

Second chances in the second city: Public housing and prisoner reentry in Chicago

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Abstract

In November 2014, the Chicago Housing Authority approved a pilot program to allow a limited number of individuals with criminal records to live in their housing programs. In this article, I contend that the pilot provides an important opportunity to institutionally recognize and extend material benefits to formerly incarcerated individuals for whom housing is both especially difficult to secure and especially important to find. Drawing on Wacquant, I argue that the pilot also offers an opening for key institutions of urban governance, such as housing authorities, to acknowledge their own role in perpetuating a pervasive “carceral continuum” that disciplines the urban poor and feeds mass incarceration. However, drawing on interviews with pilot organizers and participants, I show how the pilot responds to and replicates pervasive fears of crime that link poverty and criminality in particular. As a result, its cautious experimental design relegates participants to the status of test cases and exceptions, rather than normalizing their presence in public housing. The pilot further relies on a problematic and paradoxical understanding of “return” that obscures public housing’s historical role in the carceral continuum. In all of these ways, the logics of this pilot and others like it remain limited, thus undermining their potential to disrupt such carceral continuities.

Keywords

Urban policy, public housing, prisoner reentry, carceral continuum, carceral geography, Chicago, Chicago Housing Authority, family reunification pilot

Introduction

By July of 2016, Jimmy Beaman, Bobby Flowers, and John Stamps had all been on the waitlist for Chicago public housing for several years. All three have criminal records and

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had been living in a transitional housing facility on Chicago's west side since their respective releases from the Illinois Department of Corrections. These three men were among the first group of formerly incarcerated individuals to be accepted into Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) housing as part of a pilot program launched in November 2014 that aimed to overturn a ban on anyone with a criminal record from living in public housing (Moore, 2014a). And yet, nearly two years later, they waited.

In this paper, I use this CHA pilot program as case study and entry point to examine the complex entanglements of the housing and prison systems at the scale of the city—entanglements that speak to broader political and economic structures that transcend Chicago, though Chicago's experience may not be directly transferable to other contexts. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with pilot organizers and participants as well as documents collected from stakeholders in the summer of 2016, I explore why, several years after applying for CHA housing, Jimmy, Bobby, and John still sat in a stale living room at their transitional housing facility, considering what might happen to them if they did not get a CHA apartment or voucher before their leases ended ("I'll be living in my car," remarked John) (Stamps, 2016, interview). To do so, I draw on Loïc Wacquant's conception of the "carceral continuum," as well as secondary literature describing the social and spatial resonances between the prison and Chicago public housing. These resonances emblemize a broader punitive turn in social policy and thus, by providing institutional recognition as well as material benefits to participants, CHA's pilot and others like it create an opening to reverse the punitive policies of the past.

However, in the second half of the paper, I turn to empirical analysis to show why, despite policymakers' lofty goals for the program, the pilot remained slow and limited. In particular, I argue that if the pilot offers an opportunity to recognize the recursive relationship between our housing and criminal justice systems, its limited and piecemeal implementation reveals a failure to structurally acknowledge the reciprocity of these systems—that is, how the design and management of public housing has historically been implicated in the structures of state punishment. Framed as a "family reunification effort," the pilot obfuscates many participants' past histories with public housing, thereby denying the links between public housing and the carceral system. In doing so, the pilot's cautious design reflects ongoing stigma against the formerly incarcerated, who continue to be treated as an exceptional or special population, despite the pilot's ostensible goals of broader inclusion.

The carceral city

Despite the fact that most U.S. prisons are sited in rural areas (see Bonds, 2013; Che, 2005; Gilmore, 2007; Schept, 2014), incarceration is primarily an urban phenomenon: Most prisoners come from cities and return to cities upon release, posing challenges for urban policy and governance (Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon, 2019; Spatial Information Design Lab, 2006). The effects of incarceration on cities are unevenly distributed, however—so much so that criminologist Todd Clear (2009: 68) identifies "prison places" as neighborhoods where the effects of mass incarceration are highly concentrated. At the same time, the reach of the penal system is today so extensive that Soss et al. (2011: 295) argue that "mass incarceration, penal logics, and policing (in a broad sense) have become defining elements of poverty governance" in the United States (see also Hinton, 2016; Simon, 2007). Scholars have likened the burdensome stigma and lingering legal restrictions of a criminal record to a form of continued or extended punishment: individuals returning from carceral institutions struggle

to secure jobs, access welfare benefits and social services, and find safe and affordable housing in their receiving cities, making reentry a difficult if not impossible task (Wacquant, 2010; see also Moore, 2014b; Peck and Theodore, 2008; Purser, 2012).

Scholars have noted the particularly impactful role of housing in the reintegration process (Herbert et al., 2015; see also Desmond, 2016; Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Given that shelter is a necessity for everyone and with affordable housing in increasingly short supply in major cities, having a stable home is both especially important and particularly difficult to access for individuals with criminal records (individuals whom I will refer to as “returning residents,” using language that aligns with the recommendations of the Underground Scholars Initiative and that aims to resist reproducing the ongoing stigma against those with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system) (USI, 2019; see also Phipps, 2017). Without housing, returning residents are even less likely to find jobs, maintain physical and behavioral health and sobriety, and stay out of prison or jail (Metraux et al., 2007), leading to what Teresa Gowan (2002) has termed the “nexus” of homelessness and incarceration. Without diluting the particular severities of the prison, as the apotheosis of our punitive social institutions, scholars increasingly point out the ways in which the logics and consequences of incarceration transcend prison borders, with concrete effects for heavily impacted urban neighborhoods in particular. In this paper, I adopt Wacquant’s conception, drawing on Foucault, of a “carceral continuum,” which I find to be a particularly apt metaphor to describe the progressive spectrum of urban spaces and institutions that serve to discipline marginalized populations and maintain the cycle of individuals between the prison and disinvested urban neighborhoods (Foucault, 1995 [1975]; Wacquant, 2001, 2010).¹

