



Housing as a Pathway to Justice

Landscape Analysis of the City of Atlanta



DECEMBER 2025



Acknowledgements

Enterprise Community Partners' Southeast Market would like to thank HR&A Advisors, Inc. (HR&A) for supporting the research behind this comprehensive landscape analysis. Their work included a structured literature review, interviews with practitioners and system leaders, and a facilitated workshop to synthesize findings.

This research was made possible through the generous support of the Georgia Power Foundation. Unless otherwise specifically stated, the views and opinions expressed in the report are solely those of the report's author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Georgia Power Foundation or its affiliates.

About Enterprise Community Partners

Enterprise is a national nonprofit that exists to make a good home possible for the millions of families without one. We support community development organizations on the ground, aggregate and invest capital for impact, advance housing policy at every level of government, and build and manage communities ourselves. Since 1982, we have invested \$80.9 billion and created 1 million homes across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands – all to make home and community places of pride, power and belonging. Join us at [enterprisecommunity.org](https://www.enterprisecommunity.org).

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Background	7
Methodology	9
Key Findings.....	14
Inflection Points: Where Systems Intersect	15
Stakeholder Perspectives and Coordination Challenges.....	18
Organizational Survey Results.....	20
Case Study: CHRIS 180	22
Recommendations.....	24
Conclusion.....	28





Executive Summary

This landscape assessment explores the critical intersection between an individual’s housing insecurity and their involvement in the criminal legal system within the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Nationally, individuals with criminal records are nearly ten times more likely to experience homelessness.¹ In Georgia, where nearly 40% of adults have a criminal legal history and 1 in 18 residents is under some form of correctional control^{2,3}, this connection is particularly acute. The city of Atlanta is just one illustration of how an individual’s housing instability and criminal legal involvement can combine to entrench cycles of poverty, trauma, and exclusion, especially among Black communities and very low-income households living below the poverty line.

With support from the Georgia Power Foundation, Enterprise Community Partners Southeast launched the Housing as a Pathway to Justice (H2J) initiative to better understand how criminal legal and housing systems interact. The initiative would aim to also identify actionable, systems-level strategies that could stabilize and improve housing outcomes, reduce barriers to attaining housing, and advance economic mobility for those with criminal legal histories (defined as a history of involvement with the criminal legal system one or more times).

From 2024 to 2025, Enterprise Southeast conducted a multi-phase, mixed-methods assessment combining stakeholder interviews, literature review, a practitioner survey, an in-depth case study, as well as the development of a systems map. These efforts culminated in the identification of seven “inflection points,” – critical moments where housing instability and criminal legal involvement interact to either deepen vulnerability or offer opportunities for change

The seven inflection points are:

1. Criminalization of behaviors associated with survival for the unhoused
2. Pretrial detention and barriers to bail
3. Missed court dates leading to further legal entanglement
4. Legal debt and housing ineligibility
5. Institutional and private sector housing barriers
6. Housing instability due to foster care involvement and incarceration
7. Racial disparities and structural disinvestment in housing.

These points served as the organizing framework for qualitative and quantitative data analysis and reporting.

¹ Couloute, L., & Kopf, D. (2017). *Out of Prison and Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People*. Prison Policy Initiative.

² Georgia Department of Community Supervision. (2023). *Annual Report FY2023*.

³ Correctional control refers to persons who are incarcerated in prisons, jails, or under supervision or parole.

Findings from Enterprise Southeast’s research, data analysis, and interviews focusing on these inflection points reveal that people experiencing homelessness in Atlanta are frequently arrested for behaviors associated with survival, and those without stable housing face severe disadvantages in navigating the legal system, often resulting in detention, missed court dates, and mounting legal debt. Pretrial detention policies have exacerbated barriers to release, disproportionately affecting the extreme instability often found among unhoused individuals. Even small amounts of legal debt can impact the ability to access housing, and background checks continue to serve as barriers in both public and private housing markets, despite city of Atlanta ordinances prohibiting such discrimination.

Youth and families are also deeply impacted by interaction with the criminal legal system in a variety of ways. Young people aging out of foster care, some of whom may have also experienced parental incarceration, face high risks of homelessness and legal system involvement. Programs like community-based service provider **CHRIS 180**’s Summit Trail⁴ offer supportive housing, but capacity is limited, and federal tools such as Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers⁵ remain underutilized in Georgia.⁶ Organizations working with families such as **Fathers, Inc.** and the **Georgia Justice Project** each described how housing stability plays a central role in family reunification, employment readiness, and long-term stabilization. Despite some programs seeking to support families, services remain fragmented and siloed.

Survey data collected from local organizations working to support persons with criminal legal histories reflected the findings from this analysis’ scan of the field. Respondents rated housing access for people with criminal legal records as highly difficult, and identified the top service needs as legal assistance, financial support, addiction counseling, case management, and family-focused services. Barriers to housing access included affordability, income instability, criminal background denials, poor credit, and lack of transportation. Most respondents also reported gaps in their ability to offer service provider training, particularly in areas such as trauma-informed care and reentry navigation.

Stakeholder interviews revealed a passionate but fragmented service ecosystem. While many organizations are undertaking critical work, no single entity has emerged as a system wide leader to coordinate the many aspects of this ecosystem, which includes housing providers, legal advocates, behavioral health agencies, and the criminal legal system researched in this assessment. Organizations rely heavily on informal relationships, interagency referrals, limited funding, and internal ingenuity to support persons with criminal legal histories, often without the infrastructure needed to achieve scale. Despite these challenges, promising models are emerging, such as Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD)’s diversion services, CHRIS 180’s trauma-informed care, and collaborative housing developments like The Melody.

⁴ CHRIS 180 is a mental health and family services organization in Atlanta Georgia that aims to help children, young adults, and families overcome trauma

⁵ Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers are dedicated vouchers providing rental assistance to help youth exiting the foster care system who are in danger of becoming homeless or youth who have aged out of the foster care system who are currently homeless. Additional information can be found at: <https://www.hud.gov/hud-partners/public-indian-housing-fyi>

⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2021). *Foster Youth to Independence Initiative*.

Based on these findings, the report offers six core recommendations:

- Build coordinated infrastructure across housing and criminal legal sectors through working groups, referral protocols, and shared decision-making.
- Expand low-barrier housing options and incentivize landlord participation through risk mitigation and flexible subsidy tools.
- Strengthen enforcement of fair housing protections and scale expungement services.
- Invest in trauma-informed training, peer mentorship, and wraparound case management for service providers and outreach organizations, inclusive of resources useful in the overlap of the housing and criminal legal ecosystems
- Close data gaps to better target interventions and track outcomes across systems.
- Center the lived expertise of persons impacted by the criminal legal system in all program and policy decisions.

