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U.S. Commentary: Implications From the Family Options Study for Homeless and Child Welfare Services

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Abstract

The Family Options Study provides an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the troubling link between family homelessness and child maltreatment. The rigorous design uses multiple methods to probe the impact of housing interventions on family preservation and reunification and the underlying mechanisms. Results show that ending homelessness keeps families together; however, once separated, families continue to struggle to reunify with children. Permanent housing subsidies represent a more efficient approach to promoting family stability among homeless families compared with temporary housing with supportive services. Results introduce a new phase of family homeless research, practice, and policy; further investigation must consider broad scale approaches to keep families affordably housed in inclusive communities that protect child safety and well-being.

Homelessness and Child Welfare

The link between family homelessness and child separation represents an ongoing concern for practice and policy. Well-designed observational studies estimate that approximately one in five families entering homeless shelters for the first time subsequently receive child welfare services (Culhane et al., 2003; Park et al., 2004). A similar proportion of families rely on informal placements with family and friends to shield children and adolescents from homelessness (Cowan et al., 2002; Gubits et al., 2016). Moreover, a connection exists between child welfare involvement and homelessness in the transition to adulthood; one study estimates that one-half of young adults seeking homeless services had prior contact with the child protective services (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017).

The child welfare system struggles to keep up with demand for housing assistance. National estimates suggest approximately one in six families investigated for child abuse and neglect experience housing problems that threaten child safety (Fowler et al., 2013), whereas more than one-fourth of

adolescents previously in contact with child welfare report housing insecurity and homelessness in the transition to adulthood (Fowler, Marcal, et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2017). Thus, the child welfare system annually serves more than 400,000 families whose housing threatens child separation and discharges 7,500 adolescents immediately at risk for homelessness. Housing assistance provided through the child welfare system tends to be minimal and fails to promote stability (Fowler, Taylor, and Rufa, 2011). Given the negative life course implications associated with child maltreatment and homelessness, a need exists for effective and wide-scale approaches that address housing problems among vulnerable families (Fowler, Farrell, et al., 2017).

The Family Options Study provides an unprecedented opportunity to test theory that directly informs practice and policy. A limited and inconclusive body of evidence guides service delivery for homeless, child welfare-involved families. An experimental evaluation (Fowler, et al., in preparation) of the Family Unification Program (FUP)—an initiative that provides permanent rent subsidies for child welfare-involved families whose housing threatens child separation—randomly assigned families to receive housing case management plus FUP vouchers ($n = 89$) or housing case management alone ($n = 89$). Findings demonstrate a significant yet small reduction of foster placement 3 years after random assignment in Chicago, Illinois (Fowler et al., in preparation); however, caregiver-reported child maltreatment remains high over time regardless of treatment condition (Fowler and Schoeny, 2017a). Quasi-experimental evaluations of FUP provide conflicting results on whether the intervention promotes family stability (Pergamit, Cunningham, and Hanson, 2017). Study design limitations, including small and local samples with limited comparison groups, preclude clear recommendations for child welfare programming.

Similarly, a dearth of evidence exists for services received through the homeless system. A relatively small experiment of homeless mothers with mental health problems in Westchester, New York, shows little impact on keeping families together (Shinn et al., 2015). The study randomly assigned mothers to time-limited case management plus immediate access for permanent housing vouchers or to homeless services that typically led to permanent housing. Although some benefits emerged on family and child well-being, no effects emerged on caregiver report of separation from children over a 2-year followup (Shinn et al., 2015). Evidence also provides some support for *housing first* approaches, whereby homeless families use and retain permanent housing in the community without engaging in traditional treatment requirements (Samuels et al., 2015). A quasi-experimental study of chronically homeless families showed that provision of permanent housing, plus intensive case management focused on harm reduction, promotes reunification with children removed from the home compared with similar families in homeless shelters ($n = 172$), and rates are comparable with similar families receiving public housing ($n = 172$; Rog et al., 2017). The studies illustrate the feasibility of housing first without requiring additional child welfare involvement for homeless families; however, the evidence fails to address a number of key questions on how best to protect the safety and well-being of children experiencing homelessness.

