Disrupting the Churn Between Substance Use, Justice Involvement, and Homelessness

Critical Junctures for Improving Outcomes in San Diego[1]

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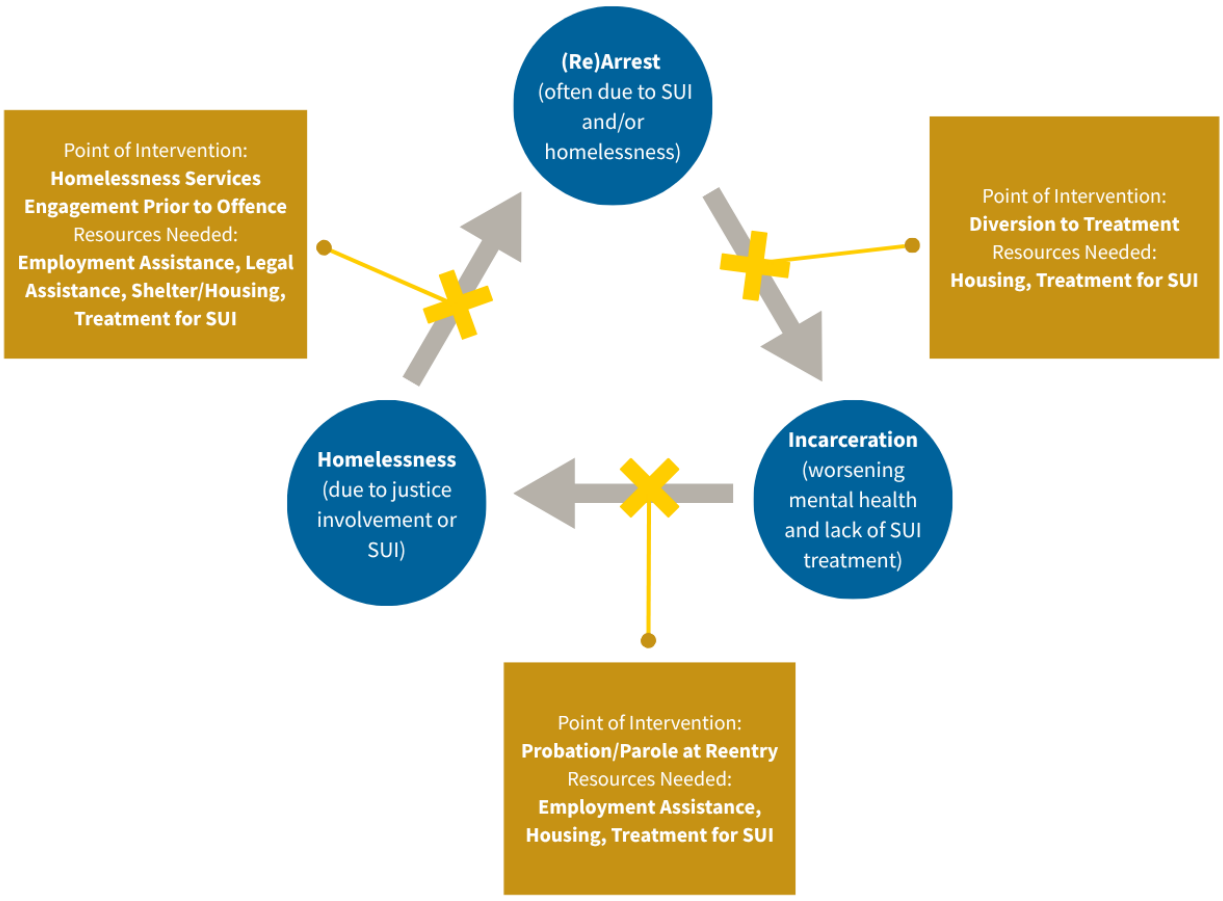
Executive Summary

Many individuals with histories of addiction find themselves caught up in a churn, cycling repeatedly between justice involvement and homelessness. For some, the pathway into the churn begins with homelessness, as addiction makes it difficult to maintain one's employment and housing and as survival strategies associated with homelessness are criminalized. For others, the pathway into the churn begins with the criminal justice system. Despite efforts to curb the criminalization of addiction and to frame substance use as a public health issue, many states have laws that can treat simple drug possession as a felony, including

[1] This report is one in an ongoing series about homelessness services provision and access in San Diego County. Our research team consists of researchers with lived experience of homelessness who are part of our Homelessness Experienced Action Research Trainee (HEART) Fellowship, and faculty and researchers at UC San Diego, the University of San Diego, and San Diego State University. Our Community Advisory Board has also provided valuable feedback on aspects of this work. Funding for this project has been donated by local philanthropists who wish to remain anonymous. To support ongoing research of this kind, please contact homelessnesshub@ucsd.edu. Additional information about our research team can be found at https://homelessnesshub.ucsd.edu/research/research-hsee.html

California.[2] As a result, many individuals with substance use issues (SUI) continue to wind up in prison or jail, particularly if they are Black or Latino. This is important as justice involved individuals are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than those who have never been to prison or jail due to increased risk of economic and housing insecurity. With individuals exiting prison or jail reporting minimal to no support to prepare them for reentry, many reoffend by committing crimes of survival or returning to substance use. We identify three critical junctures within this churn where exits to stable housing and improved health are possible: diversion to treatment after arrest, probation and parole at re-entry, and homeless service engagement before (re)arrest (see Figure 1). Based on interviews and program review, we advance eight key findings which support eight recommendations for improving the ability of providers and governments in San Diego County to assist people at critical junctures in escaping the devastating cycle of SUI, justice involvement (JI), and homelessness.

Figure 1. Critical Junctures in the Churn



[2] The penalties for drug possession generally depend on the type and quantity of the substance the defendant possessed. In California, Prop 36 introduced "wobbler offenses" in 2024, where possession of a hard drug (including fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine) with two prior drug-related convictions can be charged as either a "treatment-mandated" felony or a misdemeanor. Under Prop 36, individuals can opt into drug treatment to avoid jail or prison time. While successful completion of treatment results in the dismissal of charges, unsuccessful completion results in a felony conviction and up to three years in jail or prison.

Key Findings

1. **Drug diversion programs are a valuable intervention but completion can be a challenge when program attributes do not match clients' unique needs.** Highly structured programs met the needs of participants who had little to focus on besides recovery but were a disservice to others who were trying to work outside of their program, manage personal affairs, or care for loved ones. Poor program fit often led to program non-completion. When people leave drug diversion programs early, they violate their parole, trigger a warrant for their arrest, and risk becoming disconnected from programs that can help them maintain sobriety and reenter stable housing.

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2. **Programs that prioritize peer support and cultural competence support client engagement and program completion.** Having a mentor or peer navigator was a significant support that facilitated long-term stability for some participants. Enrolling in a program which recognized and valued individuals' unique situations, for example being a member of the LGBTQ+ community, supported program engagement.

3. **Extended housing support after residential treatment facilitates exit from the churn.** Diversion efforts provided temporary housing that many individuals needed. Upon completion of recovery programs, extended housing assistance was vital for long-term stabilization.

4. **Program knowledge and quality of program referrals from probation and parole vary widely.** Probation and parole officers sometimes referred individuals to treatment, employment, and housing assistance upon reentry. Their ability to do so varied based on personal experience and knowledge so that some officers offered tailored referrals while others offered generic referrals that often fell short of needs and others offered none at all.

