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Housing and Child Welfare: Emerging Evidence and Implications for Scaling up Services

Patrick J. Fowler¹, Anne F. Farrell², Katherine E. Marcal¹, Saras Chung¹, and Peter S. Hovmand¹

¹Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA

²Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA

Abstract

Inadequate housing threatens family stability in communities across the United States. This study reviews emerging evidence on housing interventions in the context of scale-up for the child welfare system. In child welfare, scale-up refers to the extent to which fully implemented interventions sustainably alleviate family separations associated with housing instability. It incorporates multiple aspects beyond traditional measures of effectiveness including costs, potential reach, local capacities for implementation, and fit within broader social services. The framework further encompasses everyday circumstances faced by service providers, program administrators, and policymakers who allocate resources under conditions of scarcity and uncertainty. The review of current housing interventions reveals a number of systemic constraints for scale-up in child welfare. Reliance on rental assistance programs limits capacity to address demand, while current practices that target the most vulnerable families may inadvertently diminish effectiveness of the intervention and increase overall demand. Alternative approaches that focus on homelessness prevention and early intervention must be tested in conjunction with community initiatives to increase accessibility of affordable housing. By examining system performance over time, the scalability framework provides an opportunity for more efficient coordination of housing services within and outside of the child welfare system.

Keywords

Scale-up; child welfare; homelessness; evidence-based interventions; homelessness prevention; systems science

Inadequate housing and homelessness threaten the well-being of low-income children across the United States (Solari, Morriw, Shivji, & Souza, 2016). A growing body of research demonstrates the strain of housing insecurity on child development and family functioning (Coley, Leventhal, Lynch, & Kull, 2013; Fowler & Schoeny, in press; Fowler et al., 2015). Disruptions associated with homelessness have meaningful implications for life-course development and unknown social impact and costs.

The child welfare system, designed to promote child safety and stability, struggles to meet the needs of homeless families under investigation for child abuse and neglect (Fowler, Taylor, & Rufa, 2011; Fowler et al., 2013; Park, Metraux, Brodbar, & Culhane, 2004). Most states prohibit removal of children due solely to inadequate housing, but child welfare agencies frequently encounter housing needs that threaten child safety. Data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a nationally representative sample of families investigated for child maltreatment, reveal strain associated with inadequate housing. At initial contact, one in six families experienced housing problems that threatened out-of-home placement; as many as two in five families with children in foster care needed housing assistance (Fowler et al., 2013). Although nine in ten local child welfare agency directors reported that their organizations offered housing assistance, only half of families in need received housing assistance through child welfare, and those who received assistance were more likely to experience subsequent out-of-home placement and homelessness compared with similar families who did not receive housing services (Fowler, Taylor, et al., 2011; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2011).

Homelessness among current and former foster youth adds strain on the child welfare system. Local and state studies that focus on youth aging out of foster care show one third to nearly one half experience homelessness in young adulthood (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009; White et al., 2011). Results from a prospective study using NSCAW data to follow adolescents until age 20 or 21 suggested 17% experienced literal homelessness, while an additional 11% of youth were unstably housed within the prior 12 months, rates that were relatively high compared with other emerging adults (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017). A national estimate indicated that 5% of all young adults aged 21 had ever been literally homeless (Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2009), and annually, 21% of 18- to 25-year-olds couch surfed (Curry et al., in press). Overall, inadequate housing and homelessness contribute to the sizeable inflow of families investigated, delays in child welfare case closure, and subsequent risk for youth age who out of foster care.

Local, state, and federal initiatives have attempted to address the link between homelessness and child welfare for decades. However, only recently has a body of rigorous scholarship emerged to inform best practices. Various models deliver permanent housing with assorted supports for at-risk families, but a number of barriers exist to wide-scale implementation of evidence-based approaches. To achieve system-level increases in family stability, future work must plan for the scalability of housing interventions for child welfare-involved families.