The rigorous design of the Family Options Study advances understanding of the impact of housing assistance on stabilizing homeless families. The multisite randomized controlled trial of more than 2,000 families entering homeless shelters disentangles the impact of housing assistance from plausible alternative explanations, such as prior experiences of homelessness and child welfare involvement. Multiple intervention arms enable simultaneous testing of theoretically different

housing approaches compared with homeless services as usual. Two arms test housing first approaches with long-term (subsidy) versus short-term (rapid re-housing) rental assistance, whereas a third treatment (transitional housing) first makes housing conditional on engagement in services. Essentially, the Family Options Study represents six experiments in 12 different settings that probe the intensity of services needed to promote stability. Adequate sample size enables detection of even small group differences, as observed in prior research. Repeated assessments of caregiver and family functioning at 20 and 37 months following random assignment, with high retention, inform the sustainability of effects and enable examination of potential mechanisms that account for intervention effects. Moreover, availability of child welfare records for 5 of the 12 sites provides another important indicator of family separation. The well-implemented experiment enables a series of tests regarding the theory of homelessness and connection with family separation.

Homelessness and Family Preservation

The Family Options Study demonstrates partial support for housing first approaches to addressing the connection between homelessness and keeping families together. Permanent housing subsidies reduce family separations; 10 percent of families referred for permanent housing had at least one child removed from home within the past 6 months at the 20-month followup compared with 17 percent of families receiving homeless services as usual (Gubits et al., 2015). Likewise, only 2 percent of caregivers referred for subsidies reported a child placed in fostercare, whereas 5 percent of families referred for services as usual did. Thus, permanent housing reduces the average probability of family separations by approximately three-fifths during the first 1 1/2 years following intervention compared with services as usual. The differences between treatment conditions diminish over time; families referred for subsidies continued to experience similar rates of separation at the 37-month followup, whereas the rate of separation among families referred for homeless services as usual dropped to comparable levels between conditions (Gubits et al., 2016). In addition, child welfare administrative records show no differences in the probability of fostercare placement across the 37-month followup between families referred for subsidies and services as usual (Gubits et al., 2016). No other differences emerge between housing interventions and services as usual, or between housing interventions, on family separation.

Exploratory analyses provide additional insight into the effects of housing on family stability. To help understand the drivers of treatment effects, Shinn, Brown, and Gubits (2017) examined whether family characteristics account for differences in child out-of-home placement at the 20-month followup. Findings show that reductions in parent-child separations correlated with permanent housing relate with decreases in homelessness, caregiver alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and economic disadvantage. However, improvements in housing stability represent the primary driver of treatment differences on family separation. Although these analyses fall outside of the experiment and do not infer causality, the evidence provides further support for housing first approaches toward addressing family separation associated with homelessness. Permanent housing without supportive services improves multiple dimensions of family functioning, especially reductions in homelessness that are intimately linked with family separations.

Interpretation of the Family Options Study findings on family preservation requires careful consideration. Foremost, permanent housing subsidies promote keeping families together, and appear to do so through housing stability. This finding is important in context of positive effects on other outcomes associated with subsidies. Caregivers exhibit reductions on psychological distress and exposure to domestic violence that endure at 20- and 37-month followups, whereas children on average also demonstrate improvement in psychosocial well-being (Gubits et al., 2016, 2015). Thus, children who remain in a home with permanent housing subsidies experience better family settings, on average, that are key for healthy child development. Although it remains untested whether housing and family stability account for improvements in child well-being, the evidence supports housing first approaches for keeping families together.

Restricted effects on family stability dampen enthusiasm for permanent housing as a solution to co-occurring child maltreatment. Small effects are observed on prevention of out-of-home placements at the 20-month followup. One way to interpret the effect is to consider randomly picking a family referred for permanent subsidies; the probability the family has a lower chance of child separation compared with a randomly chosen family referred for services as usual falls between 0.52 and 0.54, which is slightly better than a 50-50 chance. Moreover, the effects decrease to 50-50 at 37 months, likely because so many families receiving services as usual rehouse. The effects are similarly small in studies that focus on homeless families at greater risk for child welfare involvement (Fowler et al., in preparation; Shinn et al., 2015). Permanent housing addresses some but not all risks for family separation.