The Housing as a Pathway to Justice report is a preliminary but powerful call to action. It identifies both systemic barriers and promising solutions that, if scaled and coordinated, could transform the Atlanta housing and criminal legal ecosystems into more mutually supportive ones. By grounding the work in real experiences and structural analysis, and by elevating the leadership of directly impacted people, Atlanta can lead in making housing a foundation, not a barrier, for justice and stability.





Background

Across the United States, housing insecurity and involvement in the criminal legal system are deeply intertwined. One in three Americans has a criminal record, and individuals with such histories are nearly ten times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.⁷ More than a third of emancipated youth face homelessness within a few years of turning 18.⁸ In Georgia, this intersection is especially pronounced: nearly 40% of adults have a criminal legal history, and approximately 1 in 18 Georgians is currently under some form of correctional control, such as parole, probation, or incarceration.⁹

The relationship between housing and the criminal legal system is not incidental. A criminal record can significantly reduce one's chances of securing employment or safe, stable, affordable housing, and housing instability increases the likelihood of further criminal legal involvement. This cycle of exclusion, often described as a "revolving door," has devastating consequences not only for individuals and families, but for communities and public systems. For many, minor legal infractions result in escalating legal debt, housing evictions, or jail time, particularly for those already struggling with poverty, trauma, or mental health issues.

The city of Atlanta, Georgia, the geographic focus of this landscape assessment, illustrates many of these national trends at the local level. The city's housing affordability crisis has worsened over the last decade, with more than 230,000 affordable housing units lost in the region between 2018 and 2023.¹⁰ At the same time, rates of homelessness, particularly unsheltered homelessness, have remained stubbornly high. In 2022, the Atlanta Community Support Project found that while unhoused people comprise less than 0.4% of the city's population, they accounted for over 12% of arrests, many for survival-based behaviors like loitering or trespassing.¹¹

⁷ Couloute, L., & Kopf, D. (2017). *Out of Prison and Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People*. Prison Policy Initiative.

⁸ Dworsky, A., & Courtney, M. E. (2009). *Homelessness and the Transition from Foster Care to Adulthood*. *Child Welfare*, 88(4), 23–56.

⁹ Georgia Department of Community Supervision. (2023). *Annual Report FY2023*.

¹⁰ Atlanta Regional Commission. (2023). *State of Housing in Atlanta Report*.

¹¹ Atlanta Community Support Project. (2022). *Report on Criminalization of Homelessness in Atlanta*.

Individuals with criminal legal histories in Atlanta face multiple, overlapping barriers to securing housing. Legal debt, very low or no income, background checks, discrimination, and public policies that create barriers that all contribute to persistent housing instability. These challenges are magnified for specific subpopulations, such as youth aging out of foster care, individuals with serious and persistent mental illness, or parents reuniting with children post-incarceration. Despite the presence of many dedicated organizations working to support reentry or address homelessness, efforts remain fragmented, siloed, and most significantly, under-resourced.

Recognizing the urgency of these challenges, Enterprise Community Partners launched a national effort in 2022, known as the Housing as a Pathway to Justice (H2J) initiative, which focused on identifying barriers to safe, stable, affordable housing for persons with criminal legal backgrounds defined as “a history of involvement with the criminal legal system.” Additionally, local efforts to better understand these dynamics were also launched in Cleveland, New York City, and the Gulf Coast. The purpose of this project is to better understand how housing access intersects with the criminal legal system, and to identify practical, systems-level interventions that could improve upward mobility, promote housing stability, and improve community well-being.

In 2024, with the support of the Georgia Power Foundation, Enterprise Southeast conducted a landscape assessment to examine the overlap between housing and persons with criminal legal histories, with a particular focus on the unhoused. This work focused on the boundaries of the city of Atlanta, Georgia, as a definable, geographic starting point. This report explores the overlap between the achievement of safe, stable, affordable housing in the city of Atlanta and those with criminal legal histories, as well as a desire to better understand the opportunities, barriers, gaps, or systemic experiences involved in this intersection.

The resulting landscape assessment should not be considered an exhaustive review of all aspects of potential research on this topic. Both housing and criminal legal involvement are deeply complex and multifaceted issues and could not be explored in their totality within the scope of this work.





Methodology

Within this landscape analysis, a particular emphasis was placed on Atlanta, Georgia for several reasons. The city of Atlanta, Georgia serves as a single, defined, bureaucratic entity with definable policies, funding, partners, and legal structures. While much of what was learned is applicable more regionally and perhaps beyond, the city of Atlanta was chosen as an initial, specific starting point for this work

To better understand the intersection of criminal legal system involvement and housing instability in Atlanta, Enterprise Community Partners Southeast led a multi-phased, mixed-method landscape assessment between 2024 and 2025. This assessment combined qualitative and quantitative data collection, partner engagement, and cross-sector analysis. The findings are organized around seven “inflection points” — critical moments in the cycle of homelessness and criminal legal involvement where systems interact to entrench instability or create opportunities for disruption.

This section describes the methodology by data source and explains how each contributed to identifying and understanding the inflection points.



Background Stakeholder Interviews

In early 2024, Enterprise Southeast conducted preliminary interviews with individuals working in both the housing and criminal legal ecosystems to explore early insights and identify key issues. These conversations helped shape the study’s design and surfaced recurring themes related to policy gaps, service fragmentation, and structural barriers.

To guide the early design of the landscape assessment, Enterprise Southeast prioritized interviews with stakeholders working in or closely connected to the criminal legal system — particularly those whose work intersected with housing. Given the team’s existing expertise in affordable housing, the goal of this phase was to deepen understanding of the criminal legal system ecosystem, identify key actors, and explore how system-involved individuals experience housing instability. Interviewees were selected based on existing Enterprise relationships, referrals from trusted partners, and a snowball sampling approach in which each conversation yielded new contacts for subsequent outreach. This strategy ensured a diverse range of insights while grounding the project in the lived realities and institutional knowledge of those working most closely with justice-impacted populations.

Organizations Interviewed in the Exploratory Phase:

- Atlanta Legal Aid
- Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation
- Barred Business
- City of Refuge
- Georgia Coalition for Education in Prison
- Hope Springs Housing
- Lunoor Consulting
- Reentry Housing Partnership
- Quest Community Development Organization

Landscape Analysis and Inflection Point Framework

After this initial phase, Enterprise Southeast engaged HR&A Advisors, Inc. (HR&A) to conduct a comprehensive landscape analysis to better understand:

- The experience of persons with a criminal legal history seeking safe, stable, affordable housing in the city of Atlanta
- Existing efforts to support this population
- Potential areas for further exploration or system improvement

This work included a structured literature review, interviews with practitioners and system leaders, and a facilitated workshop to synthesize findings.

These early discussions helped identify the need for deeper inquiry into the overlapping systems affecting persons with criminal legal histories and informed the development of a more formal research effort.



