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Written Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 987, An Act Concerning Reinvestment through a Reduction in Correctional Facility Population into Reentry and Community-Based Services and Programs

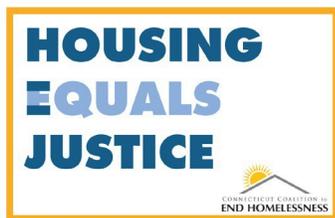
Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Sarah Fox, and I am the Director of Policy at the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness. I speak today representing a broad coalition of more than 100 organizations across Connecticut who are all committed to a common goal of achieving an end to homelessness in Connecticut. Our coalition includes non-profit providers of homeless services, as well as housing agencies, private sector businesses, and concerned citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on **S.B. 987, An Act Concerning Reinvestment through a Reduction in Correctional Facility Population into Reentry and Community-Based Services and Programs**. CCEH is pleased to be a member of the Justice Reinvestment Coalition and stand alongside ACLU-CT, SEIU-1199, and the Yale Transitions Clinic to fight for equity for justice-impacted people through the reinvestment of Department of Correction (DOC) dollars into programs that seek to undo the harms of the criminal legal system.

At CCEH, we recognize that criminal justice involvement among our state's homeless population is costly, disruptive, and inhumane. While homelessness is a tragedy for anyone who experiences it, it brings additional challenges for people involved in the criminal justice system. CCEH commends Governor Lamont for the closure of Northern Correctional Institution and the plans to close other Connecticut prisons. This depopulation is long overdue and critical to the health and safety on both sides of the wall.

The partnerships formed through the Justice Reinvestment Coalition and the work that we have set forth to do, represent something that we have long known as truth at CCEH: homelessness is the result of broken public systems, institutional racism, and income inequality. The Reforms and investment that are included in S.B. 987 would go a long way towards halting the revolving door between homelessness and jail, address structural inequities that result from criminal justice involvement, and in protecting the health, safety, and dignity of our communities.

- Together we are advocating that the funds saved by closing prisons and jails be reinvested into the people harmed by the criminal justice system via resources such as assistance finding and retaining housing and expanding medical and behavioral health services in the community.
- Together we are advocating for funding criminal record erasure so that people reentering society have a light at the end of the tunnel.
- Together we are advocating for the creation of a 24/7 mobile crisis unit to respond to people in mental health crises so they can avoid criminalization and incarceration



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altogether.

- Together we are asking the state to fund, support, and staff inmate medical services within the DOC to fix systemic staffing crises in prison healthcare.

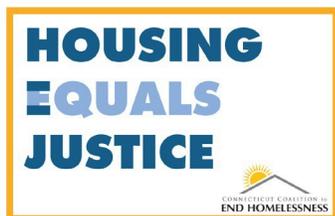
A data match and analysis conducted by CCEH and the Office of Policy and Management in 2019 quantified the scope of a problem that has been long known, but to date only evidenced in anecdote: that a significant number of people experience homelessness and housing instability following release from prison or jail. Matching data on homeless shelters and from the Connecticut DOC, the analysis determined that over 3,500 people who used homeless shelters in the last three years were also released from a Department of Correction facility within the last three years.

On an annual basis, nearly 1,200 people who slept in a homeless shelter were released from a DOC facility within the last three years. For many of these individuals, the release from DOC to homelessness was not a new occurrence: the majority (69%) of these individuals had experienced homelessness prior to their most recent release from DOC. Moreover, many of these individuals appear to be caught on a decades-long revolving door between homelessness and incarceration as 54% of these individuals have had more than six admissions to DOC, and 57% began their involvement with DOC in adolescence.

While homelessness is a tragedy for anyone who experiences it, it brings additional challenges for people involved in the criminal justice system. For people released from DOC custody who are under parole or probation supervision, homelessness can decrease one's chances of complying with the terms of supervision, leading to technical violations and/or revocations of parole or probation and more time spent in prison. Homelessness prevents people from securing employment, obtaining treatment from addiction or for mental health, and building positive social supports.

The data analysis has revealed that the lack of stable housing also leads to longer stays in prison beyond eligible release dates. Data has shown that many of the people who experienced homelessness following DOC release were released on an End-of-Sentence status. While the State's policy is to release most inmates to the community when they have completed at least 50% of their sentences, when inmates lack stable housing or an approved sponsor, they are overlooked for early release and held in prison longer. When this lack of housing is not resolved, inmates will wind up spending their entire sentence in prison and are then released without any supervision.

The fact that 80% of sentenced inmates who experienced homelessness following the DOC release were released at End-of-Sentence indicates that people who lack stable housing are forced to have longer stays in prison than people who do have housing or sponsors. In other words, homelessness results in longer incarceration stays, higher rates of recidivism, and negative criminal justice and human outcomes. Further contributing to the prolonged homelessness (and recidivism) among this population are the barriers that many face in securing housing due to discrimination and denials they face based on their criminal records.



