

Welcome Home: How Does Gentrification Intensify Social Reentry Difficulties of Former Inmates

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## Welcome Home: How Does Gentrification Intensify Social Reentry Difficulties of Former Inmates

### **Abstract**

When studying the social reentry of former inmates, studies on incarceration have focused their attention on stigma and its effects on employment and housing opportunities. Whereas, research on gentrification has studied the influence gentrification has on specific urban neighborhoods towards the increasing rates of incarceration. Nevertheless, studies have not taken into consideration how gentrification intensifies the social reentry difficulties of former inmates. This study, based on 25 in-depth interviews with former inmates from Washington, DC, shows how gentrification increases former inmates' difficulties in their social reentry process. Findings demonstrate inmates have experienced stigma when searching for employment, but not during their search for housing. Additionally, interviewees describe the difficulties of affording housing because of its increasing price due to gentrification. Finally, narratives also indicate the importance of studying how gentrification may intensify the social reentry difficulties of former inmates.

### **Introduction**

According to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE, 2015), “more than 600,000 individuals are released from state and federal prisons” -- beginning the journey of social reentry for these former inmates. During their period of social reentry, these former inmates encounter stigma stemming from their time in prison, affecting their chances of obtaining employment and housing. Moreover, as research has found a relation on how gentrification affects the rates of incarceration due to displacement, residential housing policies, and increase policing-- it is important to study how gentrification may intensify the difficulties of social reentry for former inmates. In this study, I draw upon data from qualitative interviews of former inmates conducted in Washington, DC. I then contextualize these interviews to illustrate the social reentry experiences of participants. Their narratives report experiencing stigma is a result of incarceration, and the difficulty in social reentry can be caused by gentrification. I conclude this study with a discussion of narratives, a call for future research, and connecting how gentrification could intensify the social reentry difficulties of former inmates.

## **Literature Review**

### **Incarceration and Gentrification**

According to Van Vliet (1998, p. 189), "gentrification is the process by which central urban neighborhoods that have undergone disinvestment and economic decline experience a reversal, reinvestment, and the migration of a relatively well-off, middle and upper-middle-class population." Currently, the research on gentrification has exhibited the connections between incarceration and gentrification in cities and how it affects residents in neighborhoods (Kellogg, 2015). Kellogg (2015) found gentrification in neighborhoods forces low-income and minority residents to move out. In addition to displacement, police surveillance may increase in an area undergoing the process of gentrification (Kellogg, 2015, p. 196), "entrapping all levels of criminal behavior and criminalizing what is considered poverty." As a result, Kellogg (2015, p. 199) states, "there is a link between residential housing policies that support the process of gentrification, crime, and mass incarceration." Throughout the literature, it is evident gentrification is linked to incarceration due to residential housing policies, scarce resources in impoverished neighborhoods, and policing in certain neighborhoods. However, their experiences returning to a gentrified neighborhood has not been considered.

### **Stigmas stemming from incarceration**

The literature on incarceration has suggested stigma results from the status of being a former inmate; this hinders former inmates' access to housing and employment opportunities (Sampson and Laub, 1993, Raphael 2010, Lebel, 2012 and Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship 2018). In the study by Lebel (2012), he found stigmatization is due to the status of an ex-prisoner than other labels attached to them. Although his research took into consideration a variety of former inmates: male and female prisoners, prisoners with disabilities, prisoners with illness or diseases,

prisoners with drug abuse issues, prisoners of different racial/ethnicity, and prisoners with different sexual orientations-- their history of incarceration is what influences their negative experience. As a result, former inmates who did experience stigma suffered low self-esteem (Lebel, 2012).

Obtaining housing is often one of many goals for former inmates to achieve during their reentry. However, the stigma attached to their history of incarceration restricts their access to housing; therefore, relying on family members, friends, or halfway houses provided by the jail or prison facilities (Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship, 2018). Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship (2018) found former inmates who were able to find temporary housing in halfway houses struggled to distance themselves from the stigma of incarceration. Furthermore, Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship (2018, p. 810) found, "participants viewed stigma associated with incarceration, criminal justice... as barriers to housing access, particularly in a context where they were competing with others for scarce affordable or subsidized units." As a result, their search for housing is stressful due to economic constraints and stigma attached from incarceration (Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship, 2018).

