Voices of Returning Citizens: A Qualitative Study of a Supportive Housing Program for Ex-Offenders

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Abstract

*Keywords*: jail re-entry, supportive housing, programs

One of the critical needs of offenders during reentry is the need for permanent and stable housing. Stable housing provides a foundation for other life changes that can impact recidivism and desistance from crime. For rural jail populations, there are unique challenges and obstacles in securing provisional post-release housing. More importantly, the relationship between housing as a triggering event or turning point for subjective, emotional transformations, and ex-offender experiences in a supportive housing program is not well documented. This qualitative study explores the impact of a supportive housing program through in-depth interviews with released ex-offenders. We examine how structural changes trigger or alter life course trajectories and how rural offenders are transformed through social relationship and investment in human capital. The research adds to the emergent literature by providing narrative accounts of the impact of a supportive housing program on rural jail offenders.
Home

In the epilogue to *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond writes that “home is the center of life … the wellspring of personhood … encompassing not just shelter but warmth, safety, family – the womb.” (2016, p. 293). In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy laments; “There is no place like home”, and we are probably familiar with the proverb; “Home is where the heart is”. When it comes to the American experience, home has a practical and symbolic meaning; home is both a shelter and an expression or manifestation of self (Doyle, 1992). Perhaps more importantly, a stable home contributes to psychological and community stability. It is the location where social relationships are formed, “where meals are shared, quiet habits formed, dreams confessed, traditions created” (Desmond, 2016, p. 294).

While most would agree that a home or housing is foundational to our safety and well-being, obtaining stable housing for many ex-offenders is a daunting challenge. Ex-offenders face a combination of individual, social, and economic obstacles or outright barriers to residential or housing stability (Fontaine & Biess, 2013; Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2013). Individual factors impacting housing stability include; poor work histories, low educational achievement, mental and physical illness, and substance abuse (Fontaine, 2013; Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Hammett et al., 2001). Additionally, ex-offenders often have a limited credit or rental history, and limited financial resources which impact housing opportunities and options (Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011). Substantial social barriers also contribute to housing stability and are found in the “not in my backyard” or NIMBY literature (Garland et al., 2014; John Jay College of Criminal Justice & The Fortune Society, Inc., 2011). Despite growing support for
supportive housing\(^1\) programs (see Metraux, Roman, & Cho, 2008), there is an overriding concern by community members for their personal safety (i.e. victimization) and “pure, unrequited fear” about having residents who are ex-offenders living in their community (John Jay College of Criminal Justice & The Fortune Society, Inc., 2011, p. 5). Also, family members who may have provided housing in the past may be unwilling or unable to house ex-offenders and in other cases the home is simply not safe. Living with family members, which is particularly common in rural areas, can also be difficult due to strained relationships, poverty, or criminality in the family of origin (Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Martinez & Christian, 2009). Finally, economic barriers include the impact offenders could potentially have on property values as the most frequently cited concern among community members (Dear, 1992). Other economic obstacles for ex-offenders include a shortage of affordable housing and inadequate financial resources to pay the security deposit and first month’s rent for offenders seeking housing in the private sector (Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Geller & Curtis, 2011).

Despite or perhaps because of these concerns, there is growing public interest in supportive housing for ex-offenders (Metraux, Roman, & Cho, 2008) as well as greater receptiveness among policymakers to support programs that contribute to successful re-entry and reintegration (Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014). Evidence suggests that individuals who are homeless are at increased risk for incarceration, and re-entering from prison or jail leaves individuals particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Conversely, supportive housing reduces recidivism, makes neighborhoods safer, promotes family re-unification, and is more humane and

\(^1\) Fontaine (2013) defines supportive housing as a combination of affordable housing with supportive service to include case management, mental health and substance abuse treatment services, educational services, and vocational training and employment services. In a similar definition, the Justice Policy Institute defines supportive housing as; “housing that provides on-site services to individuals in need of support to improve or maintain their health, independent living skills, income, employment, socialization skills, quality of life, and, most important, maintain their housing” (2007, p. 2).
cost-effective than re-incarceration (Black & Cho, 2004; Rodriguez & Brown, 2003; Seiter & Kadela, 2003). Homelessness and residential instability are considered critical if not one of the greatest challenges confronting ex-offenders and their chance to achieve successful reintegration (Gunnison & Helfgott; 2011; Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014).