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Most housing owners and landlords conduct criminal background screening and will deny housing to people based on having any criminal convictions.

CCEH also conducted an in-depth investigation of formerly incarcerated people experiencing homelessness in the city of New Haven, which offers an even more detailed analysis. Most notably, over half (54%) of formerly incarcerated homeless people in New Haven have been admitted to prison on 6 or more occasions, further illustrating the fruitlessness of using incarceration – or criminal legal responses more broadly – to address people’s underlying needs or to deal with the problem of homelessness.

Rather than “rehabilitating” people, incarceration simply makes it harder for people to succeed upon release. Instead of investing in policing and incarcerating people experiencing homelessness, cities and states should instead invest in stable housing, healthcare, and other social services that address people’s unmet needs.

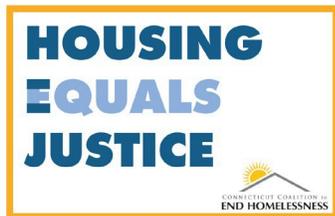
Our data has proven that once caught in Connecticut’s criminal justice system, people experiencing homelessness are disadvantaged at every stage of the legal process, with homelessness leading to negative outcomes at each justice decision point. This is not only a human tragedy, but a failure of our public systems. Ultimately, homelessness among people involved in and leaving the criminal justice system is a problem of government and system accountability, fragmentation (silos) between systems, and regressive public policies.

Solving this problem, in turn, entails ensuring that criminal justice agencies (DOC and CSSD) are accountable for identifying and addressing homelessness and housing instability among their populations, improved collaboration between the criminal justice and housing/homeless services sectors, and reforming policies that make it harder for people with criminal records to obtain housing.

CCEH believes that the creation of a ‘reentry housing assistance’ line item within the Department of Correction budget and the ask to reallocate no less than \$2 million annually to contract with community-based organizations to provide housing-related case management, housing search and navigation, temporary rental assistance, and other basic needs for any inmate assessed as needing reentry housing assistance, is a steps towards addressing the homelessness the revolving door between homelessness and jail that exists today.

In closing CCEH, in partnership with ALCU-CT, SEIU 1199, and the Yale Transitions Clinic are asking that savings from the closure of Northern and other units and facilities of \$20 million in FY2022 and \$46.9 million in 2023 be reinvested into reentry assistance programs like:

- Creation of a ‘reentry housing assistance’ line item within the Department of Correction budget and reallocate no less than \$2 million annually to contract with community-based organizations to provide housing-related case management, housing search and navigation, temporary rental assistance, and other basic needs for any inmate assessed as needing reentry housing assistance.



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- Expand Reentry Services within the Department of Correction budget and reallocate \$5 million annually to a new line item for this office. \$3 million will be used to contract with community-based organizations to hire community health workers, while \$2 million will be used to hire reentry healthcare workers, employed by DOC.
- Reallocate an additional \$4 million to the Forensic Services line item within the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to fund new reentry case management social worker positions within all state operated Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs) and expand the capacity of DMHAS-operated sites for the Advanced Supervision Intervention & Support Team (ASIST) program.
- Reallocate and additional \$4 million to Personal Services line item within the Department of Public Health to hire and train 50 formerly incarcerated community health workers to be embedded in community health centers statewide.

The time has come for local justice systems to take immediate action to halt the cycle of homelessness and entanglement with the criminal legal system. This begins with acknowledging the harms perpetuated by the current system, addressing deepening racial disparities, and enacting urgently needed policy and practice changes. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony, and for your hard work making important and life-saving decisions during this public health crisis – it is with your support that we can help make sure Connecticut’s residents are healthy and stably housed.

Sincerely,

Sarah Fox
Director of Policy
CT Coalition to End Homelessness

Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and Department of Correction Data Match

February 2020

Summary

It was observed that the Connecticut's criminal justice reforms in the last decade helped bring about significant reductions in its prison population as well lower crime rates over time. However, the downward trend appears to be at a very slow pace. This prompted an investigation into possible the cause(s) of the stagnancy in the prison population and two probable reasons were cited; high rates of homelessness and lack of access to stable community - based housing.

While it's noted that there's no empirical evidence to show the relationship between homelessness and incarceration, Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness (CCEH) worked in partnership with the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) to evaluate the impact of the two identified factors cited above.

Data Match and Analysis: In March 2019, the Connecticut Coalition to End Homeless (CCEH) furnished the Office of Policy and Management with 3 year data (Jan 1, 2016 to Jan 1, 2019) retrieved from the Homeless Management Information System to cross match with the state's criminal justice databases.