Scale-Up Framework for Housing Informed Child Welfare Services

Evidence-based practice typically defines scale-up as disseminating interventions after adequate demonstration of effectiveness (Rogers, 2003). It usually ensues following considerable efforts that assess efficacy and necessary conditions for fidelity (Gottfredson et al., 2015). However, a number of problems exist when applying this framework to the context of homelessness and child welfare. First, it corresponds poorly to everyday decision making of service providers and administrators, who must determine how best to allocate

scarce housing resources with imperfect information on what works best for whom. Second, the approach (unnecessarily) emphasizes single interventions, while inadequately housed child welfare-involved families inherently interact with multiple interventions within multiple systems. Thus, scale must consider dynamics across systems (Hovmand, Sato, Kuhlberg, & Chung, 2015). Third, waiting for evidence-based practices misses important opportunities to incorporate scale in the design of policy and programmatic interventions (Stermann, 2000). Given the complexity of needs among child welfare-involved families, our understanding and application of scale-up must be adapted to more accurately represent the reality of service design and delivery.

We propose an alternative conceptualization of scale-up of housing interventions in child welfare toward this purpose. Scale-up in this context refers to the extent to which a housing intervention (program or policy) reaches a sufficient proportion of the targeted population to achieve sustainable system-level decreases in family separations associated with homelessness and housing instability. This approach considers features of interventions such as target population and demand, tangible and intangible resources required for delivery, strategies to implement with fidelity, and sustainability in order to optimize scalability throughout intervention development and implementation (Costanza & Patten, 1995).

We argue that scale occurs in phases that follow predictable patterns in addressing demand (Luke, 2012; Hovmand et al., 2015; Stermann, 2000). Figure 1 illustrates ideal scale-up based on system performance over time. The vertical axis shows the proportion of the target population that receives services; the horizontal axis represents time, which can range from months to years dependent on the level of analysis. Scalable interventions follow an S-shaped curve that depicts a three-phased process; initial slow growth (phase 1) followed by exponential growth in reaching the target population (phase 2) that reaches and sustains maximum capacity across time (phase 3). The pattern indicates sufficient infrastructure to facilitate roll-out of an intervention, as well as emerging capacities to maintain a desired level of reach over time.

A number of different patterns emerge among interventions struggling to scale (Hovmand et al., 2015). *Failure to launch* occurs when an intervention never addresses demand for services. For example, an intervention may be so expensive it can only reach a small subset of inadequately housed families. *Overshoot and collapse* reflects interventions that grow too quickly without adequate sustaining resources, e.g., programs that have insufficient funding to keep up with the inflow of families needing services. *Overreach/Underreach* includes interventions that struggle to keep up with fidelity monitoring or changing demands of the target population. The effectiveness of services diminishes after a period of success; the diminution prompts intervention to enhance services that eventually diminish again. Persistent fluctuation in the quality and quantity of service reflects inefficiencies in scale that compromise the capability to meet demand across time. Patterns can also co-occur; for example, overreach/under-reach could function up to a point when accumulated unmet demands lead to collapse.

Examining scale-up provides a tool for strategic planning. Benchmarks may be set for the different phases to evaluate performance. For example, decision makers may set up timelines

for the length of planning and initial roll-out; they may determine how many families can be served at full capacity, as well as when interventions should self-sustain. Moreover, decision makers can forecast the scalability of new interventions based on common criteria. By plotting expected performance over time and comparing to alternatives, communities may engage in designing scalable systems (Stermann, 2000). Performance over time makes explicit the everyday dynamics faced by the service providers, program administrators, and policymakers tasked with managing inadequate housing in a child welfare system. Reviewing evidence in this context makes explicit the everyday dynamics faced by service providers, program administrators, and policymakers tasked with managing inadequate housing in a child welfare system.

Policy Initiatives and Emerging Evidence on Housing Interventions for Families

An emerging body of evidence describes housing programs and policies that target youth in contact with the child welfare system. Housing initiatives occur through various social service channels at different points in child welfare involvement, including before child protective investigations, during open child welfare cases, and after case closure. The following discusses major policy initiatives and known studies that include some comparison to evaluate child welfare outcomes of permanency, safety, and well-being. Not included are local programs without known evaluations, which likely outnumber the known studies.