**Offenders Experience of Homelessness**

Research indicates that a percentage of offenders experienced a period of homelessness or housing instability prior to their incarceration and are at risk for homelessness during re-entry (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Metraux, Roman, & Cho, 2008; Lutze et al., 2014; Wodhal, 2006). According to Roman and Travis (2006), approximately 10% of offenders experienced homelessness prior to incarceration and approximately the same percentage will experience homelessness on release. In a nationwide survey of state prisoners, researchers found that 11.6% of prison inmates reported being homeless at the time of their arrest (Hughes, Wilson, & Beck 2006, p. 8). In another national study of homeless among jail inmates, researchers concluded that the “rate of homelessness among jail inmates was approximately 7.5 to 11.3 times the annual rate of homelessness in the general population” (Greenburg & Rosenheck, 2008, p. 173). In comparison, the national average for homelessness in a given year is approximately 1% (Urban Institute, 2000).

**Unique Housing Challenges in Rural Communities**

Obtaining permanent or stable housing is a “daunting challenge” (Bradley et al., 2001) for any ex-offender and for ex-offenders re-entering rural communities, the challenge of securing stable housing is unique. Unlike urban populations, rural homelessness is not as recognizable or visible and therefore not given the same attention, resources or funding as the urban homeless (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2012; White, 2015). While patterns of rural
homelessness make it difficult to determine the prevalence of homeless in rural communities, there is reason to believe that economic conditions in rural communities aggravate homelessness (White, 2015; Wodahl, 2006). Patterns of homelessness in rural communities include individuals living in a limited number of shelters, doubling up with family or friends, living in substandard housing, vehicles, outdoor locations, and abandon buildings (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2013, p. 2). The rural homeless are also more “dispersed” creating unique challenges in terms of service access and delivery. According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, barriers inhibiting access and provision of services across rural settings include; limited shelter beds, lack of affordable housing, large service areas, lack of public transportation and outreach, and individual reluctance to seek government assistance (2013, p. 2). Homelessness in rural communities is also linked to economic conditions. Based on data from the American Community Survey, it was determined that the majority (85.3%) of the persistent-poverty counties in the United States are located in non-metro areas. Rural communities face unique challenges in addressing homelessness due to fewer economic opportunities, persistent poverty, and diminishing funding for housing rehabilitation.

**Supportive Housing Challenges in Pennsylvania’s Rural Communities**

In Pennsylvania there is a critical need to examine the availability of housing for ex-offenders re-entering rural communities. According to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 48 out of 67 counties (72%) in Pennsylvania are defined as rural. In terms of re-entry, it is projected that in 2017, approximately 9,188 prison inmates will be released to Pennsylvania’s rural counties while an estimated 56,281 jail inmates will be released to a rural community (see Zajac, Hutchison, & Meyer, 2014). Based on previous research (Fountaine, 2012; Wodahl, 2006), we expect that a percentage of these ex-offenders will experience a period of homelessness or
housing instability on re-entry (also see Zajac, Hutchison, & Meyer, 2014). To complicate matters, researchers examining patterns of homelessness in Pennsylvania’s rural communities observed an overall increase in the percentage of individuals who were considered unsheltered (homeless) and chronically homeless, and an overall decline in the number of beds per homeless individual in rural Pennsylvania (Feldhaus & Sloane, 2015, p.11-13). What’s more, all of the rural counties in Pennsylvania experienced an increase in homelessness beginning in 2008 (2015). As the number of unsheltered and chronically homeless individuals increases in the general population, ex-offenders will find it increasingly difficult to find housing and in many locations they will be competing for limited housing with the general population.

Second, a substantial barrier to implementing, operating, and sustaining a supportive housing program in Pennsylvania’s rural communities is public resistance (Garland, Wodahl, & Saxon, 2014, p. 3; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, & The Fortune Society, Inc., 2011). As mentioned, public resistance to supportive housing programs emanates from a variety of community and citizen concerns including; heightened concern over crime and community problems, and political views about helping offenders (Garland, Wodahl, & Saxon, 2014). According to Zajac, Hutchison, and Meyers, offenders returning to Pennsylvania’s rural communities “often face stigmatization for their status as ex-offenders, and that this influences their ability to secure … housing (land lords refuse to rent to them)” (2014, p.9). As such, ex-offenders re-entering rural communities are more likely to rely on family and friends for housing.

