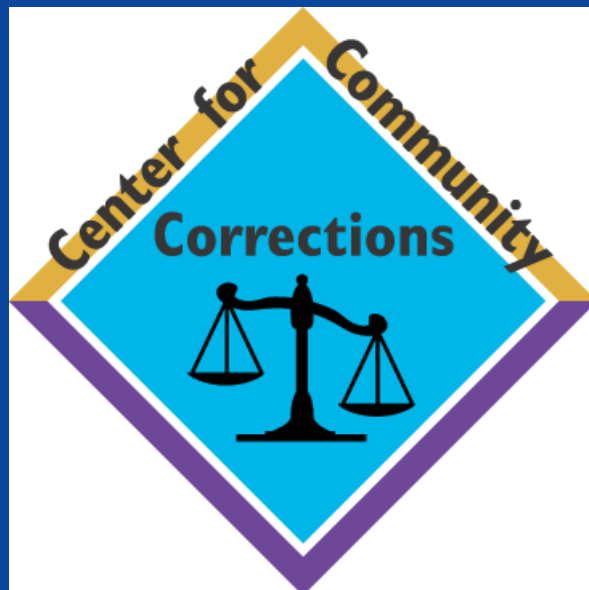


# Is **NIMBY** Inevitable?

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# IS NIMBY INEVITABLE?

**T**he Center for Community Corrections (“Center”) set out to learn whether NIMBY, the Not-In-My-Backyard syndrome, is unavoidable when locating, in residential neighborhoods, halfway houses for those released from incarceration but still under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system. A new study of public opinion by the Center suggests that while NIMBY may be impossible to eliminate, steps can be taken to mute opposition and significantly lessen public discomfort with a new facility.

The Center is a broad coalition of former public officials, researchers and corrections professionals representing local, state, and federal concerns. The Center, created in 1987, promotes the overall concept of community-based sanctions as well as specific program options.

Corrections experts increasingly agree that a gradual return from prison to the community greatly improves the chances that an individual will not commit further crimes. Therefore, to reduce recidivism and promote public safety, federal and state corrections officials would like to increase the number of halfway houses to provide that gradual transition. But though the need for halfway houses is acute, officials know from experience that locating them will doubtless cause anxiety and stress among community members.

How then can neighborhoods be made more comfortable with halfway houses, now stoutly opposed and rejected more than two-thirds of the time?

To find an answer, the Center, working in partnership with Doble Research Associates, explored the views of two groups not found in previous research: those of community leaders and public officials in cities that have dealt with siting issues, and those of neighbors of halfway houses. We wanted to understand in some depth how these two groups felt about these halfway houses for offenders and to learn if there were ways that an “invading” facility could address the legitimate concerns of communities and neighborhoods. Though we specifically asked about halfway houses, our findings probably apply to any facility where residents are making the transition to the community from prison or jail.

To conduct the study, we identified seven communities that have had experience with halfway houses for offenders. One community had had a major confrontation with a program seeking entry. Another has warmly embraced its corrections center once an “appropriate site” (the community’s term) had been found. The others have a significant number of small residential programs. We used two research methods:

- ◆ Four focused group interviews or focus groups in New Haven, Connecticut; Washington, D.C.; Birmingham, Alabama; and Ft. Worth, Texas. In each, 12 people living within a half-mile of a halfway house were randomly selected and interviewed for four hours.

- ◆ Eighty-five in-depth telephone interviews, lasting from 30 to 90 minutes, with public officials and community leaders in the four cities where focus groups were held, and with leaders, officials, and halfway house neighbors in three other sites: Tacoma, Washington; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Erie, Pennsylvania.

We also met with a group of corrections administrators who either contract for or actually run halfway houses themselves. Because of their responsibility to ensure the public's safety, we wanted to be sure we understood their procedures and issues when interacting with host communities.

While the 133 interviews conducted in the four communities do not yield results that can be applied to the national population with the precision of a survey using a large probability sample, the results offer important insights about how facilities are perceived and suggest ways by which programs might address a community's legitimate concerns.

**The Public's Starting Point.** Nearly everyone with whom we spoke understood the function and importance of a halfway house. Moreover, the great majority spoke with compassion about those making the transition from prison or jail, recognizing the difficulty of the process. Many neighbors told stories about the needs of friends, family, or, in a few cases, about themselves, struggling to resume a normal life after incarceration. As one focus group participant put it:

You're broken down to animalistic levels to survive [in prison]. So, even if you have an education and vocational skills, you have to be migrated back into society. You have to learn how to carry yourself so you're not advertising, "I'm just out of jail."