Public Education and Homeless Students

Federal policy requires all schools receiving public funding to identify and support education for homeless youth. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (PL100-77) initially passed by Congress in 1987 includes a number of provisions to address housing crises among homeless individuals and families. Its components include definitions of homelessness, design of homeless assistance programs (discussed below), and access to other forms of public assistance. The most recent reauthorization of McKinney-Vento signed into law in 2015 as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (PL 114-95) extends the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program.

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth program mandates the Department of Education to approve and fund plans submitted by school districts that addresses educational barriers caused by homelessness, such as school enrollment, retention, and academic gaps. Requirements include: mechanisms to identify homeless students, supportive services in schools, links with local service providers, transportation to schools of origin to promote stability, teacher and staff training on how to serve homeless students, and liaisons within schools to homeless and child welfare services. Major advocacy and professional development groups offer training on the design and implementation of district plans. For example, the National Center for Homeless Education and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth provide online resources that address a broad array of school needs. National numbers show the number of homeless students served has increased every year, and currently serves nearly 100,000 children with a budget of over \$60

million of federal investment; however, no known research evaluates the impact of services on child welfare outcomes.

Homeless Service System

The homeless “system” may be more accurately portrayed as a network of local service providers that coordinate resources to address housing crises experienced by individuals and families. Federal regulations guide homeless service provision through the McKinney-Vento Act, most recently reauthorized in the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 (PL 112-141). The HEARTH Act defines homelessness and eligibility for services, outlines expectations for services provided by communities, and defines data collection and reporting requirements. In addition, the legislation establishes a governance structure for communities to apply jointly through HUD for funding of programs administered by multiple collaborating public entities. Fundable services range from homeless prevention to emergency shelter to permanent housing with case management. In FY2016, HUD distributed over \$1.9 billion for homeless assistance programs that served nearly 1.5 million people—more than one third of whom were children and families (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016a; Solari et al., 2016). Homeless assistance was provided across 7612 programs within 2402 organizations, and homeless shelter was provided in 363 communities across the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016a).

For over two decades, the field has recognized a troubling link between family homelessness and subsequent child welfare involvement. Studies using administrative data have demonstrated increased likelihood of child protective services investigation and out-of-home placement after families entered homeless shelters. In New York City, 18% of families entering shelters for the first time received child welfare services within 5 years (Park et al., 2004). A birth cohort study in Philadelphia revealed that 38% of children in families who used homeless services were later placed in child welfare custody by the age of 6 years—nearly seven times the rate of placement compared to other children (Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003). A survey of homeless mothers in New York City showed two of five relied on informal placements with family and friends, in part because of shelter rules (Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002). The evidence suggests contact with the homeless system leads to increased family separations.

Later research shows a more assuring role of homeless services for families at risk for child welfare involvement. A multisite randomized controlled trial compared housing interventions for families entering homeless shelters in 12 communities across the United States (Gubits et al., 2016). More than 2000 homeless families randomly received referrals for emergency shelter (i.e., services as usual) versus one of three other housing interventions, including rapid rehousing that provided 18 months of rental assistance, temporary housing for 24 months plus 24 months of housing, and permanent housing vouchers through local public housing authorities. Results from surveys and linked child welfare records show promise for homeless services in keeping families together.

Surveys conducted 20 months on average after random assignment showed a modest rate (16%) of caregiver-reported child separation in the past 6 months for families receiving

homeless services as usual (Shinn, Brown, & Gubits, in press). Families referred for permanent housing reported nearly half the rates of informal separations (10%) and formal placements (2%). Furthermore, analyses suggested that risk reductions were explained not by changes in caregiver behavior (substance abuse, domestic violence) or economic circumstances, but rather reductions in days homeless (Shinn et al., in press). No other significant differences existed between conditions on preservation, or on rates of reunification (33%) with children who had been living away from caregivers at random assignment (Gubits et al., 2016).

