keene, Yale School of Public Health, 60 College Street, P.O. Box 208034, New Haven, CT 06520-8034, USA. danya.keene@yale.edu.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

to employment, social services, and housing (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014; Solomon, Dedel Johnson, Travis, & McBride, 2004; Visher & Travis, 2011). Housing is a particular challenge for those leaving prisons (Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, & Slayter, 2001; Geller & Curtis, 2011; Harding, Morenoff, & Herbert, 2013; Herbert, Morenoff, & Harding, 2015; Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014). Like many low-income individuals, formerly incarcerated people face a growing and severe affordable housing crisis. Fair market rents across the United States have increased at a rate that has outpaced wages such that there is currently no state in the country where full-time minimum wage work is sufficient to rent an unsubsidized fair market two-bedroom unit (Aurand, Emmanuel, Yentel, Errico, & Pang, 2017). In a context of limited housing availability, incarceration represents a significant risk factor for homelessness and housing instability (Metraux, Roman, & Cho, 2007; Roman & Travis, 2006).

For formerly incarcerated individuals, stigma associated with incarceration histories may present additional barriers to housing access that compounds issues of affordability and availability. For example, research suggests that the formerly incarcerated individuals face discrimination from landlords who can deny them a lease because of their criminal records or from potential employers who can deny them an opportunity to earn rent money (Harding et al., 2014; Pager, 2003). While these forms of exclusion are enacted by individuals, they are also the result of policies that consider incarceration or criminal justice history as legal and valid reasons to deny housing. Furthermore, the reliance on criminal background checks to screen housing applicants requires formerly incarcerated people to reveal concealable histories, turning aspects of their past into their present, and potentially activating stigma and discrimination. Indeed, formerly incarcerated people confront an array of criminal justice and social welfare policies that define a prison stay as an irredeemable mark, limit opportunities for rehabilitation and success, and restrict access to full citizenship (Kennington, 2013; Wacquant, 2010c). In this sense, incarceration represents a form of *structural stigma* that encompasses the societal conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain opportunities, resources, and well-being of stigmatized groups (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013).

As examples of such structural stigma, punitive policies associated with the ‘War on Drugs’ in the United States have resulted in increased sentencing and restricted access to social resources, including housing for individuals convicted on drug-related charges (Blankenship, Smoyer, Bray, & Mattocks, 2005). In the realm of housing policy, federal and local restrictions that limit formerly incarcerated people’s access to federally subsidized housing have become more stringent in the form of ‘one strike’ policies, mandatory bans imposed on those evicted for drug or criminal involvement, and expanded discretion granted to local public housing authorities to evict tenants and restrict access to subsidies because of a criminal record or prior incarceration (Curtis, Garlington, & Schottenfeld, 2013). These restrictions are likely to have significant implications for formerly incarcerated people’s ability to secure housing given that subsidized housing is one of the few sources of affordable housing available to low-income renters (Aurand et al., 2017; Desmond, 2016). Furthermore, they represent an added barrier to a resource that is already in short supply: only 1 in 4 eligible households receives a subsidy and waiting lists in most urban areas are measured in years (Fischer & Sard, 2017).

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Link and Phelan (2001) note that one function of stigma is to limit access to resources that are needed to support well-being, and by doing so, can maintain unequal distributions of power (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Housing is one such resource. In addition to the well-documented health benefits of housing (Benfer & Gold, 2017), it is often seen as the foundation for achieving ‘reentry success’ (Bradley et al., 2001; Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Metraux & Culhane, 2004). In a logistical sense, housing may provide access to spaces that allows formerly incarcerated people to parent their children, obtain jobs, desist from crime, avoid reincarceration due to parole violations, resist addiction or establish health promoting behaviors (Bradley et al., 2001; Fontaine & Biess, 2012).

However, housing is not only materially important to well-being, it also has symbolic value. Indeed, research finds that where one lives is intimately tied to one’s sense of self (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Desmond, 2016; Gieryn, 2000). Given that many formerly incarcerated people experience economic marginalization and housing challenges prior to their incarceration (Wacquant, 2010a), access to stable and decent housing may allow them to construct a new sense of economic independence and self-sufficiency, identities that provide distance from both the stigma of prison, and the stigma of economic disadvantage. Furthermore, access to decent housing may allow formerly incarcerated people to conceal potentially stigmatizing pasts.

