

# Beyond Incarceration

## How Breaking Barriers Is Building Pathways to Housing and Employment in Los Angeles

**P**eople leaving incarceration face compounding barriers to housing and employment that can trap them in cycles of homelessness and reincarceration. Nationally, individuals exiting prison experience homelessness at 13 times the rate of the general population, and more than 27 percent of formerly incarcerated people are unemployed—nearly five times the general rate.<sup>1</sup> In addition to experiencing broader forms of housing discrimination, individuals with criminal records face further exclusion, as background checks and disclosure of prior convictions are standard requirements in the private rental market, further limiting access to stable housing during reentry.<sup>2</sup>

In Los Angeles County, these challenges are especially acute. Approximately 20 percent of people are unhoused when booked into local jails,<sup>3</sup> and average rents require an income nearly three times the local minimum wage.<sup>4</sup>

### **How the Breaking Barriers Program Promotes Housing Stability and Successful Reentry**

Breaking Barriers is a program that helps justice-involved individuals and families in Los Angeles

County secure stable housing and build financial independence to keep it. Two nonprofit organizations jointly operate the program: Brilliant Corners, which provides rental subsidies, case management, and housing services, and Chrysalis, which provides employment services, including job readiness training, career planning, and transitional employment. Core program services are shown in the box on the next page.

The goal of the program is for participants to assume full responsibility for rent—or transition to longer-term housing options, such as Section 8 housing, permanent supportive housing, or other private-market housing of their own—at graduation.

Breaking Barriers launched as a pilot in 2015 through a public-private partnership. Then, after a 2020 RAND evaluation,<sup>5</sup> the program was redesigned to improve efficiency, particularly in its screening processes, graduated rent structures, and staffing model. The program receives funding from the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) and the Los Angeles County Justice, Care and Opportunities Department (JCOD) through the Care First Community Investment initiative.

BSCC commissioned RAND to evaluate outcomes for individuals in BSCC's third Adult Reentry Grant Program-funded cohort; JCOD later

### Core Breaking Barriers Services

Breaking Barriers provides the following services to participants:

- *rental subsidies* for 18 to 24 months, during which participant rent contributions gradually increase from 30 percent to 50 percent of income
- *coordinated support teams* consisting of a case manager, a housing coordinator, and an employment specialist for each participant
- *employment services*, including orientation, job readiness training, résumé development, career planning, and connections to transitional employment
- *flexible financial supports*, such as move-in assistance, furniture, emergency funds, transportation, and child-care support
- *linkages to external resources*, including legal aid, mental health services, public benefits, and family reunification programs.

expanded the evaluation’s scope to include all program participants regardless of funding source. Between March 2023 and December 2025, RAND researchers evaluated Breaking Barriers with a mixed-method design combining quantitative analysis of administrative data for 460 participants with qualitative interviews of program staff and participants. The researchers assessed whether the program achieved its process objectives for referrals, enrollment, service delivery, and housing placements; whether participants improved their housing and employment outcomes; and which factors correlated with success. They also compared the results of this evaluation with the results for the 2015–2016 pilot cohort. Because no experimental or quasi-

experimental control group existed, the researchers’ findings, presented in the next section, are associational rather than causal.

A full description of the program evaluation and more details on the methodology, results, and recommendations are provided in an evaluation report.<sup>6</sup>

### Key Findings

- **Program performance met or exceeded most BSCC process goals.** Breaking Barriers surpassed its targets for referrals, case management, employment placements, housing applications, and rental assistance. The only unmet benchmark was the pace of housing placements; 7.4 participants were housed per quarter, which is below the goal of 15.
- **More than half of Breaking Barriers participants obtained housing through the program.** Of 460 individuals who participated during the study period, 56 percent received subsidies and acquired housing. Among this group of participants,
  - **exits to stable housing were strong;** most participants housed through the program exited to stable housing (“positive exit”; see Table 1)
  - **negative exits were relatively low;** only 12 percent of exits were negative exits
  - **housing stability exceeded targets;** 82 percent of BSCC participants and 83 percent of all subsidized participants remained housed after one year, exceeding the program’s 12-month retention target.
- **Reincarceration exits were rare.** Only 8 percent of all program exits (regardless of whether

TABLE 1  
Exit Outcomes for Participants Who Received Housing Subsidies

Exit Outcome	Percentage
Positive exit (e.g., taking over rent, Section 8 housing, permanent housing)	61
Neutral exit (e.g., transitional housing, sober living)	12
Negative exit (e.g., incarceration, shelter, homelessness)	12
Deceased	2
Unknown	12

NOTE:  $n = 129$ . Percentages might not add to 100 because of rounding.

participants acquired housing through the program) were due to reincarceration.