Key Findings



17,226 persons within CT HMIS



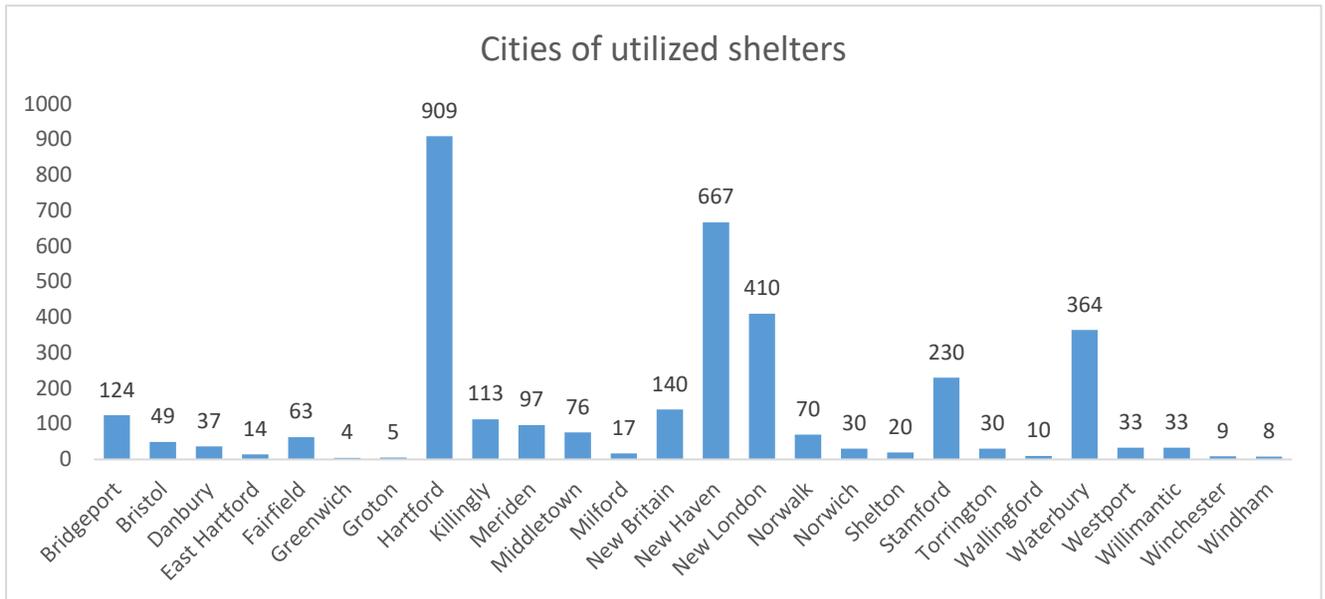
450,000 persons admitted to Connecticut DOC



8,187(48%) of persons who used the shelters between 2016 to 2019 had a DOC record

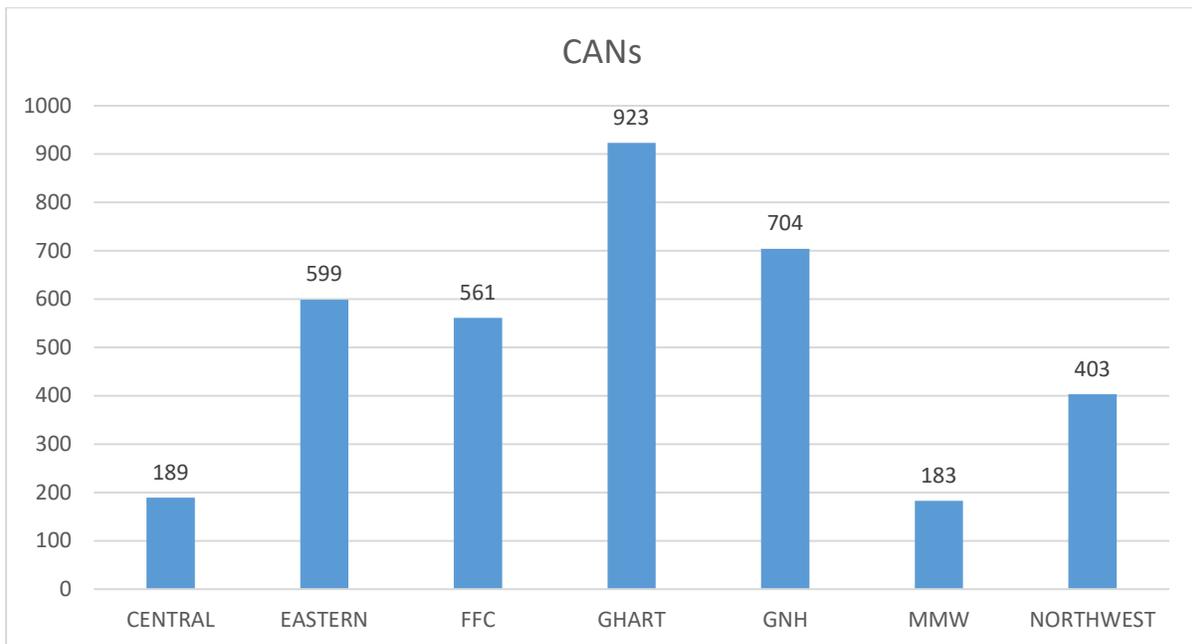
3,562 (21%) of persons who used the shelters within 2016 to 2019 were also released from DOC within same time frame

