

FAMILIES AT THE NEXUS OF HOUSING AND CHILD WELFARE

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the relationship between housing and child welfare has consistently found a higher rate of child welfare system involvement among families that are homeless or otherwise precariously housed than among low income families with stable housing.¹ Studies also show that housing problems are common among child welfare system involved families and can become a barrier to the reunification of children who have been placed in out-of-home care.²

A growing awareness of the relationship between housing and child welfare has led to calls in recent years for interventions aimed at preventing homeless or otherwise precariously housed from entering the child welfare system or for increased attention to the housing needs of families with current child welfare system involvement. Although some progress has been made on both these fronts, much remains to be done to avoid the unnecessary removal of children from their homes or delays in their return due to inadequate or unstable housing.

This issue brief summarizes what we currently know about the relationship between housing and child welfare, describes some of the ways child welfare agencies are addressing the housing needs of families and explores the use (or potential use) of housing interventions to reduce child welfare involvement among families that are homeless. It concludes with a discussion of implications for policy, practice and future research.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOUSING AND CHILD WELFARE?

Research on the relationship between housing and child welfare has consistently found a higher rate of child welfare system involvement among homeless families than among low income families that are housed. Specifically, homeless families are more likely than their non-homeless counterparts to be the focus of a child protective services (CPS) investigation,³ to have an open child welfare case,⁴ or to have a child placed in out of home care.⁵ These differences seem to persist even after controlling for other factors that might be associated with an increased risk of child welfare system involvement.⁶

To date, most studies of the relationship between housing and child welfare has focused on homeless families that entered the shelter system.⁷ Non-sheltered homeless families as well as families that are living doubled up or are otherwise precariously housed have largely been excluded from this research. One study that did include families with a broader range of housing problem found that experiencing a housing-related problem such as being evicted or living doubled up increased the risk of having an investigated report of physical abuse.⁸ Another, more recent study found that living doubled up increased the odds of having a substantiated child maltreatment report, but only among families in which the caregiver had a mental health or substance abuse problem.⁹

Not only does the research indicate that the rate of child welfare system involvement is higher among homeless or precariously housed families than among families that are demographically similar but stably housed, but also, that among families with children in out of home care, unstable or inadequate housing can delay reunification, even if housing problems were not what brought those families to the attention of CPS,¹⁰ and after controlling for other factors that may affect whether children are returned home.¹¹

HOW PREVALENT ARE HOUSING PROBLEMS AMONG CHILD WELFARE INVOLVED FAMILIES?

Some information on the prevalence of housing problems among child welfare system involved families is provided by the data that states are required to submit each year to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). “Inadequate housing” was identified as one of the “circumstances of removal” for approximately 11 percent of children who were in foster care in at some point in FY 2012.¹² Unfortunately, the AFCARS data only capture housing problems identified as contributing to a child’s placement and do not distinguish among the different ways in which families can be inadequately housed (e.g., homelessness, overcrowding, unsafe conditions).

Other data come from studies of families receiving child welfare services. One of these studies found that housing problems, including eviction, doubling up and homelessness, were more common among families with children in out-of-home care than among families receiving voluntary intensive in-home services. However, families were more likely than their caseworkers to identify needing help with housing whereas caseworkers were more likely to identify needs related to parent functioning.¹³

WHAT EXPLAINS THE HIGH RATE OF CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT AMONG HOMELESS AND OTHERWISE PRECARIOUSLY HOUSED FAMILIES?

In some cases, families come to the attention of child protective services because their homelessness or substandard housing conditions (e.g., excessive heat or cold; lack of clean water or plumbing) pose a risk to the health and safety of their children.¹⁴ Although at least half the states include a poverty exemption in their statutory definition of neglect, the circumstances under which homelessness or inadequate housing should be attributed to neglect versus poverty are not well defined.¹⁵

In other cases, housing plays an indirect role. For example, the stress associated with being homeless or living doubled up can exacerbate punitive parenting practices, leading to physical abuse, or compromise the ability of parents to meet their children's basic needs, leading to neglect.¹⁶ Being homeless or precariously housed can also exacerbate other problems, including mental health and substance use disorders, which are common among child welfare involved families.¹⁷

Finally, homeless families may come to the attention of child protective services because of what some have described as the “fishbowl effect.” One consequence of staying in a homeless shelter is that families are under a high degree of scrutiny by shelter staff, all of whom are mandated reporters.¹⁸ Parenting behaviors that would go unobserved if families were independently housed are reported to child protective services if there is even the slightest suspicion that they constitute maltreatment.

WHY SHOULD CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES ADDRESS THE HOUSING NEEDS OF FAMILIES?

