

A STUDY OF HOUSING OPTIONS FOR PROBATIONERS WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS



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Abstract: There are over 3 million persons on probation in this country and many struggle with both maintaining recovery from substance use disorders and obtaining secure housing. However, stable housing for those in probation in recovery can potentially reduce relapse and recidivism. We examined recovery housing needs from the perspectives of probation supervisors and clients of Cook County Adult Probation. We administered surveys to probation supervisors and interviewed three clients in recovery as case studies. We learned probation supervisors are in need of further housing training and resources to aid clients in recovery. Clients reported unemployment and a lack of assistance in obtaining affordable housing. We recommend probation departments improve collaboration with housing service providers; obtain training on housing; and utilize recovery housing resources to better serve their clients.

Introduction

Despite a drop in the number of people on probation, over 3 million U.S. citizens were supervised on probation in 2020.¹ Those on probation are two to three times more likely to have substance use disorders (SUDs) than the general population but often have limited access to treatment.² Individuals on probation and/or in recovery experience greater levels of homelessness, co-occurring mental illness, and stigma further reducing access to vital services. Probation clients are four to nine times more likely to have a SUD than their non-supervised counterparts,³ and many probation clients need treatment but do not receive it.⁴

This study examines the housing options and availability for those undergoing both probation and SUD recovery. In collaboration with the Cook County Adult Probation Department (CCAPD), three probation clients were interviewed to provide case study experiences regarding housing while on probation. In addition, 14 CCAPD department supervisors completed a survey regarding housing for clients in recovery. The data gathered multiple perspectives on this multifaceted issue to answer the following research questions:

- What are probationers' experiences with housing while in recovery?
- What are probation staff views of their probation clients' housing needs?
- To what extent are probation staff trained, and capable of, assisting with assisting clients with housing needs?

Brief Summary of Literature on Probation and Recovery

Substance Use, Recovery, and Housing

More than half of homeless Americans struggle with SUDs, which can make it more difficult to find and maintain stable housing.⁵ Stress due to unstable and unsafe housing is a barrier to recovery because it diminishes the ability to maintain recovery.⁶ Studies show that homeless individuals in recovery support programs that offered housing had higher rates of program attendance, longer abstinence, and more employment than those in programs without housing.⁷

Stable housing options for those experiencing SUDs have varying degrees of success. Some options have drawbacks that unintentionally increase the risk of substance use, such as limited program availability, restrictions due to criminal history, and prior eviction.⁸ Further, individuals with co-occurring disorders—SUDs and other mental disorders—may have more complex and evolving housing needs. Needs may include housing early in recovery, avoiding highly structured programs, and transitioning to independent living. However, such needs may not be answered because housing options depend largely on housing availability and SUD treatment provider recommendations. In addition, treatment providers tend to recommend independent living far less often than individuals desire it and may overlook social supports when making decisions.⁹

Housing for Justice-Involved Persons

For justice-involved individuals, housing provides stability, which aids in desistance from criminal activity. Interviews with individuals on probation confirm stable housing is a primary

need. Other primary needs are recovery supports, food security, and employment, which support probation completion and improve quality of life.¹⁰ Those with unstable housing face struggles that could lead to criminal activity, such as struggles to gain employment, to receive social benefits, and to construct stable support systems.¹¹ Individuals in precarious housing situations also may face elevated vulnerability to relapse due to stress and substance availability.¹²

Women in the justice system experience SUDs and pre- and post-arrest homelessness at a higher rate than men.¹³ Referrals to adequate housing services are critical for women probation clients with co-occurring domestic violence, substance use, and mental health issues, perhaps more so than for their male counterparts.¹⁴ Even when the justice system specializes services for women, housing assistance needs far exceed the rate of referrals to such services.¹⁵

Similar to individuals struggling with SUDs, those on probation often experience barriers to stable housing. Probation staff have reported a need for, but a lack of availability of, housing services.¹⁶ Further, those who are both on probation and have SUDs or co-occurring disorders face even greater challenges in securing housing than those not on probation. Housing challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ Given affordable housing shortages, landlords and public housing authorities have discretion to potentially restrict people with criminal records when filling housing slots.¹⁸ It is essential for probation clients with SUDs to have access to stable housing, yet they struggle in comparison to the larger probation population. Targeted programs within probation offices need to be designed to ensure that vulnerable populations are given the support needed to recover.

Probation Supervision

Unstable housing situations can undermine the potential benefits of probation supervision. Individuals on probation may have unreliable forms of contact (e.g., lack a phone number) making it challenging for probation officers to contact them or allow for alternatives to in-person probation department reporting.¹⁹ In practice, many probation departments are ill equipped to offer housing services to their clients. In some probation departments, training on and support for housing services for clients may vary, and many officers may refer clients to external agencies for potential assistance.²⁰

Housing is but one of several common needs for persons on probation. They also need employment services, education, and nutrition. Because probation officers rely on specialized community-based programs for each of a client's needs, ensuring that these services operate in harmony is important. However, currently collaborations among service providers are lacking.²¹ This can result in lapses in treatment and services, which can, in turn, undermine the recovery process.²²

Those on probation in recovery need support rather than more punitive surveillance. However, as research reveals, probation staff may actually heighten surveillance and enforce stricter rules for probation clients in residential SUD treatment.²³ In one study, individuals on probation with SUDs had more probation revocations and technical violations than those without SUDs.²⁴ Such increased scrutiny and emphasis on punishment can undermine progress in recovery.