5. **Housing placement, support, or navigation are difficult to access through homelessness services and probation/parole.** Engagement with homeless shelters, sanctioned encampments, safe parking lots, and other programs did not lead to housing placements. Some participants were not matched to permanent supportive housing or any housing in the Continuum of Care, often never being assessed for housing through the Coordinated Entry System. Others were offered housing assistance that was not suited to their needs or which they could not effectively use given a lack of housing navigation support. Probation and parole officers have almost no ability to support housing navigation for clients and no direct housing to offer.

6. **Programs that dismiss offenses or expunge criminal records support homeless program engagement and employment searches.** Criminal histories posed barriers to employment and housing. Programs that assisted with felony record expungement, the dismissal of misdemeanor charges, or the satisfaction of financial obligations to the courts provided substantive assistance to people attempting to secure employment and remain free from further criminal justice involvement.

7. **Program-based employment supports reentry to the labor force and can support housing acquisition.** Several homelessness programs in San Diego County employed participants to help them establish a recent employment history, setting them up to generate income and find more long-term employment and housing on their own.

8. **Many caught in the churn between homelessness and justice involvement face intersecting and cumulative forms of discrimination.** People representing disadvantaged minority populations, including communities of color, sexual/gender minorities, or people with disabilities, experienced bias and discrimination that compounded the barriers they faced when attempting to leave the churn.

Key Recommendations

1. **Ensure fit between treatment and client.** Diversion programs should include structured daily routines and clear program accountability related to recovery but should additionally leave room for flexibility when individuals are working towards stability outside of treatment mandates or when emergencies arise.

2. **Prioritize peer support and trauma-informed care through a culturally-competent lens**. Aspects of participants' identity must be taken into consideration as programs hire staff and design programming. Specifically, cultural awareness and humility and the provision of concordant care are critical for LGBTQ+ and Black, Indigenous and people of color individuals.

3. **Increase post treatment housing assistance.** The positive aspects of treatment programs should be extended through facilitated connections to sober living facilities and other temporary housing options. The longer individuals have housing assistance, the easier it is for them to remain sober, increase their income, and find permanent housing. Housing assistance for one year or more is ideal.

4. **Expand training and resources for probation and parole officers.** Training should be developed and provided to probation and parole officers to ensure that they are consistently well informed of all available treatment and homelessness programs in the region. While there are many constraints on what services probation and parole

departments can offer directly to people upon reentry, we should take seriously officers' desires to offer a greater level of support to at-risk clients.

5. **Increase housing assistance across systems.** Stable housing is associated with successful substance use disorder recovery, greater compliance with probation and parole guidance, and lower rates of recidivism. Low-barrier housing options should be expanded at every critical juncture: treatment programs should connect individuals automatically to sober living; all homeless programs should support client entry into the Coordinated Entry System; probation and parole departments should receive resources that would allow officers to place individuals directly into housing. To accomplish this, the homelessness Continuum of Care should expand subsidized permanent housing solutions and increase housing navigation services for the private market.

6. **Expand the innovative programs that dismiss prior offenses and expunge criminal records.** Although we call for more research on this topic, our findings suggest positive outcomes in clients' ability to access homeless program services and employment after the dismissal of offenses or records expungement. Programs that support the dismissal or expungement of fines, fees, and prior convictions facilitate exit from the churn because they increase individuals' capacity to engage with services and employment opportunities without fear of rearrest. The ability to engage may reduce the need to commit crimes of survival.

7. **Identify additional programs and regional businesses that can support labor market reentry.** The mark of a criminal record and inconsistent work histories make finding a job difficult after incarceration. Expanding opportunities for rebuilding employment histories upon reentry can enable longer-term employment and housing stabilization.

8. **Address systems-level discrimination.** Efforts should be made to eradicate harmful forms of discrimination as they occur at critical junctures. Service providers and police departments should ensure that their staff and officers are adequately trained to engage with diverse populations. Training should occur annually and include workshops on histories of intersectional and structural discrimination, trauma, and cultural humility.

Glossary of Terms

Continuum of Care (CoC): A local planning body responsible for coordinating the full range of homelessness services for a designated geographic area. This area may cover a city, county, metropolitan area, or an entire state depending on the needs of the region.

Coordinated Entry System A system of housing and service coordination whereby individuals are connected to options based on need.

Homeless Court A program designed to help participants address outstanding criminal cases, including infractions, misdemeanors, and low-level felony cases. The idea of Homeless Court is to pave the way for secure employment and housing.

Homelessness: There are four categories provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD): 1) literally homeless; 2) imminent risk of homelessness; 3) homeless under other federal statutes; and 4) fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence. At the most basic level, literal homelessness is defined as "an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.

Permanent Supportive Housing: A housing model that provides long-term housing and non-mandatory supportive services to individuals and families who have previously experienced homelessness where the head of household has a disability. Permanent Supportive Housing (often referred to as PSH) can be provided as a project or voucher-based housing assistance.

Point in Time Count: An annual count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. Each Continuum of Care must conduct a Point in Time Count.

Transitional Housing: Housing with supportive services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness with the goal of interim stability and support to successfully move to and maintain permanent housing. Transitional Housing projects can cover housing costs and accompanying supportive services for program participants for up to 24 months.

Unsheltered homelessness: Individuals and households whose primary nighttime location is a public or private place not meant for regular sleeping accommodations (such as sidewalks, parks, riverbeds, or vehicles).

Introduction: The Churn Between Substance Use, Homelessness, and Incarceration

Homelessness and incarceration are intimately linked.[ii] Justice involved individuals are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than those who have never been to prison or jail.[iii] People who have experienced incarceration are at an increased risk of economic and housing insecurity due to gaps in employment, discrimination, loss of social supports, ongoing substance use issues (SUI), and poor mental health.[iv]

Many exiting prison or jail report receive minimal to no support to prepare them for reentry, making returns to prison or jail after a period of homelessness more likely.[v] Given the rapid expansion of the American penal system over the past four decades, barriers to employment and housing and limited reentry services for justice-involved individuals are a cause for great concern.[vi] Just as justice involved individuals are at a greater risk of experiencing homelessness, people experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of interacting with the criminal justice system, as many of the daily survival strategies associated with homelessness have been criminalized, including camping and sleeping in public, sitting or lying down in public spaces, loitering and vagrancy, panhandling, residing in vehicles, and sharing food.[vii] For unhoused individuals with active addictions, laws against public intoxication, possession of drugs and paraphernalia, and drug sales, combined with increased visibility, make interaction with the justice system an inevitability.[viii]

The criminalization of homelessness has serious repercussions. Individuals penalized for their homelessness face a compounding set of barriers including records and fines that make it difficult to seek employment, enroll in benefits, and secure housing. The criminalization of addiction specifically exposes unhoused individuals to the health risks of incarceration, including reductions in mental health that may reinforce substance dependence.[ix]

Addiction is a significant factor in both incarceration and homelessness. For many justice involved individuals, their SUI was the catalyst to their entrance into the criminal justice system. Today, despite ongoing efforts to decriminalize addiction, one in five individuals in jail or prison are imprisoned for drug related offenses.[x] Eighty-five percent of individuals in the prison population have active SUIs which are not comprehensively addressed within criminal justice settings.[xi] As a result, people with SUIs often exit incarceration with active addictions, making it difficult for them to hold a job or remain stably housed.[xii] While SUIs can lead to homelessness as they make it difficult to maintain employment and housing, homelessness can also lead to addiction as many self-medicate in the face of constant stressors.[xiii] Given the bidirectional relationship between homelessness and addiction, it is unsurprising to find high rates

of SUI among those experiencing homelessness.

