Housing as Public Safety

Reliable and equitable access to housing is at the crux of many aspects of a successful, sustainable society. This includes the physical, mental, and psychological well-being of every citizen by way of healthcare services as well as the foundation of infrastructure programs that traditionally comprise roads, schools, and public buildings.

Another conversation surrounding the broader effects of providing attainable housing that deserves more attention is its crucial impact on promoting public safety – when people are offered inclusive housing opportunities, it creates a precursor to more just and effectual policing practices, decreases in violent crimes, and more complete reintegration processes from the criminal legal system focusing on lowering rates of incarceration and recidivism.

There are a multitude of cascading effects housing has on public safety. Research spanning decades affirms the economic returns associated with investing in affordable housing developments and programs with integrated supportive services compared to the astronomical costs of reactive efforts including policing, retributive measures, and incarceration. One such study showed participants in New York City's Frequent Users Service Enhancement supportive housing program reduced annual public costs by nearly $16,000 per person upon leaving the prison system compared to formerly incarcerated people not involved in the program.

Ample proof also exists to demonstrate the negative impacts on public safety of perpetuating the cycle of criminalizing homelessness. When unsheltered populations are arrested or fined for living their life in public, charged for nonviolent, low-level offenses such as loitering, panhandling, and littering, there is a twofold deleterious effect. The safety and well-being of vulnerable, unhoused individuals is worsened by encampment sweeps and arrests, often causing the loss of essential identification documents and medications along with the trauma and stress of being involuntarily relocated, while the feeling of security and trust in law enforcement effectiveness are simultaneously eroded for their housed neighbors.

The role housing plays in public safety is far-reaching and deeply embedded in the social perception of homelessness, or rather, what it means to be housed and to feel safe. Before these issues can be fully explored, however, we must clearly define "public safety" in the context of housing, and the physiological significance this has in the scope of basic human needs.

Pallet.

WHAT IS PUBLIC SAFETY?

Public safety is traditionally defined as the welfare and protection of the general public and is stipulated as the responsibility of the government. In broad terms, this encompasses the provision of law enforcement, emergency services, and justice departments that exist to safeguard people and their property from harm. While much of the burden of responsibility regarding public safety is put on state and local municipalities (varying levels of police departments and court systems), the federal government has a crucial function in the provision of public safety by way of organizations like the Department of Homeland Security, focusing on mitigating terrorism, cybersecurity threats, and disaster preparedness and response (working in tandem with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Coast Guard, and Customs and Border Patrol).

IIn this rudimentary characterization, public safety has little to do with housing or the composition of neighborhoods but rather refers to the duties of governmental agencies that directly protect citizens. Yet, it has been long established that violent crime and other threats to people's well-being or personal property do not exist in a vacuum—there are a multitude of environmental, social, and economic factors that contribute to public safety.

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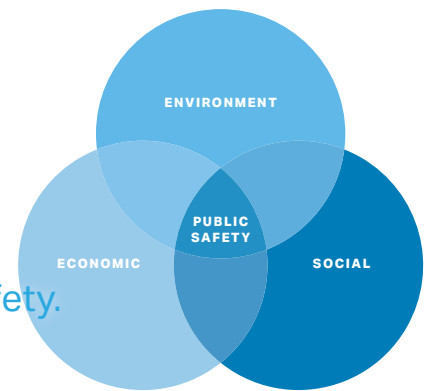
To understand the true implications of the availability and quality of housing and how this aligns with the concept of public safety, it's important to consider what indirect effects are excluded in the definition outlined above. A thorough reexamination of what constitutes public safety would certainly include housing, as the feeling of being safe goes beyond protection from sudden violence and bodily harm: one's feeling of security is also in jeopardy if they experience living unsheltered, food insecurity, lack of education, lack of employment and sustainable income, or health conditions without reliable access to or funds for healthcare services. All these challenges stem from a deficiency of stable, attainable housing, and therefore are indicative of the intrinsic relationship between housing and public safety.

