

Homelessness Among the Incarcerated Population in Charlotte-Mecklenburg

Integrated Data Report

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Acknowledgements

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Background

This Integrated Data Report is produced by the Charlotte Urban Institute with funding from Mecklenburg County Community Support Services. This report supports Charlotte-Mecklenburg's [A Home for All Strategic Framework](#) through its cross-sector and intentional use of data to reveal populations in most need of support with housing.

What is the purpose of the study?

Nationally, people who are formerly incarcerated are more likely to experience homelessness than the general public.¹ However, little is known about the intersection between homelessness and incarceration in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The purpose of this study was to examine the rate and characteristics of people who experience homelessness before and after incarceration.

This report focuses on the study outcomes. To learn more about how this research was conducted, see the Methodology Brief.

Who was in the study?

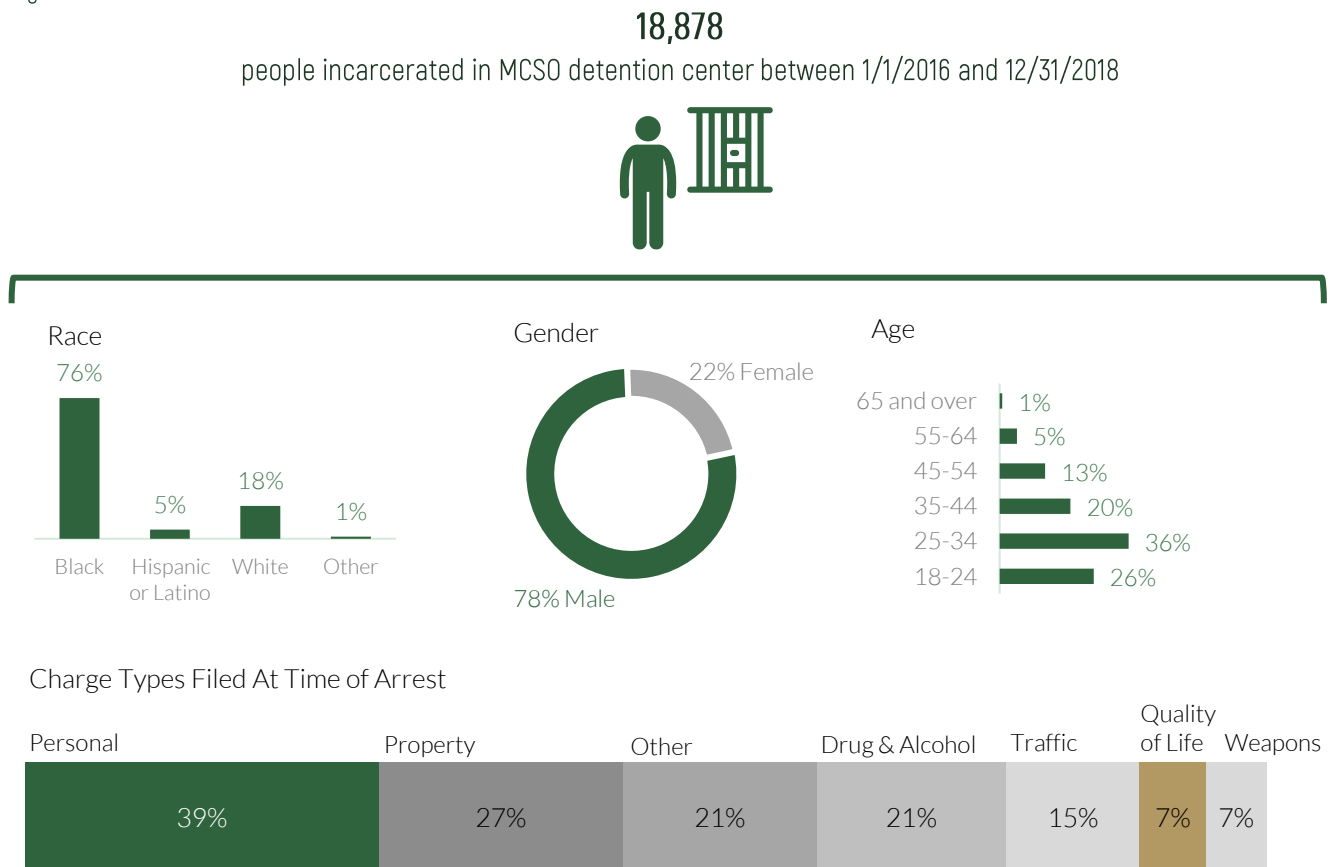
This study examined a population of 18,878 people 18 years or older who were incarcerated between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2018. In this study, incarceration means arrested and booked in a Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Office (MCSO) detention center. The study was limited to the people who lived in Charlotte at the time of their arrest and did not include people who were transferred to other state or federal detention facilities. In cases where a person was incarcerated more than once, the first incidence was included in the analysis.