DELIVERABLE 1: Identification of Inflection Points

HR&A conducted a literature review of national and local sources, including reports, journal articles, policy documents, and media coverage, focused on the connection between the achievement of housing and criminal legal involvement. Findings were organized into seven “inflection points,”¹² defined as stages in an individual’s set of experiences where they are especially vulnerable to being pulled into, or remaining trapped within, the cycle of homelessness and correctional control. These inflection points now serve as the analytical structure for the full report.

DELIVERABLE 2: Stakeholder Interviews

To understand the landscape of organizations working to disrupt the cycle of homelessness and criminal legal system interaction, HR&A conducted interviews with service providers, government agencies, and advocacy organizations across the city of Atlanta. These interviews explored the programs, partnerships, funding, and gaps related to each inflection point. Interviews were conducted via Zoom between 11/12/2024 and 12/9/2024.

Table I: Organizations Interviewed by Inflection Point Alignment:

Inflection Focus	Organizations
Inflection Points #1–3: <i>Homelessness entangles people in the criminal legal system</i>	The Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative, CHRIS 180, Georgia Justice Project, Partners for HOME
Inflection Points #4–5: <i>The criminal legal system prevents access to stable housing</i>	CHRIS 180, Fathers Incorporated, Georgia Justice Project, Partners for HOME, City of Atlanta Mayor’s Office -Special Projects
Inflection Point #6: <i>Children with justice-involved parents enter homelessness or the justice system</i>	CHRIS 180
Inflection Point #7: <i>Housing market disparities impact low-income communities and people of color</i>	CHRIS 180, City of Atlanta, Partners for HOME

DELIVERABLE 3: Synthesis Workshop

On January 15, 2025, HR&A led a synthesis workshop with Enterprise Southeast staff to analyze findings and discuss opportunities for future research, investment, or convening. The seven inflection points were validated and further refined during this session.

¹² See Figure #1 for a list of Inflection Points

Survey of Housing and Justice Sector Organizations

To complement the interviews and broaden the stakeholder input, Enterprise Southeast administered a short electronic survey to 20 organizational partners working in housing, reentry, behavioral health, and legal services. The survey captured perspectives on housing access for people with criminal records, unmet client needs, training gaps, financial supports, and system coordination challenges.

Survey Response Rate:

- 9 out of 20 organizations completed the survey, yielding a 45% response rate.

Topics included:

- Organizational mission and populations served
- Perceived difficulty of housing access for individuals with criminal legal histories
- Barriers to housing (e.g., affordability, background checks)
- Availability of wraparound supports
- Training and technical assistance needs (e.g., trauma-informed care)

Survey findings were used to validate themes from interviews and to triangulate conclusions across methods.

Literature Review

The literature review, conducted jointly by HR&A and Enterprise Southeast, synthesized current research and data to contextualize the lived experiences shared in interviews. Sources spanned criminal justice policy, housing access, affordability trends, and the impact of justice involvement on youth and families.

The literature review directly informed the framing of the seven inflection points and highlighted the racialized and systemic nature of many housing barriers faced by people with criminal legal histories.



CHRIS 180

Case Study: CHRIS 180

Enterprise Southeast developed a detailed case study of CHRIS 180, an Atlanta nonprofit offering trauma-informed services to individuals, families, persons reentering society, and youth aging out of foster care. The study documented best practices in housing placement, mental health integration, and client engagement.

Case study sources included:

- Interviews with staff
- Document review (program overviews, service models)

CHRIS 180's Summit Trail program was highlighted as a promising model for wraparound reentry support in Atlanta.

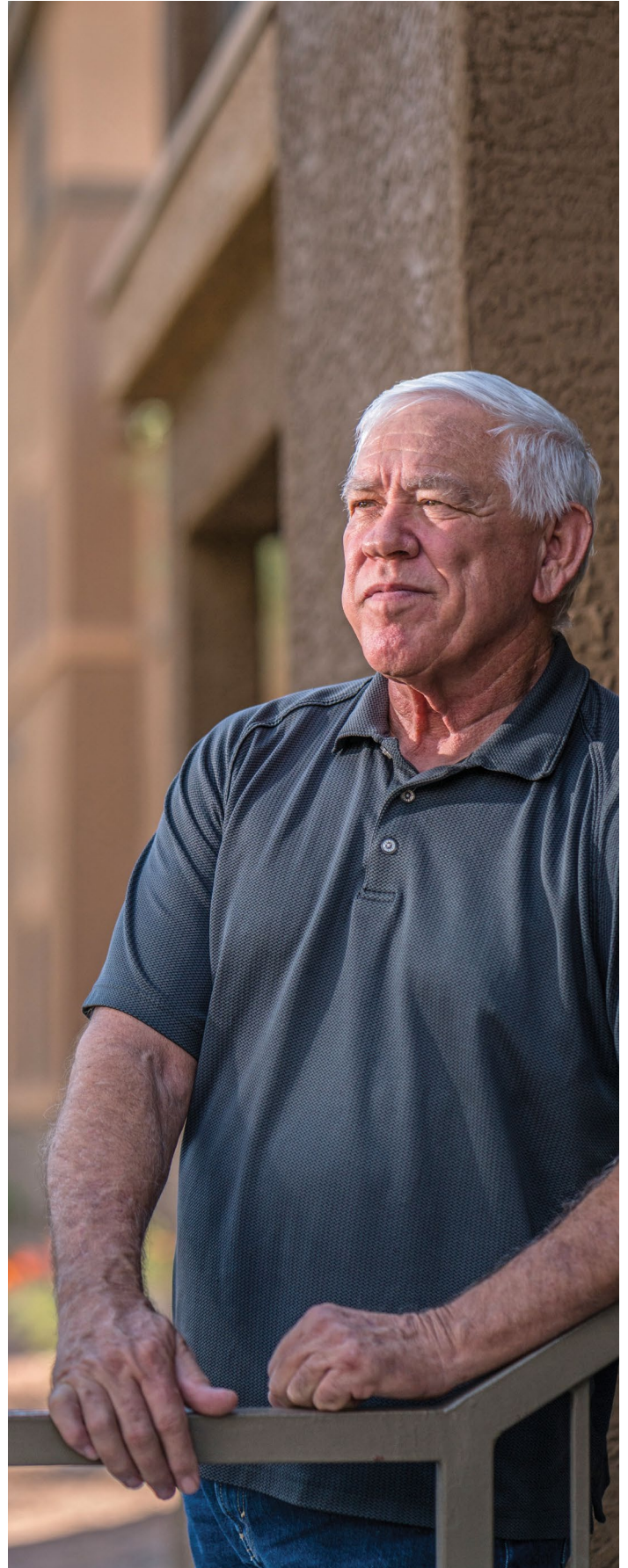
System Mapping

A visual systems map was developed to represent the seven inflection points identified through literature review and interviews. The map illustrates how individuals navigate the intersection of housing and legal systems and how they may become caught in cycles of instability.