Conversely, lack of access to decent housing may activate and reinforce stigma associated with incarceration. An emerging body of literature suggests that lack of a decent place to live may contribute to *spatial stigma:* where those who reside in or relocate from vilified and degraded locales may become marked by the perceived characteristics of their environment (Keene & Padilla, 2014; Wacquant, 2008). Residence in spaces that are associated with the criminal justice system, such as halfway houses, may represent a source of spatial stigma to potential employers, family members, and former prisoners themselves. Additionally, the challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face in accessing decent affordable housing may restrict them to the most disadvantaged and stigmatized neighborhoods, the streets or homeless shelters. Their relegation to these discredited spaces may reinforce the stigma of prior incarceration adding to it a ‘blemish of place’ (Wacquant, 2008). Furthermore, the policing and monitoring of marginalized urban spaces where residents’ criminal behavior is often assumed, may work to reveal concealable histories (Goffman, 2009; Wacquant, 2008).

Given the symbolic value of housing and place, lack of housing access, or relegation to marginalized spaces, may expose formerly incarcerated people to ongoing stigmatization. In turn, incarceration stigma that is enacted by individual actors and inscribed in existing policies may prevent access to decent spaces that support non-stigmatized identities. This reciprocal relationship between stigma and housing may be one way that the mark of incarceration endures beyond the prison sentence, serving as justification for an ongoing loss of rights, dignity, and citizenship. These reciprocal relationships also provide an example of what Parker and Aggleton (2003) highlight as stigma’s role in reproducing relationships of power and control and subsequently, perpetuating inequality (see also Tyler, 2013). Accordingly, stigma is viewed as something that resides, not within the stigmatized individual, but in the relationships between the marginalized and the powerful, and works in the service of power to justify the existing structures of inequality (Parker & Aggleton,

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

2003). In particular, the activation of criminal justice stigma to deny housing access may serve to justify neoliberal cuts to social welfare spending that have rendered affordable housing an increasingly scarce resource.

This article examines the relationships between housing, stigma, and incarceration. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative data collected from 44 formerly incarcerated people, we first examine how housing contributes to stigma experienced by those who have been to prison. The article then examines how stigma associated with incarceration and criminal justice histories shapes access to housing, through both individual acts of discrimination, as well as structural forms of stigma associated with housing policies. Finally, we show how incarceration stigma may be reinforced through participants' attempts to navigate policies of discretion that require them to distance themselves from criminal justice histories in order to establish their deservingness of scarce housing resources. Ultimately, the narratives presented here show how stigma can restrict access to a valuable material and symbolic resource (housing), resulting in ongoing stigmatization and contributing to the enduring and discrediting mark of incarceration. In this way, we illustrate how stigma that is enacted by both individuals and through state-sponsored policies, that is embodied in place, and that is managed by stigmatized individuals themselves, can work to reproduce power and serve as justification for inequality.

## Methods

### Research setting

The interviews analyzed here were conducted in New Haven, CT, a city with approximately 130,000 residents. While small, New Haven experiences many of the challenges that larger cities face, including vast socioeconomic inequality, and high rates of poverty and incarceration (Rawlings, 2013). In 2012, there were only 47 affordable and available housing units for every 100 households earning less than 30% of the area median income in New Haven County (McDonald & Poethig, 2014). Like many urban areas, the availability of subsidized housing in New Haven does not meet the need among its low-income families. Waiting lists are long and often closed to new applicants.

### Data collection

Data for this analysis come from a larger mixed method study titled Structures, Health and Risk among Re-entrants, Probationers and Partners (SHARRPP). The SHARRPP study examined movement between the criminal justice system and the community, with particular focus on sexual risk and Black/White disparities in health associated with reentry. The study involved a longitudinal survey, as well as longitudinal qualitative interviews conducted with a subset of participants. Though not its central focus, an examination of housing circumstances and experiences was one goal of the study. The study protocol was approved by IRBs at both Yale University and American University.

Eligibility for the study was restricted to individuals who were over 18 years old and released from prison or placed on probation within one year of screening (conducted from July 2010 through February 2011) for a non-violent drug-related charge. Participants were

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript



recruited through signs posted at locations throughout the New Haven area including probation and parole offices, the courthouse, offices of local social service providers, halfway houses, drug treatment programs, and community health centers. Of the 1043 individuals screened, 368 qualified as eligible for the study and 302 completed a computer-based structured survey. A subset of 45 survey participants were selected through stratified purposive sampling to complete longitudinal in-depth interviews. We limit our analysis to 44 of these participants who had prior prison or jail experiences, omitting the one participant who was recruited while on probation and had never been to prison or jail. 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.

The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed investigators to probe on main domains of interest (such as housing) but also provided an opportunity to move beyond predetermined questions by allowing participants to narrate their own stories of reentry. 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].' Though this was the only interview question that explicitly examined housing, it often led to longer discussions encouraged by interviewer probing.

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. Thirty-five participants had children. Only one participant was a college graduate, though eight participants had some college education. 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 seven others were recruited into the study while on probation, but had incarceration experiences. Twenty-one interview participants were reincarcerated during the study.

