



EVIDENCE BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

What do we know about the **impact of homelessness and housing instability** on child welfare-involved families?

On a single night in 2018, more than 100,000 children in the U.S. were estimated to be homeless. While most of these children do not come into contact with the child welfare system, homeless children that do are about 34 times more likely to be placed in an out-of-home placement than children who have not experienced homelessness.¹ Even when compared exclusively to other children who are low income but have not experienced homelessness, research shows that [homeless children have significantly higher rates of child welfare involvement](#), including investigation, substantiation, and foster care placement.

Homelessness by itself is not necessarily a safety issue nor should it be a reason for removal. Yet, all too often, child welfare policy and practice casts too wide of a net, sweeping up those families that are simply challenged by poverty under the rubric of neglect. In fact, data consistently show that [inadequate housing is a precipitating factor in at least 10 percent of foster care cases](#), contributing to tens of thousands of foster care placements annually. In addition to being a precipitating factor in removals, homelessness and housing instability² can also delay reunification, preventing the achievement of timely permanency and forcing children to remain in care for longer periods of time.³



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Furthermore, even if not present at the beginning of a case, housing issues frequently arise during the course of the family's involvement with the child welfare system. This is especially true given the challenges many vulnerable families face, including substance use, mental health, parental stress, and poverty. One study found that one in six families needed housing support when they first came to the attention of the child protection agency, while two in five families needed support after their child was placed into foster care.⁴ [Another study](#) found that even when inadequate housing had not impacted the removal decision, unstable housing delayed reunification.

Housing instability and child well-being

While most states do not allow children to be removed from their families solely because of housing issues, homeless families face adversities that can threaten their children's safety, prompting child protection agencies to intervene. For instance, unstable and unsafe housing conditions have been found to increase children's exposure to violence, neglect, and social isolation. Multiple studies have found that homelessness is associated with a lack of attention to basic needs, extreme poverty, substance use, mental health issues, and high levels of parental emotional stress.⁵ Homeless children are also more likely than their peers to have [moderate, severe, and chronic health problems](#), and less access to medical and dental care. For these reasons, families that experience homelessness have higher rates of interaction with the child welfare system, including substantiations of maltreatment and out-of-home placements.⁶

For younger children, being homeless can be especially harmful, as disparities in health and development begin early. The first five years of a child's life are the most formative for the brain and the development of vision, hearing, language, and cognitive functions that lay the foundation for the child's future learning, behavior, and mental and physical health. Some studies show that by age 2, toddlers in low-income communities are four times more likely to have a "cluster" of health

A CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP THAT ADDRESSES HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING INSTABILITY FOR DUALY SERVED FAMILIES

The California Linkages program, a collaboration between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and child protection agencies, seeks to improve outcomes for parents simultaneously receiving CalWORKs (California's TANF program) and child welfare services. One way the program is meeting its mission is by successfully leveraging resources across both agencies. For instance, child protection agencies have limited funding to address housing needs, but since a lack of housing is an impediment to self-sufficiency, CalWORKs programs are now able to use their resources to provide housing supports. In one larger county, there is even a CalWORKs housing liaison co-located in the child protection agency to support an emergency response program.

Source: D'Andrade, A., Simon, J., Fabella, D., Castillo, L., Mejia, C., & Shuster, D. (2017). The California Linkages Program: Doorway to Housing Support for Child Welfare-Involved Parents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60(1-2), 125-133.

and developmental concerns than their more affluent peers.⁷ Therefore, **when children experience the unsafe and unstable conditions associated with homelessness during these foundational years, they are more likely to experience long-lasting negative effects**, including developmental delays and poor educational outcomes.⁸

Addressing the need

Nationally, there is a broad — albeit under-resourced and under-available — continuum of housing services for homeless families. While not all services and programs are available everywhere, the spectrum of services includes:⁹

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- Short-term support with locating and securing housing, including financial support with security deposits, rent, and utilities.
- Time-limited housing solutions, such as emergency shelters and transitional housing.
- Permanent housing options, such as public housing, the Housing Choice Voucher Program (also known as Section 8), and the Family Unification Program (FUP), which provides housing subsidies for families receiving services from the child welfare system.
- Time-limited support to maintain housing, including financial support to prevent evictions.