Third, rural communities have adopted perspectives or attitudes about punishment that is anathema to offender rehabilitation. For example, rural communities adhere to expressive goals of punishment which impact spending associated with punishment. According to Garland, the
“expressive mode” of reasoning is “uncompromising” pressing the “imperatives of punishing criminals and protecting the public, ‘whatever the cost’” (Garland, 1990, p. 191). Historically, expressive goals are met through incarceration with little deference to offender rehabilitation or reintegration. Exemplifying the impact of expressive goals in Pennsylvania’s rural communities is evidence that property and drug offenders in rural communities were twice as likely to receive a prison sentence when compared with offenders in urban locations who were more likely to receive probation (The Council of State Governments, 2016, p. 26). Pursing decidedly expressive goals of punishment means that policies and funding for programs related to reintegration like supportive housing might never become part of the response to crime.

**Qualitative Literature on Supportive Housing**

Despite understanding the potential benefits of supportive housing (see Fontaine & Biess, 2012; Lutze, Rosky, & Hamilton, 2014; Metrauz, Caterina, & Cho, 2008) there are relatively few qualitative studies examining ex-offender experiences in a supportive housing program. Two recent qualitative studies (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014; Pleggenkuhle, Huebner, Kras, 2016) include interviews with ex-offenders to examine how they met their material needs after release and to document their experiences in a supportive housing program.

Harding, Wyse, Dobson, and Morenoff examined the difficulties ex-offenders face in attaining “economic security” including housing in a population of prison releases (2014, p. 7). Their sample included 15 male and seven female subjects who were interviewed “immediately after release” and longitudinally (2014, p. 8). Study participants were classified according to different trajectories indicating the level of economic security achieved. Notably, the group of offenders who experienced continual hardship (6 out of 22) “never established a stable independent living situation” and experienced “substantial involvement with the criminal justice
system” (2014, p. 12). According to the researchers, a trajectory of persistent desperation was characterized by “frequent periods of homelessness and housing instability” (2014, p. 24). Comparing ex-offenders who achieved economic stability with those who did not revealed the impact of social support including housing during the early stages of re-entry.

Pleggenkuhle, Huebner, and Kras (2016) examined the different experiences of male parolees who were placed in a supportive housing program with a similar sample of males placed on traditional parole. Several themes distinguished the treatment group from the control group to include the role supportive housing plays in financial independence, housing stability (i.e. fewer residential moves), pro-social support, and optimism in achieving long-term goals or change. While both groups experienced challenges related to finding housing, parolees placed in the supportive housing program felt significant “cognitive shifts” in commitment to agency and change (2016, p. 392). Importantly, parolees participating in a supportive housing program felt that the program helped them become “independent and successful”, removed them from otherwise dangerous environments, and facilitated desistence (2016, p. 392). In comparison, the control group failed to establish independent or stable housing.

Two other qualitative studies that do not specifically focus on supportive housing programs also bear mention. Garland, Wodahl, and Mayfield examined qualitatively the experiences of male parolees releasing to a small metropolitan community (2011, p. 95). Obstacles related to housing were identified by 16% of the parolees during the “first days” following release (2011, p. 99). Importantly, the majority of parolees found “temporary” housing with relatives, family or friends but complained that their independence was restricted. In a 2008 study of the experiences of female offenders releasing in Chicago, doctoral student Andrea Leverentz, interviewed 25 women about their experiences during the first year following release.
For some of the women, successful reintegration involved moving from progressively more independent housing situations. For example, “women frequently transition from the halfway house to a subsidized housing program to their own apartment” (2008, p. 212). According to Leverentz (2008), these women viewed supportive housing as a critical “stepping stone” in their reintegration.

While the extant literature provides insight into the experiences of offenders related to housing stability, the possibility of differences in the experiences of jail inmates re-entering rural communities is absent. More importantly, there is reason to believe that the experiences of jail inmates releasing to rural communities is uniquely different than their urban counterparts. As indicated, jail inmates in rural communities are less likely to receive services prior to release and more likely to experience structural and economic barriers to stable housing, including housing shortages. They are also more likely to experience stigma and a cultural ethos that is resistant to helping ex-offenders. Finally, due to poverty and limited economic opportunity, ex-offenders releasing to rural communities are more likely to depend on family support for housing. These issues suggest the need for further study of supportive housing programs for jail inmates in rural locations.