Child welfare agencies have a mandate to protect children and promote their well-being. Although that mandate does not include housing families that are homeless or precariously housed,¹⁹ addressing housing needs of homeless or precariously housed families may eliminate the risks to children's health and safety that inadequate housing can pose, thereby preventing out of home care placement. It can also allow parents to focus on other problems (e.g., mental health disorders, drug addiction, or domestic violence) that either precipitated or contributed to their child welfare system involvement, and hence facilitate children's return home. In fact, studies have found that providing child welfare involved families with housing related services can significantly reduce the incidence of subsequent maltreatment²⁰ and facilitate reunification for families with children in out of home care²¹ even if inadequate housing is not what brought the families to the child welfare agency's attention.

In addition to wanting to improve child welfare outcomes, child welfare agencies have a financial interest in addressing housing needs of families that are homeless or precariously housed families. The cost of providing homeless or precariously housed families with some type of housing assistance will be lower in almost every case than the cost of placing their children in out of home care.²² This means that in addition to promoting the goals of family preservation and reunification, addressing the housing needs of families that are homeless or precariously housed has the potential to generate significant cost savings, although the actual amount saved will depend on a variety of factors that affect either the out of home care costs avoided or the housing

assistance costs incurred.

WHAT ARE CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES DOING TO ADDRESS THE HOUSING NEEDS OF FAMILIES?

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by child welfare agencies when it comes to addressing the housing needs of the families that they serve is financial. Tight budgets combined with restrictions on how money from different funding streams can be spent limit what child welfare agencies can do. However, some child welfare agencies have found ways to provide families with modest amounts of cash assistance or housing related services to help stabilize their living situation. A number of states, including California, Florida, Indiana, North Carolina, and Ohio, have obtained Title IV-E waivers that allow them to use some of their federal child welfare dollars to provide families with time-limited rental or utility assistance or help meet other basic needs. Another option is the approach taken by Illinois where families may be eligible for cash assistance to pay for a security deposit, first month's rent, or other essential items as well as housing advocacy if that assistance would prevent the out of home care placement or their children or allow their children to be returned home.²³

Family Unification Program

An alternative to providing modest amounts of cash assistance or housing related services is the Family Unification Program (FUP). Authorized by Congress in 1990, the Family Unification Program provides housing choice vouchers (HCV) to families whose children are at risk of being removed from home or unable to be reunified due to a lack of adequate housing. FUP vouchers are awarded to communities by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) through a competitive grant process. The state or local public child welfare agency (PCWA) refers FUP-eligible families to the public housing agency (PHA) which determines HCV eligibility and provides the rental assistance. Although many child welfare families could potentially benefit from FUP, particularly if they are likely to require a long term housing subsidy, the program serves a relatively small number of families and does not exist in all communities.²⁴

An early evaluation of the program in 31 communities demonstrated the program's potential to promote stable housing as well as family preservation and reunification.²⁵ However, the absence of a control or comparison group limited the conclusions that could be drawn about the impact of the program. Two ongoing evaluations are using more rigorous research designs. The Family Housing Study randomly assigned FUP eligible Illinois families to receive services-as-usual (i.e., housing advocacy and tangible assistance such as furniture or security deposits) or services as usual plus FUP.²⁶ The other study is using quasi-experimental designs to estimate program impacts on child welfare outcomes (i.e., out of home care placement, time to reunification and subsequent maltreatment) and housing stability by comparing the outcomes of families that received FUP vouchers to the outcomes of families that did not in each of three sites (i.e., Salt Lake County, San Diego, and Portland, Oregon).²⁷

HOW ARE HOUSING INTERVENTIONS BEING USED TO REDUCE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT AMONG HOMELESS FAMILIES?

Below are brief descriptions of three types of housing interventions that are being used or that could be used to address the needs of homeless families with child welfare system involvement. The interventions vary along a number of dimensions e.g., duration of the housing assistance, the provision of supportive services) that reflect the diversity of needs among this population.²⁸ At one end of the spectrum are families with acute housing needs. These families may require nothing more than short-term housing assistance. At the other end of the spectrum are chronic or episodically homeless families with multiple co-occurring problems. They are likely to require long-term housing assistance and other supports.

Rapid Rehousing

Rapid rehousing aims to move homeless families quickly out of shelters and into private market housing by providing temporary rental and housing search assistance as well as home-based housing stabilization services. Some studies have found that relatively few families return to shelters after being rapidly rehoused, but additional research is needed to determine whether families are remaining stably housed.²⁹ Although rapid rehousing was not designed specifically for families with child welfare system involvement, Alameda County Child and Family Services (CFS) recently launched a Family Reunification Housing Pilot based on the rapid re-housing model to address the housing needs of child welfare-involved families using resources available through the County's Title IV-E waiver.