## Analysis

Our analysis of the interview data involved a multi-staged inductive coding process borrowed from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Prior to the start of the analysis presented in this article, each of the 197 qualitative interviews had been broadly coded with NVivo software by the study team using a set of codes that reflected the major domains of the interview instrument. For this analysis, we began by extracting the study data that had been coded 'Housing' and 'Perceptions of Self.' The first author then read these data excerpts and utilized an open-coding process to denote important subthemes related to housing, stigma, and identity. (Stigma was not an initial focus of the interviews and

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

therefore it had not been included in the initial rounds of coding.) Excerpts related to stigma, identity, the meaning of housing, and barriers to housing access were coded using Dedoose online software by the first author and two trained research assistants. These excerpts were then reviewed independently, often in conjunction with reading full transcripts. In presenting our results, we use pseudonyms and make small adjustments to participants' ages to protect their anonymity.

## The significance of housing after prison

The quest for housing was extremely salient in participants' narratives of making a life after prison. For those on parole, housing access was literally a prerequisite for their release from prison given that parole required an eligible address. As 42-year-old Doug explained, 'You know being on parole, if you don't have an address they can basically lock you back up.' Housing was also described as a resource that could provide a foundation for other reentry goals. For example, participants described the importance of housing in providing the stability needed to maintain regular employment. Housing was understood as crucial ingredient to regaining custody of children both because participants wanted a stable environment for their children, and also in some cases, because authorities made access to housing a prerequisite for reunification. In short, housing was seen as an essential foundation upon which post-incarceration success could grow. Fifty-five-year old Jeff, who spent the first three interviews couch surfing between various friends' apartments, described the centrality of housing access in his struggle to establish himself after prison noting, 'I mean if I got housing – if they gave me a roof over my head, I could take care of the rest. That's all I want is a roof over my head. It's all I need. Yeah. That's all I hope for.'

### Housing as a mark of self-sufficiency and decency

Beyond the logistics of needing a stable and affordable place to stay, where one could keep regular hours in order to get up for work in the morning, or have a spare room that children could stay in, access to housing, and certain types of housing in particular, offered participants a mark of decency to erase or mask the stigma of incarceration and poverty, and define themselves, and be defined by others, as full citizens. Participants, especially men, equated housing with economic self-sufficiency that they perceived as central to establishing a positive identity after prison. For example, according to Jeff,

> Becoming financially self-supporting. You know I want my own apartment. I want it. I got to have it. You know I want an automobile. You know. I just want to be like, you know I just want to live life, you know. And I just want my own.

Similarly, 29-year-old Darrel noted that although he enjoyed living with his girlfriend and was grateful to have a roof over his head, he wanted a place of his own, stating, 'I don't feel like it's mine. My name ain't on that lease … I really don't want that apartment. I want my own.' For 41-year-old Debra, living with someone else also interfered with her desire for independence, which she cited as the reason for moving out of her sister's apartment and into a halfway house. She explained, 'I didn't wanna live with anyone. I'm trying to do everything on my own and not go back to old things.' For Debra, moving into her own place,

even if it was a temporary halfway house bed, was important to constructing a self-sufficient identity after prison.

Several participants sought 'a room of their own' where the payment of rent or a name on the lease served as markers of valorized economic self-sufficiency. For example, 45-year-old William reflected on how his stay in a subsidized transitional housing unit provided a sense of independence and also represented his broader goals of 'bettering himself' and asserting perceived masculine ideals. He stated:

> I'd never had my own place. My addiction, I was so heavily onto people, dependent on people, especially my parents and relationships, and when I got this place [the transitional housing unit], it was mine. And you know and I was going, you know I'm still going to school. I was going to school. I felt like a man. Like I was bettering myself.

Similarly, Doug, described how his acquisition of housing after a recent incarceration helped him to reestablish his identity as a provider for his family. When he was incarcerated, Doug's wife and children were unable to pay the rent and lost their family's apartment. They moved in with his sister and he joined them there upon his release. In initial interviews, Doug expressed frustration with his inability to find an apartment for his wife, stating, 'It hurts because I still wasn't in a position to put her in an apartment.' Eventually, his wife obtained a subsidized apartment on her own and they moved in together. Although he kept a separate address in a transitional housing building, because housing authority policies prohibited him from living in this subsidized unit, he considered the apartment his home and described how this home affirmed his identity as a provider for his wife and his children. He said,

> It's beautiful. I mean it makes me feel good because I'm just coming home. I'm used to being the provider. And, you know we've been waiting for – we had a place before I went to jail. A nice place, you know.

For Doug, William and others, access to decent housing seemed to provide an opportunity to distance themselves from the stigma associated with incarceration, criminal justice involvement, and economic dependency.