Sixty-five percent of unhoused Californians reported using either amphetamines, cocaine, or non-prescribed opioids regularly at some point in their lives.[xiv] Unsheltered individuals described interactions with police that included being checked for outstanding warrants, probation violations, and having themselves or their belongings searched for drugs. Thus, instead of receiving connections to treatment, many unsheltered individuals find themselves caught up in a churn between homelessness and incarceration.

Critical Junctures for Disrupting the Churn

While many reports highlight a "revolving door" phenomenon, where individuals cycle through treatment programs, probation or parole, and homelessness services without achieving stability, others have discovered that these same resources can be pivotal in breaking the cycle.[xv] In other words, critical junctures are points within the cycle which appear to be decisive. If, at these key points, sufficient support and resources are not available, a person remains caught. But, if at those same points appropriate interventions are available, these critical junctures function as offramps, helping people exit the churn. We identify three critical junctures within the churn between homelessness and incarceration where exit is possible, specifically for people with SUIs. These critical junctures potentially place individuals in direct contact with housing, income (employment or benefits), and recovery resources which open possibilities for stability and healing (see Figure 1 in Executive Summary).[xvi]

1. Diversion efforts place individuals into treatment options instead of jail or prison.
2. If an individual has previously been incarcerated, probation and parole officers at the point of reentry are uniquely suited to offer much needed resources to individuals at a crucial time when such help can be highly effective.
3. Finally, engagement with homelessness services during reentry can prevent individuals from being arrested again due to their unhoused status or ongoing SUI.

Investigating Critical Junctures in San Diego

To understand when critical junctures intervene in the cycle of homelessness, incarceration, and addiction, we conducted a community-driven case study in San Diego where there is a large population experiencing homelessness. According to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, 48,722 individuals utilized homelessness services between October of 2023 and September of 2024.[xvii] During the 2020 Point in Time

Count (PIT) of homelessness in San Diego, 31% of unsheltered individuals surveyed stated that they lived with an SUI.[xviii] During the 2025 PIT, 37% of individuals surveyed in San Diego County jails stated that they had experienced unsheltered homelessness prior to their arrest.[xix]

Details about our research design and methodology can be found in the Appendix. It was important that we understood the challenges to exiting the churn in San Diego from all perspectives. To do this, we interviewed people actively in the churn or who had recently exited the churn by recruiting through three programs: Homeless Court (a multi-agency effort to provide legal support to people experiencing homelessness)[xx] and two addiction treatment programs, CRASH and Stepping Stone. Table 1 includes demographic information for our interviewees, all of whom had a history of substance use, homelessness, and/or criminal justice involvement. Participant ages ranged from 29 to 62.

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics (N=35)

	Count (%)
Gender	
Male	21 (60%)
Female	14 (40%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	9 (26%)
Black/African American	9 (26%)
Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e	7 (20%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	2 (6%)
Native American	1 (3%)
Mixed Race/Multi-racial	3 (9%)
Data Not Collected	4 (11%)
Current Housing Status	
Unsheltered	15 (43%)
Shelter/Safe Parking/Safe Sleeping	3 (9%)
Sober Living	3 (9%)
Unstably Housed	4 (11%)
Stably Housed	10 (29%)
Substance Use Involvement History	
Yes	28 (80%)
No	3 (9%)
Data Not Collected	4 (11%)
Past or Current Probation/Parole Experience	
Yes	27 (77%)
No	5 (14%)
Data Not Collected	3 (9%)
Past or Current Experiences of Homelessness	
Yes	33 (94%)
No	2 (6%)

We also interviewed homeless program providers; staff and attorneys at the County of San Diego Public Defender's Office, U.S. Probation Office in San Diego, and the Federal Defenders of San Diego; staff from the County of San Diego; and other non-profit providers who serve this population (see Table 2). Through these interviews we discovered how critical junctures either resulted in beneficial connections to housing, income, and treatment for our participants or kept individuals locked within the cycle of addiction, incarceration, and homelessness.

Table 2. Service Provider Interviews by Type

Recovery Services
CRASH
Stepping Stone
RecoverWell
Legal Services
Public Defender Office
U.S. Probation Office
Federal Defenders
Homelessness Services
Alpha Project
East County Transitional Living Center
County of San Diego Office of Homeless Solutions

Diversion to Treatment: The Importance of Program Fit, Housing Resources, Peer Support, and Cultural Awareness

Drug diversion programs are alternative pathways for certain individuals charged with drug-related offenses, offering them a chance at rehabilitation and treatment instead of traditional prosecution and incarceration.[xxi] Diversion programs can be utilized pretrial or post-conviction. Pretrial diversion suspends the sentence while the defendant is allowed to complete a treatment program. Once completed, the charges are dismissed or reduced. Post-conviction diversion happens after a person is convicted of a crime and allows treatment instead of prison or jail. While the conviction remains, some programs carry the possibility of a reduction or dismissal of the original charge at the discretion of the court. In either case, the point is to offer non-violent drug offenders opportunities for rehabilitation and a fresh start, recognizing that treatment can often be a more effective long-term solution than incarceration. For some of our participants, residential treatment as diversion or as a condition of release was a gateway to sobriety and stable housing. For others, court mandated treatment resulted in a further deterioration of their circumstances. We identify why diversion sometimes worked and sometimes failed, both in terms of addressing substance use and supporting efforts to secure permanent housing.

Program Fit

The most common programs participants attended were CRASH and Stepping Stone. While we recruited interviewees from these programs we also encountered many individuals through Homeless Court who had used these programs as well. Often, participants discussed having used more than one of these options as well as other programs in the region. While most programs mentioned by our participants offered structure and accountability, which participants identified as helpful tools for stabilization, there were times when adherence to rules seemed to be valued over the needs of the individual, and in those cases, rules were experienced as paternalistic and punitive as opposed to beneficial for treatment outcomes.

For Isabelle,[xxii] who began using cocaine at 16, CRASH's structure was exactly what she needed: "CRASH was the best one for me. I've been to Betty Ford and the ones in Mexico and stuff. I think it was the best one because they actually make you change your behaviors. They keep you there longer, so they don't let you leave until you're ready." For Isabelle, programs without structure had not worked for her in the past:

> "[This other program] it was just too much freedom. It wasn't enough structure. There was no processing. They let us out on passes all the time, and we were just drinking. Everyone was using. It was a terrible place."

Heather shared a similar story: "[My] residential treatment was CRASH, so it was extremely difficult. It was a behavioral modification program. I'd never done anything like it before. My God. It was life-changing. [And it worked] but I had to release everything to my higher power."

For some of our participants, diversion to treatment "felt like punishment." In these circumstances, the structure highlighted as so beneficial for recovery by others veered into the arbitrary, making programs feel paternalistic and carceral. Patrick found himself in jail at the end of 2023 for the first time in his life on account of an addiction that began with the death of his father. He described his experiences at his diversion to treatment program as an "extension of jail" because there was a strict curfew which infringed upon his scheduled work hours. Eventually Patrick was sent back to jail for curfew violations. He shared that he understood the need for structure in a recovery program, but he felt that the manager's unwillingness to support his efforts at employment was "overkill."