Linked administrative records available for 5 of the 12 sites provided another probe of treatment effects. No differences emerged on rates of foster care placement (12%) in the 37 months after random assignment; however, families referred for rapid rehousing spent significantly fewer days in foster care compared with homeless services as usual. In addition, children in families who received permanent housing exhibited more positive emotional and behavioral outcomes compared with services as usual (Gubits et al., 2016). Findings suggest lower risk for family separation associated with homelessness compared with work done in the 1990s, as well as key benefits from homeless programming for preservation and child well-being.

Homelessness Prevention

Homelessness prevention represents another potentially promising intervention point for child welfare. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Congress appropriated \$1.5 billion to create the HUD-directed Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP). HPRP provides individuals and families at imminent risk for homelessness with short-term and non-reoccurring services to mitigate housing crises. Eligibility defined by HUD includes very low household incomes (< 50% of the local area median income) and few resources to address threats for homelessness. Services are generally provided through a network of community-based providers, and typically include assistance with housing searches, one-time assistance with rent or utilities, and landlord mediation. Current funding relies primarily on homeless services resources; however, programs also braid federal, state, and local funds to sustain programming (Cunningham et al., 2015). For example, federal regulations allow the use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to support homelessness prevention services, while New York City and a number of states (CA, IL, IA, NM, WA) provide government funds for prevention efforts aimed at child welfare-involved youth and families (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2017).

Rolston and colleagues conducted a randomized controlled trial examined the impact of HomeBase—a homelessness prevention program primarily serving families in New York City—on housing and child welfare outcomes across a 27-month follow-up (Rolston, Geyer, Locke, Metraux, & Treglia, 2013). Compared to families who received services as usual, families referred for homelessness prevention exhibited significant decreases in the probability of shelter seeking as well as days in shelter. Moreover, a quasi-experiment that compared neighborhoods served by HomeBase to similar neighborhoods outside of the catchment area showed significantly lower than expected rates of homelessness at the

community level (Goodman, Messeri, & O'Flaherty, 2016). Linked child welfare records showed no differences in rates of formal placement into foster care; however, overall placement levels were small among a relatively small group of families referred for HomeBase ($n = 11/150$) versus control families ($n = 3/145$; Rolston et al., 2013). Although direct evidence does not exist, homelessness prevention affects a key process linked to child welfare involvement (Shinn et al., in press), as well as addresses neighborhood-level risks.

Initiatives to improve the efficiency of homelessness prevention benefit child welfare-involved families. Most communities cannot meet the demands for homelessness prevention; only a fraction of eligible families can access resources. A screening tool developed using HomeBase data identified predictors of subsequent entrance into homeless shelters (Shinn, Greer, Bainbridge, Kwon, & Zuiderveen, 2013). One item indicated whether families had been investigated by child protective services in the past 12 months, had an open child welfare case, or ever had a child placed in foster care; any of these events increased risk for subsequent homeless shelter use by 36% over 3 years compared with families without prior child welfare involvement. Thus, screeners weigh child welfare involvement more heavily to increase chances of getting homelessness prevention services. Overall, promising tools exist to avoid homelessness and child welfare involvement.

Permanent Housing via Public Housing Rental Assistance Programs

Permanent housing (also referred to as rental assistance programs) administered through federal public housing programs represents a major source of affordable housing for low-income families. Initially authorized through the Department of Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 (PL 89-117), HUD administers housing programs through a network of more than 4000 local public housing authorities across the United States. In FY2016, HUD invested \$40 billion to subsidize rent for more than five million low-income households (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017). Recipients pay no more than 30% of household income toward rent, either through project-based housing or vouchers to lease rental properties in the private market. Housing must meet minimum standards for space and safety to ensure access to affordable and quality accommodations. Families receive support to secure units that meet quality standards, but typically, no additional case management is provided. Importantly, families receive assistance until either they no longer want it or they fail to meet program eligibility. Given that 66% of households using rental assistance earn less than 80% of the local median income, families retain vouchers for long periods (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017).

