

# Public Policy Institute

## Western Carolina University Homeward Bound Report

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The Public Policy Institute (PPI) of Western Carolina University partnered with Homeward Bound, a non-profit based in the City of Asheville, to conduct a data analysis project examining the effect of placement in permanent housing on criminal activity. The goal of the analysis was to determine if the number of criminal charges decreased after the client was placed in permanent housing. This study was done to evaluate the effectiveness of the “housing first” model that Homeward Bound has adopted and identify any trends in homelessness and utilization of services.

### I. METHODS

Homeward Bound staff approached their clients about participating in this voluntary study. Informed consent was obtained by from 119 clients of the non-profit. About 60% of those that participated were male and 40% were female. The participants’ ages ranged from 75 years-old to 25 years-old, while the average participant age was 50 years-old. The time spent in full-time housing through Homeward Bound for these respondents ranged between one to 17 years, with the average respondent being in the full-time housing for five years. Participants included those that entered permanent housing with assistance of Homeward Bound as far back as 2001 to those that entered public housing just months before the data collection began.

Once consent was provided, PPI staff collected data on the total number of criminal misdemeanors and/or felony charges in Buncombe County before and after the respondent was placed in permanent housing by Homeward Bound. For purposes of this study the “event” was the unit of analysis. For example, a participant received two charges on the same day, it was counted as one charge in our data.<sup>1</sup> The criminal charges information was obtained through the North Carolina Automated Criminal/Infraction System which is maintained by the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. To be consistent, the PPI separated the criminal charges from up to three years prior to their move-in date and the number of charges up to three years after their move-in date.

## II. RESULTS

The amount and types of criminal charges ranged greatly across the participants. Overall, 23% (or 27) of the participants had no criminal charges at any time, while the median for the group was 8 criminal charges. Some participants, however, had several hundred charges. Most of these criminal charges, particularly for those with a very high number of charges, were relatively minor misdemeanors, such as charges of trespass or panhandling, many of which were dismissed when they went to court. Some more serious charges were noted, including felony drug activity and serious assaults.

To examine the role that permanent housing may have on the reduction of criminal activity, PPI staff examined the number of criminal charges in Buncombe County for Homeward Bound

participants using the participant's entrance into permanent housing as a "cut point." To standardize the data, we also looked at the total number of charges immediately three years prior to entering full-time housing.<sup>2</sup> The results are displayed in Table 1.

	<b>Range</b>	<b>Average (Mean)</b>	<b>Median</b>
<b>Total Charges (All Years)</b>	0 - 378	28	8
<b>Total Charges Three Years Before Housing</b>	0 - 110	10	2
<b>Total Charges After Housing</b>	0-106	4	0

For the first row ("Total Charges") which includes the participant's time both before and after full-time housing, we see that participants on average were arrested 28 times. However, the median number presented, which represents the half-way point where half of the respondents were below this value and half were above this number, may be more representative. This is due to four individual participants with over 200 charges each which inflates the overall average. There was a wide range (0 to 378) which shows the lowest and highest number of charges per participant. In looking at the last column of Table 1, we see the median number of Buncombe County misdemeanor or felony charges across the participants was eight, which is likely more representative of the group than the average given the outliers.

The second row narrows down the time frame to just the three years before each participant entered full-time housing with the assistance of Homeward Bound. Here we see the average and the mean are less, which is expected since we have a narrower timeframe. The average number of charges three years prior to full-time housing was ten while the median number of charges was two.

The last row in Table 1 displays the range, average, and median number of charges after entering fulltime housing. The average number of charges drops to four while the median was zero. Just over one-half (60) of the 118 participants had no arrests after entering permanent housing. This represents over a 100% increase from the number of

participants that had no criminal charges prior to entering permanent housing (27) when compared to those with no criminal charges after entering housing (60). Of those with at least one arrest prior to entering fulltime housing (92 participants), 38 participants (or 41%) had no arrests after entering permanent housing.

Table 2 displays the data slightly differently by dividing the participants into groups based on their number of charges. The columns represent the percentage of participants at different levels based on the number of charges (such that the percentages in each row should equal 100%), while the number of actual participants is signified in parentheses under the percentage. The rows display different periods including all criminal charges for the participant in the first row, criminal charges three years prior to entering the program in the second row, and the number of criminal charges after being placed in housing through Homeward Bound in the bottom row.