Location of CT Shelters used by the matched persons released within the last 3 years

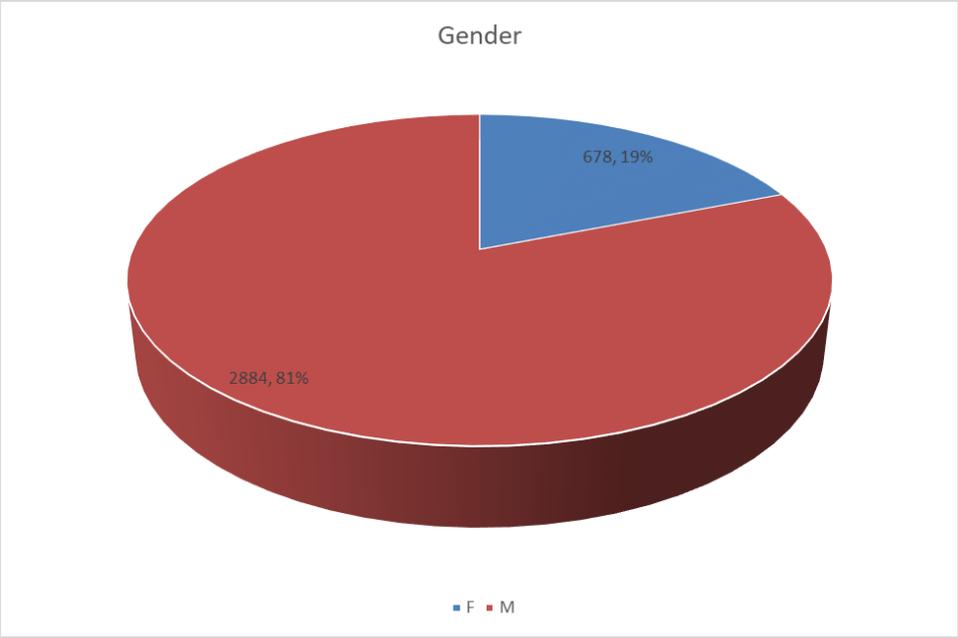


909 (26%) persons used shelters in Hartford while 667(19%) used shelters in New Haven

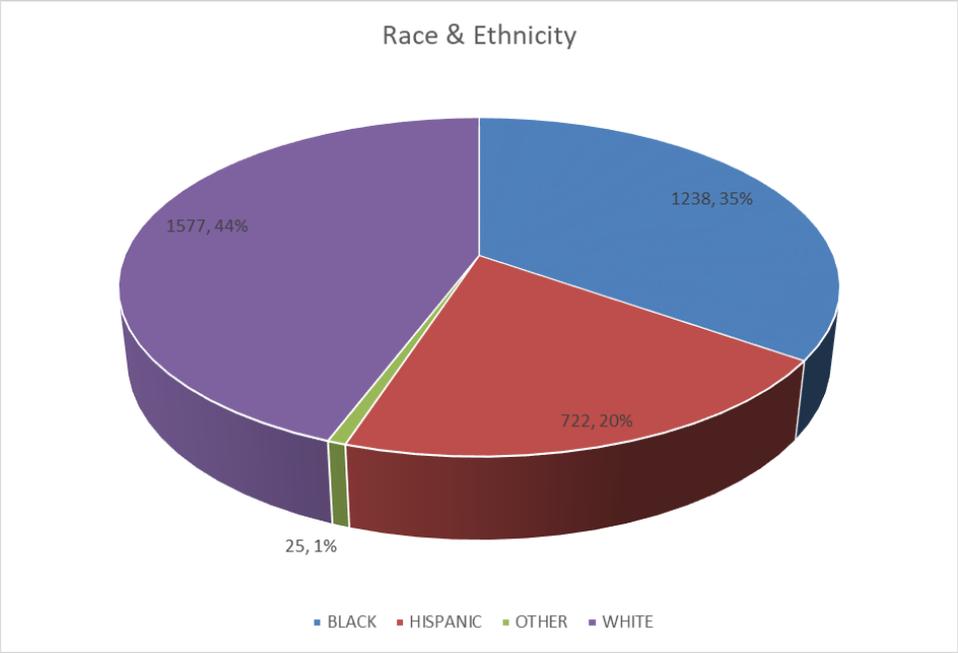
Coordinated Assess Network where matched persons were served