Patrick was once again moved from jail into a treatment program. At this point in time, Patrick was finalizing a claim with the California Employment Development Department. Given the high value of the claim ($15,000), Patrick felt it was critically important that he be able to complete this process to ensure that he had the financial resources he needed to be self-sufficient after leaving his treatment program. Unfortunately, the program rules did not allow him to leave the premises or meet with anyone for the first 15 days of treatment. Because of the urgency

of his situation, Patrick left the program after nine days. This resulted in a warrant being placed for his arrest. Given his open warrant, Patrick is currently working under the table as a construction worker. He refuses to use homelessness services as they may be a place where he could be identified and arrested, and he is currently squatting inside a construction project he is working on. Knowing that his situation is unsustainable, Patrick is considering turning himself in. However, this would result in a criminal offense, which will make it harder for him to secure employment and housing in the future.

Family emergencies can also make adherence to strict rules a challenge. Shebang was in a court-mandated sober living facility that she liked and believed could help her where other programs had failed. However, her husband got into a fight and broke his neck so she violated program restrictions to be with him and thereby broke the conditions of her parole. Now, with an active warrant, Shebang is afraid to access any services, including the mental health services she has come to rely on, worried that it will be a "sting operation" where she will be arrested. As such, she lives unsheltered in a park with her husband and suffers from anxiety and depression.

Peer Support and Cultural Competence

Peer support and cultural awareness facilitated treatment: many participants in our sample highlighted that, when program staff included people with lived experience of addiction and homelessness, it enhanced empathy and trust. While going through CRASH, Leon formed a strong relationship with his sponsor as well as the community at his sober living, whose owners also went through CRASH. Feeling that these peer supports were integral to his own sobriety, Leon is now a sponsor for other individuals who are presently battling addiction as well as a manager of multiple sober living facilities. LGBTQ+ participants who utilized Stepping Stone highlighted that culturally inclusive care was also integral to their success. Former clients of Stepping Stone revealed that discussions about trauma, sexuality, and identity that occurred onsite were crucial for long-term recovery. One trans participant noted this about Stepping Stone:

> "[It was] the only program where my pronouns were respected and I didn't feel like a problem."

As Isaac, who shared that he had experienced years of shame over his sexual orientation, told us, "What has kept me sober is the community that Stepping Stone taught me. All that community that I didn't want to be part of my whole life, showed me that I could be loved."

Extended Housing Support

When program structure was matched with additional housing assistance, participants in our sample not only highlighted that they had recovered from their addictions, but that they successfully exited the churn or were well poised to do so. For Isabelle, the connection to sober living after exiting CRASH was a lifeline. It has extended her housing assistance while she works to get everything else in order, including a job. Having entered both CRASH and sober living through Drug Court, Isabelle shared that Drug Court was footing the bill for sober living, allowing her to focus on her next steps now that she is clean. For Andrea, the ability to connect with housing through a homelessness provider upon exiting Stepping Stone set her up for success. Living on a limited income from SSI, she is thankful for the temporary rental assistance she currently has through rapid rehousing. As this assistance will last for several months, her current housing stability not only helps her feel equipped to remain sober, but to find affordable housing to move into when the program ends.

When no housing support followed treatment, participants remained in the churn. As Tanya told us, her treatment program was not good, in part because of the prevalence of drug use in the program, and in part because the program did not provide connections to housing. She left treatment unhoused and now utilizes the City of San Diego's "Safe Sleeping" program, which provides legal campsites for people experiencing homelessness. Heather shared a similar story. While Drug Court helped place Heather into a treatment facility, she was disheartened by the lack of housing assistance offered by the recovery program. Without housing navigation assistance, she exited treatment to the streets.

Leon's Story

Leon's story exemplifies the need for treatment fit, housing stability, and culturally competent peer support. Leon is a 43-year-old White male who experienced street homelessness for eight years. His parents died when he was very young, so he lived with his brother who was heavily involved with substances. He was exposed to drugs at a young age and began using in 8th grade. His substance use continued throughout high school, at which point he got expelled. Leon eventually earned his high school diploma and secured a job to keep up with his truck payments. However, when he was kicked out of his housing by the mother of his child, he developed a meth addiction that lasted for a decade and ultimately landed him in jail. It was at this point that Leon's luck changed as he was finally able to get the help he needed. While in jail, a drug assessor helped him get into a six-month inpatient program, which helped him get and stay clean for over three years. However, he relapsed immediately after his probation ended and struggled with a heroin and meth addiction that would last another decade.

Leon ultimately landed back in jail, where a drug assessor once again sent him to a treatment program, but this time he was sent to CRASH, where he stayed for four months. He knew he had to take this round more seriously because he realized that he would die if he did not. Fortunately, his sponsor ended up being a major source of support for him. While at CRASH, Leon was able to get all his health issues, including his Hep C liver cirrhosis diagnosis and mental health, taken care of. He described CRASH as "pretty rough" as they "they attacked your behaviors" through a focus on punishment and behavior modification. Yet he felt that CRASH was the only program that worked for him because it enabled him to reflect on his actions.

After graduating from CRASH, Leon checked into an outpatient program which funded an additional five months of sober living. While at sober living, Leon came to manage two sober living homes until he was ready to move out of sober living himself, providing him with an additional two years of housing as an on-site manager. Leon is now pursuing his associate's degree so that he can transfer to a university to pursue his passion in film production. In the end, having nearly three years of housing support, Leon could focus on both sobriety and financial stability, and is now not only on his way to fulfilling his career goals but he is a peer counselor to others. Leon identified the longevity of the housing support, as well as the specific support offered by his sponsor and the behavioral modification elements of his treatment as key to his success, a success that not only benefits him, but many others through his direct mentorship.

Probation and Parole at Reentry: The Need for Tailored Referrals in a Context of Limited Funding

Nine of our participants were actively on probation or parole during our interviews, and many more had been on probation or parole in the past. The relationships between probation and parole officers and clients have been shown to play an important role during the reentry period, the first days and weeks when a person leaves incarceration and reenters society.[xxiii] While participants in our study noted that it was important for probation and parole officers to be accessible and trustworthy, the most important aspect of the officer/client relationship at reentry, as gleaned through our interviews, was an officer's ability to connect individuals to appropriate and effective resources. Importantly, greater levels of officer support are associated with lower rates of recidivism, especially when that support goes beyond demonstrating care to providing up-to-date referral information and connection to residential drug/alcohol treatment.[xxiv] Yet study participants' experiences with their probation or parole officers differed greatly, with some receiving helpful referrals and others feeling lost in the churn. This is in step

with other research that highlights the variability in officers' relationships with their clients.[xxv]

Phyllis told us how her parole officer not only helped her find a treatment facility for her addiction, but that her officer was determined to help her find one that was the right fit. As Phyllis told us,

> "I mean, there's so many [treatment options] and you got to kind of find the one that fits. If you don't like that one, we'll find you a different one. Just don't go out and use, you know?"

Alton described a similar story where his probation officer was very helpful with referrals to both services and employment opportunities, including to the service organization he found most helpful to date: Care Center. For Phyllis, who currently resides in permanent supportive housing, her parole officer's referral to treatment put her on a trajectory that resulted in her successfully exiting the churn. The permanent supportive housing she has does not require her to be sober, but the combination of sobriety and stable housing makes her feel free to pursue new goals. Alton, who is stably housed due to support from his family, calls the Care Center his "quarterback," as it connected him to everything he needed including food, case management, and job placement.

Too often our participants recounted experiences with probation and parole where officers seemingly made no attempt to provide helpful services. Marquise, who has cycled through jail and homelessness for the last 15 years after leaving prison, recounted his experiences with parole: "Other than waiting to violate you if you don't show up for that month, that's all they do. There's nobody that does nothing to actually help you." For Marquise, who has never had an SUI, all he wanted from his officer was a fruitful connection to housing. Instead, his officer connected him to a transitional housing program that did not fit his needs (see Marquise's Story). Marquise left this program early and fell into homelessness.