Individualized Services

Often probation department practices may not meet individual client needs. Individuals on probation benefit if they can exercise autonomy in deciding what form of residency is best for them.²⁵ Prior studies have shown probation-mandated residential drug treatment participants did not have higher rates of sobriety than comparison groups who a choice in their treatment facility.²⁶ As a caveat, however, those with the least complex needs may be the easiest to place when they have a say over their housing options at the detriment of those who need the most support.

Variation Among Probation Staff and Clients

Individual probation officers make decisions on referrals to housing, SUD treatment, and recovery support services. The courts often rely on probation officers to know about services, to communicate them to clients, to help make decisions, and to address issues with services.²⁷ Since officers have a wide range of duties, the components of their role and corresponding methods of client interaction are highly variable. Correspondingly, clients' openness and trust in their probation officer may vary. Probation clients with family or peers with histories of substance use may be less likely to view their officers as trustworthy.²⁸ These perceptions are critical in the recovery process. As research shows, respectful and personal officer-client relationships are more effective in helping those with mental disorders than more disciplinary officer-client relationships.²⁹ Therefore, the actions of probation officers and the tenor of their relationships with their clients can have an effect on whether their clients seek or utilize available treatment resources.

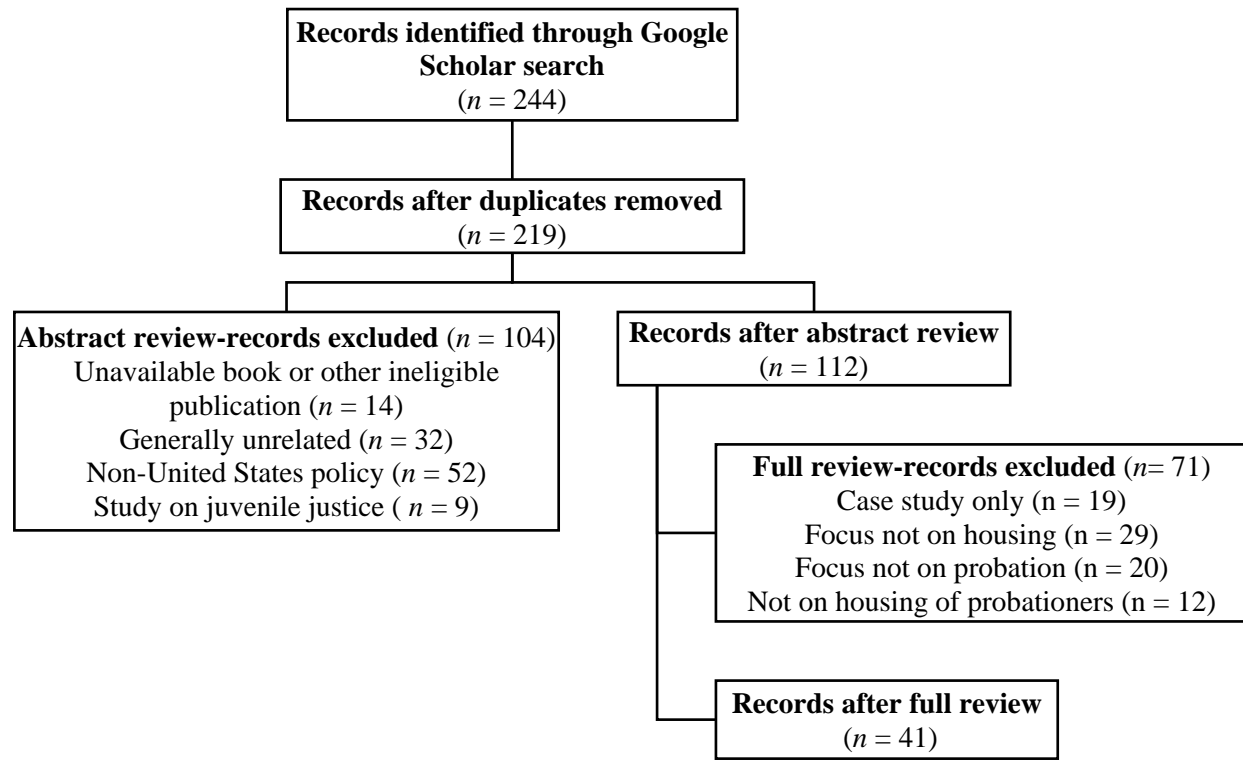
Methodology

In addition to data collection through interviews and surveys, we conducted a literature review. The research was approved by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority's Institutional Review Board.