Current Study

Program Description

This research qualitatively explores the experiences of 17 jail inmates released to a supportive housing program in Union County Pennsylvania. Union County is defined as rural by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania and operates a local jail with a rated capacity of 35. At any one time, the county jail population exceeds 65 inmates creating conditions for overcrowding. One of the factors contributing to overcrowding were individuals who remained in jail for an
extended period of time beyond their minimum date due to the lack of an approved home plan. In response, the Union County Public Housing Authority (PHA) sought a grant through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency for the purpose of implementing a supportive housing program. In 2012, the newly created Justice Bridge Housing Program (JBHP) accepted its first participants.

The JBHP is unique in terms of a supportive housing program for several reasons. First, the program is administered by the Union County Public Housing Authority (PHA) which is considered a “housing expert” in the county. Union County PHA also administers a housing voucher program, has established relationships with landlords, and understands the intricacies of tenant-based rental assistance. Participants are referred to the JBHP by county probation services and probation officers play a key role in supervising and monitoring offender participants. Finally, the JBHP is a supportive housing model and includes support services external to but coordinated through the housing authority.

**Methodology**

Data for this study came from interviews conducted with the first 17 individuals selected for participation in the Justice Bridge Housing Program. Nine men and 8 women were included in the initial participant group. Participants had spent different amounts of time in the program; from a few weeks to almost a year. Each of the interviews took place at the Union County Public Housing Authority Office. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and several Likert-type questions. Study participants were asked about their participation in the Justice Bridge Housing Program and their experiences with the Union County PHA, the impact

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2 Pennsylvania practices indeterminate sentencing. Offenders sentence to 24 months or less (maximum date) will serve their time in a local jail.
3 The Justice Bridge Housing Program was funded by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency for a 24-month period beginning on July 1, 2012. The total funding allocation was $71,896.
4 Pennsylvania PHA’s administer either Section-8 or low-rent housing programs or a combination of both programs.
of supportive housing during re-entry, and their perception of supportive housing programs for ex-offenders.

All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, data was imported into the qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti. Analysis of the data involved two-steps. First, two researchers, working independently, conducted a descriptive level analysis of the data (Friese, 2014). Open coding of the data allowed each researcher to read and apply themes or codes to particular actions, thoughts, perceptions or descriptions. The second step involved a conceptual-level analysis where the codes are examined for relationships and co-occurrence. Specifically, data was examined for patterns in offender statements related to their experiences and perceptions of a supportive housing program, working with the Union County PHA, and the impact a supportive housing program on community supervision. Two researchers were used to enhance the reliability and validity of the coding schemes.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The first set of interview questions were used to collect demographic information on the study participants and their response to questions about the impact homeless and participation in the JBHP have on criminal offending. As previously noted, the study population included 17 participants; 9 males and 8 females. The average age of the males was 28 and the average age of the females was 29. Basic demographic variables are found in table 1. Next, the participants were asked several Likert-type questions about their involvement in the criminal justice system and their perception about the JBHP. The percentage of participants who answered “strongly agree” or “agree” and the questions are found in table 2.

Table 1
Sex and Age of JBHP Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
<th>Average Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Participant Responses to Likert-type Questions

Question: My housing situation, either past or present has had an effect on my involvement in the criminal justice system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: I believe that housing stability plays an important role in successfully completing probation or parole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: I would describe my housing situation as unstable (homeless, staying with friends or family) prior to my involvement in the Justice Bridge Housing Program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: I believe the Justice Bridge Housing Program will help me maintain stable housing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Analysis

The next set of questions was open-ended and focused on different items of interest. All of the participants were asked about their past experiences of housing instability, their experience working with the Union County PHA before and after their release, and about other experiences in the JBHP. Other questions focused on the role of supportive housing in completing community supervision and their feeling of acceptance by the community. Finally, all participants were asked about their involvement in the JBHP and achievement of personal goals.

Histories of housing instability.

One of the requirements for participation in the JBHP was the offender must present evidence of the need for approved housing which is a condition of their community supervision.
There are no shelters in Union County and as such homelessness tended to be characterized by conditions related to housing instability namely; living with family or friends. For example, a majority of the participants reported “bouncing around” with family members or significant others prior to incarceration. None of the participants reported living on the street however one participant said he lived in an ‘abandon van’ parked on his mother’s property. Another theme characterizing housing instability tended to focus on the family of origin as unsuitable, unsafe or enabling. In a direct way, family contributed to housing instability and criminal involvement. As described by one of the female participants in the JBHP, her prior living situation with her parents was “cultivating an unhealthy dependence”. For another participant, the JBHB “got [her]…out of a hostile environment.”