Transitional Housing

Homeless families with significant barriers to achieving housing stability may benefit from transitional housing, which combines time-limited housing assistance, typically no more than 24 months, with an array of supportive services. The housing may be project-based (i.e., single site) or tenant-based (i.e., scattered-site), and, in some cases, families may be allowed to “transition in place” by assuming the lease upon completion of the program. Evaluations of transitional housing programs have found that a majority of families achieve permanent housing upon program exit.³⁰ Although programs that target homeless families with child welfare system involvement have not been included in these evaluations, the families served by programs that have been evaluated exhibit some of the same problems that are common among families that are involved with the child welfare system.

Supportive Housing

Some homeless families, especially those with co-occurring problems, such as mental health or substance use disorders, may require supportive housing. Although models vary along a number of dimensions, including whether the housing is project-based (i.e., single site) or tenant-based (i.e., scattered-site), supportive housing typically means a permanent housing subsidy along with intensive case management and other services. Evaluations of these programs have generally found that homeless families experience an increase in housing stability as well as improvements in other outcomes.³¹

A number of supportive housing programs specifically targeting homeless families with child welfare system involvement have been developed in recent years. A few of those programs have been evaluated (e.g., Keeping Families Together in New York City; Serna Village in Sacramento; and Supportive Housing for

Families in Connecticut) and some promising findings have emerged. These include an increase in housing stability³² and child welfare case closures³³ as well as a reduction in the foster care reentry rate.³⁴ However, because all of the evaluations had methodological problems including small sample sizes, non-random sample selection, and the absence of a control or comparison group, it is too soon to draw conclusions about the impact of supportive housing programs for homeless families with child welfare system involvement.

Recognizing this gap in our knowledge about supportive housing programs that target child welfare involved families, the Administration for Children and Families awarded demonstration grants to five communities (Broward County, FL; Cedar Rapids, IA; Memphis, TN; San Francisco, CA; and Connecticut) in 2012. The purpose of the grants is to provide supportive housing to homeless or precariously housed families multiple service needs that come to the attention of the child welfare system and to evaluate the impact of those models using rigorous methodologies. Private partners include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

Family Options Study

Although most evaluations of housing programs for homeless families focus on one type of intervention, the Family Options Study, funded by HUD with additional support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), is using a rigorous experimental design to evaluate the impact of three different housing interventions for homeless families in twelve communities. Over 2,300 homeless families with at least one child under the age of 16 were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: permanent housing subsidy without supportive services; project-based transitional housing for up to 24 months with supportive services; community-based rapid re-housing with limited housing-focused services; or usual care (i.e., services families access on their own). Three waves of data are being collected from the household heads over a three year period and the primary outcomes of interest include housing stability, self-sufficiency, adult and child well-being, and family preservation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- The relationship between housing and child welfare calls into question the “siloe” approach to helping families that has long been, and in many communities continues to be, the norm.³⁵ Coordination across child welfare, housing and homeless services systems has traditionally been the exception rather than the rule even though they are dealing with many of the same families, and none of these systems, by itself, has the capacity to provide all the services and supports those families need.³⁶ Increasing cross-system coordination presents its own set of challenges because each system is governed by different mandates and is dependent on different funding streams. Nevertheless, there are a number of steps that communities can take to move towards a more coordinated approach, including collaborative planning, cross training and data sharing.
- It is difficult for parents to focus on the problems that may have precipitated or contributed to their child welfare system involvement unless they and their children have a safe and stable place to live. Hence, child welfare agencies should cultivate relationships with both public and private, not-for-profit housing agencies to which families can be referred for subsidized housing, encourage public housing agencies to establish local preferences that would give child welfare involved families priority access to public housing or housing choice vouchers, and partnering with TANF agencies which may

be able to provide rental assistance to help families avoid or exit homelessness.

