



Supportive housing program for homeless families: Foster care outcomes and best practices[☆]



Sonja Lenz-Rashid

San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Homeless families
Foster care
Housing outcomes
Homelessness
Transitional living programs

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study is an outcome evaluation of Cottage Housing Incorporated's Serna Village Program (CHI), a supportive housing program serving homeless families in Sacramento, California.

Methods: This quasi-experimental study examined a sample of 293 children and youth who lived with their parents in CHI between 2002 and 2009.

Results: 71% of the children had a history of foster care before CHI; 10% of the youth reentered foster care after graduating from CHI (compared with reentry rates of 20–40% from other studies). The CHI youth overall spent less time in care after foster care reentry when compared to other Sacramento County youth. Child welfare costs of the sample before entering CHI were \$1,313,262, yet at reentry, child welfare costs were \$295,632 (2.5 to 5 years after leaving CHI).

Conclusions: Child welfare recidivism rates and total child welfare costs after reentry may decrease for homeless families by providing them with permanent housing and support services.

1. Introduction

The United States appears to be a leader among nations in the developed world when it comes to the current prevalence of homelessness (Toro et al., 2007). Yet, estimating the numbers of homeless individuals and families is challenging for most legislative bodies, public agencies, homeless advocates, and researchers. There are huge variations in estimated rates of homelessness due to how to define the related terms, the time frame used in research, the data collection methods, and/or the political agenda of the data source (i.e., government officials, advocacy groups, or researchers) (Toro et al., 2007). The federal government defines a person as homeless when he or she,

“lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and has a primary nighttime residence that is A) a supervised privately or publicly operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, B) an institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.”

(U.S. DHHS, 2010)

Family homelessness (i.e., at least one adult and one child under the age of 18) can be more difficult to estimate than individual homelessness, mainly because of ‘doubling up’ (Zlotnick, 2010). Unlike adult

individuals who might access shelters or live in encampments on the streets, homeless families may avoid homeless shelters and ‘double up,’ or reside in small places with two or more families, even when the size of the residence is fit for only one family (Zlotnick, 2010). Doubling up allows families to stay precariously housed, but it can result in unstable, overcrowded, and perhaps chaotic living conditions. On a single night in January 2015, it is estimated that 219,391 people in families were experiencing homelessness in the United States (NAEH, 2016a).

Unfortunately, current knowledge about the services and supports needed to help families exit homelessness and maintain stable housing is incomplete (Olivet, Paquette, Hanson, & Bassuk, 2010, p. 30). In the field of homelessness research there has been little information about the models of best practice (see Bassuk et al., 2007; Bodoyni, Orlando, & Yancey, 2008). To date there is a dearth of research documenting the most effective models of service delivery, the most effective interventions, and the recommended intensity and duration of such services (p. 31). For example, it unknown whether the typical federal 24-month time limit in transitional housing may be artificial and could force homeless families out of transitional housing programs before they are ready (Hart-Shegos, 1999), or whether harm reduction or abstinence-based models are the most effective (see Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano, & Schumacher, 2009).

[☆] Funded by: Sierra Health Foundation, 1321 Garden Hwy, Sacramento, CA 95833.
E-mail address: srlenz@sfsu.edu.

1.1. Purpose of the study

Inadequate housing of families has been linked to child maltreatment, and is frequently at the root of child welfare involvement, out-of-home placement and re-entry, and reunification delays among low-income families (Cunningham, Pergamit, Baum, & Luna, 2015). Yet, examining housing as a preventative intervention against child welfare involvement has not been broadly investigated by researchers, policy makers, or child welfare agencies. Although there is research on reentry rates of foster youth in general, there has been little research examining the best practices that might prevent reentry in to foster care, especially for more vulnerable families, like those that are homeless. This study is a descriptive outcome evaluation exploring the child welfare reentry outcomes of homeless families served by a supportive housing program in Northern California.

1.2. Homeless families and child welfare involvement

While conditions of poverty alone do not constitute maltreatment statutorily in California, problems such as inadequate or substandard housing may lead to health or safety hazards for children that can constitute child neglect (Pelton, 2015). Although not widely studied, there is some research illustrating a link between housing instability, homelessness, and child welfare, but the direction of the relationship is unclear (Cunningham et al., 2015) (see Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003; Warren, Drazen, & Curtis, 2017; Zlotnick, 2010). However, even with the little research examining homeless families' contact with child welfare there is an indication that homeless families have higher rates of child protection involvement than non-homeless families in terms of receipt of child protection services (Hong & Piescher, 2012, p. 1440). Zlotnick (2010) found that childhood foster care is as much as 34 times higher for families experiencing homelessness than the general population of the same aged children (p. 6). And, Font and Warren (2013) found that in a nationally representative sample, families who had experienced homelessness in the last 12 months were more likely to be investigated for neglect than adequately-housed families.

