

Ex-offenders among the homeless Highlights from the 2003 Minnesota survey of homelessness

Each year, Minnesota imprisons a growing number of inmates. According to the Minnesota Department of Corrections, only 10 percent of those in state prisons will remain incarcerated for life. In the seven years from 1998 to 2005, the number of inmates released each year from state prisons increased by 91 percent.

For those who are released, housing stability is one of the keys to avoiding reentry into the criminal justice system. The need for more attention to this issue is shown by the fact that a growing proportion of Minnesota's homeless adults are people who have spent time in correctional institutions.

The statewide survey of homelessness, conducted every three years by Wilder Research, has shown an increasing proportion of homeless adults in Minnesota who have served time in a juvenile or adult detention center, jail, or prison at some point in their lives. The proportion remained fairly steady from 1991 through 1997 (27 to 28%), before rising to 31 percent in 2000 and to 42 percent in 2003.

The October 2003 survey found that 609 adults who were homeless at that time had been released from a correctional facility within the past two years. This represents 13 percent, or one out of eight homeless adults in Minnesota. Just over half of them reported that they had no stable place to live when they left the correctional facility.

The survey also shows that criminal backgrounds are a growing barrier to housing and employment among homeless Minnesotans. In 1997, 15 percent reported that they had ever had difficulty getting or keeping housing because of their criminal background. That proportion now stands at 21 percent.

In order to learn more about homeless people with recent experiences in the criminal justice system, Wilder analyzed the survey information to compare these individuals with other homeless adults.

In brief, the analysis shows that recently released ex-offenders among the homeless are mostly men (75%) and, although they are found in all kinds of shelters, they are more likely than other homeless adults to be in unsheltered locations (24%, compared to 12% of others) and less likely to be in transitional housing (38%, compared to 49%).

Compared to other homeless adults, a higher proportion are outside the seven-county Twin Cities area, and fewer have come to Minnesota from other states. They report more frequent experiences of homelessness, and more exposure to unsafe conditions while homeless.

In some respects, the ex-offenders are similar to other homeless adults. About the same proportions are military veterans. They are just as likely to be employed, and working about the same number of hours per week.

On many measures, however, ex-offenders report somewhat different experiences and needs than other homeless adults. They are more likely to have received special education services as children, and less likely to have completed a high school education. Fewer have ever been married, or have had contact with their family in the last month. Fewer have any children, and far fewer have children with them.

The barriers they mention to housing are mostly similar to those of other homeless adults. For both groups, a lack of affordable housing is the most-frequently mentioned current barrier, and credit problems are also among the top three. For the recent ex-offenders, their criminal background is the second most frequently cited barrier, while for other homeless adults, credit problems come second and the cost of application fees ranks third. Besides the housing difficulties arising from their criminal records, ex-offenders are also more likely than others to cite difficulties from having no local rental history, from use of alcohol or drugs, or from having caused abuse or injury to someone they lived with.

In addition, more ex-offenders than other homeless adults have spent time in a variety of

institutional settings such as foster care, drug or alcohol or mental health treatment facilities, halfway houses, or group homes. More report a diagnosis with an alcohol or drug abuse disorder or have a serious mental illness. They report similar kinds of illnesses and physical health conditions as other homeless adults, but are more likely to have indications of possible brain injury and to report that they are often confused or have problems with memory or decisions.

Considering all kinds of chronic physical, mental, or other health conditions, more ex-offenders than other homeless adults have some kind of serious or chronic disability. They are less likely to have any kind of health care coverage.

Although the same proportions are employed, more are earning less than \$8 per hour, and they report lower median monthly incomes. Those who are unemployed cite barriers to employment that are similar to the barriers among other unemployed homeless adults, except for higher rates of problems with the category “personal reasons,” which includes criminal records, and a lack of employment opportunities.