In general, those incarcerated were Black (76%), male (78%), and under 34 (62%). The largest share of people (39%) were charged with a personal offense, such as assault, and 27% were charged with a property crime. Seven percent were charged with quality-of-life offenses, which are offenses such as public intoxication, loitering in public, urinating in public, and other crimes that are more likely to affect people who lack private shelter.² Twenty-nine percent of people were charged with two or more offenses at the time of arrest.

Most people in the study population were incarcerated only briefly; 83% of the study population spent less than one week in a MCSO detention center before being released.

Description of the study population

Figure 1



What did this study find?

In order to understand how many people in the study population experienced homelessness before or after incarceration, individual records from the MCSO study population were integrated with the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). A record was successfully matched if an HMIS record was found in the two years prior to or after release from MCSO, and if the HMIS record indicated that emergency shelter, transitional housing, or street outreach service was used. For more details on how the research was conducted, see the Methodology Brief.

Nearly 7% of persons in this study experienced homelessness before or after incarceration.

The study found that 925 people (or 4.9% of the incarcerated study population) experienced homelessness in the two years before their incarceration, and 769 (or 4.1%) experienced homelessness in the two years after their release. A total of 6.9% of the population experienced homelessness before or after incarceration.

Because of differences in research methods across studies and time periods, it is challenging to compare these rates to national or other locally-focused studies. However, this study's findings support conclusions by other researchers: experiences of incarceration and homelessness are intertwined.³ Even after one incidence of incarceration, people are more likely than the general public to experience homelessness.⁴

People who have interacted with the criminal justice system often face barriers to reentry related to their criminal record. For example, people charged with drug offenses can be restricted from accessing certain federally-subsidized housing and public assistance programs, and people with felony convictions may face barriers to employment in certain professions.⁵ Post-release restrictions on people with criminal records can contribute to financial and housing instability, which in turn, can perpetuate the cycle of incarceration and homelessness.⁶ This cycle may occur because lack of resources and housing stability creates conditions in which crimes are more likely to occur, or because individuals who lack shelter are more likely to be arrested for quality of life crimes – such as public intoxication or sleeping outdoors – that would not occur if the individual were housed.⁷

Homelessness before and after incarceration

Figure 2



People with a prior history of homelessness were at highest risk of experiencing homelessness after incarceration.