Little research examines the extent to which child welfare-involved families receive rental assistance directly from local public housing authorities. Data from the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW-II) suggest 11.7% of households who remained intact immediately following child protective services investigation received public housing, despite 52.9% of households earning incomes below federal poverty guidelines and 66.9% under 200% of poverty. Insufficient data prohibit determining eligibility for public housing; however, rates reflect low usage. Nearly every community in the United States manages a waitlist for public housing, and most extend beyond 12 months. In addition, child welfare-involved families disproportionately

experience challenges that could disqualify families from voucher assistance, such as prior convictions for violent or drug-related crimes. Low usage may reflect ineligibility for vouchers.

Permanent Housing via Child Welfare Partnerships with Public Housing

Congress recognized the potential benefits of providing housing to prevent family separation in authorization of the Family Unification Program (FUP). The HUD-sponsored program incentivizes partnerships between local child welfare and public housing agencies through competitive funding opportunities. Agencies work together to identify families whose inadequate housing threatens out-of-home placement or delays reunification, as well as emerging adults at risk of homelessness upon exit from foster care. Housing authorities provide rental assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher program to stabilize families, while youth also receive ongoing child welfare services. Congress authorized funding for FUP annually from 1992 through 2001 and from 2009 through 2011, and according to HUD, the program has awarded 20,431 housing vouchers to 242 public housing agencies (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016b).

The number of vouchers awarded ranges from 1 to 600 per community, and advocates repeatedly seek additional vouchers. In spite of the demand, however, FUP has received little evaluation in the past 25 years. An initial demonstration followed 995 families in 31 sites over 12 months after referral for FUP (Rog, Gilbert-Mongelli, & Lundy, 1998). Although findings suggested considerable reductions in homelessness and family separations, the lack of a rigorous design limited evaluation of the true effect of FUP. More recent, rigorous evaluations show mixed effects on child welfare outcomes. A quasi-experiment conducted in San Diego and Portland found that families who received FUP showed lower rates of out-of-home placement over 18 months compared to families who received usual child welfare services (Pergamit, Cunningham, & Hanson, in press). However, receipt of FUP vouchers also related to increases in maltreatment re-reports for families working toward reunification, and no differences appeared in rates of out-of-home placement or reunification among families who received FUP versus similar families who received child welfare services as usual.

A randomized controlled trial of FUP conducted with intact families in Chicago showed mixed effects. The RCT compared families who received FUP plus housing case management ($n = 89$) to those who received housing case management alone ($n = 89$). Five surveys conducted over 2.5 years after randomization found FUP related with significant and sharp declines in homelessness but no change in child mental health or academic achievement (Fowler & Chavira, 2014; Fowler, Schoeny, Bracizewski, & Marcal, 2017a). Child welfare records showed small declines in formal out-of-home placement; 1.6% of families referred for FUP had children in foster care in any given month in the 3 years after randomization compared with 2.3% of control families (Fowler, Brown, Schoeny, & Chung, 2017b). Child welfare savings accumulated to less than \$500 per family per year, not including the cost of the voucher plus other services. Moreover, rates of parent-reported child maltreatment remained high with no differences between treatment conditions (Fowler

& Schoeny, in press). Findings suggest permanent housing alone does not alleviate risk for homeless families and the necessity of continued child welfare involvement.

The impact of FUP on youth remains unknown. Current guidelines allow public housing authorities to serve youth aged 18 to 21 years who exited foster care after age 16 and lack adequate housing (Dion, Kleinman, Klauff, & Dworsky, 2014). Unlike families who retain vouchers until they longer want or are eligible, FUP provides youth rental assistance for up to 18 months. A recently launched federal demonstration tests a modified version of the program; youth will either receive vouchers plus supportive services for 18 months or housing and extended services for 36 months (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016a). The *Family Unification Program and Family Self Sufficiency Demonstration* awarded competitive grants to communities across the United States in 2016. Findings will greatly inform effective services that address high rates of homelessness among child welfare-involved adolescents (Fowler, Schoeny, et al., 2017a).

A recent implementation evaluation of FUP in eight sites revealed additional barriers for scale-up (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2016). The study showed that the strength of child welfare–public housing partnerships required to deliver FUP varied by site, impacting efficiency. Furthermore, child welfare agencies did not screen consistently for housing problems, leading caseworkers to potentially overlook families in need. Challenges also existed related to caseworkers' abilities to assist families in their housing search, particularly in tight housing markets with few affordable options. The authors recommended several promising practices for implementing FUP such as triaging and providing housing resources based on family need, developing shared case plans between child welfare and public housing agencies, and screening families into housing rather than screening out to improve reach.