1. Homeless adults released from correctional facilities within the past two years, compared to other homeless adults in Minnesota

	Homeless recent ex-offenders (N=609)	All other homeless adults (N=4,165)
Men***	75%	49%
Never married***	62%	54%
Has any minor children**	46%	52%
Has any children with them now***	10%	31%
Less than high school education***	29%	24%
In any kind of institution as a child***	53%	31%
Received special education services as a child***	32%	20%
Had contact with family in the past month***	64%	72%
Military veteran	15%	15%
Spent most of time growing up:***		
Twin Cities metro area	29%	29%
Greater Minnesota	20%	15%
Outside of Minnesota	51%	56%
Currently employed	27%	31%
Employed who earn less than \$8/hour**	52%	42%
Median income in October ^(a)	\$239	\$440

1. Homeless adults released from correctional facilities within the past two years, compared to other homeless adults in Minnesota (continued)

	Homeless recent ex-offenders (N=609)	All other homeless adults 0(N=4,165)
Current barriers to employment (self-reported): ^(b)		
Lack of transportation	35%	35%
Physical health problems	32%	28%
Lack of housing	30%	30%
Personal reasons (includes criminal history)	25%	19%
Mental health	25%	21%
Lack of employment opportunities	21%	16%
Current barriers to getting housing (self-report): ^(b)		
No housing you could afford	35%	33%
Criminal background	31%	10%
Credit problems	26%	21%
No local rental history	14%	9%
Cost of application fees	11%	11%
Eviction or bad rental history	9%	11%
Use of alcohol or drugs	7%	5%
Ever lived in:		
Drug/alcohol treatment facility ^{***}	62%	36%
Halfway house ^{***}	51%	24%
Mental health treatment facility ^{***}	26%	20%
Foster home ^{***}	20%	19%
Group home ^{***}	23%	15%
Indian school ^{***}	5%	2%
Any kind of correctional facility	100%	33%
Ever assaulted while homeless ^{***}	24%	14%
Ever homeless before ^{***}	55%	39%
Substance abuse disorder diagnosis ^{***}	43%	22%
Considers self alcoholic/chemically dependent ^{***}	53%	31%
Serious mental illness ^{***}	53%	46%
Onset of symptoms after head injury (possible traumatic brain injury) ^{***}	37%	28%
Chronic physical health condition	57%	57%
Often confused, trouble with memory, problems making decisions (cognitive impairment) ^{***}	37%	29%
Any serious or chronic disability (substance abuse, mental illness, chronic illness, cognitive impairment, or condition that limits work or normal daily activity) ^{***}	83%	75%
Any kind of health coverage ^{**}	65%	71%

Note: *Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups. The more asterisks, the lower likelihood that the difference could be due to chance: *less than one chance in 20 ($p < .05$), **less than one chance in 100 ($p < .01$), ***less than one chance in 1,000 ($p < .001$).

^(a) Difference in mean incomes is statistically significant ($p < .001$)

^(b) Responses to open-ended question where multiple responses were possible; statistical significance can not be tested

In addition to the ways that homeless ex-offenders as a group differ from other homeless adults, there are many significant differences between men and women ex-offenders. The one-quarter of this group who are women are much more likely to have children with them (28% vs. 3% of the men), and to be in transitional housing (52% vs. 34%) or battered

women's shelters (9%) rather than emergency shelters (21% vs. 41%). The proportion in unknown shelter or on the street is about the same, but women are less likely to have spent any nights outdoors in October (31% vs. 48%). The women are more likely to have been physically or sexually abused during childhood (69% vs. 35%) or to have lived in a foster

home (35% vs. 23%). Their reasons for losing their last housing are less likely to include the loss of a job (22% vs. 34%) but more likely to include a drinking or drug problem on the part of some other household member (28% vs. 15%) or abuse they received (32% vs. 10%) or another kind of relationship problem (31% vs. 22%).

The women are more likely to have a serious mental illness (65% vs. 49%) and to report they now need to see a mental health professional (58% vs. 33%). They are more likely to have at least one serious or chronic disability (91% vs. 80%), and more likely to have some kind of health care coverage (83% vs. 58%).