Nay Nay, who has "never been off probation in [her] life" and who is currently residing in a city park, recounted a similar story: "The only resource [probation] gave me was to an outpatient program [for mental health] and I was attending that, but as far as work or housing or anything like that, no." For Nay Nay, the outpatient referral she was given was not a match for her needs. While she was in outpatient, she was not allowed to drink any alcohol, which felt infantilizing to her given her age and status as an adult and given the fact that she was not in a recovery program. Although many individuals we interviewed desired an accessible probation or parole officer who was able to connect them to housing, treatment, income support, and other much needed services, most of our participants still caught in the churn felt that officers were simply surveilling them, waiting to see if they "screwed up."

Given the importance of housing on the path to stability, probation and parole departments would ideally have the resources to place people directly into housing. However, United States Probation officers working in San Diego have no housing to offer people at reentry, forcing them to rely

on referrals to various community partners. Returning to the housing they left prior to arrest is often not possible since most probation clients were living with people also engaged in criminal activity. In this context, residential treatment is often as much an option for housing as it is a resource for recovery. However, for probation officers to give effective referrals upon reentry, they need to have an accurate map of available resources, and connections to specific programs. Unfortunately, many officers do not have such relationships and cannot offer any concrete or specific housing support.

The federal system has Residential Reentry Centers (known colloquially as halfway houses) where inmates can serve the last portion of their custodial sentence in a facility in or near the communities they are from, providing them time to secure employment and housing. These halfway houses are intended to provide the housing support and resource referrals that are crucial upon reentry, but budget cuts have significantly curtailed this option. As a result, people are being released with much less halfway house time than they need and are eligible for or are being released directly from prison to homelessness. Federal Probation officers shared that many of their clients are on probation due to crimes associated with substance use, and that clients without stable housing and appropriate treatment are at greater risk of recidivism. As one officer told us:

> “If you cannot address the core issue - substance use - then you really do not get very far. And you cannot get sober if you are homeless.”

Marquise’s Story

Marquise’s story exemplifies how a lack of resources and referrals at reentry can keep individuals locked within the churn. Marquise, a Black man in his 50s who had grown up in the foster care system, was released from prison 15 years ago into a transitional housing program. Despite making it to the highest level of the tiered program, he faced challenges once he became employed. The staff at the transitional housing program took his EBT from him to pay for communal meals, which he never ate due to his work schedule. Marquise additionally felt that the program had very little oversight, resulting in drug use in the building. Finding the staff “petty” in their enforcement of rules, especially with respect to letting him use his EBT card freely, Marquise exited the program early. During this period of time, his parole officer did not help him, even after he felt compelled to exit.

Homelessness Service Engagement: The Need for Housing, Employment, and Legal Supports

All of our participants had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. As such, many had experiences with homeless programs (i.e., shelters, safe parking, and sanctioned encampments) in San Diego County. While negative experiences with programs dominated our interviews,[xxvi] participants also shared positive experiences. Both the negative and positive point to the ways homeless programs must be improved to end the churn for more San Diegans.

Satisfaction with Emergency Shelters and Similar Programs is Low

Participants reported problems with shelters and other homelessness programs which kept participants in our study from wanting to access those services again. Alton told us about his experiences with one shelter:

> “It wasn’t clean. It was almost like they said they care, but you could tell by the appearance of the place and the way the staff greets you [that they did not].”

Alton went on to explain how shelter staff seemed not only poorly trained but were not “treating people as humans.” Others in our sample felt that negative interactions with staff resulted from bias connected to their race, gender, and ability (see Spotlight on Discrimination).

Through our interviews, we additionally heard how program operations and rules can lead to retraumatization for some participants, which further deter them from using programs. Due to her past as a sex trafficking victim, Crystal, who is living unsheltered with her boyfriend, has never accessed a shelter: “I have not been in a shelter. As far as how they have it, those women really, really close, or the men really, really close. This doesn't really sit well with me, but… if I needed to-- if I had a chance to be able to be with him as a couple, then I probably would take shelter, but I don't think they have any like that out here, shelters for couples.” For Crystal, the close proximity of other clients in congregate shelters and the inability to remain with her boyfriend make such programs feel unsafe.

People we interviewed were sometimes disconnected from services, either because they had warrants out for their arrest and were afraid the police would get them at a program, or because they had been kicked out of a program. Crystal recounted being told to leave the City of San Diego sanctioned

encampment program after being accused of prostitution. She denied this charge and said it was hurtful given that she is a survivor of human trafficking. Chris described how he was kicked out of a shelter because the staff perceived him as a violent threat, which he denied. We cannot independently verify these participants' claims but regardless of what happened it is clear that negative experiences within programs, or perceptions about program offerings, lead to disconnection from basic needs resources and, sometimes, referrals to other programs.

Housing is Difficult to Access Through Homeless Programs

None of our participants actively experiencing homelessness felt that programs were connecting them to housing in any sustainable way. This finding highlights the reality of scarce housing resources in the region, both through the Continuum of Care and the private market. However, participants also attributed a lack of housing support to case workers failing to contact them and negative interactions with staff which limited their ability to engage meaningfully with housing resources made available through homelessness programs.

Many participants shared that the only housing assistance they had ever received was a housing assessment that never led to actual housing, despite extended waiting times. A previous report by Homelessness Hub at UC San Diego showed that just 26% of people exiting San Diego shelters to known destinations between 2018-2023 moved into permanent housing.[xxvii] People who stayed in shelters more than once during this period were even less likely to exit to permanent housing. Exits to permanent housing by referral from a shelter represents a fraction of all exits to permanent housing. In addition, there were cases where housing assistance was offered, but ill-suited to the client's circumstances. For example, some of our participants turned down rapid rehousing, because they knew, or property owners suspected, they could not pay the rent themselves after the period of rental assistance was over.

Long wait times, changes in program availability, and inconsistent communication were difficult for people to navigate in the rare cases when they did qualify for a housing program. Several participants who were able to acquire a Housing Choice Voucher expressed frustrations about the lack of follow-up and housing search support from programs. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Marquise received a hotel voucher for emergency shelter and also secured a Housing Choice Voucher. While he was in the hotel, however, he did not receive any housing navigation to help him find a landlord that would take his voucher:

> "After I acquired all my papers, she [his case manager] passes me onto a locator named John, who I never even met. Never called me. None. You're a locator, but I can't even call you to finish the deal for me."

Marquis was shown only one apartment in a year. Feeling that he was being

racially profiled, Marquise no longer uses his full name when he submits applications. Without the help of a locator, Marquise's Housing Choice voucher expired. He now lives on the streets, where the police frequently "bully" him without providing any resources. He no longer wants to utilize homelessness programs as he does not want to be regulated by people with no lived experience.

Participants with certain convictions, particularly sex offenders who can only live in designated places, may find it even more difficult to secure housing. Henry's status as a registered sex offender limited his housing opportunities, leaving him unsheltered for 15 years: "they said I qualified for housing, but yet they didn't have it set up, especially for my conviction. One of the things that is hard is, I have to find zoning that's correct. I have to find places that are acceptable."

Unexpected funding changes can also hinder the process of getting individuals housed. In Chris 'case, he was able to work with St. Vincent de Paul's housing coordinator and could be in housing by now, if funding were not suddenly cut:

> "We're supposed to be getting into housing [on] November 1st-...I guess the funding got cut-...-while they were in the process of helping. We were clients. Then, while they're helping us they're like, "We're running out. We can't do anything now."