## Housing status as a source of stigma

Just as housing access could support the construction of positive post-incarceration identities, the reverse was also true. Participants described how housing insecurity inhibited their ability to build credibility and distance themselves from stigmatized incarceration histories that were considered legitimate grounds for exclusion from resources. For example, 47-year-old Paul described the challenges of finding a job while residing in a homeless shelter.

> Unfortunately, they see [shelter address] on a job application, they go, 'Oh, that's the shelter.' That's a black-mark against you right there, most cases. Most employers want somebody who's got a steady address – a home as opposed to a bunk. And I can understand it. It's a pain in the butt to work around, but I can understand it: You're looking at a more stable individual. A lot of guys in the



Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

> shelter will – 'Yeah, hire me. I'm good. I'll hang out.' A week later they're back in the bag. They forget to go to work. Or worse, they show up whacked. I've done that. I don't choose to do that anymore.

As Paul articulated, unstable housing may be associated, in the minds of employers, with personal instability or lack of reliability. This presumed assumption on the part of employers illustrates the way that a stigma of place (the homeless shelter) can be attributed to residents themselves, limiting their inability to secure key resources (in this case, employment). While Paul lamented the place-related stigma that hindered his own employment prospects, he also reproduced this stigma in his statement about homeless individuals who 'forget to go to work' or 'show up whacked.' He explained that he 'doesn't do that anymore,' differentiating his present self from other homeless individuals who may exhibit these undesirable traits.

Participants also described halfway houses as places that interfered with their ability to distance themselves from the stigma of incarceration. For example, 36-year-old Rene described how the stigma associated with halfway houses could act as a barrier to employment. She explained, 'Lot of people don't want to hire somebody who's in a halfway house … when you do get a job, they [the halfway house staff] call and call and call and call and call you. You know? A lot of people don't want to go through that.'

Rene described both the logistical challenges posed by frequent surveillance that she perceived to be an inconvenience for employers, but also suggests that the stigma of the halfway house might prevent an employer from hiring her in the first place. Rene's residence in the halfway house renders her history of criminal justice involvement visible and as a result, may serve as a barrier to moving beyond it.

In summary, housing played an important role in participants' quests to construct valorized post-prison identities, and to shed the stigmatizing mark of prison. Participants longed for independent housing, 'a room of their own,' through which they could demonstrate, to themselves and others, a self-sufficiency that distanced themselves from presumed criminality and dependency associated with incarceration. The types of housing that provided this sense of independence varied across individuals, reflecting the multiplicity of meanings that people assign to housing. In contrast, residence in stigmatized spaces such as halfway houses served to make visible histories of criminal justice involvement and economic marginalization, activating spatial stigma that then created barriers to future opportunities.

## The challenge of housing access after prison

While stable housing was a salient goal for participants, it was also a challenge for many who struggled, sometimes across all six interviews, to find it. For many, these housing struggles were not new or unique to their post-prison lives. A few participants had been homeless prior to going to prison, and in fact, described their lack of housing as a key factor in their incarceration. For example, 23-year-old Jacob was first arrested when he was caught sleeping at a friend's parents' house without their permission. He was homeless and had nowhere else to go at the time. Later, while living with a girlfriend, he was arrested again for

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

selling marijuana, which he described as an economic necessity given his girlfriend's mother's requirement that he contribute to the rent.

The barriers to affordable housing facing low-income renters like the participants in this study are pronounced and not only criminal justice related. Participants described unaffordable rents that rendered unsubsidized rental housing out of reach. As 45-year-old Jason noted, 'My plan is to find a better job so I can get my own apartment. And I need a job with two checks – or at least one check pays my rent.' This assessment reflects the fact that in CT, like many states in the country, an individual would need to work two full-time minimum wage jobs to afford a market rate unit (Aurand et al., 2017).

## Stigma as a barrier to private market housing

In addition to these affordability constraints, participants reported barriers to housing access that were uniquely associated with their incarceration histories and related stigma. For example, a few participants described the reluctance of landlords to rent to them because of their criminal record. Forty-one-year-old Natalie explained, 'I'm just going around and looking for apartments. I am just leaving people messages. Something has got to come through. *I know it's due to my background* [emphasis added]. So I'm just praying on it. Lord give somebody who has an apartment let them give me a favor, let it touch their mind and heart.' Natalie's request for 'a favor' suggests that she recognizes her 'background' as grounds for exclusion from housing and seeks an exceptional act of kindness to overcome this barrier.