Development process:

- Iterative drafting and stakeholder feedback
- Incorporation of real-life service pathways and decision points
- Integration of policy and practice constraints (e.g., HUD regulations, cash bail laws)

The system map was used to facilitate discussion during the synthesis workshop and serves as a reference point throughout the report.





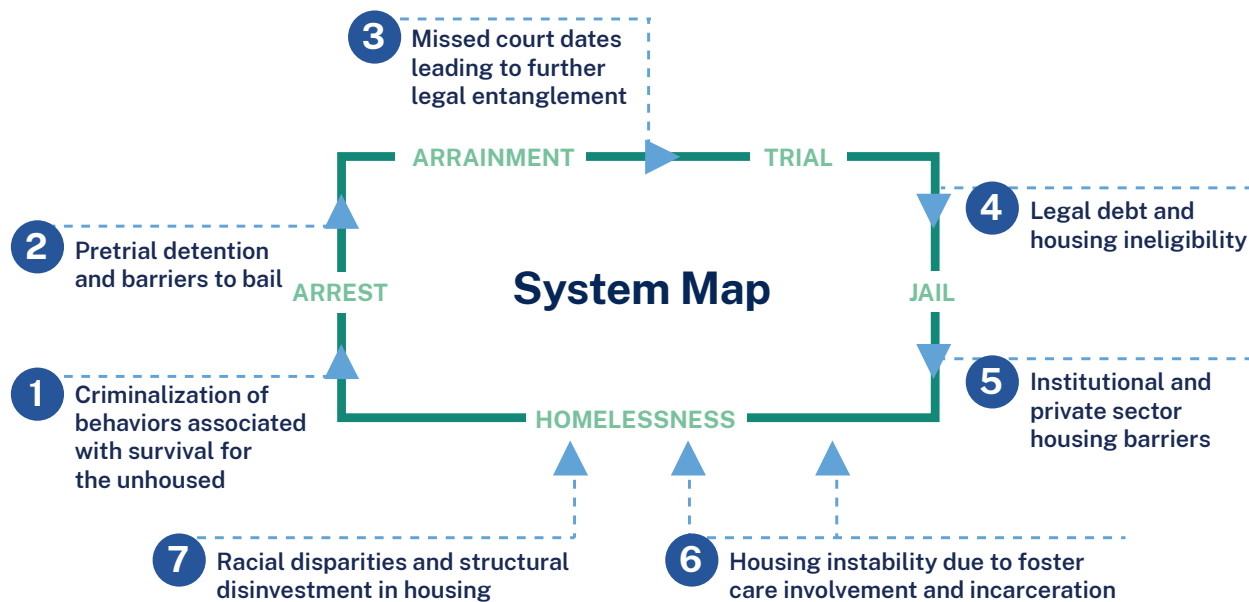
Key Findings

Inflection Points: Where Systems Intersect

The assessment identified seven inflection points, critical moments where criminal legal involvement and housing insecurity reinforce each other:

1. Criminalization of behaviors associated with survival for the unhoused
2. Pretrial detention and barriers to bail
3. Missed court dates leading to further legal entanglement
4. Legal debt and housing ineligibility
5. Institutional and private sector housing barriers
6. Housing instability due to foster care involvement and incarceration
7. Racial disparities and structural disinvestment in housing

Figure 1: Inflection points in the cycle of homelessness and criminal justice system involvement



Grouped into three thematic categories, the inflection points reveal the recurring, cyclical nature of barriers experienced by persons with criminal legal histories as well as those in their communities facing poverty, racial discrimination, or generational trauma. Across all points, a common thread emerged: while many organizations in Atlanta are doing critical work to interrupt this cycle, the lack of a single, coordinated, strategic effort, along with a lack of resources and support for affordable housing production, as well as policy-based criminalization of survival behaviors, continue to undermine progress.

This report summarizes the dynamics and barriers at each inflection point, highlighting community perspectives, systemic patterns, and opportunities for intervention.

1. Criminalization of behaviors associated with survival for the unhoused
2. Pretrial detention and barriers to bail
3. Missed court dates leading to further legal entanglement
4. Legal debt and housing ineligibility
5. Institutional and private sector housing barriers
6. Housing instability due to foster care involvement and incarceration
7. Racial disparities and structural disinvestment in housing

Homelessness Entangles People in the Criminal Legal System (Inflection Points 1–3)

Inflection Point 1: Criminalization of Survival Behaviors

People experiencing homelessness in Atlanta are disproportionately criminalized for unavoidable survival behaviors like sleeping outdoors or loitering. Although unhoused persons make up just 0.4% of the city's population, they account for over 12% of arrests.¹³ These patterns are evident in policing data and stakeholder interviews.

Programs like the Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative (PAD) can provide diversion from arrest but are under-resourced. In 2024, PAD reported that 80% of clients cited housing as their most urgent need.¹⁴ Surveyed organizations named homelessness and criminalization as top barriers for clients with criminal legal histories.

Inflection Point 2: Pretrial Detention & Bail Barriers

Unhoused individuals are often denied bail or held pretrial due to perceived flight risk. Georgia Senate Bill 63¹⁵ has worsened access to pretrial release by expanding mandatory cash bail. Interviewees from PAD and Georgia Justice Project shared client experiences in which this detention created both housing and employment instability by disrupting the ability to work, pay bills, and manage daily tasks, while survey respondents linked pretrial detention to long-term housing insecurity for similar reasons.

¹³ Atlanta Community Support Project. (2022). *Report on Criminalization of Homelessness in Atlanta*. Harrell, L & Nam-Sonenstein, B. (2023). Unhoused and under arrest: How Atlanta polices poverty. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/06/08/atlanta-poverty/>

¹⁴ Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative. (2024). Monthly Report. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6679d89a8633a045155e4e25/t/668c194545605e0c966e1775/1720457542322/FINAL_PAD_CoA_Fulton_Co_2024_May.pdf

¹⁵ More information available here: <https://www.legis.ga.gov/api/legislation/document/20232024/222855>

Inflection Point 3: Missed Court Dates Leading to Further Legal Entanglement

Without a permanent address, transportation, or basic resources, many unhoused individuals do not receive court paperwork and/or miss court appearances, leading to warrants and deeper system involvement. One local study found that 86% of former Atlanta City Detention Center detainees had warrants from previous missed court dates. Organizations like Georgia Justice Project offer assistance navigating legal services, but survey results show that scaled access to criminal legal expertise remains a critical gap.

The Criminal Legal System Prevents Access to Stable Housing (Inflection Points 4–5)

Inflection Point 4: Legal Debt & Housing Ineligibility

Unpaid fines and legal fees create major barriers to securing housing. A 2023 study found that 41% of unhoused arrestees from Fulton County and/or Atlanta Municipal Court had prior unpaid fines, averaging \$536.¹⁶ These debts accumulate interest, impact credit histories, and can result in evictions or disqualification from housing programs.