Literature Review Process

We completed a thorough search and review of prior publications to gain a broad understanding of probationers in recovery in association with housing. We searched Google Scholar (GS), a powerful database of scholarly literature³⁰ and helpful in finding grey literature.³¹ Grey literature is outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels and includes, for example, government or research organization reports, policy papers, and newsletters.³² Although GS has limitations, it is acceptable for a brief summary of literature. We conducted 12 keyword searches and assessed the first 20 articles displayed. The keyword searches included a variety of phrases that included key terms such as housing, substance use disorder, recovery, and probation. See endnote for exact phrases used in the search.³³ A preliminary assessment was done for eligibility for our review based on fitness to study themes, and the credibility of sources. We also selected only literature written in English and focused on the United States and published in 2020 or later. The search culminated in 41 articles (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Literature Search Process



Case Studies

Sample

We interviewed three probation clients who met the criteria of being in recovery for a SUD. All three were male with an average age of 48.3. Two participants identified as Black and one as White. One participant had a 9th grade education, one had a GED, and one had some college education.

Materials

Interview questions were developed through consulting the relevant literature and holding brainstorming sessions among the research team. Questions were informed by the research questions under four sections—demographics; housing (e.g., current housing situation and future housing plans); substance use and recovery (e.g., relationship and assistance with substance use); and COVID-19 effects on housing and recovery. There were eight semi-structured questions with follow-up probes.

Procedure

Probation clients were recruited for interviews through CCAPD. We started with drug and mental health court supervisors, which was later expanded to standard probation due to low participation. Researchers briefed probation supervisors on the study and recruitment process.

Probation officers read a script to clients during their regular contacts with them and offered a flyer with a link to an online form, which screened for eligibility (on probation, in recovery). The online form was created with Qualtrics software and allowed for scheduling the interview date and time either in person or virtually. The form obtained consent to participate in the study and to audio record the interview. Finally, the form requested a way us to email or postal mail a \$25 gift card from Wal-Mart for participation. We also showed our gratitude after participation by offering interviewees naloxone kits, a reference guide for additional social service resources, and the option to request a phone call contact from Cook County Health.

Interviews were virtual and lasted, on average, 26 minutes (ranging from 12 minutes to 40 minutes each). We used WebEx conferencing software to conduct them . The interviews were audio-recorded with transcripts automatically generated via WebEx software. Due to the small sample size, we analyzed the interview data using the transcripts in Microsoft Word and consulted audio recordings as needed. We used pseudonyms rather than real names and provided summaries from the interviews.

Probation Staff Survey

Sample

The sample size was 14, but for some questions there were only 13 persons who responded. Table 1 details the demographics of survey respondents. Most respondents identified as White and female, with an average age of 41. Most respondents were probation supervisors who had worked in probation, on average, 16 years.

Table 1

Demographics of Survey Respondents

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	9	64.3
Male	4	29.6
Non-binary/other	1	7.1
Race/ethnicity		
White	10	71.4
Black	4	28.6
Latinx		
Yes	2	14.3
No	12	85.7
Age (in years)		
Min, max	28, 59	
Mean	41.5	
Median	39.0	
Time working in probation (in years)		
Min, max	1, 28	
Mean	13.0	
Median	10.5	

Work in problem solving court		
Mental health court	2	14.3
Drug court	2	14.3
NA	10	71.4

Note. Sample size was 14. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Materials

The 22 questions on the survey component of this study were guided by the initial research questions written in the study proposal regarding probation staff experiences and knowledge. Additionally, the formatting of certain questions was informed by a previous survey of problem-solving court staff in Illinois.³⁴ The survey included questions on respondents' demographics and work experience (e.g., age, race, gender, years worked in probation, job title) and respondents' perceptions of substance use and homelessness among probation clients. Other questions asked respondents to rate the resources available to clients and the knowledge of probation staff regarding housing options for probation clients. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate, among other topics, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a variety of statements on the effect that housing has on probation outcomes, client satisfaction with their housing situation, and officer preparedness/ability to assist clients with housing and substance use issues. At the end of the survey was an optional prompt for respondents to share other comments they may have had regarding probation clients in recovery and their housing experiences.

Procedure

Probation department supervisors were surveyed regarding housing of probation clients with SUD in recovery. Line probation officers were not recruited to take the survey due to potential issues related to union protections or objections, as well as potential low response rate or biased responses stemming from fear of potential disclosure of actions that went against department policy and procedure. We distributed online surveys to 30 probation supervisors developed using Qualtrics survey software for a 46.7% response rate.

Respondents were recruited through the CCAPD. The recruitment period was October 2022 to February 2023. An informed consent form and link to the survey was provided. The probation staff survey was exported from Qualtrics software to SPSS version 23 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for analysis.

