Does Supportive Housing Benefit Families in the Child Welfare System?
Results of a five-year demonstration across five communities

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Children experiencing homelessness or living in inadequate and unstable housing are exposed to many risks, including a heightened threat of involvement with the child welfare system. For families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, having stable housing could mitigate these risks and help families stay together.

In 2012, the US Department of Health and Human Services launched Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System, providing $5 million in five-year grants for intensive wraparound services to be linked with permanent, affordable housing marshalled by five demonstration communities.

The Urban Institute implemented a randomized controlled trial evaluation of the demonstration to evaluate how supportive housing affects high-need families involved in the child welfare system. We also interviewed families and program staff across the five sites (Broward County, Florida; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Connecticut; Memphis, Tennessee; and San Francisco, California) to learn about parents’ experiences and about how sites implemented the supportive housing models.

HOUSING OUTCOMES
Supportive housing overwhelmingly improves housing outcomes for families receiving these services.

- One year after enrollment, 86 percent of treatment group families lived in a house or apartment with their own lease, nearly double the control group’s rate.
- Treatment group families were, on average, 4 percent less likely to face eviction, 13 percent less likely to experience homelessness, and 22 percent less likely to move two or more times.
- Treatment group families also reported fewer housing quality issues, less overcrowding, lower rates of rent burden (paying more than 30 percent of income for rent), and higher overall housing quality satisfaction.

CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES
Supportive housing can lead to reduced removals and increased reunifications among children in out-of-home care, but results vary among the sites.

- Of the four sites serving reunification families (families who had children in out-of-home care and were working on reunifying), Connecticut and Broward County showed higher rates of reunification, with each having over 30 percentage points more children reunifying in the treatment group. There were no detectable differences between the treatment and control groups in Cedar Rapids and San Francisco.
- For preservation families (families who had an open child welfare case but remain intact while receiving services), 24 months after enrollment, Connecticut and Memphis showed lower removal rates in the treatment group than in the control group, with the differences ranging from 8 percent in Memphis to 15 percent in Connecticut. Broward County, which targeted two types of preservations families, showed lower removal rates for families that remained monitored with child welfare services. There were no detectable differences between the treatment and control groups in Cedar Rapids.
Our study finds mixed results on parent, child, and family well-being one year after enrollment. But parents living in supportive housing reported feeling less stressed, and many had attended parenting interventions or engaged in home visiting services. We are continuing to track these outcomes and expect it will take more time to see clear results.

This demonstration shows that supportive housing can reduce homelessness, increase housing stability, reduce out-of-home placement, and increase reunification for high-need families, but results varied on child welfare outcomes. Some of this variation was likely because of differences among the sites in the target population, supportive housing models, implementation experiences and challenges, local housing markets, and child welfare practices. Next steps in program and policy development involve understanding how site variation affected results and identifying lessons learned from the demonstration.