On a conceptual level, participants who reported “bouncing around” were most likely referring to a cyclical pattern that included living with a family member, friend, significant other, court ordered to a residential treatment program or incarcerated. Previous researchers have commented on the existence of an “institutional circuit” in place of stable housing as a mechanism of social control over homeless populations (Metraux & Culhane, 2006, p. 505). Despite the absence of shelters in rural locations, homeless offenders are nevertheless cycling through different residential situations. More importantly, a number of the residential situations aggravated or hasten their involvement in criminal behavior. As a result, one of the participants stated that the JBHP provided an opportunity to “break the cycle”.

**Social capital and desistance from crime.**

In addition to providing housing assistance, the JBHP also integrated support services into its model. The first point of contact with the JBHP was the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Coordinator who oversaw all aspects the JBHP including integration of support services. In the
Replication Toolkit funded by a grant from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, consultants to the JBHP commented that the role of the HCV Coordinator was a “key to success” (Justice Bridge Housing Program, 2016, p. 14). The HCV Coordinator “not only partners with the Housing Authority’s executive director in overall administration of the JBHP, but she also nurtures personal relationship with most everyone involved in the program …[and] participants appreciate her practical helpfulness – especially helping to find apartments which they cannot do while incarcerated” (Justice Bridge Housing Program, 2016, p. 13). One of the JBHP participants described her feelings about the HCV Coordinator as follows:

She had a real heart for people and you know… [She] wanted to see them do well and that people don’t give us a chance and so she really wanted to help and then you go see people succeed and I just I mean she was kind of in tears … she really has a big heart.

Research on social capital and desistance highlight the importance of support from pro-social networks. For many of the JBHP participants, who on average were 10 years into adulthood, the only social networks in which they had membership were criminogenic. Drug dealers, enabling parents, criminogenic peers, and abusive partners previously alienated offenders from nurturing pro-social bonds. Once selected for the JBHP, the HCV Coordinator would became their initial source of entry into a conventional social network; a network that had a specific tangible benefit.

The initial benefit of the JBHP was of course housing. However, JBHP participants soon learned that they could call upon other “networks” to provide direct forms of emotional support, care, and other material necessities (Walker et al., 2014). For example, one JBHP participant explained how he furnished his new apartment.

When I first moved in I had one end table no furniture had an empty house party it was freaking crazy and then my mom’s friends from church came with this like a couch and
fold out bed which was nice that I got that and I had my food stamps right away when I got out they were waiting for me you know so it went to get food and then the people who lived down below me gave me a lot of stuff you know gave me a chair another end table [and] I got a TV.

For another participant, activating social networks was based on his community connections.

I got help with from with my support group, my NA sponsor, my mother, you know … that’s who is going to help me so you know I just had to ask them questions that’s pretty much the biggest thing what I learned is that a closed mouth doesn’t get fed.

According to researchers (Walker et al. 2014), social relationships tend to be enhanced when reinforced by norms of reciprocity and mutual trust. Trusting supportive relationships was a gradual lesson that JBHP participants learned as they progressed in the program. One JBHP participant explains how her perception changed as she began to trust people around her.

It [The Justice Bridge Housing Program] did change my perspective because you know I think that the theory is that [if] people aren’t out to help you then they’re against you and you’re looked at in a bad way and so you know everything has been a whole new experience it’s definitely changed my perspective that there are things out there and people out there and resources to help and you know get your life back on track. You have the support, you know which I had no idea was there.

There is no coincidence that openness and trust was the currency in which participants in the JBHP could accumulate and access social capital and the process of building trust was reciprocal. JBHP participants did not just receive the benefits of participation in a social network, they also contributed.
I have neighbors. I have a little old lady as a neighbor as a matter of fact. You know sometimes she’ll need favors like shovel the sidewalk or something or things like that and I do help her out.

Similarly, JBHP participants had to begin trusting their openness with a community that may not understand their situation, addiction or criminal past. As one participant explained; “I have lots of people that like me and enjoy me and everywhere I go people know who I am and…I do not hide the fact that I am an addict or an alcoholic and in recovery.”