- Agencies that provide shelter to homeless families or housing to families exiting homelessness should work with child welfare agencies to develop assessment tools that can be used to identify families at high risk of child welfare system involvement. These families could then be offered services aimed at preventing child maltreatment before it occurs. Conversely, child welfare agencies should work with agencies that provide shelter to homeless families or housing to families exiting homelessness to develop assessment tools that can be used to identify families in need of housing assistance either to prevent their children from being removed from home or to forestall any delay reunification. These families could either be provided with assistance directly by the child welfare agency (via Title IV-E waiver funds, for example) or referred to a housing agency with which the child welfare agency has established a relationship.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Despite growing recognition of the relationship between inadequate housing and child welfare system involvement, many gaps in our knowledge about the nature of this relationship remain. In particular, additional research is needed to better understand how different types of housing problems contribute to child welfare system involvement either alone or in conjunction with other risk factors. Likewise, future studies should seek to identify protective factors that may explain why some homeless or precariously housed families become involved in the child welfare system while other similarly situated families do not.
- Much of our knowledge about the relationship between child welfare system involvement and inadequate housing comes from studies of homeless families that entered a shelter. Consequently, we know relatively little about child welfare system involvement among unsheltered homeless families or among families that living doubled up. Future studies should include these families as well as sheltered families and compare their rates of child welfare system involvement.
- Although research clearly shows that homelessness is associated with an increased risk of child welfare system involvement, few studies have followed homeless families over the long term. As a result, what happens to the risk of child welfare system involvement when homeless families become housed is still very much an empirical question that can only be addressed with longitudinal research.
- Several different types of interventions are currently being used to address the needs of homeless families including, in some cases, homeless families with child welfare system involvement. What is not yet clear, however, is which types of families are most likely to benefit from which types of interventions. Moreover, although some of these interventions have been or are in the process of being evaluated, more research is needed to determine what constitutes best practice when it comes to reducing child welfare system involvement and promoting stable housing among this population.

CONCLUSION

Despite more than two decades of research, many questions remain about the relationship between housing

in child welfare. Perhaps the most important is how to prevent the unnecessary removal of children from their families or avoidable delays in their return home due to inadequate or unstable housing. Greater coordination between the child welfare system, on the hand, and the housing and homeless services systems, on the other, is clearly needed to ensure that families are being referred to the most appropriate services and supports. Also needed are evidence-based interventions that promote family preservation or reunification and housing stability among homeless or precariously housed families.



The First Focus State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center (SPARC), an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Walter S. Johnson Foundations, aims to improve outcomes for children and families involved with the child welfare system by building the capacity of and connections between state child welfare advocates. You can visit us online at www.childwelfare.org or on Twitter at [@ChildWelfareHub](https://twitter.com/ChildWelfareHub).

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Notes

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³ Bassuck et al. (1997)

⁴ Bassuck et al. (1997)

⁵ Bassuck et al. (1997); Cowal et al. (2002); Culhane et al. (2003). Note: Cowal et al. (2002) did not distinguish between parent-child separations due out of home care placements and those that occurred for other reasons.

- ⁶ Cowal, et al. (2002); Culhane et al. (2003)
- ⁷ Bassuck et al. (1997); Culhane et al. (2003)
- ⁸ Slack, Lee & Berger (2007)
- ⁹ Font & Warren (2013). Homeless families were no more likely to have a substantiated maltreatment report than non-homeless families but this may have been due to a lack of statistical power.
- ¹⁰ Cohen-Schlanger et al. (1995); Courtney et al. (2004)
- ¹¹ Courtney et al. (2004)
- ¹² These results are based on an analysis of AFCARS foster care data for FY 2012 collected by the Children’s Bureau and provided to the author by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. AFCARS defines inadequate housing as “housing facilities were substandard, overcrowded, unsafe, or otherwise inadequate resulting in their not being appropriate for the parents and child to reside together. Also includes homelessness.”
- ¹³ Courtney et al. (2004)
- ¹⁴ Cohen-Schlanger et al. (1995)
- ¹⁵ For a discussion of this issue, see Dale, M. (2014). Addressing the underlying issue of poverty in child-neglect cases. *Children’s Rights Litigation Newsletter*. Washington, DC: American Bar Association; Eamon, M., & Kopels, S. (2004). For reasons of poverty: court challenges to child welfare practices and mandated programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 821-836; Shdaimah, C. (2009). Rescuing children and punishing poor families: Housing related decisions. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 36, 33-57.
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- ²³ Families eligible for these “Norman services” may also qualify for a waiver to apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) if they have a child in out of home care who is expected to be reunified within 90 days.
- ²⁴ Congress funded new FUP vouchers from 1992 to 2000 and then from 2008 to 2010. Approximately 20,000 FUP vouchers were in circulation in 2012, and some of those vouchers were being used by former foster youth. Dion, R.,

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²⁵ Rog, D. J., Gilbert-Mongelli, A. M., & Lundy, E. (1998). *The Family Unification Program: Final evaluation report*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

²⁶ Fowler, P., & Chavira, D. (2014). Family Unification Program: Housing services for homeless child welfare-involved families. *Housing Policy Debate*, 24, 1-13.

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³⁴ Lenz-Rasid, S. (2013). *Supportive Housing for Homeless Families: Foster Care Outcomes and Best Practices*. Sacramento, CA: Sierra Health Foundation.

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