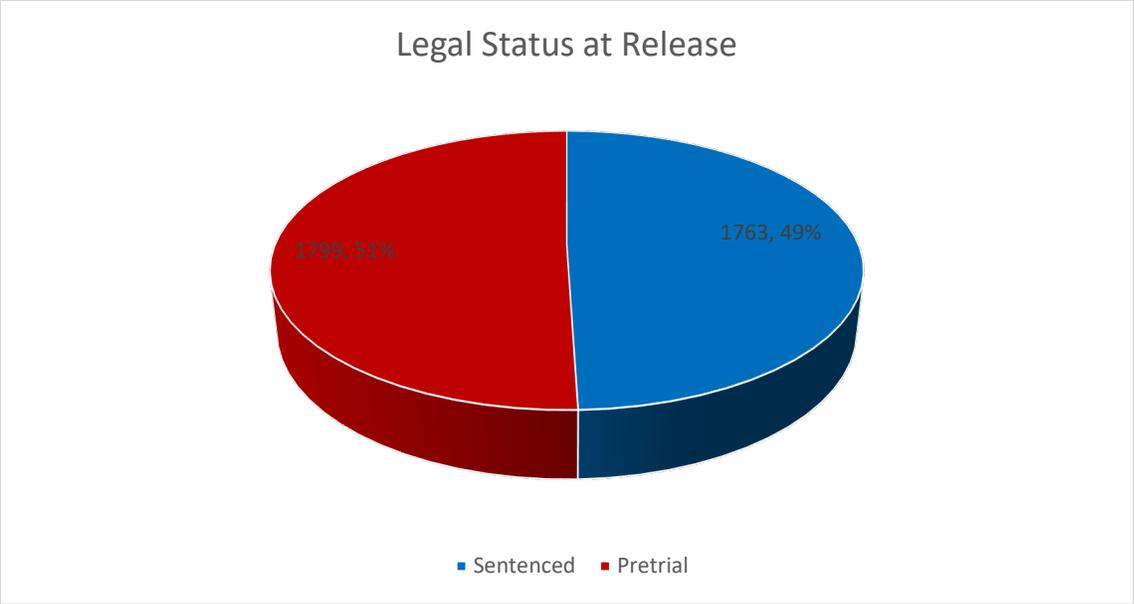
923(26%) were served at the Greater Hartford CAN while 704(20%) were served at the New Haven CAN.



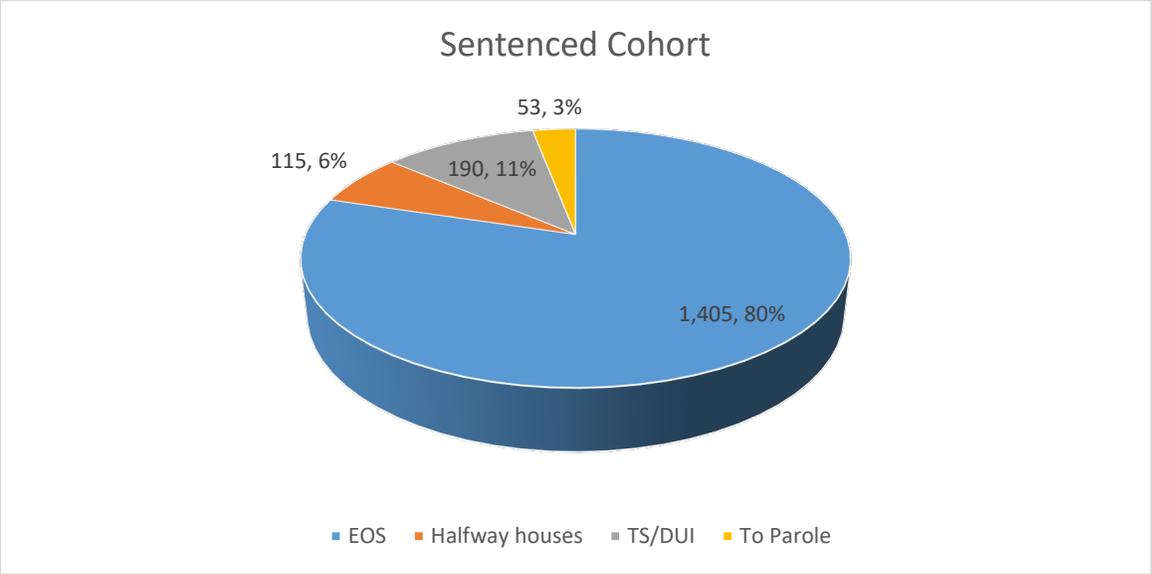
The cross match indicate that more men 2,884(81%) were released within last 3 years than 678(19%) women