Different pathways into crime require different approaches

A recent review of research points out that homeless people with experience in the criminal justice system may have committed their crimes for different kinds of reasons, which the researchers describe as follows:

- Long-term deviant lifestyles (crime and antisocial behavior as a way of life, including drug abuse)
- Subsistence (committing crimes for material subsistence)
- Adaptation (part of adjusting to life on the street)
- Diminished capacity (inability to tell right from wrong)

As these varied categories suggest, homeless ex-offenders may have committed their crimes before becoming homeless, after they were already homeless, or both. The survey findings presented here give evidence that a mix of all four of these categories is likely to be found among Minnesota's homeless ex-offenders.

The different patterns suggest that any single approach to working with homeless ex-offenders is likely to have limited effectiveness across all the groups. For example, more outreach and help

meeting basic needs can likely help to reduce subsistence and adaptation crimes, but are unlikely to reduce those committed by individuals with long histories of antisocial behavior. Increased treatment for substance abuse and mental health problems may reduce some of the crime arising from deviancy and diminished capacity, but are not likely to sufficiently address the difficulties encountered by people finishing treatment and attempting to reconnect to supportive communities.

Finally, regardless of the motivation or timing of their crimes, or the degree of their rehabilitation, criminals who have completed their sentences and are ready to rejoin civil society often find a variety of legal barriers that make it more difficult for them to do so. These barriers include systematic incentives to employers and landlords to avoid hiring or renting to ex-offenders.

Release planning helps people find stable housing

Recognizing the challenges faced by prisoners who have completed their sentences, state law requires prison staff to work with all state prisoners before release to prepare a housing plan. Due to a variety of limitations, this planning process is not always able to identify and secure stable housing. In addition, this planning requirement does not apply to federal prisons or county jails. According to homeless ex-offenders who had been released within the past year, 58 percent did not have a stable place to live when they left. This includes 23 percent of those who had left a juvenile facility, 41 percent of those who had left a state or federal prison, and 65 percent of those who had left a county jail. Among those who reported that they had received help to find housing, a smaller proportion (42% overall) reported they did not have a stable place to live.

Survey results show that the lack of a stable place to live, at the time of release from jail or prison, is related to a variety of outcomes for ex-offenders.¹ These include a reduced likelihood of receiving

¹ The survey cannot show what causes the correlation. It is likely that some part of the outcomes shown here are due directly to the ex-offender's housing status, while others are due to other factors that make housing difficult to find or keep. These factors include the criminal record itself, or the individual's personal history, which in turn is likely to include factors leading to increased risks not only for criminal offending but also poor housing, employment, and personal outcomes.

homeless shelter services (as opposed to being homeless in an unsheltered location) or other form of housing assistance; of being employed; and if employed, of earning \$8 per hour or more. Those released without stable housing also report higher likelihood of losing housing due to eviction or foreclosure, loss of job, the inability to pay rent, drinking or drug problems, a guest or visitor's behavior, violence in the neighborhood or otherwise

unsafe or substandard housing, or abuse by someone they lived with.

Table 2 shows how many reported having a stable place to live when they were released, with comparisons based on region and kinds of services they received. Table 3 shows how the stability of housing at the time of release relates to a variety of later circumstances.

2. Number and percent of homeless recent adult ex-offenders who had stable housing when they left a correctional facility, by type of facility most recently left