Permanent Supportive Housing through Child Welfare

One potential explanation for underwhelming effects of FUP is that vulnerable families need additional support beyond rental assistance to address the multitude of factors that lead to homelessness. Supportive housing models emphasize access to services plus permanent housing. In addition to connection with housing funded by homeless or public housing services, families receive connections with resources that address co-occurring threats to stability. Programs frequently provide assessment, case management, and referrals for services, such as mental health or substance abuse treatment, employment training, domestic violence or legal aid, etc. By providing flexible and comprehensive resources in a timely manner, supportive housing aims to address the complex causes of child maltreatment and homelessness.

Supportive housing models have been used extensively with homeless families as part of homeless services (Bassuk, DeCandia, Tsertsvadze, & Richard, 2014). Models vary considerably in case management provided, as well as the type of housing offered, and available evidence on effectiveness has been mixed. A randomized controlled trial in Westchester, NY assigned mothers with mental health problems entering homeless shelter to permanent housing plus time-limited case management adapted from the Critical Time Intervention ($n = 97$) or permanent housing ($n = 110$). Results suggested families assigned to

supportive housing housed more quickly and children experienced more positive well-being over a 2-year follow-up; however, no differences emerged on child out-of-home placement (Samuels et al., 2015; Shinn, Samuels, Fisher, Thompkins, & Fowler, 2015). The large-scale randomized controlled trial of homeless services also showed no impact of transitional housing that provided housing up to 24 months plus case management on formal or informal out-of-home placements (Gubits et al., 2016; Shinn et al., in press). Across interventions, limited impacts on parental and child well-being were observed (Bassuk et al., 2014).

Less research investigates the impact of supportive housing with homeless or chronically unstable child welfare-involved families. A descriptive study of families ($n = 1720$) exiting a supportive housing program delivered through Connecticut's child welfare system showed improvements in stable housing and employment among families with complete data; a subset also showed improvements in parenting and home environments for children (Farrell, Britner, Guzzardo, & Goodrich, 2010). A quasi-experiment conducted with chronically homeless child welfare-involved families ($n = 189$) in Washington State showed no differences in the frequency of family separations but significant increases in reunification for children already placed out of home over a 12-month period compared with a matched comparison group of homeless families (Rog, Henderson, Lun, Greer, & Ellis, in press). Comparisons suggested that families who received supportive housing were more similar to families with public housing vouchers. Preliminary evidence showed promise for use in child welfare.

A one-group post-test-only study of 22 families involved in the child welfare system in New York City showed families secured stable housing and remained intact over 2 years (Swann-Jackson, Tapper, & Fields, 2010). A cost analysis estimated savings associated with reduced days in foster care offset 97% of program costs (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2012). Despite limitations of the design for interpreting effectiveness, the pilot was used as the basis for an ongoing federal demonstration of supportive housing in the child welfare system. Sponsored through the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families and philanthropic foundations, *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System* funds a multiyear, multisite evaluation of supportive housing models that partner child welfare with housing and other social service agencies.

Five sites across the country received funding and technical support to develop supportive housing models that address common elements. Each location implements a triage system that screens for and addresses the needs of families whose inadequate housing threatens child out-of-home placement plus experiences additional risks for child abuse and neglect. Ultimately, the demonstration aims to reduce family separations associated with inadequate housing through coordination between the child welfare system and supportive housing services. The impact of models remains to be seen; however, intensive evaluation efforts (process, impact, and cost components) promise to yield important insights into supporting families.

