

# Evaluation of Supportive Housing for Child Welfare–Involved Families: Overview of Findings

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## The Demonstration

In 2012, the Children’s Bureau awarded five sites grants to provide supportive housing to child welfare–involved families. Eligible families included those in which children were at risk of being removed into out-of-home care and families with children in out-of-home care where housing instability was an impediment to reunification. Each site identified high-need families. Although the definitions varied, sites included families that were homeless or unstably housed and had one or two co-occurring issues, such as a caregiver with a substance use issue, a mental health problem, and intimate partner violence, among others. The grant provided funding for program start-up and certain services, but each site had to provide housing resources. Three sites—Broward County, Florida, the State of Connecticut, and San Francisco, California—used housing choice vouchers while the other two sites—Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Memphis, Tennessee—used site-based housing (sometimes referred to as project-based housing). Sites began enrolling families in 2013, and the grants ran through 2018.

## The Evaluation

With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Annie E Casey Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and Casey Family Programs, the Urban Institute conducted a cross-site evaluation to determine if supportive housing would benefit families in the child welfare system beyond usual services. Each site incorporated a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to allocate the scarce housing resources to eligible families. In 2019, Urban released a report (Pergamit et al. 2019) that showed many positive impacts of supportive housing. Several related reports on the sites’ program implementations, systems integration, costs, and families’ perspectives were also released.<sup>1</sup>

With new funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Urban has conducted a follow-up study to learn whether supportive housing led to longer-term impacts, resulting in seven publications covering different topic areas. This summary provides an overview of the findings captured in those briefs and reports, all of which can be found here.<sup>2</sup> The findings are based on either child welfare

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<sup>1</sup> “Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System,” Urban Institute, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/supportive-housing-families-child-welfare-system>.

<sup>2</sup> “Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System,” Urban Institute.

administrative data obtained from all five sites five years after randomization or a follow-up survey administered to families approximately 54 months after randomization.

### *Child Welfare Findings*

Supportive housing showed significant impacts on child welfare outcomes (Chambers, Packard Tucker, and Pergamit 2023), including reduced removals, increased reunifications, and children more likely at home with their parents after five years. By keeping children and young people out of care, supportive housing reduced payments for out-of-home care. Selection of the most appropriate families could reduce costs further.

### CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

Supportive housing reduced removals for intact families and increased reunifications for children in out-of-home care. In both cases, children were more likely to be with their family after five years.

Children in families who did not receive supportive housing were less likely to reunify but only spent a modest amount of more time in foster care as they were more likely to move into guardianship.

Children in intact families who received supportive housing had fewer new substantiated allegations after one year than children in families without supportive housing. However, both groups saw the rates of new substantiated allegations rise over time, and the rates after five years remained only slightly lower for children with supportive housing.

### DEFINING THE TARGET POPULATION

To determine the most optimal target population, we identified families where children were more at risk for adverse outcomes in the absence of supportive housing and, among those, which children benefited the most from supportive housing. Targeting a program to children and families most at risk provides the opportunity to efficiently use program resources, improve child and family outcomes, and reduce system costs. Our findings (Packard Tucker and Pergamit 2023) can provide guidance, but child welfare administrators should consider their local context and practices and examine who may be most at risk in their jurisdiction.

We found that risk and benefit varied based on whether the child was at home or in out-of-home care at baseline, so the risk factors selected for targeting should be different when considering each population for supportive housing.

For children in out-of-home care at baseline, the characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of being at home with their family five years after randomization were

- their family being homeless at randomization (instead of unstably housed);
- their caregiver having a substance use issue;

- their caregiver having experienced abuse or neglect as a child; or
- having experienced a longer time removed from home.

When considering the extent to which supportive housing reduced time spent in out-of-home care, all four risk factors for reunification cases showed significant reductions, ranging from 239 days over five years for when a caregiver had experienced abuse or neglect as a child to 457 days for when a caregiver has substance use issues.

We also found that intervening early in the case may have a greater impact than waiting for housing as the “last step.”

For intact families, the risk factors were

- having a caregiver who had a history with the criminal justice system;
- having a caregiver who had experienced abuse or neglect as a child; or
- living in a larger family.

Although the factor did not meet our original criteria, providing supportive housing to families experiencing intimate partner violence had the largest reduction of days in care over the five years among the risk factors for intact cases at 143 days.

In general, the days saved for intact families were much lower than for reunification cases and were not statistically significant. These smaller differences likely reflect the initial decision to keep the family intact based on a determination that the children will be safe, so the eventual days in out-of-home care will be less, even in the absence of supportive housing. But when comparing families in Broward County who only needed community resources (alternative response) with those who were kept intact but needed more attention (open child welfare case), we found higher-risk families will benefit from supportive housing, even when kept intact initially (the effect size was large, although not statistically significant, most likely because of the small sample size).

