

Why Stabilization Matters

A primary goal of justice system professionals is to help people successfully fulfill their court-ordered requirements and live law-abiding lives. However, some people may experience unstable situations or environments that could impede their ability to achieve this goal. These factors, called stabilization factors, include an untreated medical or mental health condition, unreliable housing or no housing, dependence on a controlled or illegal substance, lack of access to transportation, and familial or partner violence or conflict.

By identifying and addressing stabilization factors, justice system professionals can help people be better positioned to engage more fully in interventions and activities that reduce their risk of returning to the justice system.

REENTRY PROGRAMS

Stabilization factors often have the greatest negative impact during the period of time after a person is released from custody. Reentry programming is an opportunity to address stabilization factors prior to the person's release.

Housing

Studies demonstrate that—above and beyond an array of other risk factors—housing insecurity is associated with an increased risk of recidivism among people on supervision. When people are safely housed, they are more likely to maintain a law-abiding lifestyle.

Addressing housing needs is important regardless of the person's assessed risk of recidivism. One study found that housing effects are particularly strong for people at relatively low risk of committing low-severity offenses (i.e., property crimes, minor crimes, and revocations).¹ Similarly, research studies have found that providing housing assistance to people assessed as high risk significantly reduces new admissions to prison for new offenses, while periods of homelessness substantially elevate the likelihood of new convictions, revocations, and readmission to prison.²

Substance Misuse

Substance misuse is both a criminogenic need and a stabilization factor. It can lead to illegal behavior, and it can serve as a barrier to engaging in risk-reducing interventions. Specialized assessment tools can identify the extent of a person's use and suggest treatment interventions.

Transportation

Lack of transportation makes it challenging for people involved in the justice system to attend appointments, maintain employment, and engage in a host of other activities. Justice system professionals should assess a person's transportation needs and assist the person in brainstorming ways to overcome a lack of access to transportation.

Untreated Medical and Mental Health Conditions

Left untreated, medical and mental health conditions can make it difficult for even the most well-intended person to fulfill court requirements. The majority of risk/needs assessment tools include questions about physical and mental health, but these tools are not diagnostic. If a justice system professional suspects the person has a condition, referring them for a more thorough and specialized assessment will help determine the best course of action and intervention.

¹Jacobs, L. A., & Gottlieb, A. (2020). The effect of housing circumstances on recidivism: Evidence from a sample of people on probation in San Francisco. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(9), 1097–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820942285>

²Lutze, F. E., Rosky, J. W., & Hamilton, Z. K. (2013). Homelessness and reentry: A multisite outcome evaluation of Washington State's Reentry Housing Program for high risk offenders. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 41(4), 471–491. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854813510164>

Steps for Addressing Stabilization Factors

1 Assess Use specialized assessments and other informal strategies such as questionnaires, interviews, and collateral contacts to identify the presence of stabilization factors.

2 Evaluate Identify how the factors may impede the person's ability to complete court-ordered conditions and remain law-abiding. The court should consider stabilization factors prior to imposing conditions.

3 Prioritize Review the person's current court-ordered conditions, criminogenic needs, and stabilization factors. Work collaboratively with the person to prioritize and adequately sequence activities.

4 Case Plan Address stabilization factors within the case plan and regularly assess their status and impact. Frequently, stabilization factors can be related to the presence of a criminogenic need. When present, help the person identify the connection and address it accordingly.

5 Refer Refer the person to programs and services to address stabilization factors, and teach and practice new skills that may assist with criminogenic needs. Jurisdictions should develop guides that list resources available online and in person. The resource guide can be made available to people who are low risk where a case plan may not be developed.