It is fitting to integrate housing into our definition of public safety as it is not only widely considered a basic human right, but also a key element in our basic physiological needs as humans. This is clearly outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which illustrates the prioritization of vital functions in a healthy, fulfilling life.
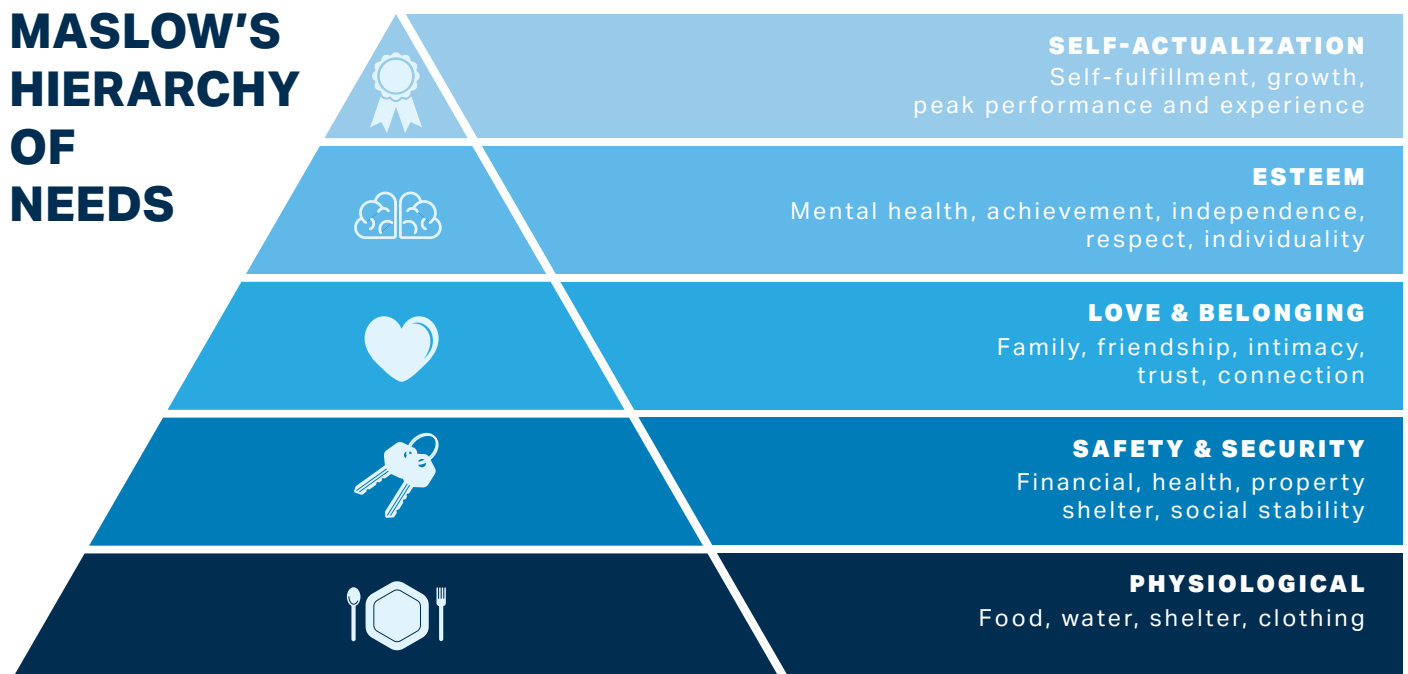
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Shelter's Natural Function as Security

Maslow's Hierarchy is built in a pyramid shape, with the most essential functions of human need on the bottom and each ascending tier built atop the previous step. This visual shows how aspects in the upper levels—concepts like self-esteem, respect, and friendship—depend on the stability of the base, comprising physiological needs of air, water, food, sleep, clothing, reproduction, and shelter. Just above the physiological factors is safety, which is composed of personal security, employment, resources, health, and property.

In the simplest terms, personal safety is contingent on and inextricable from shelter. This inborn human need for a secure dwelling is the building block for other indicators of a successful life, from family and a sense of connection to a feeling of self-actualization. Therefore, a fulfilled and dignified life that includes gainful employment, physical and mental health, connection to a community, fostering meaningful relationships, and a perception of freedom is entirely subject to having a safe place to live.