### *Cost Savings*

Child welfare agencies spend a large share of their budget on foster care, guardianship, and adoption days. By reducing the number of child welfare–funded days, child welfare agencies will see reductions in expenditures for out-of-home care. For cases waiting for reunification, the cost savings was \$28,200 per family while intact cases saw a smaller estimated cost savings of \$7,600 over five years.

Effective targeting can increase impact and create savings. We looked at the groups that had the highest risk and saw the greatest reduction in child welfare system days. In our analysis, for families awaiting reunification with a caregiver with substance use issues at baseline, the cost savings came to more than \$42,000 over five years—one and a half times more than when looking at all reunification families. For intact families with intimate partner violence as a risk factor, costs savings were about \$16,000—twice as much as compared with all preservation families (Packard Tucker, Pergamit, and Bayer 2023).

By reducing system utilization, child welfare agencies can free up funds for programs that help keep children home and families intact. Nevertheless, more research is needed to understand the full scope

of the costs and benefits of supportive housing programs within child welfare and across other social service agencies.

### *Well-Being Findings*

Indicators of well-being were captured from the follow-up survey administered to families approximately 54 months after randomization. The primary caregiver was asked to report on multiple dimensions including housing; employment; their neighborhood; their own physical and mental health; their own parenting; and their children's physical, mental, and academic well-being. Receiving supportive housing improved some well-being measures 54 months after study enrollment, though not across all outcomes.

#### HOUSING

Overall, we found that supportive housing improved housing outcomes 54 months after enrollment (Mackenzie-Liu and Pergamit 2023). Families who received supportive housing reported more stable housing situations, were more likely to live in a dwelling with a lease, had fewer moves and evictions, and were likely to have a homeless spell or spend time in a shelter. More than half (55 percent) of these families continued to have their own lease while more than a quarter (28 percent) no longer had a lease, likely because their income had increased. Families who received supportive housing were less likely to face overcrowding because fewer families were living in intergenerational households. However, we found no differences in self-reported housing quality.

Over time, we found that caregivers who received supportive housing reported lower levels of intimate partner violence, indicating that supportive housing played an important role in freeing victims from intimate partner violence.

#### EMPLOYMENT

After 4.5 years, caregivers who received supportive housing were less likely than comparable caregivers to work or be in the labor force. They reported they were less likely to seek work because of family obligations. Their lower labor force participation may have been the result of not having parents in the household and giving more time to caring for their children. But caregivers also reported having received more job training and obtaining more certifications (Mackenzie-Liu and Pergamit 2023).

Caregivers who received supportive housing were more likely to receive government benefits than comparable caregivers (e.g. TANF, SNAP), which resulted in similar household incomes. Families who received supportive housing had somewhat lower material hardship but primarily through reduced housing insecurity. Importantly, they made less use of alternative financial services such as payday loans and check cashing (Mackenzie-Liu and Pergamit 2023).

#### NEIGHBORHOOD

Overall, we found that the neighborhoods in which families resided were very disadvantaged. We did not find evidence that families who received supportive housing resided in better neighborhoods in the short term—one year after demonstration. This suggests that families were unable to initially use their housing assistance to move to neighborhoods that would provide their children with greater opportunities than they would have absent the assistance. However, we found that supportive housing

allowed families to move to neighborhoods with more opportunity in the long run as measured by the Child Opportunity Index, which captures the neighborhood resources and conditions that contribute to children’s opportunity and development, as well as by the Concentrated Disadvantage Index.

## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Overall, we found no evidence to suggest that supportive housing as it was offered across the sites had a lasting effect on parenting or parent well-being, at least as it was measured by indicators in the survey. We found no differences in parents’ reports of their health, parenting skills, parenting stress, or parental warmth.

We also found few differences in child outcomes. Supportive housing appeared to have no impact on parents’ reports of children’s academic outcomes (overall performance, on-track reading level, absences, suspensions or expulsions) or parents’ reports on indicators of children’s mental or physical health, and little effect on indicators of child behavior, as measured using age appropriate measures.

## Conclusion

Overall, supportive housing had important impacts for child welfare–involved families. On the whole, supportive housing both reduced removals and increased reunification for families who received the intervention. Moreover, supportive housing appeared to be an effective cost-saving tool for child welfare agencies, especially when targeted effectively, in particular to families with substance use or intimate partner violence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, supportive housing also improved housing outcomes for families who received it and helped families move to neighborhoods that afforded their children more opportunities in the long run. Parents were also able to move out of doubled-up living situations and support themselves without working so that they could spend more time caring for their children. Nevertheless, supportive housing appeared to have little effect on indicators of parenting and parent and child well-being, highlighting a potential area for further development for supportive housing programs. This could include targeting services directly to children or offering a two-generation approach to engage both parents and children in services that promote both parent and child well-being directly.

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