**An Overriding Concern about Safety.** Safety was by far the neighbors' greatest concern. "Pure, unrequited fear" was the way a police lieutenant described people's feelings about one facility,

although he added, "there's never been a problem" with it.

Fears were especially pronounced when it came to the safety of children. But neighbors were also concerned about:

1. the number and type of people slated to be housed;
2. the use of public transportation and other public space by facility residents; and
3. the professionalism and competence of the staff.

Respondents talked about what might allay their fears. In particular, they wanted information about how a proposed facility would operate, including its provisions for supervision and the consequences for any rules infraction, which, they said, should include a strictly enforced, "zero tolerance" policy. They also wanted an ample, well-qualified staff. One respondent said, "[We] need to know that a facility is going to be staffed properly, be [well] trained, and that there's going to be enough [of them]."

One official suggested that the public's concerns go well beyond a halfway house. "The criminal element coming in," he said, "with casual supervision and a certain amount of freedom [puts] families and property values at risk." But people's fears, he added, "would apply to people who are not criminal, even [a group home for people] in wheelchairs. If you're at all different, it can't be good."

**Mistrust.** Compounding the problem of fear was a reservoir of mistrust of criminal justice decision-makers, including those who manage proposed facilities and are responsible for ensuring public safety. Neighbors' mistrust also extended to elected and appointed officials. It appears that those who give the public assurances about a facility or its administration will have little initial credibility. People simply will not believe them, unless they are officials or community leaders in whom the public already has confidence.

When asked what to do about mistrust, many favored the idea of an ironclad contract between a community and an incoming program, spelling out

ground rules for operations and detailing whom to contact if its terms were violated. People in different cities identified different elements to include, suggesting each neighborhood will have its own priorities. But while they liked the idea of the contract, people did not trust officials to uphold their end of the deal. “I’d want Johnnie Cochran to look this over before we sign any agreement,” one woman said to hearty approval from the rest of her focus group.

While the public officials did not express the mistrust of criminal justice administrators that neighbors felt, they too were insistent on the need for competent staff. A halfway house run by local people who are known and trusted by the community was, to them, far preferable to a facility run by outsiders, particularly a for-profit outsider.

**A Voice for the Community.** Those who are asked to accept a halfway house in their neighborhood want an acknowledgement of how their own interests might be affected, an acknowledgement, they said, that is not often made. Neighbors wanted:

- a) direct communication with a program to address their concerns;
- b) a contact person at every facility who is available 24/7 and can respond immediately to any concerns;
- c) a voice in locating a proposed facility and in determining its external appearance;
- d) a voice in deciding about the procedures that would govern any interaction between a program’s clients and neighbors; and
- e) a way to monitor operations to ensure that what was promised in terms of staff, consequences for rule infractions, and numbers of residents was in fact being implemented.

People were particularly concerned about the number of offenders to be housed and the types of crimes for which they had been convicted. While those who had committed only non-violent and minor crimes were more acceptable, focus group respondents quickly understood and accepted the fact that due to the sheer number of those

currently incarcerated, some who were convicted of a violent crime would inevitably live in almost every halfway house.

Neighbors, public officials, and community leaders all called for something like an advisory committee for each facility as the preferred way to give a community a voice and ensure accountability, with credible individuals and neighbors serving as committee members. Significantly, criminal justice professionals to whom we reported our preliminary findings endorsed the advisory committee concept, with several pointing out that the idea is already being carried out by many program directors. Such a committee, they said, also has the potential to link a program to a community’s resources, especially its social service agencies, educational and job opportunities, and volunteers.

We should also note what people did not want. Without exception, they neither wanted nor expected that neighbors or the community as a whole would control or directly administer the facility. Instead, they wanted a voice that would be respected, and an acknowledgement of and response to their own interests and fears.

**The Program’s Effectiveness.** The issue of effectiveness surfaced repeatedly, with both neighbors and officials voicing strong support for rehabilitation, especially in terms of access to drug treatment, jobs, and job training. A neighbor said, “rehabilitation is the key to reducing recidivism. If you’re not preparing people to re-enter the community, there will be more crimes.” Those in halfway houses, a City Councilor said, “very seldom get a break because they have a record [and because] society is not kind to those [who have been] in prison.”

