Breaking the Homelessness-Jail Cycle through a Housing First Approach

Results from Denver's Five-Year Supportive Housing Program

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People experiencing chronic homelessness often **cycle in and out of jail, detoxification centers, and emergency care**. This cycle harms people's health and well-being, and it can be costly for city budgets.

Before the SIB initiative launched, Denver calculated that providing safety net services to 250 people who were experiencing long-term homelessness, cycling in and out of jail, and using other emergency services **cost the city an average of $7.3 million a year**.

Supportive housing, through a **Housing First approach**, aims to stabilize people caught in a homelessness-jail cycle through housing assistance and intensive services.

In 2016, the City and County of Denver launched an initiative to increase housing stability and decrease jail stays among people who were experiencing long-term homelessness and had frequent interactions with the criminal justice and emergency health systems—often referred to as the homelessness-jail cycle.

The supportive housing program provided a housing subsidy plus supportive services focused on helping residents stay housed. The social impact bond (SIB) initiative used a Housing First approach, which aims to quickly get people into housing, without requiring that participants meet pre-conditions or requirements such as entering treatment or achieving sobriety, and to provide participants with a foundation to improve their lives.

The Urban Institute, with our partners at The Evaluation Center at the University of Colorado Denver, tracked the implementation of the initiative and evaluated the efficacy of supportive housing between 2016 and 2020. The evaluation implemented a randomized controlled trial of 724 individuals who were eligible for the initiative—363 were randomized into treatment, and 361 to a control group.

Of those in the treatment group, 79 percent (285 people) were located, engaged, and housed. After accessing supportive housing, participants maintained high housing stability rates. Of those who leased up and did not die during the observation period, **86 percent remained in stable housing at one year. At two years, the housing retention rate was 81 percent for living participants, and at year three, the rate was 77 percent**.

Among the treatment group, we found the following results:

The Denver SIB program significantly increased access to housing assistance.
Over three years, people referred to supportive housing received an average of 560 more days of permanent housing assistance than those who received usual services in the community.

Denver SIB participants spent significantly fewer nights in shelters. When counting all instances of shelter during the day and at night over a three-year period, those referred to supportive housing had an average of 127 fewer shelter visits and 95 fewer days with any shelter stays than their peers in the control group (figure 1). This represents a **40 percent reduction in shelter visits and a 35 percent reduction in days with any shelter stays**.

Participants had fewer interactions with police. People who were referred to supportive housing experienced an average of eight fewer police contacts and four fewer arrests than those who received usual services in the community. This represents a **34 percent reduction in police contacts and a 40 percent reduction in arrests**.

Participants spent less time in jail. In the three years after being randomized into the evaluation, participants referred for supportive housing had an average of almost two fewer jail stays and spent an average of 38 fewer days in jail than those who received usual care in the community. This represents a **30 percent reduction in unique jail stays and a 27 percent reduction in total jail days**.

Participants spent less time in detox facilities. In the three years after being randomized into the evaluation, people referred for supportive housing had an average of four fewer visits to a short-term or city-funded detoxification facility than those who received services as usual in the community. This represents a **65 percent reduction in use of detoxification services**.

FIGURE 1

People in Supportive Housing Had Fewer Interactions with the Criminal Justice System and Public Services than People Receiving Usual Services
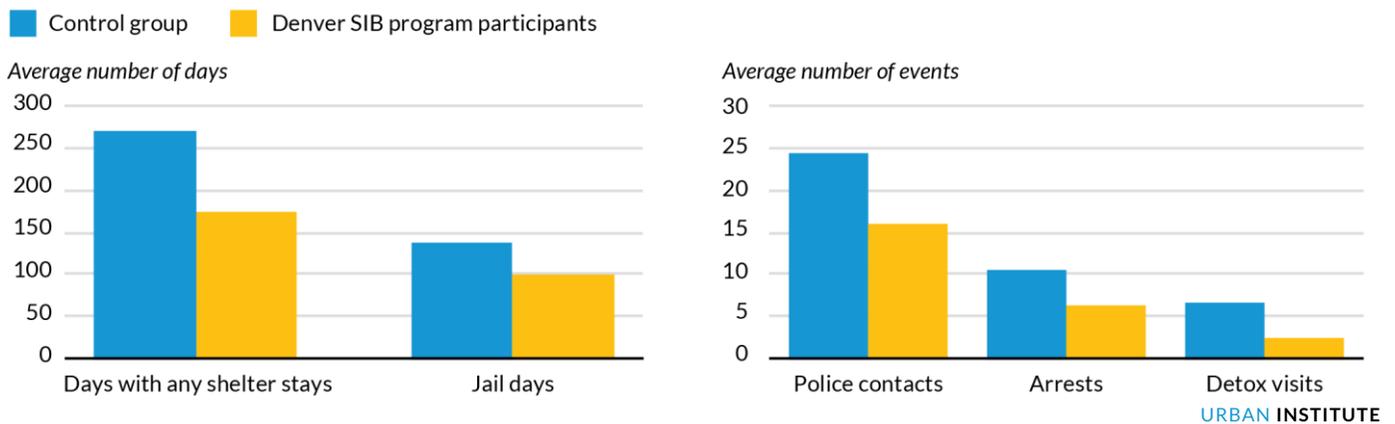
Sources: Metro Denver Homeless Initiative, Denver Sheriff Department, Denver Police Department, and Denver Department of Public Safety.
Notes: SIB=social impact bond. Results are for three years after people were randomized into the treatment and control groups. These results use intent-to-treat estimates to compare outcomes for all participants in the treatment and control groups.

The Denver SIB has been remarkably successful. The program demonstrated that with the offer of housing and the right supports, people can exit homelessness and remain housed. It also showed that investment in supportive housing can decrease police interactions and arrests, disrupt jail cycling, and reduce the use of detoxification facilities. Scaling up investments in supportive housing could end homelessness, break the homelessness-jail cycle, and shift resources toward services that focus on the well-being of people and communities.