Likewise, 42-year-old Phillip explained, 'So Friday, well, Monday, the apartment we were looking at the last minute decided that they didn't want us to move there because of my criminal background.' Phillip perceived his criminal background to be the reason behind the landlord's decision, perhaps representing both the landlord's views of incarcerated individuals, as well structural stigma in the form of policies that legitimize incarceration history as reason for exclusion from housing and require housing applicants to reveal concealable histories through background checks. Additionally, it is possible that the social consensus about the legitimacy of incarceration stigma may make this a more feasible reason for the denial of housing, even when other variables, such as race or family size, may be at play. Low-income renters, and in particular, low-income renters of color, face many disadvantages in their efforts to secure homes in a challenging housing market (Desmond, 2016). The stigma of incarceration thus exacerbates an already large challenge of finding housing.

## Stigma as a barrier to subsidized housing access

In addition to the challenges of securing private market rental housing, participants also described the way that structural stigma, in the form of subsidized housing policies, limited their access to housing. For example, 54-year-old Gary explained that his criminal record rendered him ineligible to live in public housing, stating, 'Anybody with felonies. Misdemeanors probably can move in there but not people with felonies.' Similarly, Doug described how as a parolee, subsidized housing was off limits. He explained 'You can't parole to a project with Section 8 buildings [subsidized housing buildings]. Anything the

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

government owns you can't parole to.' Participants also pointed to policies that prevented them from living in subsidized units that were leased by friends, partners and family members. Craig was unable to parole to his fiancée's subsidized apartment. 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.'

Though eligibility policies vary considerably across housing authorities, and often involve considerable discretion on the part of individual case-workers who make admission decisions on a case-by-case basis, participants articulated how criminal records could serve as basis for exclusion from subsidized housing spaces (Curtis et al., 2013; Keene, Rosenberg, Schlesinger, Guo, & Blankenship, 2018). These policies, as interpreted by participants here, represent the perceived deservingness of housing for those who have criminal records. These perceived restrictions also imply that a history of criminal justice involvement can become an enduring mark that is carried beyond the prison sentence. When revealed, this history can be used to justify exclusion from scarce subsidized housing resources.

## Navigating stigma in the search for affordable housing

While participants perceived restricted access to subsidized housing, they also noted the significant discretion associated with the enforcement of eligibility restrictions (Curtis et al., 2013; Keene et al., 2018). Participants described how stigma was activated in this context of discretion, and articulated their attempts to deflect this stigma by distancing themselves from their criminal records and asserting their 'deservingness' of scarce subsidized housing resources. In particular, participants emphasized evidence of 'good behavior,' such as staying clean (avoiding drugs), as a way to better position themselves in their quests for a housing subsidy. Some participants also employed the support of case managers and other officials who could advocate on their behalf and assist them in managing their self-presentation. For example, Rene, who engaged in a persistent quest for a subsidized housing unit across all six interviews, preemptively enlisted support from a case manager in appealing eligibility restrictions should a subsidized unit become available. She explained,

> If they deny because of my record, which was in 2010. It's about to be four years ago. … 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 [failed drug test], I've never got in trouble. From then to now I've been doing good.

Here, Rene emphasized her good behavior as evidence of her deservingness of this coveted and scarce resource. Natalie described similar efforts to prove herself both eligible and deserving of a rental subsidy. She explained:

> I just signed up for [another program] and housing Section 8 [rental voucher] and 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.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

In a subsequent interview, 18 months later, Natalie reiterated this effort to establish her eligibility for subsidized housing, emphasizing not only her lack of drug use but also her participation in a number of self-improvement and treatment programs, for which she has obtained certificates. She explained, 'Yeah, so my caseworker, she's advocating for me and I'm advocating for myself, bringing my certificates and everything, just letting them know that I've been clean now over five years.'

By emphasizing her participation in treatment, Natalie embraced a 'therapized identity' (Hansen, Bourgois, & Drucker, 2014) that trades the criminal stigma of incarceration for one of a diseased body that is in need of treatment and on a path to recovery. She claimed her incarceration and addiction history, while emphasizing the hard work she has put into recovery. She explained, 'Do you have a felony?' 'Yes I have a felony.' 'Why were you in prison?' 'I was in prison due to my drug addiction, using drugs. I did this. I worked on myself for these many years. I have certificates.'

Similarly, though he did not use drugs, Gary considered participation in a drug treatment program as a way to certify his commitment to rehabilitation and his deservingness of housing. He explained, 'I think you got to go to some NA 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 ain't gonna hurt me.' In emphasizing their hard work and rehabilitation, Natalie, Gary and others also suggest that these actions are needed to distance themselves from histories of incarceration and drug use given policies of discretion that require them to demonstrate their deservingness of housing. This distancing requires them to tacitly accept, and perhaps reinforce, stigma that constructs criminal justice histories as legitimate grounds for exclusion from resources.