For many participants, the Justice Bridge Housing Program activated social capital networks that provided immediate tangible benefits. Perhaps just as importantly, the indirect effect of social capital was “normalization” of conventional social relationships. Gradually, participants felt less “fearful” and “anxious” and because they had stable housing they could focus on family reunification, rehabilitation, meeting the conditions of parole supervision or simply helping out their neighbors. For many participants, being around pro-social others made all of the difference. As one participant stated: “Being around people who participate in mainstream culture whatever you want to call it just sort of living that normal lifestyle which you know seemed relatively foreign to me originally, seems completely normal now.”

**Identity Transformation**

One of the unique qualities of rural communities is the degree of acquaintance density (Wodhal, 2006). According to Wodhal, rural communities provide less privacy and higher levels of acquaintance density defined as the “average proportion of the people in a community known by the communities inhabitants” (2006. p. 34). In a rural community, the newly released offender might be known by the community due to their past failures and transgressions. In turn, the

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5 According to Schlager (2013), offenders tried to keep their personal identities hidden in order to mitigate stigma associated with having committed a crime or being addicted to drugs.
newly released offender constructs their social identity by reflexively identifying with the social category or classification (i.e. criminal ex-offender) to which he or she believes they belong.\(^6\) Lacking anonymity or privacy, the rural ex-offender is quite literally forced into accepting a social (i.e. group) identity that carries significant social stigma. For participants in the JBHP, housing became a “trigger point” for identity transformation sui generis.

“I always feel eyes are watching me.”

The earliest experiences of the JBHP participants were an expression of fear, apprehension, and uncertainty. Other researchers (Garland et al., 2011) have recognized the interaction of “psychological and social forces” during reintegration defined by a period of “psychosocial adjustment” (2011, p. 97) following release. For the JBHP participants, who moved into their new housing immediately following release, experiences of fear or uncertainty clearly accompanied their initial adjustment period. At first, they struggled with the internalized history of their criminal past.

“The criminal puts the stigma on you.”

“You’re of a lesser status than everyone else because you broke the law.”

Sampson and Laub, argue that desistence from crime often accompanies a “turning point” or “triggering event” (as cited in LeBel et al. 2008, p. 134) and Schlager describes “identity transformation” (2013, p. 269) as a rite of passage to earned redemption. Triggering events or turning points are largely independent from pre-existing factors and accompany commitments to conventional activities such as maintaining a residence. Over time, stigma associated with the offenders criminal past is “deflected through the development of a new, prosocial identity that is ‘fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation’” (2008, p. 137). What the research fails

\(^6\) The literature on desistence and criminogenic needs identifies renewed ties to friends and acquaintances who helped facilitate criminal lifestyles as a principle factor influencing future criminal activity (Morenoff & Harding, 2014).
to address however, is the offender’s liminal experience during the transition that accompanies identity transformation. According to one JBHP participant, their liminal experience was overwhelming.

I try to stay in the day, if I overwhelm myself it’s not okay but I have a tendency to do that with my brain, I just think and think and think and it all just like I am in this hole I can’t get out… But I don’t know like everything is going to be okay…

Activating new social identities is a gradual process involving practicing and reinforcing “conventional scripts” dictating good citizenship (Schlager, 2014, p. 269). As JBHP participants became more familiar with their new group responsibilities and roles, fear and uncertainty was replaced by “comfort”, “a sense of independence”, “a light”, “hope” and a “self-worth”.

Well, it’s a comforting feeling when I go home after work and it’s mine. You know, I mean this is my responsibility and this is my home, you know to keep it clean. It’s a place to come home, when I don’t feel good, whether I’m getting sick, or whether I’m tired, you know I get to go home and I don’t have to worry about, you know, the neighbor coming over and asking if I want to have a drink. I don’t have to worry about my, the other neighbor asking if I want to buy pills.

And;

I’m always constantly trying to feel more secure about my choices and about what I’m doing and I think the justice bridge program like gives me one less thing to worry about so I can focus on more things to better my life on a daily basis. So it just kind of enables me to be you know more sure about myself and like to just keep moving.

Importantly, conventional scripts help ex-offenders reframe their lives so that they see themselves as good people. One JBHP participant compared his new identity to the old one.
They see me going to work. I work at the campus theater so everyone .... like everybody knows you know, they just see everything; he’s got a place now, he’s got his son with him, he’s looking good [and] he’s not nodding out on the floor or on the street.