Some analyses interpreting this hierarchy related to housing even outline a bidirectional pattern, with the idea that the house is the "small chosen world of the person," a place not solely used for resting, but where the habitant can engage with others, exchange ideas, and reflect their own personality. This mode of thinking posits that a stable living environment is the basis for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs, but is also conversely affected by these sections higher up in the pyramid—if these needs are not fulfilled, then the house doesn't adequately and sustainably satisfy the most basic physiological needs of the dweller.

As the need for shelter is inborn and inseparable from our capacity to feel safe, when this stability is threatened, it creates conditions of desperation. It comes as no surprise that when people are unhoused or experience housing instability and extreme poverty, crime rates increase, stemming from this feeling of desperation. Housing and wealth inequality are catalysts to exploitation-driven crime, supporting the notion that when people's basic needs are not met, volatile and potentially violent conditions are created. However, the often-purported causal link between homelessness and crime is a reductionist and damaging one, and an accurate view can only be achieved by examining the root causes of these inequities.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

SELF-ACTUALIZATION
Self-fulfillment, growth, peak performance and experience

ESTEEM
Mental health, achievement, independence, respect, individuality

LOVE & BELONGING
Family, friendship, intimacy, trust, connection

SAFETY & SECURITY
Financial, health, property shelter, social stability

PHYSIOLOGICAL
Food, water, shelter, clothing

◇ Pallet.

CRIME IN THE LENS OF HOUSING INEQUITY

Many conversations concerning the connection between poor-quality housing (or complete lack of shelter) and crime rates puts disadvantaged communities at the center of blame, citing personal choices such as substance use or lack of motivation to seek gainful employment as the source of the problem. But years of research refutes these impressions, revealing historical institutional oppression and racism and a slew of other socioeconomic factors as the basis of crime disparities. In the majority of these cases, a lack of access to quality, stable housing can be traced back as a major contributing factor.

Structural and Economic Disparities in High-Crime Neighborhoods

The structural makeup of neighborhoods plainly influences crime statistics. When an area is disadvantaged and exhibits common traits such as poverty, segregation, lack of job access, foreclosures, vacancies, and poor land use practices and infrastructure support, it leads to higher rates of violent crime.

A history of structural racist practices like redlining shaped the composition of neighborhoods across the U.S. Although these policies—which pushed racial and ethnic minorities to less desirable locations in cities and towns and siloed valuable public resources and infrastructure (hospitals, schools, transportation hubs) to predominantly white neighborhoods—are now illegal, they have lasting and detrimental consequences.

Correlations have been made showing the link between high crime rates and neighborhoods that experience residential segregation and extreme poverty. When people are housing insecure or live in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, there is a high supply and demand of criminal opportunities: people without promising means of financial gain are incentivized to commit crime as means of survival, and the same disadvantaged populations are more likely to be victimized, as they are less liable to report incidents to the police or seek retribution. This, coupled with the concept of urban flight, often causes high-income residents to avoid historically low-income areas and further perpetuates the cycle of poverty along with economic and racial segregation.

It's also been outlined how poor land use practices, foreclosures, and high vacancy rates affect frequency of neighborhood crime. A study found that in Pittsburgh, crime increased 19% within 250 feet of a foreclosed home once it became vacant, and further increased as the property sat unoccupied. A similar survey and resulting book set in Milwaukee followed the trend of violent crime rising concurrently with eviction rates, capturing devastating snapshots of lives being destroyed by the inescapable loop of paying 70-80% of their income on housing that was described as "objectively unfit for human habitation."

Pallet.