In summary, participants viewed stigma associated with incarceration, criminal justice, and substance use histories as barriers to housing access, particularly in a context where they were competing with others for scarce affordable or subsidized units. This stigma was produced and reproduced in the actions of individual landlords and housing administrators, but also through policies that defined previous criminal justice involvement as a basis for exclusion from both private and subsidized rental housing, and required those with criminal justice histories to prove their deservingness of housing resources by distancing themselves from others who share similar experiences.

## Discussion

Our analysis illustrates that the quest for housing is central to participants' experiences of making a life after prison as they seek to shed the stigmatized identity of incarceration histories and represent themselves as decent and economically self-sufficient citizens. The narratives show how lack of housing, or the right kind of housing, can serve to reinforce stigma associated with incarceration. Participants' inability to access decent homes and their relegation to marked places such as halfway houses can prevent them from concealing and moving beyond stigmatized histories. At the same time, the stigma of incarceration inhibits their ability to secure the independent housing they so desperately seek. Their quest for housing is an arduous one as they encounter both economic constraints and incarceration

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

stigma. The latter manifests itself in the actions of individuals (potential landlords, for example) and also through policies that define incarceration histories as legitimate grounds for exclusion from housing, and that require housing seekers to reveal these histories through criminal background checks. This stigma is also strengthened and reproduced by former prisoners' own efforts to navigate policies of discretion that require them to distance themselves from the stigma they encounter

Thus, the narratives presented here illustrate the way that stigma can serve to perpetuate inequality (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Tyler, 2013). It not only works to deny access to those resources that materially support well-being, as Link and Phelan (2006) have argued, it also restricts access to the resources that support deserving and decent identities. In this way, incarceration becomes an enduring mark that serves to justify the ongoing denial of rights and resources for those who have been to prison. This justification is particularly relevant given the shrinking of existing social safety nets that has occurred under neoliberalism. As Wacquant (2010c) and others have argued, one hallmark of neoliberal policy reforms is the use of discourses of vilification and stigmatization to justify restricted access to increasingly limited social resources (Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003; Wacquant, 2010c). In this case, discourses of vilification may work to exclude former prisoners from affordable housing, both private and subsidized, that has become an increasingly scarce commodity, rather than a guaranteed right (Pattillo, 2013).

The narratives presented here also illustrate the ways that housing serves as more than just a form of shelter, but also a symbolic good in the context of widely circulating American values of self-sufficiency and independence. These values have been reinforced through policy reforms that have made the receipt of benefits contingent on personal characteristics and labor force participation (Dohan, Schmidt, & Henderson, 2005; Pattillo, 2013; Wacquant, 2010c). Many participants found housing with family members or friends, after leaving prison, and described these housing arrangements as providing beneficial sources of mutual support. However, these same participants and others also idealized 'a room of their own,' the independent housing that was for many out of reach. The economic marginalization and lack of self-sufficiency that many participants experienced both prior to and in the wake of incarceration was not only stigmatizing, but also criminalized. The last few decades have witnessed an increase in the criminalization of poverty through, for example, the rise of debtors' prisons and anti-vagrancy laws (Aykanian & Lee, 2016; Foscarinis, 1996). The salience of participants' housing quests and their desires to present themselves as economically self-sufficient through housing acquisition may reflect a desire to distance themselves from poverty that is increasingly criminalized as well as stigmatized (Tyler, 2013).

Additionally, the narratives in this article speak to an emerging literature on spatial stigma that has documented the ways that the social construction of marginalized spaces (and in particular, spaces inhabited by low-income people of color) can work to perpetuate inequalities (Keene & Padilla, 2010; Wacquant, 2008; Wacquant & Slater, 2014). This literature shows how those who reside in a stigmatized place may become marked by a stigma of place that influences their sense of self, their daily experiences, their access to resources, and their ability to advance themselves (Keene & Padilla, 2014). As Kelaher,

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Warr, Feldman, and Tacticos (2010) have noted, 'neighborhood stigma may be quite literally, a way of keeping people "in their place".' Formerly incarcerated individuals may embody the spatial stigma of the penitentiary, as well as the marked spaces of halfway houses or other forms of transitional housing. In addition, they may embody, in the eyes of others, the stigma associated with the economically marginalized neighborhoods that many former prisoners hail from and return to: neighborhoods that are surveilled and policed, and where criminality of residents is often assumed (Goffman, 2009). The embodiment of these spatial stigmas, past and present, may prevent them from obtaining resources such as housing. Furthermore, their inability to obtain decent housing in decent neighborhoods may further limit their life chances.

These data also speak to participants' agency, persistence, and resilience, as they push back against incarceration stigma to construct themselves as deserving of housing by demonstrating their accomplishments and by engaging professional helpers to endorse their decency. In these efforts of self-presentation, some participants sought to neutralize the stigma of poverty by embracing medicalized identities (see Hansen et al., 2014). For example, by embracing the identity of a recovering addict, someone with an illness that can be resolved through medical interventions, Natalie was able to distance herself from the structurally produced problems of prison and poverty that have become increasingly stigmatized in a neoliberal post-welfare era (Hansen et al., 2014).