The lack of housing navigation assistance and the shortage of affordable housing in San Diego is problematic, particularly for individuals in our sample. Housing is critical for stabilization. As Henry puts it: "If you are not able to provide or offer some form of housing, you're just putting the person back in the situation, and in a year or within a year, another set of police officers are going to ticket you again."

Employment Support Helps Clients Build Work Histories

Some homelessness programs in San Diego, aware of the barriers to employment that their clients face, have started employing their clients. Two of our participants reported positive experiences gaining employment through their programs. When Cheryl was released from prison, she got connected to Dreams for Change, which helped her gain short-term employment onsite while she looked for long-term employment. As Cheryl told us:

> They gave me work without question. When I signed up with them, they were handing me a W-2 form and told me that they had 170 hours that they could offer me. During that 170 hours of working for them, I was supposed to be actively looking for another job. The program only works if you use it… That 170 hours lasted about three months…In all actuality, I had gotten two jobs during employment with [my program].

As Cheryl described, the opportunity to work directly for her homelessness program allowed her to have a work history on her resume while she pursued other employment options. This strategy worked and she was offered two positions during this time. However, both positions were pulled from her when the prospective employers discovered her record history. Fortunately, Cheryl recently got married to a man who is stably employed and housed, which greatly improved her housing situation.

Despite the promise of these innovative solutions to employment gaps, we want to emphasize that, while employment assistance offered through homelessness programs is valuable, employment and income assistance alone are insufficient to solve individual or regional housing crises due to high costs and limited supply.

Legal Assistance Can Facilitate Homeless Program Engagement, Employment, and Housing Searches

Although the majority of our participants reported negative experiences engaging homelessness programs, or avoiding them altogether, all participants in our sample who we interviewed at the Homeless Court outreach events reported positive experiences with these events. Homeless Court outreach events are specifically designed to connect with "hard to reach" unsheltered individuals who do not trust homeless program providers, may be geographically removed from programs, and may have open warrants that prevent them from seeking resources. As Juan said,

> It's very helpful and it all rolled up into one instead of all spread out throughout San Diego… I'm trying to use all of them that I need, and then maybe there's some that I don't need, I'm bringing back to people that can't get here or don't know about.

In addition to basic needs, participants were able to regain important documents such as identification documents and birth certificates, which are necessary for accessing services, employment, and housing.

Through Homeless Court, participants cleared their tickets and warrants, opening up opportunities to access services and resources. Tracy, who has been avoiding homelessness services due to his open warrants, mentioned:

> "I just used it today to clear my warrants. The warrants that I was on the run for a year and a half have been rescheduled and cleared. I don't have to go to any cops asking for my name. I no longer have to get ready to run."

Nay Nay noted positive experiences with Homeless Court while at her halfway house program: "They helped me pay up all my tickets, that's what I had for me to be able to get my license." Although the individuals we met at Homeless Court resource events were still caught up in the churn, this intervention and its ability to travel to individuals with an additional array of services through pop up resource events addressed barriers that must be overcome in order to even begin finding employment or housing. As Homeless Court clears records and as their resource events allow individuals to retrieve their personal documents, individuals in our sample noted that many of the obstacles to employment they had been facing had now been lifted.

Missing from these events were property managers, housing navigators, or housing authorities that could provide connections to housing opportunities. While all participants appreciated the convenience and efficiency of the Homeless Court community outreach events, the housing aspect is still a gap that needs to be addressed. When asked about how the events can be improved, Thomas shared: "Honestly man, I wish, God-dang, the Housing Commission was here. [chuckles] You know what I mean? People that sign up for Section 8, and stuff like that." Marquise echoed the sentiment: "Yes, where are the landlords? Where are the people that actually have the housing?"

Spotlight on Discrimination

Across our interviews experiences with racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination at critical junctures came to light. When interacting with homelessness services providers, participants reported instances where they received subpar care due to their racial identities. For FT, an African American woman, the lack of cultural competence and respect within treatment and homelessness services became obvious to her early on and has served as a constant obstacle to accessing and completing programs. She described her experiences with service providers: "You can tell if somebody is in front of you and they're Caucasian, and they're talking about their domestic violence versus when you're trying to say your experience, their microaggression comes and it's very recognizable because I've been Black my whole life."

In addition, some of the female participants in our sample reported sexual assault and harassment by staff in their sober living or treatment programs, leading to early exits. Finally, some service programs are not equipped to assist individuals with

disabilities, including mental health challenges, leading to their dismissal. As one participant shared, he was kicked out of a homelessness program for his severe mental illness. The program told him that they simply did not have the capacity to assist him.

Several of our unsheltered participants who are disconnected from services shared that they face constant scrutiny by the police, with many reporting instances of discrimination. Ricky described his recent experience with a police officer: "Basically just one cop. He does not like me for shit. I had just got out of the hospital, and all my stuff at the park. They came through, they took everything of mine. My crutches, my walker, my medicine, ID… They got everything and threw it in the back of a garbage truck." Another interviewee, Jesus, believed that he was racially profiled by the police when they came to his encampment at 2 am to catch anyone that may have a record. He emphasized that the police handcuffed him and others before running their background checks, saying they did so "for [their] safety." Negative and racially charged interactions with the police are one explanation as to why many unhoused individuals prefer to remain unsheltered in out of the way places that make it more difficult for service providers to find and interact with them, keeping them stuck in the churn.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following eight recommendations to better help people exit the cycle of homelessness, addiction, and incarceration in San Diego (also summarized in Table 3). Our recommendations reflect the perspectives of San Diegans who have histories of SUI, justice involvement, and homelessness. To effectively intervene at critical junctures, we believe we should start by listening to what those affected by the churn say works and what they say fails them within our current system. Importantly, the recommendations we make for programmatic improvements encourage us to view homelessness, criminal justice involvement, and SUI not as distinct experiences but rather as interrelated issues that interact and reinforce one another, keeping people in a devastating cycle.

Recommendation 1: Ensure Fit Between Treatment and Client

Diversion to treatment is an effective way to end the churn. It centers the need for recovery, not incarceration. Yet according to our participants, treatment was not always a pathway to stabilization. Treatment worked when the program model fit clients' needs. For some, this was a need for more structure. For others, it was a need for more flexibility.

Program fit can be established through an in-depth assessment of individual's perceptions of their addictions, their personalities, and their preferences, as well as their current circumstances.

We recommend that all treatment programs spend time discovering what works best for each patient. We found that treatment is most effective when it provides a high level of individualized care, offering structure and accountability but also enough flexibility to be able to adjust to different individuals' priorities and needs. By contrast, when treatment elements were felt to be punitive, or participants felt that programs were merely mechanisms for legal surveillance, people consistently opted to leave treatment. This included programs that took a "one-size fits all" approach that required strict adherence to a single set of rules and requirements which did not allow variances based on individual needs or priorities. Many expressed the sentiment that, in these programs, they were being set up to fail. They felt they had no other choice but to leave and become non-compliant with either court orders or the conditions of their probation or parole. In these instances, individuals fell right back into the churn, experiencing unsheltered homelessness and avoiding services so as not to face rearrest and reincarceration.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize peer support and trauma-informed care through a culturally competent lens

Treatment, whether court-ordered or offered post-release, not only provides individuals living with an SUI an opportunity to recover; it also provides stability through temporary housing. To be effective in helping people exit the churn, these programs must retain their unhoused and system-involved clients. Our participants who reported successfully completing treatment and who were able to exit the churn identified peer support and culturally competent care as effective aspects of recovery. This was especially true for individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ and Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Conversely, participants who remained caught in the churn and who reported negative experiences in court-ordered treatment frequently cited experiences that were not culturally sensitive or appropriate, and interactions that were not trauma informed.