Interviewees cited the lack of financial relief as a significant hurdle. Survey respondents also flagged debt as a top barrier to client housing access, indicative of its close ties to low or a total lack of income, credit scores, financial stability, and other fiscally based issues that can impact housing achievement

Inflection Point 5: Institutional and Private Sector Housing Barriers

Despite city-level efforts like Ordinance 22-0-1748 (which prohibits housing discrimination based on several categories including criminal history),¹⁷ many landlords continue to reject applicants with records. Private market discretion remains a challenge. Interviewees cited efforts to provide fair housing education to landlords, but scaling these efforts is difficult, and would require additional resources as well as further capacity building.

Organizations reported the time consuming but critical role of cultivating partnerships with the limited number of known “background-friendly” landlords, noting that even minor criminal history can prevent housing access.¹⁸ Interviewees emphasized the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and expanded access to affordable housing.

Intergenerational and Disparate Impacts (Inflection Points 6–7)

Inflection Point 6: Housing instability due to foster care involvement and incarceration

Youth aging out of foster care face disproportionately high rates of homelessness and interaction with the criminal legal system. Nationally, 20% of emancipated foster youth experience homelessness upon emancipation;¹⁹ emancipated foster youth face substantially higher chances of criminal legal involvement.²⁰ Local programs like CHRIS 180’s Summit Trail provide trauma-informed housing, but capacity is limited and federal programs (e.g., Foster Youth to Independence I vouchers) remain underused in Georgia.²¹

¹⁶ Harrell, L & Nam-Sonenstein, B. (2023). Unhoused and under arrest: How Atlanta polices poverty. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/06/08/atlanta-poverty/>

¹⁷ City of Atlanta. (2022). *City Ordinance 22-0-1748*.

¹⁸ National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2021). *Barriers to Housing for People with Criminal Records*

¹⁹ National Foster Youth Institute. (2025). Housing & Homelessness. nfyi.org/issues/homelessness-2/

²⁰ Brandon Crawford, Angela B. Pharris, Rachel Dorsett-Burrell, *Risk of Serious Criminal Involvement Among Former Foster Youth Aging Out of Care, Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 93, 2018, Pages 451-457. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019074091830355>.

²¹ Stokes, S. (2024, June 11). Former Foster Youth Are Eligible for Federal Housing Aid. Georgia Isn’t Helping Them Get It. ProPublica. www.propublica.org/article/georgia-foster-youth-housing-vouchers-homelessness.

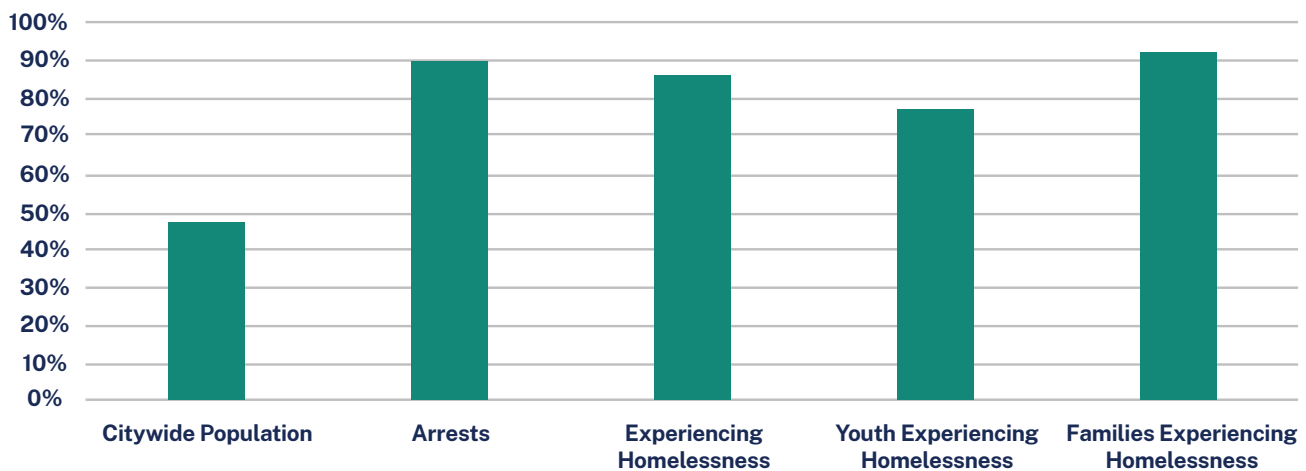
Stakeholders noted that youth exiting foster care tend to be low-income and lack rental history, financial literacy, or the “soft skills” needed to succeed in traditional housing settings. Calls for more wraparound supportive services were common from interviewees.

Inflection Point 7: Racial Disparities and Disinvestment in Housing

Black Atlantans are overrepresented in homelessness and incarceration rates. These disparities stem from systemic racism in public policy, redlining, and economic exclusion. Surveyed organizations named racial equity as a priority, and interviews displayed how these dynamics reinforce barriers for individuals of color with criminal legal backgrounds.

Programs like [Barred Business](#) and Georgia Justice Project are working to expand housing access and reduce discrimination through advocacy and community education. However, stakeholders consistently emphasized that these efforts must be well resourced with additional capacity development to be scaled system-wide to create meaningful change.

Figure 2: African American Share of Subpopulations²²



²² United States Census Bureau (2024) Atlanta. [census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/atlantacitygeorgia,US](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/atlantacitygeorgia,US); Federal Bureau of Investigations. Crime Data Reporter, cde.ucr.cjis.gov; Partners for Home. 2024 Atlanta Point In Time Count. partnersforhome.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PfH_PIT2024-2.pdf

Stakeholder Perspectives and Coordination Challenges

Interviews revealed a deeply fragmented system. While providers share clients and refer widely across services, no centralized coordination mechanism emerged.

In addition to the literature review and systems mapping, stakeholder interviews played a critical role in illuminating the lived realities, systemic gaps, and opportunities for collaboration within Atlanta’s housing and criminal legal ecosystems. These conversations added necessary depth to the inflection points by providing real-time insights from organizations working directly with persons with criminal legal histories, both those unhoused and those navigating reentry.

Stakeholders represented a diverse set of roles. While their missions varied, all shared a commitment to improving outcomes for people with criminal legal histories. Some focused on this population specifically, while others served this population as part of their larger efforts. Across interviews, stakeholders described a disjointed yet passionate service landscape, marked by innovative programs, significant constraints, and widespread acknowledgment that housing access remains one of the greatest barriers to stability and upward mobility after criminal legal system involvement.

The following section highlights how stakeholders operate at and across the identified inflection points. It should be noted that the exploration of stakeholders and coordination efforts at these inflection points below differs from the presentation above. While previously in this analysis, these inflection points were explored and grouped through an experiential lens, the following is presented through a coordination lens. The following analysis also highlights how housing and criminal legal systems currently interact in Atlanta, where partnerships exist, and where further coordination is critically needed.