A common theme of disadvantaged neighborhoods with disproportionately high criminal activity is a state of destabilization. If evictions, vacancies, and resident turnover are regular trends, it stands to follow that even the people who live in the area become disinvested, creating conditions that make the vicinity an ideal venue for crime. It's been discovered that when the built environment (including zoning, actual land use, and surrounding features like sidewalks and landscaping) is varied and utilizes mixed-use areas, opportunity crimes like burglary are visibly reduced. This combination of residential and commercial building and the varied ways people interact with the two has proven success in deterring crime. By incorporating these ideas into city planning, zoning, and other ordinances, along with creating a diverse landscape of equitable housing opportunities, cities can mitigate crime and create stronger communities in the process.
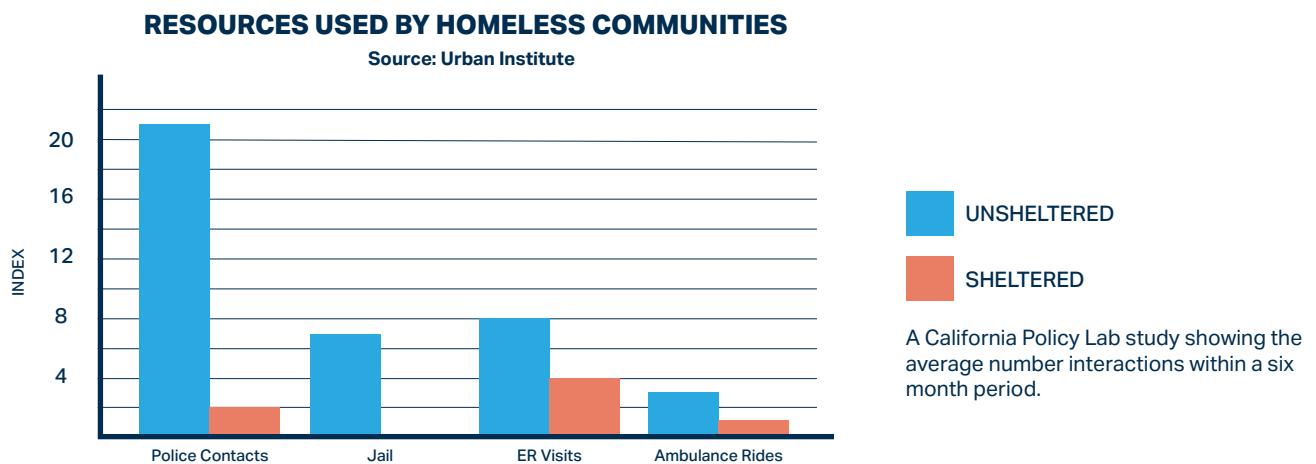
Victimization of Unsheltered Communities

It is often assumed that the link between homelessness and crime exists because those who live unsheltered commit crimes out of desperation. While this is true in some cases, violent crimes specifically are much more likely to be committed against vulnerable populations.

Studies show that unsheltered populations are at a significantly higher risk of being victimized in cases of violent crime: one found that nearly half (49% for men and 48% for women) of unhoused people surveyed said they had experienced violence. The longer these populations remained homeless, the higher the risk of victimization. Women in particular routinely experienced violent crimes like rape and felt the lasting effects of suffering long after the crime was committed.

This is encapsulated in the fact that homeless people are targeted in hate crimes at double the rate of crimes based on religion, race, or disabilities. In data spanning from 1999 to 2017, hate crime deaths among the general public totaled 183, while 483 homeless victims were murdered in attacks by housed people.

Despite all these recorded disparities showing how unhoused individuals are more likely to be victims than suspects in crime, they are arrested at alarming and disproportionately high rates. Although homeless communities represent less than 2% of the population in cities like Portland, Sacramento, and Los Angeles, they accounted for 50%, 42%, and 24% of total arrests from 2017-2020, respectively.

These examples all serve to demonstrate how the provision of supportive services and attainable shelter and housing options for vulnerable communities decrease crime and diminish the regularity of hateful criminal acts against unsheltered individuals.

RESOURCES USED BY HOMELESS COMMUNITIES

Source: Urban Institute

A California Policy Lab study showing the average number interactions within a six month period.

Positive Effects of Housing and Shelter Development

The positive impacts of creating a landscape of equitable and attainable shelter and housing opportunities and improving public safety are well-documented, yet the development of affordable and supportive housing models is consistently stymied by a lack of funding, political will, and social apathy. In addition to general shortages, access to affordable and supportive housing developments are unavailable to people with a history of involvement in the criminal legal system, further perpetuating the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.