Independent Living for Foster Youth

A number of state and federal programs have attempted to address risk for homelessness among youth aging out of foster care. The Independent Living Program (ILP), passed in 1986 through an amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, funds the majority of initiatives for foster youth transitioning to adulthood. The Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 109-169), later renamed the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, doubled federal funding to states to \$140 million in 1999 and allowed states to use up to 30% of their Chafee funds on room and board for aged-out youth up to age 21; however, funding has remained constant despite substantial increase in the number of eligible youth (Dion et al., 2014). The range of services includes financial literacy, employment training, general life skills, and help securing housing. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 incentivized states to extend foster care beyond age 18 and provide services for youth in the transition into adulthood (P.L. 110-351). As of 2016, 23 states and the District of Columbia extended foster services with the hope of preventing homelessness (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2016).

Evidence of the impacts of independent living services on housing stability is limited, but some programs have shown promise. A quasi-experiment in New York City tested the impact of a supportive housing program among youth at risk for homelessness, half of whom were formerly involved in the child welfare system (Raithel, Yates, Dworsky, Schretzman, & Welshimer, 2016). The program included temporary housing for up to 2 years along with case management, psychosocial support, life skills development, and assistance in finding housing. Propensity score matching with administrative data identified a comparison group of similar at-risk youth eligible for supportive housing. Youth who received supportive housing had significantly lower rates of homeless shelter use both during program participation (16.7% vs. 28.9%) and up to 1 year after exiting the program (8.7% vs. 12.6%); furthermore, they were 55% less likely to spend time in jail (Raithel et al., 2016).

A randomized controlled trial testing a transitional living program in Tennessee also demonstrated promise. At-risk emerging adults, including those aging out of foster care, were randomly assigned to existing services in the community or to a 9-month transitional living program with case management and counseling (Skemer & Valentine, 2016). Youth who received transitional living support were more likely to access housing assistance, secure housing, and avoid homelessness over a 1-year follow-up compared to youth referred for services in the community. Transitional living was also associated with employment and higher average earnings; however, effects on earnings diminished after 2 years (Skemer & Valentine, 2016). Youth aging out of foster care with unstable family connections likely require ongoing support into emerging adulthood to secure and maintain adequate housing.

Evidence in Context of Scale-Up

The review of emerging evidence provides a number of insights. Foremost, permanent housing is essential to mitigate the impact of homelessness on child maltreatment. Vouchers represent a key component of housing interventions delivered across service systems; evidence clearly demonstrates their value for families entering homeless shelters (Gubits et

al., 2015; Shinn et al., in press). Although effect sizes appear more modest, permanent housing shows promise in keeping families together among those already under investigation (Fowler, Brown, et al., 2017b; Pergamit et al., in press). The value added remains uncertain when housing vouchers are used to promote reunification or combined with additional case management (Farrell et al., 2010; Pergamit et al., in press; Rog et al., in press). However, vouchers are scarce; families retain vouchers as long as needed, which leads to slow turnover. No evidence tests optimal voucher allocation strategies, and thus, decision makers must determine how best to distribute vouchers in the absence of evidence. This inefficiency in targeting permanent housing constrains the ability to serve the most families in need.

A related insight concerns the reliance on collaboration across services systems for scale-up of housing interventions. Child welfare devotes little funding for housing outside of foster care; partnerships with public housing and homeless services provide additional opportunities to access supports for child welfare-involved families and those at risk for future involvement. However, prioritizing child welfare-involved families inherently delays access to public housing and homeless resources for other households given waitlists. If communities share common vision, they will either prioritize child welfare families or not. Communities without consensus must balance competing demands, such as veteran, family, and chronic homelessness. Opportunities exist for advocacy and alliance, and nearly all change efforts in public systems require collaboration. Whereas collaboration has the potential to address fragmentation, increase efficiency, and reduce burden on recipients (by eliminating redundant procedures), it brings its own complexities and its effects as a variable separate from other ingredients of intervention is unexamined (Farrell & Myers, 2011). Collaboration thus can introduce uncertainty that constrains broad scale-up of housing interventions for child welfare families and youth.