What does the carceral continuum look like on the ground? Numerous scholars have provided examples of how the specter of the prison structures life beyond its walls. Megan Comfort (2008) argues that by rearranging their lives to work around prison rules and regulations, wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men experience a “secondary prisonization” on the outside. Scholars have also extensively documented the collateral consequences of incarceration for those left behind when large numbers of mainly low-income men of color from the same few neighborhoods are locked up—including higher rates of divorce; higher rates of food insecurity, behavioral problems, housing instability, and homelessness for children; loss of family income; loss of a caregiver; and high costs to the family or extended social networks involved with paying an incarcerated relative’s in-prison expenses (Arditti, 2012; Braman, 2002, 2007; Clear, 2009; Hagan and Foster, 2012; Massoglia et al., 2011; Richie, 2002; Sykes and Pettit, 2014; Turney, 2014; Wagner, 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014). Again, the effects of these collateral consequences are spatially concentrated. As Clear (2009: 73) describes, “Incarceration can operate as a kind of ‘coercive mobility,’ destabilizing neighborhoods by increasing levels of disorganization, first when a person is removed to go to prison, then later when that person reenters the community.” Thus, punishment does not transpire exclusively or discretely within the walls of the prison. Instead, the prison relies upon a number of other institutions and spaces—the carceral continuum—to sustain the unprecedented levels of incarceration seen in the United States today (see Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Loury, 2008; Simon, 2007).

Public housing as prison?

Insofar as punishment plays out in a spectrum of urban spaces and institutions, public housing plays a complex and nuanced role in the carceral continuum—especially in

Chicago. Over the years, public housing has undoubtedly provided a restorative, vital domestic space for countless residents (see Austen, 2018; Fennell, 2015; Fuerst, 2003). And yet, scholars have increasingly begun to document the ways in which Chicago's public housing projects have resembled prisons, functioned like prisons, primed residents for prison, or indeed, funneled residents into prison. Numerous scholars have noted that CHA's high-rise projects (most of which have been torn down through CHA's "Plan for Transformation," a large-scale conversion of concentrated public housing into lower density mixed-income communities) resembled prisons in their architectural design and/or management (Goetz, 2013; Hunt, 2009; Shabazz, 2009, 2015; Venkatesh, 2000). In 1957, *The Chicago Defender* newspaper labeled the city's postwar public high rises as "prison like" in their design, while the buildings were often surrounded by meshed wire "cages" (Hunt, 2009: 182). Meanwhile, CHA's autocratic management controlled every aspect of the living environment, including the heat (Shabazz, 2009, 2015). Ostensibly removed from the criminal justice system, the design of Chicago's public housing nevertheless mirrored that of the prison in multiple respects.

However, the connections between the two systems transcended their built environment: in many cases, residents were treated like prisoners and/or subjected to policies that literally funneled them into prison. Indeed, over the decades, neighborhoods with high-rise housing projects were heavily policed and residents themselves heavily surveilled. At times, management conducted surprise apartment sweeps that took place before dawn (Shabazz, 2015; Venkatesh, 2000). The creation of federal drug-free zones in public housing developments in the 1990s allowed law enforcement to apply stricter sentences to drug crimes committed in these areas (Goetz, 2013). Shabazz (2015: 2) argues that, in combination, such practices effectively "prisonized the landscape" in neighborhoods with high concentrations of public housing. Other, more mundane examples illustrate how CHA management exerted control over residents as well: for example, residents were at times given curfews or restrictions on how long visitors could stay (Venkatesh, 2000). Thus, subsidized tenants were consistently subject to much more intense levels of control and regulation in every aspect of their lives than Chicagoans living in private housing. In this environment, Shabazz argues that the housing projects themselves can be read as "interstitial carceral spaces" between the prison and home where "carceral practices . . . primed a generation of Black men for life behind bars by fusing the elements of prison and the quotidian realities of home" (2015: 27).

Heavily surveilled and policed, public housing residents have also been targets of police extortion and violence. In 2012, Chicago Police Department Sergeant Ronald Watts and Officer Kallet Mohammed were arrested and pled guilty for running a criminal enterprise of their own: shielding drug dealers who lived in the public housing projects of Stateway Gardens and the Robert Taylor Homes, which they were assigned to patrol, in exchange for a "tax" (Kalven, 2016; Meisner, 2013). As of February 2019, Cook County State's Attorney Kim Foxx had exonerated 63 victims of Watts and Mohammed's predation (Rosenberg-Douglas, 2019). In this respect, state action directly criminalized public housing residents.

In all of these ways, then, and without diminishing the real value of public housing as *a home* for many Chicagoans over the years, we can understand Chicago's public housing as comprising one part of a broader carceral continuum operating in and through urban space. Through its built environment and management policies, as well as its legal and practical involvements with law enforcement, public housing has, over the years, both functioned in ways that are akin to a prison and funneled residents into prison. The messy interconnections between Chicago's public housing developments and the prison system did not dissolve

or disappear when the high rises came down. As Catherine Fennell (2015: 193) describes of the mixed-income Westhaven development, which replaced the Henry Horner Homes,

Almost everyone in Westhaven knew someone directly entangled in the criminal justice system. More often than not, these entanglements stretched over many years. Prison and jail were revolving doors. As local ex-offenders put it, the ex-offender was the next offender.