When reentering a community, a concern for former inmates is finding employment. Due to their history of incarceration, certain occupation opportunities and prospects for future employment are affected (Sampson and Laub, 1993, and Raphael, 2010). In Raphael's study (2010 p. 209), he found, "if an employer did have access to criminal records, the employer may simply screen out applicants based on their actual arrest and conviction. However, if employers do not have access, they may use different factors: age, race, or level of educational attainment, to attempt to screen out those with criminal histories." Overall, the literature on stigma and incarceration have found stigma affects employment and housing opportunities for former

inmates-- affecting their social reentry into a community. However, when former inmates return to their community during the process of gentrification, little to no data has been available regarding the difficulties gentrification has on their experiences of social reentry.

The literature on incarceration has focused their study on stigma affecting the reentry experiences of former inmates, whereas gentrification can influence the increasing rates of incarceration (Sampson and Laub, 1993, Raphael, 2010, Lebel, 2012 Kellogg, 2015, and Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship 2018). However, studies have not explicitly researched the difficulties gentrification creates in the reintegration of former inmates. One reason for the limited findings of gentrification intensifying the social reentry difficulties of former inmates could be due to researchers focusing their studies in finding the connections between gentrification and the increasing rate of incarceration. Additionally, limited findings between gentrification and the social reentry of former inmates could be due to researchers not probing different questions describing their reentry experiences. Moreover, the time and area of studies may have an influence on questions they ask participants during their interviews. Therefore, this study will answer the following research question; how does gentrification intensify the social reentry difficulties of former inmates? Preliminary results show gentrification may raise the difficulties for former inmates during their period of social reentry, in addition to their experience of the stigma attached from their incarceration.

## **Methods**

This study is based on 25 in-depth interviews of former inmates who were incarcerated between 1985 to 2000 from Washington DC to analyze the role gentrification has on their reentry back into their community. Interviews were conducted either in-person (before the COVID-19 pandemic) or over the phone (during the COVID-19 pandemic) using an interview guide, lasting

for 20 minutes to 2 hours and 30 minutes. Additionally, with the authorization of the interviewees, interviews were recorded and transcribed. Later using Dedoose, interviews were coded. The age range of the former inmates in my sample was 41 to 79 years old. At the time, 16% of them owned property, 72% were employed, and 96% lived in some form of housing.

To connect the narratives of former inmates to the dynamic of gentrification and stigma of incarceration, I conceptualize gentrification and incarceration, develop qualitative codes, and use these codes to analyze the interviews of former inmates. I conceptualize gentrification as change or development within a low-income neighborhood to which the price of housing and marketing is then increased. Moreover, I conceptualize incarceration as confinement or imprisonment for any period-- not limited to one-time offenses. As a result, I developed codes to identify the social reentry of former inmates: post-release challenges and obstacles, stigma/discrimination, post-release employment, neighborhood change, and gentrification. Post-release challenges and obstacles describe the reentry experiences of former inmates. Stigma/discrimination illustrates views people have on former inmates returning to their community. Post-release employment expresses the difficulty of obtaining jobs and how former inmates were able to obtain it. Neighborhood change and gentrification interpret how the cost of housing can hinder former inmates post-release plans and goals. I believe these codes are essential to finding connections between gentrification and social reentry of former inmates as these codes relate to the themes I found in each article-- gentrification and incarceration and stigmas stemming from incarceration.

## **FINDINGS**

The literature on gentrification has focused on how neighborhood change and development have increased the rates of incarceration in certain urban neighborhoods (Kellogg 2015). Additionally,

the literature on incarceration has focused on the stigmas former inmates have experienced stigma because of their status (Sampson and Laub 1993, Raphael 2010, Lebel, 2012, and Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship 2018). However, research expressing gentrification affecting the social reentry experiences of former inmates has not been studied extensively. In this section, I will summarize the main difficulties former inmates face in their reintegration process and the role of gentrification.