These supports can be provided either on their own, with short-term assistance from a case manager or coordinator, or with intensive case management and ongoing wraparound services.

Role for child protection agencies and system partners

Many child protection agencies are using their own resources as well as working with a variety of partners to address housing needs for families at risk of new or prolonged child welfare involvement.

Identification of need

Some agencies are taking steps to ensure that families are screened for homelessness and housing instability as early as possible. Testing out a new approach, Connecticut Department of Children and Families screened families for housing issues during their initial intake and assessment rather than when the case was transferred to ongoing services. Preliminary findings indicate that this approach, along with providing supportive housing, led to better outcomes for children.¹⁰

Financial supports

[Temporary financial assistance](#) provided by child welfare can help families prevent a housing crisis (e.g., avoid a

FAMILY UNIFICATION PROGRAM (FUP)

FUP, the largest child welfare-related permanent housing program, allocates Housing Choice Vouchers to families that have come to the attention of the child welfare system. It is aimed specifically at families for which their lack of housing stability might lead to:

- The imminent placement of the family's child(ren) in out-of-home care.
- Delays in reunifying the child(ren) with the family from out-of-home care.

late utilities or rent payment, or an eviction), de-escalate an existing crisis (e.g., get utilities turned back on or fix a safety hazard), and shorten the amount of time a family is homeless (e.g., ensure they have enough money for a security deposit).

While budget constraints and funding restrictions generally limit the amount of money child welfare agencies have to address housing needs, many agencies use a portion of their funding, including some of their funds from Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, to provide housing-related services. When this funding is not available, some agencies work with local housing or social service organizations to help families obtain support. For example, in Dane County, Wis., when a child welfare case is screened out¹¹ but housing (or other) needs are identified, child welfare staff are able to refer families to a voluntary, community-based program called Joining Forces for Families (JFF). The program aims to connect families to resources quickly and prevent children from entering care by addressing families' concrete needs, including housing supports. In one year alone, the 16 JFF sites in Dane County reported that they received almost 40,000 requests for supports, including assistance with eviction prevention, security deposits, and utilities. During the same year, the program was able to help more than 2,000 families stabilize their housing situation.¹²

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Non-monetary supports

In addition to financial supports, many families also need assistance navigating housing programs and the housing market. The complexity of families' needs, as well as the limited availability of affordable housing, can derail a family's ability to obtain housing, even with financial assistance, making housing search and placement services just as valuable to families as outright financial support. A number of resources have been developed that can support child welfare agencies with housing search and placement activities, including [HUD's Housing Search Assistance](#) toolkit, which was designed to help housing case managers and advocates in their efforts to assist clients with identifying, securing, and maintaining housing; and [Building Partnerships to Support Stable Housing for Child-Welfare Involved Families and Youth](#), which outlines housing resources for caseworkers as well as potential housing partners for child protection agencies.

Time-limited housing solutions

While permanent housing is ideal, housing programs often have limited housing supply to reach all families in need. Consequently, homeless families find themselves relying on shelters and transitional housing programs that provide services and allow longer stays. While child protection agencies do not usually fund homeless shelters, in some instances they now oversee and/or fund transitional housing programs. For instance, Strengthening, Preserving, and Reunifying Families (SPRF), a child welfare housing program in Jackson County, Ore., was established as a partnership between the child protection agency, a local substance use disorder treatment program, a local crisis relief nursery, the juvenile court, and other community stakeholders to address family stability and substance use for parents involved with child welfare. Together, the

partner agencies decided to provide a continuum of supports from transitional to permanent housing. Evaluation results indicate that SPRF families experienced, on average, fewer child welfare reports and removals, and higher rates of reunification.¹³