In seeking to understand the intersection of stigma and housing, this study is limited to the experience of the stigmatized. The perspectives of landlords, case managers, housing authority officials, policy makers, and other actors who might enact stigma are absent here and an important focus of future research. Furthermore, the data analyzed here were collected as part of a larger study on incarceration, well-being, and HIV risk and the interviews did not explicitly seek to examine housing quests or experiences. This may limit the depth of the analysis. However, the prevalence of themes related to housing, identity, and stigma in the data, despite the project's lack of focus on these topics, suggests that these are salient issues that require further exploration.

Prior studies have established that housing access represents an important foundation for those returning from prison, with stable housing predicting improved well-being and reduced recidivism (Bradley et al., 2001; Fontaine & Biess, 2012). This study contributes to this literature by illustrating the way that housing provides more than shelter, but is also intimately linked to the process of identity construction and stigmatization after prison.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the participants of the Structures, Health and Risk among Re-entrants, Probationers and Partners (SHARRPP) study for sharing their experiences with our research team. We are also thank Alana Rosenberg and Penelope Schlesinger. We would also like to thank the Connecticut Department of Correction (DOC) and Court Support Services Division (CSSD) for their cooperation with this research. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official view of project funders.

Funding

The research for this article was supported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) (grant 1R01DA025021–01). This research was also facilitated by the services and resources provided by the District of Columbia Center for AIDS Research, a National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded program (AI117970). Additional support was received from Yale University's Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS (National Institute of Mental Health grant number P30MH062294).

## Biography

## References

Aurand A, Emmanuel D, Yentel D, Errico E, & Pang M (2017). Out of reach 2017: The high cost of housing. Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition Retrieved from http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/00R_2017.pdf (last accessed 2 May 2018).

Aykanian A, & Lee W (2016). Social work's role in ending the criminalization of homelessness: Opportunities for action. Social Work (United States), 61, 183–185.

Benfer EA, & Gold AE (2017). There's no place like home: Reshaping community interventions and policies to eliminate environmental hazards and improve population health for low-income and minority communities. Harvard Law & Policy Review Online, S1, 11.

Blankenship KM, Smoyer AB, Bray SJ, & Mattocks K (2005). Black-white disparities in HIV/AIDS: The role of drug policy and the corrections system. Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 16(4 Suppl B), 140–156. [PubMed: 16327113]

Bradley KH, Oliver RBM, Richardson NC, & Slayter EM (2001, 11). No place like home: Housing and the ex-prisoner (Policy brief). Community Resources for Justice, Inc.

Corbin J, & Strauss A (2014). Basics of qualitative research : Techniques and procedures for developing a grounded theory (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cuba L, & Hummon D (1993). A place to call home: Identification with dwelling, community, and region. Sociological Quarterly, 34(1), 111–131.

Curtis MA, Garlington S, & Schottenfeld LS (2013). Alcohol, drug, and criminal history restrictions in public housing. Cityscape, 15, 37–52.

Desmond M (2016). Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City. New York, NY: Crown.

Dohan D, Schmidt L, & Henderson S (2005). From enabling to bootstrapping: Welfare workers' views of substance abuse and welfare reform. Contemporary Drug Problems, 32, 429–455.

Fischer W, & Sard B (2017). Chartbook: Federal housing spending is poorly matched to need. Retrieved from https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/chart-book-federal-housing-spending-is-poorly-matched-to-need (last accessed 20 March 2018).

Fontaine J, & Biess J (2012, April). Housing as a platform for formerly incarcerated persons. Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412552-Housing-as-a-Platform-for-Formerly-Incarcerated-Persons.PDF (last accessed 2 May 2018).

Foscarinis M (1996). Downward spiral : Homelessness and its criminalization. Yale Law & Policy Review, 14, 1–63.

Geller A, & Curtis M (2011). A sort of homecoming: Incarceration and the housing security of urban men. Social Science Research, 40, 1196–1213. [PubMed: 21927519]

Gieryn TF (2000). A space for place in sociology. Annual Review of Sociology, 26, 463–496.

Goffman A (2009). On the run: Wanted men in a Philadelphia ghetto. American Sociological Review, 74, 339–357.