Recommendation 3: Increase Post Recovery Housing Assistance

For people exiting carceral settings without an established housing plan, Medi-Cal funded residential treatment programs prevent episodes of homelessness. From our interviews, we found that residential treatment offered as diversion or at reentry provided housing for people who otherwise would have exited the criminal justice system into homelessness. Importantly, when

extended housing support was offered after residential treatment, individuals in our sample were able to exit the churn. Many of our participants indicated that their treatment programs connected them with ongoing outpatient care linked to sober living homes. Therefore, in addition to treatment, people exiting recovery programs could also receive an additional 3 months to a year of housing support, which was reported as crucial to helping individuals recover from addiction and achieve financial stability.[xxviii]

Recommendation 4: Expand Training and Resources for Probation and Parole

Our participants reported widely divergent experiences with their probation and parole officers, with those who exited the churn reporting greater care, responsiveness, and effort with referrals. Probation and parole officers primarily serve a law-enforcement role, but the ones we spoke with expressed that their role was increasingly expanding to include the provision of social services. We recommend greater training to support officers' work in their social service roles. In addition, ongoing coordination and engagement with city and county organizations would ensure that officers in San Diego are consistently well-informed about resources currently available to their clients. Along these lines, we recommend the development of a more robust system of communication and coordination between officers, treatment programs, and homeless services so that officers not only make better referrals but can provide "warm handoffs."

While state parole officers have a limited pool of funds to assist them in connecting parolees to housing, federal probation officers have no resources available to them at all. Further, federal probation officers told us that the number of halfway houses is not sufficient due to an increase in the number of people released, due to First Step Act sentence reductions[xxix], and a reduction of funding for halfway homes. We recommend better funding for halfway houses. We believe that providing funding to federal probation officers would give them a critical tool to help place and pay for housing for newly released individuals.

Recommendation 5: Increase Housing Assistance Across Systems

The majority of our participants were not provided with housing assistance at any critical juncture. We recommend increasing the number of housing resources available within the San Diego Continuum of Care. While rapid rehousing was often turned down in our sample, given its short duration, transitional housing programs and permanent supportive housing were accepted when offered, with positive effects. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, connections to sober living out of treatment and placement in halfway homes upon release are significant housing interventions that help individuals stabilize. Beyond the above, we recommend that individuals who will rely on the private housing market receive more housing navigation support. This might include pre-

arrangement with vetted and trusted landlords who would be willing to work with individuals who have histories of justice involvement. Many people in our sample, forced to go it alone, found it difficult to impossible to find a landlord who would rent to them.

Finally, a very small number of study participants who were prior sex offenders described significant barriers to both housing and access to drug treatment programs. This is due to the considerable and onerous restrictions on where registered sex offenders may reside. This group of people is acutely vulnerable to homelessness, which substantially increases the risk of recidivism. In addition, many residential treatment programs, sober living facilities, shelters and transitional housing programs do not allow registered sex offenders to access their services, regardless of their level of need. We recommend the creation of specific treatment options and transitional housing programs for this population or adjustments to the practices of service providers to allow them access to existing resources.

Recommendation 6: Expand programs that dismiss prior offenses and expunge criminal records and extend research on such remedies

Our participants who exited the churn all had stable income, most through employment. Many utilized programs such as Homeless Court, which not only dismissed misdemeanor offenses, but waived exorbitant fines and fees which prevented many individuals from getting a driver's license. Many of our study participants highlighted the benefits of Homeless Court in terms of its ability to help them seek out jobs now that they were free of criminal records and able to possess personal identification. Yet our team was only able to interview individuals upon their first engagement with the program. More research should be conducted to understand the true impact of expungement services.

Recommendation 7: Expand the availability of program-based employment and identify regional businesses that can support labor market reentry

Some homelessness programs hire clients directly to help establish current work histories and employable skills but this remedy is not broadly available. We therefore recommend expanding program-based employment. We also suggest that homelessness programs elicit support from regional businesses to create more reentry-focused employment opportunities. As

program-based employment is a relatively new intervention in San Diego that has only been implemented on a very small scale, such programs, as well as the support of regional businesses in helping people re-enter the job market, merit further study.

Recommendation 8: Address Systems Level Discrimination

In addition to facing bias and discrimination due to their justice involved status, histories of addiction, and experiences with homelessness, many individuals in our sample discussed additional barriers faced due to their race, gender, and ability status. Often, these experiences occurred at critical junctures, making it difficult for these individuals to stabilize. Based on these findings, we recommend that homelessness services programs, treatment centers, and probation and parole offices all create mandatory vetting systems and develop trainings for their teams so that racial discrimination, sexual or gender harassment, and ableism do not prevent individuals from moving forward successfully at critical junctures. Similarly, as many individuals highlighted discriminatory interactions with the police while living unsheltered, this recommendation extends to police departments as well.

Our interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2024. At the time of this writing there have been substantial changes to federal funding, including changes that affect housing options for people experiencing homelessness and changes that affect Medicaid (known in California as Medi-Cal), the principal funder of residential treatment for system-involved people, indigent individuals, and those experiencing homelessness. Additional cuts to reentry services for inmates at the federal level is also an issue. As many state and local services depend heavily on federal support, these, too, may be significantly curtailed. This situation is unfolding in real time, and the exact implications are not yet clear. In this report, we are describing a service landscape from 2024, which is changing as we speak. It is reasonable to assume that absent significant expenditures by the state of California, San Diego County, or the City of San Diego and other municipalities, these cuts will likely reduce rather than expand opportunities at critical junctures that were effective at helping people exit the churn at the time of our study.

Table 3. Recommendations

Critical Junctures	Findings: What Worked for Clients	Recommendations
Homelessness Services Engagement Prior to Arrest	Across the interviews, clients were hardly connected to housing. However, clients were able to benefit from resources that assisted with record expungement such as Homeless Court and employment services to help boost income. Finding stable employment is a struggle for unhoused individuals with a JI background, so homelessness organizations have started employing their clients.	• Increase low-barrier housing options and navigation assistance to prevent homelessness-related (re)arrests. • Conduct further research on expungement efforts and onsite work initiatives to address employment barriers faced by clients with histories of addiction, incarceration and homelessness. • Address systems level discrimination through adequate vetting and training of service providers and police officers.
Diversion to Treatment	Treatment programs only produced successful outcomes if clients were connected to a program that works for them. Some clients needed more flexibility, while others needed more structure and accountability. Programs with elements of peer support, culturally inclusive care, and long-term housing support were also indicators of program success.	• Ensure program fit between treatment and the client. There should be a greater focus on individualized care plans that offer structure and accountability, while providing the flexibility to tailor to ones' priorities. • Prioritize peer support and trauma-informed care through a cultural competence lens. • Increase post-recovery housing assistance to assist clients in maintaining sobriety, housing, and employment. • Address systems level discrimination through adequate vetting and training of treatment providers.
Probation/Parole at Reentry	At reentry, clients needed probation and parole officers that are knowledgeable of and able to provide referrals to necessary homelessness services and/or treatment centers. Probation and parole officers that demonstrated care and willingness to find the right programs for the clients were the most beneficial to helping them exit the churn.	• Expand training and resources for probation and parole officers to ensure they are knowledgeable about current and relevant homelessness and treatment services, and to enable them to directly place individuals into programs, such as halfway homes. • Identify additional programs and regional businesses that can support employment upon reentry. • Address systems level discrimination through adequate vetting and training of probation/parole officers.