Risks for out-of-home placement associated with homelessness likely occur at multiple levels. Shinn et al. (2017) demonstrated the importance of family-level risks on separation, especially experiences of homelessness. Mixed methods explore systems-level risks for child welfare involvement associated with entering homeless shelters (Mayberry et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Shinn, 2016). Studies probe the fishbowl hypothesis that suggests contact with homeless and associated services adds scrutiny to parenting, which in turn triggers child welfare investigations (Park et al., 2004). Qualitative interviews with 80 caregivers from 4 of the 12 sites at the time of random assignment suggest perceptions of scrutiny across different housing interventions (Mayberry et al., 2014). Caregivers express the challenges in maintaining family routines and rituals when parenting in unstable accommodations, and parents feel covertly and overtly scrutinized by others. Several parents report direct threats of child welfare referral from program staff and family, even with permanent housing subsidies.

Using linked child welfare and homeless services administrative records from the Family Options Study site in Alameda County, California, Rodriguez and Shinn (2016) estimated the probabilities associated with child welfare involvement before and after random assignment ($n = 289$). Rates of referrals to child protective services increased sharply after entry into homeless shelters, and the increases in referrals appear marginally greater ($p < .10$) among African-American families compared with White families, whereas no differences exist in substantiated accounts of child maltreatment. Substantiated reports of abuse receive ongoing child welfare services, and thus findings suggest homeless shelter staff unnecessarily refer African-American children for child welfare services. The findings point to potential racial bias within the homeless system.

However, it is difficult to tease apart the role of bias associated with homeless service usage. Substantiation represents a poor indicator of child maltreatment because it often reflects penal code instead of true risk (Kohl, Jonson-Reid, and Drake, 2009). Moreover, careful studies show that overrepresentation of minorities in the child welfare system better reflects concentrated poverty than bias (Drake et al., 2011). A similar process could explain referral rates from homeless shelters; homeless shelters may disproportionately serve families living in areas of concentrated poverty that make families more vulnerable (Fowler and Schoeny, 2017b). Study findings on family reunification also raise concerns about the home environments of formerly homeless families.

Homelessness and Family Reunification

The Family Options Study shows that most children placed out of home at the time of random assignment fail to return home. Nearly one-fourth of caregivers report separations from children at randomization with less than 1 percent said to be in fostercare (Abt Associates, 2013). Approximately one-third of these families reunite at 20 months (Gubits et al., 2015), which increases slightly to two out of five by 37 months (Gubits et al., 2016). No differences exist in family reunification at either followup for housing interventions compared with services as usual, nor between housing interventions. Thus, permanent housing subsidies reduce new parent-child separations compared with homeless services, and rehousing generally helps some but not all homeless families reunify.

It remains unclear why so many children fail to return home after families rehouse. The stress of out-of-home placements before and during homelessness may strain family dynamics. Prior research shows inadequately housed families with a child removed from home immediately following child welfare investigation exhibit greater barriers (Fowler, Taylor, and Rufa, 2011), whereas temporary housing interventions that provide extensive supports fail to reduce caregiver and family distress (Gubits et al., 2016, 2015). It may be that housing alleviates stress without sufficiently repairing parent-child relationships to enable reunification. Moreover, the Family Options Study does not assess the well-being of separated children, and any potential benefits for child safety and well-being remain unknown. Housing may be necessary but not sufficient to reunify families.

More intensive interventions that pair housing with appropriate supportive services may be necessary for families with children already removed from home. A recent quasi-experiment of permanent housing plus intensive case management with homeless families promotes family reunification over 12 months compared with families receiving homeless services as usual (Rog et al., 2017). Fortunately, an ongoing federal demonstration will greatly inform the utility of permanent supportive housing models applied with child welfare-involved homeless families. Through a federal and philanthropic partnership, five communities across the United States receive funding to develop and test local interagency collaborations that connect chronically homeless families with housing and trauma-informed case management (HHS, 2012). Careful evaluations test hypotheses that intensive services promote preservation and reunification, whereas null effects or potentially increases in child welfare involvement would point to needed corrections to theory underlying housing interventions.

Lack of reunification could also reflect constraints of ongoing poverty. The Family Options Study shows little appreciable differences in household earnings after entry into shelters, regardless of housing interventions (Gubits et al., 2016, 2015). Many families continue to struggle meeting basic needs. Although not directly tested by the Family Options Study, another experiment that randomized inadequately housed families involved in the child welfare system to permanent housing subsidies shows that families remain in low-income neighborhoods marked by concentrated disadvantage and community violence (Fowler and Schoeny, 2017b). Moreover, qualitative interviews suggest caregivers feel considerable pressure to move into the first available unit to avoid homelessness and child separation, which often results in less than ideal accommodations (Rufa and Fowler, in press). Families may not perceive situations as sufficiently stable for return of separated children.