Study Limitations

We set out to have multiple interviews with probation clients; however, we only had three that serve as case studies. We had recruitment issues despite offering a gift card incentive. However, recruitment may have been limited because it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when more probation practices were happening virtually. The case studies provide an in-depth understanding of the lives and opinions of three probation clients but are not generalizable to probation clients in recovery.

Key Findings: Case Studies of Probation Clients

The following are summaries of the interviews with probation clients. The three case studies varied in length and detail based on extent of participant responses to the same questions.

Probation Client: Charles

Employment and Homelessness

At the time of the interview, Charles was unemployed with no source of income. He reported having an Illinois Link card to use at grocery stores as a part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps).³⁵ His last job was several months prior when he worked for a package delivery company. He also previously worked as a handy man.

Charles stated he was “homeless” at the time of the interview but was staying at a halfway house and was obtaining outpatient treatment in south suburban Cook County. The referral to the halfway house was through CCAPD and was free and required abstinence. To his knowledge, he, nor other residents, had tested positive for COVID-19. He reported getting along fine with the other residents; they all went to “meetings” and stayed to themselves. He expressed a desire to live in a better housing situation and was on a waiting list for low-income housing. He reported generally moving around a lot. His plans were to complete the 4 weeks at the halfway house and then find a job and apply for other low-income housing. Charles stated he wanted a “place to lay [his] head.”

Probation, Substance Abuse, and Recovery

Charles stated that his involvement with illegal substances began at the age of 17, and they had been a problem for him his whole life. He stated having prior SUD treatment three times before. Currently, he said he “felt wonderful,” was making progress in recovery, and was trying to stay clean. Charles was interested in the Cook County Health recovery coach assistance offered by the researcher as a part of the study. The researcher provided his phone number to the designated recovery coach for follow up.

Probation Client: Kyle

Homelessness and Incarceration

At the time of the interview, Kyle was unemployed and had no income to afford housing. His prior employment included janitorial work and customer service. Specifically, he worked as a public transportation customer service representative. Kyle described himself as a “homeless veteran” who served in the United States Army. Kyle defined homelessness as living in his car, living in shelters, and “couch surfing” with friends and family. He described the circumstances leading to this experience of homelessness as stemming from being laid off during the pandemic. The stress of losing his job, his income, and his means for caring for himself and his family caused him to spiral into alcohol misuse, incarceration, and homelessness. He shared:

Because I got laid off, I couldn't afford my bills. Because I couldn't afford my bills I drank. Because I drank, I argued and fought with my wife. Because I argued and fought with my wife, I was subject to losing my marriage, losing my wife, losing my home, becoming incarcerated in Cook County Jail for a domestic dispute.

Kyle reported serving two years in Cook County Jail during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. He described his experience during this time as “fighting for [his] life.” He described routine sickness related to COVID-19, constant hunger, and summarized the jail as a “dangerous place.”

Probation, Substance Abuse, and Recovery

Kyle described losing everything during the two years of his incarceration and was released with no money and no functional relationships with his support system. When Kyle did leave Cook County jail, he was given a sentence to probation. At the time of our interview, Kyle had been on probation for a few months but described meeting his probation officer every two weeks as more intensive than necessary. He shared, “I believe [it] is a lot. Considering I have a theft...I got arrested for being drunk and stealing during the pandemic...It's the smallest crime there is.”

Kyle expressed that he felt burdened by his probation conditions. He shared that probation and court fees were oppressive for him given his inability to pay. He said, “Where is a person that's been in prison for two years – or two days – going to get \$1200? And why should \$1200 be a part of...their returning back to society?” He further stated, “I don't have a penny. But you want [me] to get on a bus every day and come up to a courthouse?” He summarized the stress of probation as the following:

For a person to be just getting out of jail and to be homeless, and all of these other things compounded on top of it. You know, you don't even give a chance to the person to get out in the world and breathe... You want to keep your foot on their neck.

Kyle traced all that he has lost back to his substance use. He shared, “Everything that I had—my cars, my money, everything's gone. My home, my relationships with my friends, my co-workers, and my family...My marriage is on shaky ground.” When asked whether the probation department had been able to support Kyle's substance use recovery, he shared that he received treatment for two years during his incarceration and obtained five certificates for completing programs. Therefore, Kyle didn't need that resource from the probation department, though he shared that “they have it available if you need it, everything's available.” Kyle shared that the court mandated he go to mental health and family counseling rather than SUD treatment. Of his alcohol use disorder, he said, “I think I pretty much tackled that part of my problems.”

Housing Options and Preferences

Kyle stated his preference for housing as simply “something [he] can call [his] own.” This was in contrast to living in shelters and jail, where everything is shared and little sense of security exists. He mentioned several shelters were dangerous, featuring violence, theft, and a concentration of highly medicated or undermedicated, residents. Further, Kyle said the shelters

undermined his recovery. He stated, “It’s been a struggle with recovery due to [my] paranoia, [my] PTSD from jail.”