Inflection Point 1: Criminalization of behaviors associated with survival for the unhoused.

Stakeholders identified several core organizations responding to the criminalization of homelessness in Atlanta. PAD (Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative) offers community-based diversion from arrest for minor offenses commonly associated with survival behaviors (e.g., sleeping outdoors), substance abuse, or extreme mental health challenges. PAD reports that 80% of clients listed housing as a need.²³ However, interviewees noted a severe shortage of shelter and supportive housing resources.

Partners for HOME serves as the lead coordinating agency in Atlanta’s Continuum of Care, and coordinates with the city of Atlanta and Atlanta Housing to manage outreach and shelter placement for unhoused individuals. Though some innovative models, like The Melody’s container housing, show promise, stakeholders expressed concern that Coordinated Entry rules exclude many in crisis (e.g., car dwellers, ‘couch surfers’). While the city has made strides in developing alternatives to arrest, housing bottlenecks persist across the system.

Inflection Points 2-4: Barriers to pretrial release, missed court, and legal debt.

These inflection points reveal how instability fuels deeper legal entanglement. Organizations like the Georgia Justice Project, CHRIS 180, and Fathers, Inc. all described working with clients who cannot afford bail, miss court due to logistical barriers, or are burdened by fines and fees that delay housing eligibility.

Georgia Justice Project supports housing through legal advocacy (e.g., clearing records, educating landlords) and described how unpaid debt, even as little as \$500, can bar clients from housing. CHRIS 180 emphasized case management that begins pre-release and continues after reentry, often involving housing navigation. Fathers, Inc. builds informal networks with landlords willing to lease to returning citizens, though rent burdens and low wages challenge long-term stability.

²³ Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative. (2024). Monthly Report. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6679d89a8633a045155e4e25/t/668c194545605e0c966e1775/1720457542322/FINAL_PAD_CoA_Fulton_Co_2024_May.pdf

Voucher-based programs (e.g., Reentry Housing Partnership, Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities) housing were frequently mentioned, but availability and landlord participation are limited. Stakeholders stressed the need for better-coordinated service delivery and enforcement of fair housing protections.

Inflection Points 5-6: Family barriers and intergenerational impacts.

Stakeholders emphasized that housing challenges do not end with the formerly incarcerated individual, but extend to children, partners, and extended family. CHRIS 180, Fathers, Inc., and Georgia Justice Project each offer services for families in transition. CHRIS 180's Summit Trail program provides supportive housing for youth exiting foster care, many of whom have experienced parental incarceration. Fathers, Inc. combines parenting support with housing assistance to help fathers reengage with their families.

These organizations stressed the importance of “soft skills” and wraparound supports, including how to be a good tenant, manage conflict, and navigate new systems. Expungement programs, such as Georgia Justice Project's 2nd Chance Desks, also help stabilize families by expanding access to jobs and housing for parents. Despite these efforts, stakeholders highlighted that services are siloed and extremely limited in scale.

More integrated programming is needed to disrupt intergenerational cycles of housing instability and legal system involvement.

Seeking to better understand the housing needs of families impacted by the criminal legal system, this landscape analysis sought to identify geographic clusters of this population in the city of Atlanta. At the time of this report, this analysis found no reliable, publicly available data at the city level to map concentrations of children with incarcerated parents.

Federal and state data systems (e.g., [National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System](#) and [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System](#)) restrict access and lack local detail. Although general statistics suggest that foster care involvement increases the risk of homelessness and legal system contact, data specific to local patterns remains difficult to obtain. Programs such as CHRIS 180, Kids2Leaders, and [Motherhood Beyond Bars](#) serve this population directly, but research is needed to understand geographic variation and target upstream interventions.

Inflection point 7: Racial Disparities and Disinvestment in Housing.

While no large-scale campaigns were identified focusing on both housing and persons with criminal legal histories, community education and advocacy in this arena are underway. Barred Business and Georgia Justice Project lead public-facing efforts to shift narratives, pass protective policies, and educate landlords. Their advocacy helped pass Atlanta Ordinance 22-0-1748,²⁴ which prohibits housing discrimination based on criminal history.

Georgia also recognizes Second Chance Month in the month of April, highlighting the challenges of reentry and reintegration to society after incarceration. In addition to national awareness campaigns, state and local organizations such as the Georgia Department of Community Supervision and the Center for Employment Opportunities also work to increase public awareness on this issue. However, enforcement against discrimination remains weak, and interviewees said stigma and bias still limit access to housing for people of color with criminal records. Stakeholders recommended stronger implementation of fair housing rules, deeper investment in culturally competent service delivery, and coordinated messaging to shift public perceptions.

²⁴ City of Atlanta. (2022). *City Ordinance 22-0-1748*.

Organizational Survey Results

Survey data highlighted the difficulty in housing access, needs and barriers, training gaps, and policy implementation challenges across Atlanta's housing network.

The survey gathered perspectives from organizational stakeholders serving individuals with criminal legal histories in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Nine responses were collected out of 20 invitations, yielding a response rate of 45%. The survey aimed to understand barriers to housing access, service needs, training capacity, and policy or funding challenges within the local network.

Access Difficulty

When asked how difficult it is for people with criminal legal histories to access safe, stable, affordable housing (on a scale from 1 = "extremely easy" to 10 = "extremely difficult"), the average score reported was 6.78. This suggests a moderate to high level of difficulty across service populations.

Top Needs for Housing Stability

Respondents identified a set of recurring service needs as essential to supporting housing attainment. The five most frequently cited needs were:

- Legal assistance and advocacy
- Financial assistance with housing costs
- Case management and navigation support
- Addiction counseling
- Family reunification or family-related supports

These responses reflect the need for wraparound services that address legal, behavioral, and relational barriers to stability, as well as support for attaining affordable housing.

Primary Barriers to Housing Access

Organizations highlighted multiple overlapping systemic and individual-level barriers. The most frequently cited challenges included:

- Affordability and lack of available housing units
- Lack of sustainable or verifiable income
- Denials based on background checks or prior convictions
- Inadequate access to transportation
- Poor or limited credit history

These findings align with broader concerns raised in the literature and stakeholder interviews about structural inequities and discriminatory practices.

Housing Outcomes Achieved

Respondents reported that people with criminal legal convictions often access the following types of housing:

- Emergency shelter
- Transitional housing
- Informal arrangements with friends or family
- No housing (e.g., sleeping in vehicles or public spaces)

These trends suggest that many individuals cycle through unstable, short-term housing situations, with limited access to long-term or permanent placements.

