

Breaking free — neighborhoods' pull and peril for the formerly incarcerated

By David S. Kirk

"I never thought I would make it outside my little ghetto. I never thought I would make it out of this shit alive," said Kenneth. "For me not being in New Orleans is, it's therapeutic in a way, because when I'm not there, I don't feel the need to be that other person. I don't feel the need to be on the offensive."

Kenneth Beaulieu (a pseudonym) was telling me this story on his front porch in Austin, Texas, where I interviewed him as part of a study of people released from prison in Louisiana in the wake of an earlier disaster, Hurricane Katrina.

When we spoke that hot Texas afternoon, Kenneth had already been out of prison for 5 years—quite a feat if you consider the odds. Fifty percent of formerly incarcerated individuals end up back in prison within three years of release. This “prison industrial complex” in the United States locks up 1.4 million men and women on any given day—the majority people of color. These figures do not even include incarcerations in local jails.

A key reason Kenneth had managed to stay clear of prison after his release is because, as he put it, he got away from his old neighborhood. His success provides a clue to how we could begin to successfully reform a system that by all accounts is broken, and stop the cycling of the same individuals in and out of prisons.

The coronavirus pandemic only underscores this need. America's prisons and jails have been epicenters of the pandemic, bringing much-needed attention to the overcrowding resulting from our 40+ year zeal to incarcerate on a mass scale. The moment is now to consider underutilized yet theoretically-grounded solutions to stop the revolving door of prison. One solution emerged from two robust experiments that Hurricane Katrina jumpstarted. Many worthwhile programs and services for the formerly incarcerated address person-centered reasons for recidivism—lack of education and skills, drug addiction, and cognitive thinking—but then send people right back to their old communities where they got into trouble with the law in the first place. As Kenneth and others' stories relay, breaking the cycle of recidivism may be more likely if we went further, and gave people an opportunity for a fresh start in a new place.

Growing Up in New Orleans

One of the first places Kenneth can remember living was a one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of New Orleans in a drab, 1970s style complex managed by his uncle. His uncle would later be murdered in the same complex during a dispute with a resident over the resident's drug use. After that, Kenneth's mother packed up the family once again and moved her children to her own childhood home just a few miles away.

Kenneth was proud to tell me that their home was not Section 8—the housing subsidy for low-income families—but paid for with a mortgage. Nor was it in the “projects,” where his enemies were. But the neighborhood in the 1990s was a far cry from when his mother grew up in the 1970s. By the 1990s the poverty rate had nearly doubled, and four in ten families lived in poverty. Crime and drugs were a fact of life; a product of withering community disinvestment by multiple levels of government.

Growing up, Kenneth was never a big kid, but, he told me, he had a big mouth, which often got him into trouble with the other kids in the neighborhood. Being studious in the classroom likewise got him into trouble.

“My teachers loved me but my peers hated me,” he told me. “So I had to create a persona of a badass because if I was academically successful in my community, I’d get my ass kicked every day.”

Once he figured out how to defend himself, life improved, and the kids who once beat him up became his closest friends. At home, his stepfather, a “real man” for working two back-breaking jobs to support his family, provided him with occasional spending money so he could buy the Air Jordan’s and Girbaud jeans that were so important to his reputation and status in the neighborhood. But his stepfather fell on hard times and developed a crack habit, so the money stopped. It was then that Kenneth started selling weed for spending money. He was 12.

He initially refused to advance beyond selling marijuana, but one weekend, he and a friend wanted to spend the day at the local arcade but neither of them had enough money. On a whim, they decided to pool \$40 and buy “two big rocks” that they divided up to sell. Their first step into “the big time” was in a nearby crack house.

“Looking back on what I done and what I contributed to,” he said, “it almost bring me to tears, ‘cause after I sold it to this woman, I watched her go sit there and smoke that shit. I felt all kinds of things at that moment, but I learned how to numb myself. I threw away that whole feeling of sickness and sadness because, guess what, I wanted to smoke me a little weed and I wanted to have a little money in my pocket. I sold my soul right then and there.”

By age 16, Kenneth’s reputation had grown, and he assumed the role of a leader of his neighborhood crew. His ascendance did not go unnoticed by the cops. He soon had his first consequential run-in with the law, for fighting, and was incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility.

He was back in the cross-hairs of the police soon after turning 18, for a marijuana possession charge. It was not long after catching this charge that his neighborhood would ignite with trouble.

