

Success in Housing

How much does criminal background matter?

A collaborative research project from four of Minnesota's leading housing nonprofits, conducted by Wilder Research.



**PROJECT FOR
PRIDE IN
LIVING**

Housing stability and incarceration

The cycle of housing instability and incarceration is well-documented and well-known. Systemic barriers and the challenges of homelessness increase the risk of re-offending.

As a Collaborative, we questioned how we could disrupt this cycle and make our housing more inclusive. By joining forces (and data), we conducted a first-of-its-kind study with Wilder Research to learn more about the relationship between criminal history and success in housing.

What we wanted to learn

1. Does an applicant's criminal history actually predict their ability to maintain stable housing?
2. As housing providers, could we be doing more to increase accessibility to housing and reduce barriers?

Special thanks to our funders: [NeighborWorks America](#) and [Otto Bremer Trust](#)
Thank you to our research partner: [Wilder Research](#)



Who did we study?

This study includes de-identified data from residents who lived in our properties between March 2010 and June 2017.

10,500+ households

including

15,000+ individuals

with an average household income of:

\$15,958

3 in 10 households

contain at least 1 adult with a prior criminal conviction.

Average length of stay:

3 years

Household Type

61% single adults under 65

13% single adults over 65

16% multiple adults without kids

11% families with children

The research: **What we found**

We knew that criminal backgrounds are more complex than a checkbox on an application, and the scope of this project couldn't possibly study all of these complexities. However, we asked how much a criminal background really matters in terms of housing success, and the research shows that for the most part, **it has little effect.**

Key Finding 1

11 of 15 criminal offense categories have no significant effect on housing outcomes. These categories include:

- Marijuana possession
- Alcohol-related offenses (other than DUI)
- Serious traffic offenses (other than DUI)
- Minor public order offenses
- DUI/DWI or reckless driving
- Other minor violence-related offenses
- Minor drug-related offenses
- Disorderly conduct
- Prostitution
- Domestic violence
- Other violent offenses

4 categories may have a statistically significant effect: fraud, assault, property offenses, and major drug-related offenses. These offenses increase the risk of negative housing outcomes by 3 to 9 percentage points (at most). However, these effects may be overstated due to the study's data limitations.

Key Finding 2

The effect of a prior criminal offense on a resident's housing outcome declines over time.

Misdemeanor: **after 2 years**



Felony: **after 5 years**



Criminal offenses that occurred more than 5 years prior to move-in have no significant effect on housing outcomes.

Key Finding 3

The level of impact that criminal backgrounds can have on housing success **is small in comparison** to other factors. The likelihood of a negative housing outcome was significantly reduced in households with: **2+ adults, 1+ children, higher income at move-in, higher subsidy, older adults.**

Source: Wilder Research

Reflections and implications

1. This research supports a **nuanced approach to screening** based on criminal history. A blanket ban on individuals with a criminal history, and their families, unnecessarily limits access to housing.
2. Communities are made stronger when residents have stable housing. We should look to screen people **in rather than out**, while still maintaining safe, stable communities.
3. We must consider if criminal history **unintentionally acts as a proxy** to screen for other risk factors and perpetuate systemic injustices.
4. **Other household characteristics** that we don't screen for are at least as important as criminal background in determining housing outcomes.
5. We believe that **any amount of housing stability is important**. A negative move-out doesn't equate to unsuccessful housing overall.