	Juvenile detention (N=27)	County jail (N=349)	State or federal prison (N=109)	Total (N=485)
Among all those released in the past year ^(a)	20 (77%)	118 (35%)	63 (59%)	201 (42%)
Among those who had help to find housing	7 (78%)	25 (44%)	33 (70%) ^(b)	65 (58%) ^(c)
Among those who did not have help to find housing	14 (82%)	92 (32%)	30 (51%) ^(b)	136 (38%) ^(c)
By number of case managers (at time of interview)				^(d)
0	4 (80%)	52 (36%)	32 (60%)	88 (44%)
1	8 (67%)	50 (32%)	21 (60%)	79 (39%)
2	9 (90%)	11 (55%)	7 (64%)	27 (66%)
3 or more	--	3 (30%)	--	3 (23%)
Among those under probation supervision	12 (71%)	61 (37%)	37 (58%)	110 (44%)
Among those not under probation supervision	8 (89%)	57 (33%)	26 (62%)	91 (40%)
Among those who were ever homeless before	8 (80%)	57 (28%) ^(e)	36 (65%)	101 (38%) ^(f)
Among those who were homeless for the first time	13 (81%)	61 (44%) ^(e)	28 (53%)	102 (49%) ^(f)
By region		^(g)		^(h)
Northeast	1 of 1	7 of 11	--	8 of 12
St. Louis Co.	1 of 1	18 of 33	7 of 8	26 of 42
Northwest	2 of 3	4 of 15	1 of 1	7 of 19
Central	0 of 1	15 of 42	7 of 15	22 of 58
West Central	1 of 1	4 of 16	1 of 4	6 of 21
Southwest	--	2 of 3	0 of 1	2 of 4
Southeast	--	1 of 6	0 of 2	1 of 8
Hennepin	10 of 13	37 of 107	30 of 50	77 of 170
Anoka	--	0 of 6	--	0 of 6
Dakota	4 of 4	1 of 1	--	5 of 5
Scott-Carver	--	0 of 4	--	0 of 4
Washington	--	2 of 2	--	2 of 2
Ramsey	2 of 2	26 of 95	17 of 25	45 of 122

Notes: The statistical significance of differences in proportions are shown the following footnotes:

- (a) Overall differences among facility types: less than .001 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (b) Difference for prison releasees: less than .05 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (c) Difference for releasees overall: less than .001 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (d) Differences for releasees overall: less than .01 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (e) Differences for jail releasees: less than .01 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (f) Differences for releasees overall: less than .01 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (g) Regional differences for those released from county jail: less than .01 likelihood of occurring by chance.
- (h) Regional differences for releasees overall: less than .001 likelihood of occurring by chance.

3. Later experiences for homeless adults with and without a stable place to live at the time of release

	Those who had stable housing at time of release (N=203)	Those without stable housing at time of release (N=275)	Total (N=478)
Current type of shelter***			
Emergency shelter	62 (31%)	118 (43%)	180 (38%)
Battered women's shelter	9 (4%)	--	9 (2%)
Transitional housing	93 (46%)	90 (33%)	183 (38%)
Unknown shelter or street	39 (19%)	67 (24%)	106 (22%)
Number of nights slept outside in October**			
Average (mean)	2.8	4.7	3.8
Median (half below, half above this number)	0	1	0
Received any kind of help paying housing costs in October**	45 (23%)	32 (12%)	77 (16%)
Currently on a waiting list for Section 8 housing	53 (26%)	66 (24%)	119 (25%)
Currently employed (including day labor)	68 (34%)	77 (28%)	145 (30%)
Hourly wages (if employed)			
Less than \$6	2 (3%)	8 (11%)	10 (8%)
\$6 to \$7.99	29 (50%)	31 (43%)	60 (45%)
\$8 to \$9.99	19 (33%)	17 (23%)	36 (28%)
\$10 or more	8 (14%)	17 (23%)	25 (19%)
Income in October from all sources**			
Average (mean)	\$480	\$341	\$400
Median (half below, half above this number)	\$284	\$203	\$218
Main barriers to employment (self-reported)^(a)			
Transportation	39 (31%)	74 (40%)	113 (36%)
Housing	30 (23%)	65 (35%)	95 (30%)
Personal reasons (including criminal history)	50 (39%)	38 (21%)	88 (28%)
Mental health	39 (31%)	47 (25%)	86 (27%)
Physical health	28 (22%)	51 (28%)	79 (25%)
Employment opportunities	35 (27%)	31 (17%)	66 (21%)
Job experience or history	29 (23%)	22 (12%)	51 (16%)
Resources needed to work or look for work	10 (8%)	29 (15%)	39 (12%)
Received emergency room care in past 6 months	77 (38%)	98 (36%)	175 (37%)
Number of times in emergency room in past 6 months			
Average (mean)	2.3	2.7	2.5
Median (half below, half above this number)	1.9	2.0	2.0
Sought health care due to violence in past 12 months	31 (15%)	40 (15%)	71 (15%)
Any current barriers to housing^(b) ***	121 (60%)	194 (71%)	315 (66%)
Reasons for leaving last permanent housing, for those homeless less than one year			
Lost job or had hours cut	54 (34%)	78 (32%)	132 (33%)
Problems getting along with others	58 (29%)	63 (23%)	121 (26%)
Couldn't afford rent or house payments	49 (24%)	81 (30%)	130 (27%)
Relationship problem (other than abuse or breakup)	61 (30%)	69 (26%)	130 (28%)
Drinking or drug problem you had	60 (30%)	94 (34%)	154 (32%)
Eviction, foreclosure, lease not renewed**	35 (17%)	79 (29%)	114 (24%)
Breakup with a spouse or partner	56 (28%)	61 (22%)	117 (25%)
Drinking or drug problem, someone else	36 (18%)	45 (17%)	81 (17%)
Abuse by someone you lived with	31 (15%)	39 (14%)	70 (15%)
Substandard or unsafe housing *	16 (8%)	43 (16%)	59 (12%)
Violence in the neighborhood*	18 (9%)	45 (17%)	63 (13%)
Behavior problem of guest or visitor ***	14 (7%)	57 (21%)	71 (15%)