Due to Kyle’s status as a veteran, the main housing options he was aware of and pursuing were Veterans’ Administration (VA) housing programs. Kyle had been on the waiting list for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing Program since 2019, which was before his incarceration.³⁶ Due to his subsequent incarceration and inability to complete the necessary paperwork, he was pulled from the waitlist. He is now back on it. Of housing programs in general, Kyle said, “Everyone talks a good game ... [and there are] plenty of programs; just as many waiting lists.” These comments speak to his sense of frustration in assistance for supportive services, such as housing. His frustration and disappointment seem to be exacerbated by his status as a veteran. He expressed disillusionment with what he felt was governmental hypocrisy and apathy toward people in his situation. Kyle felt he had a need for safe, stable, and low-cost housing in the short-term to allow him to tend to his mental health.

Housing Support

Kyle expressed disappointment and frustration about navigating his housing situation. He shared that the VA has a “go-to person,” who he has been communicating with about the waitlist. They have been honest about the length of the wait but Kyle felt that in the short term they haven’t been very helpful or supportive to him. As for his probation staff, Kyle expressed a business-like relationship, a dynamic in which he was managed as opposed supported. He said:

Everyone in probation or in the court system has a particular job, so no one mentions anything other than their job. My probation officer only wants to make sure I’m ready to p**s in a cup. My VA counselor only wants to make sure that they put my name on all these lists, so they can get credited for having someone involved in all these programs. Everyone stays in their lanes so that they can get credit for their jobs and keep their jobs. I get that. So, no one calls me up out of the blue and says, ‘Hey, how’s it going? What can I help you with?’

Probation Client: Ryan

Background

Ryan was on probation for a drug charge and experienced housing instability throughout his adult life. At the time of the interview, Ryan was working at a fast-food chain and had worked at several restaurants before that. He was often fired for selling drugs or not showing up due to being on a substance. In his words, “I wasn’t ever making enough money to survive, so I sold a lot of drugs.” He dropped out of high school in 9th grade but finished his GED. He was proud to be working a “legal job” now, but said he still struggled to make ends meet. At the time of the interview, he was living in a sober living house with 7-9 other men and paying \$800 a month, which was 80% of his income. Because of that, Ryan felt that it was difficult to get ahead.

Housing Situation

Prior to the conviction that placed Ryan on probation, he lived in a car with his mother. After being arrested, Ryan was incarcerated in the Cook County jail for nine months, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that he felt this was a traumatic experience due to how easily COVID-19 was spread. Eventually, Ryan was released on house arrest to a housing facility and entered SUD treatment. However, he stated that he had a negative experience because many of the residents were sick and sold drugs. In addition, the facility was in a location far from friends and family. After leaving the housing facility, Ryan moved first into a halfway home with 70 other people followed by a sober living home, where he was living at the time of the interview. He said that throughout his process of finding housing, he received no support and “did it on [my] own.” He was proud of his progress and described it as going up steps, where the final step would be living on his own.

When asked about his ideal living situation, Ryan stated he wanted a one-bedroom apartment, with a cat and privacy. He said, “I haven't woke up without smelling dirty feet in the past five years... I'm sick of it.” After living with so many individuals throughout his housing experiences, having privacy was very important to Ryan.

Throughout this interview, Ryan was very critical of his housing situations. He said that the housing options he has experienced have not been as they were advertised and that people use housing options and sober living homes as a way to make money. He was also critical of being on many waiting lists for housing. Referring to these lists, he stated:

I'm not a priority. I don't have kids. I'm not a female, and I don't have health issues. So, if you're not one of those three, you're going to... they told me it was over a year, and it's been three years. Oh, no more calls back still nothing. I went to Heartland Alliance. I went through Family Guidance. I went to every one of them. They're all applications you fill and out all you do is wait. And I never get any response.

Ryan said that his probation officer was not able to offer additional support with housing. He said, “They'll go on Google, type in housing or stuff that has to do with homeless people, and, you know, ex-cons or ex-felons or anything. So, they'll send me a link to something that I could do myself.” While he was critical about his options, he stated that in his opinion anything was better than jail.

Substance Use History

Ryan had a long history of SUD, but at the time of the interview he had been sober for a little over a year. He said that alcohol and drugs were always readily available in his community and his family. He said that he had first tried cocaine at 14 years old and then moved to marijuana, PCP, and heroin. He had survived several overdoses. Ryan started developing a SUD after his parents divorced, and he searched for friends and an escape from his life. Ryan felt that his SUD had caused him to be “behind” compared to his childhood friends and peers who were married and had children. He said he had to survive and be patient. However, he said that his sober living home is not the best living environment for him because it is a reminder of his SUD issues. He

said that living with people in the same situation as his made him feel he was being kept back from having his best life. Ryan was very cognizant of the impact substance use had on his life and the lives of other substance users. When discussing his roommates in his sober living home he said, “Addiction and drug abuse tears families apart. It kills people.” He said that the one thing that helped him through his sobriety process was music. “It keeps me out of the...when I start to think about using or doing any things that I used to...takes my mind off of things.”