From locked in to locked out

The “prisonization” of public housing neighborhoods, to use Shabazz’s term, epitomize the workings of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore call the “antistate state,” described as “a state that grows on the premise of shrinking” that is “both producer and product of the prison and jail expansion” (2008: 152, 146). As they show, neoliberal policies premised on a retreating state have in fact fueled the use of incarceration as a catch-all solution to social problems, where incarceration in turn becomes an issue of state legitimacy. While disinvesting in social welfare programs, the state has dramatically expanded their investments in punishment. Further, as Elizabeth Hinton has shown, federal policymakers from both parties have, over the decades, substituted anti-crime measures for anti-poverty measures, resulting in “the criminalization of urban social programs” (2016: 26). While a more detailed look at these specific programs is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless important to note how the prisonization of public housing fits into this broader strategy whereby, in the post-civil rights era, subsequent presidential administrations have effectively merged social welfare and state punitive policies. The end result is that criminal justice institutions and law enforcement agencies, as Hinton demonstrates, have become the most dominant state institutions in low-income urban communities today. The prisonization of public housing is not aberrant, therefore, but part of a broader project of state building via crime control and incarceration (see also Simon, 2007).

Perhaps ironically, then, residents returning to their home neighborhoods after a period of incarceration find themselves locked out of the same spaces, institutions, and programs, by virtue of their criminal record. Public housing is no exception; as early as 1940, the CHA’s *Manual of Operations* specified that the agency would reject applicants with “evident criminal or anti-social tendencies” (Vale, 2012). By the 1990s, federal policy changes established a strong anti-offender ethos in federally subsidized housing. In particular, in 1996, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) introduced the One Strike Rule at the urging of then-President Bill Clinton. The One Strike Rule reiterated and extended policies implemented in the late 1980s that had authorized public housing authorities to screen tenants and potential tenants for drug-related or illegal activities. Taking things a step further, the Rule further empowered public housing authorities to evict or deny occupancy on the basis of such activities, with a wide range of discretion (HUD, 1996).

HUD’s strictest admission and eviction ruling to date, the One Strike Rule was one of many “tough on crime” policies designed in the mid-1990s as part of the War on Drugs and fueled by a widespread fear of violent crime (Loury, 2008). As President Clinton explained in his 1996 State of the Union address and as was reprinted in HUD’s One Strike Ruling,

I challenge local housing authorities and tenant associations: Criminal gang members and drug dealers are destroying the lives of decent tenants. From now on, the rule for residents who commit crime and peddle drugs should be one strike and you’re out. (HUD, 1996: 2)

The ruling sent a clear message to tenants: no one with any kind of criminal record would be welcome in public housing. According to the Rule, even family members caught harboring relatives with records could themselves be evicted. Indeed, this infamous policy has largely defined the ethos of American public housing ever since (see Goetz, 2013; Petty, 2013). Additionally, by barring returning residents from moving in with relatives living in public housing, the One Strike Rule perpetuated the continued punishment that individuals experience upon release from prison and that can undermine successful reentry (Wacquant, 2010; see also Ajunwa and Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Purser, 2012; Western, 2018).

Things began to change in 2011. Recognizing the challenges of recidivism and hoping to ease the process of reintegration, the Obama-era HUD began to loosen restrictions for returning residents wishing to access public and other subsidized housing programs (Donovan, 2011, 2012). In June, then-HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan sent a letter to all public housing authorities encouraging the local agencies to join HUD “in welcoming these deserving citizens back into our communities” (Donovan, 2011: 2). Donovan pointed out to local policymakers that, while the One Strike Rule authorized and even encouraged housing authorities to screen and evict tenants with criminal records, it did not actually mandate them to do so.² Further, Donovan’s language of *welcoming back* importantly implies that many of those exiting jails or prisons may indeed be *from* public housing communities or at least, may have lived there before. Cities across the United States soon answered Donovan’s call, adjusting their screening and eligibility requirements or running pilot programs so that individuals with criminal records may now move in under certain circumstances.

Chicago is one such city: in 2014, the CHA announced their own pilot program, which would allow a maximum of 50 individuals with criminal records to move into their housing projects or receive housing vouchers (Moore, 2014a). While it is but one example among many, Chicago provides a particularly instructive case study for examining this ostensible policy reversal. In using Chicago, and CHA’s pilot, as a case study, I do not mean to suggest that Chicago’s experience broadly represents that of other cities, necessarily. Instead, I follow Zussman (2004: 354), who argues that places “are typically the manifestations, or, perhaps more precisely, the instantiations of institutions and policies” and thus, case studies have implications beyond the case itself even if they are not straightforwardly transferable or generalizable as such. He also argues for the utility of studying extreme cases, writing that “Successful case studies look at extremes, unusual circumstances, and analytically clear examples, all of which are important not because they are representative but because they show a process or a problem in particularly clear relief” (Zussman, 2004: 362).