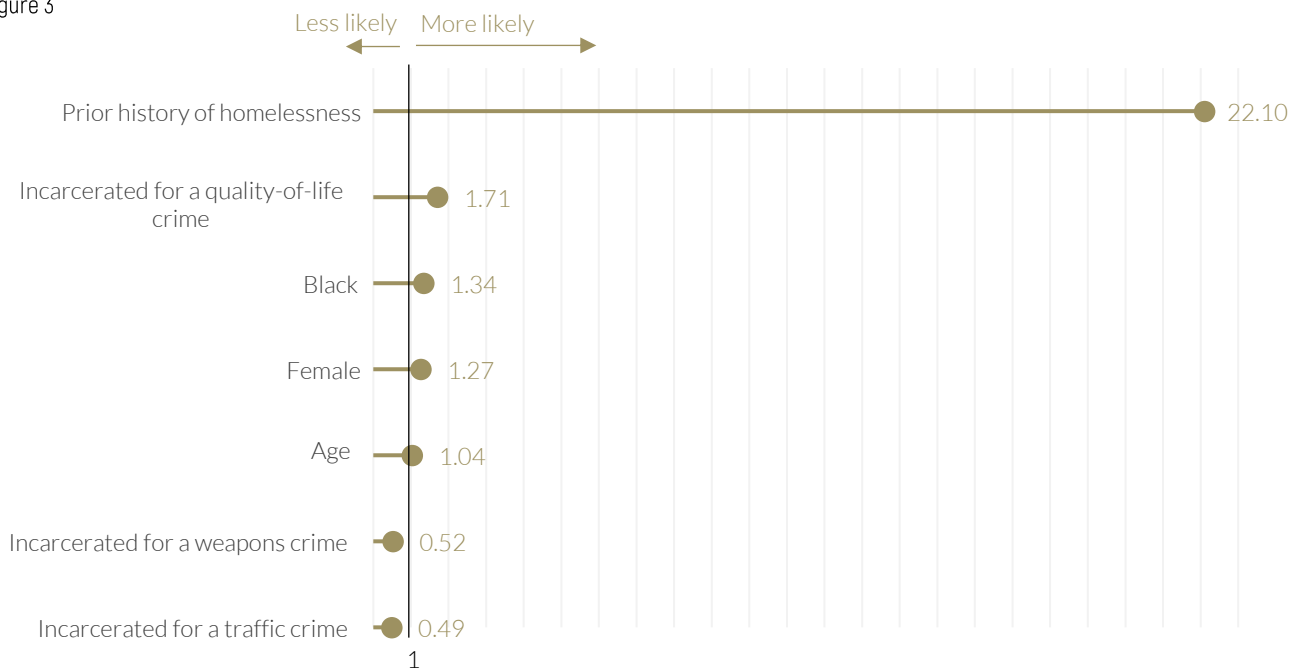
Nearly half (42% or 386 people) who experienced homelessness in the two years before their incarceration had another homeless episode in the two years after their release. The analysis found that in this sample, people with a prior history of homelessness were 22 times more likely to experience homelessness after incarceration than those without, even after controlling for factors such as race, gender, age, and charge type (Figure 3).

Race, gender, age, and charge type also predicted the likelihood of homelessness after incarceration, even when controlling for other factors, such as prior homelessness. Black people were 1.34 times more likely to experience homelessness after incarceration than White people, and females were 1.27 more likely to experience homelessness than males. Each additional year of age was associated with a 1.04 increase in the likelihood of experiencing homelessness.

People who were charged with quality-of-life offenses were 1.71 times more likely to experience homelessness after incarceration than those arrested for other reasons, while people charged with a traffic crime or weapons crime were about half as likely to experience homelessness than those arrested for other reasons.

People with a prior history of homelessness were 22 times more likely to experience homelessness after incarceration than those without, even after controlling for factors such as race, gender, age, and charge type.

Figure 3

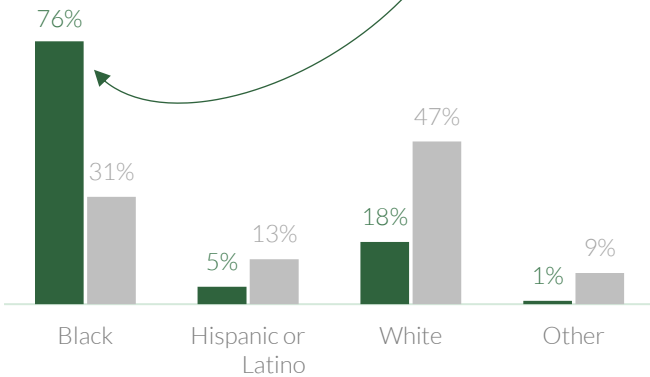


Note: Figure 3 shows the odds ratios of a logistic regression. Factors shown in Figure 3 are key, significant predictors ($p < 0.05$) of homelessness after incarceration. Predictors with values further away from 1 indicate a stronger relationship, while values close to 1 indicate a weaker relationship. Values greater than 1 indicate that the predictor is at greater odds of experiencing homelessness after incarceration, while values less than 1 indicate the predictor has lower odds.