Appendix

To analyze critical junctures in San Diego we conducted a community-driven research project. Community-driven research erodes distinctions historically made between researchers and non-researchers. Instead, it centers the knowledge of various community members who are deeply invested in the topic of research. Our team, which included two PhD researchers as well as five members of our Homelessness-Experienced Action Research Training (HEART) Fellowship, relied on early interviews with homelessness and SUI service providers and individuals working within the criminal justice system to develop our interview guides and our approaches to sampling. Teammates with lived experience of homelessness shaped the project by identifying which community partners would be of greatest value to our study's design.

In the early stages of our work, we interviewed individuals from the Public Defender's Office, the U.S. Probation office in San Diego, and the Federal Defenders of San Diego, as well as staff from the County of San Diego who specialize in resources for justice involved individuals. We also interviewed individuals from both large and small nonprofit organizations and faith-based organizations assisting the unhoused. Provider interviews continued for the duration of the project. Eventually we were able to speak with and gain insights from probation officers, staff at treatment facilities, and providers offering legal services, medical services, necessities, temporary shelter, and housing (see Table 2). Early provider interviews helped shape our case study, including our research questions, our study approach, and our choice of interview participants. Later interviews with providers helped us to hone our study's focus.

In order to gain insight into the conditions and constraints experienced by people locked within the churn, we interviewed a broad range of individuals with histories of justice involvement, substance use, and/or homelessness. We specifically solicited 29 interviews and conducted three focus groups (with 19 additional individuals) at community outreach events organized by Homeless Court (see Table 1 for individual interview participant demographics). Homeless Court is a program that seeks to interrupt the criminalization of homelessness. Misdemeanor offences associated with homelessness pose significant barriers to unhoused individuals attempting to exit homelessness and achieve stability. Homeless Court was created to allow a dismissal of misdemeanor charges, a forgiving of fines and fees, and a restoration of driving privileges contingent upon the individual demonstrating their efforts to stabilize their lives.[xxx] While Homeless Court originated in San Diego in 1989, the program has recently begun offering community outreach events, coordinating with a variety of other providers to bring a range of services to clients, thus making them more accessible. These services include probation and parole, as well as various resources for individuals experiencing homelessness, unstable housing, health issues, SUI, or un- or under-employment. We

tabled at Homeless Court resource fairs offered in the City of San Diego and in East County.

In addition to tabling at Homeless Court, we solicited interviews from individuals who had gone through two different recovery programs in San Diego County, CRASH and Stepping Stone. Both programs are used by local courts for diversion/alternative sentencing and are commonly used by probation and parole officers, either as a referral, or as a condition of sentencing or supervised release. CRASH and Stepping Stone are funded by Drug Medi-Cal, making their services available to indigent and unhoused clients. Both programs offer residential treatment for an average of 3-4 months and facilitate referrals to outpatient treatment programs and sober living homes, all of which are paid for by Drug Medi-Cal for the duration of three additional months. Because both programs are funded by Drug Medi-Cal, CRASH and Stepping Stone must conform with stipulated standards for treatment. For our purposes, this allows us to have a substantial basis for comparison.

We identified these programs because they also vary in significant ways. Stepping Stone is a mixed-gender treatment program that focuses on the needs of people in the LGBTQ community. Many elements of treatment at Stepping Stone are gender inclusive and informed by the specific needs of this community. Peer support is an additionally important aspect of this program. CRASH, in contrast, treats men and women in separate residential treatment settings that are single-sex.[xxxi]

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[i] The full study team in alphabetical order: Amelia Broadnax; Winnie Cheung; Isaiah Davis; Magda Gomez; Dennis Larkin; Stacey Livingstone; Ken Saragosa; Kuni Stearns; Chelees Turner; CJ Valasek.

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[v] Kushel, Margot, and Tiana Moore. 2023. "Toward a New Understanding: The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness." https://homelessness.ucsf.edu/sites/default/files/2023-06/CASPEH_Report_62023.pdf.

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[vii] National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. 2019. "Housing Not Handcuffs 2019: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities." https://homelesslaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf.

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[xiv] Kushel and Moore 2023.

[xv] Remster, Briamnmna. 2019. "A Life Course Analysis of Homeless Shelter Use among the Formerly Incarcerated." *Justice Quarterly* 36(3):437-465.

[xvi] Resources for physical and mental health are additional supports individuals can encounter at critical junctures that can additionally facilitate exits from the churn. While we heard a lot about health in our interviews, we heard more about deteriorating health as individuals remained in the churn than we did information on resources facilitating stability. As such, we will abstain from discussing health resources here and will review our health findings from this study in another publication.

[xvii] Regional Taskforce on Homelessness. 2024. "2024 Point-in-Time Count Data." Retrieved June 2, 2025 (https://www.rtfhsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024-San-Diego-Regional-Breakdown.pdf).

[xviii] Regional Taskforce on Homelessness. 2020. "2020 We All Count Report." https://www.rtfhsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2020-WeAllCount-Report-10.pdf.

[xix] Regional Taskforce on Homelessness. 2025. "2025 Jail Survey Data Report." https://www.rtfhsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/2025-Jail-Survey-Data-Report-FINAL.pdf.

[xx] https://www.homelesscourtprogram.org

[xxi] This model has also been applied to other special circumstances that merit diversion rather than incarceration (i.e. Mental Health Courts and Veterans Court).

[xxii] We asked every participant if they wanted to use their real name or a pseudonym. For those who wanted to use pseudonyms, they chose their own. Individuals are referenced here based on their preference.

[xxiii] Bares, Kyle J., and Thomas J. Mowen. 2019. "Examining the Parole Officer as a Mechanism of Social Support During Reentry From Prison." *Crime & Delinquency* 66(6-7).

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[xxv] Salazar, Leslie Ramos, and Shanna Peeples. 2024. "The Effects of Relationship Quality on Probation/Parole Officer Communication Orientation and the Occupational Self-Efficacy of Women on Probation/Parole." *Victims & Offenders*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2024.2390598.

[xxvi] It is important to note that the majority of our sample were not only still caught up in the churn, but specifically experiencing unsheltered homelessness, a population that has higher distrust of homelessness services either due to previous experiences or open warrants.

[xxvii] Nations, Jennifer, Yang, Michael, and Carlos Rivera-Saldana. 2025. "Passing Through and Staying Put: Emergency Shelter Trajectories in San Diego County, 2018-2023." https://drive.google.com/file/d/109mBiYTEuhN76dmCqJ87TiqZfPHG40_k/view.

[xxviii] Those who went through Drug Court at diversion received housing and treatment for 18 months to two years.

[xxix] https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/supreme-court-affirms-first-step-act-sentencing-reductions#:~:text=Among%20its%20provisions%2C%20the%20law,from%20these%20critical%20sentencing%20reforms.

[xxx] American Bar Association. 2025. "Homeless Courts." Retrieved June 13, 2025 (https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/homelessness_poverty/initiatives/homeless-courts/).

[xxxi] Neither facility discriminates based on gender identity or sexual identity, so we cannot assume that all residents at Stepping Stone are part of the LGBTQ community, or that everyone who goes to CRASH is heterosexual.