Long acknowledged to be a city of extremes, Chicago is marked by persistent racial segregation, ongoing affordable housing shortages, and infamous (if overdramatized) rates of violent crime (see for example Corley, 2018; Hirsch, 1983; Institute for Housing Studies, 2018). In addition, in the early 2010s, Illinois state prisons had reached a peak of overcrowding, all while the state was plunging into an unprecedented budget crisis (Garcia and Geiger, 2016; Jackson-Green, 2016; Reuters, 2015). About half of all Illinois inmates come from Cook County, which is where they will return upon release: in fact, Cook County is ranked second in the country (after Los Angeles County) for most prison releases per year (Illinois Department of Corrections, 2018; Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 2016; Peck and Theodore, 2008). Even more striking is the fact that most parolees return to just four Chicago zip codes (Moore, 2014b). Like other cities, Chicago is far from meeting the challenges of returning residents: of the 155 parolees surveyed by the Chicago Coalition of the Homeless in 2012, 75% reported being homeless or unstably housed. Additionally, an estimated 1200 individuals are released directly from prison to homeless shelters in Chicago

annually, while 48% of individuals in Chicago emergency shelters reported having a felony conviction (CCH, 2013).

Finding a home in the carceral city

In response to the vast housing need for individuals returning to Chicago after a period of incarceration, a group of homeless advocates and reentry service providers came together to design and advocate for a reentry pilot at CHA following the release of Donovan's letter (CCH, 2013). What the advocates eventually negotiated—over the course of several years—was the “Family Reunification Pilot.” Officially approved at the November 2014 CHA Board of Commissioner's meeting, the pilot's mundane title obfuscates the intended beneficiaries of the program—returning residents—instead positing the pilot as a mild project aimed at reuniting families (see Figure 1).

Conceived as a three-year pilot program with a cap of just 50 people, organizers agreed that participants would have to complete a year of programming with a particular service provider before they would be eligible to move into CHA housing. Once they had been screened and met all eligibility requirements (which I examine in detail in the following sections), participants were slated into two tracks: the first group could apply for their own waitlist number and join the hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans awaiting housing assistance (CHA, 2014). Or, for those with family already living in CHA housing, they could move in with those relatives (CHA specified closed blood or legal relatives only), if the family was willing.

In summer 2016, nearly two years into the pilot, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals involved in the pilot—including policymakers, advocates, and hopeful applicants—to learn about stakeholders' goals for the project as well as what they saw as possible limitations. I also collected documents describing or advertising the pilot, as well as the application forms and other materials required of potential participants. A CHA program overview document describes the purpose of the pilot as “To test the provision of stable housing against recidivism” (CHA, 2016). Similarly, during interviews, policymakers expressed that the pilot comprised an official policy experiment to, as one CHA official put it, “show some type of positive results” form which the agency could argue for “best practices” that would then be “shopped around the country.” A successful experiment would thus be a feather in CHA's cap, a program they could advertise to other housing authorities and garner positive attention on a national policy stage.

For applicants, the stakes of this experiment were personal and were extremely high: as Jimmy Beaman explained to me, “I'll be homeless if I don't participate in this program and get an apartment through this program” (Beaman, 2016, interview). John Stamps drew an experiential equivalence between homelessness and incarceration, explaining,

I mean really, I just ain't got nowhere to go. I need a place to stay . . . Living on the street, it's about the same as being incarcerated. Because the people on the street are going to treat you just as worse [sic] as the people when you're incarcerated, they look down on you. (Stamps, 2016, interview)

For him, the pilot provided a concrete route out of homelessness, which he saw as analogous to the stigma of incarceration. Bobby Flowers described how, if he were able to move from the transitional home into an apartment, he would open up a bed for another returning resident to move in and “get their life together” (Flowers, 2016, interview with the author, July 20, 2016). Whether they articulated the need for the pilot in individual or more

REENTRY PILOT PROGRAM

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Do you have a family member* who would like to rejoin your household? The CHA Reentry Pilot Program allows formerly incarcerated individuals to obtain housing despite a previous conviction.

ELIGIBILITY

You may be eligible to participate in the CHA Reentry Pilot Program if you have been formerly incarcerated and you:

- Are at least 18 years old
- Want to live with family members who agree to participate and who currently live in a CHA apartment or are participants in the Housing Choice Voucher program
- Have participated or would be willing to participate in services at one of the following agencies and have been highly recommended for success by service provider staff:
 - Safer Foundation
 - St. Leonard's Ministries
- Agree to sign a consent form to be willing to participate in services for a two year commitment as needed
- Are compliant with CHA's work requirement

GETTING STARTED

- If you and your family are interested in learning more about this program, requirements and additional eligibility criteria, please contact:
 - Safer Foundation: (312) 922-2200**
 - St. Leonard's Ministries: (312) 738-1414**
- Other reentry service providers may refer to the Safer Foundation and St. Leonard's Ministries
- For more information about the reentry pilot program, contact the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless: (312) 641-4140

*Certain family members qualify, please inquire for more information

Figure 1. A recruitment flyer for the pilot displays the types of families policymakers envision participating in the program.

collective terms, all three agreed that it was a vital intervention. Pilot organizers supported this assessment, noting that the pilot could be “the difference between homelessness and . . . possibly reoffending because they’re so desperate. So it’s really—the stakes are high” (Ramirez, 2016, interview with the author, July 19, 2016).