## **1. PERCEPTION OF STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN SOCIAL REENTRY**

Research on incarceration has traditionally focused on the negative aspect of it-- for example, stigmas attach from incarceration affecting their self-worth (Lebel, 2012). However, narratives describe their perceptions of stigma and if they have or have not experienced it due to their status as former inmates. This section highlights the stigma and discrimination encountered during social reentry of former inmates and why former inmates may choose to stay quiet about their history of incarceration or why they may embrace it.

### ***1.1 Society and stigma***

For formerly incarcerated, how society perceives them harms their reintegration' chances since these perceptions affect how they view themselves. Miguel (45 years old, imprisoned for 34 years) describes how he thinks people perceive former inmates like himself: *"I think people are being viewed, that's been released, we're just undesirables. We're the monsters, we're the worst of the worst or we don't really deserve to be respected, understood, forgiven, or even actually given the opportunity to be heard... And, a lot of times people view that, people that have been incarcerated don't deserve the right to even have equal standing."* Miguel describes the stigma and discrimination society enforces on individuals who return to society-- stating they do not deserve to have equal standing as citizens who have not been incarcerated.

### ***1.2 New relations and stigma***

Stigma and its multiple adverse effects go beyond self-perception, it also affects former incarcerated individuals' possibilities of forming a romantic relationship or a new family after incarceration. In my study, 9 out of 25 former inmates are currently in a relationship, while 8 out of 25 are single, and 8 out of 25 did not provide enough information to answer. In the case of Neeve (52 years old, charged for murder, robbery, and kidnapping, who spent 20 years in jail, currently single), he avoids telling women he has been in jail: *"Yes [stigma attached to incarceration], females because a female asked me, she said that she liked me but she said I want to ask you a question "have you ever [been in jail]? I said no. I try not to tell women because I do not want to run them away from me"*. Neeve's narrative of not telling women he has been incarcerated illustrates why interviewees may avoid speaking about their past incarcerations, because of the fear of people's reactions. Having a stigma attached to incarceration results in the consequence of not being able to form new romantic relationships or form a new family.

### ***1.3 Embracing stigma/resilience***

Stigmas attached to former inmates are often used to discredit the second chances given and take away opportunities from them. However, in cases like Drew (42 years old, arrested for distribution of Cocaine, attempt to distribute, disorderly conduct, misdemeanor, and several more, who spent 12 years in prison altogether). Drew describes his embracement of stigma: *"Yes, I do [know there's a stigma], because um, here in Washington DC, we have a movement called "the Returning Citizens". I'm a returning citizen, a proud returning citizen. Who has, had, um, a lot of success in the city jail."* Drew embraces the stigma depicted by society, turning the stigma into an empowering movement for him and other former inmates who embrace the name. As



testimonies show stigma and discrimination are still relevant against former inmates during their period of social reentry, they may also embrace the stigma attached to them.

## **2. GENTRIFICATION AND ACCESS TO HOUSING**

Research on incarceration has traditionally focused on stigma relating to the process of obtaining housing because the search for housing is important to make a life after being incarcerated (Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship 2018). Yet, research on gentrification has only focused on the influence gentrification has towards incarceration rates due to residential housing policies, insufficient resources in impoverished neighborhoods, and increased policing in certain neighborhoods (Kellogg 2015). However, interviewees did not describe stigma relating to housing; since 24 out of 25 former inmates in our sample have a place to live. Currently, 8 out of 25 interviewees are living with family, 4 out of 25 are living with a significant other, 3 out of 25 owns their home, 1 out of 25 are living in a halfway house, 1 out of 25 are living in a single-adult housing unit, 1 out of 25 are homeless, and 7 out of 25 did not provide enough information on who they live with. However, testimonies illustrated they plan on owning a home in the future. Therefore, this section will highlight former inmates' narratives on difficulties obtaining housing in gentrified neighborhoods and hopes for ownership.