Future homelessness rates and other socioeconomic outcomes have been researched in the context of supportive housing programs. One study showed that housing assistance reduced the number of jail days of homeless individuals within an 18-month period by 130% and decreased the probability of committing a crime by 80%. As mentioned earlier, this is further evidence that when people have stable and reliable housing that meets their needs, they are no longer prone to commit crimes of desperation and be incarcerated as a result.
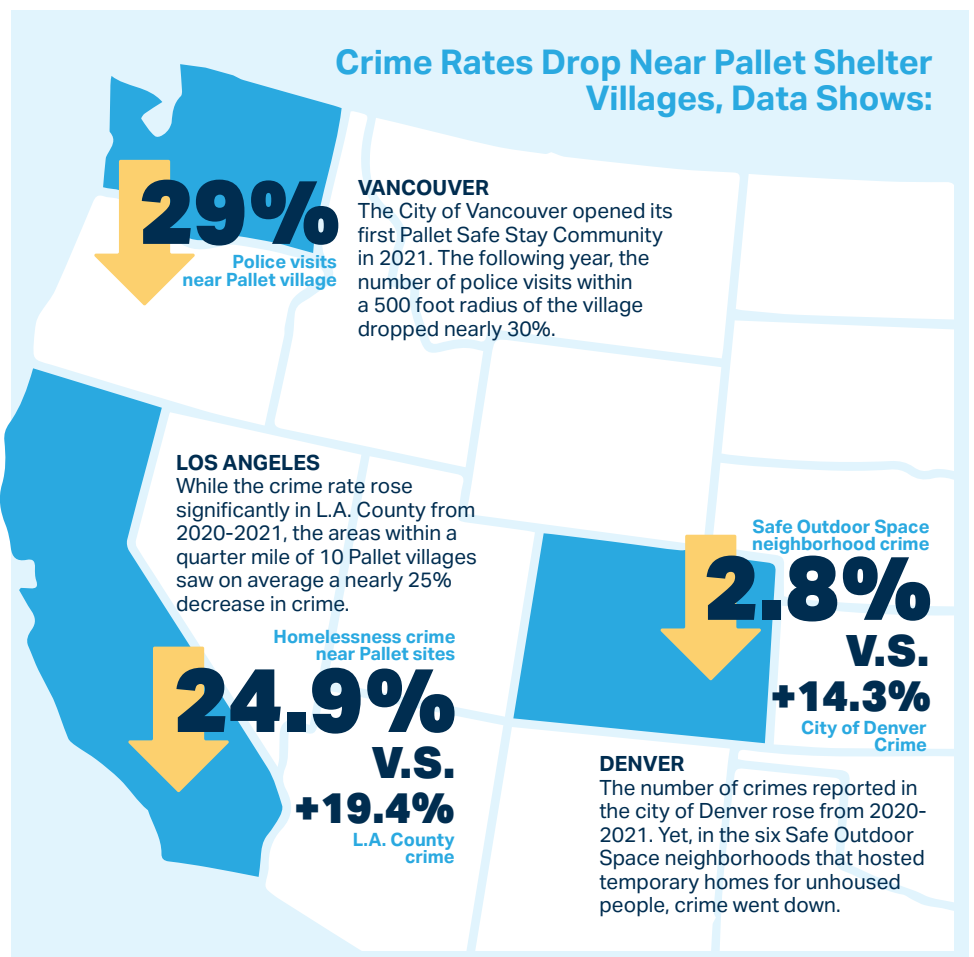
Research conducted in Orange County, CA sought to answer if, like many members of the community worried, home values decreased and crime rates increased after building affordable housing units in several neighborhoods. The findings were the opposite: after developing these properties, rates of aggravated assault and property crimes like robbery and burglary decreased within 1/5 of a mile from a given site.

Similar stories have unfolded in cities like Los Angeles, Denver, and Vancouver, WA in the wake of constructing sanctioned safe outdoor spaces and interim shelter villages for people experiencing homelessness.

In LA from 2020 to present, even as citywide crime committed by unsheltered suspects rose 19.4%, crime in areas within a quarter mile radius of Pallet shelter villages dropped an average of 24.9%. A similar pattern unfolded in Vancouver, WA: within a year of their Safe Stay village opening, they saw a 29% reduction in calls and officer-initiated visits.