For other advocates, the main goals of the pilot lay in ending the practice of continued punishment and changing attitudes. Organizers cited, for example, that “People should have

the right to move on with their lives And public housing, the whole subsidized housing industry has never really acknowledged that” (Cunningham, 2016, interview with the author, July 19, 2016). One reentry service provider described how the pilot was restoring hope to communities—“communities that, because of mass incarceration, all hope has been stolen” (Lowery, 2016, interview with the author, July 26, 2016). For others, like Francine Washington, who plays multiple roles as a longtime CHA resident, the president of CHA residents’ elected representative council, and a CHA commissioner, the pilot offers a practical intervention. For her, the pilot overturns nonsensical policies, allowing “nice, amenable” kids who “really had nowhere to go” after being locked up for minor drug possessions to move back in with their parents and grandparents (Washington, 2016, interview with the author, July 20, 2016). In her telling, One Strike policies effectively punished innocent tenants, who had to choose whether or not to harbor convicted relatives and in doing so, risk eviction themselves. She particularly bemoans cases in which ill or elderly residents in need of assistance with their healthcare were not allowed to have their younger family members move in to help care for them due to the criminal background restrictions. In her view, the pilot provides a way to keep families together and keep potential caretakers or income earners in the home. In a similar vein, a CHA official described the pilot as a way to not only rehabilitate individuals, but whole neighborhoods. As he articulated it, the value of the pilot stems from “Bringing [returning residents] back into the household to be gainfully employed, providing a support for their families, their siblings, you know, relatives and so forth. And to be positive in the neighborhood, to build back on the neighborhood.” For Washington and this CHA official, a key goal of the program was to restore family stability at both the household and the neighborhood levels, hopefully leading to improvements in household income, among other factors.

However, the pilot was also framed not only as a public housing program, but as an intervention into another public system: the criminal justice system. As another CHA official explained,

The main goal is that we have a really messed up criminal justice system, which has racial undergirds to it, and we can say that someone has done their time, paid for their crime, but people continue to pay for it when they re-integrate into society. And so the goal [of the pilot] was to try to eliminate some of those barriers.

As articulated by this staff member as well as in the official program description, this policy experiment was explicitly framed as a systems-level intervention, intended to reduce barriers to reentry and short-circuit recidivism. Thus, in addition to a number of practical and more abstract goals, the Family Reunification Pilot was designed to mitigate the failures of another public system. In the next section, I consider the potential of the pilot to meet these goals and, indeed, to usher in wider reforms.

Policy logics

As seen in the previous section, policymakers and advocates articulated good intentions and in some cases, lofty goals, for CHA’s Family Reunification Pilot. Why, then, was the pilot so slow to start? And what is its potential to meaningfully overturn punitive policies of the past and disrupt the carceral continuum? In this section, I consider the pilot’s design and early implementation in an attempt to provide some preliminary answers to these questions. In particular, I argue that, in contradiction to many of its more elevated goals, the pilot’s design fails to account for the housing system’s role in the carceral continuum and thus,

the pilot remains an individual, rather than structural, intervention. This fundamental oversight manifests in several key ways: through the haphazard, unfunded nature of the program; through careful participant screening, tight eligibility requirements, and limited enrollments; through the explicit treatment of participants as test subjects in a broader policy experiment; and through the practice of continued punishment vis-à-vis strict monitoring requirements. In all of these ways, the pilot replicates the stigma of returning residents rather than normalizing their presence in CHA housing as regular tenants. In this scenario, program success hinges on the individual outcomes of the small number of participants, rather than the broader inclusion of returning residents as a class. Finally, these tensions are perhaps best epitomized by the very framing of the pilot as a “reunification” program, which simultaneously acknowledges a *return* while positing the program as a brand new, household-level intervention and thereby erasing public housing’s role in the broader structural conditions of modern punishment—that is, in recognizing why families may need to be reunited to begin with.

A pilot for the few

Despite the documented and enormous need for housing for individuals returning to Chicago after a period of incarceration, it took three years for the pilot to fill (as originally designed, the pilot was supposed to be completed within three years and then evaluated to determine whether it could be expanded or formalized). After nearly two years, only one person had been housed. There are many possible, additive reasons for this. First, by its very nature as a pilot, no one administrator at CHA was responsible for overseeing the program—including recruitment. The program fell outside of CHA’s normal responsibilities, essentially amounting to extra work for any staff willing to take it on. The fact that several did testifies to the agency’s willingness to step up, but also to the inherently precarious and deprioritized nature of such pilot programs. Compounding this, the pilot lacked any specific funding source, deriving its overhead instead from CHA’s designation as a “Moving to Work” agency, which allows CHA some discretion in how they use their general funds. In other words, without additional funding or staff, organizing the pilot comprised yet another task for housing officials to fit into their regular workflow and budgets. While all of these may be typical for pilot programs, these structural barriers reflect a lingering institutional reticence to put strong resources behind integrating returning residents, who were instead relegated to a supplemental, experimental, and fundamentally separate program.

One effect of this organizational de-prioritization was an unexpected difficulty in recruiting and identifying participants. First, by the summer of 2016, CHA had not systematically marketed the program. To the extent that information had been released, one organizer speculated that potential applicants might not accept or believe that One Strike policies were actually ending (Ramirez, 2016, interview). So lasting and powerful was the ethos of the One Strike Rule that, she surmised, some families may be afraid to come forward and admit to having a relative with a criminal record. Second, organizers had agreed on a set of eligibility criteria, including screening out individuals with one or more violent convictions. They had also decided upon an extremely narrow definition of “family” with whom potential applicants could reunite: CHA specified that an applicant could move in with close blood or legal relatives only (parents, children, or spouses but no unmarried partners) yet most inmates are not married to their partners on the outside.³ Third, CHA also decided to enforce a work requirement for pilot participants despite the fact that returning residents have a much harder time finding and maintaining employment as a result of their criminal record. Between all of these eligibility criteria and the necessary pre-requisite experience (an

applicant must have completed Illinois' version of parole and must have completed at least one year of programming with a reentry service provider), the organizers were having a harder time identifying potential applicants than expected.