Probation Experience

Ryan was eventually sentenced to two years of probation. Due to a relapse and overdose during his supervision term, his probation was extended. At the time of our interview, Ryan had served three years and one month of probation. He was frustrated despite getting a job and stable living, and he stated “...even though I’m doing the right thing and doing what I was supposed to do...those things aren’t good enough for them [CCAPD] ...It’s one thing after another.” From his perspective, he felt that the criminal justice system treated him and others with SUD unfairly. He shared, “So now I have a felony case on top of [having a SUD] and I’m excluded from doing a lot of things that other people can just because I like drugs a little bit more than they did.”

Summary of Case Studies

All of the men featured in the case studies were unemployed at the time of the interview and struggled with poverty. Charles and Kyle described themselves as homeless although Charles was living in a halfway house. Ryan was living in a sober living home. All three had long histories of substance use that negatively impacted their life, but all were in recovery at the time of the interview. The men talked about being on waiting lists for housing and the frustration they felt with attempts to gain low-income housing. They felt unsupported by the criminal justice system including their probation officers. Kyle, who was a veteran, felt that he was let down by the government in terms of assisting him with housing.

Key Findings: Probation Staff Feedback

Probation Clients

As shown in Table 2, a majority of probation staff estimated that most of their clients misuse substances generally and that over one-quarter of their clients misuse opioids specifically. Probation staff indicated that less than 40% of their clients with SUD either have housing or homelessness as a concern or have experienced homelessness.

Table 2*Survey Responses on Probation Client Drug Misuse*

In your estimation, what percentage of your probation clients...	0-20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81-100%
misuse substances?	0	2	4	4	4
misuse opioids?	3	4	3	3	1
with SUD share housing/homelessness as a concern?	6	4	1	2	1
with SUD have ever experienced homelessness?	2	6	1	3	2
with SUD have experienced homelessness in the past 12 months?	6	6	0	2	0

Note. Sample size was 14. Responses from Cook County Adult Probation Department supervisors and officers. Homelessness is defined as living on the streets or in a temporary shelter or residence for less than two weeks.

A majority of probation staff noted that their clients were “sometimes” or “often” in residential SUD treatment, sober living, or recovery homes (Table 3). A majority also noted that clients who used substances were “sometimes” or “often” in recovery. For half the probation staff, their clients were “sometimes” or “often” previously in recovery. A majority of the staff shared that their clients were “often” diagnosed with a SUD, and 43% said that clients were “often” diagnosed with an opioid use disorder.

Table 3*Frequency of Attributes of Probation Clients*

Survey item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
All probation clients ^a				
Housed in residential SUD treatment	0	3	6	4
Housed in sober living/housing	0	3	6	4
Housed in recovery home	0	5	4	4
Housed in medical detox	1	6	5	1
Of substance using clients				
Currently in recovery	0	2	9	3
Previously in recovery, by not currently	0	1	6	7
Diagnosed with substance use disorder	0	2	3	9
Diagnosed with opioid use disorder	1	3	4	6
Currently in recovery	0	2	9	3
Previously in recovery, by not currently	0	1	6	7
Diagnosed with substance use disorder	0	2	3	9
Diagnosed with opioid use disorder	1	3	4	6

Note. Sample size was 14 unless otherwise noted. Responses from Cook County Adult Probation Department supervisors and officers.

^a For probation client items, sample size was 13.

Housing of Probation Clients

Table 4 shows responses to survey items about housing and probation, presented in descending order from those with the most agree or strongly agree responses to those with the fewest. Probation staff strongly agreed, for example, that housing security and housing satisfaction are precursors to successful program completion. But 70% of them did not "agree" or "strongly disagreed" that officers are adequately trained to deal with housing issues. Sixty-nine percent of respondents also "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that the probation department has the resources needed to help clients secure stable housing.

