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**Contact: Doug Smith, Senior Policy Analyst**  
(512) 441-8123 Ext. 102 | [DSmith@TexasCJC.org](mailto:DSmith@TexasCJC.org)

## **New Report Explains the Link Between Homelessness and Justice System Involvement**

**AUSTIN, TX** – The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC), a nonpartisan advocacy organization focused on building coalitions and advancing solutions to end mass incarceration in Texas, released the fourth report in its “One Size FAILS All” report series. The report, *Return to Nowhere: The Revolving Door Between Incarceration and Homelessness*, illustrates the tragic link between homelessness and justice system involvement, and is the product of research and interviews with homeless individuals, homeless service organizations, and law enforcement.

The report’s findings are stark. People experiencing homelessness are 11 times more likely to face incarceration compared to the general population, and formerly incarcerated individuals are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless.

“We suspected that many of the problems in our communities for which elected officials seek criminal justice system solutions are actually problems of homelessness, mental illness, and untreated substance use disorder,” said Doug Smith, TCJC Senior Policy Analyst and report co-author, who himself has experienced homelessness, justice system involvement, mental illness, and substance use disorder. “That’s why we wrote this report – to dig into the data and create informed policy recommendations that can address the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.”

According to TCJC’s report, homelessness and justice system involvement are strongly linked with mental illness: People who are homeless at the time of arrest are more likely to have a mental illness, and of the more than two million people booked into a Texas jail each year, nearly 15 percent of men and 30 percent of women have a serious mental health condition. This contributes to the unsustainable increase in people with serious mental illness winding up behind bars. “There is a mental-illness-to-homelessness-to-prison pipeline in this state,” said Greg Hansch, Public Policy Director for the National Alliance for Mental Illness.

Bailey Gray, a dual degree Masters of Public Affairs and Masters of Science in Social Work major at the University of Texas at Austin, and the report’s co-author, now serves on the Homeless Outreach Street Team in Austin: “Without community supports in place, many individuals leave correctional facilities only to enter, or re-enter, homelessness. Mental illness, substance use, and lack of employment make it more difficult for some individuals to escape this pattern. It is our ethical responsibility to create a collaborative approach to solving this issue.”

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The report's central recommendation is an interconnected, treatment-based, information-sharing, supportive system of care that tracks outcome measures across workforce, housing, criminal justice, social service, and other systems. This can inform investments in programs and services that address the drivers of homelessness and justice system involvement.

The report emphasizes that data sharing would also allow decision-makers to measure how pervasive criminal records are for the homeless and the extent to which individuals are cycling in and out of local and state correctional facilities. This is critical, as criminal justice system involvement can exacerbate the economic realities that lead to homelessness. Housing costs in Texas are increasing at a higher rate than in the U.S. in general, already making it exceptionally difficult for people living in poverty to rise out of homelessness. Further, a significant proportion of those released from jail and prison each day are homeless, and a criminal record itself creates barriers to employment and housing.

Complicating these realities is the rise of city ordinances that criminalize homelessness. The main offenses for which homeless individuals are cited and arrested include sleeping in public, sitting or lying down, and loitering. According to Eva Thibaudeau, Vice President of Programs for the Houston Coalition for the Homeless, "Criminalizing homelessness is costlier to taxpayers than alternative courses of action that divert individuals from incarceration altogether."

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendation, the report offers a range of policy solutions to end the cycle of justice system involvement and homelessness. They include eliminating harmful city ordinances that exacerbate homelessness without addressing the issues they purport to solve; addressing housing restrictions for people with past justice system involvement; creating housing-first policies that do not require people to access (underfunded) behavioral health systems before getting off the streets; and improving reentry supports for people released from correctional facilities without a place to live.

*For a copy of the report, visit [www.TexasCJC.org/one-size-fails-all](http://www.TexasCJC.org/one-size-fails-all).*

*To learn more about the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, visit [www.TexasCJC.org](http://www.TexasCJC.org).*