CHA also set a 50-person cap for the program, seemingly in contradiction to the acknowledged scope of the problem the pilot aimed to solve. This design—hand selecting a limited number of elite participants according to the strict eligibility criteria outlined above—reinforces the logic that pilot participants are exceptions to the rule, whose individual success will prove the merit of CHA's policy experiment as a whole. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2015) critiques this logic of what she terms "relative innocence," or the idea that "systematic criminalization will rust and crumble if some of those caught in its iron grip are extricated under the aegis of relative innocence." She explains how, when policymakers and the public focus on "campaigning for the relatively innocent"—which she exemplifies as "the third-striker in for stealing pizza or people in prison on drug convictions"—"advocates reinforce the assumption that others are relatively or absolutely guilty and do not deserve political or policy intervention Such advocacy adds to the legitimation of mass incarceration" (Gilmore, 2015). By limiting their program to a small number of carefully screened participants, CHA's pilot enacts this logic of relative innocence, which only further legitimizes punitive policies for those excluded from the program's immediate purview.

If reintegrating returning residents via a tiny, marginalized pilot program indicates the structural pressures on CHA against doing this work and the immense, ongoing barriers that continue to exclude those with criminal records from mainstream public institutions, the experimental nature of the pilot further curtailed its potential. Specifically, by treating its participants as test cases, the program's success or failure implicitly hinged on individual outcomes despite its ostensible goal of structural intervention. Douglas McKinney, a reentry service provider who works with program applicants, explains the program to his clients as follows: "For you to be given the opportunity to possess [CHA housing], you're a guinea pig Only you can determine if the individual coming behind you gets in [to the pilot]" (McKinney, 2016, interview with the author, July 18, 2016). Homeless advocate Rachel Ramirez similarly describes her own worries that, "If something happens with any one of the pilot program participants, the whole thing could be shut down" (Ramirez, 2016, interview). These statements testify to the persistent anxiety organizers felt about the fragility and precarity of the program, whose experimental nature explicitly aimed to evaluate whether returning residents could make responsible tenants and whether living in public housing would prevent participants from reoffending. Referencing CHA officials' fears of liability, as expressed in organizing meetings, reentry service provider Tony Lowery explains that the program "isn't for everyone. It's for people who have an exemplary record of accomplishment. It's not for everyone We [service providers] are national experts in identifying people who are ready for success" (Lowery, 2016, interview). Thus, service providers select the candidates for the pilot who they deem most likely to provide an example of individual success (the "relatively innocent," to again use Gilmore's term) and, in doing so, prove that returning residents should not be discriminated against *as a class*. Decisions of who to house are balanced with concerns from CHA and the service providers alike about their own reputations, should someone involved in the pilot re-offend.

Perhaps more than anything, these fears testify to the ongoing salience of pernicious discourses around violent ex-offenders and crime more generally. Lowery explains that it would take only one mistake to derail the pilot, describing how, in negotiations with then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel's office, "[Emanuel] was saying, 'You know, you've got to be sure, we've got to get good people, because one mistake, you know, they'll eat us up'" (Lowery, 2016, interview). Similarly, he describes a conversation with a CHA staff person who asked

‘Well, what if we have someone who comes through your program and then they commit a double-murder?’ I said, ‘Oh wow, the old double-murder, huh?’ And so I said, ‘Well, that’s why we’re painstakingly identifying people without propensity to commit these crimes’. (Lowery, 2016, interview)

Thus, the specter of violent crime haunts the pilot, despite its organizers’ stated goals to provide second chances, curtail recidivism, and intervene in a broken justice system that for too long has preyed on the poor and racialized. These fears preclude the political possibility of fully integrating returning residents and normalizing their presence in public housing, instead restricting the pilot to a limited intervention where one person’s mistake could jeopardize an entire policy shift.

These anxieties are further reflected in the pilot’s intense monitoring and follow-up requirements for participants: two years of follow-up appointments and as-needed services with a reentry service provider. By functionally extending the surveillance if not the punishment of its participants, the pilot itself remains trapped in the carceral continuum, with concrete effects. For example, Ramirez reports that these monitoring requirements further hampered the pilot’s already-rocky recruitment efforts, as many potential applicants simply did not want to continue to be tracked and monitored, despite already having completed incarceration and parole. As she explains,

People, you know, they’re like, ‘What do you mean I have to do follow-up services for two years? Why can’t I be treated like a regular [CHA] resident?’ And it’s a tension . . . because we[the organizers] also want people to be treated like normal people. That’s the whole point: let [returning residents] live in CHA like everyone else, right? (Ramirez, 2016, interview)

However, organizers were not able to negotiate for a pilot without these restrictions and at the time of this research, Ramirez knew of at least one person who decided not to apply for the pilot simply because he did not want to be tracked anymore; he wanted to live independently, like anyone else. If the goals of the program are to “let people move on with their lives” and “eliminate . . . barriers,” as described in preceding sections, attaching such additional tenancy conditions seemingly undermines these goals. Rather than restoring returning residents to full equality with other CHA tenants, the pilot’s design extends punishment. In making this argument, I do not mean to imply that the follow-up monitoring is entirely pernicious or universally damaging. However, as a blanket requirement, it also inescapably results in differential treatment between pilot and non-pilot participants reinforces the view that individual outcomes can overturn—or, if someone reoffends, reinforce—broader structural barriers.