The personal narratives of the JBHP participants reveal a continuum of adjustment from stigmatized social identities to new and emergent social identities and the roles accompanying conventional group identification. Supportive housing may have been the catalyst, trigging the activation of alternative identities but in time, each of the JBHP participants began to realize agency and self-efficacy in the maintenance of their new social roles. For many of the participants this meant reconciling and repairing relationships with parents, spouses, siblings, and their children.

[The JBHP] definitely does help. The biggest thing that it has done for me is given me peace that I can raise my children in a household not like the one I was raised in.

And;

I had to apologize I had to make amends ... for lying, for drinking and I had to say you know what, and now being honest about everything you know what I mean, no matter what, and I always felt that, that because I cleaned up the outside that no one knew that there was chaos going on, on the inside. So, I figured that this is looking good you don’t know what’s going on underneath it but really there’s just a little girl crying and screaming and getting that out and saying, you know what, I had a crappy day but I didn’t drink, I didn’t do anything bad.

For others it meant redemption from their criminal past.

It’s a bridge to justice, it’s allowed me to be civil, be normal, lead a productive life and not have to resort to criminal behavior to provide for my family.
Hierarchy of needs and realistic goals.

Early on, the JBHP was described as the foundation in which other reentry needs could be addressed. We understand needs, thanks to Maslow, as a process of ordering or as a hierarchy. Maslow’s hypothesis was that one’s basic needs must be met before higher level needs emerge (Henwood et al, 2015). More importantly, once a deficiency need like housing is met, the individual can “move up the hierarchy to pursue goals and meet higher level needs” (2015, p. 221). We also might acknowledge that lacking “shelter” as a basic need will detract from the offender’s interest, commitment, and motivation to pursue other reentry needs (see Walker et al., 2014). That is, homelessness occupies the offender’s time and resources to the extent that no other needs can be met.

Once however, the material need for housing was met, JBHP participants were free to consider how other material needs could be met. For example, one of the challenges associated with rural reentry is the need for transportation. This was clearly on the minds of several JBHP participants.

[The JBHP] translates over into other parts of my life I mean the financial manageability of that apartment then translates over to me being able to have a car, maintain a car, and all these other things. Subsidizing like the rent and whatever really helps and other things too because I’m not devoting 6 or 7 or 8 hundred dollars I make a month’s rent so I can afford to have transportation and things like that.

And;

[The JBHP] kind of takes some weight off my shoulders with you know not having to pay so much in bills where I can save money towards stuff like a car and just basic things I need you know, kind of build myself up and get going.
JBHP participants who had spent more time in the program began ordering their unmet needs to achieve readily attainable and aspirational goals. Consistent with Maslow’s original hypothesis, pursing higher level needs required motivation and self-discovery (Henwood et al, 2015) which aligned closely with their recovery. In fact, many of the JBHP participants were also involved in Union County’s specialty drug court and recovery became a higher need itself. In keeping with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, unless basic safety and security needs are met, the ex-offender “will not have an adequate platform from which to address other challenges” such as recovery (Henwood et al. 2015, p. 221). This seemed clear in the narratives of the JBHP participants.

I think that starts with just taking care of me you know obviously first things first I have to stay sober and put a program of recovery … so like just have my priorities in check … you know do what I have to do to support myself and hopefully you know I can get my career back and get back on the path that I was on.

For another participant, the JBHP allowed her to “overcome” addiction and an abusive relationship.

You know with the housing program you can get your life back on track you can get things squared away, like for example for me. I was a drug addict but then I overcame that and then I was in an abusive relationship so I overcame that … you know it just got better from there … You know things are looking up for me.

It is not necessary that all goals and needs be created anew, instead some needs are the result of past failures or previous progress that was interrupted or punctuated by addiction and homelessness. A strength-based approach to offender re-entry recognizes that while offenders have problems, they also possess strengths that can positively impact their quality of life
Perhaps hidden or unrecognized, participants in the JBHP possessed talents, qualities, and characteristics that could enable them to persevere and move forward. JBHP participants included a former nurse, a musician, a taxidermist, a former correctional officer, and young people who had just started in higher education. With housing as a foundation, JBHP participants began to inventory their strengths and aspire to completing goals they had left behind.