Initiatives aimed at promoting coordination of housing services provide little insight into scale-up. Over the past three decades, a number of federal–philanthropic partnerships have funded initiatives that test homeless service models (Dennis, Steadman, & Coccozza, 2002). Supportive housing demonstrations for child welfare-involved families and youth represent the most recent initiatives. Demonstrations aim to spark innovations that could disseminate more broadly. However, the application and funding processes do not substantially inform scale-up. Typically, competitive funding opportunities select communities that are able to articulate a coordinated plan to integrate resources across agencies and service systems, and thus, select the highest performing communities that already demonstrate capacity for collaboration. Moreover, funding is large and time limited (e.g., \$5 million over 5 years, including start-up expenses); this interjects a sizeable shock for collaboration that will likely not be replicable and threatens sustainability. Because of high variation in policy and practice context, evidence gained on intervention implementation and effects provide little guidance for decision makers working in different locations. Lack of insight into sustainability also increases the likelihood that policy is driven by political and historical events rather than by evidence (Samuels, in press).

Policy and Practice Recommendations for Scaling Housing Informed Child Welfare

In this section we summarize five recommendations that emerge from the accumulating evidence. First, to increase the chances of shoring up homeless and housing unstable families, child welfare agencies need systematic efforts to help families apply for public housing waitlists. This is achievable through two complementary methods. Child welfare caseworkers should be cross-trained with homeless services and public housing staff on how to screen for and address housing issues. Empirically informed screenings are being developed to more accurately assess housing needs (Farrell, Dibble, Randall, & Britner, in press; Shinn et al., 2013). Second, partnerships between child welfare agencies and community-based homelessness prevention providers are critical to success. Public housing applications are one of many ways homelessness prevention helps families, but access to supports is limited in many communities, and homeless families face substantial hurdles (e.g., access to documents) in the application processes (Cunningham et al., 2015). Third, some child welfare agencies offer helpful models for investing funds for contracts with homelessness prevention. For example, Illinois and Connecticut deploy state funds while New York City leverages federal TANF dollars for homelessness prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Partnerships need support and evaluation to improve, but offer an immediate response to the structural problem for scale-up.

A fourth recommendation is for child welfare leadership to join local homeless service provider networks to advocate for children and families. Participation in networks allows child welfare to influence annual decisions about how to prioritize allocation of homeless services and establish public housing preferences for homeless families. High-performing homelessness networks also work more broadly to expand access for affordable housing. This includes advocacy for inclusionary zoning policies and local financing directives that help low-income families retain or access housing in desirable neighborhoods, as well as increased funding for the national Housing Trust Fund (Freeman & Schuetz, 2017; Gramlich, 2017). Child welfare participation brings important perspective on keeping families safe and preventing homelessness. However, efforts should be targeted and supported by local agencies; requiring caseworkers to attend monthly meetings without respite from other pressing demands leads to inconsistent participation. Ideally, administrators without caseload demands and with leadership experience commit to annual participation in networks.

Fifth, communities need to diversify their approaches to addressing inadequate housing that threatens child well-being. Overreliance on permanent housing constrains reach of interventions, while current practices that tend to triage resources to the most vulnerable families may inadvertently diminish effectiveness of the intervention and drive up overall demand. A universal voucher program would alleviate strain on the child welfare system (Desmond, 2016), and a broader array of interventions must be applied at various leverage points to address the systemic challenges to scale-up. Child welfare should be intimately involved in the design and testing of innovative practice and policy initiatives.

Summary

Access to safe and stable housing represents a fundamental component of healthy child development. Charged with protecting children, the child welfare system struggles to meet the needs of inadequately housed families and constrain child welfare outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being. A growing body of evidence promises to provide key insights into preventing child maltreatment, but much uncertainty regarding effectiveness remains unknown. The proposed scale-up framework provides a tool to plan and evaluate implementation of emerging housing interventions.

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Highlights

- A review of housing interventions reveals systemic constraints for scale-up in child welfare.
- Current practices that target highest risk families may diminish effectiveness and increase demand.
- Scale-up provides opportunities to better coordinate housing services with the child welfare system.

Fig. 1.

Ideal scale-up of interventions over time in phases. Interventions typically launch with a small portion of intended reach. Rapid growth follows investments of resources after initial success. Sustainable interventions maintain performance across time. Scalability is based on features and design of the intervention implemented in intended contexts