Notes: Likelihood that between-group differences are due to chance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

(a) Main barriers to employment: Open-ended responses, coded; only first three mentions were counted. Statistical significance cannot be tested.

(b) Any current barriers: Survey respondent reported that any of a list of 12 possible barriers to housing was currently preventing them from obtaining stable housing.

4. Characteristics of homeless recent adult ex-offenders (released within the past year)

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Current age	18-25	96	20%
	26-34	116	24%
	35+	273	56%
Gender	Male	356	73%
	Female	131	27%
Surveyed individual has any children with them		41	8%
Region	Northeast	12	2%
	St. Louis Co.	42	9%
	Northwest	20	4%
	Central	60	12%
	West Central	22	5%
	Southwest	4	1%
	Southeast	8	2%
	Hennepin	175	36%
	Anoka	6	1%
	Dakota	8	2%
	Scott-Carver	4	1%
	Washington	2	<1%
	Ramsey	123	25%
	Type of shelter	Emergency shelter ^(a)	182
Battered women's shelter		9	2%
Transitional housing ^(b)		186	38%
Unknown shelter or street		108	22%
How long homeless	Less than 1 month	35	7%
	1 to 11 months	227	48%
	At least 1 year	215	45%
Resident in another facility in past 2 years	Drug/alcohol treatment	153	34%
	Halfway house	121	27%
	Foster home	16	4%
	Group home	29	8%
	Ever homeless before	274	56%
Under probation supervision at time of release	249	52%	
Had a stable place to live at time of release	201	42%	
Received help to find stable housing	113	24%	

Note: Percents are of all surveyed homeless individuals released within the past 12 months from the type of facility shown. Cell totals do not always add up to the full population size shown at the top of the column, because not all respondents answered every question. (a) "Emergency" refers to short-term shelter (up to 30 days) with limited services. (b) "Transitional" refers to time limited housing (30 days to 2 years) with services intended to help residents acquire longer-term stable housing.

Learn more

"Special populations of homeless Americans" in *Practical Lessons: The 1998 national symposium on homelessness research*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available for order at: www.huduser.org/publications/homeless/practical.html

Every door closed: Barriers facing parents with criminal records, by Hirsch et al. (2002), available at www.clasp.org.

About the statewide homelessness study

Every three years since 1991, Wilder Research has conducted a statewide survey of people who are homeless or living in temporary housing programs. On October 23, 2003, more than 700 trained volunteer interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews with about 3,100 people experiencing homelessness. This took place in nearly 250 places throughout Minnesota, including about 220 emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, and battered women's shelters. In addition to the representative sample of sheltered people, a non-representative sample of nearly 800 homeless people not currently in shelters were interviewed in 40 cities and towns by experienced outreach workers. Adults who are staying temporarily with family or friends are not included in the study.

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For more information

For details on study methods and results, see the full report, "Minnesota statewide survey of persons without permanent shelter," found on the Wilder Research web site at www.wilderresearch.org. For more information, contact Ellen Shelton at 651-637-2470.

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