Effectiveness also came up in terms of length of stay, with many neighbors saying the average stay should be at least six months, because it takes time to become acclimated to living in a community and to prepare for and acquire a job. Many also talked about the need for extensive counseling, with one saying, “you have to go deep down into the gut and find out what is wrong.”

Few saw the halfway house as a public safety measure unless programming was provided—

education, job training, and spiritual support—to help people turn around their lives. In the words of one respondent: “If you’re not preparing people to re-enter the community, there will be more crimes. Rehabilitation is the key in reducing recidivism.”

A number of neighbors said they, or their faith-based organization, would, if asked, volunteer to help provide rehabilitative services such as tutoring for halfway house residents. Moreover, they said this would increase integration with the community. Indeed, we were surprised at how little interaction current programs seemed to have with the community and how often the need for more was expressed.

**Something for the Neighborhood.** Those interviewed understood how a halfway house could help its residents. But few could name a specific contribution a facility had made to the community. Those who were aware of work done cited neighborhood or parks clean up, or rehabilitation of run-down houses. Whenever such a benefit was offered, it was much appreciated. One facility successfully located itself in a light industrial section after the community rejected its initial site selection. Subsequently, the administrator had made space available within his center to local nonprofit organizations. That, plus the facility’s many advisory committees, has created so much good will that townspeople are raising funds to provide services for which the state will not pay!

**Unfairness and Property Values.** Feelings of exploitation and resentment were exacerbated by the unequal distribution of facilities. Inevitably, we were told, poorer neighborhoods, many with a lot of minorities, are most likely to be used as sites, while more affluent areas wield their political power to keep halfway houses away.

The effect of halfway houses on real estate values was also a concern to some neighbors and officials. But for most, it was a lower priority, especially compared to the issue of safety.

**Other Suggestions.** When asked what else could make neighbors feel better about having a facility move into their area, people called for improved security, better lighting, and block

watches. While some favored increased police patrols, others did not because of what they saw as strained relations between police and the community. Some also said that a heavy police presence might raise questions about the desirability of the area. This result again suggests that each community must be assessed individually when trying to locate a facility.

People also suggested:

- ◆ Locating only very small programs with no more than 12 people in residential areas.
- ◆ Locating larger programs, especially those with many convicted of a violent crime, in industrial areas or no closer than one-quarter of a mile to residential areas.
- ◆ Devising an equitable means of distributing halfway houses across the community. One irate resident described a Junior League member coming to a meeting in his neighborhood to advocate for a program that would have been firmly resisted in her own neighborhood. Another said that once a neighborhood accepts a program, agencies site more and more facilities there until saturation overcomes the initial acceptance.
- ◆ Giving a small grant to a neighborhood that accepts a halfway house, the use of which would be determined by the neighbors. Such a grant, they said, would contribute to the area while serving as a neighborhood-building device, bringing neighbors together and helping them get to know one another. One person suggested that such “neighborhood building” would, by itself, increase safety.
- ◆ Holding an annual meeting between those state agencies using halfway houses and the city planners from the state’s major cities, in which agency heads would let planners know how many clients to expect in the coming year and then respect that number as much as possible.

**In Conclusion.** If there were one element to highlight that lessens the impact of NIMBY, it would be the degree to which a facility is engaged with the community. And the more engagement,

the better. Engagement should be thought of not merely as a means to site a facility, but as an ongoing process that begins at entry, acknowledges neighbors' legitimate interests, and provides a means for the community to have confidence in a program's design and effectiveness. An advisory committee, which public officials could require as a condition of entry, was often mentioned as a way to provide such engagement.

The neighbors' desire to be recognized as partners in establishing and maintaining a successful halfway house was nearly universal. Neighbors will appreciate a program director who works with them on external aspects, such as a facility's location and appearance, and devises a process to gain their involvement as the program proceeds. Most importantly, people said, facilities should never come in under cover of night.

By far the majority of halfway houses, once established, have fit in well. But it has often been only after a great deal of antagonism and resistance. Program directors told us they can expect only three successful entries out of ten tries. "For as much as I opposed it," said one ringleader of a forceful opposition, "we have had no problems with it, [which is] a relief, since I have five children!"

Feelings of anxiety are understandable, and the public's opposition may never disappear totally. But if respected community leaders become comfortable with a facility and are seen to be engaged with its operations, and if neighbors, too, are invited to develop a solid, ongoing relationship with it, the community's confidence in the program and the prospects for a successful entry will increase greatly.

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