### ***2.1 Gentrification and Housing Discouragement***

The increasing price of housing can discourage former inmates from renting a home. For the case of Antonio (48 years old, arrested for assault and conspiracy, who spent 6 years in prison, currently living with his significant other), he describes his thoughts of wanting to rent a home: *"For a two-bedroom, most people pay like fifteen hundred. I used to wanna rent a house, but they had the house on Deccada Street, two blocks down by Scubernaut... Man, the house was twenty-nine hundred... for a three-bedroom house."* Antonio's narrative of wanting to rent a

home but choosing not to because of the cost per month illustrates discouragement for former inmates in wanting to rent a home upon release.

## ***2.2 Gentrification, Ownership Hopes, and Price Affordability***

Due to gentrification in certain urban neighborhoods, the price of housing is often unaffordable for former inmates. In the case of Darryl (49 years old, arrested for possession and distribution of drugs, who spent 3.5 years in jail, currently living with family), he discusses his dream of wanting to own a home although gentrification has affected the price of affordable housing in Washington DC: *"That's one of the last frontiers of me saying I truly overcame my situation because if I can actually own a home, that's major...my neighborhood, it was a house that sold for 700k just across the street. I know just 18 years ago houses in that neighborhood were selling for like maybe 189 thousand. This is like 2000, so we're talking 18 years from now, so those houses have tripled in price. Just a couple of years ago there was a house that was for sale right across the street from the 14th Garage for 350. Now that house is worth a million. I'm being priced out of Northwest. This is one of the reasons why I'm upset with Metro because they keep placing me in a situation where I can't stay at work even to obtain a mortgage."* Darryl illustrates the development of Metro has caused the prices of home to increase over time, not allowing him to afford a house in his neighborhood. However, he believes achieving the hope of owning a house will help overcome his situations of being a former inmate.

## ***2.3 Gentrification and Income Insecurity***

Due to the increasing prices stemming from gentrification, many former inmates may experience income insecurity during social reentry. For the case of Edward (43 years old, charged for murder, who spent 17 years in prison, residing in Washington DC), he describes his feelings towards gentrification affecting his certainty to afford housing: *"The cost of living in DC was*

*almost forcing you to resort to crime if you didn't have education or work experience. So I didn't like that.*" Edward's feelings towards gentrification express his feelings of former inmates possibly resorting to crime to afford a cost of living in DC. Fortunately, Edward did not resort to crime to afford housing, as he currently resides in Washington DC. Through the narratives of former inmates, gentrification indeed affects the plans of former inmates during the initial social reentry, however, it does not discourage them in hoping to obtain housing soon.

### **3. SOCIAL REENTRY AND EMPLOYMENT**

Narratives in the interviews conducted illustrate how stigma is persistent in the process of searching for employment (Sampson and Laub, 1993, and Raphael 2010). However, our narratives show how most of the interviewees were able to secure a job after their release, as 18 out of the 25 interviews are currently working (at the time of their interview). This section will highlight the post-release obstacles/challenges former inmates encounter when searching for employment.

#### ***3.1 Employment and Networks***

For formerly incarcerated, networks made during the social reentry period of former inmates may increase the chances of obtaining employment. For the case of Burt (50 years old, arrested for Grand Theft and Distribution of Cocaine, who spent 2.5 years in prison, currently employed), he describes how he obtained employment: *"Word of mouth, somebody you run into somebody and it's like, well, what are you doing now? Oh, I work at such and such. So they turn you on to whoever's doing the hiring or they put you in with... the plug you into whoever, the manager, or whatever. So it was basically either word of mouth or me just putting my application in, pounding the pavement."* Burt's description of using his networks to search and obtain employment illustrates the route other former inmates may take to find employment.

### 3.2 *Employment Search and Stability*

In some cases, the challenges for former inmates searching for employment may be accomplished, however, the stability of employment is a challenge often experienced. In the case of Lewis, (43 years old, arrested for "violent crimes", incarcerated for 18 years, currently employed), he speaks of his experience of securing employment after his search but being laid off a few months afterward: *"It was so hard to get a job when I first came home. I tried everything. I filled out so many applications, went to so many interviews and it was just impossible to get a job. I went through Project Empowerment for ex-offenders. They gave me a job, but it was temporary, like four or five months. That was not anything."* Lewis's difficulties in searching for employment and then keeping stable employment expresses the difficulties former inmates may experience during their period of social reentry.