Implications for Future Policy and Research

Findings from the Family Options Study introduce a next phase of homelessness practice and research. Results clearly demonstrate how to end family homelessness: provide immediate access to long-term affordable housing. Moreover, stable housing prevents informal out-of-home placements but provides little support after families separate. Evidence emphasizes the importance of initiatives to make affordable housing accessible for low-income households.

Expansion of permanent housing subsidies represents an immediate opportunity to stabilize families and protect millions of vulnerable children. The demand for rental assistance greatly exceeds the supply, with long waitlists in nearly every community. Investments that expand coverage to more families offer cascading benefits on family and child well-being. The Family Options Study indicates that prioritization of homeless families that expedites connection to permanent housing provides a cost-neutral opportunity to improve the social safety net.

The continuing strain on the child welfare system associated with homelessness indicates an ongoing need to emphasize prevention. Systemic approaches to end homelessness need to reconsider approaches to keeping at-risk families housed (Fowler, Farrell, et al., 2017). Unaffordable housing markets generate constant demand for housing assistance that strains families and undermines service delivery (Fowler, Farrell, et al., 2017). The housing first approaches tested in the Family Options Study triage resources to the neediest households and provide little guidance for early intervention. Homelessness prevention represents a complementary approach that provides time-limited supports to families at imminent risk for homelessness (Cunningham et al., 2015). Programs vary by community but emphasize partnerships between local homeless providers and community-based agencies to stabilize families, including child welfare agencies. By keeping families housed, prevention efforts relieve pressure on homeless services and child welfare.

Fortunately, rigorous evaluations demonstrate the effectiveness of homelessness prevention on reducing rates of homelessness at the household and community levels. An experiment conducted in New York City indicates households randomly assigned for homelessness prevention ($n = 150$) use shelters at significantly lower rates more than 2 years later compared with families referred for community services as usual ($n = 145$; Rolston et al., 2013). Although significant differences fail to emerge on child welfare services, limited sample size and poor targeting of services may obscure

potential benefits (Shinn et al., 2013). Moreover, a quasi-experiment that leverages staggered rollout of the programming across New York City neighborhoods shows reductions in community-level rates of family homelessness after introduction of homelessness prevention (Goodman, Messeri, and O'Flaherty, 2016). Similar effects on homelessness appear in a rigorous evaluation conducted with all households using homelessness prevention in Chicago (Evans, Sullivan, and Wallskog, 2016).

The promising results of homelessness prevention hold especially important implications for sustainable efforts to end homelessness and associated risks for child maltreatment. The approach appears scalable; an investment of \$1.5 billion enabled local homeless provider networks to develop prevention programs and serve nearly 1 million people within 2 years during the Great Recession (Cunningham et al., 2015). Communities now face challenges in maintaining programs with local resources after the end of federal funding. Findings from the Family Options Study indicate limited impact of rapid rehousing and transitional housing interventions for already homeless families. Homelessness prevention could provide a needed alternative to stabilize families and address the intersection between housing and child welfare services.

Housing policies that promote affordable and equitable housing represent another necessary component for keeping families housed and children safe. Despite the promise of permanent housing and prevention, expanded access to housing may reduce household emotional and financial strain without limiting exposure to violence and concentrated disadvantage; these community-level risks continue to drive rates of child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007). A need exists for local, state, and federal policy initiatives that ensure access to preferred housing options for low-income families. Evidence supports the use of tools such as inclusionary zoning, low-income rental assurance for landlords, tax incentives to provide low-income housing, and expansion of housing subsidies (for example, Freeman and Schuetz, 2017; O'Flaherty, 2011). Flexible policies that create incentives for the provision of affordable housing and disincentives for poor quality housing promise to strengthen communities.

In sum, the Family Options Study definitively illustrates that timely provision of affordable housing ends homelessness and strengthens families. Research and practice now must identify efficient strategies that address overwhelming demand for housing assistance among low-income and marginalized families. Homeless services focused only on housing will fail to protect children. Investments in permanent housing and homelessness prevention represent complementary approaches, whereas public and programmatic policies must incentivize the provision of affordable housing in preferred communities. The Family Options Study represents the beginning of the end of family homelessness and associated child maltreatment.

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