<b>Table 2: Percentage of Respondents by Criminal Charges</b>					
	<b>Number of Charges</b>				
	<b>0 Charges</b>	<b>1 to 5 Charges</b>	<b>6 to 10 Charges</b>	<b>11 to 15 Charges</b>	<b>16 or More Charges</b>
<b>Total Charges (All Years)</b>	23% (27)	20% (24)	16% (19)	11% (13)	30% (36)
<b>Charges Three Years Before Housing</b>	35% (42)	28% (33)	18% (21)	6% (7)	13% (16)
<b>Charges After Housing</b>	50% (60)	32% (38)	9% (11)	3% (4)	5% (6)

As seen in the bottom row (“Charges After Housing”), again we see that half of the respondents have no arrests after entering full-time housing. However, we also see decreases across each column as we move right to left, indicated decreases in the highest categories of criminal activity. This suggests that that permanent housing may be an important factor for many participants in lessening the number of criminal charges.

### **III. POTENTIAL STUDY LIMITATIONS**

We do note some of the potential limitations to this data and its results. First, we were only able to obtain consent from 119 clients so there could differences between the group that opted in to this study and those that declined. Additionally, we only collected criminal data from Buncombe County, so we do not have data about charges from outside the county. We also recognize that records for criminal charges may not fully capture an individual’s criminal activity as some crimes go unreported and not all law enforcement involvement may not result in a criminal charge. Finally, we note that there are numerous factors in addition to permanent housing that could contribute to a reduction in crime rates. For example, studies show that age is a factor in that people commit less crimes as they get older. While we found no differences based on age and gender influencing the change in charges before and after entering permanent housing, we do note that other factors outside the scope of this study may also contribute to a reduction in criminal charges.

## IV. IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the data suggest that entrance into permanent housing contributes to a decrease in an individual's criminal charges. While this is important for many, it also represents a potential reduction in public resources used due to this decline in criminal charges. The actual costs associated with arrests and incarceration vary, as they are affected by the local economy, law enforcement personnel, and the details of each individual crime. However, the North Carolina Department of Public Safety's recent report suggests that the average cost of incarceration per inmate per day is \$99.23.<sup>3</sup> Other states have found similar costs.<sup>4</sup> Community punishments have costs as well, such as an estimated \$1,938 a year for probation supervision.<sup>5</sup> Although these costs do vary and not all of the charges in this study included incarcerations or probation, those that did involved substantial public funds to hold or supervise those involved in criminal charges.

Another public expense involved with criminal charges includes the costs of court. All of the charges in this study ended with some type of court resolution, even if the outcome was a dismissal or a punishment of "time served." As of December 1, 2018, the general court costs in North Carolina for District Court are \$173.00 while the general costs for Superior Court are \$198.00.<sup>6</sup> While these fees may be included as part of the defendant's sentence and not totally borne by taxpayers, they do give some estimate of the costs of going to court for each criminal offense, regardless of how those fees are assessed, whether the defendant's case is dismissed, or if he/she is acquitted.

The public costs for each criminal charge, including the expenses needed for law enforcement, court administration, incarceration, probation, and others, can represent a significant burden for the limited budgets of local and state government institutions. While these costs do vary, it can be concluded that placement into permanent housing, as a means of reducing criminal charges, will save the costs of government resources. Ultimately, this supports the "housing first" model, which asserts that having a safe environment to come back to each day allows chronically homeless persons to address the core issues that resulted in homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> As a further example, there were several instances of a defendant being charged with "trespass" and "soliciting alms" (panhandling) on the same day and charged by the same officer. This would be counted as one "charge" for our purposes.

<sup>2</sup> We note that we also examined a subset of the participants that had been in fulltime housing for at least three years to assure that the timeframes (as some participants had been in housing for less than three years) and the results were largely the same.

<sup>3</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Cost of Corrections. Retrieved November 27, 2018 from <https://www.ncdps.gov/adult-corrections/cost-of-corrections> .

<sup>4</sup> Dolan, S. (2015, May 31). Unpaid fine arrests cost jails. Morning Sentinel. Retrieved from <http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1684258327?accountid=14968>

<sup>5</sup> See North Carolina Department of Public Safety, endnote 3.

<sup>6</sup> North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. "Court Costs and Fee Chart." Retrieved November 27, 2018 from <https://www.nccourts.gov/documents/publications/current-court-costs>.