Harburger and White (2004) examined the overall national costs to place children from homeless families in foster care due to neglect and marginalized housing. Using 2000 U.S. Census data, the researchers estimated that it costs approximately \$2.76 billion per year to house homeless children in foster care and only \$810 million to subsidize the children and their parents in supportive (or transitional) housing programs. They found that the costs to maintain children and their families in supportive housing programs is 70% less than the costs to house those children in foster care placements. The researchers also estimate that in California subsidized housing programs (i.e. housing vouchers, Section 8, etc.) cost the state \$228 million, while foster care costs are almost \$442 million annually. Clearly, the benefits of collaboration and cooperation between child welfare agencies, public housing agencies and non-profit housing providers can outweigh the costs. Each state may stand to save a considerable amount of money by funding transitional, or supportive, housing programs for homeless families (Harburger & White, 2004, p. 502).

1.3. Homeless families and child welfare re-entry

Re-entry into foster care generally refers to circumstances in which children who have been discharged from foster care to be reunified with their family of origin, adopted, or are under guardianship are later returned to foster care (Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, & Austin, 2013, p. 196). Successful reunification is not complete without accounting for the safety and stability of a child upon his or her return home: subsequent reentries into care may be an indication of insufficient support for families (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2008). Over the last fifteen years there has been increased interest in examining the rates and reasons of

re-entry among foster care children and youth who were reunified with their families, because early studies illustrated that a large proportion of the children who return home eventually return to, and reenter foster care.

Family poverty, receipt of income support, limited parenting skills, little parental social support, and parental substance use and mental health diagnoses are all related to foster care reentry (Festinger, 1996; Kimberlin et al., 2008). The age of the child, mental health and behavioral challenges of child, and frequent changes in past placements have also been found to be related to reentry (Shaw, 2006; Wells, Ford, & Griesgraber, 2007; Koh, 2007; Barth, Weigensberg, Fisher, Fetrow, & Green, 2008). However, reentry may also be associated with inadequacies in child welfare service delivery (e.g. lack of accessibility or high family maintenance caseloads), which could affect parents' ability to follow-through with their case plan after the family has been reunified.

Yet, little is known about the impact of supportive housing on child outcomes, as most research on the effect of housing support focuses on point-in-time adult outcomes (e.g., employment, educational attainment) or family-level outcomes (e.g., housing stability) (Hong & Piescher, 2012). The current understanding of homeless children's contact with child welfare systems is mainly driven by studies that explore the experience or "state" of homelessness, rather than a change in child welfare outcomes longitudinally (Hong & Piescher, 2012, p. 1441). More importantly, there is very little known about how supportive housing programs work to keep children safe and prevent child welfare interventions. Hong and Piescher (2012) examined the longitudinal outcomes of child welfare involvement of children (n = 70) in a supportive housing program over a period of three years. The researchers found that the overall percentage of child welfare involvement decreased each year that the youth were living the program.

1.4. Housing interventions with child welfare families

For the last two decades supportive housing programs (SHPs) and housing subsidies for homeless families have been primary social work interventions. SHPs for families from across the country vary in terms of their structure, intensity of supportive services, length of housing services, eligibility requirements, and the needs of the families served. In addition, SHP housing models can be project-based (in a single building or complex of buildings) or tenant-based (scattered-site) (Burt, 2006, p. 3).

Farrell, Britner, Guzzardo, and Goodrich (2009) examined the outcomes of a SHP in Connecticut for homeless families, some of which were involved in the child welfare system. The researchers examined demographic and outcome data on 1720 parents (and 3779 children) over a ten-year period and nearly 30% had children who were placed in the foster care system (including county child welfare kinship placements). Clients who completed the SHP successfully had longer stays, were more likely to have a history of permanent housing and employment, and had higher initial and exit scores on a measure of environment of care. Similarly, a recent randomized evaluation of a program that provides housing subsidies to 2282 homeless families demonstrates that permanent housing subsidies can be an effective intervention by improving outcomes (Gubits et al., 2015). This large empirical study showed that recipients of permanent housing subsidies had only a 1.9% rate of foster care placement, compared with a 5.0% rate of families with usual care (control group).

The federal Family Unification Program (FUP) is a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing subsidy program targeted to families who are receiving services from the child welfare system and whose lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in their involvement in child welfare. The program is a partnership between public housing agencies and child welfare agencies. Cunningham et al. (2015) studied the design and implementation of FUPs in eight sites throughout the country, yet unfortunately most agencies involved did

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4936398>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4936398>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)