Permanent supportive housing

Stable, long-term housing can help improve child welfare outcomes. The Family Options Study used a randomized controlled trial to test the effects of multiple housing interventions, including a transitional housing program and a permanent housing subsidy. The study found that when families were given priority access to long-term housing subsidies instead of seeking housing resources on their own, homelessness and housing instability were reduced by half within 20 months. In addition, these families had lower rates of subsequent out-of-home placements.¹⁴ While this study suggests that permanent housing subsidies alone are an effective housing intervention, some child protection agencies are going beyond simply referring clients to other agencies for permanent housing support. Instead – through the use of Title IV-E waivers, grants and demonstration projects, and other flexible child welfare funding – they are partnering with organizations to test innovative housing initiatives, like supportive housing programs. According to some studies, **supportive housing programs, which combine long-term, affordable housing with intensive wraparound services, have been shown to be highly effective and cost-efficient for homeless families involved in the child welfare system.** This is particularly true for families with multiple co-occurring needs.¹⁵ Findings across multiple studies indicate that families that receive supportive housing fare better on a range of child welfare and housing metrics when compared to families that do not.^{16,17}

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- 1 Zlotnick, C., Bassuk, Ellen L., Paquette, Kristen, & Gillis, Laura M. (2009). What research tells us about the intersecting streams of homelessness and foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79(3), 319-325.
 - 2 The term "homelessness and housing instability" represents the full spectrum of circumstances that fall under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness, as well as under the definition in the McKinney-Vento Act, which includes children and youth living doubled-up and sharing housing due to the loss of housing or an economic hardship. It also includes families with rent burden (paying more than 30 percent of household income on rent) and families that reside in other forms of inadequate or unsafe housing.
 - 3 Pergamit, M., Cunningham, M., & Hanson, D. (2017). The impact of family unification housing vouchers on child welfare outcomes. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60, 103-113.
 - 4 Fowler, P., Henry, J., Schoeny, D., Landsverk, B., Chavira, M., & Taylor, J. (2013). Inadequate housing among families under investigation for child abuse and neglect: Prevalence from a national probability sample. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1), 106-114.
 - 5 Hong, S., & Piescher, K. (2012). The role of supportive housing in homeless children's well-being: An investigation of child welfare and educational outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 1140-1147.
 - 6 Hong & Piescher, 2012.
 - 7 Hillemeier, M. M., Lanza, S. T., Landale, N. S., & Oropesa, R. S. (2013). Measuring early childhood health and health disparities: A new approach. *Maternal and child health journal*, 17(10), 1852-61.
 - 8 Harden, B., Buhler, A., Parra, L., Herrenkohl, T., Leeb, R., & Higgins, D. (2016). Maltreatment in infancy: A developmental perspective on prevention and intervention. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 17(4), 366-386.
 - 9 HUD and its partners administer the larger, national housing programs; however, many child protection agencies are able to use their funding to provide short-term housing assistance, as well as coordinate services and resources with other national and local efforts.
 - 10 Farrell, A. F., Britner, P. A., Kull, M. A., Struzinski, D. L., Somaroo-Rodriguez, S. K., Parr, K., Westberg, L., Cronin, B., & Humphrey, C. (2018). *Final report: Connecticut's intensive supportive housing for families program*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.
 - 11 Child maltreatment reports are either screened in (assigned to a case worker for an investigation or differential response, when applicable) or screened out (determined not to be an instance of maltreatment so the report is not referred for an investigation or differential response).
 - 12 Bruce, M., Chance, R., & Meulemans, L. (2015). Joining Forces for Families: An embedded response to neighborhood poverty. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(6), 750-756.
 - 13 Rivera, M., & Sullivan, R. (2015). Rethinking child welfare to keep families safe and together: Effective housing-based supports to reduce child trauma, maltreatment recidivism, and re-entry to foster care. *Child Welfare*, 94(4), 185-204.
 - 14 Gubits, D., Spellman, B., Dunton, L., Brown, S., & Wood, M. (2013). Interim report: Family options study. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.
 - 15 Hong & Piescher, 2012.
 - 16 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2019). *Building partnerships to support stable housing for child welfare-involved families and youth*. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-housing/>
 - 17 Pergamit, M., Cunningham, M., Hanson, D., & Stanczyk, A. (2019). *Does supportive housing keep families together?* Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from www.urban.org/research/publication/does-supportive-housing-keep-families-together
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