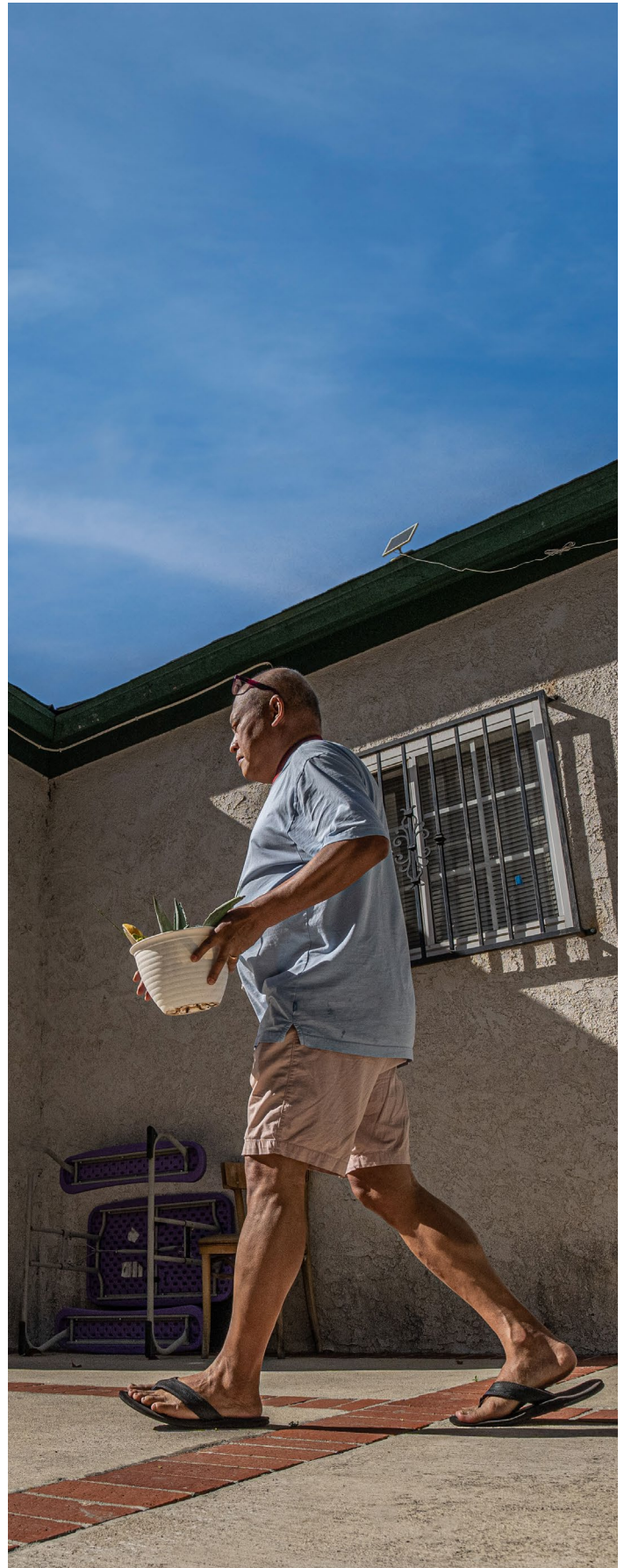
Training and Organizational Capacity

Only a small number of respondents reported offering formal training or trauma-informed care tailored to individuals with criminal legal histories.

Among those that did, practices included:

- Licensed social workers providing staff training in cultural humility and de-escalation
- A structured 6-week curriculum for returning fathers
- General awareness of the importance of trauma-informed practice, though not always implemented institutionally

This reflects a gap in workforce development and a potential opportunity to strengthen the system's responsiveness.





CASE STUDY:

Chris 180

Breaking the Cycle: Preventing Homelessness and Incarceration for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

How nonprofit service provider, Chris 180, is creating stability for vulnerable youth across Metro Atlanta.



CHALLENGE: The Foster Care to Homelessness to Incarceration Pipeline

- In Atlanta, youth aging out of foster care face a high risk of homelessness, with 50% experiencing homelessness within six months.
- Lack of stable housing increases the likelihood of criminal legal involvement, as homelessness can lead to arrests for minor infractions and missed court dates.
- Former foster youth are significantly overrepresented in the criminal legal system:
 - Over 50% have an encounter with the juvenile legal system by age 17.
 - 25% will be involved in the criminal system within two years of leaving foster care.
 - 70% of former foster youth are arrested at least once before age 26.
- Trauma, frequent moves, and lack of family support make it difficult for these young adults to navigate housing, education, and employment.



CHRIS 180 supports the mental health needs of Atlanta's children, youth, and families.

CHRIS 180 provides critical mental and behavioral healthcare services, including therapy, counseling, and school-based support within 80+ local schools. They also offer foster care and adoption placements, safe housing, and programs that create pathways to independent living for young adults. Their 200-person team delivers stability today while helping build thriving futures. Since their founding in 1981, they have proudly served more than 250,000 of their neighbors. Find support, get involved, and learn more about how they are building a stronger metro Atlanta community at www.chris180.org.

From Foster Care to Independence with CHRIS 180's Holistic Support

CHRIS 180 helps coordinate housing and wraparound services to help youth successfully transition from foster care to independence. Key components of their approach include:

- Employment or education focus: Youth should be working or in school, ensuring future self-sufficiency.
- Financial stability support: Youth save 30% of their income to prepare for future housing needs.
- Access to services: Care coordination to link youth with mental health services and other critical services.
- Soft skills development: Programs emphasize emotional intelligence and social skills.
- Early intervention (ages 15-16) to build pathways to independence before aging out of care.
- Age-appropriate services: Programmatic rules accommodate the age and stage of the individual.

Summit Trail Apartments: Permanent Supportive Housing for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

- Clustered housing model providing stable homes, community support, and wraparound services.
- Ages served: 17-24, including young parents with children.
- Operated by CHRIS 180 under a contract with the City of Atlanta and the Atlanta Housing Authority.
- In 2024, Summit Trail housed 80 young adults and 12 children, offering them a safe and stable foundation for the future.

CONTACT

Shannon Ball, Associate Director, Southeast
sball@enterprisecommunity.org

CONNECT

Enterprise, Southeast Market
enterprisecommunity.org/southeast
[@enterprisenow](https://www.instagram.com/enterprisenow)



Recommendations

This landscape assessment reveals a deeply fragmented ecosystem where individuals with criminal legal histories face immense challenges accessing safe, stable, and affordable housing. Despite passionate and committed organizations working to break the cycle of homelessness and criminal legal system involvement at various inflection points, the absence of a well-resourced, coordinated, system wide infrastructure limits their collective impact. The following recommendations are designed to respond directly to the needs, barriers, and gaps identified throughout this report.

Build Coordinated Infrastructure Between Housing and Justice Sectors

- **Bring stakeholders together** for increased networking, coordination, and communication, working toward an increased pathway toward stability.
- **Establish a cross-sector working group** to connect housing providers, reentry services, behavioral health agencies, and legal system actors to build a coordinated infrastructure.
- **Develop shared protocols** for warm handoffs, service referrals, and coordinated entry for justice-involved individuals.
- **Leverage existing convening infrastructure** (e.g., Partners for HOME, PAD, Georgia Justice Project) to sustain collaboration and coordination.