The day that would alter his life and others began like many before. Kenneth spent the morning watching Disney movies with his younger siblings and had just stepped outside when his friends rolled up to say trouble was brewing down the street. Kenneth joined the

gathering crowd as the cops arrested one of Kenneth's friends. His friend—a surrogate younger brother in many respects—had earlier pistol whipped a rival gang member from the next neighborhood over a long-running feud involving a theft. His friend was now in the backseat of the police car, and for Kenneth, that escalated the matter. "Now you're sending people to jail," he told me, recalling the day, "so what you got here is a snitch."

To make matters worse, the rival gang was now riding around posturing, flashing their guns. It was later that same day when, in the heat of a confrontation, Kenneth and other members of his crew fired on an approaching crowd, and an innocent bystander, a teenager, was killed.

Kenneth was arrested and, by coincidence, the same judge who sentenced Kenneth to ten years had sent his stepfather to prison years earlier. With that he became one of the hundreds of thousands of American men in prison. But unlike the typical statistics, when his release came ten years later, he did something that others rarely do. He left New Orleans, and likely avoided an almost inevitable return to prison.

A Test: What Happens when you Give the Formerly Incarcerated the Resources to Move?

An experimental housing program for the formerly incarcerated I started a few years ago in Maryland provides a glimpse of what would happen if we helped people like Kenneth get out of their old environments with the opportunity to start over. The MOVE program (Maryland Opportunities through Vouchers Experiment) provided free housing for six months for people leaving Maryland prisons, with the condition that the housing be located at least 40 miles away from where they used to live (roughly the distance between Baltimore and the outskirts of Washington, DC). We chose 40 miles because past housing mobility experiments like the Moving to Opportunity program had seen disappointing results when people moved only a few miles away, not far enough to create a real change in circumstances.

Over the course of a year, my team and I made numerous visits to Maryland prisons, meeting with soon-to-be-released prisoners and inviting them to participate in the program. Almost everyone said yes. The substantial demand for the program was not because so many were at risk of homelessness, although some were, but rather because many of the prisoners understood the risks of returning home. Their neighborhoods were destructive, and some would have returned to a home with a brother, father, and even mother with their own legal and substance abuse problems. And some of our participants wanted the free housing, regardless of where it was located, simply because they had never had a place of their own.

Pilot results from the program revealed that the combination of free stable housing and a new environment lowered the likelihood of re-arrest relative to the status quo individuals who simply left prison and struggled for housing, typically back in their old neighborhoods. The people who moved told us they were able to focus on the future, such as finding a job

and building relationships. The people who moved back home were focused on the past — avoiding destructive relationships and harassment by the cops.

The Maryland project built on my earlier research after Hurricane Katrina. In that analysis, I compared reincarceration rates of every prisoner originally from the New Orleans metropolitan area who was released in the first six months after Hurricane Katrina to every New Orleans prisoner released a few years prior to Katrina. Because the tragedy of Katrina forced many people to move who otherwise would not have moved, we get a glimpse into the alternate reality of their lives—a “natural experiment” in the social science world.

It turns out that those prisoners who were forced to move by the storm, and who normally would have gone back to their old surroundings in New Orleans, were much less likely to be subsequently reincarcerated than their pre-Katrina counterparts who went back home. Forty-six percent of the people who moved to a different parish were reincarcerated at some point in the first eight years after their release, still a high percentage but much less than the staggering 59 percent reincarcerated among those otherwise similar individuals who returned home.

And it was not just the prisoners who were originally from the most disadvantaged communities or the heart of New Orleans who benefitted from a move. Even those individuals from suburban areas like Jefferson Parish and St. Bernard Parish had lower rates of reincarceration if they moved out of their old neighborhoods.

Breaking Free

After serving nearly his full 10-year sentence, Kenneth decided to move to Austin, Texas, upon the encouragement of a cousin who lived on the outskirts of the city. Kenneth knew that if he was to survive and avoid prison again, he had to leave New Orleans. Not only were the old friends there and the old habits beckoned, but, he assumed he’d be harassed, falsely accused, and arrested by the police. He also wanted to leave for the sake of the family of the teen he’d killed.

“I never take for granted that somebody died,” he said quietly. “And I would say it’s almost a tribute or respect to that young man and his family to not be out and about, flaunting the fact that I’m still here while your loved one is dead.”

He asked that his parole be transferred to Austin, which was granted, and he left shortly thereafter. In Austin, Kenneth has been doing all the things that criminologists have long said are important for staying free from crime. He is employed, becoming a welder like his stepfather. He later took a job as a prep cook working from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. He is married—he met his wife not long after moving to Austin—and is an active parent to her son from a prior relationship. Kenneth’s ability to maintain stability in his life is likely influenced by the fact that he is no longer in the “game.” He is not hanging around anyone involved in criminal activity. He is no longer part of the situations and environment that led to the demise of so many.