After opening Safe Outdoor Space camps, Denver saw a 2.8% decrease in crime surrounding the sites of these neighborhoods in 2020-21, even while rates spanning the city increased 14.3%.

This all points to the proven effectiveness of attainable shelter and housing reducing crime. In the very same way, the provision of housing has significant effects on policing, community engagement, and incarceration rates.

Crime Rates Drop Near Pallet Shelter Villages, Data Shows:

29%
Police visits near Pallet village

VANCOUVER
The City of Vancouver opened its first Pallet Safe Stay Community in 2021. The following year, the number of police visits within a 500 foot radius of the village dropped nearly 30%.

LOS ANGELES
While the crime rate rose significantly in L.A. County from 2020-2021, the areas within a quarter mile of 10 Pallet villages saw on average a nearly 25% decrease in crime.

Homelessness crime near Pallet sites
24.9%
V.S.
+19.4%
L.A. County crime

Safe Outdoor Space neighborhood crime
2.8%
V.S.
+14.3%
City of Denver Crime

DENVER
The number of crimes reported in the city of Denver rose from 2020-2021. Yet, in the six Safe Outdoor Space neighborhoods that hosted temporary homes for unhoused people, crime went down.

HOUSING AS CRIME AND INCARCERATION DIVERSION

Researchers and those involved in continuums of care have long espoused the efficacy of community engagement and service provision as opposed to continual punitive measures and incarceration for individuals experiencing homelessness. Yet, even as police programs develop a broader understanding of successful practices to aid unsheltered community members, there is still ample opportunity to implement more effective practices and discourage mass incarceration and recidivism among homeless individuals.

Effectiveness of Community Engagement: Proactive vs. Reactive Policing

One tactic with proven efficacy is community policing, which relies on establishing and maintaining trust between community members and law enforcement and attempts to minimize arrests and incarcerations. It's been shown that this approach can reduce stigmatization and targeting of already marginalized groups, build stronger bonds with police and other law enforcement officials through transparency and accountability, and improve overall public safety in the process.

Establishing this kind of connection allows law enforcement officers to start meaningful dialogues with social service providers and landlords, which can facilitate lower-income residents and families moving into new supportive housing and subsidized market rate developments. This partnership is crucial to mitigate neighbors' concerns about housing voucher holders creating disorder or threatening public safety, and also demonstrates that police officers can and should be part of the reintegration process of formerly incarcerated people moving into neighborhoods.

Even with the focus community policing places on increased transparency and accountability—which has proven successful in improving public safety and reducing incarceration and arrests—many community members assume police intervention is the most effective and immediate response. Studies illustrate how this is, at best, an oversimplification: when police departments implement sweeps on encampments and other unsanctioned sites where people experiencing homelessness gather and incarcerate unsheltered individuals for low-level crimes, it increases the risk of people spending longer periods of time in pretrial detention, jail, or prison. This is turn has the potential for higher rates of parole and probation violations. In many cases, unhoused people move through the criminal legal system too quickly to receive necessary social or medical services, and therefore the cycle repeats itself. Housing, on the other hand, acts as a preventative solution to this ineffectual loop and eases the burden on public resources.

Overall, law enforcement has great potential to better serve the needs of people experiencing homelessness through engagement and individualized case management. A majority of crimes committed by these vulnerable populations are nonviolent, with charges such as trespassing violations, substance use, or public disturbances. When the suspects are incarcerated, they are often released with a higher risk of future arrest. If police place a more concerted focus on measures such as referrals to supportive services, people have a markedly higher chance of reintegration and breaking the cycle of incarceration.

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Housing Aids Reintegration and Breaks the Cycle of Incarceration

Exiting the prison system is one of the most common precursors to living unsheltered: formerly incarcerated people are nearly 10 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to the general public. The reintegration landscape is fraught with barriers to obtaining housing, including a normalized sense of discrimination against those who have had contact with the criminal legal system. This is especially concerning when one considers how involvement in the criminal legal system is shockingly common: one in every three American adults has a criminal record, and more than 600,000 people per year are released from incarceration to make the difficult transition back into their home communities.