Expand Access to Low-Barrier, Affordable Housing

- **Incentivize development and preservation** of housing options that accept individuals with criminal legal backgrounds, including those on registries or with violent offenses.
- **Create a local risk mitigation fund** or lease guarantee pool to encourage landlord participation in second-chance housing efforts.
- **Increase the supply of permanent supportive housing** and trauma-informed reentry housing, building on models like The Melody and Summit Trail, which include the necessary wrap around service provision.

Strengthen Legal Protections and Enforcement Mechanisms

- **Strengthen awareness and enforcement** of Atlanta’s anti-discrimination ordinance to prevent housing denials based on criminal background.
- **Expand expungement and record-sealing services**, particularly through mobile or county-based Second Chance Desks.

Scale Trauma-Informed Training and Reentry-Focused Services

- **Build capacity and provide training** to housing providers, property managers, and service staff on trauma-informed practices, cultural humility, and reentry navigation.
- **Fund peer mentorship and community navigation roles** within housing programs to increase trust and engagement.
- **Support flexible, wraparound case management** that includes legal assistance, mental health care, transportation, and parenting support.

Close Data Gaps to Enable Targeted Interventions

- **Support research partnerships** to identify geographic areas and support subpopulations (e.g., youth aging out of foster care) most impacted by incarceration and housing instability.
- **Standardize data-sharing protocols** across agencies and nonprofits to better understand housing outcomes for returning citizens and how to meet the housing needs of this population.
- **Develop public dashboards or policy briefs** to track systemic progress and inform local decision-makers.

Center the Lived Expertise of Persons with Criminal Legal Histories

- **Involve directly impacted individuals** in program design, policy advocacy, and evaluation efforts.
- **Compensate system-impacted leaders** and peer navigators for their time and insights.
- **Fund storytelling and narrative-shifting campaigns** that challenge stigma and center dignity, particularly for returning citizens and families.



Inflection Point 1: Criminalization of Behaviors Associated with Survival for the Unhoused

Recommendation:

- Educate law enforcement, judges, and prosecutors on the connection between housing status and low-level offenses, as well as available resources and services, to reduce unnecessary citations and arrests.
- Amend city ordinances that criminalize homelessness (e.g., loitering, trespassing) and increase safe alternatives for shelter, including sanctioned encampments with services.

Inflection Points 2: Pretrial Detention and Barriers to Bail

Recommendation:

- Advocate for local and state reforms to reduce the use of cash bail, particularly for nonviolent offenses.
- Implement housing-focused pretrial support programs to reduce flight risk and support court appearance (e.g., hotel vouchers, transportation aid).
- Equip public defenders and pretrial services with access to housing navigation support and flexible stabilization funds.



Inflection Point 3: Missed Court Dates Leading to Further Legal Entanglement

Recommendation:

- Invest in text message reminders, mobile court, and navigation assistance for unhoused individuals.
- Co-locate court services with trusted community service providers, temporary housing providers (e.g. shelters) and outreach teams.
- Pilot a court “grace period” or amnesty policy for unhoused individuals who miss appearances due to instability.
- Incorporate virtual appearances, easing challenges with transportation as well as basic hygiene and court appropriate clothing.

Inflection Point 4: Legal Debt and Housing Ineligibility

Recommendation:

- Expand city and county-level fine and fee forgiveness programs for low-income individuals.
- Support state legislation to cap or eliminate interest on criminal legal debt and prevent debt-based housing denials.
- Identify and institute other ways to fulfill financial obligations (e.g. community service).

Inflection Point 5: Institutional and Private Sector Housing Barriers

Recommendation:

- Fund and scale housing locator systems and roles to cultivate relationships with “second-chance” landlords.
- Incentivize developers to adopt fair tenant screening policies and set aside units for people with criminal legal histories.

Inflection Point 6: Housing Instability Due to Foster Care Involvement and Incarceration

Recommendation:

- Maximize use of Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers and create transitional housing programs for youth aging out of foster care with justice involvement.
- Fund trauma-informed supportive housing specifically for youth with histories of incarceration or system-involved parents.
- Pair housing with life skills, employment training, and reentry planning tailored to the unique needs of young adults.

Inflection Point 7: Racial Disparities and Disinvestment in Housing

Recommendation:

- Create place-based reinvestment strategies in communities most impacted by mass incarceration and housing exclusion.
- Launch citywide narrative campaigns to reduce stigma, and expand funding for culturally responsive, peer-led housing initiatives.
- Increase resources for employment or workforce development, while lowering barriers for unhoused individuals to access these pathways.





Conclusion

This landscape assessment reinforces what many community leaders, advocates, practitioners have long known: one's involvement in the criminal legal system creates a deeply entrenched cycle of housing instability that is difficult to escape. For individuals in the city of Atlanta, Georgia with criminal legal histories, finding safe, stable, and affordable housing is not just a personal challenge, it is a structural one, shaped by policy gaps, fragmented service systems, a lack of affordable housing, and long-standing racial and economic inequities.

The seven inflection points identified in this report illuminate the moments where these systems most acutely reinforce one another. From the criminalization of homelessness to legal debt and housing discrimination, each inflection point represents both a barrier and an opportunity. When combined with systemic disinvestment in affordable housing and persistent racial disparities, these challenges contribute to intergenerational cycles of instability, particularly for Black Atlantans and other communities of color.

Yet, this report also shines a light on the significant strengths of Atlanta's housing and justice ecosystems. Organizations like PAD, CHRIS 180, Partners for HOME, the Georgia Justice Project, and Fathers, Inc. are creating innovative pathways to housing stability, legal support, and community reintegration. Their work, along with the voices of surveyed organizations and the lived experience of clients, offers a roadmap for more effective and equitable systems change and collaboration.

These findings underscore the urgent need for coordination across sectors, increased resources and capacity, sustained investment in low-barrier housing, and policy reform that centers the humanity and dignity of persons with criminal-legal histories. Importantly, the most promising efforts are those that integrate trauma-informed practice, recognize the importance of peer support, and elevate the leadership of directly impacted people.

This report is not intended to be comprehensive or definitive, it is a beginning. By mapping key inflection points, lifting up practitioner insights, and identifying actionable strategies, Housing as a Pathway to Justice offers a foundation for collaborative, systems-level transformation. With continued partnership, data-informed decision-making, and bold vision, the city of Atlanta can become a national leader in using housing as a tool for justice, stability, and community healing.



About Enterprise Community Partners

Enterprise is a national nonprofit that exists to make a good home possible for the millions of families without one. We support community development organizations on the ground, aggregate and invest capital for impact, advance housing policy at every level of government, and build and manage communities ourselves. Since 1982, we have invested \$80.9 billion and created 1 million homes across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands – all to make home and community places of pride, power and belonging. Join us at [enterprisecommunity.org](https://www.enterprisecommunity.org).