Table 4
Responses to Survey Items on Housing of Probationers

Survey item	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly agree		M
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Housing security is a precursor to a successful probation sentence.	0	0	0	0	3	23.1	5	38.5	5	38.5	4.15
Housing satisfaction is a precursor to a successful probation sentence.	0	0	1	7.7	1	7.7	8	61.5	3	23.1	4.00
Clients in stable housing are satisfied with their living arrangements.	1	7.7	2	15.4	4	30.8	6	46.2	0	0	3.46
Those housed independently are still provided with the resources to assist their recovery.	0	0	2	15.4	4	30.8	6	46.2	1	7.7	3.46
Probation clients rely on the department to offer guidance in securing housing.	1	7.7	2	15.4	1	7.7	9	69.2	0	0	3.38
Housing resources assist the recovery process.	1	7.7	2	15.4	3	23.1	5	38.5	2	15.4	3.38
Probation assists the recovery process.	2	15.4	3	23.1	4	30.8	3	23.1	1	7.7	2.85
Clients in residential or medical programs have chosen to be there.	0	0	5	38.5	5	38.5	3	23.1	0	0	2.85
A client's access to programs does not depend on which probation officer is supervising them.	2	15.4	5	38.5	1	7.7	3	23.1	2	15.4	2.85
There is effective communication between the probation department and external social services (e.g., substance use treatment, behavioral treatment, employment assistance, etc.) ^a	0	0	5	41.7	5	41.7	2	16.6	0	0	2.75
Officers are adequately trained to deal with substance use issues.	5	38.5	3	23.1	2	15.4	2	15.4	1	7.7	2.31
When someone needs housing assistance, the department is provided with the resources to aid them.	3	23.1	6	46.2	2	15.4	2	15.4	0	0	2.23
Organizational systems are in place to support the housing needs of probation clients.	3	23.1	6	46.2	3	23.1	1	7.7	0	0	2.15
The probation department has the resources needed to help clients secure stable housing.	5	38.5	4	30.8	3	23.1	1	7.7	0	0	2.00

Officers are adequately trained to deal
with housing issues.

6 46.2 4 30.8 2 15.4 1 7.7 0 0 1.85

Note. The sample size was 13, except where noted. Responses from Cook County Adult Probation Department supervisors. *M* = mean. Mean was calculated by assigning values to Likert scale questions. Strongly disagree = 1 to Strongly agree = 6.

^a Sample size was 12 for this item.

Another survey item had respondents choose one or more response from five given options to answer the question: “Of the following concerns, which do your probation clients report as concerns regarding housing?” Results, ordered by number of respondents selecting the concern, were:

- Making rent payments (*n* = 12)
- Living environment that may contribute to relapse (*n* = 11)
- Substandard housing (*n* = 9)
- Physical safety (*n* = 7)
- Isolation from essential locations (job, probation reporting, outpatient treatment, recovery support) (*n* = 7)

In addition, probation staff were asked to cite as many options as applied to the question: “Regarding living environments, which of the following do your probation clients report as concerns?” Results were:

- In neighborhood with frequent illicit substance use or sales (*n* = 10)
- In high-stress environments (*n* = 8)
- Near friends or acquaintances who use substances (*n* = 7)
- With known substance users (*n* = 6)
- With persons who may encourage substance use (*n* = 5)

Probation Support of Client Housing Needs

Half of the respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that probation staff are very capable of referring housing to clients who are unhoused. Correspondingly, almost all said they were “minimally” or “not at all trained” on finding housing for clients (Table 5).

Table 5*Responses on Probation Assistance with Client Housing Needs*

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
CCAPD in general is very capable of referring housing to clients experiencing homelessness.		
Strongly disagree	4	30.8
Disagree	3	23.1
Neutral	4	30.8
Agree	2	15.4
Strongly agree	0	0
To what extent are officers trained on finding housing for clients?		
Not at all	6	46.2
Minimally	6	46.2
A fair amount	1	7.7
Extensively	0	0

Note. Sample size was 13. Responses from Cook County Adult Probation Department. CCAPD = Cook County Adult Probation Department.

We asked respondents the following question, “When your department is unable to offer residential solutions to a client, what do you feel are the primary barriers?” They could check all that apply from a list of barriers and reported the following:

- Limited resources/funding for housing assistance (*n* = 11)
- Limited knowledge of housing options/availability (*n* = 9)
- Limited housing options/inventory (*n* = 9)
- Clients’ criminal records making them ineligible for housing/housing assistance (*n* = 6)
- Lack of cooperation by clients (*n* = 3)

In addition, the survey asked, “What do you feel would help support clients in recovery to obtain stable housing?” The responses included:

- An online database to search for housing (*n* = 12)
- More available housing options/inventory (*n* = 10)
- Designated probation staff who can help clients navigate housing (*n* = 10)
- Financial resources (*n* = 9)
- More residential treatment (*n* = 8)
- More outpatient treatment (*n* = 6)
- Employment assistance (*n* = 6)

COVID-19 and Probation Clients

We asked additional questions about the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects on clients. Most noted some negative consequences, particularly mental health and substance use (Table 6). One respondent added an open-ended comment, “Housing is a crisis all over the country. Sometimes judges think probation has special access to housing.”