If the pilot’s design reveals logics based on individual—rather than structural—level intervention, its framing as a “reunification” pilot points to another key tension between acknowledging and erasing public housing’s role in the carceral continuum. “Reunification” seemingly implies return and indeed—as should be unsurprising based on the history reviewed above—many potential applicants will be familiar with CHA housing. As longtime tenant Washington describes, despite the overriding ethos of One Strike, individuals with records were difficult to keep off CHA properties in reality. She explains,

Even though I may take my child off my lease, he may come in my house to wash up, to get something to eat, [or] he may not. He may have a girlfriend staying somewhere on the property [who] he’s staying with. (Washington, 2016, interview)

She describes how tenants who picked up a record would stay in vacant units “or [go] from house to house, or they were sleeping in laundry rooms in the buildings, under the buildings, in the breezeways, anywhere” (Washington, 2016, interview). Similarly, McKinney explains how individuals returning from prison knew they were not allowed to live in public housing during these years, but if they had relatives or other connections in the projects, “would sneak in there” (McKinney, 2016, interview). So long as security did not recognize them, it was easy for returning residents to get onto the properties to visit or even stay with friends or family members. Thus, while they might have been removed from the lease formally under One Strike policies, tenants with criminal records often returned to the properties informally. Thus, if One Strike sent a strong message that returning residents were not welcome, the fiction of public housing as a closed system—able to permanently banish offenders from its borders—largely existed in policymakers’ imaginations.

However, when asked how many pilot participants will have lived in public housing previously, one CHA official says, “I don’t know a percentage. Hopefully it’s not a big percentage.” In interviews, pilot organizers indicate that they expect most participants to be newcomers to CHA housing, framing the pilot as a radical break from the One Strike policies of the past, as the *first time* anyone with a record will be allowed into public housing. Even the pilot’s official purpose—“To test the provision of stable housing against recidivism”—frames public housing as terra incognita for returning residents, a space where no one with a criminal record has been housed before. And indeed, in its very cautious, limited approach, the pilot’s design indicates a reticence to acknowledge that individuals with criminal records have been a part of public housing all along, just as they are part of our wider society (after all, an estimated one in three Americans has a criminal record (Lerman and Weaver, 2014)).

Further, in its failure to recognize that individuals with criminal records have never fully left public housing, the pilot also obscures the reasons that some may need to return: that is, public housing’s own role in the carceral continuum. In other words, just as the pilot adopts the language of “reunification” without acknowledging that many participants may have lived in CHA housing—formally or informally—in the past, it also erases how state action, via harsh drug laws, policing in the projects, and the One Strike Rule itself, sent many residents to jail or prison in the first place. For example, in addition to officially sanctioned police sweeps of public housing, Washington recalls witnessing regular, corrupt, and predatory policing in her community, describing,

The police were rogues. They would come in any time they needed to pay their condo . . . bill or their mortgage and they would find our young boys and . . . they would plant stuff on them and take them to jail and [the boys] would wind up with a . . . criminal record. I watched hundreds and hundreds of young men throughout the Authority get [taken off of their mother’s] lease or get criminal records for something the police were doing . . . They were busting people’s doors down, taking their drug money, their shoes, their jewelry, their cars, and they were selling guns and stuff to young men . . . We’ve had so many cases at Stateway [Gardens] where the police came in and misused the residents. We had a midday basketball game [that] they just came in and raided . . . Some people got picked up for having a joint on them. One joint. We’d sit there watching the police plant stuff on them. We were sitting there watching the police sell—many days we’d call [the Police Department] and say “You’ve got a police car with this license plate number sitting out at 35th [Street] next to a day care center selling guns and drugs out of the back of their car.” (Washington, 2016, interview)

Washington's testimony speaks to the regular and systemic nature of police predation on, surveillance of, and even violence toward public housing residents. In her telling, while CHA maintained strict One Strike policies, another public agency with an explicit law enforcement mission—the police department—preyed upon residents, producing rather than mitigating crime in the projects (see also Kalven, 2016). Residents in over-policed projects were therefore not only subject to higher levels of surveillance, arrest, and control than in other parts of the city, but were directly exploited by police officers. This is the carceral continuum in action: rather than being inherently more crime-ridden, public housing neighborhoods were actively criminalized by state action. Subject to intense scrutiny and policing in their homes and communities, public housing residents were funneled into the prison system by cops who took advantage of the heavily concentrated poor communities and a state determined that anti-crime measures were synonymous with anti-poverty measures.

If overturning the One Strike Rule provides an opening to acknowledge and overcome these historical entanglements, the response of the Family Reunification Pilot obscures the blurry boundaries between public housing and prison. In a contradictory move, despite positioning the pilot as a way to reunify families—which implies some form of return—the pilot's intervention is framed as offering residents a first opportunity to live in CHA housing. That is, to the extent that the pilot admits a connection between the housing and criminal justice systems, the imagined relationship remains unidirectional, whereby individuals are released from a broken prison system only to be rescued—via this new, experimental program—by a rehabilitative housing system. This conceptualization of housing's role in reentry or the wider justice system absents public housing from the carceral continuum and thus contributes to shortcomings in the program design.