Along with a shortage of 7.3 million affordable rental units, newly released prisoners face challenges like the inability to afford rent or security deposits, stigmatization from landlords, and parole prohibitions on living in specific neighborhoods. Those with drug offenses are often not permitted to live in public housing.

In a survey sent out to Department of Corrections reentry coordinators, 95% of responders listed a lack of affordable housing options as a prevalent barrier for formerly incarcerated people reintegrating into communities. 84% cited discrimination as a significant barrier, and 74% listed restrictive housing provider and landlord policies. Many respondents in the survey also pointed out the general lack of knowledge among corrections staff about navigating available housing options, and the increased challenges of placing people with challenging offense records or people with behavioral health needs.

Secretary Fudge of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued a 2022 memorandum addressing these issues. Elucidating the fact that criminal histories are often used as a qualifier to screen out or evict formerly incarcerated people who exhibit no actual threat to the health and safety of their neighbors, the memo calls for reform. Rethinking these policies on a federal level underlines the importance of recontextualizing housing as a crucial component in improving public safety: for both current residents of neighborhoods and the vulnerable communities at risk of being involved in the prison-homelessness cycle.

Formerly incarcerated people are nearly

10x more likely

to experience homelessness compared to the general public.

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INVESTING IN HOUSING AS PUBLIC SAFETY

Allocating more money to affordable housing, supportive housing programs, and shelter models with integrated medical care is a route to improving public safety across the country and reducing the criminalization of homelessness. Although many programs on federal, state, and local levels are active, dollars spent on housing and community development are still far surpassed by funding for sectors like police departments and corrections.

Costs of Policing and the Prison System vs. Affordable Housing Development

While budgets for housing and community development are increasing to meet the needs of vulnerable and housing insecure populations, they are still eclipsed by the total costs of crime: property destruction and vandalism, violent crimes that lead to hospitalization or emergency care, shuttering of businesses due to rampant theft, and the damage of incarceration on low-income families are only a few examples of indirect costs affected by criminal activity.

HUD's current annual budget is just under $260 billion, with the vast majority of that ($155 billion) allocated to housing programs. This section includes project-based rental assistance, housing for the elderly and persons with disabilities, mutual mortgage insurance programs, and more.

This does represent a concerted effort to fund more affordable housing and assistance programs, but in order to put it in a comparative scope with costs related to public safety, one must consider the far-reaching effects of crime and the true costs of policing and corrections. When accounting for indirect cost burdens such as forgone wages, adverse health effects, and detrimental consequences on the development of children with incarcerated parents, one study estimated the broader societal costs of the criminal legal system to be $1.2 trillion.

To put it into perspective, Massachusetts, the state paying the highest amount on housing and community development, spent approximately $2,144 per year on each low-income resident. If we adjust our view to consider housing as an essential diversion effort and assume that many people experiencing the cycle of incarceration were arrested and jailed for low-level crimes committed out of desperation and a lack of attainable housing, it would be an appropriate comparison to consider the cost of each incarcerated person. With 2.2 million people going through the criminal legal system, that equates to $134,400 per person detained.

It's clear that the costs of operating this system, including policing, corrections, courts, and other reactive measures (not to mention the breadth of damaging indirect effects of crime on eroding public safety within communities) far exceed investments in attainable housing and shelter programs. When people are securely housed, the need to overburden resources like police departments and prisons is significantly reduced.

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CONCLUSION

Housing Creates Resilient and Safe Communities

Research spanning years and focusing on drastically different communities across the country all reveal the same outcome: providing attainable, dignified housing and shelter options for every resident creates stronger and more resilient communities and has an abundance of positive effects on public safety.

By meeting this basic human need and building a landscape of more equitable opportunities, we can forge a well-defined path to decrease crime, diminish the vicious cycle of incarceration and homelessness, design more diverse and inclusive communities, and cut costs on expensive resources associated with the criminal legal system. When we recontextualize housing as indivisible from public safety, we can make progress in ending unsheltered homelessness and craft safer and more resilient communities in the process.

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Pallet.