Table 6
COVID-19 Effects on Probation Clients

Survey item	<i>n</i>	%
To what extent do you feel the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted your clients?		
Not at all	0	0
Minimally	4	30.8
A fair amount	6	46.2
To a great extent	3	23.1
In what ways do you think the pandemic negatively impacted your clients?		
Increased mental health issues	11	84.6
Increased substance use	9	69.2
Increased job insecurity	8	61.5
Increased homelessness/housing insecurity	8	61.5
Increased physical health problems	7	53.8
Increased food insecurity	7	53.8

Note. Sample size was 13. Responses from Cook County Adult Probation Department supervisors.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Improve Collaboration Between Probation and Housing Services

A majority of probation supervisors did not think there was effective communication between the probation department and external social services. Collaboration between probation and treatment and service providers can positively impact the recovery of probation clients.³⁷ In terms of housing, the Council of State Governments noted that probation officers should assess their clients' homelessness risk and connect them with homeless service providers and landlords.³⁸

Offer Training on Housing to Probation Staff

Probation staff who responded to the survey thought officers were neither adequately trained to deal with housing issues nor provided with the resources needed to help clients secure stable housing. Half of the probation staff did not think probation staff were capable of referring clients to housing. Further, almost all had little training in finding housing for clients. Barriers to offering housing included limited resources for housing assistance; limited knowledge of housing options and availability; and limited housing options. This gap was also reflected in interviews with probationers. Those in the case studies expressed that their probation officers were unable to provide leads on appropriate housing, neither recovery housing nor affordable housing.

While probation staff are not housing providers and cannot be expected to take sole responsibility for addressing the housing needs of their clients, staff should be equipped with tools to support their clients' needs, housing included. Given the interconnected nature of housing and recovery, the probation department should work to develop resources and training for staff around recovery housing, veteran's housing, and affordable housing options generally.

The Illinois Department of Human Services, Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (IDHS/SUPR), is a source of support and is willing to train individual law enforcement agencies, including CCAPD as a part of this research project.³⁹

Recovery housing has a variety of types and names (See text box). To appropriately guide, and inform, the court and their clients probation staff should learn the types of recovery housing options, including what they offer and what the eligibility criteria and general rules are.⁴⁰

Recovery Housing Types

Recovery Homes are licensed by the IDHS/SUPR with substance-free housing. The housing is to help support sobriety for those who have completed SUD treatment or are in early recovery from SUD. The homes feature structure, rules, peer-led groups, and staff activities.

Oxford Houses offer a community-based approach providing an independent, supportive, and sober living environment for anyone in recovery.

Sober Living Homes provide a substance-free environment for individuals in recovery.

Halfway Houses offer transitional living with services to address SUD usually following residential SUD treatment.

Recovery Housing features a peer-supported community for people in recovery.

Note. Adapted from Cohen, L., & Doll, M. (2018). *Recovery housing in Illinois: Brief report form an environmental scan*. Candeco Consulting Inc.

<https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/RecoveryHousingEnvironmentalScan.pdf>

Share, and Encourage Use of, Recovery Housing Resources

Probation staff almost unanimously reported that an online database to search for housing would be helpful for them to support clients in recovery and stable housing. When probation officers have the tools to help their clients with housing and homelessness, their clients have better housing outcomes.⁴¹ In Illinois, IDHS/SUPR has a recovery home coordinated capacity project in which recovery home navigators are available to direct persons to available housing to meet their needs.⁴² This program is a pilot but can serve as a current resource for probation officers and clients in need of housing (see text box). Navigators assess the clients, contact recovery homes based on eligibility, provide a warm hand-off to a recovery home, or add to a wait list. The navigator checks in regularly with the client to offer coaching and maintain engagement until placement. Substance use disorder and mental health referrals and case management are also available. These are tools that CCAPD could be trained on in the short-term to support staff's knowledge of housing options. Prioritizing staff training in these tools would support staff in making referrals to needed services and support clients in getting connected to the assistance that they need.

In addition, IDHS has a helpline that refers people to SUD treatment and recovery providers in Illinois (see text box). The helpline is free, confidential, and available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It can serve callers in any language. However, the helpline lacks the hand-off to service providers offered by the recovery home navigators.

Ultimately, building out tools and training within CCAPD will not solve the affordable housing crisis or address the dearth of recovery housing available, especially housing that is available to individuals involved in the criminal legal system and those with co-occurring illnesses. The frustration all three interviewees expressed applies broadly to all agencies referenced. The central frustration was the lack of immediate housing options and reliance on long waitlists for appropriate and affordable housing. This instability is especially unhelpful and challenging considering our interviewees, who are working on their recovery while trying to satisfy their conditions of probation.

Cook County Recovery Home Coordinated Capacity Project

Navigator can be reached at 312-508-3819 (call or text)

Available Monday-Friday 6am-5pm, Saturday 7:30am-10am

Illinois Helpline

833-234-6343

<https://helplineil.org/>

Conclusion

All probation supervisors reported clients on their caseloads who misused substances, had housing as a concern, and experienced homelessness. A majority of probation supervisors disagreed that officers were adequately trained, had resources to help, had organizational systems in place, or provided resources to help probation clients with housing needs. Our case studies featured three men on probation and in recovery. All were unemployed and struggling with homelessness and affordable housing. They all felt frustration and a lack of support in obtaining housing. Therefore, probation departments should improve collaboration with housing services, be trained in housing matters, and use existing recovery housing resources to better serve and assist their clients. Improving housing for those in recovery can potentially reduce relapse and recidivism.

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