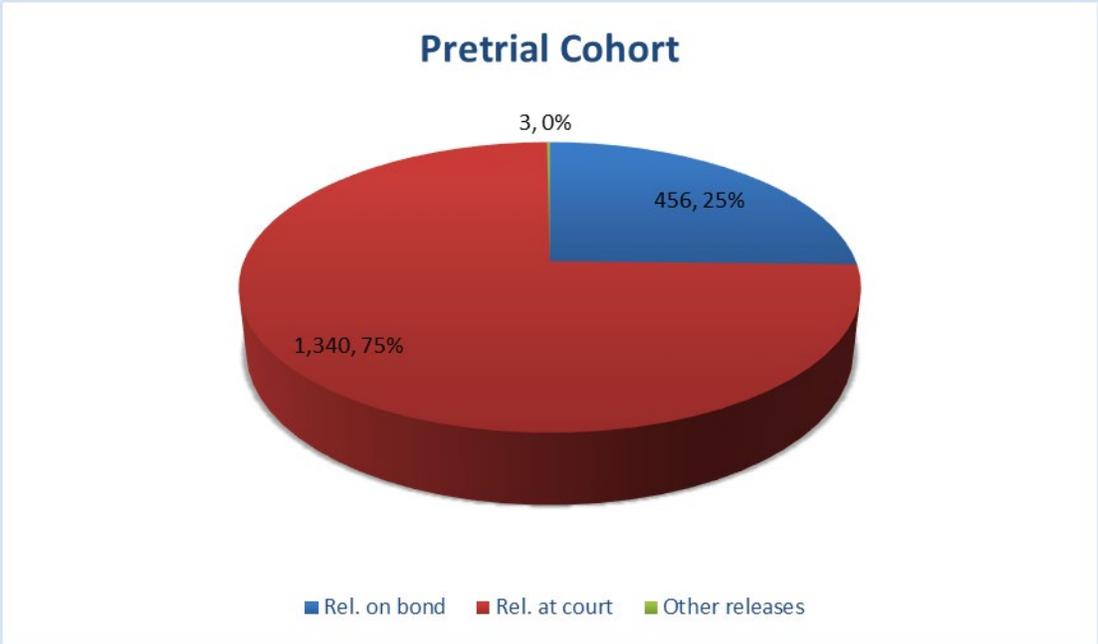
An almost even split among the white and non- white population



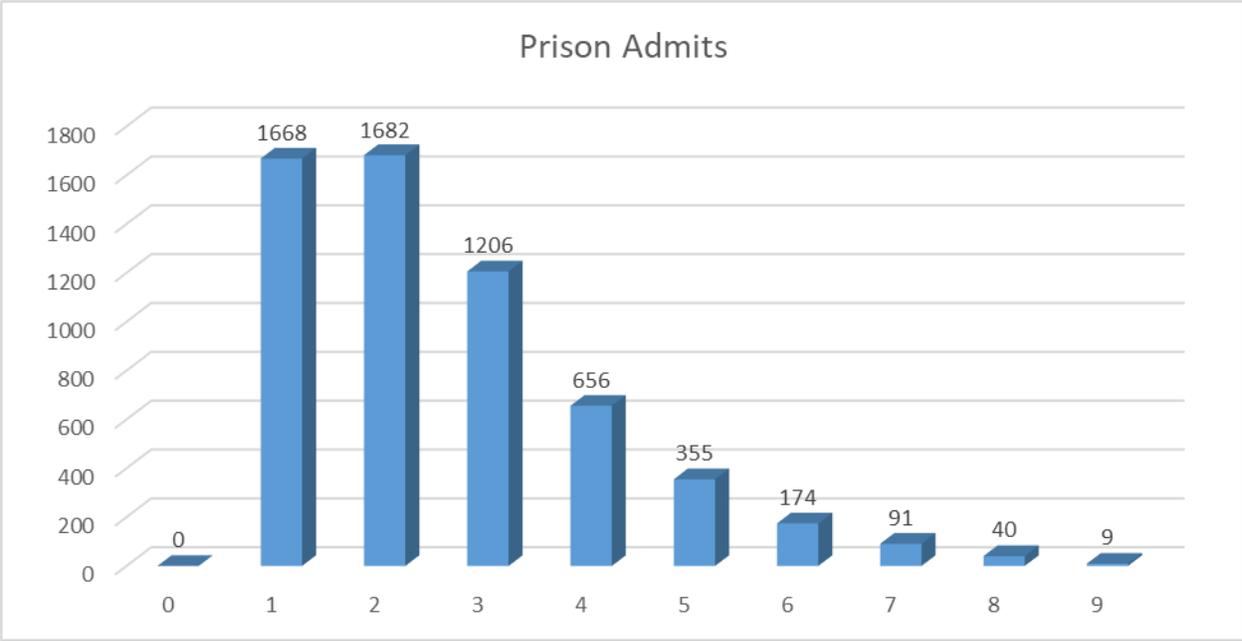
An even split between the Sentenced and Pre-trial population