### 3.3 *Employment and background*

The stigma attached to incarceration leads many formerly incarcerated people to avoid sharing their stories due to the decreased chances of obtaining employment. For interviewees like Mario (56 years old, incarcerated for 20 years, currently employed), he says: *"It's a stigma when it comes to job purposes because your background helps you get the job. I do not think it is fair because I'm not the same person I was back then that I am today, but everything happens for a reason."* For cases like Mario, stigma is present when in the process of obtaining employment. Due to background checks being issued by employers, the history of incarceration can hinder the opportunity for former inmates to be hired. Through the testimonies of former inmates, challenges are still experienced when trying to obtain employment during their social reentry.

## **DISCUSSION**

Narratives from interviewees suggest gentrification increases the price of housing, postponing the plans of former inmates when reentering a community. Additionally, obstacles such as obtaining employment, keeping stable employment, in addition to experiencing stigma in the employment process are still prevalent during their period of social reentry. Due to these findings, gentrification intensifies the difficulties of social reentry for former inmates who are trying to obtain housing. Whereas obstacles towards obtaining employment and stigma experienced by former inmates are not related to gentrification, it could be due to their history of incarceration. Therefore, my findings do support my hypothesis due to gentrification affecting the price of housing-- making it difficult for former inmates to obtain a house in certain neighborhoods. Additionally, my findings somewhat support previous research studying the reentry experiences of former inmates due to stigma from incarceration being prevalent; however, stigma may not affect their employment (18 of 25 interviewees are currently working) and housing (24 out of 25 interviewees are currently provided housing) opportunities. Interviewees who are currently employed found jobs through networking and programs like the Georgetown Pivot Program and Returning Citizens in Washington DC. Furthermore, interviewees who were able to find housing are living with their family, significant others, half-way homes, alone, or own their home.

To combat the increasing costs of housing found in my results, programs should be provided for former inmates to match or at least provide a percentage of income into finding a home when prisoners are ready for ownership or rent. Next, to decrease the difficulties of obtaining employment, laws should be passed to incentivize employers into hiring former inmates. Additionally, one on one conversations between former inmates and citizens should be held to alleviate the perceptions of stigma. Although my findings support my hypothesis of

gentrification intensifying social reentry difficulties of former inmates, limitations are present in my study. The sample of my study consists of 25 former inmates from Washington DC, making it difficult to validate and generalize my results. To further develop my research question, research should use a sample size larger than mine and study different areas of gentrified cities/neighborhoods than Washington DC. Lastly, future research should study the culture shock of former inmates when reintegrating into gentrified areas.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research paper, I have tried to illustrate the connections between gentrification and incarceration and how it affects the social reentry of former inmates in Washington DC. I focused on three main themes found from available transcriptions: perception of stigma and discrimination in social reentry, gentrification, and access to housing, and finally social reentry and employment. Although previous literature has found a link between the increasing rates of incarceration due to gentrification and literature on incarceration has found the experiences of stigma affecting housing and employment opportunities-- the narratives in my study illustrate gentrification having a more prominent role than incarceration in the possibilities of acquiring a home due to high costs. In contrast, the stigma associated with being a former inmate does not play such a dominant role when former inmates search for employment and housing opportunities during their social reentry. Therefore, the results from my study somewhat support my hypothesis of gentrification intensifying the social reentry difficulties of former inmates due to the increasing price of housing (4 out of 25 interviewees owning property), but not employment (18 out of 25 interviewees currently working) and housing (24 out of 25 interviewees do have a home) opportunities. Although it is not stated in my findings, interviewees who were able to obtain employment, found employment through organizations and

programs like the pivot program at Georgetown University and Returning Citizens at Washington DC, in addition to their networks. Additionally, interviewees who were able to obtain housing are currently living alone, with family members, or with their partner and children, or in halfway houses. For future research, scholars should further develop the relationship between gentrification and its effects on the social reentry difficulties of former inmates. Overall, this research paper studied how gentrification affects the social reentry of former inmates, finding former inmates are unable to afford housing due to gentrification; however, findings from past research on the difficulties in obtaining employment and experiencing stigma is still prevalent.

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