Hansen H, Bourgois P, & Drucker E (2014). Pathologizing poverty: New forms of diagnosis, disability, and structural stigma under welfare reform. Social Science & Medicine, 103, 76–83. [PubMed: 24507913]

Harding DJ, Morenoff JD, & Herbert CW (2013). Home is hard to find: Neighborhoods, institutions, and the residential trajectories of returning prisoners. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 647, 214–236. [PubMed: 23645931]



Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Harding DJ, Wyse JJB, Dobson C, & Morenoff JD (2014). Making ends meet after prison. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 33, 440–470. [PubMed: 25584015]

Hatzenbuehler ML, Phelan JC, & Link BG (2013). Stigma as a fundamental cause of population health inequalities. American Journal of Public Health, 103, 813–821. [PubMed: 23488505]

Herbert C, Morenoff J, & Harding D (2015). Homelessness and housing insecurity among former prisoners. The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 1, 37–54.

Keene D, & Padilla M (2010). Race, class and the stigma of place: Moving to 'opportunity' in Eastern Iowa. Health & Place, 16, 1216–1223. [PubMed: 20800532]

Keene D, & Padilla M (2014). Spatial stigma and health inequality. Critical Public Health, 24, 392–404.

Keene D, Rosenberg R, Schlesinger P, Guo M, & Blankenship K (2018). Navigating limited and uncertain access to subsidized housing after prison. Housing Policy Debate, 28, 199–214. [PubMed: 29657514]

Kelaher M, Warr D, Feldman P, & Tacticos T (2010). Living in Birdsville: Exploring the impact of neighborhood stigma on health. Health & Place, 16, 381–388. [PubMed: 20031473]

Kennington M (2013). Ambiguous freedom: A grounded theoretical analysis of life outside prison (Doctoral dissertation). University of Vermont Retrieved from https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/24194 (last accessed 1 September 2017).

Link B, & Phelan J (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. Annual Review of Sociology, 27, 363–385.

Link B, & Phelan J (2006). Stigma and its public health implications. The Lancet, 367, 528–529.

Lutze FE, Rosky JW, & Hamilton ZK (2014). Homelessness and reentry: A multisite outcome evaluation of Washington state's reentry housing program for high risk offenders. Criminal Justice and Behavior, 41, 471–491.

McDonald G, & Poethig E (2014). We've mapped America's rental housing crisis. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Retrieved from http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/weve-mapped-americas-rental-housing-crisis (accessed 1 March 2018).

Metraux S, & Culhane DP (2004). Homeless shelter use and reincarceration following prison release. Criminology & Public Policy, 3, 139–160.

Metraux S, Roman C, & Cho R (2007, 9). Incarceration and homelessness. Paper presented at Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness, Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Morgen S, & Maskovsky J (2003). The anthropology of welfare 'reform': New perspectives on US urban poverty in the post-welfare era. Annual Review of Anthropology, 32, 315–338.

Pager D (2003). The mark of a criminal record. American Sociological Review, 103, 937–975.

Parker R, & Aggleton P (2003). HIV and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination: A conceptual framework and implications for action. Social Science & Medicine, 57, 13–24. [PubMed: 12753813]

Pattillo M (2013). Housing: Commodity versus right. Annual Review of Sociology, 39, 509–531.

Rawlings J (2013). Urban apartheid: A report on the status of minority affairs in the greater New Haven area. New Haven, CT: Greater New Haven Branch of the NAACP.

Roman C, & Travis J (2006). Where will I sleep tomorrow? Housing, homelessness, and the returning prisoner. Housing Policy Debate, 17, 389–418.

Solomon AL, Dedel Johnson K, Travis J, & McBride EC (2004). From prison to work: The employment dimensions of prisoner reentry. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Tyler I (2013). Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain. London, UK: Zed Books.

Visher C, & Travis J (2011). Life on the outside: Returning home after incarceration. The Prison Journal, 91, 102–119.

Wacquant L (2008). Urban outcasts. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Wacquant L (2010a). Class, race and hyperincarceration in revanchist American. Daedalus, 139, 74–90.

Wacquant L (2010b). Crafting the neoliberal state: Workfare, prisonfare, and social insecurity. Sociological Forum, 25, 197–220.

Wacquant L (2010c). Prisoner reentry as myth and ceremony. Dialectical Anthropology, 34, 605–620.

Wacquant L, & Slater T (2014). Territorial stigmatization in action. Environment and Planning A, 46, 1270–1280.

Western B (2006). Punishment and inequality in America. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

**Table 1.**

Baseline characteristics of survey and interview samples.

| Characteristic | Interview sample ($N$ = 44) | |
|---|---|---|
| | *n* | (%)[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) |
| GED | 10 | (22.7) |
| Some college | 7 | (15.9) |
| College graduate | 1 | (2.3) |
| Ever employed | 43 (97.8) | |
| Employment since last criminal justice event | | |
| 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) |
| Self-reported housing challenge due to criminal record | | |
| Unable to access subsidized housing | 9 | (20.5) |
| Unable to stay with family/friends in subsidized housing | 10 | (22.3) |

[a]Percentages may not sum up to 100 due to rounding.