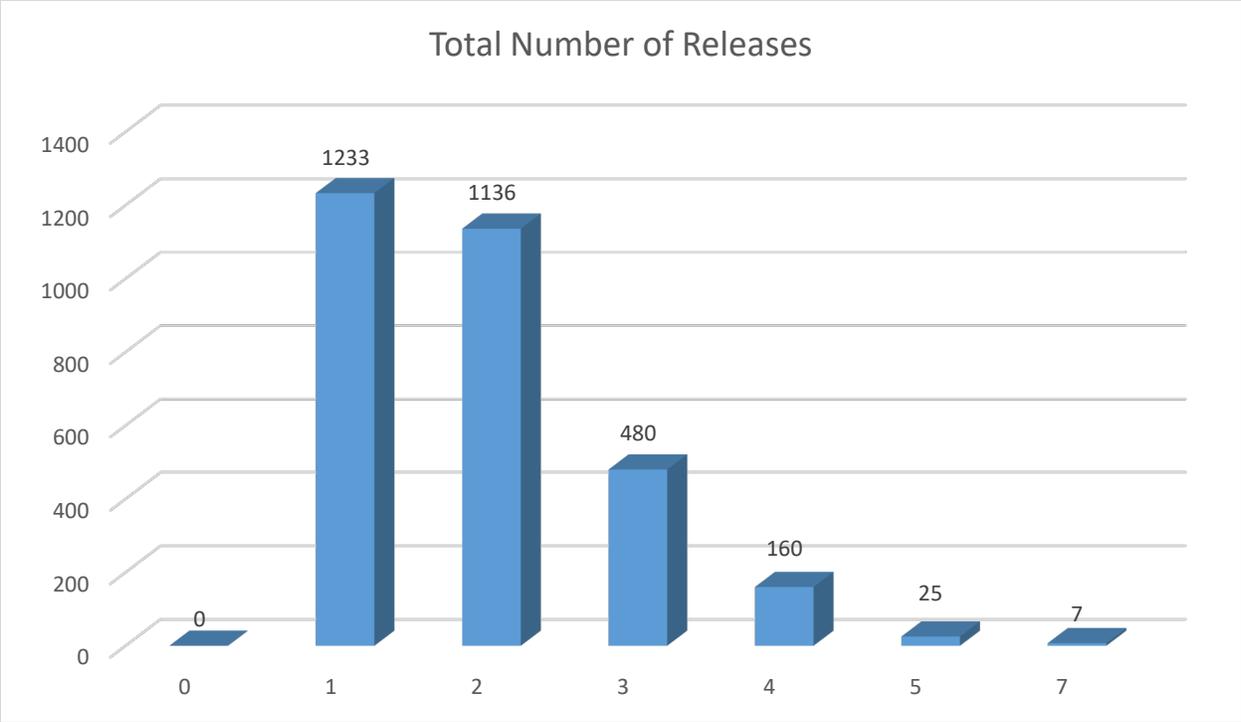
Among those sentenced, 1,405 (80%) were released at the End of sentence within the 3 years in view.