- **Employment outcomes were promising but mixed.** The program goal of 80 percent of participants earning above minimum wage at exit was narrowly missed (74–75 percent). Longer housing retention was significantly associated with a higher likelihood of employment at program exit among participants housed with a subsidy during the program: The probability of employment rose from 45 percent at six months housed to 61 percent at 18 months housed.
- **Higher engagement with program staff correlated with better outcomes.** Higher levels of engagement (measured by frequency of contacts with program staff, including in-person meetings, phone calls, emails, text messages, and virtual sessions) correlated with a greater likelihood of obtaining subsidized housing, longer subsidized housing retention, and a reduced risk of early program exit as a result of incarceration.
- **Strong program infrastructure and collaboration underpin implementation success.** Breaking Barriers benefited from highly engaged staff, strong coordination between Brilliant Corners and Chrysalis, individualized case management, and flexible financial supports. Quality improvements that have been made since the pilot have strengthened program delivery.
- **Persistent external barriers limit progress despite effective service delivery.** High housing costs, a shortage of affordable units, stagnant wages, employer reluctance to hire individuals with criminal records, and legal restrictions on certain jobs constrained participant outcomes.

## Recommendations for Breaking Barriers Service Providers, Funders, and Policymakers

The following recommendations are directed toward Brilliant Corners and Chrysalis, the organizations implementing Breaking Barriers, as well as Los Angeles County agencies, state and local policymakers, and program funders supporting reentry and housing initiatives. Although the evaluation is grounded in Los Angeles County, the findings offer lessons relevant to other large urban jurisdictions seeking to strengthen

housing stability, employment, and successful reentry for justice-involved individuals and families.

## Program Administrators and Service Providers

- Providing individualized case management and flexible supports remains essential for meeting the diverse needs of justice-involved individuals.
- Brilliant Corners, Chrysalis, and other service providers serving justice-involved populations should regularly monitor and refine referral processes to ensure that all participant groups have timely and seamless access to services.
- Brilliant Corners and Chrysalis can continue strengthening service delivery by implementing the improvements recommended in the evaluation report, including enhanced support for higher-risk and higher-need participants and ongoing attention to affordability.

## Policymakers and Program Funders in the County, the State, and Other Jurisdictions

- Program-specific interventions might not fully address high housing costs. Los Angeles County policymakers should consider complementary strategies—such as supporting living wage policies and expanding affordable housing development—to help close the affordability gap.
- Although the evaluation focused on Los Angeles, Breaking Barriers’ core features—cross-agency collaboration, individualized case management, graduated rental subsidies, and integrated employment services—are transferable. These elements can improve housing stability and employment and reduce reincarceration for justice-involved populations. Policymakers in Los Angeles, at the state level, and in other jurisdictions should consider adopting these strategies in reentry housing initiatives.
- Longer time enrolled was associated with a higher likelihood of employment at program exit and more successful rent takeover. Policymakers and funders in Los Angeles, at the state level, and in other jurisdictions should consider allowing flexibility for longer program tenure, particularly in high-cost markets, where finan-

cial independence can be difficult to achieve in a fixed time frame.

- Policymakers and funders in Los Angeles, at the state level, and in other jurisdictions should prioritize rigorous evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement. Breaking Barriers demonstrates that substantial gains between the pilot and current cohorts were driven in part by program redesign informed by RAND’s initial evaluation findings. Ongoing evaluation can help programs adapt and maximize their impact over time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People*, Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018; Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, *Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People*, Prison Policy Initiative, July 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Hensleigh Crowell, “A Home of One’s Own: The Fight Against Illegal Housing Discrimination Based on Criminal Convictions, and Those Who Are Still Left Behind,” *Texas Law Review*, Vol. 95, 2017; Douglas N. Evans, Kwan-Lamar Blount-Hill, and Michelle A. Cubellis, “Examining Housing Discrimination Across Race, Gender and Felony History,” *Housing Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 5, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Leah Wang, “Jailing the Homeless: New Data Shed Light on Unhoused People in Local Jails,” Prison Policy Initiative, February 11, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> California Housing Partnership, *Los Angeles County 2023 Affordable Housing Needs Report*, May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah B. Hunter, Adam Scherling, Melissa Felician, Sangita M. Baxi, and Matthew Cefalu, *Breaking Barriers: A Rapid Rehousing and Employment Pilot Program for Adults on Probation in Los Angeles County: Evaluation Report*, RAND Corporation, RR-4316-BRC, 2020. As of April 20, 2026: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4316.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4316.html)

<sup>6</sup> Maya Buenaventura, Alex Sizemore, Austin Smidt, and Sarah B. Hunter, *Breaking Barriers Rapid Rehousing Program for Justice-Involved Individuals in Los Angeles County: Local Evaluation Report*, RAND Corporation, RR-A4755-1, 2026. As of May 1, 2026: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA4755.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4755.html)

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This research brief describes work done in RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure and documented in *Breaking Barriers Rapid Rehousing Program for Justice-Involved Individuals in Los Angeles County: Local Evaluation Report*, by Maya Buenaventura, Alex Sizemore, Austin Smidt, and Sarah B. Hunter, RR-A4755-1, 2026 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA4755-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA4755-1)). To view this research brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA4755-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA4755-1). RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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