Black individuals are overrepresented in Charlotte-Mecklenburg detention centers and homeless services.

Black individuals make up only 31% of the Mecklenburg County population but 76% of the incarcerated population.

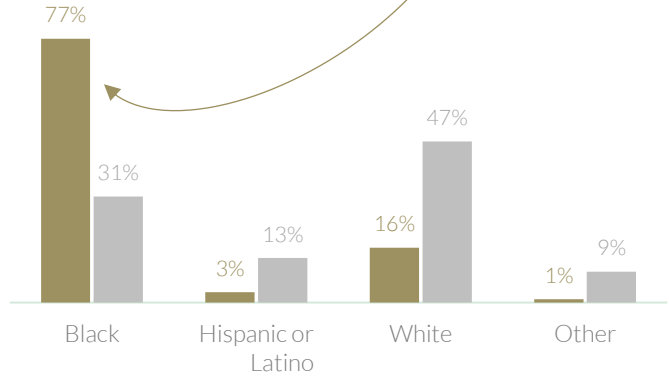
Figure 4



Note: Incarcerated population refers to the study population, or those booked in MCDCC between 2016 to 2018. The source for Mecklenburg County data was the American Community Survey, 2018 5-year estimates.

Black individuals make up only 31% of the Mecklenburg County population but 77% of the homeless population.

Figure 5



Note: Homeless population refers to those experiencing homelessness in Mecklenburg County as captured by the One Number in August 2019. This is the most comprehensive data source in closest date range to the study period. The source for Mecklenburg County data was the American Community Survey, 2018 5-year estimates.

During the study period, Black individuals made up only 31% of the Mecklenburg County population but more than 75% of the County’s incarcerated and homeless populations.^{8,9} These racially disparate outcomes are reflected throughout the United States; both homeless and incarcerated populations are disproportionately male and Black, and both have a high prevalence of poverty.^{10,11} These disparate outcomes can be traced to historic and current discriminatory policies and practices which have created a landscape in which people who identify as races other than White face higher barriers to building wealth, creating financial safety nets, and obtaining housing and job stability. Some of these policies and practices are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Discriminatory Policies and Practices

| Incarceration Discriminatory Policies and Practices ^{12,13} | Housing Discriminatory Policies and Practices ¹⁴ |
|--|--|
| Jim Crow era laws , including Black Codes, vagrancy laws, and convict leasing, designed to exploit labor from newly emancipated slaves. | Redlining , a 20 th century practice of systematically denying mortgage insurance and loans to racial minorities and in minority neighborhoods. |
| Discretionary stop and search policing practices , which studies have found to result in racial profiling and over policing in marginalized neighborhoods. | Racially restrictive neighborhood covenants , particularly in new suburban developments, were used to exclude racial minority home-buyers during the 20 th century. |
| Discretionary prosecutorial practices , including overcharging, which studies have found result in more frequent and harsher sentences for Black people. | The 1956 Neighborhood Interstate Highways and Defense Act , which funded interstate development through urban areas, often destroying established racial minority neighborhoods. |
| Policing and sentencing policies that have a disproportionate impact on Black people due to factors such as urban density, neighborhood segregation, and implicit bias. These include drug-free zone laws and mandatory minimum sentencing for certain drug crimes. | Predatory lending practices , which targeted racial and ethnic minorities with unfair loan terms (high interest rates, high fees), making it more difficult to build equity and increasing the risk of foreclosure. |

What does this mean for Charlotte-Mecklenburg?

This study provides insights on the intersection of homelessness and incarceration. The study found that only 4.1% of the sample of people incarcerated in a Mecklenburg County detention center experienced homelessness after their incarceration. This may be because in this study most people's stay in the detention center was short (83% stayed less than one week) relative to people exiting from state or federal prisons (who were not included in the study), and this short period was not immediately disruptive to people's housing situations. This finding may also point to the effectiveness of existing reentry services in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. These services include housing assistance, employment assistance, social security benefits assistance, and other services to support formerly incarcerated individuals with their reentry into society. A list of some of these organizations can be found on Reentry Partners of Mecklenburg County's [website](#).