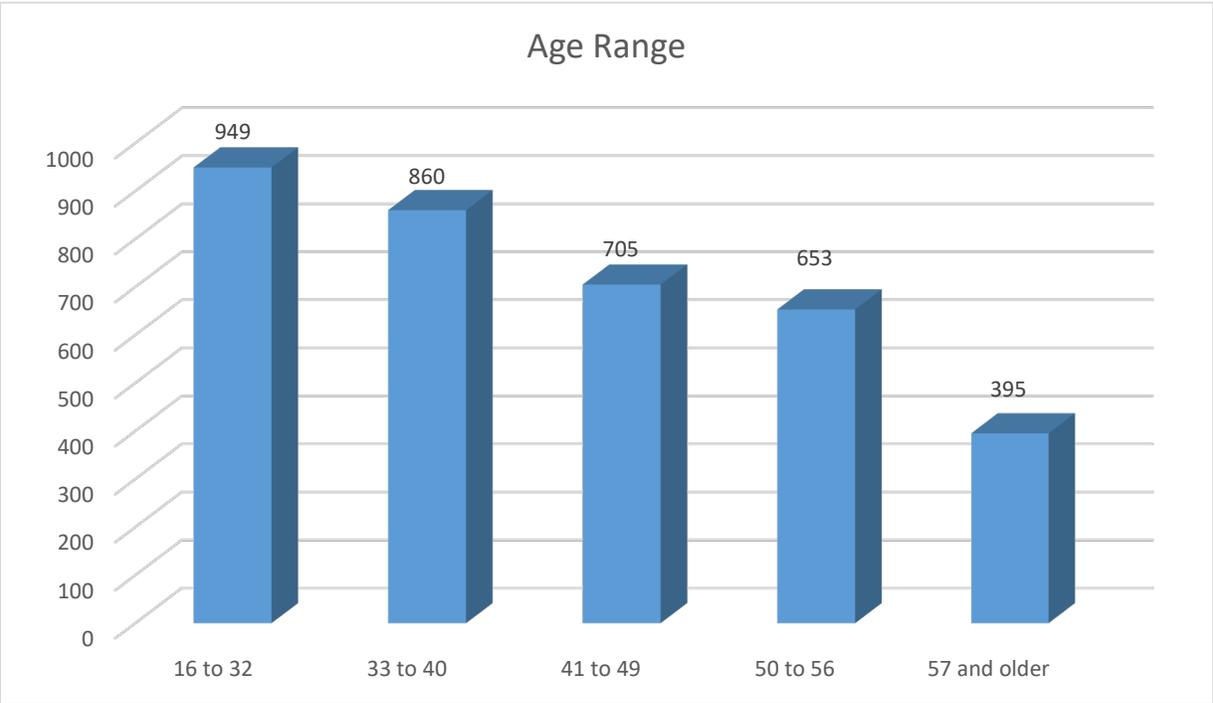
Among the Pretrial Cohort, 1,340(75%) were released at court after being detained within the period in view.



For the period under review, most of the identified individuals were arrested about 1- 3 times.

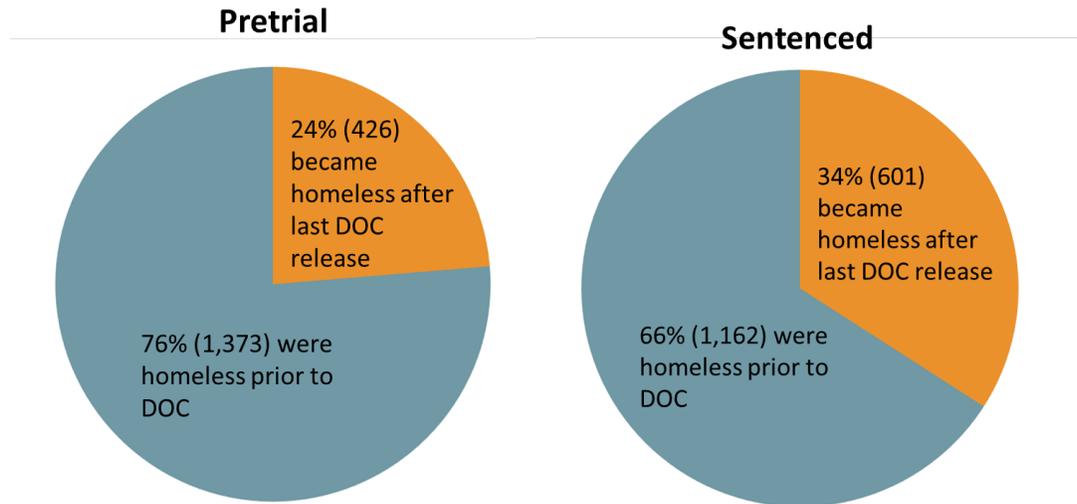


More people got released in recent years, the cohorts were released/ discharged about 1 or 2 times within 3 years.



Over 50% of the identified population are within the age range 16 – 40 years. While 217(6%) of these population are young adults.

Housing status of identified population in the cross match.



Indicates that over 50% of identified individuals were homeless before interaction with the DOC. Among the sentenced are 53(3%) parolees who were mostly identified as being homeless within the CT criminal justice system.

Conclusion

Most of the identified youth became involved with the DOC as teenagers and have been shuttling between both shelters and DOC over time.

Our analysis indicate a connection between being homeless and being incarcerated as over 60% of the identified persons were homeless prior to interactions with the DOC and the remaining population became homeless after interactions with the DOC.