The biggest one [goal] is school because when I got arrested I was going to school to be a nurse and I can’t be a nurse anymore because of my felony but that was my biggest worry and honestly I still haven’t figured out details about how I’m going to go to school, work full time, and take care of the kids you know but the justice bridge program again gives me that like security in that area that I can try to figure all that out.

And for others, pursuing their goals and needs had an aspirational tone.

My entire theory in life has always been … never to be complacent. I believe that you should always continue to pursue better things and what helped me before to stay clean and sober was that sense of accomplishment, moving forward getting bigger, getting better, making more money, a nicer house. It’s not so much the materialistic end but feeling your self-worth and that encourages me; that motivated me.

For most of the JBHP participants, realistic goals complemented conventional roles. They expressed desires to be “financially independent”, “productive”, “responsible”, and to have a “positive influence on the community”. One of the participants realized that his goal should not be like any others.
It’s about being a productive member to society you know what I mean. It’s just actually for once kind of like doing what I should have been doing for a long time so it’s sort of just like a goal is not something that should be like unrealistic.

**Summary and Discussion**

The themes emerging from the experiences of the JBHP participants included a history of housing instability, the emergence of social capital networks, identity transforming experiences, and realistic and conventional goal setting. These themes however, should not be viewed discretely rather they are intimately linked to the gestalt of reintegration or reentry. Each theme is an extension and supplement to another. A second purpose of this study was to hear the voices of the JBHP participants as they experienced a supportive housing program. To that end, the JBHP triggered a change in their life course trajectory by providing a foundation for building prosocial networks and renewed connections to community, family, and neighborhood. Participants also confronted stigmatized social identities and through gradual transformation replaced criminogenic scripts and roles with conventional scripts and roles. In doing so, the participants related feelings of independence, hope, and self-worth. As subjective perspectives changed, participants were able to see how, with the help of others, they could achieve their personal goals. Housing was the triggering event or turning point for change.

In their seminal article on changes that matter to the study of crime, Laub and Sampson (1993) conclude that “turning points” in an offender’s life are linked to behavioral change and are critical to understanding the development of social capital and a change in life trajectories (p. 317). The provision of supportive housing provides one of those turning points; the possibility of stability and a foundation in which social change can take place. As Laub and Sampson state, “the adult life course matters, regardless of how one gets there” (1992, p. 320). Based on the
experiences of the JBHP participants, “the how” is a combination of structural changes and subjective, emotional transformations. Structurally, housing met an immediate and basic need for shelter. For a rural jail population, supportive housing also met an importantly critical need to mitigate the influence or impact of social relationships that influence desistence. Other structural change included normalizing family relationships and maintaining conventional employment. Housing also triggered subjective changes in the individual. Life course changes occurred with a turning point but the quality of change is dependent on the social ties and transitions a crucial life event can trigger. According to Laub and Sampson, turning points can “modify life trajectories – they can ‘redirect paths’” (1993, p. 304). JBHP participants emphasized “breaking the cycle” by reframing past experiences and failures, and trusting in newly emergent bonds to conventional social networks. Initial feelings of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety were replaced with comfort, independence, and self-worth, and self-fulfilling prophecies yielded to a redemption narrative. Rural ex-offenders also realized the additional burden of overcoming community stigmatization in acquaintance dense rural communities. Their transition was largely public and the community made an investment in their potential for changes. When asked about community perception of his participation in the JBHP, one participant emphatically stated: “I've proven that I’ve turned my life around to them.”

Prior research indicates that ex-offenders will have difficulty securing permanent, independent housing (Fontaine, 2013). We also know that in rural locations ex-offenders will rely on family and friends for post-release housing and that housing provided by family or friends may not be ideal or safe. For ex-offenders releasing from local jails, challenges securing stable housing are unique. Limited resources and the lack of community-based systems to facilitate the transitional process can impact community reintegration and housing stability.
Additionally, ex-offenders returning to rural communities are likely to encounter a scarcity of affordable or available housing, and prejudices that may restrict tenancy. The Justice Bridge Housing Program was specifically created to provide short term rental assistance and to enable individuals to “bridge” the transition from incarceration to permanent housing. The program was operated by the public housing authority in a community that was concerned about the reentry needs of its citizens. In the end, the community made an investment in individuals who had an identified need for housing assistance and who could benefit from stable housing in terms of recidivism or desistence from crime. In the end, the community made a decision to address reentry cycling through a coordinated effort to assist offenders with a basic need; a home.