Despite existing services, people who experienced homelessness before their incarceration are still at high risk for experiencing homelessness again after their release. This cycle of homelessness and incarceration may occur because lack of resources and lack of stability creates conditions in which crimes are more likely to occur, or because individuals who lack shelter are more likely to be arrested for quality-of-life crimes—such as public intoxication or sleeping outdoors—that would not occur if the individual were housed.¹⁵ People of Black race are also more likely to experience homelessness after incarceration. This finding is indicative of the lasting impact of discriminatory policies and practices that have made it more difficult for Black communities to build wealth and housing stability in the United States.

The following recommendations stem from the study findings, local context provided by community reviewers, and the research literature.

For policymakers, lobbyists, and activists

- Continue to support/expand **permanent supportive housing programs**. The reentry initiatives with the most evidence of effectiveness at reducing recidivism and homelessness include housing support. The Washington State Reentry Housing Pilot Program (rent subsidy and case management) had particularly notable evaluation outcomes to support the need for reentry housing support.¹⁶ These programs should target individuals within the first weeks or months of release. Given the high prevalence of mental illness within the incarcerated population, reentry and housing services should include behavioral health services to meet the needs of this target population.¹⁷
- Consider **educational campaigns** to inform landlords and housing providers of [Fair Housing Act](#) protections for people with a criminal record.
- Consider creating a **financial incentives and protections program for landlords** who rent to people with criminal records. [Several states have adopted programs](#), such as Washington state's Landlord Damage Relief Program, which provides landlords with financial incentives and reimbursement for losses or damages caused by the tenant. In Michigan, the Department of Corrections and Housing

Development Authority have partnered to create a Housing Choice Voucher program that provides housing subsidies to eligible people on parole.

- Consider **funding programs that operate within MCSO** to identify individuals at risk of homelessness prior to release. For example, [Mecklenburg County's SOAR \(SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery\) program](#) provides social services assistance to people with chronic conditions and who are at risk of homelessness. This study's findings suggest that there is a need for SOAR screening and assistance within detention centers.
 - Given the short-term nature of most MCSO detention center stays, it can be difficult to connect incarcerated people with screening and services by the time they are released. Consider advocating for a data sharing partnership between MCSO and HMIS, which would allow MCSO staff to prioritize SOAR screening for incarcerated people with recent histories of homelessness.

For service providers

- Consider hiring **peer support specialists, housing navigators, or advocates** with histories of incarceration and/or homelessness. This could look like hiring individuals with this lived experience to help returning citizens navigate housing options or the appeals process for housing programs that take applicants with a criminal record on a case-by-case basis. Previous research shows that peer support *can* lead to several improved outcomes, including decreases in homelessness.¹⁸ Housing navigators, in particular, have been identified as an unmet need within Mecklenburg County homeless services.¹⁹ To improve employee retention in these often-entry level positions, service providers could consider increasing starting wages and developing a promotion structure for employees.
- Prioritize **homelessness prevention** as a means to end the cycle of homelessness and incarceration. Primary prevention, or work that prevents someone from ever experiencing that first incidence of homelessness, would be key for preventing entry into the cycle. Programs may also be more effective for younger individuals. [Previous UI research](#) found that transition-aged youth (18-24) are less likely to experience sheltered homelessness after receiving rental assistance when compared to their older counterparts. This current study also showed increases in homelessness after incarceration as an individual ages, further highlighting the need to intervene at an early stage.
- Consider partnering with **researchers and evaluators to improve existing programs**. Outcomes evaluations (which answer questions like 'is my program working?') and process evaluations (answering questions like 'why is/ why isn't my program working?') can assist service providers with ensuring that reentry programs are effectively meeting the needs of their target audiences.

For landlords

- Consider limiting or **removing background check requirements** from rental applications. For example, a landlord may consider checking for criminal record after all other rental requirements have been satisfied, or they may consider applicants with a criminal record on a case-by-case basis, as [recommended](#) by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Consider using **positive screening criteria**, such as history of on-time rental payments, to supplement the rental application. Multifamily landlords can share positive rental payment information with credit bureaus through Fannie Mae's [Positive Rent Payment pilot program](#).

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