Conclusion

After several years, the pilot has mostly filled and has largely remained—as organizers hoped it would—under the media radar (or at least, has not received any significantly bad press) (CHA, 2018; Ramirez, 2016, interview). Perhaps even more promisingly, in the process of negotiating the pilot, CHA agreed to lower their lookback windows—i.e. how many years in the past they will consider someone's criminal record—for both their public housing and voucher programs. Thus, the pilot started undoubtedly important conversations about the rights of returning residents to access public housing that have pressured existing policies in significant ways. Despite President Trump's law and order posturing, Ben Carson's HUD has not interfered with municipal reentry pilots or newly expanded eligibility, so the One Strike Rule remains functionally passé. Therefore, in pointing to the blind spots and shortcomings of CHA's pilot, I do not mean to discount the importance of such efforts as *efforts*. As I hope I have shown, providing safe, affordable, and permanent housing for returning residents is among the most pressing of urban challenges today, with tens of thousands returning to major U.S. cities annually from prisons and jails. For these individuals, housing is an especially vital component of successful reintegration but, saddled with the stigma of a criminal record (as well as, at times, geographic restrictions or the hassle of parole check-ins), especially difficult to secure. In this context, and as pilot applicants were quick to remind me, CHA's pilot comprises a potentially life-saving reform for people exiting the justice system and in need of housing. Insofar as it has fueled a public conversation about reversing One Strike policies, raised awareness that returning residents can be good neighbors and tenants, formalized once-informal practices, spurred spillover policy changes such as lessened lookback periods, and staked a claim for the right of returning residents to access housing and other public subsidies, the pilot marks a significant break

from the counterproductive policies of the past. In these capacities, its work is much needed and thus, the solution is not to end pilots like these, nor any other reforms they may usher in that would increase access to subsidized housing for the formerly incarcerated.

However, as I hope this paper has shown, without a greater recognition of how the housing and justice systems are intimately intertwined, despite being spatially distant and separately administered, pilots like CHA's Family Reunification pilot will prove insufficient to face the mounting challenges of an increasingly carceral and housing insecure society. As Joshua Evans (2016) has helpfully reviewed, a burgeoning scholarly literature examines the ways in which cities are increasingly governed by and therefore produced through experiments like CHA's pilot. Rhys Jones and Mark Whitehead (2018) further argue that governing by experiment creates experimental citizens, with important ethical implications. If pilot participants are "guinea pigs," as organizers argue, they must be for the program to succeed, what are the implications for those individuals—individuals whose lives and livelihoods hang in the balance—of being used in such experiments in order to prove a point about entire populations? And what is the potential for broader policy change when programs ostensibly aimed at challenging structural inequalities obscure the complex workings of those structures and instead hang their success or failure on individual results?

Perhaps the pilot's central flaw lies in its inherent experimental design—its very status *as a pilot*, which mandates a cautious, limited approach. In other words, that the pathway for returning residents to access public housing has to happen through a pilot program at all circumscribes the extent of their inclusion in the institution. Relegated to a special program for a limited number of hand-selected individuals, the pilot's design fails to fully escape prevailing stigma and social anxieties around violent offenders. Haunted by the specter of crime that curtails more radical political possibility, reintegration can only take place through a piecemeal experiment where the few returning residents who can participate are treated as the exception and not the rule. Thus, the pilot ultimately fails to normalize the presence of returning residents in public housing and in doing so, also fails to escape the carceral continuum that it otherwise aims to disrupt. Finally, the framing of the program as a radical break from One Strike policies that imagine public housing as *terra incognita* for returning residents, rather than as a space deeply enmeshed in the carceral continuum, erases participants' potential history as past residents and denies a key link between public housing and the carceral system. Complex problems require appropriately complex solutions, which, in this case, will require a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how seemingly disparate institutions like public housing and criminal justice actually function in tandem, on a progressive spectrum of punishment. Seeing the problem for what it is must be the first step in enacting solutions to counter it.

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Notes

1. Alternately, Nick Gill et al. (2018) have offered the term “carceral circuitry” to explain how prisons, far from being tightly bounded institutions, are in fact regularly traversed by circulations of people, objects, and practices. While I find this useful to emphasize the permeability of the prison, I employ the “continuum” model here, because it emphasizes the simultaneous variability between yet interdependence of spaces and institutions—some ostensibly punitive, others not. That is, the ghetto (to use Wacquant’s term) is not a prison, but it is related to the prison; they exist on the same punitive spectrum.
2. There are two exceptions: as Donovan explains, HUD regulations explicitly ban those convicted of manufacturing methamphetamine on the premises of federally assisted housing and sex offenders subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a state sex offender registration program. Further, Donovan encourages housing authorities to “establish standards that prohibit admission” to anyone known to use illegal drugs and established a three-year ban on anyone who had been evicted from federally assisted housing for drug-related criminal activity (Donovan, 2011: 1). The language of such restrictions is slippery: the housing authorities must “establish standards” but not necessarily prohibit admission as a blanket policy. Donovan continues that in the case of drug-related criminal activity, “[Public housing authorities] retain discretion to consider the circumstances and may admit households if the [public housing authority] determines that the evicted household member...has successfully completed a supervised drug rehabilitation program” (Donovan, 2011).
3. According to the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (most recent data available), just 26.3% of inmates in the United States are married (NACJD, 2004).

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