Kenneth explained to me, “I grew up into an environment where, when you are 10 or 11 years old you start to understand that, hey, those guys from that neighborhood over there, they don’t like us for some reason. And I ain’t never did them nothin’. It’s just because I live on this street. You know. And when you’re from somewhere like New Orleans, you always say you’re gonna leave but you never leave. That’s how the ‘hood is. It trapped you.”

He is now out of that environment, but not all is rosy. His marriage, though one of love and devotion, is not without tension, as he struggles to be a contributing member of the family. His job is menial and half of each paycheck is garnished for legal fees and child support for a daughter in Louisiana. He has also had trouble with credit card debt. Having been a drug dealer with the opportunity for quick sales and profits, it is a foreign and dispiriting task to wait two weeks for a paltry paycheck. He is also humiliated that he can no longer afford to dress well and instead shops at Walmart. Back in the day, he said, “I wouldn’t even think of buying *slippers* at Walmart.”

Kenneth is also struggling with the stigma of a criminal record. He is a grown man over the age of 30, and says he cannot even put his name on their apartment lease because of his record, a minor thing for some but it makes the neighborhood and his home feel less like home and undermines his masculinity. His stepson is growing up and needs him less, and Kenneth is feeling increasingly isolated.

His biggest challenge, however, “is surviving out here as a convicted felon in a society that don’t want me out. That is the truth of the matter.”

The barriers former prisoners face, what academics call the “collateral consequences” of punishment, mean that the formerly imprisoned never truly pay their debt to society. The resulting lack of affordable housing, dismal employment prospects, and suffocating debt often derails the chances of those like Kenneth who are making legitimate attempts to turn their lives around, and hinders their ability to repair or build relationships. In such situations, it may be tempting to fall back into the comfort and ease of old routines in a familiar environment. For Kenneth, though, his old routines are 500 miles east, in Louisiana, making it challenging for him to respond to the struggles of his current life by returning to the familiarity of his past.

During my last visit with Kenneth, two years after our first post-prison interview, he mentioned that an old friend of his mother’s from the neighborhood had told him that she was proud of him for changing his life, but some recent violence had put the neighborhood on high alert and she sure wished he was back home making sure the neighborhood was safe like he used to do. That kind of lofty status is inconceivable in his neighborhood in Texas, where he feels like a pariah. But he knows the odds if he were to return. His co-defendants in the murder case returned to the old neighborhood after serving their time and have been cycling in and out of prison ever since.

Solutions

What, then, are the solutions to recidivism?

It is clear that stable housing is crucial. A safe and secure place to live can facilitate other steps towards desistance from crime such as finding a job and repairing broken relationships. While it is possible for people like Kenneth to find stable housing on their own, government efforts can go a long way towards reducing the barriers. One concrete idea for bolstering housing opportunities for people coming out of prison is to expand the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program, which incentivizes real estate developers to build affordable housing. With a greater supply of available affordable housing, formerly incarcerated individuals who wish to move may have the opportunity to actually do so.

Specific supports to the formerly incarcerated may take the form of housing vouchers or rental assistance programs. As in my MOVE program, subsidies should be flexible enough so that recipients can move with family members if they wish, in order to maintain family ties often crucial to desisting from crime. The important caveat is that the moves should be of sufficient distance to provide individuals a real chance at a fresh start. Given the sheer volume of people exiting prison each year in the United States, it may be most feasible to target such mobility strategies at those individuals who would benefit the most from residential relocation and a new environment.

But how could we pay for housing for the formerly incarcerated when only about one-quarter of all families eligible for federal rental assistance actually receive it? The answer is a strategy long discussed in the criminal justice arena — Justice Reinvestment. The idea is simple — redirect a portion of the savings from the reduced use of incarceration to pay for housing for newly released prisoners. With the per person cost of imprisonment soaring to well over \$100 a day in many states, there are enormous potential cost savings from housing people on the outside instead of on the inside.

Of course, rather than solely emphasizing opportunities for the formerly incarcerated to move away from criminogenic contexts, it would be wise to design interventions and investments to address and remedy the disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions that produce high crime rates in the first place. Hence, while residential change is one potential solution to recidivism, we'd be wise to pursue mobility strategies and place-based investments as complementary approaches to reduce recidivism rather than as substitutes.

David Kirk is Professor of Sociology at Oxford University and Nuffield College. His book "Home Free: Prisoner Reentry and Residential Change after Hurricane Katrina" was published by Oxford University Press in 2020.